

A dark, textured background featuring several roses, some of which are glowing with a fiery orange-red light. Scattered throughout are various items: a five-dollar bill with a portrait of Abraham Lincoln, a one-dollar bill, and a five-dollar bill with a portrait of Andrew Jackson. There are also several pearl necklaces and what appear to be bullet casing or spent shell casings. The overall aesthetic is gritty and dramatic.

CANDICE  
WRIGHT

VICES  
*and*  
VOWS



VICES  
*and*  
VOWS

CANDICE  
WRIGHT



**Vices and Vows © 2024 by Candice Wright**

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

All Rights Reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced or used in any manner without the express written permission of the publisher except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

This eBook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This eBook may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient.

Cover design by Kirsty-Anne Still @The Pretty Little Design co.

Editing by Tanya Oemig

Proofreading by Briann Graziano

✿ [Created with Vellum](#)

# Contents

## [Author Note](#)

## [Prologue](#)

1. [Nova](#)
2. [Nova](#)
3. [Nova](#)
4. [Nova](#)
5. [Nova](#)
6. [Nova](#)
7. [Vice](#)
8. [Nova](#)
9. [Nova](#)
10. [Vice](#)
11. [Nova](#)
12. [Vice](#)
13. [Nova](#)
14. [Vice](#)
15. [Nova](#)
16. [Vice](#)
17. [Nova](#)
18. [Vice](#)
19. [Nova](#)
20. [Vice](#)
21. [Vice](#)
22. [Nova](#)
23. [Nova](#)
24. [Vice](#)
25. [Nova](#)
26. [Vice](#)
27. [Nova](#)
28. [Vice](#)
29. [Nova](#)
30. [Vice](#)
31. [Nova](#)
32. [Vice](#)
33. [Nova](#)

34. [Vice](#)

35. [Nova](#)

36. [Vice](#)

37. [Nova](#)

38. [Vice](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Epilogue II](#)

[Also by Candice Wright](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Trigger Warnings](#)

*This book is dedicated to Michele Surbaugh.*

*An author can spend a lifetime waiting for a reader like you to  
come along.*

*Thank you for the million and one voice mails that made early  
mornings that much easier to deal with and for reminding me  
why I started this journey to begin with.*

## **Author Note**

**Trigger warnings are located at the very end of the book.**

For the rebels who go in blind;

It's worth remembering that **Vice Moretti** is an anti-hero at best, a villain at his worst, and a monster for the parts in between. This love story is raw and toxic and, like the man himself, a little unhinged.

**Please proceed with caution.**



“It seems to me, that love could be labeled poison and we’d drink it anyways.”

— Atticus

# Prologue



The streets run red with not just the blood of my enemies but with the blood of those I loved, those I swore to protect.

I could feel the beast inside me rising, begging for its pound of flesh. Even drowning in grief, I knew all I'd accomplish was more of what I was seeing now: blood, death, torment.

I take in the bodies strewn across the tarmac, limbs bent and twisted at unnatural angles, bullets marring previously unblemished skin.

I harden myself to it.

They want a war? So fucking be it.

My breath catches as my eyes fall on my son. *My boy.*

My hands fist at my sides, aching to reach out to him, but I hold steady, knowing if I break now, I'm giving those bastards precisely what they want.

Still, I can't leave him like this.

I drop to my knees, not giving a single fuck that my five-thousand-dollar suit is now soaked from the blood.

So much blood—more pints than years he's been alive. Now he's gone, and I can't put him back together. I can't fix what I broke.

What good is money when I can't pay off the reaper with it?

Sliding my arms under his legs and neck, I lift him and stare into his eyes, so much like my own, and bite back a sob.

At fourteen, Neo was on the cusp of becoming a man. But holding him now, all I see is the boy who was my shadow.

And now he's a ghost. One more soul to haunt me.

I hear Alessio speak. "We need to get out of here, Boss."

I know he's right, but making my body move is something else altogether. "They killed my boy," I hiss at him.

"And you'll make them pay, but you can't do that if you're dead too."

I nod as he steps to me and holds his arms out. Swallowing hard, I pass the body to him before sliding my fingers over Neo's eyes, closing them for the last time. I feel vomit rush up my throat, but I keep my face impassive. A don never shows weakness.

"Put him in the car and call for a clean-up. I want the rest of my family on lockdown."

"Already on—" His words are cut off by one of my men.

"Reports of gunfire at your house, sir."

My eyes flare before I run to my car, my men right behind me. I climb in the back and take Neo once more, cradling him to my chest now that we're behind closed doors. My driver and guard know better than to say anything.

I breathe Neo in as the car speeds home, a sense of unease pressing in on me. I already know, deep down, what I'm going to find.

When we pull up outside my house, I lay Neo gently on the back seat before jumping out, ignoring the shouts of my men.

The door is wide open, and a guard lies dead on the floor just inside the entrance with a bullet hole in the center of his forehead. I step over him, draw my gun, and run up the stairs, not bothering with stealth.

The smell hits me before I even open the door to the bedroom—the sweet, coppery tang of blood filling the air.

I shove the door open and stand there, taking in the scene before me. A naked man lies on the floor, his body riddled with bullets. Just one of the nameless faces my wife fucks on the side. I ignore him, my eyes fixed on the bed.

There lies my wife, naked and bound spread-eagle to the bedposts as blood oozes from the bullet wound between her eyes. Bruises cover every inch of her pale skin, her wrists and ankles rubbed raw. The inside of her thighs and pussy are slick with cum, as are her face and chest. Her eyes stare in sightless terror at the mirror above the bed, the brutality of her death reflected back at her.

I turn and almost collide with the two men behind me. I shove them out of my way and run back down the stairs. I hear footsteps thundering after me, but I don't stop. If my wife and son are gone, there is only one target left—my daughter.

I jump into the back of the Rolls just as my men reach the car and climb in.

“The park. Now,” I order. The car speeds away before the doors are even closed.

“Boss—”

I hold up my hand to stop Alessio. I can't. Whatever he was going to say needs to fucking wait. Nobody speaks after that. The only sound is the ragged breathing of three men on edge.

That's when I remember that my daughter isn't the only one in danger.

I look at the man opposite me, whose face is blank as he sits ridged. Alessio has dedicated his life to me, and now he might lose his daughter too. I look away. I have nothing to give him. No words of comfort, no false promises. The likelihood of our daughters surviving the night is virtually non-existent.

As the car pulls up outside the park, we all dive out, guns drawn as we run to where a small crowd has gathered. I push

my way past them, stopping when I see the woman's body on the ground.

“Get these fuckers out of here,” I yell to my men as the gawkers continue to just stand around.

I crouch and slide the hair off the woman's face before looking down and seeing that she's been shot in the chest.

“That's the nanny, so where the fuck are the kids?” I hear Alessio snarling behind me.

I'm already up and looking. Part of me almost hopes I find them dead. If my enemies have taken them, death would be a kindness. The now deserted park looks sinister as the day bleeds to night, the lone swing creaking in the breeze.

I whip my head around at the faint sound of crying. I zero in on the playground and see the neon-colored tubes woven in and out of the main structure for the children to crawl through and slide down. I climb the frame and listen for more crying. The night is eerily quiet once more, as if the darkness is holding its breath.

There. A sniffle. I duck my head and look inside the large green tube and find two sets of terrified eyes looking up at me—one set just like her mother's. My daughter has her arms wrapped around Alessio's girl, trying to comfort her. But now that I'm here, she doesn't need to be strong anymore.

“Daddy,” she whispers as I reach for them both.

She wraps her arms around my neck and holds me tightly as I pass the other little girl to her father. I stand there for a moment, breathing her in, holding her trembling body a fraction too tight as I fight to get my emotions back under control.

“I want Mommy.”

I shudder at her words, supporting her with one arm as I use the other to climb back down.

“Me too,” I whisper into her hair for only her little ears to hear.

She lifts her head, her wet eyes staring into mine with a knowledge way beyond her four years of age.

“I love you,” I murmur to her, something inside me breaking.

“Love you too,” she replies, laying her head against my shoulder, her hand wrapping around the necklace she is wearing. I lift my head, my eyes meeting Alessio’s. His daughter is in much the same position as mine. Though they are both safe for now, it comes with the understanding that it wasn’t my money or men that kept them safe, but sheer fucking luck.

A feeling of helplessness washes over me, something I haven’t felt since I was a boy. I push it down, letting my anger smother my fear. This day will haunt all the rest that follow. No act of war or vengeance will bring back all that I’ve lost, but I’ll be damned if I let the bastards take any more. If they want a war, I’ll give them a war. But first, I need to make sure my daughter isn’t caught in the crossfire. She needs the kind of protection I alone can’t give her.

I stare at the man opposite me, who has already given me so much, and order him to give me more.

“Tell me, Alessio, just how loyal are you?”

His eyes widen. “You don’t have a man more loyal than me,” he answers, his voice devoid of any anger, though I’m sure my question pissed him off. Questioning a man’s loyalty is akin to testing his integrity.

“Good, because I need something from you.”

“Anything. Just tell me what it is.”

I lick my lips, wondering if he’ll still feel that way in a minute. “I want your daughter.”

He takes a step back, wrapping his arms tighter around his child.

“What?”

“It’s simple. I need yours to protect mine.”

# Chapter 1

---

## *Nova*

Twenty Years later



I stare at the bed as another ridiculously overpriced scrap of material is tossed onto it.

“All I’m saying is you need to make yourself fucking scarce for a few hours. What’s hard to understand about that?” the snippy voice from inside the closet yells at me before another dress finds its way onto the discarded pile.

“I can’t very well guard you, Gia, if I’m not beside you,” I point out, ignoring the curse words flying out of her mouth. Honestly, this is nothing new. Gia is every inch the spoiled Mafia princess. She’s also the sole remaining heir to the Fiore family throne after her brother and mother were killed on a night that ushered in what people called the *dark days*.

“I don’t fucking get it.” She stomps out of the closet completely naked, her hands on her hips, as she snarls at me, “You’re my day guar—”

I hold my hand up before she can go off on a tangent. “Mike and David are sick with a stomach virus, so you’re stuck with me until your father says otherwise.”

She growls and stomps away like a petulant child, not a twenty-four-year-old grown-ass woman.

I roll my eyes and lean against the wall, wishing I was at home watching TV in my pajamas. Not that I get to do that

much, but right now, I'd rather get fingered by Freddy Krueger than babysit Gia.

“Aldo is the underboss. My daddy—”

“Would not let you be alone with him, and you know it, Gia. You're the princess here. You know the rules better than I do. So, tell me, what would your father do to lover boy if he found you two alone together?”

When she says nothing, I push my point home. “Underboss or not, your father would slice him up before delivering him back to his family, piece by piece.”

“That's what this is all about, isn't it, Nova?” She hisses my name before she slips on a sparkly metallic dress without underwear. “You're bitter and jealous that I'm the princess, and you're nothing more than the help. It's fucking laughable. The *consigliere's* daughter becoming a bodyguard... You're a joke. What man will want to marry you?”

I sigh and cross my arms over my chest. “I know this is a hard concept for you to grasp, Gia, but not all of us want to get married. Not all girls dream of being a bride. Walking down the aisle of a church filled with people I barely know, who eagerly await their first glance at the morning's bloody sheets, holds no appeal to me.”

“Liar. You say that now, but we both know that once I'm married, my husband will get rid of you in a heartbeat. Either that, or he'll give you to his guards to play with.” She smirks as I sense a presence behind me.

Spinning, I have my gun in my hand and pointed before I realize it's my boss, Vigo Fiore.

Ignoring the gun in his face, he looks at his daughter.

“Gia,” he reprimands. He doesn't usually stop her vitriolic attacks, so I'm surprised he says anything now. “Nova's father is my *consigliere*. If nothing else, you will respect that.”

Dropping my gun, I refrain from rolling my eyes. Of course, the dressing down was for my father's benefit, not mine. I am just a woman, after all.



“Now, where is the rest of your dress?”

“It’s Versace, Daddy.”

“It’s not befitting of a Fiore,” he states coldly. “Change or stay home.”

Wisely, Gia bites her lip, knowing better than to argue with him.

Turning to me, I brace myself as he looks me up and down. Thankfully, I don’t get any skeezy vibes from the man. Still, there is something in how he looks at me that makes me feel off. There have been times—like now—when I swear I catch flashes of guilt in the older man’s eyes, but before I can be sure, it’s gone, replaced with a look of scorn and dismissal.

“You will finish watching Gia tonight and return to your regular duties tomorrow. I have moved some men around to cover those who are sick.”

“Yes, sir,” I reply. He nods, watching my face a second too long for my liking, before he walks out, leaving me and a pissed-off Gia alone again.

“This is all your fault.”

“Yes, I put laxatives in your guard’s food because I miss you so much at night I can’t bear to be apart from you,” I answer dryly.

If looks could kill, I’d be dead right now. Storming over until we are chest to chest, she somehow manages to look down her nose at me in that stuck-up way of hers, even though we’re the same height.

“Careful, Nova. You think you’re so fucking smart, but one word from me and I could destroy you. Not just you, but dear old Dad too.” She leans forward. “Who do you think my daddy would believe if I told him someone was making me uncomfortable, touching his little angel inappropriately?” she says in a saccharin-sweet voice.

I don’t give her the reaction she’s after, used to this stupid game of hers.

“Well, I’d like to think your father is where he is because he’s a smart man. You could try to push your lies on him, but I’m not so sure you’d come off as the helpless victim. Still, we both know you’re going to do what you’re going to do, Gia.”

She shakes her head in disgust. “You’re so fucking weak, it’s pathetic.” She steps back and strips out of her dress, tossing it on the floor before returning to her closet.

I move over to the wall and lean against it, blowing out a breath as I pray for strength. Lord knows you need it when it comes to Gia. She’s enough to test the patience of a saint. She can say what she wants to me, and she has over the years. My indifference to her words makes her more and more spiteful.

The thing that Gia hasn’t realized is that she’s not special. Sure, her dad is the don, and in the Italian Mafia, it doesn’t get much more powerful than that. But Vigo’s power is not Gia’s. In the Cosa Nostra, women are nothing more than pretty objects and bargaining chips. I’m the only exception to the rule.

I’m not naïve, though. There is some truth to Gia’s words about men not wanting me because of my role as her guard. Men with large egos tend to balk at the idea of a woman being stronger than them or more skilled in combat. When the time comes, though, I’m not stupid enough to believe I’ll get a free pass. I’ll either end up with someone old enough not to give a shit beyond me having a perky set of boobs or someone who will see my strength as a challenge, something he can break.

I shake my head. Those thoughts are not something I need to dwell on right now. I have enough to deal with today without worrying about the future.

As Gia steps out of the closet, this time in a far more demur navy blue dress, I wonder if some of her anger comes from the fact that she’s not married either. Twenty-four might seem young, but in the Mafia, most women are married off when they are eighteen. There have been whispers questioning why a marriage hasn’t been arranged yet for the don’s only daughter, but most speculate that it’s the don wanting to make sure he leaves his throne to the right successor. After all, a

Mafia marriage has very little to do with the bride and more to do with power, prestige, and money.

I watch as she slips on a pair of impossibly high heels and grabs a clutch from her collection, shoving in the essentials.

“I’m ready. Try not to embarrass me tonight,” she orders, walking past me and flicking her hair.

Sending a text to the guard at the gate letting him know we’re on the move, I follow behind her as she walks the long hallway and down the stairs, stopping her before she steps outside. She huffs, but lets me take the lead as I pull out the keys to the car and open the back door for her to get in. If I drive tonight, it gives her the illusion of privacy, being in the back all alone.

She climbs in and starts tapping on her phone as I start the car and head toward the city center. She doesn’t speak to me the whole way before we arrive at one of the family’s restaurants, *La Dolce Vita*.

I park at the curb in front of the building before climbing out and tossing the keys to Ed, the valet. He winks at me as I move to the rear passenger door and hold it open for Gia. She gets out of the car without looking at me and heads toward the glass double doors.

I follow behind closely, my eyes scanning for any sign of danger as we enter the restaurant. Once inside, the hostess moves to greet us, but Gia stops her. “Aldo Lambardi’s table.”

The hostess, clearly recognizing Gia, doesn’t miss a beat. She nods and offers us a quick smile before leading us to a table near the large glass windows overlooking the river. I scan the room again, taking in the many familiar faces, but I don’t make eye contact or offer them smiles. I’m not here to mingle. I’m here to work.

I wait until Gia is seated before standing against the wall, trying to make myself seem unimposing. I nod to Aldo’s two guards, who are doing the same, before returning my focus to Gia. Her dinner date is Aldo Lambardi, a prominent figure in the underworld but not a popular one. As the underboss, he’s

the man slated to take the role of don when my boss passes on the mantle.

I watch as Gia gushes over him and take in the faint grimace on his face. I wonder if he even likes her or if he is only here because he is expected to be. A courtship between the two isn't strictly necessary. Contracts can and have been signed when paired couples are little more than children, but Gia's case is different. I wonder if he thinks he can sway the don's opinion in his favor if he can get Gia to fall in love with him.

Aldo signals for a waiter before barking out his order and ordering for Gia as if she is incapable of deciding what she wants to eat. If it bothers her, she doesn't show it. She leans forward and smiles at Aldo, one of her fingers sliding over her lip in what I'm guessing is an act of seduction.

Aldo offers her a smile—one that doesn't reach his eyes—as another waiter approaches with a wine bottle. He shows the label to Aldo, who looks at it and nods before indicating for the waiter to pour them both a glass. With a flick of his wrist, he dismisses the waiter before starting up a conversation with Gia.

Their low murmurs reach my ears, but I can't make out what they're saying. Not that it matters. My job isn't to eavesdrop. It's to keep Gia safe, sometimes even from herself.

As the food arrives, Aldo looks at his men before his eyes land on me. He does a slow scan of my body, taking in the black suit and white shirt that I'm wearing, which is pretty much standard for us bodyguards. Something in his eyes flairs, though it's not lust. It's something far colder, making a shiver run through my body.

I don't react to him as his eyes linger on me for a second longer before he turns back to Gia. I fight back a shudder of revulsion.

There is no denying that the man is good-looking, though he's far too polished for my liking. His dark hair is always styled, his suit perfectly tailored, his teeth a little too white,

and his smile practiced. If Mattel made a Mafia version of Ken, he'd look exactly like Aldo.

But as good-looking and charming as Aldo can be, it's the other side of him that people whisper about. The man is ruthless, though it could be said that most made men are. But Aldo isn't violent because it's part of the job. He's violent because he likes it. There's no rhyme or reason why he lashes out. Nobody is safe from his temper. He sees everyone as beneath him, though he seems to have a particular hatred for women.

I tend to blend into the background, and women talk, so I hear all the gossip since people forget to watch their words around me. I know all about his sadistic streak and how rough he gets with women, even the ones he pays for, who never tell him no. Rumor has it that he likes the fight, so he favors young, innocent women who have no idea what they are getting themselves into. And anyone who cries about it disappears.

As much as Gia annoys me, I've spent most of my life keeping her safe. The thought of doing all that to hand her over to a monster like him makes no sense to me.

And yet here we are.

## Chapter 2

---

### *Nova*



I listen to Gia talk on her phone to her girlfriend, telling her how wonderful Aldo is, as I drive her home for the night. She doesn't mention how he eye-fucked all the waitresses or how he spoke to the staff like they were pieces of shit. To Gia, Aldo is the prize catch, and nothing I say will change that.

Spending the night watching him makes me glad I haven't been forced into a marriage yet. Gia can mock me all she wants for it, but my bodyguard status gives me an element of freedom that the other women in the Mafia don't have.

I pull up outside her house and follow her as she continues talking. When we pass the sitting room, I see the don sitting in one of the armchairs, his head in his hands. For a fleeting moment, I feel a crushing weight of responsibility coming from him. More than that, though, are the echoes of loneliness that accompany it. I keep moving before he notices me, but the image stays with me the whole way upstairs.

When Gia closes the door in my face, I roll my eyes before turning and heading down to the staff quarters. There are always empty rooms available for times like this. On my way, I send a text to the perimeter guards and those watching the gate saying that Gia is home for the evening and that if she attempts to leave to call me.

It's almost midnight, and I've been on my feet since four a.m. I take the last room at the end of the hallway, which usually remains empty because it has no window. Sitting on

the bed, I sigh as my stomach growls. Covering tonight after doing a full shift means I haven't had a chance to eat, but I don't have the energy to go find something now.

I slip off my boots and leave them next to the bed, ready in case I need them. After hanging up my jacket, I slide my shirt off and place it on the back of the desk chair before slipping my pants off. I didn't think to bring anything to sleep in because I usually head home, so my sports bra and boy shorts will have to do. Setting the alarm on my cell, I fall asleep the moment my head hits the pillow.

It feels like I've been out for minutes when my cell phone rings. I squint at the screen and see that the call is coming from the gatehouse. "Hello?"

"Miss Fiore would like to leave."

"Of course she would." I sigh, climbing out of bed and dressing once more. "Did she give you a reason why it's so important to leave now at..." I check my watch and see it's just past one a.m. "...one a.m.?"

"She said it's of a personal nature."

"Let me guess: she said she needed tampons." Why men get weird about periods is beyond me. They're a natural thing. If women didn't have periods, they never would have been born.

"That is correct, yes," he answers politely.

"Alright, I'll be there in a second. Don't let her leave."

I hang up, slip my boots and jacket on, and head out. I jump in the car and head for the gatehouse, pulling up behind Gia's Mercedes. I climb out and knock on her window.

She snarls at me when she opens it. "What are you doing here?"

"Keeping you safe. Why are you trying to leave the property without guards?"

"I don't answer to you, Nova. You answer to me."

“I answer to your father,” I remind her, crossing my arms over my chest.

“I don’t need fucking guards to grab a box of tampons. I’m more than capable.”

“You’re the don’s only living child. You are his one weakness, and you know that,” I tell her quietly, not wanting the guards to overhear us.

Once upon a time, Gia and I used to be friends. If the stories are true, we used to play together all the time before we grew up, and our roles pushed us into positions that would drive a wedge between us.

For a second, she looks ashamed before she frowns at me and sighs. “Fine, come with me.”

“That won’t be necessary. I’ll send someone out to get them for you. Which brand and strength would you like?”

“Fuck you,” she snaps before reversing and smashing into the front of my car.

Resisting the urge to wrap my hands around her neck, I walk to her car door and yank it open before pulling her out.

“Oops.” She grins. “Guess you won’t be chasing me now.”

“Don’t worry, it’s not my car, remember? It’s just the one your father has me drive you around in. Once I explain what happened, I’m sure he’ll understand.”

Her face pales. She knows, just as well as I do, that her father doesn’t tolerate this type of shit. If he finds out she not only reversed into the car on purpose but tried to sneak out at night without guards, he’ll lock her down.

“Fine. Whatever.”

She spins and starts walking back toward the house, the high heels she’s wearing making her stumble over the gravel. I shake my head, marveling at how we can be the same age.

I turn to the gate guards. “Log what happened and have someone come down and move both vehicles. I’ll let the don know in the morning.”



They give me a relieved nod as I jog after Gia. She storms up the driveway, her anger fueling her. When she gets to the door, she steps quietly into the house to avoid discovery. I watch her head up to her room before I duck into the nearest bathroom and rummage around the cabinet under the sink. I grin when I find what I'm looking for, tucking them under my arm before following her upstairs.

I knock on Gia's door, and when she opens it, I toss her the box with a grin. "Would you look at that? A full box. Now, you don't need to go anywhere."

She catches it, her eyes burning with hatred, before throwing the box of tampons back and slamming the door. I lean against the wall next to her door and slide down to the floor, smiling.

Was that petty as fuck? Probably. Do I care? Not even a little.

\* \* \*

When I finally get home after being up for almost thirty-six hours straight, I'm ready to do nothing but sleep. When banging at my door wakes me after only four hours of shut-eye, I take my gun with me, ready to kill them, regardless of whether they are a friend or an enemy.

I yank the door open and swallow down my curses when I find my dad on the opposite side.

"Jesus, Dad. I was sleeping." I turn and head back inside, knowing he'll follow behind me. The joy of living in my father's pool house means he can turn up whenever he wants to, which, thankfully, isn't that often.

"Why were you sleeping?"

"I've been pulling double Gia duty because a couple of guards came down with the stomach flu. But guard rotation has been changed now, so it's all good. I have today and tomorrow off, then back to my regular scheduled duties," I tell him with a hint of sarcasm.

I love my dad, but the man has the emotional capacity of a French fry. It wouldn't be so bad, but since my mother died while giving birth to me, I sometimes feel like I'm emotionally delayed because I have nothing to draw on. Maybe he is the way he is because he lost her. He refused to talk about her with me, and after one too many shouting matches, I stopped asking.

"Is there something I can help you with?"

"I'm heading to Manhattan for a few days. We've been having an issue with one of the buyers."

"Alright." I grab a bottle of water from the fridge and take a few mouthfuls. My dad just stands there, staring at me, not moving. "Is there something else? It's not like this is the first time you've gone away."

"I don't like leaving you alone."

I frown. "Since when?" I hold my hand up before he can answer. "I get that I'm your daughter, but let's be honest, I'm not like other girls. Anyone trying to break in will be in for a surprise."

He runs a hand through his graying hair, looking frustrated, which is odd for Mr. Calm, Cool, and Collected.

"Is something going on that I need to know about?"

"What? No. Just ignore me. It's nothing. How's Gia doing?"

"She's her usual delightful self."

He shakes his head as he looks at me, sadness in his eyes for a second before it disappears.

"I'll be fine, Dad. Promise."

He nods once before straightening his jacket and leaving.

"Well, okay then," I mutter, throwing myself onto the sofa and burying my head in the cushion to scream.

Why is everyone in my life testing my fucking patience?

A faint ringing fills the air as I lift my head. I scramble off the sofa and run to my bedroom, grabbing my cell phone off the bedside table. I frown when I see Steven's name on the screen. He started as a guard like me, and now he's the head of security at the casino.

"Hey, Steven. What's up?"

"I need a hand. Tatiana's been roughed up. She won't let any of us help her."

"Shit, okay. I'm on my way. I'll be there in twenty minutes."

"Thanks, Nova. I owe you one." He hangs up before I can say anything else.

I don't waste time. I wash my face and brush my teeth before pulling on a fresh suit and shirt. I might not be technically working, but I'll get a lot more respect wearing this outfit than I would wearing a dress where I'm going.

I quickly braid my thick, dark hair to keep it out of my face. I don't bother with much makeup—I rarely do when I'm working. A little lipstick and mascara is enough. I'm not out to impress anyone. Grabbing my keys, phone, and wallet, I shove everything into my pockets before slipping my gun into my holster and my knife into my boot and head out.

Driving over the speed limit, I arrive in fifteen minutes. Climbing out, I hand the keys to the valet, who's looking at my 1967 Shelby Mustang with his mouth open and dick hard. I can't help but laugh. Everyone is used to seeing me in the town car, which is a perk of the job. This year's model is a top-of-the-line Bentley. Last year, it was a Rolls. Each car screams money, but they don't turn heads like my baby. Of course, if anyone had seen what she looked like when I bought her, they would've reacted differently. It took a lot of blood, sweat, and tears to get her looking like this, but I can't claim any credit for it other than picking the gunmetal gray color.

"Scratch it and die," I warn him as I head inside.

I bypass reception and head straight for the elevators. Hitting the call button, I stand there and wait. When the doors

slide open, I step inside and press the button for the thirteenth floor. Staring at myself in the mirrored walls, I wonder how this is my life—running around cleaning up everyone else’s messes—but shake it off. Wishing for something different is a waste of time, and I know all too well how much worse things could be.

The ding of the elevator signaling my floor breaks me out of my thoughts as I straighten and wait for the doors to open. When they do, I walk down the empty hallway, knocking on the door at the end when I reach it.

It opens immediately. Steven looks at me with worry in his eyes.

“How is she?”

“She won’t let me or anyone else near her. She agreed to let me guard the door until you got here, that’s it. I’ve never felt so fucking helpless in my life.”

“You put a layer of protection between her and anyone coming through that door. Trust me, you made more of a difference than you’ll ever know.”

He scrubs his hand down his face. “Tell me what to do.”

“Where are you supposed to be right now?”

He checks his watch before answering. “I’ve gotta cover shift change in ten minutes, but then I’m finished in an hour.”

“Alright, I want you to go do what you’ve gotta do. I’ll take care of Tati.”

He looks like he’s going to argue, but he swallows down whatever he’s about to say. For better or worse, this is the world we live in.

“Okay, fine. But text me if you need me.”

“I will. I’m glad you called.”

He nods. We both know there isn’t anyone else he could call who’d give a damn. He turns and yanks the door open and lets it slam shut behind him, his anger palpable.

I latch the door and blow out a breath, readying myself before I head to the bathroom. Tapping the door, I announce myself, so she knows it's me, before easing it open.

Tatiana is sitting in the bath as it fills. The room is beginning to steam up, but it does nothing to hide the damage done to the woman. I keep my emotions locked down, even though everything inside me wants to hunt down the animal that did this.

“Hey, Tati.”

## Chapter 3

---

### *Nova*



She lifts her head from where it's resting on her bent knees and looks at me, a wealth of torture and shame in her eyes.

"Talk to me," I tell her softly as I walk closer and get to my knees beside her, turning off the water so I don't miss anything she says.

"What do you want me to say?" she whispers, her usually lilting voice flat.

"Do you need the hospital?" She shakes her head so hard I'm worried she'll hurt herself.

"Alright, Tati, calm down. No hospital. But you have to tell me the truth. Do you need a doctor?"

I can treat cuts and bruises, but anything beyond that, I'm useless. Tears fall from her eyes as I gently run my fingers through her hair.

"The truth, Tati. I can call someone to come here, and nobody would ever know. Trust me."

She nods. "Yes."

"Where?"

"My arm and my stomach," she chokes out.

She leans back and lifts the arm furthest from me. Judging from the color and size of her wrist, I'd say it's broken. My eyes move down her naked body, cataloging the vicious bite

marks and fingerprint-shaped bruises before they land on her stomach.

I can't see any significant damage, but that doesn't mean things aren't fucked up on the inside. I pull out my phone, fire off two texts, and wait for a reply before I shove it back into my pocket.

"The doctor is on her way. I'm going to help you out of the tub and get you dried off while we wait."

She grabs my arm when I move to stand up. "I need to get him off me," she begs.

I look into her eyes and nod before taking a washcloth from the rack in the corner and soaping it up with a bottle of fruity shower gel. Gently, I wash away the horror of her night. I don't tell her we need to preserve the evidence. We both know she'd be dead before a statement could ever be taken.

Grabbing a towel, I drain the water before reaching for her so she can use me for support. It's not easy. I end up soaked trying to get her out without hurting her. Her whimpers breaking my heart. Once she's out, I wrap her in the fluffy towel and help her walk out of the bathroom. When I get her into the bedroom, she freezes, staring at the bed with terror in her eyes. I ease her down to the floor, yanking a pillow off the bed to put under her head. Spotting a robe on the back of the door, I grab it and lay it over her, keeping her covered and warm as she starts to shake.

"Tell me what happened, Tati." I smooth her hair away from her face and keep my voice soft.

"I was just doing my job. It was a rough night. I'm fine now," she says, almost robotic, even with the rough rasp.

"This is not your fault, Tati. They pay to fuck you, not fuck you up." I fight it, but the anger is there, boiling up to the surface.

"You're the only one that thinks that," she whispers, looking up at me as tears slip out the corner of her eyes.

"I'm not. I'm just the only one not afraid to say it out loud."

“I’m a whore, Nova.”

“You’re a fucking human being.”

She shuts up, and I let her have a moment to collect herself while I get my temper under control.

Once upon a time, Tati grew up like most other women in our world. Her father was a made man, her mother a former beauty queen, and her older brother was starting in the family business until it was revealed that Daddy was a traitor. There are many things that we hold dear in our world, but nothing ranks higher than loyalty.

Punishment meant the execution of her mother, father, and brother. Tati was spared because she was only fifteen at the time. Despite the don’s many flaws, he loathes violence against children. I don’t know the ins and outs of what went on after that, but five years ago, Tati was back on the scene as a working girl entertaining high-end clients and made men.

She says it was her choice, but something tells me there weren’t many options. The son—or, in this case, daughter—shouldn’t pay for the sins of their father, but they always do. Legacies are forged in blood and steeped in violence.

“It was Aldo,” she says, breaking the silence. I don’t react, already knowing what she was going to say. “It’s done. I’m fine. I just need to rest.”

“I know, Tati,” I soothe. “Tell me the rest.”

“He was late. He was supposed to be here by three, but when he still hadn’t arrived by four, I decided to get changed and have something to eat before getting ready for my next client. They have different... tastes than Aldo.”

I keep stroking her hair, letting her talk while I listen.

“He turned up at four fifteen, pissed that I wasn’t dressed the way he wanted me to be.”

“That was just a convenient excuse to take his anger out on you. There was nothing you could have done, Tati.”

“I knew it was going to be bad. I even tried to tell him I was sick, but he didn’t care. I don’t get to tell him no. I...



he...” She sucks in a breath, then groans in pain.

“Shh... I don’t need the details, Tati. I can see what that fucker has done to you.”

A light knock on the door has Tati tensing. I get to my feet and look out the peephole. Seeing a familiar face, I pull my gun and open the door.

Ella looks at me, takes in the gun, and pauses. I make sure she’s alone before I welcome her in. “Sorry, Doc, can’t be too careful.”

“Who do we have here?” Ella asks, carrying her bag over to Tati and squatting down beside her.

“This is my friend Tati. I need you to check her out and tell me what she needs.”

“Alright.” She rummages around in her bag before pulling out a syringe and a vial of something.

I look at Tati to see how she’s doing. Pain and terror are etched on her face.

“I’m just going to give you something to help with the pain,” Ella tells Tati, and I see the moment it starts to take effect. Tati’s face relaxes, and she drifts off to sleep.

“Jesus, she’s a mess. What the fuck happened?”

“She’s been raped and beaten, Ella. I thought that was obvious,” I snap at her before sighing. “Look, she refused to go to the hospital, but I don’t see any way around it. Her wrist looks broken, and she’s complaining about her stomach. She’s bleeding between her legs, too.”

“Shit, hold on.”

Ella opens her bag again and takes out a stethoscope and a few other items, but I look away and focus on Tati’s face, resuming to stroke her hair even though she can’t feel it anymore. Maybe I’m doing it more to comfort myself. I keep my eyes on her face the whole time Ella examines her, refusing to take away any more of this woman’s dignity.

“Yeah, she needs a hospital, Nova. Her wrist is definitely broken, she has vaginal and anal tearing that requires stitching, and I can see what I believe to be wooden splinters.” She stops to blow out a breath before continuing. “I suspect she has internal bleeding from whatever was forced inside her. I’m also worried about the damage to her throat. There’s pretty extensive bruising from being choked.”

“Do you still have the wheelchair in your car?” I interrupt her.

“I do. It’s easier to take patients back to the clinic with me.”

“Do you have the equipment to treat this at your clinic?”

“No. I’m not a surgeon, Nova. Fuck.”

“Right. Hospital it is, then. Take her in as a Jane Doe. Say you found her in the parking lot if you have to, but stay with her. I’ll have someone meet you there who will tell you what to do next.”

“You know who did this to her, don’t you?”

“Yeah. And no, I won’t tell you who, because then I’d be signing your death warrant. Go get the wheelchair while I make some calls.” I dismiss her before she can ask any more questions. I get that she’s pissed, but pissed is better than dead.

She stomps out of the room, the door slamming behind her. I walk over and bolt it once more before pulling out my cell. I dial Steven’s number and wait for him to pick up.

“How is she?”

“Careful what you say, Steven. You don’t want people asking questions.”

“Sorry. I’m good, though. I’m alone.”

“Alright, well, I’m bringing Tati down soon. She needs the hospital. Can you make sure the coast is clear in, like, ten minutes? I’ll take her out the back west fire exit.”

“I’m on it. I’ll text you when it’s clear. The cameras will catch you, though.”

“I’m not hiding her from the cameras. I’m just dropping her off so if the cops ask we can say she was alive when she left.”

He sucks in a sharp breath. “That bad?”

“Worse,” I answer before hanging up.

I scrub my hand over my face and feel a headache coming on. If questioned, I’ll tell them that Steven called me because he was having an issue with one of the girls, that I had her checked over and it was my call to send her to the hospital. Tati is just one girl from the collection of girls who work here at the casino. She isn’t the first who needs to go to the hospital, and she won’t be the last. The girls know to play dumb and keep their mouths shut. As far as anyone knows, that’s where my involvement will end.

Though, if I have my way, this will be the last time Tati ever has to worry about Aldo or any other John hurting her again.

\* \* \*

By the time I make it home, I’m ready to break open a bottle of red wine and drink the whole damn thing. I kick off my shoes, strip out my clothes, and toss them in the hamper. I take a quick shower before pulling on an oversized T-shirt and a pair of leggings, then give in to temptation. I open the wine, forgoing the glass, and park my ass on the sofa in front of the TV. I turn on the crime channel to yell at them for doing everything wrong and relax back into the marshmallow-like cushions.

I think about Tati and wonder if she’ll take the help I’m offering her when she wakes up. I think about Gia and the future she’ll have with Aldo if he starts using her the same way. But mostly, I think about putting a bullet in the man’s head. It might lead to my execution, but it would be worth it.

When my cell buzzes on the table, I pick it up. “Hey.”

“It’s done,” J’s voice states before hanging up. I breathe a sigh of relief, saying a silent thank you.

Four years ago, I stumbled upon an underground network that helped primarily women and children in danger disappear. Since then, I've sent seven people their way. Tati makes eight. I'd hoped she would take the help, but some people are so scared of the unknown that they stay, hoping things will change. The only change I see these days is death.

Tati must have come to the same conclusion. Up until now, she'd been determined to prove a point. She wanted to be more than the daughter of a traitor, but that was never going to happen. Swimming in bloody waters will always bring sharks, and Tati was easy pickings. She has no protection and no family. The problem is that the Mafia never lets people walk away.

In about an hour, Tatiana will be pronounced dead. And in a few days, the assholes that destroyed her world will forget she ever existed. Then maybe she will finally be able to live the life she deserves.

A knock on the door has my head turning. I don't get visitors, ever, and with my father away, I know it's not him. Not that he ever knocks.

I grab my gun, disengage the safety, and go to the door, drawing back the drapes that cover the bulletproof window. My blood turns to ice when I see Vigo Fiore outside. The don doesn't make social calls, not to my father, and certainly not to me.

Which begs the question: why the hell is he here now?

## Chapter 4

---

### *Nova*



I never thought I'd say this, but I'm glad I'm wearing pants.

I sit on the edge of the sofa, watching him as he sits in the chair across from me with a glass of water in his hand.

“Is Gia okay?”

“Hmm?” He looks up and sighs. “Yes, Gia is fine, I'm sure.”

His words are dismissive, and something about them makes the hairs on my neck stand on end. The don might be many things, but dismissive of his daughter isn't one of them.

“Do you remember the night of the attack?”

He doesn't state which attack, and there have been many, but I know which night he's referring to. The question makes me uneasy. I fiddle with my pendant. It's a half medallion of the Archangel Michael, Patron Saint of Protection, and the only jewelry I wear. I think back to that day, but nothing stands out.

“No, sir. I don't really remember anything. A couple of fuzzy images and someone telling me to hide. I thought I might remember more over the years, but that whole day is a blank.”

He swallows and stares at my necklace before taking a sip of his water.

“It’s to be expected. You were so young. I wish I could forget, but some ghosts will haunt us forever.”

Yeah, I have no idea what to say to that. This man has rarely interacted with me beyond the odd uncomfortable look or giving me orders regarding his daughter. Now, all of a sudden, he wants to chat? I’m not buying it.

“Is there something you want me to do?”

His eyes clash with mine, and for a second, I swear I see nothing but pain and regret in them.

“I want you to marry Aldo Lambardi.”

I bark out a laugh, but when his face remains serious, I realize he’s not joking.

“I don’t understand.” I try to keep my tone neutral when what I really want to do is scream in his face.

“I know you don’t.” He rubs his hand over his face, suddenly looking older than he is.

“Gia is in love with Aldo, and I’m sure he feels the same way about her.”

Okay, that last part is bullshit, but if there is anything that’s going to spare me, it’s his daughter’s feelings in this.

“What Gia wants is irrelevant.”

“Sir—”

“She is not my daughter. You are.”

I freeze, my eyes briefly dropping to the bottle of wine I’d been drinking. Did someone slip me something? Am I dreaming right now?

I stand up and move to put some much-needed space between us. “I’m not sure what’s happening, but maybe you should call my dad.”

He slams his fist on the table.

“I am your fucking father,” he roars.

My fingers twitch with the urge to grab my gun from the sofa cushion where I left it, though shooting the don is not

recommended.

“I’m sorry. I thought I’d have more time.” He pulls the pocket square from the breast pocket of his jacket and dabs his forehead. “Sit. Let me explain.”

Reluctantly, I do, choosing the space on the sofa farthest from him.

“The fighting between us and the Irish was coming to a head. I knew this before you were even born, but that’s the nature of this life. We live in turbulent waters. If we don’t learn to swim, we drown. We try to keep our women and children out of it, but unfortunately, not everyone agrees with that stance.

“When it became obvious to the Irish that the tides were turning in our favor, they sought to weaken me. They thought if they took what I held most dear, I’d either become reckless or I’d give up. But the fuckers always did underestimate me.”

He places his glass on the coffee table and clasps his hands together. I wish I could somehow get a call to my dad and warn him that the don was unraveling. He’d be able to tell me what the fuck to do.

“They planned well. I’ll give them that. They simultaneously bombed a chunk of our legitimate business before hitting the docks and our warehouses. While we were scrambling to put out figurative and literal fires, they used the distraction they caused to hunt down my family.” His eyes slip closed for a moment before he continues.

“They killed my boy first. He was gunned down with his guards on his way home from school.”

I can’t help the pang of sympathy I feel for the man when I see the devastation in his eyes.

“My wife was next. She was dead when I found her. There was only one person left that I gave a fuck about. You.”

Now it’s my turn to swallow, because instead of seeing madness in his eyes, I see nothing but truth. For the first time since he arrived, I feel something other than anxiety over having the don here. I feel fear. Every single instinct in me is

telling me to run, that hearing what he says is going to irrevocably change my life. And yet, like a car crash playing out in slow motion, I'm helpless to look away.

"You were at the playground with your nanny. When I got there, the nanny was dead, and I couldn't find you. I thought..." His voice trails off as he looks at me. After a few moments, he shakes his head, pulling himself from his memories. "You were hiding, your arms wrapped around Gia. That medallion was hanging from your neck—your Nanny Viola's last offering of protection—and I knew... I knew if I did nothing, I would lose you too."

"I'm not trying to be disrespectful, sir, but I'm not sure I get what you're saying." Or at least that's what I'm telling myself. Somehow, the words I thought were crazy before feel like a truth I don't want to hear. "You're saying you're my father and Gia's my sister?"

"Fuck no."

I relax a little until he speaks again.

"I ordered Alessio to take you and train you, and in return, I'd take his daughter and give her everything she could ever wish for."

I feel vomit rush up my throat, but I swallow it down as ice floods my veins. "What did you just say?"

When he opens his mouth to repeat himself, I jump up and back away, needing to put space between me and this... this fucking man. I don't even know this person. He is not my father, and right now, I'm not sure he is even my don.

"You swapped us, like some bad movie?" My voice comes out choked as I try to wrap my head around what he's saying. I mean, how can this be real?

"You had a target on your back. I had to keep you safe."

"By putting another little girl in the firing line?" I whisper, appalled.

His jaw tenses. "I did what I had to do."



“You’re the reason my father can barely stand to look at me. Or I guess I should call him Alessio. You took his child from him and made her a target.”

He stands up, his imposing form reminding me to be cautious. Despite everything, this man is still capable of snapping my neck.

“God willing, you will never know what it feels like to lose a child.”

“But Alessio does. You did that. Not the Irish, the Russians, or even the cartels. You, the man he swore *omertà* for. The man he pledged his life to.” I can’t imagine the betrayal he must have felt.

“You don’t have to like my decisions, but you will remember who you’re talking to.”

“And who is that exactly? Because right now, you’re nothing more than a stranger.”

He stalks toward me, backing me up until I’m against the wall with nowhere else to go.

“You think you have it all figured out, don’t you? But you know nothing, Nova. Nothing. I did everything to keep you safe.”

“No, you didn’t. Alessio kept me safe. I kept me safe.” I shake my head, feeling numb. I know I’m in shock, but I’m blown away by how he’s acting about it all.

“I had Alessio train you so you could protect yourself. Women in the Mafia don’t get that kind of training. As my daughter, you would have been expected to keep quiet and look pretty. That would have done nothing but get you killed. As Gia’s bodyguard, though, I could bend the rules. People knew I was protective because of the attack. They understood Gia needed a female guard on staff so she, you, could accompany her into changing rooms and restrooms. It was an acceptable excuse, easy to explain away, and all the while, it was to train you to never be an easy target again.”

I stare into his eyes and wonder how someone can be so smart and so mis-fucking-guided at the same damn time.

“I’ve saved Gia’s life eleven times. Eleven attempts on the life of an innocent girl whose only crime was being the child of a don. Do you at least love her?”

He looks away, and my heart breaks, not so much for Gia but for Alessio.

“How did you even get away with it?”

“Nobody questions me, Nova. You and Gia were just little girls, same age, same coloring, same dark hair. Nobody paid much attention to you and those close enough to know the difference...”

“You killed them.” Innocent people were murdered to hide my true identity. I wonder if those choices lay as heavy on his conscience as they are on mine right now.

I always found it odd how, as his *consigliere*, Alessio always seemed indifferent and, at times, angry with the don. I never in a million years would have guessed this.

“That’s why you asked if I remembered.”

He nods but doesn’t say anything.

“Does Gia know?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. That girl couldn’t keep a secret if her life depended on it or, in this case, yours.”

I feel my eyes virtually bug out of my head. Blood or not, this is the woman he raised as his daughter. She is the way she is largely because of his influence. Jesus, is Gia how I would have turned out if life had played out the way it was supposed to?

“Why now? Why, after all this time, tell me now?”

“Because I need you to marry Aldo.”

I close my eyes, having forgotten about that. But if he’s serious about him being my father, then he’s serious about this, too.

“Why?” I ask, opening my eyes.

“Are you questioning me?”

My temper flares before I can stop it. “I think I have the right to know what’s going on when it affects my life,” I bite out.

He cups my jaw tightly, not enough to hurt but enough to be a threat. “You’ll do as I say because it’s your responsibility.”

I fist my hands at my sides and just stare at him, refusing to say anything. Sighing, he lets me go and takes a step back, an apology in his eyes that never makes it to his lips.

“The five families have kept our enemies away. As the strongest family of all of them, it has fallen to me to ensure it stays that way. Lately, there have been some who insist on testing the boundaries. The cartels have been moving drugs and women across the border, transporting them through the fringes of our territories. Same with the Irish. Their drugs keep ending up in my city, no matter how many of their dealers we eliminate. Even some of the other families are causing trouble. The only fuckers keeping their distance right now are the Russians, but if they find a weakness, they’ll exploit it.”

“And you think I’m the weakness?”

“Not yet, but you will be. I’m dying, Nova.”

He takes another step back as his words seep in. I wait for the pain to hit, but nothing can penetrate the numbness I’m feeling.

“Our enemies are pushing in, but it’s not them I’m worried about right now. It’s the ones trying to take over from within. The Fiore family has been in power for three generations. Though there are five families, it is widely known that most defer to me.”

I don’t argue with that. People call him *capo di tutti i capi*, boss of all the bosses, and there is an element of truth to it. Vigo is more powerful than the dons of the other four families. He has more territory and more men at his disposal. The other dons would have to band together to bring Vigo down, which is why they have the Commission, made up of all the heads of the families, to keep him in check.

“The Commission will use my death to remove the power advantage that I have right now, breaking my territory into pieces and sharing it amongst themselves. I know because it’s what I would do.”

“I still don’t understand what it has to do with me.”

“When I’m gone, all my assets become yours. The secret of who you really are will be revealed, and you’ll once again be the target of our enemies.”

“Then don’t leave it to me. I don’t need or want any of it.”

He snarls at me. “You are my fucking legacy. It was always going to end this way. Being a guard served its purpose. You are fit and strong and have an inside into how things work that you wouldn’t have been privy to otherwise. But the time for that is over. Aldo Lambardi is my underboss. He will succeed me, but he is not my blood. You are. You will be his bride, and together you will keep this family and all it holds dear at the fucking top where it belongs.”

I open my mouth to argue with him, but he moves forward, wrapping his hand around my throat, and leans in.

“He is the only one with the power to keep you safe.”

I almost snort. He cannot be that stupid.

“Gia and her feelings are irrelevant. Your safety is all that matters.”

He releases me and straightens the lapels of his jacket.

I almost tell him about Aldo’s violent tendencies toward women but stop myself. If I find out he already knows and still insists I marry him, it will cause far more damage than the knowledge he’s leaving me with tonight. No, I need to think. I can’t marry Aldo. I won’t. I’d rather die, and if that’s the only other option, then so be it. But first, I need time.

“When?”

“As soon as possible. A week at the most.”

“A month. You owe me that.”

He looks like he's about to argue but thinks better of it. "Fine. But I expect you to show up and smile and be the dutiful daughter. You will make this marriage work and have children that carry on our traditions."

"I'll do what you want. All I ask is for you to keep this quiet until I walk down the aisle. You said it yourself. I've only made it this far because people don't know who I am. Some people won't take kindly to being tricked, so my identity needs to be kept secret until the last possible minute."

He weighs my words and nods. "That's a smart decision. I need to tell Aldo, though."

"You might trust Aldo, but we don't know how many of his men are trustworthy. He might not be happy to have the reveal done on our wedding day, but he's smart enough to see the big picture and understand why."

"It's risky."

"It might be the only way to stop the wedding from becoming a funeral."

"Alright. For now, we'll keep this between us. I'll return home, and things will stay as they are until I get to walk you down the aisle."

He chokes up a little at that, and the ice around my heart thaws a bit until I remind myself of all the lives lost because of his stupid decision.

"I'll see myself out. Goodbye, Nova."

"Goodbye, sir," I whisper as the sound of the door banging in its frame reminds me of a cell door closing.

That's what being married to Aldo would be like. A prison sentence followed by, if I'm lucky, a walk on death row.

I shake my head, feeling tears sting my eyes, but I refuse to let them fall. There will be time for crying later. Now is the time for answers.

## Chapter 5

---

### *Nova*



I sit in a chair in the corner and find comfort in the shadows of the darkened hotel room. The gun rests heavily in my lap as the low hum of traffic outside provides a backdrop to my wayward thoughts.

What Vigo said about the conflict between the five families is true. It's no secret that the Fiore family always wielded the most power. In the beginning, it had been earned. The other families followed out of respect and deference. But times change, and so do people..

Some understood Vigo grieving, having lost loved ones themselves. But the don's grief twisted him into something else entirely. In a bid to avenge his family, other families suddenly found themselves in the line of fire. Men and women were killed without a single second of remorse, leaving children orphaned and a city in fear. The support he once garnered began to crumble as the man everyone respected became a tyrant.

When you shit all over the people who helped place you on a pedestal, nobody holds out a hand to stop your descent when you fall from grace.

The most vocal opposition comes from the Moretti family. If I had to guess, I'd say they are the reason Vigo is so determined to marry me off. There has always been bad blood between them, though nobody knows why. There is no way

Vigo would risk the Moretti family stealing his crown, even after he's dead.

My marriage to Aldo keeps his legacy intact. He's not thinking about my life, he's thinking about his throne. Well, fuck him. I'd rather swallow a bullet than tie myself to Aldo.

The lock beeping draws my attention to the door. I keep my hand wrapped around my gun and wait patiently as it opens and the man walks in. He closes the door and flips on the light, cursing in both Italian and English when he spots me.

"What the fuck, Nova? I could have shot you. What are you doing here?"

I don't point out that I could have planted a bullet in his chest long before he could have even drawn his weapon.

"Hello, Father."

He frowns at how formal I sound, stepping farther into the room. His eyes drop to the gun in my lap. "Something I need to know?"

"I had a visit from the don today."

His tense body sags as if all the strength seeps out of him. "You know." He moves to sit on the bed, his head in his hands. He looks as though he's aged ten years in the two minutes since he walked through the door.

"So, it's true?"

That tiny flame of hope I had is snuffed out when he lifts his head and looks me in the eye. "That he's your blood? Yes."

"My blood?" I scoff. "Just say it as it is. He's my father."

"Is he? It takes more than blood to define parentage. He hasn't cleaned up your vomit or wiped your tears. That makes you more mine than his."

I fight back my tears, refusing to give in to them.

"You gave me everything," I concede. "Except love. And the thing is, I'm not even mad. I'm heartbroken for you. He took your child and put her in danger. And for what? So, he could tie me to a madman?"

He frowns. “What are you talking about?”

“He has ordered I marry Aldo.”

He blinks, his face clear of emotion, except he can’t hide the unease in his eyes.

“I’m torn because if I marry him, I save Gia from the same fate. Is that even her name? How—”

He holds up his hand for me to stop talking. “Gia’s real name is Gianna. Yours is—*was*—Galilea. Gia as a nickname sort of fits both, so nobody questioned it.”

“Where did Nova come from?” I ask, though it doesn’t really matter.

“Your middle name is Stella, which means star. Nova is a bright star that fades away. It seemed fitting. To keep you alive, I had to watch all that made you Galilea slowly disappear.”

“I’m sorry for what he did and for what he took.”

“I let him,” he whispers, shame dripping from his words.

“You’d be dead if you fought him on it. What he wants, he gets.”

“Like Gianna.”

My eyes slip closed as my own grief threatens to drown me. Whether he intended it or not, Gia is exactly like the man who raised her, and I’m more like Alessio.

“She’ll come around,” I tell him, opening my eyes. “She’ll be mad when she finds out, but she’ll forgive you.”

“No. She won’t. I wasn’t allowed near her, or he’d kill us both. I had to stand on the sidelines and watch as my little girl turned into a monster. To Gia, I’m nobody, the hired help who she looks down her nose at. If I were dying, she’d step over me and carry on as if my death meant nothing. She has no compassion for human life unless it benefits her somehow.”

He stands up and starts pacing, his hand running through his hair. “I’m too late. Gianna died that day in the park. Gia is



Vigo's daughter, not mine," he says, and I feel the weight of his words rest heavily on my shoulders.

He must hate me.

As if sensing my thoughts, he turns and looks at me. "Vigo refused to let me love you. Showing you any affection was forbidden."

The more I learn, the angrier I get. Vigo is a selfish man, and his reckless decisions have left the rest of us living through the ripple effect that a single moment had on all our lives.

"I was banned from showing you that you mattered to me, but the one thing Vigo couldn't control is how I feel. I know you won't believe me now, after everything, but it doesn't change the fact that it's true."

"What's true?"

"That you matter." He steps forward and hits his chest. "You matter to me. I can't dial it back or turn it off. And God knows, at times, I wished I could."

I stand up and place my gun on the chair before walking slowly toward him. He looks at me warily. Then, for the first time since I was little, I wrap my arms around him, and he holds me tightly as he breaks for the past that broke him and the future that will break me if I can't change it.

Eventually, he gets control of himself and lets me go. Taking a step back, he wipes his face, and I take the moment to ask something I've been wondering.

"You're Vigo's *consigliere*, yet I rarely see you act as an adviser. Vigo does what he wants. Why?"

"The role of *consigliere* is built on trust. Trust, faith, and loyalty, and it goes both ways."

The pieces suddenly click into place. "And he broke it when he forced you to hand Gia over to him and distance yourself from her and me."

He swallows and nods his head.

“Does anyone else know?”

“Anyone who knew was killed.”

He sits back down on the bed as I wander over to the window and look out over the city.

“He’s dying.” I hear his sharp intake of breath and turn to face him. “I didn’t ask what was wrong with him. I don’t care. He has agreed to keep my identity quiet for one month, then I’m to marry Aldo before he takes over as the don.”

“He’ll kill you.”

“He’ll kill you too. He’ll appoint his own *consigliere*.”

“I don’t give a fuck about me,” he snarls.

“Yeah, well, I do.”

He shuts up at that. I sigh and go back to the chair, moving my gun so I can sit once more.

“As much as there is no love between me and Gia, she doesn’t deserve this. She’s about to lose the man she thinks is her father, the home she lives in, the wealth she’s grown accustomed to, and the man she wants to marry.”

“If she marries Aldo, she’ll keep all that.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “We’ve already established that whoever ends up as Aldo’s bride will end up dead.”

“No. You would end up dead because you’re not like him. He will take your strength as a challenge and try breaking you. But he doesn’t know you like I do. You might bend, but you will never break. And when he figures that out, he’ll kill you.

“Gia’s different. He won’t need to break her to mold her into the woman he wants because she is already perfect for him. You don’t see it because she’s careful around you. She can’t afford for her *daddy*”—he spits out the word viciously—“to find out what she’s really like.

“She’s cruel for the sake of it, has a sadistic streak a mile long, and she will not care what her husband does with other women as long as she has access to his wallet.”

I want to argue and say she's not that bad, but I've seen glimpses of the evil that lurks just beneath the surface.

"You should run. I have money saved for this very day. Go live your life away from all this."

"And leave you here to die?"

"If you stay, you'll die too. Don't ask me to stand by and watch. Seeing you fade away was hard enough. I can't witness you being snuffed out, too."

"Then help me come up with a plan because I'm not leaving. They would hunt me down anyway. I'm the last Fiore and the sole heir to the empire. I'll be hunted by people in our own camp as well as by all our enemies. I'm the new shiny prize."

"Why would he do this after everything we fucking sacrificed to make you safe?" he bellows.

I shrug. I don't have the answers he's after. Everything is about to come crashing down, and the only person who won't be caught up in the wreckage is Vigo because he'll be dead.

"Okay. What about the other families?"

"We're powerful but not popular with any of them anymore, you know that. There is nothing I can offer them that they don't already have except my inheritance. But nobody is going to want to take on Aldo and our family. It's a death sentence for anyone that gets involved."

"We're Cosa Nostra. We are death."

I don't argue with him. It changes nothing. "I thought about the Russians, but—"

He starts cursing, so I lean back and let him have his moment.

"You done?" I ask when the room goes quiet.

"The Russians would take your money and whore you out."

"Then they're no worse than Aldo," I snap, frustrated. "I need someone in my corner that Aldo is scared of. Someone

he won't want to cross."

He opens his mouth to respond, probably with a series of curse words, then stops himself and tilts his head in thought.

"What is it?" I can practically see the wheels in his brain turning.

"I met with one of my contacts while I've been here. They keep me informed about all of the other families. They told me that they heard something the other day they weren't supposed to."

"Okay..."

"Giovanni Moretti wants to step down as the head of his family. His health is failing, and his heart's not in it."

"That's not surprising. He's one of the oldest dons. Not that I know too much about them, thanks to the feud between their family and ours."

"Dano is in position as the underboss to take Giovanni's seat. The problem is people are whispering, saying he's weak without his attack dog."

"Dano is Giovanni's son, right? People might whisper, but I doubt more will come of it." I frown. "I thought Giovanni had two sons. I'm sure I heard there were two underbosses." Which is unusual but not unheard of.

He nods. "He does. Vice Moretti is currently serving time behind bars for manslaughter."

"Vice Moretti," I say. "I don't know anything about the man," I admit.

"Vice is... how do I put it?"

"Dangerous?"

"Unstable. He's the one who would usually take care of Dano's problems. It's the fear of Vice that kept their enemies at bay, but with Vice inside—"

"Dano's hold on being next in line for the throne is shaky."

"Exactly. And according to my source, Dano—"

Suddenly, I remember hearing rumors about the other Moretti son.

I bite my lip. “I did hear something about Vice being gay.” I assume it was just someone causing shit because if the Cosa Nostra isn’t progressive enough to see women as equals, it sure as fuck isn’t ready to accept same-sex relationships. Admitting to something like that would get him killed.

Alessio leans back and gazes at the ceiling, lost in thought. “I’ve heard the whispers too, but nobody goes after Vice and lives to tell tales about it.”

He sits back up, his eyes locking on mine. “His reputation is worse than Aldo’s. He has no conscience, no moral compass, and shows no remorse for any of his actions. He’ll cut a man’s tongue out with one hand while eating with the other.”

He licks his lips as he contemplates his next words. “Aldo is scared of him. I’m not sure what happened, but there was an incident when they were younger. Now Aldo steers well clear of the man.”

I lean forward. “What are you saying? Trade one psychopath for another?”

“The difference between Vice and Aldo is that Vice doesn’t have a thing for hurting women.”

That gives me pause. I rub my thumb over my lips. “Still, my name alone will make me his enemy, and I can’t hide it from him. The second Vigo dies, I’ll inherit, and it will all come spilling out.”

“The fact that you are who you are should make you more attractive to him. It’s a giant *fuck you* to Vigo if Vice has his daughter.”

“They’ll only drag me back. Unless...” I blow out a breath, trying to rein in my crazy thoughts. But no matter how many times I try to dismiss the idea, it seems like the only option.

“Unless what?”

“Unless I can convince him to marry me.”

“If he’s gay, he won’t be interested. You’ll need another—”

I interrupt him, shaking my head. “If he is gay, marriage will be the perfect setup. I can act as his dutiful wife in public and behind closed doors, he can fuck whoever he wants.”

Alessio looks sad for a moment. “I want more than this for you.”

“I’ll be alive, and right now, alive is the best we’ve got. I’m just not sure he’ll go for it. He’s managed this long already. And truthfully, what protection can he really offer from inside?”

“Well, like I was saying, my source overheard Dano talking about taking Vice out.”

“Seriously? I thought you said Vice is the one keeping him in power.”

“He is. Or was. The problem is, while he’s been inside, he’s become somewhat popular.”

I cock an eyebrow at that.

“People think he should be the one to become the next don because, just like you, they want someone who will stand up to Vigo and Aldo. They don’t have any faith in Dano’s abilities, and with Vice getting out soon...”

“How soon?”

“Two weeks. If Dano is successful and gets Vice killed, there will be nobody to challenge him. And Dano won’t give a single fuck about you. If anything, he’ll make an example of you.”

“So, to get Vice on board, all I have to do is convince the man his brother is trying to kill him and that he should marry me, the long-lost daughter of the man he hates. What could possibly go wrong?”

## Chapter 6

---

### *Nova*



I go through the motions for the next few days as Alessio helps me put my plan in place.

Gia, thankfully, is too wrapped up in herself to notice that anything is wrong. But once or twice, I've caught Vigo watching me while I pretend to be oblivious.

“Are you even listening to me?”

I look up at the sharp tone in Gia's voice. “Sorry, I was going over security details in my head for tomorrow.”

“It's a fucking charity luncheon, Nova. How hard is it to post guards at the doors?” she scoffs before pouring herself a glass of wine.

I raise a brow but say nothing. Anything I'd say would just go in one ear and out the other.

The sound of footsteps heading our way stops whatever tirade she might be working herself up to. When Vigo steps into the kitchen, I tense, waiting to see if he'll say anything. He barely looks at me before turning to Gia. “I realize it's short notice, but it turns out I will be able to attend your event tomorrow.”

Gia smiles widely, and something about it makes me want to puke. Gia might be a shitty human, but she loves Vigo.

“A daddy-daughter date? Sounds perfect.”

Vigo coughs, looking uncomfortable for a moment before he nods. "I'm looking forward to it, Gia." He looks at me and dips his head. "Nova."

Once he leaves, Gia sighs and sits down.

"You okay?"

For a second, I see a flash of vulnerability in her expression before she rolls her eyes and grabs her glass. Tipping her head back, she downs the contents before getting to her feet. "I'm going to lie down."

She walks off, and I let her, sensing she needs a moment to herself. I place her glass in the sink before heading toward the den to see if anyone else is around. I hear Vigo call me as I pass his office.

I hesitate for a second before turning back. "Sir?"

He gestures for me to enter and close the door. "How are you?"

I blink, surprised at his question, unsure if he genuinely cares or if he's just making conversation. "I'm fine, sir. Thank you."

"When we are alone, I expect you to call me Father."

Father. Not Dad or Daddy. I'm loath to call him anything besides *dick* right now. I was never allowed to call Alessio "Dad" in public. I never understood why until the sordid truth about my parentage came out. It's just one more thing Vigo stole from me.

"Until it's common knowledge, with respect, I'll continue to call you sir so that I don't slip up and make a mistake. I'd hate to blow the secret you've kept for twenty years." I can't help the slight hint of sarcasm.

His jaw ticks as he stands and moves over to the sideboard to pour himself a glass of whiskey. "Have you told Alessio about the wedding?"

"No. Why would I? We don't have that kind of relationship," I answer, keeping my voice neutral.



“Good. That’s good. I’ve been thinking about what you said about keeping quiet until the day of the wedding. Though I don’t like it, I can see it’s the smartest plan. Like you said, there is too much at stake to throw it all away now.”

My tense shoulders loosen a fraction.

“That said, a wedding still needs to be planned.”

I swallow down the urge to vomit, praying he doesn’t tell me he’s told Aldo. My whole plan rests on him not knowing until it’s too late for him to do anything about it.

“I’ve informed Aldo...” I almost hang my head in defeat as my brain scrambles to devise a new plan. I’m so caught up in my thoughts that I almost miss the rest of his sentence. “... that he’ll be marrying my daughter in one month’s time. For now, he assumes that’s Gia. But Aldo is loyal to me. The quick change of brides will be of no consequence to him.”

I squeeze my hands into fists at his sheer callousness.

“Unfortunately, for this to work, Gia will need to be told she is set to wed. She will then be able to plan the wedding so that when the day arrives, all you have to do is step into her shoes. Thankfully, you’re both the same size, so things like the wedding dress fitting shouldn’t be an issue. I’ll make sure she gives you your mother’s pearls to wear.”

I blink at the audacity of the man. “You want Gia to plan her own wedding without realizing she’s going to be traded out at the last minute?”

“Gia is Cosa Nostra. She knows her place. Perhaps it is you that needs to curb your expectations, no? Once married, you’ll be expected to run a household and have babies. The nightmare you’ve been living will finally be over.”

“This nightmare is my life. And though it may seem meaningless to you, I’ve been happy for the most part,” I choke out, wondering if he’d still sound so calm if I puked all over his expensive suit.

“You’ve been living a life of servitude when you should have been living like royalty. But don’t worry, all that will change.”

The man has a screw loose. I'd rather be living on the streets than rich and married to Aldo. I don't say anything, though, mostly because the shock has rendered me speechless. He must take my silence as acceptance because he smiles at me like an indulgent father, making everything feel so much worse. I need to get the hell out of this office and this life for good.

"Where is Gia?"

"She's lying down."

"Right, well, you can leave early. I'll have her night guard cover you. In fact, you should probably take some time off. You need to start making sure you have everything in order. Tie up any loose ends you might have and pack up your things. Don't worry about clothes or anything. They will all be bought new—something more befitting of your station."

I stare at him, trying to piece together this version of the man with the one I heard stories about from twenty years ago, but I can't. Whatever threads of humanity resided in him have frayed to the point of snapping. I feel cheated getting this version of him, though it sounds childish to admit it.

"Yes, sir. Is there anything else?"

He pauses momentarily, watching me in that unnerving way of his. "I want to see you once a week, just you and me. I don't have much time left, and though I understand the need for secrecy, I'm out of tomorrows."

Something in my heart twists, but I don't let it show. "Of course. Just let me know the time and place, and I'll make sure there is someone to cover Gia."

He sighs like he wanted a better response, but I have nothing left in me to give him.

"You may leave."

I nod, then turn, pull the door open, and slip away before he can change his mind. I drive home on autopilot, my mind swarming with thoughts, each more toxic than the last. By the time I step foot in my house, I'm so full of pent-up rage I want to smash something. I strip out of my clothes and climb into

the shower, turning the temperature up until it's almost unbearable. I sink to the floor and rest my head against my knees.

I've never been a big crier. Seemed to me that tears were a waste of time that solved nothing. But right now, I couldn't hold them back if I tried.

I cry until the water runs cold, but I refuse to beat myself up over it. My whole life has been flipped on its head, and whatever road I take now is going to leave me at the mercy of a madman. I guess the only choice I get to make is what type of crazy I want to risk it all for.

By the time I climb out, I'm completely drained. I dry off and crawl into bed, determined to give my brain a slight break from it all.

\* \* \*

I wake up to the sound of my alarm blaring. I briefly contemplate throwing the thing across the room before I think better of it.

I crawl out of bed, take another shower to wake myself up, and dress for the day in my usual suit. Taking time off might not be a bad idea, but I can't walk away without making sure I have people to cover me, especially today when the charity gala is on.

Thankfully, when I make it to the estate, the don isn't around, but Gia is. I knock on her door and let myself in, as she's putting the finishing touches on her outfit. She looks flawless in an off-white pantsuit with a raspberry-colored camisole underneath. Sophisticated and chic and every inch the Mafia wife.

I wince inwardly at my thoughts as my eyes drop, and I see the massive rock on her finger. What the fuck?

"Aldo and I are getting married. We're keeping it secret right now because Daddy is worried it might bring out the crazies. But in a month, I'll be Mrs. Aldo Lambardi. Can you believe it?" I look up at her, and she beams a huge smile at me in the mirror.

I stare back down at the ring. Are they fucking kidding me? And what are the chances they'll expect Gia to give the ring back so that Aldo can slide it on my finger afterward?

Something about seeing it solidifies my decision to talk to Vice. But the guilt over knowing this is all a sham makes me feel physically ill. I won't marry Aldo, no matter what happens, but I don't want Gia to marry him either. This is all such a fucking mess. I need to keep my mouth shut, though. This whole thing relies on me keeping quiet, but seeing that smile on her face makes something in my chest crack.

"Are you sure about this?"

*Be quiet, Nova.*

She turns to look at me. "You're not jealous, are you?" she asks before laughing.

"No, Gia. I just don't want to see you get hurt, and Aldo's reputation is brutal." I lay it out for her, hoping I can change her mind about him so that when everything comes to light, she escapes relatively unscathed by it all.

She rolls her eyes before turning back to the mirror to touch up her makeup. "He can do what he wants to his whores. I don't give a fuck." She shrugs.

"Well, you should. You haven't seen the way he's left them. I have. They don't deserve that."

She laughs coldly. "They're fucking whores. Cum receptacles whose only task is to spread their legs and take what they're given. If they don't like it, they can always find something else to do with their lives."

"You can't be that naïve."

"I'm not the naïve one, Nova. You are. I know how our world works. Do you think you're special because you get to play with the boys? Get over yourself. All those men you think have your back now wouldn't think twice about fucking you until you bleed if you stepped out of line. Know your place, Nova, and keep your nose out of mine and Aldo's relationship."

I stand there stunned, Alessio's words about Gia being a monster coming back to haunt me. I don't know why I still care.

"I'll meet you downstairs." I turn and walk away, stopping in the doorway when she calls my name.

"Just do your job and stay out of my business. You might think you know better, but the difference between you and me is that you're replaceable. I'm not. Don't push me."

She turns as I leave, and I shake my head at the fucking irony.

My phone rings, and I pull it out of my pocket, frowning when I see it's Alessio. "Hey, what's wrong?"

"Nothing. I just wanted to let you know everything is set. I've managed to get you in to see Vice."

I swallow and steady my nerves. "When?"

"Day after tomorrow. You ready for this?"

*No, not even a little bit.*

"Yeah, I'm ready."

## Chapter 7

---

### *Vice*



The sound of someone bawling makes my cock hard. I crack my neck and turn to the cell beside mine, imagining the newbie inside it.

Everyone is so cocksure of themselves when they get here, but there is something about the sound of the door slamming shut on the six-by-eight-foot cell that's now home for the next however many years that hits hard.

I turn back to look at the stain on the ceiling, humming a tune that's been stuck in my head all day. I slide my hand into my sweatpants and fist my cock, slowly stroking it up and down. Having a cell to myself means I don't need to hide what I'm doing—not that I'd give a shit about that anyway. If there is one thing being in prison has done for me, it's stripped away the sense of decency and decorum my old man and brother tried to instill in me.

I tried to do what they wanted, tried to make them happy, not because I felt I owed them anything, but because it made my life easier. Now, I don't fucking care. Ten years is a long time to spend behind bars. You learn to exist in a bubble while the rest of the world moves on without you.

I tighten my grip and stroke myself faster as my new neighbor's breath hitches. There is something about the sound of despair that just does it for me. Some would say it's fucked up. Lord knows I've made many therapists rich from trying to figure me out. I've picked up more than a few labels along the

way, but I don't put stock in any of them. I made peace with who I am years ago. It's everyone else who has a problem.

As the crying picks up in intensity, I groan, the sweet sound of anguish making my cock throb in time with the wailing. I try to drag it out, take my time and enjoy the moment, but I'm too worked up. By the time I spill my cum all over my hand and stomach, the newbie next door has quieted down.

If he thinks the first night is bad, he's in for a rude awakening. I won't be the only one who heard him crying. Sound carries like a motherfucker in this place. Everyone in this block will see the new guy as weak, making him a shiny new toy for them to play with. I could stop them, of course. Most people listen when I speak. But I don't get involved in shit that doesn't affect me.

Nobody is innocent in this place. Whatever happens to him will be deserved. Nothing serves up karma quite like the United States prison system, especially if you don't have the connections I do on the outside.

I grab my t-shirt from the end of the bed and use it to clean myself up before getting up and taking a piss. I still have an hour before lights out, so I work out for a bit, pushing myself until my muscles tremble. Keeping fit is one of the few ways to pass the time in here. Though I was fit before, it's nothing compared to the body I've honed now.

When the lights go out, I drop down and do a couple hundred push-ups, hoping it might help me sleep, though I know it won't. You'd think after all this time, I would have adjusted to the sounds of others sleeping nearby—the never-ending snoring, farting, sighing, and crying. But I never let my guard down. It's too ingrained. A trauma response, according to one of my therapists, from waking up in bed to find a gun pressed against my temple when I was eight.

Whatever the reason, I'm unlikely to change now. I've adapted to surviving on very little sleep. My body would probably go into shock if I ever did manage a full eight hours. I keep pushing myself until the noise around me eventually

fades. I crawl into bed, just as the sky starts to lighten, and drift off.

It feels like I've only been out for minutes—if that—when the sound of my cell door opening wakes me.

I swing my legs over the side of the bed and sit up as Harry, one of the guards, enters. "Moretti," he greets casually. As far as guards go, Harry's not so bad. He's easily bought and turns a blind eye when necessary. He just has no loyalty.

"What can I do for you, Harry?"

"Not what you can do for me, but what I can do for you."

I stretch, my neck cracking as I do. "I don't follow," I keep my voice even, but patience has never been my strong suit. If beating guards weren't frowned upon, I would've knocked a few of his fucking teeth loose already.

"You have a new visitor coming to see you today."

I frown at that. I've been here ten years, and the only visitors I've had have been the guys from my crew. "Who?"

"Some broad. I can't remember her name. A friend of a friend of a friend called in a favor. All I know is she wants to talk to you."

"And you don't think after having the same visitors for a decade that this might be some kind of setup?"

He shrugs. "It's a woman. She'll be searched before she walks in. How much trouble can she be?"

I give him a look that has him backing away.

"Right, well, shower and eat, and I'll come find you when it's time."

I climb to my feet as he hurries away, racking my brain over who it might be.

I grab my shit and head to the showers. Tio slides up next to me as we wait in line to get in. "What's with the face?" he asks.



“Getting a visitor today. Trying to figure out who it might be.”

“You don’t know? I thought you knew everything,” he jokes as I slowly turn to look at him.

“I know how many bones I can break before a person’s body goes into shock, which organs I can destroy without killing a man right away, and how to skin a person alive.”

“Right, so what you’re saying is, you know the important stuff. Got it.”

I don’t answer, I just stroll into the showers, ignoring every motherfucker around me.

Moving into one of the empty half-stalls, I place my stuff down on the wall and strip out of my clothes before turning the water on. The cold water hits me, and I grab the soap and start lathering my body.

As I wash away the sweat and dirt, I think about my visitor. My mother is dead, and so is my sister, and I’ve been here so fucking long that I can barely remember what a female looks like. So the question remains: who the fuck is coming, and why now?

Standing under the showerhead, my thoughts shift to my upcoming release date and pause as the water runs down over me. Is that what this is about? Either someone wants to fill me in on what to expect when I get out of here, or it’s the opposite, and someone doesn’t want me to leave at all. I should say fuck it and just stay in my cell. I’m too close to getting out to risk it all now, but I always was a curious fuck.

A muffled cry has me turning to find the newbie being pinned in the corner by a couple of thugs, their tattoos marking them as Ab brothers. One of them looks over at me, his Adam’s apple bobbing as he swallows before returning to his prey. He knows to give me a wide berth—like the rest of his brothers—after I cut out their leader’s tongue and fed it to him.

Shutting the water off, I grab my towel and wrap it around my waist, ignoring the twitch of my cock as the newbie

screams in pain. I have zero sympathy for the man. What's happening to him now is poetic justice. He's here because he likes to fuck unwilling, underage girls. A thick cock tearing his ass apart is just the beginning of the welcome he can expect to receive here.

The guard at the door nods to me as I pass, his eyes averted from the scene in the corner as he blatantly feigns ignorance to the brutal grunts and slapping of wet skin against skin. We might all be a bunch of degenerates, but if there is one thing that unites most of the fuckups in here, it's that pedophiles deserve their own special brand of punishment.

\* \* \*

I'm in the cafeteria having breakfast when Tio drops down in the chair beside me. I ignore him while I eat the gray bowl of fuck knows what masquerading as oatmeal. Out the corner of my eye, I can see he's staring at me. Tio isn't a bad guy, but fuck me, he likes to talk. And I can tell he's gearing up to spit out his verbal diarrhea, so I speak first before he can start talking about his favorite subjects—his sister, mother, and pussy. And when I say pussy, I mean his actual cats. All seven of them.

Tio is somewhat of a contradiction. He's soft as shit on the inside, loves his family—especially his mama—and never met an animal he didn't want to keep. But he has a temper that tends to leave bodies in his wake. Eleven, to be precise, and that's why he'll die in here.

“I won't be around much today. Keep an eye on my cell. I saw that prick Vargas sniffing around it yesterday.”

“He's jealous you're getting out in two weeks. If he can stop it from happening, he will. Probably hide something in your cell that will get time added to your sentence.”

“That's what I figured.”

“If that doesn't work, he'll provoke you, try to get you to attack him. He'll get a few easy nights in the infirmary with that pretty new nurse, and you'll spend time in the hole.”

“Then he’s a bigger fucking idiot than I thought, because if he provokes me, I won’t be sending him to the infirmary. I’ll send him to the morgue.”

Tio chuckles as he shovels oatmeal into his mouth.

“I’ve gotta make a phone call. Once I’m gone, I’ll have one of my guys set you up with what you need.”

“Don’t need much, Vice. Just the basics and a carton or two of smokes. I’m a simple guy.”

“And that’s why I haven’t killed you.” I stand up and tap the table, heading off to the phones.

I stand in line, waiting for one to free up, my mind going to who might be coming to see me later. I’m still drawing a blank, but maybe one of my guys is trying to send me some information. When the guy in front of me is done, I move over to the phone and dial, waiting for the call to connect.

“Hey, Vice. I wasn’t expecting a call today,” Isaac answers.

“Yeah, well, I have a visitor coming to see me. Wanted to know if you knew anything about it.”

“I haven’t heard anything. You know who it is?”

“Some woman. I won’t know who until I see her.”

“Alright, I’ll do some digging and see what I can find. Just keep your head down. We’ve missed your ugly ass around here.”

“I’ll be a fucking choirboy.”

Isaac laughs hysterically as I hang up. Fucker.

I head back to my cell, and on my way, Harry intercepts me. “You ready?”

I shrug. “I guess. I’ll admit, I’m intrigued. I still have no clue who it could be.”

“Well, stranger or not, I’m sure you’ll know her a fuck of a lot better by the time she leaves.”

“Or yeah? And why’s that?”

“Because the lady is down for a conjugal visit. And after ten years with only your hand for company, I bet you won’t give a single fuck who she is as long as she sucks dick like a pro.”

## Chapter 8

---

### *Nova*



“A conjugal visit? Seriously? I thought those were made-up for movies.”

“Most things have an element of truth to them. There are four states that allow conjugal visits. Just not in federal or high-security prisons.”

“Well, considering Attica is maximum security, how the heck am I getting in for a conjugal?”

“Money and influence can buy you most things these days. And Vice gets special privileges. Plus, I can be very persuasive.”

I turn off the interstate, ignoring the cramping in my stomach.

“Don’t tell me the details. Somehow, I doubt I want to know.” I sigh.

“I’ve been doing this a long time, Nova. At this point, favors and markers are worth more than money.”

“Does Vice know I’m coming?”

“No. He knows he’s getting a visitor, but that’s it. The rest will be up to you, kiddo.”

I swallow at the pet name he rarely uses.

“Just be careful. Don’t assume, because he’s locked up, he’s not dangerous. A rabid dog will always remain rabid,

whether they are confined or set free,” Alessio tells me, his voice coming smoothly through my earphones.

“I won’t underestimate him. Wish me luck.” I cut the call before he can say anything else. This was all my idea, but now that I’m here, I’m beginning to realize just how desperate it all sounds.

I park, turn the engine off, and rest my head against the steering wheel, not ready to get out just yet. The prison looks just as inviting as one might expect it to be. Nothing says welcome like iron bars and razor wire. I can just imagine telling my grandchildren where I met their grandfather.

Laughter bursts from me, high-pitched and manic. The chances of me surviving the next year are slim, let alone having grandchildren.

Taking a deep, fortifying breath, I climb out of my car and walk toward the gate. I check in and head through security.

Everything is so cold and clinical. I narrow my eyes on the guard who runs his hands over my body, daring them to push his luck. Thankfully, for both our sakes, he remains professional.

“Follow me.” He gestures for me to step away from the line where the others are waiting, so I do, ignoring the disgruntled complaints from behind me.

The guard opens the gate in front of him before locking it once more. He leads me down an empty corridor before we reach another gate. I wait quietly for him to repeat the process of opening it and relocking it behind us before I’m shown into a large, family room with a sofa and a couple of chairs on one side. At the other end of the room is a table and some chairs with a large toy box beside it, overflowing with toys that look like they’ve seen better days. The thought of a child in here playing with those pitiful-looking toys makes my chest hurt. It is a sad reality and one I know could be in my future.

I walk to the window, ignoring the bars covering it, and close my eyes, allowing myself to think of the alternative. I could run like Alessio suggested. To just walk out of this

godforsaken place and escape from this fucked-up life I was born into. I think about what it would be like to be free.

But anyone with ties to me could be used as bait to draw me out. I'm many things, but selfish isn't one of them. God, I wish I was. It's at times like this I'm envious of Gia.

I hear the gate open and tense, my eyes flying open, but I keep them focused on the gloomy view outside, giving myself a few extra minutes before my world changes. The time to run has come and gone.

I blow out a breath as the door to the room opens, and the sound of heavy footsteps enters. I turn, my eyes connecting with Vice's dark, soulless ones, and I have to force myself not to react. The guard looks between us before removing the cuffs from around Vice's wrists, then leaves, locking the door behind him.

Vice stands where the guard left him. His eyes move over my body, starting at my feet and gliding up my denim-covered legs to my flannel shirt before resting on the Archangel Michael pendant around my neck. A slight frown is the only reaction he offers as he lifts his gaze to look at my face.

I take a page from his book and let my eyes rove over him. I pulled a photo up online from the day he was arrested, so I had a rough idea of what he looked like. But the man in front of me is not the same person he was ten years ago.

At over six feet tall, he would have already been imposing, but he's easily fifty pounds heavier than before, and all of it pure muscle. Add in the tattoos that cover each arm and circle his neck, and the man the personification of the words *fuck you*.

I was prepared for him to be cold and dangerous. I expected to feel fear and trepidation, but not once did I factor in the effect he'd have on my body.

He finally speaks, his deep voice making my gaze jump to his face. "Do I know you?" His eyes look almost black from here, like thick tar threatening to swallow me whole.

"My name is Nova."

He takes a step toward me, a smirk on his face when I unconsciously take a step back. Silently, I berate myself, instinctively knowing that the last thing I want to do is present myself as prey to this man.

“Why are you here?”

“To tell you a story.”

He steps closer. This time, I stand my ground, holding my head high.

“If it’s the one about a wolf, I already know how it ends,” he murmurs as he closes the distance between us.

My heart beats so hard that my chest hurts, his close proximity making my fight-or-flight reflex kick in.

“How does it end?” I can’t resist asking as he lifts his arms above my head and uses his large body to pin me against the wall.

He dips his head until his lips skim my ear. “He eats the little girl who failed to see the danger in front of her.”

“Lucky for me, I know exactly the kind of monster I’m facing.”

My words come out a little quieter than I hoped, but when he pauses, I know he heard them. He pulls back just enough so he can stare into my eyes. The coldness emanating from them has me fighting the urge to shiver.

“So brave, but I can smell your fear.”

“I’m not scared of you,” I bluster.

“Hmm...such a pretty little liar.” His head dips to the hollow of my neck, where he takes a deep breath and groans. “Tell your story, little girl. I’m all ears.”

I half expect him to sink his teeth into my skin and rip my throat out. I feel his dick harden between us as I fight down the panic I feel creeping in. I needed Vice to be safer than Aldo, and now I realize how utterly ridiculous that notion is.

“You’re not gay,” I blurt out, feeling my plans unravel. He looks at me and grins.



“If you don’t want to talk, we could always fuck instead. It’s been a long time since I sunk my cock into a warm, wet pussy. Your fear is intoxicating. It makes me want to drive my cock into you until you beg for mercy.”

His words spark my anger, helping me fight the fear he mentioned. “I don’t beg.”

“You’ll beg for me.” His deep voice is soft, making the promise that much more sinister.

“I wonder if you’ll say the same with my cock down your throat. Will you panic when you realize you can’t breathe? Claw at my skin in a bid to get free as I pump my cum into your stomach? Or maybe I’ll come on your face, use your tears as lube when I flip you onto your hands and—”

I press my mouth to his to shut him up. The only weapon I have on me right now is my body. With him so close, the best way to defuse the situation is to take him off guard.

He freezes, making me realize that’s exactly what I did.

I grip the front of his T-shirt and kiss him with every ounce of fear and frustration I feel, pouring my chaotic emotions into him before I rip my lips free and duck under his arms, freeing myself from his hold. I put some much-needed space between us, my fingers tracing over my swollen lips.

He turns to look at me, and I get sick satisfaction at the look of surprise on his face.

“I know you don’t owe me anything, but I really do have a story to tell you. And if, at the end of it, you never want to see me afterward, I’ll go and never contact you again.”

He doesn’t answer, but he does walk over to the sofa before taking a seat. He spreads his legs and leans back. There is no way for me to sit beside him without us touching, so I stay standing. The man has me unnerved enough as it is.

“Alright. I’m all ears,” he drawls.

I hesitate, knowing what this information could do in his hands. But honestly, if he says no, it won’t matter. The truth

will be out in a matter of weeks anyway. I can almost feel the target on my back already.

“To explain what’s happening now, I need to start from the beginning.” I start pacing and blow out a breath. “Twenty years ago, a war was raging in the streets. Everyone wanted the throne, so to speak, but Vigo Fiore refused to give up his crown.”

“I remember. Probably better than you do.”

I nod. He’s not wrong. I can’t really remember anything. “That was the night the don changed.”

I wait for his reaction, but he doesn’t give me one, so I continue.

“Ever since then, the loyalty that bound the five families together started fracturing. Your family, in particular, has been very vocal about taking over from Vigo, stating he’s unstable.”

He throws his head back and laughs. “I don’t think we’re in a position to be throwing stones now, are we? If people are saying Vigo is unstable, then what does that make me?”

“A bomb,” I tell him softly, making him shut up. “A lot has changed since you’ve been gone. I don’t know how in the loop you are, but—”

“I know enough. There a point to this story of yours?”

“Your father is looking to retire, leaving your brother to take his place. But there are those who believe him to be too weak without you at his side to do his dirty work.”

“I’ll be a free man soon, so that won’t matter.”

“Can it be considered freedom if you’re expected to wear shackles and follow orders?”

“You seem to think you know me, but you know fuck-all.”

“I know we’re not that different. I know we were born into lives that have been trying to kill us since our first breath. I know I’m here now to make a deal with the devil because the alternative is worse.”

“You have nothing I want or need.” He rolls his eyes before getting to his feet.

“Twenty years ago, my father hid my identity by switching me with the daughter of one of his men. In a little under a month, my real identity will be revealed because I’ve been ordered to get married.”

He crosses his arms, uninterested.

“The fact that you’re a better option should be proof enough of how much I hate the other guy.”

“And this is my problem because...”

“It’s not, but I’m not ready to lay down and give up just yet.” I run my fingers through my hair. “Word on the street is you’re gay. I think it’s pretty fucking obvious from your body’s reaction to me that you’re not. I planned to ask you to take me as your wife so I was safe and you’d put the rumors to rest.”

He laughs as he stalks over to me. “Your first mistake was thinking I give a flying fuck what people think. Your second was looking for a hero in a fucking prison of all places.”

“I’m not looking for a hero. Heroes don’t exist in our world. I’m looking for a bigger monster than the one breathing down my neck. One that will keep all the others away.”

“Go home, little girl. Try on wedding dresses and practice your daddy-daughter dance. That’s your future. I suggest you make peace with it.”

He turns his back on me, and I barely refrain from punching him in the back of the head.

“You know what? Fuck you. I’ll figure something else out. Have a nice life, Vice. What’s left of it.”

I walk toward the door and press my hand to it just as he yanks my arm, spinning me around to face him. “What the fuck is that supposed to mean? You threatening me, little girl?”

I roll my eyes. “I’m not suicidal just yet. I have my own issues without getting involved in yours, especially when, as

you pointed out, you're not interested in me."

His hands move to my throat, squeezing as he pins me to the door. I don't fight him, even though I know I could do some damage. As of right now, he's not hurting me. The second that changes, I'll drop him with a swift kick to the balls.

"Tell me what you know."

"No," I whisper hiss.

He shakes me, my head thumping against the door before he lets me go. I rub my neck and turn to bang on the door, letting the guard know I'm done.

"I'd say it was nice to meet you, but that would be a lie. I'll make sure I pick out a dress for your funeral when I pick up my wedding gown. I'm sure Aldo will be thrilled."

He snarls at the mention of Aldo, but I don't look back. The door opens, so I step aside. The guard steps in and looks between me and Vice.

"Everything okay?"

"Peachy."

He walks over to cuff Vice, who ignores him, choosing instead to stare daggers at me as he is led out of the room.

I curse myself because, despite wanting the motherfucker to get dick-slapped by karma, I need to say something.

"Vice!" I call as the guard is about to close the door.

He turns his head as I fist my hands at my sides.

"Keep an eye on your brother. Not everyone will be happy to have you home."

The guard tugs him away, but his eyes stay locked on mine until the door closes.

## Chapter 9

---

### *Nova*



Three days after seeing Vice and I'm still pissed at the man, which is ridiculous because he was right. He doesn't owe me a damn thing. I'm running out of time and options, exhausting every avenue to get me out of marrying Aldo.

I pick up my cell when it rings and answer without looking.

"Nova? We've got a problem." Steven sighs.

"Of course we do. Nobody calls me to just talk anymore." Now it's my turn to sigh, climbing to my feet. "Who is it this time?"

"Petra. I called the Longview Motel. They told us she checked in, but she never checked out. She should have been back three hours ago, and she's not answering her cell."

"Who was she meeting?" I ask because most of the girls work out of the casino.

"I'll give you one guess."

"Aldo," I hiss.

"He's friends with the Longview owner. And likes it there because it's discreet." Meaning he can get up to whatever he wants with zero repercussions.

If he can do what he did to Tati where there are cameras all around, I can only imagine what he'd get up to out there.

“Shit, I’m on my way. Keep trying to call her, and if she picks up, call me back.”

I slip my boots on, not bothering to change out of my black jeans and hoodie. The dark clothing will help me blend in with my surroundings. It takes me forty minutes to get there. The sprawling motel is spaced out over half a dozen acres of land, making it more of a resort than a motel, but what do I know? I didn’t name it.

I call Steven to check in as I park down the road and walk up, keeping to the tree line as I wait for him to pick up.

“You find her?” he asks, making me curse.

“Just got here. I’m guessing that means she hasn’t called you back.”

“No. Fuck. I don’t like this, Nova. Petra is not one of the flaky girls. She does what she has to do and keeps her mouth shut because she doesn’t want trouble. She has two little girls at home.”

I don’t let the emotion leak in, keeping my head clear so that I can focus on what needs to be done. “I’ll find her, Steven. Do you know what room she was meeting him in?”

“Yeah, eighteen.”

“Alright, I’ll call you back when I have something.”

I hang up and slide my cell phone into my back pocket. I take my gun from its holster and hold it at my side. There is an eerie quiet surrounding me—a stillness in the air that’s waiting with bated breath to see what I do next.

I walk in the direction of the detached motel rooms. It takes me five minutes to find the right room. When I get to the door, I hesitate, unsure of what I’ll see. If Aldo is still here, I could find myself in a world of trouble. I peer in the window, but the drapes are closed. A faint light spills out from around the edges, giving me pause.

I could just leave it. The last thing I want is to walk in on them fucking. But after Tati, I know I won’t go until I’ve laid eyes on her and made sure she’s okay. I check the door, willing

to break in if necessary. I am surprised to find it unlocked. With my gun in my hand, I slowly push open the door and quietly head inside.

I take in the discarded clothes scattered around the room but find nothing broken that suggests a struggle. Hopefully, this was just a run-of-the-mill appointment, and I'm just being paranoid.

Of course, the problem is that that doesn't mean nothing is wrong, which is confirmed by the blood coating the tiled walls as I walk into the bathroom. But that's not what has me freezing in shock. It's finding Gia naked on the floor, masturbating in a pool of blood. Blood that belongs to the dead woman in the tub.

# Chapter 10

---

## *Vice*



I crack my neck as the gates slide open, taking in the black Escalade parked just down the road. I spot a tall, thin man I've never seen before leaning against it, smoking, as my brother paces on the sidewalk with his cell phone to his ear.

Heading toward them, I sling my bag over my shoulder and take a deep breath. Funny, I thought freedom would smell sweeter.

The guy spots me first and must say something to Dano because he spins around, his blue eyes locking on mine as he ends his call and walks toward me.

Though we both have our father's coloring, everything else about Dano and me is as different as night and day. While I'm tall with black hair and dark eyes, which I inherited from our father, Dano looks more like our mother. His hair is a light brown, though his neat facial hair is a shade or two darker, and his eyes are a startling light blue.

"Vice! Good to see you, brother," Dano calls out with a toothy smile.

"It's good to be seen. Fuck, you grew up," I joke, watching his reaction. It's true. The last time I saw Dano, he was twenty-three.

A smirk quickly masks a tick in his jaw. "Ten years will do that to a person. And you're one to talk. You look like a fucking machine."



“Not much to do inside but work out.”

“Well, that shit’s over now. Let’s get you home so I can fill you in on everything you missed while you’ve been away.”

Like I’ve been on vacation or some shit. He doesn’t touch on the fact that it was him and my father who decided to stay away all this time. He doesn’t introduce me to his man, and I don’t care enough to make introductions myself. Besides, if he’s here, he must know who I am anyway. He opens the door and waits for me to climb in before walking around and opening the door for Dano, who climbs in beside me.

“Let’s get you something to eat before we talk. I can only imagine the shit they fed you in there.” Dano’s lip curls in disgust. “What are you in the mood for?”

“I don’t care. I just want to go home and get changed into something that fucking fits.” And that’s the truth. Most of my shit is too small now after bulking up so much. The sweatpants I’ve got on are bordering on fucking indecent.

Dano squeezes his hands into fists, but I turn away and stare out the window, thinking about what Nova said. I don’t know how or why I’ve let her get under my skin. I don’t let people close because, as a general rule, I don’t like people. That doesn’t mean I don’t like playing games with them. Toying with people amuses me. I love watching how people react to certain situations and stimuli, maybe because I don’t react to much of anything anymore. Or at least that was true until Nova.

Maybe it’s because she poked at the one soft spot I have left—*my family*. They might have steered clear over the years, but they didn’t cut me out, and right or wrong, they are the only people left connected to my mother and sister.

Now Nova has me looking at Dano differently, but instead of being mad, I’m curious. It makes me want to break her apart, to look inside her and find what makes her tick. How she was able to capture my attention like nobody has before, I don’t know. She’s become somewhat of my obsession over the last two weeks, flitting in and out of my brain like an exotic

butterfly whose wings I'd love to rip off so she can't escape me.

The ride home is quiet, the car teeming with tension and unasked questions I have no desire to answer. Closing my eyes, I let the hum of the engine pull me into a light sleep, comfortable enough to know I'd wake the second either of them touched me.

Hopefully, they won't try something that stupid, though. I'd hate to have to rip Dano's arms off and beat him with them. He is my brother, after all.

When I feel the car come to a stop, I open my eyes and sit up. "I thought you were taking me home." I know for a fact that my apartment has been cleaned and fully stocked for my arrival.

"Father wants to see you." Dano climbs out, leaving me to curse.

I shove the door open and get out, turning to glare at Dano over the hood of the car. "And it couldn't fucking wait until after I got changed?"

"Father waits for nobody, you know that."

Dano might do as he's told, but I was never one to follow the rules. He can say what he wants. It's my unpredictability and thirst for violence that made me such an asset to them, after all.

The house is quiet when we enter. I look around and see nothing much has changed since I've been gone. Still the same silver and green pinstriped wallpaper and the same collection of antique furniture I was forever breaking and getting beaten for as a kid. Most people feel a sense of peace being home, but this place was never that for me. There was never a whole lot of happiness or laughter to be had within these walls, even less so after my mother and sister were killed.

I couldn't wait to leave this place and did as soon as I could. Still, there was a part of me that felt something when I walked through those doors. Not comfort, maybe nostalgia. I

feel the presence of my mom and sister, and that makes coming back here at least bearable.

I follow Dano to my father's office and wait as he knocks on the door and opens it when permitted to enter. Dano sits in one of the empty chairs facing the desk as I meet my father for the first time in ten years. He's aged well, I'll give him that. Giovanni Moretti was not a vain man, but he liked to look good, and at sixty-five, he still did. Looking at my father gives me a glimpse of what I'll look like in the future.

With his dark eyes so like mine, he takes me in and grimaces at all my tattoos.

"Vice, it's good to see you, boy." He stands from his desk and walks over to embrace me in a lackluster hug that lasts about as long as my first time with a woman.

"Father," I greet simply, taking the chair next to Dano when my father returns to his seat.

"My boys, back together once more." He grins, opening a silver cigar box and offering one to Dano and me.

I pass. I'd rather celebrate with my men than here with people who forgot I existed for a decade.

"A lot has happened while you've been gone. I trust Dano to fill you in on most of it. I just wanted to touch base and see if there was anything you needed."

"A hot shower so I can wash the stink of prison off me, followed by some decent food."

"Of course, of course. And I won't keep you much longer." He leans back, considering me for a moment as he lights his cigar. "You've been out of the loop, so to speak, and I wanted to be the first to let you know that I'm retiring. I know both you and your brother are underbosses, but given the circumstances, I'm going to promote Dano to don when I step down."

Dano jumps in. "It's nothing personal, brother. You've been gone so long, and people know me. They trust me. Of course, you'll remain on as underboss. That was never in dispute."

“Of course.” I bite back the sarcasm. “Anything else?”

“That’s it?” My father asks, surprised.

“I just got out of prison. I need sleep, food, and a shower, not necessarily in that order. If you were worried I’d fight Dano for the role of don, then don’t. You’re right, he’s the better man for the job. I need to spend some time adjusting to the outside world. And like you pointed out, a lot has changed in ten years.”

Both of them just stare at me. My father seems disappointed. It’s like he expected more of a fight. And Dano just looks pissed. Why, I have no clue. He’s just been given exactly what he wanted. Maybe he wanted me to shed a few tears.

“Well, if that’s all... I really want to go home and sleep in my own bed.”

“Of course, of course,” my father says with a nod of his head as I make my way to the door. “Have one of the drivers take you. I expect to see you next week for dinner. We have some things to discuss,” he adds.

“Sounds good.” I leave without another word, feeling like I’m suffocating in there.

I head to the kitchen and find a handful of men standing around doing fuck-all. “Which one of you is the driver?”

Two of them put their hands up like they’re in fucking kindergarten.

“You.” I point at the young, lanky one. “Take me home.”

“I’m sorry, sir, but who are you?” one of the other men asks with a frown.

“I’m Vice Moretti.”

And that’s how you stun a room full of men.

“Sorry, sir,” the lanky kid stutters. “I’ll bring the car around.”

I nod and follow him out. I wait on the steps until he pulls up the car in front of me. Opening the door, I climb in, give

him my address, and close my eyes.

A pair of intriguing dark ones stare back at me, much to my annoyance. I haven't been able to get Nova out of my mind, and it's starting to piss me off. I know I could have a woman at my place within the hour, ready to cater to all my needs. Hell, I could have two. But my dick doesn't even twitch at the thought. All he wants is Nova.

With a sigh, I open my eyes and stare out the window, taking in the changes as they pass by. Some of the places I would frequent are gone, replaced with things like wine bars and... What the fuck is bubble tea?

I shake my head, thankful when I see my apartment up ahead. As soon as I climb out, the driver heads off without saying goodbye.

As I jog up the steps, I stop outside the door and take a deep breath. The place isn't anything special. It's just somewhere for me to crash. But I won't be surrounded by dozens of inmates or have my father breathing down my neck.

I open the door and find my crew waiting inside for me, grins on each of their faces that mirror my own.

“Fuck, it's good to be home.”

## Chapter II

---

### *Nova*



“**Y**ou’re sure?”

“As sure as I can be. Look, my contact has never let me down before. How do you want to play this?”

“Whatever happens, you can’t get involved. You have to stay far away from this whole fucking thing.”

“Nova—”

“No. If something happens to you, I won’t be okay. Do you get that? I know I’m not really your daughter, and I’m the reason your whole life got fucked up, but to me, you’ll always be my dad. So if I lose you, then all this was for nothing.”

He is a huge part of why I’m not running for the hills. Staying is the only way I know to keep him safe. If he dies, then... I shake that thought away. Dying is not an option.

“Nova,” he whispers, his voice thick with emotion.

I give him a second to get himself together.

“I wasn’t allowed to love you.”

“I know.”

“I never broke the rules.”

“I know, Alessio. I under—”

“I wasn’t allowed to love you,” he repeats, cutting me off. “But I broke every fucking rule when it came to you and loved

you anyway. Don't die," he orders before hanging up, leaving me speechless.

I'm twenty-four, and he's never told me he loved me until now—even though I understand the reasons why. His words threaten to bring me to my knees. I spent a long time thinking I did something wrong. My mother had died during childbirth, or who I thought was my mother, and my father couldn't even look at me. I took Alessio's pain and made it my own, allowing a part of me to drain away. And though a part of me will always feel like that neglected little girl, the woman I am refuses to punish Alessio, he's been to hell and back already.

If all we ever have is this right now, it will still be enough. Because Alessio's only crime was raising a little girl he wasn't allowed to love while watching from afar as his own daughter was twisted into a monster.

I make it to the bathroom just in time to throw up.

I've witnessed people being tortured and murdered. Hell, I kept my stomach after the shit with Petra, but there has always been a disconnect between them and me, a separation between work and home. This is different, and I don't give a shit that DNA says otherwise. Alessio has always been mine. That's why it hurts that I share blood with the person who ripped Alessio's world apart.

How fucking ironic is it that the Cosa Nostra is supposed to be all about loyalty, and yet everywhere I turn, all I see is betrayal?

When there's nothing left in me to bring back up, I stand in front of the sink and splash my face with cold water and brush my teeth. Staring at my too-pale face in the mirror, I ask myself once more what the fuck I'm doing. My reflection doesn't have any answers for me. She never does.

Taking a deep breath, I apply some eyeliner and a bit of mascara before heading into my bedroom. Shaking off my emotions, I lock down anything that won't help me tonight and move to the closet. Ignoring the white shirt and suit I wear for work, I pull out a pair of skin-tight black leather pants, a long-sleeved black turtleneck, and a pair of knee-high biker boots.

Once I'm dressed, I strap a gun to one leg and a knife to the other before slipping on a harness and adding two more guns. Smoothing my hair, I quickly twist it into a tight braid at the back of my head. I check myself out in the mirror and laugh despite everything. I look like a cross between Emo Barbie and the woman from Tomb Raider.

Reaching into the back of the closet, I grab a black ski mask and a pair of gloves, shoving them in my pockets before I make my way out to the living room. I glance around at the small space that has been my home since I moved out of the main house at sixteen and close my eyes. It's not much, but it's mine. If things go to shit, this could be the last time I stand here.

It's a risk I take daily doing my job, but there is something in the air tonight—something thick and oppressive—that makes me feel a sense of impending doom.

I shake it off and head out, turning off the lights as I go. There is nothing I can do now except have faith in my abilities and trust in my training.

Moving to the garage, I swap out the plates on the black Mercedes for fake ones. I pull my cell phone from my pocket and check the text Alessio sent with Vice's supposed location before shoving it in my pocket.

I don't use the GPS on the car, knowing it's too easy to trace. The last thing I want, if I have to dump the car at the scene of a crime, is to have it traced back to us by reversing its destination. That's why neither I nor Alessio use it.

While I wait for the garage door to open, I tap out a tune on the steering wheel, wondering exactly what I'm going to be walking in on. Alessio's information was limited. His informant could only catch snippets from passing by Dano's office.

You'd think if you're plotting someone's murder, you'd be careful enough to make sure there's nobody around to hear it. But then most men, in my opinion, believe their own hype. They rely on fear to keep people quiet. It might work on men lower on the totem pole, but women are different. We learn



about fear from birth. In our world, we're seen as weaker, useless, nothing more than pawns in a game of *whose dick is bigger*.

Fear is a way of life for us, and though we adapt to it, it's always there in the back of our heads. It's because of this that women like Alessio's informant can still function. You learn to work around the fear, and when necessary, you use it to your advantage. I just hope it doesn't end up getting her killed. If Vice is anything like Aldo, then he'd make her death as brutal as possible. He'd have her begging on her knees with his cock in her mouth as he put a bullet in her brain.

I shake my head, breaking out of my thoughts. My mind tends to wander when I'm under a lot of stress, but I don't have the luxury of doing that tonight. If I don't keep my shit together, I won't have to worry about saving Vice or marrying Aldo because I'll be dead.

\* \* \*

I park the car at the clinic in one of the spaces reserved for the doctors. A car like this won't seem too out of place here, and the cameras only focus on the building and not the parking lot. Climbing out, I pop the trunk and grab a black trench coat that's far too big on me, but I slip it on anyway, using it to hide my frame and the weapons strapped to my body. I pull on the gloves from my pocket and put the ski mask on top of my head. I use it to cover my hair, but I don't cover my face just yet. If I pass anyone, they'll be less likely to remember seeing someone with their head down than spotting someone who looks like they're about to rob a bank. Not knowing what time shit is supposed to go down, I make my way to the meeting point.

The factory is in Moretti territory, and just being here could get my ass in so much fucking trouble. I walk quickly, even though I could easily jog the quarter mile. But just like with the mask, people running tend to attract more attention than those taking a stroll and minding their own business. Of course, thanks to the trench coat, I now look like a flasher in this get-up. If that doesn't keep people away, I think to myself with a grin, nothing will.

I look around once I get there, but I don't see any cars, so I make my way inside. The factory is one of three properties here, this one being the closest to the docks. It's a good location for distributing shit like guns and drugs, but if it were me, I'd avoid it like the fucking plague. If I were a cop, this would be the first place I'd look. They might have a bunch of the police force in their pockets—hell, each of the families does—but there will always be a newly promoted rookie who's trying to prove himself that thinks his badge will save him from retribution. It never fucking does, of course. They'll most likely end up floating in the same waters they were patrolling, a stark reminder to everyone else not to cross the Mafia.

Once inside the factory, the first thing I do is check for cameras. I'm not surprised when I find none. Most people would have to have a death wish to steal from the Mafia, and we sure as shit wouldn't have cameras in areas where something illegal might be happening.

There are rows of boxes stacked neatly on pallets, all marked with red tape labeled as fragile. Near those are production lines that are empty right now, but I can picture people in the daylight hours, checking the quality of each item that passes them before placing it back down for the next person.

I have no idea what they ship from here, but I doubt very much that they'd be stupid enough to leave boxes of drugs or guns lying around. People might not, as a general rule, steal from the Mafia, but junkies are a law unto themselves, unable to see beyond their next fix to the consequences. And I'm not talking about OD-ing.

Looking up, I see a mezzanine in the far corner that looks down over the space. I make my way over to it, liking the vantage point it will give me, though I don't love how blocked in I'll be. I'd be able to take out a few men from the height advantage, but if a large group comes and turns on me, they only need to wait for me to run out of bullets before charging up the stairs. There is no other way out unless I want to throw

myself out the window, but I tend to find running with broken legs rather tricky.

Looking around once more, I come to the same conclusion that it's the best place for me, even given the risks. I hurry over to it as quietly as possible, sliding the mask down over my face now that I'm inside. I make sure my gloves are in place before I climb up the steps, happy when they don't make a sound—I might need to sneak down them later and don't want to give myself away.

There is a filing cabinet and a large desk up here that you can't see from below. And a huge plant in the corner that offers a little life to an otherwise drab setting. The small windows provide enough light to see around the area closest to me but leave enough shadows to hide within.

With nothing left to do now, I lie down on my belly, angling the plant closer to the railing to give me a little extra cover, and wait for the party to start.

## Chapter 12

---

### *Vice*



I climb out of the car and fasten the button on my jacket as Dano climbs out the other side.

“What time is Felix meeting us?” I look over at him.

“Fifteen minutes. Why? Have you got somewhere better to be?”

I don’t bother answering that. I’m here as his muscle, not to chit-chat.

“Jesus, Vice, you’re such a fucking dick,” he huffs, waiting for his guard, whose name I now know is Jim, to go ahead and scope the place out.

“Sorry, Dano, I didn’t realize we had time for chatting.” I don’t bother to hide the sarcasm. Though once he’s done, I’ll have to at least try to rein it in. Disrespect is not something our men would take lightly. But right now, Dano is just my brother, and both of us are on equal footing as underbosses.

All the other families have a single underboss, but my father wanted us both in the spot beneath him. Knowing the old bastard like I do, it was probably so he could pit us against each other. He miscalculated, though, because I don’t care about proving myself to him.

Dano sighs as Jim gives us the all-clear and calls us inside. “Prison changes people, I guess,” he mutters, but loud enough for me and Jim to hear.

“I’m exactly who I’ve always been. The man you use to put people down. Be grateful that I’m loyal, brother,” I warn him, watching him flinch.

If anyone changed, it’s him. My brother has always been a pretentious little shit, but while I’ve been gone, he’s turned into someone I can barely stand to be around. There is something about him that I can’t put my finger on, but I know I’d never turn my back on the man.

Fuck him and fuck Nova for planting seeds that I’ve let take root.

I walk across the space and lean against one of the empty production lines, wondering why there is nobody working. I get that we’re meeting here right now, but we could have met anywhere. Shutting down production at one of our factories seems counterproductive.

Jim and Dano talk quietly to each other as I scan the room, keeping an eye out while the other two are distracted. I stand up when I hear a car pull up outside and whistle to my brother that it’s showtime.

Both of them look at me before they face the door. I pull my gun, as does Jim, while Dano fixes his suit jacket. Felix enters the building with his four goons and the swag of a fucking penguin. I bite back my smirk at the man who struts in wearing a shiny suit and white fucking shoes. I’m tempted to look around for a camera because he has to be punking us. Nobody dresses like this outside of B-rate gangster movies.

“Dano,” Felix calls, widening his arms as he approaches my brother and kisses his cheek. I keep my gun ready, waiting for the first sign of trouble.

Felix and his brother Ralph rule a slice of territory that separates Moretti from Fiore. Their family had been there long before the Cosa Nostra came in and took over. They have their own connections and often act as a go-between for the five ruling families.

“Felix, it’s good to see you again, my friend.” Dano smiles widely. The level of familiarity between these two suggests

they have a closer relationship than I thought.

Felix looks over at me, his eyes moving over my body, before he looks away, but not before I catch a glimpse of wariness in his expression. Yeah, boy, cocky is one thing, but you need the balls to back it up.

“So, this is the brother, huh? Funny, I thought he’d be...” His voice drifts off as he steps closer to me, inspecting me like a bug, which is funny because I’m picturing myself squishing him under my shoe.

Dano jumps in when I say nothing. “He’s not much of a talker.” I don’t contradict him. I talk when I need to. This guy just doesn’t interest me in the slightest.

“Silent and deadly. I can appreciate that.”

Wonderful. I feel so fucking proud. Asshole.

“Shall we get down to business?” Dano asks, motioning for Felix to move a little farther away from me so most of what they say remains private.

Of the four guards accompanying him, one moves to stand next to Felix and Dano. Jim and the others move closer to me. Nothing unusual there, except they’re watching me and not their charge. If Dano had the balls, he could pull a knife and slit Felix’s throat before his guard would even get a shot off. Fucking idiots.

I keep one eye on Dano but make sure I pay attention to the rest of the players. I don’t care how friendly they are with my brother; I don’t trust any of them.

There is a whole lot of posturing before Dano and Felix turn to face me and move a little closer.

“So, as I mentioned, I’ve been looking at expanding our interests,” Dano starts, which is news to me.

I don’t say anything. My father would have had to approve the deal, so he was obviously green-lighted.

“Felix here is going to be getting the product for us, and we’ll take it off his hands and pass it on to the buyers.”

I sigh, wondering what I'm doing here. They don't need me. I'm pretty sure Felix would suck Dano's dick if he ordered him to.

"The problem I'm having is getting everyone on the same page. Times are changing, after all. We all just need to learn to adapt."

If he's worried I'll fight him for the top spot, he's crazy. I have no interest in taking it from him. Let him deal with the headaches and bullshit.

"Of course, not everyone likes change," Dano says in a tone that makes me study his face.

He's tense—lines bracket his mouth as a bead of sweat slides down his forehead.

Son of a bitch.

He won't risk it. He knows if I turned on him, he'd lose, so he's set me up. This is what Nova was talking about. He's not planning on letting me leave this place alive. That's why he picked this place and shut it down. There's no one to hear the gunfire.

I play dumb for a second, calculating my odds of survival. I'll admit they're not good. Only I could survive ten years in prison and walk into an ambush set up by my own brother. If I had feelings, I'd be hurt.

"So, what are you shipping? H?"

I loosen my stance, ready to move, my gun pointing at the ground.

He and Felix chuckle as Felix crosses his arms over his chest. "We move plenty of drugs, but we leave the heroin for the Irish rodents. No, what we'll be moving is something more lucrative, sweeter," he teases as it hits me.

"People. You're going to move people." I keep the inflection out of my voice. At this point, I can't say I'm surprised. Dano never did have any morals.

"Please, anyone can do that. Nobody pays any fucking attention to their surroundings these days. It's almost too

fucking easy to snatch a person, and nobody cares. Even those who wind up on missing posters get forgotten about eventually. Life goes on, after all. No, the challenge comes from the younger market. Amber alerts make it more difficult, but it's part of the thrill. The rest comes from getting away with it."

"I'm pretty partial to the hunting part myself. Have you ever been to a kid's playground and seen how many people are on their phones? I can have their kid gone and out of the city before they even look up from whatever social media bullshit is trending. In a way, I'm teaching them a valuable lesson," Felix jokes, making the guards who have moved closer laugh.

"And you really think the other families will let you get away with this? That my father will? We have a line we don't cross, and children are on the other fucking side of it."

Dano steps a little closer, but not close enough that I can grab him. "Spoken like someone who's never tasted the sweetness of a stolen cherry."

"You sick fuck."

"I hardly think you're one to talk, big brother, I've heard the rumors, and I'd think twice before insulting me. I've had many offers for you. Some wanted to keep you as a pet, others wanted to play with your body until it gave out. But I decided to make your death a quick one. I'm benevolent like that. And after a decade of being in a cage, I doubt the prospect of being locked up again would faze you much."

Only someone who hasn't spent ten years having their life dictated to them, from when they can eat to when they could piss would think that. I grin, knowing it unnerves him and has the same effect on the men around us. "So you have it all figured out, huh? What story have you come up with to get away with this? Who will you be placing the blame on?"

"My vote is self-inflicted. Bullet to the brain because it's scary out in the real world after having every second of your life dictated to you for ten years. Maybe we should force you to write a note saying it was just too much." Felix nods at his guards.



“It sounds good to me, except it seems, brother dearest, you have gathered quite the following while you’ve been locked up. So his death would make him a martyr, and I can’t have that. No, I’m going to leave you a little gift—a boy who I think you’ll find particularly delicious. The story will be about how I saw you raping the kid just before he bled out on the floor.

“The only thing I could do was to put down the rabid dog that must have been broken and become someone’s bitch inside.” He winks at me as Felix laughs.

“I’m nobody’s bitch,” I growl as the two guards that had moved behind me while Dano was talking grab my arms and yank me back, disarming me with a twist of my wrist.

A couple feet separate me and Dano now, and he pulls his gun. A few more steps, and I’ll be able to disarm him and snap his neck.

“Sorry, brother. It’s better this way. At least for me.”

A gun fires, but I feel nothing. I look down at my chest just as Dano falls to his knees, a bullet hole in his forehead, before he face plants to the ground, dead.

I make my move while the others are in shock, throwing my head back and breaking the nose of the guard directly behind me before yanking the second guard in front of me to use as a human shield as Felix fires his gun at me.

The guard takes the bullet to the chest as another round of gunfire sees Felix hit in the neck. He drops his gun and grabs his throat, his eyes bulging as blood squirts through his fingers like a fucking geyser, covering us all before he falls. Realizing the danger isn’t coming from me, Jim and the remaining guards start firing at a spot behind me.

I don’t give a fuck who it is, I use their distraction to my advantage and take the guard’s gun from his holster before dropping him to the ground. I swing the gun up and fire two bullets into Felix’s guard just as the other shooter takes out Jim and the guard behind me. I drop to my knees and use the

production line as cover. It's not the most effective, but it's the closest thing to me.

It's silent. The sound of the guns firing has left my ears ringing. I listen for any type of noise, but all I can hear is my own breathing. Just when I think a bullet must have taken out the mystery shooter, I hear footsteps.

Lifting my gun, I jump to my feet and point it at the figure dressed head to toe in black walking my way. "Who the fuck are you?"

The figure has a gun pointed at me, much like the one I'm aiming at them, but that doesn't stop them from reaching up with their free hand and yanking off the ski mask they're wearing.

"Hello, Vice."

## Chapter 13

---

### *Nova*



**H**is mouth drops open briefly before his dark eyes swirl with something ominous.

One second, he's staring at me like I'm a ghost, and the next, he has his hand around my throat and his tongue in my mouth.

My brain short circuits. I'm not sure if I should bend over or shoot him in the head. Instead, I return his kiss with just as much vigor while aiming my gun at his dick. A girl can't be too careful, after all.

He tears his mouth from mine, staring into my eyes, searching for what, I don't know. Turning, he looks around at the carnage on the ground. "You killed Dano."

"It was him or you, and from what I heard, he was a fucking pedophile."

He walks over to his brother, staring down at him with so much hatred in his eyes it makes me shiver. He points the gun at Dano's head and fires repeatedly until the bullets run out and the gun just makes a clicking noise. He tosses it to me before he starts stomping on what's left of Dano's head.

I fight to keep watching as my stomach turns. I need to see what he's capable of. Once he finishes turning Dano's head to pulp, he lowers the zipper of his pants, yanks out his dick, and pisses all over him.

Well, okay then. I think it's safe to say Vice is beyond mad right now.

He tucks himself back in his pants and turns to look at me, his chest heaving. "If anyone finds out you killed him, you're dead. It won't matter the reason. You killed an underboss of the Moretti family."

"I know."

"But you did it anyway. Why?"

"Because it was the right thing to do. There are many stains on my soul, Vice, but I wouldn't let your death be one of them."

I slip the gun he tossed me into the back of my pants and start to walk away when he grabs my arm.

"I'll claim the kill. Tell everyone I found out what he wanted to trade, and when he realized I was going to blow his new venture out of the water, he started firing. You were never here."

"I was never here," I agree, pulling the ski mask back down over my face, making sure I am covered.

I pull the gun from my pants when I realize he won't be coming with me and hand it to him, my gloves making sure I don't leave any prints on it. "You'll need it to corroborate your story." He takes it from me, his eyes dropping to my lips before he takes a step back.

I nod and walk away, pausing when I reach the door to look back at him. He hasn't moved, his eyes focused on me. "Be careful."

He blinks before frowning as if the notion is a foreign concept.

I snort and walk out with a shake of my head. The man is odd. I think of him stomping Dano's face into a puree and swallow as the urge to puke hits me again.

Okay, so odd isn't quite the right word. The guy is... I don't think there is a word that fits him, but after hearing what I did and knowing what they planned to do with Vice, he can

do whatever the fuck he wants. I'm sure as hell not one to judge.

In fact, of the two of us, I think I might be the one who should be locked in a padded room.

I cleaned up the crime scene Gia caused with barely concealed horror and an overwhelming sense of guilt. Yet tonight, I feel next to nothing. Is it purely because Petra was a victim and these guys were nothing but monsters? Or is it something else? Doing what I do makes me desensitized to a lot of things, but being blasé about cold-blooded murder might just get me an all-inclusive with the devil himself.

I keep my head down, lost in thought, as I make my way back to the car. The parking lot is virtually deserted when I get there, so I jump in the car and head to Al's, the junkyard, and drive the car to the back where the crusher is. I climb out, take my bag from the trunk, and make sure the glove box is empty before getting back in and driving the car into the crusher. After climbing out, I stand back, hit the button on the side of the machine, and watch as the car is crushed into a cube before my eyes.

Tossing the bag over my shoulder, I go home, using the two-mile walk to clear my head. My conscience is clean, that much I know. Dano and that Felix asshole were predators of the worst kind, and I won't lose a wink of sleep over them being dead. The guards, too, were just as guilty in my eyes.

My aim was to keep Vice alive, and I did. And if that decision comes back to bite me in the ass, then so be it.

\* \* \*

Once home, I strip out of my clothes and bag them along with the trench coat, gloves, and ski mask before tossing them in the trash and dragging them out to the curb, ready for pickup tomorrow. I scan the road, tugging my robe tightly around my body. I don't see anyone around, even though I feel like I'm being watched. A shiver racing down my spine.

I shake off my paranoia and head back inside, locking up after myself before taking a long, hot shower, washing away

my sins. By the time I'm done, I resemble a prune, but I feel clean and sleepy now that the adrenaline rush has worn off. I'm hungry but too tired to make anything, so I just pour myself a bowl of cereal and take it into the living room. Sitting on the sofa, I eat as I flick through the channels, finally settling on a rerun of *The Golden Girls*.

When my eyes start to droop, I take my bowl to the kitchen and place it in the sink before heading to the bathroom to brush my teeth and pee. Once I've washed my hands, I turn the lights off and climb into bed. I'm out in minutes, oblivious to the world, dreaming about Petra waking up and pointing at me, begging me to save her. It takes forever to escape the clutches of my nightmare, which is why it takes me longer than normal to realize something isn't right.

My eyes pop open the second I sense that I'm not alone, ready to reach for the gun on my bedside table, when the weight of a body presses me into the mattress and a large, calloused hand covers my mouth.

Lips whisper against my ear, making me shiver when I recognize the voice. *Vice Moretti*.

“You look like a doll when you sleep.”

My heart races out of control as I try to hold my panic at bay. There is a saying about jumping from the frying pan into a fire that I never truly understood until now. I breathe him in, his expensive aftershave mingling with the metallic tang of blood and the acrid smell of burning.

Burning?

When I don't fight him, he takes his hand from my mouth.

“You set fire to the factory?”

“After my crew came, and we found a dead kid in Dano's trunk, yeah. I couldn't let the cops investigate. I'll use the insurance payout to build another one if needed. But right now, I'm happy with it being nothing more than a pile of fucking ash.”

“I get it, trust me.”

His weight shifts as his nose brushes my cheek. “Why’d you come?”

“I told you why.”

“I don’t buy it. You wanted me to change my mind about marrying you, right?”

I laugh. I can’t help it.

“I’m not naïve enough to think I have any influence over you or anyone else. It was a long shot anyway. And truthfully, I don’t know if I’d be any safer with you than I would be with Aldo.”

“That’s a lie. If I were like Aldo, I would have bent you over when you visited me in prison and fucked you until you bled, guards be damned.”

“I never said you were like Aldo. You’re a different kind of trouble altogether. But something tells me you won’t hurt me.”

Because he’s right in what he’s saying. If he wanted to, he could have hurt me when we were locked in that room alone. I might have training, but Vice has height and sheer muscle working for him. I would’ve fought back, but I doubt I would’ve won.

“Don’t be so sure, *bambola*. I like the taste of fear. Nothing makes me harder than someone crying. And you better believe I’ll make use of those tears if given a chance. I might not be Aldo, but I’m far from a good guy.”

“A good guy wouldn’t last a second in our world.”

He doesn’t say anything to that because he knows I’m right.

“I owe you a debt. And I don’t like owing people.”

“I didn’t save your life so that you’d owe me anything. I saved you to keep my conscience clean. I do some questionable shit, so I have to balance the scales somehow.”

“And you think saving the devil will help?” He laughs—a dark, erotic sound that makes my nipples hard.

“I never claimed to be a saint, Vice. You’re forgetting I wasn’t raised to be the perfect Mafia wife who sipped from the Stepford Kool-Aid. I was raised to be a lowly guard. Good enough to protect the princess but not worthy of a husband until now. I was so fucking grateful, but I guess the joke is on me now.”

“I’ll marry you,” he says quietly, shocking me. I frown at him before trying to shove him away, but the fucker doesn’t move.

“I don’t need your pity.”

“If you want to escape, you’ll have to leave that pride of yours behind. I’ll make you do things you’ll hate yourself for.”

“Then why the fuck would I agree to this?”

“Because once we’re married, I won’t let anyone else touch you. You have no idea what kind of man I am, Nova, but you will. I’m warning you now, though: once those papers are signed, you’re mine. I won’t let you walk away. I’ll kill you before I ever let another man take my place.”

The possession in his voice has red flags popping up in my brain like a field full of poppies. Yet here I am, considering walking headfirst into something that will probably bring me to my knees. The only reason I don’t say no is because I know I’d rather crawl on my knees for the rest of my life with Vice than stand beside Aldo for a single second.

Still, I hesitate. I don’t think for a moment that my saving his life will make him treat me well. I’ll be nothing more than a pet, a passing amusement until he gets bored. But even if that’s the case, it will buy me some time to figure out my next move. Right now, I have no more plays to make.

“When?”

“I’ll let you know when I have everything in place.”

I open my mouth to tell him not to bother but shut it again. The knowledge that this is my only chance seeps into my veins, zapping all my energy. I’m under no illusions that this will be a happy, fulfilling marriage, but it has to be better than what lies ahead for me with Aldo.



I stare into his onyx eyes, the deep, dark pools threatening to pull me under, before I look away, breaking the connection. I send up a silent prayer that I'm not making the biggest mistake of my life and nod. "Okay, Vice. I'll marry you."

I almost tell him not to make me regret it, but I stop myself. I regret it already. The only question now is, will we both make it out alive?

## Chapter 14

---

### *Vice*



I stare out the window, watching my father talk to his *consigliere*, Tony, as he waits for the driver to bring his car around.

To say my father was pissed over Dano's death would be an understatement. No matter what the man said about us being equals, behind closed doors, Dano was always the favorite son, while I was just the practice shot.

That, and he's scared of me. He tries to hide it, but he's not nearly as good at it as he believes. Now he's questioning if stepping back and retiring is the best move. In his eyes, I'll never be more than the troubled kid who eventually snapped. A kid he had no problem using when he needed to.

They both look back at the house, obviously talking about me, but they have no idea I'm up here watching them. I get a sick sense of satisfaction watching my father rub his hand over his face. The man looks exhausted, and I couldn't give two fucks. Does that make me heartless? Maybe, but I can't help but remember the lack of surprise in his eyes when I told him what Dano had been up to. He might have denied knowing, but I find it hard to believe anything gets past my father without his stamp of approval. I'd bet what's left of my soul that he's cleaned up a mess or two to protect Dano when he should have put him down, son or not.

I watch as the black car pulls up and Tony climbs in, then drives away. My father stands there for a moment before

turning and facing the house, a look of dread on his face, before he straightens and walks inside. I pour myself a whiskey and sit in the chair opposite his desk, waiting for him to appear.

It takes him a few minutes, but I hear him shuffling into the room.

“What are you doing in here?”

I turn to look at him over my shoulder. “Waiting for you.”

“I have things to do, Vice, like arrange your brother’s funeral service. I don’t have time for your shit.”

I slam the glass of whiskey down as he sits in his oversized chair. I stand up and lean over the desk, towering over him. “You forget who you’re talking to,” I remind him quietly.

“I’m your fucking don,” he yells back.

I cock my head. “For now, maybe, but I’m not sure you’re strong enough to keep leading this family.”

He reaches out to grab my throat, but I grab his wrist and shove it down on the desk before picking up the letter opener and stabbing it into the back of his hand. He cries out, his eyes full of anger and fear.

“You might have been a good don once upon a time, but times have changed, and you’ve been making some stupid decisions lately. If you don’t retire, someone will come and take you out, seeing you as an easy target. Then your legacy will go up in flames, right along with you. Everything you’ve achieved—gone. Leaving behind only whispers about a bitter old man and Dano’s fall from grace.”

“And I suppose you can do better.”

“I can’t do any worse.” I smirk, yanking the letter opener from his hand and tossing a handkerchief at him. “I’m strong enough to hold our territory. People will listen to me out of fear of what I’ll do to them and their families. I’ve earned a reputation. But while I might be vicious, I’m not unfair. What I can tell you is I sure as fuck won’t be getting involved in

human trafficking. I don't give a fuck what the other families do," I spit before he can respond.

"Selling people is fucked up enough, but kids? Do you want to know what we did to people in prison who messed with kids?"

"I had no part of that."

"But you knew what kind of man Dano was, didn't you? I have an excuse. I've been gone for ten years. But you... You've been right here watching. Tell me I'm wrong. Tell me I'm fucking wrong," I shout, reaching for his tie and pulling him to me.

He swallows, but he says nothing.

"You'll step down and name me as your successor, because if you don't, I'll kill you myself and anyone you've ever crossed paths with. I'll make it so nobody remembers your name, legacy be damned."

I shove him away from me and glare at him before he nods.

"You have two weeks. If you don't fuck with me, I'll keep my mouth shut and play the dutiful son. But if you try—"

"I get it," he snaps, interrupting me.

"Good." I turn and walk toward the door.

"Where are you going?"

I ignore him and keep walking.

I nod to Veck, one of my crew of guys loyal to me. They were the ones who visited me weekly and kept me informed of what was going on outside those concrete walls. They were my eyes and ears on the ground. Lately, they'd noted that Dano and my father had been closing ranks, making it clear anyone loyal to me was out. They knew nothing of Dano's plans to off me, and to say they were pissed is an understatement. Finding out that Dano was into kids fucked with a lot of them. Some of my guys have a history of being abused themselves.

He follows me out to my car, climbing into the driver's seat as I sit beside him, pulling out my cell phone and dialing.

When the call connects, I speak before they can. "Is it ready?"

"Yes. You're sure about this?"

"I ever do anything I wasn't sure of?" I drawl, making Veck snort.

I'm a dog with a fucking bone when I get something in my head, fixating on it until I lose my fucking mind. And right now, Nova is that bone. She has no idea what she's signing herself up for or what kind of monster she is tying herself to. And when she realizes, it will be too late. I meant what I said about letting her go. Even if she bores me and I tire of her, I'll never let anyone else touch her. She's mine.

"Right. I'll scope it out. Be there in an hour." He hangs up on me, so I dial the next number that I added myself before I woke Nova the other day.

"Hello?"

"Be ready in thirty minutes. I'll pick you up from your place."

I hang up before she can protest. I'm sure she would've liked a little time to pretty herself up—not that she needs it—but I only have a small window of time. The sooner it's done, the better.

"You have everything figured out?" Veck asks.

My crew knows about Nova and my reasoning for marrying her. They just don't know about her involvement in Dano's death or her reasons for marrying me. I can't keep them in the dark forever though, not when they'll be the ones watching over her.

"For the most part."

"Does she have any idea what she's getting into?"

"She'll learn soon enough."

“I still think you’re fucking insane. You’re one hundred percent sure she’s Vigo’s daughter?”

“Yes.”

“Your families hate each other. I know she doesn’t have a relationship with him, but does she know how much you loathe each other? More to the point, if shit hits the fan, do you think she’d pick you over him?”

I look at Veck and consider telling him about how she saved my life—taking out my brother and shit—but I keep it to myself. I won’t risk telling anyone what she did until they know and trust her. I wasn’t lying when I said she’d be crucified if the truth came out. They have no fucking idea that she has more courage than most men I’ve met.

“You don’t know me at all if you think I’d give her a choice. Once my ring is on her finger, I’ll put a bullet in her father’s head before I let her go.”

“Yes, I’m sure that will go down well.” He rolls his eyes.

“She warned me,” I tell him, hinting at what type of person Nova is.

“She what?”

“She came to the prison and warned me to watch my back around my brother. I brushed her off, so fucking sure of Dano’s loyalty because he’s my blood, but the seeds grew. I tried to ignore it, blamed her for making me doubt him. But in the end, it was her warning that saved me. She’s the reason why—”

“You were ready to take those motherfuckers out. Alright, I’ll give her a fair shot, but you can’t expect me not to be cautious. There will be a lot of eyes on you when you take over. Half of them will condemn you for marrying Nova, the rest will think of you as a god for nabbing the real Fiore princess.”

“I don’t give a fuck what people think. You know that. They better be brave enough to back up their words, though, if I hear them.”

I turn to look out the window, running over things I need to do to finish getting everything ready.

“You close on the house yet?”

“Two days ago. The movers dropped everything off yesterday. Nova can decide what she wants from there.”

“Happy wife, happy life, ay?”

I huff out a laugh, unable to picture Nova happy about how shit is going to play out. But she’ll learn. We both will. As fucked as this situation is, it’s made me realize something. This has fuck-all to do with me paying back a debt and everything to do with me wanting to own Nova.

She’s fierce and so much fucking stronger than she even realizes, but everyone has soft spots they protect. I want to find out what her weakness is, what hurts her, what makes her sad, and then I want to fuck her mouth as she cries all over my cock. I want to break her, just like Aldo would, but only so that all her broken, jagged pieces will fit seamlessly with mine. She’s too shiny right now—too polished and refined. I want to smear her lipstick all over her face and watch her mascara run down her cheeks before I paint her with my cum.

“You know Aldo won’t let her go easily, not when he finds out who she is?”

“I know.” I look at him and grin that feral smile that unnerves most people. “Let him come. I want him to.” And I do. He seeks to take what’s mine? Fuck that. I’ll remind him just how I earned my reputation.

We pull up outside Nova’s place. She’s leaning against the large iron gates, her stance casual, but her eyes dart around, looking for danger. I know Veck has noticed because he sits up and scans the area himself.

“I can see the appeal,” he mutters.

“I like you driving me around, Veck. Don’t make me cut out your eyeballs and find another driver.” The asshole laughs as I climb out and close the door.

The sound catches Nova's attention. She walks toward us and climbs into the backseat when I open the door for her. I climb in next to her and slam it closed.

"Next time, it would be really nice if I had a little extra notice," she complains.

"I called you," I point out, taking in her dark suit and white shirt with a frown.

"I was working. It's not easy getting someone to cover for me when most don't want to be anywhere near Gia."

"Right. I forgot about your job. Apologies."

Veck starts coughing in the front, his eyes wide. Asshole.

She looks at me and nods. "It's fine—this time," she warns.

I reach behind her and grip her neck, pulling her closer. "I don't like the suit."

"I cannot tell you how much I don't care."

A smile spreads across my face. Oh yes, she's going to be so much fun to play with.

"Once we're married, you won't need to—"

She covers my mouth with her hand, shocking the shit out of me. I have to admit, she has bigger balls than most men. She looks at Veck before looking back at me, pulling her hand away.

"You can talk freely in front of Veck. He knows about our marriage."

"I can't stop working once we're married. I've already cut back my hours, but I can't walk away completely without raising suspicions."

"And you expect us to think you won't be spilling our secrets to Daddy Dearest?" Veck chuckles.

"I'd expect you to keep your secrets secret. It's only for two weeks. Just until I'm supposed to marry Aldo."



“Marry Aldo? Okay, time out, kids. Maybe you should let me know what’s going on, too because I’m under the impression he’s marrying Gia.”

“And it’s your business how?” Nova answers before I can.

He growls at her, but instead of cowering, she rolls her eyes.

“Tell him. I trust him with my life.” I sigh.

She looks at me with a sad smile on her face. “But can you trust him with mine?”

# Chapter 15

---

## *Nova*



He looks at me for a second before cursing.  
“Just trust me, Veck. We have a plan.”

“Yeah, a plan that only two of you know about. How do I know she isn’t going to shoot you in your sleep?”

“Because she had the opportunity to kill me, and she didn’t. Besides, it’s because of her I’m not dead.”

I shift uncomfortably, even though I know Vice didn’t tell him about my part in the shooting.

Everyone quiets after that, so I lean back and gaze out the tinted windows and watch as the world speeds by. Knowing these are my last few moments as a single woman is freaking me out more than I thought it would, especially since I never bought into the sanctity of marriage. To me, marriage has nothing to do with love and everything to do with power.

I keep my expression blank, even though nobody can see my face. I don’t want anyone to know that there is a small part of me breaking inside—that it’s come to this. I take a deep breath, feeling my heart rate pick up. Now would not be a good time to have a panic attack.

Instead of focusing on my impending doom, I let my mind drift. I think of the younger version of me, always so eager to prove herself in a man’s world and wish I could go back and tell her to run before she felt indebted to stay. It might not be conventional what I feel now, but I’ve made bonds with

people, people I care about. Even if those same bonds are thinner in some places than others. I can't say if the roles were reversed that any of them would offer themselves up like the sacrificial lamb I'm about to, but that has to do with me being a little fucked in the head myself.

I'm not Aldo or Vice crazy, but you don't live the life I have and stay sane. Touching evil leaves a mark, a taint that others who have the same marks recognize. I try to find a balance in the darkness of my world by giving back where I can. It never wipes the slate clean, but it gives me a lifeline to hold on to when the darkness threatens to claim me.

“We're here.”

I jolt at Vice's words before looking around. I'd been so lost in my head that I hadn't realized we'd stopped.

I look at Vice for a second before blowing out a breath and nodding. “Let's do this.” I open my door and climb out on shaky legs, closing the door behind me, the sound barely registering over the beating of my heart.

I wait until Vice walks around and joins me. Surprising the fuck out of me, he takes my hand and tugs me inside. The rest of it's a blur of shaking hands and being introduced to the witnesses. The next thing I know, I'm staring into Vice's eyes, saying, “I do.”

There is a fleeting look of satisfaction on his face for a second before he dips his head and brushes his lips against mine. He pulls back, leaving my lips tingling. “Wife,” he growls against my mouth, pulling me closer, the evidence of how much he likes that word pressing against my stomach.

I let out a shuddering breath and plaster a fake smile on my face before turning to face the others. Vice's arm slides around my waist to grip my hip, hesitating for a second when he feels my gun. He guides me outside, and I let him, sucking in lungful's of air when the warm sun hits my skin. I didn't realize how cold I felt until this moment.

“I have to go back to work. I have to keep up appearances.”

He turns me and presses me against the car. “I am not a patient man, Nova. I will keep your secret, but you won’t deny me what’s mine.”

“What did you have in mind?” I don’t put up a fight. Giving in seems like the quickest way to get out of here.

“I want my wedding night. What time do you get off?”

“Eight,” I manage to get out.

“I’ll text you the address. Bring an overnight bag. I’ll give you the days, Nova, but the nights are mine.”

I swallow and nod. “I can’t guarantee I won’t get called in to cover, but it’s rare.”

“We’ll deal with what comes at us.” He’s talking about more than tonight. I pray to God he’s right.

“I have to go.”

He takes another kiss, this one far more demanding than the last, before I manage to find my sanity and push him back.

“Vice,” I warn him, making him grumble something under his breath.

He tugs me away from the car and opens the door for me to climb inside. He climbs in beside me, and we both wait as Veck gets in the driver’s seat and starts the car. Veck doesn’t say anything to either of us, and I’m thankful. Right now, I’m feeling too raw to deal with his shit.

It takes forever to get home, traffic being a nightmare. By the time we pull up outside my place, I’m just about ready to crawl out of my skin. I grab the handle to open the door when Vice reaches over and stops me. He grips my hair with his free hand and holds me in place as he kisses me again, biting my lip as he pulls away. I lick my lip, tasting blood, and watch as he does the same, a look of pure lust on his face.

“I’ll see you tonight.”

“I’ll be there.”

And I would. For better or worse, I made a deal, and I’ll stick to it. Unless, of course, he turns out to be like Aldo. Then

I'll shoot him myself.

The rest of the day passes in a fog. Not even Gia's comments or snide remarks get to me, though nothing Gia says or does means anything to me anymore. Any hope I had for her withered and died when I walked into that hotel room and found Petra's mutilated body.

If anyone deserves Aldo, it's Gia. I've gone from hating the idea of them together to rooting for them. He might just give her a taste of what she deserves. If I didn't need her for this to all play out, I would have shot her in the head that day and made it look self-inflicted. My only comfort right now is that any guilt I felt about this fiasco is gone, and I've tweaked my plan just enough for the outcome to hopefully be even more poetic than before.

I jolt back when Gia's shoulder bashes into me.

"Stupid bitch," she snarls before raising her hand to me. I'm shocked because in all the time I've looked after her, she's always pushed my buttons, but she's never crossed the line. It seems she's grown cocky since her engagement.

I grab her wrist before her hand reaches me and twist her arm up behind her back. "Don't start something you're not ready for me to finish. And just saying, Gia, I won't bitch slap you. I'll knock you the fuck out."

"My father would kill you."

"Good, then someone else can clean up your messes, you sick bitch."

She flinches, and I shove her away from me. Turing, she looks at me with death in her eyes. "You can't say shit without implicating yourself. You covered it up. Hey, maybe you killed her and tried to frame it to look like it was me." She laughs as she starts to spin a story where I'm the villain.

"Try it. I dare you. But you better be prepared for the consequences. Some things even Daddy can't save you from."

"Are you threatening me?"

"And people say you're dumb," I say mockingly to her.

“People will believe me over you.” She smiles, turning her nose up at me. I laugh in her face. I can’t help it.

“You think so?” I ask. “You don’t know fuck-all about me, Gia. We might have been friends once upon a time, but that’s long gone. I made other friends. Did you? I don’t mean those soul-sucking leeches that kiss your ass because of who your daddy is. Trust me, they won’t be there when you fall. They’ll be too busy sucking up to the next person with power.”

“Power is everything. I have it. You’re nothing.”

I step closer, anger radiating from me, but I remember to keep my words in check, not wanting to give anything away. “I am the *consigliere*’s daughter. I protect you because you are too weak to protect yourself. But you know what? \*Cough, cough\*” I fake cough into my hand. “I suddenly don’t feel well. \*Cough, cough\*” I fake cough again. “I think I better go home. Turns out I’m allergic to bitches.”

I walk away, yanking her door closed before I jog down to Vigo’s office, taking a chance that he’s in. He’s been spending more time here lately, and I know it has everything to do with hiding how sick he’s getting.

I knock on his office door, pausing when I hear a cough.

“Who is it?”

“Nova.”

He’s quiet for a minute before telling me to come in. He waves for me to sit as I take him in. He’s still wearing his pristine suit, but his eyes are glassy, and his skin is pasty.

“Thanks, but I can’t stay. I wanted to let you know I’m taking your advice and stepping back. I’ll tell everyone I’m sick or on vacation or something. I need time to get my affairs in order and ready for the big day.”

“I think that’s wise. I’ll have Donnell cover Gia to keep up appearances.”

I hesitate for a second, then sigh and speak. “You should know Gia is unstable. She needs help.”

“She won’t be our problem for long. Once Aldo is in charge, he can deal with her,” he replies flippantly.

My blood boils at how blasé he is about a woman who, for all intents and purposes, is his daughter. He doesn’t give a shit. He can switch his feelings on and off at the drop of a hat. Even if he weren’t dying, I’d want nothing to do with him. He sure as hell won’t get to play father to me.

“I just wanted to inform you in case she causes any issues.”

He waves me off. “Is there anything else that needs to be dealt with?”

“No, sir. Thank you for your time.”

I move back to the door, pausing when he calls me. “I would like you to visit me next week.”

I look him over and bite my lip so I don’t snap at him. I had promised to meet him once a week, but until now, he hadn’t followed through with the request. As I look at him, I realize he doesn’t think he has much time left. Shit. If he dies early, it will fuck things up. I need to make sure I’m ready now, just in case.

“Of course.”

“I’ll call you.”

“Yes, sir.”

I leave before he asks anything else of me, running into Donnell as I head toward the main door.

“You’re leaving?”

“Sorry it’s late notice. The don is putting you on Gia duty.”

He curses before looking over his shoulder to make sure nobody heard him.

“I shouldn’t say anything, but just be careful. She’s...” I drift off, looking for the right word.

“Unraveling. You’re not the only person who’s noticed,” he says quietly.

I blow out a breath and grip his shoulder. “Make sure there are eyes on her at all times. I won’t tell you what she did a few weeks ago, but it was bad, Donnell. And if she thinks she can blame one of you for what she does, she will. And who’s going to believe us, the pawns, over the princess?”

He huffs. “Ain’t that the truth. Suggestions?”

“Wear a body cam?” I say, half joking, but I can tell he’s considering it.

“I’ve gotta go. Thanks, Donnell. For everything.” And I mean it. There are plenty of sexist guards that think I should be on my knees sucking their dick, even though we hold the same rank. In their eyes, I’m beneath them because I’m a woman, and a woman in the Mafia should know her place is on her knees or her back. Donnell is one of the few that treats me like an equal.

“Why does that sound like goodbye?” he asks me quietly, his eyes moving over my face. I smile at him before turning and walking away.

I swallow around the lump in my throat, knowing that in a couple of weeks, he’ll probably think of me as a traitor. I drive home, letting a few tears slip free.

My cell rings as I pull into the driveway. I answer it as I climb out of the car and head around the back to the pool house.

“Nova, how are you?”

I’m quiet, absorbing his words. “It’s still weird, you calling to ask how I am,” I admit to Alessio.

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” I tell him before blowing out a breath. “I’m just feeling off. I finished protecting Gia today.”

“What happened? I thought you wanted to stay so you could keep your eye on stuff.”

“I’ll slip. I nearly did today. Gia tried to hit me, and I—”



“She what?” he snarls, making me frown. I pull the phone away from my ear in surprise while he curses. “What would possess her to touch the daughter of the fucking *consigliere*?”

“She knows she can get away with it. And if I weren’t who I really am, she’d be right.”

“She’s lost her damn fucking mind.”

“You have no idea,” I whisper, and something in my tone shuts him up.

“Nova?”

“Don’t. Please don’t ask me. Not this time, Alessio. You don’t want to know, trust me.”

He blows out a breath but says nothing else. I listen to him breathe as I walk into the pool house and lock the door behind me.

“When are you coming home?”

“Not until the wedding. As far as Vigo knows, I’m still taking care of the mess up out here. The truth is, I don’t trust myself around the man any more than you trust yourself around Gia.”

“You’re safer there anyway. If anyone catches wind that Vigo is sick, it will paint a target on his back and yours too.”

“I don’t give a shit about me—”

“Well, I do, so humor me.”

“Look, I know you’ve been working on things on your end, but I think you need a backup plan. I have a friend who can give you a new identity. I have plenty of money saved.”

“I’m not leaving you, Alessio.”

“I won’t let you marry a fucking monster, Nova,” he snaps.

I wince when I realize I haven’t shared the latest development regarding Vice. I didn’t want to get his hopes up in case it all fell through.

“Funny you should mention that.”

## Chapter 16

---

### *Vice*



I swirl the amber liquid in my glass before taking a sip, staring at the water as the dark sky finally gives up its battle and lets the rain fall.

I turn at the sound of Turner's voice. "Sir, your guest is here."

"Thank you, Turner. Please show her in, and then you may leave."

"Yes, sir."

I grin and shake my head. The man changed my diaper and is twice my age. It feels weird when he calls me that. I swallow down the rest of my drink and place it on the coffee table while I wait for Nova to be shown inside.

My stomach clenches with anticipation, a feeling I'm surprised by. I have no idea why I react to her the way I do. Sure, she's pretty—beautiful even—with her dark hair and her bedroom eyes, but I've met dozens of beautiful women before, and none of them have held my attention for longer than a second.

Sex, to me, has always been just sex. It's nothing special. It's not something I've ever been overly interested in. I guess that happens when you're initiated into it the way I was. Having hookers take my virginity at eleven years old was a rite of passage in my father's eye. It was fucked up, and the whole experience put me off women for years, but it is what it is.

Of course, my lack of interest fueled the rumors about me being gay. I ignored them, knowing my sexuality had nothing to do with my lack of interest. My dick didn't get hard for men any more than it did for women most days, until Nova. Maybe it was the way she fought so hard to mask her fear or how, despite the fear, she never backed down.

Fuck knows, but her gunning those fuckers down made me want to bend her over my brother's dead body and cover her in his blood while I fucked her. There isn't a single person other than my crew that would do what she did for me. I thought I'd met my maker that day. I even made a kind of peace with it because if I was going down, then I was taking Dano and Felix down with me. But then there she was, an avenging angel, intent on making sure I survived to live another day.

I turn at the sound of footsteps and see Nova standing at the edge of the sunken living area, her sock-covered feet making my lips twitch as my eyes move over her ripped jeans and up to her torn Guns and Roses T-shirt. Her makeup is light, and her thick hair is pulled back into a high ponytail, exposing her neck. My eyes are drawn to the smooth, creamy skin that I'm itching to mark up with my teeth.

“Hello, wife.”

“Vice.” She greets me softly, looking somewhat unsure, but she keeps her head high and shoulders back, making it clear she won't cower before me.

It makes the predator inside me sit up and stretch, finding intrigue and promise in our prey for a change. I walk forward, my eyes locked on hers as her pulse flutters wildly at her neck like a trapped butterfly. I cup her jaw, my thumb pressing against her lips before I trail my fingers down her neck. Leaning in, I lick a path from the hollow of her throat to the shell of her left ear.

“Tell me, Nova, are you going to be a good wife?”

I nip her ear before pulling back far enough to look into her eyes once more.

“The truth?”

“Always. You won’t always like what you hear, but I’ll never lie to you.”

“An honest monster? Interesting.”

I wrap my hand around her throat, my nose skimming hers. “I wasn’t born a monster, wife. I am what the family needed me to be. Most of my humanity might have been wiped away, but I have my own code, my own sense of morality.”

“So, you expect honesty but haven’t told me what the price of a lie is. Tell me, Vice, what punishment do you give to those who deceive you?”

I smile at her, and when she shivers, I know it’s every bit as sinister as the words that follow. “I cut out their tongue so they can’t lie anymore. You’d do well to remember that, wife. I have lots of plans for that tongue of yours.”

She shakes her head but doesn’t seem surprised by my answer.

The sound of someone approaching has Nova tensing, but she doesn’t turn around, trusting that I’ll handle it. One of my newer perimeter guards walks into view, his eyes drifting down to Nova’s ass before he looks at me and finds my gaze on him.

He jolts and swallows nervously. “There is a call for you, sir.”

I pull my cell phone from my pocket, and sure enough, there are half a dozen missed calls from a dozen people, including my father.

“It’s Tim, right?”

“Yes, sir,” he says, puffing out his chest as if my remembering his name makes him more than the cocksucker he is.

“You’re on duty tonight?”

“Until midnight, yes.”

“Good. I’ll call you if I need you.”

I turn to walk toward the window and watch in the reflection as Tim checks out Nova's ass again before adjusting himself and leaving.

"I need to deal with this," I tell Nova as I scroll down to the number I want.

"I understand. Do you want me to leave?"

I turn and face her as I hit call. "No. I want you to strip."

She blinks, my words shocking her. Her mouth parts as my call connects.

"Hold on a second, Isaac." I mute the call. "Take it all off. Show me what's mine."

She narrows her eyes, and I wait for her to flip me off, but she never does what I think she will. Instead, she blanks her expression and reaches for the hem of her T-shirt. She drags the material up and over her body, revealing full tits made for sucking, covered only by the white lace of her bra.

I unmute Isaac as I watch Nova bend down to remove her socks.

"Tell me what happened."

"Felix's brother Ralph happened. He wants retribution for Felix's death. He hit four of our warehouses and torched one of our strip clubs. Luckily, it wasn't open, so only the manager and skeleton crew were injured. Nothing major, though. It's a warning that things will get worse."

"And what exactly does he want? Retribution comes in many forms. Does he want money or blood?"

Nova slides her jeans down over her ass and slips them down her legs until they pool at her ankles. She steps out of the denim to stand in front of me in just her white lace bra and matching panties.

"Both, probably. Your father wants to cut some deal with him, but since he's stepping down soon, Ralph is your problem."

"Yeah."

I use my finger to motion for her to take off the rest of her clothes and move to the sofa, sitting with my legs spread. My dick throbs as she removes her bra. When she hooks her thumbs in the side of her underwear and drags them down her legs, I grip the phone hard, and I lick my lips, imagining what she tastes like.

She stands there staring at me with her arms by her side, fighting the urge to cover herself. I crook my finger and beckon her toward me. When she's in reaching distance, I motion for her to turn around. Once she does, I wrap my free arm around her waist and pull her into my lap. She gasps, her body tense, but she doesn't fight me.

"Vice? You still there?" Isaac asks through the phone as I hook Nova's legs over each of mine, spreading her wide for me before I pull her back flush with my chest.

"I'm here. Round up Ralph and his goons and take them to the viewing room," I order him as I cup one of Nova's heavy breasts and tweak her nipple.

She squirms against me.

"Showing them leniency would make me weak. He's lucky I let him live to begin with after the shit his brother pulled with mine. I offered him the gift of breathing, but it seems he isn't as gracious as I'd hoped."

My hand travels down her torso, over her stomach, to her bare pussy. I circle her clit while I continue to talk.

"Get Nixon on him. I want his bank accounts emptied and businesses shut down. I want every aspect of this man's life dug into and erased."

"On it. What about the family?"

I keep playing with Nova's clit, light teasing touches that have her hips bucking, seeking more friction.

"Round them up too. They can thank Ralph for what's about to happen to them all. Call me when it's done."

I hang up, dropping my phone and sliding my fingers through her pussy lips. When I find her wet, I growl. "This for

me? Or because you liked me doing it while someone else could hear you?”

She moans but doesn't answer as I push one finger inside her. Jesus, she's going to strangle the fuck out of my cock.

“Maybe I'll FaceTime him next time so he can see you grinding all over me.”

“Fuck,” she curses.

“Oh, don't worry. We'll get to that part just as soon as you come all over my hand.”

“Vice,” she says my name as a warning, but her tone is too airy, and I'm sure a part of her hates herself for it.

“I've done nothing but think about this since I saw you in prison that day.”

I strum her clit with one hand and keep fucking her with the other, adding an extra finger.

“Jesus, you're so fucking tight,” I snarl, my mouth latching onto the spot where her neck meets her shoulder. I suck hard, making her cry out.

“That's it, *bambola*, come around my fingers. Give in to me.”

She screams when I bite the spot I just licked, her pussy clamping down around my fingers as I stroke her through her orgasm.

When she relaxes, I pull my fingers free and press my lips against her ear. “Stand up.”

She uses my legs to steady herself before standing and turning to face me. I slip my wet fingers into my mouth and suck them clean. Her eyes widen as she bites her lip.

“Even better than I imagined.”

I stand up, take my suit jacket off, and leave it on the sofa before pulling my tie free. “Hands.”

She holds her hands out in front of her. I wrap the tie around her wrists and bind them together tightly. Once I'm

happy, I reach down and scoop her up. She slips her bound hands over my head and rests her head on my shoulder as I carry her to the bedroom, kicking the door open when we get there. I don't bother to close it. My only concern is getting inside Nova.

I stand her on her feet next to the foot of the bed before taking a step back. I grab the remote off the dresser and hit a couple of buttons. I watch Nova take in the room as the lights turn on.

The California King takes center stage with its wrought iron headboard and white satin sheets. On either side of the bed is a side table with a lamp. There is a chair in the corner near the window that will make a great reading spot, and there's a lamp to the side of it for when the sun sets. The only other furniture in the room is the distressed wood dresser I'm standing next to, which looks like it washed up on the shore right outside the window. The closet and bathroom can wait until later.

She turns to look at me again, biting her lip, anticipating my next move.

"I'll admit, I thought you'd put up more of a fight."

"I'm your wife. No matter the reason for the marriage, I'm still yours, and you're still mine. Sex is a part of that. I won't always be so easy to handle, but I know how to pick my battles." She sounds so fucking calm and reasonable that it pisses me off.

"Simple as that, huh?"

"It's only as hard as we make it."

"You have no idea what you've gotten yourself into."

She looks at me defiantly. "So, show me."

I unbutton my shirt as I walk toward the chair. I slip it off and lay it over the arm before taking my belt off next. "Do you know what it means to be married to me?"

She tilts her head like it's a trick question. "Protection from Aldo?"



“Aldo is nothing. No man means anything to you now except for me.”

She opens her mouth but wisely shuts it again.

“If I want someone to look at you, they will. If I want someone to watch me fuck you as you come undone in my arms, they will. But no man will ever do anything without my permission. You understand?”

“Are you saying you’ll let other men fuck me?” she chokes out.

“And if I do?” I pop open the button on my pants and grab my cell phone from my pocket before I shove them down my legs.

I didn’t bother with boxers this morning, so my cock stands loud and proud, pointing at Nova like a homing device.

“Will you fight me, wife, or will you spread your legs when I tell you to?”

# Chapter 17

---

## *Nova*



I lock my legs to stop them from shaking. It's not so much fear, though there is a healthy dose of that running through my veins, but mostly adrenaline and shock.

I should lie. Give myself an easy life and let him think what he wants. But I think back to the living room and the conversation about liars and decide, fuck it. Maybe the truth really will set me free.

“I'll fight you.”

He looks at me with amusement on his handsome face. I try to focus on that and not his drool-worthy tattoos, sculpted body, or his intimidatingly hard cock.

“Is that right?” He steps toward me, holding up his phone as he dials a number.

“Tim? Have someone cover for you and come to my bedroom.” He hangs up before tossing the cell phone on the chair.

I swallow, wishing I'd come in armed instead of leaving my gun in the car. I think of the coffee table in the sitting room and picture Vice's Glock lying on it. I glance at the door and calculate my odds of making it out before he reaches me.

“I married you. Only you. I'm a fucking virgin, Vice. That means you'll be the only man ever to be inside me. You want to taint that so you can play some fucked-up game with me?”

He walks closer until his body is flush with mine. “You’re pure?”

I roll my eyes at that. “I really hate that term. Pure is misleading. Like somehow, I would have been dirty if I let another man into my body.”

His hand is around my throat before I can say anything else. “Don’t,” he snarls, the hypocrite. He was the one talking about letting some other man touch me.

He picks me up and tosses me on the bed. I can’t brace myself because my stupid hands are tied together. I bounce and then right myself. In the time it takes, Vice has pulled a gun from the dresser and is aiming it at me. I freeze, watching him warily, torn between the urge to fight or plead with him.

“You know, I never thought about keeping a woman for myself. Sure as shit never considered a wife. A mistress, maybe, someone to fuck hard before coming home, and then you handed yourself to me on a silver platter.”

He grabs the tie around my wrists, lifts my arms over my head, and slides them over some type of hook I hadn’t seen on the headboard before. I can yank all I want, but I won’t get free. Not unless I can work the material itself from my wrists. Being bound like this pushes my chest out, making me feel even more exposed. If I weren’t so pissed, I’d be terrified.

I’m mad at him for being everything I feared. Mad at myself for marrying this man when I fucking knew it was stupid. I’m even mad that I didn’t let his fucked-up brother kill him when he had the chance. But mostly, I’m mad that, for a brief moment, he made me forget that we’re enemies—two sides of the same coin but never to be seen together. For a second, I forgot it was all a lie and allowed myself to believe.

*Stupid girl.*

“You have murder in your eyes, wife.” He trails the gun down my temple, over my shoulder, and down to my chest. He circles a hard nipple with the barrel before he trails the gun down my stomach.

My breath saws in and out of my chest as panic claws at me. “Vice, don’t.” I hate myself for begging, but I don’t want to go out like this.

“The smell of your fear is intoxicating, *bambola*,” he muses, the gun now resting on my mound. “Spread your legs.”

“Fuck you,” I hiss at him, locking my ankles together.

He sighs and climbs on the bed, the barrel of the gun now pressed to my stomach. “Don’t make me ask again,” he says softly.

I want to scream in his face, but something in his expression makes me hesitate. He says I have murder in my eyes, but his eyes are the most expressive I’ve ever seen. There’s lust—so much yearning that it makes my stomach spasm. There’s also wonder, curiosity, and possession, but nothing in his gaze suggests he wants to hurt me, despite the freaking gun.

I realize, belatedly, that it’s a test. He wants to show me his worst and see how I handle it. I blow out a breath and spread my legs. He moves between them, the tip of the gun now tapping against my clit. I close my eyes and send up a silent prayer.

“So, fucking pretty,” he murmurs, trailing the gun lower, pressing the tip just inside me.

I hold my breath, terrified that any sudden movement will be the death of me, when there’s a knock on the open door.

“Come in.”

My eyes widen in humiliation as Tim walks in. He does a double take when he sees me naked and tied, spread out on the bed.

“Come closer,” Vice orders, the edge of violence in his voice making my eyes move to his. He pulls the gun from my pussy and points it at Tim. “Did you really think you could look at my wife’s ass and I wouldn’t say anything?”

“I didn’t—”

“And you’re a liar too. How disappointing.”

I realize then that this has less to do with me and more to do with Tim.

“I saw you. Saw your dick get hard. Tell me, Tim, were you thinking about what it would be like to slide your cock inside my wife?”

“No, Vice, please. It wasn’t like that,” the man pleads.

“You want to taste her?”

I make a choking sound. He’s out of his goddamned mind if he thinks I’ll let this stranger between my legs.

“Here, taste.” It takes me a second to realize he’s pressing the gun to the man’s lips. “Open your fucking mouth, Tim, and taste my wife.”

The guy whimpers but opens his mouth, crying out when the barrel of the gun is shoved into his mouth hard enough to make him gag.

“Good, huh?” Vice grins. The sight of it making Tim whimper, tears falling down his face. “Pussy for a pussy.”

Vice’s eyes move to mine, hard and unyielding. This is the monster everyone fears.

“Nobody looks at my wife without my permission.” He pulls the trigger, making me shriek as blood and brain matter rain down over us.

Before I can even process what’s happening, Vice’s cock is at my entrance, his hands around my bound wrists, and he thrusts inside me.

“Mine,” he snarls as I scream, a searing pain making me feel like I’m being torn apart.

He pauses for a second, frowning, when he realizes I’m not wet anymore. Using his blood-soaked hand, he reaches down and strokes my clit, harder than before, his need to fuck me frying his patience.

There is pain, for sure, but the shock of everything has left me mostly numb to it right now, rendering my mind and body useless. Vice continues to work my clit until my body reacts to

his fingers, even if I'm still lost in my mind, and before I know it, he's pulling out and thrusting back inside me.

It still hurts, but this time, he slides in and out of me with relative ease as I stretch to accommodate him. The shock and numbness beginning to wear off.

“Fuck, that’s it, Nova. Squeeze my cock nice and tight.”

His speed picks up as his fingers stroke my clit quicker and harder, almost making it feel like a vibration. And fuck, it makes me soar. He fucks me hard and deep, and I shudder and whimper as my body submits to him.

I cry out as he hits a spot that makes my whole-body clench. My legs tense, and my back arches as he growls into my throat. “That’s my good girl. Come for your husband.”

His words act as a trigger. I come with a silent scream and whimper his name, my hands yanking at the tie. When he feels me ripple around him, he gets up on his knees and grips my hips, lifting me and changing the angle as he continues to thrust inside me. He fucks me with a savagery that will leave me bruised inside and out, and yet all it does is prolong my orgasm.

“Fuck!” he yells as I feel him jerk and flood my pussy with his cum. He sits back, pulling his cock from me, and finishes coming on my pussy.

His gaze has lost the hard edge it had before as our ragged breathing begins to calm. His eyes move down my body to between my legs before he circles my still-sensitive clit with his fingers.

I hiss, feeling tender, but he doesn't play with it for long. Instead, he coats his fingers in his cum and presses them inside me before dipping down and pressing a kiss to my mound.

Without a word, he climbs off the bed and places the gun on the dresser before picking up his cell phone from the chair. His eyes don't leave mine as he places a call and orders a clean-up in the bedroom.

“Everything but the sheets. Bag those and leave them.”

Tossing the phone next to his gun, he walks toward me, stepping over the dead body on the floor as if it were a regular occurrence, and right now, I'm thinking it is. He unties my wrists and scoops me up into his arms without a word, his silence somehow more unnerving than his anger.

He carries me into the bathroom, sitting me on the counter next to the huge shower that could easily fit ten people. He leans in and turns it on before picking me back up and carrying me inside. When he places me on my feet, I open my mouth to say something to break the silence, but words fail me. Instead, I watch as Vice picks up a bottle of shower gel and begins to wash me, starting at my feet. He's thorough, taking his time to wipe away all traces of the carnage that took place in the bedroom.

Once he's finished, he reaches for the shampoo. "Turn around."

I jump when he speaks and do as he asks. He washes my hair twice before conditioning it. There is something so soothing about someone washing your hair that it's hard to get my head around this being the same person that just fucked me raw, covered in someone else's blood.

I feel a few tears slip free, but I don't wipe them away, knowing the shower will hide the evidence. Now that the numbness has worn off, the shock has given way to disbelief.

I've heard horror stories over the years of how wedding nights have gone, but I bet none took quite the turn mine did. And yet, I'm okay. That's what's messing with me more than anything. There was a moment when I truly thought he was going to kill me. But yet here I am, still a little freaked out, a lot tender, but for the most part unharmed.

He nudges me forward until I'm directly under the spray, the soap suds washing away the last of the blood and other things I don't want to think about.

Once I'm clean, Vice walks me over to one of the benches before washing himself. I'm surprised he doesn't ask me to do it for him, and I don't offer.

I had naively thought I could get by in this marriage by remaining detached from Vice, but now I know he'll never let me get away with that. For better or worse, this man is going to make my life go up in flames, and he'll hold my hand as we watch it burn.

He turns the water off once he's clean and grabs two towels, wrapping one around my hair like a turban before urging me to stand so he can wrap the other around my body. He grabs a third to wrap around his hips before holding his hand out to me.

Whenever he leaves the choice up to me, I feel like an accomplice, like I'm part of what happened tonight and not just a bystander. Every plan I put in place has gone out the window. Every stupid notion I had about being in control was destroyed the minute Vice pointed the gun at me. I itch to prove myself somehow. I'm not this weak little girl, but staring at Vice's outstretched hand, I know I'm out of my fucking depth.

I place my hand in his and let him tug me into the bedroom. The body is gone, the sheets stripped and in a bag on the dresser, while three men are on their hands and knees scrubbing the floor. They ignore us as Vice leads us across the room, staying clear of the mess.

My eyes fall on the bagged-up sheets, and I frown, remembering his conversation on the phone. "Why do you want to keep those?"

He looks down at me and grins. "I thought it was tradition to keep the bloody sheets from your wedding night."

I feel my eyes bug out of my head as he laughs, pulling me out of the room and into the one across the hall, which must be a guest room. It's set up like the main bedroom, though the bedding here is a deep blue, like turbulent waters.

Vice rips off his towel and tosses it on the floor before taking the one from my body, too. He rubs my hair dry with the other one before dropping it to the ground. "You want me to find a hairdryer?"



I shake my head. I want to go to sleep and pretend this day never happened. I need time to build my walls back up and fortify them. Something tells me I will need every bit of mental fortitude I can get.

He pulls the blankets back and gestures for me to climb in.

“Do you have a T-shirt I can sleep in?”

“No. You sleep like this when you’re next to me.”

Too tired to argue, I climb in and face away from Vice as he climbs in behind me. He pulls the blanket up over us before he rolls me toward him. I bite back a curse as he maneuvers me so my head is on his chest and my leg is draped over him.

I feel his hard cock pressing against me and go to move my leg, but he holds me in place.

“Put me inside you.”

“Vice,” I whisper, really not up for another round of sex. Can he blame me when my wedding night so far has made me feel more like a contestant in the porn Hunger Games than a fucking bride?

“I’m not going to fuck you, Nova. I just want to be inside you. Nothing more.”

Not believing a single word he says, I reach down and awkwardly maneuver him until the blunt head of his cock is pressing just inside me. Feeling my heat, he gently pushes until he bottoms out, making me groan. God, I’m going to be so sore tomorrow.

“Sleep now, *bambola*,” he orders, his voice soft, which is the only thing soft right now.

The endearment makes me want to strangle him because that’s all I am to him—a doll. I also want to shove a pole up his ass and ask him if he can sleep when he’s skewered, but I don’t want to put the word *ass* into his brain and give him any ideas.

His hold on me tightens a fraction as his breathing deepens. I figure I’ll wait until he’s asleep before I pull away, but before I make my move, I find myself drifting off, too.

# Chapter 18

---

## *Vice*



I wake from the best night sleep I've ever had and instantly know Nova's gone. I slide my hand across the bed, finding the sheets cold.

With a snarl, I throw the blankets back and get out of bed and walk to my bedroom, not giving a fuck about my nakedness. I pause in the doorway when I realize the carpet is new and nod in approval. This is why I pay my staff big bucks. Obviously, the carpet was unsalvageable, so they took care of the problem.

I find my gun and cell phone on the dresser where I left them. Cursing when I realize my phone is dead, I put it on the charger and hurry through my morning shower.

When I'm done, I call down to the gate. "Did my guest leave?" I ask, part of me hoping he'll say no and I'll find her in the kitchen or something.

"Yes, sir. About two hours ago."

I hang up, pissed that he let her leave, before dialing Nova. She's breathless when she answers, which has my temper flaring. "What the fuck are you doing?"

"Not talking to you, apparently," she snaps before hanging up.

I snarl at the phone before redialing, but the little witch lets it ring. I dress in a pair of black basketball shorts and a hoodie, tugging the hood up on the way out. Shoving my gun in the

front pocket, I grab my keys and the gift I didn't get a chance to give her and head out to my car.

It's gray out, the air damp. The chill coming off the water makes me shiver as I climb into my car and speed down the driveway. Seeing me, the guard opens the gate and lets me out. I make my way to Nova's, silently fuming as I break the speed limits, my hands squeezing the steering wheel tight enough to make it creak.

It takes me two hours to get to her place. By the time I do, I'm ready to explode. Seeing her Mustang in the driveway, I take a deep breath and try to rein it in. I park down the road and make my way to the stone wall surrounding the place, climbing over it like I did last time I was here, which I have to admit is a fuck of a lot easier in shorts than a suit.

I check out the pool house first, but she's not here. Finding her discarded clothes in a pile on her bedroom floor, I shift through them until I find her panties. I pick them up and press them to my nose and breathe deeply, the smell of her calming the raging beast inside and making my cock swell. Instead of pocketing them, I wrap them around my wrist and leave.

I walk over to the main house, and I find the back door locked, so I smash my elbow against the small pane of glass in the door. When the glass shatters, I reach inside and turn the lock. Opening the door, I step inside and close it behind me.

I pull my gun and walk through the house until I hear Eminem playing. I follow the sound down to the basement and find Nova in a tiny pair of black shorts and a black sports bra, punching the fuck out of a punching bag suspended from the ceiling. I take in the home gym, and though it's half the size of the one I have, it has a lot of the same equipment.

I put my gun back in my pocket as I watch her, and I feel my dick start to leak. I told myself I'd be good, but that was before Nova ran away and before I found her looking like this.

She spots me in the wall of mirrors and stops. She pulls her cell from a hidden pocket in her shorts and presses something that makes the music switch off.

“What are you doing here? You’ll get me killed if anyone sees you.”

I stalk toward her and grab her arm, dragging her to the abductor machine. I shove her shorts and panties down her legs, ignoring her protests, before pushing her down onto the seat.

“You wanted to work out. Now work out.”

“Are you serious?” she hisses, moving to stand.

I pin her against the machine. “Something you should know, Nova, is that I don’t joke. Not about you and not about *this*.” I punctuate *this* by thrusting a finger inside her.

I can feel how swollen she is, and as much as I don’t want to hurt her, I’m too pissed to back off. “Spread your legs nice and wide, baby. Come on, you were the one that wanted to work out,” I taunt.

“Fuck you, Vice. This is bullshit, and you know it.”

I pull my finger free of her pussy and get on my knees in front of her. I push her thighs wide, the machine pushing back against the force. I dip my head and place my nose against her clit and take a deep breath before flicking my tongue over it.

It’s always better from the source.

“Vice,” she shouts, and I realize she’s called my name more than once. I look up at her, but I don’t release my hold on her thighs. I like the view from down here. I wonder if she’ll let me take a picture.

“You left,” I snap at her. Her eyes narrow as they move over my face.

“I can’t stay. It’s too dangerous,” she counters softly, as if sensing I’m on the edge.

Maybe she’s realizing Aldo might have been the safer bet.

“You didn’t tell me you were leaving. You just left.”

Her expression softens. “I didn’t want to wake you,” she tells me gently. I hear the truth in her words, but I know that’s

not all there was to it. “Can I close my legs now?” she asks, exasperated.

“No.”

I dip my head back down and give her a few more licks before pulling back once I feel calmer. “You sore?”

“If I say yes, will it stop you from fucking me?”

“No.”

She huffs out a laugh before she sighs. “Yes, I’m sore. Please, Vice, just give me a few hours. Unless you get off on my pain,” she challenges.

“It’s not your pain I get off on, Nova. It’s your fear.” I let go of her legs, letting them close, before pulling the gift box from my hoodie pocket.

“What’s this?”

“You never got a gift before?” I joke. “The idea is that you unwrap it and...” My voice trails off when she flushes, embarrassed. I realize my joke wasn’t far off the mark. “You never got a gift before?”

She shrugs like it’s no big deal.

“Nova.”

“What? Just drop it, okay? It’s not a big deal.”

I want to argue with her but stop myself. Fuck it. I’ll get her a gift every day to make up for all the ones she missed out on.

“Come on. Open it.”

She looks at me and smiles softly before pulling the ribbon and gently opening the flaps of the silver paper.

“Baby, half the fun is tearing into it.”

“No, not this one. I want to keep the paper and the ribbon.”

“You don’t need—”

“I’m keeping it,” she tells me sharply.

I can't even be mad, but it doesn't stop me from leaning forward and biting her lip.

She pushes me back, making me laugh as she gets back to work unwrapping the present, revealing a box inside. She lifts the lid and sucks in a breath.

“Holy fuck. Vice, this is too much.”

I reach in and gently pull the slim, diamond-encrusted Rolex from its case and slip it on her slender wrist.

“I know you can't wear your ring yet, so this is the next best thing.”

She panics as I fasten it. “What if I break it or lose it?”

“Then I'll buy you another one.”

“Wait, there's a ring?” She glances up at me shocked.

I give her a look that says of course there's a fucking ring.

“Vice, seriously.”

I cut her off with a kiss, shoving my tongue into her mouth to shut her up. She grabs a fist full of my hoodie and holds me to her as I deepen the kiss, my tongue dancing with hers before she pulls back.

“Thank you. But you didn't have to do this. I didn't expect a ring or a watch. I didn't get you anything.”

“Sure, you did. You gave me exactly what I wanted.”

“I did? What?”

“You.”

\* \* \*

I'd ignored my phone ringing as long as I could, but I knew I had to leave. The farther I get away from her, the more antsy I feel until I pull over and access the tracking information from her watch on my phone. Seeing that she is still at her place and that her heart rate is normal, I convince myself to keep going.

I stop at home quickly to change into a suit and check the footage I'd filmed last night. I'd play around with it later,

editing out the part where I shot Tim in the head. Nova looked every inch the virgin sacrifice she is, all spread out like that, blood all over her skin, her body drawn up tight as I ripped an orgasm out of her.

I wonder if Aldo will find it as much of a turn-on as I do.

Checking my watch, I curse when I realize I'm going to be late and shut the recording off.

I swap out the Jag for the Bentley and make my way to the far side of the city. The beach here is closed to the public due to unstable cliffs and landslides. The pier looks like something from a horror movie. A place that used to be filled with light and noise, with dozens of children running around without a care in the world. Now abandoned, the place is a ghost of its former self.

I park and make my way to the end of the pier, where the old aquarium sits. It's empty now, of course—all the marine life returned to the ocean or relocated to other facilities. I head down to the old viewing room, which is really a huge underwater chamber where you can see directly into the ocean and observe ocean life up close and personal. Of course, back when it was constructed, I doubt anyone would guess I'd wind up using it as a torture chamber.

As I push the door open, the people inside who aren't tied to chairs turn to look at me.

"They have anything interesting to say?"

"Not yet. But I'm sure that will change now that you're here." Conner smirks.

I look at my men. Isaac is standing next to Conner. Veck is standing against the far wall with a wide grin on his face. I take an empty chair, spin it around, and sit on it backward, looking over the men before me.

"So, which one of you is the pedo's brother?" I know, of course, but I want to see how this plays out.

"Fuck you. You don't know dick about my brother," Ralph yells from the middle seat.

“Funny you should mention dick, because that’s what got us into this mess in the first place.” I look at the men on either side of the prick. “I understand loyalty, but blind loyalty will get you killed. You all into fucking kids too?”

None of them answer me, their faces not giving much away beyond anger and fear. The fear, though... I lick my lips and stand, leaning on the chair.

“I gave you a chance. I could have killed you along with your brother and been done with it. I like to think I’m better than the generation before us, though. I was never a fan of children paying for the sins of their fathers or, in this case, their brothers. You, however, are making me rethink that stance.”

I grab the chair and, in a swift move, smash it into Ralph’s face. When his chair topples over, Isaac moves to sit him back up again. I smile when I see blood running down his face.

“Now, where was I? Oh, right. Blind loyalty. Part of me wants to be impressed by your dedication to a dead man. I’m not, but a part of me thinks I should be. Mostly, I’m pissed that I’m standing here, dealing with you pieces of shit when I could be balls deep in my woman.”

“You’re full of shit. Everyone knows you’re gay. It’s the worst-kept fucking secret. Hell, I bet you liked it in prison. It meant you could get all the dick you wanted without having to worry about someone putting a bullet in your head,” Ralph spits out through his pain, his anger making him brave.

I tug my sleeve up, revealing Nova’s panties wrapped around my wrist. I press it against his bleeding nose.

“Smell my wife,” I snarl into his ear before punching him in the face.

This time, the chair doesn’t tip over.

“I asked Isaac to bring you here like I do most dickheads who’ve pissed me off. I usually ask some questions to work out my aggression a little, but with you, I find I don’t care what’s going to come out of your mouth. See, you started this. You picked the rules by going after me when you knew it



should have ended with Felix and Dano. They fucked up, and they were held accountable. You decided to push for more. Make the rest of my family pay. So now, thanks to you. I'm going to return the favor."

I look at Conner, who is standing behind the row of men. "Nixon, you locate all their families?"

"Most. Our men are out tracking down the rest as we speak."

"Good." I point at Ralph. "Who does he have?"

"Two ex-wives. Three grown kids: a girl and twin boys. Two granddaughters. And his mother is still alive too."

"Not for long." I grin, which is when the crack appears in Ralph's stoic facade.

"Hey, leave them alone. They had fuck-all to do with this."

"Like I said, you changed the rules. I'm just playing along."

"Hey, Isaac, are we still looking for a new stripper down at Sparkles?"

"Yeah, though, just saying, we have openings at the stables too. Girls make more money on their backs than they do shaking their asses."

"You see what his daughter looks like?"

He winces, playing his part well.

"That bad, huh?"

"You fucking pricks. Leave my daughter out of this," Ralph roars, trying to break free from the ropes securing him to the chair.

"I mean, she can't strip with a paper bag over her head, but guys aren't so picky over at the stable. On their knees, no fucker will care what she looks like as long as she can suck like a Hoover and her pussy's tight," Isaac jokes, making Conner laugh.

“Is she tight, Daddy? Did you hit that? I bet you did. I bet you’re just like your brother. That’s why you’re so mad, right?”

He’s yelling louder now, screaming profanities at me as I nod to Conner.

“Bring her in here. We can try her out. See how tight she is. If her shit’s no good, I know someone who’ll take her off our hands who has a whorehouse in Mexico.”

“No, no!” the asshole screams, his anger bleeding into fear, his face white as snow, a stark contrast to the blood marring his skin.

“How does it feel to know this is all because of you? When I’m tearing into her, I’ll be sure to let her know exactly why she’s in the position she’s in. Speaking of positions, you three want to go first?” I motion to Veck, and Isaac. “I know you like to make a bitch airtight.”

I cock my head at Ralph. “She ever have a dick in each hole before? Did you and your brother bring a friend to try out Daddy’s little princess?”

A scream sounds from the next room, making Ralph thrash even harder.

“Looks like someone started the party already. Sorry to cut this short, Ralph, but I’ve got a bitch to wreck.”

He yells and curses as he continues to struggle, trying to get free. I pick up the chair I used before and swing it at him again. This time, when he hits the floor, nobody helps him up.

“Say hello to your brother for me,” I say before bringing the chair down on his head repeatedly. When the chair breaks and I’m left with just the leg in my hand, I swing it like a Louisville slugger at his face until he doesn’t have any discerning features at all. His nose, cheekbones, and jaw are all broken, and there is no skin left—just a bloody mess.

“Toss him in the grinder.” I order as I straighten up, not caring if he is dead or not. I drop the chair leg on top of Ralph as Veck drags him away.

Another excellent feature of this place is the industrial-sized kitchen that came with a huge meat grinder. It was initially used to make fresh hamburgers for the onsite restaurant. One of my men is a bit of a genius and can take anything and turn it into a weapon. It's why we call him MacGyver. He modified it, and now it's a grinder-wood chipper. It makes disposal so much easier. Now, all it takes is a simple beheading, removing the limbs, and tossing everything inside, and out comes fish food.

I take the hand towel Isaac offers me and wipe my bloody hands with it. "Now, who's next?"

"Fuck that. We didn't sign up for this shit. We were just doing our job," one of the men starts babbling.

"I get that. I do. I had to follow people and do shit I didn't want to because of orders." He relaxes at my words, but when I pull my gun and aim it at him, he freezes. "Do you know why there are lines in a coloring book? So that people learn early on that if you cross the lines, you'll fuck everything up. You weren't thinking about the big picture. You just followed Ralph like a little lamb. And now, the picture is ruined. I can't get my warehouses back or undo the damage to my strip club, now, can I?"

I pull the trigger before the stupid fuck answers—it's a fucking rhetorical question—and move on to the next guy, putting a bullet in his forehead before he can beg for mercy. The begging gets annoying after a while. When the last one starts bawling, I shoot him in the dick first before delivering the kill shot.

My ears are ringing like fuck, so I don't catch what Isaac is saying. After a few moments of just staring at him, he shakes his head with a smirk and gestures for the others to drag the bodies away. Once we're alone and I can hear again, he grabs a trash bag from the roll we keep here and tells me to strip, holding the bag open. I take off my clothes and toss them inside.

Once I'm naked, I walk over to the tiny wet room and clean myself up before donning the spare suit Isaac brought

for me. Considering the years we've spent apart, he's still good at anticipating my needs.

"I'll call the cleaners once the guys have finished disposing of the bodies. Conner will send Claire home with a couple hundred dollars for her scream queen performance. Think he realized that wasn't his daughter?"

"I doubt it. Fear usually overrides common sense. What about the family members?"

"They've been dealt with. They've been given two weeks to run far, far away. If they stay, they will be hunted like game."

"Good." I nod.

"So, how's married life treating you?" he throws out the last part with a smirk.

I raise my eyebrow. "You suddenly concerned with my love life, Isaac? You've never asked me before."

He's quiet, prompting me to look at him.

"Ah, you thought I was gay too. It fucking baffles me how many people are concerned about where I stick my dick."

"We just never saw you with women. Sure, you mentioned one once or twice in passing, but—" He snaps his mouth shut.

"You thought I was talking shit to hide the fact that I was gay." I shake my head. "Do I seem like the kind of guy that cares? That's why I never put the rumors to rest. It amused me to hear everyone whispering about me. Everyone thinks they know me, but they don't know shit."

"None of us loyal to you gave a fuck. If you were anyone else, it wouldn't have been an issue, but you were the underboss. In the Mafia, being gay will get you dead, and we didn't want that."

"There is always someone wanting to kill me, and maybe one day they'll succeed. But it won't be because I'm gay."

He doesn't say anything as I button up my jacket and turn to leave.

“I’m heading out to the warehouses to check out the damage.”

“I’ll let you know when everything is done here.”

I nod and leave, walking back to my car, whistling. I pull out my phone and tap to see where Nova is. I stop halfway down the pier when I see she’s not at home but at the Fiore casino. I narrow my eyes, not wanting her around other men when I’m not there. Why the fuck couldn’t she just stay home?

Picking up my pace, I call her.

She picks up after three rings. “I’m at work,” she answers, sounding exasperated.

I blow out a relieved breath, glad she didn’t lie about where she was. “I thought you were off now until the wedding.”

“No, I’m just off Gia duty. I still have responsibilities and a lot of loose ends to tie up.”

“You don’t owe them anything.”

“You don’t get it. These people...” she sighs.

“It’s about more than Vigo and Aldo,” she whispers, not wanting to be overheard. “It’s the regular people I’ve known most of my life. People I worked with, spent time with—hell, I’ve eaten dinner at their houses and met their kids.”

“They’re the reason you didn’t just run.”

“One of them, yeah. They’d become collateral damage because he’d assume one of them would know where I was, or he’d use one of them to lure me back.”

“There are no guarantees that it still won’t happen,” I warn her.

“I know, but at least I’ll be able to look at myself in the mirror because I did my best instead of running and hiding.”

I don’t say anything to that, knowing she won’t like what I have to say. She’s too emotionally involved with these people, and as long as she is, they’ll always be a liability. You can’t afford to have a weakness in this life. And yeah, I know that

Nova is quickly becoming mine, but she also manages to stabilize me. Who knows, maybe she'll balance my ass out.

“When will you be finished?” I ask, opening my car door and climbing inside.

“I’m not sure. I’ll call you. What about you?” she asks hesitantly.

“Got some business to deal with.”

“Right.” That’s all she says, yet I can feel so much disappointment in just that one word. “I’ve gotta go.” She hangs up, leaving me staring at the screen.

“What the fuck?”

I toss the phone on the seat beside me and hit the steering wheel. Fighting the urge to drive over to her, consequences be damned, I head to the warehouse closest to here instead to check out the damage.

Most of the damage seems to be on one side, and though costly, it shouldn’t take too long to repair. That, at least, is a relief. Unfortunately, it’s short-lived because the other warehouses were destroyed. It would cost more at this point to try and salvage them than to rebuild. I wish I could resurrect the fucking asshole so I could kill him all over again. Maybe I should have set him on fire.

I call Isaac, who answers right away. “We’re just finishing off here.”

“Good, but not why I called. I want everything Felix and Ralph owned, both collectively and individually. They’re mine now. Find out the locations because we’re about to take over some new territory.” I hang up and walk back to the car before heading to the last place I want to go right now—my father’s house.

# Chapter 19

---

## *Nova*



I check in with the guys and act like everything is normal. Things are so far from fucking normal it's a joke. Heading up to the lounge, where the girls that don't have clients will be, I knock lightly.

Technically, it's a hotel room like the others, but it's been modified for the girls to use as a greeting area. Scantly clad women sit on large sofas and fancy chaise lounges as they wait for men to arrive and select one of them, like they're picking a fucking steak.

I respect these women. Most are here through no fault of their own, and those who chose it did so because other options were few and far between. It's the men that piss me off. Instead of treating it like a regular business transaction, a chunk of them treat it as a power play—a way to show bitches their place by talking to them like shit and getting rough. That's fine if that's what they're paying for, and it's been discussed beforehand, and the girls are cool with it. However, lately, that hasn't been the case. More and more guys like Aldo are turning up to use the girls. Who the fuck will be here to help them when I'm gone?

“Hey, Trina,” I greet the beautiful, ebony-skinned woman who opens the door.

She offers me a small smile, and I walk in.

“Hey, Nova. Look, I don't know if anyone told you, but Tati and Petra have disappeared. We think Tati might have run

away after..." Her voice trails off. Yeah, the girls know what Aldo's like. Little do they know, Gia's the bigger threat.

"Petra had him the night she disappeared, too. But she wouldn't run, Nova. She'd never leave without her girls," she chokes out before looking around to make sure we are still alone.

I point to the small chaise in the corner. She follows me, and we both sit down. I take one of her hands in mine and blow out a breath. "There are things I can't tell you. Things I can't say because it's the only way to keep you and me safe. And there are things I wouldn't tell you even if I could."

I flash back to finding Petra dead and shudder.

Trina squeezes my hand tightly. "Tati?"

"I'm sure she'll be fine," I say, letting her read between the lines.

"Petra?" she whispers. I look her dead in the eye and swallow. A tear runs down her cheek, and I have to fight back tears of my own. "She's not coming back, is she?"

"No, Trina. She can't."

She nods, biting her lip, grief etched into her face. "It's always the way. We're damned if we do and dammed if we don't. The only saving grace is that the girls can be free of all this."

"Child Services picked them up and took them, but I have a feeling they'll be okay."

And they will be because the social worker assigned to the case is part of the network. She'll do her best to get those kids far away from here and with people who will love them and keep them safe.

"It's quiet tonight," I say gently, changing the subject after a few minutes of silence.

"Fewer girls means we're not getting much of a break between clients. My next arrives in ten minutes, then I have another four before I'm done."



I wince, my pussy still tender from the one cock. I can't even imagine doing more than one, especially when the likelihood of any of them being gentle with her is slim.

"Alright. We don't have much time. I have stuff going on."

"Stuff you can't tell me about?" she huffs out.

"Stuff I can't tell anyone about. When you find out, and you will, you might hate me. I just needed to tell someone I did the best I could and that I'm sorry."

"Nova, you're scaring me. Are you in trouble?"

I lean in and cup her jaw. "Tell the other girls that I love them. You have my number if you want to call me. I just—"

"Won't be coming around anymore," she says quietly as the truth dawns on her.

I see her eyes roving over my face. She doesn't know what's happening, but she knows it's bad. "You do what you have to do. You've always had our backs, and we'll remember that. Don't you worry about us."

I bite my lip hard enough to break the skin, the taste of blood giving me something to focus on, which helps keep the tears at bay.

"I've gotta go. Stay safe, Trina."

"You too, Nova."

I let myself out before I fall apart and hurry down the corridor. I'm so focused on getting away that I ignore where I'm going. I know better.

I collide with a hard body and almost lose my balance before hands grip my arms tightly. I look up and find Aldo sneering at me. "You need to watch where you're going, bitch."

I yank myself free, knowing he's going to leave bruises. Two of his men stand just behind him—the same two men from the restaurant that day. I don't know them well, but they make it clear where their loyalties lie when they look the other way.

“I’m sorry for bumping into you. It was an accident, and I meant no harm.” I say the words politely, used to playing this stupid fucking role. Inside, I’d love nothing more than to pour boiling oil all over his smug face.

“That’s not how bitches apologize. Get down on your knees.”

“It was an accident, Aldo, and I have to leave. I have a meeting with the don,” I lie, throwing out the only name that might make him back off when he’s in one of these moods.

He backhands me without warning, my head whipping to the side. I manage to stay on my feet, my anger demanding that I return the favor. The two fuckers behind him look uncomfortable now, but they don’t say anything. I know they don’t give a fuck about him hitting me. I’m sure they’ve seen him dole out worse. But they know who I am, or who they think I am, and know this is bad.

“On your fucking knees,” he snarls.

Shit, shit, shit. This is going to end badly because I refuse to give in. He has no idea the can of worms he’s opening. I yank out my phone and hit speed dial as I back up. He reaches for me just as the phone connects.

“Sir?”

“Nova? Everything okay?”

“I’m letting you know that I’ll be late visiting you, or perhaps I won’t make it at all today.”

He’s quiet for a moment. The guards have gone pale, while Aldo looks ready to slit my throat.

“Would you care to explain why?” His voice is sharp. Whether that’s because I’m lying and using him to do it or because he can sense something is very fucking wrong, I don’t know. What I do know is that if this man wants to be a dad so fucking bad, then now is the time to prove it.

“Well, Aldo wants me to get down on my knees, and then I have to get changed because I have blood—”

He hisses and cuts me off. “Hand the phone to Aldo now.”

I hold back my smirk and offer my phone to the seething man in front of me. “He wants to talk to you.”

I can’t hear what Vigo is saying, but if it’s at all possible, Aldo looks even more pissed.

“She misunderstood, Vigo. You know how women can be,” he answers, wincing when I hear yelling.

“Right, of course. Goodbye, sir.”

The phone goes dead as silence blankets the hallway.

“You think you’re so fucking smart, but you just made a fatal mistake.” He drops my phone to the ground before stomping on it until it breaks. “Hurry off and do his bidding.”

I go to step around him, deciding I can come back for my phone, when he wraps his hand around my throat and squeezes. It’s not like when Vice does it. This is all about Aldo’s fury and his need to hurt me. I could take him, but if I retaliate against a made man, his men will be well within their rights to shoot me.

I would have fought him if he forced me to my knees, even if that meant biting his dick off. That would be worth taking a bullet for. A bruised neck and a sore throat... not so much. Besides, he’s trying to antagonize me. He wants me to react. What he doesn’t realize is that I’m going straight from here to Vigo’s now, for real, so he can see the damage my so-called soon-to-be husband has done.

I fight the urge to struggle as my lungs burn and my vision goes hazy.

“Sir, the don—” one of his guards warns him, which pisses Aldo off. But it’s enough for him to loosen his grip and toss me to the ground.

I choke as I suck in lungful’s of air, coughing and gagging as I try to get my heart rate back under control.

“Get the fuck out of here.” He kicks me before storming off. One of his guards follows after him. The other holds out his hand to help me up. I stare at him like the piece of shit he is.

He sighs, reaches down, and lifts me to my feet before bending down, picking up my broken cell phone, and handing it to me. “That was foolish, Nova. You can’t go up against Aldo Lambardi and walk away unharmed. You have to learn when to bend.”

“You mean get on my knees.”

“This is a man’s world, Nova.”

“Fuck that. I can do anything a man does, and I can do it while bleeding.” I yank my phone from his hand and walk away, stopping when he calls my name.

“You’re on his radar now. It will be easier if you don’t fight him.”

I turn to face him and let him see my disgust. “He wants to rape me, and you’re telling me to make that easier for him?”

“That’s not—”

I hold up my hand to stop him. “Men like you are worse than Aldo. He at least knows he’s a monster. Tell me, has he met your sister yet?” I push when he flinches. “Be sure to remind her to just give in and make it easy on herself when he comes for her. And he will, because it will give him more power over you.” His face goes a little green, but I give zero fucks.

I take the back stairs and hurry through the kitchen. The staff there are too busy to pay any attention to me. I keep my head down as I get to my car and drive straight to Vigo’s house. This might be a stupid move, but I need him to see what Aldo is capable of and that this is just the tip of the iceberg.

Plus, if Aldo has anyone watching me, they’ll know I went exactly where I said I was going. I don’t need to give the fucker any more ammunition to use against me.

I use my pass to get in, so I don’t have to make small talk with the guard at the gate, and park next to an unfamiliar BMW. Climbing out, I walk inside and head straight for Vigo’s office. I knock in case he has anyone in with him.

When his gruff voice tells me to come in, I push the door open and wait for him to look up. When he does, he does a double take before his face becomes thunderous. “Who?” he barks.

I look at him incredulously. “You know who.”

It’s as if my confirmation zaps all the life out of him. He gets to his feet and walks over to me, his hand shaking as he slides his finger under my jaw to tip my head back. “What did you do?”

I jolt as if he’d slapped me. I reach back to open the door, but he presses his hand against it to stop me.

“I didn’t mean it like that. I mean, why is he so angry at you?”

“I don’t know. Aldo’s angry at the world. And when you’re gone, he’ll burn what you built to the ground.”

He scrubs his hand over his face. “The other families will fight for supremacy when I’m gone, and the last thing I want is a Moretti stealing what I spent years building. Aldo is the only one strong enough to hold the throne.”

“No, he’s not. He’s not even the one with the crown. I am.”

“Women can’t—”

“Rule? They can, and they do, but you and the families are too stuck in the old ways. I’m not even here to argue about that. I just want to know why you bothered making a deal with the devil to keep me safe, only to hand me over to a monster?”

“You think I want this? One man is better than dozens and dozens coming for you. If you think Aldo is bad, wait until our enemies come for you. You’ll be unprotected and unprepared. They will kill you.”

“So will Aldo. Only he’ll rape me first.”

“He’ll be your husband.”

I shake my head, wondering if this man ever loved me or if he even knows what love is. “And if he’s my husband, it can’t be rape, right?” Archaic patriarch bullshit.

“Just make him fall in love with you.”

“I’m glad my mother’s dead. I can’t imagine what she’d say if she could hear you right now.”

He slaps me, my already split lip splitting further. He stumbles back before walking back to his chair, looking exhausted. He says nothing, just looks at me when I smile, blood coating my teeth.

“And suddenly, everything becomes clear.”

I turn and grab the door handle.

“I’m moving the wedding up to the day after tomorrow. Once you’re his wife, he’ll be more careful.”

I chuckle. “Are those lies for my benefit or yours? Don’t worry, I won’t run. I know who I am more than you do. I’ll even wear my mother’s pearls like you wanted. I’m sure they’ll look pretty splattered with my blood.” I look over at him, memorizing his face. “After that, we’re done. You might have been my father once, but you were never my dad. And you never will be. All we can do now is wait to see whose funeral comes first, yours or mine.”

I yank the door open and slam it behind me, heading for the exit, when Gia walks down the stairs in a pair of ridiculously high heels and a skin-tight hot pink dress with those godforsaken pearls around her neck.

She looks at my bloody face and starts giggling. “Did he get a little rough when you blew him?” She struts over to me, looking so fucking happy, not realizing I’ve already reached my fucking limit today.

Donnell and an unfamiliar guard walk in from the back and stop when they see me and Gia talking. Both of them stare at my face, and both of them look pissed enough about it to rip someone’s head off.

“You’re a joke, Nova,” Gia cackles, using the same insult she usually does. I guess it’s hard to come up with new comebacks with only one brain cell. She leans in and whispers, “Aldo will enjoy taking you down a few pegs once we’re married.”

“Shut up, Gia. You talk so much shit your breath stinks.”

I turn to walk away, but she grabs my wrist and digs her nails in. “You little whore.”

Fuck it. I grab the pearls in my free hand and yank, snapping the strand and making them scatter all over the floor. When she shrieks, I pull back my arm and punch her in the face, feeling a huge amount of satisfaction when her nose cracks and blood explodes everywhere. “Pot, kettle, black.” I spin and head for the car before someone stops me.

I climb in and start the car when the passenger door opens, and the unfamiliar guard gets in.

“What the fuck?”

“Just drive. Vice has been trying to call you, and he’s pissed.”

My eyes bug out, and I pull away from the house. “My phone is broken,” I tell him as I drive to the main gates, using my pass to get out.

“You’re one of Vice’s men?”

“He wanted someone in place to keep an eye out. When you first went to him, he thought it might be a setup. Now he just wants an extra set of eyes on you to ensure you’re safe.”

I blow out a breath. “You just blew your cover leaving with me. They won’t know you’re Vice’s, but they’ll put the pieces together eventually.”

“Doesn’t matter. You won’t be going back, so neither will I.”

I look over at him briefly and see he’s tense as fuck, his hands fisted tight.

“He’s going to lose his mind, isn’t he?” I ask softly.

“Honey, you have no idea.”

“Fuck, fuck, fuck.”

“It will be fine.”

“Really?”

“No.”

I turn and glare at him. “You know I can kick you out right here if you like.”

“Sure, I’d like to see that. You don’t seem like you’re at your best.”

I pull my gun and point it at him without taking my eyes off the road. “How do I look now?”

“Unstable.”

“Having someone wanting to rape my mouth will do that to a girl.”

He sucks in a sharp breath. “Shit. Vice is going to go postal. I need to call someone, okay? To help me with him.”

I put the gun on my lap and frown. “What? Who?”

“A friend who will help me lock him down,” he says, taking his phone out of his jacket pocket.

“You can’t. It’s going to be hard enough getting him to leave it alone as it is. But the more people who know, the more he’ll be forced to make a move. It’s not just a matter of pride, it’s about looking weak. He can’t let this stand. I know that. But if it blows up before the wedding, he’ll ruin everything.”

He hesitates for a second before sighing and putting his phone away. “Fine, but you can’t say I didn’t warn you.”

“Thank you.” I blow out a breath. “I need to make a detour home first and get cleaned up. Minimize the damage.”

“Sorry, kid, but that’s not going to happen. I’ve agreed not to call anyone else, but I won’t let you downplay what happened. If it were me and you were my girl, I’d want you to come straight to me.”

“It’s not really like that between us. Shit, I don’t even know your name.”

“Miles. And it is like that, Nova. You’re Vice’s wife, and to him, that’s everything.”



I bite my lip, tasting blood, still unsure if that's a good thing or not.

## Chapter 20

---

### *Vice*



“Miles called. He has Mrs. Moretti with him, and they should be here soon. Would you like me to do anything else before I leave?” Turner asks.

*Mrs. Moretti.* I like the sound of that more than I thought I would. “No, you’re good. Thank you.”

“Of course.”

Once he leaves, I make my way to the kitchen and look to see what meals Molly, the cook made for me. I groan when I spot the tray of lasagna on the stove, along with freshly made garlic bread. I pour two glasses of wine before drinking one, trying to take the edge off. I’m pissed she stopped answering her phone when I called, though I know logically she couldn’t answer at work.

I didn’t like not knowing what was happening or what she was doing. I kept finding myself distracted, something my father picked up on, which resulted in another pissing match between us. There is no way I’ll be able to wait another week for the handover. Everyone can sense the tension between us, and it might give some asshole the idea to start shit.

I hear the door open and Miles’s voice as he walks in. He spots me in the kitchen and braces himself. The look on his face instantly has me on edge.

“What happened?”

“She’s okay,” he starts.

I'm heading toward him, my hands going to the collar of his shirt as I snarl in his face. "Where the fuck is my wife?"

"I'm here."

I shove Miles away at the sound of Nova's soft voice. When I see her, a red haze coats everything. I grab my keys from the counter and stalk toward the door, but she grabs a hold of me.

"Vice, don't."

"Tell me who did this," I hiss.

"Not until you calm down and promise me you won't go do anything stupid."

I spin her around and pin her to the wall. "I'm not going to do anything stupid. No, I'm going to do something very smart, and that's kill the motherfucker that did this to you and everyone that stood by and let it happen."

She swallows and winces. "Please stay. I need you."

I press my forehead against hers and try to swallow down my fury, but it's impossible. Still, I know it took a lot for her to say that.

"Okay, let's get you cleaned up, and you can tell me exactly what happened. Miles, get me the first aid kit."

I take her hand and walk her over to the island and lift her up onto it. I spread her legs wide and step into the cradle of her thighs.

Tipping her head back, I look at her under the lights. "Jesus. Your eye is bloodshot, your cheekbone is starting to bruise, and half your face is swollen. Your lip's torn to shit. It might even need a stitch or two."

I tip her head back farther to look at it, which is when I notice the fingerprints around her neck.

"You were choked!" I roar as she wraps her legs around me and holds me tightly to her.

"I'm okay, Vice. I promise."

“Someone choked you hard enough to pop the blood vessels in your eye. You are not fucking okay,” I yell at her, feeling like an asshole. But I can’t stand seeing her like this, knowing I failed her.

“I let him.”

“You let him, who?”

She grips my wrists. “Aldo. I knew I could take him. I knew I could kill him if I needed to. But then his guards would have taken me out. He couldn’t just kill me, though, not without consequences. His men might be loyal to him, but there are video feeds that would show the attack was unprovoked.”

“You didn’t hit him back?” Miles asks, walking over and putting the first aid kit on the counter.

“I needed to be able to prove I did nothing wrong. I’m just a woman, and he’s the underboss. That gives him all the power. The only thing I have in my favor is that I’m the daughter of the *consigliere*.”

“Walk me through what happened, and don’t leave anything out. And Nova, I want it all. No lies.”

She blows out a breath and nods.

I look at Miles. “Get a bag of peas and some ice water for her throat.”

I take some antiseptic wipes from the first aid kit and clean her face, making her curse. “Shhh. Almost done. This is going to hurt like a motherfucker tomorrow.”

“I know, but I’ve had worse.”

I stop what I’m doing and glare at her, making her flush.

“Right, not the way to calm you down.”

“Just tell me what happened. It can’t be worse than what I’m already imagining.”

So, she does. She opens her mouth and spills out all the shit she faced today without me by her side. I grip the counter and take a deep breath so I don’t lose my shit and storm out.

There will be a time and a place for that. Right now, Nova needs me more.

“There’s more.” She pauses, her eyes flicking over to Miles.

I clench my teeth and scoop her up off the counter and into my arms. “I’m going to help her get showered and changed.”

She wraps her arms around my neck, holding on tight as I carry her out of the room.

“I’ll heat the food up,” Miles calls out, but neither I nor Nova reply.

I take her upstairs into the bathroom before standing her on her feet. I reach into the shower and turn it on. “Tell me the rest.”

“I went to Vigo’s in case Aldo had people watching me and because I wanted him to see the damage Aldo did.”

“You should have come to me,” I grit out.

“I didn’t go for comfort, Vice. I went because I had to know.”

“Know what?”

“If he was aware of what he had signed me up for. He went to all this trouble hiding me to keep me safe, so why give me to Aldo?”

“And his reaction?”

“Shocked to start with. But in his head, he still thinks I’m better off with Aldo than having to face all his enemies alone when I’ll be easy pickings. His mind is made up. I told him I was done. I don’t care what his reasons are. He’s still willing to hand me over to a rapist who beats women to get his rocks off. Me being his wife wouldn’t change that. Vigo isn’t naïve enough to believe that, despite what he says. He’s putting the importance of his legacy above the importance of his daughter. It got heated. He said some shit, I said some shit, and he slapped me. Now the wedding is being moved up to the day after tomorrow. I don’t know what your guys know about who the don really is to me, and I didn’t want to slip in front of

Miles by accident. I know you had him working there to keep an eye on me, but I don't know if he knows all the details."

"Hold on. You're telling me that after seeing all this"—I motion to all her injuries—"Vigo not only put his hands on you, but he brought the wedding forward?"

"Yes." She nods, then winces.

Not much shocks me, but even I can't get my head around that.

"You're done with him."

"I know. I told him that. I also punched Gia in the face, which was the only good thing about my evening."

I tug her to me and wrap my arms around her. My girl is strong, but that doesn't mean I won't give her strength when she needs a little extra. "I'll take care of everything."

She lifts her head.

"Not before the wedding."

"They touched my wife," I growl at her. This can't go unpunished.

"Once the wedding is over with, you can do whatever the fuck you want, and I'll stand right by your side."

"Why does it mean so much to you? You're already married. There is nothing they can do to change that."

"You're not stupid enough to believe that. They'll try to kill you so that I'm free again. And as soon as I am, Aldo will lay claim to me. Or try to."

"I'm not worried about me. I'm hard to kill. People have been trying to kill me since the day I was born."

"I know you know how to take care of yourself, and you have your crew. But you have me, too. And I don't want to take any unnecessary risks."

I cup her jaw, my thumb stroking softly down her uninjured cheek. "You've had my back from the start, haven't you?"

“Of course. And now you’re my husband. We’re a team.”

“Don’t say shit like that when I can’t fuck you.”

“Who says you can’t fuck me?”

“I do. You’re hurt.”

“I didn’t sprain my vagina, Vice.”

I huff out an amused laugh despite everything.

“Later. Let’s get you cleaned up and into something comfortable first. I want your throat iced. Shock might be helping mask the pain right now, but tomorrow won’t be fun.”

She sighs but nods.

“Why’s the wedding so important to you? It can’t just be about keeping us safe.”

“At first, I was dead set against it.” She shakes her head when I frown. “Not my wedding to Aldo, obviously. That was never going to happen. No, I didn’t want him to marry Gia. He’s horrible. But as the underboss, Aldo was always going to marry Vigo’s daughter, and to the world, his daughter is Gia. Then Vigo told me the truth. And to keep up the ruse, Vigo has had her plan the wedding as if it were hers, completely unaware that she’s supposed to be switched out with me at the last second. I just felt like fucking shit. I mean, that’s brutal, even by Vigo’s standards. And for all her faults, Gia does love Aldo.”

“Wait, you want Gia to marry Aldo because she loves him? He’ll do to her what he does to all women. What he would do to you.”

“That’s what I wanted to protect her from. Now I’m glad she’ll get what she deserves.”

“What happened that was so bad you’d want to see her tied to Aldo?”

“She killed someone. Someone who did nothing wrong. And now, because of Gia, two little girls are going to grow up without a mother. Trust me when I say that Aldo and Gia

deserve each other. And if we're lucky, they'll end up taking each other out."

I whistle. Damn. It seems my wife has a vindictive streak.

"Plus, there are rules and traditions, like with the stupid bloody sheets. Aldo can't marry Gia one day and then kill her to marry me. People aren't stupid. When they find out who I really am, a lot of people will be divided. But they won't go against their traditions and encourage Aldo to steal me away from my husband. No matter who you are."

"Alright. If it makes you happy, I won't do anything to Aldo until after the wedding, but then all bets are off."

"If you kill him, you'll start a war."

"For you, Nova, I'd start an apocalypse."

I kiss her gently before pulling back when she winces, the taste of her blood on my tongue.

"Shit, let's get you cleaned up." I move to help her slide her jacket off, but she stops me.

"I need you to do me a favor. I know it's a lot, but I need a minute to get myself together. I need you to contact Alessio and tell him what happened. If he hears it from someone else..." She shakes her head. "Please don't lie to him. He'll pull the camera feed. He has access to them all, and he'll know. Just tell him I'm okay and not to come back until after the wedding. They will use him to get to me otherwise."

"Would it work? Do you care about him that much?" I can't keep the gruffness out of my voice.

"I don't remember my life before. I have no memories of my mother, brother, or Vigo before I became Alessio's. He's the only parent I've had. He did what he could for me with his hands tied. His daughter was taken from him all in the name of keeping me safe, and yet he doesn't blame me for it. So yeah."

"He's going to be so angry. Jesus, you'll need to do some smooth talking, or he'll be here in the morning, ready to do battle."



“Okay, alright. Don’t get all worked up. It will only make you feel worse. You shower and get changed. I’ll call Alessio.”

“I can’t give you the number, though, and my cellphone is trashed and—”

I silence her with another kiss, swiping my tongue over her bloody lip before pulling back. “I’ve got this. Go shower.”

“Okay. Thank you,” she says, her shoulders dropping, fatigue evident in her tone. And not just from today, but I imagine from the moment she found out who her father is.

I turn and leave, knowing if she strips in front of me, I’ll never go. I jog downstairs and find Miles still in the kitchen.

“Foods in. I’ve got some heavy-duty painkillers, too, that will knock her out for the night.”

“Put them in her water. I won’t leave until she’s asleep.”

“How do you want to play this?”

I look at Miles and cross my arms. “Don’t worry about that. I’ll take care of it. Your cover blown at Vigo’s?”

“Maybe. Nova seems to think so because I left with her, but I’m sure I could come up with an excuse. Why? You want me to go back?”

“Yeah, I need you to get me in.”

He opens his mouth to say something but thinks better of it.

“Fine, if that’s what you want. You should know that your wife punched the don’s daughter earlier. You might want to plan for the repercussions.”

“I’m not worried about Gia. She can cry to whoever she wants. I don’t give a shit. She’s messed with my wife for the last time.”

We make plans quietly until Nova comes downstairs wearing one of my long-sleeved black Henleys and a pair of my sweatpants rolled at the waist. Her face is clear of makeup and blood except for her lip, which is still oozing a little.

“Think you can eat with your lip like that? I’ll put a couple of Steri-Strips on it, but I’d rather do it after you eat.”

“I’ll try. I’m not really hungry, but I know once I crash, I’ll crash hard.”

“Good girl.”

“Here, drink this.” Miles offers Nova the water he’s laced with painkillers, so I hurry to dish up some food before she crashes.

She manages to eat about half a plate of lasagna before her eyes close, and her head seems too heavy for her neck.

“Okay, you’re done.” I scoop her up and hook the first aid kit with my finger before carrying her to bed.

I lay her down and apply a few butterfly stitches to her lip before taking off her sweatpants. She’s bare underneath. But for once, I’m distracted—her top has ridden up, showing a large bruise blooming on her stomach where the motherfucker must have kicked her.

It didn’t dawn on me to ask her if she was hurt anywhere else, thinking she’d tell me about all her injuries. But I guess she was trying to keep me calm. Gritting my teeth, I peel the Henley off and toss it aside. Her chest seems free of marks, but both her arms are ringed with bruises where she’s been grabbed.

I pull the blankets over her, kiss the inside of her wrist, and walk into the closet. I get changed and grab a couple of guns, shoving them into the pockets of the black tactical pants I have on. Taking a leaf out of Nova’s book from the night of the shooting, I grab a ski mask and shove it in my back pocket, along with a pair of gloves.

When I get to the kitchen, Miles is waiting for me. “Ready?”

He nods. “She gonna be okay here by herself?”

I narrow my eyes on him as he looks toward the stairs. “Careful, Miles. If I didn’t know better, I’d think you had a thing for my wife.” The warning is clear in my voice.

He looks back at me. “I just mean in case she wakes up afraid.”

“Nova isn’t like the women you’re used to, Miles. If demons seek her out in her dreams tonight, she’ll slay them herself. And I’ll be back before morning to make sure she’s good. Guards are watching the house, too. She’s never really alone, and you know it.”

He nods and follows me as I walk out to the car. I might have to keep an eye on him. I’m sure his feelings for my woman are purely platonic. I’d rather not have to slit his throat, but he’s replaceable.

Nova isn’t.

## Chapter 21

---

### *Vice*



I sit in the empty apartment and wait. Miles is on standby, ready for when I call, but for now, I'm alone.

I check my cell for the time and curse when I remember I was supposed to call Alessio. I have his number, of course. I didn't want to admit to Nova that I'd added all her shit to my cell phone, including messages and contacts, so I could look through them and get a better understanding of my wife.

I place the call and wait for it to connect, despite the late hour, knowing men like us don't ever really sleep.

"Alessio," he answers immediately.

"It's Vice."

He says nothing for a minute before I hear the breath rush out of his lungs.

"Tell me she's okay."

He surprises me. Despite what Nova has said, I couldn't get my head around Alessio's role in this. I sure as fuck didn't see him caring for her, yet I can hear the worry in his voice, and something in me settles with it. I'm still not sure what side he'll end up on when the dominoes fall, but for now, I'll give him the benefit of the doubt. But only for Nova's sake.

"Aldo cornered her. She managed to talk herself out of there, but not before he got a few shots in."

He curses, and I hear something break in the background.

“How bad? The truth, because she sure as shit won’t tell me.”

“Bruised mostly, split lip, sore throat where he choked her.”

“I’ll kill him,” he snarls, and I relax in the chair. This is the reaction Vigo should have had.

“That’s not all. She went to Vigo’s. She wanted to show him the kind of man he planned to give her to.”

“Shit, fuck. Vigo is... He’s not the man he used to be. There is no reasoning with him. I don’t understand what the fuck is going on in his head. He—”

“He hit her.”

Silence.

“What did you say?”

“You heard me. He hit her. Nova went to him with a bruised and bloody face, and he fucking hit her.”

“That son of a bitch.”

“He also brought the wedding forward.”

“It doesn’t matter, not now that she’s married to you. It just means the truth will come out sooner. You need to get her moved in with you where she’s safe. As much as I fucking hate it, she won’t be safe in the pool house anymore.”

“Don’t worry, she won’t be going back.”

He’s quiet, but he doesn’t hang up, so I wait him out.

“I’m not sure I’ll come out of this in one piece. I don’t even care anymore, but Nova will. Promise me you’ll keep her safe. I might not be her biological father, but she’s always been mine.”

“And now she’s mine, and I won’t let anyone take her from me.”

“Good, that’s good,” he mutters, relieved.

“Look, I’ve gotta go. With the timeline moving up, I have things I need to finalize. Tell Nova I’ll call her tomorrow.” He

hangs up before I can say anything else, which is just as well since I can hear a key in the lock.

I check that my ski mask is in place and shove my phone back in my pocket before pulling out my gun. With the lights off and me dressed from head to toe in black, I'm virtually invisible. Aldo walks right past me, not sensing a thing.

Fucking amateur.

I watch as he opens the fridge, pulls out a beer, and pops the lid off. He drinks the whole thing before tossing the empty bottle into the sink with the dirty dishes. He removes his jacket and hangs it on the back of one of the barstools before removing his gun and placing it on the counter. Walking into the living room, he moves toward the window and stares at the city below.

His cell rings, pulling his attention from the view. He fishes it out of his pocket and answers without looking at who it is.

"What?" he barks. He listens for a minute before laughing. "The day after tomorrow? Why? Not that I'm complaining. The sooner I marry her, the sooner I can take over as don."

He listens for a minute before cursing. "Nova hit Gia? What the fuck did Vigo do?" He pauses again.

"I don't care. Find out. She hit my fucking fiancée. That can't stand. Soon, I'll be the don, and she'll learn her fucking place, even if I have to teach it to her myself... I don't give a fuck. Make it happen." He hangs up and tosses his phone.

I stand up and walk up behind him. I pistol whip him and smirk when he drops to his knees with a grunt. Walking in front of him, I punch him in the face—one, two, three. I make sure to split his lip and bust up his cheekbone. Before he can recover, I wrap my hands around his throat and squeeze.

He struggles, but I don't lose my hold—not for a second. The urge to snap his neck is riding me hard. Only my promise to Nova holds me back.

Instead, I choke the fucker until his body goes limp. And then, just for the fun of it, I choke him a little bit more.

Tomorrow I want him to sound like he's been sucking dick for a week. When he looks in the mirror, I want him to be faced with the same shit Nova will be.

I stand up when he is out cold and kick the motherfucker in the balls before stomping on his stomach. He groans and rolls over, throwing up all over the floor.

I take his gun from the kitchen counter, never knowing when that might come in handy, and head out, leaving his door open. If I'm lucky, someone will come along and finish the job.

I yank my phone out and text Miles to let him know I'm ready to be picked up before standing in the shadows at the edge of the building. I take note of all the foot traffic, but there isn't much. He might live in an apartment, but it's one of the swankier ones. Most people know better than to shit where they eat, and it seems Aldo is no exception. To have a somewhat peaceful life, you need some kind of separation from home and work.

My cell chimes, letting me know Miles is here, so I walk around to the designated pickup point and climb into the passenger seat.

"You good?"

"Always," I answer, not giving him any details.

"Stop when we're half a mile from Vigo's," I order.

He nods before turning the car around and heading back in the direction he came from. The ride there is silent as I contemplate the days to come. With as many balls I have in the air right now, it will only take one momentary loss of concentration for everything to come crashing down around me.

If I fall, Nova falls, and I'll be damned if I let that happen.

When the car slows, I know we're near Vigo's place. Once it stops, I get out and walk around to the back as the trunk pops open. Miles gets out and joins me before I climb in.

“Tell them whatever bullshit you need to get us back in, because if they search the trunk, I’ll shoot the motherfuckers in the face.”

He frowns as he closes the lid, and then I hear him open the driver-side door and start the car. As it starts to move, I pull my cell phone out and check the camera feed for the house. When I see that Nova is exactly where I left her, I let out a sigh of relief and shove it back into my pocket.

I pull my gun, just in case, and wait as the car slows once more. I can hear Miles talking, but with the engine running, I can’t make out his words. Nobody seems alarmed, so I keep myself relaxed and wait. When the car starts moving again, I figure Miles must have been convincing.

This time, when the car stops, I wait for Miles to pop the trunk and give me the all-clear. “I’ve parked near the trees, so you shouldn’t be seen getting out. I don’t want to tie us together in case you need to use me again.” I nod as he pretends to be looking for something, talking quietly. “There are cameras covering all exit and entry points. But Rio, the guard on watch tonight, is notorious for not paying attention and watching his phone instead.”

“Porn?”

“TikTok Videos. Don’t ask. The world has gone mad.”

Miles takes a jacket out of the trunk from near my feet, nodding for me to climb out, which I do, keeping low to the ground. He drops the keys to me and closes the trunk. “This car is the only one without tracking. Take it, use the pass to get out, and I’ll get a ride with one of the other guys.”

“Alright, but if you think you’ve been made, bail.”

“I know the drill.”

He walks away, and I keep low and to the shadows. If the cameras pick up something, they won’t know what without investigating. I wait for Miles to enter the building, knowing he’s left the door open for me to follow, which I do.

The house is surprisingly quiet. I would have thought with Vigo and Gia living here, there would have been more



security. But their stupidity works to my advantage. So many idiots believe fear alone will keep people away, and for some, it will. However, they forget that there is always someone bigger and worse out there.

I make my way to where I know Vigo's office is first—thanks to Miles—and jimmy the lock and let myself inside. I rummage through the drawers for anything interesting, finding papers resembling building schematics for a waterfront housing development. I snap a few photos of them with my cellphone, accidentally knocking over an iron artistic elephant in the process. I move to stand it back up when I find a key that was hidden beneath it. I pick it up and turn it over in my hand. It's a key to a safe.

Looking up, I see a large Picasso hanging on the wall, an expensive item that doesn't go with the rest of the office. Next to it is a watercolor of an abandoned lifeguard tower overlooking a stormy, deserted sea. I recognize the name signed on the bottom as that of a local artist who strips away the hustle and bustle of the city and makes the space that is usually filled with people and noise seem lonely and isolating. The two pieces don't go together at all. Looking at them, I get the feeling they are the two bookends to Vigo's life. It's no secret that the man started with nothing and fought his way to the top. From a local nobody to a man rich enough to own an original Picasso.

On a hunch, I walk to the watercolor and tip it up, finding the safe underneath it. It makes sense. After all, if a thief were going to steal something, it would be the Picasso. I remove the painting and examine the safe, recognizing the type. Once I turn the key, it will give me thirty seconds to enter the six-digit code, or the alarm will trip.

I look around the office and consider what I know about Vigo.

He was once a supposedly great leader. People both feared and respected him, but losing his wife and son changed him. If rumors are to be believed, his wife and son are never to be mentioned. He once killed a man for saying his wife's name.

It's as if a part of him knows they would hate the person he became.

If only they knew the man was a monster long before his family died.

Family. *Nova*.

I turn the key and type in Nova's date of birth, and grin when the lock disengages and the door clicks open. Some people are so predictable.

Inside, I find a bunch more papers, a folder, a set of keys, and a stack of cash. I leave the cash and pocket everything else, sliding the folder into the waistband of my pants before locking the safe back up and rehangng the painting.

I crack open the office door and listen to see if anyone is around. Nothing but silence greets me. With a shake of my head, I leave the office and head upstairs.

Walking down the hall, I come across Gia's room first. She's not my target tonight, but I can't resist checking out my girl's handiwork. Stepping inside, I find Gia sprawled out on her bed, naked, with half a bottle of vodka on the dresser and puke on the floor. I move closer, using my gloved fingers to check for a pulse. When I find it sure and strong, I sigh in disappointment.

I heard talk about the woman back when I thought she was the don's daughter, about how she was beautiful with a sweet smile and a catty nature that she hid from most. She sounded like a run-of-the-mill Mafia princess—spoiled and vapid. Looking at her now, naked and vulnerable, my dick doesn't even twitch.

Unlike Nova, I have no sympathy for Gia. I did some digging and asked around, and people told me just how shitty she was to Nova. I suspect that's the tip of the iceberg. And well, I can't let that go unpunished now, can I?

I move around the room, my eyes falling on the desk in the corner. I pick up a black Sharpie and grin, pulling the cap off before returning to Gia. I write across her body the scores of names and insults she's used against my wife before adding a

few of my own. When I reach her mound, I write *Abandon all hope, ye who enter here*, above it before capping the marker and returning it to her desk.

Next, I pick up a pair of metal-handled scissors and start cutting her highlighted dark hair until more of it lies scattered across her pillow than attached to her head.

Once I'm done, I put the scissors in her hand and hum happily as I walk out and head to Vigo's room.

I can hear the labored sound of his breathing the second I enter. His room smells like sickness, so I'd be surprised if the maids didn't already suspect that the don is ill. I move toward the large bed and stare at the sleeping man, who looks far older than I remember. It's been over a decade since the last time I saw him, yet it seems like he's aged at least two.

I try to find the similarities between him and Nova, but nothing stands out. I guess that's how he got away with everything so easily. I remember his late wife. The hair and the body shape are both the same. If she were still alive, I don't think there would have been any doubt about Nova's parentage.

There is a table at the end of Vigo's bed filled with prescription meds. The dim lamp in the corner provides just enough light to read the names. I don't recognize most of them, so I pull out my cell and google a few, and find out that the man has some kind of cancer.

Spotting the bottle of water next to the bed, I take a handful of the pills I think will give me the desired effect and pull the capsules apart, pouring the contents into the bottle. I give it a good shake before returning it to its spot.

It would be so fucking easy to take him out right now. I could press my gun under his chin, and he'd be dead before anyone could do anything to stop it. But killing him is too easy. I want him to suffer first. I want this man to hurt, and taking Nova is the key to that.

The drugged water will incapacitate him for a couple of days, leaving him too weak to attend the wedding. He'll be

forced to watch it from home, and I'll be right here watching it with him, ready for the big reveal.

I turn and leave, heading out the same way I came and making it back to the car without encountering a single person. What a fucking joke! How this man hasn't had someone slip in, gut him, and slit Gia's throat is beyond me. The man's wife was murdered in this fucking house, for God's sakes, and yet it seems he learned nothing.

He will, though, and there isn't anything he can do to stop it.

## Chapter 22

---

### *Nova*



**H**ands move up my body to my breasts. Callused fingers pinch my nipples, making my back arch as nonsense words slip from my mouth. My stomach clenches as they move inside me, moving as if they're in no rush, yet I feel like I'm about to burst out of my skin.

My fingers grip the bed sheets as the haze of sleep starts to lift, but instead of the dream fading, everything becomes...

My eyes snap open with a gasp and clash with Vice's as he fucks me, his thick cock bumping against my cervix, bringing a hint of pain to the pleasure.

"Two, almost three," he grins, making me shake my head, still confused and sleepy.

"What?"

He thrusts into me harder, making me moan. "That's how many times I've come inside you already." He presses his hand against my stomach. "You feel that? You're so full of me, my cum and my cock. I bet it hurts so good, doesn't it?"

He's right. I do feel full, but the pressure only pushes me closer to the edge, like a shaken soda bottle ready to burst.

"I'm going to fuck our baby into you. I'm going to watch you swell with our child and feed them from your tits."

"Vice," I choke out. I hadn't given much thought to kids, though I knew he would want heirs. I just thought he'd want to wait a while.

His hand lightly strokes over my bruises, his eyes clouding as he gets lost in his anger. Someone touched his woman, and worse, I made him promise not to retaliate.

I reach up and slide my fingers into his hair and yank, snapping his focus back to me. I'm learning fast that though Vice can be rough and extreme, thriving on my fear and submission, he doesn't like to see me hurt.

There are times, though, when something in Vice switches off, almost like the lights are on but nobody's home. Those are the moments when I feel like I'm not just with Vice but with the monster that lives inside him. A dark, angry, unstoppable force with little care for anyone or anything. Right now, with his dick shoved so deep inside me, I'd rather not test him.

Tugging harder, he growls as he takes my mouth in a searing kiss, liquid lava pouring through my veins, before he pulls back and flips me over. I wince, feeling tender, but I don't let it show, knowing he needs this. I need this. I lick my lip and taste blood but it just adds fuel to the fire. He thrusts his cock back inside my pussy, gripping my hip with one hand and a fistful of my hair with the other. He feels so big, so deep like this that it's almost too much for me to handle.

He starts to move, and I push back against him, meeting him thrust for thrust as he pushes me to the peak of pleasure without letting me fall over the edge.

“You have the sweetest fucking ass, *bambola*.”

He releases my hair so he can cup my ass with both hands before he slips a finger inside my pussy alongside his cock. Before I can tell him it's too much, he removes it, only to tease the now-wet finger around my asshole.

“Oh, fuck.”

“One day soon, Nova, I'm going to take your ass. Imagine me sliding my cock in and out of your back hole while I shove three fingers in your greedy pussy.” He thrusts his finger into my ass, and I scream like a fucking banshee as I come so hard I almost pass out.

With a curse, Vice comes with me, slipping his cock free at the last second to coat my asshole in his cum.

I collapse face down, groaning in pain.

“Ah, fuck. You make me lose my fucking mind, *bambola*. You, okay?” He rolls me over gently, brushing the hair off my face.

“No, I’m not.”

He looks so guilty that I can’t help but chuckle.

“I’m dead. Here lies Nova Moretti, dicked to death in her prime.”

He snorts and buries his head in my hair, his fingers stroking my bruised stomach.

“I’m okay. I promise.”

“I’m a dick. I forgot you were hurting.”

“Would it have stopped you from fucking me if you’d remembered?”

“Like I said, I’m a dick.”

I crack up laughing, not helping the pain at all.

\* \* \*

Despite Vice’s protests, I insist on heading downstairs to eat. “I’m fine, Vice. It looks worse than it is. If I can handle your brand of fucking, I think I can manage a flight of stairs.” Okay, it hurts like a motherfucker, but I wasn’t kidding when I said I’ve had worse.

When we get to the dining room, Vice pulls the chair out for me just as Leah, the cook, brings out some pastries and a bowl of fruit. She doesn’t speak as she places the food down. But I thank her. She leaves the room and returns moments later with a carafe of coffee and a tray piled with pancakes, bacon, and scrambled eggs.

My mouth waters. “I could get used to this. I’ll need to work out more, but it will be worth it.”

Leah smiles before leaving. Another woman, this one much younger, comes in next carrying a tray with mugs, syrup, cutlery, and butter on it. She sets it on the table before hurrying away without making eye contact.

“Your staff is terrified of you,” I point out, helping myself to a plate of food.

“How do you know it’s not you they’re scared of?”

“Oh, please. I’m awesome.”

He grins and shakes his head, piling food on his plate before digging in.

A chiming catches my attention. I look around and see my cell phone plugged into a charger on the far end of the table. “Can you grab my phone for me?”

“Eat first. Whatever drama is waiting for us can wait until after breakfast. You wouldn’t want to upset Leah now, would you?”

“You play dirty, Vice.”

“You like it when I play dirty.”

“Eat before I shove my fork into your eye.”

“Keep turning me on, and I’ll bend you over the table.”

“I don’t know what to say to you right now.”

I concentrate on my food as my cell phone continues to chime until, eventually, I give up eating.

“Okay. Jesus.” I shove my chair back, but Vice gets up and retrieves the phone for me, an oddly blank look on his face as he hands it to me, which is right around the time I remember that mine got smashed yesterday.

He got me a new phone?

I look up at him, but he says nothing. I swallow my gratitude and take it from him.

“Thank you, Vice,” I tell him softly. He may have married me to keep me safe, but he’s always finding small ways to take care of me. I wasn’t expecting that.



If he carries on like this, I might just fall in love with my husband, and that would be the dumbest thing I've ever done.

I focus back on my new phone and find dozens of messages and missed calls. I start with the messages, each one more alarming than the last.

I leave the voice messages for now and slowly lower my phone to the table and look at Vice. "What did you do?"

"I don't know what you're talking about. You'll need to be more specific."

I grit my teeth and take a deep breath. "Where were you last night, Vice?"

"At home, taking care of my wife."

I shove my chair back and get to my feet, but Vice is on me before I can walk away.

"What's the matter, Nova? Suddenly realize what kind of man you married?" he taunts.

"Yeah, the lying kind. You promised me nothing but the truth between us, no matter how ugly. Yet the first chance you get, you lie to me."

I yank my arm away and move to walk past him, but he grabs me around the hips and lifts me up onto the table, shoving everything to the floor with a crash.

"You want the truth, Nova, but how do I know you can handle it? How do I know you won't run the first chance you get?"

"You don't. But if I trust you, my instinct will always be to run to you instead of away. And now, what do we have? The one person who was supposed to be with me in this just reminded me what a fucking fool I've been. And if you lied about this, what else will you lie about?"

"You want the truth, baby girl? Fine, here's the truth. I stood over your father last night and wanted nothing more than to blow his fucking brains out. The only thing that stopped me was you." I suck in a breath. "But don't mistake me for a good guy, Nova. I didn't stop because he's your father. I stopped

because I know your plan will probably have a better outcome than me killing him and everyone who ever met you. But that doesn't mean I'll let him get away with what he's done."

He pushes me back until I'm lying flat on the table, and he's leaning over me. "I'm going to make sure he knows exactly what I do to his little girl and how much she fucking loves it. I don't want him to just die, baby. I want him to suffer. I want him to know he failed. Failed as a don. Failed as a husband and father. And failed as a fucking man. Once he's gone, I'm going to take you to the cemetery. And while you cry for the man he could have been, I'll fuck you over his grave, feeling nothing but satisfaction. Tell me, do you like that truth?" he snarls, reaching for the waistband of my sweatpants and yanking them down, leaving me exposed as he lowers his zipper and pulls out his cock.

"Now, ask me what I did to Gia," he spits maliciously, thrusting inside me.

My back arches at the intrusion, and I grip his shoulders and glare at him. "What did you do to Gia?" I gasp as his hand moves to my clit.

I'm not stupid. I know he's distracting me with his dick. *Dickstacting me*. Fuck, and it's working. I wrap my legs around his waist and give in to him.

"I gave her a makeover," he sneers, fucking me faster.

"I don't care what you did, Vice," I pant. "I care that you lied to me. I have to be able to trust you. You're all I have." I moan.

His thrusts falter for a moment, his eyes meeting mine before he kisses me. His fingers keep working my clit as he kisses me far softer than usual, and I realize this is his apology. The man might be allergic to saying I'm sorry, but his lips sure know how to beg for forgiveness.

He pinches my clit, and I go off like a firecracker. "That's it, *bambola*. Come all over my cock." He slows his movements, drawing it out until he comes deep inside me.

Pressing his forehead against mine, we breathe each other in as our heart rates return to normal.

Lifting his head, he looks at me. “Have I told you how much I like being married to you?”

I burst out laughing, groaning when he eases himself out of me.

“You okay?”

“I think I might need a nap.”

“I think that’s a good idea. Take a couple of days to recover.” He brushes his finger over the side of my face.

“As good as that sounds, I have a wedding to attend tomorrow.”

He grumbles, “I knew you were going to say that. You know you don’t have to go, right?”

“I do. I have to see this through, Vice. It’s important to me.”

“Fine, but I’ll have one of my men close by in case you need him.”

“Alright.”

“Oh, and Nova? Wear your rings.”

## Chapter 23

---

### *Nova*



The wedding day is here. Vigo's health took a drastic turn, meaning he won't be attending. Instead, he'll be watching the live stream from his bedroom, courtesy of one of his guards.

I know Vice had something to do with it, but at least there is less chance of things going wrong today. Staring at my face in the mirror, I listen to the excited chatter of guests arriving and prepare myself.

Vice and I decided not to hide my injuries. I have nothing to be ashamed of, and showing what he did to me will be the first step toward making people question the type of man Aldo is. My eye is still a little bloodshot, and my lip has a lovely scab where it's finally begun to heal. I did remove the butterfly stitches because they were aggravating as hell. Half of my face is a purply color from the bruises, and my neck and arms are marred with dark finger-shaped marks.

I could have stayed away. I know when I step out, there will be as many eyes on me as there will be on Gia, but the evil bitch in me needed to see this through.

The ceremony has been scaled down, purely because of the date being brought forward. Most people bent over backward to accommodate them, but for those otherwise booked, it was impossible. I'd heard from a friend that Gia had flipped shit when she was told there would be no doves and that many of the guests wouldn't be attending due to the short notice. The

florist and caterer had managed to juggle things around, and the dress had been ready for over a week.

Now, it was just a case of them saying their vows. Then, for me, this part of my life will be over. All my stuff is already at Vice's place—well, our place now. I'd made my peace with it as much as I could. I might have made a choice that not everyone would understand, but it was one I knew was right for me.

After my encounter with Aldo, it only reinforced my decision. Me and Vice might be like oil and water, but not once have I felt the back of his hand. Nor has he shoved me away or called me names to make himself feel better. Oh, he can be an asshole, but I know there is far more to the man than he shows the world.

I look down at my wedding and engagement rings that I woke up to find on my finger this morning. Both are platinum encrusted with diamonds. The engagement ring also has a huge, brilliant-cut oval diamond in the center, making me nervous as fuck to wear it. This is the first time since saying *I do*, I'm free to wear them. Nobody is going to be looking at my hands today, after all.

I smooth down my hair and pull my braid over my shoulder, the ends tickling my bare skin. The sweetheart neckline of my soft pink dress leaves my neck and shoulders bare, highlighting every mark Aldo left on me. Knowing who I am, people have already asked what happened, thinking I got these marks protecting Gia. So you can imagine their surprise when I answered with the truth.

Some people looked pissed on my behalf. Others just looked uncomfortable, but nobody disputed my answer, and that's the point I was trying to make. Today, people will walk away from the wedding not talking about the bride but about what the groom has done to me. What amuses me the most is that everyone knows exactly what type of man Aldo is, and yet half of the people here will blindly follow him the second Vigo hands him the crown.

I leave the restroom and take my seat at the back of the church, knowing the camera isn't on me but on the altar at the front. When Aldo takes his place, a groomsman walks up to stand beside him and whispers something in his ear, making him frown. He nods and lifts his head, his eyes scanning the guests.

I fight back a grin when I get a look at the state of his face. Not having the option of hiding his bruises with makeup. Some people turn to give me amused smiles, suspecting I had something to do with it. In a roundabout way, I guess I did. Vice might have failed to mention he'd paid Aldo a visit, but I would have known it was his handiwork simply because Aldo's bruises mirror mine.

Aldo's gaze lands on me, his eyes narrowing, looking as if he's trying to kill me with his thoughts. I roll my eyes and check my nails, showing him how fucking bored I am. I know I'm painting more of a target on my back, but after all this, I'll no longer have to stand dutifully and take the shit thrown at me. Not only am I done being a puppet for this family, but I have a husband who becomes homicidal when his wife is threatened.

The organ starts playing, and everyone quiets down. When the church doors open, we all stand and turn to see Gia in a floor-length Vera Wang gown with a long train and heavy veil covering her head and face. I blow out a breath, praying this all goes off without a hitch. It takes me a second to realize that the man standing beside her, ready to walk her down the aisle, is Alessio.

I should have known, with Vigo too weak to walk her down the aisle and Aldo being the one to marry her, that Alessio would be forced into walking beside her. Tears well up in my eyes at the pain on his face as he looks down at the woman who is his daughter, even though she is oblivious to it all.

What a fucked-up position to be in. My heart breaks for the man who gave up so much. And for what? He'll have a target of his own on his back after this. Vigo didn't care about any of that, though. Why would he care about anyone else's

feelings when he's too busy expecting the world to revolve around him?

Alessio offers Gia his arm to take before walking her slowly down the aisle. As everyone watches the bride, I watch the man slowly breaking beside her, swiping at the tear that slips free before anyone notices.

The music stops when they get to the altar, and Alessio presses a kiss on Gia's veil-covered cheek before he steps away, but instead of moving over to the front pew, he walks out. I itch to go after him, but instinctively know he needs a minute alone. Aldo takes Gia's hand, and the ceremony begins.

I tune a lot of it out and just go through the motions, sitting and standing and responding at the appropriate times. The priest has just instructed the guests to be seated, and the "I do's" have begun when Alessio slips in beside me. He doesn't say a word, but I can see his eyes are red. His hand rests on the wooden bench next to my leg. With my eyes on the soon-to-be-married couple, I slide my hand over Alessio's and grip it tightly. He jolts before he turns his hand and holds mine like a lifeline.

"You have declared your consent before the church. May the Lord, in his goodness, strengthen your consent and fill you both with his blessings. What God has joined, we must not divide. Amen."

Aldo looks at me smugly before his eyes fall on Alessio with a smirk. He thinks he's invincible. He sees me sitting here, next to the man he thinks is my father, and feels safe that nobody will step up and call him on his shit now that Gia is his. He doesn't seem to realize that not all change comes from huge cataclysmic events. More often than not, change happens slowly. Small things push people to the brink, and they start to question if they want to be sheep or wolves. And in this life, being a sheep isn't an option. Prey never lasts long among predators. If Aldo can do this to the *consigliere*, then what else will he do?

It's hypocrisy at its finest. If I were his wife, people wouldn't blink twice that he hit me. It's a common occurrence in this violent life we lead. But I'm not his wife. I'm the *consigliere's* daughter, and that comes with consequences.

*Usually.*

His grin gets wider as he looks around. He doesn't see that he's watering the seeds of discontent I planted. The smiles from before now all hold a hint of unease to them. What a way to begin your campaign to rule, with your followers questioning your authority. As if sensing the unease, his smile falters before he turns back to the priest.

"On behalf of God and his church, I now pronounce you man and wife. You may now kiss the bride." The priest smiles at the couple as Aldo lifts Gia's veil.

People gasp when they see her cropped hair. I look down and bite my lip. I'm guessing that was part of Vice's makeover.

When people start to clap, I figure the kiss part of the show is over, so I get up, and so does Alessio. He leads me outside and walks me over to one of the waiting limos and opens the door for me. I climb in and wait for him to slide in beside me.

Instead, he looks at me and lifts his hand to my face, running a finger down my cheek. "I'm going to stay. Make sure everything runs smoothly. I need to get a feel for how things will be."

I want to tell him to get in the car with me, but I know he has to do this. Alessio's position in this is as precarious as mine. More so because at least I have Vice's protection. He has nobody except me.

"Okay, just please be careful."

He leans down and kisses my forehead, lingering for a moment before pulling back. "You are everything I ever dreamed a daughter could be, and I'm so fucking proud of you. Go home. Build a life with your husband and be happy." He closes the door before I can say anything and taps the roof for the driver to go.



I turn in my seat and feel those pesky tears make a reappearance as I watch Alessio through the back window, getting farther and farther away. I close my eyes once he's out of sight and fight back a sob because that didn't feel like a *see you later*. That felt a lot like *goodbye*.

"Where to, Mrs. Moretti?"

I startle at the sound of my married name and turn to look at the driver in the rearview mirror. I blow out a relieved breath when I recognize him as one of Vice's men. "I'm not sure."

I pull out my cell phone from the hidden pocket in my gown and dial Vice, unsure if he'll answer it.

He surprises me, though, and answers right away. "Nova," he says, blowing out a breath like he's been waiting for me to call. "Where are you?"

"I'm in the limo. I wasn't sure where to go."

"Have Conner bring you to me."

"Okay. Thank you."

"You don't have to thank me, Nova. I always want you with me."

He hangs up, and I tell whom I guess is Conner what Vice said. I lean back in my seat and close my eyes, glad that part of the day is over.

I must doze off because I'm startled awake sometime later when the door opens, and Vice is there scooping me up into his arms. He holds me for a second before standing me up and kissing me senseless, not giving a shit who sees us.

I pull away and rest my forehead against his chest, gripping the sides of his suit jacket. "Thank you," I murmur into his chest as I feel other people move around us.

I stand up and look around, recognizing some of the members of Vice's crew. Some I haven't met before, but they give me a nod before looking away. "Hi," I greet them all, making Vice snicker.

“Come on.” He takes my hand and leads me toward the door of a large house.

“Where are we?”

“My father’s house.”

I stumble before looking at him.

“What?”

He keeps walking, dragging me along, with his men following. “I know your day has been shit so far, and I won’t lie, it’s about to get ten times worse. But I need you to be that fearless girl who strutted herself into prison and offered herself to me.”

“I did not strut,” I snap, making him grin. A few of the men around us chuckle.

“There she is.”

The door opens, and a man who looks like an extra from Downton Abbey invites us in. “Sir, the master is in the den.”

“Thank you, Johnathan. You may leave and take the rest of the staff with you. I’ll make sure you’re all paid for the inconvenience.”

He hesitates for a minute before nodding. “Yes, Sir.”

Vice leads me to what I assume is the den. When we get there, I see two older men. One is Giovanni, the don, who looks like an aged version of Vice. The other is fair-skinned with blond hair, which makes him stand out among the rest of us.

Of course, I don’t know why I’m focusing on his hair when there are suddenly guns everywhere.

“What the fuck is going on, Vice?”

“Dad, Nino. Don’t mind me. I’m just here to take over. We talked about it, remember?”

“You are not stable enough to rule this family. You killed your brother.”

“He was no brother of mine. He was a filthy pervert who deserved more than what he got. Tell me, Father, do you really think if I’d killed Dano, it would have been with a bullet? Especially since the man was there to kill me?” He conveniently doesn’t mention that after I killed him, he shot Dano repeatedly in the face before pissing on him.

Giovanni opens his mouth but shuts it again and frowns. “No, you’re a sadistic motherfucker. What are you saying? That someone else killed Dano?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying.”

Giovanni jumps up. “Tell me who they are,” he orders, making me wonder if this is the part where he hangs me out to dry.

“Why? Are you going to thank them for saving my life?”

“They killed my boy,” his father roars. The man standing next to him frowns.

“You cannot deny what Dano was. You should have put him down yourself.”

Giovanni snarls. “Tell me who the fuck killed my son, and you can lead this family. I want a name.”

Vice double-checks. “Just a name, and you’ll step down gracefully?”

Vice squeezes my hand. I don’t know if it’s a sign to brace for what comes next or an apology for what he’s about to do.

“The person who saved my life’s name is Nova Romano.”

Giovanni steps back, his eyes moving rapidly as he tries to figure out who that is before they fall on me.

I wave. “Hi.”

He snarls and lunges for me, but Vice is there with his hand around his father’s throat. “I gave you a name, and now it’s time for you to step down.” He releases his dad, who pulls a gun and aims it at me, but Vice steps in front of me. “Touch my wife, and I’ll rip off your cock and feed it to you.”

“Your wife. God, Vice, what have you done?”

“I gave you what you always wanted. An heir to step up and a wife I can make beautiful babies with. What’s the matter, Dad? Sad it’s not Dano here instead? Hard to make babies, though, when you prefer fucking underage boys.”

He growls and points the gun at Vice’s head. “This is your fault. It should have been you in that coffin, not Dano.”

I can see the exact moment the man decides to shoot Vice, consequences be damned. I pull the gun at the small of Vice’s back and shoot Giovanni in the throat.

My gun isn’t the only one that goes off, though. A fraction of a second later, more bullets riddle his body, making him twitch. Vice turns to look at me, holding his hand out for his gun.

“I’m not a urologist. But I know a dick when I see one. For the love of God, don’t introduce me to any more of your family. I don’t have a very good track record keeping them alive.”

He laughs and pulls me in for a hard kiss. The front of his shirt is covered in blood from Giovanni. Now blood coats the front of my pink dress, and I couldn’t care less.

“I like how protective she is of you,” Isaac says with a hint of respect in his voice.

Vice tucks me under his arm and turns us back to Nino. “As my father’s *consigliere*, you’ll understand that I’m no longer in need of your services. I have my own counsel.”

The man stands there gaping, his eyes dropping to Giovanni on the floor. “She just killed the don.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I was the one that killed him,” Conner calls out.

“Hate to burst your bubble, but it was me.” Isaac sighs as the other guys start arguing that they were the one that made the kill shot. I feel warmth in my stomach at how they are all trying to protect me.

“Sometimes, Nino, power corrupts. There is no way my father didn’t know about Dano. He was the golden boy, so it

stands to reason that he's been cleaning up his messes for years."

"Right," Nino says, looking unsure, but behind his eyes, I can see a shrewd man doing calculations. "This needs to stay between us. People won't take too kindly to her killing the don, whatever the reason. They'll want to make an example of her."

"Over my dead body," Vice snarls.

"That's what I'm afraid of, Vice."

## Chapter 24

---

### *Vice*



“We can’t take the risk of keeping him alive. You know that, right?” Isaac murmurs into my ear.

“I know. I figured we could stage it to look like Nino took my father out.”

“People respect him, Vice. Unlike your father, Nino cultivated an image that garnered him respect. He was much better at keeping his skeletons in the closet. I don’t think people will believe he killed Giovanni. They’ll think it was a set up.”

“I’m not planning on turning Nino into a scapegoat. I’m planning on giving the people what they want. A hero.”

He looks at me wryly.

“Let’s say he found out that my father knew exactly what Dano was doing and didn’t just condone it but hid it from his people. If that wasn’t bad enough, Nino heard my father was arranging to put a hit out on me for killing Dano, and he decided to take matters into his own hands to stop that from happening. Unfortunately, he didn’t realize my father would be able to get off a shot of his own before he died.”

“Thus, killing Nino.”

I nod.

We both look over at Nino when we hear him laugh. His eyes are roving over Nova in a way that makes me want to remove his eyeballs and dunk them in acid.

“He doesn’t seem too cut up about his best friend being dead, does he?”

“No,” I say, gritting my teeth. “He’s too fucking busy looking at my wife’s tits.”

“Don’t worry, he’ll be dead soon. I have to say, I was wrong about her. I knew what she was hoping to get out of this bargain, but I couldn’t see what was in it for you other than a headache. I get it now. She’s fucking spectacular.”

“Careful, Isaac,” I warn him.

He shakes his head and grins. “Don’t worry, Vice. I value my life and our friendship too much to mess with your girl. And she is, you know. This might have started out as an agreement between you, but you’ve been protective of her from the beginning, to the point of obsession. At least now we know it’s not one-sided.”

I look at him and frown.

“We all could have killed Giovanni. We’re all armed. All ready to take a bullet for you. But while we were waiting for your order, your wife was protecting her husband.”

I look over at Nova, who is covered in blood, though you’d never know it from the expression on her face. Deep down, I know she’s praying for a shower, but her face shows nothing but polite interest in Nino and whatever he’s talking her ear off about.

“Go rescue your girl, and we’ll take care of Nino. Does she know what you have planned for her father?”

“No. But fuck, Isaac, you should have seen his face today when he realized the bride was Gia and not Nova. I had to knock him out before he screamed down the whole house.”

“I guess it’s better to beg for forgiveness than ask for permission anyway, right?” he jokes.

I frown at him.

“Right, I forgot who I was talking to for a second. You don’t seek permission or forgiveness.”

I walk over to Nova and hold out my hand for her to take, which she does without question. I tug her to me, wrapping my arm around her as she slides her hand up my chest.

“I’m taking Nova to get cleaned up, Nino. Stay with my men so you can corroborate your stories.”

“Of course, Vice. Can I just say I’m looking forward to working with you?”

I barely hold back my snort. “You were my father’s right-hand man for years. I respect that, Nino, but that just makes you the keeper of his secrets, not mine. Isaac will be *consigliere*.”

Isaac looks shocked for a moment before shaking it off. Nino splutters in protest, but I ignore him and usher Nova out of the room.

“Do you think he knows he’s a dead man walking yet?”

I chuckle. “I think he would have pissed himself already if that were the case. He might have been my father’s confidant, but he was never a fighter.”

“It’s not usually a requirement for a *consigliere*, but Alessio knew that not being able to fight would make him a weak link. So he trained with the best. It always made sense to me. The *consigliere* knows everything. And if the enemy wanted to know something, he’d be the one captured and tortured for information. I think they should all have some type of basic training, including how to withstand these techniques.”

“I never thought about it like that, but it makes sense,” I agree, walking her into the bedroom and through to the bathroom.

“Know much about torture techniques, do you?” I joke, but when she doesn’t answer, I look at her.

“I went through the same training Alessio did. The fact of the matter is, it doesn’t matter which family you were born into, where in the world you live, or what fucking decade you were raised in. Women are always targets. If we have



daughters, you better believe I'll be teaching them how to defend themselves."

I freeze at the thought of having a daughter who looks just like Nova. Then I picture her with a man like me or, worse, a man like Aldo, and know with absolute certainty that I would wipe out every male on this planet if it meant keeping her safe.

"You, okay? You have a weird look on your face. Is it because I shot your dad? He was going to—"

I press my lips to hers in a soft kiss, something I don't do very often. Thinking about the lengths I would go to protect my potential daughter made me realize how much worse Vigo's betrayal is.

"We were never close," I murmur against her lips.

"He was still your father. One day, you might look back and resent me for it."

I take a knife from my jacket pocket and step back a little, flipping the blade through my fingers. She stills, but she doesn't step back. Her eyes follow the knife as the pulse in her throat starts fluttering wildly.

"We don't look at things the same way, Nova. Any familial ties I might have had with that man snapped a long time ago." I glide the flat of the knife over her cheek. "I stayed for my brother."

Her eyes fly to mine.

"He was supposed to be a better man, but he turned out to be worse than us all. Now they're both gone, and all I feel is relief. I don't need to pretend to be something I'm not anymore."

I slide the point of the knife down her neck and press the tip to her pulse. She hisses when I cut the skin, but again, she holds her ground. Her fear fills the air, but it's combined with that unwavering defiance of hers that drives me fucking insane.

I lean forward and use the flat of my tongue to lick up her blood. It's not much, just a taste, but it has my dick throbbing

with the need for release.

“And what’s that?” she whispers, her voice shaking as the knife moves between her breasts, cutting through the material of her dress until it falls to her hips.

“Normal. Or as normal as one can be in our world.”

I graze the blade between her breasts and drag my tongue over the beads of blood that rush to the surface.

“What is normal, Vice? Your dad was the head of a criminal empire. Your brother, a fucked-up pedophile. I’m not going to lie, out of the three of you, you’re the most well-adjusted, and I say that as you cut me with a knife and lick my blood.”

I grin, tossing the knife to the floor before gripping the material of her dress and ripping it the rest of the way down, leaving her standing in a white lace strapless bra and matching panties.

“Oh, Nova,” I murmur against her ear as I hook my fingers in her underwear and shove them down her legs. “You have no idea what I’m capable of. If you did, you’d never think I was normal.”

“Oh, I don’t think you’re normal. Not even close. I was just pointing out that your family was that fucked up, they made you look normal.”

I chuckle, reaching behind her to unclasp her bra. “As long as you’re not looking for the goodness in me.”

“You don’t think you have any?”

I pull the bra off and toss it aside. “If you could see inside my head, you wouldn’t ask me that.”

“You have monsters in your blood. I have madness in mine. I’m not afraid of you, Vice.”

I wrap my fist in her braid and yank her head back, exposing her throat to me. “Liar. But that’s okay. I like that you fear me.”

Her breathing picks up again as I bite her bottom lip before I push her to her knees. She looks up at me with those pretty haunted eyes, and I swear to God I have an epiphany. This woman will ruin me, and I'll let her. I'll hold her hand and walk right into hell if it means I get to keep her.

I open my fly and pull my cock out and stroke it. "Open your mouth. I want your pretty lips wrapped around my cock."

She does as I ask and opens her mouth. I trace her lips with the tip of my cock, coating them with precum before easing my cock inside. I start with shallow thrusts, and when she begins to relax, I grip her braid once more and hold her in place as I thrust harder. She gags, but she doesn't fight me.

"I'm going to fuck your mouth, and you're going to take it like a good girl. Aren't you, *bambola*?"

She hums, which I take as consent. Not that it matters. I love Nova's wild and unpredictable side, but in the bedroom, I will always be in control.

I fuck her mouth harder, making her gag again, but I ignore it, going deeper and deeper until I see the panic in her eyes. "Breath through your nose, Nova."

She glares at me, even with mascara running down her face, making me laugh. Of course, I punish her for it by shoving my cock down her throat and holding it there. Her throat convulses around me, and I almost shoot my load right then.

I pull my cock out, watching as she coughs and sucks in much-needed air. I press my cock to her lips once more, groaning when she flicks her tongue over the crown. *Minx*.

This time I take what I want, holding her head steady as I fuck her mouth like a pussy until I know I can't hold back anymore.

I pull out and stroke my cock, looking at her tear-streaked face. "I'm going to come in your mouth, but don't swallow it."

She holds her mouth open as I fuck my fist for a moment before I place the head just between her lips and pump my

cum into her mouth. Once I'm spent, I tuck my cock away and stare at the pool of cum that's starting to drip from her lips.

"Such a good girl. Swallow me down, Nova."

She shivers as she does, her eyes wide with lust and confusion. She likes what I do to her. She just doesn't understand why.

I reach down and lift her to her feet. I cup her jaw and lean in for a kiss, showing her my appreciation. I taste the salt of her tears and the tangy sweetness of my cum before I pull away and press my forehead against hers.

"In case you still don't get it, I'll never resent you for getting rid of my father or brother. The only time I'll be pissed is if you try to keep yourself from me."

"Okay," she says gently, her voice hoarse.

"Good. Now take a shower. I packed a bag for you this morning. It's in my car. I'll go grab it and bring it up, then lay some clothes out on the bed for you. Come find me when you're done."

I wait for her to nod before I press a kiss to her temple. I leave her and head into the bedroom.

I spot the bag on the bed and realize someone's already beaten me to it. I had Turner put everything away for us at home, so it was easy to find what I needed this morning. I take out a yellow sundress that's fitted at the top and flares from the waist to the knee. It's strapless, like the dress I just tore from her, and will display her bruises nicely.

I lay it on the bed before grabbing a pair of black leather ankle boots and a black leather jacket. As much as I like the innocent look the dress gives off, I still want Nova to feel like herself. A little sweet, a little badass.

At the bottom of the bag, I find another strapless white bra and a matching pair of underwear. I lay them on the bed before quickly changing into clean clothes myself and make my way downstairs. I wash my face and hands in the kitchen sink before patting my skin dry with a hand towel. Tossing it onto the counter, I walk back to the den.

The guys are still there when I enter. Now, though, instead of one dead body, there are two. The scene has been set. Nino is lying on the floor across from my father with a gun in his hand and a hole in his chest.

“That was quick.”

“You didn’t hear anything?” Conner asks, surprised.

“All the rooms are soundproof.”

“Might be something you want to look into.”

“No. I wouldn’t risk my wife being attacked and me not being able to hear her scream.”

He nods. “Right.”

“My father had this place soundproofed, so all his secrets stayed within these walls. Each deal he made, each strike to his wife or punishment dealt to his kids, all took place without anyone knowing.”

“He had it soundproofed to hide his shame.”

I look at Conner. “I’m not ashamed of how I treat my wife. I like making her scream.”

I turn and walk out, heading for my father’s office. I sit down and go through his drawers, finding a couple of ledgers and what looks like a journal. I’ll have to go through that later when I have more time. I check my father’s schedule for the week and see he has a meeting on Friday with the other families’ representatives. I’m guessing that’s to welcome Aldo as the new don now that Vigo is too weak to hide shit. That gives me time to get everything together.

Taking the ledgers and journal, I make my way out of the office and find Veck heading my way.

“Lock up. Make sure the cameras are wiped and set the security system so we know when someone enters.” I look at my watch. “Which should be Julia in two hours to start cooking dinner. She’s been here for twenty years. She knows the deal. When she discovers the bodies, she won’t call the police. She’ll call me.”

“Alright. Text me when she calls, and we’ll head over to begin investigating,” he smirks.

I open my mouth to agree when Nova appears at the top of the stairs. “Fuck me.”

Veck laughs, slapping me on the back as Nova walks down the stairs toward me.

“What is with that look on your face?” she questions, offering a brief smile to Veck before he nods and walks away.

“You are so fucking beautiful.”

She touches the bruises on her face, but I reach up and skim my thumb over her cheek.

“If you think these detract from your beauty, you’re wrong. They remind me how strong you are.” I lean in closer. “That being said, this is the last fucking time another man will bruise what’s mine. I am the only one who gets to mark your skin.”

“That’s messed up, Vice.” She sighs.

“I don’t give a fuck.”

I push her up against the wall and slide my hand between her legs. She looks around, making sure nobody can see. What she doesn’t seem to realize is that I don’t care if my men see us. Anyone watching will know she’s mine.

“You know what I think, *bambola*? I think you like the thought of wearing my mark. Admit it. You want my teeth marks on your breast?” I bend my head and bite down on the soft swell of her breast, making her cry out.

I pull the crotch of her panties aside with my other hand and stroke her pussy, feeling it dampen under my touch. “You want my fingerprints on your hips or wrapped around your throat?” I growl as I slip two fingers inside her and feel how wet she is.

“Yeah, you’d like that. You want everyone to know I own you, don’t you?”

She hisses. “You don’t own me.”

“Your mouth says one thing, but your pussy says another.”

I finger fuck her harder, nipping her earlobe with my teeth. I stroke her clit with the pad of my thumb when I feel her tighten around my fingers.

“Maybe we should get my name tattooed on your skin. I think right here.” I trail my fingers over her collarbone, and she throws her head back, banging it on the wall, as she comes with a shudder.

I unzip my pants and pull out my cock, which is rock hard again. I lift her leg and angle myself so that I can thrust into her pussy with ease. I fuck her hard and fast as she holds on to me for dear life.

Nothing else matters, not the two dead bodies in the other room or my men who could walk in at any moment.

“Oh, maybe you want me to mark you with my cum. Fuck knows I want to. I want it inside your pussy and rubbed into your tits. I want to know I’m in you, on you, and surrounding you in every fucking way.”

I fuck her until she comes violently, clamping down so hard around me it almost hurts to pull free. Keeping her panties pulled to the side, I come all over her pussy, pushing some inside her and rubbing the rest over her lips and clit.

I cover her pussy back up with her panties and lower her leg to the floor.

“Later, when things feel even more fucked up than they do right now, remember this moment. Remember how much I want you. Wear me on your skin and know if I could spend all day inside you, I would.”

She looks at me with a frown, knowing something is going to go down that I haven’t told her about.

She has her reasons for doing what she’s doing, and I have mine. It’s time to see just how much she likes being my wife after I blow her life to shreds.

## Chapter 25

---

### *Nova*



**A**fter having a late lunch at a bistro that Vice had emptied out before our arrival, we climb into the back of the car and head home. I lean my head against the window to watch the world pass by just as Vice’s phone rings.

“Yeah,” he answers, the deep tone making me shiver. I swear, his voice alone could make me orgasm.

“Alright, do it. Text me when and where.”

He hangs up, which reminds me that my phone is still on silent from the church. I reach into my pocket and pull it out, but Vice takes it from me and slips it into his pocket before dragging me over so that I’m straddling his lap. I feel his hard cock press against my damp underwear and squirm.

“Give yourself a break today. There will be enough fires to put out later.”

“But Alessio—”

“Has my number if it’s important.”

I sigh and give in, feeling a little lost right now. I’ve been trained since I was a child to guard and protect Gia. There was never any confusion regarding my role. Now, though, I’m not sure what the hell I’m supposed to do. I’m not the sit-around-and-look-pretty type of wife most Mafia men want.

“That phone call was to notify me that my father’s body has been found.”



I sit up straighter and wait for him to continue. When he says nothing, I roll my eyes. “If you left him there to be discovered, I assume it was part of your plan.”

“I don’t want the suspicion cast on us,” he says, brushing his thumb over my cheek.

I snort. “I’m not worried about people thinking it was me. I’m just a girl, Vice. I’m not a threat to anyone,” I tell him with a smile.

“And that, my sweet, is what makes you the most dangerous person in the room.”

I don’t say anything to that because he’s not wrong. I’ve been using people’s bias against me over the years to my advantage.

“So, what’s the plan now?”

“Isaac is calling an emergency meeting of the five families. Either the don or underboss will be expected to attend.”

“This is where you ask to be given the role of don?”

“I’m not asking. You see, I might have been gone for a decade, but I’ve always had a backup plan in place. The most powerful men left in our organization are already my men and are loyal to me. The others are too weak to wear the crown. If I walked away, my men would come with me.”

“And chaos would ensue as the rest of the family scrambles to find a suitable leader to fill the role. Don’t take this the wrong way, but I’m surprised you managed to pull all this off without Vigo hearing whispers about it. If he thought there was a power shift in one of the families, one that could potentially threaten his reign, he would have squished you all like ants.”

“The problem with men like Vigo is that they’ve been on top for so long they forgot what it’s like to be hungry, and I’m not talking about for food.”

“You’re talking about power. I know. Everyone thinks money makes the world go round, and I’m sure, in some cases, it’s true. But power is all anyone wants. Power over their own

actions, power over others. Control is something most people seek, especially in our world. You either have it and rule or don't and follow."

He kisses me hard, bruising my lips before pulling back. "I didn't know how much of a turn-on it would be to have such a smart wife."

I roll my eyes and twirl a piece of hair, adopting a valley girl voice. "Like... I'm really pretty too, though, right?"

He grins that fucking grin that would distract the devil. "I have no use for a blow-up doll for a wife."

"Good, because I'd suck at the whole airhead thing. I might be really good at holding my tongue, but I tend to let my fists fly when I'm angry."

"I'll keep that in mind."

"You planning on making me angry?"

He looks at me with amusement.

"Right, I forgot who I was talking to. I'm just going to apologize in advance for all the things I'll throw at your head and for calling you a dickhead."

"You didn't call me a—"

"The day is still young."

"Noted." He looks about to say something else, but his cell chimes.

"The meeting has been set. It's at the Belovaine in two hours."

Belovaine, a large estate that acts as neutral ground for the families, is where most in-person meetings take place.

"That's not a lot of notice for the families to get there."

"No, but a don is dead, and a new one must step in. So this has to be done in person. If they can't make it, they can send a representative. They just have to be comfortable with that person voting by proxy."

“You know you’re going to walk out of there the don. I don’t doubt that for a second. But don’t think it won’t bring you more enemies either.”

“You worried about me, Nova?”

“You’re no good to me dead, Vice, and I’ve already had to save you twice.”

“You’re gonna play that card a lot, aren’t you?”

“Oh yeah. You forget our tenth wedding anniversary, and I’ll remind you of all the times I saved your ass.”

“The thought of ten years with you makes me hard.”

“Everything makes you hard—”

“No, Nova.” He cuts me off before I can say anything else. “Only you. Anytime you’re near me, I’m hard as rock.”

I shake my head and move to climb off his lap, but he yanks my hips closer. And I can feel just how hard he is. His hand cups my jaw as he kisses me again, soft and coaxing as he explores my mouth.

By the time he pulls back, I’m breathless and grinding down on him. Dammit, I don’t like how easily he evokes this response from my body. Instead of sharing that, I keep my mouth shut. If he knew, he’d use it against me.

“Once we get there, I want you to stay outside in the car. Isaac and Conner are meeting us there. Isaac will bring you to me if I need you.”

“Why would you need me?”

“I might not, but stranger things have happened. What you need to remember is that everything that happens in there is all a show.”

I pull back a little and study his face. “Okay, again, what does this have to do with me?”

He licks his lips. “How we act in private or around my crew might differ from how I am around the other dons.”

Something in me deflates. It's not like I didn't know I was going to be used at some point along the way. I just hoped that Vice might be different. How stupid of me.

I climb off his lap, and this time, he lets me go. I tug my dress down and go back to looking out of the window.

“Nova.”

“It's fine. I get it. I know the role I have to play. I might not like it, but I know how to act like I do.”

He sighs but says nothing else.

I feel the driver's eyes on me. I'll be damned if I can remember his name, though. I should be embarrassed that I forgot about him when I was grinding all over Vice, but something tells me he's seen worse.

We ride the rest of the way in silence. I'm just drifting off to sleep when the car comes to a stop, jolting me awake.

Vice slides his hand over my thigh and squeezes it. “I'll be back.”

“Okay,” I answer, looking at him with a nod. I'm not about to throw a hissy fit. This is neither the time nor the place. Plus, it's not Vice's fault that I thought things might be different between us.

“Guard her with your life until the guys get here, George. If anything happens to her, I'll make you pay in ways you can't even imagine.”

“Yes, sir,” he answers, and I swear I hear him gulp.

Vice climbs out of the car, giving me one last lingering look before closing the door and heading inside.

I blow out a breath and lean back. I reach for my phone and curse when I remember Vice has it. “Perfect.”

“Everything okay, miss?”

“Peachy.” I sigh, not wanting to sound bitchy. “And please, call me Nova.”

“Alright, Miss Nova.” I bite back a grin, deciding to just go with it.

Another car pulls up, and I watch as the don of the Esposito family climbs out with a guard in tow. I slide down in my seat.

“The windows are tinted, Miss Nova. He can’t see inside.”

“Oh, good. I feel like a sitting duck here without my gun.”

“Do you usually carry a gun?” He looks at me with wide eyes.

“I always carry a gun. But today I was at a wedding, and nobody was allowed to enter if they were armed.”

Of course, I’d carried a switchblade, which is now in the pocket of my jacket. But there is a reason people tell you not to bring a knife to a gunfight. All made men carry guns, and going up against them without one would be a mistake.

“I have one in the glove box, miss. You don’t have to worry. I’ll protect you if needed, but this place is like a sanctuary. Violence here will often lead to punishment.”

Punishment. That’s funny. Whatever punishment given wouldn’t undo what was done, and with these guys, it would be a bullet in the head.

“That’s good to know, George.” I don’t know what kind of training he’s had. Hell, for all I know, he could be a secret ninja, but something tells me I have a lot more training than him.

I lean my head against the window and close my eyes, wondering if it might be worth taking a nap. I’d read if I had my cell phone, but that’s not an option. I’ve only been here for about ten minutes, and I’m already going nuts with boredom. I’d get out and walk around if I didn’t think it might result in George’s death. I know Vice wouldn’t care for excuses. He’d shoot George in a heartbeat and wouldn’t lose a moment of sleep over it.

I must doze off because, when the door opens, I’m startled awake. I yank out my knife and have it pointed at the intruder

before I can even register who it is.

Isaac grins at me before climbing in with Conner right behind him. “Interesting way to say hello.”

“I’m not a kiss-on-the-cheek kind of girl.”

“And what kind of girl are you, then?”

“The knife to your throat kind.”

Conner chuckles, and Isaac’s lips twitch. “I think Vice has met his match with you.”

I shrug and pull the knife away, but I keep it in my hand. Vice might trust these guys, but I don’t know them well enough to trust them yet. Besides, with George in the mix, that’s three against one. I’d rather take my chances with the knife than blind faith.

“How long is this supposed to take?”

“Till everyone is dead,” Isaac deadpans.

I look at him with a blank face.

He laughs. “Alright, tough girl, I get it. You’re not afraid of anything.”

Now it’s my turn to laugh. “Is that what you think, Isaac? Jesus, I’m scared of everything. My life has been one near-death experience after another. I’m always afraid, but I don’t let that fear define me. I don’t let it dictate what I do or who I’ll become. I’m not weak because of my fear. My fear makes me strong because it means I’m prepared for any situation, and I don’t know when to give up.”

Isaac stares at me as if I’m some kind of insect that just did something interesting. It kind of makes me want to poke his eyes out, but I resist. Barely.

“Well, I’m going back to sleep.” I lean my head against the window once more and let my eyes drift closed.

“Is she serious?” Conner asks.

“My eyes are closed, but I can still hear you.”

He says nothing to that, so I relax, but then Isaac speaks up again. “Are you really going to sleep on us?”

I open my eyes. “I’d rethink your wording if you have this conversation later. Vice would scoop out your kidney with a spoon.”

“Oddly specific.”

“Painful as fuck, but it won’t kill you if done correctly.”

“I’m so glad we get to keep her,” Conner murmurs to Isaac.

I bite back my smile. I’m not going to be lured in by a pretty face, though. He might be all jokes and smiles now, but I can’t forget that they’re Vice’s friends, not mine.

When the door is yanked open, I have my knife up, and Isaac and Conner have their guns aimed at the intruder.

Vice ignores them. His eyes only on me. He takes me in from head to toe before turning to the others. “It’s done.”

Isaac moves to sit next to Conner, leaving room for Vice to slide in next to me. As soon as I’m in reach, he yanks me to him so that my leg is pressed against his. His hand slides up my thigh and slips just under the hem of my dress. My breath hitches, my knife still gripped tightly in my hand.

I can feel the tension in the car as Vice tells George to drive.

“So, you’ve been keeping my wife company?” There is an undertone in his voice—a barely controlled threat.

“Mostly, she just threatened to stab us before returning to her nap,” Isaac drawls.

That has Vice stilling before looking at me with a frown. “You slept with them?”

I cock an eyebrow at that. “That’s a loaded question. Are you looking for a fight, Vice? Things not go your way in there, so you thought you’d come pick on me?” My temper lashes out, not liking what he’s implying.

He slides his hand farther up my leg, dragging my dress with it. “Is that any way to speak to your new don?” he murmurs coldly.

“I’m not speaking to my don. I’m speaking to my husband.”

His hand slips between my legs and strokes over my underwear with his pinkie. “They’re one and the same, Nova. Something you’d do well to remember,” he warns me.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Isaac and Conner look at each other, but I keep my focus on Vice. “What happened in there, Vice?”

“Nothing you need to worry about. I’m the new don. For now, that’s it. We have another meeting at the end of the week to discuss the change and who will be in each role.”

“You got what you wanted then, so why are you acting like a dick?”

Conner sucks in a deep breath.

“Careful, Nova. We’re in front of my men. You wouldn’t want to embarrass me, now, would you?”

“You’re embarrassing yourself,” I mutter before looking away.

He grips my jaw and turns my head to face him once more. “I think a lesson is needed.” He hitches my leg over his. His hand spans my thigh, and with my legs spread like this, I know I’m giving Isaac and Conner an eyeful.

“Pass me the knife, Nova. I’m going to cut off your panties, and you’re going to stroke your pussy until I tell you to stop. You know why?”

“Because you’re a fucking prick?” I snap.

“Because you’re mine. Because this pussy is mine.”

“Nobody is disputing that. You’re the one who ordered them to watch over me. You did this. Either you trust them or you don’t. But if you don’t, then you have bigger fucking problems than me.”



“I trust my men.”

“But you don’t trust me. So, I went from virgin to whore in a matter of days.”

“Give me the knife, Nova.”

“You want the knife, honey? You got it.”

Before anyone realizes what I’m about to do, I lift the knife and jam it into the back of Vice’s hand. The knife was designed to cut through metal, so bone isn’t an issue. I feel the tip stab into my thigh, but I keep going until the blade disappears.

All three of them stare at me in shock as blood starts pouring from Vice’s hand and covers my dress. Nobody moves until Vice looks at me. Whatever mood he was in shatters in that moment, and his eyes drop down to where his hand is pinned to my leg.

“What the fuck?”

## Chapter 26

---

### *Vice*



Seeing her in the car with Isaac and Conner set something off inside me. A red haze coated everything as I battled the urge to shoot my men in the face while reminding Nova who she belonged to.

How that led to this, I don't know.

"You're back?" she asks, looking into my eyes and wincing.

I look at Isaac for answers, but he's staring at the knife in my hand.

"I don't know who that was, but it wasn't my Vice."

*My Vice.*

I like that.

I try to lift my hand, and she winces again.

"Jesus fuck, Nova. You hurt yourself."

Conner snorts.

With a sigh, Nova grips the handle of the knife tightly and yanks it out of her leg with a hiss. She leaves it embedded in my hand, though.

"I want that back when you're finished with it."

"Fuck, how deep did you go? George, the hospital, now!" Isaac orders.

“It’s fine.” Nova waves him off, but Isaac slips his belt off and looks at me.

“It’s bleeding more than it should. I think she might have nicked an artery. If I wrap this around her leg, are you going to snap my spine?”

“Do it.”

Isaac gets to his knees and wraps his belt around Nova’s thigh, tightening it to stop the bleeding. “Now, let’s look at your hand.”

I hold it out to him. Isaac looks at it and shakes his head. “Yeah, let’s just leave the knife in there for now. You’re lucky it’s not your dominant hand.”

“Are one of you going to shoot me now?” Nova asks in a bored voice, but when I look at her, I see the flash of fear in her eyes before she masks it.

“Nobody touches you but me,” I growl.

“Fine, just get it over with.”

“If I didn’t know you better, I’d think you were serious.”

She turns and glares at me. “You don’t know me at all, Vice. That’s the problem. If you did, you would have known that being a chew toy for you and your boys to fight over isn’t something I’m interested in. You’re pissed about sharing me, and in the same breath, you want to let them see parts of me that only you’ve seen. Make it make sense, Vice.”

I blow out a breath before reaching out and sliding the fingers of my good hand into her hair, turning her head so I can kiss her.

She stiffens, refusing to kiss me back until she senses I won’t give in. Eventually, she admits defeat and surrenders to me.

Pulling away, I look into her eyes. “The meeting was a fucking joke. All I wanted was you, and when I got here, *they* had what I needed most. It was irrational. I was pissed, and well, I don’t process shit like everyone else.”

“Is this your way of saying sorry?”

“I don’t say sorry.” I nip her lip. “I will never share you, never let another man inside your body. But that doesn’t mean that I don’t want them to see what I have. I want them to covet my woman, knowing they can never have you. If I slipped my fingers inside you now and fucked you to orgasm, Conner and Isaac would enjoy the show, but they know I’d cut off their hands if they touched you.”

She bites her lip, looking between me and the guys.

“Well, I didn’t know that, so I’m not sorry for stabbing you. You keep warning me there will be things you’ll do that I won’t like, so I feel as if I’m bracing myself all the time. I thought this was going to be one of them. That you’d toss me to the guys when you were done with me.”

“If you never believe anything else I say, believe this. I will never be done with you, Nova.”

She lets out a breath as I release her hair, then curls up next to me, her head against my chest, her hand clutching my suit jacket.

I look at Conner, who looks shocked, and Isaac, who looks amused.

“Well, life sure won’t be boring with you around.”

“I will stab you in the face, Isaac,” Nova mutters without lifting her head, making me grin. It sets off the other two, and before I know it, the three of us are laughing while Nova ignores us.

\* \* \*

The hospital was packed, but luckily, we have a doctor on speed dial for just this kind of occasion. Speaking of luck, Nova managed to do minimal damage to my hand. A couple of stitches, a tetanus shot, some antibiotics, and a matching bandage to Nova’s, and I’m good to go.

Thankfully, Nova didn’t hit an artery. She’s just a bleeder. She didn’t like being told to take it easy for the week, though, so that she doesn’t accidentally rip her stitches open.

Conner rode back in the limo with George and returned in the Range Rover to pick us up. I lift Nova into the back, ignoring the pain in my hand, before getting in next to her.

“Let’s get out of here.”

Nova murmurs her agreement, the painkillers the doctor gave her making her sleepy.

“You got a bottle of water up there?”

“Yeah, hold on.” Conner pops open the glove box, grabs the water, and hands it over.

I open it and hold it out for Nova. “The doctor wants you to take these too.” I hand her the pills I got the doctor to give me. If she weren’t so spaced out on pain meds, she’d question why he didn’t just give them to her himself.

“What are they?” she asks as she takes them from me.

“Just some antibiotics.”

She pops them in her mouth and swallows them down with a mouthful of water before handing the bottle back to me.

“Good girl. Now lie back and get some rest.”

She does as instructed and is out cold by the time we make it home. I carry her inside and strip her before laying her on the bed and pulling the sheet up to cover her. She doesn’t stir even once. I strip out of my bloody clothes and change into a clean shirt and suit before heading back downstairs.

“Those pills should keep her knocked out until tomorrow,” I say before looking at Conner. “I’ll get Miles to come keep an eye out so you can get some sleep.”

“You want me to go home or crash here in case I’m needed?”

“Take one of the guest rooms. Isaac, you’re with me.”

Isaac nods and follows me out. “Want me to drive?”

I toss him the keys to the Jag in response.

“So, what does she know about her father?”

“That he took a turn for the worse and had to watch the wedding from his bedroom. Yeah. I’ve got her phone, so she hasn’t had any updates.”

“You gonna tell her the rest?”

“What? That I drugged her father so he couldn’t make it to the wedding and made him watch as the bride turned out to be Gia?” I grin. “Probably. It’s too good not to share. The rest, though, I think I’ll keep to myself.” Like the fact that I gave him another cocktail of drugs when he lost his shit. They knocked him out and fucked with his breathing.

Gia and Aldo are celebrating their wedding night as per tradition, so they aren’t here tonight, leaving Alessio as the acting representative at the meeting today. His support went a long way in convincing the others that nobody wanted to go against me for the spot.

He doesn’t push for more, so I pull out my phone, tap into the camera feed, and watch Nova as she sleeps.

“Did anyone oppose you?”

I turn to look at him, his eyes dropping to my cell phone briefly before he looks back at the road.

“Abbott Rossi. He’s a pretentious prick, so it’s not surprising. For most of them, this is the first time they’ve seen me since I got out of prison. Let’s just say they were shocked to see the man I’ve become.”

“You had poor impulse control.”

I grin. “I beat four men to death while singing ‘We are the Champions.’ I think poor impulse control is putting it mildly.”

He chuckles. “Okay, fine, you were a psychopath then, and you’re still one now. It’s just now you’ve figured out how to hide it better.”

I’m not sure I buy that, but if it helps him sleep at night, then whatever.

We turn into Vigo’s long ass driveway and head toward the guardhouse. I pull my gun out and put the silencer on it and wait until we reach the gates.

There are two guards in the booth. One is looking at screens in the back, and the other is standing up to lean in toward the driver's side window to ask for ID. I climb out and walk around the back of the car.

"Hey!" the first guard yells as I lift my gun and shoot him in the head. He drops to the floor as the second guard whirls around. I shoot two bullets into his face before walking up and putting my arm through the window, hitting the button for the gate.

Whistling as I walk back around the car, I climb in as the gates open, and Isaac drives up to the house. There are only two other cars out front when we park. And I recognize one as the car Miles drives.

We climb out, and I grab a bag from the trunk before we head up the steps to the house.

The door is open when we get there. Isaac rolls his eyes. "Seriously?"

I snort because I thought the same thing when I first came here.

"I'll go work on crowd control while you go say hi to your father-in-law." Isaac smirks as he puts the silencer on his gun.

I grip my gun and nod which way I'm going. He heads in the opposite direction. As I round the corner, a guard appears. His eyes widen with shock when he sees me. He reaches for his gun, but I shoot him before he has a chance. One in the throat, one in the stomach.

I step over him as he bleeds out and make my way up to Vigo's room. I shove the door open, taking in the occupants of the room as I enter. Miles is leaning against the wall, watching an older man fuss over Vigo. Miles stands straighter when he sees me.

"Who else knows about Vigo's condition?"

The man whirls at the sound of my voice and curses.

"The doc here, the housekeeper, his personal guard, who's on duty today, and the chef. Everything has been kept hush-

hush.”

“Good.” I shoot the doctor in the head and walk farther into the room. “Isaac is taking care of the others. Help him out, then head back to the house to relieve Conner.”

“You got it, boss. How did it go today?”

“You’re looking at the new don.”

“Fuck yes,” he says with a smile before heading out.

I call his name before he closes the door. “Any sign of Gia and Aldo?”

“No, but word is they are spending two nights at the Bellingham Plaza.”

“Alright, thanks.”

He closes the door as I walk closer to the bed, placing my bag on Vigo’s legs. I pull out the sheet inside the bag before turning on the television facing the bed. I tap my phone and cast the video onto the TV, having it on standby until I’m ready.

Placing my gun on the table at the end of his bed for a second, I pull the syringe out of my pocket and step over the doctor to stand next to the machine that’s helping Vigo breathe. I remove his oxygen mask and turn the machine off so the beeping noise doesn’t piss me off.

Using my teeth, I tug the cap off the needle and flick the end, like I see them do on TV. With a grin, I drive the needle into Vigo’s chest and inject him with adrenaline. He comes to with a gasp, bolting upright. I shove him back down, holding him in place as he gets his bearings and focuses on my face.

“Hello, Vigo. Miss me?”

It takes a while for his brain to recognize me, but when he does, his eyes widen. He tries to shove me away, but he’s too weak. “What the fuck?” he rasps.

“Sorry about earlier.” I smile. The earlier I’m referring to was when I came to watch the live stream of the wedding with him. I thought his head would explode when he realized the



bride wasn't Nova but Gia. When he looked at me with horror and started yelling the place down, I'd drugged him again. Which brings us to now.

"I had to leave, but I'm back now. So, exciting day, huh? Let's see, my father died, and I became the new don. Your daughter got married, and—oh shit, that's right, my bad. Gia isn't your daughter. Nova is."

"Where is she? What have you done with Nova?" he chokes out before a cough wracks his chest.

"What did I do with Nova? Funny you should ask that because I brought visual aids. Fuck, I should have brought popcorn. Never mind, let's just settle in and watch the show."

I hit the play button on my phone, and the TV flairs to life. There on the screen is Nova, naked and bound to our bed, as I fuck her into the mattress.

The noise that comes out of Vigo is one of such horror it makes me hard.

"Tightest pussy I ever had, man. The only thing sweeter is watching tears run down her face as I fuck her mouth."

He whimpers, reaching for me, but I turn the volume up so Nova's cries can be heard in stereo. The editing I did means that in the next scene, Nova is covered in blood, but without showing the body on the floor. He bellows at me, scrambling to get out of bed. I pause the television just as I'd begun pumping my cum all over Nova's pussy.

I grab the sheet from the bottom of the bed and shove it in his face. "I fucked your little girl, and she loved it. Here's the bloody sheet that's covered in not just my cum but hers."

"I'll kill you," he rasps out, his skin looking gray.

"You're welcome to try. But I guarantee only one of us will be walking away from here tonight, and it won't be you."

"She's m—"

"She's mine. She stopped being yours when you planned to give her over to a psycho like Aldo, and that's saying something coming from me. Actually, she stopped being your

daughter when she became Alessio's. And she is his daughter, you know. She loves him, and he'd do anything to protect her. Even convince her to marry an asshole like me."

His eyes widen as his mouth drops open. "No."

I lift my hand and show him the simple platinum ring on my finger. "Oh yes. Nova is my wife. I guess it's funny how things turn out, huh?" I lean down and whisper into his ear. "Especially when I was sent to kill her."

I stand back up and smile widely as he grips his chest.

"You didn't really think the Irish were responsible, did you? Those fuckers couldn't organize a barn dance. Now, as fun as this has been, I need to get home to my wife so I can work on knocking her up. I'm set on breeding the next generation of Moretti into her."

"Sick..." he gasps out.

"I am, yep. That was never in dispute. But unlike you, I protect what's mine. Which for now is Nova and a shiny new empire."

"Aldo—"

"Didn't marry your heir, and the will stipulates that her husband inherits, not Aldo. You really should have been more specific."

I grab the bloody sheet and hold it over his face, pressing him back into the mattress as he begins to struggle.

"Sad it had to be this way. But that's life, right? After the shit you pulled, I doubt Nova will even shed a tear for you. But don't worry, if she does, Alessio will be there for her. And if that doesn't work, I'll fuck her on your bed until all she can think about is my cock."

He thrashes wildly, and I press harder, making sure the bloody sheet covers his nose and mouth, blocking his airways. I keep pressing down, even as the fight leaves him. I don't let go until he stops moving altogether.

Once I'm sure he's dead, I stand back and take in his wide eyes and pale skin. I nod, happy that Nova is free of him.

There is only room for one monster in Nova's life, and that's me.

I disconnect my phone from the TV and bag the sheet back up before I grab my gun and walk out. I head downstairs and wander through the rooms until I find Isaac sitting at the kitchen table eating a bowl of cereal, of all things. A man dressed in chef whites lies dead at his feet in a puddle of blood.

“Cereal?”

“I'm starving and didn't know how long you'd be. You want some?”

“Lucky Charms?”

“Yup.”

“Sure.”

I sit at the table and place the bag with the bloody sheet on the tabletop next to me, along with my gun. Isaac pours me a bowl of cereal, adding a generous amount of milk.

He tosses me a spoon before handing me the bowl and retaking his seat. “He dead?”

“Yup. You get everyone else?”

“Yeah, there weren't many here, though. Apparently, most were given the day off because of the wedding.”

I take a mouthful of cereal and nod.

We don't speak until we're both done. Isaac takes our empty bowls and places them in the sink before turning on the oven and the gas stove. He leaves the oven door open as he rummages around the cupboards.

He pulls out a bottle of vodka and a bottle of whiskey. “Bingo.” He hands me the vodka before twisting the cap off the whiskey and liberally dousing the counters and blinds with it.

I pour a trail out of the kitchen to the sitting room, soaking the armchair before the bottle runs out. I take the empty bottle

back to the kitchen and hand it to Isaac, who tosses both empty bottles in the recycling.

I grab my gun and bag and make my way to the door. Isaac follows behind me, flicking his Zippo. I open the door and step out just as the flame of the lighter sparks. He tosses it into the hallway before pulling the door closed behind him. We walk over to the car and sit on the hood as we wait for the house to go boom.

“Did Miles take care of all the cameras?”

“Yeah, he disabled them all and wiped everything, including the hard drives for the past month, just to be on the safe side. That way, any evidence of Nova and Vigo having anything other than an employer-employee relationship is gone.”

“Good. Now all we have to do is look shocked when the will is read.”

“Shouldn’t be too hard for you. Not sure about Nova, though. She’s too smart for her own good.”

I shove him hard enough to knock him off the hood. He laughs as he stands up and brushes himself off.

The downstairs windows explode in a hail of glass as flames curl up the window frame of the sitting room.

“Alright, let’s go home. I want to see my wife.”

## Chapter 27

---

### *Nova*



I wake up wincing, my head throbbing. A tattooed hand is possessively holding my breast, and when I take a deep breath, I realize Vice's cock is inside me.

I look behind me and see that the man himself is fast asleep. I squeeze my pussy muscles around him, making him groan in his sleep and thrust into me. I only wanted to see if he could feel me. I wasn't expecting it to turn me on.

When I've woken up with Vice inside me before, I wasn't sure how I felt about it. I mean, I enjoyed him fucking me, but there is a part of me that worries that I shouldn't, that there must be something wrong with me for liking being taken in my sleep.

But now, with the shoe on the other foot, I get why he likes it. There is something perversely enticing about having someone vulnerable under your control. I know that's fucked up. I'm not disputing that. But for me, I think it's because Vice has all the control in the bedroom. And right now, it's nice to find him at my mercy.

Reaching down, I stroke my clit as I keep squeezing my pussy muscles. Vice responds by thrusting into me, fucking me even though he's asleep. God, I wish I knew what he was dreaming of. His rough hand squeezes my breast, making me gasp. I stroke my clit faster as he pushes in deeper. The room echoes with proof of how wet I am with every thrust.

I know the exact moment he wakes up. His leisurely pace falters before I'm flat on my back and he's up and out of me, lifting my legs and pressing them gently to my chest, mindful of my injury. He eases himself back inside me, feeling impossibly deep in this position.

"Fuck, I could live in this pussy for the rest of my life and die a happy man," he growls, leaning over me.

I can't move, I can't stroke my clit anymore, and the orgasm that was so close is now just out of reach.

"You like my cock in you, *bambola*? You like taking me nice and deep?"

"Yes," I hiss as his grip on my legs tightens painfully. His pace becomes punishing to the point where I don't know if I want to come or cry. Maybe a little of both.

"I'm gonna blow so fucking hard. I'm going to fill this sweet pussy with my cum."

"Vice," I groan.

"You can't come until I do, Nova."

"Vice, please."

"Don't you dare. Good girls get to come, *bambola*. Bad girls get punished. Or maybe that's what you want, huh?"

"I just want to come, please."

"Soon, Nova. I'm not done fucking you yet."

Shit, I can't hold back. "Vice," I gasp, warning him.

"If you come before I do, I'll make you come in front of my crew over and over until you learn never to come without permission again."

"Fuck!" If his words were supposed to be a deterrent, they had the opposite effect. I come with a scream, my pussy clamping down around his cock so tight I'm worried for a second I'll hurt him as I milk him dry.

Then I remember who I'm dealing with. I kind of wish I'd snapped it off, because something tells me that his dirty words

and threats weren't just talk. One look at the satisfaction on his face, and I know I'm fucked, literally and figuratively.

Before he can say anything that makes me want to throat-punch him, his phone rings.

“Oh crap, you still have my phone.”

He pulls out of me, making me wince, and grabs his phone, answering it. “Yeah.”

I start to get up, but he reaches between my legs and circles my clit with his fingers before dipping them inside me, pushing his cum deep with a look of such fascination on his face it makes my stomach clench.

“Alright, thanks.” He hangs up, giving my pussy one last look before his eyes move to mine.

“Get showered and dressed. I'll get your cell phone and make sure it's charged.”

“What's wrong?”

“Shower and clothes first.”

I want to argue, but whatever he needs to tell me will probably feel ten times worse while I'm naked and vulnerable. I nod and climb from the bed, feeling Vice's cum running down my leg. I hurry to take a quick shower, careful of the stitches in my thigh. Once I've dried off, I get dressed in a pair of loose black pants and a soft pink tank top with a built-in bra. I don't bother with shoes. I'm not sure if we're going out or not. I run a little product into my hair and scrunch it, giving myself a beachy wave before heading down to find Vice.

I see Miles first. He's talking to Conner as I enter the kitchen.

“Have either of you seen Vice?”

“He's in his office, but he's not alone.”

“Okay, I can wait. Do you know if he plugged my cell phone in?”

Miles points toward the counter on the other side of the room. I spot my phone and walk over to it. Picking it up, I

scroll through it as it charges, finding dozens of missed calls and messages. Deciding to start with the latest one, I hit the button for voicemail and hold it to my ear.

“Nova, where are you? Are you okay? Fuck! Call me when you get this,” Alessio snaps before hanging up.

I dial his number, knowing he wouldn't call if it wasn't important.

“Jesus, Nova, I've been trying to get hold of you.”

“I'm sorry I didn't have my cell phone on me. What's wrong?”

“You haven't heard?”

I frown, feeling Miles's and Conner's eyes on me. “Heard what?”

He hesitates for a minute. “Vigo is dead.”

I reach out and grab the counter for balance. “What?” I'll admit I don't know how I feel about the news. I mean, I knew he was dying and that we'd never have the father-and-daughter relationship he'd hoped for.

But that doesn't mean I'm immune to it. If anything, I'm more hurt by the waste of it all. We could have had more, *been more*, but he let the past dictate everything, only to find he didn't have a future to make things right. People think they have time when it's the one thing none of us are guaranteed, especially in this world.

“Okay, thanks for letting me know.”

“Nova, you, okay?”

“I'm not sure. He was never my dad. He could have lived another twenty years, and he'd never have been anything more than a stranger. But it still feels...” I trail off, not knowing how to put it into words.

“It's alright, I get it. And to be fair, it would be different if he passed peacefully in his sleep. It hits differently, knowing he was killed in a fire.”

I suck in a shocked breath. “Say that again.”



He curses quietly. “I’m coming over—”

“Just tell me.”

“There was a fire. None of the staff survived.”

I laugh then, shock probably making me react because what are the fucking odds?

Wait, what are the odds?

I look at Conner and Miles, who both look away. “I’ve gotta go, Alessio. I’ll call you back.”

“Nova—”

I hang up before he can say anything else. I walk past Conner and Miles and head down the hallway to Vice’s large office, which overlooks the back deck and pool. I don’t bother knocking and just open the door.

Vice sits behind his desk, talking to a man sitting opposite him. They both turn to look at me as I enter. Vice keeps his gaze neutral, but the other man, who I recognize as one of the *capos* of the Gallo family, stands and frowns at me. I walk past him, stopping just in front of Vice. My chest heaves up and down as I try to gather my words.

“Who the fuck are you?” the *capo* snaps, grabbing my arm.

As soon as he touches me, Vice is out of his chair, grabs the *capo*’s wrist, and twists it until it snaps. “Nobody touches my wife but me,” he all but snarls.

“Your wife?”

“Did I fucking stutter?”

The *capo* wisely says nothing. He sits back down in his chair as Vice focuses on me.

“Come here, Nova,” he says, sitting.

I walk back over to him, and when I’m close enough, he yanks me onto his lap. He wraps a possessive arm around my waist, the other he throws over my shoulder, his fingertips lightly stroking my breast.

“As you can see, Bosco, I won’t be accepting your sister’s hand in marriage to strengthen the relationship between our families because I already have a wife. I’m sure if you want to tighten bonds, we can find another way to do it.”

“Your reputation—”

“Is well-earned. As long as you don’t cross me, Bosco, we won’t have a problem. If you do, then there won’t be a hole big enough for you to hide in.”

He nods and swallows. “I’ll let Leone know. Thank you for seeing me.” He stands and heads toward the door, his wrist hanging limply at his side. As he opens it, Conner is standing on the other side, waiting to escort him out.

Once the door closes, I jump out of Vice’s lap and start pacing. He says nothing, leaning back in his chair with an infuriating smile on his face.

I stop and tip my head back and look at the ceiling, trying to calm myself down before I say or do something that will either end up with me tied to the bed or with a bullet in my head.

“Did you kill Vigo?” I ask, dropping my gaze to him.

He looks me in the eye. “Yes.”

I blow out a breath, thankful that at least he didn’t lie to me.

“Why? When he was dying anyway.”

“You know why. Nobody fucks with my wife.”

“So it wasn’t because I killed Giovanni?”

He stands up and walks toward me.

“If I wanted vengeance for you killing my father, I’d have killed Alessio.”

I nod. “Okay.” And bite my lip.

He tugs me to his chest and holds me for a minute, his bandaged hand cradling the back of my head. He doesn’t try to

make small talk or figure out why I'm acting crazy. He just lets me work through it until I'm strong enough to step back.

"I don't know how I'm supposed to feel."

"You get to feel however you want. You being pissed at me doesn't change anything."

"I'm not pissed at you for killing him. I think deep down, I knew you wouldn't just let him get away with slapping me. If I'm mad about anything, it's that you kept me in the dark about it all."

"Plausible deniability."

"That excuse might work with the other wives, but it will never work with me."

"What is it you want to know, Nova? Just remember that wanting to hear the truth doesn't make you ready to listen to the answers. I'll sleep with my cock inside you tonight, even if you can't look me in the eye. I give zero fucks."

I think about it. Do I want to know all the details? Will it change how I feel to know what Vice did to him?

No. It might change how I look at Vice, but it won't change how I feel about Vigo. I look into Vice's eyes, knowing he'll tell me every detail if I ask him to, but all it will do is cloud everything between us.

"I don't need to know the details. I just wish I'd heard it from you and not someone else."

He cocks his head as if that had never crossed his mind. I forget sometimes that he's only had to think about himself for the last decade. It will take time for him to consider my feelings. Not that it would stop him. My feelings will never supersede Vice's wants or needs.

"What happens now?"

"We make the funeral arrangements for my father. And wait for the news regarding Vigo and decide what to do then. I'm sure his lawyers will be in touch."

“People in the Fiore camp will start to question where I am soon.”

“Maybe, maybe not. There will be a lot going on. Besides, with Gia married, most will assume you’re out of a job anyway.”

I blow out a breath and run my fingers through my hair. “So, Bosco wants you to marry his sister?”

“Jealous, baby?”

I scoff. “Have you met Donna?”

“Can’t say any pretty ladies came to visit me inside other than you.”

“Imagine if Gia and Aldo had a child.”

His eyes widen a fraction. “Seems I lucked out with you then.”

“You really did.”

His phone rings before he can say anything else. He holds up his finger to me as he answers it. “Aldo. How was the wedding?”

I tense and watch as he sits in his chair and gestures for me to come closer. He hooks his finger in the loop of my pants and pulls me to stand between his legs. With his free hand, he lowers the zipper of my pants and shoves his hand down the front of my lace panties so he can stroke my clit.

“Yes, I just heard. On the plus side, you could reuse all the flowers from the wedding for the funeral.”

I bite my lip as he slips a finger inside me.

Vice must have put it on speaker phone because I can hear Aldo’s sharp voice snarl. “You think this is a fucking joke?”

“I think it doesn’t have anything to do with me.”

“From what I heard, you’ve been made the new don. I’d say congratulations, but we both know it’s fucking bullshit. You’re not fit to be a leader, even a temporary one.”

“That’s funny coming from you. I wonder how many women will want to move away once they find out you’re in charge.”

“Fuck you, Vice. You’ll never get my vote. By the time I’m finished with you, you’d be lucky to be a soldier.”

“I don’t need your vote. The Fiore proxy was kind enough to give me one. Now, as stimulating as this conversation has been, my wife is currently coming all over my fingers, so—”

Aldo laughs. “You’re joking, right? Everyone knows you’re gay. And now that your father is gone, you’ll have nobody to hide behind.”

“Is that what you think, Aldo? That I hid behind my father? Interesting.” He comments as if talking about the weather.

My toes curl, and my stomach tightens as his thumb circles my clit.

“Don’t hide your noises from me, baby. I want Aldo to hear what you sound like when you come.”

He fucks his fingers into me harder before twisting them. I cry out and whimper Vice’s name, gripping his shoulders when my legs threaten to buckle.

“Prick,” Aldo hisses.

“Got your dick hard, huh?” Vice jokes, but his eyes are hard as ice.

“You will support me or you’ll be my enemy, Vice. And I won’t hesitate to take you out.”

“Give it your best shot, Aldo. I fucking dare you.” He hangs up, tossing his phone before grabbing my hips and pulling me onto his lap. “When he discovers the truth, he’ll come at us with everything he’s got.”

“I know,” I say, resting my head against his chest. “Alessio said you’d be the only person he wouldn’t take on, but I knew it was a long shot. It’s not that he thinks he can beat you. He’s counting on his men doing the dirty work for him.”

“Because he’s a pussy. He won’t come for me without backing. That doesn’t mean he won’t come for you when he discovers the truth, though, so you need to stick close to me.”

I sigh. “That’s not exactly a hardship, Vice. You give me orgasms.”

He laughs and slides his hand into my hair, gripping it hard as he leans down and devours my mouth, leaving me wrecked.

Pulling away, he looks into my eyes. “Things are gonna get rough, baby. But no matter what, it will be me and you to the end.”

Only time will tell if that’s a blessing or a curse.

## Chapter 28

---

### *Vice*



The call from the lawyers came quickly, but it was to be expected. Under any normal circumstances, the process might have taken weeks. But when it comes to the lives of the rich and mostly insane, things move faster.

The dons of each family were requested to be at the reading of Vigo's will. So it was back to Belovaine, where the lawyer had agreed to meet us all.

"I'll take Isaac and Conner in with me. You'll stay outside with Miles and Veck. I'm not sure how long this is all gonna take, but it sure as shit won't be without bloodshed."

"We could just stay here. Let's be honest, the last time you made me wait in the car, you ended up with a knife in your hand."

I look down at my palm and see the healing wound now that I've removed the bandages. "If anyone is looking to get to you while I'm busy, it will be now. And the first place they'll look will be our home."

"I thought you bought it under an alias."

"I did, but there is always someone somewhere who is smart enough to figure shit out, and I don't want to risk it."

"And hiding in plain sight right outside the building is the last place they'd think you'd stash me."

"Yeah." I look at my watch before taking her in.

Today, she's dressed in a simple, off-the-shoulder black dress that hits just above the knee and is teamed with a pair of red-soled black high heels. Her hair is pulled up on top of her head, with loose curls falling around her face.

"What?" She looks at her outfit, the one I picked out, much to her amusement.

"You look beautiful."

"Well, you did pick my outfit. You make me feel like a doll sometimes."

"I like dressing you. But I like undressing you more," I murmur, kissing her exposed collarbone.

"I should be grateful you don't insist on dressing me in a burka."

"I don't want to hide you. I want people to look at you and know what a lucky fucking bastard I am."

Her cheeks flush before she looks away. I've noticed she doesn't get shy or flustered unless I compliment her, and then it's as if she doesn't know what to do with it. Of course, it makes me do it even more. I love to watch my girl squirm.

"The meeting isn't until later, but I want to take you someplace first."

"Okay, are you going to tell me where?"

"Nope. It's a surprise."

"A surprise like a stripper jumping out of a cake, or a surprise like a serial killer jumping out of a drain?"

I look at her and laugh. "Those are my options?"

"Yeah."

"Well, it's none of those. Though, if you want to jump out of a cake for me naked, I'd happily chase you around a cabin with a knife."

"I'm going to pretend this whole conversation never happened. I'd hate to have to murder you in your sleep."



I yank her to me and bite her throat. “You love it when I use my knife on you. Don’t deny it. Your pussy creams so fucking hard.”

She lets out a shaky breath, but she doesn’t confirm or deny anything.

I take her hand and lead her downstairs.

“I’m taking the Benz. We’ll be back for the rest of you before the meeting starts.”

Conner joins us as we head out to the car. “You want me to drive or follow behind you?”

“No point taking two cars, Conner,” Nova answers for me.

Conner looks at me, and I nod in agreement. I hold the door open for Nova and climb in next to her.

“So, how far away is this surprise?”

“Not far, maybe thirty minutes.”

“Hmm... Will there be food there?”

I see Conner grin in the rearview mirror as he climbs into the driver’s seat.

“No, but if you’re hungry, I can send someone out to grab something for you.”

“Oh. No, I’m good for now. I was just curious. I’m too nervous about how this afternoon is going to go to eat anything.”

“Everything is gonna be fine.”

“You say that now, but I feel like my version of fine is completely different than yours.”

I wrap my arm around her and pull her into me, taking a breath of the watermelon and lime scent of her body wash. “I don’t need to worry, Nova. You do enough for both of us. But let me ask you this: do you honestly think I’d ever let anything happen to you?”

She sighs and snuggles deeper. There has been a shift in our relationship recently, one I didn’t expect. I knew right off

the bat I'd be possessive, so none of that surprised me, but the need to touch her and be with her has shocked me almost as much as how much she seems to feel the same way.

It's like we've developed some kind of fucked-up co-dependency between the two of us. As much as I know it's not normal, I can't help but love it. Something about Nova makes me lose my mind. I have a ravenous appetite for her—an insatiable hunger that I just can't satisfy. I worry that I might consume her, snuffing out everything that makes her *her*. But I can't stop, won't stop until even our hearts beat as one.

“I don't think you'd let anyone else hurt me.”

She words it well. I won't let anyone hurt her, but we both know that when it comes to me, all bets are off. My sanity tends to go out the window where she is concerned.

When we pull up outside the tattoo parlor, Nova looks at me with wide eyes. “Seriously, Vice? A wedding ring isn't enough?”

“Keep complaining, and I'll make them tattoo my name on your forehead.”

Her lips twitch, but I haven't got the heart to tell her I'm fucking serious.

I take her hand and lead her inside, Conner right behind us. The bell over the door has the receptionist looking over at us both. She offers me a flirty smile before scowling at Nova.

“Hello, how can I help you today?” She leans over the counter so far that her boobs practically fall out of her top.

Nova picks up a pen off the counter and stabs it into the top of one of them, making the girl scream. “Oops, I hope I didn't pop your implant.” My dick goes from semi to full mast in under a second.

Footsteps come running from the back at the girl's cry before Ryland appears in all his six-foot-four, blue-haired glory.

“What the fuck?” he roars before sporting me.

The girl starts crying, pointing at Nova. “She stabbed me.”

Ryland looks at Nova, confused.

“My pen slipped. I apologize for my butterfingers. But maybe, and this is only a suggestion, if she kept her boobs off the counter, none of this would have happened.”

I bite my lip to hide my laugh, but I don't miss the sound of Conner chuckling behind us.

“For fuck's sake, Lisa. I've told you this before. Clients come for tattoos and piercings, not to get dry-humped by a bitch in heat. Get your shit and get out.”

“But—”

Nova sighs and reaches underneath the hem of her dress. She pulls out her gun and points it at the woman. “But what?”

The woman takes off like a bat out of hell.

“Yeah, that's what I thought,” she mutters before sliding the gun back into her thigh holster.

She looks up when she realizes how quiet the rest of us are.

“What?”

“If we weren't on a time limit, I'd bend you over the desk and fuck you stupid.”

She blinks. “Maybe later?”

Ryland laughs loudly. “Holy fuck, who is this?”

“Ryland, meet my wife, Nova. Nova, meet Ryland. He's responsible for half of my tattoos.”

“Hi, nice to meet you.”

“Trust me, Doll, the pleasure is all mine.”

I glare at him, but he ignores me and reaches for Nova's hand to shake. She looks at me and sighs. “You seem like a nice guy, but you work with your hands for a living. If I touch you right now, I have a feeling Vice will cut off your fingers, and that might make tattooing kind of tricky.”

Ryland drops his hand and folds his arms across his chest. “Shame. I would've liked tattooing you. Nothing sexier than a

blank canvas.”

I tense, ready to pull my knife and start peeling the skin from his bones, when Nova sighs again.

“It’s like you have a death wish. Well, it was nice knowing you, Ryland.” She turns and looks for Conner. “Should we wait in the car until Vice is finished?”

Conner grins and offers her his arm.

“Hey! Why can he touch her, but I can’t?” Ryland complains. His voice isn’t angry, more curious.

“Because Conner is smart enough to know I’ll feed him his dick if he fucks with my wife.”

Ryland shakes his head and chuckles. “I’m gay, Vice. You know that. You’ve known it for twenty fucking years.”

“If anyone can turn a gay man straight, it’s Nova.”

She rolls her eyes to the ceiling before turning her glare to me. “Are you serious right now? He’s gay?” She shakes her head, muttering under her breath about stupid men, before she taps her foot impatiently. “Are we here for anything other than dick measuring?”

Ryland grins at her and gestures for us to follow. “So, what are you after, Vice? And where?”

I sit where he points and hook my foot around a nearby stool, dragging it closer so Nova can sit beside me. I pull out a slip of paper and hand it to him.

He looks at it, his eyes widening a fraction as his gaze whips up to mine. “Okay. Give me a few minutes to get set up.” As he gathers his stuff, Conner stands near the door, keeping an eye out.

“So, are you going to tell me what you’re getting?”

“You’ll see.”

She scowls at me, but when I lean over and kiss her, she forgets to be mad.

When Ryland is ready, he points to the portable armrest he just swung over my lap. I slip off my wedding band and slide it into my jacket pocket before resting my left hand on the table.

“Do you need me to help out with the counter? I feel bad —” Nova starts.

Ryland holds up his hand to stop her. “You don’t need to feel bad about stabbing her.”

“Oh no, I don’t. She’s lucky I didn’t try to see if I could fit a bullet up her nose. I just feel bad for leaving you without a receptionist.”

He snorts as he positions my finger and brings the needle down to my skin. “I’m not. She’s the stepsister of one of the other artists who works here. She’s been warned twice now. If she was anyone else, she would’ve been fired already. I’ll let him know what went down when he’s in tomorrow. He’ll get it, and we can hire a temp to cover while we find someone else. I’m not technically open today, so she wasn’t needed anyway. She just offered to help with inventory.”

“If you’re not open, then why...” Her voice trails off as realization dawns.

“You forgot who you’re married to, didn’t you?” Conner teases her from across the room.

“Nobody likes a smart-ass, Conner.”

I keep my eyes on my fingers as Nova keeps the conversation going between the three of them. She’s gradually becoming more comfortable around my men, and Conner has a natural way of putting people at ease. It helps make him good at his job.

Part of me knows it’s important for her to fit in if she has any chance of being happy. She might have been exposed to this life, more so than most women, but she’s managed to maintain a sense of morality that is so easily lost in this world. She cares about people, that much is obvious, or she would have run for the fucking hills by now.

Still, the other part of me doesn't like it one bit. I don't want to share her smiles or laughs with anyone. She's mine. I want to be her everything, even if I know there are some things she'll never get from me.

"So, how did you two meet?" Ryland asks, making Nova flush.

"I met him in prison. Thought he was cute, so I baked a file into a cake and took it in to help him break out," she answers with a straight face, making Ryland pause and look up.

"Really?"

"No, of course not."

He shakes his head, smiling.

"It was a store-bought cake. I'm a terrible cook."

I can't help it. I laugh at her bullshit, making everyone look at me in shock.

Nova smiles, her eyes dropping, and she gasps, covering her mouth with her hands. She'd been so busy talking that she hadn't paid much attention to my tattoo until now. Ryland is just finishing up the ink on my pinky when Nova looks up at me, looking completely shocked.

"Why would you do this?" she whispers, choked up.

I swipe a stray tear from her cheek before licking it off my thumb. "Because you're mine, and I want the world to know it."

I look down at my hands as Ryland wipes away the excess ink and stares at the ornamental font. On my left hand, each finger holds a single letter spelling out NOVA. On my right hand, the letters spell out MINE.

"There you go. All done. You know the drill." He wraps each finger individually before removing his gloves. "Anything else?"

I shake my head, but Nova jumps in. "Yeah, can you do me next?"

## Chapter 29

---

### *Nova*



I turn to look up at Vice, who looks at me with a dark expression on his face that makes my toes curl.

“What do you want?” he asks me, his voice dropping an octave. I wonder if he remembers the conversation we had when he fucked me in his father’s downstairs hallway.

I lift his hand, which now says my name on his fingers, and use it to lightly drag across my collarbone. “I want it to say ‘Vice’ in script, then in smaller, simple black font, ‘mio marito.’” *My husband.*

His eyes go impossibly dark then. It’s like something primal moves within them, something that I’ve just restored to life. “Leave us.”

Recognizing the tone of his voice as one you don’t mess with, I hear Ryland say, “I’m going outside for a smoke. Get your boy to come find me when you’re ready.”

Vice doesn’t reply and doesn’t take his eyes off mine. I hear the door close, surprised that I can hear anything over the thundering of my heart.

“Stand up.”

I do as he asks, wondering if I stepped into a minefield I should have avoided. My eyes flick to Conner briefly, but he’s facing the window, looking out, giving us the illusion of privacy.

“Panties off.”

“Vice,” I whisper.

“Do it now, *bambola*, or I’ll do it for you, and I’m too wound up to be gentle.”

I swallow and reach under my dress for my underwear, managing to get them down and over my gun without too much difficulty. I hand them to him and watch as he winds them around his wrist before pressing his nose to them. Biting my lip, I stand there, unsure what to do, until he looks up at me.

“Undo my pants and take my cock out.”

Fuckity, fuck, fuck. Fuck!

I look behind me at Conner again and see he’s still not paying attention to us before turning back to Vice. If I deny him, he’ll take matters into his own hands. Though he always gets me off, sometimes he likes to push my boundaries to the breaking point.

I step closer and do as he asks, figuring it won’t take me long to blow him if that’s what he wants. I pull out his cock and stroke it gently before he grips my wrist.

“I want you to turn around and face forward, then straddle me.”

“Vice, we’re gonna get caught.”

“I don’t give a single fuck.”

I close my eyes and groan. I turn around, and he offers me his hand so I can straddle his lap. His hard cock lies under me for a second before his arm is around my waist, lifting me. He uses his other hand to position his cock at my entrance, then eases me down onto him until my ass is flush with his thighs. I’m panting by the time I’m seated.

He adjusts my dress so that it covers us both before whistling to Conner. “Tell Ryland he can come back in and do Nova’s tattoo now.”

I go rigid as his hand slips under my dress to play with my clit. “Vice, come on. I won’t get the tattoo if you don’t want me to. I thought—”



I cry out as he bites my neck, pinching my clit, ripping a gasp from me.

“I would tattoo my name over every inch of your body if I thought I could get away with it.”

“Then why are you punishing me?”

“This isn’t punishment, *bambola*. This is me showing you that you fucking own me.”

He pulls his fingers away as the door opens, and Ryland walks in with Conner behind him. They both look at me with knowing eyes, my face burning with embarrassment. But there is something else there, too—a flame of awareness igniting inside me that I’m almost too afraid to acknowledge. But it’s there anyway, building in intensity at the idea of them watching me with Vice.

I don’t want them to touch me. I don’t want anyone but my husband, but I can’t deny that Vice’s urge to show me off is having an effect on me.

“Alright, let me mock something up, and we can see if you like it.” Ryland coughs before turning away.

I remember then that Ryland’s gay, so he won’t be getting anything from the knowledge that Vice’s dick is inside me. Though he might like my husband’s dick as much as I do. Conner, though, isn’t doing anything to hide the hard-on in his pants.

Vice stays still, except for his hands, which he uses to stroke my stomach. He seems almost unaffected, while I can do nothing but squirm with the need for him to just pound into me already.

“Okay, how’s this?” Ryland walks back over to us with the transfer.

I look at it and nod. Honestly, I’m at the point where I’d nod even if I hated it. I’m about to lose my mind. I just want to get off this ride before I make a fool of myself.

“Alright, let me just apply it, and we can get a look at it on your skin.”

I hold my breath as he leans in, scared to move or breathe, before he pulls back and reaches for a mirror. I let out a shaky breath as he holds it up for me so I can see.

It's small and dainty, but its message is strong. *I'm his.*

I look at the hand on my thigh and see my name on his fingers again. *And he's mine.*

"It's perfect."

"Alright. Give me a moment, and we can get this inked. It shouldn't take too long. I'm sure Vice can distract you if it becomes too much."

"That's what I'm afraid of," I mutter, making Vice chuckle behind me. His laughter makes his cock jolt, making me whimper.

Once he's ready, Ryland drags his stool over to the left of us so he can sit beside me. "You ready?"

I nod, not trusting myself to open my mouth.

As the needle hits my skin, I jump. Ryland pauses for a moment before starting again. I grit my teeth, not realizing how painful it would be. I should have expected it. It's on my collarbone, for God's sake.

Vice slides his hand up underneath my dress and strokes up my thigh. I want to grab his wrist, but I don't want to draw attention to it in case the others haven't noticed it. I close my eyes and hope that Vice backs off, but he never backs away from anything.

He circles my clit lightly, and I have to fight hard as hell not to move. His actions do distract me from the needle, which I guess was his intention. But I doubt he'll be impressed if I start moving around all over the place and end up with an ink blob instead of his name.

I reach back and pinch his side. His cock jolts, but the rest of his body doesn't react. Then his fingers start moving faster. I know he's going to make me come if I try anything else.

I bite my lip hard enough to draw blood and try to center my mind while my body becomes a battlefield of pleasure and

pain. Individually, they're overwhelming, but together, it's like one feeds off the other. By the time Ryland wipes away the excess ink, I can barely hold back my sobs.

Ryland tells me about my aftercare and places a covering over the tattoo after asking me if I wanted to see it. I shake my head rapidly as he looks at me with concern before tugging his gloves off. When the shop phone rings, Ryland excuses himself to answer it. As soon as his back is turned, Vice wraps his hand around my throat and rubs my clit hard and fast.

My eyes find the floor-length mirror just in front of us. All I can see is the lewd image of us together—my flushed face, my legs spread wide, and Vice's hand wrapped around my throat, showing the word *mine* across his fingers as his dick erupts inside me, pumping me full of cum. It's all too much for me, and I come hard as Vice cuts off my air with a squeeze of his fist so I can't scream out my release.

The whole thing is so intense that even when the aftershocks have passed, I can't stop shaking. My breathing is ragged when Ryland walks back over to us.

"You have any juice or Coke around here? Her blood sugar is low," Vice asks, his voice sounding normal, the fucker.

"Oh, shit. Yeah, sure."

When he leaves, Vice lifts me off him. My legs threaten to buckle, but then Conner is right there. He holds me up, making my humiliation complete, as Vice takes a handful of paper towels from beside him and wipes his cock before he tucks himself away. He drops to his knees in front of me, my eyes wide, as Conner grips me tighter, almost like he's expecting me to run. I stare in shock as Vice cleans my pussy with his tongue. He gets to his feet with a satisfied look on his face before tossing the paper towels into the trash.

A second later, Ryland hurries through the door with a can of Coke. He sees me in Conner's arms and looks worried, popping the tab on the can for me before holding it out for me to grab. "Here, maybe you should sit back down for a minute. The first time can be a little hard on virgins."

“Oh, it was hard all right.” Vice winks as Conner chuckles.

I glare up at Conner, shooting him with invisible laser beams, but the fucker just grins at me.

“We’ve gotta go, Ryland, but we’ll make sure she rests, don’t worry. How much do I owe you?” Vice pulls out this wallet as Ryland tells him the price.

I let Conner usher me toward the door, where we wait for Vice. Once he reaches us, Conner releases me and opens the door, scanning the area before letting us out.

Vice opens the back door of the car and waits for me to slide in before joining me. Conner gets in the front and starts the ignition.

Nobody says anything for a minute, and then I break the silence. “I should stab you in the other hand.”

Conner full-on laughs as he pulls out into the flow of traffic.

Vice leans into me, his hand under my jaw, turning my head so I can look at him. “There is no shame in what we do.”

I feel my skin heat again, dammit. Why do I always have to give away how I feel?

“I can’t control myself around you. I don’t want to. There will be moments when I touch you in front of others because nothing makes me harder than watching you unravel and witness their envy because they can’t have you. These are my tits, Nova. This is my pussy and my ass, and I’ll do what I want, when I want to. I dare you to try and stop me.” He growls the last part as I pull away and collapse back into the seat.

I’m a mess of feelings, and I have no clue how to sort through them all. On one hand, I’ve never come as hard in my life as I did just then, but my strict upbringing meant my exposure to sex was minimal. Nobody ever talked about it with me, about what it could be like beyond the missionary position. Vice is not a missionary man, and I think I’m just realizing that I’m not a missionary girl either.

By the time we make it back to the house, I've calmed down. The truth is, people are going to have enough ammunition against our relationship without me stressing about our sex life.

I've seen the worst of things—cleaning up after Aldo and Gia is proof of that. I didn't know what a healthy sex life should look like, I just knew what it shouldn't. It seemed to me there were two extremes: the fucked-up or the underwhelming. It never dawned on me that there would be a happy medium. Now, I'm not kidding myself into thinking that what Vice and I do is normal, but are we hurting anyone?

I think back to my wedding night and the dead body and decide it might be better if I don't think about this anymore. Vice is Vice, and I need to decide what I can and can't live with because he won't change. And why should he? He makes no apologies for who he is. And unlike Aldo, he doesn't wear a mask around me, pretending to be someone he's not. He saves that for everyone else.

As the car comes to a stop, I turn to look at him and find him watching me like he has been the whole ride home. “You figure out what you needed to?”

No. But I'll get there.

I slide my hand over his, lacing our fingers so I can still see the letters of my name. Something about him marking his skin with my name affects me more than the wedding band on his finger. Maybe because he can't take it off, or maybe it's because he's not hiding me. For a girl who grew up thinking I didn't matter to most people, it does something to my heart that he put my name in a place where everyone will see it, in a place where people will know that I matter to him.

Maybe that's the answer I've been seeking all along. This life has no guarantees. Our life expectancies are far shorter than most. So, who cares about the insignificant details when this man, who owes me nothing, looks at me like I'm his everything?

Vice lifts my hand and twists it, kissing the inside of my wrist. I turn when Conner opens my door and holds his hand

out for me, which I take, but I don't let go of Vice as he slides across the seat to climb out with me.

I look up at the house as Vice moves closer, his arm going around my shoulders. And for the first time since this all began, it feels like home.

## Chapter 30

---

### *Vice*



**W**e arrive in two cars, one being security, there to protect not just me but Nova as well.

She sits beside me in the limo, which I know is pretentious as fuck. But it's big enough for all of us if we need to get out of here quickly, and it's one of the few vehicles I have that's bulletproof. It would take a fucking rocket launcher to do any damage to this thing, which is the only way I feel comfortable leaving her here without me.

I'm not a fool. I know I can't shield her from everything, but I will for as long as I can. As soon as that will is read, things will change.

"No matter what, you stay in the car until Isaac comes to get you. The first meeting is with the other families. Aldo wanted it to be held after the reading of the will, but I managed to have it changed to before. I want to give him just enough rope to hang himself."

"Just be careful. Aldo doesn't care about the rules. He won't think twice about drawing a gun and shooting you if he thinks it will sway people to his side."

I wink at her. "You don't spend ten years behind bars without learning a thing or two."

I kiss her hard, my teeth nipping her lips before pulling away. I climb out of the car before tearing off the wrapping around my fingers and sliding my wedding ring back on. Isaac

and Conner step up beside me and scan the area. We are the first to arrive, which is how I planned it.

Conner has a laptop case slung over his shoulder, while Isaac and I go in empty-handed. Of course, the men who search us are fools, trusting us to follow the rules set out when they give us a basic search without checking us thoroughly. I have a gun strapped to my ankle and a knife in a custom-made sleeve insert, neither of which are detected. I know Isaac and Conner will both be carrying too. Conner sets the laptop bag down on the scanner. When it goes through without a hitch, he picks it up, and we head inside.

As we enter the large conference room with the circular table that could easily sit twelve if needed, I take a moment to scan the room before taking my seat. As the first here, I choose the spot where I can see everyone in the room, putting my back to the corner so nobody can sneak up behind me.

Conner and Isaac stand behind me, arms crossed and ready, as the others slowly trickle in. Not surprisingly, Aldo is the last to enter, looking smug as fuck as he greets everyone.

I can tell most people around the table aren't fans of the man either, which makes my life easier. As much as they fear me, I've given them no indication that I'm a threat to them unless crossed. As far as they're concerned, I took out my brother when I found out about his crimes. Crimes that, as a group, were voted against years ago. Human trafficking might be booming, but we like to think we're better than thugs grabbing people off the streets. We run guns and drugs and a host of other less-than-legal enterprises, but selling children...

Taking out Dano proved to them that I would do anything to protect the sanctity of our family and our values. Stepping up to take my father's spot might have made them nervous, but again, I haven't rocked the boat. I've kept things running nice and smooth. It wouldn't do to have them pointing fingers at me when I want them all looking at Aldo.

"Gentlemen, thanks for meeting today on such short notice," Aldo starts as he sits, acting as if he's in charge.



“It’s standard procedure when a don dies, Aldo. You know that even if you weren’t here for the last one,” Gian Rossi nods to me.

Aldo frowns but sits straighter, his two guards standing stoically behind him. “Yes, unfortunate business with Giovanni. My condolences, Vice,” Aldo says. I incline my head. “However, the situation here is a little different,” he continues.

“Why? Are you not stepping up as don of the Fiore family?” Mattia leans forward, his arms crossed over the edge of the table. He looks down his nose at Aldo, making me want to laugh.

“We both know that’s ridiculous. I’m the only person suitable to take over. I will lead us to even more prosperity.”

Isaac coughs as I barely hold back an eye roll.

“Yes, well, that remains to be seen,” Mattia, the oldest don, grates out. “Anyone here see a reason why Aldo shouldn’t be don?”

I keep my mouth shut, even though I have a thousand things to say. I have to bide my time for everything to fall into place. Aldo snorts, as if anyone would oppose him.

“No? Congratulations, then, Aldo. Will you be keeping Alessio as your *consigliere* or bringing in someone else?”

Alessio has been a *consigliere* for longer than some of these guys have been dons. They respect him and, from what I can tell, like him more than they ever did Vigo.

Aldo huffs. “I’ll have my own men taking over the pivotal roles. People I can trust. You get that, right, Vice?”

I look him in the eye before answering. “It’s vital that the men at your back advising you are trustworthy. If I order Isaac here to do something, *consigliere* or not, I know he’ll do it. Regardless of what it is.”

“Exactly.”

“Well, are there any other points to discuss while we’re all here?” Leone Gallo asks impatiently.

“My father’s funeral will be held in five days. I invite you all to come and pay your final respects, but I understand it’s not always so easy to get away.”

All eyes turn to me as they nod, murmuring about how they will be there, before turning to Aldo.

“What about Vigo?” Mattia asks.

“The nature of his death is still being investigated. Unfortunately, it was my wedding night, so I was absent when the accident happened. This means the authorities got there before we could take control of the situation. The fire marshal has deemed the fire arson, so I will be investigating. As you can imagine, my wife, Vigo’s daughter, is distraught. She’ll be arriving soon for the reading of the will, so I’d like to say a few things before that happens.”

Oh, this outghta be good. I lean back and wait for whatever shit is about to come out of his mouth.

“I think it’s clear that there was a hit on Vigo, and though we’ll mourn his loss, it’s important to keep things running smoothly. That means finding and punishing those responsible. Obviously, our eyes are turned to our enemies, but I would be a terrible leader if I didn’t look inward, too. Now, to do this, I’ll be sending a few men into each of your—”

“No,” I tell him, folding my arms. “You won’t be sending anyone into my territory and investigating my people. If you want to investigate your own, that’s your prerogative, but you have no power over me or my people.”

“I’m the don—”

“And so am I, and my first responsibility is to protect my people. I might have been in prison, Aldo, but that doesn’t mean I didn’t have eyes and ears everywhere. I know what kind of man you are, and I can tell you now that you won’t be interrogating any of my people—man, woman, or child.”

He jumps to his feet, his men stepping back. “Who the fuck do you think you are? I tell you to jump, and you say, how fucking high? I should have your fucking tongue for

speaking to me like that,” he snarls, looking to the others for support. But he’s overplayed his hand and hasn’t even noticed.

“I don’t answer to you.”

“You all fucking answer to me,” he snarls as the others get to their feet and protest.

Mattia slams his fist onto the table and roars, “Sit down.”

I lower myself back down into my seat just as the others do, until only Aldo remains standing, glaring at all of us.

“Vice is right. You do not rule us. You are overstepping, Aldo,” Mattia states angrily.

“You might be dons, but I am the godfather.”

I roll my eyes at the stupid fucking nickname the media made up. “Bullshit. You might have taken over from Vigo, but you haven’t earned anything,” I tell him.

He leans over the table, his eyes boring into mine. “I am the favored son. Gia is the heir to the Fiore fortune, and as her husband, it’s mine. While all of you were running around like headless chickens, Vigo was amassing a fortune. His territory is bigger than any of yours, and his firepower means he could destroy all of you.”

“His yes, but he’s dead. You’re just a wannabe with a Napoleon complex.”

He smirks at me. “Look at you trying to play with the big boys, Vice. We all know it’s an act. Your father should have put you down when he had the chance. Everyone knows you’re a faggot. I bet prison was like a holiday camp for you.”

He smiles viciously as I look at him with a bored expression. His look falters when he doesn’t get the reaction he’s after.

“Was that supposed to hurt my feelings? You can believe what you want, Aldo. It doesn’t make it true.”

“You know, being gay means I could off you right now, and nobody would say shit.”

I feel Isaac and Conner step closer as I cock my head and grin. “What game are you playing here, Aldo? It all seems a little convenient to me. Vigo died on the night of your wedding to his daughter, and now you’re picking fights with me because I won’t let you into my territory. You want to start a smear campaign against me? Go ahead. Who’s next? Mattia because he’s coming up to retirement age? Or maybe Leone because his territory borders yours?”

“You’re deflecting, you piece of shit. Prove it. Prove you’re not gay, and I’ll let you live.”

“You’d be dead before you touched me, Aldo. I’d be careful with the threats. After all, I killed my brother. You’re nothing more than shit on my shoe.”

“Aldo, it’s impossible for him to prove he isn’t gay.” Gian sighs, looking uncomfortable.

“I mean, you could whip your dick out and watch me not get hard,” I mock Aldo, making Isaac and Conner laugh behind me.

Leone speaks up. “You could talk to his wife.”

Aldo throws his head back and laughs. “Fucking hell, don’t tell me you fell for that shit. Vice isn’t married.”

I cock my brow as the others look at me.

Leone frowns. “Bosco tried to arrange a union between him and my niece. Vice declined because he was already married. When he tried to touch Vice’s wife, Vice...” He drifts off as I chuckle.

“You can say it, Leone. I broke his wrist. I don’t like people touching what’s mine.”

“Bullshit. If you’re married, prove it.” Aldo scowls.

I look behind me at Isaac and nod. He leaves the room without looking at anyone else.

“What I want to know is, what will be my restitution when I prove I am, in fact, married? Because if you think I’ll allow this slight to stand, you are sorely mistaken.”

“Fuck you.”

“I’m pretty sure I told you I’m not into men.”

The others talk among themselves momentarily as I look up at Conner. He nods, letting me know he’s ready for what’s to come. Now I just have to get Nova through it without her shooting me in the dick.

A few minutes later, the door opens, and Isaac strolls in. He’s alone but leaves the door open as he resumes his spot behind me. All eyes are on the door when, a moment or two later, Nova walks in with Veck and Miles behind her. She looks relaxed and confident as her eyes scan the room before falling on me.

“What the fuck is this?” Aldo bellows, moving to grab Nova, but Miles and Veck jump in front of her.

“Touch my wife, Aldo, and I’ll rip your head from your shoulders.”

“She’s not your fucking wife. She isn’t even in your family. She belongs to me.”

I stand, the room going deathly silent. “Nova is mine.” My voice snaps out like lightning. I dare him to argue with me. I hold out my hand for her, and she walks toward me. Once her hand is in mine, I sit and tug her into my lap.

Veck and Miles move away from Aldo and walk over to stand by the door, while Aldo turns and leans on the table, glaring at Nova.

“You fucking slut.”

A red haze washes over my vision. I growl and move to stand up, but Nova stops me. “Hey, it’s okay. He can say whatever he wants. We both know the truth.”

She places her hands on the table, and I move to cover them with mine when Aldo laughs. I look over at him, but his eyes are on my fingers.

“I think it’s safe to say they’re together, Aldo. Rings aside. He has her name tattooed on his fingers, and his name is on her collarbone.”

“That means jack shit.”

Conner opens his laptop bag and pulls out a copy of our marriage certificate, sliding it across the table.

“This proves they are married, Aldo,” Mattia states as he reads over the certificate.

“This would never have been approved of. Vigo hated your family.” He shakes his head at me.

“Why? I was in prison, remember? I had nothing to do with the bad blood between you all. Besides, he didn’t seem to hate me when he gave us his blessing. He even attended our ceremony, along with Alessio and my father. We only kept it quiet because my brother’s funeral was the next day. Vigo wanted to try and bring our families together. He said he was tired of all the fighting, and he felt he had lost his way. He trusted that me and Nova would be the beginning of a new era.”

“It was you who broke into my apartment and attacked me.” Aldo jolts, awareness hitting him.

“Now, why would I do that?”

“Because I—” He snaps his mouth shut, looking at Nova.

“I didn’t tell him it was you that beat me up.” Nova picks up the play that I’m making.

I kiss her neck. “Good girl,” I whisper before slipping back into character. “It was Aldo?” I snarl.

“You expect me to believe she didn’t tell you and that someone else broke into my place and beat the shit out of me?”

I ignore him and turn Nova’s head to look at me. “Why didn’t you tell me it was Aldo?”

“I knew you’d kill him if I told you he tried forcing me into giving him a blowjob.”

I can feel the anger pouring off the men around the table because wives are supposed to be off-limits. Not everyone believes that of course.

“She wasn’t married then,” Aldo snaps, sensing it too.

“I was,” she replies softly, showing her ring, which she wasn’t wearing that day.

“I was wearing my ring. You just didn’t notice. Not that you would have cared. You didn’t care who my father was, and when I called Vigo and you were told to stand down, you choked me so hard, you popped the blood vessels in my eye.”

It’s faint now, mostly healed, though the bruising is still around her neck and cheekbone in a sickly yellow color.

“Without proving you consummated the marriage, this means nothing. It’s a sham. It…” His voice drifts off as Conner pulls out his laptop and types a few keys.

I turn Nova’s head, sliding my hand into her hair and holding her in place, her eyes locked on mine as the sound fills the air. Out of the corner of my eye, I see the video of me fucking Nova cast up onto the large television. She tenses when she recognizes the sounds, trying to move her head to look, but I tighten my grip and keep her eyes on mine.

I watch as she realizes that I filmed us without her consent, and now I’m showing intimate details of not just her body but the night I took her virginity, just to prove a point.

The softness she usually has for me is gone. In its place is a coldness that makes me swallow. A tear runs down her cheek as I signal Conner to turn it off. When he does, I hold out my free hand for him to pass me the folded sheet. I toss it at Aldo, breaking my gaze from Nova’s to look at his shocked face.

“Our bloody sheet. If you look harder, you’ll find Nova’s release and my cum. Is that enough, or do I need to fuck her over the table too?”

Nova is rock solid in my arms as I wait for him to answer.

It’s Gian who breaks the shocked silence. “That won’t be necessary, Vice. I think this meeting is over.”

Aldo snarls. “I’m not finished. You don’t want to make an enemy of me.”

Gian glares at him. “Why? Will you beat my wife, too? Or make me subject her to this kind of humiliation?”

“You’ve made one thing clear, though, Aldo. We let Vigo get away with too much.” He looks at Nova, his eyes softening, but she’s oblivious, looking at a spot over my shoulder. “At least he tried to right a wrong. Maybe that can be his legacy.” He looks back at Aldo, who looks fit to be tied.

“Vice is right. You have no power over us. You have not proved yourself to be anything other than a bully. Keep your men out of my territory, or I’ll send them back in pieces.”

“You’ll regret this. You all will.”

Mattia leans forward. “Try it. But you’ll stand alone against the four of us, and we won’t stop until you are on your knees.”



# Chapter 31

---

## *Nova*



A knock on the door quiets everyone down. When it opens, a voice I don't recognize speaks up. "Mr. Lambardi. Your wife is here, and so is the lawyer."

"Tell them to wait."

"Yes, sir."

Nobody speaks until the door is closed. I keep my gaze on the wall as Vice strokes his fingers up and down my back.

I blow out a breath and move to climb off Vice's lap, but he holds me tightly. I can tell he wants me to focus on him, but if I have to look into his eyes, I will probably claw them out.

"Aldo!" I hear Gia's voice, which is when Vice taps my ass for me to stand.

I scramble off his lap before he changes his mind. All I want to do is run out of this fucking room, from this life, and never come back. Instead, I straighten my shoulders, keep my head high, and pretend I'm not breaking inside.

"I told you to wait," Aldo snaps at her just before another voice speaks up.

"I'm afraid that's my fault. I have to catch a flight in an hour. I'm very sorry." I recognize the man as Vigo's lawyer.

His eyes flick briefly to Vice before they land on me. "Oh, excellent. I'm glad you're here, Nova. Your name is mentioned in the will, too."

Nobody complains except for Gia. “Nova? What the hell is she doing here?”

“Gia, sit down. I’m sure it’s nothing but confirmation of her termination. Not that we would keep her on anyway. Clearly, she has no loyalty to the family.”

“Careful, Aldo. If you question my loyalty, I might not feel the need to keep all the secrets I’ve accumulated over the years. And we wouldn’t want that now, would we?”

“How dare you talk to my husband like that!” Gia shrieks, but I just smirk at her.

“Remember, Aldo is not the only one with secrets. Does he know?”

Her skin bleaches white as Aldo looks at her.

“Know what?”

“Nothing. She’s just being a bitch.”

“Please, everyone, be seated,” the lawyer announces.

Vice sits, and though I don’t want to, I don’t put up a fight when he pulls me onto his lap again. Gia sits beside Aldo, tossing the sheet on the back of Aldo’s chair, before her eyes move from me to Vice.

She frowns before she smiles, putting two and two together and coming up with ten. “Oh no. Have to settle for a mistress role, did we? I did mention that nobody would want you after being a bodyguard, for goodness’ sake.” She giggles. “Not everyone gets to be a bride.” She flashes me her ring.

I roll my eyes and give her the middle finger, making Isaac chuckle. I see the moment she spots the rock on my hand—the one that’s three times bigger than hers.

“What—”

“Sorry, Gia, but I really don’t have much time. Okay, where is it? Oh yes, here we go.”

“To the Esposito family, I leave you fifty thousand dollars on the stipulation it is used to create a green space such as a

park for children. We have seen so much bloodshed that sometimes it is easy to forget what's important."

I swallow as the lawyer reads my father's words, surprised to see he still had some humanity left in him after all.

"To the Gallo family, I leave fifty thousand dollars to be used to help set up a charity that specializes in children who have been displaced either from trafficking, losing parents, or adjusting to life after trauma."

I bite my lip so that I don't cry because maybe, just maybe, the legacy he leaves behind won't be all bad.

The lawyer continues, and each family is stunned to find they have been gifted fifty thousand dollars to put toward something that will be a safe space for children. Each of the dons looks humbled, except for Aldo, who grits his teeth.

The lawyer clears his throat before he continues, "Is Mr. Romano here?"

"No," Vice answers.

"I have a letter for him from Vigo with explicit instructions."

"If you make a copy, I can give it to him," I offer.

"That would be perfect, thank you. I'll still need to see him, mind you. There's some paperwork he needs to sign."

"I'll let him know."

"Good. Now, where was I? Oh yes." He smiles at me gently.

"The rest of my fortune, including all my properties, houses, investment portfolios, and vehicles, goes to my daughter and my last remaining heir. Her husband will be granted access to this fortune after two years on the condition that not a single hair on her head is harmed by his hand or by his direction or instruction. If my daughter is harmed or killed, all assets mentioned above will be given to the charities listed below."

It feels like a blow to the chest. He screwed me over, but in his own way, he tried to find a way to protect me. Vice wraps his hand around my stomach and rests his chin on my shoulder.

“That’s ridiculous. We’ll need this looked at.” Aldo huffs, and Gia looks at him sharply.

“Why? Because the will means you can’t beat your wife?” I ask without shame, still too angry to bite my tongue.

“Control your wife,” Aldo orders Vice.

“Sorry, Aldo, but unless we’re in the bedroom, my wife can do and say whatever the fuck she wants.”

The lawyer frowns at Aldo. “There will be no contesting the will, Mr. Lambardi. It’s ironclad. There are no loopholes, no way for you to change the outcome.”

His eyes move to Gia. “And last but not least, I leave Gia ten thousand dollars to get herself somewhere to rent and start a new life.”

The room goes deadly quiet for a second.

“What? What does that mean? I get everything plus ten thousand dollars?” Gia frowns, confused.

Aldo jumps in. “This just proves the man wasn’t of sound mind, and the will should be contested.”

“I’m sorry, but you’re mistaken, Gia. You will receive ten thousand dollars in total. His daughter, Galilea Fiore, will receive everything else.”

“What?” Gia screeches, but it’s Aldo who lunges for the lawyer. Leone grabs him and holds him back.

“Who the fuck is this other daughter?”

“There is no other daughter, only one. She was swapped with Gia when they were little more than toddlers to keep her safe after the rest of Vigo’s family was wiped out.”

“Who is Gia’s father, then?” Mattia questions.

“Alessio Romano,” the lawyer answers, the bomb dropping as people turn to look at me, the aftershock revealing the truth.

“Galilea Stella Fiore is Nova Romano.”

“Nova Moretti, actually. Congratulations, baby. Looks like you’re stinking rich,” Vice says as Aldo launches himself across the table. Vice’s men stop him before he reaches us, pinning him to the table as he fights and Gia screams.

I stand up when Vice nudges me. I know my face is pale because I feel like I’m seconds away from passing out.

“I think I need to get my wife out of here. We’ll be in touch. As you can imagine, this is a shock,” Vice smoothly tells the lawyer.

“Yes, of course.”

Vice looks at the other family heads. “I’ll see you all at the funeral, hopefully, where cooler heads will prevail.”

Mattia nods and then looks at me. “Are you okay, dear?”

I want to ask him if he’s fucking joking. Was he not paying attention for the past half hour?

Instead, I nod. “I’m okay. Thank you.” It’s the best I can offer, but it seems enough to appease everyone. Well, everyone but Aldo and Gia, that is.

“You did this. Nova was supposed to be mine. He swore I would marry his daughter and take over. You stole her from me,” Aldo rants.

“Nova was never yours, and we had no idea Vigo was her father. She’s just finding out now that Alessio isn’t her dad, so have some fucking compassion.”

“He’s a dead man. He knew and said nothing.”

“You said yourself not even an hour ago that you expected your *consigliere* to follow your orders, no matter what. And I’m guessing Vigo was the same. Do you think Alessio would have wanted this? Being forced to hand over his daughter? I

understand you're mad, but you won't take him from Nova. I'll offer him sanctuary if I need to."

I know Vice is only playing the game, so all these men see him as the more stable one, but his words help temper my anger. If only they could stop the hurt.

"You won't get away with this, Vice."

"That sounds like a threat, Aldo. Do not threaten me, or I'll take it as a declaration of war."

Vice slides his fingers between mine and walks me toward the door, his men letting go of Aldo to flank us. As we pass Aldo's chair, Vice reaches over and grabs the bloody sheet from the back of it, tossing it to Conner.

I keep my eyes forward and shut out everyone around me. Maybe then I can pretend this was all just a fucked-up dream.

\* \* \*

I don't remember getting in the car or the ride home. I'm aware enough to know I'm going through the motions, but I'm numb and have no desire to snap out of it. Because when I do, I'll have to deal with Vice, and I'm not ready. Not yet.

I walk into the house, aware that I'm being watched, and it pisses me off enough to drag me out of my current state. I feel Vice's eyes burning my skin as he walks behind me. Two guys I don't know look from me to him and frown.

"How'd it go?"

"As expected," Vice answers, and I barely fight back a snort. Yeah, he had this all planned out, but the silly woman that I am didn't realize he would keep me in the dark. So much for a partnership.

"Can I get you anything?" Turner asks as he steps into the room, his gaze drifting over me before landing on Vice.

The guy might do his job and do it well, but he's not my biggest fan. He hides it, but I see how he fights the sneer on his face whenever I'm around. He doesn't think I'm good enough for his boss—the crazy whack job who just shared intimate details about me to a room full of men like it meant

nothing. Shit, what does it say about me if I'm not good enough for a psycho?

I keep walking, heading toward the stairs.

"Nova," Vice calls.

"I'm going to take a shower. For some reason, I feel really fucking dirty."

He sighs, calling my name again, softer this time.

I whirl around when I reach the bottom of the stairs, everyone watching me now, and Vice freezes, most likely seeing the fire blazing in my eyes.

"It was necessary."

"Are you fucking kidding me? I was blindsided in there."

"I needed your reaction to be genuine."

I stare into his eyes, his face blank. "I hope it was worth it."

I turn and continue up the stairs. I'm halfway up when he barks my name again.

"What?" I spin around and look down at him.

"You're overreacting."

Isaac winces, and Conner drops his head.

"Overreacting? Wow, tell me you've never had a girlfriend without telling me you've never had a girlfriend." Without turning, I take another step up, keeping my eyes on his. "You killed Vigo without discussing it with me. It didn't matter if I had questions or things left to say. You did what you wanted, and I stood by you. You told me you wouldn't touch Aldo until after the wedding, and yet the bruises he was sporting in church were in identical places to mine. You omit the truth and lie when you see fit, despite the fact we made each other promises."

He takes a step toward me, but I hold up my hand. "Our wedding night was fucked up. The things you did..." I shake my head. "The fact that you killed a man for looking at me, as

messed up as that was, made me feel like more than your whore. Until today. Today, you shared parts of me that were not yours to share. Today, you made me feel like less than a whore. You're not the man I thought you were."

He growls at me, but I let him see the disappointment on my face before I grab the hem of my dress and yank it up over my head and throw it at him. He still has my panties from earlier, so I'm bare from my waist down. I remove my strapless bra and drop it to the floor, leaving myself naked and exposed in front of Vice and his men.

"What the fuck are you doing?" he snarls, tossing the dress as he heads toward me.

I turn around and walk away. "It's not like they haven't already seen it and worse."

I keep going, ignoring him cursing behind me as I enter the bedroom and go straight through to the bathroom. I lock the door and turn on the shower. It doesn't take long for the water to get hot, the steam quickly filling the bathroom as I step into the shower.

I hear yelling coming from the bedroom, but I ignore it, scrubbing myself and rinsing off the suds. Pounding on the door starts, but still, I ignore it. Vice can go fuck himself. If he doesn't let me calm down, I'm going to kill him.

I jump when the sound of wood splintering rips through the room, and I watch as Vice kicks the door in. He storms into the bathroom, his anger sucking out all the oxygen.

He yanks the shower door open and steps in, fully clothed. I turn my back on him, not wanting to look at him, and he pushes me up against the wall. I protest, but it's his turn to ignore me. I hear the sound of his zipper being lowered seconds before I feel his dick against my ass. I tense, even though I know he can't fuck me at this angle. I'm too short.

*Famous last words.*

He lifts me and impales me on his cock. I scream at the intrusion, in no way ready to take him, but he doesn't give a shit.



I brace myself against the wall as he grabs my hips and lifts me up and down on his cock, like I was nothing more than a toy to get him off. And right now, I am. This is a punishment fuck for showing him up in front of his men. He's reminding me of my place, but it's unnecessary. I figured that out when he played that stupid fucking video to a bunch of men I had spent years trying to earn respect from.

Being a female bodyguard is hard. Being one in the Cosa Nostra is unheard of. I had to work harder than everyone else and hold myself to a strict set of rules so they would see me as more than just a hole for fucking. And Vice fucking Moretti just blew that all to hell in seconds.

## Chapter 32

---

### *Vice*



I come inside her, feeling her start to pulse around me.

I yank myself free and lower her back to her feet, refusing to let her come until she listens to me. But I underestimated my wife.

She merely steps back under the shower head and washes off the cum dripping from her pussy. Once she's done, she moves around me and climbs out, grabbing a towel and wrapping it around her body. Then she leaves the bathroom.

“God dammit.” I punch the tiles, feeling my knuckles split. I strip and quickly clean myself up and dry myself off before heading out to find her. She's not in the bedroom, but I never expected her to be. I yank on a pair of sweats and search the house for her.

Eventually, I find her in the small room at the far end of the house that I told her she could use for her crafting, whatever the fuck that is, when she asked. There are boxes stacked in the corner, undisturbed. They were the only ones she asked Turner to leave alone, wanting to set everything up herself.

Her desk sits against the far wall, ready for her. But right now, she's curled up in an oversized armchair she has arranged under the window. A throw covers her from shoulders to feet, and her breathing is deep and steady.

I contemplate leaving her there, but I refuse to let her sleep alone. Sliding my arms under her, I lift her and tuck her

against my chest, realizing she is still only wearing a towel. With a sigh, I carry her back to our room and lay her on the bed. I consider lying down beside her, but I need to talk to the guys first. Instead, I unravel the towel from her body and tug it free. I press my lips against the tattoo of my name and pull the comforter up over her.

When I make it downstairs, my guys, minus MacGyver, and Nixon, are gathered around the large dining table with glasses of scotch. Isaac sees me first and pours me a glass before sliding it over. “Mac and Nixon are making sure Aldo returned home.”

I nod, pressing the glass to my lips. I toss it back, enjoying the burn, even though scotch isn’t my usual drink of choice.

“How is she?” Miles questions.

“She’s asleep.”

He nods, tipping back his drink.

“You think we’ll get backlash from tonight?” Veck asks, changing the subject.

“A smart man would fallback and devise a plan.”

“But Aldo isn’t known for being smart.” Conner sighs.

“And it’s not just you he’s pissed at. He’ll be gunning for Nova as much as he is for you. I hate saying this after everything that just went down, but maybe you should feign indifference where Nova is concerned. In public, that is. A man like Aldo wouldn’t have picked up the vibes like the rest of us. He’ll think this is an arrangement like his marriage to Gia. Nothing more, nothing less. But if he finds out what we know, he will do anything he can to use her against you,” Isaac warns.

“And what do you know that Aldo doesn’t?”

“That you love your wife.”

I jolt at that. I don’t love Nova. I want to fuck her, yes. Own her, possess every inch of her, consume her until—

“Fuck. I love my wife.”

Conner laughs. “You didn’t know?”

“How the fuck would I know what to look for?”

“If it makes you feel any better, she loves you too. That’s why she’s so upset about what you did.”

“She’s right, you know. We should have warned her.”

“We don’t involve women in business,” Veck points out.

“She’s already involved. She put this whole thing into motion. And she’s the one most likely in danger. We’d be fucking dicks to cut her out now,” Isaac tells him.

“Plus, she’ll know shit that can help us. She wasn’t just a woman in their circles. She had access to confidential information and knows the ins and outs of who’s who. She knows far more than I do,” Miles points out.

I rub a hand over my face, trying to get my thoughts together, but I’m still dealing with the realization that I love my wife. I knew I wanted her. I even knew it was not in a good way, but in an unhealthy, obsessive way. But love? I don’t know what to do with that.

“Whatever happens, things are going to be intense. I need you to cover Nova.” I look at them. I nod to the bottle of scotch, which Veck slides to me.

“I need the four of you to move in. MacGyver and Nixon, too, eventually. There is plenty of room here for you all to have your own space.”

“We figured. What about the gatehouse? I think we need around-the-clock rotation, adding two extra men for patrols,” Conner suggests.

“Do it, but only bring in men you trust. If anything happens to Nova, I’ll kill them. I’ll kill you all,” I add, letting them know how serious I am.

I down my fresh glass of scotch, stand up, and head to the kitchen, needing food. I grab an apple off the counter before taking one of the menus from the top drawer and ordering a few pizzas to be delivered.

“Tell me what’s going on with Ralph’s shit,” I say to Isaac as he walks in.

“There’s been a little pushback, mostly from people with deals tied to either Ralph or Felix. The ones I thought you might be interested in, I’ve taken note of. The others are being shut down.”

“What’s the mood like? Do I have rioting in the streets to look forward to?”

“Actually, there’s a lot of relief. Felix and his brother weren’t liked at all. They ruled with fear. If you pissed one of them off, they didn’t come for you. They came for your wife, sisters, and daughters. You, though, intrigue them. Don’t get me wrong, they’re scared shitless of you. And some think they were probably better off with the devil they knew. But the others... They’ve heard the stories of what happened with Felix and Dano and can’t help but respect you for it.”

I walk back to the dining room with Isaac following me. He continues his update as I eat the apple. When we enter the room, I take my seat and toss the core on the table.

“Cahill territory is between ours and Aldo’s. I don’t know if Aldo knows you’re taking it over. It might not be a huge slice of the pie, but its position is critical, and with it, we have nearly as much territory as he does.”

“Alright. I need a meeting with Ludovic and Amadeo. They’ve been *capos* for years. And out of all my father’s men, those are the two I don’t mind the most, basically because I got the sense they didn’t like Giovanni much.”

“Sounds like as good of a reason as any.” Veck laughs.

“That’s what I was thinking. They both have sons in their mid-thirties. Tell me about them.”

“I went to school with Gino, Ludovic’s son. He was a bully in school, but he sorted his shit out when his kid sister got sick with cancer. She died a few years ago, but he made her a promise that he would be a better man than the one he’d been turning into.”

I nod, interested in meeting him. “What about the other guy?”

“Rocky. He’s not a friendly guy, but he’s not cruel like Aldo. He lost his wife and son in a car crash a year ago, so he’s pissed at the world.”

“Too pissed to see clearly and make bad judgments, or pissed enough to see that a change of scenery would be just what he needs?”

“I don’t know. Why?” Miles frowns.

“You want them to watch over the new territory,” Isaac guesses.

“We can only be in so many places at once. And I need you guys here.”

“It’s not like you to hand over the reins to people you don’t know, especially ones you don’t know if you can trust,” Isaac points out.

“Oh, we’ll be watching them like a fucking hawk, but there is a method to my madness.”

“Building strong ties within our family.”

I nod. “My father and brother caused a lot of damage, and I need to show the people who have faith in me that I won’t let things crumble under my reign. I want to show them that we’re stronger without those two fucks. Aldo will try his hardest to burn us all down, and the easiest way for him to do that is to tear us apart from the inside out.”

“I’ll arrange for you to meet them and see if they’ll be a good fit.”

“What about Felix and Ralph’s families?”

“Most left. Those that didn’t heed our warning were taken care of. There will be no blowback. It’s over,” Veck grunts.

“Good. That leaves the warehouses. How are they doing?”

“Only one is back up and running, and so is Sparkles. Two have been torn down, but construction is scheduled to start next week. The other two are still in the process of being

guttled and cleared out. What do you want to do about the land near the docks? With that factory gone, it's open space."

"What about a restaurant?" Miles suggests. "The view of the water is good. There is a local fish market around the corner that could deliver to them. We always need more legitimate businesses."

"It's your idea, so run with it. Show me the proposal, and we'll go from there. Anything else?"

Everyone shakes their heads as the doorbell rings.

"Good, because I'm fucking starving." Miles moves to get the food as Isaac studies me. "What?"

"I was thinking about Nova."

"I could put a bullet in your brain. That would fix that problem for you."

"I meant, what is she going to do now? What's her role? She's been working as a guard for years—long, brutal hours where she was constantly on the go. Now what?"

I shrug, not sure what the fuck he wants me to say. "She obviously can't carry on with her fucking job. Not now that she's my wife."

"I know that. I'm just saying she needs something to do."

I think it over and frown. I don't even know what she likes to do. "I'll talk to her."

"It might be a blessing in disguise. Sounds like she was exposed to a lot of shit she shouldn't have been. That level of violence takes a toll on a person. She'll probably be happy to be free of it. I wouldn't be surprised if she likes being a lady of leisure. Most do." Veck grins.

Conner bursts out laughing. "You haven't spent any real time with her yet. Trust me, Nova is as nuts as Vice. She just hides it better."

Isaac smiles, and Veck looks around, confused.

"She punched Gia in the face in a houseful of guards sworn to protect her," Miles admits, walking back in with

pizza boxes in his arms.

“She stabbed a pen into a woman’s boob for looking at Vice.” Conner chuckles when Veck’s eyes open wider.

“She pinned Vice’s hand to her thigh with a fucking knife because he pissed her off,” Isaac tells him.

They all look at me for more. So, I tell them just how crazy my girl really is, trusting them. “She found out about the hit on me,” I admit, their smiles dropping. “She came on her own to the factory and waited for us to arrive. And when Dano tried to kill me, she put a bullet in his brain. She also took out Felix. She saved my life.”

“Fuck. I heard you tell Giovanni she killed your brother, but I thought you were just trying to piss him off. I didn’t know you were serious. That takes some fucking balls, Vice. It sounds to me like you didn’t just find a bride. You found your queen.”



## Chapter 33

---

### *Nova*



I sit at the top of the stairs and listen to them talk.

I rub a hand over my face. Trying to keep secrets is hard enough without Vice constantly changing the damn rules. I guess it doesn't matter now—they all saw me shoot Giovanni.

Climbing to my feet, I make my way back to the bedroom and find my cell phone on the side table. I crawl onto the bed and scroll through it, tucking my knees up under the T-shirt I took from Vice's drawer.

News has begun to circulate—news of my marriage, news of my true identity. Most people are shocked, asking questions about whether I knew or not. I don't reply to anyone, not tonight, while my head is a mess.

My cell rings while it's in my hand. Seeing that it's Alessio, I answer it. "Hey."

"Nova," he chokes out, making me jolt up.

"What's wrong?"

"C...c...container five. East gate. I'm sorry."

The line goes dead, and I stare at it for a second before I jump off the bed and throw on a pair of jeans and a sweatshirt over the T-shirt. I slip one of my gun holsters on and arm myself before adding a second gun to my ankle and my trusty knife into my pocket. I shove my cell phone in the back pocket of my jeans and head down the stairs at the back of the house.

I slip out the back door while they eat and head to the garage. I climb into my Mustang and pull the visor down, catching the spare key. I start her up and ease out of the garage, heading for the gate that's still open from the pizza delivery. I drive through before anyone can stop me.

My phone starts ringing. I lift up a little and pull it out of my pocket, holding it against my ear as I answer it. "Alessio?"

"Where the fuck are you going?" Vice roars down the phone.

I hang up on him, dropping the cell phone in my lap. I'll deal with him later. See, here's the problem with me losing faith in him. I don't trust him not to stop me. He might have offered Alessio sanctuary earlier, but I don't know if that's real or for show because he keeps me in the dark and lies to me. No matter what Vice says, Alessio followed Vigo for years. Vice will never fully trust him, and a part of me can't blame him for it. But if there is one thing I do know, it's that Alessio would never hurt me. If he's calling me, it's for a damn good reason.

Alessio mentioned container five. I thought for a moment he was talking about the docks, but there's no reason for Alessio to be there—not on Vice's turf—without telling him he was coming.

He had to be talking about the containers over at the storage unit. I've never been there, but that doesn't mean I don't know where it is or what it's used for. Drugs and guns are a booming trade, and using containers isn't exactly inconspicuous, but we have enough cops on our payroll to turn a blind eye.

My phone keeps ringing in my lap, and as soon as it stops, it starts again. Eventually, I answer it with a growl.

"If you hang up on me again, I'll tie you up and paddle your ass until it blisters," Vice tells me in a silky-smooth tone that sends a shiver through my body, and not the good kind.

"Then stop yelling at me. Look, Alessio called. He needs me. He wouldn't have called if it wasn't important."

“I don’t care if the fucking pope called. You do not leave the house without your guards.”

“I’m sorry. It won’t happen again. I wasn’t thinking.”

“Turn around and come back.”

“I can’t.”

“You will.”

“Vice, he’s my father.”

“Except he’s not, is he?” he spits.

I hang up. I can’t do this with him right now. Looks like I made the right decision to leave without telling him. Besides, it’s far easier for me to slip into Fiore territory than him. I can say I’m visiting friends. Vice coming in would be considered an act of war.

My cell rings again, but this time, I silence it and tuck it into my pocket.

I park around the corner, away from any cameras, and head for the chain-link fence surrounding the property. I quickly scan the area before climbing the fence. When I reach the top, I yank off the sweater and lay it over the razor wire before climbing over and dropping into a crouch. I keep myself low as I make my way toward the containers.

One by one, I check out the containers until I find the one I’m looking for. It has a large old-fashioned padlock on the front, but the lock is open. Slipping one of my guns into my hand, I pull the padlock free and tug one of the doors open.

It takes a while for my eyes to adjust, but when they do, I almost wish they hadn’t. Inside are a bunch of young girls, and I mean young, as in underage. All of them wearing short, tight dresses, looking absolutely terrified.

“Shit, fuck. It’s okay. I’m not going to hurt you.”

Someone says something, but I think it’s in Russian, so I have no clue what.

“My name is Nova, and—”

Someone gasps, cutting me off.

“Nova? You are Nova?” A girl pushes to the front of the others. She’s rail thin and in need of a shower and a hot meal, but her eyes are clear and alert. She can’t be a day over fifteen, if that.

“Yes, I’m Nova. Can you tell me who you are?”

“I’m Irina. A man came. He told us his daughter would help us. He told us Nova would come. Will you help us?”

Shit, goddammit.

“I’m going to try. Can you tell me where my father is?”

The girl has tears running down her face as she speaks. “The others came. The ones who hurt us. He led them away, but he was hurt.”

I dip my head, noticing the blood stains on the floor. I try to keep it together as I come to a decision.

“They’ll come back. What Alessio—my father—did could get him killed. Let’s not let his actions be for nothing. We need to leave now. I want you to follow behind me and make yourself as small as possible. Can you explain to the others?”

She nods frantically before turning and telling the others in her native tongue what to do. Once everyone is ready, I lead them out, sweeping my eyes over the place for danger. We make it to the fence where I came in without an issue, but I’m not sure how I’m going to get some of the younger ones up there.

Suddenly, a hand wraps around my mouth from behind and yanks me back as the girls start to panic and cry. My training kicks in, and I swing my elbow back when I hear a grunt and familiar voice.

“It’s me, Nova. It’s me,” Vice growls in my ear.

All the fight leaves me, and I slump in his arms for a second before he releases me. I turn and see Isaac, Conner, and Veck just behind him.

“What the fuck is going on?” Vice hisses.

“I need to get these girls out of here. Now, before the guards come back. Alessio is leading them away. He...he’s hurt, Vice. There was blood, and—” I take a deep breath. Now is not the time to lose it.

“Jesus, Vice, these girls are young,” Conner whispers.

“They were locked in a storage container. I don’t know how Alessio found them, but we need to get them out.”

“I’m going to spank your ass so hard you won’t be able to sit down for a week once this is over.”

“I don’t care what you do to me. Just help them.”

He kisses my forehead before turning to his men. “Do we have bolt cutters in the car?”

“Yeah, but it will probably trip the alarm. We’ll have to help them climb over,” Conner states.

Vice turns to me. “I won’t do anything until you’re on the other side of this fence.”

I open my mouth to argue but shut it quickly. “Okay, just hurry.”

He nods. “Do it.” And Conner shimmies up the fence, stripping off his suit jacket and laying it over my sweatshirt before climbing the rest of the way over.

I turn to Irina. “This man is my husband, and these are his friends. They are going to help us all get over the fence, but we have to hurry and stay quiet.”

“They won’t hurt us?”

“No. Never.”

She looks terrified but nods and tells the other girls what I said as Vice climbs to the top of the fence and waits for me.

“Let’s go, *bambola*.”

I climb up. When I reach Vice, he helps me over, handing me off to Conner, who is waiting on the other side. Isaac and Veck step forward and eye the girls.

“I think the younger ones need to climb on our backs. It will be quicker,” Isaac tells Irina softly.

She blows out a breath and tells the others. They huddle together, but Irina pushes one of the smaller girls toward Isaac, who swings her onto his back. The scared girl grips his neck tightly as he climbs the fence like fucking Spider-man, handing her to Vice, who then passes her down to Conner and me. I wrap my arms around her as Veck does the same with another girl. They keep going until only Irina and one other girl about the same age remain.

“You ladies want to climb or have us carry you?”

“I can climb,” Irina answers stiffly, the other girl following suit.

Isaac and Veck hover near them to make sure they don’t slip. The nameless girl reaches Vice first. He helps her over and hands her off to Conner just as Irina slips.

Vice jerks his hand out and grabs her wrist. “I’ve got you.” He lifts her and helps her over as the rest of the guys climb down to us.

Vice wraps his arm around me. “We need to get out of here.”

“Alessio...”

“Is a smart man. He’ll be long gone.”

I nod because I know we can’t stay.

“Where the fuck are we gonna take them?” Conner asks.

I bite my lip and look at Vice. He didn’t have to come. He sure as shit didn’t have to help me with them, but can I trust him with this?

Looking around at the girls, I know I have no choice. I pull out my cell and dial.

“Who are you calling?”

I hold up my finger to Vice as the call connects.

“Pick up at the end zone in thirty minutes. You’re gonna need a bus.”

“Jesus fuck. What kind of condition?”

“Need medical attention and food.”

“On it.”

They hang up, so I slip my cell away.

“Follow me. We’ll have to go on foot unless one of you is willing to drive the younger ones?”

“I’ll do it,” Conner offers.

We help him get them in the car, and he follows as I lead everyone else to one of the eight pick-up points I use.

It takes us longer than I expected, so we arrive just as the bus does. J and S jump out when they see me but freeze when they see Vice beside me.

“He helped me save them. These girls are from this territory, not Vice’s.”

“Fucking Aldo,” J snarls as he opens the doors to the bus.

I turn to Irina and reach out my hand, which she hesitantly takes. “These people will get you somewhere safe. They’ll make sure a doctor sees you and you get fed. Then they’ll try to find your parents, and if they can’t, they’ll find you a new home.”

“I can’t go back. It was my parents that sold me. They needed money to feed my siblings, but I couldn’t. I don’t.” She shakes her head.

I cup her cheek. “You won’t. These guys are real-life superheroes. They’ll keep you safe, I promise.” She nods, telling the others before S helps get them on the bus.

Irina looks at me, tears running down her face. “I hope your father is okay.”

“Me too.”

“Thank you, Nova. Thank you all,” she says to Vice and the others, not looking at their faces, then she turns and runs to

board the bus.

S climbs in with them, giving me a wave. J crosses his arms and looks me over. "I heard you got married."

Vice steps up behind me and wraps his arm across my chest. "You heard right."

"Good. Maybe he can take care of Aldo for you."

"That's the plan," Vice murmurs, his body tense.

J nods. "Do me a favor, Nova. Go be happy. Don't come back. There is nothing here but heartbreak. They don't deserve you. They never did."

He turns and walks away. I watch as the bus pulls away, and only the taillights are visible before I turn to look at Vice.

"You have some explaining to do, wife."



## Chapter 34

---

### *Vice*



I'm still simmering with rage when we pull up outside the house, Nova's hand clutched tightly in mine, even though she's sitting right beside me. Veck is driving Nova's Mustang back, much to his delight, leaving Conner and Isaac with us. Everyone is quiet now that Nova has filled us in on who J and S are and her involvement with them, likely sensing how close to the edge I am.

When I heard Nova's car start up earlier, I thought I was hearing things. But when I looked out the window and saw her taillights disappearing out the gates, I just about lost my mind. I started tracking her right away, even while I was calling. I was already pissed, but when she refused to listen and hung up on me, something in me snapped.

It was only after seeing her safe and with those girls when we tracked her to that storage facility that I managed to hold back from losing it. Unfortunately, my anger didn't disappear. It was lying in wait until I had her back in my arms.

Conner jumps out and opens my door just as Veck pulls in. I climb out, taking Nova with me and dragging her into the house. Miles is waiting with an anxious Turner hovering near the door, wringing his hands. I dismiss Turner for the night before pulling Nova into the dining room next to the table littered with discarded pizza and whiskey glasses.

The others file in behind us, fanning out around the room as I whirl around and feel my temper flair. "You put yourself

in danger tonight.”

She doesn't say anything, just stands there looking at me, her hands relaxed at her sides.

“I ordered you to come back, but you disobeyed me before hanging up on me. You knew I'd come for you. Knew my men would.” I step closer, towering over her, as she looks up at me with such defiance blazing in her eyes. “We followed you into Aldo's territory, giving him the right to shoot us on sight. You didn't care about your safety or theirs.”

Guilt flashes in her eyes. She turns her head, probably to apologize, but I grip her jaw and keep her eyes on me.

“I'm not just your husband, Nova. I'm your don. You disobeyed a direct order, putting everyone in danger. There are consequences to your actions.”

She swallows as I release her jaw.

“It was Alessio who got you into this mess. If I cut out his tongue, he can't call you anymore, can he?”

“Don't,” she snaps.

“Such fucking loyalty to him, but where is my fucking loyalty?” I roar at her.

“I have been nothing but loyal to you. I saved you twice. Fuck, it's because of me that you're standing here as the don threatening to punish me. You don't get to talk to me about loyalty when you shredded my trust with a video and a bloody sheet. A day ago, I would have come to you after Alessio called. Today, I stood in our room and realized I couldn't trust you. And yeah, that's on me. The stupid girl who married a monster. Now I know I'm nothing but a pawn.”

Her words feel like glass, embedding themselves in my skin.

“I should never have set foot in that prison. I should have shoved my gun in my mouth and pulled the trigger.”

Raw, scolding heat washes over my body before agony races through my veins at the thought of never having her. A

switch is flipped, a red haze envelops everything, and then I'm the monster she always knew me to be.

Voices filter in, along with crying. It's the crying that snaps me out of it, and I realize I've lost time. I look around and notice the pizza boxes and broken glass scattered across the floor. I see my men gathered close, trying to talk to me like I'm a wild animal they don't want to spook.

I follow the source of the crying, and my eyes snap on Nova, who I have bent over the table. Her pants have been yanked down, exposing her ass, which is cherry red. My hand squeezes both her wrists that I have pinned at the small of her back.

The sound of her quiet sobs makes me want to tear the room apart.

I release her hands, but I don't step back, knowing if she swings for me, it will be deserved.

But Nova has more fucking class in her fucking pinky than the rest of us in this room combined. She stands up, whimpering when her tender ass brushes against my hard cock. No matter what, there will never be a time when she doesn't make my dick hard.

She looks up at me as I take in the wet streaks across her cheeks. "Are you done, sir?" Her voice is steady and cold, her face blank of all emotion as she waits for me to answer.

I see it then—what she's so desperately trying to mask. It peeks out at me, enticing me to play with it.

Could it be that Nova has a monster of her own?

I grip her throat. "We will never be done."

She doesn't fight me, but her breathing picks up, fear and anger flash in her eyes, making my dick weep with need.

"Time for a different lesson."

I rip the sweatshirt she's wearing up over her head as I sense my men step back. They don't leave, though, knowing better than to go without being dismissed. Next is the T-shirt

she's wearing of mine. She's not wearing a bra, so her breasts are on display, her hard nipples begging to be sucked.

I lift her and sit her down on the edge of the table before sliding her shoes off, followed by the jeans that had gathered at her ankles. She grips the table so hard that her knuckles are white, but she doesn't look away from me or make a sound. Instead, she smirks, her eyes drifting to the pulse in my throat, and I get the feeling that I should hide all the knives.

"Conner, give me your tie," I order as I strip off my sweatshirt and T-shirt and toss them on the floor with Nova's jeans.

Conner walks out of the shadows and unknots his tie before handing it to me. Nova looks away as he approaches. Her cheeks are scarlet with embarrassment, but as her chest heaves, I don't think that's all she's feeling.

"Remember how I said you endangered my men? Well, this punishment is for them. Maybe next time you'll think before you act."

I take the tie and wrap it around her eyes, blinding her to the others. Her chest is rising and falling rapidly as I secure it in place. I press against her chest until she lies back on the table, and I keep my hand there so that she doesn't get back up.

"Gentlemen, take a seat."

Nova whimpers as I lift her legs and spread them wide. I drag the chair closer until I'm sitting with my face barely an inch from her pussy. Nova jolts at the screech of chairs being pulled out and broken glass crunching as the guys move to sit down.

She thinks she can't trust me because of what I did, but if that were really how she felt, she'd be fighting me right now, tooth and nail. No, her faith in me might have taken a hit, but she still trusts me to keep her safe. If she didn't, she never would have let me see J and S, as she called them, take the kids away.

“Such a pretty pussy.” I use my fingers to part the lips of her sex and see moisture gathering there. So, she’s not as indifferent to being watched as she pretends to be. Interesting.

I flick my tongue over her clit, making her gasp. Her grip on the table tightens as my tongue delves inside her, tasting the tartness of her arousal, which spurs on my own. I pull back and use my thumb to circle her clit while sliding two fingers inside her with my other hand.

Isaac looks at me in question, his hand on his belt. I nod, giving them the green light. The sound of their belts opening and zippers lowering has Nova tensing so hard it must be painful.

“Shhh... it’s okay, *bambola*. You know I won’t let them touch,” I soothe before dipping my head back between her legs. I suck on her clit as I continue to fuck her with my fingers, reveling in the noises she makes as her back arches and she cries out.

“Jesus Christ,” Conner hisses as I pull my mouth free and stand up, shoving my sweatpants down my legs and freeing my cock.

“What does she taste like?” Isaac asks, his voice hoarse as he strokes his cock.

I smirk at him, my eyes moving around all the guys whose gazes are fixed on Nova’s writhing body.

“Like heaven and sin, so much temptation, and it’s all mine for the taking,” I growl as I slide my cock through her wetness, bumping her clit as I wrap my hands around her thighs and yank her closer.

“You have no idea how tempting you are, do you, Nova? Fuck, you could make a priest burn his church to the ground if you promised him one taste of you.”

I ease myself into position and then thrust forward until I bottom out inside her, ripping a scream from her lips.

“Can you feel their eyes on you? They all want you, Nova. They’re stroking their cocks as you submit to me. Watching

your tits bounce with each thrust, my cock covered with your juices. They all wish they were me.”

“Vice,” she whimpers, her head thrashing from side to side as I pick up the pace, leaning over her so I can suck one of her nipples into my mouth. I bite down on it, making her groan, before dragging my tongue over her tattoo. My name on her skin makes me snarl possessively, and I fuck her so hard I wonder if the table will break.

Not that I give a shit. The world could burn down around us, and I’d still never be able to pull myself from her warm, wet pussy. She’s tight as a glove and feels like home every time I slip inside her.

“They’re going to come, Nova. I can see it on their faces. You can come when they do, not a second before.”

“Shit,” she curses, her head thrown back, her back arched in rapture.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck.” Miles is the first to lose control, coming all over his hands as I yank off the tie covering Nova’s eyes.

She blinks, and though she knows she’s surrounded by my men, her eyes lock on mine. I slide my hand under her neck and lift her head to take her mouth.

The sounds in the room tell me the others are coming, too, so I move my lips to her ear and bite down. “Come for me, wife. Come all over my cock. Show them who you belong to.”

I feel her detonate around me as I slam my mouth back down on hers, swallowing her screams as I fuck her like a savage and come deep inside her.

I keep fucking her until she goes limp in my arms, and only then do I ease myself free. Using the tie, I wipe between her legs, tossing it before tucking my cock back in my pants.

I scoop her up into my arms and look around at my men. “I’m taking her to bed. Everything else can wait until tomorrow.”

“No worries. We’ll take care of the mess. Go take care of your girl,” Isaac says.

I turn and carry Nova upstairs to our room and into the shower. I strip out of my pants and clean us both up and then dry us off. I walk her to the bed, where I pull back the covers and watch as she climbs in before I slide in beside her and tug her close.

She’s tense again, unsure, but my anger is spent now. I kiss her neck. “How do you feel?”

“I don’t know,” she chokes out.

I kiss her again, this time between her shoulder blades. “What you did tonight was dangerous, Nova. The consequences could have been deadly.”

I roll her over so she can see how serious I am. I slide my thumb across her jaw. “Do you know what would happen if I lost you? I’d kill everyone, and then I’d follow you.”

“Vice, no.” She cups my cheek.

I cover her hand with mine. “There is no me without you, Nova. You’re the only fucking thing that matters.”

A tear slips free at my words. “I’m sorry. I was mad and hurt and scared. I wasn’t thinking straight.”

“I don’t like hurting you, but it had to play out that way. It was all we had.”

“I understand you did what had to be done. It’s that you blindsided me. I spent a lifetime earning their respect, and you reduced it to ash in seconds. You should have told me.”

“I needed your reaction to be genuine.”

“Vice, I’ve been playing a part my whole damn life. I know how to act. You didn’t trust me, and it made me question everything.”

I think over her words and realize she’s right, though I won’t admit it. “We both fucked up, but it’s over now.”

She groans, her eyes shutting. “How am I supposed to face the guys tomorrow? God knows what they think of me.”

“They won’t say a damn thing. It might have been your punishment, but what we gave them was a gift. Trust me, seeing you come apart is a thing of beauty. They want you. They all do.”

“And you like that, don’t you? You like having a wife that others desire?”

“I do,” I tell her as I slide my fingers between her legs and stroke her pussy lightly, making her roll her eyes.

“You’re going to break me.”

“Then I’ll carry you.”

She huffs out a laugh. “You’re ridiculous.”

I just smile.

“I still can’t believe I let you do that.”

“You trust me. You might be mad, but you know I would cut off their fingers before I let anyone touch you.”

“I know.”

I roll onto my back, taking her with me. Her legs straddle my hips, and I use my hand to guide my cock into her pussy. She moans as she settles in, resting her head against my chest as I drag my fingers down her spine, making her shiver.

“You’ve spoiled me, you know. How will I learn to sleep without your dick inside me?”

“That’s not something you need to worry about. On the nights I can’t make it home, I’ll just take you with me.”



# Chapter 35

---

## *Nova*



It's been three days since Alessio called me, and I haven't heard from him since. To stop myself from going out of my mind with worry, I've spent most of my time holed up in my craft room.

When my stomach rumbles, I call it quits and head down to make a sandwich. Vice and his men have been busy since taking over the top spot, not to mention getting people in place to run the new territory. I'd been briefly introduced to Rocky and Gino. Both had been curious but polite, and neither had set off my red flag alarm. And given the men who have been in and out of my life, I think I'm somewhat of a red flag expert.

Speaking of red flags, I hear Vice talking on his phone as I walk past the bedroom. I dip into his office and put one of my latest creations on his desk before I head to the kitchen.

I find Turner pouring glasses of lemonade. I don't acknowledge him. I'm not purposely being bitchy, but the man has worn down my last nerve with his condescending attitude. It's only because I know he's been with Vice's family for years and Vice trusts him that I ignore him instead of playing Whack-A-Mole with his head.

I hear him tut as I open the fridge door and start pulling out things to make a sandwich. I place them on the counter before grabbing two slices of bread, feeling Turner's eyes on me.

"Is there a problem?"

“If you had eaten when the others did, you wouldn’t be messing up the kitchen again. I have other things to do today.”

“I’m more than capable of cleaning up after myself.”

He snorts. “After the pizza and glass fiasco, I doubt that.”

“Hey, I cleaned the cum off the table.” I didn’t, but he doesn’t know that.

He looks aghast. “You’re disgusting.”

“Blame Vice. He was the one drilling me into the wood.”

He grimaces before picking up the tray of glasses and storming out of the room. I shrug and throw together a chicken caprese sandwich and just manage to take a bite when Conner walks into the room with a dick in his hand.

He looks at me with a raised brow as I chew my sandwich. “Care to explain?”

I swallow and look at the three-inch pink crocheted penis in his hand. “His name is Goliath.”

“Not the explanation I was expecting,” he says as he steals my sandwich and takes a bite.

“Hey!”

“I’m a growing boy, Nova. You really should have made more.”

Giving him a look, I grab another couple slices of bread and start making another sandwich.

“So, the tiny dick...”

“Aww, don’t be sad. It’s not the size that matters, it’s how you use it.”

Isaac walks in as I’m about to take a bite of my sandwich and steals it from me, his eyes on Conner’s tiny dick.

“Mine’s green.” He frowns, taking a bite of my sandwich.

“You should get that checked,” Conner says as I sigh and grab more bread.

“You were telling me about my dick?” Conner reminds me, taking a bite of my stolen sandwich.

“What the fuck?” Vice curses before he sees the little dick in Conner’s hand and relaxes, holding up his five-inch one with a smug grin.

“Mine’s bigger.” He eyes my bread, making my eye twitch.

“You want one?”

“God, yes. I’m starving. Where’s Turner?”

“Last time I saw him, he was carrying a tray of drinks.”

“So, what’s the deal with the dicks?” Vice asks, sitting at the island as I make us both a sandwich.

“That’s what I want to know,” Conner says, exasperated.

I chuckle, taking pity on him. “When I was twelve, I killed a man.”

They all look at me and blink.

“The fuck?” Vice spits out.

“And he had a tiny dick?” Conner frowns, confused. I throw a piece of tomato at him and continue.

“I was with Gia at school, and he tried to drag her into his car. He dismissed me as a threat, but I’d been guarding Gia since I was little. It was instinctual. I took my knife and sliced through his jugular. He bled out on the steps of the school before the paramedics arrived.”

“That’s... Wow. That’s a lot, Nova,” Isaac says softly.

“Tell me you had innocent childhoods.” None of them say anything. “That’s what I thought. Anyway, it messed with my head for a bit. I suffered from PTSD, so I took up crocheting to help me focus.

“I got pretty good at it, and I still use it when I’m feeling anxious. A couple of years ago, I made dozens of little hats for the neonatal unit at the hospital. Then I saw this idea on TikTok and ran with it. Plus, dicks are great for hiding shit as a

teenager. Alessio didn't think to look inside them." My face drops at his name.

"He's why you're making these?" Vice asks as I hand him his sandwich.

"Yeah. I should have heard from him by now. He knows I'll be worried."

"I'll put out some feelers and see if anyone's heard anything."

"Thank you. I've called everyone I could think of, but nobody's seen him."

"Your contacts might not be loyal to you anymore," Conner says.

"They're solid. I made allegiances despite who I was working for, not because of it. Not everyone is happy with the hand they were dealt. There are more people looking for allies than just the top dogs."

Isaac looks at me, considering. "That's a good point. I think we should make use of it over here. One of Giovanni's main issues was that he kept himself distant from his people. It created a disconnect. They knew to fear him, but there was no loyalty to him because he gave nothing back. Wars are launched by egotistical maniacs, but they are fought by the people."

"I hoped it wouldn't come to this." I sigh.

"War was inevitable with a narcissistic tyrant like Aldo having power. And the truth is, our families have been spoiling for one for years." Conner shrugs.

"It's not the families, though, Conner. It's the people at the top wanting more and more. The rest of us just want to live our lives. I know you don't get it. I'm here now, and I stand with Vice, but I have friends in Fiore territory—people I care about who will get hurt. And for what?"

I shake my head. "There is no right side when it comes to war—just the people that survived and the ones who didn't."

He opens his mouth to say something when ringing cuts him off. It takes me a second to realize that it's my cell phone. I drop my sandwich and pull it out of my pocket.

Steven's name flashes up on my screen. I frown and step away from the guys, which, of course, makes them focus on me.

I turn away and answer anyway. "Steven?"

"Nova? Fuck."

I swallow, feeling the hairs on my neck stand on end. "Tell me," I whisper as I feel Vice draw close.

"It's Alessio. It's bad, Nova."

I reach out and grab a hold of Vice, feeling myself sway. "What happened?"

"I don't know the details. I just know it's been bad over here since Aldo took over. I heard about you. I'm glad, honey, but shit. He's on a rampage. Rumor is Aldo ordered a hit on Alessio for keeping your identity a secret."

"Where is he?"

"Sacred Heart. A couple of men loyal to him found him and took him in. They checked him in under the name Alex Weston. They're keeping watch for now, but if Aldo finds out he didn't die..."

"He'll come for him to finish him off."

"Yeah."

"Can he be moved?"

"I don't know. He's in the ICU."

"Okay, thank you. I'll—"

"You need to stay away, Nova. I know that's not what you want to hear, but he'll hope this will lure you here."

"But you just said he didn't know Alessio was alive. How could he lure me over if... Shit. He's planning a funeral, knowing I'll have to attend." I blow out a breath. "I'll figure it out. I'm not alone anymore."

“You were never alone.”

I feel tears well up, but I fight them down. “The girls? How are they?”

He blows out a shaky breath. “Not great. Aldo has needed somewhere to take out his frustrations, and Nina is missing.”

I swallow down a sob. Fuck me. All my fears are coming true.

“I’ve gotta go. I’ll let you know if I hear anything else. Stay safe,” Steven tells me.

The call ends, and I drop my head. Vice pulls me close, wrapping his arms around me. After a few moments, he puts his finger under my chin and tips my jaw up, his eyes on mine.

“Alessio is in the ICU at Sacred Heart. Aldo put a hit out on him, but a couple of guys loyal to him found him and are keeping guard.” I tell him.

“You know it’s a trap to get you there.”

“Yeah, I know. Steven even told me to stay away.”

“Who is Steven?”

“Head of security at the casino.”

“And the girls you were talking about?”

“Women from their stable. Some are there willingly, some as punishment, some because they were forced, as a way to pay off their debts, though nine times out of ten, the debts were never theirs but their husband’s or father’s.”

I shake my head and step back. “When a client got too rough, I was called in. They respond better to a woman in those circumstances, you know? And Aldo, well, he was the worst.”

“How bad are we talking?”

I turn and glare at Isaac. “Is there a sliding scale that I should be measuring rape on? And yeah, even whores can be raped,” I snap.

He holds his hands up.

“Easy, Nova, that’s not what he meant,” Vice murmurs.

“Shit, no. I meant, has he killed any of them?” Isaac crosses his arms.

“I can’t say for sure. I’ve used the network to save a bunch, but—” I bite my lip.

“What?”

“Aldo likes to beat them while he rapes them. Killing them frees them, so I don’t think so. He likes to make them suffer, carrying his marks and shame for the world to see, like he’s proud of it. Maybe he has a reason too, because no fucker ever stood up to him before you,” I tell Vice.

“Bullshit. I beat the shit out of him but let my duty to my family hold me back from killing him. You stood up to him regardless of the consequences and found a way to make him pay.” He smooths his thumb over my cheek as if remembering the bruises Aldo gave me.

“Aldo is a nut job, but Gia... There’s something broken inside her. The last time I was called, it was to check on Petra. She was sent to Aldo, but she was late coming back. I was expecting him to have done a number on her, but I didn’t expect to find her dead and Gia masturbating in a pool of her blood. Gia killed her because, as far as she was concerned, Aldo is hers.”

“Holy shit,” Conner curses.

“Alright, we’ll come back to that. But Nova, if what you’re saying about Gia is true, if we put Aldo down, we might have to put her down, too.”

“Good. My heart breaks for Alessio because he never got to be her dad, but he’s already made peace with it. She needs to die.”

“You have proof of what she did?” Isaac asks.

“Yeah. I got access to the camera feed and downloaded it before it could be deleted. I also know a doctor who took several samples and had them tested, keeping the results on file in case we needed them.”

“First things first, I want to see if we can get Alessio transferred to another hospital.”

“Here?”

Vice shakes his head. “If he’s stable enough, I want him airlifted out of the state.”

“I know a doctor who works in a hospital in Seattle. If I explain that Alessio is in hiding, he’ll cover for us. He owes me a favor,” Isaac offers.

“Really?”

“No harm in asking, but we have to find out if he can be moved first. Can you get hold of the men loyal to him and see what you can find out?”

“Yeah, I’ll do it now.”

I look up at Vice. He thumbs away a stray tear. “We’ll get him out.”

“I love you.”

He jolts at my words, shock rendering him mute for a moment before his hands are in my hair, and he’s kissing me like I’m the answer to all his prayers when, in reality, he’s the answer to mine.

“Make your calls, then come find me,” he says against my lips.

I nod and kiss him one more time before pulling away. My phone is in my hand, and I’m dialing before I even leave the room.

Aldo will wish he’d never left the hole he crawled out of.



## Chapter 36

---

### *Vice*



**T**wo days later, I stand with Nova beside me, her hand wrapped tightly in mine, as my father is buried in the family plot. Have to keep up appearances, after all.

I look down at my wife, glad she has some color back in her cheeks. With Alessio settled in Seattle, she's finally been able to take a breath. He's not out of the woods yet. Internal bleeding and a multitude of broken bones mean there will be a long road to recovery, but he's stable. And for now, it's enough.

The other heads of the families all turned out, including Aldo and Gia. I ignore them as the coffin is lowered into the ground, sending my father back to hell. Once the priest is done, I turn and lead Nova away, stopping only to make small talk with the other dons.

"Sorry for your loss, though I have to say you've done a remarkable job for only just stepping up," Mattia comments. "Your father would be so proud."

I hold back a snort. My father will be turning in his grave. It's enough to put a smile on my face. Mattia frowns.

"Thank you for coming." I shake his hand before continuing on. Nova chuckles quietly just as Aldo and Gia step into our path.

"A great man was buried today. My condolences." Aldo grins, looking at me.

“When will Vigo’s funeral be?” Nova asks while Gia glares at her.

“That bastard didn’t deserve a funeral. Not after what he did. Not that there was anything left to bury.” Gia giggles.

“What’s done is done. It’s time to move on,” Aldo states.

He doesn’t notice Leone and Gian behind him, who look at him with sheer disgust. We have traditions. That’s the only reason I’m here today, and Aldo is making a mockery of them again.

“Sorry, Nova. Did you not get to say goodbye to your daddy?” Gia mocks.

“He was never my father, Gia. What you do with him is up to you.”

“Ah yes, you were raised by another, weren’t you? Tell me, how is dear old Alessio? Have you heard from him lately?” Aldo taunts.

I squeeze her hand in warning so that she doesn’t give too much away.

“Alessio is a busy man. He’s also my dad, not my husband. He doesn’t need to check in every five minutes.”

Aldo looks positively gleeful. “Well, I’m sure you’ll hear from him soon. We should go. We have a meeting with our lawyers. It seems Vigo was sick at the end with cancer. He might not have been of sound mind when he made the will after all.”

“I’ve read it. It was updated two weeks after the massacre that took Nova’s mother and brother, leaving everything to Nova. It was updated yet again two years ago to include Gia and six months ago to include the other dons. His illness had nothing to do with his will. Get over it, Aldo. The money was never yours.”

He steps closer to me, which is when Gian interrupts. “Do you really think this is the time and place? Show some goddamn respect.”

I nod to Gian and lead Nova away from them. Her grip on my hand is so tight I know if I don't get her out of here, she'll pull her gun and shoot the motherfucker. As much as I'd love that, everything right now is a game of chess, and we're all just trying to find the best space on the board before our defensive moves become aggressive.

We head toward the limo, where Miles is waiting for us, and as we pass Aldo's car, I do a double take because sitting in the back window is a large, crocheted purple dick.

I laugh loudly, drawing onlookers who are probably wondering why I'm laughing in a cemetery, but that shit is just too funny.

"How the fuck did you pull that off?"

"I know a guy." She winks at me as Miles pulls the door open for us, and I watch her ass as she climbs in. I slide in beside Nova, and Miles closes the door before getting behind the wheel and pulling away.

"I went to that bakery downtown this morning with Conner, and I heard a couple of women talking about the restaurant you're building at the docks. They seemed really excited about it. Not just because it will be awesome, but because it will mean more jobs."

"Yeah, that's what I've been hearing too. I've hired a local company to get the work done both there and at the other sites that need it, but I'm looking at other businesses that we could set up."

"Well, while you figure it out, why don't you invest in what's already there?"

I look at her as she turns a little in her seat.

"There are plenty of places that need a cash injection—bars, cafés, restaurants. You don't have to go through the hassle of starting from scratch. You pay for the updates and shit, and then, as payment, you take twenty percent of the profits. If you do that across ten or twenty businesses, you'll make a nice profit, and so will they."

Miles looks at me in the rearview mirror and grins. “Smart and sexy. I like it.”

“Keep your eyes on the road, motherfucker,” I warn him, but there is no real heat to it.

“It’s a good idea, Nova. I’ll have Isaac and Nixon run the numbers. As for new business, what would you suggest, just out of curiosity?”

“Honestly?”

“No, lie to me.”

She pokes me. “Smart ass. Okay, but this is just an idea, okay? That new territory you got. Have you ever been there?”

“I’ve passed through. Can’t say I paid that much attention.”

“Well, right near the freeway just before the border of Aldo’s territory is a huge outlet mall, or there was going to be. Basically, from what I could dig up, a large mall was built with an outdoor area that has another dozen buildings and a couple parking lots. The company went bankrupt before the work was complete, and it’s just been sitting there empty. It’s been up for sale for over a year, but nobody would buy it because of its location.”

“You think we should buy a shopping center?”

“Yes, but only because I think it would make an even better resort.”

“Resort?” Miles asks from the front.

“Aldo has the casino and hotel. And believe me, it brings in a fortune. I think we could do better. I’m thinking gambling, but exclusive to high rollers. Top-end restaurants and boutiques, a spa, gym, pools, movie theater, and an exclusive club for members only. The club itself can be sectioned up to fit the needs of the clientele. Hell, you could have a sex club if you wanted.”

I’ll admit I’m a little stunned. “I’m pretty sure you could take over the world if you wanted to.”

“Meh, maybe later. I feel like world domination would require me to give up naps, and that’s just not something I’m ready to commit to.”

Miles laughs as I kiss the sass out of her.

“I have a meeting with a contractor later, so I need you to run this by Isaac and get his input.”

“It’s just an idea.”

“It’s a good fucking idea. I need to know figures.”

She smirks at me. “In case you didn’t know, I’m stinking fucking rich.”

“Hmm... I like the idea of being a kept man.”

“Good, because I’m going to, you know.”

“Going to what?”

“Keep you.” She grins, pressing her mouth against mine again.

I slide my hands under her dress and unbuckle her thigh holster before tossing it with the gun on the seat next to us. She moves and straddles my lap, wrapping her arms around my neck. Reaching into her bra, I pull out her switchblade and drag it up her thigh until I get to the lace of her thong. I cut through it and repeat the move on the other side before tucking the knife into my suit jacket pocket.

I yank the scrap of lace away and hold it out to her. “Tie it around my wrist.”

She flushes. “Why do you do that?”

I grin but don’t answer.

She sighs and knots the fabric around my wrist. I bring it to my nose and breathe deeply.

“I’m going to stop wearing underwear. You just keep tearing them or stealing them.”

“I’ll buy you more. Now take my cock out and slide it inside you. I want you to ride me all the way home.”

I lean my head back as she lowers my zipper and slips her hand inside the fabric of my pants and pulls my cock free. She strokes it up and down before positioning herself above it. She eases herself down, and she's so wet that I bottom out in seconds. Grabbing my shoulders, she lifts herself back up and sets a slow pace as she fucks me like she has all the time in the world.

She doesn't give a thought to Miles, who is trying to focus on the road and not what's happening behind him. She doesn't worry about appearances or that we've just buried my father. All she cares about is me and her. Here and now. If I could capture this moment, I would because this is the first time she's let go and just let herself be the woman she was always destined to be. *Mine*.

The little gold chain around her neck slips out of her dress as she bounces up and down on my cock. I grip it in my fist and tug it lightly, pulling her mouth to mine. She tastes like salvation, something I don't deserve, but I'll take it anyway. I'll take everything she wants to give me and more.

"That's it, *bambola*, just like that. Fuck me like you can't live without my cock inside you."

She bites my lip as my hands slide under her dress to grab her ass. My fingers dig in as I help her move, both of us chasing the high before she tears her mouth from mine, throws her head back, and screams. She squeezes me tightly, dragging me over the edge with her, her rapture making it impossible for me to pull my eyes away.

If I die now, I'll be a happy man.

She lifts her head, her eyes glassy and her cheeks flushed. "Silly man. We're going to live forever."

I shake my head, realizing I'd said it out loud.

"As entertaining as that was, I can see a cop up ahead, and I'd rather not get pulled over while your dick is inside your wife," Miles drawls, making Nova laugh and climb off me, leaving a wet patch on my pants.

She bites her lip, merriment on her face.

“Laugh it up. I don’t give a fuck. I’d wear you all over me if I could.”

“Yeah, that’s not happening.” She grimaces.

“Traffic is slowing. Looks like the cop is pulling people over,” Miles says.

I look up and sigh. I don’t have time for this shit today.

“You got any napkins up there, Miles?” Nova asks.

He shakes his head with a laugh. “Had her cleaned out yesterday. Sorry, Nova. You’re gonna have to drip-dry.”

“That’s gross. Vice, Miles is being mean to me.”

“Want me to shoot him?”

She contemplates it for a moment before she sighs. “No, he’s kind of grown on me. Sort of like a fungus.”

“Hey!” Miles protests.

I turn to Nova. “Put your gun back on so the cop doesn’t have a meltdown.”

“My thighs are still damp, and I’m not a fan of chaffing.” Instead, she grabs the clutch she left on the floor and tosses it inside. “Looks like the bag came in handy after all,” she smiles.

“You’re the only woman I know who doesn’t carry a bag around with them. Would you have even brought it with you if Isaac hadn’t tossed it to you as we were leaving?”

“Probably not. Have you ever seen a bodyguard with a purse?”

I don’t point out that most bodyguards are men or that she isn’t a bodyguard anymore.

“Isaac said women at funerals carried purses to put their tissues in or something just as stupid. If I’m going to be standing in a circle of some of the world’s deadliest men, I’m going to be thinking about my knife and gun, not some tissues. Just don’t tell Isaac I accidentally left my bag in the limo, okay?” She makes a face, making Miles laugh.

Our car is next, so Miles slows down as the cop approaches. He's not one I recognize, but after being gone for as long as I have, that's hardly surprising.

"License and registration, please."

Miles leans toward the glove box and pulls out his papers.

"I should let you know that myself and Mrs. Moretti are armed. Both of us have permits to carry," Miles informs him, making the police officer instantly go on alert. He looks through the window at me and Nova, his eyes lingering on Nova long enough to make me scowl.

"What seems to be the problem, officer?" Nova asks him politely.

"A fugitive is at large. A woman robbed a convenience store and shot the clerk."

"Oh no, that's horrible."

"It is. Would you step out of the vehicle, please, ma'am?"

"Is there a reason you need my wife to get out?"

"Standard procedure, sir. If you'll remain seated."

Nova climbs over me, popping the door open. With her hair down, she uses it to obscure the police officer's view and whispers in my ear. "Trust me."

"Sorry, officer, that door sticks." She leaves the door open and walks around to the front of the vehicle.

"Your description matches that of our suspect. I'm going to need to search you. The driver said you were armed?"

"My gun is in my bag in the car. And with all due respect, if a shooting happened this morning, it couldn't have been me since I was at a funeral with about a thousand witnesses," she says overly loudly, making sure I can hear.

Other vehicles are slowing down now, and passersby are stopping to gawk at what's going on. My first instinct is to get out and snap this asshole's neck, consequences be damned. But she's looking right at me through the window, willing me to let her handle it.



I slip her knife from my pocket and grip it tightly, giving her a minute, but that's all she's getting.

"Put your hands on the hood of the car, ma'am, and spread your legs."

I turn to climb out, but Miles stops me. "Watch. She has that look in her eye. The one she gets when she's about to fuck someone up."

The cop moves behind her, patting her down. She backs into him for a second before she swings around and grabs his arm, flipping him onto his back.

I jump out of the limo, and so does Miles, as another police car pulls up. Two police officers jump out with their guns pointed at Nova.

"Get down on the ground."

"This man assaulted me. We have dashboard footage to prove it."

I look at Miles with a question, but he just shrugs.

"I filmed it too. This pig made her bend over the car and spread her legs," a man standing beside one of the stopped cars says.

"You assaulted a police officer."

"I defended myself against a predator. I'm unarmed and being accused of shooting someone when I was at a funeral all morning. This man wanted to search me regardless. I agreed since I had nothing to hide, but that search became assault the second he threatened me."

"Ma'am—" the female officer starts, but Nova continues.

"He said, 'Aldo says hello.'"

The two police officers look at each other uncomfortably. Everyone knows who Aldo is, after all.

I grip the knife so hard that my hand cramps.

The male officer steps forward. "That's not assault and doesn't warrant—"

She cuts him off. “Well, his wet fingers that are coated in my husband’s cum suggest otherwise. Have you met my husband, Mr. Moretti?”

Both cops whirl around to look at me, but my eyes are on the soon-to-be-dead man on the ground, yelling, “She’s lying!”

Nova looks at the female officer watching her and points at the guy’s fingers, which are indeed wet.

I storm around the car, but Nova stops me, holding me back with the guns pointed at us.

“Fucking pigs!” someone else yells, and I notice a crowd has formed.

“I suggest you get him out of here. And yes, I’ll be pressing charges.”

The cop on the ground starts cursing her out. Nova is struggling to hold me back, and the cops, seeing the crowd is about ready to become a mob, quickly drag their fellow officer to his feet before placing him in the back of their squad car.

“Can we go? You know where to find us, right?” Nova wraps her arms around me.

The woman looks around at all the people with their cell phones out before nodding.

I keep my breathing even and count in my head so I don’t blow something up. The only thing that’s stopping me is that Nova is calm. *Too calm*, and I know my girl. If he had done what she said, she would have ripped off his dick and fed it to him.

She turns to look at the crowd. “Thank you. That could have turned out far worse. We appreciate you having our backs.” She smiles sweetly at them. I feel something coming from them I’ve never felt before, almost like a surge of protectiveness.

“It’s no problem, Mrs. Moretti, Mr. Moretti, sir.” The guy who shouted earlier looks at me with a polite nod. “We look after our own here.”

I reach over and shake his hand, knowing it’s important.

I wait until we are both inside the limo before I pin her to the seat and lean over her.

“I’m okay. He didn’t touch me,” she says fast before I explode.

“What happened?” I snarl as Miles pulls away and drives us home.

“I recognized him. Did you see his car anywhere?”

“What the fuck does his car have to do with anything?”

“I didn’t see one,” Miles jumps in.

“And he had no partner there either. A traffic stop in the middle of our territory with no partner and no backup when he was supposedly looking for an armed assailant?”

“Where did you recognize him from?” I grit out, my anger fading somewhat.

“I saw him at the casino. One of the poker tables that has a fifty-k buy-in. If he were a high roller, that would make sense, but cops don’t make that kind of dough. He was also talking to Aldo.”

“You think he’s a cop on Aldo’s payroll?”

“No. I don’t think he’s a cop at all. He really did say, ‘Aldo says hello,’ though.”

“If he didn’t assault you, then how—”

She places her finger over my lips. “You just fucked me. Your cum was literally running down my legs. When I flipped him, I purposely dragged his hand across my thigh. I knew they’d have to take him away if they suspected sexual assault, especially with all those people filming.”

“If you recognized him, you should have just said so in the car. We could have ignored the motherfucker, or I could have just shot him.”

“I might have known he was fake, but the onlookers didn’t. That’s what he was counting on. Besides, I wanted to see what he had to say.”

“You take too many fucking risks, Nova.”

“Lucky for you, or we never would have met.”

I grab her and pull her up.

“So, what was his end game? I would have said it was so he could take you, and then you’d conveniently disappear. But with no car...” Miles questions.

“You’re forgetting Aldo is in our territory right now. He just needed to be close by to pick me up.”

I close my eyes and picture locking Nova up in our room.

“I was safe, Vice. You were both right there, and I know how to take care of myself. I’ve been doing it for a long time. But now we have a story to pass through our territory. People will rally in support of us, and the guy posing as a cop will be fucked when he gets to the station and they realize he isn’t one of them. Especially if they believe he’s Aldo’s. They might even question Aldo in his fancy office at his casino. And we all know how much he’ll love that.”

“You know, you’re pretty fucking devious when you want to be,” Miles huffs.

He’s not wrong. I look at Nova, smiling at me sweetly, a picture of innocence. But it’s all an act.

She might not have let this life harden her, turning cruel and spiteful like so many before her, but that doesn’t mean she’s not vengeful as hell.

And I’d be lying if I said that didn’t make me hard as fuck.

## Chapter 37

---

### *Nova*



I hang up with Alessio and turn to look at Vice, who is fastening one of his cufflinks. We're going to a black-tie event tonight with possible investors for the resort now that it's been given the go-ahead. Of course, we don't need investors, but Vice doesn't want me to fund the whole thing like I wanted.

"How is he?"

"He's okay. Bored, snappy, and most likely making the nurses' lives hell. He got the papers we forwarded from the lawyer today. Vigo left him a million dollars and an apology."

"That's fucked up, *bambola*."

"I know. How do you apologize for taking someone's kid? And then to give him all that money. Alessio said it felt like a payment for Gia. He's pissed, to say the least. Oh, and all the money from my inheritance has been transferred. I just need to figure out what I want to do with it. I was thinking about donating some of it and investing the rest."

"Talk to Isaac. He's pretty good with that stuff. He takes care of all our money."

"Okay, I will. Now, give me ten minutes, and I'll be ready. I just need to pull on my dress and add the finishing touches to my makeup."

"Oh, and before I forget, Alessio told me an interesting bit of information he heard from one of his friends."

“Oh, what’s that?”

“The storage facility we rescued the girls from? It blew up. Hundreds of thousands of dollars’ worth of damage.”

“Really? Imagine that.” His lips twitch.

“And Aldo’s building was condemned the same damn day.”

“What a coincidence.”

“Coincidence, my ass.” I snort as I turn and head upstairs. I pause at the top, turning to look down at him. He looks like a fucking god in his dark suit and black shirt, his tattooed neck and hands elevating him from sexy to *holy fucking hell* hot.

“Hey, Vice.”

He looks up at me, his eyes traveling up my legs, which my short robe doesn’t cover.

“I love you, you know.”

He licks his lip, and that smirk on his face makes me want to both punch it and sit on it.

“I know.”

I roll my eyes at the ass and hurry into the bedroom.

My dress is already laid out on the bed, so I pick it up and shimmy into it. I’ve kept it simple. It’s black with long sleeves and hugs my body, flaring at the knee and has a round neckline that shows a hint of cleavage. I arrange my necklace so the Archangel Michael sits just between my breasts. I’ll have to take a bag tonight because I can barely squeeze my body into the dress, let alone a gun.

I slip my knife into my bra, though, feeling naked without it. Black high heels complete the outfit, giving me a few extra inches. I swap out my watch for the diamond tennis bracelet that matches the earrings Vice gifted me and stand back so I can see my full reflection in the mirror. With my hair loose and wavy and my makeup smoky, I look like I’ve made an effort but not gone overboard.

I tuck my hair behind my ear and curse when I notice one of my earrings is missing. I scan the floor for it but don't see it. I put them in earlier, so it's possible I lost it downstairs. Or maybe when I was putting the laundry away. Dammit.

I walk over to the dresser and shift through my underwear drawer but come up empty-handed. I check Vice's next, but I don't find my earring. I do find a small jewelry box, though. I pull it out and look at the door.

If this is another gift, I'm going to kill him. The tennis bracelet and earrings are more than enough. Hell, the fact that I've already lost one of the earrings is precisely why I don't usually wear them.

Unable to resist taking a peek, I open the lid, and all the air rushes out of my lungs. I stand there in shock, trying to make sense of what I'm seeing and explain why it would be here. I lift it from the box, hold it up to the chain around my neck, and whimper when both halves fit together perfectly.

I yank it away as if it burned me.

"I thought you were going to be ten minutes. Typical woman... What's wrong?" Vice looks at my face. His eyes drop to the necklace in my hands—the other half of the one around my neck.

"Why do you have this?" I whisper, taking a step back from him.

He moves to the door and locks it before stalking toward me. I back up until I hit the wall.

He cages me in, his arms on either side of me. "It was a lifetime ago. It doesn't matter anymore."

I shove at him. "It matters to me. Tell me right now how the fuck you have this."

"I won't let you leave me," he warns, and I know that whatever he says will destroy me.

He peels my hand open and pulls the chain I found in his drawer free. He stares at the half-pendant of the Archangel Michael before flipping it over. On the back is a stylized *N*.

“My mother was murdered on her thirty-sixth birthday. I was fifteen years old. She was picking my little sister up from school when they were run off the road.”

I blink. I knew his mother had died in a car accident, but I didn't know he had a sister.

“What people don't know is that we found evidence that neither my mom nor sister died in the wreck, even though they were found in the car in a ravine. Both had been tortured and raped. My sister was six years old,” he hisses.

Tears run down my face at the torment in his voice.

He rubs his thumb over the *N*. “My sister's name was Natalia.” He reaches for the chain around my neck, turning the half-coin over to show the letter *V* on the back. “*V* isn't for your Nanny Viola. It's for Vice. Natalia picked them out for us the Christmas before she was killed. She always wore the *V* for me. I always wore the *N* for her.”

I rear back, banging my head on the wall.

“I don't understand. How did I end up with it?”

He leans his forehead against mine, his hands gripping my hips. “We found out the truth about what happened to my mother and Natalia a few years after their deaths, purely by accident.”

He blows out a harsh breath. “Giovanni wasn't Natalia's father. Vigo was. He raped my mom and threatened to kill me and Dano if she said anything. He didn't know he got her pregnant. It was a pure coincidence that he was walking in the park with you in your stroller when he passed my mother and Natalia. She wrote about it in her diary. The horror on his face when he saw how much Natalia looked like you. Not because he felt guilty, but because if he could see it, so would others.

“He sent a team of men to take them out, and they did, but not before having their fun first.”

I sob, gripping his jacket, feeling my heart break. I'm sick to my stomach for the loss of a woman and a little girl that I'll never meet, all so my so-called father could hide his sins.



“I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry.”

“He never laid his hand on a child after that day, far as I know. And he didn’t let his men either. He executed the men he sent after them. I think the guilt twisted him up inside, but it was too late.”

He takes a step back, his face tight. “You know the world we live in better than most.”

I shake my head, not wanting to hear anymore.

“An eye for an eye, *bambola*.”

“No, Vice, please don’t.”

He carries on as if he didn’t hear me. “I was tasked with taking care of your mother. It was simple. She was so busy fucking her lover she didn’t know I was there. She must have liked it rough because she was covered in bruises. He had her tied to the bed. I watched as he fucked her like a whore and came all over her before I opened fire.

“She begged me to let her go, but all I could see was my mother begging for her life, for Natalia’s. I blew her brains out and walked away.”

I punch him in the face, the move shocking us both. I run for the door, but he catches me and pins my arms to my side as I fight and scream at him.

He shakes me hard, my head whipping back. “You wanted the truth. Now you’re gonna listen.”

He yanks me to the bed and pins me face down, with his knee in my back, as he rummages in the bedside drawer. He pulls out a set of handcuffs and snaps one around my wrist before he flips me over. He shoves my free arm to the top of the bed, where he threads the cuffs through the bars and snaps the last bracelet around my wrist. He pulls back once he knows I can’t get free.

I kick out at him, but he grabs my legs and sits on them. “I didn’t kill your brother. That was my father. Dano was sent after you. He was just a kid himself. He shot your nanny, and

it drew attention, so he ran when he couldn't find you. He called me panicking. I told him I would take care of it.

“I got there before Vigo did. I found you trying to protect another little girl. I could smell your fear, but you just stared at me with so much defiance. That never changed.” He slides his finger down my cheek, but I turn my head away.

“You told me you weren't afraid of me all while your legs shook.”

He bows his head as I fight back the urge to vomit.

“You had Natalia's eyes. I couldn't kill you. I don't know what made me do it, but I slipped Natalia's chain over your head and told you to hide. I watched from the shadows as you dragged your friend to the jungle gym. I walked away just as Vigo pulled up. Things were hot with the Irish. We used them as cover, and nobody ever suspected a thing.”

“What happened to no women, no children?” I hiss.

“My rage was out of control. You were the first person to break through. After that, I went off the rails and killed everyone who had a hand in my mother's death. And once they were gone, I took out anyone stupid enough to even look at me wrong. I killed four men the night I was arrested. The only reason I wasn't put away for life was because they jumped me first and my lawyers pleaded self-defense.”

“You knew who I was when I turned up at the prison.” I think back to the look on his face when he saw my chain.

He nods, his eyes moving over my face.

“You got a second chance to finish getting your revenge. I bet you told Vigo all about how you defiled his little—” I suck in a breath and feel more tears slip free. “You played him the video.”

He nods again before getting up and yanking at his hair. “I smothered him to death with the sheets you bled on.”

I turn and puke all over the side of the bed.

He steps toward me, but I shriek at him to stay back. “Well done. You got what you wanted. Vigo is dead. My money is in

my account, just waiting for you to spend it. And me, I'm in pieces. I hope it was worth it."

"It was never about the money. And yeah, maybe to start with, I wanted to fuck with Vigo's head, but you changed everything. I turned you away, remember? But when you came back, I knew I couldn't let you go again. I fucking love you."

"Fuck you. This isn't love. I don't know what the fuck this is. You let me out of here right fucking now, and I'll keep my mouth shut. I'll go, and you'll never see me again."

He grips my hair and yanks my head back, his eyes wild. "You are not leaving me. I won't let you. You can't."

"Watch me. You killed my mother and changed my whole life."

"I won't let you go."

"Then I'll go from wife to prisoner because I won't stay willingly."

"So be it. We'll talk more when you've calmed down. I'll tell them you're sick."

"Do whatever you want. You always do."

He unlocks the door and grabs the handle. "I'm not the same man I once was."

I stare him in the eye with as much hatred as I can muster. "I should have married Aldo instead."

He snarls and yanks the door open before slamming it behind him. Without him here to see me, I give in to the despair and dissolve into sobs that batter my ribs and bruise my heart.

I cry so hard I can't catch my breath. I cry for my brother and my mom, for the sister I never knew. But mostly, I cry because this is the end of us. I love Vice and hate that I do because there is no coming back from this for us. There is no version of us that can survive the aftermath.

My head throbs by the time I have my crying under control.

When the door opens, I jump, surprised to see Turner in the doorway. His mouth goes wide when he sees me.

“Please, you have to get me out of here.”

“Hold on.”

I swallow as he disappears, coming back with a key for the cuffs. Once I’m free, I hurry to the bathroom and throw up again. I brush my teeth and wash the makeup and tears from my face.

When I return to the bedroom, Turner is still there, wringing his hands. “Vice took Isaac and Conner with him. Miles is checking a glitch with the cameras near the rear gate. If you want to leave undetected, it needs to be soon.”

I nod, kicking off the stupid heels and slipping on jeans. I yank the dress over my head, not caring that Turner is watching me. I pull on a sweatshirt and shove my feet into a pair of sneakers.

“I’m ready. My gun, keys, and phone are with my bag downstairs.”

“Quick, let’s go.”

“Thank you for helping me, Turner,” I tell him softly as I follow him down, knowing I’m not his favorite person.

There is a little pink dick on the end of the banister. I pick it up and shove it in my pocket as it sinks in. I’m not just leaving Vice, but the guys too—men who have become like family to me.

I walk into the dining room and stop when Turner moves aside, and I see Aldo standing there with a gun pointed at me.

“About fucking time,” he snaps at Turner.

I turn to look at Turner, but he flushes and looks away.

“What did you do?” I whisper.

“What I had to.”

“You traitor. Vice will kill you.”

“You were arguing. He’ll think you left. He won’t know I was involved. I’m doing this for him. He deserves so much better than you.”

“What, like you?” I spit.

“Touching as this is, we need to go,” Aldo orders.

“I’m not going anywhere with you.”

“Oh, you are, even if I have to shoot you in both knees and carry you out myself.”

He aims the gun at my kneecap, and I know he’s sick enough to do it.

“Fine.”

“Check her pockets,” he tells Turner.

“I just watched her get dressed. She has nothing on her. Her gun and phone are on the table over there with her bag.”

I eye my gun and consider running for it, but Aldo must know what I’m thinking because he cocks his gun.

“Move.”

I walk forward as he keeps himself between the table and me. Once I’m within reach, I decide to risk it. It might be the only chance I get. I ready myself to sweep his legs out from under him when something hits me on the back of the head, and everything goes dark.

\* \* \*

When I come to, I’m lying on the ground with a headache from hell and the taste of blood in my mouth. I bite back a groan, squinting my eyes open to see where I am.

It looks like some kind of warehouse, but it’s not one I’ve been to before. There are small windows lining the top of the space, but they’re way too high for anyone to see in or out of. The floor is cold concrete and empty of everything. It’s too clean, like someone has swept and mopped it recently. The faint smell of bleach confirms my suspicions. But why would they bleach the floor? Unless...

I turn my head, and the room swims out of focus for a second, the pain stealing my vision. I try to breathe through it, but I can feel the nausea swirling inside me. I spot what I was looking for—a drain in the center of the room. This isn't a warehouse. It's a kill room.

My hands are tied in front of me, making it tricky to move. I know I have to get out of here, except when I try to stand up, everything goes black, and I find myself back on the hard, cold ground before passing out again.

When I next come to, I groan. The headache is worse than before. I probably have a concussion. I open my eyes when I feel the button on my jeans open and the material pulled down my legs.

I'm disoriented. Each move threatens to make me throw up again. It isn't until I feel a body over mine that my brain registers what's happening. I'm naked, and someone is between my legs. No, not naked. My sweatshirt and bra are still on.

"I told you you'd be mine." Aldo's voice snaps everything into focus as I look up to see him wrestling with his belt.

I try to wiggle free, but I'm still weak from the blow to the head. Panic threatens to paralyze me until I remember my knife. It's hard to get with my hands tied together, but while Aldo's getting his dick out, he's distracted. This is the only chance I'll get.

I pull it out and flip it open as he hovers over me, his bare cock pressing against my pussy.

"You thought you could deny me? I'm the fucking king," he snarls, ready to thrust inside me, but I move first.

I plunge the knife into his throat and twist. "You might be king, but I'm the motherfucking queen. Checkmate, bitch."

I pull the knife out and swipe across his throat. Blood sprays us both, and he rolls off me, gasping and grabbing at his throat as I get to my knees.

This time, I manage to get up without falling. I stagger toward the door, stopping when I hear the click of a gun. I

close my eyes and feel myself give up.

Seems the universe has it out for me today.

I turn slowly, not surprised to find Gia pointing a gun at me. “Gia.”

“You bitch. You just couldn’t stand to see me happy, could you? You took him from me,” she screeches, making pain shoot through my already throbbing head.

“He kidnapped me and tried to rape me.”

“You didn’t have to kill him,” she hisses.

“I really did. Gia, what are you doing? You’re free to go anywhere and start over.”

“That’s your problem. You always thought you were too good for this life. Not me. I love it, and you ruined it.”

I grip the bloody knife tightly, waiting for her to come closer. We both jump at the sound of the door opening.

“No, you won’t get away, not this time,” Gia screams, and before I can do anything, she aims the gun at my head and shoots.

## Chapter 38

---

### *Vice*



I tap my foot as I wait for the speeches to start and resist the urge to check the cameras, knowing I'll turn around and go home. People approach me and try to make small talk, but I shut them down. I don't want to be here, not without Nova. I feel like I'm crawling out of my skin.

Fuck it.

I stand up and walk out. Conner and Isaac, who had been watching from the side of the room, follow me.

"What's wrong?" Conner asks.

"I need to get back to Nova."

"Why, what's happened?"

"We argued. I left her cuffed to the bed."

"Are you nuts? She'll kill you."

I get in the car and wait for them to climb in with Conner in the driver's seat. "Come on, hurry the fuck up."

Conner peels out of the lot, and Isaac leans over to look at me. "She'll get over it, Vice, whatever it is you did. She'll forgive you. She always does."

I look out the window and swallow around the lump in my throat. Not this time, she won't. She'll never get past this. Every time she looks at me, she'll see her dead mother.



I pull the chain out of my pocket. I should have gotten rid of it, but I just couldn't bring myself to do it.

The *N* catches in the light, and I get this horrible feeling in the pit of my stomach. I slip the chain over my head and tuck it in my shirt. Yanking my tie off, I toss it on the seat next to me before I give in to temptation and check my phone. I log into the camera feed only to sit up when I find the bedroom empty.

I check the rest of the cameras and can't find her anywhere. Flipping through the apps, I hit the tracking one on her watch, but it's telling me she's at home.

"Something's wrong. I can't find Nova."

"Call her," Isaac says.

I do, even though I know she won't answer my call. I let it keep ringing until a male voice answers. "Nova's phone."

"Miles? Where the fuck is Nova?"

"What do you mean, where's Nova? I thought she was with you."

"Check the house, Miles. Find her."

I stay on the line as he searches for her. Conner and Isaac are silent as we speed home. The car barely stops before I'm out and running up to the house.

Miles is waiting for me with a shake of his head. "She's gone."

I grab her cell phone from his hand and scroll through it, seeing she has seven missed calls from Steven, the guy she said was head of security.

I hit dial and wait for him to answer.

"Nova, thank fuck. Are you okay?"

"Not Nova." I grit out. "Where the fuck is my wife?"

"Shit, fuck. I don't know, man. I'm following a lead, but I hoped I was overreacting. I heard some assholes talking about

how the boss man grabbed Nova. He was going to make her pay.”

“Fuck!” I roar, gripping my hair. “Where would he take her? Think.”

“I don’t know, but I’m following Gia. She just flew out of here like a bat out of hell. If anyone knows, it’s that bitch.”

“Where are you now?”

“Corner of Bennet and Melbourne. If you’ve got Nova’s cell, she has an app on it to track Gia for all the times she would sneak off. Fuck, I think she spotted me. I’ll call you back if I find anything.”

He hangs up as I swipe through the phone and find the Life360 app. I open it, and sure enough, there she is.

“This is my fault. I was trying to find the fucking glitch in the system. I should have checked on her,” Miles curses.

“You thought she was with us,” Conner reassures him.

“Wait, what glitch?” Isaac questions.

“Turner reported that the camera in the kitchen that shows the back gate kept distorting the image. I’ve been trying to figure out the problem for the last hour.”

I turn to Conner. “Find Turner.”

I stand there and look over at Nova’s bag on the table. Her gun is right beside it. Fuck, she’s out there somewhere, completely unarmed.

I turn at the sound of Conner’s voice. “Because Vice said so, that’s why.” He presents Turner to me, who looks confused.

“Sir?”

“Where’s my wife, Turner?”

“I don’t know, sir. I thought she was with you.”

“Nope. I left her here.”

“Maybe she went for a walk to cool down after your argument.”

I step closer. “Who said we argued? And I find it hard to believe she just went for a walk when I left her handcuffed to the bed. Don’t worry, though. I can check the video feed.”

His face goes pale.

“I like to watch us fuck, so I had cameras installed in the bedroom. These aren’t on the same circuit as the others for obvious reasons.”

I pull out my phone as Turner backs up.

“I’ll just get dinner prepared.”

“My wife is missing, and you think I want fucking dinner?”

I access the feed and go back to just after I left her. And lo and behold, I watch as Turner enters the room.

“I can explain,” he says when he sees my face.

“I’ll ask you one more time. Where is my wife?”

“She wasn’t good enough for you. She’s a Fiore whore. I know what they did,” he chokes out.

I pull back my arm and punch him. He screams as I pull back to do it again.

“No, wait. Aldo has her. He said she belonged to him. You can find someone else. Someone good—”

I swing my fist and punch him again, knocking him out.

“Cut out his tongue, then take him to the shed. I’ll deal with him when I find Nova,” I tell Miles.

“I got it.”

“Let’s find Gia and see what she knows,” I tell the others, storming out of the house with both mine and Nova’s phones.

Isaac calls in the rest of my men and our allies as we head toward Gia’s location. I stare down at Nova’s phone. There’s a picture of us on the screen. I’m asleep, and she’s leaning on my chest, looking happy. I didn’t even know she’d taken it.

I don’t know how long I stare at it before I feel the car come to a stop. I look up and see that we’re in an industrial

area, parked outside a line of warehouses. I climb out, walking past the cars lining the street as I track Gia.

“Hold up, Vice. This could be a trap.”

“Ask me if I fucking care, Isaac.”

“Nova probably isn’t even here. She—shit,” Conner curses, bending down and picking something up off the ground.

He holds out a three-inch knitted dick for me.

“She’s here.” I pull out my gun and run toward the building closest to us, Conner, and Isaac hot on my heels. I yank the door open despite Conner yelling for me to wait, and I find a nightmare playing out before me.

Gia is lying on the floor in a crumbled heap, with half her head missing, and Aldo in a pool of blood. But that’s not what has me running inside. No, it’s the man with tears streaming down his face doing chest compressions on my wife.

“She’s not breathing,” he yells at me as I drop to my knees beside her.

She’s covered from head to toe in blood. There’s so much, it’s in her hair and eyes.

“Steven, right? You call an ambulance?” Conner asks, dropping down to do mouth-to-mouth.

“Yeah, it’s on its way.”

I stare at my wife. My home. My fucking everything as she fades away in front of my eyes. She’s everything I never knew I needed until she entered my life. I can’t do this without her. I lean over her, willing her to wake up, but she’s just not there. Everything that makes Nova *Nova* is just gone.

I slip my hand into hers and find her knife clenched tightly in her hand.

“Aldo’s dead. He’s had his throat slit. I don’t know if he raped her or not, but she fought him till the end, Vice,” Isaac tells me softly as my eyes take in her bare legs and exposed lower half.

I shrug out of my jacket and cover her in a daze as Conner pulls back, his head bowed as he rests his hand over Steven's.

"She's gone."

I look up at Isaac, feeling tears in my eyes and not giving a single fuck. "Be a better don."

He frowns. "Vice?"

"I won't leave her alone in the dark. I go where she goes." And with that, I swipe Nova's knife across my throat.

I hear them all roar as I fall back, my hand finding Nova's. I hold her one last time as I bleed out next to her.

\* \* \*

Fire licks up my throat, pulling me from the dark. My mouth is dry, and my tongue feels swollen. I crack my eyes open and lick my chapped lips.

I blink and look around, trying to get my bearings, when I see a familiar head lying on the bed beside my leg.

"Isaac," I choke out. Jesus fuck, that hurts.

His head whips up, his eyes wide, before he jumps up and grabs a jug of water from the table at the bottom of the bed. He pours me a glass, shoves a straw in it, and holds it out for me to sip. The icy coldness feels like a thousand tiny knives stabbing me in the throat.

As soon as the thought crosses my mind, everything comes flooding back. I shove the glass away, water spilling everywhere. "Nova."

No. I'm supposed to be with her. I try to get out of bed, but Isaac stops me, and I'm too weak to throw him off me.

"She's alive, Vice." His words don't register. All I can see is her bloody body and lifeless eyes.

He grabs my arms and shakes me. "She's alive."

I freeze as his words sink in. "What?"

He nods and sits down beside me. "She's alive. The paramedics arrived after you passed out and got her back. She

coded twice, but she's stable now. She woke up before you did. I can't believe you did that. What would have happened if she had woken up to find you gone?" he snarls.

"I need to see her."

"Just fucking wait," he snaps, which is unlike him.

He stands up and runs his hands through his hair as he paces. "She died, then you died. And honestly, neither of you should be here right now. And I swear to fuck, if you ever pull that shit again, I'll kill you myself. I don't want to be don. Do you understand me?"

He blows out a breath and leans on the table. "You lost a lot of blood, but because the angle was off, you didn't cut deep enough to sever your jugular. The paramedic rode to the hospital with his finger in your neck the whole way. There's some scarring, but you should make a full recovery."

"Good. Now take me to Nova."

"Listen, there's something you need to know." He rubs his hand over his face. He looks exhausted. "She was shot in the head."

I freeze at his words, my hands gripping the siderails.

"There is also evidence of blunt force trauma. The bullet went in here"—he traces the tip of his hairline before turning and showing me the spot behind his left ear—"and came out here. She lost a lot of blood, too, and the bullet caused damage to the areas of the brain it came into contact with. On top of that, she was deprived of oxygen, and when they were operating on her, she had a stroke."

"What are you telling me, Isaac?"

"She woke up, but Vice... Fuck, I don't know how to say this. She doesn't remember anything."

"That might be a blessing. Was she raped?"

"They don't think so. There was evidence that she'd had sex recently, but there was no bruising or tearing to suggest she put up a fight. But Vice, when I said she doesn't remember anything, I don't just mean the attack. From what we've

pieced together, she's missing about two years of her life. She doesn't remember us. She doesn't remember you, and the doctors say she probably never will. When she became combative, they put her in a medically induced coma to stop her from hurting herself and so her body could heal a little longer."

His voice softens, his own sorrow bleeding through.

"I'm sorry, Vice. I wish I had better news."

"Me too. But she's alive Isaac, and that's more than I had before."

\* \* \*

I was released a little over a week ago, but I've spent all my time at my wife's bedside since.

Except for today.

Standing in front of the other families, I laid down the law, not giving a single fuck if they complied.

"Aldo is dead. He kidnapped and attacked my wife. She managed to kill him before Gia shot her in the head. She is currently in a coma. I'm sure you've heard all of this, but I wanted to give you the courtesy of letting you know what's happening next. I'm taking over Fiore territory."

They start to protest, but I hold up my hand. "He forfeited the right to it when he attempted to rape and kill my wife and Vigo's daughter. That is not the legacy Vigo wanted to leave behind. The family is grieving. Not for Aldo and Gia but for Nova, who they all liked and cared for. I will not let someone else step in and fuck them around anymore. I understand that with my current territory, what I got from the Cahills, and now this, I will have far more than any of you. But I don't care. I have zero interest in taking yours from you. You stay in your lane, and I'll stay in mine."

"You can't have all that—"

I cut Leone off. "Try to take it from me. I fucking dare you. I have *capos* to see to the day-to-day running of things

while I help my wife heal. But make no mistake, if you come for us, I will burn your world to ash.”

I turn to leave, pausing when Mattia calls my name.

“How is Nova?”

“Alive. And right now, that’s a whole lot more than any of us expected.”

I walk out and feel Miles step up beside me as we head to the car. “You’ll need more guards if you insist on making us *capos*.”

“Isaac is still *consigliere*, as much as it pisses him off, and Conner is going to be my underboss. The territory is too big for me to manage alone. I need you all to step up and stop fucking bitching about it.”

“You know we will, Vice. But I won’t leave you unprotected. We need more guards for both you and Nova.”

“Contact Steven. He’s already proven he’d do anything to protect Nova. Alessio is due to fly back in two weeks. He’ll know trustworthy people loyal to Nova as well.”

“How’s he taking things?”

I shrug. “We don’t sit around and chat, but not good. She won’t remember the bridges they mended.”

I get in the car and wait for Miles to get in. The driver nods to us before driving us back to the house.

“Isaac and Veck are meeting us there. Conner is staying with Nova.”

I nod, reaching up to finger the chain around my neck. It’s stupid to be wearing the very thing that put this all in motion, but after going through Nova’s belongings at the hospital, I found hers. I slipped it around her neck before I started wearing the other half. It makes me feel connected to her.

I’ve never had much faith in higher beings, but we both died. Something or someone was watching over us and brought us back. Maybe it was St. Michael himself. Either way, I won’t squander the second chance I was given.



The driver drops us off at home, but instead of heading inside, we walk down to the cliff edge and the shed at the far end of the property. I yank the door open and find a barely conscious Turner chained naked to the floor. He squints as the sunlight pours in, looking up at me with both relief and fear.

His fear makes my cock throb for the first time since waking up in the hospital.

“Vice, please forgive me. I’ll do better, I promise. I just wanted to make you happy.”

“String him up,” I order Miles as Isaac walks through the door.

Isaac goes over to help Miles as I survey the tools on the wall, just out of Turner’s reach.

“I trusted you. I trusted you with the only thing in this world that I love, and you betrayed me.”

“I’m sorry. Please forgive me.”

I pick up a wrench and smash it into his teeth, smirking when he screams, and a handful drop to the floor.

“I could have sworn I asked you to cut out his tongue.” I look at Miles.

“I wanted to see what else he’d been up to. Turns out it wasn’t just you he loved. He loved your brother, too. He even got him a boy or two when he couldn’t get one himself, like a pedo 7-Eleven.”

I slam the wrench into his mouth again, making him cry and spit out blood. I toss it on the table before pulling out Nova’s favorite knife and reaching for his flaccid cock. Gripping it hard, I slice it off. His screams are like a symphony to my ears. I toss it to Veck as he enters the shed, and he catches it with a grimace.

“Motherfucker.” He drops it and stomps on it, making Isaac and Miles laugh.

“You knew Aldo would rape her, or at the very least, you assumed he would. You sick fuck. She should have been safe in her own home.”

I reach for the cattle prod and fire it up, smiling when it hums. I walk behind Turner and move my mouth to his ear. “Let’s see how you like it.”

I part his cheeks and shove the cattle prod up his ass, making him scream and pass out. I leave it there, whistling as I move around the front of him again.

“As much as I’d love to play a little longer, I need to get back to my girl.”

I slice him open, from his sternum to his pelvis, and watch as his intestines fall to the floor near my feet.

I hear Veck gag. The smell is pretty gross, but I’ve smelled worse. I grab the saw from the table and use it to open up his rib cage, and with a little bit of coaxing, I rip his heart from his chest just as it stops beating.

I hand it to Veck. “Bag this up for Nova.”

He nods, looking a little pale.

I toss the saw before heading to the wet room at the back of the house. I strip off and toss all my clothes in the furnace before stepping into the shower and washing away all the blood.

I stand under the water until I hear my phone ringing. I climb out and answer when I see it’s Conner.

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s Nova. She’s awake.”

\* \* \*

I make it to the hospital in record time.

When I walk in, I find Conner pacing outside her room.

“The doctor’s taking the breathing tube out.” He rubs his eyes. “Have you thought about what you’re going to say? She doesn’t know you at all.”

“I’m aware.”

“She won’t wake up and magically be in love with you. That version of Nova is gone.”

“It doesn’t matter, Conner, because I’ve loved every version of that girl, and I always will. I made her fall in love with me once. I can do it again. All the dark and broken parts of her that fit mine are still in there. We’re connected.”

“I hope to God you’re right.”

We both move to sit and wait for the doctor to come out.

It feels like hours later when he comes out to us, looking tired. “Are you her husband?”

“Yes, Vice Moretti.”

His eyes widen at my name before he coughs and clears his throat. “Okay, well, the good news is she’s far calmer than last time, though confused and disoriented, which is to be expected. It’s important to note that there are some changes that will probably occur, thanks to the brain damage she suffered.”

“Like what?”

“Well, as you know, she’s missing a chunk of her memory, and that will probably never come back. But that’s not to say all her memories will be affected. Some memories may be hazy, while others will be crystal clear. She may also have trouble with her speech or recalling some words. She may find this frustrating, but that’s to be expected. The stroke has left her left side weak. She will probably have mobility issues and need assistance. Speech and physical therapy will help, but honestly, we just don’t know how things will progress. The brain is complex. She may find that she has limitations for the rest of her life, but the important thing is that she’s alive. I’ll come back and check on her later. Just don’t push too hard. Let her take things at her own pace for now.”

“Thanks, doc.”

I wait for him to walk away before blowing out a breath.

“She’s going to have a target on her back because people will think she’s weak, making it easier to get to you.”

“You forget who you’re talking about, Conner. My wife could never be weak, and if I hear you say that again, I’ll

knock your teeth out.”

I walk to her door and let myself into her room.

She’s facing the window when I enter, looking lost. I walk slowly around the bed, fighting the urge to yank her into my arms.

Sensing me, she lifts her head. I see recognition in her eyes. And for one fleeting moment, I think she remembers us, but the look morphs into one of confusion.

“Do I know you?”

It feels as if a knife has been shoved into my gut. But maybe it’s better this way. Now she can’t remember that she hates me. Now I can make her love me and love her back like she deserves.

“I’ve come to see my wife.”

I sit down on the chair beside her bed and lay my hands flat on her thigh and watch as she sucks in a breath when she sees her name on my fingers.

“Wait, what?”

“It’s a long story.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

Funny, neither am I.

So, I start at the beginning—the day I met her at the prison—and tell her everything except what happened twenty years ago.

“Wow, that’s a lot.”

“I know.”

She bites her lip as she looks at me.

“Were we happy?” she whispers, a tear running down her face.

“Fuck, yeah.”

“Do we, I mean, are we... Fuck, this is awkward. I don’t know you, and yet you’re looking at me like you want to eat

me.” She slurs a few of her words, but otherwise, she doesn’t seem to be having much trouble. Thank God for small miracles.

I grin. “I always want to eat you,” I tease, making her blush.

“Do we love each other?” she finally asks softly.

I tug at her hospital gown and drag the material down to reveal her tattoo. “More than anything.”

She lifts her hand to my throat, hesitating to touch the vivid red scars. “What happened to you?”

“You died.”

She searches my eyes, looking for more.

“You didn’t think I would let you go alone, did you?”

Two more tears slip down her cheeks as I stand up and press my forehead to hers.

“I wish I could remember you.”

“It’s okay. Now you get to fall in love with me all over again.”

She hooks her finger in the chain at my neck, pulling it free, making me tense.

“How do you have this?”

I pull back and look into her eyes. I can’t lose her. I’ve come too close too many times now, so I do the only thing I can.

*I lie.*

“You lost your necklace. I hated seeing you so upset, so I found one just like it. You insisted I wear half, and we had our initials engraved on the back.

“I have N for Nova, and you have...”

“V for Vice.”

She smiles at me. It’s a little shaky and a little fearful, but I see that streak of defiance shining through.

“I think it will be easy to love you.”

I chuckle, pressing a kiss on her forehead. “Famous last words, *bambola*.”

# Epilogue

---

## Vice



Eighteen months later

“I hate you.”

“Liar.” I look up at her from my spot between her legs, my gaze softening on the small, rounded bump of her stomach before I reach her lust-glazed eyes.

“Please, I need to come.”

“And you will when I’ve finished eating. Now be a good girl and let me finish my meal.”

I lap up her arousal, swallowing it down like the greedy bastard I am.

“Vice!” she screams when I fuck her with my tongue before flicking her clit with the tip. “I’m going to kill you. I’m going to set fire to you and push you off a cliff.”

“Patience, Nova.”

“Screw patience. Stick your dick in me already.”

“Well, if you insist.” I stand up and push her legs back, stroking her wet pussy before thrusting inside her.

“Yes!” she cries out, gripping the table, and I flashback to another night when I fucked her on this very table.

The image makes me pound into her harder and faster.

Getting to know each other again has been a series of trials and errors. And though she didn’t remember us, her attraction

to me was still very much there.

That doesn't mean it had been easy. I was gentle with her recovery in some ways. But when it came to our sex life, I threw her in at the deep end, so now she doesn't blink about others being in the room when we fuck.

“Harder, Vice. You won't break me.”

I groan and grip her ass hard enough to leave bruises and fuck her like I hate her.

“Oh God. Ahh.” She arches her back and comes, screaming my name. I pull my cock out and come all over her pussy.

She looks up at me and grins when I push my cum inside her. “You can't get me pregnant again.”

“Just wait until you have this one, then all bets are off. I like seeing you swollen with my kid.” I bend down and press a kiss on her belly before scooping her up and carrying her to the bathroom to clean her up.

Later that afternoon, we're at the resort, which is full of people, when I see someone approach her. Steven is right behind her, so I know she's safe, but that doesn't mean I like men talking to my wife.

“So, everything is on schedule. I have to say this place is going to be spectacular when it's finished,” Ludovic states.

“Well, it is Nova's brainchild.”

I watch as the man says something to Nova and reaches out to touch her stomach. Ah, fuck. “Excuse me.”

I head in Nova's direction just as she pulls out her gun and shoots the asshole in the shoulder.

The people in the room react to the gunfire by drawing their weapons and pointing them at my wife until they realize what's going on. Then the guns move to the cursing man with blood pouring from his shoulder.

Steven and his partner haul him up off the floor.



I stare around at everyone and watch as they lower their weapons. I really don't like people pointing guns at my wife, even if it is only for a moment.

I turn to glare at Steven. "You didn't think to stop her?"

"You have met your wife, right?"

She looks at me and pouts. "He touched my stomach. Why do people think that's okay? He wouldn't like it if I walked up and grabbed his balls."

"I wouldn't be so sure about that," Rocky mutters, walking over with a grin.

She's leaning heavily on one side, so I know she's hurting. She's stronger now than she was, but her left side is still weak. Thankfully, it's not her dominant side, so it hasn't affected her ability to shoot, but she does get tired more easily. Especially now that she's pregnant.

"Tired?" I ask her gently as I scoop her up.

"Horny. I'm always horny. This kid is gonna be just like its father." She huffs, making Steven and Rocky laugh. Another thing I've noticed is that she has zero filter. If she thinks it, she says it. Luckily, her speech is fine. There were a few hiccups along the way, but now, aside from the odd forgotten word, she's good.

"Want me to fuck you in the Mustang?"

"For the love of God, I do not need to hear this shit," Alessio grumbles, walking up behind us.

He and Nova have matching canes now, though Nova's too damn stubborn to use hers.

"Hey, Daddio. I hate to break it to you, but if you want to be a gramps, you've got to expect Vice to play with the box the kid comes in."

I dip my head against her hair to hide my laughter.

"I never thought I'd miss being in the hospital," he complains.

Nova grins. "He loves me, really."

Alessio's eyes soften because, yeah, he really does.

"You want to come for dinner? We're having the rest of the crew over. I promise not to have sex on the table while you're there."

"Jesus fucking Christ," he groans.

She looks at me and winces. "Oops." She looks a little nervous, so I kiss her, ignoring the motherfuckers around me.

"Fuck what anyone else thinks."

"Okay," she whispers before looking at Alessio. "Hurry up, if you're coming. I'm hangry, and Vice's arms will fall off from carrying me."

"Bullshit. That man would carry you everywhere if you let him," Alessio grumbles, following behind us.

"Don't be jealous," Nova teases him.

"Don't you two have Valentine's plans?"

"I wanted to spend it with all the people I love. Besides, how can he top last year's Valentine's?"

I look at Alessio and smirk.

"He gave you a human heart, Nova. You know who does that? A serial killer."

She looks up at me with her arms wrapped around my neck.

"Serial killer, huh?" She squirms, making me laugh.

"That get you hot, *bambola*?"

"It's possible we've just unlocked another kink."

"I'll bring the rope and my knife to bed with me later."

"I'm right here!" Alessio yells, making Nova giggle.

# Epilogue II

Nova



“Conner called to thank you for his penis. Not something I ever thought I’d say,” Vice grumbles, lifting my feet and placing them on his lap. I let my eyes slip closed as he presses the insole with his thumb and starts massaging my foot.

“When I found the purple glittery wool, I knew I had to make him one.”

He chuckles as I yawn.

“How are you feeling?”

“Sleepy. Your daughter kept me up half the night, and you kept me up the other half.”

“I’m not even going to pretend to be sorry. There’s no place I’d rather be than inside you.”

“Yeah, well, I think slot A needs a rest from tab B.”

He lifts my leg and kisses the inside of my ankle, his hands trailing up the inside of my leg. His fingers stroke over my panties before he presses lightly against my ass.

“What about slot C?”

His cell phone rings before I can answer. He sighs and pulls it out, looking at the screen. “It’s Isaac.”

“Take it. I’m not going anywhere.”

He places a kiss on my lips and slides out from under my legs before answering, opening the glass doors to the deck,

and heading outside. I curl my legs underneath me and stroke my stomach as my daughter rolls around beneath my palm.

I watch Vice through the window as he talks on the phone to Isaac. He's dressed in nothing but sweatpants and a white T-shirt, his tattoos on display, making me drool a little. The man is so fucking hot he could make a nun volunteer to deep-throat him.

I think about Isaac, who is now running the casino with Conner. The casino is still as popular as ever, but with Aldo and Vigo out of the way, things are running much smoother. Still, I miss having both Isaac and Conner here. Sunday dinners aren't enough.

It has been nearly two years since I was shot. Two years. I'm not sure I would have made it through without them. Vice may have been my rock, but his men were my safe space to land, reining him in when he needed it.

As hard as it's been for me to lose such a huge chunk of my life, it was harder for Vice. The woman he loved was gone, and in her place was a shell of a woman who ran a gamut of mood swings from depressed to homicidal.

But somehow, we made it through. We'd never be conventional. Vice is probably the only man on the planet to hand his hormonal wife a knife and a victim to play with. Of course, the victims were shitty humans, but I doubt a jury would see it that way. I knew I wasn't quite right in the head. My impulse control was shot to shit, and the sight of blood seemed to give me the urge to finger-paint.

For anyone else, I would have been too much. But Vice is far from sane himself. We're broken as fuck, but we fit together in the most perfectly imperfect way.

And I'd rather be broken with him than whole with anyone else.

# Also by Candice Wright

## APEX TACTICAL SERIES

The Brutal Strike

The Harsh Bite

[The Wicked Sting](#)

## THE INHERITANCE SERIES

[Rewriting Yesterday](#)

[In This Moment](#)

[The Promise Of Tomorrow](#)

[The Complete Inheritance Series Collection](#)

## THE UNDERESTIMATED SERIES

[The Queen of Carnage: An Underestimated Novel Book One](#)

[The Princess of Chaos: An Underestimated Novel Book Two](#)

[The Reign of Kings: An Underestimated Novel Book Three](#)

[The Heir of Shadows: An Underestimated Novel Book Four](#)

[The Crown of Fools: An Underestimated Novel Book Five](#)

[The Mercy of Demons: An Underestimated Novel Book Six](#)

[The Throne of Lies: An Underestimated Novel Book Seven](#)

The Echo of Violence: An Underestimated Novel Book Eight

[Ricochet \(Underestimated Series Spin-off\)](#)

## THE COLLATERAL DAMAGE SERIES

[Tainted Oaths: A Collateral Damage Novel Book One](#)

[Twisted Vows: A Collateral Damage Novel Book Two](#)

Toxic Whispers: A Collateral Damage Novel Book Three

## THE PHOENIX PROJECT DUET

[From the Ashes: Book one](#)

[From the Fire: Book Two](#)

[The Phoenix Project Collection](#)

[Virtues of Sin: A Phoenix Project Novel](#)

## DEATH IN BLOOM SERIES

[Coerce](#)

[Compel](#)

## THE CANDY SHOP SERIES

[Dulce](#)

[Reese](#)

[Lollie](#)

Sugar

SHARED WORLD PROJECTS

[Hoax Husband: A Hero Club Novel](#)

STANDALONE

[Vices and Vows](#)

# Acknowledgments

Kirsty-Anne Still @ The Pretty Little Design co. – For my awesome cover.

Tanya Oemig – My incredible editor - AKA miracle worker. I'm so grateful to have you on my team. You're amazing and I adore you.

Briann Graziano – Proof reading extraordinaire.

Stacey, Mallory, Marie and Thais – you girls are the bomb diggity.

Julia Murray — my amazing PA, friend and stealer of book boyfriends.

My kids for being epic human beings.

My Candi Shoppers– you are the best readers group a girl could have. I love you more than muppet porn.

My readers – You guys are everything to me. I am in awe of the love and support I have received. Thanks for taking a chance on me and on each of the books that I write.

Remember, If you enjoyed it, please leave a review.

# About the Author

Candice is a romance writer who lives in the UK with her long-suffering partner and her three slightly unhinged children. As an avid reader herself, you will often find her curled up with a book from one of her favorite authors, drinking her body weight in coffee.





# Trigger Warnings

This story is a dark mafia romance. It contains scenes and themes that some may find triggering including but not limited to:

- Sexually explicit scenes
- Dub Con
- Gun Play
- Profanity
- Graphic Torture and Violence
- References to child abuse, rape and sex trafficking.
- Off page rape (not of main characters)
- Attempted rape
- Assault
- Death of a child (mentioned in the prologue, set twenty years before the main story)
- Reference to Homophobia
- Gun Violence