A man with dark, wavy hair and a light beard, wearing a dark suit, white shirt, and dark tie. He is looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. The background is a dark, textured wall.

A DARK MAFIA STANDALONE ROMANCE

VICIOUS VOWS

M. JAMES

Vicious Vows

A Dark Mafia Standalone

M. James

PNK Publishing

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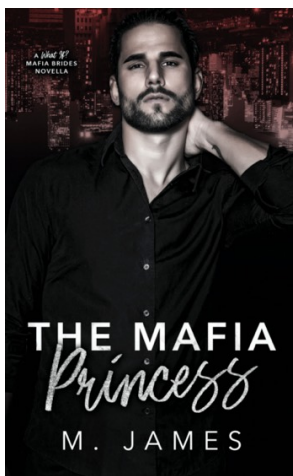
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Gianna



Sitting in the shower under the spray of water, my arms wrapped around my knees, all I can feel is numbness. The water is so hot that the opaque glass has fogged over, and the shower is full of thick steam, but I can't stop shaking.

There's pink dripping down onto the tiles from the blood on my hands. My father's blood, from where I found him just a little while ago, on the floor of his study. The scene keeps replaying in my head, over and over again, like the clip of a horror film I don't want to watch but can't look away from.

Today was meant to be perfect. It was perfect. Just this morning, my father was at the breakfast table when I came down, his newspaper in front of him as always, waiting for me to join him. Don Giacomo Mancini—feared or respected by everyone else in Chicago, depending on who the person is—but to me, just my father. He'd put down his paper to hug me, a hug spiced with scents of aftershave and leftover pipe tobacco, like every other morning—except this morning was my eighteenth birthday.

It's hard to remember, right now, how beautiful the morning started out. How perfect and sunny it all was, looking out over the manicured lawn and climbing roses that I've greeted every morning for every day of my life so far. How eager I'd been to see what my father had planned, what surprises he'd have in store for me.

Right now, his consigliere, Lorenzo, is downstairs dealing with the aftermath of my father's death. He's the only person I could think of to call, the only person who could help—the

only person that I know my father trusted completely, other than Alessio. But Alessio's been gone for three years, and I knew better than to call him, even after Lorenzo had arrived and I no longer needed to worry about what to do next. He'd removed himself from our lives for reasons I don't know and that my father refused to talk about, and any attempts to bring it up were always shut down completely. Still, I thought about him as I sat there on the floor of my father's study while Lorenzo found a maid to help me get upstairs and get cleaned up. He would want to know, I thought, somewhere in the back of my grief-fogged mind.

But right now, all I can think about is finding my father on his study floor, blood black against the hardwood floor in the darkness, the fire leaping cheerily in the fireplace as if nothing were out of the ordinary. As if my entire world hadn't just been shattered.

My hands are still bloody, but I clench them into fists, pressing them against the backs of my closed eyes until I see stars. I don't want to see the dead body in my mind any longer. I want to see my father the way he was this morning, at the breakfast table. I want to see his expectant smile, waiting for me to notice the pastry that had been laid out for me, along with iced coffee in my favorite mug. I want to see him leaning over, striking a match, and lighting the candle in the middle of the cinnamon roll, the small flame flickering over the melted icing and pooling yellow butter across the plate.

"I wasn't sure when you would come down, tesoro. So I left the candle unlit. But now—"

I bite my lower lip hard enough to taste blood. He'd lit the candle, smiling indulgently at me, singing me happy birthday out of tune, as he has every year. *"Your mother would have sung it more prettily. Like the angel she is now, I expect. Make a wish, cara ragazza."*

I made the same wish that I've made every year. *Let the year to come be as happy as the one before.* Every year, it's been granted. This morning, I had no reason to see why that would change.

“What am I supposed to do?” I whisper it aloud to the empty shower, my heart aching in my chest. The shower smells like sweat and iron in the hot steam, my own flushed skin, and the blood filling the air instead of the sweet scent of shower gel and shampoo. I want to crawl into myself and disappear, make this *all* disappear.

I have no one that I feel I can turn to. My father trusted Lorenzo, but I’m not sure that I do. There are no friends that I have to call on, no one for me to go to for comfort. My father tried to introduce me to other mafia daughters, to encourage me to make friends, but I could never relate to them well enough. They all hated their fathers—hardened men who saw them as currency, as a means to extend their ambition, who raised them for marriage and nothing else.

My father was my friend, my confidante. He was someone that I wanted to be more like as I grew up—kind, honest, fair, and intelligent. He did all he could to make sure that I didn’t feel that the loss of my mother robbed me of my only chance at a loving parent. He never refused to answer my questions about anything that I wanted to learn. He never made me feel as if my only future lay in a marriage that he would choose for me.

He’d planned a perfect day for me—booked spa appointments, sent me off for a day of luxury and pampering, and left presents for me to find when I came home. The note he left me is now one of the things I’ll cherish most. This morning, it was only a birthday note. Now it’s the last one I’ll ever have from him. I can remember it by heart, even right now, even with everything tormenting me at this moment.

To my beautiful daughter,

Although you are all grown up now, you will always be my piccolo tesoro, just as you have been since you were born. I look forward to many more years of watching you grow into the talented, intelligent, and beautiful woman that you are becoming.

Love,

Your father

I lean my head against the tiles of the shower, trying to recall the night. It was the last perfect night I'll ever have with my father. I play it through step by step—putting on the lavender dress he'd bought me, slipping the earrings on, going down to the car waiting for me at eight p.m. exactly. I'd slipped into the cool, leather-scented interior, and he'd been sitting there, leaning over to give me a quick kiss on the cheek, smiling. A special night, to be sure, but just one of so many more we thought we would have.

“You liked your birthday presents?” he asks, and I nod.

“Thank you. They're perfect. Especially the earrings.” I reach up and touch them, dangling from my earlobes, and my father's smile widens, but there's a tinge of sadness to it.

“Those were your mother's. I got a fresh box for them and had them wrapped, but they were hers. I have other pieces of her jewelry, but those will wait for when you're married.”

“Oh.” The gift takes on a new meaning, even more special than it was before. “I'm so glad I have them.” I brush my fingers over the earrings again, suddenly wanting to never take them off. There's a bit of anxiety mixed in with the emotion now, though, with the mention of marriage. My father so rarely brings up the topic that anytime he does, it makes me wonder if this is the moment that he's going to tell me he's chosen someone, or that he's looking for candidates to begin choosing from. “I'll wear them every chance I get.”

The ride to the restaurant is quiet—my father seems lost in thought—and I glance over at him as the car pulls up to the curb. He shakes himself a little as he gets out, the driver coming around to open my door, and I see he's brought us to a restaurant in the city that we've gone to before, a fancy sushi place that I love. We're escorted to a private booth in the back, and my father gives me a conspiratorial smile as the waitress

brings a bottle of chilled lychee sake to the table, along with water for us both.

“You shouldn’t technically be drinking this,” he says, pouring sake into small ceramic cups for us both, “but what’s the point of being one of the three most powerful men in Chicago if my only daughter can’t have a drink on her eighteenth birthday? Anyway, we have someone driving us home.” He winks, tapping the glass against mine as I pick it up, and we both take a sip of it.

I’ve had a little alcohol before—a glass of wine at holidays, mostly—but this is different. It’s sweet enough that I like it, even though it burns the back of my throat, but I cough a little, and my father chuckles.

“Not too much,” he cautions, although he lets me refill the cup. “But a special treat, for your birthday.”

“How did your meetings go?” I ask as the waitress brings us our appetizers, and I see his smile falter for a brief second, ever so slightly. I don’t think I’m supposed to see it, but I do.

“They were fine,” he says, recovering quickly. “But tonight isn’t a night to talk business, tesoro. This is your night. And I want to talk about your future.”

That anxiety clenches in my stomach again, and I take another small sip of the sake, picking up the jade chopsticks by my plate. “What do you mean?” I ask nervously. “Is this about me getting married?”

My father snorts. “No, Gianna. I’m not marrying you off at eighteen. I want to talk about whether or not you’d like to go to college. We can enroll you for this fall—you can study whatever you’d like. It’s up to you. I can hire another private tutor to teach you at home, but I thought you might like the experience of going to the campus to learn. You’ll have security with you, and you’ll still live at home, of course, but —”

“I would love that.” The idea is a little bit of a nerve wracking one, but new and exciting all the same, and I feel my heart leap in my chest at the thought. “Maybe I could study

literature?” The possibilities are thrilling, and I look at my father, waiting to see his reaction.

“You don’t have to decide tonight,” he says, chuckling. “Just think about it, and we’ll discuss it later.” His expression turns a little more serious then, and he sits back, looking at me. “You will have to be married eventually,” he says quietly. “But I think there’s plenty of time for that. And we don’t need to talk about it just yet.”

Not just yet is good enough for me, for now. The rest of the dinner is relaxing and fun, the two of us talking about lighter things—about what I want to do for the summer, the possibility of a vacation, my father admitting he works too much. We eat far too much food and still split dessert, and on the way home, I can see that he’s tired. It must have been a long day for him, with all of the meetings, and once we’re home and back inside, he gives me a smile.

“I’m going to retire early, I think,” he says. “Good night, tesoro.”

“Good night.” I go up on my tiptoes, giving him a hug and another kiss on the cheek, and then go upstairs. I’m tired too, thoroughly relaxed from the day at the spa and full of sake and expensive sushi. I go through the motions of getting ready for bed, washing my face, and slipping into my favorite pair of pajamas before getting into bed and reaching for a book.

I read for an hour or so before I can’t keep my eyes open any longer, switching out the light. I’m almost asleep when I hear a sudden noise downstairs, something that almost sounds like a cry of pain, and then a heavy thud—like something falling.

I sit half-upright, unsure if I was dreaming or not. The cry could have been an animal outside—a cat that wandered through the fence, maybe, or a bird. But the sound—

I had thought it was only a dream. But I hadn’t been able to shake the feeling that something was wrong, even as I lay back down. I shouldn’t have been afraid in my own house, but as I’d finally gotten up, padding across the bedroom and into the

hall, all I can remember feeling was an awful, cold knot of fear deep in my stomach. Something had felt wrong from the moment I started down the stairs.

I remember trying the master suite first. I could see that my father hadn't gone to bed yet—the king-sized bed was neatly made up, his slippers at the edge of it, the room quiet and dark.

I thought of going back to bed then. But every instinct in me screamed to go downstairs, the same instinct that warned me not to turn on a light when I went down, finding the lower part of the house dark—except for my father's study, where the door was cracked open, buttery warm light spilling out.

I told myself it was nothing. That the sound had been a book dropping. A stubbed toe. That I would walk in and see him in front of the fireplace with a glass of port and a cigar.

When I pushed the door open, I did see him in front of the fireplace. But he wasn't sitting in the leather wing chair he loved so much, or holding a glass of wine, or smoking one of his favorite cigars. He was—

Sitting in the shower, I rub my hands over my face, hard enough to hurt, seeing the last of the blood wash off of my hands and down the drain. I want to wipe away the memory, the sigh of my father facedown on the hardwood, one hand outstretched in front of him as if reaching for something, the table next to the chair overturned with a shattered glass next to it, wine mingling with the blood slowly leaking over the floor. I want to forget the sound of my own scream as I saw him, the way I collapsed to the floor, the smell of blood that I know I'll recognize all my life now.

I don't know what happens next. But I know that my life as I knew it—my life as the beloved daughter of Don Giacomo Mancini, is over.

Who I'm meant to be now, I have no idea.

Alessio



My day so far has been utterly exhausting. When my phone buzzes with a message letting me know that my boss, Luca Romano, wants to see me, I know that it's not about to get any less so. In fact, at this late hour of the afternoon, it likely means that something has come up that's going to keep me here later than I want to be, instead of heading straight for my favorite vintage whiskey bar and the company of one of the handful of girls that I can rely on to meet me there for a date and filthy sex later.

Which is how I'd prefer to spend my evening—and *has* been how I've spent them more often than not, recently.

Things have been calm in New York's criminal underworld for a while now. With the alliance between Luca and Viktor Andreyev—the leader of the Bratva here—and their mutual alliance with the Irish Kings in Boston to back it up, as well as the deals they've made with the Santiago cartel in Mexico, business is booming, and no one has the balls to make any challenges to their authority. All that makes my job relatively easy—except for days like today, when I've had to deal with shipment issues, a crew that doesn't seem to understand their expectations, and the need to chastise the man who was in charge of hiring them. It's all unexciting and tiresome, and as I close the ledger and tuck my phone in my pocket to go and meet Luca in his office one floor up, I find myself hoping that whatever he needs, it won't take very long.

The grave look on his face when I walk into the office tells me that it's likely going to be otherwise.

“Sit down, Alessio.” Luca motions to one of the leather chairs in front of his desk, leaning back in his own. “I have news that you’re not going to like to hear.”

I sit down, not bothering to hide my tired sigh. Luca is my employer, but also my friend, and has been for a long time now. As his right-hand man, I know everything—or very nearly everything—that he does, and he trusts me more than anyone else in his employ. If he’s a bit more distant at times than others, I can understand it—the man who was his right-hand once upon a time betrayed him horribly, a betrayal as deep as if it had come from a brother.

“I don’t know of an easy way to say this.” Luca rubs his hand over his mouth, his expression grim. “Don Mancini—your stepfather...he’s dead, Alessio.”

It takes a moment for the words to sink in. “Dead?” I blink at Luca, unable to fully take it in. “He can’t be. He—”

I suck in a breath. “I haven’t talked to him in some time, but the last I knew, he was in good health. What could have happened?” There’s any number of things, of course, but Giacomo wasn’t that old—in his late fifties. He should have had plenty of life left to live, even with the stresses and pressures of being the head of the Chicago mafia.

“It wasn’t natural.” Luca runs a hand through his hair. “His daughter found him. Dead, in the middle of the night, bleeding out from a slit throat in his study. The window was open. Someone attacked him in his home, and escaped.”

“And they’ve been apprehended?” I lean forward. “Surely Vasilev and McNeil are helping with this? They were his allies, after all. And the Family?”

“All looking into it,” Luca says tiredly. “But no, nothing has been found yet. Whoever it was planned well and covered their tracks well.”

“And Gianna found him?” I close my eyes, not wanting to imagine how awful that must have been for her. Gianna and her father were always close, closer than most mafia fathers are with their daughters. He didn’t believe in the old ways of

raising daughters, keeping them ignorant and suitable only for marriage at a young age, ignoring them in favor of sons. Gianna was his only natural child, and he loved her deeply. “How is she?”

Luca shakes his head. “From what I hear, not well. The funeral is tomorrow. I received a request to release you to go to Chicago, both for the funeral and to meet with the Family to discuss Don Mancini’s successor. I expect that will have something to do with the girl’s marriage as well, whether it was already arranged or still needs to be. Yesterday was her eighteenth birthday, apparently,” he adds with a sigh. “Not the way it should have gone.”

“I know why they want me back.” I grit my teeth, thinking of the last conversation that Giacomo and I had before I left Chicago for three years without speaking to him. Gianna had been fifteen then, with a gaze that wandered towards me far too often for my own comfort. “Giacomo will have put it in his will that he wants me to be his successor.”

“Really.” Luca looks at me curiously. “Was that the nature of your falling out? I would have thought he would want it to go to his daughter’s future husband. I don’t mean this as an insult, Alessio; I know he thought of you as a son—but none of his blood actually flows through your veins. You have his name, and that’s all. At least Gianna’s children would be half-Mancini in truth.”

I frown. “He wanted me to marry her when she was older. Twenty-one at least, he said. The best way of both ensuring the son of his heart led the family after his passing and that the heirs would be the family of his blood. I refused, of course.”

“Of course,” Luca echoes, but I can tell from his tone that he doesn’t understand. “You refused to be betrothed to Gianna?”

“She’s my stepsister.” I stare at Luca. “And half my age.”

“But you weren’t raised together. You left three years after she was born. You’re hardly siblings in anything but the most legal sense. Certainly not blood-related, or even with the awkwardness of having grown up together. And she is of age now.”

“Exactly Giacomo’s argument. And my answer remains the same. Absolutely not. I will not lead the Mancini mafia—not only because I have no right to, but because I have no *desire* to be don. And I will not marry Gianna. It’s not right. Besides—”

I don’t finish the sentence. The argument I’ve already made against it is strong enough, I reason. Gianna is too young, even if she’s technically old enough to marry, and she’s legally my stepsister. It doesn’t matter that I have reasons of my own why I don’t intend to marry her, whether Giacomo expressed *that* desire in his will or not. Reasons that I plan to keep to myself, rather than discuss them with my boss.

“They expect you in Chicago, one way or another,” Luca says. “Tomorrow.”

“And I’ll go.” I let out a long breath. “There’s no saying no to the Family, of course. I’ll help set affairs straight, and then I’ll come back here—where I’m perfectly content working as your right hand, and helping *you* lead.”

“Which you’ve done exceptionally well at.” Luca frowns. “I don’t think they’ll be as quick to allow you to refuse as you think, though. Whatever Giacomo has asked, they’ll feel duty-bound to adhere to. And they may have ideas of their own.”

“I’m certain they will.” My jaw tightens. “But I have my own opinions, and I intend to stick to them.”

“Good luck,” Luca says, looking at me from across the desk. “Whatever your decision, I’ll support it.”

I’m grateful for his support, of course. But as I leave the office and head back to my own apartment—a high-level, expansive loft in one of New York’s high-rises—I have every intention of sticking to the choices I’ve already made.

My life, as it is, is all I could want as far as I’m concerned. I have influence and money while being able to remain in the background as Luca’s consigliere—a position he’s often mentioned elevating me from to underboss, but even that, I’m unsure if I want. I’ve never been power-hungry, at least not in my own estimation, and I’ve seen what comes of holding such a position in this world. I’ve seen the dangers posed to not

only Luca and his allies, but to their families. I don't escape danger entirely in my position—that would be impossible, but the barrel of the gun has never been aimed directly at me.

It's not only the danger, either—but the responsibility. There are so many people who rely on Luca, and on others like him. Every choice he makes matters. I'm not sure that's what I want for my life. I've never aspired to rise higher than I already have.

Now the Family will want me to. I have no doubt of that. And more than that, they'll want me to make good on Giacomo's desires—not only for me to inherit, but for me to marry Gianna. And that, I absolutely will not do.

I toss my keys into the ceramic dish on the antique wooden table just inside my door, shrugging off my suit coat and reaching up to loosen my tie. I'd planned to go out and have a drink, but now I'm not so sure that staying in doesn't sound like a better idea, not when I have to go to Chicago in the morning. I reach for my phone as I walk into my living room, the view of New York in the early evening spreading out beyond the huge windows that overlook it, and thumb through the list of numbers I have—all girls who would be more than happy to come over with a moment's notice.

That sounds like a good night. The peace of my own home—the last night like that for a while, depending on how long it takes to iron things out in Chicago—a glass of good wine, and a girl on her knees sucking my cock while I enjoy it, letting me run my fingers through her hair and tell her *good girl* while she makes me come, and takes my mind off of everything plaguing it now.

I sink down onto the black leather couch, watching the lights of the city flicker to life, and feel myself stir with anticipation as I type out the text. In thirty minutes, this evening will have gotten much better.

And when I finish up what needs doing in Chicago, I can come right back here, to that same ideal life that I've created for myself.

It'll just take a few days, that's all.

The next morning, as I board the jet that Luca let me borrow for a more peaceful flight, I'm less certain. I went to bed with my sheets smelling of vanilla perfume, my cock well-sucked, having enjoyed a second round as well with the girl who had come over—a pretty red-haired lounge singer I met downtown named Siobhan, with a melodic voice that sounds even prettier when she comes. She'd let me tie her to the bed and tease her with my tongue until she was begging to come, giving me something much more pleasurable to focus on than what I'd be doing in the morning, and then come three times over when I flipped her over and fucked her as hard as I pleased. I should feel satisfied and relaxed today, having had both good sex and sound sleep the night before. Still, I feel tense and unsettled instead, and as I sink into my seat on the jet, I can't shake the feeling.

It's not made any better when I arrive in Chicago, a few hours before the funeral. I send my bags with a driver to drop off at my hotel—I have no intentions of staying in Giacomo's home, even though I know it's what he'd have asked me to do—and head straight for the church, feeling that knot of anxiety in my gut tighten mile by mile, until I'm stepping inside.

The smell of wood and incense that hits me the moment I walk in the doors brings back a flood of memories—everything from my own confirmation not long after Giacomo and Rosa adopted me, to Sunday mornings sitting here in the hard wood pews, to Gianna's baptism when she was small. I'd hoped it would be much longer before I returned here for a funeral.

The church is still mostly empty—most of the mourners haven't arrived yet. The coffin is just above the stairs—dark wood and brass, elegant and simple. I have no doubt that Giacomo left instructions as to what he would want, just as I'm sure that he left instructions about everything else, as well.

Instructions that the Family will want me to carry out.

I know Gianna is the singular figure in the front row without having to see her face. She's sitting stick-straight in the pew, dressed in black, her thick hair pulled back at the front with a

diamond hair comb that glitters in the low light of the church, looking at the coffin. I pause a third of the way down the aisle, hesitant to see her, to speak to her.

It's been three years. When I left, she was a fifteen-year-old girl with an inappropriate crush on me, nothing more than a child. Now, I know she'll be something else. And the Family will ask for her to be something else to *me*, specifically.

I've told myself, again and again, that I'm horrified by the idea. That eighteen or not, she's too young, too innocent—and above all else, legally my stepsister, even if she was raised all her life with my presence as nothing but a footnote. There's no feeling between us, no connection, but it feels wrong all the same.

I force myself to keep walking, one foot in front of the other, until I'm three pews away from her. I stop and clear my throat, waiting for the moment when she turns her head to look at me.

“Gianna?” I keep my voice soft, soothing, wanting to comfort her in some small way if I can. This is a loss for us both, but I think it runs even deeper for her.

For a moment, she doesn't turn. Her shoulders stiffen when she hears my voice—and then she turns her head. Her blue eyes meet mine for the first time in three years, beautiful, even saddened and red-rimmed, and I'm unprepared for the way she makes me feel the moment she looks at me.

She looks older. More grown-up than I'd imagined. And I'm struck with a realization that I've never had before.

She's absolutely beautiful.

Gianna



I wake up in the morning still feeling numb.

I've felt this way for two days now. I've cried and cried, but the entire time, I've felt hollow, detached, like I'm crying over something that isn't real. It all still feels like a horrible nightmare—finding my father's body, the minutes I spent collapsed on the floor next to him, begging for him to come back, to wake up.

Thinking about the reality of all of this doesn't just mean letting myself truly realize that my father is gone. It means thinking about what happens now, and that's too frightening to comprehend, at least at this present moment. My father protected me from everything, but now I don't know how much protection I have. Someone will want his position. It might be Lorenzo who takes it. I have no idea—and I have no idea what that means for me.

I know I don't want to marry Lorenzo, a man three times my age, without a single thing to recommend him, in my opinion, in either looks or personality. I don't know if I want to marry anyone who might be chosen for me. I thought I had time to put that off, to *not* think about it. And now—

Standing in front of my closet, looking at the hastily purchased black dress for today, I still feel like it's all been a horrible dream. I know how the rest of the day will play out—the service at the church, the burial at the cemetery, the gathering here later where everyone will tell me how sorry they are for my loss, and the men of the Family will gather in my father's now-pristine study and make decisions for me about what my

life will be after this. All of the agency, all of the freedom that my father tried to give me, will be stripped away and replaced with whatever choices they make for me.

But it doesn't feel *real*.

I slip into the knee-length black dress, sitting down at my vanity to try to do something with my makeup that will make me look less like a ghost that's been sobbing for two days. Nothing I do really helps—and in the end, I decide it doesn't matter. I don't care what anyone else thinks of how I look today.

Except—

I sink my teeth into my lower lip as Alessio flickers back into my thoughts. *Three years*. I barely remember him. He left when I was still too young to remember, and didn't come back until I was a teenager. By then, all I knew of him was that he was a handsome man who all but ignored me, even though I wanted him to do exactly the opposite. He kept his distance, remaining polite when we interacted and barely speaking to me unless necessary, even on the rare occasion that we all ate a meal together. According to the law, he's my stepbrother, but it's impossible for me to think of him like that. I don't *know* him, and we certainly weren't raised together.

It's not as if I've been pining after him all these years. I put him out of my head after he left, and the crush faded. But now —

I can't help the small jolt of excitement that leaps in my chest, cutting through the numbness a little, at the thought of seeing him again. I can't help that it makes me want to add a little more color to my cheeks and pick a flattering shade of lipstick. I want him to look at me and see that I've grown up. That whatever he thought of me back then, I'm different now. I know that likely won't *mean* anything to him—that if he shows up at all, it will be to pay his respects and then go back to wherever it is that he stays now...not in Chicago, I don't think.

But all the same, I can't help hoping that I will see him. And I hold on to that small hope, because I need whatever I can if

I'm going to make it through the day.

I end up getting to the church too early. I slip inside, breathing in the familiar, comforting scents around me, and go to sit in the front pew. My stomach clenches on nothing when I see the coffin, nausea filling me even though I haven't managed to eat anything today. I feel my teeth cutting into my lip again as I blink back tears. I don't know how I have any left—but they're already welling up, looking at the wood and brass box that somehow contains my father. I'm dreading the moment they open it up, the moment when I have to see his face and know for certain that none of this is the nightmare that I keep trying to tell myself it still could be.

I'm not sure how long I sit there alone. I'm lost in thought, trying to think of better memories and happier days, and I don't hear the footsteps coming down the aisle behind me. I don't hear anything at all, until a voice floats towards me—a voice I recognize.

“Gianna?”

I know it's Alessio before I turn to look. I remember his voice, that faint accent learned from my father, the formal way he speaks to me. But his voice is softer and more soothing than I've ever heard it turned in my direction before. Something in my chest aches, hearing it, and I blink back more tears before I slowly turn to look at him, steeling myself for whatever it is that I might feel when I see him again.

It's an effort not to let him see what I'm thinking—at least, I hope he doesn't. I'm struck by him all over again the moment I see him there—tall and handsome, short dark hair swept away from his face, piercing green eyes looking at me with a softness that I don't think I've ever noticed in them before. He's dressed immaculately in a tailored suit, all black, his gaze and bearing somber, and he waits for me to speak before he says anything else. He just looks at me, and my mouth goes dry.

“Alessio.” The way I breathe his name isn't exactly appropriate—not for the day, or where we are, or *who* we are

to each other. But my heart flips in my chest, my pulse picks up in my veins, and I feel that hopeless crush all over again, just like I did when I was fifteen.

He's sophisticated, and elegant, and beautiful. He's always made me want things that I shouldn't. And it seems like three years hasn't changed a thing.

I get up, slowly, my entire body stiff from having sat in the pew staring at my father's coffin for so long. Alessio doesn't move, as still as a hunter in the woods trying not to scare off prey, and I wonder what it is that has him so guarded, besides the fact of having been gone for so long. I walk towards him, stopping just a short distance away, and he almost looks as if he's had to try not to flinch away from me.

Does he hate me? I can't imagine what I might have done to make him feel that way. It wouldn't make any sense, really. But I can't read anything on his still, silent face.

"I'm glad you came," I whisper, even that sounding loud in the quiet of the church. "I didn't know if you would. If anyone would tell you. Or if you'd come even...even if they did."

"I wouldn't have failed to come back for this." There's that stiff formality still in Alessio's voice as he looks down at me, but I can hear it falter the slightest bit. "How are you, Gianna?"

"I've been better." I bite my lip again, tasting blood; it's been bitten so often in the last forty-eight hours. A small, almost hysterical giggle builds up behind my teeth, and I have to swallow it back so I don't make a fool of myself here. I feel like I might come unhinged at any moment, like the numbness might break, and I might fall apart when the reality of it all hits me, and I don't know who I would turn to any longer if that happened. Once, it would have been my father I would have leaned on, if anything so awful had occurred. But now, I have no one.

"I'll be here for a little while after the funeral. The Family wants to speak with me, and then—" Alessio hesitates. "Well, I'll be going back to New York soon. But I'll make sure that you're alright, before I return."

There's no quantifiable reason for the way my stomach drops a little, hearing that. Of course, he's going back to New York—there's no reason to think that he would stay. I don't know why I would be disappointed to hear that he's going home, once all of this is taken care of.

"I'm sorry for your loss," Alessio says quietly, still looking down at me. I wish, for just a moment, that I could hear what he's thinking. I don't have the slightest idea why he's looking at me, almost as if he wants to bolt, as if he wants to be anywhere but standing here with me, with something shining in his eyes that almost looks like guilt.

"It's your loss, too." Before I can stop myself, I reach out, touching the back of his hand—and for just one moment, his fingers brush against mine before I feel him flinch back.

He *steps* back, too, putting a little more distance between us. Farther down the church, I can hear the wooden doors to the front opening and the sounds of hushed conversation. Alessio's shoulders stiffen, and he nods to me.

"I'll see you after the funeral, Gianna," he says formally. "I'm sure the Family will want to speak with me at length, but I'll be sure to give you my condolences and check on you again, before I make any decisions about when I'll be leaving.

Once again, there's no reason to feel so bereft when he walks away. There is no reason to feel that disappointment again.

And there's no time to think about it, because the church is beginning to fill up with everyone else who has come to say goodbye to my father, and I'm dragged abruptly back into the moment, into the reality of what's happening around me.

Alessio hasn't been a part of that for a very long time. And it seems to me that one way or another, he has no intentions of being a part of it now, either.

Alessio



I've never felt anything like the guilt that speared me when Gianna came to stand in front of me, when she spoke to me—when she touched my hand. The way even that brush of her fingers made me feel—

What the hell is wrong with you? I berate myself as I walk to my seat, feeling both that sick pulse of guilt through my blood and a desire that is both unexpected and unwanted. *In a church, no less?* I'm half-hard in my suit trousers from being so close to her, from the scent of her floral perfume and her hand grazing mine. I've never been aroused by something so simple in my entire life. I'm a man in his late thirties with a long list of women who have been in and out of my bed—it takes more than a pretty face, a whiff of perfume, and the touch of a finger to make me hard.

Except when it comes to Gianna Mancini, apparently.

The worst part about it is that marrying her is exactly what Giacomo wanted me to do. He *wanted* me to think about her as a wife—not back then, of course, but when she was old enough. He wanted me to promise that when she turned twenty-one, I would marry her. No matter that I'd be nearly forty then, or that I'm her relation by law, even if not by blood. No matter that I'm twice her age, that I was an adult when she was born. He'd said I was the only man he trusted with both his name and his daughter, and he wanted me to be her husband. Not a marriage of convenience, either, as I'd suggested. He wanted her to be happy. He'd believed *I* could make her happy.

I didn't have the heart to tell him all the reasons why he was wrong about that. So instead, I'd stuck to my excuses, to Gianna's age and our legal bond, and left. I'd stayed away for three years, and I would have stayed away for many more, if not for Giacomo's untimely death.

And now—

I swallow hard, taking my seat in the pew and resisting the urge to adjust myself, ignoring the ache in my groin in the hopes that it will go away if I don't think about her at all—not about her wide, soft blue eyes or the rosy shape of her mouth, how beautiful she is now, or the way her fingers felt soft against my hand. Not about what else I longed for her to touch in that moment, the way I imagined in one split second her without that black dress, her fingers and lips moving over my skin as I taught her—

Christ above, man. What the hell is wrong with you? I grit my teeth, forcing the thoughts out of my head. I feel slightly as if I've come unhinged, like something about all of this has caused me to start losing my mind. I *must* be losing my mind if I'm fantasizing about Gianna in a church at her father's funeral.

At *our* father's funeral, if the technicalities are upheld.

I manage to keep my thoughts on the straight and narrow for most of it. It's not hard once the church is full and the priest starts Mass—the air is too somber for anything else, too full of grief. Giacomo Mancini was a good man by all accounts—as good a man as one can be in this world we live in, and he helped those he could by whatever means he could. The church is full of both his peers and those he knew by association, people in the community that he helped, and it's clear that he was a man who will be missed. It's no surprise to me—even after so many years away, I don't doubt that he stayed the same man who adopted and raised me as his own when he thought he'd have no other child.

I want to go to Gianna, when we're in the cemetery. I see her one row forward at the edge of the grave, her hair blowing around her face and her cheeks streaked with tears. I have the

aching desire to gather her in my arms and comfort her, to tell her that things will be alright. That I'll keep her safe. Nothing makes me want that more than seeing Giacomo's consigliere—Lorenzo—standing next to her, a man I neither like nor trust, as much as Giacomo would have insisted I should feel otherwise. Throughout the burial, I catch him looking at her with a possessiveness that makes me uncomfortable, and I grit my teeth, holding myself back.

I feel certain that I know what the Family will ask of me, and if I go to Gianna, if I let myself comfort her and be seen with her in my arms, it will make it that much harder for them to take me seriously when I tell them that not only will I not do as I know Giacomo wished, I will not be staying here in Chicago, either.

I'm not surprised when I'm approached the moment the last bit of dirt has been thrown on the grave. The others standing around are beginning to dissipate, heading back to the waiting cars, and I see Lorenzo guiding Gianna back to hers with a hand on the small of her back that makes me see red, my teeth grinding together for reasons that I know I should not feel. Reasons that mean I need to return to Chicago sooner, rather than later.

"Alessio Moretti?" The gravelly voice comes from a few feet behind me, and I turn slowly, seeing the craggy face of Enzo Fontana, one of the elders from Sicily, and the second-highest ranking member of the Family.

I incline my head without thinking, an automatic sign of respect. I have no intention of bowing heedlessly to their wishes, but rudeness won't help anything—and my presence here and how I behave reflects on Luca, as well. Regardless of what happens today, I'm still Luca Romano's consigliere.

"Don Fontana." My voice is measured, equally respectful, but there's not a stirring of emotion on the other man's craggy face. He's dressed in an expensively tailored suit, a long black coat over it despite the warmth of the day, and a hat covering his iron-grey hair. He gestures to a car idling at the edge of the cemetery, two guards waiting outside of it.

“If you’ll come with me, Mr. Moretti,” he says calmly. “The Family would like to speak with you in private.”

“I expected as much.” I follow him to the waiting car, into the cool leather interior, and the silence that follows, a silence that persists until we arrive at the downtown hotel where he and the other senior members of the Family are no doubt staying. I follow him into the gilded elevator, still silent as we go up to the penthouse floor, past copious security, and into the richly appointed suite where I see five other men, equally aged and equally powerful, sitting in the living area, all with cut-crystal glasses of liquor in hand. One nervous-looking man is seated at the far end, dressed in a suit that would look expensive anywhere except in this room, where every man here except for him has access to the finest of Italian tailoring. *Giacomo’s lawyer, I expect*, I think as I take the seat that Don Fontana motions me to.

“You know why you’re here, of course, Alessio,” Don Fontana says, addressing me familiarly, though I know I should not do the same. “Mr. Smithwick will read Giacomo’s will, and we will discuss what it contains and how you will be a part of that. Although, of course, I’m sure you have some idea of what is written there.”

“I do.” I meet Fontana’s gaze evenly. “Unfortunately, I don’t think that I will be able to fulfill Don Mancini’s wishes. We—disagreed on his choices. I’ve given him my answer, and death doesn’t change that. *Nothing* will change that,” I emphasize, and Fontana shrugs.

“We will see. And we’ll discuss.” He nods to the lawyer. “Mr. Smithwick, please read the will.”

“Ah—of course.” The lawyer takes out a leather portfolio, opening it. The first part is more minor legal details and some of Giacomo’s assets, all of which have been put in trust for Gianna, and the matter of the mansion, which is also hers until the matter of her marriage is decided. “Turning to the topic of Don Mancini’s daughter and her marriage—” Mr. Smithwick clears his throat. “It is his stated desire that Alessio Moretti wed his daughter, Gianna Mancini, when she turns twenty-one, or in the case of his untimely death, as soon as possible. It

is also his desire that Mr. Moretti take on the surname of Mancini, as was always desired, and that he take over the position that Don Mancini previously held, effective immediately. It will be at Mr. Moretti's pleasure who remains in their current positions of rank within the organization, and who Mr. Moretti desires to replace."

"Well, there you have it." Fontana turns to look at me. "It should be neatly handled. You will take Giacomo's position as his stated and desired heir. And since his death could not be called anything other than untimely, you will also marry his daughter as soon as it can be properly arranged, once she's been given a period of time to grieve."

He says it calmly, flatly, as if it's all been decided. As if before the will was read, I hadn't said that I felt certain I knew what was within it and what my decision would be.

"No." I give my answer as calmly as I can, as *respectfully* as I can, but it won't be changed. I made up my mind about that before I ever left New York.

"No?" Fontana raises grey eyebrows. "Alessio, the will is clear. Giacomo has said—"

"And I know what *I've* said." I know I shouldn't have interrupted him, but I can't bring myself to sit there and listen to him tell me, at length, what I already know. What I've already argued about, also at length, with the man himself—with my adoptive father, an argument that broke both of our hearts long before it was broken all over again with the news of his death, before I could speak to him again. "My adoptive father and I have had this discussion. He knew my feelings on the matter and what I wanted. If he chose not to amend his will after I made mine clear, that was his prerogative and his choice. But I will not marry Gianna, and I do not want to be don."

Fontana regards me calmly, as if I haven't even spoken—as if I'm nothing but a child having a tantrum. *He might regard me that way*, I think grimly. But it won't change anything.

"I can think of any number of men, off the top of my head, who would be grateful for Gianna Mancini's hand in

marriage,” he says slowly. “Who would even beg us for the chance. Giacomo Mancini was powerful. He was respected. And the man who marries his daughter will inherit that along with his mafia and his wealth. There’s no reason why you should refuse, especially as this was his request.”

I’d known this was coming, but it still horrifies me. Not only the idea of what has been asked of me, but how it makes me feel. Before I’d come back to Chicago, I hadn’t been able to even think of the idea of marrying Gianna. But after seeing her in the church today—

That hot flicker of desire stirs deep in my belly again, and I try to ignore it. A look and a touch of the hand, that’s all it was. There’s no reason for it to make me think of her any differently than I ever have, no reason for it to make my mouth go dry and my heart beat harder at the idea of what marrying her would mean, the idea of taking her to bed, of taking that innocence that I’ve been entrusted with against my own desires.

Or rather, against my will, now. My desires, it seems, aren’t my own to command any longer.

“It’s impossible,” I tell Fontana curtly. “She’s my stepsister. That’s reason enough for me not to marry her.”

Fontana just chuckles, shaking his head, a sentiment that’s shared among the others in the room. “You weren’t raised together,” he says dismissively, waving a hand. “There’s no blood relation. It’s a foolish excuse, Alessio, and you know it. But what I can’t understand is why you insist so strongly on pushing back against this. There’s wealth and power in it for you, along with an exceptional marriage. You will be raised from consigliere to don with one signature. Men have killed for less.”

“I’m not interested in power, and I’m not interested in a wife. But if I were interested in either, I wouldn’t gain it by taking advantage of Gianna Mancini. And that’s all this is. She’s too young, all other arguments aside. And my feelings about the rest of it still remain.” I clench my jaw, refusing to be moved. “I won’t change my mind about this. I’ll stay to ensure that

Giacomo's affairs are settled, and then I will be returning to New York and my position with Don Romano."

Fontana's lips thin. "You insist on continuing this obstinance, despite both Giacomo's wishes and ours? Despite being told what you've been asked to do, something that any other man in your position—"

"I'm not any other man," I tell him coolly. "And I've given you my answer."

I can tell that I've made him angry. It's clear in his posture, in the set of his jaw as he answers. "Very well, then. If this is your position, and if you can't be moved from it, then we'll fall back on our second choice for who will take the mantle of don, and Gianna's hand in marriage—since you decline to accept." He turns and looks at the others, who nod.

"And who is that?" I speak before I can stop myself, before I can think better of the question I'm asking. They'd be within their rights not to tell me—I've voluntarily given up my right to inherit all of this, and they're under no obligation to tell me what their plan is in the event of that. But Fontana, for whatever reason, replies. And within moments, I think I understand why.

"She'll be married to Andre Leone," he says calmly. "I don't know that his family will be willing to have him take on the Mancini name, which is regrettable. They will not want to sacrifice their family name, which means the Mancini empire will be absorbed to raise up the Leone name." Fontana shrugs. "But such is the way life goes, sometimes."

There's something deceptively quiet in his voice, and I think I know why. I'm even more certain of why he told me this in the first place, when I see the expectant look on his face, waiting for my reaction.

I know very well who Andre Leone is—the eldest son of Giacomo's rival in Chicago, Enzo Leone, the head of one of the mafia families within the organization. It's no secret that he's resented Giacomo's refusal to make him underboss despite his pristine family line, and that he has always wanted Giacomo to agree to promise an eventual marriage between his

son Andre and Gianna. Now, it seems, the Family plans to give him exactly that since Giacomo is no longer here to protest his daughter's marriage.

And I could put a stop to it, with a word.

Fuck. My jaw tightens, anger pulsing through me—anger at myself, at Giacomo, but especially at the Family and Fontana. He knows what he's doing; I can see it in the smug twitch of his lips, and I know what he's expecting me to say. He knows that there's no way I can go back to New York with a clear conscience, knowing that I'm leaving Giacomo's legacy to be absorbed into the Leone family, knowing the triumph they'll have, knowing I'm abandoning Gianna to Andre Leone's bed.

But I can't have her in mine. I *won't*. So what is the compromise?

I let out a slow breath. "There is another solution here, Don Fontana," I say carefully. "One that perhaps serves both of our interests."

"Oh?" One of his thick, iron-grey eyebrows rises again. "And what is that, Alessio?"

"I will resign my position as Luca Romano's consigliere. I will remain in Chicago and take Giacomo's place as don, as you have asked. But I will *not* marry Gianna. Instead, I will take her on as my ward. I will be her protector and caretaker, until an appropriate husband can be found for her, one who does not have designs on her father's legacy, one who appreciates what Giacomo built here and wishes to raise it higher through marriage, not absorb it into his own family line. Those suitors who wish to seek a marriage contract with her may approach me and court her under my supervision. When a husband is to be chosen for her, it will be with *my* approval alone. There will be stipulations, including that the man who marries Gianna must be willing to take on her name."

Fontana frowns. "You do understand that means that only those outside of the three highest families will look to marry her? Leone will not sacrifice their family name for hers. Neither will the Marino family. They would insist that she hand over her name and wealth to them."

“Which means neither of their heirs will be considered,” I tell Fontana coolly. “Only those who respect the storied history of the Mancini family will be allowed to court Gianna. With my supervision, Giacomo’s wishes will be fulfilled to the best of my ability—she will be married to a man who will respect her and her family’s legacy, and who will bring it forward into the next generation.” I nod to Fontana. “After all, it is respect, and not ambition, that raises a man in the esteem of the Family, is it not?”

Fontana chuckles. “Son, no man rises here without ambition. But I take your meaning.” He lets out a long breath, glancing at the other men assembled, all of whom have let him speak. It’s a pointed nod to what I’d said already—that respect is what’s most important here. I can’t give in to Giacomo’s wishes or Fontana’s, not entirely. But I can do something to prevent Enzo Leone from taking what he wants from Giacomo’s family. I can do something to protect Gianna.

You could do more. The small, insidious whisper in my head grows a little louder, an ember of desire flickering in my belly. *I could* do more. I could do what’s written out in the will and marry Gianna. I could marry her *now*, without waiting more than a few months, the appropriate time to allow her to grieve, not the three years I would have otherwise been asked to wait. In a few months, she could be in my bed. It could be our wedding night, her slender body wrapped in the silk and lace of bridal lingerie, her sweet mouth upturned to mine, her soft skin—

My teeth grind against each other until I think they might crack, forcing the thoughts out of my head. *No*, I tell myself, ignoring the twitching throb of my cock, the heat that fills my blood at the idea of her innocence given up to my hands. *This is wrong.* What I want is wrong—what I feel is wrong. Nothing has changed simply because she’s grown up. Nothing *can* change.

It’s not until Fontana speaks again that I realize I’d been so lost in thought that I’d missed him conferring with the other senior members of the Family. He turns back to me, his

expression firm, and I know that a decision has been made, one way or another.

“We will accept your compromise, Alessio,” Fontana tells me. “You will notify Don Romano tonight of your decision. You will move into the Mancini mansion and take on Gianna as your ward. We will discuss, at a later date, the prospect of which men will be considered as potential suitors to wed her. Until then, she is in your care.” He turns towards the door, where I see a guard standing there, dressed all in black and silent. “Bring Gianna in.”

I feel a jolt of surprise at that, and another sharp pang of anger, realizing that they’d plucked her away from the gathering to remember her father in order to bring her here to hear their decision. *If I hadn’t proposed the compromise, she’d be finding out that she was meant to marry Andre Leone, right now. On the worst possible day to give her news like that.* The carelessness of it feels astounding, and if there was any question in my mind about the rightness of my decision to stay and protect Gianna, it’s gone in that moment.

The guard nods, stepping out, and a few moments later, the door opens again. This time, Gianna steps inside, pale-faced with red-rimmed eyes, her gaze flicking nervously over the gathered men sitting there.

“You said you wanted to speak with me?” she says softly, still standing rooted to the spot, and I rise without thinking, crossing the room to her. No one else has stood or offered her a seat—she’s a tool to them, a means to expand or redistribute power as they see fit, nothing more. But to me—

What is she to you, exactly? That insidious voice is in my thoughts again, but I ignore it. I take her elbow, gently, trying not to look too closely at the way her wide blue eyes turn up sweetly to look at me as I guide her to where I was sitting before—in front of Fontana, since I know he’s the one who wants to speak with her.

“A decision has been made about your future, Gianna,” he says, not unkindly, but I feel my jaw tighten anyway, that protective urge flaring in me once again. “Alessio has said he

will stay here in New York and accept the title and responsibilities of don, as your father wished. However, he has chosen not to accept the offer extended by your father that the two of you marry. He has requested that we leave you in his care as his ward instead, a suggestion that we have chosen to accept. Your husband will be chosen at a later date, a responsibility that Alessio has agreed to take on, as well. In fact—” Fontana looks at me, his lips pressed together thinly. “He insisted on it.”

“Oh,” Gianna says the word softly, but there’s no protest from her. Her gaze flicks to mine momentarily, catching me before I can look away. I see something that almost looks like disappointment on her face. I don’t know why, exactly—is she disappointed that I’m staying? That I’ll be the one choosing her husband? Or something else entirely.

“My father told me nothing about what he planned for me or his business once he had passed away,” Gianna says quietly. “So if that is your decision, then I will abide by it. But I would like to see the will, please.”

There’s a quiet steel to her tone that startles me. She’s sitting straight in her chair, her hands folded neatly in her lap, but for the first time, I see something in her that tells me she’s no wilting flower. She won’t defy them outright, but neither is she going to take whatever they say without some evidence that she’s not being entirely used.

I feel a flicker of pride, watching her—and something else, something that I don’t want to look at too closely. She holds out her hand, and Mr. Smithwick hesitates for a moment until Fontana nods, and he hands it over. I don’t miss the way Gianna’s mouth tightens at that, seeing that the lawyer waited for Fontana’s approval before handing over her own father’s will, but she says nothing. She simply takes the portfolio, opening it, and begins to read the document silently.

Long minutes stretch out without anyone speaking. I watch as Gianna flips through it, her face somber and pale, her eyes glossy with unshed tears. It’s not until the very end that I see one drip down off of her lashes, and then another. I have to

clench my hand against the side of my leg to keep from stepping forward and wiping it away from her cheek.

“Very well,” she says softly, closing the portfolio and handing it back to Mr. Smithwick. “I’ll do as you and Alessio have decided. When will he come to stay at the house?”

“Tonight,” Fontana says, before I can open my mouth, and I fix him with a dark look.

“Tomorrow,” I amend. “Gianna can manage one night on her own, certainly, with the staff there at the mansion. I’ll spend one more night at my hotel and make arrangements in the morning for my things to be packed up at my home in New York and flown here, and I can take up residence in the Mancini mansion, as requested. But I think Gianna deserves at least one night without a near-stranger in her house.”

“You’re not a stranger,” she says quietly, her gaze flicking to mine again, but I think I see a hint of gratitude in her face. “Tomorrow, then.”

It’s not until I’m back at my hotel that I call Luca. He answers after the first ring, his voice grave and serious. “Don Fontana contacted me,” he says, and I feel a hot flush of angry resentment that Fontana couldn’t even allow me to let Luca know what was decided myself, on my own time.

“I thought he would let me inform you,” I say quietly, my voice terse. “But I see that’s not the case.”

“Of course. I don’t think you were keeping it from me. And I can’t say I’m surprised. I thought that something like this might be the result, considering—” Luca lets out a slow breath on the other end of the line. “Considering your history with Don Mancini.”

History. The word is a vast understatement. “They wanted me to marry her. I refused, of course.” I clear my throat. “But this way, at least, the future of the Mancini name will be decided by me, as Giacomo wanted. It’s the best I could do.”

“Of course,” Luca echoes, but I can hear some doubt in his voice—about what, exactly, I’m not sure. “I was told that they

requested you remain in Chicago, rather than returning to New York to settle your own affairs.”

“That’s right.” I run a hand through my hair, eyeing the minibar in my room. “I’ll have someone collect what I need from my apartment and have it shipped here. I don’t plan to let the place go, for now, at least. Things may change.”

“I doubt it,” Luca says wryly. “Once Fontana has decided something, it rarely changes. But I can appreciate your reasoning.” He pauses. “If things should change, Alessio—I’m going to have to replace you as consigliere, sooner rather than later. I won’t be able to simply change that, if you come back.”

“I didn’t expect that you would. I know the responsibility you have.” It still weighs heavily on me, though, even as I say it. I’ve built something of my own in New York, working with Luca, something that feels earned rather than given. Giving it up to take on Giacomo’s legacy feels like a loss—a feeling that adds additional guilt to the weight on my shoulders, because I know what it meant to him to give this to me. But I can’t have both—and the one thing that could tip the scales was Gianna’s safety.

If it had been nearly anyone else, I might have returned to New York. But I couldn’t give her over to Andre. There was no chance of that.

When the conversation with Luca is finished, I open the minibar, take out the first bottle I see without bothering to look at what it is, and pour it into one of the glasses sitting nearby. When I raise it to my lips, it turns out that it’s vodka—far from my first preference—but I swallow it down anyway, needing the burn of the alcohol. In one day, my entire world has turned upside down.

So has hers, the voice in my head reminds me, and I grit my teeth. It’s right, of course. Gianna’s world has turned upside down as well, and much more drastically than mine. Giacomo was the only father I ever knew, and I loved him, but we hadn’t been close in some years.

I wasn’t the one who found his body.

She needs your protection, I remind myself, when my thoughts threaten to stray back to what Giacomo and the Family had wanted me to do, back to the knowledge that, if I chose, *I* could be the one who married Gianna.

My cock twitches again at the thought, a reminder of the unwanted desire that sprang up today out of nowhere. I reach down to adjust it, gritting my teeth against the swell of desire. I'm alone in my own room now—it would be easy to sink down into the armchair or the bed, undo my trousers, and have my cock in my hand in a moment. I rub my palm over the thickening ridge, considering—but after a brief struggle with myself, I pull my hand away, trying to ignore the now insistent throb.

If I touched myself now, I would think of Gianna. I have no doubt about that, as guilty as it makes me feel. And so I tip back the rest of the glass of vodka, doing my best to ignore my cock, and go back to the minibar in search of another drink.

I might not be able to control my desire, but I can control my actions. And if that means going unfulfilled, then that's simply how it will have to be.

Gianna is under my protection now. My responsibility, my *ward*.

Anything else is unacceptable. I remind myself of that as I sip my second drink, a whiskey that's much better, and try to turn my thoughts to other things.

I can control myself. I have to.

I can live with nothing else.

Gianna



I t's hard for me to even fully take in what's happened at first.

It's not until the last of the company has left the mansion—leaving me sitting in the living room with the staff milling around and cleaning up—that I'm able to try to think about what all of this has turned into.

I don't know how to feel. The grief feels like a tide, ebbing and flowing, at certain moments gripping my chest so tightly that I think I might die from it, and then receding enough for me to think again. The moments when I can think more clearly, all I can think about is the decision that was made today—that Alessio is coming to live here.

Tomorrow.

My stomach knots with an odd, nervous excitement at the thought—and a twinge of disappointment, too, when I think about what was decided. I know now that my father wanted me to marry Alessio. That *he* was meant to be my husband—the thing my father always refused to talk about—and take over for my father after his death.

It feels overwhelming—like too much to absorb. I'm still fearful about the circumstances of my father's death—as is the Family, if the extra security posted around and inside the mansion now is any indication—and I feel entirely unsure about what's supposed to happen now. According to my father's will—which I'm glad that I insisted on reading—Alessio was meant to marry me once I'd had time to grieve. But he refused, and now the compromise that he made with Don Fontana is something entirely different.

His *ward*, he'd called me. An old-fashioned, sophisticated word, albeit one that feels fitting for the world I live in, and the entire situation that I've found myself in. Instead of being my husband, Alessio will choose one for me. Instead of marrying me himself, he'll protect me until he can hand me over to someone he picks.

It's not what I would have chosen for myself, I think, as I go up to bed, still feeling half as if I'm floating in a dream. If he'd agreed to marry me, I would have gladly accepted. I think back to a few years ago, when he'd come back to visit, when I'd developed that terrible and unreciprocated teenage crush on him. I'd wanted him so badly then, his handsome face filling dreams that were entirely inappropriate, too many hours spent in daydreams about what might be beneath those tailored suits, thoughts that I couldn't entirely flesh out with so little knowledge about what would come after he slipped out of his clothing, and me out of mine. I didn't even know how to picture him properly—I still don't. I still don't know what comes next...not really. I have some idea, from books I've read, but it's hard to imagine it, exactly.

He could teach me. The idea stirs something warm and exciting deep within me, making my heart flutter in my chest. With it comes a flicker of guilt for feeling anything good at all, anything pleasant. For *wanting* anything to make me happy, when I've just lost so much.

But my father had wanted Alessio to be my husband. He wanted me to be happy. I don't know what his reasoning was, exactly—but he must have thought that Alessio would make me happy, that he was the best choice. And I feel a surge of frustration towards Alessio, for not going along with it. For defying my father even now, when it would have meant so much for him to agree.

He doesn't want me. The thought feels worse than it should, the idea that Alessio is so off-put by the idea of marrying me, *touching* me, that he'd rather hand me over to someone else. *But after all*, I think bitterly as I slide into bed, *he still gets to be don.* *He's not required to marry me for that, apparently.*

It's an unkind thought with no real reason for me to be certain that's how he feels about it, but I can be forgiven a little unkindness, I think, tonight of all nights. I lay there in my bed, curled beneath the covers in the huge mansion that is now technically mine and also somehow Alessio's, thinking of tomorrow, when he'll come and live here. Thinking of the life I was meant to have—the one where I was free for a longer time, where I went to college, where I experienced more of life without the needs and desires of a husband to hold me back. I was supposed to be free of all of that, for a while longer.

The night feels very lonely. And as I think about the last dinner I had with my father, the last conversation we had, I turn my face into the pillow and let the tears fall.

He was the only person I had who I knew truly loved me. The only one who I knew for sure would keep me safe.

And now he's gone forever.

—

In the morning, I feel tired and drained, my face swollen from crying in my sleep, and my eyes puffy. The best I can do before Alessio arrives is splash cold water over my face when I do my morning skin care routine, slipping into a dove-grey dress and flats, pulling my hair up in a loose bun so that I look somewhat presentable, and not like it's been difficult to make myself do much of anything in the way of caring for myself in the past few days. *If he cares*, I think grimly to myself, going downstairs to meet the day.

There's breakfast waiting for me in the informal dining room, which still feels much too large for just me, too large even for two people. I have no idea exactly what time Alessio is arriving, and I pick at the French toast and fruit that the cook fixed this morning, anxiety twisting in the pit of my stomach. I barely know Alessio, but he was supposed to be my husband, and he refused. I barely know him, but he's about to be living here with me, sharing the same space and meals and—

My head snaps up, and my heart leaps into my throat as I hear the front door open, the sound of a low male voice giving instructions. I hear heavy footfalls across the floor, walking

towards the room where I'm sitting. I swallow hard, setting my fork down as whatever small bit of appetite I had flees—and it wasn't much to begin with.

Alessio steps into the doorway, and my mouth goes dry.

In the morning light, standing in the dining room of the house I've lived in all my life, he's every bit as gorgeous as I remember—every bit as handsome as I thought he was yesterday. His dark hair is swept back away from his face, neatly styled, and those green eyes fix on me as he stands there, watching me from across the table, his hands in the pockets of his perfectly tailored suit. It clings to him in all the right ways, and I have a sudden, heart-pounding vision of running my hands over him—over the crisp fabric of his button-down, my fingers curling around his tie, pulling him into me for a kiss.

“Good morning, Gianna,” he says, his voice rich and deep, and while it does very little to dispel my fantasy, it does pull me out of my thoughts.

“Good morning,” I manage, feeling as if I might trip over my words at any moment. Three years, it seems, did nothing to dispel the way seeing him makes my heart flutter and leap, and the feelings I had yesterday weren't only a temporary madness caused by my grief. Even after a night's sleep and in the full light of day, I still want him every bit as much.

And none of that matters, because he doesn't want me.

“I know this is awkward.” Alessio clears his throat, shifting slightly. I get the impression he's also uncomfortable with the situation, as strange as that seems to me. “I also know I'm invading your space, and I—”

“This was your home, too.” I blurt it out before I can stop myself, knotting my hands anxiously together in my lap, my breakfast forgotten. “You grew up here,” I remind him. “You have every right to live here.”

“I think I forfeited that some time ago,” Alessio says quietly. “But it does seem that I'm the only one who feels that way.” He takes in a slow breath, nodding at the table. “May I sit? I

didn't eat much this morning. I thought of having this discussion with you in what is, now, I suppose, *my* office—but given the circumstances—”

A lump rises in my throat at the memory of finding my father dead in his office, and how it would feel to go back in there right now. It's been cleaned, of course, but I would still look at the floor and see the blood, remember—

“You could make a different room your office,” I suggest. “I mean—whatever conversation it is that you want to have, we can have it now. That's fine. I just meant, after—” The words tangle up on my tongue again, making me feel slow and foolish, and I press my lips together. “You can do whatever you want, of course, but—”

“Gianna.” Alessio's voice is gentle now, as he walks to the table and pulls out a chair. “If you want me to move the office to a different room in the house, you only have to ask. If you want anything at all, you only have to ask. All I want is for you to feel safe, comfortable, and protected.” He takes another slow breath, reaching for the glass carafe of orange juice in the middle of the table. “It's why I agreed to stay.”

“Not because it will make you one of the three most powerful men in the city?” The question comes out more biting than I mean for it to, and I see something flicker across Alessio's face, an emotion he quickly hides before regaining his composure.

“I'm here because of you, Gianna,” he says simply. “I had every intention of turning down all that your father requested of me, *including* the title and responsibilities of don. But Don Fontana's other plans for you were unacceptable. I couldn't allow him to follow through. So here I am.”

“My knight in shining armor.” I didn't intend for so much sarcasm and bitterness to drip off of my tongue, but it did anyway, and to my horror, I could feel my eyes getting glossy and hot with tears. “What was Fontana going to do, anyway?”

Alessio hesitates. “Gianna, I know this is all hard for you.” He reaches out, his fingers hovering over the back of my hand as if he's uncertain whether or not he should touch me, and then

his hand closes over mine, warm and solid and as comforting as he means for it to be.

Like a brother, the bitter voice in my head hisses. A brother he's never been to me and that he's never felt like. He left when I was born and came back when I was so much older, and all I see in front of me is a devastatingly handsome man who rejected me when I and everything I have was offered up to him on a silver platter. It shouldn't make me so hurt, so angry, but it *does*. "Just tell me the truth." I pull my hand back, knotting them in my lap again, my breakfast long since gone cold. "What was it that made you agree to stay?"

Alessio's hand lingers for just a moment where mine was before he pulls his back, and I see an odd sort of restraint on his face, like he's holding back some emotion that he doesn't want me to see. *Just let me see!* I want to shout at him, the grief and frustration and hurt of the past days welling up. *Just let me in.* But I don't think he's going to. He's as poised and elegant as ever, exactly the man that I remember from when I was a teenager, a man who barely so much as gave me the time of day. And now, he's here. Living with me. *Protecting* me, supposedly.

"Don Fontana wanted to marry you to Andre Leone," Alessio says wearily. "The Leone family would have absorbed your family name and wealth, making it a part of their own empire, which would have pleased Enzo Leone greatly, I imagine. I wasn't going to let that happen, even if marrying you myself, as I'm sure you saw that your father wanted, is out of the question."

Why? Why is it out of the question? It's on the tip of my tongue, but I don't know if I want the answer. I'm not sure that I want to hear it, whatever his reasons are for rejecting me. "And you're staying here until—"

"For as long as I need to," Alessio says firmly. "I *have* taken on the position of don, now. But that also means it's mine to relinquish, if I choose. And if the man who marries you—who I will *also* choose—is up to the task and willing to take on the Mancini name, then yes, I will relinquish it and return to New York."

My eyes instantly brim with tears, for reasons I don't understand. I sink my teeth into my lower lip, trying to bite them back, feeling as lost as ever. "So that's it, then. You're going to watch over my father's estate, watch over *me*, and then leave."

"It's not as cold as you make it sound, Gianna." Alessio's voice has that weary quality to it again, as if all of this has taken something out of him, too. "I'm here to ensure that no one takes advantage of either you or your fortune. Your father would have preferred to wait until you were a bit older for you to marry, and I agree, but the Family is insistent that this be resolved as soon as possible. So I am here to help continue what your father should have taught you."

"*Should?*" I stare at him. "What should my father have taught me? As far as I'm concerned, he taught me everything I need to know—"

"He expected to live longer than he did," Alessio says gently. "And he expected me to marry you, despite the conversations we had on the matter. So what you need to know in order to marry someone that the Family will approve of—how to be a good mafia wife, for one—are things that, yes, he neglected to teach you."

"A *good mafia wife*." The words roll as sarcastically off of my tongue as I mean for them to, this time. "And you're going to teach me?"

"Yes." Alessio sits back in his chair, still looking calmly at me. "It was your father's greatest wish that you be cared for and protected, Gianna. It's mine, as well. *I* care for you, and I want nothing more than to ensure that the husband who's chosen for you is aware of what a treasure he's been given by being allowed to marry you. I will make certain that the man who marries you is someone that I trust, that *you* can trust, and who will never harm you in any way."

I look at him as he speaks, trying to sort through the jumble of emotions welling up inside of me. What he's saying *sounds* good, genuine, *right*, even. He won't marry me himself, but he wants to be certain that not just anyone is allowed to, and

certainly not Andre Leone—who I have met before, and would not want to wed. It's clear that Alessio plans to have a great deal of control over it all—but who else would I *want* to have that kind of control over my future, besides myself? Certainly not the old man I sat in front of yesterday, who has no idea what I want, or what my father wanted, beyond the will that's clearly already been compromised on. And I don't think that old man, Don Fontana, cares all that much about what my father wanted in the first place, if I had to hazard a guess.

“That sounds—” I don't know what to say. The emotions are all too much, and I bite my lip, looking at Alessio across the table. He seems so calm, so collected, and all the while, I feel as if I'm coming apart at the seams. Everything has been turned upside down so quickly. “I have time, right? Before I have to get married?” My voice quivers on the last word, and there's a flicker of sympathy in Alessio's gaze.

“Yes,” he says simply. “I will make sure you have time, Gianna. The Family won't wait forever for you to be married, but they *will* wait.”

I nod, grateful for that, at least. My heart trips in my chest as I look at Alessio sitting there. He looks so handsome in the light, sitting at the head of the table, and I can't help but think of what it might be like if he stayed—if he decided that he belonged here, if he chose not to leave.

If he ever were to decide to do what my father wished for him to, and marry me.

“I'm—going to go upstairs,” I say thickly, emotion welling up in my throat and making it difficult for me to speak. “I need some time, I think.”

“I understand.” Alessio smiles gently at me. “I'll be getting my things arranged today, but if you need me, you can come and find me, Gianna. And I will relocate the office, as you asked.”

“You don't have to—”

“It's no trouble,” he says firmly, and I nod, turning quickly on my heel to flee back up to my bedroom before I burst into

tears.

I spend the rest of the day in my room. I don't trust myself to speak to Alessio without either saying something I shouldn't or *doing* something I shouldn't, which would be so much worse. I feel knotted up inside with grief and worry and other, stranger feelings that I can't put a name to, and guilt floods me every time I think of Alessio in the house, and I feel a sharp prick of excitement at the idea that he's *here*, and that for now at least, he's staying.

No matter how I try to distract myself—with books, music, even re-watching one of my favorite shows for a few hours—nothing works. My thoughts keep drifting back to Alessio, to what I had thought was nothing but a silly and inappropriate teenage crush, and I can't stop myself.

I've never felt anything like this for anyone else. I've never seen any other man who makes my heart leap into my throat when I see him, who makes my blood race, who makes my lungs feel as if all the air is being squeezed out of them. I've never imagined kissing anyone else, touching them, never wondered what any other man would be like if I took them to bed—a prospect that I'm not entirely able to imagine, but can't help but try to envision.

Only Alessio. And he is the one man who seems to not only *want* to refuse me, but is almost eager to hand me over to someone else. It could almost be insulting, if it didn't make me feel so strangely disappointed...even sad.

I rarely ask the staff to do favors for me—even growing up with them always there to tend to any need I might have, I rarely have any that I make known. It's always made me feel guilty to have others at my beck and call, but today, as I have a few times since my father's death, I make an exception. I ring for someone to bring me up dinner instead of going down, since I skipped lunch, and I pick at my food in my room, wondering if Alessio will come up and check on me. He doesn't, which makes me feel worse. Eventually, when it's late enough, I drag myself into a shower and then into bed, lying in the dark and staring at the ceiling, trying not to envision Alessio in a bed somewhere down the hall, in whatever room

he chose to stay in. Not my father's, I don't think—I think that would feel strange for him—but I wonder if he went back to his old room, the one he stayed in when he was here before, the one that was his before me, when the mansion was his home.

My cheeks flush red, remembering the afternoon three years ago when I snuck into that room and found a t-shirt left on his bed. I'd picked it up and smelled it, breathing in the spicy, woody scent of his cologne, feeling both as if I were doing something terribly wrong and exciting all at once. The smell of his cologne and his own natural, warm scent on the fabric had made my heart beat faster. It made me want to put the shirt on and curl into it, imagining that it was his body, his arms against me instead. I'd stolen the shirt, keeping it in my dresser drawer—and I'd forgotten it was there, for a while, once he'd left. Now, the memory comes flooding back, and I have to resist the urge to get up and retrieve it.

It wouldn't smell like him any longer, anyway. By now, it smells like the expensive laundry detergent the staff uses and my own perfume from my other clothes, not Alessio any longer. And if, for some reason, he should come up and peek in to see if I'm alright—my face heats up even more, imagining him looking into my room and seeing me in bed, sleeping in his shirt.

There's something a little exciting about that idea, too, though—a flood of butterflies in my stomach that I do my best to ignore—the idea that he might come up and find me like that, shake me awake, demand to know why I have something of his. That he might even punish me for it.

The unexpected thought startles me, and I go very still, my heart beating a quick rhythm in my chest. *Is that something that happens? Is that really something people enjoy?* I test the thought again, unsure of quite what such a punishment would entail, but I feel that small thrill again, the trip of my heart in my chest, a strange warm feeling flooding through my stomach and making the small muscles in my thighs tremble in a way I haven't felt before. My thoughts keep drifting back to Alessio, likely lying in bed down the hall, flickering through

images of what he might wear to bed—or not. Pajama pants with no shirt, just boxers—I imagine what his chest might look like, smooth and muscled or dusted with fine black hair, feeling more and more restless with every thought that passes through my head, and less able to sleep.

It feels stranger than I expected, having him here. It all feels strange. I don't entirely understand what it is that I'm feeling, or what any of it means, or what I'm expected to do about it—except simply see how it all plays out.

But that, I think as I close my eyes and do my best to fall asleep, is going to be much easier said than done.

Alessio



I wake in the morning unsettled, with an aching erection and a sick feeling of guilt flooding me from the last shreds of the dream that I do my best to shake off.

I dreamed of Gianna, something I tried very hard to avoid any chance of. I tried to push every possible thought of her out of my head before falling asleep. I tried not to imagine her in bed just down the hall; how easy it would be to look in on her and see her sleeping there. I tried not to imagine just how easily I could have her in *my* bed, if I just gave in to what it is that everyone around me seems to want me to do and married her. Lying there in a room in the same house, under the same roof, proved to be more of a temptation than I could have imagined. It was all too easy to conjure an image of her in the bed with me, pale skin against smooth white sheets, those liquid blue eyes looking up at me with innocent desire.

This is going to be more difficult than I realized, I thought as I lay there, recalling what it had been like just to sit across the table from her. The crush she once harbored for me hasn't gone away with time; that much is clear—I could feel the nervous tension coming off of her like a wave, and even though she pulled her hand away after a moment when I touched her, I felt her wanting that contact, that touch.

Maybe she's just a grieving girl who wants comfort, I tried to tell myself, but I haven't made it to thirty-six years on this earth without knowing when a woman wants me. Or, in Gianna's case, a girl, because I can't bring myself to think of her as a woman. If I do, it means acknowledging that she's old

enough to want, to desire, to feel—old enough to make choices that I can't condone the consequences of. Old enough to tempt me into things I know I shouldn't do.

I'd lain there sleeplessly for a long time, trying to think of anything else—of old flames, of the woman I fucked just before I came to Chicago, of the things I'd need to attend to in the morning...anything at all. Eventually, I fell asleep to the thoughts of going over the household ledgers—only for Gianna to invade my dreams.

She was, so far as I can tell, the last thing I dreamed of before I woke up—and the evidence is lying hard and thick against my thigh, demanding attention as I lie there cursing my wayward thoughts and my anatomy all at once. I try not to recall it—the way I'd dreamed of walking into my bedroom to find her already under the sheets, naked with the soft material clinging to her breasts, sliding down to show me, inch by inch, the body that I can't seem to stop wanting to see. I'd stood at the foot of the bed, gently demanding that she lower it more slowly, drawing out the anticipation, the pleasure, for us both. I'd been rock-hard by the time the sheet had pooled around her hips, revealing full breasts and a narrow waist—both in the dream and reality, it seemed—instructing her to slip her hand beneath the sheet, to the last part of her that hadn't been revealed to me, to touch herself until I told her to let me see. My cock had throbbed and ached, my hand drifting to it of its own accord, and now—

I grit my teeth, flexing my hand next to my thigh, trying not to touch myself. I woke up before the dream could go further, before I was able to see her most intimate flesh. Still, my thoughts are all too quick to want to fill in what might have come next, to imagine the soft dark hair between her thighs and how wet she might be for me, the sight of her fingers slowly stroking pink, warm flesh that would twitch and flutter under her fingertips, flesh that she might not have even touched before.

Oh god. That thought is enough to make my cock lurch dangerously, threatening to leave a mess over my thighs and the sheets without having even touched myself. The idea that

Gianna might be *so* innocent that she's never even let her fingers stray over herself before, that she might be completely unaware of pleasure of any kind—it shouldn't turn me on. It shouldn't make my jaw clench, and my muscles flex in an effort to hold back the urge to—

My hand closes around my cock before I can stop myself, the shaft so slick with pre-cum from my arousal that there's no uncomfortable friction, only the hot glide of my palm over my over-sensitive flesh, enough to make the muscles in my thighs quiver, and my toes curl. I try to put Gianna out of my head as I stroke; *god*, I try, but she keeps flickering into my head no matter what I do—her wide, innocent blue eyes and her soft smile, those plush, rosy lips that would look so beautiful wrapped around the head of my cock as I fed it between them, teaching her just how to lick, how to suck, how to give the perfect blowjob that no other man would ever get to experience from her—

“Fuck!” The curse comes out as a hoarse, muffled growl as I clench my teeth against the sudden burst of my orgasm, my cock hardening and throbbing in a rush of pleasure so intense it's almost pain, that last image of Gianna on her knees with rosy, puffy lips around my cockhead sending me over the edge before I know what's happening. I manage to throw back the sheet just in time to avoid drenching it, hot cum spurting thickly over my fingers and hand as I thrust up into my fist, groaning between clenched teeth as my other hand fists at my side, my strokes hard and erratic.

I lay there panting for a long moment afterward, eyes closed, feeling that wave of guilt all over again. *What kind of man are you?* I ask myself with bitter rancor, my stomach knotting as I sit up, disgusted with myself as I feel the sticky, cooling cum on my fingers. I stride to the bathroom, turning on the hot water for the shower, and stepping inside before it's fully warm, eager to try to wash away the way both the dream and my subsequent loss of control made me feel.

By the time I manage to shower, shave, dress, and go downstairs, I find Gianna already at the breakfast table. She looks pale and tired, like she didn't sleep well either, but then

again—I can hardly blame her. Not only has she lost her father, but now there’s a man who might as well be a stranger living in her home, and she’s facing impending marriage to someone who will be only slightly better than a stranger when they’re wed. In the face of that, my concerns and guilt are nothing.

She looks up at me as I sit down with a small, tired smile. “Good morning,” she says, her tone a little more formal than it was yesterday. I wonder if she’s intentionally trying to put distance between us. I couldn’t blame her if she was—and it’s better for us both, truthfully, if she does.

“Good morning.” I clear my throat, sitting down, and reaching for the tongs to add bacon from a platter in the center of the table to my plate. This experience is one I haven’t had in some time—having breakfast served like this by staff instead of picking it up myself or by an assistant on my way to whatever morning meeting or task I have...or just downing a protein shake before the gym. There’s bacon, eggs, thick toast with small ceramic pots of jam, butter, and honey, a steaming tureen of oatmeal with more small dishes next to it full of cream, raisins, dried cranberries, and brown sugar, sausages, and miniature quiches. Gianna has a quiche and a piece of dry toast on her plate, and I resist the urge to ask her if she shouldn’t be eating more. I can imagine she doesn’t have much of an appetite, with all that’s happened.

I realize she’s looking at me, watching me with an almost appraising expression on her face, and I glance over at her. “Is everything alright?”

“You seem...” she pauses, her teeth catching on her lower lip, and I have to look away. What I imagined this morning with my hand around my cock still feels all too close, and I don’t know how I could live with myself if I sat here at the breakfast table imagining her mouth on me. “—off,” she finishes, and I can still feel her eyes on me.

“Just the first night in a new place,” I say quickly, in an effort to change the subject as I reach for a piece of toast. “Or at least, a place where I haven’t spent the night in some time. That’s all.”

“You didn’t come up to check on me last night.” Her voice sounds almost piqued, as if she’d hoped that I would. “I thought you might be upset with me. That I said or did something—”

“I wanted to give you space to be comfortable with my presence in the house,” I tell her quickly, not wanting her to think that I’d been angry with her. “I thought if you wanted to see me, you’d come and seek me out. Otherwise, I thought taking it slow might be best.”

“So what now?” Gianna is picking at her toast now, shredding it between her fingers rather than eating it. “What happens?”

I pause, considering as I cut a piece of sausage. “What would you do if your father were still alive?” I ask, hoping the question won’t come off as insensitive. “What were you planning for? Anything? Was there anything coming up—”

“College.” Gianna bites her lip again, and I see that glossy shine in her eyes. “We talked about whether or not I wanted to go to college—he was going to have me go and enroll. With plenty of security with me, of course,” she adds quickly. “And he did specify I would still live at home. But that was what we talked about, the night he—”

Her voice breaks off, and I reach out without thinking, touching her hand again. She doesn’t pull away this time, her gaze lifting and meeting mine, and I see the tears trembling on the edges of her lashes.

Even grieving, she’s still stunningly beautiful.

“I’m so sorry,” I tell her quietly, unsure of what else to say. “It was your birthday, wasn’t it?”

Gianna nods. “I’m going to think about that every year now. Every year I get older is one he won’t. It feels so unfair.”

“Well, I can promise you that he would have rather that than the other way around.” I don’t know how reassuring that is, but it’s the truth. “The circumstances of your father’s death are suspicious, Gianna—which I’m sure you’re aware of. I know the other bosses in the city are already looking into it, and I plan to use my own influence and resources to do the same. If

there was something amiss, I'll find out about it. I promise you that."

She swallows hard, nodding. "I trust you," she says softly. "I know if there's something wrong, you'll find out."

"And in the meantime, everything that can be done to keep you safe, will be." I slip my hand away from hers, no longer able to keep touching her without my thoughts wandering, as guilty as that makes me feel. "I don't want to stop you from taking classes, but there will have to be more of a security presence than you might be comfortable with, given the permissions and accommodations we'll certainly have to get from the college to have that significant of a presence with you. And, of course, your future husband—"

"You're not going to say that I have to get permission to keep going to college." Gianna's eyes widen. "My father would *never* have wanted that—"

"I was going to say that he'll certainly want his own security with you as well, I'm sure, once a husband is chosen for you. But no, Gianna. Any man who is against you getting a degree for your own pleasure is one whom I would disapprove of. But I will say that I wouldn't expect much use to come of it. Mafia wives don't work, Gianna. They aren't professors or doctors or anything else you might be thinking of."

"I could be an author." Gianna shrugs. "I wanted to take literature classes. Poetry, maybe. That's something I could do on my own time. In between whatever—" Her teeth sink into her lower lip again, hard enough that I want to lean in and kiss away the sting she must feel. "Whatever it is that I'm supposed to be doing as someone's wife."

The thoughts that flood my mind in an instant, one after another, are entirely inappropriate. I banish them as quickly as I can, refocusing on the conversation, but for a moment, they're there—the idea of Gianna as a wife, tending to her husband's needs, on her knees for him or bent over a bed, of cum leaking out between her soft folds, pearly white and pushed back into her with long fingers that make her squirm and moan, intent on getting her pregnant as soon as possible.

Gianna, soft and round with a child from that, her skin flushed and radiant—

In all those thoughts, I'm the one she's kneeling for, bending over for, my cock and fingers inside of her, my child she's carrying. All I can do is hope that she sees none of it on my face as I try to collect myself, cursing myself for even thinking of it. I'm hard all over again, my cock twitching and lengthening against my thigh, and I won't be able to stand up for a few minutes at least until I can get myself back under control.

"You're sure you're alright?" Gianna is peering at me anxiously again, and I clear my throat. *She's so innocent that she can't even tell that she's turned you on. She has no idea what an aroused man looks like. This is what you're fantasizing about.* The guilt burns hot and thick in my chest, and I let out a breath, looking down at my plate.

"Like I said." I force a smile. "Just not the best night's sleep I've had in a while."

After breakfast, Gianna excuses herself, and I go to the office that I requisitioned for myself yesterday, a room that has a view out to the pool at one side of the house from a large bay window in front of where I've situated my desk. I spent most of the afternoon yesterday getting the room organized to my liking—putting up bookshelves and arranging my books and files, and personal items that I like to keep in my office space. There's no fireplace in this room, which is an unfortunate step down from the other, but there are plenty of other rooms in the house with fireplaces if I want to have a drink and read in front of one. For the most part, the room is exactly as I'd like it, and I sit down to start the day, putting Gianna as firmly out of my head as I can.

Which is easier said than done, considering one of the tasks I've set for myself is to call Luca and discuss the issue of Giacomo's death with him.

Luca answers the video call from his office in the high-rise in New York, which I already feel a stab of nostalgia for. The Mancini mansion is beautiful, well-appointed, and luxurious,

with everything I could possibly need—but it's situated a bit outside of the city proper, and I already miss the noise and constant movement of Manhattan. Everything is in motion there, all of the time—everyone has somewhere to be, something to do, giving the feeling of being constantly swept up in a tide of urgent humanity, all in a hurry to live their lives as fully as possible. There's a richness to the city that I miss that isn't here, on the outskirts of Chicago.

“How is she?” Luca asks as he picks up the call. “And Chicago?”

“It's as good as can be expected. The same goes for Gianna.” I let out a slow breath. “I know Fontana isn't going to wait long before he starts suggesting potential matches for her. I promised her that she'd have time before she'd be pushed into a betrothal. They promised her that time, but you know how Fontana is. He won't have as much respect for her grief as we'd like to think.”

“That's true.” Luca taps his fingers against the desk, clearly thinking of something that he wants to say and not saying it. “Are there any prospects you have in mind for her?”

“Not yet.” I pause, frowning. “What aren't you saying?”

Luca sighs, running a hand through his hair. “Fontana filled me in on the will, Alessio. I know what Giacomo wanted you to do. Gianna would be safer if you simply married her. Surely you realize that?”

“I can keep her safe without marrying her.” I grit my teeth, frustrated that even Luca doesn't seem to understand my position on this. “I called you to discuss Don Mancini's death. The circumstances of it—”

“Are strange,” Luca agrees. “He's always had excellent security at his home—he's had to. For someone to slip into the mansion in the middle of the night like that—it's not something that could have been achieved without someone having some inside knowledge. I know Vasilev and McNeil are already looking into it. But I'll see what I can do on my end.”

I nod. “It’s all I can ask. And I’ll do my due diligence here as well—and get in touch with the other bosses. There’s been no small amount of upheaval here recently, and it might have been someone taking advantage of the unrest. Wouldn’t be the first time.”

“No, it wouldn’t,” Luca agrees. He’s quiet again for a moment, and then he rubs his hand over his mouth, focusing on me from the other side of the screen. “I know you have your own feelings about all of this, Alessio. But you ought to consider the offer to marry the girl. She’s safer with you than she would be with any of the families trying to get to her—not *for* her, but for her name and money. You know that. You know what absorbing the Mancini empire would mean to any of the other families who want to rise higher in Sicily’s estimations. You’d be better for her.”

I stifle a groan—and the way I feel a quick, jolting stir of excitement in my belly at the thought of doing just that, of throwing away all my arguments against it and making Gianna my wife, the way the thought makes my blood beat a little faster in my veins. “That doesn’t make it the right thing to do,” I insist. “I’ve told you my reasons. She’s legally my stepsister, and her age—”

“—won’t matter to anyone else,” Luca finishes, his tone flat. “No one else will have these principles, Alessio, and they won’t treat her better for not having them. As for the matter of being her stepbrother, you know as well as I do how little that means. It’s a piece of paper, that’s all. You barely knew her. That holds very little water, other than to excuse you from doing something that you want a reason to avoid, for god knows why.”

“I’ll find her a husband who will treat her well,” I insist. “I’ll make sure she’s taken care of. That’s the best I can do. As for the rest—any help you can give me, or anything you hear will be greatly appreciated.”

“Of course.” Luca nods. “I’ll be in touch with you as soon as I find out anything at all. And if you need anything—”

“I’ll call.”

When the screen goes dark, I sit back in my chair, feeling tired all over again. I'd hoped at least Luca would understand my reasons for pushing back against the idea of marrying Gianna. But he seems to think the same as everyone else—that I'm a fool for even trying to refuse.

This isn't going to get easier, I think as I sit there, looking out of the window to the estate beyond. The longer I'm here, the closer I get to Gianna, the harder it will be not to care for her in a way that I suspect will quickly begin to feel far from step-brotherly.

It will be on me to control myself. To force myself to do the right thing.

And that means giving her to another man, instead.

Alessio



The next week is spent falling into a new sort of rhythm, one that I can tell is very different from how things were before for Gianna. Her father's absence, of course, is the most glaring part of that for her, I'm certain—but it's also a matter of learning how to live with someone who is, for all intents and purposes, a stranger. I avoided her as much as I could when I was here three years ago, aware of her crush and not wanting to feed into it for either of us, knowing what her father wanted of me. Gianna is all too quick to tell me what she was used to before—about breakfasts and dinners with her father, sitting while he read his morning paper or told her about the events of his day, or listened to her as she told him about what she'd read or learned or asked him endless questions. Now, all she has is me, and I'm well aware that's not enough, especially since I can't be for her what her father wanted me to be.

I can't imagine that would be what *she* wanted—that her teenage crush has lingered so thoroughly that she would want to marry a man twice her age, that she would want to marry *me*. I think she's aware that I don't really want to settle in here, that I still have one foot in New York, that I intend for whoever marries her to hopefully be someone that I can feel comfortable handing off the mantle of power to, instead of staying on myself as the new don.

A week, to me, feels too soon to have her sitting in my office while I discuss her marriage prospects with her. But I know that Fontana won't see it that way, and while he hasn't pressed the issue yet, I know it's better to have the discussion with Gianna sooner rather than later, before he insists that I move

things along at a faster pace. I want to buy her more time to adjust and make a choice, not less.

“Did your father not talk to you about marriage at all?” I ask her as she sits down in the leather chair across from my desk, her expression nervous. She’s wearing leggings and a long green tank top that sets off her dark hair and pale skin, clinging to her curves, but I don’t think it’s her choice of outfit so much as just *her*. Every day here so far has been a trial when it comes to keeping my thoughts away from anything that could be construed as anything other than *familial*, and I’ve been failing more than I would like. Gianna is beautiful, sweet, and innocent, and all I should be thinking about is protecting her. During my waking hours, I can usually push away any inappropriate thoughts before they take root too deeply, the guilt flushing them out if I can’t—but while I’m sleeping, is a different matter. My dreams have featured her every night since I moved into the mansion, and no matter what I try, I can’t seem to shake her loose.

The sooner she’s married, the sooner I can get those thoughts out of my head—and the sooner, hopefully, I can go back to New York. But above all else, I don’t want to rush her. That would defeat the purpose that I came here for—to protect her and make sure that she’s safe.

“No,” she says softly. It makes sense, I suppose—Giacomo stayed firm in his decision that I should be the one to marry her, even after I said flat out that I wouldn’t consider it, but I would have thought that he would have at least discussed other marriage prospects with her—or the *idea* of marriage, at the very least.

“So he kept you entirely in the dark? Even about what he wanted from me?” I’d seen her surprise when she read the will, but it’s still hard for me to fathom that Giacomo never said anything to her at all.

Gianna shakes her head. “He changed the topic whenever I’d ask him about it—which wasn’t often, because I didn’t have any desire to get married soon. He—” She takes a slow breath, clearly feeling overwhelmed, and I give her a moment. “Did

he not know that you wouldn't do it?" she asks softly. "That you wouldn't marry me?"

"We had an argument about it," I admit. "The last time I was here. He told me plainly that he wanted me to be his heir and that he wanted me to marry you. I refused, and we went back and forth, but without any resolution. I told him that I wouldn't change my mind, and I left and went to New York. I don't know why he didn't tell you."

"Maybe he didn't want to get my hopes up, if he thought you might still say no." Gianna looks at me across the desk, her gaze, soft and steady, and my heart thuds in my chest.

Get her hopes up? "You don't want me as your husband," I tell her firmly. "Your father couldn't understand why I refused, no matter how much I explained, but my answer hasn't changed. I'll find you someone who you'll be happier with, and who will be a better match."

Gianna's teeth worry at her lower lip, and I see her hands knotting together nervously in her lap. "I don't know what's expected of me," she says softly. "We didn't talk about—any of it. My mother died when I was so young, you know that. I didn't make friends growing up, not really. It was always just me and my father, for the most part. I don't know what a mafia wife is supposed to *do*."

"It's not that complicated," I tell her reassuringly. "The wives I know are mostly focused on their families, and doing things like helping with charities or sitting on boards for various organizations that give them insight into parts of the community that will help their husbands. There are events and dinner parties, things like that. You're there to be supportive, to be—"

"A trophy?" Gianna frowns. "You're about to tell me that I need to look pretty on his arm and say witty things when asked and stay quiet the rest of the time, right?"

I wince. "Some of the time, yes. But my goal is to find you a husband who will genuinely respect and care for you, Gianna. There are plenty of mafia sons who will want to meet you—it's just a matter of finding you the right match. And if you

marry someone closer to your age, there will be time before you have those kinds of responsibilities. Time for you to get to know each other and form some kind of companionship before you have to be a part of those kinds of things.”

“What about—” She licks her lips nervously, and I have to look away for a moment. The sight of her tongue flicking over her full bottom lip makes me feel slightly dizzy, and I feel my cock twitch in my suit trousers. “What about—after we’re married?”

I look at her, trying to hide the confusion in my voice. “What else do you want to know? Besides what I just explained—”

“I mean—” Gianna’s cheeks are flushing, red staining her high cheekbones. I realize with a slow glimmer of understanding what she’s talking about. “I mean, after the *wedding*.”

Oh no. We are not having this conversation. My chest tightens at the prospect of explaining the birds and the bees to Gianna, my mind racing, trying to parse out just *how* innocent she really is. “What is it that you’re asking, exactly, Gianna?” I ask as softly as I can, and I see her flush deepen.

“I don’t know—anything about pleasing my future husband, really.” Her voice is almost a whisper, her eyes flicking away from me as if she’s too embarrassed to look at me while she says it. “I know—a little about what to do, I mean, but not *how*...”

Gianna swallows hard, still looking away, and I’m grateful for the moment to compose myself. The conversation has gone in a direction I didn’t expect, and just the sound of her soft voice whispering questions about how to please her future husband in bed has my cock thickening, a slow pulse of desire as I try to wrestle my own thoughts under control.

“I know it’s not how things are always done,” she continues, her voice a little stronger now. “But I want my husband to be faithful to me. I don’t want to wonder who he’s with, what he’s doing with others—even if it’s not love, I want him to be satisfied enough that he won’t stray. I want—” She breaks off again, and I suck in a slow breath, trying to think of what to say. It’s difficult, with my cock straining against my fly now.

She wants to satisfy her husband. Please him. Make sure he's so well-fucked that he won't have the slightest desire to stray from her bed. I could be that husband. All it would take is a word, a single *yes* to Don Fontana, and Gianna would be mine. I can't imagine straying, being unfaithful, not with her in my bed, sweet and innocent and perfect. I look at her with some effort, sitting there, almost trembling with embarrassment over the questions she's forced herself to ask, and it's all I can do to keep myself under control.

I want to reach for her, pull her into my lap and stroke her hair, kiss her gently, and promise her that it won't matter, because she's mine, and I'd never so much as look at another woman. I want to tell her that she doesn't have to know, because I'll teach her. I'll teach her *everything*, how to suck my cock and how to take it, how to part her pretty thighs so I can lie between them and taste her until she cries out for me again and again, how to give me everything that will please us *both*. I could choose any one of a hundred men for her, and they wouldn't be as devoted to her pleasure as I would be.

Get yourself under control, Moretti, the voice in the back of my head hisses at me. This is the kind of man you want to be? Fantasizing about teaching her to take your cock while she sits there shaking, asking you to comfort her? The guilt runs through me, thick and hot, and I swallow hard.

"You don't need to worry," I tell her as gently as I can. "I intend to try to find a husband for you who will respect you enough to remain faithful to you. And barring that, one who will respect you enough to be discreet." I see Gianna's eyes widen, her instant reaction, and I hold up a hand. "I know what it is that you want. But fidelity is something that is—difficult to find among men like the ones who occupy our world. You should go into this with clear eyes, Gianna."

"I don't want a husband who would cheat on me." Her voice is soft, but firm. "I know better than to expect love. I might be sheltered, but I'm not an idiot. I know enough to know that a husband whom I can respect and get along with is what I should hope for. But I don't think asking for him not to cheat is too much." She licks her lips nervously, a flush growing in

her cheeks. “I don’t want to spend my entire married life knowing that everyone secretly knows my husband is with other women too—that they’re all pitying me. All those other wives, wanting to commiserate with me over the shared infidelity of our spouses. It’s humiliating. I want my husband to respect me more than that—I don’t think that’s impossible.”

“I hope that’s true.” I look at her, wishing I could soothe her worries better than I’m able. “You’ll have a chance to meet your prospects, Gianna. You’ll talk to them and get to know them a bit, before a choice is made. You can say that’s what you want and see their reaction. I’m not trying to force you into anything. But Fontana won’t wait forever. You may not find a perfect choice.”

There’s a flicker of disappointment in her face, but she nods. “Is that all?” she asks, starting to get up from her seat, and I nod.

“For now. We can talk about it again later, Gianna. Not everything has to be worked out today.”

The moment she’s out of the office, I reach down and adjust myself, feeling my cock throb against my palm through the light wool of my trousers. It’s going to be hard to focus on much else, and I briefly consider going upstairs and dealing with it—but there’s the possibility of running into Gianna on the way. The last thing I want is for her to see the state that conversation left me in.

You’re a thirty-six-year-old man, Moretti, I growl at myself, looking back down at the papers on my desk. Surely, you can manage to ignore a wayward erection long enough for it to go away.

The problem, of course, is that my days around Gianna are beginning to feel like one prolonged wayward erection, throughout various parts of the day. I force myself to ignore it anyway, going over a spreadsheet until my eyes start to cross and my cock starts to soften, some of the frustration draining away.

And then I look up, out of the window that overlooks the pool at one side of the house, and see Gianna in a bikini.

And why wouldn't she be? It's one of the first beautiful days of summer outside, bright and hot and perfect for swimming. My first thought is that I'm glad she found the initiative to put on a swimsuit and do something she would enjoy, instead of staying in her room. But hard on the heels of that thought, slamming into me with a force that takes my breath away, is the feeling that I'm not sure I've ever seen a more beautiful girl in all my life—or one that I've more desperately wanted to fuck.

The hot guilt that lances through me on the heels of the thought doesn't stop my cock from hardening again as I look at her, my easing erection springing back to full, aching life. Almost every inch of her perfect body is visible in the tiny red bikini that she's wearing, from her full breasts that are only just covered by the small triangles of silky red fabric and strings to the narrow curve of her waist and slope of her hips, another small triangle covering the apex of her thighs, sliding up between the soft shape of her ass. All of her curves would fill my hands perfectly. I can imagine in a split second the weight of her breasts in my palms, the way her nipples would stiffen under my touch as I ran my fingertips over them, god, my *tongue*. Her legs are long and slender, her thighs perfect and soft, and I can imagine them wrapped around my shoulders as I delved my tongue between them, tasting her sweet pussy for the first time. The first man to ever touch her, taste her, the first to show her how good the heat of my tongue could feel, tracing her folds, sliding inside of her, licking over her clit. I can *hear* her startled gasp, realizing how good it can feel, her small whimpers of pleasure as I teach her all of those sensations for the very first time.

Fuck. My head is spinning with lust, every part of me focused on the vision yards away from me, just outside. *I could go out there now. I could kiss her, lay her back on one of those lounge chairs, see what her reaction would be. I could teach her everything she needs to know about pleasure, and never let another man find out how well she could learn.* I imagine eating her out there, in the sunlight, pulling aside that scrap of bikini to press my mouth between her thighs. It would be all I'd do, at first. I wouldn't even show her how it felt to have so

much as a finger inside of her yet—I'd just please her, make her come with my lips and tongue, until she was so overwhelmed with pleasure that she would beg for me to show her more.

My cock is throbbing, painful with need. I flex my hands at my sides, gripping the arms of my chair, knowing I should get up, leave the room, go literally anywhere else in the house. Above all else, I should *not* touch my cock, because if I do, I'll jerk off to the thought of Gianna out by the pool, *in* the pool, of that red bikini clinging wetly to her glistening, soft skin, and then—

Then I'll have fallen deeper into the pit of self-loathing that I've been digging for myself since I walked back into this mansion and agreed to watch over her until she could be safely married.

There's plenty of work I could do. There are spreadsheets to go over, files to look at, Giacomo's endless business arrangements and employees, and a dozen other things to familiarize myself with. Plenty of work that doesn't involve watching Gianna sunbathe, swim, do *anything* at all in that tiny bikini, or imagining her without it, or—

My cock throbs again, and I feel the damp heat of pre-cum against my thigh, my cock swollen and straining, leaking against my skin. My heart is pounding in my chest, a faint sheen of sweat on the back of my neck, the breath catching in my throat. I don't know if I've ever been this aroused before, if I've ever, in all the time since the night I fucked a girl for the first time on the deck of Giacomo's yacht and hoped the security tailing me wouldn't interfere, wanted a woman as badly as I want Gianna Mancini right now.

I don't know if I've ever felt anything like this, and if I have, I can't remember it.

If I have, I don't know how I could possibly *forget* it.

My hands tighten into fists again, trying desperately not to touch myself. I watch as she disappears beneath the water, a brief reprieve, although my cock is still throbbing just as insistently. And then she reappears, dark hair clinging to the

back of her neck, bright sunlit water beading over her skin. When she starts to step out of the pool with that bikini sticking to her like a second skin and the water dripping off onto the deck, I lose what is quickly becoming an endless battle with myself.

I don't even bother undoing my belt. I drag my zipper down with one pull, hard enough I almost think I might have broken it, palming my cock out of my trousers feverishly and letting out a hiss of pleasure when my hand wraps around my hot, aching length. I run my fingers over my dripping cockhead, spreading the pre-cum down the shaft, ignoring every guilty, shouting thought in my head as I watch Gianna out on the pool deck, lounging back in one of the chairs in full view of my office window.

She's not doing this on purpose. She can't be. It's a coincidence that she's lying exactly where I can glimpse between her thighs, where I can see the shadow of what might be the dark curls just beneath the red fabric—because surely a girl as innocent as she is wouldn't think to shave. She might, if her husband asked her to, but—

My cock throbs dangerously in my fist, imagining requesting that of her, asking that she shave herself bare for me, insisting that she let me see. *Have you been a good girl? Did you shave your pussy for me the way I asked you to? Lift up your skirt, sweetheart, let me see. Let me feel—*

I suck in a breath at the thought of sliding a hand up her skirt, beneath her panties, stroking bare, soft flesh. Outside, her legs spread the slightest bit wider, her back arching a little as she squirms with pleasure on the chair, enjoying the warmth of the sun on her skin. And when she rolls over, the perfect shape of her ass directly in front of my gaze, enough pre-cum spills out of the tip of my cock that I almost think I've come without realizing it.

The view is exactly what I would see if I fucked her from behind. I could slip that tiny bit of fabric to one side, nudge my cockhead against her wet entrance, push myself into her—so tight and wet and hot that no other pussy would ever feel as

good, ever again. She'd never need to worry that I would stray from her bed, not if I could have her. Not if she was mine.

I close my eyes for the briefest moment, imagining gripping her ass as I thrust into her, sliding my fingers between her cheeks, teasing the tight hole there, just above where I'd fill her up. I could teach her to take me there eventually, too—to let me fuck her ass while I filled her with my fingers, rubbed her clit, and made her come for me like that, too. Every part of her is innocent, untouched, but by the time I finished—

My eyes snap open, the fantasy so far gone that I feel that hot flood of shame again, even as my hand still twists and strokes over my cock, my balls tight, so close to the edge. I almost don't want to come yet—it feels so fucking good, stroking myself like this, imagining things that I *know* I'll regret as soon as the orgasm ebbs, that will make me hate myself a little more for losing control. For now, all I feel is pleasure, my fingers rubbing over my straining length, and Gianna—

Fuck. I realize, somewhere in the lust-fogged recesses of my mind, that she's no longer out by the pool. She's not on the lounge chair any longer, at least. She could be swimming; she might have gone underwater while I had my eyes closed—but I feel as if *I'm* the one underwater, the thoughts, and their potential ramifications slow to make their way through my mind as my hand still feverishly works my cock, too far gone to stop. I can't stop now. I lean my head back against the chair, eyes closing again, hips thrusting upwards, fucking my hand the way I want to fuck her, bouncing on my lap, her head back against my shoulder, her pretty thighs splayed wide so I could stroke her clit while I fuck her. I'm lost, far beyond anything that isn't the hot, throbbing pleasure in my cock. When the orgasm comes at last, spilling over my hand in a thick, spurting mess that I forget to catch with tissues before it can ruin my suit, it's all I can do not to groan loudly enough that anyone nearby will hear and know exactly what it is that I've been doing.

I can't remember the last time I came this hard, touching myself. My cock is still stiff, throbbing against my palm, and I keep stroking, my length slick with my own cum as I imagine

fucking it into Gianna, deep and hard, driving my cum into her until there's no chance that at least some of it wouldn't take root.

I feel that first flicker of guilt, the ember flaring to life, but the pleasure is still there, and I'm not ready to let go of it yet.

All I want, in that moment, is her.

Gianna



I can't believe what I'm seeing.

I hadn't meant to eavesdrop—or spy, or whatever this is. But the sight in front of me, Alessio in his office, his hand around his cock—

I've never seen anything like it, and I can't stop watching.

I had planned on going back up to my room. But I'd had to walk past Alessio's new office to do that, and when I did—

The sounds were strange. Like the proverbial cat, I'd been curious, and I'd crept up to the door that I don't think he knew was cracked—that he *definitely* must not have known was cracked, considering what I saw when I peeked inside. I almost scurried away the moment I realized what it was that I was seeing, until I realized that he was far too focused on himself to notice me in the doorway, watching wide-eyed, my heart pounding. I should have left—but I wanted to see.

And now I can't tear my eyes away.

I've never seen a man touch himself before. I've never seen a *man*—not like this, not in even the slightest state of undress. I've never watched porn or looked up pictures. I don't think it's ever hit me, until this exact moment, just how entirely innocent of all of this I really am. Until I see Alessio in his leather desk chair, legs spread and his zipper down, his hard cock gripped in his fist as he strokes it. And the *look* on his face—

Does it really feel that good? His lips are parted—god, he has a beautiful mouth, full and soft, the kind of lips I think I'd like

to kiss—his breath coming in short gasps as his hand slides over himself, his head tipped back, eyes closed. I can see his flexed muscles in his forearm, the tension in his thighs, and his hand—

He has lovely hands, long-fingered and broad, veined along the back, and seeing him gripping his cock makes me feel faintly breathless. I can't take my eyes off of *that*, either. I've tried to picture what one might look like, before—and I wasn't too far off the mark—but the reality is both better and more frightening all at once. If all men are made like this, I don't know how any man could fit inside of me. He's *long*, the tip of it just below where I think his navel must be, and thick. His hand fits around himself nicely, but would mine? Would my fingers touch, if I gripped him the way he's gripping himself right now? I'm not sure, but the thought of touching him like that—of kneeling between his legs right now, my hand pumping his cock instead of his own, makes me feel dizzy with a sudden rush of sensation that I've never felt before and certainly don't understand.

I don't understand anything that I'm feeling, not really. I feel hot, flushed for reasons that have nothing to do with having been laying in the sun outside, and I feel an odd tingling between my thighs, a sort of buzzing heat that also feels entirely unfamiliar. When I squeeze my thighs together reflexively, a reaction to the strange, building pressure between them, I feel—wet?

My gaze flicks back to Alessio, his head still tipped back against his chair, his hand sliding over his glistening cock—glistening with *what*, I'm not sure. I feel that throbbing ache between my legs again, and I can't help but wonder if it would feel that good if I touched *myself* there.

I shouldn't, I know that. Especially not here, in the hallway, peering into Alessio's office and spying on him. He'd be furious if he realized I was here watching. He'd be even angrier, I think, if he caught me touching myself the same way, watching him. I've never done this—never had even the slightest inclination to—but I know enough to know it's meant to be private. That I shouldn't be seeing what I am.

I could go back upstairs and try it. But something in me rebels at the thought. I feel as if something is waking up in me, something thrilling and new, and I want to see what happens at the end of this. I want to see what comes of what Alessio is doing, what the *point* of it all is.

Maybe it will give me some sort of answer as to what it is that men want.

Without fully deciding to commit to it, my hand slips underneath the sarong I threw on over my swimsuit, pushing aside the chiffon to brush against the edge of my bikini bottoms. I feel something pulse between my thighs again at the brush of my fingers over the material. I bite my lip, summoning the courage to slip them underneath. The soft hair between my legs is damp—*but of course, it is*, I think frantically, trying to make some sense of what's happening to me at this moment. I was swimming just a few minutes ago—but this feels different.

Alessio's hand twists around his cock, his palm squeezing over the tip for a moment, and I see thick fluid pearling there, sticky against his fingers. *I wonder what he tastes like*, I think, unbidden, and then my face flames at the realization of what just went through my mind.

I feel that pulse between my thighs again, that steadily building pressure, and I close my eyes for just the briefest of seconds as I slip my fingers between flesh that feels more swollen and tender than usual, searching out where it is that I need touch, friction—

Oh god. I have to bite my lip hard enough that I taste blood to hold back the sound that nearly erupts from me. I'm *so wet*, wet in a way that I know has nothing to do with swimming, slick and hot, and when my finger bumps against a hard knot of flesh between my folds, I nearly cry out with the jolt of pleasure that bursts through me, as startling as an electric shock, but *good*.

So good, that I can't stop myself from doing it again, and again—rubbing my finger over that sensitive spot. It's swollen and stiff, that same jolt coursing through me each time I brush

my fingertip over it, circling, rubbing, my knees going weak and watery as I watch Alessio. His hand is moving faster now, stroking with quick, sharp movements that seem to match his breathing, and my hand starts to take on a similar rhythm. Watching him seems to be making it better somehow, intensifying the sensations, and my gaze flicks between his pleasure-taut face and his stroking hand.

I wish he'd taken his clothes off. There's something arousing about seeing him sitting there in a suit, doing something that I know he *shouldn't* be doing in his office, in the middle of the day, in front of an open window—but I want to see more of him. I want to see how muscular he is, if his chest is smooth or not, if he has that fine line of hair running down to his cock—what all of his strong, virile, masculine body looks like. I want to touch him, taste—

My eyes go wide as I see him jerk in the chair, his hips lifting off of it as he starts to fuck his hand, thrusting into his fist in a way that I think *must* be mimicking the way he'd thrust into a woman, the way he'd thrust into *me* if I were on his lap right now, legs spread, all the hot, wet slickness coating my fingers coating that thick length instead, and then—

I stare in open-mouthed shock and curiosity as something *bursts* from his cock, sticky-looking fluid spurting over his fingers and hand, making a mess of his suit trousers as he keeps stroking feverishly, his mouth open on a silent groan of pleasure, as if it feels so good that he just doesn't care. As if he can't think about anything other than *how* good it feels. As I watch, fascinated at the display in front of me, I feel a sudden cresting pleasure in my own abdomen, deep inside of me, responding to both the quick movement of my fingers and what I'm seeing. It's so strong that it almost frightens me, an intense welling of sensation that almost makes me want to pull my hand away, but I chase it instead, my teeth buried in my lower lip as I grip the edge of the doorframe, leaning against it for support as my knees buckle, and a feeling like nothing I've ever experienced or imagined crashes through me.

I don't know how I manage not to make a sound. It's blissful, incredible, making me feel for a moment as if I might pass out

from the intensity of it. I'm gasping, my heart racing in my chest, and as I see Alessio blink his eyes open and stare at the mess he's made of his trousers, all I can think is *if it feels this good, I think I know why everyone is so concerned with it.*

I have a sudden, mortifying image of pushing the door open and going to kneel in front of him, taking his cock in my hand and whispering to him that I'll clean him up, that I'll lick up every drop that he's spilled. It's so vivid that my knees buckle again, more of my own arousal leaking onto my fingers, that pulsing desire still there. *He's going to see me any second,* I realize with panic as Alessio starts to get out of the chair, no doubt looking for some way to clean himself up, and I yank my hand away, scurrying away from the door and towards the stairs before I can be caught.

Once safely back in my bedroom, door shut and locked behind me, I lean back against it, eyes closed and trying to catch my breath. My heart is still beating a quick, hard pulse in my chest, the vivid image of what I saw Alessio doing burned behind my eyes, my fingers still wet from my own orgasm. I suddenly have a much, much better idea of how all of this works, and my mind is racing with vivid imaginings of my wedding night—of *that* inside of me, helping slake the burning, aching need that I can still feel pulsing faintly in my veins. Of hands touching me, skin, and—

What else would he do? Would he use his mouth? I feel dizzy at the thought of that, of Alessio's mouth between my legs, replacing my fingers, how it might feel. I've barely given a thought to sex before this, but suddenly, I feel as if I'm on fire with the desire to know, to experience all of this, to explore, and to have all of my questions answered.

And I want *Alessio* to be the one to answer them. I don't want any other man touching me. I want *him*. The man who was supposed to be my husband, the one who, for reasons that I don't fully understand, is pushing me away, trying to give me to someone else, when all I want is him.

I trust him. I know he would never hurt me. That he would be gentle with me, careful, that he would take care of me. I even

think, despite his caution that I shouldn't expect too much from my future husband, that he would be faithful to me.

What if I could seduce him? The thought feels dangerous—but thrilling, too. *What if I could convince him to marry me? That he's what I want?* If I could overcome his objections, if I could make him want me the way I want him—maybe I wouldn't have to marry someone else.

Maybe it could be Alessio and I, living here, together in happily wedded bliss. I wouldn't have to leave my home or let myself be touched like that by a stranger, by someone I don't love or even necessarily want.

My father always knew best. He always knew what I needed to be taken care of, to be happy. He thought that Alessio would be that for me—and I think so, too.

The only one who still needs to be convinced is Alessio.

—

I take extra time getting ready for dinner, putting on a light, flowy, chiffon maxi dress that's cut a little lower in the front than some of my other dresses, with thin straps crisscrossing over my back and tiny flowers scattered over the white fabric. It looks sweet and feminine and flattering without being too obvious—I think—and I make sure to put on a little bit of makeup, too. I'm already flushed from being out in the sun today, and I never use foundation, but I dust a little rose gold shadow over my lids and put on mascara, tapping a light rose stain onto my lips and slipping rose gold diamond studs into my ears. My hair takes the longest—it's long and thick and has just enough curl to be unwieldy at times, but I manage to braid it, looping it around my head and pinning it in place. My heart beats a little faster in my chest, thinking about Alessio's face when he sees me, hoping to see some of that same desire there that I saw this afternoon.

What was he fantasizing about? What was he picturing? It can't have been me—he's made it plain that, right now, at least, he doesn't want me. It's up to me to convince him otherwise. But I feel a burning twist of jealousy in my stomach at the idea of it being anyone else—of him imagining some

girl back in New York, for instance. I hate the idea of him picturing some other girl kneeling between his legs or bouncing on his lap. I know he's been with other women—he *must* have been—but I hate the idea of that, too.

I want him to feel that way about me. I want him to hate the idea of me with someone else—kissing them, touching them, letting them do all the other things to me that I can't even quite imagine yet. I want him to be just as jealous of me—not trying to find someone to pawn me off on so he can be freed of the responsibility. I know that's not entirely fair to think, but I can't help it.

It feels like too much to hope that I might be able to make him love me—but *wanting* me, even being convinced to go along with my father's will and marry me... seems possible.

Alessio is already waiting at the dinner table when I come down, a glass of wine in front of him. He's scrolling through something on his phone, but he quickly sets it down when he hears my footsteps—and for one brief second, as his gaze sweeps over me, I think I see the startled flicker of desire that I hoped for. His eyes sweep from my face downwards, catching on my cleavage for a moment and then sweeping lower, all the way to where the skirt sweeps my toes and back up. I don't know if he even entirely means to do it—I see the way he quickly swallows, his gaze darting away as he reaches for his glass of wine. There's a decanter on the table as well, and an empty glass in front of where my place is set.

“I don't know if you were allowed to have wine,” Alessio says, clearing his throat as I sit down. There's a tension in him that I haven't seen before, and I wonder if it's because of what he did in his office today, or because of the way he looked at me just now, or something else altogether. “But I think considering everything that's happened recently, whether or not you have a glass is the least of our concerns.”

Something in me is slightly miffed at the idea of Alessio deciding whether or not I'm allowed to have a drink—that it's his business at all. I reach for the decanter without a word, pouring myself half a glass, and one of Alessio's eyebrows rises.

“I suppose that’s my answer, then.”

“My father didn’t treat me like a child.” I pick up the glass of wine, taking a pointed sip, making sure to let my lips linger on the edge for just a moment. I want him to notice, but his attention is dragged away by the salad course being brought in.

“I don’t think of you as a child,” Alessio says firmly, as the china salad bowls are set in front of us, and he reaches for his fork. “But you *are* my ward. My responsibility. I want to make all of this as simple as it can be for you—for things to change as little as possible. For there to be as little—upheaval as I can manage for you.”

“My father died, and I’m going to be married off to a stranger.” I take another sip of the wine, feeling my appetite fade a little as I look down at the Caesar salad in front of me. “I think it’s a bit late to be trying to minimize *upheaval*.”

“Point taken.” Alessio lets out a slow breath, picking up his own glass again. “I want you to know that I, personally, am in no rush. I would stay here as long as necessary to make sure that you were safe and protected, and that your future was secured and happy. It’s the Family that may put pressure on both you and me sooner rather than later. It’s important to me that you know that.”

I nod, tracing my fingers nervously up and down the stem of my wine glass. The conversation isn’t going exactly how I had hoped it would. I want to flirt with him, arouse him, and make him think about being the one to marry me, but the problem is that I don’t know *how* to flirt. I don’t think any of the tactics I’ve read about in books work all that well in real life, if I had to guess, and I’ve never had any experience with *actual* men. My encounters with men have been limited to Lorenzo and meeting my father’s associates at dinner parties, and none of them would have ever dared so much as look at me with any kind of intent.

“How was your day?” I blurt out, before I can think too hard about what it is that I’m going to say. “After our conversation, I mean. How was, um—how was work?”

I catch his slight flinch, the way he chokes a little on his sip of wine, trying quickly to hide it. My pulse speeds up, remembering the sight of him in the office today, hand wrapped firmly around himself, head tipped back, lips parted on a silent moan of pleasure. I feel my cheeks flush, and Alessio seems to take notice of that, at least.

“Are you alright? You seem a little flustered.” His voice drops an octave, and it makes me think that *he’s* getting a little flustered, too. I can feel the tension thickening, and I wonder if he’s aware of it, too.

“It’s just been a long day.” I’ve barely touched my salad, but that course is already being whisked away in preparation for the staff to bring in the main course. I reach for my wine glass again, my other hand curled into a fist in my lap, short nails digging into my palm. “It was nice to get outside for a little while—go for a swim, lay in the sun.” I watch his face as I speak, curiously, and sure enough—I see the tiniest twitch at the side of his mouth, a tightening of his lips that makes my heart leap in my chest.

Was he—watching me? The idea sends a thrill through my blood, fizzing like fine champagne. I hadn’t thought of that possibility—that his office window, which *does* face directly out to the pool, provided him with an excellent view of what I had spent part of my afternoon doing—and of *me*, wearing very little.

My mouth goes dry at the thought that *I* might have been the cause of his arousal. That he might have seen me and gotten so turned on, so hard, that he couldn’t help but get himself off right there, in his office, where anyone could have seen. Where *I* saw.

I lick my lips, shifting in my chair as I squeeze my thighs together as discreetly as I can, feeling that building pressure again. *Is he feeling it, too?* My mind races with lewd possibilities, that he’s getting hard right now, thinking about this afternoon, imagining me in that tiny bathing suit that I wore out to the pool. I have another sudden flash of imagination—slipping to my knees under the dinner table, sliding his zipper down and freeing his aching cock, wrapping

my hand around it and my lips over the tip, taking him into my mouth as he sits there and eats his meal, all the while being serviced by my lips and tongue.

The ache between my thighs intensifies at the thought, the pressure building, throbbing, and my hand tightens in my lap. *What is wrong with you?* I had a crush on Alessio before, but I never imagined dropping to my knees for him twice in one day, sweetly and submissively tending to his needs while he goes about his day. *Why does it turn me on so much?*

I wish I understood. I wish I knew anything at all about any of this—and I wish I had someone to ask. But the only person who can answer my questions won't—and if my suspicions are true, it's because he wants the same things I do.

Which begs the question that rattles around in my head as I sit there across the table from him, trying to eat lamb chops and green beans instead of thinking about his cock in my mouth—

Why won't he marry me, then?

Alessio



Never has anything tested my resolve as much as living under the same roof as Gianna.

I get up the following day with fresh determination to remain nothing more than her caretaker, to think of her as nothing other than my ward, my stepsister by law, my *responsibility* to protect and guide. I put out of my head the thought that her odd behavior at the dinner table might have been caused by her having caught me in the office yesterday—if she *had*, I remind myself, she would have been disgusted and horrified, not flirtatious.

If that awkward conversation at dinner had been her attempts at flirting, that is.

Either way, it doesn't matter. I remind myself of that through breakfast as Gianna makes small talk about the literature classes that she could take at the college, wandering off afterward and saying that she has plans to go up to the library upstairs and look through the texts she might be asked to read if she goes that route.

Which is fine with me. There's no chance of having to fight my rebellious libido if she's safely ensconced upstairs with a dusty book and a cup of tea. I can focus on spreadsheets and ledgers, scheduling meetings with Giacomo's associates, and deciding how what he built will move into this new phase. All of it tedious, with plenty to occupy my time and mind that has nothing to do with Gianna's—charms.

Until I emerge from the office to track down a quick lunch and nearly run directly into her.

“Gianna!” I gasp her name as I nearly collide with her, grabbing her waist out of sheer reflex to keep her from falling before I even really see her—and feel as if I’ve been jolted with electricity at the moment when my hands touch bare skin.

I look down at her, eyes refocusing, and it takes a moment for my suddenly dizzy mind to comprehend what it is that I’m seeing.

She’s wearing a bikini again. A different one this time—royal blue—but just as perfect a contrast against her smooth skin, the thin ties appearing to barely hold the scraps of silky fabric together, covering only the most necessary bits. I can’t fathom how she got away with buying such skimpy swimwear—but then again, when living at a mansion where no one else will see her, I suppose it doesn’t really matter...or *shouldn’t*.

But *I* can see her, and despite the fact that I shouldn’t be aroused in the slightest, every bit of blood has already left my brain.

My cock is throbbing. I can feel it straining against my fly, harder than I think I’ve ever been in my life, already leaking pre-cum. We’re a foot away from the staircase, and I have a sudden, vivid vision of spinning Gianna around, putting her down on her hands and knees on the stairs, and thrusting my cock into her from behind as I yank those minuscule bikini bottoms to one side. I can almost feel the tight, wet heat clenching around me, *hear* her mewl and then cry of pleasure as I sink down to my balls in her wet pussy, and fill her up—

My cock throbs again, a warning, letting me know just how unreasonably aroused I’ve gotten from nothing more than the sight of her in her swimsuit and the feeling of her skin under my hands. I also realize, rooted to the spot as I am, that I’m still holding her there—when I shouldn’t be touching her at all.

I drop my hands as if she burned me, stepping back quickly before realizing that all I’ve likely accomplished is giving her a front-row view of my entirely inappropriate arousal. If she

looks down, there's no way she won't see my cock, hard and straining in my trousers, a thick and visible ridge.

Thankfully, she doesn't look down. But her lips curl up in a small, teasing smile that almost, *almost* makes me think she's done this on purpose.

But why? Why would she do that? Why would she come out here barely dressed, trying to seduce a man twice her age—and her stepbrother at that. Why, when soon she'll have her pick of any of the mafia sons her own age that she wants?

It makes no sense.

“I'm sorry!” Her gasping apology only barely registers with me as she looks up at me, blue eyes wide. “I was just heading out to the pool—”

Gianna breaks off, her eyes fixed on mine—thankfully, because my erection isn't flagging in the slightest. “Where were you going?” she asks innocently enough. Still, there's the smallest tinge of teasing curiosity in her voice that confuses me. “Upstairs?”

She couldn't have seen me yesterday. She can't be wondering if I'm about to go upstairs and jerk off in the middle of the day. She can't be teasing me about that. She's too innocent, too sheltered for such a thing. I can't think that she would be anything other than disgusted if she'd seen me, if she realized how aroused I am right now. If I let myself believe that—

“I was going to get some lunch,” I manage, doing my best to speak normally, and not as if I'm being slowly strangled with lust. “Just a short break.”

“You should come out and go for a swim with me.” She says it as if the idea just occurred to her. “Someone can bring lunch out to the pool. It's beautiful outside, and you haven't enjoyed any of it yet.”

Oh god. The idea of that is impossible—unmanageable. “I have quite a lot of work to do,” I tell her, trying to sound apologetic instead of desperate to get back to my office, where

Where, what? Where you can watch her from the window again? Because that's what's going to happen—another ten minutes with your cock in your hand and another ruined suit, not spreadsheets.

“What’s the point of being don if you can’t take part of the afternoon off?” Gianna asks teasingly. “Surely you’re not going to work yourself to death like—”

She breaks off abruptly, her face turning pale as she realizes what she’s said in a moment of humor, and all the tension between us drains away. I can almost *feel* the sudden chill in the air; the heaviness and guilt wash over me, covering me like a thick blanket as I look at her suddenly somber face, her teeth sinking into her lower lip.

She wants company. A distraction. And you're refusing her because you're so worried you can't keep your cock in your pants.

“I can take the afternoon off,” I tell her, feeling suddenly as if I want nothing more than to see the light return to her face. “Lunch out by the pool sounds nice, actually.”

I’ve never felt so torn in two different directions in my life. I should tell her no, avoid the temptation, keep the distance between us that’s beginning to feel more and more necessary. But the smile on her face when I say I’ll join her outside is impossible to ignore. I find myself promising that I’ll meet her outside in fifteen minutes, after I’ve had a chance to change.

I already know this is a terrible idea, that it’s going to be practically impossible to hide my arousal, which I can’t imagine how I’m going to keep tamped down. It’s hard enough to keep her out of my head when she’s not in front of me, barely dressed, but this—

Gianna is already out by the pool when I go out to join her, lunch set up on a low table and a carafe of some sort of drink in the center of it. She’s wearing a thin dress over her bathing suit, which gives me a moment’s relief from trying not to look at every inch of exposed skin—but it’s filmy enough that the light filters through it and highlights every bare curve. It’s

somehow even more arousing than just the bikini—or I’m already so far gone that anything she wore would turn me on.

“I thought you might go back to work instead,” Gianna teases, nudging a plate towards me. There are lettuce cups with what looks like chicken salad in them, and she reaches for the carafe, pouring me a drink. It looks like lemonade at first, but when I reach for it and take a sip, I realize it’s alcoholic.

“Now you’re convincing me to drink in the middle of the day?” I wince as I hear myself—I didn’t mean for it to sound so flirtatious, but I feel as if Gianna has me more and more off-balance with every day that passes. “A glass of wine with dinner was one thing, but I don’t know if you should be drinking this. Not at—”

She fixes me with a narrow look. “Are you going to say *not at my age?*” she asks, uncrossing her legs under the table, and I feel my mouth go dry despite the drink. “I’m in my own home, and it’s just a glass. It’s *fine*. Or are you always planning on telling me what to do?”

My cock lurches, hardening in my swim trunks, even as I tell myself that I’m imagining the seductive note in her voice at the end. I’m imagining it, because, *god*, there’s nothing more right now that I want than to tell her what to do. To instruct her, bit by bit, in every step of what I want her to do to me—and how to receive what I want to do to her in return.

Gianna picks at her food, something I’ve noticed her doing with each meal over the past few days. She’s barely eaten at any meal, and I file that away as something to mention to her. *That would definitely fall under ‘telling her what to do,’* I think as I reach for my own food, and my cock twitches restlessly against my thigh, a steady throb of frustrated arousal. I don’t want to rush her engagement and marriage—especially not out of my own lack of self-control—but the sooner she’s safely married off, the sooner this constant, low-grade feeling of frustration can fade away.

“You need to eat more,” I chide her gently as she finishes the glass of spiked lemonade, looking at her almost untouched salad. “Especially if you do want to drink.”

Gianna looks up at me sharply, and I expect a retort from her, but her teeth just sink into her lower lip as she looks at me from under long lashes. It almost looks as if she shivers, and then I see her slow exhale as she nods. “I’ll try to eat more,” she says softly. “If that’s what you want.”

Fuck. There’s something happening here, something that I don’t want to examine too closely, because of how easily it could spin out of control for both of us—how smoothly it would feed into my desires...and possibly, it seems, hers as well.

Desires that, if I’m right, I don’t even think she knows she has.

She gets up after a moment, walking towards one of the lounge chairs as she reaches for the hem of the filmy dress she has on over her swimsuit, and I can’t tear my eyes away from her. Her back is to me, and so I give myself one moment of watching her, my body throbbing with need as I watch the thin material slide up over her perfect ass, the royal blue fabric of her suit caught between the full, curved cheeks, over the small of her back and the curve of her narrow waist, higher until I have a torturous, mouth-watering view of her from behind.

Once again, I can so easily imagine telling her to lay down on that chair on her stomach, spreading her legs and nudging that thin scrap of fabric aside to nuzzle between her thighs from behind, licking her until she panted and begged to come, drenching my face with her orgasm and then sliding my cock into her hot, tight—

“Are you coming?” Gianna asks, and I blink at her, my mouth almost dropping open in shock before my brain clears just enough to realize that she’s asking me if I’m getting in the pool with her.

“In a minute.” I reach for the glass of lemonade and drain it, knowing full well that if I stood up right now, Gianna would have a clear view of exactly how turned on I am. Thankfully, she walks to the pool without a backward glance, walking down the stairs and into the water, her every step only making it harder and harder for me to focus—both literally and figuratively.

She sinks below the water, the glimmer of sunlight over her as she swims to the other end. I take that opportunity to get up and walk to the edge, pushing down on my aching cock with the heel of my hand while she can't see. At least underneath the water, she won't be able to see the state I'm in.

Gianna surfaces after a moment, just in time for me to get waist-deep. The water *is* refreshing—everything else aside, her idea to spend the afternoon out here has merit. The sun is bright and warm, and we have the place all to ourselves. The solitude of it is a relaxing luxury, something that I didn't have back in New York—my apartment building had a rooftop pool with every comfort and convenience a wealthy resident could ask for, but I certainly didn't have it all to myself.

She dips under the water again before I can say anything, and a moment later, resurfaces in front of me, so close that I can't move for a second. She's nearly touching me, her skin slick with water beading over it, her dark hair clinging to her shoulders wetly, and I'm not sure I've ever seen anyone more beautiful.

“You finally decided to join me.” She looks up at me teasingly, her hands coming up to touch my chest, and I suck in a breath, hoping that she can't see my reaction. It's that brief moment in the church all over again, when she touched my hand and made me feel more than the simple touch should ever have been able to manage, except now we're alone, and in a place where, if I wanted to touch her, there would be no one to tell me otherwise.

Except for her, when she inevitably comes to her senses.

“Gianna.” I reach for her wrists, gently encircling them with my fingers and moving her hands away from where they're brushing against my skin. I know I should say something else, something to make her understand how inappropriate this is, but I don't know what to say.

“What?” She tilts her head, and I think I feel a slight shiver go through her, but she doesn't pull away. “Don't you want to have a little fun?”

Everything she says is just this side of inappropriate, just enough to make me wonder if she really means what she's saying, or if I'm only interpreting it through a fog of lust, if responding to her innuendos would only result in her backing away, horrified that I heard her incorrectly.

My grip on her wrists loosens enough that she slips out of it, backing away and splashing me with a sudden movement of her hand that catches me entirely off guard and leaves me drenched. "Lighten up," she teases, and I grimace.

See? This is what she means by 'fun.' Not what you were thinking.

But *god*, she makes it so hard not to get every signal mixed up. Gianna darts towards me, brushing against me as she splashes me again, clearly trying to get me into a playful fight that will only end with us far too close to each other. Her pouting is almost irresistible, those full, rosy lips pursed in my direction when I don't respond, and when I finally give in and splash her in return, her delighted giggle makes my cock harden in a way that I know it shouldn't.

This is wrong. It's all wrong. But the wrongness of it all is part of what's turning me on, part of what's making me throb with equal parts lust and guilt as I move towards her through the sparkling water, aiming another splash at her without realizing that I've almost backed her against the wall.

I freeze again for one split second, just before I box her in, and as Gianna wipes the water away from her face, I see the look in her blue eyes one moment before she launches herself at me.

There's no time to react or pull away. Her hands lock around the back of my neck, pulling me in against her, and her mouth crushes against mine. It's an inexperienced kiss, hard and clumsy, but I don't think about that. I don't think about the way her teeth catch on my lip or the way her mouth slightly misses mine before she manages to find my lips. All I can feel is her hands on me, her *mouth*, the desperate, reckless passion in the kiss, and the soft heat of her body against me as she tugs me

closer, the water rippling around us as she wraps her legs around mine and pulls me in.

It's almost impossible to stop. I'm aching, throbbing, and I know she can feel how hard I am. It would be impossible to miss in that moment when she pulls me close, my hips meeting hers for one glorious second before I arch away, knowing that if I grind against her the way I want to, we'll be lost. I'll have my trunks open, and her bikini pushed aside, and Gianna will lose her virginity in her backyard pool before either one of us can stop.

Or, worse still, I'll come before that can happen and embarrass us both.

It takes every bit of effort in me to pull away. I disentangle myself from her, unlatching her hands from around the back of my neck and backing away, feeling the insistent ache within me only worsen as I do. It's a novel experience for me to have to turn down a woman who has just shown so plainly that she wants me, and it's not one that I'm enjoying in the slightest.

"Alessio—" Gianna bites her lip, looking at me with eyes gone glassy with desire, and I shake my head, putting more space between us.

"We can't do this," I tell her gently. "Whatever it is that made you want to do that—you need to put it out of your head. This isn't right, Gianna. It can't happen."

"You want it." Her words are almost accusatory, flung at me. "I felt—"

"What you felt was what would happen to any man with a woman pressed up against him like that." It's not strictly true, and I feel a little guilty using her innocence to convince her of it. I've never felt arousal like *that*, not with anyone.

"So you don't want *me*?" There's a hint of hurt in her voice, and I rub a hand across my mouth, feeling frustrated.

"*You* shouldn't want me. Gianna—this is wrong. If I do desire you, in any way, it's something I should grapple with and do my best to overcome, not give in to. And this—attraction I suppose you have, it—"

“Why?” Her lips are pressed into a stubbornly thin line as she looks at me. “I’ve had a crush on you since I was fifteen, Alessio. You know that. It was in my father’s will that he *wanted* you to marry me! So if I want you and you want me —” Her forehead creases, her eyes narrowing as she watches me from across the thin strip of water separating us. “Why *did* you leave?” she asks accusingly.

“The first time or the second?” I know what she’s asking, but I’m stalling as much as I can. This isn’t a conversation that I want to have with her, especially not with everything in so much upheaval for her, her father’s death so newly fresh. Hell, *I* don’t want to reminisce on the last argument I had with Giacomo that left us estranged; that meant that I never saw him again—the only father I ever had—until I saw him in a coffin.

“Either.” She still has that stubborn set to her jaw, and I know that I’m not getting out of this conversation easily.

“Fine.” I let out a slow breath. “The first time was because he had you. Not out of jealousy,” I add quickly before she can get that idea in her head. “But I was eighteen when your mother died. Almost nineteen. I wanted your father to be able to focus on raising you—put all of the love he had into that, not comfort a grieving son. And besides, I’d been thinking about it since you were born. I felt that he no longer needed me to be his heir—that he would find a husband for you willing to keep the Mancini empire intact. I didn’t want to keep working alongside him, establishing that expectation in everyone else’s eyes that I would eventually be his heir. I didn’t want to step in front of you or take what could be yours. I didn’t want to be the reason you were married off to some other family while I took over the Mancini name. So I took my old name back up—Moretti—and I went to work for other families in Chicago, and then New York. That first time, Giacomo and I stayed in touch. He was disappointed, but he supported me, and I think he was grateful to have the space to grieve on his own. You were too young to need comfort. I thought he agreed with my choices. But of course, he had other ideas that I wasn’t privy to.”

“But that’s what’s happening anyway.” Gianna frowns at me. “You’re taking the role of don, and I’m going to be married off to some other man, into another family. What you say you *didn’t* want. So—”

“My hope,” I interrupt her quickly, “is that we will find you a husband who finds taking your name and your father’s empire to be a suitable replacement for his own, lesser name. If that is the case, then I’ll simply step down, and go back to New York.”

“Like before.” Gianna’s expression is mutinous. “What about the second time? Why did you leave then?”

“Your father told me what he wanted,” I say quietly. “I had come back a handful of times after I started working for Luca Romano. His family and yours worked closely together, and Giacomo wanted to establish stronger ties. But that last visit—he sat me down and explained what it was that he hoped I would agree to...what he had put in his will. That he wanted me to take up the Mancini name again, marry you when you were twenty-one, and be his heir.” I feel the ache in my chest all over again, remembering that last conversation. It had been more acrimonious than I care to recall, and I hate that it was the last time we spoke—out of my own stubbornness, rather than his efforts.

“I have a great deal to atone for,” I tell Gianna softly. “And I can begin by keeping my promise to protect you, rather than taking advantage of you.”

“How is it *advantage* if I want it?” It’s clear from her tone of voice that she doesn’t understand in the slightest. “If that’s what my father wanted—why *not*, Alessio?”

“You shouldn’t want me,” I repeat. “I don’t know what’s gotten into you, Gianna, why you’ve—latched onto this idea, but this isn’t right. You’re my stepsister. By law, yes—but law is what would make us man and wife, too. And beyond that, I’m twice your age. Any of the sons that I will find to court you will be a better choice.”

“And if I don’t want them?” Gianna tilts her chin up, a measure of defiance in her face, but I can see the hurt behind

it. I've made her feel rejected, and that knowledge makes my chest ache all over again—but better the rejection now, I tell myself, than her continuing to nurture this foolish crush.

“We all have to do things that we don't want to in this life,” I tell her, wincing at the lecturing tone in my own voice. *She needs to hear it*, I remind myself. *She has to understand*. “I want to make this a slow transition for you, Gianna, and I *will*, as much as I'm able. But the only reason your father didn't prepare you for marriage to some other man is that he was so firmly steadfast in his idea that *I* should be the one to marry you. That's not going to happen. And so, it's up to me to figure out how to handle what should have already been set in motion.”

Her lips are still set in that stubborn line, but I can see her eyes watering as she looks away. The desire has evaporated, replaced by a heavy cloud, and if I came out here to try and cheer her up, it's clear that this has gone in the exact opposite direction.

The day is as sunny and bright as it was when I joined her out here, but it feels as if the temperature has dropped. It feels foolish standing there in the pool across from her, having this conversation. I turn to go up the stairs, forcing myself to ignore the way she wraps her arms around herself in my periphery, her expression turning so deeply unhappy that I want to go to her and gather her in mine.

Instead, I force myself to walk away, telling myself that comforting her will only make this harder on us both. That pushing her away is the only way to ensure her happiness in the end—or as much of it as I can manage for her, anyway.

I'm not sure who I'm lying to more—myself, or her.

Gianna



I've never felt so embarrassed in my entire life. I've never had *reason* to be so embarrassed. More than that—I feel hurt and rejected and more than a little stupid for trying at all. *He made it so clear that he wasn't going to marry you. That he wasn't interested in being with you. And you threw yourself at him anyway.*

Nothing and no one can be crueler to me than my own mind. The thoughts beat inside my head as I wait for Alessio to disappear inside, clutching my arms around myself as I shiver in the water despite the heat of the day. The spiked lemonade had given me a pleasant warmth in my blood and a little extra courage before, but now my head just aches, my eyes burning with tears.

I wish desperately that I could take the last hour back entirely.

I'd planned all of it, of course, with as much calculation as I could manage despite my inexperience. I'd "run" into him in my bikini, teased him into coming outside—although the slip of the tongue that had made him feel guilty enough to agree had been entirely unplanned. I'd asked for the lunch and the alcoholic lemonade to try to make it seem a bit more celebratory. I had done everything I could to set up the afternoon to go the way I'd hoped it would. I'd tease him, get him in a playful mood with his guard down, and then—

I close my eyes, feeling humiliated all over again. *My first kiss. That's always going to be my first kiss.* I want to tell myself that he rejected me because I was so bad at it, but I know that's not true. I know, because even as innocent as I am,

I *know* what I was feeling for that brief moment when he was pressed up against me while I kissed him. He was turned on—*so* hard from touching me, kissing me, and there had been that one brief second where he kissed me in return.

He rejected me because he thinks it's wrong for us to be together. That I shouldn't want him, as if I'm not capable of deciding who and what it is that I want. That some stupid piece of paper making us legally step-siblings means more than the fact that I only ever saw him a few times before this. That his age means anything at all, that I'm not capable of knowing how old he is and still wanting him—in some ways because of it.

I don't want to marry some spoiled mafia son my own age. I don't want to marry someone so enamored with my wealth and the title he'll get that he's willing to sacrifice his own family's name to take mine. I don't want someone who I don't know.

I want Alessio. Handsome, old enough to guide me and still young enough to keep up with me, intelligent and capable, and most importantly—the person that my father trusted with his empire, with his legacy, with *me*. Even with all his explanations, I still don't understand how Alessio can want to throw that away, how he doesn't see the immensity of what my father entrusted him with.

It takes a while for me to pry myself out of the pool, but I finally do, wrapping a towel around myself and retreating back into the mansion with my things. I know it's cowardly of me and a little childish, but I don't come down again for the rest of the day, staying up in my room. I ring for the staff to bring dinner up, unable to face sitting across from Alessio at the dinner table, the incident in the pool still fresh in my mind—and I'm sure in his, too.

All of it—the confusion and emotions and rejection—leaves me feeling drained and exhausted, and I pick at my dinner, leaving most of it untouched, and going to take a long, hot bath. Afterward, I slip on the t-shirt I stole from him, knowing it's not going to make me feel better, but it's hard not to wallow in the emotions. The shirt might not smell of him any

longer, but being swathed in the oversized material makes me feel oddly comforted, clinging on to the last bit of hope that I didn't even really know I had until it was already being taken away from me.

The nightmare that swallows me up almost as soon as I fall asleep isn't the first one I've had since my father's death, but it is the worst. I'm in his study again, looking down at the body, but this time, he's facing up instead of down on the floor, his throat opened wide in the bloody gash that the murderer left—and in this nightmare, he's still *alive*. Still choking on his blood, gushing and bubbling out of the wound, choking out my name as he pleads for my help, but I can't *move*. I can't do anything, and when the dream wavers, I'm in my own bathroom, dousing my bloodied hands under the stream of water from the faucet, but it won't wash off. It clings to my hands like glue, and I'm sobbing, scrubbing them again and again until the skin reddens and peels and starts to slough off, my own blood mixing with what's left of my father's, and then —

Something is shaking me in the dream, and I jolt awake, feeling tears hot on my cheeks—and a hand on my shoulder. I gasp, jerking upwards in the bed, and through the fog of grief and confusion, I hear Alessio's low, deep voice.

“Easy. You were just having a nightmare. Just a bad dream.” His voice is soothing, and I feel his hand still resting on my arm. It takes me a moment to realize that he must have been trying to wake me up—that the gentle shaking in my dream was from him. “Gianna, I'm right here. You're okay. Do you want me to turn on a light?”

I shake my head wordlessly, hoping he can see it. The idea of light feels like too much right now—too bright, too overwhelming—and I don't want him to see what a mess I must look like right now either, tear-stained with swollen eyes and an exhausted expression on my face. He's seen me like that before, but it feels worse somehow right now, with him here in my bed—

In my bed. A flush of heat tangles up with the awful emotions churning through me, more confusion to add to what I'm

already feeling. It's not desire, not exactly—I'm too upset for that—but there's something intimate about his presence here that makes my stomach churn and my heart flip in my chest. It feels new, uncertain—and I don't want him to leave.

"Why are you here?" I whisper as his hand rubs along my arm, still trying to soothe. There's distance between us—he's keeping me quite literally at arm's length, sitting further down the bed, his fingers against my arm the only contact. It *is* soothing; I can feel the tears slowing, my breathing a little more even.

"I heard you crying," Alessio says gently. "I wasn't sure if you were awake or not, but I wanted to make sure you were alright. That it wasn't—"

He hesitates, but I think I know what he's not saying—that he wanted to make sure that it wasn't because of *him*, that I wasn't up here crying myself to sleep because of what happened in the pool today. I feel my face flush with embarrassment that he would think that at all—and that I'm wearing his shirt, but I tell myself that he won't be able to see in the dark, and anyway, after so many years, he's not likely to even recognize that it's his.

"You didn't have to," I whisper. "I'm sorry I bothered you—"

"It's not a *bother*, Gianna." Alessio lets out a slow breath. "I care about you, you know. I wouldn't be here if I didn't. I don't *want* to be don. I've worked under the New York don for years now, in varying capacities, and I see the weight of it, the responsibility—the toll that it takes. It's not something I've ever wanted for myself. But what I do want is to make sure you're safe. Which means not continuing on down the hall when I hear you crying in the night." He says the last wryly, as if it ought to be obvious, and I feel a small hesitant smile at the edges of my lips that I know he can't see."

His hand rubs along my arm again. "Do you want to talk about it? The nightmare?"

I shake my head. "No," I whisper. "I really don't." I know I'm probably supposed to, that talking about it would supposedly exorcise it all somehow, but to me, it just feels as if saying it

aloud will make it all more real somehow, bring it out of the shadowy world of terrible dreams and turn it into something tangible.

“Then you don’t have to.” Alessio’s voice is still gentle, soothing. “What do you need, Gianna? What can I do to help?”

I hesitate, unsure if I want to say the first thing that comes to my mind. “I want you to stay,” I whisper softly, before I can think better of it, and I feel the way he stiffens momentarily, as if his first instinct is to turn me down. “Just for a little while,” I add, my teeth sinking into my lower lip. “Just until I can fall asleep again.”

I can still feel him hesitating. I know he’s thinking of the kiss this afternoon, of the conversation we had, and wondering if giving in will make it all so much worse. I can feel, too, the moment that he relents.

“Until you fall asleep,” he says gently, and I feel the bed shift under his weight, the shadowy shape of him moving across the bed to lie down next to me as I slide back down under the covers. He’s still keeping me at arm’s length, his hand resting on my forearm as I lie on my side, facing away from him.

His fingers slowly slide up and down my arm, still soothing. “Just try to sleep,” he says quietly. “I’ll stay long enough to try to make sure that the nightmares don’t come back.”

I nod, closing my eyes. I know that sleep isn’t going to come easily, even with Alessio there, but I breathe in the scent of his soap and cologne, that piney, spicy aroma, and I try to feel as if things are going to be alright. That having him here will be enough.

It’s harder not to wish he could stay. To not lean into the feeling of the soothing hand on my arm and wish it would drop lower, rest against my hip, my waist, pull me close so I could feel the comforting weight of his body behind mine, holding me, keeping me in the circle of his arms so that nothing else could ever get to me.

He says he's here to keep me safe. That's what I want, too—but in all the ways he says he can't, all the ways that he feels he shouldn't. I want *him* to be the one who keeps me safe forever.

I try to push the thoughts out of my head, to breathe slow and even, to fall back into sleep. To relax into the feeling of having someone here with me, something I've never felt before, just for tonight.

It's not dreamless sleep when I finally do sink back into it. But this time, I dream of Alessio. I dream of his arms around me, of him underneath the covers with me instead of atop them, his arm over my waist and his lips against my shoulder. I dream of him holding me all through the night, his warmth sinking into my skin, that feeling of safety that I fell asleep with lasting so much longer than just one night.

In the dream, the hand over my waist has a gold ring on the finger, one to match the one I'm wearing. In the dream, Alessio is *mine*, my husband, a man who wants to keep me safe forever, and not only for a little while. A man who isn't running from everything he was offered—and everything I want to give.

When I wake up in the early morning, eyes sticky and aching from crying and my entire body sore from the tension of the nightmare, Alessio is gone. I hadn't expected anything else—but I still feel a pang when I roll over and see that the only evidence he was ever there is the wrinkled duvet and the scent of his soap and cologne on my pillow. I bury my face in the pillow, breathing it in, fighting back another wave of lonely, aching tears.

Nightmares don't last forever, thankfully. But neither do dreams.

Alessio



I feel more than a little concerned when I see Gianna pale and silent the next morning at the breakfast table, picking at her food the way she has been more often than not lately.

“Is there something I can ask the cook to make for you that you would find more palatable for breakfast?” I ask when I see her stab the same small piece of sausage with her fork three times without ever actually putting it in her mouth. “I’m worried about how little you’re eating.”

“I’m trying.” Gianna pokes at the sausage again. “I’m just tired. I’ll try to eat more at lunch.”

I felt guilty, leaving Gianna in the middle of the night, but I didn’t think it would help either one of us for her to wake up with me in her bed. It was hard enough to lie there, wanting to pull her into my arms and hold her close, to soothe her, stroke her hair, kiss her tears away—and be unable to do any of that. To have to lie stiffly away from her at arm’s length, one hand touching her arm, knowing that to comfort her in all the ways I desire would only drag us deeper into a mire that neither of us would be able to escape.

I know she doesn’t understand my refusal, that she’s hurt by it. *She’ll understand eventually*, I told myself last night as I went back to my room, every step away from her feeling like torture, fighting every desire I had to hold her throughout the night and let her wake up safe in my arms. *When she’s clear-headed, months from now, when she’s married to someone closer to her age, when grief and fear aren’t clouding her every decision.* It’s why I agreed to her being my ward, after

all—to make sure that the right decisions were made. That no one else made those decisions for her and that her choices were guided down the best path for her.

The night didn't pass well for me, either. I didn't sleep until I felt as certain as I could be that Gianna wouldn't suffer any more nightmares. Even once back in my own room, I slept restlessly, thinking I might be woken at any moment by the sound of her crying again. It's left me in an unpleasant mood this morning, amplified by my worry over her health.

I open my mouth to say something in response, but I'm interrupted by the sound of someone clearing their throat in the doorway. I look up to see Juliana—the family's household manager—standing there in her impeccable black suit, her face calm as ever. “There's someone here to see you, Mr. Moretti,” she says. “I showed him to your office; he's waiting there.”

“We'll talk about this later.” I glance at Gianna once more, feeling another pang of worry at the lack of color in her face, before getting up. I'm not sure who the unexpected visitor is, but I have a feeling they're not going to improve my morning.

I'm even more certain of that when I walk in just in time to see Don Fontana sitting on the other side of my desk.

“To what do I owe this pleasant surprise?” I ask as I step in, keeping the expression on my face as carefully neutral as I can manage. It's far from pleasant, but I don't let on, sitting down in my leather chair as if this is a perfectly fine way to have to start my morning. “I can call for coffee, if you like.”

“Please.” Fontana smiles at me. “Black, if you don't mind.”

“Of course.” I pick up the phone, calling down to the kitchen for coffee to be sent up, and then sit back in my chair, looking at him curiously. “So. You're here because—”

“There's some concern about Miss Mancini's marriage,” Fontana says bluntly. “I'm well aware it's only been a short time since the funeral,” he adds, as if he knew that would be the next thing I said, “but the other families are already getting restless, and I—and the other senior members of the Family—are concerned.”

I can feel my jaw tighten immediately. I'd feared that something like this would happen—that Fontana would want to take back the reins of control over Gianna's future—and the future of the Mancini legacy—but I had thought it would take longer. "Are you not able to ease their concerns? She's allowed time to grieve, surely—"

"Of course." Fontana nods, pausing as the door opens, and one of the staff brings in a tray with coffee for us both. He takes his cup, waiting until the door is shut again, and then continues. "Of course, the girl must be allowed her time to grieve. But we can be working on it all behind the scenes before then, yes? I've drafted a list of candidates for your consideration. You can look it over and introduce them to her in a less—charged setting. A dinner party, perhaps, instead of one on one. Next week. Of course—" he pauses, his gaze resting coolly on mine. "There is an easier solution to all of this. You do as Don Mancini asked, and marry his daughter."

"This isn't what we agreed." It's difficult to keep my voice as even and calm as I'd like. "I was promised time."

Fontana shakes his head. "The agreement was made in haste, I'll admit, and repented at leisure. It's not enough for you to simply have her as your ward, Alessio. With her unmarried, the risk of something happening to her to gain control over her fortune and her father's legacy is too great. Considering that her father's murderer has still not been found—that the trail has been difficult to pick up—this is not something that can be given the kind of time you hoped for. If you will not marry her still, then we will need to take action ourselves."

He reaches down to the briefcase at his feet, pulling out a leather portfolio that he hands me. I take it numbly, feeling certain of what's inside before he even confirms it.

"There's a list of candidates that I've drawn up, with input from the other senior members. Names, photos, and information about each of their families and history. Your opinion of them will be noted, of course, and we still wish for you to be the one to choose Gianna's husband, as agreed. But it must take place *soon*. There needs to be an engagement within the next six weeks. Eight, at most."

“That’s an arbitrary number.” It’s hard for me to keep my voice calm, not to snap at him. “And not enough time for her to know her own mind, not with things as they are—”

“Which is why you’ve taken on this responsibility, to know her mind for her, and what will be best.” Fontana’s voice is calm, even, and it’s hard to argue with him when, just last night, I had the same thought, trying to convince myself of why I had to leave her in her room alone. “Look them over, Alessio. Let me know your thoughts. Next week, let the girl meet them. We will proceed from there.”

I keep my teeth gritted and my face calm until he leaves, letting out a long and frustrated sigh the moment I hear the door shut behind him. I have no doubt that this is less out of his own concern than because the other families are pressuring Fontana and the other elders to have their sons considered, all leaping over one another for the chance to marry the Mancini daughter, the only obstacle between them and all that she has to offer.

And, of course, rather than push back, they’re bending to the pressure.

I’ve never had a great amount of respect for the old Family or the old ways. In that, Giacomo and I were alike. I know that he wouldn’t have bent to this—but he had more power, more influence, more sway than I do. I might hold his title, but I’ve been gone too long and occupied a place for too long that keeps me from having that sort of respect. If I had stayed on as his heir, perhaps. But I forfeited that, and I don’t have the ability to bend the Family to my will.

Cursing under my breath, I flip open the portfolio that Fontana left. There’s a list of names to begin with—six of them. *Marco Fazini. Antonio Lombardi. Matteo Barone. Carlo Bernardi. Giorgio Russo. Tommas Lombardi*—two of them, I realize, must be brothers, or cousins, perhaps. Both of them old enough to vie for Gianna’s hand in marriage.

And the thought of any one of them touching her makes me burn with resentment that I know is wholly and entirely inappropriate.

I'm not looking forward to telling her about this new development, especially after the night she just had, but there's no point in delaying it. It won't be good no matter when I explain what Fontana wanted to her, and he wants her to meet them next week. If anything, the more time she has to prepare and brace herself, the better.

And the same for me.

I send her a message after lunch, when I've had a chance to thoroughly look through the portfolio, opting to eat lunch at my desk to avoid the conversation any sooner than necessary. Gianna has gotten to know me fairly well over the past weeks, and I have a feeling she would pick up on my mood and not relent until I told her what was going on. I want to tell her on my own time, when I've had a chance to think about what to say. And I want to do it somewhere that might soften the blow a little—out to a nice dinner, perhaps—and temper her reaction.

She hasn't been out of the house since the funeral, and neither have I. I reason that if I'm going to deliver bad news to her, it might as well be softened by a night out.

I send her a text, letting her know that I have plans for us to go out to dinner, and to wear something nice. It's only after I send the message that I hope she won't misinterpret the invitation as a date. Surely, I've made it clear enough, I think, as I try to focus on my remaining work for the day, trying not to think about the possibility of her misinterpreting it. I bury myself in any distraction that I can until seven p.m. rolls around, sending my driver a message.

She knocks on the door a few minutes after I send her a text asking her to meet me in the office, an odd flush on her cheeks when she walks in. "Is everything alright?" she asks as she sinks down into the leather chair opposite my desk, and I let out a slow breath.

"Don Fontana came to see me." It's not exactly an answer to her question, but I don't fully know how to answer it. *No, everything is not alright. You're going to have to be engaged in six weeks if I want to have any say in who you marry, unless*

I agree to marry you myself. Right now, it's taking every godforsaken bit of self-control I have not to take you downtown and put a ring on your finger.

But I can't say any of that, so I go with avoiding the question as best as I can. "He's decided to take a stronger hand in choosing your husband. That is to say—he's given me a list of candidates for you to meet, and he has a—timeline in mind."

Gianna's face pales. Whatever burst of color there was in her cheeks fades entirely. "What kind of timeline?" she whispers, and I wince at the look on her face.

I let out a slow breath. There's no point in lying to her, or even in beating around the bush. She'll find out soon enough, and delaying it helps nothing. "Fontana wants us to hold a dinner party next week for you to meet them. He expects a choice to be made and an engagement in place within six weeks. Eight at the most, he said."

Gianna's mouth drops open. She sits there for a moment, trembling, her hands gripping the arms of the chair. "I can't —"

"I know," I tell her gently. "Which is why I will do all I can to help you make the decision. Things are difficult for you right now, and as sheltered as you've been—"

"That's exactly why I asked you to explain things to me!" Gianna bursts out, her lower lip trembling. "Why I asked you those questions—how to—how to please my husband, how to keep him from..." She swallows hard. "Finding other women to sleep with. I don't know what I'm doing, I hardly know anything about it, and—"

"I'm sure your future husband will find it charming and be delighted to teach you how—"

Her face is set in stubborn lines as she interrupts me. "I want *you* to teach me," she says, meeting my gaze with as much determination as I think she can muster, even though her cheeks are beginning to blush pink again. "You can make me marry someone, but I can make it difficult. I'm only going to go along with this if *you'll* teach me how—"

“Gianna.” I try to keep my tone as calm as possible, in the face of the preposterous thing she’s suggesting—a suggestion that has all the blood rushing to my cock in an instant at just the thought of being the one to teach her about pleasure, about sex, about everything that a man might want her to do in bed. “Even as innocent as you are, I *know* that you know the importance of your virginity in all of this. That extends to—other acts, as well.” *Fuck*. Just the mention of *other acts* has me rock-hard, throbbing against the fly of my suit trousers. What I wouldn’t give to teach Gianna how to touch a cock, how to—

I need to think about something else, but it’s impossible with her sitting there in front of me, blue eyes wide and pleading, asking me to tutor her on how to please her future husband.

“Just theoretically.” Her teeth sink into her lower lip, and I feel dizzy. “I know I can’t—touch you. But you can show me. How things work in the bedroom—you can explain. If you do, so I don’t feel so lost...so I can feel like I have someone I trust to explain it all to me—then I’ll go along with this. I’ll do whatever you ask.”

God. She has a way of saying exactly the thing that makes me hard without really meaning to, every time. *Whatever you ask*. I can think of so many things to ask of her, so many ways that I would teach her exactly what a man—what *I* want.

The look on her face is impossible to deny. I can already feel myself reasoning it out, telling myself that a little theoretical instruction won’t hurt, that teaching Gianna how to please her husband can only make her transition into being someone’s wife easier. That, as the person in charge of her future and happiness, it’s my *responsibility* to do this for her, to set aside my own frustrations and make sure that she feels as comfortable as possible.

What harm could come of explaining it all to her? Of letting her know what her husband will expect and want?

My cock throbs, reminding me *exactly* what harm could come of it. If I lose control—

She won't tell me no. She wants me, and if my taking her virginity meant that I would be her husband instead of one of the six boys in that portfolio, I know she would happily allow it. It doesn't matter that I'm convinced it's a product of her grief-addled mind or that I think she would come to regret the decision in time—Gianna *thinks* she knows what she wants, and she thinks that it's me.

“Alessio.” Her teeth are still buried in her lower lip, her expression pleading. “*Please*. They might want me to be so innocent that I don't know what I'm doing at all, but *I* don't want that. It will make me less afraid of it all. Please.”

I can't deny her, not when she asks me like that. Not when I can see her nearly begging. There might be a dozen or more things I would want her to beg me for—but not for my help. Not for me to ease her fears.

I don't want to make her beg me for that.

“Alright,” I concede. I run one hand through my hair, feeling uncertain as I look at her, her worried expression instantly easing. “I'll have to—think about it. How to go about it, I mean. But I will try to help.”

“Can we start tonight?” Gianna nibbles at her lower lip again, and I wonder how, exactly, I'm meant to do this without losing control. “You could come to my room, and we could—”

“No.” The word comes out too sharp, too abrupt, and I see her flinch. “The library,” I tell her, trying to soften my voice. “A place comfortable for both of us, but without the—intimacies of one of our bedrooms. And who knows? Maybe there's an instructional book or two in there to help me explain.”

Gianna giggles softly at that, and my cock throbs again, a warning reminder that we could try this in any fucking room in the entire house, and it wouldn't help. I'm going to want her just as badly, and this is going to be every bit as difficult.

I'm going to be questioning the wisdom of my decision every moment between now and the one where she eventually chooses a husband—but it's too late to back out now.

When I go up to the library a few hours after dinner, Gianna is already there. She's sitting on a velvet chaise, and I'm relieved to see that she's wearing leggings and a tank top—while it's far from being unsexy, I'd been half afraid she'd show up in wedding night lingerie. She has a book balanced on her knees as she reads, and there's a fire leaping in the fireplace, the heavy velvet drapes at the windows drawn. It might be less intimate than one of our bedrooms, but only barely.

There's a glass of wine on the small table at her elbow, half-empty, and I have a feeling she's had a drink to calm her nerves. I wanted one myself, but I couldn't risk lowering my inhibitions. It will be hard enough to keep myself from touching her in any way that I shouldn't, even entirely sober.

“So,” Gianna says softly, setting the book aside and sitting up. “What are you going to teach me?”

My entire body tightens, hearing her say it like that, soft and curious, looking up at me with so much trust in her eyes. I want to teach her *everything*, in reality, not just theory, and my entire body aches before even a single word has come out of my mouth.

“It depends on your questions.” I sink into one of the leather wing chairs near the fireplace, feeling the pleasant prickle of the heat over my legs. Even in early summer, a house this large can be chilly at night, and the fire provides a welcome ambiance, if nothing else. “What do you want to know, Gianna?”

“What happens on my wedding night?” She sits up completely, facing me cross-legged on the couch. I force myself not to look down at where the tight material of her leggings is pressed between her thighs, not to imagine touching her there, stroking her—not to wonder if she's already wet with the anticipation of what I might tell her.

“That could be a vast topic, too.” I chuckle lightly, trying to keep some humor in my voice, so I don't lose my mind altogether. “You'll need to be more specific. What parts of it don't you know about?”

“Any of it.” Gianna presses her lips together, her hands knotting in her lap. “Where will we go after the reception?”

“Well, that depends. Your husband might have a plan already, or he might ask you what you prefer. He might want to take you to a luxurious hotel, or bring you back here for your wedding night. You should decide where you want to stay as a married couple, before then. I imagine you’ll want a nicer suite than your childhood room, but maybe not the one your father occupied. That could feel—a bit strange.”

“I don’t think I would want a strange man in there.” Gianna’s teeth graze her lower lip, and I don’t miss the innuendo behind her words, the way she leans on *strange*. I haven’t been sleeping in the master suite, but I know full well what she’s implying—that if it was me, a man she knew and trusted, she’d take me to bed in the room meant for the lord and lady of the house, as it were. “I’d probably prefer a hotel, I think. Somewhere—neutral.”

“That’s something you can tell them, you know,” I reassure her. “The point of all of this—hosting a dinner party, letting them court you before you make your decision, is so you can get to know each other a little better than a strictly arranged marriage might allow. So you have a chance to express the things you might want and see how these men react.” *Boys*, I want to say. Not a single one of them is a man, not in my estimation. All are only a little older than Gianna, mid-twenties at most. Appropriate for her, but not in any sense of the word experienced or worldly enough to be called *men*.

“It’s not—wrong for me to talk about my wedding night with them?” Gianna’s cheeks flush, and it’s a struggle to keep my breathing even, to not think about what she must be feeling right now. Her anticipation, her nervousness, the possibility of her arousal—it all feels like a drug that I want to revel in.

“Well, I wouldn’t go into great detail. But if you would feel more comfortable spending it in a hotel, that’s certainly a preference I think you could express, just like any other preference about your wedding.”

Gianna nods, taking a slow breath. “And after? Say we—go to a hotel. What then?”

My cock twitches against my thigh, and I can’t help but wonder how in the hell I’m going to get through this.

“It depends,” I say slowly. “Your husband almost certainly won’t be inexperienced, but it depends on how much he—values your pleasure over his.” I swallow hard. “What he might ask for, or—demand.”

Gianna shifts slightly on the chair when I say *demand*, and I feel that pulse of blood in my cock again. *God help me, if she starts asking me about demands—*

“What do you mean by my pleasure over his? Won’t he want to—touch me?” Her voice trembles a little with nervousness.

“Yes, I’m sure he will. But to what extent—” I breathe in, trying to find the right words. “Likely, if he’s not in too much of a hurry, he’ll want to help you out of your wedding dress himself. If he knows what he’s doing and has the patience to take his time, he’ll go slowly—try to arouse you before he takes you to bed. He’ll kiss you, touch you—”

“Where?” There’s a sudden breathiness to Gianna’s voice that makes me ache. “Here?”

She reaches up, her fingers curling around the curve of her breast, and my mouth goes dry. I hadn’t realized it until just that moment, but as the fabric of her tank top presses against her breast, her fingers moving over her nipple as it hardens, I can see that she’s not wearing a bra.

“Like this?” she whispers, reaching up with both hands, cupping her breasts as she softly rubs her nipples at the same time, and for a moment, I can’t speak. I can’t breathe. I should have anticipated something like this, but I’m not sure anything could have prepared me for the sight of Gianna touching herself, running her hands over her breasts as I watch, her lips slightly parted as she feels the pleasure of the friction over her nipples.

“Yes.” I clear my throat. “Gianna, you don’t need to demonstrate—”

“How else will I know for sure that’s what you mean?” She pouts slightly, her head cocking to one side. “I just want to make sure I understand—”

“Not everything needs to be demonstrated.” I swallow hard. “For instance, once your husband undresses you, he may want to pleasure you first, to make sure that you’re ready for him. To help make the first time less painful.”

“With his fingers?” Gianna asks curiously, and thankfully, this time, she doesn’t move her hand between her thighs along with the question. I’m not sure I could bear the sight of her touching herself in front of me—not like that.

“Yes. Or his tongue.” I nearly choke on the last word, because the idea of another man with his mouth on Gianna’s pussy inflames me with jealous frustration, at the same time that an image of my *own* mouth between her thighs fills my mind, my mouth practically watering at the idea of her taste on my lips. I have no doubt she would be the sweetest I’ve ever tasted.

Gianna’s cheeks flush a bright pink. “His *tongue*?” she whispers, shifting on the couch again, her eyes shining with curiosity. “He’ll put his mouth on me there?” Her teeth sink into her lower lip again, worrying at it. “And men enjoy that?”

“If they’re good lovers, they do,” I retort before I can think about it—and the obvious implication that if it were *me* in her bed, I would waste no time making her come with my tongue. I see that recognition in her eyes instantly, the curious way her gaze slides over me, and I shift in the chair, hoping to hide my half-hard cock. It’s all I can do to keep myself from slipping over into full, throbbing arousal. “He might be too—eager, the first night. But most men will want to repay the favor in time.”

“What do you mean?” Gianna frowns, a small line appearing between her eyebrows. “He’ll want *me* to do that? Put my mouth on his—”

There’s no help for it. The moment Gianna innocently inquires about giving a blowjob, I’m hard as a rock. My cock lurches upwards, straining against my fly, aching as I feel a trickle of pre-cum sliding down my shaft. Days of on-and-off arousal have left me so sensitive that even that slow slide of moisture

feels good, like the wet flick of a tongue. Even jerking off every night, as I've been doing lately, hasn't done nearly enough to take the edge off.

"Yes," I affirm, trying not to sound as choked as my voice feels. "I can't think of any man who won't want that, Gianna. In fact, most will insist on it. Hopefully, the husband you choose will be gentle about it at first—allow you to learn."

"And he'll want that the *first* night?" She sounds faintly terrified. "I—"

"He may be in such a hurry to have you in bed that he won't insist on it the first night," I try to soothe her, but I'm not entirely sure it's an honest answer. I can't imagine any man seeing Gianna, having her as his wife, and not taking the opportunity to see those pretty lips wrapped around his cock.

"How would I—" She bites her lip. "On my knees?"

My arousal is verging on pain. I'm not sure my cock has ever been so hard, so achingly swollen, as it is at that moment. Pre-cum drips freely down the shaft, trickling over my balls and soaking my boxer briefs, and I know if I so much as adjust myself, I won't be able to stop myself from stroking it. I'm not sure there's a drop of blood left in my brain.

"He might ask for that," I manage. "Or on his back, with you between his—thighs."

"Will you show me?" Gianna asks, and my blood rushes in my ears, almost too loudly to hear her. "Where to touch, I mean. Yourself. On your—"

The idea of stroking myself in front of her is nearly enough to make me come on the spot. "No," I manage, even as my cock throbs in protest, desperate for release. "Absolutely not. Theoretical, you said. I will—explain, as best as I'm able, but as far as anything else—"

"I won't touch. You can sit over there. But I want to see." Gianna's mouth is taking on that stubborn pout again. I have the sudden, wild urge to stride across the room and take her over my knee for her attitude, spanking her until her ass blushes as red as her cheeks.

The fantasy is immediate and sharp in my mind—her skin is hot under my palm, the way she would squirm in my lap, her panties tugged down to her knees. The way, if she were good enough, I would rub her clit until she came after taking her punishment, feeling her writhe against me, before putting her on her knees to take my cock in her mouth like the good girl that she would learn to be. I can imagine her soft lips wrapped around my cockhead, sucking it until I was on the verge, and how I'd rest it against her lower lip, that one she's always biting, watching my creamy white cum spurt over her lips and drip down her chin—

My cock pulses with a warning, enough pre-cum dripping down my shaft that I almost think I've lost control and come in my trousers. There will be a wet spot regardless if I'm not careful, and I shift in the seat, even that friction almost too much as my cock rubs against my fly.

“No, Gianna,” I tell her firmly. “That's too far. And I think this is enough instruction for tonight. You should go to bed.”

“But—” Her eyes narrow, her chin tipping up as if to argue, and I put a bit of authority in my voice, more than I've used with her before.

“Go to bed, Gianna.”

I *see* the way her entire body softens, the way her thighs clench as she nods, that lip still pushed out in a pout even as she stands up gracefully. And in that instant, I *know*.

At least part of the reason I've resisted marrying her is that I couldn't justify exposing her to my desires—to the things I want, the things that I would desire in a wife, if I were to marry and stay faithful to one woman. To take advantage of Gianna's innocence in such a way, especially, felt wrong.

It still does, for all the reasons I've told myself—and her—time and again. But in that one moment, when I tell her to go to bed and see the desire that ripples through her, I know that she's perfect for me in every way. The woman of my dreams—innocent and submissive to her very core, a woman I could instruct and mold for my desires, and mine alone. A submissive to cherish and praise and spoil, to punish when she

disobeyed, and pleasure when she was good. *Everything* I want—and she could be mine, if I only say the word.

It's torture like nothing I've ever imagined.

The door has barely closed behind her before I jerk open my fly, nearly breaking my zipper in my haste. My cock is slick and swollen as I wrap my fist around it, spreading my legs as I fuck my fist with hard, reckless abandon; any chance of taking my time with it is long gone. I clench my hand around my length, as tight as I imagine Gianna's virgin pussy would be. I stroke it with such a fierce, relentless rhythm that I think I might be rubbed raw tomorrow, but I don't care. I need to fucking come, and I do—in seconds, spurts of thick, hot cum spilling out over my hand and thighs as I groan aloud, fucking my hand as hard as I wish I could fuck her. My thighs almost cramp with the force of my climax, harder than any orgasm I've had in a long time—certainly harder than I've ever come by my own hand. My lap is soaked with it, my cock still spurting long past when I would normally be finished, my balls aching with the intensity of it. I stare down at the mess, fingers still twitching along my length, rubbing out the last shocks of pleasure as I lean my head back against the chair, biting back another frustrated groan at the state of my suit.

My dry-cleaning bill is going to be ridiculous, if this continues much longer.

Gianna



I didn't watch him this time, but I heard him. I think anyone on the upper floor heard him—I was halfway down the hall when I heard the strangled groan that I recognize now. I felt that answering ache between my thighs, imagining him in front of the fire, his cock in his hand as he frantically touched it, thinking of me.

He *must* have been thinking of me. Just as I'm sure now that he must have been watching me that day in his office, while I was out by the pool. It gives me a wicked, delicious thrill to think of turning him on like that, making him lose control. It makes me wonder what he would do if he caught me watching him. Would he punish me? What would he do for a punishment if he did?

My fevered imagination runs wild when I go to bed, as he instructed me, confusion warring with what I now recognize as my own arousal. *It turned me on when he told me to go to bed. What does that mean? Is that wrong? Is it bad? Why—*

I could ask him, I realize. The next time we have a “lesson,” I could ask him why that aroused me. Although, of course, that would mean admitting that it had.

Is that so bad? I bite my lip as I slip out of my leggings and into bed, wearing just my tank top and panties. They're damp—I can feel them clinging between my thighs, and I squeeze my legs together, trying to ease the ache. *Maybe letting him know he turns you on would tempt him—*

I shouldn't be tempting him. Alessio made it very clear why he thinks he shouldn't marry me. But at least part of that is him thinking that *I* can't possibly know what I want—trying to make my decisions for me. And while the idea of that doesn't decrease the ache between my thighs, it also frustrates me in other ways.

If he would marry me, teach me, be my husband—I wouldn't have to marry a stranger. I wouldn't have to wonder what some other man would be like in bed, if he'll be patient or not, gentle or rough, if he'll care about my pleasure.

If he's a good lover, he will. Alessio's voice echoes through my head, and I shiver, imagining Alessio leaning over me, gently spreading my thighs apart, drawing my panties down with infinite, teasing slowness. I can imagine his hands under my knees, opening me for him, gazing down between my thighs in a way that would arouse me and embarrass me all at once—and the idea of that turns me on even more. I feel that heat between my legs intensify, my panties clinging wetly, and before I can stop myself, I slide my hand underneath them, fingers searching through the dark, wet curls of my pubic hair to find that spot that felt so good before.

Alessio would find it with his tongue. I know he would. My fingers slip against my swollen flesh, my cheeks heating with embarrassment as I feel how wet I am, even alone with no one else to know. I can *hear* my fingers moving, that slick, wet sound, and I imagine it's Alessio's mouth instead, his lips kissing me there the way he kissed my mouth for a moment, rubbing and sucking as his tongue finds the spot that my fingers sought out.

The thought of it feels vulnerable and scary, and immensely arousing all at once. I stroke faster, wondering what his tongue would feel like. He made it sound as if it would feel so good, better than my fingers, even—and I can't imagine how that's possible. My thighs are already tightening, my muscles tense as I feel that throbbing, building pressure low in my abdomen, the pleasure intensifying until I have to turn my face into my pillow to muffle the cry that I let out as the sensation sweeps over me in a sudden burst before I can get further in my

fantasy. My thighs clutch around my hand, rocking, arching as I rub and rub, making small tight circles around the swollen, pulsing spot where all the pleasure feels as if it's radiating from.

I'm almost in tears from the intensity of it when I start to come down, my entire body trembling. I feel strange all over, like I want someone there with me, someone to hold and touch me, stroke my hair and skin, and ease me down from the pleasure. I want warmth and safety, the heat of another body, and it takes everything in me not to get up and go down the hall, to crawl into Alessio's bed and his arms. I want *him*, desperately, and the tears of pleasure turn to tears of frustration as I think of the dinner party next week, and the men that I'll meet.

Men who I don't have the slightest interest in, and don't want to marry.

But it seems that I'm not really being given a choice.

—

I'd expected to be allowed to leave the house to go out shopping for the dinner party—the first time I would have left since the funeral. Instead, when I broach the topic at breakfast the next morning, Alessio firmly tells me no, that it's not possible. He says it's too dangerous, that he'll have a selection of dresses picked out by a personal shopper, and sent to the house for me to choose from.

I don't know whether to be frustrated that I'm not being allowed out, or aroused by his authority. All I do know is that when he says no, sternly, I feel that ache between my thighs again—along with a strong urge to rebel and see what happens.

But if I argue with him, he might stop the lessons, and I don't want that to happen.

Over the course of the next week, though, there are no more lessons. Alessio keeps to his office, mostly appearing only for meals and occasionally to spend some time with me, playing a card game or watching a movie, though he keeps his distance. The one time that I do start to bring up the possibility of going

up to the library for another “lesson,” he cuts me off, citing work that he still needs to do, and disappears.

Which leaves me frustrated and bereft the night of the dinner party, staring at the dress hanging in front of my closet with no little resentment.

I’d been tempted to choose a black dress out of sheer rebellion, just to make my feelings about all of it abundantly clear. The fact that black has never been particularly flattering on me only made it all the more tempting. Still, in the end, I chose a navy blue dress so dark that it *almost* looks black, just so I can’t be accused of being difficult.

Although—I can’t stop thinking about what Alessio might do if I *was*.

Would he spank me? I bite my lip, thinking about it, feeling intensely as if I’m not supposed to be aroused by the thought, and at the same time, wondering if I even care. *Do* I care that I might be turned on by the idea? I imagine defying him in some way tonight and him reaching for my elbow, steering me out of the dining room or parlor into some side room, pulling me down over his lap on a couch, and his hands sliding the silk of my dress up over my thighs—

I suck in a breath, forcing the fantasy away as I feel the pulse of desire between my legs. I don’t have time—

But maybe I do. I’m wearing nothing but my panties—the black silk thong that won’t show underneath the clinging silk of the dress—and a black strapless bra cut low enough in the front that it won’t show underneath the dress either. I feel that throb of arousal again, imagining Alessio coming up to check on me, finding me—

Finding me how? The thought thrills me, and before I can stop myself, I sink down on my knees onto the rug in front of my full-length mirror, curiously tugging the front of my thong aside. I’ve never looked between my legs before, and there’s a certain lewdness to the way my dark curls are already damp that makes heat swirl in my belly, my fingers scissoring between my folds to slowly spread myself open so that I can see more.

He could catch me like this. Looking at myself in the mirror—touching myself. He'd tell me how bad I was, how good girls don't do this—

My breath catches in my throat, coming faster now, and I feel a trickle of wetness over my hand as I slowly rub my fingers back and forth, spreading myself open a little wider. My skin is flushed and swollen, and I see that spot that feels so good when I touch it, a swollen bud of flesh that is peeking out. I trail my fingertip over it, swirling some of that slick arousal, and I gasp, my hips bucking up into my hand as I do.

I imagine Alessio standing in the doorway. *If you're going to touch yourself, then spread your legs wider. Good girl. Show yourself off to me. Don't stop now.*

I feel certain that I shouldn't be doing this. But I *can't* stop. It feels so good, and I force myself to keep my legs open instead of clenching them shut as I feel myself about to come, wanting to *see*, to learn what it looks like when that pleasure overtakes me.

And as it does, I'm not thinking about the six other men I'm going to meet tonight. All I'm thinking about is Alessio.

I cover my mouth with my other hand, moaning into my palm as my hips buck upwards into my fingers, and I see all of it—my wet, clenching flesh on display in the mirror. It looks so lewd, so blatantly sexual that I feel my cheeks burn red with mortification—and at the same time, it's the best orgasm I've had yet.

I think I like the idea of being watched. And more than that, I like the idea that I'm *learning* what I might want. That maybe, just maybe, I'll be able to advocate for it in bed, for myself.

If my husband even cares to know.

That thought weighs heavily on me as I clean up in the bathroom, rearranging my underwear and slipping into the navy blue silk dress. It's entirely possible that my husband *won't* care about my desires. That he won't want to know what turns me on or indulge my fantasies. That he'll only be interested in his own pleasure and what he can take from me.

That's what the other girls I knew whispered about—what their mothers told them. None of the details, nothing about their own bodies or even their potential husbands', but that sex was for that future husband's pleasure, that they should simply lie back and allow them to do as they pleased—even if *what* would be asked, exactly, was never explained.

Now I have a better idea, from Alessio. And I want very much to find out what the other side of it all might be—what it might feel like to be with a man who wants to make me feel every bit as good as I could possibly make him feel.

My emotions are in a tangled, messy turmoil by the time I finish getting ready, made even more so by the fact that I finally opened my mother's jewelry box for this. It was given to me shortly after the funeral, part of my father's will, but I hadn't touched it. My father had always intended to give it to me on my twenty-first birthday—aside from the few pieces that I now know he had intended to dole out beforehand, like the amethyst earrings he gave me on the night of my eighteenth birthday.

I want to wear those, feeling as if the sentiment behind them might be strong enough to help get me through this, but I opt for jewelry that will match my dress instead. My mother's jewelry box is large, full of a variety of earrings, necklaces, bracelets, and rings, a fortune's worth of jewels in one place. It takes me longer than it probably should to look through them all, wanting to savor each one, wishing I knew what they all meant. I wish I knew which ones my father gave her and which she inherited herself, which ones she chose, and which ones might have been given to her by other family members as gifts. I never knew her well enough to have the chance, never spoke to her, or heard her voice when I was old enough to remember it.

It hits me all over again how much I've lost, and I want to crawl into bed and curl into myself instead of going downstairs, meeting men I don't know, opening myself up to the possibility of a life spent with a near-stranger. I want comfort and familiarity, not the fear of the unknown.

But in this, I'm not being given a choice. And if I refuse, what little semblance of choice I do have will be taken away.

It's enough to finally propel me into choosing what I do want to wear—a pair of earrings with teardrop sapphires cascading down from pear-shaped diamond studs, and a gorgeous cocktail ring comprised of a radiant cut sapphire that reaches nearly to my knuckle, with diamond baguettes studding the band on either side. After a moment's hesitation, I take a thin choker necklace studded with diamonds out of the box, a teardrop sapphire hanging from it, and clasp it around my neck. The sapphire rests directly in the hollow of my throat, and the necklace sits on my throat like a collar, a thought that makes my heart skip a beat in my chest.

Is that—something, too? I imagine Alessio slipping his finger underneath the chain, pulling me in gently for a kiss, with just enough force to let me know what he wants, but not enough to break it. My pulse speeds up, fluttering in my throat, and I swallow hard.

I have a very overactive imagination, it seems, for someone who doesn't really know how all this works.

Is that how it always is, at the beginning? I feel as if I'm waking up, discovering things I hadn't known to imagine or want before, as if there's this whole new world of possibility in front of me to discover. And the most frustrating thing about it is that whether or not I *get* to explore it entirely depends on who I marry, and if *he* wants me to—or if he's only interested in using me to get off before discarding me.

I want to think Alessio wouldn't give me to a man like that. But maybe neither of us would know until it's too late—especially since I'm not supposed to discuss things like that. I can't imagine Alessio will.

I stand up, fluffing my dark, carefully curled hair over my shoulders, sliding two diamond pins into one side to hold some of my hair back. There's nothing else to do but go downstairs—I can already hear the sounds of the door opening and closing and the low murmur of conversation below me. My

chest tightens with nerves, butterflies taking off in my stomach in a sick whirl.

There's no point in putting it off any longer. I steel myself, tipping my chin up in defiance of my own fear, and go downstairs.

I can feel eyes on me as I come down the staircase. Alessio is standing near the dining room, talking to two young men who look only a little older than me, all of them with drinks in their hands. They turn to look at me as I walk down, and I feel my spine stiffen, my mouth going dry as I step onto the wooden floor and walk towards Alessio.

"Gianna." He smiles at me. "This is Antonio and Tommas Lombardi. Gentlemen, meet Gianna Mancini."

Brothers. Of course. I see it now: the similarity in their faces and their short, slightly curly dark hair, identical liquid brown eyes focused on me. They each take my hand, telling me how glad they are to meet me, but it's hard to listen. All I can see is Alessio, his jaw set as he watches, and I can *swear* I see a glimmer of jealousy on his face.

But I could also be imagining it.

I'm introduced to others as they come in. Alessio brings me a glass of wine, warning me to sip it slowly, and when he bends down to whisper that in my ear, a shiver goes down my spine that I can't quite hide. I try to remember the names as I'm introduced—Marco, Matteo, Carlo, Giorgio—and then the door opens, and another young man walks in, sending me into a nervous spiral of confusion.

Six. Alessio said six. Did Fontana add someone to the list?

I don't recognize the man who walks in. He's wearing an expertly tailored charcoal suit, his dark blond hair styled back away from his face, showing off dark blue eyes that look around the room with what I feel is probably an unearned arrogance. There's that same arrogance in his step, a swagger that makes me feel vaguely uncomfortable as he walks into the room, and I feel Alessio stiffen beside me.

“He wasn’t invited,” he growls in a low voice that sends another shiver all the way down my spine. Then he’s striding forward to intercept the newcomer before he can make it any further.

There’s a tense conversation that I can’t hear and can’t read lips well enough to understand anything that’s said. My pulse is fluttering in my throat, and I know I’m ignoring all of my other guests, but they’re all focused on what’s happening, too, watching as Alessio and the young man who just walked in argue in low tones. Alessio’s expression darkens further and further, but I see the moment he relents. The way the man brushes past him carelessly, as if Alessio doesn’t matter, makes me instantly hate him.

He strides directly up to me, and I catch a whiff of his cologne. It smells like a clean spring day, but I like the warmth and the spice of Alessio’s more. He takes my hand, smiling at me, but it doesn’t quite reach his eyes. “Andre Leone. A pleasure, Miss Mancini.”

Andre. A cold block of ice settles in my gut, twisting in me as I stare at him. *This is who Fontana wanted me to marry. Who Alessio stopped me from marrying.* A marriage to him would absorb my family into his, make the Mancini legacy disappear into whatever the Leone family wants it to be. The Leone family won’t be second to what my father created—they’ll take it for themselves instead.

“The pleasure is mine, Mr. Leone,” I manage, using every bit of politeness that my father taught me to force myself to speak in an even voice, keeping a forced smile on my face and resisting the urge to snatch my hand out of Andre’s. “You should mingle. I can’t stay away from my other guests forever, but I’m sure we’ll speak again.”

The moment I manage to get away from Andre, I make a beeline to Alessio. “Did you know he was coming?” I whisper in a sharp, hushed voice, staring daggers at him. “Did you know anything about this?”

“Of course not.” Alessio’s jaw is tight, his eyes steely. “This is Fontana’s doing, I’m sure. A means of pacifying the Leone

family, I hope—keeping them happy while still allowing you to make another choice. They would have been furious that the engagement Fontana planned fell through, once the Family agreed to my compromise.”

“They’re not going to make me marry him?” I hadn’t thought to be afraid of it before, but the fear springs up in my chest, squeezing tight.

“No, of course not,” Alessio says firmly. “I won’t allow it.” But even as he says it, I see a hint of that twitch at the corner of his mouth and eye, that tell, that means he’s not as confident as he would like for me to think he is.

It’s the first time I’ve had a reason to think that perhaps there’s more to the power my father had than simply holding the title of don. That taking on that title might not have automatically given Alessio the power I might have thought.

“Dinner will be served soon.” Alessio steps away from me, raising his voice. “If everyone will join me and Miss Mancini in the formal dining room?”

There’s a spread of appetizers already on the table—charcuterie on stone trays, shrimp cocktail in chilled glass bowls with sauce, small phyllo cups filled with melted brie and topped with dollops of jam, decanters of wine interspersed between them. Usually, my father’s household staff—Alessio’s and mine now, I suppose—is kept spread out, only a necessary few at the house at any given time to keep it from feeling overwhelming. Neither my father nor I ever liked to feel as if we were being doted on, or incapable of doing anything ourselves. But they’re all here tonight, spread out through the dining room as we file in, Alessio taking the seat at the head of the table and me to his right. There are small seating cards in front of each place—the Lombardi brothers are at Alessio’s left, which indicates to me that he might have a preference for me choosing one of them—and Andre looks displeased as he surveys the table while the others take their seats.

“There’s no place for me, *Moretti*,” he says petulantly, emphasizing Alessio’s given name, and I see Alessio’s jaw tighten.

“You are an unexpected guest,” he replies with terse politeness. “Please, take a seat at one side. And you may refer to me as Don Mancini, Mr. Leone, as that is the title I now hold.”

Andre’s mouth purses like he’s tasted something sour, but the authority in Alessio’s voice is unmistakable. It sends a tingle of excitement down my spine, making me squeeze my thighs together and shift in my chair, the butterflies in my stomach fluttering for an entirely different reason as I look at Alessio’s implacable expression.

That authoritarian note in his voice shouldn’t turn me on so much, but it does.

The staff spreads out around the table, pouring wine as the guests fill their plates with appetizers. I’m too nervous to eat much, but I add a few shrimp and pieces of cheese to my plate, picking at it as I look at the men gathered around the table.

One of them will be my husband. My stomach knots at the idea. Either of the Lombardi brothers is attractive enough, but I don’t know anything about them yet. Marco Fazini seems pleasant—all of them *seem* pleasant, really, except for Andre, but that doesn’t mean anything. It doesn’t tell me if they’ll be respectful, make me laugh, or care about pleasing me in bed. So far, not a single one of them has made my heart race the way it does when I’m near Alessio.

“We were very sorry to hear about your father,” Antonio says from where he’s sitting across from me, next to my brother. “Our entire family was. I know our father worked closely with yours on occasion. There was great respect between them.”

I can hear what he’s not saying, of course. *My father knew yours. He was trusted. You can trust me, or my brother. We’re the ones you should choose.*

It feels like manipulation, and I hate it.

“It’s a shame I can’t marry both of you, then.” The words come out before I can stop them, and I can’t shake off the tinge of sarcasm clinging to them. “Or marry one and keep the other on the side. But that’s strictly the province of mafia

husbands, isn't it?" I reach for my wine, just in time to catch the stinging glance that Alessio sends my way.

"Gianna." Just the one word, but I can hear the reproof in it, the warning. It sends a tingle down my spine. It makes me want to rebel more, to be worse. To push him into punishing me. I haven't been able to get the thought out of my head since our "lesson." *Would he be able to control himself then? Or would he take what he wants—and then have to marry me?*

"Gianna," Alessio murmurs my name, more forcefully this time, and I realize that I'd drifted away into my thoughts. My thighs are clenched together, that throbbing pressure building again, and I know I have to stop thinking about ways to corner Alessio into marrying me. Unless I'm very lucky—in my opinion, anyway—one of these other men will be the one I marry. And if I want to have a say in the matter, I need to pay attention.

"I'm sorry." I force a smile back onto my face. "I got lost in thought for a moment."

"It's fine." Carlo Bernardi, the one sitting next to me, speaks up. "I was just asking what your interests are. What do you do in your spare time?"

I turn a little to look at him. He's handsome too—one of the oldest of the group—with dark hair that he keeps a bit long and blue eyes. They're all handsome, but Carlo has the kindest eyes.

Across the table, before I can answer, Andre snorts.

"What do you mean, 'spare time'? What else does a mafia daughter have? It's not like she serves a purpose, beyond marrying and giving her husband an heir." He smirks, picking up his wine as his gaze lands on me with an expression that tells me clearly what he's thinking—that he's imagining just what he would do to me to get that heir.

My skin crawls, any desire from my lewd thoughts about Alessio fleeing instantly. "I like to read," I manage, looking at Carlo and doing my best to ignore Andre entirely, even though

I know it will only make his attitude worse. “I’m hoping to take literature classes at Northwestern in the fall.”

Andre snickers from the end of the table, which was to be expected, but he’s not the only one who looks surprised. Even Carlo looks a little taken aback.

“College?” Matteo Barone is the first one to speak up, from where he’s sitting next to the Lombardi brothers. “Not that there’s anything wrong with that,” he adds hastily. “Just—are you thinking of getting a degree?”

“Why wouldn’t I?” I can feel Alessio’s gaze on me, waiting for me to say something out of turn again, but I can’t just keep silent. “My father thought I should. But he also thought I should wait to marry until I was twenty-one, so—” I shrug. “Perhaps you have some argument about what my father wanted for me?”

Matteo looks slightly taken aback. Carlo is the one who speaks up, in a soothing tone that I think is meant to make me feel better, but really makes me feel patronized. “It’s just that a mafia wife has duties that have nothing to do with an education. You won’t work, so why waste the time? It’s not as if you need to earn a living. No one here would let you want for anything.” He smiles at me as if trying to placate my emotions. “You shouldn’t feel that you have to—”

“I *want* to.” I know it’s rude to interrupt him, that I shouldn’t—but I’m starting to not care. I can feel a slow trepidation building in my stomach, a fear that my future is going to change in so many more ways than just the one facing me right now. “I like to learn. I want to study something that interests me. It doesn’t matter if it turns into a job.”

“Well, I mean—it *can’t*,” Matteo insists. “You can’t work. It’s just—not done.”

I press my lips together, trying to hold back my response. He’s right, of course. Even my father wouldn’t have supported my going out and creating a career for myself. The security implications, the safety protocols, and even just the optics of the daughter of one of the three most powerful men in Chicago holding an ordinary job would be impossible. But sitting

across from any of these *boys* and having them explain to me how I will never be allowed to have a career of any sort, whether I want to or not.

“I know,” I finally say tightly. “But I want to pursue my interests regardless. And I plan to.”

No one really seems to know what to say—except Andre, of course, who swirls his wine in his glass and arches an eyebrow. “Unless your husband says otherwise, of course.”

“I’d have to pick you first.” The words come out sharp and biting, and I see Alessio tense next to me, but I can’t stop myself. I’m too upset. “You weren’t even invited.”

“I was.” Andre takes a careless sip of his wine. “Just not by you. Don Fontana told me to attend. Which I think supersedes the authority of anyone else here, yes?” He raises an eyebrow.

So Alessio was right. There’s a tense silence around the table, which is broken only by the staff coming in to sweep away the appetizers and replace them with a soup course. For a little while, it’s only broken by the clinking of spoons against china, until Tommas Lombardi speaks up, telling me about his family’s vineyard in Italy, which is apparently second only to the Agosti vineyards.

It’s a tedious dinner. I learn just enough about each of them to know that while a few of my choices might not make me miserable—given my own choice in the matter entirely, I wouldn’t pick any of them.

But then again, they’re all being held up against the impossible standard of Alessio, who I’ve wanted since I was fifteen, and who I only want even more now.

I barely taste any of the meal, even though I know it must be delicious. I can’t even taste the dessert, which is a rich chocolate mousse with fresh raspberries on it, one of my favorites, but all I can think about is the steadily growing knot in my stomach, the feeling that all of this is going to go so terribly wrong. That no matter what I choose—*who*—I’m going to end up with a husband who will want to control all of my choices going forward, all of my life. Who will have

expectations I'll have to fulfill, no matter what my own desires are.

Alessio promised me that I'd still be able to go to college and live my life the way my father and I planned, even though I'm being pushed into marriage. But *how* will he help me make that a reality? My husband will be the don. He will go back to working for Luca Romano—or something else entirely. I realize, sitting there in a cloud of steadily growing dread, that while Alessio might *want* to protect me, that he might think he can accomplish it even without marrying me, it is, in fact, the only way that he could ever really keep me safe the way he says he wants to.

And it's the only thing he absolutely refuses to do.

I can see the flickers of jealousy in his eyes when the Lombardi twins flirt with me, when Carlo asks me about my favorite books, when Matteo describes the summer house he wants to take me to—*alone*, he adds pointedly—if he's my choice. I can *see* that he hates the idea of any of these other men having possession of me, touching me, taking me for their own. But as far as I can tell, that changes nothing.

The moment the last guest leaves, I turn to Alessio from where we're standing at the foot of the staircase. "I don't want to marry any of them," I whisper.

His expression is harder than I've seen it before when he looks at me, his jaw set. "You'll have to," he says finally. "Fontana has made it plain, by sending Andre here, that he won't suffer delays. He *will* marry you to Andre Leone if we don't make our own choice within the timeframe he's given."

My choice would be you. I swallow hard. "I don't—I can't—"

"You have to." Alessio's tone is ruthless. "Unless you want to be married to that prick. Which means keeping your pretty mouth shut and smiling and minding your manners. Do you understand, Gianna? I can't make this work in your favor if you insist on having outbursts at the dinner table—"

"You know why!" I stare at him, disbelieving. He's never spoken to me this way before, and what scares me more is that

I can see the fear behind it. He's unsure if he can manage this as well as he expected, if he can keep me as safe as he meant to. The ground under his feet isn't as stable as he wants me to believe.

"You need to be careful, Gianna, if you want to be the one choosing."

"What happened to the lessons?" I narrow my eyes at him. "You promised, in exchange for my cooperation. It's been a week—"

"I have to think about that." Alessio's jaw tightens. "I'm not sure it's appropriate—"

"So now you're a liar?" I can hear my voice rising, the words coming out more hurtful than I mean for them to be. "So now you're just going to go back on your word and throw me to the wolves? Why should I trust that you can protect me at all? You wouldn't do what my father asked, and now you won't help me make sure that one of these men will want me, that I'll know what to do so I won't be so scared. You could have fixed *all* of this, and you won't! You promised to teach me, and you —"

Alessio's eyes are blazing, anger in them that I've never seen before. The muscle in his jaw leaps as he looks down at me, and it's enough to make me stop talking abruptly, my heart hammering in my chest in mingled desire and fear.

"You want a lesson?" His voice is deadly quiet. "Maybe it's time for a different kind of lesson, Gianna. One that you'll remember the next time you're at dinner with the men who will decide your future."

His hand closes around my elbow as he marches me across the foyer, towards the door that leads into his office. My heart is in my throat, my breath catching as he closes the door behind him, flipping on a light that bathes the room in a soft glow. The curtains are still open to the large window that overlooks the backyard, and if someone walked past, they could see us, standing there in front of Alessio's desk.

“No doubt your husband will do the same as I’m about to, if you defy him,” Alessio says quietly. “I hadn’t planned on this, but perhaps it’s best if you find out first from me.”

I have no idea what he means. My pulse is fluttering wildly, fear on the verge of overtaking me, but there’s excitement, too. I don’t understand it, and I don’t know what’s going to happen next, but there’s excitement in that, too.

“Turn around,” Alessio says, his voice hard, but there’s an underlying current of something else, too. “Face the desk.”

I swallow hard, and for a moment, I think of disobeying. I wonder what will happen if I do. And then slowly, very slowly, I turn to face his desk.

“Pick your dress up,” Alessio instructs. “Just the back of it. Up to your waist.”

The blood rushes in my ears so suddenly that I almost can’t hear anything else, my knees going weak as heat floods me. *He’s going to punish me.* That throbbing arousal returns, burning between my legs, making me ache as I reach for my skirt with trembling fingers. I can feel my face burning with heat, and I know that I *shouldn’t* want to do this, but a part of me does. A part of me wants to find out what happens next. What Alessio will do—and if it’s what my fevered imagination has managed to dream up.

Slowly, I slide the silk up my legs, my hands shaking. I can feel Alessio’s eyes on me, and I desperately want to look back, to see what expression is on his face, if this is turning him on, too. I want to know if he’s fighting the same sort of feelings that I am.

I don’t remember, until my skirt is nearly to my thighs, that I’m wearing only a thong beneath it. My face feels like it might combust with heat, my cheeks glowing with humiliation, and my hands stall, the silk fluttering against the backs of my thighs as I hear Alessio clear his throat behind me.

“Keep going, Gianna,” he instructs, and I feel my knees tremble all over again as I obey.

The silk brushes against the tops of my thighs, the bottom curve of my ass, and I suck in a breath as I lift my skirt to the small of my back as he instructed, leaving my ass bare to his view. My eyes are squeezed tightly shut, my heart is pounding in my chest—and I can feel that my panties are soaking wet, clinging between my thighs.

“Good girl,” Alessio murmurs, and before I can stop myself, I let out a small, whimpering moan.

I can almost *feel* Alessio freeze behind me. “Shit,” he murmurs under his breath. “Fuck—”

I can hear his breathing, quicker now. *He’s aroused too*, I realize, and I wonder if this is when it finally happens, when that control that he’s been hanging onto snaps, and he takes my virginity for himself. This isn’t necessarily where I had hoped it might happen, in his office instead of in a soft bed, but—

“Bend over, Gianna.” His voice is hard again, stern, as if he’s gathered himself. “One hand on the desk, the other holding your dress up just like you are. Bend over all the way.”

Oh god. I swallow hard, my chest heaving with quick breaths as I go very still for a moment. The position he wants me in is so vulnerable, so exposed, and—

“*Now*, Gianna,” he growls, and I bite my lip hard to keep from moaning again.

I’m not supposed to be turned on by this. This is meant to be a punishment. But I can feel the quiver that runs through me as I force myself to obey, my skin flushed and burning now all over, as if my entire body is on fire. I press one hand against the desk, bending over slowly so that my bare ass is pushed out towards Alessio, and I know he can see the clinging black fabric between my thighs. I hope desperately that he can’t see how drenched the fabric is, how much this is turning me on.

“I can use my belt or my hand, Gianna. Ten strokes, and that’s all. Just enough to remind you that you need to mind your manners. Your choice.”

Another quiver runs through me, threatening to buckle my knees. The thought of Alessio touching me, even as a punishment, is enough to nearly make me dissolve. “Your hand,” I whisper, my voice shaking, and my thighs press together, a burst of arousal flooding through me. I’ve never experienced anything like this, and I wonder if Alessio knows, if he realizes what he’s doing to me. I don’t think he *would* be doing it if he knew.

He steps closer to me, close enough that I almost think I can feel the heat radiating off of him, but I could be imagining it. I feel as if I could come out of my body, trembling with the anticipation of his touch, wanting it to be more than this. My hand clenches into a fist in the silk, pressing into the small of my back as I grip the edge of the desk with my other hand, the fearful anticipation of what comes next fizzing through me. “Count out loud,” he murmurs, his hand brushing against my hip, and I gasp at the sensation, at the intimate contact of his fingers against my skin.

When his palm connects with my ass, my mouth drops open on a shocked cry. I’d been so caught up in my arousal that I hadn’t expected *pain*, and the stinging heat that spreads suddenly through my skin makes me yelp.

“*Count*,” Alessio reminds me, his voice a low growl, and I swallow hard.

“One,” I whisper, and his hand comes down again.

The first three hurt. Not as much as they could—even I can tell he’s not spanking me with his full strength. But around the time that I cry out *four* in a choked voice, the stinging burn blends with the pulsing arousal between my thighs, and it feels as if every stroke of his hand jolts me there, heating my sensitive flesh and sparking over that sensitive spot between my thighs. The edge of the desk bites into my hand, my palm sweating against the silk gripped in my fist, and all I can think about is the strange, swirling vortex of sensation sweeping through me, pain and pleasure and arousal and humiliation all tangled up together. It’s enough to bring frustrated tears to my eyes, burning behind my eyelids and dripping onto my lashes when I open my eyes again, gasping.

The concept of arousal, of desire, of knowing anything at *all* about sex is already so new to me. And now *this*—

Somehow, I manage to keep counting. All the way to ten, where I'm left trembling there, knees locked and body frozen, heat coursing through me and an insistent throbbing between my legs that feels as if it's taken me over entirely. I want to beg Alessio to ease it, to make me come, but I can't force the words out. I can't imagine that he *would*. All I can do is stand there, tearful and trembling, waiting to find out what happens next.

His hand touches my hip again, just above where my skin is red and burning from the spanking. "You can lower your dress, Gianna," he murmurs, and it takes a moment for me to obey, my fingers stiff from having been so tightly clenched into a fist. When the silk does fall down, slithering over my heated skin and down the backs of my legs, I let out another whimpering moan that makes me close my eyes in shame.

"Go upstairs." It's a command, deep and throaty, Alessio's voice hoarse in a way that makes me think he's holding onto his self-control by a thread. If I were braver, if I were more experienced, I would turn around and try to seduce him, to kiss him, to do *something* that would end with tonight going very differently than how I know he intends for it to play out—with me heading upstairs to my bed.

But I'm not brave enough. I don't know *how* to make things happen the way I wish they would, how to convince him. I might be learning quickly, but I'm still too innocent to be able to bend his wishes to mine. And that innocence is part of what keeps him at arm's length.

I swallow hard, unsure for a moment if I'll be *able* to walk away—my legs are so unsteady that I feel like I might just crumple to the floor and stay there. But I put one trembling foot in front of the other, all the way to the door, and behind me, Alessio doesn't move. He doesn't speak.

And I go up to bed alone.

Alessio



It took me a long time to go up to bed after Gianna walked out of the office.

I didn't trust myself not to go to her room. She wanted me—I could feel it in every trembling line of her body, the way she shuddered when I touched her hip. I saw how wet she was, and it made me feel half-insane.

I can't want her. I can't have her. I *shouldn't*. But it's harder and harder each day when she makes it so clear that she wants to break my resolve, and my only defenses are my own principles and my belief that she's not thinking clearly. That later—*much* later—when she could, she would regret the choice.

Instead, I'm relegated to another night of self-pleasure in my office before I even dare head upstairs. It's almost more frustrating than pleasurable at this point—more of a necessity than something I'm actually enjoying. But I can't justify leaving Gianna alone here, even with security, to go out and find someone to pass an evening with—I'd never be able to live with myself if something happened to her because I wanted to go out and get laid. And more than that, though I don't want to admit it, no one else would give me what I want. No one else would be *her*, and I'm beginning to feel consumed with what feels like a forbidden desire for her and her alone.

Once she's married, it will be different, I remind myself. She'll be even more off-limits then, and you can go back to New York. Time and distance will fix it, and the desire will fade. But at the present moment, sitting in the dark of my office with my

fist around my cock and the memory of Gianna moaning when I slipped and said *good girl*, it doesn't feel like it will fade.

It feels like it's only going to get so much worse.

I don't feel much better in the morning. I slept restlessly, my dreams full of Gianna in lewd, erotic positions that leave me hard as a rock and flooded with guilt when I wake, my hand resignedly wrapping around myself again to ease the frustrated arousal before I get up and start my day.

I haven't come in my own hand so much since I was a fucking teenager, I think, with no little resentment—towards myself and my lack of control over my own desire, not her—as I dress and head downstairs to breakfast. Gianna is already at the table, wearing a prim, ruffled-front white blouse that makes her look all the more innocent, even though she's wearing a bit more makeup than usual and a rosy lipstick that accentuates the fullness of her mouth, and instantly makes me think about the possibility of having it wrapped around my cock.

Breakfast is silent. She picks at her food as usual, but I can't make myself instruct her to eat more. I'm beginning to see more and more that she's aroused by my authority, by being told what to do and then praised for it, and that's all the more dangerous for me. It makes her all the more perfect for what I would want, if—

No. There is no if. I repeat that to myself until I can retreat to my office, drawing the curtains so there's no chance of glimpsing her out at the pool in her bikini again, and I have lunch brought to my desk. I work through dinner, hoping to put enough space between us that the memory of last night can fade a little, but an hour or so after dinner, I hear a knock at the office door.

I let out a slow sigh, knowing who it is. I could ignore it—ignore *her*, but that would almost certainly cause more problems than it would fix. “Come in,” I finally call out, swiveling a little in my chair to face the door as Gianna steps in, still wearing the wide-legged black dress pants and ruffled shirt she had on this morning.

It doesn't stop me from remembering how beautiful she looked, how perfect, leaned over my desk in her evening dress with the silk bunched in her fist, her bare ass reddened and on display for me.

That was a punishment, I remind myself. Not one for play, either. A real punishment. Not for your arousal or hers, regardless of the result.

"Is there something you need?" I try to keep my tone as distant and formal as I can, try to ignore the way that she shifts when she sits down in the leather chair across from my desk, reminding me how tender and sore her ass must be and why.

"I know you're going to argue with me," Gianna says softly, and I see that stubborn set to her jaw that tells me she has something in mind, and she wants me to listen. "But I think you're being foolish."

"Oh?" I frown at her. "I'm not sure I appreciate your tone. Did you already forget last night's lesson?" I keep my voice hard, cold, even though it's difficult with her. I want her to remember it as a punishment, not as something she enjoyed. Because if she does—

"That's exactly my point." Her chin tips up a little, and I see the quick flutter of her pulse in her throat, a light flush spreading across her neck. If I unzipped her trousers right now, slipped my fingers inside, and touched her panties, they'd be damp. I know they would be, and the thought of it makes my cock twitch eagerly despite myself. "As embarrassed as I was—I had a certain...*reaction* to it. I don't really understand it, not yet, but you could teach me. And I think you want that. I *know* it affected you the same way, too. You just don't want to admit it."

The last is said defiantly, as if she's daring me to try to tell her otherwise. If I did, it would be a lie. I don't want to lie to her, but neither do I want to agree with her that I'm turned on by what happened last night, and make her point for her.

"It doesn't matter," I finally tell her, settling on that. "You need to focus on who it is that you want to choose to—"

“That’s my *point*.” Gianna cuts me off, and there’s a light in her eyes that’s daring me to punish her again for it. I feel that aching twitch in my groin again, and I cling to my self-control with everything I have.

Not only does she crave what you do, but she’s also a bit of a brat on top of it. It’s as if she were made for my desires, and innocent as she is, I could teach her to understand those desires even more, to be as perfect for me as I could possibly want.

If only I could do that and still live with myself afterward.

“Why am I marrying someone else?” Her tone turns demanding, her eyes narrowed. “I know you keep saying I’m too young—but what if I don’t want to marry someone who’s basically a boy? Someone who will try to mimic what he thinks a man is by controlling me? Someone who doesn’t know how to please me—” She bites her lip, her lashes fluttering down in a way that I don’t think is intentionally seductive, but makes me ache all over nonetheless. “And you can’t keep saying it’s because we’re technically stepsiblings. That’s bullshit, and you know it—”

“Gianna.” I cut her off. “I should punish you just for speaking to me that way. You need to learn manners—”

“Do it.” There’s that stubborn light in her eyes again, and a glimmer of heat there, too. “I’ll enjoy it, though. I enjoyed it last night. And when I went upstairs—”

“Enough!” I slap my hand down on my desk, startling her. If she tells me what she did when she went upstairs, how she might have touched herself—I won’t be able to stand it. I’ll bend her over the desk and take her in ways not only inappropriate for our relationship, but for how she should lose her virginity, too. “Gianna, all of that aside, the answer is still no.”

“Why?” There’s that hint of a pout again. “This doesn’t make sense—”

I grit my teeth. “Because what I would want from a wife—the things that would keep me satisfied enough to not stray from a

woman's bed, the way you want...those are things I shouldn't ask of you. That I shouldn't teach you."

"*What things?*" She glares at me. "How can you decide for me that I wouldn't want it? You don't know what I think about. What I'm curious about. You don't know how I felt last night while you—"

"I do." My jaw hurts from how tightly it's clenched. "I know exactly how you felt. And I refuse to take advantage of those desires to turn you into what I would want. It would be easy, Gianna, but I'm not sure it would be your choice. And I—"

"You can't know that." She swallows hard, and she's beginning to look defeated. It should make me feel relieved, but it doesn't.

"You need to let this go, Gianna. I've made my decision. I'm sorry if you're not happy with the choices laid out in front of you, but I'm doing my best to ensure that you have a choice at all. Fontana would have you married to Andre Leone, and I know that's not what you want. It's not what I want *for* you. So instead—"

I try to ignore the aching in my groin, shuffling through the papers that I've been looking at instead, attempting to turn the conversation in a different direction. "I've organized a list of individual dates for you with the candidates, based on who I think you were most compatible with, but if you don't agree with my observations—"

It's hard to even say it. I hate the thought of her with any of these men, the idea that any of them might be allowed to touch her. I think of her soft, breathy moan last night, and want to strangle the life out of any other man who managed to drag that sound from her pretty lips.

Gianna is quiet for a long moment. She looks at the sheet pensively, and I can see that she's thinking of something. I'm half-afraid to ask what.

"Fine," she says at last. "I don't care what order you put them in—Carlo and the Lombardi brothers were the least offensive of the bunch, but I don't want to marry any of them. And I

never want to see Andre again, if I can help it. But if I don't fight you on this, and if I agree to never bring up you marrying me instead again, you have to do something for me."

Her tone is so absolutely serious that I stare at her for a moment, half disbelieving. "Gianna, this isn't up for discussion—"

Her chin tilts up again. "It is," she says flatly. "Because you can make me do this, but I can make it miserable for us both. I can make it infuriating. Any of them will still marry me, because they don't want *me*; they want the money and influence that comes with making me their wife. You can punish me again for it, but I don't think you will because I enjoy it, and you're too afraid to lose control—"

"*Gianna.*" My patience is wearing thin, and while she's technically right, that doesn't mean I'm enjoying being lectured by a girl who is meant to be *my* ward. "What is it that you want?"

"I want what you promised me." Her eyes don't leave mine for a second, even as her cheeks flush, and I can see that flutter of her pulse beating harder in her throat. "I want another lesson. But I want you to *show* me."

My own heart thuds in my chest, my cock twitching with renewed and entirely inappropriate interest. "What do you mean?" I ask carefully, but I suspect I already know.

"I want to see how you touch yourself." Her face is flushed, but to her credit, she doesn't flinch, even though I can tell she's embarrassed. "I want you to show me how *you* would want to be touched. The places that feel good. I want you to show me how I would touch my husband, enough that I'll know exactly how to please him. So I can make him feel good enough that he'll want to please me, too." Her lips press tightly together. "I don't want to just lie there and pretend that I like it. I want it to be *good*. So show me what men like. Show me what *you* would like."

God. It feels as if I can't spend even a few moments in her presence without being so turned on that it's nearly painful. The prospect of what she's asking is both alluring and

something that I know that I should not, without a doubt, agree to.

“Whoever you marry, they wouldn’t be happy to know that I ___”

“They won’t know.” Gianna glares at me stubbornly. “You’re not going to touch *me*, Alessio. You’re not going to damage my precious innocence in any way.” There’s a sarcastic tone in her voice that makes me want to get up, pull her into my lap, and damage that innocence in so many different ways, after I’ve reddened her ass for the way she’s spoken to me since she walked in. “You’re just going to demonstrate. I won’t touch you, either. I’ll still be just as *pure* as any of those boys could possibly want—but with a little more knowledge.”

Deep down, I know my acquiescence is less because I think her argument is sound and more because the idea of jerking off in front of Gianna, even if it’s still only my hand pleasuring myself, sounds so much better than the lonely pleasure I’m going to indulge in after she leaves otherwise. Because it turns me on, because I want it, and because fighting my own desires has become utterly exhausting, even if I know this is one more step down a slippery slope that could send us both tumbling into something we can’t take back.

“If I agree,” I say slowly, “you won’t bring up marriage between us again? This will be the last conversation we have about it?”

Gianna nods. I don’t know if she’s agreeing because she knows it’s a lost cause, or because she is hoping that what she’s proposed will turn into something else—something more like what she wants—but either way, it would mean not having to fight her on this.

“If you’re lying to me—” I pause. “If you don’t keep your word, Gianna, I will choose someone for you. Immediately. You will have no more say in the matter. Is that understood?”

She nods again, more slowly this time. I can see the light quiver in her lower lip and the anticipation in her face. “I understand,” she whispers softly.

“I mean it.” I need her to understand, unequivocally, that I do. “That *will* be the consequence.”

“I know.” She bites her lip. “Here? Do you want to—”

Her eagerness is more arousing than it should be. “No.” I shake my head. If I’m going to demonstrate this to Gianna, it’s not going to be in my office. *Especially* not here, where I can remember seeing her bent over my desk so prettily. “We’ll go up to the library again.”

It should feel awkward when I meet her up there. It *should* feel uncomfortable, shifting the wing chair so that I’m facing her as she curls up on the chaise again, watching me with a curious, frank interest in her eyes that almost makes me feel as if I’m on display. It should all be uncomfortable.

But instead, I’m already half-hard. This feeds into my desires so perfectly, this role of teaching her, showing her exactly where I would want to be touched, licked, sucked by her pretty mouth. If she were mine, this lesson would go very differently.

But she’s not, I remind myself as I sink into the chair, facing her.

“Are you going to take your clothes off?” Gianna’s eyes sparkle with teasing mischief, and I glare at her, trying not to think about the idea that she *wants* to see me naked.

“No,” I tell her flatly. “You don’t need to see all of me for this. Just my—” I clear my throat, forcing the word out, even though it feels as if I shouldn’t be saying it to her. There’s no *if* about it, actually—I just shouldn’t be. “Just my cock.”

Her teeth sink deeper into her lip when I say *cock*, that flush at her throat creeping up, her gaze dropping to my lap. There’s that curiosity still in her eyes, and she looks at me for a moment before glancing back up to my face. “What would you want me to do, if I were the one touching you right now?”

“If—” I take a slow breath, clinging to my self-control with what now feels like the very skin of my teeth. Imagining her doing these things to me will come so close to undoing me, and I have to separate myself from it somehow. “If I wanted a woman to do this to me,” I correct, trying so very hard to make

it not about *her*, “I would tell her to get on her knees. Right here.” I spread my legs a little wider, gesturing to the space between them. “And if I were instructing her, I would tell her to undo my belt.”

As I say it, I reach for the buckle, thumbing it open smoothly. Gianna’s gaze is fixed on my hand, her breath coming a little faster now with nervous anticipation. “And then I would tell her to take down my zipper and slip her fingers inside. Likely, I’d already be hard, but I like for a woman to go slowly. I’d tell her to ease my cock out, to be a good girl, and make sure it was nice and hard for her mouth.”

Fuck. The last comes out before I can stop it, and I know that within moments, I’ve slipped too easily into the role of teaching her. *She just needs to know the mechanics, not what you would fucking say,* I chastise myself as I drag down my zipper. I can’t miss what those words have done to Gianna, the way she’s breathing harder now, her hands pressed into her lap, her cheeks rosy with arousal. If I told her to do just that right now, she would. She would get on her knees for me and follow every instruction.

My fingers slip inside my slacks, touching the hard line of my cock in my boxer briefs, and I hesitate. It’s not too late to back out, to go ahead and have the inevitable fight with Gianna over my refusal, and send her to bed. This will mean my cock is the first she ever sees—and that shouldn’t thrill me the way it does. It shouldn’t make me throb; my balls are already tight and aching. It shouldn’t make me want to come for her, so my orgasm can be the first she sees, too.

I’m already rock-hard. I hear Gianna’s soft gasp when I slip my cock free, the warm air of the room ghosting over the wet tip, pre-cum already dripping down my shaft. Her eyes go large and round, and she stares at my cock in a way that makes it throb visibly, my arousal already far closer to the edge than it should be from displaying myself like this to her.

“It’s so big,” she whispers, and I let out a choked laugh.

“Make sure you tell a man that whether it’s true or not, and you’re well on your way to him doing whatever you ask.” I

wrap my fingers around the shaft, pressing my fingers into the base for a moment to ease my arousal a bit.

“What are you doing?” Gianna leans forward, her tongue tracing along her lower lip, and my cock throbs again, more pre-cum pearling at the tip. “What’s that?” Her voice is curious, inquisitive, and I suck in a slow breath, worried that the intensity of all of this will tip me over the edge too soon.

“This is what happens when I get aroused.” I brush my thumb over the glistening head, letting her watch as some of the fluid drips down the shaft.

“Oh.” Her teeth sink into her lip again. “I think—there’s something similar when I—”

“Yes.” I bite the word out, utterly unable to listen to her describe her own arousal without either coming on the spot—which would be embarrassing—or crossing the room and pinning her back on that chaise. My fingers brush over the tip again, swollen and hot against my fingertips. “This is the most—sensitive spot.” *Fuck*. My toes curl, my thigh muscles so tight I’m afraid they might cramp with the effort it’s taking not to come. Gianna’s eager eyes on me, following my hand, her rosy lips damp as her tongue flicks out to brush against the edge of her full lower lip—it’s almost too much. I swallow hard, my jaw clenching as I brush a finger against the soft flesh just beneath the tip.

“Here,” I murmur. “If you brush your finger or flick your tongue right here—it feels incredible. Your mouth especially—if you have your lips wrapped around a man’s cock and flutter your tongue just here—” I brush my finger over it again, my cock throbbing in my fist as more pre-cum leaks down the shaft.

She wants to touch me. I can see it in her face, in the heat glimmering in her eyes, the way she’s leaning forward on the chaise. All I would need to do is say the word, and she would be on her knees in front of me, her sweet, hot mouth wrapped around me, ready to swallow the cum that’s on the verge of bursting out of me. I squeeze the base of my cock again, trying

to slow down the pace of my oncoming orgasm, but it's difficult.

"And if I just want to use my hand?" Gianna asks softly, her voice a little strangled, too, as if she's just as aroused by this. *God*, I want to know how wet she is. I can almost feel it on my fingers, that slick, messy heat that I'd find if I slipped my hand into her panties.

"Everyone is different." I clench my jaw again, breathing slowly, trying to hold back. "But this is what I prefer." I begin to stroke, long, slow strokes, my palm rubbing over the damp head with each pass, down into the very base of my cock as I bring my fist down. "The same movement, over and over. Unless you *want* to tease, to draw it out, and then you can mix it up."

"Do you like that?" Gianna draws her lower lip between her teeth again. "Being teased?"

"It doesn't matter what I like," I grind out. I'm so desperately close, and as much as I know I shouldn't be so close to coming this hard from stroking myself in front of a woman at my age. As much experience as I have, I'm almost past caring. I *need* to fucking come, and I don't know how much more patience I have left in me for this. "This is a—general—lesson. *Fuck—*"

I hiss the last word between my teeth without meaning to as Gianna leans forward, her hands on the edge of the chaise, her tongue sliding over her lower lip again. All I can think of is how easily I could bend her over it, how quickly those pants could be around her ankles, her panties pulled aside so I could thrust into her. *She's soaking wet. You know she is. She would be so hot, so tight, so fucking good—*

"If you have any other questions—*ah—*" I stroke again, pressing my fingers just below the tip, squeezing out another drop of pre-cum, and Gianna lets out a small, quick breath that feels as if it jolts straight through my cock when I hear it. "I'm going to come in a minute, and I won't be able to—"

"Do I do the same thing with my mouth?" Her lips part, her eyes still bright and curious. "That—rhythm? How hard do I suck—"

“*Shit.*” My cock throbs, and I’m going to come. I can’t stop it, unless—

I jerk my hand away. For one second, I think I’ve ruined my own orgasm, that I’m going to explode anyway. My cock jerks and twitches, glistening in the light, the veins thick and standing out along the shaft. I feel the urge recede, the smallest bit, but I know it won’t be for long once I start to touch myself again.

“Everyone is different,” I repeat, trying to focus, to *think* through the impossible fog of lust. “But a hand and mouth together is good. It might take some—practice. Start slowly and build up the pace, and when you can tell he’s close, then keep a steady rhythm. Lips and tongue and fingers. It will take you time, but you’ll get the hang of it. And then, in time, if you can take it all the way down your throat—”

My cock throbs again, warningly, at the idea of Gianna deep-throating me. I swallow hard as her eyes widen even more.

“My *throat*? But how would I even—”

“Practice.” I can’t stand it any longer. I wrap my hand around my aching shaft again, knowing how close I am to the point of no return. “Most men will want to come in your mouth—or somewhere else. But if you don’t want—”

“Where else?” Gianna looks at me curiously, and I know this is it. I won’t get this sentence out without picturing what I’m about to say, and I’ll lose control.

“On—you. Your face, your breasts, your—”

Her mouth opens slightly, but I don’t see disgust on her face; I see *arousal*. She stares at me as I groan, my cock swelling and throbbing in my fist. “I’m going to—oh, *fuck*—”

I’m not sure I’ve ever come so hard in my life. The intensity of it washes over me like a tidal wave, one hand gripping the side of the chair as a burst of hot cum splashes over my fist, dripping over my fingers. I hear Gianna’s surprised gasp, the sound trailing off into something that sounds very much like a moan, and that only intensifies the sensation, spurt after spurt splashing over my fingers and hand as I tilt my head back,

unable to do anything other than give myself over to the intense, overwhelming pleasure.

Gianna is breathing hard. I can hear her as I stroke my hand slowly over my cock, slick with cum, drawing out the last swells of pleasure before I take my hand away. When I open my eyes, she's staring at me with a glassy-eyed look that tells me she's turned on almost to the point of begging me to touch her—and if she weren't so innocent, she might.

She's a little less innocent, now.

Guilt follows the euphoria of my orgasm, so close and hot on its heels that one has barely faded before the other arrives. I reach unsteadily for the handkerchief I'd put in my pocket, one I'd intended to use to minimize the mess and forgotten all about, wiping my hand off on it before unsteadily tucking my softening cock back into my trousers. "Remember what you promised," I tell her flatly, my voice going cold. I see the way she flinches at the sound, and that brings another kind of guilt, but she has to know this is the end of it. If she doesn't, if she tries to ask for more—I don't know if I can stop myself from touching her. I want to find out just how wet she is, to taste her, to teach *her* what it means to feel that kind of pleasure. It's taking everything in me not to think about whether or not she'll touch herself after I leave.

"I know." Her voice wavers slightly. "I—"

I shake my head, standing up. "I'm going to bed, Gianna. Tomorrow night, you'll have a date with one of the Lombardi brothers. Think about your future and which of those men you want to share it with. Your decision will matter very soon."

I see the way her shoulders slump slightly as she nods, but she doesn't say anything else. And when I walk out of the library, still vibrating with the aftershocks of pleasure, it takes everything in me to remind myself that it's for the best.

I've made the right decision. Now, I just have to see it through.

Alessio



I can't stop looking at the clock.

Gianna left at seven with Tommas Lombardi—a dinner and theatre date that I expect to result in her being home by midnight. I was clear with both him and security that I expected her back no later than that—and I've spent every minute since then on edge, restless and unable to focus on anything I've tried to use to keep my focus off of what might be happening right now. Nothing—not going through files or reading a book or attempting to watch a movie has kept my attention, not when the more present image of Tommas Lombardi holding Gianna's hand or touching her thigh in the theatre box seat next to his is determined to fill my mind.

It feels like absolute misery, waiting for her to come home, thinking of her time spent with anyone else. And I know that it's a misery I could put myself out of so easily, if only I'd compromise the principles I've stood on thus far.

For two weeks, I've arranged an initial date with each of the young men who came to dinner, and for two weeks, Gianna has dutifully spent an evening with each one. I can tell she's hated every minute of it, and it takes everything in me to tamp down my steadily rising jealousy, the fury I feel at the idea of anyone else with their hands on her. The fact that she hates it so much, too, should help, but it doesn't. It only makes it feel doubly worse—that we're both in misery over this.

She's kept her promise. She hasn't brought up the topic of a marriage between us again, and after each date, she's reported back to me with her feelings about it.

Including this one, when she finds me in the living room with an old movie droning in the background and a fire lit despite the summer warmth, a tumbler of whiskey in my hand instead of my usual wine. She sits down on the sofa an arm's length away from me, her silky black dress cascading around her slender calves. It takes everything in me to keep my eyes off of her legs, or the small diamond cutouts at her waist, filled in with netting that lets the glimpses of skin show through.

“Either of the Lombardi brothers is a possibility,” she tells me with a shrug. This is her second date with a Lombardi brother—the first I arranged a private dinner for the two of them, which was even worse than tonight, with both of them under the same roof with me. I hated seeing her dress up for them, hated the way seeing her in the black silk dress that she chose for the theater made me feel, hated the idea that his hand might touch her thigh through the silk and not mine. I told myself that it was my penance for wanting her at all, that if I'd just managed to keep control of my desires, I wouldn't feel like this.

It's not a very comforting thought.

“Do you like either of them?” I lean back in my chair, and Gianna gives me a look that suggests I should know better.

“No,” she says flatly. “And I don't like Carlo either, or Marco. I don't like any of them. But either of the Lombardi brothers are probably the least awful.”

“Is there anyone you absolutely don't want?” I force myself to ask the question as flatly as possible, like a questionnaire, like this means nothing to me other than ensuring her future. Like the idea of any of them with her doesn't make me burn with the desire to strangle whoever touches her.

“Giorgio and Marco.” Gianna swallows hard. “Marco is too—he comes on too strong. I think he'd get bored of me quickly and find someone else on the side. And Giorgio is crude. I don't like his sense of humor.” She bites her lip. “Although I guess none of that really matters. It's not like they're going to want to be friends with me. Or like this marriage is anything but a business arrangement, really.”

There's a hint of defeat in her voice that cuts me deeply. "I'm sorry, Gianna," I tell her gently. "I know you want the kind of marriage that you know your parents had. But it's not something I can facilitate in the time Fontana has given us. And if he insists on Andre—"

"I know." She sucks the corner of her lower lip into her mouth, nodding as she looks down at her hands. "It will be worse. Trust me, I know."

As the days pass, with every date, I see Gianna get quieter and quieter. Meals are more silent, and she spends more and more time in her room. I can see that it's all upsetting her, that this process is breaking her spirit bit by bit, but I don't know what else to do. Fontana's deadline is growing closer, and she has to make a choice.

I end up telling her that she'll attend a charity dinner with me at the Chicago natural history museum, and she can choose which of the three remaining candidates will be her date. "The other two will be there, naturally, so you can speak to and dance with any of them. You'll need to make a choice after this," I warn her. "So think about it."

"Tommas." She answers quickly, quickly enough for me to feel a stab of almost painful jealousy. "He's been the least—pushy. I think he might not be the worst of them."

It's not exactly a glowing recommendation. And when Gianna comes downstairs to meet me so we can go to the gala, I find myself wanting desperately for her to be on my arm instead.

She chose a deep purple gown for the gala, strapless with a reinforced v-shaped neckline filled in with some sort of illusory fabric. It's split up one side to her thigh, and I see she's wearing amethyst earrings, glittering in the light beneath her upswept dark hair. She looks beautiful, more beautiful than anyone I've ever seen, and as I escort her to the car, all of my thoughts about Tommas Lombardi are unkind.

It's a good choice, I remind myself. If she chooses Tommas, she will have picked a family with enough sway to not be overwhelmed by the sudden leap in status, but not so well-respected that they'll resent being absorbed into the Mancini

family. Not only that, but since Tommas has a brother, the Lombardi family will continue on as well. If I'd been forced to choose for her, it's the choice I would have made, and I wonder if she's thought of any of this. If any of it has been what made her lean more towards choosing him.

I try to let her be, once we're there. I have people I need to talk to, and I want to give her some time with Tommas without taking up her focus. She's kept her promise, but not bringing up the topic of marriage with me doesn't mean that she hasn't thought about it. We're too close to Fontana's deadline—I can't distract her.

But *god*, it's difficult. I can see during dinner that Gianna doesn't have any real affection for Tommas. He's attentive towards her, clearly eager for her attention in return. I'd almost be able to admire the way he focuses so entirely on her if I didn't want to drag him outside and punch him in the jaw for it. *It's going to be him*, I think as I sit there, working my way through a salad course that I barely taste and watching the two of them. *In a few weeks, he'll be her fiancé. Then, her husband. And you'll go back to New York and a parade of women you don't remember while he teaches her all the things you wish you could.*

I never knew jealousy could have such a bitter taste, but I'm learning it now.

I can see that Matteo and Carlo are jockeying for her attention, too, as the gala goes on and the dancing starts. It would almost be amusing to watch Tommas and Matteo compete for Gianna's attention, the two brothers working against each other, if it weren't for the fact that as the evening goes on, it's harder and harder to ignore the fact that I want to be the one swaying across the dance floor with her in my arms.

You could have had that. And you chose differently.

I do end up on the dance floor, with a pretty blonde in a long red dress who doesn't look much older than Gianna—probably a younger daughter of one of the families who hasn't been married yet. I catch Gianna's glance just once—see the heat of jealousy in her eyes, too—before she's swept off in one

direction by Tommas and me in another. I lose track of her for a moment. When the song ends and I look for her, she's nowhere to be seen.

I grit my teeth, hoping Tommas hasn't slipped her off to a corner somewhere in hopes of getting his hand up her skirt. I break away from the dance floor, scouting the outer hallways of the room before heading up the stairs. I hear her voice, low and soft, just before I come around the corner, and I stop dead when I see his fingers on her chin, gently tipping her lips up to his so that he can kiss her.

My vision swims red for a moment. In one hot, angry second, I vividly remember the feeling of Gianna's mouth on mine in the pool, that moment when I felt her against me. It was a clumsy, inexpert kiss, but it had been searing against my lips all the same, because it was *her*. And now Tommas is feeling those same lips against his, pressing Gianna up against the wall, and it's all I can do not to go and drag him off of her.

Instead, I clear my throat, and he jumps back guiltily, his face flushing red. *A boy, not a man.*

"I'm sorry, Don Moretti, I—"

"Never mind that. Both of you, back downstairs." I motion to the stairs for them to go first, and I don't miss the mutinous look in Gianna's eyes as she obeys, following Tommas down.

She doesn't speak to me again until we're back in the car on the way home. "I've made my decision," she says from where she's sitting across from me, her hands folded on the dark purple skirt of her dress. "I'm going to choose Tommas."

I wish she'd waited to tell me. The jealousy is still too close to the surface, and I grit my teeth against the first thing that comes to mind. It slips out anyway.

"So the kiss made up your mind, then?"

Gianna gives me a piercing look that tells me that she sees right through this. "No," she says coolly. "The fact that he seems amenable enough to my going to college, doesn't expect me to have a child within the first year that we're married, and hasn't tried to do more than kiss me makes me

think he's the right choice. He does seem to like me, too," she admits. "So maybe it won't be all bad."

"He would have tried to do more than kiss you tonight."

"Maybe." She shrugs. "But he hasn't so far. And he will be in a few weeks anyway, right?"

There's no heat, no desire in the way she says it, but it stokes the fuel of my jealousy anyway, thinking of him in bed with her. The car falls silent for several long minutes, and I look pensively out of the window, trying to turn my mind to other things instead. The conversation I'll have with Fontana, for instance, letting him know that Gianna has made her choice and that plans can be put in motion for a wedding. The conversation I'll have with Luca, telling him I'm coming back to New York and what place there still might be for me there, in the Romano mafia.

Or you could take a fucking break, I think wryly, watching the lights of the city dim as we drive away from it and back to the mansion. You could go on vacation. Put an ocean between you and all of this.

"You know, it's not fair for you to be jealous of me now." Gianna's voice drifts towards me, quiet and so sad that the retort I nearly make dies on my tongue as I hear her. "You could have had me. I know all the reasons you gave. But at the end of the day, if you don't like the idea of Tommas and I together, you only have yourself to blame."

I want to be angry with her. I want to tell her to watch her mouth, that she'll earn another punishment, that she's breaking her promise. But she isn't, not really. She isn't asking me to change my mind. She isn't trying to convince me of anything. And as much as I don't want to hear what she's saying, it's the truth.

Whatever I'm feeling, it's because of the decisions I've made. But I still think that decision was the right one.

"I'll tell Fontana in the morning that you've made your choice," I tell her evenly. "I expect things will probably move fairly quickly after that."

Gianna says nothing. She doesn't need to, not really. I know what she's thinking—that this is the choice that will make her the least miserable, but it won't make her happy. None of this will make her happy.

But I don't believe that I could, either. And in the end, that makes the difference.

—

I call Fontana the next morning and give him the news. Some hours later, while I'm wondering what to say when I call Luca, there's a knock at my office door.

"Come in." I turn away from the computer just in time to see one of the staff opening the door and stepping inside.

"Mr. Fontana is here to see you, sir."

My stomach drops. As far as I'd been aware, the conversation was finished this morning, when we'd agreed that arrangements needed to be made for the official betrothal paperwork to be signed. The fact that Fontana has shown up here unannounced, isn't a good sign.

"Show him in," I tell her, feeling my gut twist into knots. My apprehension doesn't lessen when Fontana walks in, and takes a seat without so much as a greeting.

"I didn't expect to see you here." I try to keep my expression as neutral as I can, wondering if Fontana looks so calm because he enjoys the feeling of keeping me in the dark. "Is there something more than what we discussed this morning on the phone?"

"Yes." He leans back in his chair, frowning. "I had a call from the Leone family after you and I spoke. I had to, of course, inform them that Gianna had chosen otherwise. It was an—extensive discussion."

The knot in my belly tightens with apprehension. "And? Is there a reason I should know about this conversation?"

"There will be a different choice," Fontana says without preamble. "Gianna will marry Andre Leone. Before you say anything," he adds, "I know that's not what we agreed upon."

But on further reflection, it *is* the best choice for the Family. The Lombardi family does not have enough to offer as they are, and they may be unable to maintain or even grow the current status of the Mancini family. But with the wealth and connections that Gianna brings added to what the Leone family has already built, it can only benefit all of us.”

“Except for Gianna. Who, on the heels of her father’s death, was *promised* a choice.” I glare at Fontana. “You can’t seriously be planning on insisting on this.”

“I am.” There’s not a hint of hesitation in his tone. “Tommas Lombardi will be regretfully informed that he will not be Gianna’s choice. As soon as it can be arranged, she and Andre Leone will sign a betrothal contract. It’s expected that the wedding will take place within a month afterward. At which point, of course, your duties here will be completed, and you can return to New York. As you wanted,” he adds pointedly.

I grit my teeth, trying to think clearly, and not say the first angry thing that comes to my mind. “Gianna will argue this. You know she will. Of all the choices she was given, Andre was the one she wanted least. She wouldn’t even entertain the idea of it.”

“It doesn’t matter.” Fontana shrugs. “She doesn’t have a choice in this, Moretti. Her father was too lenient with her, I think. She has a place in this world, and that place is to marry who she is told and produce heirs. I had hoped you would have helped impress that fact on her, since her father was lax in doing so.”

Breathe. I’ve rarely hated a man as much as I hate Fontana at this moment. “There must be some other solution. You can’t possibly think that marrying Gianna to a man she hates will cause anything other than strife—”

“The choice is made.” Fontana pauses. “The only other possible choice is *you*, Alessio. If you were to announce your intention to honor her father’s will, there could be no argument with that. Giacomo’s desires were plain and are legally binding. Not even the Leone family can say otherwise. But you’ve already made your position on that plain, and

otherwise—my decision is made. My word is final. And this is what I say—that Gianna *will* marry Andre.”

“No.” The word comes out before I can stop it, my mind racing. “No, I won’t allow it.”

Fontana’s iron-grey brow rises. “You won’t *allow* it?”

“I’ll marry her.” The words feel like they’ll burn my lips as I say them, but I can’t stop now. It was difficult enough to imagine her as Tommas Lombardi’s bride, but this is unthinkable. “I promised Gianna that I would protect her. That her safety and happiness were my first priority. If this is the only way to ensure that, then that’s what I’ll do.”

Fontana’s mouth turns down at the corners. “You may want to think this through, Alessio—”

“I don’t need to. As you said, the decision is made. *My* decision is made. If Andre Leone is the only other choice, then I will marry her.”

I know the Leone family must be pressuring Fontana. I know that they must be pushing him to go forward with what he’d planned before he agreed to my compromise. And I know there must be some way to keep Gianna safe from that without backing down on everything I’ve stuck to, every principle that I have.

I’m hoping that I’ve called his bluff. But I can see from the expression on his face that’s not the case.

“If you mean that, then you’ll be prepared to sign the betrothal contract now.” Fontana gestures down to his briefcase next to the chair. “Call Gianna in, and we’ll take care of the paperwork. Giacomo’s will is honored, then, and the Leone family will be unable to argue.”

That knot tightens in my throat now instead of my gut, like a noose. There’s no way out of this, and I think of what I’m signing myself up for—a lifetime of celibacy, if I intend to give Gianna what she desires...a faithful husband. It’s the only way to both keep her out of the Leone family’s hands, and keep my own promise to myself not to touch her. Not to take advantage of her. Not to corrupt her.

I'll deal with that later. Fontana is looking at me expectantly. Those things can be worked out. Gianna and I can come to some arrangement, or—

“Alessio.”

“Yes. I’ll call her in.” I reach for my phone numbly to send her a message to come to the office, knowing that it will catch her off guard. She should have more warning than this, but I know Fontana won’t care. He wants this handled, one way or another. If I stall, he’ll take it as a sign I’m not serious and leave. Then Gianna will belong to Andre Leone, and that’s something I can’t live with.

I can see the confusion on her face when she steps into the office and sees Fontana there. She’s wearing a pretty chiffon sundress in a bright yellow color, the ruffles dipping between her breasts, and my mouth goes dry just looking at her.

“Is something wrong?” she asks, and I have no idea how to answer that question. Fontana speaks up before I can.

“Alessio has agreed to marry you, my dear,” he says, and I see the instantaneous shock in her eyes, the way her mouth drops slightly open. “So I have the betrothal contract here, for you both to sign.”

“What?” Gianna stares at me. “What are you talking about? I —”

“The Leone family has managed to supersede your choice of Tommas as your husband,” I tell her quietly. “They have convinced Don Fontana that Andre is the only rational choice for you, for the good of the Family. Which means it won’t matter that you have decided on someone else.”

Her face goes pale. I see all the blood drain out of it, her thoughts clearly racing to catch up. “So how are you going to—I don’t understand—”

“Your father named me as the one he chose for you in his will,” I tell her gently. “So if I agree, no one can argue with that. It’s binding. It’s me or Andre. Those are the only two options now, according to Don Fontana.”

He nods. “You may state your opinion if you wish,” he says calmly. “Alessio has made his plain.”

There’s a flicker of mutiny in Gianna’s eyes—I can tell she doesn’t appreciate being told that she’s being *allowed* to have an opinion. But she bites it back, which I find impressive, especially considering how difficult it is right now even for me to bite back what I want to say.

“I choose Alessio,” she says calmly, tipping her chin up. “If he is a choice, then I want him. I’ve felt that way since the will was read.”

It’s impossible to tell, even for me, if Fontana is pleased or displeased by this turn of events. He opens the briefcase, taking out the papers. Gianna holds out her hand, silently, and he ignores her. I see the flush of red on her cheekbones, the instant anger in her eyes at being dismissed.

“Let Gianna read the contract,” I tell him flatly. “She should know what it is that she’s signing.”

Fontana makes an unpleasant face, but he hands the contract over. I can see Gianna’s fingers trembling as she flips through it, reading each page. Her lips are pressed together, and I can’t tell if she’s happy or not. *Is she disappointed that it’s not Tommas now? Is she disappointed that it’s me?*

For fuck’s sake, I shouldn’t *want* her to prefer me. I’ve done all I can to keep her from wanting me. But now, the thought that I might disappoint her feels like almost too much to bear.

“Should I sign it now?” she asks, glancing at my desk as if looking for a pen. I think I hear a flicker of tentative anticipation in her voice.

Fontana holds out his hand for the contract. “Come here, and you will both sign it. It will need to be witnessed by a priest as well—we can go to the church this evening. This should all be handled as soon as possible.”

I nod. Once the Leone family is aware of what’s happened, they’ll be quick to want proof that all has been done as it should be, or else they’ll make an argument for the betrothal being null, and Gianna married to Andre instead. If my goal is

to keep that from happening—and it is—then we’ll need to make sure all loose ends are tied up sooner rather than later.

Gianna’s hands are still shaking as she signs her name, what might have been pretty script otherwise turning into something slanted across the line. Without thinking, I reach out and take her hand in mine, and I hear her soft, surprised intake of breath.

When I look up, she’s looking right at me with those soft blue eyes, and I see a flicker of hope in them. She catches her lip between her teeth, and for a moment, Fontana fades away, and it’s just the two of us standing there at my desk, her soft, warm hand caught in mine, and the promise of something new between us.

Except—

No matter how this turns out, I’ll disappoint her. There’s no way for this to go how she’s hoping, and for me to still stay true to what I think is right.

Gianna stays very quiet until Fontana takes his leave, taking a copy of the contract with him. She sinks into the other chair, her face paler now, her gaze resting on me.

“So what now?” she asks softly. “You were so insistent that you wouldn’t marry me, and now we’ve ended up here anyway, all because Fontana went over your head. So that’s it? You just gave in?”

I sit down slowly, that knot of apprehension returning at the thought of what I’m going to say to her. “Not exactly,” I tell her slowly. “I’ve agreed to marry you so that Andre Leone cannot. I know how you feel about that, and frankly, I feel just as strongly that it’s not a good match—not for you, and not for your family’s legacy. Since it’s been made clear to me that it’s the only way I can protect you, I *am* going to marry you. But it will be a marriage of convenience, Gianna.”

Her mouth drops open a little as she stares at me. “You can’t mean what I think you do—”

“We will have a chaste marriage.” I can see the disappointment in her eyes from the moment I say it, but I

keep going, knowing this all needs to be said. “I will not touch you. We will sleep in separate bedrooms, and—”

“And what?” Gianna looks at me, her tone laced with burgeoning resentment. “So I’m going to *stay* a virgin? I’ll be married, but nothing else will change?”

“Would you rather lose your virginity to Andre Leone?” I feel my frustration rising quickly. “Would that be preferable?”

Gianna presses her lips together in that stubborn line that I’m getting to know all too well. “The marriage won’t be valid unless we sleep together.”

“Blood on the sheets can be faked.” I look at her evenly. “If you’d made friends with the other mafia daughters, I’m sure you would have met more than one who slipped up with a man before she was married and had to fake her virginity. Fontana won’t question me, so long as I have something to show him.” *He’d never believe that I opted not to fuck my eighteen-year-old virgin bride, anyway.* No one would.

“And heirs?” Gianna raises a sarcastic eyebrow, clearly looking for any way that she can to poke holes in my plan. “They’re going to be expected. Who will inherit after you? People will have questions if I don’t get pregnant.”

It takes everything in me not to react to the thought of her pregnant, soft and round and sweet, and of what I would do to get her that way. Of all the nights I’d spend fucking her to achieve that, filling her—

I swallowed hard, feeling my cock twitch against my fly, swelling eagerly at the thought. “We’ll say we’re infertile. As for inheritance, your father adopted me for exactly that reason. We can do the same.” I lean back in my chair, feeling suddenly very tired. “I’ve made up my mind, Gianna. I’ve been swayed to marry you by circumstances beyond my control, but that doesn’t mean I can’t still stick to the principles that I had when I agreed to take you on as my ward. I came here to protect you, not fuck you.”

Gianna flinches visibly at the bluntness. “So I’m always going to be a virgin? You’re going to be celibate? How is that fair?”

You're *never* going to sleep with me, not even when you think I'm 'old enough'?" She stares at me. "That's insane, Alessio. To expect of *either* of us."

"We can discuss how to manage the issue of celibacy later." I force down the thought of her with another man, the idea of *anyone* other than me taking her virginity, especially with her being my wife. The thought makes me incandescent with a quick-burning rage, but she's right, of course. It's *not* fair to either of us. But the alternative—

"The circumstances that made me uncomfortable before haven't changed, Gianna. You will always be half my age. You are technically, by law, my stepsister. And—"

"This is ridiculous." Gianna shakes her head. "You *know* I don't want a celibate marriage or an unfaithful husband. Or don't you remember the lessons I asked you to give me for just that reason? And now—"

"The contract is signed, Gianna. The decision is made. Or would you have rather been Andre's wife?"

Her face is pale, her cheekbones tinged with red high at the tops. "That's not fair," she whispers. "You know it's not fair. You should have told me this was how you felt before I signed it—"

"Would your decision have changed?" I look at her, wondering what I would do if she said yes. If she said her mind *would* have been changed, that she would rather go to Andre Leone's bed than the kind of marriage I'm offering her.

The look she gives me nearly cracks my heart in two. "You know the answer to that," she says softly. "But at least I would have known everything before I signed."

She gets up then, pushing herself out of the chair without looking at me as she strides to the door. And I feel sure, as I see the light glance off her skin as she steps out of the room, that there are tears on her cheeks.

Gianna



The wedding planner is droning on about something in the background, pushing fabric samples and pictures of iced cakes towards me, but I can't focus on any of it. I know I'm supposed to make decisions—supposed to have an opinion, but I can't bring myself to care. It's been a whirlwind since the contract was signed, and all I want is for it to come to an end.

I can tell Alessio is trying to make up for my 'disappointment' about how he intends for our marriage to play out, as he describes it once, and I don't know how to tell him that it's more than disappointment. It's the strangest kind of heartbreak I can imagine feeling because, on the one hand, Alessio agreeing to marry me is everything I wanted. But not like *this*.

I wanted a real marriage. Not this half-thing that he's proposing, something between roommates and being husband and wife. But Alessio won't budge, and after that first conversation that we had about it after Fontana left, he shuts down whenever I try to bring it up. It's not a topic that's up for discussion, and he makes that abundantly clear.

"It's a summer wedding, so brighter colors might be a good choice—" The wedding planner is opening a binder now, full of more color charts and something about seating, and I want to scream. None of this matters to me. None of it has ever mattered—I don't know if it would even if this wedding was going to culminate in a marriage that was everything I could ever want. The day itself doesn't matter to me—I want what comes after, and that's the part I'm not going to get to have.

I can tell that Alessio has been trying to make me happy, nonetheless. When I mentioned that I had no one to go shopping with to choose a dress, Alessio told me he'd have it brought to me instead—which wasn't exactly what I'd meant.

After so long cooped up in the house, I think I would have enjoyed an afternoon out in the city, but I know he feels safer with me here, rather than out where someone could get to me. Even after six weeks, the identity of who murdered my father is still a mystery. Even with Alessio's connections and Don Fontana's assurance that the Family is looking into it, there's been very little headway made at all.

So I ended up choosing my wedding dress in the smaller living room downstairs, where the personal assistant who sourced the rack of dresses brings me one at a time to try on in front of the three-way mirror that's been set up, the double doors leading into the room securely closed against any prying eyes. Not that there would *be* any—I tried to tease Alessio that morning about watching me try on the dresses, and he told me curtly that it's bad luck for the groom to see the bride's dress before the wedding—as if I wasn't aware of those kinds of silly superstitions, and as if I'd really been serious in the first place.

As I tried on the dresses, though, the idea of Alessio's eyes on me as I slipped in and out of them made me shiver.

I'm still upset with him for not telling me his plans *before* I signed the contract. Even though he's right—that it wouldn't have changed anything, I still wish I'd known. It would have felt better, somehow, to make the decision knowing that, instead of finding out afterwards.

Instead of things getting more comfortable between us in the days leading up to the wedding, they've become more distant. I can *feel* him physically isolating himself from me. I wonder if this is how our entire marriage will be—Alessio hiding from the wife that he tried not to marry, and me rattling around this too-big mansion, without even the benefit of children to soften the blow.

The wedding planner clears her throat, looking at me expectantly, and I realize I haven't made a single choice in the

hour that we've been sitting here. I'm not even sure that I remember what options she gave me. I force a smile, looking at her. "I really don't know what to choose," I tell her. "Just pick whatever you think will make a beautiful wedding. It really doesn't matter to me."

There's a look of surprise on her face that turns almost into something like pity, and I can't stand it any longer. I get up, fleeing the room, leaving a stranger there to design my wedding for me.

—

On the morning of the wedding, I get ready by myself, glad that I picked a simple dress so that I can get dressed in peace, without anyone flitting around me doing up buttons. Oddly, I don't feel the lack of having a mother to help me—mine has been gone for so long that I never expected to have her here when this day finally came around. The real difficulty, I know, will come when I step into that church without my father to walk me down the aisle.

With the side zip of my dress done up, I look in the full-length mirror, smoothing my hands over my skirt. I've lost so much weight that it had to be altered again at the last minute. However, the waist of it still nips in nicely, the A-line heavy satin skirt billowing around my legs and ending in a hemline trimmed with fragile floral lace. The sleeves are off-the-shoulder, exposing a pretty line of collarbone, the fitted satin bodice dipping down just slightly between my breasts, more of the floral lace filling in the space between them. The back of the dress has faux buttons and more of that lace spilling down the middle of the skirt to the brief train, and when I take one of my mother's sapphire and gold hair combs and attach the finger-tip length veil edged in that same lace to it, slipping it into the back of my updo, the effect is perfectly bridal.

And Alessio, even if he *does* appreciate any of it, will likely do his best not to let me know.

That feeling of unfurling arousal that I had those first weeks that Alessio was here, that feeling of unlocking new desires that I never knew I had, the discovery of what it means to be

aroused at all—all of that has turned into a frustrated inferno that makes me snappy and irritable, made all the worse by the knowledge that I'm not going to be allowed to explore it. I'll be married to the man who made me feel all of this, the man who awakened all of these desires in the first place—and he's refusing to come to my bed. It feels like insanity. No matter how often he explains it, it makes no sense to me. His excuses feel like just that—excuses—but at the same time, I know he wants me. I've seen it. And no matter how many times I lay in bed at night with my hand trapped between my thighs, imagining that last lesson in the library as he touched himself, I can't reconcile that I'm going to have to stay in this frustrated state forever.

I don't even want to stay this way past my wedding night. I wasn't supposed to have to.

I was supposed to get to find out all of the things I've wondered about—all of the things I want to know—and it feels monumentally unfair that just when it seemed like I would get the chance to discover all of them with Alessio the way I hoped, he pulled the rug out from under me.

Slowly, I smooth my hands over the bodice of the dress, letting myself imagine for just a moment that they're Alessio's hands instead, tracing over the satin of my gown, luxuriating in learning the curves of my body this way before he slips the dress off and touches the bare skin beneath. A shiver runs over my arms, imagining it, thinking of his lips on the back of my neck, his fingers brushing away a stray bit of hair, and my chest aches, realizing that none of that is going to happen.

Tonight is going to be a lonely night, not one where I learn all the answers I've been hoping to discover.

I close my eyes as I slip my mother's sapphire earrings on, trying not to be resentful. Alessio overstepped his own boundaries to make sure that today wouldn't be my wedding day to a man I would have absolutely despised, who made my skin crawl, and I know I'm supposed to be more appreciative of it. But the alternative—

It doesn't matter now, I remind myself as I go down to the waiting car. It's done. So now you make the best of it.

I had hoped, at the very least, that if I couldn't have a lover, marrying Alessio would at least mean I would be marrying a friend. But his frustrated desire for me that he refuses to indulge has made it feel as if he's just running from me—and as if it's always going to be that way.

As I expected, the grief hits me the moment I step into the nave of the church. I smell the incense and wood, the scent of old carpet that's been cleaned again and again, and the slightly damp smell of the rainwashed stone from outside. All I want at that moment is for my father to be standing here, his arm looped through mine, joking about how it took my wedding day for him to willingly set foot in church. He'd gone a handful of times throughout the years, mostly because it was a necessary show for his position, a neutral and safe place to be seen—but he'd made as little of a priority of it as any other tradition.

He would have joked about all of this with me, the pomp and circumstance of it. He might have finally talked a little more about my mother—a topic he rarely brought up, still painful after all those years. I might have heard a story about their wedding day.

Instead, I'm standing alone, looking at the double doors as the music begins to filter through, shivering with nerves and loneliness. I reach out to push open the door, my fingers trembling, suddenly terrified of how I'll feel when I see what's on the other side. It feels like I'm stepping over into a different life, one that I'm not sure I want, and that I'm afraid to find out what it will be.

Alessio is standing at the end of the aisle, handsome as ever in a perfectly tailored dark charcoal suit, his green eyes fixed on me as I walk toward him. I can't read his expression or tell what he's thinking, not even a little. His face is utterly calm as I focus on not tripping on my way to the altar, fingers clutched around a bouquet that some wedding planner chose for me, the blood rushing in my ears until I can barely hear the music. I try to imagine my father walking next to me, steadying me, but

it doesn't help. It just brings tears to my eyes, threatening to undo my carefully done makeup. And if my father were here

If he were here, today wouldn't be happening at all.

I'm glad for the veil that slightly obscures my face as I step up to Alessio, holding out my hand, hoping that it will keep him from seeing the tears hanging onto the edge of my lashes. His hand feels broad and warm when it wraps around mine, and I want to feel safe like this, protected. That's why he came back—to keep me safe.

But everything that's happened in the last few weeks has only made me feel worse.

It's hard to focus on the vows. *Love. Cherish. Protect.* I believe Alessio will try to protect me. But *love? Cherish?* While there must be some form of love there, for him to do this—or maybe just obligation—it's hard to believe that he'll *cherish* me.

But maybe most of the time, in this world that I was born into, the vows said here are lies. The *love* part almost certainly always is.

Maybe I was foolish to hope for anything else.

I manage to say my own part of the vows, repeating the words numbly. When Alessio slides a thin rose-gold band encrusted with small diamonds onto my finger, all I can think is, *how did he know I prefer that?* Most of my jewelry is from my mother, who favored white gold or platinum. It's what I would have picked for myself if I'd chosen a wedding band.

He picked out his own, he told me, when he'd bought mine. I had thought of giving him my father's wedding band, tucked away in my mother's jewelry box after it was given to me, but something about it didn't feel quite right. My parents had a marriage that they cherished, an unusual kind of marriage for a man of my father's status and power, and it felt wrong to use that ring to symbolize a marriage that would, in many ways, be one of nothing but convenience.

So I kept it tucked away and brought the band Alessio chose with me to the church instead.

I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may—

My heart stutters in my chest when Alessio's fingers go to the edge of my lace veil. My lashes are still damp, although, at some point, the tears faded in the struggle to simply focus enough to repeat my vows. My eyes flick down to his full lips, and I know he's going to have to kiss me. He *has* to. It's a part of the ceremony.

Will this be the only time he ever does?

His lips haven't touched mine since that clumsy, hard kiss that I gave him in the pool. This one couldn't be more different. His hand touches my waist lightly as he draws back my veil with the other, so lightly that I almost don't even feel the pressure of his fingers. When he bends down, my heart trips in my chest, fluttering with nervous anticipation—but the kiss is every bit as light. The barest brush of his lips over mine, a ghost of a kiss, skimming over my mouth.

I wonder if he can see the disappointment in my eyes when he pulls back. I feel sure that he can—it's too hard to hide it, but nothing changes on his carefully blank face.

I wait for him to say something, anything as we're announced, but instead, his fingers carefully slip through mine, still only barely holding my hand, as we turn to walk down the aisle as husband and wife.

Wife. I'm married now. *Mrs.* Mancini, which is even stranger, because my name won't change. Alessio will take it as his last name again as a means of preserving my father's legacy—one last slap in the face of tradition from a man who never had much respect for it.

My gaze sweeps towards the steps in front of the altar for one brief second as Alessio and I turn away, my chest tightening as I remember that only two months ago, I was in this church for a different reason, wearing black instead of white, looking at a coffin instead of my hands clasped with someone else's. Grief instead of joy—except it's not really joy that I'm feeling today.

All I can feel is that same fear I felt before—the fear of what’s to come.

—

The reception, although I had no hand in planning it—and I suspect, neither did Alessio—is beautiful. It’s held back at the mansion in the grand ballroom that was reserved for my father’s biggest parties and events—rarely held after my mother’s death—the room choked with flowers and satin-draped tables, finished off with a string quartet serenading the guests from the other side of the wooden dance floor. I don’t recognize very many of the people who come to give their well-wishes, but I recognize the names—many of them the parents of the young men who were originally paraded in front of me to marry. If any of them are resentful that Alessio ended up claiming the right to marry me after all, none of them show it—probably all assuming that it’s more prudent not to.

The Leone family, pointedly, does not show up.

The catering looks delicious—a trio of tender lamb chop, scallops, and braised quail arranged with roasted potatoes and root vegetables—but I can barely eat. I catch Alessio’s gaze on me as I push the food around the china plate with my fork, feeling my stomach turn when I try to taste a sliver of the perfectly seasoned quail, the blueberry reduction it was basted in bursting over my tongue in a flavor that I barely notice. I know he wants me to eat more, but *how*? How am I supposed to do that when day after day, week after week, my life feels as if it refuses to return to anything even approaching normalcy? My appetite has been gone for a long time now, and I notice as I stab a carrot and watch it slide off of my fork that the sapphire bracelet I’m wearing fits even more loosely than before, the sharp bones of my wrist standing out in relief against the white gold and gems.

“Try to eat your dinner.” Alessio’s voice is taut, as if the evening is a strain on him, too. His wine glass is untouched, and I catch a reproving expression on his face when I refill mine from the decanter between us. “You shouldn’t drink so much wine on an empty stomach.”

“And you shouldn’t marry a woman you don’t want to fuck.” I feel my face heat as I say it, my teeth biting at my lips as if to take it back the moment the words are out. It feels vulgar on my tongue, but a part of me *wants* to shock Alessio, to upset him. I shouldn’t be the only one feeling this way on my wedding day.

“Are you already drunk?” Alessio’s mouth thins for a moment, and I glare at him.

“No.” I keep my voice low, refusing to cause a scene on my wedding day, on top of everything else. “I don’t think I’ve ever been drunk, Alessio. But you have to agree, this is all a little ridiculous. You can’t blame me for having a glass of wine when I’m going to go to bed alone tonight.”

Alessio’s jaw tightens, and he says nothing. He finishes his dinner before getting up from our table, likely planning to make the rounds of the guests. I stay put, rooted to my spot, still pushing my food around my plate until the vegetables turn mushy in the sauce and the meat has gone cold.

He doesn’t come back until it’s time for our dance. The cake-cutting has been skipped altogether in favor of a dessert table—probably the planner’s idea, or maybe Alessio just didn’t like the idea of feeding me cake. The thought of his fingers against my lips, sweet with icing, makes me tremble a little, and as much as I hate to admit it, he might have had the right idea if so. If his aim is to stay out of my bed, then those sorts of intimacies are best avoided.

But even so, I can’t get the image of his icing-laced fingertips brushing against my lower lip out of my head, the thought of closing my lips around them, licking off the thick white frosting as I sucked his fingers deeper into my mouth—

“Gianna?” Alessio frowns at me, his hand lightly on my waist again as he leads me out to the dance floor. “Are you alright? You look a little flushed. If this is all too much—”

It’s the first real concern he’s shown for me all night—in a while, really, considering his attempts to sequester himself away from me after our engagement—and I bite back the resentful comment I want to make in favor of something

kinder. Something that will, possibly, smooth over the ragged edges of the evening.

“I’m fine. Maybe it is the wine.” It’s a lie, of course—I’ve only had two glasses—but it’s better than hinting at the fantasy that filled my head.

Alessio seems to take it at face value, though, leading me out onto the dance floor to the swelling sound of the string quartet. His hands are light on my waist, and he leaves space between us as we dance, his every movement stiff and formal—entirely unlike what it should feel like to dance with my husband on our wedding day. My heart aches with every step, but there’s a buzzing tension between us, too. I wonder if only I can feel it—if it’s somehow elevated for me because he’s told me so clearly that nothing will happen between us tonight. Even the light touch of his fingers feels as if it’s burning through my dress, an echo of what they would feel like against my skin, his other hand on my arm searing me like a brand. I want him to pull me against him, to feel the pressure of his body against mine as we dance, for him to do and be everything I dreamed of. Everything I want.

The careful distance between us feels like a gulf that I desperately want to make disappear, but there’s no way across it. If Alessio feels anything about tonight, he’s keeping it carefully hidden, his face implacable as he turns me around the dance floor, each step feeling like another echo of his obligation to me.

Maybe that’s all I’ve ever been. An obligation.

It’s not until it’s nearing midnight that he returns to the table again, where he left me after the dance, leaning in with the barest touch on my arm, one that still fills me with frustrated heat. “Do you want to go upstairs?”

For a moment, my heart races with anticipation and a flicker of hope. There’s no scent of wine or other alcohol on his breath—he’s very carefully avoided drinking anything tonight, which I assumed was a means of making sure he kept his resolve not to sleep with me tonight. But his hand is on my arm still, helping me up as I nod, and I’m glad for it, because

my legs suddenly feel weak and shaky at the possibility that maybe, just maybe, he's changed his mind. That hope persists when he leads me into the largest of the guest suites upstairs, which someone from the household staff must have cleaned and prepared this morning, taking the dustcovers off of the usually unused furniture and remaking the bed with heavy cream-colored linens and a floral duvet.

I turn to look at Alessio as he shuts the door, hope flaring wildly in my chest. He looks at me with an unreadable expression, and all I can think is that any moment now, his hand will reach for my waist with intent this time, drawing me to him so he can press his lips against mine, and then—

Then, I'll finally get to find out where all those lessons lead to.

He walks past me, to the bed, and some of the hope gutters and flickers out. I watch, confused, as Alessio pulls down the covers, exposing the cream-colored sheets underneath.

I want to be in that bed with him. I want his skin against mine, warm and smooth, learning every inch of his body as he explores mine. I want my wedding night the way it's supposed to be.

But instead, Alessio just glances at me without a hint of heat in his gaze. "I hope you don't mind sleeping in here," he says slowly. "If anyone knew you slept in your usual bedroom, the one that was just yours, they might find it strange. And I didn't think you would want to sleep in the master suite. So here we are. As for the rest of it—"

It takes me a moment to realize what he's doing—and by the time I do, it's nearly done. He slips something out of his pocket—a pin, I think—and pricks his finger, blood welling from the tip as he turns to the bed. He swipes his finger over the cream-colored sheet once, twice, a third time, and then wipes his hand on a handkerchief pulled from his pocket, sending a flare of heat through me as I remember the 'lesson' in the library, and how he'd cleaned himself off as I sat there frozen in stunned fascination over what I'd just seen.

"It'll be dry by morning, and I'll send the sheets to Fontana as proof." Alessio puts his hands in his pockets, looking almost

pleased with himself for outfoxing the old Don.

I stare at him, trying to hold back the burning tears at the back of my eyes as the hope I had, vanishes. I look at the bed—not even my own, but a strange one I’ll sleep in alone tonight—and then away from it, refusing to look at Alessio at all.

I can feel him hesitate as he walks past me. From under my lashes, I see him stop at the door, his hand hovering over the knob, emotion twisting his face for the first time all night. I can see uncertainty, regret—and a flicker of what looks like desire there, too, but I don’t know that well enough to know for sure it’s what I’m seeing.

“I’m sorry, Gianna,” he says finally, his voice low and soft. “I don’t know how to make this easier.”

And then, before I can answer, he opens the door and is gone.

Below the room, I can still hear the faint sounds of the reception still going, the hints of music, and a hum of conversation. I fumble for the zipper of my dress, avoiding the mirror as I yank it down and step out of the pool of falling satin, hugging my arms around myself as I walk to the dresser.

There are a few things that must have been brought up for me, in case I wanted them. I grab the first tank top I see, pulling it over my head as I retreat to the bed in nothing but that and the lacy panties that I’d worn beneath my dress—again, in a flicker of hope that maybe things would go differently tonight than I’d thought.

Everything went exactly as Alessio promised me it would—and it leaves me feeling empty and hopeless, the years of my new marriage stretching out in front of me like a lonely wasteland. I take off my jewelry with trembling fingers, yanking the pins out of my updo hard enough that a few pieces of hair come out with them. Then I fall into bed, the tears finally overflowing as I curl around a pillow that smells like laundry soap and dried flowers. There’s nothing familiar about it, nothing comfortable. And as I cry myself to sleep on my wedding night, I’ve never felt so alone.

Alessio



Leaving Gianna on our wedding night feels like the hardest thing I've ever done. I lay awake that night in my own room, sleepless and exhausted, far more sober than I would like to be and thrumming with unfulfilled desire. My every thought is plagued with imaginings of how beautiful she looked in her wedding dress, how much I wanted to take it off of her, to feel that heavy satin sliding between my fingers as I lifted the skirt up to her thighs and pressed my mouth between them for the first time. A dozen images like it fill my sleepless imagination—Gianna on her knees in her virginal wedding gown, bits of her updo coming loose around her face as I guide her through sucking my cock for the first time. Sitting on the edge of the bed with the skirt around her hips, obediently spreading her legs first for my mouth, then for my cock as I slide into her, staining the white of the skirt with her innocence. The fantasy veers between filling her with my cum and pulling out to splash it across her perfect breasts under that fragile floral lace, defiling the pristine gown, and all the while, I lay there in bed achingly hard, forcing myself to keep my hands away from my throbbing cock.

I haven't touched myself since I signed that goddamn contract, feeling somehow even worse about jerking off to fantasies of Gianna now that she's going to be my wife. It makes no fucking sense, and anyone I told would probably want to have me committed. Still, it feels worse knowing that despite all my efforts, we've been backed into this corner anyway. It feels as if I'm supposed to try harder to protect her innocence now, not the opposite.

But my imagination isn't as easy to control, and it means I spend the night as sleepless as if I'd spent it in her bed. I get up the next morning feeling exhausted, guilty over my dreams, and guilty over my intention to avoid her this morning, going straight to my office after instructing one of the staff that I pass to bring me breakfast and coffee there.

Work will be the best distraction. It always has been. I do my best to keep my thoughts off of my neglected bride, who will be waking up alone this morning, without even a honeymoon to look forward to. I feel guilty about that, too—but a romantic vacation away would have made it harder to keep my hands off of her, not easier. And knowing Gianna, she would have tried to tempt me. Here, it's hard enough to resist. In some tropical location with her perfect body swathed in a tiny swimsuit every day, sleeping next to me or nearby, I might have driven myself insane wanting her.

Work. Leads on who might have murdered Giacomo—emails from Theo McNeil and Nikolai Vasilev with names of other criminal leaders in the city, those who owed him money, whose men had gotten on the wrong side of his, or who had other reasons to want to see him gone. Even as I sort through the names, look up information about them, and reference the emails, none of it feels quite right. None of them feel like players who would have been able to bypass Giacomo's security and send someone to murder him in his own home. It would take a hitman of considerable skill to do that. Someone trained specifically for it.

I frown, scribbling down a name before I can forget it. One of Luca's allies, a Bratva leader by the name of Viktor Andreyev, had an enforcer who worked for a mercenary organization in Moscow. It feels like a leap, but as I consider the possibility, it feels more and more like there might be something there. I'll need to follow up on it, and I grasp at that particular task, grateful for anything to distract me from the complexities of my current marital situation.

It works, to some extent. There are other tasks that need doing, more business to be sorted through, and it carries me through the day until just a little while before dinner, when it occurs to

me that leaving my new wife entirely alone for a full twenty-four hours the day after our wedding likely isn't the best idea. I get up, stretching, and walk out to the hall. Jeanie, one of the cleaning staff, is dusting in the hall, and I stop, clearing my throat.

"Yes, Mr. Mancini?" She glances up at me, the name change so quick on her lips that I expect the household manager briefed them all on it ahead of time.

"Have you seen Gianna today? What she's been doing?"

"As far as I know, she's been upstairs all day. I cleaned up there earlier, and she was still in her room. But I don't see everything, Mr. Mancini."

"Thanks." I leave her there, feeling a flare of guilt. The idea of Gianna being in her room all day makes me feel as if I've failed in some way, but I'm not sure what it is that I'm supposed to do, exactly. I don't know *how* to help her, not when I know that what she really wants is the thing that I can't do for her.

I head upstairs, feeling tired and in need of a hot shower, before getting dressed again and going down to dinner. I pass Gianna's room on the way, and when I see the door is cracked, I can't stop myself from pausing just long enough to glimpse inside.

I tell myself that I'm just surreptitiously checking on her, just making sure she's alright and hasn't spent the entire day in bed. But what I see stops me in my tracks.

She's naked. Entirely naked from head to toe, and I can see from the way her damp, dark hair clings to her back between her shoulder blades that she must have just gotten out of the shower. My hands curl into fists as I imagine what her skin must feel like right now, before I can stop myself, warm and damp against my palms if I ran them over her.

With every bit of effort I possess, I force myself to turn away, to stop looking before I can continue to take in the slope of her breast and the curve of her waist, the way her hip swells into the perfect globe of her ass, her skin flushed and pink from the

shower. My cock is half-hard already, jolting into arousal at the sight of my wife's bare skin. I have every intent to continue on down the hall until I see her reflection in front of me, framed in one of the pictures hanging on the wall across from her room.

Fuck. My heart is hammering in my chest, my mouth going dry. She's so fucking beautiful, every inch of her delicate perfection, and I want to run my hands over all of her. I clench my fists tighter, fighting the urge to go into her room as I watch her bend over, sliding a pair of silky-looking panties up her thighs. If I were looking directly at her, I might be able to see the hint of her soft folds between them, and the thought makes my cock harden even more, straining against my fly.

Any second now, I realize as I watch her slide the panties over her hips, she's going to turn around and see me. Only that thought—the fear of her catching me watching her—propels me forward down the hall, back to my room and the safety of the shower I'd planned on taking.

When I leave my room again, dressed in chinos and a t-shirt for the evening, my desire has returned to a frustrated simmer. I managed to keep my hand off my cock in the shower, knowing I'd fantasize about bending Gianna over and stripping those panties off of her, but I don't know how much longer I'll be able to hold out. It's one thing to go without sex; it's quite another to go without a release of *any* kind—and it's been weeks now since I've come.

She's no longer in her room when I walk past a second time. But the door is still cracked, and from the hall, I can see the grey wicker laundry hamper on the other side of the room—a pair of silky black panties crumpled on the rug next to it.

My heart hammers in my chest as I stare at them. I feel frozen to the spot, and I feel the rush of blood to my groin, a throbbing, aching need that floods through me as I stare at Gianna's panties and tell myself not to do what I'm thinking of. Not to fall that next bit further, no matter how hard I am right now, no matter how my heart thuds in my chest with the anticipation of what I'm imagining.

But my feet are already carrying me forward before I can stop myself. I scoop the panties off of the floor, burying them in my pocket with another hot pang of guilt, and retreat back down the hall to my own room. I'm going to be late for dinner, but—

Or maybe I won't. The throbbing in my cock is painful, and it nearly bursts out of my fly the moment I drag the zipper down, rock-hard and dripping pre-cum. I don't think this is going to take long, especially not with what I want to do.

I slip the silky black panties out of my pocket, and realize with another painful throb of desire that it's a thong—just like the one she wore the night I spanked her in my office. I have a perfect memory of her ass arched out towards me, red from the imprint of my hand against her skin, that small strip of black fabric between her thighs soaked with arousal. She'd been turned on by the punishment. It's the only reason I hadn't done it again when she'd deserved it.

I'm not sure I could have stopped myself from fucking her a second time.

Slowly, I bring the fabric to my nose, breathing in her scent for the first time. It's sweet and musky and makes my cock throb; more pre-cum flowing freely now, my balls tight with the need to come. I'm fairly sure it will only take a few strokes before I spill over the edge, and I wrap my hand around myself, determined to make it last a little longer if I can, as I squeeze the base of my cock, stimulating the taut flesh with a few short, quick strokes that leave me groaning into the silky fabric as I breathe in her scent.

My toes curl against the rug, the muscles in my thighs going taut as I slowly slide my fist upwards, the friction of skin on skin making me shudder with pleasure. It feels so fucking good, and I flick my tongue out against the silk, desperate to taste her as my palm slides over the swollen head of my cock, another groan spilling from my lips. I know what I must look like right now, my wife's panties pressed to my nose and mouth when I could have her on my bed instead, my face buried in her pussy. I could have wet, slick flesh against my mouth, her scent smeared across my stubble, and instead, I'm

thrusting into my own fist, desperately close to the edge as I fight the urge to groan her name.

I can't last long. Weeks of not touching myself and the forbidden, taboo thrill of what I'm doing are too much, combined together. *She's my fucking stepsister*, I shout at myself from somewhere in the depths of my mind, trying to force back the urgent desire, trying to stop myself, maybe, before I finish this—but it doesn't feel like it matters in this moment. That might be true—but she's my wife now. And I'm going to come imagining her pussy in my face whether I should or not.

My cock is throbbing in my hand, on the verge of release. I wrap the black silk around the head of my cock, thrusting, fucking into her panties as I stand up on shaky legs, still stroking as I near the very edge—and then I rip the silk free, spreading them out on the bed as I aim the tip of my cock towards the soft fabric right where they would lay against her center, stroking furiously.

The sound that rips from me as my cock explodes sounds nearly inhuman. I grip my cock tightly, rubbing my hand along it in a frenzy as I watch cum splash over the gusset of my wife's panties, imagining that it's her pussy instead, her soft pink folds spread wide as I come all over her clit, watching it drip down. I moan, grabbing onto the edge of the bed as I lurch forward, still stroking, thrusting, imagining running my fingers through her pussy afterward, gathering up all that thick, hot cum and pushing it inside of her while she squirmed and mewled under me, wanting more. I imagine fucking it into her with my fingers, rubbing my softening cockhead over her clit, driving her to another orgasm with my cum deep inside of her—

Fuck. I'm still fucking hard, the fantasy pushing my desire into overdrive. It's not enough. Nothing short of fucking her will be enough, but I grab the cum-soaked panties, wrapping them around my cock as I kneel on the bed, dragging the wet silk over my overstimulated cock as my hips snap forward, imagining I'm fucking her like this—on her knees too, pushing my cum deeper inside of her. I imagine squeezing her

ass with my other hand, pounding my cock into her, my thumb tracing the tight hole between her cheeks as I fuck her the way *I* want to as she submits to me—

The second orgasm comes hard on the heels of the first, almost too much, as it tears from my oversensitive cock. I hold the panties over my cockhead as I come into them again, focusing only on it, the mixture of overwhelming pleasure and pain almost a punishment even as I groan and thrust, the orgasm ripping through me as I press my lips tightly together against the moan of her name.

The moment the climax ebbs, my cock finally starts to soften, and I feel exhausted. I slump against the pillows, the soaked fabric still wrapped around my tip, feeling ashamed of myself as I wonder how long, exactly, I'm going to be able to do this.

How long can this go on? *A few weeks, and I'm stealing her panties and using them to jerk off.* It feels worse than just sleeping with my wife. I've told myself I'm protecting her innocence, but again and again, I'm violating it in my imagination. If I can't control my desires—

What if I gave in? What if I gave us what I both want?

I let out a groan, rubbing a hand over my eyes. I went into this marriage intent on keeping my resolve. I'd believed I could do it, that I could protect her without subjecting her to any of my desires.

It looks like that's going to be more difficult than I could have ever thought.

Gianna



I left the panties for Alessio on purpose.

I'd caught a glimpse of him, watching outside of my room as I dressed. I saw him looking at my reflection in the picture, and I had a spark of an idea.

Now, lying in my bed after catching him doing exactly what I had imagined he would, peeking at him through the cracked door as he'd jerked off using the panties I'd left behind for him, I don't know how to feel.

In the moment, I'd felt flushed and hot and soaked between my legs, every part of me vibrating with the desire to slip into the room and replace his hand with mine. I'd imagined pushing him back onto the bed, taking him into my mouth instead, hearing those groans for *me* instead of the quick, frantic movements of his hand. Even as I'd slipped my hand up under my skirt, stroking my swollen clit as I watched him kneel on the bed and fuck his fist, clenching my panties over his still-hard cock, I'd wanted to go in and tell him to just fuck *me* instead.

I know he wants me. I heard him mumble my name, even though it was clear he was trying not to. I saw him pressing my panties to his nose, breathing me in, something that made me feel embarrassed and aroused, and confused all at once. I think, if I keep pushing, I could manage to seduce him. We're stuck together now, after all, and I don't think he can hold out forever—especially not if I learn how to make it so hard for him that he *can't*.

But I don't know if that's what I really want.

I want him to give in on his own, I think sadly, looking up at the ceiling, blinking back tears. I want my husband to come to me because he genuinely wants me, not because I've tricked him into it. And I want Alessio to fall for me, to desire me, of his own volition. I don't want him to regret it afterward.

I need something else to focus on. I feel like a miserable tangle of grief and hurt and lust and confused, unanswered feelings, and I know that after two months, it's time I start trying to reconstruct some sort of life for myself. The question of my marriage is answered, and as unsatisfying as that answer is, it's done.

So tomorrow, I decide as I lie there, I'm going to make some changes for myself.

—

Alessio joins me at the breakfast table, to my surprise. It's felt like, since the wedding, we've been circling each other, feeling out who will be the first one to give in and try to figure out what this new normal looks like. I find him at the table sipping coffee and scrolling through his phone, and when he sees me in the doorway, and his gaze sweeps over what I'm wearing, one of his dark eyebrows rises a little.

"You look more casual than you usually do." He turns back to his coffee, but something in me leaps at the idea that he notices the filmy, chiffon-y dresses that I usually wear around the house. I opted for jeans, espadrille sandals, a silky camisole top, and putting my hair up in a ponytail today, my mother's white-gold small diamond hoops finishing off the outfit.

I rub my thumb over my thin wedding band, still unused to the feeling of it on my finger. "I'm going to go to the college to sign up for classes," I tell him, hoping my voice sounds as firm and sure as I want it to. If he was expecting me to ask permission, I want that expectation removed. I married Alessio, not one of those control-freak boys who courted me before, and I want the freedom that he promised me—to an

extent, of course. “I’ll take plenty of security with me,” I add, promising quickly. “I already have an appointment.”

Alessio frowns, and for a moment, I think he’s going to tell me no. I’m poised to argue with him, but he finally nods, setting his phone down as he reaches for his fork. “Still planning on studying literature?” he asks, as casually as if this conversation was always expected, and I feel a flush of relief.

“Yes.” I swallow hard, nodding quickly. “I think so. I’m meeting with an advisor, just to make sure. But I’m excited to start in the fall. I feel like—” I hesitate, wishing he’d look at me, instead of just down at his plate. “I’m excited to have something else to focus on. I feel like it will be good for me.”

Alessio hesitates for a moment and then nods. “I agree.” He glances at my plate, which is already filled with eggs, sausage, and a piece of toast with butter and jam. “Eat,” he says firmly. “You’re going to be walking around, and I don’t want to worry about you passing out from hunger.”

There it is, that authoritative edge to his voice that sends a jolt through me, down my spine, and between my thighs. My mouth goes dry for a moment, and I reach for my fork, feeling a spark of appetite. It’s not much, but I manage to eat a little more than usual, rolling his words around in my mind as I do. *I don’t want to worry about you.*

I like the idea of him worrying about me, a little. I like the idea of him caring.

And I like that bit of authority in his voice, telling me to eat. Instructing me.

I want to hear it in other ways, too.

I try not to think of it in the car on the way to Northwestern, to focus on the prospect of college and classes and getting back to some of the things I’d hoped for in my life instead of thinking about my absent husband and strange marriage. I think about how I’ll be able to occupy my time—homework and writing and a new creative outlet. I might not be getting the love or physical satisfaction from my husband that I want, but I’ll have plenty of time. Without children for a while, I can

study and read and write to my heart's content—until Alessio decides that our mysterious ‘infertility’ has gone on long enough, and we adopt. And even then—

Alessio will let me do mostly as I please, as long as I show up on his arm when need be, and don't insist on doing anything *too* radical, like getting a job. I could probably go to graduate school, if I want. I turn that idea over in my head, ruminating on it until the black SUV pulls into a parking lot at the campus. I get out, feeling a little uncomfortable at the five security guards who insist on following me.

This is the part I don't like, that I'm not looking forward to. I'll never feel like a normal college student with security trailing me like this, like I'm a celebrity instead of just a girl who happened to be born into a very wealthy family—a family powerful enough to have enemies. Nothing has felt normal in so long, and even though I already went through the steps to ensure that my security wouldn't cause trouble for me on campus, letting the appropriate people know that they'd be here with me, that desire to ditch them lingers with me as I slip into the advisor's office and leave them in the hall.

It's not far enough. I can feel the eyes on me as I turn the knob, curious onlookers walking past, and it makes my skin itch. I feel that way—itchy and restless—all through the meeting with the advisor. We discuss majors and settle on English literature. She combs through classes with me and discusses the security situation once again. I leave with a class schedule and a feeling somewhere between excitement and anxiety as I step back out into the hall.

I'm going to be a college student. I *am* a college student. And I want to feel like one, just for a minute.

Heart racing, I spin on my heel and head the other way down the hall, away from my security.

“Hey! Mrs. Mancini, wait—”

I hear the call from behind me, hear heavy footsteps as they follow, at a normal pace, and then faster when it becomes clear I might be trying to ditch them. I veer down one hallway and then another, down a flight of stairs, dashing for an elevator as

I try to give them the slip. I want to explore on my own, just for a little while, just long enough to look around the campus without that pressure of eyes on me—not just my security, but all the students and staff and faculty wondering who I am, who could be so important as to need all of *that*.

I want to disappear into a crowd for the first time in my life, and the need feels so desperate that I don't think about the consequences, or what will happen when Alessio inevitably finds out. I just *go*, and when I spill out onto the stone-paved path and grassy surrounds of the campus outside of the backdoor of the building, my heart leaps with a newly discovered sense of freedom.

I'm free. Just for a little while. A half-hour, maybe, depending on how quickly they catch up.

I head down the path, looking at the buildings, brick and stone and glass, the water shimmering in the distance behind them. I have no idea which one of these buildings will be mine, which one I'll come back to day after day until it feels familiar, which one is the library where I can study, which one I might get lunch in. It feels strange and new, but in a good way—like possibilities unfurling in front of me for a change, instead of being closed off.

There's a small coffee shop off to one side of the path, and I veer in that direction, fishing in my thin leather purse for the credit card that Alessio gave me before I left. It feels like a long time since I've bought a coffee out, and I relish the purchase, getting an iced mocha and breathing in the scent of coffee beans and baked goods before heading back out again—and almost directly into the broad chest of one of my security guards.

I look up at him, clutching my nearly-spilled coffee, and the look on his face makes me feel like a chagrined child.

"It's time to go home, Mrs. Mancini," he says sternly, and I feel a flush of anxiety. The coffee no longer sounds as appetizing, thinking about going home to Alessio and the scolding I'm going to get from him. I bite my lip, wondering if there's some way I can convince them not to tell him.

I already know that's a lost cause, though. I might also technically be their employer, but Alessio is the one who pays their salary. They're not going to keep a secret like that from him—not a chance. I'm just going to have to deal with the consequences of my actions.

Consequences. My thighs tighten suddenly on the smooth leather seat as I slip inside the SUV, wondering just what those consequences might be. The coffee shakes a little in my hand as I raise it to my lips, the silky sweetness of the mocha making my stomach cramp a little—it's the richest thing I've eaten or drunk in a while, with my appetite being what it has been. I hadn't snuck off without my security with the intent of making Alessio punish me, but now that I think about it—

Heat blooms in my stomach, spreading through my veins, and I think of that night in his office, the impact of his hand against my ass, the way the strange pleasure that I'd felt from it had made my knees weak. *Will he do that again?* I bite my lip, taking another sip of the coffee, my blood buzzing for reasons that have nothing to do with the caffeine.

The anticipation turns to stomach-clenching fear; however, the moment I step into the foyer with the security guards surrounding me, and see Alessio waiting for me there, his face taut and painted with angry lines that make me shiver for reasons that have nothing to do with desire. I can see that he's furious.

And all that fury is directed at me.

Alessio



I've never been so angry with Gianna, not even when she made a bit of a scene at that first dinner party, not even when she mouthed off to me afterward. And I have no intentions of hiding it, or making this easier on her.

I march towards her, ignoring the way she shrinks back as I reach for her, the security parting around me like a wave as I do. She lets out a small yelp of protest as my fingers close around her elbow, but I ignore that too, leading her at a quick pace towards the door that goes to the smaller living room down the hall.

"No one is to disturb us," I tell one of the guards sharply. "Make sure that no one does."

"Alessio—" Gianna's voice is a thready whisper, and it stabs at my chest, but I swallow back the urge to go a little easier on her. I wait until we're inside the room, the doors securely shut behind us, and then I round on her.

"Do you have *any* idea how worried I was for you when I got the call that they'd lost sight of you? Do you have any idea what I imagined could have happened? Who could have taken you? You are *valuable*, Gianna, and your father's murderer is still out there somewhere! You were irresponsible, and you put yourself in danger, and—"

Her wide blue eyes are welling with tears. I try to ignore it, try to tell myself that she needs this, to have the magnitude of what she's done drummed into her without hesitation, but I can't help the way it makes me feel to see her like this.

She can't put herself in that kind of danger again. I can't lose her, too.

The thought startles me with its intensity, hinting at the sort of feeling that I can't let myself admit that I feel—not now, not for her. I take her elbow again, a little less roughly this time, and steer her towards the sofa in the center of the room.

“Alessio, what—” Her voice trembles, and I stop at the edge of it, looking down at her.

“You put yourself in danger today,” I repeat firmly. “You forced your security team to go on a wild-goose chase looking for you. You made me worry, *terrified* me that something was going to happen to you. You caused unnecessary upheaval in everyone's day, and for what? To explore on your own? To get coffee?”

Gianna's lower lip trembles. “I just wanted to feel normal for a minute,” she whispers. “Like a normal college student signing up for classes. I've *never* felt normal. Not even a little.”

I feel my chest tighten at her admission, and I want to sympathize with her, to let this go, to comfort her. But I *can't*. I tell myself, as I look down at her, that this is for her own good. She has to learn the severity of what she did, the necessity of following the rules—especially right now.

“I can understand that,” I tell her, allowing a little gentleness to seep into my tone. “But all the same, Gianna, what you did today was unacceptable. And you're going to be punished for it.” I nod to her jeans. “Unbutton your jeans and push them down to your thighs. Your panties, too.”

Gianna's eyes go round, and I see a red flush stain her cheeks. Her lip quivers, her hands trembling, and I harden my voice as much as I can—at the same time as I fight desperately to keep my cock from doing the same. I can't have an erection while she's across my lap—that's not what this is about. And I don't want to give her the wrong idea.

“Now, Gianna,” I tell her sternly, and the blush on her cheeks deepens even more as she raises her shaking fingers to the

button of her jeans. “You may turn around while you push them down, if you like.”

She nods, swallowing hard as she turns, her hands still undoing the front of her jeans. My mouth goes dry as I see her start to push them down, her thumbs hooking in the denim and the glimpse of silky pink fabric that I catch beneath as she pushes both her jeans and her panties to her hips, just as I instructed, facing away from me.

When the creamy, perfect curve of her ass comes into view, I don’t know how I’m going to keep myself from getting hard. She stops just below it, at the tops of her thighs, and I take her elbow again, guiding her down over my lap. She gasps the instant she realizes what I’m doing, resisting me just a little.

“Alessio, *please*, you don’t have to—”

The sound of her begging me sends a jolt of blood straight down to my already-swelling cock. “I told you that you need to be punished, and I meant it, Gianna. Don’t make this harder than it needs to be.”

“But do you have to do it like this?” Her hand plants on my thigh, resisting being drawn down across my lap, her voice a small whimper. “You could do it like last time—”

“No.” I lift her hand off of my thigh, bringing her down across my lap. Her breasts brush against my arm through her silky tank top, the perfect upturned curve of her ass hooked across my other thigh, and I stifle a groan as I look down at her. She’s a vision—a glorious, perfect vision, and I’ve never wanted a woman more in my entire life.

This is starting to feel like as much of a punishment for me as it is for her. I struggle not to think about it as I lay my hand against one side of her ass, fighting the urge to stroke my hand over the curve. “Twenty this time,” I tell her, and Gianna makes a small nodding motion with her head. I can feel how tense she is under my touch. “Count out loud.”

When I bring my hand down against her smooth flesh, she lets out a high-pitched, whimpering cry that once again feels as if it goes straight to my cock. “One!” she gasps out, her hand

flailing out to grab at the coffee table, and I see the glint of the diamonds on her wedding band. The same feeling goes through me that I felt on the day of our wedding, when I slipped it onto her slim finger, a possessive feeling that grips me like a vise. *Mine*, I think, gritting my teeth as I bring my hand down again, feeling her flesh heat under my fingertips. *Mine, mine, mine*. My wife. My—

“Three!” Gianna cries out, her voice more breathless now. “Four—”

At five, I feel her starting to squirm against my lap. My cock, already struggling not to get hard, thickens and swells against my thigh, quickly rising as she wriggles against me. “Six!” she gasps. “Seven—Alessio—”

She nearly moans my name as my hand comes down again, her hips pressing into my thigh, and my cock stiffens instantly, the sound sending most of the blood from my brain straight down to my groin. This is going in the wrong direction, and unless I course-correct quickly, every defense I had against sleeping with my own wife is going to rapidly crumble.

“Stand up.” I take her arm, urging her up off of my lap, watching to make sure that she doesn’t stumble and fall as she obeys. Her jeans are still around her thighs, and I grab for them, jerking them up before I can get more than a glimpse of the soft black hair at the junction of her thighs, hiding most of her pussy from me—but not before I catch a breath of her arousal, the warm scent filling the air between us and making my cock jolt painfully against my fly.

“That’s not what this is about,” I tell her sternly. “That—sound you just made. The way you reacted. This isn’t for pleasure, Gianna. This is a *punishment*.”

Her eyes narrow at me, rebellion flaring in them. I never knew brattiness could turn me on so much until Gianna. “You can’t make me *not* enjoy it,” she breathes. “You can’t control that.”

“You have no idea what you’re talking about.” I grit my teeth, fighting the urge to reach down and adjust my straining erection. “You have no idea what you’re doing to me, Gianna.”

“Don’t I?” She raises an eyebrow, her gaze dropping pointedly to the thick bulge in my lap.

“You’re too innocent and sheltered to really understand.” I shake my head. “We’ll do this a different way. I won’t be responsible for—”

The color in her face deepens, flushing a darker red as she glares at me. Her eyes glisten, and the frustration on her face is almost palpable. “I might be innocent and sheltered,” she snaps through gritted teeth, “but I’m not an idiot, Alessio. There’s a library in this house, for fuck’s sake, with some *very* enlightening books. And I have a phone. I can look things up ___”

That *does* make me angry. “So you cajoled me into giving you those ‘lessons’ for what? You could have just looked up the answers yourself. Watched some *instructional* videos. Or were you too afraid of getting caught watching porn? Innocent Gianna, watching filthy videos—” I break off, the throbbing in my cock at the idea of her touching herself under the blankets while watching porn almost too much to take.

“I wanted *you* to teach me. I wanted to see the real thing, not some performance.” Gianna frowns at me. “But once it was clear you weren’t going to show me anything else, yes, I looked some things up. And it was very enlightening. So yes, Alessio, I know some men like submissive women. I know they like to be in charge sometimes. I know they like to tell women what to do. Or am I wrong?” She cocks her head, taking a step back, her gaze landing on my hard cock again.

“I still don’t understand why you’re fighting this, Alessio,” she says softly. “I know you want me. I know it turns you on to punish me. And I want it, too.” Her teeth graze over her lower lip, that flush deepening all over again. “I want you to tell me to lay down over your lap again, and this time, I don’t want you to stop when I start to moan and squirm. I want you to tell me to get down on my knees and do the things to you that you taught me about. I want you to teach me all the things you like and then tell me to do them. I want *all* of it, Alessio.”

Her voice deepens, turning husky and rich, and I know she can't possibly be doing it on purpose. She doesn't know enough about seduction for that, but she doesn't need to. She's seducing me without even trying, making me harder than I think I've ever been in my entire life. I stare at her, grappling with all of it as I feel my defenses crumbling, just as I'd feared.

What she's offering is everything I want. I've always had a fantasy of having a woman be my submissive in exactly that way, in that kind of twenty-four/seven dynamic—a woman who took equal pleasure from it, who craved it in the way that I can hear in Gianna's voice.

She wants it. She understands it better than I'd thought, though I can't imagine she has a thorough understanding. And even as I tell myself that I'm supposed to protect her, to not take advantage of her, I wonder if any of that reasoning even holds up any longer. She's standing in front of me, *telling* me what she wants. Any argument against it, even the shaky one that legally she was my stepsister, falls away until I don't know how to fight against what I want—what we *both* want—any longer.

It feels too good to be true.

"I liked being cared for and protected by you," Gianna says softly, her wide blue eyes searching mine. "I want you to take care of me in *every* way. I want you to tell me what to do, to cherish me, and keep me safe. I want you to teach me what *you* want. I want a different set of lessons, Alessio."

She bites her lip, looking at me pleadingly. "I like that you punished me today," she whispers. "On the way home, I kept thinking about what you would do. I *wanted* you to. And I think deep down—part of why I ran off today might have been to see what you would do."

Every word she says crumbles what little resistance I have left. The want, the *need* for her, feels palpable, uncontrollable, like I have no defenses left against it. I take a deep breath, searching for any will left to tell her no—and find none.

So I make a decision.

“If this is really what you want—” I say it slowly, feeling my throat tighten with desire, time slowing down around us as everything narrows down to Gianna, and what she does next.

“Then take off your clothes,” I murmur. “And lay back down over my lap.”

Gianna



When he says it, there's that fizzing sensation in my blood again, like champagne bubbling through my veins. "Do you mean it?" I ask, my voice trembling, afraid that he'll change his mind. That this is some trick, some other kind of cruel punishment, and that he's not really going to give me what I so desperately want.

"If you want this," Alessio repeats, his voice deep and gravelly and laced with lust, "then you'll be a good girl, Gianna, and do as I say."

I suck in a sharp breath, the words burning straight to my core as I reach for the hem of my tank top. "Slowly," he instructs. "Let me enjoy seeing you strip for me for the first time, beautiful girl."

His praise warms every inch of my skin. I do my best to obey, to fight the urge to rip my clothes off, and slowly slide the top upwards, inching it bit by bit up my stomach to show the smooth expanse of pale flesh, and then higher, to the curves of my full breasts. At the sight of the bare skin, the hint of rosy nipple, Alessio clicks his tongue.

"You went out without a bra? That's another five strokes, young lady." His voice is hoarse as I pause. "Keep going, Gianna, unless you've changed your mind. Let me see those pretty breasts."

The palpable desire in his voice makes me feel as if I'm going to melt. I obey, raising the tank top slowly over my breasts, the silky brush of the fabric over my sensitive nipples making me

gasp. I pull it over my head, tossing it to the side, and reach for my jeans—still unbuttoned and only half-zipped.

“Slow,” Alessio reminds me, his gaze raking hungrily over my bare torso. His eyes catch on my breasts, my waist, dropping lower, and I’ve never had anyone look at me with such raw desire before. I can feel how wet I am already, and I squeeze my thighs together a little as I slide my jeans down, this time past my hips, all the way off until I step out of them.

“Panties.” Alessio’s gaze is fixed hungrily between my thighs. “Every inch, Gianna. You’re going to take your punishment naked. I want you thoroughly punished, and then, if you’re a good girl, maybe there will be a reward.”

A reward? I feel myself tighten at that, a hollow clenching inside of myself that makes me whimper softly. I want to know what the reward is, what he might finally give me in exchange for my willing, bare submission to my punishment. Even thinking it makes me clench again with desire, my breathing coming faster as I slide my silky pink panties down over my hips, letting them drop to the floor with a quick exhalation of breath as Alessio’s eyes settle between my legs.

“Come here,” he murmurs, and I obey, knowing that if at any moment I changed my mind, if I didn’t want this after all, I could tell him, and he would stop. It’s part of what makes me feel safe with him, what makes me feel like I can walk up to the edge of where he’s sitting and stand there, waiting for him to tell me what to do next.

His hand touches my hip, and I whimper again. I’m aching now, those champagne bubbles exploding in my blood, all of me poised and eager to find out what happens next. “I’m going to want you to shave this sweet pussy for me, Gianna,” he murmurs, his fingers stroking the front of my thigh, so close to the apex of it that I gasp a little. “But we don’t need to worry about that tonight. Now, if you still want this, lay down over my lap.”

This time, I don’t hesitate. I bend down, stretching my naked body over his lap; the fact that he’s still fully clothed while I’m bare from my head to my toes only adds to how arousing

all of this is. His hand smooths over my ass, still tingling from the earlier spanking.

“We’re starting over, Gianna. Five more for your lack of a bra, so we’ll make it an even twenty. Be a good girl, and count for me.”

When his hand comes down, and I cry out the first one, I squirm. I can’t help it. By five, I’m openly writhing on his lap. By ten, I’m arching and rubbing against his thigh, desperate for some friction, for something to ease the burning ache between my legs that has, at this point, outstripped the burning in my ass from the spanking. “*Please—*” I whimper, and Alessio chuckles.

“Not until you finish taking your punishment, sweetheart,” he murmurs. “And you’re squirming around far too much.” His other hand presses on my back, trying to hold me still. “If you don’t want me to send you to your room with a promise not to touch yourself, no matter how wet you are, then you’ll try as hard as you can to be still. Alright?”

I nod, gasping.

“Say yes, sir,” Alessio growls, and I let out another whimpering, helpless moan.

“Yes, sir,” I whisper, and another slap of his hand connects with the curve of my ass.

Another, and another. “You’re being a good girl,” Alessio croons as he smooths his hand over my skin, bringing down the fifteenth stroke. “You’re taking your punishment so well. Such a good girl for me.” *Sixteen, seventeen.* Three more, and he’ll be finished. My ass feels like it’s on fire, red-hot with pain, but the rest of me is throbbing with an aching, needy pleasure that makes me feel like I might combust entirely if Alessio doesn’t give me something more soon.

Eighteen, nineteen. I sob out the strokes through frustrated tears, trying not to buck against his thigh, feeling as if I’m coming apart at the seams. “*Please,*” I whimper again as the twentieth connects with my ass, and Alessio makes a low sound deep in his throat, his hand gently stroking my ass.

“You were such a good girl,” he murmurs. “I do think you deserve a reward. Can you spread your legs for me, Gianna? Let me feel how wet you are.”

I let out another helpless moan, my thighs parting immediately. *I* can feel how wet I am, to the point that I’m sure I’ve made a mess of his trousers, and the moment his fingers slide over my swollen folds, I gasp.

“Now tell me, sweetheart—and don’t lie—have you touched yourself before?” His fingers slide back and forth, collecting the wetness between my thighs, so close to that sensitive spot that I desperately wish he’d touch.

I nod, moaning softly.

“When was the first time?” His finger dips between, circling my entrance. “God, you’re so wet. Such a filthy girl, getting so wet from being punished. You’re going to feel so good around my cock.”

“*Oh—*” I cry out, nearly sobbing from need, the feelings and sensations a thousand times more intense than anything I’ve ever felt before. “The first time—*oh god—*” I buck against his fingers, aching for him to slide them into me, but he just slips one downwards, nearly to that spot. “I saw you touching yourself,” I whisper, when I realize he won’t move his finger again until I answer. “In your office. That day I went out to the pool. I watched you get off, and I—I felt like I needed to touch myself, too. So I did, and I felt—” I sink my teeth into my lip. “I—”

“You had an orgasm.” Alessio cups his hand against me, and I rock back into the touch, moaning. “You were a bad girl, spying on me like that. But I’ll let it go this time. Now I’m going to give you another orgasm, Gianna, since you took your spanking so well. But this pussy is mine now.” He slides his finger a fraction closer. “I’m going to make it mine tonight when I give you my cock. No more touching yourself without permission, is that understood?”

I hesitate, my mind spinning into overdrive. Just the thought of that kind of control makes me clench, and my face flames as I *feel* my arousal dripping onto his palm.

“Gianna?” he prompts. “Your pleasure is mine now. *All* of you is mine. If I find out you’ve come without permission, you’ll be punished.”

“I understand,” I whisper. I can feel how hard he is, thick and rigid underneath my hips, and I can’t resist the urge to squirm against him, pressing down against his erection. The promise that he’s going to fuck me later, that I’m going to find out what it feels like to have him inside of me, sends a thrill through me that has me moaning the instant his finger slips forward.

“That’s it,” he murmurs. “Look at you. I just barely touch your clit, and you’re a moaning mess. What a good girl.” His fingers stroke my hair, twining through it as he rubs between my thighs, the strokes becoming firmer and more insistent as I buck and twist into his touch. “You’re going to come for me, aren’t you?”

I nod, whimpering as I twist my hips against his fingers. My hands clench into fists, and I hear Alessio’s low groan as I buck against the hard ridge of his cock again.

“Just let go, sweetheart,” he murmurs, massaging my clit in tight circles, his fingers steady and firm. I can hardly believe that he’s finally touching me like this, that he’s giving me everything I wanted so badly, that he’s going to make me come. “Come for me, Gianna. Come all over my fingers. Good girl.”

The orgasm hits me like a tidal wave. I cry out, the sensation gathering where his fingers are rubbing against me, bursting out over my skin, tensing every muscle and making me seize and buck against his hand, my fingers clawing at his leg as my back arches. I’ve never felt anything like it—not from my own fingers—and I ride his hand helplessly, grinding against him for as much of the pleasure as I can manage. “*Alessio—*” I moan out his name, nearly in tears from the intensity of it. He slows his fingers, sliding them against me in a soft, soothing motion as he eases me down from the climax.

He lifts me off of his lap, moving me in one swift motion so that I’m laying back against the pillows of the couch, and I

spread my legs eagerly, expecting that he's going to slide into me next. Alessio chuckles softly, shaking his head.

"Not yet, sweetheart," he murmurs. "We're not going to rush this."

"But you said—" I'm on the verge of pouting, and I think he can see it, because he smirks down at me, his hand going to the button of his trousers.

"Oh, I'm going to take your virginity tonight, Gianna. But it will be tonight. After you take a long bath and then eat dinner—all of it—" he adds sternly. "And then I will take you to bed, and we'll do this properly. First, though—"

He sucks in a breath as he frees his thick, rigid cock, leaning down to scoop my panties off of the floor. "First, I need to come. I won't last long tonight, not as worked up as you've gotten me."

I start to lean up, to reach for him, and Alessio shakes his head. "Not yet, *dolce*," he murmurs. "I just want you to watch. One more lesson for my good girl."

His hand wraps around his cock, stroking in long, sure movements as he sets the panties aside for a moment on the coffee table. I watch as he raises the fingers he used to get me off to his lips, licking my taste off of them as he groans. "I can't wait to taste you tonight," he murmurs, his hand moving faster over his cock. "You're so fucking beautiful, *tesoro*." His gaze slides over me; his voice is husky and thick with lust. "So fucking perfect."

He looks gorgeous, kneeling above me, his long-fingered hand wrapped around his thick, pulsing cock, the veins standing out as he strokes more quickly. "Look at you," he breathes. "My perfect wife. My sweet girl."

Alessio's voice catches, and he grabs the panties, holding them in front of his cock in his left hand as his hips cant forward, thrusting into his fist as he groans. "Watch me come for you," he growls, his cockhead flaring as he presses his thumb below the tip, his hand moving quickly now, angling his cock down

towards the silky fabric. “Watch me fill these wet panties up with my—fucking—cum—”

He lets out a groan, his face tightening as the cum spurts from his cock, splashing onto my panties as his cock swells and throbs. I watch in fascination, my hand twitching, nearly straying back to rub myself again until I remember what he said earlier, and I catch myself just in time. I’m aching all over again, dripping wet as I watch him come, the sight in front of me so utterly filthy and arousing all at once. I watch him press the fabric to his still-spurting tip, groaning as he rubs it over the swollen flesh, jerking his cock into my panties for a few more strokes before he motions for me to stand up.

When I do, he turns, gently slipping the panties back up my legs, the fabric settling on my hips. I shiver and moan when I feel the warmth of the cum-soaked fabric between my thighs, and I see Alessio’s half-hard cock twitch again at the sound.

“You’re going to wear these upstairs,” he says, gently patting between my thighs. “And when you’re upstairs, I want you to lay down, and make yourself come again—but you can only touch outside the fabric. Is that understood?”

I nod.

“I’ll know if you don’t obey me,” he says sternly. “I want you to come wearing these, and then take them off. Take a long bath, and get dressed for dinner. Meet me downstairs at eight. Is that understood?”

I nod again, my skin flushed. My nipples are hard, my skin aching with desire, and all I can think about is his cum touching my skin and what he’s told me to do. I feel like I’m in a dream as I go upstairs, a kind of foggy haze that wraps itself around me and makes me feel dizzy with desire, curiosity, and anticipation, all tangled together in a delicious mess of emotion.

Alessio said he’d know if I didn’t obey, but I can’t think of any reason why I wouldn’t. Even though he made me come with his fingers, I’m still aching by the time I reach my room—and it’s more than that. I *want* to obey him. I want to please him. I

want to be a good girl for him, and he's given me very clear instructions on how to do precisely that.

Instructions I'm dying to carry out.

I strip off my clothes the minute I'm in my room with the door closed, with none of the slowness that Alessio insisted on, down to my panties. My skin flushes with a thrilling kind of embarrassment as I stretch out nearly nude atop my bed, reaching down between my thighs to touch the damp fabric there.

It's still faintly warm against my fingertips, and I shiver, arousal fizzing through my blood all over again. I can still see Alessio with my panties in his hand, his fingers wrapped around his cock, forearm flexing as he stroked himself urgently, the evidence of his pleasure soaking the fabric currently between my legs. Reflexively, I push my finger against it, nudging it between my folds, up against my clit. His cum, warm against my skin.

The moan that slips out of me is involuntary, filling the air, my hips twitching up to meet my hand. I'm still so sensitive, even after what happened downstairs—maybe more so because of it. The friction of the fabric against my clit feels different than my bare fingertip, but it feels *good*, amplified by the utter filthiness of what Alessio told me to do. I replay the scene over and over in my head as I circle my finger around my clit, urging that building sensation higher, imagining that he's coming on me instead of my panties, his cum splashing over my skin, my pussy, my clit—

I let out another soft, keening moan at the thought, my hips bucking up, my finger rubbing now instead of circling, back and forth over the tight, hard bud of flesh where all of the pleasure is centered. It feels so good, so *dirty*—but I'm being a good girl for Alessio, I remind myself. His good girl, pleasuring myself just the way he told me to.

That's what sends me over the edge. I clap my other hand over my mouth to muffle the high-pitched cry of pleasure as my entire body tightens, shuddering with another orgasm as I rub the cum-soaked fabric into my clit, two of my fingers sliding

down to push it against my entrance, grinding against the sensation and the thought of his cum all over me. The fabric is soaked all over again, drenched with my arousal, and I twist and moan on the bed, wanting every last bit of pleasure I can draw out of the orgasm as I come on my fingers.

Afterward, I lay there, gasping, feeling so liquid and boneless that I'm not even sure I can get up to shower. I have to—but I lay there a little longer, luxuriating in the feeling between my thighs, before sliding the panties off and setting them aside.

An hour and a half later, I'm ready for dinner—dressed in one of the floaty maxi dresses that Alessio is used to seeing me in, this one black chiffon with huge, lush pink and burgundy flowers printed on it. I slip on a pair of garnet studs, leaving my hair loose around my shoulders and putting on just the lightest bit of makeup. I hesitate for a moment, fingers hovering over my assortment of lip stains and lipsticks, and then I reach for a deep garnet shade to match my earrings.

If Alessio wants me to use my mouth on him later, I like the idea of leaving some of my lipstick behind.

He's at the dining room table when I come downstairs, a decanter of wine already between our plates, and he's sipping at a long-stemmed glass of red. My breath catches a little when I see him, and it almost feels like a dream.

I've wanted him for so long, and now—now I think I'm finally going to get what I want. Alessio as my husband—in every way.

He looks so handsome sitting there, wearing dark grey chinos and a black t-shirt, his dark hair swept back away from his face, the glass of wine in his hand. When he turns and sees me, his green eyes filling with a heat I'm beginning to recognize, my heart flutters in my chest.

“I had the kitchen make your favorite dinner.” Alessio gestures to the chair next to him. “You've been picking at your food for a long time, Gianna. You don't have to stuff yourself—in fact, it's probably better that you don't—but you do need to eat a meal.” His expression softens as I come to sit next to him, and he reaches out, touching my hand gently. “You said that you

like that I protect you and take care of you. I intend to keep doing that. But you will need to be a good girl and obey me. And if this truly is the dynamic that you want—there will be consequences if you don't."

His gaze is still kind as he says it, and I feel my heart flutter again in my chest, nervous anticipation flooding me. "What if I disobey because I *want* to be punished?" I whisper, and I see that twitch at the corner of Alessio's mouth, his fingers flexing around the stem of his glass.

"Then you'll still be punished," he murmurs, his voice huskier than before, and I can tell that the idea has some appeal for him, too. "But I can't stop you from enjoying it, Gianna."

There's always been tension between us, from the very first day he arrived back in Chicago. But tonight, as I eat my dinner with some actual interest for the first time in weeks, the tension is so thick that it feels palpable. I don't know exactly what's going to happen when we go upstairs, but I have some ideas. The anticipation fizzles through my blood, making my fingers tremble on my fork as I eat.

"Only one glass of wine," Alessio tells me sternly, when I reach for the decanter again. I give him the beginnings of a pout, but he just smiles at me. "I want you clearheaded for tonight," he says softly, his hand reaching for mine. My skin tingles at the touch of his long fingers brushing over my knuckles. "I want you to be sure of what you want, and able to tell me if you want me to stop. I want you to remember and enjoy all of it. I don't want anything clouded by alcohol or for there to be any questions as to whether or not tonight is exactly what you want."

His voice is so soft, so tender, that it makes my eyes mist over with tears. I nod, reaching for my water glass instead, my pulse beating hard in my throat. I'm ready for dinner to be finished, for us to go upstairs so I can finally, *finally* have Alessio all to myself, but he's being careful not to rush anything. I suspect that it's less about making an event of the whole thing and more about giving me time to change my mind, if I want to.

But there's not a single chance that I will.

"I picked a new suite of rooms for us," Alessio says, when we're finally finished with dessert, and he sets his napkin aside. "I didn't think you'd want to sleep in the old master suite, but if we're going to do this—share a bed, behave as husband and wife—then we should have our own bedroom suite." He pushes his chair back, reaching for my hand. "Come with me."

I have that feeling, once again, of being in a dream as he leads me upstairs. He picked a suite on the third floor of the mansion, one that has a balcony that overlooks the expansive stonework patio behind the house. Whoever decorated the room did it all in soft blues and golds, giving it a faintly French design, and the bed is huge—a four-poster in dark wood and draped with luxurious bedding that matches the color scheme and piled with soft-looking pillows. My face heats as I imagine Alessio spilling me back into that pile of pillows, and when he closes the door behind us, my heart starts to race.

"We're going to take this slow," he says softly, reaching for my hand and pulling me closer to him. "Tonight is about you. I'll teach you all the things that I'll want for my own pleasure later."

He takes that final step, closing the small distance between us, and his hand rises to touch my cheek. I sigh with pleasure at the touch of his fingers against my skin, the way he trails them through my hair, and as he tips my face up to his, I feel as if I can hardly breathe.

"We'll start with this," Alessio murmurs, and for the first time, he kisses me.

My knees nearly buckle. His mouth is soft and warm, the kiss light, brushing over my lips. I can tell that he meant it when he said he wanted to take things slow. As much as my heart is galloping in my chest, every part of me yearning to find out what it will be like to have him inside of me, I know that slow is better.

I want to remember all of this.

His hands rest on my waist, sliding gently against the chiffon fabric clinging to my skin, skimming up my ribs to gently press against the sides of my breasts. Slowly, he deepens the kiss, the press of his lips more insistent, each movement of his mouth increasing with his touch. His fingers find the curve beneath my breasts as he softly sucks my lower lip between his, his thumbs brushing over my stiffening nipples as his tongue slides into my mouth. I let out a soft, keening moan as I feel the hot slide of his tongue against mine for the first time.

“Gianna.” Alessio breaks the kiss, soft humor in his voice as his hands cup my breasts, fingers still tracing the shape of my nipples underneath the chiffon. “Do you even *own* a bra?”

I narrow my eyes at him. “Yes,” I tell him indignantly, leaning forward in an effort to steal another kiss. “But I thought you might like it if I didn’t have one on tonight.”

“I do.” Alessio’s hands move upwards, fingers skimming over my chest, tracing my collarbones, moving to the thin straps of my dress. “But I would also enjoy seeing you in layers of lingerie, unwrapping each one to get to the next reveal of skin, the next hint of the pleasure to come—” He bends down, pressing his mouth to my collarbone, his tongue tracing a hot line over the sharp edge of it, across my shoulder, his lips pressed to the curve of my shoulder as he moves the thin straps aside. “We’ll have time for all of that,” he murmurs, his hands going to my waist again as he guides me back towards the bed. “But tonight—”

He kisses me again, soft and slow, as his fingers reach for the zipper at the side of my dress. Every movement is slow, intentional, and once again, I feel sure that he’s giving me the chance for an out, making sure that there are no surprises so that if I change my mind, I can say so.

Another time, I might have said something. But I’m finding I’m enjoying the slow pace, the brush of his fingers against bare skin for the first time as he draws the zipper down, parting the fabric. My skin prickles under his touch, and I let out a soft, gasping breath as I feel his hand stroke my side.

Alessio slides the straps off of my shoulders, slowly, letting the dress begin to slip off of me. The chiffon drapes over my breasts, slithering down, catching on my stiff nipples, sending another wash of sensation through me before the dress catches on my hips and then, finally, pools to the floor around my feet.

There's a soft groan as Alessio looks at me, his gaze sliding over me as if he can't decide where to look first. "You're so fucking gorgeous," he murmurs, his long-fingered hands wrapping around my waist as he lifts me just a little, setting me on the edge of the bed. "So beautiful, my sweet girl."

I look up at him, feeling my breath catch in my throat, my heart hammering in my chest. "Lay back," he says gently. I obey without thinking, sinking into the pile of pillows as I lay nearly nude atop our bed, only the lacy white panties I chose to wear beneath my dress still covering me.

"Christ." The word is a hiss as Alessio looks at me, his hand automatically going down to adjust the hard ridge of his cock. "You're a vision. *Fuck*, I can't believe—" He moves to join me on the bed, and I look at him, my lips forming a soft pout.

"Aren't you going to get undressed, too? I want to see you." I want to find out what *he* looks like naked. I want to see all of his lean, muscled body bare for me, his gorgeous cock free, all of that ridiculously handsome body on display for my pleasure, too. Alessio chuckles, his hand sliding up my calf, and he shakes his head, even as my pout deepens.

"Soon, *tesoro*," he murmurs. "But for now, this is all about you. It makes it more erotic," he adds, both of his hands sliding up my legs now, parting them as he kneels between them. "You're going to submit to me, sweet girl. You're going to give me everything, naked and vulnerable and bare for me, and I'm going to take it all." His voice deepens, his accent thickening, that heat filling his green eyes. "And I'll decide when I get undressed for you, *dolce*."

His hands are on my inner thighs now, the muscles under his palms twitching and trembling. I can feel my breasts quivering with each indrawn breath, my eyes wide as I wait to find out what comes next. He parts my thighs wider, readjusting

between my legs as his hands skim further up, over soft flesh to the creases of my thighs, and then he presses his thumb against my lace panties, just over my clit.

My hips jerk up towards his hand, and he chuckles softly.

“So eager,” Alessio murmurs. “Did you do what I told you, *dolce*? Did you come for me upstairs and then make sure this sweet pussy was bare for me tonight?”

I nod, my teeth sinking into my lower lip. Even alone in my bathroom, I’d felt so embarrassed, shaving my pussy bare for the man I planned to give my virginity to tonight, thinking of him seeing me so exposed. I couldn’t stop thinking about the possibility of him touching the bare flesh, licking me there, *tasting* me the way he’d promised. I’d been soaking wet and throbbing by the time I had finished, my pussy slick with arousal, and I’d wanted so badly to come again.

“It turned you on to shave for me, didn’t it, *bellissima*?” Alessio murmurs, seeing the flush in my cheeks. “Did you disobey me? Did you make yourself come again?”

I shake my head, still biting my lip. “No,” I whisper. “I didn’t. I promise.”

“But you wanted to.” His thumb presses harder, the lace rubbing against my clit, and I let out a whimper. “You wanted to touch yourself right here. You wanted to make yourself come. Such a filthy girl.”

His voice is a hoarse whisper as he gently rubs my clit through the lace. I can feel a flood of arousal gathering between my legs, and I whimper again, my hips canting upwards into his touch, wanting more.

“But I’m going to be the first to touch your pretty, bare skin, aren’t I?” He pulls his hand away, and I moan, my eyes misting over from frustrated need as I nod.

“Good girl.” The way he says it makes me moan again as he reaches for the edge of my panties, his fingers grazing over the sharp line of my hipbones as he starts to slide the lace down my hips. “Such a good girl for me.”

I'm trembling by the time he gets my panties down to my thighs, the heat in his eyes, and the way he wets his lips with his tongue as he sees my bare, smooth skin making me clench and throb with arousal. "Please—" I whisper, not entirely sure what I'm begging for, but completely sure for the first time that Alessio will give it to me.

He slips the panties off, tossing them to one side as he spreads my legs wide again. My cheeks flush as I feel myself opening up to his gaze, wet and vulnerable, my skin hot from the way he's looking at me. "So wet for me," he murmurs, holding my thighs apart as he slowly strokes a fingertip over my clit, down through the slick wetness between my folds, and I let out a shuddering, gasping moan.

"You've been so good. Do you want to come on my fingers or my tongue for the first one, *dolce*?" His fingertip circles my clit again, and I let out a soft mewling sound, arching up into the touch.

"Fingers," I whisper, closing my eyes. I *want* his tongue—I want to know what it feels like, but a part of me is terrified of how good it will feel, of the intensity of it. "You're going to make me come more than once?"

Alessio laughs, dark and promising, his finger rubbing softly over my wet flesh. "I'm going to make you come until you can't any longer, *bellisima*."

Another shudder of anticipation runs through me, and my fingers curl into the blankets as I look up at him with wide, expectant eyes. His fingers circle my clit, slowly first, and then faster, until I'm gasping and clawing at the blankets, so close to the edge that I hardly even realize how hard I'm biting my lower lip, my hips constantly arching upwards into his touch.

"Let go, *dolce*," Alessio murmurs. "Good girl. Come for me."

The sound of his voice sends me over the edge, a tidal wave of pleasure crashing into me as I moan and twist under his hand, his fingers skillfully carrying me through it. I feel his hand stroke against my hip as he croons encouragement, over and over, his fingers slowing as the climax starts to ebb.

“Good girl. Such a good girl.” He keeps murmuring it, pulling his fingers away from my oversensitive clit, still stroking my wet folds as he slips down between my thighs, spreading them wide enough that he can lay between them. “I’m going to let you rest for a moment, and then you’re going to come for me again.”

I whimper, nodding, but I don’t know how I’m going to bear it. The throbbing between my legs feels like almost too much, and I gasp when he gently kisses the inside of one thigh, brushing his lips upwards as the light stubble on his chin rasps against the soft skin there. He turns and does the same on the inside of my other thigh, still murmuring encouragement as I lie there, watching the handsome man between my legs in a sort of stunned amazement that this is happening at all.

Slowly, when he thinks I’ve rested enough, he nuzzles between my legs. I jump at the first touch of his lips against my folds, feeling the vibration of his groan as his mouth slides over my soaked flesh. “God, you taste so fucking good,” he murmurs, brushing his lips over my pussy again, still on the outer edges. “I’m going to devour you. I want you to come all over my fucking tongue—”

When his tongue slides between my folds, I nearly come undone. The sensation is so intense, so overwhelming, that I buck upwards, nearly dislodging him as I cry out with a gasp, and Alessio chuckles, his hands gripping my thighs to hold me in place. “Lie still, *bellisima*,” he orders, and something about the authoritative command pins me to the bed instantly, my breath coming in quick gasps as his tongue flutters around my entrance, lapping up my arousal before sliding higher, up to my swollen, sensitive clit.

“Oh! Oh—Alessio—” I cry out as his tongue slides over me there, wet and hot, the pleasure flooding me instantly. It feels like I’m going to come before he’s even barely begun, the soft heat driving me wild as he licks and flutters over the swollen flesh, and my hand finds his hair without thinking, fingers threading through it as I buck against his mouth. “I—I—”

“Yes,” he murmurs, pulling away just long enough to look up at me. “Come for me again, Gianna. Come all over my tongue

so I can taste you.”

It feels so good—almost *too* good. I writhe against his mouth, crying out as he starts to flutter his tongue again, almost afraid to give in. But after a moment, there’s no choice. The pleasure is too much, building to a crescendo that I can’t fight, and the moan that escapes me turns into something close to a high-pitched scream as it washes over me in wave after wave.

I’m still trembling when I feel his fingers pressing against my entrance. My body instantly tries to clench around him, and Alessio brushes his lips over my thigh again, his fingers lightly rubbing against me.

“This will make it easier for you to take my cock,” he murmurs. “You’re almost certainly going to come again, Gianna. Just let go for me, alright? Be a good girl, and I’ll fuck you like you deserve.”

I feel tears welling at the edges of my eyes, overwhelming pleasure still shuddering through every muscle. When Alessio leans in, his lips closing around my clit as he starts to suck on the still pulsing, oversensitive flesh, I make a sound like nothing I’ve ever heard before. His lips are tight around me, his tongue fluttering again. For a moment, I don’t even realize he’s pushed two fingers inside of me until I register the sudden, sharp pain and the feeling of fullness, the strange sensation of something inside of me.

He holds his fingers very still for a moment, still sucking on my clit, and my hips start to move almost of their own accord, wanting more. It feels strange, but it feels *good*, too, the sharp pain already receding in favor of the building pleasure where his mouth is pressed against me. Slowly, the fingers start to move, sliding in and out with a sound that makes my face flush red with embarrassment, but I’m too far gone to care as much as maybe I should. My entire body feels like a raw, exposed nerve, pleasure thrumming over me, and I gasp as his fingers curl, sliding into me again as he presses against a spot that makes me cry out.

My body jackknives under his touch, only his other hand on my hip, holding me down, keeping me from dislodging him as

I come again. It's not so much another orgasm as a steadily rolling wave of pleasure, ebbing and flowing again and again, until it feels as if it won't stop—as if it might not ever stop.

I can feel him working his fingers inside of me, moving them, a third scissored into my drenched entrance as I cry out and twist against his hand. Alessio pulls back, concern in his face as he looks down at me.

“Too much?” he asks softly, and I shake my head. It *is* almost too much, but I want it. The feeling of his fingers inside of me, filling me up, just makes me want more.

“I want—” I moan again as his fingers slide back, nearly out of me, arching up before I can lose his touch. “I want you inside of me—”

Alessio groans, his fingers slipping out as he looks down at me. I can only imagine what I look like to him, naked and trembling, a wet, flushed, swollen mess between my thighs.

Slowly, he leans back, still kneeling between my legs. I start to close them, but he shakes his head, his hand pressing against my knee. “No, sweetheart,” he murmurs, his gaze hungry as it sweeps over me again. “I want to look at you just like this. So wet and ready for me. So fucking beautiful.”

His voice is rich and thick, dripping over me, and all I can do is watch breathlessly as he slides his shirt up, revealing a taut abdomen ridged with muscle, olive-skinned with dark hair spilling down his navel into the waist of his pants. I moan softly when he slides the shirt off, giving me a view of his bare, broad chest dusted with more dark hair and inked with tattoos. I'm not sure I've ever seen a more gorgeous man, and I watch eagerly as he tosses the t-shirt aside and reaches to undo his belt, wanting to see the rest of him.

I gasp when his cock springs out, framed by muscled thighs, as Alessio slides off the remainder of his clothing, kneeling gorgeously naked between my legs. He reaches down, sliding his hand over his thick, straining cock once, and I can see that he's already slick with pre-cum, his cock glistening in the light of the bedroom.

Slowly, he leans over me. I feel him brush against my inner thigh, hot and hard, as he bends to kiss me softly, his lips brushing over mine as he gently sucks my lower lip between his, the fingers of one hand caressing my cheek.

“We’re going to go slowly, *dolce*,” he murmurs. “And if it hurts too much, you tell me to stop. We don’t have to do it all tonight. We can work up to it.”

I can feel how hard he is, throbbing against my thigh. I don’t know how he would manage to stop, not as aroused as he must be, but I can hear the sincerity in his voice. He means it, and I nod, tilting my chin up to kiss him again.

“I want you,” I whisper softly. “Please—”

Alessio reaches between us, nudging his cock against my entrance. I gasp at the feeling of him pressing against me, thick and swollen, and his fingers spread me open as his hips move forward the slightest bit, pressing the tip of his cock into me.

I cry out, half in surprise at the sensation and half in pain, and he stops instantly, shuddering above me. “Is it too much?” he asks, his voice low and soft, and I shake my head.

“No,” I whisper, pleading. “Please don’t stop. It hurts a little, but—please don’t stop.”

Alessio hesitates, but he leans forward, kissing me again slowly. It’s sweet and intimate, his nose brushing against mine as he deepens the kiss, and I feel his hips nudge forward infinitesimally, pushing himself into me the slightest bit more.

I gasp as I feel the tip sink into me, my hips twitching as my fingers curl into the blanket, my breath coming in soft, quick pants. “Alessio—” I breathe his name against his lips, arching my hips into his, trying to encourage him. I want more, and the pace he’s setting is torturous, as much as I know that it’s for my own benefit.

Inch by inch, he slips into me. It feels strange at first, the burn of my sensitive flesh giving way to a feeling of delicious fullness as he sinks into me that last inch with a groan that seems to come up from his very soul. Alessio goes still as he

sinks to the hilt, his hands flexing next to my head where he's gripping the pillows as he moans.

"God, you're so fucking tight," he murmurs, his hips twitching against mine. "So wet—you feel so fucking good—"

One hand goes to my hip, stroking there in an almost soothing motion as he shudders above me. "I can't wait to teach you everything," he whispers, his voice cracking with lust. "So fucking perfect—"

When he starts to move, his mouth crushed against mine in a deep, searing kiss, I never want him to stop. I wrap my arms around his neck, fingers brushing against the soft hair at the base of his neck as he slides out of me with excruciating slowness and then back in again, the slick, wet sounds filling the room as Alessio devours my mouth.

I love this, I think, the pain fading into the background as I focus on the sensation of being filled by him, the sound of his breathless groans, the pressure of his body against mine. His skin is hot, damp with sweat as he moves against me, and I don't want it to end. I want to keep doing this forever, to be this close to him every moment, and as I feel his hips jerk and twitch against me as he sinks into me again, I know he's getting close to the edge.

"I'm not—" Alessio kisses me again, thrusting once more before shuddering and going still. "I'm not going to last much longer—*Christ*, you're so fucking tight—" He grinds his hips against me, groaning, and his hand slips between us, his fingers finding my swollen clit. "Can you come for me one more time, *dolce*?" he murmurs, and I nod, feeling that tight pressure deep in my belly that tells me I'm close again, too.

His fingers stroke expertly over my clit as he thrusts shallowly, his brow creased with concentration as if it's taking everything in him not to come. Once more, his cock fills me entirely as he thrusts the rest of the way. I throw back my head, a keening moan filling the air as I clench around him, and I hear Alessio curse, his hips jerking against mine before he tears himself free.

“Alessio, I—” I gasp, clenching on nothing as my hips arch up, frustrated at the sudden loss as I see him grab his cock frantically, his hand jerking along the slick length. He lets out a near-pained groan as I see the tip flare, and then his hand clenches the blankets next to me as thick, hot cum splashes over my belly, Alessio’s moans of pleasure filling the air between us as he comes.

I stare at him, confused. “What—”

“You’re not on any kind of birth control,” he murmurs shakily, his hand still stuttering along his cock as he squeezes out the last drops of cum, the sticky fluid splashed over my skin. I feel another throb of pleasure, seeing it painted over me like that—it makes me feel as if he’s marked me as his, like I belong to him. “And we didn’t use a condom.”

His hand drops away from his cock, and he gets up, a little shaky as he walks to the bathroom. I lay there, stunned, unsure how I feel about it. I’d expected him to come inside of me. I know that the tears pricking at the corners of my eyes are just a reaction to so much happening all at once—to all the sensation and pleasure and everything else I’ve felt tonight—but I can’t help but feel a little disappointed. *Doesn’t he want to get me pregnant? Isn’t that what husbands always want? Is it me?*

I don’t want to ask and ruin the mood. Especially not when Alessio comes out of the bathroom a moment later, a warm, damp washcloth in his hand. Gently, he cleans up the mess on my stomach, stroking the washcloth between my thighs and over my sensitive folds. I let out a soft sigh of pleasure at the feeling of the warmth on my tender flesh, and when he tosses the cloth into the laundry and slips back into bed with me, I immediately turn towards him.

“Come here, *bellissima*,” he murmurs, tugging the covers of the bed down and pulling me against his chest. “Are you alright?”

I nod, blinking back the tears. I don’t want him to see them—I don’t want him to think I’m sad. I’m not—I feel a tangle of emotions, all of it feeling new and uncertain and a little overwhelming, but none of it is sadness.

I have the urge to tell him I love him, but I bite it back. I want him to say it first—and I want to be sure of it, when I do. “That was amazing,” I whisper instead, burrowing against him as his hand lightly strokes my upper back. “I want to do it again.”

Alessio chuckles. “We will,” he promises. “But right now, you need to sleep, sweetheart.” He rolls over a little, reaching for a glass of water on the bedside table. “Here. Drink this, and then sleep.”

I want to argue—to tell him I’m not tired, to draw out the evening a little longer. But I quickly realize that’s not true. I’m *exhausted*, the events of the day and everything that happened tonight rushing in like a tidal wave, and it’s hard to believe that my visit to the college was this morning. It feels like so much has happened since then.

My eyes are already closing when Alessio takes the glass of water out of my hand. And before I know it, nestled in the circle of his arms, I’m fast asleep.

Gianna



I wake up feeling happier than I knew was possible. Alessio is still asleep next to me, the morning sunshine slivered over our bed through the drawn curtains, and just that thought makes me smile. *Our bed.*

At some point in the night, I rolled onto my side, and Alessio followed me. I can feel him spooned against me, still naked, and I realize he's hard. I can feel him pressed against my lower back, hot and rigid, his lips brushing against my shoulder, each even breath ruffling my hair. When I squirm back a little against him, unable to help myself, he groans in his sleep, a low sound that makes me flush warm with desire.

Slowly, I turn in his arms to face him, reaching up to brush his hair away from his cheek, stretching out. I can feel the soreness in my muscles and between my legs, but I want him again, and the desire wins out over how tender I feel right now.

He stirs awake when I kiss him, one palm pressed against his face, and I feel him smile against my lips. "Good morning, sweetheart," he murmurs sleepily, his hand resting on my waist, and I move closer, feeling his stiff cock press against my stomach.

"It is now." I kiss him again, my heart thudding nervously in my chest as I slip my hand between us. I haven't touched him like this before, and I gasp a little when my hand brushes against his cock, my fingers wrapping around him. He feels so hard against my palm, hot and straining, and I feel a little of his arousal drip onto my fingers as I stroke my fingers along

the length of it, my thumb teasing just beneath the tip the way he did when he gave me the ‘lesson.’

Alessio groans, his forehead brushing against mine as he kisses me once more. “You’re not too sore?” he asks softly, his hand stroking down my hip, over my thigh. “We don’t have to do this again so soon. Just because I’m hard—”

“I want to make you feel good.” I brush my fingers over the tip of his cock and feel him throb in my hand, an answering pulse fluttering between my legs. “And I want to feel you inside of me again.”

My cheeks flush hot as I whisper it, but Alessio moans, rolling me onto my back in one swift motion, my hand trapped between us as I stroke him. His hand slips between my thighs, and he makes a low, lustful sound deep in his throat when his fingers dip between my folds, and he feels how wet I am already.

“My dirty little girl,” he murmurs, kissing me again. “My perfect wife.”

He reaches for his cock, my hand falling away as he nudges himself between my thighs. It’s easier for him to slip inside this time, the soreness quickly giving way to pleasure as he kisses me, sliding deeper as his hips press against mine. “Good girl,” he whispers against my lips, smiling at the shudder of pleasure that ripples through me. “You take my cock so well. So perfect. So wet and tight.”

The murmured words are as good as the feeling of him inside of me. Every whispered praise sends a flare of arousal through me, making me gasp and arch against him, whimpering softly as he moves, each slow thrust of his cock punctuating what he’s saying to me. *Good girl. My sweet, perfect girl.*

I don’t even realize I’m about to come until the pleasure bursts through me, my nails sinking into his shoulders as I gasp and cry out, tightening around him in a way that makes Alessio gasp and jerk free of me. His hand closes around his cock, his teeth clenched as he spills over my stomach again, a repeat of last night. I’m still shaking with pleasure as his cum splashes

over my skin, and the tears spring to my eyes again, frustration at the loss of him inside of me welling up too fast to control.

“Why won’t you come inside of me?” I whisper before I can stop myself, tears rapidly filling my eyes.

Alessio lets go of his cock like he’s been burned, and he looks at me, startled. I see the last drops of his cum drip onto the sheets, his cock still twitching, but he’s entirely focused on me at the moment, his brow creased with concern.

“It’s not you, *bellissima*,” he murmurs, reaching for me as he stretches out in bed next to me again. “Or at least—it’s only because I want to wait until you’re a little older for children. Eighteen is too young.” He reaches out, touching my lower lip gently. “I want to come inside of you. *God*, I want it. But not until you’re on birth control.” He leans forward, kissing me softly. “We’ll get you a doctor’s appointment this week. And then—”

His hand slides down my thigh, his fingers dipping between my legs to stroke my swollen, tender flesh. It’s almost more soothing than arousing, but I can still feel the building ache of pleasure, his touch making me want him all over again. “As soon as it’s safe, I’ll come in you over and over,” he promises. “I’ll fill you up with it until it’s dripping out of you, if that’s what you want, *dolce*.”

He kisses me again, soft and slow, his fingers slipping inside of me and curling as I gasp. “And one day, when we’re both ready, I’ll fill you up with my cum for a different reason. I’ll fuck you and come in you, and then I’ll finger you just like this, making sure you keep every drop inside of you. Would you like that, *tesoro*?” He murmurs it against my lips, his thumb finding my tender clit as I nod, gasping against his mouth.

“And then, as soon as I’m hard again, I’ll fuck my cum into you. You’ll always be full of it, every day, until it takes root. Even then, I’ll keep filling you up. I’ll never get tired of giving you my cum. You deserve all of it. My good girl—”

The orgasm crashes over me, almost like flipping a switch, and I moan against his mouth, turning into his chest as his

fingers thrust inside of me, his thumb rolling over my clit. The pleasure crashes over me again and again, and I thrust against his hand, feeling his softened cock trapped against my belly as he kisses me, swallowing up my moans as I come on his fingers.

After a long moment, I come back to reality. Alessio is looking down at me, propped against the pillows, one hand still stroking my thigh. “This is good for you?” he asks softly, and I laugh, my eyes widening as I turn to face him.

“What do you mean?” My voice is still breathless, a little hoarse from the sounds I’ve been making. “Can’t you tell?”

“I just—” Alessio frowns, running a hand through his hair. “I don’t want you to only be doing this to please me, Gianna. I worried about that. About taking advantage of your natural submissiveness, how innocent you are—”

“I’m less innocent now.” A jolt of fear twists through me, and I push myself up to sit, too, biting my lip as I look at him nervously. “Have you changed your mind?”

Alessio laughs sharply, a short bark of a sound. “God no,” he murmurs. “But this—it’s what I’ve fantasized about for a long time, Gianna. Having a woman who wants to be mine like this twenty-four/seven, the kind of dynamic where you’re always my submissive, obeying my every command, for your own pleasure as well as mine. It’s a hard thing to find, someone who enjoys authority as much as you do, who likes having their life orchestrated by someone else.” He hesitates. “That’s not to say it always has to be that way. All you have to do, if you want a break from it, is say the word. You’re not trapped in this, but I—”

For once, I’m the one comforting him. I lean up, taking his face in my hands, and kiss him lightly. “I don’t fully understand all of this yet,” I admit, whispering softly as I look up at him, my fingers stroking the stubble on his cheek. “But I want to learn. I want you to protect me and take care of me, to tell me what to do. I *want* to obey you, and I want you to punish me when I don’t. I want you to tell me when you want pleasure, any time, anywhere, and I’ll do it.” I swallow hard,

looking up at him eagerly, and I can see the shine of desire in his eyes. “I like the idea of you controlling my pleasure. I like the idea of you telling me when and where I can have mine. I like—I like all of this, Alessio, and if there’s something that I *don’t* like, I’ll tell you that too. But I want this. I really do.”

I bite my lip, looking at him, and he lets out a slow breath.

“This feels too good to be true,” he murmurs. “But if this is what you want, and you promise that you’ll tell me if it changes—”

“I will.” It’s an easy promise to make. The idea of ceding so much control to him feels like a relief, like a weight lifted off of me. I trust Alessio, and I want him—and I feel as if I’m falling in love with him. As if that crush from years ago has taken root since he came back, turning into something deeper. Something so much more profound.

He kisses me again, and when he pulls back, I look at him with a mischievous smile. “Can we plan a honeymoon now?” I ask, shifting so that I’m leaning against his chest. “Now that we’re going to be *really* married?”

Alessio laughs, kissing the top of my head lightly. “If you’re a good girl,” he promises, and a shiver of pleasure goes through me.

Every time he says *good girl*, it feels better than the last.

—

We make it downstairs for breakfast eventually, and the minute Alessio sits down, I slide into his lap. “Should I feed you, if I’m your submissive?” I ask him teasingly, reaching for a piece of toast and tearing off a corner, and Alessio laughs.

“No, *dolce*, it’s the other way around.” He cuts a scone in half, swiping a bit of jam on it, and holds a piece to my lips. “You’re going to have to eat at every meal,” he murmurs, his fingers brushing over my lower lip, sending a warm flush through me. “You’re going to need all the energy you have for the things I’m going to do to you.” I can hear the desire in his voice, as warm and soft as his touch is making me feel, and it makes my imagination run wild.

I'd never imagined that something like eating breakfast could be so sensual.

I squirm a little in his lap, licking jam off my lower lip, the tip of my tongue brushing his finger. "What sort of things are those?" I whisper, and Alessio smiles, cutting off a bit of sausage and feeding it to me. Something about the feeling of his fingers slipping between my lips, brushing against my tongue as he slides the food between them, has me almost trembling in his lap. Is it strange to be turned on by something like this? I have no idea—but I trust Alessio. I trust him more than anyone else that I know now—and there's a sweet, blissful pleasure in that, in being able to trust that anything he does to me, with me, anything he makes me feel, is something I can enjoy without fear.

The flavor bursts over my tongue, filling my mouth as he traces the shape of my mouth, and I feel his cock swelling underneath me, his breath warm on my cheek as he lightly brushes his lips over my ear.

"You're just going to have to find out. We're going to have more lessons, Gianna—and this time, I'll teach you what it is that *I* want." He lets me feed him a bite, too; the two of us nestled together on the chair, and I notice that no one comes into the dining room. It makes me wonder if he told the staff to let us alone on purpose, and that suspicion is only confirmed when I feel him start to harden underneath me.

"I might ask you to kneel under the table and suck my cock while I eat," he murmurs, one hand over my legs as he feeds me the scone bit by bit, holding me down against his hardening cock. "You might have my cum for breakfast before you eat anything else, and then sit there, wet and needy, until you've cleaned your plate. Then, if you're a good girl, I might do this."

I let out a soft gasp as he stands up suddenly, pushing the plates down the table as he lifts me onto the edge of it. I'd put on another of my filmy maxi dresses before coming down for breakfast, and he pushes the skirt up to my hips, spreading my thighs as his fingers hook expertly under the edge of my panties and pulls them to one side.

“If you’re my good girl, I’ll make you come just like this.” He sinks back down in the chair, his elbows holding my legs apart as he lowers his face between my thighs, his tongue sliding up between my folds in a hot, wet line that makes me cover my mouth with one hand as I grip the table with my other. “Keep quiet,” he murmurs, his breath warm against my clit. “Or the staff will hear you. How would you feel about that, my sweet girl? Having all the household staff knowing you’re getting eaten out on the breakfast table?”

The gush of arousal between my thighs is all the answer he needs. I hear his low, growling chuckle as he presses his mouth to my pussy again, his tongue circling and fluttering over my clit as he sucks and licks at the swollen flesh. It’s not the slow build of last night—this is faster, more urgent, pushing me to an orgasm that he knows I’ll struggle to keep silent through, one hand gripping my hip as he devours me.

Anyone could walk in, I think frantically. It’s the only thing keeping me from coming, and it’s also simultaneously the thing shoving me headlong to the edge. The thought of one of the staff walking in and seeing me perched on the edge of the table with my husband’s head between my thighs sends jolts of searing pleasure through me with every movement of Alessio’s mouth. His hands tighten on my legs, the suction of his lips increasing until the pleasure is almost unbearable, and then I feel myself tip over, my thighs tensing and my knuckles going white where I’m gripping the table as the orgasm crashes over me.

Dimly, I hear a plate hit the floor where it must have been jolted off, but I don’t care. My entire body is flushed hot, my face burning with humiliation, because I know what I must look like, writhing and bucking against Alessio’s mouth as I come shamelessly in the middle of our dining room, my hand tightening in my husband’s hair.

My cheeks burn even hotter when he pulls back, and I see his lips and chin glistening, his freshly shaved jaw wet with my arousal. When he stands up, I can see how hard he is, and I spread my legs wider for him without thinking, aching to have him inside of me again.

Alessio chuckles. “You are a good girl,” he murmurs. “So quick to let me fuck you, just because you can see that I’m hard. But you’re too sore for a third round so soon. I don’t want to hurt you, sweetheart. So we’re going to do something else instead.”

He moves the dishes on the table as I watch him curiously, his other hand undoing his belt and zipper, drawing his thick, throbbing cock out. I lick my lips, wondering if he’s going to let me put my mouth on him finally, but instead, he steps between my thighs, gently pressing me backward.

“Lean back on your elbows, *dolce*. Very good,” he adds, when I obey immediately, my forearms braced on the table. It pushes my chest up and out, my back arched enough that he has a perfect view of my breasts in the filmy material of my dress, and Alessio reaches up, tugging the straps down until the dress slips, pooling at my waist suddenly. I gasp as I’m suddenly bared from the waist up, my nipples instantly stiffening, and Alessio groans, his gaze hungrily taking in the sight in front of him as his hand moves over his stiff cock.

Anyone could walk in, I think all over again, my skin flushing with delicious, arousing embarrassment as Alessio nudges his cock between my thighs, rubbing it between the folds of my pussy.

“I’ll be gentle,” he murmurs. “You’re so wet for me, sweet girl. I’m going to get my cock all nice and slick, just like this —” he groans as he rubs his shaft through the dripping mess between my thighs, nudging the tip up until it bumps against my clit. I gasp, sinking my teeth into my lower lip to keep from moaning so loudly that someone might hear, and Alessio smirks.

“You’ll have to be quick, sweetheart, if you want to come like this,” he murmurs, nudging his cockhead against my clit again as he rubs himself back and forth against my pussy. “I need to come after tasting you, and I want to fuck those pretty breasts before I do.”

I stare at him, shocked. It’s not that I *don’t* want him to do that, but it had never occurred to me. The thought of it is so lewd,

so filthy, and it sends another jolt of pleasure through me at the same moment that he rubs the tip of his cock against my tender clit again. My head drops back as I start to shudder, another climax spreading through me as I fight not to moan aloud. It's a smaller one, but my hips buck upwards, rubbing against his cock, and the sound Alessio makes as he pushes the swollen tip against my clit sends another wave of pleasure through me.

He steps closer, his hand rubbing his slick shaft as he angles it up against my chest, his hands reaching up to cup my breasts. I watch his face, fascinated, as it goes taut with pleasure, his hips jerking as he angles me so he can thrust upwards, my skin slick with my own arousal that he uses to lube the tight channel he's created between my breasts.

"*Alessio*—" I breathe his name, moaning as I feel him start to thrust, fucking me with quick, short strokes. He gasps with each one, his eyes dark with lust, his fingers rolling and pinching my nipples as he holds me tightly around his cock.

"You can touch yourself if you want, *tesoro*," he murmurs. "But it won't take long for me to come."

That turns me on, too—knowing that I arouse him so much, that he wants me so badly that it's hard for him to control himself once he gives in to his own pleasure. My hand slips between my thighs without a thought, playing with my swollen, sensitive clit as Alessio fucks my breasts, his pre-cum adding to the slick wetness over my skin.

"I'm going to come all over your pretty breasts," he growls, his cock thrusting faster now, the tip brushing against the hollow of my throat with each jerk of his hips. "I'm going to cover you in my cum, *bellissima*. I'm going to—"

I almost wish someone would walk in right now, that someone would see Alessio using me like this, so overcome by his own pleasure that he's rutting on my chest like a beast, primal and desperate for his own climax. He thrusts against my skin, the heat of it making me flush even more, and my fingers roll and pinch my clit, wanting desperately to come one more time. If I don't, I know I'll have to wait until the next time we play.

It's the sound he makes when he comes and the heat of his cum spurting over my breasts and throat, the feeling of him fucking them as he comes all over me with short, ragged thrusts punctuated by hoarse moans, that sends me over the edge. Nothing arouses me as much as Alessio's desire, as much as his pleasure. I feel my clit throb under my fingertips as another small orgasm pulses through me, my lip bitten almost bloody to keep from screaming out my own pleasure in the middle of our dining room.

Alessio pulls back, breathless, his cock still half-hard between his thighs as he looks down at me. "*Christ*," he swears, his gaze sweeping hungrily over my bare, cum-splashed breasts, my flushed skin, my still-dripping and swollen pussy exposed to his gaze where my skirt is pushed up around my hips. "You look like a fucking piece of art. I want to keep you like that on the lounge in my office, bare and spread out and covered in my cum, ready for me to use whenever I get hard again."

Just thinking about that makes me moan, my pussy clenching at the thought, and Alessio's eyes widen as he takes in my reaction.

"Fuck," he whispers. "God, you're fucking perfect."

He reaches for a cloth napkin, gently cleaning off my chest as he tips my chin up to kiss him again, slipping himself back into his trousers when he's finished. Tenderly, he slides my dress back up, fixing it so that I'm covered, and then he kisses me once more, so much sweetness in the kiss that it makes my heart ache.

"Go upstairs and get cleaned up, sweetheart," he murmurs against my lips. "I'm going to see about having a doctor come and give you a prescription for birth control. In the meantime —" He pulls back, tapping a finger gently against my lower lip as he smiles down at me. "There are books in our bedroom that I want you to read—books that will teach you all about the kind of dynamic I want with you. I'm going to quiz you on them tomorrow, so read as much as you can. If you're a good girl and learn all your lessons well, there will be a reward in it for you."

His smile promises exactly the kind of reward I hoped for. And as much as I would have loved for him to teach me every single thing about what he wants from me himself, he picked the second thing I would have liked the most—reading about it. It makes me feel loved, like he knows me well enough to know I'd rather read books than scroll through articles or watch porn with the kind of acts in them that he wants me to do. The idea of him quizzing me on what I learn and punishing or rewarding me for my performance turns me on all over again.

I think Alessio sees it, because he smirks as he tugs my skirt down, arranging my clothing so that I once again look decent if someone were to walk in, albeit still sitting on the breakfast table. “Careful,” he murmurs, giving me one more kiss. “I might start to get jealous of the idea of your professors at Northwestern seeing you like this, if you get so turned on at the idea of being tested on something.”

With that, he lingers for one more moment, before shaking himself a little and stepping away as if it's hard for him to leave me. “I'll see you at dinner,” he says gently as I slide down from the table, my legs still feeling a little shaky, and then he turns to go, walking out of the dining room towards his office.

I watch him leave, still hardly able to believe that all of this is real. That Alessio is mine now—*really* mine.

The way I wanted him—and so much more.

Alessio



The first thing I do in the morning, after breakfast, is arrange Gianna's doctor's appointment. It only takes a few minutes for me to find the leather-backed book that has a number of contacts in it—including the doctor who was willing to make house calls for Giacomo.

It will be less embarrassing for her if she can have the exam here, I reason as I call. The number is for Dr. Vincenzo's private line, and she answers almost immediately.

"This is Alessio Mancini—I got this number from Giacomo Mancini's business records. My wife needs an appointment, and I'd like to arrange for you to come to the house, if that's still something you're willing to do?"

There's a pause. "Of course," she says finally. "I'm sorry to hear what happened. If Gianna needs anything at all—I've seen her before. I'm happy to do whatever makes her comfortable."

That feels like an instant relief—someone who knows Gianna, who Gianna will feel safe with. I'm also pleased that Dr. Vincenzo is a woman—I'd never expected to be jealous of something as clinical as a routine exam, but the idea of a male doctor examining Gianna, touching her, discussing her sex life with her—all of it sends a burn of hot jealousy through me that feels a little disconcerting.

I also wouldn't have ever thought I'd be turned on by making a doctor's appointment, but as I hang up the phone, my cock is half-hard, imagining what I'll be able to do with Gianna once

she's on birth control. Just the thought of being able to come inside of her makes it difficult to focus on anything else. I saw the disappointment on Gianna's face when I refused to come inside of her—and it was one of the hardest things I've ever done, to leave that wet, welcoming heat and spill all over her skin instead—but part of this is protecting her, still. She wants me to cherish her, to care for her, and I can do that by making certain that as fast as things have moved in the last day, some things don't move too fast before we're both ready for them.

It's selfish, too, in a way. I want her to myself for a while longer, now that it seems that I'm going to have her. I want her undivided attention for a bit, not taken up by loving and caring for a child. As much as I do want a family with her—the culmination of the relationship we've now decided to have—and as much as I know an heir is a necessity for the life we live, I want time with her first.

My head is reeling from everything that's happened in the last twenty-four hours. It feels as if I've been swept up in something that I don't entirely have control of, and I'm caught between guilt and desire and all of the other feelings that Gianna rouses in me.

There's no doubt that I'm falling in love with her—that I've *been* falling in love with her, since before we were pushed into the marriage. It's hard to even say we were *pushed* any longer—that's how it began, but it's no longer that. Not for either of us.

It all feels too good to be true—that I could have not only what I've wanted for so long, but with *her*. I'm trying to do all that I can to ensure that I can be absolutely certain that this is what she wants, that she understands what it is that she's offering me and that she has ample chances to back out if she so desires. And so far, nothing has shaken her determination that this is also what she wants.

And if she changes her mind after reading the books? What then? I've taken her virginity, there's no going back now on that. I have to force myself not to think about it too hard, to wait and see what happens when she has a better understanding—to take this one day at a time. To not think

about how it will feel to lose this with her before it's even really begun.

Gianna appears in my office the next afternoon at four p.m. on the dot, as promptly as I instructed her last night. Her hair is damp at the edges, telling me that she took a shower after her doctor's appointment and before coming to meet me, and her cheeks flush the instant she sees me. When the door shuts behind her, she walks quickly to the edge of the velvet-tufted lounge sofa by the windows and bookshelf, and sinks to her knees on the rug without a word.

I raise my eyebrows, impressed. "You did read all of what I left for you, didn't you?" It's not even really a question—the way she's kneeling, her hands folded in her lap, her eyes down, tell me that she read, if not everything, then a decent bit of the material I left in the bedroom for her.

Gianna nods demurely. "Yes, sir," she whispers, and with those two words, my cock is half-hard in an instant, jerking upwards against my fly as it swells and throbs eagerly.

"And you were a good girl?" I walk towards her, stopping a foot away from where she's kneeling. "You didn't touch yourself while you were reading all of that? I know you must have been so wet, sweetheart, reading all those filthy things. You didn't touch your pussy?"

"No, sir," she whispers, her voice trembling a little, and I don't miss the way her thighs squeeze together. My cock stiffens even more, rock hard and aching, and I force myself to focus.

"I want to ask you about the appointment first, before we get into your quizzes, *tesoro*," I tell her gently. "So sit on the sofa, and I'll ask you what I want to know, alright?"

Gianna's cheeks pinken even more, and I see the way she shifts restlessly, but she nods, picking herself up off of the rug and sitting on the edge of the lounge sofa. I know she must be beyond aroused—I didn't touch her last night, wanting to give her a break. She'd insisted that she didn't need one, that she wanted me, and I told her sternly that her arguing had earned

her most of a day without an orgasm. She would have to be very good when she came to my office if she wanted to come.

Of course, the flip side of that is that I've been hard on and off all day, thinking about what I'm going to do if she *is* good—and what I'll do if she isn't.

“The doctor said you were healthy? That everything is alright?” I have the notes from the appointment; they emailed me after the visit, but I want to hear Gianna tell me. I can see that she finds it embarrassing—her cheeks are bright red as she nods, and that only makes it that much better, asking her to explain.

“I'm fine,” she says, her voice soft. “She said nothing was—abnormal. She'll get my birth control prescription to me in the next two weeks, she said.” Gianna pouts lightly, looking up at me. “I don't know why that's necessary, Alessio. I *want* to have a baby with you. That's what I'm supposed to do! You're supposed to want me to get pregnant. And if you're not sure about me—about us—”

“Shh.” I step forward, taking her chin in my hand gently and pressing a finger to her lips. “We've already discussed this, *tesoro*. I told you why. You can argue with me, but that will only lead to more punishment when it comes to things like this. For instance—” I rub my thumb over her lower lip, enjoying the way she shivers at the touch. “Since you've decided to argue with me on this, you won't be allowed to get off after your quizzes. Instead, I'm going to teach you how I like my cock sucked when we're done. And if you're very good and do just as I say, then I'll let you come.”

Gianna bites her lip. “But—”

“*Gianna*.” I give her a warning look. “If you keep this up, you won't get to come at all today. Not even if you do a good job with my cock. Do you understand?”

She nods, her eyes downcast, and I wait for a brief moment. I want to give her a chance to back out if this is all too much—if she's not enjoying it. But I can see the way she's fidgeting in her seat, and I know all of this is turning her on.

“Now.” I take a step back. “You can stay seated while I quiz you, *tesoro*. You’ll be down on your knees long enough while I teach you to make me come with your mouth. Did you see the parts of the lessons that I highlighted for you? The notes I left?”

Gianna nods, looking at me with a prim, studious expression that sends a fresh jolt of desire through me, her hands folded neatly in her lap. She came in to see me wearing exactly what I’d hoped she would, knowing her as well as I do—a pleated black skirt that’s just a bit short, a pink button-down chiffon shirt, and knee-high socks with heels. I’m desperately hoping that she doesn’t have panties on underneath the skirt, so that I have an excuse to punish her for that, too.

“Yes, sir,” she whispers, and I give her an approving smile.

“What should you do in the mornings, Gianna?”

“If I wake up first and you’re hard, I should wake you up with my mouth. Gently, so you don’t come too soon, and you can tell me if you want me to finish you like that, or some other way.”

“Very good. And if I wake up first?”

“Then, once I am awake, I should ask you if you need to come before you begin your day, and how.” Her voice is soft and sweet, proudly reciting every answer. I have no doubt if I went upstairs, I’d find notecards in a pile by the bed with Gianna’s pretty handwriting scrawled across them.

“*Very* good, sweetheart. And what do you do if there’s a day when you feel like you don’t want to do this? If you need a break?”

“We’ll come up with a word or phrase, and I’ll tell you. It’ll mean that I need a little vacation, and I won’t be punished for not doing the things we normally do.” She bites her lip. “Except I’m still not allowed to make myself come.”

“That’s right.” I nod firmly. “That’s the one rule that doesn’t change, Gianna. Your pussy and your orgasms are mine. So long as we are together, and in this dynamic, you may not touch yourself or come without permission, no matter what.”

“I understand, sir.” There’s a slight quiver in her voice, and I can tell it’s from desire, not disappointment. Of all the things she’s learned about so far, my control of her orgasms seems to be the one that turns her on the most.

“And if you can’t wait to come? What do you do, *tesoro*?”

“I come and find you, and ask you if I may. If I’ve been good, then you might give me instructions on how I can come, or ask me to do it while you watch. If I’ve been bad, then you might tell me no.”

“And if you’ve been *very* good, or *very* bad?”

Gianna bites her lip. “If I’ve been very good, then you might take the time out of your day to make me come with your fingers or tongue or cock. You might even ask which I want. If I’ve been very bad, then you might punish me for asking by making you come without any relief for myself, or making me watch you come without my own orgasm, or preventing me from coming for more time.” She licks her lips nervously, and I take a slow breath. Just hearing her say the word *cock* has me leaking pre-cum, throbbing against my fly. It’s difficult to keep control of her—that’s my task, as much as hers is submission. Holding back, in order to stay in line with the dynamic we’ve chosen.

“You’re doing so well. One more question, sweetheart, and then we’ll move on for now. Does a punishment always mean you’ve been bad?”

She shakes her head. “Sometimes you just need to remind me that you can. And sometimes it’s for your pleasure.”

“Very good.” I motion to the rug. “Down on your knees, sweetheart, and keep your hands in your lap for now. I’m going to teach you how I want you to use your mouth.”

The anticipation in Gianna’s eyes is almost too much. She sinks onto her knees obediently, looking up at me wide-eyed as I step closer, directly in front of her. “Undo my belt, *dolce*, and take down my zipper. Slowly.”

“Yes, sir,” she whispers. Her fingers nimbly undo my belt, sliding the leather free, and I have a momentary vision of

bending her over the chaise, taking my belt to her ass for some infraction. *God, I want to belt her ass red and then fuck her there*, I think, and my cock throbs against her fingers, making me grit my teeth against the wave of lust. We have plenty of time for things like that—first, Gianna needs to learn the basics. I want to take it all slow with her—I never want to frighten her or push her too far, no matter my own desires.

When she draws down my zipper, my cock nearly springs out, bulging out of the gap in my boxer briefs. Gianna wets her lower lip with her tongue, waiting expectantly with her hands against my thighs, and I groan.

“You’re so perfect, sweetheart,” I murmur. “You can take my cock out, *tesoro*. Just fingers for now. Stroke me a little, sweet girl. Get used to having me in your hand.”

Just the touch of her fingers is almost enough to undo me. She slides me free, her hand cool and soft against the heated throb of my straining cock. Her fingers slide up the shaft, teasing the head almost exactly the way I showed her that night when I jerked off for her in the library. She’s frowning in concentration, the little line that forms between her brows so adorable that I want to kiss it, and for a moment, I consider simply laying her back on the sofa, raising that too-short skirt, and sliding myself into her wet heat.

This is as much about your control as her obedience, I remind myself, at the same moment that her hand wraps around me, and I moan.

“Gently,” I remind her. “Long, slow strokes. Rub your thumb over the tip—oh, *fuck*, Gianna, just like that.” The pressure of her thumb is perfect, sliding over the sensitive, swollen tip and against the soft flesh beneath, and she bites her lip, smiling at the praise.

“Can I use my mouth now?” she asks softly, almost pleading, and for a moment, I think I’m going to lose control, and come before she ever touches me with her lips.

“Yes, sweetheart, you may.” I slide my hand through her hair, gently guiding her mouth to my cockhead. “Slowly, at first.

Careful of your teeth, *dolce*. Just trace it with your tongue a little—*fuck*—”

It’s been longer than I’ve ever gone in my adult life since I’ve had a mouth on my cock last. Nothing could have ever topped this moment—Gianna on her knees in my office, her pretty, innocent face upturned, hopeful for my praise as she laves my cock with her tongue for the first time. It’s warm and soft and wet, circling my tip with small fluttering licks, the tip of it tracing the veins and brushing over that soft spot. She tilts her head, wrapping her hand around the base as she licks up the sides of my cock like a fucking ice cream cone. While in normal circumstances, it wouldn’t be anything close to enough stimulation to make me come, in this particular set of circumstances, I’m already on the edge.

She makes a soft, humming moan as more pre-cum pearls at the tip, and she licks it up. “You taste good,” she whispers. “I want more.”

“*Christ.*” My hand tightens in her hair. “You’re going to get it all at once if you’re not careful, sweetheart.”

“Does that mean I’m doing well?” She smiles up at me, dragging her tongue up my cock again, and I swear there’s a hint of mischief in her eyes.

“It’s perfect,” I assure her. “Now wrap your lips around the tip, sweetheart. Just suck a little.”

My thighs tremble when she slides her lips down around my cockhead, fitting it between her lips as she opens her mouth wide to accommodate my size, her tongue flitting around the edge and just beneath. When she tightens her lips in an attempt to suck, I very nearly come again.

I pull free of her mouth, groaning, and Gianna bites her lip. “Did I do something wrong?” she asks worriedly, and I shake my head.

“No, *tesoro*. I—” I swallow hard, looking down at my twitching cock, a half-inch from her lips. I want to bury myself in her throat and come hard, but I don’t want to hurt or frighten her. *Slowly*, I remind myself. “I’ve fantasized about

exactly this for a long time. Now that it's happening, it's hard not to come too soon. If anything, you're doing *too* well," I tell her teasingly, rubbing my thumb over her reddened lower lip.

"What do I do when you come?" she asks softly, and I bite back another groan. "Do you want to come in my mouth, like the books—"

"Most of the time, yes." I nudge my cock against her mouth again, enjoying rubbing my cockhead against her lips, streaking the puffy, reddened flesh with my arousal. "Sometimes I might want to come on your breasts, like this morning, or your face. But today, I would like it if you would be my very good girl, and swallow my cum."

Gianna nods eagerly, reaching for my cock. "Yes, please," she whispers, pressing her lips to my cockhead again in a soft kiss before sliding down, her tongue circling my tip, and I know I'm not going to last long.

She's not perfect. Her teeth catch me a few times, slowing my race to the finish, and her suction is uneven, but all that comes with practice—practice that I will certainly enjoy giving her. She takes me halfway, her hand attempting to match her pace with her mouth as she strokes the lower part of my shaft, and I feel that tightness in my balls that tells me I'm not going to make it much longer.

"I'm going to come in your mouth, *dolce*," I murmur, my hips thrusting a little as she takes me to the back of her mouth, her tongue rubbing along the underside of my cock. "Make me come, sweetheart, and swallow it all like a good girl. And then you can have your choice of how you come for me."

Gianna moans around my cock, and the sound tips me over the edge. My hand tightens in her hair, holding her in place as I lightly thrust my cock over her tongue, and as I harden and swell in her mouth, the sensation of that first rush of cum nearly makes my knees buckle.

It's so fucking good. I can hardly believe my cock is in her mouth, that Gianna is swallowing me down, and as she chokes a little, I nearly draw back, but she shakes her head. Her eyes are wide and a little teary with effort, her lips swollen, but she

swallows reflexively, taking every drop of cum that I shoot down her throat as I moan above her, the pleasure almost unbearable in its intensity.

One small drop slides out of her lips as I withdraw, dizzy with pleasure, and she licks it up instantly, looking at me expectantly. It's enough to make my cock throb all over again, seeing it.

"Was that good?" she whispers, and I nod, trying to find my voice.

"You were a *very* good girl, Gianna. Now, I think you're going to get your choice of how to come, but first, you have to answer a question."

She nods, licking her lips as if she wants to get every last taste of me that lingers. "What is it, sir?" she asks softly.

"Are you wearing panties under that skirt, sweetheart?"

The way her cheeks flush is answer enough. "Pick up your skirt, Gianna," I tell her, and her face burns red, but she obeys. She lifts the edge of her skirt up, and my cock throbs with fresh desire as I see nothing but her bare pussy, the soft skin glistening with her arousal. If I touched the rug beneath her, I know it would be damp.

"Only bad girls don't wear panties, Gianna," I tell her reprovingly. "First, your lack of a bra, and now you come in here without your panties. You've made a mess of my rug, haven't you? Touch it."

Her face is entirely red now, flushed down to her cheek, but she does as I tell her, her fingers touching the rug between her thighs. I know from the soft whimper she lets out that she's dripped all over it while she sucked me off.

"Please," she whispers, and I can see the way her thighs are trembling. "Please let me—"

"Oh, I will." It's hard to keep the devious smile off of my face as I nod to the velvet lounge. "But since you forgot your panties, you're going to get yourself off while I watch." I step to the other side of her, turning the lounge so that it's facing the desk, and I back up, leaning against my desk as I motion to

it. “Lay back, Gianna, push your skirt up, and finger yourself until you come. I want two fingers inside yourself, and your other hand on your clit. I don’t care how loud and messy it is, but you’re going to do it just like that until you come for me.”

Her lips make that now-familiar pout as she looks up at me from where she’s still kneeling. “But—I want—”

“Do you want to not get to come at all?” She shakes her head quickly, and I nod. “Then be a good girl, Gianna, before I take this away, too.”

I’ve quickly learned that even though she pushes back a little against humiliation, she also enjoys it. She gracefully pushes herself up, that flush spreading down her neck and to the top of her cleavage as she sits back on the chaise, facing me.

“Legs spread, sweetheart,” I instruct. “One foot on either side.”

She swallows hard, but she obeys. I catch another glimpse of her pink, swollen pussy as she spreads her legs, feet on either side of the chaise the way I told her to. Then she picks up the edge of her skirt, raising it up to her hips and exposing herself fully to me.

“Spread your pussy, *tesoro*,” I murmur. “Let me see how wet you are.”

When she obeys, my cock twitches again, starting to harden all over again. She’s fucking drenched, dripping, and glossy with arousal, and when she moves her hand down to her entrance, I feel myself throb in anticipation of the sounds her fingers are going to make.

“I’ll buy you some toys soon enough, so you can play with yourself for me,” I promise her. “But for now, two fingers, Gianna. Let me hear it while I watch you fuck yourself. And since you were so shameless as to soak my rug, don’t even think of covering your mouth. Both hands on your pussy, and let me hear you moan.”

She whimpers, her eyes filling with tears of embarrassment and arousal, but the moan that she lets out when she sinks two fingers into her wet pussy, the fingers of her other hand

circling her clit, is such a sound of raw pleasure that I immediately draw down my zipper, palming my hardening cock out into the open again.

“So obedient,” I praise her, wrapping my hand lazily around my cock. “I’ll sweeten it with this. You can watch me stroke myself while you play with your pussy. Do you like that?”

Gianna nods, breathless, as she starts to move her fingers. I can see her clenching around them as she thrusts them inside, the wet sound filling the room, and I can already see the dark spot on the velvet beneath her, her arousal dripping down. Her fingers circle her clit, rubbing back and forth, and she moans helplessly again as she pushes her fingers deeply inside of herself, her gaze fixed on my hard cock in my hand.

“Please fuck me,” she whimpers. “Please, I need your cock—”

I shake my head. “No, *dolce*,” I murmur. “You haven’t been good enough for my cock. Later, we’ll see, if you do this for me. Keep playing with yourself, sweetheart. I love seeing you like this. So wet and needy for me.”

She’s fucking *drenched*. I don’t know if I’ve ever seen a pussy so wet. Her hand is coated in it as she fucks herself with her fingers, and my mouth waters, wanting to lick her to her orgasm. It’s once again a lesson in my own self-control, and I stroke my cock a little more firmly, rubbing my palm over the head as I watch her throw her head back, her hips bucking up into her hands as she works them between her thighs.

“Good girl,” I murmur. “You can come for me whenever you want, *bellisima*. Make that pretty pussy come for me.”

Her fingers move faster, harder, her right hand pinching and rolling her clit as she moans helplessly. “Can I have a third finger?” she begs, asking just as I hoped she would, and my cock throbs in my hand.

“Yes,” I tell her immediately. “Fill yourself up, *bellisima*. Make yourself come.”

That third finger does it. She pushes her fingers deeper, twisting against her hands as she moans and cries out, her hand rubbing frantically over her clit. When her legs splay

wider, a flood of her arousal drenching her fingers and the velvet beneath her as she comes, I can't hold back any longer either.

I stride across the room, still stroking, stopping next to her face. "What a good girl," I murmur. "You deserve another mouthful of my cum, sweetheart, for putting on such a good show. I just couldn't help myself. Open up, beautiful girl, and hold out your tongue."

She obeys instantly, her fingers still stroking out the last ripples of her orgasm between her thighs, and when her lips part and her tongue flicks out, I rest my cockhead on it, stroking feverishly. I watch, groaning as white cum streaks over her tongue, as her throat convulses while she swallows it down, moaning as she keeps petting her clit with two fingers, and in that moment, I think I could have died happy.

I've never had anything quite like Gianna—and I'm beginning to think I've fallen in love with her.

Alessio



The next morning, before the alarm goes off, I'm slowly dragged out of sleep by the feeling of warmth surrounding my cock, the soft flutter of a tongue beneath the head, and the light chill of the air on my chest and thighs. I blink my eyes open to see the sheets tugged down and Gianna curled between my legs, her fingers playing gently along the shaft of my cock while she surrounds the head with her lips, fluttering her tongue. Her eyes dart up to meet mine, and she smiles, letting go of me for just a moment.

"This is what you wanted, right?" she asks softly, and I nod, groaning as I lean back into my pillows. *This is a dream. This can't possibly be real.* I'd told her exactly what I wanted, expecting a negotiation or for her to not want to participate in at least some of it, but everything has been what she's wanted, too. Her lips are still brushing my cockhead, and she looks at me, as comfortable there between my legs as I could possibly desire.

"It's exactly right, *tesoro*," I murmur, reaching down to stroke her hair.

"Do you need to come?" Her fingers trace the throbbing vein along the top of my cock.

"God, yes." I'm throbbing, *aching*, harder than I can remember being when I've woken up in a long time. "Just like that this morning, I think, sweetheart. Just play with me with your mouth until I come."

It's hard to believe it's real. Gianna does exactly that, stroking and licking and playing with my cock until I let go in her mouth with a deep groan, my cum painting her lips and tongue as she licks it all up and swallows the rest. I roll her over with a growl, spreading her legs and sliding down to devour her until she comes all over my face, and we end up having breakfast in bed after all of that, followed by a leisurely shower. I very nearly end up fucking her in the shower—I haven't been inside of her again since the morning after I took her virginity, careful to let her recover—but I force myself to wait. I have a long day planned for us, and I don't want to take too long enjoying each other.

“What are we doing today?” Gianna asks as we make our way downstairs. Her hair is braided in a pretty halo around her head, a few pieces loose, and for once, I'm confident that she has both bra and panties on before we go out. I checked for the latter, slipping my hand under her brightly patterned sundress to check, and then rewarding her by nudging them aside and giving her a few quick kisses to her clit before tugging them back into place and leaving her like that before heading downstairs. I'm already thinking of the things I could surprise her with today, the plans I've already made for our honeymoon that she doesn't know about yet—and all the ways I can spoil her. It's a feeling that I've never had with anyone else, this desire to lavish her with affection and surprises, and I'm enjoying it as much as I know she will.

“I thought we could do some shopping for our honeymoon,” I tell her with a smile as we get into the back of the SUV. The way her eyes widen is instantly gratifying, and she lets out a small squeak of anticipation.

“Our honeymoon? Are you already planning it?” Her hands nearly clap together, and she fidgets in her seat with excitement. “I can't wait! Where are we going?”

“That's a surprise until lunch,” I tell her firmly. “But you'll have some hints. For one, you're going to want to buy some new bikinis—and I expect you to show me every single one before we choose.”

Her excitement is palpable—and adorable. It makes the trip as much fun for me as it is for her, seeing her eagerly awaiting the day ahead of her. I can't help but think of the last time we went out together, when I took her to dinner to tell her that Fontana wanted her to be married sooner rather than later, and how different things are now. How much has changed in such a brief time.

I can tell that she's enjoying showing off for me, too. She parades every single one of the bikinis that she tries on in the first store in front of me, in every color and pattern I can think of, coming out of the dressing room and turning this way and that so I can see every angle. I have half a mind to follow her back into the dressing room and fuck her in one of them—especially after one, in particular, that's a few scraps of black fabric held together by gold chains and not much else—but I manage to keep myself from getting us both in trouble, remembering that soon enough I'll be able to fuck her in it overlooking the beach from our resort.

“Some new clothes too, I think,” I tell her when we leave, after buying her five of her favorites and mine—including the one with the gold chains. “And shoes. Is there anything else you need?”

Gianna's eyes are sparkling—I can tell she's enjoying every bit of this. “What are you offering?” she asks teasingly, holding onto my arm as she goes up onto her tiptoes, kissing me sweetly. “You're spoiling me, Alessio.”

“I've never had anyone that I wanted to spoil before.” It's true. I've paid for shopping and spa days out for girlfriends before, but I've never gone along, and I've certainly never enjoyed it the way I'm enjoying today. I love seeing her so happy, love seeing the pleasure on her face and the excitement in her eyes. As we trail through designer store after designer store, purchasing shoes and lightweight dresses and flowy pants and blouses for what Gianna has surely suspected by now is a warm-weather vacation, I find I don't get bored of seeing her show me outfit after outfit, clearly utterly thrilled by all of it.

“You should have an engagement ring one of these days,” I tell her thoughtfully, as we pass the bags off to the driver before

going to lunch. I run my thumb over her diamond and rose-gold wedding band, turning it around on her finger. “There wasn’t a lot of time to get you one. But I think—”

“There’s no rush.” Gianna turns to kiss me again, going up on her tiptoes. “We’re married, and we’re happy. I don’t need any more jewelry for that.”

“Well, one of these days, I might surprise you.” I take her hand, leading her down the sidewalk with security trailing us. “Now, I have a special lunch planned, and I don’t want to miss our reservation.”

I made plans for us at a sushi restaurant known for its omakase menu, and Gianna lets out a soft sound of pleasure when we walk into the cool, dark restaurant filled with the soothing sounds of trickling water and soft music. The hostess leads us to a booth towards the back of the restaurant, and Gianna slides in across from me, looking around with a small smile on her face.

“You really did go all out, didn’t you?” Her smile spreads as the waitress arrives with a bottle of white wine, one that I’d already asked for before we arrived. “You’re really trying to woo me, aren’t you, Alessio? You don’t have to, you know—we’re already married.”

“I never want to stop treating you this way,” I tell her firmly, pushing her glass of crisp white wine towards her. “Especially when you’re giving me so much, too.” I feel a trickle of that guilt again as I say it, that fear that I’m somehow talking her into all of this, influencing her into wanting it, as much as all the signs point to the opposite—that she really does want it. “This is—my wildest fantasy, Gianna. I’m not sure I believe that it’s real sometimes.”

She gives me a soft smile, reaching across the table to brush her fingers against the back of my hand as she takes a sip of her wine. “It’s real, Alessio. And it’s everything I wanted, too.”

The first course comes—coconut-crusted calamari in a sweet soy glaze—and it’s the perfect segue into what I wanted to tell her. “So.” I give her a mischievous smile, reaching for my own

glass of wine. “Any guesses as to where we’re going for our honeymoon?”

Gianna considers, picking up a piece of the calamari with her chopsticks. “Somewhere sunny with a beach, obviously. Spain? Or the Amalfi Coast?”

“Good guesses, but no.” I grin at her. “Although I plan to take you all of the places that I possibly can, eventually—those included. We’re going to Greece.”

Gianna’s eyes go wide, and the instant excitement that I see on her face tells me immediately that I made the right choice. “Oh, I’ve seen pictures,” she murmurs excitedly, a smile spreading across her face. “It’s so beautiful. It’s going to be so wonderful!” Her hand finds mine again, squeezing lightly. “I can’t wait. A romantic vacation just the two of us—it’s everything I’ve ever wanted.”

I watch her as she takes another sip of her wine, my heart feeling lighter than it has in some time. I’d thought for so long that this was the wrong thing to do—that marrying her, sleeping with her, even loving her would somehow cause me to lead her down a path that would make her unhappy, that she couldn’t possibly want me. That if she did, she wasn’t thinking clearly. But the past few days have shown me that I think I was so very wrong.

That the best way of protecting Gianna might have been as her husband all along.

She’s exclaiming over the next dish—a small ceramic bowl filled with tiny marinated scallops and caviar on top—when I see something shift outside the window that catches my eye. There’s a man standing across the street in a dark jacket, a beanie pulled low on his head despite the weather, and despite the fact that it could be anyone, something about it sets off an alarm in my head. I keep eating, carrying on half a conversation as I watch out of the corner of my eye as cars pass. One passes, and then another, and the man is still there—staring directly at our window.

Two more cars pass, and he’s still there, not moving a muscle. And then there’s a flurry of traffic, a light turning red as cars

completely block my view—and when they’re moving again, the man is gone.

It could be nothing. But I’ve spent years working in the mafia, working for Giacomo first and then for Luca. I’m no enforcer, no assassin, but I’m trained to spot things others might not, to have my head on a swivel, to know when danger is close. And something about what I just saw feels wrong.

I motion for the waiter, hating the confused look that I see on Gianna’s face as I hand the man my credit card. I’d planned a romantic day out for us, and the meal has barely begun—but I can’t risk it.

“Alessio?” There’s a nervous quiver in her voice as Gianna sets down her chopsticks and looks at me. “What’s wrong?”

“I saw something outside. *Someone*. It could be nothing, but I don’t want you to be in even the slightest danger.” I take my card back, sign the bill, and stand up as I reach for her arm. “Let’s go.”

There’s a brief moment where I see disappointment flash across her face, and then she nods. “Okay,” she says softly, and I can see the flicker of fear in her eyes.

I motion to the security that had faded into the background. “Get added security at the house,” I murmur to one of the men as I guide Gianna to the door. “Make sure every door, every side, every possible way in has at least two, if not three, men on it at all times. I don’t want to take any chances.”

“Of course, boss.” The man is already pulling out his phone, moving towards the door, as I walk with Gianna out to the SUV waiting at the curb.

“I’m sorry the day was interrupted.” I look worriedly at her as she sits there, her hands twisted in her lap, her face paler than I’ve seen it in days. “This isn’t how I wanted it to go—”

“It’s not your fault.” She swallows hard. “Do you think—you think it had something to do with who murdered—” Gianna’s voice quivers, and she can’t finish the sentence.

“I don’t know,” I tell her honestly. “But if there’s even a chance, I needed to get you out of there.” I pause, considering

as the car moves out into traffic, my gaze sweeping the sidewalks through the dark-tinted windows for any signs of that man, or anyone else like him. “I think we might need to move up the date of the honeymoon,” I murmur, feeling that sense of unease growing. “It might be a good idea to get you out of the country while my men are looking for who’s responsible for what happened to your father.”

“Far be it from me to argue with going on vacation sooner,” Gianna says lightly, but I can hear the tension in her voice, even as she tries to make light of it. I know she’s afraid, and I’ll do whatever I can to keep anything from happening to her—to keep her safe.

Including taking her across an ocean, if I need to.

“The house is well-guarded,” I promise her as she slides into bed next to me, wearing soft pajama pants and a camisole that I know aren’t meant to be sexy, but somehow make me want to slide my hands all over her all the same. Still, I feel sure that’s not what she needs right now, and instead, I turn to hold her, curling against her as she sinks back into the pillows. She kisses me softly, but there’s not the same heat in it that there usually is, and I gently run my hand over her back, trying to soothe her to sleep. I have my own worries and fears about all of this, but they’re nothing compared to hers—especially not when she was the one who found her father dead in his office. No matter how well-guarded I’ve managed to make the house, I have no doubt that she’ll fear that whoever was responsible might find their way past my security detail as well.

It takes me a long time to fall asleep, my mind running through scenarios, all of me tensed for an alarm to go off or my phone to buzz with a notification from security. But what wakes me up instead is Gianna, sitting bolt upright in the middle of the night, shaking and crying in huge, gulping sobs that sound as if she can barely breathe.

It only takes a second for me to wake up fully, too. I reach for her, gently running my hand over her back as I reach for her hand with my other, murmuring softly to her. “Gianna, it’s alright. You’re having a nightmare. Nothing’s wrong. I’m here—you’re safe. Nothing’s happened.” I keep repeating it over and over as she tries to breathe, her hand clenching mine in a death grip as she finally looks at me, wide-eyed.

“I had another nightmare,” she whispers brokenly. “Like—like the one I had the first night you stayed with me for a little while, but this time—” She shakes her head, tears still sliding down her cheeks. “This time, it was you I found. He broke in, and he got *you*—”

“No. I’m here.” I reach for her, pulling her into my arms and against my chest, laying back against the pillows. “I’m right here, Gianna, and I’m fine. I promise. It was just a nightmare.”

She nods, swallowing hard, and after a long moment, she turns towards me, nestling her head beneath my chin. Her breathing slows, evening out, and at first, I think she’s fallen asleep again on my chest. But then she tilts her head up, nuzzling at my jaw for a moment before her hand presses against my cheek, turning my mouth towards hers. She kisses me softly, her lips grazing over mine, and I return it—until her tongue slides against my lower lip, her body arching against mine with a soft moan, and I know she’s seeking a different kind of comfort.

“No, Gianna.” I gently pull away from the kiss, not dislodging her, but moving so that she’s lying on my chest again. “I don’t want to do this while you’re so upset. You need to rest, not—”

Gianna looks up at me, that soft, sweet pout on her face. “I want a distraction,” she says softly. “Something good to make me fall back to sleep.” Her hand slides down my bare chest, down to my boxers, her fingers nimbly slipping into the gap there before I can stop her. My cock is soft, nestled against my thigh, and she gently strokes her fingers against it.

“I don’t think I can get in the mood right now,” I tell her gently. I don’t want her to be disappointed, or think that I don’t desire her. But the nightmare has me worried, unsettled,

wanting to comfort her—not fuck her. “I’ll hold you for as long as you like. But I don’t know that I’m going to get hard, Gianna. Not when you’re so upset.”

“Can I just play with it?” Her fingers are still toying with my cock, and even though I’m not getting aroused, it still feels good—soothing, almost. I can tell she wants the same thing, something to occupy her hands and mouth, to comfort herself with—and she wants it to be me.

“Alright,” I relent. I’m well aware of what she wants to do, well aware of how it fits into our dynamic, and it doesn’t surprise me that she wants it. It surprises me even less when she moves down my body, pillowing her head on my thigh as she slips my cock free and begins to tease her tongue along the length of it, her lips brushing over the head as she gently takes it into her mouth, sucking and playing with the soft flesh.

I feel myself twitch and thicken a little in her mouth, the soft warmth impossible not to react to. She’s not trying to get me off, and I’m not trying to come, but the feeling of being just held in her mouth is a good one—something I’ve never experienced before. I reach down, stroking my hand over her hair, running my fingers through it as she adjusts so that almost all of my cock is in her mouth, resting against her tongue as she lightly sucks on it. She makes a soft, satisfied humming sound as she does, keeping my cock warm as she lays there, and the minutes tick by. I get half-hard, teased by the occasional movement of her tongue against me and the sucking motion of her lips, but it’s not going to get me off—and I don’t mind. It’s a sort of comforting pleasure I’ve never had with anyone, and the fact that *she* finds this—and me—so comforting as well makes me happy in a way that I wouldn’t have expected.

I’ve always been dominant in bed, but not the type that likes causing pain. I’ve never liked hurting my partners—even a spanking, as much as it arouses me, only turns me on when the submissive is thoroughly aroused by it, the way Gianna is. I find the idea of punishment arousing, but only when my partner does, too. The dynamic that Gianna and I have is perfect—I like controlling my partner’s pleasure, their arousal,

giving commands, and having them obeyed and rewarded. I like comforting and caring for a partner—ensuring that they eat and exercise and take care of themselves as well. A *service-dominant*, I've seen it referred to, but I don't particularly care what it's called. It's what I enjoy—and by some miracle, I've ended up married to a woman who wants that just as much.

I realize, when her mouth finally loosens around my cock, that she's fallen asleep on my thigh. Gently, I dislodge myself from her mouth, my half-hard length resting against my thigh as I maneuver her back to where she was sleeping before, tucking the covers around her before slipping my cock back into my boxers and curling up behind her. The idea of getting myself off while she sleeps doesn't even occur to me—there will be plenty of time for that when she's feeling better. For now, all I want is to hold her.

In the morning, I wake to her between my thighs, her mouth on my cock again. I'm rock-hard now, throbbing against her tongue as she teases it over me, but I shake my head, reaching for her as I tug her up to lie next to me again.

"You didn't need to do that this morning," I tell her gently, and Gianna frowns.

"That's the rule," she says, and I shake my head again.

"Of all the mornings, you could have used the safeword today. Last night—"

"Was last night," she said firmly. "And I wanted to wake my husband up the way we agreed. Although—" She gives me a small, mischievous smile. "If you're wanting to make me feel better—"

Her hand closes around my cock, stroking lightly. "You haven't been inside of me since the morning after the first time," Gianna whispers softly. "If you were worried about me, I'm fine. I'm not sore at all. And I very, very much want you. If you—" She bites her lip, her cheeks flushing. "If that's how you want to come this morning, sir."

A white-hot bolt of lust streaks down my spine at that, and I roll her onto her back in one smooth motion, tugging my boxers down as she reaches for the waist of her pajama pants. I strip off her tank top, eager for her bare skin, and it's only the desire to be gentle with her that slows me down when I have her naked underneath me. I start to slide down her body, but Gianna shakes her head.

“Not right now, Alessio. *Please*,” she whispers. “I want you inside of me.”

Protocol aside, I want the same thing. And something tells me that she needs this more than she needs me to insist on the sorts of rules that we have in place for our dynamic. She doesn't need a dominant right now—she needs her husband.

When I nudge my cock against her entrance, I find that she's already soaking wet. She lets out a soft, breathless moan as I slip inside of her—more easily this time, her legs locking around my hips as she pulls me deeper. “More,” she whispers, gasping it against my mouth, her hand pressing against the back of my neck as she pulls me in for a kiss.

It's sweet and slow, each thrust a long, hot slide of bliss as deeply inside of her as I can go, feeling her clench around me with each movement of my hips against her. She tightens her legs around my hips, rocking against me, her moan swallowed up by my mouth when she comes on my cock, rippling and fluttering around my length until I think I can't bear it any longer.

I want to come inside of her so badly. I want to stay buried in her, throbbing, spilling, filling her up with my cum until she can taste it. It feels impossible to pull out, but somehow I do, sliding out of her just in time. I don't even manage to grab my cock before I start to come, that last squeeze of her pussy around my cockhead sending me over the edge, the first spurts spilling out onto the sheets before I manage to wrap my hand around myself and stroke the remainder of my orgasm onto her soft inner thigh. She moans softly as I come on her skin, her eyes wide and pleading, and I know what she wants—and I can't wait until I can give it to her.

At that moment, I want all over again to tell her that I love her. I've nearly said it every day since that first night, the words hovering on my lips, but I'm afraid that it's too soon. I'm afraid that it won't be the right time, that I'm not certain *enough*, that I need to wait.

It doesn't occur to me that there's a possibility that I might wait too long.

Gianna



By the next day, some of my fear has receded, but I can tell that Alessio is still tense. I wake up before him in the morning—like I have most mornings—and slip under the sheets, tracing kisses up his thighs and all the way to his half-hard cock, teasing it with my lips and tongue. It’s soothing to me, a routine that I love, but this morning, when the sensation finally stirs him awake, he reaches for me instead.

“Come here,” Alessio says softly, and for a moment, I think he’s going to pull me atop him, but instead, he moves me so that I’m curled up against his chest. “I’d rather lay here with you a little longer instead,” he murmurs, pressing his lips against my hair, and I don’t argue. As much as I want him, I can feel that he needs this instead, and I find it sweet. I can tell he wants me close, but it’s not about arousal. He wants comfort from me, too, and it makes me feel good to be able to give him that.

I also want him happy, more than anything else.

“I want you to get ready to leave for the honeymoon,” he tells me over breakfast, his face still creased with concern. “We’re going to leave later today—I’ve adjusted everything to reflect that. I think it will be safer if we’re outside of the country. Get packed while I handle some last-minute business things, and then we’ll go on a relaxing vacation while my men and my contacts sort this out here. How does that sound?”

“It sounds good,” I tell him, and I mean it. It *does* sound good—time spent away from this place and the mixture of good and bad memories that linger here, time spent with Alessio, without anything to do but simply enjoy each other. Even with the stress of feeling as if we need to leave sooner rather than later, I’m looking forward to it.

“Good.” He stands up, giving me a quick kiss. “I’ll be in my office.”

I have every plan to let him be until it’s time for us to leave, until I have all of my clothes and toiletries and other things packed, and realize that I don’t know where my passport is. I don’t even really know if I *need* it or not—some things like that don’t necessarily apply to the wife of a mafia don flying in on a private jet, but I’m not sure. I have everything else in my leather tote bag for the flight there—a soft cashmere sweater, a book and headphones, my identification, and the credit card I have for emergencies, though I doubt I’ll need that, either.

I assume Alessio would know, so I head downstairs to his office. I have a feeling if it’s anywhere, it’s kept in my father’s old office, but I don’t really want to go poking around in there myself. I still haven’t been in there again since that awful night.

When I knock on the office door, he doesn’t answer. I wonder if he’s stepped out for a moment—the door isn’t locked, so I step inside and immediately see and hear that he’s on a call. He’s leaning forward over his desk, the phone on speaker, and he looks up at the sound of my footsteps, his face instantly creased with confusion.

“I’m sorry, gentlemen, give me just a moment.” He taps a button on the phone and then turns towards me. “Did you need something, Gianna?”

I flush, feeling as if I’ve interrupted him. “I just—I had a question about my passport. I don’t know where it is, and—”

I trail off, seeing the expression on his face. It’s the sort of stern expression that sends a pleasurable quiver through me, making my hands tremble a little, but more with anticipation

than fear. I can tell that there's going to be consequences—and I also have a feeling that I'm not going to hate them.

"I know where it is," he says calmly. "But also, this is a question you could have asked me later. If you're going to barge in and interrupt my meetings, Gianna, it needs to be for a good reason."

I bite my lip, trying not to smile. "I'm sorry," I tell him contritely. "I can go—"

"I don't think so, *bellissima*." Alessio sits back down in his chair, gesturing to the desk. "I'm going to give you a perfectly good reason for being in here. On your knees, *dolce*, under the desk. You can finish what you started this morning and suck my cock while I finish my meeting. Just be a good girl, and be quiet about it."

My entire body is thrumming with anticipation from the moment I realize what he wants, my feet already propelling me forward. I slip under the desk as Alessio moves back into place, giving me just a moment to unzip his suit trousers and slip my hand inside before he goes back to his call.

I hardly notice what they're talking about. Something to do with business numbers and shipments—nothing I care about—but from the moment I take Alessio in my mouth, teasing the tip of his cock with my tongue, I'm buzzing with pleasure, my entire body flushed and hot. I keep quiet, just as he told me, but I can tell that *he's* having trouble keeping quiet too—his thighs tense, and his free hand balled into a fist against his upper leg—and that gives me a thrill. I'm on my knees beneath his desk, but I have some power over him too, and as I slide my mouth further down his cock than I have before, trying to take more of him into my throat, I feel him stiffen and twitch.

I can feel how wet I am, too. Every time I do this, it turns me on—the feeling of having Alessio in my mouth makes me ache. I slide my tongue over him, wanting to feel every ridge and vein, wrapping my lips around the tip and sucking the way I now know drives him crazy. I can feel the way his hips jerk when I do it, his quick breath that he hides with a cough, and I

can tell from the way he throbs in my mouth that he's getting close.

I could tease him a little. It's a wicked thought, one that could get me in trouble, but I can't resist it. I slow down when I'm sure that he's on the edge, licking along the sides of his cock and fluttering my tongue beneath the tip instead of sucking, and when I see his hand clench against his thigh, I know it's working. He might punish me later for it, but it's worth it for the pleasure in the moment, and a part of me likes the idea that Alessio might punish me.

I slide my mouth down again, taking more of him, and the ache between my thighs builds, the pleasure that I'm inflicting on him turning itself back on me. The desire builds, the feeling of teasing and toying with Alessio's cock, the knowledge of what I'm doing—going down on him while he's on a business call, pleasuring him while he goes about his day—driving me wild with that throbbing, aching need.

Before I can stop myself, my hand slips under my skirt, my fingers sliding beneath my panties. *Just a touch*, I tell myself, forgetting that I'm not supposed to touch myself at all without permission, losing myself so thoroughly in the pleasure of what I'm doing to Alessio, the sensation of having him in my mouth, the filthy idea of all of it. I slide my fingers over my clit, gasping a little around his cock, and once I feel that first burst of pleasure under my fingertips, that heat spreading through me, I can't stop.

It almost feels like I'm in a daze, rhythmically sliding my mouth along Alessio's length as my fingertips toy with my clit. This time when I feel that he's close, his cock stiffening even more between my lips, I don't stop. I'm lost in pleasure, his and mine, and my fingers move faster, my mouth tightening around him.

I don't mean to come. But when I feel that first burst of heat across my tongue, the taste of him filling my mouth, I tip over the edge before I can stop myself. I squeeze my thighs around my hand, forcing myself not to moan, not to cry out, the pleasure rippling through me as Alessio tenses and comes down my throat without a sound, still carrying on his business

meeting above me, and that only intensifies my orgasm as I shudder with pleasure beneath the desk, the thrilling humiliation of it all drawing it out until I'm trembling, slipping my soaked hand out from under my skirt as I keep Alessio's cock in my mouth.

I stay that way until his meeting is done, kneeling between his legs with the evidence of my disobedience on my fingers, keeping his soft cock warm between my lips as he finishes his call. I hear him hang up, and he pushes his chair back, his cock slipping free as he reaches down to tuck himself back into his suit trousers and zip up.

Alessio looks down at me, and I already know I'm caught. I can tell he's trying hard not to smile as he reaches for me, taking the hand I used to get myself off—intentionally, I'm sure—as he helps me up off of the floor. “I would say you were a good girl, Gianna,” he murmurs. “But you weren't, were you?”

There's no point in lying. I shake my head slowly, and he raises my hand to his lips, flicking his tongue over my fingers. “You were a *very* bad girl,” he murmurs, shaking his head, and I feel my cheeks flush red.

“I'm sorry,” I whisper, and Alessio lets go of my hand, turning me gently to face his desk.

“I know you're going to make mistakes, sweetheart,” he says softly. “I'm not angry with you. But you do have to be punished. Have you finished all of your packing?”

I nod. “Everything,” I whisper.

“That's good.” He reaches for my skirt, lifting it up over my hips, and I feel his fingers hook in my panties, tugging them down gently. “Now, I'm going to spank you—fifteen strokes, for coming without permission. Then you're going to take all of your clothes off and go lay on that lounge facing me. You're going to stay just like that for the rest of the day, for me to use whenever I feel like I need a release. And when I'm all done, we'll go upstairs and clean you up, and then we'll leave. Is that understood?”

I nod, biting my lip. “I’m not going to be allowed to come, am I?”

Alessio shakes his head. “You already had your orgasm, sweetheart. No more for you, not until we get to Greece. You’ll lay there and take my cum, and think about how you’re going to earn back your orgasms.”

The punishment isn’t the spanking, not really. It’s how every word seems to go straight between my legs, building my arousal until I’m trembling, my inner thighs sticky with it, gripping the edge of the desk as Alessio begins to spank me. Every slap of his hand burns through me, straight to my core, making me drip with an aching need that makes me whimper and moan, arching my back as if I’m begging for more. I hear him curse aloud when he reaches fifteen, my whimpered count and the moan that follows it is almost lost in the sound of his groan as he drags his zipper down, thrusting his hard cock into me from behind, his hand on the middle of my back as he pushes me down over his desk.

“I’ve wanted to do this since the first time I spanked you,” he growls. “I’ve fantasized about bending you over like this so many times.” His hand finds my zipper, yanking it down as he strips the dress off over my head, tossing it over his desk as his hands find my breasts, his cock thrusting into me more roughly than he ever has. “Don’t you dare come,” he murmurs as I clench around him, shuddering. “You’re *not* allowed to come, Gianna.”

For a moment, I think it’s impossible. I don’t know how to have that kind of control, but something about my tendency to want to please him takes over. I hover there on the torturous edge, clinging to my pleasure with ragged nails as Alessio fucks me hard, his cock burying deeply inside of me with every thrust. I hear his groan as he pulls out, turning me and pushing me to my knees again as he feeds his cockhead between my lips. He strokes himself over my tongue, and I swallow every drop, reveling in the ability to please him even as my entire body throbs with frustrated need.

“Such a good girl,” he murmurs, stroking my hair as he paints my tongue with his cum. “My sweet girl.”

He tucks himself back into his trousers for a second time, helping me up. “Go lay down,” he instructs, motioning to the lounge. “Just like last time. Legs spread, either side of it, so I can look at that pretty, wet pussy while I work.”

By the time Alessio is finished working, I’m so aroused I feel like I could die. My pussy feels swollen and tender, every movement sending a burst of pleasure through me that makes me whimper. Lying there with his eyes on me, watching him look up from work casually every so often to let his gaze slide over me, lingering between my thighs for a moment before going back to his computer, drives me wild, making me feel like I’m on the edge without even touching myself. Every so often, he would get up, his cock a thick, hard ridge at the front of his suit trousers, and my heart would leap with anticipation, the arousal between my legs a throbbing, pulsing heartbeat as Alessio would casually drag his zipper down, taking his cock in his hand and looking at me as if deciding what part of me he wanted to use this time. He fucked me once more, pinning my knees to my chest as he drove himself into me in front of the open window, pulling out to spurt cum all over my stomach and breasts. He left me there like that, covered in it, and I thought I wasn’t going to be able to bear how aroused I was *then*.

Now, hours later, with my breasts covered in another round of his cum and my face painted with it as well, the taste of him still on my tongue, feels like nothing compared to the desire throbbing through me at this moment. *And he said I wouldn’t be able to come until we get to Greece.* At this moment, that feels impossibly far away.

Alessio shuts his computer down, standing up, and for a moment, I think he might come over and fuck me again. I don’t know if I want him to or not—every part of me is aching to have him inside of me, touching me, but I don’t know if I can bear any more of the unfulfilled pleasure. For the first time, I’m thinking of saying the safeword, until he walks over and gently helps me up off of the sofa.

He tips my chin up with two fingers, gently kissing me, and steers me towards the door. “Let’s go get you cleaned up,” he

says softly. “You look fucking gorgeous covered in my cum, but we do have a flight to catch.”

Two hours later, we’re boarding the jet, and the ache between my thighs has simmered to something manageable. I set my tote down on one of the seats, sinking into the soft leather and letting out a sigh as Alessio sits across from me. “I can’t wait to get there,” I tell him, sinking my teeth into my lower lip, and Alessio chuckles.

“You just want to come.” He glances meaningfully down between my thighs, and I fight the urge to squeeze them together.

“I want to spend time alone with you. I mean that,” I tell him softly, and he smiles at me, getting up and coming to sit next to me.

“You’re perfect,” he murmurs, turning my face towards his so he can kiss me. His lips graze over mine, soft and light, and I lean into the kiss, stifling a moan. “My perfect, beautiful wife. And I can’t wait to spoil you even more.” His hand settles on my thigh, his other hand stroking my hair, and I can’t help but lean into his touch. “I’m falling for you, Gianna,” Alessio murmurs, his thumb brushing over my cheekbone. “I was afraid to say it too soon, but we’re at the beginning of our romantic vacation, going off together as husband and wife for the first time. What better time could there be to say it?”

His hand presses against my cheek as I feel my eyes mist over, his fingers brushing lightly over my skin. “This was all so very unexpected,” he says softly. “I still feel guilty sometimes. Like I shouldn’t have you...like I’ve talked you into this, like I’m orchestrating this somehow, and you’ll wake up and realize you deserve so much more. But you’re so much more than I could have ever dreamed of wanting, Gianna. I’m falling in love with you, and even as hurried as we were leaving—I can’t wait for this trip with you.”

When he kisses me, it takes my breath away. I struggle to blink back tears, kissing him back soft and slow, the frustrated arousal forgotten in the sheer pleasure of feeling his mouth on mine. “I feel the same way,” I whisper when he pulls back a

bit, his fingers still stroking through my hair. “You make me feel safe. I wanted you to marry me from the very start, as soon as I ever knew it was a possibility. And this life that I have with you now—*everything* about it—makes me happier than I knew I could be. I wish it could have come about a different way—but it makes me happy, nonetheless.”

Alessio nods, sitting back a little as he looks at me, his brow creased in thought. “Some of the guilt comes from not knowing if Giacomo would approve,” he admits. “I know he wanted me to marry you, but sometimes I wonder if he knew me well enough to make that decision. I was gone for so long.”

I frown at him, sitting up and shaking my head. “No,” I tell him firmly. I see his eyebrow rise—I’ve never talked to him in so stern a voice before, but I want...I *need* him to understand this, to believe me. “Of course, my father would have approved.”

Gently, I reach for him, pulling him in to kiss me again. “You’re the only man he would have ever trusted me with,” I tell him quietly, moving closer so that I’m leaning against him, curling into the safety and warmth of the man that I, too, am falling in love with.

The only man I trust, too. And the only one I want to love, forever.

Gianna



I've never seen anything as beautiful as Greece. From the moment the jet starts to descend, and I can see the crystalline blue water below, I'm glued to the window, watching the iconic blue-topped white buildings in the distance and the colorful spray of flowers, the beauty of it stretching out below us as we get closer and closer to landing. I can tell that Alessio is enjoying my reaction from the smile on his face, and I nearly skip off of the plane as we go to the waiting car, eager to see where it is that we're staying. He hasn't given me any clues, not so much as a picture, and it's hard to sit still as the car winds its way through the streets to the waterside hotel that Alessio has rented for us.

"I got us the best suite, *bellissima*," he promises me as we get out in front of the huge white stone building, taking my tote for me as we walk in through the front doors. The floor is all gilded and colorful mosaic, the stairway a gorgeous wrought iron that we walk up floor by floor, with me unable to resist the urge to look out of every window at the view beyond. When we reach our door, Alessio shoulders the tote, scooping me up into his arms and carrying me across the threshold into the room. "As a groom should," he says, setting me down and kissing me soundly before letting me look around at our home away from home.

It's stunningly beautiful. There's a fresh, open-air feel about it, everything from the huge canopy bed done up in white linens, with gauzy white fabric looped around the canopy and blowing in the breeze, to the mosaic countertops and rustic stone floor with woven rugs scattered across it, and the wide

doors flung open to reveal an infinity pool that looks out over the ocean beyond.

“No one will see us up here,” Alessio says, a smirk on his face that tells me he already knows what I was thinking. “We have the entire first floor to ourselves.”

“So I can go skinny-dipping?” I’m already reaching for the zipper of my dress, eager to get into the pool, and Alessio gives me an indulgent smile.

“You can do whatever you want, *tesoro*,” he murmurs, pulling me in for another kiss. His tongue slides into my mouth, his hand slipping down to grip the curve of my ass as my dress pools to the floor, and for a moment, I think we’re going to end up in bed. But I have other ideas, and I slip out of his embrace, grinning as I slide my panties off of my hips and turn, bare naked, and stride towards the pool.

“Come join me, *husband*,” I call out teasingly, enjoying the feeling of his eyes on me as I walk away. The sun is bright and warm on my skin, the water blissfully cool the moment I step into it, and I’ve never done anything like this before. It makes me feel free and daring, my pulse fluttering excitedly as the water washes over my bare skin inch by inch, and I hear Alessio walk to the doorway, watching me with barely concealed desire in his gaze as I slip into the pool, the view stretching out without stopping on every side.

“I think I just might.” He strips his t-shirt over his head, the sun gleaming off of his olive skin, and when he steps out of his jeans, his half-hard cock already swelling further at the sight of me in the water, I have the sudden wish that we could stay here forever.

Just me and the man of my dreams in paradise.

Alessio follows me into the water, and I try to dart away from him teasingly, but he snags me easily by the waist, pulling me into his arms. “I still think about that day you talked me into going out to the pool with you,” he murmurs, bending to kiss me. “What if we try that over again?”

“I like the sound of that,” I whisper, wrapping my arms around his neck and returning the kiss, moaning softly when his tongue slides into my mouth. “We don’t have to stop this time.”

Alessio’s hands slide over my bare skin, and I feel his hard cock press into my belly, hot against my cool skin. “I did promise that you’d get to come, once we got to Greece,” he murmurs, lifting me in the water. When my legs go around his hips and his cock nudges inside of me, I let out a gasping moan that I think might have been heard at least one floor down.

“You can come as many times as you want, *bellissima*,” he promises me, walking me backward so that I’m leaning against the back wall of the pool as he starts to thrust. His hand slips between us, immediately finding my clit as he kisses me. It takes only seconds for me to tip over the edge, clinging to his shoulders as I come hard, the arousal that’s been building since I was in his office yesterday crashing over me.

Alessio makes me come twice more before he does, slipping out of me long enough to set me on the pool edge and eat me out to another breathless orgasm before he pulls me back into the water, turning me around and fucking me hard and fast with his fingers rubbing over my clit the entire time. He spills over my back as he comes, the heat of it making me moan and arch backward, a small flicker of disappointment rising in me when I remember that we left before I could get my birth control pills. I’d hoped that our romantic honeymoon might be the first time he came inside of me.

“You *do* want children, right?” I ask him a little while later, when we’re both lying out nude on our lounge chairs in the sun, liberally slathered in sunscreen and enjoying the freedom of not having a single pair of eyes on us. I turn towards him, shading my eyes. “It really is just you wanting to wait a little longer?”

“Of course, I want children with you,” Alessio reassures me. “A few of them, I hope. But I want time with you, first. I want

to be a little selfish with my wife, for a little while. We have plenty of time.”

“I know what you mean.” I lean back, enjoying the feeling of the sun on my bare skin. “There’s so many things we haven’t done yet. Dates to go on, places to travel—”

“I want to do all of those things with you. In a few years, we can revisit the topic of children. I *do* want them,” he says again, firmly. “But I want to enjoy the sweet surprise of being married to you first, *tesoro*.”

It all feels perfect. Alessio has planned everything out, from the afternoon poolside to the chef’s tasting that’s brought to us on our own private balcony later, course by course, paired with exquisite wine and served with a view of the island below, lights twinkling in the gathering darkness.

“We’ll go out tomorrow,” Alessio promises as we finish dessert, a light-as-air tropical mousse that might be the best thing I’ve ever tasted. “There’s plenty of shops to wander through and things to see.”

“How long are we staying?” I ask curiously, wondering if he’ll finally tell me, and he shrugs.

“I’ve left it open-ended. I’m waiting to hear how things are back home, with—” he hesitates. “I don’t want to bring up unhappy things tonight, but you know what I’m talking about. Originally, I planned for a two-week honeymoon, but if we need to extend it—” Alessio smiles. “I’m sure it wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world.”

As much as I’d like for our extended vacation to be for other reasons, I can’t argue that he’s wrong. The idea of more time with him here sounds blissful, and as we fall into bed a little while later, tangling up in the crisp white sheets, I think once again that I could stay here forever.

I’ve only been in Greece a day, and I already love it.

—

The next day starts out equally as blissful. Breakfast is brought to our room, and we eat it out on the balcony again, Alessio’s gaze sweeping over me in the filmy white dress I bought, with

small blue flowers scattered over it. “You match the scenery,” he says with a laugh, pulling me in for a kiss as he plants the straw hat I bought atop my head. “Let’s go explore Santorini.”

Alessio is the most light-hearted I’ve ever seen him as we make our way through the winding streets, as if being away from home has taken a weight off of his shoulders, too. We still have security with us, but they keep their distance, giving us the illusion of being entirely alone as we make our way through small shop after small shop, browsing and exclaiming over small, silly items. Alessio buys me a shell necklace and an embroidered sarong, and we stop for lunch in a small cafe overlooking the water, with some of the most delicious food I think I’ve ever had. We see the cats that roam through the streets and get enough sun to turn my cheeks pink. After lunch, Alessio takes my hand, and we start to walk down towards the beach.

We’re halfway there when he stops suddenly, his hand tightening on mine. “Turn around,” he says quietly, and I look at him, frowning.

“What?” My heart speeds up in my chest, and Alessio gives me the look that I know means I’m not supposed to argue with him.

“Turn around,” he repeats, still very quietly. “We’re going back to the hotel.”

“But—” I start to protest, feeling a wave of disappointment. “Alessio, everything is fine. You’re seeing things—who could have followed us here? We were supposed to go down to the beach—”

“I know.” He says it through gritted teeth, reaching for my arm. He’s gentle, but he turns me around, nudging me back up the path. “Go, Gianna.”

I don’t know what he thinks he saw, but I go. I can’t help but pout a little, frustrated that our perfect day has been infringed on by the danger we came here to escape, and I know Alessio can tell. I feel certain that he’s going to punish me for it when we get back to the hotel, but instead, the moment the door to

our room is shut behind us, he pulls me into his arms, kissing me.

“I’m sorry,” he says softly into my hair as he wraps his arms around me, holding me against his chest. “I couldn’t risk something happening to you. It felt like someone was following us, and I—I couldn’t take the chance.”

Privately, I’m worried that he’s a little paranoid, but his restlessness about it doesn’t seem to ease. We spend the rest of the day in the room, enjoying the infinity pool and having dinner on the balcony again. Alessio almost hovers over me, unwilling to let me out of his sight for even a moment. There’s no romantic sex when we go to bed—he pulls me into his arms again instead, holding me close until we both finally drift off to sleep, my thoughts full of confusion as to what he’s so worried about. *Surely we’re safe here*, I think as I drift off, Alessio’s lips against my temple as he lays there with me under the soft linen sheets.

“I’ll always keep you safe,” he whispers as I drift off, and I believe him.

My worry is that *he* doesn’t believe it himself.

Gianna



I wake up first in the morning to the sun streaming into our room, and I look over at Alessio's peaceful, sleeping face. I wonder for a moment if I should wake him up the way I do at home—but I'm not sure that he fell asleep last night for a long time. I have the glimmer of an idea as I sit there looking at him, remembering a small pastry and tea shop near the hotel that we passed by yesterday. *I could bring him breakfast back and surprise him*, I think, the idea taking root as I imagine having it all set out for him on the balcony before he wakes up.

He'd worry if he knew, especially after yesterday—but I can't believe that there's any real threat. *We're so far away*, I think, biting my lip. *How could there possibly be danger here?* If anything, I reason, when I come back without any issue, Alessio will see there's nothing to fear. We'll be able to have the day that we missed out on, and he'll be able to relax again.

My mind made up, I slip on a sundress and a pair of flat sandals, grabbing my credit card before I slip out of the room. Alessio doesn't so much as stir, clearly exhausted, and I make my way down to the lower floor, slipping out of the hotel and heading towards the pastry shop.

It's a beautiful day. The sun is bright, and everything smells like salt and flowers. I tip my head back, feeling the sunny, warm rays spread over my face as I walk. *I could stay here forever*, I think all over again, letting myself relax into the feeling. It's the happiest I've felt in a long time, and I never want it to end.

I don't see the movement in the alleyway next to me, or the three figures that slip out of it, until it's far too late.

The hand that grabs my arm does so at the same moment that another hand covers my mouth, the chance of my being able to scream for help gone in an instant. I smell something sharp and clinical on his skin, my senses swimming as I twist in the arms dragging me backward, fear racing through me like a jolt of electricity. I haven't felt this afraid since I found my father's body, and the horror of that all comes back in a rush. For a brief moment, as those hands close around my arm and mouth, the open air and the Grecian street vanish, and I'm back in the study with the scent of the dying fire and blood filling my nose, the stickiness of that same blood on my hands as I'd reached for my father's body, the grief and confusion overwhelming me. It freezes me in place, making it impossible for me to fight back—and it wouldn't have helped even if I did. The hands holding me are far too strong.

Regret follows closely on the heels of that fear, the realization that Alessio was right to be careful coming far too late.

He's going to wake up, and I'll be gone. I should have listened. Tears well in my eyes as I feel the prick of a needle in my arm, and I wish I could take it all back, that I could be in that cool, crisp linen bed, that I had obeyed him the way I promised I would. I want his arms around me and the piney, woodsy scent of his skin and hair surrounding me; I want the warmth of Alessio's body and the safety that it always makes me feel. The yearning for it cuts through me, down to my bones, making me ache as I feel myself slump against the arms holding me. It feels all wrong, the stink of sweat and unwashed skin filling my senses instead, and as I'm passed from one set of familiar arms to another, dizziness overwhelming me, I feel hot tears fill my eyes. I hear voices, mumbling something I can't quite make out. It's in Italian, and I should understand it, but everything sounds hollow, like hearing words from underwater.

I try to summon the last memory I have of Alessio before all of this—the feeling of his arm over my waist, the vanilla-orange scent of the candle next to the bed, and the bright

warmth of the sunshine. Still, as I'm hauled into the alleyway, all of those memories are overwhelmed by the stench of garbage and the bruising grip these strange men have on me, the fear and the knowledge that there's nothing I can do as the drugs work their way through me wiping away anything that could salve that feeling.

My legs go limp, my sandals catching on rough-hewn stone, tumbling over each other as I'm dragged backward. Dimly, I realize that it's happened—I can feel the straps catch on my toes and the scrape of the stone against my feet, the pain lancing up them, a trickle of warm blood down my ankle—but I can't seem to muster the energy to do anything about it. It's as if the world is slowly going foggy, fading away, and I see a van parked at the end of the alley in the last moments before the world tilts and spins—and then everything goes black.

—

I wake to the taste of vomit in my mouth and the feeling of different sheets underneath me—rougher than before. I sit up with a jolt, my head pounding painfully, my mouth sticky and dry, and the clink of metal warns me before I feel the bite in my wrist that I'm handcuffed to something.

“Just the one hand.” A calm, Italian-accented voice drifts through the shadows towards me. “You can use the other hand. There's water on the table if you want it.”

I blink, trying to clear my fuzzy vision. I can't make out anything about the man sitting in the dark corner, but I finally begin to make out that I'm in a dank, basement-like room, sitting on a mattress covered with a worn sheet, a small bit of light coming through a window at the top of the stone wall. One of my wrists is handcuffed to the rusted metal headboard at one end of the mattress, and as the man said, there's a cup of water on a rickety table next to it. I reach for it slowly, wondering if it's drugged with something else.

“The water is fine,” the man says, as if he read my mind. “You're not going anywhere—no reason to tamper with it.”

“You sound very sure of yourself.” The words come out a little slurred, likely because of the drugs. “There will be—people—looking for me—”

“Of course.” The man stands up as I reach for the water, walking a little closer. “But they won’t find you.”

Slowly, I take a sip. The water is warm and tastes stale, and I swish the first sip around my mouth, wanting the taste of vomit out. I spit it out onto the filthy stone floor, and the man chuckles.

“Such manners for a well-bred lady, Gianna Mancini. I’ll have to teach you better than that, before you marry my son.”

My heart stops in my chest. For a moment, the world spins around me again, and I’m sure that I’m going to pass out. *No*, I think, as my fingers go numb and nerveless, and the cup drops to the floor. *It can’t be.*

I’ve never seen Enzo Leone myself. He’s tall, with iron-grey hair and a perfect white smile, his dark eyes fixed on me with a look that makes my skin crawl.

“Of course, Alessio will come after you,” he says, as if explaining something to a child. “For now, you’re bait. That’s why you’re not already on a plane back to Chicago, and being taken to my mansion. I need your husband dead, after all. So he’ll find his way here, to you—and then my men will kill him. Of course, we’ll set it all up to look as if Alessio tried to murder you here in Greece. The story will be so sordid—the adopted son of Giacomo Mancini, married to his stepsister after his adoptive father died so suddenly and, strangely, insisted on such an odd union in his will. With a little more consideration, it will seem clear that Alessio orchestrated his adoptive father’s murder himself, so that he could marry you and take your inheritance. I will, of course, be happy to go along with Don Fontana’s original plan and allow Andre to marry you—despite the unfortunate loss of your virginity along the way. A small price to pay for your wealth.” He smiles lasciviously, looking down at me. “You *have* lost your virginity, haven’t you?”

“That’s none of your business,” I snap at him, shrinking back on the mattress. I hate that it’s touching my skin, but *I’m* not all that clean either, my feet and calves filthy from being dragged through the alleyway, my dress torn and stained. “I don’t need to tell you what Alessio and I did together.”

“Oh, but you do.” Enzo smiles. “After all, since you’re not a virgin any longer—and don’t worry, dear, I’m quite sure that you’re not—nothing is stopping me from enjoying you before I have you sent home to my son. One more cock in you won’t make a difference, after all—and I would *so* enjoy taking pleasure in what your father tried to make sure my family was denied. Insult to injury, isn’t it, getting fucked by your future father-in-law? Or maybe you’ll like that, since you liked fucking your stepbrother so much.”

He moves in quickly, his hand shooting out to grab my throat before I can twist away, even though I try. “I’ll start now,” he says, leaning over me. “A quick fuck to break you in, and we can test out your other talents later. It might take a little while for Alessio to find this place. I wouldn’t want you to get bored —”

His voice cuts off in a strangled gasp as I twist to one side, shoving my knee up hard and catching him in the balls. I nearly vomit all over again when I feel the pressure of his erection against my knee, the hard ridge unmistakable, but the sound of pain he makes as he lurches and staggers backward is worth it.

Enzo glares at me, his hand cupping his groin. “You’re going to pay for that,” he snarls. “You’re going to fucking *bleed* before I send you home to my son. Enjoy your one night of rest,” he hisses, as he stalks towards the door. “It’s the last peace you’ll get.”

I manage to hold it together until the door slams behind him. The moment it does, I clap my hand over my mouth, bursting into horrified tears as I curl into a ball on the bed, the impact of it all crashing down around me.

Enzo Leone had my father killed. He wanted me to marry his son, to take everything my father built and rip it to shreds, and

he knew the only way to accomplish that was for my father to die. He knew he could pressure Fontana into giving me to Andre. What he hadn't counted on was the will—or Alessio eventually agreeing to it.

He's being led here. I'm bait in a trap. Tears well in my eyes, and I half wish Alessio would be so angry with me that he *wouldn't* come for me, that he'd leave me here, so that he'd be safe.

The rest of me desperately clings to the small, faint hope that he *will* come, that he'll save me, and that this will turn into nothing but a horrible memory. That against all odds, Alessio will make sure I'm safe.

I curl up tighter, closing my eyes, tears dripping down my cheeks as exhaustion washes over me. I try to imagine myself back in the honeymoon suite with Alessio, in that huge bed with him wrapped around me, the salt breeze blowing into the room—and it feels impossible.

Yesterday was a dream, and today has become a nightmare. And this time, I'm terrified that I won't wake up.

Alessio



I wake in a wash of warm sunlight over the bed, the scent of citrus and clean linen surrounding me, and in the first few moments, when I don't yet remember the worries of yesterday, I feel more relaxed than I have in a long time. There's a pleasant arousal humming through my blood, my cock hard against my thigh. I sink back into the pillows, anticipating the warm caress of my wife's lips and tongue over the length of it, the same pleasure I've been spoiled with every recent morning. I'll come in her mouth this morning, I think, in those last half-asleep moments. And then I'll make her come with mine.

It's only when I don't feel anything that the surprise of it wakes me up. Gianna enjoys our morning routine as much as I do, and I'm startled to find that not only is she not between my thighs, but she's not in bed with me at all. I sit upright, rubbing one hand across my face, glancing towards the en-suite bathroom. It occurs to me that she might not be feeling well, and I get up quickly, striding naked to the bathroom and knocking briefly before pushing the door open.

"Gianna? Are you alright—"

She's not there. I can see the balcony and the pool—I have a line of sight on both—and I know she's not out there either. And in that moment, I'm not sure I've ever felt anything like the frantic, overwhelming fear that crashes over me.

My first thought is to call for security and ask if they've seen her—I tell myself that she might have gone down to the lobby to ask about something, that she might have just stepped out

for a moment. But deep down, I know it's something worse. That my fears from yesterday were justified.

That fear only intensifies when my security says that they haven't seen her either. It's impossible that someone could have taken her from our room without knowing, which means that she's either been harmed in some other part of the hotel—equally unlikely—or she slipped past them and went out alone for some reason. Why would you do that? I think frantically, rubbing my hand over my mouth and pacing until my lips feel raw and my emotions are a tangled mess. Gianna knows better. I know she knows better. I can't imagine that she'd feel so safe here that she'd throw all caution to the wind—but then again, I remember, she's never been away from home before. This must feel like an impossibly far distance for danger to follow us.

But I'm very afraid that it has.

My second thought is to call Luca—again. I'd called him yesterday after getting back to the hotel and left him a message, telling him what I was worried about. Now I call again, unsure of the time difference in my absolute panic, and hoping that he picks up.

“Alessio?” His voice sounds rough, a little sleepy, but he answers. “Is everything alright?”

“I think Gianna's missing.” I sit down heavily on the edge of the bed. “I sent you a message yesterday.”

There's a pause on the other end of the line. “I was going to wait to tell you—” Luca hesitates. “Viktor's Syndicate spies managed to dig up some information. There's reason to think that Enzo Leone was behind Giacomo's death. We're still looking into it, but there's—”

“Where is he?” A sudden, terrible fear grips me. I don't need to know what Luca has found to know that it makes sense. Enzo had hated Giacomo for years. He had resented his son not being engaged to Gianna in the first place. I hadn't thought he would go as far as murder—but the pieces fit together. And if he knew we were coming here—

“I’m not sure.” Luca’s voice is clearer now, as if he’s gotten out of bed and walked to somewhere that he can talk without disturbing Sofia. “You think he’s there? In Greece?”

“I think if she’s missing, that’s a real possibility. I sent my security out to look and ask questions—but even if she just stepped out for a minute, she should be back by now.” I grit my teeth, rage overwhelming the feelings of panic and flooding through me. “*Fuck!*”

Luca lets out a slow breath. “Viktor has a contact there—a man called Adrian Drakos. I’ll send you his information, and I’ll give him a call...let you know as soon as he’s aware of what’s going on, and you can go and see him. He has people everywhere there. He’s not a *good* man, per se, but he’s helped us before. If Gianna is missing, and if Enzo—or anyone else, for that matter—is behind it, he can help you.”

“The Family can’t know about this,” I say tersely. “Not until we get to the bottom of it. I don’t think Fontana is behind it, but I also don’t trust him entirely. If he thought it was best for the Family as a whole for Enzo to get his hands on Gianna, he might not stop it.”

“He sees things—differently,” Luca says slowly. “I agree it’s best to do this without his interference.”

There’s a knock at the door, and I go to answer it. It’s one of my security, and I tell Luca to hold on as I speak to him.

Within minutes, I have a picture of what’s happened to Gianna. Questioning the owner of the small floral shop across the road managed to net him the information that she saw a dark-haired woman surrounded by three men, but before she could see much more, she had a customer, and when she looked back to see if the girl was alright, she was gone. *There could be plenty of dark-haired women that it could be*, I try to tell myself, but I recognize the description of the dress she was wearing.

“She was taken,” I tell Luca, when I get back on the phone. “Just by three men—no real descriptors yet. But if you can get me that information—”

“I will,” he promises. “Give me a little time—an hour or two. Drakos isn’t an easy man to deal with, but I’ll get you his information and make sure you can safely go and see him.”

Waiting even a short amount of time feels impossible. I have no idea what’s happening to Gianna, but my thoughts are flooded with every possible terrible scenario, keeping me pacing until the moment my phone buzzes again with Luca’s name on the screen.

I have to find her. And I won’t give up until I do.

—

Two hours after Luca calls, I find myself walking up to three burly security guards outside of an expansive villa on the water. They look at me suspiciously, hands twitching towards their weapons, and for a moment, I want to plow past them, break into Drakos’ home and demand his help. I want to tear apart this entire fucking island until I find Gianna again. I don’t want to be patient, or *talk*, or wait another moment before finding Enzo Leone and turning him inside out.

But I take a deep breath, and give them the passphrase that Luca gave me.

“*La mano che lancia la moneta sa se vince.*” I pause, waiting, and they nod, stepping aside.

“He’ll be on the patio,” the tallest of the three guards tells me. I walk past them, out to a huge stone patio overlooking the water, gauzy curtains flowing in the breeze, and a man in a tailored black suit standing at the edge of it.

“If I lived in a place where I was on vacation every day, I’m not sure if I’d always dress like I was going to the office,” I say dryly, and Adrian Drakos turns to face me.

“I am never on vacation.” His mouth turns up on one side in a smirk. “I’m not sure that I ever have been. Luca sent you by way of Viktor, hm? I should start charging them a commission for the amount of times they need my help. But then again, Viktor has a deal with the Wolf now, so maybe I simply hope that he keeps Vladimir from looking my way.” Drakos shrugs. “What do you need—”

“Alessio Mancini. Don Mancini, from Chicago.” I have a feeling that my title doesn’t matter much to this man, and Luca might already have told him, but it feels as if it’s worth saying. “My wife is missing.”

“Luca told me. I already have men looking. Luca said that he’s sending some men over on a flight and asked me to house them.” Adrian’s expression says exactly what he thinks of *that*, though he doesn’t comment further on it otherwise. “There are only a few places here where a private jet can land. I have someone looking into that, too. Give me a day, Alessio,” he says calmly. “We will find out where your wife is.”

I’m afraid to hope that he’s telling the truth. “You’re sure of that?” I frown. “This island may not be *that* large, but to find someone like that so quickly—”

Adrian smirks again, a casual, easy expression on his face, but there’s a hint of something else beneath it—something that tells me that he’s not a man that anyone would want to be on the wrong side of. “I spent twenty years working for the Syndicate, *adelfós*,” he says flatly. “I have been on this island for a long time now. Nothing happens here that I want to know about that I do not find. A day, Alessio. And we will find her.”

I’m not entirely sure that I believe him. I spend the day anxious, pacing, alternating between fearful imagination and calls with Luca, who is insistent that I stay at Adrian’s villa rather than go back to the hotel. “Two of your household security were meant to be on duty the night that Giacomo was murdered, and weren’t,” Luca tells me. “Someone changed the shift logs. I’ve called Vasilev—he’s going to question them.” Luca hesitates. “Unless you say otherwise, of course—”

“No.” I shake my head. Even knowing what Nikolai’s methods of *questioning* are, I can’t bring myself to care. Nothing is too much when it comes to finding Gianna. I want to be both here and there at once; my utter helplessness at this moment at being somewhere that I can do so little and so far from where I could do something back at home makes me feel as if I’m slowly going mad. “I trust you. Do what needs to be done. I’m waiting on Drakos’ information now.”

“Speaking of—” Drakos walks out onto the patio, his expression grim. “We’ve tracked Enzo down—or at least, a man fitting this description. With some—encouragement, we found informants who saw a van approaching a house here—” He spreads a map of the island out on the table, and points out a road near the other side of it. “A dark-haired girl being taken out of it, wearing a dress matching the description of the one you gave me. From what I was told, there’s a decent amount of security surrounding this house—probably more inside.”

He frowns, standing back. “Luca’s men are here. I have men who can help as well. But—”

“I don’t care.” I shake my head. “Whatever caution you’re going to give me, I’ll go myself if it means a chance at getting Gianna back. It’ll be worse if he gets her back to Chicago.”

Adrian shakes his head. “This is why I’ve never married,” he mutters, turning his attention back to the map. “Luca will be recompensing me for this. Viktor will owe me a favor, though, so there is that, at least. And besides—” he shrugs, his eyes flicking over the roadways. “I don’t like a man who comes onto my island and makes himself at home like this.”

His island. I nearly snort at that, but manage to refrain. If I’m getting his help, that’s all that matters.

“Your security is armed already?” Drakos looks pleased when I nod. “Good. I have weapons for you. We’ll go after dark.”

I nearly protest. For a moment, all my good sense is wiped out by the need to get to Gianna *now*, my overwhelming fear of what’s happening to her. But Drakos is right. We’ll have a better chance of slipping in and getting to her after it’s dark, when we can have at least some element of surprise.

The waiting is agonizing. I strap on the weapons Drakos provided me as we get ready to leave, my fear and anger building with each passing minute. *I’m going to find you*, I repeat over and over in my head, knowing there’s no possible way she could hear me, hoping that she believes in me enough to know that I will.

We split up into three separate vehicles, coming at the house where Drakos believes Enzo is staying from different directions. On another night, the island after dark might have been balmy and romantic, setting the mood for Gianna and me—but tonight, it just feels ominous, the dark closing in around us as we slip from the van and out into the streets, which are oddly empty.

“I have my ways,” Drakos murmurs when he sees me looking up and down the streets in confusion, and then he says nothing else after that, motioning for us to move forward.

He puts his hand up when we reach the end of the street, halting me and the men behind us. Some yards away, I see four black-garbed men standing outside a door. And then, in the darkness, I hear the soft sound of silenced gunshots—four of them, coming from above.

The men drop. I see dark liquid start to spread from underneath them, out onto the street, and Drakos motions for us to move forward.

In the shadows, I glimpse the other groups of men with us. We converge on the house from the three points, and Drakos gives me a look. He knows well enough that this isn't something I've done before, that I don't know what's waiting for us on the other side. I've agreed already to follow his lead.

I've never been an enforcer or an assassin. But I'm going to get my wife back.

We slip towards the back door, the other groups coming in towards the windows at the side. One of Drakos' men, a huge guard built like a professional wrestler, waits for Drakos' signal—and then, the moment it's given, he lunges forward and kicks the door in with one hard blow that rattles the doorframe of the house.

And then, everything happens at once.

Enzo's men are on alert as soon as they hear the sound, but we have the element of surprise. The rattle of gunfire fills the air, and I act on instinct, giving myself the briefest second to make sure that the man I'm shooting isn't one of ours before I pull

the trigger again and again, the scent of hot metal and gunpowder and blood filling the air. Through the chaos, I see Drakos motion towards a staircase leading down, and we start to move that way, ears ringing from the gunshots. Behind us, I can hear the cracking of glass as the windows break, the front door slamming open as more of our men come in that way, converging on the house as I go towards the stairs and the small hope that I have that it will lead me to Gianna.

I've never killed someone before today. I've never gotten my hands bloody like so many of the other men I work with, but I drop the guards at the end of the stairs without a thought, pushing forward as one of Drakos' men breaks open the door in front of us—

The crack of a gun in the room brings me up short, the hiss of the bullet going past me making my blood freeze for a moment before I hear a snarl of pain from behind me, the heavy thud of someone going to their knees. I spin on one heel, frantically looking, and see Drakos half-down on the floor, his hand clutching just beneath his ribs.

“Go,” he growls, breathing hard as his men start to circle him, watching the stairs and the room ahead of us simultaneously. “I'll—manage.”

The other men still with me are already pushing forward. For a moment, I can't entirely make sense of what's going on in the chaos—and then I see *her*.

Gianna is handcuffed to a bedframe, curled up in terror on the mattress, her hair tangled and face streaked with tears. And on the other side of her, Enzo is standing there, a gun in his hand.

“I wasn't expecting quite so much drama,” he murmurs, his finger curling around the trigger. “Or such a show of force, I'll admit. I was unaware you had such—friends. I can't kill her, of course—I need her. But you—”

If it was only me and my men, even Luca's, that might have been the end of me. But Drakos' men have no loyalty towards me—no loyalty except to Drakos himself, and at that moment, he's on the other side of the door, bleeding through his fingers from a gunshot wound. Whether Enzo manages to shoot me or

not before he drops, it doesn't matter to them—only that they do what they were told.

The gunfire goes off in a burst, tearing through Enzo in a series of holes that rip through fabric and flesh, spattering Gianna with blood. She shrieks, lurching backward, and Enzo's finger spasms on the trigger, a bullet going wide and burying itself in the wood with a splintering *crack* six inches from her head. She shrieks again, jerking at the chain holding her to the bed in a panic, but I'm already moving towards her.

“Gianna.” I reach for her, pulling her into my arms. “Gianna, I'm here. You're safe. Gianna—” I murmur her name over and over, stroking her hair as one of the other men starts to search Enzo's body, looking for a key.

The moment Gianna's hand is freed, she throws her arms around me, clinging to me. “Alessio—” she sobs my name, still shaking, and I pick her up off of the bed, cradling her against my chest as I carry her towards the door.

“We'll talk when we get back to the villa,” I murmur. “You're safe. That's all that matters.”

She looks at me with wide, terrified blue eyes, her mouth opening to speak—and then she slumps in my arms in a faint.

Gianna



The relief I feel when I wake up in Alessio's arms is so overwhelming that, for a moment, I forget how much of this was my fault. The second it comes crashing back, I burst into tears, burying my face in his shirt, heedless of the bloodstains splashed across it.

"Where are we?" I whisper against his shirt, swallowing hard. I feel on the verge of panic again, and I don't entirely understand why he doesn't seem furious with me—why he's holding me, stroking my hair and my back, and soothing me. "What—"

"We're at the home of a man called Adrian Drakos," Alessio says. "One of Luca's contacts. He helped us track you down."

"Where is he?" I look up, wiping at my eyes. The living room is mostly empty except for some security, and the house is quiet.

"He was injured. It's fairly severe, though he'll live. He's upstairs being tended to." Alessio smooths my hair away from my face, looking down at me. "We're going to stay here for a little while, Gianna, until we can be sure that everyone working with Enzo in Chicago is dealt with. Once we're sure it's safe, we'll go back. I want to be home with you—but we can't rush it."

"I'm sorry," I whisper through tears. "I'm so sorry. I should have listened to you. I thought you were overreacting, and I wanted everything to be perfect, and I'm so—I'm so sorry." The tears keep streaming down my face, the words coming out

in choked sobs. “I know you’re going to punish me. I deserve it. You were almost killed because of me, I—”

“Gianna.” Gently, Alessio detaches me from him, holding me there with his hands on my arms. “Yes, it was foolish. But you’re safe now. We’re both safe. You made a mistake, but I’m not going to punish you for it.”

I blink up at him through tears, wondering if I’ve heard him correctly, wondering if that’s what I want—for him to punish me, or not. “You’re not?” I whisper, and he shakes his head.

“No, sweetheart. I love you, and I’m going to show you that in every way that I can.” He strokes my hair back away from my face, his thumb brushing over my cheekbone. “This isn’t about punishment. We’re both alive, and we’re together, and Enzo Leone can never hurt either of us again. That’s all that matters.”

“But—” I bite my lip, fresh worry washing over me. “I don’t want things to change. I *like* our dynamic, Alessio. I like how things are between us—”

“I know.” He smooths his hand over my hair again, leading me towards the stairs and away from Adrian Drakos’ expansive living room. “But right now, all I want is you.”

The room upstairs is almost as nice as our honeymoon suite. Adrian has a gorgeous villa on the water, and our room overlooks it, with that same floral and salt breeze wafting in from the balcony. It’s one huge, open-air room, with a clawfoot tub on one side of the room near the window. “Let’s get cleaned up,” Alessio says as he closes the door behind us, his fingers already tugging at my zipper. “Someone will go and get our things from the hotel.”

I have no complaints about being stripped out of the filthy dress. The moment it falls away from me, I feel as if a weight is lifted off of my shoulders. I help Alessio out of his bloodstained clothes, my hands sliding over his bare skin as if I’m not entirely sure that he’s real.

“Let’s get you in the bath,” Alessio says gently, leading me towards the tub. He turns on the hot water, letting it run until

it's steaming, and as the tub fills up, he turns me towards him, kissing me again. "I'm not angry," he murmurs again, his lips soft against mine, "but *please*, Gianna, if anything like this ever happens again, *please* listen to me. I can't come so close to losing you again. I was terrified."

"I'm sorry." I lean my forehead against his, feeling my eyes prickle with tears all over again. "I won't ever do something like that again."

"I hope we never have to worry about it." Alessio helps me into the tub, and I moan with pleasure as the hot water sinks over my skin, washing away the dirt and specks of blood and soothing every tight, sore muscle in my body. When he slides in behind me, I curl against him, pressing my face to his chest.

"I just want to go home with you," I whisper, and he rests his chin atop my head, his hands still soothing me.

"Soon," he promises. "And when we go back, we'll be sure that there's nothing to fear. I want you to feel safe, Gianna. It's all I've ever wanted."

"It was my fault—" I bite my lip, feeling the wave of guilt all over again, and Alessio shakes his head. Gently, he reaches for me, turning me so that I'm straddling his lap in the huge tub, facing him.

"It was a mistake to go out alone," he says firmly. "And I hope you learn from it, and never do anything like that again. But Enzo was determined to get to you. He might have found a way no matter what. We might have been on more even ground then, or it might have been worse. There's no way to know. But *now*—now it's over. You're safe." Alessio draws me in, his hands on my face as he kisses me. "I love you, Gianna," he whispers. "I wish I'd started a life with you from the moment it was offered to me, but I'm glad that my stubbornness didn't rob me of you—and of so much happiness—in the end."

"I love you too," I whisper, the words slipping from my mouth for the first time, and I know it's true. It's been true for a long time, I think—but it feels right to say it for the first time here, now, like this.

Alessio presses his forehead to mine, a low groan filling the air between us as his hands tighten on my hips, and I feel his cock nudging between my thighs. “If it’s too soon—” His hips shift beneath me, and I can feel his muscles tightening, trying to resist the urge to thrust up into me. “I can wait. But *god*, Gianna, I want—”

“I do, too.” I reach between us, my hand wrapping around him as I guide him against my entrance, biting my lip against a moan as I feel the tip slip inside of me. “I need you. I need—”

I don’t have to say aloud what it is that I need. Alessio crushes my mouth to his, his fingers winding through my hair and pressing against the back of my head as he kisses me long and slow and deep, his hand on my hip guiding me down until he’s fully inside of me, the two of us pressed together. The water ripples around us, splashing against the edge as I rock against him, gasping with each movement of him inside of me. He’s thick and hard, filling me up entirely, and Alessio’s tongue slides against mine in the same rhythm that his cock thrusts into me, his hands guiding me as I ride him for the first time.

He leans back against the tub, still kissing me as he pulls me against his chest, and I roll my hips, gasping with pleasure as my clit grinds against his slick, wet skin. “You feel so good,” I whisper, breathless as I arch above him, moving faster as I chase my own pleasure, his groans muffled as I kiss him again. “*Alessio—*”

“I know.” His hand tightens in my hair, his hips bucking up against me, and some of the water sloshes onto the floor as he thrusts. “Fuck, you feel so fucking good—”

I know he’s going to pull out when he’s close, and I don’t want him to. I slip my hand between us, stroking my clit as I rock my hips, gasping with each movement of his cock, and I’m on the edge, my muscles tensing as I move faster. I kiss him hard, teeth grazing his lower lip as the climax bursts over me, unable to stop myself from moaning and wanting to muffle the sound. His hands squeeze my hips, fingers digging into my flesh, and I feel him buck up into me before he can stop himself. The near-pained groan he lets out gives me the first clue that he lost control before I feel him go rock-hard inside

of me, swollen and throbbing as I feel the hot rush of his cum for the first time.

It sends me over the edge again, one hand gripping the side of the tub as I throw my head back, the sound I make filling the room this time as a second orgasm crashes over me. Alessio's hands are almost bruising, the sound of his pleasure mingling with mine, and he gasps as he sags back in the tub, realization crossing his face.

“Shit,” he mutters, although he doesn't slip out of me. “We—*fuck*. I didn't mean for that to happen. I couldn't stop—”

“I don't care.” I lean forward, crushing my lips against his again. I feel him twitch inside of me, still hard, and I rock against him once more, wanting him all over again. “I want a family with you, Alessio. I know you want time—but I think we've both seen that we don't know how much of it we're going to get. I want whatever we have together, however it happens. And I don't want anything to stand in the way of that.”

For a moment, I'm not sure if I've convinced him. But he stands up, lifting me with him so that my legs wrap around his hips, water sloshing everywhere as he steps out of the tub and carries me to the bed. He spills me back onto it, careless of how wet we both are still, pushing my damp hair out of my face as he starts to thrust inside of me again.

“*Bellissima*,” he whispers, his lips grazing over mine. “My wife. My love—”

He groans it, over and over, punctuating each thrust with soft words, filling the air with promises of love. I wrap myself around him, clinging to him, arching under the weight of him atop me until I feel him let go inside of me again, this time without hesitation, and I come too. I shudder around him, moaning his name, and I know that this is everything that I want.

He has always been everything that I've wanted.

Even in the darkest times, Alessio has kept me safe. And I know he always will.

Forever.

Epilogue

Gianna



It takes three months before we can go back home. Adrian Drakos generously hosts us for the first month of that, until we feel confident that no one else will be following us to Greece. Then we take up residence in a private rented home, with so much security that some days I feel stifled.

But most days, I just feel happy—happier than I’ve been in so long. Greece becomes our home away from home for a little while, a place for Alessio and I to fall deeper in love as the fear and grief of the months, weeks, and days before slowly softens and becomes something more manageable. I still have nightmares, but he’s always there to soothe me back to sleep, and they’re fewer and fewer as the days go on. And as our time in Greece stretches to two months, and then three, I find that I have something to tell Alessio—but I want to wait until we’re back home.

Slowly, as we wait it all out in a place that—like so many others for us now—has both good and bad memories, the pieces of it all come together. They might have sooner, if my father hadn’t kept me so in the dark about anything to do with his business—and if he hadn’t trusted Lorenzo, a man who I’d never felt comfortable around, so completely.

“Promise me you’ll listen, if there’s ever anyone I feel unsure about,” I tell Alessio one night as we lay in bed, not long after finding out the role that Lorenzo played in it all—that he helped the Leone family breach our defenses, helped change the guard logs—and that he was responsible for the information that led Enzo here, to Greece, and to us.

“I listened to you about Lorenzo when I first arrived, didn’t I?” Alessio asks, and I have to concede that he did. The fact that he *wouldn’t* have been Alessio’s right hand—something I think he suspected from the start once he knew what was in my father’s will—was a driving force behind his defection. Enzo promised him wealth and power and a place that he wouldn’t have achieved otherwise. Whether or not Enzo would have kept his promises, Lorenzo believed him.

“Sometimes I wish we could stop being who we are,” I whisper in the darkness, curled against Alessio’s side. “All of these machinations, the betrayals—even if we’re careful, there’s no guarantee it won’t happen to us one day. Sometimes, I wish I could just be ordinary.”

“I know.” Alessio turns onto his side, looking at me. “There’s your father’s legacy to think of. He entrusted it to us both. We can’t just run away from it. But we’ll—try to do things differently. You’re going to go to Northwestern when we go home. When we have children, we’ll raise them to think about things differently, to look at the world in a way that the families around us now don’t. Your father tried to do that with you, and we’ll continue it.” He kisses me softly, and at that moment, I want more than anything to tell him the secret I’m holding onto. But I don’t—not yet.

I want to save that for when we go back home.

The moment we walk in the doors, I’m glad that I did. Even with all the bad that’s happened here, walking into the familiar wood-floored foyer, with the scent of vanilla and the hint of lemon cleaning supplies filling the air, the furnishings and decorations and art that are all so familiar, I feel like I’m stepping back into an embrace.

“I think I could sleep for a year,” Alessio groans, and I laugh softly, taking his hand.

“I have something I want to show you first.”

I don’t know the other bosses’ wives well, though Alessio has gotten to know Nikolai Vasilev and Theo McNeil somewhat, since he arrived here and took my father’s place. I went out on a limb and called Marika McNeil, asking her if she could help

me while we were in Greece—and to my surprise, she did. With the help of her sister-in-law, Lilliana, Nikolai’s wife, they sent me pictures back and forth for weeks, asking for approvals and choices. It all led to this—the room that I lead Alessio up to on the third floor, just down from our bedroom suite.

Alessio frowns at me. “What’s this?” he asks, and I smile at him, trying to contain myself.

“Close your eyes,” I tell him, and I open the door, leading him inside. “Now you can look.”

It takes him a moment for it to dawn on him. I watch as he looks around the room, taking in the yellow wallpaper with tiny ducks on it, the white wainscoting, the cheery art on the walls, and the rocking chair with the soft blanket thrown over the back. And then his gaze lands on the crib along one wall, and I see realization spring into his eyes.

“Gianna”

He’s speechless, and for a moment, I’m worried. He’d said, after all, that he wanted time with me—that he wasn’t sure if he was ready yet for a baby. But we’d also made the decision in Greece to let things happen as they would, and I bite my lip, nerves working their way through me.

“Are you happy?” I ask finally, and he nods quickly, still looking around the room as if he’s not sure that he’s really standing here.

“I—of course I am. How—when—” He’s still spluttering, my usually composed and elegant husband unable to string his words together, and I laugh. I can’t help it.

I go up on my tiptoes, taking his face in my hands and kissing him softly. “Marika and Lilliana helped me while we were in Greece. I couldn’t have done it without them. It was really sweet of them, too, since they hardly know me.” I bite my lip, taking a step back as I look around the room. “Maybe I’ll finally have some friends. Lilliana and I can figure out this mom thing together.”

“*Fuck*,” Alessio breathes, reaching out and crushing me to his chest. “You’re really pregnant. I didn’t think—I’m happy. I’m really happy. I just didn’t think it would happen so soon—”

He kisses me again, his mouth drifting to my neck, my collarbones, down between the open neckline of my shirt before he sinks to his knees, pressing his mouth against my still-flat stomach. He stays that way for a long moment, his hands on my hips, before he suddenly stands again, sweeping me into his arms and carrying me out of the nursery and down the hall to our bedroom.

“You *are* already pregnant,” he murmurs, his fingers hastily undoing my buttons, “but that doesn’t mean we need to stop this.”

“I see absolutely no reason why we should.” I laugh, kissing him again as he slips my shirt off, his hands already at the zipper of my jeans. I’m just as eager to get his clothes off, to be in *our* bed again. As wonderful and romantic as our vacation turned out to be, this is our home, and this is the place where I fell in love with my husband.

We stumble back to the bed together, Alessio’s bare skin against mine as he kisses his way down my body again, lips brushing over every inch of me. “We can go back to all of our games tomorrow,” he whispers against my skin. “But tonight, it’s just us. Do whatever you want, Gianna. Come as much as you like. I just want you.”

When his mouth slips between my thighs, lips and tongue sucking and licking at all the spots he knows so well now, it only takes me seconds to fall apart against him. I cry out his name, fingers clawing into the blankets as he keeps going, his tongue working me through my orgasm and into another as I writhe beneath him, bucking against his mouth.

I feel his fingers slip into me, two and then a third, thrusting and curling inside of me as he sucks on my clit, his tongue fluttering over the pulsing nerves. I still want more—I want him inside of me, but I can’t speak through the pleasure to beg for it. All I can do is moan his name, twisting under him as he makes me come again, and then he finally moves up, his

mouth crushed against mine again as I feel his cock push urgently between my legs.

I can taste myself on his lips as he kisses me, but I don't care. I slide my fingers through his hair, down to the back of his neck, my legs wrapping around his hips as he slides into me, hot and hard and slow, until he's as deeply inside of me as he can be. His fingers lock with mine, raising my hands over my head, his hips moving in a constant rhythm as he kisses me, every part of his skin touching all of mine. All I can think is that I belong to him, that I always have. As he rocks inside of me, the pressure of his body grinding against my clit sending me over the edge into another orgasm, I know exactly what I want.

"I want to be yours," I whisper against his mouth, breaking the kiss. "*All* of me," I whisper the word with emphasis, unable to describe exactly what it is that I want, my cheeks flushing hot and red just from the thought. But I can tell from the look on Alessio's face that he knows exactly what I meant.

"Are you sure?" he murmurs, going very still inside of me, but I feel his hips twitch, his cock throbbing. I know he wants it, too.

My teeth sink into my lower lip, and I nod. "Yes," I whisper. "Please. I want—I want it."

Alessio groans, thrusting inside of me once more, and then he pulls out slowly, letting me feel every thick inch of him as he slips out. I let out a soft whimper at the loss of him inside of me, feeling empty and hollow, but he doesn't leave me that way for long.

His fingers slip inside of me, coated with my arousal, and I moan as he thrusts them into me once, twice—and then slides them lower, spreading my arousal over the small, tight hole beneath. I gasp as he circles it, slowly pressing a finger inside, his gaze on mine as he watches me.

"Tell me if it's too much," he murmurs. "I'll stop—we can finish this in the shower. Or not at all, if you're in too much pain. I'll always stop if you need me to, *dolce*."

“I will,” I whisper. “But I want you. Please—”

His finger slips deeper, his other hand going to my clit, teasing me into a frenzy of arousal until I’m gasping, nearly on the edge again. When I tumble over into another orgasm, moaning his name, he adds a second finger, thrusting into me gently as I fall apart, and when I look at him, I can see that he’s almost painfully hard, his cock brushing against his stomach, visibly throbbing. I know how badly he wants me, how hard it is to hold back. Still, he goes slowly as he always does, careful to make sure I’m ready before I feel his fingers slip out, his cock brushing against where they were a moment before.

“Are you sure?” he murmurs, and I nod, moaning as his fingers brush over my clit again.

“Yes,” I whisper. “*Please.*”

Alessio groans as he pushes into me, just the slightest bit, and I gasp. It hurts at first—a burning pressure even more intense than when we slept together the first time, but the unmistakable look of pleasure on his face and the sounds he makes turn that pain into a strange kind of pleasure almost immediately.

“*God*, you’re so fucking tight,” he growls. “Fuck—I was already close, and now—”

He goes so slowly, just like the first time. Inch by inch, he presses deeper, his fingers rolling over my clit in slow circles that leave me moaning and writhing beneath him, the pain disappearing into a sort of fullness that—mingled with Alessio’s pleasure and the filthy way that this all makes me feel—turns into something that feels so fucking good.

“I’m going to—” my voice breaks off on a moan, my hips arching up, pushing back so that Alessio slides the rest of the way into my ass. He lets out a choked, strangled sound as he goes absolutely still for a moment, his fingers still working my clit.

“Yes—” he breathes. “Fucking come on my cock. Come with my cock in your ass. My good girl. Sweet, beautiful girl—” He nearly moans it as I come apart, bucking underneath him as

I throw my head back, the pleasure sweeping over me as I tighten around his cock and I feel him push forward. My legs are pinned back against my chest as he groans, his face buried against my shoulder as I feel him jerk and shudder against me, the hot rush of his cum filling me as his lips graze against my throat, whispering how much he loves me as I arch against him, the two of us pressed tightly together as we come.

He slides out of me a moment later, rolling onto his back next to me, breathless. “Are you alright?” he asks, glancing over at me, and I laugh softly, turning to curl against his chest.

“I’m fine,” I whisper. “I promise. It was exactly what I wanted.”

Alessio wraps his arms around me, holding me close. “You are perfect,” he murmurs. “More perfect than I could have ever dreamed.” His lips press against the side of my head, the two of us tangled together as I close my eyes, blissful in the arms of the man I love. “I love you,” he says softly, as if reading my thoughts, and I tilt my chin up to kiss him once more, already slipping away into sleep.

“I love you too,” I whisper. And then I drift off, safe and protected, knowing the future I have in front of me is the one I’ve wanted all along.

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I thought he was nothing more than a rebellious fling. But now I'm his...with no way out.

Ibiza was meant to be an escape. With my father dead, my brother sent away, and my mother frantically trying to marry me off to anyone who will have me, all I want is to forget all of this is happening. So when my friends give me the opportunity to sneak away with them to the mecca of yachts, parties, extravagance and sin—I take my chance and go.

I have every intention of leaving my worries behind me in Chicago, and my virginity in Ibiza—and David is everything I want. Handsome, charming, and utterly uninterested in anything beyond our brief fling, the whirlwind romance he takes me on is one I plan to enjoy every second of, taking only the memories of it when I go.

But too late, I find out that memories aren't all I have left of our time together. And when I discover that the man I'm meant to marry is the same one who swept me off my feet an ocean away, that secret becomes something far worse. It could end our unwanted union—or make it impossible to escape.

I thought I'd never see him again. But now he's my reluctant groom—and I'm going to be his ruined bride.