

A woman with long, dark, wavy hair is shown from the back, looking over her shoulder. She is wearing a black, backless dress with thin straps. The background is dark with a subtle diamond pattern. The text is overlaid on the image.

THE  
TAINTED VOWS  
DUET

A VOW OF

*Love & Vengeance*

LP LOVELL

# **A VOW OF LOVE AND VENGEANCE**

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## TAINED VOWS BOOK TWO

LP LOVELL

# CONTENTS

1. Gio
  2. Emilia
  3. Gio
  4. Gio
  5. Emilia
  6. Emilia
  7. Gio
  8. Gio
  9. Emilia
  10. Gio
  11. Emilia
  12. Emilia
  13. Gio
  14. Emilia
  15. Emilia
  16. Gio
  17. Emilia
  18. Emilia
  19. Gio
  20. Emilia
  21. Emilia
  22. Gio
  23. Emilia
  24. Gio
  25. Emilia
  26. Emilia
  27. Gio
  28. Emilia
- Epilogue

Acknowledgments

About the Author

## GIO

**E**milia's breaths were deep and even in sleep. If I hadn't witnessed it, I'd never have known how hysterical she was only an hour ago.

I'd washed her father's blood away and held her while she broke. Then I'd brought her here, to the Hamptons house. Where I could protect her and keep her safe from the oncoming storm, and there would be a storm.

Because her uncle had fucking used me. He'd made an alliance, forced me to take his niece's unwilling hand to seal it, then betrayed me.

Oh, a storm was coming, all right. I would make it rain blood in the streets of Chicago. Betrayal was a knife that cut deep and hard, and I would repay the favor. Starting right now.

My little kitten didn't even stir when I pushed to my feet and brushed my lips over her hair.

After her tears had stopped, she'd fallen into a silence that scared me. I thought maybe she'd gone into some kind of shock. She didn't fight me when I gave her the sleeping pills. Her compliance concerned me, but at least she would be out for a few hours.

I had some things I needed to take care of right now.

Jackson was waiting for me at the bottom of the stairs, one hip propped against the banister and a wild grin on his face. “Did The Outfit princess really kill Roberto Donato?”

I nodded, and his grin widened.

“I like her.” Of course, that would make him like her.

I started down the hall. “Let’s go have a chat with Andreas.”

Jackson followed me through the house and down into the basement that looked like something out of a horror movie. The corridor was dark and dingy, and the door to the interrogation room was smeared crimson, the handle covered in sticky finger marks. Could no one clean up after themselves?

The overwhelming metallic scent of blood hit me the second we stepped inside. Andreas hung from a ceiling hook that went through his wrists. Through, because he had no hands to cuff.

My enforcer did love removing extremities. The bloody stumps of his wrists were bandaged purely to stop him from bleeding out. Still, blood tracked down his arms, streaming in rivulets over his body. As if that weren’t enough, he was covered in multiple cuts, deep slices that added to the crimson canvas that was Andreas’s skin.

Jackson never went easy on anyone, but sometimes—very occasionally—I pitied his victims. Not this one. The mafia was a business, but it was also family; it was personal. And this felt extremely fucking personal right now.

Rarely was I made to feel stupid, but he and Sergio Donato had made a fool of me. They’d put my family at risk, cost me men, very nearly cost me Tommy, who was like a brother to me. And Andreas well knew, blood was repaid in blood. He



knew what we would do should he be discovered, and yet he still chose Donato. Was it so hard to be loyal?

Andreas's head hung, and from the shallow rattle of his chest, death was calling his name.

"Did you at least get everything before he..." I waved a hand toward the man's barely breathing form.

Jackson leaned against the blood-spattered wall. "Oh yeah. Sang like a canary the second he saw my knife."

So the copious wounds and missing hands *were* just for fun then. Not that I blamed Jackson. Andreas deserved everything he got, and he'd receive no mercy from me.

Grabbing the rat's blood-soaked hair, I lifted his head and slapped his cheek. He groaned and whimpered like the pussy he was. "The least you could do is die with a little dignity, Andreas. Even your wife wasn't such a pussy."

He moaned out a sob, openly weeping. The only thing worse than a traitor was one who couldn't face the consequences of his actions when they bit him in the ass. "I gave you the opportunity to protect your family from Nero. Do you remember? I sat at that table and gave you a fucking out. So, not only are you a traitor to me but also to your wife and kids."

And that might have been what pissed me off the most because I would never do that. No amount of money or threats could make me risk my family.

I could let him die. Leave him here to bleed out. But that was too easy. Rage beat away at me, demanding he suffer in the worst way. This man would shit on his brothers, aid in their deaths, risk his own innocent children...

“I hope they paid you well, Andreas.” I moved over to the metal cart in the corner of the room, picking up the gas canister. “You know how I kill rats.” In a way that sent a message that dissuaded any man from making the same mistake. Traitors’ deaths were a grizzly business.

He moaned when I approached him, as though trying to talk. When he opened his mouth, I saw that his tongue had been cut out.

I glanced at Jackson. “Good job. I don’t want any information. Seeing as how the fucker has no tongue and no hands to even write with.”

Jackson laughed like the twisted bastard he was. He tapped his temple. “Don’t you worry.”

Shaking my head, I upended the canister over Andreas’s head while he wept, coughing and choking as he inhaled it.

Stepping back, I met the pleading gaze of Andreas’s one unswollen eye, then plucked my lighter from my pocket. He mumbled a slew of sounds, probably trying to beg, but the time for begging had long passed.

I flipped open the lighter and rolled the flint before tossing it into the small puddle at his feet. Flames caught and ripped upward in a rush, hungry for their victim. He screamed. Oh, how he screamed.

I relished in his pain, letting the sound drive my rage, feed my lust for revenge.

The scent of burning flesh and gasoline filled the air as I turned and walked away. That was what I did to traitors, and Sergio Donato was next.

Andreas’s screams followed me all the way to my office—becoming more agonized and desperate, almost inhuman.

He was calling out a message and a warning, and every man in this house could hear it. They would spread the word until everyone who worked for me knew their fate should they ever betray me. I wanted respect, but I would take fear.

By the time I'd poured a drink, Andreas had fallen silent. If he wasn't dead yet, he would be soon.

Jackson took a seat on the leather couch, and I handed him a glass of whiskey.

I leaned against the front of my desk and downed my own. "Make sure his wife and kids are taken care of. Money. House. Whatever they need." I was a monster, but I would never punish innocents for the crimes of a husband or father. I simply wanted Andreas to go to the grave believing he had caused the death of his family. Cruel perhaps, but I had nothing *but* cruelty for a rat.

"You're way too nice for this shit."

"I'm sure the smoking corpse in the basement thinks so. What do you have on Sergio?"

"Not much more than we already knew. Everything was a setup. Sergio had a rat here and in the mob. He was feeding the mob information about our shipments, pretending they were his. Paddy never intended to hit us." Which meant we weren't really enemies.

However, I had now killed his nephew and his brother, so maybe we were. Only one way to find out.

"Good. Cut off Roberto Donato's head and send it to Patrick O'Hara with an invitation to meet."

"Okay." He pushed to his feet and headed for the door.

“And Jackson?” I waited for him to glance at me. “As far as anyone knows, I killed Roberto. His men are dead. The cameras are wiped. No one can ever know it was her.”

He nodded. “Understood.”

**EMILIA**

I didn't know how long I'd been in this room, in this bed. Days? A week? I'd lost track, consumed by my guilt and grief. I didn't even know where I was.

From the sparkling chandelier to the heavy curtains covering the tall windows, everything about this place was about as far from Gio's modern penthouse as possible. The only familiarity was the soothing scent of pine and mint that clung to the sheets.

His scent may have lingered, but I hadn't seen much of the man himself since he had brought me here. Last night I woke up with him wrapped around me, but in the cold light of morning, he was gone, and I wasn't sure whether I'd dreamed it.

He said he was going to send me away. I'd agreed, and yet... I missed him, craved the warm embrace of his arms, as though he could make me feel whole for just a moment. His absence only added to my heartache, an extra log on my self-made pyre.

Gio may have been gone, but Renzo was a constant. Even now, my brother sat in the chair by the window. Silent. Unmoving. Always watching, as though I might fall apart at any minute.

At first, he'd tried to talk to me. He told me he knew what I'd done, that he didn't blame me or hate me, but how could he not? I had killed our father. I couldn't even bring myself to look at him.

He tried to comfort me, to make me eat and shower, but I just wanted to be left alone. To simply exist within the never-ending embrace of my pain until I felt both everything and nothing. Numb. It was a strange kind of numb.

There was a knock on the door, followed by the creaking of hinges and footsteps over the hardwood floor. My gaze remained fixed on the wall, hoping whoever it was would go away.

"How is she?" a low voice asked, a voice I recognized all too well—Gio.

In my periphery, I saw Renzo get up and shake his head. "No better."

"Give me a moment."

More footsteps before the door clicked shut again and tension descended over the room. It was the feeling I got when he was watching me, a shiver of awareness snaking down my spine.

"Emilia." He rounded the bed and dropped to a crouch in front of me. His hair was damp from a shower, his usual black suit in place. A day's worth of stubble covered his jaw, making him look even more dangerous than normal, and it was the only indicator that he was anything less than perfectly in control. That scrutinizing gaze swept over me like he could see the wounds I'd carved on my soul and was offended by them. "Get up."

I hadn't seen him in days, and that was all he had to say?

His lips twitched in a shadow of a smile when I glared at him. “Glad to see there’s still some fight left in you, princess.”

In the next breath, I was wrenched from the bed and into his arms. “What are you doing?” My voice was croaky from disuse. I would have struggled against him, but honestly, I didn’t have the energy.

“It’s been three days.” He marched me to the bathroom.

“I don’t want—”

“I don’t care what you want, Emilia. You aren’t responding to Renzo, so now you get me.” He put me down on the vanity, and I shivered when the cold marble met the bare skin of my thighs. “Your father is dead. You killed him.” His words were like a pickax to the raw wound in my chest.

All that festering ugliness rose from where it lingered just beneath the surface, breaking through my blissful numbness and drowning me, sucking me into its dark depths.

“Do not move.” He stepped back and cut on the water for the shower. Then came back and pushed between my legs. “I’m not going to let you break over that man.”

He couldn’t control this. I was breaking, and in a fucked up way, I was glad of it because if I didn’t... if I just carried on after what I had done, that would truly make me a monster, wouldn’t it? It would make me like them. Sergio and Matteo, and Gio... numb to death.

He gripped the hem of his oversized shirt I wore and pulled it over my head before tossing it onto the floor. Fingers trailed my cheek reverently, lifting my gaze to his. Right then, he looked at me like he’d burn the entire world around us if the flames would chase the darkness from my mind.

I felt like an exposed nerve under his scrutiny, like he could see every tainted inch of me, and I hated it. I needed to say something, anything, to stop him from looking at me like I was some broken little doll.

“I don’t regret it.” Lie, lie, lie.

I didn’t regret that my dad was dead. I regretted that I’d been the one to do it. I felt pity for the naïve little girl who had loved her father, who wanted to be loved, and then just wanted to be free and was now covered in mafia blood.

Gio touched his forehead to mine. His breath washed over my face, and I inhaled the mint-tinged scent of it as though he were breathing oxygen into my starved lungs. “Tell me why you did it, piccola.”

When I tried to pull away, he wouldn’t let me, his fingers knotting in my hair and pinning me in place. I didn’t want to talk about it.

He tugged my head back, and when he forced me to look at him, I almost flinched from the ice in his eyes. Gone was the man who had held me on so many nights, and in his place was a mafia boss who was done waiting for answers. “You will tell me why you slipped from my bed, shot one of my men, then left yourself unprotected while you crossed New York and walked into a hotel full of Outfit men. *Alone.*” Each word grew more strained, his anger a rolling wave he’d clearly gone to great efforts to conceal until now. His hand slipped from my hair to my throat, fingers flexing against my skin in warning.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” I whispered.

His grip tightened, and I relished in it. Wanted him to squeeze a little harder, to hurt me. To punish me. His gaze searched mine like he could see every deep, dark secret swimming



through my head. “That’s where you’re at, huh? You want me to break you?” His lips twisted into a sinister smile. “Do you feel bad for murdering your father, Emilia?”

The figurative knife I’d buried in my own gut twisted, stealing the air from my lungs.

“It’s pretty cold, sweetheart. The man who raised you…”

All those ugly emotions rattled against the confines of the fragile glass box I’d put them in. Waiting. Just waiting to sink their claws into me, to make me bleed all over again. His thumb swept over the side of my neck as though he could see me fracturing beneath his words and couldn’t help but try to soothe me, even though he was the cause.

“How long had you been planning it? Since he gave you to me?”

“Stop!”

“Or since he gave Chiara to Matteo?”

At the mention of my sister’s name, tears stung my eyes. No. I would not cry. Not even for Chiara. Was this what Gio wanted? To see me suffer. Did he hate me so?

“Tell me why, Emilia.”

“It wasn’t supposed to be him!”

His grip on my throat immediately softened, and the silence that fell between us was broken only by my ragged breaths and the running water.

“Sergio,” he said.

“Yes.” My gaze dropped to a slither of ink that peaked between the buttons of his shirt collar.

I waited for him to berate me; instead, his anger dissipated, his gaze softening as he stroked my cheek.

“Never again look at me like you want me to hurt you, piccola.” His lips pressed over mine, and for a second, he took every thought in my head and extinguished it.

The kiss was possessive, branding, and I lost myself in it. His lips dragged across my cheek to my ear. “And I haven’t forgotten that you put your life at risk. You will be punished...”

Just not today. Because today I was still the fragile little mafia princess.

Broken.

Wounded.

Weak.

Gripping my waist, he pulled me from the vanity and guided me into the shower. He remained for a few moments, watching me, before slipping from the room.

I missed the strength of his fingers at my throat, the distraction of his lips, all while hating him. Because I’d been so perfectly numb, and he’d pulled me from it.

My mind instantly began spiraling. Blood and guilt and self-hatred. My legs threatened to buckle under the weight of it all. Too much. It was too much.

I fumbled with the shower controls and cranked the temperature up as high as possible. Resting my head against the tile, I almost sighed in relief as the water scalded my skin. That pain was every bit as powerful as Gio’s kiss, as his bruising grip. My mind emptied once more, and the agony that ate away at me paused in place of the exterior pain.

I knew I was falling apart, that this wasn't okay, but I didn't know how to be okay or if I ever could be again. And so I resigned myself to my own destruction.

**GIO**

**T**ommy peered into the paper bag with a scowl. “Three bullets and you couldn’t even bring me one cheeseburger.”

I never thought I’d be so happy to hear the ungrateful bastard bitch and moan about his beloved junk food. He looked like absolute shit, but he was alive. “You’re healing. You need—”

“I’ve stayed plenty healthy on a steady diet of fat and sugar.” He tugged at the pale-blue hospital gown that hung off one shoulder. “I had multiple gunshot wounds, Gio, not a heart attack.”

I shook my head and fell into the chair beside his bed. The fact that he’d pulled through was the only bright point in a shower of shit right now. Roberto’s head had been sent to Patrick O’Hara. I was banking on the mob boss being every bit as irritated at being set up as I was.

Roberto’s unexpected demise had set things into motion faster than I would have liked, but now I would control the narrative. I’d sent Sergio his own special message. This would appear as a strategic move on my part.

Revenge.

I was braced for a bloody response, but Sergio had gone ominously quiet. Neither he nor Matteo Romano had been seen by any of my sources in The Outfit for days. I didn't like it.

Sergio should have been rampaging through my streets right now, killing my men. The man who bides his time is always the most dangerous. Impulsive emotion exposed weakness.

"How is Emilia?" Tommy asked.

The same as yesterday and the day before when he'd first woken up and asked about her.

"No different." Still didn't leave my room, barely left the bed, and only ate if I sat there and made her.

For the first time in my life, I didn't know what to do. I couldn't help her; I couldn't understand what it was like to ever be innocent enough to regret killing someone. Couldn't understand her grief over a man she hated enough to kill. But, he was her father. My father and I were estranged when he had died, but I still mourned him, or perhaps just the relationship we'd never actually had.

"I still can't believe she killed him." He shook his head and winced as he tried to lift himself up in the hospital bed.

"I don't know what to do. I thought she'd just come out of it on her own, but it's been a week."

If anything, she was getting worse. Each day the pain in her eyes lessened, but it was replaced with... nothing. Just this black void, as though she was slipping away bit by bit.

"She's probably never lost anyone, Gio, and she definitely won't have killed before. She's drowning."

I hated how fucking helpless I felt. I could control dangerous men, run an entire empire, and put the fear of God into my enemies, but one small woman had the power to bring me to my knees. And that was terrifying. Emilia should have been at the bottom of my list of priorities right now, and yet there she was, right at the top, a flashing beacon. Even while I was handling everything else, she was a constant in my mind.

Tommy tilted his head, studying me. “You love her.”

“I...” Did I? Was this what love felt like? To be utterly consumed by one person, to the detriment of everything else in my life? I cleared my throat and pushed to my feet. “I need to go.”

He huffed a laugh, then flinched against the pain. “Fucking asshole Irish,” he grumbled under his breath while pressing the button on his morphine pump several times. “Should have kept that fucker alive for me, just so I could poke some holes in him.”

“Trust me, Una and Jackson poked plenty of holes in him.”  
Cut off a few body parts too...

He pressed the button again.

“You know you’re only getting one dose. Stop pressing it.” I swatted his hand away—he was a terrible patient. “I’ll be back tomorrow.”

“Bring a damn cheeseburger,” he said as I headed for the door. “And smuggle in some extra morphine.” I shook my head as I stepped into the brightly lit hallway, passing the men I’d posted to guard Tommy’s room.

I had a million problems right now, but seeing my best friend alive put a small smile on my face. Now, to address my other big issue...

Tommy was right. Emilia was drowning, and I needed to pull her out. There was only one way I knew to do that, and as sick as it was, my dick twitched at the thought.

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**E**milia sat in the chair at the window, the gray light of fall making her look washed out and sallow. Her knees were pulled to her chest, her distant gaze focused on the gardens beyond the glass. A sketchpad rested on her lap, a pencil clasped between her fingers, but the page remained blank. Just like her. She was a ghost, a shadow of the girl I'd known only a week ago, as though grief had seeped into her, staining her.

Her fragility made me want to hold her, to piece my little kitten back together until she hissed at me once more. But if hugs and sweet words were enough, she wouldn't be getting worse.

“Emilia.”

She blinked, her gaze shifting to me. Shadows lingered both beneath and within her eyes, and I missed the spark that always seemed right on the verge of turning into a wildfire.

“You have to leave this room at some point.”

With a slow blink, she turned back to the window.

I moved in front of her, blocking her view, forcing her to look at me. “Tommy's awake. He wants to see you.” I hoped he would be the thing that snapped her out of this, even if I was frustrated that I couldn't.

“I'm glad he's alive,” she whispered and went back to staring at a spot on my shirt as though she could see through me to the outside world.

Fuck this. I wasn't going to let her break over Roberto Donato, of all things. She would not shred herself for a man who got everything he deserved.

“Stand up, piccola.”

She slowly lifted those dead eyes to me, and when she didn't move, I held up a finger.

“One.”

Her brows pulled together. “Gio—”

“Two.”

“No.”

I couldn't help but smile at the tiniest thread of defiance from her. “Feel free to test me, princess. You're already owed a punishment, and I'm still so very angry at you for putting yourself in danger.” Anger spiked through me the same way it always did when I thought about her trying to kill a damn mafia boss, a dangerous man with armed guards... I tamped it down because anger wouldn't serve either of us.

I would show her with action what she meant to me and the repercussions when she tried to take herself away from me. “You should know better than to push me, though.” I grabbed her throat, and she let out a thready breath when I dragged her to her feet.

Fuck, I loved seeing my tattooed fingers against her smooth skin. It was a perfect representation of the dark stain I was on her glowing purity. I wanted to taint her, to infect her so entirely that no one would ever doubt who she belonged to. Tugging her close, I brushed my lips over her jaw, inhaling the sweet scent of her.



“Three,” I murmured against her soft skin. I turned and backed her toward the bed. When I pushed her away, she fell, bouncing on the mattress. “Don’t move, Emilia, or you’ll just make it worse on yourself.”

She stared up at me, a frown marring her youthful features. “Gio, I don’t—”

“I can gag you if you prefer? I like hearing you beg me, princess, but your silence will do just fine for what I have in mind.”

She snapped her mouth shut, and I plucked a length of silk from my jacket pocket. I yanked both hands above her head before binding them. And she remained so beautifully submissive and compliant as I did it because somewhere, deep down, she knew she needed this.

Emilia was lost, crying out for me to find her, to remind her of her place in this blood-stained world. And it was right here, as mine.

I fastened the restraints to the metal headboard and stepped away. She looked so perfectly vulnerable, and I pictured her bound to my bed in every different way, her legs held apart, pink pussy open and dripping. Helpless. Fuck. My dick went from semi-hard to granite in an instant.

She tugged against the restraints as though she wanted to escape, but I knew she didn’t. Not really. For the first time in a week, there was a spark in her eyes, even if it was laced with hatred. I’d take it over her indifference or pain any day.

“You can hate me all you like, Emilia. But you need this, and I need you.” I slipped my jacket from my shoulders, and she quickly became a slave to her own desire, every bit of her

focused on me. I didn't want her to think of anything but me and her, and us.

When I was naked, she snapped her gaze from my hard dick and squeezed her eyes shut. Fighting. Always fighting.

"I think—"

"Don't think, Emilia." I gripped the hem of her shirt, and she shivered as I slid it up her body, then left it wrapped around her bound arms, covering her eyes.

Her lips parted, a shaky inhale making its way past them. God, she looked perfect, her body stretched out like my own personal playground.

I sucked one nipple into my mouth before biting down and dragging a gasp from her.

When I kissed her, she was slow to respond, hesitant, as though waking from some dormant state. I would drag her out of her own mind and bring her to me kicking and screaming if I had to.

Those plump lips parted, and she sucked in a deep breath, inhaling me as though I were the oxygen she needed to breathe once more. Then she was kissing me back, demanding my possession. I gave it to her the same way I would always give her anything—everything.

Our tongues collided in lashing strokes, one part desire, the other punishment. She pitched up, chasing me. *Yes, sweet Emilia, chase salvation.*

I would erase every thought from her mind until she was begging for me.

I gripped her hips and flipped her over, the silk twisting easily with the movement. She was my perfect little puppet on a

string, and I couldn't wait to put my handprints all over her ass.

As I straddled her thighs, I fought the urge to slide my dick straight inside her. My hands swept over the smooth expanse of her back, her hips, to her thighs. She trembled at the gentle touch, waiting, anticipating. She jumped when I brought my hand down on her ass.

“If you're hoping for pleasure, you'll be waiting a while, piccola.”

She and I had some things to hash out. This was about more than just pulling her out of her head.

“Hurt me, Gio,” she almost begged.

I wouldn't. Not really.

I replayed the look she'd given me a few days ago when my fingers had been wrapped around her throat.

She had wanted the pain, the punishment, and she'd get it, but not for killing her father. No, her offenses were far worse than that... “The night you killed your father—”

She tensed as though just the words sent her spiraling, but I would no longer tiptoe around her. She couldn't continue in this toxic state of denial. Another slap had the skin on her cheek turning pink, though she didn't make a sound.

“That night, Jackson found a rat.” *Slap*. “A rat planted by your uncle to fuck me over.” This time when my hand landed on her, it was harder, and I cautioned myself when she flinched from the blow. “He woke to his call and you gone. I thought you'd betrayed me, Emilia,” I admitted through gritted teeth as I landed the next blow. “That you were working with Sergio and had run back to him.”

“I wouldn’t,” she whimpered as I stroked a hand over her reddened ass.

“No. But you would try to kill your uncle—a mafia boss.”

Another smack, and I swear she arched her back into it. And all the while, she was so impeccably silent. Not a single plea or cry from those innocent lips.

“A man with armed guards. A place with little chance of success or escape.” *Smack.*

“Gio,” my name was a prayer on her lips that had my dick throbbing in response.

“You’re mine, Emilia.”

She was, and yet I’d dropped the ball and failed to protect her, even if it was from herself.

“Even your fucking death belongs to me. And you were willing to gift it to that piece of shit.”

“I’m... I’m sorry.”

“Are you?” I swept my tongue up the length of her spine at the same time that I dipped a hand between her legs.

Fuck, she was soaked. Her hips squirmed, trying to force me inside her.

“What do you want, princess?”

She dropped her forehead to the mattress. “I don’t know.” Her voice broke. Good.

*Shatter for me, my love.*

“I think you do.” I pressed one finger deep inside her, and she clenched around me, a small moan slipping from her throat.

“You. I want you,” she said in a rush.

Satisfaction thrummed through me as I slipped another finger inside her. No one was as responsive as Emilia. To both pleasure and pain.

As untouched as she was, she'd become hard-wired to react to me, and it was intoxicating. Her pussy clenched around my fingers, and I wanted nothing more than to feel her grip my cock like that. So wet and tight. Instead, I pulled out, dragging a trail of moisture upward and around her ass.

She tensed, and I tsked under my breath.

“You don't get to decide how you have me, Emilia. But I will have every bit of you. Every thought, every sweet moan.” I leaned over her, raking my teeth over her shoulder. “Every fucking hole.” I eased a finger into her virgin ass.

She sucked in a sharp breath, and I licked up the side of her neck, barely holding it together as her ass clamped around my finger.

She shook, breathy little moans trickling from her throat in the most perfect symphony. This was her punishment, but also her therapy. I needed to break down every barrier she had and leave her with only me. I would bring her back to me with the reminder firmly imprinted on her skin to never again do anything that might take her from me.

“Reckless.” Thrust. “Defiant.” With my free hand, I reached between her legs and stroked her clit.

She writhed beneath me, her defenses crumbling to dust.

“You drive me fucking insane, piccola.” And she always had.

My dick was leaking pre-cum, and the urge to fuck her was so damn strong. When I pinched her clit, she came apart, shaking and moaning, her perfect ass clamping down on my finger. God, she was everything I'd ever wanted.

“Never letting you go, Emilia.” I gripped her hip and fisted my dick before slamming into her pussy.

She keened at the rough entry, and I stilled, reveling in the feeling of having her wrapped around me once more. A week had felt like an eternity. Now that I’d had a taste of her, I knew I’d never get enough. No one could compare, and nothing could ever match this. She was heaven on Earth.

I drove into her without mercy, and her nails raked into the pillows, back bowing in an attempt to force me even deeper. Her innocence was already so corrupted.

She tugged against her restraints as she turned feral. She was my reckoning, pulling me apart at the seams until I couldn’t remember what it was ever like not to feel this complete.

I realized how much she’d truly scared me that night. How close I had come to losing her. Even the thought of her betrayal hadn’t been enough to drown out the fear. The memory made me rabid, and I fucked her harder as if I could imprint myself on her fucking soul.

“You’re mine.”

It was a punishment and a claiming, love and war made flesh. I shoved the shirt up to her wrists, exposing her face before I fisted her hair. I yanked her head back until her spine bowed and she took even more of my dick. “From the moment this pussy bled on my cock, you’ve been mine.”

“Gio—”

“Say it, Emilia.”

For once, she didn’t hesitate. “I’m yours.”

Fuck, I loved those words on her lips.

Her pussy squeezed me, and my movements faltered as pleasure hazed everything. I gripped her jaw, fingers denting her soft cheeks as I kissed her and fucked her and marked her.

I swallowed her moans as she came on my cock, pleading and crying. I kept fucking her until she was begging me to stop, and I had to fight the urge to bury myself deep and come deep inside her. Instead, I managed to engage my brain and pull out, stroking my dick and painting her back in thick ropes of come.

Emilia pressed her forehead to the mattress, her ragged breaths mingling with my own to break the silence.

“Every single shred of you is mine, piccola.” I dragged a finger through my come on her skin before gripping her jaw and forcing her head to the side.

Tears welled in her eyes as I slid my finger inside her mouth.

“Every tear. Every thought. No one else gets to have a single piece of you. Not even the dead.” Before I pulled it out, her tongue wrapped around my finger. “My good girl.”

I released her wrists and used the silk to wipe the mess from her skin. She rolled onto her back and stared up at me. And then, like a fractured pane of glass, my little kitten finally shattered.

A sob wrenched from her chest, so pained, so heartbreaking. Gripping her waist, I pulled her into my lap and held her to my chest. Her arms went around my neck, and the sounds that left her lips clawed at me. I would take her pain if I could, but I could only make her face it. Hiding away wasn't helping; it was destroying her.

“He doesn't deserve your grief, piccola.”

She clung to me like I was her lifeline, and I would have been lying to myself if I said I didn't like it.

I laid back on the bed and held her until her sobs turned to hiccups and her tears evaporated. Silence fell between us, and I stroked my hand down her back, fully expecting her to retreat into her head at any moment. Not like I thought I had some magic dick that could fix her. Emilia was stubborn, and though I knew she needed this, that I'd seen a spark of my little kitten, pulling her from her grief would take a lot more than one fuck.

I would repeat this process as many times as I had to if need be. Not that fucking her was a hardship, but I didn't enjoy her emotional turmoil. The entire notion of her suffering over Roberto angered me beyond reason.

Emilia turned her cheek to my bare chest. "He thought I'd run away from you," she said, her voice detached, quiet, "that I was asking him to help me."

I remained silent, not daring to interrupt her.

"He told me to go back." Her finger traced a line over the tattoo on my shoulder. "I asked him if Chiara ever came to him for help..." Her voice cracked on the last word, and I inhaled a deep breath, knowing the answer, hating it for her.

Emilia had done nothing to warrant her father's blatant neglect, and the idea that anyone could hurt her made me wish the man was alive, just so I could kill him slowly, painfully.

"Your father wasn't a good man, Emilia."

"But I killed him. My own father," she rasped. "What does that make me?"

"It makes you strong." It made her a queen. "It makes you someone who took justice for your sister."



“You know the worst part? He apologized.” Her voice hitched. “He said he loved me. While he was dying, when it was too late.”

And *that* was why she harbored so much guilt. Because right at the end, he’d given her a glimpse of a man he could have been, the man an innocent girl had wanted him to be. It was a lie, and it was cruel.

“A man will quickly find remorse when he’s staring death in the face.” In those final moments, a man would barter with the devil himself, say whatever he needed if it might buy him but a few minutes. I’d seen it time and time again.

I didn’t know what would bring her more peace, though, to believe her father did, in fact, love her or that he was a soulless, selfish creature who didn’t care for her.

I didn’t know what to say to make this better. So I gave her something that might, at the very least, absolve her of some blame.

“Your family deceived and betrayed me. If you hadn’t killed him, I would have, Emilia.” The moment I found out about Andreas, I would have taken Sergio’s brother. He was right there in my city, after all. “And I would not have made it so quick. At most, you took hours from him. And those hours would have been painful. Trust me.” Men without honor did not deserve honorable deaths.

Fresh tears dropped onto my chest. “Do you think... that my father knew?” she asked, the vulnerability in her voice making me tighten my grip on her.

“Knew what, piccola?”

“That Sergio deceived you. If he’d known, he wouldn’t have let me marry you...” Her voice trailed off.

Even now, when she knew the man was a piece of shit, she still wanted to believe he'd had a slither of redeemability. That he wouldn't have left her at my mercy, a man they believed to be truly *merciless*.

"I'll never lie to you, Emilia. Even if it hurts you."

She nodded, dashing more tears on my skin. Fuck.

"It's unlikely that your uncle's only underboss was unaware of his dealings." I gripped her face, bringing her gaze to mine. "I'm sorry, Emilia. You deserve better." I pressed a kiss to her forehead. "I am going to destroy Sergio for what he did to you. Then Matteo." Then the entire Outfit. I brushed my lips over hers. "I'll gift you his head."

I rolled her onto her back and stroked her hair away from her face. "Just don't hide from me again, *piccola*."

"I'm not like you, Gio. I can't just kill someone and carry on." Her words were a hushed breath. "I don't know who I am now."

"You're mine."

Roberto, Sergio...dead or alive, they didn't get to have a hold on her. They didn't get to occupy a thought in her pretty head, and they sure as fuck didn't get her tears.

"And I will remind you of it again and again until you remember."

**GIO**

**J**ackson kicked in the door pretty easily, given how expensive this apartment building was. You'd think their security would be better. We stepped inside the pristine apartment, and I took in the view of Lake Michigan in the distance.

Don't get me wrong, the DA was well paid, but not this well paid. No, this was what corruption and blood money bought. But it came at a price.

My men moved through the apartment, securing it, ensuring no one called anyone they shouldn't, like law enforcement.

A woman's high-pitched shriek came from one of the back rooms before a blonde was dragged into the living room and shoved down onto the couch. She clutched her silk robe around her, pressing a hand to her mouth to try to quell her sobs. Maybe she thought we'd kill her for being too annoying.

Then Howard came stumbling onto the scene, his hair sticking up in all directions, his pajamas in place. "What is the meaning of this, Guerra?" He acted brave, but his gaze flicked to his wife.

I wondered if she knew how corrupt he was. Surely she realized this lifestyle had to be dirty money. *My* dirty money.

Jackson grabbed Howard's shoulder and pushed him down onto the couch beside his wife. "Sit there, and shut the fuck up."

I let out a dramatic sigh as I moved over to the window and shoved my hands into the pockets of my pants. Nothing made a man more nervous than casual and calm. Rage and violence were predictable, obvious. It was the anticipation of violence that truly broke a man.

"You insist on disrespecting me, Howard. Despite everything I've given you." I glanced at the DA, and he swallowed heavily.

"It's not—"

"You don't answer my calls, and I'm forced to come here—to batter down your door and threaten your wife."

The woman whimpered, tears streaking down her face in black lines.

I moved toward him. "You see, I pay you well to be at my disposal, Howard. This apartment, your nice car, your three vacations a year." I stopped in front of him. "All me."

His face turned red, jaw clenching. "I'm the DA—"

In a rare show of temper, I shift to the side, gripping the back of his neck and slamming his face into the coffee table in front of the couch. His wife screamed before someone clamped a hand over her mouth.

I was usually more tactful, but I was all out of patience today. Gripping a handful of Howard's hair, I yanked his head back. He groaned, hands fluttering over his broken nose as blood ran down his face.

“You are my fucking bitch. I expect your obedience. When I call, you answer; when I tell you to do something, it gets done. Do you understand?”

He gave a jerky nod, blood now dripping onto the cream couch, staining his pajamas.

“Good. You will stop pursuing the mob and start pursuing The Outfit.”

He shook his head while tipping his face back, trying to quell the bleeding. “I can’t. It’ll raise suspicion if I have no cause.”

“Your department is aware of Outfit activity, is it not?”

“Yes, but they don’t cause any trouble. It’s not—”

“And if bodies were to start littering the streets? If there were a ‘gang war’?”

His gaze met mine, and I could see the fear in his eyes. I delighted in it in a way I would never admit to anyone.

“Then they would open an investigation.”

My lips twitched. “Good.”

I patted his cheek and stepped away. Jackson released the wife, who looked like she was about to throw up or pass out.

“And Howard? If you ignore my calls again, if you don’t do what I want, remember, I know where you live. I know where your children go to school. And I will always know. There is nowhere you can hide, no outrunning me...” I let the threat hang in the air before his wife started sobbing.

If he even thought about denying me, I was sure she’d have something to say about it. A woman would sacrifice all for her children.

I strode for the door, Jackson falling into step beside me.

“What now?” he asked.

I pulled a piece of paper from my pocket, glancing at Renzo’s scrawled handwriting. A list of names and addresses of Outfit members. He wasn’t thrilled about giving it to me, but I knew he knew that Sergio was a risk to Emilia.

Sergio would never find out she had killed Roberto, but that wasn’t the only target on her back. Sergio had seen me with her at The Yama, had possibly heard from Matteo what I’d done to him, the claim I’d so possessively stamped on her... He had to know by now that she was my weakness. And in war, all weaknesses must be exploited. I knew he sure as fuck wouldn’t spare her for sharing his blood.

I didn’t go for the capos on the list because I had other plans for them. Instead, we waited for nightfall and went to a bar. Outfit owned. Teaming with their soldiers. At least it *was*.

I glanced around at the twenty or so dead bodies littering the place. Blood spilled across the hardwoods like some kind of morbid sacrifice to a dark god. Nero would be so proud.

The last soldier was currently pinned to a table, two blades rammed through his biceps as he coughed up blood. Jackson loomed over him like his own personal reaper, promising to steal his soul.

“Where the fuck is Sergio Donato?” he asked again.

The man hadn’t answered five minutes ago, and now I wasn’t sure he physically could. He was bleeding out, and we had no adrenaline with us to help this along.

He coughed again, attempting to roll to the side so he didn’t choke, but he cried out as the blades sliced into him with every

move. "I don't... I don't..."

"You don't know?" Jackson asked, and the man nodded jerkily.

"That's a shame."

Jackson placed a gun to the man's head, the pop of the silencer signaling his end. We'd asked, five? Maybe six of them the same thing, but these were just soldiers. Commanded by a capo. The capo might know where Sergio was. Kill enough of their men, and I was sure they'd hand him over.

It was really a question of who they feared more. Him or me?

Turning away from the blood bath, I took out my phone and called Howard. Sure enough, he picked up after only a couple of rings.

"Guerra," he said curtly, his voice nasal, no doubt from his swollen nose.

"Baccio Rosso. You'll find your bodies there. I want The Outfit buried, Howard. Tie them up in bullshit on every legal business they have." Then I hung up.

This was only the beginning, but I would make Sergio and anyone who supported him regret crossing me. Their only out would be to turn their backs on him. Then I would flush him out like a starving rat.

I slid my phone into my pocket and glanced at Jackson. "Find their capo." I tossed him the folded slip of paper Renzo had given me. "Get Sergio's location. I'll meet you back home."

Jackson nodded, a sick smile working over his lips. I'd lost track of how many men he'd ended today, but he was always thirsty for more. I pretended I was better, but it was only

because I didn't allow myself to indulge in the violence that clawed at me like a rabid beast.

I would, though. As soon as I found Sergio, he would see exactly how blood-thirsty I truly was.



**EMILIA**

I remained under the scalding spray of the shower until my skin stung and my head swam from the heat. Then I stepped out, wrapped myself in a towel, and sat down on the bathmat before I passed out. This had become somewhat of a routine to me now, one of many coping mechanisms.

I wanted to hide away, to wallow in my grief, to disappear. I wished to forget and be forgotten, but Gio wouldn't allow that. For days he'd been relentless, forcing me to remain present and aware. No matter how much I didn't want to be.

He'd tied me to his bed, touched me, hurt me in all the ways I'd come to crave, torn down every wall I'd erected around my mind, and dragged me from my state of blissful numbness back into this world of pain and blood.

It hurt. Everything hurt, and he was my only salvation from myself. He'd become my cure, my medicine, my drug of choice, and I was addicted in the most toxic way.

When he wasn't here, everything became unbearable, and I sought my own brand of distraction. He was away yesterday and last night, and I was spiraling, falling into that deep, dark abyss.

I was coping, though, surviving. And that was all I could manage right now.

Gio came home an hour ago and told me to come downstairs to a meeting in his office. I didn't want to leave this room, but I couldn't deny that I wanted to be near him. Needed him. Maybe he knew that because he didn't touch me; he simply showered, changed, and left the room.

This felt like a test of some kind, and one I didn't want to fail because I didn't want to be this person. Broken. Weak. Hiding.

When the dizziness had passed, I pushed to my feet and went back into the bedroom. My gaze passed over the bed longingly, and I was so tempted to crawl into it but walked into the closet instead.

One side was stocked with Gio's uniformed black suits, the other with the clothes Tommy had bought me. My heart clenched at the thought of Tommy.

I'd barely thought about him since I'd killed my father, too consumed with myself. I knew he was alive and wanted to see me—I just hadn't cared. I was a horrible person.

I tugged on leggings and a sweatshirt, then made my way out of the bedroom and into a massive house. I'd been here for over a week, and I hadn't seen anything beyond that bedroom door.

The hallway stretched on forever, chandeliers throwing little specks of light over the thick carpet. It reminded me of something out of *The Great Gatsby*, an almost antique glamor to the place. It was nothing like the modern penthouse we'd occupied in the city, and though I knew the house belonged to Gio, it didn't seem very "him."

I descended the grand staircase, where the carpet gave way to hardwoods. My bare feet padded over the polished surface as I followed the sound of voices. I paused in the doorway of a huge kitchen filled with several men and a single older woman standing at the stove.

Silence fell as several stares shifted my way. My cheeks heated, and I knotted the sleeve of my sweatshirt in my fingers as I looked for Gio or Renzo. I found only strangers staring at me.

A big guy stepped forward, flashing a smile that pulled at a faint scar on his cheek. I recognized him from the hospital. He'd been covered in Tommy's blood—Jackson.

“Come on, little sparrow. I've been told to feed you, then take you to Gio.”

I dropped my gaze to the floor. “I'm not hungry.” I didn't want to go in there with all those men. I didn't want to eat. I didn't want to be out of my room.

“I'm Jackson, Gio's enforcer. Kinda.” Behind him, the low hum of conversation resumed. “And I know *you* know that if you don't eat, Gio will bitch.”

“No, he'll just hover and stare at me until I do what he wants just to get rid of him,” I mumbled.

“Exactly.” Grinning, he backed away to the breakfast bar.

The woman placed a coffee mug in front of Jackson as he tossed a croissant onto a plate.

Both were pushed into my hands before he led me down a hallway, passing rooms that screamed of opulence before he knocked on a door. Without waiting for a response, he opened it and stepped inside an office.

The entire room smelled of wood, smoke, and old books, and I inhaled deeply, a crippling sense of nostalgia washing over me. It reminded me of my father. The good version, recalled through the rose-tinted vision of a child.

My gaze instantly found Renzo sitting on a couch in front of the open fire. His eyes met mine before he offered a soft smile. He knew what I was thinking. He always knew.

I shifted my attention to the massive desk at the rear of the room, backed by the light of the window. And in front of it was Gio, his broad frame silhouetted in that light like some kind of dark god.

“Found your little bird wandering the halls,” Jackson said, flopping down onto the couch beside my brother.

“Did you now?” That sensuous rumble dragged over nerves that always felt too exposed these days. Gio looked like a conquering king behind that colossal desk, running his empire.

I swayed on the spot, a junkie in need of their fix. His lips twitched, and he pushed away from his desk a little.

“Come, piccola.”

I didn't even care that my brother was there. Maybe I should have been ashamed of how much I wanted the man, needed him. But I was too fraught to focus on anything aside from getting through one day and then the next. Gio did that for me, as unhealthy as it might be.

I approached, and he plucked the coffee and plate from my hand, placing them on the desk before pulling me onto his lap. The solid planes of his warm chest pressed against my side, and I melted into him, taking my first full breath in what felt like hours.

“You look better.” His voice was a rasped whisper over the side of my neck, hot breath making me shiver. He picked up my coffee and lifted it to his lips. “Eat your croissant, princess.”

I glared at him as he sipped from my mug but took a bite of the pastry because, as Jackson had pointed out, Gio was overbearing.

“Good girl,” he whispered.

My face flushed with heat, and I dared peek through the curtain of my hair at my brother. His attention was on us, but for once, he wasn’t glaring at Gio. That was probably a good thing.

“You wanted a meeting,” Ren said, leaning back against the couch cushions. “I assume to discuss my uncle.”

Just like that, the bite I’d taken turned to ash in my mouth. I placed the rest of the croissant back onto the plate.

“We can’t find him,” Jackson grumbled.

“And you think we might know where he is.” Renzo snorted. “I gave you a list of capos. None of them rolled on him?”

“None yet, and trust me, I was *very* persuasive.” The coldness in Jackson’s voice made me sit up, but Gio’s hand slid over my hip, entrapping me.

His thumb slipped just above the waistband of my leggings, stroking soft circles. “You are his nephew and an enforcer. Emilia is his niece. There must be something—”

I laughed, the sound hollow even to my own ears. Sergio’s dog would have more idea of his whereabouts than I did. “I know nothing of my family’s business dealings.” I barely knew their personal ones.

“You might have overheard something—”

I met Gio’s gaze. “I haven’t.”

I was about to ask if I could leave, to retreat back to my solitude, when Renzo spoke up.

“He obviously knows that *you* know he fucked you over. That you’re coming for him.”

Gio rolled his eyes. “No shit.”

“So you won’t find him. The capos probably don’t even know where he is.” Ren shrugged. “I can tell you the addresses of a few of his homes outside the city. He’ll be close to Chicago, but I doubt he’ll be anywhere I would know.” His gaze flicked to me. “He’s aware of where my loyalty lies.” Renzo’s loyalty was to me, and I didn’t know what I’d done to deserve such an amazing brother. “Does Sergio know our father is dead?”

Gio’s hand sliding to the back of my neck was the only warning I got before Jackson spoke.

“Well, we sent him Roberto’s hand. So I’d say so.”

“Jackson,” Gio hissed.

Jackson glanced from me to Gio to Renzo. “What? I thought we didn’t like him, given that...” He jerked his head toward me. “You know.”

I felt sick. They cut off my father’s hand to send to my uncle. Why would they do that? Did Sergio know it was me who had done it? He would hunt me down. Kill me.

My breaths came too fast until it felt as though no air was truly getting into my lungs. My vision tunneled.

“Out,” Gio snapped.

There was a shuffle of feet, the click of the door closing, and then he was pushing to his feet, placing me on the desk.

Hands clasped my face, forcing me to look at him. “Breathe, Emilia.”

“Why would you do that?” I couldn’t keep the hysteria out of my voice.

He towered over me, steeled and cold in the face of my unstable emotions. “I sent your father’s hand with his signet ring to your uncle because it’s what I would do had I killed him.”

I could barely think straight. “What? You want him to think it was you?”

“Yes.”

I peered at him through my blurred vision. “Why?”

“Like, I said, I would have killed Roberto anyway. I also sent the head of the rat who betrayed us, so trust me, Sergio will not be questioning who killed his brother or why. The timing of Roberto’s death was... convenient.”

Convenient... “And that’s all it is? You’re allowing him to think it was you for the sake of convenience?”

We stared at each other for a moment before his gaze softened.

“You know it’s not,” he murmured as fingers swept over my cheek. “I would protect you from this entire fucked up world if I could, Emilia.”

By cutting up my father. Why did the thought trouble me so much? Maybe it just added to the guilt that had begun to feel like a part of me. Not only had I killed him, but the man didn’t even get the dignity of being buried whole, not even in some

unmarked grave. My mother would have no closure, Luca...  
Luca would hate me.

“It’s all just so...”

“Awful?”

“Disturbing.”

“You’re thinking like an innocent girl, Emilia. This is the mafia.”

“But—”

“Your father chose this life, as did I, as did your uncle. Sergio and Roberto decided to play a dangerous game. They knew the risks.” He pressed between my legs, his breath washing over my face. “And I’ll remind you that one of those risks was you. Your father didn’t care for you in life, and he’ll get no fucking respect from me in death.”

I shook my head and managed to keep from crying. “I never wanted any of this.”

“I know.” His hand swept over my hair. “I know, piccola. This isn’t a life I want for you.” He kissed my forehead. “If it were safe to let you go, I’d like to think I would.” Where that had once been all I wanted, the thought now terrified me.

I blinked and met his gaze, the eyes of a ruthless man who looked at me with nothing but the purest affection. “Could you? Let me go?” The answer I wanted was not the same one I’d have craved only a week ago.

He hesitated for the briefest moment. “I’m not a good person, Emilia. I’m selfish.” That was a lie.

Giovanni was everything I always feared he would be—violent and merciless. But compared to the men I’d known my entire life, he was kind and honorable. To me, at least.



“So no, I’ll never let you go.”

I didn’t want him to.

“Whether your uncle is dead or not.”

A shiver of fear trickled down my spine. “If he finds out it was me who killed my dad—”

“He will never find out.” His hands slipped from my hair to my neck. He could choke the life from me if he wanted to, but each touch was soft, reverent. “But Sergio is a danger to you regardless because he is my enemy, and he knows you’re my weakness.”

“I am?”

“Emilia.” A breath huffed past his curled lips. “How could you not know?” His mouth brushed mine. “You are the calm to my storm, the light to my dark—”

“The weak to your strong.” And I hated that.

“No, you’re the strongest person I know, princess.” He kissed me, and my fingers trailed his stubbled jaw, my heart letting out a staggered beat that felt an awful lot like what poets and songwriters described as butterflies.

“But sometimes it’s okay to be weak.” His hands went to my waist, and he lifted me off the desk.

My thighs instinctively wrapped around his hips as he carried me to the couch by the fire.

There, he sat and readjusted me on his lap, chest to chest, his kiss still branding my lips. “You can break for me, Emilia, and I’ll catch you every time.”

I expected him to kiss me again, to touch me, strip me. I wanted the oblivion of his bruising grip, of his body

dominating mine. Craved it. But he didn't give it to me, instead threading his fingers through my hair and tugging my face to his shoulder. His arms came around me, and Gio just... held me.

My spine went rigid as my mind tried to fight every other fiber of my being that wanted to just melt into him. It was the same voice in the back of my head that had always made me keep fighting, that demanded strength.

But I wasn't strong right now, and truthfully, I deserved to be broken. Any decent person would be, right?

So, I clung to Gio like he was my anchor, and he held me until breathing felt a little easier. I didn't realize how much I needed him to just...hold me, too wrapped up in seeking the pain and distraction he was so very good at offering.

"Don't you have things to do?" I asked. Better things than babysitting and coddling me, which he was clearly doing. "I thought you were at war."

"Dead men can wait a little longer."

I shivered at the coldness of his words, though between him and the roaring fire, I was so warm and comfortable that I could have fallen asleep. It felt like the safest place in the world, and I imagined this was what normal felt like—warm and safe. It was all I'd ever wanted.

"Do you ever wonder what it would be like to just be normal?" I sighed against his chest. "Not in the mafia."

He was silent for a few moments, his breath stirring the strands of my hair. "I wonder, but I can't picture it. Blood and dirty money have been engrained in me since birth, princess."

I'd always resented being born into the mafia, always hated being born a girl into it even more, but I realized that Gio,

Renzo, Luca...they were perhaps even more trapped in it than I was. I might have been sheltered and sold, but they were the opposite of sheltered. Baptized in blood with no way out.

“Do you ever grow numb to all the death and violence?”

His chest rose and fell beneath my cheek. “The more I’ve killed, the more I’ve disassociated from it.” He stroked my jaw. “But I never kill without purpose. My father taught me early on that a man must know his worst self, lest he become consumed by it.” His fingers trailed down the length of my throat, and I swallowed heavily. “I know my worst self. I know I’m a monster, and I’m okay with it.”

I sat up and took his free hand, tracing the lines of ink over the back of it. “You’re not a monster, Gio.” Far from it.

“And you?” That endless gaze met mine as though he could suck me in, pry out all my secrets and spit me back out. “Do you ever wonder what it would be like to be ‘normal?’”

I smiled. “All the time.”

“And what do you think normal looks like, Emilia?” He leaned in, his lips brushing my shoulder.

It took me a moment to think past the tingling he ignited on my skin. My fingers raked into his hair, holding him to me as I tilted my head for him. “Like this. Safe and warm and easy. I imagine it’s morning coffee at a local café, lazy Sundays. Friends, college, a job—”

“And what job would you want?” he hummed against my neck.

“I...” I didn’t know. “It’s silly to even think about it.”

He cupped the back of my head, forcing me to look at him. “But you did think about it. So, tell me.”

“I guess I pictured myself studying art history. Maybe opening a gallery somewhere.” Somewhere far from Chicago. My lips curled as the fantasy life I’d once dreamed of unfurled in front of me. “I would travel the world, looking for pieces, meeting new people, experiencing new cultures...” I let out a long breath and my whimsical dreams right along with it. I dropped my gaze to his chest. “As it turns out, I was never even allowed to learn to drive a car, let alone travel anywhere.” I laughed humorlessly. “Too much of a flight risk, according to my father.” If I could have driven, I’d have run as far and fast as I could, stolen a car. Something. Anything.

“I’m sorry, piccola.”

I felt that sentence burrow into me, going far deeper than simply words. I wasn’t sure if he was apologizing for himself for keeping me caged or my father. Or maybe just my life.

“It wasn’t all bad,” I said, suddenly feeling the need to defend the very man I’d killed.

He’d said those same words on a dying breath. *I’m sorry. I love you.*

“Every time I think of my father now, I never remember the bad. It’s like death has blocked it from my mind.” I closed my eyes, fighting the familiar sting of tears, but feeling the need to purge my soul to Gio in a way I never would to anyone else. I only had Renzo, and I couldn’t tell him this. “Now I just see the bedtime stories, him teaching me to swim in the lake, taking us to Navy Pier and riding the Ferris wheel even though he was terrified of heights.” I couldn’t help the small smile that touched my lips. “He caged Chiara and me, sold us, deprived us of a life, yet I still see him through the rose-tinted glasses of a child. And knowing I killed that man—”

“You know that isn’t the version of him you killed, Emilia.”

“I know. It’s so fucked up to mourn him.” I had no right to that grief when I had pulled the trigger, and yet... I squeezed my eyes shut, and Gio’s lips pressed to my forehead.

“Do you want to bury him?” he breathed against my skin.

Did I want that? Maybe I needed closure, to lay him to rest. That version of him. That version of me. “I don’t know.”

“I’ll arrange it.”

“It’s fine. You’re busy—”

He silenced me with a kiss, slow and drugging and all-consuming. By the time he was done, I could barely breathe right, and I definitely couldn’t remember what I had been protesting.

“It will be done.”

**EMILIA**

**R**enzo clutched my fingers as we stared into the gaping hole Gio's men had dug. It was a lonely spot for a grave, near the boundary wall of Gio's backyard, beneath an oak tree.

The wind whispered through the branches that stretched overhead. A few golden leaves floated down onto the shiny lid of the coffin as though Mother Nature were making an offering, giving my father her blessing.

The silence stretched between Renzo and me, thick and cloying, and I wanted to fill it, to say something, but I couldn't. As I stared at Roberto Donato's final resting place, I realized I had nothing *to* say. No kind words, no prayers.

"Do you want to say anything?" I whispered.

"No. He's dead. And the world is a better place for it."

I glanced at my brother, his lips pressed into a tight line, jaw clenched. "It's okay that you loved him, Ren. He loved you."

He'd been good to Renzo and Luca. He'd been good to Chiara and me at one point.

"I loved him once. But what he did..." He shook his head. "I'll never forgive him, not even in death."

I hated this for him. I didn't want him not to grieve for my sake.

“Ren—”

He dropped a kiss onto my head before stepping away. He took a handful of dirt from the pile beside the grave and tossed it on top of the coffin. The sound of earth hitting the lacquered surface had my chest tightening.

The fucked up part of all this was I knew I wouldn't mourn the man if I hadn't been the one to kill him.

I glanced at my brother, his shoulders hunched, chin dropped to his chest. He was the best person I knew, and he could tell me my father deserved it, pretend he didn't care, but I knew Renzo. He was trying to hide his grief from me, and it wasn't fair. He was entitled to it, and I suddenly felt like an intruder standing there.

“You should stay a while, Ren,” I said before stepping away.

“Emi, no—”

I waved him off and practically ran to the house. Back to my solitude because I needed a few minutes of escape.

Once inside Gio's room, the familiar self-loathing threatened to consume me. Would I ever get through an entire day without feeling like this? Did I even want to? Life was suffering. I'd caused it, so I would endure it.

My fingers practically tore at my zipper before I slipped out of the black dress and got into the shower. Icy water sucked the breath from my lungs, and I cranked the temperature to its max, waiting for it to heat, then burn. Here, I could pretend I was okay, allow the water to hide my tears and ground me in the sweet sting of pain. It was all I had, the only way I knew to hold myself together.

I was standing in the shower, the scalding water pummeling my skin when I sensed him. Gio. His energy always seemed to consume a room, his gaze like a physical brush over my skin.

I turned around and braced my shoulder blades against the cold tile as he approached, stripping out of his shirt, then pants and boxers. If pain distracted me, then Gio naked melted my brain. My pulse spiked, my thighs pressing together with each careful step closer. This was what addiction felt like, a rabid craving clawing away at the inside of my skin.

He opened the door, his gaze sweeping over me with pinched brows. “Emilia—” He reached for the controls, recoiling with a hiss when the water touched his hand. “What the fuck?” He quickly turned down the temperature, and for a moment, we both just stared at each other.

I expected him to berate me, judge me, something. Instead, though, he simply stepped beneath the spray of the water and wound his hand around my throat, harder than normal. Then he kissed me. It was a ruthless kiss, hard and violent, full of tongue and the sharp sting of his teeth.

I fell into it like he was the darkest abyss and I wanted him to plummet within his depths.

His fingers dug into my throat in a way I knew would bruise, and I relished in it, in the way my mind honed in on that one sensation to the detriment of everything else. The world shrank around me, forgotten, inconsequential.

“Is this what you want, princess? To suffer?” It didn’t feel like suffering. His lips left mine before brushing the reddened, sensitive skin of my shoulder. “You want to hurt? To be punished?” His gaze met mine, narrowed, assessing, but I couldn’t answer him. His grip on my throat tightened, and I choked on a breath. “Is this what you need, piccola?”



“Yes,” I whispered.

“Why?” His hold softened enough to allow me to speak.

“I don’t know.” A distraction? Punishment? Exterior pain to detract from the interior? I wasn’t sure. I just knew it felt like relief, like that first full breath of air when I used to dive into the lake and kick for the surface.

“You do.”

“I just don’t want to feel...anything.”

A beat of silence passed between us, interrupted only by the wash of water over tile. “Then you come to me for it. I will control it. How much, when, where.” At his words, my heartbeat ticked up, my pussy aching at the thought—I’d become so messed up. “Do you understand, princess?”

A smile twisted his lips when I nodded. “Good.” His lips crashed against mine, and I moaned when blood tainted my tongue, my lip splitting beneath his teeth.

“I’ll always give you what you need, Emilia,” he breathed, pressing a hand between my legs and burying two fingers in my pussy.

The sudden stretch was harsh, and I gasped as my body tried to adjust. I wasn’t sure if he was angry or just giving me what I had asked for.

“So fucking tight,” he groaned before he dropped to his knees, hooking one leg over his shoulder. That sinful mouth descended on me in a frenzy—licking, sucking, and biting my clit until I felt wild, feverish, lost in a sea of pain-tinged pleasure. He wound me higher and higher, the lash of his tongue combined with the merciless thrust of his fingers driving me to the edge in what felt like seconds.

When he pressed a third finger against my ass, I tensed. He forced it inside and the burn blended with a sordid kind of pleasure that had me coming instantly. It hit me hard and fast like a rogue wave crashing against the shore. My legs shook so hard I could barely stand on the slick floor, but Gio held me up the same way he always did.

“You come for me so sweetly, piccola.” He bit the soft skin at the inside of my thigh. “You taste like fucking life.”

He rose and kissed me, forcing his tongue inside my mouth on a groan. All I could taste was blood and my own come on his lips, and he was right; that did taste like life.

His rock-hard dick pressed between my legs, and I flinched from the hard press of him over sensitized flesh.

“I’m going to make you come again and again until you beg me to stop. I’m going to fuck you and hurt you.” His teeth pinched my jaw before his lips brushed my ear. “By the time I’m done with you, piccola, you won’t *feel* anything but me for a week straight.”

Spinning me around, he slammed me up against the wall so hard that my cheek cracked off the tile. He fisted my hair, yanking my head back as he kicked apart my legs. Then he thrust inside me, all the way to the hilt. My lungs flailed for air, my body wanting to curl away from the intrusion, but I couldn’t. There was nowhere to go, nothing but him and his unrelenting hold, and it was perfection.

“Take it, Emilia. Every fucking inch.” Every inch was a lot. He filled me, overwhelmed me, stretched me beyond capacity. And he gave me no reprieve before he was slamming into me over and over.

Gio commanded my body, dominated it, played it like a puppet on his strings. I craved his violence, his brutal hold, the bite of pain when he hit too deep, the ache in my spine as he forced it to bow and made me take even more.

His fingers laced my throat, pulling my shoulder blades to his chest as he nipped up the side of my neck. “Is this what you want, Emilia? For me to use you and fuck you and hurt you?” He thrust even deeper, and I cried out.

“Yes!”

“Such a dirty little princess.”

His hand slid down my stomach, fingers pinching my sensitive clit and making me buck and moan.

“Are you going to come for me, Emilia?”

“Yes,” I moaned as he twisted my clit in a way that hurt, but combined with his dick pounding into me, I was too overwhelmed with sensations to differentiate the fine line between pleasure and pain.

He alternated between stroking and pinching. Soft then hard. Sweet then cruel. Winding me up and pulling me right back down.

And the entire time, he fucked me ruthlessly until I was screaming his name, begging him to let me come. I both loved and hated him in that moment.

“Come for me, Emilia,” he groaned. “All over my cock.”

His finger circled my clit, his cock sliding deep, and I fell apart, moaning and thrashing as over-sensitized nerves spasmed all at once.

He pulled out of me, and I felt his hand working over his hard dick before he groaned, sinking his teeth into the side of my

neck as he came. It was primal, almost animalistic, as though he were marking me. I felt the warm liquid hit my back before he stepped away. The second his large body wasn't blocking the showerhead, the water washed all traces of him from my skin.

“Next time, I'm going to bathe you in my fucking come and make you wear it.”

Why did that turn me on so much? Gripping my hips, he turned me to face him, then removed the hand-held showerhead from the wall. A wicked smirk played over his lips as he switched it on and adjusted the temperature.

His hand wound around my throat again. “Spread your legs, Emilia.”

I did, and he moved closer. I flinched from the icy water on my thigh before he aimed it right between my legs. It was shockingly cold on my abused clit, and I lurched and thrashed in his hold. His grip tightened, one thick thigh pushing between my legs to stop them from closing.

“Gio, please,” I gasped.

“You wanted punishment, did you not?”

“No, I—”

“Take it, Emilia. And remember this the next time you want to try to turn this pretty skin pink. It's mine. All of you is mine.” He pressed a kiss to my lips. “Your pleasure, your pain, your punishments.”

He shifted the showerhead, and though it was cold, the water was pummeling against my clit in just the right way. I didn't think I could come again, didn't want to, and yet my body jerked and shuddered painfully as it made a pitiful attempt. I

cried out, muscles tensing in a way that felt more like torture than pleasure. Only then did he cut off the shower.

“Good girl.”

We stood there, looking at each other, our intermingled breaths loud in the sudden silence of the shower stall.

Whatever had just passed between us transcended sex or even normal emotion. I’d never been so vulnerable to anyone. And yet when I was weak, he was my strength. When I needed something, he gave without question.

His hand cupped my cheek, and a shiver tore over my skin. “I’ll always give you what you need, piccola. No matter how fucking dark it is.”

I gripped the back of his neck and pushed onto my toes to kiss him. How ironic that the man who was once a lingering shadow to my naïve innocence was now the only bright point.

With a start, I realized that I loved him. I loved Giovanni Guerra, and I didn’t know how to feel about the fact that I’d fallen for the very man I vowed I never would.

I kept my eyes closed as though he would see the truth if I dared look at him.

His fingers moved to my chin, tilting my face up. “Piccola, look at me.”

Unable to deny him, I opened my eyes, meeting his piercing gaze. He studied me for a beat, and I wondered if he saw it written into my face, if I was as horribly exposed as I felt.

“You’re my weakness,” he breathed, as though in response to my silent confession. His forehead fell to mine like he could breathe me in. He felt like oxygen and life and everything I’d never had.

I loved him, and though I knew that was dangerous, I couldn't quite find it in me to care.

**GIO**

**A**damo pulled up outside the warehouse in Calumet Harbor, headlights cutting over Jackson's form leaning against the hood of an SUV.

The briny scent of Lake Michigan hit me the moment I set foot on the dock, the night air untainted by trash and the exhaust fumes of New York. I did not want to be back in Chicago so soon, especially given that I'd lost ten men here in just a few days. But we'd "questioned" and killed endless numbers of Outfit soldiers and a couple of their capos, so retaliation was to be expected.

What I didn't expect was for them to so easily find the safe houses I had here. It was concerning. Suspect even. I wondered for a moment whether another rat sat amongst my ranks.

I pushed the thought aside for now and focused on Jackson. He'd wanted to handle this alone, given how risky things were. I admit, I was tempted, if only so I didn't have to leave Emilia. She was better but changeable, fragile, dare I say, dependent on me.

I also had no doubt Sergio would kill his own niece to get to me, and no matter how many men I'd left at the house, no amount of protection felt like enough.

This was why men like me only married for business. The mafia had no place for feelings and sentiment, and honestly, the way I felt about her fucking terrified me.

I would go back to New York right now if I could, but this had to be me. Even if I trusted Jackson not to just kill everyone—and I did not—Patrick O’Hara had agreed to meet tonight, and I knew he wouldn’t talk to anyone but Nero or me.

I stopped in front of my enforcer, my gaze flicking to the semi-automatic rifle slung over his back. “Really? Is that necessary?”

“Dramatic effect,” he said, bringing a cigarette to his lips. The glow turned his face crimson, playing over the scar on his cheek. He liked to pretend it was some hard-won battle wound. Truthfully, he just liked insane women, the kind prone to jealous rages involving kitchen knives.

“Your guys?”

“Already in there.” He jerked his head toward the warehouse behind us before pushing off the car. “I waited for your boring ass before getting to the good stuff.”

I moved toward the building, and he fell in step beside me, tossing his cigarette to the ground with a skitter of sparks.

This warehouse was The Outfit’s main point of export—drugs and weapons shipped under the guise of electrical goods. Washing machines, dishwashers... I could have just slipped that tidbit of information to Howard, but this was so much more personal than anything the law could dish out. As much as I hated to admit it, Sergio had landed a blow against both my business and my ego, and I owed him.

No, there would be no prison cell for Sergio and his mafia, only death.



Jackson rapped his knuckles over the door, and one of his guys answered, waving us both inside. The warehouse was full of high shelves stacked with boxes.

As we made our way through, I counted seven bodies littering the floor. The sight of one of my guys amongst them had anger spiking through my bloodstream. I'd lost enough people, and that was another family without a son, brother, or father. This was the business, but it was the part I'd never quite managed to be okay with. And for the last few years, it was a part we'd avoided. We had peace, and Sergio Donato had dragged us into war.

At the back of the building were some offices. I followed Jackson inside the nearest one, where five men were on their knees, hands cable-tied behind their backs. Outfit members.

Jackson's men surrounded the room, backs to the walls, weapons in hand.

The place smelled like blood, body odor, and cigarette smoke, and the harsh fluorescent lights were giving me a damn headache already.

"We didn't need five of them." I leaned against one of the desks that had been shifted to the side of the room.

"Better too many than not enough." Jackson removed his rifle, placing it on the desk beside me before he pulled a hunting knife from his ankle holster. He flipped the oversized dick replacement in his hand, a smile playing over his face. "Though, personally, I prefer not enough."

"Who's in charge?" I asked.

None of them responded, and though I knew they were just ground soldiers, someone was always in charge. That person

reported to someone else, who reported to someone else. And eventually, Donato.

This was how you crippled a mafia. Here, on the ground, with soldiers and product. What we did at Baccio Rosa, that was just a taste, the start. We'd since hit warehouses, bars, nightclubs, even home addresses. We were slowly decimating them. Bit by bit. Piece by piece.

I pulled my gun from the holster and placed it in my lap. "Who is in charge?" I repeated.

One of the men spat on the ground. "Your mother is a whore," he grunted. Imaginative. "If you want war, then Sergio Donato will give it to you."

I didn't miss the tinge of admiration that accompanied Sergio's name. So loyal. So stupid. "So you, then. You're in charge."

He glared defiantly, and I laughed. He was a drab-looking individual in a dirty vest and jeans. Several gold necklaces were nestled amongst his chest hair, matching the one gold tooth glinting beneath the dim lights. A mid-level soldier at best.

I moved toward him and dragged the barrel of my gun down his cheek. "You must not know who I am."

"Giovanni Guerra." Smarter than he looked. "We don't fear Famiglia, pretty-boy pussies." He spat, the glob landing on my shoe.

A rare lack of control gripped me, and I drove my fist into the man's face hard enough that I felt his eye socket crunch. He collapsed forward on a groan.

Jackson grinned, bouncing on his feet. "You know you want to bleed him like a pig," he said, offering me his obnoxiously large knife.

Straightening the sleeve of my suit jacket, I stepped back. I didn't get my hands dirty. Everyone thought I was calm and collected, but I was just as bloodthirsty as Jackson and Nero. The difference between us was that I rarely committed violence based on an emotional reaction, only when I felt nothing. Some might say that made me worse, but I knew my worst self. Leashed it, controlled it.

I pointed to the guy I'd just punched, and he glared at me, his eye already swelling. "Leave him alive."

The smile that covered Jackson's face was a manic, depraved thing. This was what he lived for—fear and death, blood and war.

Jackson embraced the worst parts of himself at all times, and that was what made him a great enforcer. Every boss needed a guy like him who was willing to do the gruesome jobs without question.

Nero and I may have carried a certain reputation, but a good chunk of that was carved out with Jackson's knife. He was the rabid dog in our organization, unencumbered by the chains of leadership or diplomacy. He killed because he was told to, but he enjoyed it.

He stalked toward a guy at the end of the line, who struggled fruitlessly against his restraints as though he could actually get out of this situation. He begged; he promised information I knew he didn't have to give. None of it would save him because his purpose was to be a gruesome message—to die. Nothing could save him from that fate.

I folded my arms over my chest as Jackson gripped a handful of the man's greasy hair, then sliced the knife over his neck. His throat opened like a tap, and crimson poured down the gray material of his shirt like a disease reaching for a new

host. The choking of his last breaths was interrupted only by the sound of blood spattering over linoleum and the whimper of the next man in line.

The body hadn't even slumped to the ground before Jackson moved on to the next and the next. With each one, their begging grew more desperate, their fear a cloying scent that tainted the already less than ideal air in here. The last guy pissed himself, which just finished everything off nicely. And then there was one. Jackson sheathed his knife and cracked his neck to the side.

I let out a sigh. "Don't break his jaw. I need him to be able to speak."

Gold chain guy's eyes flashed with fury, though one was swollen shut already.

Dropping to a crouch in front of him, I gripped his face and forced his head back. "You have two choices. You can go to Sergio Donato and tell him that I know what he did, that I will keep coming for The Outfit, piece by fucking piece, until everyone associated with it is dead."

For the first time, I saw a hint of fear in the man's eyes, which meant he wasn't actually mentally deficient. *Good.*

"Or, you can go to your capo and make him an offer. If the capo hands over Sergio Donato and Matteo Romero, I'll allow them to appoint a new boss and leave the rest of their men alone." I shoved him away and pushed to my feet. "Are you loyal to Donato or The Outfit?" With that, I turned away.

It was a good offer, the only mercy I would offer any of them because I wanted to destroy them all. The blood lust was a hand around my throat, squeezing. Because my pride was dented? No. Because their deception had cost me good men,

and it had almost cost me Tommy. Because though I would never hurt Emilia, they had still tossed her to me like a juicy morsel, not caring what happened to her. And because they had killed her sister, an innocent woman who deserved better.

I heard Jackson's fist land the first punch, then came the cracking of bone, the grunt of pain, and wheezing gasps for air. A punch from my enforcer was like being hit with a sledgehammer.

"Don't kill him, Jackson." I stepped outside the office, the sound of fists meeting flesh and grunts of pain fading as I made my way through the warehouse.

Adamo waited by the door, keeping watch. "Tell the men to douse the entire place in gas," I said as I passed.

I lingered by Jackson's car until he came out of the building a few minutes later. The heavy smell of gasoline was already drifting in the wind as two of his guys dragged the unconscious messenger into a car.

"You do realize that when I say don't kill him, it doesn't mean, almost kill him?"

He snorted and opened his car door, taking out a cloth. He proceeded to wipe the blood from his hands before tossing it back inside. "I think 'barely breathing' is a nice touch." He took a pack of cigarettes from his pocket and placed one between his lips. "Sends a solid message. Wouldn't you agree?" Fucking Jackson.

"No."

His lighter sparked, the flame dancing over his face. "You're no fun anymore. Although, for a second there, I thought you were going to be."

"You have issues."

He shrugged, and I inhaled a deep breath, the briny scent of the lake now drowned out by the gasoline singeing my nostrils.

I checked my watch, my pulse rising in anticipation. I had armed men in the surrounding buildings and back up half a mile away. But I hoped I didn't have to use them for what came next. Patrick O'Hara.

"Is the perimeter tight?" I asked.

Jackson glanced at his phone. "Yep."

This was bold, meeting the mob boss here, on Outfit soil. But I needed him to see that our enemy was one and the same.

I'd hand him the fucking match and let him burn down a major link in The Outfit's business. Without this warehouse, they'd be grounded for weeks. Ripe for the picking.

With my offer to the capos, hopefully, they'd see that Sergio Donato was not worth the hell I would rain down on them. It was the only time I'd grant them mercy. The only opportunity they might get to take the easy way out before I could no longer hold back Nero.

Jackson's phone buzzed, and the glow of the screen washed over his face as he glanced at it. "They're coming through the gate now."

**GIO**

**M**y men fanned out as three SUVs rounded the corner and pulled to a stop a few feet away. Headlights cut through the shadows of warehouses that loomed over the scene like silent onlookers. Doors opened, and several men filed out, guns raised, their movements practiced and efficient.

Jackson hiked up his rifle, but I placed a hand on the barrel, lowering it. We weren't here to fight with the mob.

I spread my arms wide, palms up to show I wasn't armed.

Seconds seemed to tick by painfully slow before the back door of one of the SUVs opened. One shiny shoe met the tarmac, and an older man stepped out into the tense night air. He was maybe mid-fifties, wearing a three-piece suit, gray hair neatly combed back. Partick O'Hara had an old school vibe about him that reminded me of some forties gangster film.

He walked forward, three of his men flanking him. Everyone was on edge. One wrong move and this would turn into a firefight that I did not want.

"Giovanni Guerra," he said, stopping a few feet away from me.

"Partick, thank you for meeting with me."

His head tilted to the side, gaze sweeping over me. “Well, Roberto Donato’s hand made for a rather compelling invitation.” He peered at the warehouse, sliding his hands into his pockets. “Did you know he killed my nephew’s wife?”

“No, I didn’t.” But given the long-standing feud between the mob and The Outfit, and their apparent disregard for women, it wasn’t surprising.

“Just a few months ago. Left her baby motherless and Liam heartbroken.” His gaze slid back to mine, and the older man seemed tired. “I thank you for ending her killer, but it doesn’t negate the fact that you killed my brother, David, and his son, only two weeks ago.” His calm demeanor shifted, revealing something far more deadly. Patrick O’Hara might have been older, might have looked civilized, but men like him and I were always hiding behind masks. I knew he’d kill a man without blinking.

“And I’m sorry for that.” Well, maybe I was sorry for Shane, but not David. I couldn’t regret killing the fucker who’d nearly killed Tommy. “We were both set up—”

My words were interrupted by a single bang, the distinctive sound of a bullet splitting the night air. The warm mist of blood hit my face as a gasp of pain reached my ears.

It took my mind a long moment to catch up, to process what was happening. But it was too late. O’Hara’s eyes went wide as he choked for air, trying to breathe through the gaping bullet hole in his throat. Blood blossomed over the front of his suit, and even as Jackson grabbed my arm and tried to drag me away, I reached for the man.

Pulling free, I caught Patrick before he hit the ground, lowering him to the concrete.



Maybe I thought he deserved a shred of dignity. Or perhaps I felt like I owed him for killing his family members. I wasn't sure, but as I stared into the dying eyes of a man who had served as my enemy, I realized that I had underestimated my true enemy.

Sergio Donato had set a trap, and I'd walked right into it.

The eruption of gunfire snapped my attention back to my surroundings. Jackson dragged me away, pulling me behind the car as bullets pinged off the metal.

Anger and frustration washed over me. I'd come to broker peace, and it looked like I'd lured O'Hara here to kill him.

How the hell did Sergio know we'd be here? That Patrick would be here? The warehouse had no cameras, and we'd had the perimeter surrounded this entire time. That meant that the sniper was in position long before we had reached the warehouse. We had another rat; it was the only explanation. Thoughts flew through my mind at a hundred miles an hour as I tried to recall any and every hint of deception.

More bullets pinged off the car, blending with the rapid *bang, bang, bang* of Jackson's semi-automatic.

"That was a fucking sniper," Jackson as he dropped back down beside me to re-load.

"No shit."

"Came from the warehouse to the south. The furniture place."

Another round of shots pinged off the car, but I managed to peer out long enough to assess the surrounding buildings. There, about a hundred yards away, sat the warehouse in complete darkness. It was the perfect position to make that shot. A clear line of sight, easy escape.

“Cover me,” I said to Jackson as I palmed my gun and rose.

“Shit. Do not die, Gio.” With several more curses, he stood and opened fire.

Manic laughter blended with the rapid shots as I sprinted for the nearby Outfit warehouse. The smell of gasoline permeated the air when I ducked behind the building. Bullets followed my path, hitting the brickwork inches from me, but I was already running, moving around the back and into the shadows between buildings and storage containers.

The steady *pop, pop, pop* of gunfire grew quieter as I moved, slipping farther and farther from the fight. I felt shit for leaving my men, but if I could find that shooter...

I made it to the furniture warehouse and pressed my back against the wall, peering into the dark alleyway between buildings.

A shadowy figure dropped from the metal fire escape ladder. He blended into the night, dressed all in black, hood pulled up to conceal his identity.

The case clasped in his left hand marked him as the shooter. Sniper rifle. Professional. Unlikely to be mafia then, but a hired hit.

I didn't give a fuck as long as the mob knew it wasn't me who hired him. I would serve him up on a silver platter and hope it was enough to prove Sergio's involvement to broker peace.

Lifting my gun, I took aim at his thigh, but he jumped to the side just as I pulled the trigger. He was faster than I thought possible, as though he'd known I was there the entire time.

A bullet hit the ground an inch in front of my foot, and I froze.

“I don’t want to kill you,” he said, and I stilled at the sound of a familiar Russian accent.

The figure tipped back his head, the black hood falling from his face. Moonlight shone over short blond hair and expressionless features that always made me uncomfortable. His was the mask of a killer with all the remorse of a robot.

“Sasha, what the fuck? You just killed O’Hara?”

Una’s brother lifted a brow as though I were an idiot. “I wouldn’t be very good at my job if he were still alive.”

Jesus Christ. “Who hired you?”

He stared at me with absolutely nothing in his eyes. If Una was cold, then Sasha was pure ice. He gave away nothing; pretty sure he *felt* nothing. He lived for one thing—to kill. And unfortunately for me, he was very fucking good at it. Not that I was in danger. He only killed for money. If Sasha wanted me dead, I’d be lying right alongside O’Hara.

“I also wouldn’t be very good at my job if I told you that.”

“Fuck.” I dragged a hand down my face, feeling the figurative walls closing in around me. “Sergio Donato just used you to fuck us over. Me, Nero...” Still nothing. “By extension, Una...”

His brows tugged together slightly. “I am neutral. Your business dealings are of no concern of mine, Giovanni.”

“Did he tell you to do it here? To set me up?”

He stared at me blankly. He truly was going to remain loyal to his damn client. To Sergio.

“You couldn’t have at least given me a little warning?”

“I do not report to you, and I care not for Nero Verdi’s petty mafia dealings.” He turned away from me, lifting his hood once more. He paused and glanced over his shoulder. “It is not personal.”

That almost sounded like regret, or as close as the Russian was ever going to get. He rounded the building and was gone, a shadow disappearing back into the blackness from which he was born. I let him because even if I could overpower a trained Elite assassin—and not many could—that psycho fucker was kind of family. And we didn’t turn on family.

The squealing of tires drew my attention, and it was only then I realized the gunfire had stopped. A few seconds later, an SUV screeched to a halt at the end of the alleyway.

The door opened, revealing Jackson leaning over the passenger seat. “Get the fuck in.”

I jogged to the car and slid through the gore on the leather seat. The driver’s side glass was smashed out, and blood and brains painted the inside of the passenger window. When I glanced in the back, I saw the guy with the gold chains sprawled over the seat, a bullet wound in his chest, unseeing eyes wide open. Fuck.

“How many did we lose?”

“Three.”

Three dead, O’Hara dead, any chance of peace in tatters... I let out a breath, fighting the rage that threatened to consume me.

Jackson pulled past The Outfit warehouse, flames now licking along its windows as smoke billowed into the night air. It was the only solace to tonight, but even that was a hollow victory given that Sergio may well have known what we’d do. Did he sacrifice his warehouse just to fuck me over? A perfect trap.

My anger boiled over, and my fist smashed the dashboard. “Fuck!” I drew in a deep breath, trying to regain the control I was so obviously losing. “It was Sasha,” I said quietly, watching the dark scenery pass by the blood-slicked window.

Jackson’s stare burned into the side of my face. “Are you fucking serious?”

“He knew we’d be there.” I looked at my enforcer, the glow of the dashboard playing over his tight features. “Did Andreas hint at another rat?”

“No, but...” He shook his head and snapped his jaw shut.

“But what?”

His fingers tightened on the steering wheel. “We do have two Outfit members in our house, Gio—”

“No.” There was no way Emilia had anything to do with this.

“You’ve known her for what? A month?”

“You really think she’s working with them after she ran from me, from her family, and the prospect of a mafia marriage?”

“I admit it’s convenient, and with her brother no less. Renzo Donato. One of their best young enforcers, now behind enemy lines.” He turned onto the interstate, sticking to the speed limit to avoid drawing attention to our bloodied car. “Tell me, if she hadn’t tried to run, hadn’t seemed like the damsel in distress, would you have trusted her?”

I didn’t answer him because I didn’t know.

“Would you have kept her so close?”

“I don’t know.”

“You do.” He snorted. “You had an apartment set up for her. That marriage was supposed to be paper only, a token gesture.

And now...”

Now she was living in my house, sleeping in my bed...

“I could just as easily have sent her back or killed her *and* Renzo.”

“But you wouldn’t do that. Not to a girl vying for her freedom. Not to a brother who was only trying to save his little sister.”

“They couldn’t know that!” I snapped. “They think I’m as bad as Nero.”

He shook his head. “You might have a bloody reputation, but Andreas knew otherwise. Enough to predict that you wouldn’t send a scared girl back to her tyrannical family.”

The thought burrowed inside my mind like a parasite, eating away at everything I thought to be true. I replayed every conversation I’d ever had with Emila from the moment I had met her. “Sergio sent men to hunt her down. They tried to kill her.”

He said nothing, but his silence was louder than any accusation he could voice.

“She killed her father,” I said, trying to argue against the image forming in my mind.

“And Nero had his own brother killed.” He shrugged one heavy shoulder. “Who’s to say that Roberto’s death wasn’t in Sergio’s plan?”

I fell into silence, unwilling to believe she had betrayed me. It would mean everything she ever had said was a lie. Matteo, her sister. Her grief and guilt over her father.

And if she *had* lied to me, did I have it in me to kill her or was I too far gone? Did I love her? Fuck.

“Look, I like the girl, Gio. I even fucking like Renzo.” Jackson dragged a hand over his face. “I’m not saying it’s definitely the case, but I don’t want you to be blind to her.”

No, it was my blindness that would make her the perfect mole. An innocent young girl, a victim, a fighter. Was I so transparent that Andreas could have orchestrated this? For the first time in my life, I wished I hadn’t killed a rat so I could fucking ask him just how deep his deceit ran.

Jackson drove the rest of the way to the airfield, leaving the bloodied car and dead body for our cleaners to dump.

Over the course of the ninety-minute flight back to New York, my anger only rose, twisting into something volatile and vicious. I was now potentially facing war with The Outfit *and* the mob, and I may well have a snake in my bed. I didn’t want to believe it, but the very fact that I shied away from the idea meant it needed to be explored.

Men had died tonight, and more would die. There was no room for weakness.

**EMILIA**

I couldn't sleep. Gio was away tonight, and without him, I was on edge, like my body couldn't break out of flight mode. I'd already had one nightmare tonight. A nightmare that had Renzo running to my room and offering to stay with me, just like he had when we were kids. But now he'd fallen asleep, fully clothed on top of the comforter. His soft snores filled the darkness, and though it soothed me having another person here, it wasn't the same as having Gio's warmth wrapped around me.

I heard a murmur of voices somewhere in the house, a creak of a floorboard in the hall a few seconds later, and then the door exploded open. I bolted upright, clutching my chest as my heart let out a pounding beat.

Renzo shot to his feet, gun in hand, and instantly alert. "What the fuck?"

Light spilled into the dark room from the open doorway, the silhouette of a figure I knew all too well filling it. "Gio?"

Bright light suddenly flooded the darkness from the overhead chandelier, temporarily blinding me. When I blinked the spots from my eyes, I found Gio storming toward the bed. His suit was disheveled, blood smearing his cheek, his throat, and the



tattooed skin of his forearms. No doubt the dark material of his suit pants and shirt were also soaked.

That wasn't what alarmed me, though. It was the look on his face—cold, lethal, and fixed on my brother like a predator stalking its next kill.

“Gio, what—”

Without warning, he grabbed Renzo by the throat and slammed him against the wall.

“Stop!” I scrambled from the bed, stopping a few feet away from them, when I noticed the knife Gio now had pressed to Renzo's throat. Was he pissed Renzo was in here with me? Had Renzo done something?

“Gio,” I whispered, terrified for my brother. The man covered in blood and wielding a knife was not the man I knew. My hands shook violently, my chest squeezing so tight I could barely breathe. “Please.” I moved to the side, trying to shift that lethal attention to me.

Renzo's wild gaze met mine. “Stay back, Emi.”

Gio inched his face closer to my brother's, and the anger that was so apparent only seconds ago evaporated. In its place was a deadly kind of calm that scared the shit out of me. *He'll kill him.* “Are you a fucking rat, Renzo?”

My heart plummeted to my gut at the possibility. No. No, Renzo would never serve my uncle. *He used to, though...*

Despite the blade pressing against his windpipe, my brother looked offended. “Fuck, no.”

I instantly felt guilty for even thinking it was a possibility. Ren would never betray me like that.

“Someone is still feeding your uncle information, and you are still Outfit, so I guess that wouldn’t make you a rat, would it? Just loyal.”

“The only person I’m loyal to is my sister.” Renzo glared at Gio like he’d gut him if he could. And maybe he would. Ren was no friend to the Famiglia. He was here in this house because he helped me, because we had gotten caught.

“The logical theory is that it’s one or both of you,” Gio said, his monotone voice far more unsettling than if he had shouted the accusation.

He thought *we*—I would choose my uncle over him. After everything I had told him about Matteo and Chiara. After my father... The sting of hurt jabbed into my gut, digging in deep in a way I wasn’t sure I’d ever be able to pry out.

I swear I could feel the crack in my chest as the void that had once existed between Gio and me tore open once more, filling with deceit and distrust and hatred.

It was like the ground had opened up at my feet and I was tumbling into the darkness with no end in sight. I wanted to beg Gio to make it stop, but it was too late. It couldn’t be stopped, couldn’t be taken back. The seed of doubt had been sown and was taking root right before my eyes. And so I fell, and fell, into the very abyss I had forged for myself the moment I had placed my trust in a man like him.

“If you really think I’m a rat for my uncle, then get it over with, Guerra,” Renzo snarled in his face.

“I want you to admit it.”

Renzo laughed, and my spine stiffened. Did he not value his life? “I’m not admitting to shit.”

“Not you.” Gio turned his shoulders slightly until he glanced at me. “Emilia.”

The venom in his eyes made me want to recoil, to run away from the monster before me, but I wouldn’t—couldn’t. Because he had a knife to Renzo’s throat, and I would die before I let him take my brother from me.

He really thought I had betrayed him this entire time?

I squared my shoulders, my gaze flicking from the knife at Ren’s neck to Gio’s eyes. “Admit what? That I’m some kind of spy for Sergio?” A laugh that bordered on hysteria slipped from my lips.

And that’s how I felt, hysterical, unhinged. Because the scene playing out before me... either way, it was going to destroy me. I could feel it—impending doom raking its claws over my skin, waiting to sink them in and rip out my heart. I would lose one, if not both of them.

“I’m not a fucking *spy*,” I spat, though my voice wobbled.

Gio’s grip on Renzo tightened, his jaw ticcing erratically. “You think I won’t kill him, little princess? I want the truth.”

“You know I would never help that man!” Tears streaked down my face as fear for my brother strangled me. “Please don’t hurt him, Gio. Please.” I would get on my knees and beg the devil for salvation if I had to.

He pressed his blade into Renzo’s skin until blood welled, a fat drop rolling down the *V* of his shirt.

The sight of it broke me, and I lost it. “Why are you doing this?” I screamed at him.

When he looked at me, there was no trace of the man I’d come to know. This was the man who had earned Giovanni Guerra’s

gruesome reputation. Ruthless and cruel. He'd been many things to me but never cruel. My uncle was cruel. Matteo was cruel. And the realization that he was just like them was a crushing disappointment, driving a wedge into that fissured crack in my chest and widening it.

"Because I am being betrayed at every turn, and the common theme seems to be the name Donato."

I swallowed down the hatred burning through me and approached him. His gaze never left mine as I raised a shaking hand to his jaw, trying to ignore my brother's strained breaths. I fought down the disdain I felt for the Famiglia boss at that moment. "You truly believe I've lied to you about everything? That I deceived you this entire time?"

"This entire time' has been a few weeks."

I nodded solemnly. "Long enough that you should know the truth."

His brows furrowed, angry breaths hissing through his teeth. I saw it; a moment of doubt, of sanity, or perhaps clarity.

My hand lowered from his face, moving to his wrist. He allowed me to pull the blade away from Renzo's throat and bring it to my own.

"It's not Renzo you're angry with." I felt the wet kiss of the blade's bloody edge, the rush of Gio's warm breath over my face. "It's not Renzo you think used you." I stepped closer until my chest bumped his, until he was forced to focus entirely on me. "If you believe I did, then kill me." Part of me wanted him to end it. There was a certain poetry in it, really, the girl whose life was never her own, killed by the only one who ever made her feel alive.

I gripped his wrist harder and stared into those beautiful blue eyes. They were like the endless horizon on a perfectly clear day, and even now, with him vibrating with tension against me, I found the same sense of peace in them that I always had. “Do it, Gio.”

“Emilia—” Renzo started.

I held my free hand out toward my brother, cutting him off. He nearly died to save me once. I would do the same for him a thousand times over.

“Leave, Renzo.”

“No.”

“Leave, Renzo!” My voice broke with the force of the outburst. “Please.” I didn’t want him to see this, to defend me and get himself killed.

He huffed out a breath. “I know you love her, Guerra, and that is the only fucking reason I’m stepping out of this room.” There was a pregnant pause. “But if you hurt her, I will kill you; I promise you that.”

I’d never heard Renzo sound so bloodthirsty, and I had no doubt that if I died here in this room, he would try to kill Gio. My brother would die for his efforts, but he would try regardless. Maybe that was the legacy of the Donato children—to die.

The tension rose until I could feel each heavy thump of my pulse, hear each rasped breath like a gunshot in my ears. Renzo finally moved away, and I felt his eyes on me the entire time before the door clicked shut behind him. I knew he wouldn’t go far.

Then it was just Gio, me, and a hurricane of hate and pain swirling between us.

His gaze burned into mine as though he could pry what he wanted to hear from my lips. He wanted me to be the rat. Well, I wasn't, but if he wanted blood, I'd spill mine for him.

"Okay. I'm ready," I said in a low whisper. I tried to pull the blade against my skin, but he was like trying to move a mountain. "Do it!" I shouted, more tears now tracking down my face.

His hand trembled slightly, and with it, the blade bit into my skin, the sting all the more painful for being inflicted by him, a man my fanciful, naïve heart had thought to love.

But people like me didn't get love.

We didn't get loyalty.

I didn't even get freedom.

As I stood there with blood trickling down my throat and tears streaming down my face, I was reduced to nothing, my life worthless even to myself. Sucking in a trembling breath, I closed my eyes, unable to look at him anymore. "Please just do it," I breathed.

"Because you think you deserve it?"

"Maybe." Killing my own father surely made me worthy of death. "Or maybe I just don't care anymore." I didn't care for this endless merry-go-round of mafia bullshit that I could never get off, never get out of. I didn't care for powerful men flexing their might and putting me on my knees every time I dared to stand tall. "Blood in, blood out, right?"

I opened my eyes and met his gaze. There was a pause where it felt as if the entire world held its breath with me. My pulse thrummed against my eardrums, too loud. A drumbeat to my impending fate.

“Emilia.” Fingers brushed my jaw before Gio’s forehead dropped to mine, a shaky breath washing over my lips.

“Do it.” My grip on his wrist tightened, and more warm blood slid over my skin.

“I... I can’t.”

“Why not? You’re so convinced I’m Sergio’s pet,” I spat the words, and despite my bravado, my entire body trembled with each rabid beat of my heart in my chest. Out of habit, I inhaled the scent of pine and mint, hating that it grounded me in that moment, that my instincts were soothed by it rather than terrified.

It felt like an eternity passed before he fought my hold and pulled away. His shoulders dropped, the aggression visibly draining from him as though it had never existed. As though the last few minutes never had happened. But they had, and they couldn’t be taken back.

“I don’t think I could ever hurt you,” he whispered, as though it were some sordid confession.

I wanted to laugh at the ridiculousness of that statement because no one had ever cut me deeper—literally and figuratively. “You just did.”

“I had to be sure.” A hand wrapped around my neck, his palm pressing over the scratch he’d left there, slicking blood over my skin and his. “You make me weak. Blind.”

His lips pressed over mine, and I let him kiss me. Worse, I kissed him back, if only to remember what it felt like. To embrace that warm rush of belonging, of being the center of someone else’s world for a single moment before it was ripped away. Because this was a goodbye. As his lips pressed to mine

and the last tears I would allow myself to cry for him dashed my cheeks, I shuttered myself to Giovanni Guerra.

I allowed the pain to strengthen me because I had grown weak, complacent in the arms of a man who would turn on me in a heartbeat. I would not be weak again.

His kiss became desperate, but it was too late. “Emilia,” his hold on me tightened as though he could feel my heart that was once so open to him growing cold. “I’m sorry,” he breathed against my lips.

The organ in my chest let out one last strangled hiccup, and then I steeled myself and blocked it all out. “So am I.” I pulled away from him, closing the door on every emotion I had until I was numb, cold.

One thing my father’s death had taught me was the ability to shut off the emotions that hurt me. Grief. Heartbreak...

I’d come dangerously close to giving this man my heart, and how stupid of me to think what we had could possibly be love. It was obsession and possession. Nothing more. I was a fool to ever stay with him. To allow him to trap me in this house.

I went to step around him, and he blocked my path. “We are done here. So, move.”

“We’ll never be done, Emilia.” He fisted my hair, pulling me into him with a bite of pain across my scalp. His anger lashed against me like static crackling in a storm. “You can fight me and scratch me, kitten, but you *are* mine.”

My own rage niggled beneath the surface of my skin, but it never quite made it to the surface. “I didn’t feel like yours two minutes ago when you cut my throat.” No, I felt like his enemy, and I hated him for being every bit as disappointing as all the other men in my life.



I vowed to myself there and then that he would never have my heart again. Deep down, men like him, like Matteo—they were all the same. I'd nearly forgotten the lesson that was very much carved into my soul with my sister's death. Lust would do that, though, and hope called to those who had rarely felt its enticing caress.

I stepped around him. "And to think, I thought you were so much better than Sergio and my father."

This time he didn't stop me. As soon as I shut the door, I heard something smash.

Good. Let him rage; let him break. Let him feel as helpless as he just made me feel.

The thought of not having him terrified me, but I would survive the same way I always did.



## GIO

I stared out the window as I sat on the couch in Nero's office, a glass of whiskey in my hand. The burning liquor was doing nothing to chase out the cold that had settled in my gut. I was losing. Everything. Chicago, my men, Emilia...

It had been nearly a week since Patrick O'Hara was shot, and all four of the bars I owned in Chicago had been burned to the ground. It was now hard to tell if it was the mob or The Outfit.

With the messenger dead, the message never reached The Outfit capos, and while Jackson was working on contacting them, we couldn't force them to take calls. With the mob now against us, we were certainly in a weaker bargaining position as well.

"Gio."

I snapped my gaze from the view of the pool to Nero. He was frowning at me from behind his desk. Jackson sat on the couch beside me, shifting under the tension straining the air.

The pair of them were like sharks that could smell blood in the water, and they were agitated, eager for violence. I usually prided myself on being the smart one of the three of us, the

rational one, able to find a peaceful, diplomatic solution. But that night with Emilia proved just how stupid and violent I truly was. I'd acted from a place of anger, and it had cost me dearly.

"I said, I don't think you have another rat."

I frowned. "And why is that?"

"Una managed to get hold of Sasha. He wouldn't tell her much, but he said his employer had zero information on your location. He bugged O'Hara's phone and knew he had a meeting there."

I dragged a hand over my face, my own agitation ramping up tenfold.

No rat. It was salt in a very raw wound. A wound that opened and wept every time I walked into a room and Emilia left. Each time she refused to even look at me. It didn't matter what I said or did. I sent her flowers, gifts, made food and left it outside her door. I *apologized*—it was as though I now didn't exist in her eyes. I could withstand her anger, her defiance, but her indifference was much harder to weather.

I'd tried not to replay the look on her face that night, the hurt and fear for her brother. I tried even harder to push away that fucking resignation, the acceptance when she pulled that knife to her throat. It was the same look she'd worn when Sergio's capo had had her on her knees in that motel room with a gun to her head. And finally, the indifference, as though I were just like every other man in her life who had let her down.

I should have been one hundred percent focused on the mob, on Sergio Donato... Instead, I just replayed those looks over and over. And now I find out I never had any reason to suspect her. I was destroying everything I touched.

“Great.”

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” Nero snapped. “You fucked up. It happens. We deal with it.”

“No, Sasha fucked everything up! I had it handled. Una—”

“Careful, Gio,” Nero warned. His fists were balled on the desk in front of him, knuckles washing white.

Jackson gripped my arm, and from the corner of my eye, he shook his head. “Look, no one fucked up. But we *should* fuck up the entire Outfit and present Sergio Donato’s head to the Irish as an ugly-ass olive branch. Job done.”

“Oh, why didn’t I think of that?” I threw my hands up, then glared at him. “Because we can’t fucking find him!”

Sergio was pulling strings from the shadows, unseen, while reaping carnage on us.

“Then what do you suggest?” Nero quirked a brow. “Come on. I know you’ll have some peace-loving solution.”

“I don’t.” I shrugged. Maybe I would if I gave a shit, but right now, I didn’t. “Just keep killing their soldiers and hope we can get the capos to turn. Hell, kill everyone. The mob. The Outfit. Fuck it.”

Nero narrowed his gaze on me, suspicion painted into every line. “And here I thought you would try to get us in a circle, singing kumbaya.”

“We need Sergio.” We had to cut off the head of the snake. I shoved to my feet and headed for the door, not in the mood for this. “Tell Una I have a job for her if she’s interested. Given what Sasha did, her precious fucking balance shouldn’t be a problem.”

I visited Tommy and made arrangements for him to be discharged in a few days before making my way back to the house. Truthfully, I was avoiding the place. Because I couldn't handle *her* avoiding *me*.

I stepped inside the house and spoke with one of my men, ordering him to double up the patrols on the perimeter.

We were outside my office when Emilia came down the hall, a stern glare on her face. Her anger was like a rolling storm barreling across the space between us, but I welcomed her wrath, craved the scratch of my little kitten's claws.

I half expected her to walk past and ignore me, the same way she had every time I'd seen her in the last week. As though I disgusted her. Instead, she walked straight toward me, and my pulse sped in response. God, she'd made me so desperate for a single second of her time.

I dismissed the guard and steeled myself for the rage that excited me so much.

When she stepped beneath the bright light of the overhead chandelier, I noticed the flush of her cheeks. I could have mistaken it for anger if it weren't for the damp strands of her hair hanging down her back. The reddened skin extended down her neck and chest, and my jaw clenched hard at the sight of the mild burn.

I had told her to come to me.

"Emilia." My voice was part greeting, part warning.

Because, as always, she'd defied me. Because she was suffering and harming herself.

"I want him gone." She came to a halt in front of me, jerking her thumb back to Adamo, who hurried after her.

His nervous gaze flicked to me, and I wanted to laugh. I'd seen the guy kill in cold blood, but little Emilia Donato had him rattled. I was glad it wasn't just me whose life she managed to fuck up.

"Tough. He's your guard. He stays."

She glared at me like she could set me alight with her hatred alone. At least it wasn't indifference, though, and I almost sighed in relief as her rage battered against me.

"I don't need a guard."

Fuck, her brattiness both pissed me off and made my dick hard.

I gripped her throat and shoved her back against my office door. Her breath hitched, glare intensifying. "Clearly, you do." My thumb stroked over her flushed skin. "What did I tell you about hurting yourself, Emilia?"

She swallowed, her throat bobbing beneath my fingers. "What I do is no longer your concern, Giovanni."

My teeth clenched at the sound of my full name on her lips. I hated it.

I leaned in and inhaled, loving the scent of my shower gel on her skin. "Everything about you is my concern, princess, because you'll always be mine. No matter how much distance you put between us or how much you hate me." No other man had ever touched her or ever would.

Her mouth gaped open, then snapped shut. She stared back at me with so much fire, and I wanted to spank and fuck the indignation right out of her.

I maneuvered her away from the door, fighting a smile. "Adamo stays."

I opened the door and stepped inside before she could respond but halted when I came face to face with the barrel of a gun. The cool metal pressed to my forehead, and Emilia fell silent at my back.

I let out a sigh. Right now? “Una, do we have to do this every time? You’re in *my* fucking house.”

She lowered the gun, an emotionless smile working over bright-red lips. “I like to keep you on your toes.” She waved the weapon around. “You failed spectacularly, by the way. If I were an enemy, your brains would be all over your pretty friend right now.”

The floorboards creaked as Emilia moved behind me, drawing Una’s attention. I fought the urge to wrench her back out of the assassin’s sight. Nero’s wife didn’t exactly define friend from foe well. If you weren’t in her inner circle, then you were an enemy, a hit, or a potential future hit. She kept things very black and white.

“Well, for a start, my men *let* you in.” I moved farther into the office, and she backed up a step. “They aren’t going to let in my enemies. And secondly, you and Sasha are the only fucking people who ever lie in wait in my office to put a gun to my head.” I had at least thought I only had one of them to contend with since he had moved to Sicily, but oh no, here he was in America, fucking shit up for me.

Una tucked the gun into the holster at her thigh and walked over to my desk, perching on its edge and crossing one long jean-clad leg over the other. “You called.” She spread her hands with a flourish. “Here I am.”

“That was fast.”

“I was free.” She shrugged. “And bored.”



I glanced toward the door and found Emilia still lingering there, her curious gaze locked on Una.

“Emilia, Renzo is probably looking for you,” I said by way of dismissal before moving over to the bar, trying to pull the assassin’s attention to me. I didn’t want them in the same room.

“Seeing as dear Gio clearly isn’t going to introduce us... Emilia Donato, I assume?” Una’s head tilted, indigo eyes sweeping over Emilia with cool assessment. “The Outfit’s Trojan horse.”

“Una,” I warned before turning my narrowed gaze on Emilia because she was still here. Ignoring me.

“Also, the one who killed Roberto Donato and started a war.” The Russian smiled because she enjoyed antagonizing me.

There was something almost inhuman about Una. The way she moved, the way her gaze tracked you like prey she was about to tear the throat out of. Yet Emilia didn’t waver.

Her small fists balled against her thighs, her chin rising to meet Una’s gaze. “He was my father and my enemy. And I don’t regret it.”

I knew that was a lie, but looking at Emilia right now, no one else wouldn’t know it.

Una pushed to her feet and approached The Outfit princess like a shark eyeing an injured seal. “I’m curious.” She stopped in front of the younger woman. “Why did you kill him?”

“Because he allowed my uncle to sell my sister and me like cattle.” Emilia’s anger was evident in every strained muscle, her voice growing stronger with each word. “They drove my sister to her grave. Call my father’s death justice if you will.”

For a single moment, the psycho façade slipped from Una’s face. “I would burn the world down for my sister.” And she nearly had. She pinched a piece of Emilia’s chocolate hair between her fingers and murmured something in Russian. “And so the pawn becomes a queen.” She dropped her hand away, a smile pulling at her lips. “Fear not, lisichka. In this world, power is taken in blood. The strong survive, and the weak die, forgotten and inconsequential.”

A similar smile touched Emilia’s lips, and I glanced between the two women who seemed to be finding some common ground, an understanding of sorts. And that was fucking concerning.

Una turned her attention to me. “Give me a name, Gio.”

My gaze met Emilia’s, and she didn’t flinch as I said, “Sergio Donato.” Words held power, and names even more so. But a name spoken to the Kiss of Death...well, I might as well have etched it on the reaper’s list. Death would come for him, and there was no escape. No outrunning it or hiding.

Una’s lips twitched, and I fully expected her to deny me. Such was her way. Balance and her bullshit code among killers. Fuck knows. But if Sasha could take out Patrick O’Hara, then she could sure as shit take out Sergio. I expected her to ask for an exorbitant amount of money for her troubles. Not that I wouldn’t pay it at this point.

Instead, she simply nodded. “Okay. Sergio Donato will be dead within the week, but it’s her hit,” she jerked her head toward Emilia. “Not yours.”

“I...” Emilia stammered. “What?”

“Oh, I don’t like to get involved in Nero’s games.” She winked—fucking winked—at Emilia before striding toward the door.

“Tommy got shot thanks to Donato, Una. This is hardly Nero’s game,” I snapped.

She paused, and the look she shot over her shoulder at me could have frozen hell over. “Oh, I know. Why do you think I’m taking the job?” She opened the door. “Two million in my account by tonight, Gio.” Then she walked out. Of course. She couldn’t do it out of the kindness of her heart, especially when she had no kindness and no heart.

“Who is she?” Emilia asked after a few moments of silence.

“That is Nero’s wife, Una Verdi. Also known as the Kiss Of Death, one of the most effective assassins in the world.”

Emilia’s brows pulled together before she looked at the closed door as though she could see the woman still standing there. “She looks so...”

“Yeah, I know. Sergio will be dead within the week, piccola. I promise.”

Did I want to kill him myself? Yes, but I needed him stopped more. By any means. I wanted Emilia safe and my business back on track. Money and safety came before ego and vengeance.

“Good.” She grabbed the door handle.

“Emilia.” I grabbed her arm. “I’m sorry.” I’d said it already, but I didn’t know what else to say. “Please, just—”

She yanked free of my grip like I’d burned her. “Get rid of Adamo.” Then she slipped from the room.

For the first time in my life, I didn’t know what to do or how to fix it. Maybe I wasn’t supposed to.

I’d shown her my worst self, and she hated me for it. Hated this world, this life.

I was aware of all the reasons why I should let Emilia Donato go, emotionally if not physically. But I couldn't. They said love was selfless, but not for men like me. No, men like me became consumed with that which they had never had. Suddenly, money and power seemed like nothing without her.

Rubbing my temples, I tried to soothe the headache brewing there. Then I pushed Emilia from my mind and opened my email. One of my men had sent me a blank email with a file attachment. I opened up the grainy images that had been taken in Chicago, featuring one man in particular—Luca Donato.

He was running The Outfit in Sergio's stead, keeping it stable, and that was a problem.

He was a problem. One I was going to have to deal with.



## EMILIA

I walked the perimeter of the grounds, pulling my jacket tighter around me. Leaves skittered across the lawns, catching on the cool breeze. Fall had well and truly set in, and I could almost feel the icy breath of winter on the back of my neck.

It was cold out here, but I needed the air, the space. Glancing toward the house, my gaze was drawn to the ground floor window where the silhouette of a figure lingered. I couldn't make out the details, but I knew it was Gio. Watching me. As if Adamo, my own personal stalker, weren't enough.

Leaves crunched behind me, and I turned, fully expecting to find the young guard traipsing after me, ready to cuss him out. Instead, I found Renzo approaching. His brows were pulled together, hands shoved deep into the pockets of a hooded sweatshirt.

“You shouldn't be walking alone, Emilia.”

I rolled my eyes, having had this very conversation with Gio when he saw me out here yesterday. He'd demanded I not leave the house at all. Ridiculous. I was surprised he hadn't already come out and dragged me inside. Though if the dark SUVs parked in the driveway were any indication, he had guests to attend to.

“Why am I surrounded by overbearing men?”

Renzo came to a halt beside me. “It’s the right amount of bearing, I’ll have you know.”

“There are guards walking the perimeter on the other side of that wall, Ren, and Adamo is probably lurking somewhere, thinking I don’t know he’s following me.” Speaking of which... I linked my arm with Ren’s and kept moving. “I think we should leave,” I whispered.

He snorted. “Didn’t you just point out the guards?”

“Like that ever stopped us.”

“This isn’t the lake house, Emi. This isn’t Dad trying to keep his unruly teenage daughter in.”

“I fail to see how Giovanni is any better than our father at this point.” I knew the words were unfair, but I was hurt and angry and clinging to my hatred even as I spiraled.

Truthfully, I was drowning without him. Some days it felt as though I was hanging on by a thread after nights full of nightmares. Then my demons would stalk me into my waking hours, too, nipping away at me with sharp teeth and cruel whispers.

I barely slept, rarely ate. It felt as though I was drifting, despondent, lost.

Was this what heartbreak felt like? I’d watched enough movies featuring tubs of ice cream and tears. God knew I’d shed enough tears. Maybe ice cream would help...

What made it worse was that he kept apologizing. Why couldn’t he just let me hate him? I needed to hate him because I couldn’t forgive him. I had trusted him, and he’d nearly

killed my brother in front of me. He had hurt me far more than just physically.

Renzo let out a sigh and rubbed the back of his neck. “Look, Emi—”

“Don’t you dare defend him, Ren.”

“He apologized to me.”

I tried to hide my shock because men like Giovanni Guerra did not apologize. He apologized to me, but I knew he was just trying to get back into my pants. He didn’t actually feel remorse for what he had done. Apologizing to Ren was different... It required him to humble himself. Still...

“So he should. He was wrong.”

“He wasn’t, though.” Ren could not be serious. “I hate that he threatened you, Emi, and I want to kill him for this.” He reached up and brushed one fingertip over the barely visible scratch at my throat. “But you don’t know what happened that night. Some shit went down in Chicago with the Irish, and honestly, if I were him, I’d have thought the same.”

I tried to wrangle the thread of irritation that wound through with the knowledge that Renzo knew what happened that night and I didn’t. But I rationalized that Renzo had given Gio a chance to explain. I hadn’t.

“You wouldn’t have reacted like that,” I mumbled.

The look he flashed me was one of sympathy, the look of a brother to his naïve little sister. “He threatened someone you loved, made you believe he would hurt me in order to get the truth. It’s textbook. I *would* and *have* done the same.”

“It wasn’t just some trick, Ren! He did hurt you, and he would have killed you.”



His gaze drifted toward the big oak tree at the top of the hill. “Guess we’ll never know, will we? Because he didn’t.” He shrugged. “All I’m saying is you can’t be mad at him for protecting his people.”

“I can be mad at him for not protecting *me!*” I shouted, tears prickling my eyes. “I thought he was better than them, Renzo.”

His gaze swung to me, eyes softening. “He’s not Dad or Uncle Sergio or Matteo. I mean, he’s still a Famiglia fucker, but he’s nowhere near as bad as them.”

“Why the hell are you defending him? You don’t like him.”

“Because as much as you talk about running, you know you can’t.”

I blinked at him, a stray tear breaking free.

“He cares about you, Emi. And he’s a scary motherfucker. No one will keep you as safe as he can. Just...don’t hold a grudge for no reason.”

I folded my arms over my chest. “I don’t hold grudges.”

He threw his head back on a laugh. “Oh, yeah. Like the time you didn’t speak to Luca or me for two damn months because we accidentally killed your fish.”

“You gave them beer! That is not an accident.”

“It was a fish. It’s not like you can be emotionally attached to a fish.”

I punched him in the arm. “You’re an asshole.”

We walked up to the top of the hill, stopping beneath the branches of the oak. Our father’s grave was unmarked, but the

tree was a far more beautiful tribute than any he truly deserved. This place was full of both pain and peace for me.

Ren threw an arm around my shoulder as though sensing I needed his strength. “It won’t all be for nothing, Emi. Dad’s gone. Soon Sergio will be, too.”

“What will happen to The Outfit? To Luca?”

I often thought of my older brother, worried about him. He may have helped me once, but we stood on opposite sides of the board. If he ever found out that I had killed Father...

“Gio’s asked me to try to get in contact with The Outfit capos.”

I frowned. “Why?”

My brother pinched the bridge of his nose, and I noticed the lines of strain setting into his youthful face. “He wants them to turn on Sergio. Elect a new boss, and I guess ally with the Famiglia.”

“And if they don’t?”

I knew the answer before Renzo said the words. “The Famiglia will kill everyone. Or at least the upper-level members. Capos, enforcers...”

“Luca...” I breathed.

“Even if the capos do turn, I can’t see Nero Verdi leaving Luca alive.” Ren looked away, and I knew he was trying to hide his feelings from me.

Luca was a stick in the mud, but he was our brother. He wasn’t evil like our uncle or as complicit as our father. He didn’t deserve to die.

Turning, I walked back toward the house.

Renzo jogged after me, leaves crunching beneath his boots. “Where are you going?”

When I didn’t answer him, he grabbed my shoulder and forced me to face him. “Emi, Gio’s in a meeting with his boss. In case you forgot, his boss is Nero Verdi, and regardless of how much he may care for you, he is still Giovanni Guerra. We are their captives. There’s nothing you can do.” He dragged a hand through his hair. “I can probably get a message to Luca when I try to contact the capos.”

“No.” I shook my head adamantly. “If Gio found out you tried to warn Luca, he’d see it as a betrayal.” The memory of him putting a knife to Renzo’s throat flashed through my mind, and I felt sick. “We both know how he feels about that.”

For a single moment, I felt so fucking helpless, so useless in the face of powerful and awful men. I had no power, nothing but the Donato name, which meant less and less with each passing day—

“The Donato name,” I murmured more to myself than Ren.

He frowned at me, but I ignored him, striding the rest of the way to the house. He didn’t follow.

None of the guards stopped me as I went to Gio’s office. I pushed open the door without knocking, and every gaze turned to me.

Gio was at the window as usual. Another guy sat behind his desk, and Jackson was on the couch.

Then there was Una. As dangerous as all these men were, I knew the pretty little woman sitting on the desk, swinging her legs back and forth, was by far the greatest threat. She was completely at ease, casual in a way that only somebody lethal

really could be. When my gaze met hers, she smiled and jerked her chin like we were sharing some secret.

Gio turned from his stalking spot and took two steps toward me as though he couldn't help it. Then he seemed to catch himself and pause.

"You're going to kill Luca," I accused.

A frown crumpled his features as he strode forward. "That doesn't concern you, Emilia."

I laughed humorlessly, and he gripped my arm, trying to drag me from the room. There was an urgency to his movements, like he couldn't get me out of there fast enough. "Seeing as he's my brother, I'd say it has everything to do with me." I yanked out of his hold, and we glared at each other for a beat, nothing but venom lingering between us.

"Luca Donato is the enemy." A deep voice came from behind Gio, controlled, calm.

I turned my attention to the man behind the desk. He was broader than Gio but with the same athletic frame that fit perfectly in a suit. He might have been even more beautiful than Gio if it weren't for the coldness in his hazel eyes. It was hard not to drop my gaze in submission.

This was Nero Verdi.

Just the thought of his name was enough to make me feel sick with fear. If Gio's reputation was bad, then this man might as well be the devil himself. Women, children...he had zero morals. If someone got in his way, they died. I could expect no mercy from him.

"Luca is loyal to The Outfit, not my uncle specifically." I forced myself to meet his gaze without flinching, hoping I was right.

Luca had never had to be loyal to anyone but my uncle, but given the choice, I had to hope he would do better.

“He’ll act in the best interest of The Outfit. He’s honorable.”

“I doubt that, but even so, honor never saved anyone.” Nero laughed, his gaze raking me from head to toe. “Certainly not from me.”

“Sit, *lisichka*,” Una said, sweeping a hand toward the couch.

I had no idea what that word meant, but it sounded like an endearment.

I moved farther into the room and dropped onto the couch beside Jackson’s massive frame.

He leaned back and clasped both hands behind his neck. “Well, now, this should be interesting.” He grinned and winked at me, lessening the tension in the room slightly.

“You don’t want me to kill Luca Donato.” Nero leaned forward, bracing his elbows on the desk. “Give me a good reason not to, little girl.”

The smile on his face was mocking, and I supposed to a man like him, I would seem ridiculous. A naïve girl getting emotional about her brother. I had no doubt he was humoring me, maybe for Gio’s sake. Or even Una’s.

I swallowed heavily, feeling the weight of Gio’s gaze from across the room, but I focused on Nero—he was the one I had to convince. “You want the capos to turn on my family, but it’s not that easy. My uncle will have made sure of that. He’s smarter than he seems.”

“Don’t we fucking know it,” Jackson mumbled under his breath.

Nero tilted his head to the side. “*I don’t want anything. Gio is the one trying to negotiate some peaceful surrender.*” He glanced at Gio as though the notion disappointed him. “I vote we just kill them all.”

Panic washed through me. “That would leave a power vacuum,” I blurted, winging this for all I was worth and trying to recall snippets of conversation I’d heard between my father and my brothers over the years.

I didn’t like the mafia, but in that house, it was often either mafia politics and shooting guns with my brothers or learning to cook with my mother. I chose the former.

“The Irish are your enemies, too, right? You’d hand them Chicago. They’d absorb all Outfit territory and become more powerful.”

Fuck, now Nero looked pissed.

Silence descended on the room, and I felt stupid. Who was I to tell a man like him how to fight a war? No one.

The tension burst when Una laughed, clapping her hands together. “She has a point.” Her violet gaze swept over me. “First a princess, then a killer, then a strategist. You are full of surprises.” She swept her hand out. “Go on, tell them what you propose.” The twitch of her lips told me she knew exactly where I was heading with this.

I nodded and met Nero’s intimidating gaze. “*You can control The Outfit.*”

“The capos would never remain loyal to us,” Gio argued, shifting until he was leaning against the wall across from me. His arms folded over his chest, and I tried to ignore his flexing biceps, the casual grace with which he held himself, but it was impossible.

“No, but they will to the Donato name.” I sucked in a deep breath, barely able to force my next words past my lips, but this was the only way I could think of right now. The only thing I could do to save Luca. “If I marry Gio, he has a weak claim.”

“No.” Gio’s objection shouldn’t have stung quite as much as it did.

I mean, I’d never wanted to marry him, and right now, I hated him, but did he have to sound so vehement?

I ignored him, turning my attention to Nero, the one who would ultimately override Gio’s objections. For a moment, I felt like an asshole because Nero would do to Gio what my uncle had done to me. But for Luca... “With both my brother’s support, it would be enough. Let them run it and answer to you.”

Nero leaned back in his chair, staring at me as he tapped an index finger over his bottom lip. “A puppet mafia.”

“Luca and Renzo are both respected enough...” Luca would hate the idea of bowing to the Famiglia, but he would surely see reason.

“No.” Gio moved to stand in front of me now. “No, Emilia.”

I sucked in a sharp breath before pushing to my feet. “You didn’t give a fuck about marrying me for *your* bullshit alliance.” The least he could do was marry me for mine. I offered him a cool smile. “You should be happy, Giovanni. Now you’ll get a whole mafia in exchange for marrying me.”

His jaw ticced, and as we had our stand-off, the rest of the room fell into silence. Tension thrummed between us, lust and hate and pain circling, nipping at my heels.

“You are such a hypocritical bastard. Am I not good enough for you now?” I stepped closer to him and jabbed him in the chest. “Because you’re the asshole who chased me across two countries just to ‘claim me.’” I shook my head, beyond pissed. “You know—”

One second he was standing there; the next, he threw me over his shoulder.

“Gio! Put me down.”

“Meeting over,” he barked before striding from the room.





## EMILIA

Jackson's laughter faded as Gio stalked down the hall. I smacked his back as he ascended the stairs, though it had zero effect. He was such a condescending, hypocritical asshole, but worse, he was robbing me of a chance to actually help Luca.

Blood rushed from my head when he put me down, and my vision swam before the gray walls of his bedroom came into focus, then his face. Right before I slapped it.

His head snapped to the side, breath hissing through his teeth like an angry rattlesnake. "Emilia."

It was the only warning I got before his hand was around my throat. This felt so familiar, and I hated that I wanted it, that I craved the quickening of my pulse, the imprint of his fingers on my skin.

"What the fuck are you playing at?"

I glared at him, even as a pathetic sense of hurt pounded away at me with every heartbeat. "Don't look so disgusted, Giovanni. You were going to marry me once before. You can do it again. It's just a piece of paper."

He shoved away from me and paced, dragging both hands through his hair. "Fuck. Why didn't you come to me in private

with this?”

Because I didn't even know what I was going to do until about two minutes before I walked into that office.

“Because I will do whatever it takes to protect the people I care about from you and Nero Verdi.” I lifted my chin. “Even if I have to marry you to do it.”

I had never wanted to get married, certainly not in the mafia and definitely not to the very man I was sold to in the first place. But if I were going to do it, why not for my own cause? Not like Gio hadn't already had my body and taken my freedom anyway. What was a ring, really?

“You don't want this, Emilia.”

“I want my brothers running The Outfit instead of in a coffin.”

“You want freedom.”

“What I want has never mattered!” I shouted, and he stopped, what looked like sympathy flashing over his face. “It doesn't matter.” It was my only constant—how inconsequential my life was. If I was going to sacrifice myself, then at least it was for Renzo and Luca, not my asshole uncle. At least it was my choice.

Gio stepped close, his warm fingers whispering over my cheek. God, how I craved him. How I wanted to fall into the safety of that embrace. But it was a lie. There was nothing warm or safe in Giovanni Guerra.

“It matters to me.” Such sweet words slipped from his lips as he cupped my jaw. Like a lover. Like a man I could have loved once. “I will always care about you, piccola.”

I'd come to hate that term of affection on his lips. It reminded me of how deeply I'd allowed him to cut me.

“More than anyone or anything.”

“You said you’d never lie to me.” I breathed. “We both know you care far more for the mafia than you ever will me.”

His sapphire gaze hardened. “And you said you just wanted us. No deals. No marriage. Now here you are, getting knee-deep in mafia politics.”

“Yeah, well, things changed.” He changed. “There is no *us* now.”

His jaw ticced at that, but I didn’t care. Let him be angry. Let him feel a sliver of the hurt he’d inflicted on me with a blade to my throat.

“This will be purely a business arrangement.” One that served *my* needs this time.

His teeth raked his bottom lip as he stared at me. “Oh, princess, you really think we could ever be a passionless piece of paper? No. I don’t think so.” A smirk played over his lips. “I reinstate our deal.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “What deal?”

His hand collared my throat once more, and I hated that my pulse hiccuped in excitement, that I wanted him to squeeze a little harder. His chest pressed to mine, warm breaths slipping over my face as the scent of pine and mint drowned me. My heart thrashed in my chest, my entire body gravitating toward him as though he were a force of nature, a black hole sucking me into his void.

He shoved me back against the wall so hard that my head hit the plaster. “The deal where I only agree to marry you if I find this pussy dripping for me.” His free hand dropped to my hip, fingers playing along the hem of my shirt, then the waistband

of my leggings. His grip on my neck tightened to painful. “The deal where you beg me, Emilia.”

I choked when his hand dipped inside my underwear. My fingers wrapped around his wrist, but my attempt to pull him away became weak the moment he brushed my pussy.

Fuck, I hated him, but his touch felt so good, and my body craved him like its own personal drug. My pussy didn't care that he was without morals, that he had threatened Renzo and broken my trust. None of that mattered.

“I'll never beg. I don't want—” I lost my breath when he mercilessly slammed two fingers inside me.

“What were you about to say, kitten?” His teeth raked my jaw. “That you don't want me?” He withdrew and pushed back in, and I remained paralyzed, trapped like a bird in a cage.

My head spun as heat tore up my spine. I liked the heavy press of his body, the intrusion of his fingers, the thin threat of violence lingering in the air.

I didn't dislike this side of him entirely. I both loved and hated the dark creature who choked me and demanded my obedience. That was the problem, though, because that same creature would kill me if the mafia called for it.

“I don't,” I breathed.

“This sweet pussy can't lie.” His fingers crooked inside me, and I dropped my head back against the wall. “You're fucking dripping for me, Emilia. The same way you always are.” His grip tightened, fingers digging into the soft skin of my throat. “You know why?”

I couldn't breathe, couldn't think past the rabid craving he ignited in me.

His tongue dragged up my neck, hot and dangerously enticing. “Because this pussy is mine.” His thumb pressed over my clit, and my legs nearly buckled. “And that makes us so much more than just business.”

I met the smoldering blue of his gaze. “I...” I tried to muster a sliver of resolve, a grain of sanity. My hold tightened on his wrist, and he paused in his movements.

“Tell me to stop, princess.” Another nip beneath my ear, followed by a kiss that felt as though he was searing the sensitive skin of my neck. “Tell me you don’t want to come on my fingers.”

A beat of hesitation was all he needed to continue, and my hold slipped from his wrist. He fucked me with his hand, circling my clit, playing me so expertly.

“You can hate me all you like, Emilia, but don’t lie to me. Don’t pretend you don’t want this.” Another hard thrust and a moan broke past my lips. He kept pushing me higher and higher, winding me up like a toy. “That this isn’t what I do to you.” And then he nudged me over the edge.

My body tightened, pleasure ripping through me like a tsunami. I cried out as my legs shook, as he tore from me everything I had to give and all the things I didn’t want to. He was the storm, and I was a sapling having my fragile roots torn from the ground. He swept me up and ripped me apart.

His fingers remained inside me as I tried to find my breath and my dignity because God knew he stripped me of it and left me bare.

He slowly pulled out of me and then slid his fingers into his mouth. He sucked the taste of me from them before bringing them to my lips, dragging my come and his spit over them.

I couldn't think, couldn't speak, as small aftershocks worked through my core. Gio leaned into me, sweeping my hair away from my face.

"That's one part of our deal." His hand slipped from my throat before he braced both palms on the wall on either side of my head, trapping me, caging me. "This is the part where you beg, Emilia."

"You want me to beg for my brother's life?"

He stared me down with that cold gaze. Cruel. Merciless. Powerful. That was it. He knew he had power over me in that moment because if he said no to this marriage, Luca was as good as dead.

"I want you to beg to be mine in every possible way."

Power must be exchanged for power, and right then, I was on the giving end.

Closing my eyes, I swallowed hard, quenching all traces of my pride before sinking to my knees. "Please," I said through gritted teeth.

Only days ago, he'd tried to kill Renzo, and now, here I was begging him to marry me in order to save my other brother from his violence. Life was suffering, though, and suffer I would. "Please marry me, Giovanni." Opening my eyes, I glanced up at him towering over me, his palms still braced on the wall above me.

"You do look good on your knees, Emilia." His fingers slid over my cheek before he fisted my hair roughly. His teeth gritted, the anger he rarely showed lighting his eyes. "But I recall having this exact conversation once before when you were begging for the life of a different brother." His grip

tightened, his body practically vibrating with strain. “Do you remember what I told you?”

I did. How could I not remember his crass words?

“I told you that I wanted submission, not sacrifice. That the next time you got on your knees, you would be willingly choking on my dick.”

I was nothing but a sacrifice to everyone. No, to anyone but him. To him, I was a challenge to be conquered. Giovanni Guerra wanted me to want him above all else. And I did, God help me, I really did. Could I submit in the name of sacrifice?

Holding his gaze, I lifted my hand, releasing his belt with shaky fingers. His eyes flashed with a feral edge that both scared and excited me. Giovanni Guerra was a man of charm and intelligence, of brutal control in almost all things. When it came to sex and violence, though, I’d come to realize he was one or the other. Controlled or feral. He was sometimes more beast than man, snarling and snapping against the restraint he tried to leash himself with.

That man thrilled me, but that side of him was a harsh reminder of what he’d done to Renzo and what he would do to Luca.

So I pushed his slacks down and freed his hard dick, wrapping my fingers around the velvety skin. He truly was beautiful, even here.

Leaning forward, I dragged my tongue over the drop of precum, lapping at him like he was the best thing I’d ever tasted. Gio groaned, muscles rolling and shifting. He tasted like power and lust and the heady thrill of holding a man like him in my thrall. Growing braver, I took him into my mouth until I gagged and he groaned.



“Fuck, piccola.”

My pussy clenched at the sound of him coming undone, and I couldn't pretend that I didn't want him to fuck me.

I worked over him a few more times before he fisted my hair, thrusting into me with jilted movements. And I wanted it, for him to become wild and uninhibited, to be so lost in me that all he could think about was my touch, my mouth. That all he wanted was to come down my throat.

I submitted to his whims, became his sacrificial lamb. And as he buried himself deep, as he came and I gagged, I'd never wanted to lay upon an altar and bleed so much.

I swallowed everything he gave me, and when he pulled free from my mouth, he looked at me in a way no one else ever had. With awe and lust and respect, maybe even love.

Ragged breaths filled the room as he dragged his thumb over the corner of my mouth, swiping a warm drop of his come over my bottom lip, then my top.

He pulled me to my feet, his gaze dropping to my come smeared lips. “I will marry you, piccola, and I promise, I will have you in every way.” He stepped back, and I took a gulp of clean air, untainted by his intoxicating scent.

“If Luca agrees...”

A twisted smile pulled at his lips as he leisurely re-fastened his pants. “You and I will be wed as soon as possible. Then I will broach your brother.”

I felt the color drain from my face. “What?”

He smirked. “Problem?”

“But if he doesn't agree—” I'd have given up any chance at freedom and still might lose my brother.

“Those are my terms. Take it or leave it.”

“If he does not agree, will you spare him?”

“That’s not up to me.” He shrugged as though my brother’s death were a casual thing. “You dangled a puppet mafia in front of Nero. I don’t know what he’ll do if he’s denied.” Nothing good. “If you’d spoken to me in private first...”

Fuck.



## GIO

**T**ommy winced as Jackson helped him into the bed. He was still weak, and the doctors had wanted him to stay in the hospital longer, but I wouldn't risk it. I need him home. Safe. Protected.

If Sergio could take out Patrick O'Hara, he could go for anyone—Jackson, Tommy, Emilia...

To make matters worse, the mob had stepped up their aggression since Paddy's death. I was left choosing between abandoning our properties and holdings in Chicago—the bars, warehouses, and hotels that were all fronts for money laundering—or sending more men, which not only put me at risk of losing said men but leaving New York weak.

A logical voice said that I should just leave Chicago be, let the mob have it, bring our drugs in elsewhere, but surrender wasn't in my DNA.

“Can you fuck off already?” Tommy snipped when Jackson tried to tuck him in.

The big guy laughed. “Seriously, how do you still look like such shit?”

“Show some respect for the ‘should be dead,’ asshole.”

“How do you feel?” I knew beneath the joking bravado, he was happy Tommy was home. I’d never seen my enforcer so rattled as he was that day in the hospital, covered in Tommy’s blood.

We were all assholes, but we were family, brothers in far more than blood. We were bonded in our damnation.

“I feel like I got shot three times and turned away at the pearly white gates. And even the devil didn’t want me. So here I am.”

“Fuck the devil.” Jackson grinned. “You need more meds?”

“I’ll always take more meds. Stupid morphine machine,” Tommy grumbled.

I lifted a brow. “Doc will be here any minute.” I might have checked him out of the hospital, but we had a doctor on the payroll. She got paid a pretty penny for what was usually the occasional gunshot or knife wound. She would be coming here twice a day to check on him until he was okay.

Jackson’s phone rang, and he pressed it to his ear. “Yeah?” His brows crumpled as he listened to the one-sided conversation. “Secure it. I’ll be in touch.” He hung up and dragged a hand down his face. “One of the Hudson warehouses was set on fire,” he said, taking a seat on the end of Tommy’s bed.

Unease wormed through me, and I settled into the chair by the window. “Outfit?”

He shrugged. “No idea.”

The Irish didn’t know where our warehouses were here unless Andreas and thus Sergio had shared that information. If the mob was coming for revenge, then they’d be going for a damn sight more than a warehouse that didn’t even have any product

in it. I wasn't stupid enough to bring what little product the Pérez brothers were supplying me into any known locations.

No, this had Sergio's name all over it. The Outfit was testing the waters, shooting blind on vague information.

"What are you going to do?" Jackson asked, resting his elbows on his spread knees.

I scrubbed a hand over my chin. Chicago was one thing, but the second they set one foot in New York, my response had to be swift and decisive.

The Outfit was in disarray—soldiers dead, capos scattered, their leader in hiding, and yet they were somehow still making moves. Because Sergio might have been gone, but they did have a leader. Luca Donato. He was enacting Sergio's orders, and I would assume he was one of the few, if not the only person, who knew where Sergio was.

Luca was a man I wanted as a friend—if only for Emilia's sake—but who was currently a foe. That left me with limited options.

My own selfishness was the only thing that stopped me from broaching him and making a deal immediately. It was the smart thing to do, the obvious choice to call a halt to the violence. But if he said no, Emilia would say no at that altar.

There was a time when I had wanted her to want me, to choose me of her own free will, but that was unrealistic. With every touch, every harsh word, I found I no longer cared how I had Emilia, only that I did. I would do anything, including putting my own interests at risk and leveraging her brother against her. She was my obsession.

If we could marry tomorrow, I would shove her into a white dress and march her down that aisle, but the marriage license

took two weeks to obtain. I could not allow The Outfit to keep wreaking havoc for the next ten days.

“Find Luca Donato and extract him from Chicago. I’ll see if we can come to terms. If not, perhaps ten days as our guest might persuade him to choose his loyalties more wisely.”

“Wait.” Tommy held a hand up. “If he denies you, you’re just going to take him hostage?”

“Yes.”

“Why? Surely if he doesn’t agree, you’re going to have to kill him anyway...”

Jackson laughed. “But if he kills him, The Outfit princess won’t marry him. He wants her first.” He folded his thick arms over his chest, disapproval pouring from him. “Isn’t that right, Gio?”

I pushed to my feet, refusing to explain myself, not even to my best friends. “Just get him. Call me when you have him.”

I stalked to the door, unable to handle the judgment because, truthfully, I was judging myself. Emilia should not have come before the mafia, the business, my family, but I’d long since given up trying to find anything rational in the way I felt about her.

I had wanted her from the very first time she had slapped me. The thought of having my ring on her finger made my dick hard. She might have hated me right now, but she still came for me so sweetly, sucked my dick like her lips were made for it... The more I thought about it, the less moral I became.

Donato would ally. Emilia would be my wife. She would learn to love me. I could and would have it all.

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I pulled into the alleyway beside Vice and made my way inside the abandoned nightclub. It was the middle of the day, and the place was always eerie without the music and patrons.

Jackson sat at the bar in silence, sipping on a whiskey. Beside him was none other than Luca Donato.

A few of Jackson's men clung to the shadows of the room, and that told me all I needed to know. My enforcer considered the eldest Donato son a threat.

"Jackson." I stepped behind the bar, pouring myself a drink as I took in the two of them, both battered and bruised.

Jackson had a split in his bottom lip. Donato had a busted cheekbone and bloody eyebrow, and judging by the way he was hunching over, a cracked rib. Both their clothes were bloody and torn, and it was clear they'd had one hell of a fight. But while Luca glared at me, Jackson grinned. He loved it when someone gave him a decent scrap.

The bruises that marred Luca's face made it difficult to find the similarities between him and Emilia, but it was there in the wariness of his gaze, the steely set of his shoulders despite being in pain.

"Luca Donato. I am—"

"I know who the fuck you are."

"Good." I slid a drink in front of him and rounded the bar. He turned on the bar stool as I came to a halt in front of him.

"That makes this easier. I have a proposition for you."

"Let me guess, you want me to turn on my uncle," he sneered.



“No need. Your uncle will be dead very, very soon. What I need from you is to lead The Outfit.”

He frowned at me, confusion blanketing his face.

“And in exchange for my allowing you to live and take the throne, you and I will be allies through marriage. You will act as... well, think of it as a franchise of the Famiglia.” I knew he wouldn’t go for that last part, but Emilia had dangled it in front of Nero like a pot of gold at the end of a blood-stained rainbow, and now he wanted it.

Luca laughed, throwing his head back as he clutched his ribs.

Jackson jerked his thumb toward the guy who was almost as bulky as him. “Just kill him now, Gio. You’re wasting your time.”

The laughter cut off before Luca pushed to his feet. “Fuck you. He’s right. Kill me, just like you did my father.” He looked me up and down with a level of hate reserved for the real personal shit. “I will never ally with you. Never betray my family.”

And that left us both in a predicament. Him, for obvious reasons, and me, because Emilia would never forgive me if I killed him. There was no doubting the fact that I really *should* kill him regardless. Even if he did eventually agree to terms, I couldn’t trust that he’d hold to it. A man would do and say anything to save himself. And given the level of hatred I saw in Luca Donato’s eyes right now, I’d say betrayal was likely.

Which brought me back to why the hell I wasn’t putting a gun to his head right now and pulling the trigger—Emilia. She was no longer just my weakness. She’d become a gaping fucking hole straight to my heart.

“Why not? Betrayal seems to be a common theme in your family. I guess I shouldn’t be offended that Sergio fucked me

over when he could so easily do it to his own nieces.”

I watched his reaction carefully. Did he know Sergio had double-crossed me? Did he know or care what happened to his sisters?

Luca’s jaw ticced, but he said nothing, gave away nothing.

“Soon enough, you will be forced to make a choice, Luca. In less than a week, I will marry Emilia—”

“Just because you’ve made my sister your whore, doesn’t mean a thing.”

My fist collided with his jaw hard enough to send him sprawling off the bar stool. He was up and in my face a moment later. Jackson made no move to intervene. He didn’t need to.

“I’m trying really hard not to kill you, but you’re making it difficult.” I shook my head as he spat a glob of fresh blood onto my floor. I turned my back on him and swiped the bottle off the bar, refilling my drink. “Emilia will be upset if I hurt you. Now...if the only way I get her is by forming an agreement with you, then you *will* form a fucking agreement. Do you understand me?”

He laughed again before staggering back to his seat. “So, my little sister has you wrapped around her finger, too.” He shook his head. “She had Renzo turning traitor for her, and now the great Giovanni Guerra tempered.”

“Make no mistake, Donato, your uncle will die.”

“Perhaps, but not before you’re forced out of Chicago.” He let out a hacking cough that did not sound healthy. “You can’t fight the mob and us. How many men have you lost in my city, Guerra?”

I fought the urge to snap his fucking neck right there and then. The death of my men was not something I took lightly. I hated that their wives and children were now paying for my mistakes.

I showed none of my feelings to him, though, instead painting a smile on my face. “How many have *you* lost to *me*, Luca? How many of Sergio’s men have died for a war he started? For one man’s greed.”

He fell silent.

“Exactly.” I let out a breath, dragging my gaze over him in disgust. “On second thought, I may not have a need for a man who cares so little for his own men. Perhaps Renzo could run The Outfit instead.”

His gaze met mine, jaw tense. “You think they’ll follow my little brother?”

I shrugged. “Maybe, maybe not. What you fail to realize is I don’t give a fuck whether The Outfit survives or whether you live or die. You’re here because of your sister.” I stepped closer, looming over him deliberately. “I’m going to give you a few days to think about it. Ten to be exact. After I marry Emilia, we’ll speak again.” I patted his cheek. “Of course, I can’t just let you scamper back to your uncle. So, you’ll be our guest.” I smirked. “You’ve already experienced some of Jackson’s hospitality.”

Luca’s teeth mashed together. “You think a couple of weeks of roughing me up will change my mind? This is a waste of time.”

“Shame.” On a sigh, I picked up my glass and took another sip. “The choice is yours, Luca. Either way, I control you. You can be out there, ruling your mafia with minimal involvement

from me, or you can rot as a permanent prisoner of the Famiglia. Either way, I get what I want.” An end to the war and Emilia.

Nero would have his puppet mafia via Renzo if need be. I didn't give a shit.

I downed the remainder of my second drink before slamming the glass onto the bar. “If your own life isn't enough incentive, then consider this. If this doesn't work, Nero will simply wipe out all trace of The Outfit.”

No one became inconvenient to Nero Verdi and lived to tell the tale. And for once, I was more than willing to unleash the monster.

“My reputation may be exaggerated, Luca, but I assure you, Nero's is not. So, choose; the men who are loyal to you or the uncle who sold both your sisters as whores. If you're too much of a pussy to care about your own blood, then at least think of all the men who died for Sergio and the ones who will now die because of you.”

I turned to Jackson. “Take him to the warehouse basement.”

Then I walked out of the club, leaving Luca Donato to his pain and his pride.



## EMILIA

I stared at the ceiling of the bedroom Gio had finally allocated to me—only until the wedding. Or so he thought.

Morning light played over the molding, catching in the little crystals that dangled from the chandelier. As always, since sleeping without Gio, I woke tired and restless. I'd managed to sleep alone my entire life, but after a couple of weeks in his bed, I couldn't remember what it ever felt like not to have the warmth of his arms around me.

Viscous nightmares clawed at the edges of my memory, dark shapes I couldn't fully make out and didn't want to. Sheer will was the only thing that stopped me from crawling into his bed in the middle of the night just so the presence of his body could keep away the demons.

I wanted to. More than anything.

I craved the sting of his palm, the control he wielded over me so effortlessly, the way he pulled me back to him every time. Without it, I felt chaotic, cast astray. Lost.

Giovanni possessed me in the best and worst ways. He brought me a sense of belonging I had never felt. Only to cast it aside when I trusted him, when I was vulnerable.

That left me alone, craving a man I was determined to hate. I closed my eyes and could almost feel his fingers on my throat, his dick driving into me like he owned every part of me.

My fingers slid over my stomach and into my sleep shorts. I was wet for him. Always wet for him. I pressed my clit and buried a finger inside myself, but it wasn't enough. It wasn't... him. I pushed harder, added another finger—

There was a knock at the door. “Emilia.”

I jumped at the sound of Gio's voice and yanked my hand away, my face burning. Did he know what I was doing? Oh God.

“One minute,” I blurted.

Scrambling from the bed, I grabbed a robe and fastened it around my waist. I dragged a hand through my hair before crossing the room and opening the door.

He leaned against the doorframe, his open suit jacket revealing the black shirt and gun holster fastened around his chest. No man had a right to make such blatant violence look that good. He was like death wrapped in Armani, and I wanted those tattooed hands around my throat, that lethal body pinning me down.

The moment my gaze met his, my skin tingled, my entire body craving him. He was the warm safety of strong arms and the rush of a first kiss. He was danger and darkness and adrenaline in my veins.

His gaze swept over me before his lips curled into a wicked smirk that went straight to my pussy. “You look flustered, princess.”

“I... What did you need?”

He pushed off the frame and stepped forward, crowding my space. “Maybe the question should be, what do you need?”

He reached out, gripping my right wrist, and bringing my hand to his face. He closed his eyes and dragged my index finger beneath his nose. And I let him, transfixed by the way he inhaled me as though I were an expensive cigar. Those sapphire eyes flashed open, ensnaring me.

“Your pussy smells like sunshine and sin, piccola.”

My cheeks caught fire, and he smiled. Gripping my wrist tighter, he sucked my index finger into his mouth, humming before releasing it with a pop.

“And you taste like fucking innocence.”

I snatched my hand away like he’d burned me, taking a step back.

He followed, stalking me into the room like prey. “Were you thinking of me while you fingered that sweet pussy, Emilia?”

“No.”

His teeth scraped his bottom lip. “Liar.”

I folded my arms over my chest as though they could shield me from the sexual tension winding through me. “What do you want, Giovanni?” My voice sounded thready, unsure.

“Aside from you... The doctor is here for Tommy. She’s going to come in here in a minute and talk to you.”

I didn’t need a doctor. “About what?”

“Birth control.”

I laughed despite the spike in my temper. “Since when do you get to make decisions about *my* body?”



He moved so fast, I didn't see him coming. He fisted my hair and jerked back my head until I was staring up at him, plastered to his hard chest. "Since you let me inside it."

My palm landed on his chest, nails digging into his shirt and the skin beneath, wishing I could hurt him, wanting to mark him as deeply as he'd marked me.

He nipped my throat, hot breaths prickling over the skin. "Since you begged me to fuck you." A warm swipe of his tongue. "Since you became mine."

"That was before—"

"I meant what I said. I will marry you and have you in every way. I want your body, your heart, your fucking soul, but I don't want a child with you."

My chest squeezed in a way it had no right to. I didn't even want this marriage. I definitely didn't want a baby, did I? No. It was everything I was running from—a mafia broodmare.

"It's a null point, seeing as I'm *never* fucking you again," I snapped. I raked my gaze over him, and though the man was perfection personified, I tried to look as though I found him lacking.

His breath trickled over my face, his lips just a whisper from mine, and my pulse banged in my ears, desperate, needing. "Never is a long time, piccola. And we both know your hand is a poor substitute. As is mine for your perfect pussy."

Oh God, I could barely breathe. I hated him. "You're right. You should probably go get it elsewhere." I kept my voice level and even tried to convince myself that was what I wanted.

I imagined him going to that club and fucking that blonde. Bending her over his desk, whispering dirty words into her ear.

Calling her a good girl. I inhaled a deep breath, fighting the red-hot jealousy that robbed me of reason. Judging by the smirk on his face, though, he'd seen it.

Part of me wanted him to do it, wanted him to hurt me more and prove me right. Prove that he was not someone I should love, not someone I could trust. Because it seemed that threatening to kill my brother and me wasn't enough. Even though I knew he would pick the mafia over me time and time again, just as my father had.

"Is that what you want, Emilia? For me to fuck someone else?" His free hand went to the small of my back, snapping me against his hard body. And it was hard *everywhere*. He ground his length against me, and I couldn't help the gasp that left my lips. "For me to touch her like this?"

His lips whispered over my throat, and I shivered, even as anger consumed me.

"To kiss her..." He pressed his lips to mine, bowing my spine as he forced his tongue inside my mouth.

And I kissed him back, an angry clash of tongue and teeth that sent blood roaring through my veins.

I should have stopped it, pushed him away, but I didn't. I was weak for him, and he knew it. Crippled beneath the onslaught of lust and the desperate need for him to want me. Even when he'd caused me pain. I wished I could cut him out like the disease he was.

I bit him hard, and he groaned before pulling away. A drop of blood welled on his bottom lip, and he swiped it away with his tongue. I felt alive for the first time in days, that familiar violence swirling between us a visceral thing.

"I'll take that as a no."

“Take it as whatever you want. I don’t want you, so fuck whoever you like.” The words felt like acid on my tongue, but I held his gaze. *Prove me right. Prove you’re unworthy of this fucking heartache I feel for you.*

His jaw tensed, eyes flashing. “Fine. If that’s what you really want?”

“It is.”

I wondered if I’d pushed him too far as he turned for the door. “Do as the doctor says, or you won’t like the consequences.” Then he left me, panting and shaking, trying to calm my racing heart. Controlling asshole.

The doctor came in a few minutes later, leaving me with a pack of pills. I took them from her because who was I kidding? I touched myself to the thought of him, kissed him... I didn’t trust myself not to give in to him, and the last thing I wanted was a baby.

I didn’t need to be any more bound to the mafia and this life than I already was.



## EMILIA

**G**io and I hadn't exactly parted on good terms earlier, so when a knock came at my door that evening, I was surprised to open it and find him standing there. Even more so when he told me to put on a dress because we were going to the club.

The only "club" dress I had was barely a dress at all. It dove between my breasts and showed most of my legs, including the ugly bullet wound on my thigh that had only just healed.

When I stepped out of my room, Gio was waiting for me. His gaze swept over me, but it felt like his fingers caressing every inch of my skin.

His brows pulled together. "You can't wear that."

I plastered a smile on my face. "Oh, I can."

He wanted me to come to the club, wanted me to wear a dress, well this was what he got. Shaking his head, he stepped forward and took my hand, slipping the ruby engagement ring onto my finger.

"Is that really necessary?"

"Just so everyone knows who you belong to."

I rolled my eyes and started down the hall. “So long as we both know the truth.”

He followed me, mumbling something about murder.

**B**y the time he pulled into the alley beside Vice, the tension in the car was practically choking me. Gio cut the engine and rounded the hood, opening my door for me. I stepped out, and the second the door slammed, he was smashing me up against the side of the car, trapping me against his hard chest before his lips fell on mine. Hard and hungry and barely controlled. I should have resisted, but I couldn't.

“Had to wear this fucking dress.” He fisted the material at my thigh like he wanted to tear it off me.

I slapped his hand away, sucking in several ragged breaths as I glared at him. “Not like I pick my own wardrobe.” Although I couldn't deny that I liked him wanting me, even if I was determined to deny him.

He took my hand, his thumb brushing over the massive ruby. He might as well have pissed on me in front of everyone.

He guided me through the back door and up the stairs into his office, but instead of staying there like last time, he walked me through the glass door into the VIP area. The music was loud, vibrating through me with every note, making the entire building feel as though it had a pulsing heartbeat.

Gio led me to a booth in the corner. It seemed set apart from the rest, with a full view of almost every corner of the club. The VIP section sat on a mezzanine, the main club below a sea

of writhing bodies. The people down there seemed happy. Drunk. Lost in the music and each other.

Gio sat, but before I could take a seat beside him, he pulled me into his lap. The short dress rode up, almost exposing my panties to him. His palm landed on my thigh, warm and calloused, his thumb circling the scar he had given me. Every bit of me honed in on the slow sweep of Gio's thumb over my skin, the hard press of his thighs beneath me, his body heat.

All the while, he seemed completely unaffected. He sat casually, a king surveying his kingdom, and what did that make me? Certainly not his queen. His pet, perhaps.

A waitress brought us drinks, placing something pink and fruity looking in front of me. I took a sip, fully expecting it to be non-alcoholic, but I tasted just a hint of burn beneath the sweetness.

Sucking in a steadying breath, I forced my attention to the other tables. People were drinking, laughing, dancing. I was struck with a pang of longing for how normal their lives were. I wished my biggest problem was tomorrow's hangover, paying a bill, or taking a final. I craved those normal struggles. Not mafias and alliances and bartering for the lives of my family members. Outside of the bubble I was stuck in with Gio, it all seemed so simple, but in here...in here, it was beyond complicated.

"Why have you brought me here, Gio?" I asked.

No sooner had the words left my lips did Laylah appear. My spine stiffened with engrained dislike. The woman had done nothing to me, not really. Well, she had blatantly made a move on Gio in front of me, but I was pretty sure she'd fucked him first, so maybe she was the one who should be pissed off. Still, I was the one with the ring on my finger.

“Gio.” She flashed a wide smile, her boobs nearly falling out of her tight black dress. “I need to talk to you.” She lifted her brows and tilted her head toward the office.

I stiffened, wanting to tear her peroxide hair from her skull.

“Give me a moment,” he said, and then I wanted to tear his damn eyes from his skull.

I forced myself to remain calm, not to react as Laylah sashayed her way to the office.

Gio swept my hair from my neck, his lips trailing up the side and pressing beneath my ear. “Still want me to fuck someone else, Emilia?”

I had no right to feel hurt. I did tell him to fuck someone else...I couldn't have prepared myself for the pain in my chest, though. I felt sick; I wanted to cry and scream at him, but I didn't. Because I also wanted him to prove me right, to be awful and destroy whatever this was that I felt for him. So we could have a cold marriage where he couldn't hurt me.

Steeling myself, I pushed out of his lap and turned to face him. “If that's what you want.” *Please don't want it.*

“So, if I go in that office with Laylah, you won't get jealous?”

I swallowed heavily, trying to calm the racing beat of my heart. This was for the best so I could survive this marriage with my heart and sanity intact. “I'd have to care to feel jealous.” I forced myself to hold his gaze as the lies fell from my lips. “You mean nothing to me, Giovanni.” I saw the hit land, the nail in an already-sealed coffin.

His gaze hardened before he pushed to his feet, jaw ticking. “Very well.” He picked up his drink and strode away from me toward his office.



I watched him open the door and slip inside. Watched him leave me and go to her. Because I had pushed him. Good. This was good.

I wanted to drink until I truly didn't care. He should have carved out any feelings I had for him when he put a knife to my brother's throat, to my throat. I hoped he *was* fucking Laylah. Maybe then I'd finally stop wanting him.

My mind ran rampant, imagining what was going on only feet away from me behind that mirrored glass. The ring on my finger suddenly felt like it was burning me. So, I slipped it off and dropped it into my bag.

Fuck Gio. I was going to dance and get lost in a crowd of strangers. For just a few moments, I was going to be a normal girl. I strode over to the small bar and ordered another drink. Every fiber of me wanted to turn around and look at that damn office while I waited. It was like an itch at the back of my neck, driving me insane. The moment the drink landed on the bar, I downed it.

"Add it to my fiancé's tab," I said before walking toward the stairs.

A wall of muscle blocked my path, and my gaze tracked up over a wide chest before landing on Jackson's scowling face. I took a small step back because as much as I thought he wouldn't hurt me, he was terrifying. I wobbled on my heel, and his hand engulfed my arm, steadying me.

"Did you get fucked with babysitting duty while he gets his cock sucked?"

His stern expression cracked into a more familiar smile. He was still scary, but much less so when he smiled. "You can't go down there, little sparrow."

I folded my arms over my chest. “Why not?”

“Boss’s orders.”

“So, I can’t dance?”

“Sure, you can, sweetness. Just right here.”

I glanced around, and the only people dancing were two drunk women beside a table of men who were watching them like it was a personal show. No thanks.

Fuck this. “Gio owns this club, does he not?”

“Yeah...”

“And in a few days’ time, I’ll marry him, which means I’ll own it.”

Amusement twinkled in his eyes. “I suppose so.”

“Then I’ll go where I like in *my* club.”

He threw his head back on a laugh, and I shoved past him. “You know what, you go for it.” He followed behind me, his colossal weight shaking the metal stairs with each step. “But don’t say I didn’t warn you.” His hand clapped over my shoulder at the bottom as he curled his huge frame over me, bringing his lips to my ear. “And if I were you, I’d put that ring back on.”

I glanced over his shoulder, up at the glass office. I could picture their bodies intertwined, her moaning his name— “No, I don’t think I will.”

He laughed again and released me, sweeping his arm toward the dance floor.

I slipped into the crowd, and Jackson didn’t follow me, but I could feel him watching. Music washed over me as bodies pressed in on every side, their energy infecting me. Despite

my emotional turmoil, a smile pulled at my lips as my hips swayed to the beat. It was so...freeing.

After a few minutes, hands landed on my hips, a hard body moving against mine with the music. When I glanced over my shoulder, I half expected to find Gio, but of course, my fiancé was busy.

My dance partner looked like a college jock, all messy hair, easy smile, and youthful features. I debated pushing him away, but then my gaze drifted up to that office, the mirrored exterior reflecting the flashing lights and writhing bodies. Did he have her bent over his desk? Was he telling her what a good girl she was?

I shuttered those thoughts and danced with the stranger, letting him put his hands on my body. Our hips moved to the beat, the hard press of him grinding against my ass, but I didn't care. It felt good to be wanted in such a basic way, not because of my name. Not because I was a challenge or a possession. This guy didn't want anything from me except a dance, probably a fuck.

I laughed as I realized how ass-backward my life was. While other girls were looking for commitment and avoiding casual one-night stands, the idea appealed to me. He swept the hair from my neck, and warm lips brushed my throat. I stiffened, a knot forming in my gut that felt an awful lot like guilt. And that was ridiculous considering where Gio was right now.

I closed my eyes, trying to push away the image of him and Laylah together. When I opened them, it was like watching the Red Sea part before me. Dancers shifted away from the lone figure cutting through the crowd. Whether they feared Gio or his presence was simply so commanding that people instinctively shifted away from him, I wasn't sure.

He prowled across the dance floor like a tiger on the hunt, his gaze fixed wholly on me. His rage was a visceral thing, stroking over my skin, driving my pulse into a frenzy. A sick part of me liked it, wanted it. I craved his jealousy, his anger, for him to see someone else touch what I would never give him.

The guy behind me seemed totally oblivious to the fact that I'd gone still. His lips brushed my neck again, and I held Gio's gaze as I tilted my head to the side. His jaw clenched right along with my heart, adrenaline thrumming through my veins like a freight train. My skin heated, moisture pooling between my thighs that had nothing to do with the hands on my hips or the lips at my neck.

Gio came to a stop, towering over me, his body almost vibrating with violence. Oh shit, he was really mad. I realized that I may actually be about to witness a murder.

He physically removed the hand on my hip, and a scream sounded in my ear. I was yanked out of the way as Gio bent the man's hand behind his back at an angle that suggested broken bones. My stomach rolled and guilt stabbed at me.

The guy was silently crying, the sound drowned by the throbbing music. His face morphed from agony to fear when Gio whispered something into his ear.

Everyone around us stopped to stare at the man being assaulted in the middle of the nightclub. A moment later, Jackson was there, pushing Gio away before helping the sobbing man. He glanced at me with a raised brow that screamed, "I told you so," before dragging the jock away.

And then it was me and Gio and his rage. Despite the sea of people around us, fear spiked through my bloodstream hard and fast.

Like prey caught in the sight of a predator, I felt the overwhelming urge to run. I turned and cut through the crowd, adrenaline driving each panicked step. I made it to the edge of the dance floor before a hand clamped around the back of my neck in a vice grip. A wall of muscle met my back, the scent of pine and mint cutting through the smell of sweat and perfume that tainted the air.

“Three,” he growled in my ear.

I turned my head to the side, my lips brushing the stubble of his jaw as my pulse hammered out a frantic beat. “I don’t recall one and two.”

“One was when you let someone else put their hands on you.” His fingers flinched into my hip. “Two, three, and four were when you let him put his lips on your fucking skin.” He bit my throat, right over my pulse and hard enough to bruise. “So, running, in fact, brings you to five. At least.” He fisted my hair and turned me to face him, something feral flickering through those blue irises.

A trickle of panic blended with indignation at the fact that he was chastising me for dancing while he’d been *fucking* someone else. I lashed out, fighting his hold. My nails raked his face before he restrained both my wrists in one hand. Three pink lines marred his cheek, and the wicked smile that twisted his lips had me attempting to take a step back.

“Oh, piccola. This is going to hurt.”

“Fuck you, Giovanni.”

Without warning, he grabbed my hips and tossed me over his shoulder.

“Gio!”

No one did anything to stop him or to help me. If anything, they looked away, and I wanted to scream in rage. Fuck him, fuck them, fuck all of this.

He walked back upstairs and into his office—his empty office—slamming the door behind him. My ears rang in the sudden quiet as he lowered me to the floor. My body slid against every inch of his, but when my feet hit solid surface, I got no reprieve. He pressed me up against the glass, caging me in. Every inch of him was strung tight, bristling with tension.

“Get away from me.” I shoved at him, and he gripped my wrists, pulling them above my head.

“Now is not the time to fucking push me, Emilia.”

“Oh, sorry, I forgot, I’m supposed to just lay down and take whatever you dish out.” I glared at him. “Did Laylah lie down and take it like a good girl?”

He cocked a brow before a slow smirk cut over his lips. “Tsk, tsk. Are you jealous, princess? No, you’d have to care to feel jealous.”

“I *don't* care.”

His fingers wound around my throat. “So, you didn’t let that piece of shit touch you because you thought I was fucking her?”

Had I done that? No, not really. Maybe...

His eyes flickered with something dangerous that had my pulse ticking up. “Is that why you took off your ring?” he said through gritted teeth.

“I can dance with whoever I want.”

“Oh, princess...” He let out a humorless laugh, running his tongue over his teeth. “Wrong.”

His grip shifted to my jaw before his lips slammed over mine, hard and vicious and claiming. That kiss said that every part of me was very much his, and he would have his pound of flesh if he had to strip it from my bones. He tasted like danger and safety, and I wanted to run from him every bit as much as I wanted him to never let me go. He tore away from me, and I dragged several burning breaths into my lungs before he fisted my hair and forced me over his desk. “Grip the edge of the desk, Emilia.”

“No.” I defied him on principle, though really, I just wanted to incite him. I needed him to hurt me, to control me, to ground me. But I couldn’t ask for it, couldn’t submit to it. It had to be like this—angry and violent and dominating.

He wrenched my head to the side, grinding my cheekbone into the wood. “Grip the desk. Now.”

My pulse skyrocketed, anticipation making my head spin. I stretched out my arms, fingers wrapping around the edge of the wood.

“Good girl.”

I preened under the praise, and I hated myself for it. It was a constant battle, caught between wanting to defy him and please him. He dragged my skirt up my thighs, and cool air met my skin right before the crack of his palm. I cried out in surprise, then heard the clink of his belt. Was he going to fuck me? Did I want that? No, he’d just fucked someone else, for God’s sake.

Everything came to an abrupt halt when a crack filled the air, followed by intense pain across the back of my thighs. I screamed and let go of the desk as it felt like fire ripped over my skin. He pinned me back down by my neck.

“Let me go!”

“Five strikes, princess. I’m going to give you five strikes, and you’re going to count them.” The pain was throbbing over my thighs, but I lowered my chest to the desk once more and resumed my grip. Maybe it was the challenge, or maybe I had just become messed up because I secretly liked the pain, craved it. And only he could deliver.

“One,” I breathed.

The next two blows hit my ass, and tears stung my eyes as it felt like a hundred tiny razor blades dragged over my skin.

By the last strike, I could hardly breathe, my body wired on endorphins and adrenaline. My skin burned, tears streaked my face, and yet I felt more at peace than I had in days. Weeks even.

Gripping my hair, Gio yanked me up onto my hands, angling my head so he could kiss me. His lips were a punishment all of their own. Demanding, controlling. It wasn’t a kiss; it was a claim, as if someone had intruded on his territory and he needed to mark it. His hips pressed hard against my abused ass, trapping me against the edge of the desk.

In the violence of it all, I’d forgotten everything that wasn’t him. I barely noticed the smooth glide of leather around my neck until it snapped tight, cutting off most of my air.

“Spread your thighs, Emilia. Nice and wide. Let me see that tight pussy.”

I widened my stance as he trailed his fingers up the inside of my thigh, just catching the edge of one of the raised welts. I hissed out a breath before he slipped my underwear to the side and dragged a finger through my pussy.



“You’re drenched, princess,” he groaned in my ear. “You like the belt on your pretty skin. Marking you.”

He pressed two fingers inside me, and I bucked, gasping for air as the belt tightened farther around my throat. “I want to fuck you and choke you just like this until you beg me to stop. Beg for my forgiveness.”

I would beg for nothing. His thighs pressed against the back of mine, making the welts chafe with every thrust of his hand.

He fucked me, deprived me of oxygen, controlled my body until I was delirious.

“Whose pussy is this, Emilia?”

I clamped my mouth shut, and he stopped. I wanted to kill him.

He pulled out and slapped my clit, the shock cutting through the pleasure. “Tell me, princess.” He rammed those fingers into me again, so hard that I smashed against the edge of the desk, the belt cutting off my air.

“Yours,” I gasped. “It’s yours.”

He kissed my throat, pumping into me hard and fast. “So perfect, piccola.”

A twist of his wrist and my pussy clamped down around him, pleasure tearing up my spine. My head swam and lungs burned as my vision spotted. He loosened the belt, and I collapsed over the desk, sucking in gasping breaths. I was vaguely aware of the sound of his zipper, the press of him behind me...

“Good girl.”

I didn’t know what it was about those two words at that exact moment, but they jarred me from the haze of bliss. *Did he call*

*her a good girl?* I couldn't help but imagine Laylah's body right here not so long ago. *Did she beg him to fuck her?*

I felt the nudge of his dick at my entrance, and nausea rose up my throat. "Stop."

He paused. I counted three rapid beats of my heart and one staggered breath before he pulled back.

"What?"

I pushed up and clawed at the belt still around my throat, suddenly panicking, wanting to be anywhere but here. "I said stop. I need..." I didn't know what I needed, but he released the belt, and I scrambled away from the desk, pulling my dress back down. "I need..."

"Emilia." He moved in front of me, clasping my face in both hands.

I closed my eyes, unable to look at him, knowing what he'd done with her, knowing he was going to fuck me right after. I felt soiled and used. The fact that I had told him to go with her didn't seem to matter to my wounded feelings. "I want to go home," I whispered.

There was a beat of silence, a rustle of material, and then he was draping his jacket over my shoulders. I pulled it around me as if it could cover all my bare skin, but I hated that he seemed to know what I needed right then.

Gio picked up his keys and led me down the stairs until we were outside the club. He held the door open for me to get into the car, and I winced when I sat down, my abused thighs and ass stinging.

Gio reached over me and fastened my seat belt before placing a bottle of water in my hand. "Drink that. All of it." He

rummaged through the glove box before finding a box of Tylenol. He placed two pills on my thigh. "Take those." I did.

The ride home was silent, and though there was tension, I found the silence peaceful. Thoughts tried to break through my endorphin-addled mind, but I was calm for once. Sad but calm. And maybe that was the best I could hope for these days.

We pulled through the gates of the Hamptons house and wound up the drive. The car stopped outside the front door, and for a second, neither of us made any effort to move.

"I didn't touch her," he said into the silence.

I wasn't sure I believed him, didn't know if it even mattered. I opened the door and slipped the jacket from my shoulders, mourning the scent of him the moment I dropped it on the seat.

"I'll see you at the altar, piccola."

I shut the door and walked inside.



## GIO

**T**he urge to follow Emilia upstairs was like an itch beneath my skin that I couldn't reach. I wanted to bury my dick in her, mark her, bathe her in my fucking come if I had to. But as always, everything was more complicated than that.

Instead, I took a shower, allowing the hot water to ease the tension in my muscles as I fisted my dick. I pictured her striped ass and thighs, could almost hear her telling me her pussy was mine. I braced my hand against the wall and imagined she was here with me, on her knees, sucking my dick so sweetly. That was all it took for my balls to tighten before heat ripped down my spine. I painted the tile in my come before washing it away.

It helped. For a few minutes. But soon enough, the itch was back, and I found myself standing outside her bedroom.

I felt like a creep as I eased her door open and saw her asleep. The hallway light spilled over the huge bed, revealing her tiny form curled up in the middle. Strain clung to her body, a small frown line pulling between her brows. I wondered what she dreamed of. Was it me? Was it me with Laylah?

I felt guilty for making her think I had fucked Laylah, sordid even. The idea that I could ever want anyone else was

ridiculous. My obsession with The Outfit princess ran so deep that it was a goddamn problem.

I needed to prove a point to her, though. I wasn't sure whether Emilia genuinely believed she didn't want me or she tried to push me away because she did. She was a complicated creature, forged in betrayal and steeped in distrust.

One thing was clear, though, my sweet fiancée was jealous, and it delighted me. What did not delight me was that it drove her to let another man touch her. I could still picture his hands on her hips, his lips on her neck, thinking he could have what was mine. He'd be dead if it weren't for Jackson, and when Jackson was the voice of reason... Well, that was when I knew I'd lost it. She *made* me lose it, drove me to the edge of sanity with every breath. She made me want to claim her and punish her, and punish her I had. But as enraged as I was, as beautiful as those pink stripes looked on her skin, I did not want to hurt her. Emotionally at least. And I knew I had.

My chest clenched when I recalled the panic on her face as she asked me to stop. I *never* wanted her to ask me to stop, never wanted her to have to.

It meant I'd read her wrong or handled the situation badly, and there was no excuse for that. Worse, I couldn't make up for it because she was sleeping in a separate room, hating me, preparing for some passionless marriage.

I couldn't accept her distance, though. She could put a whole world between us and it wouldn't change the fact that she was mine. Mine to protect. Mine to love...

Which was why I was here, watching her sleep. As though I could chase away her demons when I knew I was one of them.

Like a magnet, she pulled me closer until I was beside her bed, staring down at the perfection of her face. When I brushed her cheek, she turned into the touch, my name a murmur on her lips. Emilia might fight me tooth and nail, but I knew she felt this every bit as much as I did.

I would marry her, and I would tear down those fucking walls she'd built around herself. I didn't want her lust without her heart or her body without her soul. I would have every bit of her the same way she had consumed every piece of me. Forever.

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**T**here wasn't time for a lavish wedding, but as I stood in the ballroom of the New York courthouse and looked at the handful of guests that made up my closest friends and family, I regretted that I hadn't given Emilia more.

Not that she cared. She'd made that abundantly clear, telling me time and time again that this was just business. But it wouldn't always be; I would make sure of that. I should have given her something more memorable.

Nero shifted beside me, the token best man. There was going to be no reception, no speech, but he'd gotten as emotional as Nero was capable when I'd asked him to basically stand here in a tux instead of sitting with his family three feet away.

"You nervous?" he asked.

"Am I supposed to be?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. I was."

I lifted a brow. "You married a woman who regularly threatened to kill you. I'd be fucking nervous, too."

He laughed. “Don’t think I didn’t hear about The Outfit princess stabbing you.”

“Fucking Tommy and his big mouth.”

He clapped me on the shoulder. “It’s fun, though, right?”

“Surrounded by psychos,” I murmured.

He was right, though; I did like it when Emilia hurt me. Her fight made my dick almost as hard as she made my life.

The hum of classical music filled the room, and I turned my attention to the doors at the other end of the makeshift aisle. They creaked open right before Emilia stepped through, clinging to Renzo’s arm.

My heart tripped over itself for several beats, my lungs forgetting to draw air. She was always stunning, but fuck...

White lace clung to her, the material replicating leaves that molded over her curves lovingly. Dark hair cascaded down her back, tamed but still wild, just like her. She was perfection, the most beautiful thing I’d ever seen and likely ever would.

As she walked toward me, her gaze remained fixed on the floor, her cheeks stained pink as she spoke quietly with her brother. I wanted her to look at me, to give me her full attention. And when she did, when those sea-foam green eyes met mine, it felt like my world stopped spinning.

No, it didn’t; its center just shifted.





## EMILIA

**T**hey say a woman's wedding is the best day of her life. Or maybe that was just my mother's propaganda.

I'd had two weeks to come to terms with this, and yet my legs still shook with each step I took down the aisle. I clung to Renzo, my gaze trained on the red rose petals that littered the marble floor like spots of blood. The bloody path that led to Giovanni Guerra.

I wasn't sure if I was doing the right thing, and that doubt made each footstep heavy. When I spoke those vows to Gio, when I let him put that ring on my finger, I would lose all leverage. My only hope was that maybe, just maybe, he felt enough for me to save Luca's life should this all go wrong.

I could feel Gio's gaze on me as I drew ever nearer to him, but I couldn't look. Couldn't face my fate just yet.

Renzo pulled me into his side, calloused fingers sliding over mine in the crook of his arm. Warm, comforting, supportive. "Are you okay?" he whispered.

I nodded, focusing on my feet. One foot in front of the other. Breathe in, breathe out.

“Say the word, Emi, and we’ll leave. We’ll run out of this courthouse and grab a cab before they can catch us. I’ll totally do it.”

“I know you would, Ren.” And I loved him for it. “I’m just nervous.” No, I was terrified. This right here was the very thing I had always feared, and Renzo knew it.

I sucked in a deep breath before I forced myself to lift my gaze. A small cluster of guests stood on one side of the aisle. Una, Jackson, and Tommy, all in the front row. Adamo and Annaliese were also there, along with a few men I didn’t recognize.

And on the other side of the aisle was a figure with his back to me, the only person in this room not looking at the bride.

I instantly recognized the enormous frame that dwarfed the man beside him. Dark hair was neatly buzzed as always, the stuffy suit he never took off clinging to broad shoulders—Luca.

I’d never been so happy to see the boring bastard. He was here, at my wedding, which meant he must have agreed to the alliance. My heart skittered with a newfound sense of hope, and I smiled as I glanced at the end of the aisle.

The moment my gaze landed on Gio, everything else fell away. He wore a tux, his dark hair combed back, revealing the sharp angles of his face. But his beauty was not what stole my breath. It was the way he looked at me.

Awe, adoration, desire.

Love.

Giovanni Guerra looked at me the way every woman dreams of on their wedding day. He looked at me like he had waited a

thousand years for this moment. None of this was real, but it felt like the most real thing in the world right then.

Renzo released me when we reached the altar, and Gio took my hand, warm fingers sliding over mine. When he met my gaze, the smile that cut across his lips was blinding.

For a single moment, we were just two people who could love each other. I was just a girl standing in front of a boy in a white dress. For a moment, it was all so simple.

As the priest spoke the vows and Gio repeated them, I wished he wouldn't look at me so intently as he promised to love me, to cherish me, to spend the rest of his life with me. It felt too real, the words settling into my soul like a lead weight. And yet, as I spoke them back to him, I wanted them to mean something. I wanted *us* to mean something more than just family names and mafia bullshit.

He slipped the simple gold band onto my finger, and it felt binding. When I slid the ring onto his finger, I liked seeing it there, liked knowing that he belonged to me as surely as I knew I belonged to him.

"You may kiss the bride," the old priest mumbled.

Gio gripped my face in both hands and pressed his lips to mine. He kissed me like he was making the greatest vow of all. Like he was laying his life at my feet and begging me to take it.

He was my enemy. My lover. My husband. The lines of love and lust and hate had never been so blurred.

When I pulled away from him and turned to face the sad, meager clapping of our families, my gaze landed on Luca. And my heart dropped. His face was covered in a litany of bruises, his bottom lip split and scabbed.

Dark eyes met mine, and the venom bubbling there nearly knocked me over. I recognized the man beside him from Gio's house. He had a gun resting against my brother's ribs.

Luca had not made an agreement and come to see his sister marry. He was here by force, which meant Gio had already made him the enemy. Was this all just a farce to get me to marry him? My chest grew tight, and I couldn't breathe properly. Gio's arm wrapped around my waist, leading me out of the ballroom.

"What did you do, Gio?" I said through gritted teeth as we stepped into the hall.

"I brought Luca to witness his sister's marriage. Now we may negotiate."

"Negotiate?" I tried to yank my hand from his grasp, but his hold only tightened. "He's your captive."

He didn't answer as he led me down a set of marble stairs. Strangers going about their business in the courthouse stopped and clapped, some cheering for the "happy couple" in their midst. I painted a fake smile on my face as the train of my white dress billowed over the steps behind me. And all the while, I wondered how I could have been so stupid to ever think I could play games with mafia men.

I'd underestimated just how manipulative Gio could be. He had me, and he had Luca. And now, nothing would stop him from destroying my family.

He tugged open the car door. "Get in, Mrs. Guerra."

I slid across the back seat before he settled beside me. Almost the second the door closed, Gio grabbed my waist, dragging me into his lap until I was straddling his thighs.

I shoved my palms against his chest. "You tricked me."

His gaze skirted over my face, expression softening. I hated him for it, hated that he pretended to give a shit about my feelings. Anger and frustration and bitter fucking disappointment ate away at me, and I shoved him again.

“I did not trick you.” He grabbed both my wrists, pinning them together behind my back. The lace dress barely covered my breasts, which now thrust forward into his face.

“Luca was causing problems. I needed him off the board until the wedding.”

I knew his usual way of getting someone “off the board” involved a bullet. I struggled against him. “Why?” I gasped. “Why not just make the deal with him already?”

“Had he denied my request, can you honestly say you’d have walked down that aisle?”

No, I wouldn’t.

His free hand dragged over my bottom lip, his gaze tracking the movement. “You underestimate the lengths I would go to have you, Emilia.” He leaned in, teeth scraping along my collar bone and making me squirm. “No matter how unsavory the means.”

“And now, if you kill him, it doesn’t matter. You already have what you want.” My voice broke, tears stinging my eyes.

Dark brows pinched together as Gio clasped my chin. “Is that what you think? That I’ll kill Luca?”

“You’re Giovanni Guerra.”

“And you are now Emilia Guerra. My wife. My love.” His thumb stroked my skin. “Make no mistake, I care little for The Outfit or Luca Donato, but I would never deliberately hurt

you, piccola.” His gaze held mine, and there were those emotions in his eyes again, pulling my own to the surface.

I wanted to believe him. Had to believe him because the alternative was my husband killing my brother, and me, trapped in a marriage to a monster.





## EMILIA

**W**e didn't go home. The driver took us to the apartment I'd first stayed in with Gio, and I could guess his reasoning for that. He wanted privacy.

My pulse thrummed against my eardrums the entire elevator ride to the top floor, and the second the door to the apartment closed behind us, it became frantic.

I took in the penthouse that felt so foreign yet so familiar. In some ways, the old, innocent version of me never had left this place, never left his arms. I missed that. Missed when Gio—even as my enemy—always made me feel safe.

He loosened his bow tie and pulled it free, making the simple act ridiculously sensual. And the smirk that played over his lips said he knew it, knew how much I wanted him.

No, I would not be weak.

My body hummed with nervous anticipation as he stalked toward me. I backed away like cornered prey, stumbling when my heels caught in the lace of my dress.

He slipped his jacket over his shoulders, and I took in the muscles straining against his shirt and gun holster. Fuck. The man always lit a fire in me, and it tore through me now, wild

and uninhibited. I wanted him, even after he'd just held my brother at gunpoint at my own wedding.

As much as I hated that he'd had Luca all this time, I understood why he'd done it. A really fucked up part of me was even flattered. He'd wanted me more than peace. Had delayed potentially making a deal that would save lives in this war just to ensure I married him. It was fucked up and selfish, but oh, how I secretly wanted to be his selfish obsession.

I wanted to matter to him above all else, but I knew I never would, not really. And that was what had me steeling myself against him, fortifying my walls brick by brick.

With each step he took, the urge to keep distance between us pressed in on me.

“Why are you backing away, princess?”

My heart let out a strangled beat as the breakfast bar hit my back, trapping me. Gio's lips twitched as he advanced, gripping the counter on either side of my waist.

“Are you scared?”

“No,” I breathed.

“Then why run?”

“You just...” I held up a hand as though I could ward him off.

“I don't want to do this with you.”

His brows pulled together, jaw ticcing. “Always fighting, piccola.”

“You always *make* me fight!” My hand landed on his chest, and he imprisoned it there beneath his own. “I don't want to.”

“Then stop.”

“The minute I stop is when you or Nero take what is left of my family. That’s when you hurt the people I love.” I shook my head. “We are more enemies now than we ever were, Gio.”

He stared back at me, anger flickering through those blue eyes like a storm. “No, we’re husband and wife, Emilia. I already told you I won’t let anything happen to Luca.”

“I trusted you once not to harm Renzo or me. Forgive me if I don’t do so again.”

“What would it take to earn your trust?”

I shook my head. “You can’t. It’s broken.”

He grabbed my waist and lifted me onto the counter the same way he always did, then pressed between my thighs. He reached for the gun at his chest and pulled it from the holster, making me freeze. Panic rose when he gripped the weapon, and I tried to scramble away from him. His free hand squeezed my hip, trapping me.

“What are you doing, Gio?”

“I need you to forgive me, Emilia.” He took my hand and wrapped my fingers around the hilt of the gun. “Forgive me or kill me.”

“What? No!” I tried to release the gun, but his hand still covered mine, forcing me to hold it.

His gaze never left mine as he pressed the barrel of the gun beneath his chin. His fingers slid over mine until I heard the click of the safety releasing.

Tears stung my eyes, my pulse galloping through my veins. “You’re being ridiculous. I can’t shoot you!”

“It’s as easy as pulling a trigger. You’ve done it before.” To a man who hadn’t protected or cared for me half as much as this

one. “He wronged you. I’ve wronged you.”

“Do you want to die, is that it? Do you need help?”

He chuckled. “No, piccola. I’m very much in my right mind.” Clearly, he wasn’t.

“Why would you do this to me?” I stared at him through blurred vision, tears streaking my cheeks. “Why...why won’t you just let me hate you?”

Gripping the back of my neck, he pulled me close, the gun pinned between our bodies as his lips met mine. The kiss was scorching, full of torment and passion, fear and courage, lust and hate—everything we’d shared since the moment we met.

My hand trembled around the weapon, and he stroked my face as though *he* were trying to comfort *me*. While he had a gun to his head.

“Because I love you,” he whispered against my lips.

Three words.

They were just three words, and yet they stole my breath, paralyzed me. Three words that took a sledgehammer to the flimsy walls I’d tried to erect to keep him out, to protect myself. “And if this is what it takes to make you believe that...”

I closed my eyes, breathing in his every exhaled breath. I could never kill him because I loved him, too.

“I’d rather have you put a bullet in my brain than see the hatred in your eyes when you look at me.”

I knew that as much as I held onto my hatred, it wasn’t because of what he’d done to Renzo anymore. My brother had long since forgiven him. I held onto it because the alternative scared me. Loving him, needing him, scared me. I was

terrified he would let me down and break my heart again. But God, I wanted to trust him, to give in to this pull between us. To love him and let him love me.

The man was now my husband. Could I really keep trying to hate him for the rest of our lives? I was already struggling.

“Promise me you won’t let anyone kill Luca,” I breathed.

He stroked my cheek. “I would never again do anything to hurt you, Emilia.”

“Not even for the mafia?”

“Not even for them.”

“Promise me.”

“I promise, on my life.” The life he was willing to let me take.

“I don’t *want* to love you.” It was as close to a confession as I could give him. The gun fell away from his chin before I dropped it to the counter beside me with a clatter. “But I don’t hate you, Gio.” I wasn’t sure I ever really had, no matter how hard I’d tried. I closed my eyes as I leaned into the gentle touch of his fingers on my cheek. “I forgive you,” I whispered.

I had no idea how freeing those words would be after weeks of fighting all these feelings I had for him. Those words tore down everything that stood between us, everything I had put there. It was just him and me and the vows that now bound us together.

He grasped my face in both hands and kissed me. He kissed me like he loved me and was begging me to love him back. My fingers threaded through his hair, tongue brushing his tentatively, pleading with him not to break the heart I’d just placed in his hands.

“I’m forgiven. Now I’ll make you forget anything that isn’t my name while you scream it.”

I was suddenly hot everywhere as his palms slid up the length of my spine to the row of tiny pearl buttons at my back. Then he yanked. Buttons sprang free, pinging across the kitchen and scattering off the hardwoods like rain, signaling the start of a storm.

“I think that was expensive,” I murmured against his lips.

“I’d pay twice as much just to get you naked.” He slid the lace down my shoulders, his lips following its descent in a burning trail. “I’ll buy you another one.”

“Are you planning on me needing to marry again?” I asked through ragged breaths.

His teeth nipped at my shoulder in warning. “Fuck no, you’re mine. Forever.”

“Forever is a long time.”

“It’s not nearly long enough for all the things I want to do to you...”

Gripping my hips, he picked me up and carried me through the apartment, his mouth covering my breasts in hot, open-mouthed kisses as he went. He kicked open the door to his bedroom and lowered me to the floor before slowly sliding the gown down my body. When I was left wearing only a thong, garter, and a pair of heels, he stepped back, his gaze sweeping over me.

“Fucking beautiful.” His lips met mine again in a brutal clash, like he could devour me. Hands slid over my body, tracing the line of each and every curve as though he were committing me to memory. It wasn’t until his fingers slipped beneath the scrap

of material at my hips that I remembered I couldn't do this. I stopped him, claspng both his wrists.

“Wait. I can't...”

He lifted a brow. “Are you going to tell me you don't want me, Emilia? Because we both know what I'll find if I touch this pussy.”

“No, I...” My cheeks heated, and I cursed my own petulance when I'd decided to take my break from my pill early just so he couldn't fuck me. I didn't trust myself to stand by my principles and not give in to the lust that always burned so hot between us. So, I'd taken precautions. “I'm on my period.”

“Fuck.” A tortured groan slipped from him that did not sound at all like disappointment or disgust.

He fought my hold and pushed my thong down my thighs, dropping to his knees. He tapped my leg and made me step out of the underwear now at my ankles. My face was practically burning, even as curiosity slowly rose within me.

Warm hands dragged up the inside of my thighs before he gave a light tug on the string of my tampon. “You think that would stop me?”

“I don't...it's...” I felt like I was on the verge of passing out from embarrassment.

He chuckled as he kissed the inside of my thigh, right before sinking his teeth into the soft flesh. “Fuck, I want to devour you. Lift your leg for me.”

“Gio...”

“Lift.”

I did, and he gripped my thigh, tossing it over his shoulder right before he buried his face between my legs. I didn't have

time to be ashamed or try to stop him before his tongue lashed my clit and my legs threatened to buckle.

I cried out, fingers threading through his hair, leg curling against his back as it felt like he took a Taser to my nerve endings. Everything was so sensitive, so heightened, my entire body craving him.

It was dirty and forbidden, and I'd never been more turned on in my life. Gio made me feel like I was the most desirable woman in the world and nothing would stop him from having me. Certainly not Mother Nature.

He licked and sucked on my clit until I was moaning his name, riding his face, begging for more. He made me utterly shameless, and when the orgasm crashed over me, it was more intense than anything I'd ever experienced. My entire body shook, but he held me up, pushing me past pleasure and edging me with the hint of pain he knew I craved.

When he finally pulled away, I was gasping for breath, my mind spinning. He pushed to his feet and towered over me as he began casually unfastening his cufflinks, like he hadn't just shattered me entirely.

"Go take out the tampon, Emilia." He placed his cufflinks on the nightstand.

"But..." There would be blood everywhere... "You want to...?" God, could my face get any hotter? I fanned myself and his gaze lifted to me, a smile creeping over his lips.

"One." His fingers moved to the buttons of his shirt, the material slowly parting. He was beautiful. Golden skin and ink and muscle. He was a weapon, honed to purpose, a savage hiding behind the civility of a suit.

"Two."



I folded my arms over my chest and forced myself to look at his face. “What happens when you get to three?” I lifted a brow. If he was going to spank me, then he could go right ahead.

His teeth scraped his bottom lip on a grin as he shrugged out of his shirt. My attention fought between his mouth, which did such bad things, and his body that I wanted to lick every inch of.

“I’ll do much worse than spank you, princess.”

“Like what?”

He stepped closer and dropped his lips to my ear. “Three,” he whispered. “Guess you’ll find out. Now, be a good girl and take out the tampon before you make it worse on yourself.”

As though I were a puppet on his strings, I turned and went to the bathroom.



## GIO

**E**milia lingered in the bathroom doorway, her cheeks fuck-me red as her gaze trailed over my naked body. My sweet wife. Her awkwardness delighted me, though I didn't know if it was because I'd made her take out her tampon or that my dick was rock hard and pointing at her.

“Come here, piccola.”

She made her way toward me, her face growing redder with every step. I took in the perfection of her body, all tight curves and smooth golden skin, marred only by the scar on her leg. A fucked up part of me loved that I'd marked her while equally hating the blemish.

“Get on the bed.”

She did as she was told, lying on her back, chocolate hair spilling across the black satin sheets. An angel in the devil's lair.

“Spread those fucking legs, princess. Let me see what's mine.”

The pink that had begun to fade flared across her cheeks violently as she clamped her thighs together. “Gio, this is—”

“Now, Emilia.”

Still, her legs remained closed.

“If I have to count you down, your next punishment won’t be pleasant.” I lifted a brow. “Remember, bad girls don’t get to come.”

On a ragged breath, she tilted her head back and stared at the ceiling as her legs fell open.

“Good girl.”

I dropped my gaze to her perfect pussy, a smear of crimson decorating it. My dick instantly became painful. I’d fantasized about her blood on my dick ever since I took her virginity, right here on this very bed.

The memory ignited a feral kind of pride. She’d bled for me. No other man would ever have her, ever know the perfection of being buried inside her.

“You’re so fucking beautiful.” I kneeled between her thighs and took her left hand, kissing over her fingers, over the gold band I’d just placed there. “Mine in every way, Emilia Guerra. And I will never let you go.”

She was everything I’d never known I wanted. I couldn’t have prepared for her, couldn’t possibly have predicted what it would feel like to need someone so intensely. Not *for* anything, but just her existence. To fight and fuck and do it all over again the next day. That was what Emilia was—love and war. Constantly.

I slammed my lips over hers, kissing her like I could fucking devour her. I wanted to because nothing with her ever felt like enough. She kissed me back with lips and tongue and teeth, all punctuated by a desperate little whine in the back of her throat.

“It’s been too long since I’ve had you, Emilia.” My fingers trailed the inside of her thigh, over the lace garter that marked

her as my bride, to the apex of her thighs.

Her breath hitched, fingers trailing my back.

“Since I felt the tight squeeze of this perfect pussy around my cock.” I slid my fingers inside her tight, wet heat, and she bucked against me, a moan echoing between us.

Her pussy clenched around me, and I loved how responsive she always was, as though she were hard-wired to react to my touch.

When she was trembling and moaning beneath me, I pulled away. She protested with a whine, shaking as I trailed sticky crimson smears over her abdomen. I gripped her throat, the crimson of her blood and the black of my tattoos such a vivid contrast against her skin. She looked so perfectly tainted, and as her eyes met mine, I knew she wanted more. For me to wring every inch of pleasure from her willing body. To corrupt every grain of the innocence that once shone so brightly in her. Maybe I should have felt bad for ruining it, but I didn't.

“You're like a drug I can't go without, princess.” I brought my lips to her cheek, nipping at her jaw as my dick pressed against her pussy. “I think about fucking you constantly.”

I drove into her in one violent thrust, a long groan slipping from my throat at the tight squeeze of her walls around my cock. Emilia's body bowed, her head falling back as nails raked down my arms.

“Fantasize about you bleeding on my cock.” I bit her bottom lip, barely containing myself. “And here you are, my ring on your finger, bleeding for me once more.” I thrust deeper, and she flinched, even as a moan fell from her lips. “Just like I said you would be.”

I pushed up onto my knees, holding her throat as I stared down at the point where my cock disappeared inside her. The sight alone was enough to have my balls tightening, but combined with a pussy that cradled my dick like a glove... I groaned. "Your blood looks so good on my dick, princess."

My movements turned violent, each thrust pushing her into the unforgiving grip of my hand. Her body became putty. Pliant, bending to my every whim. Emilia turned feral, wild, possessed.

By me.

For me.

Her body was mine. Everything she was, was mine to manipulate and stroke and pleasure in any way I wished.

"Gio, please," she cried out, nails scoring along my forearm. "Bruise me. Fuck me," she begged. Fuck. Her pussy clenched around me as though she could suck me deeper, and my grip on her throat tightened as I fought not to blow my load right along with her. She moaned my name, writhing on my dick as she fell apart.

"Fuck." The second her stranglehold on me released, I pulled out, gripping my dick and sucking in deep breaths as I tried not to come.

God, this woman drove me wild. I could barely control myself around her. I glanced down at her blood smeared on my throbbing dick, on my hand, the insides of her smooth thighs. She'd never looked more stunning, and I'd never wanted her more. Not even when I took her virginity because that was tinged with the knowledge that I might have to let her go. Now, I never would. I would brand myself on her until

everyone knew she was mine and no one more than her. She'd feel me for days by the time I was done with her.

Emilia's brows pulled together as she took in my hand wrapped around my cock. "What are you—"

"I've waited a long time to come in you again, Emilia." Because I didn't want to knock her up. Pulling out of her when all I wanted to do was bury myself deep and come inside her...that had been a particular kind of torture. "And as perfect as it is, I don't want to come in your pussy."

Confusion blanketed her face, but she was too far gone to question it, her face flushed, pupils blown, like an addict willing to do anything for her fix.

"Get on your knees," I ordered.

She shifted onto her hands and knees, presenting me with her perfect ass and open pussy.

I released the chokehold I had on my dick and slapped her ass, leaving a sticky handprint on her skin. "You look so good, painted in your own blood, princess. My handprint on your throat, your ass."

This time, when I pressed my fingers into her, there were three, stretching, twisting, dragging unsteady breaths from her lungs. "Such a tight pussy." I thrust in hard, my dick throbbing at the thought of what I was going to do next.

I lowered my face to her ass, and she flinched when I breathed over her tight little hole. I gripped her hip, stilling her. "Shh, Emilia. I told you I would have all of you." I nipped at one cheek. "Every thought. Every feeling." Another nip, punctuated by a particularly hard thrust of my fingers. "Every perfect inch of your body."

She flinched at the brush of my lips over her asshole.

“Every hole.” My fingers pressed deep as my tongue swiped over her ass.

She bucked, squirmed, moaned. I knew she told herself it was wrong for me to fuck her bleeding pussy, her ass. She would learn that nothing was wrong when it came to me having her. There were no lines, no boundaries, no forbidden corner of her I did not wish to conquer. “That’s it, relax, *amore mio*,” I soothed, finger fucking her pussy harder, teasing pleasure from her.

When I finally pushed my tongue inside her ass, she moaned, pushing back against me, seeking more. So sweet and responsive.

I chuckled as she squirmed beneath me. “Such a perfect, good girl.”

I pulled away from her, and she keened, her back bowing as though inviting me to take more. And oh, I would. I would desecrate her until all she thought about was me.

I dragged my fingers up her ass, covering her crack in blood before I spat on her hole, swirling the mess of body fluids together on a groan. “Fuck, you’ve never looked more beautiful, *piccola*. Like a goddess.” A filthy goddess bearing the stains of my touch.

I gripped her hips and lined up my dick with her ass. “I’d normally warm you up for this, Emilia. Work my fingers in this tight hole before I fucked you here, but...” I pressed against her, and she tensed. “You’re due a punishment.”

She fisted the sheets as she shook her head.

“So, relax, and let me in, princess. I promise after the sting, I’ll make you feel good.” I spat on her ass once more before pushing against the ring of muscle. “Breathe, *piccola*.” I



pushed inside her, gritting my teeth at the tightness. If her pussy was perfection, then this was the sweetest form of torture.

“It hurts,” she moaned.

I reached beneath her and circled her clit as I brought my lips to her throat. “It’s supposed to. But we both know you like some pain, princess.” I kissed below her ear, circling her clit harder, faster. “Now take your punishment like a good girl.”

She moaned, her body giving to me, allowing me in inch by aching tight inch. By the time I was buried inside her, I could barely breathe, and Emilia was on the verge of coming again. Her limbs shook before her arms gave out, and she sprawled chest down, ass up on the mattress.

“Do you want me to fuck this ass, Emilia?”

“Yes,” she whined.

I pulled almost all the way out and thrust back in on a groan. She cried out, her back bowing. God, I would never get enough of her. No matter what I gave her, she just took it and wanted more.

She cried my name as I fucked her, begging, clawing at the sheets as mascara streaked her cheeks. At the first clench of her body, I couldn’t hold off anymore. Pleasure tore down my spine like the lash of a whip, and I came so hard, my vision blacked out for a moment. She drained everything from me, wrung me out until my ears were ringing with the sound of her cries.

“Mine,” I breathed over her back, swiping my tongue over her sweat-slick skin.

When I pulled out, her entire body was shaking with aftershocks. I held her ass cheeks apart, watching my come

trickle out of her, down to her bloody pussy.

“You look so beautiful leaking my come, Emilia.” I caught it with my finger, pushing it into her pussy. When I was done, she rolled onto her back, eyes closed, chest heaving.

She was filthy, defiled in every way.

As much as I wanted to leave her like that, I scooped her into my arms and carried her into the bathroom.

“No.” She buried her face in my neck. “Just let me sleep.”

I laughed. “I would love to let you sleep covered in blood, come, and sweat, princess.”

I placed her down in the shower stall, and her cheeks turned red once more. I dragged my thumb across her cheek. “I hope you always blush like this, Emilia. No matter how many times you beg for my dick.”

“I didn’t beg.”

I smirked and cut on the shower, waiting for it to warm before dragging her beneath the spray. “You definitely begged.”

She tipped her head back into the spray, and I brushed my lips over hers.

“Like the good little wife that you are.”

I washed every inch of her body, and for once, she made no objections. She didn’t tell me she could look after herself or that she didn’t need me.

When she was dry and dressed in one of my shirts, I got into bed, but she lingered beside it, her gaze darting between the door and me.

“Emilia,” I practically growled. “If you are thinking about running...” I realized how much I feared that. The last time I

thought we were both on the same page, she had left in the dead of night and nearly gotten herself killed.

“No, I’m...” she rubbed at her arm. “I’m worried about Luca.”

I leaned back against the headboard and let out a breath. “He’s fine. Jackson may have roughed him up a little, but I assure you he will have had far worse.”

She dragged a hand through her hair before wrapping her arms around herself. She looked small, fragile, and I hated it. Hated that she seemed to carry the weight of her family on her shoulders. A family who hadn’t helped her when she needed it. Aside from Renzo, none of them had done enough.

Luca might have helped her one time, but he hadn’t once tried to contact her or me since she’d been with me. If that were my sister in the same situation, I’d have moved heaven and Earth to stop her from being married against her will. And if I’d failed, I would have done everything in my power to save her from her captivity. Luca cared within the boundaries of not openly defying Sergio. That told me all I needed to know.

“Come here, piccola.”

For once, Emilia did as she was told without fighting. Rather than just getting into bed, she climbed into my lap, wrapping her arms around my neck. It was such a rare show of vulnerability from her, and my chest ached, knowing how much it must have taken her to show it.

I pulled her close, inhaling the scent of my body wash that clung to her skin.

“He looked at me like he hated me,” she whispered, tucking her head beneath my chin.

“He doesn’t hate you, Emilia. He hates me. He thinks—” I cut off, realizing that my next words may not have the desired effect.

“He thinks you killed his father.”

I let out a sigh. “Yes.”

“So even if he doesn’t hate me for marrying the man he thinks killed his father, he will when he realizes it was me who pulled the trigger.”

I cupped her jaw, bringing her gaze to mine. “He will never find out. I killed Roberto, okay? That’s it. End of story.”

Her gaze softened, fingertips brushing over my lips.

“Okay?”

She nodded.

“Good. You will get to speak to him. I’m having him taken to the house tomorrow. But first, I want twenty-four hours.”

Her brows pulled together. “You know we can fuck at the house. Or anytime. We’re married, Gio.”

I laughed, swiping a strand of damp hair away from her cheek.

“Oh, don’t worry. We will be doing plenty of that, but first, I have a surprise for you.”

“What kind of surprise?”

“The surprise kind of surprise.”

She narrowed her eyes suspiciously. “Fine, but I don’t like surprises.”

“Have you ever had one?”

“Other than ‘surprise, you’re being sold to Giovanni Guerra,’ I don’t think so.”

I tugged her close and pressed a kiss to her lips. “And look how that turned out for you.”

A pang of sadness burrowed into my chest at how sheltered, how deprived her life had truly been. I would change that, give her every experience and savor every smile she gave me in return.

I would make her happy.

I fucked Emilia in the shower this morning, but the second she stepped into the kitchen, my dick hardened again. She wore a dress and knee-high boots that were downright indecent. I didn't know whether to fire the personal shopper who bought Emilia's wardrobe or give her a raise. Maybe I'd just shoot Tommy again for accepting the clothes.

Emilia tugged on a leather jacket as she approached me, and my gaze dropped to the bruises beginning to blossom around her throat. That definitely didn't help my situation, and I adjusted myself before taking a sip of coffee.

“Is this okay?” she asked, gesturing down the length of her body. “It would help if you just told me where we're going.”

I leaned forward on the barstool and grabbed her hips, pulling her between my legs. “Well, I can't leave right now and take you on a honeymoon, so we have a day. But like I said, it's a surprise.”

I pushed her onto a barstool and slid a plate in front of her with an omelet on it. “Now eat, piccola. All of it.” I pushed to my feet. “And drink the water.”

I headed to the bedroom while listening to her grumble about what a controlling asshole I was. She liked it really.

I'd just plucked a jacket from a hangar when my phone rang. If it were anyone else, I would have ignored it, but Jackson knew I was busy. He wouldn't call if it wasn't important.

I answered. "Yeah?"

"Got a problem." He let out a sigh. "The Outfit found the dockside warehouse." The warehouse we were keeping Luca in.

"Fuck. Did they get Luca?"

"No, but Gio, they never tried to free him. They tried to kill him."

"What?" I stood there in my closet, staring at the wall, trying to piece everything together. Why would they do that?

"How many guys were there?"

"Just four. Only one made it to Luca, clipped him in the arm, but my guys got there before he could finish the job."

I pinched the bridge of my nose. Why would Sergio try to kill his own nephew? His loyal nephew... it made no sense. Unless he realized what we were trying to do. If Luca and Renzo sided with me, who was now family by marriage, swaying the capos to their side would be easy. Sergio's days were already numbered, so he was trying to eliminate his successor.

"One more thing. Matteo Romano has been seen in the city, according to my guys."

"Shit." That meant he was behind this. He had to be. "Give me a couple of hours. I'll bring more men to transport Luca."

"I can handle it, Gio. You're with Emilia—"

“I’m not taking her anywhere while Romano is in New York. Get all your guys on it. I want him dead, Jackson.” Dead and nowhere near Emilia. I could still remember the way he had looked at her, like he owned her, like she owed him something.

This all seemed too coincidental right after the wedding. They must have followed Jackson when he he’d taken Luca back to the warehouse. Which meant they knew we were now married, and they were watching us. The thought made me uneasy. “Until then, just hold the perimeter and get rid of the bodies.” I hung up and fought the urge to launch my phone at the wall.

Emilia would probably be annoyed at my canceling our date, but she’d be more pissed if she found out her brother was nearly killed and I took her out on a day trip.

I also didn’t want to tell her any of this right now and panic her unnecessarily.

Turning around, I strode into the kitchen. “Change of plans. We have to go back to the house.”

“Okay.” A trace of disappointment crossed Emilia’s face before she masked it. “Everything all right?”

“Yeah.” I moved closer to her and kissed the top of her head. “It’s just not as safe as I’d hoped.”

She slid from the stool and washed her plate before moving to the door. “Let’s go then.”

And just like that, the bubble burst. Normality crept back in. Death and war and responsibility. For the first time in my life, I didn’t want any of it. If it weren’t her brother, if I weren’t worried about her safety, I would leave it all to burn right now.

“I promise I will make this up to you, piccola.” I opened the door. “When it’s safe.”

“It’s never safe, Gio.” She offered me a soft smile. “It’s okay. I was born into the mafia, remember? I’m used to it.”

She was used to having no life, to being sheltered and caged. That would not be her life with me. We’d had peace and a degree of safety for years. I would handle Chicago, and we would have that again. I would give her that.





## EMILIA

**R**enzo took a seat beside me, sliding a plate across the table. I picked up the Nutella-smothered bagel and took a bite. His cooking skills certainly weren't up to Gio's standards, but I would never turn down sugar.

Ren had been fussing all morning, hovering, like he was expecting me to have some kind of breakdown.

I wasn't thrilled at the prospect of marrying Gio yesterday, but things were different now. Those three words hadn't magically fixed everything, but they had granted me permission to forgive him. Or maybe deep down, I was just so desperate to be loved that those words really were magic. I would have admonished myself for my childish naivety, but the man had put a gun to his own head. It was insane and, well...what I needed.

I wasn't about to discuss last night with Renzo, though. I wouldn't be able to talk about even the most innocent of it without turning fifty shades of red.

I turned my attention to Tommy at the end of the table, avoiding Renzo's inevitable scrutiny. He lifted a cup of coffee to his lips, and that small motion was enough to make him flinch. He hunched over slightly, his face pale.

I'd give him more painkillers, but Gio told me not to. Right before he'd left in a rush a few hours ago. He wouldn't tell me what this new danger was or where he was going, and it took everything in me to swallow the questions I wanted to ask.

I had to accept that he was a mafia boss, that he wouldn't tell me everything. That was the role of a mafia wife, and as much as I hated it, I could play it if I had to. I'd watched my mother do it for years.

This was what I'd traded in exchange for Luca's life. At least Gio loved me, and I loved him. That was more than most mafia brides got.

"He should be back by now, shouldn't he?" I asked no one in particular.

With my uncle still on the loose, I couldn't help but worry. This was the other part of my life now—waiting to see if he'd make it home safe or die or get arrested.

I caught a brief look exchanged between my brother and Tommy before they both looked anywhere but at me.

"What was that?"

Tommy offered me an innocent smile. "What was what?"

I turned to Renzo because I could read him like a book and knew him better than myself. "What was that look, Ren?"

He folded his arms over his chest. Defensive. "What, now I'm not allowed to look at someone?"

There was a beat of silence where I gave him the opportunity to come clean, right before I clipped him around the back of the head.

"Ow!"

“Tell me what you know, Renzo Sergio Donato. Right now.”

“Oof, middle name and everything,” Tommy mumbled.

Renzo threw his head back on a groan. “Fuck, you’re annoying. I don’t know anything.”

I grabbed his nipple through his shirt and twisted, and he screamed like a little girl, leaping up from the table. “All right, Jesus fuck.”

Tommy snorted. “The Outfit enforcer, undone by a nipple cripple from his sister.”

I pointed at him. “You’re only getting out of it because you’re injured.”

He stared at me wide-eyed and covered his nipples with his hands.

I glared between them. “Both of you, tell me what is going on.”

Ren let out a sigh. “Gio will tell you when he gets back. He just doesn’t want to worry you—”

“Renzo!”

“Fine.” He huffed. “Wherever they’re keeping Luca was compromised. Someone tried to kill him.”

I felt every inch of heat drain from my body. Of all the things I expected him to say, that was not it. I assumed it was a Famiglia problem, not...not a me problem. “What?” I whispered.

Renzo grabbed my shoulder. “He’s fine, Emi. Jackson’s men caught the guy. He was Outfit.”

“Uncle Sergio tried to have Luca killed?”

“Yep.” He popped the *P*. “Maybe now he’ll see the damn light.”

My uncle tried to kill Luca, and that made no sense. My brother was so loyal to my uncle, never faltering or failing in any task my father or uncle had ever given him. Maybe he thought Luca would be tortured for information. Was it some fucked-up kind of mercy? Still, the fact that he would do that...

“Why wouldn’t Gio tell me that?”

“Don’t be mad at him, sweetheart,” Tommy said. “He just doesn’t want to worry you.”

“I’m not some fragile flower, Tommy,” I snapped a little too harshly before squeezing my eyes shut. “Sorry. I’m sorry.”

“Emi, it’s fine. Luca’s fine. Gio took some men to go get him and bring him back here himself. Doesn’t trust anyone else.”

He was bringing Luca here? I’d seen the way my brother had looked at me in that church, and it posed the question that had been circling my mind ever since Gio had agreed to marry me. If Luca didn’t agree to ally with the *Famiglia* in some fashion, would they kill him? Gio said he wouldn’t, but I’d looked Nero Verdi in the eye and known without a shadow of a doubt that man would end both Ren and Luca if it suited him. Gio was powerful, but he answered to Nero.

And now it seemed even if Gio kept his word and freed my brother, Sergio may want him dead anyway. No matter what I did, everyone was always in danger and trying to outrun fate was becoming increasingly more difficult.

Surely at this point, with Sergio still in hiding, a coup from within The Outfit was the only answer.

“Did you manage to contact the capos?” I asked Ren.

“None of them are taking my calls.” He let out an exasperated breath and dragged a hand through his hair.

I wanted Sergio dead for so many reasons, but his going after Luca was the icing on the cake.

“It’ll be fine, Ren.” I grabbed his hand, clasping his fingers in mine.

“You really think Luca will agree to this?” He shook his head on a short laugh. “He’d rather die than roll over for the Famiglia.”

I didn’t miss the edge in his voice, and I glanced at him, his hardened gaze colliding with mine. For the first time, I saw what following me had truly cost Ren.

I knew he despised my uncle and Matteo, perhaps even our father, but he was an Outfit enforcer, and the Famiglia was killing Outfit soldiers.

“Luca would rather die than roll over for the Famiglia, or you would, Ren?”

He opened his mouth to answer, but fell silent at the sound of the front door opening, then closing. Several sets of shoes clicked over the hardwoods, and I glanced at the kitchen doorway as several men strode past, a huge, seemingly unconscious figure being dragged between them.

The guy had a bag on his head, but it was the gold ring on his finger that caught my attention. A ring I would know anywhere because my father, uncle, and brothers all wore them. The Donato sigil. Luca.

Gio followed right behind them, his attention focused on the procession in front of him. They were gone in a blink, moving farther into the house.

I shot to my feet, ignoring Renzo and Tommy when they called after me. I made it into the hall just as Gio ducked through a doorway. Following him, I descended a set of stairs into a dingy-looking basement.

I'd been in this house for weeks, and I didn't even know it had a basement, but the place felt ominous, and I could guess what happened down here.

The men who had been dragging my brother passed me at the bottom of the stairs without a word. I didn't even see their faces, too focused on the blood on their clothes. Panic laced my veins, and I stumbled forward.

Gio stepped out of a doorway at the end of the corridor, closing it behind him with a soft click.

I needed to see Luca, but the moment I tried to move around him, Gio blocked my path, grasping my shoulders.

"He's fine, Emilia."

"Someone tried to shoot him, Gio! Your men are covered in blood."

"Hey." He cupped my face and pulled my gaze up to his. Calm, collected, controlled.

I took a deep breath, allowing some of his steadiness to leach into me.

"He got clipped in the arm. It's a scratch. The blood is from The Outfit men they killed and disposed of. Okay?"

I inhaled a deep breath and nodded. Gio pressed his lips to my forehead before wrapping his arms around me. He always felt like a source of oxygen to starved lungs.

"Why is he unconscious?"

“Luca doesn’t exactly appreciate his captivity, nor our protection, and he’s a big bastard.” His breath trickled over my scalp as he huffed a short laugh. “He’s sedated.”

“Are you going to kill him?”

He gripped my jaw, forcing me into silence as he met my gaze. “What did I promise you, Emilia?”

“You promised you wouldn’t kill him,” I whispered, a single tear managing to escape and trickle down my cheek. I was worried for Luca, but more than that, I was terrified Gio would break that promise and, in doing so, break me. It had only been twenty-four hours since he’d put that ring on my finger, but I’d allowed myself to hope, to want this, to believe that he cared about me.

“I don’t give a fuck about Luca Donato.” His breath washed over my face until I could almost taste the hint of mint on my tongue. “But there’s very little I wouldn’t do for you, piccola. I made you a promise, and your forgiveness hinged upon it. So, consider Luca Donato gold fucking plated as far as I’m concerned.” His gaze dropped to my mouth, thumb dragging over my bottom lip.

“And if he doesn’t agree?”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we get to it.” His brows pinched together, and I didn’t like the doubt that flickered in his eyes.

“Will you torture him?” I whispered. “For Sergio’s location?”

He shook his head. “Like I said, I made you a promise, but even if I hadn’t, any information Luca knew would no longer be relevant. Sergio isn’t stupid.” His thumb swept along my jaw softly. “Perhaps Sergio turning on him will make Luca re-evaluate who the enemy really is.”



I nodded, trying not to think about the what-ifs and maybes. Gio could promise me the world, but I didn't think Nero Verdi was a man who ran his mafia based on the whims of Gio's new wife.

"Can I see him?" I asked.

"He's still out cold. The drugs will wear off in a few hours." Taking my hand, Gio pulled me toward the stairs. "Come on. I'll make you lunch."

"I already ate."

He glanced over his shoulder at me as I followed him up the steps. "What did you eat?"

It felt like a trick question. "A bagel."

"With what?"

I narrowed my eyes on his muscular back. "Nutella."

He shook his head and mumbled something under his breath.

We stepped onto the landing, and he closed the basement door with a resounding click before producing a key from his pocket and locking it. "I'll make you actual food."

"You're a feeder. You have a problem."

He grabbed my waist and turned us until my shoulder blades pressed to the door. "You look thin, piccola." He grabbed my hips, his nose trailing up the side of my throat. "I like having something to hold onto while I fuck this sweet body." His lips brushed my skin, and I swallowed roughly.

The feel of his hands on me, his lips, his hard body...I always wanted more.

He laughed into my throat before stepping away. "Food first, amore mio."



## EMILIA

**I**t was the next afternoon before Gio allowed me to step inside the cell Luca was being held in. And it was very much a cell. The cinder block walls were bleak and depressing, and there were no windows or furniture aside from a single bed pushed up against the far wall.

The dim light hummed over Luca's colossal form slumped on the small mattress. He looked like a chained beast with his back against the wall, arm outstretched and cuffed to the metal headboard. That was the only way Gio would allow me in here without him, with my brother leashed like some rabid dog.

Dark circles lingered beneath untrusting eyes that stalked my every step. He looked at me as though I were now the enemy, and honestly, I was starting to wonder how I—a girl who never wanted any part of the mafia and had no involvement in its dealings—was suddenly on everyone's shit list. *You did kill your father*, a mocking voice whispered in my mind, and I shoved the thought away. I couldn't deal with that right now.

"If you're here to try to sell hubby's alliance to me, you can go. Renzo already came down here with his team Famiglia bullshit," he sneered.

I nodded and took a seat at the foot of his bed. "Did Renzo tell you what happens if you don't agree to this?"

Luca's disgusted gaze raked over me. "I'd rather die than turn traitor."

"They will kill you, Luca. I can't lose another sibling, so please..." I let out a long breath. "I married him so you could run The Outfit."

"Yeah, as his bitch." He snorted and shook his head. "Last I saw, you were trying to run away from him. Now you're fawning over him."

A seed of guilt burrowed into my chest and sprang roots because he was right. Somewhere along the line, I had stopped fighting, and though I'd made my peace over my feelings for Gio, part of me hated myself for giving in to this fate, for becoming everything I was running from.

I glanced down at the gold band on my finger before tucking my fingers between my thighs, hiding it.

"It's a business transaction, a marriage of alliance." The lie felt like ash in my mouth.

"Bullshit." His gaze narrowed on me viciously. "You think I don't see the way he looks at you. The way you look at him. It's clear where your loyalties now lie, and it isn't with The Outfit."

"My loyalties have never been to The Outfit! They are to myself and those I love. That's it." I just happened to love Gio as well as my brother, which complicated things. "I want peace between The Outfit and the Famiglia, the same as Giovanni."

"Have you heard yourself, Emilia? You're willing to whore yourself out to the man who killed your father. Marry him."

I ducked my chin, hoping he wouldn't see the color I could feel draining from my face. "Uncle Sergio betrayed them," I

said hoarsely. “What did you expect?”

“For my sister not to become a traitor.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” My temper snapped, dissipating all traces of guilt as I shoved to my feet. “Did you know Sergio was going to fuck them over, Luca? That he sold me to *Giovanni Guerra*, knowing he was planning to betray him.”

He said nothing, and I shook my head, pain squeezing my chest.

“Be honest, knowing what you do of Gio’s reputation, did you expect me to still be alive right now?”

He dropped his gaze to his lap, shame coloring his features.

“Yeah, I didn’t think so. So, do not talk to me of betrayal. You’re not even loyal to your own blood!”

His brows pulled together. “I helped you get out.”

“One good act does not negate years of looking the other way, Luca. You act like being Giovanni’s ally is a fate worse than death, yet you are Sergio’s puppet, and I assure you, Giovanni is a far more honorable man than our uncle.”

“He killed our father, Emi! How can you look past that?”

“Because our father was a piece of shit!”

Luca glared at me like he’d slit my throat if only he weren’t cuffed to that bed.

“Do you know why I agreed to marry Gio and then ran?”

“I assumed you wanted to do your duty but changed your mind.”

“Duty.” I snorted. “Uncle Sergio said that if I didn’t marry Gio, he would give me to Matteo...as a whore.” I looked back

at my brother. “Dad was in the room. He said nothing.”

“He wouldn’t—”

I laughed. “Please, Luca. Stop trying to find a thread of decency in Sergio or Dad. They would, and you know it.”

He closed his eyes. I didn’t know why he needed to believe the man he served was so much better than the Famiglia. Maybe he’d personally killed some of Gio’s men in recent weeks and needed to clear his conscience.

“What do you want me to say, Emilia?”

“I want you to see that Uncle Sergio is the villain here!” I threw my hands up. “He tried to kill you, for fuck’s sake.”

“A mercy—”

“Bullshit! He knows you pose a threat to him. That Gio married me and would back you. He knows you could run The Outfit far better than him, and he would be obsolete.” I met his gaze, silently pleading with him to let me fucking save him. “Please, Luca.”

For a moment, his expression softened, filling with a kind of longing I’d never seen in my stoic brother. But in a blink, it hardened.

“You might be willing to bend over for the enemy, Emilia, but I won’t. Tell him to come down here and kill me. Get it over with.”

I shoved to my feet. “Luca, no—”

“He killed our father!” he roared, the walls practically vibrating with rage. “I will never forgive them for it. I’d rather die in this damn cell—”

“It was me!” I backed away from him a few paces as tense silence descended over the small room.

My brother’s brows pulled together, his anger replaced by confusion. “What?”

“I killed Dad.” I choked on a sob. “It was supposed to be Sergio, and he just... He thought I’d run from Gio, and he wouldn’t help me. And he didn’t help Chiara... I killed him.”

His confusion slowly ebbed away until it morphed into an unreadable mask. “Get out,” he said quietly.

Tears streaked down my face. “Luca, please—”

“You better hope Guerra kills me, little sister, because if he doesn’t, the next time I see you, I’ll make him a widower.” The venom in his voice cut me to the core, and I stumbled back. “Get the fuck out.”

Tears clogged my throat as I turned to leave, the pain in my chest unbearable. It was the same rejection I’d experienced my entire life. That feeling of not being good enough to love. Not being good enough for his loyalty.

I opened the door and paused. “What did Dad ever do to make you care about him more than Chiara and me?” I choked out but left without waiting for an answer. I didn’t want to lose Luca, but I already had.

By the time I reached the top of the stairs, tears were blurring my vision and I could barely breathe. It hurt so fucking much. All I could think about was the look on his face, the hatred and disgust, a direct reflection of what I already felt about myself since killing my father.

Nero would kill Luca, and I couldn’t save anyone. Not even myself.

I spiraled into an abyss until it felt like everything was screaming inside my head, and I just wanted it to stop. I wanted to escape this never-ending cloud of grief and despair that felt as though it had blanketed my life for years. And it just got darker and darker, the weight heavier and more crushing.

I stumbled through the house and up the stairs on autopilot. I heard someone call my name, but I just moved faster, needing to escape.

I didn't go to mine and Gio's room, instead ducking into Renzo's and slamming the door.

Ugly sobs tore past my lips as I rushed to the nightstand. Seeking, needing to cut this feeling out of me. Subconsciously, I knew what I was looking for, why I'd come to his room. But it wasn't until I was sitting on the edge of the mattress, tears blurring the image of my brother's switchblade in my hand, that my mind caught up.

I pressed the tip of the blade into the fleshy part of my forearm, just below the crease of my elbow. A single sharp prick of pain that was so clarifying, as though every messy emotion in me centered on that one point. Dangerous. This was so dangerous. I snatched the knife away from my skin, staring at the drop of blood that welled and trickled down my wrist.

The bedroom door clicked open, and I fumbled, dropping the knife.

Shame washed over me at the prospect of Renzo finding me like this, seeing what I'd become. But when I looked up, it wasn't Renzo standing in the doorway; it was Gio.



His brows pulled together as he took in my face, the blood, the sobs that would not stop wracking my body. I wondered if he was disgusted by my weakness, but as his gaze shifted to the tiny puncture wound on my arm, then the knife at my feet, I didn't feel ashamed. Not like I would with my brother.

Gio saw me, knew all the ugly, jaded parts of me. My love for Renzo kept me from showing this to him, but Gio... he'd seen me at my worst and loved me regardless.

He approached, picking up the knife and pocketing it before standing in front of me. His fingers swept over my cheek, and I closed my eyes, more tears breaking free as I did.

"Tell me what you need, piccola."

"I don't know."

His other hand dropped to my wrist, calloused fingers following the thin trail of blood up to the crease of my elbow. "You do."

Opening my eyes, I looked up and met his gaze, like the deepest, darkest parts of the bluest ocean, cold and bottomless. I wanted him to drown me, to fill my lungs and chill me to the bone until I felt absolutely nothing but him.

"Hurt me," I whispered a sordid, desperate plea. A weakness I offered him in return for salvation from my sins.

Sometimes, Gio was my disease, but it seemed he was always my cure.

His hand fisted my hair, wrenching me to my feet before his lips met mine. His kiss was hard and unforgiving, teeth raking my lips until the metallic tang of blood coated my tongue. His violence felt like being resuscitated, having mint-scented oxygen breathed back into my lungs, and I sucked him in

deep, wallowing in the desperation, the depravity, the pain that stained us both so irrevocably.

His hands gripped my thighs, lifting me, holding me against him as he moved, his lips never leaving mine. Only when a door slammed did I realize we were in his room.

My back hit the mattress before he pulled the knife from his pocket. My breaths hitched as he loomed over me.

“Do you need me to restrain you for this, princess?”

I shook my head, and he pressed his lips to my throat.

“Good girl.”

I felt the cool kiss of the metal on my stomach before he sliced my shirt away, then my bra. My entire body shook in anticipation, waiting, braced, needing.

I heard the nightstand drawer open, the clink of something before he held up what looked like jewelry. A thin chain with a bit of metal on each end. The smile that covered his face was wicked as he brought one end to my chest and squeezed the little clip open.

I jerked when it snapped closed around my nipple with a sharp sting.

“Tell me to stop at any point, princess.”

He snapped the other one in place, and pain ricocheted between my nipples like earthing points on an electrical circuit. It was all I could focus on, my mind so blissfully consumed with the endorphins firing through my bloodstream.

“Don’t move,” he ordered before stripping out of his jacket, his gun holster, his shirt.

My gaze tracked over the tattoos covering his muscular body. So beautifully dangerous. My very own demon.

Leaning over me, he pressed his lips to mine as he grabbed the thin chain and twisted it around his hand, tugging on both nipples and sending a throb echoing through me.

“More,” I gasped against his mouth.

“How much do you want, Emilia?”

“Everything,” the word was a breathy plea on my lips.

He ripped off my leggings and panties so violently that I was yanked down the bed. Then he forced my legs apart, staring at my pussy like he owned it, like he wanted to conquer it.

He tugged on my tampon string with a groan. “Would you like to bleed for me some more, piccola?”

Right then, I didn’t want pleasure, just pain. But then he pulled out the tampon and tossed it into the trash can before plunging two fingers inside me. I moaned and shamelessly arched into his touch.

“Always so fucking responsive,” he groaned.

Between the rough thrust of his fingers and the low ache from my nipples, I was dangerously close to coming within seconds.

“Gio,” I breathed.

With a smirk, he once again produced the knife from his pocket, flipping open the blade. My heart leaped, a twisted blend of anticipation and fear winding through me.

He brought the knife to my sternum, and there was a sharp sting, the tip breaking my skin.

His thumb pressed over my clit as he thrust his fingers deep, and it all culminated in the perfect storm of sensation. I came as he dragged the blade down my chest in a burning line. It was perfect, toxic, destructive ecstasy.

My vision dotted, body writhing as a string of incoherent moans slipped from my throat.

Yes, Gio was my demon, my sin, my punisher, my sweet, sweet salvation.

His fingers left my pussy before he trailed that hand up my stomach, over my chest, smearing my come and blood up my body until he collared my throat the way I liked. His free hand released the nipple clamps, and my entire body trembled at the sensation of blood rushing back into them. It was almost an orgasm in itself.

“So perfect, Emilia. So mine.” His lips captured mine, and I could feel how close to the edge he was in that kiss. His hard cock pressed between my legs, and just when I expected him to fuck me, he pulled away, kissing my forehead and leaving me there on the bed.

I stared after him in confusion as he ducked into the bathroom.

He came back with a damp cloth, wiping it over the line of blood on my chest. It was barely a scratch, the bleeding almost stopped already. Not like Gio would ever really hurt me, and not in any way that would scar.

He then swiped it down my stomach, between my legs. I was too fragile to fight his attention right then, as though my consciousness was hiding in a corner of my mind.

And finally, he put a fresh tampon in. Maybe I should have been embarrassed, but nothing about that moment felt

shameful. Intimate and vulnerable, yes, but not shameful. I was raw, exposed, fracturing, and he was caring for me, giving me what I needed, the same way he always did.

He dressed me in one of his shirts, then sat on the edge of the mattress as he handed me a glass of water. “Drink.”

I sat up and took it without arguing. When I was done, he plucked the glass from my fingers and set it on the nightstand.

“I...thank you,” I whispered as I pushed to my feet. I just needed to process without his scrutiny, to be weak for a moment.

He let out a sigh. “Get the fuck back in my bed, princess, before your day gets a whole lot worse.”

“It’s the middle of the afternoon.”

“I don’t give a fuck what time it is. Bed. Now.”

I wanted to fight him, but then Luca’s face flashed through my mind, his hatred that felt as though it was still burning me from the inside out. Gio was a safe haven of sorts, and I just wanted to bask in that for a little while, to be sheltered from the world.

I lay down, inhaling the scent of pine and mint that wrapped around me like a warm blanket. Minutes later, with his heat pressed to my back, his solid arm banded around me like he would never let go. I turned to him, pressing into his bare chest.

“What did he say to you, piccola?”

I buried my face in his throat. “Nothing.”

Gripping my jaw, he pushed me back enough to search my face. “Make no mistake, Luca lives because I made you a promise and because it would upset you were anything to

happen to him. But now..." Now he'd found me with a knife. Now I had begged him to hurt me.

"You can't kill him just because he upset me," I whisper.

The smile that pulled at his lips was not nice. "You vastly underestimate what I can and will do where you are concerned, princess."

I blinked away tears. "I told him."

He let out a long breath and tugged me back into the safety of his throat, where I couldn't see his reactions. "He'll come around. He has no choice."

"He told me he'd kill me if he saw me again." My voice broke, and Gio's hand slid to the back of my neck, his entire body tensing. "He looked at me like he hates me, Gio."

"Luca will see reason," he said.

But I knew my brother, and he wouldn't. I closed my eyes and allowed Gio's soft breaths, the steady beat of his heart, to calm me, to soothe the ache in my chest. He felt like a drug to my soul, thrilling and then numbing.

More than that, though, he felt like safety and peace and shelter. In the midst of my turmoil, his arms felt like home.



## GIO

I stared down at the dead body of one of my men sprawled in the trunk of Jackson's SUV.

One of the bar staff had found him in a dumpster in the back alley of the club. Luckily, Adamo was here, handling some shit, and managed to keep the staff member quiet, but it was a taunt if ever I saw one. And it crossed a line. Dead bodies were one thing, but dead men around my legitimate businesses were another entirely.

In this city, I was a respectable businessman. We didn't do bodies and war on our streets. We weren't some gang of drug dealers. We were the Famiglia, lining the pockets of senators, mayors, judges... and none of them wanted to be associated with bodies.

The guy wasn't just a member of staff. He was security, one of Jackson's soldiers. The timing was too coincidental for it to be anyone but The Outfit.

"Fuck!" I slammed the trunk and stalked away, dragging both hands through my hair.

This was the problem when you backed animals into corners. They were rabid. Stupid. Sergio was crossing lines that should not be crossed.



One of Jackson's guy's hopped into the car and started the engine before pulling out of the alley.

Jackson followed me inside the club and up to my office. Music thrummed through the walls and floor, muted by the glass wall that separated it from the rest of the club. It was busy tonight, which only pissed me off even more. Anyone could have stumbled across that body.

I took a seat behind my desk, and Jackson sat on the arm of the couch as I pulled up the last few hours of security footage on the TV screen. I fast-forwarded through the first hour and stopped when a familiar figure in a suit walked right in the front door. Matteo Romano.

"For fuck's sake." An unknown Outfit soldier I could let go, but Matteo fucking Romano, consigliere of the Chicago Outfit, just walked right on in and killed one of my men. He was mocking me.

"The guys on the door are just normal security, Gio. They wouldn't know."

I pinched the bridge of my nose. "Pay the waitress to keep quiet. Fifty grand should do it. And I want more men at every business we have."

He lifted his brows. "All of them?"

"Hire extra security if you have to. And show them all pictures of every Outfit capo, enforcer, underboss... Sooner or later, they'll do something. Romano wants something. There's a reason he hasn't left the city."

"You think he might go for Luca again?"

The thought panicked me for a moment. If he got to Luca, he could get Emilia. "No, the house is too heavily guarded. He

wouldn't be that stupid." Still, I fired off a text to Tommy to check that everything was okay there.

He responded, saying it was, and Emilia was fine.

I turned to Jackson. "Go to the warehouse and keep working on the one you kept alive from the attack on Luca. I'll talk to the guys here and wrap up some things, then I'll join you." God knows I wanted to break some Outfit bones right about now.

Jackson pushed to his feet and left.

Fuck, there was just no end in sight with this shit.

I'd only been alone for a few minutes when there was a knock on the glass door that led to the club. It opened with a boom of music. Laylah strode inside with a tray in hand, a single glass of whiskey balanced on it. Not like I couldn't use a drink right now.

"I brought your drink."

"Thank you, Laylah," I said without looking at her.

She put the glass on my desk before perching on the wooden surface, so close that my elbow brushed her thigh. One leg slowly crossed over the other, her already short dress riding up her thighs. The scent of her perfume invaded my nostrils, cloying and over-powering.

"That will be all—"

"Gio." Her hand landed on my chest, sliding slightly beneath my jacket, intimately, far too intimately.

I was already pissed after Romano's bullshit, but fuck. I grabbed her wrist, squeezing hard enough that she winced slightly.

“What is on my left hand, Laylah?”

She whimpered, and I tilted my head to the side.

“I didn’t catch that?”

“A...a ring.”

“A wedding ring.”

“I...I thought...”

“You thought what?” I pushed to my feet, shoving her hand away.

She stumbled over her words, her cheeks turning red.

“The next time you touch me, you will find yourself unemployed, Laylah. Now get the fuck out.”

She hurried for the door, clutching her wrist. I collapsed back in my chair, letting out a long breath.

If I had the time to train a new club manager, I would fire her right now for that shit. If there was one thing I couldn’t stomach, it was disrespect, and implying that I would cheat on my wife, well, that was insulting.

Luckily for Laylah, I was neck-deep in Outfit and mob bullshit right now.

My chest was tight, my heart pounding out an angry beat against my ribs. I needed a damn outlet. Fighting or fucking preferably.

Picking up the whiskey, I downed it before pushing to my feet. Adamo was waiting for me at the bottom of the stairs.

“Take me to the warehouse.” I was going to punch something or someone.

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**S**taring out at the darkness beyond my office window, I lifted my glass of whiskey to my lips. The ice tinkling against the crystal broke through the deafening silence that could only be found in the early hours of the morning.

I loved this time. It felt as though the entire world was asleep, but it wasn't. Creatures such as me slipped through the darkness unseen, making sordid business dealings. Torturing Outfit members for information. Not that the one we captured from the attempted hit on Luca could tell us anything. Only that Matteo ordered them to do it. They hadn't heard from Sergio, didn't know where he was.

So, Matteo was his go-between. Ergo, if we could get Romano, we would get Sergio. Simple.

Una had a string of loose leads on Sergio, but even she admitted the man was like a ghost. The fact that she, one of the best assassins in the world with a wealth of resources, couldn't find him, was alarming. But of course, he knew Nero was married to her, that we would likely utilize her. Especially after he had employed Sasha's services.

It all felt like an ax hanging over my head. No, our heads. Emilia was now well and truly in the firing line with me. And that was what kept me awake at night instead of being wrapped around my wife.

Worse, I couldn't see an end in sight. Even if we killed Romano and Sergio, then what? A new capo would step up and take over. The mob still thought I'd had O'Hara killed. Peace was a distant dream, and I loathed Sergio for putting me in this position.

I might have felt encouraged if Luca were at least open to discussion. But he was no closer to coming around, though I hadn't spoken to him in person since he'd threatened Emilia. I'd made her a promise not to kill him, and if he said a single cross word to her or about her in front of me, I might not keep that promise.

The hinges of my office door squealed, and I turned around to find Emilia peering through the ajar door. Her hair was messy, her silk nightgown barely reaching mid-thigh. As always, she made my dick instantly hard with just a look. Made me forget about everything that wasn't her.

My gaze dropped to the thin scab decorating her sternum, and hard became painful. I didn't enjoy her emotional pain, and I hated her fear, but I loved that she allowed me to help her. That she needed me. I liked pushing her over the fine line of pain and pleasure and watching her fall apart for me.

I would be her outlet, her solace, her therapy. I would shield her from everything and everyone but me. "Come here, piccola."

She padded across the room to me. "Why are you still awake?"

I gripped the back of her neck and pulled her close. "I'm just catching up on some work."

"You look like you're brooding."

She took my free hand in hers, brushing her fingers over my split knuckles. The Outfit fucker had taken a good deal of my anger, even if he hadn't told us shit. Her gaze lifted to mine, brows pinched together.

"It wasn't Luca," I said before she could ask.

"I didn't think it was."

“Lie. You know I would hurt him if I were in a room with him.”

“You promised—”

“Which is why I haven’t been in a room with him.” I stroked her cheek with my free hand. “Why are you up, *amore mio*?”

“I had a nightmare.”

“Want to talk about it?”

She shook her head, and I could guess what it was about. Her father. The guilt always seemed to chase her into sleep. She’d been bad for the last few nights, and I told myself that was why I hadn’t told her about Romano being in the city. Really I just hated to panic her or cause her distress. The man was her boogeyman, but he would never get near her. She didn’t need to know, but his being here niggled in the back of my mind.

“Can you shoot, princess?” I knew she had the basics because she’d shot Phillippe when she escaped my penthouse.

Her brows pinched even more. “Yeah. Renzo taught me when I was fourteen.”

“Good.” I stepped away from her and went to my desk, opening the drawer and taking out the nine millimeter I kept there. “I want you to have this.” I handed her the gun, and she eyed it before wrapping her fingers around the hilt. “It’s just a precaution, but I want you to carry it with you at all times. Anyone tries to harm you or take you, you shoot first and ask questions later.”

“You want to give me a gun?” She lifted a brow. “You do remember I once stabbed you, right?”

I huffed a laugh. “You’re not quite so volatile these days.”

“You don’t think so?”

I gripped her jaw, brushing my lips over hers. “Would you stab me now, piccola?” I nipped her lip. “Would you try to kill me?”

“No,” she breathed.

“And why is that, piccola?”

Her hand landed on my chest, those sweet lips so close I could breathe her in, taste her on my tongue. “Because I love you.”

My dick twitched. I loved hearing her say those words. So innocent, so trusting.

My fingers wound around her throat before I turned her around, yanking her back to my chest. She gasped, and I forced her head to the side, kissing up the smooth length of her neck.

“I fucking love you, piccola.” My free hand dropped to her thigh, inching up the silk of her nightgown. “Now bend over this desk and spread your legs.”





## EMILIA

**G**io held my hand as he led me down the hallway. “I don’t like surprises,” I said. I was tired and crabby this morning, but it was hard not to get caught up in his child-like excitement.

“We’ve already ascertained that you’ve never actually had a surprise. And seeing as your last one was postponed...”

“Renzo did once let a frog loose in my room and called it a surprise.” I was ten, and he’d caught it for me; then, when he brought it into my room and opened his hand to show me, it had jumped right out. I hadn’t slept properly for days, thinking it would crawl into my mouth in my sleep. “So, yeah, I don’t like surprises.”

Gio laughed. “Well, I promise this isn’t a frog.”

He pushed open a door, and a draft of cool air washed over me as I stared down a flight of concrete stairs. “Is this another creepy basement?”

Without responding, he tugged me forward, down the steps, and into a garage. Several fast-looking cars filled the space, but he walked past all of them, stopping beside a dark-purple Range Rover. He then took my hand and dropped a set of keys onto my palm.

I frowned at the fob, then up at him. “I don’t understand.”

His lips quirked. “This is your car.”

“You...bought me a car?”

“Yes.” He bought me a car. A whole car. In my favorite color.

“It’s purple.”

His lips quirked. “I’m aware.”

“Purple is my favorite color.”

“I know.”

I’d never told him that. “How—”

“I’m observant.”

I shook my head. “This is...” Over the top. Generous. Sweet. And pointless. I gnawed on my lip, not wanting to trample all over his gift. “But I can’t drive, Gio...”

“I know.” He swept my hair behind my ear and leaned in, kissing first my cheek, then my jaw, my neck... I tilted my head to the side, little shivers trickling over my body. “That’s why I’m going to teach you.”

“What?” I pulled away so I could meet his gaze. “Seriously?”

“Get in, princess.” He jerked his head toward the car, and I practically squealed as I threw my arms around his neck and hugged him.

To some people, it may not be the biggest gesture. Buying me a car was sweet, but teaching me to drive... It was freedom, an open door to a cage that had always been locked. He was trusting me, giving me a means of escape my father always refused to let me have. It was a gesture that said he understood me and what I needed. That he would not chain me.

My back hit the side of the car before his lips crashed over mine. “Get in the car before I fuck you against it, princess.”

I smiled, then nipped at his bottom lip and ducked under his arm. The car was so big I had to practically climb up into it. Gio got into the passenger seat, the picture of calm. I definitely would not be calm if I were him. It was probable that I was about to kill us in the next two minutes.

He took a fob from the center console and pressed it, lifting the garage door. Then he guided me through starting the engine and putting the car into drive. “Now, just press the accelerator and steer. Easy.”

I pressed the accelerator, and the car lurched forward.

He laughed. “Gently.”

A couple of minutes later and I was rolling down the driveway at the high speed of a snail. “Should I pull over and let them pass?” I asked, nodding my head toward the rear-view mirror and the black SUV looming behind me.

“No. They’re following you, piccola.”

I frowned without taking my eyes off the road. “Why?”

“Security.”

“But I have you.” And the gun currently pressing into my lower spine.

“It’s just a precaution.”

As annoying as it was, I knew his brand of overbearing came from a place of concern and love, not a desire to trap or control me. We reached the gate, and I expected him to tell me to turn around, but instead, it started to open.

“Wait, we’re going out there?”

“You have the hang of it now.”

“On a straight drive with no other cars!”

He chuckled. “I won’t let you crash.”

Oh, God. What if I did, though? This car looked expensive, and I only just got it... But my worries disappeared the moment I pulled out the gate. The sense of freedom and independence was something I had never experienced, and I smiled, feeling lighter than I ever had.

We drove for a couple of miles, crawling along the Hamptons roads. I rounded a bend and saw a car pulled across the road ahead. I fumbled for the brake, coming to a halt. My pulse picked up when I took in the armed men surrounding the vehicle.

“Gio—”

“Emilia, get down!” Gio grabbed for me just as I heard the bang.

Blinding pain ripped through my shoulder, and I cried out. I instantly knew I’d been shot. Not like I hadn’t taken a bullet before, but the memory didn’t compare to the shitty reality.

My vision blurred, and I tried to suck in deep breaths as Gio forced me down over the center console. Tears stung my eyes as gunshots rang out around us, my blood slicking over the cream-colored leather.

“Emilia, look at me.” Gio gripped my chin, his eyes sweeping over me. “It’s just your shoulder. I know it hurts, but I need you to push your seat back and get under the steering wheel. Can you do that, princess?”

I nodded and did as he said, wincing as I curled into a ball in the footwell. “Good girl. Stay there. I’ll be back for you in a

second.” As the shock abated slightly, fear took over, beating away at me with every breath. I didn’t want him to leave me.

“Gio—”

“Do not move, Emilia.” He kissed me quickly, and then he was gone, a litany of bullets pinging off the door in his wake.

I pressed a hand over my bloody shoulder, trying to breathe through the pain and panic.

The gunfire grew louder and more continuous as I waited for long seconds, or maybe minutes, I wasn’t sure. When the driver’s door was yanked open, I expected Gio, so when Matteo Romano’s scarred face sneered at me, I froze, terrified.

My brain slowly kicked back in, firing adrenaline into my bloodstream like a shot of heroin. I panicked and tried to scramble across the seat, but he grabbed me by my injured shoulder, squeezing until the pain nearly blinded me. Crying out, I kicked and screamed as he dragged me out of the car and into a war zone.

A line of men were level with the back of my car, shooting at the black SUV that had stopped about twenty yards behind. Gio’s men hunkered down behind it and in the trees to the side of the road, firing back.

Matteo strode away from the gunfire, dragging me away from the car, away from Gio. A moment of helplessness washed over me as the chances of Gio getting to me became slimmer.

I needed to calm down. Panicking wasn’t going to help me. I forced myself to suck in several deep breaths to quell my fear and focus on my anger. Matteo thought I was weak and helpless, but I realized I wasn’t. Not totally. The weight of my gun pressed into my back, the metal warm and reassuring. The

urge to reach for it niggled at me, but I couldn't shoot him right here. We were too far from Gio and surrounded by Outfit men. No, I had to time this right.

Matteo dragged me to a waiting car parked a little way from the one blocking the road. He shoved me in the back seat before getting in beside me. The driver pulled away, squealing tires ringing out over the steady pop of bullets behind us.

I could almost feel every inch of the distance he put between Gio and me. My panicked heartbeat seemed to drive the pain higher as blood soaked through the front of my tank.

Matteo smirked at me, the barely healed scar on his face a vivid reminder of the pain I was sure he'd inflict on me as payment if I allowed him to take me.

"I have waited years to have you, Emilia. And oh, how I'm going to enjoy breaking you." He gripped my jaw and mashed his lips against mine before biting my bottom lip hard enough to make me bleed.

I fought him, beating my palms against his chest while he laughed.

"You know it was always you that I wanted. Chiara didn't have half your fight. She broke far more easily than I know you will."

I snatched my face away before head butting him in the nose. The blow rang through my skull and made my vision spot.

"Little bitch." He gripped my hair and yanked my face into his lap, grinding his disgusting dick against my cheek.

Fear, disgust, and hatred blended together in a volatile mix that had me reaching behind me. My fingers gripped the gun, flipping the safety.

The panic from only seconds ago was nowhere between. I wanted pain and suffering and blood. I wanted him to die. I pulled the weapon free from the back of my jeans and rammed it against his dick before pulling the trigger. The bang exploded right next to my head, and I faintly heard him scream through the ringing in my ears. He did release me, though.

The driver glanced over his shoulder right as I lifted the gun and pulled the trigger, knowing it might spell my own death. I didn't care. They would not take me alive. Tires squealed, and my body was thrown across the car so hard my head cracked the window. I was launched into the back of the seat in front. My nose cracked, and stars dotted my vision.

Peering around the car, I took in the dead driver through blurred vision. Matteo sprawled across the seat, his crotch covered in blood and a nasty-looking cut on his head.

I couldn't hear through the constant low static in my ears, could barely see straight. Fumbling for the door handle, I yanked it and fell out of the car, dazed and bleeding. The only thought pounding through my head was that I had to get away, had to run. The car had come off the road and crashed into a tree.

I stumbled up the short embankment and onto the road, gun still clutched in a death grip. I didn't even know which way to go or how far we'd driven.

I stood there for a moment, swaying on my feet, wanting to just lay the fuck down and close my eyes. A black SUV rounded the corner, taking me by surprise because I couldn't hear shit. Reflexively, I lifted the gun, firing off one round right before it screeched to a halt a few feet in front of me. I stumbled back, convinced that Matteo's men were about to pour out of the car and come for me.

The back door opened, and I kept the gun raised, my arm shaking from the effort. Gio stepped out. Slowly, with his hands raised. Safe. I was safe. It was like every bit of adrenaline left my body all at once. I dropped the gun and fell to my knees as the world spun around me.

Gio's arms encircled me and then lifted me.

I just wanted to go to sleep, right here, against his warmth. So I did.





## GIO

I paced the room while the doctor finished stitching up Emilia. I knew she was fine. I'd had enough men take a bullet to the shoulder to know that, but the tightness in my chest wouldn't ease.

She looked awful, with the blood and the bruising around her broken nose.

That wasn't what had me descending into blind rage, though. He had shot her, taken her while I was pinned down by bullets and unable to do anything but watch my bleeding wife being dragged away. All of that made me want to end him as painfully as possible, but what sent me over the edge was her bottom lip and the clear bite mark that had broken her smooth skin.

The only thing that tempered my rage was finding out that the piece of shit was alive. By the time I was done, Matteo was going to wish she'd shot him in the head just like his driver.

I lingered against the wall, seething, waiting for the doctor to finish.

She finally taped a dressing in place and gave me some pills, along with instructions to ice Emilia's re-set nose. Then the doc left.

Emilia leaned her head back against the pillow and glanced at me. "I'm fine, Gio." She wasn't fine, though. She was bruised, covered in blood. If that bullet had been just a little lower... The thought had a lump settling in my throat.

They had tried to take her from me, and of all the things Sergio had done, this was by far the worst. My fists clenched at my sides, and I needed a second, so I went to the bathroom and got a washcloth, then took one of my T-shirts from the closet.

When I took a seat on the edge of the bed, Emilia leaned forward, allowing me to remove her bloodstained shirt. No argument, as though she knew I just needed to take care of her right now.

"I promise I'm okay, Gio," she whispered as I swiped the damp cloth over her bloody chest.

"You could have died, Emilia." I continued wiping the blood away, moving the cloth to her face. My gaze dropped to her lip. "He bit you."

She looked away, shame washing her features.

"Did he kiss you?"

"I tried to stop it," she whispered.

Rage tore through me like a wildfire, and I felt like my heart was going to claw its way out of my chest; it was beating so hard. I cupped her cheek and kissed her forehead, trying to maintain a thread of calm. "I know. It's okay, piccola."

"Is he dead?" she whispered.

"Not yet." He would be fucking soon, though. I was going to enjoy hurting Romano, cutting him up bit by bit.

"I...I have to tell you something."

There was a moment, a single horrific moment where I could hardly breathe, where I thought she might tell me that he had touched her, forced her. That I didn't get to her fast enough—

“In the motel room, the man who put the gun to my head...” She sucked in an unsteady breath. “Sergio didn't send him. He said, ‘Matteo said, if he can't have you, no one can.’”

Which meant Matteo went off-book. Sergio didn't try to kill his unruly niece. Matteo Romano tried to kill the woman he couldn't have.

I tugged my shirt over her body and kissed her cheek, then her lips, being careful not to hurt her bruised face. “You should have told me.”

She nodded, dropping her gaze to the comforter. “I didn't want you to send me back there where they'd give me to him. But if you thought Sergio would kill me...”

“Piccola.” I pressed a finger beneath her chin. “I never would have sent you back. Not for any reason.”

“I know that now,” she breathed.

I brushed my thumb over her bruised lip, taking in her swollen nose and the black eyes already beginning to form. “I'm going to repay every one of these bruises.”

“It's kind of my fault. I shot the driver.” The pain killers were starting to kick in, and her words slurred slightly, her eyelids drooping.

“Sleep, *amore mio*.”

“I love you,” she mumbled as she burrowed into the pillow, her eyes already closed.

“I love you, piccola.” She had no idea how much.

I got up and left the room, passing the two guards I'd stationed outside, more from paranoia than practicality.

Jackson was waiting downstairs, right outside the basement door. And he wasn't alone. Renzo paused in his pacing when I approached them, and he looked every bit as wild and unhinged as I felt. I might not always have seen eye to eye with the kid, but one thing was irrefutable; he loved Emilia.

"How is she?" he asked.

"Doctor stitched her up and gave her pain killers. She's sleeping." I pinched the bridge of my nose, feeling the weight of my failure. I let that fucker get her. "Renzo... I'm sorry. I didn't protect her—"

"Stop." He let out a sigh. "He ambushed you in the middle of The Hamptons, for fuck's sake." He shook his head. "Besides, you gave her a gun, and she protected herself."

I could see the pride in his eyes, and I was grateful as hell to him for teaching her to shoot, even against her father's wishes. A small smile worked over my face—my little kitten with her claws. "Shot his dick off, to be more precise." I snorted.

"I managed to stop him from bleeding out," Jackson said.

"Good." I pushed open the door and descended the steps into the cold concrete surroundings of the basement. "You have work to do."

I wanted to hurt Matteo Romano, cut strips of flesh from his body until he was nothing but blood and exposed muscle, then leave him to die slowly and in agony. Because he fucking dared to try to take my wife. He shot her, and broke her nose, once tried to kill her. He fucking kissed her! And knowing what he did to her sister, I could just imagine what he had

planned for Emilia. My pulse ticked up at the thought, and my steps faltered.

No, I wanted to torture him, but with this level of rage, I'd kill him in seconds. We needed him. The rational part of my mind that was completely consumed by Emilia knew Matteo was our best chance and only potential lead in finding Sergio.

Removing both my guns from their holsters, I handed them to Jackson. "Keep a hold of these for me."

His brow lifted. "Well, you just ruin all the fun."

"Oh, you'll have your fun. But we need him alive long enough to squeal like a pig being slowly butchered."

He grinned at that. Jackson liked to savor his suffering, and I wanted that for Matteo; I really did. I wouldn't let my rage quicken his demise. I stopped outside the door to the interrogation room. "I want everything he has on The Outfit, including Sergio's location."

"I want in," Renzo said.

Jackson lifted a brow at the kid. "You can't lose it and kill him. No matter what he says."

Renzo took his own gun and handed it to Jackson. "I'm good."

They both looked at me, and I nodded. "Fine. But don't kill him." I would be the one to watch his worthless soul leave him when the time came.

"Gio, I think..." Renzo sighed. "I think it might be good to let Luca in on this."

I narrowed my eyes at the young Donato. "Luca isn't with us, so technically, he's on Romano's side."

“If he does anything, I’ll take responsibility and put my brother down. It’s a win, win. Emilia can’t hate you.” His gaze held mine. “That’s the only reason he’s even still alive, isn’t it?”

Yes, it was, but my weakness for Emilia shouldn’t be so obvious. It put her at risk.

“Look, I think Jackson and I can probably drag some pretty damning things from that piece of shit. Things I think my brainwashed brother should hear.”

I really had nothing to lose here, except... “Fine.” I pulled a key from my pocket and stepped toward the other door in the hallway. “But don’t harm Luca. Emilia might hate me if I killed him, but she’d hurt worse if you did it.”

A slight smile touched his lips, and he shook his head. “Damn, you’re soft for her.”

“Fuck off.” I unlocked the door and pushed it open.

“It’s a good thing. She deserves soft,” he murmured before stepping inside Luca’s room.

The eldest Donato was sprawled on a narrow bed that wasn’t quite big enough for his frame. He stared at the ceiling, refusing to even look at us.

“Finally come to kill me?” he asked.

I was all out of patience for his dramatic petulance, and I hadn’t forgotten the state he had left Emilia in the last time they had spoken. “Get up. You’re going to see a show.”

He frowned at me. “What?”

“Get the fuck up,” I snapped. I was on edge, and I wanted nothing to do with these Outfit assholes who dared to threaten my wife—unless it involved killing them, of course.

Luca pushed to his feet and hesitantly followed us out of the room and into the one next door. He stilled in the doorway at the sight of Matteo chained up, hanging from the ceiling. He'd been stripped down to his boxers, and Jackson had bandaged what looked like a sanitary napkin over his crotch.

The worm thrashed on his hook at the sight of a possible ally, mumbling incoherently around the BDSM-style ball gag.

I pointed to the chair in the corner. "Take a seat, Luca."

He remained where he was, fists clenching, jaw ticking. Jackson grabbed his shoulder and forced him into the chair.

If Luca was even half a fucking man, he'd want to watch the guy who drove one sister to the grave and just shot the other one suffer. But he'd already threatened Emilia once, like the pussy he was.

Fuck, I was so angry at him, at Matteo, Sergio, Roberto. I wanted them all to suffer. They were all part of this sick shit that made Emilia worthless, and it made me murderous.

"Sit and watch, or go back to your cell. I don't really care. Renzo thought you'd want to witness some justice." My gaze raked over Emilia's oldest brother. "I personally think you're too much of a selfish prick to care. You make any move to interfere, and Jackson is going to put a bullet in a knee cap." I glanced at Jackson, and he nodded.

I turned my attention to Matteo, and the tension in the room ratcheted. I tried to think, to ask him what I wanted to know, but as I looked at him, all I could picture was him kissing Emilia, biting her, hurting her.

Whatever ragged thread of sanity I was clinging to snapped, and I punched him in the face, then again. "You dared to put your lips on *my* wife!"



His face, body, kidneys. He was like a fucking heavy bag under my fists.

“Shot her.” Another blow and he grunted. “Tried to take her.” I gripped his jaw, crushing his cheeks into the ball gag until tears streamed down his face. The rage beat away at me so hard, I wanted to squeeze until his eyes popped out of his head and his jaw broke. “Did you think you could have her?” I shoved him away, and he swung back on the chain, then forward, right into my waiting fist.

His already-broken nose busted open again, spraying me with blood. I reveled in it, wanted to fucking bathe in it.

“I made it very fucking clear the last time we met that she’s mine. You touch what’s mine, and you pay the price.” I glanced at Jackson. “Get me the baseball bat.”

Jackson threw his head back on a laugh. “As much as I would pay very expensive hooker-level money to see you smash him around like a pinata, I don’t think there’s any candy in him. Also, we need him alive, kind of functioning.” I glared at my friend, and he held up his hands. “Hey, your words.”

I snarled and punched Romano again. And again. I went until my arms ached, and my breaths came in hard pants. Until he was a bloody mess and my rage was tempered to a wildfire instead of a supernova. I wanted to do worse. So much worse. The last hit was to his mangled dick. He cried out around the ball gag before sagging against the chains.

“You done?” Jackson asked, handing me a towel.

I wiped the blood from my hands as Jackson removed the gag.

“Sergio is going to kill all of you,” Matteo panted, the words were thready and half lost on a groan.

I couldn't help but laugh. "I would worry about yourself, Romano." I tossed the towel down on the cart in the corner. "You took my wife, and I want to know why." I wasn't sure it really mattered, but I wanted to know if Sergio had anything to do with it, if he posed a future threat.

Matteo had the balls to glare at me. "Because she's mine." His words were slightly slurred through his swelling jaw. "Promised to me."

I took a step forward, and this time, Renzo restrained me, slamming his palms against my chest. The look in Romano's eyes... it was beyond the mere sick lusting of a mad man. He genuinely thought he had a claim on her. And it infuriated me.

"I'm well aware of what Sergio promised you." I pictured all the things Romano would have done to Emilia, and my vision tinged red. "What he threatened Emilia with."

"What are you talking about?" someone asked behind me.

I turned and found Luca frowning at me, leaning forward in his seat.

Renzo was the one who answered him. "If Emilia wouldn't marry Gio, Sergio was going to gift her to Matteo. As his whore."

Luca frowned, his gaze dropping to the concrete floor between his feet.

"What fun we would have had." Matteo hacked a laugh that was barely more than a cough. "Roberto wouldn't let me have Emilia the first time around." His voice was barely above a whisper but had no less impact.

It was Renzo who tensed now. "She was sixteen, you sick fuck!"

Matteo flashed a bloody grin. “Her sister cried and begged, but I always knew Emilia would fight.”

The beast inside me roared to the surface, and I shoved Renzo aside, punching Matteo in the ribs hard enough to hear bones crack. He let out a muffled cry that did little to satisfy me.

“Gio.” Renzo put a hand on my shoulder but wisely did not get between us again. “He knows he’s not getting out of this alive. He wants you to kill him before you can get any information out of him. He’s baiting you.”

Matteo hacked a laugh through wheezing lungs. Fuck. I took a deep breath, hating that I was so far from my normal, rational self. I was usually impossible to rile, slow to anger. Emilia had changed that, though.

I took in Matteo’s pinched brows, the scar that marred the entire side of his face thanks to his last encounter with my wife. I remembered her giving it to him, almost killing him. I wished I hadn’t stopped her now.

“I’m not going to kill you, Matteo. I want to know where Sergio is.”

“Fuck you,” he spat, and I laughed.

“No, fuck *you*. Because Jackson and Renzo are going to do things that will make what you did to Chiara look like Disneyland. By the time they’re done, you’ll wish you had the chance to kill yourself like she did.”

I cracked my neck and glanced at Jackson.

“Let me know when you’re done.” I turned toward the door, taking in Luca’s pale face before I left.

As much as I wanted to stay, I was too emotionally compromised to remain level-headed. I’d kill Matteo, and I

refused to give the asshole what he wanted. Renzo had more than enough rage to make sure Matteo thoroughly suffered, and if not, well, suffering was Jackson's specialty.



## EMILIA

I spent the next couple of days barely getting out of bed. My shoulder hurt, but the painkillers practically knocked me out.

Renzo hadn't been around much, and aside from sleeping and forcing me to eat three times a day, neither had Gio. I didn't need to ask where they were. The screams that echoed up from the basement were answer enough, and also not the one I wanted. Because Matteo was still alive, and I wanted him dead.

Another cry rang through the house just as Tommy walked into the living room.

"For you." He placed a mug of coffee on the side table, then took a seat in the chair beneath the window, clasping his own coffee. He was still nowhere near full health, and I thought he secretly liked having another invalid to keep him company.

I moved into a cross-legged position before picking up the mug and taking a sip.

Tommy glanced at the TV, taking in the crappy housewives reality show playing. "You watch this shit?"

I glared at him. "Don't start judging my entertainment choices."

He snorted. “Just didn’t take you for the type.”

I wasn’t. Simply because most of the time in Chicago, I’d been locked in the basement or out at the lake. Painting, drawing, reading, writing...those were the things I indulged in. But right now, drawing or painting was enough to make my shoulder ache after just a few minutes, and Gio’s books were mostly non-fiction bore fests. I was more of a smutty romance girl. And I was not asking him for that.

But I had to admit, lying here with my blanket and watching TV was so normal that I wanted to cry at the simplicity of it. Well...if I just ignored the tortured screams echoing around my husband’s house.

“I’ll give it to Matteo; he’s holding up pretty well,” Tommy said while staring a little too intently at the TV. He was into it. “Jackson is pretty inventive when he wants information.”

“I have no idea why my uncle inspires such loyalty in everyone,” I mumbled. “Then again, he did give Matteo a wife, with free rein to do whatever he wanted to her.” My stomach rolled at the thought, and I placed my mug back down.

Tommy’s earnest gaze met mine. “I’m really sorry about your sister.”

“Thanks.” I pulled the blanket around me. “I just...I’ve never wanted anyone dead as much as that man.”

“Not even Sergio?”

“No. Matteo is at the top of the death list.”

“There’s a list?” He smirked and leaned back in the chair, his red hair catching in the morning sun. “Don’t worry, sweetheart. Gio will make sure he gets what he deserves.”

“Oh, I know.”

He tried to suppress it around me, but I could practically taste the violence vibrating off Gio ever since Matteo had gotten to me. Adamo lingered more closely, and there were guards outside our room every night. He was extra protective, impossibly overbearing, and bubbling with barely leashed violence. Never toward me, just everyone else.

Tommy’s gaze flicked behind me. “Speak of the devil...”

My spine prickled with awareness seconds before I heard the muted whisper of footsteps over the rug, then felt the trickle of hot breath at my neck. And finally, the warm press of lips, accompanied by the rough scratch of stubble.

Those stupid butterflies erupted in my chest, and my entire body melted in his presence. If I craved Gio before, I was now deep in the throes of addiction. But that was okay. Gio made me feel safe and loved, cherished in ways I’d never known. Anyone would be addicted to that.

“*Amore mio.*” His tongue caressed the words in a way I wanted caressing other parts of me.

I tilted my head to the side, and his teeth scraped my skin, making me shiver.

He chuckled, gripping my chin and twisting my head to the side until his waiting lips brushed mine. “How is your shoulder?”

“Okay.”

He rounded the couch and clasped my chin, towering over me as he turned my head one way, then the other. I knew my face looked awful. The bruising from my broken nose had spread, giving me two black eyes.



“It looks better,” he said.

“No, it doesn’t.”

“Fine, you look like shit.” He smirked before stepping back.

“Still beautiful, though.”

Tommy made a retching sound, and I laughed as Gio flipped him off.

“Have you eaten, piccola?”

Tommy met my gaze across the room, fighting a smile after I’d bitched to him yesterday about Gio always trying to feed me.

“I can feed myself, Gio.”

“I didn’t ask if you could.”

I let out a sigh. “I’m not hungry. I have coffee.”

“I’ll make you something.”

There was no point in arguing with him. The man was almost as obsessed with feeding me as he was fucking me. He took my hand and pulled me to my feet before dragging me to the kitchen.

Annaliese was cleaning up, and she offered me a warm smile before leaving us alone. The older woman didn’t say much, but I guessed in a house rife with mafia activity and the screams of torture, that was a very good thing.

Gio picked me up and put me on the counter the same way he always did when he was cooking. I bitched about him constantly feeding me, but I liked the peacefulness of watching him cook. Maybe it was just because he seemed calm, normal. For a few moments, he wasn’t a mafia boss, just a man doing something basic, something he enjoyed. I didn’t

know him as well as I should, considering he was my husband, but I knew he didn't often have time for enjoyment.

He took some ice from the freezer, wrapping it in a dishcloth before handing it to me. "Put that on your face."

I did as I was told, and he began moving around the kitchen, cracking eggs and chopping peppers.

It was only then that I realized the screaming had stopped. Was Matteo dead? The silence felt ominous, almost haunting. I'd grown accustomed to the pained cries, and that was a disturbing thought.

I was halfway through the omelet he had made me—possibly the best omelet I'd ever had—when Jackson appeared, wiping blood from his hands with a rag.

"Anything?" Gio asked, placing his cutlery down on his empty plate.

Jackson grinned, looking a little manic. If he weren't Gio's friend, I would find the man terrifying. He was, after all, the cause of all the screaming that had become the symphony of the last three days.

"Yep. Got Sergio's location."

Gio pushed to his feet and put his plate in the dishwasher. "Never doubted you."

Jackson snorted and waved a hand toward the hall. "He's all yours."

Gio moved toward the door, removing a gun from his holster.

"Wait." I stood. "You're going to kill Matteo?"

He clasped the gun at his side. "Yes."

“I want to see him.” I wasn’t sure why. Maybe I just needed to witness his demise, to see him as hopeless and broken as my sister was. Maybe I just needed to know that he was truly gone, that Chiara was avenged.

“Piccola, he’s in no state for visitors.”

Jackson snorted. “What he means, little sparrow, is that he’s mutilated beyond recognition, and it’ll give you nightmares.”

They all thought I was so damn fragile. And maybe I was compared to them, but I harbored a level of rage toward that man that could not compare. There was nothing they could do to him that would disgust me. He deserved all of it.

“Don’t treat me like I’m some fragile little girl, Gio.”

He shook his head and re-holstered the gun. “Fine, but remember I warned you, *amore mio*.”

I nodded, determined to prove him wrong even as anxiety gnawed at my gut. Not over seeing Matteo tortured, it was just him. Even weak and at death’s door, looking in that man’s eyes was like looking into the depths of my own nightmares. He was my walking, talking, breathing demon in the flesh. But not for much longer.

“I want to see him suffer.”

Gio took my hand, dropping a kiss on my forehead before he led me out of the kitchen. “So bloodthirsty, princess.”

He walked down the hall but hesitated outside the basement door. “Emilia...”

“I’m fine, Gio. I don’t care what you’ve done to him. It won’t change the way I look at you if that’s what you’re worried about.” I already knew he did awful things.

He huffed a short laugh. “Not me.” No, Jackson, his right hand.

He pulled the door open and walked down the stairs ahead of me. My stomach churned as we approached the two doors at the end of the corridor. I knew Luca was on the other side of one of them. I tried to push him from my mind and focus on the other door.

Gio unlocked it, and the second it swung open, the smell hit me. The metallic tang of blood mixed with what smelled like shit and charred bacon. I gagged and slapped a hand over my mouth.

Gio stepped inside and turned to me. He stood in the doorway in his immaculate suit, surrounded by blood and gore like the devil himself. As though the violence couldn't touch the one who commanded it.

I could tell they'd tried to clean up some of it, but crimson swirls smeared over the floor, splattered the walls. A chain creaked, though I couldn't make out the source of it past Gio's broad frame.

“You don't have to do this,” he said, as though he expected me to run away from the horror show he and his men had created.

Maybe I should have, but I never backed down. I refused to now.

I took several breaths in through my mouth and stepped past him. Nothing, and I meant nothing, could have prepared me for what I saw. Bile crept up my throat as I took in the sight of Matteo. Two hooks were rammed through both his shoulders, attached to chains anchored in the ceiling.

But the worse part was that he was literally just a bloody stump. His arms and legs were missing, severed below the

shoulder, and at mid-thigh. The skin around the wounds was blackened, and if I had to guess, that was where the smell of burned bacon was coming from. They'd cut off his limbs and cauterized the wounds to keep him alive. It was a brand of cruelty I couldn't even comprehend, but I felt no pity for him. He hung limply, unconscious, and I felt nothing really. If it were anyone else, I would be horrified, disgusted... but not for him.

Gio leaned against the wall, and I felt the intensity of his gaze as I circled Matteo's limp form.

When I got to his back, I saw that his boxers had been ripped open, and a metal pole was protruding from his ass. Blood dripped down it before collecting in a puddle beneath him.

"Jackson did this?" I asked.

He pointed at the pole. "*That* was Renzo."

Because Matteo had raped Chiara, my brother had done the same to him. Still, I couldn't quite believe that my brother—my sweet, kind, laughing brother—was capable of this. "I didn't think..."

"He's a mafia enforcer, piccola. Same as Jackson."

I didn't like to think about that, but I nodded, feeling oddly numb, disassociated from everything.

"Did you want to speak to him? He'll be delirious with the pain and blood loss, but I can give him an adrenaline shot."

"You do that?"

The smile that pulled at his lips was ruthless. "Oh yeah, wakes them right up."

God, he was twisted, and why, right now, with my sister's mutilated abuser hanging in a bloodstained room, did I find

that so disturbingly attractive?

I focused on Matteo again. Did I want him awake? No. There was nothing I had to say to this man. No wrath my words could inflict that Jackson and Renzo hadn't already done in what looked like a hundred different ways. All I needed from him was his death.

I approached Gio, and he remained still, the picture of casual calm. I placed a hand on his chest, and he reached for me, cupping my face.

"I don't think he suffered enough for doing this to your face."

"Gio. I head-butted him and shot him in the dick." He smirked at that. "The man has no limbs. Pretty sure we're even."

He kissed my forehead. "Not even slightly." God, he was insane sometimes.

I unbuttoned his jacket, and he lifted a brow. "Get your mind out of the gutter," I said as I slipped my hand inside and pulled his gun free from the holster.

"Ah, but now you're holding a gun, piccola. My mind is firmly in the gutter." He adjusted himself, and I smiled, embracing the moment of lightness before I steeled myself for what came next.

"Wake him up."

His thumb swept my cheek, that blue gaze searching mine. Whatever he found there had him moving to a metal cart in the corner of the room. It was covered in various lethal-looking instruments and weapons. And a syringe. He picked it up before approaching Matteo and jabbing it into the side of his neck. It was only a couple of seconds before he lurched like a fish on a line, eyes flashing open.

The movement sent a fresh wave of blood pouring from his shoulders and a keening cry ripping from his lips. His awareness made the scene a thousand times more horrific. For the briefest moment, I actually felt a flicker of pity for him. I hated it but reminded myself that it was because I wasn't a monster like him.

Gio moved beside me. "You don't have to do this, Emilia."

I did, though. I wasn't a killer, or at least I never used to be. But I'd killed my father for abandoning Chiara and me. If he deserved my wrath, then the man who actually had hurt her certainly did.

I had become the weapon they forged with their indifference and tempered in their cruelty, and I would be the one to avenge Chiara.

I held Matteo's pained gaze as I lifted the gun, and he looked relieved. I was delivering him mercy he didn't deserve, but deliver it I would. I pulled the trigger. The gun exploded in my hand, the bullet ripping through his skull and snapping back his head. Silence echoed through the room, permeated only by the trickle of blood hitting concrete.

I expected to feel something, even if it was only that familiar flicker of self-loathing that had risen after I had killed my father, but I felt only relief. His death didn't balance my sister's. It didn't bring her back, but I had done what I could to deliver justice. And Gio had ensured Matteo received a punishment I was incapable of.

It was a fitting end for Matteo Romano.

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was sort of numb for the rest of the day. Like I didn't quite know what to do with myself now. The dark cloud that had hung over my head for so long was starting to dissipate—not entirely because Sergio was still out there, and everything in Chicago was far from stable—but those first rays of sunlight were creeping over me. Only, I realized I didn't know how to live in the sun anymore. When this was all said and done, I wasn't sure who I would even be.

Tommy was down in the gym doing rehab with his new physio. Ren was on some job with Jackson—torturing Matteo seemed to have bonded him to the Famiglia somewhat.

So, I found myself wandering through the house until I drifted to Gio's office, subconsciously seeking him out. I knocked and walked in, halting when I saw Luca standing in front of the desk with his back to me.

Gio had a frown on his face, but it cleared when he spotted me. "Emilia." He pushed to his feet and cut across the room to me.

I stumbled back. Not from him but Luca. I couldn't deal with him right now. "I'll come back."

Gio's hand clamped around the back of my neck, and he pulled me close, whispering in my ear. "You will never be the one to leave, piccola." His lips brushed my cheek. "But you might want to hear what he has to say." Gio stepped aside, leaving me to face Luca.

I braced myself for his anger, for the lashing hatred that had struck so deep the last time we'd spoken. Instead, his chin dropped to his chest, gaze fixed on the floor.

"Luca has reconsidered our offer," Gio said, threading his fingers through mine.



Suspicion prickled up my spine like insects crawling over my skin. “Why? You’ve made it pretty clear where your loyalties are, Luca.”

The level of venom I felt toward my brother shocked me, but the last time we had spoken, he had threatened to kill me. He’d made it very clear where he stood, and it was never with me.

Only Gio knew just how deeply my brother’s words had affected me. I hadn’t even told Ren, lest he tried to kill Luca.

Luca had caught me unaware and driven a knife straight into my weak spot—my guilt over killing our father. But if the last few days with Matteo had shown me anything, it was just how justified I’d been. That man was a monster of the worst kind, and they all had left Chiara to him. Were willing to leave me, too. Fuck them, and fuck Luca.

I turned to Gio. “A man who supports Sergio Donato is not worthy of running anything. Put Renzo in charge.”

Gio’s gaze softened, and he brushed fingers down my cheek. “Renzo isn’t ready. He doesn’t want it.”

“Someone else then.”

“It has to be a Donato. That’s the entire reason you married me, remember? To save your brother.”

I swallowed around the lump in my throat. “That was when I thought he was worth saving,” I whispered. Before I knew he was so brainwashed by Sergio.

“Emi, I didn’t... I didn’t realize how bad it was. With Matteo and Chiara. They said she was ill—”

Anger spiked through me, and I whirled to face Luca. “And you believed them?”

She wasn't ill. She needed help, and we all abandoned her. He hadn't abandoned me, though. Not when I really needed him.

"Why did you help me escape, Luca?" It was the one thing I could never work out. He would do anything for our uncle, and he hadn't helped Chiara, so why me? "Why me and not her?"

"Because you didn't want to get married. She did."

He wasn't wrong. Chiara had practically skipped down that aisle, thinking Matteo was some Prince Charming.

"You know what, it doesn't matter." I leaned into Gio, allowing his warmth to bleed into me. "She's dead. Matteo's dead. And Dad's dead." I watched his reaction carefully, noticing the slight tightening of his jaw. "Now you suddenly want to ally with the rival mafia you hate and the sister you threatened to kill?" I narrowed my eyes at him.

"The things Matteo said..." Luca glanced away, and what looked like shame crossed his face. "I'm sorry I didn't believe you. I never thought Sergio would give you away like some fucking *gift*." He spat the word.

"You let him in there while they tortured him?" My gaze snapped to Gio.

"Renzo thought he should see it."

"What did he say?" I whispered.

Gio stroked my hair and kissed my forehead. "Nothing important, princess."

I knew he was lying, protecting me. While part of me itched to know Matteo's dying confession, I realized that I didn't need to hear anything that man had to say.

“Regardless of our personal issues, I don’t want war with the Famiglia,” Luca said. “I don’t want to see more of my men die.”

Gio turned to my brother. “Do you know where Sergio is?”

My brother’s brows pinched as he shook his head. “Even before I was taken, he’d become paranoid. Communicating via burner phones. I haven’t seen him since we received Dad’s hand.”

Gio nodded. “Okay.” He believed him, just like that? “We’ll discuss this more when Sergio is handled. Until then, he might try to kill you again. I think you should stay here for your own protection.” Gio moved away from me, back to his desk. “Annaliese will make up a room for you. But Luca...” My husband took a seat, staring Luca down, every inch the apex predator in the room. “Should you threaten my wife again, harm her, or upset her in any way, I don’t give a fuck who you are; you will die every bit as horribly as Romano did.” Nothing about that should have been hot, but it was Gio, and the man managed to make violence a love language. With my brother three feet away, though, my face caught fire.

“Understood.” My brother stepped back, his gaze sliding to me. “I...I’m sorry, Emi.”

I shook my head, unable to bring myself to trust him. “If you fuck us over, Luca...”

“I know.” He turned and left the room. The door clicked shut, and I took what felt like the first full breath in several minutes.

“You’re blushing, piccola.” A smirk cut over Gio’s lips. “Come here.”

I walked over to him, and when I rounded the desk, he stood and reached for me. Grabbing my hips, he pushed me to sit on the polished surface in front of him. “Us?”

“What?”

His hands landed on my knees. “You said ‘if you fuck *us* over.’”

“Are we not an us?”

His lips quirked as he leaned over me. “Oh, *amore mio*, we are definitely an ‘us.’” Warm palms slid up my thighs, inching the skirt of my dress up. “Spread your legs for me, princess. Let me see what’s mine.”

I couldn’t have fought the command if I wanted to. My pulse leaped as my thighs parted, and it was in a full sprint by the time his heated gaze dropped to my lace underwear. “Good girl.” He used one finger to push the underwear aside and just stared at the most intimate part of me. “So pretty,” he said, brushing over me.

My entire body heated, trembling with anticipation, waiting for him to press inside me.

Instead, he stopped and pushed to his feet. “How is your shoulder, princess?”

“Fine,” I said too quickly.

He smiled, sweeping the straps of my sundress from my shoulders. The material fell to my waist, revealing my bare breasts. I couldn’t wear a bra with my shoulder or normal clothes. Hence the sundress in fall. I’d heard the guys bitching endlessly about the heating that Gio insisted was cranked up to counter it. The man was ridiculous, and I loved him for it.

“Do you want me to stop?” he asked.

I gripped his wrist, guiding his hand between my legs. “Does it feel like I want you to stop?”

He chuckled as he dropped his face to my chest, sucking one nipple into his mouth, then biting. “You’ve become so tainted, my virginal little wife.” He pressed one finger inside me, just to the knuckle.

My hips rolled of their own accord, chasing more. “Gio.”

“Patience, *amore mio*.” He lowered to his knees in front of me and leaned in, biting the inside of my thigh, and I moaned and spread my legs farther. “So perfect, Emilia.” He swiped his tongue over me, and I bit my bottom lip to stop myself from crying out. “So mine.”

He circled my clit with his tongue, and my hands went to his hair, my hips chasing the pleasure only his mouth could deliver. Gio ate me like I was his last meal, groaning against my pussy like he was the one getting off on it.

When he slammed two fingers inside me, I lost it, moaning his name, writhing, begging. He made me come so hard that my entire body tingled and black spots dotted my vision.

When I could no longer hold myself upright, I collapsed back on the desk, hissing when pain lanced through my shoulder. It wasn’t enough to cut through my post-orgasm bliss, though.

Gio pushed to his feet, towering over me. I bit my lip, waiting for him to strip out of the civilized suit and show me the savage beneath. My savage.

Instead, he reached for me, pulling me into a sitting position with gentle hands. “Are you hurt? Did you rip the stitches?”

“No.” I reached for his belt.

His fingers wrapped around both my wrists, imprisoning them in one hand. “No sex. You’re injured.”

“But you just—”

“I needed to taste you, piccola.”

Oh God, I couldn’t think when he said things like that. “What if I *need* you to fuck me?”

With a smirk, he brought his lips to my ear. “I will make you come over and over, princess. My tongue, my fingers, in your pussy and ass... But we both know I can’t be gentle once I get my cock inside you.” He kissed and nipped down my neck, bringing my already-simmering blood to a boil. “I won’t hurt you.”

How could the man sanction cutting off someone’s limbs one moment and be so damn moral the next?

“What if I tie you to this chair?” I reached for his belt again, whispering kisses over his tense jaw. “Get on my knees.” The belt clinked as I unfastened it. “And taste *you*.”

He let out a groan. “I’ve created a monster.”

I smiled. Yes, yes, he had.



## EMILIA

**T**he warm brush of Gio's lips moved over my shoulder, drawing me from sleep. "Happy birthday, piccola."

I groaned and rolled over, pulling the comforter over my head, and Gio laughed. "It's not my birthday," I grumbled.

"Well, then Renzo was wrong."

Wait. Ren would never get my birthday wrong. I threw the comforter back and squinted at Gio's annoyingly perfect morning face. "What date is it?"

"November twentieth."

My eyes widened. "What? How?" Where had the time gone? That meant I'd been with him...three months? More...

He flashed a smile. "Well, you see, the Earth rotates around the sun, and as it does, it spins on its own axis—"

"Shut up." I tossed a pillow at him.

"And so, I think you'll find it is your birthday, my lovely wife." He kissed me, barely brushing his lips over mine. Just enough to tease. "I have work to do today—"

"Have you found Sergio yet?" I knew exactly what kind of work he was doing since Matteo had told them where Sergio



was. Of course, it couldn't be quite that easy, but they were close.

"Don't worry about it today. This evening everyone is coming for dinner."

I frowned. "Why?"

"Because it's your birthday," he said slowly, like I was stupid.

The last thing I wanted was everyone making a fuss, though. "It's unnecessary. We don't really celebrate birthdays in my family."

He lightly gripped my throat, cutting off my words as his lips brushed mine. "Well, in *our* family, we do."

I swallowed around a sudden lump in my throat. We didn't do anything for our birthdays. No dinners or days out. Father was too busy, and anything out of the house was considered dangerous and required a security detail.

"Renzo and Luca will be there," he said quietly. Gio wanted to give me time. He wanted to give me family. He wanted to give me everything I hadn't had before. Time and time again, he showed me how much he cared.

"I love you," I said before kissing him.

His thumb stroked over my pulse as he groaned into my mouth. "I love it when you say that."

I swept my tongue over his lip, and he growled.

"Emilia." He adjusted himself, and I smiled, thoroughly pleased that he was struggling, considering he was the one who wouldn't fuck me.

"We could just celebrate right now."

"No."

“It’s just my shoulder, Gio—”

“Just...” He touched his forehead to mine. “You were nearly taken from me, piccola.” His voice trembled slightly, and though, of course, I knew he was enraged by Matteo’s attack, I hadn’t quite realized how much it had shaken him. “Sometimes it feels like you’re my fucking heart living outside my body.” He pulled back and met my gaze. “So please, just let me look after you.” His words were so heartfelt, his eyes pleading with me.

“Okay,” I whispered.

Just as I was adjusting to being loved by him, he was adjusting to loving me. Neither of us knew what we were doing, but I could give him this much.

He rolled on top of me fully, and it was so hard to focus on anything but the press of his hard body between my legs, the warm, smooth skin of his chest over solid muscle... “I promise you, princess, when I have you wrapped around me again, I’ll make you come on my cock so many times, you’ll be begging me to stop.” And then he had to say things like that...

“Until then...” His hands slid into the waistband of my shorts, dragging them down my hips. “I’m going to enjoy my favorite breakfast.”

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**G**io sat on one side of me at the large dining table, Renzo on the other. Tommy and Luca were here, as well as Jackson, Annaliese, and Adamo.

Luca was quiet and tense, I guessed, because he was technically surrounded by the enemy. Tommy either didn’t

notice that my brother was uncomfortable or didn't care because he kept talking until finally, Luca engaged. If anyone could bring my brother into the fold, it was Tommy.

I could endure the awkwardness of this whole dinner situation if it meant I got to eat Gio's spaghetti. He'd cooked it because he knew it was my favorite. Well, it was when he cooked it. The man was gifted.

Tommy was telling a story about his drunk Irish grandma, and I laughed, feeling lighter than I had in months.

Right up until Luca spoke. "Have you found Sergio yet?"

Silence fell over the table, suspicion tainting the air. None of us knew if we could trust him yet, or if the question was a dig for information.

Gio cleared his throat, his hand sliding over my thigh. "We're not talking about business tonight." He turned to me, pulling an envelope from the inside pocket of his jacket and placing it on the table in front of me. "Happy birthday, piccola."

"You didn't have to get me anything," I mumbled, awkward at the prospect of him buying me anything. Like the brand new car wasn't enough.

"I didn't. Not really." His lips quirked. "Just open it."

I glanced at the blank envelope and picked it up, removing the single piece of paper from within. It was a letter addressed to me. I skimmed over the words, my eyes widening with shock and excitement. "You got me into the Academy of Art?"

"You said you wanted to get an art history degree..."

"Gio, I..." I didn't even know what to say. I'd never really had a chance to dream or have aspirations beyond childish fantasies. When I'd married him, I thought I was giving up

whatever silly ideas of freedom I'd had. I never imagined that he'd do something like this, gift me the very thing I'd always wanted—freedom. Choice. I crawled onto his lap and threw my arms around his neck. “Thank you.” I kissed him, and someone—Tommy or Jackson—wolf-whistled.

Gio smiled at me like he was the one who had just gotten a gift. “You're welcome, *amore mio*.” His fingers threaded through my hair, and he kissed me again, making my pulse spike.

“I can beat that.”

I pulled away from Gio and turned to see Una striding into the dining room. Her boots clicked over the hardwoods as she approached Gio and me. Stopping beside us, she dumped a duffel bag onto the table so hard the cutlery rattled.

“Happy birthday, *lisichka*.” She winked and unzipped the bag with a flourish.

I didn't know what I expected from Una, but I slapped my hand over my mouth at the sight of Sergio's glazed eyes staring at me from his severed head. My stomach rolled, Gio's spaghetti dangerously close to making a reappearance. It took a moment for the bile to settle back down my throat and the shock to wear off. She'd done it. She'd killed him.

“Sergio is dead,” I breathed. It almost felt anti-climatic, as though I expected to feel some monumental shift in the universe, but no. The Earth was still spinning; everything was the same. But a weight lifted from my shoulders, and a shackle I hadn't even realized I still wore fell away.

“As promised.”

“Where did you find him?”

Her head tilted in a way that was distinctly predatory. “Does it matter?”

No, I didn’t suppose it did.

She re-zipped the bag and dumped it on the floor, kicking it to the side unceremoniously. Then she fell into the chair I’d vacated. “Please tell me you at least have cake.”

I tried not to smile. She was a killer. Undoubtedly the scariest person in this room, but I couldn’t help but like Una. And this truly was a gift, something I knew she wasn’t keen to do, but she had—for me.

Jackson rolled his eyes. “Always with the dramatics. Happy birthday. Really?”

“Don’t be jealous you didn’t get to put him down.” She flipped off Jackson. “Could have done with you for the hacksaw, though.” She stretched her arm out. “I think I pulled a muscle trying to get through his spine.”

That was a disgusting thought that had my stomach rolling again.

“Well, if you’d asked...” Jackson huffed, folding his thick arms over his chest.

Tommy wrinkled his nose, glancing between the two of them. “You two are fucked up.”

Una smiled. “Don’t worry, Irish. You’re still my favorite.”

They were the most dysfunctional family I’d ever seen, but they were very much a family. They would protect each other and bathe themselves in blood to do so if needed.

Annaliese cleared the table before disappearing into the kitchen.

I glanced at Gio. “Does this mean everything is over?”

“Nearly.” He reached out and swept my hair from my cheek.

“There’s still the mess with the Irish to clean up.”

“I might be able to help with that,” Una said, taking the glass of wine Tommy poured for her.

Gio narrowed his eyes at her. “You have a plan?”

She snorted. “No, Nero is the one with the plans. I have friends.”

Tommy laughed. “No, you have chess pieces.”

“Same thing.”

Annaliese chose that moment to bring in the cake, and they all sang “Happy Birthday” while my cheeks burned at the attention.

It was the best birthday I’d ever had, though. Sergio was dead. I had a future, a family... And Una had her cake.



## GIO

**B**eing in Chicago made me edgy, but it was necessary.

Liam O'Hara was the new head of the Irish mob, and he'd refused any and all contact with us. So, I was forced to take drastic measures. I would have peace, no matter the cost. For the business, the family, but mostly for Emilia. I wanted some normalcy for her, to feel safe. I couldn't give her any of that with the threat of violence hanging over us.

Nero and I exited the car and crossed the street to Emerald, one of the hottest nightclubs in the city and mob-owned. The bouncer eyed us up and down when we approached, his fingers flinching toward his belt and the gun holstered there.

"Easy, wouldn't want to cause a scene in front of all these people," I said, over the hum of music, gesturing to the line of people waiting to get in.

The guy's hand lowered to his side, gaze shifting to all the witnesses just feet away.

"I'm here to see Liam O'Hara," Nero said.

"I know who you are." The man glared at Nero even as he took a shifty step back. "The boss doesn't want to see you. Unless you're dead, of course."



Nero laughed. “He’s welcome to try. As are you.” He parted his jacket shamelessly, revealing the weapons holstered at his chest. Unlike the bouncer and me, Nero didn’t give a fuck who saw what.

The man faltered for a second, and I took advantage of his distraction, stepping close and ramming a gun into his side. “You’re going to take us to him, or I’m going to put a bullet in your liver.”

“You won’t make it out alive,” he snapped.

“You let us worry about that.” I forced him ahead of me into the club. I’d already researched the layout and knew exactly where O’Hara would be, but I dragged the bouncer along so he couldn’t contact anyone and warn them. Not that it would help them. The club was filled with my men already, all waiting to move should this all go tits up. If we couldn’t negotiate with them, we would eliminate them. Still, the less warning they had, the less collateral damage we would sustain.

We moved through the packed club and down a corridor that opened out into the VIP section. It was quieter back here, the music a low hum, the dimmed lighting panning over tables full of people.

O’Hara’s table was in the corner, crowded with some of his lieutenants and a few women, a certain blonde Russian included.

I shoved the bouncer. “You can go.”

He stumbled away, disappearing back toward the main club. No doubt to rally the troops.

The guards at the end of the corridor reached for their guns the second they saw us, and I shook my head. “What are you

going to do? Shoot us in the middle of your own club? I hear the mob already has enough problems with the DA.”

They hesitated, and that was when Liam O’Hara noticed our presence. He shoved to his feet so fast that the girl who had been fawning over him toppled to the floor. His jaw ticed as he strode away from his men and approached us.

“You have ten seconds to turn the fuck around and leave before I kill you in front of all these people, Guerra.”

Nero laughed beside me. “You know, it’s nice that you’re the one they hate for once.”

I rolled my eyes and turned my attention back to the mob boss. “Violence would be unwise. We didn’t come here for a fight. We came to discuss peace.”

“Peace?” he laughed. “After what you did to my uncle?”

“Fuck, this is boring.” Nero sighed. “My men are everywhere inside your club, and trust me, I much prefer to just kill those who get in my way, so which is it? Hear us out, or death and blood?” The smile he flashed was downright disturbing, and given Nero’s well-earned reputation, O’Hara should have been very fucking concerned.

Jaw tense and fists balled at his sides, Liam O’Hara stepped back. “You have five minutes.” Great, he wasn’t completely stupid.

He turned back to the table and waved his men away. They all rose, leaving only the handful of women behind.

Liam took a seat right next to Una, so unaware of the viper in his midst. I guess a pretty smile and a short dress would make a man stupid. Una was a good actress, but she couldn’t blunt her lethal edges that much, no matter how hard she tried. She draped a hand over Liam’s shoulder while smirking right at

Nero. He, in turn, allowed the woman beside him to practically climb into his lap. God, those two were so messed up.

I typed out a text on my phone and hit send before turning my attention to Liam. “I had nothing to do with Patrick’s death.”

He snorted. “Don’t insult me.”

“I won’t. I’ll prove it to you.”

He narrowed his eyes at me, and I understood his hatred; I did. There was a lot of spilled blood between us, but Patrick’s wasn’t included.

A couple of minutes later and Sasha seemed to materialize out of the darkness of the hallway, startling the guards. They went for their weapons, but the assassin was lethally fast. One second they were standing; the next, they were crumpling to the floor, the glint of a blade protruding from each of their thighs.

O’Hara shoved to his feet at the sight of his groaning men, his face tinging red with rage. “What the fuck is this?”

Sasha’s cold stare fixed on O’Hara as though the man were an ant to be crushed beneath his boot. He walked up to the table and dropped a duffel bag on it. “I killed Patrick O’Hara,” Sasha said in that creepy terminator voice.

Liam’s gaze hardened, and he reached for his gun, but Una had a tiny blade pressed to his jugular almost immediately. It looked no bigger than a hairpin and hid within the silver cuff at her wrist, but I’d seen her open a man’s throat with it many times.

She stroked the side of Liam’s face, a smile playing over crimson lips. “That would be unwise.” She allowed just a little of her Russian accent to bleed through.

The mob boss let out a low laugh. “Una Verdi, I presume?” He glared at me like I was responsible for him thinking with his dick. “What is this?”

I waved toward Sasha. “Proof. That we had nothing to do with Patrick’s death.”

“That’s hard to believe when Verdi’s assassin wife is defending the killer.”

Una rolled her eyes. “We’re contract killers. We have no interest or side in your wars. We are neutral.”

“Says the woman married to the Famiglia boss.”

Nero snorts. “That makes her less inclined to side with me, trust me.”

“Look at the position you’re in,” I said, nodding toward the blade at his throat. “I could have you killed right now. But I didn’t come here for more blood and death. We were never enemies. I met with Patrick because we’d both been played by Sergio Donato. He pitted us against each other, hoping the Famiglia would take out the mob for him and he could rule over Chicago.”

“You attacked us first,” Liam said, trying to shift away from the lethal press of Una’s blade. “Sent a head to my uncle’s bar if I recall.”

“Because you stole one of our shipments.”

His eyes narrowed at me. “No, we didn’t.”

“You thought it was Outfit because that’s what Sergio fed you.” His brows pulled together. “And when I figured it out, I rushed to make amends with Patrick, but Sergio had him killed.”

Sasha unzipped the bag, revealing Sergio's well-traveled head. We'd put a couple of ice packs in with him, but the smell still made me gag.

Liam wrinkled his nose and turned away before Sasha re-zipped it. "Sergio Donato paid me to eliminate Patrick O'Hara. I only disclose this because Donato is dead, as are all who were once allied with him." Sasha's icy gaze landed on O'Hara. "I do not care for your politics or vendettas, and I am only here as a favor to Una. Try to find me or kill me, and you will die."

It was the most I'd ever heard the assassin say. Sasha turned around and walked out of the VIP room, disappearing into the shadows, probably not to be seen again for months.

Liam clearly wasn't happy about letting his uncle's killer simply walk out, but he had to understand that this was the way Sasha and Una operated. Just as they had when they'd worked for the Bratva. They were neutral. A mafia boss might pay them one week, only to be taken out himself the next. They didn't discriminate or take sides, which was why, as Nero said, Una usually avoided working for us. It wasn't personal.

But death always seemed to become personal to someone, and that was the very reason the two killers worked so covertly. Sasha had done us a huge favor by coming here and admitting he had done the job. He'd broken his own rigid protocol and risked the wrath of the mob. For us.

I only hoped Liam wasn't stupid enough to go after him because Una would not hesitate to destroy him. Sasha was her brother in all but blood.

"He killed Patrick for Sergio and then killed Sergio?" Liam asked, eyeing the duffel bag.

“No, *I* killed Sergio.” Una slipped her hand inside his jacket, removing his gun before moving to take a seat beside Nero. She rested Liam’s gun in her lap. Ready. Always ready.

O’Hara glanced between the three of us. “So, what now? You wish to ally with me against The Outfit?”

“No.” I leaned back in my chair. “We have that covered. The Outfit is no longer a problem.”

Liam leaned back in his seat, his gaze sweeping over me. “Because you married Emilia Donato.”

“Yes. Among other things.” I didn’t want to tell him that Luca and Renzo essentially worked for us now. It gave us too much power, more of a foothold in Chicago, and made us a threat to the mob. I preferred to use threats as a last result. You catch more flies with honey than vinegar.

Liam focused his narrowed gaze on me. “So you want an alliance with the mob also?”

I shrugged. “Peace. We all just want peace, but yes, strong working relationships benefit everyone.”

He was silent for a long time as he lit a cigarette and blew a stream of smoke past his lips. “I won’t make peace with those Italian cunts.”

I lifted a brow. “And why is that? It would benefit everyone.”

His jaw ticced. “I’d rather make no money than work with them.”

“Because Roberto Donato killed your wife?” I didn’t want to bring it up, but I could understand his hatred toward The Outfit. They’d killed his young wife and left his daughter without a mother. It was unforgivable. I couldn’t imagine losing Emilia, let alone losing my child’s mother.

Liam dropped his head forward, and I could see the weight of the grief he bore.

“Would it help you to know that we killed Roberto Donato?”

“I saw the hand.” He tipped the remainder of his drink back.

“Did he at least suffer?”

I didn’t know how to answer that, but Una did.

“You’re a father, O’Hara. Tell me, how would it feel to be shot by your own daughter?” she asked.

His brows furrowed, and he swallowed heavily. “I would never fail my daughter so badly that she would do that.”

She nodded. “Good.”

I could practically see the wheels turning in his head. “There’s too much bad blood—”

Nero let out a sigh. “For fuck’s sake. We *are* The Outfit. We own them now.” Subtle. Real subtle. “Luca and Renzo Donato work under us. So, you can have half of Chicago or none of it. There’s my fucking offer.” Well, he never was one for politics or sympathy.

I held my breath as the two bosses eyed each other up.

“Fine. Roberto and Sergio’s deaths do go some way to paying the blood debt. So, I’ll agree to an alliance. With the Famiglia, who owns The Outfit...” He lifted both brows. If that was what he needed to tell himself, I didn’t care. We didn’t own them, not really. Controlled them, yes. Took a cut, of course. “But I want what they have. A marriage alliance.”

Nero laughed, and Una elbowed him in the ribs.

Liam turned his attention to them. “You married off your consigliere. You can do it again with a Famiglia daughter.”

My jaw clenched at the notion of any kind of arranged marriage, but especially at the idea of selling a woman. It was hypocritical as fuck, but I hated it.

“There are no Famiglia women. I’m sure Jackson would be willing to marry, though.” Nero smirked, and I knew he was amused by the idea of any woman putting up with Jackson.

“We have no women of age, either,” O’Hara said.

“Great.” I slapped my hands on my thighs. “So, we’re agreed that there will be no marriage.”

“A betrothal,” O’Hara said, his gaze fixed on Nero. “I have a daughter, Reagan. She is a baby, but you have a young son, do you not?”

Fuck. Three, two—

“That’s not happening,” Una snapped, her fingers wrapping around the gun in her lap. “My son is not a poker chip for your bullshit mafia games.”

Liam shrugged. “This is how alliances are forged. When children are betrothed, they form friendships, lasting relationships between families. You know this.”

“And if we do not agree?” I asked.

Liam’s gaze leveled on me. “Then we will not be enemies, but you know I can’t allow The Outfit to gain more power here in Chicago. The Donatos have a sister married to the consigliere of the Famiglia. That puts them at an advantage.”

Fuck, I just wanted to stop the never-ending war and violence. “Can you give us a minute?” I asked Liam.

He nodded. “I’ll get a drink.”



The second he left the table, Una was pointing a gun in my face. “No.”

Nero’s jaw ticced, and I fully expected him to agree with her, but he pushed her weapon down. “I think we should agree.”

“What?” Una glared at her husband, and for a moment, I thought she might shoot him.

He glanced at her. “Think about it. We have The Outfit. With the mob as well, we’d be handing Dante three major crime syndicates.” Should have known he’d be thinking about it from a power standpoint.

“I don’t care about the damn mafia, Nero. He is a child!”

I cleared my throat, not really wanting to get involved. “If he grows up and doesn’t want to marry her, he can always break it off. It’s two decades away. We have plenty of time to get out of it and find another solution to our problem.”

Both Nero and I looked to Una. Waiting.

She might have been cold, but she was fiercely protective of her children. “He is my son.”

“He will rule the Famiglia after me,” Nero said, touching her face and forcing her to look at him. “You know this. And he will be every bit as ruthless as you, morte. You really think he’ll be forced into some marriage he doesn’t want?”

The thought of Dante stepping up after Nero was terrifying. There was no way he was going to be anything less than savage with parents like them. Nero was right, though. Dante’s place would always be firmly within the mafia, and if he wanted power, then alliances had to be forged.

“Una, you know none of us would ever let anything happen to Dante,” I said. It was true. I’d protect Dante as if he were my

own.

Her lips pressed together, and I was surprised when resignation crept over her features. “Fine. But if he wants out of it, he will not be held to it. I will kill you myself, Nero.”

I fully believed her.

Her lethal gaze shifted to me. “I hope your peace is worth it.”

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**I**t was gone midnight when we arrived back at Emilia’s family lake house. Not that you would know it. Luca answered the door, his face drawn, shirt rumpled.

I frowned at him. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing—”

A high-pitched scream rang down the hall, followed by giggling. A second later, Renzo came running around the corner with Dante on his back, neighing like a horse as Dante laughed and kicked him. I snorted.

“Why is he still awake at this time?” Una shoved past me, stalking down the hall after Enzo, the pony.

“The kid doesn’t sleep,” Luca said, dragging a hand down his face. “It’s like he’s on crack.”

Nero grinned. “You fed him sugar, didn’t you?”

I snorted. “Rookie error, my friend.”

Dante would sell his soul for some candy, so I wasn’t totally surprised that a two-year-old had manipulated grown men.

Luca looked like he’d seen some shit tonight. “He’s like a small demon.”

I laughed. “Where’s Emilia?”

He thumbed down the hall. “Living room. She chose the quiet one.”

I headed through the house, taking in the sparse walls and fancy art. Emilia said it had always been like this, and the boys had made no attempt to make it homier since inheriting the property. I mean, I got it; they’d just left it like it was. I had done the same with the Hamptons house when I’d moved in. We were men. We didn’t give a shit.

Their mother was now living in a townhouse in the city, apparently. She didn’t want to be around the mafia after losing her husband. Emilia didn’t seem too bothered about seeing the woman, so I left it alone.

I made my way to the living room and spotted Emilia in the armchair by the fire. Her head was tilted back, eyes closed, and clutched to her chest was baby Tatiana. The sight of them together was like a fist around my heart. Longing filled me because I wanted that—her and a baby. I wanted all of it.

I approached her and carefully removed Tatiana from her grasp, moving the tiny baby to my chest. The moment her hands fell around empty air, Emilia lurched awake, eyes wide and panicked. When her gaze landed on me, she relaxed.

“You scared me. What time is it?” she asked.

“Twelve thirty.”

Tatiana stirred, and I smoothed a hand over her back. Emilia’s gaze dropped to the little girl, softening.

Fuck, I wanted to take her upstairs right now and put a baby in her, but I reined in the impulse. We had all the time in the world now. She was twenty. Had seen nothing of the world, experienced so little. But I was going to change all of that.

“Come, piccola. We need to go.” I turned away, heading for the door.

Emilia followed, her feet padding over the hardwoods behind me. “Go where?”

“We have a flight to catch.”

“To New York?”

“No.”

I found Nero in the kitchen drinking whiskey with Luca and Renzo. The laughter and screaming had stopped, so I assumed Una had managed to wrangle Dante to bed. The Donato brothers looked exhausted, and I couldn’t help but smile.

Nero held out his hands for Tatiana, and I reluctantly handed her over. Okay, so maybe I was broody. The kid had a way of making all of us completely soft for her, and I prayed to fuck Emilia didn’t give me a daughter just like her. I’d never survive it.

“Have fun on your honeymoon, Emi,” Renzo said.

She looked from him to me, her eyes widening. “We’re going on a honeymoon?”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

“Because you never had one, and I want to take you.” Ah, my sweet little mafia princess. So confounded by the smallest things. “We have peace. This lot can handle everything here.”

The smile that slowly split her face was blinding. “We’re leaving the country?”

“We are.”

“Oh my God.” She threw herself at me, wrapping her arms around my neck.

Fuck, I’d take her to every damn country if it made her smile like that.



## EMILIA

I sat cross-legged on the lounge and closed my eyes as I tilted my face toward the burning sun. The sound of waves gently lapping against the yacht's hull was like a balm to my soul, and I thought I could happily stay here forever. The boat was ultimate freedom, following the wind anywhere in the world.

Opening my eyes once more, I glanced down at the pad in my lap, trying to draw from memory. There was no way to capture the charm of the little Greek island of Mykonos with pencil and paper. The white buildings that sat clustered against the backdrop of the mountain. The jewel green of the Mediterranean ocean that gave way to frothy waves that lapped mercilessly at stony shores. It had been one of my favorite places so far, with its picturesque streets and lively bars.

I'd loved everywhere we'd been in the last two weeks, though.

We'd started in the Greek islands, then Athens and Italy, because Gio deemed it tragic for me to never have been to our motherland. At each stop, he indulged me in museums and art galleries. Greek statues and masterpieces from the Italian Renaissance had blown me away with their beauty.

Then we went to Sicily and stayed for two days with Una's friend, Sasha, and his wife, Adelina. Sasha was a strange character, and to be honest, the guy scared me. But Adelina was nice, even if she did head up the Sicilian mafia.

From there, we'd cut across the Med until last night, when we'd reached Egypt. We were currently anchored about a mile off the Egyptian coast, waiting to travel down the Nile to Cairo. Why? Because I told Gio I wanted to see a camel one day. Not pyramids or mummies. A camel. Well, now I was getting all three, and I was so excited.

The man would do anything to please me. I didn't know why or how I had gotten so lucky, but I loved him more than I ever thought I could love another person. If there was such a thing as a soul mate, then I thought he was mine because he fed my soul with every action, every word, every kiss.

I felt like I was living in a Disney movie, between all these places and him, though Gio would be both the villain and Prince Charming.

I swept my pencil over the paper once more, trying to capture the wildness of the sea.

A warm breeze stirred my hair before I felt rough fingers glide over my bare back. "*Amore mio*, you're up early."

Gio moved to the lounge beside me, a towel wrapped around his waist and a mug of coffee in his hand. It was winter, and though Europe hadn't been the warmest, it was still sunny. The closer we got to Egypt over the last couple of days, the hotter it became. Gio's skin was already a deep sun-kissed gold, and if the man looked good before, he looked like every dirty fantasy I'd ever had now.



I watched as a drop of water fell from his wet hair, sliding over his pec and jumping over each row of abs. I was jealous of that drop of water. My gaze dropped lower, stopping on the pronounced tent of his towel.

“Keep looking at me like that, Emilia, and I’m going to fuck you right here on the deck.”

I smirked. “You wouldn’t. One of the crew might see.” I knew from experience that he had no qualms about fucking in the middle of the ocean when the crew slept. But in broad daylight, when they were going about their duties... He was far too possessive.

“See what? That you’re mine?”

“No.” I tossed my sketchbook onto the lounge and pushed to my feet before straddling him. I yanked his towel free and wrapped my fingers around the hard length of him. “That you’re mine.”

He was warm in my hand, his skin velvet soft. He groaned when I stroked over him, and I glanced down. He really was impossibly beautiful like this. Bare, sun playing over his muscles, relaxed. I’d never seen him so calm and playful.

I kissed him, stroking him once more before I pulled away. “Stay right there.”

He frowned when I climbed off him and sat on the end of my own lounge, picking up the sketchbook and pencil. He remained where he was, bending one knee so he could rest his elbow on it, his cock standing proud against his stomach. He looked just like the statues of the gods we’d seen in Greece, but with a bigger dick.

“Do you know why all the sculptures of men in Greece and Italy always have small dicks?” I asked as I turned to a new

page and started outlining his form.

He frowned at me. “Why would I know that? Wait, why do you know that?”

“Art student.” I smirked as my eyes took him in from an artistic perspective, though the man *was* art. “They believed that a small penis was a sign of intelligence. Hence they depicted their gods and warriors with beautiful bodies and small cocks—strength and intelligence.”

“I don’t know if you’re insulting me or complimenting me. Are you saying it’s small or big?”

I snorted. “Well, I don’t have a lot—or any—experience other than you, but I’m pretty sure it’s not small...”

He lifted a brow, a smirk playing over his lips. “So I’m unintelligent?”

I laughed. “No, babe.”

“You better hurry up drawing my monster dick, piccola, because I’m about to bury it somewhere in a minute.”

“Nope.” I kept drawing, my eyes touching on every bit of him as I captured his likeness.

His damp hair, the carved lines of his face, the tattoos, abs. And, of course, I couldn’t miss the dick that was standing to attention like it was on duty.

“My pussy is off limits until I’m done.”

“Who said anything about your pussy, princess? You just called me unintelligent. Your smart mouth definitely needs occupying.”

My entire body heated at the thought of him fucking my mouth. Or any of me, really. He had me addicted, craving him

at all times. I met his gaze as he brought his coffee to those wicked lips.

The sea breeze picked up a little, cooling my flushed skin. "I'll make a deal with you."

His lips quirked. "Well, our last deal worked out very well for me, so let's hear it."

"You let me draw you, and when I'm done, I'll suck your dick."

"Done."

"Nuh-uh, I'm not done. I'll suck your dick, but I want you hard and begging," I said, offering him the same terms he once gave me, well, twice gave me.

His face split into a grin. "Created a damn monster..."

"Well? Are you going to keep it hard for me so I can get a pretty picture?"

He didn't answer, simply gripped his dick and stroked it. The muscles in his forearm corded, the veins popping against his heavily tattooed skin. Fuck. He made the act of stroking his dick a master class in seduction, and my mouth went dry. I pressed my thighs together, totally unprepared for the need that slammed into me at the sight of him.

"Like this, princess?"

I swallowed hard. "Yep," I squeaked. I should have known by now that he always got the upper hand, and I would never be in charge here. He had a good ten-plus years of experience on me, and he played dirty.

After a couple of minutes, I wasn't drawing anymore, my attention fixed on his tattooed fingers gripping his dick, his thumb sweeping the drop of pre-cum over the head.

His gaze met mine, the muscles in his neck straining on a groan. “I think *you* should beg to suck *my* cock, Emilia.”

And damn him, I fucking did.

# EPILOGUE

GIO

### Three years later...

I pulled into the parking garage of the Academy of Art and found Emilia's car, stopping behind it. For the most part, I left her to it with college and her social life because she had a life outside of me. And I wanted that for her. As long as I was the favorite part of that life, I was happy. Today was different, though. She was only a week off her last exam. In a couple of months, she'd get her degree in Art History. So, I had a gift for her.

Taking the box from the passenger seat, I got out and leaned against the hood. I replied to a few emails on my phone while I waited, but it was only a few minutes before I heard Emilia's voice echoing off the concrete walls of the garage.

"No one is going to stab me, Adamo. He was trying to hug me."

"My orders are clear. No touching," Adamo replied back to her.

"My husband's orders. Gio is unreasonable and irrational and —"

She rounded the corner and faltered when she saw me. Her sundress rode up her tanned thighs, cardigan falling off one shoulder. Her hair was in a messy bun, a pencil rammed through it. She was so fucking cute.

Adamo trailed behind her, a handbag slung over his shoulder, and I snorted at the sight. She hated having a guard, and I swear she went out of her way to punish the guy for getting dicked with babysitting duty.

"Unreasonable and irrational, and...?"

She narrowed her eyes at me. “Overbearing.”

I pushed off the car as she approached. Sliding a hand around her waist, I pulled her close. “Overbearing is not the word you’ll use if I see someone try to touch you, princess.”

She rolled her eyes and mumbled under her breath about possessive assholes. “Why are you here?” she asked, eyeing the box in my hand. “Aside from being the best husband in the world and bringing me the best doughnuts in the world.” She made a grabby hand motion, and I smiled as I handed her sugar fix over.

“I have a surprise for you.”

“Doughnuts?”

“No, not doughnuts.”

She took the pink-frosted doughnut out of the box and bit into it, moaning. “Oh my God. So good.”

I licked frosting from her lower lip before adjusting myself. “Keep making noises like that, piccola, and you’ll find yourself bent over this hood.”

“Yeah?” She kissed me, the sweet taste of raspberry on her tongue.

Adamo cleared his throat, and I glanced at him.

“You can take Emilia’s car home, Adamo.” I held my hand out for her bag.

He took out the keys and handed it to me before scrambling inside the Range Rover.

Emilia moved to the passenger side of my car and got in, totally focused on her doughnut. I was a mafia boss, a hard man by most standards, and yet when it came to her, I’d drive



half an hour out of my way just to get her the doughnuts she loved. After three years of marriage, I'd long since given up trying to fight my weakness for the woman.

I leaned across her and buckled her in while she licked her fingers. I gripped her wrist and sucked one finger past my lips before releasing it with a pop. Her gaze tracked the movement and then landed on my mouth. Little monster. I smirked before leaning back in my seat and driving away.

“Did you have a good day, piccola?”

“Yeah, we're on the Renaissance.” She went into a full explanation of all the things she'd learned. All the things she was passionate about.

I didn't know who any of the artists were that she spoke of, but I listened all the same, hanging on every word. I loved seeing her so animated.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

“I told you, it's a surprise.”

She groaned. “You know I hate surprises.”

I snorted. “You do not. You got shot one time, *amore mio*. And you've had plenty of good surprises since then.” I glanced at her scowling face. “You're just impatient.”

“Fine. Don't tell me.” She turned up the music, and I laughed. She was such a brat.

I drove across town to Red Hook and pulled up outside an old industrial building. This area of the city was full of cool apartments, coffee shops, and art-covered walls. I owned some real estate over here because it always made for good investments.

I parked in an alleyway and got out of the car, opening Emilia's door.

"Where are we?" she asked as I helped her out.

"This is Red Hook. And this..." I gripped her shoulders and turned her around to face the building behind us. "Is yours."

"What?"

My skin was practically itching with anticipation as I took her hand and led her across the alley. I pulled out a set of keys and unlocked the huge steel door before sliding it open with a grate of metal. The building beyond was empty. Five thousand square feet of exposed brick walls with steel support pillars dotted throughout. The hardwood floors creaked as we stepped inside.

"What is this?" Emilia asked, her voice echoing off the walls. Curiosity lit her eyes as she peered around.

"This is your art gallery, Emilia."

She whipped around to face me with wide eyes. "What?"

"I bought it." I shrugged, my stomach churning nervously. I wanted her to like it. It suddenly felt like the most important thing in the world for her to like this place. I could have waited, let her pick her own place, but this building came up, and I managed to snatch it before it went on the market. Industrial spaces in Red Hook were notoriously hard to get.

"Well, I guess technically, you bought it. Your name is on the deed, so..."

She just stared around in wide-eyed silence for a moment, and I rubbed the back of my neck.

"If you don't like it, I can find something else—"

“Of course, I like it, babe. I...” She shook her head. “It’s amazing. I can’t believe you did this.”

“I want you to have something of your own, piccola. Something you could have had if it weren’t for the mafia.”

“You bought me an art gallery,” she breathed, running a finger over one of the metal pillars. “Because I once told you that if I could be normal, this is what I’d want.”

“Yes.”

She turned to face me, her head tilting to the side as she approached. “You listen to me.”

“Always.” I tracked the roll of her hips as she took another couple of steps. “I love you.”

“Enough to buy me an art gallery based on my silly, whimsical dreams.” Her smile was breathtaking.

“Enough to give you the whole world if I could, Emilia.” Closer again... “Any dream, every wish...”

“You love me,” she repeated, and though I’d told her many times, sometimes she looked just like she did right now. As though she was only just realizing the true extent of how I felt about her.

She was my air, my sun, my everything. It frustrated me that she didn’t know it. I’d buy her a hundred art galleries if that was what it took to show her.

“More than anything in this world.”

“And you want me...” Now *that*, I knew she needed no reassurance on.

I lifted a brow. “Come here and find out just how much I want you, princess.”

She smiled and shrugged her cardigan off her shoulders as she closed the gap between us. Then she reached for the zip of her dress before slipping the straps free. One final step and she was in front of me, the material of her dress cascading down her body.

My gaze dropped to the perfection of her golden skin and lethal curves. Want was a hugely underwhelming word to describe how much I needed her wrapped around my cock right then. Always.

I fisted a handful of her hair and tilted her head back. “Are you already wet for me, *amore mio*?”

Her cheeks tinged pink, and I smiled. Every damn time. “You know I am,” she murmured.

I backed her toward the nearest metal pillar, and she hissed when the cold steel touched her bare skin. My mouth descended on hers, dominating, claiming, punishing, until she moaned against my lips and clawed at my shirt.

“Turn around and hold onto the pillar.”

She did, and I stroked over the silky skin of her back, slipping a hand between her legs. She was soaked when I pressed two fingers into her, that tight pussy clamping around my fingers, always begging for more. My little kitten was needy and demanding.

I pumped into her but didn't touch her clit. She writhed and pushed back, chasing an orgasm I wouldn't give her. Not yet. Not like this.

“Gio,” she whined.

I pulled my belt through the loops and wrapped it around her throat. She bit her bottom lip when the leather caressed her skin. Emilia loved to ride the fine line between submitting and

fighting, pleasure and pain. It started as a way for her to cope with emotions, and like any crutch, I guess she became addicted to the emotional and physical release she found in it. So, of course, I gave it to her.

I unfastened my pants and released my dick before pressing it against her pussy. Her back bowed, neck pressing into the belt as she tilted her hips for me. My needy little wife.

“Tell me you’re mine, Emilia.”

“I’m yours,” she breathed.

I drove into her in one thrust, and she cried out, her pussy pulsing around me in a way that always threatened to send me over the edge. I bit her shoulder as that tight heat gripped me. Fuck, nothing had ever felt as good as her. “You take my cock like such a good girl.”

I pulled out and pushed in hard.

Her back bowed, fingers turning white as she gripped the beam harder. “Fuck, Gio.” She pushed back against me as though she could force me even deeper.

I gripped her hip with my free hand, fucking my way into her. “What do you need, princess?”

“Hurt me.” I loved when she asked for it rough. “Please,” she begged so sweetly.

I tightened my grip on the belt, hard enough to restrict her air but not enough to bruise. My other hand moved from her hip to her breast, pinching and rolling one nipple as I thrust into her.

“Gio.” She came, nails scratching over metal, pussy clenching around my dick until I let out a groan.

My balls tightened, and pleasure ripped down my spine as I came inside her, and all the while, she squeezed my cock in a vise grip. It was hard and fast and rabid because sometimes I couldn't take my time with her. She was sheer, maddening perfection, and I would never get enough.

I rested my head against the back of her neck, our intermingled breaths echoing off the empty walls of the building.

My hand slid over her flat stomach, wishing it weren't so flat. *Soon.* "I fucking love you."

Her fingers intertwined with mine against her skin. "I love you," she gasped out as I rolled my hips, pushing my semi-hard dick and my come back inside her, wanting it to stay there, to mark her, claim her, take root...

*Soon.*

**W**e went home, and I went into the office and worked; the same way I always did. Emilia tended to watch TV with Tommy, paint, or draw. Sometimes I hung out with her, but between The Outfit, the Famiglia, and my ever-growing portfolio of legitimate businesses, my workload was ever-increasing.

I picked up my burner and sent a text to Luca about Rafe's next shipment. I kept my word and still bought from the Pérez brothers for New York. All Rafe's product went to Chicago, effectively doubling our business. Of course, we only took a cut of Chicago's profits, but Nero was thrilled with how it had all gone.

We rarely heard from the mob, but I tried to organize the occasional get-together. We were going to Chicago next week for a barbeque at the lake house. Nero and Una would bring Dante, and Liam would bring his daughter. Emilia got to see her brothers, which she loved. It was good. It had taken a few years for things to settle down, but everything was finally good. Peaceful. Prosperous.

Which meant it was time.

I turned my laptop off and left the office, making my way upstairs. The shower was running when I stepped into the bedroom, and it cut off as I stripped out of my suit. When I went into the bathroom, Emilia was in a towel, wet hair clinging to her shoulders and dripping over her tanned skin. She was searching through the vanity drawer frantically, and I couldn't help but smile as I leaned against the doorframe and watched her.

"Have you seen my birth control pills?" she asked. "I always leave them here. Maybe the housekeeper moved stuff around."

"The housekeeper didn't move them, piccola."

She turned to face me with a frown, and I moved closer.

I crowded her against the vanity before scooping up her tiny frame and placing her on it. "They're gone."

Her brows rose. "Gone?"

I said nothing, waiting for her to realize my intent.

"Wait. You took them?" Her eyes went wide, and I nodded.

"You... you want a baby?" she whispered.

I pressed between her thighs and scooped her wet hair off her neck before kissing her throat, licking moisture from her skin. "I want to fuck you." I nipped her ear, then her jaw. "And fill

you with my come.” I kissed the corner of her mouth, her lips.  
“And watch you grow round with our child.”

“You said you don’t want a baby with me.”

“Three years ago...” I clasped her face. “You were young and hadn’t experienced life.” And now she had.

We’d traveled; she’d been to college. Anything she wanted, I made it happen because I loved her. Because I wanted to erase her life before me and replace every bad memory with good ones. Because I wanted her to live.

“You didn’t want to marry me, piccola. I wasn’t about to trap you with a child.” I smirked at the memory of how hard she fought me.

“You just bought me an art gallery.”

“I did.” I pulled her towel loose and let it fall to the vanity, slipping a hand between her legs. “We’ll figure it out.”

“You want a baby,” she repeated. “With me.”

I pressed two fingers inside her, and she sucked in a ragged breath, nails biting into my shoulders. “I do.” I’d been patient, waited for her to finish college, created peace within the mafia. And I’d never wanted anything more than this—her and a child. “You can have it all. *We* can have it all.

“How long have you been thinking about this?”

“Since the first time I fucked you,” I said truthfully. That first time, part of me had hoped I had gotten her pregnant right then.

I watched her with Una and Nero’s children, the way she smiled at them, held them when they cried. My little kitten had spent her whole life fighting, but when she was around them,



she just stopped. That purity and innocence I loved so much were never more apparent than in those moments.

Emilia was my peace in a life of war and violence, and I wanted it for both of us. All of it.

I pressed my thumb over her clit, and her lips parted on a moan. “Just the thought of you pregnant makes me fucking hard.”

“You’re always hard,” she said breathily, reaching for my belt. She yanked it open and undid my pants. When my cock was free, she wrapped her calves around my back and pulled me close.

“Again already?” I smirked. “So wanton, princess.”

She grabbed my wrist, and I allowed her to pull my fingers from her pussy. “I thought you wanted to make a baby.”

“Oh, piccola. I’m going to fuck you over and over.” In one movement, I sank deep into her. “And you’re going to take every drop of my come like such a good girl.”

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**T**hank you so much for reading Emilia and Gio’s story! I hope you loved them as much as I do.

If you’d like to read Una and Nero’s story, *KISS OF DEATH* is available now and FREE in Kindle Unlimited. [Get it here.](#)

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