



Assassin Bride OF
THE DOON

LEXI LOVEJOY

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Epilogue

KNOCKED UP BY THE DON

SNEAK PEEK

Lexi Lovejoy

ASSASSIN BRIDE OF THE DON

**My mission was to kill him on our wedding night,
but no one prepared me for falling in love or to be taken
hostage.**

His family betrayed our people, making us enemies,
I detest everything he stands for and all he feels for me is rage.

We're both fueled by revenge, but our attraction is undeniable.
No matter how much we fight it, we're drawn together like
fire and ice.

I'm unraveling from his kiss, his touch, his embrace,
He's slowly stealing my heart and drawing me in with no hope
of escape.

Tasting this forbidden fruit will cost me my family and my
freedom

But when he's above me and inside of me, all I want is him.

Being forced by his side made me question everything.

This monster I planned to murder is now the man I want to protect.

**I need to know if this is his twisted scheme to destroy me,
Or if I've found love in the arms of the enemy.**

MIA GENOVESE

“It’s crazy in here,” Isabel shouted, raising the red solo cup she had grabbed within two minutes of walking through the door. I looked around the expansive room. Curtained-off alcoves separated private areas, but I knew I’d see the people behind the curtains eventually. They always came out to play. The other three clubs were wastelands of drunken middle-agers, and we hadn’t stayed more than a half-hour at any of them. The only good thing we’d found was a cheap bag of tightly packed weed that Isabel had finished right before we’d arrived here. I took a hit for courage, but it didn’t seem to do much. Alcohol would have to do.

I turned to the bartender. “Give me something strong and fruity,” I demanded, passing a twenty to him. I glanced back at Isabel. “This is my first chance at freedom.”

“There are plenty of hot guys here. This is the most popular club on New York’s entire west side, babes. Pick someone and fuck him. Easy as that.”

I sighed as I scouted the potential candidates. A tall man in neon paint danced seductively nearby, but the rat’s nest atop his head had my eyes veering away from him. “It’s been too long since I’ve been on the scene,” I admitted, shaking my head and crinkling my nose. How had I once enjoyed coming to places like this and finding a distraction among the sweating bodies? I hadn’t even been legal drinking age the last time I’d come four years ago, but as the daughter of Pete Genovese, the west side’s mafia boss and head of the National Commission, I could do whatever the hell I wanted. It had been four years

since my freedom had been stripped away, and I was finally back.

“Your dad took care of *the situation* for you,” Isabel slurred with a shrug, leaning into the bar for balance. “You don’t have to worry about that Colombo ever again.”

Colombo. A spark of rage filled me at that name. “They got what they deserved,” I told Isabel through gritted teeth. Dad had told me more than enough stories about their brutality. They killed without reason. They came into our territory and frightened our people. And in the past month, the alliance among the five biggest crime bosses, otherwise known as the Commission, had finally had enough of their shit. The Columbos regularly recruited non-Italian people into their regime, and one of the half-bloods opened fire on a dozen of our soldiers, killing a handful of them. The Commission finally decided in a late-night session to dispatch the Colombo boss.

His daughter was collateral damage, but it didn’t matter to me. I had no doubt she was as cruel as the rest. And now, I didn’t have to marry his son. I was free to come back here and enjoy my twenties. A wide smile took over my face as I gathered my drink and took a sip. The alcohol burned the back of my throat, but that was just what I needed. “Let’s do this,” I told Isabel, marching into the crowd of bodies and losing myself to the ecstasy of it all.

I felt the music in my core, and I began swaying my hips to it, arms raised above my head. Isabel did the same, but her rhythm was a bit off as she continued feeling the effects of the pot from earlier. “Bitch, I’m so happy I have my bestie here with me again!” she shouted, her smile wide and contagious across her face.

I’m happy that the burden of that damned marriage is off my shoulders, I mused. It wasn’t even the marriage that had worn on me for years. It was the daily training with a martial arts and weapon specialist. It was the mental load of knowing that I’d soon be taking my husband’s life. I wasn’t my father, and that reminder sat bitterly on my tongue, but I swept it away with a long, deep breath and threw my hips side to side. That’s

what the marriage was, after all. A way to get me inside and get the job done. But now, I didn't have to worry about that.

A set of hands rested snugly on my hips and I swayed into them, biting my lip seductively as I shot a glance over my shoulder. At first look, the man looked attractive. Medium height with bulky arms and a pleasant face. His grip was relaxed, and I wondered if I'd hit the jackpot on my first shot. He leaned into my ear and, in a hushed tone, whispered something in a language I didn't understand. My brows pulled together as I turned. "Do you speak English?" I asked. Having sweet nothings whispered into my ear by someone who spoke a different language would be cool, but if I couldn't understand him—if he couldn't understand me...

He only gave me a blank stare. *Fuck*. This one had had potential. I shook my head and turned back to Isabel, continuing my dance alongside her. "What's wrong with that one?" she asked.

"No English," I pouted, holding my drink above my head as I swayed to the music. "I didn't used to be so picky."

Isabel only shrugged as she looked around, looking for her own adventure of the night. I knew we were going to split eventually, but for now I'd let the music run through me as I danced and beckoned anyone interested to come closer. Isabel turned her back to me and began grinding against my front, so I laughed and smacked her ass, ready to end the night the way I wanted to. The way I *deserved* to.

I chugged most of my drink in one sweep and held it up as I shouted the lyrics to the song, soaking in the attention I'd drawn to us with that move. Another man came over, and the shallow dimple on his cheek was enough to convince me to start dancing. He wasn't as attractive as the first guy, but he certainly had his favorable attributes. He gripped my ass and danced against me, clearly interested in showing off the raging hard-on he'd gotten from my company. It seemed like a decent size, so I nodded in approval. "Mia," I introduced.

He gave me his name, but it fell to deaf ears as one of the curtained alcoves across the room shimmered open and

revealed a small group of people behind it. Immediately, though, I could see who was in charge of the group. He sat in the center of the sofa, and despite there being room for two more people comfortably, the others either stood or sat in the chairs arranged around the room. They all looked at him as if he held all the power in the conversations.

My eyes zeroed in on this man, and everything else in the room fell to the wayside for just a moment as I watched the way he spoke. His face remained set in stone as he crossed an ankle over a knee and nursed the glass he held on his lap. I could almost imagine the wide metal rings he wore on his finger clinking against the glass as one of those fingers tapped incessantly. Was he angry about what the person was telling him? I couldn't tell for sure, but he certainly didn't look happy. A ringlet of black hair fell across his forehead as he focused on what someone was saying to him, and he leaned forward slightly, dropping his crossed leg and spreading the two of them apart. He took up a lot of space, and I sucked in a deep breath as his gaze moved toward the crowd, scanned it, and then paused.

On me.

He sat up a little straighter and said something to one of the men without once breaking eye contact with me. I couldn't seem to look away. His gaze was commanding in a way I had never experienced with another man.

"Is something wrong?" the man I danced with asked, and I forced my gaze from the man in the alcove. The man before me lost all of his luster as my mind lingered on where my eyes had been.

"Not at all," I told him, forcing a smile. Maybe I would go and introduce myself to the mystery man later this evening. The thought of sitting on his lap and grinding into him as he sat back on that plush sofa sent a spark of absolute thrill through me. Judging by the tattoos and the authority, I imagined he was a part of the mob—either a made man by my father or one of the higher-ups in the Colombo district. I didn't particularly care. Nobody here would know my name or where I came from.

“Are you looking to fuck?” the man in front of me asked, and the way he asked it gave me the ick.

“We’ve been dancing for five minutes,” I said, raising my brow. “You’re a little over-eager.”

He narrowed his eyes as he turned our bodies until I could no longer see the man in the alcove. After a moment, he shot his gaze over my shoulder, and those eyes widened. I wondered if this was his way of escaping a woman he didn’t think would put out. I wanted to laugh at the absurdity of it as I took a small step backward, intending to tell the man to go and shove it. There were plenty of other suitors here, and I *would* find one. But my back collided with a hard, warm surface, and I froze as it didn’t give even an inch.

“I’ll cut in here.” The voice behind me was deeper than most, and velvety smooth. It sent a rush through my entire body as two hands came down on both of my arms, almost as if to hold me in place. As if I’d run. The man before me turned immediately and slithered off down the dance floor, likely looking for a new, more interested partner. I turned to face the man behind me, looking up. And then I looked a little higher. I’d seen his commanding demeanor in the alcove. I’d watched as his cool eyes locked on mine, but I was unaware of the impressive height. He stood a foot taller than me, and his body was broader in all the places that counted—all the places that would make a one-night stand most impressive. I’d slept with small and large men, some young and others older. This man was the perfect storm of all my preferences. Tall, strong and powerful. I had no doubt I’d found the man I would take to bed tonight.

With a small sway of my hips, I pressed my palm into his chest and smirked. “If you wanted a dance, big guy, all you had to do was ask.”

VINCENT COLOMBO

The second my eyes locked on my ex-betrothed across the club, everything around me slowed. All the scheming, all the plans to make the Genoveses suffer. Everything. And then, as it picked back up again, I spoke to Alessio at my side. “You’ll never fucking guess who’s here,” I snarled.

He scanned the crowd and, after a moment, his eyes fixed on the same woman as me. He spat a curse under his breath, and I forced the anger in my chest to subside. I forced every emotion away as I stared into the eyes of the enemy. “What are we going to do?” he asked, running his hand through his hair as Mia Genovese looked away and back at her dancing partner.

I wish I fucking knew. Her father had killed half my family a mere two days before, and here she stood, dancing in a club with no care in the world. My father and sister weren’t yet in the ground, and she was *dancing*. And as she looked at me, she didn’t have the decency to look even remotely remorseful. We hadn’t decided how we’d come back at them, but we had to be careful about the tactics we used, or we’d upset the Commission. We couldn’t kill Pete, but his daughter? I had every right to end her miserable existence under the *vendetta* code and make things even.

I strode across the room and toward her, and I didn’t fail to notice the way people tracked me from the corner of their eyes. They sensed the predator among them, and they fled. Even her miserable excuse for a date. She turned into me, and there, behind her eyes, sat not even an ounce of recognition as she began swaying against me, smirking up at me as if she

were the one in control. She rested her hand on my chest and spoke. “If you wanted a dance, big guy, all you had to do was ask.”

I couldn't recall the last time someone outside of my inner circle had referred to me as anything other than “sir” or “boss.” Even as the son of the first Colombo boss, I had always been given the respect I was owed. She didn't know who I was. I returned her smirk as the possibilities of what I could do flooded me. One possibility stirred above all the others—potentially the most twisted and perverse of them all. As she swayed against me, I knew it wouldn't be difficult to convince her to come back to the alcove, so I loosened my hands on her waist and tilted my head back to my area.

“Let's play,” I told her, and her gaze shifted between me and the alcove before finally nodding and following willingly. Oh, she would come to regret that decision eventually, but for tonight, I would make sure she wanted this. I would convince her to enjoy herself, and then tomorrow when she learned the truth, her reaction would make fucking her worth it.

She followed me inside, and Alessio looked between us, wisely keeping his mouth shut. “Stand outside. We have some *business* to take care of here.”

My brother didn't say a word as he followed my order and exited the tent, the other guards and men following suit. As soon as we sat alone, I looked her up and down. Despite the hatred that burned in my chest for her, I didn't fail to notice that Mia Genovese was positively stunning in her silver evening dress. It looked like she wore minimal makeup beneath the blonde updo that accentuated the long curves of her neck. A natural beauty. She had all the men in this club fawning over her, and she still picked the wolf behind the curtain. I guided her toward the couch and pulled her into my lap as I leaned back. She pressed both hands into my chest and ground into me, hardening my cock immediately.

“I'd like to know your name,” she said, arching her back and grinding her hips into mine again.

The corner of my lip tilted up at the question. She had no idea. “Vin,” I replied, staring into those light green eyes that seemed to reveal every line of emotion she felt. I’d let her continue coming onto me. I’d let her have fun first, because once I got started, I wouldn’t be stopping.

“You don’t say much, do you, Vin?” she asked. I only smirked. “I don’t know how much experience you have with this, but a two-sided conversation typically makes this more fun for both parties involved.”

A spark of amusement lit my chest. She would be fun to break, I considered. But the thought of breaking her father through her had me clenching my fists on the fabric of the couch. It would be so easy to reach up and grab her throat—to flip our positions and end her life right here. Her father hadn’t hesitated to kill my sister, so what would be the difference? I knew the Commission respected an eye for an eye, but if I did that, I’d still be missing an eye. I would *still* owe Pete Genovese another death, and I knew nobody else meant anything to him—nobody like his daughter.

I pushed those thoughts away as her hand slipped beneath my shirt and up my bare chest. “We can do this in silence if you prefer,” she mused. “But it’s more fun if you tell me what you want me to do.” This wasn’t about my pleasure. This was about humiliating her when I finally got my hands on her. This was about breaking her in a way that would break her father—a man who cared most about his business.

“I want you to suck my cock,” I told her, gripping her hair and tugging her head backward. That slender neck strained from the motion, and I guided her head down until she rested between my knees. She *smiled* at the way I tugged her hair, and my cock throbbed. I knew the hold had to be painful, but she released a small, performative moan. It had me wondering if she actually enjoyed it, and that had my arousal building.

“Happily,” she said, licking her lips and giving me the most seductive look I’d ever seen on a woman. She fingered my zipper while I watched, my grip involuntarily tightening as my cock came free. She looked at me through lowered lashes as she licked all the way up my cock and brought it into her

mouth, sucking hard. She worked me between her lips, and I pushed her head deeper as her tongue worked meticulous circles around my head. I tilted my head back and exhaled deeply at the intense sensation of her mouth hitting all the sensitive spots and working the ones that she innately knew about.

“Fuck,” I whispered as she took me deep and held me there for a second. Deeper than anyone ever had without gagging and withdrawing. “Fuck,” I repeated with more force. I felt her lips curve back over my cock, and I jerked her head away by the hair. The smug smile she wore told me that she knew precisely what she was doing to me. It pleased me to know how she’d feel when she learned the truth, but I tugged her up and back on my lap, pulling down her panties just past her knees. She tried slipping them the rest of the way from her body, and I smirked, quickly standing and switching our positions, holding them around her calves as a partial restraint.

I turned so that she lay back on the couch, and without even a warning, I plunged into her. Mia gasped and arched, and it shocked me to find her so wet for me—so ready for this. I plunged into her again, meeting her dazed eyes. “You’re so wet,” I told her, tightening my grip on her waist and shuddering as she clenched around me.

I knew I was fucking her for a purpose, but Christ, this woman was far more interesting than I anticipated. She didn’t seem to mind being rough, and she had no fear of being with a man she didn’t know, even knowing that her family now had a new, relentless enemy. “What are you doing here tonight?” I asked her, remaining deep inside of her as I spoke.

Her quick, shuttering breaths came out as small pants, and I knew whatever answer she gave with me being buried deep inside of her would be genuine. “Exercising some new freedom I haven’t had in a long time,” she replied.

I clenched my teeth as I considered where that freedom had come from. I gathered both of her wrists in my hand and pinned them to the cushion above her head, thrusting hard into her. “Freedom typically comes at a price,” I replied, baiting her.

She nodded as I thrust again and again. A cry left her before I paused and waited for her response. “A price worth paying.”

I hated this woman with every fiber of my being, and I couldn't stop myself from easing a hand up behind her head and gripping the back of her neck roughly. I pulled it upward, my fingers lingering over the pressure points there that I knew how to use. I closed my eyes and lost myself to the thrusting for a few moments, trying to ignore what exactly I was doing. But as her moaning grew more intense, I opened my eyes and found the eyes of the man who killed my family, planted on a pretty, deceptive little face. The face of a traitor. A monster.

I withdrew myself and stood, grabbing her ankles and flipping her onto her stomach. Immediately, Mia arched her back, and I gripped both of her hips as I shoved myself into her again, at peace with not seeing her face. As my release came quickly and I dug my fingers into her in a bruising grip, she shouted with the same release. It barreled through me with an intensity I hadn't experienced for a long, long time. I looked down at her, realizing that this was my last chance to make a decision. I planned to take her, but should I do it now?

An idea hit me as I stood there, looking down on her. There *was* a way to take both her and something else her father would value. It would be cruel and twisted, but for vengeance, I'd do it.

She flipped herself back over quickly, and I narrowed my eyes on her. “I was expecting something rougher from you, big guy,” she said with an amused grin. “Something kinky.”

I hated the intrigue I felt as she spoke—the questions that arose in my mind. I'd kill her eventually, and none of those things mattered, but...I'd let her go tonight. I'd run my new plan by Alessio and the others, and then I'd strike tomorrow. “Maybe next time,” I told her. She had no idea what next time would entail, and I smirked as she turned and waltzed back into the fray of the club as if nothing had happened.

Alessio came back inside immediately, looking me over. “You fucked her?” he asked.

The cunning smile that pulled at my lips was a mockery of anything real as I leaned back into the cushioned couch.

“I have a new idea, and I think you’re going to like it.”

MIA GENOVESE

Isabel looked like she'd been brought back to life when she came into my room at noon the next day, shoving open my blinds and handing me a to-go coffee. "Sleeping past noon is for bitches and wannabe losers. We've got to get our day started," she said.

"We didn't get in until after five," I groaned, sitting up and taking a sip of the chilled coffee, mixed with my favorite creamer and flavor shots.

"*You* didn't get in until after five. *I* still haven't been home."

I eyed the evening gown she still wore. Only a thick coat sat over it. I examined my old pajamas I had on. A pair of shorts and a long T-shirt covered all the way down to my knees. I distinctly recalled wearing these pajamas three nights ago. I wasn't hungover when I'd gotten in, but I was *certainly* exhausted, and I remembered little of bringing myself to bed, especially when my mind still lingered on the sex I'd had with Vin. He was...excellent. He didn't bother with gentle formalities, and that was just the way I liked it. Though none of that mattered. I didn't bother getting more than a first name, and I assumed that name had been an abbreviation for something longer. He hadn't even bothered to ask for my name, yet I still wondered if I'd ever see him again at that same club.

"I'm not doing anything today," I told Isabel, switching to the water at my bedside table and taking a swig. "Why don't we

make breakfast and watch movies? We can order pizza or something.”

“That sounds like a plan. Let me go to the bathroom, then I’ll meet you in the kitchen.”

As we split ways, I passed two people in the family home, and they each waved kindly to me. I’d been a permanent fixture in this home since we’d decided on the betrothal three years ago. I’d had my own place at twenty-one, but in order to train secretly, I couldn’t afford to live alone. Plus, my dad had wanted to ensure my safety, and a family home with a dozen guards at all times would be much safer than my shoebox apartment.

I contemplated what foods were in the fridge, and I pursed my lips, wondering if anyone had gotten milk. If so, we should have had everything to make French toast... Lost in thought, I didn’t notice a household employee walking by me until I shoulder-checked her *hard*. “Shit,” I muttered, turning and extending an arm to ensure I didn’t hurt her. “Are you okay?”

I hardly had time to process my words as she gripped my wrists in a maneuver I thought she was using to support herself from the impact of the hit, before quickly noticing the zip ties she’d expertly secured around them. I jerked away, but she held tight, and I opened my mouth to shout and attract someone’s attention. Behind me, someone slid a sack over my head and covered my mouth with a hand, pulling me back into a hard, much larger chest. As darkness overtook me, the situation finally felt entirely real. Panic slid away and became replaced with an urgent sense of necessity. I *needed* to get out of here. I couldn’t let them bring me wherever they intended. If they moved me to a secondary location, I knew I’d die.

The man picked me up roughly, and no matter how much I kicked and thrashed, trying to shout for someone to help me, I couldn’t get the upper hand. I didn’t even land a single hit on him. My movements didn’t even seem to faze him as I threw myself around. I felt as the crisp morning air brushed my bare legs, and my thrashing grew relentless as I tried and failed to escape the hold. I’d been trained for this, so why couldn’t I get so much as a single leg free? Someone had to be around to see

me. I passed a minimum of six people every time I left the house, and there was no way they'd been able to avoid that.

But they did. Somehow they got me to the gravel driveway, and the door to a van slid open. The distinct sound sent my heart clattering, and the only words that ran through my mind were *no, no, no*. This couldn't be happening, but it was. I was being taken, and there wasn't a way to fight back. Nothing could stop the inevitable from happening as the man threw me roughly into the van. The back of my shoulder hit something metal, and the side of my face slammed into the floor. I groaned and curled inward, reeling from the pain of my entire body being dropped into the hard van. The door slammed shut.

"Shit," I said, forcing myself upright and breathing through the wince. I tried feeling for the handle of the door, but as I tugged it, I found it locked. The front door opened as I continued groping the door, trying to find a lock that must have been removed. Then we took off. "Think, Mia," I whispered under my breath.

"There's not much to think through. You're in a predicament, and nothing you do now will stop that."

I froze, the voice coming from no more than a foot or two to my right. I turned my head in that direction, finding the voice unusually familiar. Through my fear I couldn't place it, but I knew it. I'd heard it before. The sack left my head in a swoosh, and my eyes met a set of familiar, hardened hazel ones. That ringlet of silky black hair hung right above his eye, and the smug smirk he'd given me last night rested on his lips, though this time there was no amusement or interest behind it. Only cool, calculated evil. Vin.

I gaped at him as I held my tied hands before me. My hair hung limply in my face, and I couldn't bring myself to say a word as I stared for a moment, soaking in the silence surrounding us. Finally, once the shock wore off, I gritted my teeth. "If you wanted to fuck again, you didn't have to kidnap me," I finally said, shaking my head. I knew it wasn't the right thing to say. I also knew there was a lot behind the scenes of this situation I was unaware of, but as I sat before the man

who caused the soreness between my legs that I still felt today, shame reddened my cheeks.

“Mia, my little *topo*,” he said, clasping his hands together in front of him. *Topo*. Italian for “mouse.” The nickname disgusted me.

“Don’t call me that,” I spat.

His smug expression dropped into a completely cold one. One that sent a chill running through me. I may have struggled to control my mouth at times, but I knew when I was being stared down by someone dangerous. I swallowed, leaning back and against the back of the front seat. I surveyed my surroundings, noticing that all but the back row of seats had been removed, leaving only the metal openings for two more seats to be installed. The nearly empty van was even more unsettling as I realized that he sat back on the only seats, leaving me on the floor.

“You’re lucky I didn’t kill you on the spot last night, *topo*,” he said in a taunting tone. He dared me to protest, and I knew better than to do it this time. “Do you even know who I am?”

“I have no fucking clue,” I told him, shaking my head. I recalled that he’d used my name, so he knew who I was. I wasn’t foolish enough to believe it was a mistake. He knew he had the upper hand in every way, especially since I had no idea how to pacify the situation and get him to release me. I took comfort in the fact I’d been trained, and I knew that so long as I was left alone with one armed person, I could get a gun and fight my way out. But if he killed me first...

I couldn’t think like that. I couldn’t allow that possibility to sink into my mind. If he took the time to take me, he had to want something.

“My name is Vincent,” he said, the coldness in his eyes somehow darkening. “Vincent Colombo.”

Oh. Oh, fuck. I now didn’t have a doubt in my mind that I was going to die today, especially after what I’d said to him last night. I’d told him that the price of his sister and father’s death had been worth it, and I hadn’t stopped to notice his

expression. I hadn't thought it was more than a fleeting platitude to a stranger, but I knew it had been so much more to him. I knew that I'd let him fuck me, and I had liked it. A curling ball of nausea roiled in my belly at that thought, and I clamped my lips together to keep from puking. He had to have known who I was, and he'd still fucked me.

My eyes shot up to his as all of this ran through my mind, and I swore that behind the cool exterior, I saw smugness in his eyes. That alone made me want to come across the van and shove my fist into his face, but I knew better than to act so thoughtlessly. I didn't have the upper hand right now. Not even close.

"Your father created an enemy out of me after what he did," Vincent said coldly.

"The Commission approved it," I told him, shaking my head. "They agreed that killing your father and naming another boss was beneficial. My father was just the one in the best position to do it with the least casualties." I knew what I said was bullshit. In technicality, that's what had happened. But in reality, my father had been working on the Colombo demise for years. He'd been bringing every indiscretion to the Commission, and finally, after all that work, they'd agreed. If Vincent knew his father, he would've known that the ruling was far overdue. My father had told me of all the things they'd done for years, and I knew they deserved it.

"My sister wasn't part of it. Harper had nothing to do with *any* of this!" he shouted. "He had no right!" Vincent leaned forward as if he planned to hit me, and I flinched back, but the pain never came. He only sat in front of me, breathing heavily. I didn't say anything as I leaned as far away from him as I could. He took a few deep breaths and sat back, his cool demeanor returning. "But I will have my payback."

"By killing me?" I spat.

"Eventually, yes," he acknowledged, and I wondered what that meant. Something in my mind clicked. If he didn't plan to kill me immediately, I had a chance. I'd been trained to kill him for years, and I knew this would prove to be a unique

opportunity. I could take advantage of being alive and do just that, and maybe then I'd save myself in the process. "I planned to only take and kill you, but last night gave me other ideas." I felt myself pale with those words. "I owe your father two eyes, but you're the only one who matters to him. But do you know what would matter to him just as much?" I shook my head slowly. "An heir."

The words made me sick, and I fought back a dry heave. Torturing and killing me was one thing, but to do that? Vincent was evil and twisted for even thinking about that. "You...you can't," I told him.

"Oh, I can," he assured me, and I could tell he wasn't joking nor bluffing even a little bit. "And it'll give me the payback I need."

"The Commission will take everything from you," I argued. "He's the head of it, and they respect him."

"No, they won't take a thing from me. They support an eye for an eye, and this prevents any mass bloodshed. And I assure you, *topo*, there's nothing the Commission wants more than to end disagreements. For all intents and purposes, this will do just that. And when your dad retaliates, they'll end him just like they ended my father. And he'll die knowing that I took both his daughter and his grandchild from him, and he could do nothing to stop it."

"You can't hold me for that long," I told him. "That's not something the Commission would ever approve. An eye for an eye is not a drawn-out process that lasts for decades."

"It can be when you're my wife."

I had no idea what to say to that as I stared at him. I wasn't his wife. The deal had been canceled, and there was no reason to reenact it. I didn't need to kill him anymore, as his father was already dead. But...marriage was the initial plan, and regardless of that title, I could follow through.

"The papers have been drawn up, and as of today, you are legally my wife. I own you, and there isn't anything you can do about it. If you try to run, I can find you either by illegal or

legal means. You'll never be able to hide from me." This time, that dark twist of his lips terrified me. "And if you *do* succeed by some twist of fate, I'll kill everyone you ever knew or loved."

I knew he was cruel, but I never knew the extent of that cruelty. Now I knew that my father had been correct to hate this family. He knew what he was talking about, and I would do what had to be done.

I would kill Vincent Colombo as initially planned.

VINCENT COLOMBO

I sat in the conference room of my family home, staring blankly at the mural Harper had done years ago to “lighten up” the place. The yellow abstract line art sat starkly against the dark gray wall. I never thought looking at something so random would have me clenching my jaw and wishing to go back to last week when she had still been living here, talking about how she planned to leave and pursue an art degree. But Pete Genovese had taken that from us, and I would make him pay for it.

“I don’t like it,” Caterina said, shaking her head. “She’s not even a sworn-in member of the Genoveses. She’s a civilian. Maybe she has some shitty beliefs, and she’d spent her whole life learning to hate us, but she didn’t do shit to you.”

“It doesn’t matter,” my brother Alessio retorted back at her. “She’s his daughter. If he had another weakness we’d exploit it, but there’s nothing else we can use.”

“But is she really a weakness?” Caterina pressed. “I asked around to check out the damage, and nobody seems to give a shit that she’s gone. Her little friend went to her father, but Genovese hasn’t sent out anyone to look for her. He has to know you’re the one who took her, but only Mia’s friend has done anything to try to find her. It’s almost like her father doesn’t care.”

“It has to be a ploy to get what he wants,” I countered. “You planted my message?”

“I did. Signed it with your name and stamp, too. The friend brought that to her father as well, but he hasn’t taken any measures to check on her. Nobody has.”

I ran my tongue over my teeth as I leaned back. “The friend is stirring up a fuss?”

“She was. I think he silenced her, and she hasn’t been looking since. She’s important to him, if not as a daughter than as a potential tool for an alliance, so why isn’t he doing anything? We can’t kill her if it won’t have the impact we want.”

That was the problem. She was the only potential weakness we had, and it was the only thing we could use. If I were a betting man, I’d say that he was intentionally acting unfazed to protect her. I knew where everyone rested on the situation. It had been two days of nonstop debate, and none of us had even gone in to see her. I didn’t think I trusted myself to be in a room with her again until we agreed on an approach.

My brother had lost his father and sister, too. He grieved differently than me, but he agreed that taking out the Genovese girl was the only viable option. He also agreed that impregnating her and taking out the next heir would be the best way to give Pete the proper payback for what he’d done. But Caterina and Luca, my friends and the other half of my inner circle, had different ideas entirely.

“Killing her would send enough of a message not to fuck with us,” Caterina said, shaking her head. “To murder an innocent child would be an abomination. There are certain boundaries that even we can never cross, and that’s one of them. Can you imagine how your father would feel about that plan?”

I agreed; I’d killed hundreds of men and women, but children were sacred. “It would never be born,” I offered as a compromise, knowing I’d never be able to buy even that.

“As if that makes it better,” she scoffed, crossing her legs in front of her as she leaned back and picked at her fingernails. “I never would’ve infiltrated that house if you’d told me you were planning *this*. We’re all grieving, Vinny, but when you finally come to grips with this loss, you’ll never forgive yourself for doing this.”

“There’s no other way to get revenge!” Alessio shouted at her.

“Don’t take that fucking tone with me,” she shot to my brother, and he clamped his mouth shut, knowing better than to fight with her. “I’m clearly the only one with a level head here, and I’m not going to let you two make dumbass decisions because you’re angry. Have you even thought about who would get her pregnant? Whose baby you’re going to murder?” I hadn’t thought about that, and it reminded me that there were a lot of variables that we hadn’t considered.

For the first time, Luca finally spoke softly, leaning forward. “I won’t let you kill an innocent baby. If you want to make him suffer, send pieces of his daughter to him. Keep her alive and keep him hoping she’ll be returned to him. That’s enough.” The thought of cutting Mia into pieces and sending them back didn’t sit right with me, though. I hated the woman with every fiber of my being, but since the night in the club, I couldn’t stop thinking about how it felt to fuck her. I hated the fascination I felt for her. She shouldn’t have been anything but leverage to me, but I couldn’t seem to get those noises she’d made out of my mind. Why did murdering her and an unborn child feel less like torture and more like the debt we were owed?

Everyone in the room stayed silent for a moment as we gathered our thoughts. Alessio stared at his hands as they sat flush on the table in front of him, and he clenched his jaw tightly. He glanced to the side, taking in the same mural that I’d been staring at earlier, and I knew what it did to him. I knew exactly how he felt as he stared at it. That feeling had convinced me I could kill an innocent child. Knowing that child would be the heir to the Genovese family, maybe I could.

“It’s my decision, not any of yours,” I said, taking a deep breath.

“Bullshit,” Caterina said, slamming her palms on the table and leaning forward. “Bull. Shit. You don’t make decisions like this without consulting us. That’s not how we operate here, and you know it.”

“I’m the boss!” I shouted at her. “When my father died, he gave me the title, and if I think this will be best for our businesses moving forward, I’m going to do it. I don’t give a fuck how it affects me.”

“What about how it affects your relationship with us?” Luca asked. “I won’t be able to look at you the same if you decided to do this. None of us will.”

I closed my eyes tightly, my mind flashing to my sister and father’s bodies lying on a slab before me. He had been riddled with gunshots, but I could tell it was him. My sister, on the other hand, had been shot in the head. Half of her skull was gone, and her face had been rendered unrecognizable. The only way I knew it was her was the small butterfly tattoo with a spiraling C that she’d gotten behind her right ear. It was the only ear that remained on her corpse.

“Doing this won’t get your family back. It will only tear apart the family you have left,” Caterina said softly, and I heard her drop back into her plush seat. I opened my eyes and looked back around the table at the family who remained. I knew she was right, but the thought of letting Pete’s crimes go unpunished tore at something inside of me. My father had run things in a way that we kept close to home. He’d been as good as a man can be in this career, and by doing this, I’d be stomping on his legacy. I knew that’s what would happen.

“Killing her isn’t enough,” I said, shaking my head. I saw the fury in Caterina’s eyes, but I continued before she could argue. “If we can find another way, I’ll consider forgoing the other part of the plan. But if we can’t think of anything...”

“I can infiltrate again. I’m sure they upped their security since I went last time, but there’s always a way in. They have so many damned hired hands at that house, nobody will see me. I’ll find someone else important to him,” I could see Caterina already planning the route in her mind. She was the best spy I’d encountered in my time here, and she knew it.

“There is nobody else,” Luca retorted.

I recognized that none of us would agree to any decision right now, so I took a deep breath and nodded. “Then we wait. We

keep her here, and we think about alternatives. She's under my protection, and you all make sure everybody knows that. The only one allowed to touch her is me until we decide what we're going to do."

"We could just kill her," Alessio suggested.

I only shook my head. "Not until we know if there's a way to use her first. Whether it be for a pregnancy or something else."

I stood and, without another word, ended the conversation by striding out of the room. I could've gone toward my bedroom or office, but my legs had a different idea. I ended up turning toward the room where we kept Mia. I strode down the hallway and stopped beside the locked door. I grabbed the key from my pocket and pressed it into the lock, pushing the door open.

There, standing at the end of the bed, looking fighting mad, stood Mia. "It's been *two days!*" she shouted. "Two days of being alone in this room and wondering if you would leave me in here forever." She'd been fed, and she'd had a small bathroom and a bed, yet she still stood there fuming, not seeming to have a single regard for her own life as she stared up at me. Everything about her intrigued me, and that fact pissed me off more than I wanted to admit. But goddamnit, the interest I felt wasn't going anywhere, and that was more dangerous than anything, especially when I knew this situation would by definition end one way or another with her dead.

MIA GENOVESE

The last visitor I'd had was Vincent yesterday, and he had stayed inside for less than a minute before silently turning and walking out. Maybe I should've been nice and tried to sweet-talk him and earn some freedom, but I knew it wouldn't work. Plus, I wasn't even sure if I could stomach it. It didn't matter how attractive I found him. I couldn't believe I'd been *intimate* with him.

I'd paced across the room no less than a thousand times over the last couple of days, waiting for anyone to come and offer me company. I knew Vincent wanted me dead, so I should've been grateful I had a decent room and regular meals, but I couldn't. He and his family had been responsible for everything that had gone wrong with my family and me for years. They'd killed and betrayed, and they ran things so differently than we did. We'd managed to keep the peace with the Irish mob for years, recruiting only the most pure-blooded Italians loyal to the cause, but the Colombos had a different philosophy. They recruited whomever they pleased, creating made men from imposters. We'd all paid for it when one of the dirty micks had opened fire at a Commission meeting, killing a variety of people from all five families.

Everyone was in agreement: the secret-spilling nature of the Colombo family was not something we could continue allowing. I planned to swear my allegiance to my father as soon as the situation was handled, and I hoped it would settle itself sooner rather than later. I hoped I could be the one

responsible for ending this once and for all. I just needed the opportunity.

When my door opened, I sprung to my feet, prepared to defend myself from any oncoming attackers. Instead of someone rushing me, though, a man walked inside and rubbed his hands together, looking me up and down. He looked familiar, and it took me only a second to place him as the man I'd seen in the alcove with Vincent the night at the club. The man who had waited outside the curtain for us. He looked similar enough to Vincent that I knew there was some kind of relation there. Brothers or close cousins, I assumed. He stood nearly as tall as Vincent, though slimmer and less innately intimidating. His nose looked like it had once been long and straight, but the slight crook at the top told me that it had been broken at some point. His hair and eyes were the same hues as Vincent's, though I saw more sadness than rage in his expression.

"I'm Alessio," he said, holding a few large folders in front of himself as he strode into the room like he owned it. I supposed he *did* likely own it. "I'm Vincent's brother, and I came to have a conversation with you."

"Are you planning to tell me how you're going to kill me? If so, Vincent was extremely thorough in his explanations, and you don't need to waste your breath," I told him, crossing my arms over myself.

His jaw clenched, and he leaned into a wall on the other side of the room. "You're very talkative for someone who's been put in her place."

"If I'm going to die, I'm not going to make it easy for any of you."

He chuckled, though there was little humor in his eyes. "Frankly, we haven't decided what we're doing to you. You'll die, though. That's non-negotiable. We just can't decide yet if we're going to do more than that. We all have our own ideas for what to do in addition, but Vincent is responsible for choosing, and he hasn't. Consider yourself lucky. He's actually a good man. I don't think he'll be able to go through with anything more than killing you, unless you prove you're as

horrible as your father.” I nodded, but I didn’t say anything more. “You don’t seem like you particularly care about this situation. Do you feel nothing for what happened to our family because of your father?”

I bit my lip. This I could do. I could fake remorse. “I’m sorry for your losses,” I told him. “But I didn’t do it.”

“You don’t seem very sincere,” he commented. Probably because I wasn’t. Losing people was difficult, and I could respect that he grieved, but I also knew all about the horrible cruelty this family found pleasure in, because my father had told me all about it. Some people in this world genuinely have bad things coming to them, and the Colombos were one of them. I couldn’t feel sympathy for a family who was more monstrous than even my own. After everything I’d heard over the years, I couldn’t bring myself to care, no matter how much he wanted me to. Did that make me a bad person? Maybe. But it made me an alive one too.

“Well,” he commented, pushing off the wall. “This conversation cemented my stance on the situation. Vincent should have killed you already, but instead I’m going to make you useful.”

My eyes dropped to the pile of documents he’d rested on my dresser. “What are they?”

“Account balances and money owed to us. Our usual accountant hasn’t been keeping up very well with this information on top of her more serious duties, so I’m bringing it to you. See if you can find anything amiss.”

I tilted my head. “Why would I help you do anything after you’ve made it clear that killing me is your only plan?” I asked.

“We can keep you in a much worse room than this,” he said. I understood the message. He looked between me and the stack of documents, and before walking out the door he paused. “And a single of these documents is found destroyed when I come back, I’ll pull out your fingernails and send them to your father.” I gaped at the threat, but I knew it was genuine. “Have a good evening, Mia.”

As he strode out of the room, I stayed in my spot for a long moment, staring at the door. It should be a good thing that they didn't know what to do with me, but instead it felt like a curse. Some options were far worse than others, but in the end my death was inevitable. I hated that my first reaction was to shred the documents and say to hell to the consequences, but I knew that being tortured would only make my goal more difficult. I wondered why Vincent was hesitating with choosing the most brutal option, especially as I thought about all the things I'd been told as a child about his family's brutality.

My mind trailed into absent thought as I grabbed the documents and brought them to bed with me, looking over the top handful and beginning to sort through them. I certainly wasn't doing this for the Colombos, but without anything to do in this room, I'd go crazy. So I got to work on being a free employee to the Colombo family, biding my time until I could do something truly useful.

VINCENT COLOMBO

A day later, and no decision had been made. I did the work that seemed most important, and I tried to throw myself into it fully, but I couldn't get the damn Genovese girl off my mind. There were high tensions among my people and the surrounding territories as people pulled on their leashes, breaking in my leadership as their new boss. It was to be expected, and I had to make an example of two underlings this morning for challenging me too hard and too publicly. My frustration at an all-time high, I rushed to Mia's room to see if this encounter would give me the answers I needed. I couldn't continue worrying about her as collateral. She was a tool, and I'd use her as intended. I needed to make a decision, despite the fascination I felt for her and how she intrigued me more than anyone ever had.

I barged into her room, and she shot a bloodshot stare in my direction. She sat slouched and flustered, and a massive stack of documents rested around her in various different piles. She didn't say anything as I came inside, just stared through vacant eyes as I approached and looked down at...

"Who gave you these?" I asked.

"Alessio said to make myself useful, so here I am." Her voice came out scratchy from disuse, and if she were anyone else, I'd feel bad for her. I watched as she carefully moved the documents out of her way and leaned back on the bed, never moving her eyes from me. I thought about the difficult workload that Teressa, our accountant, had been handling since my father's death. She kept all the books of all profits

and losses, and she manipulated the money so that it appeared legal and legitimate. Sometimes, the less important things like the debts owed to us fell to the wayside for months until she got back on track.

“Are you making progress?” I finally asked.

She only shrugged, completely deflated by either being kept in this room to await her fate or the tedious financial documents I knew would make anyone irate. It struck me, how unfair this entire situation must feel to her. She’d done nothing but be born into a family of monsters, and I was exploiting that and using it as a reason to end her life. There was no choice, it had to be done, but I could see how she was nothing more than the bystander who had to pay for someone else’s misdeeds. It didn’t help that she sat here looking so vulnerable in her worn-out condition. Until now, she’d been stubborn and hardened, but seeing the woman beneath all of that...

“Did you come in here just to see if my free labor was serving you well?” she asked, raising her brows. There was the woman I’d come to know.

Before I had a chance to respond, my phone began ringing, and I pulled it to my ear immediately. “What?”

“Down here where you killed the two guys yesterday, there’s a conflict. Some of the Genovese men are demanding we give back the girl. They said you’ve had her for a week, and the boss is getting real antsy that you haven’t sent word about her yet.”

“Fuck,” I muttered into the phone. “Can you talk them down? I’m busy.”

“There isn’t any talking these people down,” he said. “If you don’t come and give them some answers, they’re going to destroy the block. There are a lot of men, and they’re all armed. We’re outnumbered here, boss.”

Turf battles happened more these days than I wanted to admit, especially in those few streets bordering our territories, but this wasn’t a turf battle. If it were, there wouldn’t have been much talking. The only one who could settle a conflict like

this was me, but from the shouting I heard in the background, I knew better than to assume the conflict wouldn't escalate before I arrived. Within another minute or two, it would be an all-out war against our people, and nothing I could say would stop it.

“Did Genovese say anything to them? There has to be a message.” I glanced at Mia, and I found her watching me intently

My man on the ground huffed. “They said something about going through with the deal. You know what that means?”

“What *exactly* did they say?” I pushed.

“He said he wants the deal that was agreed upon, and that you already have the key to make it happen. I assume that's the Genovese girl. If so, she's a bargaining chip, and he expects her to be either returned to him or to someone else who will make a suitable alliance for him.”

His demands made me tip my head back to the ceiling and laugh, but the laughter faded as I recalled the predicament my men were in. Those demands made it sound like the kidnapping of his daughter meant nothing to him—like he only cared about using her for an alliance. Had I underestimated how much he cared for the girl?

“Don't let there be bloodshed. Protect yourselves. I'm coming,” I told the man, thinking about the people who were likely with him. A new made man worked on that side of town, and I knew he'd step into the conflict if given the chance. I hung up and turned out of the room.

“Wait,” Mia shouted. I looked back at her. “Where are you going?”

I whipped around. “I'm going to kill you father's good-for-nothing men.”

She shook her head. “Please, think this through. You don't need to kill them. I don't know what they did, but—”

I stormed toward her and snarled into her face, “They're there to deliver a message from your father. He doesn't give a fuck what happens to you. Your dad is fine with me having you so

long as I make an alliance with him. And if I don't keep you, he only requests I sell you off to someone who will make a better alliance." It wasn't exactly what I'd been told, but it was close enough.

I could see her eyes darkening as I spoke the words. Were her hands shaking? "Take me with you," she demanded.

"This might be a fucking bloodbath and you want to go with me?" I scoffed.

"Please," she enunciated. "I've always been a pawn to that man, and if he doesn't give a shit about my safety, I want to show him and his men that I'm more than just a pawn. I don't belong to whichever man will provide him the best fucking alliance, and I'll show all of them that. I'll kill them all myself." She paused and shook her head vigorously. "I'm not going back there to be used by him again. I'd rather be killed by your hand than be handed back to my father to be sold off for whatever price he sees fit."

This was the last thing I'd expected to hear from her, and I examined the face full of fury with a new, sparking interest. Seeing her attempt to kill her father's men in a fit of rage would certainly be interesting. What was the worst that could happen? If one of the guys shot her, she'd be just as dead as if I killed her myself. And if Pete learned that one of his guys was responsible, it'd be just as satisfying to see their downfall. Moreover, if Pete learned that his own daughter fought against him, I knew that would be more of a slap in the face than anything I could do to her. "If you're not in the car at the same time as the rest of the team, we leave your ass behind," I said, turning to leave.

She shot up and began dressing quickly, and I quickly called Caterina, who said she'd meet us there from an important assignment. I gathered Alessio and Luca from the kitchen, then headed to the van. To my surprise, despite stopping for no more than thirty seconds, Mia beat all of us to it, waiting there for me to unlock it.

"The fuck is she doing here?" Alessio asked.

“She wanted to come,” I told him with a shrug. “We can let her see what it’s really like being with us.”

“And if she dies?” Luca asked, sitting in the passenger’s seat and kicking Alessio to the back with a smug grin.

I shrugged as Mia got in the car. “Then she dies.” I knew she’d hear what I said, but I didn’t particularly care. I had much more pressing things to be concerned with at the moment.

We took off and I skidded through the streets, mentally cataloging the weapons I had on my body. A pocketknife, two guns, and a small throwing star that I kept on me at all times. I thought back to Harper giving me the sleek piece of metal for Christmas one year, and I tightened my jaw. I doubted I’d ever use such an obscure weapon, but it was a reminder of what I needed to do. What I needed to decide.

“If you get in our way or turn against one of us in this fight, I swear to God I’ll blow your brains out right here,” I told Mia, meeting her eyes through the rear-view mirror. “Go for kill shots only. You don’t spare a single fucking person.”

“I don’t have a gun.”

I shrugged. “You should’ve thought of that before offering to come with us, *topo*.”

She clamped her mouth shut, and a part of me yearned to see her get herself into a kind of trouble she couldn’t handle out here. A small part of me wondered if letting herself get hurt or killed would be a wise move, but I didn’t think I cared. What was she other than a princess to a throne built on blood and betrayal? Plus, I’d seen that fury as it ran through her, and I had a feeling it would be useful in more ways than I’d anticipated. Her father hadn’t bothered coming for her before, and now he didn’t even seem to care about her safety, just her usefulness. If this continued, I didn’t think it would be difficult to sway Mia to our side. If she hated her father as much as we did...that would be useful.

We skidded to a stop at the next street over, and I opened my door, only sparing Mia a sidelong glance. I could hear an escalated argument, and the moment we all closed our doors

and began jogging toward the fight, I heard the sound I'd been dreading. A gunshot. "Don't get yourselves killed," I demanded to the team as we rounded the corner and took in the scene.

There were fewer people than I'd expected, and that allowed me to take a deep, calming breath. Only about ten people shouted at my three guys, and the shot that had rung out looked to be from one of the front men, holding a pistol in the air. Nobody seemed injured yet, but it was only moments until that happened. I slinked around the side of the building, keeping as tight to the shadows as possible. The men confronting my men were distracted enough that I made it to the group before a single one noticed us approaching, and by that time it was too late.

The man holding the gun in the air aimed it at me, but I quickly pressed his hands away and pushed the barrel into his own chest. His eyes flashed with fear as I squeezed his wrist just enough that he pulled the trigger twice, shooting himself in the heart. I didn't spare him a second glance as he released the gun and I immediately brought it up and shot a man approaching Luca as he fought off two others. I released the clip and cleared all the bullets before tossing the pieces away from one another and turning toward whoever remained.

I'd taken down two, Luca had one, and two more were in the fray with Alessio and the people I'd come to help. I expected more men to be on me, but I glanced at Mia, swerving between three separate guys fast enough that none of them could track her. This went beyond self-defense. I was mesmerized by each of her motions as she kicked up and caught one man in the side of the face. He fell to the ground, groaning in disorientation. She had no problem deflecting the other men's attacks.

One of them reached for his waist, and before I could say a word, he had a gun leveled at her head; but I couldn't even open my mouth to shout to her in the time it took her to notice and react. Mia grabbed the gun and dipped out of the way as it went off. She kicked the man between the legs and grabbed the gun from his hand, whipping the butt of it toward his face and

catching him in the jaw. He fell alongside the other man, completely unconscious. I watched as she squared off with the third man, and I wondered why she'd kept this from me, this skill she'd clearly honed over years. He swung once and clipped her shoulder as she dodged, but without restraint she jumped closer to him and clocked him in the jaw.

“Get on your fucking knees.” The voice came alongside the sharp feeling of metal to the base of my skull, and I realized my error immediately. I'd failed to recount the people remaining. I had been too distracted by Mia and her skill to consider that two people were unaccounted for.

I didn't do as I was told, though. I remained standing. “I don't get on my knees for other men,” I replied shortly.

He chuckled deeply. “You do today.”

Another walked around my side and looked me up and down. “You don't look like much of a boss if you ask me,” he said. “But I know who you are. I've seen you around these parts. My boss wanted me to relay a message to you and only you. He doesn't give a shit that you have her. He would've given Mia to you. Marry her and do what was initially planned, or give her back. Those are your two options.”

“She's mine now, and he won't get her back.”

He chuffed. “Sure she is. Now get on your knees and—”

His voice cut off as a gunshot rang and the metal on the back of my head fell away quickly. I looked over my shoulder briefly, finding Caterina with a smirk on her lips and a gun in her hand, still pointing at the place where the man who had been behind me had been standing. It was a testament to her skill that she managed to sneak up to right behind me, despite an adversary on both sides.

I shot my gaze back to the last man standing before me and I lunged forward, gathering the weapon he hadn't bothered to reach for in his shock. Before he could say a single word, I aimed it at one of his knees and pulled the trigger. Then at the other. His agonized scream bounced from the buildings around us, but it didn't do anything but send a thrill of pleasure

through me. I glanced at Caterina. “This one likes to talk. Take him back to the surface room and let him do some more of that. Find out who’s to blame for this.” She didn’t say a word as she began dragging him from the scene, seemingly unfazed by the situation at hand.

I glanced around and found that the fighting had subsided. All the men on the ground were either unconscious or dead. My eyes immediately found Mia, standing among a few of the least bloody bodies. I moved toward her on instinct. “You didn’t tell me you could do that,” I commented.

She shrugged and narrowed her eyes. “You never asked.” *Checkmate*, I read in her expression. I had a feeling there were a great many things I hadn’t asked about that I needed to know, and her smug look told me that she knew it. I had a lot to learn about Mia Genovese, and it surprised me that I felt eager to do so.

MIA GENOVESE

It hadn't been much of a decision after learning how little my father cared about my kidnapping. I'd assumed there had been negotiations on my behalf. I'd thought he cared enough about my safety to seek out Vincent, but it sounded like he hadn't cared at all to know I was safe—just to know I was *useful*. I knew I was here to be useful and kill Vincent, but I thought my safety meant more to him than this. It disgusted me, and I didn't regret for an instant fighting his men for relaying such an unconcerned message.

“You had to have seen their fucking faces when they realized we'd snuck up on them,” Alessio laughed, tipping his head back. “I swear to God, it never gets old.” I'd grown used to having men laugh about killing each other, and it had become almost a common occurrence in my father's territory. But Vincent and Alessio didn't seem to give a shit about whom they killed. They didn't make that part humorous, no matter how much they laughed about the men's reactions to them showing up. Even Luca didn't even say a word about the fight, though he didn't say much of anything. I was beginning to see him as the usual strong and silent type.

They weren't innately cruel, which seemed unusual after the people I'd been around my entire life. Had I been blind to the ways of my father and his men during my entire life? Part of me couldn't believe that I'd spent 24 years in his home without seeing his actions as anything more than necessary to keep his power, but... these people seemed just as powerful without ever laughing about the deaths of their enemies.

We pulled into the driveway of his manor, and the coursing dread of going back to my room and staring at a stack of papers that meant nothing to me tore into every ounce of my self-control. I stood slowly, and Luca, Alessio and Vincent seemed to not notice as I followed them toward the house. Caterina, on the other hand, came from a direction away from the driveway, rubbing both her palms across her rust-colored pants. Blood, I realized. That had to be blood, though she'd hardly been there for more than a minute of the fight. "I took care of the situation," she said to Vincent, giving him a nod. He gave her one in reply, and I wondered how it felt to have that level of solidarity. I recalled seeing Caterina during the fight, and her stealth and skill had been admirable. If we weren't enemies, I would've loved to ask where she learned the techniques and how she did them. It would have been interesting to learn what she knew.

"I hope you don't need me to cover your ass next time," Caterina said to Vincent. He shot her a look, but she continued, "Don't get me started on the situation I had to get out of so I could be here and cover your rear. Which, may I add, should have been one of *their* jobs." She pointed at Alessio and Luca accusingly.

"We assume our boss can cover his own six," Luca said in a deadpan tone, opening the door to the house as the others went inside. "But when he has a spectacle to look at instead of covering himself, it's a little more difficult."

A spectacle? I pursed my lips as I considered the way he drew the attention of the conversation to me. I hadn't wanted to show off what I could do, but it had clearly become a necessity. It was either that or be killed. I could've also kept my mouth closed and *not* begged to get out, but as I strode back into the house, I found an entirely new sense of optimism. Or maybe it was the back and forth bantering between all these people. These friends.

"I can get myself out of any situation you put me in," Vincent said. "Sometimes it just takes a little more finesse than other times."

“Is ‘finesse’ the new word for ‘death’ these days?” Alessio asked. Caterina reached past me and gave him a high-five as she chuckled at his joke. There was clearly a lot of fondness among this entire group, but among these two specifically, I saw something...more. Especially as they looked right past me and into one another’s eyes for a long moment before looking away.

I followed them all into a room I hadn’t seen before. A long wet bar rested across the side of the room, and on one side of it, the shelves looked stocked with the best top-shelf liquor. Below it sat some glasses and a stainless-steel ice machine. They each made themselves at home in different places—Caterina behind the bar, Vincent and Alessio at two stools, and Luca in a reclining chair to the left. None of them demanded that I go back to my room, so I lingered behind them, just watching the conversation unfold.

“I want something stiff,” Alessio stated, placing a hand palm down on the bar.

“All of the drinks are stiff,” Caterina said with a roll of her eyes, but she poured an expensive looking bourbon anyways, sliding it to Alessio. “What do you want, Mia?”

It took me longer than I wanted to admit to see the way her eyes scanned my face. I glanced at Vincent and saw the stiff set of his jaw, but I looked back at Caterina when he didn’t say anything. “I’ll drink whatever you’re having.”

Alessio tipped his head back and laughed. It took him a second to compose himself, but when he did, he glanced at me with upraised brows. “I wouldn’t recommend what she drinks. That fruity shit has enough sugar to kill a grown man.”

I smiled. “I like fruity.”

Caterina pointed at me and smiled. “A woman after my own heart.”

I waited awkwardly as she mixed a drink with a handful of different liquors and flavorings, and I didn’t fail to notice how everyone in the room got silent as they looked at me. I wondered how much more bantering and joking would have

happened if I weren't here. Everything I'd seen until now had been serious and mafia-related. They'd been all business, and it hadn't felt so genuine.

If I took Vincent from these people, they'd be devastated. When I'd imagined killing him, I'd imagined him being a man like my father—cold, hard and dethatched. I hadn't expected people to genuinely care for him. This dynamic between all of them was the last thing I expected to see today. Cruel or otherwise, there was something among these people that felt sacrilegious to destroy. I thought that my father and I had a good relationship compared to many of the other mafia families I'd seen, but it was nothing like this. How many evenings had they all sat around this bar and laughed about life together? How much tragedy would I cause by killing him?

"You've clearly done things like this before," Luca commented to me across the room.

"Drinking?"

He chuckled deeply. "No, fighting." I froze. I couldn't explain where those moves had come from, so I remained silent. "Someone like Pete Genovese wouldn't have his daughter defenseless. You're too much of a weakness to him that way."

"Clearly you believe I'm still a weakness to him," I said. "Considering you plan to kill me to hurt him."

Vincent turned and looked me up and down. "Everyone has weaknesses and ways to exploit them. Unfortunately, your father just has far less than the average man."

Unfortunately. I'd sensed how much Vincent had hated me from the moment I'd gotten here, but to refer to my eventual death as unfortunate said something completely different. I stared at him for a long moment, trying to figure out exactly what I was seeing on his face, but I found nothing but a cool stare.

"Unless you're willing to share your father's weaknesses with us," Caterina proposed with a wide smile, passing my drink to me.

I shook my head, taking a long gulp and nodding in satisfaction. “If I knew of any, I would definitely share. Especially after today.”

“What about the charities he donates to? That usually says something about a person.”

I laughed, but as I looked around the room and found everyone staring at me emotionlessly, I realized that they were serious. “I didn’t realize bosses donated to charities.”

Vincent rubbed his chin. “Are you aware of how much money we bring in, *topo*?” For once, the nickname didn’t faze me as I shook my head. “Millions. Hundreds of millions in a good year. Donating to different charities gives us the opportunity to clean some of the dirty money we bring in, and it helps us build friendships and alliances with the general population. We need those alliances.” He paused. “We donate to the orphanage in town. Hell, we run the thing. Then our family takes in the kids who age out, and we give them a boost. Some of them stay because of our generosity, and I swear them in as made men. With the ones who don’t stay, we help them make a name for themselves in the world in another way.”

Was he trying to convince me that he was a decent person so I’d narc on my dad? “Why would you let people go?”

“They’re kids. We’re not evil,” Alessio said, mortified that I’d even ask the question.

“If they want to stay, we sometimes fake genetic testing, so they fit into the ‘Italian’ mold,” Caterina stated with a shrug. “If they go, we ask that they return and repay us one day. Some don’t, but we don’t care. Most of them come back for one reason or another. One of our orphans is a trauma surgeon at the county hospital who looks the other way when we bring in guys with gunshot wounds. It all comes back around.”

As she told me this, I noticed something flashing in her eyes—something that I couldn’t quite place. A fondness, maybe? Beyond that, I could hardly believe these people did something so good. So genuine. I’d heard all about them bringing half-breed made men into our world, but now I

understood why. They were giving orphans a place to make a home, and I couldn't fault them for that.

I'd thought the way my dad lived his life was the standard for all of the mafia, but as I looked around, I was beginning to realize that I'd spent my entire life wearing blinders, and that it was time I saw the world for what it really was. One thing was for sure: these people were not the ones my father had told me horror stories about my entire life.

VINCENT COLOMBO

It wasn't just my territory where I had favors and debts to collect, so I spent the better part of Sunday morning on the west side of town, walking between the places where I had business. None of the people there were familiar with my face, just the charitable contributions I gave them to get information on the moves of the Genoveses. It neatly covered the protection fees Pete Genovese charged for these people to operate businesses in his territory, and he wasn't the wiser. I needed them to keep their businesses open and running, and I needed to know what was happening.

I walked out of the last business of the day. I had gotten similar reports from each one. The Genoveses were being suspiciously quiet. They hadn't been around anywhere in the past week, and nobody knew where they'd gone. It was unusual, to say the least. The lack of information was concerning. There was *never* so little information, not in the years this information had been my job to gather. So instead of marching out of the west side, I strode into the Central Bar and Grill. It wasn't too busy inside. A dozen or so patrons milled about, a few were gathered around a pool table, and the rest were in their respective seats.

I went straight to the bar, keeping my senses open to anything that seemed off. I knew this place was a hotspot for gossip, and I avoided it for that reason. The last thing I needed was to be discovered here. So few people knew my face that it wasn't too much of a risk, though. My father had been known, but he'd never introduced me as an heir at important meetings,

always just as an associate of our *borgata*. Someone insignificant and meaningless. I had never asked him the reason for the distinction, but now I understood. If I'd been well-known, I never could've infiltrated a place like this, right in the center of New York's west side.

"Bourbon, neat, please. Make it top-shelf," I told the bartender, looking at the chipped counter in front of me.

A few men sat at a table about ten feet away, and one of them spoke loudly enough that I could make out each word. "I hear she's a traitor," he said. "Turned against her own people for the Colombo guy. Not much of a boss if you ask me."

I grabbed the glass as the bartender passed it to me, and I slid him a fifty and said, "Keep the rest." His eyes flashed in excitement, but he didn't say anything as he cashed out my order and put the rest in his tip jar. If there was one thing I knew for sure, it was that big tips kept people quiet. "I was never here, got it?" The man nodded and moved to the other side of the bar where a young lady sat down and glanced over a menu.

"She's probably been fucking him for years," another of the men said, shaking his head in clear disgust. "Whore." It didn't take a lot of guesses to know who they spoke about, especially when the Genovese name was constantly coming from their lips. If these men were talking about Mia that way, it meant word must've spread that she'd fought against her own father's men, despite being kidnapped. That knowledge thrilled me endlessly, and I wondered what Pete thought when he first learned what his daughter had done. Maybe turning her against him and this entire *borgata* would be the best thing to do with her, especially when Pete's men were talking about how much of a traitor the daughter was. It would have them reflecting on him as a leader too, if his own daughter couldn't be trusted.

"She should have never left the damn bedroom. She should have been traded off for an alliance. Daughters don't do shit for the power structure, and the boss knows that."

“I’d pay good money for her to fight me,” the third voice said in a weaselly tone. “Wouldn’t be much of a fight on her end, I’m sure.”

I couldn’t help but smile into my glass as I thought about the way she’d destroyed three men within minutes. That had been impressive for anyone, let alone a woman half their size. I had half a mind to bring these men to her and let her show them what she could do. The entire table busted out laughing at the joke, and I wondered how drunk they must have been to find that funny.

“I’d like to fuck her tight little pussy,” another of the men stated crudely, and I clenched my jaw at the words. “Clearly she’s a fighter.”

“I’d bet for the right price, the boss will sell her to you when he gets her back. She’s not going to be good for much else after she’s been around the block on the other side of town, if you know what I mean.”

I didn’t know why the words had me clenching my hand around the glass so tightly that I feared it may break, but I couldn’t help myself. I took a deep breath, needing to take control of this situation. I turned in my seat and looked at the table, meeting one of the guy’s eyes. “You guys are talking about the boss’s daughter?” I asked, mentally putting myself on the same level as these low-lives.

The one who looked at me first seemed immediately charmed, smiling with crooked, yellow teeth. The other two looked a little more hesitant. “What do you know about her?” one of them asked.

“I know she has a nice tan birthmark right between her tits,” I told him. I’d spent plenty of time eyeing her, and I’d never seen a birthmark there, but it was a gamble I had a feeling I could win. I’d bet none of these men had ever been in the same room as Mia, let alone gotten a good enough look at her tits to spot my lie.

“Ah,” the man to the right said, slamming his hand on the table. “I recognize you. The guard at the house, eh?”

A way in. I smiled and nodded. “Lucky to still have a job after they took her out of the house a few weeks ago,” I commented. And just like that, they all melted in the palm of my hand.

“I heard the boss killed the head guard for letting the Colombo’s spy in through the front door. The man’s slick, but they have him on camera, so Boss is a step closer to getting Mia back. Not that it’ll be a happy reunion after what she’s done.”

I chuckled under my breath as they referred to my spy—Caterina—as a “he,” but I didn’t correct them. “She’s a pretty face. He’ll be able to use her in another alliance. I’m sure he has some in mind.” In other words, *do any of you know who else he’s building alliances with?*

“There are no other *borgate* worth negotiating with. He needs Colombo’s territory to expand before he can get anything else. God knows he’s been working at this shit for years.” The man rolled his eyes. “Between us, I don’t think he can do it alone. He’s sent in spy after spy, but they can never infiltrate all the way. They never get enough information to make a difference.”

That’s because my defenses are top-tier. Because all the important information stays within my circle, and nobody can infiltrate us.

“Actually,” the man with yellow teeth spoke. “Between us, I heard they managed to get someone inside. It’s why everyone has fallen back on their usual efforts. They don’t need to pursue other avenues, because if this inside man works, the Colombos are as good as gone.”

“Wasn’t killing the first boss enough?” I asked.

“He’s not getting the territory as long as the son is alive and fighting. When we get it, we’re all going to be able to expand and grow. Boss promised all the made men a triple pay increase.”

“Fuck yeah,” one of the guys said loudly, holding up his beer. “In that case, I hope this spy is really good at his job.”

“Cheers to that, brothers,” I replied, feigning a smile and cheering with them. We all took swigs of our alcohol, and I found my mind working circles around the news I’d learned.

It made sense, of course. I’d never received so little input from all the businesses around here, so I knew something had to be going on. Something wasn’t right here, and this explained it. If he managed to get a spy to infiltrate deeper than all the rest, he wouldn’t want his men going around town and bragging about it. This bar was a safe place. No Colombos would dare enter a west-side bar frequented by the boss himself, but here I was.

I thought it had been weird that nobody had bothered coming after Mia more than once. Nobody seemed to care, aside from her friend who had fallen completely off the grid. But now, it all made sense. They were closer than I thought to finishing this, and I needed to figure out how. Who the hell had gotten deep enough within my ranks to warrant this level of drawback?

MIA GENOVESE

I strode toward the large, double office doors at the end of the hallway, and I took a deep breath. It had been another week, and nobody had bothered coming for the documents, but I'd gone through them all with a fine-toothed comb. Despite half of the information being boxed out with a black sharpie, I was one hundred percent certain that I'd found outstanding debts that nobody had known about—large ones.

Two armed guards stood outside Vincent's doors, and I paused in front of them. To my sheer surprise, neither of them stopped me. They each stepped aside and let me stride into the room. I pushed through the doors, and the guards behind me pulled them closed again with a boom.

Vincent sat across his desk, hands crossed over one another as he spoke to Caterina. Her eyes turned toward me immediately, and one of her thin brows rose in what I assumed was surprise. She held a thin blade in front of her and swiped the tip of it beneath each of her fingernails. She lay back on the couch, one knee propped up and the other relaxed.

"I don't know why they let me in," I said. "I didn't realize you were in a meeting."

"It's nothing formal," Caterina said with a shrug.

"And you're on my list of people they're not to stop," Vincent said. "What do you need?"

I looked between them and bit my lip before shaking my head. "I'll come back."

“No, you won’t,” Vincent demanded. “Show me what you have there.”

I could make this quick, I decided. I planned to show him where all the outstanding debts rested, but I could just pass over the stack. My notes on the back of many sheets were self-explanatory, and he certainly didn’t need me to decipher them.

“Here,” I said, passing them over and pointing to the top paper. “I have everything listed regarding outstanding debts, and there’s a ton of them. You can see where they all came from in the stack.”

I took a step back, making to leave the room, but Caterina stood. “You stay and go over all of this with Vinny. We have our business settled.”

I couldn’t help but look her up and down, specifically at the knife she still expertly twirled in her hand. “Who *are* you?” I found myself asking without thought. The moment the words came out of my mouth, I closed it quickly. I hadn’t intended to ask the question out loud.

She laughed. “I think the question you’re looking for is ‘what can you do?’ The answer is a lot of things.”

I knew I should keep my mouth closed, but I couldn’t help myself. “At the fight last week, how did you do that?” She had to know what I meant. She’d snuck up on a grown man and shot him without ever being seen. She’d used moves to fight others even I couldn’t do.

Vincent chimed in. “Our Caterina had a unique upbringing,” he said, looking her over. “She used to be a pickpocket—a damn good one—in order to earn enough money to survive.”

“Blending in has always been my specialty,” she admitted. “It’s how I survived as long as I did. The first person to ever catch me was Vinny himself, and he was *not* happy when I chummed a gold watch and a few hundred bucks off of him, even after he caught me and took back the wallet. I didn’t know who he was at the time, but when he found me later and told me, I realized that staying here would be my best bet.”

I wondered what kind of upbringing she must've had to need to pick the pockets of strangers for a living. I had a feeling that Caterina's story was a lot more intense and interesting than either of them was letting on, but before I could ask, she turned toward the door. "I'll keep my ears to the ground on the west side and see if I hear anything." And like that, she was gone.

"What's happening on the west side?" I asked.

Vincent shot me a piercing glance, and I nearly took a step back at the weight of it. Fortunately, I managed to keep myself cemented to the spot. "I learned some new information."

"No need to be cryptic," I scoffed, rolling my eyes. "It's not like you plan to leave me alive long enough to do anything with the information, do you?"

He sat a little straighter. "You'll be pleased to know that your family has pulled back because they have someone who's infiltrated our *borgata*, and there's no need to have boots on the ground when they have a way in already."

I clenched my jaw as I considered it. They didn't bother sending anyone for me, because they had another way into Vincent's business arrangements? I didn't think I could hate my father more for leaving me here, completely uncaring about my well-being. Whomever he had on the inside had better—

I cut off my own thought process. They had pulled back as soon as Vincent had taken me. I'd assumed my father's lack of interest in retrieving me had been a lack of care, but now I couldn't help but wonder if it wasn't that at all. It couldn't be a coincidence that there was now someone on the ground on the inside. That someone was *me*. I knew I should be pleased that he put so much stake in me gathering information and doing my job; but as his daughter, I'd expected him to care for me more than this. To be interested in retrieving me and sending me back on our terms. But he spoke about me like I was nothing more than a pawn, and I wouldn't let that stand. I couldn't be just that. I'd always known that I was a tool to

him, but I thought he cared enough to see me as more than that, too.

“Interesting,” I finally replied.

“Interesting is the only thing you have to say?” Vincent asked, easing himself to his feet in a way that I knew should’ve scared me. It didn’t, though. I knew my days here were numbered, and I realized there was little he could do to intimidate me.

“I’m not there,” I told him with a shrug, wrapping my arms around myself. “As I said, it’s not like it’s going to affect me at all.”

With a predatory stiffness, he moved around the desk and approached me, and I held my breath, my body reacting in a way I didn’t want to admit. He stopped when he stood mere centimeters from me, and his eyes flickered across each crevice of my face wildly, almost as if he was searching for something there. “I don’t fucking like you,” he told me. “And I don’t like your attitude.”

“That’s funny, because I also don’t fucking like *you* or *your* attitude.”

His brows shot up. “Do I give you the impression I care what you think?”

“Do I?”

We stared down one another, neither of us backing down, neither of us so much as flinching. I wondered if he was used to people standing their ground in front of him. I could feel how difficult it was to do so deep within my chest, but the loosening of my belly made it feel almost manageable. I hated that even after everything, I reacted to him this way. I hated that despite hating him, I wanted him.

“You’re playing a dangerous game, *topo*.”

“Those are the most fun types.”

He moved an arm up until he wrapped a hand around the nape of my neck possessively. He didn’t say anything as he stared into my eyes, likely trying to decide where to take this

conversation. I knew he wasn't used to being treated like he wasn't the superior one in the conversation—like he wasn't in control—and I did just that.

“You don't seem to know what happens when people think they're more powerful than me. *Especially* people like you.”

“People like me?” I repeated.

“Yes, people like you. People who don't fear the things that should terrify them.” He spoke in a soft, seductive tone, but I knew his words were anything but soft. “It's people like you who get yourself and everyone around you killed, because you think you're in control when you're really not.”

“I know how much control I have right now,” I told him, looking between his mouth and his eyes with a smirk. “And it's a lot more than you realize.”

His jaw clenched as his grip on the nape of my neck tightened ever so slightly. I had all the control here, and he knew it, so I shifted forward until my chest rested against his. I moved my face slowly forward, and my smirk only deepened as his tense muscles grew infinitely tenser. I shook my head and took a step away, happily having proven that I wasn't just a pawn to be used. My father may have believed me to be that, but I wasn't, and I wouldn't let Vincent act the same way.

I only managed to take a single step—one small motion—before he grabbed my upper arm and pulled me back into his chest *hard*. He wrapped one arm around my waist and with his other hand, he pulled the base of my hair roughly. He forced me to look up and into his eyes as he pressed his face close enough to mine that I felt his breath on my nose. “There's one thing you need to understand,” he said in the same deceptively soft tone. “I'm always the one in control.”

His lips slammed down on my mouth in an intense, captivating sweep. His stubble brushed across my chin as he held me there, and I realized at once that there wasn't a single thing I could do to stop the situation from progressing, but there wasn't a single thing I *wanted* to do. I felt myself melting into his arms as he held me upright, and as his grip on my hair tightened painfully, I could only gasp against his lips.

“The first time we did this, you said that you expected something different from me. Something kinkier,” he said, tilting my head to the side and snarling in my ear. “I’d love to hear what you had in mind.”

I liquified beneath his words, bringing both hands up to his chest. He thought he had all the power here, and maybe he did physically, but I had something, too. I could feel that he was attracted to me in a primal way, and I could take advantage of it.

“I expect to be fucked by a man who knows his interests, not a boy who does what’s expected of him. Which are you, Vincent?”

A snarl arose from the back of his throat, and I was moving before I could think. He sat me on the corner of my desk, and with one arm he slid my shirt over my head. I lifted my arms and allowed him to remove the garment. When he gripped the front of my bra, he tore the material like it was threadbare, and I gasped as it fell from me, revealing my heavy breasts. They ached as he stepped back and ran a hand down my center, cupping me between the legs. “I don’t fuck like a boy,” he told me.

“Then show me.”

In a swift motion, he lifted each of my legs over his shoulders and brought my pants down just enough that when he pressed his face into me, I shouted in surprise. He didn’t hesitate. He plunged his tongue deep into me, working me with its quick motions. I shuddered as he hit the perfect spot—one that had me shouting in need. I didn’t particularly like or trust him. But I *did* want him.

I fell apart beneath his tongue, and I realized that even without him inside of me, there was no disputing that this man between my thighs would not fuck like a boy.

Not even close.

VINCENT COLOMBO

I feasted on her without restraint or remorse. I obliterated her from the inside out, and when she was shuddering from her orgasm, I continued. I destroyed her before ever even revealing my cock, and when I finally withdrew, leaving her a panting, shuddering mess beneath me, I smirked up at her. She stared at the ceiling as I undid my belt, looping it around itself in a way I'd done more times than I could count.

I grabbed her hands and pulled them into my chest as I wrapped the belt around each of her thin wrists, tightening it. She gasped, and I eyed the pink nipples that looked like they could cut glass on her chest. My cock throbbed as I dropped my pants and stepped out of them with little thought. I jerked her pants the rest of the way from her body, leaving her entirely nude before me.

My fingers tightened around the belt as I jerked her off the desk, moving her toward the opposite side of the room. I hooked one arm beneath her bare ass and lifted her, pressing her back into the textured wall. I held her wrists above her head as I slid deep into her.

“God, Vincent,” she cried.

I didn't think about killing her this time. I didn't think about the cruel things that I could do with her or the things that her family did to mine. I knew that I did this to show her who was in charge, but as she clenched around me, every negative thought faded into nothing but pure enjoyment and ecstasy. This was something I wanted to do. Something I *needed* to do.

I paused when I'd completely sunk inside of her, and I clenched my jaw as I withdrew and plunged into her again. She gasped and moaned as I went at a harsh rhythm that should have been too much. For any other woman I'd fucked, this had been too far for them, but Mia rolled her eyes back and cried out as I slammed into her, shoving her back into the wall and pinning her wrists there.

God, I'd never had someone keep up with me and my pace so well. I'd never enjoyed hearing someone's moans so much. I didn't hold back as I continued pushing myself into her until the moment of no return came, building until there was no return. I pulled from her immediately and released her wrists, pumping myself twice before my cum ran all over her belly, pooling between us.

"You certainly don't fuck like a boy," she said, shaking her head and clearing her throat.

I paused and looked at where I held her in front of me. She clearly had plenty of skills of manipulation. I knew we weren't in this position only because I wanted it. Mia was cunning in a way most people were not, and I wondered how far her skills went. An idea clicked in my mind as I lowered her to the floor and took a step back. I grabbed my shirt and wiped clean my stomach before tossing it to the ground. "I have somewhere to go, and I want you to go with me."



I KNEW she wouldn't hesitate when it involved getting her out of the house, so she followed me into the van and downtown, right to the edge of her father's territory. I had a debt to collect today, and I knew it would be worth bringing her. Today would tell me precisely what I needed to know about her. "What are we doing?" she asked, looking around the rough part of the neighborhood.

I leaned back in my seat and looked at the apartment complex before us. "I allow west-side people to live here for a price. So

long as they don't do their business in our territory, they give me a fee, and I let them live their lives."

"My father's men live here?" she asked.

"For a price," I reiterated. "A price they don't like to pay, and one I have to remind them is mandatory."

"Is that what we're doing?" she asked.

I nodded and turned off my car, palming the keys and glancing over at her. She stared at the building in question. "It is."

"And what are you expecting me to do?" she asked as I opened the door, not even removing the seatbelt.

"Be useful for once."

I closed the door and began moving toward the building. It took longer than I'd expected for her to step out of the car and rush to my side. She matched each of my strides, and I held the door open as she stepped inside. "I need to know—"

"Once again, you need to know nothing," I reminded her, my step not so much as faltering.

She didn't hesitate to reply. "If you're bringing me here to—"

I turned on her and pressed her into the hallway wall, my hand on her upper chest as I held her in place. "I owe you *nothing*," I reminded her. "Show me what you can do in thick situations. I didn't bring you to ask questions. I brought you so you can show me what you're made of."

She didn't even look intimidated as she rested her head against the wall and sighed. "Fine."

I waited a few seconds before stepping away and continuing forward. She didn't even take a second to pause before following me, and damn it, I felt my cock hardening at the sheer will of this woman. She had no fear, and I couldn't tell if it was a good thing or bad. She certainly took her boldness to the next level, but we'd see how it went this time, especially as I recalled each time I'd come to gather my money in the past.

I paused at the door at the end of the hall before giving three powerful knocks. The walls were thin enough that I could hear

him shuffling around the other side of the apartment before his voice came through the door. "I'm not interested in whatever shit you're selling."

I glanced at Mia, and she only stared at the door with narrowed eyes.

"I'm not selling anything, Mike. Unless you count the rent you're three months behind on paying."

Something slammed on the other side of the apartment, and I looked toward Mia with an amused smirk. "This is where we see what you're made of, *topo*. Good luck."

The door slammed open, and the man who stood in the doorway wore no shorts and only the dullest shade of blue boxer briefs. He left little to the imagination as he stood before us, but Mia didn't even take a step back as the man looked between us, pissed that we had dared to come and collect.

"Get the fuck out of here. The rules are different now that the Colombo boss is dead," he shouted in my face. "Genovese is the new man in town, and you'd be wise to know it."

"He is, is he?" I asked, rubbing my hands together. "Have you not heard? There's a new Colombo boss, and he's a hell of a lot less understanding than the last."

He looked at me and then at Mia, who stood by my side. His eyes latched on her in a combination of interest and disgust. "You one of the Colombo whores?"

Instinctively, I yearned to move forward and shoot the man between the eyes, but as a smirk widened on Mia's face, I realized it was substantially more amusing to see this unfold without getting involved. She stepped forward with so much confidence that the man in front of her took a small step backward, nearly tripping over his own feet as she strode into his apartment and took a judgmental glance around the place.

"A whore..." She turned the word over in her mouth, and I followed her inside. "I think you should learn manners, Mike. But I'll settle for the payment due to my boss over here."

"He's not the boss I serve," Mike spat, shooting me daggers.

“We can do this the easy way or the hard way, but I’ll have you know that my father instilled the hard way into me from the time I was knee-high, and I *much* prefer that.” Before I could even see what he was doing, I watched as he swung a meat cleaver toward Mia. I took out my gun, but before I could lift and aim it, she veered out of the way, grabbing his wrist and using the momentum of his body to press him into the kitchen wall. He stood many inches taller than her, but the way she held him in place gave the illusion that she was the physically dominating one.

I tucked my gun back into my holster and watched as Mia pressed her body into his. I couldn’t stop my mind from flashing back to the way her thighs had wrapped around me and held me in place as I had fucked her. Now they pressed into this man, and I couldn’t help but feel a little jealous as she touched him.

“The hard way it is,” she said as if his attack hardly phased her. She reached to the side of his cluttered counter and grabbed a small knife, barely the length of a finger. “Here’s what’s going to happen. You’re either going to tell my friend where the money is, or you’re going to lose a finger.”

“Who the hell is your father to be teaching you this shit?” he spat.

Mia’s smile only widened. “Pete Genovese,” she said, and I watched in utter amusement as she cut the tip of his finger off with one slice. He screamed and thrashed, but she hardly reacted. “But I don’t work for him anymore. Now I work for the Colombos.”

“You were kidnapped!” he cried, and as she lifted the knife again he shouted, “I’ll tell you where it is. God, I’ll tell you!” He began relaying instructions as Mia held him there, and I moved through his house, grabbing a large wad of cash he had hidden beneath the springs of his pull-out couch. I could feel that there was far more than necessary here, but I pocketed all of it.

“My rent money’s only part of that, man,” he complained, sagging against Mia.

“Next time don’t fuck around, and this will go much smoother.” Mia pushed off him and backed away, coming back to my side as he pulled his bleeding finger to his chest. I hadn’t given her a single instruction, but somehow I found this far hotter than anything else she could’ve done.

“Don’t give me shit again, or I’ll bring her with me next time, and she won’t go easy on you.” Mia didn’t say another word as we walked out of the apartment and down the hall. It wasn’t until we reached the elevator and the doors closed that I glanced at her with a raised brow. “What the hell was that?” I asked.

She shrugged. “Me being useful.”

I didn’t even want to think about how hot it was to see her be so useful, so I closed my mouth and shook my head. I wasn’t sure if I wanted to bring her on these jobs more often because of how useful she proved to be or because of how hot I felt for her when she did reckless shit like cutting off a man’s finger. She would certainly be a fine partner.

MIA GENOVESE

I'd spent far less time in my room when Vincent decided to come and bring me to debt collections. None were as interesting as the first document I'd worked on back in the bedroom, but leaving and doing something had felt like an improvement to the boredom that constantly plagued me. This place and these people had me constantly questioning myself and what my role was here. I knew they had originally planned to use me to get to my father, but the longer I stayed here, the more I wondered if their plans had changed. Vincent hadn't said anything about my father trying to retrieve me, and it endlessly frustrated me that there was no news. I knew my father had taken all the main people off the ground in hopes that I'd follow through with my mission, but what if that wasn't the case? What if he decided he didn't care about me the way I'd thought he did? He'd always been so focused on my task that I couldn't even remember the last time he'd told me that he loved me.

My door opened without a knock, and I turned over in bed, eyeing Caterina where she stood. "Do you want to come and eat dinner with us?" she asked, leaning against the frame. I hadn't been invited to dinner in the month I'd been here, and I wondered if this was some kind of innuendo or ulterior motive.

"Someone usually brings my dinner here," I told her, pushing myself up in bed.

She sighed and shook her head. "Listen, Vinny has no idea what to do with you, and I feel like he won't be making up his

mind anytime soon. I'm not going to let you sit here and rot in your room without company when you've never done anything to deserve that kind of treatment."

I didn't know how to feel about Caterina, especially when she'd been nothing but kind to me. However, I had seen what she'd done during the fight on the west side, and I knew she could be *very* dangerous. More than that, though, I didn't know what to think or feel about any of this, and I was afraid that joining them for dinner would be a mistake. I couldn't betray my dad, even if he'd betrayed me. I had to follow through and do what had to be done, but if I saw them act like a family again—if I realized it wasn't a fluke—I didn't think I could follow through.

"Come on," Caterina said, leaving no room for debate. "Luca made it, and he'll be offended if you don't come."

I followed Caterina through the winding halls and into the kitchen where Alessio sat, one leg propped on another chair and one relaxed against the floor. He looked at Caterina, his eyes grazing down and back up her body for a moment before they fixed on me. "The fuck is she doing here?" he asked.

Caterina shot him a glare I never would've never challenged. "She's eating dinner with us, and if you have anything to say about it, *don't*."

Alessio glanced back and forth between us and didn't say anything more. Luca, on the other hand, moved around the kitchen, a dishtowel over his shoulder. I had heard what Caterina had said, but I hadn't expected him to be the one actually cooking dinner. He noticed me standing there and grabbed another plate from the cabinet, setting a fifth place silently. "Thank you," I said, framing it as more of a question than a statement. He didn't say anything, but he nodded and gave me a small, barely discernable smile.

I turned my attention to where Vincent sat at the table, giving me the devil's eye. I had a feeling Caterina had decided on her own to invite me to dinner, especially judging by the glances they each shot at me. "I can go back to my room," I suggested, biting my lip and taking a step back.

“Sit down,” Caterina demanded, and I immediately took her order.

“Damn, Cat,” Alessio said. “We’re just wondering why she’s here. She isn’t exactly part of a family dinner. She’s leverage.”

“She’s a human being,” she said, and I watched as she took a seat at my side. Vincent sat at my other, watching the entire scene with a closed mouth. “And you’d do well to remember that.”

Nobody dared to challenge her or say anything more as Luca brought the food to the table and sat it in the center, taking his seat. Everyone sat there silently, and I knew this wasn’t normal for them. I remained silent as everyone dished out their food. Caterina went last, doubling the portion that everyone else took. “I know for a fact you aren’t going to eat all of that,” Alessio said, gesturing to her food.

“I know for a fact that you know how to mind your own damn business,” she retorted.

“Who pissed in your Cheerios?” Luca asked, and I nearly spit out my drink of water as I held back my laugh. I eyed the large man, and I wondered briefly if he was as tough as he looked. He wasn’t nearly as tall as Alessio or Vincent, but his bulk more than made up for it. His bald head and tattoo-covered scalp was enough for me to take a second look and wonder.

“Are we going to have a normal conversation tonight, or should we all just go to bed early?” Vincent finally asked. “Because I’m not sitting here and listening to you all fight like children after the day I’ve had.”

I expected at least one of them to look skittish. If my father would have spoken to anyone like that, nobody would’ve said a word, knowing he’d be liable to end their lives. But Caterina shot him a look. “Okay, *Dad*, then what do you want to talk about?”

“Dad?” Alessio scoffed.

“Well, he’s trying to boss us around like one,” Caterina said. “I invited Mia here because we’re not shitbags, and we’re not going to treat her like she wronged us when she’s done nothing

but help us the entire time she's been here. I mean, for Christ's sake, it sounds like she hates her father as much as we do, am I right?" I immediately nodded, holding up pretenses, but it felt far too easy. I knew I nodded with the intention of lying, but why did it feel like it wasn't entirely untrue? "She's a part of this family for now. At least until a decision's made."

"It can't be much more dysfunctional than the other family you have, am I right, Mia?" Alessio asked.

It had been ingrained in me for so long to be deceitful and lie to my father's enemies, but I didn't feel like I needed to. I hardly knew them, but just sitting here and watching as they coexisted and teased one another felt like a place I belonged. It felt like somewhere I could speak openly to an extent. I shrugged. "Probably less dysfunctional," I admitted. I caught myself before I said anything else. *This isn't where I belong, I told myself repeatedly. These people want nothing to do with me. They want to end my father, and that's it. They don't care about me.* But no matter how much those thoughts pierced my mind, I knew they weren't entirely true.

Alessio went off about finding a small tendon in his chicken, tossing it across the table at Luca before they got in a teasing verbal battle with one another. Caterina began speaking to Vincent about unimportant parts of each of their days, and I could only watch as they acted as a family—one that deserved to stay together. I knew I had a duty to my father, but I couldn't do this. There had to be another way.

If I killed Vincent, I'd be cutting the head off of this inseparable team, and it'd be a tragedy to see that die. I could see that Caterina came from a past I didn't understand and would likely never learn. I saw that this was the sole place she belonged, and without Vincent and this group, she'd be nothing more than a wanderer. Alessio had already lost the rest of his family, and without Vincent, I didn't even want to think about what he'd become. I didn't want to think about the blossoming tension between Caterina and Alessio that would surely turn sour upon Vincent's death. And Luca...well, I couldn't even imagine where the quiet and strong Luca would

end up without this team. Vincent held these people together, and I was beginning to understand that.

I had to get in contact with my father and end this. He couldn't rely on me to be an inside source when the connection I felt with these people was too strong to ignore. There had to be another way to give my father what he wanted without ruining these people's lives.

VINCENT COLOMBO

Luca and Alessio sat to my left and right as the table slowly filled in around me. Alessio, as the underboss, greeted men on my behalf as I took in the scene, ensuring everything ran smoothly. I had Luca as my *consigliere* keep a close watch for any conflict that might arise. All the *capos* we hosted sat around the table, and most of them seemed to get along well. They all had the last name of Colombo, but that meant little when it came to rank. Luca was the only one in the room without our last name, but none of the Colombos would ever take his place, and everyone knew it.

My father's *consigliere* sat next to him sat two seats away, keeping a close eye on the crowd just like Luca, but he didn't show a hint of animosity toward the new arrangement. Luca had been my best friend and right-hand man for years, and the closest members of the family could never understand why my loyalty to him ran so deep when he wasn't a Colombo. But no other Colombo had ever taken a bullet in the leg for me, and I didn't trust that anyone aside from Alessio and Caterina ever would. When my father was murdered, I took his place and named the two as my top lieutenants. My uncle, Christian, had been in Luca's role for years, and he still took on some of the duties without the title. For that reason, he sat right below Luca in the hierarchy. Almost no other Colombos respected my decision to change the personnel my father set in place, but they didn't seem to agree with *any* facet of change set in place.

There were still a handful of missing members of the family, and I took note of who wasn't there as I stood and the room

fell silent. “Thank you all for coming. I know I haven’t called one of these meetings in my time as boss, and I’d like to start by thanking you all for making this transition as effortless as possible.” Formalities were bullshit, and we all knew it, but I made a point of eyeing each person who made the transition less than effortless for me. They each stared back with wide eyes.

“Is there a reason you called an official meeting?” Christian asked. “Or is it for mere introductions?”

I sighed and shook my head. “It’s no secret that we’re in the middle of a hostile situation with the Genovese boss after what he did to our family. We have a few things to discuss regarding that conflict, and we have other recent mishaps with the Irish mob that came to light recently. Pete Genovese has been keeping many of his soldiers close to the ground, and his *capos* are nowhere to be found. Either he went off the rocker, or the information I gathered is good.”

“A Genovese off his rocker isn’t something unusual,” one of my distant cousins said from the other end of the table.

“It’s also not unlikely that he finally managed to infiltrate with an inside man. He’s been trying for years, as we all know. Nobody has been successful, but I received word that he finally accomplished it.” Everyone in the room stared silently.

“You can’t think that it’s one of us,” another cousin asked. “We were all loyal to your father for years.”

“I’m not my father, and plenty of you have shown that you’re less than content to have me as your new boss. It was bound to happen eventually, but when nobody expected it, many of you showed your true colors.”

“Many of the people in this room were shocked and absolutely flabbergasted to hear that we lost two beloved members of our family,” Christian admitted.

“And your sons showed up to the emergency Commission meeting where I was named heir, and they tried to fight it. They used the names of people in this room to justify their decision—people who still haven’t come and pledged their

loyalties.” I looked around the room again. “It’s been over a month, and I still haven’t heard from many of you.”

Christian sighed deeply, but he had nothing to do with what his sons decided to do. They controlled entirely different sectors of my investments, and they worked together to do so. It was only because of their father that they each survived their betrayal that night, but I didn’t doubt for a second that they would turn out to be responsible for the inside person attempting to ruin my career.

“You’re accusing some of us, then?”

I leaned into the table. “I’m asking that all of you keep your eyes out for anything that may seem wrong, and I’m giving one last command to make your allegiance to me clear, or you will regret it.” I knew that my message would cross the room stiffly, and the tensions rose immediately. The people here weren’t subject to my brutality the way the others in my life were, and they never hesitated to hold their tongues. At my father’s meetings, there would be constant arguments and outrage over decisions, but everyone knew their place and knew that once the meeting ended, they trusted and respected their boss.

I wasn’t sure if all the people here still felt like that, but I couldn’t imagine any of them intentionally betraying me. Not when they’d been loyal to this regime for so long. However, I still needed to make my truth clear. I still had to rule with a firm fist if I wanted to demand the respect I was owed.

“Have you not considered that you have a mole under your nose?” a first cousin asked—Christian’s daughter. I knew she held resentment that I kicked out her father from a role of power, despite the way he didn’t seem to care. “You kidnapped his daughter and married her for legal purposes. How involved has she been in your affairs and with your inner circle?” she asked. “It makes more sense that she’d be the cause.”

I opened my mouth to deny the accusation, but I clenched it shut again. Up until she was taken, there had been no large-scale withdrawal. There had been nothing unusual about the Genovese businesses or people, and I knew instinctively that

Christian had to be onto something. Why had Pete Genovese been adamant about keeping her and using her as I pleased? I'd thought he genuinely didn't care for his daughter at all—that it was a perceived weakness that we'd gotten wrong. But I'd seen what Mia could do with her words and with her bare hands, and a woman didn't become that skilled without a purpose. I couldn't think of a single way all of these variables made sense outside of the suggestion at hand.

Mia was the only part of this equation that hadn't made sense from the start. We'd wanted to kill her, but when her father hadn't shown any interest, we'd let her live. We continued letting her live for that reason. Was it possible that we were all being played? I looked between Alessio and Luca, and they seemed to be considering something similar. It made sense, but it didn't make sense why she would've fought for us. She'd been adamant about fighting her father's men, and she didn't seem to care how it affected him. *That* didn't make sense.

“Regardless, I'd like everyone to keep their eyes open and make sure there isn't anyone else infiltrating our ranks. I trust each of you to do right by me, and I would hate to regret that decision.” I paused and kicked Alessio under the table, glancing at him. He nodded and stood, stepping out of the room. He knew where my mind had gone, and he had his phone in his hand before he fully left the room. “The next order of business is the Irish mob moving into town. They've been causing an uproar for all of us recently—more than usual.”

“Pete had a kill-on-sight order,” another cousin said. “It's keeping them from getting their roots too deep in our territory because it's so close to his.”

“We're going to have to implement something similar, but only if the man is approved by me before being questioned and killed. They've been trafficking in bad drugs, stuff that's been killing our customers. They've laced in so much shit that we have to be more careful about where we're storing it.” I glanced at Christian. “Your boys are responsible for the safeguarding of those assets. Have them double the guards,

and have the details sent to my desk by tomorrow morning. I want to clear each name before they're around our shit."

Christian nodded, and Alessio stepped back into the room, staying beside the door. His eyes were narrowed and jaw clenched, and I immediately straightened. "You are all dismissed. Come to me if you have further concerns." I didn't give anyone a chance to speak further as I stepped into the hallway with Alessio and closed the door. "Did you get ahold of Caterina?"

"Yes," Alessio said, shaking his head. "Mia said she was walking across the street to pick up food for them, and she hasn't come back in a half-hour. She's in the wind."

MIA GENOVESE

I knew I had almost no time to talk to my dad. The only way he'd talk to me would be face-to-face and in his territory. He wouldn't trust that I was alone and uncompromised, especially after I'd fought his men. The only choice I had was to go to him. When I'd heard about Vincent's meeting, I knew it was my only opportunity to go, so I slipped Caterina and left. I caught a cab all the way to the west side and walked the last three blocks to my father's manor, eyeing the people who passed by on the streets. Nobody seemed to recognize me until I finally reached the gates to his house, and they opened immediately for me.

I walked inside, and at the door I found one of my cousins sitting in a small alcove. He sat up and looked at me in shock, almost like I was nothing more than a ghost to him. "Benj," I greeted. "Is he in?"

We both knew to whom I was referring, and Benji nodded, standing quickly and moving toward me. "Everyone thought he'd killed you. We heard that you were his new wife and fighting for him, but...Uncle Pete said it was all part of the plan. I thought for sure you'd been killed and he was covering it."

I pursed my lips and continued striding toward where I knew his office was, not bothering to give my cousin another glance. I wondered how many different rumors were circulating about my whereabouts. I didn't even think my father knew what was happening, though I didn't doubt he gave the illusion that everything was perfectly in line with his plans. I didn't bother

knocking on his office door, knowing I had a severely limited timeframe. When I shoved open the doors, I saw my father sitting on the other end, leaning over a pile of documents. His eyes veered up to me, but they didn't soften how I'd anticipated. Had they ever softened when he'd looked at me? "Mia," he greeted, uncertainty clear in his gray eyes. Not worry. He didn't even look me up and down to check for injury. "Why are you back? Is the job done?"

That told me all I needed to know about the inside person Vincent had been talking about. *I* was that person, and I was clearly doing a piss poor job at it. "No, I needed to talk to you about that. There are a lot of things I don't think you know about them, and I'm not sold on the fact that killing Vincent would be the best option."

He leaned forward slightly, and I knew I'd messed up by making my claim right out of the gate. But I didn't have time to work around the topic. I didn't have a chance to say anything other than what needed to be said and then return before anyone noticed I was gone. Frankly, they'd probably already noticed, and I needed time to get an alibi. This had to be settled quickly. "You're on a first-name basis with our enemy now?" he asked. "I heard all about you fighting your own people for him. I assumed they had misunderstood the situation. Maybe you were trying to prove yourself to get closer to him. Was I incorrect?"

I paused. What was I to say? I *had* fought my father's men, and I didn't feel a bit of guilt about it. Not when their only message was that I was nothing more than a pawn to be used and discarded. "Are you not concerned about me at all?" I finally asked. "He took me, and he planned to kill me and send me back in pieces. You understand that, correct?"

He didn't look even a bit horrified by my words, and I ground my teeth as he shrugged. "That was his intention, yes. But he ensured you were where you needed to be to get the job done. I need you to kill him, Mia. You've trained for years, and I know you're more than capable."

I wanted to argue that he didn't seem to give a single shit about my well-being, but that wasn't the focus of this

conversation, and it certainly wasn't important enough to mention right now when I had to convince him to change his plans. "I am capable," I told him, crossing my arms. "But since being there, I've realized that killing the Colombo boss may not be the best tactical move. I know what you've told me about him and his crew, but it's not all true. They're—"

"They're our enemies," he said, his voice booming around the office. "They've never been anything less than enemies to us, even when you were betrothed to him for an alliance. You know that. You know who they bring into the mafia, and you know the consequences of it."

I did know who they recruited, but now that I knew the reason behind it, I couldn't fault them for what they did. It ended badly once, and Vincent's father and sister paid the price, but it ended in their favor too many times to see it as a bad thing. They saved the lives of too many orphans to write it off as something bad. But even though I had that knowledge, I decided not to share it with him. "I don't think that's worth taking down an entire *borgata*," I told him. "The hierarchies are too unstable, and there would be too many loose cannons vetting for Vincent's place. There's no saying who could become the leader next."

"Me," he said concretely. "You know that's the plan, and the Commission has all but approved it. If there's too much instability, they'll appoint me to keep the peace. You know this. You're going to go back and follow through on our plans, because this is the only way to get what we're owed."

Something clicked. "Is this the biggest reason you want to pick a fight with the Colombos?" I asked. "Not because of the mistakes they've made in the past, mistakes that cost all of us. Not because of the pure-bred Italian legacy. You're concerned with destroying them because of the territory."

"You know that's the reason for all of this," he said back. "It's always been the plan. If you would've succeeded in killing Vincent before the death of his father, it would've driven the old *borgata* boss mad with vengeance, and he would've signed his own death warrant by retaliating. Killing the old boss and

his daughter guaranteed that his son would act irrationally, and he did. He took *you*.”

I shook my head. “Have I been nothing more than a pawn to you in all of this?” I asked, my heart breaking. “I thought I was your heir. I thought I was the one meant to expand our *borgata* and make history so we could do this together.”

His laugh came out hoarse. “I’ve never named you my heir. My underboss is my brother. You’ve never been in line, and I’ve never told you such a thing. I planned all of this out to work itself out in the end, and you’re the only variable going against my plans, Mia. You’re the one who can make or break this plan, and I can assure you that if you break it, there’ll be grave consequences.”

I’d done everything to make him happy for my entire life, never looking too closely at the dynamic between us. I’d stupidly assumed that I was more than a chess piece to him. I’d assumed that he was acting on a moral high ground, and the territory he’d gain was the biggest benefit. I’d assumed so many things that my head spiraled as I considered everything I had wrong. I couldn’t kill Vincent. I couldn’t kill their legacy when they had accomplished so many great things I’d been blind to until now.

“Get your ass back there and make me proud. Do what you’ve been trained to do.” *Or else*. I knew the words were implied, so I stepped back and nodded. One thing I knew about the man was his unswayable energy and the way he wouldn’t take well to a debate, so I moved from the room, my mind spiraling as I left the manor and made my way down the street and into a donut shop right inside of Vincent’s territory. I hardly heard my own voice as I ordered a dozen different flavors and paid using the card Caterina had given me.

I’d been lied to my whole life, I realized. And when he hadn’t outright lied, he’d deceived me into believing certain things. I’d always had an unwavering loyalty to my father, and as I thought back on the conversations we’d had, I realized that it had been me who deluded myself. He’d made it sound as if the Colombo family was cruel and harsh beyond my imagination, but he had never named me as heir, and I’d known in the back

of my mind that I likely wouldn't ever be named as such. But I had thought there'd be some level of honor once I'd completed this mission. Now, though, I was beginning to see the truth. I was a pawn now, and he'd make sure I remained that way as long as I lived. His message had been genuine the day I'd fought his men: he would use me as a bride and assassin now, and then he'd sell me off to the next highest bidder later.

I walked out of the donut shop and toward Vincent's home, deciding against a cab this time. My head so far in the clouds, I didn't notice anyone approaching until a firm hand pressed my chest into the nearest wall, and I dropped the box of donuts to the ground. "Where the fuck were you?" Vincent snarled in my face, using his other hand to pat down my body. I realized that he was looking for weapons, and I froze.

"Donuts," I said lamely. I had this alibi, but the rapidness of his approach had me stumbling over my words. "I got donuts from my favorite spot. Caterina sent me out for food..."

"You are *not* free to go wherever you please. We may be treating you with a level of respect, but you are still our prisoner, and I don't expect you to see yourself as anything more than that. Do you understand me?" he shouted. I only gaped at him. "I asked you a question." His voice was louder and harsher than I'd ever heard it. I had never seen Vincent lose his temper in such a way. He'd killed people out of anger, and he'd been angry in front of me plenty of times, but he always maintained a cool and collected demeanor. This was different. This was frantic.

"Yes," I whispered.

I followed as he dragged me toward a black SUV that he had haphazardly parked beside me. I'd been so lost in thought that I'd somehow not noticed him swerving toward me and jumping out. I hadn't noticed anything. I'd been so caught in my father's trap and all of his deceptions that I had no idea what to think or where to turn. I had a lot of reflecting to do, and it all involved the man who was pulling me into the car and slamming the door behind me. The man who had a family who loved him. The man who donated to orphanages. The man who I had unwittingly come to care for in the past month.

What was I going to do?

VINCENT COLOMBO

I spent a long while trying to figure out what to do with Mia. Luca and Caterina both gave their input and admitted that they couldn't stand by and watch me kill the innocent woman, and Alessio, for the first time, said he'd support my decision regardless of what it was. I knew my brother well enough to know it was a formal way of saying he agreed with the other two, and I had no idea what to do with that.

Mia had engrained herself into our ranks, and if she was the mole as some of my family suggested, I would have to do away with her. But I didn't think she was the one we were looking for. I didn't think she was guilty of any of the things her father had done, and punishing her as if she were felt wrong. I was the fucking boss of a crime family, and I knew brutality was essential to keep my title, but the thought of hurting Mia ground on every sensible nerve in my body. She had fought for us; even if it had been a ruse to engrain herself in our ranks, she'd done it well. She had earned some of our trust, but she was the only one to use against her father. How had my father made these decisions?

I sent Caterina to gather Mia for breakfast and made my way to the kitchen, starting on some eggs and bacon. It was time we settled this—that I evened the playing field and opened up about this situation and my plans with her. I needed to give her full disclosure that I was feeling unsure anymore about using her to hurt her father. I wasn't sure it would send the right message, especially when he had made it clear that he didn't care about where she ended up as long as she fetched him a

good price. My jaw ticked, the thought making my stomach churn.

The patter of footsteps approached from behind as I pulled the last piece of sizzling bacon from the stovetop. “Good morning,” Mia said, phrasing it as more of a question than a comment. I only nodded as I gathered both large plates and brought them to the long dining table. It had already been set for six people, so I chose my usual seat and gestured for her to sit in the one beside me. “This feels serious,” she said. “Not at all like breakfast.”

We both sat, and I scooped a heaping portion of each dish onto my plate, passing her the serving spoon next. “It is serious. I feel like, after everything, it’s important I level with you. You deserve to know where I plan to go from here and how I plan to face your father’s threats to me and my people.”

“I was under the impression you were going to use *me* to face my father’s threats.”

I looked her up and down, from the knotted hair she still hadn’t touched after a night of sleep to the oversized pajamas that swamped her. She hadn’t even bothered to get ready for breakfast with me, and that realization brought my mind to a screeching halt. It was almost as if she trusted me with this side of her—the vulnerable, barely awake side. It shouldn’t have mattered, but somehow, it did. “That was the plan,” I told her.

“Was?”

“Let me be upfront for a moment here, Mia. I have every reason to want to kill your father, but I have no reason to become someone like him. Taking you out of this world would make me a monster, just like the monsters that I fight every day, and it’s not something I want to do. Do you know what he did to make me feel this way?”

She stared into my eyes and gave a small nod, but I needed to repeat it. I needed to make sure she understood everything that had gone into my decision to kill her, and then she needed to know what had gone into my decision to spare her instead. I needed to give her the chance to continue down the correct

path, especially if the rumors of her being a mole are true. I didn't think she was, but it was my duty to explore all the possibilities.

"Your father called a peaceful meeting regarding our arranged marriage, so my father brought my sister. She was just learning all the different dynamics of the mafia life, and she was beginning to understand how delicate some situations were. My father brought her so the day would serve as a teaching moment." My heart raced as I recollected the events of that day, but I continued. "When they showed up, he killed them. I could barely identify their bodies." She gave me a sympathetic look, and I knew it was genuine. "I wanted revenge for my father, but I would've *killed* to have revenge for my sister. And you—well, you seemed like Pete Genovese's biggest weakness."

"I understand why you made that decision," she told me.

"You *can't* understand!" I shouted, taking a deep breath and calming my breathing. My sister's loss was still so fresh—too fresh to properly remain calm—so I focused on my father. I faced a different kind of anger when I thought about him. It was still fresh, but I could use reason when I considered it. "My father was killed by yours, but the commission ordered it to be done. My sister, though...you were going to pay for that. I was going to either send pieces of you back to him or get you pregnant and kill both you and his next heir. And until I knew you, I didn't care."

All this shit had my blood thumping in my ears, and the only thing that calmed me enough to take a deep breath was her unblinking gaze that remained locked on mine. Her emerald eyes peered so deep into my soul that I almost believed she could see the dark chasm there—the shattered pieces the loss of my family had left behind. "I already knew all these things," she said gently. "And I'm sorry for what he did. I truly am." I remembered when she hadn't been sorry at all. I remembered when she'd claimed it had been justified, and I could see so clearly that she wasn't thinking those things now. I didn't know what had changed her perspective, but something had. She continued, "Can you tell me about her?"

I knew who she meant, and the question took me aback. I began speaking before I could think better of it. “She wasn’t meant for this world. She was too good for all of us. All she ever wanted was to be an artist, but she felt obligated to join this life so she could be with us. She painted small murals and designs all around the house, and even though Dad would give her shit about it, we all loved them. We all loved *her*.”

Mia finally looked toward the plate in front of her, sadness wafting from her. “She sounds like a beautiful person.”

“She was.”

The conversation between us fell silent for a few minutes, and I took a bite of bacon, chewing it as I considered the other things I needed to tell her. First, I needed to calm down and get myself under control. The sadness made way to a deep rage that hadn’t fully left me since seeing their bodies, and I didn’t need to push that rage onto Mia. But even after three minutes of silence, I couldn’t shake that anger, so I continued anyway. “The Commission ordered the death of my father, and they did it because of the fucked-up ideologies that had been passed down through the generations. As boss, my father had every right to create new made men, but unlike the other families he never cared about using full-blooded Italians.”

“It’s for the safety of our people,” she said, shaking her head. “It prevents undercover people from infiltrating, and it keeps everyone safe and loyal.”

Her father had conditioned her so goddamned well that it sickened me. “Blood means nothing. Loyalty means everything.”

“The reason they have a problem with it is the made man who started a shooting at one of the conventions, Vincent.”

I wasn’t arguing with her about this. “We use orphans who have nowhere to go,” I reminded her. “The ones who want to join us are loyal to us entirely. It’s the reason nobody’s been able to take what’s ours. We have too many people who would lay down their lives for my family. Genetics should mean nothing, so we don’t let it. That’s a part of my father’s legacy I intend to continue.” I could tell that this was a point she didn’t

understand or want to accept, and my frustration only grew. “One person betrayed us and the Commission killed my father for it. They killed him because he was generous enough to give children a path in life when they would otherwise be on the streets. And now, half of my family is dead.”

She didn't say anything as she moved the eggs around on her plate. She disagreed with a lot of the things I'd said about the Commission, and that'd be something I'd remedy tomorrow. “You're the only one who can give me the means to retaliate, but I can't use you like that, not when you're innocent in all of this,” I said, going back to the main discussion at hand. I hated saying it. I hated admitting to both of us that I no longer had the plan to retaliate and get the justice I was owed.

She moved her hand to my lap and squeezed before shifting it to the left and grabbing my hand. The feeling of that gesture sent sparks shooting through my arm. Something as simple as her touch obliterated me, so I jerked away and stood. She was trying to comfort me, but I didn't need comfort from her. Not when she wasn't on the same page about so many crucial things. I hated that I wanted her. I hated that she was innocent in all of this. I hated this entire fucking situation.

“I'm not weak, and I don't need your comfort,” I snarled, bending until my face was an inch from hers. “I need this whole situation to go away, and until you can offer solutions, I don't want anything from you. Not a goddamned thing. But if you betray me, Mia, just know that I'll be forced to act. Neither of us will enjoy what comes of that. Do you understand?”

She gaped at me for a moment as the words sank in, and finally she nodded. I turned and walked out of the room, hoping the mole wasn't the person everyone said it was. It *couldn't* be her.

MIA GENOVESE

Caterina came in and gathered me the next day for a “meeting,” and no matter how much I prodded, she wouldn’t tell me what it was for. All she’d said was that Vincent had insisted I go, and that she wasn’t to explain until we got there.

“Vincent isn’t going to be there?” I asked as we began the drive. Alessio drove while Caterina and I sat in the back seat. She lounged with her legs crossed as if this meeting wasn’t of any significance, and it gave me a little more confidence as we neared the location Alessio had put in his GPS. Then again, Caterina seemed entirely unstable. It wouldn’t have surprised me to see her riding into a war similarly.

Alessio replied this time. “He has business elsewhere today. As his underboss, I can represent him whenever it’s necessary. Plus, I like going to these meetings. I’m a little more personable than Vincent, so it goes more smoothly.” I could understand that. From my encounters with Alessio, I’d noticed far more smiles and light-hearted conversations than I could ever imagine with Vincent. None of the smiles or conversations had been directed at me, but I’d seen the way he’d interacted with Caterina and others, and it was a sharp contrast to Vincent’s demeanor.

“If he’s not here, I don’t understand why I am.”

“Beats me,” Caterina said, picking at her nails. “He just insisted we bring you. I imagine it’s so you can get a better look at what we do here.”

“It’s not like he plans to keep me here,” I told her. “It doesn’t matter if I see what you do.”

She gave me a scrupulous look and chuckled lightly. “You really are blind, aren’t you?” *Blind?* She didn’t say it as if she meant it as an insult, but I wondered if that had been her intention. Caterina was so hard to read, and I could never be sure where I stood with her. Though I had a feeling she’d make her thoughts known if she truly disliked me. But how could she not after my father had taken so much from her boss?

Alessio pulled to a stop outside the building, and we all stepped from the car. The building looked entirely ordinary. It sat in between a nail salon and a tax place, but it didn’t have any particular sign to mark it as a business. The plaza itself didn’t seem outwardly bad, but without a sign, I made sure to stand behind Caterina and Alessio as we all made our way inside. We passed the empty reception area and marched toward the voices in the back of the building. I didn’t know what I’d expected. My father had wanted me to kill this man for his gross and horrible misdeeds, but I hadn’t seen a sign of anything innately horrible. But a part of me still anticipated the worst from the meeting. A part of me wanted to be able to justify killing Vincent and giving my father what he wanted.

When I heard a child’s excited voice, I deflated. I knew Vincent was decent, but hearing the child’s voice only reminded me that the side I’d picked—my father’s side—may not have been the right one after all. We walked into the room, and I looked around at all the people inside. A woman and two young boys sat at one end of the table, and they wore their bookbags on their backs as they sat on the floor and played with toy cars. A few gruff-looking men wearing mafia colors sat at the table, talking to one another. Then, intermingled among them, stood a handful of ordinary people. A man with well-groomed facial hair and a cane. A plump middle-aged woman with a manilla envelope. A few young men who looked like textbook business owners.

Everyone’s eyes veered toward us as we entered, and Alessio immediately greeted a few of the people, making small talk as

Caterina and I took our seats in the center of the table. She looked around as if scanning for threats, and I wondered if she was acting as a guard today. It wouldn't surprise me if that was her role here, especially given the gun holstered at her hip and the knife she constantly wore there, too—the one she pulled out and began twirling in her hands as she waited for Alessio to take his seat. What kind of meeting was this?

Alessio finally took his seat and looked around the table. “I'm opening this meeting for conversation before I get started. Is there anything anyone would like to say?”

One of the businessmen in a suit and tie stood. “I just wanted to thank you and Vincent for contributing to my accounting firm over the past year. We're indebted to you. We were drowning at the beginning of the year, and your business alone brought us afloat. And all the referrals you've given have helped us thrive. Thank you.”

“You're the reason we're able to contribute so much, Harold,” Alessio says. “Claiming so much of our money on our behalf and doing our books has kept everything under wraps.”

Another person stood and thanked Alessio for something similar, claiming that Vincent saved his business, too. Caterina leaned into me and whispered quietly enough that nobody could hear, “This is how he launders his money. He makes generous contributions in exchange for them giving him a position in their companies in name only.”

I whispered back. “What's the point?”

She chuckled and leaned over a bit closer. “Have you ever heard the advice not to do more than one illegal thing at a time?” I nodded. My dad had said that plenty of times, though he never seemed to follow his own advice. He was untouchable by the law because of his position as Head of the National Commission, but Vincent wasn't. “He has positions at these companies so that he can claim an income from them. He feeds drug money into their businesses over the span of a year, and for tax purposes he earns that same amount. That way, the business breaks even, and he can claim the dirty

money he's giving them." That was smart. That way, all of his income streams had a taxable source.

"And he gives them a lump sum every year for their help—enough to bring the businesses out of whatever hardships they're facing. He gives referrals out for the accounting firm, and he pays a significant amount for his taxes to be forged. For a place like an orphanage, he helps the kids who age out and donates a few hundred thousand every year to ensure they have all the things they need and want."

"He thinks he's entitled to the kids because he donates money?"

She snorted. "You clearly don't know Vinny at all if you think that." She was right. I *did* know he wouldn't feel that way. I didn't know why I wanted to continually think the worst of him. Maybe it was because everything would be easier if he was the bad guy I'd thought he was. He'd told me that he recruited the orphans when they aged out of the system and had nowhere to go. He helped the ones who needed help, and though he asked for them to return the favor one day, he didn't expect it. Vincent was decent, and I was the evil one for considering taking him out of this world.

"I'm only here because he picked me from this orphanage and saved my life," Caterina said matter-of-factly. I whipped my head toward her, gaping at the realization. "I tried to pickpocket him, and he offered me a position instead of taking my life. I'll never forgive that debt." The thought of Caterina in an orphanage was something I couldn't imagine, and I wondered if she'd gotten her violent, knife-wielding tendencies from her time there. I wondered if she'd endured things that went far beyond the rest of us, and I wondered if Vincent really had been the one to save her life.

A toy car launched across the room, and it hit Alessio in the shoulder before he caught it and eyed it with a raised brow. He slowly moved his gaze to the boys on the floor, both wide-eyed and covering their mouths as they giggled. "Flying cars haven't been invented yet," he teased, holding the one small, ordinary one between his fingers. "But I have a feeling one of you is well on your way to making that happen." I grinned as

he tossed the car back, completely unfazed by the boys' giggling. His smile remained on his face as he got back to talking to one of the other people.

“Okay, now that everyone has had a chance to speak, we have some unofficial business to discuss.” He opened a folder in front of him and glanced down at the paper. I recognized it as the list of debts I'd gone through. My handwriting was in the margin in a blue pen, and I gaped. “We have roughly twenty thousand more dollars coming in, and we need to know who can help us claim that income.”

One of the businessmen raised his hands. “Our profit margins are lower this year than last, so we can make it fit.”

Alessio nodded and added a note beside mine. “Excellent. And we anticipate another hundred thousand in profits next year. Can I assume everyone can split that number among their businesses? We can launch an advertising campaign for your businesses in order to make it more believable if anyone else's margins are down this year, too.” A room full of nods accompanied his question. “Then anticipate an additional ten to thirty thousand depending on how business goes.”

I leaned toward Caterina. “Everyone here can be trusted?”

She only nodded as Alessio continued. “Emily,” he said, looking at the woman beside the two children. “Vincent has his eye on the three orphans aging out of the system. Are they interested in having a sit-down with him to discuss options?”

She nodded. “Two of them will need assistance to fund college, and the other had taken an interest in becoming a made man. He has nowhere else to go, and I think he'll be a good fit.”

“Nowhere else to go?” I asked.

Emily turned her kind eyes to me and gave a half-smile. “He's a troubled boy. He has a past that will keep him from traditional work. But he gets along with Vincent, and he's loyal to those who help him. He's always been a good boy, but this is his only option.”

My heart sank as I considered all the kids like that whom Vincent has helped. I knew how hard the world was for people who made mistakes in their past, and if Vincent was willing to make the lives of these people better, who was I to judge? The thought of Italian descent prodded the back of my mind, but I pushed it away. That factor didn't matter. It didn't need to play into what he was doing here. He wasn't pulling people off the streets and disregarding the rules set by the Commission. He was *helping* people, and I should have seen that before.

“For the other two, Vincent can fund three years of modest living expenses—more if they swear to return his favor in the future,” Alessio continued, clicking his pen. “Those are the matters that needed to be discussed today. I think that’s all.”

The door to the room opened, and another man walked inside. This one looked rougher than the rest as he walked cockily toward the table and rested a hand on it beside Emily. He glanced at Alessio. “Sorry, I’m late. What did I miss?” He sounded anything but apologetic.

“We’re done here, actually. There’s nothing for you today. But Vincent would like to see the income reports from this month.” Even Alessio’s tone changed, growing more distant and less accommodating. The entire dynamic of the room shifted to discomfort with this man’s presence, and I wondered why everyone seemed to fear him. I could tell he wasn’t a business owner or a traditional employee of Vincent’s, but who was he?

Caterina whispered to me once again. “He’s Vincent’s biggest drug dealer. He handles the big trades, and he’s always bringing more trouble than he’s worth. But he’s damn good at not getting caught.”

He whipped his head toward us and narrowed his eyes. “A new bitch,” he said, looking directly at me. “What do you do?”

I didn’t know what to say to his crude tone, but Caterina didn’t hesitate to stand, slamming the blade of her knife into the table. “You’re talking to the boss’s girl.”

He didn’t take his eyes off me. “Boss’s girl? I’ve seen the other chicks he’s fucked. He still chose this one?” he sneered. “That’s what you do, then? You fuck Vinny?”

Caterina leaned into the table, resting her hand on the base of her knife. “Insult his girl again and I’ll kill you before he even gets to you.”

The man rolled his eyes and tapped the table before turning away and leaving the room as quickly as he’d entered it. Of all the things I could’ve been thinking about, I couldn’t get Caterina’s words out of my mind. *The boss’s girl*. I didn’t know at what point those words started feeling real, but they now did. They felt like a badge of honor, and I couldn’t shake it.

I was his prisoner—I was supposed to be his future executioner—but that didn’t feel true anymore. Even if I had to, I didn’t think I could bring myself to kill Vincent. Though I’d been relentlessly thinking about what to do for weeks, I knew what had to be done. I knew the side I had to choose.

VINCENT COLOMBO

The fucking reports were a mess. I'd been waiting on them for two weeks, and I told Alessio to address the situation at the meeting with Ty that morning. Not only had Ty been late, but Alessio said he'd insulted Mia. *My Mia*. He thought he was invaluable to us, but nobody was valuable enough to get away with that. He'd given sloppy reports in the past, and I'd confronted him and beat him into place. But he knew his place, and I'd remind him what he could and couldn't get away with. I was on the fence about killing him or maiming him, but as I worked my way through the report, finding the second half worse than the first, my decision was made. I talked with Luca about it, demanding that he make a message of the execution so that nobody else would make the same mistake, and I knew it would be done by morning.

What I hadn't expected was a visit from Mia. She stormed into the room as if on a mission, and I immediately set the pen on the desk and gave her my attention. "I made a decision," she told me.

"Continue," I told her. She looked wild—entirely frenzied by whatever she'd been thinking about.

"I know you still don't know what to do with me, and I know you're pissed about what my father did. I am too. I also know why you sent me to that meeting this morning. You wanted me to hear the report about the orphanage. You wanted me to understand why your family runs things the way they do, and I understand it now. I get why you recruit orphans with nowhere else to go and can understand why you do it. The Italian

bloodline isn't as important as that, and I think it's a bold and courageous thing to do." She paused and took a deep breath. "I know you're pissed at me—"

"I'm not pissed at you," I told her.

She froze. "You're not?"

"No. I'm pissed that your father indoctrinated these rigid beliefs onto you, and I'm pissed that it took so much effort to get you to see that his teachings were bullshit. But I'm not pissed at you." She didn't seem to know what to say to that, so I waited, leaning back in my chair. I was also pissed that my people believed she was a villain, even though she'd proved herself to be the opposite. I was pissed that I still had no plans to get back at her father for what he had taken from me. I was pissed at more things than I knew how to count, but Mia wasn't one of them.

"Okay...well, then, I guess that makes this a bit easier," she concluded, leaning into my desk. "I'm with you."

My brows shot up. "With me?"

"I like the way you run things here, and I like you. I didn't want to when you brought me here, and maybe this is some twisted, fucked-up form of Stockholm Syndrome, but I'm with you. I'm staying with you."

I didn't know what to think about that proposition. I pulled myself to my feet and slowly made my way around the desk, not dropping her gaze as I went. When only a sliver of air sat between our bodies, I moved my hand to the back of her neck and pulled her face closer to mine. The catch of her breath sent an ache through me, but I kept my composure. I had to. "Define what you mean by 'with me,' Mia. Because if you mean what I think you do, there'll be no turning back."

Her eyes flashed something hot, and I knew exactly where her mind had gone. "I mean that I'm here to stay," she whispered, her breath fanning my lips. "In whichever ways you'll have me."

I pulled her face closer and thrust my lips against hers, wrapping the other arm around her waist. I pulled her entire

body flush with mine, and she moaned lightly against my lips, bringing both of her hands to my chest. The warmth and honey taste of her consumed my every thought as I delved deeper into her, worshipping every sound and move she made. She writhed against my firm hold, but I didn't allow it to break.

I needed her closer. I needed to be inside of her. I needed her beneath me, crying out as I fucked her into next week. When my lips brought these soft moans from her, I could hardly wait to hear the louder, less controllable sounds I would bring later.

I bent my knees and lifted her with little effort, sitting her on my desk. I remembered the way this had started before—the way the desk had held her while I'd undressed her, sliding my fingers across her warm, smooth skin. I'd hated her then. I'd still yearned to kill her and destroy her dad in the process, but now my thoughts were entirely different. They were filthier in an entirely different way.

I forced myself to pull away. I balled my fists as she tried to lean back in, but I held her back, grinding my teeth as I spoke the words that needed to be said first. "If you're with me, you have to be with my family. You have to help me stand against *yours*, and I know that's a lot to ask, but I can't have someone in my inner circle who has alliances with the enemy."

"I told you that I'm with you, Vincent," she said, shaking her head vigorously. "I'm with you in all the ways I need to be."

"Then I need you to take a blood oath to me."

It wasn't an unusual request. Blood oaths were the way all the made men were initiated, and it was the way previous enemies made alliances. We both knew the significance of it. If a blood oath were broken, it would be a death warrant for the person who took it. That person would essentially be turning over their life. So when Mia nodded, relief coursed through me. "I'll take a blood oath for you. I've been in this game since I was a child, and I've been told things about you that aren't true. I was lied to and deceived, and more than anything, I was used. Here, I'm a part of something bigger and more significant. Something that will change lives. I'm not a pawn."

“No,” I told her, shaking my head. “You’re not the pawn here. You’re the queen.”

I reached across my desk behind her, not releasing her by even an inch as I slid my hand over my sharp letter opener—useful as both a weapon and an office tool. I met her eyes as I pressed the tip into my palm, barely wincing as I drew a small line of blood. I passed the blade to her, and she gripped it in one hand.

She narrowed her eyes and gridded her teeth, cutting a small slice on her palm, too. She tossed the blade behind her and showed me her palm. “I swear with my blood that I will always defend your people. I will be true to you and your people, and I will not betray you from now until my last day. So long as you don’t betray me, I will be loyal in return.”

I noticed her addition, and I could respect that she had the foresight to add the sentence. “I won’t betray you,” I told her. “And I accept you as a loyal employee to my family and me.” I grabbed her palm and held it between us, bringing her lips back to mine with more ferocity than before. The trust that the oath gave was enough to let down all my barriers as I tore her shirt from her and felt every inch of her skin that I could get my hands on. Maybe I couldn’t use her as a pawn in my game. I couldn’t kill her to get back at her father. But this may have been better than any of those plans.

She was my wife, and I wondered if that title was more than something to wield against her and control her. It felt like it was starting to take the role of something more traditional. My cock was rock-hard as she touched me in return, and I groaned as she reached between my legs and gripped me through my pants, working her thumb over me and biting my lip in tandem.

I may not have killed her, but I certainly took the only leverage her father had. I took his daughter, and he would never be able to use her again. If that was all the revenge I could get, I didn’t give a fuck. I had the prize, and Pete Genovese wouldn’t get her back. “I’m going to fuck you so hard,” I told her, gripping the base of her hair and tipping her head back. I left nipping kisses up her throat and bit just hard

enough that I drew a gasp from her. “And when we’re done, you’re not going to remember your name.”

MIA GENOVESE

I allowed his mouth to course over every inch of skin he'd stripped bare. I arched and cried out, but his mouth didn't stop. It didn't slow. This wasn't a fast fuck. It wasn't hateful or loathing as it'd been before. I didn't feel conflicted about letting him fuck me and enjoying it. This time, I allowed myself the pleasure of his sensual touches. I allowed his lips to trace up my inner thigh and toward my navel. I embraced his fingers teasing me between my legs as he roughly turned me and positioned my hands on the desk in front of me. I shuddered as he kicked my legs apart and pressed his hard cock between them. But he didn't fuck me yet. This was so, so different, and I pressed back into him, trying to convince him to take me right here. Right now.

"Patience, *topo*," he whispered, nipping the back of my bare shoulder blade as he moved a hand beneath my arm and up my center. He paused at my breasts, taking a detour and kneading my nipples. It sent sharp sparks of pleasure so deep into my core that I couldn't help but cry out at the sensation. "I know what you want, and I plan to give it to you."

"Now," I demanded. His hand moved upright more, and his fingers lingered at my throat, resting there as if to say that he had control of the situation. As if to say he was the sole one in control. "You think you can scare me into submitting, but I think you've learned that's not the case," I told him, moving a hand back and grabbing his cock tightly in my palm.

"If I wanted to scare you, you'd be scared," he assured, his fingers tightening around my throat enough to attempt to prove

his point.

I surprised him, though. I released a long moan as I ground into him and stroked him. He stiffened, and I continued. With his other hand, he stroked between my legs, and my moaning only intensified. The feeling of him dominating me and doing whatever he wanted sent sparks of thrill through me.

“You like this,” he stated with a chuckle, giving my neck a small squeeze as he plunged a finger into me. I cried out loudly.

“Yes,” I whispered as he continued his sinful assault on me. I didn’t think there was a thing this man could do to me that I wouldn’t like. “I want it all. I want you to do whatever you want to me, Vincent. Please.”

“Jesus fuck,” he groaned, pulling me into his chest firmly. He had me pinned in every way as he finger-fucked me hard, stretching me and obliterating me with every thrust. He gripped my throat hard enough that I knew he wanted me to feel his control, and the intensity of my orgasm flooded through me all at once, making me a jerking mess of moans and cries.

At once, he released me, lowering me onto the floor and grabbing my wrists in one hand. He pinned them above my head as he gripped himself and thrust into me *hard*. “Fuck me harder, Vincent,” I begged as he thrust so hard that my entire body jerked with the force of it. I took every inch of him inside of me, moaning and shouting with the pleasure that each motion brought from me.

“You were made for me,” he said, pounding into me with enough intensity that another orgasm built within me. Another burst of pleasure brought me so close to the edge that I knew I was seconds from tipping over it again. “Open your eyes.” I hadn’t realized they’d been closed until I forced them open and met his gaze. The intensity of the moment swam in his eyes as intensely as it did in mine. All the ruggedly handsome lines on his face echoed the same longing I knew I’d find in my own. The gaze swept me over the edge, and I plummeted

into another orgasm, shaking and shouting with it as he pounded into me again and again.

He dipped his head and captured a nipple in his mouth, sucking it between his teeth. A pang coursed through me, only intensifying the pleasure I already felt for him. “Oh God,” I cried out as his mouth moved to the other breast, repeating the same steps. I’d never come so hard in my life, and I could hardly decide how to react to the explicit, all-consuming feeling of him all around me. Fucking me. Touching me. I felt like everything was changing with each thrust, and as his thrusting grew choppy and he shouted his release to the ceiling, I could only pant through everything I’d just experienced. I could hardly focus on a single thing as he rested inside of me, collapsing above me and holding himself up with only his elbows.

“Fuck,” he whispered. I could only nod in agreement. *Fuck* was right. I hadn’t ever experienced anything like this before. Maybe it was because there’d never been an emotional connection between my partner and me, or maybe it was because nobody else could quite fuck like Vincent. I had no idea which option was more likely.

“I’ve never...” I cut myself off, clearing my throat. I could feel the hoarseness in my voice from shouting, though. “I’ve never had something like that before.”

He slowly withdrew himself, and I watched as he pulled his condom off. When had he put that on? Had I been so consumed by the moment that I hadn’t noticed the protection? I must have been. “Me either.” He stood and offered me a hand, and I followed him. I grabbed my clothes from the floor and began redressing as he put back on his pants and left the shirt wherever it had been tossed across the room. He immediately glanced back down at the documents on his desk, but his eyes didn’t move over them. He stared blankly for a moment before meeting my gaze again. “I can have a few tasks assigned to you,” he said. “I *need* to give you some tasks.”

I furrowed my brows and buttoned my pants. “I’m happy to take some of your work from you, but...why do you say it like

it's the most important thing in the world?"

"Mia, you can't be this oblivious."

I shook my head and straightened. "What the hell do you mean by that?" I asked defensively.

"You have to realize that I want to come across the room and continue fucking you. If given the chance, I don't think I'll ever stop, and we're in the middle of a conflict that could kill us all if I'm not diligent about where and how I spend my time." He looked me up and down. "If I spend all of my time inside of you as I'd prefer, it won't end well for any of us."

"It'd end well for me," I mused, biting my bottom lip as I considered going another round with him. I had a feeling my thoughts would hover around sex with him every moment of the day for at least a week.

"Mia," he warned.

"What? It would."

"You need to have tasks so that I don't come in and fuck you every time I have a chance," he said with a long sigh. I opened my mouth, but he cut me off with a raised hand. "Don't argue with me about this. I'll have some tasks ready for you tomorrow."

I nodded and wound my fingers together in front of me. "Yes, sir," I said tauntingly.

His jaw ticked. "You need to go."

I could only smile as I nodded and walked toward the door. I knew precisely why he needed me to leave, and it had nothing to do with wanting me to go. I paused and looked over my shoulder. "Vincent," I said. When he looked at me, I gave him a genuine smile. "I'm happy to be part of your team." I hadn't ever meant anything more.

I left the room and clicked the door closed behind me. I swore I heard a long groan on the other side of it, but I walked away anyways, understanding he had a lot of work to do. Now that everything was settled between us, we'd be having far more

time together, but now wasn't the time. There was still one more thing I needed to take care of.

I made my way back to my room, relishing in all the newfound freedom I had. There was nobody watching me and nobody checking where I'd gone now. I was here to stay, and Vincent knew it. So when I made it to my room, I laid back on my bed and looked at the screen of my phone—one that Caterina gave me a week ago as a show of trust. One more thing needed to be done, and it was time I took care of it. I dialed my dad's number and typed out a message, reading it three times before hitting send. My racing heart settled the second it said "delivered," but I knew it had to be done. I read the message one more time before deleting it and blocking my dad's contact.

I'm done, and I'm staying with Vincent. Don't come for me. I'm not coming back.

VINCENT COLOMBO

Mia had certainly made an impression—one I couldn't get out of my mind. I worked through meetings and minor conflicts with a constant erection. Nothing could bring it down no matter how gory or brutal the discussions became. Mia still found a way to make a fleeting appearance in my mind long enough to cause issues. They were issues I was prepared to work through this evening, though.

We had noticed an uptick in movement on the west side, but there'd been nothing substantial enough to worry about yet, so I had Caterina keeping a close eye on the situation while Luca and Alessio spoke to all our contacts to ensure nothing was preparing to go down. I had, after all, ignored a summons by Pete Genovese two days before. I still had his daughter, though he had no idea that I kept her for an entirely different reason now.

The conflict was on an uptick, and it'd have to be something settled sooner rather than later. There would be no alliance with him, I'd decided. Mia had made the decision to swear herself to me, and I wouldn't use her as a bargain for peace. I wouldn't use her at all. She was mine, and he wouldn't take her back. He didn't seem to appreciate what he'd had when she was still on his side, and I'd be damned if I let her go back there.

I wanted to stay home and monitor the conflict, but I had other obligations this evening, and Mia deserved a night out to do something that didn't involve veiled threats or death. Tonight

would be the perfect opportunity, so I sent her a silver dress and heels, and I demanded she be ready by five o'clock sharp.

"Tonight could be dangerous," Caterina said, shaking her head and twirling her dagger in a way that showed her uncertainty. "They're on the move. You need to take me with you."

I shook my head. "I need you to stay here and keep an eye on everything," I told her.

"I'll be damned if I sit back and watch them attack this event. You know how much this cause means to me, and I can't watch something happen while I'm left behind."

I knew *exactly* how much these events meant to her. It had been where we'd met the first time, and it had been where she'd attempted to pickpocket me all those years ago. I would have never guessed that she'd become one of my top three most trusted advisors, but here we stood.

"You're in charge of keeping everything in line. I'll have my phone on me all night, and if something looks fishy, we'll take care of it." She sighed heavily and nodded, clearly not liking my decision to leave her here.

I made my way into the main entranceway, and I stopped in my tracks as I stared at the most stunning woman I'd ever seen. Mia wore the dress I'd given her, and it hugged every inch of her in a way that I hadn't anticipated. It left nothing to the imagination. "You can't wear that," I demanded, shaking my head. "We're finding something else."

She whipped around and met my eyes, giving me an approving nod. "You look nice."

"Come on," I said, reaching for her hand. "You're changing."

She laughed and took a step back. "I don't think so. It took twenty minutes to get into this dress, and it might be the most comfortable thing I've ever worn. It stays."

"If one person leers at you—"

"Tone down the theatrics. We're going to be late."

I didn't think she understood how serious I was. I also didn't think she realized how magnificent she looked. If she glanced

downward, I had no doubt she'd see my bulging erection from the mere sight of her. Her black hair lay stark on the silver of the dress, and it gave her skin a glow that I'd never seen on her before. The touch of makeup she wore accentuated all her features, and as I glanced down at the cleavage the dress revealed, I tightened my jaw. Oh, other men would certainly look at her tonight, and I wouldn't be able to control my temper. Unfortunately, we were going to the single place where controlling my temper was essential.

I exhaled slowly and offered her a hand. She slid her small, smooth palm into mine, and I pulled her swiftly into my chest. The smile that lit her face sent my heart racing. "When we get home tonight," I told her, "I'm not going to spare that dress." She tipped her head back and laughed.



WE WERE GIVEN front-row seats to the stage, and everyone referred to me as Mr. Colombo. To my surprise, only a few people's gazes lingered on Mia, and I thanked God for that mercy. "This is a beautiful event," she admitted as a server in a suit brought an appetizer to our table. "I didn't realize the orphanage had the funds to put on something like this."

"I pay for it," I shrugged. She gaped at me, and I continued, "I know this is a point of disagreement for us, but this orphanage has provided me with alliances and partners who have saved my life and my people's lives more times than I can count. I pay for them to have a dinner each year where they honor their benefactors. The recognition gets them more funding, and in return, the children have better care."

She nodded and put the small sliver of an appetizer in her mouth, chewing and nodding in approval. "It's a nice thing you do here. I'm sure you've changed a lot of lives."

"I have." She smiled at me, and I saw something different in that smile. Something softer and more sincere. I saw loyalty and appreciation there. "I haven't thanked you," I told her.

“For swearing your loyalty to me. I know it couldn’t have been an easy decision.”

She nodded, not meeting my eyes. “It was the hardest and easiest decision I’d ever made,” she admitted.

I didn’t know what to think of that response, but the lights in the auditorium dimmed before the chairperson of the orphanage strode onto the stage, smiling broadly and giving me a small wave. I nodded in return as she grabbed the microphone and began the same speech she delivered each year. She gave her thank-yous to all the benefactors, and then she said my name last, listing a number of things that I’d allowed them to fund over this past year. I couldn’t keep my gaze from traveling to Mia as she stared at the stage and clapped at the words that were spoken. My eyes were fixed on the soft curves of her body and the confident strength of her motions. While the woman on stage continued her speech with a tone that demanded everyone’s attention, Mia’s silent presence was the only thing that could hold mine. I couldn’t fathom the thought of ever hurting her in the way I had initially planned. She was too important in too many ways.

The speech drew to a close, and the woman on stage was beginning to lead into my speech when my phone began vibrating in my pocket. I pulled it out immediately, turned the volume up, and pressed it to my ear. “What?”

Alessio spoke quickly. “Caterina just gave word that they’re moving. They’re coming here. To your house. She’s trying to slow them down so we can get units here. We have six teams on the way and one already here.”

“How many are moving?” I asked.

“Three dozen.”

“Fuck,” I growled. “We’re coming.” I hung up the phone and stood, giving the woman on stage a cue to end her speech without bringing me up. She effortlessly veered topics as Mia stood alongside me, and I grabbed her hand, pulling her through the long room. A few people offered me a hand and gave genuine thank-yous, but I didn’t have the time to stop for pleasantries.

As soon as the door was closed behind us, Mia spoke. “What happened?”

“Your father’s launching an attack on my home. He has the cavalry on the way.” She gasped and rushed around the van, jumping into the passenger’s seat. “I’m sorry dinner had to be cut short.”

She shrugged, removing her heels and tossing them in the back seat. “That’s okay. This is what we all signed up for, not fancy dinners and rehearsed speeches.” She shrugged as I accelerated, speeding down the side streets as quickly as possible. “Dinner is boring anyway. I’d much prefer some action.”

Despite all that was happening, a small smile pulled to my lips at her words. If I hadn’t known she was made for me before, I had no doubts about it now.

MIA GENOVESE

We pulled into Vincent's home before the attackers, charging toward the front door. He kept me in front of him the entire time, and when he closed it, he clicked three bolted locks.

The house looked nothing like what I'd come to expect. Soldiers milled about, all armed to the teeth with different weapons. Some sat at the windows, taking the early vantage, and others rushed around and gathered what they needed to prepare themselves. Luca and Alessio strode toward us together, both wearing two separate pistols. I wondered what other weapons were beneath their clothes, but I didn't ask. Alessio extended a gun toward me as he began speaking to Vincent, and I grabbed it and examined the cool metal as he spoke. "Caterina slowed them down. She slashed a few of the tires, so some of their people are coming in a second wave. Other than that, we have the tactical advantage. But we *don't* have the numbers."

"ETA?" Vincent asked.

"Any second. Our other teams won't be here for ten minutes."

I looked at Luca, and he seemed to be a physical embodiment of the calm before the storm. It took me aback, seeing him alongside Alessio, when the two couldn't have been more different. Alessio at least seemed predictable. He constantly smiled, brought humor into most situations, and looked at Caterina like she was an untouchable goddess. His motivations and feelings were clear. Luca, though, didn't give away much of anything. I didn't know how to feel about him, and I

decided I'd stay close to him in the fight and learn what I needed to know.

"They're here!" someone shouted from the other side of the room.

"Don't let them in the house!" Vincent shouted back, and gunshots began firing. He looked at me, grabbed both of my cheeks, and pulled my face close to his. "Stay in here," he demanded. I only shook my head. He didn't understand why my father would decide now was the time to launch an attack, but I understood completely. He realized that he'd lost his inside person, and he needed to come up with a new plan. I knew he'd justify the attack by saying he wanted me back, but that wasn't the real reason. He didn't care about me, only what I offered him. I was his last chance to gain inside footing, and this was his way of telling me I was making a mistake. This fight was my fault, and I wouldn't sit back and watch as other people got killed.

"I'm fighting for you. Don't ask me not to."

His lips pulled together in a tight line. "Okay," he whispered, taking a deep breath. "You're right, but I swear to God, if you get yourself hurt or killed..."

I pushed at his chest lightly. "Go, Vincent." He only hesitated for half a second more as he turned and made his way toward a window, watching as the guys kept my father's men at bay, shooting any body part that dared to escape the vehicles. My father's men sat there, waiting, and I knew that this could be bad—very, very bad. We only had the advantage until they found a way inside, and then it was all over. We'd be nothing more than fish in a barrel. I wouldn't let them get inside.

I tried to consider the strategy my father would use to end this battle swiftly. I gnawed on my bottom lip as I considered. I wasn't sure if he even wanted to win this battle or if he did it solely to send a message. That was the first thing I needed to decide. I imagined that he'd given his men orders not to kill me, but did he demand that they take over the house and kill everyone else? Yes, he would have. He wouldn't have sent all these men solely to deliver a message. I imagined he had two

potential plans. He could either kill Vincent and take me back, claiming he did it for the sake of his family, able to take the territory as the Commission had promised. Or if the attack failed, it would be a message to me: Don't betray him, or there would be consequences. That had to be what his play was. Regardless of if he won or lose, he'd still get what he wanted.

A loud boom came from the back of the house, and I straightened. Luca didn't hesitate before running toward the sound, and I followed him a few steps behind. There weren't enough men here to spare, so I knew we had to take care of this ourselves—at least until the other teams came and saved our asses. Ten minutes. We could hold them off for that long.

Luca turned a corner to the kitchen and fired two shots before diving forward and ducking behind the center counter just in time for a few return shots to fire. I came in hot behind him, firing my shots at the eight figures standing there. Two were already on the ground, and three more fell alongside the two fallen. Five down, five to go.

None of them fired back at me, going as far as lowering their weapons. I ran forward, firing one more time before one of the men reached me. Four more.

I knew my gun would be best at a further range, so I dropped it and balled my fists. They couldn't kill me—none of them had dared to fire, so I knew that was true—but I had a feeling that fighting me wasn't off the table. And Luca, still crouched behind the center island, was fair game for a bullet to the head, so I had to take care of this. Four men stood against me, and I straightened my spine, preparing myself for a difficult fight. I'd never had odds so out of my favor, but I'd make it work. I had to, because the alternative was having these four men come into the main part of the house. If that happened, we'd lose our advantage.

“Stand down, Ms. Genovese,” one of the men demanded.

I took a deep breath. “Fuck you.” And then I started swinging. All the years of training my dad had put me through had led to this moment, and I knew I could handle it. I threw punch after punch, obliterating one of the men in front of me and keeping

the others from going past me. I could tell he was taking it easy on me at first, but as it became clear that I planned to take him down alongside the rest of the men, his swings grew more violent.

I took one to my shoulder as I dodged the rest, but holding back all four of them became impossible. I needed help, and as I looked over my shoulder at one of the men who had passed me, I found Luca giving me all the help I needed. He disarmed the man easily, and I heard as he grunted through each hard hit. One of the men trying to get past me stepped back and lifted his weapon, and I had only enough time to dive atop him, knocking his gun from his hands and allowing the other two forward.

“Fuuuck!” I shouted as I landed hard on my arm. I grabbed the man’s gun from his hand as he fell beside me and pointed it at his head before pulling the trigger. I aimed at one of the two men who rushed at Luca, but the gun only clicked. I didn’t give myself even a moment to think about the aching in my arm or the way I felt a small trickle of blood easing down my head and into my eye. I swiped it away as I charged and grabbed the leg of the man aiming his gun at Luca. This time, though, he pulled the trigger before I could stop him.

I gasped in horror as the man went down from my attack, hitting his forehead on the floor. It disoriented him long enough for me to reach for the knife block on the side of the counter and pull a knife from it. The whole thing crashed to the floor beside us, but I crawled atop his body and plunged the long steak knife into his throat. He gasped for a few seconds, sputtering up blood, before going unconscious.

My eyes trailed up to where Luca still stood, holding the man he’d been fighting as a human shield. I couldn’t help a sigh of relief as I realized the gunshot hadn’t hit Luca at all. It had hit one of my father’s men in the fleshy part of his leg.

I couldn’t bring myself to stand for a long moment, but it didn’t matter this time. Not as Luca threw the man to the side and he bounced back, standing as if he still had plenty of fight left in him, despite the gunshot wound. Luca rushed forward and slammed the gun from the man’s hand. I watched in

surprise as Luca showed brutal hand-to-hand skills. He destroyed the man with nothing more than his fists, and when the man fell, he finished him with a swift gunshot.

Luca stood in the middle of the room, catching his breath as I remained sitting, heaving in all the air I could. He stepped toward me with all his impressive bulk, and he offered me a red-tinted hand. I nodded and took it, heaving myself up with a groan. He observed every crevice of my face, reaching forward and wiping some blood from my forehead. I tested my arm and sighed in relief when only a tinge of pain came from the motions. There was no break, and that's what mattered most. "You're one crazy motherfucker," he said, shaking his head with a straight face. "But thank you."

I only nodded, forcing myself to stand straighter as I looked at the carnage in the kitchen. We'd taken out ten men—nearly a third of the ones coming. It had been pure luck that my father had given the order for his men to keep me alive, and I'd used it to my advantage. Luca and I returned to the main room. I had no idea how long had passed—it could've been minutes or an hour—but we found the remainder of Vincent's tactical team inside and a man on his knees in the center of the room. Blood dripped from his mouth, but he didn't look otherwise injured.

I caught Vincent's gaze as he stood over the man, and my heart dropped for just a moment. A part of me expected him to come forward and shout at me for having something to do with this attack. I expected him to shove me into a wall and tell me it had all been my fault. I recalled my father shouting at me for making small mistakes in the past, and my mind was still conditioned to receive that form of treatment. Why the hell had I allowed myself to be treated that way for so long?

Instead, though, he rushed forward. He reached a hand out for me, and I flinched. Concern etched across every line of his face as he dragged a thumb lightly across my forehead. "Are you okay?" he asked. He looked almost unmarred by the attack, and it didn't look like anyone had gotten inside on this side of the house. I noticed blood on his sleeves, so I knew he

did some sort of fighting, but I wondered if it was as intense as what Luca and I had faced.

I nodded, and I felt a deep sense of guilt in my chest for this entire situation as I noticed a few men at the windows on the ground, lying in pools of their blood. On the outside, over a dozen people lay on the lawn, not one of them quite yet to the house. “Are you?”

“I am. It’s over,” he told me, moving his hand down my cheek before wrapping an arm around my waist. He looked over my shoulder and eyed Luca, in noticeably worse shape than me. “Thank you,” he told the man.

“Thank her,” Luca said. “She took out more guys than me.”

Vincent gave me an impressed look. But it hadn’t been a challenge. Something in my mind had flipped. I’d done it to protect Luca and all the people here. I’d done it because they no longer felt like enemies. They felt like *my* people.

Vincent’s gaze dropped back to the man in the center of the room, and his gaze hardened. “Take him to the basement to be questioned,” he said, and three of his guards lifted the bleeding man and did as he asked. As people worked to remove the bodies of both our people and my father’s, my chest ached from the intense guilt that this had all been my fault. I’d been the one to send my father a text message. I could’ve called and explained the situation, and maybe he would have understood...

I cut off my thoughts. No, he wouldn’t have. This was inevitable, and I should be thankful I was here to lessen the bloodshed. He did this because of me, and now that I had decided to stay with Vincent, he’d have the full support of the Commission to do whatever he needed to do to get me back.

VINCENT COLOMBO

All I could focus on was the still bleeding cut on the top of Mia's forehead as she followed me around the manor and helped clean up the mess her father had caused. When I walked into the kitchen, finding bullet holes in the walls, countertop, and refrigerator, I gaped. Ten bodies lay strewn about the room, and I considered how Mia and Luca had done this by themselves. How had neither of them sustained far more life-threatening injuries? I pulled Mia more tightly into my side, speechless at the sight.

"Don't," she said, and I looked down at her with furrowed brows. "Don't get pissed off at what happened. They're all dead, and that's enough of a payment for what they did."

I took a deep breath. "Whichever one gave you that cut deserves a far longer and more brutal death than what he got here today."

She scoffed but didn't say anything more as we made our way through the rest of the house and ensured it had been properly cleared of her father's men. Mia pulled me to a stop as we approached her door, and she shook her head. "We can go and clean up after we get the answers from the man in the basement."

"I want you to have your cut cleaned first," I demanded, but she shook her head.

"We take care of the most important thing first."

"You're the most important thing."

She snorted. “No, I’m really not.”

I wanted to argue, but she left no room for debate as she turned and pulled me toward the basement stairs. She released my hand as we walked down them, and she paused at the landing, staring at where the man sagged in the center of the room. His arms hung above him as ropes held each of his wrists upright. His entire body weight dangled from where the rope held his wrists, and I smirked at the discomfort on his face as I passed by Mia, sliding a hand across her waist.

“I plan to ask you a few questions, and I am *really* looking forward to doing it the hard way,” I told him, moving toward the rack of tools a few feet from him. I slid a finger over the tip of many weapons. Hurting him would be a gift, and he had no idea how serious I was about that. Mia’s blood flashed in my mind, and it made me feral. “Let’s begin, shall we?” I gripped a long fillet knife, one traditionally used to cut into fish. I knew how sharp it’d be.

“You don’t need to do none of that,” the man said, shaking his head. “I’ll talk.”

I made a sound of disappointment and gestured for one of the guards to lower him to the floor. He did so slowly, leaving the man’s arms tied, but loose enough that he could grip the angry bruise over one of his ribs as he hunched. “Well, go ahead, then.”

Mia stepped at my side, her face just as tight as mine. The man looked at her and held her gaze for a moment. I stepped forward and slid the blade across his chest, making sure to nick one of his nipples. “What the fuck!” he shouted, grabbing the narrow slice and groaning in pain.

“Every time you look at her, you’ll be punished. Do you understand?” I growled at him. Mia looked at me and rolled her eyes, but I could see the amusement churning beneath them. She liked this side of me, I realized. It turned me on more than I wanted to admit. “Talk,” I reminded him.

He looked up again, but this time he only dared to look at me. “The boss gave us all a message. He knew you’d keep one of us if the fight went poorly. He said that you have his daughter,

and he's given you enough time to consider your next steps. He demands that you give her back, or he'll continue this game, only next time he'll send enough men that you won't have a chance at escaping. He has the backing of the Commission and the other three families, and they intend to launch a full assault if you don't return what belongs to him."

Mia gasped. "I don't belong to anybody," she spat.

His gaze drifted to her, and I slid the blade across his lower abdomen this time. He hissed through the pain and closed his eyes, only looking at the floor. "It's just a message," he said through the pain. "He believes you do, and you're his daughter, so by the law of the Commission you *do* belong to him."

I didn't know what I'd expected next, but Mia's reaction was far from it. She moved too quickly for me to consider what she was doing. She grabbed one of the largest, angriest-looking knives from the stand. She moved toward him, and I knew she had every intention of killing him for his statement. I could only take a step forward as she raised the knife and went to plunge it into his chest. But the looseness of his ropes allowed him to move his own hands, grabbing the sharp end of the blade with a hiss and jerking it from her grasp. He had just enough leeway to wrap an arm around Mia's throat and press the edge of the dagger into the side of it.

I tensed, and every part of my body froze. If she wouldn't have been so angry—so sporadic—Mia would have never been in that position. She never would've been reckless enough to be caught in such a way. The ten dead men in my kitchen proved that.

The man looked smug, and as my guard attempted to lift his restraints, Mia's feet left the floor as the grip on her throat tightened. She made a gurgled sound of distress, and the guard released the tension immediately. He had such a tight grip that if we attempted to lift him, we'd hang Mia alongside him. And if I moved forward... The knife at her throat pressed into the side hard enough that a small bead of blood was already drawn.

“Here’s the deal. Release me right now, or she’s dead.”

“If you kill her, you have no leverage,” I remind him.

She gasped, wincing at the pressure he added to the knife. I couldn’t imagine being stiller. “If I don’t, I know what happens next. You’ll kill me anyways. I either get out of here and she lives, or I die. And if I die, so does she.”

For the first time in my life, I had no idea what to do or how to proceed. I’d never felt as helpless as I did in this moment. I would give up a million prisoners for her safety, but I didn’t trust that she’d be safe if I let him go. I didn’t know what to do, so I gestured for the guard to release the ropes. Mia fell from her tippy toes onto her flat feet with a deep exhale, and I watched as he took a step, pushing her forward with him. Mia’s eyes were glazed with both fear and anger, and I watched as he took a second step.

This time, he stumbled slightly over the placement of Mia’s foot, and she struck. She pushed the sharp end of the knife from her throat, twisting his wrist until he was forced to drop it. He still held her around the throat with his arm, and in an attempt to maintain control, he leaned back, pulling her from her feet again. But she seemed to anticipate it. She tucked her knees and rolled over him, knocking him to the ground and freeing herself.

She turned as if to attack him again, but I moved between them. I saw the fear in his eyes as he realized he’d lost every hint of leverage he’d thought he had. I kneeled atop him and rested the blade against his throat as Mia kicked away the other knife. I glanced up at the small trickle of blood that came from her neck, and my jaw ticked. I wanted so badly to kill him right here and watch the life drain from his eyes, but there were many more things that could be done. Many *worse* things. “I was going to give you an honorable death,” I whispered, pushing the blade into his neck enough to leave a painful and shallow cut. As I spoke, I drug it slowly across his neck. “But taking my time will be fun with you.”

He tried to lift his head as if to slice his own throat and end the torture he knew he’d receive, but I pulled away just in time. I

held his forehead to the ground with one hand. “You made her bleed,” I told him, the sneer on my face only growing. I didn’t know if I should show this side of myself to Mia, but right now I didn’t particularly care. “I’m going to return that favor.”

I pressed the tip of my knife into his eye slowly, and the man screamed. He continued screaming as I twisted it, adding pressure and twisting deeper. I pushed just far enough that I knew the injury wouldn’t kill him, and then I withdrew the knife. “I have a man here who specializes in all sorts of painful torture. He’s good at it, and I’ll make sure he takes his time with you.” He continued screaming as he tried to blink away the pain. Nothing would help him now. “And maybe, after you’re blind and deaf—after you’ve lost all your fingers and toes—we’ll let you loose in the woods and see if you can find your way home. Maybe we’ll see if you’re even capable of killing yourself before the elements get to you.”

Mia rested a hand on my back, and I stiffened, looking over my shoulder at her. I anticipated her to show some kind of mercy. I expected her to ask me to stop, but when I saw her cruel expression, I knew that we were on the same page. For giving her a scratch, I’d make his death long, slow and painful.

MIA GENOVESE

I'd grown up around brutality, but I hadn't thought it had become a part of me. I never thought I'd enjoy it, but when Vincent snarled down at the man who'd intended to hurt me, I realized that a part of me would always appreciate it. Vincent coming to my defense had been the most eye-opening thing I'd ever experienced, and I realized at that moment that everything had changed.

This was more my home than the Genovese estate had ever been. The loyalty Vincent had demonstrated today had been more intense and true than anything I'd ever experienced with my biological family, and I knew I was freer here than I had been anywhere. I was safer and more cared for. I could finally be unapologetically myself, and Vincent wouldn't shy away from a moment of it. I'd thought that I hated him, but I simply hadn't known him. Not until now.

I followed him into his room, the adrenaline finally wearing off with each step we took. When we reached the door and he opened it, I went immediately to his bed, sitting at the end of it and allowing my eyes to close as I buried my face into my hands. I listened as Vincent moved around the room, and though I wondered what he was doing, I didn't ask. I needed a moment to close my eyes before I got myself cleaned up and ready for bed. I needed a moment to shut it all off and stop thinking about how all of this was my fault, and there was nothing I could do to fix it.

The faucet turned on for a few seconds, and I finally opened my eyes, finding Vincent concentrating as he filled a small

bowl, a washcloth hanging over the edge. “What are you doing?” I asked.

He didn’t even glance at me as he turned off the water and made his way to my side. “I’m cleaning up my wife,” he told me, dropping to his knees in front of me. It surprised me as he dipped the cloth into the water and stood, placing a finger beneath my chin and lifting it. He began dabbing my forehead with the warm cloth, bringing it all the way down the side of my face where I’d felt my blood run earlier. When he dipped it back into the bowl, the clear water became clouded with red, and he rang it out carefully. I watched as he focused on cleaning around the cut without giving me an ounce of discomfort. He did the same to the small cut on the side of my throat, and when he finished, the bowl was soaked red with my blood. I hadn’t realized I’d lost so much.

“I think a few butterfly stitches should work well enough on your forehead,” he said, pulling a small first aid bag from where he’d placed it behind me. I hadn’t even realized he’d put it there. He pulled an alcohol swab from the bag and opened it, looking between it and my forehead uncertainly. He shocked me again as he lunged forward and captured my lips with his, nibbling on the bottom one in a way that had me melting into him. A slight sting on my forehead was overpowered by the warmth of his tongue sweeping across mine before he pulled away with a smirk.

I noted the red tinge on the alcohol wipe, and I almost laughed at the absurdity of his actions. “You could have just wiped my head,” I laughed.

“I think the distraction worked,” he said, placing the wipe down and kissing the cut. I released a breath, chuckling slightly as he finished with the butterfly stitches and a piece of gauze. He stopped and dropped back to his knees, and it shocked me as he lay his head in my lap. I grabbed a fistful of his silky black hair and ran my fingers through the slightly tangled strands as he rested his head there.

“We’re going to figure everything out,” I promised him. I considered telling him my entire truth—that I’d come here with the intention of killing him and giving my father what he

wanted. I considered telling him what I'd thought about him and all the lies my father had told me over the years. But right now wasn't the time. I'd tell him soon. Once this whole situation settled, he deserved to know every single cruel and horrible detail of my plans, and I knew he'd forgive me. After all, he'd intended to kill me to send a message, and everything had changed for him, too. Everything had changed for both of us, and he deserved to know everything. Just...not right now.

"I don't know if there's anything to figure out. He has all the alliances and all the backing he needs to take out my family name. He just has to pull the trigger." His voice was muffled in my leg, and I shook my head, thinking through everything. He orchestrated this attack to send a message. I had no doubt about that, but why would he bother with a message if he already had everyone's backing? I knew it was possible, but I didn't fully believe the messenger. The Commission knew he'd killed Vincent's sister, and in their eyes, I knew that Vincent would be entirely justified in taking me. That was how they ran things.

"I don't believe that," I admitted. "We're missing something. If he had that, he would've already pulled the trigger."

"You're still here, and he wants you to be safe."

I shook my head. "If that were the case, he never would've let you keep me for so long. He wouldn't have launched this attack while I was still here. I don't think he has all the alliances he wants us to believe." Vincent hadn't done anything to piss the Commission off enough for an attack—not yet. I had to believe that my father had either lied to the Commission or to us. Neither option would surprise me.

Vincent sprung to his feet quickly, shaking his head. He turned and pushed his body over mine, easing me back on the bed until my back lay flush against his comforter. "I don't want to talk about this right now," he told me, shaking my head. "I want to follow through on what I promised you earlier."

I looked down at myself, taking in the silver dress that had remained shockingly intact through all of the fighting. The charity event felt like it had taken place years ago, not a mere

three hours before now. After all this dress had endured, I was particularly fond of keeping it, but the blood splatter that had taken over the bottom half made that wish nothing more than a fantasy. I smiled and bit my bottom lip. “I’m inclined to tell you that you can’t possibly tear through this fabric.”

He smiled and nipped at the lobe of my ear, drawing a gasp from me. He reached to my side and held a small pocketknife beside my face—the one he’d used to tear the gauze that he’d placed over my wound. He dragged the cool metal down my cheek, and I shuddered. I couldn’t believe the fucked-up reaction I had to him bringing a weapon so close to me, but my stomach turned molten as he dragged the flat edge down my chest and to the top of my gown.

“I know you like it rough, but your reaction to this knife surprises me, *topo*.”

I gasped as he turned it and put a small slit in the dress between my breasts. “Why do you still call me a mouse?” I asked as he tossed the knife to the side.

He gripped the dress with both hands and, using far less effort than expected, tore the material in half, revealing the hardened peaks of my breasts. “You’re small like a mouse,” he replied, “and you have the ability to do a lot of damage without notice. Mice can chew through the wires of a house and destroy someone’s life without being seen. You somehow snuck into my life and wrecked me before I even realized I’d let you in.”

I thought about that as his hands covered my tits, his thumbs and fingers rolling my nipples in a way that had my breath speeding up. “You did the same to me,” I told him, and he paused just long enough for me to reach behind him and grab a fistful of his hair. I lifted my hips and, in a maneuver he wasn’t expecting, flipped our positions, sitting atop him with a smile of satisfaction. He leaned back, placing his hands beneath the back of his head as he watched me. I pushed the remaining fabric of my dress to the floor and undid his belt loop, pushing his pants downward.

I made sure to give him a show as I slid atop him, grinding into his hardened cock as I moved. I bent so that our lips

nearly brushed, and as he pursed his lips for a kiss he anticipated, I pulled away with a smirk. His jaw ticked. “If you tease me like that, you’re not going to like where this goes.”

“I thought we’d already established this, Vincent. You can’t take this to a single place I wouldn’t *love*.”

I slid down his body, pulling his boxers with me, and took every inch of his cock into my throat, sucking hard. He moved a hand to the back of my head, gripping my hair in a way that should have been painful. He pushed himself so deep in my throat that I gagged around him, but his groan had me aching between my legs. I looked up through lowered lashes and smirked at him as he kept his hand wound in my hair and controlled every motion I made. I moaned against his length, moving my hand between my own thighs and giving myself a similar pleasure.

“Fuck, Mia,” he groaned, pounding me down on him as I massaged myself, moaning relentlessly against him. I felt the tension building within myself so quickly that I ground into his leg as I massaged myself. I didn’t break eye contact, and when his eyes rolled back, I grabbed the back of his hand and forced myself away from him. I climbed atop him fully, resting a hand on either side of his head and sinking on him. The sensation of him filling me brought an indescribable feeling as I rocked back and forth, taking him in as deeply as I could. I bounced and ground into him until that pressure had built to its apex.

“Vincent,” I cried out. He reached up and grabbed both of my breasts, squeezing them and sending me over the edge I’d been teetering on for long minutes. I screamed for him, rocking and grinding and crying. I continued rocking, even as he too groaned, spasming beneath me. It wasn’t until he grabbed my hips and flipped me beneath him that I stopped shouting my moans.

I lay back and panted as he stared deeply into my eyes. “I fucking love you, Mia,” he said. “God, I fucking love you.” The shock of the statement froze me to my spot, and I said nothing as I stared into the sincere expression in his eyes. “We

can leave—give up the territory and run away from all this shit. None of it matters as long as I have you.”

I shook my head. “No, you have to get your revenge. You have to pay my father back for what he did to your family.”

“None of it matters anymore. If I lose you too, I’ll never forgive myself. Mia, if we can’t figure out how to end this, I’m not taking chances. I’ve built an empire here—one full of people who trust and respect me. I can always take it somewhere else and start over with you. I can be happy somewhere else as long as I have you.”

His words obliterated me. I knew the weight of them. Avenging his family had been his main goal for as long as I’d known him. He would’ve given his own life to do that, but whatever had changed had been so significant that it no longer mattered if he got that vengeance. Whatever had shifted felt so important and so real that I could hardly breathe. And he didn’t even know the truth.

VINCENT COLOMBO

With the threat so high, I considered leaving the monthly debts alone for a few weeks, at least until we settled this entire situation. But all the people in the western part of my territory knew the day I came, and knew they were to have their debts ready. I'd held off before, and it had ended poorly for all parties involved. They no longer had the extra money later, yet I had to show that I enforced my debts even when collection was a few days late.

Instead of going alone, I brought both Mia and Alessio. Alessio would guard the door and Mia would come inside with me. We'd get in and out, and there would be no funny business. Luca and Caterina were in charge of the house and protecting it while we were away. "This guy drew his gun last time I went," I told Alessio. "So let's be aware of that."

Alessio shook his head disappointedly, glancing at Mia. "These guys are ridiculous. Mia, are you going to put him in his place, or is that going to be my job?" He looked into the back seat at her. "Luca told me you're damn good at kicking ass."

She cringed, and her fingers moved to the scar on her forehead that had fortunately healed pretty well over the past week. "I'd really rather not have a replay of that situation any time soon."

He chuckled. "But you can handle it if it arises, and that's all that matters. You fit in well here, you know that." I could see that the compliment meant something to Mia as she leaned back in her seat, gathering one of her knees to her chest.

I pulled into the apartment complex, and Mia immediately stepped from the car, eager to get inside and get this taken care of. I held Alessio back just long enough for her door to close. “Keep her safe,” I told him. We’d had a similar conversation a few days ago when I’d told both him and Caterina that Mia was one of us now, and she was to be treated like family. I’d expected some pushback, especially from my brother who wanted revenge as desperately as me. But he’d only said that we’d find another way. And Caterina...well, she’d been over the moon. She’d been waiting for Mia to make it official.

“I know she’s been itching to ask me to train her,” Caterina had said. “She’s going to make a damn good student with all she already knows.” It was almost as if everyone had been waiting for us to make it official. Everyone other than me knew it’d been coming.

Alessio reached forward and patted my shoulder with his hand. “With my life.” We all moved from the vehicle together, and when the exterior of the building appeared relatively clear, something in me calmed. We needed to get in and out. No tricky shit. No arguments. I recalled the anger I’d faced from these people the few times I’d brought Mia. My mind lingered on the apartment complex across the street where the man had pulled a knife on her. This complex was typically much tamer than that one.

We made our way inside, and I knocked on the first door. Mia and Alessio stood behind me as we waited for any response, but nobody spoke. I knocked again. “Francene!” I yelled. “I saw the Volvo outside! I know you’re here!” No response. “I’m going to break in the door! I know you’re here! I’m not playing games today!” I looked between Mia and Alessio as I waited for a few seconds. I wasn’t going to continue waiting.

I reared back, and just like I’d done to people in this complex a dozen times before, I kicked in the door with one swift blow. The hinges cracked, and I kicked one more time, sending it caving inward. I strode into the room, and the sight that greeted me seemed as if it came in slow motion. Alessio and Mia came inside, too, staring at the gory mess that was

Francene's couch. "God," Mia whispered, walking closer. "Who would have done this?"

I shook my head as I approached, too. Rather than waiting at the door, the shock of the scene brought Alessio forward, and he hovered near the body. It didn't make sense why she'd be killed, as she wasn't one of my people, and my people would never have come for her. She could've had other enemies, but I didn't believe in coincidences. I didn't believe that I'd simply stumble on this scene.

I pressed the back of my hand into her arm and froze. She wasn't even cold yet. It made a chilling kind of sense. "We need to get out—"

Four figures exploded from the room, guns drawn. I reached for my gun, but a voice drew me to a halt. "I wouldn't do that. They have orders to fire if you pose a threat. It won't be any skin off my back."

I whipped my head toward the voice of a man who strode through the back hallway of the home. A familiar man. My entire body went tense as I faced the man who murdered my family, and I considered the repercussions of opening fire anyway. I genuinely believed I'd have enough time to fire one shot before I was taken down—one shot to avenge my family. But half of the family who remained stood at my side, and I couldn't see them meet the same fate.

I could feel Mia just as tense at my side, and I considered how we could possibly get out of this situation. "Mia, I want you to go," I told her, not moving my gaze from where her father stood with a cunning smirk on his lips. "Now." *Get the others and call for help* were the unspoken words I didn't need to say.

"Mia, dear. Don't take a step."

She looked between us, and I knew she weighed who had the most power over the situation. At the moment, it was Pete Genovese, and she knew it. "I don't take commands from you," she spat at her father, taking a single step away.

His brows shot up as he trained his gaze on her. "Oh, really? Is that why you stayed with *Vincent*, then?" He said my name as

if it were something dirty on his tongue. “You, dear, could have gotten away from the kidnapping. I knew you could. I trained you long enough to know that unless you were chained, you would escape.”

“Dad—”

“You willingly stayed, and you did it because you were loyal to me. Because you were *working* for me. You were supposed to be the key to ending this whole thing.” He paused and looked between us. “Did you tell him any of these things before turning your back on me?”

I saw her shaking her head out of the corner of my eye, and the words processed in my mind. It made an alarming amount of sense, and I ground my teeth as I looked at her.

“Or are you still playing on my side?” Pete asked. He chuckled. “I know you have more of me inside of you than you want to admit. Have you been playing him? Stringing him along to his final execution?”

“No—no. I’m not working for you anymore!” she shouted. *Any more.*

“Did you tell him what you were planning to do? About the reason for the marriage?” I knew I needed to keep a clear head, but hearing this had my mind reeling. She’d sworn herself to me, and that meant that she should’ve told me everything. If she were truly loyal to me, nothing Pete said should surprise me, but I had a feeling there was something coming. Pete Genovese looked at me with a smirk. “My dear daughter was meant to kill you, Colombo. She was trained for years to do it, and when you kidnapped her, you unwittingly let a wolf into your home.”

“No,” I told him, but Mia didn’t say a word.

“She knew her job, and when you took her, it was an opportunity for us. She’s always been one of my strongest soldiers. Isn’t that right, sweetie?”

I looked at her, and tears streamed from her eyes. “Is this true?” I asked. She didn’t say anything as she sucked in a sharp breath through her teeth. Had she lied when she’d sworn

herself to me? Had she done it, knowing that she would gain more trust and inevitably kill me anyways? I thought about all the moments we'd had—the moments I thought had been genuine. I'd told her that I loved her, and she hadn't said it back.

She turned and sprinted from the room, and Pete laughed, gesturing to one of his men. "Go and retrieve her." Alessio and I were all that remained, and he looked between us before sighing deeply. "I thought you'd be a better adversary than this." At once, all of his men swarmed. A shot fired, and I expected to feel the pain of it, but when I didn't, I looked toward the noise. Before I could pinpoint the barrel that had fired, Alessio collapsed at my side. I whipped toward him, quickly catching his head before it hit the ground. The rest of him slammed into the hardwood with a bruising force that had me wincing.

We'd both taken hits like that before, though. I'd caught his head, and that was the most important part of him. The most valuable part. My hands felt sticky with blood as I examined his relaxed face. His closed eyes. The small hole that punctured the center of his forehead leaked blood onto the floor. I couldn't process what I was seeing as I held my brother. He was all I had left—the last part of my family and the only one who could truly share the loss of my sister and father with me. I held him tightly, but harsh hands jerked me away. A hard blow brought darkness over my senses, and only then was I aware that I had been shouting Alessio's name.

MIA GENOVESE

When a shot rang out, I ran faster, knowing that I needed to get to Luca and Caterina—knowing that I needed to get their help. We had hourly check-ins scheduled with them, and when they didn't hear from us, they'd come looking; but an hour was too long, especially when a bullet had been fired.

I heard one of my father's guards pursuing me, but I kept running. I took side streets and alleyways, losing him as I sprinted. I couldn't remember a time when I'd gone faster than right now. I'd never needed to. I recognized the loud exhaust of my father's sports car before he pulled up to my side, driving alongside me. "Get in the car, Mia."

I wondered if I could swerve and lose him. In the time I'd been here with Vincent, I was confident I knew the streets better than him. I could get to Luca and Caterina, and they could help us. They had to.

"I'm going to execute him."

I halted in my tracks, turning to face him. Both relief and terror coursed through me—relief at the fact that he wasn't already dead, and terror about what was to come.

"Get in the car and we can talk."

If he was here, it meant that he had men already bringing Vincent somewhere. If I found Caterina and Luca, I realized that I still wouldn't know where Vincent was being held—not without talking to my dad. They'd come looking within the next half-hour, but I was in the position to do something now. Maybe I could negotiate on his behalf. And if he'd been shot,

he'd need attention. We wouldn't have time to look for him. "You can't kill him," I said boldly.

"When the Commission learns about all the things he's done, they'll side with me on his execution."

I stepped toward the car. "He hasn't done *anything*," I argued.

"A representative of the Commission is at the house, and she's going to assess the situation. She will approve his execution, and then I'll do it publicly so that everyone knows what happens when they cross me."

My breathing quickened, and I shook my head. "No," I whispered.

"Get in the car, and we can talk about it."

I had no choice left. I had to do as he demanded if I ever wanted to see Vincent again. And I had to see him again. He had to know how much had changed for me. I'd gone into his home with every intention of destroying him from the inside out, but so much had changed between us, and he knew that. He would forgive me when I explained everything. He had to. He couldn't die thinking I'd betrayed him this entire time like my dad had insinuated.

I walked around the car and sat in the passenger's seat. I knew I needed to hold my tongue, but I couldn't. "You let me go like I meant nothing to you. You acted like I didn't matter to you at all when you let Vincent take me. I'm your daughter, and you were okay with me being sent off like a cow to slaughter."

He huffed, his hands tightening on the wheel. "You're my employee," he said. "Getting this territory is more important to me than anything, and you were my key to getting it. But you only proved that if I want to have something done, I have to do it myself."

I thought about the way Vincent proposed running away with me. Would that change now that he knew the truth? God, I wanted to curse myself. I knew I should've told him what I'd initially planned, but I didn't because I was scared of what he'd think. I was *terrified* that it'd change how he felt about

me. “Is he alive and unharmed?” I asked, thinking about the gunshot.

“For now,” he said, hesitating. “His guard didn’t have the same courtesy. We couldn’t have someone talking.”

His guard? My chest constricted, and I felt like someone had punched me there. Alessio was the only other one in that room, and if he’d been killed... God, I couldn’t even imagine a world where Alessio had been killed. Vincent had lost too many people—too many close family members. And Alessio had been the last one alive. He wouldn’t be able to heal from this. Had my father truly killed the smiling, kind-hearted Alessio? I thought about the fleeting glances and touches that he and Caterina had shared when they thought nobody was looking. Vincent had leaned on him as a best friend, and I knew it was a loss he’d never be able to fully cope with—not as long as my father lived. God, Alessio had so much left to do in his life, and it wasn’t fair that my father had killed him. None of this was fair. And my father had no idea what he had done.

“You’re so fucking stupid,” I whispered, shaking my head.

“What did you just say to me?”

“I said you’re fucking stupid!” I shouted, slamming my palms down on the dash. “That was Vincent’s brother. You deserve to go to hell for what you’ve done to him.”

He swerved the car rapidly, and my face slammed into the side of the door, my head banging on the metal of it. “Talk to me like that again and you’ll see how little being my daughter matters to me.”

I stayed silent, trying to consider every repercussion of his actions. Vincent would kill him. There would be no forgiveness for this, and frankly, my father didn’t deserve it. It was my father who had been brutal and heinous over the years, not the Colombo family. He had manipulated and cheated and lied his way all the way to the top. He had enough favors in his pockets that he felt untouchable, but he wasn’t. He was anything but. Vincent would kill him for this, and I wondered if he’d kill me by association. It wouldn’t surprise me if he

did, and I wondered if I'd deserve it for lying to him and following my father for so long.

"Let him go, and you have my word—"

"What the hell do you think your word is worth, Mia?" he asked, pulling into his compound. As I looked around, I realized that was precisely what it was. It wasn't a home full of love and affection the way that the Colombos had been. There weren't loving murals painted on walls or a family who sat around the table for dinner. There was nothing but a cold need for power, and I hated that I'd gone so long without seeing that.

"Nothing," I finally said. The only warmth I'd ever had in this place was my friendship with Isabel, and I hadn't spoken to her in months. As I considered it, I realized that I hadn't even *heard* from her. A sinking feeling filled my chest, and I tried to ignore as it wrapped around me and brought goosebumps to my flesh. "Why would you kill the woman back there?" I finally asked, hoping there'd been a good reason. I needed to change the subject. I couldn't think about Isabel right now.

I had to hope that he had some regard for life, but as he shrugged, I realized I had been wrong. "She was a pawn, too." How was she a pawn? What was he using her to accomplish? Was everyone in his life a pawn?

"Dad," I whispered. "Why haven't I heard from Isabel in all this time?"

I hoped he'd tell me that he'd demanded she stay away from me. I hadn't given her much thought while I was with Vincent, as I'd assumed she was safe here. For a long while, I assumed that my dad was a decent person. I thought I'd have a warm welcome when I came back, but I was beginning to wonder.

He didn't reply. "*Dad*," I repeated more forcefully. I thought back to the last time I'd seen her, still tired and hung over from the night before. She would've known I was missing. She would've raised all the alarms and forced him to send people after me. She would have made a mess of his plan to stay quiet.

“She wouldn’t accept my decision to leave you there, so I had to take care of her before she became a problem.” Every part of me constricted as he turned off the car and stood nonchalantly. He didn’t give a fuck that he’d taken everything from me. In fact, he looked in high spirits as he strode toward the house, leaving me behind in the car. I heaved, my stomach constricting so tightly that I thought I may hurl. Alessio. Isabel. How many other people would he take before it was enough?

It wouldn’t end with Vincent. He’d continue murdering everyone in his way, and he’d ruin lives as he did so. Isabel... God, she’d been a great person. She’d been a fierce and protective best friend, and I couldn’t believe he’d kill her for something as stupid as spreading the word that I’d been kidnapped. Sure, she would’ve orchestrated a way to come save me. She would’ve done everything to make sure I was safe. And in return, I hadn’t even thought of her in the months I’d been away. She had been rotting in the ground for months, and I hadn’t even known. I stepped out of the car, but I didn’t feel my limbs as grief consumed me wholly.

“And Mia?” my father said, turning back toward me with his hand on the door handle. I only had time to look up and meet his smiling eyes before he spoke. “If you interfere in any way with my plans to execute Vincent, I’ll kill you, too. Anyone who stands against me will die.”

He didn’t even realize how ignorant he was to leave me alone, standing outside the house I wanted nothing more than to burn to the ground. I wouldn’t let him get away with this. I wouldn’t let him take another person I loved. If he was going to hurt Vincent, he’d have to go through me first.

VINCENT COLOMBO

I'd tried as hard as I could, but I wondered if any of it was even worth it. I'd lost my entire family and the only woman I'd ever loved; and now, as I sat in a chilled basement, bruised and aching in every part of my body, I could only think back on one of the last family memories I had with both parents and my siblings. It had been before my mother left and long before anyone had died. Technically, it had been a business trip for my father, but Alessio and Harper had been there, getting on one another's nerves the way they always tended to do. My father had constantly been reprimanding all of us. But we were together, and if I could go back to that moment and live there forever, that's the one place I'd go above all other places.

I found myself conflicted with the need to fight the Genovese boss and gain some level of revenge, but it didn't feel like enough. Nothing I could do would be enough to pay him back for what he'd taken, and his death would only bring the Commission down on my own head. I would either die here today, weak and without any revenge, or I would die soon, an enemy in the eyes of the Commission for killing Pete without cause.

Despite all of the things I should be concerned about, most notably the death that awaited me outside the door to this basement room, the most concerning part of all of this was Mia and her involvement. She seemed just as shocked to see her dad as I had been, but what if she'd orchestrated all of it? What if she'd been the one to betray us, and she'd been the reason for my brother's murder? She'd never been innocent.

We'd let her live because we'd considered her innocent of everything her father stood for, but she had played a part in all of this from the beginning. If I saw her again, I'd kill her for what she did.

I worked at the ropes that bound my hands together, and it took longer than expected to slip them from my wrists. When I'd been brought here, I'd been beaten to bloody hell. They kicked me in the ribs and the arms, threw punches at all my exposed flesh, and then tied me to circular hooks that had been screwed into the concrete walls. I hadn't felt any of it—not past the pain that Alessio's death had brought me. Every time I looked at my red-tinted hands, the dull ache within me returned and drowned out the external pain. But now, the pain throbbed everywhere.

I stood, brushing the small pieces of dirt from my jeans. I could do this for the people who were left. I wouldn't let Pete Genovese kill me today—not when Caterina and Luca were still waiting for us to return, likely trying to find exactly where we'd been taken. They didn't deserve to lose another person today. I stood behind the basement door and waited for the first unfortunate person who would stride inside. I'd be ready.

I didn't have to wait long—no more than fifteen minutes—before the lock to the door clicked, and the door eased open. I didn't give myself a chance to think better of it. I grabbed the person's arm, shocked by how light they were as I slammed them against the cement wall. The huff that came from the figure was feminine, but I didn't give a shit. Nothing mattered as I wrapped a hand around the person's throat and looked down at her face.

The familiarity I felt as I stared into those green eyes could have shattered every part of me. I couldn't help but soften at the sight of her, relaxing slightly despite knowing who she was and what she could do. The memory of Alessio, lying in a pool of his own blood, flashed in my mind, and I tightened my grip enough that she gasped and grabbed ahold of my wrist. "Vincent," Mia whispered.

"Are you here to rub it in? To laugh at the way you managed to take everything from me?" I snarled into her face. "It's

because of you that he's dead.”

She shook her head as much as I allowed her, and her voice came out raspy beneath my hand. “It only started that way. It changed,” she gasped. “I didn’t know—”

I tightened my grip. I had to do this. I had to avenge my brother at any cost, and if Mia was that cost, I had to convince myself to do it. But as I looked at her, despite willing myself to follow through and end her, my hand loosened. “You fucking did this!” I shouted, my entire body shaking. Unable to look down at her saddened face for another second, I turned and stormed away. I didn’t think as I balled my fist and slammed it into the wall. I didn’t care if it broke something, and I had no doubt that’s exactly what it did.

“Vincent, stop!” she shouted, charging forward and grabbing my arm. I went to twist it out of her grasp, but she was fast. I didn’t know how I’d forgotten about her skill. She had me on my stomach on the ground in an instant, her knees digging into the back of my thighs. “I didn’t do this!” she shouted. “I would’ve given my life to save your brother, and you know that as well as I do. Back when you first kidnapped me, I had planned to kill you, but things changed. You *know* things changed. They changed for you, too.”

“I never lied about my intentions,” I told her, trying to force my arm from behind my back. She held tightly.

“So that makes your intention to kill me nobler?” she asked. “We both planned on killing each other. That’s the least of our concerns right now. I know you’re hurt, but you know I had nothing to do with this. I never planned for other people to get brought into this mess.”

“You should’ve told me the truth when you swore yourself to my cause,” I told her.

“I didn’t swear myself to your cause. I swore myself to *you*. And if I had told you in that moment, you wouldn’t have trusted me. You would have sent me away.” She took a deep breath. “I’m going to get off of you, but if you try to hurt yourself, I’m taking you back down.”

“What makes you think I won’t kill you?” I snarled, thrashing. She took a long breath, not responding for a moment. “If you really think I had any part in this, I won’t stop you. If you think for one second that I’m not as in love with you as you are me, do it. Kill me.” She pulled herself from me, but I remained on the ground as her words soaked into my mind. Slowly, I looked over a shoulder at where she stood. She wrapped her arms around herself tightly, and I could see the vulnerability there. “I’m not losing someone else I love today,” she continued, shaking her head. “So, if you kill me, know that I’m not fighting you. I’m here because I want you to live. I *need* you to live.”

A small part of me yearned to see her suffer for what happened to me, but the larger part of me knew she wasn’t the cause. Maybe she started out as my enemy, but she wasn’t that anymore. She was a friend—*more* than a friend. I brought myself to my feet and approached her again, looking her up and down. There were no visible injuries, but something in her had cracked. I could see it as clearly as day, and I knew it wouldn’t have been my brother’s death that caused that devastation. “What did he do to you?” I asked.

“He killed my best friend when she wanted to search for me,” she told me, nodding as if just now processing what that meant. “She’s dead because of him.” I recalled Caterina vaguely mentioning a girl who seemed worked up about Mia’s kidnapping, and I’d wondered why nothing had come of it. It made sense now, and her trembling sadness also made sense.

“Do you have a plan?” I finally asked.

She paused, biting at her bottom lip for a moment. “His entire plan hinges on the Commission approving your execution. If they don’t and he kills you anyway, he won’t get your territory, which is the one thing he wants the most. An eye for an eye is the only reason they’d approve that...”

“But an eye for an eye won’t apply. I took nobody from him.”

Something clicked in her mind. I watched as her eyes went alight for a second. “*She was a pawn,*” she whispered, shaking her head. “It’s why he killed the woman in your territory. If he

convinces them that you went on a killing spree, they'll let him come after you." It made a scary kind of sense, and I wondered what other murders he'd pinned on me. "But I know you didn't do it. I was with you, and I saw the whole thing. I know his endgame. He's been using me for years to get what he wants, and I know the things the Commission would kill him for." She met my eyes. "I know how to get you out of this, but you have to trust me."

Mia could be leading me to the execution block. She'd lied to me before, and she'd done an impressive job at manipulating, but none of that mattered as I instinctively nodded my head. I placed all my trust in her hands, knowing it had the potential to get me killed. I looked down at her, moving my hand to the back of her neck and drawing her lips into mine. I'd felt little more than agony and grief for the past few hours, but as her lips brushed mine, I knew that I'd either make Pete Genovese pay, or I'd finally join my family. "I might be a fucking idiot for trusting you..."

"And I might be a fucking idiot for loving you, but we're in this together. We're going to get out of this together." I followed her through the larger basement and up the stairs. She looked back at me and took a deep breath. "We could go out the back door and get away, but that's not going to get you out of this. The only way to get you out of this is by going through the front door."

MIA GENOVESE

I clung to the few details my dad had given me as we strode through the main hallway of the house. Vincent's executions still had to be approved by the Commission, and there was a representative here, hearing his case. I knew how they worked, and if they decided that Vincent was worth executing, the representative would stay and see it through. We had to convince them not to listen to my father's backward lies and half-truths. Our only shot was convincing the representative of the truth. It would have to be good enough. And honestly, the Commission had no bearing on my actions, just Vincent's and my father's. They had to keep peace among the bosses. I'd kill my father myself.

One of the maids walked through the house with her head down, and I stopped her. "Have you seen my dad?" I asked.

She pointed to the front of the house. "He's in a business meeting outside." She scurried away quickly, making herself unseen. All the maids here were experts at doing just that.

"There's a patio out front he uses for meetings with people he doesn't want to bring into the house," I explained.

"Are you fucking crazy?" he asked, pulling me to a halt as I reached for the front door. "Neither of us is armed. He'll kill us on the spot."

I shook my head. "Vincent, you have to trust me. He's speaking with a member of the Commission about you. That's what this meeting is." I turned and looked through the window, finding a woman in a dark gray suit sitting across

from him on the patio. A handful of other people milled around the property outside. Witnesses. “We’re going to tell her the truth.”

He gave me a small shake of his head. “We can’t fight back if he attacks us, Mia. I’m not going to let him kill you. We have to get out, and we’ll figure everything else out later. We’ll come for him *later*.”

That was the thing, though. There wasn’t a later. Once the Commission made the decision to back my father, he’d be untouchable. Even if we did kill him, they’d come after us in turn. The only way to end this for good was by interfering in this meeting before the decision had been made. We wouldn’t be able to counter the decision afterward—not when my father had made sure it was in the works for long before this.

“There isn’t a later, Vincent,” I explained, shaking my head and pushing away from him. “This has been in the works for a long time, and he believes he has a good enough case to end it today. It’ll be a case full of lies, and the only way to end it is by telling the truth right now. There’s a reason he’s done all of this without an official hearing. He doesn’t want your counterstatement. He wants this to be *over*. And it’s going to be if we don’t end this.”

I didn’t think he understood, and I didn’t have the time to explain it to him right now. I couldn’t explain that my father had been picking at the Colombos’ reputation for *years*, and he’d built enough of a following with his position in the Commission to be believed and trusted. He’d used that position to lie and deceive, and he’d done it so subtly that nobody had ever thought to question him. Only I would be believed. Only I could stand against him as his daughter and the heir to his entire empire. There had been too many people I hadn’t been able to save, but Vincent wouldn’t be one of them.

“It might be safer for you to leave, but I don’t know if I’ll be believed without you here.”

He shook his head. “I’m not leaving you behind.”

He placed all his trust in me, and holding it close to my heart, I turned and strode out of the house. I made it a few steps before

my father saw our approach and stood, pulling his gun immediately. The woman at his side stood as well, following in his motions and removing her own weapon.

I held up my hands. “We’re unarmed,” I told him, looking at the woman instead of my father. “I don’t know what he’s telling you, but there’s no reason to eliminate the Colombo rule here in New York. My father has been—”

“Get the fuck in the house,” he snarled, his hands shaking.

I intentionally stepped closer to Vincent, angling my body in front of his. My father wouldn’t hesitate to shoot him, but I prayed he’d hesitate about shooting me, despite what he said earlier.

“He’s been lying,” I continued. “Vincent took me from my home as vengeance, and I learned precisely how he and his family work. They’re not horrible people like he’s been saying. I’ll answer any questions you have, but there’s no reason for an execution.”

The woman narrowed her eyes at me, almost as if she didn’t believe a word I was saying. “Pete wouldn’t come to us with false allegations like this. They’ve been a constant issue for years, and he’s trying to look out for everyone’s best interests. This isn’t a one-time issue.”

“He wants the territory,” I told her. “Have you not thought about how he’d benefit from this? He’ll gain an entire fifth of the territory here in New York, and he’ll expand all his businesses. What will stop him from going for yours next? That’s all he’s wanted for years. He’s trained me to be an assassin for him and take care of the Colombos if the Commission wouldn’t do his dirty work for him. He’s lying to everyone.” Something flashed in her eyes. Realization.

My father spoke first. “This is a private meeting,” he said, and I could hear he was trying to put on a front for this woman. She spoke to him on a first-name basis, so she had to know him better than some of the other representatives. I imagined there was a reason he’d chosen her to make this decision.

“I’d like to hear what they have to say about the murders.”

“Murders?” Vincent asked. “It was the Genovese who murdered my entire *family*,” he shouted.

“And you murdered two dozen of his men who live in your territory,” she said.

My father’s eyes whipped from person to person. He’d flung horrendous accusations toward Vincent, and he never expected them to be questioned. He never thought the truth would come out, but I recalled what he’d said in the car earlier about the woman being a pawn. He had done horrendous things to ensure he got what he wanted, and this was just another drop in the bucket. I was going to spill the goddamned bucket at this woman’s feet, and we’d see who gained the upper hand.

“He told me he killed them,” I said, shaking my head. “My father did that, too.”

Her jaw tightened, and she said nothing more as she continued staring at us. I couldn’t tell from her expression what she believed, but I could see the outrage growing on my father’s face as the truth came out. He knew that with these allegations, the Commission would be forced to delegate people for an investigation before a verdict was made. And when they investigated, they would likely find some trace of my father’s men there. He thought he was going unchallenged, and I knew he wouldn’t have been cautious enough to keep the truth under wraps. We’d just opened a whole new can of worms that went against everything my father had been trying to do for years under the table. I brought too many things to light, and we both knew that everything would unfurl. He’d never had someone fight him before. Until me, he’d always played the game well enough that he could easily go unchallenged.

“Pete,” she said, her tone neither light nor accusing. It held a breath of professionalism that I knew wasn’t there before.

He shocked me. He turned to her as if to say something, and he fired. I gasped, covering my mouth as the woman fell, dead before hitting the ground. It was something I hadn’t expected to happen. He’d been friends with the representatives of the Commission, and I never would’ve expected him to kill one. He knew the repercussions, but I didn’t think for a moment

he'd considered them through his rage. I stared at the woman and wondered if it was my fault she'd been killed, too. My decisions had been the reason for so many deaths, and my chest ached at the thought as I stepped more in front of Vincent.

"I warned you, Mia. I told you what would happen if you betrayed me." I could see in his crazed eyes that he'd do it, he'd kill me where I stood, and there'd be nothing we could do to stop it.

Vincent shoved me back so quickly that I fell to the ground and watched as he took my place in my father's aim. "No," I screamed. A shot rang out, and Vincent fell to one knee, holding the place in his calf my father had shot. Dad rushed forward and pulled Vincent away from me, pressing his gun into his neck. "You only gave me more leverage," he snarled to Vincent. I could only imagine how hard he pressed the gun to his neck as Vincent winced. I'd seen the pre-existing bruises forming, and I knew how much blood he'd be losing from his leg. He was in no position to fight right now. "You forced my hand, but the result is the same. I'll say that you escaped and attacked us. You killed Jen, and then you turned on us and killed Mia for spite. I did what I had to do to protect my family."

"There are too many witnesses," I shouted as he turned the gun on me. I knew he'd shoot, and I didn't want Vincent to see it. I couldn't let him watch another person he cared for die. God, he'd never survive that. "Look around, Dad. People are everywhere, and I know they heard."

"I'll kill them, too," he snarled, and I knew he was serious. It would be a bloodbath, and I had a feeling he'd still come out on top. "They'll trust my word. They'd never believe I'd kill my own daughter."

He steadied his hand and I took a deep breath, closing my eyes and knowing he'd follow through. But a shot came from the distance and my dad shouted, his gun clattering to the ground. Blood oozed from his hand, and I looked toward where the shot rang.

I hadn't noticed her hiding behind a nearby bush. I had no idea how she'd gotten there undetected, but she didn't care about hiding now. Caterina strode forward, pure malice on her tear-stained cheeks. She must've known what had happened. She must've found Alessio and come straight here. "You killed him," she said in a cold, unemotional tone, loading her gun again and pointing. This time, he lost a finger and screamed as he jerked away from Vincent, grabbing his hand.

She only reloaded, ignoring both of us. "You took the man I loved, and you're going to suffer." She shot him in the ankle and reloaded. Through his screams, she did it over and over. She shot him in a dozen different places as he cried out and begged her to stop. He made false promises, but she kept going. As Luca came around the corner and went straight for Vincent, she didn't stop. Each shot was aimed to cause the most pain, and I didn't bother stopping her. I let her enact her revenge for all of our sakes, and I watched emotionlessly as I thought about Isabel, Alessio, and all the innocent people he'd killed.

I saw a lot of people in the yard looking on. Some of the people had been groundskeepers, and others were soldiers who had pledged their loyalty to my father. Not a single person stepped forward, so I stood and looked at all of them. Over two dozen people stared back, and I made sure each of them heard my voice. "You can all make a choice right now. Switch your loyalties or die. We will have none of you spreading lies to the Commission about what happened here today. If you testify honestly, you keep your place here. If you plan to betray us..." I looked back at where Caterina continued firing shots into my father's writhing body. "We'll show no mercy."

VINCENT COLOMBO

It had been a through-and-through shot, and with a few stitches, the wound had been tended to easily enough. The bruises, on the other hand, felt impossible to ignore. Doc, one of the orphans who had paid his debt by coming back and tending to the injured mafia in the ICU, had given me some X-rays to make sure nothing else was broken, and then he sent me on my way. I pressed a pack of ice to the most painful places on my ribs as I lay back on my bed, forcing my mind to stay on the most important parts of the day.

Pete Genovese had been killed in a long, painful way.

Alessio had been brought to the funeral home, and his final arrangements would be made tomorrow.

Everyone else was alive and well, and we had an appointment with the Commission to disentangle all the lies the Genovese had woven over the years. Mia would be the chairperson to represent her father's estate and assets until they appointed someone else to control what he'd built.

Caterina would monitor the Commission closely to ensure no more lies were told. I knew there would be attempts, but I trusted she'd handle them. Still, so much felt out of line and unsettled. I felt like I hadn't avenged my family in the way they deserved. I hadn't *protected* my family.

A small, timid knock came at my door, and I instinctively knew who stood on the other side. "Come in," I shouted.

The door eased open, and Mia strode inside, biting her lip as she clung to the wood of the door as if it was an anchor to her

sanity. “How are you doing?” she asked, pausing and shaking her head. “Actually, that’s a dumb question. How are your injuries?” I shrugged and said nothing. “You haven’t showered yet.” I wasn’t going to tell her that the thought of showering tonight felt like something I couldn’t accomplish. I’d been just like this when Alessio had been alive. I...I couldn’t wipe it away. It felt like it was the last part of him I had, though I knew how stupid that sounded.

She sighed and closed the door, moving through the room as if it were hers. She gathered my trashcan, emptying it on the floor and filling it with soapy water in the same way as I’d done for her a mere week ago. I furrowed my brows as she grabbed a washcloth and approached. “I’m going to at least clean off some of the blood and dirt that’s on your face and arms while we talk.” I let her approach and sit on the side of the bed. “We haven’t really had a chance to address anything that happened.”

“There isn’t a lot to address.”

“There *is* a lot,” she insisted. “I want you to know that when I swore myself to you, it was because I had made up my mind before that to stop working for my dad. It took me a while to realize that you were a good person, but when I did, I stopped. I sent him a message a week and a half ago officially saying I no longer worked for him, but I’d made up my mind long before that.”

“I know.”

“I don’t think you do,” she pressed. “I didn’t know anything about you or your people. I didn’t know how much love is in this house, which changed everything. Even if you don’t trust me or want me here anymore, I’ll always stand with you.”

I looked up at her as she dabbed away some of the dirt from my arms and the blood from my face, making the water grimy. Her betrayal had been the least of my concerns. In fact, it hadn’t taken more than a few minutes outside of the basement to realize that I couldn’t hold it against her. I understood why she’d believed what she had, and I couldn’t fault her for it. “Mia, I know you’re loyal,” I told her.

Her hands paused on my arm. “You do?”

“You stepped in front of me because you planned to take a bullet for me,” I reminded her. “There isn’t anything more loyal than that.”

“You *did* take a bullet for me,” she reminded, me, glancing down at my calf. She finally dropped the rag in the bucket and pushed it aside. She moved a little closer to me and placed a gentle hand on my arm. Heat spiked through me at the touch, and I pursed my lips. “I wasn’t going to let anything happen to you,” she told me. “You didn’t deserve anything he did to you, and I’m happy we finally took care of him.”

“He was your father,” I reminded her.

She scoffed. “I have no part of that man’s hatred and cowardice inside of me. I’ll never claim any part of him. I’m loyal to you and only to you. I was going to kill you because of the cruel stories my father told me when I thought he loved me. He said you were horrendous and murderous—that you cared only about power.” She shook her head. “He said you recruit any trash off the streets so you’d have enough manpower to take down the other families. It was why I believed Italian descent was so important, and it was the reason I argued with you about that. I didn’t realize what you were doing was so good.”

I didn’t need to hear more about it. I grabbed her wrist, and despite the pain, I flipped her beneath me, careful to avoid any pressure on my leg. “I don’t want to talk about your father right now,” I told her. She gaped up at me, looking me over as if I were too frail to move unassisted. “I don’t want to talk about him or any of the things he did. Those are things I’d rather discuss tomorrow. Right now, I just want you.”

“Me?” she asked. “You still...you still want me?”

I couldn’t stop the hoarse laugh that exploded from me. “Mia, I *need* you,” I told her. “I wouldn’t want anyone else to be here with me right now.”

“I’m a Genovese, and they did so much to you.”

I shook my head. “Legally, you’re a Colombo now. We’re married, and I thought it would be amusing to spite your father in that way, too. You’re my goddamned queen, Mia Colombo.”

She leaned up and brought her lips over mine with a wild smile. “Queen of the underworld,” she mused. “I like the sound of that.”

I brought my lips down on hers hard, and she moaned beneath me, showing me precisely how much my touch affected her. She couldn’t have possibly faked this reaction. I didn’t know how I’d convinced myself of that in the basement of her father’s estate. She pressed her hands into my shoulders and arched her entire body up to meet mine, and I knew that what she felt for me was real. Nothing other than us mattered right now.

“Let me,” she said, pressing so lightly on my chest that I hardly felt the pressure, despite how every part of me had been bruised to hell. I pulled away slightly and allowed myself to lay on my back as she hovered above me, sliding off her pants and shirt. She bared herself to me, resting most of her weight on her legs rather than my body.

“Stunning,” I breathed as I looked up at her. All that smooth bare skin took my breath away.

She traced a finger across one of the tattoos on my chest, so gentle that I felt only warm and tingly beneath her touch. “Do any of them mean anything?” she asked briefly, the finger swirling alongside the ink.

I pointed to where I knew one of the symbols rested on my chest. “It’s the Chinese symbol for strength,” I moved my finger to the next. “Protection.” I lingered my hand over the last. “And family.”

“They’re beautiful.”

I nodded and smiled lightly. “They’re shared among my entire family. We all have them. The strength to lead, protect, and cherish family above all else.”

Mia bent, resting her hand atop the conglomeration of symbols, as she kissed me again. I felt every ounce of grief

and sympathy she felt before she pulled away a fraction of an inch. “You’ll honor them by wearing these for the rest of your life and following the messages.”

When she met my lips again, she didn’t rush. She didn’t push us forward more quickly than necessary. She dipped and moved against my body in a way that showed both comfort and longing. I lost myself to the dips and curves of her body atop mine. I allowed every inch of her to consume me with the heat and passion she allowed to fill the room. All of my touches were fleeting as she moved, removing my elastic shorts with her nimble, brushing touches. I lifted my hips, the pain of the motion secondary to the touches that had my heart racing.

When she sank herself onto me, I groaned, unable to veer my gaze from the look on her face. The ecstasy I could see in her eyes, too. She moved her hips in a long, sweeping motion. She took me deep into her and cried out, and I could only grip her hips tightly as she continued. This wasn’t fast and frantic. It wasn’t a hateful fuck like we’d done before. It was so much more as the emotions flowed between us. Her hair hung down her back, swaying with each motion as she thrust in and out, crying as she found her release.

I reached between us and gripped her chin, leveling her head so that she looked me in the eyes. “I want you to look at me while we fuck,” I told her. And she did just that. In her eyes, I saw as she barreled through her climax, rocking harder and crying against me, and the look of pure trust in her eyes sent me over the edge, too. No matter what came in our future, I knew that right now, everything was perfect. Right now, I had her in my arms, and nothing could touch us here.

EPILOGUE

Vincent had planned this for a month, and I held my glass of water close to my chest as I hoped it came together seamlessly. Five places were set at the table, but I knew that there'd only be four people there. The fifth was to be honored.

The doorbell rang, and I rushed forward. Vincent beat me there, and when he opened it, Luca stood there, holding a small pile of dishes. Vincent groaned and took the top few before they had a chance to clatter to the ground. "Luca, pizza would've been good enough."

He only shrugged. "It's for old time's sake."

I'd gone to only one of their weekly family dinners, and Luca had made the meal. Vincent claimed that it had been a constant among their group, and I realized that was one thing we needed on a night like tonight.

Vincent carried the plates to the table before opening one and gaping at it for a moment. I furrowed my brow as I watched him tense. I wondered briefly if he was having a stroke, but as I took a step forward, he looked at Luca. "It was his favorite," he said.

"I made it for the last two birthdays. I couldn't make something different this year."

Vincent didn't say anything else as he helped lay out the spread, and I waited, leaning against the counter, far more nervous than I had any right to be. I wondered if Caterina would come as she'd said. I could only imagine what she was going through with the loss of Alessio. I'd seen her in passing

as she left meetings with Vincent, but much like Luca, she didn't stay here anymore. She had her own apartment in the inner city, and she worked for Vincent more traditionally. I knew how much he missed having his friends close. I knew he missed having a large family here, and I hoped that tonight would bring that back. This was our way of trying.

Unlike Luca's knocks, Caterina simply strode into the house about ten minutes later, interrupting a conversation between Luca and Vincent. We all sat around the table, two places empty. The one at the end of the table had always been Caterina's, and the seat in the center of it... well, nobody looked toward that mat as she sat. "Sorry I'm late," she said with a wince. "I was in pretty deep today, and it took longer than expected to disentangle myself from the situation." She didn't need to elaborate. She had been at the Commission, making sure all our dealings had held. We'd managed to unravel the web of lies my father had woven, and she was there to make sure nobody tried to take advantage of our misfortune.

When she caught sight of what rested on the table, she froze. It had been two months, and nobody had healed from Alessio's death entirely. It had kept us all apart for a while, but I hoped this evening would change things. "You know, he probably brought up this pork recipe at least once a week all year around," she said. Luca chuckled and passed her the bowl first.

For a few minutes, the conversation was tense. Alessio had always been the one to break the ice before, but he wasn't here now, and it had to be done. And there was only one thing that would get everyone to stop thinking about the elephant in the room. "I'm pregnant," I finally said, looking around the table.

Caterina's head jerked upright as she looked between me and my barely expanded belly. Luca's knife clattered to the table, and Vincent glared over at me. "I thought we agreed on subtle," he chastised.

"How far along?" Caterina asked.

"Far enough to know it's a boy," I told her. Vincent reached beneath the table and rested a hand on my knee, moving his

thumb around it lightly. The touch sent a spark of longing through me, but I forced myself to ignore it as he continued moving his hand.

She looked at Vincent, a wide smile spreading across her lips. “You’re having a boy,” she stated, shaking her head as if she was in denial. “God, I feel horrible for the poor kid if he inherits your attributes.”

I couldn’t contain the laugh, and Vincent’s hand tightened on my knee in a silent, humorous warning. “You can say that again,” I agreed.

Instead of remaining on the knee, his hand moved up my thigh, and every muscle in my belly went loose as his fingers trailed forward and backward. Vincent smiled at all the people in the room before speaking. “Hopefully he has more of Alessio’s traits, since he’s going to have his name.” Caterina gasped, and Luca...smiled. I could count on one hand the number of times I’d seen that smile, but he did just that. He looked at his plate and took a bite, but I could tell that this snippet of news had made a difference for both of them. “And I hope that you’ll both be here more often so you can get to know him when he gets here.”

Caterina nodded, and I acted like I didn’t see the small tear welling in her eye. “As long as Luca makes dinner, I’ll come every week.” She paused and looked at me for a long moment. “And as soon as that baby comes out, there are a few things I can teach you—things that’ll serve you well as you live here.” My eyes dipped to the knife at her side that I constantly saw her flipping, and I nodded eagerly. There were so many things I couldn’t wait to learn from her. “To Alessio,” she said, holding her wine glass up and staring at his empty placemat.

“Happy birthday, buddy,” Luca said.

Vincent didn’t say anything as he lifted his glass, and I smiled a bit. “It was an honor to meet you,” I whispered, and we all sipped our drinks.

Vincent’s hand began moving again, reminding me of that heat in my lower stomach. His fingers drifted a little higher—high enough that they nearly grazed the sensitive bundle of nerves

between my thighs. I bit my lip and took a bite, forcing myself not to choke on it as he *did* brush me this time. I leaned into his touch, and it was gone immediately as he pushed away from the table. “I look forward to a lot more dinners like this,” he said, nodding at each Caterina and Luca. “But if you’ll excuse us a moment, there’s something my wife and I need to take care of in the kitchen.”

This time, I did choke on my food for a moment before swallowing it properly. “Vincent,” I scolded. But his stare told me that there was no discussing this right now. I stood and turned from the table. “We’ll be right back with dessert,” I promised.

“Not for them,” he muttered in my ear.

Luca heard his remark and laughed behind us as we turned down the hallway. I giggled as he pulled me forward and out of the dining room. It was obvious we didn’t head toward the kitchen as he brought me toward the bedrooms, and I rolled my eyes as he guided me toward his room. I followed him inside and opened my mouth to speak, but his lips cut me off. I couldn’t help the light moan as I leaned into his kiss. “Vincent,” I laughed. “Our friends are waiting for us downstairs.” He didn’t seem to care in the slightest as he pressed me into the wall beside the door and pinned both arms over my head, ravishing my neck with long, deep kisses. I only continued liquifying beneath him, rolling my eyes and leaning into him. “Vincent,” I moaned.

“Have I ever told you how fucking sexy you are?” he asked, and I chuckled. “When you grab your little stomach and talk about the baby. Do you even realize how big you smile when you do that? God, you never smile like that. It’s the sexiest shit I’ve ever seen.”

He dropped my arms and hooked me around the waist, lifting me. I wrapped my legs around him and sank into his hold, feeling the erection already pressing between my legs. My eyes veered over his exposed tattoos, and I nodded eagerly. “You want to know what turns me on?” I asked, nipping at his bottom lips.

“I already know.” He moved from the wall and turned toward the bed, carrying me toward it and tossing me on the surface. I bounced on it, attempting to sit up just in time for him to grab my leg and twist me. I gasped as I rested on my belly, both legs hanging off the bed. He gripped my hips and pulled me back into him before releasing one and grabbing a fistful of my hair, tugging my head up. I gasped and shuttered from the pure domineering force.

“I know you don’t like vanilla,” he said, leaning forward and breathing in my ear before nipping at the lobe. “The first time we met, do you remember what you said?”

“I said a lot of things,” I told him, trying to push myself upright. His grip only tightened, and I considered. “What did I say?”

“That you expected something rougher.” My mind trailed back to saying that, and my eyes widened. “I’m going to give that to you.” He didn’t hesitate before moving a hand between my legs and plunging a finger into me, doing something utterly sinful between my thighs. I gasped and moaned, and he didn’t relent. He continued working me until I came on his fingers so hard that I couldn’t stop myself from writhing and jerking. Still, he didn’t let me move an inch as he continued the assault on me. I shook and cried out as the pleasure eddied and revamped, more intense than before. I could hardly breathe as a second orgasm rocked me to my core.

“God, Vincent, please,” I begged. I didn’t know what I was begging for in the haze of my intense release; I just needed something.

He jerked back on my hair again, and the orgasm only intensified. I couldn’t remember ever screaming so loudly and so intensely as I did at that moment, coming around his fingers. “Please what?” he rasped.

I gathered my wits just long enough to clamp my jaw closed, take a deep breath, and give him what he wanted. I played with him for old times’ sake. “Please fuck me with your cock. Like a *man*,” I said.

“*Fuck, Mia,*” he said. We both knew he was with the manliest person around. He didn’t even bother undressing as he continued working me, undoing the zipper on his pants and allowing himself to spring from them. Jesus Christ, there was no denying he was a man. He removed his fingers and, in one powerful sweep, slammed into me. I shouted as the pleasure caused a deeper ache within me.

He rocked back and slammed into me harder. Faster. He wrapped an arm around my waist for leverage and held me to his chest as he fucked me with every ounce of yearning I reciprocated for him. We didn’t need all the frilly stuff. The words of affirmation. The extra touches. We needed none of it to know that we fit together so well that nothing could separate us. All that we were and all that we had overcome was cemented in the way his body molded mine and he pounded himself into me. We were everything as he brought me to my knees again, obliterating me in a way that only he could.

He withdrew from me and moved his cock up slightly before plunging into me again, only in a much different hole—one that stretched to accommodate him. He shouted and I cried out, shuddering from the surreal sensation of him filling another part of me. He plunged into me one more time before bringing his finger between my thighs and working me in a wholly different way. “I’m going to come,” I cried, rocking back into him as he moved faster and harder. I shattered beneath him, consumed by everywhere he touched me and all the things he did to fully satisfy me. It was almost too much as I moaned and cried out, listening to his light groans as he too came apart.

When he finally stopped, breathing as frantically as me, I looked over my shoulder at him. His flushed smile was all I needed to see to remind me of how lucky I was. Vincent Colombo was the reason I had become the luckiest, happiest woman alive, and I would never forget that.

If you loved this story then you will love ...

KNOCKED UP BY THE DON

*I can't decide if I will murder her or marry her
But one thing is certain, her life will never be the same.*

She's the witness too beautiful to kill.

So I claimed her instead.

Her obsession to discover my secrets,

Made her the Mafia target.

As a Don, my world is dangerous and dark.

She's too innocent to understand.

Now I must protect her like an Angel,

While I possess her like a Demon.

I'll show her that I am both.

*Especially now that she's carrying my child and I'm the only
one who can protect her...*

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KNOCKED UP BY THE DON

CHAPTER 1

HARLOW

“Watch it!” the fantastically slender model hisses at me as I accidentally prick the underside of her arm with a pin. “I have *flesh*, you know. I’m not made of plastic, and I’d like to keep some of my skin intact.”

I don’t know about plastic, but her personality sure seems like it’s made of marble. I’ve never met a more stone-faced model in my life—then again, I’ve never had a chance to help out at Fashion Week in New York either. “Sorry,” I mumble with a handful of straight pins firmly pressed between my lips. If I drop any of them, a gaggle of barefooted runway models will start shrieking about the sanctity of their toes. I’m pretty sure they have every body part heavily insured. I do my best to pinch together the dress I’m trying to affix to this model without poking her again. It’s my first time working Fashion Week and intimidated is a gross understatement for how I feel. Coupled with excitement and awe that rivals that of meeting a superhero, my hands are quite literally shaking.

As soon as I have her dress on, the tall blonde beauty strides away from me like a beautiful long-legged space alien that can cross the room in two swift steps. Almost instantly, my former boss Marguerite shoves another model in front of me to dress, as if this is a human assembly line. This time a male, he’s also ridiculously attractive, and entirely nude. It’s difficult not to look at what’s hanging between his legs, especially when it starts to swell in response to my touch as I begin to pin him into his pants. “Aren’t you guys supposed to be able to control that at runway shows?” I joke, trying to lighten the awkward moment.

He grins at me with a devilish look in his eyes but doesn’t answer my question. “How old are you?” he asks.

“Twenty-three, why?”

“And which design firm do you work for?”

“Is this Twenty Questions?” I retort.

He chuckles, and even his laugh sounds sexy. I think these models are literally created to be tempting. “I’m just trying to figure out how someone who can’t stick a straight pin, and has never seen a swollen cock, wound up working at the most prestigious fashion event in the city,” he teases. Fair enough.

“I don’t technically work for any design firm, at least not yet,” I explain. “I just graduated from the Fashion Institute of Technology, and I’m still trying to figure out how to make a name for myself in the industry. My old internship boss needed some help this week, so she let me come along.”

I finish up getting him dressed as quickly as possible, not saying anything else that might give away my lack of experience. This guy is much nicer than the female model who looked at me as if I belong outside on the street pandering for coins instead of backstage with her.

I can’t help but notice some of the things going on around me in the bustle of preparation for the runway show. All of the heavy hitters are here, including designers from Racked, *the* most elite, profitable firm in the industry. They have a catalogue of high-profile clients that essentially strangles all the competition.

I have my sights set on getting on board with a less cut-throat company in order to make a name for myself as a fashion designer—a firm that’s stable, but definitely lower on the food chain than Racked. I know better than to even think about trying to get my foot in the door at a firm like that. Even with my impressive internship recommendations, they’d laugh me straight back to the last century. There’s not a single newbie fashion designer in the entirety of the Garment District that would dream of applying there, including me.

“You’re all set,” I say to the model with a smile. “Good luck on the runway.”

He smooths his hands down the front of his pants, stalling at his crotch for a moment before winking at me. “I don’t need luck; I was born for this. Try not to ogle the other designers too much.”

I feel my face flush with embarrassment. It's not as if I could get a glimpse of anything the designers from Racked are working on anyway. They keep all their ideas under tight wrap until the show begins. It's almost crazy how tight their security is; their models even get dressed behind opaque screens to keep anyone from sneaking a peek at their designs.

I look around me and take in a breath for a moment, as Marguerite is too busy talking with one of the models to put me to work again. The entirety of backstage is a flurry of fabrics and furiously deviating hues. Creativity is practically seeping through the walls, and the smell of freshly dyed cloth and new leather permeates the air. This experience is a dream for me. A dream suddenly twisted into a nightmare when I hear the sound of gunshots in the main exhibition hall.

Everything happens so quickly that it blurs together in my head like a time-lapse movie on LSD. Screams erupt, half-dressed models and horrified-looking designers run, and I drop all the straight pins onto the floor. I see Marguerite scrambling to push through her colleagues to get to the exit and hear the sound of more gunshots being fired. I don't know anything at all about guns, but isn't the point of firing one to actually hit something? These sound like they're just being used to scatter people away, like roaches under a lifted rock. But when one of the shots takes out the overhead lights, leaving only the foreboding red glow of the emergency lights, I start to wish I was under a rock.

The exit doors are swarmed with a moving mass of people all tangled up together as they try to squeeze out of it. It reminds me of one of those horror movies that quickly turns into a grisly scene. So, I run in the opposite direction, hoping to find a different exit—maybe a back door that leads out into the street instead of the hallway.

I push through the clothing racks laden with designer clothing, try not to freak out at the fact that it's eerily quiet in the direction I'm heading in alone and push down the feeling of intense adrenaline threatening to give me a full-blown panic attack. *I just need to get out of here.*

A small door comes into view at the far wall of the building, and I run toward it, letting out a small stifled scream when a man suddenly appears to be running beside me. “Hurry!” he says as I look over to see that it’s the ultra-attractive male model from before. “Just get to the door and—”

Before he can finish his sentence, another gunshot erupts. This one hits a target. My entire body stiffens to an abrupt halt, prompted by sheer terror as the model crumbles to the floor at my feet. His beautiful face has been cracked open by a bullet lodged in the side of his skull.

I feel like I need to scream, but no sound comes out of my gaping open mouth. His eyes roll back into his head until the sockets are completely filled with white. I’ve never seen a dead body before; I always thought my first experience would be more peaceful, more formally presented in some sort of decorated casket with the sound of somber music playing, than this sight of a man being brutally killed in front of me.

I look down at my dress to peel my eyes away from the carnage, but it doesn’t help because my ivory-colored sheath is splattered with blood. I have a sickening feeling that the damp trickle down the side of my cheekbone is also blood. Frozen in a state of panic, I’m too shocked to even move. I stand there, covered in blood splatter, with a dead man at my feet, trying to push a breath through my lungs before I pass out. *I still need to get out of here.* I need to will my feet to move before I wind up on the floor right next to him. But instead of my adrenaline kicking into a flight-or-fight mode, I feel heavy and made of more marble than that snarky female model’s personality from earlier.

The only thing that breaks me from my stupor is the sight of a man approaching slowly from behind one of the garment racks. He walks with a deliberate stride that is almost predatory, still holding the gun in his hand before sliding it into the waistband of his pants. The rational part of my brain tells me he isn’t going to shoot me if he’s putting his gun away, but it also tells me that whoever this guy is, he’s just murdered someone in front of my eyes. That makes me a witness. *Damnit, why won’t my legs move?*

The man comes to a stop, standing squarely in front of me and staring at me with a steel gray gaze. Contrary to my bloodied appearance, his impeccable suit isn't even creased in the slightest. How can you murder someone and yet still remain so calm, so clean, so cool-tempered? The better question is how a man who looks so divinely handsome can commit such a heinous act?

The man locks his eyes with mine, and I give up on trying to reclaim that stuck breath in my chest. Without saying a single word, he reaches down and grabs the dead model by the top of his shoulder. He hoists the lifeless body up over his shoulder with one single swift motion, as if he's casually flipping his suit jacket over his back. A daunting sensation comes over me that whoever this guy is, he's done this before. He pauses just briefly, lifting an eyebrow at me as I stand there motionless. It's almost like he's trying to figure out why I haven't run away screaming at the top of my lungs yet. *Trust me buddy, I'm wondering that myself.* I'm transfixed in both horror and a seductively dark sense of intrigue I'm pretty sure I shouldn't have. It makes me feel a bit like someone has taken a seam ripper to my insides.

There's a scuffling sound coming from the other side of the room, and without further hesitation, the man disappears back behind the garment racks that he had stepped out from, carrying the dead weight of what was once a flirtatiously lively model. Suddenly, I snap back into the moment at hand. Instead of racing out the door I'd been headed toward, I spin around on my heels and run straight back toward the runway entrance. I sprint through the elaborate opening and race down the runway, practically tripping over my feet until I spill out into the chaotic crowd.

My eyes search frantically through the sea of shocked faces, trying to find the shooter wearing the impeccable suit. But he is nowhere. The gunshots have stopped, the immediate threat seems to have passed, and already cops and emergency workers are flooding into the building. I look around to see if I can find Marguerite so I can tell her what I saw. But before I can get very far, a police officer steps into my path to question me. In the true style of New York City's finest, he doesn't

bother to ask me if I'm okay and instead launches straight into questioning why I'm covered in blood. I suppose that's fair, considering I do look like I just stepped out of a slasher movie. A medic saddles up beside him, waiting to be allowed permission to make sure I'm all right.

My mouth opens and words pour out of it in a nonsensical stream. I manage to get out the gist of it—how a model was shot dead backstage right next to me, and how a man in a charcoal gray suit carried the body away. The cop looks at me as if I have three heads sprouting from my shoulders. I almost fear for a second that he's going to take me to the psych ward and have me admitted.

Thankfully, Marguerite appears and intervenes before any such thing can happen. "Forgive her, officer," she says in a thick French accent. She's not even French—she grew up in the Bronx, and just happened to be lucky enough to have her mother bestow a cool name upon her, to which she has molded her identity. "Harlow is just confused. She's obviously shaken up and traumatized by what has happened."

"Can you vouch for her whereabouts?" the cop asks, looking skeptical.

"Of course I can, she's my intern," Marguerite snaps, as if she finds the audacity of this man questioning her to be offensive. "You should run along and find whoever did this and ruined opening day of Fashion Week. Isn't that what my tax dollars pay you to do?" Marguerite might have been a pain in the ass to work for during my senior internship at FIT, but she's a force to be reckoned with, and right now that's working to my advantage.

After the cop leaves, and I manage to wave the medic away, I turn to her out of sheer confusion. "What's going on? Why was that cop looking at me like I was nuts? I just watched one of your models get shot in the head. Doesn't anyone want to find out what happened to him?"

"What are you going on about?" she asks irritably. "No one was shot in the head. Whoever did this was simply trying to ruin the start of Fashion Week, probably that new designer out

of Chinatown. He always seems to be causing trouble. Or maybe even those crazy people over at Racked. Sometimes I feel like they will do *anything*, just to steal the show away from the rest of us hardworking designers.”

“No Marguerite, listen to me,” I protest. “How can you not believe me? I saw it with my own eyes!”

She lets out an exasperated sigh. “Okay, then, which one of my models was it?” she asks, putting one hand on her hip as if I’m wasting her time. “Because I’m pretty sure they’ve all already been accounted for.”

“The male one I was dressing right before the gunshots rang out. The one with the platinum hair and the—”

“I think you need to go home and get some rest,” she interrupts, rolling her eyes at me.

Fashion Week isn’t for the lighthearted, although I must admit, this whole scene has definitely rattled me. “But Marguerite—”

“Enough!” she snaps. “My nerves are fried. I don’t know what it is you thought you saw, but it can’t possibly have been true, because I don’t even *have* a male model in my show this season. It’s a strictly female line.”

I feel my stomach lurch. I know what I saw. And I don’t know why the cops don’t believe me or where that male model came from. But I definitely just witnessed a murder.

Marguerite turns to leave, grabbing swaths of her fabrics as she storms out of the building at a furious pace, leaving me trying to figure out what I’m supposed to do now. Since Fashion Week is definitely not starting today after this violent chaos, I follow suit and head out to my car. But as I slide into the driver seat and instinctively lock the car doors, I am struck by two things.

The first is that I have just witnessed a man being murdered and no one seems to believe it happened. And the second is that I have just set my eyes on perhaps the most mystifying and brutally handsome man I’ve ever seen.

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