



Blood

MONEY

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LA FAMIGLIA DE LUCA BOOK TWO

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

KRISTINE ALLEN

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To Sapphire Knight. The MMM World Collaboration was your
brainchild and I'm honored to be a part of it.

Once upon a time, there was a young man who loved a girl,
and she loved him right back. Then I threw it all away. Turns
out guys born into darkness don't get a happily ever after.

And now that darkness owns me.

As the underboss to one of the youngest dons in La Cosa
Nostra, my responsibility is a heavy crown. Regret is not an
option. My grandfather taught me that the world is ruthless—
and now so am I.

Until she came back, and now all I have are regrets.

Stubborn, she throws my family's protection back in our faces.
Now word is out, and she's become a target for more than one
reason.

Our enemies are conspiring against us, and a war is brewing. I
can't let her get caught in the crossfire. That already happened
once. We need to be able to trust each other, yet we both have
secrets that threaten to destroy us. Not happening.

I'll find a way. Because I. Never. Give. Up.

PROLOGUE

Vittorio, Six Years Old....

“Hurry,” Gabriel whispered with suppressed excitement. He held my hand as we raced through the lushly carpeted halls in our home. He was two years older than my six years, and he was my hero. I would’ve gone anywhere and done anything for him.

“Where are we going?” I gasped breathlessly when we darted through the kitchen and skirted around the island. Our cook had her back to us, but she cast a glance over her shoulder, and we made eye contact. My heart seized in my chest, and my footsteps faltered.

Gabriel tugged on my hand at the same time as she winked at me, then turned back to what she was doing.

“Vittorio,” he quietly urged.

I returned my attention to my older brother as we slipped out the back door. We were quiet, and the only sounds we made were the pounding of our Vans landing on the grass, then the creaking of the back gate. Both of us looked toward the house to see if we’d been caught. Grandfather scared me, and I didn’t want to get in trouble.

“Let’s go!” He grinned, and I giggled as we ran down the alley behind our big old house we shared with our grandparents. It was the first full day of summer vacation, and the flowers growing in the yards we passed smelled so good. It was one of my favorite things about this time of year.

The moment we turned left at the end of the alley, I knew our destination, and I grinned.

Several blocks later, and out of breath, we burst into the bakery. The scent of bread rising and the sugary-sweet smell of frostings, donuts, and other treats rushed over me, and I breathed deeply. Next to my mama's perfume, it was the best smell in the world.

"I know you didn't just run into my bakery," Mrs. Romano chastised as we skidded to a stop in front of the display cases.

"No, ma'am," Gabriel assured her, then elbowed me, pulling my gaze from the rows and rows of delectable goodness.

"No, ma'am," I parroted, eyes wide and heart racing.

One of her bushy brows lifted as she stared us down. She was so scary, I wanted to shrink behind my brother, but I was frozen in place at her scrutiny.

"What will it be today?" she asked, holding back a smile.

A relieved sigh left me, and I took that as my cue to scan the options. Tongue sticking out of the side of my mouth, I moved down the glass. It was always so hard to choose. I crouched to see a lower shelf and paused. Staring through the case were two bright green eyes. I peered closer and blinked, thinking I had imagined it. Slowly, I stood upright, but the eyes followed me to the top.

That was when I realized those green eyes were connected to a little girl with wild, curly red hair. She didn't look like she was as old as me—she was probably Alessio's age. She waved at me with a pink-frosted cupcake in her hand. I glanced over at Gabriel, but he was busy talking to Mrs. Romano. Shy, I waved back.

"Kendall, what did I tell you about helping yourself to the treats?" Mrs. Romano suddenly barked, and the little girl's already big eyes went huge. Then she slammed the door shut on the back of the case, and I saw the top of her head with her hair flying behind her as she darted for the back room.

Ken-doll. That's a funny name for a girl. Shouldn't it be Barbie?

"Vittorio, pick what you want," Gabriel told me, making me jolt. I turned from him to Mrs. Romano and pointed at the pink-frosted cupcakes.

"That's pink," Gabriel said as he looked like he'd smelled something bad. "Don't you want something different?"

I shook my head, and my brother sighed. "Get him a donut too," he added.

Mrs. Romano reached into the case Kendall had just been staring through and pulled out a cupcake like Kendall had grabbed. Then she handed it to me in a small white bag.

Gabriel paid her with his allowance money, and she handed him some dollars as change. He was eight, so he'd started getting that for doing "chores." Mama said when I turned eight, I'd get money for doin' my chores too.

The bell on the door jingled as we left, and I cast one last glance back. The girl named Kendall stood in the window with her hand on the glass and a sad expression. I wanted to go back, but Gabriel was rushing me.

"We need to get back before anyone knows we left," he urged before handing me one of the donuts from his bag.

As we hurried back, we devoured the donuts. I kept the cupcake in the white paper bag because I wanted to save it for later.

We made it back in the house and were tiptoeing past the library, where we could hear our father and grandfather arguing. Suddenly the wooden door slid open, and our grandfather stood there, angry and scowling. "What are you two doing?" he shouted.

It made me jump and drop the bag. The cupcake fell out and landed with a splat of pink icing on the dark wood floor.

"You went out alone?" His voice was getting loud and scary.

Then he turned on Gabriel, who shot a worried glance my way and whispered, “Run!”

Grandfather swung and caught Gabriel across the face. My brother gasped and dropped the change from where he’d been holding it tightly in his fist. I watched as blood dropped on the dollars. “Stupid fucking boy!” Grandfather cursed in Italian.

“They’re only boys!” our father harshly snapped as he stepped in front of us.

“They are *De Lucas!*” Grandfather hissed.

I knew Gabriel told me to run, but I was so scared I couldn’t move. Shaking, I remained there, feet rooted to the floor.

“Gabriel is nearly nine years old! They need to understand who they are and how any number of people would love to get their hands on them, Lorenzo!” Grandfather was practically screaming.

I trembled, and Gabriel quietly laced his fingers with mine and squeezed. My heart felt like it might burst from my chest.

“I’ll deal with them!” Father snarled, and I looked at him with fear burning through to my bones.

He grabbed our arms and dragged us away. I sent one last sad glance over my shoulder at the smashed cupcake.

“Lorenzo!” Mama hissed from her library as we passed.

“Not now, Valentina!” he replied with his teeth gritted.

I practically ran up the stairs to keep up.

When we got to our room, he closed the door and released me. He immediately swatted Gabriel’s butt several times. Gabriel cried out in surprise. Then Father turned toward me. My eyes bugged, and I shook my head. I tried not to cry because I wasn’t a baby, but the look on my father’s face terrified me.

He gripped my arm, and Gabriel bolted between us.

“No, Papa! Please, I made him do it!” he begged. The blood from the cut on his cheek and lip was smeared across his

face.

“Your grandfather needs to know I dealt with the two of you,” he whispered angrily at my brother. Then his expression softened. “I’m not going to hurt either of you, but you can’t do things like that.”

Gabriel bit his lower lip, then immediately winced and released it. He stepped back and hung his head.

“No, Papa! Please! No!” I cried as I tried to get away, but he held firm. Then he brought his big hand back and let it fly. My butt burned, and I screamed. Each one seemed to set me on fire until I was sobbing, and Father held my quaking form. He gently set me back and crouched in front of us. He held each of us by the arm as he looked us in the eye.

“I’m so sorry I had to do that. Your grandfather overreacted, but he is right. You are De Lucas. There are people out there who would hurt you to hurt our family,” he tried to explain.

Gabriel lifted his chin. “Then I would kill them!” he fiercely snarled.

As I sniffled, I stared at my brother, and my mouth fell open in shock.

Our father wrapped his big hand around the back of Gabriel’s head and brought their foreheads together. “Oh, my brave boy,” he whispered before he pulled me in with them. “You must learn to be smart and cunning—ruthless but always fair. That will get you so much further than being angry and rash. I love you both so much that it’s dangerous. Not something I expect you to understand, but you and your brothers mean *everything* to me. If you want to go for treats in the future, how about you ask me, and I’ll have someone go with you?”

“I’m not a baby. I can take care of me and Vittorio,” Gabriel stubbornly insisted. He scowled and huffed.

Father ruffled his hair. “I’m sure you can, son.”

He kissed both of our heads, then stood. “Stay up here for a while. I’ll have your mother get you when it’s time to come

down for supper, okay?”

“Okay,” we both murmured.

Father left, and we climbed on our beds and stared at each other from across the room.

“I’m sorry I got us in trouble,” Gabriel whispered.

I rubbed the back of my hand under my nose and sniffed. “It’s not your fault,” I mumbled.

Each week after that, when Gabriel got his allowance, we hustled down to the bakery. However, from then on, there were no more unsupervised mad dashes down the road—we had a vigilant shadow. Father’s soldier would follow us there but would wait outside to allow us to feel like “big kids” going in on our own.

Each time I went, I hoped for a glimpse of the little red-haired girl, but I never saw her again.

Not until we were much older.

Chapter ONE



“IOU”—Five Finger Death Punch

Present Day....

Gabriel was pissed as hell at our mother for insisting on going to this MMM—Motorcycles, Mobsters and Mayhem—book signing thing. I can’t make this shit up. That’s what it was called, and the irony wasn’t lost on me. Not that the rest of us were overly happy either. Except, after catching one of the assistant chicks totally eye-fucking my older brother, I knew he would end up being okay with it if he got laid. Lord knew he was so uptight, he could use a good, sweaty, wall-banging fuck.

As I followed my mother around the signing, I couldn’t help but check out a few of the authors and several of the readers. In a way, it was a single man’s dream. Women as far as the eye could see. Women who loved reading dirty books.

Truthfully, I'd been a bit shocked when I'd picked up one author's book and flipped through it. Of course, I had the worst luck and opened to a part that was straight sex. I'm talking well-worded porn. No shit, I'd started to get a stiffy from it—until I realized that was the stuff my mother was reading. I'd instantly slammed the book shut and put it back on the display.

Then I had metaphorically bleached my brain.

My phone buzzed, and I pulled it out to see a text message from Catalano, one of my most trusted capos.

Catalano: Answer is still no

I sighed. I'd been trying to buy the bakery down the road from our childhood home for months. Mrs. Romano was getting up in years, and her health had taken a hit a few months ago. My reasons for wanting it were complex. For La Cosa Nostra, I wanted it for cleaning our money. The sentimental sliver within my dark soul wanted it because it held memories of laughter and some degree of innocence.

I dialed the number to Sinnamon Sweets, and it was answered by a familiar voice.

“Mrs. Romano,” I began in my most appealing and persuasive tone. “It's Vittorio. How are you?”

At first there was silence, and I had to pull my phone from my ear to see if we were still connected.

“Mrs. Romano?”

“I'm here,” the woman replied in a crotchety voice. “Why are you calling me? They sending in the big dogs now?”

I couldn't help but chuckle. Even as a grown man, I remembered sneaking down to her bakery with Gabriel. We weren't supposed to go out unaccompanied, but that didn't stop us from pushing boundaries and being reckless. We'd gotten our asses tanned for it too. Despite the woman's tough exterior, she'd always had a soft spot for us—until we grew up and started working within the ranks of La Cosa Nostra.

“I was calling to see if you’d had time to consider my offer.”

She snorted. “I got it, but hell no, I’m not considering it. I told you I’m not selling my bakery.”

“I understand how much the bakery means to you, but I also know you’ve been struggling with your health. I figured you might like to retire and move—closer to your daughter and granddaughter,” I sweetly appealed. I could pour on the charm when I wanted to, but she wasn’t having it.

“Was that a threat? You leave my family out of this,” she snapped.

I startled a bit, because despite my darker side, I hadn’t been making any implications.

“Mrs. Romano, that wasn’t my intent. I’m truly trying to look out for you,” I tried again.

“Humph! Your organization doesn’t look out for anyone but themselves,” she replied, and I could practically see her sneer in her tone. I’d known the woman for enough years to be aware of her behaviors.

“That’s not true. You know we keep you protected,” I reminded her. The bakery had been one of our “customers” since Mrs. Romano’s parents owned the bakery. The general public believed the protection was actually from us, which in the past and maybe in a lot of circumstances was true. My personal nostalgic attachment to her business changed those rules a bit—I was emotionally vested in the bakery and its owner. Something I’d never admit to a living soul because that would be dangerous.

“Look, Mr. De Luca, I understand the agreement my parents made with your *organization*, and I’ve upheld it as agreed. But that’s as far as I go. My business is not for sale to you.”

“But does that mean it *is* for sale?” I kept any excitement or concern out of my voice, because I couldn’t let her know I was worried someone else would buy it. It would kill me to have someone buy it and either run it into the ground or close

it and open something else in its place. I needed that last bit of my too-short childhood to remain untouched. Not that I could admit that to anyone.

“No,” she snapped and ended the call.

I breathed a sigh of relief despite my irritation at not being able to acquire the bakery. Little did she know, I was a patient man. As long as she wasn't selling it to anyone else, I could wait her out. However, my brother, the don, might not agree.

“No luck?” Gabriel asked, and I cast a glance his way. He watched me with a cocked brow. Pietro, his bodyguard and friend, stood at his side. Pietro had grown up with us, but his family was smaller and had never shown interest in leading the Chicago Family.

“Not yet, but I'll find a way,” I assured him. As the underboss, I dealt with a lot of the day-to-day shit. Mario had initially been the one trying to get Mrs. Romano to sell, and I think he pissed her off. I knew I shouldn't have allowed him to do it, but Gabriel told me to give him more responsibilities because he wanted to see how he handled them. But Gabriel didn't understand the emotional connection I had to that stupid bakery.

And I certainly wasn't going to tell him.

A woman with light red hair passed me with a tote full of books, and I immediately checked her out. She was pretty in a girl-next-door way. And she had a fucking gorgeous ass.

Alessio laughed, and I ripped my attention from the redhead to stare at him questioningly.

“You and fucking redheads,” he muttered, then snickered.

I flipped him off, though he wasn't wrong. They were my weakness, but I refused to acknowledge why.

Mom turned from the table she'd been at and handed three more books to Alessio. “Put those in the tote, sweetheart.”

He rolled his eyes the second she moved on to the next table.

“Knock it off. Don’t be a dick. She’s having the time of her life,” I chastised him.

“Easy for you to say. You’re not her pack mule,” Leo grumbled.

With a cocky grin, I patted the side of his arm. “Look what a workout you’re getting. Better than your usual one where you lift your drink to your mouth.”

“Fuck off,” he muttered.

The same redhead approached the table behind my mom. She glanced my way and gave me a shy smile.

“One of your favorite authors?” I asked her as I tipped my chin toward the table. The author’s banner read “Darlene Tallman.” She was an animated woman currently conducting an in-depth conversation with my mother regarding one of her books my mom evidently loved.

The redhead gave me a perplexed tilt of her head. “Are you talking to me?” she asked quietly and pointed to her chest.

My gaze dropped to said chest, but I quickly averted it because I wasn’t trying to be rude. Then I met her blue eyes and gave her my best grin. “Yes, I was.”

“Oh! Um, yes, I really like Darlene’s books. Have you read them?” She blinked up at me, and I stared back, unsure if she was joking or not.

“No, can’t say I have,” I finally replied as I slipped my hands in the pockets of my jeans.

She dropped her attention to the books she held, then back at me. Then she repeated the action. “Can I, uh, ask you a question?” she stammered.

“Sure,” I drew out almost like it was a question.

She held the top book up. “Is this you?”

I jerked my head back in surprise at both her question and the image on the cover of the book. It was titled *Colton’s Salvation* by Kristine Allen, and there was a man on the cover without a shirt but with thick, heavy chains over his shoulders.

I cocked my head and squinted at it. Crazy enough, it did look a little like me, but it definitely wasn't. "Sweetheart, I like to think I'm pretty fit, but that guy definitely has a few muscles on me. But if I said it was, would you consider having dinner with me?" I teased.

Her cheeks went rosy, and she laughed. "That was pretty smooth, and if I was single, I'd totally take you up on that."

My shoulders fell a bit. "Well, hell. Figures."

"Sorry," she whispered with an apologetic wince.

"Don't be. Your guy is a lucky man," I honestly replied.

"Oh, honey, I'm sorry. I've been taking up all of Darlene's time. I'll move on," Mom told the pretty redhead. "Come on, let's move on to M. Merin's table."

Mom gave Darlene a wave, and we moved on. There was a strawberry blonde at the table wearing a leather vest with a bunch of patches sewn on it. With a slightly nervous smile, she asked my mom, "Have you read any of my books?"

Hell, if that didn't start an intense conversation with my mother and the lovely M. Merin about how my mom had read every single one of her books. There was a gorgeous dark-haired woman with her, and she was utterly exquisite. Except she was staring past me, absolutely transfixed.

Turning, I realized she was staring at Gabriel, who was leaning against the wall at the end of the row. His phone rang, and he walked off. Pietro leaned in and whispered to him, and the beautiful brunette sighed. When she reached up and wiped her mouth, I couldn't help but chuckle.

She jumped, and her face flamed. For a moment, my ego was appeased when she gave me the once-over with wide hazel eyes. I grinned and looked over my shoulder at Gabriel and Pietro as they disappeared into the crowd.

"H-Hi," she stuttered. "Can I help you?"

If one's face could actually be on fire, hers might have been, because I could've sworn it got redder. She was truly a captivating young woman.

“No, I’m with my mom. She dragged me with her. Are you one of the authors?” I asked as I tried to be my most charming self. Though I was partial to gingers, she was easily a close second.

“Vittorio! I didn’t bring you with me to flirt! Here,” Mom chided, handing me a large white shopping bag full of this M. Merin lady’s books. I had no idea how we were going to get all these home. At the rate she was going, every square inch of the SUVs would be full of paperbacks.

“Duty calls,” I apologized and gave the brunette a wink.

One of my brothers took a picture of Mom with the author. Then we left for the next table. I almost choked when I saw the book the redhead had shown me.

So this is that author chick, Kristine Allen.

She had dark hair that did that bally-og, or -osh, or whatever thing where it transitioned down to bright red. My gaze made an appreciative sweep over her curves, but a guy with a close-cut salt-and-pepper beard walked up and set a drink behind the displays for her. He cocked his brow at me, and I made note of their wedding rings.

“You’re a very lucky man. She’s quite stunning,” I told him in a soft tone intended for just him. I paired it with an easygoing smile as Kristine began speaking with my mom. They were laughing and intensely involved in whatever they were discussing.

“I like to think so,” he replied with a relaxed grin once he determined I wasn’t a threat.

He and I made small talk while the women chatted. I busted out laughing when he asked if I’d ever modeled before because his wife was always looking for fresh faces.

“No, definitely not. Though someone thought that was me,” I said as I pointed at Colton’s book.

He picked it up and studied both me and the book. “Yeah, I can see that. You sure this isn’t you?”

“Absolutely,” I confirmed with a choked huff.

Mom handed Alessio the newly acquired bag and gestured for me to follow.

“Nice talking with you. What’s your name?” I asked as I held my hand out.

“Marty,” he replied as he took it in a firm grip and looked me in the eye. I appreciated that. “You?”

“Oh, uh, Vic,” I told him. “But I better catch up. My mother isn’t going to be happy until she has our arms popping out of socket.” We both laughed, and I gave him a chin lift, then followed after my dear darling mother.

We spent another two hours at the signing because Mom insisted on stopping to talk to each and every author. Who would’ve known an author event could be that goddamn exhausting? I was never so happy to see my bed.

Unfortunately, unlike my older brother, I went to bed alone that night.



With my eyes closed, I leaned my head back in the seat and sighed. Classical music filled my ears. The plane was climbing, and I planned to catch a nice, long nap on the way back to Chicago.

A nudge had me grumbling as I plucked out my AirPods and turned to my older brother with a scowl. “What?”

“When we get back, I want you to swing by and talk to Mrs. Romano. We need that bakery,” Gabriel insisted in his typical no-nonsense tone.

Christ, I knew I should’ve taken Leo and Alessio up on their offer to fly with them to Vegas instead of going straight home.

“Really? Can you not think about work for ten whole minutes? I’m trying to relax.” The man took everything too seriously. He was a grouchy, driven beast thanks to our

grandfather and our father. Not that I hadn't learned a few lessons from them, but while it had shaped him into a growly bear, I preferred to think of myself as a cunning wolf. There was time enough to work out plans once we got home.

"Not when I have The Family to look out for." We worded things carefully so anyone around us would think we were simply discussing "business" and "family." Granted, Pietro and my man, Dario, were sitting behind us to keep an eye out for our safety and to act as a buffer. The seats next to us had two old ladies wearing big diamonds and giggling like schoolgirls as they gossiped. They were already on their second mixed drinks and didn't seem to be slowing down.

Good for them. I hoped when I was their age that I could enjoy life like that.

"I get it, but Christ, Gabe. It can wait until we get home. There's nothing we can do about it while we're thousands of feet in the air. Once we're home, I'll go by and talk to her. There are a million places we could buy if this doesn't work out."

"Vittorio, I want that bakery—and I always get what I want."

"Right. And half of the things you want, I've been right by your side or in the background making it happen. Quit obsessing over it and chill out. You got your dick wet last night, so you should still be swimming in postcoital bliss. Speaking of which, how was it?"

When he snapped his mouth shut and his jaw clenched, I knew I'd struck a nerve.

Incredulous, I sat forward to look him in the eye. "Did you strike out?"

He shot me a glare. "Of course not."

"Then why are you in such a shitty mood?"

"It doesn't matter," he muttered and turned his head away to stare out the window. By then, there was nothing to see except for the tops of the clouds, so I knew he was using it as

an avoidance tactic. Leaning farther forward, I tried to get him to look at me.

“Then why are you so pissy?” I curiously demanded.

“I’m not pissy.”

I snorted in disagreement.

“I’m not. I’m just irritated because she was gone when I woke up.”

Stunned, I fell back into my seat. My mouth gaped. “Wait. You mean to tell me you brought her to your cabin, she hauled ass while you were sleeping, and you’re *mad* about that?”

Gabriel was the stereotypical “love ’em and leave ’em” kinda guy. The only woman he’d ever let stay with him was Autumn, and that was due to extenuating circumstances. Sure, they were supposed to get married, but I knew damn well he didn’t love her as more than a good friend. It worked out because she was now happily married to our long-lost cousin and popping out babies.

“I’m not mad,” he argued. “I was hoping for another round before we left, that’s all.”

With a raised brow, I gave him a calculating stare. “You liked her.”

“Jesus, are we in grade school now?” he grumbled, and I grinned.

“You do. So call her when we get back and go see her again,” I said with a shrug. Hell, that was an easy fix. Even if he didn’t get her number, we had unlimited resources with which to find her.

“I don’t know her name. Just Lee, and I’m not sure that’s actually her name. I don’t know where she’s from.” He turned to look me in the eye. “I don’t have anything to go on to find her.”

I blew out a frustrated breath because I felt for him. He was never like this, which meant there was something about this Lee girl.

Damn, that sucks. Poor bastard.

Deciding to leave him to his thoughts, I put my AirPods back in and dozed off.

It seemed like I'd barely closed my eyes, and then we were landing. The second I took my phone off Airplane Mode, it was blowing up.

"Christ almighty, who the fuck is messaging you?" Gabriel asked as we got our carry-ons down from the overhead bins.

"Catalano," I mumbled absently as I read through all of his messages.

"Everything okay?"

"No. Mrs. Romano is in the hospital."

Chapter THO



Kendall

“Some Nights” –fun.

Present Day....

My phone rang as I was finishing the last of the cookies for the order I had due in the morning. Glancing over at the screen, I saw it was my mom. She would be okay if I called her back. It quit ringing, and I returned to my task.

Except obviously she wasn't, because my phone rang again.

Setting my piping bag to the side, I blew an errant curl out of my face. Frustrated, I scooped up my phone. “Mom, I’m trying to finish this order that’s due tomorrow. What’s so important?”

My mother’s sniffles had my spine straightening, and my brows pinched in worry. “Mom?”

“Your grandma is in the hospital,” she sobbed.

Shit.

“What’s going on? Is she okay?” My blood ran cold. My *nonna* had been sick off and on over the past year. She’d come down with pneumonia, and it had kicked her ass. It had also been how we found out that she was in congestive heart failure. Left-sided heart failure as a result of years of uncontrolled hypertension, they’d explained. Basically, her left ventricle wasn’t working effectively, and fluid would build up, causing shortness of breath and coughing.

“She wasn’t taking her meds, and she went into fluid overload. They said if Steve hadn’t found her, she would’ve probably drowned in her own fluids,” she explained with a hiccup. Steve was my grandma’s nurse who Mom hired to check on her once a week. Thank God for perfect timing.

“All right, but she’s okay right now?” I asked, my heart thundering. I may be a grown-ass woman, but I wasn’t ready to lose my nonna.

“They said she is, but I need you to go to her. Your father and I are trying to get back, but there have been a ton of flights canceled. You’re close enough to drive, and you’d definitely get there before we would. Please?” she pleaded. They were currently living in Ireland. My dad had been born and raised there but went to college in America, which was where he met my mom. About five years ago, he got an incredible job offer back in his hometown, and they’d made the decision to take it.

My eyes closed, and I hung my head. I had a million things to do here, too, but this was Nonna. “Yeah. I’ll get this order done and see if I can drop them off to my customer tonight. I’ll leave first thing in the morning.”

“Th-Th-Thank you, sweetheart,” Mom stuttered, and my heart went out to her. Like me, my mom was an only child, but she’d already lost her dad. Nonna was all she had left.

“No worries, Mom. I love you.”

“Love you too.”

Damn it all. I hated Chicago. Once upon a time, I loved it. Now, it was big and crowded. I enjoyed my life in Grand Rapids. It was quiet. Safe.

And there was no Vittorio De Luca.

At the memory of his name, a phantom blade pierced my heart and sliced it wide open.

Maybe he moved.

I couldn't be that lucky.



I packed what I'd need for several days, but I didn't plan on being there longer than that. At least I prayed this was just a minor setback for Nonna, and she would be home soon. Last night, I called to check on her and let her know I was coming. Then I dropped my customer's cookies off, thankful that my customer was one of my neighbors.

After I woke up, I called Nonna again to let her know I was leaving soon. Of course, she told me it wasn't necessary for me to travel to Chicago.

As I set my small suitcase by the door, I popped into my kitchen to check on the cookies I'd decorated for her. They were dry, so I sealed them in plastic to keep them fresh longer, then carefully placed them in tissue cups and in a small box.

It took me one trip to get my single bag and my purse in the car, then another for the box of cookies. Maybe I was a bit OCD about my cookies, but I didn't want to risk dropping them. They went in my front floorboard on a towel so they didn't touch the mats. I didn't want to risk hitting the brakes and having them slide off the seat.

When I got behind the wheel, I sat there a moment. "You can do this. Go straight there. No looking around. Stay focused on the road and getting from Point A to Point B."

The miles passed, and the closer I got to Chicago, the more my anxiety amped up. By the time I was about forty-five minutes away, I was breaking out in a cold sweat. I never drove this far. In the past, when I went back to Nonna's, I took the train. No one wanted to drive through Chicago if they didn't have to.

Okay, that might have been an exaggeration. It was me—I was “no one.” It was a nightmare.

Unable to keep going without having a nervous breakdown, I pulled off the highway. I figured it would be better to get gas there instead of having to get it anywhere in the city. Then I wouldn't need to fill up again until I was safely on my way home.

I told myself I was being smart. Really, I was stalling, and I damn well knew it.

Rolling up to the gas pump, I turned off my car and laid my head on top of my hands that were practically bending the steering wheel. As I practiced my deep breathing, I had no idea how long I'd sat there. A knock on the window had me screaming as I popped my head up, my heart damn near hammering through my ribs.

A man stood looking in my window, his face pinched with concern. “Are you okay?” he shouted though the glass.

“I'm fine,” I replied, my voice raised to be heard though the glass as well. No way was I opening my door until he was a safe distance away.

He gave me a nod but didn't look like he believed me. Thankfully, he wandered back toward his vehicle at one of the other pumps. When I got out, he stared at me, giving me chills.

“That's not creepy at all,” I mumbled under my breath as I locked my doors.

Nervous, I hurried inside to use the restroom and prepay for my gas. Inside, I wasted time in hopes the dude would finish up and leave before I went back out.

About thirty minutes later, I left the gas station and headed back to the pump. I was relieved to see the guy was gone. Still,

I rushed to fill up and get back on the road.

Back in my car, I locked the doors and opened my bottle of water. With a deep breath, I turned the key and started to pull out. Something caught my eye, and I glanced toward the side of the building as I passed. I gasped when my eyes locked with the same man's stare, and I hit the gas and peeled out of the parking lot. I couldn't be sure because I was trying to pay attention to the road and merge back onto the highway, but it looked like he pulled out when I did.

It was likely my overactive imagination, but I started to freak out. It was hard to breathe, and my hands were sweating and shaking. Another glance in my rearview mirror didn't show the darker gray car following me. Then I laughed out loud.

"This is ridiculous!" I told myself before I took a deep cleansing breath and slowly let it out. "And you're talking to yourself," I muttered.

Needing to talk to someone, I called my friend Jackie.

"Hey, girl. How's your grandma?" she asked the second she answered.

"She sounds like she's doing okay, but it's hard to say without being there and assessing the situation, you know?"

"Yeah, I get it. But did she say what the doctors told her this morning?"

"She hadn't seen the doctor yet when I left." I sighed as I changed lanes to get around a truck pulling a trailer with lawn equipment.

"Well, I wish her the best of luck. This has to be hard for all of you."

"I'm just so worried about her. Then the thought of running into you-know-who is enough to make me lose what's left of my sanity."

"I know you hate going back there, and I wish you'd just taken the train. You're probably going to get stuck in that shitty traffic there," Jackie mentioned, not helping my

goddamn anxiety get any better. She and I met in preschool, and we'd been friends ever since. She was the only one who knew everything—not even my parents did.

“Gee, thanks for the pep talk,” I said as I checked my rearview mirror again.

“Sorry.” Her wince was practically evident through the phone.

We talked for a few more minutes, and then I let her go.

By the time I parked parallel to the back of Nonna's bakery, I'd thought I'd seen the guy from the gas station no fewer than ten times.

Shaking off my paranoia, I dragged my shit out of the car and took it upstairs. The apartment seemed so empty without my nonna. Unable to stay there in the silence, I left my stuff, grabbed my wallet, and headed out toward the train. I sure as hell wasn't driving to the hospital.

Chapter THREE



Kendall

“Listen”–Collective Soul

Sixteen Years Old....

“Nonna! Everything is swept and cleaned up front! I’m running down to Walgreens!” I hollered into the back, where my grandmother was in the cooler putting away the last cake she had for the day. It was scheduled to be picked up first thing in the morning.

“Okay, but don’t you be talking to strangers!” she called back, and I rolled my eyes. She acted like I was five or something.

“I won’t!” I placated. Then I left through the front door, the bell jingling as it swung shut.

As I walked down the sidewalk, I took in all the hustle and bustle and smiled. Something about it sent a zing of excitement through me. A buzzing that wouldn’t quit seemed

to drive me toward something I didn't understand. Being in the city made me feel *alive*.

Right before I reached Walgreens, my phone buzzed in my back pocket. I pulled it out and grinned when I saw it was a message from my friend Jackie. I kept my head down, thumbs flying over the keys as I replied. The automatic doors slid open, and the cool air conditioning hit me right before I slammed into someone.

My phone clattered to the ground, and I squeaked in surprise. At the same time as I crouched to pick it up, the person did the same, and we banged heads. "Ouch! I'm so sorry!" I apologized as I held my sore forehead.

"No, it was my fault too. You in a hurry?" the boy asked as he chuckled, but I was unable to answer.

My mouth went dry, and I almost drowned in the stormy blue of his eyes. I was barely aware of his cute little smirk as he held out my phone. Blinking slowly, I swallowed hard. He was absolutely gorgeous. Dark brown hair that was a bit too long on top and flopped over one dark eyebrow. He had a couple of tiny freckles on the side of his bottom lip, and it was either them or the way it was a bit fuller than the top one that held me transfixed.

He cleared his throat, and it shook me out of my stupefied stare.

"Huh?"

"Your phone?" He cocked the visible brow, and my face heated. There was no way he didn't notice the effect he had on me.

How embarrassing.

"Thanks," I muttered as I reached for the outstretched device. My fingers touched his as I took it, and it was like being hit by lightning. My breath caught, and I gasped. I had to drop my gaze because looking at him was like staring at the sun. He was brilliant and blindingly beautiful.

Then I looked down and saw my phone screen was cracked.

“Oh shit,” I whispered. I’d gotten the phone from my mom. As her hand-me-down, it wasn’t new, but it was new to me. My parents had never let me have my own, but for my sixteenth birthday, they had surprised me with my own number and my mom’s old phone—not that I cared. I loved that thing, and I knew I had to make it last.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, his concern evident in his tone.

“My phone broke. My mom’s gonna kill me.” I was trying to do the math to find out how many hours I’d need to work for Nonna to pay to have the screen repaired before I went home. I was trying to save for a down payment for a car, but this would put a dent in that.

“Don’t you have insurance?” he asked with a frown.

My shoulders fell. “No.”

“Let me see how bad it is. I might know someone who can fix it,” he explained as he held his hand out.

Lordy, even his hand was attractive. Tanned, with long fingers and blunted tips. There was a slender white scar on his index finger that certainly didn’t distract from them in the least. I had a sudden vision of them cradling my cheeks as he leaned in to kiss me.

I shook myself out of it. And if I thought my cheeks were hot before, my entire face flamed at the way my thoughts had strayed and caused a zillion butterflies to rip through my belly. The way I tingled between my legs shocked me. Sure, I’d had crushes on guys before. I’d even gone to the movies with Drew Felder—though my parents didn’t know because I wasn’t actually allowed to date. My friends had talked about their sexual experiences enough, but that was the first time my body had responded to someone like that.

“Can I get your number? You know, in case the guy I know can fix it. He’s pretty much a wiz with electronics,” he explained. He still held my phone as he waited expectantly for my reply.

“Um, I, uh,” I stammered as my heart raced so fast I thought it would surely burst. I didn’t know this boy, nor did I

know his friend. “I don’t know if I can afford it.”

“I’ll tell you what. How about I put my number in your phone? Then you can reach me if you decide you want to get it fixed. I don’t think he’d charge much. And since it was partly my fault that you dropped it, I’ll split the cost,” he offered. I’d referred to him as a boy, but that slight stubble on his firm jaw, paired with his build and the way his muscles flexed as he moved, told a different story. He was a man. Young, maybe, but a man just the same.

Shaking off my wayward thoughts, I pulled my lips between my teeth and shrugged. Then I whispered, “Okay.”

As he rapidly tapped his thumbs over my screen, he bit his bottom lip. It brought those two little freckles up next to his white teeth, and I sighed. He lifted his gray-blue eyes briefly, then dropped them again before he handed my phone back to me.

“There you go. That’s me,” he said as he pointed at the cracked screen.

Vittorio.

Dang, even his name was drool-worthy. It made me wish I was a little older, or at least had the experience my friends did with flirting.

“Thanks,” I murmured. “I’ll think about it.”

An awkward silence ensued until someone approached to enter the store and we had to move out of the way.

“Well, I better be going.” I practically tripped over my words as they blurted from my mouth. I couldn’t have sounded more like a kid. Inwardly, I groaned.

“Sure.”

I gave him a small smile and stepped around him. As I passed into the store, he called out, “Hey.”

“Yeah?” I tilted my head.

“I didn’t catch your name.”

My lips pulled to the side as I tried not to smile. “Maybe because I didn’t give it to you.”

“Okay, Mystery Girl. If you, uh, want to use that number just to talk, I wouldn’t mind,” he offered with a crooked grin as he hooked his thumbs casually in the worn pockets of his jeans.

My mouth fell open, and my brows twitched. “Um, okay.”

He gave me one of those guy chin lifts and walked away.

Utterly blown away, I stood there and watched his leanly muscular shoulders and cute butt as he walked off and disappeared in the crowd. By then I needed the A/C in the worst way, so I rushed inside.

Flustered, I rushed to the tampon aisle and grabbed what I needed. As I stood in line, I pulled out my phone, wincing at the cracked screen. With a grin I couldn’t hold back, I texted Jackie.

Me: Girl, you wouldn’t believe the guy I literally ran into as I was going into Walgreens!

Jackie: Spill!

Me: Tall, dark, and handsome with the most spectacular storm cloud eyes. He was probably the cutest guy I’ve ever seen

Jackie: What??????? Pics or it didn’t happen

Me: I wish. Maybe I can get one if I see him again

Jackie: Do you know him? Did he come into the bakery?

Me: No, but I have his number *winky face*

Jackie: No. Way.

Me: ((Internal squealing))

Jackie: LMAO

I paid for my items and hurried back to the bakery. The front door was locked since we were closed, so I went around the alley and up the metal stairs that rattled as I practically

raced up them. Out of breath and grinning ear to ear, I burst into the apartment that my grandma lived in above her bakery.

“Good heavens, child! Slow down! Is something chasing you?” she teased with a twinkle in her eye. She was sitting on the couch, watching one of her game shows. The aroma of baking pasta filled the room, and my stomach rumbled.

I barked out a laugh, still trying to catch my breath.

“You’re in a good mood for someone who’s on her period,” Nonna observed with suspiciously pursed lips. Her dark hair, threaded with silver, was pulled up in the tight bun she always wore. She narrowed her eyes as she studied me.

Going for my most innocent expression, I gave her a wide-eyed, big-toothed smile. “Eh, just talking to Jackie on the way home.” Not a lie.

“Hmm.”

“How much longer before dinner?” I asked, changing the subject. I wanted to take a shower to wash sticky summer and the bakery scent off. Not that it would last—I’d be back down there tomorrow. Good thing I loved it, but that didn’t mean I wanted to smell like a donut when I wasn’t working.

That night, when I went to bed in my mom’s childhood room, I pulled out my phone and stared at Vittorio’s contact information.

If only I was bold like Jackie.

Chapter FOUR



“Sinematic (Acoustic Version)”–Motionless In White

Present Day....

“Jesus, Mrs. Romano,” I muttered as I stared down at her pale form that nearly matched the white sheets surrounding her. Back from the signing less than three hours, and I was at the hospital.

“What do you want?” she muttered without opening her eyes. “Hoping I was dead so you could swoop in and steal my bakery?”

Despite the gravity of the situation, a huffed laugh escaped me as I sat in the chair by her bed. “If I wanted you dead, do you think I’d have Steve coming by every day?”

“Humph!” she huffed, and her lids lifted, allowing her dark hazel orbs to stare through me. As if I was a kid again, I

fought squirming in my seat. “You’re lucky he’s pretty to look at, or I’d tell you to stick it up your ass.”

Her daughter was paying for the nurse to stop by once a week. She didn’t know he checked on her every day and I was paying for the rest.

“Why weren’t you taking your meds?” I asked.

“Because they make me piss nonstop, and I have work to do,” she snapped.

Closing my eyes, I dropped my head as I slowly shook it. Then I lifted my exasperated gaze to hers. “Mrs. Romano, you’re losing a lot more time being here in the hospital than you would taking bathroom breaks.”

The stubborn woman refused to reply because she knew damn well I was right.

“If you sold me the bakery, you wouldn’t need to worry about working at all. You could live out your retirement years in comfort.”

“You only want it so you can run your dirty blood money through it. My parents would be rolling in their graves if I let that happen,” she practically hissed.

I stood up and buttoned my jacket. “Or maybe they’d be thankful that their daughter isn’t working herself into *her* grave.”

Silence as she stubbornly glared at me. Then her expression softened. “What happened to you, Tory?”

The use of the childhood name she’d had for me was a punch to my gut with all the memories that assaulted me. “I stepped into my rightful place,” I emotionlessly explained.

“And I did what I thought was best,” she whispered.

The pain that lashed through me at her words brought a momentary sheen over my vision before I blinked it away.

“Is there anything you need?” I asked her, though I knew the answer.

“No.”

I nodded. Then, without another word, I left the room.



My silverware clinked on the plate, and I cut into my chicken parmigiana. Though I didn't look up, I knew the moment Luciano entered the back room where I was enjoying my dinner.

Without asking, he took the seat across from me. Taking my time, I finished chewing, set my utensils down, then used the linen napkin in my lap to carefully wipe my mouth. When I gave him my attention, I cocked a brow. Then I reached for my wine and took a drink. "Is there a reason you're interrupting my dinner, Luciano?"

The detective strummed his fingers on the table but didn't speak. Dario stepped closer and slipped his hand into his jacket.

I sighed. "If you have nothing to say, please leave. I was enjoying my meal before you so rudely interrupted."

"You have a problem," he finally announced.

Unconcerned, I blinked at him but didn't reply. Luciano Moretti might have been on our payroll, but that didn't mean I trusted him. There were few people I actually trusted outside my immediate family.

He leaned in and spoke softly, though there was no need, as I had the entire back room of Horatio's to myself. "There's been some talk with the gangs on the West Side. One of our informants told us they're planning to infiltrate your areas. The last thing I want is for innocent civilians to get caught in the crossfire of a Mafia gang war."

Still, I held my tongue.

Luciano huffed, then rolled his eyes and reached into his inside pocket. Dario immediately had a gun trained on the detective. "Jesus Christ, Vittorio. I'm not your enemy."

Though we paid him well—private school for five girls was rough on a cop’s budget—I gestured to the exposed badge on his waistband. “That would say otherwise.”

“We fucking went to school together all of our lives. You ensured that my girls all got ‘scholarships’ for their educations. I’m not stupid.” More than that, we had another connection, but neither of us discussed it. He slapped a thumb drive on the table, then made a show of wiping it down with the edge of the tablecloth before he flicked it closer to me. “This is everything I have regarding their numbers, plans, and timeline.”

Dario plucked the device from the table and slipped it into his pocket. My friend and bodyguard was loyal to the core. He would gladly throw himself on a sword to make sure I wasn’t caught with something from law enforcement.

“Thank you,” I told Luciano. Once I had a chance to look it over, I would determine if it was worth worrying about. At that time, I would speak with Gabriel, and we would make plans, if necessary. No way would I show an ounce of concern in front of the good detective—my childhood friend.

He sat there staring at me, his leg bouncing. A nervous tell I knew he ordinarily wouldn’t let show.

“Did you have something else?” I asked in a bored tone. “My dinner is getting cold.”

“She’s here.”

I didn’t ask who he was talking about. We both knew.

And though I was aware that would be a strong possibility, I had hoped I was wrong, and she wouldn’t come. But of course, she would. Anguish burned through me, but no one would’ve known. I’d had years to learn how to school my expression and bury my emotions.

When I didn’t say anything, he sighed, then got to his feet and left.

I fell back in my chair and dragged my hands over my face.

“You okay?” Dario quietly asked.

“I’m fine,” I robotically replied.

I wasn’t.

“Call the car.” I tossed my napkin over my plate, my appetite gone. I tossed a Benjamin on the table and stormed from the room with Dario on my heels.

By the time I stepped out on the curb, the black sedan was pulling up. I ducked in when Dario opened the back door. Once he closed me into the back seat, he climbed in front. To further torment myself, I rattled off where I needed to go. The entire way across town, the tension within coiled tighter until I was about to snap.

We slowed as we passed Mrs. Romano’s bakery, Sinnamon Sweets. The lights were on upstairs, and I almost told the driver to stop. There were no signs of movement, but it didn’t mean she wasn’t there. It also didn’t mean she was.

“Let’s go,” I crisply told the driver and gave him my next location. My hands were fisted so firmly that my nails dug into my palms.

Like the apartment I’d driven by, the house was lit up when I arrived, but in this case, it wouldn’t matter if the lights were all off. I would never be turned away.

I got out and stormed up the stairs, rapping my knuckles hard on the door. By then my stomach was cramping, and I wanted to hit something.

Footsteps approached the entrance, then paused. I knew the peephole was being used because I heard the small metal plate move to the side, and then the door swung open to the house I owned.

“Well, hello there. I was beginning to think you’d forgotten about me,” she said with a sultry smile. Her hazel eyes weren’t green enough, and her red hair was a bit too rust-colored. It disgusted me that those were my first thoughts when I saw her. I was so fucked-up.

I stepped forward, and she backed up until I cleared the threshold and kicked the door shut behind me. My fingers relentlessly gripped her straight hair. That it wasn't a riot of curls that I could tangle them in pissed me off.

"Bad day?" she murmured.

"Don't talk," I growled before I slammed my lips to hers and closed my eyes. I didn't want to hear her slightly raspy voice.

She grunted in surprise, and I grabbed her ass to tell her to wrap her legs around me. When we hit the edge of the bed, I set her down. Not making eye contact, I ground out, "Take off your clothes."

My hands were practically shaking as I loosened my tie, then jerked off my jacket and shirt. When I reached for my belt, she gently rested her hands over mine. The clank of my buckle echoed in the quiet room, and I let my lids fall shut as she freed my dick and dropped to her knees.

"Fuck," I gasped when she wrapped her lips around my cock and drew it into her mouth.

In my mind, she had emerald-green eyes and wild, fiery curls. Slowly, thread by thread, the chaos within me unraveled. The tension in my shoulders loosened. Finally, the knot in my abdomen relaxed.

When I came down her throat, I was pretty sure I moaned another woman's name. Dahlia wouldn't say anything, though.

After all, it wasn't the first time.

Chapter FIVE



“Fantasy” –Aldo Nova

Eighteen Years Old....

I was sprawled in a lawn chair with a beer in my hand and a grin on my face. The sun had gone down, and it was finally cooling off a bit. Bobby’s house was in a nicer neighborhood and had a privacy fence so the neighbors didn’t get their panties in a wad when he had a party. Granted, none of us wanted to get busted by the cops, so we kept the wild shit to a minimum. Especially since Roman’s dad and grandfather were both cops.

“Anyone seen Vince lately?” Roman asked.

Vince had grown up with us as a scholarship kid. No one had seen him since the day after graduation. I bit my tongue because I knew he’d started taking some jobs with The Family a year or so ago.

“Not lately,” Bobby replied before lifting his beer and taking a long drink.

The side gate opened, and we all glanced over to make sure we weren't getting busted. My heart stuttered because I knew if we did, it would be my ass. Gabriel sat there with some chick on his lap and didn't even look over his shoulder. He didn't care because he'd successfully developed a diamond-hard exterior. Nothing our grandfather did seemed to faze him. I envied him.

“Luciano!” Bobby called out as he raised his beer to our friend coming around the corner of the house.

At his greeting, I relaxed, and my grin returned. At least I did until I saw the girl Luciano had brought with him. Then I ground my teeth and squeezed the neck of the bottle so hard I was surprised it didn't break.

“Damn, who's that?” Roman asked, but I didn't answer because I was too busy holding myself back from punching my friend in the eye. And that sucked.

Scuffed checkered Vans led up to long ivory legs that disappeared under frayed denim shorts. She wore what looked like a vintage Black Sabbath T-shirt that fit snug over her tits. I shifted in my seat to adjust my dick that had come to attention as if it had recognized her before I did.

It was the Walgreens chick—Mystery Girl.

I was unreasonably angry that she was with Luciano. Hell, I didn't know her. I certainly had no claim on her. Yet I was so pissed I was practically seeing red, and it wasn't her hair.

“Hey, everyone. I hope you don't mind that I brought my cousin. This is Kendall. She's visiting for the summer,” he introduced.

Two things immediately hit me—relief and confused disbelief. *Damn, it's a small world.*

Everyone gave her a warm welcome. Well, everyone except for the chick on Gabriel's lap. She placed a possessive hand on his chest and shot Kendall a narrowed-eyed glare.

Fuck her.

Leaning forward with my elbows on my thighs and my bottle dangling between my knees, I silently watched Kendall and waited for the recognition to hit. As she glanced around nervously at everyone, she faked a smile and gave a little wave. Until her eyes locked on mine. Then her mouth fell open, and I smirked.

Luciano headed for the cooler, where he snagged two beers. After opening them, he handed her one. She took a sip, but her nose wrinkled almost imperceptibly, and I knew immediately that she wasn't a fan of beer.

I smirked. *Pretty little good girl.*

They made their way toward me, and he took the last chair next to mine. It left her standing awkwardly beside him. *Fuckin' douche.*

I stood up. "Here, you can have mine," I offered.

She gave me a sweet smile that jolted my chest as if I'd been hit by lightning. It was the same feeling I'd gotten when I ran into her in front of Walgreens a few days ago—literally.

"Thanks," she murmured as she sat down.

I took a seat on the grass next to her chair.

Big mistake.

Because the smooth skin of her legs was within reach, and whatever perfume or lotion she'd used was reeling me in. My fingers itched to touch her. My palms twitched to test my theory that her legs were covered in silk. I wanted to trace the slight smattering of freckles with my tongue.

Christ. After dragging my gaze from her, I cleared my throat and took a long pull from my bottle.

Luciano was talking animatedly to Bobby and Vincent. Trying to keep my gaze averted, I picked at the label on my beer.

"I don't really like beer. Do you want this?" she whispered as she nudged me with the cold bottle.

I glanced up and stared at her through my overgrown bangs. “I didn’t know Luciano had a cousin,” I murmured as I took the proffered drink.

She quickly withdrew her hand after our fingertips touched, and I wondered if it was because she noticed the almost visible spark that flew between us each time we touched.

A tinkling laugh left her perfect lips, and I had to look at her. She was like a siren that called to me, daring me to risk smashing into the rocks to be with her.

“Well, if you want to get technical, we’re second cousins or something like that. His grandfather is my grandmother’s brother. My mom and his dad are cousins,” she explained with a shrug.

“So you don’t live around here,” I clarified, unsure why that bothered me so much.

“No. I live in Grand Rapids, but I came to stay with Nonna for the summer,” she explained. She leaned forward with her elbows on her knees and her chin propped on her hands. Slowly, she scanned the small gathering, then returned her attention to me. “I love Chicago, but I don’t think I could live here.”

“Why not?” I asked.

She sighed. “I don’t know. I’m sixteen and I have my license, but I could *never* drive here. It would scare the crap out of me. Besides, all my friends are there.”

I laughed. “Well, most people here use public transportation of some kind or another. And you could always make new friends.”

I glanced through my bangs at her wistful expression, and my chest went all funny. The wind caught a stray curl, and it fluttered around her face before she tucked it behind her ear. What I wouldn’t have given to do that for her. I set my nearly empty bottle to the side and lifted the one she gave me. Knowing I was placing my lips where she’d had hers was strangely erotic.

God, I'm a fucking weirdo. What the fuck is wrong with me?

“I would hate that. I love driving. It’s... empowering,” she explained with a fanciful quirk at the corner of her mouth. Then she gazed at me. “And are *you* volunteering to be my new friend? Because *she* certainly isn’t in line.” She nodded toward the girl with Gabriel.

“Eh, screw her. And yeah, I’ll be friend *numero uno*. The most important one.” I chuckled.

“Well, you did give me your chair,” she playfully rationalized.

“As any gentleman would,” I teased as I looked up at her.

“Somehow, I have a feeling you are no gentleman,” she teased back with a cute little wrinkle in her nose.

Fuck, she had no idea how right she was, but I gasped in mock outrage and splayed a hand over my wounded heart. “I am hurt.”

She snorted and rolled her eyes.

“I’ll tell you what. I have to, uh, work in the morning, but you meet me in front of the Walgreens tomorrow and I’ll take you to lunch. I’ll show you what a gentleman I can be. I’ll pull out your chair, pick up the tab, and walk you home afterward,” I offered with a gallant-ish bow from my seated position.

Her regretful wince told me I wasn’t going to like her answer. “I can’t. I’m helping my nonna in her bakery tomorrow,” she explained.

Wait. What?

Bakery?

No way.

I stared at her face, studying her and searching for the little girl’s features in her matured ones. What were the odds, right? My mouth moved before I thought through my words. “You’re the little girl with the pink cupcake.”

“Huh?” she asked with a questioning smile.

Of course she wouldn't remember. I was probably around six back then, and if she was sixteen now, then she couldn't have been more than four. Funny how that day stayed in my memory bank for over twelve years as if it was yesterday.

"Mrs. Romano's bakery," I clarified. "I remember you. Hell, it was probably almost this time of year. You were there. You swiped a pink cupcake from the case, and your grandma chewed you out."

I neglected to tell her about how I had to have the same treat she'd had that day. Nor did I tell her I never even got to taste it. I certainly wasn't going to tell her that my "job" was delivering flowers for La Cosa Nostra. Flowers that had drugs in the bottoms of the vases.

"Really? I mean, I'm not surprised, because those were and still are my favorites. But I can't believe you remember that!" Her melodic laugh sent a satisfied shiver down my spine.

Tapping my temple, I smirked. "Good memory."

"Obviously," she replied as she tried her damndest not to smile.

"So, did you ever get your phone fixed?" I asked.

Her good humor vanished, and I felt like a grade-A asshole for bringing it up. "No," she mumbled dejectedly.

An idea came to me, and I nudged her again. When her bright green eyes met mine, I momentarily forgot what the hell I was thinking.

"What time are you done in the bakery?" I finally blurted.

"We close at six, but I have to help clean up."

"Perfect. I'll meet you out front."

"Uh...."

That deer-in-the-headlights look was adorable on her.

"Nonnegotiable. As your number one friend, I insist."

“How about we meet in front of Walgreens?” she asked before she captured her lip with her teeth.

Holy hell, I wanted to suck it free. Then I wanted to sweep my tongue through her mouth to see if she tasted like that fluffy pink frosting.

“Okay,” I murmured, because in that moment, I probably would’ve insanely agreed to just about anything she asked.



That morning I made about five deliveries. I could deliver cocaine, heroin, ketamine, or Xanax on any given day. Some of the deliveries were for The Family, but a lot of it was my own now. They took a share of the profit, but what I got for it wasn't chump change. I easily made five to ten grand a month. Gabriel was going to college, but I had another life plan. We'd both end up in the same place, and I'd be making more money sooner than him.

My grandfather pretty much made us all start at the bottom. Not that I ever dealt directly, but none of us got shit handed to us. We had to prove ourselves to the old bastard one way or the other. As the oldest, Gabriel was expected to go to college to earn a degree in business. My grandfather had dreams of a patrilineal succession, though that wasn't how things worked with La Cosa Nostra. If Gabriel ended up taking over one day, our grandfather wanted him to have a solid background to make everything seem more legitimate. As the second son, I was supposed to support Gabriel, so my education was expected to be the same.

Screw that. I had plans.

Basically, I saved my allowance for several years. No shit. *Years*. Then I bought bulk in a few things and started making “deliveries.” At eighteen, I had about fifteen to twenty people who sold my shit. They bought from me and then made a profit when they sold it. I can say I've never seen the end user. Didn't want to.

“Thank you, Mr. Edwards,” the sales associate said as she handed me my bag. “I hope your girlfriend likes her birthday present.”

“Me too,” I told the woman with a wink. She flushed, and I walked out of the store. A quick glance at my watch told me I had about forty-five to be at the Walgreens down by my neighborhood. As I passed by the flower shop I “delivered” out of, I stopped in and debated. Finally, I grabbed a pretty little bouquet and brought it to the register.

“Are those for your mama, or do you have someone special?” Mrs. Bianchi asked me. Despite the fact that her business’s protection money came in the form of letting us make our deliveries, she loved me. Besides, they were still making money, because our customers were required to actually order the flowers from them. We weren’t total assholes.

“They’re for a friend,” I replied with my best smile as I leaned on the counter.

She raised her brows and pursed her lips. Then she whispered conspiratorially, “Okay. If you say so.”

“That’s my story and I’m sticking to it,” I told her with a smirk, then paid her and was on my way again.

By the time I got to the store, I had about fifteen minutes to spare so I went to the side of the building and pulled out my cigarettes and lighter. I shook one out, held it between my lips, cupped my hand over the end, and lit it. It wasn’t often that I smoked. Mostly when my nerves were bad—and for some reason they were frazzled. I took a long drag, held it in, then blew it out. One guy passing me on the sidewalk gave me a dirty look. As he walked away, I rolled my eyes and flipped him off.

Every two seconds, I glanced in the direction of the bakery. I scanned the crowd for curly hair that looked like it would burn me. Somehow, I had a feeling if I ever touched it the way I wanted to, it would.

Finally, I saw her coming up the street, so I stubbed my cigarette out on the exterior of the store. I stuck the flowers in the bag so they were blooming out of the top, then hid it behind my back.

“I almost didn’t come,” she admitted when she stopped in front of me.

“Why not?” I asked her with a tilt of my head.

“Because I don’t really know you,” she replied in a tone that said *duh*.

“Oh really? Then why did you?” I dropped my head to look her in the eye with a smirk.

She pushed her face forward until her nose nearly touched mine, and my breath caught. “Because you’re a friend of my cousin, and you were nice to me. Besides, if you turn out to be a jerk, Luciano will kick your ass.”

The girl was ballsy, and I really loved that. I didn’t bother telling her that Luciano wouldn’t lay a finger on me because he knew who my grandfather was.

“Well, it’s a good thing you did, because I brought you something,” I told her without pulling away.

Though she tried to play it cool, I saw the slight widening of her bright emerald eyes and the way the corner of her mouth twitched as she tried to hide her smile.

“Then hand it over,” she murmured as she held out her hand and wiggled her fingers in a *gimme* motion.

“Ah, ah, ah, not so fast. I want to take you somewhere first.”

Immediately, she drew back and eyed me warily. “Where?”

“Trust me.”

“Again, I don’t really know you.”

“But you said I’m a friend of your cousin, right? And he’d kick my ass if I was a douche.”

The cutest little huff left her full lips, and I wanted to lean closer to kiss her, but that was no way to earn her trust. And for some reason, I really wanted her to trust me. Which was probably pretty stupid because she was only sixteen. If her parents or grandma decided to call the cops, it would get ugly, and I didn't want that for her.

“Fine. But you tell me where we're going, and I'm pulling up Luciano's number. If you try anything funny, I'm calling.”

“You'll see. It's a *surprise*. And feel free to call him and tell him you're with me.” Though I really hoped she didn't, because there was a good chance he'd get pissed and tell me to stay the fuck away from her.

She appeared to think about it for a while. Finally, she nodded. “Okay, let's go, but I have to be back by ten.”

“Absolutely.” I held out my arm for her to hold on to it, and she slipped her hand through the crook of my elbow. Her soft touch was like ten thousand volts hitting me at once, and my heart stuttered. If I wasn't mistaken, I thought she gave a sharp inhale at the same time.

Fuck, she shouldn't trust me.

We took the L train, then the bus to Navy Pier.

“You're taking me to Navy Pier?” she asked excitedly as we exited the bus. Again, she hooked her hand on my arm, and again, she stole my breath with her touch.

“Not just Navy Pier,” I said mysteriously.

She cocked a dark red brow and smirked. “Oh really?”

“Mm-hmm,” I hummed.

When we got to Centennial Wheel, she practically squealed. I'd ordered the tickets online as we traveled the train, hoping she would like it. I wasn't disappointed.

“Can we ride after it gets dark?” she begged, practically bouncing on her toes. “I've always wanted to ride after it's dark.”

“I’ll tell you what. We ride now, and I’ll take you again before we leave.”

She gaped. “Twice?”

I wanted to tell her I’d do anything for her, but that was dumb because I really didn’t know her. Yet some weird part of me felt like I’d been waiting for her all this time. “Yeah, twice.”

“But that’s a lot of money,” she whispered, a pinch forming between her brows.

“It’s okay. I think you’re worth it,” I admitted with a wink, trying to act like I was playing and my insides weren’t being battered by the millions of butterflies slamming around in there.

In her excitement, she squeaked and threw her arms around my neck. It pressed her soft breasts against my chest, and I instinctively wrapped my free arm around her to steady us. We both froze, and our rapid breathing matching each other’s before we broke apart—her quickly and me reluctantly.

I cleared my throat. “Well, shall we?”

By the time we got on the car, she was about to explode. “Can you believe we got our own car?” she excitedly whispered.

“Great timing, I guess,” I replied with a grin and a shrug. The fifty I handed the guy didn’t hurt either.

She was so preoccupied with staring out the window that she hadn’t thought to ask about the gift I had for her. In the enclosed car, the fragrant blooms filled the air. While I had her as a captive audience, I tapped her on the shoulder.

“Yeah?” she asked as she turned her head to face me.

I held up the bag.

Her mouth dropped open, and I moved it closer to her until she took it gently before burying her nose in the blooms. “They smell amazing,” she gushed with her eyes closed and a serene smile.

“Look in the bag,” I whispered, my hand cupped at the side of my mouth.

Her brows drew together, and she lifted the flowers out. I held my hand out to hang on to them.

“What is this?” she asked as she pulled the box out.

“What’s it look like?” I prompted.

“Vittorio.” Her voice was low in reprimand. “You can’t buy me a phone.”

“I didn’t,” I lied. “But I felt bad that yours got broken, and I noticed we had the same carrier. I was due for an upgrade, and they were buy one get one free.”

“What? No way,” she argued.

I shrugged. “It was a helluva lucky coincidence. I figured we both win, right? I got a new phone, and you got a new phone.”

She hugged it to her chest, and her eyes went shiny. “This is so sweet of you. You really didn’t have to do this.”

“Like I said, I felt bad that yours got broken because you ran into my”—I spread my fingers and acted like I was squeezing my pecs—“rock-hard chest.”

She rolled her eyes, but she couldn’t hide the way her mouth wanted to lift at the corners. Then she pulled the box away from her body and looked down at it as if she was in love.

Tell me why I wanted her to look at me like that.

“Thank you,” she gushed before throwing herself in my arms and hugging me. Again.

I might’ve held her a little tighter and a little longer than I should’ve.

That was the beginning of the best summer of my life.

Chapter SIX



Kendall

“Sign of the Times”–Harry Styles

Present Day....

I’d gone straight to see Nonna in the hospital as soon as I’d arrived in Chicago. She looked like she’d aged twenty years since I’d seen her last, and it had only been a few months. Granted, I never stayed long when I visited. I was always afraid I’d run into... him. Someone I didn’t want to... but still.

God, I could hardly bring myself to think his name. When I did, it hurt like it was yesterday.

“Kendall, listen to me. I need you to go straight over to the bakery. There’s a customer coming by to pick up their order I finished this morning. Tillie normally would’ve been there, but she had to leave early for her daughter’s piano recital. I told her I’d be down when she left, but then this happened,” Nonna told me as her hands worried the edge of the blanket. After her heart diagnosis, she’d hired Tillie on as assistant manager.

Tillie had worked for my grandmother since she was in high school, and she'd been a godsend. Her helping out had allowed my grandmother to take the afternoons off.

"I'm sure if I call them and explain the situation, they would understand," I reasoned, but she was already shaking her head.

"No. You have to be there. It's a very important order. Promise me!" she vehemently pleaded.

"Okay, okay. I'll go over there. Just please, don't get too worked up. That can't be good for you."

"I'll be fine," she insisted.

I'd left with a promise to return as soon as the order was picked up.

With traffic, I'd barely made it on time, but I needn't have worried. They were late.

Glancing at the clock, I huffed in frustration. The box had been in the cooler, so I'd grabbed it and placed it on the back counter so it was ready and waiting. The customer was now officially ten minutes late, and we were supposed to close in twenty minutes. As if it would suddenly make them appear, I stared at the entrance and willed the bell to jingle.

"For fuck's sake, people," I grumbled under my breath.

Restless, because I'd rather be at the hospital, I paced. Then I got curious to see what this customer ordered that my grandma had believed was so important. Obviously, to them it wasn't worth being on time. I lifted the lid on the cake box to find a rather plainly decorated quarter sheet cake. The decoration almost made me spit on it, though. It had green trim—and an edible image of the middle-finger emoji in the center.

As I went to cover it back up, I noticed the corner of an envelope sticking out from under the cake board.

Nosy, I carefully slid it out. It felt like...

No way.

Warily, I opened the flap, which was tucked in and not sealed, and I about fell over. Thumbing through it, I counted a grand in hundred-dollar bills. *Fucking hell, Nonna is going senile.* I needed to ask the doctors if there were signs of a stroke. Anything that could explain why she accidentally put a thousand dollars in cash in a customer's order.

I closed the box back up and pressed a hand over my heart. The door jingled, and I quickly shoved the envelope under a stack of pastry tissues. No one needed to see that much cash just lying around. As I spun, I pasted a bright smile on my face.

A man in a suit was approaching the counter as he was talking on his phone. "Yeah, I know. I'm running a little behind. I'm at the bakery place now. I'll be there soon."

"Can I help you?" I asked, my heart beating double time against my ribs.

"Yeah, I have an order for Spinelli." The guy didn't even make eye contact, too busy glancing at his watch and then tapping away on his phone.

I breathed a sigh of relief that I'd thought to look at the cake before he arrived. "Of course. I have it right here." I swooped up the customer's box and set it in front of him. "I just need you to sign for it here," I instructed as I pointed to the order slip taped to the top. Carefully, I peeled it off and set it and a pen on the granite counter in front of him.

He scrawled an illegible signature, then lifted the lid, snorted a laugh, and closed it again. "Thanks, babe," he said with a wink and a smirk.

As he walked out, my lip curled. *Ew.* Then I scurried around the counter and locked the front door as I flipped the sign to Closed. I snagged the envelope and shut off the lights. With the money in hand, I went into the office and locked it in the safe, then covered it with the canvas print of my grandparents on their wedding day. Once I was satisfied it was straight, I used the spiral staircase to go up to the apartment. Since I was already in the office, it made sense. Truth was the

sun was going down, and I hated using the outdoor stairs in the alley after sundown.

Using my spare key, I unlocked the door at the top of the stairs and went into my grandma's apartment. The scent of cinnamon apples hit me the second I went in, transporting me back to my younger years.

And that summer.

That familiar shaft of pain nearly crippled me, and I hated that after almost ten years, it could still do that. At twenty-six, I shouldn't still be grieving over the heartbreak of sixteen-year-old me. Too bad a deep breath did little to alleviate the ache in my chest.

Doing my best to shake it off, I went into my grandmother's room and grabbed an oversized makeup bag from under her bathroom sink to pack the things she'd texted me about, asking me to bring back for her.

With brisk motions, I efficiently placed everything inside and zipped it closed. As I passed the spare bedroom I'd called mine that summer, I paused. It was a bad idea. Yet a little part of me needed to see it again. I didn't know why.

When I placed my hand on the knob, I closed my eyes. No matter how much I told myself I could handle turning the worn brass, my fingers only shook before I let it go as if it were on fire.

I'd never told my parents why I didn't come back for years after that summer. Thank goodness they never asked. And I'd lied to my nonna about why I wanted to switch to the smaller, original guest room to sleep when I finally came back. She thought I didn't like the sun waking me up in the mornings because it shone through the big window in my mom's old room.

"Stupid girl," I cursed my sixteen-year-old-self and left the apartment. The metal treads rattled as I rushed down, the downward spiral matching my feelings.

By the time I got back to the hospital, I had my emotions under control.

Mostly.

“Sprite,” Nonna fondly whispered when I entered her room. She looked like she had a little more color than when I’d left.

Tears welled at her childhood pet name for me, but I blinked them away. I placed her things on the rolling table that was in front of her and leaned down to kiss her satin-soft, wrinkled cheek.

“Hey, Nonna. How are you feeling?” I murmured as I lightly trailed my fingers along her hairline and down her cheek. It was like I needed to touch her to prove to myself that she was still with us.

“Eh, I’m all right. Too many people panicking. I’m ready to go home,” she gruffly replied.

“What did the doctors say?” I asked her, already knowing the answer.

She huffed but didn’t answer.

“Nonna,” I admonished.

“Fine. He said another day at least, and no more Negronis. I’m going to have fluid restrictions, more walking, and those damn pills that make me piss all day,” she grumbled.

“Nonna, you said you were gonna do that last time,” I said with a groan as I sat in the chair by her bed.

“Yeah, well, they don’t know everything,” she muttered, and I palmed my face.

“They know what you need to do to stay healthy,” I argued and let my hand fall to my lap.

“Humph! I’m in heart failure. I’m not gonna be healthy.” She scowled as she smoothed the blanket over her lap.

“People live for many years in heart failure... *if* they follow their doctor’s advice,” I stressed. Lordy, I wanted to shake some sense into her.

“How’s it living if I can’t do anything I enjoy?”

I rolled my eyes at the surly woman I loved more than anything. “There’s still plenty you can do that you enjoy.”

“Did Spinelli pick up his cake?” she asked me, conveniently changing the subject.

I sighed as I shot her a worried frown. “Yes, he did. But Nonna, I need to talk to you about that. You accidentally put an envelope of money in with the cake.”

Her eyes went wide, and she froze. The monitors started beeping faster, and I looked up at them right as the nurse came in.

“Mrs. Romano, is everything okay?” The nurse was talking to my grandmother, but she gave me a judgmental stare—as if I was causing an issue.

“I’m fine,” Nonna assured her, though her heart rate was still up.

The nurse took her blood pressure, checked her pulse manually, then fiddled with some things. When that didn’t seem to satisfy her, she told us she’d be back shortly. About fifteen minutes later, she returned and went to the computer on the wall, where she typed for a minute. She scanned my grandma and the small bottle, then drew the medication into a syringe. “Your doctor wants you to have a small dose of metoprolol because your blood pressure is quite elevated, and your heart rate isn’t coming down. Okay?”

“Whatever,” Nonna replied belligerently.

Stubborn woman. She must be one of the worst patients.

After a few minutes, the nurse seemed satisfied, and she turned to leave. “Please don’t upset her,” she softly murmured. “She doesn’t need to be getting worked up right now. I’ll be back later to check on her.”

I nodded. I should’ve kept my mouth shut and discussed the money with her later. The last thing I wanted to do was upset my grandmother while she was in the hospital for her heart issues. The nurse left, and I pressed a kiss to Nonna’s hand. “Are you feeling okay?” I asked her.

She turned the hand I'd kissed so she could cup my cheek. "I'm fine. But please tell me you didn't take that money out of the box."

My hesitation must've answered her question, because she covered her mouth and closed her eyes.

When that damn monitor flashed her heart rate, I panicked. "Nonna, you need to take a deep breath. They're gonna kick me out if you keep getting upset. Please take a deep breath," I begged as I squeezed her hand. In that moment, I was so damn confused. Why was she getting so worked up that I'd saved her from giving away a thousand dollars?

"Oh my God, you don't know what you've done," she finally murmured once the machine stopped flashing and beeping. I breathed a sigh of relief when the nurse didn't come barreling in.

"Then tell me so I understand. What did I do that was so wrong? I thought I was helping you." None of this was making sense.

"That money goes to La Cosa Nostra," she whispered.

"What?" I cried. "For what?"

My heart was pounding, and though I knew what she was going to say, I prayed I was wrong. Each second that ticked by seemed an eternity as I waited, every sound amplified.

"It's the bakery's monthly protection money," she admitted, and my heart dropped into my stomach.

"No." I shook my head in disbelief. "That can't be true. Please tell me that's not true."

Unable to meet my gaze, she closed her eyes, and the floor seemed to fall out from under me.

He wouldn't do this. Despite breaking my heart, he couldn't truly be so cold. Could he?



The next day, I went back to Nonna's apartment to shower. After the episode last night, her doctor wanted her to stay another couple of days so they could tweak her medications. I figured I might as well get cleaned up so I could stay with her again. My parents would be here tomorrow, and then maybe I could go home to Michigan.

As I soaped up under the hot water, I ran the washcloth over my chest and down over my stomach. Glancing down, I traced a finger over the scar on my hip and the one on my thigh. They barely showed now, but my eyes welled at the sight. I wondered if it would ever stop being so incredibly painful.

I rushed through the rest of my shower, dried off, and dressed. Then I locked up the apartment and went down the outside stairs to the side alley.

I was digging my phone out of my purse when someone slammed into me and pushed me against the building. I started fighting and kicking, but when I started to scream, a hand slapped over my mouth, and the back of my head hit the rough bricks. I winced, tears forming in my eyes.

"If you wanna live to see another day, you better hold still and shut your mouth," the guy growled. Eyes wide, I froze. It was the guy from last night—Spinelli. Well, if that was his real name. "Where's my fuckin' money?"

Since he still held a hand over my mouth, I glared. Then I glanced to the street to see if anyone was paying attention to what was going on in the alley. Of course, no one so much as looked this way as they passed.

I mumbled against his hand, but it was pressed so hard against my mouth that my words were unintelligible.

"Don't you fuckin' scream. You hear me?" he snarled.

As best I could, I nodded.

Slowly, he peeled his hand away. My nose curled at the thought of his filthy palm over my mouth.

"I don't have your money. And even if I did, I wouldn't give it to you. Tell your boss he can go to hell," I sneered

hatefully. My heart might have been racing and on the verge of exploding, but I wouldn't let it show.

"You're not too bright, are you?" His gaze narrowed.

"I'm bright enough to know my grandmother has nothing to pay you for. So fuck off. She doesn't need your *protection*," I spat.

"You little—"

"Hey! What the hell is going on back here?" A man in a suit came striding down the alley toward us.

My attacker seemed to suddenly shrink before my eyes. He cast a worried glance at the guy, then stepped back and released me.

"We were talking business," Spinelli muttered, not making eye contact.

"Well, your *business* is done, understand?" The guy was intimidating, but I was worried for him because he had no idea who this Spinelli worked for.

So I was surprised to see Spinelli rush off, much like a dog with its tail between its legs.

"Are you okay?" the man asked, concern lacing his words.

He was tall and broad, with dark mocha hair and warm brown eyes. There was a familiarity about him that I couldn't put my finger on. I didn't know him, but there was still something....

"I'm... yeah, I'm fine. Thank you for coming to my rescue," I said with a relieved sigh. With my hands steepled, I pressed the seam to my lips and huffed out heavily. Then I shook off my still-rattled nerves and swallowed hard. "He just shook me up is all."

"Anytime," he replied with a grin as he held out his hand. "I'm Konstantin Woodsman, at your service."

I reached out to shake his hand, which dwarfed mine. "Well, it's a pleasure. I'm sorry to run out on you after you so

gallantly rescued me, but I'm on my way to see my grandmother."

His lips twitched at whatever secret amusement he had in his head. "Then I'll let you be on your way, but stay on the path and be careful of strangers."

My brows pinched, and I gave him a confused smile. "Um, okay. I'll do that. And if you're in the area tomorrow, and you're so inclined, you can stop by the bakery, and I'll hook you up with something to show my appreciation."

"You own the bakery?" he asked with a tilt of his head. He was rather handsome, though I found my traitorous soul wishing he had smoky blue eyes.

"No, my grandmother does. I'm just visiting, but I'll be helping out there for a bit tomorrow," I explained.

"Ahhh," he drew out with a slight smirk. "Until tomorrow, then."

"Have a good day, and thank you again." I gave him a little wave.

When I stepped out of the alley, I was still shaken. It left me overly cautious, and I kept looking over my shoulder the entire way to the train.

Chapter SEVEN



“Dangerous”–Seether

Present Day....

“You’re selling drugs in my neighborhood? In my *business*?” I asked the young punk who we’d caught selling meth in our area. Worse than that, it was in one of our nightclubs. Dario had the soldiers who brought him in chain the prick to the wall in the basement of a run-down house we owned just for such events. My gaze was narrowed, and I was pissed. Both because Luciano had warned me and because it was fucking true.

“This ain’t all your territory,” the kid replied, too snarky for his own good. “This ain’t the fuckin’ Roarin’ Twenties. The Mafia doesn’t run shit anymore.”

I cocked a brow. “Oh, really?”

“Yeah. Really,” he sneered, and I wanted to run my fist through his face. After the day I’d had yesterday, I was in the mood to fuck something up.

“How old are you?” I calmly asked as I uncrossed my arms. With my head tilted, I waited for his reply.

“Twenty-two,” he spat as he pulled against the chains. They clinked on the heavy eyebolts when he leaned closer to me. “You gotta problem with dat?”

An evil grin lifted the corners of my mouth as I removed my jacket and handed it to Dario. “On the contrary,” I replied before I punched him in the face. He fell back and bounced off the painted cinderblock wall. My ring had sliced open his lip, and blood gushed down his chin.

“You fucking piece of shit!” he screamed, his voice rising an octave as his blood dripped onto the plastic under his feet.

“La Cosa Nostra owns this entire fucking city. We *let* you have the West Chicago area out of the goodness of our hearts. The agreement we had with your boss was that you stayed in your area, and everything was good. You stray anywhere else, and all bets are off.” There was no goodness in our hearts. That agreement was strictly business, and it was an attempt to keep the gangs corralled in a controlled area while we got a small cut of their profits.

“We don’t answer to you anymore,” the dude muttered with his swelling lip.

“Is that so?” I punched him in the eye, and he screamed again.

“Oh, that’s gonna leave a mark,” I told him with mock concern as his eye began to swell shut and blood seeped from the cut on his cheek. Three more blows to his face and a few to his body had him crumpled and hanging from the chains.

I grabbed his hair and lifted his head. A groan told me he was conscious, and then one eye blinked open, confirming it.

“I want you to take a message to your boss. The next time we pick you or one of your buddies up in our area, we’ll be dropping your body off on his doorstep. Then we’ll be

gunning for him. *Capisci?*” My tone was light and almost playful—a clear indicator that the twisted and dark creature within me was enjoying this interaction.

“O-O-Okay,” he stuttered as he gasped for breath. I was pretty sure I broke a rib.

Or two.

“Good boy.” I patted his swollen cheek, getting his blood on the palm of my hand. I wiped it on a towel Dario handed me. I’d wash up before I left.

“Please clean this up,” I told the soldiers who stood stoically nearby as I gestured toward the gang member chained to the wall. One of them nodded, and I started up the stairs with Dario on my heels. Yes, I could’ve had one of the capos or their soldiers take care of this, but sometimes one had to handle things oneself to get a clearer point across.

I didn’t hide behind my desk and let others do my dirty work.

“Got a call while you were occupied. The bakery didn’t pay. Money wasn’t in the cake box. Guido went by to give them a nudge,” Dario quietly informed me as we stepped out into the kitchen of the run-down house.

“Goddamn it. Mrs. Romano is in the hospital. We could’ve given her some time.” I spun to glare at Dario.

He held up his hands in surrender. “Hey, I’m just the messenger. Thought you’d also like to know that the family refused to pay when Guido made his second stop to collect.”

“The family?” I asked through gritted teeth. “He shook down *the family*? Who, exactly?”

“Not sure. He said it was a female. That’s all I got.” Dario gave me a leery glance.

I saw red. If Guido had laid a finger on who I thought it was, I’d cut the fucking thing off. He’d be lucky if I didn’t cut them all off. He didn’t have permission to shake down the fucking families of our “customers.”

When we left, I intended to swing by the bakery, but I ended up having to go to the warehouse in Iowa with Gabriel. That turned out to be a shitshow of epic proportions.



We were hauling ass away from the warehouse outside of Davenport, Iowa. Gabriel had instructed me to get cleanup arranged, so I made the call to Venom and the RBMC boys we worked with. The Royal Bastards MC had a legitimate biological cleanup business—though not all the jobs were aboveboard.

“We’re on our way,” Venom replied the moment I told him we needed their services ASAP. He also assured me they would gather any and all evidence and get us the results. I relayed Gabriel’s instructions for handling the warehouse.

“I appreciate it,” I told him.

“Anytime. You and The Family have been loyal customers for a long time.”

“I also need Facet to look into a few things for me.” I could’ve had our guy do it, but I didn’t want this going through The Family.

“Sure thing. What do you need?” Venom asked.

“Can you have him call me?”

“Of course. This number?”

“Yes, this is good.” It was one of many burners I had.

When we arrived at the safe house to clean up, Gabriel and I parted ways. He went home, and I went to see Dahlia.

There was no foreplay. I breezed in, told her what I wanted, and she stripped. Meticulously, I folded my clothes and laid them over the chair. Then I approached the bed, where she waited, ass in the air. I placed my hand on the small safe by the bed and removed a condom, then locked it again. Yeah,

I was a little fucking paranoid. I wasn't using condoms she provided because I wasn't taking chances.

I rolled it down my length, coated it in spermicidal lubricant, and climbed behind her. When she lifted her head to look over her shoulder, I shoved her back down so her face was in the pillow. All that was visible was the wild disarray of curls—I'd paid for her to get a perm.

God, I'm sick.

Absently, I wondered how long it would be before she started having feelings and I had to get rid of her. Once they started to get emotionally involved, I paid them off, moved them out, and cut them loose. I would never get married, and I wasn't about to let any of them trap me.

Shaking off my cold thoughts, I lined up and dipped in to see if she was ready. Satisfied, I drove in and fucked her hard and fast. I didn't want romance, just to lose myself for five goddamn minutes. When she came, I filled the condom with a roar. Still hard, I pulled out once she stopped spasming. Through pants, I told her, "I want your ass."

"Okay," she breathlessly agreed.

After removing the first condom and setting it on the floor, I retrieved another one, then the lube. Once I knew she was ready, I pushed in as she moaned in pleasure. She was so fucking tight this way, and I knew I'd come the way I needed to.

"Vittorio," she moaned as I moved.

Without hesitation, I smacked her ass. "Don't fucking talk," I ground out.

Knowing it would ruin the illusion, I didn't want to hear her voice. I didn't want to see her face. I didn't want to cuddle or whisper things I didn't mean. I wanted to fuck her and leave.

Fuck, I'm getting worse. I hated that this was who I'd become.

Wordless, she nodded.

“Good girl,” I crooned, then thrust deep in her ass as I closed my eyes and pretended it was the tight pussy of another woman. “Play with yourself so you come again,” I grunted.

She whimpered and did as I instructed. Those quiet sounds I could imagine were someone else’s. I conjured up dark red curly hair and the most beautiful green eyes I’d ever seen. In my mind, she held my gaze over her shoulder as I buried myself inside her tight body again and again. “Kendall,” I whispered as she came.

With that thought, I didn’t last long.

As I exploded, I shouted, “Fuck yes. Kendall!”

Breathing raggedly, I pulled away and removed the condom, then took it and the first one into the bathroom. From under the sink, I pulled out a bottle of bleach. I filled each one with bleach and left them sitting in the sink while I returned to the bedroom for my clothes. I was disgusted by the lengths I went to because of what that old, twisted fucking bastard and his bullshit had done to make sure we understood not to knock up someone who wasn’t our wife.

No bastards for the De Lucas. Nope. No way.

Except Francesco had fucked up. But truthfully, I was glad, because we had Charlie. The old man wouldn’t have anything to do with him, so he was safe. I just wished Frankie had lived to see his son grow up.

As I stared at myself in the mirror, I got sucked back in time.

“You fuck some slut, I don’t care. But don’t you fucking dare get them pregnant. Do you hear me?” he shouted as I stood in front of his desk like I was a soldier at attention.

“Yes, Grandfather,” I murmured, trying to appease him. I closed my eyes to hide my eye roll. He was in a mood, and that never ended well.

“You think this is a joke?”

“Of course not, but I’m fifteen. I’m not even having sex,” I lied.

Suddenly, he was out of the chair, around the desk, and holding my dick and balls in a punishing grip.

I gasped, fighting to breathe, and trying not to drop to my knees because he'd rip them off for sure.

"You think I'm stupid?" He spoke in a soft but deadly tone.

"No," I whimpered. Sweat broke out on my face, and nausea welled in my stomach.

"Don't you ever lie to me. You and Gabriel are the future of this family. I will not have it further sullied like your father did. Do you understand?" Each word dripped evil, and though I hated to show it, I trembled.

"Yes," I gasped.

"Ensure you do, because Vittorio? If I find out you got some little bitch pregnant, I will kill that fucking bastard child like I should've killed Mario. Then I will fuck her myself to see what was so special about her before I slit her throat in front of you. Capisci, Vittorio?"

I had to blink several times to get my grandfather's image out of the mirror. It didn't matter that he'd retired back to Sicily. He lived in my head still. And truthfully, I wouldn't put it past him to come back and follow through with his threats.

Without a word, I started to dress. Thankfully, she was quiet the entire time. Until she wasn't.

"Hey," her husky voice called out as I exited the bathroom.

I glanced up and raised my brows.

She rolled her eyes. "God, why do you have to be such a dick? You fuck like a machine, and that's really goddamn amazing, but shit, a little emotion every now and then would be nice."

"We had an agreement," I reminded her. "Have you forgotten?"

"No, but—"

“There are no ‘buts.’ That signed agreement? It’s very specific. If you can’t abide by it any longer, then I will make the arrangements.” I turned to leave.

“Baby—” she began.

With a slicing motion of my hand, I cut her off as I winced.

Well, that’s that.

“Expect the paperwork in the morning.”

And I left.

Chapter EIGHT



“Adrenaline” –Zero 9:36

Eighteen Years Old....

“Where have you been?”

I froze, my spine stiffening. Then I slowly spun to face my grandfather and lied through my teeth. “Hanging out with Bobby and Luciano. Why?”

His gaze narrowed as he searched my face for a sign that I wasn’t telling the truth. With Father and Gabriel gone on some task or another, my grandfather, the current don of La Cosa Nostra, stared at me—because I was next in line and therefore the object of his focus. He was a fucking heartless bastard, and I hated him.

“You’re home late,” he observed.

“So? It’s summer, and after making your deliveries all day, I stopped to see my friends. I wasn’t aware that was a

problem.” One of my brows arched as I waited for him to reply. I didn’t tell him I’d also made several of my own deliveries. I was sure he knew—the old goat knew everything. But there was one thing I didn’t want him to touch. If he did, he might dim my little flame.

“It’s time I increased your responsibility. If you ever hope to be in a position of power in this family, you have a lot to learn. Don’t expect things to be handed to you simply because your last name is De Luca.”

Fucking hell. Inwardly, I groaned. Little did he know or care, I didn’t want power. Not the kind of power he wielded, anyway. And I didn’t want a goddamn thing he would hand me, no matter what.

“Whatever you see fit,” I told him with a careless shrug. No way was I letting him see that I hated him and everything he stood for. If I did, he would try to beat those thoughts out of me.

He approached, and I fought the desire to flinch from him when he gripped my shoulder. “Make sure you’re prepared to focus on what I teach you. Compassion is a weakness your enemies will exploit. Better to be feared than dead.”

It took everything I had not to snort in his face. I wanted to shoot the phrase about catching more flies with honey at him, but it was pointless.

He dropped his hand and stepped back. “Good night.”

Breathing a sigh of relief, I walked away from him.

The second I stepped out of the door, I was pushed. Immediately, I swung my arms to dislodge Mario’s hands from me.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” I snarled at my older half-brother, glancing around to make sure my mom wasn’t somewhere nearby. The last thing she needed was the reminder that in the first year of their marriage, my dad had been unfaithful.

“Giacomo wanted to see me.” He lifted his chin and crossed his arms over his chest. “What dear old Granddad

wants, he gets.”

“Enjoy.” I shrugged, but he grabbed my shoulder as I tried to walk away and spun me to face him.

“What the fuck do you want?” I glared, not wanting to talk to him. If he wanted to suck the old fucker’s dick for brownie points, that was on him. I didn’t give a shit.

“Who was the chick I saw you with at the pier?”

My teeth clenched, and my muscles bunched before I forced myself to relax. “No one.”

“Hmm, didn’t look like no one. What’s the matter? Afraid she’ll lose interest in you if she met me?” The smug look on his face pissed me the fuck off. I hated him. He’d fucked the last two girls I dated, which was why I’d decided I didn’t want to date anymore.

Until Kendall, anyway.

But I didn’t want him anywhere near her.

“Fuck no. Besides, it ain’t like that. She’s the cousin of a friend. I told him I’d show her ass around. It was whatever,” I lied, trying to play it off. He was like a shark—if he smelled blood, he’d attack.

“That so?”

“Yeah,” I replied with an eye roll and sneer.

“So you wouldn’t care if I made a play for her?”

My stomach cramped, and I wanted to rage. The thought of him touching her made me want to slam my hand into his face until I caved it in. Instead, I shrugged and kept my expression bored and bland. “Suit yourself, but she’s a fucking kid. Little young for your tastes.”

He stared into my eyes as if he could see into my mind. His smirk made my heart race as adrenaline surged through me, wanting to explode as I beat the fuck out of him. Then he leaned in and whispered, “Maybe I like them young so I can break them in right.”

Between my grandfather's bullshit and now Mario's, I was ready to hit someone. If he laid one finger on her, I'd kill him.

"Whatever, man. Now fuck off. I gotta call Sierra." Sierra was a chick who worked at Walgreens. She was a bitch, but if Mario thought I had interest in her, he'd zero in, and they fucking deserved each other.

The flare of interest that lit his gaze confirmed I'd thrown him off the scent.

Without another word, I pretended to be texting on my phone and walked away.

Once I was out of sight, I shoved it in my pocket and took the stairs up to my room two at a time. I dropped to the bed and rested my elbows on my knees. Gabriel had moved out, so I now had our room to myself. Truth be told, I missed him and the nights we would lie awake talking about how things would be "when we're grown-ups." So far, we were very wrong. I didn't feel like I had control of myself and my life just because I was eighteen.

My phone vibrated, and I pulled it out. At the little message bubble on my lock screen, I grinned.

Kendall: I LOVE THIS PHONE! Thank you so much for running into me and being an awesome guy!

Me: My pleasure

Though if she really knew me, I doubted she would think I was an awesome guy. Mafia son, drug dealer, and more. With a sigh, I shoved down my self-recriminations and decided I would enjoy my summer with her, and then I'd have to let her go. And I'd have to find a way to keep her away from Mario in the meantime.

Kendall: Are you sure I can't pay you for part of it? You still had to buy your phone

Me: No way.

Kendall: Please? I don't feel right

Me: I'll tell you what...

Kendall: Yes?

Me: Meet me again tomorrow and let me take you out

Dots pulsed, then disappeared. That repeated a few more times before she finally hit Send on her message. It made me wonder what she was typing all the other times that she deleted.

Kendall: Like, um, a date?

Me: Yeah

It took her a while to answer, and I was afraid I'd scared her off. Right when I was about to send her another message, the dots appeared again, and I held my breath.

Kendall: I get off at 3 tomorrow

Me: Is that a yes?

Kendall: Yes

My heart flipped and fluttered from how giddy her single-word answer made me. Now I had to figure out where to take her. Dinner and a movie was cliché, and with a girl like Kendall, I wanted something special.

Then it hit me, and I grinned.

Me: See you then. Wear comfortable shoes

Kendal: LOL. Okay. Well, I gotta get up at the ass-crack of dawn so I'm going to bed now

The thought of her and a bed sent really inappropriate thoughts spinning through my head. I told myself I was being an idiot. She was only sixteen, and if her family had an issue with her going out with me, I was a legal adult. What that meant was I had to be on my best behavior.

I could do that.

I could be good—even if I knew at my core that I was the furthest thing from that.

Chapter NINE



Kendall

“Stop and Stare”–One Republic

Present Day....

Konstantin Woodsman, my rescuer from yesterday, stood at the counter. He’d come by as I’d asked him to, though I truly hadn’t expected to see him again.

“Are you sure that’s all you want?” I stared disbelievingly at the single cupcake sitting in the small box. He’d chosen one that was made to look like an ice cream sundae.

“That and maybe a chance to see you again?” he replied, shocking the shit out of me.

“Me?” I squeaked splaying my hand over my chest.

His chuckle was deep and warm. I couldn’t be certain, but I thought his cheeks flushed a bit. He gave a slightly nervous laugh and ran a hand through his hair as he looked away. Then he locked his gaze on mine again. “Yes, you.”

“Oh, well, I, uh, don’t actually live here. I’m just helping out while my grandmother is recuperating,” I stammered as my face heated. I’d never been good at accepting attention from men. Always self-conscious of my unruly red hair, my pasty white skin, and the bloom of freckles that dusted my cheeks, I didn’t think guys really found me attractive. Well, there was one guy I had believed, and look where that got me.

He smirked. “It’s okay. I’ll be back.”

With a wink, he gathered the small box and walked out the door. I’d been a little flattered by his flirting, as he was quite good-looking.

After he left, there wasn’t time to think of a lot. It was busy, and we had a ton of orders. Mom and Dad’s plane got delayed due to some nasty weather in New York, so they wouldn’t be here until late tonight now. They decided to get a hotel near the hospital so they could walk over until Nonna got discharged.

Mom asked if I minded sticking around for a few days. It left me torn, because yes, I wanted to be here for my family. Yet, it frustrated me because I had to cancel one of my orders in Grand Rapids and refund the customer’s money. Their order was supposed to be picked up today. Thankfully, they were understanding, but I gave them a discount on their next order to maintain a good relationship. Okay, and to ensure they came back to me.

Since I was stuck in Chicago another day or two, I was working in the bakery to help Tillie and Paulie get the special orders out for the day. Paulie was making the basic orders, like bread, donuts, and undecorated cookies. Tillie and I were doing the cakes and decorated cookies. It was organized chaos in the kitchen, but I was in my element. This was my happy place.

I sealed the last of the cookie order I was finishing up for a baby shower. It wasn’t a huge one, so I’d baked and decorated them in the wee hours of the morning when I’d gone downstairs because I couldn’t sleep. Nonna had made me go back to her apartment because I wasn’t sleeping well at the

hospital. I didn't have the heart to tell her it wasn't the hospital—it was this city.

“Baby shower cookies are ready!” I called out as I slid the box to the side.

Ashley came back and grabbed them. Her big smile was infectious, and I grinned back at her. “Aww, these are so cute!”

“Thanks,” I replied as my face heated. I was terrible at taking compliments on my work too.

Ashley and Rosie were the two high school girls who worked weekends and covered the front for us. Saturdays were always busy, so they were a godsend.

I shook my head. No, they worked for my *grandmother*, not *us*.

I glanced at the clock. I'd been there for ten hours, and I was dead on my feet. “Can you guys handle things? I'm gonna go upstairs for a bit, but I'll be down to help you close.”

“We've got it. You don't need to come back down. Rest and go see your nonna,” Tillie assured me.

She meant well, but it would drive me crazy if I knew I was up there sitting on my ass while they were cleaning and closing things up, so I gave her a noncommittal “Mmm.”

Exhausted, I dragged my ass up the stairs and collapsed on the couch. One leg hanging off the edge, I set an alarm and dropped my phone to the floor next to me. As I sprawled there staring at the ceiling, I lost myself in my memories—something I tried not to do often.

I blamed it on the stress of the Mafia trying to shake me down for Nonna's money. It pissed me off that he could potentially be a part of that. Granted, I had no idea if he was still involved, but I couldn't imagine he wasn't. The De Lucas were like Mafia royalty, if there was such a thing. His childhood dreams wouldn't matter to them—of course he would still be a part of it.

Forcing myself to leave my phone on the floor and not open my browser and do a search on him, I closed my eyes.

His face plastered the insides of my eyelids, and I groaned, throwing my arm over my eyes as if that would keep him at bay.

When my alarm went off, I jumped and fell off the couch. It didn't feel like I'd slept two minutes.

"Jesus," I muttered as my heart slammed against my ribs and my eyes darted around wildly. It took me a minute to orient myself. Then I shuffled downstairs.

"Girl, I told you not to worry about coming back down," Tillie admonished the second I stepped into the kitchen. "We have all of this cleaned up."

"Then I'll cut the girls loose up front and finish closing things down up there."

She shook her head. "Stubborn woman. Wonder who you take after?"

I laughed as I went through the doorway to the storefront. The girls were chattering as they wiped down the cases.

"Hello, ladies. Get outta here!" I teased.

Their eyes went wide with appreciation.

"Are you sure, Miss O'Sullivan?" Rosie asked as she rinsed the rag she'd been using.

"Absolutely, and please call me Kendall," I insisted for the fourth time that day.

"Thank you, Miss Kendall!" they cheerfully chorused, making me laugh.

Neither girl needed to be told twice. They went and clocked out, then came back up to grab their bags from under the register. I remembered all too well being their age. It was a Saturday night, and they deserved to go have a fun evening.

"Make wise choices tonight, girls," I tacked on, just because it didn't hurt to remind them.

"We will," they both replied with giggles that told me they may or may not. Oh well, no one could say I didn't at least try.

“You two can go as well. I’ll lock up. I doubt anyone will be coming in this late anyway,” I called back to Tillie and Paulie. I knew they were looking forward to getting home to their families.

“I’ll lock the back door on our way out,” Tillie promised as she grabbed her keys, her face bright.

“Thanks,” I told her as they stopped by the register.

“The front door isn’t locked since it’s not quite time. Mrs. Romano doesn’t like it to be locked until closing time on the dot,” Ashley explained, hugging her bag to her chest.

“It’s fine. I’ll take care of it,” I assured them before waving them off.

The buzzer on the back door sounded as they all exited, and I smiled, picking up where they’d left off. Just as I crouched down to wipe the bottom shelf of the glass display cabinets, the bell rang up front.

“One second,” I told the customer. “We’re pretty well picked over, but I’ll see what we still have in the back.”

When I stood, I found two young men just inside the door. One stood with his back to me, watching out the huge plate-glass window. The other gave me a sly grin as he approached the counter.

“What were you hoping we had?” I asked, pretending like they didn’t make me nervous.

“I have a list,” the guy in front of me explained as he reached in his pocket. Except it wasn’t a piece of paper or a phone he pulled out. The guy had a pistol, which he pointed at me. “It says give me everything in your register,” he whispered as he gave me a creepy smirk.

Paralyzed with fear, I stood there blinking at him. My heart seized, and I swallowed the giant lump in my throat. “Y-Y-You can’t just come in here and rob the bakery,” I stuttered, my brain short-circuiting.

“The fuck we can’t. Word has it you made this place fair game. Move!” he urged as he waved the gun between me and

the register.

Cautiously, I walked over and entered my code to open the drawer. With trembling hands, I pulled the day's cash out. I hadn't even counted it yet, so I had no idea how much there was, but it had been a decent day. Thankfully, I'd already given the girls their tips from the jar.

"Put it in one of those donut bags," he snapped.

I nodded rapidly and did as he asked.

He snatched it from my hand, and before I could process what was happening, he swung his arm and hit me in the temple with the gun.

I dropped like a sack of flour, and everything went black.

Chapter TEN



Kendall

“Over My Head”—The Fray

Sixteen Years Old....

My hand was warm where Vittorio held it in his larger one. My heart was pounding, and I was sure he could hear it. Especially in the reverently quiet Art Institute of Chicago.

“Did you know they have one of the largest impressionist collections besides what’s in France?” he asked as we stood in front of an encased bronze statue of a ballerina.

“Really? How do you know that?” I glanced his way. His profile was classically beautiful, and I couldn’t help thinking he should’ve been on display with the other works of art. He turned his attention to me, and I inhaled a stuttering breath. He was so handsome he literally took my breath away.

He smirked, and for a moment, he dropped his brilliant blue gaze. Then he hit me with the power of it, and I couldn’t

think. "I read it on the website," he whispered.

My teeth captured my lower lip as I tried not to laugh. "And here I thought maybe you were a closet artist."

"I couldn't draw a stick figure if my life depended on it," he admitted with a chuckle. "I just haven't been here since I was kid."

"You came here as a kid?" I asked, a bit surprised.

"Hey, I'm a cultured non-drawing guy," he said with mock affront. Then he went serious, and his face looked wistful as he stared back at the statue. "This is one of my mom's favorite places. She used to bring me and my brothers here a lot. I think it's why my younger brother was inspired to be an artist."

"Really? Is he good?" I was curious about the family of such an enigmatic but gorgeous guy.

"He's... incredible." The way he said it told me he was very proud of his younger brother.

"We've never discussed it, but have you already graduated?" I asked as we moved to the next exhibit. He was friends with Luciano, and I knew he graduated this year, but I didn't know if they were in the same grade or if Vittorio was older or younger.

"Yes. Just graduated. Why? Does that mean you can't go out with me because I'm not in high school anymore?" he teased as he bumped against me playfully.

"No, I was just wondering. So you graduated with Luciano?"

"Yes. We both went to St. Ignatius."

"Good little Catholic school boy, huh?" I smirked as I gave him a sidelong glance.

He laughed. "Not hardly. But if that gives me brownie points, then sure."

"Something tells me you rarely, if ever, need to worry about brownie points," I murmured. With his looks and

personality, I was sure he had girls falling all over him—girls prettier than me.

“With you I do,” he said so softly, I questioned whether I’d heard him correctly. When I gave him a narrowed-eyed stare, he was studiously scrutinizing a painting as if he hadn’t said a word.

We’d wandered around for about an hour when I started looking around for a bathroom.

“Is there something wrong?” he asked as he glanced around with a furrowed brow.

“No. I just need to go to the bathroom,” I explained.

“Come on,” he instructed as he gently tugged on my hand. We walked a bit more before we saw the sign, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

“I’ll wait for you over there,” he offered, pointing to the wall opposite the bathroom doors.

I nodded as I went in. It seemed like I peed forever, and I cursed the massive coffee I drank before leaving. The caffeine was a necessity because I didn’t sleep for crap due to being so nervous about today. Then we’d been busy before I left, so I’d chugged it down on the way to meet Vittorio.

By the time I finished and washed my hands, I was embarrassed because I was sure he must think I was in here pooping. God, how mortifying.

When I walked out, he was nowhere to be seen. My chest collapsed and drew my shoulders down. “Oh shit. He left me here,” I whispered, covering my mouth. Tears actually welled in my eyes as I leaned against the wall. After blinking them away, I tried to figure out what I should do.

The men’s bathroom door opened, and my breath caught when he walked out. I wanted to laugh at my paranoid self. He stopped in front of me, and I squinted.

“Is your hair wet?” Without thinking, I reached up and touched it. When I did, my fingers brushed the smooth skin of

his forehead, and I quietly gasped. He groaned, and his eyes fell shut a moment before he reached up and caught my hand.

“Yeah, sorry. I was getting hot out here, so I splashed some cool water on my face.” But he wouldn’t look me in the eye when he said it, and his voice went weird.

Strained.

His Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed, and I realized how close we were. Slowly, I lifted my gaze until it clashed with his, and I wet my lips nervously. His eyes were the most amazing blue. Bright as the summer sky, with splashes of midnight that radiated from around his pupils. They glittered like cut crystal, and I couldn’t look away.

He brushed a wild, stray curl off my forehead. “You are so fucking pretty,” he breathed.

I ducked my head. “No, I’m not, but thank you.”

Using the edge of his forefinger, he gently lifted my chin until I was looking at him. “Yes. You. Are,” he insisted before he paused and dragged his teeth over his lip. Then he whispered, “And I wanna kiss you so bad. Can I kiss you, Kendall?”

Unable to speak, and with the blood rushing in my ears, I nodded. God, yes, I wanted him to kiss me more than anything.

As if we were in slow motion, he leaned in, and his perfect mouth tentatively brushed over mine. The shock that jolted through me at that light touch was mind-blowing. Then he did it again, but this time, his lips parted and plucked at my top one until I opened for him.

When the tip of his tongue traced the slight opening, I instinctively gave him what he wanted, and he dipped in, stroking and learning—owning my mouth. The world tilted on its axis as my head spun.

I whimpered, and he reluctantly broke away. As my heart raced, our breaths puffed against our damp lips.

And I knew I was in trouble.

Chapter ELEVEN



“Away”–Breaking Benjamin

Present Day....

Gabriel had planned to go down to talk to Mrs. Romano, but I told him I would. According to the nurse, she was only supposed to be hospitalized overnight for observation and fluid removal. When I had stopped by that first day, I had sweet-talked a nurse into letting me know what the plan was by telling her I was Mrs. Romano’s grandson.

Oh, the irony.

“You’re positive there’s no one?” I asked Facet. From the back seat, I stared out the window as we traveled through Chicago traffic. I was aware of Dario listening to my conversation from the front passenger seat.

“Not for almost a year,” Facet assured me. Though it was little reassurance, because imagining anyone else touching her

did things to me that it shouldn't. Not that I was surprised, because that was the reason I hadn't looked into her once since she left almost ten years ago. It would hurt too much to find out she'd moved on. Though I wanted nothing more than her happiness, the thought of that being with someone else burned like battery acid in my stomach.

"Thank you."

"How far back do you want me to go?" he asked.

"That's good enough. I only wanted to know where things sat now." I didn't want a list of the men she'd been with because I'd be tempted to put out a hit on every one of them, and that was fucked-up. At least I was sane enough to recognize it.

We ended the call, and I sent payment for the information Facet had gathered.

The look on Dario's face told me he wanted to ask me about the conversation, but he wouldn't dare with the driver present.

When I arrived at the bakery, I fully expected to find Mrs. Romano up in her apartment resting. Instead, I found all the lights on in the bakery, an unlocked door, and a seemingly vacant business. Instantly on edge, I silently pulled out the small pistol I kept under my jacket. Dario did the same, then gently turned the lock on the door so no one could come in after us.

Warily, we tread on noiseless feet across the small seating area toward the part of the counter that was open to allow staff access from the back for orders. Two more steps and I froze momentarily before I cursed under my breath, "Fuck."

Red hair spread like flames, obscuring the face I knew I'd recognize the second I brushed it away. I'd prayed it wasn't her who had been threatened by my incompetent soldier. Now it was as good as confirmed, and I hated it. *So help me God, if this was him taking shit in his own hands again, he's as good as dead.* I prayed Mrs. Romano was upstairs and not in the bakery somewhere.

Briefly, I crouched, then expelled the breath I'd been holding when I felt Kendall's pulse beating steadily in her neck. That little sign of life was more a relief than I could've ever imagined.

Though I hated to leave her, I needed to make sure there wasn't anyone remaining in the store—good or bad.

While Dario could do it on his own, after the ambush in our warehouse, I wasn't taking chances.

As quickly as we could, we cleared the first floor, then went up the staircase in the office to the apartment upstairs. Torn, I knocked. I hated to worry Mrs. Romano needlessly, but it was necessary to ensure she was safe.

Several attempts gave us no reply, so I tried the knob, which turned easily in my hand. Dario and I glanced at each other and quietly entered the apartment.

As we went room to room, I was more relieved with each one she wasn't in. At least we didn't find Mrs. Romano's body. Still, I was concerned and confused, because I was sure Mrs. Romano would've been home by then. Once we were sure every room was clear, I left Dario to check the cameras in the office, and I rushed back to Kendall.

“Motherfucker,” I grumbled when I crouched and moved her curls off her face. The cut on her temple and the blood that had trickled along her face sent rage shooting through my veins.

Dario arrived and looked at her. “Is she dead?”

“No,” I answered, keeping my face an expressionless mask. It took everything in me not to let the emotion show in my tone—those words had ripped my soul in half.

As gently as I could, I felt around her head and found a lump already forming where she must've landed when she fell. My fingers came away sticky, and I was furious.

Uncaring that I'd be ruining a three-thousand-dollar suit, I dropped to my ass and carefully lifted her head to my lap. Slowly, I smoothed my fingers over her face. I traced the arch of her soft brows and trailed them along her jawline until I

could brush my thumb over her full lower lip. My heart cried at having her so close yet still not mine. My body ached to pick her up and cradle her to my chest. It had been damn near ten years, but it felt like yesterday. If only things had been different back then.

“Christ, Kendall, please wake up,” I begged in a whisper as I pulled my phone out of my inside jacket pocket. Completely out of character, I dialed 9-1-1. We didn’t call for help like that—we handled everything ourselves. But this was different.

Before I could hit Call, her thick lashes fluttered, and her eyes opened. I’d convinced myself that my memory was faulty and that there was no way her eyes were as vivid as I remembered them. I was certain I’d built her features up in my mind. Yet like the deep and endless green of the forest, I got lost in them, making me forget about the call I had started.

She started to sit up, but she winced at the movement, and I gently held her down.

“Don’t get up. We need to get you to the hospital,” I said, hiding the fact that my heart was in my throat.

“No,” she groaned and pressed a hand to her head.

“You could have internal bleeding,” I argued. The thought of this being worse than it seemed was nearly crippling. Even though I couldn’t have her, no matter how much my mind screamed she was mine, the thought of her being gone forever nearly sent me spiraling.

“I’m fine. I just need some Tylenol. There should be some in the first aid kit,” she mumbled as she made to get up.

Again, I pressed my hand to her chest to keep her still. I ignored how close my fingers were to her breast.

She huffed in annoyance, and I wanted to laugh despite my fears. The woman was obviously stubborn as hell, just like the girl had been.

“I still think you should go in. Let me call EMS.”

“No.”

Knowing there was no reasoning with her, I sighed. “Where is it?”

“There’s one under the register and another in the kitchen.”

Stretching, I grabbed the red metal box I saw on the shelf under the cash register. I set it beside me and opened the latches, then lifted the lid, rummaging inside until I saw the three little packets labeled as Tylenol and grabbed one.

If she were my woman, she wouldn’t have a goddamn choice—she’d be going in.

But she’s not, that little voice said.

I hated that voice.

“I’ll get her something to drink. Will you be okay?” Dario asked as he scanned the large glass storefront. Where we were behind the counter, we weren’t visible to passersby.

“I’m good.”

He went to the back, and I heard him opening and closing cupboards.

“Kendall, I think you need—”

“No,” she practically growled. She shook her head, but the movement caused her face to pinch with pain. Her hand flew to her head as she whimpered.

“Fine,” I muttered and reluctantly set my phone down. “Where is Mrs. Romano?”

“She’s still in the hospital,” she murmured with a wince.

Though I hated that she was still hospitalized, at least I knew the old woman was safe.

“I called Santino. He’s on his way to check her over,” Dario announced as he came back and handed me a measuring cup with water in it. When I cocked my brow at him, he shrugged. “It was all I could find.”

She lifted her head enough to drink from the cup and popped the two white pills.

Santino was one of our soldiers who'd been a combat medic in the Army. He was who we called when we had a wound we didn't want documented. He was also the next best thing we had to an ER in this case, and since she was being stubborn as hell, it would have to do.

Thankful for Dario's foresight while she had my normally calm brain in chaos, I gave him a curt nod. I wished Angel and the RBMC boys were closer.

What I wanted to do was pack her up and drag her to my condo, where I could keep her safe and all to myself, but that wasn't likely to happen. And if she wouldn't go to the ER, then there was no need to call law enforcement in—I'd be handling this personally. I'd get further than they would anyway.

And my justice wouldn't take as long.

"Let me up," she grumbled.

Despite her protests, I wouldn't let her get up until Santino signed off on her moving.

Once he arrived, Dario let him in. The first thing he did was close the wound on her temple with a butterfly bandage. Then he did what seemed like a million things with her eyes and face, along with asking her a hundred different questions. He then sat her up and checked a few more things, then did it again with her on her feet.

"I don't have a built-in CT scanner or MRI, but so far everything looks good," he explained. "Personally, I recommend you go to the ER, but I understand your reluctance."

While Santino was talking to her, Dario motioned me into the kitchen. Reluctantly, I left Kendall to Santino's capable hands. Hands I wanted to cut off for touching her, but I kept that to myself.

"The cameras weren't recording. They only show live feeds," Dario told me.

Gripping my hair in a frustrated hand, I huffed. "Of course they weren't. Goddamn it."

“Is there something I should know, boss?” Dario asked with an assessing stare.

Immediately, I wiped all expression from my face. “I don’t like that someone is robbing businesses in our area.”

Dario gave me a deadpan stare, but I didn’t give him any more.

We returned to where Santino was finishing up with Kendall. He glanced at me, gave me a few instructions, then turned back to Kendall, who he now had sitting in a chair behind the counter. “Miss O’Sullivan, do you have any questions about what I recommended?”

“No,” she murmured. The entire time, she refused to look at me—and I knew.

She still hates me.

Maybe that was for the best. No matter how bad it ripped my chest open until I felt like I was bleeding out. My life had changed so much over the last ten years. If it wasn’t safe for her then, it sure as hell wasn’t now.

Then why did it feel like someone had carved out my heart with a dull, rusty knife?

“Did you get a look at who did this?” I asked her.

“Yes,” she whispered, staring at her clasped hands.

“Can you tell me what you remember?” Dario asked as he pulled his phone out. His thumbs rapidly tapped at his phone while she described the two men who’d come in and held her at gunpoint before pistol-whipping her. That little detail signed their death warrant when I found them—because I *would* find them.

“They didn’t exactly disguise themselves. They were either really stupid or really bold,” she muttered.

Once we were certain Dario had noted every detail she remembered, he and Santino helped her upstairs. Every time they touched her skin to guide her, my teeth creaked as I ground them together. I followed at a safe distance to keep myself from snarling and lashing out at my own fucking men.

Upstairs, she was sitting on the couch when I stepped into the living room. In my earlier search, I'd remained focused and impersonal. Now that she was essentially safe, I allowed my curiosity free rein and scanned the apartment, comparing it to what it looked like ten years ago. My gaze fell on the door to her old room.

Memories assaulted me as I fought against the vise crushing my lungs.

By the time I pulled myself out of my head, Kendall had gone into the bathroom. Dario and Santino stared at me, waiting for guidance.

"You two can go," I told them.

Dario's dark brow cocked. Santino glanced from him to me and back.

"I'm not leaving you here alone," Dario insisted.

"I won't be alone. Kendall is here, and I'm not leaving *her* alone after this happened. The assholes could come back, she could have a brain bleed, go into a coma, anything. Even Santino said she should have someone with her. I'll call you in the morning to pick me up. Santino, you don't have anything you're currently assigned to, so I want you on the bakery during the days. Tell Georgie he has the night shift," I instructed.

"Vittorio," Dario began, hesitation heavy in his tone. "I'll stay with you."

"Did I stutter?" I coldly asked. As the underboss of the family, I didn't like being questioned. I answered only to Gabriel.

"No, sir. You did not," Dario replied, but his pursed lips told me he wasn't happy with my directive.

"I'll walk you down to lock up." They both nodded, and I followed them downstairs.

After I opened the door, Santino left with his black assault pack. To the common observer, he looked a bit like a college instructor with a backpack.

Dario glared at me. “What are you doing?”

As my bodyguard and the closest person to me, next to my brothers, he took liberties when we were alone that others wouldn't.

“Ensuring her safety.”

“Why?”

“Because it's my responsibility to ensure the safety of those who fall under The Family's umbrella.”

He crossed his arms over his chest and gave me his silent regard for a moment. “That might be true if they had paid this month, but even if they had, it isn't the underboss's place to conduct a soldier's responsibilities. So try again. Why?”

“You know, I'd blacken the eye of anyone less than you.”

“So?”

A frustrated sigh escaped me. “It's personal,” I quietly admitted.

His brows nearly shot to his hairline. His surprise wasn't a shock. The man went nearly everywhere with me. If I'd been involved with someone, he would've known.

Shaking his head, he dropped his arms. “Fine. But I'll be the one here for you in the morning. Are you going to inform Gabriel of where you are, or do I need to?”

“This doesn't concern him. I'm safe, so there's nothing to share.”

He huffed. With a final glare, he left the bakery but waited outside until I locked the door. Distrustful as a motherfucker, he pushed on it to make sure it was secure. I rolled my eyes, and he smirked, then gave me a finger wave but didn't budge.

“Jesus,” I grumbled and walked away.

Before I hit the office, I double-checked the doors. If I knew the damn code, I would've armed the system. I'd noticed it when we cleared the place earlier. I was pissed that she'd been here alone without the doors secured and the alarms set.

With a shake of my head, I climbed the stairs.

Once in the apartment, I glanced around but didn't see Kendall. Then I heard water running and knew she must be showering. That was a vision that had me groaning. Imagining her body as the water sluiced over it was torture. My fingers twitched as I pictured soaping her up, and I groaned. "Fuck."

On edge, I shrugged out of my suit coat and meticulously laid it over the back of one of the barstools. Not that the suit was worth a shit now, but it was habit. Then I loosened my tie and pulled it off. I unfastened several of my shirt buttons, along with my cuffs, and rolled up my sleeves. Then I made her an ice pack for her head and carried it to the living room, where I set it on the coffee table.

Trying to think of anything else but her naked curves, I dropped to the couch with my elbows on my knees and held my head in my hands. This was such a mistake, but I couldn't leave her on her own.

Finally, the water stopped, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

Until I imagined her in just a towel.

Christ.

When I heard her feet padding on the hardwood floors, my spine stiffened as I waited.

Please let her be dressed, please let her be dressed, please let her be dressed.

Her scream had me off the couch like a shot and spinning to see what had scared her. Except her wide-eyed stare was focused on me, not anywhere else. Her usually rich red hair, a dark auburn from her shower, fell over one shoulder, and I tried not to follow the water that dripped from the ends and ran down her alabaster skin.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" she snapped once she got herself under control and found her voice. One hand tightly held the top of the towel, and the other was splayed over her chest.

Her very ample chest.

I swallowed hard but kept my face impassive.

“I’m staying with you tonight to make sure you don’t have any complications,” I calmly explained, though inside I was anything but. In fact, at the moment, I was nearly coming out of my skin from how bad I wanted to be near her. It was ridiculous. I hadn’t seen the woman in almost ten fucking years. I should’ve been over her. She shouldn’t still be affecting me like she was.

“No you’re not. Absolutely not. No. Uh-uh,” she rambled as her hand sliced through the air.

“This isn’t up for discussion,” I informed her in the coolest manner I could manage.

“It most certainly is!” Her face flushed, and I began to worry about what the increase in blood pressure might do to her. “This is *my* family’s home, not yours. You have no say so here, and you absolutely have no obligations to me.”

“Kendall, Santino specifically said you needed to relax. He also said it was a bad idea for you to be on your own tonight. You don’t know him or Dario, so I wasn’t having them stay with you.” It seemed perfectly logical to me. And over my dead body would they stay alone with her.

“I don’t know *you* either,” she ground out between gritted teeth.

Damn, that hurt. Though I didn’t blame her. She had every right to hate me for what I’d done, but I couldn’t help wishing she didn’t.

“Please. I’ll sleep on the couch.” I wanted to sleep next to her. “You won’t even know I’m here.” I’d be checking on her all night.

“Why do you even care?” she asked in exasperation.

“Because I feel bad. Because I wish....”

“You wish what?” she sneered, clutching the towel tightly.

“It doesn’t matter,” I tiredly replied and briefly closed my eyes against the temptation in front of me. When I opened them, I stared off to the side of her head.

“It sure as hell—”

A phone rang, cutting her off, and I breathed a sigh of relief that it had saved me from answering her. As the underboss for the Chicago Family, I didn't fear much, but this woman and her effect on me? It terrified me.

She took the phone into the second spare bedroom and spoke quietly—I assumed so I couldn't hear. Her actions caused a small piece of me to burn with a feeling I hadn't experienced in ages.

Not since I was eighteen.

And goddamn it, I didn't like the feeling one fucking bit.

Because though I truly hated to admit it, I was *jealous* of who she might be talking to. During the ten years she'd been gone, I'd intentionally not looked her up or kept tabs on her because it was pointless—we couldn't be together. Finding out she'd moved on and started dating would've ripped young me apart. To find out she was in a serious relationship or had gotten married would destroy today's me.

Besides, I'd all but convinced myself that I was over her. Which was obviously bullshit, because I'd broken down and asked Facet to find out if she was seeing anyone.

That didn't mean there couldn't be someone very new.

That sent me down a dark rabbit hole of worry that I had to pump the brakes on really goddamn fast.

I'm so fucked.

I did my best to harden my heart before she came out of the room. She was no longer on the phone, and she was dressed. Despite my ire, I fought a nostalgic smile. Of course she'd be wearing Harry Potter pajama pants.

She was texting someone and hadn't even looked up to see if I was still here. My nails bit into my palms as I forced myself not to demand to know who'd called.

I'd given up that right ten years ago when I broke her heart.

“You should put this on your head,” I told her as I grabbed the ice pack and brought it to her. The scent of her body wash or lotion floated through the air to bewitch me, and I started to lean in to breathe deeper but stopped myself.

She snatched the ice pack from my hand with a glare. I lifted my chin as I clenched my molars.

“If you wanna stay, then stay. You can sleep on the couch. But I want you gone in the morning.” Without waiting for a reply, she turned on her heel and went back in her room. The sound of her slamming the door echoed in the open-concept apartment.

“Well, that went well,” I muttered.

It didn’t escape my notice that she didn’t offer me the use of her old room. Curiosity ate at me. Without a sound, I slipped my shoes off and padded to the door. With the best of my ninja skills, I gently turned the knob and slowly pushed the door open before I stuck my head inside.

My breath caught, and I frowned. The room looked exactly like it had ten years ago. Same queen-size bed, same quilt, same dresser. If that was the case, I couldn’t believe the other room had changed either. That one was much smaller and had a daybed alongside her grandmother’s crafting items.

Why would she prefer to sleep on an uncomfortable twin-size mattress instead of on the queen—which I knew was comfortable as hell?

Understanding dawned, and my eyes closed as my chest constricted.

She chose discomfort over the memories in the bigger room.

Chapter TWELVE



Kendall

“Animal”–Neon Trees

Present Day....

Mom had texted me when I was showering to let me know they’d landed and were getting their luggage. Their first priority was my grandma, and I didn’t want any of them worrying about me, so I didn’t tell them what happened. Then I texted my cousin Luciano to see if he could come by to stay with me. I figured if he came over, Vittorio would go away.

And right now, I really needed him to go away—*far* away.

Because he made me weak. Ten damn years and my body still responded to him. What the hell was that about? Clearly I’d fooled myself all that time—had myself believing I was over him. I mean, I should’ve been. After all, I was a twenty-six-year-old independent woman, not a child. It was ridiculous that I was letting that teenage girl within control my emotions regarding someone I should’ve been *over*.

Granted, while he'd been good-looking when he was young, he was devastatingly breathtaking today.

But I was either on my own or stuck with Vittorio, because Luciano was working late. Of course.

As I sat on the rock-hard daybed holding the ice pack to my head, I chewed on my lip and my shoulders slouched. Despite how he'd ripped my heart out, I couldn't be a total asshole. It wasn't in my nature, no matter how much I should hate him.

Muttering under my breath, I dropped the ice pack to the bedside table, then got up and grabbed one of the extra quilts from the closet. Fortifying my defenses the best I could, I stormed out into the darkened living room.

At the sound of my door opening, Vittorio turned away from the window he'd been staring out. His hands were in his pockets, and I couldn't help but notice the blood staining the thighs of the expensive fabric.

"Here," I said as I tossed the blanket on the couch. No way did I trust myself to get close to him. His scent had made me weak in the knees when he'd handed me the ice pack earlier. I didn't dare risk the temptation.

When one of his dark, sculpted brows winged up, my heart stuttered. I'd always loved it when he'd done that before, and the bastard knew it. My thighs clenched together at that minuscule movement, and I hated myself for my response to him.

"I'm not the enemy, you know," he softly murmured, as if he could tell what his presence was doing to me. It made me want to throw something at him.

My throat practically seized up when I tried to swallow the lump lodged there. "Yeah? Well, from where I'm standing, that's exactly what you are."

I had to have imagined the flicker of pain in his eyes before he coldly erased it.

"Word gets around quick, Kendall. Protection money isn't just a scam, you know. It tells the other riffraff in the city that

someone or a business is ours. And what's ours doesn't get fucked with. I understand that your grandmother didn't pay because she was in the hospital, but when you blatantly refused, it made an announcement," he explained.

I scoffed in disgust. "He attacked me and then expected me to pay him. Fuck him and fuck you."

His icy gaze narrowed, and the muscle in his jaw jumped. "He hurt you?"

"He slammed me against the fucking building, Vittorio. He fucking shook me down like a common thug. No different from those assholes who robbed me tonight. What if my nonna had been the one here?"

"He will be dealt with. That wasn't authorized by anyone in The Family—"

I held up my hand and cut him off. "I'm going to bed. Feel free to let yourself out in the morning. Sweet dreams."

I spun on my heel and stomped back to my room. Childish? Yes, but still a little satisfying.

"I'll check on you periodically to make sure you're okay," he called out as I reached my doorway, his voice the perfect pitch to drive me crazy.

"Don't bother. If I'm dead in the morning, then so be it, and neither of us will have to worry about the other." Without waiting for his reply, I slammed the door.

Too bad I tossed and turned the entire night. With him so close, my body was on fire. Desire licked like flames over the surface of my skin, and molten lava seared through my veins. And right when I couldn't take it anymore and I reached my hand between my legs, the door slowly opened.

"Ugh, go away," I groaned as I turned to my side and tossed the covers over my head. My heart was thundering in my chest as I squeezed my eyes shut and prayed he hadn't seen what I'd been about to do.

He didn't say a word, and for that, I was grateful.



The next morning when I awoke, he wouldn't make eye contact, and the minute his thug arrived, he left. I found a note on the kitchen counter telling me to call him if there were any issues.

When I went downstairs, Tillie looked stressed.

"Everything okay?" I asked her.

"Oh! Yeah. Great," she replied, but I didn't buy it. Her reply was too forced, the two lines between her brows too pronounced.

"Are you sure? You don't look like it," I pressed.

Tillie burst into tears, and I immediately pulled her into my arms. She was in her early thirties, and we'd always been friendly, though not close. The way she clung to the back of my shirt told me how distraught she was.

When her sobs subsided, she stepped back and gave me a watery laugh. "I'm sorry. I'm not usually such a mess."

"Tillie, please talk to me."

Her eyes went bleak, and she dropped her head. "Mickey lost his job. I make good money here, but with our bills, it's not going to be enough to cover the rent and everything else. We have Janie's school tuition, her piano lessons, her ballet... how do I tell her we can't pay for that? I don't want her to have to go to public school. God, Kendall, what are we going to do?"

My heart broke for her. I knew Nonna paid her well, but I wasn't really sure if there was enough in the budget to give her a significant raise. At least not enough to make up for her husband's lost wages.

"Maybe we can ask around and see if anyone needs help."

"He's been applying at other places, but we live paycheck to paycheck. It's going to be rough if he doesn't find

something soon.”

“I’ll talk to Nonna.”

“Please don’t. She doesn’t need more crap on her plate. It wouldn’t be good for her right now.”

“Tillie...”

“No. Promise me.”

Reluctantly, I sighed and nodded.

Other than Tillie’s issues, everything in the bakery was business as usual, though I was guarded and jumpy all day. I didn’t tell Tillie and Paulie about what happened because I wanted to tell my family first.

After lunch, Mom texted me to let me know Nonna would be discharging, and I wouldn’t need to go down to the hospital to visit.

My parents brought Nonna back to the apartment late that afternoon, and I reluctantly broke the news of the robbery to them. They freaked the fuck out, and my dad wanted us to call the police. But having been raised part of his life in Northern Ireland, he knew how shady things could be at times, and he finally calmed down when Nonna told him to leave it be.

“If the De Lucas say it’ll be taken care of, we don’t involve the police,” she insisted.

I might not like it, but I was beginning to see that was how things worked around here. I couldn’t believe I’d never known the truth.

“Fine,” he huffed.

“Well, I don’t know about you three, but I’m going to bed,” Nonna said, getting up with some difficulty. When we all jumped up to help her, she grumbled and swatted us back. “I’m fine. Good grief.”

Mom and I made eye contact, and we both shook our heads. She mouthed, “Stubborn woman.”

I smirked and nodded.

“I’m not blind either. I see you two,” Nonna muttered as she started back to her room.

We laughed, and she flipped us off but kept walking.

My parents hugged me good night and got ready for bed. They were sleeping in Mom’s old room—the one I refused to step foot in now. I went to mine.

Mom and I ran the bakery while Dad stayed with Nonna and kept her from going downstairs. A couple of nights later, my parents went out on a date night.

Nonna and I were sitting in the living room after I had finished closing up. The pasta dish I’d prepared the night before was baking, and the smell of Italian spices filled the apartment. She was knitting, and I was reading.

Though I wanted to get back home, the longer I stayed, the less I wanted to leave. The routine of getting up every morning and creating treats that made people happy wasn’t a chore at all. It was my Zen place, and it made me as warm inside as a cake right out of the oven.

“I think it’s time I retired,” my grandmother announced as we ate, breaking the silence and startling me with what she’d said.

“What?” I asked with my mouth full. I finished chewing so I could swallow and carefully set my fork down. “Y-Y-You can’t be serious.”

She sighed as she pushed her food around on her plate. Then she looked up at me.

“Kendall, I’m not getting any younger. Your mom has her life in Ireland, but she never really had any desire to run the bakery. I had hoped you would, but Chicago isn’t where you want to be. I’ve had some offers that I’ve been turning down for some time. The bakery is prime location, and I own the building outright. It might be time to consider them,” she explained as I sat there with my mouth hanging open.

When I could get my tongue to work properly, I shook my head. “No, Nonna. You can’t sell the bakery. It’s been in your family since before you were born,” I argued.

A sad smile curved her lips. “Yes, but I can’t do it forever. I’ve been wanting to travel, and this might be the time. If I sold the bakery, I could go back to Italy to see my cousins there. It’s been years since I’ve been back, and half of them have already passed away. I’m over seventy, and with my heart... well, who knows how long it’ll keep ticking.”

“Nonna, don’t say that,” I interjected, my eyes burning with unshed tears.

“Then I could go see your mom in Ireland for a bit. Maybe even go to France to see the Eiffel Tower. I’ve always wanted to do that,” she mused as if I hadn’t spoken.

Though I wanted her to be happy, the thought of anyone else owning the bakery was devastating—the thought of it being closed altogether, worse. Nonna and the bakery were the only reason I returned to Chicago. The thought of not having any reason to come here again should’ve made me happy. Yet it hurt nearly as bad as watching Vittorio walk away the other day—another thing that shouldn’t have bothered me.

“I wish you still loved Chicago,” she wistfully admitted, then sighed and returned her attention to the knitting in her lap. As I watched her, the clicking of the needles was the only sound in the room. No, that wasn’t true. My heart was beating so hard, I could hear it.

“I want the bakery,” I blurted.

She paused midstitch and gave me a shocked stare. “You... want... the bakery?”

“Yes,” I replied with finality. Processing my impulsive outburst, I started to sweat. Then a chill washed over me, leaving goose bumps in its wake. Finally, a sense of peace filled me, and I smiled. It was as if I saw everything with crystal clarity. This was what I was made to do—I’d known it ten years ago, but I’d cut off my nose to spite my face.

Because I’d been hurt, and I was angry.

At first she looked concerned, but then I would’ve sworn I saw the briefest flicker of guilt. It was gone before I was sure,

and firm resolve steeled her features. I was afraid she was going to tell me no.

“I’ll have the papers drawn up,” she finally shot back, and the tension that had been coiling within me settled.

“I’ve been saving up, so I should have a decent down payment. I just need to go to my bank and talk to them about financing the rest,” I explained. It didn’t matter that I was saving up for a house. Suddenly, I prayed my credit was good enough and that the business plan I’d been working on for the past year would be solid. With a little tweaking, I thought it would.

“I’ll tell you what.” She leaned forward as if what she had to tell me was a secret of national security. “Let’s talk to the bank in the morning and find out what your payments would be and what the terms would work out to be. Then you just pay me that every month. It’ll be like my ‘retirement check.’ It’ll save you from all the fees and crap you’d have to pay with getting a loan, and I’ll have a steady income still. Win-win, right?”

“Nonna, are you sure?” I asked, worried she was getting the shaft in this deal. “Don’t you want to talk to Mom about it first?”

By right, Mom should have the first option to buy the bakery.

“Absolutely, I’m sure. And I already know your mother doesn’t want it. When I was still in the hospital, she’s the one who told me I needed to think about selling. So, it’s settled. You can move in here whenever you’re ready. I don’t need that big ol’ room if I’m gonna be a world traveler. The small room you’re using will be good enough for me when I come to visit.” She gave a decisive nod.

“Oh. All right. Well, I can go back this weekend and get some of my stuff, if that’s okay,” I thought out loud. My lease on my house was up in three more months. If I was frugal, I could cover Nonna’s payment, my rent in Grand Rapids, and my expenses. It might be a bit tight for the next few months, but I’d be okay.

“Of course. In fact, I might talk to your mom and dad to see if they want company on their trip home. That would give you time to see if you really want the headache of owning and running the bakery.” She gave me a knowing smirk, and I chuckled. I’d been running the bakery since I got here.

When my parents arrived after their date, we shared the news with them. At first, they both looked a bit concerned, but that quickly faded, and they congratulated me.

A little bubble of excitement grew within me and left me nearly giddy.

Chapter THIRTEEN



“Pride Before The Fall”—Seether

Eighteen Years Old....

“I’m proud of you,” our grandfather boomed as I stood in front of his desk.

I didn’t give a shit. The things I did weren’t done to make him proud—they were done to make me independent. To amass enough cash to escape. Gabriel could continue to be brought up into The Family under Dad’s tutelage. I didn’t fucking want it.

Still, I was standing before the fucker in my own home as if I were being brought before the warden—and maybe I was. He had an office in the old Victorian mansion we all lived in together. I never understood why Dad hadn’t left and gotten his own place when he married Mom. He knew what his dad was like, yet he kept all of us here. Thankfully, Grandfather

loved our mom. She came from a good and powerful Italian family.

“Okay,” I drew out, unsure where he was going with this.

For several moments, he sat there with his tented fingers tapping on his chin.

“You start college in the fall. I think it’s time we started looking for a suitable match for you,” he finally informed me.

My spine stiffened.

No way. Not happening. I was never fucking saying “I do.”

“Dad—” my father cautioned, but Grandfather silenced him with a look.

“The boy is eighteen. He’s doing the work of a soldier and excelling. We need to start looking at a future for him,” Grandfather firmly countered.

My dad knew I didn’t want this life. None of us kids did, but Gabriel was willing to because he was the oldest and it was “who we were.”

I believed Gabriel was only doing it because he knew the rest of us didn’t want to.

Alessio wanted to join the military to get the fuck out of here. Gabriel and I knew that the minute he turned eighteen, he would be in a recruiter’s office and gone on the first thing smoking.

Leo had dreams of playing in the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. The boy probably would too. I’d never heard someone his age play the cello the way he did. Hell, half the adults I’d heard couldn’t touch him.

Francesco wanted to go to Paris to study art. There wasn’t a doubt in my mind he would. As the baby by two and a half minutes, he would probably be allowed to, because he was spoiled fucking rotten. Both of the twins were, really, but Leo was quieter and completely absorbed in his music.

And me? I just wanted to live my fucking life. Though my grandfather thought I was going to be majoring in business, I

planned to leave for college and study premed, then go to medical school. I wanted to save lives, not take them. There was no way I would let the savage wolf that hid in the darkest parts of my soul take over. That black shadow that lurked within had the potential to turn me into someone I didn't want to be. It was the part of my grandfather that existed in all of us because of our genetics and our upbringing.

Yeah, I'd been blessed with more intelligence than was probably fair or safe for one person to have. I wanted to put it to good use, not squander it. I just needed to save up enough money to be able to pay for college, because I knew my grandfather was going to ensure I was cut off when he found out. At the rate I was going, I should have enough for my first four years by the end of the summer.

Like I said, I wasn't stupid, and I'd been hustling a helluva lot longer than he knew.

"Vittorio!" Grandfather shouted, and I knew he'd addressed me several times, but I'd been too wrapped up in my head.

"Enough!" Dad ground out as he launched out of his chair and slammed his hands on the desk.

My grandfather's face went an unhealthy shade of red, and I hoped it would be the day he gave himself an aneurysm. None of us could be that lucky, however, because the old goat would never die. Evil never did.

Without looking at me, my father pointed at the door. "Out, Vittorio!"

He didn't need to tell me twice.

As I closed the door and walked away, I could hear their shouts, but I tuned them out. I had more important things to worry about.

Because I'd officially fallen head over heels for Kendall. The problem was I knew my fucking grandfather wouldn't approve of her. He had it in his head that he had a say in who we dated. He'd gone so far as to tell Gabriel he was negotiating a marriage. Poor fucker couldn't even drink

legally, and our grandfather was planning his wedding. Dad swore he wouldn't let that happen. And Gabriel swore he was marrying Autumn, the daughter of one of Dad's business associates.

Autumn was a sweetheart, but her dad was a real bastard. She was pretty in an exotic way, but she was also half Native American, which Gabriel and Dad had kept from our grandfather. As soon as the asshole found out, the shit would hit the fan.

Fuck, I hated him.

Besides, I knew Gabriel only wanted to marry Autumn because her dad was an absolute dick who beat the shit out of her. Gabriel had a hero complex and thought he could save the fucking world. It would catch up to him one day.

Because the members of the Mafia weren't heroes.

This life we lived would eat poor Autumn alive. She was just too soft—too introverted and artist Boho for me, and definitely not who our grandfather would choose. Though I didn't give a shit what Gabriel did with his life because he was his own man. Fuck our piece-of-shit grandfather.

Besides, I liked my women a little spicier—like Kendall.

The fact that Kendall was half Irish would send him into a tirade of epic proportions. He wouldn't care that we were basically still kids. Hell, she was sixteen, and I was eighteen and had just graduated. I wasn't looking to get married. But if there was one thing I knew, it was that I was crazy about a certain feisty little redhead.

And I didn't give two shits about what Grandfather expected of us. If I had to, I'd leave with the clothes on my back and the cash I'd been saving up. And I'd never look back.

I pulled out my phone and sent a text to Kendall.

Me: Wanna hang at Bobby's tonight?

Kendall: Sure

As I read the reply, I grinned. Already, the wild and dangerous wolf that lurked inside was subdued. Simply knowing I would be around her brought a calm into my existence.

And maybe... just maybe... she was the yin to my yang. The light to my dark.

My balance.



“What do you want to be when you grow up?” I asked her as I leaned forward and twirled a section of her hair in my fingers.

Off to the side, I was sitting in the grass in Bobby’s backyard with Kendall lying with her head in my lap. Our friends were drinking where they sat closer to the firepit.

“I’m not sure,” she replied as her fingers absently drew circles over the denim covering my leg. “I always thought I’d work in the bakery with Nonna. Maybe I’ll be a teacher, though. What about you?”

“Well, my family would love to see me working for the family business.”

“And what do *you* want to do?” she asked, tipping her head back to stare up at me. I was glad she didn’t ask what the “family business” was.

“I want to go to medical school. I’m supposed to start at the University of Illinois in the fall. Then I might stay here for their medical school, or maybe I’ll find something a little closer to... oh, I don’t know... maybe Grand Rapids. Or closer to wherever you’re going to college.”

Her gaze went wide, and her lips parted slightly at my answer. “Really?”

“I figured by then we should know where we stand, right?”

She rolled over and sat on her knees between my spread legs. She slammed her lips to mine, and I wrapped my arms

around her to pull her close. Needing more, I grabbed her ass and lifted until she got the hint and straddled my lap. Her little whimpers drove me crazy, and I pushed my hard dick against where I really wanted to be. I cursed the layers separating us as she tipped her hips and ground her pussy against me.

Hooting and wolf whistles broke through my Kendall haze, and we broke apart. Her face was bright red, and I flipped the guys off for embarrassing her.

“Wanna go somewhere else?” I asked her.

“Okay. Where?”

“I’ll show you. Come on,” I encouraged as I stood up and held my hand out to help her to her feet.

“Aww, you don’t have to go! We were enjoying the show!” Bobby called out as he leaned back to watch us walk around them. He nearly fell over, and I laughed.

“Yeah, well, it’s been fun, but not that fun. Later, guys,” I told them with a wave of my finger again as we went around the corner of the house to exit through the gate.

We walked down the street hand in hand as the streetlights came on.

“Where are we going?” she asked as she glanced around at the neighborhood we walked down. The houses got bigger the farther we went. Finally, we reached my house. She skidded to a stop and tightly held my hand.

“What?” I cocked my head as I looked back at her.

“Where are you going?” she hissed.

“My house,” I laughed. My grandfather was on a trip back to Sicily and wouldn’t be home for two weeks. My parents were at a big dinner party and wouldn’t be back until after she had to be home. That meant I wouldn’t have to explain much, *and* I didn’t have to expose her to my dick of a grandfather.

“You *live* here?” Her jaw dropped.

“Don’t be too impressed. It’s been in the family for generations—well, since my grandfather came over as a young

man. We live here with him, so we have three generations in one house. Well, except Gabriel. He moved out because he got a place with his friend Storm for college. He only comes over to hang out with everyone. I'm a little jealous," I admitted. If I had been him, I wouldn't ever come back unless I had to.

Actually, that wasn't true. I'd stay close just like he did, because none of us wanted to leave our younger brothers completely alone. If we were close by, we could get there to rescue them if our grandfather was being especially mean or dickish. He pretty much left the twins alone because they were so far down the line, he wasn't worried about them. He had Gabriel, me, and Alessio to "mold" as he wanted.

After unlocking the door, I led her through the house and made a stop in the kitchen. "What do you want to drink?" I listed off everything we had available.

"I'm fine with water," she replied.

I grabbed a couple of bottles and a few sodas, and we headed upstairs. Once we were in my room, I closed the door and turned on some music.

"Where are your brothers?" She was wandering around my room, checking out the framed photos I had.

I shrugged. "I think the twins are staying with a friend. God knows where Alessio is off to. And Gabe is still at Bobby's, I'm sure."

Glancing over her shoulder, she gave me an assessing once-over. "Did you bring me here to take advantage of me?"

"Hell no!" Of course, I wouldn't complain at anything she wanted to do, but I didn't want her thinking that was all I wanted to be with her for. "You mean more to me than a quick fuck."

Her cheeks flushed a pretty shade of pink, and she bit her lower lip as she dragged her attention back to her perusing. "Good to know," she murmured.

Enraptured, I watched her flit from one thing to another. Her fingers trailed over almost everything she checked out, as if she needed to tactilely absorb every detail.

“When is your birthday?” she asked as she stared at a pic of me at my eighth birthday party.

“February 27. What about you?”

“July 20.”

“Mmm, a Leo, huh?”

She gave me a devilish smirk. “Yes, and you’re a Pisces.”

“True.”

“Oh my God, is this you?” she squealed as she held up a picture in a black frame.

I stepped up behind her and reached around to take the frame from her hands. For a moment, I lost myself in the image as I stared at the picture of Mom holding my fat little toddler ass. Gabriel stood next to her and must’ve been about four or five. Dad had his arm around Mom, and his hand rested on her obviously pregnant belly.

“Yeah. Mom was pregnant with Alessio.” I pointed at my older brother. “Look at Gabriel’s little shit-eating grin. I’m pretty sure he’d been up to something before this was taken.”

“You were so cute!”

“I’m not now?” I teased, nuzzling her neck. But I was being good and kept my hands safely on the frame.

She plucked the photo from me and set it back on the dresser, then spun in my hold. She threw her arms over my shoulders, and I gently hooked my hands over her biceps. The song changed, and she grinned.

“I love this song,” she said as she lifted her hands over her head and started dancing to the music. My hands slid down her arms when she did, and I caressed her sides all the way down to her hips. I loved seeing her so carefree, and I really loved the way her body was undulating against mine.

The song ended, and a slower one began. Slightly breathless, she pressed her hands on my chest and gazed up at me with a soft smile. We swayed together, and neither of us spoke.

She surprised me when she stretched up on her tiptoes to press her lips to mine. Then more so when she licked the seam of my lips, which I instinctively opened for her. Letting her lead the way, I returned the tentative strokes she made against my tongue.

When she put more pressure against my chest, indicating she wanted me to move backward, I did as she wanted.

The backs of my legs hit my bed, and I fell to my ass on the mattress. Through it all, we didn't lose our connection. My breath caught when she climbed in my lap, settling her knees on either side of me. My dick was all in, and I had one helluva boner.

"Vittorio," she gasped as she rolled her hips and her clit made contact with it.

"Fuuuuck," I whispered as I broke free and rested my forehead to hers.

"Did I hurt you?" she softly cried.

"God, no," I moaned. "But I'm not doing anything you don't want to."

Searching my gaze, she wet her lips, and I watched each minuscule movement. She made that move again, and my cock surged at the contact, pulling a sexy little sigh from her kiss-swollen lips. Her eyes heavy-lidded, she did it again, and I grabbed her ass as I thrust against her and slammed my lips to hers. That elicited a needy whimper that had my dick leaking in my underwear.

"Jesus, Kendall," I burst out in surprise, my mouth still against hers.

"Do you want me to stop?" she panted between kisses.

"Fuck no. Take what you need," I replied, digging my fingers into her hips and grinding into her.

One hand went to the back of my neck, and the other twisted in the strands of hair at the top of my head. As she tugged me closer and found a better angle, she rode my cock, rubbing her pussy on me with increasing desperation.

Her breathing grew ragged, her movements frenzied. My goddamn balls were pulled up tight and aching for release.

“Are you gonna come?” I whispered into her mouth.

“Yesss,” she hissed as I slid a hand up the back of her shirt.

Slowly, I brought it around to her front and lifted her shirt to expose the swells of her perfect little tits. I could see the perky tips peaked in her bra. I pinched one through the thin fabric, and she groaned.

Her lips parted as I grabbed her hair and pulled it back to expose her neck. I traced the racing pulse on the side of her throat with my tongue, then tugged harder to bow her back. It thrust her tits closer, and I shoved one cup down so I could wrap my lips around one nipple and suck.

She cried out and dug her nails into my back as she held her pulsing pussy over the top of my rigid length. I freed her nipple with a pop and stared at her beautiful face lost in her pleasure.

Seeing her come unraveled sent my orgasm barreling closer until I shot my load in my underwear. I didn't care one iota because if it made her feel good, I'd ruin every pair I had.

She dropped her head to my shoulder as she gasped for breath. “Holy shit,” she huffed.

“You can say that again,” I agreed, equally as breathless. “But I, uh, need to go get cleaned up.”

Her head popped up, and her face crumpled. “God, I'm so sorry!”

I chuckled. “Don't be.”

With a last lingering kiss, I lifted her off me and laid her on my bed. She tucked a pillow under her chin with a contented sigh.

Glancing down, I saw the damage to my jeans was minimal, but I grabbed a clean pair and also some boxer briefs. Kicking off my shoes, I cracked my door, listening for signs of anyone else in the house. When I knew the coast was clear, I

slipped into the bathroom, where I quickly wiped off and changed.

I padded back to my room to find her lying on her back, arms thrown above her head and knees in the air. With a wicked grin, I quickly climbed up and dove in to bury my face between her legs. She squealed and laughed, and I deeply breathed her in. “Jesus, you smell good.”

“Oh my God,” she gasped in mortification before she slapped her hands over her face to hide.

After pressing a kiss to her denim-clad pussy, I crawled up her body until my still-hard cock was nestled against the V at the apex of her thighs. “I really didn’t intend for anything like that to happen,” I quietly admitted.

“I’m not complaining,” she replied with a humorous twist of her lips.

“Maybe not, but I told you I didn’t bring you up here for that, and I didn’t want you thinking I lied. But I’m also not gonna say that wasn’t amazing.”

She ran a fingertip along my lower lip. Her eyes popped wide when I growled and caught her finger between my teeth.

“What big teeth you have,” she teased.

I released her, and a dark chuckle came from the depths of my soul. “The better to eat you with, Little Red Riding Hood.” I tugged at her deep red hair.

“Will you always be my Big Bad Wolf?”

I grinned. “For as long as you’ll let me.”

Then I captured her lips in a kiss that led to a little more heavy petting.

A glance at the clock had me groaning. “I gotta get you home,” I grumbled.

She sighed. “Yeah, I know.”

“Will I see you again tomorrow?”

“Maybe.” She was trying to hide her smile, and I pretended to be a wild animal attacking her.

Her laughter would be something I heard in my room from that day on.

Chapter FOURTEEN



Kendall

“Strip That Down”–Liam Payne (feat. Quavo)

Seventeen Years Old....

Staring at the calendar, I couldn't suppress my grin. The big red circle around July 20 seemed to flash like a beacon. It was my birthday. Today, I was seventeen, and now there was only a year between Vittorio and me—well, I could say he was eighteen and I was seventeen, at least. Unlike before where it seemed like he was hanging out with a kid.

Ever since that day in his room, the butterflies in my stomach went absolutely batshit each time I saw him. And we'd done a lot more kissing and petting in the past several weeks. It might've been my new favorite thing to do. Besides the almost tangible sparks, he did things to my body that should've been illegal. The way he made me feel was like the best high a person could get, but not once did he push for more

than what I was willing to give. Hell, he hadn't actually put his hand down my panties.

Sure, he did a lot to me over my clothes—one time over my panties—but he never went further.

The mere thought of his touch sent an excited awareness through my limbs. Because I'd made up my mind.

I wanted Vittorio to be my first, and it was going to happen today.

Nonna would be taking me out to eat, and then I told her I was going to the movies with a few friends I'd met this summer. It wasn't a total lie. I mean, Vittorio *was* my friend, and his younger brothers were coming too.

Alessio was my age, and the others were younger, but I didn't know exactly how old they were. I just knew the twins were the youngest.

"Happy birthday!" Nonna shouted from behind me, and I spun to face her. She held a beautifully decorated cake that had to have taken her hours—time that she could've been making cakes for other people that would pay her bills.

"Thank you!" I gushed before I rushed to her. "But you shouldn't have. You should've focused on things that made money for the bakery."

With a dismissive huff, she set the cake on the counter.

Happy beyond belief, I threw my arms around her neck and squeezed her tightly. Then I stepped back to go around her to see the cake better.

"Goodness! What was that for?" she asked with a curious smile.

"Because you're the best, Nonna," I told her with a little jump in place.

"You ready to go down to Horatio's for your birthday lunch?"

"Is the pope Catholic?" I teased.

“Kendall! You shouldn’t make jokes about the pope,” she admonished as she made the sign of the cross and rolled her eyes. She muttered in Italian that my soul be protected, and I fought my giggle, wondering if she knew I understood everything she said. I might not have been able to speak Italian well, but I understood it since I’d heard it from birth.

We left the cake for after our meal and walked down to the restaurant. As we waited for our table, an awareness sent a tingle over the surface of my skin. I scanned the restaurant, and my breath caught as I saw Vittorio at a table against the back wall. He was there with what looked like his family, but he only had eyes for me. He smirked, and my cheeks burned as I scratched my nose to hide my smile.

As we followed the hostess, Nonna glanced over and saw Vittorio’s family. Her spine stiffened, and she turned up her nose as she averted her eyes from them to the young girl seating us. When we reached our table, she had her back to them, which left me trying not to stare at Vittorio. It was hard because his presence was magnetic.

When the waitress brought the hot bread and asked for our drink order, I jumped slightly because I’d been pretty oblivious. As I reached for a roll, I caught my nonna studying me with a narrowed gaze. “What?” I asked her.

She glanced over her shoulder at Vittorio’s family, then back to me. “You know them, Kendall?” Her tone was deceptively calm, and after the way she’d essentially snubbed them, it put me immediately on guard.

“Should I?” I asked, intentionally not answering so I didn’t have to lie.

“No. You absolutely should not,” she insisted.

Dropping my attention to the menu, I shrugged like it was no big deal and I wasn’t interested. “They’re cute,” I replied, as if it was a casual observation.

“So is a polar bear, but it’ll slaughter you without blinking,” she muttered.

“Geez, Nonna. Violent much? Do you know them or something?” I played it off like I was joking, but now I wanted to know.

“They aren’t someone I want to know.”

The server approached, and we placed our order. When our food was delivered a little while later, Vittorio and his family were preparing to leave. My eyes zeroed in on him, and he winked. Again, my cheeks heated, and I quickly returned to my meal, intentionally ignoring him to the best of my ability. Thankfully, Nonna didn’t seem to have noticed our exchange.

“As always, this is delicious, Nonna. Thank you.”

Her smile and relaxed posture told me she hadn’t seen me gawking at Vittorio again.

“Are you sure you don’t mind me going to my quilters club meeting tonight?” she asked as she finished her meal and dabbed daintily at her mouth with her napkin.

“Of course not. I’m going to the movies with my friends, I don’t expect you to sit home alone when this is a scheduled thing for you. I’m a big girl, Nonna.” The corner of my mouth quirked up, and she relaxed.

We boxed up our leftovers, and Nonna paid for our lunch. Then we made our way home.

As she put the boxes in the fridge, I headed to my room to get cleaned up. When I reached my door, she called out to me. “Kendall!”

“Yeah, Nonna?”

“I’ll be home around eleven. Do you have your key in case you get back before me?”

I shoved my hand in my pocket and pulled out the key attached to the sparkly pink cupcake keychain. When I wiggled it in the air, she shook her head.

“Smartass.”

I laughed and went into my room. For a moment, I fell back on the queen-sized bed. As I stared up at the ceiling, I

thought about tonight. My heart was racing just imagining everything.

Unable to sit still, I got up and took a shower. Nonna wasn't out in the main area of the large apartment when I got out, so I assumed she was in her room getting ready too. I'd had my clothes laid out since this morning, so I pulled on the white lacy balconette bra, then the pink lace-edged camisole, and turned side to side to study how I looked in the mirror. Satisfied, but wishing my boobs were a little bigger, I finished getting dressed, then went back to the bathroom.

While I was putting on a little makeup, Nonna poked her head in. "I'll see you tonight. Make sure you kids stick together, especially if it's after dark when you're coming home. Text me to let me know you made it home safe, okay?"

"Will do, Nonna. Love you."

"Love you too."

She left, and I heard her footsteps across the hardwood floors. Then the door to the outside landing opened and shut. I picked up my phone, which Nonna hadn't noticed was different, and texted Vittorio.

Me: I'm almost ready

The three little dots pulsed briefly.

Vittorio: I'll be there soon

Me: Use the outside stairs

Vittorio: Well I can't very well go through the bakery, now can I?

Me: Oh

Vittorio: LOL. I'm on my way

Vittorio: BTW, you looked cute earlier

My cheeks warmed, and I bit my lower lip at his message. Then my thumbs raced over the screen.

*Me: You weren't too shabby yourself *winky face**

I hurried to finish up and then shoved my phone in the back pocket of my favorite frayed denim shorts. In a flurry, I breezed out of the bathroom and waited nervously by the door. The knock I was expecting still made me jump. I took a deep breath and gradually let it out to slow my thundering heart. Then I clenched my hands a few times and shook them out to ease the trembling.

When I turned the knob, my breath hitched at Vittorio standing there with his head ducked. He looked up at me through his shaggy bangs, and his bright blue irises locked on me. My heart went wild again. He gave his head a little toss to flip the hair out of his eyes. I couldn't help but admire the way his white T-shirt pulled taut across his shoulders and chest.

“Happy birthday,” he murmured with a crooked grin.

“Thank you!” I smiled as I stepped toward him and threw my arms around his neck. He instantly curled his hands around my sides and then squeezed slightly as he dropped his appreciative gaze to the swell of my breasts. As if he'd touched them, my chest flushed.

The way he looked at me was like I was the most beautiful girl in the world. He made me feel special.

“You ready?” he asked before he lifted one of his hands and brushed a wayward curl behind my ear. That light touch as his fingers brushed against me sent a thrill through to my toes.

I nodded, then looked around. “Where are your brothers?” I asked when they weren't out front.

“Alessio, Frankie, and Leo are waiting at the theater,” he explained as he took my hand and we started down the sidewalk. We dodged people along the way, but once we were a block from the theater, he quickly darted off to the side so we were against the brick of a storefront. Then he spun us until my back pressed to the building, and he caged me in.

“What are you doing?” I whispered as he stared down at me.

“Are you my girl, Kendall?” he murmured with the corner of his mouth tipped up, bringing out the slight dimple he had

on that side.

I reached up and brushed my thumb over it. He was so handsome and sweet, and it blew me away that he saw me the way he did. “I don’t know. Am I?”

“I’d like you to be, because I like to think you kinda like me,” he teased.

“Like... *like* you?” I asked, then pressed my lips together to fight my smile.

We both laughed.

Then he went serious. “For some reason, I believe I was meant to run into you that day. Like fate played a hand in us both being in that exact spot at that exact moment. Each day, I can’t wait to text you or call you. I want to spend every minute of every day with you. Which is crazy because I’ve never felt like this about anyone. I also know some people would roll their eyes at me and tell me that at eighteen, I can’t know someone is *the one*, but everything about you feels right—perfect, even. When I’m not with you, it feels like a part of me is missing.”

“Vittorio,” I gasped, my heart nearly ready to explode in my chest at his admission.

“I don’t expect you to feel the same way right now, but I’ll wait for you to be ready. Even if it takes years. I don’t know how I can be so sure, but I am. So let’s enjoy your birthday, okay?” He brought his lips to mine and kissed me. It was sweet and sensual but way too brief.

“Okay,” I replied, my voice sounding like I’d swallowed gravel.

Hand in hand, we resumed our walk. Vittorio’s brothers waved as we approached the theater.

“I already bought the tickets,” Alessio announced as he held them in the air.

“How do you know I wanted to see the same movie you guys do?” Vittorio asked with a huff.

“It doesn’t matter what you want to see. We know Kendall has been talking about this movie since the first day we met her,” Alessio replied with a smirk. The boy was cute, and at first, he’d flirted with me tirelessly to get under his brother’s skin. But I’d never had an ounce of real attraction to him. In my eyes, everyone paled to Vittorio.

“Trying to get my girl again?” Vittorio asked as he casually slid his fingertips into the back pocket of my shorts. I knew he was making a show of staking his claim, because there was no heat to his question.

Still, I bumped his hip with mine.

“She’s the birthday girl. What she wants, she gets,” Alessio told his older brother with a shit-eating grin.

“You’re not wrong,” Vittorio agreed. He glanced down at me, sporting that wicked tilt of his lips I loved so much. Then he kissed the top of my head and gave me a squeeze.

“Ew, you two are so gross,” one of the twins said as they both made faces and wrinkled their noses.

“Give them a couple of years and they won’t be saying that,” Vittorio murmured in my ear.

Alessio must’ve heard him because he snickered and bumped fists with Vittorio.

I swatted Vittorio’s abdomen with the back of my hand, and he made an “oof” sound, though I knew dang well I hadn’t hurt those rock-hard abs of his.

Vittorio and Alessio bought popcorn and sodas for all of us.

As the kid behind the counter prepared our stuff, I set some Whoppers and a box of Hot Tamales on the counter and pulled my cash out of my pocket, but Vittorio held up his hand.

“I can pay for my own,” I argued.

He cocked a brow. “No you can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because I won’t let you.” His smug expression had me shaking my head.

We all traipsed into the theater with our arms full of our haul and found our seats in the very back row.

Alessio sat on one side of the twins, Vittorio on the other, and I sat next to Vittorio and against the wall. The younger boys were a bit rowdy, but Vittorio and Alessio leaned over and whispered something to them, and they both glanced toward the door, then sat quietly with their heads together. It seemed like they were having a conversation, but they definitely weren’t talking.

“Frickin’ twins,” Vittorio muttered.

People filtered in until the theater was full, and before I knew it, the lights dimmed, and the screen came to life. I was so excited because I’d been waiting for this movie all summer. Yeah, maybe it was considered a kids’ movie, but I loved animated movies. They were a close second to the Harry Potter movies, though.

About twenty minutes in, my heart started to gallop—Vittorio had rested his hand on my leg. Though the touch was innocent enough, it sent flames licking across my skin. His entire focus was on the screen, but he drew lazy circles on the inside of my thigh. I didn’t think he was trying to be sexual, but Jesus H. Christ, he was driving me crazy. The moisture pooling between my legs was almost embarrassing.

My breathing grew ragged, and a tiny shudder rippled through me.

By the time the credits rolled, I was a mess. I’d missed most of the movie because I was too distracted by the light, yet searing brush of Vittorio’s fingertips.

“What did you think?” he asked me as we shuffled out of the theater.

“It was great,” I squeaked before clearing my throat and repeating my reply.

He paused, but his brothers kept going. I turned to him to question why we’d stopped, but he quickly answered my

unspoken thoughts.

“You okay?” His forehead pinched between his brows as he scanned my face.

“Yeah, I’m great,” I lied.

Appearing satisfied by my reply, he softly smiled, and we caught up the rest of his brothers.

“I’m gonna walk Kendall home. You okay with the double-trouble twins?” Vittorio asked Alessio.

“Yeah, I promised them we’d stop for ice cream on the way home.”

“Cool. See you later,” he told them.

Alessio gave him a nod, and the twins waved.

“Bye, guys! Thanks for joining me for my birthday!” I called out to them as they turned to walk away.

“Happy birthday!” the two youngest boys yelled. “And don’t let Vittorio spank you!” one of them tacked on, causing them both to giggle.

Vittorio choked as he tried to hold in his amusement, and I knew my face was bright red. Alessio just laughed his ass off.

“Jesus,” Vittorio muttered with a soft chuckle. “Let’s go. I have a quick stop to make.”

“Okay,” I murmured as he took my hand and we headed toward my grandmother’s.

A few blocks away, he cut through an alley and knocked on a door. When an older lady answered it, she immediately smiled.

“Vittorio! This must be your young lady,” she exclaimed with a heavy Italian accent. I wondered if she knew my nonna. They looked to be close in age. Maybe she was his grandma.

“It is. Mrs. Bianchi, this is my girlfriend, Kendall. Kendall, this is Mrs. Bianchi. She and her husband own the flower shop I deliver flowers for.”

The woman snorted and gave him a stern stare before she smiled and looked me over with a twinkle in her dark eyes. “Miss Kendall, it’s a pleasure.”

“Yes it is. It’s very nice to meet you, ma’am.”

“Aw! She’s so polite. You did good, Vittorio,” Mrs. Bianchi told him conspiratorially, though I was right there. I smiled. “Oh! You want your package.”

Mrs. Bianchi turned from the door, and I heard her rustling around. Then she appeared again with a small bouquet and a big gift bag.

Vittorio accepted them with a grin. “Thanks, Mrs. B.”

“Anytime. Kendall, don’t you be a stranger. Stop by the shop anytime. Oh, and happy birthday!” she told me.

“Thank you.” The corners of my mouth lifted happily.

She gave us a wave and closed the door. I heard the lock turn and the sound of footsteps going up the stairs.

“She loves me,” he whispered in my ear. As he spoke, his lips had brushed along the shell of my ear, and goose bumps broke out on my shoulders and down my arms.

“It seemed like it,” I replied.

We continued on our way to my nonna’s. Our pace was leisurely, and I enjoyed breathing in the scent of his cologne as the sun dropped lower in the sky and lights started to come on around us.

We reached the bakery and turned down the alley to take the stairs up to the apartment. At the landing, I put my key in the lock.

“Cute,” he said as he flicked the little cupcake on my keychain when I turned the key. The movement put his chest to my shoulder, and I drew in a stuttered breath.

“Nonna got it for me,” I explained as I opened the door.

“I’m not surprised. Well, happy birthday,” he told me as he held out the bouquet and the bag.

I took the flowers and clutched them to my chest. Drawing all my courage together, I blurted, “Do you wanna come in while I open it?”

For a second, he looked surprised. Then he glanced into the apartment.

“Nonna isn’t here. She had her ladies’ night. She’ll be back around eleven.”

Several unspoken questions seemed to float between us, and he wet his lower lip before dragging it through his teeth. “Are you sure she won’t beat my ass?” he teased.

I snorted and went inside, turning on the kitchen light. “You coming?”

His Adam’s apple bobbed, and he whispered, “Yeah, sure.”

Once he stepped inside, I closed and locked the door, then carried my flowers to the counter. I laid the bag next to them and pulled the massive amounts of tissue paper out. “I think you killed a tree with that.”

He shrugged with his hands shoved in his pockets, and the corner of his mouth kicked up.

My breath caught at how cute he was.

Finally, all the tissue was out of the way. I gasped when I looked in the bag. “Vittorio!”

Reverently, I pulled out the plastic-wrapped bundle. It was a complete hardcover set of the Harry Potter collection. I hugged them as if they were a living, breathing thing.

He laughed. “So I did good?”

“Oh my God! Yes! I love them, but how did you know?”

He snickered. “Are you kidding me? I saw your phone case that first day. Then when we went shopping at the pier, everything you went crazy over had something to do with Harry Potter.”

I set them to the side and threw my arms around him, and he reached out to catch hold of my sides. “Thank you so

much!” Not just for the gift but for being so observant.” He was the best boyfriend ever.

That seemed so weird, yet so amazing. He was my first real boyfriend.

Lifting to my toes, I kissed him. His hands tightened at my sides, and when I teased the seam of his lips with my tongue, he groaned softly. As he swept his tongue through my mouth, his thumbs moved slowly over my abdomen. Molten heat raced through my veins as I pressed into his hard body and tangled my fingers in his hair.

When we broke apart, panting and fighting to gain control of our breathing, he rested his forehead on mine. “Fuck, Kendall.”

I pulled away to meet his crystal-blue gaze. It was so heated, his eyes resembled the hot blue center of a flame.

“Vittorio?”

“Yeah?” he breathlessly replied.

“I want one more thing from you for my birthday,” I whispered.

“What’s that?” he asked in an equally soft tone.

Gathering my courage, I licked my bottom lip. Silence stretched between us for several heartbeats until I finally found the words. “I want you.”

His breath hitched. “You....” He didn’t finish his sentence, just simply cocked his brow.

“Yes.”

If the hardness pressing against me was any indication, he knew exactly what I was saying.

“You mean like all the way? I don’t know if that’s a good idea.”

“Why not?” Hurt drove through my chest, slicing me open like a dagger.

“Your grandmother will be home soon.”

“Not for another two hours,” I countered, not willing to accept defeat yet.

With his brows pulled together, he searched my face for a few moments. “Are you sure?”

“Yes. I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life.”

I knew the second he caved because he crashed his lips to mine and tightened his arms around me. One hand went up to grab my hair at the back, and the other cupped the bottom of my ass cheek. His fingertips hit under the edge of my frayed shorts and dug in. There wasn’t a millimeter of space between our bodies.

When he pulled away, it was damn near violently. “Where’s your room?”

I pointed to the hall that went to the bedrooms. “That’s the bathroom,” I said, pointing to the center door. “Go right. First door on the left.”

He tugged my hand as he made a beeline in that direction. Nonna’s craft room was at that end of the hall, and her bedroom was on the left end with her en suite bathroom butting up to the hall bath.

When we entered my room, he kicked the door shut and kissed me again. Anxious to see him, I tugged at his shirt. We separated long enough for me to lift it as high as I could before he ripped it over his head. When he moved back toward me, I pressed a hand to his chest, stopping him.

“Kendall?” he asked.

“I just wanna look at you,” I breathed as I took in the olive tone of his tanned skin and the hard planes of his muscles. He wasn’t a huge, bulky guy, but damn was every hill and valley rock-hard. His stomach flexed when I traced my fingers over the tattoo on his ribs. “I didn’t know you had a tattoo.”

“Gabriel and I got them when he turned eighteen,” he explained.

That meant he wasn’t actually old enough when he got it. I traced the scrolled letters. *Simul Sumus Plus*. “What’s it

mean?”

He shrugged. “Nothing, really.”

The way he glanced away told me the Latin words meant something very important to him, but I didn’t press. Instead, I leaned over to kiss it. He sucked in a sharp inhale, and his abs rippled when my lips touched him.

He firmly gripped my biceps and brought me upright. “Please don’t make me embarrass myself again,” he begged, his voice hoarse.

I had no idea what he was talking about. Had it embarrassed him that he came in his pants before? I thought it was hot as hell.

Slowly, we removed each other’s clothes until I stood in my lacy bra and matching panties and he was in a pair of boxer briefs. It was his turn to trace his fingertips over my skin. He slowly and gently connected the freckles that sprinkled my shoulders from the sun. Then he trailed his index finger along my collarbone and down the center of my chest. He ran it over the top of my bra where, thanks to the demi cups, my breasts threatened to spill over.

“You’re so fucking beautiful, and I don’t know how I’m this lucky.”

Chapter FIFTEEN



“Heel Over Head”–Puddle Of Mudd

Eighteen Years Old....

I'd wanted to fuck Kendall from the first day I ran into her. It had taken every ounce of self-control I had to keep my desire reined in. She was special, and I'd known that right away too. She was worth more than a quick fuck. Every minute I spent with her needed to be important. I never wanted her to think that all I wanted from her was her pussy.

That didn't mean I didn't want her, because I sure as hell did. I was an eighteen-year-old guy, and I was horny twenty-four seven. It had been sheer hell controlling myself any time we fooled around.

Her telling me she wanted me was a dream come true. But I didn't want to rush it because I wanted her to know I appreciated that she was letting me in her body.

“You’re biased,” she murmured.

I tore my gaze away from the swell of her soft breasts to meet her pretty green eyes. “Maybe, but that doesn’t mean you aren’t fucking gorgeous. Do you know how many guys check you out everywhere we go?”

Her frown of disbelief told me she really didn’t see it.

I gathered her hair at the back of her head and tugged to tip it back. “The fact that you have no idea how breathtaking you are makes you that much more amazing. Lie down.”

I released her hair, and she turned to the bed to pull down the covers. My lips lifted in a smile at how cute it was that she was actually getting into the bed. The fact that her perfectly rounded ass was exposed in the little white thong killed my smile—and nearly killed me.

It was impossible to keep my hands off her. I allowed one to reach down and cup her pussy. With a little whine, she froze, and I groaned when I realized the fabric was damp. I fucking loved when that happened. As she was leaned over the bed, I dropped to my knees behind her and cupped the ivory globes of her ass. She gasped and fell forward on her hands. When I pressed my face to her lace-covered pussy and licked along the seam before I sucked the fabric in my mouth, she gasped but pushed back.

“Fuck, you taste good.” I needed more of her, so I quickly tugged the thin sides over her hips and let them drop to the floor. Her heavy breathing and the fact that she hadn’t said to stop told me she was okay with what I was doing, but I still needed to know. “Is this okay?” I asked as I dragged a finger through her wet slit.

“Y-Y-Yes,” she stuttered.

I grinned wickedly, then pushed her cheeks apart and licked from her clit to her pussy. I drove my tongue inside and moaned at how wet she was and the sweet-tangy taste of her core. Fuck, I’d wanted to do that forever.

She gasped, and I did it again, but this time when I pulled back, I slipped a finger in and pressed forward as I slowly

dragged it in and out.

“Vittorio,” she breathed like a prayer.

“Get on the bed and spread your legs,” I told her, my voice raspy with need.

She scrambled to do as I said, and I climbed onto the bed, where I resumed eating her out like my fucking life depended on it. With her legs over my shoulders and me holding her thighs open, it wasn't long before she was coming all over my face and hand. She screamed my name and ripped at my hair as her tight channel squeezed the fuck out of my fingers buried inside.

“So good,” I praised her before pulling out and kissing my way up her body. I slipped a hand beneath her and unhooked her bra so I could nose it up. Then I wrapped my lips around her pretty pink nipple. After licking and sucking on it until she was arching off the bed and holding my head to her body, I moved to the other one. Not until her breathing was ragged and needy did I stop. When I did, I moved farther up until my cock nestled at the apex her thighs, grinding the fabric-covered length over her swollen little nub.

I swallowed her cry as I brought my mouth to hers. She kissed me back with as much abandon as she'd come all over my face. My cock jumped at the thought that she could probably taste herself on my tongue, yet she didn't pull away repulsed. She lifted her hips so she could press into me as hard as I did her.

“Please,” she whispered when we broke for breath.

“You're sure?” I asked her. Up until then, we'd only made out, and I might've let my hands wander a bit, but nothing close to this. I didn't want to move too fast or do anything she'd regret.

She grabbed my head and pulled me back down, causing me to chuckle against her lips. When I slid my tongue into her mouth, she bit it and held it gently with her teeth. “Yes, I'm sure,” she said as she still held me captive.

When I had a minute to breathe and talk, I raised my head to glance down at her. Lips kiss-swollen and slightly parted, I imagined them wrapped around my dick. But this was about her. With those green eyes bright as emeralds, ivory cheeks flushed pink, she looked like a goddess. And hell, did I want to worship her. As I memorized every detail of this moment, I sifted my fingers through her curly hair that fanned out around her, looking like flames. I almost believed they were, because she had me on fire.

“I gotta get something, okay?”

She eagerly nodded, and I dropped to one elbow off to her side and reached for my jeans. I pulled out my wallet and fished a condom out of it, then hovered over her to drink her beauty in once more.

“God, I’m so damn lucky.”

She bit her lower lip, and her dark lashes dropped to fan her cheeks.

“Look at me,” I told her as I knelt between her legs and pushed my underwear down.

Those beautiful eyes opened, and she blinked at me before her gaze dropped to my hard cock. When I wrapped my hand around it, her eyes widened, and a primal part of me preened. I released my length to rip the wrapper open, remove the condom, and roll it along my shaft. Then I dropped to one hand and worked my briefs down my legs, kicking them off the bed.

“You had a condom with you?” she asked, looking a bit worried.

“My grandfather and father have drilled into us boys since the first time we got a hard-on that we better wrap our shit. I always have them with me,” I explained with a wince. What I didn’t tell her was that our grandfather practically beat into us that we weren’t to knock up any woman who wasn’t our wife.

He’d told us about our older half-brother, Mario, with no less than disgust at what he saw as our father’s failure to maintain our family’s purity. He was such a dick, and part of

me didn't blame Mario for being bitter. Especially since our grandfather used Mario and led him to believe he might have a place in La Cosa Nostra when we all knew it was a lie.

“O-Okay.”

When I notched the tip in her hot wet center, I had to clench my teeth and breathe deeply. I knew she was snug because my fingers had just been in there. I'd tried to stretch her a little, and I prayed I wouldn't hurt her. Slowly pushing my hips forward, I dipped in and out, a little deeper each time. I dropped to my elbows so I could tease her lips with mine as I worked my way in. When I was about a third of the way, I felt the resistance and froze.

“Kendall?” I knew she probably didn't have a lot of experience because of how shy she was, but I had no idea she was a virgin. If I hadn't been careful and worked my way in, I would've thrust in and it would've been awful for her.

I started to pull back, but she quickly wrapped those toned legs around me.

“No. I want this,” she insisted, her mesmerizing green eyes pleading with me.

“Baby, I don't want to hurt you,” I tried to argue, but she tightened her legs, pulling me in until I could feel the barrier her body had in place give slightly.

A glare lowered her brows as she narrowed her gaze. “If it's not you, it'll be someone else. One way or another, one day I'll lose it. I want it to be you.”

The thought of someone else inside her like this made me see red and violently grind my teeth. She was *mine*.

With that thought, I drew back slowly and pushed in firmly until she cried out, pain flashing on her face. Holding still, I waited until that look slowly dissipated and the hunger returned. I released the breath I'd been holding and repeated the motion until I was fully seated in her and we were one.

A single tear leaked from the corner of her eye, and I pressed a kiss to it, catching it on the tip of my tongue.

“Are you okay?” I whispered as I softly rubbed my cheek on hers and nuzzled the track of her tears. I wished I could return those tears to her eyes, but I couldn’t. Instead, I would show her I appreciated the pain she’d taken on for me.

“Yes, I’m good,” she assured me, though it ended in a stuttered inhale.

I flexed my hips slightly, and she met me with hers, making me squeeze my lids shut. “You feel so good, but I don’t want you to hurt if it’s too much.”

“I’m okay now. Just a little tender, but I need you to move. Does that make sense?”

Honestly, I wasn’t sure. I’d never in my life been with a virgin. But I took it to mean she was good—at least good enough to continue. “Tell me if you need me to stop.”

She nodded, and I slid out slowly before going back in. When she didn’t protest but instead gripped my shoulders and urged me on with her legs, I repeated the motion. Each time was utter heaven—and hell just the same. The animalistic side of me yearned to fuck her hard and empty into her after she came around me. Shoving aside the greed of that beast, I kept with that steady pace until sweat broke out on my face and back.

“More,” she urged, and I ducked my head to her shoulder as I clenched my eyes shut.

“Baby,” I groaned in both protest and need.

“I’m fine. I need more.”

“You don’t know what you’re asking for,” I replied through gritted teeth as I tried my damndest not to come at the thought of what I wanted to do.

“Me either, but I know I need... something... more... harder.... God, Vittorio, I *need*....”

“Fuck,” I muttered under my breath. But I lifted my head and stared into her eyes, which had darkened to the forest at midnight.

“Please....”

At her plea, I withdrew and plunged in, my eyes nearly crossing at how goddamn good it felt.

“Yes,” she hissed, and I pulled back to drive into her hot, snug pussy again. When her hips met mine and she dug her nails in, I let loose.

“Oh my God,” she gasped, and her eyes rolled when I thrust in and out harder and faster.

The way she begged me for more along with the knowledge that I was the first man in her tight cunt freed the beast. I lost myself in her body, and she followed the instincts she’d been born with, seeking her pleasure and using me to get there. As she rubbed against me with each stroke, I growled, and my muscles started to tense. I gritted my teeth as I held myself in check, but I wasn’t gonna make it.

“You need to come. Please, Kendall, you gotta come,” I begged.

Shifting my weight to one elbow, I reached between us to kickstart her. The first touch of my thumb to her clit made her eyes go wide, and her mouth parted on a gasp. The walls of her pussy tightened, and I thought I would die right then and there. When she got so tight that I could barely keep moving, I gripped her thigh and lifted her leg to allow me in deeper. She exploded, and her throbbing milked my orgasm straight out of my goddamn spine.

The ecstasy seemed to pulse through us for hours as we clung to each other. My muscles were drawn tight, and I didn’t ever want to let her go. I’d been with a lot of girls before her, but sex had *never* been like that. I didn’t even know what that was.

It took a while before the post-euphoric haze lifted. Reluctantly, I left her body. I carefully removed the condom and tied it off, then wrapped it in a tissue from her nightstand and tossed it into her trash by the door. “Two points,” I called out, and she laughed. Then I gathered her in my arms and rested my chin on the top of her head.

While I didn't know what the hell we'd just shared, what I did know was I wanted to feel that for the rest of my life.



“Vittorio!” I heard whispered frantically.

I grumbled, pulling the warm body tighter to mine.

Then that warm body twisted and shook me. I groaned in response.

“Shh!”

I blinked away the best sleep of my life, and slowly everything came back to me. Jerking my head up, I scanned the darkened room as I listened for what startled her.

“Wha—” I started, but her hand smashed over my mouth.

Her eyes were wide and wild. The lips I'd kissed the fuck out of formed a “shh” shape, and she pointed at the closed door. “My nonna,” she mouthed.

That got my attention, and I froze.

“Kendall?” I heard Mrs. Romano call out from the hallway.

Kendall scrambled from the bed and jerked my plain T-shirt on, then silently opened a drawer and pulled on a pair of cute little sleep shorts. She pointed at me, and I held up my hands in surrender.

A knock made her jump. Then she went to the door, and I almost laughed at the instant transformation as she put on a half-asleep face and slowly opened the door enough to look out and stand in the opening. “Nonna? Is ever-thin okay?” she mumbled as if she were still stuck in sleep mode.

“Everything’s good. I just came home and saw the flowers and the books. There was tissue paper scattered all over the kitchen floor. I wanted to make sure you were okay, because I

expected you'd still be up reading when I got home," her grandmother explained.

"Oh... yeah," she began but stopped to yawn. "Jackie had the flowers and gift delivered for my birthday. Wasn't that sweet?" She yawned again, and I wanted to applaud the Oscar-worthy performance.

"Aw, that was nice of her," Mrs. Romano practically cooed, and I knew she bought it.

"Sorry, it was such a long and busy day, I just crashed early, Nonna. Did you have fun with the girls?" she asked.

"Humph! Yes, but I swear some of those women act like they're ninety-five years old. And it's okay, sweetheart. You get your rest. That's where I'm heading now too."

Kendall leaned out the door, and I heard her kiss her grandma's cheek. I covered my mouth to keep from laughing.

My movement had Kendall freezing.

"What?" she asked her grandmother.

"I thought I heard something, but it must be that damn wind. It's terrible tonight. Well, good night. I'll see you in the morning."

"Good night, Nonna." Kendall closed the door and leaned against it. Her head rolled my way, and she covered her mouth.

I heard the door down the hall close, and I dropped my hand. "You look good in my T-shirt, but you'd look better out of it again," I whispered.

"Shut up!" she mouthed back.

With a light chuckle, I lay back and stretched.

She climbed back in the bed, and I pouted as I tugged at the shirt.

She swatted my hand away. "It's not funny! We weren't supposed to fall asleep! Now you have to stay until we know *she's* asleep," she muttered.

I pushed myself up to lay the top half of my body over hers as I braced my elbows on either side of her shoulders. “Well, you shouldn’t have worn me out so bad. Now we’ll have to find something to do to kill the time until she’s sawing logs.”

“You’re terrible!” she softly giggled, telling me she didn’t really mean it.

Humming, I nuzzled her neck and dropped kisses to her warm skin. She stroked my back, and I practically purred.

“I love you, Kendall,” I whispered into her chest.

At my inadvertent admission, she froze. Then she grabbed my hair and lifted my head. “What?”

Maybe I hadn’t meant to say it, but I sure as hell meant the words. “I said I love you, Kendall O’Sullivan. But I didn’t say that to get you to say it back.”

She sucked her lower lip into her mouth.

Unfazed, I rolled to my side and pulled her back into the curve of my body. Of course my eighteen-year-old dick came to attention at the contact. “Sorry about that. He has a mind of his own,” I quietly teased.

Her body shook in what I hoped was silent laughter and not sobs. I rose to one elbow to look over at her face. Her eyes tracked my movement, and the smile that lifted the corners of her perfect lips warmed my heart. Content, I lay back down and snuggled her close.

The old-fashioned clock beside her bed ticked away the seconds as I smoothed my hand up and down her arm, occasionally dipping down to stroke along her soft thigh.

“I should see if she’s still awake. We can’t doze off again. Can you imagine what would happen if she came in to wake me up in the morning and you were in my bed? I’d be a dead woman.”

“I’d protect you,” I mumbled with my eyes closed.

She elbowed me.

“Oof! What’d you do that for?”

“Don’t fall asleep!”

“I’m not!”

She flipped to face me, and I sighed contentedly when she ran her soft hand over my forehead and down to cup my cheek. “Vittorio?”

“Hmm?”

“Look at me,” she whispered.

With a playful huff, I opened my eyes. Our noses were practically touching.

“I love you too.”

My heart stopped beating.

She tipped her head to bring her lips to mine, and that lifeless lump of muscle in my chest kick-started itself into overdrive. As we moved our mouths and stroked our tongues together sensually, I removed her clothes and then fused my lips to hers again. Not breaking our kiss, I rolled her to her back and settled between her parted legs. Her warm body beneath me felt better than anything in my life.

When she tipped her hips to catch the tip of my cock in her wet opening, I sucked in a sharp breath and slowly released it as I sank deep inside her tight sheath. “Fucking hell,” I breathed as I slowly moved in and out of her welcome heat.

With each thrust, she ground her clit against me. “Fuck yes,” I breathed as she moved faster, her pussy sucking on my aching cock.

The way she found her release pleased me as I braced myself and about died at the pulsing of her perfect, tight cunt. Once she sighed and her body went soft, I lost it. I plunged in deep over and over until I knew it was coming, then jerked out to explode on her stomach.

“Jesus, Kendall,” I panted, holding myself up off the mess I’d made. Finally, I got up and grabbed more tissues, then went to wipe her off.

She grabbed my wrist and stopped me. Using her free hand, she rubbed my cum into her skin.

“You are going to be the death of me,” I muttered.

With a grin, she got up and pulled her sleep shorts back on, then found a T-shirt in her dresser and put it on. It was a little more snug than mine had been, and I hoped her grandmother didn't notice in the morning. While she dressed, so did I, though I didn't want to.

Once I had all my shit gathered up, she slowly turned her doorknob and pulled back. She listened for a moment, then nodded and gestured for me to follow.

“How do you know she's out?” I whispered.

She gave me a “Really?” stare, and then I heard the loud snore coming from the opposite end of the hall. My brows shot up, and she covered her giggle.

We tiptoed through the apartment. She tapped in the alarm bypass code and cracked the door. Then she peeked out and looked around outside before she opened it all the way.

I reluctantly stepped out onto the landing. At the same moment, we leaned into each other, and I gave her a kiss goodbye. When we broke apart, I smiled and framed her face with my hands. “Thank you.”

“No, thank *you*,” she replied impishly.

But I remained serious. “Kendall, I mean it. What you gave me tonight was a gift, and I don't accept it lightly. I'll see you after you get off work?”

With her lower lip caught in her teeth, she nodded.

After one last kiss, I descended the stairs like a thief in the night.

Which I absolutely had been.

Chapter SIXTEEN



Kendall

“Gone Away”–Noctura

Present Day....

Nonna was true to her word and wasted no time in contacting her doctor. My parents stayed once she told them her plans because they didn't want her flying on her own. Thankfully, my father was able to work remotely for a while.

It took a couple of weeks, but the second she had clearance from her doctor, she was ready to leave with my parents. Since they had to take their rental car back to the airport, they all told me goodbye at the bakery.

“You'll do wonderfully,” my mom assured me as she cradled my face and stared at me with pride. “This was never my dream, but it's your calling. I know you'll make the bakery flourish.”

When Mom stepped back, Dad swooped in and gave me a big hug. “Love you, little bit,” he told me, his accent thicker since they’d been back in his homeland. I loved it.

“Love you, too, Dad,” I told him, blinking away my tears.

We parted, and he quickly pressed the back of his hand to his eye and looked away.

Next Nonna gathered me close. “I know my baby is in good hands. But if you ever have any questions, Tillie knows the business side inside and out, and you can call me anytime.”

“I know, and thank you.” I held her tightly.

“I need a moment with Kendall,” she told my parents as she took a step back.

They both looked confused but nodded. Dad said, “Okay, we’ll take your bags down to the car.”

“Thank you,” Nonna replied.

Once they were outside and the door was closed, my grandmother looked at me. Guilt swam in her eyes.

“Nonna?” I tilted my head with concern.

“A long time ago, I made a mistake. But I need you to know I did it with your best interests at heart.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m not sure it matters now, but I know for the last two weeks, Vittorio has been a regular at my—the bakery again. I’m sure it’s not because of me.”

“You already said they want to buy the bakery,” I threw out as my heart pounded and my palms started to sweat.

“I don’t think that has anything to do with this. He comes in the bakery. Eats. Watches. Waits.”

Trepidation made my chest tight, and I swallowed the lump in my throat. “Oh?”

She wasn’t wrong. The fucker stopped by the bakery every morning for coffee and a bran muffin. It was disgusting, but I imagined he didn’t get a body like he had by eating donuts

every day. When he left, one of his goons stayed across the street or chilled in the bakery pretending to read. It was so obvious.

It was more than that, though. Everywhere I went, I conveniently “ran into” him.

“Fancy meeting you here,” he said when I ran into him at the grocery store Sunday afternoon.

I went to Walgreens last Tuesday, and he was there buying razors. He had a beard now, so did he really need razors? Maybe. Hell, I didn’t know. He was making me question everything.

“Nonna, I think you’re reading more into this than there is,” I flippantly bullshitted with a fake laugh.

With a sigh, she took my hand. “Sometimes, life gives us second chances. Though I may not approve of their family, Vittorio is, at heart, a good boy.”

I wanted to laugh at her calling that sexy beast a “boy.”

“Umm, okay?”

“I’m just saying, maybe you two have some things to talk about.”

My spine stiffened. “Nonna....”

Her hand went up. “Just think about it.”

“Sure,” I told her, though I had no intention of having a heart-to-heart with Vittorio De Luca. That ship had sailed.

Then sunk.

And he fired the torpedo.

I walked with her to the door and followed her down the stairs, ready to lunge if she looked unsteady.

Mom and Dad met us halfway, and Dad insisted on her holding his shoulder the rest of the way down.

We said our goodbyes again, and I tried not to cry. I would miss them.

As their rental car pulled away, I wondered what my grandmother believed she'd done and prayed it didn't have anything to do with what I thought it did.

He hadn't cared then—I didn't know if I wanted him to care now.



The next morning, I was filling the display case as the bell rang. I'd slept like crap thanks to having nightmares all night. It was gonna be a long damn day. When I stood up with a forced welcoming look, it fell when I saw who it was.

“Good morning.” His smile was bright, and I wanted to punch him in the throat.

No one should be that cheery so early in the morning. Nor should they look that goddamn good.

Not a hair out of place, custom tailored suit pressed and pristine, he was a walking god.

With a snarl, I pulled out his nasty muffin and slapped it on a plate, because he'd insist on sitting at one of the tables to eat it, then grabbed a cup that I poured coffee into—black. I slammed the plate down on the counter by the register, surprised I didn't break the dang thing. The coffee I was a little more cautious with.

In silence, I rang him up. When I gave him his change, I dropped it in his palm and jerked my hand back to ensure we didn't make contact. Because I couldn't lie, I was afraid of my response if we did.

As always, he dropped it all as a tip in the jar. I wanted to take it out and shove it up his ass.

“Thank you,” he warmly replied as if I hadn't been a raging bitch to him.

Mouth hanging open, I watched him walk over to his table. *Damn his perfect ass.* Despite the expensive jacket disguising

it, I could still see it with each step he took.

The morning rush kept me busy, and I didn't have a lot of time to pay Vittorio much mind. Finally, it began to dwindle, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

The bell jingled again, and I glanced toward the door with a tired smile. When Konstantin walked in, I wanted to groan. *What shitty timing.*

"Welcome in!" I brightly greeted. "What can I get for you today, Mr. Woodsman?"

"What if I just came in for the view?" he teased.

The clatter of a mug hitting the table had both of us glancing over. Vittorio sat there with the muscle in his jaw ticking as he stared at his phone. He wasn't fooling me, but I got a perverse pleasure from his ire.

"Well, maybe I'd be flattered," I replied with a coy flutter of my lashes, playing it up.

"And if I asked you to dinner?"

"What time?" I replied.

The sound of a chair roughly scraping against the floor filled the bakery, followed by the stomp of expensive Italian loafers on the tile. The bathroom door slammed. I didn't need to so much as glance at the table to know exactly who it was. Now that he was out of earshot, I deflated.

"How about if I pick you up around six-thirty? Does that give you time to close up?" Konstantin tilted his head as he waited for an answer.

"As long as you don't mind me smelling like a donut and looking like this." I waved over myself top to bottom and gave him a weak smile.

Guilt flooded me, and I felt horrible. Konstantin was good-looking, but I really wasn't interested. I'd put on that performance strictly to get under Vittorio's skin, and that was a shitty thing to do to Konstantin.

He leaned both elbows on the counter and folded his hands together, bringing him closer to me. The scent of his crisp cologne and the peppermint on his breath floated around me, but unlike when I wanted to swoon at Vittorio's scent, I was unaffected. "I think you smell delicious."

I was pretty sure I heard a grumbled "Oh, for fuck's sake" right before Vittorio returned to his table.

"Then I'll see you at six-thirty," I announced, doing my best to sound excited.

He laid his hand over mine as he stood up again. "Until later."

When he turned to leave, his gaze met Vittorio's stormy one. He gave Vittorio a polite nod as he exited the building, to which Vittorio squinted. That muscle clenched repeatedly in his jaw.

The second Konstantin was out of sight, Vittorio angrily stood. I gasped when he stalked my way. Then I took a step back when he passed through the Employees Only opening. As he drew closer, I retreated until my back was pressed to the wall.

He was inches from me. With each breath I took, my nipples brushed his chest.

"That's what you want?"

"W-What?" I stuttered.

"A sweet-talking meathead," he replied through gritted teeth. "Is that all it would take? For me to go to the gym, wear a cheaper suit?"

He was being ridiculous, because Konstantin's suit was likely just as expensive as his. And while he might not be as bulky as Konstantin, Vittorio was... built. He may have been a lot of things I couldn't stand, but the man was fine as fuck.

"What the fuck is your problem?" I snapped, my chest rising and falling rapidly. I couldn't be this close to him. I wasn't strong enough.

“You. You’re my problem,” he replied with a guttural groan before he wrapped his big hand around the front of my throat and crashed his lips to mine.

Oh God. I whimpered. But I couldn’t help it. My body *knew* his. Ten fucking *years*, and I still craved him. It wasn’t fair.

My lips parted, and his tongue dove in. Lost in the feel of his fingers curled around my throat and the powerful sweep of his tongue against mine, I pressed against him. I couldn’t get close enough. I needed him so badly that I wanted to crawl inside him and exist there forever.

His free hand slowly skimmed my waist and traveled over my hip. When he dropped lower and dug his fingers into my thigh, he lifted my leg and pressed that hard, thick shaft into my aching and heated core. He was so goddamn good at that. He still knew exactly how much pressure to apply, how to rotate his hips, and how hard to grind against my clit to drive me crazy.

If he kept up that pressure, I was going to come.

Suddenly, he ripped his mouth away. We were both fighting for air. The seconds ticked by as we stared at each other, and I realized I had one hand clinging to the arm that held my neck and the other clutching the lapel of his suit jacket. I let go as if he’d scorched me.

He dropped his hand and smoothed his suit. Then he leaned in, and I shivered as his lips teased my ear and a thumb feathered over my bounding pulse.

“When you’re having *dinner* tonight, I want you to remember how you just responded to me. I want you to think about how my face used to fit perfectly between your legs. I want you to remember how my cock tasted in your mouth and how it filled your tight little pussy. You might’ve gotten away once, but make no mistake, Kendall. We have unfinished business.”

His nose trailed slowly across my cheek, and his lips followed as he pulled away.

A shiver of longing shot through me. I should've slapped him, but my arms refused to work.

“And Kendall? If he touches you? I'll break his arm. If he fucks you? I'll kill him.” The heat in his icy gaze was the biggest contradiction known to man.

My mouth hung open.

After straightening his sleeves, he walked out of there as if he hadn't just ripped me apart and left me raw and bleeding.

That was the moment I realized we'd been right there in the front of the bakery with giant-ass windows and the possibility of a customer coming in at any minute. And I'd been ready to climb him like a goddamn monkey.

“You have no right,” I whispered to the empty room. “How dare you make me want you and act like you give a fuck?”

I sagged against the wall and pinched the bridge of my nose.

“Are you okay?” Tillie asked as she pushed through the stainless steel door from the kitchen with a tray of cheesecake slices.

Shaken, I nodded. “Yeah, I just got lightheaded,” I told her with a weak smile.

Not a lie.

Frustrated, I reached into the case and grabbed a pink cupcake. I ate that sucker in two bites, hating Vittorio for pushing me to consume the calories *and* my own damn product, cutting into my bottom dollar.

Fuck.

Chapter SEVENTEEN



“Save Yourself”–Devour the Day

Present day....

I'm a fucking idiot.

Half a block from the bakery, I stopped and leaned against a storefront. My head fell back, and I squeezed my eyes shut.

What the fuck had I been thinking? I had no business following her. I had no business going to that goddamn bakery every morning. And I sure as hell had no business touching her, yet I couldn't help myself. In my heart and mind, she was still mine.

It was like her being back negated the last ten years. And only a fool would think like that.

“Wanna talk about it?” Dario asked.

I squinted one eye open and looked at him. “What is this, a counseling session?”

He snorted. “Not hardly. But, boss, you and I have been together a long time. You have Dahlia, and I know that’s for convenience, but you don’t do shit like this.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” I deadpanned. I didn’t have Dahlia anymore either.

“Bullshit. You stayed at her house after she got robbed. You go to that fuckin’ bakery every morning. You have a guy on her place all day, every day. I saw what you just did.” The last bit he said in a low and quiet way.

“I’m watching out for our potential investment.”

“Bullshit. You might get Gabriel to believe that, but I don’t buy it. I *see* you.”

“Enough. Leave it,” I ground out as I pushed off the building and resumed walking.

He quickly caught up and walked alongside me, deftly dodging the pedestrian traffic. He pulled out his phone, and I was aware of his thumbs flying over the screen before he tucked it back in his pocket. Another block later, my car pulled up to the curb in front of us.

Dario gestured to where the driver was coming around to open the back door.

I huffed in irritation. “How do you know I didn’t want to walk farther?” I snapped.

“It’s not safe,” he replied through gritted teeth. “Get in the fucking car.”

“You dare to tell me what to do?”

“It’s my job to keep you safe,” he bit out. “Let me do my motherfuckin’ job.”

Stubbornly, I stood there staring into his dark eyes. Finally, I took a breath, my nostrils flaring in frustration, and climbed into the back seat. The driver shut the door, and he and Dario got in front.

He wasn’t wrong. Mario had been trying to kill Gabriel and me. We didn’t know who he was working with. Where at

one time we could walk down the street without a soul daring to mess with us, those days were obviously gone now. We had a traitor in our organization, and we had no idea how deeply his cancer had spread.

The entire way to the office, I held my tongue. I was angry. I was impatient.

I should've just told her. But I couldn't. She wasn't ready. And even after all this time, I wasn't really sure what to say without hurting her more.

We pulled into the underground garage of the high-rise where our offices were, as well as Gabriel's condo and mine. Still mute, I went up the elevator, bypassing the office for once, and got off on my floor. I didn't have the penthouse like Gabriel did, but I had half of the floor below his. Alessio and Leo shared the condo that occupied the other side.

"You don't need to protect me in my own home," I snapped as I went inside with Dario on my heels. Where I might've let the door slam behind me, he closed it with a soft snick.

When he grabbed my arm, I balled my fist and spun, ready to attack. Inside, I was raging—unraveling. The need to fight or fuck was burning through my veins, driving me insane. If it had been a month ago, I would've told the driver to take me to Dahlia. The problem was I didn't want her or any other random chick. I wanted a redhead who hated me and what I'd done to her. If only I could tell her it had been for her own good.

"Get. Your. Hand. Off. Me," I coldly bit out through my gritted teeth.

"Your grandfather isn't running things anymore. Hell, he isn't even in the country anymore. You can be with whoever you want. Fuck him. So why are you being so goddamn stubborn? Christ, just fuck her and get it out of your system!" he spat, his dark gaze narrowed and focused on me.

Jaw clenched, I didn't answer. I didn't like him even talking about me fucking Kendall. And the thought of

someone else's hands on her—like the douche from today—had me feeling downright murderous.

Not taking the hint, he continued. “There’s obviously something going on between you and that bakery chick. After we stopped by the night she was attacked, you said it was personal with her. I’m not stupid. What I don’t understand is when this happened. I’m with you almost twenty-four seven. Yeah, I know you’ve been trying to acquire the bakery, but the granddaughter hasn’t been here in as long as I can remember. So my question is how do you know her? I looked into her, and I know she lives in Grand Rapids, Michigan, where she grew up.” Arms crossed, he stared me down.

“It’s none of your fucking business. We are not friends, Dario.”

“Outside of your brother, I’m the closest fucking thing you *have* to a friend!”

He wasn’t lying. As the underboss for the Chicago Family, I didn’t have a lot of friends. In fact, he was absolutely correct—he probably was the closest thing I had to one. It was hard to know who to trust. Even old high school friends rarely kept in touch nowadays, unless you counted Luciano. Part of me believed the only reason he somewhat worked on our side was because of her—his cousin.

Fucking hell, I couldn’t get away from her.

Worse, I didn’t want to.

Needing to unload, I made my way to my liquor cart and poured two fingers of whiskey. His cocked brow didn’t go unnoticed.

Was I proud that midmorning, on a weekday, I was resorting to alcohol? No. A few more sips, and then I caved.

“I knew Kendall years ago. We, uh...” I glanced down at the glass in my hand. Lost in the swirl of the amber liquid, I tried to decide what to say. “We had a relationship. I was ready to walk away from everything for her.”

I took another swallow. Dario patiently waited.

“It didn’t work out.” That was all I was giving him. Any more and I didn’t know if I could hold my shit together.

“How long ago was that?”

“Ten years ago. It’s been ten years since we were together. Crazy, huh?” The last of the whiskey burned down my throat, and I gave a disgusted laugh.

“Crazy that you still love her, you mean?” he asked with a cocky arch of his brow.

“Who says I still love her? We were kids. Who the hell knows they’re really in love with someone at eighteen years old?”

“Maybe you were, maybe you weren’t, but you can’t tell me it’s pure happenstance that you haven’t had an actual relationship as long as I’ve known you. Nor is it coincidence that every goddamn mistress you’ve had is a redhead. And I know what I saw in there today. You are not one for PDA—you’re the most private motherfucker I know. Yet I swear to fucking Christ, if you could’ve, you would’ve fucked that chick right there in front of those glass windows.”

I hated that he was that observant of my personal life.

“I want you to find out everything you can about that dickwad who’s taking her out tonight,” I told him, still not answering his question.

As I left my apartment to go down to the office, I was pretty sure I heard him laughing.

Though I had a million things to take care of, to include meeting with the contractor we’d hired to renovate a historic building we’d purchased downtown—the plan was to make it into high-end condos, sell off half, and then rent out and Airbnb the rest—I needed to see Gabriel.

I knocked on the door, then walked in, as I was accustomed to doing.

“Oh! Whoa!” I called out as I slapped a hand over my eyes and spun away. The scrambling rustle behind me told me I’d

shocked the shit out of them. “That’s something I can never unsee, Gabe. Have you never heard of locks?”

“Have you never heard of waiting for a reply before busting in?” Gabriel replied to the sound of his belt clinking as he refastened it.

Alia, his girlfriend, was frantically whispering before I heard the bookcase slide open. “Sorry about that!” she said with a giggle, and the bookcase closed. She took the hidden elevator back up to Gabriel’s apartment.

“Do you have your dick put away safely?” I impatiently asked.

“Maybe,” Gabriel replied, and I rolled my eyes.

Too bad if he didn’t because I turned around.

“Jesus. In the office?” I asked with an arched brow.

“Hey, when I have a woman like her, I’ll take it anywhere I can get it,” Gabriel shot back. “Now, what was so important that you had to barge into my office?”

“I still can’t find out who’s behind the increase in gang activity. Catalano found the kid who played lookout in the bakery robbery. He said his buddy asked him to make sure no one came in but swears he didn’t realize that was what his friend was planning. Georgie picked up the buddy this morning. That asshole refused to tell us who he was with—claims he was acting independently.”

“But you don’t believe that?” Gabriel sat at his desk, strumming his fingers on the top.

“Hell no, I don’t. He has a tattoo on his arm that matched one on a guy we found with a bullet between his eyes after a supposed gang altercation.”

“Did we call a meeting with Hefty?”

Hefty was the head of the gang the little fucker who was selling meth in our nightclub belonged to. It was supposedly the gang that left the bullet in the dead tattooed guy.

“Yeah, Catalano is meeting with him tonight. But he swears he didn’t authorize the nightclub sale. Says the kid’s customer told him to meet him there.”

“Do you believe him?”

“Honestly, I don’t know. Kid was an absolute prick. Cocky enough to think he didn’t have to play by the rules. Who knows? I’m just tired of coming up with dead ends. It’s pissing me the fuck off.” I stalked to the floor-to-ceiling windows and stared absently out at the city we ran.

“Vittorio. Chill out. We have people working on this. It’s not all on you. They’ve been very good at covering their tracks, but they *will* slip up. And when they do? We end them.”

“What if I can’t wait for that?” I turned my head to face him.

He studied me like I was a species of animal he’d never seen before. “What’s really going on with you?” he asked, his tone dropping an octave.

“Kendall’s back. She’s running the bakery.”

“You mean she’s staying?” I nodded. “Well, fuck.”

Gabriel was the only one who knew the truth.

I rested my head on the cool glass.

“These are different times. We run things now. Maybe if you talk to her, tell her the truth,” he reasoned.

“And what? She forgives ten years? Forgets the heartache I caused? I still have her text messages.”

“What? How? *Why?*”

“Fuck, it’s stupid, but I saved that old phone. The piece of shit won’t hold a charge anymore, but if I plug it in....” I did it to torture myself. It was my punishment. My reminder of why she’d been better off without me.

“But *why?*”

“It doesn’t matter,” I muttered, closing my eyes.

“Jesus Christ. You do it to punish yourself, don’t you? There was nothing you could’ve done. You know what would’ve happened if you’d left. Mrs. Romano was right. You made the best of a really shitty situation,” he argued, but it didn’t matter.

“The best? That was the *best*?” I cried, finally losing my cool.

“In a twisted way, yes. Vittorio, you saved her life,” he asserted.

“I don’t think she sees it that way,” I countered with a humorless smile.

“You still love her, don’t you?”

I tried to swallow the lump lodged in my throat.

“I was afraid of this. Vittorio... if you still love her, you have to talk to her. Lay it on the line. Tell her everything. If she still can’t forgive you, then you’ll know you tried everything you could, and then you can try to move on.” The pain in his gaze nearly broke me, and I looked away.

Move on? How the fuck am I supposed to move on when I haven’t been able to for the last ten years?

“It doesn’t matter. I’m not the same guy I was when I was eighteen.”

“In here”—he banged his fist on his chest—“you are.”

I couldn’t help but feel like he was so very wrong.

“I can’t pull her into this life.”

“She’s already in it, brother. If she’s with you, then once we get to the bottom of this bullshit, she’s safer than running that bakery without our protection.”

“And until then?”

“Until then, we still keep her safe.”

I was one step ahead of him. Santino was on her right now, and Georgie would be following her on her “date.”

It was killing me knowing she would be with another man for even a few hours to have dinner. I should've told her she wasn't going. Today's me shouldn't have hesitated to do just that. But every time I was around her, I craved her. It made me think and do stupid shit.

Even after ten years, my feelings hadn't gone away. They hadn't dissipated in the least. And I knew they never would.

I loved her.

For ten fucking years, I'd been half a man because the other half didn't exist without her.

Resignation mixed with a crazy ripple of hope hit me.

“You're right. I'm going to talk to her. But I need to give you a heads-up: if the guy she's having dinner with tonight touches her, I'm going to need the Ankeny boys.”

Gabriel sighed. “I get it.”

I nodded and went back to my apartment. I needed another drink.

Lost in my thoughts, I poured the amber liquid into a glass, then crossed the room to my home office.

Alone, I sat at my desk and opened the bottom drawer. My throat hurt as I swallowed the lump stuck there. As I took a sip of the smooth liquor, I stared at the old phone. Then I pulled it out, plugged it in, and turned it on. To torture myself, I opened the message screen.

Text messages from Kendall ten years ago....

Kendall: Why weren't you there?

Kendall: Why aren't you answering me?

Kendall: Was it all a lie?

Kendall: You're killing me, Vittorio

Kendall: Please. I need to know if you ever really cared

Kendall: I guess that's my answer then

Kendall: You are the lowest of lows, Vittorio. I loved you. I feel like I'm dying because I gave you my heart and now I'm bleeding out. You should've gone into acting because that was the best performance I've ever seen. If all you wanted was to fuck me, you could've just said that. Maybe if I'd known that's all you wanted I could've kept my heart guarded. Instead, I willingly gave it to you because I thought you were giving me yours

Kendall: You're a fucking liar

Kendall: I hate you more than anything

Kendall: I hope one day someone does this to you so you can know how badly you destroyed me

*Kendall: I'm blocking and deleting your number.
Goodbye*

Each message was a knife to my heart, but I deserved it.

Chapter EIGHTEEN



Kendall

“I Come First”–Halestorm

Present Day....

Konstantin was a great guy, but I didn’t have a lot of interest in him. I think he was aware of that by the end of our dinner. He seemed resigned but still kind, and it made me feel like an asshole for leading him on.

“I’m sorry,” I told him as we reached the bottom of my stairs. “Tonight was great, but....”

He stood there with his hands in his pockets and a sad smile on his face. “It’s okay. At least I got to have dinner with you and pretend for a little while that a woman like you would be interested in me.”

“It’s not you,” I began, but he started laughing ruefully.

“Please don’t give me the whole ‘It’s not you, it’s me’ spiel. I think that would hurt more.” He shrugged as he cast his

gaze down the street. “Is it the dude who was in the bakery this morning?”

“What? No! I don’t even....”

He swiveled his head back to give me a look that told me he knew I was full of shit.

“How well do you know him?” he asked before pressing his lips flat and giving his head a little shake.

I sighed. “I’ve known him since I was a kid.”

He closed his eyes and dropped his head a moment before he lifted his gaze. “So you know who he is?”

With an apologetic wince, I nodded. “You really are a great person, though. I’m just in a weird place in my life right now.” I wrung my hands as I tried to ease the blow.

“I get it. No worries,” he said with a sigh. “But can you please go upstairs and lock your door?”

“Huh?” I jerked my head back in surprise.

“I can’t be certain, but I think there was a guy who followed us here. I’m not sure where he is now, and I could be wrong. It would just make me feel better if you were safely inside before I left.”

Suddenly scared, I darted my gaze around.

“Don’t make it obvious if he’s still here.” He made a cautious scan of the area.

“Thank you,” I whispered before I pressed a kiss to his cheek, then rushed up my stairs. At the top, I struggled with the keys a moment, but when I glanced back down the stairs, Konstantin was still standing watch. That gave me a small measure of relief. Enough that my hands quit shaking and I was able to insert the key. I made a mental note to have a coded lock installed.

Once the door swung open, I waved. Konstantin sadly lifted his hand, then left. I hurried inside and turned the deadbolt.

It wasn't long before there was a knock, and I froze in the kitchen, where I'd been getting a glass of water and pulling out a cupcake. Yeah, I planned to eat my feelings again.

Cautiously, I set the cupcake on the island, then silently approached the door. A quick peek through the peephole showed a man in a suit with his back to me. My heart started to hammer, and I stepped back. The wood floor creaked, and I went still.

"Kendall? I know you're in there!" I heard through the door.

My shoulders drooped, and I pursed my lips in frustrated relief. I was pretty sure I recognized that voice. Another quick peek confirmed it.

"You've got to be kidding me," I whispered to the gods of karmic bullshit.

"Kendall," he pleaded.

Caving, I opened the door, bracing it so I could look out but he didn't get the idea that I was inviting him in.

"Can I please come in?" he asked.

"Why?"

He took a deep breath that he let out in a rush. "We have some things to talk about."

"Why does everyone think I need to talk to you?" I huffed.

He tilted his head in confusion.

I pinched the bridge of my nose and gestured for him to come in. Once he passed by me, I secured the door again. Needing a moment, I leaned my head against the thick wood as I fought for composure. Finally, I took a fortifying breath and turned to face him.

God, that wasn't enough time.

"Was that you following us?" I blurted.

He winced. "Not exactly."

"So it was one of your goons."

“Please don’t call them that,” he said as he palmed his face, then let his hand fall back to his side.

“Vittorio.” My voice cracked, and I hated that. “You can sugarcoat things however you want. Either way, you had someone following me. Why are you here?”

That muscle clenched in his strong jaw, and for the first time since seeing him again, I studied his face and the changes ten years had wrought. The fine lines that fanned out from the corners of his eyes were new but didn’t detract from his attractiveness. My fingers twitched at the need to feel the scruff that covered his jaw. It certainly wasn’t there before, but I sure as hell felt it on my face when he kissed me this morning. His hair was no longer carelessly shaggy but rather perfectly trimmed and styled. I wanted to reach up and mess it up out of spite.

“Because I told you we had unfinished business. I need to come clean about a few things.”

My spine stiffened.

“When you left ten years ago, I wanted to leave with you,” he continued.

I crossed my arms protectively and snorted at the bullshit he was spouting. “Uh-huh. That’s why you didn’t show up, right? Because you wanted to go so bad.”

“It was a complicated situation.”

“Jesus,” I muttered as I rolled my eyes.

“Fucking hell, Kendall. Will you please let me finish?” he asked as he covered his mouth in exasperation. He dropped his hands and began to pace. With each pass he made, I caught a whiff of his cologne and clenched my fists.

“By all means, finish so you can *leave*.” I propped my fists on my hips.

He blew out a huffed breath. “You know what I am now, right?”

I sneered. “Yes.”

His Adam's apple bobbed, and he nodded. "Remember when I said my grandfather expected me to join the family business? This was my father's position when I met you. My grandfather was the don."

He paused, but I didn't say anything.

"My grandfather was a fucking asshole. He controlled everything, to the point that he arranged marriages for us."

A stabbing pain hit me, and I thought my chest had cracked open. Shock caused me to stumble back a step. "You're m-m-married?"

"No. But someone came to me the night before you were going to leave, and... well, they made a good point. My grandfather wouldn't take me leaving lying down. He would've come after me. And to punish me and ensure I didn't leave again, he would've killed you."

I gasped and placed a hand over my neck. "What?" I whispered in a raspy cry. "Who said that?"

"It doesn't matter who said it. They were right. I would rather have let you go than have something happen to you."

"Don't you think that should've been *my* choice?"

"No!" he snapped.

"So you would rather I hated you and thought you abandoned me?" I cried.

"Yes!"

"Why?"

"Because if I told you what was going on, you wouldn't have let it go. I couldn't risk that. I wanted you to have a chance to find love again. Get married. Have babies. Have a good life."

A sob broke free, and I fell against the kitchen island. Hand over my mouth, I shook my head. "How could you be so cruel?"

"Cruel? I wanted what was best for you!"

“It was best for me to raise our child alone?” I shouted through my tears.

He froze in the middle of my kitchen, his usually beautiful olive-toned skin ashen. “What did you say?” he asked in a voice so soft I wasn’t sure he’d actually spoken.

“You heard me,” I snarled. “Don’t act like you don’t remember. You were quite explicit about me leaving you alone and you not wanting a child to fuck up your life. So fuck you.”

“We have a child?” He glanced around the apartment like he expected said child to come out of the woodwork.

“Are you fucking crazy? Or are you just trying to twist that knife you planted in my heart?”

Before I could process what was going on, he was in front of me, holding the tops of my arms. His face was inches from mine. Those hypnotizing smoky blue eyes were wild. “Where is our child, Kendall?”

“He’s dead! You knew that!”

He blinked rapidly and took an uneven step back, letting go of me so forcefully that I grabbed the island for balance. His previously pale face went green, and he gave several barely noticeable shakes of his head. “You had an abortion?” he asked, and I swear to God, he looked like he was gonna puke or cry.

Tears were already pouring down my face, the pain as fresh as it was the day of the accident. “God, no. I would never.... There was an accident... the day my nonna told me you didn’t want anything to do with me or the baby.”

His face contorted in disbelief, and he couldn’t seem to get air into his lungs.

His reaction doesn’t sense. Nonna told him all of this. He knew.

Right?

“I didn’t know,” he practically wheezed. “None of it, Kendall. I didn’t know.”

Though I didn't want to believe him, I was confused. He looked devastated, like he was hearing all of this for the first time. No one could fake the blood leaving their face, nor the green that colored his complexion at the thought of me aborting our baby. I didn't know what to do with that.

All I could do was stand there ugly-crying my heart out.

Then I was in his arms, and he was holding me so tightly I thought he might break me. His arms trembled. With one hand, he fisted my hair as he pressed my head into the crook of his neck, where I soaked his expensive suit. The words he kept repeating finally sank into my overwhelmed brain.

"I'm so sorry. Baby, I didn't know. I'm so fucking sorry. I swear I didn't know. Oh my God. I didn't know." A warm wetness hit my neck.

As his litany of apologies continued, I knew I believed him. But by believing him, I knew my nonna had lied.

And now I knew what she had done.

We stood there crying together until we both ran out of tears. Ten years of repressed agony on my part and a fresh wound for him. To say I was reeling was the understatement of the year. I completely shut down my nonna's involvement in everything for the time being. It was too much betrayal to deal with at once.

Then, in the ragged breaths that interrupted the otherwise silent apartment, I began to heal. "Where do we go from here?"

"I'm not letting you go again." His reply was resolute.

With my eyes squeezed shut and my lips pressed together, I clung to him.

Finally, he gently extricated himself and cradled my face in his hands. Looking me dead in the eye, he said, "I never stopped loving you."

Before I could start crying again, he captured my mouth in a slow and gentle kiss. I tasted his tears, and I knew he tasted mine. So much for being cried out. When the kiss ended, he

dipped his head so our foreheads were pressed together. He nuzzled along the side of my nose with his.

“Through it all, I never stopped loving you either. I tried to hate you. I told myself I hated you. But you had my heart, Vittorio. You’re my other half.”

Lifting to my toes, I pressed my lips to his in a chaste but firm kiss. When I thought of all the years we’d lost, I wanted to start crying again. Yet my heart soared too much for that to happen. It hit me that he was part of the Mafia, but it didn’t matter in that moment. Somehow, I knew we’d figure shit out.

I dropped back on my feet and peppered soft kisses on his neck. Under my lips, I felt the rapid tattoo of his pulse. Then, feeling braver than I had in years, I reached up and loosened his tie. I continued working it until I slipped it from his neck, and then my fingers deftly unfastened the buttons of his shirt. When I reached his waistband, I tugged the shirt free and pushed it open.

The second my hands made contact with the smooth skin of his stomach and trailed up to his chest, he sucked in a hissed breath. It told me he was experiencing that zap of electricity too. Like a current running between us, completing its circuit with us. It was a hum that grew as I pressed my hands up to his shoulders, tugging the jacket and shirt off together.

Because I hadn’t thought it through, he helped me by removing his cuff links and setting them on the counter. I gave a nervous laugh, and he lifted my chin with the edge of his forefinger. “I’ve missed you so damn much.”

“Me too,” I whispered.

He lowered his head to kiss me, and as his tongue slid along mine, he unbuttoned the sleeveless shirt I’d worn. Then he did as I had and pushed it off my shoulders.

I shivered as the silky fabric slid over my arms.

While his palms roamed over my exposed flesh, I unbuckled his belt. It clinked as I moved my hands underneath it to undo his pants. The second I did, the weight of the belt

dragged them to his ankles. Immediately, I slid my fingertips into the elastic of his boxer briefs and curled them around his already-hard shaft.

“Fuck,” he moaned, his lips still against mine.

His kiss turned voracious when I gently squeezed and stroked along the silky-smooth length. When I gripped it again, he grunted and pulled away. I barely had time to huff my disappointment before he spun me around and pressed my chest to the island. I heard him kick off his pants.

I could feel him dropping to his haunches behind me before his heated breath fanned over my panties. Then his finger tickled my pussy when he hooked it around the fabric and tugged. They slid over my hips so slowly, I wanted to cry. One at a time, he lifted my feet to remove the thong.

“I always loved when you wore skirts.” Reverently, he circled the globes of my ass before he squeezed them, then pulled them apart to dip his tongue into my dripping slit. He lapped at my wet opening and then reached between my legs and pinched my clit.

It startled me, as I didn't see it coming, and I jumped. That caused me to jerk away from his mouth, and he immediately stopped.

“Vittorio,” I begged.

“What, Kendall?” he asked as if he had all the time in the world.

“Don't stop,” I whined as I pressed my forehead to the cool granite and squeezed my eyes closed.

“Then don't move.”

His softly spoken words sent that hot breath blowing over my now-damp pussy, and a chill raced down my spine, making me shiver. Goose bumps broke out and spread over the surface of my skin. Though nearly a decade had passed since the last time he'd done this to me, I remembered it like yesterday. The heavy anticipation told me it had been entirely too long. Yet I wanted more. I needed him to fill me with what I'd had my hand wrapped around.

“Vittorio, I want to feel you,” I pleaded, my desperation climbing.

He slipped two fingers deep inside my sheath, and I instinctively clenched around him. “Fuck, I love it when you do that,” he whispered, although I wasn’t sure if he meant for me to hear that. Then his other hand worked my clit, and I cried out from the blast of sensation. He groaned and bit my ass. Not hard but rather playfully, like it was so sexy he couldn’t contain himself.

It was too much, and it was everything. I was crumbling. Everything I’d believed for so long was an untruth. My foundation was rocked, not just by the emotions but with what he was doing. Tearing down my walls like only he knew how to do.

He inserted a third finger, and I grabbed the edges of the island as I pressed my head to the counter. He was stretching me and stroking exactly the way I needed him to. A few more circles over my clit and I shattered into a million pieces. Through waves of utter bliss, I dove and spun. There was no up or down, only ecstasy—pulse after pulse of throbbing ecstasy.

As the exquisite feeling began to ebb, I was left languid and satiated like no man since him had been able to do. It was always him.

Only him.

Like I was in a drunken euphoria, I was dimly aware of him gently lifting me from the counter and turning me to tuck me into his strong body.

God, why did everything feel right with the world when he did that?

“You okay?” he murmured as one hand cradled my head and the other ran along my back. Occasionally it dropped down to cup my naked ass.

“So much so,” I answered into his chest. His hard, smooth, warm chest. It only took a slight turn of my head to kiss him on his insanely defined pec. My arms were wrapped around

him, and my fingers danced over the muscles of his back that flexed with each of his movements.

For a few moments, he simply held me tightly. “I should probably go,” he said after an indeterminate amount of time.

The second the words infiltrated my hazy brain, shock hit me, and my head reared back into his hand that still rested there.

“Leave?” Hurt drew my brows down, and my lower lip trembled. “Why?”

“Trust me when I tell you I don’t want to. But I...” He closed his eyes as he chewed on his lip.

When I tried to free myself, he held fast. “No. You’re not understanding,” he said.

“I’m understanding just fine.” I locked down my emotions. Tight.

“Jesus, no you aren’t. Kendall, I don’t have any condoms with me.”

He was right. I didn’t understand, and I frowned as I dropped my head.

Finally, he held my face in his massive hands, forcing me to look at him. “If I don’t leave, I won’t be able to hold myself back. I’ll want to be inside you. Over and over.”

Relief relaxed my body into his. “Are you serious? That’s all?”

It was his turn to frown. “What do you mean, ‘that’s all’?”

“I think I have some in my purse.”

At my answer, his gaze narrowed, and his nostrils flared slightly. That muscle in his jaw worked overtime, and his breathing went a bit ragged. “I don’t even want to think about the why of you having them, because I’m not an idiot, and I know you had a life over the last ten years, but that doesn’t mean I have to like it.”

I lifted my brows at him, knowing damn well there was no way he’d been a monk over the years either.

“I don’t... um... I don’t use anyone else’s condoms,” he eventually got out.

My heart fluttered at the thought that he didn’t carry condoms and yet wouldn’t use some chick’s questionable rubbers. Because that meant he either didn’t have random hookups or he had someone steady. I wasn’t sure if I wanted the answer to that.

Suddenly, he lifted me and sat me on the counter. My short skirt did nothing to protect my bare butt from the cold granite, and I squeaked at the contact. He slid his hands from my knees up the outside of my thighs. When he paused, I knew what he’d found. I tried to grab his arm to stop him, but I was too late, and he was too strong.

“What the fuck?” he asked, tracing his fingers over the jagged scar as he stared at it.

I placed my hand over his and calmly held it. He glanced up at me. “Leave it,” I murmured.

He looked like he would argue, but then he wet his lips, and his pale blue gaze darted from one of my eyes to the other, trying to read me. I knew he wanted to push the issue, but I simply needed him first.

He breathed a sigh of resignation, palming each cheek. Determined, he nudged my knees apart so he could step between them, then tugged until his hot, hard length was nestled against my dripping core.

“I’d love nothing more than to shove my bare dick balls deep inside that tight pussy of yours, but I won’t disrespect you like that,” he ground out. His eyes flashed, and they looked like shards of ice.

“I’ve never gone without protection, except for that brief moment before you pulled out. But—”

“Me either,” he cut in.

“Not ever?”

“Never.”

“Oh boy.”

“Are you on birth control?”

“Yes.”

“How do you feel about me—”

“Yes,” I blurted, then immediately sucked my bottom lip between my teeth. I’d sounded desperate, and I hated that, but this was Vittorio. No one had ever felt like he did. No one ever affected me the way he did.

His gaze wandered a moment, and I knew he was thinking about backing out—until I saw it light on my cupcake. A wicked smile kicked the corner of his mouth up.

Before I could think to question that expression, he swiped a finger through the pink frosting. Then he painted my mouth with it. I released my bruised lip, and he leaned in to lick and suck the frosting off. My tongue tentatively chased his. While he did that, he was also reaching around me to unhook my bra. The tension of the fabric immediately released, and the straps fell off my shoulders.

“Take it off,” he whispered in a sultry demand.

Of course, I complied.

“Not that I didn’t love your tits before, but damn. They’re... bigger. Fucking beautiful.” Triumphant, he cupped my heavy breasts and pressed them together so he could dip his head to gather one in his mouth. Then he turned slightly to take the other one and suckle it. It felt amazing. He sucked hard, and I gasped at the direct connection to my goddamn core.

Without realizing it, I’d woven my fingers through his dark brown hair. With each deep pull of his mouth on my tit, I gripped his hair tight. It definitely wasn’t too orderly anymore.

When he released the current nipple with a pop, he grabbed the cupcake and shoved the frosting right over the tip, then repeated it with the other. At first I made a squawk of protest, but then he made sure to thoroughly clean it off. Both of them. It obviously took him a while, because he worked on that until I was squirming on the counter, afraid of the mess I was making.

I was wet. So fucking wet. And I wanted him more than I'd wanted a single solitary thing in my life.

Not true. But I wasn't going there right now.

He peppered kisses up my chest, then dragged his lips lightly up the slope of my shoulder until I shuddered and each breath came in rapid succession.

He nibbled on my earlobe.

Goose bumps spread like a flash flood across the surface of my skin.

His nose and mouth feathered over the curve of my cheek.

I sucked in a sharp breath.

When his mouth found mine, he gently sucked on my lower lip, and I tasted the lingering sweetness from the frosting. He pulled back, and his magical fucking eyes mesmerized me. Lifting his finger, smeared with more frosting, he slowly pushed it into my mouth.

I closed my lips around it and sucked.

He groaned, and his thick, hot length jumped between us. I wanted to grin at my victory. That I'd gotten to him. He'd worked me over for God knew how long, but finally, I had the upper hand. I spread my legs a little more and rocked them so I slid my release along the underside of his cock.

He swallowed hard, his Adam's apple bobbing as I curled my hand around his and started to suck on his finger the way I wanted to suck on his cock if he didn't shove it in my waiting hole right fucking now.

As if he'd read my mind, he pulled his hips back and lined the head up against me, swirling it in the slippery liquid that tattled on me and my excitement. He teased me with the tip, and I tightened my legs around him, pulling him in farther.

A primal growl rumbled deep inside him, and his hips drove forward, impaling me on his big, perfect shaft. "Fuck," he grunted when he was buried deep.

His finger left my mouth with a pop, and I leaned back to rest on my hands so I could see. His cuff links went flying. I heard them ping on the floor and bounce.

“Don’t care,” he murmured.

Both of us dropped our gazes to see where we were connected. The burn was glorious as he stretched me. When he took his time pulling out, I saw the glisten of me on him. He must’ve, too, because he reached down and gathered some on his thumb before pressing it to my clit again.

“Jesus Christ,” he groaned as I tightened my pussy walls around him.

“I can’t help it when you do that,” I whispered in a voice raspy with need.

He did it again, his breath harsh as I convulsed around his leisurely stroking dick. “I can see your pussy move when you do that.”

I barked out a hoarse laugh. “Imagine that.”

“Fuck, you feel good.” His pace increased but still remained too slow for my liking.

“Faster,” I encouraged.

“I don’t want this to end too soon,” he admitted as his crystalline gaze locked with mine. “I feel like I just got you back, and I want to savor this moment.”

“Vittorio,” I growled through gritted teeth. “We can do it again. As many times as you want if you will just. Fuck. Me.”

A guttural curse flew from him as he pulled my ass to the very edge of the counter. Right when I thought I might fall off, he hooked my legs over his corded forearms. Then he finally sped up, and I sighed.

Why? Why did he feel so much better than anyone else ever had?

Because we were made for each other.

His hips snapped at a rapid-fire pace, and each time he bottomed out, it took my breath away.

“Fucking Jesus,” he muttered as he watched his cock get swallowed up by my greedy pussy with each powerful thrust.

Since he’d abandoned my clit to hold my legs, I reached down and played with it myself.

“Motherfucker,” he gasped as he stared at my fingers between my legs. His head fell back, and his lashes fanned his chiseled cheeks. The cords of his neck were pronounced as his lips parted. Sweat trickled down his temple. I watched it roll over his jaw and drip to his chest, where it followed the valley between the perfect slabs that were his pecs.

He was stunning.

Pressure built within me, and I knew I was close. As if it was rippling through my body one section at a time, my muscles tensed. I knew he could tell, because his strokes grew as wild and frantic as my two fingers circling my clit. He was now fucking me so hard I could feel him damn near hitting up into my stomach.

Our sweat-slicked skin slapped as we connected.

Quiet grunts filled the air, but I had no idea if it was him, me, or both of us.

And then the dam burst.

With a scream, I came so hard, I soaked him. That time, a tidal wave of pleasure hurtled me through time and space. I was out of my body and out of control. He didn’t stop, which only prolonged those incredible sensations.

As the powerful contractions of my pussy faded away, I could hear us.

Each thrust echoed the wet sound, and I was mortified.

“Sonofabitch. Fuck. Holy shit, I’m gonna come so goddamn hard.” His fingers dug into the fronts on my thighs as he went absolute beast-mode on me. My tits shook violently with each savage thrust until he drove in especially hard and froze, buried deep. A primal roar burst from him, and I could feel the pulsing of his cock as it filled me.

Time lost meaning as we tried to get control of ourselves.

“That was so fucking hot,” he panted.

“Huh?” I gasped right back.

“You squirted on me.”

“I pissed on you?” I whisper-yelled.

Through his ragged breaths, he grinned. “No. That was squirting if I’ve ever seen it—which I haven’t, for your information. And it was hot as hell.”

“Christ,” I muttered.

When he released my legs, I winced.

“Shit, did I hurt you?” Concern bled from him.

“No, I just got stiff.”

Immediately, he scooped me up. I grimaced at the feeling of his cum leaking out of me because God only knew where all that was gonna end up. We’d been in my *kitchen*. I’d have to bleach everything. I buried my embarrassed face in his neck.

“Which room?” he asked.

“My grandma gave me hers,” I muttered. “But I need to get cleaned up.”

“The hell you do. I’m only gonna get you dirty again.”

He gently laid me on the bed.

“I at least need a towel,” I insisted.

He rolled his eyes, but he went into the bathroom. I heard the cupboard open and close. Then he came back out and gestured for me to lift my hips before carefully laying the towel under my ass.

Once I was situated, he spread my legs, and I tried to squeeze them shut. He was stronger than me, though, and his reprimanding glare made me pause. “I love seeing that on you. Never imagined that could be so fucking sexy.”

“What?” I was still a teeny bit embarrassed.

“My cum leaking out of your swollen pussy. Damn, I tore it up,” he replied in amazement.

I snorted, and my eyes went wide when I felt more leak out.

“Fuck,” he whispered, and I was shocked to see his hand sliding up and down around his already-hardening length.

He climbed between my legs and entered me again.

It took three more rounds before we fell into an exhausted heap.

Chapter NINETEEN



“Nothing Is Enough” –Devour The Day

Present day....

She draped over my side in a boneless sprawl. One leg was tucked over mine, her head rested over my still-pounding heart, and her hand lay flat on my abs. Across my chest, I could feel her little puffs of air with each exhale.

“Kendall?” I said quietly in case she was dozing.

“Hmm?” she immediately responded, so I lifted my head to see her eyes open, though heavy-lidded.

“It’s not important right now,” I murmured, not wanting to disturb her postcoital bliss.

But she lifted her head and propped her chin on her hand so she could meet my gaze. The green of her eyes in that moment was almost surreal. “I’m awake. What?”

Unsure, I wet my lips. Now that I'd opened my mouth, I wished I hadn't.

"Vittorio?" she asked, and I could see the worry beginning to form in the depths of those emerald orbs.

"Tell me about what happened. How you lost... him." I hated that I hadn't been there for her. I'd like to think that, had I known she was pregnant, I would've snuck away. But after my grandfather's threats, I honestly didn't know if that was true. Regardless, I wished I'd been there.

At that, she dropped her head back down, and I was sure she could hear how fast my heart was beating. My hand on her back, I slowly stroked her soft skin in what I hoped was a reassuring manner.

"You don't have to—"

"I was in a car accident. I'd literally hung up with Nonna right before that. I was crying or maybe I would've seen that the truck behind me wasn't stopping." She spoke so softly, I barely heard her—yet I did. She told me about being pushed into the intersection. The impact. The scar on her leg. All of it. I was sick to my stomach at the thought of what she went through—and worse, that she'd felt alone.

"Baby, I'm so sorry. I never told her I didn't want anything to do with you and the baby. I swear I didn't know." I couldn't tell her that enough. The pain was a gaping chasm in my chest. I could only imagine what it had been like for her.

"I believe you," she whispered.

I tightened my arm briefly and lifted my head to kiss the crown of hers.

"The one good thing was that right after the accident, a man stopped and held my hand. I was upside down and so damn scared. But Mario didn't let go until the paramedics got there."

My heart stuttered as I froze, and my blood ran cold. "What?" The word came out sounding like it had been dragged over hot coals.

She raised her head again, and a sad smile lifted the corners of her mouth. “Yeah. I never saw him again. But he witnessed the accident and was the first on the scene to check on me. I always wished I could’ve thanked him.”

“What did he look like? Maybe I could help you try to find him. It’s a long shot, but you never know.” Trying to force my voice to sound casual was a feat of astronomical proportions.

Before the words left her mouth, I knew. I already knew exactly how she would describe him, and I wanted to vomit. When she confirmed my worst imaginings, I wanted to destroy something. But I remained with her because I knew she needed me present in that moment.

After I shoved my rage down into the deepest, darkest part of my soul, I pulled her up and kissed her. Slow and full of all the love I had for her and the baby we’d lost. A baby I hadn’t known about until tonight.

I held her.

I didn’t ever want to let her go.

But I had something to do.

When her breathing fell into an even and steady rate, I carefully extracted myself from her warmth. She fussed a bit and reached toward where I’d been, but I held her hand, and she settled. When her hand relaxed, I gently let go.

Then I sent a message to Dario.

As quickly and as quietly as I could, I dressed while I rummaged around in the kitchen for something to write with. As I tucked in my shirt, I saw the small grocery list notepad on the fridge. I ripped a piece of paper from it and scrawled a quick note.

Baby,

I had some things to take care of. I promise I’ll be back as soon as I can.

I still love you.

Vittorio

Then I folded my jacket over my arm and quietly let myself out. I made a mental note to chew her ass out for not using the alarm system. Then I decided to get her a better one. Hell, maybe I'd just move her in with me.

At the bottom of the metal stairs, I saw Dario and Santino waiting by the car. Santino gave me a chin lift, stepped to the side, and took a seat at one of the bistro chairs outside the bakery.

Tension coiled in my shoulders as we pulled away from the curb. Dario handed me my shoulder holster, and I verified it had what I needed in it. Then I put it on and shrugged into my jacket.

“Got some bad news,” Dario began.

I groaned. How much more could we take? “What?” I asked as I pinched the bridge of my nose.

“Your girl’s date? Konstantin Woodsman isn’t his name.”

My hand fell to my side. “Come again?”

“You heard right,” he grimly confirmed.

“Then who the fuck is he?”

Dario shook his head. “Konstantin Makarov.”

“You have to be fucking kidding me,” I deadpanned.

“Nope.”

“Was he fucking with her to get to us?” I demanded.

“It doesn’t look like it. From what we gathered, he’s here getting the lay of the land. Rumor has it that’s who the Bratva is sending to run the Russian faction now.”

“Great,” I muttered. “I’ll talk to Gabriel tonight.”

We rode in silence for a few blocks.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Dario asked as I adjusted my sleeves.

“Are you sure your name isn’t actually Dr. Phil?” I snapped in irritation.

He shook his head, but as he turned to the window, he smirked.

It wasn't long before we'd stopped outside the run-down house I'd had the little gang prick at. Dario and I got out. Catalano and Georgie were already there when we went inside. I gave them a curt nod but didn't stop. They all fell in behind me.

Our footsteps sounded like thunder as we headed to the basement.

It smelled like old piss and shit. Not gonna lie, my stomach revolted for a second. Or two.

The battered man chained to the wall hung from his arms. Not pausing for a second, I stormed over to him, grabbed his dark hair, and jerked his head up.

"Ow, fuck," he muttered through split lips and missing teeth. His left eye was practically swollen shut.

"Hello, brother." My sarcasm was heavy.

"Fuck off," he gasped.

"I don't think so," I replied in a light and matter-of-fact manner that I certainly wasn't feeling. What I wanted to do was rip him limb from limb with my bare hands.

He grunted.

"Now, how about we try this again? Who were you working with? Because we know you didn't have enough men to pull off the warehouse ambush on your own." I led with that because I was itching to inflict pain.

"I was working with Fuck and You," he spat.

"Mmm, I was hoping you'd say that." I reached into my jacket and unsnapped the sheath. Then I pulled out the knife. I checked the blade with my thumb and was satisfied with the thin edge. Contemplating the man we'd had Angel heal enough to keep alive so we could get information from him, I debated where I wanted to strike first.

I tossed the knife in the air and caught it by the hilt, blade pointing down. Then I buried it in the joint of Mario's shoulder. He screamed, and I smiled.

“Still not talking? Huh. Well, you might be interested to know that Hefty told us you approached him. We weren't happy that he didn't tell us immediately, but then I found out you had his daughter. That was really foolish of you. So that one was for Hefty.”

“Fuck that fat piece of shit,” he grunted.

I jerked out the knife. He shrieked briefly, then passed out, and I sighed. Blood poured over his now-dingy white shirt. I wiped the blood from the blade on his other sleeve. “Grab the ammonia.”

Georgie handed the small vial to me. I snapped it and held it under Mario's nose. He jerked and gagged.

I patted his cheek. “Now, where were we? Oh yes. Let's take a walk down memory lane, shall we?”

He spit at me, but it didn't even get close.

“That was just sad.”

He sneered. Ballsy fucker. God, I hated him before, but I loathed him now.

“Remember a little trip you took to Grand Rapids about, oh, ten years ago?”

At first, he looked confused, but then he started laughing maniacally.

I ground my teeth but stayed quiet.

“You were such a sucker. My only regret is that I didn't fuck her before I had them hit her. It would've been epic. Her bent over with your baby hanging down in front of her while I shoved my cock in her. And she was so fuckin' pitiful. ‘Boohoo! I hurt! Boohoo! I'm scared!’ Do you think your little bastard died right away, or do you think it died in the hospital?”

Rage engulfed me, my entire body shaking as I fought not to lose my cool. Agony over a loss I hadn't had time to process had me reaching into my jacket again. I pulled out my pistol, then the silencer, which I calmly and meticulously attached to the barrel.

Inside my head, chaos reigned as I screamed and destroyed everything around me. Yet to the casual observer, I was cool, calm, and collected.

"Vittorio?" Catalano said. I could hear the uncertainty in his tone. He was wondering if this was a scare tactic. He had no idea I was past that.

"Boss," Dario called out as I lifted my arm. But he was too slow.

I shot Mario in the dick, reveling in his cries as the darkness seeped through my veins. He passed out again, but I heartlessly waved the ammonia under his nose again. He coughed and choked.

"Grandfather sent me to do it!" he immediately shouted in a high-pitched tone. "He wanted her to die, too, but I let her live!"

The vicious blackness closed in. I placed the gun to his forehead.

"You little pissant. You ain't got the guts. Gabriel will have your ass and you know it," he sneered.

Disrespectful to the end.

He tried. I'll give him that.

"That's something I'm willing to face," I coldly replied as I pulled the trigger.

"Vittorio!" everyone yelled at once.

Dario jumped in front of me and grabbed my face. Eyes wild, he stared at me. "Jesus fucking Christ, what did you do?"

My chest was heaving as I stood there without answering. Finally, I replied, "He killed my baby."

"Oh fuck," Dario mumbled.



“Have you lost your ever-loving, motherfucking mind?” Gabriel asked me. “We have shit blowing up all over the place, and you killed our only source of information at the moment!”

Staring into space, I sat in a dusty chair in the kitchen of the shithole Mario was now rotting in.

“Vittorio. Are you listening to me?”

I blinked. Then I made eye contact. “I hear you. I’m not sorry. But he wasn’t going to tell us anything. He tried to kill us, Gabriel.” I fought to swallow down the bile that rose in my throat. “He killed my baby, and he did it following our grandfather’s orders. Kendall was supposed to die too. The only reason I’m not on a plane to Sicily this very second is because I know that evil fucker has too many people there. But the next time he comes back to Chicago to visit? I’m putting a bullet between his eyes too.”

“Christ.” Gabriel ran a hand through his hair, making it stand up wildly. I’d laugh if I had it in me at the moment.

“Somehow, our precious patriarch found out Kendall was pregnant. Of course, he never told me. I have no idea if it was him that got to Kendall’s grandmother, or if she just thought she was protecting her granddaughter. Either way, Kendall believed I knew about the baby, and that I didn’t want it or her. It was a boy.” Though I sat there for all intents and purposes as an emotionless statue, I was broken. A single tear fell and rolled down my face. I felt it drop off my chin.

“Vittorio,” Gabriel said, his voice cracking.

“I did *everything* he asked.” I slammed the side of my fist on the beat-up table. “He promised me that if I did what he wanted, he would leave her alone. I didn’t contact her. I didn’t so much as *look her up*. I studied business. No, I didn’t graduate, but I’ve worked for The Family every day since I left school. Why? Why would he do that? Why did he hate me so much?” I cried, defeated and devastated.

“I don’t know,” Gabriel murmured as he slowly shook his head.

I knew he didn’t. Our grandfather was a hateful man. There was no rhyme or reason to his actions. He did what he wanted, when he wanted, and damn how it affected anyone else.

I got to my feet. “I have to go.”

“Brother, let Dario take you home to get cleaned up. You can’t go back to her like that. I’m assuming that’s where you’re going?” Gabriel had his jacket unbuttoned and pushed back, his fists were propped on his hips.

Disconnected, I glanced down and saw the blood splattered all over me. My hands were stained with it. It was drying under my nails. My thoughts chaotic, I nodded, then followed Dario out the back door, where he could load me up without being seen.

The ride back to my condo was a blur. I stripped in my bathroom, discarding my clothing in a pile that Dario bagged up and made disappear. I turned on the water as hot as it would go, then climbed in. Steam billowed around me, but I was so numb I couldn’t feel anything.

As I stared at the floor, the swirling pink water was disappearing down the drain. My movements robotic, I scrubbed under my nails and washed myself twice.

Memories assaulted me.

The night before Kendall left ten years ago, her grandmother had caught me after I dropped her off. She confronted me.

“Vittorio, I heard what you said to her.”

“What?” I pretended I had no idea what she was talking about.

“How long?”

“I’m not sure what you mean,” I hedged.

“How long have you been seeing her?”

Knowing I was caught, I ran a hand through my hair. "Almost all summer."

She closed her eyes and cursed in Italian. Then she looked at me through a shimmer of tears. "You can't do this. You can't go with her."

"Why not? I'm eighteen. I can go anywhere I want. I'll wait for her. I love her," I explained, sure she'd understand.

Slowly, she shook her head. "I'm sure you think you do. She's a wonderful girl. But, Vittorio... you're a De Luca."

"So? I don't need my family. I don't want that life," I argued.

"My boy, it doesn't matter what you want. Giacomo will never let you go. If you don't see that, then you're a fool. You're the second youngest grandson. If you leave, he'll go after you, and he won't hesitate to hurt her. Please, you know it's true. Don't make my granddaughter suffer because of foolish young love. You live in two different worlds." The sadness and regret in her gaze ripped me apart.

"If I leave her, she'll be devastated," I tried again. "It'll break her heart."

And mine.

"Better she be devastated and learn to get past it than be dead."

I pulled my lower lip in and raked my teeth over it. I couldn't look at her—because I knew she was right. I'd been living in a dream world where I got a happily ever after.

Inhaling a deep shuddering breath, I let it out. Finally, I nodded.

"I'm doing it because I love her. She's not going to believe it, but I understand." I ignored the burning at the back of my throat.

She rested a hand on my arm, but I carefully shrugged her off. With my shoulders slouched and my hands shoved in my pockets, I walked away from the best thing I'd ever had.

How did I not see that he was behind everything? Mario had seen me with Kendall, and I knew it. I thought I was such hot shit. I'd believed that because I told him I was only doing a favor for Luciano, Mario wouldn't have any idea what was really going on.

Water ran over my face and in my eyes, but there wasn't enough to wash away all the sins I'd committed. How was I going to tell her that it was my fault she'd lost our baby? Should I even tell her at all? But if I didn't, it would eat at me until I rotted from the inside out. She would never forgive me. I'd finally gotten her back, yet I would be losing her in the same fell swoop.

I rested my arms on the tile wall and laid my head against them. The hot water beat down on me, but still, I felt nothing.

Chapter TWENTY



Kendall

“I Don’t Wanna Love Somebody Else”– A Great Big World

Seventeen years old....

“Be good, sprite. I’ll see you at Thanksgiving,” Nonna said as she hugged me at Union Station near the Amtrak ticketing kiosk. It was busy, and people milled around us, some meandering, some rushing as if they were about to miss their train.

Nearly giddy, I squeezed her tightly. “Absolutely. Thank you again for letting me chill with you all summer.”

“Pssh! It was my pleasure. You were a great help, as always. I can’t thank you enough.”

“You paid me, Nonna,” I chided as I laughed.

She pulled back and held me by the shoulders, her expression serious. “Kendall, good help is hard to find, and

your time is valuable. Remember that. You. Have. Value. Don't base who you are and how happy you are on anyone else. Everything happens for a reason, and sometimes we have to learn to let go so we can fly."

"Oooo-kay, Nonna." Her sage words had me giving her a frowning smile because she wasn't making a lot of sense. Then again, she always did like to give me cryptic advice. Part of her personality that I loved.

She used her cool hands to cradle my cheeks. "I love you so much, Kendall. One day, you'll run my bakery, and you'll create beautiful things, meet a wonderful man who supports you and keeps you safe, and have little babies who love sweets as much as their mama. You, my darling, are my legacy."

Tears swam in my eyes. Nonna was never upset that my mom wasn't interested in the bakery. She only wanted what made Mom happy. But she was so pleased that the bakery was in my blood. Truth be told, I was too. And what she'd said really hit home, because I'd already met that man. One day, when I was a grown adult, we would be together, and we would return to Chicago. I could see it all now—I would run the bakery, and we would have a family.

"Thank you, Nonna. That means so much to me." I gripped her wrists and gave a gentle squeeze.

She gave me another big hug.

"You don't need to stay with me. I'm a big girl. I know you need to get back," I assured her.

"Are you sure?" She searched my face with a furrowed brow.

"I'm absolutely sure. I'm not five anymore. I know how to listen for my train and not talk to strangers. I've got my tickets, and I know where to go." Playfully, I shook the tickets in front of her.

Despite my teasing, she looked worried about me, and I thought it was sweet. Finally, she shook her head, and with a soft smile, she relented. "Call me if there are any issues with your train and you need me to come back."

“You know I will.”

With one last kiss to my cheek, she walked off.

Though I was sad for the summer to be over, I was excited. I glanced at the time on my phone, then scanned the crowd in Union Station. I’d already dropped off my suitcase in the baggage area, so I was ready to go. With my backpack slung over my shoulder, I stood alone in the middle of the Great Hall.

Me: I’m waiting in front of the Amtrak ticketing kiosk

I watched for the dots telling me he was replying, but they didn’t come. I figured he wasn’t able to right now and hoped everything was okay.

Me: I can’t wait to see you

Still nothing.

I shoved my phone in my back pocket. With an hour before my train left, I chewed on my lip, trying to decide whether I should go wandering around or stay put. Since I had time, I figured I might as well sit my ass down.

My brow pinched as I looked for an open seat. Finally, I saw an opening and hurried over. Once I was in place, I pulled my phone out again. With each minute that rolled by, I scooted closer to the edge of my seat. My anxiety ratcheted higher as they made the announcement that my train was boarding in five minutes.

Me: I need to head over to board. Are you here yet?

Dead silence.

I knew I needed to head toward the train. Maybe he planned on meeting me there. Hell, maybe he was already there.

Calling his number, I held the phone to my ear as I wove through the crowd toward my concourse. It rang and rang before it went to his voice mail.

People were starting to board when I arrived at my train, and I popped up on my tippy toes to see over the crowd, looking for dark hair and crystal-blue eyes. When I didn't see him, I glanced at my phone. I was running out of time. My heart started to pound, and I tried hopping to see better. A dark head with headphones on wove through the crowd, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

Until he looked up and I saw his brown eyes lift.

Disappointment weighed me down. I tried calling again.

Voice mail.

Me: Vittorio? Where are you?

Time seemed to be ticking by at an accelerated rate. Before I knew it, nearly everyone was onboard, and only a few stragglers were rushing in. The train would leave whether the ticketed passengers were all there or not. I needed to board.

I sent another text telling him which seat was mine. He was supposed to get there early enough to make sure we could change our seats to be together.

“Miss? Are you riding this train?” a woman asked me. “It’s the one to Grand Rapids, right?”

“Yes.”

She sighed in relief. “Thank you. I’ve never taken the train, and I feel so lost.”

I gave her a tight smile.

As she climbed on, she glanced back at me. “Um, shouldn’t you be boarding?”

With my brows knotting in the center, I glanced around again. My shoulders fell, and my chest ached. “Yeah, I should.”

With heavy feet, I went down the aisle and found my seat. I was happy to see I was by a window. With my nose practically pressed to the glass, I stared out the window, watching for Vittorio to come running.

But he never did.

As the train pulled out of the station, I made excuses. Something happened. He got stuck in traffic. There was an accident, and he was hurt. In the accident, his phone was crushed, and he couldn't contact me.

Except every excuse fell flat because he would've found a way to contact me.

If he wanted to.

Me: I guess you decided not to come

The cold, hard truth was that he wasn't coming, and he probably never had any intention of being there. Everything he'd told me was a lie.

Then there was the sad fact that for weeks after I got home, I still tried to contact him. I texted, called, even sent a written goddamn letter.

Certified.

Signature and return receipt requested.

I even messaged his older brother, Gabriel. I wasn't stupid, but evidently, I was desperate.

Gabriel told me I needed to let it go. That was it. Then I think he blocked my number.

After a month had gone by, I deleted Vittorio's number from my phone.

Then I wished I hadn't.

Chapter TWENTY-ONE



Kendall

“Everybody’s Fool” –Evanescence

Seventeen Years Old....

“I’m sorry, sprite, but he said to tell you not to call him anymore,” my nonna quietly admitted.

Tears burned behind my lids as I gripped the steering wheel tighter. “Did you tell him *why* I’m trying to call him?” I choked out. “I’ve been calling for months.”

She was the only one who knew, and I’d sworn her to secrecy.

Through my phone’s speaker, I heard her take a deep breath before she sighed heavily. Her voice cracked when she admitted, “I did.”

“And he still said that?” I sniffled as my lower lip trembled.

“I’m so sorry, sweetheart,” she whispered.

“I-I-It’s o-o-okay,” I stuttered. “I’ll call you later.”

“Kendall—” she started, but I didn’t hear anything further because I reached down into my lap and ended the call. I threw my phone in my purse and snapped it shut as the first tear fell. It had been raining, almost like Mother Nature was in sync with my heart.

A sob broke loose, and I blinked away the blur from the tears. The light up ahead turned yellow, so I slowed down and came to a stop at the red. Tears continued to fall, and I felt so alone. I rested one hand on my stomach as my violent crying started to make me feel sick.

The lights rapidly approaching in my rearview caught my attention right before they collided with the back of my car. The deafening cacophony of crunching metal, breaking glass, and the unholy screech of tires registered before another sound broke through—a honking horn, blinding headlights, and another impact. My car seemed suspended, and I was weightless before my head slammed into the side window and I was thrown back and forth. Shards of glass flew around me like tiny missiles, and the world spun.

When everything came to a standstill, I was upside down, my hair hanging in my face, choking me as I sucked in painful breaths and it pulled into my mouth.

Everything hurt, and I was disoriented and confused. My hands were pressed to the roof of the car that seemed much too close to the top of my head. One wrist throbbed painfully and I had to pull it back to my chest.

“Miss? Are you okay?” I heard from what seemed like a tunnel.

Something warm dripped on my hand. Slowly, I turned my head toward the voice. Through my curtain of hair, I could barely make out a young man with dark hair and worried brown eyes. He was crouched to look through my shattered window.

“I’m stuck,” I rasped, fumbling with the seat belt release.

“No! Don’t do that yet,” he instructed. “The fire department is on their way. Can you hear the sirens?”

I used one shaking hand to push my hair out of the way, and pieces of glass fell out of the tangled strands. The movement took my breath away. “I hurt,” I groaned. “So bad.”

The sirens grew closer.

“What’s your name?” he asked me.

“K-K-Kendall,” I told him with a wince as pain shot through me.

“Hey, Kendall,” he kindly returned as he reached in and held my hand. “My name’s Mario. I’m not gonna leave you, okay?”

“Okay,” I whispered as I began to cry again.

There was a commotion, and he slowly released my hand. I cried out and wildly reached for him.

“They’re here,” he explained, but then he was gone, and a man was in his place. Everything anyone else said after that became wordless mumbling, though their mouths still moved.

My head was pounding, and I didn’t feel good. Things seemed to turn black in my peripheral vision, but I was aware of being jostled and then gently but painfully extracted from the car. The sheer agony of each movement was unbearable, and I thought I would pass out.

“No! No! No! No! No! No!” I screamed. Desperation clawed at my throat as I felt like I was being split in two, and my leg was on fire.

Then everything faded away.



I woke up days later in a hospital bed. Stiff and sore, I tried to sit up only to collapse with a shriek. Everything was painful, but my leg was excruciating.

There was a sudden rustle, and then my mom was in my view.

“Baby! Oh my God, baby, I’m here. I’m here.” Tears streamed down her face as she gently cradled mine in her soft hands.

“What...?” My voice was hoarse as I glanced around, trying to figure out what was going on. “What happened?”

“Shh,” she soothed as she pressed the call light thing. “It’s okay. You’re okay.”

But I wasn’t. There was a void in me. I felt hollow and empty. Broken.

And a terrifying fear hit me.

One shaking hand went to my abdomen. My *flat* abdomen.

“Mom?” I asked, panic setting in. Tears spilled from my eyes that wouldn’t stop. The accident came back in high-speed flashes—the horrific sounds, the pain, the terror.

“The doctor said you should still be able to have more babies later,” she murmured as she smoothed my hair.

“What? No! Mom!” My heart was racing so fast, and I couldn’t fucking breathe. That baby—my son—was my only link to Vittorio, the last piece of him I had. With the realization that I’d be doing everything without the father of my baby, I’d been scared, but I already loved my baby boy, and I hadn’t even met him.

She bit her lip as she glanced over her shoulder. A nurse came bustling in, quickly joined by others. She was talking and fussing over me, but all I could hear was a steady tone that didn’t quit. A cast encased my left arm from my hand to just before my elbow, and I used it as a weapon as I swung.

“Get away from me!” I shouted, half out of my mind.

Everyone was talking at once, but I could only stare at what used to be as I cried ugly, heart-wrenching sobs.

God knew how much time had passed before I tapered off into shuddering breaths and stared blankly at the ceiling. I

hated the smell in there. I hated the stark room and lack of warmth. I was cold.

So incredibly cold.

My teeth chattered, and I shook violently.

My mom piled blankets on me as she called for the nurse again.

They gave me something that made me feel floaty, and my eyes wouldn't stay open anymore. Everything faded away until my world was a different place.

In that strange plane, Vittorio was there. He kissed me softly, and his eyes were full of the love he made me believe. But then he grew angry and shoved me away.

"How could you?" he demanded.

"It wasn't my fault," I frantically replied, holding on to his shirt.

"You killed him!" he spat at me. The hatred on his face ripped my heart out.

"Vittorio," I pleaded as I reached for him, but he floated away from me until he disappeared.

"No! Don't go!" I screamed, but it was too late.

I woke up to my mom trying to calm me down. I was given more medicine, and I faded away again.

This time, there was nothing but blackness. And I never wanted to leave it.



I sat in the chair in my room, blinking as I gazed out the window at the sky. White, fluffy clouds drifted by, uncaring of the lifelessness within me.

"Look, Kendall," my mom cheerfully said as she set a take-out bag on the portable table. I didn't respond. I didn't

even look her way. “It’s your favorite.”

I was vaguely aware of an aroma, but it turned my stomach.

She rolled the table so it spanned over my lap, then lowered it, but still I stared through the glass. I made no move to touch the food she presented. I didn’t acknowledge her presence.

“Honey, you need to eat. The physical therapist said you need to build your strength back up. I can help you, if you want.” She cut the food and lifted a fork to my mouth, but I didn’t acknowledge her. She nudged my lips with the warm food, but I didn’t budge. I wasn’t hungry.

A frustrated sigh escaped her. “I don’t know what to do,” she murmured.

“Leave her be.” My father’s quiet Irish brogue came from behind me.

“She has to eat,” Mom brokenly said.

“You can’t force her,” he soothed before I tuned them out. I knew they were talking in hushed tones, but I ignored them.

They both kissed me and reluctantly left.

The sky darkened, and a sprinkling of stars blossomed in the sky. The nurse came in later and helped me back to bed. It still hurt, though not as bad as before. When everything was quiet and the lights were dimmed, I dropped my gaze to my lap. Slowly, I peeled the covers back. With my right hand, I gathered my gown in my fingers, making it bunch up until the hem was above my plain white cotton panties. Tentatively, I ran my trembling palm over my stomach.

A tear fell.

My attention slid lower, and I stared at the ugly black stitches that went up my thigh to my hip. I remembered someone telling me that part of the door or the dash—hell, it didn’t really matter—had snapped off and been embedded along my leg. The skin was puckered and angry-looking.

I quickly covered myself with my gown, then lowered the head of the bed but didn't bother fixing my covers. I turned my head to the side.

A soft cry broke free, and I sobbed until I had no more tears left.

"I don't want to be here anymore," I whispered, my throat raw. I was answered with silence. "Why didn't you take me too?"

No one replied.

Chapter TWENTY-TWO



Kendall

“The First Time” –blink-182

Present day....

There was a knock on the door, and with a bright smile, I hurried to let him in. Except when I swung the door wide, it wasn't the De Luca I was expecting.

“Alessio?” I hadn't seen him in years, but there was no mistaking the slash of his dark brows as one climbed higher than the other. Or that smirk.

“Hello, beautiful. Can I come in?”

“Ever the charmer.” I swept my hand across my front and into the apartment in invitation.

He stepped over the threshold, and the magnitude of his sheer presence was enough to make the apartment feel claustrophobic. Alessio was charismatic, sweet, driven, and, at times, intense. He was quite a character.

“So this is where you and my big brother snuck around and almost got caught by your nonna, huh?”

My face heated as my jaw hit the floor. “He *told* you about that?”

“There’s not a lot about Vittorio I don’t know. He, Gabriel, and I were the closest. Maybe because the twins had each other?” He shrugged as if it didn’t really matter.

“Why are you here? Where’s Vittorio?” Worry crept in, and though I wasn’t sure what was going on, a sixth sense told me it wasn’t good.

“Falling apart, I imagine.”

“What?” My eyes bugged out, and I had no idea what to do. I wanted to shake Alessio and yell at him to stop being so cryptic and tell me what the fuck was going on.

“He loves you, but since he’s not here yet, I’m afraid he’s drowning in some serious guilt and is trying to talk himself into walking away. My guess is he’s telling himself you’re better off without him and away from the mess that is The Family.” He watched me and my reaction carefully.

I clenched my teeth as my hands curled into fists. “Are you fucking serious right now?”

A sad smile lifted one side of his mouth. “I’m afraid I am.”

“Then why are you here?”

He walked farther into the kitchen, trailing his fingertips over the countertop. When he reached the spot Vittorio and I had beautifully defiled, I almost swallowed my tongue as I stood there paralyzed, praying he didn’t know about that too. God, how mortifying that would be. But he kept moving without pause.

He tapped the tray of cookies I’d just made for Vittorio. “Did you make these?”

“Yes. But that doesn’t answer my question. Where is Vittorio, and why are you here?”

He sighed, then locked his dark eyes on mine. “Because I needed to find out if you could handle his darkness, and if you were willing to be the one who would anchor him and pull him from that soul-sucking abyss. If not, then you two won’t work. If you can, then he needs you.”

Without hesitation, I stomped to my room, slipped my feet into a pair of Vans, and grabbed my phone and keys. Then I stopped in front of him. “Let’s go.”

A smile slowly curved his mouth. “I was hoping you’d say that.”



Alessio had two men standing next to a black car at the curb outside the bakery. With a frown, I glanced at the car, then him. “This is you?” I pointed.

One of the men opened the back door, and Alessio took my hand to help me in. I sat on the butter-soft leather, and he waited until I was completely in before closing the door.

He went around to the other side, and as one of the men held his door, he joined me in the back seat. The man wasted no time closing Alessio’s door and rounding the vehicle. Both of the suited guys got in the front seat, and we quickly pulled out into traffic.

Trying not to think of what was going on with Vittorio, I smoothed my hand over the leather before I glanced at Alessio, who was watching me. “So this is how the other half lives, huh?”

He snorted a laugh.

Twisting my lips to the side, I folded my hands in my lap to keep from being fidgety. After a few minutes of silence, I turned to Alessio. “Can you give me a heads-up on what to expect? I have nothing to go on, but I want to help Vittorio in any way I can. The way you came over... I’m worried.”

“I can’t tell you the specifics, Kendall. That’s up to him and what he wants you to know. But what I *can* say is he made a bold move today, and I don’t know if he made it with a clear head, but it’s too late either way.” He huffed without humor. “Gabriel called me and asked if I would talk to you, so here I am.”

Unease settled in my chest, and I gulped. “That’s not super reassuring. Is he hurt?”

“Not visibly—that I’m aware of. But he’s beating himself up, and I’m afraid he’ll make a self-destructive decision if left to his own devices. He needs to be reminded that you love him, and he needs to know you’re strong enough to stand by his side.”

“I’ll do whatever I have to do. I’m not walking away from him—not again.” My heart couldn’t handle it a second time.

The car slowed, and I glanced out the window to see we’d stopped in front of a tall building.

“We’re here,” Alessio said before climbing out when the driver opened the door. The other guy opened my side. He held out his callused hand, palm up, and I rested mine there so he could help me out.

I stared up at the imposing building. “He’s in there?” I asked.

Alessio nodded, then held out his elbow for me to loop my hand through.

When we went inside, I was blown away. It was a bustling high-rise full of a variety of people: business suits, women with children, and some maintenance workers doing something on a scaffolding.

“What is this place?” It was bright, modern, and airy—so different from the home Vittorio grew up in.

“There are several businesses, a legal office or two, office space, condos, maybe some other things. Our offices are here, and we all have a condo in the building. It’s owned by DL Enterprises.”

I knew I wasn't imagining the pride in his voice, and I was sure "DL" stood for "De Luca."

We went through a security checkpoint that Alessio was waved through, then into another area with a separate bank of elevators that he used his fingerprint to access. I lifted my brows at him, and he gave me that signature Alessio smirk.

With each floor we passed, my nerves went ballistic. My heart started to gallop, and my stomach flipped and fluttered. We stopped a few floors from the top and the doors slid open. There were no long hallways, just two doors on either side of a space the size of an average residential garage. It was painted a rich burgundy, and on the wall straight ahead was a narrow table with a painting above it that looked insanely like one Vittorio and I had seen at the art museum.

Alessio saw what held my attention, and a sad smile lifted his cheeks. "Our brother—Francesco."

Though I'd forgotten, I remembered hearing my grandmother say he had died. "He had a son? Right?"

"Charlie. He's the coolest little dude." The love in his tone warmed my heart.

"So this is Vittorio's condo?"

"Well, that side is." He motioned to the right. "I share that one with Leo. I'm rarely home, and neither is he, so it works." He lifted a shoulder in his perfectly tailored suit. No one could say the De Luca brothers didn't know how to wear a suit.

"You each have *half the building*?" I asked in amazement.

He unlocked Vittorio's door as he chuckled. "Gabriel has the penthouse on the entire top floor."

We could hear water running inside.

"Let me make sure everything is okay," Alessio said.

He briskly walked down a hall, and I nervously twisted my hands as I took in the floor-to-ceiling windows that overlooked Millennium Park. It was a beautiful view, but I couldn't get past my worry to really enjoy it.

Footsteps approached, and I turned around to find Alessio returning. “He’s in the shower. Do you need me to stay? I don’t mind.”

“No, it’s okay.” I wasn’t sure what I’d do if Vittorio did try to push me away, but I didn’t want witnesses if he did.

“Do you have your phone?”

I grabbed it from my back pocket and held it up. He extended a hand, and I gave it to him, watching as he called a number. A phone in his pocket rang. He dug it out and answered, then hung up and returned my phone to me.

“Now you have my number if shit... goes south. I’ll come get you and take you home if need be.”

“Thank you,” I murmured.

“No, thank *you*. I’ll be in touch.”

I nodded, and he left.

Suddenly beyond nervous, I tried to decide whether I should wait out here or go to his room. The pull was too strong, however, and I found myself cautiously following the sound of running water. The bedroom door was slightly ajar, and I slipped inside. The bathroom door was wide open, and steam poured around a tiled wall of what seemed to be a walk-in shower.

Making up my mind, I toed off my Vans, then stripped out of my jeans and T-shirt. Then I dropped my undergarments. My bare feet barely made a sound as I crossed the floor and entered the shower. My heart broke at the defeated position of the man I loved. One forearm was braced on the wall, his head resting on it. His free hand was splayed on the wall at his drooped shoulder level.

For a moment, I was captivated by the beautiful form that stood in the cascading water. The sculpted muscles appeared hewn from stone, like the statues in the museum—carved by an artist, or even by the gods themselves. He was beautiful.

Taking a huge chance, I approached. When I was within a foot of him, he lifted his head, sensing my presence. But

before he could turn to face me, I whispered his name and wrapped my arms around his waist, pressing my cheek to his strong back.

At my initial touch, he jumped and tried to turn, but I stood fast and held him tight.

“You shouldn’t be here,” he croaked in a voice that seemed ripped from his soul.

“This is exactly where I need to be,” I corrected.

Using the slipperiness of our wet skin, he spun in my hold. We didn’t speak. He simply held me close.

“We belong together,” I told him. “Two halves of a whole.”

“Kendall,” he whispered, but I wasn’t going to let him get away with ending this because he didn’t think he was good enough for me or some other stupid bullshit.

My palms flat on his chest, I jerked my head back. “No. There’s no me without you. Let me be whole. Let me be there for you. Alessio wouldn’t tell me exactly what was going on, but he said they thought you were trying to talk yourself into letting me go. That’s not happening.”

“Baby,” he murmured as he pushed the wet hair out of my face. “There’s so much you don’t know.”

“It doesn’t matter.” I reached up and cupped his cheeks, the short hairs of his beard tickling my hands. “Ten years we lost. We have a lifetime ahead of us. The past is the past. We can’t change it. We can only go forward.”

“Even if my past is what hurt you?”

“What?”

“It’s my fault that you lost the baby.”

A humorless, huffed laugh burst free, and I stared at him like he was certifiable. “It wasn’t your fault. It was an accident.”

His face went impassive as he looked away, forcing one of my hands to fall away.

“Vittorio?”

He closed his eyes, as if he was unable to look at me. “Something you said when you told me about the accident... it got me thinking. I confronted the person who I thought might be responsible. He admitted to it. Bragged about it.”

My lungs seized. I could not get oxygen in, and black dots swam before my eyes.

His arms tightened, and his fingers dug into my flesh in a bruising manner. “Kendall, stay with me. Breathe, baby. Breathe.”

At his demand, I sucked in a ragged, gasping inhale. My vision cleared, but I was tingling head to toe. If he let me go, I’d likely fall to my knees. “Why?” I croaked through a throat parched from the burn of my building tears.

“It’s a long story. Basically, my grandfather ordered it, and Mario was an ass-kissing piece of shit.”

“M-M-Mario?” My legs buckled.

He turned us so my back hit the tiles, his body holding me up. He gripped my head and pressed his forehead to mine. Nose beside mine, he stared into my eyes. The agony I knew was in mine was mirrored in his.

“This is why Alessio was right. I can’t expect you to be with me when I was the reason for your greatest loss.”

Pain sliced through me with each unanswered question that slashed through my brain, the wounds reopened and bleeding fresh. The devastation when I realized Vittorio wasn’t going to show up at the train station. The heartbreak when he wouldn’t answer my initial text messages or calls. The fear and uncertainty the day I found out I was pregnant. The regret that I’d deleted his number. The pain and fury when I was told he didn’t want anything to do with us. The emptiness when I realized my baby was gone. The bleakness and the hopelessness that dragged me under and almost killed me. All of it crashed over me.

“Kendall! Look at me!” He shook me.

I'd been staring right at him, but I was too locked in my memories to respond. My first protective instinct was to run—to hate him. But sanity prevailed, and I blinked away the tears that poured from my eyes. If I did that, I was proving to him that he was right to let me go—proving I wasn't strong enough to stand by his side through the hard things we were sure to face.

And more than the self-preservation, I wanted to live my life beside him.

The fierceness in his gaze reminded me of a wild animal. I rested my trembling hands on either side of his neck, his pulse pounding against my palms. “It. Wasn't. Your. Fault.”

“God, Kendall,” he said as he shook his head in disbelief. “I don't deserve you.”

“Together we are stronger,” I whispered, dropping one hand to cover the tattoo on his side. The same one his brother had. In my darkest days, I'd looked it up. I didn't know why, but I did.

“Fuck,” he breathed before his lips crashed to mine. We clung to each other as the kiss said everything we couldn't—everything we didn't have words for.

“Up,” he grunted, and I hopped up to throw my legs around him. He held me tight.

Because he had me.

He fumbled for the faucet and shut the water off.

Then he carried me to the bed, dripping water the entire way.

Holding me with one arm, he shifted us fully onto the center of the mattress. Through it all, his tongue lashed against mine. We broke free only to adjust.

My hands were everywhere, trying to relearn every inch of him. I reveled in the changes ten years had brought him. The broader shoulders, the thicker muscles, that thick, hard cock that I swore was bigger—I worshipped it all.

He ripped his mouth free to move it to my throat. He sucked and licked the water from my body, then made his way between my legs. Though as a man, he was larger, he still fit perfectly—exactly as he'd pointed out. He continued working his magical mouth down to exactly where I was dying for him to go. He was relentless and didn't let up until I had shattered, screaming his name.

Slowly, he licked me until the last of my orgasm faded. Then he rolled to his back, bringing me with him until I straddled him. When he tried to enter me, I slid down his body until his shaft was under my lips. I wrapped my fingers around the base and drew the soft head into my mouth.

"Oh Christ," he hissed. Reflexively, he grabbed my hair as his back arched. I swallowed to bring him down my throat, and he made a gargled groan. When I glanced up at him, the cords of his neck stood out, and his eyes were rolled back in his head. His hips flexed, and I gagged, pulling him free only to suck him in as deep as I could again.

"Fuck, I'm gonna..." he grunted and tugged at my hair, but I fought the pull and kept going until he shot his hot spurts of cum down my throat. I swallowed every drop.

"Jesus," he gasped as he gave one last shuddering thrust.

I planned to keep working him over until he was hard again, but I needn't have worried. He hooked me under my arms and jerked me up his body like I was nothing more than a rag doll. He positioned me over the end of his length, then dropped me at the same time as he drove his hips up.

It was heaven.

He fucked me like he hadn't just come in my mouth. My next orgasm barreled into me like a runaway train. I came so hard, I flooded all over him.

"Oh God," he groaned but held still, and I desperately needed him to move. But when I tried to grind on his perfectly amazing dick, he flipped us around until I was on all fours and he was behind me. The second we were in place, he shoved back inside, and I whimpered.

This right here was what I wanted us to have for the rest of our lives.

Chapter TWENTY-THREE



“Written In Stone”–Seether

Present day....

I wanted to fuck her so hard that she felt me for days. I wanted to imprint myself in her, but I also wanted to get a quick taste of her again. I jerked out and pulled her ass cheeks apart so I could see everything, then lowered myself and stuck my tongue into her dripping pussy. Fuck, she tasted good. I dragged her juices up to her ass, where I circled the tightly puckered hole. She squirmed at the sensation, but I held her in place. My cock surged at the thought of filling her there.

With a nip to her perfectly rounded glute, I kissed up her back and then grabbed her drying hair. Using it like a handle, I turned her head and murmured in her ear, “Has anyone ever been in your ass?”

Her sharp inhale proceeded her breathy “No.”

It pleased me that I would be the first. But not yet.

I sank my teeth into the slope of her shoulder, and she moaned. Trailing kisses down her spine, I used one hand to drag the end of my shaft through her slick pussy lips. Feeling her heat, I notched the tip in her slit. Then I grabbed her hips and pulled back as I drove forward. I did it again and again until my entire cock was buried in her hot cunt.

“Jesus, you’re so tight. This pussy was made just for me, wasn’t it?”

“God, yes,” she whimpered.

“Fucking right it is,” I ground out. I withdrew just enough to thrust hard and deep back into her welcoming sheath. “I’m never letting you go now. You should’ve run while you could.” I drove in again.

“Not a chance,” she gasped.

A primal growl rumbled from the depths of my soul. From the darkness a chant arose.

Mine! Mine! Mine! Mine!

With lust-glazed eyes, she glanced over her shoulder at me as I pounded into her. Those evergreen depths held me tight, and I couldn’t look away.

That coupling was harsh and desperate—a long overdue claiming. I slammed my cock into her until she came all over me, her release dripping down my balls. Her violent contractions squeezed me until I exploded, her pussy spasming so hard and so long, she milked me dry.

Sweaty and spent, I fell to her side, dragging her with me.

“Holy shit,” she panted. When she spoke, it pushed her tits into my arm. I cupped one and snugged closer. My wet dick was sandwiched between us, and I didn’t want to move for at least two days. Well, unless I was inside her.

“Things aren’t always gonna be easy, but I swear to you, I will always love you. You will always be my priority,” I promised her, my eyelids heavy.

“That’s all I ask,” she murmured.

We dozed for a while. It was dark when we woke up. Naked, we shuffled out to the kitchen, and I scrounged us up some food, then scooped her up and carried her back to bed. That time, we went slow.

By the time I filled her, she had come three times, and I had worshipped every curve and every inch of her skin.

“Love you,” she mumbled, half asleep.

Resting on my elbow, I looked down at her and smiled. “I love you too,” I replied and kissed her cheek.

I’d do my best to make sure she always knew that.

By killing Mario, I’d left us with a lot of unanswered shit. Not that I had any faith that he was ever going to talk. And now we had more stress to deal with if the Bratva was poking around. I knew Gabriel was wondering if they’d been working with Mario, because I sure as hell was. But I didn’t believe he would’ve told us.

I nuzzled her soft, curly hair and breathed in her scent. With her in my bed, I was content.



Kendall

The next day after Vittorio went off to meet with his brother, I picked up my phone. Chewing on my lip, I debated whether I was making the right choice. I mean, after all this time, I had to ask myself—did it matter?

I think it did, because my heart needed answers.

Using my video chat, I called my mom. It rang a few times. Finally, her image popped up on my screen.

“Kendall! How are you sweetheart? Miss us already?” Mom asked with a bright smile.

“Actually, yes. I missed you the moment you drove off,” I ruefully admitted as I settled against the headboard of Vittorio’s massive bed.

“Aww, honey.” My mom looked like she was tearing up. Then her gaze narrowed. “Where are you?”

Shit.

“I’m, uh, at a, um, friend’s,” I stammered, trying to look like I wasn’t totally busted.

She cocked a brow and gave me *the look*. That look that said she didn’t believe a damn word I was saying. “It’s seven in the morning with you,” she deadpanned.

“Yeah, but we... had drinks.”

The look didn’t stop.

“Okay, I stayed the night with my... boyfriend.” I cringed, because admitting that to my mother, no matter how old I was, kinda scared me. Not to mention, that label. Was that what we were? Vittorio and I never really discussed it.

“Boyfriend? Kendall, you haven’t been there two months!” Mom’s eyes bugged.

It was my turn to give her look back to her. “And how long did you know Dad before he proposed?”

Her cheeks went rosy and I shamelessly grinned.

“Touché,” she conceded, and I smirked.

“Is Nonna around?”

“She is, did you want to talk to her?”

“Please?”

“Mom!” she called out. “Kendall’s on the phone!”

Mom walked with her phone, and I saw the bright and airy home they had built in Ireland. One day, I would go back. It had been too long since I’d visited. *Maybe Vittorio will want to go with me.*

“Hello, sprite!” Nonna’s face filled the screen. She frowned, then pulled the phone back a bit. “I’ll never get the

hang of these crazy things,” she muttered before the corners of her mouth happily lifted.

Mom laughed. “I’ll be right back. I need to switch the laundry.” She blew me a kiss then walked away.

“Nonna, why did you tell me Vittorio didn’t want the baby?” I cut right to the chase the second I saw my mom leave the room.

Nonna’s brow furrowed and she glanced down.

“Nonna?” I gently prodded.

She heavily sighed and when she looked up at me, regret filled her gaze. “I did what I thought was right. I’m sorry, but Vittorio’s grandfather was a horrible man, Kendall. I knew if Vittorio found out you were having his baby, he’d be on the first thing smoking to get to you. That would’ve been catastrophic.”

“And losing my son wasn’t?” I whispered as my lower lip trembled.

“Oh, sprite. I never wanted that, and it was an unfortunate accident, but if Giacomo would’ve found out you were pregnant with Vittorio’s child... it would’ve been so much worse,” she quietly tried to explain.

“Is it true that he didn’t know?”

Her shoulders slumped. “Yes.”

“Did you ever tell my mom you knew who the baby’s father was?” I softly asked.

“No,” she breathed.

I closed my eyes and took a deep, cleansing breath, then let it out.

“Did you tell him, then?” Her voice was soft and hesitant.

Lifting my lids, I focused on my grandmother and nodded.

Relief softened her gaze and her eyes glistened. “I’m glad. And I’m so very sorry for lying to you. It was wrong, but done

for what I believed were the right reasons. But Vittorio... you know what he is?"

"Yes. He's a *good* man who treats me like his queen. And I love him."

A tear fell and ran down her wrinkled cheek. "I know you do. Just promise me you'll be careful," she urged.

"Always."

"What's all this?" Mom came back into view, her worried gaze landing on Nonna, then me.

"I was just telling Kendall how happy I am she owns the bakery now, and how proud I am of her. Got me all emotional." Nonna sniffled and gave me a watery smile. I was happy she let us keep that secret.

"I'm glad you trust me to keep the bakery alive and in our family," I told her with a wink, then I gave a sniffle of my own.

"So who is this boyfriend of yours?" Mom playfully waggled her brows.

"His name is Vittorio."

"Lorenzo's boy?" Mom's expression told me she knew exactly who they were and wasn't overly comfortable with the idea.

"Yes, Mom. And he's wonderful. Amazing. Incredible." I sighed. "And so very handsome."

"Well, if he grew up looking anything like his parents, he would be. If that wasn't a blessed gene pool, I don't know what was." I could tell by Mom's expression that she was trying to be positive. Then she twisted her lips and wrinkled her nose. "Lorenzo was several years ahead of me in school, but I couldn't help but have a little crush on him. Hell, I think all the girls at St. Ignatius did."

I laughed.

"Just think, if he would've fallen for me, Vittorio could've been your brother," Mom teased.

“Ew! Mom! Just... don’t.” I pretended like I gagged.

Then we were all laughing.

Finally, I sobered. “I love you both. And I thank you for everything you did to make me who I am today.”

“Oh, honey,” Mom started but pressed her lips together as she blinked away what appeared to be tears.

“Sprite, promise me you’ll love with everything you have.” The corner of my nonna’s mouth kicked up before she scowled. “And if that boy hurts you, he’s answering to me,” she grumbled.

“Deal.” Though my nonna’s lies were confirmed, my heart was lighter. Knowing the truth made all the difference. A piece of me would always grieve for the loss of my sweet baby boy who never got a chance to see the world, but I was finally able to let him rest. My heart ached as I told myself I would see him again one day.

We talked for at least an hour before I heard the door unlocking behind me.

“Gotta go!” I quickly told them. I wasn’t ready for them to give Vittorio a bunch of shit.

“We love you,” they both called out.

“Love you, both! Give my love to Dad!” We were all waving as I ended the call and glanced up at the gorgeous man striding into the room.

“Your Mom?” he asked as he motioned toward my phone.

I nodded. “You’re back early.”

With a hungry stare, he began to remove his clothes.

Each and every move he made had my core clenching. My cheeks heated and my heart raced in anticipation.

“Miss me?” he whispered. Then he placed a knee on the bed and wrapped his hand around my ankle. With a quick tug, he had me squealing as I fell to my back. His soft lips tickled my sensitive skin as he trailed kisses from my ankle to my

thigh. As he dropped his face between my legs, he breathed deeply.

At the first swipe of his tongue, I was twining my fingers into his dark hair and pulling him closer.

“What big teeth you have,” I teased when he nipped at my throbbing clit.

A chuckle shook his shoulders and he lifted his head. “The better to eat you with. All.” Lick. “Day.” Swirl. “Long.”

Then he sucked on that aching little nub and rational thoughts ceased to exist.

EPILOGUE



Two and a Half Years Later

It had been a shit day, and I wanted nothing more than to be at home. Instead, I'd been putting out fires all day.

Unfortunately, it was now late as fuck. I hadn't planned on being out so long.

I was quiet as I entered the condo because I had no idea what kind of day Kendall had, and I didn't want to come in being a grouchy dick. By the front door, I removed my shoes.

As I passed the room next to my home office, I heard a sound. Slowly, I turned the knob and pushed it open a crack. Another thump. There were little lights spinning on the ceiling. Walking on the balls of my feet, I moved closer until I was peeking over the crib rail, where the noises were coming from. Big green eyes blinked up at me as my son held his sleeper-covered feet in the air.

“Why are you still awake, young man?” I whispered.

He kicked his legs against the mattress, causing the thumping I'd been hearing.

A toothless grin lifted his chubby cheeks. Little shit. He knew when he did that, I couldn't resist him. I reached in and lifted him. He squealed and smacked my cheeks.

"Shhh!" I told him as I placed a fingertip over his lips. He bit it. "Ouch! Someone's been growing teeth." Using my thumb, I folded his lower lip down. In the dim light from the little moons and stars that slowly spun on the ceiling, I could see the faintest line on his lower gum before his tongue covered it. "Well, looky there."

I tiptoed across the room, placing a hand on his back as I looked down in the other crib. Rosario Francesco was just like both the uncle he was named after and me. He was quiet and observant. A watcher. He was also soundly asleep, his small head rolled to the side and his cherub lips parted. His chest rose and fell softly with each breath, and I fell in love all over again.

Romeo patted my face as if to say, "Dad, he's sleeping. Look at me!" Romeo Vittorio was my namesake, but I swear he was more like Gabriel as a kid than me. Full of energy, mischievous, and always giggling, he was a happy but rambunctious baby.

"I love you just as much," I assured him, and he smiled as he chewed on his hand. "But it's time for you to go to sleep. Let's check your diaper."

I laid him on the changing table and began to undress his lower half so I could swap the used diaper for a clean one. As I went through the motions that had become second nature over the last six months, I couldn't help but wonder if our first son would've been like his brothers or if he would've been like his mother with her curly hair. I'd never know, and that made a small piece of my heart ache.

"Mr. De Luca! I could've done that," Ingrid whispered as she entered the room through her adjoining door we'd added. The nanny I'd insisted on hiring was older, but she was amazing with the boys. She'd had an impressive résumé, but

her actions spoke more to me than words on paper. The reference letters from a few A-list actors didn't hurt, though.

"I know, but I was here, and I don't mind," I murmured as I finished with my son. Before I handed him over to her, I kissed his cheek, then whispered, "Daddy loves you. And when you're older, I will never force you to do anything you don't want to do."

After one last snuggle where I buried my nose in his neck to inhale his soft baby scent, I placed him in her arms. She propped him on her shoulder and began rocking him in the chair while gently patting his diapered butt. First, he lifted his head to stare at me with his wise eyes. Then he yawned and dropped down to settle into her.

"Is Kendall sleeping?" I asked.

She shook her head. "Told me she was working on a cookie order she'd been having issues with and not to disturb her unless it was an emergency."

I nodded, then carefully exited the room so as not to make too much noise. With a decidedly wicked train of thought, I slid the pocket door closed that separated the bedrooms from the main area of the condo. Then I steadily moved on to the kitchen.

She'd moved in with me shortly after everything went down with Mario. The bakery manager and her family needed a place to stay, and it meant Kendall didn't have to go there every morning to open while she was pregnant. As far as I was concerned, it was a win-win.

Leaning over one end of the massive island in our kitchen, she was using a frosting bag to make final touches on a cookie. Engrossed in her work, she didn't hear me sneak up behind her.

"Hello, gorgeous," I drawled as I rested my hands on her hips and nuzzled her neck through her hair.

"Oh!" She jumped and spun, her frosting bag sticking me in the cheek.

“Did you just stab me with a decorating tip?” I asked with mock affront.

She grinned and rolled her eyes. “Like I hurt you.”

“I’m wounded,” I argued, eliciting a laugh from her beautiful lips. “I need medical attention.”

Setting the bag to the side, she grabbed my chin with her thumb and forefinger so she could tilt my head with squinted eyes as she leaned closer. “Hmm, you do have a bit of frosting... right... here.” She pushed up to her tiptoes and licked the side of my cheek. With a satisfied nod, she said, “Got it.”

“Now you’re licking me?” I cocked a brow and grabbed the wild mess of hair she had pulled up in a loose bun. Her red curls were like satin springs in my fist. When I gave a slight tug, it tipped her chin up, and her lush lips parted.

“Oooooo, is the Big Bad Wolf going to eat me now?” she asked with a snarky smirk.

Embodying the nickname, my grin turned downright wolfish as I leaned in and slowly drew my nose along hers. Then I feathered my lips over her cheek so I could whisper in her ear. “No. He’s going to devour you.”

A stuttered breath told me she wasn’t unaffected.

I nipped her soft earlobe before I trailed along her neck. Using her hair to guide her, I tilted her head to further expose her to me. Between the scent of sugar and spice, she smelled divinely edible. Unable to stop myself, I tasted her soft skin, kissing and licking as I followed the corded muscle to her shoulder. I ran my nose along her collarbone and inhaled, then ghosted my lips up her throat. When I reached the spot where my tongue rested over her pounding pulse, I groaned.

“You taste delicious,” I murmured, then dipped a finger in the bowl of pink frosting that sat on her makeshift workbench. After scooping some on my fingertip, I smeared it over her lower lip.

Her hooded green gaze was locked on mine as I wet my lips, then sucked her bottom one into my mouth. The frosting

was sweet, but not as much as she was. That led to a lazy, seductive kiss as I slipped a hand under her shirt. I reveled in the smooth skin that stretched over her ribs, then pushed the cup of her bra up to free her tit so I could roll her nipple between my fingers.

“Vittorio,” she whimpered against my mouth.

Since her speaking interrupted our kiss, I gently pulled back to search her eyes, which had darkened to an evergreen so rich I wondered if woodland pixies had painted them for her. As I lifted the hem of her shirt, they darkened until they appeared bottomless.

“I love you,” I told her.

The corners of her pink lips tilted up, and she licked the lower one, looking for more frosting. “That’s good to know, because I love you too. But Ingrid is here.”

“I closed the pocket door,” I replied as I grabbed the waistband of her leggings, sliding them down and then off her legs.

“What are you really doing?” She blinked at me with a questioning pinch between her brows.

“I already told you, Little Red Riding Hood. I caught you when you went to help your grandma that summer. Now I think it’s time I eat you.”

She laughed. “I think you’re safe. You’ve done that a million times since.”

“Can never be too sure.” Ensuring her cookies weren’t in the way, I lifted her to sit on the island counter. Then I proceeded to do exactly what I’d promised.

By the time she’d come all over my face, she was practically limp. I stood up, and she wrapped her legs around me. Leaning down with my weight on my elbows by her sides, I kissed her as if I had all the time in the world. Then I reached over and stole one of her cookies.

“Hey! Those are for an order,” she chastised.

“You always make extras.”

She huffed, but I knew she wasn't mad. I was the reason she made extras.

"Who's having a baby girl?" I asked as I realized what the cookies were.

With a wicked glint in her eye, she grinned but didn't reply.

I paused with the last bite of my cookie on the way to my mouth. Then, heart seizing, I pushed off the counter and looked down at her. "You're...?"

She snorted a laugh as she sat up. "No, but the look on your face was priceless."

Relief made my shoulders sag. Hell, I wanted twenty more kids with her, if that's what she wanted. But I was hoping the boys would be out of diapers first.

"Gabriel and Alia just found out this one is a girl," she explained.

My mouth fell open, and she swiped her finger in the bowl and shoved her frosting-coated finger into it. I sucked, and her eyes darkened. But first things first. "So you're telling me he's having a girl. The first one in our family since my aunt?"

"Yep."

"Oh hell, that poor little girl. She's either gonna be so spoiled, or her uncles, brother, and cousins are going to drive her nuts. Probably a bit of both. And my brother is gonna be losing his mind." Evilily, I busted out laughing.

"Better watch it, buddy boy. People in glass houses and all," she said as she motioned around her to all the glass surrounding us.

She grinned, and I growled.

"Are you done?" I asked.

"Yes," she replied.

"Good." I picked her up, enjoying the little squeak of surprise she made. Then I tossed her over my shoulder,

plucked something from the counter, and carted her to our room. When we got there, I made sure the door was locked.

“Vittorio!” She swatted my ass.

“Oh ho ho. We’re playing that, are we?” Using the wooden spoon I’d snagged from the kitchen, I swatted her right back.

Then I showed her just how much I loved her.

Twice.

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I dedicated this book to Sapphire, as the MMM World Collaboration was indeed her brain child. But I have so many people to thank for every little thing y'all did along the way. If I missed mentioning you, please know that my love goes out to you.

Sometimes life digs its claws in and pulls you under. It makes you question everything about yourself. As an author it made me question my sanity and my craft. Through the writing of this book, I had a lot of ups and downs and maybe that shows, maybe it doesn't. Regardless, the style of this book is a little different from what you've seen from me in the past. Trust that in my heart and guts, it was necessary so that Vittorio and Kendall's story was told in the best way possible. I hope I did their story justice.

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Often, I try to spin the military into my books. This is for many reasons. Because of those reasons, my last, but not least, is a massive thank you to America's servicemen and women who protect our freedom on a daily basis. They do their duty, leaving their families for weeks, months, and years at a time, without asking for praise or thanks. I would also like to remind the readers that not all combat injuries are visible, nor do they heal easily. These silent, wicked injuries wreak havoc on their minds and hearts while we go about our days completely oblivious. Thank you all for your service.

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KRISTINE ALLEN

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The Weight of Honor

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La Famiglia De Luca

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[Blood Lust](#)

[Blood Money](#)

[Blood Ties \(Coming in May 2023!\)](#)

About THE AUTHOR

Kristine Allen lives in beautiful Central Texas with her adoring husband. They have four brilliant, wacky, and wonderful children. She is surrounded by twenty-six acres, where her five horses, four dogs, and five cats run the place. She's a hockey addict and feeds that addiction with season tickets to the Texas Stars. Kristine realized her dream of becoming a contemporary romance author after years of reading books like they were going out of style and having her own stories running rampant through her head. She works as a night shift nurse, but in stolen moments, taps out ideas and storylines until they culminate in characters and plots that pull her readers in and keep them entranced for hours.

Reviews are the life blood of an indie author. If you enjoyed this story, please consider leaving a review on the sales channel of your choice, bookbub.com, goodreads.com, allauthor.com, or your favorite review platform, to share your experience with other interested readers. Thank you! <3

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