



BOUND TO HIM

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

BELLE AURORA

BLURRED LINES SERIES

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CONTENTS

1. [Weddings and funerals](#)
 2. [A deep regret](#)
 3. [A bloody nightmare](#)
 4. [The importance of traditions](#)
 5. [A walking angel](#)
 6. [Vicious little mouse](#)
 7. [Walk of shame](#)
 8. [Dogs and other animals](#)
 9. [A cold-blooded killer](#)
 10. [Northport](#)
 11. [A gilded cage](#)
 12. [Observation](#)
 13. [We bleed together](#)
 14. [Everyone had something](#)
 15. [High end champagne](#)
 16. [Transgressions](#)
 17. [An entire bowl of bullshit](#)
 18. [Boundaries](#)
 19. ['Til death and beyond](#)
 20. [How do you do it?](#)
 21. [Only human](#)
 22. [The Disciples](#)
 23. [Done](#)
 24. [At peace](#)
- [Epilogue](#)

CHAPTER I

WEDDINGS AND FUNERALS

*V*ittoria

THERE WERE ONLY two ways to get made men to stop fighting for a day.

Invite them to a wedding, or force them to attend a funeral.

“Five-minute warning,” came from the doorway. A middle-aged woman I didn’t know popped her head into the room, taking care to block me from view of any nosey passersby.

My nod was subtle but my stomach clenched viciously in protest. The woman looked to me, then over to my sister, who sat draped haphazardly over a chair, scrolling away on her phone. I noticed a subtle look of disapproval sweep over her face as she took in Vincenza. The slight lowering of her brow told me she didn’t like the cool, casual manner in which my sister was taking this whole debacle.

Sadly, she didn’t know the half of it.

The woman offered me a thin smile that reeked of pity. Her sympathy was kind, but I didn’t have it in me to return that smile. Not today.

The door closed quietly and the snick of the latch closing in place felt awfully final. I think it was then that I realized that this was actually happening. My eyes closed in silent

prayer, hoping some higher being would hear me, beseeching a deity who mightn't have existed to intervene.

Please, God. Gods. Goddesses. Idols. Spirits. Anyone. Please.

I exhaled long and slow as I stare into the floor length mirror, shaking my hands out as anxiety fingered my spine, settling like a noose around my neck, tightening deliberately until I struggled to breathe and fanned my face, believing I might pass out.

I don't want to do this.

My numb feet led me to the window and when I peered down at the street, I blanched. Cars were double and triple parked. The church he'd chosen wasn't very big and I wondered where everyone would fit.

It seemed this tragedy – this catastrophe – would have a live audience.

Oh, God. I can't do this.

My tongue swelled as I put a flat hand to the area under my breasts and choked out, "Enza, I don't think I can do this."

Vincenza, without a care for my disposition, still scrolling on her phone, scoffed, "Of course, you can."

"No," I started quietly, shaking my head. "No." As I began to hyperventilate, my protest became rattled. Louder. "No. No. No. I can't."

Predicting a panic attack wasn't far off, Vincenza finally put down her phone and rose up out of her seat. I was pacing when she took hold of my trembling shoulders, held me still, peered into my eyes and said, "We talked about this."

I know we did, but that was yesterday, and that was just talk. Today was a whole different story.

Today made it real.

Her firm, detached demeanor spoke volumes. She had no intention of freeing me from this burden.

A mixture of emotions flooded me all at once. Resentment. Dread. Anger. But mostly, fear.

At twenty-one, I was far too old to begin crying because I wasn't getting my way, but here we were. My lips quivered and I blinked back tears as I begged her, "I don't want to do this, Enza. Please don't make me do this."

"Aw, Vicky, don't cry," she cooed, pulling me into her warm embrace. She held me close, cupping the back of my head gently and my arms gripped at her back, my fingers tightening in the material of her suit jacket. I sniffled into her shoulder, breathing in the sweet scent of her dark, golden-brown hair. She gave me a minute of reprieve before she pulled back, looked me dead in the eye and said, "I know you don't want to do this. I don't want this for you either." She regarded me carefully as she lifted a hand to brush away my tears and then, her pretty sable eyes turned frosty enough to give me chills. "But sacrifices need to be made."

Easy to say when you weren't the sacrifice.

My mouth opened but before I even got the chance to protest, a solid knock on the door sounded. Both my sister and I turned as it opened, and when he walked into the room, he glanced over what Vincenza was wearing and his lip curled in disgust.

"Really, Enza? A suit? A *black* suit?" our uncle, Como Vero, drawled, utterly unimpressed with her antics. "What the hell is the matter with you? It's your sister's wedding."

Vincenza shrugged carelessly. "Precisely why I chose an outfit fit for mourning."

His face twisted and he looked uncomfortable as he jerked his head, stretching his neck out from side-to-side. He tugged at his tie, straightening it while he uttered, "There's a lot riding on today. Please, for the love of God, do not fuck this up for your sister."

"Wouldn't dream of it, *zio*," she muttered in return.

"We're going to talk about this later. Don't think-" Obviously he'd seen me, but I don't think it hit him until a

second pass over me, and when he stilled and took me in, he smiled but there was a hint of sadness to it. “Oh, sweetheart. You look beautiful.” Zio Como turned to Vincenza and said, “Doesn’t she look beautiful?”

“That she does,” she replied, strolling over to the bar, lifting a glass of bourbon to her lips, sipping on it.

Como’s smile deepened on me. “All eyes are gonna be on you, honey. I mean, come on. How could they look away?” I know he was trying to make me feel like any other bride on her wedding day, but we all knew this wasn’t like any other wedding.

My sister shot me a sly smile. “That’s the plan.” When she finished with a conspiratorial wink, my stomach turned in a way that made me think I was going to lose my lunch.

My heart rate spiked. I didn’t want to do this.

Then, he said the words I’d been dreading to hear. “It’s time.”

Time was of the essence and we all just stood there, looking to one another, until my sister moved to retrieve the stunning bouquet sitting on the bar. She brought it over and, for the first time since my freedom was bargained away, she looked at me with something loosely resembling regret.

Older than me by seven years, she had always been my protector.

Always, until today.

There was no protecting me from what was out there.

“Look,” she started. “You’re going to get overwhelmed up there. So, what I want you to do is,” she placed the bouquet into my lax grip, curling my fingers around it and said, “Think about papa.” Vincenza’s hands curled around my own and then, we were holding the flowers together as one. “I know this is hard. I just want to tell you that I am so proud of you and I love you very much.”

To the untrained ear, it was just one sibling being affectionate with the other. But I heard it for what it really was.

A goodbye.

No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't think of a single way out of this situation. There was nowhere I could flee to that would keep me safe. They had the ability and resources to turn every stone on every corner of the planet until I was found. Escape was futile.

So, this was it.

My throat got tight. I tried to but couldn't speak, so instead, I simply nodded.

With my sister by my side, we walked the long hall to the entrance of the church. The organ began to play soft church music and I watched as the cousins I asked to be bridesmaids made the long walk to the front of the church with my sister, who acted as my maid of honor, trailed closely behind. Once they stood opposite the three handsome men on the groom's side, the organ stopped playing, the church turned silent and it was my turn.

Zio Como took great care in placing my veil over my face then he tucked my small hand into the crook of his elbow and patted it tenderly as we took our places front and center.

My heart stuttered when I spotted my husband-to-be waiting for me with his back turned.

The first notes of Pachelbel's *Canon in D* began to play and in uniform, pews creaked and material swished as the entire church turned to set their eyes on me. When my uncle began to move, I followed with my heart in my throat. I clutched at his arm tightly enough to injure. The closer we got to the altar, the stronger my urge to run was.

I shouldn't have been looking, but the man set to marry me was tall. His frame was built, his hips were lean and the suit he wore was tailored to fit him well. His dark hair matched my own and when he finally turned to face me, I almost gasped out loud.

Having never seen the man until right this moment, my stomach fluttered and my heart danced off-kilter as I took him in from the privacy of my veil.

He was older than I assumed he would be and he looked about as exasperated as I was, but still, he stood dutifully, civilly, waiting for his bride. Waiting for me. His heavy brow lowered a touch when I advanced. His full lips pursed, only slightly. His strong jaw flexed and it was only because of how close I was that I saw his shoulders droop with the heavy sigh he released.

I stopped farther away than I should have. It took my uncles gentle coaxing to bring me forward. My husband-to-be took a single step towards me and I leant away from him.

It was funny because the expression on his face never changed, but I could tell. He was smiling at me.

Something happened to me then. A warmth I'd never felt before bloomed in my middle. My mouth dried. Without exaggeration, I could safely say here was the most handsome man I had ever laid eyes on. And my stomach dipped.

No.

It was wrong. This all felt wrong.

This isn't how it was meant to be.

My uncle took my clenched fist and made to hand me over to my new master. The stranger watched me carefully. I stared in fright. And the second my cold knuckles brushed his warm hand, I jolted as if I'd been shocked and pulled away, clasping my bouquet between both hands in a death grip.

“Vittoria,” Zio Como reprimanded. “You must take Ettore’s hand.”

“I’m sor-” But the beginnings of my apology were cut off when Ettore spoke and his voice was deep and rich like warm melted dark chocolate.

“It’s fine.”

The priest looked at me with an air of dissatisfaction but at Ettore’s nod of consent, the ceremony began. The priest preached about trust and loyalty, and I withered on the inside.

You’re going to hell, Vicky.

The ceremony went on at a snail's pace and I prepared for what was coming. Then, the part I'd been dreading finally came. The priest nodded to my sister and she stepped forward, gently taking the ends of my veil and lifting it up and over my head. My face must have been paler than it felt because Vincenza whispered, "Breathe. Think about papa and just breathe."

I nodded and when I turned back to the man beside me, he snuffled out a soft laugh at my unwillingness to relinquish my bouquet.

My body was on fire. My neck burned and the apples of my cheeks blazed as the priest began with, "Ettore Scala, do you take this woman, Vittoria Vero, to be your lawful wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and health, until death do you part?"

He didn't even hesitate. "I do."

My brows narrowed at the man beside me as the priest asked the same of me. "Vittoria Vero, do you take this man, Ettore Scala, to be your lawful husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and health, until death do you part?"

Where he was without hesitation, my reluctance went unconcealed and I froze.

After a long moment, the priest prompted, "Vittoria?" but I remained still and unmoving.

"Now," my sister hissed from behind me. "Do it *now*."

Muttering in the pews commenced and my husband-to-be frowned deeply at me while, in my head, I found clarity in my own whispered words. "*For papa.*"

"Well?" The priest had long lost his patience. "Do you take this man to be your husband or not?"

Time seemed to slow as I dropped my bouquet, holding onto what had been concealed inside. My heart ached as I lifted one shaking hand, pointed the gun at my intended and stated roughly, "I'd rather die."

I pulled the trigger, shooting Ettore Scala point blank. He barely moved as the bullet pierced his flesh. Blood seeped from between his fingers and it was only when he winced that I remembered I wasn't done here.

I glanced back at my sister and found her wild eyed and grinning victoriously at Ettore. Her gaze met mine and her smile faded. Vincenza gave me a sharp nod and I smiled sadly in return.

Until we meet again, sister.

I spun frontward, towards the wedding's attendees, and lifted the gun, turning it on myself.

The shot rang out and everything went black.

CHAPTER 2

A DEEP REGRET

*V*ittoria

A MERE MILLISECOND before I pulled the trigger a second time, I was shoved harshly, but the gun went off with the bullet travelling upwards through the roof instead of its intended target, my skull. My breath left me in a whoosh as I landed forcefully on the cold marble floor and my vision completely shorted out before stars danced in my eyes. Winded, I gasped as something large and heavy fell onto my body, pushing me down. And when I regained focus, I immediately wished I hadn't because what I saw in front of me was the gloriously enraged face of Ettore Scala. He gripped my forearm, lifted it effortlessly, then slammed my hand against the ground, and I watched in terror as the gun skidded across the marble, stopping under a pew.

My heart raced when I came to understand the reality of the situation.

Ettore Scala was still alive. Regrettably, I was too.

Plans foiled, I searched for my sister amongst the chaos but there were too many people skittering around for me to land eyes on her. My gaze swept the scene. Our bridal party was in disarray. My bridesmaids were huddled together, scared senseless, while one of the groomsmen held my Zio Como up by his shirt, yelling into his face so hard that spittle sprayed my terrified uncle. My stomach ached and my breathing

slowed when I realized that the Scala family outnumbered my own by ten. But, amongst the clamor and noise, one sound was out of place.

Crying.

I followed the sound of whimpering sobs until I found its source. And my heart stopped dead.

Two little boys and a young girl struggled violently against the family members that held them back, keeping them safe. From me. And the way they were looking at me...

The acid in my stomach boiled and bubbled as guilt wracked me, hard. I thought I was going to be sick from it. Yes. There was blood on my hands, but I wasn't a monster.

My ears rang. What they were calling out faded in and out of my hearing. But in a moment of clarity, I saw the girl reach for us and cry out a petrified sounding, "*Papa!*"

What?

I blinked in confusion and continued to do so, even after Ettore Scala turned his head towards the children and calmly stated, "I'm fine." Then he looked to the boys and repeated, "It's alright, boys. Daddy's okay."

What? Did they just... He wasn't... No. They weren't...

It hit me with the force of a brick to the temple.

Oh no.

No.

No, no, no. Shit.

This was bad. Where was Vincenza?

My body wriggled in an attempt to get away from this man, but his head snapped towards me, his grip tightened on my wrist and I flinched in pain, knowing he was fully justified in the level of force he was using.

Cold fury darkened his gaze and now that I had a moment to think on it, I comprehended just how badly I fucked up.

I know it wouldn't mean a thing to him, but I had to say it. "I'm sorry," I whispered with genuine fear in my eyes. My gaze swept over the children stopping at the oozing wound at his shoulder and I said the words again, desperate and quavering, "I'm sorry."

His brows knotted, his jaw ticked and when he stood, he took no care in hauling me up harshly, setting me down on wobbling legs. I peered downward to find the floor warping and twisting as I fought to stay conscious. My betrothed's blood decorated my pristine white dress and it was fitting. My purity was tainted and my dress now reflected that.

Ettore turned towards the chaotic congregation and lifted his hand, demanding silence. It took a moment but the entire hall hushed instantly into an eerie quiet, save for the quiet whimpers of his children.

They held my uncle still. I wanted to tell them to let him go, but I knew I was in no position to make demands. Not now. Zio Como's gaze met my own and the look of betrayal he wore absolutely crushed me. I wanted to go to him. As I yanked my arm, Ettore held firm and when he spoke, I paused, unable to believe what I was hearing.

My intended came across as devastatingly charming as he said, "Yes, well, now that my bride has gotten that out of her system, I think it's time we stopped goofing off and got married."

"What?" I croaked, only I wasn't the only one asking that question out loud.

Surely, he wasn't serious.

"Tor," the person beside us who I assumed was best man uttered in disbelief.

Ettore simply waved him off. "Father Francis, if you will."

The priest looked between us, hesitating, before he cleared his throat and explained, "My boy, I'm sorry, but we cannot proceed if an objection has been called. Those are sacred rules and I must abide by them."

Ettore's jaw tensed. He leveled the priest with a deadly stare and uttered coldly, "There was no objection."

The priest glanced at me. "But..."

"My bride made a joke." The priest glanced down to where his shoulder was oozing blood and Ettore amended, "A tasteless joke." Then he turned that arctic stare on me. "Didn't you, darling?"

The moment I opened my mouth to object, Ettore Scala leant in close and muttered, "A single nod from me and this church will be redecorated in the exact shade of your family's innards. I will eviscerate every single one of them, paying particularly close attention to your sister and uncle. Think very hard about what your next words will be."

There were men who bluffed and there were men who didn't.

I wasn't a betting woman, but, right then, I would have bet everything I owned that Ettore Scala was not a man who bluffed.

Scala's men were at the ready, hands tucked into their jackets, just waiting for the go ahead. I looked for my sister once more but came up empty.

Where was she?

My uncle peered at me in stunned disbelief as I remained silent. And then, something new. Disappointment shadowed his features.

The priest asked once more, "Well, Miss Vero? Is that all this was?" He glanced up at Ettore as he asked the ridiculous question, "A joke?"

Zio Como had never been disappointed in me before. Not ever.

The way he looked at me... I couldn't stand it.

I met my uncle's eyes and muttered the words without feeling. "Yes. A joke."

Collectively, the church let out a relieved breath.

The priest looked mildly reassured. “Then, shall we continue?”

My nod was weak, but that didn’t matter. The ceremony recommenced and this time, when Father Francis asked me, “Vittoria Vero, do you take this man, Ettore Scala, to be your lawful husband, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and health, until death do you part?” I responded quietly, knowing the words would almost certainly get me killed.

“I do.”

Bleeding from his shoulder, Ettore stood soundlessly with his jaw steeled throughout the proceedings. Rings were exchanged, more vows were spoken, and I attempted to not flinch every time he brushed by me.

The ceremony came to an end with, “You have given and received a ring as a symbol of your promises. By the power vested in me by both state and church, I now pronounce you man and wife. You may,” Father Francis wavered nervously on the last part, “kiss your bride.”

This was it. The moment Ettore Scala got revenge.

Where he would no doubt punish and humiliate me for the disrespect I had shown him. And really, who could blame him?

My eyes fluttered closed as I awaited whatever was coming.

I stood rigid, expecting to be reprimanded. I did not expect to be kissed, and gently at that.

My eyes shot open as my husband cupped my cheek and deepened the sweet kiss in front of our families and God alike. I would have been lying if I didn’t say it was nice enough that my stomach knotted itself into a sweater.

I allowed him to kiss me for as long as he wished and when he pulled back, our gazes melded. His expression held distrust. Mine, regret. And after we signed our names to the register, Ettore took my hand and held firm as he led me away

from an audience, towards the long hall that joined the church to the reception hall.

I craned my neck back to find my uncle but instead found my sister, hiding in the shadows, bitterness cloaking her features.

CHAPTER 3

A BLOODY NIGHTMARE

*V*ittoria

I WAS HAVING trouble keeping up with the long strides of his legs, stumbling a few times as my husband dragged me back into the room I had gotten ready in, slamming the door shut behind us.

A heavy thrum of tension surrounded us. He let go of me and I backed away, slowly, until my bottom hit the wall. And there I stayed.

Ettore made his way over to the floor length mirror and grimaced as he carefully removed his jacket. The white shirt was soaked red on one side. When he began to undo the buttons, he spoke. “Don’t worry, wife. It’s only a flesh wound.” His deadly hazel eyes met mine in the reflection of the mirror. “I will recover.”

A promise that very much sounded like a threat.

My chest panged, I shrunk in on myself and dipped my chin, hiding from his accusing stare.

The door opened and three men silently filed in, one after the other. I recognized them as the best man and groomsmen. One of them held what I assumed was a large metal toolbox, but when he set it down on the floor, knelt by it and threw it open, I saw it was actually medical supplies.

“Sit down,” groomsman one told Ettore, and he did. The man examined Ettore and muttered, “It’s just a flesh wound.” Then he turned to me, lifted his brows and asked incredulously, “How’d you miss? You were a foot away from the guy.”

“Tino.” Ettore growled the warning.

And Tino just shrugged. “What? I’m just asking.”

Groomsman two smiled, then chuckled and then he was laughing out loud, doubling over and clutching his gut.

Ettore was not impressed and asked the man, “Something funny about this, Sandro?”

Sandro, obviously not knowing what was good for him, simply nodded and kept laughing. He looked between us, chuckling, “Now that’s a wedding.”

Ettore glared at the man. I chanced a glance up at the third man in the room only to find his blank stare on me, but fire danced in his eyes. Shivers trailed the length of my spine and my stomach ached painfully.

Tino called him over. “Daniele, come hold this closed.”

The best man moved, surveilling me the entire way over, and when he reached my husband, he paused in front of him and asked, “You need something to bite on?”

Ettore clicked his tongue and shook his head in annoyance. “Just do it already.”

My curiosity had me observing from the opposite side of the room.

Sandro took some gauze and coated it with iodine. “This is gonna sting like a bitch.”

“It already stings like a bitch. Do it,” Ettore ordered, his jaw clenched.

My husband hissed as Tino cleaned the wound. As if he’d felt me watching, he lifted his heated gaze to mine. Our eyes locked and as Tino instructed Daniele to pinch the wound closed, he placed something metal against it and muttered a

distracted, “Brace,” then began to staple the wound. Ettore’s expression screwed up and he bared his straight white teeth with every click of the device. Still, he kept his eyes on me, and I couldn’t look away.

A fresh bandage was applied and when my husband moved to put his bloodstained shirt back on, Sandro stopped him. “What are you doing? Take my shirt, Tor.”

But Ettore simply shrugged back into the red soaked shirt, buttoning it slowly, eyeballing me. “No.” And just when the other groomsmen began to argue, he lifted a hand and there was silence. “Now, if you’ll excuse us. I need to have a word with my blushing bride.”

Oh no.

The way his voice grated said this was not going to be where he asked me if I preferred chicken or fish.

The men filed out and all I could do was watch.

Please don’t leave me alone with him.

Just before Tino closed the door, he shot me a quick glance and muttered a hushed, “Good luck.”

The silence stretched for a while until he retrieved his suit jacket and leisurely walked it over to me. He held it out. “Please.”

It was a trap. I could smell it a mile away, and yet, after a long moment, I took it from him. He turned. I held it open as he carefully worked his injured arm in first.

“There are some women who would applaud you for what you just did. Some would even say you were justified in your... extreme reaction.” The other arm slid into the awaiting hole. “I will only say one thing.” He spun so quickly that I didn’t know what hit me. My head thumped against the wall as his hand curled around my throat, choking me. And then, he got in my face and spoke caustically through gritted teeth, “Next time you shoot me, you’d better make sure you kill me because I will not stop until your dead, rotting corpse is buried under a pile of manure in my yard.” I gasped for breath, lifting my hands and weakly fighting, scratching at his arm. But

Ettore Scala would not be moved. “I can make you disappear. Nobody will ever find you. Do you hear me?” Eyes wide, gasping for air, all I could do was nod. His eyes narrowed on me. “Are you scared?” I managed another nod, but my vision began to grey. “Of course, you are. That’s good. That is very good. You should be.”

He searched my reddened face a moment longer then, suddenly, I fell to the floor in a heap. I inhaled so hard that my throat itched and scratched and then I was both gasping and coughing, stopping only to gag. Saliva dribbled down my chin. The bridge of my nose began to tingle and my eyes watered. I whimpered, terrified.

Ettore, however, made his way back to the mirror. He straightened his jacket, then adjusted his cufflinks, peering emotionlessly at me through the reflective glass. “Now,” he began. “They’re expecting us.” His features darkened in time with his eyes. “I’m going to give you a moment. You’re going to get yourself cleaned up and you are going come out wearing a smile or, so help me God, I will carve one into your fucking face. Do you understand me?”

I lifted my hand to my burning throat, panting. My nod was weaker this time.

“Good,” he uttered without feeling. He attempted to lift his shoulder, but ended up wincing once more before posing, “I hope you achieved what you meant to, Vittoria.” He went to leave and my frightened eyes followed him all the way up to the door, where he paused, looked me up and down in disgust, then uttered a quietly stony, “My children were in that room.”

The cold fury that lined his voice...

I didn’t think I could feel worse than I did, but then he said that, and I was gutted all over again.

Alone, I curled up on the floor, hugging my knees to my chest. I don’t know how long passed before the door opened and Vincenza slunk into the room, casually, as if nothing happened.

“You knew he had children.” My throat burned as I croaked out the accusation. “You knew they would be there.”

I knew my sister was cold, but I don’t think I realized the extent of it until she went to the mirror, reapplied her lipstick, smacked her lips together and said, “Oh, boo-hoo. So what?”

What?

Who was this person?

Sickened by her response, I began to see my sister in a new light, and it wasn’t good. “You would have left them orphans?”

The second I said it, I wished I could rewind.

Her reaction was exactly as expected. “Are you fucking with me right now?” Her eyes blazed, she spun on me, then boomed, “*He made us orphans.*”

My stomach twisted. I turned my head to the side, meekly. I didn’t wish to argue.

A long moment of tension passed between us and then I heard her sigh. “Look. Things didn’t go as planned. It was messy. But, after thinking about it, this could still work for us.”

Oh God. No. No more. Please, just let me be.

Of course, I didn’t say that. Rather, I asked wearily, “How?”

“You’ll spy on him. His comings and goings. Who he does business with. All of it. And then, you’ll report back to me.” I dipped my chin in an attempt to stop myself from saying something Vincenza would take offence to. She went on. “We can still take his life. We’ll just go about it differently. We can ruin him, Vicky. Take everything he loves until he’s as miserable as we are.”

Speak for yourself, sister.

What if I didn’t want that?

All I wanted was a peaceful life. I wished Enza could see what this hate was doing to her. I didn’t want to end up like

her, cold and calculating. I still had a sliver of fire in my heart. Unfortunately, it was often used to warm my sister.

Suddenly, Vincenza's expression changed and a cat-like grin settled on her face.

“What is it?”

I could feel the ice pumping in her veins when she explained, “Your husband will never find peace with you as his wife. After today, he'll always sleep with one eye open, never knowing when the next attack will come.” Her teeth gleamed as she said all too happily, “It will be torture.”

My sister helped me stand, smoothed down my blood-spattered dress, took my hand then dragged me to the mirror. What a contrast my reflection was compared to what it had been a mere hour ago. My hair was a tangled mess, mascara stained my under-eyes, lipstick smeared. Dress creased with a seam torn at my shoulder, and my neck...

Large purple handprints collared my throat.

Vincenza sighed, muttering, “You can't go out there like this.” She did her best to fix me, re-doing my hair and reapplying my makeup, but when she moved to attempt to cover the bruise at my throat, I lifted a hand, stopping her.

“Leave it.”

She looked at me curiously. “Suit yourself.”

Regrettably, nothing could fix the state of my dress. We tucked in the split, fraying seam but the dark red stains would have to stay. And so, with my sister by my side, we left the safety of the room, walked towards the opposite end of the hall and paused, just outside the reception doors.

Vincenza turned to me. “Ready?”

No. I wasn't ready. I would never be ready. It wasn't supposed to be like this. And now, here I was, stuck dealing with the consequences of my own actions.

Ugh.

“I'm ready,” I said, unenthusiased.

The doors opened, we stepped inside and two hundred heads turned simultaneously, and not a single one of them looked happy. Apart from the traditional Italian music playing in the background, this had to be the most disturbingly somber wedding reception in recent history. The expected chatter was absent. No one spoke, or laughed. They all just sat in their chairs, looking miserable. My stomach tensed as I passed each table and they simply turned away, refusing to acknowledge me. Even my own family members.

It hurt especially when Zio Como stood, threw his linen napkin down on the table and thundered away in the opposite direction.

Even with my sister by my side, it was clear. I was utterly alone.

We approached the bridal table. My heart began to race when Ettore stood and walked around to meet us, not stopping until we were toe-to-toe. Now that I had a second to take him in, I noticed things I hadn't before.

He towered over me in a way that made me feel small and insignificant. His hazel eyes had a touch of forest green in them. And he was muscular enough to knock me down with the slightest wave of his hand.

Ettore looked as though he might have considered doing just that.

I had never been very good at hiding my emotions so I knew what he saw right then was a girl who was terrified of him. And then he sighed, holding out a hand to me. I turned to my sister in panic. Without a care for my fragile disposition, she handed me over to this... this... *beast* of a man. Our hands touched and I blanched. His palm curled around mine and I fought the urge to hyperventilate. When he began to walk us towards our chairs, I almost dug my heels in, refusing to go. But, instead, I did what was expected of me.

Like the good girl I was, I complied.

Ettore helped me to my chair, pushing it in after me, then took the seat to my left. Vincenza sat unassisted to my right.

And there we remained, soundlessly, for what seemed like hours.

During that time, a man approached our table, smiling, with a camera in hand. I noticed my husband tense until his body was rigid as a flagpole. I sat up dutifully as the man lifted the camera and just as he was about to take the shot, Ettore stood so quickly that his chair warbled loudly in the quiet space, drawing the attention of everyone in the room.

The man with the camera stilled when Ettore loomed, glowering savagely at him.

The cameraman quickly got the hint, put up his hands in placation and backed away.

Not long after, Zio Como approached the table and the moment I saw him coming to speak to me, I sat up eagerly. But when I opened my mouth to speak, I was rudely shut down with a hard look that warned me to stay silent.

My uncle spoke then, but the words were not for me. He looked to my husband and said, "I know what you must think of us. I, myself, am shocked by what has occurred here today. This is not the girl I raised. I can't apologize enough to you and your family. I was not a part of this treachery and it pains me to say..." he looked at me then with heavy disappointment, "I don't know this girl."

And that was it. That was the moment my heart broke in two.

My ears rang and I struggled to breathe through the hurt.

When he went on to say, "She belongs to you now. Do what you must. I have washed my hands of her. She's dead to me," those broken pieces of my heart crumbled to dust.

My heartbeat slowed. Every shallow breath burned my lungs and when Zio Como walked away without even looking at me, my throat clogged with unshed tears. Seconds passed and my vision blurred. Not wanting Ettore to witness my tears, I turned my back to him as the first of them fell.

I don't know how he knew, but from the corner of my eye, I saw something white appear. Between his fingers dangled a

white linen napkin. Grateful but mortified, I took it and discreetly dabbed at my eyes.

By this point, the pressure in the hall grew until I thought my head would explode from it. The men on his side of the room were watching the men on my side with an eagle's eye, waiting for one of them to merely look at someone the wrong way. A brawl was imminent and just when one of the Scala men rose from his table with a deadly look on his face, his fists balled, Ettore stood.

He held out his hand to me and, after the night I'd had, it would seem I was mentally beaten into submission, because I took it without prompting. He pulled me up and then, together, we were walking over to the empty space that was the dancefloor. My stomach dipped as he pulled me towards him, placed a stiff hand at my waist and began to sway us from side-to-side.

It took a moment for the music to catch up, but when the beginnings of Frank Sinatra's *The best is yet to come* started to play, I could have died.

This was a sick joke, right? Who approved this song?

Both in bloodstained dress clothes, we slow danced while everyone watched us in dubious silence.

A minute passed, then another. Guilt swarmed my insides. I glanced up at him and he peered down at me. I didn't intend to speak, but my lips parted and I blurted out, "I didn't know you had children."

His cool eyes narrowed on me. "Is that right?"

I shook my head, timidly. I should have stopped there. "Where are they?"

He led perfectly. We swayed in sync. Although he spoke calmly, there was an unmistakable undertone of anger. "After what happened I didn't think it was safe for them here. Their nonno took them home."

I couldn't hide my shame. My response was a mere whisper. "That's fair."

As we danced, Ettore glanced down at my neck. “You bruise easily.”

Maybe I was imagining things, but I sensed a little guilt in there somewhere.

I didn’t bruise easily. The marks on my neck were a direct result of him brutally choking me.

“Not really, no.” My response spoke volumes.

His lips thinned, I lowered my face and an awkward silence followed. The longer we danced, I found my husband’s touch far less alarming. We’d had a day. I suspected we were both overwhelmed and somehow, partially numb.

Suddenly, a loud yell sounded. We turned towards it and saw two groups of men standing far too close to each other. My uncle got between them, attempting to calm both parties, but soon there was pointing and then they were shouting in each other’s furious faces.

My hand tightened around Ettore’s lapel and I began to hyperventilate, still going about the motions, slow dancing. I looked up to find my husband observing the mess that was about to come.

Wasn’t he going to do anything? Why wasn’t he stopping this?

I opened my mouth to suggest he get on that but Ettore spoke at the same time. I was stunned when uttered an unenthusiastic, “Kiss me.”

My eyes widened. “What?”

He appeared annoyed. “Our families have been through a lot today, wouldn’t you say?”

Yes. You could say that.

He went on, “There are only two people who are able to diffuse the tension in this room. So, I want you to kiss me like a wife should kiss her husband.”

My heart stuttered along with my speech, “I-I-I don’t know how a wife should kiss her husband.”

His eyes darkened but there was something else there lurking there. Desire. “You’ll work it out.”

The shouting got louder, but all I could see was him.

Um, alright. I guess I could try.

I took my loose hand and nervously touched it to his belt. His stomach flexed under my fingers. I stepped closer, flattening my front against his, and my uneasy exhale shook. My fingers glanced his stomach, moving upwards, across his chest until it met his uninjured shoulder. My fingertips whispers along the line of his throat, around to his nape, and, as if I couldn’t help myself, my fingers curled as I gently ran my nails along the short hairs there.

My knees wobbled. I locked them as I slowly raised myself up on my tiptoes. Our eyes met and I dawdled before tilting my head slightly, closing the distance and pressing my cold lips against his warm mouth.

The kiss was soft. It was gentle and lingering. No steam. Merely a humble act of harmony where there should have undeniably been discourse.

I could feel the tension around us transform to bewilderment, and then cold confusion.

Same, though.

And just when I moved to pull back, Ettore’s long fingers dug into my hip. I hissed into his mouth, but he held me there. When he was satisfied that I wasn’t going anywhere, he gentled his hold on me, running his thumb over the stung area. And then, his arm rounded me, snaking around my small, soft body, pulling me close until our bodies were flush against one another.

The hand in which he led with gripped my own, trapped, pinched between our bodies. And then, Ettore deepened the kiss. Our noses brushed and, unconsciously, I nuzzled into him. He released a breath that turned into a partial groan. My pulse throbbed in my neck and... elsewhere, too.

When my husband moved to end the kiss, I gripped his collar tightly and pulled him back, letting out a shamefully

dazed, “No.”

Ettore Scala yielded and our mouths melded once more. We kissed brazenly in front of our families. It was hot in a way I had only seen in movies. It was exciting and electric, and when he pressed the hardened length of his cock into my hip, my face bunched and I whimpered.

Holy shit.

I had never been kissed like this. I didn't know kissing like this existed.

I wanted more. I wanted to feel his tongue against my own. I wanted his hand between my legs. I wanted to undress him right there and then, and then I wanted to mount and ride him like a common whor-

The spell I was under broke quite suddenly when somebody whooped. Our lips separated and I blinked up at him wide eyed and astonished.

Oh my God.

I very nearly climbed my husband and dry humped him in front of our esteemed guests.

Red faced and embarrassed, my look of shock must have amused some of them because laughter began, then clapping and soon, the tension in the hall evaporated as, together, my family and his, cheered for us.

“*Ugh,*” was all I managed to choke out before I felt Ettore's body shake once in silent laughter.

Mortified at my reaction to this man, I peeked up at him with blazing cheeks to find him looking down at me with a smile so slight, I could have imagined it.

I had never been close enough to man to have shared little moments. But when he released my hand, brought his thumb to my pulsing, swollen lips and gently cleaned the smeared lipstick off of my lip line, the small, intimate act caused something odd to happen to me.

A piece of my broken heart began to repair itself. In that moment I thought, all things considered, it could be worse.

Yes, this marriage would forever have brutal roots, but if we were both willing, if we nurtured it, it could grow into something strong. Into something beautiful.

It was typical that at the very moment I found a splinter of hope in this impossible situation, I heard my sisters disturbingly ecstatic voice in my head.

We can ruin him, Vicky.

As if it were an admission of guilt, I searched for her at the bridal table. She sat watching me closely and I felt her gaze pierce my insides. She lifted her glass, sipping on bourbon. Anyone who looked at her then would find nothing untoward in her body language. I knew better.

Vincenza was furious.

One couple joined us on the dancefloor, then another, and soon, the reception became a lively event. And, yes, our families would never truly trust each other, but there was a certain amount of respect one had to offer.

I chanced a look at Ettore. He was an ominously handsome man.

I wasn't the only one who felt a change in the air around us and we exchange a knowing look, our expressions turning somber and, together, we became solemn. This wedding was the least of our problems. Eventually, we would have to leave and go home together. Ettore now had to live with the woman who attempted a murder suicide in a church and I had a husband who...

No.

It hurt to even think it.

Marriages like ours were common in the ranks. I was under no assumptions that we would ever be more than glorified roommates. There would be no love lost between us and what I had attempted today meant there would also be no trust.

I knew what was expected of me. I would be seen and not heard. Under normal circumstances, I would have born

Ettore's children, but as I had learned, he already had three. He would be free to take on as many mistresses as he wished, so long as he kept them private, and I would be stuck in the prison that was his home, alone and lonely.

I wished things could have been different but I still counted myself lucky.

After all, not many people could shoot the capo of *Malocchio* and live to tell the tale.

CHAPTER 4

THE IMPORTANCE OF TRADITIONS

*V*ittoria

AFTER OUR SHARED KISS, the evening wore on in a different bearing. The familiar sounds of chatter and boisterous laughter echoed through the hall. People drank and danced, and I yawned into the backs of my fingers.

I wasn't sure what time it was, but I could sense it was getting late when a pretty woman approached, crouched between our chairs and said, "Okay, you two. You got through it. And believe me, there were moments I thought you wouldn't so, you know. Good for you." It was then that I noticed it was the same woman who had given me the five-minute warning before the ceremony. "Now, all that's left to do is the smashing of the vase. After that, you can leave."

My voice came out worn. "Smashing the vase?"

The woman blinked at me. "You don't know? The two of you hold a vase together then throw it down on the ground, breaking it to pieces. The number of fragments on the ground are the number of years you'll have together."

My heart leapt. I straightened, looking between them and said, "Oh, we don't have to do that. Do we?"

And the woman's expression fell. "It's tradition."

God, was there anything I could do right?

I immediately backtracked. “Well, if it’s tradition...” the words faded out.

“It is,” she said excitedly. Smiling lovingly at Ettore, she leant in and pressed a kiss to his cheek before wiping the leftover lipsticks away with her fingers. “I’m proud of you.”

Ettore simply grunted, and the woman’s smile deepened before she stood and floated away. Not a minute later, she returned with a small vase in hand. Mic in hand, she asked us to stand and we did. I was hyperaware of Ettore’s hand burning a hole in my lower back as we stood front and center. She announced it was time, placed the vase in my hand and stood back at a safe distance, waiting expectantly for the magic to occur.

This wasn’t my tradition, so I looked to my husband for direction. The hand at my back slipped around to rest on my hip as he moved closer. I lifted the vase, waiting. His hand joined my own, gripping the vase tightly.

Our attendees started a slow clap. That clap gained momentum. Cheers of support began. And then, pandemonium. Men stomped their feet. Hands slapped down on tables. Cutlery jangled. High pitched whistles rang through. And when the encouragement turned deafening, I couldn’t help the small smile that tugged at my lips.

“On three,” he muttered, then began to count. “One, two, *three.*”

As one, we threw down the glass vase as hard as we both could. I waited for the smash, but watched in shock as the vase bounced once, then again, landing between us, utterly unharmed.

Oh my God.

My heart stuttered.

Seriously?

The roar died down until a sickening silence settled around us. I didn’t miss the single crowing laughter. How could I when it was unmistakably my sisters?

It was official. The universe was fucking with us.

As far as bad omens go, this one was pretty clear. Zero fragments meant zero years together.

I should have been overjoyed, and yet, there I stood, mildly insulted.

A quick glance at the woman who had organized it had my stomach sinking. She was clearly devastated.

The silence stretched on. I peered up at my husband to find him already looking down at me. His expression was unreadable but I could sense a certain disappointment there. Without a single thought, I slipped my hand into his and held it tight. I didn't take my eyes off him as I lifted my high-heeled foot, got into position then brought it down over the vase.

The tinkling sound of breaking glass filled the air.

I twisted the sole of my foot, making a show of crushing it even more thoroughly.

This was not my tradition. There was no certainty in how many years a marriage was due. But I respected the gesture.

People needed hope. Without it, we were nothing.

Ettore's fingers tightened around my own. We stood wordlessly, but I felt so much being said, especially when my husband gently lifted his large foot and stepped onto the already cracked glass before us, creating even more fragments.

I bit my lip to hide my smile.

A moment passed, then another, and I don't know who started the applause, but I did know one thing.

Fate be damned, we created our own destiny.

My gaze firmly attached to that of the man beside me, my heart raced. I felt it coming long before he moved. Oh God. I needed it. I craved it. I was desperate for another taste of him. And when he lowered his face, I propped myself up on my tiptoes, meeting him halfway. He grunted into my mouth, breathing me in. I sighed into his, breathing him out. I cupped

his rough cheek and sucked at his bottom lip. The hand at the small of my back lowered some more and then I was throbbing in places I should not have been throbbing in public.

What was it about this man that made me want him so?

Some said tension made for electric foreplay.

We kissed until we were both out of breath, until we were both dazed and confused. Until foreplay wasn't enough.

Ettore's voice grated when he ordered, "We're leaving."

I nodded, dreamily.

Gripping my hand tightly, Ettore all but dragged me through the back exit, out to the waiting limo, opened the door and pushed me in. I stumbled, crawling on shaking legs to make room for him.

Ettore entered, closed the door behind him and, immediately, the car began to move. He sat back with his legs wide, lifting a hand to run his fingers through his hair before lowering his heated gaze to me, tugging at his tie. He threw it off and his disturbed growl of, "Privacy," should have frightened me, but the way my pussy clenched said otherwise. When the partition between us rose, he narrowed his eyes and jerked his chin, and immediately, I crawled between his open legs. I didn't wait for instruction. I knew what I wanted and I went for it. My clumsy fingers scrambled with his belt while he worked on the buttons of his shirt.

Earlier, I hadn't really had time to look at him, but the moment he shrugged his shirt open, my fingers stopped working. Staring openly as the sun kissed torso, all I wanted to do right then was run my fingers down every dip and plane of the muscular wall of his chest. Unlike the few boys I had messed around with, there was a light smatter of hair over his pecs that centered down past his belly button, trailing even lower to somewhere much more exciting.

Lord.

No doubt about it.

This was the body of a man.

It was only when my eyes glanced over the reddened bandage at his shoulder, did I feel a short-lived pang of guilt.

Ettore wasn't having my sudden change of mood. Impatient, he lightly smacked my hands away and reached for his belt, undoing it quickly. Deft fingers lowered his zipper. He separated the flaps of his black dress pants, reached inside, and pulled it out. His thick, angry looking cock sprang free and my lips parted.

My mouth watered at the sight of it. As if he could read my mind, he stroked the crown of my head, taking my hair between his fingers and pulling lightly, causing a yelp to escape me.

Holding a handful of my hair, he pulled hard enough to make my neck crane, exposing my throat and then, he brought his forehead to mine. "You said you were sorry. Did you mean it?"

My expression crumbled. "Yes. I'm sorry." I was sure I sounded desperate. "I'm so sorry."

His face darkened. His lip curled. And then, he pressed his parted lips to the apple of my cheek and spoke against it. "Prove it."

With a stiff yank, I buckled forward over his throbbing cock. I lowered my face until the head of his dick touched my lips. I widened my mouth, sliding it over and sucked.

I found it strange. His skin was hot, but smooth. He tasted clean, but mildly salty.

A small sound of feminine satisfaction escaped me as I quickly became an addict for him, nuzzling into his crotch like a sex-starved nympho.

He hissed in a breath as I began to bob my head, taking in as much of him as I could. His brows lowered and his lips pursed as he watched closely while I desperately sucked his cock in the back of a limo on our disastrous wedding night. On my knees, with my small hand wrapped around the thick length of him, jerking lightly as I tried to take all of it, but

gagged until threads of saliva coated his straining, rock-hard dick.

My husband, it would seem, liked that, because as I puffed and panted, desperate to breathe, he rocked his hips, forcing more of him into my throat until I was red-faced, choking on his cock.

I took it. Dare I say, part of me even enjoyed being used in this way. And when he pulled back and I sat there, open mouthed and gasping for air, he pulled me up on shaking legs, reached under my dress and yanked down my panties before having me settle in across his lap. My knees on either sides of his thighs, there was no time for modesty when he lifted my skirt and found my weeping pussy. Taking his cock in hand, he swiped the head of him through my wet folds and when he was satisfied that I was as ready as he was, he lined us up and took my hips in his large hands. I settled one hand on his stomach and the other on his uninjured shoulder. Then, as the tip of his dick kissed my needy hole, he looked me dead in the eye and muttered, “You’re going to have to beg harder than that.” He pulled me down as he threw his hips upwards.

He filled me until I felt stretched in a way I had never felt before and I cried out in shock, gasping loudly, collapsing into him and bringing my forehead to his. And then, he fucked me. His hips pumped relentlessly and all I could do was whine like a bitch in heat and hold on for the ride.

He was angry, I could tell. He needed this, and I gave it to him as reparation.

A hand reached under my skirt. Roughly, he grabbed the place where ass met hip and squeezed hard enough to make me wince. The obscene sound of sex, of wet squelching and skin slapping skin echoed throughout the small space and when I closed my eyes, a light slap to my cheek startled me.

His eyes bore into mine. He spoke through gritted teeth. “Don’t you fucking close your eyes. I won’t let you pretend I’m somebody else. I want you to see it all. See me. Watch what I’m doing to you. Hate me for it.”

My pussy fluttered then throbbed. Ettore Scala fucked me like a whore in a back alley behind a bar, and I loved it.

His wild eyes bore into mine as his hips slammed against me in the crudest way.

Slap. “You really,” *Slap,* “should have,” *Slap,* “killed me, *topolina.*” *Slap, slap, slap.*

Oh God. That was so hot. What was wrong with me?

The rougher he got, the better it felt. My head swam.

His gravelly voice cut through this fever dream. “You belong to me, Vittoria. I own you now. I can do whatever I want to you and nobody will care. You know what that means, don’t you?” He paused for dramatic effect, and I hate to say it, but it might have worked when I heard him say the stony words. “You’re fucked.”

Ettore pressed a rough kiss to my mouth, taking his teeth and biting into my lip. Holding it there as he pistoned crudely up into my delicate body. Weak bodied, I pushed at his chest and groaned, craving the something that was brewing.

He laughed darkly, pulling down on my hips until the base of his dick met my sore, brutalized pussy. My lips parted and my expression became faraway. I was stretched wide, full of him. And then he squeezed my hips between his large hands and began to pushed back and forth, dragging me over his lap, and I was forced to grind on him.

I moaned loudly, “Oh God.”

“*Shhh,*” he lifted a hand, running his fingers down my cheek. “No, baby. Don’t do that. Don’t pray now. Do you really want Him to see you like this?” His fingers gripped my chin and held me still as he punished me with another cruel and devastating kiss. “Taking it hard like a good little slut?”

I couldn’t help it. My pussy clenched around him. I watched in awe as he closed his eyes, lifting his head heavenward, wearing a pained expression. His lips parted, and his eyes fluttered, and *Jesus Christ,* I was certain then. Ettore Scala was the most beautiful man in existence.

He used me, coldly, ruthlessly. And I wanted to be used by him.

Ettore released my hip and slipped his hand between my legs. The experienced man he was, he found my clit easily and began to circle it with the pad of his thumb. My stomach grew taut as I ground down on him, searching for a little slice of heaven. He pressed harder and I ground faster. I felt funny. Light in the head, but somehow, heavy everywhere else. Sizzles of electricity charged up and down my spine. My breathing turned heavy and then I was panting. Tighter and tighter my pussy clenched around him and he watched me closely, searching my face. He rubbed faster and I felt myself falling. My breathing turned shallow, my vision blurred, my back got tight, and then I careened off of the cliff.

I moaned then whimpered as I found my release.

Ettore groaned harshly as my pussy throbbed viciously around his dick. He ground into me, stretching my orgasm out and I dug my nails into his good shoulder as I fought through it. Then, suddenly, I felt him still. He let out a ragged breath as his erection began to jerk and spew come into me. Wet warmth coated my insides before it began to seep out, dripping down between our legs.

His hold on me gentled. His movements slowed, then stopped. And then, together, we panted.

We stayed that way for a long while, until our breathing slowed and our bodies softened. Ettore tapped my hip and I got the hint. I sluggishly climbed off of him and fell breathlessly into the seat beside him.

Instantly, he looked down and when he caught sight of his semi-erect cock, my cheeks burned in humiliation.

My eyes widened as he blinked, huffing and puffing, coming down from his orgasm. A moment passed, then a minute, then two, and then he looked down at his stained fingers, turned to me with furrowed brows and an accusation in his eyes when asked the awkward question I knew had been coming.

“You were a virgin?”

CHAPTER 5

A WALKING ANGEL

*V*ittoria

“YOU DIDN’T THINK to tell me?” Ettore muttered under his breath, close enough to the shell of my ear that he radiated warmth while sounding utterly furious. “Didn’t consider that was something you should let me know?”

What he said lingered as I stood in the center of the foyer. My jaw tensed uncomfortably and I fisted my free hand tightly enough to have left the imprint of my nails lodged firmly into my palm. Having caught my reflection in the floor-to-ceiling mirror on the way in had me cringing on the inside. My long brown hair was no longer in delicate waves, but tangled from violence and sex alike. My naturally pouting lips were now red, bruised and swollen. I had a very attractive looking beard rash on my cheek and chin. And the veritable stranger who just fucked me in the back of a moving limo was now demanding answers that I didn’t think I had it in me to give.

After Ettore broached the mortifying question, I was lucky enough that the limo pulled up outside of the hotel and the driver had given a couple of courteous taps to the window that separated us. Ettore growled low in his throat before tucking himself back into his pants and fixing his attire. He opened the door beside him and stepped out. I shuffled over but stilled, surprised, when his large hand dipped back inside. He held it out to me and after a second, I took what he offered, if not

only because I wasn't wearing panties and hoped to exit in a graceful way that didn't expose my nether region.

He closed his hand around mine and my first instinct was to pull away. The small tug of my hand had him turning his head and glaring at me in a way that said I did not want to fight him right now. And as we walked, I couldn't help but notice he held my hand awfully gently for somebody who had just threatened my life as he rammed me so hard that he almost split me in two.

He was no longer inside me, but I felt him still. My core pulsed as if begging him back.

We were causing a scene. I know this because as we walked towards the front desk, hand-in-hand, every person we passed along the way stopped mid-step to stare. And, could you blame them?

My makeup was smeared. My dress torn. The flap of Ettore's shirt hung out at one side, over the waist of his tailored pants. His tie hung loose around his neck, boutonniere snapped in two, with the head of the white rose hanging limp by a single thread. My heels dangled from one hand. Not to mention, we were both covered in blood.

I would have stared too.

We looked like a walking crime scene.

The concierge stood wide-eyed, waiting for our approach. I should have known he would take me somewhere the staff knew his name. But that wasn't exactly a fair assumption. The truth was, there weren't a lot of places in this city that didn't know who he was.

We arrived at the counter and the concierge said, "Good evening, Mr. Scala. Are you in need of medical attention?"

A firm, "No," was all he offered, but his jaw was steeled and I could tell he was in pain.

The concierge seemed to have dealings enough with him to return, "Very well," as she began typing. Not long after, she placed two keycards onto the counter and said, "The suite is ready for you. If you need anything, please don't hesitate."

“I never do,” he rumbled the impassive reply before snatching up the cards, placing his hand at my lower back and guiding me to the elevator.

The silence was welcome but I feared it wouldn't last long. When the doors opened at the 14th floor, I noticed there was only one door in and out. I wondered where the other rooms were. I wanted to ask but didn't want to look stupid. The truth was, I had never stayed in a hotel before. I hadn't ever left the state. The farthest I'd ever slept from home was at Zio Como's, four blocks away from my family home.

My father was the over-protective kind. When he passed, I thought that meant I would gain a little freedom. Unfortunately, I hadn't been able to predict the point that my sister's level of protectiveness far outweighed my fathers.

The fact that I remained a virgin at twenty-one was solely because my sister did not allow me to date. And like the good girl I was, I obeyed.

I always obeyed.

Fat lot of good it did you.

Bitterness washed over me.

No shit.

Ettore placed the keycard into the slot. The red light turned green. He pulled on the lever and threw open the door, standing by it. I hesitated. He pinched the bridge of his nose then sighed, agitated. “Vittoria, I have been shot today and lost a decent amount of blood. I am dirty and I am tired as hell. I'm sure you'll agree with me when I say,” he lifted his head and a spark of anger ignited in his eyes as he spoke through gritted teeth, “I have been patient with you in a way that would test even a saint. So, get your ass into the room because you and I are going to have a little talk.” The guilt I felt then evaporated to nothing when he looked me up and down then uttered, “And if you think I'm going to carry you over the threshold, you are out of your fucking mind.”

Our eyes held as I moved into the room.

I knew he had every right to be mad at me. That didn't mean I had to like it.

Ettore placed the spare card into a slot by the wall and like magic, all of the lights turned on. I glanced around at the huge area around us.

This wasn't a room. This was something else. To call it an apartment seemed too little. It was a home. A *spectacular* home. Furnished to the nines, it looked like something you would find in an upscale real estate magazine.

The large living area trailed off into multiple rooms. At first glance, I could see there were at least two were bedrooms. It had a wide-open balcony with an entertaining area on it. The plush white sofas made my feet ache with the need to go lie down on them. It had high ceilings and a kitchen with sparkling counters that held a stainless-steel ice bucket and in it, a bottle of champagne. I wanted nothing more than to go check out the reading nook, but I held myself still, poised, and waiting for the attack that I was sure would come.

Vincenza had warned me about Ettore Scala.

He was a vicious, blood-thirsty man who would stop at nothing until the Vero family was utterly destroyed.

How disappointed she would be if she could see me now. To know I had let this monster touch me.

To know I had liked it...

I swallowed hard and lowered my gaze. Under my dress, I pressed my legs together as the fresh memory played back in my mind.

Weak, she would call me. *Pitiful. A disgrace.*

As I battered myself internally, Ettore brushed past me and made for the bar where he poured himself a tumbler of whisky. I blinked in astonishment as he downed it all in one gulp, placing the glass down with a light slam. And then it was a stare off.

His heavy brows furrowed on me and I could tell he was fighting an internal battle, much as I was. And the silence

raged on. I was sure he thought I would become self-conscious enough to speak, but I was quiet by nature. I rarely raised my voice and in the odd instance that I did, I was fast to apologize. At home, Vincenza was the boss. And I was... well...

My heart panged.

...Sorry to even exist.

Ettore poured another for himself, this time a more sensible measure. He lifted the glass and held it to his mouth, asking a reluctant, "How old are you?" before tipping it back.

I cleared my bruised throat, stood awkwardly and tried desperately to avoid his black piercing gaze. "Twenty-one."

And Ettore closed his eyes, lowered his head and ran a hand down his face, muttering, "*Fuck me.*"

I willed myself to step back, but my body refused to listen. "I'm sorry." I wasn't actually sorry. It was simply force of habit to apologize when things got heated. I was used to shouldering the blame, even for things I had no control over.

He took in a deep breath and let it out slowly, refusing to look at me. "I knew you were young, but I didn't know you were *that* young." His expression turned pained and he reached up to touch the covered bullet wound, hissing out, "Earlier, in the limo..."

Oh God, no.

My heart stuttered and my cheeks blazed as I forced out, "I don't want to talk about that."

Please don't make me talk about that.

Ettore stood tall and even though I was sure it wasn't meant to be intimidating, I suddenly regained use of my limbs and took a small step backwards. His expressive eyes bore in on me. "Much like you, I have been dreading this day. I woke this morning and took my crying children over to their nonno's, telling them everything was going to be okay. That I was marrying was a nice woman."

Trepidation pierced a hole in my solar plexus and my throat tightened to a point that I thought I might not be able to

breathe ever again.

Why was he telling me this?

“I get to the church and I’m still not feeling right. Take my place, the organ starts and I can’t even turn to look. Dread cements me to the spot.” Unconsciously, I took a tiny step closer because I knew the feeling. “And then it’s time. I hate that we’re doing this. I’m angry and resentful. But then I turn,” he lowered his gaze and his voice turned quiet, “and see you.”

The way he said it... My arms lined with goosebumps.

Ettore lifted the bottle to pour himself another glass of whisky. “Beautiful, I think. God, she’s beautiful. A walking angel.”

No. No, no, no.

Shame threatened to smother me. One nice word from this beast of a man and warmth spread through me in a way that was insulting to my entire family.

Maybe Vincenza was right. Maybe I was weak.

Or maybe you felt something too.

He lifted the glass and studied its contents. “So small. You looked terrified and somehow, that makes some of the dread fade away. You pull away from my touch and I find that shit utterly adorable. The whole ceremony I think to myself, ‘you know what, this could work’. The veil is removed and I see your face. Shit. It all but knocked me on my ass. Beautiful seems too small a word to use when I look at you. I can’t even find a word to describe it. It’s overwhelming, the way I feel.”

My gut tensed and my mouth went dry. Regret made my head and heart throb alike.

Why was he doing this? Surely, he knew I was torturing myself enough already.

My knees almost buckled when he licked his lips. “And when it comes time to say ‘I do’, I say it and I mean it.”

Stop.

Stop it.

I know where this is going. I know where this story ends, and I don't want it recounted.

“Ettore...”

But he ignored my plea. “And then it's her turn. I know she's going to do the right thing. After all, I am a very important man. A man who made a promise to his children. This girl wasn't gonna make a liar out of me.”

The guilt, the dishonor, the shame... it was too much.

How humiliating that my lips began to tremble and I felt the sting of unshed tears burn behind my eyes. “Ettore, please...”

“You know what happened next.” He tipped back his head and swallowed the whisky in one gulp, holding onto the glass. “You looked at me,” he muttered. “You looked me right in the eye when he took your shot.”

Fuck. He sounded so defeated. I don't know why it mattered to me, but for some unknown reason, it did.

I could handle his wrath. His rage and fury. But this bitter disappointment was eating me up from the inside out.

He pointed at me then and mimed pulling the trigger. “*Boom.*” I turned my head to the side and shut my eyes tightly, distressed that he was making us relive the awful moment. “Target hit. Right in front of my children.” His face screwed up, he reared back and threw the glass at the wall closest him as hard as he could. It shattered and the sound had my shoulders jumping in fear. The echo of glass tinkling resonated throughout the space. When I opened my burning eyes again, his stance turned rigid, his face became red and the tendons in his neck bulged when he roared an irate, “*Right in front of my fucking children!*”

My body jolted in fright. I tried desperately to keep it together, but being yelled at was the last straw. I burst into tears. My breath hitched and I gasped out, “*Please. I'm so sorry!*”

I was. God help me, but I was. I didn't mean for any of this to happen.

I didn't realize he'd cut himself until blood sluggishly dripped from his middle finger onto the tiled floor. Without feeling, he picked up a linen napkin and curled his injured hand around it as he explained roughly, "Those kids are good kids, and they have been through it. They already lost a mom. They did not need the trauma of seeing their pops almost die in front of them. And you..." He glowered at me then and it felt like a physical attack. Even more so when he snarled, "You heinous little bitch. You took more from me today than I even let anybody take from me. I was so enamored by you that I didn't even see it coming, and I should have. You taught me a lesson today. Your toxic beauty is a weapon I will no longer be affected by."

I dipped my chin and wept in silence.

My heart ached as if it were broken, never to be repaired again.

It only got worse when he uttered an emotionless, "You embarrassed me today. Made a laughing stock of me. Men have died for less. It is only because of your tender age, of your childishness and naiveté, that I have spared your life. But I will make a promise to you right now. The next time you fuck up, I won't hurt you." His expression remained impassive. "I will, however, slaughter your entire family and make you watch. Think I'm bluffing? Try me, *topolina*." I lifted my watery eyes to his and found them cold and unfeeling. "Now. I am going to shower to wash every fucking bit of you off of me, then I'm going to have a smoke to ease the pain I'm in and after that, I'm going to call my father to check on my children. And you, Vittoria Scala, are free to do whatever the fuck you want so long as you stay in this suite and stay the fuck away from me."

CHAPTER 6

VICIOUS LITTLE MOUSE

E *ttore*

I STOOD NUDE, dripping wet in front of the bathroom sink with swirls of steam curling around me, fogging the mirror. My heart thumped in my chest as I kept my heavy gaze on the uncovered bullet wound just above my breastbone. I lifted my hand and felt over the reddened surrounding area, hissing through my teeth when I poked a particularly sensitive spot.

An inch lower.

The blood pumping through my veins turned ice cold.

A single inch lower and nothing could have saved me.

I clenched my jaw so tightly that my temples throbbed. I could see the steady heartbeat jump at my throat. My eyes flashed as the thought of what could have been danced in my mind.

My lip curled in repugnance when I thought about her, crying in the next room. I wasn't moved by her tears because despite what happened today, I wasn't a stupid man. She wasn't crying with genuine regret. She was crying because her abhorrent plan failed and now, she had to deal with the consequences like a big girl. "Vicious little mouse."

With a shake of my head, I snagged a towel off the shelf and patted myself dry. I tried my best not to get my wound wet, but avoiding the odd few droplets of water was

impossible. My touch gentled as I passed over the wound, but even though I barely grazed it, a sharp sting speared through me, and I watched in irritation as a droplet of blood pooled at between the staples holding it closed. That single droplet quickly turned to two and then a thin trail of blood was making its way down one side of my body. And that was about all I could take on this incredibly taxing day.

I laughed bitterly, shaking my head while pressing the towel to the seeping lesion. “Oooh. You vile cunt.”

Of course, I get saddled with a loose cannon.

I didn’t know Vittoria Vero before today. Unfortunately, I had the displeasure of dealing with her sister, Vincenza, multiple times. Our families’ roots were deeply entwined. It went deeper than just a solid partnership. The friendship that my father had with Renato Vero spanned decades and when he was killed, Vincenza and Vittoria were left orphans. They weren’t the only ones to feel the loss. If I didn’t know my pops so well, it would have been presumptuous to assume Renato’s death brought on his early retirement from our firm. I never asked the question outright, but a heavy sadness cloaked my dad after the tragedy with Renato occurred. He hasn’t been the same since.

It was my father who suggested I take a Vero as my wife.

I didn’t bother to hide my disdain at the idea. I’d been married once before. It took him months of gentle coaxing to get me onboard. He called it penance. I didn’t feel such a drastic step needed to be made to make amends – In fact, I didn’t think amends needed to be made at all – but here I was, married under God to a twenty-one-year-old nutcase.

“Should have seen it coming,” I rumbled under my breath, disappointed in myself.

Yes. I should have. But the moment I saw her, I was blinded. I couldn’t seem to see past her beauty. There was something about her. Her eternally wide doe eyes were the prettiest shade of brown I’d ever seen a person wear. Her hair was long and thick, flowing in waves down the delicate line of her back. She was small but soft. She had hips and her ass was

full but firm. I couldn't take my hands off of it while she ground her hot, wet pussy down on my cock, reaching for her high.

It was then I was reminded that she was a virgin and I took her far too roughly. Perhaps I should have felt guilt over it. A normal man might have.

I didn't.

The thought of taking her again and making her hurt had my flaccid cock turn into a fat semi.

I was her husband. She was mine. Nothing more than a lifelike toy for a man to play with.

I could walk out of this room, force her to her knees, order her to open her mouth and drive my cock down her fucking throat. I could drag her by the arm and bend her over the arm of sofa, spit on her other virgin hole and push inside without a care for her enjoyment. I could take her again and again, fucking her raw, twisting her into the most humiliating positions, biting her smooth skin until she was as bruised as my ego was, taking what I needed then pushing her away, leaving her small, stretched hole dripping with my cum.

I could do it if I so desired.

My head turned and I glanced at the closed bathroom door.

Right then, I was mad enough to consider it.

Listen to you.

And just like that, my cock deflated along with my wrath.

"Fuck," I said as exited the bathroom and walked nude into the master bedroom, tossing the bloody towel aside as I went through my bag, finding a pair of black cotton pajama pants. I didn't bother with underwear, just slipped them on, replaced the gauze over my wound, retrieved my phone and dialed the number, standing by the window, looking out over my city.

God. She's just a fucking kid.

Vittoria was just a girl. Sure, legally, you had to consider her an adult, but if I had to be impartial about it, the truth was

all I saw was a young, stupid girl who did an idiotically reckless thing and was now cowering somewhere in the suite, terrified for her life.

I wouldn't go to her. She didn't deserve comfort and I certainly wouldn't be the one to provide it.

Actions had consequences. Today was a lesson for my young bride.

Some things couldn't be undone.

The moment my father answered the phone, he didn't bother with pleasantries. "Where are you?"

"At the hotel."

"And Vittoria is with you?"

"Yes."

Nunzio Scala was not the type to hesitate, and yet, he did right then. "Is she still breathing?"

Nice vote of confidence, pops. "When I left her twenty minutes ago, she was."

Through the phone, I heard my father let out a long, relieved sigh. "Good. That's good."

Was it? I tried not to feel insulted. "You don't seem too concerned about your baby boy."

"It was a flesh wound," was all he responded with.

Yes, it was, but that didn't mean it didn't hurt like a bitch. "I didn't call to talk about this. How's Ella? Are the boys doing alright?"

"I loaded the boys up on sugar, let them stay up late watching a movie. They crashed out about an hour ago. I didn't have the heart to wake them so I covered them with a blanket and left them on the living room floor."

"Good." At least that was one thing off of my mind. However, I loathed to ask, "And Ella?"

"Eh." I heard shuffling, as if my father was walking away from where he was. I know I guessed correctly when lowered

his voice and said, “Well, first she demanded we take her back. She got mad when we didn’t. Then she switched tactics and, sweet as pie, asked whether I could call you. I told her you would call when you could. She stormed off, slammed a few doors and now, she’s not talking to me.”

Ah, yes. I snuffled out a laugh because pops was well versed in the Ella experience.

As soon as I laughed, I felt a sharp sting of pain right in the heart and then, my smile dropped and suddenly, it didn’t seem so funny anymore.

Poor kid. After her mother, she wasn’t the same girl. In her twelve short years, my daughter had experienced more trauma than most grown adults could handle. It wasn’t fair. If I could take it away and put it on myself, I would. Alas, that’s not how the world works.

I know people meant well when they said things like, “Don’t worry. It’ll make her stronger.” And maybe they were right. It did make her stronger, but it shouldn’t have had to.

She was a child. She didn’t need strength. She needed to be protected.

“Is she up?”

My dad scoffed. “What do you think?”

“Put her on.”

“Alright. Let me find her.” It didn’t take long. I heard him knock on a door before saying, “Ella? Your dad’s on the phone, sweetheart.”

Fast footsteps echoed in my ears, a light scuffle over the phone, and I couldn’t help my smile when she demanded angrily, “Papa?”

My grin stretched wide. “Ella Bella, it’s late. What are you doing up? You okay?”

At hearing my voice, she lost all of her sass, and then her voice trembled. “I’m okay. When are you coming to get me?”

Inwardly, I hesitated because I knew it wasn't the answer she wanted. Outwardly, I kept my voice steady and firm. "Tomorrow, baby."

Her breathing turned shallow as she asked, "Can you come get me now? I want to be with you."

I closed my eyes and prayed for strength when I said, "No. I can't come get you now, Ella. I'll see you tomorrow though, okay?"

A high-pitched whimper sounded followed by a hard thud. When everything sounded far away, I put two and two together. She dropped the phone. Dropped me. Right then, I was just another person who let her down.

Her loud sobs broke me.

Ella argued like a woman, but cried like a little girl.

She never did come back to wish me goodnight. Instead, my father and I said our quick goodbyes and he left to deal with Ella while I moved to the bed, sat with my back to the headboard and contemplated what was truly important.

Keeping my family safe from a new threat.

AFTER A LONG, sleepless night, dawn finally broke and a decision had been made.

CHAPTER 7

WALK OF SHAME

*V*ittoria

I DIDN'T SLEEP a wink the night before. Whenever I found myself dozing, I woke with a start, my heart racing as though I'd been shocked hard with jumper cables. The tension in my jaw had now rolled over to my temples and I could feel the beginnings of a migraine pinching just below my ears.

No matter how much it pained me, I refused to leave the bedroom I had decided to hide in all night. I would not go out in search of painkillers. If Ettore found me and asked what I needed them for, he would have glanced down at his injured shoulder then laughed at my precious condition, and the embarrassment would have crushed me.

It was a little after eight am when my bladder screamed for relief. I approached the door silently, placing my ear to it, listening closely for any movement outside. But I heard none.

A quick peek outside my room towards the bedroom Ettore had retreated to showed the door remained closed. Emboldened, I gripped the bottom of my dress and held it together as I tiptoed barefoot down the hall to the nearest toilet. I relieved myself quickly, washed my hands and made to sneak back into my chosen room, but stopped myself when I heard muffled conversation coming from behind the closed door that housed my husband.

Curious, I remained on neutral ground, not leaving the kitchen slash open living area. By this point, my head was throbbing and my stomach turned slowly. I helped myself to a glass of water, sipping slowly and when that wasn't enough, I quietly searched the drawers in and around the kitchen until I found some aspirin. I knew it wouldn't make more than a dent in my migraine, but took it anyways because something was better than nothing.

I sat poised on the sofa, waiting for Ettore to make his entrance. I waited, checking the clock. Time passed slower than usual. My posture turned lax as I sunk into the back of the sofa and closed my eyes, waiting some more, but Ettore spent the better part of the morning on the phone. I couldn't make a single word out, but the constant chatter reminded me that my husband wasn't boasting with what he said the night before.

He was an important person. Between being a notorious capo and a single father, his time was precious and stretched thin. And I was just an obstacle he now had to navigate.

Maybe he was speaking to his children or maybe he had commenced damage control. The story of Ettore Scala being shot at the altar by his unwilling bride would have circulated by now. My gut tensed with unease because I felt awful about it.

It was so cozy on the sofa that my eyes grew heavy and just when I began to nod off, I scrambled awake as the bedroom door swung open. Ettore stepped out appearing well dressed, well slept and irritated as hell. He was fiddling with his left cufflink, popping it into place. His confident gait faltered only when he noticed me and I could see why.

He was clean and showered and looking all kinds of sexy.

I, on the other hand, looked like warmed up shit served three ways.

I could see it aggravated him to ask, "Why are you still dressed in that?" He worked on the other cufflink and said, "After the shitshow you orchestrated yesterday, the least you can do is make it so that we're on time for lunch at my dad's. Go shower and change."

Sometime during the night, the bruising around my neck had my voice turn hoarse. I swallowed through the pain and spoke quietly, “I can’t.”

“What do you mean you can’t? Where’s your bag?”

With each additional question, I shrunk deeper in on myself. I did not want to speak but when a man like Ettore asked you a question, you answered. “I... didn’t pack one,” was my reluctant response.

Things seemed somewhat lighter this morning. I was going to miss that when the ball dropped in a few seconds.

“Why didn’t you...?”

Three, two, one.

His face turned somber and he stilled.

There it goes.

The sigh that left him was bone tired. Then he nodded slowly, letting out a hostile laugh. “Because you never planned on making it past the ceremony. Why pack a bag? You don’t need fresh drawers when you’re dead, right?”

Ding, ding, ding. Get the man a prize.

“Right,” I said this so quietly it was barely a whisper.

“Jesus Christ,” was what he said before he bit his tongue, but it didn’t take a genius to finish his sentence. If I had to guess, I was sure it the rest of his statement went something like “You, Vittoria Vero, are an unimaginable asshole and you make me sick”.

With everything my sister had told me about this man, I expected the beast to attack. She would have had me believe that even the smallest transgression would result in a beating. So, I suppose I was surprised when rather than tearing me to shreds – which, let’s be honest, I would have deserved – Ettore simply closed his eyes then lifted his hand to massage his temple. I watched his jaw tense then release, over and over again, and I had to curl my toes into the plush rug beneath me to stop myself from going to him. I knew it would be unwise after he very clearly told me to stay the fuck away from him.

But I had the oddest sensation. A prickling at my nape that did not enjoy seeing him pained. And an even more reckless desire of wanting to touch and comfort him.

My heart ached when he let his guard down and showed just how tired he was. He opened his eyes, glanced over me as a whole, then calmly uttered, “I’ll call down, get you some new clothes. Go shower, Vittoria. We’re gonna be late.”

What?

Confused but grateful, I realized something as I offered a passive nod, then excused myself to the bathroom to do as he asked.

Ettore Scala could very well be my worst nightmare, but these were not the actions of a monster.



ETTORE DROVE AN ASTON MARTIN. I confess, it wasn’t the brand of car that surprised me, but the model. I expected him to drive something sleek and sporty, but when the black SUV pulled around, I was sure they’d brought out the wrong car. But then he took the keys and stepped forward. He opened the passenger door and offered me a hand. I glanced down at his open palm and let out a slow breath as I took it. His fingers curled around mine and as I seated myself, I saw Ettore look down at my forearm. Thankfully, he did mention the fact that I had goosebumps. He didn’t have to. We both saw them. He closed the door after me and walked around to the driver’s side. A quick glance at the back seat and realization dawned.

Of course, this car was perfect for him.

The two booster seats in the back had a ghost of smile forming on my lips before a sudden thought had that smile transforming into an expression of pure terror.

Yesterday, I wasn’t ready to become a wife.

Today, I was a stepmother.

It seemed that amongst the chaos yesterday brought, I'd forgotten about that small detail.

“Oh shit,” I whispered wide-eyed as Ettore stepped into the car.

After my shower, I stepped out of the bathroom to find a gorgeous black midi dress with a pencil skirt and white trim waiting for me. It was not something I would have ever chosen for myself but I had to admit the white Dorset buttons trailing from the left side of the waist, down to the thigh were absolutely stunning. To the left of the dress were two white paper bags and on the floor in front was a tan colored shoe box with something scribbled over the top.

A quick look through the bags had me finding a hair brush, basic makeup in the perfect shades, and a black lace demi bra and matching panties. The cups of the bra were so low I thought they might not cover my nipples. I almost refused to wear the racy lingerie, but when I found I had no other option, I slipped them on and...

I looked good. I was almost too curvy for the ensemble but my softness spilled over in just the right way. On top of that, it made me feel confident. It made me feel sexy.

Who knew?

There was a moment when I lifted the dress that I was sure it was going to be too small, but I shimmied the skirt up and over my thick thighs quite easily. I opened the box on the floor and gasped at how beautiful the black pumps inside were. I slipped the red-bottomed heels on effortlessly and although a small smile teased my lips, my brow furrowed as a thought struck me.

How did Ettore know my sizes?

I didn't time to think on it. Instead, I brushed my hair and used the travel size hairspray to tame my awful fly-aways. I applied a light coat of foundation and layered my mascara until my lashes were thick and long, and when I got around to looking at my reflection in the mirror, I barely recognized

myself. Apart from the deep purple bruises around my neck, I looked classy in a way that screamed wealth.

Now, in the car, Ettore and I hadn't spoken a word to each other, but as I kept my eyes ahead, from my peripheral, I could see him glancing over at me more than was wise.

Knowing I commanded his attention had me warm in places I shouldn't have been. I shuffled in my seat, restlessly. I turned away, flushed, when I caught Ettore adjusting the hard ridge of his crotch.

The sexual tension grew and grew until it filled the cab of the car and it suffocated, and then I found myself blurting out, "Thank you for the dress." He looked at me with a marred brow, so I added, "It's beautiful."

When he didn't immediately respond, my stomach twisted and I turned to stare out of the passenger window. But then he rumbled, "It looks good on you," and I felt those words trace a path from the pulse at my throat, over the hardened nubs of my nipples, down lower until it circled my clit and I was forced to squeeze my legs together to relieve myself of the dull throb.

My mouth was dry as the Sahara, but it was only polite to respond in kind. My voice came out huskier than intended. "You look handsome."

Again, he was either taking his time to respond, or he simply didn't plan to. But when I chanced a peek at him, I found him gripping the steering wheel so tight that his knuckles turned white. His jaw was steeled and his nostrils flared.

For a second, my chest seized. I didn't understand.

What did I say to make him so angry?

It was force of habit when I opened my mouth to apologize, but he growled, "Are you sore?"

Confusion settled over me. "Uh..."

His eyes bore into mine and for a second, he looked so unhinged that I leant away from him. He then clarified,

roughly, “Your pussy, Vittoria.” Oh my God. What a question. “Are you sore?”

My neck heated in discomfiture. I nodded lightly and my voice shook when I admitted, “A little.”

The vicious smile that tipped at his lips scared me. My heart began to race when he chuckled darkly and promised, “I hope you have a high pain threshold because later, after I’m done with you, it’s going to hurt so much worse. You’re going to ache from it. You’ll feel me inside of you for days.”

It wasn’t the delicate kind of wooing I was used to. In fact, it was a cold blatant threat. I shouldn’t have wanted that.

Why did I want that?

Because your passive nature craves to please your husband.

Because you want to be used again.

Because you know he’ll make it hurt so good.

My fingers ached to reach for him, to pull him close and kiss his pouting lips and forget all of the foolishness. All I could do was reach up to my shoulder and grip my seatbelt with both hands in an attempt to stop myself. I wondered how long this lunch would last.

Not too long, I hoped.

CHAPTER 8

DOGS AND OTHER ANIMALS

V *ittoria*

LUNCH WAS ABOUT AS AWKWARD as I imagined it would be.

The car slowed as we entered a cul-de-sac with two rows of impressive houses on both sides, but it was the towering mansion at the head of the street that we approached. Ettore didn't stop when we reached it, either. He pulled up, right into the drive and parked next to a champagne-colored Mercedes Benz.

He cut the ignition, but neither of us made to leave. He looked to be contemplating what to say and, truthfully, I didn't expect much more than he offered. "My father will want to have a word, then you're going to meet my kids. After that, we'll say hi to everyone else and get this over with. Don't expect much. They're not going to warm up to you. But this is my family and I expect you to be polite and respectful."

I was a little slighted that he felt the need to lecture me.

"Of course," I replied, docile as a spring lamb.

He spared me once last glance, taking his time looking me up then down before opening the driver's side door. "Come on."

Nervous as hell, I let myself out and hopped down, smoothing out my dress. On shaking legs, I made my way over to him. We were toe-to-toe. I glanced up at him through my

lashes, and he stared down at me. And then, he held out his hand. I took it immediately and when he curled his fingers around mine, I squeezed them back in return.

I had to admit, it felt a lot safer for a lamb to walk into a Lion's den with the king of the jungle himself.

Instead of approaching the front door, Ettore led us around the house towards a side gate. He opened it and I followed him down the narrow path. We reached the backyard and Ettore walked us to the back of the house. I could hear people inside, but rather than entering through the sliding door, he brought us around to a second entrance. He opened the door slowly, quietly, and once we were inside, he peered down the hall, making sure we were alone. His odd behavior made it clear he didn't want us to be seen just yet.

We followed the hall until there was nowhere else to go. Ettore lifted his free hand and knocked on the heavy looking, intricately carved mahogany door. Without waiting for a response, he placed his hand to the brass lever and pushed, letting us in.

The moment my eyes landed on Ettore's father I had the weirdest feeling of déjà vu. The older man stood in the center of the home office with his hands behind his back, evidently waiting on us.

Ettore brought us forward then released my hand and stepped away. I twisted back in fear, and when I was reassured he wasn't going far, I let out a breath, turning back to the head of the Scala family.

The moment he smiled I felt a weight lift off of my shoulders. He stepped towards me and, in a paternal gesture I'd sorely missed since the passing of my father, took both of my hands in his and held them firm. "Hello, Vittoria."

My throat ached. "Hello," I replied apprehensively.

"I'm Nunzio. We didn't get a chance to chat yesterday."

An uneasy chuckle escaped me. "My fault, I'm sure."

His smile widened before he looked between Ettore and I. "Seeing as you're both standing upright and breathing, I take it

you have reached an understanding. Yes?”

The silence spoke volumes. Then Ettore uttered an unfeeling, “We’re working on it.”

Nunzio patted my hand. “That’s good. Very mature of the both of you. I’m impressed.” I wasn’t sure what to say when the older man said, “I hope my son is treating you well.”

I don’t know why it irked me, but it did. The protective need to stick up for my husband burned low in my gut. “He’s been the perfect gentleman.”

Nunzio snuffled out a laugh before reaching up to gently touch the bruises at my throat. He lost his smile, turned to his son and drew out the words long and slow. “Yes. I can see that.”

Well, hell.

Nunzio released my hand. “I’m so glad things have worked out. I know the rest of the family is simply dying to meet you.”

That statement came out sounding far too foreboding for my liking. “I’m eager to meet them too.”

“I’m sure you are. Welcome to the family, sweetheart.”

With that, Ettore placed his hand to my hip and guided me out. The closer we got to the opposite end of the hall, the louder the voices became and the tighter my chest got. Ettore didn’t hesitate when he walked us out into the fray of people. Once we were noticed, as one, they all stopped talking and turned to stare. I recognized a few of them. Ettore’s groomsmen were there, as was the middle-aged woman who walked me through the smashing of the vase. At least she looked happy to see us. She smiled happily and moved to greet us when two lightning-fast blurs hit Ettore at full force.

“Daddy!”

He groaned loudly before kneeling down to scoop the two miniature version of himself and for the first time since our official meeting yesterday, I saw what a genuine smile on Ettore Scala looked like.

Envy ate me whole. What I would have given to have him smile at me like that.

He kissed both of their heads then hugged them close. They hugged him right back and I did not miss the way his jaw flexed in pain when they squeezed him tight. It had to be agony and yet, he didn't even flinch.

One boy spoke, "Dad, we got to stay up."

Then the other, "And watch a movie."

"We fell asleep on the floor."

"And nonno said we didn't have to shower if we didn't want."

And then, they talked at the same time. "Because we're gonna end up stinking anyways."

Ettore laughed softly. "Really? That was nice of him to make sure you two would smell like an old pair of gym socks when your dad got back." He tickled them and they giggled loudly.

The whole scene made my heart flutter. I thought he must be a good father. He had to be when they were so excited to see him.

"I want you guys to meet somebody, okay?" He placed them down and held their hands, turning them to face me. They recognized me, of course, and both watched me warily, as one would a snake. "Vittoria, these are my boys."

I was determined to get off on the right foot this time.

I crouched down to their level, keeping my ankles and knees pressed tightly together then smiled gently. "Hello. I'm Vittoria."

They took their time, but I maintained my harmless stance and smile. As Ettore had warned, they did not warm to me. And just when the silence spanned long enough to become awkward, Ettore let out a firm, "Boys, don't be rude."

It was the first boy who spoke carefully. "I'm Adrian."

The other boy murmured, "I'm Domenic."

They seemed sweet. “It’s lovely to meet you,” was all I managed before someone swooped in front of them, blocking me from their view. My smile faltered when the young girl – the one who I’d last seen screaming for her papa – glared holes through my head. I cleared my throat and tried to mend what I’d broken. “Oh, hello. I’m Vi-”

I didn’t get to finish my introduction because the little girl reared back, then brought her hand forward swift and hard, slapping me across the face with all her might. It was impressive, the force she managed to put into it. I was so stunned that I wobbled on my heels before falling clumsily back on my ass, holding my fingers to my throbbing cheek.

Simultaneously, gasps of shock and loud male laughter surrounded us. And what was left of my tattered ego was crushed into a fine sand, blowing away in the wind.

I could say a lot about Ettore. My assumptions of him ran deep and more than most of them were not good. It would have been fully justified should he have laughed with the others. But he didn’t. I don’t think I will ever forget that instead of gloating in his child’s anger, he let go of the boys and barked, “*Hey*,” at his daughter, holding on to her by the upper arm and spinning her to face him. “What the hell was that?”

The little girl seethed. “You shouldn’t have brought her here. I don’t want her here.”

“This is not how we deal with things. Do not let your anger get the better of you,” he said as if he hadn’t just choked the life out of me the day before. “You are not that person. You’re better than that. Now, let’s try this again.”

I remained in a heap on the floor when he released his daughter to help me stand. He surprised me by touching the reddened area where her blow had landed and his lips thinned as he glanced down at his daughter through hard eyes and said, “Ella, this is Vittoria. My wife. Your step-mother.”

Ella’s lip curled in an almost identical way to her fathers and when she opened her mouth to no doubt air her grievances with me, Ettore muttered, “You’d better consider what you’re

going to say next very carefully. Cheer camp is next month and I assume you want go.”

Her eyes narrowed on him and then on me. It looked as though it taxed her greatly when, in deadly calm, she uttered steadily, “Hello, Vittoria. I’m Ella.”

She looked angry, but I felt the sadness bubble over inside of her. I felt for the girl. It didn’t feel right to see her punished for a blundering attempt at protecting her family. “Pleased to meet you, Ella. That’s a beautiful name.”

She looked me over in loathing and sneered, “My *mother* named me,” before folding her arms across her chest and slowly walking away, maintaining eye contact as she made her exit.

The sweet woman from the night before found then was the best opportunity to clear her throat and announce as cheerily as possible. “Alright. I think we’re good over here. Why don’t you all take a seat and we’ll bring the last of the food over.”

Just as Ettore moved to guide us to the table, we were stopped by the wall of grown men. The only openly smiling one immediately tried to diffuse the tension with a joke. “I didn’t know we were allowed one hit. Now, I’ll take it easy on ya, but watch out for Daniele. He’s got mean hook on him and I know he’s been dying to get one in on ya.”

“Sandro,” sighed Ettore, clearly not finding the jest funny.

“What? Oh, come on. It was a joke,” Sandro returned. “Lighten up, Tor.”

Ettore ignored him and instead made introductions. “Vittoria, you may remember my groomsmen. The smiling idiot is Sandro.”

He offered me his hand and I took it cautiously. We shook briefly.

“In the middle is Santino.”

“Tino,” he amended, also offering me his hand. He held it a mere moment, but we didn’t shake.

Ettore ended on, “And this is my brother, Daniele.”

Uh oh. His brother. No wonder he looked like he wanted to sink his teeth into my throat and tear me to pieces.

Daniele did not offer his hand or a hello. He just stood there, glared at me like I was nothing more than a nuisance. A fly circling his head and he wanted to slap me away as hard as possible.

Ettore then turned towards the kitchen where Nunzio was tasting something from a large pot. “You’ve met my pops. The woman cutting bread is Emilia.”

“That’s my wife,” Sandro piped in happily.

Ettore went on, “You’ll remember my sister Giada from the reception.” *Oh*. The sweet, smiling woman was another sibling. At least one of them was rooting for me. “Sammy, Giada’s husband, is... I don’t see him, but he’s here somewhere.”

Giada threw in. “He’ll be up in a minute. He’s in the cellar slicing the prosciutto.”

“And their daughter, my niece, Nikki is,” Ettore looked around. “Where’s Nikki?”

Giada made a thoughtful sound, but averted her gaze when she carefully explained, “We thought it best she didn’t come today. She flew out this morning.”

Ettore’s brow furrowed as he pulled out a chair for me and helped me sit. “Why?”

Everyone else took their seats as Giada fluttered about the subject. “Well, after what happened yesterday,” I could tell she was trying to be diplomatic when she said, “she was a little... mad.”

From behind us came a much more forward explanation, “She went around to the uncles looking for a gun.” The tall, sturdy man placed a platter of thinly sliced prosciutto and provolone cheese onto the table, wiped his hand on his pants then took my own without asking and pumped it once. “How are ya? I’m Sammy.”

“Hi,” was my polite reply.

Ettore’s brows rose in surprise. “She went looking for a gun?”

Well, great. Now I had a target on my head.

I don’t know what possessed me, but with the children safely seated in the next room, I couldn’t seem to help myself from clearing my throat and muttering, “Well, if she still needs one, tell her I know a guy.”

And, Gods of Hell, the silence that followed my very bad joke was brutal.

My neck burned, my cheeks flamed, and then I was just about to apologize when Nunzio Scala began to chuckle. Sandro followed close behind. Then Sammy and Tino joined in. Giada didn’t laugh, but her eyes did. And soon, the entire table – apart from Daniele – was laughing.

Fighting the urge to throw up, I made eye contact with Ettore and mouthed, “I’m sorry.”

He looked at me for a long moment in confusion, as if he couldn’t figure me out. And then, to my shock, I watched as his eyes softened and his lip twitched. I guess my apology was accepted because he reached across the table, picked up a bottle of red wine and poured a little into my empty glass.

Daniele spoke over the rim of his wine glass. “Slow down, Tor. Is she even old enough to drink?”

The statement hung in the air. It was meant to embarrass us both. But Ettore didn’t appear embarrassed when he stopped pouring and replied easily, “Only just.”

Daniele was clearly annoyed his shot missed its target. I kept a discreet eye of him and from the way he was looking at me, it was obvious that he and I would have beef until the day one of us was dead in the cold ground. So, I suppose I was stunned when Giada took my plate with a smile, but was stopped by Daniele.

“Here,” he said. “Let me.”

The deed drew Ettore's attention too, and when he sat up at full height, alert and ready for action, I found myself tensing by his side. Daniele took his time, loading up my plate with pasta, roasted meat and salads. When there was no more room on the plate, he rounded the table, but instead of handing it to me, he kept going. My spine straightened and I knew it was going to be bad when he passed the table, keeping his glacial eyes on me. I felt Ettore's body twist, his gaze following every step his brother took.

Meanwhile, I didn't dare.

My heartbeat quickened.

The conversation at the table stopped and then, Daniele had the attention of everyone in the room. Without a moment's hesitation, he opened the sliding door, lifted the plate and tossed it into the backyard. It landed with a crash that startled me. Seeming all too pleased with himself, Daniele slunk back around the table, took his seat, looked me dead in the eye and uttered frostily, "Dogs don't eat in the house."

Blood rushed through my ears as the silence stole the air around us.

My father-in-law turned to his son, shaking his head. It was clear he was ashamed by his youngest's actions. Everyone else sat uncomfortably wordless. Something told me it took a lot, but even Sandro had lost his smile. When Giada stood to retrieve another plate, Ettore stood and everybody stilled.

I lowered my head to hide my flushed face.

Ettore moved slowly, leaning over the table. Daniele's hard gaze met that of his brothers and all we could do was watch as Ettore took Daniele's plate and gently placed it in the empty space mine had been in. Giada rushed over to fill my new plate and then everyone took their places and began eating.

Everyone except Daniele.

CHAPTER 9

A COLD-BLOODED KILLER

*V*ittoria

“OPEN IT.” Giada smiled widely as I blinked down at the large square box in my hands.

Lunch had ended as awkwardly as it began, with Ettore dragging his brother out by the collar of his shirt, having tense words with the younger man then returning on his own, announcing, “Daniele just remembered he has something important to do.”

That prompted Tino, Sandro and Emilia to make their leave, and then it was just immediate family left.

When Giada disappeared into the next room and returned with the white box, she glanced at her brother and started with, “I know you said you didn’t want a gift so I respected your wishes and got one for the bride instead.”

Oddly touched by the gesture, a small smile teased the corner of my lip as I began to undo the silver ribbon around it. I lifted the lid and parted the protective paper, but my smile fell then faded to nothing when I saw what it was.

A wedding album.

“How lovely,” I uttered, pulling it out of its box and holding it on my lap. “Thank you, Giada. I love it.”

But my neck throbbed as I exchanged a solemn look with my husband. Sadness draped itself over my shoulders when I made the realization that we had no photos of the day. Not even a single keepsake, apart from the scar that would form just under Ettore's collar bone.

My lungs burned and, suddenly, I found it hard to breathe. I must have paled considerably because she put a hand to my forearm and let out a concerned, "Are you alright?"

"Gia," Ettore took care with his sisters' emotions as he explained carefully, "We don't have any pictures to put in there."

"Oh," she muttered woefully a moment before a thought dawned on her. "I have some. I took a few during the ceremony. Here." Giada pulled out her cell and began scrolling. When she found what she was after, she handed it to me. "See?"

My heart stuttered at the photograph in front of me.

It was taken from the center of the aisle in the church a moment after my veil had been lifted and we turned to face each other for the first time. I looked up at Ettore like he was the only man to exist, and he peered down at me as though he would never again have eyes for anybody else.

It was both beautiful and gut-wrenching.

My heart rate increased and then, my hands were shaking.

This could have been the beginning we deserved. This could have been the start of a wonderful life. An adoring wife to a devoted husband.

My breathing turned ragged.

It was beautiful, and I ruined it.

Moments after this photo was taken, disaster struck and, in my head, I still heard the echoing gunshot.

Panic set in and I stood so fast that the album landed on the floor with a hard thud. Perspiration dampened my brow and my vision blurred. I began to hyperventilate. Both Ettore and

Giada were by my side in a flash. I paced, shaking a hand out while panting, “I can’t breathe.”

“It’s okay,” Giada said, placing a hand around my waist and holding me upright. “I’ve got you.” I couldn’t see much of anything when she ordered my husband, “Tor, would you get Vittoria a cold glass of water?” To me, she spoke softly, “Okay, honey. Come with me. You need some fresh air and some quiet.”

She led me away to a room that connected with the back area, sat me down on a lounge and moved to open all of the windows. The moment the cool breeze fanned over my face, I felt I could breathe again. I didn’t see Ettore, but he must have delivered the water because Giada held it up and helped curled my fingers around it. She ordered firmly, “Drink.”

I lifted the glass with shaking hands and tipped it back unsteadily, gulping down water so fast that it dribbled down my chin and onto my lap. My stomach recoiled as the icy water settled, but after a minute, it did seem to help.

Something touched my forehead. My eyes fluttered open and Giada mopped at my moist brow with a cloth. I was embarrassed but grateful. My lips stuck together as I whispered, “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” She smiled sadly. A few minutes passed and I felt a little better. When I sat up without shaking, she said, “You know, this might sound strange seeing as I appear to be somebody you just met, but I know you. In fact, I’ve known you a while. I don’t know if you remember, but I used to come to your house with my dad. I would play with you and your sister while they talked business.”

What?

Confusion swept over my features. “I’m sorry. I don’t remember.”

Giada’s smile turned sheepish as she sighed through the words, “You used to braid my hair, but, bless you, you weren’t very good at it. I always left with fat, matted locks of fuzz, but

in spite of that, I always left with a smile. One time, I gave you something of mine. An Italian charm bracelet.”

Recognition dawned and I gasped slowly. “Oh my God.” I blinked at her. “I *do* remember you.”

I still had that bracelet, but up until now, I had no memory of receiving it.

She laughed prettily then, “There you go. Your father was a good friend of my dad’s. In fact, Papa Nunzio lectured all of us before the ceremony. Warned us to treat you right, or else. I know seeing those bruises on your neck are killing him. Even more so that Ettore put them there.”

Shame had me lowering my eyes. “I deserved it.”

I admit I was a little surprised when she said, “Of course, you did, but Nunzio didn’t raise his boys like that. He brought them up to protect their women, even when they’re irrational.” She rolled her eyes. “*Especially* then.”

She wasn’t trying to make me feel bad, but her compassion had me feeling the lowest kind of disgrace. “I owe your family an apology.”

“No, you don’t,” she said and her dull tone had my face snapping to hers in disbelief. “See, maybe it’s because we have history or the fact that I know a little about your life that makes me undeniably sure that it’s *us* that owes *you* an apology.”

Immediately, my throat clogged.

What Giada planned on saying next, I wasn’t prepared for. “And I just wanted to tell you how brave you’ve been.” The bridge of my nose tingled. “Nobody could have prepared you for what you’ve been through, but you made it through.” My lips trembled. “All alone and look at how strong you’ve been. Personally, I don’t think I could have survived the kind of loss.” When she reached up to stroke the hair at my crown, I was already hanging on by a single frayed thread. “And yes, you fucked up, but it’s nothing that can’t be fixed. Mistakes don’t break us.” And then she said something that tore my

heart out. Something I'd wanted to be a part of again since the day my father was taken from me. "We're a family."

That was it. The final push.

My chest tightened painfully, my expression crumbled, I dipped my chin and warm tears trailed my cheeks as I quietly wept. Giada scooped closer, carefully put her arm around me and held me close as I cried with shame, and misery, and regret, all at once.

How anyone could show me an ounce of kindness after my unthinkable actions were beyond me. And she wasn't just kind, but consoling. Something my own sister hadn't offered during this entire ordeal.

Now, I wasn't sure of much, but right then, nobody could have convinced me otherwise of one single fact.

My sister-in-law was an angel.



Ettore

THIS WHOLE SITUATION was becoming more and more bothersome by the minute.

The instant I walked Vittoria into my father's home, I felt something burn at my sides. Something I rarely felt. Regret fell over me like a shadow.

I was cocky and thought placing my new wife in a position where she was surrounded, fenced in like an animal, would make her skin crawl. And it did. What I did not plan for was my own reaction to her discomfort.

Introducing her to my father was an obligation. When he told me he planned to show me who Vittoria Vero really was, I welcomed it. I was certain he would be the one to see her true self. But then, he baited her. Gave her the perfect opportunity to shame me.

What a surprise my little flower was. Yes, her petals were delicate and bruised, but she hid thorns under her lovely exterior. And when she unwaveringly looked my father in the eye and lied easily about my treatment of her, there was a swift moment, a sharp sting at my nape, where uncertainty flashed in forewarning.

I chalked what she had done down to self-preservation.

Meeting my children was a test. The boys were a warm up. But Ella was worth fifty percent of her grade.

Had I known my daughter would physically attack the woman?

No, but I had my suspicions.

Did I relish in it?

Only momentarily.

Watching her be struck and fall, brought down by a child – *my* child – should have brought me the sick sense of satisfaction any bastard would have enjoyed. I predicted her to snap. I wanted her to snap. I willed it. Then I could turn to my father and silently gloat. But my resigned Vittoria took the abuse without more than a flinch. Like it was normal. Expected.

And I found I did not like that.

It made me question things, and I liked that even less.

Regrettably, I had been far too preoccupied with this internal dilemma to foresee my brother's planned degradation of my young bride. By the look he threw me as he walked her meal out the back door, I was sure he thought I would enjoy it. But once again, it was her reaction that concerned me.

I observed closely as her hands clawed and her fingernails dug into her thighs, the material of her skirt bunching awkwardly under the table. Vittoria remained straight-faced as members of my family tore her down, piece by piece.

And, suddenly, it felt wrong. Like flogging a dead horse.

The last straw was seeing the blood rush from her pretty face as the reminder of what occurred the day before hit. She tried to hold it together, but nobody was that strong. Her body quaked, her forehead beaded with sweat, and then, I watched her spiral.

Her pain. Her humiliation. Her panic.

I did not enjoy it. Not one bit.

Grudgingly, I had to face facts. These were not the actions of a cold-blooded killer.

As I pondered what this meant, I gifted her an hour with my sister, knowing Giada had the ability to calm even the most restless of souls. But an hour was all she had. A quick glance at the heavy silver watch on my wrist said we had dawdled too long already.

Under alternate circumstances, things might have been different.

I didn't beg permission when it came to things that were mine so I did not knock, simply put my hand to the lever and let myself in. Both women turned to look at me. I told myself I didn't care that Vittoria had regained color to her cheeks, but the easing of my gut spoke otherwise.

"Come, Vittoria. It's time to go."

She stood with little hesitation, only stopping to thank and hug my sister, and then she came to me, standing dutifully by my side, awaiting instruction.

Fuck me. She would never understand what her passive nature did to me.

My cock jerked happily in my drawers.

We said our goodbyes and when I walked around the car, opening the door and holding my hand out to Vittoria, she did something... odd. Her expression softened, she placed her small hand in mine and when she was seated, offered a heartfelt but breathy thank you.

Her gratefulness for bare minimum was troubling and, quite frankly, pissed me off.

Who the fuck had treated my wife so poorly that opening a car door for her was some grand gesture?

I didn't know, but when I found them, I'd kill them.

I would offer their heads to her on a pike as an act of devotion, bury them beneath the shadow of her sadness and craft her a crown from the midnight flowers that sprouted there.

My blood boiled. I slammed the car door harder than expected and my fury rose until I turned and saw my sister standing on the porch, wringing her fingers together, wearing a look of trepidation.

She stepped forward as I went to her, meeting me half way, and her eyes were heavy with woe. She spoke quietly so Vittoria wouldn't hear her plea. "Don't do this. She's just a confused girl. She's not a bad person, Tor. You see it, don't you? I know you do." My sister peeked around me, finding my wife. And then she gently took my hand and squeezed as she beseeched, "Please. As your sister *and* a mother, I'm asking you not to do this. *Please* don't do this."

I think deep down she knew my mind would not be changed, but she had to tell herself she tried.

My hands rose to hold her upper arms. I lowered my lips to her forehead and pressed a gentle kiss to it. Then, I pulled back, peered down at her and uttered regretfully, "I have to."

CHAPTER 10

NORTHPORT

Vittoria

BACKING out of the driveway without Ettore's children was my first clue that something was wrong. That small red flag did not stop waving the entire ride over.

Wherever we were driving to was farther away than I assumed it would be. I took note at twenty minutes, then thirty and when we reached an hour on the road, I sat anxiously in my seat thinking the worst.

The first sign we passed said Fort Salonga, and the next said Northport.

It was a residential area, but the moment I looked out of my window and saw water shimmering in the distance, I blanched.

Not good. Definitely not good.

Yeah. I was sure of it then and my gut sank.

Ettore had brought me out here to kill me.

The dread in my stomach twisted and turned until I felt ill, but outwardly, I remained unmoved. If this was going to happen, it was going to happen. Nothing I could say or do would change things.

In this world, an eye for an eye was the most common form of retaliation and I had a feeling that when Ettore lined

up his shot and pulled the trigger, he would not miss.

Right then, I had many regrets, but my biggest would be not saying goodbye to my sister.

Vincenza was... difficult. She was strict, severe and unforgiving. Often times, she could be unknowingly cruel. But she did the best she could with a broken heart and an equally broken mind. Although she didn't always give me what I needed, like a loving family with a sister who was kind and affectionate, I had to appreciate how hard it had been on her.

She was there that night. When it happened. And Vincenza witnessed it unfold.

Our father's untimely death was seared into her brain and I could still smell the burning flesh whenever I was in her presence.

There were conflicting reports of what had happened that night, but one thing that wasn't ever in question was who pulled the trigger. I glanced over at the striking man I had taken as my husband and my heart screamed out to know why.

Why did he do it?

He didn't seem like a wholly unreasonable man. But then the mottled bruises circling my throat offered a difference of opinion.

Our father's death was a cloud that followed us everywhere we went. I could see it. That day, at the church, how many of his men looked at me like I was scum. As if I were lower than dirt. Their eyes blazed with the question. How could I do it? How could I marry the man who killed my father?

As if I'd had the choice.

Lost in thought, I hadn't noticed the car slow. Wherever it was he had taken me, we were there. Ettore parked in the drive of the stunning waterfront property, turned off the car, and let himself out. I looked up at the enormous colonial. It had to be at least 1700 square feet and the property itself was, at first glance, a couple of acres. I had never seen that many gables on a roof before. The exterior was a subtle in its beauty. Intricate

stonework was laid over the walls, the plethora of mixed sized windows were all painted a uniform white, and the yard was immaculately kept. It looked pristine in a way that made me feel bad that it would soon be marred with my blood.

I was so enamored by the house that I got a little spooked when the door beside me suddenly opened. Ettore stood there, patient and waiting, and when he did what I knew he would, I sighed under my breathe and took his outstretched hand.

My heart skipped a beat when his warm fingers circled mine. That meant something, right? It had to. I had never been so affected by a man before. So moved in his presence, floating at a single touch. I wish I had more time to explore these uncomfortable but tangible feelings because they were worthy of discovery.

Really, heart? Of all men, it had to be this one?

My brain let out a bitter laugh and whispered, “Karma’s a bitch.”

I was aware of just how fucked up it was that I would go to my grave quietly and obediently simply because he desired it and I wished to please him.

So, as we began the dreaded descent to what I was certain would be my final resting place, you can understand my confusion when Ettore unlocked the front door, let us in, released my hand with a jerk of his chin and rumbled, “Come on. You get a quick tour.” He paused to look me up and down, desire burning in his eyes, “Ending on the master bedroom.”

Um. What did he just say?

I didn’t dare reach for the ember of hope that ignited then.

What did he mean by that?

He walked on and I followed. Of course, I followed. I was his pet. Docile. Compliant. And – God help me – I wanted to be good for him. Right then, as that pesky cinder of hope lit into something bigger, I silently chastised myself. Vincenza warned me about my naivete. As it so happened, it was a warning I should have heeded.

What is with you, following this guy around like a little lost puppy?

I didn't know. I didn't *know*.

What was happening to me?

I reminded myself that I didn't love Ettore. I told myself that I didn't even know the man. He and I were not soulmates. We were simply a consequence of poor fortune.

Don't forget well suited.

Ettore pointed out the rooms around us, but I didn't hear a word of it. I was too engrossed with his mouth. So sullen. So petulant. I wanted to kiss his pout away. My lips would touch his and he would lose sight of everything else. Like magic, his woes would fade away and he would fall in love with me. Given half the chance, I knew I would be a good wife.

I only had to prove myself.

Up the stairs we walked. My ears stopped buzzing when he pointed out certain rooms. "This one is where the boys stay. And Ella is down the end of the hall." My breathing turned choppy when he stilled in front the room at the end of the hall, slowly turned around to face me and said gruffly, "You know which room this is, don't you?"

I did. The last on his list. It was the master bedroom.

The apples of my cheeks turned pink and I averted my eyes as I nodded lightly.

"Good," he responded, stepping into me. Crowding me. "Earlier, I asked you if you were sore. This was mere curiosity. You know that nothing would stop me from having you again, don't you?" My stomach turned wildly. It went out of control when he gripped my chin between his thumb and forefinger and lifted until his mouth was a whisper away from my own and said, "You are never too sore for me, are you?" My nerves were out of control. When I didn't respond, he moved my chin from left to right, and then I was shaking my head. "When I want you, I will have you. Isn't that right, wife?" He then moved my chin up and down, slowly. He played with me a moment. I wanted the kiss so badly. I stretched for it, but he

hovered just out of reach. A slow smirk lifted in the corners of his mouth, pleased by my unconcealed desire. “Perfect.”

Still facing me, he reached behind and opened the door, stepping back through it, revealing the flawless bedroom. At my uncle’s house, I slept in a modest and lonely queen bed. In front of me now was a Californian king with an aged black wooden sleigh frame that held a comforter without a single crease and plush pillows that begged to be slept on. The open door of the walk-in closet showed it was bigger than the bathroom I used at home. Decorated charismatically. It was everything I wished for, and – God willing – I got to share it with Ettore Scala.

I was so lost in its charm that I didn’t hear Ettore approach from behind until the fronts of his legs were flush against the backs of my own, my ass nestled in against his strong thighs. I struggled to breathe knowing what was coming. I could hear his satisfied smile when he lowered his lips to the shell of my ear and taunted on a whisper, “I can hear your heart beat.”

My legs buckled when, with a rough shove, I fell to my knees. My hands splayed on the floor, my hair fallen over my face, he slowly walked around me and began, “We are going to play a little game. For me, this will be fun. For you? Well, that all depends on how good you are. I am going to make a statement,” he crouched down in front of me, his hand seized my throat tightly enough to cause discomfort, and he forced my head up as he growled, “And you are going to tell me exactly what I want to hear.”

He used his free hand to push away the hair draped over my face, looking me dead in the eye as he began his game. Without an ounce of emotion, he uttered a severe, “You are mine.”

Debased, I held his cold eyes and grudgingly muttered quietly, “I am yours.”

Ettore’s eyes hooded in contentment. “You belong to me.”

Even quieter. My lips trembled. “I belong to you.”

He did not like the falter in my volume. I know this because he moved swiftly and as one hand curled around my throat, the other came around to hold me at my nape and he shook me slightly, demanding, "Tell me I own you."

My eyes closed as he jostled me. My breathing hitched as I whined pitifully, "You own me."

"'Til death and beyond." His wild eyes flashed at my hesitation. His lip curled as he thundered, "*Say it.*"

Breathing heavily through my nose, I took a defiant moment before caving. My jaw ached as I said the shaking words. "'Til death and beyond."

His eyes closed in ecstasy and he made a purely male sound deep in his throat. My pussy wept in anticipation. Without warning, Ettore stood, yanking me up with him. My body lurched as he tore down the zipper of my dress, hauling it roughly off of my body. And as I stood there in my lace lingerie and black pumps, I crossed my arms over my front in a poor attempt to cover myself.

I heard it a millisecond before I felt it. The hard whack across my ass had me hissing out in pain.

Ettore clicked his tongue. "Silly girl." My butt throbbed viciously and I fisted my hands by my sides to stop myself from lashing out. He noticed, of course, and he laughed menacingly, "Oh, do it. I fucking dare you. Let me loose." I forced myself to calm and he actually seemed disappointed. "No? He tutted, "That's no fun."

With a firm hand between my shoulder blades, I was propelled forward. I stumbled onto the bed, losing one heel and when I saw Ettore, fast paced and coming at me, I did something stupid.

I scrambled on my hands and knees, trying to get away.

He grinned, lunging forward and caught my ankle easily. "Where do you think you're going?" An effortless tug was all it took and I was caught. I was a fool to feel both terrified and excited. I panted as he placed a heavy hand in the center of my back, holding me down, while my ass remained high up in the

air. When I felt him flick the waist of my panties, I struggled but it was purely for show. “Look at this. A gift for me, all nicely wrapped up. Let’s see what’s inside.” I was starting to understand what he liked. I struggled again as he ripped my panties down to my knees, exposing me, then came in close and breathed against my pussy, “Oh, baby. You shouldn’t have.”

My cheeks blazed.

Surely, he wasn’t going to...

All at once, my eyes rolled back, my mouth rounded and my toes curled as Ettore flattened his tongue and licked me from slit to crack. He licked me once, twice, then dipped his tongue inside of me, reaching, tasting, and I departed this world.

Death by indulgence wasn’t a bad way to go.

I hadn’t noticed he released me until both of his hands rounded my ass, kneading both cheeks as he ate my pussy. I moaned quietly, horrified to find I was actually enjoying this. And he... Good God, the sounds he made.

He grunted like a hungry animal, and I, devoured as his willing meal.

I peered back and my stomach dipped. There was something inherently filthy about being exposed the way I was, almost completely nude and finding him fully dressed as he took what he wanted from me.

The thought had me bucking back against him.

This pleased my husband. I know this because he pulled his tongue out of me long enough to growl, “If you want to come, you’ll fuck my mouth.”

I did want to come. I craved it more than anything. I wanted it to fill his mouth. I wanted him to taste it. I was a good girl.

For him, I would be anything he wanted me to be.

I bucked, thrusting backwards. I did it over and over, again and again, and every time I did, Ettore’s tongue licked down

low, glancing my clit. I fought for it. Oh God, I warred for a piece of heaven. And then, I was making restless sounds as I threw myself back into him, fucking his face. Wet, squelching sounds bounced off the walls. My clit began to swell, my hot pussy clenched and my stomach tensed as I felt it approach. He sucked at my puffy lips, groaning in pleasure. My entire body tightened and a low whine escaped me. Ettore slurped at my wet hole like I was a rare delicacy and, right then, I believed him.

More.

A little more.

Please.

My head flung back, my eyes fluttered and I panted without shame.

Right there.

That pant turned into short high-pitched cries of pure bliss. Ettore gripped my ass so hard I knew it would leave marks. Then, suddenly, it hit me like a fucking freight train. The abrupt scream that left me turned my throat raw on the inside. My body strained as I shook through my orgasm. And Ettore drank it up with a low groan of fulfilment.

My husband let me fall forward onto the bed. I gasped through the lingering pleasure. Somewhere behind me, I heard clothing rustle and before I had even come down from my high, Ettore flipped me over, yanked me forward, lifted my legs, lined himself up and plunged forward. My face turned pained. A weak cry left me as his thick cock stretched my raw, tender pussy but when I looked up at him, I seemed to forget all about the discomfort because Ettore was naked.

Gloriously naked.

His body was something out of a fine art exhibition. Muscled and strong, he was a living sculpture and mine to revere. Expression fierce, he bit his bottom lip as he plunged in and out, fucking me mercilessly. My entire body shook with every thrust.

He liked that.

He liked it even more when he gripped my bra and yanked harshly, exposing my modest breasts. And then he thrust with even more vigor just to watch them bounce. He cupped one soft tit, pinching my nipple hard. My tight body clenched around him and Ettore hissed out, "Look at how quickly she submits. She's so good, responding to my touch." He gripped my thigh, digging his nails into the tender flesh, staring unflinchingly down at where our bodies met. "Every time I pull out, she tries to suck me back in. Do you see that? Do you feel it?" He looked at me then, "Do you know what that means?" I shook my head and Ettore stilled inside of me balls deep, letting go of my leg to grasp my cheeks with rough hands, pulling out faces close where he proceeded to make my heart stutter. "She's in love."

As screwed as it was, I thought he might be right.

He released me and my head fell flat against the mattress. He fucked me slower then, with more control, and although I wanted another orgasm, I was too sore to even attempt to reach for it. Instead, I watched him closely. I wasn't prepared for when he suddenly yanked my legs up and over his shoulders, bending at the waist, towering over me and the new angle made everything feel tighter, which in turn made me feel fuller. My lips parted along with the feeling and when I unconsciously clenched my pussy, Ettore involuntarily bucked into me. His brow held a sheen of perspiration as he growled out, "Jesus. *Fuck*. Baby, you're so fucking tight. Do that again."

I did. My body wrapped around his, tight as a glove, and he groaned loudly. "Are you on birth control?"

"No," I breathed erratically.

"Good," was all he said as he thrust into me harder and faster, moving me up higher on the bed. His skin slapped loudly against my own. His gaze turned hazy, he breathed out heavily through his nostrils and then, he muttered, "You want my cum, don't you?"

"I do," I cried and was surprised to find I meant it.

"My little slut wants her pussy filled."

“Yes.”

“Here it comes,” he panted roughly before pushing forward and stilling inside of my sore, abused pussy. His voice turned strained when he ordered, “Take it, bitch.”

His cock began to flex and jerk inside of my stretched hole. His face turned pained as, spurt after spurt, he came inside of me. He groaned through it, his body turning rigid. I felt the wetness seep out of me and leak downwards, coating my asshole.

Ettore threw my legs down and fell forward, collapsing onto me. He was too strong, too heavy, but I reveled in his weight. I couldn't stop myself from draping my arms around his back and gently running my fingertips along his damp spine. His semi-hard cock still inside of me.

He accepted my touch. In fact, I could have sworn he welcomed it.

We remained like that a long while. And after the tension was gone, Ettore lifted his head from the space between my breasts and blinked sleepily. And this was the first time I had seen him without ages of tension latent on his face. My stomach twitched. Without it, he looked younger. Freer.

Unable to keep myself from him a second longer, I brought my face close to his, gently ran my nose along the length of his, then kissed his lips tenderly. He didn't respond at first. I think he might have been surprised by the sudden show of affection. But then he wrapped an arm around me and spun, taking me with him. Now draped over his tall frame, our kisses turned slow but passionate. He snaked his arms around me and I ate as his lips as he reached down to squeeze me the cheeks of my ass.

I was floating from the feelings he inspired. Everyone in my life treated me as if I were weak. But not Ettore. He pushed me far outside my comfort zone, knowing I was strong enough to take what he gave. And just before I did something stupid like declare my endless love for him, quite suddenly, I was pushed back onto the mattress.

I felt the loss immediately. My pussy ached from it and our combined juices wept out of me like tears of mourning. I blinked at the abrupt separation and frowned gently as I watched him, naked and proud, saunter to the pile that was his clothes and begin to dress.

The silence was long and deadly. I couldn't bear it a second longer, so I filled it with asked something I'd wished to know since I first laid eyes on him.

“How old are you?” came the hesitant question.

He pulled up his pants, buttoned and zipped them, then answered brusquely, “Thirty-seven.”

Oh. Wow. Okay then.

He was *much* older than I thought.

I didn't really know what else to say. I guess conversation wasn't really Ettore's thing either because once he shrugged on his shirt and slipped on his shoes, he held onto his jacket and tie then moved towards the open doorway.

I couldn't hide the way my expression fell and my gut sank heavily.

Baffled, I stood on shaky legs and gripped the edge of the comforter, pulling it up and around me as I rushed to follow him. I paused three-quarters of the way down the stairs, watching him in the foyer, and I had to have sounded pathetic when I asked a quietly flustered, “Where are you going?”

He didn't even look at me as he finished buttoning his shirt and spoke tonelessly, “Listen, I gotta go. You'll find clothes in the dresser and the kitchen has been stocked.”

What?

I was flabbergasted when he ended on, “Make yourself comfortable,” before opening the front door, stepping out and closing it behind him with a firm snick.

Numb, I stumbled into the next room and watched through the window as he stepped into his SUV, started the engine and backed out of the driveway. My heart clenched as he drove away without hesitation.

Here I had been worried about what came next. The shared space. The sleeping arrangements. Being somebody's wife and a stepmother to three children.

As it turned out, I hadn't needed to be.

CHAPTER II

A GILDED CAGE

*V*ittoria

ETTORE DIDN'T COME BACK that night, or the next day, or the day after that. Maybe I was foolishly naïve, but after a week, it finally hit me and my heart sank.

He wasn't coming back at all.

Ettore had abandoned me.



I BEGAN to pack a small bag. I didn't feel right about taking too much from a closet full of clothes that weren't my own. And, yes, I believe they had been purchased for me, seeing as they were all in my size and still had tags on them, but still. Ettore may have been my husband, but it was clear to me now. He would not take me as his wife. Not in the traditional sense anyways.

Up until now, I hadn't even tried to leave. It was pathetic, but I waited. I waited for Ettore to return. I convinced myself he would, but he'd left me here without my phone and when I attempted to use the landline in the kitchen, there was no dial tone. I couldn't call anyone and even if I did, I didn't know exactly where I was. So, I paced for days. I cleaned an already clean house. I read from the books in the library without

actually taking in a single word. I watched television with open eyes and zero understanding. I cooked, but didn't have much of an appetite so I ate only when my body began to loudly protest. I slept in the master bedroom with eyes closed tightly and my heart beat drumming in my ears.

I went about the motions of living. And still, I waited.

With every day spent alone, my anxiety grew and grew. It was day seven when I woke feeling completely unrested that I became agonizingly aware of the fact that that my husband was not coming back.

It hurt. God, did it hurt.

I cried that morning. I curled up underneath the crisp sheets, covered my head and wept for hours. Those tears followed me throughout the house for majority of the day as I shuffled from room to room not knowing what to do with myself. They dripped from my eyes without permission, trailing my cheeks, even when I didn't have the strength to cry anymore. The sadness faded out and my body went numb, still they leaked from me.

I hated myself for the show of weakness. I was grateful nobody was around to witness the breaking of my soft heart.

One question lingered in my mind.

What do I do now?

In the entirety of my life, I rarely made a single decision on my own. My sister commanded almost every aspect of my existence. Who I saw and how I dressed. I had thoughts of my own, of course, but Vincenza was dictatorial. We didn't converse. She spoke at me. I was told what to do, and I did it. My opinion was inconsequential. She even convinced me of what I liked and disliked. I didn't enjoy the way we lived, but, after what she'd been through, I didn't have the strength to fight her.

She was all I knew.

So, I took what little I could and decided to head back home.

Vincenza would gloat, of course. She'd spin the narrative. That big, bad Ettore Scala, capo of the *Malocchio* syndicate, had been so frightened of his young wife that he had to drive her out, an hour away, and desert her like a dog on a desolate street corner for fear of what she would do to him next.

It didn't matter what she said. I knew the truth.

Ettore wasn't frightened at all. He was simply pissed the fuck off and making an example of me. It had nothing to do with our family history and had everything to do with me. But Vincenza would claim this victory as her own and I would let her because if I was anything, I was compliant.

I shouldn't have felt so betrayed. I wasn't sure why I did. I shot the man with intent to kill. Did I really think two days of sex would win him over? That he'd forgive me with an enthusiastic blowjob?

Lord.

My face screwed up and I threw things into the bag harder than intended.

I mean, just because I had a change of heart and did the stupidest, reckless thing someone in my position could do, he didn't owe me anything. Just because I might have developed conflicting feelings for the monster, that didn't mean he returned them.

Suddenly, I was shoving things into the bag with a roughly closed fist and harshly gritted teeth. And then, quite abruptly, something I hadn't thought about weaseled its way into my mind and I stilled, unblinking.

My uncle had disowned me. Openly. Publicly.

The pressure in my head caused my temples to throb.

And that meant...

My stomach ached as I whispered the words out loud. "I no longer have a home."

I don't know how long I stood there, unmoving and barely breathing. But after the seriousness of my situation came to

light, I found another emotion making the slow climb up my throat.

With a harsh growl, I lifted the hairbrush in my hand up high and brought it down onto the soft contents of the bag, over and over again until the pent-up rage seeped from my pores and ebbed away. Panting with exhaustion, I ran a hand through my long hair, fixing it with dainty fingers and looked in the mirror to find my cheeks pink and my soul broken. And for a single fleeting moment, I hated my family.

Everything I did, I did for them, grudgingly, and at Vincenza's bequest. I sacrificed myself on an altar I didn't even worship at. And where was she now?

Where was my sister?

My heart ached and my eyes burned. I closed them and attempted to steady my breathing.

It was all for nothing and cost me everything.

I didn't want this. I wanted to be free, but that was less likely than Ettore coming back for me. My survival instinct was stronger than my ego. It always had been. And the slow realization of my situation came to light.

I didn't have anyone else. Regardless of our history, of our circumstances, I didn't have any other options here. An irrational part of me demanded to be with my husband. I needed money, and support. I needed a home.

The words were a timid whisper in my mind.

We need him.

Being with him for only two short days, Ettore had shown me I wasn't as fragile as I'd been led to believe. He'd pushed me to see how strong I could be. I had been numb for so long that I forgot what it was to feel. I desperately craved it, craved *him*. The passion, the hunger and fury alike. He gave me back something I hadn't even known I'd lost.

Myself.

I hadn't even known I was crying again until I felt wetness bleed down my throat. I swiped at my eyes, held the bag, gave

it a light shake then zipped it up.

It wasn't fair. He'd taken so much from me already. My father, my family and now, my heart. It made no sense to want him back.

When I made it to the foyer, I peered around wistfully before heading to the front door. I swung the bag over my shoulder, put my hand to the knob, pulled the door open and took a single step forward before my heart jumped into my throat and I gasped loudly in fright.

I stumbled back as the hulking man turned to face me. Wide-eyed and shocked, I looked over him. He wore a tight black tee, black fatigues and scuffed black boots. The black leather gun holster draped over left shoulder linked in with his belt and my heart stammered when I saw he wore not one, or two, but *three* open carry pieces.

And as I stared at him with a racing heart and a gaping mouth, he looked down his nose at me. He looked Italian. Sounded it too when he asked, "You need something, Mrs. Scala?"

My mouth was dry. My tongue stuck when I stumbled over my words. "I-I- uh-" I shook my head. "No."

He gave me a firm nod. "Okay," then he added inflexibly, "I'm going to need you to step away."

I swallowed hard, walking backwards until he was satisfied. His stern face remained unchanged when he reached into the house, took the door knob into his large hand and slowly pulled it closed, creating a barrier between us, locking me in but keeping him out.

My jaw felt stiff and heavy as my feet began to move of their own accord and then, I was at the back door. I saw the shadow of another tall figure standing right outside of it and changed directions, heading to the door that led to the garage. It was the only other way out. And when I slowly opened the door, I was a little less shocked but equally scared to find another goon situated right outside of it.

Like the others, he was dressed for war and when he spun to face me, he looked similarly unimpressed when he said, “I don’t want no trouble.” He made a show of putting his hand to the holstered gun at his belt. “Back away from the door.”

What in God’s name...?

I felt ill as I quietly stepped back a safe distance.

The goon closed the door and, slowly, the pieces of this confusing puzzle began to fit together. When the final fragment clicked into place, I walked listlessly over to the sofa, dazed and disoriented, and sat numbly, letting my bag fall off my shoulder, dropping to the ground with a dull thud. I blinked and turned my head to gaze at the manned front door, and my brow furrowed.

I couldn’t believe this. Or maybe I could. Either way, a single heated word slipped from my mouth. “*Motherfucker.*”

Ettore hadn’t abandoned me.

My head throbbed and my chest tightened with the realization.

He’d made me his fucking prisoner.



Ettore

I WATCHED through the monitors as she moped, aimlessly walking the halls of the house. She hadn’t showered or changed her clothes in three days. Her hair remained unbrushed and she didn’t sleep more than a few hours each night. She was restless, but more than that, I could see she was sad. My wife looked miserable.

It made my jaw flex as I observed from afar.

Why I cared was anybody’s guess.

The wound below my shoulder was still tender. There was a constant dull ache attached to it, a reminder that what had

been done couldn't be undone. I'd taken the necessary action.

It would have been foolish to say I missed her. So, I didn't dare speak the words.

Not out loud.

My sister hadn't spoken more than a couple of words to me since the day I took Vittoria away. Giada's disappointment stung. I, of course, would never let it show because I loved my sister dearly. Daniele, however... there wasn't a day since Vittoria was relocated that he wasn't acting the haughty prick. I wanted to pop my brother right in the fucking mouth. I would have relished in it too, but to wear my emotions on my sleeve would only leave me open to harsh criticism and that was not a risk I could afford to take.

My position as capo called for a cool manner and sound mind.

Regrettably, I found myself less than rational whenever it came to my young wife.

I could still smell her sweet scent. The taste of her lingered on my tongue. I felt her, snugly wrapped around my body. It was torture to watch her from behind a screen. She would never understand that this prison sentence was a punishment with which I too suffered.

Right then, I watched her stand by the mantle in the living area. She carefully picked up a frame that held a photograph of me and my kids. The way she ran gentle fingertips over my face had my gut tightening in a violently protective way. And yet, I felt my chest puff out.

It was gratifying that she felt so attached to me after so little time. Wildly naïve, but pleasing nonetheless. But nothing pleased me greater than turning her sister away from my front door step.

Vincenza, the insolent bitch, arrived at my home mere days after the wedding. "I want to see my sister," she demanded as if she were entitled.

I peered down my nose at her and remained unruffled as I announced indifferently, "I'm sorry. Vittoria is not currently in

residence.”

She blinked, confused, and then her expression darkened and her hands fisted by her sides. “What have you done with her?”

I smirked inwardly as her anger ignited. “What I do with my wife is none of your concern, Vincenza. She is mine in body and name. Whether she is merely recovering from a long day of taking my cock,” her eyes flashed and I basked in it, “or I threw her body off of a fucking cliff,” for a second, her expression fell, “it is none of your goddamn business. Not anymore.”

I knew from personal experience that the elder Vero sister was a live wire. A single spark was all it would take this bomb to explode. I could tell she wanted to sink her teeth into me and feast on my flesh until there was nothing left because bad blood often spoiled. Vincenza, however, knew not to test me. I had already taken a parent from her and if she wasn’t careful, her sister would meet the very same fate.

“Fine,” she uttered, walking back a step. Her sudden change of demeanor had me suspicious. “Just a little reminder... before she became a Scala, she was a Vero, and she’ll always be my sister.”

I watched her closely as she left and after she was gone, something about the interaction felt wrong. Somewhere under her ire, I saw another emotion linger.

Elation.

And that was concerning whether I found Vincenza to be a threat or not.

CHAPTER 12

OBSERVATION

E *ttore*

MY CELLPHONE WAS GLUED to my hand.

Vittoria was quickly becoming my favorite reality show and I was man enough to admit I had sunk all the way down into obsession. I watched her every chance I got. Between work and the kids, I did not have a lot of free time, and yet, I found a way to watch my wife go about her days. I itched to be close to her and, sadly, this was the only way how.

Could I have made the time to visit?

Of course, but the strength it would take to leave her again was more than I had in me. So, I merely observed.

It was four weeks in and she still hadn't yet learned she was being watched. The first ten days were touch and go. She didn't do much more than walk from room-to-room in a stupor, fighting her depression. I expected this to go on a while, but by day twelve, she surprised me.

She woke, threw off the covers and staggered into the bathroom. I switched cameras and watched as she placed her hands on the edge of the sink, looked hard at her own reflection and frown deeply. Even with the puffy eyes and knotted hair, she was still the most beautiful creature to have ever walked the earth. With a shake of her head, as if she were disappointed in herself, she began to undress. My brows

narrowed when she stood naked, glancing at her own reflection.

It had been less a month but the stress had an obvious effect on her body.

Her soft curves had become far more delicate. Her stomach dipped inwards and just underneath her small breasts, there was a bump on either side which I quickly realized was the tops of her ribcage protruding.

I didn't like what I saw, but then again, neither did she. Vittoria's lips thinned as she took in a deep breath then exhaled slowly. She stepped towards the shower, turned the knobs inside and then, a sound of annoyance left me as steam filled the room and it became harder to see.

Some would say it was morally wrong to witness my captive wife shower, especially when she didn't know she was being watched, but I did not give a solid fuck. She'd already attempted to kill herself once before. How was I to know she wouldn't try that shit again?

She was mine and I protected my own.

On day thirteen, Vittoria started a routine. She showered in the morning, dressed from the clothes I had bought for her, ate a small breakfast, then picked up a book 'til lunch. She chose either an apple or banana for lunch, then changed into something looser, moving to the living area where she turned on the smart TV and accessed an online yoga class. She spent the next forty-five minutes bending and stretching in ways that made my pants feel oddly tight around the crotch. After yoga, she watched a little television followed by her daily exploration of the house. By five p.m. she had cooked herself dinner. Tonight, her menu was spaghetti *aglio e olio* with freshly grated parmesan over the top.

It was only the day before that Vittoria discovered the smart fridge in the kitchen allowed her to add items to the shopping list. It pleased me that she was using it. The newest additions on it were tomatoes, cucumbers, sourdough bread and triple chocolate ice cream. And it was a good thing too. I enjoyed watching her eat.

By day seventeen, she was looking more herself and as she fell back into her own personality, I got to witness it for the very first time. Especially when, after a mug slipped from her hand into the sink and broke, she jumped back and said, “Eeek.”

She actually said it. She didn’t make a sound of fright. She fucking said it.

“Eeek.”

Can you imagine?

Yeesh.

It seemed more and more unlikely that this woman was the poised assassin she made herself out to be. Even less likely when, on day twenty, I sat back in my office chair as she stared out of the bedroom window, into the backyard. With a determined look of concentration on her face, she crossed her arms over her chest and stood there, still as a statue. Although it didn’t show on film, I knew what she was focused on. She glanced out at the immaculate pool and made a thoughtful sound.

Seeming a little annoyed, she moved then, sitting on the edge of the bed. Now, Vittoria rarely spoke to herself and when she did, I couldn’t always make it out, but this, I heard.

“What would Vincenza do?”

And my brow instantly marred.

Alright. That certainly got my attention.

What is she up to?

The one place the boys hadn’t fitted a camera was in the walk-in closet. I could see directly in, but only at an angle and when Vittoria disappeared from sight, the tensing of my stomach spoke of how little I liked that. My jaw clenched as she fluttered in and out of view, and I was finally able to breathe again when she stepped out wearing a black one-piece bathing suit. And I relaxed a little now knowing where this was going.

The boys had their strict instructions. Vittoria was not to leave the house under any circumstances. It would be interesting to see how she went about this.

Before she left the bedroom, she sat in front of the vanity with an expression of unease. She exhaled slowly, gathering her long, silky hair at the top of her head and tying it into a high ponytail. A glance at her reflection had her clutching her stomach and wincing. I watched her battle her nerves. She slid on an oversized pair of sunglasses before standing once more, holding onto a towel and there was no mistaking how anxious she was – her heavy breathing gave it away – as she slipped into a pair of golden flip-flops. On her way out, she grabbed a towel and as I switched cameras to follow her down, I was impressed by how quickly she lifted her chin and pasted on a completely feigned look of arrogance.

“Be Vincenza,” she muttered to herself as she approached the back door. “Be Vincenza. Be Vincenza. You’re Vincenza.” She put her hand to the door knob. “Go.” Then threw it open, glaring at one of my biggest boys and most loyal men, Marco, then announced haughtily, “I’m going for a swim.”

Marco blinked down at her. “Yeah, I don’t think so.”

My brows rose when she uttered smugly, “It’s not your job to think now, is it? Get out of my way. I’m going for a swim.”

“Listen here-” Marco began but she cut him off with a cold sounding, “No, you listen. Do you know who I am? Do you know why you’re here? I’m sure word has spread by now what I did to my husband on our wedding day.” Her expression was eerily still as she announced steadily, “I shot him. Point blank. In a church full of our loved ones.” Her eyes narrowed on my lifelong friend. “Ettore means something to me. You don’t. Now, what do you think I’ll do to you?” A single brow rose as she asked, “Do you really want to fuck with me?”

There was a moment even *I* was taken aback. Would you listen to this cocky bitch?

Why did I find this little act hot?

It was a stare-off, long and painful. When it became crystal clear that Vittoria was not going to back down, Marco's jaw flexed, he put a finger to his earpiece and hit the button, awaiting instructions, continuously glaring at her.

The alert came through. I hit the button on the app and spoke into my phone, loud and clear. "Let her go, but keep a close eye on her."

Marco lowered his finger from his earpiece and forced a smile that did not reach his eyes. "Enjoy your swim, Mrs. Scala."

With her head held high, Vittoria walked on through as Marco followed close behind. She placed her things down on a reclining outdoor chair, approached the edge of the pool and did not hesitate when she dove in. She spent half an hour doing laps of the length of the pool with Marco's eagle eye on her and when she was done, she stepped out, huffing and puffing, then sat on the chair and dried off before gathering her things and turning back to the house.

Again, Marco tailed the small woman until she was safely inside.

The moment she walked into the house, the jig was up. Her confident demeanor fell and her body crumpled with it. She leaned back against the door, put a shaking hand to her chest, breathing heavily with a look of disbelief etched onto her face. And then, a bubble of laughter climbed her throat. She closed her eyes and laughed softly, saying, "Oh my God. Oh my God." Her laughter continued. "I can't believe that worked."

It was the first time I heard it and I couldn't help but notice what pretty laughter she had.

A small smile stretched at my mouth. *Ah, Jesus.* I felt like an idiot. Why was I smiling?

Because my wife is fucking adorable.

She was. She really was. I couldn't wait to see what she got up to tomorrow.

On day twenty-three, it started. She costumed up, marched downstairs and threw open the front door. When Ivan turned to

face her, she looked him dead in the eye and demanded, “You’re going to pass a message on for me. I want to speak to my husband.” Before he had a chance to respond, the door slammed shut in his face and then I watched as Vittoria’s expression turned restless.

Day twenty-four, twenty-five and twenty-six were very much the same, only her demand to speak to me grew more irate every time she made it.

By day twenty-seven, her spirit broke. This time, as she barked the order to speak to me, I didn’t miss the way her lips trembled. When she slammed the door shut and slid down the length of it, her bottom hit the floor and she burst into quiet sobs. My chest ached when she placed her forehead onto her upturned knees, fisted her hands and smacked herself weakly across the head, over and over again.

And regardless of what people thought, I hadn’t always been an asshole. That part of me was still somewhere in there. The deep dig to find it was usually rather hard. But not with Vittoria. Her sorrow cried out to what was left of my blackened soul.

The internal war raged on. My initial desire to see her pay for her crimes was sorely outweighed by the need to guard and protect her.

As I watched her body shrink in on itself, my fingers twitched around my phone.

So, she wanted to talk.

I clicked out of the surveillance app, placed my phone screen side down and leaned back in my desk chair, considerate.

Her tears were not enough to sway me.

That would be a conversation she would have to earn.

CHAPTER 13

WE BLEED TOGETHER

Vittoria

ONE. Just one.

One escape attempt and my outside privileges were promptly revoked. The sound of drilling and jarring metal coming from all corners of the house were a dampening on my spirit. A quick glance to the window on my left and the offending items had my face screwing up in abhorrence.

Well, now you've done it.

If I considered myself a prisoner before, I was now officially a caged animal. The bars on every window made sure I knew it.

What's worse is Ettore sent over his brother to deal with it. And if I had to look at his smug smirk one more time... My teeth gritted so hard that my jaw ached. When Daniele went around to each window and gave it a solid wrench, checking its strength, a stabbing pain behind my eye told me I was on the verge of a migraine.

Look, had my it been the best idea for an escape?

Some would have called it inventive.

I, unfortunately, was not one of those people.

Let's be honest, once I was in the crawlspace, I basically had an immediate panic attack. I was not great in teeny spaces.

To make matters worse, I got turned around and, mortifyingly enough, couldn't find my way back out. It took a moment of extended consideration, but eventually I had to call out for help. Like a kitten being rescued, Marco – who was three times my size, mind you – was sent in after me and seeing his angry face crawl towards me had me backing up.

His growled, “*Stop moving,*” was enough to paralyze anybody.

My cheeks flamed and my throat swelled with embarrassment. Even more so when he positioned us so that I was on my knees in front of him and he guided me back to the manhole with a splayed hand on my butt, pushing me along, because my legs had turned to jelly and refused to work.

The moment I saw light gleaming through the small rectangular hole, I rushed towards it and when I looked up, out of it, there stood Ivan, glaring down at me. I could feel the thick coat of grime and dust all over my body. It itched and a small cough escaped me as he reached out. I took his hand and he pulled me up and out. Marco followed close behind, and then I was sandwiched by two very mad goons who looked at me like I was the bane of their existence.

Same.

Ivan put a finger to his earpiece. “We got her.”

Marco's eyes lowered as he listened to the instructions being relayed through the feed, nodding. “Yeah. I wouldn't worry about that. She's not going anywhere.”

But I couldn't concentrate on anything other than who was on the other end of the earpiece. “Is that him?” I leaned into Marco and he leant away from me as I all but yelled into his ear, “*We need to talk.*”

“No, she isn't hurt.” Marco looked me up and down, his lip curled. “Just covered in dirt.”

“*God,*” I blew out, maddened, running both hands down my face in frustration. The laugh that left me was pure delirium and even though I looked Marco in the eyes, I was sure it was clear who my message was for. “I get it. You're

pissed. But I can't change what happened. I am your wife and you are being a really shitty husband, Tor. I'm not asking for much here. What is it going to take?"

I stood there, panting wildly, looking into Marco's eyes, my own pleading for an inch.

Marco remained unmoved, but after a short while, he reached for his earpiece. He removed it and my heart stuttered when he held it out to me. I took it with trembling hands, slowly placed it to my ear and then he spoke. "Every time I'm satisfied things are going well, you go and do something that puts us back at square one." The sound of his rich timbre had me breaking out in goosebumps all over. "What do you want, Vittoria?"

What did I want?

I wanted out. Out of this pretty, glorified cell.

My lips quivered and my voice cracked pathetically as I accused pitifully, "You abandoned me."

"And you broke my heart," he clapped back and my stomach ached with how freely he admitted such a thing. "So, I guess we're even."

My face crumpled, I dipped my chin and my shoulders shook gently as tears fell from my eyes. I was convinced then. We were never going to get passed this. I spoke through a torrent of tears. "You should have killed me."

My heart broke to pieces with his agreement. "You're right. I should have."

I nodded to myself. I sniffled then let out a hushed, "It's not too late."

Ettore did not speak for a heartbeat, but when he did, I could hear his resentment. "How easy that would be for you. You would leave me to agonize with your memory while you move on from this life. No. If I have to suffer through this existence, so will you." What he said next was stone cold and laced with fury. "In this family, we bleed together."

Those last words resonated with me deeply, but while Ettore meant them in a way that spoke of family love and loyalty, I heard them as a threat. And I thought of my sister.

In our family, we didn't bleed together, but when Vincenza bled, she did not hesitate to put a blade to my flesh and drain me just the same. I felt awful – truly awful – that this time away from her had been pleasant in some ways.

I tried not to think about what she would ask of me if I were ever to make it out of here.

I didn't want to think on it.

Now, as Daniele worked on the last window, right by the kitchen, I knew it would be my only chance to speak to him. I got up off the couch, made my way to the fridge and filled a glass of water. I leant against the counter, putting the cool rim of the glass to my mouth, asking, "How is he?" before sipping on the iced water.

Daniele did not spare a glance as he fitted the bars on the outside of the window and was aloof as they came when he uttered nonchalantly, "He's good. He's great. He's busy running the streets and raising his kids." My silence caused him to glimpse at me a second before saying, "What? You thought he'd be wrecked? Please. You were nothing but a blip on his radar. Don't flatter yourself, honey."

I set my glass down. "I wasn't insinuating he was distraught or anything."

He drilled on one side and when he was done, he muttered, "So, what is it you want to know?" The other side was then secured and the high-pitched squeal the drill gave off was excruciating. "Oh. I get ya." There was that smirk again and his brow rose. "His bed ain't cold, if that's what you're gettin' at."

Right.

Numbness spread through my chest.

Ettore was grown. He was a purely sexual male. Did I expect him to wait? Wait for what? He hated me.

As I suffered through the beginnings of a mental breakdown, it was only polite to ask, “And the kids?”

“Don’t even remember your name,” he said dispassionately.

I know what he was up to. Daniele was trying to hurt me, and succeeding.

“Good,” I said with a straight face, which was pretty hard to do when your insides were melting away.

My retreat to the master bedroom was swift. I don’t know how long I stayed there, sitting on the edge of the bed, but darkness fell and swallowed me whole. I heard heavy footsteps approach but paid no mind to them. It was only when the bedroom light switched on that I lifted my head from my upturned knees that I blinked rapidly, adjusting to the brightness, that I saw Marco standing in the open doorway.

I hugged my knees tighter and my eyes followed him as he walked into the room, reaching for his earpiece. I didn’t know what he was up to, but I kept a careful eye on him as he removed the black receiver from the waist of his pants and made a show of placing the device onto the vanity before taking a seat on the dainty stool that shouldn’t have supported his massive frame.

He watched me rock gently and said, “I heard what he said to you. I probably shouldn’t interfere, but you should know better than to believe anything Daniele says.”

I didn’t respond for a long moment. My voice was hoarse when I queried, “So, he’s lying?”

“I don’t know if he’s lying, but I do know he hates you and will say anything to make you hurt.”

Thank you, Marco.

I struggled with the panic that insisted it be felt as I uttered quietly, “I don’t know how to make this right.”

“You can’t,” was his firm response.

My voice quavered. “There has to be a way.” I rocked harder, back and forth, whispering, “There *has* to be.”

And, right then, Marco was done being nice. “Jesus Christ, Vittoria. I think I have observed long enough to know you aren’t a murderer but, *fuck*. Be reasonable. Do you know how lucky you are to be here, in this place, after what you did?”

Part of me did know. It didn’t change the fact that the solitude was killing me. I must have sounded pathetic when I confessed, “I’m so lonely.”

Marco was not sympathetic. He rested his elbows onto his knees, leaning closer to me. “You’re sitting in luxury, living in a gold-plated prison. You’re not in chains. You’re not being starved or abused. You get to live a semi-normal life. Can you see how this attitude might come across as ungrateful?”

My lashes were wet as I scrambled to sit up. “If he doesn’t want me, that’s fine. I’ll go away. I’ll leave and never come back.”

But Marco shook his head. “That’s not gonna happen.” He paused a second, and from where I sat, it looked as though he was thinking very hard about what he was about to say next. “Everyone answers to somebody. You know that, right? Everybody, even Ettore Scala. And when they demanded blood, when they called for your head, he refused to give it to them.”

My shoulders drooped.

He did?

A somber look settled over his features. “Ask yourself why.” I was, but the answer wasn’t clear. “Look, he needs time. What kind of father would he be if he let you into his home, close to his kids after-”

“Oh God, I would never hurt our kids.” The words rushed out of me so quickly that I didn’t really hear what I’d said, but Marco did. And whatever it was he heard made his face soften some.

When Marco stood and picked up the receiver, I rushed to get one more question in before he switched it back on. I knew the answer before I even asked. “He’s watching me, isn’t he?”

Marco shot me a knowing look. “What do you think?”

Of course, he was. I think I'd known for some time now. After all, mirrors rarely hummed and whirred.

As Marco moved to leave, he stilled just inside the doorframe. "I've known Ettore a long time. When I asked him what you were like, he told me you were a foolish little girl." Not entirely untrue, but *ouch*. "He also said you were the most beautiful creature he'd ever seen." Okay. Less ouch. "Part of me wonders whether he's keeping you here just so he doesn't have to share you." I thought about that as he added, "Look, he's an asshole. Putting yourself in a position to be humiliated will please him immensely. Make a gesture so grand he can't ignore it. But be prepared, it might take a few attempts before he responds."

He patted the wooden doorway twice, reached behind him and fitted his receiver, replaced his earpiece then lifted his brows deliberately, leaving me alone to consider what he'd said.

After some time, I made a quiet realization. I wasn't getting anywhere with anger and tears.

I needed to change tactics.



Marco

INTERFERING WAS NOT something I was paid to do, but somehow, I couldn't stop myself. There was a reason I was here. Ettore Scala was my best friend and he trusted me implicitly. So, when I stepped outside, gently closing the front door behind me, I put my finger to the earpiece and held the button down. "I know you're listening, Tor. You're always listening. You happen to get all that?"

He was there. It was just taking him a moment to answer, and when he did, I heard exactly what I planned to. I heard a man who was questioning himself. "I did."

Good.

I would never hurt our kids.

Hell, I couldn't have set it up better. I hadn't planned on her saying what she said, but I hoped it would ease some of the disquiet between them. People might have asked me whose side I was on here, the Scala's or the Vero's. But the answer would always remain the same.

I was on Ettore's side.

He was my best friend and after everything he'd been through, he deserved happiness.

And maybe – just maybe – soft-hearted Vittoria would be the one to give it to him.

CHAPTER 14

EVERYONE HAD SOMETHING

V *ittoria*

IT WAS difficult to bargain without a bargaining chip, but everyone had something of value.

My stomach tensed as I stepped out of the walk-in closet wearing the floor length pale satin, cream-colored robe. It felt wonderful against my skin, like a gentle fingers caress on my legs with every step I took. And when I approached the bed, I peered down at it, clutching the ends of robe together tightly before closing my eyes, taking a deep breath and exhaling slowly.

Everyone had something.

Maybe Marco was right. Maybe there was no way to fix what I broke. But I still had something Ettore desired.

Me.

That night in the hotel, he called my toxic beauty a weapon and, as it so happened, right now, I needed one.

My hands loosened and the sides of the robe parted in the middle, revealing my softened belly and the small dark triangle of curls down below. I needed his attention and words were not working. I gently shrugged and the smooth material fell from my shoulders, down to my middle, leaving my breasts bared. I let the robe fall to the ground. The material

gathered around my feet and then, I was left standing utterly nude and bared to him in the gentle warmth of lamplight.

Was he watching me?

I pulled away the covers and slipped onto the sheets, laying back with my heartbeat steadily throbbing at my throat. I blinked and swallowed hard, nerves attacking my stomach in a way that made me feel lightheaded. But it didn't matter.

I was going to do this.

He hadn't yet come when I called. Perhaps, when he heard his name on my lips as I touched myself, he would reconsider.

At least, I hoped he would.

"Please be watching," I muttered under my breath as I moved my hands from my sides to my stomach. My fingertips glanced over my skin, circling and swirling slowly. I closed my eyes and let my head sink back into the plush pillow as my hands cautiously explored.

This wasn't the first time I'd masturbated, but I had never done it quite so openly. It was always under the covers, in the dark with a hand slipped into my underwear. Never so... exposed.

And as my cool hand moved up and over my breast, my nipple beaded almost painfully, causing my lips to part and my face to soften.

If I were being honest, I planned on this being an act, showing Ettore what I thought he wanted to see. But now, as the stirring of lust swirled in my taut belly, I barely thought about being watched. When my legs parted and my hand slipped between them, I cupped my mound and let out a shaky sigh. Unconsciously, my legs spread even wider as I dipped my middle finger into the warmth of my pussy, running it gently along my slit, up and down, slowly at first, circling my nipple with a light finger.

I thought about the last time we were together, here in this room. The smell of his cologne lingered in my memory. His primal state. How my husband threw me down, held my ass high and ate my pussy like it was his absolute pleasure. I'd

never felt so desired. Ettore worshipped me in a way that made me feel both uncomfortable and undeniably wanted.

And as my fingers glanced my opening, I found it slick with wetness, and I bit my bottom lip hard enough to hurt, making my fingers work faster, then breathed out, “Oh, yeah.”

My clit began to swell and when I thought about the moment Ettore plunged into me, the precise moment of penetration, my hips bucked upwards and my toes curled into the sheets. I dipped my fingers inside of myself, in and out, a poor imitation of how roughly Ettore fucking me. A long, needy moan was torn from my throat. “God, yes, Tor. Fuck me.”

It was so obscene, the way he took me.

Ettore didn't ask permission. He didn't need to because I was his to take.

My breathing turned shallow and hitched when I grazed my clit. I dipped into myself, gathering wetness, using it to lubricate my fingers and a desperate whine escaped me because it felt so damn good. I was close, but not close enough. My fingers circled one nipple, pinching hard enough to make me hiss out in pain, but it felt like a solid greedy lick to my clit.

This wasn't a show anymore. “Please, Tor. Don't stop.”

I alternated fucking my hot, needy pussy with my fingers then circling my clit with gentle but firm fingertips. My body began to tense. I tugged at my nipple, pulling it until it stung, and shuffled restlessly out of sheer frustration.

“Just like that,” my voice didn't even sound like my own. “Don't stop. Oh, God, don't stop. I'm so close.” I ran my fingers over my clit rapidly, panting loudly, moaning in short bursts. “Don't stop, baby. Fuck me harder.” My legs stiffened. I felt it coming and whined impatiently, “Please. I need it. I need you.” Everything went tight. My ass clenched, my tight hole fluttered and my fingers worked overtime over the bundle of nerves that demanded attention. I was desperate for it and just when I thought it would never come, my eyes shot open,

my back arched and I hoarse cry escaped me as my body went numb, my head swam and pussy clenched then released, over and over again, in what was the most intense orgasm I had ever given myself.

And as quickly as it arrived, it began to ebb away, leaving me a puddle of goop in the center of the bed. My body limp, I huffed and puffed quietly, making soft sounds of feminine satisfaction, running my legs up and down the length of the sheets until my heart beat returned to an acceptable pace and feeling returned to my body.

I sat up on the mattress and blinked sleepily. After a while, I got up, went to the bathroom and cleaned up. I washed my hands, turned off the faucet, and thought a long moment before I glanced up directly into my reflection and uttered a timid, “It could have been you.”

It could have been.

But you're not here.

I felt silly. This little show may have all been for nothing. There was no guarantee he was watching. But, as I shuffled back to bed and slipped under the covers, my body felt lighter than it had in weeks. I fell asleep thinking I should do this again tomorrow, if not for Ettore, for me.

After all, I was only human.



I WOKE WITH A NEW ATTITUDE. Maybe it was the delicious orgasm I had given myself or it was the fact Marco had given me solid confirmation that Ettore was watching me, but when I slipped out of bed in the morning and walked towards the bathroom, I turned on the shower and spoke out loud as I pulled a fresh towel out from under the vanity. “Good morning. I would say have a good day, but I’m still mad at you, so all I’ll say is have the day you deserve, dear husband.” I blew a kiss towards the mirror, then stepped into the shower with a coy smile.

After lunch, when I was partway through my yoga session, I transitioned from child's pose to cat's pose then breathed deeply as I stretched my back out, I muttered, "Why am I even bothering working on my bendiness?" I moved into cow pose, sticking my butt out as I lifted my head. "You know, I can think of a couple of things you could do to me in this pose. Three if you really use your imagination."

Another solitary dinner went by. I plated up my pan-fried salmon and garlic rice, loading up on steamed greens, then I took a lonely seat at the counter. I cut a small piece of salmon and popped it into my mouth, and my face turned soft with pleasure. I dug into the rice and spoke around my mouthful. "I'm not a bad cook. I mean, not all of my meals are wins, but this one I'd give a solid eight." A bite of the plain, flavorless greens had my adjusting my score. "Alright, a seven."

There was on weird side-effect of my one-sided conversations.

A peculiar sense of connection. Of contentment.

As I sat back on the sofa with a half glass of wine, watching yet another reality show, I suddenly lost focus and looked around, wondering where the camera was in this room. I spoke the words whisper soft. "I wonder if you had a good day."

He probably wasn't even listening.

But I hoped he was.



WHEN I OPENED the front door and Marco turned to face me, I held the two mugs of coffee up in surrender, looking mildly sheepish. "I thought if I brought you coffee, you might let me sit out on the porch while we drank it."

Marco looked down the length of his nose at me and I withered, rushing out, "I also wanted to apologize for how I've been treating you. You're only doing your job and it was unfair of me to talk to you the way I did that first week." I lost

focus a moment when I revealed, “My father would be so disappointed. He didn’t raise me like that.” I blinked back to reality with a creased brow and a genuine apology. “I’m sorry, Marco.”

After of moment of excruciating silence, Marco reached out and carefully took a mug from me. “You can sit, but if you run, I’m not going to gentle when I catch you.”

A slow smile spread across my lips. Barefoot, I moved to the porch and happily sat on the first step, bathing in sunlight. I closed my eyes and lifted my face towards the gentle warmth, revealing, “I’m not much of a runner. My bouncy bits bounce too much and I have zero coordination. You’re safe from today’s game of tag.”

I looked up at him in surprise when he laughed through his nose. I turned back towards the sunlight and after sufficiently recharging my soul, I kept my eyes closed as I asked, “Have you spoken to him?”

“I have, just this morning.”

The hairs on the back of my neck stood. “Oh?” My pulse drummed in my neck, but I tried to sound unaffected. “How did he sound?”

“Tired.”

That had my eyes opening. “Really?”

“Yes, he’s tired. Why do you sound surprised? Between the kids, work and this mess you got yourself in, he doesn’t have the time to scratch his ass.” My face fell and guilt settled heavily in my gut while Marco sipped his coffee, but he shot me a knowing look. “I can see you have something on your mind. So, come on. Let’s have it.”

I held my coffee between both hands until prickles of heat burned my palms. “My sister...” Part of me did not want to know the answer. “Has she asked about me?”

Marco’s hard expression softened only momentarily when he confirmed my suspicions. “Once, I think.”

Once.

Wow. I tried not feel betrayed, but it was kind of hard not to.

I remained silent for a while, processing that little tidbit and after the hurt turned from a sharp stab to a dull throb, I was slow to speak. “I think I was about twelve years old when I first noticed it. Before our mom died, while Vincenza was out at track meets or extracurriculars, she would take me to the mall with her and whenever we were ready to check out, I would look over at the candy and beg my mom to get me something sweet. She almost always said yes. But I could never get myself something without getting something for my sister too.” My brow crinkled in thought. “I remember Vincenza coming home one day and walking into the house with a small white bag. She reached inside and took out a double choc sundae and I innocently asked, ‘Hey, did you get one for me?’ and she shrugged and replied, ‘Sorry, I wasn’t thinking of you.’” My vision blurred. I blinked it away. “I know it’s stupid...” I laughed softly to cover the lump in my throat, but I felt awfully sad when I explained, “It’s become more evident as the years pass.” I looked down into my mug. “It’s a bitter pill to swallow knowing you love somebody more than they’ll ever love you.”

Marco’s lip curled. “That story doesn’t surprise me. Your sister is one of the most self-centered people I have ever met. She’s a textbook narcissist.”

I rolled my eyes but there was no heat behind it. “Well, of course, you’re going to say that. We’re on opposite ends of a blood feud. And, let’s be honest, Vincenza and Ettore will never find common ground. That’s a burned bridge that will ever be mended.”

Marco conceded with a nod, “Understandable, given their history. Given what happened.”

“Yeah,” I uttered through an exhale. “Vincenza hates Ettore.”

Marco’s burst of bitter laughter had me blinking over at him. When he saw I wasn’t kidding, his brows rose and he said, “The only person she should hate is herself.”

Pardon me? A moment of confusion had me silent. “What do you mean?”

“Well, because of what happened that night,” he said, as if it explained everything.

The way he looked at me then caused another brief pause.

Vincenza may have been self-absorbed, but where I may have felt numb over what happened with our father, I had her back on this one. My sister was allowed to feel angry. We were entitled to hurt.

My brows dipped as I relayed the most important part of that painful story. “Ettore shot my father. He killed him. Why should Vincenza feel anything other than hatred for him?”

“Because of... what she did.” I sat there on the step, looking up at him and we wore matching expressions of resentment. After a while, a look of confusion crossed Marco’s features and he said, “You don’t know?”

I didn’t know what it was, but the way he said it had a solid sense of trepidation tightening across my chest. My heart beat slowed. I barely had the strength to ask the quiet but dreaded question, “Know what?”

It didn’t take a genius to see the moment he realized he’d said too much, and with that, Marco bailed. He stood tall, handed me his half full mug and opened the front door. “This is a family matter and one you should discuss with your sister when you get the chance.” He ushered me inside, but before he closed the front door, he seemed to linger, hesitating. He shook his head, knowing he shouldn’t be saying what he was about to, but was compelled to add, “You never thought about it?”

“Thought about what?” came my bewildered response.

He licked his lips and said, “After your father’s death, your family lost a seat at the high table and Ettore walked free without punishment. There was no retribution. Your uncle never sought revenge. And you never stopped to think why?”

I’d heard the story countless times. It was how my sister learned to manipulate me. My father was murdered in cold blood.

I swallowed hard as my temple began to throb.

Wasn't he?

"Ettore despises Vincenza," the front door creaked as it began to close. And just before it did, Marco said, "And with good cause."

Marco was right. I'd never really thought about it.

Oh God.

And now, I couldn't think of anything but.



Ettore

"*I'M SICK THIS,*" Vittoria uttered into the bathroom mirror, wearing nothing but a skimpy pair of navy underwear. As she leant in, her stomach pooched a little and all I wanted to do was walk in behind her and put my hand to her softness. "*I don't want to wash my hair.*"

"So don't," I replied, as if we were in the same room.

"*But it's greasy,*" was her sad admission.

"Who cares," I sipped at my black coffee, glancing down at the paperwork I'd been neglecting for days. "Tie it up."

"*I could always wear it up,*" she muttered thoughtfully.

Without glancing over, I pointed my pen at the phone screen. "There you go."

"*Or maybe,*" she drawled, "*I should just cut it.*"

I sat up straight, paperwork forgotten. My brow furrowed and I snapped, "Don't you fuckin' dare."

I loved her hair as it was. It was thick and lush, and shiny, and it smelled good.

"*I've never had short hair.*" My charming wife made a face. "*What if it looks weird and then I'm stuck with it?*" She

shook her head and blew out an irritated, *“Forget it. I’ll just wash it.”*

My posture lessened as I leaned back in my chair, relieved. “Good.”

As she entered the shower, I tried to get as much work done as I possibly could knowing the second she was out, I would become distracted again. And when she stepped out, deliciously wet and shamelessly nude, my cock jerking behind my slacks, coming to life. She gathered her hair into a towel, twisted it then threw it back, leaving it sitting on a mound on top of her head.

“I wish I could go for a swim,” she said under her breath.

But I shook my head as I signed the papers. “Not a chance. You’re grounded, baby.”

She sighed long and slow and it caught my attention. She rested her hands onto her bare stomach and slowly trailed them upwards. Her fingertips glanced the buds of her nipples and when she covered her breasts, squeezing them hard enough to make her soft flesh swell through the gaps of her splayed fingers, I stilled as she uttered absentmindedly, *“I would do anything for a swim.”*

“Well.” My cock stood full mast now. I unconsciously placed a hand over the hard length of it. “I guess I could reconsider. Maybe.”

It had been twelve days since Vittoria began this monologue and, in the beginning, I was quietly surprised but weary of her intentions. That first day, I kept a closer eye on her than usual. Hearing her speak directly to me, without fear or anger or tears in her eyes, was a pleasant surprise. And so, an internal dilemma brewed.

Vittoria was the woman who shot a bullet right through me. Even though I was technically healed, the fresh pink scar continued to ache. I should not have been smiling at her harmless flirting and immature teasing. And yet, her commentary on dinner became one of my favorite segments of the day.

She was brutally honest about her cooking and at times got cocky when her winning streak surpassed two days of good meals. By the third, she was promptly reminded that while she was an okay cook, she wasn't a great one, and usually ended with her scraping the contents of her monstrous creation directly into the trash can and eating a bowl of cereal instead.

In her solitude, her inquisitive nature grew and she often asked me questions about myself, about how the kids were doing, and how she would really like a visit from Giada if I were to ever allow it.

It was strange that she rarely mentioned her sister, but then knowing Vincenza Vero, I deduced it wasn't strange at all.

Their family dynamic was peculiar. It was curious to me that after that initial visit, Vincenza hadn't followed up on her sister's whereabouts. Had it been Giada, I would have torn the walls off of the fucking house with my bare hands just to get to her. I had a hard time understanding where or how the two fit in with one another. Vittoria was devoted to her sister regardless of her shortcomings, but Vincenza... she seemed to have moved on without giving Vittoria a second thought.

I didn't like that. It was bullshit. But so long as my wife remained unaffected, it wasn't my business.

The closer it got to the evening, I felt a restless impatience stir in my loins. I made sure that by eleven thirty, I was safely in the confines of my bedroom because that was usually when her performance began. I sat up against the headboard with the sheet loosely draped over the lower half of my naked body, my phone in my hands, waiting for my private show.

I wasn't prepared that first night. In fact, I was still at the office when she sprawled across the bed, fully open to me, and touched her sweet little body. My gaze hooded as she dipped her fingers into the pretty pink pussy and rubbed her swollen nub. My fingers curled around my phone with such intensity I thought I might snap it in two. In awe, I watched, unblinking, taking in every minute detail. And then she breathed out my name and, fuck me, my cock drooled. She held me captive. I hadn't even gotten a chance to lock the door when I

awkwardly struggled with my belt, tugged at my zipper then dug into my pants, pulling out my dick. I don't remember ever being that hard. I tried to take my time, running my hand up and down my throbbing, angry length, but ended up losing the battle.

I came. Twice.

She was unbelievable and as I sat there, mindlessly numb from ecstasy, with cum coating my knuckles, with it splattered across my shirt, I knew what she was doing by taunting me. It was hard to resist Vittoria, especially when she looked the way she did then, but I endured.

Slowly, day-by-day, she was wearing me down. I didn't know how much more I could take.

By eleven thirty-four, Vittoria exited the bathroom wearing a pair of white lace panties and thin-strapped matching bralette. She approached the bed and climbed on, crawling slowly on all fours, giving me a solid view of her rounded ass. She laid down with a quiet sigh and I watched closely as she put her hands to her bare stomach. When she dipped one set of fingers under the elastic waistband, she asked, "*Are you there, baby?*"

This was absurd.

My wife had me locked in a chokehold. I was consumed by her, night and day, and just when I thought I was safe from her as I slumbered, she infiltrated my dreams.

"Where else would I be, *topolina?*" came my rough reply, my hand already under the sheet, wrapped around my throbbing cock. I ran my thumb across the bead of precum rubbing it across the head of my dick.

Neither of us lasted long, but when we came, we came together. And I liked that.

I *really* fucking liked that.

CHAPTER 15

HIGH END CHAMPAGNE

V *ittoria*

OF ALL THE days I'd been held up in Northport, today had to be the best, by far. As I walked into the kitchen with an idiotic smile etched into my cheeks, I placed the box down onto the counter and wondered how the hell we had gone from *then* to *now* in such a short time.

It all started the evening before, and after ten sensual nights of exploring my body, I could safely say that I had discovered things about myself that surprised even me. One of the things I learned was that my nipples were unusually sensitive and it was possible to come from playing with them alone. My lips often throbbed when I thought about my husband's hungry kisses. And I only ever pictured one thing when I was ready to touch heaven. The look on Ettore's face when he came was always what sent me over the edge. Also, it was pretty apparent by now that I was indeed a closet exhibitionist.

Who would have known?

There was something extraordinarily daring about the role that was also oddly safe. My whole life, I only had one deep-seated fear. Rejection. And, here, in my bedroom, there was no chance of that. Whether I was being watched or not was still very much in question, but even if Ettore wasn't viewing me, I still performed for him. Enthusiastically, at that.

But last night surpassed all others. When my performance ended and I lay wide-eye, panting and astonished by how quickly I managed to go from start to finish, I uttered a surprised, “Wow. That was...” My brain felt like mush. “Unexpected. Surprising, but a good surprise. That was a top-tier orgasm. Best so far. Like high end champagne.” Lightheaded, I puffed out, “Whoa.” And when I stood, making my way to the bathroom to clean up, I washed my hands and taunted my husband with a playful, “If I were you, I’d be worried.” I lifted my wet hand and wiggled my fingers in front of the mirror. “With fingers like these, I’m starting to wonder if I even need you anymore.”

So, the next morning, when I brought out a mug of coffee to Marco with a polite smile and a happy, “Good morning,” I was a little staggered when he took a mug, but held out an expensive looking matte black bag. I took it carefully with a cautious, “What’s this?” It had some weight to it.

Marco sipped at his coffee and shrugged lightly. “No idea. It arrived early this morning.”

Interesting.

Curious, I sat on the top step and fished the black rectangular box out of its bag. It had golden hinges and there was a golden spade symbol on the front with the letter *A* embossed into it. When I sat the box down and opened it, a golden bottle sat in its black velvet lining and it had me asking a quietly confused, “What is this?”

Marco whistled low. “*That* is Armand de Brignac.” I blinked up at him, puzzled. “Ace of Spades.” I shrugged. “Brut.” My brows rose in question and he sighed lightly at my obvious ignorance. “Champagne. *Expensive* champagne.”

The second he said the words, my mouth fell open. I held the gorgeous bottle up, in front of my face, examining it, and out came a mystified, “High end champagne.”

My stomach flip-flopped.

Well, I guess that answered one question.

Well, it was undeniable now. Ettore had indeed been watching me.

A slow smile spread across my face but my brow dipped low.

How did he manage it?

Even incommunicado, in radio silence, he was flirting with me, and doing a good job.

I couldn't help but be impressed.

Marco's eyes narrowed on me. "I feel like I'm missing a major part of the story here. Do I even want to know?"

I shook my head, but that smile remained. I grew a little shy when I stated, "It's a personal joke."

And Marco's brows rose as he asked an incredulous, "You and Tor have jokes now?"

The bottle sparkled in the sunlight. Suddenly, my chest expanded and I breathed so much easier. "Apparently."

I brought the bottle inside, took it from its box and placed it carefully into the refrigerator. I closed the door gently and gave quiet pause before speaking out loud. "I know I earned it, but I'll save it for when you come to visit."

My soft smile drooped momentarily. Some of my happiness ebbed as I asked, "You are coming to visit, aren't you?"

My heart felt strangled and I felt my ego dissolve into a puddle at my feet when I all but begged, "Please visit."



DAYS PASSED and we were now approaching mid-April. It was a beautiful, warm day.

I heard the front door open as I began the short walk downstairs. "Marco?" My hair was still wet from the shower I'd taken. I ran my fingers through it and the cute little floral, long sleeved day dress stuck to my thighs as I called out, "So

long as you're in the kitchen, could you pour me a mug?" Still tired from the night before, I muttered under my breath, "I hope it's strong enough to kickstart a car because need it."

Barefoot and breezy, I didn't even look up when I entered the kitchen, but saw the tall silhouette by the counter. Without pausing, I sashayed over to the cabinet by the fridge, opened it and pulled out two dessert plates. "I'll cut you a piece of cake." I closed the cabinet and said, "It's chocolate. I'm pretty sure I messed up somewhere so it's a little on the dense side, but it's still cake so I'd rate it a six. Seven if you're feeling generous."

When I turned and my eyes landed on him, I stopped breathing. My hands fell to my sides, and the plates went along with them. My heart stammered. It took me a long time to find my voice, but when I did, all I could do was rasp out, "Hi."

Oh my God.

He was even more handsome than I remembered. Ettore stood tall with legs slightly apart, his hands in front of him, playing with his wedding ring.

He's here.

My husband had impeccable taste and it showed in his sense of style. Dressed flawlessly in a black tailored three-piece suit, his hooded eyes trailed down the length of me, head to toe, and I swear, I felt it, a gentle caress over my body. When he started to move, the sound of each meticulous footstep had my stomach clenching as he began to round the counter, and my heart beat elevated.

It seemed like some things hadn't changed. My being so affected by him was one of those things.

He's here.

The tension between us grew and the plates clinked loudly in the grossly silent space as I clumsily placed them back onto the counter behind me. When he paused in his steps, leaning casually against the kitchen island, watching me through the shadows in his eyes, I breathed out, "You're here."

And just as he opened his mouth to respond, with no doubt something witty and snarky all the same, I don't know what came over me. He seemed to anticipate my move a second after I made it because when I launched myself at him, he caught me mid-air with very little effort. I wrapped my arms around his neck and my legs tangled around his lean waist. He threw an arm under my butt, tugging me upwards and when he lowered his face, I lifted my own. Our lips met in a hungry, all-consuming, teeth jarring kiss that would ruin every other kiss for me. My palms slid over his strong shoulders, up passed his neck and then I was holding his face in my hands, prepared for war should he decide to deny me his lips.

Thankfully, that didn't seem likely. Even less so when he groaned into my mouth and his tongue dipped in, a gentle stroke against my own.

My pussy clenched in anticipation and when he held me up with one arm but began fiddling with his belt with the other, I helped by resting my elbows onto his shoulders, holding myself up as he worked to free himself. It took longer than I hoped and I pulled back a single second to speak against his lips, "Let me help."

The arm on my ass tightened and he uttered possessively, "Don't you fucking let go. I got you right where I want you." I heard the jingle of his belt and then the lowering of his zipper, he bounced me lightly on his arm before reaching under my dress. He pulled my panties to one and groaned out loud when his searching fingers found me already wet. I smiled into the kiss and when he nipped my lower lip, my expression turned faraway as my hips bucked. I felt the stiff heat of his cock as he lined us up and then he brought his hand up to my chin, curling his fingers around it until they dug into my flesh, he looked me deep in the eye, fiendishly aroused and growled, "My baby's always ready for me, isn't she?" I tried to nod through his hold and Ettore was pleased by my efforts. "Now," he said with a cold glint in his eye, "Take daddy's cock."

He began to lower me and when the head of him breached my pussy, a shaky sigh left me. It had been a long time and I'd forgotten how thick he was. We were a snug fit. Part way

joined, my eyes locked onto his and stayed there. I blinked slowly as he pushed in even farther, stretching me, and in this position, he felt impossibly deep.

It was too much. He was too much.

He pressed a soft kiss to my lax lips. “You’re doing so good, baby. Just a little more. You can take it.”

With one final push, he was balls deep inside of me, and when my eyes fluttered open, I found his harsh gaze had softened some. Ettore brought his nose to mine, he closed his eyes and we breathed into each other a long moment, linked. In that moment of stillness, I felt every ripple and throb of him. I expected him to fuck me relentlessly, but for the first time since our wedding kiss, Ettore was gentle with me. He brought his lips to mine and kissed me tenderly, over and over again before he lightly suckled my bottom lip.

The throbbing of my pulse, I felt everywhere and as tightly as we were connected, I just knew he did too.

I allowed him to explore my mouth, pulling away playfully and smiling into his lips when he growled low in his throat, a clear warning to not take his toy away. He remained firmly lodged inside of me as we kissed. I couldn’t even find the will to be embarrassed about the fact that every time his tongue brushed my own, my pussy twinged. I felt wetness trickle out of me, seeping down between our bodies.

He was utterly infuriated when, as he ate at my lips, he paused to say, “You happy now? You tease and torment me, and there is only so much I can take. I’ve spent more time with my hand on my cock in the past two months than I have in my entire fucking life. I am only a man, Tori.” He nipped at my lips. “What the fuck are you doing to me? You’re like a goddamn drug.” Our mouths melded in a hot, wet kiss that smacked loudly when he pulled back to confess, “I can’t stop kissing you.”

I wasn’t the drug. He was. And I smiled happily as I snorted him up, basking on the high.

“So don’t,” was my throaty reply.

“I couldn’t even if I tried.”

The raw honesty between us was refreshing.

When he spun us, the feel of the cool refrigerator door on my back had my entire body breaking out in goosebumps. Using the stainless-steel surface as leverage, he watched my face as he pulled out slowly and pressed back in, and I felt an electrical current spark in the bundle of nerves between my legs.

I’d been dreaming of this for weeks. He was my biggest fantasy come to life.

He pulled out then pushed back in, harder this time, and I whined softly, loving the feel of my body stretching to accommodate him. In and out, over and over, gaining traction until Ettore fucked me slowly but steadily as his eyes searched my face. Gradually, I drowned in desire. And he didn’t stop. He worshipped me. He pressed his face into the side of my own and huffed, “You’re so fucking beautiful it makes my heart ache.”

Holy shit.

How was I to resist him when he said things like that?

Our brief history of violence meant I was resistant and I don’t think I fell in love with Ettore at that moment, but it was the closest I’d ever been to it. I had never felt more connected to a person than I did right then.

He demanded of me, “Tell me your mine.”

And I gave, “I’m yours.”

He placed his forehead against my temple and grated, “You belong to me.”

Was there ever a question?

I felt zero trepidation when I said the words. “I belong to you.”

The way he flinched as our bodies slid apart then together again told me he belonged to me too.

“‘Til death and beyond.”

“Always, baby,” I breathed against his mouth and this time, when our lips connected, it felt deeper than lust. Deeper than anything I was used to.

It felt like coming home.

His hips picked up in pace and, quite suddenly, it wasn't enough. Ettore's front pressed into me, firmly, until my body was trapped against his. His torso flush against my own, I felt his heart beating and, as I gazed into his icy eyes, I saw something.

A spark of warmth, and I claimed it. It was mine.

My husband fucked me, harder and harder, and when I felt that delicious stirring begin, I reached between us and touched myself. Ettore noticed. Our foreheads met and, together, we looked down. The sight of his long, thick cock driving into me was enough to make my pussy spasm, and it caused Ettore to hiss and his hips to buck out of time.

As I rubbed the sensitive bud between my legs with one set of fingers, the other coiled around the material at his shoulder, holding on for dear life as he plowed into me. My body bounced with every thrust and soon, my head fell back against the cool fridge door. “Oh, shit.”

My snug pussy tightened around him and he nipped, then sucked at my collarbone. “Fuck yes, baby. Come for me. Let me feel it when it hits.”

I was already dangling over the edge. It didn't take long to tumble all the way over.

My fingertips pressed firmly on my clit and when I changed up the circular rotation to a rapid side-to-side movement, my eyes fluttered closed as my lower belly grew taut. Within seconds, my spine went rigid, my mouth rounded and I gasped loudly as it struck me.

My core pulsed fitfully around him, like a tight glove milking his cock, and Ettore hissed loudly, pushing himself into me, holding himself deep inside of me. The hand around my jaw tightened, he pressed his mouth against the apple of my cheek and ground against me. So deeply connected, he

struggled to breathe right and his quiet muttering of, “Oh, yes, baby. Just like that. I’m so proud of you. You feel so good,” had my arms circling his neck, holding him close and mewling softly.

His breathing turned heavy. “Tell me you want my cum.”

I did. More than anything. “I want it.” I puffed out.

Ettore groaned out, “Jesus. *Fuck*. I’m gonna fill you up.”

“Give it to me,” I cried.

“You’re such a good girl. *My* good girl.” He pressed a small kiss to my parted lips. “Take it, baby.”

Not a moment later, his body turned firm and unyielding, and when his cock began to jerk and he started to come, it lasted so long I thought he might not be able to stop. His fingers curled around me harshly as he lost control. Ettore was left breathless, and when it was finally over, he let out a rattle and rasp, inhaling deeply, panting loudly. He held me up with closed eyes, wearing an expression I’d never seen him wear before.

It was soft in a way that looked unnatural on him.

Effortlessly, he carried me over to the kitchen island, sat me down on the edge then tugged at my skirt, lifting it high. He pushed my legs open and when he looked down at my tender pink pussy, my cheeks flamed. My husband stared openly, reached out and shamelessly spread my lips apart with two fingers.

I held my breath as he witnessed his come seep out of my snug hole and the expression, he wore then was one of pure male satisfaction.

My gaze lowered. Embarrassed, I forced a small smile and teased, “Are you trying to get me pregnant, dear husband?”

It was a joke so I expected a laugh. Instead, I got a cool glance and something in his eyes that looked dangerously close to guilt.

“Wait,” I peered down at the thick white semen oozing out of me, then back up at him. “Are you?”

CHAPTER 16

TRANSGRESSIONS

Vittoria

MY HEART STOPPED when Ettore merely said in that infuriatingly uninterested way of his, “Would that be so bad?”

I don’t know. My brain had temporarily ceased to function.

He followed up with, “Don’t you want kids?”

My heart sank.

Quietly confused, I replied a guarded, “I thought I had three.”

His expression did not change, but his jaw tensed and I didn’t know what to make of it. “Look, maybe we should talk about this later.”

Later?

My unblinking eyes remained on him as I slowly closed my legs and tugged my dress back down. “No. I think we should talk about it now.”

A tense moment passed.

He didn’t look pleased, but for once, I didn’t pander to his needs. I kept firm.

“Fine.” Ettore tucked himself back into his pants and spoke through the process of zipping and buttoning up. “There is a lot of tension building between my family and yours. I

think each of our..." he seemed to think about the right word to use here, "Transgressions would be forgiven if we had something that brought us together. All of us."

I see.

It was barely a whisper. "Like a child."

"Nobody would question my bringing you back if..." he glanced down at my belly.

I thought about it. Ettore presenting me to his family and my own, with a swollen belly and his arm around me. His family would be overjoyed, no doubt. But my family? I only had one person who still claimed me and Vincenza would shit a brick.

The pressure in my head grew and my tongue began to swell as I asked anxiously, "And what if that doesn't happen?" His lips thinned and I grew more panicked as I went. "What if I don't fall pregnant? Then what? What does that mean for me? Am I just stuck here forever, living out this sentence, with my husband coming to get his rocks off whenever the mood strikes?"

And, this guy. He actually had the gall to strike back, "That's unfair."

My eyes widened a moment before they narrowed on him. "Unfair," I muttered, then repeated slowly, "Unfair?" My brows rose. "I don't think so." I hopped off the counter and took two steps back, moving a safe distance away as I said what had been brewing inside of me since the day I was left here. "Do you know what's unfair? What's unfair is the man who killed my father is walking around free while I'm being imprisoned for a mere flesh wound." Another step back. "What's unfair is begging for attention from that very man and feeling such intense guilt over wanting to be close to him while he uses me as a ploy, manipulating me at every turn, trying to get me pregnant without even talking to me about it." Well, at least he had the grace to look ashamed. I must have sounded so disappointed when I uttered sadly, "God. I'm a person, Tor."

His lips thinned. “I’m aware,” was his cool response.

“Then maybe start treating me like one.”

Before he had a chance to respond, I was already walking away, moving up the stairs towards the bathroom. I felt so dirty. I had to wash him off of me.

By the time I finished, I walked back out of the bathroom in a towel to find him sitting on the edge of the bed, peering down at his hands, looking every part the defeated man. I hated that seeing him like this made me soft in the heart and weak with the need to go to him.

My voice was softer when I spoke again. “Why did you come?”

He didn’t even deign to look at me. “Because you called.” He seemed confused by it, himself.

My heart ached. He appeared tired. Vulnerable, even. And that was something I understood all too well. With a quiet sigh, I made my way over and took a seat beside him. I shuffled closer until our thighs were pressed together. And then, I looked at him to find he was already looking at me.

So much had passed between us. So much could be said with a single look. A flurry of emotions trailed back and forth – Resentment. Desire. Anger. Yearning. – and I felt so overwhelmed by it that I could seem to stop myself from twisting, reaching out and gently touching his cheek. He allowed me to bring him to me and I could tell he was surprised by the gentle kiss that lingered on his lips.

When I pulled back, Ettore’s eyes had tightened in suspicion. And it killed me.

How sad, that I couldn’t even kiss my husband without fear of distrust.

Lifting my hand, I gently touched the creased between his brow, smoothing it out as I smiled sadly and uttered quietly, “You want to knock me up but you can’t even accept my kisses without looking for a motive.”

I saw it. The very moment he realized I had a point. Ettore's expression turned somber. "I guess you could say I have trust issues."

He said it so seriously with the slightest touch of rancor that, after a moment of tense silence, a smile tugged at my lips. My response was humble. "Same."

The reluctant smile that spread across his face was beautiful. It called to my own and, just like that, the air around us changed. With the mood lightened, I took the opportunity to cover his hand with my own and squeeze. "I want to come home."

His fingers tightened around mine. He ran his thumb across my knuckles and the action was a harsh contrast to the hard word he responded with. "No."

Looking at his handsome face, at those lips that kissed me stupid, it was easy to forget that this man was dangerous. I knew better than to push. I had to pick my battles.

My face fell and I let out a hushed, "When can I?"

His, "When you've done your time," was cold and detached. I tried not to make it obvious how much it hurt as I attempted to pull away from him, but a swift yank of my arm had me up and draped across his lap and then, he had my face in his hands. He forced me to look at him. His eyes softened some when he said, "You just keep behaving yourself. Keep being my good girl, okay?"

I couldn't hide my sadness when I nodded lightly. He kissed me warmly and, with little resistance, I fell into him.

When he left later that night, I felt like I was being torn apart from the inside out.



DAYS PASSED. I mourned his leaving, but soon, I fell back into my routine. I did as he asked and played the role of good girl during the day, while at night, I misbehaved in my bed, calling out his name in the hopes it would bring him back to me.

I lost count of the days. I fantasized about my husband often. Those fantasies turned into dreams and sometimes, I could feel him. Sometimes it was as though he was really there. And tonight, I was having the most wonderful dream. It was late when Ettore entered the room. He undressed and lifted the sheets. The cool breeze over my nude body had me breaking out into goosebumps as he slid in behind me. My nipples beaded as his warm hands snaked around me, coming to rest on my belly. And when I began to move against the hard line of his erection, he lowered his mouth and pressed soft kisses to my shoulder and neck. I tilted my hips back and moaned quietly. The arm around my middle tightened as he touched me there, the pads of his fingers testing my readiness.

“Wake up, Tori.”

“No,” I groaned.

Why would I want to wake from such a wonderful dream?

Feeling as I did right then, I never wanted to wake again. But when the head of his cock breached my tight, wet hole, I woke with a start. I tried to twist back to look at him, but he held me still with a firm arm around me then he kissed the place just under my ear and said, “It’s okay. It’s me. I’m here, baby.” Another soft kiss. “Just let me take care of you.”

My body relaxed against him and my fingers curled into the sheets as he pressed into me, all the way, without pause.

It was a night of slow, indulgent sex. Conscious sex. This wasn’t two people using each other to get off. It was a building of something bigger. Admiration. Adoration. Call it what you will. But his being here was important. Together, we were rebuilding.

Ever the gentleman, he made sure I came before he released inside of me. I felt his heart beating fast against my back and I was sure, he felt mine when he pressed his lips to my pulse. Quiet and still, we stole from each other, sucking in one another’s warmth. We each needed it to feed our souls.

Our fingers entwined and I simply had to say it. “I want to come home.”

His delayed response wasn't as harsh as it had been the time before, but his drowsy sounding, "Not yet," still stung.

Okay. Not yet was a step up from no, albeit a small one.

I had to count my wins where I could. It was still progress and I had nothing but time.

Lucky for me, I had the patience of a saint.



WEEKS HAD PASSED and Ettore's visits had become more frequent. Every time he surprised me, I couldn't wipe the stupid smile off of my face. That smile often transferred through our eager kisses. Yes, we always ended up naked, our bodies entwined, but it wasn't all just sex. It was actually quite normal, in a sense, and far less hectic than it had been. He brought me flowers, and Italian sweets, and sometimes, he cooked for me. As our time together was limited, we always kept our conversations light in an attempt to veer away from the heaviness of our past. We opened a bottle of wine and sat on the floor, in the dark, bathed in moonlight. We talked about menial topics. Our likes and dislikes.

It was the first date we never got.

We held hands in silence. He held me close and my heart ached when placed his lips against my temple, just because.

As ridiculous as it sounds, it frightened me to see him like this, to be here with him like this. It was easier to call him a beast when I believed he wasn't human. I had seen this man at his worst. But now, things were different. I had learned Ettore could be sweet when you weren't threatening his life. He was affectionate in a way that surprised me. And, much like me, he was bound by duty.

Conflicted, I silently worked through my thoughts and feelings. And, as it were, I came to the shocking conclusion that despite everything we had done to hurt each other, we were all the other had. And I was dangerously close to falling in love with my husband.

After kissing for what seemed like hours, I pulled away to look directly into his hooded gaze when I said the words he knew was coming. "I want to come home."

The long pause answered me long before he did.

He searched my face and when he reached out to me, I closed my eyes. He gently placed the stray lock of hair behind me ear and leant in. He pressed his warm, full lips to my cheek and let the kiss linger. And then, he said something that kickstarted my heart. "Soon."

Oh my God.

Soon.

Soon.

That small word was a huge contrast to 'No,' and marginally better than 'Not yet.' And even though I did my best not to show it, I could tell he sensed my elation. I knew it for certain when he laid back, flat on the carpet with his arms folded behind his head, looked up at the ceiling and said, "I want your mouth on me." My stomach flip-flopped when his eyes darkened and he uttered the crude words out loud. "Suck my cock."

Goddamn it.

I would never admit it out loud, but I loved it when he ordered me around like that.

Not sure what that said about me.

I did as he demanded. I took his semi-hard dick out of his pants, doubled over and sucked it into my mouth. I licked and jerked and spat and slurped. I worshipped him, and when he held my head down, my throat contracted around him, and his hiss and moan made me feel so goddamn adored.

He fucked my mouth then came with a shudder and grunt, and when he spurt across my tongue, I swallowed his salty offering eagerly.

I was desperate to please him.

Things were changing. I could feel it.

So, when I woke the next morning, alone but content, I happily jumped out of bed. I brushed my teeth then slid into the shower, humming to a song I'd forgotten the words to. I dressed quickly, slipping on a pair of cream-colored satin panties and a matching bra before working the distressed jeans over my legs and buttoning up the sheer white blouse. I tied my hair into a high ponytail, applied ChapStick to my kiss swollen lips then exited the bathroom with a small smile that had a shorter lifespan than a fly.

All of the drawers were open. All of them lay empty. And movement in the hall garnered my attention. Marco was carrying two suitcases down the stairs and I fell into a full-fledged panic.

What the fuck?

My throat tightened and my knees shook. I lifted a hand to the wall and spoke through a croak, "What is this?"

Everything was going so well. I didn't understand.

Careful not to fall head first down the stairs, I called after Marco, "What is this? Where am I going?"

No.

He's finally doing it. You goddamn fool. A few kisses and you fell for it.

No, no, no.

He played you, and you fell for him.

Shit. It was happening. He was finally getting rid of me.

My eyes widened in fear. "What did I do?" But Marco just kept walking. "Talk to me. What did I do?" I watched him take the suitcases down to the foyer and, without stopping, he moved to walk them right out of the front door. My heart was in my throat and I was on the verge of tears when I cried out a rattled, "Marco, please. What did I *do*?"

Without a second thought, I rushed down what was left of the stairs and followed him out. And when I saw where Marco was taking my suitcases, barefoot, I skidded to a halt.

“What’s all the commotion?” Ettore stood on the path, peering down at me with a knowing look. A single brow rose when he uttered with feigned disinterest, “I thought you wanted to come home.”

Oh my God.

My heartbeat thumped in my chest.

Oh my *God*.

My lips trembled as I took off, running at him. I jumped and he caught me, holding me to him. I wrapped my legs around his middle, threw my arms around his neck and hugged him tight as I sniffled loudly. Ettore pulled back to look at me. He cupped my cheek, brought his face to mine and kissed me lovingly through my tears. Overwhelmed, I both laughed and cried, and when we separated, Tor used his free hand to gently wipe away the wetness from my cheeks.

“Ready to go?” he asked quietly.

It burst out of me when I replied through a hitching cry, “Yeah.”

My husband didn’t smile openly, but his eyes did. Like a baby koala, he carried me as he walked. I rested my head on his shoulder, indulgently, as he brought me around to the passenger seat of the car. I allowed him to lower me to the ground and help me in. He buckled me up, closed the door and returned to the driver’s side. He slipped inside, started the car and backed out of the driveway.

And I took one last look at my prison.

Marco stood on the porch, with his arms crossed over his chest, looking every bit the badass. But I could have sworn there was a whisper of a smile on his lips.

When I lifted my hand in lazy wave, he returned it.

And with a final glance, a thought crossed my mind. Although the house was beautiful, I vowed right then that I would die before I ever came back to Northport.

CHAPTER 17

AN ENTIRE BOWL OF BULLSHIT

E *ttore*

I HAD to admit that watching Vittoria being stared down by my twelve-year-old daughter as they sat on opposite ends of the table was rather entertaining. The boys had sat down long enough to re-introduce themselves to their step-mother, and then they were out. But Ella... Ella wanted Vittoria to suffer. And she started by asking a cold, “Where are your shoes?”

From my place behind the kitchen island, I let them hash it out.

Vittoria looked down at her bare feet and answered through a small laugh. “I was in a hurry. I guess I left them behind.”

And Ella nodded curtly. “Right. I just thought by the way you were dressed that you could afford any.”

Oof.

Vittoria glanced back at me with wide, blinking eyes and Ella’s barely-there smirk told me she’d achieved exactly what she meant to.

My daughter was not going to make this process fun, but until things got extreme, I decided to sit back and refrain from intervening. After all, I wasn’t the only one with trust issues. It would take more than her dad bringing home his young wife for Ella to trust again.

She was justifiably cautious.

I had a sneaking suspicion that Ella would have been difficult regardless of the unfortunate events of that day, all those months ago. She was loyal to a fault, and Ella loved her mother more than words could describe. The level faithfulness meant that Ella wouldn't dare give in so quickly because she felt it was disrespectful to her mom.

That evening, I called the family and when they arrived to see Vittoria standing nervously to greet them, the range of reactions was wide.

Giada looked at her with a gasp, then she looked back at me, then back at Vittoria. And then, she flew forward to wrap her arms around Tori. From my wife's surprised laugh and returning, clutching hug, it was clear they were as happy as the other.

Meanwhile, dad came in and greeted his grandkids with kisses and hugs and money slipped into their pockets when he thought I wasn't looking. And when he drew Ella into a hug, he looked down at her, patted her cheek and asked, "How are you, sweetheart? You eaten?"

Ella replied with a sweet smile. "I have eaten." That sweet smile turned caustic when she turned it on me. "An entire bowl of bullshit." She walked away in a way that was so much like her mother, my heart ached.

Pops stared at her retreating form and said, "That kid... she's got a mouth on her. Wonder where she gets it?" But after a moment, he narrowed his eyes on me and asked carefully, "What did you do?"

Vittoria spoke up from the open doorway. "I don't think it's him as much as it's me." My father spun to look at her. His brows rose slowly and she smiled in that honey sweet way that always had my breath catching. "Hi, papa Nunzio."

My father clicked his tongue, shook his head and put his hands to his hips. "I should'a known."

So much Italian drama packed into one small man.

He didn't go to her. Instead, he held out his hands and it was a kick to the gut when she rushed over to be held by a father again, even if it wasn't her own. My dad held her hands, squeezing tight, as he didn't hesitate to tell her, "He's been a goddamn bear for months. Four days ago, he smiles and I wonder what changed." He threw me an intentional look that called me a sneaky asshole. "Now I know."

I would have called him out if he hadn't been right, and when he embraced Vittoria in a fatherly manner, kissing her forehead and welcoming her home, an enormous weight lifted off of my shoulders. For a moment, it hovered, but the lightness didn't last long. It transferred to the pit of my stomach when I saw Vittoria's eyes close and her lips tremble.

Eventually, we were going to have to talk. About Vincenza and the trouble she was causing at the high table. About the quiet price on her head. About what happened to her father. All of it.

This was our fresh start and we were not going to build our relationship on a foundation that rocked. We needed to be solid. I needed her to be solid for me. And as I looked at her now, sitting down with my father, holding his hand as though she thought if she let go, she would wake from her desperate dream, I was convinced that, for me, she could be that woman.

Vittoria was resilient.

I got to witness that resilience firsthand when my brother turned up two hours late, stepped into my house without knocking and waltzed in like he owned the fucking place. Daniele made it to the kitchen, then walked his surly ass to the refrigerator, opened the door, stuck his head inside and asked a blasé, "So, what's the big news?"

He tugged at his tie and casually undid the top button of his shirt before he popped the top on a bottle of beer. The cap tinkled when it landed on the floor. He lifted the cold bottle to his lips, tipped it back and drank from it for a whole ten seconds. "You got anything to eat, man? I'm starved."

This guy. "Do you think about anything other than food?"

The bottle hung from his fingertips and he glanced back with a mischievous grin. “Food. Pussy. Drugs. In that order.”

Jesus.

I wondered about my brother sometimes. Must be nice not to have to worry about the basic shit the rest of us had to worry about. I always took it easy on him. So, maybe it was my fault that Daniele was the way he was. “Sit down. Let’s talk.”

Already, he knew something was up. He looked closely at me and, for once, read the room. His grin fell and his demeanor changed, became more rigid. “You talk. I’ll stand.”

Fine. “It’s about Vittoria.”

His grin returned, darker than I’d ever seen it and my brother jumped at the opportunity to say, “You finally ready to let go?” His eyes bled black. “Because I can do it for you. Let me do it for you. Say the word and I’ll make the drive over right now. I’ll wait ‘til she’s in bed. She’ll go to sleep and, *boom*, never wake up. Easy.” For a moment, his sanity came into question, especially when he said, “Or I can make her feel it. I’ll drag her out of bed by her hair, tie her up and make her scream. She’ll go scared, crying and begging.” He was far too eager when he leant in across the counter. “What’s your preference?”

It took everything I had not to lunge at him. This was my wife he was talking about.

Although, I couldn’t very well blame him for his callousness. He learned from the best, and they called me a heartless beast.

“I don’t think that will be necessary,” came her stone-cold response but when I turned to face her, I could see that hearing his detailed plan had shaken her to the core. She stepped into the kitchen and looked at me then. “Will it, husband?”

The steadiness in her voice. Her unblinking gaze. The angry pink hue in her cheeks.

Fuck me.

I didn't think she had it in her and, right then, I was filled with swelling pride. "I don't think so."

A quiet moment passed.

"What the fuck?" I bristled at my brother's slow glance up and down the length of her soft, curvy body. Daniele spun on me wearing an expression of utter confusion. "You brought her home? Already?" I was about to respond and tell him that my decisions were my own and I didn't answer to him when he began to shake his head. "No, no, no. I'm out." He slammed the fridge door shut, set his bottle down so hard the beer frothed over and I saw his eyes brim with anger. "Fuck this." He pointed a hard finger at Vittoria, fuming. "And fuck *you*."

Sometime during the short outburst, Vittoria gravitated towards me. Her side bumped my front as she blindly sought me out, knowing I would keep her safe.

And, *God*.

She would never know what that did to me.

It unleashed something. An arcane protectiveness that I'd never before felt. Not even with my children's mother.

I vowed to keep her safe, by any means necessary.

My little wife may have looked small and weak, but everyone was so struck by her gentle beauty that they forgot to notice she wore jagged armor. I loathed to think on why she required it. Perhaps some things were better left alone because if I found out who was responsible for my softly-spoken Vittoria needing a shield, I would make them regret having not crafted one themselves.

My position meant I had the ability to destroy people and although I seldom used it, that didn't mean I didn't receive an obscene amount of joy when I did. And my brother was walking on very thin ice.

The front door slammed shut and her body lurched along with the bang. I looked down at Vittoria and uttered a deadpan, "I think he likes you."

Her jaw tightened and I fought the urge to laugh when she prickled, “Yeah, about as much as a prostate exam with no lube.”

My arm banded around her. I pulled her softness into my firm torso and pressed my lips to her temple. “He’ll come around.”

The truth was, I didn’t know if he would, but it seemed like the right thing to say.

“Is it bad that I’m more concerned about Ella than I am Daniele?” Now, that made me laugh. The quiet chuckle left me before I could stop it. And when she glared at me, slapping me lightly on the chest, demanding, “What’s so funny?”

I forced my grin down, but my eyes couldn’t hide my mirth. “One thing about Ella is...” My offhand shrug was followed up with a cool, “She is her father’s daughter.”

And when Vittoria’s face dropped, I smiled. That smile transformed into a grin when she muttered dismally, “Oh God.”

Standing as she was, wringing her hands together, staring out at nothing, with her lips pouting, I moved, unable to help myself. My palms cupped her face, I tilted her head up and held her still as I brought my face down to hers. The kiss was gentle but firm and when she fell into me with a sigh, I knew she was exactly where she was meant to be.

Home, with me.

The doorbell rang but I refused to part from her. After a moment, I reluctantly pulled away, but not before I pressed another peck to her full, pink lips. And then, I was all business.

“Because of you and your,” I settled my unyielding gaze on hers, “late night shenanigans,” Her neck heated, turning the prettiest shade of pink, “I have been sorely neglecting my duties. So, for the next hour, I am going upstairs to my office.” The doorbell rang again and I turned towards the sound. “And you are going to answer the door and see to our guest.”

She blinked at me. “Answer the door? Me? On my own?”

She really was adorable sometimes.

“Yes,” I reassured her. “This is your home now, *topolina*.” I began to walk away. With my back to her, I called back, “Besides this caller is for you.”



Vittoria

A FOOT away from the front door, I kept my eyes trained on it. The doorbell rang once more and I worked slowly, unlocking the chain, putting my hand to the knob and pulling the door open.

Almost immediately, Vincenza pushed through and let herself in without even looking at me. Instead, she took in the enemy’s fortress, searching for a weakness. “Took you long enough.” She removed her coat and held it out to me. I took it and waited for her to turn around and look at me. When the silence stretched long enough, she did turn and I almost winced.

Had her eyes always been so cold?

“Huh,” she said without a splinter of concern for my wellbeing. “I thought you were dead.”

Nice to see you too, sister. “Well, I’m not.”

Her brow rose. “And here you are, standing in his beautiful home, without injury.” She made a show of pouting her lips and fluttering her lashes before uttering mockingly, “His *adoring* little wife.”

What was wrong with her? Vincenza was acting as though I betrayed her.

“I tried to murder him, Enza. He could have done a lot worse than lock me away in a mansion for a few months. I’m grateful.”

“What?” Her humorless laugh came across scornful. “Don’t tell me you actually like the guy?”

I did. So much. But I was good at reading her emotions and I knew she was on the edge so what I said was less inflammatory. “I like his kids.”

Vincenza walked into the living area and waved me off before she sat down uninvited, stretching her arms out along the top of the sofa. The nerve of her to say what she said right then, right here, in Ettore’s home. “Don’t worry. You’ll have your own kids someday. Now that you’re back, we stick to the plan.”

My stunned silence lingering.

People talked about Vincenza. I’d heard stories about her floating on the wind that I never truly believed because I loved her. But right then, my blinders were lifted.

Maybe they were right. Maybe she was crazy.

“Have my own kids...” I muttered distantly. “After making these ones orphans, you mean.”

She blinked at me then. “I’m starting to wonder whose side you’re on, Vicky.”

Whose side I was on?

I was on the side of peace.

Right then, I looked at my sister and was surprised by what I discovered. Was this really the same person I was petrified of making upset? Why did I ever to go the lengths I did to keep her happy, at the sacrifice of my own?

A stunning realization came to front.

Mildly put, Vincenza wasn’t the center of my universe anymore. I didn’t care what she wanted. She was no longer my priority. And I wondered why that was.

Only one thing came to mind.

With Ettore, I didn’t feel alone anymore.

Standing a few feet away from her, I uttered evenly, “I need to start cooking. You’re welcome to stay for dinner.” And just to make myself abundantly clear, I added, “Meet the kids.”

She blinked at me a long moment before her stare turned cold and deadly. “No. I don’t think I will.” I followed my sister to the front door where I handed her back the coat I hadn’t relinquished. She looked at me then in a different way, as if noticing something she hadn’t seen before. The tension surrounding us built to force that threatened to crush me, and just before she left, her entire demeanor changed. My brow furrowed at how easily she transformed. Her easy smile came closer and then she was kissing my cheek. She then placed something in my hand and curled my fingers around it. “Look over these, will you?” As she walked out, she called back, “Oh, and I need it by morning.”

She got into her car and drove away with a pleasant wave, and I peered down at what she slid into my hand.

The USB carried an impossible weight and my shoulders drooped. She was so good at getting her way that she made it look like an artform. With a sighed, “Godammit,” I shut the door and got started on dinner knowing I wouldn’t be getting a wink of sleep tonight.



Ettore

THINGS DIDN’T ALWAYS GO TO PLAN and sometimes, an hour of work turned into five hours, three lengthy phone calls and enough paperwork to flatten a fucking field.

Looking at what I had in front of me, I suppose I had neglected more than I originally thought.

When Vittoria knocked on my office door hours ago, I responded with a curt, “What?” but was immediately put in my place when she pushed open the door, standing by it with a

small smile, as my two terrors ran in, already bathed and dressed in their pajamas, ready for bed.

I took a moment, hugging and kissing them both, making sure to give them enough of me that they never felt like a burden. And when I stood to walk them to bed, my heart both warmed and cooled at the sight of Vittoria moving forward and the boys taking her hands without hesitancy. “It’s okay. I’ll take them.”

“You don’t even know where their room is.”

Why was I fighting this? It was a good thing, wasn’t it?

Her easy, “They’ll show me,” had my lips thinning. And then it hit me why I was feeling so sore.

After their mom died, I took on the role of both mother and father. I fed them. I did the bathing. I dressed them and put them to bed. And now, I watched my boys hold the hand of a veritable stranger so comfortably. It was as if I wasn’t required anymore. Like I was utterly expendable.

Talk about a solid kick to the nuts.

But as I looked at my young wife, I had to remind myself that she was only trying to help. She had first hand experience on the single father gig. She knew how hard it was. After her mother died, her father had been her sole parent. Like me, I was sure he did the best he could to make sure his little girl never felt like she went without.

And as I glanced at my sons, my chest grew taut.

Her father was all she had, and I had taken that from her.

Immediately humbled, I moved, not stopping until I was directly in front of her. She looked up at me and when I peered down at her, I felt warmth spread around my middle. I leant down to press a chaste kiss to her forehead. “Thanks,” and was immediately rewarded with that honey sweet smile I loved so much and suddenly, those intrusive thoughts fled.

Now, as I hunched over my desk unable to see clearly anymore, a quick glance at my wristwatch told me why. It was past two in the morning. With a long, drawn-out breath, I got

up, leaving my jacket and tie behind and decided to sneak into bed with my sleeping wife.

Only, my sleeping wife wasn't there. And so began my search. It didn't take long to find her. Vittoria sat upright on one sofa with the laptop I'd bought her resting on her thighs and she was typing a mile a minute. In fact, she hadn't even noticed my approach. But what surprised me was that she wasn't alone. Sleeping on the sofa across from her was Ella and it looked as though she'd been asleep for some time.

Vittoria sighed, lifting her arms up above her head, linking her hands and stretching her back out. She moved her head from side-to-side, hissing lightly as she worked out a kink in her neck. And I frowned. "What are you doing?"

She jumped, spooked, and when she turned to face me, I found her glare to be even more adorable than her smile. "Jesus Christ. Don't *do* that. I have the heart of a canary. One bad scare is all it'll take. You'll find me cold and lifeless on the cage floor in the morning."

A reluctant smile pulled at my lips.

I was coming to find that my wife was funny.

I observed my sleeping daughter. "Why isn't she in bed?"

Vittoria had since gone back to typing. "She said you normally let her stay up to watch *Love Island*."

My, "She's twelve. You let her watch that garbage?" had her stilling.

Her wide eyes somehow looked even larger when she gave herself away by nodding as she nervously choked out, "No." Her gaze went from Ella then back to me and what she said next, she whispered, "But don't ask her because, you know, she doesn't like me so she's going to say I let her watch that..." she swallowed hard. "...garbage, you know, to get me in trouble." When my eyes were drawn to the pile of chocolate wrappers on the table, Vittoria shrunk in on herself and she muttered timidly, "Also, somebody let Ella eat those."

I was close to laughing. "Was that somebody you?"

She shook her head but her body slumped as she confessed, “Yeah.”

Fuck me, I almost couldn't stand it. I needed to get my daughter into bed so I could get my wife into bed. So, I scooped my daughter up and tucked her in, but when I tried to use the same tactic on my wife, she stopped me with one hand to my chest while she continued to type with the other. “Tor, I can't leave this. Vincenza said it needs to be done by tomorrow.”

Pardon me?

I wasn't sure I heard her right.

“Do what?” came my abrasive question.

“You know.” She shrugged like it was no big deal. “Balancing the books.”

My expression darkened and for a second, my anger threatened to spill out through my mouth. But one look at my beautiful wife had me reigning it in. I calmed myself before asking, “She's got you doing Vero books? Running numbers?”

My tone, although even, must have given away my displeasure because Vittoria instantly jumped to excuses for her sister. “It's just that I've always done them and nobody knows my system so I guess it's just easier if...”

I put my hand to the laptop lid and began to push on it. Slowly, it closed, giving her enough time to snatch her fingers back.

What I said next was not up for debate. “It's late and we're going to bed.”

“But I need to...” The worry in her gaze as she glanced at the shiny exterior of the laptop had my jaw clenching.

Something about her restlessness brought on my own and I truly hadn't meant to growl the words at her. “*They can wait.*” She shrunk in on herself and regret coursed through me. I sighed, closing my eyes.

Fucking hell.

For months, I watched Vittoria grow from an undernourished bud to a poised, dew coated, sparkling white rose. And, goddamn Vincenza Vero, the motherfucking strangling vine, comes back on the scene and here we are again. I was not going to let Enza suck the spirit out of my wife. Not when it had taken her this long to find it again.

Fuck Vincenza and fuck her manipulative power trip. Tomorrow, I dealt with the Vero Famiglia and let them know how this was going to go down.

I hoped I sounded convincing when I said, “I’ll get it back to them.”

I must have because when I attempted to scoop her up a second time, she let me and her mouth worked my pulse point, sucking and kissing, the entire way up to our bedroom. Her eagerness meant what should have been a nice, comforting welcome home turned into an impatient fuck against the column post of my bed with one arm twisted behind her back while the other scratched at my forearm as my hand wrapped around her throat.

But afterwards, exhausted but sated, we dozed wrapped in each other’s arms. I stoked her luscious hair and she ran her fingernails over the coarse stubble at my jawline. Our faces close, we breathed as one, unable to stop from planting barely-there kisses wherever they could reach. And when Vittoria nuzzled into my throat, my heart thumped hard in my chest. I didn’t think there was more natural feeling in the fucking universe than being here like this with her.

I liked it a lot.

Together, we slept.

We slept soundly.

CHAPTER 18

BOUNDARIES

Ettore

“TOR?”

I tried to be quiet as I readied myself for the day. Obviously, not quiet enough because she blinked sleepily through one eye, holding herself up on an elbow as she drowsily asked, “Where are you going?” Her sleep softened face had me pausing just to take it in.

My heart did the strangest thing.

The next time it beat, it beat for her.

She looked utterly edible. I couldn't help myself from stepping forward and sitting myself down next to her. My head dipped and I pressed my lips to her exposed shoulder. “To take care of a small problem.” As if it were a compulsion, my hand settled on her hip but refused to behave, roaming the softness of her curves in ownership. But I didn't have time to play this morning. “It's early. Go back to sleep. I'll wake you when I get home. We'll have breakfast.”

She was too tired to argue. She blew out, “Okay,” through a stifled yawn and when her head hit the pillow once more, her breathing steadied almost instantly.

I watched her sleep a moment longer before I stood and made my way to my car. The sun hadn't yet risen. I drove to the modest looking two-story home. The alarm system was

basic and took me less than seven minutes to disarm, less than three minutes to find a way to let myself in and less than two to find him, cloaked in darkness, asleep in his bedroom.

His light snuffles told me I hadn't woken him, so when I took the empty seat in the corner of the room, lifted it and placed it by his bedside, I lowered myself into it, resting my ankle on my knee. I fished my zippo lighter out of my jacket pocket and began the habit I picked up in my teen years of flicking it open, watching it light, then flicking it closed again.

Each time it lit, the soft glow of the flame caused his features to shadow. A minute of this and I noticed him stir. Slowly, at first, and then when he became aware that he wasn't the only person in the room, he shot up in panic as I flicked open my lighter and left the flame burning.

In alarm, he panted out a hoarse, "What the hell?"

"Good morning, Como."

Flick, flick. Flick, flick.

Como Vero reached over to the bedside lamp and when he turned it on, the room was bathed in warm light. And the older man blinked at me. "Scala?" He seemed confused. Weren't we all. "What are you doing here?"

Flick, flick. "You and I need to have a little chat." *Flick, flick.*

"About what?"

Flick, flick. "Boundaries." *Flick, flick. Pause.*

The pad of my thumb rested along the hinge of my lighter as the irony of what I'd just said settled over me. And once it had, I reached into my pocket, took out the nondescript USB and tossed it at him. He didn't bother to catch it.

My anger simmered as I began to speak. "You stand in front of that girl on her wedding day, in a room full of the only people she had left in the world and you tell her she's dead to you." My head tilted as I continued to stare at the man. "And now you feel it's acceptable to put her to work?" *Flick, flick.* I shook my head. "No. That's not happening."

“What’s it to you?” Como, the moronic fuck, had the balls to ask.

“What’s it to me?” *Flick, flick.* My gaze hooded on him. “That’s my wife.”

“Oh, please,” Como returned heatedly. “You didn’t want this marriage.”

Flick, flick. He wasn’t wrong there, but I hoped what I said would soon sink in. “Yeah, well, she didn’t either and I’m the husband she got. So, when I say this shit isn’t happening, it *isn’t* happening.”

The thin ice he was walking on got even thinner when he actually tried to defend himself. “Vittoria has always done this.”

Flick, flick. “Not anymore.”

My anger became molten fury when he said, “She’s the only person I trust to run the books.”

The next flick of my lighter had the flame dancing in my hand. My gaze dimmed when I snarled, “And now she’s dead to you.”

For the first time since I arrived, Como picked up what I was putting down and then, he looked frightened. “Listen to yourself, Scala. You’re acting crazy.”

“Crazy?” The laughter that left me dripped with acid. “You haven’t seen me crazy... yet.”

Como ran a hand through his messed-up hair. He looked me in the eye when he admitted, “Look, I didn’t mean what I said. She’s my niece and I love her, but I would have said anything to diffuse the situation. I would have said anything to appease you.”

Did he think his show of reverence would win me over?

All I saw was a coward, shaking in his sheets. “Including breaking her fucking heart. Right?”

Como’s chin dipped, he lowered his eyes and the only thing filling the long silence that passed between us was the

flicking of my lighter.

And then, I thought about my wife and her desperate need to maintain a familial connection. I thought of a way where both Famiglia Vero and Vittoria got what they wanted. “Okay,” I began. “You want Vittoria to do your books? Come by the house to discuss terms and payment.”

The man’s head shot up in disbelief. “What?”

He heard me. “*If* Vittoria wants the job, you’re going to pay her for the work she does.”

The asshole had the nerve to say, “But we’re family.”

A laugh shot out of me. “Yeah? That’s funny, Como. That’s real funny.” I sobered quickly. “You disowned her.” When I leant in close, he backed away from me. “I’m her family now and when you hurt one of mine, I feel it. A direct cut to my flesh. It’s my job to protect her, even from pieces of shit family members like you.”

Knowing the situation demanded one, he caved with a shaky, “I’m sorry.”

But I was not impressed. “I’m not the one you have to apologize to.” My cold glance passed the space around us. “Tonight. 7 o’clock. You’re going to host dinner for us, as a family.” The last word in that sentence dripped with disdain. “I’m going to tell my wife that you called me and *begged* to see her. I’m going to tell her this because I think it will make her happy to believe you care. I’m sure she misses the house she was raised in. No doubt she probably has things here she’d like to bring home with her.” *Flick, flick.* “She doesn’t need to know the truth and if she does find out,” my eyes narrowed on the man, “I will make you hurt. Do you hear me?”

Como Vero watched me closely. “You really do care about her.” A statement. A skeptical one, at that. Then he conceded defeat. “I already lost a brother to you. I don’t want to lose anyone else.” He sighed, “Bring her home.”

Right then, with his shoulders drooped, he appeared smaller somehow, and I realized then that the only Vero who was capable of holding a seat at the high table was Vittoria’s

father. Como was too weak a man for the role. And the thought of Vincenza in that seat... it made one shudder.

Without another word spoken, I stood tall and walked out of his room. I then drove home and woke my wife with kisses and breakfast and good news. Her initial shock turned into a quiet laugh and wide smile, and then, it all fell away. Heartbreak, mourning and intense longing broke through the forefront. I held her as she cried softly into my throat, and it told me I'd done the right thing in disregarding my every instinct to destroy Como Vero.

And I knew then I would have done anything for this kind of response.

Anything to make her happy.



Vittoria

DINNER WENT BETTER than I could have hoped for. From the very moment my Zio Como opened the front door, I didn't wait. I threw myself into his arms. And when the first of my tears escaped, he held me close with a hand to the back of my head. I barely heard his apology over the pressure in my head relieving itself, but the truth was, even if he hadn't offered it, I would have come and embraced him nonetheless.

Como may not have been the best role model, but I couldn't just forget what he did for us.

He was a bachelor with zero commitments, living a free life, when we were dumped into his lap. He took us in without a second thought. He never complained. He didn't mistreat us. In fact, he changed his life to work around our needs. I couldn't discount all the good he did.

Sometimes people said things they regret.

The sudden memory of the night my father died caused a shadow to fall over my soul.

I was guilty of it myself.

Sure, it was a little awkward at first. When Vincenza hugged me, I could feel her stare Ettore down in some bizarre power move. Thankfully, my husband had more sense than to engage. Besides, that fight would have been over in seconds. Like a rottweiler vs a chihuahua, I know Ettore was simply waiting for Enza to overstep so he had an excuse to tear her head off.

He was behaving for me.

The conversation was stunted at times, but polite. The flow of the evening slowed some and when I asked my uncle if I could go up to my room, he said, “Of course. It’s your room, Vicky. It’ll always be your room.”

I didn’t expect Tor to follow me up and I felt mildly embarrassed of the soft pink bedsheets and lace frill around the posters of my bed. Dear Lord. Why did I still have dolls on shelf? My cheeks turned a deep shade of pink as I laughed nervously and uttered, “I guess I wasn’t all that set on growing up too quickly.”

My husband stepped in close and attempted to make me feel better by saying, “It’s overrated anyways.”

You know. Of all the time we spent arguing in the beginning, it felt like we’d finally made it over that hill and now, I considered myself extremely lucky to have him. Ettore Scala could be a scary motherfucker, but he was soft for me. My heart claimed him and I was proud to carry his name.

When he crowded me from behind, he put his hands to my hips and squeezed. “Six months ago, this would have made me a creep.” I was about to ask what would have made him a creep when the hard length of him pressed into my ass causing my lips to part. “But now, I’m just being an indulgent husband.”

He was indulgent.

We spent more time in my room than intended and when we slammed backwards into my closed door, I pulled away from his mouth long enough to whisper, “We should stop.” My

head tilted to the side, giving him room to place wet kisses along my throat. Tor's strong hand trailed my spine, lower until he clutched at my ass cheek. My eyes almost rolled into the back of my head when he kneaded it firmly and simply replied, "No."

So, when we stumbled out of my room sometime later, holding hands. My quiet laughter dissipated when I saw my sister standing there, taking in my flushed cheeks and swollen lips.

Her lip curled, "Did you guys get busy in there? Ugh. Gross. We just had this wing cleaned. If you could keep your hands off each other for five minutes, coffee's ready." She began to walk away. "And wash your goddamn hands."

Tor and I looked at each other a long moment before he chuckled. Mortified, I buried my face into his collar and groaned.

His voice was filled with mirth when he said, "Did she look jealous to you?" I hadn't really noticed. "Think she's regretting her decision?"

I pulled back, blinking up at him in confusion. "What decision?"

He shot me a look. "You know." But I didn't know. "The big one." My face must have shown I wasn't following because his gaze narrowed a little. "Marriage?" His head tilted slightly. "This ringing a bell?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You don't know?" he uttered disbelievingly.

"Know what?" I laughed out of pure perplexity.

He blinked at me then, and what he said caused a physical reaction. "That my offer of marriage was to Vincenza, not you."

My heart clenched and my face fell in time. I felt the blood rush out of my face as I took a small step back. "What?"

Ettore watched me step away and frowned. "She declined, obviously. Offered you up in her place." Oh my God. It felt as

though my heart split in two as he muttered an even, “You really didn’t know?”

My eyes began to sting as the lengths of her betrayal sank in. I blinked my tears back. All I could do was shake my head.

He took a single step forward but he seemed to know not to touch me. “Listen. For what it’s worth, I definitely got the better sister.”

Oh God. I know he thought it was a compliment, but, right then, was the wrong thing to say.

“Excuse me.” I turned, starting for the stairs.

I was already half way down when I heard him say, “Vittoria, wait. Baby...”

My heart was thumping in my chest when I stormed into the living area and spotted her sitting poised on the edge of the sofa. “Is it true?”

“Is what true?”

“That you sold me off.”

Ettore walked into the room and Vincenza glanced at him uncaringly. Como watched on from the opposite side of the couch. And, you really had to give Enza credit. She didn’t even deny it. She simply poured the coffee and said, “We would have killed each other.”

I stood there, stunned. She really did it. She sold me off like day-old bread.

My soul splintered. “What did I cost, huh?” She looked at me then, completely unashamed. And then I turned to my husband and asked, “What am I worth?” Nobody answered. My heart raced and I shouted, “*What the fuck was I worth?*”

Como stood with his hands out. “Vicky, please.”

But Enza finally broke her silence. “A seat at the high table.” She picked up her coffee cup and sipped at it. “You were never meant for this life. You’re too soft.” Too weak, she meant. “And so, I made use of you. My marrying anyone would have been a waste of my life. Papa raised me as a son. I

was built to sit on that seat.” She placed her cup down with a gentle clink. “It’s my destiny. It always has been.”

I was right. Everyone had a bargaining chip. And, as it turned out, I was Vincenza’s.

It was at that moment that a conversation had with Marco flooded back to me and I asked, “You know, I have trusted your guidance since I was a child. You led and I followed, your loyal and devoted subject. And I know you don’t like questions, but I have one for you and I demand an answer.” For a moment, her expression turned puzzled, as if she couldn’t believe I was capable of talking to her this way. “Vincenza, why did we lose our seat at the high table and why did you need to gamble me to get it back?”

“You know what happened,” she said quietly, landing her furious gaze on Tor.

I shook my head. “I always took what you said at face value because I believed you would never lie to me, but I am calling you out. It doesn’t make sense. It never did.”

Her eyes filled with tears. Her hands balled into tight fists. “He lifted his gun. He shot it and we lost our father.”

“Why though?” I looked between them and my stomach ached, desperate for answers. “*Why?*”

“Because Ettore Scala is an unfeeling monster. He shot papa and murdered him in cold blood.”

Ettore laughed but there was nothing humorous about it. “As always, Vincenza, your story is lacking. I didn’t raise my weapon until necessary.”

“Liar!” My sister stood, seething. “You aimed and shot to kill.”

Ettore glowered at her. Exasperated, he boomed, “Yes, I did, but I wasn’t aiming for *him*.”

What?

The silence that followed was painful. It seemed I was only going to get answers from one person and so, I turned to my husband and my voice broke when I begged, “What

happened? Please tell me. I need to know. I'll never heal if I don't."

Ettore peered down at me before he lifted his gaze to the trembling wrath that was my sister. "It was a quarterly meet. Everything was going smoothly until it came to the Vero seat. Normally, your pops spoke but that day, he allowed Vincenza to speak for him. Instead of sticking to script, your sister decides to make demands for more territory. And I don't know what she thought would happen but, everyone laughed at her and I was stupid enough to tell her that she could have my territory if she could fight me for it. The laughter turned raucous and I laughed too, because what she was asking for was crazy. She hadn't earned shit. Obviously, this was not something she wanted to hear. Embarrassed, Vincenza lost her temper and did something stupid. She pulled her piece. The laughter stopped immediately. She was warned that this was an expelling offence. She knew she fucked up the second she did it, but her ego was triggered and her response to that was, 'Oh well, better make it worth it then.' She pulled the trigger. Mine followed. And while your sister is about as bad a shot as you are, baby, mine would have met its target..." Oh God. I knew what was coming before he even said it. "If your father didn't take the bullet meant for her. Your dad died and the Vero seat sat empty. Until now." He looked at me earnestly. "I would never have done it if not provoked."

"He's lying," Vincenza uttered. "He's lying. I'm your sister." And then she cried, "He's lying! It wasn't *my fault*."

It wasn't her fault. Nothing was ever her fault.

"I believe you."

Tor's face softened as my words reached him.

"What?" Vincenza was shocked by my admission. "But I'm your sister."

"Funny you say that," I spoke sadly. "You never treated me like one."

I could see she was stunned by my candor. "Vicky, please. Everything I did, I did for us. I sacrificed everything for this

family.”

“Including me.” Her mouth gaped and for the first time in my recollection, she looked powerless. “You knew about this?” I asked Como and his hesitation said it all. I could barely contain my disappointment. “Of course, you did.”

The silence carried as I processed.

The emotions in the room intensified and Ettore wanted to avoid another Vero family drama. “I think it’s time to leave.”

He was right. It was, and I doubted I would ever come back here. Weirdly enough, I didn’t feel sad about it. Just... empty.

I slid my hand into his, looked up into his face and let out a weary, “Let’s go home.”

That night, I left my sister behind. That didn’t mean I didn’t love her. It just meant that I had grown enough to know she would never love me.



SOMETIME AFTER MIDNIGHT, I lay across my husband’s chest listening to his heart beat and just when I thought the numbness had consumed me whole, he breathed life back into me.

“I would have chosen you,” he whispered against my hair, pressing a soft kiss to the crown of my head. “Again, and again.”

My arms tightened around him and he held me until I fell asleep.

I guess I had to thank my sister for one thing and one thing only.

She gave me Tor.

CHAPTER 19

'TIL DEATH AND BEYOND

*V*ittoria

IT WAS around midday when I strolled up to Tor's office under the guise of bringing him lunch, when really, I just wanted to be close to him. I sat perched on the edge of his desk and watched as he lifted the macchiato to his lips. That's when I pounced. "You don't talk about your previous wife."

I wasn't an amazing cook, but I had no complaints about my coffee. He placed the small cup back down onto its saucer. "No, I suppose I don't."

"Will you tell me about her?"

For a moment, I thought he was going to decline, but then he reached out and took my calf in his hands, massaging gently. "Her name was Amara and, the short answer is, one day she was here and the next, she wasn't."

Oh. "Was she ill?"

"Yes."

His hands felt amazing. "I'm sorry. That must have been hard."

"She was never a part of my plans. Like you and I, we both went into the marriage knowing what it was, but she had this way of making things work. She was tough. Resilient. Not afraid of a goddamn thing." A small smile tilted at his lips.

“And God forbid you came for one of our kids.” He whistled long and low. “When she came marching, even I moved out of her way.”

I found myself smiling too. “She was a good mother.”

“The best.”

Girl, why are you torturing yourself? “And you loved her.”

“Very much.”

Ouch.

It was then that I realized I was jealous. Over a ghost.

Maybe it was the fact that there was an abundance of photos of this particular ghost around the house, or maybe it was that she was gorgeous in gleaming light way, but if I were being completely honest, it was that while their wedding photo sat up on the mantle, our wedding frame remained empty and every time I passed it, a bitter taste filled my mouth.

I always knew I wouldn't be anybody's first choice, but right then, I couldn't help but feel second best.

Lost in distracting thoughts, my eyes fluttered when honesty hour kicked off and he asked, “It was your sister, wasn't it?” My eyes met his when he elaborated. “She wanted me dead, she put you up to it and you did it because it's better to be the right hand of the devil than stuck in his path.” Ashamed, I closed my eyes, refusing to look at him when he sighed then said, “I had my suspicions, but some of the things she said that night confirmed it.”

When I scooped forward and all but fell into his lap, facing him, he didn't stop me from undoing the buttons of his shirt and parting the white silk until it was there, right in front of my eyes. The scar was fading and had since turned a lighter shade of pink, but no matter how much it healed, I would always remember the gaping wound spilling out with blood and knowing I had caused it.

My heart ached. I leant in and softly pressed my lips to the reminder of the tragedy I'd almost caused.

It was barely a whisper. “I'm sorry.”

He took in a shuddering breath when I kissed it slowly in apology, over and over again, and when his arms snaked around my middle, pulling me close, I teetered over the edge of the cliff as this brash man comforted me for my own faults and failings.

I was tipped over the edge when he turned my head to the side, forcing me to look at him, looked me dead in the eyes and uttered, “If all I had to do was take a bullet to deserve you, empty the fucking clip in me.”

Oh God.

Oh *God*.

He said it so casually, as if he hadn’t just reached into my chest and plucked out my heart.

My lips began to tremble and my vision blurred. I hadn’t meant to say it out loud but it croaked out of me, “I think I’m in love with you.”

Tor’s eyes flashed. His lips captured mine in a harsh and demanding kiss that was utterly cleansing. Eventually, the kiss gentled and slowed, and when he bussed my lips with his, he pulled back enough to say, “About fucking time.”

I sniffled and smiled into his lips, although it shook.

I’d never been in love before. It was a strange mixture of warmth and affection, of tenderness and care, but it was also raw and painful, and somewhere below all of those sparkling feelings was cold, anxious dread. Because I couldn’t lose this. I couldn’t lose him.

Not after I just got him.



WEEKS PASSED and I hadn’t seen or spoke to my sister. Instead, I focused on this family and found that I loved being a step-mother. That emptiness I felt the day I left my uncles house meant I had room in me for more, a space to fill in my heart and these kids filled it, effortlessly.

Even when Ella glared at me and left the room, leaving me feeling like a piece of trash.

I watched her leave and my stomach twisted. “What am I doing wrong?”

Tor read the paper at the table and didn’t even bother to look at me when he responded, “It would seem you are repeatedly doing something that she’s taking offence to.”

“Like what?”

“Like breathing.”

My lips pulled down and, this guy with the dad jokes. He looked supremely happy with himself when I picked up an oven mitt and threw it at him. “Oh, haha, wise guy.”

I knew it was going to be hard. Ella was a tough nut to crack. But I vowed it right then.

I would win her over.



THE NEXT MORNING, I unwittingly made everything worse.

The kids were at the table eating breakfast and I had just finished tidying up the entire kitchen when the boys started to fling food at each other.

Tor was immediately on it. “Boys, if you act like animals, I’m gonna start feeding you from a trough.”

Adrian’s face bunched. “What’s a twof?”

Tor explained, “It’s a big, long, dirty thing that pigs eat out of. You want to eat outside, like a pig?”

Domenic’s face brightened and he jumped in his seat. “Yes!”

“Well, good thing, you’re heading that way,” their dad murmured.

The kitchen was sparkling clean when I decided to stick my foot into my mouth. “Guys, you know where the

dishwasher is. Please use it. I swear, if someone puts a single fork into that sink, I will take that tea towel and hang myself with it.”

Ella’s spoon drooped into her bowl with a light splash and a loud clink, and although the boys seemed relatively unaffected, the tense silence coming from Tor and Ella made my insides shrivel. I cautiously asked, “Is everything okay?”

Ella’s chair screeched loudly and she stormed off, leaving her breakfast behind.

I blinked at her retreating form before looking towards my husband. “What did I do?”

I knew it was bad when he said, “Boys, go upstairs.” I watched them leave and then, he patted the seat next to him and uttered softly, “Sit down, baby. Let’s talk.”

When he started to speak, my stomach tensed. Part way through, it clenched. By the end of his story, it downright ached, and my chest right along with it.

My words were feather soft. “She killed herself?”

Tor nodded. “The boys don’t remember but it was Ella who found her.”

My heart dropped in time with my stomach.

Oh, shit. My poor excuse for a joke had just triggered my step-daughter and right then, I didn’t blame her for hating me. I would have hated me too.

I just couldn’t seem to get it right with Ella and I was truly worried she and I would never see eye-to-eye.

Later that night, after a quiet dinner where conversation was stunted, I pucked up the courage to knock lightly on her door. When she opened it, I was prepared to be turned away. Imagine my surprise when she moved back, allowing me entry.

“Hi,” I uttered nervously. “Your dad took the boys to soccer practice and I’m feeling a little lonely in this enormous house. I thought I would make some hot chocolate if you wanted some.”

She thought about it a long second before she lifted her chin and nodded once, still unable to drop her suspicions of me. “Okay.”

Forget about weeping statues of Mary or Jesus shaped potato chips. *This* was a miracle.

She followed me down into the kitchen and watched closely as I struggled to make us cocoa without setting the kitchen on fire. When I finally set a mug down in front of her, she remained solemn-faced as I placed a handful of mini marshmallows into her mug and when she picked up a spoon, dunking her mallows, I began softly with, “Ella, about this morning...”

She cut me off. “That wasn’t a very funny joke.”

The way she said it, quietly and full of hurt, I had to agree. “You’re right. It wasn’t. I’m so sorry, honey. I didn’t know.”

Ella played with her cocoa, lifting spoonfuls of it and dribbling it back into her mug. “She used to joke about it too. And then she did it.” For the first time since I met stone-cold Ella, she actually sounded like a little girl when she said, “I still don’t know why.”

I wanted to hug her then, but I wasn’t entirely sure it would be welcome. So, instead, I reached over and placed my hand lightly over her free one. She allowed only a few seconds of comfort before she remembered she despised me and when she pulled away, I wasn’t surprised.

Ella stood, leaving her mug of hot chocolate on the counter and said, “I’m tired.”

“Alright.” Sadness filled me whole. Not because she wanted to escape me, but because she was so uncomfortable in her own feelings that it caused her to flee. “Well, thanks for keeping me company.”

The old Ella shone through when she shrugged. “Didn’t have anything better to do.”

With every one step forward, somehow, we ended up tumbling three steps back.

That didn't mean I'd stop trying.



“ELLA, would you clean this mess up?” Tor asked distractedly.

“Why me?” she complained.

And Tor simply looked at her. “Because I asked you to. Now, please. I don't need this shit right now.”

A few days had passed since our last talk. Ella had been avoiding me since. And it probably wasn't a good idea to get involved here, but I couldn't seem to stop myself from chiming in. “Honey, it's the boys mess.”

Tor glanced at me before checking the time on his wristwatch. “I know, but-”

I don't know what possessed me, but I cut him off with, “Then you know that the best way to raise men who respect women is to treat them equally in every way, including cleaning up their own mess.”

His light sigh told me I was pushing it. “I don't have time for this, Tori.”

That's okay. I did. “So, let me deal with it. I'll show them how it's done. Make it fun.”

And my husband threw me a look of sheer skepticism. “You think you can get those little monsters to clean?” He laughed through his nose. “I'd like to see you try.”

You're on, buddy. “Challenge accepted.”

When Ella glanced at me, I winked at her and when she looked away, I swear she wore the tiniest smile. Tiny, but still there.



IT WAS AROUND nine pm when Tor walked through the door. I stood in the foyer waiting for him. My hair was a mess, I was

certain I looked stressed the fuck out, and my smile was crooked. But the mess was gone and when his gaze passed the clean, toy-free floor, Tor's eyes narrowed in suspicion. "You did this."

"I did not," I squawked, insulted.

And he walked into the room, surveilling it slowly before he put his hands to his hips and said, "You're tellin' me the boys, *my* boys, Adriano and Domenico, those two walking natural disasters... they did this?"

My smile was less crooked then. "Uh-huh."

"How?"

How?

Oh God. I couldn't tell him I was mere seconds away from a mental breakdown. Rather, I said unevenly, "Patience and persistence." Just as I said it, a lock of hair fell over my face.

He stared at me for a solid minute before he sauntered over and took my face in his hands. I know he meant nothing by it when he said, "I like it when you play at being mommy."

I didn't mean to pout. "I'm not playing."

And his face changed then, grew thoughtful. "No. You're not, are you?"

He drew close and kissed me, and I breathed him in. When he led me upstairs, I glanced at the bed and hesitated. Tor obviously felt it enough to ask, "What?"

I was so worried about offending him that I stumbled over my words. "I'm just- I'm so tired. I don't think I have it in me to..." At the look on his face, I backpedaled instantly. "But you can, if you need it. I'm just too tired to..." What was the right word to use here? "Participate."

It was the wrong thing to say.

I couldn't understand why he appeared angry when he uttered a hushed, "What did you just say?"

Oh hell. I was screwing up. *Again*. "You're a very virile man and... I'm your wife... you should be allowed to... you

know... whenever you want.” Quietly, and a little frightened, I gently reminded him, “You told me to never deny you.”

For a moment, he didn't move. He simply stood there, assessing me. His stormy features dimmed some and when he said, “Take your clothes off,” he said it evenly.

My stomach clenched at his false calm. But he was my husband. This was his right.

I did as he asked, and once I was nude, I turned towards the bed, but he grasped my hand and tugged me in the opposite direction. I blinked in confusion as he turned on the bathroom light, took off his jacket and reached into the large cubicle to lift the lever. Hot water billowed out of the showerhead until steam swirled around us. He adjusted the temperature, held out his hand and with zero hesitation, I took it.

He walked me in and under the spray. The sigh that left me was one of pure bliss.

I didn't even notice he had undressed until he slipped in behind me. That sigh of bliss turned into a heavenly moan when he lifted his hands and began to massage the knots out of my neck and shoulders. I fell back into him and although my knees wobbled, he held me up, washing me with a tenderness and care I didn't know he had in him.

Afterwards, he dressed me before he dressed himself and sat me down between his outspread knees. He brushed my hair and kissed my neck as my eyes wearily fell closed. I yawned when he pulled back the sheets and helped me in. My head hit the pillow and I muttered sleepily. “Tor?”

The mattress shifted when he took his place beside me. “Yeah?”

I was half asleep when I slurred, “I really do love you. You love me too, don't you?”

Right then, I fell to slumber so I wasn't really sure I heard him respond, but I could have sworn I dreamt him say, “‘Til death and beyond.”

Of course, it was all a dream.

Irrespective, I fell asleep smiling.

CHAPTER 20

HOW DO YOU DO IT?

E *ttore*

IT WAS early afternoon and I already wanted to strangle the disrespectful fuck that was my younger brother.

As was the norm, Sundays were reserved for family and when my pops put on a spread, he didn't need to call us over. We smelled the invitation from down the street. Soon after we arrived, I saw mama's navy blue, white speckled enamel pot sitting in the center of the table, and I could already taste what was inside.

When the entire family was seated, Giada opened the pots and I immediately began salivating. My mother's rabbit ragu sat to one side of the big pot of polenta, and on the other was something I didn't recognize. Whatever it was smelled great though.

While Vittoria loaded up plates for the boys, I watched her closely as she leant down and asked them each what they wanted. It caused an unexpected emotion to wash over me. Satisfaction. She fell into her role of stepmother fairly easily which spoke highly of her considering my kids were not always on their best behavior. I had to cut 'em some slack though. They'd been through things other kids their age couldn't possibly understand, and Vittoria's own losses resonated with theirs.

I watched my wife and her gentle curves move effortlessly around the family table and part of me grew impatient wondering what the hell was taking so long. She was young, I was amorous and we weren't using birth control, yet every month she got her courses.

My gaze fell to her stomach with a longing I thought had long passed.

The desire to see her pregnant was a needy one. I wanted her to swell with part of me. I wanted a son with my wife's expressive eyes or a daughter with her soft heart. But more than anything, I craved another child to dote on.

Hers. Mine.

Ours.

While she provided for the kids, it was my job to provide for her. I took her plate and began to fill it. And I felt his eyes on me from across the table. When I glanced up at him coolly, Daniele simply looked down as I held my wife's plate, shook his head slowly then lifted his hand and mimed a whipping motion.

My jaw tightened at the implication that I was pussy whipped. I would refrain from pouring a ladle of steaming hot sauce into his lap, if only because I could see my father's health waning and another fight between siblings was not going to improve his disposition.

Daniele was still young and he had time to make mistakes. What he didn't understand was, I had already made them and guilt ate away at me every day since the unexpected loss of my beloved Amara. In the years since she passed, I noticed things about myself. Things I didn't do. Things I should've done. While Amara held down the home base, I worked outside of it. Oftentimes, I came home late. Some nights, I didn't come home at all. Asserting myself into the role, becoming head of this house, it took time and effort and I neglected things. People.

I had no idea Amara was struggling mentally. Like most mothers, she hid it well. But now, as I lowered Vittoria's plate

as she took her seat, she smiled at me, widely, openly and full of love.

The critical thoughts that attacked me came at the most inconvenient times.

Maybe if you came home earlier...

Maybe if you spent more time with her...

Maybe if you'd shown more affection...

Maybe if you'd taken the kids every now and then so she could relax...

Maybe if you'd taken her out for a meal every now and again...

Maybe if you treated her like the woman she was and not the mother she became...

Maybe if you'd fixed her a fucking plate...

Under the table, Vittoria's dainty hand covered my knee and squeezed it in gratitude, and I couldn't stop myself from dipping into her and capturing her mouth in a brief kiss. Her eyes widened in surprise at the very moment my mouth touched hers. And when I pulled back, she looked around the table quickly then picked up her fork and glanced down at her plate, but I didn't miss the way her lips softened with a barely there smile while the apples of her cheeks turned a light shade of pink.

If I'd done even some of those things, maybe – just maybe – she would have stayed.

These were mistakes I would never make again. My one regret was not being what Amara needed at the time she needed it. The shame that lives inside of me will never wane. But I swore to be better and for Vittoria, I vowed to be the husband Amara – *shamefully* – never got.

Some lessons were learned the hard way.

And my brother was about to discover that.

Before I'd even started to eat, I noticed my dad watching Vittoria closely. When her lips closed over the forkful of food,

she chewed slowly and her eyes closed in delight.

“You like it?” My father asked.

Vittoria nodded, making a sound of sheer pleasure that I hadn’t heard her make outside of the bedroom. I shifted in my seat.

“Try the other one,” he said and my eyes narrowed on the old man because it was obvious, he was up to something.

Vittoria was happy to oblige and when she lifted the second forkful to her mouth with what looked like a braised beef stew, her lips closed around it, her brows creased in thought and then, she stopped chewing. The gentle clink of the fork as it touched the side of her plate sounded louder to me and for a second, it looked like she was having a difficult time thinking, or breathing, or swallowing.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, concerned, before peering at my dad and accusing, “What did you do?”

Vittoria lifted her elbows to the table, closed her eyes and rested her forehead against her hands a moment, shaking her head. And it alarmed me enough to pick up her fork, scoop up some of the stew and shovel it into my mouth. The more I chewed, the more I realized it was just a stew. A regular stew. It had a rich wine-based tomato sauce, cubes of tender beef, thyme and a hint of sweetness provided by the stick of cinnamon I could see resting against a particularly juicy piece of meat.

But then Vittoria sniffled and I sent a cutting glare to my father. His light smile told me there was nothing to worry about. After a moment, Tori reached out, took hold of her glass of water and sipped at it, swallowing the contents in her mouth. When her eyes met my dad’s, she was blinking back tears as she uttered shakily, “It tastes just like...” the words seem to stick in her throat.

“Your dads,” my father finished for her. She nodded brokenly and his smile widened. “He told me one night, over a glass of wine, here in this very room. He said the best beef ragu he ever made was by mistake and that his girls liked it so

much that it became a favorite. Wasn't long after your mom died, you see, and he was still mastering the cooking bench. I asked him where he screwed up and he said thought celery seed and cinnamon were interchangeable."

Vittoria let out a watery laugh and the rest of the table smiled. All except Daniele.

A quiet moment passed before Papa Nunzio's smile dissolved. "I wish I could bring him back for you, sweetheart. I really do." The regret in his voice carried when he said, "He was my friend and I miss him very much."

My wife and father exchanged looks of mutual sorrow and I slipped my arm around my wife's back in a silent show of support, giving her the moment she required. But before long, the meal picked up again. Easy conversation was flowing and everything felt lighter.

I should have seen it coming. There was nothing more my brother enjoyed than making people uncomfortable. The truth was, I enjoyed it too, but not at the cost of my family's happiness.

"I don't get it," Daniele stared directly at Vittoria and when he had her attention, he said, "How does it work?"

"How does what work?" she replied warily.

His lips stretched but there was nothing joyous about the smile. If I had to call it anything, I would have called it mocking. "I just don't know how you do it." He dared to shift his focus to me then. "How do you sleep with the man who killed your father?"

The entire table ceased conversation and an awkward silence followed with the light clinking of cutlery cutting through. I was stuck between wanting to stand up and lunge at him from across the table then beat the ever-loving fuck out of him and checking to make sure the kids couldn't hear what was being said. The latter won out and my head snapped towards the kids table where the boys were chatting away, blissfully unaware of the storm brewing beside them, but Ella...

Fuck me.

Ella sat stiffly with rigid shoulders, her fingers curled around the armrests of her chair, appeared both confused by what she'd heard and utterly shocked by it. She peered anxiously between Vittoria, Daniele and myself, knowing something bad was coming and bracing for it.

“And I'm not talking about sleeping either.” Daniele picked up his wine glass and swirled the contents. “Like, you're fucking this guy. You're actively choosing to have sex with a man who pulled the trigger. The one who shot the bullet that ended your dad's life. How do you do that, Vittoria?” His expression turned grave. “How does one stoop so low?”

Vittoria's face turned solemn. She placed her hands onto her lap and sat unmoving. In her eyes was... nothing.

My wife had checked out.

“*Daniele*,” pops warned, while I stood fast enough that my chair hit the ground with a hard smack.

I pointed a harsh finger at my brother and snarled, “You know what? I've fucking had it with you, you spoiled as fuck, useless shit. I know you like to poke and prod until you get a reaction and usually, I don't bite, but today, you pushed the wrong person. Today, you pushed too far.” Giada tried to intervene but, I lifted my hand and received the silence I demanded. Only then did I look at the miserable fuck, sunk into his seat, and tell him how it was. “I'm the fucking heir and you're nothing but the spare.” There was no mistaking it. I did not come to play. I glanced him over, disgusted. “Look at you, living with all the glory from the name pops built, living with all the benefits that the power I maintain keeps. Stayin' warm from a fire,” I poked myself hard in the chest and thundered, “*I fucking stoke.*”

From beside me, I felt Vittoria's cold hand curl around my wrist and her broken, “Tor, stop. Please,” held me motionless.

My chest rose and fell as molten lava pumped through my veins. But her gentle plea cut through it and all I could do was curl my lip at the childish asshole. My voice sounded rougher

than intended. “You get one. That’s it. One warning. Your next one comes in the form of a missing limb.” Before I sat, I met his eyes and saw the regret there, but I didn’t care. It was too late and he’d pushed too hard. “Good to know you’ve got my back like I’ve always had yours. Fucking with my happiness like I haven’t been through hell and clawed my way back, like my family doesn’t deserve a goddamn break.” I shook my head at him. “With family like this, who needs enemies, right?” Daniele attempted to speak but my firm gaze held him silent. I only had one more thing to say. “You ever disrespect my wife like that again and I will put you through a fucking wall.”

And I meant it.

With that, I picked up my chair and took a seat besides my soft-hearted wife.

Under the table, my hands shook.



THE MEAL ENDED as gracelessly as it began. Silent and still, with tension sizzling in the air. It was only afterwards that I realized I needed to speak to my daughter, but when I went looking for her, she was nowhere to be found. I checked every room, twice, and it was only when I went into panic mode and headed for the backyard, I heard her speaking to somebody.

“Why are you so mean to Vittoria?”

From his sigh alone, I knew who she was with. Daniele returned, “I’m not being mean. That’s just how adults joke around.”

Would you listen to this guy?

I waited to hear my daughter’s response.

Ella thought about that a moment before she said, “It’s only a joke if everyone is laughing.” She paused a moment. “Mama taught me that.”

My brother's voice lowered some. "Sounds like something your mom would say."

When Ella spoke up next, I almost couldn't believe what I was hearing. "She's not so bad, you know?"

Daniele groaned in annoyance. "Aw, shit, Ella Bella. I thought you were on my team."

"I don't know," Ella replied. "It's kind of nice to have another girl in the house. She got the boys to stop touching my things. And papa likes her."

"Yeah," he conceded quietly. "He does, doesn't he?"

"Maybe..." Ella paused then, and when she began to speak again, it was almost as if she were hearing the words from a fresh perspective. From a new angle. Like advice given to oneself. "Maybe you'd like her too if you gave her a chance."

My brother kept quiet and just when I thought he wasn't going to bother responding, I heard it.

"Maybe."

CHAPTER 21

ONLY HUMAN

Vittoria

ELLA AVOIDED her dad for the rest of the day. Daniele smartly stayed away from him too. Giada tried her best to lighten the mood afterwards, but the damage had been done. Tor and papa Nunzio retired to his office a while and I knew it wasn't business they were discussing. They both needed a minute where they didn't have to appear strong, and men like these couldn't do that amongst prying eyes. Now, we were home again. The boys were in bed and Tor and I had the difficult task of talking to his daughter about what she'd heard.

I assumed Tor would take the head of the table, but when I took the seat to one side of it, he surprised me by choosing to take the chair beside mine. This left Ella opposite us and, in true Ella fashion, she didn't hesitate to hit the ball right off the bat. "Is it true, what Zio Danny said?"

The question was directed at me so it made sense that I answer it. "I-" I started, but stopped to think about my response. *Yes. No. I don't know. It's not what you think.* I turned to him with raised brows.

How did we broach this?

But Tor didn't hesitate with his daughter. He offered a resolute, "Yes."

“What?” Ella’s shock was worn so openly, it made me want to get up and go to her, but my place was beside my husband. In this, we needed to appear as a team. United. The way she shook her head in disbelief was gut-wrenching, especially when she accused, “You said you weren’t one of the bad guys.” *Oh, honey.* She looked so betrayed. “I believed you.”

I remained quiet, a bystander offering silent support to the man who both stole my father, and then my heart.

From the corner of my eye, I saw him inhale deeply and exhale slowly before he said, “It was an accident.”

But Ella wasn’t buying it. “No. No, I don’t believe that. You always told me you don’t aim unless you’re willing to shoot.” She got increasingly angry as she went on. “You said you’re a good shot.” Her voice rose. “That you never miss.” Her brows furrowed when she cried out, “Why are you lying to me?”

Tor closed his eyes and I felt the pain radiate off of him, like crashing waves in a turbulent ocean.

It was time to speak and when I did, I did it softly. “Your dad isn’t a bad man, Ella. He isn’t lying to you. It was an accident. It’s just... sometimes situations are complicated. This is one of those situations.”

This girl who had experienced so much hurt in her young life seemed torn. She wanted to believe me, anyone could see that, and when she glanced at her father, then down to where I had placed my hand over his, her face crumbled and she asked a shaky, “Is that why you shot him?”

I looked at my husband. He squeezed my fingers. I turned back to Ella and said quietly, “Yes.”

Ella’s shoulders shook as she began to cry. Tears streamed down her face and her voice croaked when she said, “I hated you.” She swiped at her face and tried again. “I hated you for what you did.” Her breathing hitched when she turned her wet lashes to her father. “But you deserved it.”

My heart clenched painfully at the thought of Tor hearing these words from his precious daughter. I wasn't going to sit here and stay quiet. "That's not fair," I told her. "Ella, your dad and I have both done horrible things to each other. Terrible, horrible, really bad things. But that doesn't make us bad people. It makes us human."

Her view of her father had changed. It was obvious her little heart was breaking. "I don't want to hear any more." She slipped out of her seat and attempted to flee.

Tor remained silent and seated. I blinked at him, then at her, and next thing I knew I was standing. "Ella, stop. Let's talk about this."

"I don't want to talk. You're an idiot and so is he."

She wasn't getting away that easily. I was hot on her heels. "You can say what you want about me. I'll take it and keep my mouth shut, but I'm asking you to listen to me for a minute."

Ella really was her father's daughter. She proved that when all she offered back was a cool, "No."

The thing was, she wasn't the only one changed by all this, and I don't know what possessed me – maybe fear or sheer desperation – but what I said next had her stopping in her tracks. "Yeah, well, tough shit, missy, because here it is." I reached out and curled my fingers around her upper arms, making damn well certain she couldn't escape me and then I looked her dead in the eyes and began to tell her a story. "I had a father too and I loved him very much. And one day, he and I got into it. We had a fight. A big one. I said some things to him that day, things I didn't mean. Things I swore to take back the next morning after we'd both slept it off." My throat tightened. "But I never got the chance because he died that night." My fingers flexed and I struggled to say, "I will never get to apologize. I will never hug him again, or mess around with him, or roll my eyes at how lame he could be. And, God help me," the brief laughter that left me hurt coming out, "he was *lame*."

Ella stood there, still and listening to the tragic tale.

My grip softened on her. “Now, I’m stuck in a mental prison knowing that his last thoughts of me were in anger.” The bridge of my nose tingled and I blinked back tears. “So, don’t, sweet girl.” I left her go and reached out to stroke her hair. “Don’t say things you might never be able to take back. Because the way I live, knowing he was mad at me when he was k...” My lips trembled. I swallowed hard and finished up on a whisper, “It’s torture.”

Ella looked at me and I couldn’t take my eyes off her. We shared a moment. We were just two people who had lost a parent through tragic circumstances. Two people with a shared experience.

A line cast out from my heart and hooked onto hers.

There was a change in the air around us and I think, right then, we each understood each other a little better.

I stepped out of the way and placed a gentle hand to her shoulder. Chaotic tension swarmed both father and daughter, and when Ella made her decision and took off running at her dad, his tall frame was already up and out of his chair. She threw herself at him and his strong arms caught her, just as a father should. Ella’s thin arms curled around his neck and Tor was gentle with her, pressing his lips to her forehead, closing his eyes and rocking her back and forth.

My hand lifted and came to rest over my heart. Relief had me deflating.

All may not have been right in the world, but in this world, in our small bubble, we were working to make tomorrow better than yesterday.

Afterwards, in bed, Tor held me in very much the same way. He couldn’t have possibly known about what happened the day my father died, but nevertheless, he atoned in the only way he knew how. With soft caresses and even softer words whispered at the shell of my ear. And when his lips touched my own in an honest and frank apology, my own parted and pressed into him in acceptance.



TOR WATCHED ME CLOSELY. He read my face easily and quickly surmised, “You’re sitting on something.”

I was feeling good. Things had been better than... well... ever, in my case. Tor and I had no secrets. Everything was out in the open. We were learning to communicate better, but he was right. I was sitting on something. Something big.

“I am not.” He stared me down across the table in the crowded French restaurant and I rolled my eyes lightly then quietly amended, “It’s nothing.”

God, he looked great tonight. He’d put away his suits and dressed in smart casual for our date night. When he walked down the stairs in gunmetal grey tailored trousers that looked like they’d been painted onto his strong legs, a dove-colored cashmere sweater that hugged his muscled chest and a pair of masculine black boots while fiddling with his watch, my core clenched damn near painfully and I almost choked on my tongue.

My own high-waisted linen pants, plain white blouse and black pumps combo seemed drab in comparison, but when he glanced at me and did a double take, we stood a few feet apart and his heated gaze swept my body appreciatively. And my insides turned to goop.

I couldn’t understand how he had the ability to make me feel so beautiful without a single word spoken.

It was magic.

“Tell me,” Tor commanded as he reached into the ice bucket and topped up my champagne glass.

“Okay,” I sighed in mock annoyance, but I really did want to share. “I picked up Ella from practice. I got there a little early because, as you know, I’m terrified of her.” Tor chuckled softly and I smiled. “It was a minute to and I got out of the car, waiting for her. And when the girls got out, they came out chatting. Ella spotted me and said, ‘That’s me.’” My stomach

clenched lightly as I went on, “And one of her friends said, ‘Who’s that?’” I cleared my throat and tried to speak past the thickness of it. “Ella was walking towards me and she called back, ‘That’s my stepmom.’”

Shit. I was about a second out from blubbering.

Across the table, Tor’s face softened.

I laughed then sniffled, then my shoulders bounced in a tiny self-conscious shrug. “That’s all.”

When he smiled at me in the way I always wished he would – warmly, lovingly – my own wobbled and I bit my bottom lip to stop it.

He reached across the table and lifted my glass. I took it from him and he lifted his own, holding it out to me. I felt a little silly as he forced us to celebrate, our glasses touched and gentle clink felt like a victory. I wondered why it was important, but the answer was sitting right there in front of me.

My wins were also his.

Our gazes locked as we sipped on high-end champagne.

And, sure, we had a long way to go, but we had to acknowledge how far we’d come.



WHENEVER I WENT through a relatively easy stage of my life, I could always count on something to come and mess it up. So, while basking in our temporary bliss, the hairs that stood on the back of my neck never truly calmed. And as predicted, I was soon reminded of why.

I stood at the top of the stairs when I heard them.

Giada was talking low to her brother and I hadn’t meant to eavesdrop, but when I heard what my sister-in-law said, my chest immediately grew tight. “You heard Roam. He wasn’t messing around. She is overstepping *again*,” she emphasized the word, “and you know better than I do that if she does that with Roam, he’s going to fire a warning shot right into her

head. Tor, you have to do something. She's going to get herself killed."

My eyes widened as I froze in my tracks.

Who?

"How do you even know about this?" Tor huffed out, aggravated.

Giada kept quiet a moment before she merely said, "Sammy."

"He should not have told you that," was my husband's peeved reply.

"Well, I'm glad he did," The usually sweet Giada snapped. "What are you going to do about it, Ettore?" Oh damn. She was using his real name. Even I knew that was bad. "What she's doing is suicide."

Tor, however, brushed off Giada's concern with a cool, "How is that my problem?"

"You have to tell her."

Tor scoffed. "Actually, I don't."

Giada took a deep breath before she started anew, "She's still her sister. There's still a way out of this. Vittoria needs to know."

And it clicked.

Oh.

And my entire body slumped in awareness.

Oh.

Tor lowered his voice as he went off on a tangent. "No, G. She's happy. Do you get that? She's *finally* happy. And between my fuck up and *hers*, I am not letting anything touch my wife ever again. This is a hassle she does not need." Sometime during his spiel, my heart melted into a puddle and my expression gentled. I loved Ettore Scala. I really, truly did. "I will take care of it. She doesn't need to know."

But that wasn't his decision to make. And as I began down the stairs, they both glanced up as I asked, "What don't I need to know?"

Giada's face snapped to her brothers, but Tor kept thin-lipped, his closed off expression on me.

Already feeling the exhaustion settle in, I asked jadedly, "What did she do now?"

CHAPTER 22

THE DISCIPLES

*V*ittoria

“BREATHE, BABY.”

The quiet words reached me and, in a delayed movement, I turned to my husband and took in a stuttering breath. He reached out and gently cupped my cheek. I leant into it as he said, “I stand by what I said. I don’t want you to do this.” When my lids opened again, he looked mildly haggard as he confessed, “I don’t want you in his sights.”

My neck twisted and I glanced out to the unassuming warehouse. Our limo was idling, waiting for an exit I wasn’t sure was even going to happen. I didn’t want to be here either.

I wasn’t very good with confrontation and you didn’t get more confronting than this.

My lips parted with my slow exhale. I turned to my husband, took his hand from my cheek and held it tightly. “I have to.”

Tor did not look happy. His jaw remained tight when he uttered, “I think your soft heart needs reminding that she would not do the same for you. I don’t need to tell you that she left you for dead and didn’t even flinch. And now, this shit?” He paused a moment. “Roam is not a man to be trifled with. The second you show an ounce of emotion, he will pounce on you like a lion hunting a gazelle, and then the rest of his pack

will lunge for you too. They will eat at you until all that is left is a blood stain on the floor and then they'll mop it up and it will be like you never existed." I swallowed hard. Well, that didn't sound great. "I have seen good people ruined all for gaining his attention. I need you to remain cool, calm and collected. Can you do that for me, baby?"

Oh God. My stomach hurt.

I don't know. Could I?

I thought about my life prior to this moment. About my sister and her manipulations, about the times I should have spoken up when I remained soundless. About how she took my silence as weakness, never looking deeper, not knowing how taxing it was.

I hadn't been silent by choice. I was silenced. There was a difference.

An ember of courage lit in my middle. Yes, it was small, but its glow had the tightness in my chest easing.

I was stronger than she ever gave me credit for. "I can do that."

"Listen," he shuffled closer, "You're not alone. I'm here, right beside you. The second I feel the situation getting out of control, I will step in and take the heat. Nothing is going to touch you. Not while I'm here. Do you understand?" I wanted to say yes, but I had been let down by the people closest to me and my hesitation showed. "Do you hear me?" He took my face between his hands and forced me to look at him. His eyes blazed as he gave me a light shake for emphasis. "*Nothing.*"

And that reluctance?

It fell away.

Of course, I believed him. It was impossible not to when he spoke with such conviction.

I nodded and swallowed hard. My husband watched me closely for a long moment and then he lifted a knuckle and knocked on the limo window. The door opened and I unconsciously took the hand offered to me. It guided me out

and when I lifted my head to see his surly face peering down at me, my light gasp was barely heard and I acted on instinct.

Marco grunted when my body collided with his. I wrapped my arms around his middle and his light chuckle sounded in my ear as he awkwardly patted me with one arm, keeping the other by his side. “Don’t tell me you’re actually happy to see me?”

When Tor lightly touched my back, I released Marco and backed into my husband’s tall frame, smiling at the curt brute. Tor’s arm slipped around my waist and his thumb lightly stroked my hip. “Well, I don’t know. You’re not going to chase me out of the crawl space again, are you?”

“Not today,” he said evenly, but his eyes were filled with mirth.

“Then, sure.”

And the asshole put both his hands to his chest, made a show of fluttering his lashes.

But as we both chuckled through our reunion, Tor wasn’t feeling much like laughing. “Focus.” The pressure was getting to him. He’d been crabby all morning. Marco, spotting the strain, instantly sobered when Tor asked, “Who’s in there?”

“Arthur, Cat and Anoushka. Striker’s ride just pulled in.” Marco checked his watch. “Roam and his boys will be here in a few and Vincenza often likes to make of a show of running late.”

I sighed lightly. Of course, she did.

Sometimes I wondered whether we were truly cut from the same cloth. Our appearance said we were, but our personalities were so different that we may as well have been from Venus and Mars.

“Better to get in before he arrives.” Tor squeezed my hip and when he began to walk, he took me with him. Marco stayed behind, waiting by the limo.

The second we breached the entrance, I heard a man speak in a British accent, “Noush, if your foot touches mine again, I

won't even bother with a tool. I'll chew the fucking thing off." He then growled, "Keep away from me."

When my gaze landed on the man, I blinked because of all the people I thought I would see sitting behind the chairs of the high table, it wasn't that of a tall, lithe silver fox with freshly trimmed hair and a neatly manicured beard. He looked dapper in a bespoke suit with a chain running from the center button of his navy vest to the inside of one pocket.

And, holy shit, he was *gorgeous*.

I guessed the young woman he was speaking to – Noush, he called her – was the one who responded. I tried to hide the way my brows rose when I looked at her because she didn't look like a mob boss. She looked like the type of woman to start shit with you for looking at her boyfriend.

Her long, bleached-fried blonde hair bordered on yellow with dark roots peeking through her regrowth. Noush sat at the table with her feet resting up on the edge of it. She wore foundation a shade too light for her olive complexion, her eyes were lined heavily with kohl and her lashes were clumped with mascara. Her too-long neon orange acrylic nails tapped on the table top. On top of that, she looked to be wearing uber-casual sportswear and an attitude that said she didn't give a fuck. All while sucking on a lollipop.

She pulled the stick out of her mouth long enough to turn to the man beside her and say, "I'd give anything for you to chew on me, daddy." She stood fast and lowered one hand over her crotch and gave it a slow stroke. "Here. Let me show you where you can start."

The other woman in the room, however, was the very picture of elegance. Well-dressed, she looked to be in her sixties, with dark hair pulled back into a slick chignon. She wore pressed silk and sat tall, cringing at the words of the younger woman and when she spoke, I heard the slightest Hispanic accent hiding in her voice. "Anoushka, you are the vilest sort of trash and I loathe that you and I are forced to share this space four times year."

Anoushka sat back down. “Aw, Catalina. That silver tongue of yours is so precious,” her gaze darkened, “maybe I’ll cut it out and keep it in a box by my bed. I could use it when I’m feeling especially lonely.”

Wow. I couldn’t tell if these were threats or foreplay.

That was when Tor cleared his throat. The focus shifted and all eyes settled on us.

Arthur wasted no time looking me up and down, and a devilish grin stretched at his mouth. “Well, well. Lookie here. You’ve been holding out on us, Scala.”

Anoushka also looked me up and down, but in a very different way. “Rumor was you killed her.” She mimed a rope being pulled tightly around her neck and made a choking sound.

Catalina clicked her tongue at the two of them then stood, walking towards us. She reached out and took my hands without asking then turned to Tor and said, “I knew he wouldn’t. He couldn’t. Look at her.” She lifted one hand under my chin and held my face up, inspecting it. “My dear, you are lovely. Your father always talked of you. His softly-spoken little angel. Such a shame, you know.” She let me go quickly and lifted her nose when she said, “That sister of yours...” Cat wore an expression I understood all too well.

Sheer revulsion.

I hadn’t yet been able to get a single word out. Somewhere behind us, footsteps sounded and then another man wearing jeans, gleaming white sneakers and a loose white tee walked right by Tor. My husband greeted the man with a casual, “Striker.”

Striker responded by lifting his hand, making the sign of the devil, and walking over to his seat, falling into it heavily with a sigh.

Alright then.

Tor led me to the table. There was only one seat in front of us but there was no battle for the chair. Without a single thought, he helped me sit in the *Malocchio* seat then took his

place behind me, resting his hands on the back of my chair in a claim of ownership.

“So,” The Brit I had concluded was Arthur of The Overcoat Army shot me a naughty look and uttered an oh-so-charmingly, “Is it true, pet?” One brow rose. “Did you really shoot the poor bastard? In a church, on your wedding day too?” I opened my mouth to speak, but he cut me off with, “I only ask because you don’t look capable of hurting a bloody fly.” Again, I tried to respond, but he was too quick for me. “The gun in the bouquet bit...” He made an intrepid sound and looked at me with newfound admiration. “Well played, darling. They’ll be talking about that one for years to come.”

Onus began to swarm in my lower belly.

I didn’t want them to talk about me for years to come. I wanted to live a quiet life with my loving husband and sweet stepchildren. I was tired of this game. So weary of the bloodshed.

All I wanted was peace.

Thoroughly overwhelmed, I didn’t know what to say when Anoushka slurped her lollipop and stared me down. When I stared right back at her, she looked me over and said, “You look like you’ve got toxic pussy.” Um, what? “One lick and he’s tripping balls.” The lollipop stick stuck out of the side of her mouth. “Am I right, Tor?”

Tor’s blunt response was, “Shut the fuck up or I’ll come over there and staple your fucking mouth closed, Noush.”

Hers was a wicked, “I knew it.”

Hell. Was it always like this? No wonder Tor was so tired after dealing with these people.

Cat chimed in, then Arthur did too, and the four of them began to speak over the top of each other until the echo of clicking heels sounded and when I turned towards it, I saw her. My sister entered the space wearing a sly smile. She glanced around the table and only when she saw me, did she falter.

My heart squeezed. She looked every bit the part in her feminine tailored suit, but her features looked worn and no

amount of concealer could hide the dark circles under her eyes.

The others quieted down. Arthur seemed to noticed the pause in Vincenza's step. He grinned, rocking back in his seat. "Family reunion, Vero?"

Vincenza did not take her eyes off of me as she approached. Her cool manner matched that of her voice. "Looks like it." When she sat in the chair my freedom rewarded her, she looked me right in the eye and said, "Hello, Vicky. You look well."

I felt a lot right then and it was difficult to put a cap on it, but I felt Tor's hand on my shoulder and the tumbling in my gut slowed, then stopped. My equally unruffled, "Enza. So do you," must have surprised her because her brows rose and when she smiled, it was almost mocking.

And then, silence. We were caught in a stare off when more footsteps approached in the multiples. When Tor squeezed my shoulder, I blinked, then focused on the new arrivals. And seriously wished I hadn't.

My breath caught and hairs on my arms stood. Because the five men who settled in haphazardly, taking up space at the head of the table?

They were terrifying.

The Disciples, as they called themselves, were seated now. Each set of eyes I met, met my own right back.

Just as Ettore had feared... they noticed me.

All of them tall and muscular yet so different in appearance and manner.

A man with long white hair braided down his back, high cheekbones and cold, clear blue eyes stared unblinking at me. His beard was also braided in one straight line, meeting his chest. He wore a strange, leather patchwork vest. One might have said he looked creepy, but I saw him as ethereal. He looked like he belonged in the mountains, in the snow, and I couldn't explain why other than he was arctic himself.

Two of the men sat side-by-side and it took me a moment to realize they wore the same face on different bodies. They were identical although each of the twins had nose rings telling them apart. One of them had a stud in each nostril with a small chain joining them, while the other had a septum piercing. Two-studs appeared curious of me. Septum Dan, however, looked at me as like I was a barking dog in the middle of the night and he would have liked nothing more than to keep me quiet, with a bullet if necessary.

After a moment of quiet, the scariest looking man, with longish brown hair falling over his eyes and a wide, jagged smile etched onto his face with ink, leant forward and spoke quietly into the ear of the dark-haired, obsidian eyed man who sat centered and I knew immediately that the man he whispered to was Roam.

I couldn't hear what he said but he made it fairly obvious the statement was about me, seeing as he kept his eyeliner smudged eyes on me, unblinking. He was lean but cut, his tattooed muscular body was on full display as all he wore was tailored slacks, a pair of black suspenders sans shirt, an odd looking black beaded rosary hanging in the center of his broad chest that held a silver pentagram as well as an upside cross, and black heavy silver-buckled boots.

On anyone else, it would have looked ridiculous. On this man though?

I could have easily mistaken him for an alt model.

Each of these men screamed danger, but a single lazy glance from the ominous man sitting front and center, surrounded by misfits, had my heart jumping into my throat and blood rushing in my ears. A small silver hoop glittered in his ear. He blinked at me a second, his heavy brows marred and then he ran a hand down his neatly trimmed beard, slow and calculated. When he spoke, his voice was deep and he uttered an offhanded, "Ettore, please explain to me why we have another Vero at the table when I barely tolerate the one." He did not hide his disdain for my sister when his hooded gaze swept over her.

Her own responded in kind.

Meanwhile, I sat frozen to the spot, my heart thumping in my chest so hard I was sure they could all see it.

Tor had told me a little about the man. He even said he considered Roam a friend, or as much of a friend as a man like Roam could abide. The Disciples were relatively new blood. All of them had been a part of the notorious firm, The Forty Nine, ruled by a man named Artem Kozak. He gave the boys free reign over the city and they very nearly destroyed it.

Artem gained the upper hand by having his boys recruit without standards and he gained notoriety by creating an army of thieves. Nobody wanted a war with Artem because nobody had the manpower to fight back. So, when Artem began to buy up territory all over New York, all the others could do was sit back and watch his empire grow.

He was an exceptional businessman and his sudden death rocked the underworld. Tor told me a story he'd heard about the boys revering their mentor so much that on the first anniversary of his death, they dug him up and brought him home. Of course, that was so farfetched and bizarre that I simply refused to believe anyone would do such a thing. Just thinking about it gave me the creeps.

Now, Artem's boys rebranded as The Disciples. They had taken the place he left for them and although it would seem that Roam was head of the table, my eyes were drawn to the chair beside him.

Once upon a time, there was a king, but now the unclaimed throne sat empty.

When I asked why, Tor simply explained that once a year each seat gets a vote and, like those who want power, they each vote for themselves. Nobody wanted one to have power over the many, especially not if that person was Roam.

My husband relayed rumors about the men sitting at the head of the table. That people said they were crazy. That they'd all met in an institution. And when I chuckled at the

notion, I quickly sobered because Tor wasn't laughing with me.

Now, as I glanced at them all together, I wasn't laughing anymore either.

"New business," was all my husband responded with to the man they called The Demon King.

Roam considered that and when he leant back in his chair, it creaked. He was a large man. The tallest I'd ever seen. "Fine." He appeared unimpressed when he checked his wristwatch. "This bullshit costs me half my day and a single minute of my time is worth more than all of you combined. So, get a fucking move on."

I couldn't stop looking at him. It was dumb and dangerous, but I simply couldn't. There was something about him that was magnetic and although new business was being discussed, I couldn't hear much of it. Even less when Roam seemed to feel my eyes on him and met them with a probing gaze of his own. I felt my neck heat and when his slow smile revealed sharply pointed canines, my gut clenched and a shiver stole down my spine.

The man definitely looked like his bite was worse than his bark.

I swallowed hard and glanced away and as each seat went around the table airing their grievances with one another's men or the overstepping of turf, it wasn't long before Roam called on us. "Tor, your new business had better not run long."

"It won't," he assured the man, and what Tor said next was for my ears only. "Just as we practiced. You can do this. Cool, calm, collected."

When I stood and cleared my throat, there were equal looks of surprise and confusion as I addressed the table. "A lot of you knew my father. I know some of you had close, personal relationships with him and I think for the most part, he was a good man. The seat he fell into," I motioned to where my sister now sat, "fit him perfectly. He was loyal and happy, and he never demanded more than his share of things."

Vincenza glared at me then, knowing it was a stab and it most definitely met its mark. “There has been a great amount of unpleasantness surrounding the Vero name and with good cause. Some would say the change in management has been,” I hesitated to say it out loud, “a let down.” Vincenza’s jaw steeled, but I went on. “My sister doesn’t always go with the grain, but to be fair to her, I don’t think anyone could properly fill the shoes my father left behind. I know the mockery that is being made of our name and I have a request if council would so grant it.”

I took a moment.

Oh, Lord. This is not going to go down well.

They listened intently. I stood tall, straightened my spine and said it. “That seat is as much mine as it is hers and,” I glanced at my sister and hoped she could see the apology looming in my eye, “I wish to claim it.”

“Excuse the fuck out of me?” was Vincenza’s furious response as she shot up out of her seat.

“Sit the fuck down,” uttered Roam with little to no heat at all, and it took her a second but my sister acquiesced, and if that didn’t speak of the power he held at this table, nothing did.

Light chatter began as Roam drummed his nails on the edge of the table. He pondered a moment and when he spoke, the chatter stopped and he was heard. “I will have you know the reinstatement of the Vero seat is not something I support of and I, for one, did not give an aye.” Uh oh. Not a good start. “But you have me curious. Vincenza is the eldest and entitled to the seat. Why should we grant it to you over her?”

Take a breath. Keep calm. Speak slowly and clearly.

I lifted my chin and did my best to hide my emotions when I stated steadily, “I was sold for that seat. Without me as payment, it never would have been brought to council nor reinstated. I don’t think it’s an unreasonable request to wish to claim what I paid for.”

Murmurs of agreement sounded and Enza glanced around, looking a little shook. “Vicky, no,” Vincenza uttered. “You can’t do this.”

No?

Watch me.

Roam looked down his nose at me for a long moment and then, he chuckled quietly. “What the fuck? My inquisitive nature has been peaked and I want to see how this pans out. We’ll take it to vote. Arthur?”

The Brit said, “I know she’s a horrid pain in the ass, but she is entitled. It’s a nay from me.”

Catalina didn’t hesitate. “If we have to have a Vero seat, I’d prefer it to be a Vero that doesn’t make me want to gouge an eye out. Aye.”

Striker spared me the quickest glimpse before peering back down at his phone. “Sure. Why not?”

Anoushka glanced at Vincenza with a tiny smile. “You sold your blood – your *sister* – off to buy a seat at the table?” She laughed then, “Stone cold, bitch.” I was almost sure she was going to say nay when she surprised me with an, “Aye.” And when she glanced over at Enza again, there was no humor left in her face. “Even I know some things are off limits. Let’s see you try and win it back with nothing to your name.”

Vincenza’s jaw went stiff and she avoided looking into the other woman’s eyes.

Roam then counted himself and I wasn’t surprised by his unfeeling, “Nay.”

And finally, from behind me, my husband was still a member of the table. “Aye.”

Vincenza looked at me then and I heard the pain in her voice when she muttered, “What have you done?”

Roam didn’t look too happy himself. He turned to the man next to him with the wide sharp-toothed grin tattooed onto his face. The man shrugged lightly and Roam turned back to the table. “The ayes have it.”

Oh my God. We did it. The seat was mine.

“You ungrateful fucking dog,” was the startling cry that came from Vincenza. She stood slowly, her face was red and she was huffing and puffing as if there wasn’t enough air in the world to fill her lungs. “How could you do this to me?”

No matter what she thought, it wasn’t easy.

I felt her pain, felt her fury and the hate she aimed at me, and yet, I loved her enough to save her. “I would like to ask...”

Roam sighed then, “Let me guess. You want more territory?”

“No,” was my reply.

“A loan, perhaps, to help kickstart your campaign?”

“No.”

Roam smiled but I could see he was becoming impatient. This is what Tor was most worried about. Two active seats at this table made us practically invincible. It also made us a walking target. Roam knew this and was clearly not thrilled about it. “Then what is it you want, little one?”

I took a deep breath. “I want to retire the Vero seat, permanently.”

The even look on his face told me this was not what he expected to hear and while my sister squawked, “*What?*” Roam simply lifted his hand in a light wave, demanding silence, and uttered a vaguely interested, “Alright. I’m listening.”

“Do I have to give a justification?” was my gentle response.

“No.” Roam’s eyes narrowed on me. “You don’t.”

“Let’s be honest,” I told the table. “One less seat at this table means a bigger slice of the pie for the rest of you. Let me save some of your precious time. We don’t need to take it to vote. Dissolve the seat.”

It sounded too easy and Roam wasn't buying it. "And what of your territory." He turned to Tor. "No doubt you want it to go to your husband."

But I shook my head. "You can decide amongst yourselves who gets it. Split it, leave it stark, I don't care, but I don't want it."

Behind me, Tor stroked my hair and I heard his unspoken words. *'I'm so proud of you.'*

Vincenza, however, was hyperventilating. "You can't do this." Her fist slammed onto the table as she boomed, "*You can't do this!*"

Roam looked at me a long moment, his brows furrowed and then he tilted his head and tried looking at me from a different angle. "Actually, we can." He snuffled a laugh through his nose and spoke directly to me, "You are a funny girl, Vittoria Vero."

"Scala," I corrected. My sisters' eyes flashed when I told the table, "I'm a Scala."

My husband's light exhale of satisfaction warmed me greatly, but my blood ran cold when Roam's grin bordered maniacal. "And to think I was going to kill you."

CHAPTER 23

DONE

Vittoria

THE MEETING ENDED ALMOST IMMEDIATELY AFTER and, as expected, my sister stumbled out after us.

“Why?” came her desperate cry and I stopped to face her. The hatred in her eyes burned so bright it resembled a flickering flame. “It was one thing, the *only* thing I had. I have lost everything else. Why did you take this from me?” Her voice went hoarse. “*Why?*”

Good God. Why did she think that was? Everything Vincenza had lost had been on her and, now, knowing all the details, I had long lost sympathy for her. “I did it for you.” I threw a thumb back to the warehouse. “Did you think that they would just welcome you back?” A look of disbelief crossed my features. “You broke the rules. You screwed up. They were just waiting for an opportunity to kill you, Enza.”

“Oh, please,” she snarled. “And who happened to tell you that?” She glared at Tor. “Your loving husband?”

Tor stepped forward, menacingly. “Watch your fucking mouth, Vincenza.” I took hold of the back of his jacket and he stopped in his tracks. His jaw went tight and what he said next proved how good he was to me. “I’ve got a grudge that demands sating. The pleasure of killing you should be mine,

but it would hurt my wife greatly and so, regrettably,” his lip curled in loathing, “you continue to breathe.”

Vincenza didn't even flinch. She was too wired. Her body shook with raw fury and what she said next was typical of her when she was mad. “You are so easy to manipulate. You always have been. If you got off of his cock long enough to actually see straight, you'd know he was using you.”

I didn't bother masking my scoff. “Like you used me.”

She uttered through gritted teeth, “That was different.”

How had I ever thought this person wanted what was best for me? “It always is when it comes to you, isn't it? Because Vincenza's needs outweigh anything and everything else. You are so power hungry that you would do anything to get it. And that's precisely why you shouldn't have it.” She looked frantic and, for a moment, I felt for her. My voice gentled. “It's done, and I stand by my decision. The seat is retired. I suggest you move on.”

“Like you have?” She cried shakily. “You little bitch.”

Tor moved forward, but my firm grip on him didn't waver. He allowed me to stop him. *Allowed* was definitely the right word because, let's be honest. If he really wanted to lunge for her, he could have. My skin crawled anxiously as he growled out, “What your fucking mouth, Enza. I'm not gonna tell you again.”

But she didn't hear his threat. Her face crumbled when she accused, “You've already forgotten him, and so easily.”

My heart cracked, then shattered, and fell to a pile at my feet.

How dare she?

“Jesus, Vincenza. You are so tied up in your own bullshit that you've forgotten that Papa would have been the first to say there are no bad people, only bad choices. And... and I know why you're so determined to avenge his death.”

My sister's expression sobered then. “What are you talking about?”

A sadness I hadn't felt since the day my father died came rushing back. "I know why you took it so hard. I know why you need someone else to pay for losing him." I spoke quietly on an exhale. "Because deep down, you know who the real villain is here and you can't stand looking at her when you glance in the mirror." I had thought the words for a while now, but it hurt to say them out loud. "Your volatile temper cost us our father."

I knew I was right on the money when Enza's expression fell, she closed her eyes and dissolved into body-wracking sobs. She shook her head and whispered, "It wasn't my fault."

Only, it was and nothing would ever bring him back, and so, I chose to put my angry internal monologue aside and instead say, "It's over. No more bloodshed. No more conflicts. No more confrontations."

She glanced at me with regret in her eyes. I looked at her very much the same. The three of us stood there a long, tense moment and I realized I was done here. Done with her. Done with this bullshit. Just... done.

I reached out for Tor and he knew what I needed. He grasped my fingers gently and, with a light tug, began to lead us away.

It felt like the end of a chapter. The closing of a book.

But Vincenza's footsteps shadowed close behind. "I won't stop."

By my side, I heard my husband's exasperated, "Fuck me, this bitch doesn't quit."

And when I twisted back to look at her, her tearstained cheeks glistened with wetness and she pasted on a caustic smirk, although it wobbled. "What? You think it ends just because you said so?" She didn't hide her disdain. "You're so weak. So pathetic. I should have known you'd fall for the first man who put his cock in you." My heart twinged at the insult, true as it was. "I have never been more embarrassed of you than I am now. You pitiful wretch, mark my words. I will

never stop. He made us orphans and I won't sleep until his children are as alone in this world as we were!"

The threat to his children had a manic Tor's body going rigid. His eyes flashed and I knew his patience had understandably reached its limit. Right then, I would have let him have her.

But I was closer.

My own eyes flashed and when my insides began to bubble with raw fury, I did something I had never before done in my life. I leapt forward and when I snatched at her, she winced as my nails dug into the flesh of her forearm, and I had never before heard my voice the way it sounded then. "The fuck you will." Vincenza blinked at me, stunned by my forceful stance. I stepped forward, forcing her back. "Don't mess with me, Vincenza. That is my husband and those beautiful children may never be my kids, but so help me God, I will protect them as a mother." And then I remembered something Tor had said. "In this family, we bleed together." With a sharp shove, I released her and she stumbled back, holding her arm to her chest, peering at me as if she was seeing me for the very first time. Her silence gave me the opportunity to say, "I should have said this to you a long time ago so listen well as I finally have the courage to say it now. You have pushed me for the last time. We're done, Enza. Stay the fuck away from my family."

She always had to have the last word. "Or what?"

Self-preservation was clearly not in my sister's vocabulary. Tired of all the fighting, I took in a deep breath and closed my eyes, wearily. My husband snaked his arm around my middle, snapping me out of my stupor. I looked up at him. He glanced down at me. And together, we walked away from Vincenza once and for all.

I did not miss the affronted look on her face at being completely disregarded.

My footsteps didn't slow as I called back a blunt, "Or I'll kill you myself."

And I meant it, too.

Tor gently touched my lower back and held my hand as he helped me into the limo. My handsome husband sat beside me, watching me closely, holding my hand and running his thumb lightly across my knuckles as I came to terms with what had just happened.

There was no going back. I no longer had roots that lead me home.

To say that it hurt that I no longer had a family would have been an understatement, but it hurt far less than I expected it to. My eyes found the thick masculine thumb stroking my hand lovingly, and the realization hit.

Everything I needed was right here.

My free hand came to rest on my fluttering stomach.

This baby would not know their aunt or great-uncle, or their grandfather whom I loved so very much. And yes, I was made to feel alone in this world, but this child didn't have to be.

I glanced up at Tor's face to find him watching me. His apprehensive gaze had me smiling softly in reassurance. "I'm okay."

He released my hand before sliding his arm around me and pulling me close. I fell into his chest and listened to every steady beat of his heart as he pressed his lips to my brow. "I don't know how," he muttered softly. For a man who could glare away the shining sun, at times, his openness stunned me. "I wouldn't be."

God. My heart bathed in the glow of his adoration and I didn't think I could possibly love him more than I did right at this moment.

Ettore's ability to read me and my vulnerability was second to none.

I hadn't yet told him about our little sprouting peach pit, but I would, soon. After feeling suffocated for so long, I only

wanted a moment to breathe. And with Tor, every second was a cooling breath of fresh air.

Yes, he was a dangerous man, but I saw it now. He was no danger to me.

Whether it was his desperate need to touch me when close, or the way he couldn't stop himself from holding my chin up and kissing me breathless, or maybe it was the way he wrapped his body around mine as we lay in bed, his legs tangling with my own... He wasn't much for talking, but his actions spoke loudly. Everything he did let me know I wasn't alone anymore.

I remember feeling raw, but part of growing up was understanding. I'd stopped waiting for an 'I love you' when I realized he'd been saying it all along, just not in the ways I was used to hearing it.

Desperate for comfort, I turned my face into him, pressing light kisses along his stubbly throat. He stretched his neck out, giving my mouth better access and it didn't take long before he dipped his head and captured my lips with his own. The taste of mint lingered on his tongue and the smell of his cologne had my hands reaching out and tangling in the front of his shirt. Soon, our kisses turned passionate and greedy. I barely heard the light hum of the partition window lifting as I began pulling at his clothing, and Tor didn't bother undressing fully. He pulled his throbbing cock out of his open fly, pulled my panties to the side and lifted me to sit on him.

Our eyes met and my fingers dug into his shoulders as my body stretched to accommodate him, and Tor caressed my hips as I lifted my hips then sunk back down, riding him slowly, taking my time to make us both feel good.

He groaned and I watched his head fall back as I clenched around him.

I was devoted in my religion.

He was my church. My place of worship. And I prayed to him like a God.

Sure. This wasn't where I thought I would end up, but the fates had decided I was exactly where I needed to be.

And as I gripped at his collar, my body shook and I moaned through my release, Tor grasped my waist and pounded up into me until he found his. My body slumped forward, our chests heaved together and the connection we had bordered on transcendent as our pounding hearts beat as one.

Our beginnings were rough and strained and violent, but to image life without him now was sheer anguish.

We were meant to be.

Luckily, destiny always found a way.



I COULDN'T WIPE the stupid smile off of my face. I'd never taken Tor for a cuddler, but here we were. Cuddling.

Why I was nervous about telling Ettore he was going to be a father again was anyone's guess. I suppose a life of being put last still had a lasting effect on me. But part of me knew I needn't worry.

When he stepped out of the bathroom, wearing nothing but a towel, sprinkled with water droplets left over from his shower. I sat cross-legged in the center of the bed. My gaze lowered to where his waist met the towel and my core clenched knowing what was underneath. The light smatter of hair that led downwards had me wanting to follow it with a steady finger. His back muscles flexed as he ran a hand through his damp hair and I bit my lip because the unconscious action was so unassumingly hot.

He really was stunning and I quietly gloated knowing nobody got to see him like this.

Nobody but me.

I waited patiently for his attention and when his eyes met mine through the mirror, I smiled. "Hi."

His lip twitched then he returned, “Hi.” After a moment, he caught me watching him and his eyes narrowed. “What are you up to?”

God. How did he always know?

Was I so obvious?

Nerves had me jumping right into it. “I was thinking. The boys are getting older and eventually, they’ll need rooms of their own. So, what do you think about moving them from the room next to ours to the two down the end of the hall? They’d be right across from each other so they wouldn’t feel too separated. We could even get them walkie-talkies until they felt comfortable sleeping alone.”

He turned to face me and his mouth pulled down in thought. “Sure, eventually, but they like sharing a room. We don’t need to rush.”

Um, actually...

I made a face. “And what if we did?”

“Need to rush?” he asked, clearly confused.

This is it. Don’t overthink it. Just take the dive.

My shoulders jumped lightly and my heart began to race when the words fell out of my mouth, “Well, where else are we going to put the nursery?”

Tor’s body stilled. From under me, I held up the white stick with shaking fingers, and for a second, he just stared at it. He stared at it a long moment before he looked down at me and when his unreadable eyes met mine, I swallowed hard. He gave no indication of how he felt about this news. When he closed his eyes and lowered his head with a long sigh, my face fell and my heart sank deep into the pit of my stomach.

Uh oh.

He was unhappy.

My heart stopped dead.

Well, I didn’t see that coming.

A moment passed, then two, and just when I thought to open my mouth to say God knows what, out of his mouth came a quiet, “Finally.”

My head snapped up.

One word, but it had my heart beating again. Mouth dry, I exhaled deeply in relief and held a hand to my chest. A light laugh left me but it faded fast and I found myself scrambling backwards as my gorgeous husband started for me. His hungry eyes had my lips parting and his towel fell away when he put a knee to the edge of the bed. He crawled forward, strong body looming over me, naked as the day he was born, and I lay trapped underneath him, cheeks pink and warm, blinking in surprise.

“How long have you known?” he demanded.

“A couple of days,” I responded.

He glanced down at where my top had ridden up, belly exposed. “Are you sure?”

Why did he sound so tense?

My smile was warm and my nod was light. “Three tests says so.”

His rigid body hovered, his throat bobbed as he swallowed hard, and then, a miracle.

The hard angles of his face gentled, his usually cool eyes warmed, he curled a hand around the back of my neck, gripped my nape and lifted my head as he lowered his own. He kissed me tenderly and I sighed against his lips. Soon, kissing wasn't enough and he undressed me carefully, lowered his solid body over mine and although it was sex, he didn't fuck me. I felt the difference.

He maintained eye contact as he made love to me, refusing to let me look away, begging me to see him, demanding I feel him, ordering me to understand how precious I was to him. And I did. My heart was flooded with it.

Afterwards, Tor wrapped his arms around my nude body and refused to let go, tenderly nuzzling my belly as he lectured

our baby, “And you are going to be good to your mama. None of this heartburn bullshit, okay? No getting her sick in the mornings either. You need to learn this shit early. You don’t bite the hand that feeds you.”

My body shook in silent laughter as I lightly scratched at the short hairs that covered his nape.

He dipped his face into my stomach and pressed his lips to the area just under my bellybutton, kissing us both dotingly.

And just when I thought I couldn’t adore him anymore than I already did, I went and fell all over again, loving him more today than I had yesterday.

CHAPTER 24

AT PEACE

E *ttore*

THERE WAS no hiding how ecstatic I was about our baby and I couldn't wait to tell my family. Vittoria and I both agreed not to make the announcement until twelve weeks as was recommended by the good doctor. And when the time approached, I saw Tori had become riddled with nerves.

“What's wrong?” I stepped in behind her, slipping my hands over her not yet visible bump, pressing my front into her back.

“Nothing,” she clipped out.

I planted my chin on top of her head and caressed her stomach, soothingly. “Liar.”

And when her shoulders slumped, my brows drew down as she started then stopped, then started again. “I'm just worried.”

“About what?”

She scoffed as she cut up small pieces of fruit to put into a bowl. “God, name something, Tor. Telling the kids. Telling your family.” The knife slipped through the apple harder than necessary. “Feeling so damn happy and knowing your brother will find a way to take that happiness and flip it in the way he always does.” The blade hit the chopping board hard when she anxiously uttered, “It won't be long before my sister finds out

and-” The cutting paused when she breathed out a shaky, “And I don’t know what she’ll do.”

Frustration built up inside of me.

Nope. I didn’t like this.

I reached out, took the knife from her and set it down before spinning her around and when she glanced up at me, the way her mouth pulled down was an immediate no for me. I stroked her hip. “Do you trust me?”

She sighed and rolled her eyes, the little shit. “Yes,” she drew out the word.

“Do you love me?”

And although she still looked irritated, her voice gentled. “Yes.”

“Do you trust me to take care of you? To guard you, and protect our children?”

With that, her irritation flew the coop. She wore her soft heart on her sleeve when she looked straight ahead, at my chest, and reached out to lightly poke my stomach. Her voice quieted, “Of course, I do.”

My hands rose then settled on her dainty shoulders. She glanced up at me and I peered down at her. God, I wondered if there would ever be a time I wasn’t physically moved by her beauty. “Then let me take care of it.” She closed her eyes in that way she did when she didn’t want to deal with something, but I wasn’t having it. My hands moved to lightly collar her neck and my thumbs glanced her throat. She reluctantly opened her eyes and I told her, “I need you to do something for me now, okay?” My young wife looked up at me intently, knowing I had never once asked for a favor. Her nod was all I needed. “Stay happy and healthy, and look after our baby. Can you do that for me?”

Her lips straightened, then lifted and her sweet smile was all I ever needed. It kept me warm in the cold. “Okay, honey.”

Fuck me. I loved it when she called me that.

“Good. Now kiss me,” I demanded.

Tori stood on her tiptoes, her arms circled my neck and when she pulled me down so our faces were level, she looked me in the eyes a moment before she leant in and pressed her warm, soft lips to mine. And when my chest expanded with raw, tender emotion, it was almost hard to believe that I'd hated her at some point.

Somewhere along the lines, this woman, young and naïve as she was, became the very air I breathed.

I cupped her cheek and pecked at her pursed lips until she laughed softly into my mouth.

Did she even understand I would do anything for her? Could she ever possibly know what she meant to me?

My heart had been damaged for so long, and Vittoria had slowly mended it with honey sweet lips, light teasing and wide smiles that were so bright they put the sun to shame. Every time she kissed me with a tender heart, whenever she climbed into my lap just to be close to me, when she moaned my name as I fucked her and spent myself in her tight, pink pussy, another piece fell back into place.

I didn't realize how close I was to falling apart until she embraced me and held me together with unconditional love.

She pulled away from my teasing lips long enough to let out a breathy, "I love you." Like I didn't know.

She wore her affection so openly that a blind man could have seen it.

"I know," was the given response. But when I added, "I love you too," I think I must have shocked the shit out of her because she blinked and shook her head as if she hadn't heard me right.

I gave her a moment to process.

"What did you just say?" It came out as a whisper.

I narrowed my eyes on her. "You heard me."

And her face turned soft in a way that made my heart stammer. "Say it again."

Jesus Christ.

For her, I would have pulled the moon from the sky and set it on her nightstand as a night light.

I felt no shame being vulnerable with this woman. Tori wasn't the type to ever use it against me. I felt secure in the knowledge that whatever I gave, I got back times ten.

Why would I hesitate when she had reached into her own chest and pulled out her bleeding heart, just so I could watch it beat for me?

My expression didn't gentle when I spoke. It was too tense an emotion to feel soft. I licked my lips and the movement had her watching my mouth when I said the words a second time. "I love you."

I don't know what I expected but I wouldn't have felt awkward should she have burst into tears of joy.

My little wife blinked and lifted her face to mine. I brought my own down willingly. And a moment before my lips touched hers, she sighed, looked me in the eye, patted my cheek and said, "I know."

And I stilled.

She grinned.

My lip curled.

Her body shook in silent laughter as she shook her head, turned and walked away from me.

I kept my eyes on her gently swaying hips and deliciously full ass, and when I was left alone in the kitchen, my brow furrowed as I scratched at my chin and muttered under my breath, "I thought we were having a moment."

So much for putting it out there.

Seconds later, I heard her call from the top of the stairs, "Are you coming?"

And a slow grin that stretched at my lips. In one fell swoop, I pulled off my tee and made for the bedroom with my chest bared. I took the steps two at a time and found her

kneeling in the center of the bed wearing nothing but her underwear.

Fuck me, she was stunning. All thick hair, pouting lips and curves that killed.

I closed the bedroom door, took a moment to appreciate the view then started for her.

“Not before you do.”



THE HOUR WAS LATE, the house was quiet, beside me, my wife stirred in her sleep.

Her unconscious shuffle towards me had me feeling things a cold man like me had no business feeling.

The scar at my shoulder ached and, as if she had some otherworldly connection to it, she sleepily turned her head and pressed a feather soft kiss to it.

It was a small movement. A barely-there touch. And yet, I found it difficult to breathe.

To think the heart she'd almost destroyed was the very same one she'd brought back to life.

It felt unnatural as it was not something I was built for, but for the first time in years, I found peace with this beautiful creature tucked into the side of my chest.

Something told me that peace would extend to everyday thereafter.

EPILOGUE

ACCEPTANCE.

*V*ittoria

ANA WAS FUSSING.

I bounced her on my hip and tried desperately to get dinner prepped before she went down for her nap. “Come on, honey,” I moaned quietly as she rubbed at her little eyes. “I have to do this. I thought you liked watching me in the kitchen.” And, dramatic as she was, her lips trembled, her eyes watered, and then she threw her head back and wailed, demanding my full attention.

Of course, she got her way and the second I gave it to her, lifting her high and smiling wide, her attitude completely changed. The gummy smile she wore was so damned adorable, I couldn’t help myself from pulling her close and kissing her little chubby cheek a thousand and one times. “Lord help me. You are even more demanding than your father.”

“I seriously doubt that,” Ella muttered as she walked into the kitchen, right up to me and plucked Ana from my arms, smiling down at our chunky chicken. “I’ll put her down if you want.”

Who would have thought Ella would have come to be my savior over the past year?

There was no doubt Ella loved her sister, and Ana loved her right back. Her little legs bounced as Ella rocked her from

side-to-side and it might have been all the post-pregnancy hormones, but I often became overwhelmed watching them together.

I could see it already. Ella would be the sister I desperately craved, but never got.

And although the boys adored their little sister, they were still young and Ana did things that didn't interest them, like barf, cry and poop.

Sometimes, she managed to do all three at the same time.

Some would call her talented, but her brothers would not be those people.

As I watched the two sisters with a soft smile, the back door opened and in he strolled. I fought a sigh and said, "Tor isn't home."

But Daniele just said, "I know," already making a beeline for his target.

When Ella rolled her eyes and held her sister out, Daniele clapped his hands then reached out for his little doll. Ana's mouth rounded in excitement and her tiny hands clenched and released as her favorite person in the entire world took her into his arms. "How's my little angel doing?"

When he smiled down at her, Ana was blinded to everything else and although Daniele and I didn't always get along, that didn't matter to me so long as he treated my baby right.

To this day, I don't know what my husband had said to his brother to get him to stop acting a fool, but when Ettore commanded, it was smart to yield.

"She's gassy," I threw out seeing as Ana couldn't, and I watched in fascination as Daniele's face fell.

He glared down at her plump belly then talked to his niece like the wise guy he was. "You want Zio Danny to take care of it, baby?" I couldn't stop myself from smiling when he poked her protruding stomach gently and mock cautioned, "Listen here, toots." He threw his thumb back. "You get outta there

and leave my Ana Banana alone, you hear?” He lifted her high, got real close and growled against the soft skin of her gut, “Don’t make me come in there.”

My light chuckle got his attention and when he handed Ana back to her sister, he stunned me by approaching the kitchen island, leaning his hip against it and jerking his chin. “How are you doing?”

Even Ella’s head snapped up. Her brows narrowed at her uncle as I hesitated slightly, “I’m... fine.”

He nodded, looking down at my body, and I don’t think he meant for it to sound creepy when he said, “You bounced back okay.”

What on earth was going on here?

Confused, I drawled out, “I guess so,” but it came out sounding like a question.

He appeared a little uncomfortable when he looked down at my chest and asked, “And how’s the... the...” I blinked as he put his hands up in front of his chest and rounded them.

I took a wild guess. “The breastfeeding?”

“Yes.” He slapped a hand down on the counter. “How’s the breastfeeding going?”

Ella’s brows rose so high they damn near hit her hairline, while mine creased. “Alright, I’m just going to ask. What are you doing?” Daniele mouth pulled down when I enquired, “What is this?”

He appeared frustrated and when he reached up to scratch at the back of his neck in self-conscious move, I immediately felt bad. Especially when he shrugged and muttered, “You’re my sister-in-law. And I know Tor’s been busy because of what Roam’s got him doing, so I stopped by to see how you were coping.” He looked mildly uncomfortable when he uttered, “Gotta take care of our own.”

Wow.

That was actually really nice and I stood there, silent, but oddly touched by his concern.

“Oh.” After a moment, I regained my composure and offered gently, “I’m doing okay.”

“You sure? Because I can help out if you need me to.”

The way he said it, both willing and sincere, made my heart warm. My face softened and a small smile revealed itself. “I’m sure, but thank you for the offer.” For the first time since I’d known him, I did something I felt I couldn’t do before now. I reached out and placed my hand on his, giving it a light squeeze. “That’s sweet of you.”

The compliment made him prickly. He pulled away from me, but leisurely enough that it wouldn’t offend. “Yeah, well, in this family...”

I finished the Scala motto for him. “We bleed together.”

He paused then and we exchanged a look. One of mutual understanding. And the tension between us eased some.

Daniele said, “Right.” He tapped a knuckle against the island, straightened then uttered, “Well, you got my number.” He made for the back door. “Use it.”

He definitely put no effort into making it sound touching and yet, I was moved. Deeply. “Alright. I will.”

I waved him off as he made his exit and I stood there a minute wondering why I felt such a shift from the whole painful back and forth. And then it hit me.

Up until this very moment, I wasn’t fully accepted by Tor’s family.

And with that realization, and Daniele’s departure, I felt a tremendous weight lift off of my shoulders and float away.



I OFTEN TALKED TO AMARA. Whenever I cleaned the house and came across something of hers, I took care to be gentle with it. My jealousy over the ghost of Ettore’s first wife had long faded and now, as I lived in her house, enjoying her

family, I felt a sort of kinship with the woman, even having never met her.

When Tor and I would fight, I complained to her, knowing she would have understood my side of things. When the kids were misbehaving, I prayed for her to send me strength. And when I was feeling particularly low, I asked her for guidance.

Between the photos and home movies, I felt as though I knew her, and the older Ella got, the more I saw of Amara in her.

“Do you think she would have liked me?” I asked Tor one night in bed as I ran my fingers over the light smatter of hair at his chest.

Brutally honest, as Tor was, he stroked my spine and shook his head. “Nah, baby. She would have torn you to pieces.”

And maybe I was addled, because the smile I wore stretched wide.

On our first wedding anniversary, Tor and I spent a quiet night at home with the kids and we had already decided there was no need for gifts. So, when Tor sprung one on me, I was a little peeved. But when I opened the inconspicuous brown paper package, I found my annoyance ebb away.

I held the frame to my chest and felt it tighten, along with my throat. “How did you know?”

My loving husband simply responded, “I pay attention.”

I watched him approach the mantle and still as he peered into the face of his first wife and my heart ached. With a heavy exhale, he reached out to remove the wedding photo and put ours up in its place, but I found myself saying, “Leave it up.”

I never planned on replacing her. She was more a part of this family than I and she deserved to be acknowledged. She would always have a place here.

Tor turned to me and his brows creased. “Are you sure?”

“I’m sure,” I replied with zero hesitation.

My smile softened as Tor moved the frame and placed our only wedding photo beside it, blending old with new. And when he moved back to my side, slipping one strong arm around me, together, we peered up at the mantle and I let out a deep satisfying breath.

“Alright,” Tor uttered reluctantly. “Maybe she would have liked you.”

My gaze warmed as I looked up at him. “I love you.”

He peered down at me devotedly. “Til death and beyond.”

The End.