



DUPPLICITY

MATILDA MARTEL

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ONE

NADIA



There's no escaping who we are.

Today is the beginning of my end. Every year on a cool night in September, the daughters of dons and capos gather in the opulent home of Donatella Marchesi, the matriarch of the once powerful Marchesi Famiglia, and submit their lives and future happiness, like lambs to slaughter, to the whims of their fathers.

It's the day I've dreaded. The one I prayed would never come.

But no one answers my prayers.

I wake up to the sound of footsteps pacing outside my door and immediately recognize the owner. My nonna's clunky heels always give her away. She taps her arthritic fist against the high-polished finish cedar door separating me from the rest of the world and waits patiently for me to respond. I rub my eyes and stretch my arms over my head, struggling to shake the sleep from my brain. But something seems off. I gaze at a small crack between the drapes, squinting to focus my sleepy eyes, and glimpse the soft rays of moonlight slipping into my darkened bedroom. Confusion and panic set in.

"What's happened? What time is it?" I mumble apprehensively. Early morning news is rarely good.

"Nadia, your father phoned late last night. He's coming to see you before we leave for the day," Nonna whispers through a crack in the door and does her best to warn me of the coming

storm. Perhaps he's granting me a reprieve. I roll my eyes at the thought, then slide my legs off the mattress, planting them firmly on the chilly hardwood floor and wishing I'd worn socks to bed. My drowsy eyes shift to the small clock I keep by the bed and realize it's only a quarter past five.

"I'm up. I'll start my bath now," I reply through a yawn, bending forward in an all-body stretch before trudging into the bathroom. The frigid tile floor makes me jump, and I skip onto a nearby mat as chills climb up my arms. I twist the brass faucet on my clawfoot bathtub and run my hand across the stream of water, testing the warmth before adding cold. My mind drifts to thoughts of my father's visit. He never brings kind words or offers excuses for his long absences. I don't remember the last time I bothered asking, but he always assures me it isn't because he missed me.

Tomasso Corvo doesn't know how to be a father. His children are ornaments and pawns, collateral to be bartered to the highest bidders, and nothing more.

It's the sad reality of my sorry life. I've always understood my place. But that doesn't mean I accept it. When you've spent your life under your father's thumb, invisible but essential, you learn to keep your head down for fear of having it chopped off. But I can't let it end this way. I swore I'd find a way to once again feel the sun's warmth on my skin and the cool rush of wind in my hair. I'd run on a beach and kick up surf with my toes.

And I'll find a way. Somewhere deep down, I know I can fight.

When push comes to shove, I'll breathe fire.

I step out of my sleep pants and pull my tank top over my head, tossing both into the hamper with an overhead shot, imagining I'm shooting a basket. When every day is the same, you find joy in the simplest things. My brother played basketball as a teenager and taught me what he could when I was young. I miss having him near.

My movement draws my attention to the vanity mirror and the sight of my naked body in the harsh fluorescent light.

Typically, I avoid looking for fear I'll stress over every imperfection and flaw, but today I don't. Today, I gaze long and hard, examining my figure and taking note of changes. The girl staring back hardly looks familiar to me anymore. My face looks gaunt and unhealthy. My cheekbones and jaw feel sharper. They've transformed my baby face into something more mature. I feel like I've aged ten years since my father brought me home. That was two years ago, just days after my eighteenth birthday— the day I finally became useful.

I run my hand across my breasts, past my puckered nipples, and onto my hips. Ribs poke through the pale skin of my torso, and my concave belly highlights the sad fact that I've skipped far too many meals. My father won't be happy. If he notices, he'll think I'm deliberately making myself sick. I never set out to lose weight, but misery does terrible things to your appetite.

I release a heavy sigh and grab an elastic to gather my hair into a bun. There's nothing I can do about it now. And although my father always wants me to look my best, he never allows me to be seen. What does it matter? Why should I fuss when I never leave the house without my nonna and a herd of bodyguards?

Steam greets my toes as I climb into the bathtub and sink beneath the near-scalding water. I acclimate to the heat, and my icy limbs melt, relaxing into the suds created by my favorite bubble bath. The aroma reminds me of my mother's perfume, the signature scent she wore for years before her untimely passing. I have so few things left of her. My father purged the family home of her memory immediately following her funeral. He claimed her memory haunted him, and her photos made it too difficult to move on with his life. I suspect it was guilt for failing to keep her from harm. He's a coward—a weak-minded man who left her for dead rather than pay her kidnapper's ransom.

He thinks I don't know. He believes no one knows.

But I've known for years. And one day, I'll avenge her.

I know why he's coming today. As much as I'd love to pretend and live in a fantasy world that he's coming to wish me a happy twentieth birthday, there's no denying the timing of this sudden reappearance. My father only crawls out from his hiding place and slithers into Brooklyn when he needs something from someone. He stuck me here in my grandmother's home, away from the prying eyes of the Five Families, hoping an air of mystery would make my stock rise.

I hope he's failed. Maybe people have already forgotten I existed. Of course, that's wishful thinking. I doubt he'd allow anything to ruin his dreams of making an alliance with a more powerful family. Least of all, the wishes of his only daughter.

Thirty minutes later, the tepid temperature drives me from my watery respite, and I pad into my closet, looking for something suitable to wear. It hardly matters that the sun has barely risen. If he's taking time from his schedule to grace me with his presence, my father will expect me to dress in my Sunday best. He'll want to inspect the merchandise with the critical eye of an appraiser and decide what changes must be made to my appearance before tonight. He won't leave anything to chance.

Last year, he wanted my hair longer. Six months ago, he accused me of dressing too modestly for a woman looking to entice a husband as if I'm ever allowed to shop for myself. When I asked for clarification on my supposed *husband hunt* based on my inability to go anywhere without my nonna, he threatened to shut my smart mouth with the back of his hand. Fortunately, grandmother intervened.

I pull a short black Chanel dress from its hanger and hang it on a nearby hook. The high collar makes it modest attire and hides my protruding clavicles, but the length exposes enough leg to keep me from looking frumpy. I take a second to examine the rows of shoes and grab one of the many variations I own of the classic black pump. According to my nonna, you can't go wrong with a pump— unless you're at the beach.

“You look lovely, *stellina*.” My grandmother extends her arms and crosses the wide kitchen, gathering me into her embrace with a look of sympathy that makes my blood run

cold. She's always warm and affectionate, but I suspect most of it is a façade. She's as ambitious as my father and will happily use me to claw her way back to the top.

“What's wrong? Did something happen to Bruno?” My voice emerges with a clipped gasp as an avalanche of worst-case scenarios floods my panicked brain.

She shakes her head and makes the sign of the cross over her chest. “No, don't say such a thing. My concern is for you.”

“Me?” My stomach churns, and bile climbs into my throat. I clasp my hand against my neck as if that might stem the tide of anxiety contributing to my full-body clench. “Did Papá say something?”

She steps behind me and places her hands on my shoulders, leading my stiff body toward the breakfast nook. “You should eat. Your father is on his way, and you don't want to face him with an empty stomach. You may faint and cut your pretty face.”

My feet skid to a halt and plant themselves firmly against the slippery checkerboard floor. I skitter forward but catch myself on the back of a chair. “What does that mean? Has he made a match?” I ask through gnashed teeth, and my words come forth with a growl, my throat clogged with rage. “Please help me. Leave the front door unlocked, and I'll leave. No one needs to know you were involved. Don't make me marry a man I don't love.”

She ignores me, fussing with her hair while I beg for my life. It's an empty plea to a woman who would never go against her son. Even if she were to comply, there are no less than six armed guards in the shadows outside who would stop me before I reached the street. I know she loves me, but this is how things are done. I can't escape what was set in motion long before I was born.

She brings her lips to my forehead and kisses my head. “This is our way, Nadia. Love is for fairy tales.”

TWO

NADIA



I stare past my father's unimpressed gaze and focus on the garden, numb to everything but the thumping beat of my racing heart. Fortunately, he notices nothing. As long as I stand still and nod with resignation after every sentence, the tears threatening to flood my face remain neatly tucked within my eyes. A political marriage holds the key to generational alliances, and he intends to leave my wedding reception with a much better standing among the great families of New York.

My father is formidable but much less powerful than he desires.

"I want you to look your best tonight. It's a matter of family pride. Antonio De Luca has already inquired about a match between you and his eldest son, Massimo. I hear he's particularly fond of you." He laughs, pleased with his good fortune and my impending doom.

"And Michele Agostini wants to take another look at you before granting final approval to an arrangement for his heir, Giovanni." My father rubs his palms as he speaks, building friction like he can almost feel their money in his hands.

"Yes, papá," I repeat the only words I'm allowed to utter and clench my fists until I feel the sting of my manicured nails dig into my hand. I don't know if I draw blood, and I don't care. No one will be looking at my hands tonight.

These were always the kind of matches I expected. I haven't seen either man since my father hosted an outlandish

party for my eighteenth birthday, hoping to pique the interest of the most powerful dons and their lunatic sons. Giovanni isn't as unhinged as the rest but is a well-known philanderer with baby mamas stashed all over the city. He'll humiliate me publicly but perhaps leave me alone in favor of warmer beds.

Massimo is a psychopath with delusions of grandeur. I've heard he wants to be the don of dons— a laughable ambition. He knows that position is currently occupied by a man who could make him disappear with a single word, but his small mind tricks him into believing he's up for the challenge.

“Your nonna will accompany you on an excursion into Manhattan to prepare you for tonight. I need you to look your best. You're fortunate enough to look like your beautiful mother. Make her proud by serving your family well.” He paces, daring to reference my mother, wagging his fat finger as he speaks.

Ice spreads through my veins. The end of my pitiful life is near.

“Are you listening, Nadia?” My father bellows, crossing the room to bring his sweaty face inches from mine. He places a handkerchief on his brow and grumbles, “Say yes or no, girl.”

I nod and swallow the despair clogging my throat. “Yes, papá. I understand.”

I understand everything. He's using me to reclaim the lost glory of the once-great Corvo Family. Once upon a time, we were mafia royalty, so impressive we joined the ruling five as the *Sixth Family*. We helped line the coffers of our allies with drug money from our loyal connections in Columbia and the Middle East, ran weapons of all shapes and sizes, and lent out the family's most ruthless killers as hired guns. But those days are long gone. Fifteen years ago, shortly after my mother was killed, my grandfather was accused of conspiring to kill Vincenzo Serpico, the heir to the Serpico family. He was guilty, paid the ultimate price, and left a stain on the Corvo name. My father has never been able to repair the damage. He spends extravagantly to keep up appearances and court allies,

but less money means fewer men to defend his territory. As his power dwindles, my father aims to recapture what he believes rightfully belongs to him.

“Are those the only two men who have shown interest?” My nonna interrupts my father’s inspection. She’d never go against her son, but I can tell by the look in her eye she isn’t thrilled with either match. For years, she’s had her eye on Diego Serpico, nephew, and heir apparent to Dante Serpico, the boss of bosses. But I’d rather she didn’t put that thought into my father’s head. Diego is certifiable, controlling, and devoid of any human emotion. He’s his uncle’s number one enforcer— a job typically relegated to lesser men than him, but Diego takes pleasure in killing and won’t let anyone steal his joy.

I know there’s very little chance of falling in love in an arranged marriage, but I’d like to keep my head on long enough to find a way out.

“No, there are more. But no one who will meet our needs. We’ll see if we catch bigger fish tonight.” My father laments, and his brow furrows as he contemplates how to unload me to the highest bidder.

“Nadia should have the best match at the gala. You don’t have to decide tonight. There’s still time,” Nonna chides, discussing my future husband like I’m not even in the room. “I expect better suitors for my only granddaughter. Try harder, Tommaso.”

A wave of apprehension slams into me, and my spirits dissolve into chaos. What is she doing? Why is she making this worse? I lift my gaze and watch her sardonic expression falter as she holds my father’s glare. “Perhaps you should wait until you have better prospects. Nadia can only marry once, and she’s still young. It’s better to prolong this arrangement than hand her over to an unworthy man who will do nothing for the family.”

My grandmother’s declaration hits me with welcomed surprise, but I fight hard to disguise the relief that settles into my bones. There’s no sense in getting ahead of myself. As

much as my father defers to his mother's advice, he's hungry for power and too close to the brass ring to turn back now.

“Another year won't make a difference. We'll know more tonight, but whatever happens, I expect you to represent this family with honor,” he rasps through clenched teeth, then wipes his brow.

“Do we understand one another?”

I nod once with downcast eyes and mumble the answer he expects. “Yes, papá.”

He lifts my chin, forcing me to look straight into his angry eyes. “Don't let me down, Nadia, or you'll live to regret it.”

THREE

DANTE



“Everyone needs something, Representative Hurley. The city tells me I need permits whenever I want to build something new. My doctor needs me to slow down and smell the roses before I work myself into an early grave. It has nothing to do with the Hippocratic oath. That bastard needs to keep lining his pockets in exchange for his discretion. My sister-in-law swears I need a wife. But who has time to look for love?” I pause for effect, staring daggers at the audacious man wedged tightly into the chair across my desk. His crimson face and sweat-laced brow indicate he knows where this is heading, but he allows me to continue.

“And you need money for a campaign I don’t support for favors you’re stingy to provide.” My jaw ticks as I grit my teeth, simmering with anger I’m about to unleash. “And now I ask you what I ask everyone else—what’s in for me?”

My younger brother, Daniel, ambles into my room, the gun on his hip on full display. He has no problem announcing his connection to the underworld— a luxury that does not extend to me. The Serpico family is one of the largest landowners in New York. As the head of the family and face of the legitimate side of our business, I must maintain the façade of respectability. But that hardly means I’m averse to getting my hands dirty.

Daniel shifts his gaze from me to Hurley, and his cold, stoic expression falters momentarily. He’s much more intuitive

than me, and I can tell he suspects something I can't quite sniff out.

Todd Hurley, a career politician who's been in bed with my family since shortly after my late father became don, squirms in his seat and prepares to spout his peculiar brand of nonsense. "You're a man with many secrets..."

I cut him off with a growl, "We both have secrets, and if you ever threaten to reveal mine..." Daniel lifts his hand to silence me, then lunges toward Hurley. Without explanation, he lifts the portly man by his lapels, strips his jacket off his arms, uses the fabric to sequester his body like a straitjacket, and then rips open his poorly made dress shirt. Todd squeals as Daniel rips off the tiny microphone taped to his chest, drops it to the floor, and stomps on it.

"Have you lost your fucking mind," Daniel snarls and easily lifts Hurley off the floor, letting his flailing legs dangle wildly to gain purchase. "Do you have..."

It's my turn to interrupt my brother before his anger wreaks havoc that can't be undone. I have no idea if this fool has more than one mic wire taped to his hairy body, and until I learn more about who's watching me, I'd rather make sure whoever is sitting in a van somewhere across the street knows he's still alive.

"We have concluded our business, Representative Hurley. But I promise to monitor your career more closely in the future." My veiled threat seeps into his frightened brain, and he nods, still levitating an inch off the carpet, thanks to Daniel's chokehold.

"I'm happy we understand one another," I seethe as repressed rage works through my tight throat. Daniel doesn't wait for my command. He carries Todd Hurley into the hallway and hands him to my men, instructing them to escort the politician outside. I'll have to remind him not to seek retribution. Anyone else would be on their way to a watery grave in the East River, but Hurley's position demands restraint.

I knew I should have pushed this fucking meeting to the end of the afternoon. There's so much to do, and I'm too angry to think clearly. My day is ruined.

"Do you want me to take care of this?" Daniel returns to my office and closes the door behind him. As his scowl deepens, he loosens his tie and mumbles something under his breath.

I shake my head and frown, confused why he's suggesting a hit on a well-known politician. He knows better than that. "Of course not. As much as I liked to tear that fucker's heart out for daring to betray me, we'll have to sit on this until he's no longer a public servant. I have a long memory. One day soon, he'll pay for this disrespect, and it tickles me knowing he'll never sleep soundly again."

Daniel scoffs and tosses a letter on my desk. "Not fucking Hurley. I mean the Marchesi gala tonight. Someone just dropped off another reminder and asked me to bring it to you."

I lift the cream-colored envelope and read the calligraphy on the front. It's addressed to the Serpico family, but there's no doubt I'm the one they expect to attend. This is the fourth reminder I've received in as many days. I despise these outdated cattle auctions, but they serve a purpose. Family alliances build power and secure dynasties. Fifty years ago, my father snatched up my mother at one of these affairs. They spoke about it like it was the most romantic day of their lives, but I'm almost sure they embellished the details.

I've been to plenty in the past, when I was a younger man brimming with youthful idealism, but my father passed before he had the chance to pressure me into an arrangement. I decided long ago that sort of business was not for me. When the time comes, I'll choose my own bride.

"I have no choice. Everyone expects me to show my face. Maybe, I'll drag Diego with me. I'm sure he's the one they want to see." I disguise my enthusiasm with a grumble, then drop the envelope, continuing to read from a distance.

Daniel's eyes narrow with suspicion. "You don't fool me. I know you want to go and I know who you want to see. I

almost wish I could go for you. It isn't too late to do things my way," he groans, his typically calm veneer evaporating before my eyes. I hesitate to admit it, but I'm sure his infatuation runs deeper than mine.

He saw her first.

"I've already told you how I feel about that. It's a horrible plan," I rasp, unwilling to look him in the eye. He can always tell when I'm lying.

"Then go and take care of it. You can't sit on it much longer," he snarls, his lip twisting with contempt. "If you don't move now, someone else will." It's an impossible proposition. If Daniel could take my place, he would, but he no longer exists on paper. He's a ghoul living in the shadows, erased by my paranoid father for his protection. He's a Serpico by blood, not name.

"I have responsibilities you don't understand. And I'm not sure I'm ready to marry a woman I don't know. That's one of the benefits of being don. No one can force me to do shit." It's true, but I'd make an exception for Nadia. She's too young, fragile, and belongs to the one family I should avoid. But she has no comparison. I'd marry her tomorrow if I didn't believe this could come back to bite me in the ass later.

He regains his composure and turns the knob, exiting my office as calmly as he entered. "Some things are inevitable."

FOUR

NADIA



“It’s a lovely dress, Nadia,” my nonna hums with muted enthusiasm, then hands the sales lady my father’s credit card. “Out of all the ones you tried on, this was my absolute favorite. It’s vintage and the perfect color to steal everyone’s attention.” She lifts the strapless blue concoction, my eighteenth attempt at finding a suitable dress for tomorrow’s dinner at Don De Luca’s home. We’ve been invited to three so far. Earlier today, Giuseppe Russo’s son, Lorenzo, threw his hat in the ring. I can see it now. I’ll sit like a china doll in the corner and submit to the family’s closer inspection while my father and his friends hash out a deal that suits them and obviates my identity.

I need to find a way out before this world swallows me whole and spits me out dead or too traumatized to save myself.

I don’t know why I’m here. She dismissed every dress I loved. Black was out of the question. It’s too morbid, and the color reeks of rebellion. A high neckline was far too matronly. How is anyone supposed to know what they’re getting if they can’t see what I have to offer? White screams virginity, and although that characteristic is among the many requirements expected of the perfect mafia daughter, she didn’t think I should look like I wanted to stay that way.

There is no use voicing my opinion when no one cares what I have to say. My brother, Bruno, my only ally, sympathizes with my plight, but still believes we should forfeit

our happiness for the sake of the family. He'll make the same sacrifice soon.

"Can we go home now?" My perpetual whine undoubtedly grates her nerves, but she refrains from losing her temper, if only for her own benefit. Nonna hates scenes. She purses her lips and angles her head with an air of sympathy I'm not sure she shares.

"I know this is hard, but you always knew this day would come, *stellina*. No woman dreams of having their husband chosen for them, but you never know what can happen." Her words offer little comfort. For every happy mafia couple, dozens more exist at each other's throats. There's no sense in hoping for a miracle.

"I don't want to talk about it anymore. You know my feelings, and can't say I haven't been cooperative. But now, I'm tired, hungry, and too sad to continue," I mumble through tears, my bottom lip quivering under the weight of my words. "Choose whatever dress you want me to wear, and stop pretending I have a say in this."

Nonna hands my bags to one of the many bodyguards loitering nearby, then clasps her hands with a grin. She ignores my pleas and points to the French restaurant across the street. "We'll eat there. I'm famished, and we'll need fuel to finish the rest of our errands. We chose dresses, Nadia. You still need shoes, and we have appointments with a stylist at 3:00. I'm sorry, *stellina*. There is no rest for the weary." She hooks her arm in mine and scampers towards the closest crosswalk.

"You're not listening to me," I put on the brakes, skittering then stomping until the strength of her momentum ends my standoff. "Please, let me go home. I have a closet full of dresses for these ridiculous dinners that are nothing more than two grown men patting each other on the back and orchestrating nightmare arrangements for their children. No one will ask my opinion."

I know she agrees with me. But she has a job, and she's trying her best to keep me from having a nervous breakdown. "You spend every waking hour in that house and complain

incessantly about it.” She offers a smile that fails to reach her wide eyes and doesn’t see the hypocrisy of her words. I spend hours at home because no one lets me leave the house.

“Let’s eat now, or we won’t make it to our appointments on time.” I fight to keep up with her pace and almost stumble when I see an armored Mercedes S-600 cruise up to a nearby curb. I recognize the owner as soon as he steps out of the vehicle— dressed like he just walked off the front cover of Italian GQ. Dante Serpico, the secret boss of bosses, commands everyone’s attention even when he tries to look inconspicuous. He adjusts his cuffs, smooths down his jacket, and walks towards Mancini’s, one of the many places the Serpicos launder their money. It’s a slice of New York history that attracts the who’s who of Manhattan’s high society, unaware they’re dining a few feet away from the city’s most dangerous families.

“Let’s go there. I feel like pasta.” I change trajectories and nearly dislocate my nonna’s arm. This might be my one chance to speak to him alone. I know he likes me. I rarely leave the house, and whenever I do, he magically appears. It isn’t like me to assume anything. I don’t have the life experience to determine a man’s intentions, but my gut tells me to go for it. Other options are nonexistent, and my hope dwindles by the hour. There’s no guarantee he’ll be at the gala, and even if he chooses to attend, my father may not let me out of his sight.

It’s nonna’s turn to hit the brakes. “We don’t have reservations, Nadia, and it’s the lunchtime rush. We’ll never get in.”

“There’s no harm trying,” I chide her through nervous laughter, then provide our names to the hostess loud enough for the suited men still idly chatting on one side to hear me. “I know it’s a gamble, but could you fit us in?” I relish my few minutes in front and in control. It’s a small win but it might be my first decision in years. Every day I sit by my window, longing to be outside and yearning to do everyday things like ordinary people. I wish the circumstances were better, but I should savor this precious moment of freedom. There’s no

telling how much worse things will get if I marry a man more controlling than my father.

The young woman, elegantly dressed in black and keeping watch over the clipboard, peruses through her list in search of space. The Corvo family may not be the behemoth organization it once was, but we're hardly tiny players. And we're related to some of the most famous criminals in the city.

"I'm sorry, ma'am, but we have an hour's wait. Would you still like me to jot you down?" My nonna's mouth gapes with shock, and although she expected to be turned away, the threat of shame makes her snap, "Alfredo Mancini and my family go way back. I'm sure you can find something, little girl..."

Someone behind us clears his throat, and both women turn to search for the source. Nonna gasps. The hostess's eyes widen with fear. Time stops, and the beat of my racing heart thunders in my ears. It's him. I'd know that voice anywhere.

I glance over my shoulder, and there's no mistaking the man who's stolen the air from the room. It's Dante, the don of dons, king of the criminals, and leader of the Five Families. I haven't seen him in weeks, but the smirk etched into his handsome face makes me believe he expected to see me. Did he see me follow him in? That's ridiculous. I didn't even know I'd be here.

His smoldering steel-blue eyes latch onto mine, and my tummy twists into knots. We've never stood so close, and although I always knew he was striking, my previous estimations did not do him justice. Dazed by his beauty and unraveled by the scent of his woodsy cologne, my lips part as a sudden wave of confusion slams into me and renders me speechless. His gaze intensifies, never breaking as he casually commands the frightened hostess to seat us in the Tribeca Room— a section dedicated to the crème de la crème of New York's underworld.

"Of course, Mr. Serpico," the hostess chirps and nearly curtsies as she gathers our menus and scribbles a note onto her clipboard. Dante doesn't wait for our gratitude. He simply

nods and leads a crowd of similarly clad men toward the back of the restaurant, turning heads every step of the way.

Mancini's has been around since the 1950s. It's an old-school place with dark wood floors, art deco chandeliers, and stained-glass partitions dividing full-grain leather tufted banquettes. I haven't been here in years, but nothing has changed. The Mancinis spared no expense catering to their benefactors and have taken every precaution to guarantee privacy.

Discretion is crucial in our world.

We follow the hostess into the Tribeca Room, a place I've only heard about in whispers. It's a second-floor section reserved for people who don't want to be seen by regular lunchtime diners. Nonna and I slip into a quiet booth with dim lighting, far away from the crowded table where scary-looking, broad-shouldered men in Italian suits drink expensive liquor and violate public health laws by smoking Cuban cigars indoors.

A waiter approaches to offer menus and asks us what we'd like to drink. I'm not legally allowed to drink, but something tells me my order won't be questioned. Without hesitation, I ask for a glass of Sangiovese to calm my shaky nerves and give me the courage to proposition a man I hardly know. Fortunately, nonna is too engrossed with the table of men to object to my selection.

"You're staring." I tap my grandmother's arm and try to wrench her attention away from the table of gangsters. "You don't know them well enough to get away with eavesdropping on their conversation." I shake my head and place my purse on the seat beside me, searching frantically for a compact to check my face. The heady testosterone level in the room has turned me into a pile of mush, and the pair of gray-blue eyes, intent on making eye contact with mine, has made me self-conscious about my appearance. How will I ever have a moment to speak to him alone? Nonna reports everything back to my father, and although she'd love to be part of the Serpico family, a girl like me doesn't defy tradition and negotiate her own arrangement.

“I know everyone there, and they’re not saying anything important. Do you really think they’d come here to discuss family business? They’re talking about the gala tonight. They’re discussing their sons,” she straightens her posture and brushes the lint off her clothes, preening like an annoying, ambitious bird.

“This is a good opportunity for proud fathers to consider an alternative for their sons. They’d never admit it, but every man wants a trophy for his pampered boy– the perfect arm candy who will make their foolish sons the envy of every man. And I know no one ever tells you, but you’re a beautiful girl, Nadia. One look at you in your new dress and the heirs to the great families will swim like a school of piranhas to reach you first. Your father may have his heart set on Massimo De Luca, but I think he’s short-selling his greatest asset.” Nonna forgets herself. She thinks she’s clever, but every word that emerges through her lipstick-stained teeth makes the bile in my roiling stomach climb into my throat.

No one wants to be a commodity– not even an expensive one.

“I think I’m going to be sick.”

FIVE

NADIA



My unproductive nausea gives me a brief time-out to settle my stomach and steel my nerves. I lean against the wall of the ladies' room and stare into the mirror facing me, imagining I'm somewhere else— anywhere but here. There must be something wrong with me. Generation after generation of Corvo women have complied with their families' cruel expectations and manipulations, but that gene must have missed me. I can't find it in my heart. I can't turn off my brain long enough to pretend my soul isn't raging within.

How did they do it?

When I was younger, I heard about a legendary girl named Gianna Costa. *At least she was a legend to me.* Nearly twenty years ago, her father arranged for her to marry the second son of Don Agostini. He wasn't the worst choice, but he wasn't *her* choice. She had plans of her own— dreams of living a full life unencumbered by duty and selfless sacrifice. But she didn't rebel— *not at first.* She never spoke a word against her fiancé and endured the harsh reality of exchanging vows with a man she never loved. For one year, she lived the life of a perfect mafia wife, surrendering her freedom and submitting fully to her husband.

She made him believe she'd fallen in love.

That part makes my skin crawl, but she had her reasons.

He let his guard down. He was so confident in her affections that he stopped following her. He stopped controlling her spending and let her come and go as she pleased. Why wouldn't he? She always came home anxious to see her husband, eager to rock his world with a sexual prowess born from desperation and loads of adult films.

Her husband never saw it coming.

Gianna scrimped and saved every dime, stole what she could, sold her baubles, and built a secret nest egg. One day she went out for groceries and never returned. Some pessimists say the Agostinis tracked her down and killed her. Others say she changed her name and now lives her best on a beach in Mexico. I prefer to believe the latter.

The legend of Gianna Costa gives me hope that one day I'll follow in her footsteps. If my father forces me to marry Massimo, I'll play the cards I'm dealt and work behind the scenes to make my escape.

It sounds impossible and dangerous, but life is more than just surviving— it's about living.

I lift my wrist and tap the screen on my watch. I've been gone more than ten minutes, and my nonna is liable to send a search party into the stall to drag me back. No doubt she's already ordered my dish, something that compliments hers and is easy to share. It doesn't really matter. I have no appetite and no desire to remain in this claustrophobic environment one second more. As much as I love getting out of the house, I hate being watched like a hawk.

The walls are closing in. For years, I've begged God for a miracle. I prayed for intervention and salvation. All my pleas have gone unanswered. But not all is lost. God helps those who help themselves, and I believe my biggest strengths are yet to be revealed.

I don't need a savior. I'll save myself.

And one day, I'll find a way to leave this life behind.

If I can find the strength to open my mouth and promptly throw myself at the mercy of Dante Serpico, maybe I'll

survive long enough to see my plan through. I'd rather be free, but that isn't an option.

If I must marry, I choose him.

But why would he choose me?

The sound of heavy footsteps outside the door jolts me back to reality. I dry my hands, check my face one more time and use my ass to push the door, hoping I'm a step ahead of one of my father's creepy bodyguards. A hand catches the door and holds it open, crowding me as I slink into the dark hallway. Instinct kicks in, and years of self-defense training force my fist into a protective pose.

"It's only me." Thick fingers encircle my wrist, catching my hand before I can immobilize him with a left hook— or so I'd like to believe. I might be small, but I know how to throw a punch, thanks to my big brother. My discombobulated mind takes a moment to recognize the man before me.

"You?" I blink twice, fluttering my lashes as I struggle to focus on the face inches from mine. Steel blue eyes narrow with keen observation as a slight smile spreads into his stubbled cheeks.

I never imagined he'd find me first.

"Pardon me. I'm sorry I frightened you, but you came out quite suddenly." Dante Serpico releases my wrist but keeps hold of my hand. "Are you unwell?" My head dizzies, but I attempt to hold his gaze, wondering how long it will take him to look away. I can't propose marriage if he insists on stealing my breath. He hardly blinks, and I feel my limbs weaken as I willingly fall into his web, eager to feel him wrap me up and carry me off to his lair. He licks his lips as his smoldering glare sharpens. Confusion sets in, growing exponentially as he cradles my hand between his.

What is he doing? This might be easier than I imagined.

"It's fine. I'm fine," I mumble, simultaneously scared out of my wits yet ridiculously aroused.

"Why are you so nervous?" Dante's eyes darken, and a strange tension builds between us. My pulse skitters and the

air around us electrifies. No man has ever looked at me this way—like no one exists but me. “I remember you well, Nadia Corvo. Do you remember me?”

He does? The Monster of Manhattan remembers me by name?

“I attended your eighteenth birthday party two years ago, and you were probably the saddest birthday girl I’ve ever seen.” He closes the distance between us, heating my shuddering body with his warmth. His soft gaze awakens something inside me, and my senses spin, powerless to escape his entrancement. This is how he always gets what he wants—he stuns his prey with his beauty, bewitching them with a smile, then cuts their throat before they realize he’s a wolf in sheep’s clothing.

What was I thinking? I’ll never survive a man like him.

“I remember you, Mr., I mean Don Serpico.” I clear my throat, trying hard to appear unaffected by his presence and failing miserably.

“I hear you will be at the gala tonight. No doubt everyone will fall at your feet.” With a steady gaze locked on mine, he lifts my hand and brushes his lips against my goosefleshed skin.

“Will you?” I stammer, and a rush of heat floods my cheeks. This is my only chance.

“Will I what?” His brows pull with confusion.

“Will you fall at my feet?” I lick my lips and flutter my lashes like a woman I saw in a movie. It feels sexy, but God only knows what he sees. This is the first time I’ve ever been alone with a grown man who isn’t a relative or a priest, and it’s the most foolish I’ve ever felt.

“I’m twice your age. Do you know what you’re asking?” His blue eyes gleam with desire as they drink me in from head to toe. I shudder under his gaze but breathe deeply, fighting hard to temper the beat of my thundering heart. He holds my life in the palm of his hands, and he may not want me enough to save me.

The intensity of his gaze makes the air leave my lungs. “I know what I’m asking. Do you know what I’m asking?”

“I do, and yes, I’d fall at your feet.” As approaching steps grow loud, he releases my hand and walks away.

What does that mean?

SIX

DANTE



“I ‘m not going to that shitshow. *No fucking way.* What are you planning?” My nephew, Diego, storms into my office half-cocked and disrupts my day with his unsolicited objections. Few people get away with raising their voices in my presence, and he isn’t one of them.

Always lurking, Daniel struts in behind him and closes the door. “Lower your fucking voice and watch your goddamn mouth, kid.” He doesn’t snap or bellow. In typical fashion, his calm, gravelly voice makes a matter-of-fact statement that brooks no argument. As much as we love our nephew, he has a habit of leading with his temper— a trait he inherited from his father, our older brother, Vincenzo. If life was fair, Vince would be sitting where I am now as head of the family, but my dear brother met a tragic end fifteen years ago. The Corvos took the brunt of our vengeance because someone had to pay, but I’ve long since learned they did not act alone. We exacted our revenge on the old Don Corvo and maintained a working relationship with the new don in hopes of uncovering the truth about his father’s accomplices.

Daniel wanted to kidnap the don’s daughter to make him talk, but one look at her made him change his mind. In a stunning turn of events, he argued that we’d already exacted revenge, and there was no need to involve an innocent girl. His anger dissipated, and he suddenly became a man of peace, spouting nonsense like two wrongs don’t make a right. We should be the bigger men. Bullshit lines that didn’t make sense

until Nadia Corvo stepped into view, and I lost the ability to form words.

Revenge could wait. Soon, the culprit will grow comfortable and confident. And he'll make a mistake. That's when I'll cut his heart out and send it to his mother.

Until then, I have more important things on my mind— a gorgeous thing with long legs, black hair, supple breasts, and eyes as green as the rolling hills of Tuscany.

If I have my way, Diego will one day succeed me. I didn't plan to be don, and Daniel wanted it even less than me. It was always supposed to be Vincenzo. This is his birthright. But I won't pass the reins to someone who can't control his temper and acts like he's still wet behind the ears.

I drop the documents in my hands, pause, then focus on my irate nephew, pacing the floor like a caged animal. "Since when are you allowed to have an opinion concerning my plans?" I blow out a sharp breath hoping to keep my anger in check. I don't appreciate being questioned by members of my family, especially one of my soldiers.

I give commands— *I don't explain my reasons.*

"You know how I feel about being arranged. You're not married. You never concerned yourself with negotiating an alliance for the family's sake. Why should I?" he groans and bares his teeth, seething with misplaced rage.

I pound my fist against the desk, and a thunderous echo makes him step away, straightening his shoulders and shifting his gaze to Daniel. He won't find refuge with him. Daniel knows better than to question my authority. "You feel nothing unless I tell you to feel something— do I make myself clear? *I am in charge.* Your feelings on this matter are inconsequential and absolutely unwarranted. We're attending tonight for my benefit, not yours. But if you continue to piss me off, I'll look under every rock to find the least attractive woman in New York and force you to marry her before the end of the month." I gnash my teeth and growl, scattering papers off my desk and throwing a chair across the room.

Diego says nothing and remains still, eyes wide with fear. I glare at him for thirty seconds, then return to my desk. Daniel remains pinned to the wall, unmoved and undisturbed by my outburst. We have the same temper, but he's much better at keeping his cool.

Diego grunts then gives me his back. He marches towards the wall on the far end of the room, pacing, pondering, and tugging his hand through his black hair. He looks so much like Vince; I sometimes give him a pass for these episodes of blatant disrespect, but he's ruined my mood and killed my buzz. The only person on my mind is Nadia.

I think Nadia Corvo asked me to marry her.

I've always gotten what I wanted through money, intimidation, or violence. But as much as I wanted her, I swore I wouldn't take her by force. And now I don't need to. She'll come willingly.

"I know you don't owe me an answer. But if you plan to make me marry someone I don't love— I beg you, not Alba Marchesi or Nadia Corvo. Alba's in love with Massimo De Luca, and I won't marry anyone named Corvo. I don't want her in my house. There's no way I'll keep my cool in bed." His words make my hackles rise. I curl my fingers into a fist and rear back, ready to clock him.

If I ever deemed him worthy of such a jewel, he would get down on his hands and knees and thank me for years. But since that's recently become irrelevant, I won't kill him.

I relax my hand and shake it out, still anxious to strike something but settling on diplomacy for now. Having him attend the gala with a black eye wouldn't be the most sensible course of action.

Always knowing my mind, Daniel walks towards the window and retrieves the chair I tossed moments ago. He sets it right and, with a wave of his hand, instructs Diego to sit. Of course, he complies. He'd never dare cross Daniel. "Relax, loverboy. Nadia is not on the table."

“Don’t look for fire where there isn’t smoke.” I run my hand across my face and massage my tense jaw. I don’t like asking for favors. I’m typically on the other side of this equation. Diego is a good soldier and will do my bidding without the need for groveling, but this is a particularly delicate situation, and I’d like to make sure we’re on the same page.

Diego blows out a heavy sigh of relief. I’m instantly annoyed, but I continue. “I need you there as a distraction so I can move around freely. That is all. Pretend you’re interested in more than one. Stare into space. Flirt. Smile. Do whatever you do that makes women love you but don’t grab asses or charm a poor unsuspecting woman into a closet. Keep it clean, for fuck’s sake.”

“What are you implying? I can keep it in my pants for one night.” He attempts to defend his honor until Daniel silences him with a glare.

“This was a last-minute decision, and we won’t stay the entire evening. I’ve got something important to deal with, and then we’ll leave.”

Diego’s eyes understandably glaze over. “If you’re not arranging me, why are we going? Are you getting married?”

I don’t answer. It’s none of his business, and I have no patience to explain my reasons. I return to my chair and fall onto the cushion with an audible groan. “Trust me. It’s for the best you know as little as possible. All you need to do is smile and pretend you’re agreeable to an arrangement. Not too agreeable— there’s no need to encourage anyone. Just go along with what I say, and don’t be crude. *Capisce?*”

He squints with confusion, then turns to Daniel. “Will you be there?”

Daniel frowns at the suggestion. “Of course not. Nothing has changed. As far as everyone is concerned, I’m still in Messina and will be until the foreseeable future. This is important family business, and at the present time, his motives are none of your business. So, stop complaining and play along.”

I'm too annoyed to continue the conversation, and every passing minute makes my blood boil. "Shower, put on your best suit, go easy on the cologne, comb your fucking hair, trim that beard, and be at the house by 7:00. Don't piss me off more than you already have by showing up late. Am I clear?" I bark my commands and point to the door. "Now, get the fuck out of my sight so I can work."

Diego errs on the side of caution and bolts through the door without saying goodbye. Daniel starts to follow but glances over his shoulder before stepping out. "What are you planning? What have you decided?"

I lean forward and place my elbows on my desk. My chest tightens, and a heavy breath leaves my lungs. "Honestly, I don't know what the hell I'm doing. You know what I want, and I know how you feel."

"I trust you to do the right thing, brother." He mutters and throws one more passive-aggressive jab before he reaches the door.

"This is as much for you as it is for me," I ramble, unsure what nonsense I've contrived to defend my actions.

"Don't patronize me," he grunts, takes a deep breath, and turns away. "Just do what you need to do."

SEVEN

NADIA



The car rolls to a stop, and I take a moment to catch my breath, my chest rising and falling as I stare at the thirty-five-room neo-Renaissance marble mansion that houses one of the oldest crime families in New York. The Marchesis lost their power and rank after the last don died, and his only heir was convicted of murder. Donatella's annual gala started as an extravagant birthday party for her late husband. And after she helped orchestrate a few well-received matches, the event transformed into what it is today. It's no longer a day of demure introductions and gentle prodding. Love and romance have been replaced with handshakes and contracts for the highest bidders.

My father has waited years for this day.

Tonight, I'm important.

I'm a means to an end— his greatest asset to achieve the life he covets.

It's the only true purpose I serve.

Today is my twentieth birthday, and only my brother remembered. He woke me early this morning with a card and a cupcake and promised to celebrate later. I'm unsure what I expected, but I thought someone other than Bruno would acknowledge the day.

No one else said a word— not even my nonna after we spent most of the day together. There were much greater priorities on her agenda.

As we wait, my father glares at me with muted disdain. I avoid his gaze, but the air around us thickens with an awkward silence. It's so uncomfortable I could cut the tension with a knife. "I don't have to tell you how important tonight will be. All the great families will be in attendance, including the Serpicos. I have a hunch the don wants a bride for his nephew. They could be a powerful ally but don't give him the time of day. I've already chosen Massimo De Luca for you. His father, Antonio, and I have hammered out a lucrative deal that guarantees me a portion of my old territory. The Serpicos will never see us as equals. They'll never forgive our indiscretions. But we have an obligation of tribute, and I must pretend to give him my ear." My father obliterates what little hope I carry. He knows the dangers I'll face, but *my* risk is worth *his* reward.

"Massimo will one day become don of the De Luca family, and your cooperation in this matter could restore our family's greatness. You will not embarrass me or disappoint your grandmother." He talks over my head like he does to every servant in our house.

It's fitting. I exist to serve his ambitions. Massimo is a psychopathic loose cannon. There's no containing a man like him. He'll destroy me as easily as he annihilates his enemies, and I'll spend my life in inevitable misery. I suppose there is some consolation in knowing nothing will change.

We exit the car, and my slow descent into hell begins. I have an out-of-body experience. The repetitive motion of swallowing my fears has become second nature. I float on a cloud of resignation through stained-glass French doors into an opulent foyer complete with marble floors and Baccarat crystal chandeliers. My eyes roam, shifting aimlessly from the priceless paintings peeking out from the hallway to the antique artisan panels lining the staircase. My eyes are filled with beauty, yet the expensive décor is not the most gorgeous sight I see.

Dante Serpico steps off the grand staircase and immediately commands a room full of men in his form-fitting Italian suit, white shirt, and burgundy tie. My stammering

heart beats wildly, and the air leaves my lungs. His blue eyes gleam with excitement, but his full lips remain rigid, tense, refusing to give anything away. He runs his fingers through his dark hair, dusted lightly with gray at the temples, then extends his powerful arms to greet us.

“*Buonasera,*” He approaches my father with a firm handshake, lightens his grip to greet my nonna, then offers his hand to me, cradling and caressing it like a gentle lover. My cheeks heat as nervous tingles travel through my arm into my nether regions. His eyes rake over me with salacious intent and linger over the curve of my breasts, intensifying the rising flush on my chest.

“You look stunning.” His silvery tenor washes over me and awakens a kaleidoscope of butterflies in my corset-bound belly, cinched too tightly to giggle.

“Thank you... so do you.” I stumble over my words as my eyes grow wide with horror. *Why did I say that?* His pleased expression assures me I haven’t offended him, but I fear my family may overhear.

Not that they’d notice anything going on in my end of the room. Nonna is too stunned by the luxury to pay attention to me, and my father is undoubtedly wondering how much this extravagance set Marchesi back.

His world revolves around money— *his and everyone else’s.*

Dante tilts his head, and his gaze narrows with scrutiny. “You didn’t? You don’t think I’m stunning?” His mouth twitches then spreads into an amused grin. I slowly die inside. What’s the appropriate response? He’s the most dangerous man in Manhattan, and I threw myself at him in front of the ladies’ room.

“Forgive me, I didn’t mean that,” I stammer and backtrack as fast as I can, fearing I’m coming on too strong. “Are you teasing me?” I swoon, struggling to compose myself and too wrapped up in the man’s sultry gaze to remember my world is on fire and spinning out of control. He said he’d fall at my

feet, but did he mean it? I can't read men well enough to know when they're sincere or just trying to get into my pants.

Is that all he wants?

"Slightly," he teases and ushers me forward, placing his hand on the small of my back. "Let me get you something to drink before they send you into the lion's den. My spies tell me your father plans to marry you off to Massimo. Does he know how you feel? Does he care?" He leans closer and whispers into my ear, his nearness offering a strange comfort I've never experienced with anyone else.

"I'm not allowed to feel anything, Mr. Serpico. When you spend your life under your father's thumb, you learn to travel the path of least resistance." I swallow the anguish clogging my throat and fight to hold my raw emotions in check.

A moment of tense silence envelops the space between us. I feel the warmth of his gaze but bow my head, unable to return it, unwilling to hope for better and resigned to whatever misery my future unfolds.

"Good evening, Nadia," Diego Serpico interrupts the awkward silence with a devilish grin that makes me flinch. "It's lovely to see you again." His words sound disingenuous, and I'm too panicked to return the sentiment. My mind spins as I try to focus on the series of movements and gestures that bring me face to face with one of the scariest men I've ever met. His tattooed fingers entwine with mine, and he tugs me forward into his embrace, spinning me into the dining room like Fred Astaire. His cheerful voice brings me no solace. I know he hates me. It's cruel and mocking but precisely what I'd expect from a man devoid of empathy.

"That's enough." Dante's gruff voice brings Diego's dance to a quick end. His frown deepens into a scowl, and he steps between us, practically pushing his nephew into the wall like a bouncer separating a fight.

Without a word, he offers his arm, and my father's suspicious gaze never leaves us.

EIGHT

DANTE



Jealousy is a confusing emotion for me. For most of my life, I've coveted money, power, and respect. I've worked hard to build my family's position and fought to maintain a public persona that enables me to operate in polite society.

It wasn't an easy achievement and cost me the simple luxuries of an ordinary life. Love requires frailty, and that is a condition I cannot afford. But this doesn't feel like a weakness.

It doesn't feel like anything I've ever felt before.

And because I want to explore what this means— I dine with my enemies.

Tomasso Corvo is not responsible for my brother's death. He's not the one who forced me into a role I never wanted. There's no vendetta against them, but Tomasso Corvo is not a friend. He's an untrustworthy bully who wants too much too fast and has zero qualms about selling his only daughter into an unhappy marriage to achieve his goal. For many of us, it's tradition— uniting families and building alliances that last for generations. No doubt my father would have forced me into one if he'd lived long enough to see me married. But that doesn't excuse Tomasso from turning his daughter into a virtual prisoner. I've heard rumors for years and always imagined it was an exaggeration. Having her so close, gazing into her wide green eyes only to have her confirm this nightmarish existence, makes me see red.

And she's right to fear the future.

Massimo De Luca won't be the man to set her free. She'll simply go from one prison to another, buried alive and locked in a vicious cycle that will worsen over time. I don't take her ruin lightly. Nadia's meant for more extraordinary things than becoming the frightened wife of Antonio De Luca's lunatic son.

But is she any better off with a man like me?

"It's lovely to see you, Don Serpico." Mrs. Corvo remarks halfway through dinner, her black eyes gleaming with avarice. She's far more comfortable with me sitting so close to her granddaughter than Nadia's father. She would support our union because she knows I have enough wealth to share with my future wife's family.

The wealth she craves.

Before my brother's death, she and my mother were close friends. I vividly remember her as a much younger, beautiful, and shamefully envious woman. My mother dismissed her flaws and found her thoroughly amusing. But her mother, my nonna, loathed her presence. She swore nothing good came from someone coveting what you have. Envy breeds resentment and *malocchio*—the evil eye. She presents herself as a doting grandmother, but she's just as greedy as her son.

"Thank you, Signora Corvo. The feeling is mutual," I lie, unable to speak the truth. Her lips curve into a wide grin that exposes perfectly veneered teeth. I wonder how much it pains her to pay me reverence when she surely blames me for her family's downfall.

She isn't wrong, but I despise her nonetheless.

"This a beautiful house. I wish I'd seen it under better circumstances," Nadia whispers as she lifts a goblet of wine to her plump lips. I stare enraptured at the graceful movement of her arm and the demure way she curls her shoulders forward, trying to appear invisible while she sits at a table full of snakes. After a quick sip, she rests her glass on the table near her plate, and my eyes instinctively focus on the ruby-red

lipstick staining the rim. My mind journeys to dark places—red lipstick on my cock and smeared across her pale cheeks, cum dripping down her chin. That image is far more exquisite than anything hanging on Donatella's walls.

She bows her head and fidgets with the square of linen on her lap, wringing her napkin as her anxiety threatens to swallow her whole. I move to the edge of my seat, lost in a hazy daze of lust and engrossed in the vision before me. Nadia lifts her eyes and peeks through fluttering lashes, captivating me with a longing stare. I grind my teeth, gnashing my molars until my jaw aches, fighting the urge to clear the room, slide her onto the table and take her innocence with one brutal thrust.

But that's not who I am. I am the don of dons, leader of the Serpico family, and CEO of Serpico Trust. I lead a dangerous double life. My success and freedom are tied to my ability to remain anonymous in a world where nothing stays hidden forever. It's inconceivable to think no one would notice my marriage to a woman young enough to be my daughter—no, not daughter—yes, if I had her young enough, she could be my daughter.

And yet, that thought does nothing to deter me.

“Thank you,” I groan, adjusting the turgid cock testing the seams of my trousers. “If you've finished your dinner, I can take a few minutes to show you around. I know this house well.” The words leave my mouth before I consider how they'll be perceived. And for some reason, I don't care. I need to speak to her alone and figure this out before it's too late.

Falling in love is out of the question, but watching her marry another man could result in far more harm to my mental well-being. This could be the best course of action. I could protect her from misery and keep my sanity intact. It's not entirely altruistic, but the alternative feels far more destructive.

“I'll show her around,” Diego interjects with a sinister grin that raises the hair on the back of my neck. I don't know if he's still under the false impression that he's being arranged

and has suddenly warmed to the idea, but his enthusiasm is not appreciated.

“No,” I cut him off with a growl, and my insolent nephew settles back into his seat. Tomasso’s brows pull into a deep frown, but he’s quickly distracted by his mother, gushing over the chandelier hanging overhead.

“Right now?” Nadia’s caught off guard. With wide eyes, she fumbles to her feet and takes my offered hand, placing it gently in my palm. The touch of her warm skin on mine turns the blood coursing through my veins into a raging river. My pulse jumps, and my heartbeat skyrockets. This isn’t the first time this little girl has almost brought me to my knees, but the more time I spend in her company, the stronger my addiction grows.

I place my hand on her waist and edge her closer, eager to feel her body pressed to mine. Diego doesn’t miss a beat. His gaze narrows with suspicion, and he offers to accompany us on my impromptu tour.

“Sit down, make small talk, and keep your ear to the ground. Watch the De Lucas.” My angry command confuses him, but he reluctantly complies. He has no choice— I’m the boss. I make the rules.

And right now, I want her all to myself.

NINE

NADIA



Dante leads me through a cramped hallway lined with rich burgundy and gold wallpaper reminiscent of a perfectly preserved gilded age home. Our surroundings suit him. He is a modern-day robber baron pulling mafioso marionette strings behind the scenes. He portrays the cultured gentleman to the tee, but everyone fears him. No one crosses him, and the few who dare are never heard from again.

I make small talk when the heavy silence becomes too much to bear. I'm unaccustomed to being alone with strange, handsome men, and Dante Serpico may be the most gorgeous man I've ever met. With every measured step, he manages to inch closer, pressing his warm body next to mine and soothing my trembling limbs like a balm. I don't know him well enough to feel this comfortable around him. He's a monster. A devil in an expensive suit. I can't let him plant hope in my heart.

"How old are you, Nadia?" He extends his arm and guides me into the foyer toward the stairs. The scent of his cologne floats into my nostrils, and I momentarily lose my balance, swooning into his chest and accidentally caressing a hard pec. Mortification devours me.

"Twenty... today is my twentieth birthday." I reach for the banister to steady my legs, hoping he doesn't believe I'm too immature to walk on heels. His masculine scent and my choice of footwear aren't entirely to blame. The two bites of chicken I sampled over dinner, the first thing I've eaten all day, aren't enough to sustain me.

“Easy there, birthday girl.” He wraps his arms around my waist and halts our ascent. “I don’t want you taking a spill.”

My cheeks catch fire, but I duck my head, chuckling to mask my embarrassment. “Thank you. I think all this stress is beginning to take its toll.” His curious stare and warm smile disarm me, but he responds with nothing. I’m unsure how long I can handle such a slow-moving conversation. My nerves are shot. My patience is thin. I don’t know why he’s taken such a sudden interest in me. I have nothing to offer and no agency to grant favors.

We reach the top of the stairs and move past the landing into a vacant moonlit room. It resembles an old-fashioned sitting room with rococo trim bookshelves and antique furniture. I spot a grand piano parked near the massive window facing the street. Beams of silver light illuminate the black and white keys, drawing me close like a moth to a flame. I haven’t played piano in years— ever since my stepmother, Fabrizia, absconded with mine after the divorce. It was done purely out of spite. I later heard she sold it for pennies.

I leave Dante behind, rushing to the opposite side of the room, anxious to feel the keys under my fingers. I tap a C sharp, then tickle a chord with glee. My heart floats with joy, and for the first time in weeks, my mouth curves into a genuine smile – not forced or faked for the sake of politeness. The feeling has become so unfamiliar I lift my hands to my cheeks, surprised by how wide my skin stretches to make room for it.

Dante’s footfalls make me glance over my shoulder, and my eyes grow wide when I find him inches away, a pleased expression transforming his handsome face. “I have a piano in my home in Westchester. I can have it brought into the city for you.”

I shake my head and release a sigh of heavy remorse. My dreams are always painfully short— reality never stays away for long. “No. My father tells me Massimo De Luca wants me to live at his family’s house while we prepare for the wedding. His father fears I’ll try to run or elope with another man.” I

shrug my shoulders, unsure who gave them that idea and wondering why I hadn't thought of it before.

"Elope with who?" He tilts his head, and his brows crease with concern. "Is there someone else?"

I shake my head once, then stop to ponder his question. "Else? There's no one. There never was, and now there never will be... unless..." Words on the tip of my tongue disappear into a void of despair, too outrageous or cruel to utter out loud.

"Unless?" Dante sidles closer, the fabric of his slacks brushing against my skirt as our eyes meet in a heated gaze. I lick my lips and feel time slow to a crawl.

"Unless I fall in love with my husband," I stammer, pushing every word out in an elongated breath. His sly smile withers into a grimace.

"That's doubtful. Massimo De Luca doesn't care about anyone but himself." His blunt words unnerve me. What do any of us know about love? As much as I believe him to be correct, he doesn't need to destroy what few dreams I carry.

"Men like him? Aren't you and he the same kind of men?" I grind the words out through my teeth. Men like him hold all the power in my world. Right now, he's lovely and kind because I'm no threat to him. He could change my life with the snap of his fingers, but what could an ineffectual girl give him in return?

Dante doesn't bite, and he certainly doesn't miss the sarcasm in my voice. A faint smirk appears, surprised and perhaps titillated by the challenge. He lifts his hand and gently places it on my shoulder. "Your options are limited but not non-existent."

"What options?" A quiet gasp escapes my parted lips as the shock of his words sink in.

"You're the *only one* who can help me. But you'd rather dangle a carrot, tempting me with a better life only to keep it out of reach." Words spill from my quivering lips as emotions clog my throat. I don't know what's come over me. I've never

shown strength in fear, but this is my last chance to fight for a better life. He can say no, and undoubtedly he will, but I'll be no worse than I was when I arrived.

His blue eye hood, and I sink my teeth into my bottom lip, stunned by the growing ache that radiates into my limbs and settles deep in my core. The air crackles with electricity and lust. My heart races with expectation. When his lips part, I brace myself for his kiss, but he leaves me wanting— waiting for an answer that will surely break my heart.

He lingers in place and trails the tips of his fingers down my bicep, caressing gently and warming the gooseflesh on my arms. I exhale with heavy, uneven breaths, fearful of what may come and terrified nothing will. “Have you ever been with a man?”

“Never...” An unfamiliar hunger invades my senses. My heart flutters. My mind spins. Arousal pools in my panties, and anticipation pulses through me. Why is he asking? Does he plan to help me?

“Are you sure you want to play with fire?” His arrogant response confuses me.

“What does that mean?” I whisper, afraid to assume anything.

“It means I accept your request, but you need to accept my conditions.” His lips curve into a satanic smile that piques my interest. “You have nothing to offer me, Nadia— nothing but your body. I'll never be cruel, but I may not always be gentle. I'll never take you by force, but if you want me to protect you and save you from becoming Mrs. De Luca — an act that could trigger a war — then you won't deny me. Nod if you understand.”

What choice do I have? I give him an unsteady nod, too naive to consider the consequences and too fearful to leave with my father. If I leave this room and return to my father's side, I'll never have this chance again.

There's no time to consider his proposal. No time to see what's coming. His thick hand cups the back of my neck, and

he swallows my gasp with a bone-tingling kiss that turns me inside out. I try to speak, surprised by his passion and shocked by my own. But his tongue silences me, breaks my resolve, and taps into a wild need I never saw coming.

“That’s it, little girl. There you are.” His cocky words feed my lust, and my pulse quickens with thoughts of the forbidden. He’s twice my age. He’s too old for me, and I’m too young, but that doesn’t stop me. People are waiting for me downstairs. My father and grandmother expect me to return and accept Massimo’s proposal. But as long as this man keeps kissing me, there’s nowhere else I want to be.

“You’re so beautiful. You’d make the angels renounce God and worship you in his place.” He breathes into my neck, nibbling, suckling, and unraveling me with his touch. “I don’t know if I have a heart or soul to give you, little one. But you have my protection, money, and body to use as you wish.”

His giant hand snakes into my bodice and cups my breast, squeezing my naked flesh and pinching my nipples between his fingers. I moan into his lips as the sharp pain quickly morphs into pleasure. “Show me, Nadia. Let me see the pink little pussy that now belongs to me.”

His words stun me into submission and flip a switch inside my lust-addled, sexually deprived mind. His words replay in my mind.

There’s no denying him. There’s no denying him.

I lift my skirt, reach under my hem and pull down my panties. They’re soaking wet, but that doesn’t prevent me from placing them in his outstretched hand. There’s no going back from here. I’ll be ruined. If word of my behavior emerges, I’ll be a sullied woman unfit for the precious De Luca heir.

And that’s precisely what I want.

I would rather be this Dante’s whore than Massimo’s wife.

TEN

DANTE



Nadia places the sliver of lace and silk in my hand, and I close my fist around it like a greedy miser clutching gold. Wetness coats my palm, and I bring the paltry fabric to my nose, inhaling the scent of her sex and licking her arousal off the tiny cotton gusset. Her eyes grow wide and darken as her pupils dilate with unspoken desire.

“Good girl,” I mutter, dizzy from the sudden surge of blood thickening my cock. This outcome is entirely unexpected and wholeheartedly craved. I feel like I willed this to life. If she hadn’t asked, I would have suggested it or perhaps even demanded it. Things were set in motion earlier today. My men are positioned outside, awaiting the chaos that will surely erupt when I declare my intentions to marry Nadia. Antonio and Massimo know better than to create trouble in a room full of made men, but hell will break loose when we reach the streets.

Nadia is leaving with me tonight. I won’t take any chances or put my faith in Tommaso. If I do, she’ll be married to that maniac by morning.

“Come here.” I shove her panties into my pocket and point to the space before me. She’s no more than a foot away, but I want her closer. I want her to come of her own volition. She complies without delay, shuffling her feet until the tips of her patent leather heels tap the edge of my Italian loafers. I circle my hand around her delicate throat and lift her head, forcing her to look me in the eyes. I feel her throbbing pulse under my

thumb, but she doesn't flinch. She doesn't move but waits for me to make my move.

“Are you afraid of me?” I ask, glaring down into her beautiful face with uncontainable avarice. She's breathtaking—too beautiful to capture in a painting. I could swallow her whole, licking every part of her body, feast on her flesh, and sate every desire stewing in my dark mind. I could break and rebuild her a thousand times and never get my fill.

She tries to shake her head, but my hand on her throat prevents it. I step closer, let my hand fall to her chest, and stroke my fingertips against her flushed skin. I feel like a vampire—ravenous to consume my prey. “You should be. But I don't want you to be frightened. I want you to be curious.”

“Curious?” she stammers, then swallows so hard I hear an audible gulp.

“Lift your skirt for me...” I keep my voice low and then drop to my knees.

She bends forward and gathers the blue chiffon hem of her billowy skirt. With her back flush against the black polished wood of Donatella's grand piano, she keeps herself balanced and slowly lifts her skirt, exposing the apex of her thighs. Her calm, defiant expression disentangles something deep in my heart and utterly unravels me.

My mouth gapes. My hands tremble. My mind splinters as molten lava courses through my veins, and adrenaline surges. Primal need and the sight of Nadia's pink untouched pussy, glossy with a thick sheen of arousal, obliterates whatever moral compass remains. I lunge forward like a predator pouncing on unsuspecting prey and bury my mouth between her slick folds. I lift one of her legs over my shoulder and mold a hand over the round curve of her glorious ass, delivering her sweet cunt directly into my mouth.

She yelps and gains purchase by twisting her fingers into my hair. “Oh God...” she whimpers, moaning deliciously as my tongue laps her hard clit with vicious strokes. I feel unleashed, rabid, and harder than a lead pipe.

“I can’t wait to have you in my bed, little one.” I thrust two fingers into her tight pussy and feel her walls clench around the digits. She moans, writhing helplessly, arching her back and reaching behind to steady her wobbling legs. I pump harder, arousal coating my hand, Nadia’s stuttered moans vibrating through her and onto my lips. I’ve never been more turned on and never wanted anyone more.

“Don’t stop. Please don’t stop,” she sobs and throws her head back, convulsing wildly as the tension building inside her threatens to explode. My dead heart flutters to life, and my control breaks again. The sound of her cries, begging for more, pleading for release, shakes me to my core. If I don’t stop now and banish her from my sight, she’ll grow powerful enough to control me.

I pull away, and her hand grasps the back of my head and pushes me forward. She’s a greedy girl who won’t be denied, and I’m too weak with lust to fight. One last lick is all it takes. Her trembling leg clings to my face, and I feel the full brunt of her shattering release. Nadia’s sweet nectar splashes into my mouth, coats my beard and short-circuits my brain. Neural pathways click and rewire my mind. I lap without restraint, swallow every ounce of her release, and drown in her arousal. For the sake of my sanity, I need to stop, but I can’t. I want more.

“Dante...” she whimpers, and the sound of my name on her lips makes me scramble to my feet. I close my mouth over hers but keep my hand on her slick pussy, petting that swollen bud in tiny circles until a second sensation rips through her shivering limbs and her frail body melts into mine. I hold her tightly, rocking her gently as the strength of her second orgasm wanes, and she can stand on her own. Her mascara is smudged, and her green eyes shine with unshed tears. I’ve smeared her lipstick across one cheek, but nothing detracts from her beauty.

“I need to talk to your father, angel.” I brush the sweaty tendrils of raven waves off her cheek and lift her chin. Her goofy smile disappears, and a mask of fear replaces it.

“He’ll be angry. My nonna will be so disappointed in me. They’ll call me a whore, disown me, tell me I’ve ruined the family. I don’t want to hurt them, but I can’t marry Massimo.” Her voice is heavy with panic. She holds a hand over her mouth and stifles a choked sob threatening to burst free. I wrap my arm around her waist and cradle her face to my chest.

“You’ll be my wife. You’ll be the most powerful woman in New York, and if he’s ambitious as I believe he is, he’ll kiss your ass until kingdom come. He might crave retaliation and retribution, but he isn’t going to get it.” I tip her chin and catch the lone tear streaming down her cheek. “And no one will call you a whore...” I pause and lower my mouth to plant a kiss on her forehead. “Except me. I may call you one in the heat of passion, and I apologize in advance.”

She smiles and bows her head, giggling softly against my chest. “That’s terrible.”

“I am. But it might grow on you.” As much as it hurts me to leave her now, I peel myself away from her warm body and ask her to wait here for my return. She nods and sits at the piano, wiping her tears and tickling the keys with fascination. This won’t be easy, but it has to be done.

Now that I’ve tasted what I’ve been missing these last two years, I refuse to let her go.

I thought I had no love to give her, and a part of me wanted that to be true. But that was nothing but wishful thinking.

Daniel was right about her. He was right about me.

Nadia was inevitable.

ELEVEN

DANTE



“Nadia is my daughter. You don’t get to steal my daughter behind my back and pretend you’re doing me a favor.” Tommaso Corvo’s eyes twitch, his face a glowering mask of bridled fury. He’s right. My behavior is highly unorthodox and tantamount to kidnapping. Some families won’t support this course of action and fear it might influence others to take matters into their own hands. It would be pandemonium— every man stealing the bride of their choice.

But that consequence is unavoidable.

Fortunately for me, the families of New York are much too concerned with the amount of money they make off our alliance and won’t give a damn who I take to my bed.

The only thorn in my side will be Antonio De Luca. I’m almost sure he’ll see this as an affront to his son’s honor and rally his friends to rebel against me. They won’t. Money trumps family honor, and they’re not about to relinquish their status and wealth over Massimo De Luca’s wounded pride. I may need to concede to something to get back in their graces, which might undoubtedly include a sliver of territory. He can take it over leave. I won’t bend backward to satisfy a man whose only claim to Nadia existed in his deranged son’s head.

I haven’t gotten where I am today by defending my decisions to someone like Antonio De Luca— or this bloated bastard in front of me.

“I understand you’re upset by this sudden change of plans, and I know you intended to sell Nadia off to Massimo De Luca no matter what happened tonight. A fact you conveniently forgot to mention to Don Agostini.

“Nothing was settled, Don Serpico. We exchanged a handshake,” he blurts out, hardly aware of the gravity of his words. He planned to present his daughter tonight, yet made a secret deal beforehand. I’m confident Antonio pressured him into it. There was nothing to gain by an early agreement. My girl would have been the belle of the ball, inundated by suitors and proposals. Which is precisely why I made my move before the bidding began. I couldn’t take a chance of losing Nadia to another man. I made a calculated move to guarantee her safety and ultimately get what I wanted.

“I won’t beat around the bush. We can make this easy, or I can make your life difficult. There’s no reason for you to say no to me. I’m not tarnishing your daughter’s reputation or sully your good name. Nadia will be my wife and mother of the future don of dons. She accepted my proposal, and we’ll marry next week. I’ve already phoned Father Roberto to marry us at the old basilica downtown. If you give our union your blessing and agree not to make waves, I’ll consider the rift between our families mended.” I grit my teeth as those distasteful words leave my mouth.

My eyes drift from Tommaso to his mother, idling nearby and much more thrilled than her son with the prospect of me marrying her granddaughter. I expect her social climbing heart to be over the moon. “May we visit with Nadia to ensure she wants this?” Her words make me chuckle, and a few of my men join in.

“Forgive me, madam, but no. Nadia leaves with me tonight. You may visit with your granddaughter soon when she’s fully under my protection and accompanied by my men. And please don’t insult my intelligence by pretending you’re concerned with her well-being. You planned to feed her to a pack of wolves, the De Lucas, for much less than you stand to gain with me.” I respond harshly, abandoning all pretense.

Tommaso lifts his palms in mock surrender and stammers, sweating profusely as he tries to save face. “Of course, you have our blessing. I only want to ensure my daughter marries well.” He’s so full of shit. He had something cooking with De Luca, and his hesitance only reaffirms my suspicions.

But I know him well enough to feel comfortable that he won’t put up a fight— not against me, anyway. His coffers are running low, and he doesn’t have the manpower to go to war.

“Thank you, Don Corvo. That’s exactly what I wanted to hear. You leave your only daughter in capable hands and be assured that I will be a faithful and generous husband. You can count on my friendship, and you have my protection if De Luca comes for retribution.” I extend my hand, and he quickly takes it with more grace than I anticipated.

“My men will see you out to your vehicle and escort you home. We’ll contact you soon and provide details of our upcoming wedding. My people will begin work in the morning. Your input is not required.”

I should say something more meaningful, but my mind is plagued with memories of Nadia’s mouth on mine, her taste, her scent, and the sweet way she moans when she comes. I want to return and finish what we began, but I shouldn’t take too much too soon. We’ll marry in a week, and I’m more than capable of restraining my needs a little longer.

But it won’t be easy.

As soon as the Corvos cross the threshold, Massimo appears from the dining room and attempts to follow them. My men swarm and hold him at bay, a look of confusion clouding his features. I almost pity him. *Almost*. My spies tell me this wasn’t an arrangement for him. He’s been obsessed with Nadia for years and vowed to marry her this year.

As reality sinks in, he cranes his neck and glares at me, shouting curses that make my men draw their guns. Diego points his weapon in Massimo’s face and baits him to make a move. Antonio rushes in, swinging his arms over his head, and places himself between Diego and his son.

“Don Serpico, what’s happening?” He reaches into his coat pocket, and Diego cocks his gun, ready to shoot if he doesn’t move slower. He retrieves a handkerchief and wipes his sweaty face before waving it like a white flag.

“The old man kidnapped Nadia. She’s mine, Dante,” Massimo seethes, spitting and shouting as my men corner and silence him with a chokehold.

I groan and knot my knuckles, struggling to control my anger. “Restrain your son, Antonio, then take him home and teach the boy some manners.”

TWELVE

NADIA



Whatever transpires downstairs happens quickly. Dante returns minutes later, hair ruffled, jacket shed, and a wild look in his cool blue eyes. He stares at me with a look of wonder, like this is the first time we've met, and he didn't have his mouth buried between my legs moments ago.

He offers his hand, and I take it, trembling with worry over what went down. "Are they angry? Did my nonna say anything?" My voice shakes, but I follow him into the hallway, skittering like a frightened animal afraid of her own shadow. I never expected everything to happen so fast.

"We'll talk more about it tomorrow. Let me take you home, little one." A shy smile appears, and my racing heart skips a beat. His countenance has changed. His confidence diminished but his gaze bolder.

I can't pinpoint exactly what's wrong, but something feels different.

"Is everything okay? Did I do something wrong?" Maybe he's having doubts or, worse, a change of heart. I smooth my hands over my skirt, a nervous tick that helps me focus on something else. We take a flight of stairs leading into the kitchen and exit through the back door, quickly escorted by a crowd of men who usher us into an armored Mercedes.

He shakes his head once, then straightens his posture, inhaling deeply as he helps me into the back seat and closes the door. "It's been a long night, and there's still much more to

do. But I'd like to get you settled in before I return to take care of business." His sultry voice returns, and he pats the small space separating us, gesturing for me to sit closer. I wiggle my hips and slide along the leather bench seat, curling into his massive frame. His steely gaze drops and our eyes meet again—butterflies flutter into my heart. He's brutally gorgeous and too sexy for my inexperienced eyes, but I steady my nerves and force a smile. Fifteen minutes ago, I came twice in his mouth, and now he's playing it so cool— it's maddening.

"I hope you don't think we're moving too fast. But you're not entirely safe until we're married. Once you're my wife, no one can touch you. No one would dare." He turns away, unable to look me in the eye for more than a few seconds. I don't know why I crave more attention so soon. Perhaps, I feel vulnerable and want his reassurance that I'm not the only one catching feelings. He said he had no heart to give, and I learned long ago that when people show you what they are, you should believe them. I need to remind myself that this is an entirely transactional relationship— my body in exchange for his protection.

Now that I've experienced a few moments of what that side of life has to offer, it doesn't seem quite as abhorrent as it did in my mind.

But no love? Can I keep my heart in check?

I'm asking too much. For now, I'm safe from my father's wrath and Massimo's grasp. That should be enough.

The car decelerates in front of a white and green awning attached to a residential building. Dante steps onto the sidewalk before his driver can reach the door, waving him off when he tries to help me. His brow furrows angrily as he warns the man to keep his distance. He takes my hand and leads me past a fawning doorman as his men follow every step of the way.

"I wish we could marry sooner, but the church doesn't appreciate being rushed." We rush past a crowd of people who appear unfazed by the small battalion of burly men securing the premises and clearing the perimeter. We head undisturbed

to a private elevator in the back of the lobby and enter the car with only two guards at our side.

“I expect you’ll feel uncomfortable moving in so soon, but I’ll try to make your transition as smooth as possible. I want you close to me. I won’t feel at ease if I don’t know where you are at all times.” The door opens before we reach it, and an elderly woman peeks through. As soon as he spots Dante, he steps to one side and ushers us into the three-story penthouse that houses the wealthiest men in town.

“This room is typically reserved for family members, but I hired someone to make it cozy for you. Forgive my presumption, but I had a gnawing feeling it would come to this, and I wanted you to feel comfortable in your new home. My room is just down the hall.” He makes a gesture that doesn’t signify the direction, and I assume he doesn’t want me to know which door belongs to him. I understand. This is his home, his sanctuary, and he doesn’t know me well enough to blindly accept that I haven’t been planted by my father to do him harm.

I stare at the darkened room, illuminated only by a sliver of light coming in from beneath a door I assume is the bathroom, and feel a slight tension slither down my spine. What is he hiding, and why is he taking so long to turn on the light? My mind spins with possibilities. Is he expecting to cash in on my debt now?

Before I can ask, he clears his throat and steps towards the closest wall, flipping a switch that brings the room to life. My jaw drops with astonishment. It’s massive. It’s an elegant cavern ripped from the pages of Interior Design Magazine— fit for the front cover. It’s fit for a queen.

I tiptoe forward and lift my hand to my mouth, trying hard to contain my glee. It’s the most beautiful room I’ve ever seen. The king-size four-post bed is layered with a cream-colored velvet duvet, white linens, and a plush pink faux fur throw that looks almost too luxurious to sleep on. Cream velvet curtains, laced with twinkling lights on each end, cover each side of a wall-to-wall, floor-to-ceiling window looking out into the Manhattan skyline. Someone has created a reading nook with

plush throw pillows and a fuzzy blanket folded neatly in one corner. I've got an intricately carved bookcase filled with books, including a hardbound copy of Little Women. I think I've died and gone to heaven. The clack of my heels ends abruptly when I step onto a huge faux fur rug, complimenting a smaller one placed directly in front of an antique vanity resembling something from an old Hollywood movie. Tears prick my eyes as I turn to face Dante, grateful for his kindness and thoughtfulness but entirely at a loss on how to show what this means to me.

“Do you like it? You look like you like it,” he stammers, eyes gleaming and lips tipped in a seductive smile. I nod with enthusiasm and jump into his arms. I crush my lips to his, my need wild, my lust overwhelming. It's brazen, savage, trampy, and thankfully welcomed by him. He quickly takes control, cradling my head, groaning, growling, and staggering backward onto the bed. I fall forward, embracing him as our limbs entwine in a knot of frenzied desire.

“Beautiful girl, you don't know how long I've wanted to kiss you.” His tongue invades my mouth, coaxing me to deepen our kiss, and I do. I pour everything into satisfying the burning fire he's kindled within me. My breath comes in pants, my chest rising and falling as I slowly lose control of my senses.

“I love the way you kiss me.” I pull away from him and gaze at his heavenly blue eyes. It's such a childish thing to say, but it's true. I don't just feel his kiss on my lips, I feel it down to my toes.

“Good, because I don't think I can stop.” He captures my lips as his hands reach under my skirt and cups my pussy, sliding his fingers through my shamefully wet slit from hole to clit. I'm so wet, soaked, drenched to my thighs, and I should be embarrassed, but I'm not. He's responsible for turning me on and making me come; my lust is the product of his handiwork. His breath hitches with surprise like he wasn't expecting me to be naked— as if he doesn't have my panties in his pocket. He pulls my skirt to my waist, angrily flipping layers of tulle as he crawls between my thighs.

“I need to get my taste, Nadia,” he coos, spiraling his tongue around my hard nub with the precision of a skilled artisan molding clay. I gasp and spread my thighs wider, granting him access and making room for his broad shoulders. Something about his words doesn’t make sense, but the touch of his lips, the pull of his tongue, pushes those thoughts out of my mind. He licks and suckles my clit, eating me out like it’s the last meal he’ll ever consume. My body jerks forward with every vicious lick, but he keeps me steady, holding my legs, tossing them over his shoulders, and diving in tongue first. My eyes roll back in my head, my hips grinding again and again as my body hums with a newfound lust. I scream, pant, roll my hips, curse profanities, praise him, scream for mercy, and pull his hair to regain control that was never mine. Dante fucks me with his fingers, pumping deep until he finds a tender spot deep inside, stroking, thrusting, petting with perfection until a shattering release destroys me and leaves me a wreck of shuddering limbs.

He takes languid strokes, lapping me up while his hands roam, clasping my waist and kneading my breasts. I moan with delight and sleepy gratitude, “You’re magnificent. You probably hear that all the time.”

“Are you implying I do this all the time?” He chuckles softly against the thin of my inner thigh. “Yours is the only opinion I care about, Nadia.”

I sigh with contentment and smile, “I still think you’re magnificent. And that’s not a word I throw around.” I lift my hand and run my fingers along the edges of his chiseled jaw.

He lifts his weight and hovers over me, his blue eyes twinkling with mischief, his brow covered in sweat. “As much as I want to lie here with you for the rest of the evening, you need your rest, and I need to take care of business. I’ll send someone to check on you after you settle in.” He leans forward and brushes his lips against mine, filling my mouth with his tongue and groaning into our kiss. “I look forward to picking up where we left off.”

He places one last kiss on the tip of my nose and rolls off the bed, adjusting his clothes as he strides out of my room. I

lie still for a moment and replay the events of the evening. My family must be stunned. Massimo will be furious. Tomorrow will bring many surprises, but for the first time in as long as I can remember, I feel safe.

And so, so satisfied.

THIRTEEN

NADIA



“Me? How can a plan something in one week?” My mouth drops open in utter disbelief. Dante stands a few feet from my bed minutes before sunrise and coldly informs me that things are in motion. That doesn’t feel like enough time to do everything that needs to be done. I’ve never planned a wedding for myself or anyone else. The last person in my family to marry did so long before I could provide any suggestions, and even if I’d been able, no one would have asked.

Dante doesn’t appear to be asking me, either.

“It seems like a lot, and I’m not asking you to do it alone. I’ve already made preparations with the church and hired a planner. My sister-in-law, Nora, and a team of my best men will accompany you today. You must select a wedding dress to have it fitted on time and meet with the wedding planner after lunch. I know it’s short notice, but I’m confident you can finish everything before dinner. I’ll be back tonight.” His replies without a hint of inflection. It hardly sounds like he cares one way or the other.

My heart sinks. I hardly expect him to be dripping with words of love or romance, but his matter-of-fact declaration leaves me tongue-tied and confused. I give him a wide-eyed nod and rub the sleep from my eyes, assuming he’s satisfied with my reply— but he isn’t. I’m new to relationships— or whatever this might be, and I’ll be the first to admit I have much to learn.

“I’ll be busy today and won’t return until long after you’ve fallen asleep. But I’d like you to join me for dinner tomorrow.” His confident swagger fades. He fidgets with a button on his coat and steps closer, smoothing the blanket at the bottom of my bed. “Do you like your room?”

“Everything is lovely. Thank you so much for thinking of me. I couldn’t have chosen anything better myself. Perhaps you should select my dress for me.” I mutter hastily, trying to sound lighthearted while combing my messy hair with my fingers.

“That’s bad luck. I’m not a superstitious man, but there’s no reason to tempt fate.” His eyes meet mine while he waits impatiently in a peculiar stand-off, jaw tense, and fists clenched at his sides. I haven’t spent enough time around men to understand their moods, but I go with my gut, slip out of bed and give him a proper goodbye. His demeanor lightens, and a sly smile appears. I stand on the balls of my feet, circle my arms around his neck and kiss him on the cheek.

He groans with displeasure and tightens his grip on my waist, pulling me in for a much more affectionate goodbye. I try to protest, fearing my morning breath will repel him, but he isn’t having it. “That’s better, little one. Make sure you buy a new wardrobe and pick out something nice for tomorrow. I want to show off my future wife,” he growls into my ear, and I embarrass myself by responding with a hair-raising squeal.

“I’m sorry,” I gush and slink out from his arms, hiding my hot cheeks with my hands.

“Don’t worry about the cost, Nadia. You decide what you want for our wedding. Nora knows to follow your lead, and I’ve warned her to keep her opinions to herself. My bride has the final say.” My heart swells as I watch him stride away, dressed to kill in a bespoke suit that hugs his biceps and accentuates an out-of-this-world ass.

Dante Serpico carries himself like a man who knows he makes women swoon.

And I’m one of them.

Nora Serpico is a slight woman with olive skin, hazel eyes, and a curtain of course, dark hair worn down mid-back. She doesn't look anywhere near forty-five years of age and certainly doesn't act it. She's a warmer, funnier, younger version of my nonna, but she doesn't take over every conversation, swearing she knows best. As much as I miss her, I'm glad she's not here with us today. There's no way she'd allow me to pick out my own wedding dress.

“What do you think of this one?” I hold a white silk slip dress with a plunging V-neck and a crisscross back in front of me, then swing around to face the full-length mirror in front of the dressing rooms.

Nora whistles through her fingers, catcalling me as I step onto a pedestal for a better view. “It's gorgeous. Dante will lose his mind when he sees you wearing that. But you may want to save it for the reception. The priest won't appreciate the neckline.” She points to the bodice, and I bow my head, realizing she has a point. We're marrying in the basilica in front of politicians, local celebrities, businessmen, and every capo in New York.

“I can't buy two dresses,” I grumble with defeat, hop off the stand and drag my feet back towards the racks.

Nora takes the dress and hands it to an eager associate. “She needs to try it on but will take this one as a backup. You need to bring out something fluffy, organza, tulle, silk, crystals— you get the picture. My soon-to-be sister-in-law is marrying Dante Serpico in one week, and we need every salesgirl helping her out.”

I try to interrupt, waving my hands, concerned I'll be a bother, but Nora silences me by handing me a glass of champagne and patting the chair beside hers. “Dante instructed me to spare no expense, especially with your gown, and believe me when I tell you the man won't even feel it. You're

marrying a very wealthy man, and he'll want you to look the part."

I crawl into the red leather chair and sip some bubbly, glancing over my shoulder at the salesladies rummaging through racks and displays. Nora smiles excitedly, encouraging me to inspect each dress as women come one by one, wedding gowns folded over their forearms, and present them for my inspection. I feel like a princess, but the extravagance embarrasses me. Whenever one is to my liking, I ask for the price, grimacing when it exceeds the budget I have in my head.

"Were you and Diego's father a love match?" I stare at the tiny bubbles dancing in my glass, then duck my head, ashamed that I've brought up such a sensitive subject to make small talk. I heard stories about Vincenzo Serpico. Everyone agrees he was even more handsome than Dante.

I find that hard to believe, but I may be biased.

"We weren't. Our fathers were business associates who relied heavily on a supply and demand partnership—Vince's father here in New York and my father in Mexico. If you get my drift," she drops her voice and murmurs from behind her glass, trying to be discreet. "I'd only just returned home after growing up with relatives in Los Angeles, and the last thing on my mind was marrying an Italian from New York. Vince felt the same way. But our fathers wanted to seal their alliance and secure some bullshit legacy." She points to a dress, but I wave it away, too engrossed in her story to give it more than a once-over.

"We started out apathetic at best and enemies at worst. But that didn't last long. Behind his cocky, gruff exterior, he was sweet, romantic, and sexy as shit, and he turned out to be the love of my life. Losing him destroyed me, and I've never recovered. We loved briefly, but we loved fierce, and before he left this world, he gave me my Diego." She smiles through tears, and I lean in to hug her, honored she shared her story with me.

“Now, don’t start crying, too!” she commands. “This is an important day, and you need the right frame of mind to find the perfect dress.”

“They’re just so expensive. And it’s been a long time since someone let me pick out my clothes. I’ve forgotten what I like,” I pout and examine a new line of dresses being offered.

“Stop penny-pinching, Nadia. They want you to get the dress you want.” Nora squeezes my hand and points to a beautiful white confection of organza, embroidered lace, a corseted bodice, and flutter sleeves. My eyes grow wide as I take in the dress of my dreams.

“They?” I question her pronoun before I’m quickly distracted by a new selection. “Oh my God, it’s stunning...” My heart races with joy as I jump out from my chair and lean forward to examine the gown. It’s exquisite. Breathtaking. Too beautiful for words. I run my fingers down the delicate fabric adorned with tiny crystals and search for the price tag, hoping it won’t be too expensive.

Nora flies out from her chair and demands someone guide me into the nearest dressing room. “Call the seamstress, please. We’ll take both dresses with a rush fitting. Come on, sweetheart, I want to see how you look.”

FOURTEEN

NADIA



The manager of Le Bernadin greets us at the door, his deference on full display as he leads us to a quiet table near the back of the sprawling room. All eyes fall on Dante, but his gaze never leaves me. He holds me close, his hand on the small of my back as he guides me through the crowd of tables filled with the city's social elite. He feels like a personal lion guarding me against a pack of circling hyenas scrutinizing my every move and wondering what hole I crawled out from.

No one knows who I am. My father never allowed me to socialize outside a few infrequent gatherings where my presence was required or expected. Everything about my new life feels unfamiliar but not unwelcome. I'll gladly adjust to the harshness of bright lights and critiquing eyes if it means I'm free from my father's cage.

A dotting waiter attempts to pull out my chair, but Dante lifts his hand, declaring he'll do it himself. "That's my job." He helps me into my seat, then leans forward, his eyes trained on the cleavage peeking through my plunging neckline. He smiles and brushes his cheek against mine. "It's a little late, but Happy Birthday. You look stunning. I promise you, I want to be a gentleman, but I'm not sure I can. Especially when you wear a dress like that."

My cheeks heat, and I instinctively lift my hand, obstructing his view of my breasts. His brows crease with displeasure, and he quickly rectifies my mistake. "Please don't

do that. Let me enjoy the view.” He takes my hand in his and lifts it to his lips. I suck in a breath and clench my thighs, trying hard to ignore the ache in my core. Diners sitting nearby stare, enraptured by the scene playing out in our quiet side of the room, but Dante ignores their prying eyes, calmly taking his seat across from me.

“Nora told me you found your wedding dress. She said she expects me to shed tears of joy when you walk down the aisle,” he smirks with a low hum, teasing me while he peruses the wine menu. “If you look as beautiful as you right now, I have little doubt I will.” His eyes rake over me, and he slowly licks his lips, unconcerned with hiding his lust. I feel naked, undressed piece by piece by his smoldering gaze, and I welcome it. His glare lingers on my breasts, and my heart thumps violently, thundering in my ears as a knot settles in my throat.

I wait for my quickening pulse to quiet, then reply, “She talked me into taking two— an elegant one for the church and a sexier dress for the reception. I hope that’s okay. Nora’s very persuasive, and all my protests fell on deaf ears.”

Dante slides his hand across the table, weaving his thick fingers through mine. A shudder passes through me, hardening my nipples and weakening my quivering limbs. “I’m glad you did, little one. I want you to have whatever you need, and I can’t wait to see it. I hope you bought clothes for our honeymoon, not that you’ll need much.” His wicked smile warms my body as I envision spending endless nights in his powerful arms. I don’t understand what’s happening to me. My nonna raised me better than this, yet she always stressed the importance of submitting to your husband. My mind races with dirty thoughts, but I console my conscience with the fact that this isn’t some random man moistening my new panties. In one week, he’ll be my husband, and whatever shenanigans ensue will be sanctioned entirely by God.

At least, I think they will.

“Where are we going?” I’m so nervous I can hardly lift my voice above a whisper.

He cradles my hand, his velvety voice rising with his piercing gaze. “It’s a surprise but one I’ll hope you enjoy. This is so last-minute, and I’m not sure how much time we’ll have, but we need to take a couple of days to learn how to be husband and wife. When we return to the real world, we’ll be forced to deal with all the repercussions caused by our wedding.”

I let out an audible breath, and purse my lips, frightened my request is causing him more trouble than I’m worth. “If you have regrets...”

Dante cuts me off with a groan. “No regrets, little one. Not one.” He releases my hand and stuffs his hand into the inner breast pocket of his suit jacket. “*Cara mia*, I wanted you long before you came to me, and I’d be honored to be your husband.” He places a black velvet box on the table and opens it. The contents catch the light from a nearby chandelier and blind me. When I regain my sight, I feast my eyes on a gorgeous, over-the-top oval-cut diamond engagement ring. My jaw hits the floor. Tears flood my eyes, but I quickly wipe them away, fearing I’ll make a scene.

“When did you have time to get this? You said you had a busy day at work.” I fumble with the box, and Dante helps slide the expensive monstrosity onto my finger. It’s heavy on my hand, but it’s the perfect size and exceeds all my expectations.

“I took a long lunch and asked my jeweler to arrange a selection of his finest rings. As soon as I saw this one, I knew it was the one.” His sheepish smile warms my heart.

“You have a personal jeweler?” This is unheard of— *who has a personal jeweler?*

He nods and makes way for the waiter to pour a bottle of champagne he ordered before we arrived. “They come to me, sweetheart, but until now, I haven’t had much use for him. I believe that’s all about to change.” He toasts to us, then to me, and ends his rambling by telling me there’s so much more to say and promises he’ll find time before the wedding. The statement unnerves me slightly, but I chalk it up to

unavoidable nerves that come with marrying a virtual stranger in seven days.

He seems wonderful, but he's twice my age, powerful, wealthy, and a criminal posing as a respectable man.

Who wouldn't be nervous?

FIFTEEN

DANTE



Daniel: We have a problem with De Luca. He's trashing the family, threatening war with the Corvos and claims you're too weak to show your face. And he insists you stole his son's bride.

A shadow of rage sweeps across my face as the shock of his words burns into my brain and singes my retinas with red-hot flames. My shoulders tense, and Nadia immediately notices the difference in my body language. I've never been good at hiding my emotions. Daniel has me beat on that.

Me: His bride? Nadia's mine.

She looks at me and worries her bottom lip. "Is everything okay?"

I nod, then shake my head, furious I'm allowing De Luca to rent space in my head. The most beautiful woman I've ever met just agreed to be my wife. I'm marrying her in seven days and then spending the rest of my life fucking her daily, and that son of a bitch is ruining my mood.

Daniel: I'll handle it. I just need your permission to bust heads.

Me: Don't kill anyone yet. And don't show your face. I'll be there soon.

I stab my reply into my phone, then tuck it into my pocket, pissed our first real date will be cut short. Worried that bastard will leave before I can punch his lights out, I throw a wad of cash at the manager and ask him to forgive my rudeness. He knows me well enough to excuse my behavior, and I assure him I'll make it up to him. It's a shame we have to leave before dessert. The chef went out of his way to prepare a cake for Nadia. Daniel swears it's her favorite. He's been on this case much longer than me and is well acquainted with her likes and dislikes. I feel like a heel not knowing them myself but until he pointed it out, I'd never given those things much thought.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart. I have an emergency, and as much as I want to take you home and help you out of that dress, this takes precedence," I grit my teeth with bitterness and help Nadia to her feet.

We rush through the restaurant, hand in hand, worry etched into Nadia's beautiful face as we weave through a line of tables and exit through a side door. She may have grown up in our world. But she isn't accustomed to moving freely through the darkest sides. She spent most of the first seventeen years of her life in a boarding school in New Hampshire. When she returned home, her father kept her sequestered from the violence and depravity surrounding our everyday lives.

I wish I could shield her from all that ugliness, but as my wife, she'll always carry a target on my back.

My SUV rolls into the alley, and my personal bodyguard helps us into the back seat. Nadia settles into her seat, adjusting her dress before turning side to side in search of her seat belt. I watch her move, the twist of her waist, the bounce of her breasts, and the way she sweeps her long dark hair onto her shoulders. My gaze locks on the rise and fall of her chest as anxious pants steal her breath. My fingers ache to touch every inch of her innocent body. I'm eager to get her alone, kiss her ample cleavage, lick my way across her abdomen, and bury my mouth in her sex. We're too close to home to use this time to my advantage, but I want to use these minutes well.

“I won’t take long, angel. Stay up and catch a few shows. I’ll be home in time to tuck you in.” I lean into her seat and run my fingers through her brown locks, lifting the soft strands to my nose. She smells fresh and sweet, like ripe strawberries waiting for a dollop of cream. My pulse skitters as those filthy thoughts form in my lust-addled brain, and I pull her close enough to kiss.

“Will you be careful?” She breathes into my neck, and my resolve breaks. I bring my mouth to hers and part her lips with my tongue. She raises her body, unbuckling her belt to meet my kiss. I lose myself in Nadia, her taste, sweet moans, and soft whimpers vibrating into my skin. Every single one makes me lose my balance, my head dizzying with thoughts of dragging her upstairs and claiming her now.

“I promise I’ll come back to you. I’ll always come back to you. I’ll fucking kill anyone who tries to stop me.” I bite her bottom lip, punishing her for making me so weak, desperate for so much more than she can give. It’s been two days, and she’s already deep in my head, burrowed into my soul, and too much a part of me to let go.

My driver pulls up to the front of my building, and two of my men rush through the front door, ready to protect the woman slowly stealing my heart. I lift Nadia into my arms, cradling her against my chest, and carry her inside. “You’ll be safe here. I have men posted inside and out, plus two snipers on the roof. No one gets through until I return.”

Before leaving, I pull her into my arms and taste her mouth again. She snakes her arms around my neck and pulls me down to her height. She’s such a greedy little girl. I can’t wait to corrupt her. I shield her with my body, away from my men’s prying gaze, and palm her breasts, squeezing each succulent mound with a hunger that tears me in two. Her green eyes glimmer with hope— an emotion I’m not sure I ever felt until she came into my life— and her parting words make me wish I’d let my brother handle my business after all.

“Hurry home. I’ll be waiting.”

Antonio De Luca has a big mouth and needs to learn when to shut the fuck up. I've overlooked his bullshit in the past, and I can see that was a mistake. No more. Enough is enough. If it was anyone else, I would have entrusted Daniel to handle it how he sees fit, but he's made it personal, and I can't allow his insults to go unanswered.

He has three perfectly good sons that fly under my radar and work hard for their father, but he can't stop coddling his golden boy, Massimo. Whatever Massimo wants, Massimo gets, and there's nothing he wants more than *my* Nadia.

That doesn't sit well with me. It's not a matter of jealousy. I'm confident Nadia doesn't share his feelings, but someone like him can't be trusted to keep his fixation in check. He's a psychopathic killer with a temper to match mine. This isn't about family honor, and it isn't about losing a potential alliance. Massimo is furious I've stolen her away. Their arrangement was the culmination of years of work, killing his enemies, threatening his competition, and pressuring his father to make a deal with a man their family despises. As soon as we heard rumors about a possible agreement between the two families you'd least expect to join forces, Daniel put my ear to the ground and learned of Massimo's obsession.

The De Lucas have never gotten along with the Corvos. It's an ancient rivalry that intensified when the latter edged their way into the periphery of the Five Families. Like the Corvos, the De Lucas are ruthless, power-hungry thieves who would rather take what they want by force than earn it. Tommaso doesn't know, but Antonio was the first to point the finger at his father, Matteo Corvo, after my brother's death. He hoped to wipe out the competition and take over Corvo territory. He failed.

If he'd been around, my father probably would have forced Daniel to personally avenge our brother as a matter of family honor. But those were the days when he kept him tucked away in Sicily, a precious backup, a spare in case something

happened to me. My brother and I have had a target on our backs since the day we were born, and keeping us apart was the best way to ensure we weren't taken out together. Daniel didn't mind being relegated to the shadows— that's where he thrives. He's a phantom, moving undetected through our fucked up world, and he wouldn't have it any other way. He didn't want to be in my shoes, and he'd rather eat glass than carry the burden of my responsibilities.

But this is different and involves something far more important than the reputation of our family. Nadia could be in danger.

“Everyone's who is anyone is upstairs. Even Corvo.” My nephew, Diego, steps into the back seat of my idling SUV and then double-checks the guns tucked neatly within his tuxedo jacket. He's a big kid, although I'm not sure I can call him that now that he's a man of twenty-five and always ready for a fight. Daniel and I helped raise him after his father's death, and although he's grown up entrenched in our world, I secretly hoped he'd find a different path.

I exit the vehicle on a side street adjacent to Mancinis like a businessman heading into a hostile board meeting, aware of my surroundings and unwilling to relinquish my secret identity in such a public place. The people who exist in the upper echelons of society have no idea who I really am. They've never seen the monster lurking within.

“Where's Daniel?” I straighten my tie, smooth my hair with my fingers, and try to disguise the scowl etched on his face. Daniel appears from the darkness, always on cue and ready to chop heads.

“Did anyone see you?” I ask, following him toward his car. It's a calculated move never to be seen in the same place at the same time. Few people know he exists, and those who do believe he's still in Messina, Sicily. I like to keep it that way.

“Of course not,” he states confidently. He's a cocky shit, but I trust him implicitly. If he says no one saw him, then no one did. He knows how to remain unseen.

“Did anyone come to my defense?” I ask, trying to calm my nerves before I do something I’ll regret.

He nods, unfastens his tie, and steps into the backseat, anxious to leave the scene before someone sees him. “Tommaso defended you rather vehemently. I was surprised by his passion, but what choice does he have? His daughter is about to become a Serpico, and he’ll be family by default.”

“Anyone else?”

“No one but De Luca spoke against you. Antonio called you a tyrant. Massimo called you the dirty old man who kidnapped his bride. Diego nearly knocked him out, and Bruno Corvo defended his sister’s honor. It ended when Massimo accused you of being too scared to show your face and needing others to fight for you. After that, his father dragged him away before Diego could put a bullet in his head. That’s all I could hear from where I stood. Good luck, brother.” He reclines into his seat and disappears behind the tinted window.

I can’t believe I gave up an evening with Nadia for this bullshit.

SIXTEEN

DANTE



I've always thought of myself as a benevolent leader. It's a relative assumption based on the nature of my business, but there have been far worse dons than me. There is more than enough gold for everyone, and I share my good fortune with men who know their place. That doesn't mean I pretend to be a saint, and it doesn't mean I'm inclined to forgive those who wrong me. But unlike my father, who shot first and asked questions later, I like to give the accused a chance to defend their case.

Antonio De Luca has tested my patience too many times. He frequently consorts with the Russians, our greatest rivals, and flagrantly questions my authority. Things have only grown worse since Massimo reached maturity. He's a thorn in my side with aspirations to replace me. That information didn't require any sleuthing to uncover. It's straight from the horse's mouth. He tells everyone he meets that one day he'll be the don of dons.

I've overlooked their treachery and disrespect because they pose no real threat. But sooner or later, everything comes due.

"Don Serpico, your brother sent his people to seal off the Tribeca Room. No one has come in or out in the last fifteen minutes, and the men are growing restless. Bruno Corvo arrived moments ago and is waiting for you by the stairs. He says he has information." Alfredo Mancini greets me at the door and assists my men in clearing the room. Diners shuffle

past us carrying aluminum and cardboard carry-out boxes in branded gift bags. They scurry towards the exit from all different directions, desperate to escape.

“We told everyone there was a potential gas leak and comped their dinners. I hope that was all right.” He clasps his hands in prayer, hoping he made the right call.

I nod and acknowledge his sacrifice. “Thank you for closing on a Saturday night. I’ll compensate you generously.”

Alfredo bows his head in reverence. “Don’t mention it. You do so much already.” This place belongs to me. He would have gone out of business years ago—Fifth Avenue real estate has quadrupled in the last twenty years. Even the great Mancini can’t sell enough lasagna to keep up with those prices. It wasn’t an act of generosity. The more reputable businesses I own, the more I can clean my dirty money without drawing too much attention. But I’ve allowed him to stay in charge and run it as he sees fit and take home the actual profits. What the hell do I know about running a restaurant?

I find Nadia’s older brother at the foot of the stairs leading to my private dining room, one of the few public places in town that get swept for bugs on a daily basis. Members of the five families come here knowing they’re guaranteed discretion, but Antonio De Luca isn’t one of them. He typically keeps his distance. “Don Serpico.” Bruno approaches respectfully and then extends his arm to greet me. He looks like Nadia, with black hair and green eyes—features they inherited from their beautiful mother. I wonder how much he knows about her death. I wonder if he knows De Luca secretly does business with the same men who kidnapped, killed and buried her in a shallow grave.

“Bruno, good to see you. Nadia speaks highly of you.” I shake his hand and listen intently to his panicked voice. I don’t know much about him, but I know he has a cool head, loves his sister, and she trusts him implicitly. That’s enough for me to listen to whatever he has to say. “Massimo bolted before the lockdown. He was shouting nonsense about my sister, swearing you took her against her will. *Is Nadia safe?* I fear he created this distraction to get her alone.” Bruno’s words make

my blood run cold. He's right. Antonio loves shooting his mouth, but he wouldn't have the balls to call me out in front of the other families unless he had something to gain.

There's no time to second-guess his assumptions. I push open the doors, barge into the room and scan the space for De Luca's dead eyes. He quickly stands and shouts for his men to surround him. They take painfully slow steps, too smart to take a position against me. I never forget a face and would punch each one accordingly if they didn't stand down. My men and Bruno pounce and neutralize his bodyguards before they reach their boss. Made men jump to their feet with their hands held high, professing innocence and cursing Antonio for involving them in his schemes.

They're not entirely blameless. They sat here and listened to his treachery when they could have left the moment this motherfucker slandered my name. But I'll forgive them for now.

"Did you have something to say to me?" I slide the fitted jacket off my arms and unbutton my cuffs, rolling my sleeves as I approach Antonio with a cool stride. "Do you want to say it to my face this time?"

Antonio stutters, sweating profusely as my footsteps stall a foot away from his pale face. "Tommaso and I had an agreement, and your actions have created strife for our families," he lies through his teeth. The Corvos and De Lucas have been at odds since my grandfather was don. Nadia would have been nothing but a bandage covering a gaping wound.

I inch closer, annoyed he'd believe anything could diffuse my anger. "Do you think you're allowed to tell me my business?" I use his first name, a blatant sign of disrespect for a man who deserves no less. "Don't pretend to be a doting father. Did you think tying Corvo to your family would keep him from singing like a canary? I give him a week before he cracks, and finally tells me about your involvement. Of course, I could speed things up by informing him that you were the one who turned his family in." My bluff is enough to make him tremble. I may not know all the details, but I know his

hands are stained with my brother's blood. And to my surprise, he doesn't deny it.

"You better hope your son doesn't find his way to my house. My brother just returned from Sicily, and I think you have some idea what he can do," I rasp, my voice tight with rage.

The lines on his face tense with anxiety. His brows pull low. "Daniel?" The fear in his voice is justifiable. I love my brother dearly, but he's a cold-blooded killer. He gets no joy from it, but he never hesitates or feels remorse doing what needs to be done.

"Of course, Daniel. You know all about what happened to Vince. Pray I reach your son before my brother cuts his head off and sends it to your wife as a gift. Are we clear?" I space out each word evenly, hoping he understands the gravity of my threat.

"My son left for business in Staten Island. He wouldn't..." He cuts his words, unable to make his bullshit sound convincing.

"If he lays a hair on my bride's head, I'll kill him myself, and there won't be anything left to send you." I curl my fists around his lapel and yank him forward. I plant a brutal kiss on his lips, then toss his stunned, flailing body into a line of chairs. *Il bacio della morte*— the kiss of death.

Now he knows his days are numbered, and not even God can save him.

SEVENTEEN

NADIA



I stare into the mirror and think of Gianna Costa, wondering if she's as happy as I feel now. Before Dante, escape was the only reasonable path to save me from a miserable life. Now, suddenly everything has changed. I arrived here two nights ago, afraid of everything, a prisoner on her way to the guillotine, and now I feel like I'm falling in love.

What would Gianna think of me now?

I've traded my freedom for a more dangerous life and another cage with more room. I don't have enough experience to trust my gut.

What if it's a mistake?

I lift my brush and drag it down my hair, untangling frizzy knots and smoothing down unruly waves. There's no telling when Dante will return, but the odds are high that he'll arrive in a horrible mood. Perhaps my outfit will change his mind. I stride towards the full-length mirror in the corner of the room, a family heirloom that once belonged to Dante's mother, and inspect the black lace teddy I've chosen to surprise him. It hides nothing and makes me look sexy, sophisticated, and older than twenty. Since I'm marrying a forty-one-year-old man, that may be a good thing.

Two days ago, I would have turned bright red imagining myself in something like this, but things have changed. Dante's kiss lit a flame deep inside my core, and every kiss kindles it. His attention has become an addiction. Every

piercing glance warms my body and builds an unbearable tension that longs for release. I don't know how he worked so fast, but Dante Serpico picked a lock I didn't know existed and kicked the door wide open. It may never close again.

I pad across the floor and reach for the perfume I wore to dinner. Dante complimented it more than once. I dab my wrists and lift one to my face, inhaling the subtle fragrance of freesia and amber before rubbing the remainder onto my neck. The massive diamond on my finger catches the light, and I smile to myself, remembering the soulful look on Dante's face when he slid it on my finger.

I know the odds are stacked against us. He's a dangerous man living in a terrifying world where husbands die every day. Even his allies despise him and constantly look for chinks in his armor to take him down and replace him. He promises he'll keep me safe, but for how long? He can't be in two places at once, and his work will always take priority.

He won't keep me safe— his men will. And I'll need to be satisfied with that.

A sudden wave of premonition gives me pause. I glance over my shoulder and search the room for signs of danger. Nothing appears disturbed, but the nagging sensation doesn't still. My skin prickles as a primitive warning sounds off in my brain. I reach for my robe and slip it through my arms, tying the knot to fasten it closed. Clamoring footsteps draw me to the door. I turn off the lights and peek through a crack, afraid someone will see my shadow, and instinctively shoot to neutralize the threat.

The sound of gunshots makes me flinch, and I shrink to the floor, paralyzed with fear, too frightened to move and too stunned to scream. I cover my ears and close my eyes, hoping to drown out the sound of Italian curses and praying this isn't the end. We're not even married, and someone is already trying to kill me. Dante is too far away to protect me, and I have nowhere to run. Two more shots ring out. I don't know if it's outside, downstairs, or down the hall, but it's close enough to make me scramble under the bed. I recite the Hail Mary, whispering verses through quiet sobs I hope no one hears.

My mother died this way. She was kidnapped in the middle of the night while my father was out with his men. Bruno says only one man stayed behind to protect us— one man who was killed before we could warn us. My brother and I were dragged out of bed at gunpoint, bound and gagged, and tossed in a dark closet. We stayed there until my father returned home hours later, but our mother was long gone. We never saw her alive again.

Sometimes, in the middle of the night, when I'm all alone, and the house is quiet, I can still hear her cries, begging them to take her and leave her children alone. She sacrificed herself and trusted the wrong man to save her.

“Nadia?” The door flies open, and the echoing thump of heavy footsteps makes me recoil deeper under the bed, too panicked to recognize the voice.

“Nadia, are you here?” It's Dante. He's here. He came. I roll out from beneath the bed, heart thundering, pulse racing, legs swishing left to right as I crawl to my knees and jump to my feet. Dante greets me with a panicked expression, jaw slacked and blue eyes wide with fear. I rush into his arms, crying, blubbering nonsense about death, my mother, and guns, too flustered to finish a sentence.

“Baby, thank God you're here. You scared the hell out of me. I thought they'd taken you,” he stammers through tears and lifts me into his bulging arms, rocking me and peppering my face with kisses like he hasn't seen me in years.

“Who's here? What's happening?” I stutter, shivering in his arms and keeping watch on the door, terrified it isn't over yet.

“Don't cry, sweetheart. No matter what happened, I would have found you.” His lips caress mine sweetly, lovingly, then dominating. His tongue invades my mouth, punishing me, ravishing my lips, stealing my breath, and searing a path into my soul. Our connection feels real, vivid, an all-encompassing hum pulsing ecstasy into my veins.

I moan into his mouth, hungry and captivated by a man with the power to save and destroy me. And I want him to do

both. I want him to ruin and rebuild and change me into something bigger, someone strong enough to fight back against a world that wants to control me. He's so brave and fearless. Nothing scares me. I need his strength to seep into my bones. "I'll always protect you. Nothing will stop me from getting to you. I'll kill every motherfucker that gets in my way and bring their heads back as fucking trophies." His vicious words shock me in the most delicious way. My arousal grows as his giant hands explore my body and squeeze my ass, caressing my inner thighs until his fingers reach the hem of my panties and slip inside me.

"You're so fucking wet." His fingers slide in and out, gathering wetness, teasing, thrusting, plunging deep until he finds that spot inside me that makes me sing. I gasp, the air leaving my lungs in a loud whoosh as his thick digits invade my pussy, stretching me open and building a friction that makes my hips jerk obscenely on his hand. "Your little pussy is weeping for me. I think it's crying for cock, baby."

I chew my lip, nodding, whimpering as he works his magic, pumping ruthlessly, teasing, thrusting, spreading arousal through my folds until his fingers find my hard button. We fall to the floor, landing together on the faux fur rug in front of my bed, moving as one—hands, mouths, grunting and moaning as our tongues entwine. I don't know where I end, and he begins, but I want to find out.

"Come for me, Nadia. Look into my eyes and come for me." His deep voice makes my eyes hood. His hot breath on my skin makes me shiver. He pets my clit, swirling his fingers in tiny circles, eyes locked on mine. Each stroke gets me closer. Every kiss makes me lose control. The friction intensifies, building, growing, taking me to the edge of a dark abyss and pulling me under.

"Right there, princess. Now, look at me."

I struggle to open my eyes, but the minute I do, his smoldering gaze hurls me to the point of no return. The power of our passion sweeps me into his warm embrace, and I wrap my arms around his neck, steadying my flailing body with his. I arch my back, gasping for air, screaming, sobbing, and riding

his hand as the sweetest agony I've ever felt shatters me into a million pieces.

He smiles and lifts his finger, slipping it into his mouth to clean it off. "That was fucking perfect."

EIGHTEEN

DANTE



“It was a close call.” I drop my shoulders and rest my head in my hands, running my fingers through my hair as I try to figure out how that piece of shit breached my security and made it into my home. I can’t eat. Despite my best efforts, I can’t work. We know fucking Massimo was behind the break-in, but he was cunning enough to hire someone else to do it.

Daniel disposed of the bodies and recognized them as Russian hired guns, excommunicated bratva from Brooklyn. But they had to have help from the inside. Someone in my ranks gave them the code to my private elevator, killed one of Nadia’s bodyguards, and neutralized my poor housekeeper enough to send her to the hospital. She won’t be back to work for weeks.

I don’t want to think about what that bastard might have done with Nadia. He’s not above rape, and he’d sooner dispose of the evidence than deal with the consequences of his actions. Antonio swears he didn’t sanction his son’s lunacy and has offered proof it wasn’t him— a ridiculous alibi from one of his men. I already know he didn’t do it personally, and trying to convince me of his innocence only adds fuel to the raging fire burning inside my mind.

Besides, his time is up. You don’t kiss a man on the lips and then change your mind. For now, I’ll let him live in fear. I’ll let him suffer the death of his son before allowing him to join him.

“Any word on fucking Massimo?” I pour myself a glass of whiskey and tighten the cap before replacing it on the shelf. It’s too early for alcohol, but I need something to calm my nerves and soothe my rage. As long as Nadia’s safety is compromised, I can’t let her leave the house, and the thought of keeping her trapped makes me sick to my stomach. I don’t want to lock her up in a cage like her fucking father, but with a war on the horizon, I won’t take any chances. Her safety is more important than her happiness.

“Antonio has left the city, but I have a hunch Massimo is lingering nearby, watching the building, waiting for a moment to isolate Nadia. Bruno Corvo believes the De Lucas have a safe house in Westchester, on a working farm owned by his wife’s cousin. He thinks Antonio is hiding there. I don’t know if I can trust that kid, but he looks so much like Nadia, I hung on to every word he said.” He laughs, then rolls his sleeves, folding the fabric until a blue snake, a matching tattoo we got as teenagers, slithers from beneath the cotton.

“It’s a little off-putting.” I chuckle, swirling the amber liquid in my glass before finishing it in one gulp. It’s expensive whiskey—meant to be savored, not chugged like tequila. But I’m eager to head upstairs to check on Nadia.

“It is. But we’re in no position to talk.” He removes his gun from its holster, points the barrel down, and hits the magazine release. He checks the chamber and then hands me the weapon. “I want you to give this to Nadia. Bruno told me she knows how to shoot. He taught her when they were kids and claims her aim is excellent. She should have a weapon in her room in case someone tries to break in again.”

I nod, take it from his hands, and place it on the table before me. Everything he says makes sense, but a part of me isn’t crazy about handing her a loaded weapon. She wanted me to save her from Massimo. She never pretended to be in love with me. And as much as I want to keep her safe, I’m not entirely sure she won’t use it on me.

“Are you sure it’s a good idea?” I question his logic, knowing he wouldn’t suggest it if he wasn’t sure.

Daniel cocks an eyebrow and shakes his head, frustrated I'd second guess him. "I don't think Nadia hates you, and I don't sense any duplicity on her end. Besides, you'll need to trust the woman you marry. She'll lie next to you every night. If she wants to kill you, she could do it while you're sleeping."

"Why don't you give it to her? It's about time you formally introduce yourself." I ask, already knowing the answer.

My question amuses him, but he doesn't dignify it with a proper reply. "I need to head downtown and bully that priest into changing the wedding date. He wouldn't agree over the phone, but I suspect the proper motivation will change his mind. I've already asked Nora to cancel the invitations. It's too dangerous to marry in such a public affair. War is brewing, and if you draw too much attention in a time like this, your identity could be revealed."

I hate it when he talks about me like I'm Batman.

NINETEEN

DANTE



I t's wrong to assume a man like me doesn't know the difference between right and wrong. When you live a life entrenched in violence, the lines often get blurred, but I'm not a sociopath without a conscience. I'm not religious, but I believe every sin jeopardizes your immortal soul. That doesn't stop me from living the life I want to lead, but some things still weigh heavy on my heart.

Lying to Nadia is one of them.

"There's been a change of plans." I barge into her room without the courtesy of knocking and find her sitting comfortably in a chaise by the window, legs curled on her side, calves tucked under her thighs. She's casually dressed in black leggings and an oversized sweater, reading a book I don't recognize. Daniel must have bought it for her, like everything else in the room— the curtains, the bed, the fake fur strewn about. He never fails to surprise me.

Nadia angles her head and lifts her gaze to meet mine. Green eyes flicker wide as she waits for me to finish my thoughts. "What plans?"

"My brother Daniel believes it's too dangerous to marry in front of a crowd. There isn't enough time to secure the basilica and properly vet all three hundred guests. He knows best in these matters, and I trust him with my life. More importantly, I trust him with yours." I think for a moment and consider giving her the whole truth. She trusts me. There's no reason she should, but she does. And I don't want to lose that trust so

soon. The longer I keep her in the dark, the angrier she might be. But I'm a stubborn asshole, and I don't suspect that will change in the next five minutes.

"Daniel? Why haven't you ever mentioned him before?" The dark lashes shadowing her pale cheeks shoot open with surprise, and a soft gasp escapes her pink lips. I cross the room, ambling closer with sweaty palms, my pulse racing out of control. This is the perfect opportunity to confess the truth, share my expectations and give her a real out, but it's too late to pretend I'm a chivalrous man.

I clasp my hands in front of me, wringing them as I speak. "Haven't I?" I lie. I know damn well I've never told her about him. "He spends most of his time in Sicily but arrived yesterday to attend the wedding. He keeps to himself most of the time, uncomfortable with attention after my father sent him away when we were teenagers. Years before Vince was murdered, my father began receiving threats to all our lives. One night, they almost succeeded when they blew up my mother's car outside a diner in Brooklyn. Fortunately, she wasn't in it. Fearing he'd lose his entire family, my father used decoys cars to throw off would-be assassins. Daniel and my mother were spared, but to prevent future attempts, he faked their deaths, changed their identities, and shipped them off to Syracuse— Sicily, not New York. After our mother passed away, he comes and goes more often, but we never tell people when he's around. It plays to our advantage."

She stares, her eyes brimming with sympathy. "I'm sorry he had to go through that. Are you close?"

I nod, ready to come clean, until a warning voice whispers in my head. It's not time. Not yet. "We're close."

"Is he here now?" She slides her legs off the tufted velvet chaise and lands on the floor. Before she stands, I rush into the space between her thighs, halting her movements and keeping her in place. I take her hand and lift her into my arms, straddling her legs around my hips. I sit down but keep her on my lap, her warm pussy less than an inch from my cock.

“He was here but left to talk to the priest,” I whisper into her hair, pulling her body tightly to mine.

“Priest?”

“He believes Massimo is hiding in plain sight. And his father has a target on his back. They may grow desperate and try to kill us or stage a kidnapping. Massimo is too much of a lunatic to guess his next move, and since yesterday’s break-in couldn’t have been done without help on the inside, I’m not sure who I can trust. Your brother is helping us and promises discretion, but I don’t trust your father enough to loop him in. I’m sorry, little one. But he was conveniently absent at Mancini’s last night, and no one has seen him since. Not even your brother.” I exhale and lean my forehead against hers, my body relaxing in her embrace. This is the first time I’ve ever trusted a woman enough to allow myself a hint of vulnerability. I wish I could return the favor with honesty. Nadia’s a balm to my weary soul and deserves better than I’m giving.

“I don’t blame you. He’s not a trustworthy man. My mother trusted him with her life and...” Her words trail off, and a veil of sadness clouds her beautiful face.

“I know, doll. Your mother was a lovely woman. She didn’t have an enemy in the world.” I brush my fingers along her cheek and lift her chin to kiss her lips. This isn’t the time to indulge in my desires. It isn’t the place to feed the hunger growing exponentially every time I hold her close. For her sake, I need to maintain control.

“She must have had one,” she whispers, her bottom lip quivering with grief.

“Those were your father’s enemies, and it was up to him to protect her from harm. Just like it’s up to me to keep you safe.”

She nods with resignation and then tries to reassure me concerning her brother. “You can trust Bruno. He’s seen my father for who he is and worries he’ll ruin what’s left of our family. He may not betray him, but if he promises to stay silent, he will.” She circles her arms around my neck and lifts

her knees, cinching them behind my back. Her legs spread wider as she settles into her position, and her sweet cunt brushes gently against the throbbing pipe in my pants. I know she feels it. There's no way she'd miss something so obvious.

"We marry in two days, little one. I know that's a huge request when we're only starting to get to know each other, but you'll be safer when you carry my name. It's one thing to mess with a don's fiancée. Kidnapping his wife is an invitation to war. De Luca would never be able to show his face in the city again." I say, leaving no room for argument.

"Will that be enough time? I thought you said I couldn't leave my room." She has a point. She always has a point, but I've come prepared with an answer.

"I know, and for now, please adhere to my request. It won't always be like this, Nadia. After I know more, you'll have the run of the house, and when things calm down and I get to the bottom of the kidnapping attempt, you can have as much freedom as you want—as much as anyone can have with a team of bodyguards trailing behind them wherever they go. I'm sorry, but you're precious to me. I guard what I love most in the world." The words spill out instinctively before I can rein them in. Love? That emotion is even more foreign to me than jealousy, yet both have dictated almost every move I've made in the last seventy-two hours. The last time I told anyone I loved them was my mother on her deathbed.

"Are you planning the wedding?" she asks, lashes fluttering as she unhooks her legs and crawls onto the space beside me.

"Nora and the planner have agreed to arrange a small wedding with a handful of guests at the basilica Wednesday night. Tell her exactly what you want down the color of flowers, and she promises she'll get it right." There's no need to tell her Daniel is handling everything. He's got a better eye than me, but I don't need that bastard taking all the credit and making me look bad.

"Is this a ruse to speed up the wedding night?" She uncrosses her legs and steps into the space between my thighs,

looking down from her unimpressive height. I smile and reach for her hand, but she pulls away with a smile. “You can tell me the truth.” Nadia leans forward, and her delicate fingers caress my cheek. I grasp her waist and pull her closer. She presses her breasts against my face, taut nipples skim across my parted lips, and I close my mouth around one, moistening her sweater with my saliva.

I smile, my beating heart expanding in my tight chest. She’s so beautiful. It’s hard to deny her anything. “You’ve unraveled my web of lies, little one. Of course, I want you sooner. I would have taken you that first night. I’ll take you right here and now. I’m only holding out for your sake.” That’s not entirely honest, but there is some truth to it.

She kneels and places her open palms against my parted thighs. “Does it look like I want to wait? I want you, Dante. Don’t you want me?” I stare, stunned, but she wastes no time making her move. If I didn’t love her before, I love her now. Her hands slide to my waist, and her fingers go to work. My belt comes off. My pants unfasten, unzip, and spread open. She fists my cock in her tiny hand and stares at the ink on my hips and abdomen. She’s never seen me without a shirt.

“Are you covered with them?” Her eyes meet mine, lashes fluttering as her fingers wrap tightly around my shaft.

“Not everywhere. They’re strategically placed.” I thread my fingers through her long dark waves and nudge her forward, eager to feel her mouth and tongue enveloping my cock. I’ve thought about this day for over a year, imagining how it would look and feel when my dick crossed the threshold of her swollen lips and slipped down her throat.

“Show me, please. I don’t want to get this wrong,” she whispers, rolling her hand up and down, gathering precum on the tip of her fingers and spreading it across the bulbous head.

I shake my head and grunt, her touch sending a rush of blood to my groin, making me bigger, harder, and so fucking eager to mark her pretty face with cum. “You couldn’t do anything wrong, princess. Just take me in your mouth, swallow it, and suck.”

Nadia leans forward, eyes gleaming with avarice, and swirls her tongue across the head. She moans with satisfaction, and the vibrations travel straight to my balls. I tighten my grip on her hair and push her down, it's an act I almost regret, but her enthusiasm ends my brief bout of remorse. She takes me into her mouth, and a guttural groan of ecstasy bursts from my lips. I slide in deep and slam against the back of her throat. I pull back, fearing my unbridled excitement will turn her off, but it doesn't. She quickly adjusts her angle and takes me deeper, bobbing her head, slurping, tasting, and devouring my cock like the most seasoned pro at a brothel. My eyes roll back, but I shake my head, refocusing on watching my cock slip in and out of her pretty lips, watching her struggle to fit my big cock in her tiny mouth. It's art in motion. She moans, thighs clenched, probably rubbing that little pussy to gather friction. Her nails dig into my thighs, gaining purchase to increase her speed and satisfy her hunger.

“Do you like sucking cock, little one?” I grunt, words tumbling out as I strain to speak.

She nods, taking me deeper, harder, so close I feel my balls tighten and prepare for release. But this isn't the way I want to come. I pull her hair and yank her to her feet, lifting her shaky limbs onto my lap.

“Greedy girl, not like this.”

TWENTY

NADIA



“How do you want it?” I step away, my breath hitching as anxiety overtakes my lust-addled mind. I don’t want him to think I’m too nervous to move forward. Fright is a natural emotion in this circumstance. He’s older, stronger, more experienced, and packing a massive cock that nearly broke my jaw.

“This is your first time. We should probably take it slow, little one. I don’t want to scare you so soon.” He flies forward, stopping abruptly to cradle my face, moving his fingers along my jaw. His hand cups my throat, squeezing gently as his lips come down hard. His embrace is brutal, but my body welcomes his touch, humming and sparking like a live wire that’s just been flipped on.

“I watched you, princess. I watched you at church. At parties. Whenever your father let you out of the house, I followed, waiting for any opportunity to devour your perfect body with my eyes. But now I want more.” He greets me with a sinister grin that makes my heart slam into my chest. He pulls my sweater over my head, tosses it to the other side of the room, then unfastens my bra, letting the scant material fall to the floor. I lift my hands to cover my chest, but he shoves them away, wanting to examine every ounce of flesh on display.

“Don’t hide. Don’t deny me.” His deep voice makes me shiver, and my nipples harden to taut peaks under his gaze. He slides his mouth to my breasts, licking a path to my nipples

before engulfing one in his mouth. I whimper as he winds his tongue around each one, curling me into his body and steadying my trembling limbs as he feasts. He's not gentle, and I'm glad for it. That's not the kind of man he is, and I don't want a sanitized version of Dante Serpico.

I want to know who he really is.

His mouth returns to my lips, and his kiss steals my breath. In one fluid motion, he lifts me into his arms and deposits my limp body on the king-size bed. His lips and hands return to my throat, breasts, and nipples, then slowly slip down to my belly. I help him unbutton his shirt, and he slips out from his pants, discarding mine along the way.

"You're so fucking wet, Nadia. So, so wet, little one. Do you think you're ready to take it all?" He fists his cocks, squeezing the shaft until beads of precum ooze from the tip and fall on my stomach. The sight strengthens my arousal, and I reach down to spread the sticky fluid across my abdomen. I've abandoned all shame and dignity. My mind is too focused on the sculpted man hovering above me.

"I'm ready..." I swallow hard, fighting the urge to pull him down and force him to fuck me.

"You have no idea what you've gotten yourself into, baby. You don't know how much I will use this pussy, your mouth, and, sometime soon, your perfect ass. But I promise you'll learn to love it." His filthy words wrench a squeal from my tight lips. He's taking too long building a fire that's already out of control.

"Dante..."

"Nadia..." His gravelly voice vibrates into my skin, and I roll my hips, shamelessly trying to reach the cock he refuses to use. He's an incurable tease hellbent on driving me out of my mind.

"I told you I couldn't promise you love, but I was wrong. I was lying. I've loved you all along." His shoulders spread my legs, and he presses his face against my pussy, sliding back and forth, rubbing his beard through my folds until I've

irrevocably marked him with my scent. “I’m yours, Nadia. I’ll always be yours.”

“I’m yours, Dante,” I whisper through labored pants and chattering teeth, overstimulated by his breath on my skin.

“You’re ours, little one. You’re ours,” he rasps, confusing me with his words, making me pause until the pull of his tongue on my clit empties my mind with a shuddering scream. His fingers plunge inside my pussy, pumping frantically and splashing arousal he greedily devours. He sucks my clit, licking, slurping, slipping it between his lips, and lapping my hard button until I have an out-of-body experience and listen to my broken sobs begging for cock.

Dante crawls to his knees and runs his turgid length through my folds, back and forth, back and forth, bumping my hard clit with each pass. He’s so hard, long, and thick I wince, trembling with fear and expectation. But there’s no time to reconsider my frenzied pleas. He thrusts forward, gliding his fat cock inch by inch, stretching my walls, tunneling as far as he’ll go until he fills me to the brim. I gasp, the air leaving my lungs in shuddering moans that grow louder with each plunge.

“Sweet girl, your tight pussy is strangling my fucking cock.” His hips jerk forward, grinding against the apex of my thighs, pumping, pumping, rolling his hips to find the perfect angle to fuck me. I spread my legs wider, and he slides his hands under my ass, taking me hard and rough, showing my virgin pussy no mercy as he claims what belongs to him.

“Fuck me back, Nadia. Show me how much you want this. Show me, dirty girl. Don’t hold back.” He leans back and hoists me onto his lap, sliding deeper inside me as I straddle his thighs. I’m so full, I can hardly move. He’s filled every space inside me, marked me, stretched me open, and made me an addict for his cock. As hard as it is to comply with his wishes, I want that friction. I want him to know how hungry I’ve been and how wrong he was to make me wait.

“Is this what you want?” I ride his harder-than-steel shaft, bouncing, soaking him, and obeying his wishes to fuck him like the filthy girl I am. He thrusts up. I plunge down. Moving,

riding, I can't feel my legs, but the sweet pull of his cock keeps me chasing my release. We build a rhythm, stoking a smoldering friction that consumes us in wildfire.

“Take it, baby. Take it all, and tell me you'll always come back for more.” He grunts, pounding my pussy, moving harder, faster, dominating me with his cock until the kindling fire has nowhere to go.

“Come for me, little one. Come on my cock,” he groans, thrusting, fucking, blinding me with orgasm after orgasm until we explode together, withering in flames of ecstasy that make the world around us disappear.

I don't remember falling asleep, but hours later, I wake up alone.

TWENTY-ONE

NADIA



I wake up naked and sore like I've spent the last few hours as Lady Godiva, riding a horse bareback through the English countryside. The bedding smells of sex and Dante and a little like the perfume I wore to entice him, but the sheets next to me are cold. He must have left hours ago without a word or a kiss goodbye.

Maybe he wanted me to rest up for later.

Last night, no, this afternoon, was wonderful, better than I expected from a man people call the Monster of Manhattan. He was rough but loving. Sinful but sweet. Will I have to wait until Wednesday night for part two?

Is that why he left my bed?

I roll to my side and run my hands over the indentation that marked where he slept. He must have been there for hours before returning to work. The sun is setting, and my stomach is grumbling, but I'm too much of a mess to run into the kitchen without showering. He said I could call the kitchen for food, but that sounds silly. This isn't a hotel. This is my new home, and I should be able to explore it.

I slide my legs off the bed and pad naked into the bathroom. It's strange growing comfortable with nudity so quickly, but there's no sense pretending I'm an innocent flower waiting to be watered. I just had sex in multiple positions with a man I hardly know, a man I'm marrying in

two days. That feels nasty when I say it out loud, but it doesn't feel wrong. Dante called me a dirty girl, and I supposed I am.

Dirty and happy.

The cold tile makes me flinch, but I've recently discovered the floors are heated. Rich people think of everything. I stride toward the switch on the wall, then open the shower door, flipping the knob to get it started. The waterfall shower head springs forth, and a cascade of warm water quickly turns hot. It drenches me, soothing my aching limbs and slowly washing away all remaining traces of Dante from my prickled skin. I expect to smell like him again— sooner rather than later. He seems insatiable, lusty, an addict who may want sex night and day. I'm unsure if I can keep up, but I'd like to try.

My sexual awakening is still in progress, and I don't think I've learned half of what there is to know.

I grab my loofah sponge and run it across my skin, scrubbing hard, building a lather that rinses clean under the heavy flow of water. When I step out onto the tile, it's warm enough to lazily stride into my closet and fetch the first clothes I see. I grab a pair of sleep shorts and a tank top under the fuzzy robe Dante left at the edge of my bed. It's short and shows too much leg but long enough to cover the essentials. It occurs to me to dress modestly with strange men traipsing downstairs, but I push that thought out of my mind. I'm dressed decently and can't be expected to constantly cover up in my own house. What if I'm pregnant? Not now, of course, but one day. I hope I'll be allowed to dress as comfortably as possible.

Pregnant? Oh God, why did I say that word. I'm a woman who's just had unprotected sex. That one day could be as early as this damn minute.

No, don't think that way. You'll drive yourself crazy before the wedding— as if the priest will somehow know I've already been broken in.

I shake my head and open my bedroom door, looking left to right for any signs of creeping men. The halls appear deserted, emptier than I would have imagined for a place that's

supposed to be on lockdown. My stomach rumbles again, and I take that as a sign to get to the kitchen as quickly as possible, grab food and return to the safety of my room.

Maybe Dante won't see me. Perhaps no one will see me. I'd hate to get in trouble so soon.

I tiptoe downstairs, cringing to the sound of my footsteps and confident I'll be caught before I reach the fridge. When I reach the final landing, I scatter into the hall, following the scent of food as I slink against the wall and sidle towards the swinging door leading into the kitchen.

"Weren't you told to stay in your room?" Dante's voice makes me jump out of my skin. I fly back, lose my footing and fall through the swinging door, catching myself on the wall before sliding spread eagle onto the floor. I scramble to my feet, intent on running upstairs, but a strong arm catches my waist and carries me back.

"It's for your safety, Nadia. I don't want anything bad to happen to you, baby." His voice sounds different, calmer, almost fatherly. "Why are you down here? I was about to bring you food." He returns to the stove and turns off the burner, dabbing balls of arancini with a napkin before placing them on a plate. My mouth waters, and I pad closer, inspecting each one and waving my hand when he piles on too many.

"Are you going to argue with me? You're painfully thin, angel. I want you to eat as much as you can." He dips a ball into a bowl of marinara and taps my lips, instructing me to open my mouth.

I take a bite and close my eyes, humming with satisfaction when the taste of deep-fried risotto settles my growling tummy. "They're delicious. I didn't know you cooked."

"You don't know a lot of things about me," he states confidently, ushering me away from the fire and placing my food on the kitchen island. "Eat up, baby. Clean the plate for me."

"I couldn't possibly eat so much. It's late, and I don't want to wake up sick." I take another bite and then look over my

shoulder to find a solid wall of chest hovering close. He's wearing a tight-fitting t-shirt and jeans, an outfit I've never seen him wear before. I blink, my eyes roaming over the breadth of his broad shoulder and pronounced pecs. They look bigger, hotter— or maybe it's just the shirt. "This was incredibly kind of you. I was only hoping for a piece of fruit. I didn't want to bother anyone with cooking for me so late."

"Feeding you is one of my many responsibilities. And I take each one seriously." His full lips curve into a slight smile, and my heart does a series of cartwheels in my chest.

"Now that I've given you food, answer me. Why are you dressed like that? Men are crawling through this house all day. Are you looking to be punished?" He growls against my ear, and my skin heats with memories of his breath against my skin, licking my pussy, and suckling my breasts. I shouldn't be aroused so soon. But I am. He had his way with me only hours ago, and my legs are so sore, I don't know how I made my way here without crying.

"Is someone around?" I flutter my lashes coquettishly, hoping he takes the hint that I'd happily trade his food for sex.

What's happening to me? I'm out of control.

"We're alone, sweetheart. I sent everyone home because I'm still unsure who I can trust." He groans and licks my neck, grazing his teeth against my sensitive skin. My nipples tighten as the scent of his musk drives me crazy with lust. There's no need to play around. My inhibitions are long gone, and this man is days from being my husband.

"Should I take this upstairs?" I lean forward and place my hands on the kitchen island, arching my back to meet his kiss. I feel desperate for more. Hungry for his touch.

"No, baby. Stay just as you are," he croons and circles his arm around my waist to unfasten my robe. The silky fabric slides off my shoulders and pools at my feet. He kicks it away and winds his thick fingers into the waistband of my shorts, sliding them off my legs in one tug. Cool air hits my naked ass. My thundering heart echoes. I need to feel him inside me.

Right here. Right now.

“You make me so fucking crazy.” He widens my legs and squats on the floor behind me. I shiver at his touch as his hands slide up my thighs, cupping my sex and claiming something that already belongs to him.

“I’ve got something for you.” He grips my hips, pulling them out before spreading my ass cheeks. I can’t protest. My heart’s beating too fast. My breath is coming in wild pants. I feel his tongue travel through my wet folds and settle into my puckered hole. I yelp, but my voice catches in my throat.

What is he doing?

“I’ve got something for you. Something you might like.”

“What?” I whimper with need, pouting like a child waiting for Christmas morning.

“This.” He pulls a shiny object from his pocket and brings it to my face. I don’t recognize it. It’s big, metallic, and looks like a fat spade. I glance at him, eyes stern and smoldering with desire. “Open your mouth. Get this wet for me.”

I obey, trying to understand what it means and where this is going. He leaves it in my mouth for less than a minute, but it feels like forever.

“Relax, sweetheart. Your time is coming.” He sticks the object in his mouth, and I watch, fascinated by the act. When he pulls it out, saliva drips down, coating every side until the remainder falls on his fingers. “This will feel uncomfortable, but I promise it’s for the best.”

“What is it?” I ask as my legs threaten to buckle under the weight of this torturous anticipation.

“It’s a plug. It will stretch you out and prepare your ass for my cock. Now, be a good girl and relax.” He brushes the hair off my shoulders and nudges me forward. I comply, eager to see where this is going.

He kisses my neck and shoulders, then skims his tongue down my back and along my crack. I feel a wet finger invade

my ass and wiggle my hips, surrendering wholeheartedly to his desire.

“I’ve ached for you for so long, Nadia.” He exhales against my skin, and the heat of his breath makes me moan. “I wanted to steal you away. If I knew you’d be mine. If I thought you would have come willingly, I would have broken into your bedroom and brought you here, fucked you, claimed you, marked every inch of your skin with come, then killed every motherfucker who tried to take you away. You’re mine, Nadia. You’ve always been mine.” He squeezes my ass cheeks and sinks his teeth into my flesh. I cry out, not from pain, but from want. I need more.

“Oh God, please... more.” I bend deeper, press my cheek against the cold marble, and spread my arms to keep me in place. My skin tingles under his fingers, sizzling under the heat of his piercing gaze.

“Say please, and I’ll give you what you want.” He commands, and I comply with a whimper, “Please.”

“I want you like this, but I don’t want to hurt you.” He licks my pussy, lashing my clit with merciless precision, again and again, each hateful stroke making me cry out and beg.

“I don’t want that. I want you.” The words slip, but they’re no less true. I want to feel his pulsing, throbbing cock invade every orifice until he’s spent, exhausted from using my body for his pleasure.

He growls into my ear. “Are you sure you can handle it?”

If he wants to put that contraption in my ass, I’d much rather have the real thing. I hear him spit on himself, then on me. “You’re a horny little thing, aren’t you? I bet you’ll be the kind of wife who craves cock all day.” He runs his length through my wet slit, pushing it through, dousing it with arousal before bringing it to my ass. I clench, fearful of the pain but excited to feel him claim another part of me. He pushes inside me, whispering soothing words, stroking my back and ass, lulling me into a strange calm that makes me exhale and submit without reservation.

I want to please him. *I was born to please him.*

“Just like that. You’re so fucking tight. It’s going to take a minute to get you used to my cock.” He coos, tightening his grip on my hips to control his deep descent.

“Oh, God. Please, please don’t stop. Keep going.” I cry out and shamelessly shove my ass into his pelvis. I’m mad. Insane. The searing pain should make me beg for a reprieve, but I’m too close to quit now.

“Filthy girl. Taking it every inch.” He thrusts harder, pumping slowly as he widens his path and stretches my ass open. Pleasure ripples into my core and radiates to all four limbs. The intensity stuns me. His passion destroys me. I can’t hold out much longer.

“Dante,” I shout, simmering with desire, overwhelmed by the mounting passion, strengthening like a hurricane through warm waters. He plunges deeper, harder— each thrust grazing something deep inside me, a button that needs to be pressed.

“Don’t call me...” he grunts and catches my hair, pulling it back, catching my throat as he sends me over the edge, crashing hard and drowning me in the sweetest bliss I’ve ever felt. He crushes his lips to mine and fills my mouth with his tongue. He keeps thrusting, pumping steadily, erupting in gushes, filling me with so much cum it spills out and slides between our thighs.

I sigh and exhale a shaky breath, lost in the afterglow of the naughtiest thing I’ve ever done and surprised by how much I loved it. The pain recedes quickly, but the euphoria remains. I never expected to fall so fast.

Dante wraps his arms around my waist and presses my back tightly against his chest. He cradles me in his powerful arms, kissing me sweetly, whispering apologies I don’t understand, and directing me to the opposite side of the room. He pulls a towel from a drawer, holds it under the faucet, drenches it in hot water, and then applies it to my legs. He fusses, cleaning whatever remains of our nasty union, then helps me step into my shorts. His movements feel urgent, but I’m too lightheaded to question his motives.

“Is someone here?” I turn my head toward the swinging door and squint, focusing on a dark space in the jamb. I step closer, and the darkness disappears, replaced again by the light in the hallway. A flash of movement makes me panic. Someone was watching us. One of Dante’s men must have seen me in the most indelicate position possible. What if he filmed us? What if he’s the one who betrayed the family and helped Massimo try to kidnap me?

Dante, who notices everything, doesn’t seem concerned, but I need to know. I have to stop him before he gets away.

“Someone’s here!” I dart towards the door and fling it open, just in time to hear a pair of footsteps stomping upstairs. Adrenaline makes me fly. I turn the corner, lift my gaze and find the pervert on the second landing, struck still, waiting for his inevitable capture.

“Dante?”

TWENTY-TWO

DANIEL



Nadia's face pales. Her mouth falls open in a shock that reverberates like a bass drum against the kitchen walls.

I could kill Dante for returning early, creeping in the shadows, and ruining our moment alone. He promised to be out until morning but couldn't help himself.

He's an unapologetic voyeur who likes to watch.

We're identical twins, and he says watching me is like watching himself with Nadia. I don't share his kink. My time with Nadia is my own, and I don't watch if I can't join in.

"Nadia," Dante descends, approaching one slow step at a time, arms extended as if he's summoning her to his side. He's unaccustomed to being turned away. No one denies him anything, and it's obviously gone to his head. He must be out of his mind to believe she won't tear us apart.

She doesn't move but stays glued to my side, scared out of her mind. She closes her fist around the hem of my t-shirt and paws my chest with the palm of her hand, grasping for purchase. "Who... who are you? What's happening?" I circle my arms around her waist, but she wiggles out of my arms to face me. "Who are you? Are you Dante? Someone, please tell me what's happening before I scream." Shame devours me. I've frightened the only woman I've ever loved. Disrespected her and made her question her sanity. She's horrified, and no doubt feels violated.

This was not how I intended to tell her the truth.

“I’m Daniel. And this isn’t the first time we’ve met, baby. I’ve been here all along.” I don’t know why I think that will make her feel better. That’s pitiful consolation. I’ve lied to her, pretended I’m someone else because I wanted to be near her.

I saw her first. I’ve wanted her longer. But I don’t have a life to give her. Thanks to my father’s paranoia, I don’t exist on paper.

“When?” Her eyes brim with tears, and my heart explodes with grief. What the hell have we done?

“We made love upstairs,” Dante speaks, stepping closer to be near her. “I’m Dante. He’s Daniel. We’re identical twins. The only way we could have you was to agree to share you. I know we should have told you from the start, little one. But how do you explain something like this to a girl who doesn’t know the world outside her room?”

He somehow makes it worse.

“I’ve been with two men in one day? Her brow pulls low, stunned by his admission and too confused to process the horror. “When were you going to tell me? When was the perfect time to tell me you planned to turn me into your whore?”

My head spins so fast, my vision blurs. How did we fuck up so badly, and how did I expect it to be any different? I step into her space and offer my hand, desperate to touch, comfort, and make her understand that’s not how we see her.

This decision didn’t come easily for either of us. If the circumstances were different, we might have wanted to keep her all to ourselves. Coupled with her age, it was the main reason we kept our distance. We considered every detail, thought about logistics and schedules and even pondered relinquishing her to the other. That stalemate lasted weeks before we decided it would forever ruin our relationship. We’ve shared women more often than not. But I never expected to love her so much, and maybe I don’t.

If I truly loved her, I would have allowed her to turn me down— to choose for herself. I’m despicable and no better than

fucking Massimo.

“Leave me alone. I don’t even know you!” She shrivels and slaps my hand, her beautiful face flushed with rage. Her misery is so palpable I can feel the physical pain of her suffering.

“Today. We were telling you today. That’s why I came home early.” Dante interjects, no sign of remorse on his face. I know him well enough to know he feels as desperate as me, but he was raised by our father, who taught him never to show pain.

“I don’t believe you. You would have married me. You could have kept this up for years!” She slips away and races at full speed into her bedroom. I push Dante out of the way, nearly knocking him down the stairs hoping to reach her before she locks us out.

I catch the slamming door and crash into her room. My mind screams to give her space, but I can’t let her go before she hears us out. Not after what happened downstairs, yesterday, the day before, and almost every day of the last year, watching, waiting for my chance.

“You deserve better.” I hold my hands up, cautiously striding toward her, afraid she’ll bolt like a frightened deer. “I know you deserve better. We owe you a better explanation and a lifetime of apologies. But we can’t give you any of those things if you won’t listen to us.” My voice trembles as my broken heart splits open.

She blinks away tears from her heavy lashes and straightens her posture, channeling strength I’m not sure she has. “Who... rescued me?”

I lift my hand and bow my head with disgrace. “That was me.”

“I did,” Dante corrects me before the lightbulb flickers, and he realizes she’s not talking about her arranged marriage. “Rescued how?”

“Yesterday. The men. The guns. Which one of you saved me from being kidnapped?” She looks from side to side,

narrowing her gaze as she waits for the truth.

“That was me. We met two days before that, the day you moved in. I brought you here, to this room. I was hiding downstairs when those Massimo’s hired guns broke in. Dante would have done the same if he’d been here in my place.” I step closer, terrified she’s pulling away for good. They’re not married yet. She can still change her mind and flee to her father’s house. Massimo would scoop her up in seconds. His obsession runs almost as deep as mine.

“Did you fix this room for me?” Nadia chews her quivering lip, struggling to hold back tears that won’t stop coming.

I nod once, too embarrassed by my complicity to look her in the eye. “I’m sorry, sweetheart. You have every right to be furious.”

Nadia lifts her chin and clenches her fists at her side. She looks past me and stares daggers at Dante. “Daniel cooked for me, rescued me, made me feel comfortable in a strange house—what exactly did you do?” She sobs, her breath hitching as she scolds him. This is unprecedented, and I’m not sure he knows how to handle the challenge.

“I proposed.” Dante panics. Stuttered words fall from his lips as he tries to justify his absence in a way that doesn’t make him look like an asshole. “My plate is fuller than Daniel’s. That’s one of the reasons I believe this can work. You’ll have two men who love you, protect you, and provide for our children.” My eyes shoot open in tandem with Nadia’s. Everything he says makes the situation worse.

“Who are you people? How could you believe I would be okay with any of this? Shared by two men? I... I... I can’t be in the same room with you horrible men. Please leave me be.” She snuffles, wiping tears that freefall down her flushed cheeks. “Oh my God, you think I’d be fine with an open marriage? How many men do you plan to share me with? Will you be with other women too?”

I sweep across the room and corner her against the wall, my eyes glazed with tears, but my desire to solve this is

greater than my need to breathe. “We’re in love with you. Both of us. This is how we love; we don’t want to love you separately. We want to love you together, and there’s no one else. No other women. I meant what I said, you’re mine, and I’m yours.”

She swipes her hands across her cheeks and lifts her gaze, more hurt than angry. “But I’m not yours. You’ll freely share me and think I won’t notice because you have the same face. Let me go. You betrayed me. You both betrayed me. I don’t want to be here anymore.”

I shake my head, furious with myself for letting it get this far but unwilling to let her walk out the door. “No. I’ll leave you to Dante if you don’t want us together. I won’t fight it. I won’t try to break you up. I’ll walk away now.” I pull her into my arms and close my mouth over hers, inhaling her breath and swallowing every kiss I can get before I surrender the only woman I’ve ever loved to my brother. The decision will haunt me forever, but I won’t stay here to watch them. I’ll keep my distance and return to Sicily, living the life of a bitter monk.

“What if I want you? Will he step aside?” She points to Dante, who balks at the suggestion.

“I will not. I’m the one you’re marrying. I’ll be your legal husband. We have an agreement, and I’ll hold you to it. Are we clear?” He grits his teeth, making demands, but his stammering voice betrays him. He’s terrified of losing her but will choke on his pride before he begs her to stay.

Nadia squirms out of my grip, wrenching her arm with a jerk. She crosses the room and opens the small table by her bed. With a weary look, she removes the gun Dante gave her earlier today, holding it flat in the palm of her hand to keep us from disarming her. “I want to be alone. Please leave me and take this with you. I don’t want to be tempted to use it.”

TWENTY-THREE

DANIEL



“**Y**our plate is full?” I growl, my eye twitching as I try to stem the full brunt of my fury. “You’ll marry me or else?” I repeat the ridiculous words Dante thoughtlessly spouted moments ago, so enraged I could beat him unconscious. We planned to break it to her delicately, not bust into a room moments after we orgasmed.

Dante paces like a caged animal, his fingers furiously unfastening his tie as he struggles to steady his labored breath. I know he’s wrecked, but he has an unhelpful way of showing it. “What was I supposed to say? She basically told me she’d rather marry you than me. Why does she seem angrier at me? You were the one who lied and pretended to be someone you weren’t. I’m not losing her, Daniel. I set this up. I asked her to marry me. And the one risking a fucking war to be with her.”

I sit across his desk, barefoot, my jeans dotted with specks of cum, evidence of our lovemaking mocking me cruelly. I tap my fingers on my thighs, drumming incessantly, still stunned at how something so incredible turned to shit so fast. It was wrong to deceive her. It was the pinnacle of delusion to believe she’d go along like nothing happened and return to carrying on a love affair with two brothers.

These are untested waters for both of us. In the past, if someone rejected our proposition to fuck us together, we moved on without a care in the world. Nadia is different. This is different. And I know I’m not the only one who feels it. “After we deal with Massimo, I’ll head back to Sicily. She’s

marrying you, not me. Maybe in time, she'll forgive you enough to let you back in her bed."

Dante peels off his jacket, thrashing his arms, fighting with the fabric, then rolling it in a tight ball and tossing it in a corner. He curses me, her, Massimo, Sicily, Tommaso, and anything and everything that is currently making his life difficult. He glares with defiance, his jaw tightening as he groans, "No fucking way. No. No. No." The vein at his temple throbs as sweat drips down his red face. If he doesn't calm down, he's going to give himself a stroke.

I throw my arms up, clenching my fists, ready to beat his stubborn ass. "You're not listening to me. You're a powerful man used to getting what you want, and I know you're invested more than you're willing to admit. But this isn't what she wants, and I won't pressure her to accept something she never signed up for. She asked for your help. Give it to her. I'll disappear— it's what I do best." I scrub my hand through my hair, pulling the roots to shift the ache swallowing my heart.

The lost look in her eyes haunts me like a bad dream I want to forget. The sight of her tears makes me regret we ever met.

No, that's not true. I don't regret being with Nadia. Not one fucking minute. As much as I feel like a fucking prick for tricking her into this unusual arrangement, I wouldn't change a second of having her in my arms.

"She's pissed. I'll give her that. I should have stayed away. But I couldn't. I went to the office, walked the streets, and paid a visit to her fucking father, who is nowhere to be found. And I couldn't get her out of my mind. All I wanted to do was come home and crawl into her bed. Except I can't do that until she knows the truth," Dante turns to face the door, gesturing for me to return upstairs.

"We need to leave her in peace. She needs time and space to calm down. You can't bully her into feeling better about being duped; no matter what you call it, we tricked her. I tricked her by posing as you— which, if you remember, was

your idea from the start, dickhead.” That’s not an excuse. But it’s the truth.

He feigns ignorance. “That was a suggestion. You had the perfect opportunity to come clean when you’re fucking head was being her legs.” He calls me out, and I can’t deny I had three chances to confess. I took the easy way out like the coward I’ve become.

“You’re right. I have no honor.”

“Stop making me feel worse. We’ll fix this. We just need to figure out how. Go upstairs and check on her. Apparently, she hates me more than you.” He swings his arm and points to the hallway, urging me to go against my better judgment—something that’s become a regular occurrence.

“Fuck off, Dante. She asked for time. The least we can do is give her a night alone.” I give him the bird, pissed I ever listened to him in the first place. He didn’t force me to go along, but I couldn’t stand back and let him have her all to himself. When the hell did I become such a selfish bastard?

“I didn’t ask you to bust down her door. ” He paces towards the window, staring into the New York skyline while he thinks of a plan. “Knock on her door, ask her if she’s okay. No need to barge into her room or makes demands. No matter what transpired this evening, there’s still a threat outside, and she needs to know not to make any foolish moves like leaving without an escort. Tell her we’ll take it slow.” He smiles, satisfied with another optimistic plan that will surely blow up in our faces.

“How about you go upstairs and apologize? You didn’t say dick upstairs, big brother. You stood there without an ounce of shame after you watched me fuck her in the kitchen.” Anger pulls me to my feet, and I walk the short distance to the door, staring longingly at the path upstairs.

Dante defends himself, the lilt in his voice a dead giveaway that he doesn’t believe a word he hollers. “I did apologize. *In my way*. And I’ll apologize again when she talks to me.”

“Why? Why did you need to watch us? Why couldn’t you wait?” I cross my arms over my chest and stare at his smug expression, still confused by his choices.

“Leave me alone. You know why.”

TWENTY-FOUR

NADIA



Two men. I had sex with two men, hours apart, willingly, eagerly, and however much I want to scream to the sky that I knew nothing about it, I had an inkling something wasn't right. Dante's charming, debonair, says things that he thinks I want to hear with a confidence that makes me question his sincerity. He's rougher and meaner, with a soft center and hard exterior he doesn't want anyone to penetrate.

I thought he was the sexiest man I'd ever met. I would have sworn on a stack of bibles that he had no comparison. Until I noticed slight changes in his demeanor. Sometimes he was softer, kinder, and thoughtful enough to remember details from our time before. He became the perfect man— a bad boy with a heart of gold. How could I resist him?

But it wasn't Dante. And it wasn't Daniel. It was both working together to fulfill my deepest darkest fantasies.

I'm going to hell. No redemption. No purgatory. I'm on a one-way road leading me straight to the fiery pits, and the only thing on my mind is imagining them both together.

I've fallen faster than Lucifer.

How can I be in love with two men who betrayed me, took away my choices, and violated me through omission? Gianna Costa would be so disappointed in me. She bucked tradition, used her wits, and fled New York for a better life. I've traded one prison for another and one maniac for two. It's reprehensible, and yet, I'm still tempted to stay.

I've spent enough time in the shower, scrubbing my skin, washing, rinsing, and repeating. No amount of soap can remove the sinful scent of two men. And right now, I'm not entirely sure that's what I want. Tired of crying and longing to leave, I cut the water and step out onto the warm tile.

Who marries two men? Two powerful, wealthy, gorgeous men willing to share, watch, fuck me night and day until all I can do is beg for a tiny reprieve from mind-blowing orgasms. That's not meant to sound so hot, but that's what I've become. That's what those treacherous fiends have turned me into.

I reach for my towel and wrap the soft terrycloth around my shoulders, tightening the grip as I dash into the closet to hunt for clothes.

Is Massimo so bad? Yes, he's terrible. My only choice is remaining here or escaping in the dead of night for a second chance and another life.

I can do it. If I put my mind to it, I can do anything.

I won't be another mafia statistic. I'll save myself. I'll channel Gianna to give me strength.

It's half past midnight. There's no better time than the present to slink out into the dark night and disappear into the streets. They'll look for me, and maybe they'll catch me. But I need to try. For the sake of my conscience, not to mention my immortal soul, I need to know I didn't submit without a fight.

I search my closet for an inconspicuous bag I can use to pack lightly. Luggage draws too much attention, and I need to fade into the background, or I'll never make it past the doorman downstairs. If I can make it to Bruno, I can beg for enough money to get out of town. He has to help me. He'll agree with me. Living with two men, two lovers, is too scandalous to support.

It's a matter of family honor.

I fill the bag and dress as quickly as I can. I throw on jeans, layer blouses under a thick sweater, and strap on boots. This is the first time I've ever traveled on my own, and I need to consider all climates if I'm going to survive life on the road.

Adrenaline fuels my panicked retreat. I grab my coat, sling it over my forearm, and throw my purse in my bag. I should travel lighter, but this is the best I can do on short notice.

There's no time to linger on notes explaining my departure. They know what they did and can't be surprised I'd want to flee. As much as I hate them, I'll miss them. Both of them. They'll be hard to forget, but I can't stay. They've already made me fall in love in a matter of days. There's no telling what a year can do. I'll be their nasty girl, their immoral love slave, surrendering her body daily for their pleasure.

And why does that sound so fucking good?

Because I'm an unrepentant tramp who wishes they'd never confessed so I could keep deluding myself with hot sex.

I tiptoe toward the door and peek through the crack, searching for any signs of Dante or Daniel. The coast looks clear, but it won't stay that way much longer. They're undoubtedly downstairs debating which one needs to talk me off the ledge. As if any of this could make sense to anyone. I know I'm young, inexperienced, impressionable, and weak, but I know when something feels wrong. They should have been honest from the beginning. Chances are I would have said no, but at least I would have entered this with my eyes open.

They tricked me into falling in love. That was their plan all along.

I close my eyes and inhale, holding my breath as I twist the knob and pull it open, marching out with a determined stride that gets me nowhere. The air leaves my lungs in a loud gasp as I slam into Daniel Serpico's chiseled chest and stumble back into my room.

"Are you going somewhere?" His unforgiving tone and stoic expression make me shiver. Even if I didn't recognize him by his clothes, I'd know which twin was standing before me. They may look like carbon copies, but I've learned to discern their scent.

“Yes, I’m... leaving.” My voice trembles with doubt, like I’ve suddenly changed my mind and lost my will. I don’t want to leave, not him, not now. The only thing I want to do is slide to the floor and take this man with me. “You can’t, sweetheart. You know you can’t.” Daniel is the one who calls me sweetheart. That’s another tell. He steps through the threshold and closes the door behind him. I take a step back, more afraid of myself than him. He slips the strap on my shoulder and places my bag on the floor, shaking his head with palpable disappointment that makes me want to beg his forgiveness.

“You can’t keep me here.” I’m a woman scorned, and there’s no shame in standing my ground. But even I don’t believe what I’m saying.

“Of course, I can. I don’t want to hold you prisoner, but I’ll do whatever I must to keep you safe. The alternative, a world without you, is too painful to imagine.”

My heart skips a beat, and his blue gaze debilitates my already weak resolve. But no matter how much I want to give in, I can’t.

“Don’t pretend this doesn’t benefit you.” I stare defiantly, lips pursed with rage I can’t express. “This isn’t only about Massimo De Luca. This is about you and Dante forcing me into your perverse relationship. I’m Catholic. *I’ve been confirmed!* I didn’t go through all that trouble to live a secret life of sin. I may not have exhibited much shame these last few days, but that doesn’t mean I don’t feel it. Dante and I were marrying. I thought I was making love to my future husband, not his brother. Not deceitful twins who plan to turn me into their whore.” I snap, spewing words and poison that make his calm expression twist with anger.

“Stop calling yourself that, or I swear to God, I will haul you over my knee and spank your ass until you forget that word exists. I love you. That means something to me. Does it mean something to you?” He lunges forward and traps me against the closest wall. His hands on my throat restrain me. The touch of his hard body makes me too weak to struggle.

He tilts his head and examines my face with glowing fascination. “Most of the city is Catholic, Nadia. It never stops anyone from pursuing pleasure. But *I am* sorry. I should have told you from the start. This wasn’t a game. No one was having a laugh at your expense. We just wanted you and didn’t know how to broach the subject without losing you for good. Have we lost you for good, sweetheart?” He invades my space, and I let him.

I want him. *I need him.*

I’d follow this man to hell if he led the way.

TWENTY-FIVE

DANTE



I stare at the ceiling and watch the light pouring through a crack in the drawn curtains. I should have closed them, but I thought the sound of rain would help lull me to sleep. It didn't.

I can't turn off my mind. I can't wish away the ache in my heart.

The clock says 4:30, but I haven't slept a wink. Nadia is a room away, curled in Daniel's embrace, a smile of contentment spread across her beautiful face. I know because I sent him in, and when he failed to return from her room, I crept in and watched them sleep.

It's what I do. I love to watch almost as much as I like to fuck. Daniel doesn't share my affliction. Although I'm not sure, I can call it a sickness if I never want to be cured. He doesn't know what he's missing. Watching Nadia is a religious experience that takes me to a higher plane of existence. I can't breathe. I can't move. The only thing I want to do is watch the look in her eyes and the bliss on her face.

There's no need to pleasure myself because the sight is enough to make me come.

I turn my head and stare at the clock on my nightstand, willing the little hand to move faster. If I could make the sun rise, I would. If I could make her forgive me, I'd get on my hands and knees. Is this love? Real love? I never thought I'd

say that, but there's no denying the loss I already feel as I consider letting her go.

This is my fault. Daniel wanted to handle things differently, but I made him wait. My stubborn streak knows no bounds— it never has. It's a trait I got from my father. He also believed he had an answer for everything and couldn't stand to have his judgment questioned.

I insisted we wait until the Marchesi gala and play our hand publicly. After all, who would deny me their daughter? I'd make a match and reluctantly unite with a family who needed redemption. I never expected her to come to me first, and my enthusiasm to be with her resulted in these horrible decisions.

Daniel wanted to help her escape. He could call in favors, alter her identity and whisk her away to a villa in Sardinia, away from prying eyes and mafiosos looking to gain a reward for her return. He suspected she didn't want to marry Massimo De Luca or Giovanni Agostini because what self-respecting woman would?

He kept his ear to the ground for months and uncovered secret meetings between the families. With my permission, he worked to put his plan in motion with help from our contact at the State Department. He bought a house on the southern coast of Sardinia and made it ready. It wasn't the first time he'd helped a woman leave a horrible arrangement. Eighteen years ago, he orchestrated a daring escape for our childhood friend, Gianna Costa, who now lives a much happier life in the south of France.

I should have let him do the same for Nadia. But the more I watched her, the more I wanted to keep her here. If she fled for Europe, Daniel would have her all to himself. They'd live happily ever after on a beach, loving, laughing, and having babies that weren't mine, and the thought of sitting on the sidelines made me see red.

I'm not Daniel. I'm not selfless.

He offered to leave her to me if I'm who she chose, but there's no way I'd reciprocate the same courtesy. I can't allow

him to have her all to himself.

It's the act of a selfish bastard, and that's who I am.

I'm not a man who thinks of happiness often. You don't miss something you've never known. But I know it now. Nadia made me happy, and because I'm a world-class asshole who never deserved it in the first place, I'm in danger of never feeling that rush again.

She was right to call me out. And she was right in choosing him over me.

I took her to dinner and spent money on a flashy ring. He saved her. He worked tirelessly to make her feel at home. The motherfucker even had to throw in a homecooked meal before nailing her ass in the kitchen. How the fuck do I compete with that?

A sudden vibration makes me lose my train of thought. I search the sheets for my phone and bring it towards my face to read the screen. It's Diego. I tap the receiver and answer, "What is it? It's 5:00. Whatever you say better be worth waking me up." He doesn't know I've been awake for hours.

"I'm at a bar in Brooklyn..." He yells over music as he walks to a quieter place to finish the call.

"Why are you there, and why are you drinking at this hour? The sun is about to rise." I don't know why I'm questioning the hours he keeps. He's twenty-five, and I'm not his father. Jesus Christ, I sound like an old man.

"It's Bruno. He confessed it was his father who broke into the penthouse but not for the reason you think. Massimo had nothing to do with it. Tommaso doesn't give a damn who marries his daughter. He wants to start a war to avenge his father and scoop up whatever territory remains when the dust settles. He's been playing her off different families, hoping to get at least two bids, and when she suddenly meets a mysterious and tragic end, they'd blame each other for her death. It sounds insane, but according to Bruno, his father never counted on you coming into the picture."

“What are you saying? Tommaso planned to kill his own daughter?” I shake my head as I speak, sure I’ve missed something.

“Yes. As soon as Bruno uncovered the plan, he called to meet me. He doesn’t believe his father has given up his plans and fears for his sister’s life. He asked me to place extra men outside your building and keep Nadia from leaving alone. His father is reckless and desperate. Antonio and Massimo are on to him, and he has little time to pull off the hit.” The gravity of his words sinks in, and panic tears into my soul. I fly out of bed, grab my gun and storm into the hall toward Nadia’s room.

Daniel is with her. I know he would never let her slip away.

But I need to see it for myself.

I creep in as quietly as possible into a pitch-black room, my footsteps muffled by the ridiculous faux rug Daniel was confident she’d adore. His intuition is always on point, but it’s irritating how often he proves me wrong. The closer I get to the bed, the more my heart sinks. It’s too quiet. No rustling. No heavy breathing.

The sheets are warm and reek of sex. That bastard weaseled in a second round while I lay awake, wracked with guilt in the other room. The blankets are pushed to one side like someone kicked them off their legs and jumped out of bed. It’s probably nothing. Nadia didn’t finish her dinner, and Daniel is always hungry. But a gnawing feeling in the pit of my stomach tells me otherwise.

I reach the landing and descend the first flight of stairs without making a sound, glancing left to right for signs of either of them. The three of us should be alone in the house, but whispers in the hall tell me otherwise. I know that voice. I’ve heard that warble before, but the hushed volume makes it hard to place.

I slink into an adjacent office and hide behind an open door. I can’t call my men without drawing attention to my position, and I don’t want to give up the element of surprise.

Another whispered threat jars my memory. I focus on the darkened space and see Tommaso holding Nadia in a chokehold with the butt of his pistol resting on her temple. I freeze, struck by a terror I've never experienced. In my line of work, my life is compromised almost daily. I've had so many guns pointed at my vital organs I've grown desensitized to the threat.

But this is different.

No one threatens my wife.

“Let her go, or I will hunt you down, pull your heart out of your fucking chest and shove it up your ass. And when I'm done, I'll deliver your corpse to your mother's doorstep.” Daniel growls, his face beet red with rage.

Nadia whimpers, probably frightened out of her mind. I'll kill him. I'll gut him from stem to stern for pointing a gun at her and forcing me to murder him in her presence. But there's no other choice. She's been betrayed enough for one day, and I won't disappoint her again.

“Let her go or die. That's your only choice.” I step out of the shadows and slowly walk into the light. Tommaso's eyes grow wide. He looks from Daniel to me, shifting his gaze in stunned disbelief, terrified he's seeing a ghost.

Daniel shouldn't be here. He died almost twenty years ago— or so he thought.

Tommaso stumbles back and removes the muzzle from Nadia's head. Daniel pulls her to him and slips out of my way, leaving her father without a human shield. I take my shot, just one. That's all I need. Tommaso falls back. He doesn't grasp for purchase or gasp for air. He can't. One bullet in his forehead is enough to take him out for good.

I rush to her, needing to hold her in my arms, and beg for forgiveness. But she pulls away, wrenching her arms from Daniel's embrace to examine her father's corpse.

“You filthy piece of shit!” Nadia kicks his body— once, twice, and a third for good measure. Daniel's eyes flash to mine and mine to his, suddenly aware our girl has a temper to

match our own. “You low down dirty son of a bitch.” She stomps on his chest and then kicks his balls, breathing fire she’s held in for far too long. Her eyes flash to mine. Her fists clenching like she’s seconds from clocking me out.

“You! How dare you lie to me! You said you’d fall at my feet. But you didn’t. You let your brother do it and then watched! How could you?” She brushes the tousled hair off her face and scowls. “How could you?”

Her words bring me to my knees, figuratively and literally. I take her tiny hands in mine, inches from her father’s body and Daniel’s scrutinizing gaze. “Forgive me. I should have told you. It was vile and unfair. You deserved better from us, and I promise you, we’ll *do* better. We’ll *be* better. I’ll be on my best behavior— at least when it comes to you. But don’t leave us. Please don’t go.”

She wipes her tears, pulls one hand out of mine, and offers it to Daniel. “Do you promise to never make me choose between the two of you? Because I don’t think I can. I love you both,” she sighs and pulls us into her embrace, one arm around me, one around Daniel.

“We won’t, sweetheart. We love you, too.” Daniel answers before me, reassuring her with a kiss on the forehead. I will always be outdone.

EPILOGUE- 3 YEARS LATER

NADIA



“How’s my little one?” Dante lies on the sand, his arms pulled over his head as we try to catch a few more rays before sunset. I bring my hand to my forehead, smiling gleefully as shimmering light bounces off the rolling waves from the deep blue Mediterranean.

“I’m in heaven.” I walk through the damp sand toward the water, kicking surf with my toes, spinning joyfully as a gust of wind lifts my hair off my shoulders. This is our third summer in Sardinia and the first one since moving here permanently late last year. Diego runs the Serpico Family now. It’s his birthright, and he wanted it far more than Dante ever did.

Our lives are much better here, in a quiet paradise where we can be ourselves, away from the judgment and men who want to hunt my husbands down.

Men like my father. A man so hellbent on revenge, he had no qualms about murdering me, sacrificing me to make Dante suffer. My life meant nothing, and, in the end, so did his. Daniel delivered his body to my nonna, a woman who understood his plan all along and never shielded me from danger. I feel her loss, but I’ve moved on. The only Corvo who ever mattered was Bruno, and thanks to Dante, our family honor and territories have been restored.

I pray for his safety daily and look forward to seeing him over Christmas. I hear he has news of his own.

I've played the good wife for three years, by Dante's side in public and in both my lovers' arms at night. It's unconventional and scandalous, but that's what makes it sublime. No guilt. No fear of divine repercussions. I'll live my life to the fullest and love the only way I know how.

I couldn't part with either, and I hope I never do.

Daniel leaves his place on the sand and follows me on a walk along the water. His arm encircles my waist. His lips seal to my neck, making me skip a step and fall into his arms. "You're overheated, sweetheart. It's time to go in and get you cleaned up for dinner." I follow blindly, my hand in his, eager to go wherever he takes me.

"What are you making me?" I lift my gaze and watch his mouth curve into a wicked smile that makes my heart race with naughty expectations.

"I'm going to make you come, baby."

Daniel shuts the shower door behind him, turns the handle, and runs his hand across the stream of water. He unfastens my top, pulling it off my shoulders and allowing the baby pink triangles to fall to the shower floor. My bottoms follow. I don't know how or when Daniel removes his swim trunks, but the feel of his naked cock stabbing my back tells me the deed is done.

"You're so fucking sexy, sweetheart. Whenever I look at you, I think of a hundred ways to fuck you." He palms my breasts, nipples beading tightly under his massive hands, calloused from spending hours in his woodshop building a cradle from scratch. The man is a god, and he's been hard at work since we learned we're expecting our first baby in eight months.

I don't know who the father is, and I don't need to know. Identical twins share identical DNA, and no test could tell them apart. It doesn't matter anyway. My baby will have two gorgeous daddies and more love than I ever knew growing up.

"You're so wet. So ready and primed for me. Not even motherhood has weakened your insatiable need for cock." His

deep voice and filthy words make my skin prickle. He's not wrong. I want it day and night. The more you get, the more you crave, and this pregnancy has only amplified my trampy ways.

He spins me around and presses my back against his hard chest. A thrill passes through me. I know what he's doing before he lifts my arms and places my hands against the foggy shower wall. Dante stands on the opposite side of the glass, naked with a drink in his hand, ready to watch the show. He's incorrigible. Filthy. And makes me feel so beautiful whenever he watches his brother fuck me. He's corrupted me to my core and fashioned me into his willing love slave— the one thing I swore I'd never be.

I didn't know what I was missing.

“Tell Dante what I'm going to do to you.” Daniel runs his fingers down my spine, along the rounded curve of my ass, and cups my pussy. “Tell him, or I'm going to stop.”

I stare at Dante's blue eyes, inches from mine, only divided by glass, and moan, “Baby, Daniel's going to fuck me.”

Dante takes a drink and nods. “Good. You need it.”

Daniel plunges his big cock inside me, stretching me open, pushing me forward, and pressing my breasts against the glass. I can't hear Dante hum, but I know the look on his face. I can practically feel the vibrations on the glass between us. He holds his hand out, pretending to touch me, sipping whiskey while I moan, wail, and bump against the glass in time with Daniel's thrusts. I turn my head, offering Daniel my lips, my tongue, longing for his kiss and watching Dante move closer to look, always watching, always waiting for his turn.

“Come here. Fuck me together.” I curl my finger and call him into the shower. Sometimes he listens, and sometimes he continues to stare, lost in a world of his own, a world I want to join.

He pulls the handle and steps onto the wet tile, nudging us further inside. My breath catches. My tummy roils. There's no

time to think or hesitate. These rare moments always go so fast.

In one motion, they lift me together, between them, my legs wrapped around Dante's waists, and his cock nestled deep inside me. Daniel slides his cock inside my ass, and I gasp at the dual invasion, moving in tandem, a perfect fluid motion of two bodies, the men I love, deriving every ounce of pleasure from me and me alone.

"Dante! Daniel!" My vision goes hazy, and my limbs convulse. I've never felt so full, so loved, and so fucking satisfied. One orgasm turns into two. The rapid beat of my racing heart makes me pant, sob, scream, and cry for more. There's always so much more. When we come, we do it together, as one, lost in a rapturous bliss that sends us into another world.

I have it so much better than Gianna Costa. And next time I see her, I'll make sure to tell her.

THANKS FOR READING!

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And many more!

Thanks for reading and I hope you come back again!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Matilda is a Texas girl in love with a Philly boy who loves to write dirty books about two people who trip into love and fumble their way into a Filthy, Funny, Happily Ever After.

I live in Austin, with my husband, two crazy Chihuahuas and an even crazier cat. And I spend most of my day writing dirty romance books about older men who fall in love with younger women and make fools of themselves trying to win their hearts.

I like my hero to be successful, sweet, suave, sophisticated and kind— and then I want him to lose all his composure and game when he meets the heroine. I want him to turn into a bumbling idiot when he spots the girl of his dreams and revert to a teenage boy in a man's body trying to win her.

I like my heroines to be witty, intelligent, and unshakeable—who could do just as well without a man—until the hero convinces her otherwise.

I write A LOT OF AGE GAP—because I LOVE AGE GAP ROMANCE. I've got no other excuse for it.

No matter what kind of story it is, my ladies are ADORED, and my endings are always Happily EVER AFTER, not HFN.

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