

*You belong to
me now.*

Devil's Captive

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

CELIA
AARON

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DEVIL'S CAPTIVE

I'm to be married. It should be a time of joy, but all I feel is dread as I walk down the aisle toward a man who only wants me for my family ties. But my walk is cut short when Mateo Milani enters the cathedral, murders my groom, and takes me for himself.

Mateo is cold, violent, and vicious beyond anything I've ever experienced. The devil with a handsome face and eyes that haunt my dreaming and waking moments. There's no escaping his grasp, and even if I could run, Mateo would find me and drag me right back to hell. He wants to possess me, stealing pieces of my soul with his cruel words and heated touches.

His motives are sinister, his methods calculated.

I hate him in ways I've never hated anyone in my life.

But the part of this nightmare that scares me the most is the way he makes me forget my hatred, the way he commands my pleasure, and the way I crave him when I should want him dead.

TW: This is a dark romance with equally dark themes, language, and situations. Violence, mind games, hide and seek terror, revenge, attempted SA, dubious-con, then some additional extra-bloody violence.

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LUCRETIA

A white dress. A full cathedral. Hundreds of people turning to stare at the bride. At *me*.

My stomach churns, bile rising at the back of my throat as I force my feet to carry me forward. My father holds my arm in a death grip as my mother watches me with thin lips and narrowed eyes from the front row.

I won't run, no matter how badly I want to. There's nowhere for me to go. Nowhere that could shelter me from the hell I'd unleash if I tried to escape this narrow path to damnation.

This wasn't supposed to be my fate. I was free of my family's grasp. I'd finally made it out into the wide world beyond the confines of my last name.

Until I was pulled back in, forced into the role I'd tried so hard to avoid.

I'm walking back into it right now, one crystal-encrusted heel after another, crushing the white rose petals that were hastily thrown down by a distant cousin with her hair in ringlets and a skip in her step, one who will likely someday meet my same fate: a forced marriage for political and monetary gain.

The acid in my stomach tries to force its way into my mouth and onto the bruised petals. I swallow it back, barely.

I sway when I get halfway, the entire cathedral crawling with black dots. No, it's my veil—like dozens of ants on the

white fabric, ready to sting and bite. My mother's lips somehow grow even thinner, her disapproval eating through me. I have to keep moving.

This is it. This is the end of what was supposed to be my life. Now it will belong to someone else.

"He won't hurt you," my father whispers over the drone of the organ and pulls my arm even tighter, making my shoulder ache from the pressure. "He gave me his word."

My heart pounds so loudly I'm surprised no one else can hear it. It's like a drum in my ears, a funeral dirge of incessant percussion that beats discordantly against the light melody floating through the cathedral.

When I let my gaze rise, I find my intended. Horatio Manchello. He's young, his eyes bright as he surveys his bride. Even through the veil, I can see the way he stares, his eyes traveling up and down my form as his face breaks into a wide smile.

I've never met him, never so much as shook his hand, and he's looking at me as if I'm his next meal. Dread pools in my gut and sweat begins to bead along my forehead. I sway again, the black ants crawling closer and promising pain.

"Keep it together," my father hisses.

I can't. I try to stop walking, but my father pulls me along, our steps halting as he half drags me to the altar.

My mother pins me with a disapproving glare, and I wonder how long it will be before she backhands me again. Even now, I feel the dull ache along my jaw, a bruise probably growing right beside the one she gave me a week ago. Or the healed one I got a month ago when this nightmare began.

"*You must do your duty to this family!*" Her voice echoes in my mind along with the *crack* her hand made when she hit me. It had been years since she'd struck me. Ferdinand had put a stop to it when he was old enough to challenge her and my father.

Ferdinand.

The thought of my brother is like a lead weight in my throat, and I have to banish him from my mind. If I don't, I'm going to collapse right here in front of everyone and beg the priest to stop this from happening to me.

Not that he would. The priest knows my family, our history, and the power of our name. He would never cross my father, not for all the gold in the Vatican. Gold isn't useful if you're dead.

My father leads me up the steps, my legs shaking as I silently beg him to stop. But those pleas are answered in the same way the voiced ones were. Ignored. Overruled. Forgotten.

"This isn't about you, Lucretia!" he'd snapped at me when I begged him to let me return to school, to call off the wedding. *"This is about our family!"*

"Treat her well," my father says stiffly as he grips my hand and pushes it toward Horatio.

Horatio inclines his head in a gracious nod, then takes my cold, shaking fingers. His eyes meet mine through the veil. Where I'm falling apart, he's confident. Of course he is. He's joining the most powerful family in this city. He's gotten exactly what he wanted, exactly what he's paid for.

"Bella." He smiles as the music stops, the echoes of the organ bouncing around before falling into silence as the wedding guests sit with creaky knees and breathy sighs.

I can barely think, barely stay upright as he grips my hand tightly and turns to the priest.

"Shall we begin?" the old man in the ridiculous hat asks.

"Please." Horatio is still smiling, happy in his triumph.

The church is silent now. My head is buzzing like an angry hive. I swallow my bile again and just try to breathe.

Noise comes from behind me; no doubt my rowdy cousins are up to their usual bullshit, even at a wedding, even when I'm falling to pieces. All it will take is one look from my mother, and they will get in line like they alwa—I jump when

something pops nearby, like the sound of someone hitting a snare for only one tart beat.

I feel something splash against my veil and body. Then the hand that was holding mine too tightly loosens and lets go.

Horatio falls.

I blink and look down. My dress is painted with a spray of crimson, red dotting the satin and lace.

The cathedral is no longer silent. Women are screaming and men yelling. The priest has ducked behind his podium.

I turn and realize the noise I'd heard wasn't my rowdy cousins. It was the men with assault rifles spreading out across the church, their guns pointed upward or into the crowd. Some of them are firing, the blasts loud in the marbled space. I stare, horrified, as they seem to pick out certain men from the groom's side and force them to kneel in a row, rifles pointed at the backs of their heads. An older woman has fallen to her knees and wails, and I can only guess it's Horatio's mother. More shots. More blood.

It's slow motion and somehow sped up all at once. None of it makes sense—not the killers in black, not the blood, not the screams. I can only blink, my mind failing to comprehend what's happening.

It's chaos, and everyone would be stampeding out the doors if they weren't guarded by men wielding guns. There's nowhere to go. We're trapped, and Horatio's brothers lie dead on the steps just beneath me. Wiped out.

The screams somehow pull me back to reality, to the present. They send a shock through me, and I realize I haven't been breathing. My knees threaten to give again as I take in the barbaric enormity of what's happened in a mere fraction of a moment as I gasp in a breath.

But my eye is drawn up and away from the carnage. A man is striding down the center aisle, his gaze on me. Pale eyes, dark hair—he's wearing a tux with a red rose in his lapel, a gun in one of his hands. It's strange what you notice in life-or-death situations, I suppose. Because I focus on the rose, on

the tiny bit of beauty that catches my eye. Not on the groomsmen who lie in pools of blood or my intended who weakly tries to crawl away.

I look at the rose as it comes closer, as the man who's wearing it climbs the steps and aims his gun at Horatio, then pulls the trigger two times. It makes the same pop sound I heard earlier.

The guests scream again, their screeches echoing around the beautiful cathedral and bouncing off the gilt ceiling tiles and the Byzantine fresco of Mary.

Still, I look at the rose. Maybe because I want to see something beautiful right before I die, before a bullet rips through me the same way it did through Horatio. Will the man with the rose shoot me several times to make sure I'm dead, the same way he did to my groom? I swallow hard, my tongue thick and my ears ringing. Even so, I keep my eyes on the silky petals, the edges of them darker than the center. Maybe it's better this way. It was only last night I was thinking of doing it myself to escape this day. My life was going to be over the moment the vows were finished, so why not end it sooner? But now, now I realize I don't want to die. It doesn't matter though, because I no longer have a choice.

"Father Illio. Up!" The man bangs on the lectern. "Let's go!"

The hat rises almost comically behind the polished wood until the frightened old man's eyes appear. They widen when they see the man with the rose.

"M-Mateo?" he asks.

"I'm here for the wedding." The man takes my hand. "Let's get on with it."

He holsters his gun and turns to glare at me, his eyes narrowing. "I'd like to get a look at my bride before we seal the deal." He reaches for my veil.

"Stop!" my father bellows.

The man—Mateo—turns and looks at him. "I'll double Horatio's bride price." He says it so easily, as if he's offering a

few coins for a wayward child to toss into a wishing fountain.

“No!” my father yells but doesn’t move. Two men have their guns trained on him. Mateo seems to have brought a small army with him. All the biggest players in the city are here for my wedding to Horatio, their families at their sides. They didn’t come to the wedding armed. An oversight, but that doesn’t mean they aren’t capable of doing some damage. This man, Mateo, must have a death wish. There’s no way he’ll walk out of here alive, much less as my husband.

I blink through the fog of my shock and fear. Wait. Did ... did he just offer ...

“I’ll triple it, but that’s as far as I’ll go.” He holds my father’s angry stare. “I can marry her with or without your agreement, Leonard.” Mateo glances at the armed men all around the sanctuary, their guns at the ready. “And I’m happy to spill more blood if that’s what it takes.”

I try to dart down the steps, but Mateo catches me around my waist and yanks me to him, my back to his front. He holds me there, his arm like an iron bar across my waist as his other hand goes to my throat and squeezes.

“You aren’t going anywhere, princess,” he hisses in my ear.

I gasp and dig my nails into his hand.

He laughs, low and sinister. “Keep going. I’ll pay you back in kind.”

I freeze when he tightens his grip on my neck, stopping my air.

I stare at my father through the bloody veil, tears welling in my eyes. He doesn’t even look at me. Not once.

“Deal.” He backs up and sits next to my mother.

Mateo laughs again, the low sound rumbling through me as he lets go of my throat.

“Father?” I cry.

Mateo yanks me to him and snatches the bloody veil, lifting it and letting it fall behind my head.

“Daddy!” I scream again, using a name that hasn’t been on my lips since I was five years old.

“Don’t look at him.” Mateo grabs my chin and forces me to meet his gaze. “Look at *me*.” His eyes rake up and down, lingering for a brief moment on the bruise at my jawline. When his light blue eyes meet mine, something inside me goes cold. I don’t know this man, don’t know anything about him. It was the same with Horatio, but this ... this is *not* Horatio. Horatio was typical—maybe even soft, maybe I could’ve learned to tolerate him—that’s what my mother said, anyway. But this man—he’s cold and hard. He murdered without a thought and intends to take me by brute force. I can’t let this happen.

“No.” My voice is a whisper as I cringe away from him.

He smirks, his full lips twisting up on one side. “Oh yes, princess.”

I try to take a step back, but he grabs my arm and pulls me around to face the priest.

“Make it fast, Father.” His grip tightens on me. “I’m a busy man.”

“Let go!” I try to yank free of his hold.

“Lucretia!” my mother cries.

I turn my head to look at her, to find some help. But all she does is give me the look I’ve seen my whole life—the one that says if I don’t quiet down and do as I’m told, the consequences will be painful. My heart turns to ash, the gray bits of it floating into nothing at my feet.

“Mother?” I choke on the word. “Please.”

“No one’s going to help you, princess.” Mateo pulls me to him, his eyes burning into me. “No one’s going to do a thing to stop me. Not your family, not a single person in this church, not even the priest. From this day forward, you are mine to do with as I please.” He smiles, the cruelty in it sending a chill

down my spine. “A Fontana in my hands, to break as I see fit. I’ve looked forward to this day for a long, long time.”

“Let me go.” I hate the way my voice cracks, a sob rising in my throat.

“Never.” He takes my hand in a crushing grip and turns us to face the priest. “Get on with it.”

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Father Illio stumbles through whatever words he's used at a million weddings before, then arrives at the vows. When he finally falls silent, he looks at me with wide eyes, reminding me of an owl.

I didn't plan for this part, though every other bit of my scheme has gone perfectly. I wiped out Horatio and his brothers easily—no one predicts a massacre at a wedding. Perhaps they should have. That thought makes me smile.

My bride cringes away when I do.

I squeeze her small hand tighter and pull her to my side. "I take this woman as my wife, and she takes me as her husband. There."

Father Illio blinks slowly, looking more like an owl than ever. "I, ah ... do you have the rings?" he asks.

"Certainly." I turn to Sonny and point down at the best man, Horatio's older brother. "Sonny, do the honors."

He kneels and goes through his pockets as some of the guests mutter with disapproval or horror, then rises with a ring box in his hand. With an easy toss, he flicks it to me, and I grab it from the air as he goes back to pointing his gun at what's left of the Manchello family.

I flip open the box. "Not bad." Taking the ring out, I peer at the diamonds set along the platinum band. "A little over the top, but I can't say it's outside my taste at all." I pluck the ring free with my teeth, then drop the box.

My bride, her entire body shaking, doesn't offer me her left hand. So, I reach down and take it, then pull the ring from my mouth and slide it onto her finger.

"Where's mine?" I ask.

She shakes her head. A pretty little thing, brown hair in waves and hazel eyes. She's got a mouth that was made to take cock; mine of course. No one else's. I'll be putting it to good use later. When I think of how she'll cry and beg me to stop, it only makes me smile wider.

Red takes a ring box from one of the bridesmaids and opens it, taking out a simple platinum band. I don't let him give it to my bride. She's so scared she'd drop it, and then I'd have to make her father crawl to it and pick it up. Actually, that doesn't sound so bad.

I flip the ring in the air like a coin. She looks up, watching it turn end over end. Then I swipe it from the air and slip it onto my finger. A tight fit. I'll have to get it resized.

My bride's bottom lip trembles, a tear streaking down her perfect face. "Please let me go," she whispers.

"I already told you, princess. I'm *never* letting you go." I grab her waist and kiss her hard on the mouth, bruising her with the force of my claim to her body, and most of all, to her name.

The priest's voice is barely audible, his tone defeated. "I now pronounce you man and wife."

No one cheers. The organ doesn't start up. The flower girl is weeping in her mother's lap. Blood stains the marble floors, and I'm certain there's brain matter on my bride's skirt.

I couldn't be happier. I pulled off the coup of my fucking dreams, and it went perfectly. The Fontanas are on their back heel, and the bloodshed has only just begun.

When I let her go, she draws in a harsh breath and tries to back away from me.

"No, princess. You're with me from now on." I scoop her into my arms and carry her down the stairs.

My men fall in behind me, their guns still at the ready as I carry away my spoils of war.

Her father will contact me within the hour, and I have no doubt what's left of Horatio's family will be out for blood. I'm ready for them.

I crave this violence, and if I could bathe in the blood of my enemies, I'd happily do so. My bride shakes in my arms, her gaze darting around, frantically looking for someone to save her. No one will. I've made sure of that.

Once I get her out of here, I'll take great pleasure in breaking her. My mouth waters at the thought of it.

"Where are we going?" Her voice quavers as I carry her out into the sun.

I smirk at her. "Home, princess. Isn't that how the fairy tale ends? I take you home and fuck you full of my children?"

She's dazed, her eyes wide as she looks up at me with pure terror. Fuck, it makes me go hard in my pants.

"This isn't real. We aren't married. We—"

"I think you'll find that we are, princess. The marriage certificate will be on file within the hour."

Sonny opens the back door of the black SUV parked right in front of the cathedral. I place my stolen bride inside and slam the door, her white dress caught in the jamb and floating in the light breeze.

I bang on the top of the car, and it takes off. The rest of my men fill the other SUVs while Benito and Red make quick work of knifing the tires of the nearby cars.

Once that's done, I motion for Red. He bars the cathedral doors and jets down the stairs, a grin on his face as he jumps into my car. People start banging on the doors, and it's only a matter of time before they try to escape out the back. That door is barred, too. It'll be a while before anyone shows up on my doorstep.

"I can't believe we pulled it off." Red jumps into the passenger seat as I take off, tires squealing.

“You doubted me?” I ask.

“No, I just figured one of us would be choking on his own blood right about now, but they barely put up a fight.” Red seems almost disappointed in the lack of conflict.

“The Fontanas and the Manchellos are old families with few heirs. You know this. We killed Horatio and his brothers. His mother and a few cousins are all that’s left,” Sonny intones from the backseat.

“Easy pickings.” Red reloads his gun. “I thought about popping them right then and there.”

“We spilled the blood that needed to be spilled.” I enjoyed every second of it. My retribution on both families was in no way swift, but it was still satisfying all the same, especially now that I have a Fontana bride.

“I need more. Those pricks—they didn’t deserve such quick deaths.” Benito keeps an eye out behind us.

“I’m just getting started, Benny.” My bloodlust is still raging, and the ones I really want dead—Leonard and Carmen Fontana—are still breathing. But I’m not going to let them off so easy. Not like I did Horatio and his brothers. The Fontanas are going to suffer before I let the axe fall on their worthless necks. Now that I have their daughter and sole remaining child in my grip, I’m going to twist the knife in their side and bleed them slowly. Which reminds me. “Sonny, text the account guy and tell him to wire the bride price to Leonard.”

“You’re really going to pay it?” Sonny pulls out his phone despite his surprise.

“I’m a man of my word. You know this.”

Sonny sends the text. “How long before we get that money back?”

“Depends.” I press the pedal farther, speeding toward my compound in the wooded hills outside the city. “Once I’m bored with torturing their daughter, I’ll finally end them. And once I do, all those assets will come right back to my family through my *beloved* wife.”

Red grins. “You’re going to wreck that poor, sweet, innocent girl.”

Benito laughs. “I bet she’s never even touched a dick.”

“A virgin? God forbid.” Red snickers.

“She’s a princess, boys. Of *course* she’s a virgin.” One I’m going to tear to shreds on my cock. Fuck, just the thought of it makes me hard again. It doesn’t hurt that she’s a beautiful little thing. Doe eyes and a curvy body. I’m going to fucking wreck her, and I’m going to enjoy every goddamn second of it.

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LUCRETIA

The SUV pulls down a long drive. I'm pressed against the window, trying to memorize the grounds and how the gate works, how many men are guarding it. But none of that helps me, not when I realize there's at least a dozen men at the tall wrought-iron gate.

We keep riding deeper onto the property, my hopes sinking with each spin of the tires. The house is far beyond the wall, maybe half a mile through trees and rolling hills. Even if I could escape the house, there's no way I wouldn't get caught before I made it back to the main road.

Defeated, I sit back. "Is this his house?" I ask the driver. "I mean, the Milani estate?" It has to be, but I want confirmation that I haven't been taken anywhere else.

The driver doesn't respond, doesn't even look at me in the rear-view mirror. Chills race along my skin as I see the house appear up ahead. Even in the sunlight, the outside is a dour gray color, the stone rising three stories high. It's not exactly a house from a ghost story, but it's close and not at all what I expected. My parents live in an Italian villa, a replica from one of the most beautiful homes in Tuscany. Open and airy, it reeks of opulence. This place—it's closed off, dark.

We stop out front. There are two guards on the wrought-iron doors that lead into a small courtyard, where I'm guessing the front door is.

I wait for the driver to get out.

He doesn't.

I sit for a moment, my fingers tangled together as I look around. “Am I supposed to get out?” I ask.

The driver stays silent.

I’m already on edge, my whole life upended and fear riding me hard, and now this guy is giving me the silent treatment. For the first time since all this started, anger flares inside me.

“You’re a dick. Do you know that?” I ask.

He flicks his gaze to the mirror then looks away.

At least I got that out of him. For a split-second, I feel appeased. Then I fall right back into the terror that has become my life.

I try the door handle. It gives this time. I’d already tried it when the car had slowed a few times while making turns, but it was locked.

Stepping out, I trip over my dress and almost fall to my knees. I manage to grab onto the door frame to hold myself up. Once I manage to keep my balance, I reach down with my left arm and gather up the puffy skirt, then slam the car door as hard as I can.

The car eases away slowly, as if the driver is trying to show just how unbothered he is.

I look up at the house, the large trees at the corners giving it a dappled effect as the sun begins to lower along the horizon. A breeze wafts by, the first promise of fall in the air, and I look around. The drive is circular with an expanse of grass beyond it that ends in a straight row of bushes that nestle against the tree line. I can’t see anyone, but I feel eyes on me all the same.

I can either try to walk back down the driveway, sit on the steps and wait, or go into the house. None of those options sound particularly appealing. My heels are already chafing my toes, so walking out of here—already a laughable idea—isn’t going to happen. If I sit here, then what? I wait for my husband—my stomach turns as I think the word.

My husband. I glance down at the bloodstains on my dress that are now turning brown. Mateo Milani is a monster, one who has no qualms killing people in cold blood. At least I know I won't be next. He won't kill me. Not when he married me to get a link to the most famous mafia family on the eastern seaboard, maybe even the entire US. He wanted a Fontana, and now he has one. So, no, he won't kill me. But that doesn't mean he won't hurt me. My fingers travel to my chin, feeling along the bruise my mother left. That'll be nothing compared to what this man does to me. My knees go weak again, my bladder threatening to let loose as I turn to the house and stare up at it.

I have to go in. There's nowhere else.

The two men standing at the courtyard doors don't even look at me. Their assault rifles are slung across their backs as they chat quietly. It's like I'm not here. Maybe I'm a ghost. Maybe my body lies right next to Horatio's back at the cathedral. Or maybe that would have been preferable to what's about to happen to me in this house.

Gathering what little courage I have, I hold my dress up and climb the few stairs to the wrought-iron doors. The men, saying nothing, open them for me.

I want to ask them where I am, what's going to happen, if their master is home—but from the way they avoid my gaze, I know they'll speak just as much as my driver did. Kicking my chin up despite my fear, I walk past them. One strides beside me and opens one of the wide wooden doors to the house. It's dark inside. Far darker than it is out here.

Hesitating, I look up at the man. "Is ... is he in there?" I ask, my voice sounding small and weak.

He doesn't answer. My irritation flickers to life again, but quickly dies as I peer into the open door at the dimness beyond.

I can't turn back. I have no doubt that if I tried to run, one of these assholes would catch me and drag me back. Probably *still* wouldn't say anything to me, though.

Taking a deep breath, I walk forward, my toes aching and my ankles threatening to give as I step over the threshold.

The goon closes the door behind me, and I'm left alone, the house still and gloomy.

I open my mouth to call "hello" then close it just as fast. I don't want to draw attention to myself. Keeping to the wall, I ease around the room, my eyes adjusting to the darkness as I go. It's a foyer, the floor marble, and the walls a light gray—or perhaps that's just because they're mostly in shadow. Nothing special about this room, other than it's emptiness. No guards. No sound except the click-clack of my heels.

I step out of one, then the other, my feet already feeling better when they touch the cold marble. A small groan of relief comes from me, but I swallow it down lest it carry.

There's a room to my right. The doors are open and reveal a large sitting room with leather couches and a fireplace. To my left, there's a billiard room. I move toward it and catch the scent of a cigar, one that must've been smoked relatively recently. A staircase rises in front of me, but I avoid it and take the hallway that leads deeper into the house.

I find a set of French doors ahead, but when I try them, they're locked. Each time I try a door on this hallway, it's locked, and when I get to the back of the house, I find a door that leads to a pool and sitting area, and beyond that is a garden—all of it framed in wide glass windows. The door is locked, though. So, I retrace my steps back to the foyer.

The house is still. No movement except my own. I'm alone in here. That makes me breathe a little easier, and it gives me an idea. Maybe ... I swallow hard ... Maybe I can find somewhere to hide? The idea is dumb and desperate, but it's all I have. If I can find a weapon and a hiding place, perhaps I can wait out the worst part of the storm. I saw the look in Mateo's eyes, felt the violence in his touch. He's going to hurt me when he comes for me. I won't be a sitting duck for him if I can help it.

With that in mind, I steal up the stairs, my feet quiet on the wood. When I reach the top, something in the air shifts. Then I

hear the *shick* of a door shutting somewhere below.

“Princess.”

His voice makes me go cold.

“Where are you?” He laughs, the sound rough and vicious as it echoes up to me. “Run if you must, but I’ll catch you. I owe you for these scratches on my hand.”

My heart seems to stop, my chest constricting as I stand frozen at the top of the stairs.

Steady footsteps below, along with a whistled tune, finally shake me from my stupor. I take off, my dress still gathered in one arm, and run down the hallway to my left. There are plenty of doors up here, all of them shut. I keep going, rounding a corner and find another hall of doors, and at the end is a staircase beckoning me to it.

I move as fast as I can without making too much noise, then creep up the stairs to the third floor. The air up here is cooler, as if the vents are closed and the rooms neglected. Good. There will be more hiding spots.

The whistle comes again, setting my teeth on edge as I hurry down the hall and pause in front of a closed door. It looks like all the others, which is why I choose it. Maybe Mateo will tire of looking for me in all these rooms. Maybe I’ll get a reprieve.

I turn the handle and step inside, then quickly close the door behind me. It’s a bedroom. The drapes are open, the dwindling sunlight barely lighting the bed and furnishings. There’s an en suite bathroom. I glance inside, but there’s nowhere to hide. So I turn to the closet. Swinging the door open, I find it empty.

“Shit.” I swear under my breath. I’m about to return to the hallway and choose another room when I hear the whistle again, along with slow, steady footsteps on the stairs. The hair on the back of my neck stands on end, and I hurry into the closet and slowly close the door, holding the handle and gently releasing it so as not to make a sound.

The closet is dark, but I won't search for a light switch. Instead, I back away and am relieved to find it has a slight turn to the right at the back, sort of like an L shape. I stuff myself into the small space, grabbing my skirt and pulling it until its piled against my front, all of me hidden from anyone who simply glances into the closet.

When I hear the whistle grow closer, sweat breaks out all over me. It's cold and clammy, fear in each droplet of salty water. The footsteps are quieter now. He's walking along the runner in the center of the hallway. But his footsteps are still coming closer.

Then they stop.

Unbridled terror begins to pump through my veins, and I clench my eyes shut and will myself to breathe as silently as possible.

The footsteps begin again, and so does the whistle, but this time, they're moving away. Had he stopped right outside the bedroom door? I open my eyes and lean just a hair to the side to make sure he hasn't appeared in the closet somehow. No, the door is still closed, the darkness almost perfect in this small space.

The whistle grows even quieter, then fades altogether.

I lean my forehead against the wood-paneled wall in front of me and press a hand to my chest. Drawing in deeper breaths, I try to think this through, to find some way out. I have no weapon, and even if I did, I don't think I could fight Mateo. He's twice my size, and his reputation precedes him. He's ruthless, a murderer, the sort of man no one would ever willingly give their daughter to, not even *my* father, which is saying a lot. I've been out of the mafia world for over a year, but I still know the stories about Mateo Milani. Another shiver runs through me, and I stand up straight again and listen.

Nothing.

Minutes pass.

The upstairs is silent.

Has he left? No. I can't fall for it. My mind conjures a vision of him standing right outside the closet door, a knife in his hand or worse. I know he's going to hurt me. I just don't know in how many ways—not yet.

I have to try to escape. It's probably futile. I'll most likely get caught before I even step a single foot outside the house. But I have to try. I can't go back to my parents' house, can't go back to college, but I can run. I'll run as far away from this place and these people as I can. Even as I tell myself this, I feel the creeping dread created by the certainty that no matter where I run, Mateo will find me. He paid a lot for me, for my last name. He's not going to let me take it away from him.

Once again, I close my eyes and just listen. I stay that way for a few more minutes until my muscles begin to twitch, the adrenaline demanding I do something.

I reach for my dress to push it out of the cubby when I hear the bedroom door open.

My breath stops, my body going rigid.

“I know you're in here, princess.”

My fingers curl into the fabric, making tight fists of tulle and lace. He's bluffing, trying to draw me out. He doesn't know I'm here.

Those footsteps, the ones I know will haunt my nightmares, come closer. So close that I know he's standing outside the closet door.

“If you come out, maybe I'll go easy on you.” His voice drips with amusement. “Treat you like a princess. How's that sound?”

Shit. He's not bluffing. He *knows*.

My battered heart sinks through the floor, and I want to scream or cry or do anything but stay trapped in this house with this horrible man. But I don't. I stay silent, hoping something or someone can save me from Mateo Milani.

When I hear the door handle begin to turn, I go cold. My fingers lose feeling, my knees threatening to buckle.

The door swings open, faint light painting the closet as Mateo's shadow is writ large on the wall beside me.

"Hmm." He sighs. "Fuck."

Then he closes the door.

I blink, disbelief filtering through me. It's a trick. Has to be.

Then I hear his footsteps retreating.

His voice comes through. "She's not up here. Have the men search the grounds. I'll check the first floor." He slams the bedroom door, and his quick footfalls disappear in a matter of moments.

This is it. My chance.

I shove my dress out from my hiding place, then work myself free. I swing open the closet door, not wasting a moment, then hurry to the door to the hallway.

Standing there for a few moments, I press my ear to the door and listen.

Nothing. It's silent again.

I wait a little while longer to be sure and think about how to get out. There has to be more than one staircase leading up here. I just have to find one, get down to the first floor, and either find the kitchen and the knives, or better yet—find a way out. I can do this.

Steeling my nerves, I grip the door handle and turn it slowly so as not to make a sound. Once the latch is free, I take a breath and send a prayer to heaven that I can get out of this alive.

Then I pull the door open and come face to face with the devil.

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*T*ake her throat in my palm and walk her backwards into the bedroom. “Did you truly think you could hide from me, princess? Under my own roof?”

She sputters, her hands going to my wrist, but she doesn’t scratch. No. She knows better.

With a hard kick behind me, I slam the door shut. She jolts in my grip. Fear flashes through her eyes. The pure, unadulterated terror I’ve brought out in quite a few people over the years. This is the first time I’ve ever seen it in someone so beautiful, which makes it all the rarer. I want to bathe in her horror, drown myself in her dread. When she whimpers, I get painfully hard.

“Please don’t hurt me.”

“Hurt you?” I stop when she bumps against the bed. “Oh, Lucretia, I’m going to do much more than just hurt you.”

“Please,” she whispers.

I lean closer to her, our breaths mingling as I stare into her hazel eyes. “I like it when you beg.”

She shudders, and I let her go, then reach for the bodice of her dress.

With a hard yank, I rip it in half. She gasps and screams as I keep yanking until the entire ridiculous mess of fabric is lying at her feet. She brings up an arm to cover her breasts and presses her thighs together. But it’s too late. I’ve already seen the white panties covering her cunt, the dusky pink of her hard

nipples, the way she trembles under my violence. It's intoxicating.

"Take the panties off." I force myself to step back from her.

Her eyes widen even more, and she shakes her head. "No!"

I reach for my belt and unbuckle it, then draw the leather free and run it through my palm. It will be my pleasure to redden her round ass and show her I'm not the sort of man she should fuck with.

Tears well in her eyes as she reaches down, leaving her breasts open to my view. Fuck, her hard nipples could cut glass. I run the belt through my hand as she hooks her fingers into her panties and draws them down her legs.

She stands completely bare before me, tears streaking her cheeks as she shivers.

I stare, taking in every inch of her skin, the way her breathing is ragged, the way she looks at me with open horror. Good. I want her to remember that I'm her nightmare. I'm the creature borne from her family's violence, and I intend to repay it in kind.

"Get on the bed." I wrap the belt around my fist.

Her chin begins to tremble, and she shakes her head.

"No?" I step to her, forcing her to crane her neck to look up at me. "You can either do what I tell you, or I will tie you to this bedpost and belt your ass as you scream. Is that what you want?"

With a trembling breath, she shakes her head, more tears escaping.

"Then get on the bed, princess."

Slowly, agonizingly, she lowers herself to the mattress then scoots back. Her gaze catches on my pants, on the throbbing traitor that's begging to come out and play with my new toy.

When she yanks her gaze away and meets my eyes, I smirk. "You'll get that when you earn it, not before."

Her dark brows draw together for a split-second, as if she wants to give a retort, but then the fear returns, swamping whatever thoughts might have been swirling in her head.

“Lie back.”

She takes a deep breath, goosebumps rising along her olive skin.

I can feel the opposition inside her, the desperate desire to refuse me. But then she glances at my hand where my belt is tightly wrapped.

Another whimper leaves her, one that makes my cock strain even harder against my fly. She lies back, her legs shut tight, her hands covering her breasts.

“Show me.” I step back and devour her with my eyes. Curvy and soft, she’s a wet dream. Gorgeous perfection that hides the depraved heart of her family. I won’t forget what she really is. It’s impossible. But I can enjoy looking at her, enjoy making her quake with fear.

“Show you?” Her voice is barely a squeak.

“You know what I want.” I reach down and adjust my cock.

“Please,” she whispers.

“Please what?” I flex my fists. “What do you want to beg me for, princess? You want me to stop? To leave? To keep my hands off you?” I smirk. “I *own* you. Tits to toes. Everything you are belongs to me. Now I want to see what I bought and paid for, and you’re going to show it to me. Every last fucking bit of it.”

She trembles, fear wafting from her like an intoxicating perfume.

I step closer to her, looming over her in the failing light. “I’m not a patient man, princess.”

She digs her teeth into her bottom lip as more tears leak from her eyes, then takes her hands from her breasts and puts them down at her sides. Her nipples are still so, so hard. I’d

love to suck them until she writhes beneath me, then coat them in come. I stay where I am and drink her in.

“Keep going.”

A small sob catches in her throat.

I unfurl the belt and snap it between my hands. “Don’t make me tell you again.”

She takes in a halting breath, more tears rolling along her temples, then slowly opens her legs.

I have to swallow a groan when I see her pretty little pussy. Soft and sweet. It’s a perfectly ripe cherry, one that needs to be split wide open on my cock.

“Are you a virgin, princess? That’s what I bought, isn’t it?” I can’t take my eyes from her, from the smooth skin that trembles and erupts in goosebumps as I stare. “Answer me.”

“Yes,” she whispers.

“You’ve touched yourself, though.” I let my gaze drift back to her sweet pink cunt, and I lick my lips. “When you were alone in your room and you thought everyone else was asleep. You put those fingers inside you, didn’t you? Felt yourself and rubbed your clit until you came?”

She swallows hard, her knees shaking.

I put one knee on the bed between her legs. “I’m being nice, princess. If you keep defying me, that will change.” I tower over her, so close that I can feel her heat.

“Y-yes. I’ve touched myself.” Her voice quavers.

“Good.” I remove my knee from the bed and stand again. “Show me.”

Another gasp from her, the movement shaking her tits and pushing me even closer to the edge.

“Make yourself come. Right now.” I toss the belt to the bed beside her and unbutton my pants.

She shakes her head. “No, no please.”

“Put your fucking fingers on your clit, princess. Or I’ll do it for you.” I step to her again and pull out my aching cock.

She clenches her eyes shut and lets out a short sob as she reaches between her legs.

“Make yourself come.”

She moves her small, shaking fingers in a circle around her clit.

“Put them inside. I want to see them wet.” I grunt as I give myself one long stroke.

She does as she’s told, pressing a finger into her pussy then bringing it out and spreading the moisture on her clit.

“That’s it.” I stroke myself slowly as I watch her fingers. “Play with it. Show me what you do when you think no one’s watching.” I lean over her and brace myself on the bed with one hand as I stroke my cock with the other. “You aren’t leaving this room until you come. If you fake it, I’ll know.”

Her eyes finally open, meeting mine, but she quickly looks away. Her fingers are still stroking, teasing her clit as she whimpers.

I stare, unable to tear my gaze away from her nimble fingers, and I can sense when her temperature begins to change. She’s terrified, but her fingers know exactly what to do. Despite her fear, she’s turned on, her breathing speeding up.

“Fuck yes.” I stroke myself faster, matching the pace of her fingers.

When her hips begin to move, my balls draw up tight, my cock growing so hard it could fuck straight through concrete.

Her lips part, her eyes still closed as she rolls her hips, losing herself to her own touch. Her thighs begin to shake, and then she holds her breath. When she lets it out on a moan, I can’t hold back any longer.

I stroke my cock and come all over her hand and her pink pussy, marking her with my come and defiling her innocence

with my filth. Fuck the Fontanas, and fuck their perfect little princess.

When I stand up and stare down at her, I smirk. This is just the start, the opening salvo in my war against her. Breaking her will be the most fun I've had in years, second only to the fun I'll have when I kill her parents.

She finally opens her teary eyes and looks up at me, her body limp and defeated, my come glistening on her smooth skin.

I reach down and scoop some of it onto two fingers. "Open."

Her eyes widen.

Leaning over her, I stare into her eyes. "Open your fucking mouth, princess."

She parts her lips. I press my fingers into her mouth and swipe them along her hot tongue.

"Clean them off." I lower myself to her, hovering above her as her tongue moves along my fingers. My cock is already coming back to life. "Suck."

She does, her cheeks hollowing slightly.

"Swallow."

When her throat bobs and the suction relents, I pull my fingers from her mouth and run one around her plump lips. Beautiful and soft—she's a trap. A viper hidden in a pretty package.

I push away from her and stand, then tuck myself in and button my pants.

She closes her legs, her hands returning to cover her breasts. She stares up at me, fear writ large in her eyes as she watches every movement I make. I could take everything from her right now, shove her legs apart and fuck her raw. It's more tempting than I thought it would be. But I like to play with my food before I eat it. Always have.

“Don’t disobey me again, princess. I told you I’m not a patient man.”

She flinches at my words, a tremor wracking her body. She’s terrified. Good.

As I walk away, her harsh sob cuts through the air.

I laugh, glee in my heart and vengeance in my hands.

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LUCRETIA

I wake suddenly, startled as I sit up in the bed. After Mateo had left, I'd cleaned myself up and hidden under the blankets, huddled and shivering, staring at the door and waiting for the monster to come back for me. He never did, and I must've fallen asleep from sheer exhaustion, though I woke several times during the night. Each time, I stared at the door and prayed that he wouldn't be there.

My stomach grumbles as I lie back down, my gaze once again returning to the door. The sun paints the damask wallpaper in shades of warm orange, and I can only guess it's around eight or nine in the morning. None of this feels real—not this house, not the wallpaper, not even the morning sun. It's as if I'm wading through a foggy dream, one that hurts to prove its realness.

A flash of memory careens through my mind—pale eyes glaring into my soul as I rub myself to orgasm. Goosebumps run all over my skin, and I curl into a ball, trying to protect myself from the memory ... and from the man. All those fleeting ideas of escape died a quick death last night. He won't let me go. He's going to pull my wings off one by one and laugh when I still try to fly.

I'm trapped and alone, stalked by a man who embodies my darkest nightmares. The bridge of my nose stings, tears trying to swim in my eyes. I swallow hard, tamping down the emotion. Crying isn't going to help me. Given the way Mateo treated me last night, the tears might actually incite him to do worse. Besides, I've cried so much that my eyes are puffy and

my head aches—yet I’m still here. I’m still trapped. Tears don’t help.

Keeping an eye on the door, I sit up and wrap the sheet around me, then hurry to the bathroom. When I’m finished and on the way out, I stop and look in the mirror. My face is pale, and my mascara in streaks on my cheeks from last night. My hair is a mess, the dark strands twisted and tangled. With quick fingers I feel along the updo and pull out the pins holding it in place. It falls around my face, and I sweep it back as best I can and drape it over one shoulder. Then I wash my face, scrubbing off the makeup until I look more like myself. My mother had instructed the makeup artist to make me look like a doll, a perfect one with red lips and smoky eyes. The artist had done a great job, but it wasn’t me. The woman in the dress marrying Horatio—before he was murdered—it wasn’t me. This woman—she isn’t me, either. I’m only going through the motions, trying to feel some sense of control. But I know I have none. Not in this place. Not with that man.

I turn and leave the bathroom, then stop in front of my tattered dress. It still lies in a pile on the floor. There’s no salvaging it. Maybe that’s a good thing, or maybe that simply reflects my own state. I’m torn, too, ripped in more ways than I can count. Being sold to Mateo—because that’s what happened, my father *sold* me—only added to the ribbons of torn and raw flesh inside me.

“Ferdinand, I wish you were here,” I whisper, though my brother can no longer hear me. He’s gone, his body buried deep and part of me interred with him.

I go to the windows and look outside. Other than a guard patrolling three stories below, the grounds are quiet in the morning light. The grass is well manicured, and there’s a rose garden beneath this side of the house. Beyond are the trees that ring the estate, blocking access to the rest of the world. I may as well be on the surface of Mars.

I return to the bed and sit down heavily, then adjust my makeshift toga so that it covers more of my shoulders. My eyes drift to the door again, fear tiptoeing up my spine at the

thought of Mateo standing just outside the way he did last night.

My fingers clutch the sheet a little more tightly, my anxiety rising as I stare at the door handle, waiting for it to turn and my next torture to begin.

It doesn't.

I wait for what must be an hour. Random sounds filter up to me, none of them particularly distinct—male voices, doors closing, and other noises of a house waking up.

My mind drifts and seizes on last night. On the terror. On the ... pleasure. I clench my eyes shut. Because that's the wrong word for what he pulled from me. I may have orgasmed as the devil stared down at me with spiteful blue eyes, but it wasn't pleasure. It was stolen. Yet another piece of me bitten off and chewed up.

When I work up the nerve to go to the door, I raise a shaking hand to the knob. It turns like it did last night. But this time when I swing it open, a monster isn't waiting for me outside.

My heart seems to understand the reprieve, because it pumps a little faster as I enter the hallway. I keep one hand at my chest, clutching the sheet to ensure it stays put. When I reach the staircase I'd climbed the night before, I hesitate. What am I going to do? Just pop down the stairs and ask where my breakfast is?

I press the back of my palm to my mouth to stifle a brief, hysterical giggle. Maybe I'm finally cracking under all the pressure, losing my mind right along with my freedom. I take a deep, shaking breath and try to get myself under control.

I could just go back to the bedroom or pick another hiding spot, but I'm not foolish enough to try that again. He found me easily and toyed with me until I fell for his trick. And then he ... I grip the railing hard as the memory surges through me again. Shame warms my cheeks, and I add that to the list of things I have to push down and bury. I can't dwell on it right now, not if I want to survive. He hasn't hurt me. Not yet. What

he did was psychological torture more than anything else, but the way he handled that belt—I have no doubt he'll use it on me if I don't play his game to his liking. So that's what I'll do; I'll play his game until I see a chance to run. It's not what I want, and I certainly don't want him to think I'm going to sit quietly and take his abuse, but what choice do I have? I have zero leverage. I have to get my bearings and stay out of Mateo's crosshairs. Maybe then I can find a way out.

Mind made up, I drop quietly down the stairs and reach the second level. There's more sound down here, voices and what sounds like pans clattering in a kitchen.

I ease along the hallway of closed doors and pause when I get to where it opens into the foyer, the second floor looking down at the front door.

A man stands guard, his rifle slung lazily over his shoulder as he looks at his phone.

“That's not what I said, Benny.” A man with red hair strides into the room, a dark-haired man on his heels.

“You said you fucked her,” the other man, Benny I suppose, says.

“No, I said I did things to her that made her see god,” the red-haired man retorts.

Benny snorts a laugh. “You're full of shit, and I bet you never even touched her.”

“Look, I see what you're doing. Trying to learn from the master. But if you want me to teach you my ways, you'll have to pay for that privilege.” The other man opens the front door and both men stride out, bickering lightheartedly until they're out of earshot.

“Hungry?” The voice in my ear makes me jump.

I whirl to find Mateo behind me, his gaze raking over my body. No words form on my lips as my heart kicks into overdrive and I stumble backwards.

He advances, a smirk twisting his full lips. “Where are you going, *wife*?”

The word is like a dagger, one intended to maim, not kill. He's going to take his time with me.

His hand shoots out and grips the sheet.

I squeal as he yanks me to him, his eyes boring into me.

"I can't have my princess walking around dressed like a pauper, now can I? You're a Milani, not some guttersnipe Fontana." He adds a cruel smile to his words. "Come with me." He releases me, then walks past me.

I keep my eyes on him, turning to watch as he stalks down the hallway. I don't want to follow him, but I don't want to anger him either. My heart sinks farther with each step I take, but I follow him into a bedroom at the end of the corridor. It's huge, even bigger than my parents' lavish bedroom back home. Dark wood panels the walls, and the floor is similar but dotted with rugs beside the large bed and in the sitting area in front of a fireplace. It smells like him in here, a hint of some sort of expensive cologne and soap.

He disappears through another door.

I stop, hesitating. I don't want to move farther into what is clearly his bedroom, and I *definitely* do not want to get closer to his bed. It's not rumpled at all, the navy duvet perfectly crisp. He didn't sleep last night?

"Are you coming, princess?" he calls.

I jump, then press my palms to my cheeks, trying to calm myself. It doesn't work, but I still have to follow him. I walk slowly and hover at the doorway. It's a closet, a huge one that's mostly bare except for a few things on hangers.

"This is your closet." He turns to me, a ridiculous outfit in his hands. "You will sleep in our bed every night, and you will comport yourself as a dignified wife should." He holds the clothes out to me.

I blink and make no move to take them from him. It's nothing but a ridiculous maid costume, a tiny one at that.

"What is it?" He steps to me, towering over me as I crane my neck to look at him. "I tried to choose things befitting a

Fontana princess. Do you not like what I picked out?"

Despite his calm demeanor, he's laughing at me. I can see it in his eyes, in the way he mocks me every time he calls me "princess."

My resolve to play his game evaporates as quickly as my freedom did. "I'm not wearing that." I hate the quaver in my voice.

"No?" His tone drops low. "Are you saying no to me, princess?"

I step back.

He matches me. His gaze eats me up, and I can't tear my eyes from his face, from this man I'd never seen before in my life, but now he looms large. The dark hair, 5 o'clock shadow, sharp jaw, and pale blue eyes—all of it is seared into my mind, into my nightmares. He's a handsome man, no one could deny that, but his cruelty obscures his beauty.

"I asked you a question, princess. Are you telling me no?"

"I'm not wearing that." I step back again.

He reaches out, his hand gripping the sheet and yanking it down as I try to grab it. He's too strong, his grip sure as he pulls it to my knees despite me trying to hold it and pull it back up.

When his hand goes to my throat and wraps around it, I scream and try to shove him away. It doesn't work. He walks me backwards, my sheet gone, and shoves me onto the bed.

I scramble back, getting to my knees and fisting my hands.

He looks me up and down, his nostrils flaring. "You're going to fight me?"

I'd kill him if I could, but I know that's not possible. No one can kill the devil.

"Don't touch me." I edge backward toward the other side of the bed.

"You're my wife. Of *course* I'll touch you." He watches me, his gaze following every minute move I make. He's a cat,

one with claws I've already felt. "I'll do a lot more than that, princess. I'll stuff you full of my come. I think you'll enjoy it."

"Stay the fuck away from me!" I scream and bring my pathetic fists up again, my entire body shaking.

He tsks, his gaze harsh as he stares me down. "If I wanted to, I could pin you to the bed on your stomach and shove my fat cock up your ass while you screamed. You wouldn't be able to stop me."

"I'll scratch your eyes out." I bare my teeth.

"I've already made you come for me." He licks his lips. "Or have you forgotten the way you creamed all over your fingers while I watched?"

Shame coats me like oil, and I clench my eyes shut at the memory trying to invade. The worst part of it is the way my nipples harden, the way I feel warmth spreading through my chest and lower. Shame. Nothing more.

"No." He laughs low in his throat. "You remember just fine, don't you, princess?"

I snap my eyes open and raise my fists higher. "Stay away from me."

He sighs as if he's bored and tosses the maid outfit on the bed. "You wear this or you wear nothing. It's your decision. But I expect you downstairs in five minutes." Turning, he strides to the door, then pauses. "Five minutes, princess. If you take longer than that, I'll come looking for you. And when I find you ..." He walks out and doesn't finish the sentence. He doesn't have to. He's already made his threats.

"And don't forget the shoes." The laughter in his fading voice makes me rage and tremble all at the same time. He's mocking me, poking at my pain like a sadist.

I collapse onto the bed once he's gone, tears welling in my eyes as I hang my head.

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*M*y phone vibrates as I sit at the dining room table and watch while Lucretia's five minutes tick away. I click open my texts.

Carlito: I heard you're married, and you hit the Marchellos. What the hell, Mat? You made that big of a move without me?

I roll my eyes.

Me: Yes.

Carlito: Why!?!

Me: You know why, idiot.

Carlito: I could've helped.

Me: The last time you 'helped' Benito almost lost a kidney.

Carlito: I'm coming home. Now.

Me: Unnecessary.

Carlito: You need me there.

I can barely stifle a laugh. Carlito isn't the sharpest, but he's loyal. That's saying a lot in our world. Still, he's my little brother, and I don't need him underfoot when big moves are being made.

Me: Stay home.

Carlito: You just don't want to admit you need me.

Me: I don't need a clown, Lito. This isn't a circus.

Carlito: Fuck you. Booking flights now. See you soon, asshole.

I sigh and pocket my phone. My younger brother isn't cut out for this life. Never has been. He's safer living in LA and making pots or whatever the hell it is he does. I don't want him here when I've just begun the master stroke of a plan that will put me on top of all the families. But he has our mother's stubborn streak. Nothing I say will stop him. I pull out my phone again and text Sonny the news.

A snicker echoes in the foyer. I slide my phone onto the table and lean back in my chair, my eyes on the open doors. The maid uniform was a last-minute idea on my part. A perfect one, I might add. This little Fontana princess thought she was going to get an easy life of luxury with Horatio Marchello. I bet she thought she had it made. Not on my fucking watch. I won't be happy until every Fontana suffers, especially her. Whatever innocence she may possess—I'm going to twist it and burn it until its darkness matches mine. She'll be my pet; one I'll parade around in front of her parents until it's finally time to go for their throats.

More laughter drifts through the air, and then I hear a wolf whistle.

Her hooker heels clack on the marble, her steps speeding up until she's almost jogging down the hall. She slows as she approaches the open dining room, and her shadow flutters through the air as she comes to a stop just out of view.

I check my watch. Her stalling is going to cost her. She only has ten seconds left. I could tell her that, but I'd rather her be late. I'd rather take off my belt, bend her over the table, and give her a taste of the pain she deserves.

Tick tock.

A smile spreads across my face as the last seconds evaporate. I start to stand as she steps into the room.

Fuck. I sit back down. She made it. Barely.

I take her in. The black and white maid uniform hugs her body. The top is cut low across her generous tits, and the skirt barely covers her upper thighs. Her eyes are tired and puffy, her chin quivering—but even so, she’s still a beauty. It amazes me that Leonard and Carmen let her go to college at all. Then again, I suppose her brother Ferdinand had a lot to do with it. He was the hope of the Fontana family, a rising star who was supposed to take the top spot—the one that will soon belong to me.

She walks toward me, her steps small and her gaze moving around the room as if a snake might pop out from the buffet or strike from beneath the table. The only danger to her in this room is me, though I suspect she already knows that.

“How do you like your new home?” I ask.

She jumps a little at my voice, then pauses a few chairs away from me. “It’s ... big.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

She reaches out and grips the chair back in front of her, her white nails digging into the fabric. “I don’t like it.”

I don’t know why, but her honesty is amusing. I suppose I assumed she’d be just another lying Fontana. But in this case, I know she’s telling the truth.

“Not as ostentatious as you’re used to, princess?” I suck a tooth. “Very sorry to disappoint you.”

She opens her mouth, then closes it, clearly thinking better of speaking.

For a moment, I’m curious about what she was going to say. Then I come to my senses. I don’t give a shit. She’s just a pawn in my game, a little brat who needs to be broken.

Her gaze travels the room again before landing uneasily on the table in front of me. It’s like she wants to keep me in her

sights, but she doesn't want to look me in the eye. Probably wise of her.

"You went to college?" I ask it like a question, though it isn't one. I know everything about her. What I don't know is why I'm talking to her. My plan was to have her serving me breakfast and attending to my every whim.

"Yes." Her tone is guarded.

"Not for long, though, was it? Leonard pulled you out so he could sell you to the Marchellos."

Her jaw tightens for a second, though her eyes are still downcast. "Yes."

"Because your family is trash. Your piece-of-shit father is sitting on a mound of fucking garbage and calling it a kingdom." I stand. "All because of your name. Isn't that right, princess?"

She tenses.

I like it.

When she finally meets my gaze, I feel a hint of fire in her. But then she closes off that emotion, her eyes staying neutral as she watches me.

"Yes," she says grudgingly.

"Yes, your father is a piece of shit?" I snap. "Or yes, your family is garbage? Which is it?"

Her eyes flare again, that fire trying to ignite. But she quells it then looks away. "Both." Her voice is barely a whisper.

Seeing her in the morning light, I notice her eyes are more green. Or perhaps they just appear that way for now. Her lips are full, and she has an olive tone to her skin that complements her dark hair. My gaze lingers at the bruise on her jaw. Her makeup covered it yesterday, though I still saw it. Today, it's edged in faint yellow, the center still purple.

She flinches when I reach for her, but I don't stop.

I grip her chin and turn her face away so I can get a better look at the mark. My eyes narrow, and a spark of anger lights in my breast. It's out of place. I know that, but that fact doesn't dampen its existence. She is my plaything. *Mine*.

“Who did this?”

She turns to look at me though I don't drop my hand. I hold her right where I want her, where she can't look away and hide from me.

“Why does it matter?” Her voice is soft. Like her.

“It matters to me.”

“Why?” She looks genuinely confused.

“Because I own you. No one gets to hurt you except *me*.”

She flinches at the emphasis in my tone.

“Tell me who did this.”

She blinks and tries to pull out of my hold.

I grip the front of her costume, my fingers pressing between her breasts as I yank her closer.

She gasps.

“I told you not to disobey me, princess. When I ask you a question, I want an answer.” I glance at her full lips, now parted. “And I know I don't have to tell you not to lie to me. I don't have to say that, do I?”

“N-no.” She shudders as I run my fingers down her chin to her throat, wrapping them around it without squeezing ... yet.

“Tell me who hit you.” I lean closer, my lips grazing her ear. “Tell me or I'll make you hurt, princess.” I ease my other hand down the front of her outfit and down to her skirt. When I cup her pussy, she whimpers. “I'll push you to the edge and then throw you off.”

“My mother.”

“There. That wasn't so hard, was it?” I flatten my palm against her cunt and rub up and down slowly while keeping my hand at her throat.

She shakes her head slightly and licks her lips.

I stare at her mouth, at the way her skin glistens, the same way her cunt glistened last night after I marked her with my come. My cock thickens at the memory. Her pulse flutters at her throat, and when I meet her eyes again, she swallows hard. I keep moving my palm, rubbing her pussy as her breath quickens.

A noise in the hall jolts me from whatever stupor this Fontana viper put me in, and I step away from her.

She takes a deep, shaking breath.

“Whoa, where’s breakfast?” Sonny strides in, his demeanor practically jaunty. He glances from Lucretia to me and back again. Then his gaze slides down her body. The anger that was already simmering in me ticks up a notch. It shouldn’t. I *intentionally* dressed her this way. I wanted her to feel humiliated. Hell, I wanted her to serve me like a goddamn slave. That’s what I told Sonny would be happening when he came to breakfast.

But when he stares at the hem of her short skirt, something inside me seems to hit a boiling point.

“Sit down,” I bark.

He cocks his head at me, confusion in his eyes. “Okay? But I thought ...”

“That’s your first mistake.” I take Lucretia’s elbow and pull her to my seat. Once I sit down, I yank her into my lap so she’s sitting sideways, her tits in my face and her legs draped over the side of my chair but hidden from view by the top of the table.

Sonny takes his usual seat, a questioning look on his face, but he doesn’t say anything else.

“Carter!” I call for the cook.

She jumps when I yell.

Good.

She *should* be afraid of me.

I made a promise to destroy her family, and I'm not the kind of man to break my word. Especially when I swore it to my father as he lay dying in my arms from Leonard Fontana's bullet.

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LUCRETIA

I'm barely breathing, too scared to move, much less say anything. Mateo is beneath me, his large frame supporting me with ease, and his hard cock digging into my backside.

I can't read him. One minute he's mocking me, and the next he wants to know who put the bruise on my jaw, and the next he's ... touching me.

It's all a game to him, some way to inflict a whiplash-like torture on me, though I don't know why. I don't even know why he wanted to marry me if he thinks my family is garbage. None of this makes sense. Him, least of all. But there's one point I'm clear on—I *hate* him.

A man in a white chef uniform enters the room with a few other chefs behind him, and they all place trays of food and plates on the table. It smells wonderful even though I don't think I could eat a single bite. My stomach is in knots, and I think my mind is, too. Whatever games Mateo is playing, they're definitely working.

"Why the fuck is Lito coming home?" The other man at the table starts forking food onto his plate as one of the chefs pours him a coffee. He looks to be older than Mateo by a few years, and he's not as handsome. His hair is lighter, and his dark eyes don't have the same striking sparkle to them as Mateo's. He might be a brother, but I doubt it. "Like we don't have enough trouble?" The man gives me a pointed glance, then returns to his plate.

Who is Lito?

“He thinks we need his help.” Mateo snorts a laugh and reaches around me to begin cutting up a waffle on his plate.

“He thinks we’re going to win a war with art?” The other man shakes his head. “I love him like a brother, but he is about as useful as a screen door on one of our drug submarines.”

“I’m aware, Sonny,” Mateo deadpans. “Quit stalling, tell me the real news.”

Now this sounds promising. Real news—as in, what’s going to happen now. I want to know if my parents are going to do anything about this situation. From what happened at the wedding, I doubt it, but I’m grasping at any straws I see.

Sonny drops some sugar into his coffee. “The Cavalleris are pissed. They’re talking about having a meeting just to address what we did at the wedding.”

“As we suspected.” Mateo brings his fork to my mouth.

I shake my head.

“We should’ve killed Sarita when we had the chance. She’s going back to her father to drum up a war over what we did to her sons.” The other man slurps his coffee.

Sarita, I know that name—she’s Horatio’s mother, the woman who was wailing at the wedding.

“We knew she would. And no, we shouldn’t have killed her. What we did yesterday pushed the fucking envelope, but killing her would’ve turned the families against us with no way back. We have to let this play out. Stick to the plan. We’ll have her head soon enough.” Mateo reaches up with his other hand and grips the back of my neck. “Open your fucking mouth.” His voice is more of a growl than anything.

I open despite myself.

He shoves the piece of waffle onto my tongue. “Chew. I can’t have my beautiful Fontana bride going hungry, now can I?”

Sonny points his fork at me. “You fucked her yet?”

Mateo tenses.

I keep chewing even though my cheeks flame red and my discomfort kicks up another notch.

“I’ll do whatever the hell I want with her, Sonny. If that’s all right with you?”

“Jesus, I was just asking.” Sonny spears a piece of sausage. “Legally speaking, consummating a marriage is part of the deal. I thought you’d ...” He shakes his head and eats the sausage.

“You have something you want to say to me?” Mateo cuts another piece of waffle and presents it to me.

My stomach is already churning, but I know refusal isn’t an option. I open and he presses it into my mouth.

“I thought you’d be happy, is all.” Sonny throws up his hands. “We finally did what we said we’d do, and you seem ... pissed. What the hell is going on? Is it her?” He moves his gaze to me, his stare hard as I chew and try to keep the food down.

“It’s not her. She’s just a fun little toy.” Mateo sighs and leans back. “I hate to say this, but you’re right.” He shrugs. “I guess I’m just coming down from the high of slaughter.”

My stomach turns, and acid bubbles in my throat. When I blink, I see Horatio’s body and the bodies of his brothers. Blood pools all over the floor and coats my dress. And no one does anything. No one stops it. No one comes to my rescue. I sure as hell couldn’t rescue myself: not from the life my family forced on me, and not from the man who took me. After all, I’m just a ‘fun little toy’ that Mateo will break sooner or later. Because no matter how tough I try to be, I’m not strong enough to withstand the sort of cruelty he’s capable of. My stomach sours further.

“It was beautiful.” Sonny takes a loud drink of coffee. “The blood. It felt good to get back to our roots.”

“It really was. The screams.” Mateo chuckles. “The theater of it all.”

“The look in your father’s eyes when he heard my offer of double.” Mateo grabs my chin and turns my face to his. “Did you see it, princess? The greed? I did. He couldn’t wait to auction you off. Couldn’t believe his luck that I showed up and offered the lower bidder.”

He thinks I don’t know what my father is. But I know him far better than Mateo does. My father agreeing to Mateo’s offer was the least surprising event of the day.

“He sold you to me, offered up your virgin pussy. What do you think of that, princess? That your father knew I would fuck you hard and make you cry, but he didn’t care as long as I wired him the money?” He runs his hands to my waist and squeezes.

It shouldn’t hurt me. But it does. Maybe it’s the exhaustion or the terror. Maybe I’m just weaker than I want to be. I don’t know. But my eyes water. And I *don’t* want to cry in front of these men. I don’t want to show them the weakness that lives inside me. Even so, a tear runs down my cheek.

Mateo swipes it with his fingertip and licks it away.

“You didn’t answer me.” He squeezes my waist tighter, his cold eyes holding mine. “What do you think of the fact that your father sold me your tight cunt for three million dollars?”

I bite the inside of my cheek and try to focus on the pain. That’s the sort of hurt I can deal with. The hurt Mateo is talking about—that’s one I can’t control. I taste blood, then answer him, “I think that it doesn’t matter what I think.”

His lips quirk on one side, as if a smile is trying to break free, and he runs his thumb along my jaw where the bruise is. “You’re smarter than I thought.” He turns back to Sonny. “She was majoring in biology, planned on being a veterinarian. Isn’t that right, princess?”

More hurt piles on top of me, burying me slowly. That future is gone now. Whatever dreams I had died when my mother arrived to pull me out of school. Or maybe they died when Ferdinand did.

“Yes.”

“But now you’re majoring in being a Fontana slut for me.” Mateo smiles, handsome even in his cruelty. “I can’t wait to give you your grades.” He moves one of his hands to my thigh and squeezes. “I bet you’d do anything for an A.”

Sonny laughs.

I turn away from Mateo, my gaze downturned as I stare at the table. That’s when I notice the knife.

It’s nothing fancy. A simple butter knife but with a sharpened tip. It would take a lot of force to kill a man with it, but you could definitely wound someone. And maybe that’s all I need to do. If I can use it to hurt Mateo at the right time, I might be able to get away. I could run. Maybe he’d find me, maybe he’d hurt me for trying to escape. But he’s going to hurt me anyway. He’s already made that clear.

“Princess?”

“Hmm?”

His hand moves higher, his thumb drawing circles on my inner thigh. “Do you think you have what it takes to stab me with that knife?”

I turn to him, my eyes wide.

He presses his thumb higher until it grazes against my panties.

It’s horrible, the way he touches me without invitation, as if he truly believes I’m nothing more than a possession. I don’t want to feel anything when his skin brushes against mine. I want to be numb. But I’m not. Heat, the kind that wraps around you like vines and sinks into your bloodstream with poisonous thorns, that’s what I feel.

He jerks his chin toward the knife. “You could try it. I might even give you the chance to grab it instead of breaking your wrist. You could take your best shot, princess. I won’t be mad.” His voice is almost a purr as he leans closer, his mouth at my ear. “Because then it would be my turn.”

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“*Y*ou think it’s a good idea to just let her wander around?” Benny strikes a match and lights a cigarette.

“Where’s she going to go?” Red leans back on the couch, a glass of liquor in one hand and his phone in the other.

“I don’t know. But she might try to run, I guess?” Benny takes a drag.

“She’s a scared little mouse.” I shrug. “If anything, she’ll try to hide from me again.” Maybe I’d like her to try it. Her pathetic attempt last night was a fun game for me. Hunting her down was easy, and then all I had to do was wait. The fear in her eyes when she opened the door and saw me—fuck. I adjust myself in my pants.

Benny and Red share a look.

“Shut the fuck up.” I wave an irritated hand at them.

“Didn’t say anything, boss.” Benny takes another drag and offers the cigarette to me.

I shake my head. Every man has his vices, but tobacco isn’t one of mine.

“The boys know she’s off limits. They won’t touch her.” I decide to pour myself a drink to take the edge off.

“That’s what you’re worried about?” Red shoots Benny another raised eyebrow look.

“Knock that shit off!” I bark and splash a healthy amount of whiskey into my glass.

Red covers his mouth and pretends he’s yawning, but I know that prick is covering a grin. I should’ve left his ass in the dumpster where I found him. Literally.

I sink down at my desk and take a swig of the liquor. It’s ten in the goddamn morning and these dumbasses have already driven me to drink. I know I’m lying to myself. It’s not them. It’s *her*. That fucking princess with the sad eyes that spark with fire in their depths before she douses the flame. I’ve read every scrap of information I can on her—the same on her whole family. Though I admit hers are the only photos I’ve studied. I feel like I could sketch her face with my eyes closed. The thought sticks in my gut like a serrated blade. Because I shouldn’t know about the freckles along the bridge of her nose or the slight upturn at the tip of her nose—I shouldn’t give a shit about anything except making her suffer.

I shove all those concerns from my mind and turn to the only thing that can calm my nerves. “Business.” I finish my drink. “Where’s my coke shipment?”

“Sitting off South Padre. There’s been an increase in enforcement along the border after they found all those migrants in that 18-wheeler.” Red stubs out his cigarette. “We’re dead in the water until the feds back the fuck off.”

“Bring them up the coast. What about Galveston?”

“Too dangerous. More Coast Guard, more problems. It’s better to wait.” Red holds up his hands. “I know you hate it. But it is what it is. If we try to bring it ashore farther north, we risk losing the whole thing.”

“Fine.” I grind my teeth. “But if you can’t land it by the weekend, I want you to come up with some other way.”

“I’ll land it.”

“The opium’s already being offloaded in Jersey,” Benny says with a shit-eating grin.

Red glares at him. “You just got lucky. That’s all.”

“Say what you want, but I got it done. Our warehouse is full, and the chemists are there right now doing their magic. We’ll be moving product in less than a month.”

“Coke’s worth more than your black tar bullshit,” Red shoots back.

“Coke isn’t worth shit if it’s floating in the ocean.”

“Motherfucker, you have no creativity when it comes to ___”

“Enough!” I slam my hand on the desk.

They both whip their heads around to me.

I’m on edge. Seething. Doing everything I can to stop thinking about the woman who’s probably looking for another way to hide from me.

“Do we still have Rodrigo?” I run a hand through my hair.

“Yeah. Barely. Last I checked he was still breathing.” Red shrugs. “I don’t think he has any more information though.”

I stand. “Let’s hit the sauna.”

I know they share another one of their fucking looks, but I don’t care. I need to take the edge off, and this is one way to do it.

They follow me through the house and out the back, then through the rear garden to the stables. The horses eye me, none of them particularly friendly despite living under my care for years. Maybe they know a predator when they see one.

I walk into the last stall and push open the metal door that reveals a set of stairs that leads down into darkness.

“Hey, before you get ...” Red clears his throat. “*Occupied*. Could you clear 50k for a bribe?”

“Sure, if that gets me my coke faster. I don’t give a fuck.”

Red nods and trots back toward the house.

“Let’s do this.” Benny’s already rolling up his sleeves.

I shake my head. “Get the fire pit ready. I’ll bring the body.”

“Sure thing.” He doesn’t ask questions. He knows better. In fact, he knows exactly what’s about to happen.

I walk down the stairs. The gratifying sounds of abject fear and whimpering meet my ears.

“Glad you’re still with us, Rod.” I yank the chain to the bare bulb overhead. A low, wide room with metal grates for floors and earthen walls appears. In my line of work, a place like this is a necessity. We call it the sauna, though it’s always clammy and cold.

Rod lies in a heap on the floor, his hands duct-taped behind his back and his face swollen and discolored.

I open a small door to the right, pull out a hanger, and drape my coat over it. Then I remove my shirt and hang it up as well.

Rod shivers, his pitiful wails growing louder.

“Were there others?” I shake out my arms and shadow box a little to loosen up.

“No!” He screams and shrinks back.

“I don’t believe you, Rod.”

“I told you everything.” His voice is distorted from his missing teeth and busted lips. “She was the only one.”

I drop to my haunches beside him. “It’s just that creeps like you don’t touch just one little girl. I mean, I don’t have any studies, Rod, but a child fucker doesn’t exactly change his stripes, does he?”

“P-p-p-please.”

“I would’ve killed you anyway, Rod. You know that, right? You think I’d let you take out one of my soldiers, go to his house, kill his wife, and rape his daughter without hitting you back?”

“The Franchesis will pay you to get me back. If you just ___”

“You think I need money?” I cluck my tongue. “That’s what you think?” I grip him by the hair and lift him to his feet

with one hand.

He screams, the agonized sound soothing the discomfort in my gut. “D-d-don’t!” His eyes dart to the cabinet in the corner.

“Shhh.” I shake my head, then point at it. “You’re worried about that?”

He blubbers.

“No, Rodrigo.” I walk him backwards and grab one of the shackles that hangs from the ceiling. When I lift his arms, he screams as his shoulders pop out of place. I hook him to the shackles and back up.

When his screams finally turn back into blubbering, I continue, “Don’t be afraid. I’m not going to use any of those tools on you.”

He looks up at me through his swollen eyes, and even through the marred flesh, I can see the slightest flicker of hope. He thinks he has a chance of escaping, that I might let him go. That I’ll stop hurting him. That hope is what I’m going to enjoy snuffing out.

It’s what I need.

I raise my fists and grunt when I make contact with his already-broken nose.

He screams.

I can feel the tension draining away as a smile crosses my lips. “Don’t worry, you piece of shit. I’ll finish you with my hands.”

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LUCRETIA

The house is huge. At first I thought it was on par with my parents' villa. I was wrong. This place has rooms upon rooms, an indoor and outdoor pool, a weight room that seems fit for an NFL team, and the garages are full of outrageously expensive cars. I thought my family was rich, but I've never seen this kind of wealth.

I can go wherever I want. No one speaks to me or tries to stop me, even when I walk into the garages. The soldiers stationed around the house glance at me, and a few openly gawk, but none of them bother me. I suppose Mateo feels I'm sufficiently caged. He's right. There's no way out of here. Not with guards on the hallways and a small army scattered around the grounds.

My heart sinks more and more as I explore. Each soldier is another reason why I'll never escape. I finally make my way into the kitchen. Everything is stainless steel and polished to a shine. Foods are set out on elegant trays along a center island, though they aren't all fancy. In fact, one of the trays is a chafing dish with what looks like pizza rolls on it.

I couldn't eat breakfast, not sitting on Mateo's lap while he mocked me. But now, alone in the kitchen, my stomach growls as I survey the food. I grab a white plate from the end of the counter and snag what looks like freshly baked bread, some burrata to slather on it, a couple of pizza rolls, and what looks like egg salad sandwiches with no crust.

The fridge is stocked to the gills with tons of things my mother would never allow in our house. I could count the times on one hand that she ever let me have a soft drink. Here, I grab a Dr. Pepper and take all my food to a small table at the back of the kitchen. It's tucked away in a picture window that gives a view of the same rose garden I could see from the window upstairs.

With one more look around, I feel safe enough. My back is to a wall, and I can see both doors in and out of the kitchen from here. Not that I think Mateo would be mad that I'm eating his snacks. He seemed to want to feed me this morning, though I have no idea why. He doesn't care about me. I'm just a trophy for him, like a body part kept by a serial killer. I shiver at the thought and tuck myself even farther back against the wall, a slight chill coming in through the windowpanes. Winter's almost here. I should be at school. I think back to my schedule for this semester. At this time of day I would've been in my psychology class. Not my favorite subject, but it might've helped me navigate this situation if I knew how to deal with psychopaths.

I turn my mind away from Mateo. It's the only way I'm going to settle my nerves enough to eat. Instead, I look out at the garden. The roses haven't died off yet. Or maybe they just go dormant for the winter—that sounds more correct. There are still some flowers here and there, most prominent among them a section of red roses that bloom vigorously despite the chilly wind. I recognize them instantly. Mateo wore one of them yesterday when he destroyed my wedding.

Perhaps looking out at the garden wasn't the best plan. I focus on my food, trying one of the pizza rolls to start off with. This is another item my mother would've had a conniption over. It's not bad, but it's not good, and I think that's the way it's meant to be. I eat another one, chewing thoughtfully before taking a big drink of Dr. Pepper. I feel like a little rebel in here, snacking and hiding out. But it's not real. Mateo likely knows right where I am.

I miss my dorm, the freedom of living on campus. But I suppose I'll never have that again. The thought sobers me even

more, and my hunger fades. I take a few more bites then lean back and simply look out the window. Past the roses, I see what looks like a stable, and beyond that a large wooded grove. The property is sprawling, and I wonder what other buildings lurk behind the house. There's a pool house that I can just see the stone edge of, and past that are more trees.

A creak behind me has me turning my head.

Two men walk in, their gazes landing on me immediately even though I've tried to shrink back into the alcove.

One of them smirks. "I like the outfit, *Mrs. Milani*."

That name. I hadn't even thought about it. But that's who I am now. Not Lucretia Fontana. Not a person. I'm simply an attachment of Mateo's, a piece of him.

The one who spoke to me stops beside the table.

I look up at him and force myself to glare. It's one thing for Mateo to abuse me, but another for one of his men. My mother didn't teach me many useful lessons over the years, but she was always very clear on not letting soldiers push her or me around. *'We may have to bend to the will of great men, Lucretia, but that's all. No one else tells us what to do. No one else touches us. Do you understand me?'* I can still feel the phantom pinch of her fingernails on either side of my chin as she told me this, her tone whispered and harsh. The fact that she believed—and still believes—my father to be a great man creates a raucous mix of disgust and anger inside me.

The soldier's gaze slides lower and lingers on my breasts, and then he licks his lips. "Not bad."

"Leave." I use the haughtiest tone I possess.

His dark eyebrows rise. "You're giving orders now?"

I lift my chin and look at a point over his head. "I'm *Mrs. Milani*, so yes. Get out of my sight."

His amusement evaporates into a snarl. "You don't tell me to do shit, stuck up little bitch."

"Geno, let's go." The other man shifts uneasily from one foot to the other. "Come on."

The mouthy one points a finger at me. “You’ll learn your place soon enough. I’ll get my turn to show you where you belong when Mateo passes you around.”

He follows the other man out, the door slamming behind them.

I jump, then wrap my arms around myself and fight like hell not to cry. What he said hadn’t even occurred to me. Does Mateo really intend to share me with his men? A shudder races through me at the idea, and I clench my eyes shut and take a deep breath. Then another.

“You don’t like the food?” An older man’s voice.

I turn toward it and put my hands out to ward off whatever is coming next.

The chef from earlier stands behind the island, his eyes on me. “I make whatever Mateo and his band of merry men ask for. Red likes the pizza rolls.” He wrinkles his nose. “Mateo prefers a burrata with fresh bread. Sonny is the pickiest. Plain saltine crackers with a thin brush of hummus.” He tsks. “And Benny eats pretty much everything. What’s your favorite food? I’ll add it to the spread.”

He has kind eyes with crow’s feet beside them and salt and pepper hair. The white uniform has black embroidery over his breast with the name Carter. I don’t trust him, but of all the men I’ve seen in this house so far, he seems the least dangerous. Or maybe that’s just wishful thinking and he’s hiding a shiv in his back pocket.

“Ramen.” I answer the first thing that comes to mind.

“What kind?” He leans against the stove, no judgment in his eyes or tone.

I swallow my embarrassment. “The cheap kind that comes in the little packages.”

“Hmph.” He nods. “That’s ... unexpected.”

I shrug, my muscles finally loosening up. “I’d never had it until I went to college.”

“Yeah?” He walks to the pantry and starts digging around. “I guess your parents weren’t the ramen type?” he calls.

“No.” I shake my head. “My mother hates carbs. She eats pasta, of course, but sparingly. There’s no way she would’ve let me have ramen. But when I got to college, I could get whatever I wanted.”

“And what you wanted was ramen?”

I smile for the first time in ... I don’t know when, actually. “They had the packages at the little convenience store in the bottom of my dorm. It looked easy.”

“Your mom didn’t want you to learn to cook, either?” He comes out of the pantry with some bottles with what looks like Chinese writing on them.

“It wasn’t important to her, I guess. She was more interested in keeping me thin and stupid so she could marry me off.”

“But I heard you went to college? That’s something.” He glances toward the hall. “Mateo might’ve benefited from some schooling, though education isn’t really his forte.”

“I did.” I push my plate away and stand. “But that’s over now.” I can’t hide the hurt in my voice. The yawning void of disappointment inside me is still there, will probably be there forever. I could’ve had a life, been someone besides just another mafia boss’s wife. But here I am. Trapped.

“Maybe it doesn’t have to be.” He pours a few spoonfuls from the bottles into a pan and flips on the burner. “You never know.”

He’s trying to be kind, but we both know I’m not here to be anything other than a brood mare. Once I give Mateo his children, he’ll likely spend his nights with mistresses. That should comfort me—the idea of being rid of him—but it makes me feel ... worse somehow.

“I’ll whip up some different ramen recipes, and you can tell me which ones you favor tomorrow. Sound good?” he asks over his shoulder. “I can get the noodles, but the sauce is what makes ‘em sing.”

I don't have anything to lose. This house is my prison, but maybe making friends with Carter will be a step toward some sort of freedom. I don't know.

“Sure.” I ease toward the door.

“If I can't make better ramen than the instant noodle people, then I may as well hang up my apron.” He starts humming as the smell of soy sauce flavors the air.

I back out of the kitchen, feeling better than when I entered.

Then I bump into the wall.

I turn and find Mateo, his face and chest streaked with blood. Shirtless and feral, he stares me down like I'm his next piece of prey.

A scream rises in my throat, but I don't let it fly. I choke it down.

He doesn't say anything, his eyes holding me captive. There's so much in them I don't understand. I see violence and anger, but underneath those things there's more. I'm afraid of the depth of him, because I know if I delve too deeply, I'll drown. I'm not cut out for a man like Mateo. A man like him will rip me to shreds and leave me bleeding if I let him. That's why Ferdinand was dead set on getting me out my parents' house—he knew I couldn't survive in a marriage like this. He tried to free me, but now I'm caught up even more, trapped in the glare of a man who horrifies me.

I swallow hard.

His gaze drops to my throat, then rises to my eyes again.

I'm afraid to look down at his muscled body, to see the gore that coats him. Even if I wanted to, I can't break the hold he has on me. His eyes are captivating, terrifying in their beauty.

He reaches out and takes a lock of my hair, rubbing it between his blood-stained fingers. “Soft, princess.”

He's toying with me.

“You don’t have to do this.” My voice shakes, and I’m certain my knees are trying to give way, but I don’t let them.

“Do what?” The ghost of a smirk crosses his lips.

“Hurt me.” I hate how weak I sound, the fear coating my words.

He steps closer, and I have to lean back to maintain eye contact. I don’t know how I know, but if I make one wrong move, he’s going to pounce.

“I only do things I want to do, princess.” His eyes swallow me up. All I can see is him, looming huge like the moon when it’s on the horizon. “And there are *several* things I want to do to you.”

“Please don’t.” My words come out breathy, shaky, and goosebumps break out all over my skin.

He releases my hair and runs his finger along my cheek and then down to my throat. “I could snap your neck with one hand.”

A shiver races down my spine, and I gasp as he tightens his grip around my throat.

“D-don’t.”

“Your pulse is racing. Blood pumping.” He presses his nose into my hair and inhales. “You smell like flowers and sugar, and I already know how sweet your cunt will taste.” He shoves me backwards, pinning me to the wall with his body, his heat lighting me up in ways I despise. “But you aren’t sweet, princess. You’re rotten. Just like your entire family.”

“If you hate me so much then why did you marry me?” I snap. I whip those words from my lips before even thinking.

He squeezes my throat tighter, his gaze flitting to my mouth. “There it is. There’s that sharp tongue.”

I can’t breathe. My body is on fire, my pussy growing wet as I grit my teeth. “Fuck you.” The words barely make it past my lips on a tortured whisper.

“Is that what you want?” He leans down and bites my bottom lip hard enough to make me whimper. “You want me to fuck you?” He slides his free hand beneath my skirt and under my panties.

I can't answer, not when the world is starting to spin and black shapes crowd my vision. But I feel when he rubs my clit, when his fingers slide lower and press inside me.

“You can pretend you don't want this, but we both know you do.” He suddenly lightens his grip on my throat, and I breathe in, my body waking up in a sudden jolt as he pinches my clit.

I gasp, my back arching as pleasure streaks through me, shocking me with its strength.

“There you are.” He runs his teeth along my throat and bites while his fingers stroke my clit faster and faster. “Come on my hand.”

“N-no.” I try to shove him away.

He doesn't move, but he pulls his hand back and slaps my pussy.

I squeal, and he does it again before returning to my clit.

“I told you to come, princess. Don't fucking think about disobeying me.” He bites my throat again, the pain mixing with the pleasure, and when he pinches my clit again, I shatter.

A moan lofts from my lungs, and I grip his bloody shoulders as he strokes me through my orgasm. It rolls and dives, giving me sensation that tightens inside me before blooming again and again. When I finally come down, my legs wobble, and I can barely breathe.

He steps back and puts his fingers in his mouth, licking them clean. “That's what I expect from my little Fontana slut.”

His words cut, and shame fills me as I realize how he played me, how he made me want him when I should've been repulsed. Hot tears burn in my eyes, and these aren't ones I can swallow down. They trickle along my cheeks as he smirks at me. I want to claw his eyes out, to strike back and cut him

the way he's cut me. But I can't do it. Not even with words. He's made clear that he cares nothing for me or my opinion.

Even with the tears, I push my shoulders back and meet his eyes. "Are we done here?"

"You can go." He jerks his chin down the hall.

I turn on my heel and hurry away.

His voice carries behind me. "But we aren't done, princess. Not by a long shot."

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J grunt as my release hits me, my come splashing on the tile at my feet as warm water cascades down from above. Leaning against the shower wall, I catch my breath and try to clear my head.

Killing Rodrigo relieved some of the pressure, but then I went and coiled myself up again by finger-fucking Lucretia in the hall. But the moment I saw her there, I couldn't stop myself. She's like a goddamn deer, innocent and completely unaware of the danger she's in. I took what I wanted in that moment, but I want more. So much fucking more.

I slam my fist into the wall, savoring the pain that burns along my nerves and sizzles to the base of my brain. It's the only thing that can knock me out of these thoughts. Lucretia Fontana isn't someone I should want. If anything, I should be taking all of her right now as she cries beneath me. I'd lick up her tears as I owned her cunt and made her scream.

My fist crashes into the wall again. Then again.

I stand straight and shake it out, my own blood sluicing down the drain as I try to re-center myself. She shouldn't be a distraction. She's a means to an end, nothing more. Terrorizing her is just a sweet treat for me as I dismantle her family.

"Focus, motherfucker." I flip the water to cold and let it pour down my face. When I'm finally iced to my dark core, I turn off the water and step out. It's time to get dressed.

After all, we're having company tonight. That thought almost makes me smile.

I stalk out of the bathroom and to Lucretia's closet. Her new outfit is already hanging up, ready for her to wear. It will be particularly gratifying for Leonard and Carmen to see their darling daughter dressed like this.

Going to the bedroom door, I open it and yell, "Princess!"

I bet my voice sends a shiver of fear through her. Yet another reason to be happy. I flex my aching fist, then return to the bathroom and dig around for some plasters.

"Yes?" Her voice, quiet and soft, sounds behind me.

I find the first aid and throw it onto the counter, then pour alcohol across my knuckles, enjoying the burn.

She stands against the doorframe, her arms wrapped around her middle.

"It's almost time for dinner. You'll need to change into something more appropriate." I watch her in the mirror as I pull out some plasters. She has dark circles under her eyes, and she almost sways in her hooker heels. A decent man would pity her. But even as I'm standing here looking in the mirror, there isn't a decent man to be seen. Only me.

"Okay." Her gaze goes to my bloodied hand. "What happened?"

I don't answer her.

She approaches.

I tense. It's not as if I let people walk up behind me on the regular. That's a good way to catch a case of lead poisoning.

She stops beside me and reaches for the first aid kit.

"I don't need your help." I peer down at her.

She grabs a piece of gauze. "I didn't ask."

Her fire seems closer to the surface now, as if her exhaustion and fear have stripped away her top layer of manners. Good. I like her better this way. She's not a princess, not some fairy tale girl who's destined for a happy ending. She's my captive. The sooner she realizes that and returns to

her base line of being a vicious Fontana, the better. No more lies or playing pretend.

She takes my hand and inspects it. “It wasn’t like this ... before.” Her cheeks heat as she presses the gauze to it.

“You mean when I had my fingers in your cunt?”

She clenches her eyes shut, then opens them again and keeps working, her lips pressed tightly together.

“You want to say something, princess?” I tease.

She shakes her head and rips off a piece of medical tape, then wraps it around my hand. Her fingers work delicately, her nails painted a pale pink and her wedding ring glinting in the bathroom light. Her skin is paler than mine, smoother. But that tracks, especially given that my family doesn’t have the Fontana pedigree. We were street rats in Sicily only a few generations ago, whereas the Fontanas have been Italian royalty in America since the 1800s.

I grab her wrist. “If you think helping me will stop what’s coming, you’re wrong.”

She meets my gaze. “I’ve never been able to stop bad things from happening. Why should that change now?” She tries to wrench her wrist away, but I don’t let go.

Anger sizzles inside me, the dangerous kind that leads to bloodshed or worse. “Do you want me to feel sorry for you? Is that it? Poor little Fontana princess is finally getting a taste of her own medicine?”

Her eyebrows draw together. “What? What have I *ever* done to you? I didn’t even know you until you showed up and—and—”

“And killed your precious Horatio?” I grin.

“You’re a monster.” She tries again to free her wrist.

Again, I don’t let her. She should know by now that the more she tries to pull away from me, the tighter I’m going to hold her.

“You would know, *princess*.” I yank her to me, her body pressed to mine as my cock makes itself known against her stomach.

She gasps, then swings at me with her free hand.

I catch it easily. “Is this the way you want to play it?” I squeeze her wrist. “You want me to take everything from you right now? Because I can, princess. You know I can.”

“I want you to let me go.” She spits the words.

I eye her lips. Her temptation. That’s what she is—nothing more than a temptation. One that will lead to damnation if I fall for it.

And finally, my brain kicks back on, and I let her go. I turn my back to her and finish wrapping my knuckles. “Your outfit for the evening is in your closet.”

She’s backed all the way to the bathroom door, her eyes on me in the mirror.

“What? No French maid look for the night?” She snaps, her sharp wit showing through the naïve haze that swims around her.

“Why, you’d rather wear that?” I let my gaze travel down her body, her round tits, the pinch of her waist, the flare of her hips, and the smooth skin of her thighs. “You can, but I thought you’d prefer to greet company in something more appropriate.”

She stills. “C-company?”

“Yes, princess. You’re married to a powerful man. I thought you’d already know you’d be expected to host dinners and be a good wife in *all* ways.” I turn to her and whip the damp towel from my waist.

Her eyes go right to my hard cock, and they widen just enough for me to know she likes what she sees. Good, she’ll be sucking it down her throat soon enough.

“Who’s coming to dinner?” she asks, her eyes finally meeting mine again.

“Yes. Oh, didn’t I mention it?” I love playing these little games with my wide-eyed viper. “Your parents.”

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I stay in my closet until I hear Mateo leave. He whistles as he closes the door, his steps receding down the hallway.

I know why he's in a good mood. The dress hanging in my closet barely has enough fabric to qualify as clothing. He's set me up to look even more ridiculous so he can laugh and mock me in front of my parents.

Pacing back and forth, I try to decide what to do. I'm not wearing this damned neon-pink get-up, and I won't be greeting my mother and father as a French maid. Which means I'm screwed. The next time I walk past the pink monstrosity, I yank it off the hanger and slam it against the back of the closet.

"Fuck you, Mateo." I don't know why he hates me or what he thinks I've done, but it doesn't matter. He has me under his thumb, and I have to find a way to survive before I'm crushed by him. Burying my head in the sand isn't going to save me. He's already proven he'll enforce his will on me. I stop when I think about how I came on his fingers, the way I moaned.

"Ugh!" I press my hands to my cheeks and shake my head. I don't understand him. He's cruel, but he hasn't hurt me. Not the way I expected him to, anyway. But the night is young, I remind myself.

I resume pacing, my mind trying to pick apart the lock that is Mateo Milani. But there are no answers in this dark closet. The only place where I might get some insight is downstairs

when my parents arrive. But that's not without a whole host of other issues—namely that my father sold me to a homicidal maniac without so much as a blink of the eye. And my mother agreed.

“No more tears.” I swipe angrily at my cheeks, then lean against the wall and try to think of some sort of plan. But I was never the one with strategy. That was Ferdinand. He wouldn't have let me fall into Mateo's hands. He would've kept me safe, not thrown me to the wolf. But he's not here. I am. I have to save myself, but I just don't know how.

One thing is certain—I can't hide in here all night. Mateo will come for me.

I stand straight again and wipe my cheeks. This impossible situation isn't getting any better, so I stomp out of my closet and into the bedroom. I glance at the bed. I suppose I could make another toga. I take a step toward it, then pause and turn toward Mateo's closet. My palms go sweaty, mainly because I don't know how he'll punish me for what I'm about to do. But it doesn't stop me.

With sure strides, I go to the closet door and yank it open. Rows of suits, shirts, pants, and every item of clothing a man could need greet me. Everything designer, everything bespoke to fit Mateo perfectly. I drag my fingers across the expensive fabrics. He may not care if I walk around here half naked, but he certainly spends plenty on his own wardrobe. I grip one of his fine blazers and yank it off the hanger.

“Asshole.” I drop it to the floor and grind my heel into the fine wool. It's a tiny rebellion, but it makes me feel better. It gives me some sense of control, even if it's fleeting.

I keep walking until I get to his dress shirts. Dozens of them, all neatly pressed and hanging in a perfect row. I peer at each of them until I come to a white one with faint blue stripes. This will do. I pull it down, then walk deeper into the closet until I come to several sets of drawers. I find ties, handkerchiefs, cuff links, and finally, belts.

“You'll do fine.” I snatch the black Gucci belt from the drawer, then strip out of my ridiculous costume and pull on his

shirt.

It smells like fresh linen, but it also has his scent. His soap, or his cologne, or whatever it is he uses. I put the sleeve to my nose and sniff, then force myself to stop and pretend that it smells terrible and I hate it. After all, I *do* loathe the man, even if he smells good.

Once I have it buttoned, I cinch the belt around my waist. There are no belt holes for me to use the buckle, But I make it work with some tucking and tightening.

Leaving the closet, I head to the bathroom and run some water, using it to smooth my hair down. Then I scrub the remnants of the old mascara from beneath my eyes until I look relatively decent. I still have puffiness, but I'm not too bad.

I step back and check my reflection. His shirt swims on me, but the belt has cinched it nicely. It falls to my mid-thigh, and in some other universe, it might pass for an odd shirt-dress.

This rebellion is bigger. I swallow hard. Mateo *will* punish me for it. I need to accept that fact, even if I fear it. But I'd rather meet my parents with my head high. They need to know their backstab hasn't broken me ... Not yet. Mateo's been holding back.

I peer into the mirror, my eyes tired, and ask the question that's been chirping through my mind like an annoying insect. "*When is he going to take everything from me?*"

Loud voices loft from downstairs, and I take a calming breath before turning and leaving the bathroom and then the bedroom.

"—blood is on your hands." My father stands in the foyer, Mother beside him. He doesn't sound angry, just chiding. "Everyone saw."

"I wanted everyone to see." Mateo's voice is cold, so much colder than it has been toward me over the past day. "It's important that they know my family and I are not to be trifled with, Leonard."

My father shakes his head. "They saw a madman."

“One who’s already paid you, so perhaps you should focus on gratitude.” Mateo’s biting tone sharpens even more.

My mother huffs. “Are we going to stand here all night, or are there dinner plans?”

My stomach lurches at the thought of eating, of what Mateo has planned for me during dinner. He’s creative with his humiliation.

“This way, Carmen.” Mateo turns on his heel, his eyes landing on me, as if he’s known all along I’ve been standing here.

I grip the stair railing and force my legs to carry me down.

Geno, the guard who was a dick to me in the kitchen, stands at the front door and watches me with a scowl. He’s the least of my worries.

My mother lets out a sharp scoff. “What on earth are you wearing?”

It’s like a whip that draws blood on my heart. Of all the things she could say, could do—she chooses this. What I’m wearing is more important to her than anything else. No matter that she sold me, that my new husband murders without a thought, that he could’ve hurt me beyond repair in the hours since he’s had me in his grasp. None of that bothers her. Only my outfit.

“It seems my bride has taken creative license with my clothing.” Mateo smirks, his gaze sliding up and down my body.

My mother snaps her attention back to Mateo. “Of course she’s acting out. You haven’t taken her on a honeymoon. What sort of groom does that?”

Mateo strides to me, and it takes all the strength I have not to back away. He wraps his arm around my waist and tilts my chin up. “Is that what you want, princess? A honeymoon?”

I want plenty of things, foremost among them, my freedom. I want a divorce, I want to go back to school, I want to be anywhere but here. His light eyes are laughing at me,

though there's no smile on his face. That's all I am to him, a joke, a game, something he can destroy.

"Of course she does!" my mother answers for me. "She's not some silly, common girl. She's our daughter. She deserves more than terrible clothes and a lifetime spent in this gray prison."

I suppose she wants me in Prada and Chanel, wants me paraded around like a Fontana queen so she can save face. There have been countless times when I've thought nothing my mother says can surprise me anymore. It's heartbreaking how wrong I've been.

Mateo keeps his grip on my waist as he turns to my mother. "She will stay in this 'gray prison' as long as I wish. She's my wife. *Mine*."

My mother opens her mouth, but Father speaks up first. "We have no quarrel with that. Marriages are difficult at best, and we don't mean to interfere." He gives my mother a sharp look. "After all, you've been good on your word. The bride price has been paid, so I don't see why we can't put all that earlier unpleasantness behind us."

Now it's my turn to scoff. "Unpleasantness? Is the cold-blooded murder of an entire family nothing more than 'unpleasantness'?"

"Lucretia!" My mother's sharp tone is painfully familiar. "The dramatics are unnecessary."

Mateo's smirk has turned into a grin, and he leans close to my ear, whispering, "I didn't kill the *entire* family, but it's only a matter of time, so you aren't wrong, princess."

I pull away from him though he doesn't let me step back. I don't know who disgusts me more—the monster who holds me in his grip or the monsters who put me here.

My father clears his throat. "Shall we ..."

"Come, dinner is waiting." Mateo guides me forward, his hand on my hip as he leads me to the dining room.

When we walk in, a man is already seated toward the head of the table.

“Vincenzo?” My father hurries around to the man. “It’s been so long.”

Vincenzo stands and shakes hands, then gives my mother a nod. “I was happy to accept Mateo’s invitation to meet his new bride.” He smiles. He’s older, perhaps in his fifties, and has the look of a man who used to break hearts like it was his job. Square jaw, dark eyes, a thick head of hair with only a few streaks of gray at the temples. He’s almost as tall as Mateo, and anyone unfamiliar with the families might think he was Mateo’s father.

“And this must be Lucretia.” He turns to me.

“Yes, my daughter.” My father has the nerve to sound proud.

“You chose well, kid.” Vincenzo moves to me and takes my hand, then kisses the back. “Such a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Milani.”

Mateo tenses as Vincenzo kisses my hand and keeps it for longer than necessary. His fingers press into my hip, possession clear in the way he holds me to his side.

“Nice to see you again, Carmen.” Vincenzo finally releases my hand and turns to my mother. “I think we last saw each other in Sicily, wasn’t it?”

My mother puts on her sweetest smile, the one she always uses when she’s trying to play a room. “I believe so. You helped me choose the best olives at the market.”

“Indeed.” He nods. “It was a beautiful time to be back home.”

My father stiffly steps to one of the dining room chairs and pulls it out. “Carmen.”

She goes to him, her hips swaying more than usual.

“Come, wife.” Mateo leads me to the head of the table. When he sits and pats his lap, my face goes hot.

“I’m not—”

“No? Are you certain you want to go down that road, princess?” He blinks, that damn smirk returning to his face. He doesn’t say anything else, but the subtext is clear. I’m not allowed to disobey, and if I do, he’ll hurt me.

So, I sit.

Mateo grabs my hips and pulls me closer to him, his palm sliding along my thigh. “I take it you didn’t appreciate the clothes I left for you?” His voice is low, deadly.

“I’m not wearing that.” My voice shakes, betraying my fear.

“Perhaps next time I won’t leave you any clothes at all. Would you prefer that?” His fingertips knead my thigh. “I think I might.”

My mother gawks. “Really, Mateo, you won’t allow her to sit in her own seat?”

His mouth turns into a smile, one that would be heartbreakingly gorgeous if it weren’t so disingenuous. “We’re newlyweds, Carmen. Surely you understand how intimate such a time can be?” He turns back to me. “You like your seat, don’t you, princess?” He moves his hips up just enough so I can feel how hard he is.

Vincenzo shakes his head, his expression wry. “He’s been doing this for the entire day, hasn’t he? The whole time you’ve been married?”

I can’t say the things he’s done to me, the way he’s made me shatter despite myself. My cheeks flame even hotter as the memories try to rise to the surface. “He’s very ... *affectionate*.” Everyone at the table knows I’m lying.

Mateo shakes a little, and when I look at him, I realize he’s stifling a laugh.

“Affectionate?” Vincenzo smiles. “Now that’s not a word I would’ve ever thought someone would use to describe you, kid.”

“You clearly don’t know me as well as you think, Vince.” Mateo’s hand slides higher, his fingers finding the edge of my panties.

I try to press my legs together to stop him, but he turns his hand to the side, palming my legs apart.

Footsteps sound in the hallway, and Carter walks in with two other chefs at his back. They lay out a feast—prime rib, buttery potatoes, glazed carrots, and steaming rolls.

My mouth waters, but I don’t think I can eat. Not with Mateo’s hand between my legs and my parents in the room.

Mateo simply waves a finger, and Carter makes a plate for him and sets it in front of us.

“Eat, wife.” He finally pulls his hands from between my legs, then turns me so I’m facing the table. “I won’t let my bride go hungry.”

My mother’s lips thin a bit more as she scoops a small serving of salad onto her plate. “You don’t want to encourage her too much, Mateo. She gained ten pounds when we let her go to college. She came home for the summer, and I had to get her right back onto a tight regimen of healthy eating and exercise to get her into this shape.”

I’m already caught in a spider’s web, Mateo’s venom working its way through my body as it slowly kills my soul, but my mother has to get her hits in, too. My eyes water, and I curse myself for being weak, for letting her hurt me when I’m already bleeding out.

“Nonsense.” Mateo reaches around me, his scent enveloping me as he cuts the prime rib, dips it into the potatoes and gravy, and brings it to my mouth.

My mother’s eyes narrow as she watches me.

“I’m not hungry.” I turn my head away.

“You are.” Mateo moves his other hand to my thighs again. He presses his mouth against my ear, his warm breath sending goosebumps along my skin. “Eat, princess. If you don’t, I’m

going to finger-fuck you and make you come while Mommy and Daddy watch. I'll enjoy it, too. So very much."

Oh, god. No. Absolutely no. I turn back to the loaded fork and open my mouth.

Mateo laughs low in his throat as I take what he's offering.

My mother scowls and picks at her salad. The food is amazing. The prime rib is tender and the potatoes—I don't think I've ever had potatoes this delicious in my life. Needless to say, potatoes weren't common in the Fontana home, not when all I needed was 'a handful of almonds' according to my mother.

Mateo loads up his fork again and brings it to my mouth.

I eat.

"Though we've settled the bride price, we still need to talk about the ... *issues* from the wedding." My father takes a big drink of his wine. "Sarita Manchello has already taken her case to several of the families, and she wants to set a meeting as soon as possible—could be as soon as next month—to discuss what occurred yesterday."

"She wants to discuss my happy marriage?" Mateo forks some carrots and brings them to my mouth.

Happy? If I could laugh, I would. But I'm at that point of emotional exhaustion that if I laughed, it would most certainly turn into an uncontrollable crying fit.

"Open," Mateo growls.

I do, and he slides the fork inside, leaving the carrots between my teeth. I chew, the sweet glaze popping on my tongue. I never knew a carrot could taste so good.

Vincenzo shakes his head, a half-smile on his lips. "I think he's talking about the bloodbath you caused at the cathedral, Mateo, or perhaps that's just a wild guess on my part."

"Let them set the meeting." Mateo shrugs. "I'm happy to discuss whatever Sarita desires. However, I also demand Horatio's books. As you know, our laws say that I take his cut.

He has no other heirs, and neither does Sarita. Their line has ended; therefore, their holdings are now mine.”

“She’ll never agree to that.” My mother gives up pretending to eat her salad and places her fork beside her plate.

“I don’t need her to agree to anything.” Mateo brings the wine glass to my lips. “Perhaps you’ve noticed, Carmen, but I can be *very* persuasive.”

I drink. Mateo keeps tilting the glass. So I drink more until I reach for his wrist to push it away. He relents finally, but I’ve swallowed more than half the glass, and I’m a lightweight at best.

“Are you full, my princess?” he asks.

“Yes,” I answer quickly and truthfully. For the first time since I got here, my stomach feels settled.

He moves his hands to my ass and eases me from his lap. I stand and sidestep, getting as much distance from him as I can.

But he stands, too, his hand resting on my hip. “Thank you for dining with us, Carmen and Leonard. Now you can scurry back to the other families and tell them I treat my wife as I should. She’s alive and perfectly fine.” He pins my mother with a glare. “Not a mark on her, as you can see. At least, not one that came from *me*.”

Does he sound ... angry? I must be mishearing. There’s no way he cares about my mother hitting me.

“I beg your pardon?” My mother’s haughty tone is back as she gets to her feet, my father following her.

“I hate to repeat myself, Carmen.” Mateo gestures toward the door. “You’re dismissed. And if I hear the slightest whisper that you’ve been talking or plotting with Sarita, I can assure you that what happened in the cathedral was only an appetizer for what I’ll do to you.”

“Now, Mateo, you can’t—”

“You have your money.” Mateo’s cold voice is like a cutting winter wind. “Now go.”

It's the oddest sensation, and it seems wrong to admit it, but—I feel almost giddy. No one has *ever* spoken to my parents like this. No one would dare. My family was once the most feared of all. My grandfather had more blood on his hands than a surgeon, and he is still spoken of in fearful whispers. He wasn't the only monster in my lineage, either. Plenty of Fontanas cemented our reputation in blood, decades of it, and the family only fell into trouble once my father became the head. Ferdinand was intent on getting our reputation back, on putting us back on top. But he never got the chance.

My father begins to sputter, his face going red.

Vincenzo watches with an amused expression, and I suspect I do, too.

Mother grabs Father's elbow. "Let's go, Leonard. Now." She must sense the danger, the coiled adder that is Mateo Milani, because she doesn't give Father a chance to be indignant. Instead, she half pulls him from the table, then leads him from the room. Not a word to me, not even a backwards glance.

Then again, they've only ever cared about self-preservation. That's why they sold me to the madman who just dismissed them as if they were nothing more than common fools. The madman who ordered Leonard and Carmen Fontana from his presence in a way that made my heart soar higher than it has in a long, long time. A sobering, and *terrifying*, feeling.

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“**S**top torturing the poor girl.” Vincenzo smokes a cigar as I swirl my whiskey. “She has no idea about your parents.”

“It doesn’t matter if she knows, Vince.” I take a drink.

“It *does* matter.” He sighs. “I’ve told you this from the moment you hatched this plan—she’s not to blame for who her parents are, just as you’re not to blame for what happened to yours. Really, kid, I don’t understand why you can’t see that.”

“Maybe I do.” I stare into the fireplace, the blackened wood smoldering and popping. “Maybe I just don’t care. Making a Fontana suffer—*any* Fontana—is good enough for me.”

He leans his head back and puffs his cigar, making smoke rings rise toward the ceiling. “I don’t think that’s true. I saw the way you looked at her.”

“Like I want to break her neck with my bare hands?” I ask.

“No, more like you want to break her back.”

I shrug. “She’s my wife. Fucking her is a given.”

“But you haven’t yet?”

I shrug again.

“Mmhmm.” He smiles faintly.

“What the fuck is that?” I finish my whiskey and pour another.

“Nothing.”

I want to roll my eyes at him the same way I did when I was a teenager and he was my father’s best friend. They used to let me sit in on business meetings starting when I was thirteen. They were so goddamn boring. I wanted to be doing anything but listen to them talk about balance sheets and ducking the feds—though I rather enjoyed when they detailed how they dealt with threats to our family or our business. Those talks weren’t too bad.

Vincenzo was one of the more powerful bosses back then, and he did a lot to help my father come up in the world. Until it was all taken away. By the Fontanas. The whiskey burns as it goes down.

“Lucretia is just a tool. That’s it. I have the only Fontana heir. I have the name. They don’t have shit for holdings, but that doesn’t matter anymore.” I stare into the fire again. “I have their child, and I’m never going to let her go.”

“Are you still set on this plan?” he asks, his tone almost sad.

“Yes.”

He sighs. “Killing them won’t bring your parents back.”

“No, but it will make me feel really fucking good.”

“How will it make *her* feel?” he asks.

“Doesn’t matter.”

Another long-suffering sigh. “I think you’ll find that it does.”

“Giving me marriage advice when you’ve never been married?” I fire back.

He stares at me, something inscrutable in his eyes. “Fair point.”

“Come on, Vince. Did you come here to give me shit or to talk about plans?”

He shrugs. “Both. But I’m not talking plans until you fix me a whiskey.” He glances around. “Where are the boys,

anyway?”

“Sonny’s balling some strange downtown, Benny is gambling, and Red’s fucking around with the DEA at the border.”

Vince whistles. “DEA?”

“Red and his damn drug subs. You know, when he first came to me with the idea, I thought he was joking. But he’s made it work.”

“Not this time though?” he asks.

“No, but it’s Red. He’ll come through.”

He sips his whiskey.

The fire continues to crackle, and I find my gaze wandering to the door, and then upward toward the ceiling. She’s in our room. I wanted to fuck with her more after dinner, but I also needed to talk business with Vincenzo, so I had to let her go. She practically ran from me, her hair flying out behind her, fear in every step. I catch myself smiling at the memory of it.

“Mmhm.” Vincenzo raises his glass to me. “Just as I thought.”

“Shut up, old man.” I finish my whiskey. “Now, let’s get down to it.” I sit across from him. “Sarita and the meeting. I’m ready to finish this. All I need is your commitment to back me, no matter what.”

He turns his glass in his hands, the firelight glinting off the crystal. “I’ve always backed you, kid. No point changing that now. So how’s this going to go down?”

I give him the answer he’s already expecting: “With a lot of blood.”



IT’S LATE when I finish up with Vincenzo, and even later by the time I make it to my bedroom. It’s dark, the room quiet

except for Lucretia's soft breathing.

She's curled up in a ball on the far side of the bed, so close to the edge that she could fall off if she shifted only a hair farther.

I take off my coat, my shirt, then my pants as I walk around to her side of the bed. The faint light from the bathroom falls over her face, her dark hair shining even in the dimness. She must've showered, because I can smell my soap in the air. Her lips are slightly parted, and she has her hands folded under her head. The face of an angel but a heart forged in hell. She's so beautiful, a perfection that seems nearly impossible, especially given her parents. Carmen Fontana was a looker when she was younger, from what I've heard, but she was nothing compared to her daughter.

My cock is already hard, and I run my thumbs around the waistband of my boxer briefs to tuck it in. I stand and watch her for a while longer, my cruel heart wanting to wake her up and make her cry. Her mouth wrapped around my shaft as tears roll down her cheeks—such a fucking pretty picture. But there's another part of me—one that's been annoying the ever-loving fuck out of me—that wants to let her sleep. And yet another part that wants to wake her to talk to her, to ask her how she enjoyed the torture of dining with her shitty parents, to ask her more. But that's not what this is about.

I reach out to touch her cheek then pull back. I can't do this by half measures. Either I wake her up and take what I want from her, or I leave her alone. What's that saying? Inside every man are two wolves? Not me. Inside me is a singular fucking beast that knows what it wants and takes it. It's how I've lived my life. I reach for her again, intent on wrapping her hair around my fist and forcing her to her knees. But again, I stay my hand. Because if I do this, she'll despise me. If I break her this way, I won't be able to go back. Some things can't be mended. And I've told myself again and again, that I want to break her, that I want to reach the point of no return, that I want to make her *hurt*. But here I stand, the beast inside me suddenly advising caution when all its ever done is join me in the euphoria of blood and destruction.

With growing frustration, I stalk away and climb into bed.

I look over at her, but she seems miles away, her face turned from me.

Closing my eyes, I tell myself I need to sleep. I need to clear my head and wake in the morning with renewed purpose. Because if I'm going to bring down no fewer than two families in one fell swoop, I need my shit together.

But even as I clench my eyes shut, I *feel* her. I sense her breath, her warmth, can even catch the scent of her. She's sleeping quietly, but she's loud in my ears. Tormenting me with her nearness, with her goddamn innocence. She shouldn't *be* this way. She shouldn't blush for me, shouldn't be anything except a Fontana whore. But she's not. She's ...

I roll over and swipe a hand down my face. If there was another prisoner in the stables, I'd be heading that way right now to get my hands dirty. But there isn't. So instead, I lie in bed and torture myself while slowly falling into blissful dreams of the woman I plan to destroy.



I WAKE SLOWLY, my blood sizzling as I open my eyes. My cock is aching, my entire body on edge, and it doesn't take long to figure out why.

Lucretia is snuggled against my side, her body warm, her scent sweet. The faint morning light shows me her eyes are closed, still dreaming. Her hand is on my stomach, her knee resting atop my thigh. Only a few more inches and she'd nudge my cock, feel just how hard she's made me.

Last night, I counseled patience. But this morning, that logic is gone.

With a quick movement, I've flipped her onto her back.

Her eyes snap open, and she screams.

I slap my hand over her mouth, then grab one flailing wrist and pin it above her. "Good morning, wife."

She tries to close her legs to keep me out, but I press my knees between hers and force her to spread. Once I have enough room, I press my hips between her thighs. Fuck, her cunt is so hot, I can feel it through the fabric of her panties and my briefs.

My phone buzzes on the nightstand. I ignore it.

I groan and thrust against her, my cock rubbing against her heat, driving me insane.

She arches, trying to buck me, but she has no chance. I'm too strong, too fucking determined. I pull my hand from her mouth and grab her other wrist, consolidating them above her head under one of my palms.

“Stop.” She writhes and uses her heel to kick the back of my calf. “Get off me!”

I grip one side of her shirt—*my* shirt—and yank, the buttons popping free and revealing her round tits.

“No!” She screams.

“Stop saying no when we both know you don't mean it.” I lower my head to one of her nipples and suck it into my mouth.

She squeals and kicks me again, her fingernails digging into the side of my hand.

I suck her nipple hard, then bite down on it with my teeth.

The sound she makes is a mix of indignation and pain. I love it. I move to her other tit, licking and sucking it as I run my fingers down her trembling stomach to her panties.

My phone buzzes again.

“Mateo, stop.” Her voice is breathy, her body flushed.

“You don't want me to, princess. I know exactly what you want.” I slide my fingers into her panties and find her soaking. Another groan rips from me, and all I can think about is how tight and wet her cunt will feel once I'm balls-deep inside her. At the thought, I move my fingers to her hole and push inside. “Fuck, you're so tight. So goddamn wet.” I pulse two fingers

inside her, going to my knuckle before pulling out and bringing her wetness back to her clit. “You’re going to take my cock, aren’t you, princess? You want all of it.”

“N-no.” She moans as I stroke her clit faster. “Never.”

“Such a little liar.” I smirk and stare down into her eyes. “Will you ever tell me the truth?”

That fire lights in her eyes again. “I hate you!” she yells.

“Finally.” I kiss her hard, our mouths at war as I stroke her clit. “Open,” I grate against her lips.

She turns her head away.

I take the opportunity to fasten my lips to her throat, sucking her tender skin as I plunge my fingers inside her again and again.

She moans, her body shaking as I finger-fuck her, my cock demanding I do the real thing.

“I’m going to make you hurt, princess.” I bite her throat, leaving my mark. “I’m going to fuck you until you cry.”

“Shut up!” She tries to buck me again.

I grin as she meets my gaze again, because what I see in her now is what makes her fucking irresistible. She’s pissed. She’s fucking enraged—at me, at the wet state of her hot cunt, at how much she wants this despite telling me no.

“There you are.” I kiss her again, giving her no chance to turn away from me. With a harsh yank, I rip her panties off. She tries to pull her wrists free, to somehow escape my grasp. Not a fucking chance.

When I bite her bottom lip, she opens her mouth to scream. That’s when I sink my tongue in. She closes her mouth, ready to bite it, but I pull back, then attack her again, kissing her until she gives in, her tongue moving against mine, my fingers playing her clit.

She’s on the edge. I can feel it in the way her hips lock, the way she holds her breath.

I pull my fingers away and yank down the waistband of my boxer briefs. When my cock head presses against her wet flesh, I groan with pure pleasure.

Her eyes widen. “No.”

“Yes, princess.” I press my head to her opening.

“No!” She yanks, trying to free her wrists from my merciless grip.

“Stop lying.” I’m going insane, completely primal with my need to take all of her. “Stop telling me you don’t want this.” I bite her lip again, eliciting a moan from her.

My phone buzzes as a harsh knock sounds at my door.

I turn my head and yell. “What the fuck is it?”

“Sorry, Mateo, but it’s an emergency.” Sonny’s voice.

“So is this.” I stare into her eyes, into her fucking soul. I’m hanging by a thread, and all it would take is one small shove of my hips for me to get inside her.

“Red’s in custody at the border. Trying to bribe a federal agent. *Someone* gave him 50k and set him loose.”

Fuuuuuuck. I drop my head next to hers and realize my heart is not the only one that’s pounding. Hers is matching it beat for beat, the strain in our bodies like two magnets resisting each other, or perhaps it’s the opposite.

I release her wrists and sit back on my haunches. She scrambles away from me and yanks my shirt together, hiding her body from me.

“This isn’t over.” I keep her in my gaze. “Not even close, princess.” I stand, finally breaking eye contact as I stride to my closet and dress quickly.

“The jet is waiting,” Sonny calls from the hallway. “Flight plan’s already filed. I can take off as soon as I get to the hangar. I just wanted to let you know.”

“I’m coming,” I bark.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea. It could be a trap or—”

“I said I’m coming,” I bark.

Once I’m dressed, I feel my heartbeat finally slowing, my mind clearing from the haze she put me in. I’ve never been on the back foot in my life—not in my business dealings or my personal life. I can see what’s coming, like a chess player thinking three moves ahead. But not with her. Not with this woman I only intended to break. I realize now she’s the one breaking me. The hairline cracks started years ago when I first began studying her family, when I first saw photos of her. Her sweet sixteen. Her first day at college. Her brother’s funeral.

I’ve been watching her family for a long, long time. Eight years since my parents’ murder, five years I’ve been following every move my little princess makes. It made sense, especially given my plans, but what’s happening right now? The way she has me in a fucking tailspin? It makes no sense at all. Maybe this trip to the border will give me the distance I need. I can clear my head, come back here, and finally take what’s mine—Lucretia Fontana, every last fucking crumb of her.

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LUCRETIA

I hold my head in my hands, a sob shaking me as I sit in Mateo's bed. He's gone. Left with a murderous expression on his face but not a word from his mouth. It's better that way, I think. Better for him to leave me here to lick my wounds.

If Sonny was telling the truth, then Mateo might be gone for a while. Days. Maybe weeks? I take in a deep breath and let it out slowly. This is the opening I need. If I can find some way to slip out of here while he's away, I'll have a head start on getting as far from here as I can. It won't be easy. Hell, I probably won't make it, but I have to try. Because if he touches me again, if he ... if he does the things he just did, I don't know how I'll survive here. I hate feeling like I can't trust myself, and that's exactly how he makes me feel. I press my forehead against my knees. He'd been so close to taking me, and I'd been so close to giving in. Shame burns behind my eyes, but I swallow down my tears. Like always, they won't help.

I get out of bed and return to his closet, grabbing another shirt and buttoning it up. The belt was finicky last night, so I open his top drawer and pull out a tie, then wrap it around my waist and knot it. I look around the bed for my panties, but they're gone. Probably ripped to shreds anyway. I fuss with the tie again, ensuring its secure, then grab my platform heels and put them on.

Making my way out of the bedroom, I edge down the hallway and listen for voices. Two soldiers are at the front

door, one texting on his phone while the other one yawns. As I pad down the stairs, neither of them give me more than a glance. I like it that way. Better to fly under the radar.

When I walk into the kitchen, Carter is there along with a woman in a similar chef outfit. She's laying out the crustless egg salad sandwiches as Carter slices the bread to go along with the burrata.

"Good morning." He smiles. "Hope you slept all right. You certainly look more well rested."

"Thanks, I guess." I sit at the island.

"Theresa, this is Mrs. Milani."

"Nice to meet you, ma'am." She inclines her head.

"Nice to meet you." It occurs to me I haven't seen any women in the house. She's the first one.

Carter finishes arranging the bread slices, then wipes his hands on his spotless apron. "What can we make you? If you'd rather have breakfast in the formal dining room, we can—"

"No," I answer quickly. "In here is fine."

"Great." He smiles in a way that makes me think of the way dads in sitcoms smile. Non-threatening, warm, and—unlike the tv dads—genuine.

"What's your favorite breakfast?" He goes to the stove and opens a simmering pot.

I catch the scent of sesame oil and soy. "Is that ramen?"

He stirs and replaces the lid. "Not yet, but it will be. I won't drop the noodles in until you're ready for lunch."

"Can I have it for breakfast?" I ask.

He turns and raises a brow, then nods. "I don't see why not. This'll be my first ramen for breakfast dish, so go easy on me."

"I'm sure I'll love it." I settle in as Theresa offers me a cup of coffee. "Thanks." I take it, not sure when I had coffee last. My mother is a fan, as long as there's no cream and sugar in it.

“We have Italian cream and a crème brûlée version that Carter makes.”

“That sounds amazing. I’ll try the crème brûlée, if that’s all right?”

“Of course.” She turns, her dark ponytail whipping a little as she hurries to the fridge.

Carter opens the cabinet by the stove and pulls out several different packages of ramen, all of them different from the ones I’m used to, then selects two and drops them into the pot.

My stomach grumbles as I watch them work seamlessly, each of them clearly a master in the kitchen.

“Do you like to cook, Mrs. Milani?” he asks.

“Call me Lucretia.” I chafe at the thought of being ‘Mrs. Milani’, especially when I was never given a say in the matter, though that would’ve been true even if I were ‘Mrs. Manchello.’ “I’ve never been much of a cook, though I was getting pretty proficient with the microwave during my freshman year.”

He winces. “The microwave, hmm?”

“Yep. I had a micro-fridge in the dorm. Microwave on top, fridge below. I could just grab a hot pocket—” He winces again. “—from the bottom and pop it into the top, and in all of two minutes, lunch.”

“Well, in that case, I’m particularly glad you’re here with us now.”

“That makes one of us,” I say under my breath.

Theresa gives me a knowing look, one that almost seems to pity me, then makes herself busy in the pantry.

Carter stirs the ramen then pops the lid back on before coming over to the island. “How are you holding up?”

I snort. I can’t help it. “You ask it like I’m in a hostage situation. Or maybe on my deathbed.”

“You aren’t on your deathbed, but the first part doesn’t sound so far off.”

“I guess everyone knows how I got here.” I rub my eyes and try to erase the images of Horatio and his dead brothers lying at my feet.

“Yes, word travels fast. Mateo told me the day before you arrived that I’d be cooking for you.”

How long had Mateo been planning this? It’s something I’ve wondered, but I’ve been too keyed up to spend much time thinking about it. This must’ve been in the works for quite some time for him to show up at the wedding with the bride price at the ready and his men in position to wreak havoc. I’ve also pondered the why of it. Not that I’d ask him, and not that anyone else in this house would tell me. Was it really just to gain a foothold into the Fontana name? He has to know it’s nothing more than a façade at this point. If the name died with me, it wouldn’t be that odd. After all, plenty of big names have died out in our violent world, and no tears were shed over their loss. So why go to all this trouble?

“Lucretia?”

I look up at Carter and realize he’s been calling my name more than once.

“Sorry, I was just ... thinking.”

“Not a problem. But your ramen is ready. I just need to know if you want an egg and scallions on top.”

“An egg?” I’m unfamiliar with it, but I’m down to try it, especially since I’m certain Carter knows what a good ramen is supposed to look like. “Sure. But I’m a no on the scallions.”

“Noted.” He ladles the steaming ramen into a bowl, cracks an egg over the top, and slides it over to me. “Enjoy it. If you don’t, please let me know. I’m here to feed you, and I can’t do that if you aren’t honest about your likes and dislikes.”

“You have my word.” I don’t know if I’m being entirely truthful, though. Carter is the only friendly face I’ve found in this place, so I’m not keen on telling him if I don’t like his food.

Thankfully, he turns away and starts wiping down the stove and counters as I pull my first bunch of noodles from the

bowl and blow on them. The broth is so hot that the egg is cooked except for a slightly runny yolk. When I finally put them in my mouth, I close my eyes at the taste. Rich and perfectly salty, these are easily the best ramen noodles I've ever had in my life.

“So good,” I say around the mouthful.

“Good. Now I know your baseline, and I can experiment from here.” He ladles the rest of the noodles into a large bowl, adds more broth, then places them on the serving line next to the caprese salad. Somehow, I already know that's one of Mateo's chosen snack foods.

“I'll see you at lunch. I'm making a lemon chicken piccata. Does that sound all right?”

“It sounds amazing,” I say between bites.

“Good. Theresa, let's get to the market.”

They leave, and the kitchen feels a few degrees cooler as I finish my noodles and place my bowl in the sink. I find myself wishing I could go with them to the market. But I don't ask. That would only make it awkward when they had to tell me no. I'm certain everyone has strict orders to keep me locked up in this gray stone prison, especially when Mateo is gone. It doesn't matter. I'm going to spend the morning checking all the exits, the nooks and crannies, and keeping tabs on the soldiers. My mind made up, I rinse my bowl and empty coffee cup, then walk toward the door. As soon as I find an opening in the soldiers' patrols, I'll—

I yelp as the kitchen door swings toward me so fast it almost nails me in the face.

“Whoa!” A man matches my yell.

I step back and bump into the island as he swings the door open more slowly this time. Dark hair, dark eyes, and with a jawline I'd recognize anywhere. This has to be one of Mateo's relatives. A cousin or a brother by the look of him, definitely younger. Mateo is late twenties. This man looks my age, and he's dressed like he just came from a fabulous beach vacation, with matching tan. His eyeliner is also done in a perfect wing.

“You’re the wife?” He looks me up and down. “Why are you dressed like a ragamuffin?”

“Why are you dressed like you like pina coladas?” I shoot back.

He snorts a laugh. “Fair. I was actually auditioning for a bit part in a shark movie when I heard my brother got hitched and did a few murders. I jumped a plane from sunny L.A. and now I’m here with you. But where’s Mateo? He’s not answering his phone. The prick.” He strides in and glances along the line of foods, a slight frown creasing his handsome face. “Carter isn’t making me those apple fritter things anymore?”

“You’re his brother?” I can’t square this guy—one with a witty, easygoing style—with the brooding, angry, violent man who shares my bed.

“Carlito.” He picks up a piece of bread and dabs it in some herb-filled olive oil before taking a bite. “But they call me Lito for short.”

“I’m Lucretia.”

“I know.” He takes another bite, then turns to me. “You still haven’t told me why you look like an extra from a low-budget production of a filthy version of *Annie*.”

I can’t explain it, but I want to laugh and also say something smart back. It’s like he’s put me at ease, though I don’t know how.

“Because your brother only gives me hooker clothes to wear.”

“Well, my dear, sex work is work, you know.” He sighs. “Now where is he? I need to talk with him about this disaster.” He waves a hand at my shirt dress. “Not to mention his beef with half the families now that he’s done the whole blood bath thing at your wedding.”

“He’s gone. One of his men got into trouble—”

“Red.” He rolls his eyes. “Has to be Red.”

“I think so. Mateo left this morning to try to get him out of federal custody, I guess. Sonny went with him.”

“That leaves Benny. Have you seen him?” He dusts the crumbs off his shirt.

“No, but I just got down here.”

He leans against the island for a few moments, possibly thinking the situation over.

I edge toward the door, eager to go on my reconnaissance mission.

He runs a hand through his dark hair. “The way I see it is I’m here to solve a handful of problems, but because Mateo has run off, I can only solve one.” He points at my dress. “That problem is you. I honestly can’t stand to look at this crap anymore. We’re going shopping.”

“Wh-what?” I don’t think I’ve ever felt more perplexed in my life.

He snaps his fingers. “I thought they said you went to college?”

“What? I did!”

“Then you should understand that you and I are going shopping. Grab whatever you need. I’ll drive.”

“You don’t understand. If I leave here with you, Mateo will—”

“Be really pissed and scary and grumpy. Yes, I know.” He gives an exasperated sigh. “I’m his brother, after all. I’ve dealt with his moody drama all my life. I can handle him. Now let’s go.”

I sputter, trying to think of a way to describe exactly how much punishment will fall on our heads, but then I stop myself. This is what I’ve been looking for—an opportunity to escape!

“Okay. I’m ready.”

He shakes his head. “If you say so. Come on.” He walks out of the kitchen, and I follow as he leads me past Mateo’s office and into the side hall that opens to the garage.

There's a soldier on the door. I slow, fully expecting him to tell us we can't leave, but he simply nods at Lito and lets us pass.

I hurry up, sticking close to Lito as he beelines for a bright yellow sports car.

"He never lets me drive the Lambo." He grins and pauses at a spot on the wall where several key fobs are hanging. "This one." He snags one fob and hurries to the car.

I walk to the passenger side. It takes me a few tries to figure out how the door works, but once I do, I slide into the leather seat and breathe in the new car smell.

Lito starts the car, and the engine purrs to life. "Mateo is such a hardass. But you'll learn that under all those layers of rock ..." He pulls a pair of shades from his shirt pocket and slides them on. "There are more layers of rock and then an icy, sharp husk underneath that has to suffice for a heart." He grins and opens the garage door, then guns the engine.

I strap the seatbelt on and fold my hands in my lap.

"But he's not so bad once you get to know him. At least, I hope that's the case for your sake." He whips us out of the garage at a terrifying rate, and I can't hold in my scream as he races down the driveway toward the woods.

"Don't worry." He gives me a sideways glance. "I'm not going to kill my brother's wife, at least not before I get her some decent clothes."

"I *have* decent clothes," I retort over the roar of the engine. "I mean, they're college clothes, but I like them."

"Hoodies and jeans, I take it?" He arches a brow.

"Yes, but—"

"No." He cruises through the open gate and takes a hard left turn onto the highway. "You're the wife of a rising star in our world. You have to dress the part. And I'll give you a piece of advice." He hits the gas so hard I think I might be having an out-of-body experience. "Don't let Mateo push you around. He's making you wear shitty clothes?" He makes a

pfft sound. “One-up him and walk around naked in front of his men. He’ll change his tune quick if you put yourself on display like that.” He waggles his brows.

I press my legs together and curl my shoulders inward. With the way he drives and the things he’s suggesting, I realize getting into the car with Lito might not have been my best move.

“Hey.” He pulls his shades down, his dark brown eyes meeting mine for a terrifying second, though his voice gentles as he speaks to me. “You don’t have to worry about me, Lucretia. Don’t be scared. I’m not interested in you or anyone on your team for that matter.” When he puts his attention back on the road, I feel the coil around my chest relax somewhat. Both because we might not die, and also because I don’t have to fear him. Not the way I fear the other soldiers in the house. Though, no one’s given me any trouble except that one asshole yesterday.

“So, you’re gay?” I ask.

“Ding ding ding. She gets a prize.” He smirks, and I can see a hint of Mateo in it. “I’m the brother with the better taste in clothing, men, food, you name it. So you’re lucky I came along.”

I relax even farther back into the seat, my mind whirring with possibilities. Maybe I can slip him at whatever store we’re—

“Lucretia?” His voice is a purr like that of the engine’s.

“Yes?”

“I don’t want you to get the wrong idea.”

What would be the wrong idea? “Okay? I’m not sure what you—”

“I’m loyal to my brother. Before anyone else. Understand? So whatever fantasies you might have about trying to escape or running back to your family—”

That draws a harsh laugh from me. “That’s the last place I’d run.”

“It’s like that, then?” He takes the on-ramp to the freeway, and we zoom past several cars. “I don’t keep up with the family gossip much anymore, but I have heard that your parents aren’t exactly the warmest.” He glances at me again. “I also heard about your brother. I’m sorry.”

Why does my throat still close up and my eyes burn? It’s been six months, and I still get caught off-guard whenever he’s brought up, or even when I think about him. It’s like an unexpected gut punch, and it never seems to get any easier.

“I’m sorry,” he says again. “I’ve never lost a brother, but our parents were ...” He tightens his grip on the wheel, then lets off. “Anyway, let’s just say I can relate. Were the two of you close?”

I nod, not trusting my voice.

“I get that. Mateo and I used to be closer. We’re so different, always have been, but I think that’s what helped us get along when we were kids. We grew apart more when I moved to L.A. I know he misses me, no matter what he says.” He makes a wry expression. “And he says plenty. Always giving me shit. But I think he’s secretly glad that I’m doing my own thing out west. Maybe sort of living vicariously through me. I don’t know. He’s a tough nut to crack, but you’ve probably noticed that.”

“What do you do?” I have to admit I’m curious how Lito was able to get out. Usually, men in the families are expected to keep their lines strong, to take part in the family businesses, and even to fight over the top spot.

“This and that. I’ve been an extra in almost 50 movies.” He twirls an imaginary mustache. “I once drove Tom Cruise from the airport to the Beverly Hills Hotel. Can you believe that? He was a good tipper, too. But the main thing I do is make pottery.” He holds up one of his hands, the skin around his fingertips dry and weathered. “Doesn’t matter how many masks I do, they stay like this. The clay sucks up all my good moisturizer. I spend a fortune at Sephora, and they still look like this. Mateo gives me shit about that, too.” He smiles, and I find myself somewhat shocked at what I’ve discovered—

Mateo loves his brother, and his brother loves him back. Love, something that seemed impossible in a man like him, but here it is. I can hear it in the way Lito talks about him.

Just listening to him opens up a whole new facet to Mateo I'd never even imagined. He has a brother, and not just that, a brother Mateo has encouraged to live his own life well outside the families. "You're the creative member of the family, I guess."

"Oh, Mateo can be pretty damn creative. But his main medium is blood." He wrinkles his nose. "Just not my style." He takes an exit and cruises along the ramp, then makes a sharp turn toward the upscale shopping district that lies along the southern edge of downtown. "God, I've missed this city. Everything so grimy but also polished to a shine where it matters." He parks in a fire lane at the front of Neiman Marcus, then steps out and stretches. "Yeah, I definitely need some new clothes too. It doesn't get this cold in L.A." He rubs his hands together and walks around to my side of the car. "New wardrobes for both of us. Today is going to be fun." He grabs my shoulders and turns me around so we walk together. "Just one thing." He pauses before opening the store's doors for me.

"What?" I ask.

"If anyone asks—" He eyes my makeshift dress again. "—we are *definitely* not together."

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“Are you even listening to me?”

I look up at Sonny whose forehead is wrinkled in worry.

“I’m serious. Red may have really screwed the pooch this time.”

“I know.” I shrug. “But we’ll get him out of it.”

“Why would you just turn over 50 large to him when you know how he is?”

“Are you questioning my ability to run this family?”

He groans and throws up his hands. “Why do you jump to the worst possible conclusion? Of course I’m not questioning your ability to do anything. I’m simply pointing out that Red is a fuckup, and Red with a pocketful of cash is an even bigger fuckup.”

He has a point. Actually, he has two.

I grumble and glance out at the coastline below. “I admit I may have put a little too much faith in him on this one.”

Sonny waves a hand. “I mean, look, I know I’m being dramatic, okay? I think I’m just on edge because you’ve been acting so strangely ever since the wedding.”

I can’t argue with him there. I *feel* different. I look at the band on my finger, the one that’s very close to cutting off my circulation. When I decided to take Lucretia, it was nothing more than a business move, a way to set up the kill shot on her

family. But the moment I saw her standing there with blood on her veil and her eyes dazed, I felt something inside me shift. At first I thought it was simply the triumph of the moment, of finally starting my revenge against the Fontanas and the Manchellos, but now I realize it was more. It was *her*.

“I saw your file on her,” he says more quietly.

“You going through my desk now?” I ask.

“You left it out ...” He clears his throat. “A couple of times.”

I suppose I was a bit foolish to think Sonny wouldn’t notice my interest in Lucretia. He’s my right hand, the trust between us unbreakable. My parents never officially adopted him, but like Red and Benny, he’s been an honorary member of the family since we were kids. I smile when I remember my mother—she never met a stray she wouldn’t take in.

“I just think you’ve been a little distracted.” He holds his hands up, palms toward me. “Not a criticism, just an observation.”

I shake my head. “Criticize all you want. If I can’t get the straight shit from you, then who’s going to tell me? Benny?” I snort a laugh. “Red?”

“They worship you. There’s no way they’d ever question a single thing you do.” He shrugs. “But it’s in my job description.”

I raise a brow. “Are you saying you *don’t* worship me?”

He quirks a half-smile. “Get over yourself already. You’ve got Benny and Red kissing your ass so hard you probably have hickies. You don’t need me to join.”

“Always room for one more.” I lean back in my chair and stretch my legs. The hum of the jet usually goes a long way to put me at ease, but not this time. I can’t seem to settle, to stop thinking about *her*. The way she felt beneath me, the way she kept saying no when we both knew she wanted every hard inch of me.

“There you go again.”

“What?” I shrug.

“You got that look on your face, and I know you’re a million miles away.” He shrugs one shoulder. “Maybe not a million, just a few hundred.”

“I’m here.” I force myself to shelve thoughts of Lucretia, though I know it won’t work for long. “What’s the plan on Red?”

“I’ve already pulled a few strings so we can talk to the agent in charge as soon as we land. She’s known for being *reasonable*.”

“Ah, I see. ‘Reasonable’ as in she’s got kids to send to college and a public servant’s pay doesn’t cut it?”

He nods.

I steeple my fingers. “How much is this going to cost me?”

“Depends on how she wants to play this. But I’m thinking that 50k is long gone, and we’re going to have to drop more on top of it.”

“And still no coke?”

“And still no coke,” he confirms.

“Fuck.”

“As far as I know, it’s still stalled off the coast. The feds don’t have it in hand.”

“That’s good news at least.” I pinch the bridge of my nose.

“You haven’t gotten much sleep in the past week.” His eyes narrow on my face. “One would think it’s because you’re in the honeymoon stage, but that’s not the vibe I’m getting.”

“Are you asking me if I’m fucking my wife?”

“I’m not *not* asking it. Look, when you hatched this plan, we all knew that marrying Lucretia was just setting the game board to your advantage. But it’s more than that. Maybe Red and Benny don’t realize it, but I do. Like I said, I saw her file. And I *know* you. Better than anyone. Even Lito.”

I raise a brow. “Lito would take issue with that.”

“Lito takes issue with everything I do because it involves rules.” He gives a rueful smile. “Can you imagine what it would be like if he was running things?”

I make the sign of the cross. “Heaven help us all.”

He laughs. “Exactly. Anyway, all I’m trying to say is that if you want to make a real run at this whole marriage thing—”

“I don’t.” I can’t tell if I’m telling the truth.

He leans forward. “I know who she is, Mateo. I know what her parents did. But I also know how you look at her, how you gravitate toward her, how you practically fucking stalked her before you ever met her. If you wanted to explore that, I’m just saying that might not be a bad thing.”

“You know I can’t.”

“You’re the head of the Milani family.” His wry smile is back. “You can do whatever the fuck you want.”

I can’t argue with that. But my point still stands. I’m bound to Lucretia, but I’m also bound by honor to exact vengeance on her parents. She’s collateral damage, a means to an end. Even if I want to bridge the divide between us, it’s not something I’m able to do, not after what her family did to mine. It’s a prison made by our shared history, though she doesn’t feel the bars as keenly as I do. She doesn’t know the extent of what her family has done. Maybe I should tell her. Maybe I should show her exactly why I hate her. But is hate the right word? Did I feel hatred when I was on top of her, when I was sucking on her perfect tits and rubbing my cock against her wet cunt? No, I felt desire, so much of it that I was out of fucking control. And underneath that primal need, there was another emotion, one that only whispers in the deepest parts of my heart. One that should never be used to describe how I feel for anyone with the last name Fontana.

I need to hate her. It’s what my family’s honor demands. And the fact that I don’t ... the fact that I feel so much more for her. *Fuck!* This isn’t the way it was supposed to go.

I stare at my hands, at the bruised knuckles and the goddamn wedding band. I should’ve used them to bend her to

my will, to take everything from her and leave her a hollowed-out shell. But I haven't, and I didn't. And the one time I came close—it wasn't about hurting her. It should've been, but it wasn't. When I was on top of her, it was a give and take, a dance of denial and longing, one that would've ended with both of us wrapped in each other and drowning in pleasure. This morning wasn't about punishing her for the sins of her father. It was only about the two of us, the way we keep pulling toward each other like magnets. Cursed by forces outside of our control, forces so fucking primal that I can't tell how deep they go, can't even get an idea of how to root them out. It's as if this need for her is written into my DNA, carved into my skull with caveman's blade.

I let out a frustrated sigh and rub my eyes, my mind spinning with thoughts of a woman who might scratch my eyes out the next time we meet. "Goddamn. What a fucking mess."

"Are we still talking about Red?" Sonny asks.

I don't answer, the truth already ringing in my ears as the plane begins its descent.

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LUCRETIA

“*I*’m not sure we spent enough.” Lito stands in my closet, his fingers tapping his chin. “You could’ve used more casual shoes, we didn’t get enough belts, and your taste in dresses was nothing short of appalling.”

“We can’t all be as trendy as you.” I run my fingers along the faux fur jacket he’d picked out for me. “I’m just trying to look like I belong around here.”

“You belong.” He turns to me. “We shopped our asses off for hours, got our nails done, then pigged out on cheap Chinese. We’re practically soulmates.” He yawns. “I’m just glad Mateo isn’t home yet. I want a cuddle buddy.” He pulls me in for a hug.

I got over the awkward pretty quickly this morning as he bossed me around various designer boutiques, demanded champagne wherever we went, and put every scrap of clothing we bought onto his brother’s credit card. Lito has been nothing short of a god send, even if he is the devil’s brother.

“Come on, let’s do Korean beauty. We have to keep these gorgeous faces top notch.” He leads me to the bathroom and sits me at my vanity before starting to rub lotions and potions on both of us.

A harsh knock sounds at the bedroom door.

“What?” he yells, then goes back to smoothing lotion on my cheeks.

Benito appears in the bathroom door, his eyes rolling as he watches us. “What the fuck is going on in here?”

Lito gives him a sharp glare. “You know, Benny, it wouldn’t kill you to pay some attention to your skin. You may look fresh right now, but in about a decade, your shit’s going to start to crack. Want to mask with us?” He points to the box of toning face masks we picked up at Sephora.

“Abso-fucking-lutely not.” Benny wrinkles his nose.

“Stop doing that. You’ll need Botox before you hit 30.” Lito smiles down at me. “But not us. We’re going to be wrinkle-free until at least forty.”

“You can’t stay in here with her, Lito.” Benny crosses his arms over his chest. “Mateo will lose his shit if he finds out.”

“Then I guess we won’t let him find out.” Lito shrugs and smooths some cream along his temples.

Benny grumbles. “I should’ve already told him you took off today without saying a goddamn word. Do you have any idea how bad that makes me look? I’m supposed to be watching her.”

“Stop talking about her like she’s not here.” Lito pushes my shoulder. “Give him hell.”

Benny gives me a scowl in the mirror.

“We went shopping. We’re back now. Nothing’s wrong. I’m still a prisoner here. Lito has made that abundantly clear.” I shrug. “And if you want to be a snitch, then that’s on you.” I tilt my chin up.

Lito grins at me in the mirror.

Benny scrubs a hand along his jaw—a move I’m sure has dropped plenty of panties. But it does nothing for me. There’s only one man who’s ever made me think twice, made me feel heat in secret places. The fact that it’s the man I hate above all others doesn’t say much for my current mental state.

“Lito, if something had happened while you were—”

“Nothing happened. Calm your tits, Benny. And unless you want to join us in the fine art of skin care, I suggest you run along.” Lito wraps a headband around his hair and smooths it off his forehead before peering in the mirror. “No grays ... Yet.”

Benny grumbles a few more times before backing away, and only a moment later we hear the bedroom door slam.

“Men are so emotional.” Lito snorts.

It pulls a smile from me. I’ve never heard anyone in the families talk about the powerful men the way he does. It’s like he knows them so well because he was supposed to be one of them, but then he takes their bullshit and flips it on its head. I have to be honest—it’s absolutely refreshing. Endearing, too.

Lito runs his fingers through my hair, sifting the strands as he looks for grays.

If he finds one, I think I might fall apart. Not because of the gray hair, per se, but it would likely be the straw that breaks my back. Seemingly satisfied, he plops a headband around my neck then draws my hair back tightly to match his.

“Your complexion is to die for. I didn’t get any of that good olive from my parents. I’m more like *Dracula*—a fucking sexy one—but I suppose we all have our crosses to bear.” He dabs some cream under my eyes then does the same for his. “Mateo got the good olive tone, but I got all the brains, so I suppose it was a fair trade.” He smirks, and it reminds me so much of Mateo that I almost feel like I’m stuck in a déjà vu moment.

I angle my head the way he’s guiding as he deftly applies some sort of mask along my eyebrows. “My brother got the brains, I think. The street smarts, for certain. Ferdinand was always so quick on his feet, so clever. I wasn’t like that. I felt like I needed to stop and think things through. I didn’t want to react too quickly or say something stupid. My mother would make me pay for every misstep.” I run my fingers along my jaw line where the faint bruise still lingers.

“She was harder on you than him?” He swipes something that smells like fresh cucumbers across the mark.

“Definitely. But I think that’s normal in our households, you know? Ferdinand and my father were always plotting and planning, and my mother was always trying to think of ways to make me a perfected version of herself.”

“Oof.” He frowns. “That sounds hellish.”

I smile, mainly because I’ve been thinking that this is hell right here, not the house I came from. If nothing else, the devil lives at this address, but Lito is right. My parents’ home was horrible for me. Body issues, control issues, panic, and anxiety—I’m surprised I haven’t completely cracked in half under the pressure. The only release valve I had was Ferdinand, but when he was killed, I lost everything.

“Have you been happy here at all?” He steps back and examines his work on my face. “You’ve only been here a few days, but at least your mother—” He glances at my bruised jaw “—isn’t here to dump her issues on you. And Mateo can’t be that bad, right?”

“He’s *plenty* bad.” I scoff. “I don’t know. I mean, he’s gorgeous, and I swear I see so much in him when I look into his eyes sometimes. But, then again, maybe I’m just seeing a psychopath who’s good at fooling me.”

“Eyes up.” He places a cool mask on my face, pressing it into shape. “A psychopath, hmm? Do you *really* believe that?” He gives me an exaggerated side eye then pulls me from the vanity chair and guides me to the bed. He squeaks with glee when he sees the rolling cart beside the door, two large pink margaritas sitting on it. “Carter, my man, you’ve outdone yourself.” He does a chef’s kiss on his fingers before grabbing them and handing me one while he takes a big swig of his, getting a little on the edge of his sheet mask. “Drink first, then answer my question.” He tips the bottom of my glass so I swallow more margarita than I intended, but it goes down sweetly with no alcohol-flavored bite.

“Are these virgin?” I take another big swig.

“They’re top shelf.” He walks around to the other side of the bed. “Now, do you truly think my brother is nutso, or do you think there might be some shades of gray in there?”

“I don’t know.” I let all my frustration leak into my words as I turn down the sheet and the blanket, Mateo’s scent wafting off the linens and turning my feelings into a thorn-filled tangle. “Even if there *was* something there, I don’t know if I can just get over the trauma of what he did. He *bought* me. He killed without the slightest hint of remorse. He gave me a damn maid uniform, and he ... he’s done things to me.”

“Did you hate the things he did to you?” he asks. “But don’t go into details or I might vomit.”

“Yes and no. It’s complicated.”

“Okay.” He sighs. “Go into a little bit more detail so I can understand, but not so much detail that I have to retch violently just to get the images of you and my brother out of my mind.”

“He’s so rough, and he takes things I haven’t given him.” I chew on my bottom lip then take another big drink of my margarita as I try to think through it all. “He’s a bully. Isn’t he? I think you know he is. He’s so blunt and mean and, and, and *infuriating*. I mean, I’ve never been with a guy, but I can’t imagine this is a normal way for, you know, sex stuff to happen.” Oh, god, I need to stop drinking. Even so, I barrel on, “But he makes me feel like ... like I want him to take those things, to *do* those things to me. But then I feel ashamed to want that from him, because he doesn’t see me as anything other than a toy. He calls me ‘princess’ to humiliate me. He hates me, and I don’t really understand why. But ... But he hasn’t pushed me to the point of breaking. He’s gotten really, *really* close. But he hasn’t ...”

“He hasn’t fucked you?” His tone drips with incredulity. “Seriously?”

My cheeks burn, and I would press my palms to them to cool them if my face wasn’t covered in a sheet mask. “No. I mean, he tried, but I said no.”

“And he listened? Doesn’t sound like a psychopath to me.”

Am I really about to say this part out loud? The margarita I’ve already had says that yes, yes I am. “When he was doing those things, and when we were close. Wh-when I said no, I felt like ...” My voice drops to a whisper, the shame killing my volume. “I felt like saying yes. And he *knew* that. Somehow, he knew, and he used it against me.”

“Vicious, driven, and cocky. Definitely sounds like Mateo.” He sighs. “He knows because there’s a connection between you. I haven’t even seen the bastard, and I can feel the heat between you two when you talk about him. It’s not just sexual either, is it? The way you talk about him, the way you just stare off at nothing like a silly little thing—I know you’re thinking about him more often than you aren’t. You’re wondering and wanting to know more.”

“But that’s just it. I know these bits and pieces of him—the violence, the dominance, the ego, the cruelty. I thought that was all there was. But there’s more. He’s clearly a good brother to you—”

“‘Good’ might be pushing it,” he deadpans.

I roll my eyes. “You love each other. That’s a huge thing, because just a few days ago, I would’ve said Mateo isn’t capable of loving *anyone*.”

“He can love.” Lito settles back against his pillow. “And when he does, he loves hard. Sonny, Benny, and Red—he’d go through hell and back for them. Same for me. And the more you tell me about how he’s been with you, it makes me wonder if maybe—”

“He doesn’t love me, Lito. He doesn’t even know me. We’ve never had a real conversation. Unless you count threats and humiliation as conversation.”

“With him, I mean, yeah. That doesn’t sound far-fetched. Like I said, all he does is give me shit, but he also loves me.”

I wrinkle my nose. “Sounds abusive.”

“Only if you’re a pussy.”

I laugh and elbow him. “Yeah, that’s not unhealthy or anything.”

“Healthy or not, it’s the way he is. Fierce in all things.”

“Fierce is a good word for him.”

“It’s a good word for you, too.” He turns to look at me, the sheet mask on his face giving him a mummy vibe. “I can see it. At first, I didn’t, but the cozier we’ve gotten, the more I know you’ve got some steel in your backbone and a fire in your gut. That’s what you need to show him.”

“So he can lose his temper and choke me out? No thanks.”

“Just the opposite. You know how they say to punch a bully in the nose and all that?”

“Yeah.” I don’t think I like where this is going.

“I’m not saying you should literally punch him, but I can guarantee if you give his own shit back to him, he’s going to respect it. If you don’t snap back, he’ll keep pushing you. That’s his way. It’s like he’s testing you. He’ll keep pushing you, and you can either roll over and take it or dish it right back to him.”

“Why all the games? It’s exhausting.”

“Think of it as his way of getting to know you.” He smiles wistfully. “I remember the night he pulled Red out of a dumpster. Mateo, Sonny, and I had been out drinking, and we wandered down an alley to take a piss. Then we heard ‘mmmmmmffffff’ and moaning, then saw bright red hair poking out of the top of a dumpster. Red was stuck, beat to hell and back, and stank to high heaven. Only fifteen years old. We pulled him out, and Mateo put him under his wing, practically adopting him into the family.”

“Where were his parents?”

“Who knows? The little shit had been in and out of foster care for years and had finally run away. He ended up on the street fighting for scraps and getting his ass kicked right and left. Mateo made sure that never happened again.” He sighs. “All that said, remember that Mateo’s an asshole. Nothing has

been able to change that in all the years I've known him. But —and this is a big but—he's *my* asshole. He'll give me two tons of shit, but if anyone else dares look at me wrong, or judge me, or hurt me?" He whistles from a high to a low pitch. "Mateo would become their nightmare. He wouldn't rest until he exacted every bit of vengeance he could."

"Why does his love always have to be terrifying?"

He finishes his margarita and puts the glass—sans coaster—onto Mateo's nightstand. "Because he's fierce, remember? He loves just as fiercely as he does everything else."

"He doesn't love me, Lito. And I *hate* him." My eyes grow heavy, my body melting into the warm bed. "Besides, all this fierceness and meanness is a fucked-up way to get to know someone."

He laughs. "Yeah, well, welcome to the family."

My eyes drift closed. "Let's say I follow your lead and stop holding my tongue with him. What if he doesn't like it and hurts me, Lito? What then?"

"That's a good question, but here's a better one. *Has* he hurt you?"

"I mean ..."

"No. I'm serious. Has he ever actually hurt you?"

I think back to the things Mateo has done, to the way he's toyed with me. "He's said some awful things."

"Yeah, but beyond that, beyond that sort of communication divide between your civilized way of speaking and his Neanderthal one, has he actually *hurt* you?"

I try to pick apart our history together, to find the moment when he harmed me. But no matter what I look at, I'm not finding the smoking gun. What he did at the cathedral was gut-wrenchingly awful. The things he's done to me since I've been under his roof have been wrong on several levels, the worst of which was how he made me want him when I should've wanted to end him.

Lito snuggles under the covers. “Wake me up when you come up with an answer.”

“You’re still wearing the face mas—”

His light snore cuts through my words.

“Never mind.” I sigh and stare at the ceiling as I will sleep to swallow me whole. It doesn’t, though, and I’m left with two things: impossibly smooth skin and an even more impossibly complicated attraction to Mateo Milani.

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The road is dotted with cacti, dust spewing out behind our car as we roll through the bumpy terrain along the southern border.

Sonny texts furiously, his brows furrowed. “This isn’t what we agreed on. First she made us wait a day, now this shit. We were supposed to meet at the airport, not out here.”

“Feds never keep their word.” I peer out at the clouds rolling in, the wind blowing dirt against the car like bursts of bird shot. “Let’s just get Red and get out. I wouldn’t want to keep my new wife waiting. She must be missing me terribly.”

He snorts. “Don’t think so. Benny says Lito is all up her ass.”

I sit up. Lito’s home?”

“Yeah. He came in yesterday morning. It’s in the group text.”

“I don’t read that shit.”

He side eyes me. “You should.”

“I get enough bullshit in the fantasy football chat. More than that and I might get violent.” I crack my knuckles. “I wonder what he’s been telling her.”

“Everything. You know Lito. Doesn’t have any idea what the word ‘secret’ even means.”

I groan and rub my forehead. Lito has just complicated shit, par for the course for him. If she’s charmed him—and I

know she has, fuck she's had me chasing my goddamn tail, so she has him wrapped around her finger by now—then he's going to stick his nose where it doesn't belong. Into my marriage.

“Head in the game, boss.” Sonny jerks his chin to the rusty trailer ahead of us, several government vehicles pulled up outside of it. “I don't like it.”

I glance in the rear view at the two SUVs that pulled out of the scrub to follow us in. “It doesn't matter. We agreed to the meeting.”

We pull to a stop in front of the tattered shack, then step out. Guns are leveled at us immediately, and I have zero doubt there's at least one sniper with his scope trained on the back of my head.

“Hands up.” Two agents approach slowly, then stow their weapons and pat us down.

“What's this?” The one running his hands along my front pauses at my waist.

“My dick.”

He runs his hands around it.

“You going to finger my asshole while you're at it?” I smirk down at him.

He steps back, a scowl on his face. “He's clean.”

“Same here.” The other agent backs off from Sonny.

The door of the mobile building creaks open.

“Agent Hawk.” Sonny looks up at her. “We're here as agreed. Where's Red?”

“Mr. Starnes is inside.” She narrows her eyes on me. “We need to talk.”

I step toward the stairs. The federal officers all tense, some of them even raising their guns again. They're scared. Pussies.

“Easy.” Agent Hawk holds her hands out. “They're unarmed. Give it a rest, boys.” Her tone brooks no argument,

and her demeanor is the same. She's not an easy opponent, and from the gray hair and the weathered lines on her face, she's been in the game for quite some time.

I climb the stairs and follow her into the building right as fat drops of rain begin to fall. Sonny follows, and he closes the door behind us. The trailer is narrow and dim, the air stale.

"Guys." Red sits at a metal table against the wall, his hands cuffed and attached to a ring on the top of it. "What took you so long?" His lip is split, one of his eyes almost swollen shut.

"The fuck happened to you?" I take a seat across from him.

He glances at Agent Hawk. "Her men hit like little bitches, but she's got some chops."

I turn and look at her hands. Sure enough, they're bandaged. At least she does her own dirty work. I can respect that.

"We'll take him off your hands, and we appreciate your discretion. The 50,000 he was detained with will, of course, remain as property of the government. If we could—"

"I'll need an additional 50,000 to release your friend." She pulls a chair across the metal floor, the legs scraping like nails on chalkboard. When she sits, she crosses her legs at the knee and settles her gaze on me. "I'd also like to have a conversation."

"My client didn't agree to an interrogation," Sonny says.

"Your client can speak for himself."

"Not when he pays me good money to do it for him."

"Mr. Milani, I'd like to know more about your wedding."

"Mateo, don't answer ..." Sonny's voice fades as I put a hand on his arm, then pull it back.

"What would you like to know, Agent Hawk?"

She folds her hands in her lap. "Now that you've taken out the power players of the Manchello family, what's your next

move?”

I consider her, the sharpness in her eyes and the careful way she chooses her words. There are certainly microphones all over this rusted room, with federal agents listening in with bated breath.

“I can’t say I know what you’re speaking of; however, if there were any unfortunate incidents on my blissful wedding day, those are in the past.”

“Are your parents’ murders in the past?” she fires back.

On the outside, I give nothing away. On the inside, I tense at the cavalier way she mentions their slaughter, but there’s something else, too. How did she connect all those distant dots?

“I’m not sure I’m following your question, Agent Hawk. What does my wedding have to do with my parents?”

She gives me a sober half-smile. “Oh, I think you know exactly what they have to do with each other. And I need you to pump the brakes on whatever plan you’re working up. The families are in a state of relative equilibrium. It’s in everyone’s best interest to keep it that way.”

“So you can keep getting your cuts in peace?”

Her jaw clenches, but that’s her only tell ... so far.

“To keep bloodshed to a minimum. To save lives. The less violence, the better.”

I shoot a pointed look at Red, at the goddamn state of him. “Less violence, Agent? Would you care to explain how you treated my man with *less* violence?”

She reaches out to a particularly rusty spot on the wall, presses part of it, opens a panel, then flips a switch. “No one’s listening for now. Your man tried to bribe one of my agents, and it almost worked. He’s lucky I got wind of it before he made the final deal. Agent Brown is under my thumb, but he’s still young and dumb and filled with the ideals that all of us in this room know are empty and ineffectual. What’s even worse, Brown is ambitious. He would’ve taken your man and that

bribe straight over my head, and then my hands would've been tied."

Of *course* Red picked the wrong fucking agent to bribe. I would grab him and shake him like a little bitch, but that will come in time. He's still young, and while he usually has good instincts, this time was a catastrophic misjudgment. Then again, I'm the one who gave him 50 large and free rein.

"Then, how lucky we are that you were here to take care of the issue."

"Lucky, sure. But it's not free. I don't do favors to crime lords, Milani."

"You have your money, and I'll have Red deliver the other 50k to whatever abandoned hovel you'd like." I make a show of looking around the dilapidated trailer. "I don't see what else you want from me."

"I want your word that it is *over*. No more bullshit with the Fontanas, the Manchellos—no more grudges."

"Just as you don't do favors to crime lords, I don't make empty promises to federal agents." I lean forward in my chair and am gratified when she's wise enough to lean back. "I have paid for your assistance in this matter, and as I see it, we're done here."

I stand, and Sonny gets up with me. "Release Red, and we'll be on our way."

"You don't want to play it like this, Milani."

"That's the difference between you and me, Agent Hawk. This isn't a game to me." I stare down my nose at her.

"If you hit Sarita Manchello—"

"Is that who's paying you? Is she the one who told you to shake me down?" I step to her. "Or was it Leonard Fontana? Is that why you're so desperate for peace? You want to keep sucking on their teats?"

She tenses.

I nod. "As I thought. Now, the deal is done. Release Red."

She rises and hits the switch in the wall again, then turns to me with a sour look on her already-dour face. “I need backup.”

“What are you—”

“Mateo Milani, you’re under arrest for suspicion of murder.” She pulls a pair of cuffs from the back of her belt and goes into her *Miranda* spiel.

I look at Sonny.

“—cannot afford one, one will be appointed to you—”

He shakes his head, advising me not to speak. Red rattles the chain running through his cuffs, but Sonny holds up a finger to silence him, too. Two agents enter the room, both of them young and eager. They eye me like I’m some sort of venomous snake, which as far as they’re concerned, I am.

“—understand your rights as I’ve recited them to you?” Agent Hawk finally takes a breath.

“I understand perfectly well what you’ve just done, Agent Hawk. The problem is, I don’t think you do.”

Red huffs a laugh, and the agents lead me to a waiting SUV as Sonny gives Agent Hawk an earful.

As they shut me in the back of the car, I find my thoughts wandering to my new bride.

Looks like it’ll take a little while longer for me to get home to her. That’s too bad, because I’m ready to finish what we started. And I will. But first, I have to show Agent Hawk just how big of a mistake she’s made.

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LUCRETIA

“Arrested?” Lito’s face begins to turn a bright shade of red. “Like, you mean *arrested* arrested?”

I rub my aching forehead. The margaritas were definitely *not* virgin.

“How can I just ‘sit tight’ if he’s in federal—”

“Yeah ... Yeah, Sonny, I know but—Yeah. Okay.” He sighs. “I will. Just let me know when you—” He pulls the phone away from his ear. “That dick hung up on me.”

“Arrested for what?”

“Murder.”

I don’t think my eyes can go any wider. “He killed a federal agent?”

“No.” Lito pauses. “At least I don’t *think* so. Sonny made it seem like it was a bullshit hold, that they’re trying to pressure Mateo.” He makes a *ppft* sound. “They clearly don’t know what they’re doing. If they did, they’d know that you can’t pressure Mateo into doing anything. If you push him, he only pushes back harder.”

“I’ve noticed.” I smooth the dark blue blanket under my hands. “But I guess this means you’ll be babysitting me for a little while longer.”

“Babysitting? No. Binge-watching Netflix shows? Yes.” He rolls out of bed and stretches.

“You don’t seem worried.”

“I’m not. Are you?”

“I don’t know.” It’s an honest answer.

“Hmm.” He walks into the bathroom and closes the door.

I lay back in bed, my mind turning over this new bit of information. If Mateo is detained, then maybe I actually have a chance of escape. And what if he can’t beat the charges? Could this mean I’ll be free? I shake that thought away. No one in our world ever goes down for anything serious, and certainly not for murder. I can’t say for certain, but I’m pretty sure the men Mateo killed at the wedding will never be found, not by authorities, anyway. The families tend to have private cemeteries, and they bury their dead without a word—if there’s even a body to bury in the first place. It’s cruel, but the mafia has its own rules, its own customs, and its own method of resolving disputes.

If all that holds true, then Mateo will return. It’s just a matter of when. This tiny window may be my only shot at getting out of this situation.

Lito strides from the bathroom. “Come on. Let’s get breakfast and then pick some shows. Nothing superhero, though. I’m feeling more angst, you know? Like, I could maybe even cry a little. But just a little. Not like that time I saw ‘My Girl’ or hell, that old movie ‘Terms of Endearment.’ Holy shit, what was wrong with people back then to make such sad movies?” His voice trails away down the hall. “Come on. Pancake time, bitch!”



“I CAN’T TAKE ANOTHER SHOW.” I flop onto the couch in the movie room. “It’s been three days of shows.”

“We don’t have many options. Can’t go clubbing. Besides, it’s raining.” As if to punctuate his words, thunder rumbles through the house.

“What about ‘Sister Wives’?” He flips through the apps.

“I hate that husband guy. I can’t stand to listen to him talk.”

“I hate him too.” He frowns. “He’s so weak.”

“He really is. I don’t know how he got one wife, much less four.” I put my arm behind my head as a pillow.

“What about some scary stuff? Halloween is coming up soon.”

I wrinkle my nose. “I’m not into the blood and gore.”

“Triggered?” he asks.

“Maybe a little.”

“Was it *that* bad at the wedding?” He huffs. “I wasn’t even invited. I should’ve been best man. I’m his *brother*.”

“You should thank the Virgin Mary that you weren’t there. It was gruesome. I can’t—I can’t even describe it. I felt so bad for Sarita.”

“That makes one of us.” He flips through some more options.

“Wait.” I turn my head to stare at him. “Why wouldn’t you feel bad for her? Her sons were slaughtered right in front of her.”

He chews on his bottom lip. I’ve discovered he does that whenever he’s thinking too hard about something.

“Spit it out.” I slap his leg.

“Look, darling, there are certain things that I think are better discussed between you and Mateo. He’s the one you should be asking about Sarita and her family.”

“I *did* ask him!” I throw my hands up. “I asked him why me, why my wedding, why Horatio and the rest. I still don’t know. It still doesn’t make any sense, and no one will tell me. I just assumed you didn’t know since you have this whole life outside of the families—” My words sour on my tongue. “That’s the life I wanted, one where I could make my own choices and be free.”

“You think my life is easy?” he counters.

“No. But I do envy the fact that once Mateo returns, you’ll probably ditch and go back to your apartment, your art, your friends, your whole life that is separate and apart from the families.”

He laughs, though it isn’t his usually bubbly sound. “No wonder Mateo wants you. You’re so naïve it’s adorable.”

I scoff. “What do you mean?”

“We are *never* free of the families. If you thought you could go off to college and kiss this life goodbye, then more the fool you.”

“But that’s what you did—you went off to LA and you have nothing to do with—”

“What do you think I would do if Mateo, god forbid, didn’t come home?” he asks quietly.

“I ... I—”

“I would take over his spot at the head of the family and run it with honor until someone—and I’m aware this would happen sooner rather than later—came for my head.”

That hits me hard. The thought of something happening to Lito, my one lifeline in this new world, is like a kick to my gut. My thoughts stray to Ferdinand, to how I would’ve done anything to protect him. I don’t know if this is Stockholm Syndrome via a Netflix binge, but I’m starting to feel a similar way toward Lito. I can’t let him get hurt. He’s kind and strong—though a bit heavy on the alcohol and beauty products—and someone who’s worth fighting for.

He gives me an almost weary expression. “We are *never* out. Our last names, the blood in our veins—those are for life, Lucretia. You need to take that to heart. Your parents gave you a little extra leash, but it was only a matter of time before they pulled you back in.”

“Ferdinand stopped them. He’s the only reason I managed to have freedom—even if it was fleeting.”

“Maybe you have more freedom in store than you know. Mateo may seem like an insufferable prick, but he *can* be reasoned with ... on some things.” He shrugs. “But what happened at the wedding—that was non-negotiable.”

“Why?”

“That’s between you and Mateo.” With a yawn, he tosses the remote at me. “All right. You’ve made your point on no more shows. I think I’m going to call it a night. Let’s go get our nails done tomorrow. How’s that sound? We’ll just have to duck Benny. But he’s pretty easy to fool. Not as easy as Red, but almost.”

I realize he isn’t going to tell me anything, and I’m beginning to think there’s some merit to his points about the families being in our blood. Underneath his kindness is a band of iron, one that might be even stronger than he knows. “Nails, yes. Sounds good.”

He leans over and kisses my hair. “See you in bed. Goodnight, sis.”

Why does that make my eyes water?

“Night.” I barely manage to get the word out, but thankfully Lito is already out the door.

I snuggle under the throw blanket for a little while, then realize I’m about to fall asleep. I may as well turn in, too. Once I’ve turned off the TV and straightened the couch, I stretch and head out into the hall.

The kitchen is dark as I cut through it to get to the stairs.

I pause when I hear a sound in the pantry, then freeze when Geno walks out with an Oreo pinched between his fingers. “Oh, it’s you.”

A streak of lightning brightens the room for a fraction of a second.

“Midnight snack?” he asks, his gaze straying down my body.

I’m wearing some silky pajamas, but with the way he’s looking at me, I might as well be naked. I move toward the

other door as unease churns in my stomach.

He steps in front of me and eats his cookie with loud, open-mouthed chewing. “Where are you going?”

“I’m going to bed.”

“With the twink?”

I glare up at him. “Say that to his face, and he’ll knock that stupid look off yours.”

His jaw twitches. “You really are a mouthy bitch.”

“Leave me alone.” I try to sidestep him.

He grabs my upper arms and squeezes. “You think you’re something, but we all know the boss is going to wear your pussy out then throw you away. You aren’t even good enough to breed.”

Fear and anger spin inside me, braiding together as panic begins to take hold. I keep my voice even. “Let me go.”

“Or what?” He yanks me to him. “What are you going to do?”

“Get off me!” I reach up and scratch his face.

He shoves me backwards, and I hit the kitchen island. Pain explodes along my lower back as I turn and run. But he’s already on me, one of his meaty hands covering my mouth as he pulls my hair until I scream.

“Shut the fuck up!” He pins me face down to the island, and I try to bite his hand when I feel him yanking at my pajama bottoms.

This is not happening. I will *not* let this happen. I fight him and bring my hands up to the hand he has over my mouth. I dig my nails into him, pull one of his fingers away, then get it between my teeth and bite down hard. Blood spurts into my mouth as he howls and yanks his hand away.

I spit and jerk away from him, then run to the door that leads outside. I flip the lock, but he catches another handful of my hair before I can open the door.

“You fucking bitch.” He slams my head against the door, and I almost pass out from the pain of it.

I fall to the side, barely holding myself up on the counter as he comes up behind me. Blood trickles down the side of my neck.

“I’m doing the boss a favor by putting you in your place.” He goes for my pants again.

I spin, a knife from the butcher block in my hand, and slice across his middle.

He stops, his eyes dropping to his chest where another flash of lightning shows a crimson stain spreading along his dress shirt.

I take the opening and run to the back door, then yank it open and tear off into the rain.

“Bitch!” he screams from behind me, and I dash around the pool, the rain drops slapping me in the face as lightning streaks overhead. I can’t look behind me, if I do, I might freeze from fear. So I barrel ahead through the rose garden, the thorns tearing at my clothes and my skin underneath. But I don’t stop, pushing myself as my heart pounds and thunder rolls through the air.

When I clear the garden, I jet across the grass, my bare feet squelching in the soggy ground.

“Get back here!” He’s closing on me, his voice far too close.

A grove of trees is ahead, and I sprint into them, their low-hanging branches slapping against me as I power through. I swear I feel the ghost of a hand grabbing for me, and I dart to the left between two trees and keep going.

My lungs are burning, water sluicing into my eyes and making the dark night blurry save for when a flash of lightning brightens the sky.

I see the property wall ahead. My heart sinks. There’s no way I can climb it fast enough. But I don’t stop. I can’t. When I reach it, I scrabble at the mossy stones, my fingers slipping

off. I try again, my nails digging in as I struggle to pull myself up. The exertion makes the pain in the back of my head bloom anew, and I start to see dark shapes climbing along the wall beside me. I blink hard, and they disappear. I move up, the top of the wall still far away.

Then my fingers slip, and a scream rips from me as I fall.

I land hard, but not on the ground.

Mateo looms over me, his face hidden in shadow and rain.

“Escaping already, princess?”

“G-G-Geno.” I try to look past him, to see if he’s still after me.

“What?” He pulls me closer. “You’re bleeding.”

“Geno.” I cling to him, wrapping my arms around his neck even though I feel weak, too weak. “Please don’t let him—”

“He touched you?” The low, silky amusement is gone from his voice. It’s all harsh edges and sharp notes. “What did he do, Lucretia?”

“He tried t-t-to—” I bury my face in his neck, his familiar scent somehow comforting. “Please don’t let him hurt me.” I can barely get the words out I’m shaking so badly.

He turns and stalks back toward the house.

I try to look around for Geno, but the dark shapes are back, obscuring everything. I can feel myself starting to fade, my mind shutting down.

Another flash of lightning rips the sky apart, and the last thing I see are the burning eyes of the devil, beautiful in their terrible rage.

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LUCRETIA

“—*W*akes up we’ll know more.” A man’s voice, one I don’t recognize, wakes me from a dark, stormy nightmare.

I open my eyes and find a white-haired man leaning over me. “There you are.”

“Wha—” I glance around, my vision clearing enough so I see Lito and Mateo standing beside the bed.

“You’re all right.” Lito lets out a relieved breath. “You hit your head, and it bled a lot, but it’s okay.”

“Minor concussion, I’d say.” The white-haired man with the stethoscope stands up. “Head wounds always bleed profusely, but yours only needed a couple of stitches.”

“Stitches?” I reach up.

Lito takes my hand. “Don’t.”

“Okay.” I glance at Mateo. He’s still soaked through, his dark hair windswept and wet, and his cheeks are covered with scruff. He looks like he’s been through hell, but that’s nothing compared to the tempest in his eyes.

“Thanks, Doc. Benny will drive you home.” Lito pats my hand.

“Anytime.” The doctor grabs his leather bag and shakes Mateo’s hand. “Keep a close eye on her. Keep her awake for a while. Maybe half an hour. After that, she can sleep, but if anything seems off or she has trouble waking, call me

immediately. I gave her a slow release dose for the pain, so she may start to drift off.”

Mateo gives him a stark nod, and then the doctor leaves, closing the bedroom door behind him.

“Does it hurt?” Lito strokes my damp hair away from my face.

“A little.” I glance down and realize I’m naked under the covers.

“You were soaked,” Lito says quickly. “I stripped you—no real peeking of course, *ew*—and the doctor checked you over. You have some bruising on your back, too. But he said it would clear up.”

Mateo shifts from one foot to the other, his body language that of a caged lion.

“You’re back.” I say the obvious.

He walks to me, standing over me as Lito pats my hand.

“I’ll handle it.” Mateo’s voice is low, menace-laced.

“I’ll, um, go get you some water and snacks.” Lito stands and clears his throat, then hurries from the room.

Mateo stares down at me. It’s unnerving.

“Why aren’t you talking? Isn’t this the time where you chide me for trying to escape and threaten me with punishment?” I don’t know why I’m taunting him. He did just carry me all the way here and got me medical attention, but I’m still pissed off all the same. One of his men just tried to assault me, to hurt me in ways I don’t want to think about. I shiver at the memory of his hands on me.

“He touched you.” He reaches out and runs the backs of his fingers down my cheeks. It’s such a gentle movement, one I would never expect from him. “He *hurt* you.”

My eyes water, and I hate myself for feeling weak, for leaning into his touch. “Yes.”

“Tell me what happened.” He sits beside me and takes one of my hands in his.

It's so sweet and unexpected that more tears well in my eyes and roll down my cheeks. "I don't know if I can."

"You can." He rubs his thumb back and forth over my knuckles. "I need to know."

I swallow hard, my mind going fuzzy at the edges. At least the pain isn't so bad, not like it was when I was running.

"Princess." God, the way he says it this time, the softness, the near reverence. "Please."

I don't know if it's the drugs—it must be—but I could swear he just said 'please'. But that's not him. That's never been him.

"I-I was downstairs. Then I was going to cut through the kitchen to get to the stairs ..." My mind continues to drift as my mouth moves, as I retell what happened, but it's almost as if I'm telling a story about something that happened to someone else. Not to me. I'm not the woman screaming and fighting. I'm just a witness. A bystander. A person who should've done more but stood paralyzed, instead.

When I finally stop talking, he's still rubbing my knuckles, his touch so gentle. "You fought him."

I nod, tears dripping from my jaw before he reaches out and swipes them away. "I tried, but he was so much bigger."

"You scratched his face. That was good. You ran. That was good, too. You have fight in you, princess. I've always seen it." He strokes a hand through my hair, though he's careful not to go too far.

"What happened while you were gone?" I stare up at him, and even in the dim room I can tell he has dark circles under his eyes.

"Just some cat and mouse games with the feds. They simply haven't realized I'm the cat in this scenario."

"Did you rescue Red again?"

"Again?" He smirks. "I see Lito has been telling tales."

"Lito is wonderful." I'm getting fuzzier by the second.

“I hope you didn’t tell him that. I’ll never hear the end of it.”

A giggle pops out of me. I must be high to giggle like this in front of the devil.

“Tell me about college, princess. Tell me why you wanted to be a veterinarian.”

I wrinkle my brow. “You want to talk to me? Like really talk to me?”

“I want you to tell me, yes.” His eyes, though tired, twinkle a little. “Why so shocked? You’re my wife, after all.”

“Are you making fun of me? I can’t tell anymore.” I sigh, suddenly tired beyond belief.

“No. Not this time.” He holds my hand between both of his. “I genuinely want to know.”

I chew my bottom lip, but then he presses his thumb against it, freeing it from my teeth. “Go easy.”

“Habit.”

He nods. Then waits. The silence builds as I try to collect my thoughts that are scattering farther and farther away like papers blowing in a mocking wind.

“When—When Ferdinand and I were kids, my mother never let us have pets. She said they were filthy and would ruin her house. Ferdinand accepted it, but I didn’t. I’d always loved animals. If I was ever out somewhere, and someone had their dog on a leash, or their cat in a carrier, or even their iguana on their shoulder—I always asked to pet it. I loved animals so much. They always seemed so much kinder than people, you know? They didn’t have motives other than getting some petting and having a snack. There wasn’t anything else lurking beneath their surface. What you see is what you get.”

“Some animals are dangerous, though, aren’t they?”

I nod, but it makes my head go sloshy so I stop. “They are. But they don’t *hide* that fact. You know a cat has claws, you know dogs have teeth, you know snakes will bite. It’s

straightforward. It's their nature, and it's not a secret. I always liked that. I didn't care if they were dangerous." I'm finding it hard to keep my eyes open. "I didn't love them any less just because they could hurt me. It's not their fault; it's just their nature. They still deserve love."

"Hmm." He strokes my inner wrist now, his skin whispering across mine. "You believe all dangerous creatures deserve love?"

"Yes." I open my eyes and meet his gaze. His eyes are almost silvery in the low light.

"Ferdinand once found a snake on our property, but a good bit of its tail was missing after a run-in with a hawk. He brought it to me, sneaking it past my mother of course, and I bandaged it as best I could and kept it in my room. He knew how much I loved animals. I took care of it for days and fed it worms and bugs that Ferdinand collected for me. One day, it bit me." I hold up my index finger where the scar still lingers. "When Ferdinand found out, he was livid and wanted to throw it out the window and tell Mother, in case it was venomous. I didn't let him. I continued to take care of it until the end of its tail healed, and then I let it go in the garden. Ferdinand didn't really understand it, but he loved me." I can't look away from him. "He's the only person who ever really loved me for me. The only one who cared about me. And when he was killed, a part of me died too. It's a piece of me that I can feel is missing. One that'll never come back, no matter what." My eyes sting from unshed tears.

"Who killed him?" His question is strange, the tone of it making my addled brain believe that if I could give him a name, he'd take them out. He'd find who killed Ferdinand and make them pay.

I shake my head. "No one ever found out who did it. It was an execution—" My voice breaks, and I can't continue.

He's still rubbing my wrist, his grip soft but sure. "I lost my parents. They were betrayed and murdered. I feel that missing piece, too. Whenever I act, I ask myself if what I'm doing honors their memory." He sighs heavily. "The answer

isn't always yes. I know I disappoint them sometimes, but I also know they'd love me anyway. That's why the loss hurts so much. You and I know what it's like to lose that depth of understanding, of love. But it doesn't make us weaker. It makes us stronger. It makes us more dangerous than those who've never lost anything."

"Do you know who did it?"

He stills. For long moments he doesn't seem to move, to breathe. Then finally, he lets out a breath. "Yes."

"Did you make them pay?" I ask quietly, almost afraid to hear the answer.

His eyes bore into me so deep that I can feel him in my soul. His answer comes out on a harsh whisper. "Yes."

I realize that Lito had been right. Mateo loves, and he loves fiercely.

His gaze is piercing, as if he can see straight through me, leaving me nowhere I can hide. Not from him, not when we know each other on this deep level of grief. It's too intense, and I have to look away, my head swimming with the movement.

I clear my throat and try to pull myself out of the pit of my feelings, of my memories that are tinted in shades of pain and regret. "A-anyway, all creatures deserve love and care. That's why I wanted to be a vet." A sting of pain rushes through me when I remember that it'll never happen. Not for me. My life isn't mine anymore. It belongs to him.

"It does." He's still rubbing my wrist.

"Wait. Did I say that out loud?" My voice seems to come from somewhere down a long tunnel.

"Go to sleep, princess. You're safe with me."

I would laugh at the thought of being safe with Mateo, but my mind is already gone, floating in a starry night while a predator with pale eyes watches me from the dark.

“*W*here were you?” I grab Benny by the throat and slam him against my office wall. “Where the fuck were you?” I yell into his face.

“Mateo!” Sonny tries to pull me off, but I don’t let him. I squeeze my hands around Benny’s throat. “She was almost raped, and where the fuck were you?”

Benny’s eyes begin to bulge, but he doesn’t fight me. He tries to get air, but he doesn’t push me away or attempt to free himself. Because he’s loyal. Because he always has been.

“Fuck!” I finally let go and step back.

Benny bends over, hands on his knees as he sucks in air and coughs at intervals.

I can’t look at him. Not without wanting to do violence. Instead, I turn away and stalk to the bar, grabbing a bottle of whiskey and chugging it, the burn in my throat matching the one in my heart. It was supposed to be a game with her. Just a game where I got to torment the pretty little Fontana before I went in for the kill. But it’s so much more than that now. When I saw the fear in her eyes, saw her blood—the crystal tumbler cracks in my grip. I drop it, blood oozing from my hand.

“Mateo. You’ve barely slept or eaten in three days. You’re running on fumes. Go easy.”

“Go easy?” I turn to look at Sonny.

His face is just as haggard as mine, perhaps even more so. He just spent three days arguing and sparring with federal agents while I sat silent and refused to cooperate.

“There is no going easy. She’s my *wife!*”

“I’m sorry.” Benny’s voice is hoarse. “I thought she was with Lito. I didn’t know—”

“You should’ve known!” I roar.

He stands straight again, then hangs his head. “Yes.”

Red lies on one of the couches, his gaze bouncing back and forth between me and Benny. “Look, I love it when the golden boy here gets in trouble, but if he really thought she was with Lito—”

“Stay out of this.” Benny glares at him.

“Okay.” Red closes his eyes, his bruised face still a goddamn mess.

Everything’s a goddamn mess at this point. The feds are breathing down my neck, I’m no closer to ending the Manchellos and the Fontanas, and my wife is injured and drugged upstairs. Why does it tear me to pieces to see her like that? I’m the one who wanted to hurt her, to make her feel the pain I felt when my parents were stolen from me. But to know that she fought for her life, that she gave Geno almost as good as she got—it should never have happened. She should be safe here in her own home. The rage is back, boiling my blood until I can’t see straight.

I take another swig from the bottle, then walk back to Benny.

He doesn’t flinch, doesn’t try to hold me off, even though he knows exactly what I’m capable of.

“If I had known Geno was any sort of a threat ...” He shrugs, and I can sense his disappointment. And it’s not in me. It’s in himself. “I’m sorry, Mateo. I let you down. I let her down. I’ll do whatever it takes.”

Half of me wants to break the whiskey bottle against the wall and slam the jagged edge into his face. But that’s not

entirely true. I'm directing too much of my anger in the wrong direction. Benny made a mistake, but he's not the one who hurt Lucretia. That was Geno and ... fuck, part of it was me. Part of it was the way I treated her, the way I toyed with her. That realization sits heavy in my gut, burning like acid. Still, my men knew she was off limits. That she was *mine*.

I put a hand on Benny's shoulder, then tip his chin to the side and look at the marks I left on his neck. *Fuck*. I've never hurt him like this. He, Red, and Sonny are my brothers, same as Lito.

"I'm going to tell all of you this now." I finish the bottle. "Lucretia is just as untouchable as I am, as any of you are. I thought I made that clear to my men when I brought her home, but I guess the message didn't get through." I toss the bottle into the trash by my desk. "Call all the soldiers. I want them here in no more than an hour. Only leave enough men at our operations to keep them secure. I want the rest of them to witness what happens to anyone who tries to hurt my family."

"Are you sure you're up for this?" Sonny, phone in hand, hesitates. "It's been a rough week."

"I'm always up for vengeance." I stride out, down the hall and out the back door as Sonny starts barking orders into his phone.

Even in the dead of night, it doesn't take half an hour for my soldiers to amass.

The horses in the stables neigh and stamp nervously, unsure of why so many humans are crowding around and murmuring furtively.

"With me," I call and open the door to the sauna.

Dozens of footfalls echo behind me as I go, my men following my orders. And if they weren't already completely obedient to me, they will be shortly. Their lives will depend on it.

Geno is tied up near the back wall, his bare feet barely making contact with the grate as the shackles on his wrists go straight up to the ceiling. He hangs like a piece of meat ready

to be butchered, his naked skin already taking on a yellow pallor.

My men line up against the wall, some of them two and three deep, and all their eyes are on me as I pace back and forth.

Geno whimpers, the gag in his mouth keeping his bullshit at bay.

When Sonny appears on the stairs and nods, I know everyone's present.

I stop in the middle of the room and look out at the faces, at the terrified eyes, at the wrinkles of worry, and the mouths already drawn down in horror.

"I shouldn't have to do this." I crack my knuckles. "But I want to." I unbutton my shirt, then pull it off and walk to the table of instruments Red laid out for me at the side of the room. I drape my shirt toward the back of it, away from any gore.

I choose a screwdriver—a large, blunt flathead—and return to the center of the room. It's so quiet. No one seems to be breathing. The only sounds are Geno's whimpering and the pitter-pattering of his piss as it hits the grate.

"The man behind me thought he could steal from me." I slap the screwdriver into my palm. "He thought he could take something that wasn't his to take." The tension inside me is tight enough to snap a steel fucking bar. "He touched *my wife*."

The soldiers seem to compress backwards, cringing away.

"He put his hands on her. She fought him. He's bleeding right now from what she did. Lucretia Milani is no fairy fucking princess. She's a fighter. She won't allow anyone to take advantage of her or this family. She's proven that. Now, I need each of you to prove to me that you understand me. I need you to show me that you know the consequences of trying to take what's mine, of laying a finger on my wife, of doing *anything* that dishonors me or my queen." I walk to the man nearest me and hand him the screwdriver.

He takes it with a shaking hand.

“No one is allowed to kill him!” I yell. “That belongs to me. No heart shots, no head shots. You can bleed him with a stomach hit, but no kidney or liver.” I step back and gesture toward Geno. “Get to it. Prove your loyalty to me and my wife.”

Geno screams through the gag as the first soldier approaches him.

I watch, my arms crossed, my rage still boiling. It won't drop to a simmer until Geno's lifeblood is on my hands. But first, he's going to suffer. I think my soldier might hesitate, but he surprises me with a swift strike to Geno's leg. He adds a wad of spit to Geno's face as he backs away.

“Next.” Benny hands another soldier a switchblade, then keeps giving out weapons as my soldiers turn Geno into a grotesque pincushion.

His screams all blur into one agonized cry as they cut and stab him again and again. They follow my instructions and avoid major arteries, but by the time each man has taken a shot, Geno is missing fingers, toes, and half of his nose.

Benny steps up, a hunting knife in his hand. “You'll never have to worry about thinking with this again.” With a vicious slice, he cuts off Geno's dick. Then he yanks the gag away and stuffs it down Geno's throat. He gags, but Benny wraps the fabric around his head, forcing him to keep his dick in his mouth even as he tries to vomit it out.

Red goes next, slicing off his ears and tossing them to the bloody grate. Then Sonny, who's always favored blunt instruments—he embeds the claw end of a hammer into his shoulder.

I turn and address the men. “This is what happens if you fuck with us. Do you understand?”

“Yes sir!” The words are a wall of sound, each man declaring his loyalty.

I walk to the table and grab a bone saw, then turn to Geno, the fire burning in my soul reaching new heights. “Now it's my turn.”

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LUCRETIA

My head aches, but not too bad, and my back is sore. Those are my first sensations as I struggle to consciousness. The first thing I notice is the sound of birds chirping in the trees near the house. It's morning. The second are the light snores coming from Lito who's hunched over in a chair by my bedside.

"Hey." I reach out and touch his hand.

He blinks his eyes open and sits up. "Ouch!" He reaches for his lower back. "That's stiff. But you're awake! And you look like hell." He frowns.

"You've looked better, yourself." I give a wan smile.

"Does it hurt? Are you in pain?"

"I'm all right, I think." I sit up. It sends a pulse of achiness to my head, but it's bearable.

He fluffs my pillow behind me and sits on the bed next to me. "I'm sorry." He holds my hands. "I'm so sorry. I didn't know you were in—"

"It's okay. There's no way you could've known." I squeeze his fingers. "And he didn't hurt me—"

He winces. "He did, Lucretia. On my watch."

"It's not your fault, Lito. I promise." I squeeze his fingers. "Don't blame yourself."

"I do. But even if I didn't, Mateo would. He's gone off the deep end more than usual."

“He has?”

“Yeah. He and the guys have been out at the stables all night.”

“He went horseback riding?” I don’t know why that strikes me as hilarious, but it does, and a strange giggle escapes me. “That’s how he blows off steam, huh?”

His lips thin a little as he presses them together.

“Oh.” I stop laughing. “Oh, does ‘the stables’ mean something else?”

“You remember the door I showed you? The one I said that you should never open?”

“The one by the tack room?” I ask.

“Yeah.”

I get a cold tingle down my spine.

“They’ve been in there all night ... with Geno.”

I blanch when I hear his name.

“Sorry.” He pats my hand. “Sorry, darling.”

“No, it’s okay. I guess it makes sense that Mateo would discipline him or have a meeting or whatever. It makes him look bad if his men take advantage of me, I guess.”

Lito gives me a befuddled look. “You think he’s mad at Geno for *making him look bad*?”

I get a flash of Mateo sitting beside me, my hand in his as he asks me questions. Real questions—ones about my life. Was that real or was I dreaming?

“What did the doctor give me?” I rub my eyes.

“I don’t know. I wanted some, though, but I didn’t ask for any. I knew I was going to be here to keep watch. Can’t be tripped out on morphine when I’m supposed to be protecting you.”

“You don’t have to protect me.”

“I do.” He leans over and kisses my forehead. “I’m so sorry.” When he pulls back his eyes are glassy. “I should’ve been there.”

“Don’t. If you cry, then I have to cry.” I pull him into a hug. “So don’t cry.”

“I’m so sorry.”

I squeeze him harder. “I’m okay. I’m tougher than I look.”

“I know.” He snuffles.

“Don’t get snot in my hair. With the stitches, I have no idea when I’ll be able to wash it again.”

He laughs. “There she is.”

“But really.” I pull him away. “I’m going to be fine. He didn’t do what he tried to do. I scratched the shit out of him and ran.”

“I’m certain he wishes you’d killed him.”

“Mateo’s that mad?”

“I haven’t seen him like that in ... ever, maybe?” He grabs a water bottle from the nightstand and hands it to me. “Drink this. I’m going to get Carter to whip us up some waffles with extra syrup. Be back soon.”

“Okay.” I take a long drink of the water as he walks out, but then he pauses at the door.

“Yell if you need me. I’ll be listening.”

“Stop worrying. Mateo’s home.” I say it so easily, as if Mateo being here means I’m safe. But even though he’s gone out of his way to prove the contrary, I really do feel safer that he’s here. When he found me last night, I didn’t feel fear. I felt relief. I felt ... glad. I was able to melt into him as he carried me to safety.

I sigh and settle back in the bed.

When the door opens, I jump.

Mateo, his eyes wild and blood streaked across his bare chest, carries a bloody box under one arm and a hammer in his

hand.

“What—”

He marches to the wall across from the foot of the bed, opens the box, pulls out a bloody hand and proceeds to nail it to the wall.

My gorge rises as he pulls another hand from the box and does the same.

“Mateo, what is this?” My voice is small, my heart pounding. But I know what it is. I knew the second Mateo appeared with gore splashed across his chest.

He tosses the box and the hammer down with a rough clatter, then turns to me. “He’ll never touch you again, Lucretia. Neither will anyone else. You’re safe. You’re *mine*.” He stalks over to me, his bloody hands at his sides, his eyes on me. “Do you believe me?”

I stare up at him, and for the first time since we’ve met, I see pain in him. No, not just pain. *Agony*. He’s torn apart, but I realize in that split-second it’s not because of what he did to Geno. It’s because of what Geno did to me. He’s blood-splattered and weary, but he did this for me. He killed a man in my name, and I can’t handle the wealth of emotions, some of them discordant and dark, that it pulls from me.

“Mateo ...” My voice falters.

“Tell me you believe me, Lucretia. Tell me you trust me.” He holds my gaze, his body drawn tight like a piano wire.

I shouldn’t trust him. I shouldn’t be anything but horrified. He just nailed a man’s mutilated hands to my bedroom wall. But the pain in him is real, the regret is *real*. There is no ridicule in his tone, no thinly-veiled hate. There’s so much more. More emotion than I thought possible in him, despite what Lito tried to tell me.

The words come to my lips with no effort, as easy as breathing. “I trust you.”

He closes his eyes as if he’s relishing the sound. Then, without a word, he strides into the bathroom and shuts the

door. I hear the shower turn on.

I stare at the hands, half mesmerized, half fearful they might move. I can't get my bearings, and my head begins to pound.

“Hey, whoa—” Lito is in the doorway, a plate of waffles in his hand. He stares at the hands on the wall. “That's ... That's ...” He gags, then straightens and wipes one hand across his mouth. “That's no less than he deserved.” With a determined stride, he walks to the bed and sits beside me, then lowers his voice. “But I totes understand if you aren't in the mood for waffles right now.”

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“*I* can go.” Lito sits on the pool table, blocking Red’s shot. “I’m good at stuff like that.”

“No.” I lean back against the wall.

“Why not?” Lito frowns.

“Because Sarita is playing chess, and you’re eating the checkers.”

“Ass.” He waves a hand at me.

Red prods him with his pool stick. “Do you mind?”

“Fine. Whatever.” He stands and paces around to the front of the billiard table.

“She’s trying to sway sentiment to her side just as we expected.” Sonny watches the game, but he never shoots pool. “She’s already hit up several of the families on her self-pity tour, and I’m afraid some of them are falling for it.” He glances at me. “Likely because you rattled the shit out of them at the wedding. They feel vulnerable now, as I said they would.”

“We needed the show of force at the wedding.” I shrug off his criticism. “It let everyone know that the Milani family is ready to take over. They need to fall in line or they’ll end the same way the Manchellos did.”

Sonny rubs the bridge of his nose. “I think diplomacy—”

“Diplomacy got my parents slaughtered, Sonny,” I snap.

He sighs. “I’m only trying to help you.”

“Go easy on the old man.” Red points his pool cue at him. “He can’t take the strain.”

Sonny bounces to his feet. “This ‘old man’ can take you outside and kick your ass. How about that?”

“At least you guys never change.” Lito grins. “I’ve missed you.”

“I know you’re trying to help, and I appreciate you, Sonny. I just know in my bones that this is going to have to go down a different way. Diplomacy isn’t going to solve the rot in the families. The Fontanas and Sarita are proof of that. They never went down for what they did to us, so all I’m doing is rectifying what the families have ignored.”

Sonny leans back and blows out a long sigh. “How’s she doing?” he asks. He doesn’t have to say her name.

“Much better. Her head’s almost healed up, and her back isn’t anywhere near as sore as it was a couple of days ago. She’s tired of being on bed rest, though.” Lito glances at me.

“She needs to get well.” I’ve kept my distance for the past few days while she’s recovered. She feels comfortable with Lito—which I fucking hate—but I didn’t want to spook her and compromise her healing.

Besides, I was running on fucking adrenaline and monstrous rage when I nailed those hands to our wall, and once I slept some of it off, I realized my peace offering may have had unintended consequences. Then again, she should get used to it. If anyone dares hurt her again, their penalty will be even worse. I’m a violent man when it comes to defending what’s mine. No one can change that, not even her.

With the distance, though, I itch to see her. To poke at her. To get her to talk to me like she did the night when she was hurt. And not just talk—I want her. All of her. I want to make her mine and take her body roughly, gently, every way there is. But this time it’s not to punish her for her last name. I’m not playing games with her anymore.

When I saw her tearing through the rain, fear in her dark eyes and terror in every step, something inside me snapped. I've wanted to hurt her—but I never wanted her to get hurt. It's a fucking paradox that I'm not going to bother trying to untangle. But I simply knew when I saw her that I would fight for her. I would kill for her. And I have. Multiple times.

Then when she told me about her brother, about that yawning sense of loss inside her, I could feel it, too. I'm right there in the dark with her, mourning a missing piece of my soul. My parents died young, ripped away from Lito and me when they should've been showing us the way. I have more in common with Lucretia than I could've guessed, and I'm not going to keep denying the connection I feel for her or the way I've wanted her from the moment I first began stalking her years ago. I'm a goddamn psycho, and it's time she accepts it.

"I'm glad she's on the mend." Red lines up his shot again. "I wish we could kill that motherfucker all over again."

I couldn't agree more, but we need to look ahead, not behind. "So the meeting is Saturday?" I ask Sonny.

He nods. "Yeah, Sarita is pitching it as a wake for her sons, but it's really a way for her to swing more sentiment her way. All the families have agreed to attend, so I don't need to impress upon you how pivotal this meeting is. We need Vincenzo to speak on our behalf. He's the only one who'll carry as much weight as you, and he won't have the taint of self-interest on him."

"He'll come." I watch as Red misses his shot.

I get up and study the table.

"I think you should bring Lucretia, too."

"No." I find the perfect shot.

"Hear me out." Sonny holds up his hands. "The wedding was a scene. A bad one, but I'm not re-litigating that with you. It's done. But if the families see Lucretia with you, unharmed, then—"

"She's not unharmed, though. She was assaulted in her own home." I grit my teeth.

“You dealt with that, and now the men jump at her shadow.” Sonny continues, “But as I was saying, the families were in an uproar over what you did. You shook them up, badly. They want to feel safe again, and the best way for you to play your part in that is to bring Lucretia to the gathering. Show her off. Let her shine.”

“No. She’s not fully healed, and I won’t risk her.”

Sonny lets out a frustrated sigh. “You’re risking her by not taking her! Think of all the stories people will make up. Sarita will say you’ve killed Lucretia, or Carmen might claim you’ve been keeping her away from her daughter out of spite. You can put all that to bed, put the families at ease, and give them a sense of security.”

“I’ve been keeping Carmen away from her daughter as a favor to Lucretia.” I glower. “And we all know what Carmen and Leonard deserve, right along with Sarita.”

Red nods. “They’ll get what’s coming to them.”

“The meeting has thrown off my timeline, but I’ll still have my vengeance, Sonny.” I point my pool cue at him. “Nothing is going to stop that.”

“Fine, just put it on pause. Wait for this to blow over, then get back to your plans. But please take Lucretia with you. We’ll all be there, too, keeping an eye out. She’ll be safe, and you’ll smooth all those ruffled feathers.”

I take the shot, knocking it in with ease, then I toss my pool cue on the table and walk away.

“What the fuck? I could’ve won that round,” Red complains. “Where are you going?”

“To see my wife.”

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LUCRETIA

The water feels good, and I sink down lower, letting the heat seep into my bones. The ends of my hair float in dark tendrils around me, some of them mixing with the bubbles on the surface.

I hear the bedroom door open and close. “I’m in the tub,” I call. “So if you’re still squicked out by looking at ladybits, you should stay in the—”

“I’m not.” Mateo strides in, his fingers undoing the buttons of his shirt as he stalks toward me.

“Hey!” I yank my hands to cover my breasts.

He smirks, that sexy look of his sending heat straight to my core.

“Stop.” I press my thighs together.

“No.” He whips his shirt off, then goes for his belt.

“What are you doing?” I pull my knees up as I watch him, unable to look away.

“Enjoying a bath with my wife.” He shucks his pants and his boxer briefs down his legs, his thick cock popping free.

I swallow hard.

Once he’s bare, he stands straight.

I’m frozen. I’ve never seen a man naked like this. In person. Movies? Internet stuff? Sure, here and there. But nothing like this. The pure masculine beauty of him—the

muscles, the V, the scars that pepper him, the package. I can't stop looking.

“Lick your lips one more time, and I'll put it in your mouth, princess.” He steps toward me.

I scramble back, sloshing water onto the floor.

“I wasn't licking my lips.” I yelp as he flattens one of his wide hands at my back and scoots me forward, then climbs in behind me.

“You were. Now settle down. You wouldn't want me to get excited, now would you?”

Given the way his erection presses against my lower back as he pulls me against his chest, I'd say he was already pretty damn excited.

“What are you doing?” I jolt as he slides his palms down my sides and rests them on my thighs.

“I told you. Now lay back.” He sighs. “This water is hotter than the fires of hell. Do you always do this?”

“It's cooled off some.” I don't know how I'm making words when I'm naked in the tub with Mateo. What is happening?

He laughs low in his throat, then puts a hand on my shoulder and pulls me back, a sizzle rushing through my body when we touch. “Better.”

I turn my head and look up at him. His gaze is on my breasts, the bubbles dissipated enough so he can see everything.

“Stop.” I cover myself.

“What? I can't enjoy my wife?” He swipes his hands up my sides, then forces them underneath my hands so he's cupping my breasts.

“Don't.” My breath hitches as he kneads my skin, his fingers firm against me as he swipes them back and forth across my nipples.

He groans and squeezes them, my body heating like the strike of a match. “Fucking hell, princess. Your nipples are like bullets.” He pinches them, twisting slightly.

I open my mouth, a pant coming out as I press my thighs together to staunch the ache that’s started between them. His cock pulses against my back, and I die a little when a moan escapes me.

“That’s my girl.” He purrs in my ear as one of his hands traces down my stomach.

I grip his wrist to stop him, but I don’t dig my nails in. Not even when he runs his fingers lower, teasing my clit before dipping to my entrance.

“Mateo,” I whimper, my body on fire but my heart full of trepidation.

“You told me you trust me.” He rubs my clit, back and forth, sending streaks of electrical current through me. “Was that a lie, princess?”

I can’t think when he’s touching me like this, one hand squeezing my breast while the other strokes me so perfectly. “N-no.”

“Then prove it.” He delves lower, two of his fingers pressing inside me.

I arch, my body coming alive as he pushes deeper.

“Fuck,” he groans in my ear. “Saved this tight pussy for me. All for me.”

His filthy words are like gasoline onto the fire, and I grip his thighs, holding on as he eases in and out, faster and faster, then pulls back and strokes my clit again.

“I know what you like, princess. I know what this hot little body needs.” He presses his lips to my neck, sucking the skin between his teeth as I move my hips, completely at his mercy, chasing the pleasure he’s giving me with nothing more than his fingers.

My legs shake, my body already so close to the edge.

When he stops, I thrust my hips toward his fingers, demanding more.

That low, sexy laugh surrounds me, and then the water is shifting.

“Mateo!”

He stands and pulls me up then scoops me into his arms and steps from the tub, water falling all around us as he carries me through the bathroom and to the bed. Laying me down, he spreads my legs, then gets on his knees.

“Are you going to—Ah!” I grip the damp duvet as he presses his mouth to me, licking me from entrance to clit.

Then he does it again, and again.

I writhe, my wet skin pebbling in the cool air as he yanks me to the edge of the bed and throws my legs over his broad shoulders. When he presses a hand down on my stomach, a moan rips from me. The pressure of his tongue on my clit is too much, and I try to close my legs, but he growls and digs in deeper, his tongue delving inside me.

“Mateo.” I can barely get his name out, can’t think past the next stroke of his tongue. “Please.”

“Please, what, my princess?” He pulls his tongue back and uses it to tease my clit again.

“Please ...” I don’t know! I don’t know what I want anymore. I thought I wanted freedom, I thought I wanted to fight him off, to deny him, but right now I’d kill to feel his tongue bring me to orgasm.

He rises and lifts me to the center of the bed, then prowls over me. “I know what you want.” He kisses me, sharing my taste with me. It’s erotic and filthy, and I open my mouth, needing more of him.

He swipes his tongue inside, the head of his hard cock pressing against my clit. I move my hips, getting the delicious friction that I need.

“Not like this, princess.” He kisses to my throat, then lower, sucking a nipple into his mouth. I watch him, my body

wound so tightly that I might come just from the way he's licking me. "You come on my cock. Nowhere else."

I moan, my legs open, my body desperate for him even as my mind tries to rebel.

He kisses up my chest to my mouth again, kissing me hard as he lines up his head at my entrance. "Tell me no," he murmurs against my lips. "Tell me how much you don't want me. How much you hate me. I'll fuck you anyway, princess, because I know what you need." He presses his cock head inside me, stretching me as I moan. "I won't stop. I'll *never* stop."

I dig my nails into his shoulders and bite his bottom lip, my need outweighing whatever calculus my brain was trying to do. Because I want him. I want all of him. "Don't stop," I whisper against his mouth.

He plunges inside me, sending a sharp pain through me.

I yelp as he stills and kisses me viciously, his tongue lashing mine as he pinches one of my nipples, his body tense as he holds himself on one elbow.

The pain recedes quickly, and I feel full. So full, as if I'm about to break in half from the pressure. But then he moves, sliding out and back in. Then again. And again. Slowly, I relax, my body adjusting to him, to the sensation of fullness.

He pulls back and stares down at me, his brows drawn tight. "Tight and wet for me, princess. So fucking perfect."

I move my hips tentatively, then realize the more I rock against him, the more he hits my clit just right. The pain is gone, and I'm consumed with raw want. I want, and want, and want. I kiss him, savoring every bit of our bodies touching, the pleasure each stroke brings me.

He moves faster, destroying me on levels I didn't even know existed and building me back up. Each hard thrust sends me higher, and I arch, my breasts pressed to his hard chest as he feasts on my throat, my shoulder. His teeth mark me, his mouth like a brand on my flesh. I want more. I can't stop.

I rise up to meet him, my body so keyed up that I don't think anymore. I'm nothing more than primal need, pure desire.

"Fucking hell." He bites down on my neck, his teeth sending pinpricks of pain shooting through me.

Somehow, that's what sends me over, my orgasm hitting me from everywhere and nowhere, rolling through me like thunder as I explode, my breath gone, my mind in tatters. I call his name, my mind knowing no other.

He grunts low, his body tensing even more as I'm lost in my pleasure. Then I feel him grow even thicker, and when he bites me harder, I feel his cock jerk inside me. He's coming, and it sends another wave of delicious ecstasy through me, my body reveling in it all, the overwhelming sensation of pleasure. I've never felt this before, never been so adrift but also so safe in someone's arms.

I can barely breathe, can barely think as the aftershocks skitter through me.

He kisses where he bit me, then rests his head against my shoulder. Taking in deep breaths, he shudders as I run my hands down his back.

Resting his full weight on me, he grabs me and flips to his back, his cock still inside me.

I shiver at the sensation overload, at everything being too much all at once.

He grips the duvet and throws it over me, then runs his hands down my back, though he's careful not to press on my bruise. In fact, as my fog clears, I realize he's been ... *gentle* with me, as far as a man like him can be.

"Princess?" He says it without scorn, without derision.

I rest my chin on his chest and meet his gaze, his light eyes having ensnared me from the first moment I saw them.

"Are you hurt?" he asks.

I shake my head.

He lets out a long breath.

I reach up and swipe his dark hair from his forehead. He takes my hand and kisses it, both sides.

Why does that make my eyes water?

I press my cheek to his chest and inhale a shuddering breath. “I wanted to fight you,” I whisper. “I never wanted to give in.”

“You didn’t give in to *me*.” He runs his fingers through my hair, though he takes care not to touch the injured spot. “You gave in to *us*.”

I blink, my tears falling onto his chest. He reaches down and pulls me up his body, his cock slipping out of me as he groans. “Look at me, Lucretia.”

“You said my name.” I smile as he cups my cheek.

“It’s a beautiful name. A perfect fit.”

“You think I’m beautiful?” I ask.

His eyes widen. “You doubt it?”

“I don’t know. It’s not like you’ve ever said it.”

“I wanted you from the first moment I saw you.”

“You mean the moment when you killed my groom?” I shudder.

He glances away.

“What was that?”

“What?”

“You’re never the first one to look away. It’s always a competition with you. It’s part of your whole ‘asshole MO.’”

“My ‘asshole MO’?” Amusement coats his tone. He runs his hands down my back and grips my ass. “I’d seen you long before we were married.”

What? “You did? How?”

He doesn’t answer, his eyes eating into me the way they always do. The secrets between us begin to creep back into

place, a wall that we broke through only moments ago. That's when I feel shame begin to filter through my mind, settling on me like soot. What have I done?

I slide off him and roll away until my back is to him.

He sighs. "Don't do that."

I don't know what he wants from me. He's already taken my virginity. I fell for it, giving myself to him like a desperate idiot. And we didn't use protection. God, I'm so stupid. The only person I hate more than him right now is me.

He scoots up behind me, spooning me. His body heat is intoxicating, his scent all around me. He moves my hair out of the way and presses his lips to the back of my neck.

"Why did you marry me, Mateo?" I ask. "Was it just for my last name, or was there something else?"

"Why does it matter?" He scrapes his teeth along my skin. "We're married now."

"It matters." I roll to face him.

He grips my hips and pulls me closer, forcing me to straddle one of his thighs.

"Tell me the truth." I put my palms on his chest and try to keep my distance.

He smirks and wraps his arm around me, easily squeezing my resistance away as he crushes me to his chest. "The truth is that it doesn't matter. You're here now."

"It does matter. You need to—"

He silences me with a kiss, rough and demanding.

I dig my nails into his chest, but he only kisses me harder, steamrolling over my resistance with his wicked tongue. When he moves his thigh, massaging me and sending tingles of pleasure through me, I moan. He moves on top of me, spreading me wide again.

"Mateo—" I gasp when he presses his cock into me, the ache from earlier flaring and then receding as he moves slowly, gently, giving me all of him a bit at a time.

“*This* is what matters, Lucretia.” He drops kisses along my jaw line. “You and me.”

I should claw his face off, should do something to show him I don’t want this. Instead, I move with him, falling under his spell and into his rhythm. He makes it last, giving me pleasure again and again until I don’t ask any more questions, don’t do anything except feel and experience him. Until I’m boneless and sleepy, my body sated and my heart dangerously close to being completely lost.

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“No.” I wave the jeweler away. “Try again.”

He clears his throat and digs through his case for another set of stones.

“Thank god you said no.” Lito rolls his eyes. “Those were atrocious. We don’t do a cluster as a main stone. Absolutely not.”

“I understand.” Giuseppe nods and plucks out some more black velvet pouches.

“We should’ve been done here an hour ago.” Sonny taps his fingers on my desk. “We need to discuss tomorrow night.”

“We’ll discuss it as soon as I’ve picked some stones.” I watch as Giuseppe lays out some more diamonds on his black velvet tray.

“These are a mix of princess cut and Asscher cut. Each are excellent color and clarity. Very few inclusions and nearly colorless.” He hands me a loupe.

“Give me that.” Lito swipes it from me and plucks up the largest stone, inspecting it with a critical eye as I peer over the others on the tray.

Red flops on a sofa and groans. “How did this go from an ‘I hate her’ situation to an ‘I must give her the perfect wedding ring’ situation? Did all this happen while I was stuck with the feds? Is this what I missed?”

“I knew this would happen.” Sonny shrugs.

“What?” I turn from the diamonds to look at him. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

He gives me a wry expression. “Come on, Mateo. The file you kept on her? The way you practically stalked her for years before you ever met her? And then how you were so single-minded about the plan to crash her wedding and take her from Horatio, no matter the cost?”

I shake my head. “That was part of my plan for revenge. Not—”

“Sure, but how did it just so happen you seized upon your plan when you realized she was going to be married off to someone else? You could’ve struck before then. You’ve had years to think over how you want to make the Fontanas and Manchellos suffer for what they did, but you didn’t act until she was on the table.”

Benny whistles. “Holy shit. The old man is actually onto something.”

“I told you not to call me that,” Sonny snipes.

“No, wait, wait, wait—” Red sits up and puts a hand out like he’s just had a eureka moment. “Remember how we’d go out to clubs and shit and get mad bitches, but Mateo would sit and be broody. Which, I mean, was great for attracting some choice women, don’t get me wrong, they love strong, silent types almost as much as they love gingers.” He grins. “But maybe that whole time he was mooning over Lucretia?”

“He was.” Sonny nods.

“You don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about.” I wave a hand as if I can cut through their bullshit.

“This is like when the stripper’s been teasing you the whole goddamn night, but then in the champagne room she finally takes off the g-string and you see the whole world.” Benny shakes his head. “Holy shit.”

“That’s one way to put it.” Sonny glowers.

Lito hands me the large stone and the loupe. “This one. Look.”

I take it, happy to have a distraction from the idiots who are still yammering on about bullshit. The stone is perfect, not a blemish in sight.

“Oh, I knew as soon as I met her.” Lito smiles smugly. “Clear as day.”

“Shut up, all of you.” I hand Giuseppe the stone. “This one in the center, and I want the square ones all the way around the band.”

“Excellent choice, Mr. Milani.” He hesitates and points to my finger. “And for you?”

I look at the band. “Just whatever will go with hers. No stones. But not so plain as this.” I hold up my finger.

“Very well.” He starts packing up. “I’ll send a prototype of the setting this afternoon, and if you approve, I can have them finished tomorrow.”

“Sounds good.”

He bustles from the room, his black case giving no hints that it holds a king’s fortune inside.

When I hear laughter, I turn my head toward the sound. I know it’s Lucretia. I feel like I’d recognize her voice even if I were in a sea of people.

“She’s in the kitchen with Carter,” Lito explains.

A spark of jealousy flares in my chest. Why is she laughing with *him*? She should be laughing with *me*. I can be funny. Surely.

“We should talk about the wake—” Sonny snorts a laugh. “If you can call it that anymore. She’s going all out with black flowers and mourning colors. Even the invite the courier brought listed specific mourning colors for all guests.”

I raise a brow. “Is that so?”

Sonny flips through some papers on my desk and hands me the invitation.

I glance over the particulars, then turn to Lito. “Call whatever shop sells fancy dresses and have them visit this

afternoon. I want Lucretia in something bright and bold.”

Lito smiles and rubs his hands together. “I love it when you go full asshole on other people.”

Sonny sighs in his long-suffering way. “You’re starting shit before you even get there?”

“As if you’re surprised?” I rise and head to the door.

“Wait, we need to talk about our plan,” Sonny squawks.

“I’ll be back.” I hear her laugh again, and now I’m hurrying along the hall.

I pause outside the kitchen door and listen.

“He’s adorable!” Lucretia squeals. “Look how he follows me around.”

“He’s already smitten,” Carter says. “I don’t know how I’m going to get him to come home with me after this.”

I push open the door just enough so I can peek inside.

Lucretia walks backwards past the island, and then I catch movement near her feet. An iguana is stalking toward her, its thick body moving quickly.

“Oh my goodness, George.” She sinks to the floor and holds her hands out to it. “You’re such a good boy.”

It crawls onto her hand, then up her arm.

Lito creeps up beside me and peeks in.

She laughs. “That tickles.”

When the beast gets to her shoulder, it perches there like a green gargoyle and nudges her cheek.

“He’s definitely taken with you. He doesn’t do that to me unless he knows I have treats for him, though he usually greets me at the door when I come home.”

“I love him. He’s so cute.”

I don’t think I’d use the word ‘cute’ to describe the lizard, but I’ve quickly learned that Lucretia sees the world differently than I do. And maybe that’s a good thing.

“Gross,” Lito whispers.

I close the door softly and turn back toward my office.

“Hey, can we talk?” Lito asks.

“About you going back to LA?”

He rolls his eyes. “Oh my god, you love me, shut up.”

I smirk and let him lead me into one of the back bedrooms.
“What is it?” I lean against the four-poster bed.

“Lucretia.” He laces his fingers together.

“Yes?”

“What are your plans?”

“What are my plans with my wife? I’m not sure what you’re asking.”

He makes an exasperated sound. “Do you love her?”

“I don’t have time for—”

He blocks the door.

“Seriously?” I’ve beaten his ass plenty of times when we were young, though he used to give as good as he got. I didn’t realize he still had that scrappy streak in him. But, then again, he is my brother.

“Look, I know she was part of your grand plan—which you left me out of, by the way.” He looks down. “They were my parents, too, Mateo.”

That hits me like a gut punch, even though I know it shouldn’t. I intentionally left him out of my plans so he wouldn’t get hurt. He’s too good-hearted to do the things that I do on the daily. And a small part of me envies that about him. But more than that, I want it to stay that way. The good in him is part of my mother, a part I never want to tarnish.

“I know they were, Lito.” I grip his shoulder. “And I know you deserve revenge as much as I do. I’d just rather deal it out and let you know when it’s done.”

“That’s the thing. I don’t want revenge on people who had nothing to do with what happened to Mom and Dad. Like

Lucretia. She's innocent. No matter who her parents are or what her last name is—she was like me. She was out, for the most part, starting a life in the world beyond the families. But her shitty parents dragged her back in after her brother died.” He cocks his head to the side. “Do we know who did it?”

“Her brother? No. I heard about it when it happened—mainly because he was on my list, too—but no one has said a word.”

“Isn't that fucking odd, though?” He crosses his arms over his chest. “You take a shit, and it's front page news on the families' iPhones, but a firstborn son gets offed and no one makes a peep?”

“It's definitely not normal. I put some feelers out about it, but never got any bites. Why? Where are you going with this?”

He shrugs. “I don't know. But it's weird, is all. And Lucretia may be more caught up in it than you know. Maybe she's a piece in a much bigger game.”

“If that's true—and I'm not saying it is—then who's running the game? Who's pulling the strings?”

“No clue, but something about it doesn't add up.”

“You a private detective now?”

“Just because I'm smarter than you doesn't mean I'm a detective.” He grins.

“Delusional.” I motion at the door. “Will you move now?”

“No. You still didn't answer my question.”

“Which one?” I stall.

“You know which one.”

Love. That's not something I'm ready to face, and would I even recognize it? I've been on a dark path for so long that I wouldn't know love if I saw it.

“I don't know.”

“You’re lying.” Lito’s eyes narrow. “To yourself, most of all.”

“You got your answer. Can you move now?” I step to him. “Or do you need an ass kicking like old times?”

“I work out three times a week, big brother.” He puffs out his bird chest. “You’d better watch your fucking tone with me.”

I try not to laugh, but a chuckle escapes anyway.

“Asshole!” He shoves me then opens the door and stomps away down the hall.

“Don’t forget to call the dress—”

“I got it. Fuck off.” He flips me the bird and disappears into the foyer.

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LUCRETIA

“*B*ut isn’t this a wake?” I run my fingers along the rack full of bright dresses.

“To-may-to, to-mah-to.” Lito pulls a dress and hangs it at the front of the rack, then another, then swaps two of them. “Okay, these are organized from what I like the worst to best.”

“Why am I trying on the ‘worst’ ones at all?”

“We’re building up to the best. If we know what we don’t like, we’ll know the right one when we see it.” He plops on the bed and waves a hand. “Get to it.”

“Um.” I pluck the first dress from the rack. It’s neon yellow, long, fitted, and has a pop of feathers on the asymmetrical shoulder strap. “Can I just go ahead and say ‘no’ to this one?”

He wrinkles his nose. “I suppose, but only for that one. All the rest, you have to try.”

“Ugh.” I hang the yellow monstrosity at the back of the line and grab the next. I want to protest this one, too, but I already know Lito isn’t going to budge. So, I strip down to my panties—Lito plays on his phone and pays my nudity no mind at all—and slide it on. It’s a salmon pink gown, and even its ruffles have ruffles. “Um, thoughts?”

He looks up, then barks a laugh. “Hello, Dolly! What are you singing for us tonight?”

My cheeks heat. “Why am I trying on the bad ones!” I yank it off over my head, frilly bits scratching my cheeks, and

toss it onto the chair.

“I need some amusement in my life. Please continue.” He goes back to his phone. “And ditch the panties. I can see the lines.”

“Brat.” I shuck my panties and try on three more dresses, get three more snarky comments, then grab one of the ones on the ‘best’ side when he’s not looking. Creeping behind the rack, I start to pull it on when he calls, “I’m going for snacks. Be right back.”

“Always the damn snacks,” I grumble, though I secretly hope he comes back with some of the honey almond brittle that Carter makes. It’s amazing.

The door closes and I’m able to take my time and examine the dress in the closet mirror. It’s red, the front dipping in a low V, with thin straps that go over my shoulders. The back is open, but not so far down that my bruises show. The high slit hits almost at my hip, and if I wore the right pair of heels, I have to admit I’d look pretty smoking. I reach up and lift my hair, pretending it’s in an updo.

A shadow passes across the closet door, and then I see him.

Mateo.

His eyes seize on me like a predator’s teeth in prey. “*Princess*,” he breathes.

I drop my hair as he walks up behind me, his hands girdling my waist as he looks me up and down in the mirror.

“This is the one.” He leans down and nibbles my ear, my body already warming under his touch. “You look like a meal.”

I gasp when he moves to my neck, his mouth teasing my skin as he licks and sucks, his hands moving to the thin straps and easing them off my shoulders. When my breasts are bare, he groans and palms them, squeezing them as the silky dress falls to the floor.

“Mateo.” I shiver as he grips my chin and turns my face to his, his mouth conquering mine with a sureness that sets me on fire.

One of his hands traces lower, going between my thighs. “I like it when you don’t wear panties.” He nibbles my lip, then turns me and pushes me up against the closet door.

“What are you—Mmm.” I moan as he strokes my clit, his fingers already playing me like a well-loved instrument.

I hear his belt come undone, and then I feel his cock head pressing against my ass.

“We can’t. Lito will—”

“Wait,” he finishes for me, then grabs one thigh and lifts it, perching my foot on the wooden closet cabinet.

I gasp when his cock head presses at my entrance.

Then he grips my hip and lifts me so I’m on tiptoe. “There you are, princess.” With a groan, he slides into me.

My toes curl, my mind going blank as he pulls back and glides back in.

“Fuck!” His voice is gravelly. “Your cunt was made for me.” He thrusts into me harder, our skin slapping as he continues stroking my clit.

Pinned against the door, all I can do is moan and take it, take each stroke from him, his cock owning me over and over again. I push back against him, and he grips the nape of my neck, holding me still as he plunges so deep that I cry out.

“You can take me, princess. You can take every inch.” His voice at my ear sends a thrill through me, one that ends in my clit where his fingers are still ratcheting me up higher and higher.

“Soon enough, I’ll be fucking you in the ass.”

I push back. “No.”

“Oh yes.” He thrusts harder. “I’m going to fuck your tight hole and put my come in you. Your mouth too. I dream about my come dripping from your chin onto your tits.”

“Mateo!” I squeal.

“Soon, princess.” He grinds into me, his cock embedded deep. “Fuck, so good.”

He doesn’t let up, and I can feel my orgasm approaching. I’m all wound up, my body like a coil that Mateo knows exactly how to compress.

When I finally let go, my body shakes, my hips seizing. He surges even deeper inside me, filling me with him as he comes, his cock spurting inside me as I contract around him again and again, my body desperate for all of him. It feels so good, so perfect, as if this was always meant to be.

I gulp in air as Mateo drops kisses along my back.

“My perfect princess.” He nips at my shoulder.

I turn and look up at him, then wrap my arms around his neck and kiss him. He pins me against the door again, his hands going to my ass as he lifts me and wraps my legs around him. I kiss him until I’m breathless, until I’m forced to come up for air or die.

When he pulls back, he’s so handsome it makes something inside me ache, his hair mussed and his eyes glinting. “I could kiss you for hours. Days.”

“It’s just the honeymoon phase,” I say as breezily as I can.

He cups my cheek. “I don’t think so.”

God, why does my heart flip over itself when he looks at me like this, when he says things that I desperately want to be true?

“I don’t think I’ll ever get over wanting you, princess. Needing to feel your mouth, your tits, your perfect cunt.”

“Filthy.” I raise a brow.

He smirks, speeding my traitorous heartbeat. “Absolutely.”

“If you two are done with your debauchery, we have dresses to try on,” Lito calls in a bored tone.

“We found the right one.” Mateo kisses me. “You’re dismissed.” He slides inside me again, my body shivering at the intrusion. “Unless you want to hear me fuck my wife against the door?”

“Gross!” The bedroom door slams as Mateo spreads me wide and hammers into me, our hearts pounding together as we lose ourselves in each other.

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“*T*his feels so weird.” Lucretia fidgets in her seat.

I reach over and take her hand, squeezing her fingers as I cruise down a two-lane highway past massive estates. “How so?”

“I was supposed to marry her son, and now I’m going to his wake, but I’m married to someone else. It’s just ... It feels weird and like I’m insulting her.”

“Oh, we are.” I grin. “We’re insulting the hell out of her.”

She fidgets again. “Why, though? You still haven’t told me the why of all of this, and I’m getting pretty tired of you distracting me with your tongue and your dick whenever I ask these kinds of questions.”

Fuck, I love it when she talks dirty. “Is that so?”

“Yes.” She gives a decisive nod. “But now we’re in this tiny car—which no one could possibly get frisky in—and going to a wake—where you can’t be doing anything sexy to me. So, no distractions.”

“You naïve little princess.” I kiss the back of her hand. “I can fuck you wherever I wish. Including in this car and right in front of everyone at the wake.”

She gasps. “You wouldn’t dare.”

“I would. And by the time I was done licking your cunt, you’d be begging for my cock.” I wink at her. “I know from experience.”

“Stop!” She reaches to cover her face with her other hand.

“If you mess up Lito’s makeup job—”

“Fine.” She puts her hand back in her lap. “Ugh. Milani men are the worst.”

“Never forget it.” I kiss her hand again.

“So ... are you going to tell me why? I feel like I should know, especially before I walk into this wake or whatever it is. Can you be honest with me?” She smooths her already-smooth dress. “I feel like ... like I’ve given you so much of myself.” She nibbles her bottom lip. “So much more than I ever intended to, especially after what you did at the wedding. I mean ...” She pulls her hand away and tangles her fingers together. “You did horrible things, Mateo. We’re going to the wake for the men you murdered. I think I deserve to know why you did it.” She looks at me. “Don’t you?”

I shift gears and brake, then pull over on the side of the highway. Sonny, Benny, and Red drive past and slow down, but I wave for them to go on ahead.

Lucretia turns toward me, her face flawless in the moonlight. Her red lips are a temptation no man could ignore, and the earnest question in her eyes is like a dagger.

“Just tell me why,” she says softly. “I want to understand you.” She reaches out and takes my hand again. “Please let me.”

If her eyes were a dagger, her words are an executioner’s axe. This is it. The moment when I have to tell her the truth and let her judge me, judge my actions. I thought I could put it off, could keep putting it off—but she’s right. Before she walks into this nest of vipers, she should know why I’ve set all this in motion. If for no other reason than to protect herself—if she knows who she’s dealing with, she’ll be better able to avoid their pitfalls.

I keep her hands in mine and begin. “Several years ago, my father and Vincenzo Roman made a deal to split the drug trade in certain areas of their territory with the Manchellos and the Fontanas. This was back when the government still had the

war on drugs and was cracking down on drug routes from South America. My father still had supply lines that could be trusted, and the Manchellos and the Fontanas had territories that needed product. They worked out a deal. The deal went on for a few years until the drug war eased and more supply lines became available. The dispute began then. My father and Vincenzo wanted to maintain the same deal. The Fontanas and the Manchellos wanted to change the terms to favor themselves more now that they could source product from outside the families.”

She squeezes my hands, her lips pressed together tightly.

“The dispute grew larger and larger. The other families washed their hands of the matter and decided to let the four of them—Milani, Roman, Fontana, and Manchello—scrap it out among themselves. It turned into warfare, lower level dealers and players getting hit here and there. But the Fontanas were running out of money—mainly because of bad deals your father made on other fronts. He convinced the Manchellos that the deal with Vincenzo and my father had to end, and the only way to end it was to take out my father and Vincenzo.”

Her shoulders tense, but she doesn’t look away. She already knows what’s coming, but I can’t stop. The story is a thorn inside me, one I’ll never be rid of.

“They hatched a plan and set it in motion. It worked to a degree. Sarita made a call and lured my father to one of the Manchello delis, the back room a den for gambling and business. She claimed she had a deal to propose. My father accepted the meeting, but Vincenzo wasn’t with him that day. My mother was.” My lungs go tight, my heart rampaging in my chest. “It was a trap. They shot both of them down. I was there that day, too, waiting in the car and fucking around on my phone. I was still just a stupid kid, but I ran as soon as I heard the shots. I saw your father jump in a car. He had the gun in his hand. My mother was dead before she hit the ground. My father only lived another moment and died in my arms.” I close my eyes, and the phantom gunshots still ring in my ears. I can still hear my father’s labored breath. “It was the worst day of my life.” I swipe a hand down my face. “I took

over the family after that, but the buzzards came and picked through the empire my parents had built. I was too young to know what the fuck I was doing, but I eventually figured it out. Then I worked for years to build it back to what it was, to make it stronger, to become powerful enough to hurt the people who hurt me.”

Tears roll down her cheeks, and I pull out my kerchief and wipe them away as gently as I can.

“I-I didn’t know.”

“You couldn’t have.” I wipe more of her tears. “But after that day, I couldn’t think of anything but revenge. I soaked in it, obsessed over it. I made plans, several of them, which all ended in your family and the Manchellos dying screaming.”

“I’m so sorry, Mateo.”

“You didn’t do anything, princess. Not a damn thing.” I sigh and dab more tears from her beautiful face. “Back then, I didn’t care. I wanted to hurt every Fontana, every Manchello. I wanted to take you from your parents and degrade you, make them watch as I hurt you. And then I’d come for them.”

She leans away from my touch. “That’s why.” She swallows thickly. “That’s why you came for me that day at the cathedral.”

I nod. But is that really the truth? Is that the only reason? “I ... I’d watched you. I had surveillance on your whole family, but especially you.”

She wraps her arms around her middle. “What?”

“At first it was just so I could keep tabs, so I could plan what I wanted to do to you. But then, then I ... I sort of got to know you. I knew your course schedule, I knew who your few friends at school were, I knew where you liked to go to lunch, the tree on the quad you liked to sit under while you read.”

Her mouth drops open in shock.

“I studied you—far more than I ever studied your parents or your brother. It was *you*.”

“You stalked me?”

“Yes. I can’t deny what I am. What people say is true—I’m vicious, cold, and violent. I like hurting people who cross me. But with you ... I *wanted* to hurt you ... I just never could.”

I hand her my kerchief, and she dabs at her eyes.

We sit in close silence for a while.

She snuffles. “I’ve been so stupid.”

“No—”

“I have. I kept pushing away reality and trying to see some good in you. I guess because I wanted to make this whole situation more bearable or whatever. But you knew all along. You planned everything. You never wanted me as a person, never saw me as anything other than some sick trophy.” The tears are coming full force now. “But you took *all* of me. Every last bit. I’m so stupid—” Her voice breaks and she takes a deep, shuddering breath. “Just drive,” she whispers.

I reach for her.

“Don’t.” The coldness in her voice stings like a slap in the face.

One that I deserve. Because after all this, I know she’s right. I’m a fucking monster. I covered her in blood and stole her away. But what I never expected was to fall for her. Hell, I’ve been falling for years. I was never going to let her marry anyone, let alone a Manchello. I would’ve spilled blood no matter who it had been.

I yank the wheel and hit the gas, pulling back onto the road as she dabs at her eyes.

A million things go through my mind—things to say, but none of them can change what I did. She’s right to hate me. I ruined the only good thing I had.

When I pull into the Manchello drive, she’s looking in her vanity mirror and applying something under her eyes.

A dozen soldiers, some from each family, mill around the entrance. I’m waved through and speed along the lane to the front of the house. It’s a particularly ridiculous mansion, one designed to look like a plantation from the antebellum south.

Gunmen are stationed on the roof, and there are plenty more that aren't visible in the trees and along the back of the buildings.

I park obnoxiously in front of the gaudy fountain. By the time I get to Lucretia's door, she's already opened it. I take her hand and help her up, but then she pulls away quickly and keeps her eyes down.

Fuck.

I take her elbow gently and lead her up the front stairs and into the house. A large arrangement of black roses looms in the foyer, and it's evident from first glance that everyone obeyed the drab dress code—everyone except us. Lucretia wears her revealing crimson gown, and I have a matching rose on my lapel. She's stunning, every bit the mafia queen she always dreaded becoming.

Sarita stands to the left of the ghastly arrangement and greets her guests. Her gaze pierces me before we get anywhere near her.

“Princess—”

“Don't call me that.”

“Lucretia.” I grip her elbow tighter. “I know you're upset with me right now.”

“‘Upset’ doesn't even begin to cover it,” she hisses.

“Understood. But I need you to paste that haughty expression on your face, put your shoulders back, and rule this fucking place the way only you can.”

“Why? Why does it even matter to you?”

“Because I won't let anyone tarnish you. Not even me.”

She looks at me finally, her eyes still glassy. “Why do you say things like that? Why? How can you be so horrible and at the same time so, so ...” She shakes her head.

“Because I love you, Lucretia. That's why. I'd carve out my heart and hand it to you if that's what you wanted.”

Her eyes widen, and she stops, stunned.

“I’ll let you carve it out yourself if I make it through tonight, all right?” I kiss her forehead. “I’d do anything for you, anything you ever asked.”

I turn and keep walking in the receiving line. She’s at my side as we make it to Sarita.

The woman scowls at us. I meet her icy stare with one of my own.

“Thank you for having us.” Lucretia’s voice is soft but steady.

“I’d never allow him to set foot here if it weren’t for the meeting.” Her eyes glint. “Which I look forward to very much.” She gestures toward an enormous portrait of Horatio hung from the banister. “You two would’ve been so happy together. But now you’re wed to a filthy creature with no morals, no decency.” She spits at my feet, missing and hitting her wood floors.

“Nice to see you again, Sarita.” I stare down at her. “Let me know if you have any sons I might have missed.”

She pales, her hands fisting, mouth trembling.

I keep walking, Lucretia now gripping my arm tightly.

“Why would you say such a thing?” she whispers tightly.

“I never miss a chance to twist the knife in my enemies, but I think you already know that.” I put my hand over hers and walk her deeper into the house.

Benny and Red are chatting up two blondes, and Sonny is in deep conversation with the Galliano consigliere. He’s been making the rounds to the families to ensure we’ll have enough people on our side when Sarita sues for my head.

Vincenzo strides up, a drink in his hand. “My god, you look ...” He eyes Lucretia.

I have the distinct urge to break his fucking neck. And not just his, every man in this room has shot a look at her, some far too long for my liking. But she’s a jewel, one that shines and can’t be denied. Of course they want her, but they’ll never get anywhere near her. Not if they want to live.

“You’re a breath of fresh air in this funeral hell. I’ll say that.” Vincenzo smiles at her.

“Thank you.” She gives him a slight nod.

“When’s the meeting?” I ask, a bit more sharply than I intended.

“We’ve got ten minutes. Let’s talk, if you don’t mind.” He juts his chin toward a side room. “Business.”

I follow him, Lucretia at my side.

“I, um, I don’t think I’m up to talking business just yet. I need to breathe.” She shakes her head.

“I’m not leaving you to these vipers.” I pull her to my side.

“I’ll be fine. I’m just going to sit right here.” She points to a loveseat in an alcove.

“No.”

“Oh my god, you’re being a wet blanket. I need some space to breathe, to think, to try and work through all the terrible things you just told me.” She pulls her hand away and glares at me. “Shove off, asshole.”

Her sass sends heat to my cock.

I grip her waist. “Stop acting as if you’re wearing panties under there, Mrs. Milani. I’m fully aware you aren’t, and I’m also fully aware that if I bent you over that loveseat, yanked up your dress, and fucked you until you screamed, there’d be nothing in the world you could do to stop me.”

“You wouldn’t dare!” She smacks my chest, making my need for her burn even brighter.

“Kid,” Vincenzo interrupts. “We don’t have much time.”

I lean to her ear. “I’d dare quite a lot when it comes to you.” Then I turn and point at Benny.

He hurries over.

“Watch her. I’m going to speak with Vincenzo for a moment. Don’t let her out of your sight.”

“Got it.” He stations himself against the wall.

“Back soon.” I kiss her hair that flows in wavy tendrils down her back, then follow Vincenzo into the side room.

He closes the door behind us.

“What is it?” I ask.

“We have the votes. The families are going to look the other way. But they’re going to make you agree to take no further actions against the Fontanas or the Manchellos. You’ll have to agree and stick to your word. Can you do that?”

Can I simply let years of anger and regret go? No. My original course of action, if left unchanged, would end with Carmen and Leonard Fontana dead. I know Lucretia has no great love for her parents, but if I follow through with my plan and kill them, will that end any chance I have of her loving me?

“I need your word, Mateo.” Vincenzo holds his hand out. “This is your best shot. I’m telling you this as your friend, and ...” He sighs. “And as something of a father to you over the past few years.”

I eye his hand and realize this decision is going to change everything. I can either hold onto my revenge and potentially lose Lucretia, or hold onto Lucretia and finally let go of my parents’ death.

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LUCRETIA

*S*it on the love seat, Benny hovering nearby, and try to get my bearings.

Mateo finally came clean with me about his motives, and it knocked me off my feet. I knew he didn't marry me with good intentions—just look at the way he went about it—but I had no idea his vengeance went so deep. I can't say I'm an innocent party, not when my parents are who they are, but I had nothing to do with his parents' deaths.

He wanted to destroy me. I let out a deep breath and shake my head. But how much can I blame him? From the way he and Lito talk, their parents were their whole world in a way I can't even understand. They had love, and in the families, that's rare. Most are like mine, a powerful father and a mother who either goads him on or acts as a doormat.

Even so, what he tried to do to me is reprehensible. So why do I want to forgive him? I've been a fool for him from the start, from the moment he walked into that cathedral and dealt death with a red rose in his lapel. When I should've been running, I stayed. When I should've fought him, I gave in. And when I shouldn't have wanted him, I desired him above everything else.

I feel torn apart from the inside. And then his words come back to me: "*I love you.*" He hadn't said it to earn my forgiveness. He didn't have to say it at all, but he did. And though I keep trying to find some note of falseness in him, there is none.

Mateo Milani *loves* me. Fiercely. Fully. In a way I hadn't known was possible. And the more I hear him echoing in my mind, in my heart, I know I love him too. Not from the start, no. But he's shown me every step of the way that he values me, he sees me, and he wants to have a life with me. There's so much more we need to discuss, but his words aren't lies, and neither are the ones in my heart. I love him.

He finally comes out of the meeting with Vincenzo, his gaze immediately searching for me. I let him pull me to my feet and kiss me.

"Already missing me?" I ask.

"Yes." He kisses me again.

"It's time." Benny points to the stairs where a steady stream of people are moving to the second floor.

"Come." Mateo takes my hand.

"I'd rather stay here and wait for you. Seeing my parents right now ..." I shake my head. "I don't think I can do it."

Mateo pulls me in for a hug, his comforting scent surrounding me. "I'd protect you. You know that, don't you?"

"Of course. But these are more emotional wounds. I don't think Carmen's going to knife me."

He sighs.

"Let's go." Vincenzo buttons his suit coat.

"You'll stay here?" Mateo puts me at arm's length and peers into my eyes. "*Right* here?"

"Yes."

"I'll watch out for her." Benny's still leaning against the wall, a cigarette behind his ear.

Mateo thinks about it for a few more moments, then nods. "All right, but don't try to run, princess. I'd chase you, I'd catch you, and then what I'd do to you—you'd enjoy it."

A pleasant shiver rolls down my spine as he kisses me once more, then gives Benny a nod. "You know what to do."

“I got this, boss. Run along to your bigtime meeting. Red’s up there probably about to piss his pants.”

Mateo kisses my forehead, then backs away, his light eyes holding mine until he has to turn and climb the stairs. He and Vincenzo fall into quiet conversation as they ascend and then disappear down the hall.

I take my seat again and wonder how long the meeting will last. My thoughts are with Mateo, with how important tonight is. Even with the pressure, he’s been focused on me. Somehow, he gives me confidence in a way I’ve never experienced before. My mother taught me to be snobby so I could look down on others but never forget my true place. Mateo doesn’t pigeonhole me like that. He sees so much more in me, and he puts me first. It makes me feel ... powerful. I smile at the thought, at the way he’s become so much more to me than I ever imagined.

“Why are you dressed like a street walker? This is a wake, for goodness sake.” My mother sits beside me, her withering gaze sliding down my dress.

Shocked from my thoughts, I can only blink at her.

Benny shifts nervously from one foot to the other, but he doesn’t interfere. After all, I’m not in danger from anything except my mother’s sharp tongue.

“Nice to see you, too, Mother.” I stand.

“Wait.” She reaches out and takes my hand, the first kind touch I’ve had from her in years. “Please?”

I stare at where she’s touching me.

“Sorry.” She pulls back and folds her hands in her lap.

Most of the people in the room have filtered out, likely getting ready for the meeting.

I sit back down slowly. “Shouldn’t you be upstairs waiting for Dad?”

“In a minute. I saw you here and wanted to talk.” She peers into my eyes. “Has he hurt you?”

“Would you care?” The retort comes from me unbidden.

She has the nerve to look stung. “Of *course* I would care. You’re my daughter.”

“No, he hasn’t hurt me.”

“I’m sure he threatened you into saying all is well over in his ghastly house, but you can be honest with me, dear.”

“Is that why you came? To get gossip to share with your friends?”

“No.” She pats my hand. “No. I just wanted to make sure you’re all right, to make sure you know what sort of man you’re married to.”

“I’m married to the sort of man who paid you and Dad a great sum of money. That’s all you cared about when you sold me to him.”

“That’s not fair, and you know it. When Ferdinand was taken from us—” She dabs at her dry eyes. “We had to act quickly. That’s why we arranged the marriage between you and Horatio. He would’ve treated you well.”

“You sold me to your friends. What other deals do you have with the Manchellos?” I ask.

“What do you mean?” Her eyes narrow.

“You know exactly what I mean. Mateo told me what happened to his parents. He told me who killed them.”

She blanches. “Whatever he’s told you is a lie, Lucretia. You have to know that. He’d say anything to hurt us now that he’s gotten our name.”

Anger washes through me like a tide of lava. “You *sold* him our name. I was there, Mother. I saw you accept the bid on me like I was nothing but a piece of livestock.”

“We’re not the villains here. *He* is.” Her voice rises. “He knew we were nearly destitute, and he came at us in a moment of weakness. What would he have done if we’d said no? Have you thought about that? Do you think he would’ve just let you walk away after what he’d done to poor Horatio?” She glances

around, then leans in so close her Chanel No. 5 burns my nose. “He didn’t let your brother walk away, now did he?”

“What?” I can barely push the word out.

Her thin lips pressed tightly together, she nods. “It was *him*.”

I feel like I’m falling. That moment when you can’t breathe because the air has been stolen from your lungs—that’s what I’m trapped in.

My mother stands and smooths her black dress. “I’ll see you upstairs.” She walks away after cutting the legs out from under me, after sawing through sinew and bone and leaving me open and bleeding.

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MATEO

“*Y*ou all know why I’ve called this meeting.” Sarita stands at the head of a large table in the middle of a ball room. Her voice echoes from the high ceilings, and she cuts a dramatic figure all in black with her sharp eyes and poisonous tongue. “Most of you were present when my family was slaughtered, my sons taken from me without provocation, without justification.”

I lean back in my chair, the picture of calm. Sonny sits beside me, his demeanor as tense as I’ve ever seen it.

“Mateo Milani gunned down my sons, murdered my sweet Horatio on his wedding day and stole his bride! My family’s blood is on his hands, and I deserve justice.” She slams her fist on the table. “Never in the history of the families has anyone struck such a brazen blow against another member of our organization.” Her voice shakes, and I suspect it’s with real emotion. “He took my children. My sons. The only family I have left. Mateo Milani destroyed my family right before my eyes.” She holds her hands up. “Their blood is still here. It will never wash off. I’ll never stop seeing their dying eyes. The babies I birthed, I raised, I *loved!*”

Some of the people at the table shift uncomfortably. I keep my eyes on the big players—the ones who’ll have a say in how this dog and pony show ends.

She points at me. “He sits there, smirking in triumph when he should be the one who’s dead. He must pay for what he’s done!” She slams the table again. “I’ve come before the

families to demand justice and recompense. Justice—give me Mateo Milani to do with as I see fit. Recompense—his holdings pass to my family. We will keep the organization strong by maintaining his assets and rid ourselves of the rot he's brought to our doorsteps. Milani is a plague, and my family is not the only one he will ruin. He's already taken the only heir of the Fontanas, made her his whore.”

“Don't.” My voice is quiet, barely making it over the reverberations of Sarita's plea.

Her eyes snap to me, her mouth clenching.

“Never speak of my wife that way, Sarita.” I meet her glare, my cold heart beating slowly, methodically. “I left you alive, but that's a decision I can change at any moment.” I roll my hand at her in a 'go-on' motion. “Now, continue with your screed.”

“You bastard.” She seethes. “Even now you think you have the upper hand!”

I simply stare at her with a bored expression.

Her hands fist as she gazes around the table. “I demand you take action against this man. He doesn't belong here. He doesn't deserve to live after what he's done to me. My children had their lives stolen, their futures erased.” She lowers her voice. “It could've been any of you. It still could be if you let him walk out of here. You don't know who's next. A mad dog shouldn't get a second chance. He has to be put down for the good of everyone around him.” She slowly lowers herself into her chair and dabs at her eyes.

Vincenzo jerks his chin at me. “Mateo, the floor is yours.”

Sonny takes a huge glug of his drink.

I stand and button my suit coat. “That's a hard act to follow, is it not?”

Some of the men at the table give me sly half smiles, but the women are stone-faced. I don't blame them. They're picturing their sons lying in pools of blood, slaughtered like Sarita's. She did her job well. It's too bad for her that I already know the votes are on my side.

“Yes, I killed Horatio and his brothers.” I shrug. “Everyone saw it happen. But what I did wasn’t a random act of violence as Sarita claims. I simply acted as anyone would under our unwritten laws. You see, my friends, she hit my family first.”

Her eyes narrow.

“And as everyone here knows, acts of aggression cannot be tolerated amongst us. Isn’t that why we’re here today? You all believe I committed an out-of-hand aggression against the Manchellos. But that is not what happened at all. What I did was exact vengeance, a blood price for the blood of my parents.”

Sarita reaches for her drink and almost knocks it off the table.

“Most of you knew my parents. Tony and Ella Milani were a power couple, were they not?”

Several heads nod in agreement.

“My father was known for making hardnosed deals that benefitted all the families, and my mother was his trusted advisor. But you also know they were gunned down behind one of the Manchello shops.” I look at each head of the big families in turn. “And no one here ever brought any accusations against the Manchellos, or against anyone—” I turn to glare at Leonard Fontana. “For their deaths. You let it go, water under the bridge, because you didn’t want to rock the boat, one that was already taking on water with the loss of my parents. So, I was thrown to the wolves, left to fight for my inheritance and fend off challengers. You all watched, safe in your glass houses, while I struggled. My parents’ deaths were left unavenged.”

I look each family head in the eye one by one. “But no more. I took my vengeance the same day I took my bride. The Manchello blood I spilled will never equal what was taken from me, but I had my revenge.” I turn my gaze back to Sarita, whose face has gone a few shades lighter. “It was you, Sarita. You set my parents up. Your phone call to them that day to discuss business is what put them in that alley where—” I turn

to Leonard, Carmen standing behind his chair “—Leonard Fontana shot them down.”

More family heads shift uncomfortably in their seats. I don't think any of this information is new to them, though perhaps they assumed it would never come to light.

“So, I plotted my revenge as is our custom. I slew the Manchello boys, and I took the remaining Fontana heir as my wife. My actions have not gone beyond the bounds of a family vendetta, and this meeting should never have been called in the first place. However, Sarita believed her sins were hidden, so she sought ‘justice’ from this tribunal. I would simply state that I’ve already granted her the justice she deserves.” I ease back into my seat as murmurs erupt around the table.

Vincenzo gives me a nod, then rises. “After hearing both sides, it’s time for certain families to make their decision. You know who you are. If you wish to find for Sarita Manchello and allow her to take vengeance on Mateo Milani, simply give a thumbs up. If you wish to find for Mateo Milani and close this matter altogether, simply give a thumbs down.”

He gestures for the families to make their moves.

As we assumed, the Cavelleris and the Fontanas both give a thumbs up. The Gallianos and Tuscans both give a thumbs down. That leaves Vincenzo. His vote will decide my fate.

I'd go ahead and light a cigar, but I'd rather wait and savor the look on Sarita's face when her claim fizzles into nothing.

Vincenzo looks at me, then lifts his hand.

When he flips his thumb up, I feel like he's made a mistake. But when he smirks at me as the room goes into an uproar, I feel his knife in my back. It's one I never saw coming.

But such is the nature of betrayal.

Sonny turns to me, his eyes wide, his voice a harsh whisper, “Go. Now! Fucking go!”

Before things go to shit, I'm out of my chair and heading for the door.

“Don’t let him leave!” Sarita screeches.

Franco Cavalleri tries to block my way, but a quick punch to his throat sends him toppling over and wheezing. I shove past him and yank open the door to the hall.

Red whips his head around. “What?”

“We have to go, now.” I run past him.

The soldiers from the other families let us pass, but it’ll only be a few seconds before they try to come after us.

“Where’s Lucretia?” I bellow as I hurry down the stairs.

“Here.” Benny gestures to the love seat.

“We have to go.” I take her arm and pull her up. “Now.”

“No. I’m not going with you.” She sounds dazed.

The shouting upstairs grows louder, and the soldiers start to cascade down the stairs.

“Princess, we can’t—”

She slaps me. Hard. “You killed him!” She screams and jumps on me, her nails digging into my cheek.

“Lucretia!” Benny tries to pull her off.

“Leave her!” I yell and wrap my arms around her tightly, then take off running.

She’s still fighting me, slapping and scratching, pulling my fucking hair, but I don’t let her go as I make a mad dash through the foyer and out the front.

Benny and Red are behind me, their guns out as I run like hell to the car.

Lucretia is screaming, her body writhing as she tries to hurt me.

“Stop!” I yell and shake her.

She wails, and I put her on her feet to open her car door. When she tries to run, I grab her around her waist and drag her back. “Princess, get in the fucking car.”

“Get away from me!” she screams.

I manhandle her into the passenger seat and slam the door, then run around.

She's already trying to open her door when I get in, so I reach over and grab her shoulder, keeping her in place as I shift with my left hand and take off, sideswiping the Lambo ahead of me.

The front steps are swarming now, soldiers and power players all looking for me. I gas it down the driveway and glance in the rear view, relieved to see Benny and Red keeping up behind me. The only one unaccounted for is Sonny, but the other families would never let Sarita take my consigliere. Murdering each other? Sure. Kidnapping one of our lawyers? Never.

Lucretia is still screaming, still fighting me even though I have a death grip on her shoulder.

I don't know what's happened, what's made her like this, and I can't get a word in. I pull my hand away to shift, then wrench the wheel to the left as we reach the main road.

"Lucretia!" I bar her arms, keeping her from swinging at me. "Tell me what's wrong."

"You bastard. You bastard." She's crying now, the fight draining from her as huge sobs bubble up. "How could you?"

"I don't know what you think I've done, but I love you, Lucretia. I love you."

"No you don't!" she screams and tries for the door handle again.

"Don't!" I'm going at least 100 miles an hour. She wouldn't survive if she opens that door.

I lunge across her, grab her seat belt, and yank it across her body, then wrap it around my wrist to keep her in place.

"Let me go!" She can barely speak through her tears. "Please let me go."

"Never!" I yell back at her. Then shake my head and force myself to lower my voice. "Tell me, Lucretia. Tell me so I can fix it."

She shakes her head, tears dripping onto her dress. “You can’t fix it. You can’t bring him back.”

“Who?” I almost miss the turn onto the freeway and spin the wheel just in time to avoid hitting the water tanks along the median. Once we’re on the straightaway, passing cars right and left, I can finally turn to look at her. “Who did I kill?”

Her voice breaks on a sob. “Ferdinand.”

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LUCRETIA

“*W*hat?” He acts bewildered.

“My mother told me it was you. You killed him! You had your revenge.” I can barely breathe through the tears and the regret that seethe inside me.

“No.” He yanks on the seatbelt. “I didn’t kill your brother.”

“I don’t believe you.” I look at him with new eyes, ones that see the unrelenting darkness. “You said you stalked my whole family, that you even knew what tree I liked to read under! You kept tabs on all of us.”

“Yes.” He speeds past so many cars that they’re all blurs. “I did. But I didn’t kill your brother. I wanted to—” His jaw clenches. “I did. But it wasn’t me.”

How can I believe him? How can I believe the man who’s seduced me to the point that I thought I loved him? He’s a liar, a really good one. But it all makes sense. He’s had it out for my family for years, and when he started picking us off, Ferdinand was the first to go.

I close my eyes, Ferdinand’s face floating through the ether behind my eyelids. He was always sort of half-smiling at me, as if he was in on some joke. It used to irritate me, but now I’d give anything to see it again.

“You broke my heart.” I wipe my cheeks, my vision clearing as I glare at him. His face is scratched, little trails of blood on his cheeks. “How could you? He never hurt you. He didn’t do anything to you. You—”

“Lucretia.” He swerves onto an exit and takes a hard right, the tires screeching as he floors it back toward his estate. “You have to believe me. I didn’t kill your brother. Your mother is just trying to fuck you up.”

“The way you do? The way you always twist the knife?” I spit back at him.

“Yes!” He meets my gaze, his eyes wild as blood rolls down his temple. “That’s exactly what she’s doing. She threw the meeting somehow. We’ve been betrayed. Vincenzo voted against me.”

I’m even more lost than I was before. “Vincenzo? I don’t understand.”

“He threw in with your parents and the Manchellos. They orchestrated the entire thing, set me up.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means Sarita is going to be coming for my head. She can take it without consequence.”

“Why did Vincenzo—”

“I don’t know!” he roars and slams his hand against the steering wheel. He takes a deep breath and lets it out. “I don’t know.” He sounds broken, and maybe he is. He treated Vincenzo like a surrogate father, looked up to him, and now he has his knife between Mateo’s ribs.

I can relate. I feel the same searing pain. The man I love, my husband, took away the one person who ever cared for me. How can this be real? How can my life have turned into this? Nothing but desolation and regret, shame and fear. I cover my face with my hands and weep.

“It’s all going to be all right.” Unwinding my seatbelt from his wrist, he clicks it into place. “I know you don’t believe me. You have no reason to. But I didn’t kill Ferdinand, Lucretia. I swear to you on my parents’ souls. I’ll do whatever it takes to prove it to you.”

I don’t want to believe him. I want to go for his face again, to inflict the pain on him that’s tearing me apart inside. He

should hurt the way I hurt.

“Lucretia, please.” Broken, so broken. He’s a wounded animal.

So am I. Because of the lies, the heartbreak, the million cruel words from my mother, and the violence done to my brother. Maybe I’m like him—broken beyond repair. I can feel my sharp edges, all of them still cutting me, bleeding me out. I’m lost.

“Please, please, Lucretia.” His voice is pleading, desperate. It’s something I’ve never heard from him. It’s so raw and real that it makes me take a breath.

‘I swear to you on my parents’ souls.’ He would never make that declaration on a lie. Unless every single word he’s ever told me was a falsehood, one he created to lure me closer to him so he could strike the final blow. I press my hands to my ears, trying to silence the roaring in them, the cacophony in my head. Who’s telling the truth? No one? Is the foundation I thought I’d built with Mateo nothing but an illusion?

What do I do? I’m still in shock, still spinning from what my mother said. Still torn apart.

“How many times has she hurt you, Lucretia? How many times?” he cries. “When I came for you that day, you were broken. *She* had broken you so she could use you, could sell you to Horatio. I want to kill her for what she’s done to you!” He slaps the wheel and falls silent, his entire body humming with tension.

He’s right. I was broken. I thought I’d never recover, never be able to dream again, to hope again. But maybe I can be whole again. Maybe the missing parts of me fit into the missing parts of Mateo. Maybe together, we can make one. I just have to trust him like he asked me before. It’s a decision, one that only I can make. Do I keep holding onto my past and hoping for a mother who loves me and a brother who’s gone, or do I move forward? Do I make the choice to keep going? It’s hard, and it hurts, but growth always does.

“I ... I believe you.” I reach out and take his hand.

He squeezes my fingers. “Thank you.” He brings my hand to his mouth and kisses it, murmuring thank you over and over.

When we pull up in front of the house, he turns to me and kisses me hard, his hands on my cheeks as he claims my mouth. I meet him, giving him my sorrow and my pain, my tears still flowing as he kisses me like it’s the last time.

“I love you so much.” He presses his forehead to mine. “Don’t ever doubt it, even if you doubt *me*.”

My heart, already shattered, aches for him from a million different facets. “I love you, too.”

His eyes widen, and then he kisses me again, pulling me over the center console and pressing my body to his as he holds me in his arms. We kiss until I can’t breathe, can’t move, can’t do anything except melt into him.

“Say it again.” He drops a kiss on my lips.

“I love you.”

“Again.” He nibbles my neck.

It pulls a laugh from me, even through the tears. “I love you.”

Someone taps on the window.

It’s Red and Benny, both of them with guns in their hands.

“What happens now?” I wipe some of the blood from his cheek.

He opens the door and lifts me from the car. “Now,” he looks around as his soldiers begin to assemble around us. “We go to war.”

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“*J*esus, what did you say to her?” Sonny peers at my face.

“Her mother told her I killed her brother.”

His face sours even more. “Of course she did. Lying windbag.”

“What happened after I left?”

Lucretia hurries in with a first aid kit in her hand.

Sonny glances at her, then back at me and shakes his head.

“You can speak freely in front of her. Don’t hold anything back. She needs to know the situation—and that goes from this point forward.”

Lucretia stands beside me and dabs alcohol on my cheek.

“This really isn’t necessary.” I look up at her.

“I feel so bad.” She dabs some more.

I pull her into my lap.

“Mateo!”

“You need to make up for it somehow, princess.” I kiss her chest as she reaches for a Bandaid.

Sonny shakes his head. “Sarita tried to get the council to agree to hand me over until you turned up, but they wouldn’t allow it. Then she said she’d give you 24 hours to hand yourself over to the men she has stationed out front or she’ll come for you.”

“God, I can’t believe I did this,” Lucretia whispers as she dabs more alcohol on my forehead.

“I liked it, my little minx. Your claws are sexy.”

Sonny groans. “We’re about to go to war. Can you stop flirting for two seconds and pay attention?”

“I’m paying attention. Sarita doesn’t concern me.”

Sonny gawks.

“Vincenzo does.”

He sobers quickly. “That motherfucker. I should’ve known he was out to double-cross us.”

The door bursts open, and Lito hurries in, a half cucumber slice beneath each of his eyes. “Oh my god, what happened? I just saw Benny and Red in the hall loaded down with weapons like *Rambo*. Are you all right?”

“I’m fi—”

“Not you.” He cuts me off and gives Lucretia a half hug. “You.” He bends over and peruses her face. “Your makeup is all runny. You’ve been crying.” He turns to me. “I worked on this masterpiece for almost an hour, and you’ve got it all streaky. What did you do to make her cry, asshole?”

“Me? Nothing.” I hiss when she wipes alcohol across the bridge of my nose.

“You’re such a baby,” she huffs.

I squeeze her ass. “Keep teasing me, princess.”

“Fill me in. Give me the details.” Lito perches on the edge of my desk.

“This—” Lucretia points to her face. “Is from Mateo admitting that he’s been stalking me forever because of what happened to your parents.”

Lito’s brows lower as he gives me a death glare.

“But that was only like ten percent of it. Ninety percent of the runny mascara came from my mother telling me that Mateo killed my brother.”

“That’s a lie,” Lito says, then looks at me. “Isn’t it?”

I almost roll my eyes. “Yes, it’s a fucking lie!”

“See? No need for tears, my pretty one.” Lito runs his thumb along the corner of her eye. “Too smudged to save, I’m afraid. I’m guessing you’re the one who did that to his stupid face?”

Lucretia blushes and gives a rueful nod.

“It’s fine. He deserves it after that whole ‘French maid’ thing.”

“Fair point.” She turns to me. “That was a really dick thing to do.”

“I’ve got a dick thing you can do.” I bite her shoulder.

“Gross.” Lito scoffs.

“Are you done?” Sonny asks, his tone verging on petulant. “Can the grownups talk?”

“Fine.” Lito waves a hand. “I’m just here for the scoop. Continue.”

“Vincenzo is joining Sarita and Leonard—”

Lito gasps. “He *what?*”

Sonny pinches the bridge of his nose. “He’s turned on us. Voted against Mateo and offered his head to Sarita on a platter. We have to get ready. They’ll be coming at sundown tomorrow if not sooner.”

“Unless I give myself up.”

Lucretia cradles my cheeks. “Not happening.” Then she goes back to putting Band-aids all over me.

“I trusted him, and maybe I shouldn’t have. When Mom and Dad were hit, I knew Vincenzo was supposed to be there that day, and he wasn’t. It always seemed like a niggling little coincidence, but after tonight, I’m not so sure. What if he’s been the one behind the scenes this entire time? Watching me work and rebuild what was stolen from me, just waiting until he found the right time to swoop in and take it all for himself.”

“Jesus.” Lito crosses himself. “If that’s true, then he’s been playing this game for years.”

Sonny leans back and looks up, clearly thinking.

Vincenzo as the mastermind—that gets me thinking, putting the pieces together. “He could be the one feeding info to the feds. The special agent in charge knew a lot of details, especially about what happened at the wedding.”

“Anyone could’ve told her that. The place was packed,” Sonny replies.

“Yeah, but she knew it was connected to my parents. She *knew* the wedding was revenge. That isn’t common knowledge. In fact, I can count on one hand how many knew about it, and the only one I don’t trust is Vincenzo.”

Sonny rubs his temples. “Holy shit. Vincenzo is a rat. He got the feds to pressure you so you wouldn’t get close to discovering his secret.”

“That he had a hand in what happened to your parents,” Lucretia says.

“And that he’s in bed with the feds.” Lito crosses his arms over his chest. “This changes *everything*. When the families find out—”

“They won’t do shit.” I growl. “They’re too afraid.”

“They’re afraid of *you*,” Sonny says. “If Vincenzo goes down, there won’t be anyone strong enough to stop you from taking over, and they know it.”

“You think they’d take Vincenzo’s side even though he’s a rat?” Lito shakes his head. “No way.”

Sonny sighs. “At this point, I’d say it’s 50/50. The Gallianos and the Tuscans will want his head. The Cavelleris, Franchesis, and the Fontanas—they’re in bed with him.” He stands, suddenly looking older than I remember. “I need to make some calls and set some meetings. Everyone get ready. No matter what I can get done between now and tomorrow night, Sarita is coming, and she’s bringing as many soldiers as

she can muster from her family and others. We have to be prepared for the worst.”

“What a mess.” Lucretia leans against me.

“You need rest.” I stand and scoop her into my arms.

“I can walk.”

“I know.” I kiss her cheek and carry her out of the office and to the stairs.

She looks at the extra men stationed at the front door.

“Don’t worry. All my soldiers are on alert. You’re safe.”

“I’m not worried. I just don’t want bloodshed.” She snuggles closer to me as I climb the stairs. “I’m sorry he betrayed you. I know he was like a father.”

“He was.” I carry her to our room. “But I never let him take my father’s place. I was old enough to know the difference.”

“But it still hurts, doesn’t it?” she asks.

“Yes.” I wish it didn’t. But I’ll be feeling the knife in my back for quite a long time. On top of that, Vincenzo just landed at the top of my vendetta for my parents’ murder. He was in on it all along, I can feel it in my bones.

“You’re brooding.” She runs her fingers along my brow.

“Old habits die hard.” I put her on the bed.

She reaches for me, and I drop to my knees in front of her.

“Come here.” She pulls me closer, and I put my head in her lap. Trust is a commodity in our world. Vincenzo kept mine until the last possible second, until he could shove the knife all the way in. Lucretia sees sadness in me, but all I feel is hate. Hatred for the man who took so much from me while wearing a mask and pointing the finger at everyone else. I want him to die slowly, to scream and scream until I finally remove his tongue.

She strokes my hair. “At least with my parents, they are obvious with how horrible they are. My mother, in particular.

She doesn't hide it. She's always stabbed me right in the chest, face to face."

I smooth my hands along her thighs. "Never again."

"Do you still want to kill them?" she asks softly, her fingers easing along my scalp. "My parents?"

I want to tell her no, that I can let it go. But the darkest part of me still wants their blood on my hands. "For you, I would spare them. Only for you."

She sighs. "I can't hold their fate in my hands, Mateo. I know what they've done to you. What they've done to me. They're bad ... I just don't know if I want them ... dead. I try to think about what Ferdinand would say if he knew all the facts."

"And?"

She shrugs. "I don't know. I think he would grant them mercy. But that's how he was. He didn't want to run the family the way my father did. He wanted to turn the businesses around, go more legit, pull everything into the light."

"Go legit?"

"Yes." I can hear the smile in her voice. "He was an optimist. And he was smart. I think if he'd had the chance, he could've done it."

I nuzzle her thigh, then get to my feet. "Let's wash up." I pull her up and lead her to the shower.

Stripping her is a particular pleasure, and I kiss along her shoulders, down her chest, and leave one kiss on her pussy before pulling her into the shower.

I soap her up, rubbing her body with the loofah until she's covered in bubbles. When I reach her stomach, she stiffens slightly.

"What?" I tilt her chin up and look into her eyes. "Are you hurt?"

"No." She presses her palms to my chest. "It's just that we haven't been using protection. I don't know if I'm ..."

“Pregnant?” I grin. “Would that be a bad thing?”

“No,” she says quickly. “But are we ready?”

“I’m ready to have a family with you, Lucretia. I’m ready to be everything you need for the rest of our lives.” I lace my fingers through hers. “But if you want to wait, I understand. I’ll arrange for the doctor to get you what you need so you can decide.”

She smiles up at me. “Let’s see what happens for now.”

My heart expands even faster than my cock, and I lift her and pin her against the wall, the water sluicing down our bodies as she wraps her legs around me.

“I love you, Mrs. Milani.” I kiss her as she sighs, her body warm and ready for me as I slide my cock up and down her wet slit.

When I push inside her, she arches, her mouth opening on a pant as I pin her to the wall. She takes all of me, her sweet cunt so tight that I have to breathe deeply to keep from coming too soon.

“Tell me what you need.” I lick her throat and fuck her hard, my body joining hers as I keep her against the wall, her hips pinned with each of my thrusts.

“Don’t stop.” She pulls my hair, and I lean down and bite her nipples, then suck one into my mouth. I tease the hard bud as I surge inside her, taking all of her with rough strokes that make the base of my spine tingle.

I return to her mouth and press my thumb to her clit.

She jolts, her body so reactive for me. I grin and nip at her chin as I stroke her clit.

“Mateo!” She digs her heels into my thighs as I grip her ass with one hand, holding her up as I fuck her.

“I know what my princess needs.” I nibble her ear, then lick the shell. “My fat cock in her hot cunt.”

“My come inside her, dripping down her thighs.” She moans and trembles, her hips moving more frantically. “My

filthy words in her sweet ear.” I suck the spot on her neck that drives her wild.

She gasps, then her hips lock. I can feel her cunt squeezing me, her body trying to milk me into my release as she orgasms. It works, and I shove myself deep inside her as I let go, my come coating her as I grind against her. I can taste the sweat on her as I lick her throat, kissing and sucking until we both come down from the high of each other.

When I pull out and put her on her feet, she leans against me, and I hold her, resting my chin on her crown.

We stay like that for a long time, just holding each other in the warm water as the wolves around us close in and bay for our blood.

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“*J* burnt them. Again.” I set the smoking muffin tin on the stove as Carter waves a kitchen towel around.

“It’s all right.” He coughs. “We’re all a bit distracted.”

I wanted to make muffins for Mateo, but I’ve never been much of a cook. Carter’s patient with me, but I’m still not cut out for this, even with his adept tutelage.

“It was a way to keep my mind off it.” I sit at the island and rub my eyes, then glance out the window at the coming twilight. “But I guess it didn’t work.”

“Really, it’s fine.” He tosses the towel over the charred muffins. “It was my fault for stepping away.”

“Shouldn’t you be going?” I point to the window. “It’s getting dark. It won’t be safe.”

“I’m not worried about any of that. Mateo has been in plenty of rough scrapes. He’ll make it through this one, same as all the others.”

He scoops the ramen he’d been simmering into a bowl and sets it in front of me. “Eat. You need your strength. Things are going to be tense.”

“I’m already tense.” I roll my shoulders and grab the chopsticks from him. “I’m just scared, really. Mateo told me not to worry and that Sonny is doing everything he can to win the other families to our side, but it’s not like that’s going to stop Sarita. She’s a mother who lost her children. She’ll never let that go. I wouldn’t be able to.”

“But you’re different.” He sits beside me. “Sarita is another beast entirely. She betrayed Mateo and Lito’s parents, god rest their souls, and made that choice despite knowing what it might eventually cost her. Would you make that choice?”

“To betray people who counted on me? Never.”

“Exactly.”

I stir the noodles. “It doesn’t mean her sons deserved to die.”

“This world isn’t about giving us what we deserve.” He pops a pizza roll into his mouth, chews, and winces. “These are truly terrible, aren’t they?”

It brings a slight smile to my face. “You’ve never tried them?”

“No. I want to go back to that time period.” He rises and grabs a paper towel, politely spitting into it before dropping it into the trash. “We’ll just pretend this never happened.”

“Sounds good to me.” I try the noodles. As always, they’re delicious.

“Something’s on fire.” Lito strolls in and grabs a handful of Chex mix.

“I can’t bake.” I slurp my noodles.

“That’s what Carter is for.” He grabs a beer from the fridge. “You’ve got more important things to do.”

“Like what? Sit here and worry myself to death?”

“Like get your classes straight for next semester.” He slides into the seat on my other side.

I stop slurping. “What?”

“I talked to Mateo in between his guns and ammo sessions with the soldiers and told him you should go back to school.”

My heart stutters as I swivel to Lito. “What did he say?”

“No, at first.”

“Oh.” My heart falls.

“Because he said if you wanted to go back to school you would’ve asked him.”

“When?” I groan in exasperation. “When have I had time to ask him? After he shot my groom? Before he nailed a man’s hands to my bedroom wall? When?”

Carter stands and pats his stomach. “I don’t think that pizza roll sat right with me. Excuse me.” He disappears into the hallway.

“You grossed him out.” Lito snickers. “Anyway, I told him this whole thing is new to both of you, but once you’ve settled in and—” He waves a hand “—killed Sarita and all that, you’ll want to start your life. Your *real* life. One where you get to chase your dreams.”

“And he was okay with that?”

“I mean, he said your dream should be to be in his bed underneath him, but I told him he’s an asshole and that you’re meant for bigger things.”

I can’t help the smile that spreads across my face. “Are you serious?”

“Yes, girl.” He samples my noodles. “Those are fire.”

“So he said yes?”

“He said all you have to do is ask. But then he added you won’t be staying on campus and if any ‘foolish schoolboy dares so much as to speak to you’ that he’d drag him to the sauna and so on and so forth.”

“Oh my god!” I squeal and wrap my arms around Lito, squeezing him as hard as I can.

“Ugh, you’re like a girdle.” He laughs. “Besides, you would’ve gotten it done without me. I just sped the process.”

“I mean, yeah, I was going to tell him I wanted to go back to school, but we haven’t really reached the part where we plan our future. We’ve been kind of busy learning each other, and now we’re just trying to stay alive.” I glance out the window as the sun fades from the horizon. My mood drops,

my excitement turning bitter in my gut. “She’s coming, isn’t she?”

“Yeah.” He slings his arm around my shoulder and pulls me into his side. “But we’re ready. Mateo will win this. He always does.”

“But what if he doesn’t?” Worry sours my appetite as I look up at Lito. “What happens then?”

“Then we fight until it’s done.” He kisses my forehead. “We’re Milanis. We don’t go down easy.”

The kitchen door opens, and Mateo glowers at Lito. “Get your lips off my bride.”

“You can’t be jealous of a gay man.” Lito rolls his eyes.

Mateo pulls me from the stool. “Come with me. I want to show you something.”

“It’s his dick, isn’t it?” Lito groans. “God, you two are so gross.”

Mateo leads me out of the kitchen and down the hall to the sitting room. I rarely come in here. It’s fancy and seems more like a place you walk past, not a place you linger in.

He strides to the ornate fireplace, then turns on his heel.

I stop. “What—”

He lowers himself to one knee and holds out a jewelry box. “I know we started out on the wrong foot.”

“That’s one way of putting it.” I arch a brow and move to stand in front of him.

His eyes glint. “But the day I married you was the best one of my life. I just didn’t realize it then. I do now. You were meant for me, Lucretia. I was made for you. I think ... I think maybe I knew it all along on some level.” He smirks. “I certainly knew I wanted to wreck you in more ways than one.”

I bite my bottom lip.

“But this is the way we should’ve begun. With me proposing. With me proving myself to you.” He opens the box

and shows me a beautiful ring, the center stone glittering and surrounded by a band of diamonds. “Lucretia Milani, will you marry me?”

Tears are already flowing as I look at him, at the monster who stole me away. “We began the way we were always meant to. I wouldn’t have it any other way. And yes, I will marry you, husband!”

He plucks the ring from the box, slides the old ring off my finger, and puts the new one on. I hold it up to the light.

“It’s so beautiful. I love it.”

He pulls another ring from his front pocket, this one a wider band engraved with leaves and swirling vines.

I take it from him and swap it for the one on his finger, then I get on my tiptoes to kiss him. He grips my waist, lifting me and kissing me deeply, his tongue stealing my breath as he angles my head and takes all of me. In this moment, we belong to each other, married in a cathedral but also wed in our hearts.

I wind my arms around his neck, holding onto him as the light fades and we’re left just the two of us, hopelessly in love despite our past.

We’re still kissing when the first gunshots go off.

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We meet Lito in the hallway. “Stay with her at all times. Don’t leave her side. Get her to the safe room just like we talked about.”

Lito nods and takes her arm, then pulls out a gun. “Upstairs. We’ll be safe there.”

“Everything will be all right.” I squeeze her hand.

She grabs me and pulls me down for one more kiss, her sweet taste on my lips. Soldiers run past us, their guns at the ready and my command on their minds. They know what to do.

I break the kiss and stare into her eyes. “Be safe. I’ll come for you when it’s over.”

She nods, and then Lito is hustling her away, though she turns to look back at me as she heads up the stairs.

I give her a nod, watching her until she’s out of sight, then I turn and sprint to my office and grab my loadout: two pistols, several knives, a shotgun, and a long rifle over my shoulder.

“We’re good. They shot up the guards at the gate,” Red calls from the hallway.

“Check in with Benny on the back wall.”

I hear Red’s radio click, and Benny’s voice comes through. “They’re creeping up on us back here. Acting like we can’t see their dumb asses through the trees. We’ve picked a few off, but there are a lot of them.”

Sonny's been working for the past 24 hours to call off the other families with news of Vincenzo's treachery, but it seems it hasn't worked. At least, not completely. Sarita doesn't have numbers for this sort of assault on her own. It has to be her, Vincenzo's forces, and at least one more family—if I had to guess, it's the Fontanas with a small army of mercenaries likely financed with Lucretia's bride price. *Fuck.*

"Tell him to keep picking them off and to let us know if they breach the wall," I tell Red and stride past him to the front of the house.

My thoughts drift upward to Lucretia, but I have to remind myself she's safe. Lito would die before he let anyone hurt her. So would I, for that matter.

"No prisoners. They came to our house to kill *us*. We don't let any of them walk away from this," I yell.

"Yes sir!" my soldiers respond in unison.

Some of them funnel out the front door while others head out the back to reinforce Benny. Red lingers only a few paces behind me, no doubt put there by Sonny.

"Front gate guards?" I ask him.

He shakes his head. "Not a peep."

I peer out one of the front windows. The grounds are quiet, but I know there are men in the trees. We haven't heard from the front gate in five minutes. That's five minutes too long.

We're on our own. None of our allies have come to our aid. I'll remember that when I'm head of the council, but I suppose they don't think I'll make it out of here alive. How wrong they are.

More gunshots ring out from the trees, and then the sound grows. The armies are engaging beyond my line of sight, though I can see muzzle flares here and there. Sarita is coming. She's true to her word on that part, at least.

Red's radio buzzes to life with someone yelling. "There are too many!"

"It's Carlo." He jerks his chin toward the trees out front.

I take the radio. “Carlo, fall back to the house. Everyone, run like hell!”

I point to the next line of soldiers. “Go. Now.”

They scatter out of the house and take up positions along the front, hiding behind bushes and the row of cars we set up as a barricade.

I follow them out and press my back to an SUV. “The second you see an enemy, you pull the fucking trigger!” I bark.

“Yes sir!”

Red hunkers down beside me as the gunshots grow closer and my men start emerging from the trees, all of them pushing hard.

I take the radio from him. “Benny, what have you got back there?”

“More of them. Fuckers.” The sound of a gunshot slaps through the speaker. “They’re everywhere.”

Sarita’s mustered every last man, sending them all rushing toward me like waves to the shore.

Some of my men fall, picked off from behind.

“Strafe the tree line!” I call.

The gunfire ramps up all around me, the trees shaking under the moonlight as bullets pepper their leaves.

Once the retreating men are clear and hunkered down behind the cars, I wave my hand. My men stop shooting.

“Wait for it.” I stare at the woods, watching as the darkness crawls with movement.

“Mateo.” Sarita’s voice crackles through the radio.

Red hands it to me.

“You ready to surrender?” I ask.

Her laughter is like a nail gun in my ears. “This is your last chance, Mateo. Come out and hand yourself over, and no one else has to die. But if you refuse, I’m going to raze this place

to the ground and kill everyone I find. That includes your new bride.”

Though I seethe at the threat to Lucretia, my voice remains cold, calm. “Careful, Sarita. Your friends the Fontanas wouldn’t like that too much.”

“Oh, you’d be surprised. They already signed off on her death as long as they get to claim a third of your holdings.”

I grip the radio so hard it cracks. Her parents sold her out again. I’m just glad she isn’t here to hear it, to know how little they value her. The goddamn fools. She was the greatest asset they ever possessed, and now she’s *mine*.

“You still there?” she goads.

“Yes, and I’ll still be here when all this is through, though I can’t say the same for you. I’ll enjoy curbstomping you the way I did your sons.”

“You son-of-a-bitch!”

I hold the radio away from me as she screeches, then the sound cuts off.

“Hey, kid. How’s it going over there?” Vincenzo’s voice wraps around me like a constrictor.

Red shakes his head with what looks like disappointment.

“We’re great. Now why don’t you call off your bitch and all of you go on home?”

Sarita sputters in the background as Vincenzo replies, “I’m afraid I can’t do that. I’m all in.”

I was seething before, but now the rage courses through me and turns my blood into pure fire. “You set them up, didn’t you, Vince? Tell me the truth for once in your rotten life.”

“Don’t go getting all sanctimonious on me now, kid. This is just business. The same as it was back then. You know how it is, and you play the same game I do.” He sighs heavily. “Just give up. You’re beaten, and you know it. It’s over. You had a good run. Now be a man and save that pretty little wife of yours by stepping up.”

“If you want me so badly, you’re going to have to come get me. But Vince, I need you to know—when you’re dead, I’m going to make sure no one remembers you. I won’t even give you a grave. No wife to mourn you, no children to miss you. It’ll be like you never existed. The next time you see me, it’ll be your last.” I hurl the radio at the sidewalk, smashing it to bits on impact.

“Eyes up, guns ready!” I call.

The woods are still crawling with movement, and then at least a dozen canisters fly through the air and land in the grass, erupting in smoke. Our view is completely obscured as slugs begin to hit the cars and the front of the house, smashing glass and sending bits of stone raining down on us.

“Hold!” I yell.

Red is on his knees beside me, a lighter in his hand. “Come on. Let’s do this.”

“Wait,” I bite out.

I watch the white smoke, searching for movement, for bodies. When I finally catch a glimpse of a rough line of men approaching, I point at Red. He flicks the lighter, the flame glowing orange, and then he presses it to a fuse. It sparks and shoots off beneath the car, into the grass, and disappears.

Red drops to the ground and peers beneath the car, staring at where the fuse went out.

“What the fuck?” I toe him. “It went out.”

“It should work.” He shakes his head. “It has to fucking work!”

The gunfire intensifies, pounding the cars and destroying the house’s façade.

“Red!” I yell.

“It’s going to work!” he yells back.

“Return fire!” I cry, and my men begin to shoot back, taking out a few of the smoky figures here and there. But it’s not enough. We’re about to be overrun.

“There!” Red yells and points.

The spark is still alive, slithering through the grass like a snake. When it reaches the cache of gunpowder and pellets buried in a line beneath fresh sod, I yell, “Get down!”

We all take cover as the explosion lights up the white smoke and the dark sky. It runs across the front of the house, decimating the line of attacking soldiers. It ends in a crescendo of screams, and when I peek my head up, there’s no more movement through the now-gray smoke.

“Clean them up, boys!” I yell and run out, leading my men into the killing field when another line of Sarita’s soldiers emerge from the trees. An entire host of men we didn’t anticipate.

Fucking hell.

This is it. This is all there is. I fire, shooting down man after man as my soldiers stand by my side, all of us fighting for our lives.

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LUCRETIA

“Oh my god, there’s so many more of them.” I stare, horrified, as soldiers swarm out of the trees and rush Mateo.

More smoke cannisters go off, blocking my view.

“No!” I press my palm to the screen.

“What the fuck?” Lito points to one of the other screens.

“Who’s that?” I swallow hard as a man creeps up behind the guard at the kitchen door and slits his throat. “Oh my god!” I gasp.

Lito pulls me into his arms. “We’re safe here.”

The man enters the kitchen, then we lose sight of him on the cameras.

“He’s inside. He snuck through Benny’s line at the back of the house.” Lito rubs my upper arm, trying to warm me even though I’m frozen to the core. “There are more guards. They’ll get him before he gets up here.”

“What if he finds Carter?” I haven’t seen the cook since this afternoon. “What if he never left?”

“Carter will be fine. He’s been around the block a few times. Don’t worry.”

I want to believe Lito, but I can’t. Not after what I just saw. I look back at the camera on the front lawn and search for Mateo, but the smoke is still too thick. I can’t tell who’s standing, who’s firing, or what’s going on.

“I can’t see him, Lito. Where is he?”

He looks at the monitor. “I don’t know, but we have to keep the faith, all right? No falling apart when they’re out there fighting. Stiff upper lip.” He squeezes my arm. “Mine’s already stiff from the fillers, so I’m one step ahead of you.”

I turn and glare at him.

He shrugs, his eyes still on the front lawn screen. “Sorry, humor’s my defense mechanism.”

“It’s all right.” I lean against him as we watch the video. The one at the back of the house goes out, leaving the screen black.

“They shot it down.” He cycles through the other feeds and settles on the foyer.

I keep my eyes on the front lawn, hoping for a glimpse of Mateo. Inside, my mind keeps repeating ‘please don’t be dead’ over and over like a prayer.

“Shit!” Lito points to the foyer camera, and I can see the man from the kitchen climbing the steps.

“It’s Vincenzo!” I cover my mouth.

“Fuck!” Lito opens a drawer beneath the surveillance console and pulls out a pistol, loads it, and hands it to me.

“He can’t get in here, right?”

“No.” He checks his own pistol and flicks the safety off. “At least, I don’t think so.”

A cold sweat breaks out on my brow. “Does he know this room is here?”

“Likely. It’s been here since the place was built, back when our parents were in charge.”

“But there’s no way he knows the code, right?”

Lito cycles through the cameras again and catches Vincenzo walking down the hallway, headed straight for us. “He can’t know it.”

“Has it ever been changed?” I ask.

Lito puts a hand out and backs me up all the way into the back corner. “I don’t know.” Then he aims for the door.

With shaking hands, I lift my gun, too.

“Here.” He reaches over and flicks the safety off. “Just don’t shoot me, okay?”

“No promises.”

He gives me side eye.

“Humor can be my defense mechanism, too.” I shrug, the movement tight and small.

“If the door opens, just pull the trigger. Don’t hesitate.” He lets out a steadying breath.

“I will.” I may not be an experienced fighter, but I’ll do everything in my power to protect Lito. He’s like a brother to me, and I won’t lose another one. Not on my watch.

The digital lock beeps. Vincenzo is trying the code.

I swallow hard, my arms still shaking though I keep my aim on the door.

The numbers beep again and again.

“He doesn’t know it.” Lito lowers his gun. “He can’t get in.”

The lock gives a long beep.

“Fuck!” Lito snaps his gun back up.

The door opens.

We both fire.

But the door doesn’t open all the way, and a canister rolls in. It spews smoke that burns my nose, my throat, my eyes.

I pull the trigger again and again until I’m out of bullets, then I sink to my knees and pull my shirt to my nose. It does no good. Everything burns and stings.

Someone grabs me, and for a moment I think it’s Lito, but then I’m being dragged out of the panic room and into the adjoining closet.

“Lucretia!” Lito yells as Vincenzo slams the door shut, then uses the butt of his gun to smash the digital keypad.

I cough and sputter, my eyes and nose running as Vincenzo yanks me to my feet and walks me from the closet.

He rips his gas mask off and tosses it to the floor. “Come on.” He drags me to the door and into the hallway as I try to fight him off. But he grabs me and slams me against the wall, my ears ringing and my forehead exploding with pain. “Cut that shit out, Lucretia or I’ll shoot you in the head and be done with it.” He takes my arm in a brutal grip and pulls me along with him.

“Get off me!” I scream. “Mateo!”

“Mateo’s dead.” He shakes me hard. “So shut the fuck up and come along.”

“No.” I try to free myself. “You’re lying.” I swing, catching him in the jaw.

He yowls, and I run. But I’m still partly blind from the gas, and he grabs a fistful of my shirt, yanking me backwards.

I scream as he shoves me against the wall again. “Last chance. Stop fighting me, or I *will* kill you.”

“Get the hell away from me!” I swing for him again, but he blocks it.

“Stupid cunt. I warned you.” He raises his gun to my face.

“Let her go.” Mateo’s voice rushes over me like a soothing balm.

“Mateo!” I scream as Vincenzo yanks me back and puts his gun to my head.

My eyes are still awash in tears, but I can make out Mateo farther down the hall, a gun in his hand. “You’re alive.”

“You can’t get rid of me that easily, princess.”

The arrogant tone in his voice is more reassuring than anything. He’s okay. He’s come for me.

“Cut the shit, kid. Put your gun down or I shoot her in the head. Your choice.”

Mateo steps closer.

Vincenzo squeezes me harder, his arm like a vise around my ribcage. “Don’t try it, Mateo.”

“I’m not trying anything. I just want to know why.”

“Why?” Vincenzo scoffs. “Why the fuck does it matter?”

“Because I deserve an answer.”

“The way you deserved the empire that I helped your father build?” Vincenzo’s tone is laced with derision. “You think your last name gave you the right to take and take and take. I should’ve killed you the day they died.”

“Why didn’t you?” Mateo eases a little bit closer.

Vincenzo chuckles mirthlessly. “I guess I got a little sentimental when I was middle-aged. But I finally came to my senses, and now here we are. It worked out better this way. I got a cut of the old business, and now I’m getting a cut of what you built with your own hands. I’ve milked the Milani family to death, and I have to say I’m pretty proud of it. Like I always say, work smarter, not harder. Now, put your gun down or she’s done. I’m not fucking around, kid.”

“I’m putting it down.” Mateo glances at me, not an ounce of fear on his bloodied face. Then he slowly lowers himself to the floor. Right when the gun touches the runner, he yells, “Now!”

Someone hits Vincenzo from behind. We both fall forward, and then two deafening gunshots sound.

I’m dead. Vincenzo shot me in the head, and my blood is pouring out and soaking the side of my face and my shirt.

“Lucretia!” Mateo yells, and then I feel his hands on my shoulders. He’s pulling me free. When he has me in his arms, I turn and look.

I’m not the one who was shot. It was Vincenzo. I’m covered in his blood.

“Are you all right?” Mateo swipes the bloody hair from my face and peers into my eyes.

“I-I think so.”

“And this is for the tear gas!” Lito kicks Vincenzo in the side. “Motherfucker!”

Mateo is still searching me for wounds, his hands running through my hair. “You’re certain you’re okay?”

“I’m fine.” I take his wrists and hold them in front of me. “What about you? And Red? And Benny?”

“All good. We routed the ones out front and Benny is holding them off in the back. They’re scared now. They know we have snipers in the trees picking them off, so they’ve slowed considerably.”

“It’s almost over?”

“It is.” He kisses my hands. “And then—” He smirks. “Then we take the fight to them.”

Lito kicks Vincenzo’s lifeless body again. “Do you have any idea how much I just scrunched my face from that fucking gas? I’ll need preventive Botox!”

Mateo rolls his eyes. I throw my arms around his neck, and he holds me tight.

“I love you.” I have more tears now, though these aren’t from the teargas. They’re from relief, and happiness, and *love*.

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Sunny chomps through an apple and pushes my back for another one.

“Good boy.” I hand it to him then stroke down his snout. “That’s plenty for today.”

I give him one more scratch between his ears then head for the metal door at the back of the stables. It’s cold out, the chill getting into my bones as I descend the stairs and flip on the light.

“This is the very first time I’ve had a couples affair down here in the sauna.” I pull up one of the metal chairs and sit in front of Carmen and Leonard Fontana.

Leonard cringes away from me, but Carmen just gives me a dead-eyed stare.

“I hope you two are comfortable.” I lean back.

“Does Lucretia know you have us here?” Carmen asks.

“Yes.” I pull another apple from my pocket and take a bite.

Leonard licks his busted lips. They’ve only been down here for a day, but he’s already in survival mode.

“I don’t believe you.” Carmen turns away. “Bring her here.”

“I already asked if she wanted to take part.” I smirk. “She isn’t into torture like I am. I guess opposites really *do* attract.”

Leonard coughs. “You can’t do this to us. The families—”

“The families know you were in bed with a snitch. Vincenzo Roman’s assets have all been signed over to me along with Sarita’s.” I shrug. “The families tried to get me to split them, but I simply had to remind them how they turned their backs on me when you and Sarita came for my head. How *angry* that made me. How *easy* it would be for me to seek vengeance against them for it. Then, they wisely decided that their assets and your assets—as pitiful as they are—will now be mine.”

“You can’t kill us. We’re your in-laws,” Carmen says.

“I think that’s a wonderful reason to kill you. It’ll certainly make the holidays a lot easier.” I take another bite of the apple.

Leonard begins to shake, his chin wobbling. “Please let us talk to Lucretia.”

“You are.” I point at the camera in the ceiling. “She’s watching you right now.”

He looks up. “Darling, please. Don’t let him do this to us. We love you.”

I shake my head. “I don’t think that’s going to work, Leonard.” I cluck my tongue. “She already knows that you signed off on her death. So, maybe try another tack. I would suggest groveling, apologizing, begging—things in that vein. Though, I’ll warn you—Sarita tried all those and more, and she’s currently charring in the burn pit.” I gesture with my hand. “But with that said, go on.”

“Lucretia, baby, please. We’re sorry. We just ... we made a bad deal with Vincenzo.” Leonard’s blubbling so hard he’s almost incoherent. “He’s the one who set it all up. He’s even the one who advised us to have Ferdinand—”

“Leonard!” Carmen barks.

He shuts up, his face going even paler.

My phone rings. I answer. “Yes, princess?”

“They killed him.” Her voice breaks, and I want to hold her so badly it tears me apart. But I have to be strong. I have to deal with them for her sake.

Carmen and Leonard stare at me.

“Yes. The question is, what do you want me to do about it?”

Leonard starts blubbering again. “He wanted to ruin the business! He wanted to go legit and get rid of all the things that made the Fontanas great. I couldn’t let that happen, but I needed money. I told him I wanted to marry you to a good family, but he wouldn’t allow me to pull you from school. He threatened me. I had to do what—”

I hold up a finger to my lips. “Shh. Lucretia is talking.”

He closes his mouth, but a snot bubble erupts from his nose.

“I don’t know what to do.” She sniffles. “I-I’m coming down there.”

“All right.” I hang up, then stand and climb back up the stairs as Leonard wails.

Lucretia appears through the garden, running toward me with her hair in a dark streak behind her from the wind. I open my arms and catch her in them, her tears wet against my neck as I hold her close.

She cries as I keep her tightly against me and Sunny nuzzles her back. “I knew they were horrible. I *knew* it, but I never thought ...”

I kiss her cheek, tasting her tears. “I thought it as soon as you told me there were no witnesses, no leads. There’s always someone who sees something, who knows. Unless it’s an inside job. Unless there are no witnesses because no one looks at the people closest to you, the ones who are supposed to love you above all others. Your parents were hiding in plain sight.”

“They set it all up just so they could marry me to Horatio. It was all for money. That’s all we were to them—a means to an end.” She cries harder, and I hold her for a long time, sheltering her against the cold wind as her heart rips itself apart with grief.

When she finally settles, taking big breaths, I tilt her chin up and look into her eyes. “You don’t even have to say the word, princess. I will handle this. And we will never speak of them again.”

“I don’t know if I can—”

“*I can.*” I kiss her forehead. “I need you to know I’m not only doing this for you. I can’t let them live. Not with the way they’ve hurt you, the way they offered up your neck to the executioner’s axe. I’m going to kill them, Lucretia. I need you to accept that. But I’ll give you the choice of a quick, merciful death or a long, painful one.” I silently beg her to choose the latter.

She sniffs. “I ... I don’t want them to suffer.”

I stifle an exasperated groan, then give her a nod. “I’ll handle it. You go inside, run a bath, and get warm. I’ll be in soon.”

Her lip trembles, and I kiss it, then swipe my tongue against hers. “Go, bath, now.” I turn her around and smack her ass.

She gives me one last look over her shoulder, then trudges back toward the house.

I pat Sunny’s head. “She chose quick. Isn’t that a fucking bummer?”

He snorts his agreement as I turn and head back down to the sauna.



SHE’S in bed when I return. After a quick shower, I climb under the covers with her and pull her to my chest.

“Are they gone?” she whispers.

“Yes.”

A tear escapes her eye and drops onto my chest.

I pull her on top of me. “No tears, princess. Not for them. They don’t deserve it.” I run my hands down her naked body, gripping her waist and pushing her farther down until she’s straddling my cock.

“Mateo, I’m all conflicted—”

“Then let me un-conflict you.” I flip her and find her entrance, pushing inside her until I find her wetness.

She digs her nails into my sides. “This is wrong.”

“That’s why it feels so good.” I push the rest of the way, then slide out, getting her wetness all along my shaft, before plunging deep.

She arches. “Mateo!”

“I’m going to fuck the sadness right out of you, princess.” I bite down on her shoulder, holding her in place as I piston inside her, hitting her clit just the way she likes.

She wraps her legs around me, holding on as I give her all of me. No more tears are falling. Instead, her lips are parted, moans escaping as I make her mine.

“Tell me you want this.” I kiss to her tit and lick her nipple, then tease the tight bud with my teeth. “Tell me you want my cock.”

“Mateo!” she moans.

I bite her other nipple. “Tell me!”

“I want you!” she cries.

“Always.” I rub the broadside of my tongue all over her tits. “Tell me you’ll always want this no matter what. No matter who I kill. No matter who I torture. No matter what sort of evil shit I’ve done. No matter what evil shit I’m going to do in the future. Tell me you want me.”

I grip her ass, and sit back, watching her bounce on my cock as I fuck her beautiful body. “Tell me, princess.”

“I want you.” She grips the duvet, crushing it in her palms. “I *always* want you.”

“Show me that pretty pussy taking every inch.” I watch as I slide into her, her pink flesh gobbling me up as I hit her deep again and again.

She arches, her body meeting mine stroke for stroke. When I lick my thumb and press it to her clit, rubbing in tight circles, she hisses.

“You’re going to come on my cock, princess, and I’m going to shoot my load inside your tight cunt.” I lean over her and kiss her, our tongues swiping against each other as I keep pounding inside her, my thumb speeding up and swirling faster and faster.

She’s lost in me, in us. No more tears. No more worries. She’s primal like this, a fierce creature that only I can cage. Only I can tame. And she’s mine. Completely mine. Forever.

“Come, princess. I want to hear you scream for me.”

“Mateo!” she cries, her body tensing as she releases, her pussy milking me as I come, squirting inside her and filling her again and again.

This is the way it was always meant to be between us.

A bond forged in hate and perfected in love.

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EPILOGUE

LUCRETIA

Years later

I drop the rotten tooth into the stainless-steel pan beside the table. “All done.”

“Did that hurt her?” Mrs. Ward wipes her eyes. “I’m so sorry, Delilah.”

“No, she’ll be fine.” I pull the foam bite guard from the alligator’s mouth and hand it to my assistant. “But you need to watch her diet. Pet alligators can gain weight faster than their counterparts in the wild. It can also lead to tooth decay. Bring her in for cleanings at least once a year from now on.”

“But what if she gets too big?” she asks.

“We’ll make do.” I direct my assistant to remove the IV and bandage the spot on the alligator’s leg.

“Thank you, Dr. Milani.” Mrs. Ward gives me a grateful look. “I don’t know what we’d do without you.”

“My pleasure. Take care.” I peel off my gloves and hurry to my office. I’m running late as usual.

My phone already has a dozen missed messages, all of them from Mateo.

I pull off my white coat and change quickly into a slinky dress that has plenty of give for my baby bump, then slide on some glittery flats.

“Princess, you were supposed to be in my car twenty minutes ago.” Mateo leans against the doorframe, his

imposing figure blocking out everything else. His sexy, scolding voice sends a shiver down my spine.

“I had to yank an alligator’s rotten tooth. It was hurting her.”

He smirks. “Why am I not surprised?”

I walk over to him, and he pulls me against him.

“How are you feeling? Up to going to the gala?”

“I’m good. Second trimester superpowers. Besides, Lito would kill me if I didn’t show up to meet his new boyfriend.” I get on my tiptoes, and he rewards me with a kiss, one I feel all the way to my toes.

“What have you been doing today?” I ask when he finally relinquishes my lips.

“Oh, this and that.” His cruel smirk tells me he’s been doing plenty of bad things.

“You’re the devil.” I bite his bottom lip.

He groans and palms my ass. “Then you must’ve sold your soul to me, because I own you now.”

“Or maybe you stole me? How about that?”

He squeezes my cheeks and kisses me again, leaving me breathless. “Then that makes you my captive.”

“I suppose so.”

“For life. Because I’m never letting you go.”

“I faintly remember you telling me that on our wedding day.” I arch a brow at him.

“I recall that as well. And look how truthful I was being. You’re fucking smitten with me, princess. You can’t live without me.”

“Arrogant.”

He lifts me from the floor and kisses my throat, sending tingles to my nipples and lower. “You love my arrogance.”

I sigh and let my head fall back so he can kiss my chest. “I do.”

“And I love your tits.” He uses his chin to pull my dress down and sucks my nipple through my bra.

“That’s all you love?” I giggle and smack his shoulder.

“Oh, no, princess,” he practically purrs against me and slides one of his hands lower, scooping up the back of my skirt. “I love your pink cunt too.”

I squeal as he runs his fingers along my panties. “I have patients in here!”

He steps forward and uses his foot to kick my door closed.

“We’re already late,” I protest.

“Shh, the patients might hear,” he teases and turns me around, then bends me over my own desk and yanks my panties down.

“Mateo!” I scold him, but he ignores me and presses his cock against my entrance.

“So slick.” He slides inside me with a grunt.

I press my forehead to the desk and push back against him. “Hard and fast.”

“I love your pregnancy sex demands.” He leans over me and bites the nape of my neck, fucking me so hard my desk scrapes across the floor. When he reaches around and strokes my clit, I’m already gone, coming hard as he grabs my hips, holding me on his cock as he comes.

“We’re so filthy,” I pant.

“Glad to see I’m rubbing off on you.” He kisses the back of my neck, then grabs some tissues off my desk and cleans me up.

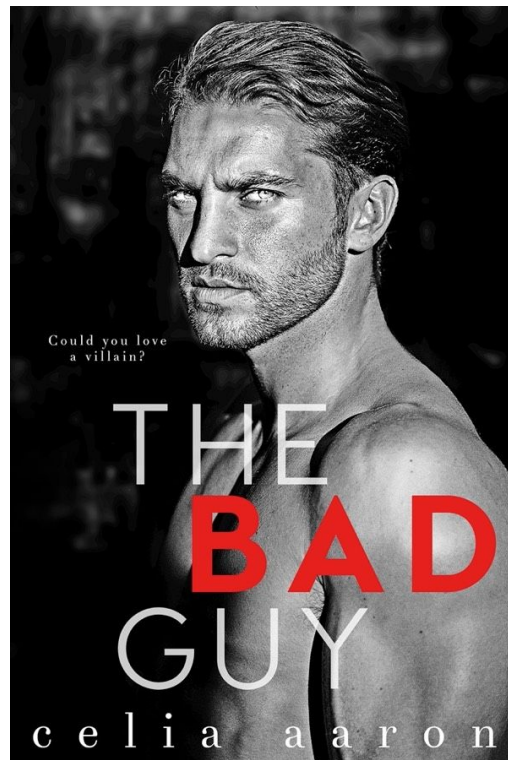
When he presses a kiss to my round belly, I melt for him all over again, the same way I have for years.

Mateo Milani may be the devil. He may have stolen me from the life I thought I was destined for. But now I know this

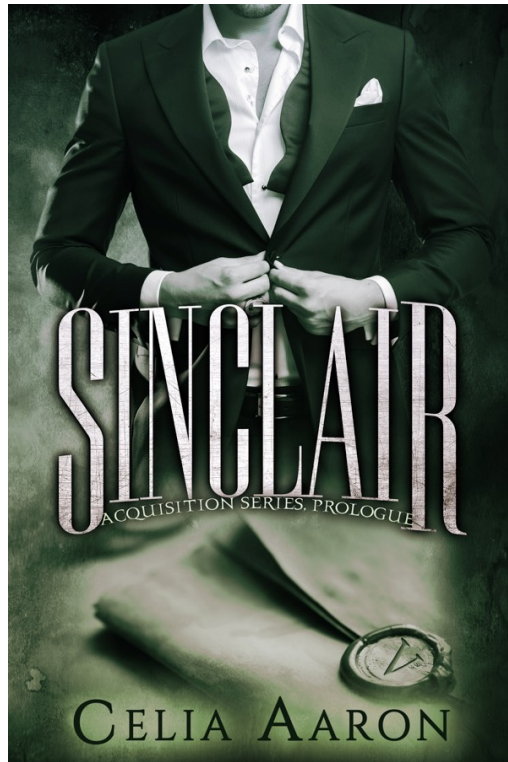
was the only way it could've happened. Happy in the arms of the devil, I'll stay with him for the rest of my life, his willing captive.



If you'd like to read about another **Bad Guy**, check out Sebastian.



If you haven't read the dark romance Acquisition Series, I suggest you begin with Sinclair, a FREE read.



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ALSO BY CELIA AARON

Dark Romance

The Bad Guy

She was a damsel, one who already had her white knight. But every fairy tale has a villain, someone waiting in the wings to rip it all down. A scoundrel who will set the world on fire if that means he gets what he wants. That's me.

I'm the bad guy.

The Acquisition Series

Darkness lurks in the heart of the Louisiana elite, and only one will be able to rule them as Sovereign. Sinclair Vinemont will compete for the title, and has acquired Stella Rousseau for that very purpose. Breaking her is part of the game. Loving her is the most dangerous play of all.

The Cloister Series

I joined the Cloister to find the truth. But I've discovered so much more, and the darkness here is seducing me, pulling me down until all I can think of is him. Adam Monroe, the Prophet's son, a dark prince to an empire that grows by the day. He is tasked with keeping me safe from the wolves of the outside world. But the longer I stay at the Cloister, the more I realize the wolves are already inside and under the Prophet's control. If Adam discovers the real reason I'm here, he'll bay for my blood with the rest of them. Until then, I will be Delilah, an obedient servant of the Prophet during the day and Adam's Maiden at night.

Blackwood

I dig. It's what I do. I'll literally use a shovel to answer a question. Some answers, though, have been buried too deep for too long. But I'll find those, too. And I know where to dig—the Blackwood Estate on the edge of the Mississippi Delta. Garrett Blackwood is the only thing standing between me and the truth. A broken man—one with desires that dance in the darkest part of my soul—he's either my savior or my enemy. I'll dig until I find all his secrets. Then I'll run so he never finds mine. The only problem? He likes it when I run.

Dark Protector

From the moment I saw her through the window of her flower shop, something other than darkness took root inside me. Charlie shone like a beacon in a world that had long since lost any light. But she was never meant for me, a man that killed without remorse and collected bounties drenched in blood.

I thought staying away would keep her safe, would shield her from me. I was wrong. Danger followed in my wake like death at a slaughter house. I protected her from the threats that circled like black buzzards, kept her safe with kill after kill.

But everything comes with a price, especially second chances for a man like me.

Killing for her was easy. It was living for her that turned out to be the hard part.

Nate

I rescued Sabrina from a mafia bloodbath when she was 13. As the new head of the Philly syndicate, I sent her to the best schools to keep her as far away from the life—and me—as possible. It worked perfectly. Until she turned 18. Until she came home. Until I realized that the timid girl was gone and in her place lived a smart mouth and a body that demanded my attention. I promised myself I'd resist her, for her own good.

I lied.

The Elder

In Azalea, Mississippi, the only thing hotter than the summer days are the men of the King family. When the patriarch Randall King is found dead, Detective Arabella Matthews will race the clock to stop the killer from striking again. Benton, the eldest of the King siblings, has to decide if he wants to cooperate with the feisty detective or conduct his own investigation. The more he finds out about his father—and the closer he gets to Arabella—the more he wants to keep her safe. But the killer has different plans ...

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Celia Aaron is a recovering attorney who loves romance. Dark to light, angsty to funny, real to fantasy—if it's hot and strikes her fancy, she writes it. Thanks for reading.

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