

MISCI MAFIA
BOOK TWO

FORTRESS OF THE
QUEEN

DAKOTAH FOX
MACKENZY FOX

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For those out there who believe in second chances x

AUTHOR'S NOTE

CONTENT WARNING: Fortress of the Queen is an adults only dark mafia romance centered around the Medici Boston underworld crime family. It contains dark scenes which may disturb some readers including but not limited to: kidnapping and human trafficking, foul language, bondage, and lots of steamy, spicy loves scenes. Reader discretion is advised, for adults 18+

Please note: This book is the conclusion to Book 1, Fortress of the King and cannot be read without reading Book 1 first.

BLURB

I TRIED TO STAY AWAY.

Even when everything fell apart, when I became his prisoner and my world

tumbled out from under my feet. I didn't know then...

That he would still own my heart. My soul. My very being.

And I want to be his Queen.

The lies and betrayal seem like nothing compared to imagining a

world where he's not in it.

When our paths collided, I kept my true feelings hidden, scared that my heart would shatter.

But the rules have changed, and now we have to work together.

Everything we hold dear hangs in the balance.

Everything ends tonight.

And Angelo Medici is the one thing I can't bet on keeping.

PROLOGUE

MY DEAREST ANGELO,

If you're reading this letter, it means something terrible has happened.

I wish, more than anything, that I could have told you the truth to your face, but I can't change how the cards were dealt.

As I'm writing this it feels unbearable to continue. I've fallen so far down the rabbit hole, that I don't know what's real anymore.

Maybe you will never believe me, but this is the truth:

The life of my sister hangs in the balance.

As you have discovered, I do have a sister, she was kidnapped and held for ransom in exchange for information on you. I've never met the kidnappers, nor do I know who they are.

Then the game changed.

They said I had to kill you. Your life, in exchange for Mia's.

I only wish I had the courage to ask for your help, knowing I'd never have your forgiveness.

But now you know.

And make no mistake; I want them all dead for doing this.

Every. Last. One.

I already surrendered, Angelo. But I could never kill you. I also can't give up my sister either. I won't.

Know this; I never saw the ruthless monster you said you were. A man with no heart, no soul, a man who couldn't be loved.

The eyes are the window to the soul, and in yours I see a man I never knew existed.

It wasn't supposed to happen like this but being with you was never a game. It was real, all of it. To me anyway.

I don't care what happens to me, please believe that, but I beg you to help get Mia back. She's innocent.

Also know that I'm sorry for everything... except for falling for you.

You made a light in my life where there was only darkness.

That's what I will take with me.

I never meant to hurt you.

I'll take my sins to the grave, hell or purgatory, whichever comes first.

I'll never forget you.

Forever and Always, Rayne x

ANGELO

“I HAVE TO KILL YOU?” SHE WHISPERS, LIKE SHE’S NOT THE silent assassin sent to murder me in my sleep.

The nerve of this woman astounds me still.

I’ve hired many men in my time, and I thought they had nerves of steel; they’ve got nothing on her. I’m slightly awed. Even if her intention to kill me was only thwarted because of Enzo and our quick thinking, I guess we’ll never know the truth.

A part of me will always wonder if she’d have had the chops to see it through. My lips curl up at the thought.

I walk back toward the chair and grasp my whiskey glass, tempted to throw it against the wall. Anger mixed with lust runs through my veins like poison which sets my entire body on fire. *Only she gets me like this.*

How can one woman embody so many emotions in me? She evokes things inside me I thought were dead and buried. Maybe that’s what angers me the most—the fact she gets under my skin even now, when she should be six feet under.

Betrayal.

It runs deep, and it makes the furnace in my belly rise. For now, I’ll keep it in check because if I unleash it, I can’t be sure what I’d be capable of.

Lately, since she’s not been in my bed, I’ve had the worst sleep in years.

Nights of turbulent tossing and turning, trying to chase the demons away. It's like I knew deep down it was too good to be true. And my nightmares about Lucia are back.

That's a bad omen in itself right there; nothing good ever comes out of that kind of torment.

It's not like I woke up today knowing I'd be faking my own death. Now I'm in this unfortunate predicament.

Despite what she may think, I am *always* in control. Even now.

How she's played this whole thing stabs my skull like a dagger, searing me like a condemned man. She was good, *so fucking good*.

I've tried to look at it from all angles. Unfortunately, my sympathy chip was ripped away from me a long time ago. My moral code disappeared a lot sooner than that.

Even if her part in all of this was under duress, I can't spare her.

How can I possibly sympathize with a woman who has been working against me? Sleeping in my bed and betraying me behind my back.

Now she lays here in my bedroom when she really belongs in a fucking dungeon, not lying on my bed like sleeping beauty, the Queen of the damned.

Oh, but that's where I'm wrong. The *damned* is me, for believing a lie.

I stare out of the window. "All will be revealed, *Carina*. You should get some sleep; you're going to need it."

As I turn, I see she has done just that. In her drug-induced haze, I get time to think.

The plan is to head back to Fortress and debrief my brothers, not that they'll be happy about what I've decided. The whole idea is fucking nuts.

No matter what I think of Rayne right now – and it's difficult to see through my loathing and utter contempt– an

innocent life hangs in the balance. Maybe I am going soft, why else would I give a shit about her sister?

Even if I know Mia is innocent in all of this, I also know she doesn't deserve to die, and she may just be the best way to go after the people plotting against me.

More importantly, Rayne will be mine to do with whatever I choose, and I still haven't quite decided yet what I'll do with her.

One thing's for sure, *she's still mine.*

My palm twitches at the thought of my little fox being my prisoner.

The only thing saving her right now is the fact that somewhere in the deep depths of my corrupt soul, I do understand loyalty. Family is everything to me, and that is her only saving grace.

I should kill her, but the conflict I have wars within me.

I hold the unread letter from her purse in my hand, and while I'm tempted to burn it, I need to know what she said, what she intended me to find, and why she even wrote it—even if her lies turn my stomach.

Now could be as good a time as any since I've got nothing else to do for the rest of the night except sit here seething and angry.

The Rayne lying on my bed isn't the Rayne I know. This version is softer, compliant, and sad even. I only know her as being strong and capable, a woman who can take charge and knows what she wants. That's what drew me to her from the beginning.

My, how looks can be deceiving.

Rest assured, she will agree to all my demands, even though she's already proved she can't hold her tongue. I'll make her compliant; if it's the last thing I do.

I have enemies, which goes without saying, but the question is, which one of them is bold enough to carry this out?

The Russians?

Payback from the Brazilians? From that fuckface Rombaldi.

The Irish mafia?

Fuck knows. It could be any one of them. They all have a cross to bear, and the pending construction of the casino doesn't help. It puts an even bigger target on my back, and my brothers.

We need to go into lockdown, and after my 'death' is the perfect time to do it, to keep everyone safe.

Whoever plotted my death better wish they booked a one-way ticket to Hell, because my wrath will be better expended on their heads and anyone they're associated with. I don't fucking care. They all deserve to die.

And as for Rayne. I'll deal with her in due course. For now, because I'm a reasonable man, I'll let her sleep. She's going to need her rest for what I've got planned.

She isn't going anywhere. *She's mine.*

It's strange. Looking over at the woman beside me in the car but not reach out to touch her. Not being able to listen to her sweet, soft voice and her laugh. It's torturous.

All those thoughts are now past tense, null and void, indulgences at best.

All she gets now is Mr. Medici, the head of the Boston crime family, a different beast altogether.

I want to ask her so many things. Marveling at her composure as she sits next to me and stares out the window, I refrain from speaking. She will be feeling the effects of the drugs for a while yet, which will keep her compliant for now.

She has a shawl draped around her shoulders and her legs curled up on the seat. The only way I can tell she's tense, is by

the bare-knuckle grip she has on the material as she holds it against her chest.

I think about when I made her come on my bed and how I should have left her hanging.

I should have made her start to understand the depths of my deprivation; since I'm no longer required to be a gentleman, there is no need to hold back. *So why did I?*

I suppose the old saying about women making men weak has its merits, and I'm disgusted with having to admit to my brothers and my family that I've been played.

In my line of business, there is no room for weakness. Weakness gets you killed.

I'm the villain in this piece. There are no two ways about it, which is why locking her in a cell until I figure out what to do with her is paramount in regaining trust in the ranks.

The only option is to drive back to Fortress, where I'll keep her hidden until the plan is in place. Time is of the essence; nothing will be left to chance this time around.

I wonder what she's thinking, if she even has the slightest clue what I could do to her and what I've done to others for far less, or if she even cares. Torturing her doesn't excite me, unless it's to deprive her of an orgasm, which could be my new sadistic way of revenge, not that it'll satisfy my current appetite, but it'll make her squirm.

All the while, the letter burns a hole in my pocket.

I read the fucking thing while she slept, and I don't know what to make of it. *More lies?*

It only fuels the beast inside me that I'm barely keeping contained.

Yet, I can't find the ferocity to end her life. I run a hand down my face. *This is so fucked.*

After twenty minutes, I can't hold my tongue any longer.

"Tell me, *Carina,*" I begin, drumming my fingers on the steering wheel. I glance sideways to check she's still awake,

my words like ice. “Did you leave that letter for me to try and save yourself if the inevitable happened? Plan B?”

Keeping her composure, she says, “No, Angelo, I didn’t. I was hoping that Enzo would come through and he’d find a lead instead. I just needed more time, but my time was up.”

I snort. “And if he didn’t find a lead, were you going to just jab me anyway?”

She turns her head slightly. “We both know I’m not capable of that.”

I let the silence linger for a moment. “I bet you are, *Carina*. In fact, you never know what you’re truly capable of until your options are limited and the ones you love are in peril.”

“It sounds like you know,” she fires back.

My palm twitches again. “I *do* know, and whereas I obviously don’t support your overall goal, I understand that your sister is innocent and while I should just let her rot and throw you in the Charles, that won’t benefit either one of us in the long term.”

She swallows hard. “And the short term?”

I stifle a laugh. “I guess that remains to be seen.”

“I said I’d do anything, I meant it. We both know I’m at your mercy and there’s nothing I won’t do for Mia. *Nothing*.” Her words are from the heart, at least.

“That’s good news. At last, we can both agree on something, ironic really how it comes around full circle.”

There’s momentary silence. “If I try to tell you that I would never have gone through with it, you won’t believe me anyway,” she all but whispers. “But for what it’s worth, I’m no killer, Angelo. I would never...I *could* never... I left that note so you would find it in the morning after I left.”

I hold up a hand to stop her from speaking. “I think whatever energy you have left, you need to save for what we’re about to do next. After all, you still have to follow through with my imminent death, remember.”

I feel her glance at me in my peripheral as she asks, “Do you honestly think that will work?”

“Why won’t it?” I fire back. “You assume I don’t know how to play this fucking game. I invented the game, and I look forward to the looks on their faces when I rise from the dead and kill them all and anyone who ever dares cross me again.”

The thought amuses my twisted soul. I’ll slaughter every last one of them, saving the culprit of this spectacle till last. I need to take my time and enjoy it.

“And then what?”

I grin. “I’m sure you can figure you out, *little fox*. Saves you worrying that pretty little head over it. After all, we both know you have a quite vivid imagination.”

“Will you hate me forever?” she asks after a moment of hesitation.

The timidness in her voice clenches at my heart, but I push it away. She’s already taken enough of that, and she isn’t getting any more.

“Hate’s a very strong word, *Carina*. Speaking of which, you’ve told me you hated me on more than one occasion.”

“I was drugged out of my mind, which doesn’t count.”

“I’m sure that’s not the first time you said it,” I remind her, the last time merely hours ago.

She sighs. “I never truly hated you, Angelo. I just didn’t know what to think about you. I believed a lie. I thought you were the monster, when in reality, what does that make me? The woman sent to betray you?”

“And you think you saw someone different?” I muse. “Let me tell you this, you never believed a lie. I may not traffic women and children, but I am soulless, Rayne. It’s best you understand that before we go any further. If you really knew me and what I’ve done, then you would truly hate me.”

“So, I’m not the only one who’s been holding back?”

I glance sideways at my brave little fox. “I’ve never professed to be a saint. But I did give you all of me. I may have fallen for you, but that is my mistake. One I don’t have any intention of making again.”

When our eyes meet, I see something cross hers, but it’s gone in an instant.

Regret? I guess we’ll never know.

Of course, she’s only ever had the sugar-coated version of me; I had no reason to be a mob boss with her. She was the light I thought I needed, and the consequences were that I let my guard down.

I ended a man’s life tonight. Senator Mendes will never take another breath again. My only annoyance is that I didn’t get to witness his demise at the Gala as we were interrupted. I’m sure it’s all over the news as we speak.

She will never truly know the depths I go to in order to exterminate the maggots in this city. She will never know how many men I’ve killed; how many times I’ve visited the warehouse, and how many bodies we’ve disposed of. I’ve lost count myself, it’s immaterial.

She will probably also never know the lives we saved from the human trafficking shipment, like the one just a few days ago, and how many pedos we’ve taken off the streets. It’s fucking sick. If that’s what she calls holding back, then so be it, but in my view, it’s hardly the same thing at all.

I cleaned this city up. I command it. I control it, and I’ll control her. She’ll be begging me for mercy by the time I’m done with her.

“I’ve never heard you say who you really are, even when I knew exactly what you did in this city,” she says quietly.

“Say it,” I snarl.

She swallows, looking out the window again, resting her head back. “Angelo Medici, the king of Boston. The head of the Medici mafia crime family.”

Fuck if I’m not hard at the way she says my name.

Despite my earlier statement about never having me, I want to stop the car, bend her over the hood, and fuck her until she's screaming my name.

“There. That wasn't so hard, was it? Feel better?”

She shifts in her chair. “Before I even met you in person, I knew we'd be good together.”

I snort. “So, you liked fucking me then?”

“Not just that.”

“Then what?”

“It wasn't a lie, Angelo. *Us*.”

There is no us.

“I never let you in, despite what you think. It's fucking dangerous for you to know any more than I'm the head of the mafia. I kill people, *Carina*, it's what I do. I've kept that from you to protect you. You of all people know what my enemies are capable of...”

“To protect me?”

“Unlike you, Rayne, I've always had *your* best interests at heart. I didn't want to get involved with you at first, you were too precious to taint in this life. I wanted to walk away so many times, but I couldn't. So much for fucking intuition.”

She glances at me and folds her arms across her chest. “It doesn't matter what I say, does it?”

“Am I wrong?”

“You know you are.”

“Don't challenge me on it. You. Will. Lose.”

“Can I ask you one thing?” she asks after a few moments of silence.

“Not if you expect me to answer. I gave you the rules back at Falmouth, glad to see you're following them.”

“If you call being tied to a bed free.”

I smirk. “Trust me, right now, you’re better off with me than anyone else.”

“That may be the case, but Angelo ... you have a sister; surely you can see my side.”

I glare at her now, briefly taking my eyes off the road. I was wondering how long it would take for her to bring that up. “Don’t fucking go there, Rayne, I’m warning you.”

She tilts her head back on the chair and closes her eyes. “That’s all I was going to say, what if it was Valentina? What would you have done? What *wouldn’t* you do? Imagining her being kept by these monsters, doing God knows what, you’d kill every last one of them, like I want to.”

Finally –there’s a notion I can get behind. I want her angry. I want her to want retribution. Maybe she’ll be useful after all.

I shift in my seat and clutch the steering wheel tighter. Of course she’s right, but I will never admit to it. I would kill in a millisecond for Valentina. In fact, if anyone were to lay so much as a finger on my sister or harm one hair on her head, they wouldn’t still be breathing. All my brothers would do the same, too.

“You’ve no fucking right to question me on anything, just remember that.”

“It wasn’t my choice that I was blackmailed!” she fires back. “I was a normal functioning human being until I started working for Fortress gallery.”

I shake my head. “Somehow I find that hard to believe.”

“I told you everything in the letter, forever and always. I meant it.”

My anger boils. “Rayne, I will gag you in a minute, don’t fucking test me!”

She says nothing more. Thank fuck, I’ve just about had enough of this conversation.

I glance over at her once more, her head is resting against the window, and she closes her eyes.

She may be beautiful, but she tests me more than I care for, my patience is waning, and on top of that, I still long to take her body and her sweet pussy. But I won't give in to her, no matter how much she calls to my dark side.

“Where are we going?” she asks sleepily.

I can't help but smirk at my forthcoming reply before saying the words. “Ah, that. Yes, you wanted us to be open and honest, right? So why not meet the rest of the family?”

Her eyes fly open, and she turns her head. “What?” she stammers.

“You heard me.”

“The family? As in your brothers?”

Somehow that appears to be worse news than having to kill me.

I can't help the sick smirk on my lips. “Relax, enjoy the ride. We'll be there soon enough.”

For once, she has nothing else to say, in fact, she appears to be a little shocked.

She has every right to be afraid.

That's it, little fox, should've run when you had the chance. She's going to be sorry she ever met me.

That's a promise I know I can keep.

RAYNE

IN HIS WORLD, ADMITTING YOU'RE SCARED IS MOST DEFINITELY admitting defeat, and I doubt he's ever been scared about anything in his life.

Maybe I'm trying to mask how terrified I actually am by asking him crazy questions and probing him further, or perhaps I've just lost my mind entirely.

I'm still hazy from the sedative he drugged me with, but it irks me that he's so calm with my betrayal.

I know he's a raging beast, so why doesn't he show it?

I still have no answers, no freaking clue what's going on in his head.

I refuse to believe that he will kill me, no matter what he thinks of me and what I've done. Maybe I do have a death wish. I still crave him after all, even after everything. It makes me question my own sanity.

And now he wants me to meet the family.

If I can survive my sister being held for ransom as well as lying to the Medici mafia boss and plotting his death, then surely I can get through this.

About an hour later, my eyes flutter open, and we've come to a stop at a set of large iron gates. The rain started to pour while I slept; it's bouncing off the windshield furiously.

The gates slowly slide open, and Angelo drives down a long driveway until a massive stone building resembling

something out of the eighteenth century comes into view. It has two levels and windows boarded with iron railings.

“Is this Fortress?” I whisper.

He glances at me and raises an eyebrow. His tone is stone cold when he says, “This is your temporary home.”

We bypass the house, and he takes a detour down a dimly lit road off to the left and all of a sudden we’re underground. Angelo brings the car to a stop in a huge parking garage.

If he’s fatigued at all from this never-ending night, he doesn’t show it.

“What happens now?” I ask.

“Get out of the car and follow me,” he instructs, popping the seatbelt free and opening his door. He marches straight for the back entryway while I trail behind, still a little unsteady on my feet.

I take a few deep breaths, and if I’m honest, I’m shitting myself.

As we approach a door lit up by a safety light, Angelo suddenly spins around to face me.

I gasp at the quick movement as he backs me up against the wall and tilts my chin up with his finger so our eyes meet. He looms over me like a phantom and his eyes sparkle like diamonds.

“Listen here, *Carina*, and listen good.”

I swallow hard, my eyes dart to his mouth as he cages me in, his scent intoxicating. He presses toward me, and I can feel the heat and electricity rolling off his body. Though I’m not sure it’s lust anymore, I think he might actually hate me.

“Whatever happens here tonight, you keep quiet unless spoken to, do you hear me?”

I blink up at him, searching his eyes for a hidden clue but finding nothing. “Angelo, what are they going to do to me?”

“I’d be more concerned over what *I’m* going to do to you. You’re mine. If anybody touches you, I’ll chop their fucking

hands off. The deal is you're compliant at all times and you obey the rules, fuck me over again, and I'll leave your sister to rot."

My eyes go wide at the venom that seeps out of him.

"Fine," I mutter when he waits for an answer.

He regards me sceptically as I look anywhere but at him. "A little louder, my sassy little fox seems to have lost her voice."

"I said *fine!*" I snap.

A slow grin spreads across his face, the sick bastard. I don't like making Angelo angry.

He starts to loosen his tie as he watches me.

"Good. Now hold still." He produces a set of handcuffs from nowhere and swings them around on one finger. "Now, turn around."

"Is that really necessary, Angelo? It's not like I'm going anywhere."

He glances at me sharply. "Don't fucking address me by my name in there. You'll speak when I tell you to and only then. These will keep you where I want you for the moment."

I gasp as he locks the cuffs around my wrists, and my humiliation is complete.

He holds his thumb to the plate at the door's entrance, then inputs a long pin number to unlock the door. He steps through, pulling me with him by the elbow.

It hurts with my hands bound so tightly that my eyes water, but I say nothing.

I don't want to piss him off any further and give him any more reason to change his mind about helping me.

He leads the way up the dimly lit corridor. It's like something out of ancient times; old-fashioned sconces light up along the curved stone wall toward a large oak door.

I hold my head high. There is nothing he can do to me that will break me. When you're already broken, there's no further you can fracture.

As we get closer to the door, I hear voices on the other side. Another pin pad code and the door bolt unlocks as he pushes it open.

Three faces look up at us from the enormous ornate dining table with massive wooden wing-backed chairs.

One face I know well enough by now is *Enzo*, and the other is his brother Marco. I don't know the last face, but it's obviously his brother, the family resemblance is loud and clear.

Enzo stands as he regards me, his brow furrows when he sees me in handcuffs.

Marco's eyes are dark, murderously so, not the kind, charming man I met earlier this evening. I can't say I blame him; I was sent to murder his brother tonight, after all. I would expect the air to be a little chilly.

The silence is deafening.

"Whisky, brother?" says the man I haven't met yet.

He looks like Angelo with the same dark hair, tanned skin, five o'clock shadow, and similar intense blue eyes.

I see Angelo nod in my peripheral. "Better make it a double," he mutters.

He eyes me, then nudges me forward, and I stand there awkwardly with my hands behind my back.

"Are you going to introduce us?" the brother replies as he walks over to the bar lined with bottles and takes a decanter off the shelf. Then his eyes shift to mine, looking me up and down, a smirk plays on his lips. *Definitely a chip off the old block.*

I go to open my mouth before Angelo gives me the look of death, and I close it again.

“Rayne, you’ve already met Enzo and my brother Marco. This is my younger brother Dante.”

He pours two shots, salutes me with a crystal tumbler and takes a mouthful, his eyes on me the whole time.

“I’d shake your hand,” I say, ignoring Angelo’s darkening eyes. “But I’m a little tied up at the minute.”

Dante spurts out his drink all over the counter as he laughs out loud.

Marco rubs his chin, assessing me with absolutely no humor on his face.

So, this is the other serious brother. I can see where he gets his intimidating stare from.

“Where did you find her?” Dante says, wiping his chin as Angelo regards him with a look of annoyance. “Assassins anonymous?”

Enzo covers his mouth with his fist, and I know he’s fighting a smile too. I’m glad they can see the humor in this whole situation, not that everyone does, clearly.

“I’m glad that the two of you find Angelo’s *almost* demise so humorous,” Marco says, disdain in his tone, then to Angelo, “At least one of us here has your back, brother. Maybe Dante needs another lesson in family loyalty, starting with my fist down his throat.”

“Lighten up, it was a joke.” Dante rolls his eyes. “Do you really expect anyone to believe that *she* would have gotten away with it?”

I’d be offended if I wasn’t so edgy, especially the way he nods over to me like it’s the most incomprehensible thing in the world.

“She got too close,” Marco fires back. “It seems you’re overlooking the fact she had a vial of fucking poison to stab our brother with later tonight.” He then sears his gaze with mine. “Is that what you do, sweetheart? Is this how you get your kicks? Well, you picked the wrong fucking family to mess with.”

Angelo looks to me and gives me a nod. Good, because I wasn't going to keep quiet anyway.

"Yes, of course, it's how I get my kicks," I say, sarcasm lacing my tone. "I also have a death wish too. I came here to murder Angelo Medici and almost got away with it. Is that what you want to hear?"

Marco's eyes never leave mine. "She's fiery, brother," he says to Angelo. "No wonder you cuffed her."

Dante saunters toward us and holds out the whisky to Angelo; he eyes me carefully but doesn't say anything. Angelo throws the shot back in one gulp.

"Why is she still fucking breathing?" Marco roars at Angelo.

I don't know how I keep my composure, but I remember what he said about listening to his rules, and while I want to cuss in his face and scream back, I hold my tongue.

"Because we still fucking need her!" Angelo fires back. I try not to let my eyes go wide at his admission.

I also shouldn't feel the pain in my chest at how he spits out the words, but I do. I feel everything.

Does that mean he needs me, so he's letting me live? Or does he need me so he can use me as a pawn?

Then I wonder why any of it matters; as long as they get Mia back, I don't give a shit. They can feed me to the wolves for all I care.

"Tell them," Enzo says, nodding to me. "Tell them what you told me."

I can feel the heat radiate off Angelo the minute Enzo speaks, but at least it appears he supports the truth of my innocence, I think.

"What's the point? You've all obviously made your conclusions about me and the situation," I say gravely. "It doesn't matter that these assholes stole my sister and are probably keeping her locked up in a dungeon like a sewer rat while I run around town wining and dining with the fucking

fabulous Angelo Medici. In the meantime, she stays tied up somewhere, left for dead unless I get them intel and beg for just so much as a few words to make sure she's still alive, but you don't want to hear any of that. You want an excuse to take all the anger out on me because none of you can actually believe a civilian with absolutely no ties to the criminal underworld or any incentive – other than getting my sister back – is capable of getting this close to him, and you fucking hate it.”

All eyes in the room look at me.

It's Enzo that speaks first. “That was quite a speech.” He circles the room as everyone continues to stare at me. “She was never going to kill Angelo. She came to me for help and hired me to find out who took Mia, and that's what I've been doing. The calls, the emails, everything is encrypted –that's why it's taking so long to try and get even a remote trace. You all know how our enemies work, and they're only getting more cunning. Once the boys bring the associate in who handed her the vial, we'll know a lot more.”

“Did they find something?” I blurt out. “On Mia?”

Enzo shakes his head. “No, but we'll find out.”

Dante gives me a look of sympathy. At least he seems to not want to cut my eyeballs out and keep them for a souvenir. Marco still has a look of disgust and distrust on his face –a very bad combination.

“Follow me, Rayne, we're leaving,” Angelo says, clearing his throat.

“W-wh-where are we going?” I stammer.

“To the basement for the moment. I'm sure you'll be more than comfortable down there.”

“The basement?” Enzo questions.

Angelo doesn't wait for an answer, he holds me by the elbow, and we cross the room before any more is said. He slams the door shut behind him, and we walk up a short corridor to another room. When he opens it, the stairs lead down. *He wasn't fucking kidding.*

“Mind your step,” he warns. Even when safety lights come on as we descend, he holds onto me. The stairwell is steep and I really don’t want to be down here all alone.

“Is this to prove you’re serious to the others?” I ask. “You continue to hold me as your prisoner because your pride got in the way?”

His hand grips me tighter, but he says nothing.

At least it’s clean down here, it doesn’t resemble a dungeon, thankfully, but there are still separated rooms with bars on each one and a simple cot with no windows. *Prison cells.*

I shudder, wondering what they usually use this place for.

His eyes glare down at me, and it’s then I realize I’m showing way too much skin in my ripped dress. He pulls the material to cover my flesh as I stare at his angry face.

“You still want me, don’t you?” I taunt. “You want me so much you can’t even stand it.”

He grips my throat with one hand as I challenge him.

“Do it, Angelo,” I whisper.

If he wanted me dead, he would’ve done it by now. Wouldn’t he?

“You think you can taunt me with this fucking body and that smart mouth?” he spits.

I don’t know where this bravado suddenly came from, but I stand my ground. “Can’t I?”

It occurs to me that he wasn’t wrong; I am his weakness, I see it in his eyes.

Like a man scorned, he slides one hand into my dress and cups one breast, his thumb rubbing over one hard nipple as I watch him. I try not to fall victim to his touch, but somehow that’s impossible. *He’s fucking everywhere.*

“You’ll do what you want anyway,” I say, pushing myself further into his hands. “Won’t you, Angelo?”

He licks his lips. “It’s always been my fantasy to tie you up, to be at my mercy while I fuck you. It’s only now though I’ve had the notion to gag you while I do it.”

“I bet that makes you hard,” I whisper, knowing my taunts will displease him, or maybe I’m wrong and they will encourage him further.

He grabs me by the waist suddenly, making me gasp as he pulls me into him, so I can feel his cock as it presses against me.

He steers me backwards until my back hits the stone wall, one hand still in my dress as he caresses me, then he dips down, ripping the remaining material apart.

“Angelo –” It seems my taunting has, in fact, spurred him on.

He rubs my hard peak back and forth. “Is this what you want, *Carina*?”

I murmur under his scorching touch, unable to speak.

He squeezes hard, it’s almost painful, and I cry out with a mix of pleasure and pain.

He bobs his head down, then takes my nipple into his mouth, flicking his tongue back and forth and sucking with his mouth covering my flesh, then he bites. His sweet torment throbs between my legs as he reaches over to my other exposed breast and tugs that nipple hard. He’s harsher than he’s ever been before, and my body craves him, it craves anything he’s got for me.

I’m enjoying his torment more than I should in a sick, weird way. He’s like an addiction I can’t get enough of, nor can I break away from.

“Legs apart,” he barks, biting down again as I mewl with adrenaline as he lets go of my throat.

I move my feet further apart and feel his other hand slide down my thigh, going under the silky hem of my dress and trailing his fingers up to the apex of my thighs. He finds my

sweet spot in a heartbeat and rubs my clit mercilessly. “Jesus, fucking Christ,” he mutters when he feels how wet I am.

I’m ready for him, to say the least, but my mouth still won’t draw any words. It’s sinful and beyond the point of decency, but there is no mistaking that I want it, *I need it*.

“You do fucking want this, don’t you?” he growls against my skin, his fingers playing with my pussy like he’s always owned it.

“Not as much as you.” I push my body into his. I can’t contain my panting and my pleasure at his touch.

He suddenly reaches further down and inserts two fingers inside me. I cry out as he fucks me with them moving rapidly, his eyes burning with desire.

I glance down at his hands, assaulting my body, and my orgasm builds to an explosion as I climax.

I call out, moaning incoherently, but he doesn’t let up, instead, he pumps harder, relentless, and I keep on screaming as my orgasm draws out like it may never end.

He pulls his fingers out roughly and a sick pleasure grows in me as I see his disheveled state.

“How badly do you want my cock?” He tilts my chin up to meet his gaze as he grabs himself.

“So bad,” I stammer, and I do, so much so my legs may give way if I don’t have him now.

“You’ve got no lethal poison on you now, other than that sweet pussy, do you? *Carina*.”

“Angelo, *please*.” My body burns, waiting for him.

“Say you want it.”

“I want it!” I scream.

He snickers and rips my dress entirely apart; I hear the fabric tear.

“I’m not giving you that just yet, *little fox*, but you can suck me off if you want it so much.” I hear him unzip his pants

and watch as he pushes them down with his boxers to his thighs. I voluntarily drop to my knees as he holds his cock and rubs the tip over my mouth.

I lick it as I make the mistake of looking up at him.

His eyes are fiery, scary even as he watches me. One hand fists my hair, and the other holds the base of his cock as he shoves it further into my mouth. I gag as I try to swallow him without choking.

“You look so fucking perfect as my prisoner,” he groans, moving his hips as I swirl my tongue, tasting him, wanting to give in to him so much that it scares me.

His harsh words shoot through me as it's laced with contempt, but it doesn't stop me. His jaw clenches as I suck him harder, and he hits the back of my throat as he cusses down at me.

Suddenly, he yanks me to standing, my breath panting and ragged.

His mouth crashes onto mine and he forces his tongue in my mouth as I gasp. He walks me over to the cot and turns me around. All of a sudden, I hear him rustling around, then I hear the cuffs clink and he pulls them off as they clatter to the floor.

I don't have time to even rub my wrists.

“Put your hands on the mattress and stick your ass out.”

I do as I'm told as he runs a hand down my ass cheek and then gives it a sharp slap. The noise echoes off the walls as I bite my bottom lip. He does it again.

“Every time you defy me and open that cock sucking little mouth of yours when I tell you not to, you'll get your ass smacked,” he says as I bite down on my lip so hard that I taste blood. I've never needed a man so much in my entire life, and this whole violent way he's going about it only thrills me more than I could ever imagine.

Whack.

He smooths my skin where he strikes me and I can feel his dick between my thighs, pulsing, like he can't wait to be inside

me. He's so damn hard, I push back, trying to impale myself.
Whack.

“Oww!” I yelp.

Whack. Whack. Whack.

“Tell me again you fucking hate me,” he demands.

“No!” I call out, that earns me another whack and his hand smooths over my sore and reddening skin.

“You really want to test me, *Carina?*” He runs a hand through my wet folds, and I groan. I'm sopping wet and so ready for him.

“I need your cock, Angelo, that's what I need.”

He leans forward, pulling one nipple hard as I blanch, and whispers, “This is for my pleasure, *little fox.* Not yours.”

Little does he know; I'm enjoying every second of his rough handling.

I can't help it. I'm so pent up with need that the intrusion is a sweet, unwelcome sin.

He suddenly pushes his cock inside me with a grunt, holding my hips so tight I know he'll leave a mark, but I don't care. He moves in and out fast, fucking me hard, as one hand moves to my sore ass cheek and caresses it while he whispers to me in Italian.

I've no clue what he's saying.

He holds me in place with his hips and plunders in and out, digging his fingers into my skin; it's like we can't get close enough. He's gaining back control in the only way he knows how; by taking it.

I come hard, crying out as he pounds me, then moments later, he finds his own release, calling out loudly as I feel him pulse deep within me, losing himself, breathing into my neck as he mutters incoherently.

My body tingles as he stills.

“At least I know your body still wants me,” he murmurs in the aftershock. “At least you don’t seem to be pretending about that.”

He pulls out abruptly and sets me on my feet, though I can barely stand.

“I was never pretending, Angelo,” I whisper, though I doubt he even hears.

He zips up abruptly and then throws a blanket at me from the end of the bed. “Wear this until I get you some clothes.”

He takes off, not even bothering to lock me in my cell.

“Are you just going to leave me here?” I call out, but it falls on deaf ears.

He stomps up the stairs loudly, and I hear the door slam and then it locks at the top.

I slide down the wall and sit there in the dark, ravaged and completely spent.

I weep. Because that seems like the only thing I know how to do anymore.

ANGELO

SO I'M A MAN POSSESSED; THAT MUCH IS ABUNDANTLY TRUE.

My body is on fire, and that quick fuck with my little fox has done nothing but speed up the rage inside me.

I lock her in the basement and go to deal with my brothers and Enzo. I had to get away from her. I give in to her every whim, she's my downfall and she knows it. She's fucking dangerous, and I need to clear my head.

I smooth myself out before I go to face them, not really wanting to display the fact I've just fucked her. The basement is soundproof so they would not have heard us, but they wouldn't have to be geniuses to guess.

The lack of sleep is obviously getting to me, and we have a murder to plot.

I walk back into the room and straight to the liquor cabinet.

"Are you fucking out of your mind bringing her here?" Marco is on my case as soon as I reappear.

"For fucks sake, Marco, where did you want me to take her, the warehouse?"

Dante snickers. I've almost had enough of his shit, too.

That reminds me. "Don't try and stick up for her again," I warn Enzo. "I fucking mean it."

"Nice going, handcuffing an innocent woman," he goes on, ignoring me. "I've seen you do some shit in my time, but this

takes the cake.”

I know he’s right. I know I’m directing my rage at the wrong person; I should be directing it at my enemies, and in many ways Rayne is innocent. She did what any one of us would do.

I just don’t know how to go back.

“Shut the fuck up,” I bark. “You’ve done enough.”

“Taking her to Falmouth is one thing.” Marco shakes his head. “But here?”

“Don’t tell me you plan on keeping her down there?” Dante splutters. “In that get up? In that cold fucking cell?”

Of course, I’m not going to keep her there, but they don’t know that.

I turn on him. “Keep your fucking eyes in your head, little brother, or I’ll cut them out with my knife and serve you them for supper.”

Dante laughs, shaking his head like I’ve lost it, and maybe I have.

“It’s been a big night.” Enzo tries to reason; he’s always been like this. I usually admire his self-control and eerie calmness, but even I’ve had enough for one night. “We have approximately twenty-four hours to work out what we’re doing next and where we go from here.”

“What’s the plan?” Marco assesses me with an expression I don’t like.

“Wait where the fuck is Fynn?” I bark.

“Got held up at Ma’s,” Dante answers. “He went back to the house with Ma and Valentina. Jonas is with him.”

I run a hand through my hair. “When will Rocco and Santino be back?”

Marco slides his gaze to mine. “They’ll be back at the warehouse before dawn.”

“Good.”

“That’s it?” Marco shakes his head. “So, we’re just gonna let her sleep it off in the basement, and then what?”

“Then we seek our revenge,” I say, clutching the tumbler, feeling the need to drown my sorrows even more than usual. “It’ll be a challenge, considering I’ll be dead.”

Dante looks up as he and Enzo share a glance. “What are you saying?” he asks.

“I’m saying, we’ll go through with the plan and let them think she succeeded.”

Marco stands, unable to bear it any longer. “Have you lost your mind?”

I stand tall as I gaze over at him. I know he cares and is protective of me, of us all, but even he knows this has to happen. It’s the perfect plan.

“Not quite yet, but it will unnerve our enemies, draw them out of the shadows. After all, to catch the big fish, you have to wheedle out the pond scum first.”

“What we need to do is take out the rest of Rombaldi’s men,” Marco shouts. “Not sit here playing dress-ups because you’ve lost your marbles.”

I smirk. “Don’t look so sullen, Marco. It’s only make-believe, I won’t really be dead.”

Marco shakes his head. “Am I the only one here taking this fucking seriously?” He turns to the others.

Enzo frowns. “He does have a point, Marco, think about it. If Angelo is dead, the shift for power will move swiftly. Our enemies will emerge from the shadows like leeches. The question is, do we have enough manpower to keep them at bay?”

“We have a whole fucking army,” I remind him. “Darko and Dom will be ready as well.”

My head soldiers, they are all over this city.

“I don’t like it,” Marco mumbles.

“You may not like it, but it has to be done, and it’ll give me time to work out where Mia is.”

Enzo looks at me sharply. “You plan on rescuing her, right?”

I pull the lapels on my jacket, straightening myself out. “I gave my word.”

“To a fucking liar!” Marco shouts. “You owe her nothing, Angelo.”

I turn my gaze on him. “They’ll sell her, Marco. To a prostitution ring in the Middle East, and that’ll be that. Does that sound like something Ma would be proud to know that I let happen, given everything?”

He looks murderous. “Fuck her sister. I don’t fucking care.”

“Well, you should,” I reiterate. “It’s those scumbags who steal, rape, and fuck with my city that let it slide into the cesspit it once was. I won’t ever let that happen again. We don’t kill innocents.”

He looks away, although I see the resolve in his eyes. My brothers and I made a pact a long time ago. We may be ruthless killers, but we will not become scum. We do not kill the innocent just because we can.

What if it were your sister, Angelo? What if it were Valentina?

I bristle at Rayne’s earlier words, which sends a cold chill right through me.

“I’ll call you the minute Rocco and Santino get in,” Enzo says as they all observe me, waiting for me to crack.

I don’t give them the satisfaction.

“Finally.” I give them a shit-eating grin. “Someone came to work today.”

I'm a thief in the night.

I laid on my bed for a while, it's not lavish here by any means, but it's still comfortable since I spend a lot of time here, especially when a crisis occurs and things are in lockdown. I stare at the ceiling, realizing I have to go and see her. She has had no food, only water, and while I've got the controlled thermostat on so she won't freeze, my mind ticks over with what she's thinking.

I wait until it's utterly still in the house. It's four am.

Going to the fridge, I take out some leftover pasta. Grabbing a pillow and one of my hoodies, I venture downstairs.

She's where I fucking left her over by the cot, curled up asleep on the mattress wrapped in the blanket, her dress still torn apart on the floor.

Her long, glorious curls are splayed out on the pillow like spun gold. Even like this, underneath nothing but a blanket and the marks I left on her, she's regal.

I sit on the edge of the bed as she jolts suddenly.

"It's me," I hiss.

She clutches one hand to her chest as she curls her legs under her into a ball. "You scared the shit out of me."

"I brought you some..."

She looks down at what I'm holding.

"You didn't eat much at the Gala," I go on.

I pass her the bowl of pasta, and she looks at it tentatively.

"It's not poisoned," I sigh; oh, the irony.

Her eyes flick to mine in the dark as my lips curl up. "Eat; you need to keep up your strength."

It delights me when she does just that.

"You understand why I'm doing this, don't you?" I go on.

"You're asserting your authority over me to show your family you're not weak," she says.

My gaze snaps to hers. “You would’ve made an excellent soldier,” I muse. “Maybe you’re in the wrong line of work, you could be my secret weapon.”

She swallows hard, watching me like a hawk, like I may snap at any moment. Little does she know, I rarely lose my cool, and when I do, it’ll be with her riding my cock.

“Are you offering me a job?” She stuffs more pasta into her mouth.

Am I?

“You could be instrumental.”

“Not just as your plaything?”

“Look at it this way, I will be dead by the next dawn, *little fox*. That means you’re very much in charge.”

She stops eating. “What do you mean?”

I turn to her. “I need that strong, sexy, fucking beautiful, fearless woman I know,” I tell her. “I need her back. In order to find Mia and kill the ones who wish me dead, we have to play the game, and we have to be smarter than they are, outwit them, so they never see our attack coming.”

“What do you have in mind?”

“You now work for me.”

Her eyes go wide. “I do?”

Why not. She belongs to me.

“Yes, and I can teach you.”

She slowly begins to eat again.

“I’m working it out with the others,” I go on. “But as I said, we all have our parts to play in this, including you, and in order to do that, you have to be ready.”

“Ready to kill?”

We stare at each other in the dim light. I have to put my feelings aside, but it’s so damn difficult. I care about her. I don’t want her to get hurt...

“Yes.”

She nods.

“That doesn’t scare you?”

She shakes her head. “At one point, I’d have said yes.”

“And now?”

“And now things have changed. Everything has changed, including my perception of the world.”

Ah, that. The moral compass.

“If it makes you feel any better, letting go of any emotional attachment helps.”

“Is that why you’re the way you are?” Her eyes look sad when she says it.

My heart beats faster in my chest at her question; she confounds me at every turn.

“Maybe.”

“Were you always like this?”

I nod. “Yes. And that’s why I should have stayed away from you initially, but you reeled me in.”

I go to reach for her, but I stop. She sees and looks down at her lap.

“So that’s it, for us?”

Shut. Her. Down.

“I didn’t say that. You don’t seem to understand what I’m saying.” My lips twitch at her innocence.

She frowns. “What are you saying, exactly?”

“You’re my prisoner, *little fox*. And now you work for me. There is no *us*.”

She stares at me wordlessly.

“We have to work together to find the answers, and I’ll help you stay alive. That’s the only deal I have on the table.

You can take it or leave it.” I go to stand. I’ve had enough of this conversation and her getting under my skin.

“What about in your bed?” she fires back.

I smirk, my back to her. “I’ll do what I want with you. That was the deal. You agreed to do anything I said.”

“Are you going to kill me? When this is over?”

My heart beats so loud in my chest that I’m sure she can hear it.

I turn back and reach to her, touching her chin as she stares at me in the darkness. The sight of her tear-streaked face constricts deep in my chest, and I do everything I can to push the feeling aside. She knows she is at my mercy; we both know it.

“You’re much too precious to want to kill, and besides, you’re useful for the moment. I can use you to my advantage.”

She shakes her head, it’s like she can see right into my twisted, black soul. “You’re mad because I got this close, aren’t you?”

No. I’m fucking impressed.

“Your loyalty is admirable, but you got a little sloppy, and I intend to rectify that immediately. You want to be the queen, don’t you? To defeat those who have hurt Mia when the time comes? I can teach you that.”

She looks away, thinking about what I’ve said. She’s still angelic even in this moonlight with tired eyes, smeared makeup, and messy hair. I still fucking adore her and it’s to my own detriment.

“We’re all damned in the end,” she whispers.

I hold her chin more firmly as she looks back at me. “You’re nothing like me, *Carina*. Be thankful for that, because by the time I’m done with you, you’ll no longer wonder who the real monster really is.”

“You truly have no mercy,” she says, shaking her head. “They were right.”

I smirk. “There is no happily ever after, not for any of us.”

“No truer words have been spoken.”

I let go of her as I step back. “You should get some rest.”

“Oh, thanks, I’ll see what I can do.” Sarcasm drips off her tone.

I lean down to her ear. “Something tells me you like those handcuffs more than you care to admit.”

Her chest rises and falls sharply, much to my delight. *She’s still affected by me.*

I think about our fuck session earlier and guilt hits me from all angles. *I fucked her here. In this horrible, stinking place. She belongs in my bed...*

I can’t. If I let her up into my wing, she could...

“I’m sorry,” she whispers suddenly, my gaze shifting back to hers. “For what it’s worth. I’m truly sorry. If we’d have met under...” She laughs. “Who am I kidding? Would you honestly have looked twice at me if I wasn’t working for you and acting like a whore?”

My anger bubbles again. “I’ve never, ever, thought of you as a whore, *Carina*,” I whisper. “I never want to hear that word come out of your mouth ever again.”

I grab the hoodie and throw it at her. “Put this on.”

“I’m fine.”

“Stop being stubborn and I might let you out of here.”

Her eyes go wide as she puts the bowl aside and reaches for the hoodie, the blanket slipping away as her breasts and her torso come into view. I reach for her hand, stopping her.

Her wrists are red and sore. I tear back the blanket and frown. She has marks on her hips; I put them there. I hurt her.

I close my eyes.

As if reading my mind, her hand reaches to my face and she runs her fingers over my stubble, my cock as hard as a

rock as I try to fight the fire between us. *This is going to fucking kill me.*

“I hurt you.” It’s not a question.

“I hurt you,” she fires back.

My lips curl up, and I crouch down, touching her skin where she’s sore and bruised lightly.

“I’ll fucking kill every last one of them for you,” I whisper, one hand cupping her breast as she stares at me. “I’ll make them wish they never even heard your name.”

She nods, with fear in her eyes but also something else.

“I want that,” she whispers. “I want it so damn much.”

I nod. “And so you will have it.”

I pull the hoodie over her head, it hangs to her knees. I take her hand in mine and haul her off the cot.

She follows beside me barefoot as we leave the basement.

Not for the first time, I wonder what I’m doing. Why don’t I just keep her down here? How I can so easily overlook what she’s done...but the reasonable part of me knows that I’m a fool to believe that she’s a killer.

We walk silently up the stairs to my quarters, her hand cold in mine as my hoodie dwarfs her petite frame.

I don’t need to tell her not to leave this room, she knows.

When we get to my bedroom, I push the code in and she steps inside. The urgency to take her up against this fucking wall and all over my bedroom almost engulfs me. Instead, I motion to the bed. She slides beneath the covers as I walk to the huge, ornate windows.

It looks out onto the grounds, the forest looks eerie in the darkened abyss of trees.

The full moon shines through the tree tops overhead, casting its glow on everything below.

In the darkest parts of my heart, if you could even call it that, I still want to know what makes her tick. I want to see

what she'll do with this power. I see her reflection in the glass. Behind me, she lays down, her eyes closing as I stare at her silhouette.

I tap my fingers on the glass and promise that I will have more than one heart on a platter for this; in fact, I look forward to it.

I also have to consult with Mario before I make any more plans. He has to know.

I turn and walk toward the bed, watching her small frame in my giant bed, her breathing lulls as she falls asleep.

I know to the core of me, like the sweet poison that almost ran through my veins, I know I will have my revenge. I will always have the last word and they won't know what's hit them.

It's the one thing I'm good at and the one thing I know how to do precisely.

I'll do it, for her. I'll kill them all.

The Fortress fit for a Queen.

ANGELO

I BARELY SLEEP A WINK IN THE FEW HOURS LEFT OF THE NIGHT from hell.

A part of me questions why I brought her up here, but another part of me knows why.

Despite everything she's done, her loyalty to her family resonates with me. The only family she has left. The one thing she didn't lie about was her parents being dead. I know all about that feeling, there's not a day that goes by without thinking of my father and the last day I spent with him. I've had to step up and be the man of the house from an early age after losing him. So I understand her instinct to protect, to want to fight, even when the odds seem impossible.

I have a hot shower while she still sleeps, the steam filling the room quickly as I think about all I have to do today. First, I have to check in with Mario and let him know everything. Second, I have to make a plan with my brothers, Enzo, and my soldiers. We all need to be on the same page.

When I get out of the shower, Rayne stirs as I amble out in my towel to my walk-in closet.

“Good morning,” I say, passing her by. She rubs her eyes and yawns. Yeah, being drugged does kinda have that effect, but I don't regret my decision. “Sleep well?”

I hear the sheets crumple as she sits up, still dressed in my hoodie from last night.

“It's better than the dungeon.”

I snort. “Right.”

She clutches the sheets under her armpits. I drop my towel and pull on some fresh boxer briefs and a pair of jeans. I turn, and I feel Rayne staring at me.

“Enjoying the show?”

“I’ve never seen you in anything except a suit,” she says.

“It’s Sunday,” I say by way of explanation. “I’ll organize coffee and breakfast, but you’re not to leave my quarters.”

Our eyes meet across the room as she takes in my words. “Am I really your prisoner?”

“I told you that last night, don’t make me repeat myself.”

Why the fuck does she have to look so ravishing, even in my fucking hoodie with her hair all messed up, tangled in my sheets.

“When are we going to...”

I snicker. “Can’t wait to off me, huh? Don’t worry, *Carina*, you will get your chance.”

She sighs loudly, just to piss me off. “So, you’re going out?”

“Looks like it. I have a death to plot and a funeral to plan.” I can’t help the mocking notion in my voice. This just fucking creeps me out. “If you have any suggestions on the color of the casket, then be sure to let me know when I return.”

She looks at me like she fucking hates me. *Good. Get to know that feeling, sweetheart, because the road that we’re going down is dark and unforgiving.*

I pull on a long-sleeved fitted shirt and run my hands through my wet hair.

“Can I ask where my phone is?” she says, as I pull on some socks and black boots.

“Enzo has it.”

“What if they call me?”

“Enzo will be downstairs. If a call comes through, then he will come up to you.”

“So I can’t leave this room?” I don’t know why she acts surprised. I don’t know what she thinks we’re doing here.

“As I said, coffee and breakfast will be brought to you. If you leave this room and I have to come back, then the deal is off.”

I steel my jaw as she closes her mouth.

Despite what she thinks, I’m far from enjoying this. I fucking hate it.

I fucked her heated and angry last night, and I don’t know what to make of it. Sure, it was hot being with her again, but the dynamics have changed. I think I honestly liked it better when she wasn’t trying to kill me.

“I’ll be back in a few hours,” I say, not that she should get an explanation. “There’s a television and some books to keep you company. I’ll have some clothes and sleepwear delivered to you shortly. After this, we will be going back to the country.”

“After this meaning, when you’re ‘dead’?”

I can’t help the quirk of my lips. “Precisely.”

“Where exactly were we last night?”

“You ask a lot of questions.”

“It’s not like I can go anywhere.”

“Then why do you need to know?”

She shrugs, looking down at the mattress. “It was nice there. I could hear the ocean.”

Nice? This woman astounds me. I drugged her, tied her to my bed, interrogated her before giving her an orgasm, and she likes the fucking ocean?

I hide my smile, but I’m not surprised. Those few that have had the privilege of going to my home in Falmouth have always said the same thing; it’s like a sanctuary. It’s not

something you can put a monetary value on; it has that feeling of contentment and utter peace.

There is something about my house that crosses between ethereal and country. The trees lining the property, the cliff overlooking the ocean, and the sky that never seems to stop changing color.

I always dreamed that if I ever had a family, then that is the place I would decide to call home permanently. That obviously fizzled out when I lost my wife and child, and I rarely ever go out there anymore. Sometimes there's just too much fucking peace and quiet.

"Falmouth," I reply curtly. I give her one last glance before crossing the room and closing the door abruptly. It locks automatically behind me, so she's not going anywhere fast.

I've never run from a woman. Yet like everything with this infuriating belladonna, she's weeded her way into my soul and cast her tentacles everywhere. And what's more, they fucking choke me.

The monster in me should cut her throat and end this madness once and for all, but I know I can't. I know that I will never harm her. I know that even though she's betrayed me, I'd still take a bullet for her if it came down to it. All the while, I'm still battling with these demons that consume me every single day and night.

Getting under my skin was the easy part, getting out from under it is proving a little more complicated.

I descend the stairs and see Enzo waiting in the lobby with Gus and Darko. I give them a curt nod.

"Got your text," I say to Enzo.

"They've got the associate at the warehouse."

"Has he talked yet?"

Enzo shakes his head. "Rocco didn't want to do too much until you get there. Needless to say, it stinks of Russian territory."

I nod. “I have to go see Mario, then I’ll head over there in an hour.”

“All right,” he says.

Darko stays silent as I cast my gaze on him. “I take it you’re up to speed on where we’re at?”

He nods. “We’re ready, boss.”

I saved Darko from a life of poverty about fifteen years ago, and he’s been my loyal subject ever since. Though he never has much to say for himself, he’s never let me down. My other man, Dom, my personal bodyguard, I’ve decided to assign him to Allegra for now. She deserves protection just as much as any of us until this is finally over.

I glance at my watch. “I have to go. Text me if there’s any update at the warehouse.” Enzo nods as I turn and point at him over my shoulder. “And she’s not to leave my suite, understand?”

“Got it.”

I know Enzo’s grown fond of her in a short space of time, and I don’t like it one bit. Under normal circumstances, your woman getting along with your best friend is the ideal situation and something I’d encourage, but these aren’t normal times and even further from normal circumstances.

I leave and have Gus drive me to the hospital.

The last thing I want to do is stress Mario out, but he has to know what’s going on and I have to be the one to tell him.

He’s awake when I enter his room, the TV blaring loudly like the man’s half deaf.

He brightens when I see him.

“Angelo, this is unexpected,” he says, reaching for the remote control and immediately turning the TV off.

I hand him the coffee I picked up on the way because he wouldn’t have had a decent cup since the last time I was here. “How are you feeling?”

It's the dreaded question, and he'll always tell me he's feeling good even when he isn't.

"I'm good. You just missed Allegra," he says as I take a seat. *Speak of the devil.*

I raise a brow. I haven't told Mario about what happened with her indecent proposal, and I haven't heard from her since. "That's a shame," I reply.

He studies my face. "Rough night?"

"You could say that."

"Gotta be a broad."

"We have a situation."

He takes a sip of his coffee before I go on. "I'm listening."

"The girl I've been seeing, the one I told you about."

"Yes, I remember."

"It turns out she's working against me."

He glances up at me but says nothing.

"I found out she's being bribed; her sister has been held for ransom in exchange for information on me which then turned more sinister. She hired Enzo to try and find out who her sister's captors are. It seems whomever these people are, they're going to awfully great lengths to stay hidden."

"And you have no leads on who it may be?"

"The Russians, we think. At first, it looked like it could have been from Rombaldi's camp, being he got taken out after the raid, but my guys followed one of the associates doing the dirty work and he went into Russian territory. He's being held at the warehouse."

Mario's brow furrows further. "Petrov and his men have had it coming with the illegal gaming and the underground fights they've been organizing. This is just another ploy to try and whack you for good. Taking over our empire has always been their number one goal. It's nothing new."

“It’d take more than ending my life for them to take over. Marco has been the underboss for quite some time,” I remind him. “Our family and connections are strong. I have the police and politicians in my pocket. Mario, there are people in this town who owe me, and I won’t be made a fool of.”

“So, prove it. Find out who did this and end them.”

“I plan on doing just that.” I walk to the window and stare out at the grounds. At least the old man has a decent view while he lies here day after day.

“And the girl? What will you do with her?”

I watch the people below, strolling around the garden dressed in hospital gowns. I wonder if Mario will ever leave this place. It seems unlikely, and I know I’ve been avoiding thinking about it. He’s always been around. A constant in my life, especially after my father and then Roberto died. We became even closer. I can’t imagine losing him, but this disease seems to have other ideas.

“I haven’t decided yet.”

He begins to cough and wheeze as he tries to sit up. I rush over to him, helping him sit up and adjusting his pillows. He clutches onto my wrist.

“Don’t let the woman make a bigger fool of you. You know what you have to do.”

I stare at him, his weathered face stern, just like my father’s.

“It’s not that simple, Mario.”

He pulls me to him and shakes me. “Have you forgotten who you are?”

I stare down at him, my eyes just as fierce. “I’m everything you taught me to be. You played a part in creating this monster. Take a look, didn’t I make you proud?”

His chest wheezes again as he struggles to hold onto me. “You’re like a son to me,” he says. “When Roberto was taken, my focus shifted to you, Angelo. But if you keep this girl

alive, that makes you look weak. Those that betray the Medici family all pay the ultimate price, it's what we stand for."

I'm not going to kill her.

"I'll deal with her in due course," I tell him. "You don't need to worry about that. You, of all people, know I will do whatever it takes to keep this family safe, that will never change."

"Does that include yourself?"

"Don't worry about me."

He assesses my face and doesn't look convinced. "She played you, didn't she?"

"I know what I'm doing," I say, but he can see straight through me. There is no point denying it. "She's innocent in many ways."

"Angelo. Beautiful women come and go, it's part of being the Don. They will flock to you. The danger, the power, all of it excites them. Women are the devil, make no mistake, they will weaken you at every turn."

"This wasn't like that," I mutter, instantly regretting it. He lets go of my sleeve and I take a step back. "I believed she was different. I believed a lie."

I know I sound weak, and he won't appreciate that, but at times like this I feel nobody can reach me. This burden is my cross to bear and I have to figure it out on my own.

Ultimately, I will deal with the problem. I just don't know what I'm going to do with said problem right at this minute.

He stares at me like I've lost my mind. Yes, it's been a long time since a woman has had me wound this tight, and we both know it. After Mario lost his wife, Gloria, to cancer a few years ago, it was the final blow. I've never seen a man go gray overnight, but women have the knack of bringing you to your knees, and Gloria was a good woman. The perfect mafia wife. She looked the other way and never asked questions. Losing Roberto was hard on both of them, especially only being blessed with one child.

“You’re old enough now to know what to do for yourself. You know what has to be done, and I am confident you’ll see it through. I know you, but I don’t know this look on your face right now, Angelo. That’s the part that’s scaring me the most.”

“I’m in a dilemma,” I say honestly. “On the one hand, I should let her sister rot wherever they are holding her, who is she to me? On the other, she’s an innocent and could be sold to the sex trade, the very same racket we just busted wide open, and I can’t let that happen.”

He smirks. “You know, Roberto wore his heart on his sleeve, you’re more guarded.”

I look at him sharply. “I don’t disagree, but I separate myself from other madmen who kill for the sake of killing because I wanted change in this city. My mother...” I trail off.

He nods. “I know, son, we each have our crosses to bear. Every last one of us will suffer for our sins. Our mercy will be what defines us from those who have already given their souls over to the devil. You’re the Don now. You’re a ruthless man, but killing innocents will only plague your mind until it rots your bones.” I know he speaks from experience. We’ve all done things we aren’t proud of, even him. “The Familia will respect you more for your leniency, that’s if you truly believe she’s innocent. You can’t win the hearts of the people of this city when your morals are shady. Your ruthlessness can be better displayed on those who cross us and continue to plot and scheme in the underworld.”

“I have the Russians under control. For the moment.”

He snorts. “Since when has Aleksi Petrov ever been under control?”

“Since his involvement in plotting my death looks imminent. I have to get to the warehouse soon and find out all I can. A war is coming; make no mistake, the blood of those who continue to conspire against the Medicis will flow into the Charles.” I straighten, knowing that the words I speak are the truth. *This is who I am.* The poison to kill runs in my veins and it runs deep. Ever since my father... “I have Rayne held prisoner. She’s mine now, I need her to be the middleman to

get to the other side. Enzo's tracing has come up blank, so it seems like they're going to great lengths to protect who they are. Depending on what happens at the warehouse, things could get better or worse."

"I'm sure you'll get to the bottom of it."

"In order to get what I want, I need to take desperate measures."

"Sounds like a bad pick-up line."

My lips twitch. "Something like that."

"If this woman wanted you dead, and I'm glad she didn't succeed obviously, then what does this mean for the Medici family? Where do you plan on going with this?"

"I have to fake my own death," I say as our eyes meet.

A slow, menacing smile creeps on his face. His eyes glow with excitement. "You've got to be fucking kidding me?"

"I wish I were."

He takes another sip of his coffee as he digests what I've told him.

"How will you do it?"

"She'll go through with the plan, we'll make it look real for the tabloids, and I'll stay out of sight. Our enemies will soon enough show their faces."

"That's risky, Angelo. The vultures will swoop in fast."

"So let them."

"If they think you're gone..."

"Then they'll try to move in, I've got an army of men that will fight the fight. It will be the perfect opportunity to sweep through the city and flush out more corrupt politicians and the constabulary who think they're no longer on my payroll. It'll show who's loyal to us and who isn't. I don't know why I didn't think of this sooner."

He rubs his chin gravely. "It's a bad omen to fake your own death."

I rest a hand on his shoulder. “You worry too much, Uncle. I’ve lived a thousand lives in this short space of time. I’m not afraid, everything I’ve built up for this city is for the Familia,” I go on. “So we can all have a better life, so nobody has to struggle. If we control the streets, it means we control the people. We can have this city where we want it. Crime rates have dropped because we own the drug trade, we call the shots. Illegal prostitution has all but ceased because we put provisions in place to keep a standard in the clubs and bars and flush out children and underage girls. I control corruption because I set the benchmark. I make the police commissioner look good, the mayor, the governor; they all breathe air because I allow them to. If we can weed out every other slimy piece of filth that lays in wait, ready to strike while they think the crime family of Boston is down and out, we could finally have the city that we always dreamed of.”

He wheezes again as he looks up at me, pride in his eyes. “You keep Roberto’s memory alive, Angelo. You’ve never taken your eyes off the prize, even when you didn’t want the job.”

This is the only man I love and respect, like a father. “It’s because you taught me,” I say. “Everything I do is to make you proud, you know that.”

He grins. His face is sallow and gray, but the spark in his eyes, that you can’t deny. He’s dying. I have to deal with that at some point. Right now, I can’t imagine a world without him in it.

“You sound like I’m already six feet under. Rest assured, Angelo, I will die a happy man knowing that the right man is taking the Familia exactly where it needs to go. I’ve done all I can do here. You can do this without me.”

A lump forms in my throat. “Don’t go talking like that...”

He waves me off. “Go. Spill the blood of those who have turned against us. With each minute you lose, the enemy closes in, and that’s time we do not have to lose.”

I nod my head, removing my hand from his frail body.

“I’ll give you a full report when we’re done at the warehouse.”

“It’s what I live for,” he replies with a wink. “Pardon the pun.”

I walk to the door and look back at him, his eyes are already closed.

Enduring a world without my mentor in it will be difficult, but the burden is mine and mine alone.

He’s right. The Familia comes first, which is why I need to get to the warehouse and get some answers.

I have approximately eighteen hours until I’m officially dead. Time’s a-wasting.

RAYNE

SOMEWHERE DEEP IN MY SUBCONSCIOUS, I'M AWARE THAT I could have made a very big mistake in not injecting Angelo with poison when I had the chance, and this whole thing could still blow up in my face. Not that I ever wanted to kill him.

But, the fact of the matter is, they could just be saying they will help me get Mia back to save their own hides and get their revenge. They could be using me, leaving Mia to rot in hell and throwing me to the wolves when they're done.

Let's face it, I'm not surrounded by all these great gallant men who will protect me. Marco looks like he's going to strangle me the minute he gets me alone. But what did I expect? They are a crime family, born to kill, and they will stop at nothing to get what they want.

I'm surprised, in some respects, that I'm still breathing. I should be thankful that I may even get to see this through to the end.

I have to play it smart. I have to have some sort of game plan of my own, I just don't know what that is yet.

I do know that I'm not a killer, even for Mia. As much as it would pain me to lose her, taking another life was never the answer.

Now, I've nowhere to go and I'm locked in Angelo's Fortress like a prisoner.

Everything feels like a war raging against me, and there are so many questions swirling around in my head. The main ones being; are Mia's captors even going to hand her over?

And why do they want Angelo dead so badly? Aside from him being the Boston Kingpin, this feels more than just revenge, it feels personal.

Again, I have zero answers and my head may explode from all the could-be scenarios I conjure up in the few hours I've adequately been lucid.

My brain isn't exactly keeping up with anything since being drugged. The after-effects are only just wearing off and having little to no sleep in the last twenty-four hours has rendered me fairly useless.

The stress over Mia eats away at me, I *should* be doing something. Being locked up in Angelo's bedroom at Fortress as his prisoner isn't helping matters, especially after what we did. How he was with me in the basement...more to the point how disgusted I should be with myself and how little I actually feel. Though that's a lie, I do feel something, numbness.

I wasn't expecting to be let out on the street to roam free or anything, but locking me in here seems a little pointless. I need to be doing something. Maybe that's what he's afraid of.

At least Enzo seems to have somewhat of a soft spot for me, if I can even call it that, or maybe he's just a reasonable person and can see sense. At least he stuck up for me.

I have seen, on more than one occasion, that he genuinely seems to be on my side. He did try to stop Marco from jumping across the table and choking me, that has to count for something, surely. I can't blame Marco for being mad, not one bit, but they also need to take their heads out of their asses and see things from my side.

Mia and I are the innocent ones here. She's the one who got kidnapped, for heaven's sake. I'm the one who got roped into this just because I work for the Medici family, and I'm apparently Angelo's 'type'.

At one point in time, that may have been a compliment, now, it just feels like a foregone conclusion. And what's more, I still continue to let him do what he wants to me, pushing all my feelings aside because a deep, dark part of me wants it,

craves it, fucking needs it. I'm so far down the rabbit hole that I fear I may never return.

I think about Marco and his loyalty to his brother, the anger in his eyes, the rage in his face. It's exactly what I feel for Mia. What Marco should be doing is directing all his anger towards helping me find these fuckers and having done with them all. Even though I couldn't murder Angelo, a part of me believes I would gladly pull the trigger when it comes to those that have hurt my sister. What's more, I'll feel no remorse.

I register nothing when I hear a light knock at the door. I managed to fall back asleep for a little while after Angelo left, but I feel anything but refreshed. I slide off the bed and walk over to the door.

It doesn't exactly surprise me to see Enzo standing there, but what does surprise me is when I glance down at the tray he's holding with breakfast and a steaming mug of coffee. The smell alone delights my senses, and I creak the door back, spreading some light in from the window down the hallway.

"I thought you might need some fuel," he says tentatively. "May I come in?"

I nod and open the door the whole way back. He walks over and places the tray on the side table against the wall.

"Are you okay?" He raises an eyebrow as he turns to look at me.

I haven't looked in the mirror lately, but I can only imagine how disastrous I appear right now. And I'm still dressed in Angelo's hoodie.

I don't know where to start with that answer. "I'm as good as I can be, considering the alternatives," I reply wearily.

I want to dismiss him and tell him that I need to be alone, but I realize that Enzo has been the only one who has shown me kindness in all of this. Even now. I realize he genuinely is a good guy. Deadly, perhaps, but at least he has some compassion. Not like his boss and best friend...

Fear runs through me at every turn for my sister and this entire situation, though I try to hide it.

As much as I want to collapse and scream the house down, I must maintain the illusion that I'm strong and capable. I have to show strength and try to believe that this won't break me, that *they* won't break me. I won't let them.

I will have to deal with the emotional trauma later. I'm not unaccustomed to that either. I did it once when my parents died, I will do it again.

Enzo walks toward me. "For what it's worth, I'm sorry, Rayne, for this whole business, for my part in the deception. I didn't want it to be this way, you must know that," he says.

I look down at my hands as I sit on the unmade bed and try not to wince at his words. "It's kind of uncanny when you think about it," I muse, knowing it's probably the lack of sleep, dehydration, and utter exhaustion that makes me blurt out things I wouldn't ordinarily say.

"What is?" he asks, leaning on the bedpost.

"Finding you, running into you the way I did, of all the private investigators in the world I could have hired, and it turned out to be Angelo's best friend."

"Trust me, I was just as surprised as you were when I found out."

"At least you appear to believe me. I can't say much for the others." I walk over to the tray and take the coffee cup in my hands, taking a sip and then another. It's like liquid gold, hitting me from all sides. I resist the urge to moan.

"I do believe you," he says. "Even when you gave me a fake name, I knew for the most part what you were saying was true. It's unfortunate you're even in this situation just from association and being an employee of Medici Gallery. The whole fucking thing is off the charts. Like a bad soap opera, but worse somehow."

"Yes, well, unfortunate is definitely one word for it," I concede. "Wrong place at the wrong time and all of that, I have to wonder how I could be that unlucky."

"I guess whomever it was saw an opportunity. That's how it works; bring in a beautiful young woman to seduce the

wayward bachelor mob boss. Kind of has a ring to it, wouldn't you say?"

"That's not exactly how it went down." I do my best to explain. "But I suppose, for all intents and purposes, it's true enough."

Enzo smirks. "Can I be frank with you?"

I raise an eyebrow, "Do I really have a choice?"

"You're not my prisoner, Rayne, I'll leave that up to Angelo, though it hardly looks like the punishment he usually uses for detainees. I will say this; I have never seen him look at a woman the way he looks at you. That could be some saving grace for you in all of this. In time, he may come around. He will see reason. He knows as much as I do that you're innocent."

I swallow hard and glance at him and see the ghost of a smile on his lips. "I suppose things could be worse," I say. "He could have left me in the dungeon, after all. But all I can think about is Mia. You've no idea, Enzo, she's just so young and innocent in the world. If anything happens to her" I trail off. I feel so broken, so much unrest settles within me as I perch back on the bed, clutching the mug.

"We're going to do everything we can, you have to believe that." He sounds sincere.

My eyes flick to his, and his words are strangely reassuring. I really want to believe him.

"How do I even know that is true?" I whisper. "Marco wants to murder me; God knows what the others will do. There's a long line of Medici family members wanting their revenge on me. Where does that leave me when this is over? I've nowhere else to run."

"Angelo gave you his word, didn't he?"

I stare off into the distance. "That he'd get Mia back. Not that he'd spare me, and I accept that. I just need Mia safe."

He folds his arms over his chest. "There's no two ways about it. If Angelo said he'd get Mia back, he will. As for the

rest, that's up to you. I know he feels betrayed, hell, I shouldn't even be saying this, but I've seen the other side of the coin. I've seen what you mean to him, and I know him better than anyone."

I glance at him. "You know I would never have done it, don't you?"

He nods, watching me carefully. "Yes. I do."

"The fact is none of you owe me anything. That's the truth."

He runs his fingers through his hair. "When all this is through with finding her, and we will find her, Rayne, you may just be the very key we needed to defeat our enemies. This is how it goes in our world. I wouldn't say that we owe you nothing for that. Besides, you should know by now that sometimes the devil in front of you, may not be the worst monster in the room."

"Better the devil you know, right?"

"Something like that."

"I was never expecting knights in shining armor."

He gives me the side-eye. "Were we ever that?" He snorts. "On the other hand, the Familia also have a reputation to uphold. It's Mario's legacy, Angelo's Uncle. And Angelo will not let years of planning and preparation go to waste, and this is the perfect opportunity to execute it; a clean sweep of the city, restoring faith in the people, making them feel safe again."

"I always thought the mob were just ruthless killers," I say. "Not people you want to mess with. You almost make it sound like you're the good guys."

"Well, we aren't always the bad guys, Rayne, despite what you think. I'm not saying we're angels, but Angelo has never killed in cold blood. There is a purpose behind everything he does. Just hold on, that's all I ask."

I swallow hard. It's like he's trying to convey something, but he can't say too much.

I nod because I have no words to give.

“I’ll leave you with it then.” He nods over to the tray. “You should eat something, keep your strength up.”

“Thank you,” I reply. “For the breakfast, it’s nice to know someone still wants me alive, at least for the moment.”

He smiles ruefully. “Touché’.”

He makes his way to the door but barely gets through it when someone comes barreling through, almost bowling him over. It takes me a second to realize it’s Valentina, her long dark hair swirling around her shoulders. Her hands on her hips, she’s glaring at the both of us, eyeballing us with equal amounts of annoyance.

Enzo immediately turns to me and shakes his head in an awkward gesture. Something tells me that Valentina doesn’t know anything about what’s going to happen to her brother...

“What’s going on, Enzo? Fynn said there have been some issues after the Gala. Is everything all right Rayne, are you okay?” Her dark eyes switch to mine and then Enzo. They share a passive look that I can’t quite understand.

“Cool it, Valentina, everything’s fine, there’s nothing to worry about,” he says.

She shakes her head, and her eyes dip to his mouth for half a second.

I watch them with curiosity.

“Where’s Angelo?” she demands. I can see where she gets her feistiness from. She is pissed.

“He’s visiting Mario. And you’re on a need-to-know basis, didn’t he tell you to stay at your Ma’s?”

She completely ignores him. “The rumor going around is there’s been an attempt on Angelo’s life? Enzo, is this true?”

My eyes go wide, so she definitely does know something, but nothing to do with the fact *I* was the culprit sent to kill him. This should be fun.

“Who told you that? Fynn?” he fires back, his eyes dancing with wickedness.

She shrugs nonchalantly and turns to look at me, and rolls her eyes. “I’ve got ears, Enzo. I’m not a stupid little girl anymore.”

The corner of his mouth tugs up.

“You look terrible,” she says, looking toward me, though her tone isn’t unkind. “Angelo asked me to bring some clothes and things for you earlier, he sent out for them, but I insisted. I hope yoga clothes and sweats are okay since he said comfy.” She places two bags down in front of me.

“Thank you,” I murmur gratefully. “I do feel terrible. My drink was spiked last night, and after...well, everything that’s uh...”

Enzo swiftly turns his head to give me a definite *don’t fucking go there* look, but I’m past the point of caring. Obviously, Angelo’s little sister is kept as far away as possible from mafia mob business for her own good. I wish I could say the same.

“Ohmygod. Rayne! That’s terrible, do you know who did it? Angelo must be furious.”

I want to face-slap myself.

“Hence why he’s gone to see Mario,” Enzo finishes ushering her back towards the door. “And Rayne needs to rest, it’s been a long night for her.”

“Call me,” she hollers over his shoulder as he herds her out towards the door, “We can go shopping....”

He closes the door before I can answer, then I hear him saying something about Angelo being at the warehouse, whatever that means.

At least there’s one Medici still left that doesn’t hate me, and that’s only because she doesn’t know what’s really going on. She will know soon, and so will his mother. I wonder if he’ll tell them the truth.

I eat my breakfast, though it's past lunchtime, and I barely register the taste. I wonder what the next steps are and how in the hell he's going to fake his own death. I guess when you're the mob boss, you can make anything look possible.

I've no doubt he knows people in high places that can make him temporarily disappear, he owns this city, after all.

I rest on the bed and flick through a few magazines as I wait, trying to kill time. Eventually, I decide to take a shower. I retrieve the bag Valentina dropped off for me into the bathroom. It's filled with an array of Lululemon activewear, sneakers, t-shirts, La Perla underwear –because that clearly constitutes as 'comfy' – and some Victoria's Secret pajamas. There's a large cosmetic bag with luxurious skincare and body lotions. It seems Valentina has excellent taste. Maybe she thinks I'm moving in. If only our love affair were that simple, even calling it that makes me want to scream.

I like Valentina, it'll be a shame to have her wanting a knife in my back, but it's not her fault.

Whatever the case is, I'm grateful to have some fresh clothes and to be able to wash my hair. When my eyes skate across the mirror and I look at myself, I frown in dismay.

My makeup is smudged, and while there's barely anything on my face now, the mascara under my eyes makes me look like a corpse. I reach into the bag and pull out some cleansing lotion and wipe my face clean with a washcloth. Then I turn the taps on and run the water hot until it's steaming out.

Once inside, I decide to use Angelo's body wash. It's musky and smells like him. I shampoo my hair, and my mind races at what the hell may happen next. *Mia*. I'm coming for you.

No matter what happens, I will fight to the death. I will take the Medici men on myself if that's what it takes. I lay a hand on the glass as I try not to collapse, but it's no use.

I cry hard. Sobbing onto my forearm as I rest my head, trying to breathe.

“Why?” I cry out. “Why fucking Mia? Why couldn’t it be me, you fucking pricks!” I scream at the top of my lungs as they burn, just like my soul.

I’m damned to hell, maybe, that’s all I know. Maybe this is how it’s meant to be.

Nobody can save me now, not even the devil himself.

ANGELO

I TAKE THE FASTEST ROUTE TO THE WAREHOUSE. ROCCO WON'T have killed him yet, but he'll be in a world of pain. It's been a few hours. Hopefully, he'll have some information.

I punch the code into the pin pad at the side entrance and enter, locking the door behind me.

The entry immediately diverts into another locked room with the same solid steel door as the entry for double security. I put the second code in, and I'm surprised to see Fynn when I get inside since he was supposed to be at Ma's. The meeting room with the two-way mirror looks out into the interrogation room. That's a fancy word for torture chamber.

"Nice to finally see you," I quip. "I'd almost forgotten what you look like."

"Very funny. Someone had to keep watch over Ma and Valentina."

"And you're here instead of watching them because?"

"I'm heading back there shortly, Dom has it covered."

"Dom is going to be watching Allegra once the news breaks."

"So I heard," he snickers. "This your last hoorah?"

I point at him. "Ma and Valentina. I don't want either of them going anywhere until this all blows over."

"Try telling that to Valentina, you know how stubborn she is."

“I’ll deal with her,” I tell him, then nod to the chamber. “So, what’s the story?”

“He says he got paid to do the drop, and maintains it’s not the Petrov’s, even though we have him going into and leaving Russian territory.”

I remove my jacket and hang it on the coat rail against the wall. “Nothing worse than a simple-minded moron, though I guess that’s why they’re the bottom-dwellers of every organization.”

I glance through the glass. The dude is hanging upside down.

I roll my eyes. “I see that Rocco has gotten straight to it,” I go on. “Nothing like all the blood rushing to your head while you bleed out to get the juices flowing.” I also see Santino on the phone, as he paces the room.

I think about Enzo and what’s going on back at the house. The prick’s probably right at home now, watching Netflix and chilling with her. It leads me to believe that I may have made a mistake putting Enzo in charge of her house arrest.

“Well, he keeps saying the same thing over and over, he could be telling the truth. The less the associates know, the better for exactly this reason.”

I know he’s right, and that doesn’t fill me with any kind of joy because, in these scenarios, torture is useless. They’ll say anything to get the pain to stop.

Everything feels off, and it isn’t the first time I’ve come to this conclusion. I can feel it in my bones.

“Fuck,” I mutter. “Not what I wanted to hear.”

He shrugs. “We’ve caught him red-handed. He can’t deny he dropped the vial to Rayne at the Gala, but that may be all he really knows. In truth, they never tell associates shit, Angelo. This could be fruitless and a waste of time; time being the one thing we don’t have a lot of.”

I know he’s right, but he still delivered the poison meant to kill me. He can’t play innocent and plead for his life and

expect to get mercy. The trouble is that an associate could be missed, which will pose a problem.

“No shit,” I say, running a hand over my face. “If Vaughan can’t crack the code, then I don’t know what kind of fucking technology we need to upgrade to, but it’s trying my patience.”

“It may be best to send the girl in once you’re technically dead.”

I turn to him, my anger rising. “The girl has a name.”

“Yeah, devil woman, right?”

I swallow hard. Being tired makes me lose any manner of patience I may have held otherwise. “You want to keep that head on your shoulders, Fynn? Then just keep talking.”

He glances at me sideways. “Touchy. So, the rumors are true.”

I turn and glare at him. “What rumors are those, exactly?”

“That she’s more than a friend. That she means something to you. I heard you had Enzo in a fucking headlock.” He doesn’t mask his grin.

“Well, you heard wrong.”

“Then why are you so edgy?”

I roll my sleeves up, I may as well prepare for the inevitable. “When someone lies and betrays you and makes you look like a fool in front of your entire family, then come and talk to me. Until then, shut the fuck up.”

He shakes his head. “I’ve never seen you like this; I mean, I’ve seen you pretty fucked up, but this is...”

I grab hold of his shirt as he holds his hands to the side in surrender. “Angelo, this is Armani, for fucks sake!”

“I don’t fucking care. In case you haven’t noticed, I’ve got a shit ton going on right now and I don’t need a fucking parrot on my shoulder; if you want to be helpful, then do what you do best and find a way out of this.”

The security door opens behind me, and Marco steps in along with Dante. Marco frowns when he sees I have hold of Fynn with both hands. I let him go, shoving him backwards as he straightens his shirt. Fucking pussy.

“It seems we made it a few seconds too early,” Dante quips. “Did you want us to leave, Angelo, so you can rearrange his face? He could do with a new nose.”

“Same nose as you, fuckface,” Fynn fires back. “Since we are twins, after all.”

Dante rolls his eyes. “We’re fraternal, idiot. Clearly, I got the brains as well as the looks.”

Marco gives me a nod, ignoring both of them. “Everything okay here?”

“Does it look fucking okay?” I bark, running a hand through my hair.

“Angelo, things are at a climax right now, you need to get some sleep...” He goes on as I glare at him.

“You think I can sleep when a war is brewing?”

He holds my glare with his own. “There is always a war brewing, brother. The threats against us will never cease as long as we all live. I understand that the dynamics have changed, it only brings more threats. More enemies. More miscreants trying to take what’s ours. All of this is taking its toll.”

“What are you trying to say? That I can’t handle it?” I shout at him.

He comes toward me, and his hand rests on my shoulder. “I would never say that, but you have all of us. We’re with you all the way. This is a time where we need to stand together and unite, not be divided. You can’t solve all of this on your own.”

“I didn’t think we were divided,” I retort, though I know that’s not entirely true.

“We have our differences of opinion on what to do with Rayne, Angelo, but I support your decision to keep her alive while she’s useful.”

I stare back at him. *While she's useful.*

I know that he's right. Rayne Michaelson may only be a pawn in this game, but my men and my enemies won't see it that way. They'll see it as weakness, and weakness is not something I can afford.

Yet, killing her is as absurd as letting her go unpunished. Taking her as my prisoner and using her to find who wants me dead is just the beginning. There is no doubt in my mind that this girl has changed the way I feel about everything, and it's clouding my judgment.

I need to get myself back on track.

"I'll deal with her. The associate says he took the deal to make the drop, but it wasn't Petrov's order," I say, my tone softening slightly. "I'm going to go find out exactly what he knows and if he's lying."

"Of course he's lying," Dante says, his eyes wild. "He'll do and say anything to protect his own. The Petrov's have had it in for us since as long as Papa was alive..."

I glance at him, and bile rises in my throat. *Papa*. The man who will be forever more nothing than just a memory. I wonder what he would have been like as we grew older, to live out his days with Ma and be proud of the men we grew into. Instead, he was gunned down right in front of my eyes, I held him in my arms as he bled out on the street. No child should have to witness that. I'd give anything to have one more day with him.

"Like I need a reminder, the Petrov family won't get away with the underworld gambling ring they've been slowly pushing, buying off constituents who are supposed to be in my pocket, and they sure as shit won't be getting away with plotting my demise and starting a war. Once I'm unofficially dead, we will see where the cards fall."

"So it's true then?" Fynn says, shaking his head. "You're really going to go through with this?"

"Why not?" I question, turning to him. "It's the perfect rouse. Let them think I'm dead, and the vultures will swoop in."

For this to work, we need everyone, and we'll need to debrief the entire Familia and the soldiers. Turning the underworld upside down is long overdue, and this is the perfect time to do it." I turn to Marco. "And this is where you will step up temporarily in my place while in public."

"How long do we have to fucking pretend you're dead?" Fynn doesn't look or sound impressed. He's a lot like Mario in his beliefs about faking your death being a bad omen, and I can't say I'm thrilled about it, either, but if it brings us the outcome we want, then so be it.

I have to take every opportunity that presents itself to get where I need to be. And I need more of the Rombaldi scum in this world taken out, once and for all.

"For as long as it takes to find out who wanted me dead."

"And the rest of the pawns?" Dante concludes. "The vultures, do we just let them swoop? Sit back and do nothing?"

I shake my head. "No, brothers, we stand strong. The Medici family were once royalty, I don't have to remind you of that. Respected first and foremost, only feared when the rules of the city were broken, and we will be like that again. This is our chance, and we must take it."

"With that comes great responsibility for Marco," Fynn says. "With the casino about to open..."

"I've got it under control," Marco retorts. "Opening the casino will be perfect timing. You're forgetting Angelo will still technically be here, making the decisions, he just won't be in the public eye. Nothing needs to change, except the persona that he's gone."

"What about when he's magically alive again?" Dante can't quite keep the mischievous glint out of his eyes. If I didn't know any better, I might say he's looking a little too forward to this. "How do we explain that?"

"I'll take care of the media," I say. "For the first few days, it will all be speculation. With how the media work in this town, we won't likely need to do much else, they'll be too

distracted with the news of my death. People will believe what they want and come to their own conclusion regardless. That'll buy us some time while they swarm."

"Plus, they'll run a retraction story once it's over," Marco concludes. "We can explain Angelo went into hiding for protection, the media is the least of our problems."

"Where will you be during your isolation period?" Fynn asks. "It's not like you can just stay unnoticed at the townhouse. Even at Fortress, the media will circle."

"Falmouth," I say. "Nobody knows about that except my inner circle."

Marco frowns. "It will be harder to protect you there, especially if we're coming and going. It will only be a matter of time until one of us is followed, and then it'll be a circus."

"Nobody will be coming to Falmouth. I can do everything I need to do via secure lines over the phone or satellite, and I can come into Fortress under the cover of darkness if that's what's needed." It's not ideal, but I can't risk being seen at Fortress either.

Once the ambulance carts my carcass to the hospital, I have to be able to leave and get out of there, knowing Fortress and my townhouse will be surrounded by paparazzi. "What's paramount is the background work, we must be ready to defend at all costs. Once it's clear who my would-be assailants are, we will strike. Until then, we wait."

Marco rubs his chin as he assesses me carefully. Before he can say anything else, Rocco pops his head in the doorway and says, "Boss. We got a problem."

I run a hand through my hair for what feels like the millionth time today.

"Just what I need," I mutter.

He nods to my brothers. "I actually think he's telling the truth."

"I'll be the judge of that." I follow him out across the cold, cement floor to where the prisoner is tied up. I turn to Rocco.

“Was hanging him upside down completely necessary? He’s not much use to us when all the blood’s rushing to his fucking head.”

Santino snickers as I give him a nod.

“Uh, no, I guess not,” Rocco replies. “But it’s more fun for me and more frightening for him. Guess I thought I’d kill two birds with one stone.”

I bend down to my haunches and tilt my head. He’s duct-taped for the moment and blindfolded. He’s younger than I thought he’d be, maybe twenty-something—a pawn, nothing more.

“Fynn says he doesn’t know who hired him,” I say. “But that doesn’t mean it wasn’t Petrov.”

“That’s true,” Rocco agrees. “We followed him back into Russian territory, but he didn’t rush to the Petrov mansion to report back, doesn’t that strike you as being kinda strange?”

I stand and circle him. “Nothing is strange to me anymore. I ceased being surprised about anything a long time ago.”

I rip the duct tape off his mouth, and he pants and moans and tries to struggle. “Save your energy,” I tell him. “You’re going to need it.”

“I already told you!” he cries. “I don’t know shit. I got a call, and I got a down payment once the drop was made. I didn’t know what it was, and I didn’t question it. I just did it for the extra cash.”

I grab him by the hair as he grimaces. “The poison sent to kill me, that’s what the drop was.”

“Petrov didn’t hire me for this job,” he pleads. “If I knew who it was, I’d fucking tell you!”

“Petrov could have hired you, like I’m sure my colleague has explained,” I go on calmly. “The less you know, should it come down to an interrogation like this one, the better. That’s how it works, kid. You’re just a pawn in a very big game of cat and mouse.”

“I have a young wife,” he goes on as I let go of his hair.

“So did I,” I mutter, wiping my hand on a cloth that Santino graciously hands me. “And that didn’t stop the circle of life one little bit. Your death is imminent, it’s what has to happen. We each have a role to play, my friend, and you chose your course when you decided to work for the Petrov’s. I despise everything they stand for, not that they stand for much aside from trying and failing to overrun my city time after time.”

“I can help you,” he tries, as I do a complete three-sixty. “I’ll set up a meeting with Petrov himself.”

This piques my interest for a moment, until I realize this pawn is nobody in the Russian’s eyes. That’s why he’s at the bottom of the ladder. He could easily be wiped off the face of the planet and not be missed, that’s what sets *us* apart from *them*. I know everything there is to know about my soldiers, every last one of them, and I leave nothing to chance.

I made mistakes in the early days, but I learned from them. Aleksi Petrov’s ‘army’ is a shit show and we all know it. His own men don’t respect him because he looks down on them and has his own best interests at heart. It’s why I sit at the throne, and he continues to grapple at the mere crumbs that I throw at him.

“I don’t need a meeting with him,” I say. “I know exactly where this is going to go because I pull all the strings. I control them whichever way I want them to go, and right now, there is no more use for you.”

Rocco looks a little disappointed but being here torturing him is only taking more time away from what I have to do later. As each hour passes, more is at stake and time is one luxury I just don’t have enough of to waste.

“*Please...*” he begs. “I’ll do whatever you say.”

“Good,” I say, clapping my hands together as he flinches. “It’ll be much easier if you don’t struggle.”

“Wait...I...*no!*”

I nod to Rocco. “Kill him and throw him in the Charles. I’m done playing games and I don’t need any loose ends. The

first thing he's going to do is run back to Petrov's camp or wherever the fuck he's from. I don't need any more distractions. I've already wasted enough time being here."

Rocco leans down and reseals the duct tape and shuts the fucker up as he protests and wriggles around.

"We'll reconvene at Fortress tonight. Marco has the details."

He nods. I glance to Santino. "You're on clean up with him. Make it snappy, I have a dinner to get to tonight." I'm tempted to make a last supper joke, but I refrain.

I walk toward the storeroom and my brothers are all having a heated discussion, and then they all simultaneously stop talking when I appear. The man hanging upside down about to die is of no consequence to them and certainly no threat.

"If you want something to do, help Rocco prepare the van," I say to Dante, then to Fynn. "Make sure Ma and Valentina are home tonight. I need to make a pit stop before dinner so I can tell them in person what's going to happen."

"Dinner?" Marco quirks an eyebrow.

"I thought one last appearance before my demise might be well suited for anyone watching us." I shrug. "Make it look like business as usual in their eyes."

It goes without saying that only the immediate family will know the truth, as well as Mario, Gus, and my two best men, Dom and Darko, but no other outsiders - including Allegra. The less anyone else knows, the better.

"Ma's going to freak," Fynn replies.

"It is what it is brother." I give Marco a chin lift. "Everything all right?"

"Of course," he replies.

My lip curls. "You know if you're going to talk about me when I'm not in the room, you may like to make it look a little less conspicuous."

“Where are you going now?” Marco asks, completely dodging the implication.

“Back to Fortress,” I say. “We’ll reconvene there once Rocco and Santino are done to go over everything. I’ll be having dinner tonight at the Golden Apple at nine sharp before my impending death looms. Rather fitting, wouldn’t you say? If only this were some kind of fairytale rather than the nightmare it’s turning out to be.”

I need a stiff drink, but I also need to get back to Fortress. I need to see what my little fox has been up to these last few hours, and being around her is the only thing that seems to clear my head.

Fynn and Dante nod as Marco observes me, there are things he wants to say, I know that. Being the closest in age – and the next in line should something truly happen to me – he knows me inside out. I can’t lie to him, and he knows it.

“Later,” he says as I turn on my heel to leave.

“Much later,” I reply, slamming the door behind me as I step out into the cool afternoon breeze.

If only everything in life were so simple.

RAYNE

I COLLAPSE ON THE FLOOR AND DON'T KNOW HOW LONG I LAY there for, the hot water cascading all around me as the steam swirls. I hear movement at the shower door, but I don't bother to look up. The shower taps turn off and the water stops. My hair is plastered against my face as I lie sprawled out, motionless. Maybe if I lie here long enough, he'll think I'm dead and it'll be over.

That's just wishful thinking as I feel two strong hands lift me up, and then I'm being wrapped in a towel.

I know it's him. I mean, who else would it be? It's not only his scent that I'd know anywhere, or his firm hold as he carries me to the bed, or the fact that I hear him whisper to me in Italian. I don't care anymore. I cling to him.

I don't know what he's saying, but whatever it is, the sound at least soothes my soul.

"Angelo..." I whisper. "I can't ..."

"I know, *Carina*," he says after a long while. "Promise me one thing when I find her?"

I nod, shaking. Anything to stop this pain. *I'll agree to anything as long as he finds her.*

"I want you to have your revenge, too, *little fox.*"

I swallow hard as I feel his heart racing in his chest. I can't get close enough.

Our eyes meet as I look up at him and he pushes the wet hair out of my face.

“If you want to walk away now, *Carina*, I’ll let you.”

My heart races at his admission as I continue to stare at him. His eyes are stormy, the darkest of blue. Eyes that I could never, ever get enough of, no matter how much they haunt me.

“You mean, I’m free to go?”

He nods slowly. “Yes. And I will still get Mia back.”

I frown as I whisper, “Why would you do that?”

His eyes shift for a moment. “Because I know a guilty woman when I see one, and you’re not it.”

“But...”

“No buts. This isn’t a game I want to play anymore, so once I’m ‘dead,’ you will be free to leave.”

I stare at him, unseeing. Suddenly, the potential loss of him feels so much greater than anything I’ve ever felt before.

“No,” I say as he looks back at me quickly. “I’m in this till the end. I always see things through, Angelo. I’m not running away when I’ve done so much damage already. I need to make this right.”

“You don’t have to do this, you don’t have to do anything.” His voice sounds so far away.

“Why?” I whisper, looking away because I can’t face him. “I’ve done so many wrong things, so much I can’t make up for. Two wrongs don’t ever make a right.”

He pushes his face into my hair, and I hear him inhale. “Trust me when I say, the only soul blemished from redemption in this room is mine, *Carina*. And we will get our revenge, that I can promise you.”

“I don’t want to go,” I tell him after a long moment. “I want to see this through. You said I was yours, so prove it. I want you to teach me.”

“What, survival skills?” He chuckles.

I shake my head. “No, Angelo, to be like you.”

This time he really does laugh, it's a strange but lovely sound. I've never heard him laugh before. Then he says, "You could never be like me, Rayne, not ever."

But he's wrong. The rage I feel bubbles up inside me like a volcano.

"I want them dead," I say, clutching his shirt as I look up at him again. I turn in his lap until we're face-to-face. "Teach me, Angelo, for when I may need it. Teach me how to...how to do it..."

He kisses my forehead. "You can't even say it. That tells me everything I need to know."

I stare at him, his beautiful face that has already captured me far greater than ever being his prisoner could.

"I *can* say it, but only if you'll show me," I whisper. "I need to know how to defend myself. I'm no good to anyone if I'm weak."

He stares at me, when he sees I'm serious, he nods. "I have to go talk with Valentina and my Ma. We will go over to my townhouse and get ready for dinner tonight. I want you to wear something.... racy. We do have a show to put on, after all."

I bite my lip as I nod, not even considering at this moment what he's even suggesting, and I have no clothes other than what Valentina brought with her, and I'm not wearing a sexy see-through La Perla teddy to dinner.

I'll figure something out. I'll still do what he says, because while he may not be my saving grace, he's all I have right now.

"We're going to get through this," he says, tilting my chin up with his hand. "We're going to get these fuckers, Rayne. Whenever you have a problem with anything, you come to me first. Remember that."

"I won't be making the same mistake again, Angelo. Crossing you was never..." I trail off. I don't know if he'll ever forgive me, but I know we've come to some kind of understanding.

“I’m aware of that now Rayne, more than you realize.”

“I just can’t lose her Angelo, she’s all I have My parents...” I trail off as the tears spill once more, thinking about them and now what I’ve become. They surely could not be proud of where I am and how far I’ve fallen. I was supposed to protect her ... and now look at me. “I just can’t take another loss like that, it would kill me.”

He stares down at me, caressing the side of my face with his hands. “I’m going to do everything in my power Rayne. I know you’ve suffered.” He wipes the tears away with his hand. “I’m so sorry that happened to you with your parents, I don’t want you to suffer anymore.”

“We were so young,” I sniff thinking back to that time, it’s unbearable. “I don’t even know what they would think of me now.”

“Don’t talk like that *Carina*, you’ve done nothing wrong. I don’t ever want to hear you say that. I’m sure your parents would see the depths that you have gone to for your sister, it’s commendable.”

I blink up at him, it definitely doesn’t feel that way, but his kind words soothe me so deeply inside my heart, I feel it may shatter once and for all. “I know you’ve suffered too,” I say quietly.

His eyes flick back down to me, he’s never spoken of it, but I know it’s there. It brims on the surface, I’m sure of it. “It’s true, I know about suffering,” he sighs sadly. “I wish I could have saved my father, but that’s not how it happened.”

“I’m sorry Angelo.” I want to ask him about it, but I can’t find the words to do so. I don’t want to hurt him.

He studies my face for a moment as if sensing my hesitation. “I was fifteen years old when he died, he was shot right in front of me and died in my arms.”

“Angelo,” I say, bewildered to say the least. I had read about it previously, but to hear him say it...

“But this isn’t about me,” he adds quickly. “I just wanted you to know. I know suffering, I know loss, and I know all

about loyalty. I will stop at nothing to avoid this happening to you.”

I want him to reach down and kiss me, but he doesn't. Instead, we just look at each other and he stares so far into my eyes that I feel like he's reached the very depths of my soul.

I can see the turmoil in his eyes, too, like a strong current surging with the tide, but he's so much stronger than me. He can survive whichever way the impending current throws him.

Me, I'm not so sure. I made a deal that I'll do as he says until it's done. Not because I have to, but because I believe he will keep me safe.

What I can't control is how my heart still races whenever Angelo is near. I shouldn't still want him, but I do. And that's more dangerous than I could ever have anticipated.

Angelo returns from seeing his mother and sister before nightfall. He tells me we will be dining at the Golden Apple bistro tonight, it's elegant and classy and perfect for Angelo to be seen out. All of this is for show until the dreaded moment back at his townhouse.

I swallow hard as I sit in silence, waiting for him. He pours himself a tumbler of whisky and downs it before we leave; the signs of stress are beginning to show through his tough exterior. I know he has a lot on his plate, which takes a lot of planning. I'm sure even the great Angelo Medici hasn't planned his own fake death before.

I wonder where he was all day when he left me at Fortress, but I'm afraid to ask him. Afraid, because I know they were tracking the man who delivered me the poison, they likely tortured him to death for information. Maybe Angelo already has blood on his hands.

If he has any news, he doesn't show it. Instead, he instructs Enzo to go to his Ma's house with Fynn, the brother I haven't

met yet, as extra security for the night until it's done.

We ride over to his townhouse with Gus driving and the partition up. Darko takes a seat in the front, stoic as ever, and it makes me wonder if any of his guys ever sleep. Since Dom is with Allegra, so Angelo tells me, Darko is our shadow tonight.

“So, how did today go?” I prod.

He turns his head to look at me, I'm still not used to him in his civilian clothes, but he's a sight to behold even when I don't know what he's thinking and things are this tense.

“It was fantastic, *Carina*.” His voice drips in sarcasm. “I suppose you want me to tell you all about it?”

“Were you at the warehouse?” I blurt out. It's obvious from his tone he's not going to tell me anything.

His eyebrows shoot up in surprise. “Where did you hear that?”

I sigh and look out of the window for a moment. “I heard Enzo say something to Valentina. I don't know what that means, of course, but now I know it's something not good.”

“The warehouse is nothing you need to worry your pretty face about. It's where I do business, that's all.”

He says *that's all* like we're discussing the weather, not his possible torture chamber.

“Did you find the man who put the poison in my purse?”

He rubs his hand across his face wearily, finally looking at me. “Yes,” he says.

I wait to see if he is going to elaborate. “And?” I prompt when he doesn't.

“And I said I'd take care of things, things you don't need to worry about. The associate was useless, but my guys are looking into what little information he gave up.”

I don't dare ask him what happened to the guy for fear of the answer; I think I already know.

“Enzo said you went to see Mario today, that’s your Uncle?” I don’t know if changing tact will help or hinder me in trying to get on the same page as him but I figure it’s worth a try.

He glances at me. “Yes, that’s right.”

“You haven’t spoken much about him, he was the Don before you?” All things I’ve read about of course going into this mess.

“Yes. We are very close, he looked after us when my Pa died. His son Roberto was killed a few years back.”

I glance at him and swallow hard. “Does he still make the decisions?”

He shakes his head. “I make all the decisions, *Carina*. He’s an old man now, he’s unwell on his death bed. Given better circumstances I’m sure you’d like him, most women do.”

“What does he say about all of this?” I ask quietly.

“There’s a danger in knowing too much, *Carina*. That’s lesson number one.”

“So, how will you teach me if I can’t know anything?” I fire back. “That’s going to make things difficult.”

“I’ll teach you what you need to know, never anything more than that, it’s safer that way.”

He sits back in his seat, but he says nothing more. I figure now’s not the time to press him on anything else and we ride in silence.

He’s cold again. Like he was when he first found out I betrayed him. Long gone is the easy conversation we had between us. It almost feels like that in itself is a death. One I was solely responsible for.

“You know, I don’t have anything to wear for dinner tonight,” I say when the car comes to a stop.

He escorts me to the front door while Dom lurks behind us. “Oh, that you do, *Carina*, I made arrangements earlier.

There's a dress hanging up in my room with a pair of size-seven heels."

Should I honestly be surprised? "Someone's been paying attention."

"I assume you brought the La Perla?" He tilts his head. And there it is.

The way he looks at me. Even as his prisoner, there was no mistaking the lust in his eyes, even now, he can't even hide it.

The thump in my chest threatens to overcome me. "Thank you for sending them. All the garments are beautiful, especially the La Perla." Knowing he picked it out sends fire shooting through me, lighting my senses like wildfire.

He nods towards the stairs. "Time to go get ready."

I follow him up to his bedroom.

"I have to make some calls," he tells me once we reach his suite. "You know where everything is, I'll be back soon."

I nod and make my way to the bathroom to get ready. I pass by the enormous walk-in closet and do a double-take. A long, black, slinky dress is hanging up, and a matching pair of heels sit on the ground below it.

It truly is beautiful. He really did go all out. I guess it's not every day you plan your own funeral.

The label is still attached. I don't know the designer, but my eyes bulge out of my head when I see three thousand dollars on the tag. This man is insane. The same man who bought my entire collection at the charity auction and re-gifted me back the Harry Winston earrings after I pawned them. My heart jolts at the memory of when he handed them to me the second time around.

That was when I knew that he knew. The jig was up.

As much as it is a relief to not carry the burden of lying to him anymore, there's a new aspect that I hadn't intended until this very moment; that I'm now his pawn. Despite what he says, I know he has plans for me. He didn't get to be the Mafia boss of Boston by just letting people go.

Though, he has been calmer since he got back from the warehouse. I don't know if it's because he killed somebody or just let out his frustrations in general, but his demeanor has shifted. The fact that I don't bat an eyelid that he may have ended someone's life tonight just shows how far my moral compass is off the grid and how much I will sacrifice for my sister.

I never thought I'd be the kind of person who would be able to kill another being, and I hope I never have to, but a deep, dark part of me knows that if it came down to it, I would.

I wring my hands together as I try, for the millionth time, not to think about Mia and what she's going through. *I'm coming, Mia, just hold on. Please, just hold on a little longer.*

Enzo still has my phone. Angelo said his hacker is still trying to work out how to get through the firewall; it's elaborate and intricate and nothing they've ever seen before. It's been days since I hired Enzo, and still nothing.

All I can do is pray that we get to her in time. Without hope, I may as well go join Angelo's enemies at the bottom of the Charles.

Dinner starts out a little somber, but it's not like this dinner is a celebration. I'm surprised he's even doing this.

I can't tell how Angelo is feeling, he's so guarded, but I'm on tenterhooks. We sit at one of the tables at the back of the restaurant, and he orders Dom Perignon as I fiddle with the edge of the tablecloth.

He's seated with his back to the wall, so he's got a full view of the entire restaurant, and I sit on the booth seat at his side.

"Relax," he tells me, his voice low and dark.

"You going to have to get me drunk and disorderly in order to do that," I say as soon as the waiter has left our table.

He rubs his chin. “Wouldn’t be a bad idea.”

“Anyone would think we were celebrating,” I whisper.

He holds his glass up to mine as the liquid settles. “Aren’t we, *little fox*? But it doesn’t hurt to go out with a bang, does it?”

I’m uneasy at how well he’s taking this, like it’s almost an amusement to him. In the meantime, I’m a jittery mess, ready to make a mad bolt for the door.

“I suppose not?” I can’t hold the surprise from my tone at his optimism.

“They won’t see this coming; you working with us. They have no fucking idea, and I want to keep it that way.”

I hold my glass up to his, and we clink them together. I move my lips to take a sip and he watches me intently. I see that burning look in his stare, and I know where he wants this to lead tonight.

He motions for me to come closer with a nod of his head, and as I lean in, he says, “You look fucking delectable in that dress, *Carina*, now kiss me.”

It takes about half a second for my lips to reach his; they’re warm and inviting.

He’s softer with me in public, not at all like in private. What’s most bizarre is that he doesn’t seem to care who sees. His tongue gently circles mine and I can taste the champagne on his lips. My body quivers at his sensuality, he’s such a good kisser.

He pulls back to look at me. “Now you’ve got me fucking hard. We should order before I make a real spectacle.”

I bite my lip and fight a smile.

He raises an eyebrow at me over his glass. “Do you know what you want?” He looks down at the menu.

I place my hand on his thigh as I lean further toward him. My fingers travel inwards as I grip him tighter and go in for

another kiss. If this is the last night together, then I want my fill of him.

He grins, turning his head toward me, “Careful,” he whispers as my fingers brush past his hard length. His eyes flick up and around the room before looking back at me. “You get that for dessert, baby.”

“One last time,” I whisper as sadness coils through me.

“This place is too lit up and too busy to fuck you here at the table.”

My eyes go wide. “Angelo, you wouldn’t.”

He laughs, it’s a sweet soft sound. “You’d be surprised what I could do in one of these quiet booths, given half the chance. I’d like to see you come without making any noise.”

I swallow hard and shake my head, hoping I’m not giving away how much that turns me on. The waiter returns to take our order just in the nick of time. I’m nervous being around Angelo, and a dark part of me thinks that he likes it.

Angelo nods to me to order first, then he orders a steak for himself and some tapas for an entree.

“Pumpkin ravioli, baby?” he raises his eyebrows, “You might wanna live a little for our last supper.”

“I’m going all out for dessert, don’t worry,” I assure him.

He grins over his glass.

“So, what’s the plan after this?” I whisper.

He checks to make sure there’s no one close by. “We head back to the townhouse, tussle a little or a lot, then you call triple zero.”

“Tussle?” It’s my turn to raise my eyebrows.

He shrugs. “A roll around in my bed should about set the mood before I die. You’re not going to deny a man his one final wish, are you?”

I blink rapidly, the enormity of this going straight to the pit of my stomach. The champagne soothes my nerves a fraction,

but it's also going straight to my head. Maybe I should drink some more...

"What Mr. Medici wants, Mr. Medici gets," I say as he looks at me sharply. "Isn't that how it goes?"

"You're thinking about what I did to you in the basement, aren't you?"

The inferno resurfaces, knowing that I let him hate-fuck me and I didn't care. "How could I forget?"

"Are you saying you didn't like it?"

"I didn't say that."

"What then?" he pushes.

I lower my voice. "You fucked me like you hated me. I'd say that just about covers it."

He sits back in his chair and grins into his hand as he rubs his chin. "Just keep talking like that, and I'll show you what a hate-fuck truly looks like."

My core clenches. *Is something wrong with me?* I should not be turned on by his debasement.

I lick my lips, knowing that as tempting as it seems, I have to try to take back some control.

I escaped my horrible marriage. I survived domestic abuse. I can survive this. I need to get back into the mindset I had before. Angelo Medici cannot hold all the cards.

"And here I thought we were starting to share some common ground," I muse, sipping my champagne.

He leans to my ear. "The only common ground we'll have tonight, is you riding my dick."

I hold his gaze as he challenges me. "Do I get a choice?" Not that I don't want what he's offering.

He grins. "You always have a choice, *Carina*."

Our tapas arrives and we eat in complete silence as I try to process my thoughts.

Angelo glances at his watch every now and again, the only sign that tells me he's on edge. And this is how he is all night—hot, cold, and anything in between.

During the main course, the waiter brings over a bottle of the Chateau which Angelo dropped a fortune on at the auction. I recognize the label ... as well as what happened at the loading dock that afternoon.

“Angelo..” I can't contain the smile on my lips thinking about it.

He grins as he swirls the wine after the waiter leaves us, “You didn't think I'd forgotten about that did you?”

I bite my lip and look at him under my lashes. “Finally we get to share a glass,” I whisper. It's not the usual crappy red I hate, it's actually delicious I guess that's what dropping a hundred grand on two cases will get you.

Halfway through the meal, I notice Darko at one of the tables nearby, I wondered where he'd disappeared to. He's gone unnoticed the entire night, at least by me. *How do they do that?* He really is a shadow.

I try not to let my mind wander to the fact that I am very likely being watched by Mia's abductors. My contract runs out tonight.

When it's time to leave, Angelo tips the waiter, grabs my hand, and we leave the restaurant. He helps me into the waiting car like he has all the time in the world.

I don't think I've ever been so rattled.

He lets go of my hand as soon as we're inside. The way he's been acting and taunting me at dinner, I half expected him to pull me into his lap and continue where we left off. Even if his hate-fuck comments still have me reeling, I still thought he'd devour me the minute the door closed behind us. But he doesn't.

We ride back to his townhouse in complete and utter silence.

Maybe it's because I've been in his presence too long, or the fact he casts a dark shadow that now surrounds me too, encasing me, even as I try not to lose myself in all of this madness.

Stay strong. Keep breathing.

If Angelo wants me, then he can take me. I no longer care what that makes me. The only thing worse than trying to figure out which mood he's in now, is the awful feeling that I may spend tonight alone.

And that's about as pitiful as any one person can get.

ANGELO

THE WOMAN BESIDE ME IS THE DEVIL. I SWEAR IT.

She sits in the restaurant with me all night, acting like she's made of pure steel rather than glass; she doesn't splinter or crack like I first expected. In fact, the more uncertain and dangerous her fate appears, the more concrete she becomes. *Is she still acting?*

On the other hand, she could be an angel, sent to destroy my very soul with her beauty that still takes my breath away. She gives in to me so easily sometimes and yet other times acts like she hasn't a care in the world if I touch her or not. *How does she do it?*

I've mastered the art of being in the mob for most of my life, but Rayne Michaelson could genuinely be the human version of purgatory, leaving me in a permanent state of unease.

She's fucking with my soul now, what's left of it anyway.

I never thought I had one, that I had anything inside of me after Lucia, my father, and Roberto were killed. However, it only makes me realize that I do have a beat still there in my wrecked, mangled heart, and still, it beats solely for her.

If only I could just *not* care. If only I could just be what Mario has taught me to be. Yet, with her, all of that goes out the window.

She's my queen.

My chest beats with a thud loud and clear, one I can't ignore. As I glance sideways, the beauty next to me gazes out the window.

I study her in the reflection; she's absolute perfection.

She'd be a welcome accompaniment to any well-bred man who wanted a wife, except she's so much more than that.

But would she make a good mafia queen? The thought jars me.

I take a steady breath as my mind wars with the very notion and why I'm even thinking it. I even told her I'd let her go. I run a hand down my face wearily as I continue to stare at her.

After a few moments, I realize her head has shifted to look back at me.

Her eyes can only be described as emeralds on ice. If there ever were a diamond that you couldn't put a price on, cut so perfectly and so unique, that would be her. It makes me wonder if there's anything she could do that I wouldn't punish her for.

She tried to kill me, and yet I still want her in my bed.

I had to bite my tongue at dinner, because what we did in the basement wasn't a thing of hate.

It was raw, animalistic passion. What's more, is she fucking enjoyed it. She wants more of it because every time I mention taking her in that way, her breathing changes, and her eyes widen, as if her very desire can't be contained in her deep, green irises. It makes me want her, but I'm man enough to admit I know when I have a weakness. And my weakness is her.

Plus, I like making her wait.

She probably thought I'd pull her into my lap and have her ride me in the car, I'm that pent up with sexual frustration.

My eyes dip down her body, knowing she's still watching me. The dress leaves very little to the imagination. Under

normal circumstances, I'd never let her wear anything like that in public so other men could ogle her.

The long slit down the front barely contains her tits and shows her tanned, flat stomach, which has my mouth watering and my dick twitching. It would be so easy to reach over and slide my hand into her dress and play with her, smoothing the other hand under her dress to find her pantyless as I spread her legs to give her what she wants and what I so desperately need. However, that isn't how this works.

We're playing a new game now, and sickeningly, I want her to beg me for it.

I want her so worked up and annoyed that she's a hellcat. I want her scratching her nails down my back as I fuck her raw against whatever available surface is close by.

And her mouth...Jesus, do I want her mouth. I watch as her lips part as if she's going to ask me something, then she closes it again.

I can't *not* touch her.

I move one hand to her exposed shoulder, it's the lightest of touches, but her eyes close the second I feel her soft skin. I turn sideways, leaning down to kiss her there because if I don't feel her soon, I may fucking die.

"You did good tonight, *Carina*," I say, as my other hand moves to her knee, caressing her gently. "I'm impressed."

I feel her eyes on me again. "I didn't really do anything except show up and pretend we were having a nice, romantic dinner."

"Pretend," I grunt, biting her skin softly as her chest rises rapidly. "Weren't we having a nice time?"

"It's a little hard to enjoy yourself knowing that even more turmoil is about to erupt," she says.

The comment floors me. Maybe she's not as confident as I once thought.

"Are you nervous?" I ask.

She answers, “No.” But it’s a little too quickly.

I circle her skin with my fingertips, moving to the inside of her knee while her breath hitches. I can see her nipples pebbled under the thin material of that dress...

“I think you’re lying, *little fox*.”

“If I’m a little fox, what does that make you? *The wolf*?”

A slow grin spreads across my face. “I think I like the sound of that. It’s better than motherfucker.”

She fights a smile, and I kiss her again on the shoulder. My other hand snakes around the back of her neck as she gasps when I firmly grip it.

“What’s the matter, *Carina*?” I whisper against her skin. “Afraid of a little hate-me fuck?”

She swallows hard. “You said it wasn’t that.”

“But you’d like me to show you. You liked it when I tied you to my bed, didn’t you?”

She closes her eyes again, then snaps them open when I say, “Answer me!”

“You should know by now, Angelo, that I’m not afraid to admit to you that you can’t do anything to hurt me. I know you won’t.”

I lean closer to her ear as my hand grips her thigh hard. “Don’t count on it.”

She shakes her head, adamant. “If you were going to kill me, you would have done it by now.”

I smirk. She’s so very right. I would have slit her throat long ago if that were the case. “If I felt between your legs right now, I bet I’d find you soaked.”

I’m almost certain a small mewl leaves her mouth, but I can’t be entirely sure. It would be so fucking easy to pull her dress up, push her face down into the leather seat and fuck her from behind hard and fast. That’d shut her up and make her hate me, perhaps for good this time.

When she doesn't answer, I bite the lobe of her ear. "You think because I showed you leniency that makes me some kind of hero?"

She shakes her head. "No, I don't, but the man who picked me up out of the shower and told me I was no longer his prisoner is the man I fell for that very first day I saw him."

"You don't know what you're saying." My tone is clipped. She doesn't know what she's talking about.

"Yes, I do," she fires back as my hand grips her neck harder so she can't move and she's forced to look at me through the glass. "We had a spark. You can't deny it."

There's a long silence before I say, "I don't deny you're very good, *little fox*. Maybe the best."

She ignores me. "I knew when I met you what I was doing, obviously, but what I didn't know was how easy it was going to be to fall for you, to forget about who you really were and what you do to people. It made me think I could do it, that I could keep up the pretense, but that would be a lie, Angelo, because we both know I couldn't."

I move my hand to her breast and squeeze it hard as she gasps again. "You spewed so many lies that you don't know fact from fantasy, do you?"

"That's not fair. You have to forgive me at some point."

"Do I?"

"Yes, because if we're going to pull this off, we must work together, remember?"

I know she's right. She's a smart woman and knows how this world I'm a part of works. She, of all people, knows what we have to do.

"What's in it for me again?" I prod. "I'm doing all of this to save your dear little sister and settle the score with those who wish me dead, but I could do that anyway."

I'm baiting her, and she knows it.

“Like I promised. I’m your prisoner. Even when this is over, you can inflict whatever punishment you want on me, and I’ll take it,” she says, just like that, as if we’re not discussing the possibility of her demise. “That was the deal. Plus you find out who’s really out to get you.”

“You’re such a clever girl,” I muse. “Always one step ahead of everyone else, why else would you sell the jewelry that I gifted you?”

“I needed cash quickly, obviously. I planned on splitting when I got Mia back.”

I stare at her, lost for words. I don’t know what I expected, but it wasn’t that.

“After you killed me?”

She shakes her head. “No, after I ran from you. I knew you’d hunt me down when you found out what I was hired to do, and I knew you’d kill me. Having cash meant I could get somewhere fast and hide out for a while until everything blew over.”

I chuckle. “Smart and beautiful but very naive.”

She frowns. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“You think that things just ‘blow over’ in the mafia?”

Her eyes flick to look back out of the window. “I guess not,” she says in a small voice.

“Vendettas are forever, princess. You of all people should understand that by now.”

“Like your enemies? The ones who want you dead.”

“Exactly like that. As I said, I’ll kill every last one of them, and I’ll paint this town red with their blood. Perhaps then it will be enough.”

Her eyes flick to mine again. “They deserve it.”

I smirk. “You could actually convince me that you mean it.”

“I *do* mean it, Angelo. I wasn’t kidding when I said I want you to teach me...”

I move my hand from her breast back down to her knee and hold it there. If she doesn’t understand by now that she’s mine, she will soon. I play to win.

“It’s very different thinking you can kill someone than actually doing it. Taking a life is no small thing. It helps if the person’s a deadbeat, of course, but it’s still murder, whichever way you look at it.”

She tilts her chin. “How did you get so good at it?”

“Practice,” I muse.

“What does it feel like? To take someone’s life knowing that yours is the last face they’ll ever see.”

I study her carefully for a moment. “That depends on the person. Some get a kick out of it, others it disgusts them, but they still do it. For me, it’s like taking out the trash. It’s a necessary evil, or everything else starts to stink. You have to understand, *Carina*, that the ones we take out have done unspeakable things, things you couldn’t even imagine were possible.”

“Like trafficking women?”

“Yes. Underage girls and children.”

Her lips part, except no sounds come out.

“These men sell women and children to brothels around the globe; they’re sold as sex slaves. Recently, a pimp in my neighborhood was employing underage girls as young as twelve. Children who were homeless or from broken homes, like offering them sexual abuse was a way out of living off the streets. It’s a different kind of sick, one you should know nothing about, but sometimes you have to see and hear it to truly believe it. Then there’s the dark web which you don’t even want to know about.”

“What did you do to him?”

“I cut him to pieces until he gave me what I wanted.”

“Which was what?”

I kiss her shoulder again as she watches me, her breathing rapid again. Like she doesn't want to hear it, but she also can't look away.

“Names. He was just the middleman.”

“And that's how you keep this town clean?”

I smile against her skin. “One of the many ways I control it, yes. I approve of who can and of who can't operate. The drugs and guns that run through this city do so by my say-so. Nobody can come into my town and set up shop. It's a very well-orchestrated machine. I make the police commissioner and the feds look good, and let's not even get into the mayor and the politicians.”

“How does that keep the city clean?” she asks, her brow furrowing. “By offing the offenders who dare cross you?”

I laugh. “You have to understand. Every organization needs order. People love rules. Those who abide by the rules can live a carefree life, one that involves not having to look over their shoulder or worry if they're going to be robbed or murdered in their beds. Those who break the rules suffer the consequences. There will always be guns, drugs, and sex, but organized crime is just that, there is no room for outsiders.” I run my hand into her hair and tug her head gently back. “There's only room for order, *little fox*, and when you have control, you literally hold all the power of politics, passion, and position in the palm of your hand. People respect the cleanness of the city; those who want to turn it into a cesspit have to answer to the Medici Familia.”

I slide my hand into her dress because I can't take it anymore. Her nipple is hard as I brush my fingers over it, and she moans.

“So that's why people fear you?” she whispers. “Because you really are the devil.”

I cup her breast and continue to rub my thumb over her taut peak. “You knew that the moment you met me. I'm a dangerous man, Rayne, you know what I'm capable of, yet

you still sit here and let me play with your body and you don't even flinch."

She closes her eyes. She wants this. She parts her legs, and I take that as an open invitation to test my theory of how wet I've made her.

So much for playing it fucking cool and making her beg. I'm still not going to give her what she wants, but I can tease her until she screams.

I cup her sex, aroused as hell when I find her with no panties on. I slide her dress open further so both breasts are exposed. "Lean back against me," I growl as she does just that, and my fingers run through her wet folds. "Just as I thought, fucking soaking. Does talking about killing bad people turn you on, princess?"

"Angelo..." she calls out when I tweak her nipple and bite down on her neck and flick her clit at the same time.

I hitch her dress up further, moving my hand to her other nipple as I stare down at her big, beautiful breasts. I'm going to come all over them later tonight. That's her punishment before I'm a dead man.

I chuckle at the thought. "What is it?" she asks.

I shake my head. "Nothing." I insert two fingers inside her pussy as she cries out, my thumb still working her clit as I strum her nipple, dying to have my mouth on her. My cock strains so hard that I may not last this car ride.

Seeing her like this though does things to me. "That's it, my beautiful, dangerous, *little fox*. You want it all ways, don't you? You hate me, but you still want me. Your body betrays you every fucking time."

"Oh God..."

"Let go," I tell her, quickening my pace as I watch my fingers disappear in and out of her as she pants, arching her back as she grinds against the heel of my hand. "Come for me."

She throws her head back as her tits jiggle and she climaxes so hard I feel the shock run through her body as she yells out *fuck, fuck, fuck*.

I pull my fingers out of her as she mewls, sagging back against me. Her eyes open as I stare at her, shoving my fingers in my mouth to suck them as I taste her arousal. I'll never grow tired of tasting her, not ever.

“So, you see?” I say, pulling her dress back together so she's covered. “We're not so different in some ways. We both get off on this twisted kind of danger. Maybe we're more alike than we thought.”

“Maybe you just know how to push my buttons,” she snaps back, sitting up quickly.

“I think we both know I push *all* your buttons, quite well if that orgasm was anything to go by.”

She puts herself back together, and it takes all my might not to unbuckle my belt and rip my pants down and show her what seeing her come for me just did.

But like life, the game is constantly changing.

Now I want her to want me.

I want *her*, to fucking want *me*.

However, I'm not a patient man, and this being my last night until we're isolated at Falmouth, I want to see what she does tonight. If she'll come to me.

If she's going to be my queen, after all, it's high time she started acting like one.

RAYNE

I DON'T KNOW WHO I AM ANYMORE.

The moment Angelo leaves my side, I begin to question everything I know.

He relegated me to the guest suite the moment we got here and then left, saying he had business to attend to. Again.

I don't know what the plan is or what the hell we're doing tonight, or how it's supposed to happen. Angelo has told me absolutely nothing. And I let him finger fuck me in the car because I'm a needy whore who can't stop my pulse from racing at the very sight of him.

Maybe I'm sick, that would explain this want, *no*, this *need* that I have for him. It comes on so strong, hitting me in the face like a freight train, taking me on a one-way track further into the pits of hell.

All the while, I hold my phone in my hand like it's my lifeline. He finally gave it back to me, although he did tell me not to use it until this is all over. When I questioned him if he'd found anything out about the location, that's when he told me he had to go and sort business out.

I walk to the bathroom and wipe every last inch of makeup off my face. I'm tired, not just from lack of sleep but also from being drugged, bound, and fucked royally by Angelo.

When I change out of my dress, I slip the La Perla teddy on. Not just because I plan on Angelo seeing it, but because, in reality, I don't honestly know what he has planned for me. Maybe my punishment is not having him inside me.

I pull on some silk pajamas, I figure I may as well get some rest while he sorts out ‘business’, and wander over to the window in the dark.

I can’t help but think about Angelo telling me I could go, how sincere he seemed at that moment, vulnerable almost. Of course, I must be imagining that last part because the last thing Angelo does is show any signs of weakness, even if he did show me a rare insight to his soul when speaking about his father.

He isn’t at the top of his game because he loses control and doesn’t know how to handle complicated situations; he controls this city and everyone in it with an iron fist because he’s good at it. I’m betting I’ve only seen the tip of the iceberg when it comes to what he’s really capable of. That notion may have scared me once upon a time, but not now.

It gets me thinking; none of us know how much time we have. Nobody can foresee the future, which is why time is so precious to me. I need this to be over. I keep praying with everything I have inside me that I will get her back. I don’t want to think about the consequences or what-ifs.

The street outside bustles with late-night traffic. We’re well protected behind the large security gates that expand the perimeter of the house. Angelo doesn’t do security by halves.

Though it’s right downtown, it’s also a little camouflaged from the outside world, like a smaller version of the Fortress but with a more curbside appeal.

I don’t know how long I stand there for. My mind wanders as I try to grasp all the things that have happened in the last few weeks. If someone told me this would be my life a few months ago, I would have laughed in their faces. I guess this is really the definition of jumping out of the frying pan and into the fire.

When I slide under the duvet and my head hits the pillow, I’m out like a light.

The next thing I remember is waking with a jolt, my heart racing in my chest and my sheets tangled. I don’t even recall

what it was I was dreaming about.

I sit up, holding a palm to my chest as I try to slow my breathing. Then I feel the wetness under my eyes as I brush the tears away with my fingers.

I'm not as strong as he needs me to be.

I know this.

But I just need to hold my head up a little longer. As much as all of this scares me to my very core, at the same time, I feel the bubbling of the anger surging. Every minute that passes by is another minute I may never get back with my sister.

I made a silent vow to my parents that I would do everything I could to get her back.

It's quiet and still as I slip out of bed and pad over to the open bathroom and take a pee. I need a drink, a stiff one. I don't care if Angelo has confined me to these quarters. If he wanted me to stay put, he should've filled up the mini bar.

I slide open the door and peer out; the hallway is dark and quiet.

I tiptoe down it toward the stairs and descend, heading for the kitchen. I've only been here once before, but the layout isn't overly complicated.

As I get to the bottom step, I see the silhouette of a lamp in Angelo's study.

The first and only time I snooped around that night, I found his diary and his tray of decanted whiskey in a crystal decanter.

I listen and decide the coast is clear until out of nowhere I hear Angelo's voice, it's eerily calm, something I know only too well to be dangerous.

"I wouldn't expect you to understand, Marco. What's it been now? Five years?"

"That's got nothing to do with it!" I hear Marco's reply. They're talking over the phone with Marco on speaker.

“You’re just trying to switch the conversation around to me, so you don’t have to answer the fucking question!”

Straight away, it’s obvious they’re fighting because their tones are clipped, and Marco sounds extremely mad.

Angelo, however, sounds bored when he says, “It’s not a very interesting question, and frankly, I’m tired of having to explain myself. Out of everyone in the family, I would have thought that you’d understand. Clearly, my lack of judgment has been slipping a lot lately, even where family is concerned.”

“You’re starting to sound a lot like Dante, and we all know he’s led around by his dick too.”

“That’s pretty fucking insulting given the circumstances. That little fuckface is gonna feel my wrath by the time this is over, and so is Enzo.”

What are they talking about?

I edge even closer to the doorway.

“For siding with her?” Marco replies, his tone clipped.

Oh shit.

“What are we? Five years old?”

“They think she’s right, though. They think she had no choice.”

“Did she? In all honesty?”

Marco sighs like he’s in pain. “Not you too.”

“Not me too, what?”

“She’s cold-blooded, Angelo, I wish you could see that. She doesn’t give a shit about you. All she cares about is herself. I get that it’s life or death, I of all people get that, but you’re my brother, goddamn it, and I’m not going to sit around the Medici table and act like everything’s okay and welcome her into the family. I will have nothing to do with her.”

Why is he saying all this?

“So don’t come,” Angelo replies. “Stay at fucking home and live in the past for the rest of your life.”

“Now you’re just being childish.”

Angelo laughs, and I hear the clink of ice in his glass as I imagine him swirling his bourbon around. “Why the fuck did you even call me?”

“Because I care about you. What? As your younger brother, I’m no longer allowed to tell you when I think you’re still being played?”

“Give it a rest, Marco, you’re like a nervous twitch, and it’s starting to grate on me.”

“Doesn’t it make you wonder if she planned this all along? To get caught? Pretty convenient that the boys barely found anything out from the associate, except he was sent in by the Russians. It’s nothing we didn’t already suspect.”

Angelo snorts. “I think you need to take a vacation, you’re more paranoid than ever.”

My heart races in my chest, and I really should get my feet moving. The last thing I want to do is get caught...but it’s like a train is about to collide into the oncoming platform, and you can’t look away.

“Well, someone has to take this seriously, since I can see you’re not going to.”

This time Angelo chuckles, “Trust me, brother, I think you’re taking this serious enough for the both of us. I think she’s a vulnerable woman who was put in an impossible situation. You haven’t spent time with her as I have, she’s many things, but the last thing I’d ever call her is cold-blooded.”

Marco laughs and then says something in Italian; they sound so similar it’s freaky. “Now you’re thinking with your dick and not with your head.”

“I don’t know what you want me to say or what the point of this conversation is. If you’re done, I’ve got a murder to

plan. You remember the one? I kinda have to get my death all tied up nice and neat,” Angelo says with snark in his tone.

“No, I’m not done. You’re going to continue this on with her after it’s over, aren’t you?”

“Since when did my relationships become any of your business?”

“Since it involves the assassination of this entire family,” he retorts. “Since I’m the one who is stepping up to take over while you’re *deceased*.”

“Well, don’t get too comfy. I’ll be in the country for the next few days, not on planet Mars.”

“I can see calling to try and persuade you to forget this whole charade is evidently not going to work,” he says angrily. “I can only hope to God that you know what you’re doing, Angelo, as I don’t want to be the one attending your funeral, your real one, that is. I’d lay down my life for you, brother, you know that, but I want you to know that I don’t agree with any of this.”

The phone clicks off.

I hear the creak of Angelo’s chair as I slink back against the wall, trying to shrink further against it. I hear Angelo sigh, cursing, then the clunk of his phone being thrown on the desk.

My heart races in my chest.

So, Marco hates me, which I can handle, but knowing that Angelo still has feelings for me makes something inside of me shatter. I’m stunned beyond belief.

There’s complete silence in the study, and I know I’ve left myself open to being heard sneaking away. *Shit*. I do not need Angelo finding me eavesdropping on him, it’ll be just another thing he can add to my long list of misdemeanors.

I’m about to take a step when I hear, “*Little fox*.” I freeze in my tracks, like a thief in the night. Then, “I know you’re there.”

My heart kicks up about a thousand notches as I try to swallow the lump in my throat.

Shit!

Instead of running up the stairs like an errant child to the safety of the guest suite where I can lock the door and hide, I steel myself and hold my head high.

I walk into the room barefoot and see Angelo sitting behind his desk. His whiskey in one hand as he leans his head against it. He looks tired. His shirt is open at the nape and his shirt sleeves are rolled to his elbows.

“Angelo,” I say tersely. “I was...”

“You were, what?”

I swallow hard. “Going to find a drink when I heard you talking.” *No more lies.*

“Did you enjoy the show?”

“I didn’t think it was a show, I thought it was two brothers having a conversation about something they disagree on.”

His lips twitch.

He looks so dark and dangerous in this moment. He oozes sex appeal without ever having to try. How I thought that I could escape this man is almost laughable. There is no outrunning Angelo Medici.

“It’s no secret that we disagree,” he goes on. “My brother has obvious reasons to why he thinks we should abort this mission, but I have other ideas.”

My heart thumps in my chest as he talks, his eyes never leaving mine. As if reading my mind, he holds out his glass toward me. I grab it gratefully and take a mouthful. The icy cold liquid slides right down, burning the back of my throat as I wince but refrain from coughing.

“Why?” I ask. “Why do you have other ideas?”

His bright blue eyes shine in the darkened light. This man who I crossed still has feelings for me, and I’d be denying my very soul if I said that I didn’t too.

“Because I fell in love with you,” he says.

My eyes widen as I stare back at him. “Angelo...” I take a long deep breath, then say, “You say that like it was past tense.”

He bites down on one side of his bottom lip, as if we’re about to duel. “My mistake. I’ve fallen in love with you, *Carina*. What do you think about that?”

I look for any signs of him ribbing me, and I realize he’s being deadly serious.

“I would say that I tried hard to fight my feelings for you, and I failed. It’s why I wrote that letter when I thought I’d have to leave you. When I said that I was sorry that I fell for you, and I never, ever meant to hurt you,” I whisper, “those words were true. The time I spent with you was the most exciting and thrilling of my life, and I never got to enjoy any of it because I was doing it all to help Mia.” I drop my head, unable to continue.

After a few moments of silence, he says, “Look at me.”

I shake my head, too ashamed to meet his gaze.

“*Carina*. Look. At. Me,” he demands. I force my eyes to his. “I know, and I understand now. I know that we can’t go on like this. I can’t work with you if I don’t trust you.”

“What are you saying?”

“Do you truly want to work together, *little fox*?”

I bite down on my lip, and a tear escapes my eye because he’s hit the nail on the head. I do love him. I love every dirty, rotten, beautiful thing about him and always will.

“Yes, Angelo.”

“Then we must trust one another.”

This is almost a hard limit for me, and I think he knows it. So much has happened in my life up to this point that has made me doubt the comfort and safety of a man. I never thought I would be one of those women who needed it, but right now, I crave it down to my very core.

“I’m willing to do that,” I say quietly.

He regards me coolly. “Then you must no longer behave this way.”

I glance at him sharply. “What way?”

“Like you are now. The only way I want you submissive, is in the bedroom, my sweet *Carina*.”

I want that, too, so much.

“Maybe I’m not as strong as you think I am.”

He smirks. “You’re strong enough to get this far and sneak around in my house and listen to private conversations.”

“I guess you could say I’ve adapted since meeting you,” I say. “I meant everything I said in that letter, Angelo. You must know that. Always and forever.”

His eyes are wild as he watches me and I stare back at him. Then he rises from the desk as I step backward.

He’s like a panther; slow, calculating, and downright majestic. He rounds the desk as I back away.

“If you’re not afraid of me, why are you running?” he growls.

When I hit the wall behind me, I flatten my hands against it. “I’m not running, Angelo.”

“No?” He reaches out to play with a strand of my hair. “Then what’s this?”

“Anticipation,” I reply, breathless.

“For what?”

I reach out and cup his face in my hands. “For this.” I reach up and kiss him hard, like my life depends on it, and his mouth opens to me as our tongues collide.

The kiss is raw, rough, and full of unbridled promise. My body wants him, my mind wants him, my very being wants this man like I’ve never wanted anything else before.

When I pull back, he’s panting just as much as I am.

“We’re working together now, Angelo. No more lies.”

He reaches down and snakes his hands in my hair and cups my head, then he kisses me back. It's slow and deep as he presses his cock into my stomach. Every single inch of him feels like lava scorching my skin. A noise leaves my throat that sounds primal and I know he hears it.

He unbuttons my pajama top and pushes it off, then yanks my pants down as he peers down at my body.

"Fuck," he says, his eyes devouring me.

"Angelo," I whisper as he takes me in. One hand snakes down my body to cup one breast, as he gazes at me in awe.

"I've never seen a woman so beautiful," he tells me.

When he brings his lips back to mine, I push myself further into his arms, wrapping them around his neck and rubbing myself against his cock. He growls, and it goes straight between my legs. I need him there, all of him.

"I need you," I whisper, nipping his jaw with my teeth when we break away. He lifts me and I wrap my legs around his waist as he pushes further against me making me cry out.

"Fuck me, Angelo. Please."

"I want to do you so bad," he drawls, his mouth at my neck where he kisses and nips my skin. "But I want you in my bed, not on my desk."

I don't get a say. He carries me out of the room and up the stairs. We kiss the whole way there as he mutters to me in Italian. I stay wrapped around him, holding on for dear life.

When we get to his bed, he throws me down on the mattress, his eyes never leaving mine.

He shoves his pants down, and his shirt swiftly follows. Shrugging it off, he throws it across the room with a ferociousness that makes me wonder if he was ever able to be gentle.

His muscles move in the moonlight as he strokes himself back and forth, his cock hard and long as I stare at his movements. Then he climbs over the top of me as I grab his ass and our lips crash together.

When he pulls back, his eyes are fierce as he says, “Do you really think you’re ready for this?”

I frown. “For sex, or for what comes after?”

His lips curl into a half-smile. “Both.”

He cups both my breasts before I can answer. Reaching down, he sucks on one nipple and pushes my breasts together as he moves to the other. I buck wildly under his flaming touch as he nips and sucks and I dig my nails into his back as he groans.

“You’re the only man...” I say in between gasps as he tortures me. “Who has ever made me feel safe.”

He stops his ministrations as his dark eyes move back to mine. “I will always make sure you are safe,” he says. “No matter what happens.” His hand moves down the lace material of my teddy and he cups my sex. Then he pulls the crotch to the side and feels through my wet folds. I’m so slick and ready for him.

“God, Angelo,” I gasp. “I want you so much.”

His cock nudges my inner thigh as he fingers me, circling my clit as I cry out. He rides me through the wave of pleasure, all the while he watches me fiercely, like he never wants to let me go.

“I want to rip this thing off you,” he growls, slowly sliding two fingers inside me. “But then I wouldn’t get to see you wear it for me again.”

“I need you inside me,” I whisper, clutching his head in my hands. “I need to feel you, Angelo.”

He gives me a look that would make the devil blush as he pulls his fingers out and lines his dick up to my entrance, rubbing through my folds as I hiss and moan like a mad woman. This is how he makes me feel; like a woman possessed.

He doesn’t impale me brutally like I thought he would. Instead, I gasp in complete pleasure when he nudges inside

slowly, pushing in all the way. He stills and settles when he's buried deep, making me feel all of him.

He keeps up his slow sensual kisses as his other hand caresses my hip. Slowly he starts to move, and it's not like the times before when we've both been so frantic to fuck that we've almost broken things to get to our climax.

It's different this time; he's tender, taking his time, although in reality, this is the fight of our lives. A thought crosses my mind as my hips move to his slow rhythm; he moves in and out sensually as my legs wrap around him. *Is he making love to me?*

My body trembles at that very thought. Maybe he is worried I'll break.

He rolls his hips slow but firm, thrusting at the end. He raises my arms above my head and pins me with one hand, spreading his legs as he tortures my body inch by inch.

I quiver and shake, utter bliss flows through my entire being, our bodies wholly one.

He takes his time, drawing out every movement and treating my body like his own temple.

He leans up onto one hand, thrusting hard as he groans and talks to me in Italian. I squeeze my eyes closed because the mere sight of him is enough to make me combust and I want to make this last longer.

"Let go, *little fox*," he whispers, his teeth sinking into my neck as I give in to my release, long and drawn out. He follows close behind, rolling his hips faster as he calls out my name, my real one, his release a long, sexy moan.

He lays his weight on top of me, and I can still feel his dick pulsing in the aftershocks as he buries his head in my neck.

"You'll be the death of me." I'm sure I hear him mutter.

Oh, the irony.

Though the comment momentarily distracts me, I know my first assumption was entirely correct.

Angelo Medici just made love to me.

ANGELO

EVERYTHING IS IN PLACE. THE TIMING COULDN'T BE ANY better if we tried.

Instead of taking Rayne any which way I wanted, I carried her up to my room, stripped naked, and made love to her.

I haven't made love in years. Not like that, not since Lucia. And it felt fucking good.

I definitely must be losing my mind, but I also know that I don't want secrets between us. We need to be able to trust one another to pull this off, and that is no easy feat.

We take a shower, devouring one another under the hot spray, the steam washing away any doubts I have and in its place, I feel comfort. In those last few moments, before the party started, I felt at peace.

Even though we've had quite the evening of events and the vanilla sex we just enjoyed, I know she's nervous. I can't say I blame her or don't feel a twinge in my gut, but the sooner we get this whole show on the road, the better.

"Everything is in place. Soon after you leave here, I will message a contact at the hospital from my burner phone. She's already waiting. When you ring 911 and the call gets assigned, she will take the job and will arrive in the ambulance with her partner," I say. "Her name is Sage, and she owes us a favor. It will be leaked to the media that my housekeeper called it in, and they performed CPR. In the meantime, you'll leave my apartment. A taxi will be waiting out front, which you'll take to your place. Gus will tail them in an unmarked car, then pick

you up in the laneway behind your apartment and take you to Falmouth.” I stare at her, then add, “Any questions?”

I’m sure she has plenty, but as she gapes at me, I realize how elaborate this all is.

She recovers quickly and asks, “So I make it look like I’m just going home?”

“Exactly, in case you’re followed or anything along those lines. You’re just going home as if nothing happened. You must assume you’re under surveillance, *Carina*.”

“I don’t want to be alone in my apartment even for a moment, Angelo. What if someone is waiting there to hurt me, or worse?”

“You won’t be alone. I will have my guys on you. You won’t see them, but I can assure you that they will be there. Nothing is going to happen to you, they’re ex-seals, Rayne, not pussy boys. Trust me, like what we said.”

She nods. Though she’s shaky, there is a determined look in her eyes. I know it will override the fear.

I clasp my hands in hers as she glances up at me. “Now is our time to do this, are you with me, *little fox*?”

One thing is certain; she has no hesitation about getting Mia back. She’s fearless that way. The same way I am with my family.

“I’m with you, Angelo, all the way.”

I smile and kiss her quickly. “Good.”

She takes a few deep breaths. “I’m ready.”

“Enzo and Marco are on immediate standby,” I assure her. “Fynn and Dante are with them at my Ma’s place, with my cousins Santino and Jonas. Dom is with Allegra, just in case, plus Darko and my soldiers will be on the ground.”

“It’s all hands on deck then.”

“In this instance, I think there’s safety in numbers.”

“What does Allegra know?” she asks me. “The thought of that woman gives me the shudders, her fake niceties when really she can’t wait to sink her hooks into you.”

I pull her close. “Jealous?” She gives me an eye roll. “She knows nothing, and we must keep it that way. It’s not unusual for any of us to be on standby or lockdown over business, especially when it involves the Familia.”

“All right, so then I wait for you to get to Falmouth, right?”

“Yes, Enzo is tracking your phone again. Now that you have it back, he will call you immediately after leaving the laneway. Then I’ll meet you in Falmouth. Enzo and my guys will be there before me, you won’t be alone, I promise.” I touch her cheek with my hand. “I know this is easy to say for me, but you need not worry. This is all going to play out in our favor.”

“I’m scared, Angelo, what if they don’t hand her over?”

“Vaughan is this close to getting that trace. He’s working on it every second, Rayne, just in case they cross us. If anyone can crack it, it’s him. Trust me?”

She looks up at me with those beguiling eyes and it hits me again, there’s nothing I won’t do.

It’s not for the first time tonight that I’ve realized this fact.

I also hate she’s going off like this alone, though I know she isn’t actually alone, but I want to be there by her side. It kills me that we have to be separated like this, even for a few hours.

I pass her the cordless phone to the house. “Make the call.”

She takes it with a shaky hand and I brush a knuckle over her cheek. She dials 911.

“911, state your emergency?” the operator answers swiftly.

Her big eyes glance up at me, and I encourage her with a nod.

“My b-b-boss, I think he’s having a heart attack.”

Just like we rehearsed.

And so it plays out. The operator stays on the line to get all the information, the address, my symptoms and hangs on the line for a few minutes until Rayne seems calm enough to follow the instructions and an ambulance is dispatched. I text Sage while this is all happening.

When Rayne hangs up, there's an echo of complete silence and stillness between us. Neither of us moves for a few moments; every breath feels like a lifetime.

"I'm sorry it had to come to this," she whispers.

I shrug my shoulders. "It is what it is. You have to go now."

She nods and swallows hard. "I'll be waiting."

I tilt her chin up with my hand and look at her beautiful face. "Don't look so sad, I'm the one who's dying here."

She gives me a small smile.

I embrace her tightly. "We have about six minutes, *Carina*, you need to leave."

"I love yo-" She stops mid-sentence and glances up at me again with glassy eyes. My mouth twitches at her unorchestrated outburst, I definitely didn't see that coming.

"Are you trying to say something, my *little fox*?"

"No." She shakes her head, thinking better of it, but it's a little late for that.

"*Carina*, there's one thing you must know in all of this. I fell for you from the moment I saw you in Render Cafe that day. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

I haven't said the words in over a decade. Admitting I'm in love with her was no easy feat but saying the words...I close my eyes.

"So, you meant what you said. Do you love me?" she whispers.

I open my eyes and stare down into hers, and I see she wants to hear me say it, she wants to know. After everything we've been through, I owe her that.

A smile tugs at my lips. "Yes, my beautiful, brave queen. I love you, and I've loved you from the first moment I saw you, so that should clarify that question, shouldn't it?"

Her eyes sparkle for the first time in a long while, and I know she meant it when she went to say the words first. Despite everything, she loves me.

I don't even know how this can be happening. It shouldn't work, *we* shouldn't work, but somehow, we do. And I know somehow, maybe just by the skin of our teeth, we're going to get through this.

We can't fail. I won't let us.

The last six minutes feel like a lifetime. Rayne is safely in a taxi on her way to her apartment, while Gus tails her with Darko and I've thrown Rocco into the mix, too. I'm fucking itching to talk to Enzo, but I have the next showdown to attend before that happens. I can always call him from the ambulance.

Silence surrounds me as the enormity engulfs me. Even on the city streets, as the ambulance siren gets closer and closer, I wait and hear nothing.

This is what I do when under immense pressure. I still. I take a moment to feel the quiet around me before striking. The waiting game is not a new thing for me, the only tension going through my body is for Mia and her safety. I fucking hope I get to meet her.

I throw back a scotch and think back to a time when things seemed a lot less complicated, though I've no idea exactly when that was. There's always something going on within the family, especially with all the projects we have going and the

casino, businesses, the club, and everything else in between. Then there's Valentina; she certainly keeps me on my toes.

However, these last few days have felt more intense than ever before.

I circle my fingers around the rim of the glass as I contemplate what happens next. I can't look too far ahead, one moment at a time.

I haven't told Rayne yet that there's an extremely slim chance she'll get Mia back. I suppose I'm also hoping for a miracle. I feel like a bastard for not telling her my thoughts based on my experience in these matters. Yet, in this instance, it's necessary to protect her from information that could cause her more stress.

The last thing she needs is a mental breakdown like the one I found her in whilst she was showering. I know I'll have to deal with the consequences should the outcome take a turn.

I'm not prepared for what we may find, but I know I'll help her through it no matter what happens. We just need Enzo and Vaughan to come through.

The screaming of sirens gets closer. I'm not afraid, not of this. The only thing I'm afraid of is loving someone again and then losing them, a little too late for that perhaps, but to rope someone into this game of life in my world somehow seems selfish on my part.

Should men like me even have the opportunity to love someone?

Do I deserve that?

I know I'm a selfish fucking asshole for continuing this for as long as I have and for not walking away. I had the perfect opportunity to do just that, and I couldn't stay away.

Not even when I thought she hated me.

Perhaps it's weakness after all, I don't know.

Mario was happily married for decades; I wonder if he ever questioned himself like I'm doing now. Though Gloria also never tried to kill him.

Would I always be looking over my shoulder if she were to be mine? Can I really be confident of her safety, as I promised?

I know I would protect her at all costs, but I can't be everywhere all of the time. If any harm were to come to her because of my lifestyle and bringing her into the underworld, I would never forgive myself. But I'm helpless to walk away, even now.

One thing that sticks at the back of my mind is that I could teach her so much; together, we'd be a force to be reckoned with. However, it would also make her a target. That part makes me instantly sour.

Imagining having a woman like her by my side makes me believe I could do anything, but losing her could mean my ultimate demise. Worse than any poison stuck in my neck.

Although it does make me wonder. Are there happy endings for someone like me?

My own mother had to go through the terror of losing her husband at such a young age, after everything they went through, and then having five children to raise. What if something were ever to happen to me for real, and Rayne was left a widow? All good questions, but God only knows the answers.

I don't have much time, but I stay seated in my sitting room. Sage knows her way in.

I close my eyes while I wait, one luxury for the moment I can still afford.

Almost immediately see my father's face flash before me out of nowhere. *Fucking hell.*

My eyes flick open. I do not, under any circumstances, need to be thinking about that right now.

I try again to relax as much as possible, maybe the scotch has finally gone to my head.

As my eyes close once more, I'm taken back to the last day I saw my father alive.

I don't know why this is happening, and it feels like I'm helpless to stop it. Maybe my subconscious really thinks this is it and my life is flashing before my eyes. *Jesus fucking Christ.*

However my mind wanders...

"Angelo, watch your step boy." My Pa's voice echoes around me.

We're loading crates of apples for the Bistro, where Gloria is famous for her pies, into the back of his truck. Me being me, I'm trying to take more than I can carry, maybe to impress him, I'm not sure. I filled out this year, a growth spurt insued, I'm almost as big as Papa. At fifteen years old, it's becoming more and more apparent that I'm not a boy for much longer.

"Papa, you worry too much."

"So will you some day, just wait until you are five kids deep."

I give my him a look, of course that's the last thing on my mind. My father would have a fit if he knew what I had been up to lately. I've more than started to notice girls, but I definitely can't imagine having children of my own.

"I'll go get the rest of the boxes," I tell him walking over to the back of the loading area at the fruit market we're buying from.

It's an enormous building, the owner knows us well. We're here early this morning, the cold is seeping in being late November, and the place is deserted.

I'm whistling a tune in Italian, another thing that pleases my Pa. Most of our conversations while we are out together are in Sicilian, it's actually all we spoke during the first years of our lives growing up.

I pick up one of the last crates when I hear a heated discussion, someone's yelling. I turn my head to look and see Pa being confronted by an older man, he's yelling loudly.

Pa doesn't like it when I get too involved in his business, although he has taught me to fight and how to hold a gun. It's not like I don't know what he does, and I know one day I'll be

more heavily involved, but I don't want him to be pissed at me for butting in. I hang back and strain to listen to what they're talking about.

"It isn't me personally expanding, it's the company." I hear papa telling the man. "I'm sorry you lost your job, but the place needed a massive overhaul."

He's talking about the security company he just purchased with Uncle Mario, as far as I overheard it was a small operation going bust.

I shake my head and keep walking to the truck and load the crate in the back, walking back to fetch the last one before we get back to the bistro. Papa knows how to handle these kind of situations, he's the hardest, but fairest man that I know. He commands attention and receives respect wherever he goes, and he does it all without even raising his voice.

I continue my task, even when I hear the man going at my Pa again.

It's then that everything happens in slow motion, I turn with the last crate of apples in my hands, at that exact time I see the man reach into his jacket pocket and pull out a gun. He points it at my Pa and I freeze. I know he carries a gun, however I've never seen him shoot it, I've never seen anything serious in his line of work. Everything happens behind closed doors.

Papa is holding his hands up in a gesture where I know he's trying to reason, it's not a good sign. I start to run with the crate, towards the back of the truck, my heart is in my mouth - is he going to shoot? It's in that moment I hear that noise I never want to hear ever again...

"I don't think so ... your time is up Medici."

Bang, bang, bang.

I drop the crate and scream, seeing my Papa drop to the ground at the same time the apples fly everywhere. The man looks at me briefly not before shoving the gun back in his jacket and running away out of the alley way. I momentarily

run after him screaming, then I hear Pa calling out to me and I stop in my tracks, running back to him.

I crouch down on the ground, "Papa," I cry, tears rolling down my face. I lift him up by the shoulders and hold his head in my hands, he's clutching his chest, blood running everywhere.

His eyes flutter back as he tries to focus on me. I start yelling for Marcello the greengrocer, or anyone to help. The shot fires certainly echoed out across the market. Sure enough, Marcello and a couple of his workers coming running out, he yells at one of the young boys to call for an ambulance.

I stare down at my Pa while he tries to form a sentence. Loose apples roll around us.

"Hold on," I tell him, sliding out of my sweater and using it to apply pressure over his chest.

"Angelo," he murmurs out, his eyes start to close.

"Papa!" I yell, "No, please don't die, help is coming Please Papa."

My hands are stained in blood and the commotion around me is palpable, but I hear nothing.

I know Marcello is frantic next to me, but I can't work out any words.

"Be brave my son. Papa loves you."

"No!" I scream. I cry. I yell. I turn my head to Marcello, he's just as distraught as I am, he says something about an ambulance being on the way.

How the hell did this happen?

I look back to my father, the only man I've ever loved. I will him to hold on, my heart pounds in my chest that this could be it. It can't be it, we have more to do. I need him!

I look over to the broken apple crate, a million apples strewn everywhere as Pa lays in my arms and draws out his last breath. His body sags as I wipe my face with the sleeve of my shirt.

He can't die. He has Ma and five children, is he never going to know the new baby?

I sob and scream at his lifeless form, until I can sob and scream no more.

Everything goes black inside me as I shake his unmoving body...

My eyes flick open as I scooch forwards in my chair and run my hands over my face. I'm sweating, and tears pool in my eyes threatening to spill, but I won't fucking let them.

It's been a while since I thought about the whole scene that played out before me that day, the blood, the apples, the comotion. It's all too much to fucking take.

I take a deep breath hearing the sirens approaching, maybe that's what triggered my mind into thinking about it. There will always be that part of me that will wonder what I could have done differently. He wasn't even gunned down by an enemy, just a disgruntled worker taking out his frustration over losing his job on my father. It hardly seems fucking fair.

The cops got to the guy before my uncle did, he's got life but didn't last a minute in prison with Mario's connections.

I'm almost relieved to hear the ambulance pull up and the flashing lights out front, that in itself is saying something. I just want this whole fucking thing to be over. I don't have to wait too long, which is a good thing since my mind has spiraled enough waiting for Sage.

It's going to be a trip down memory lane seeing her again, it's been a while. She's a family friend, she and her elder brother grew up with us. She was sweet on Fynn for quite sometime, they were on and off again through high school here and there.

I realize, she's going to know we're in some kind of trouble. I got her out of a very unfortunate jam a few years back with an old boyfriend and some drug charges, so I suppose I am calling on a favor, something I've tried to steer clear of doing before now.

When the door bell buzzes I get up from my seat take a deep breath, pushing the past aside for now, the memory still vivid; I miss my father so much.

I lean in the doorway when I swing it open and look down at her petite frame.

“What have you gone and done now, Medici?”

Her partner Drew is in tow behind her, they will both benefit financially for this, big time. Even though Sage will probably refuse to take it.

“You look good,” I say with a sly grin, not answering the question. She’s always been cute, and smart too, putting herself through medical school all those years ago.

“Is this one of those don’t ask, don’t tell kind of situations?” she likes to joke around but I’d trust her with my life, and that’s saying a lot.

“You got it. More importantly are you ever going to return my brother’s phone calls?” I fire back.

She balks. “Fynn? You’re not still trying to set me up, are you?”

“Indulge me, I’m about to die.”

“Oh lord, Angelo. You know this is a bad omen, faking your own death.”

“That’s not the first time I’ve heard somebody say that to me recently. And you didn’t answer my question.”

She shakes her head. “Fynn and I are ancient history, you know that.”

Heaven knows he needs a good woman to tame him. Someone loyal, beautiful, and not afraid to kick his ass.

“Sometimes history repeats itself,” I say with a shrug. Though she’s right, some things are best left in the past. I guess a person has to know when to pick their battles.

My mind flicks back to Rayne, even though I’m only a few miles apart, it feels like there are oceans between us. And I don’t like it.

I need my *Carina* back in my arms where she belongs.

“Are you at least going to invite me in for a coffee?” Sage says, breaking me out of my moment of reverie.

“There’s no time for that,” I scoff. “And since when have I ever been chivalrous?”

She cha-grins. “Point taken.”

What happens next is paramount to keeping my side of the bargain in place. I will do everything in my power to find Mia. This is a complicated but necessary step.

I promised Rayne.

It’s a promise I intend to keep, even if I have no fucking clue how I can keep that promise.

RAYNE

THE CAB RIDE OVER TO MY APARTMENT GOES BY IN A BLUR.

I've no idea where Gus is or who this guy is driving me; I suspect one of Angelo's men as he seems a little too stealthy and a tad too stoic to be just a regular cab driver. Of course, I don't question it. That seems to be the least of my problems right now.

I rest my head on the cold window as we drive on. I heard the ambulance coming closer as the cab pulled out from the curb. I know it's all going down, so there really is no turning back now.

I close my eyes and momentarily think of my beautiful little sister. We've survived so much together; losing our parents so young at once was enough to destroy anyone, but we lived through it, somehow.

The road hasn't been easy, none of it has. I took on the protective role of my sister very early on after they died. A big part of me feels a tremendous amount of guilt that this happened, that *I* let it happen, that it's *my* fault.

If I had never gone to work at the gallery, I would never have been a target for their sick little game. If I hadn't left my husband and gone looking for a new life and a new city, I would still be working at Christie's with no association to this mafia family whatsoever.

Why the fuck couldn't these kidnapper criminals find their own assassin in a world full of billions of people? Someone

more experienced in these matters, why me? I still struggle with why, but I guess I'll never truly know.

I close my eyes to try and blink it away. I think back to a time when we were happy, when Mia and I laughed until our bellies ached and tears rolled down our faces.

When we traveled together and hiked the Grand Canyon only last year, all the times we've stayed at each other's places, and I've listened and helped her out with boy troubles and tales of woe. She did the same for me when I went through my divorce. I know her friends are missing her and wondering what the hell is going on by now, and lord only knows how long that can be kept at bay before people start asking too many questions.

I feel like the biggest liar and fraud, not even being able to tell the truth about this to anyone, not even Melody, whom I've grown close with. That reminds me, now that I have my phone back, I probably have a ton of missed calls and messages to look at, but I can do that on the drive over to Falmouth.

Melody was still asking for a full rundown on what was going on with Angelo and me the last time we spoke at work, and I've no idea what I would even tell her right now. Lying isn't in my nature, yet I've become quite good at it. I can't even remember a time when I had a normal life and did normal things like gossip with my girlfriends without a care in the world.

Until now, I've refused to believe I would never see Mia again. She was alive in that photo with the newspaper, and that was only a few days ago, which gives me hope.

Yet, I have no guarantee, only the word of some monster with no soul or value on human life. They don't give two shits about her, I know that. Even if she is found alive, what are the chances she hasn't been harmed or assaulted?

Perhaps I am deluding myself, maybe living in denial has served a purpose to get to this point, to keep me somewhat sane while it all unravels, but the thoughts are always looming. The unknown. The what-ifs. And the not knowing.

I keep my eyes closed while we travel. The cab driver says nothing.

I think about my parents' faces, the last time I saw them, but I don't go there too often in my mind. The trauma and the grief never truly go away, though it's times like this that I need them.

My dad was patient and kind and all the things you could ever wish for in a father. He taught us to be honest and always say our please's and thank you's. I miss his smile; I miss how he would wrap his arm around my shoulders and tell me everything was going to be alright. We didn't get enough time. I feel tears pool behind my eyes, it just isn't fair.

My mother, the spitting image of my darker-haired sister, they were close—two peas in a pod. Mom was warm and generous and had a feisty side that my dad called a *spirit*. She could talk the talk when things got tough or a challenging situation came up. They always had our backs. We were all so close.

Our parents were loving; I still don't understand why they had to go. Why their lives were cut short, it's something I've battled with for many years, and countless years with a therapist hasn't brought me any closer to that truth.

My life moved forwards, yes, but I will never let go of them. I don't actually believe that's possible. I don't want to forget them. I wanted them to be proud of the job I'd done with Mia, how brave I had been in all of this, how I'd kept her safe and watched her back. Now, look at me. I feel tears escape my eyes, but I brush them away briskly because I can't go there right now. I have to keep my wits about me.

Bringing up the guilt and the pain of that part of my life isn't going to help me get any closer to getting Mia back.

When the cab driver pulls up at my apartment, I reach for my purse. I take a few deep breaths.

I thank him and slide across the seat, and step back out into the cold. I make my way across the sidewalk toward my front door, as I hear the taxi roll away. My hands are shaky as I let

myself in, it takes several attempts to even get the key into the door. I turn the handle once it unlatches and step inside, locking it behind me.

Everything seems to be still and quiet, and for the first time, I feel afraid to be here alone, which is absurd because there is nobody here but me.

I think back to what Angelo said about being followed, Gus waiting for me, and all the people looking out for me. I suppose that's something, but it doesn't calm my nerves.

I flick a few lights on, but I have no intention of staying here. Angelo's instructions were very clear; walk in the house, go up to my room, change my outfit, leave the bedroom and kitchen lights on, and walk out the back door to the alleyway where Gus will be waiting.

I do it fast. I want to get out of here, and I feel out of sorts even in my own apartment, like I'm being watched, even though I know that's not possible.

I flick my bedroom light on and quickly change into some sweats. I pack a small overnight bag with my essentials. Angelo assured me that there would be clothing and items for me at Falmouth, but something about putting on my favorite hoodie and having some of my own things around me makes me feel a little bit better. I throw it all into the bag, leave my lights on, and take off back downstairs.

What I'm not prepared for is to be greeted by a giant.

He pushes off the back wall the moment I step outside and I gasp as he scares the bejesus out of me.

"Who are you?" I stammer when I recover from the shock.

"I'm Rocco." He grins. "And we need to move."

I glance up at him, Christ alive, he must be six-foot-seven. He's military kind of scary, has short dark hair and long sideburns, tanned skin, and is as beefy as a wrestler.

"Wait ... how do I know ...?"

"Gus is waiting." He shrugs.

God, I have no idea who this guy is. Angelo never mentioned it, just that Gus would be waiting at the back in the car. I have no choice but to trust him and follow him. He takes long strides toward the parked vehicle.

The moment we reach it, he opens the door and ushers me in without saying another word.

I see Gus in the front, and he greets me with a nod. Once we're inside, the front passenger door opens, and Darko jumps inside. Gus takes off, and I literally sit on the edge of my seat wondering where the hell Darko just sprang from.

No one says anything. The only sound is the light hum of the engine as we pull out of the alley.

I glance next to me, and I see Rocco staring at me, it's intimidating at best. I don't know how to feel with these guys, but I try to remain calm. I at least wish he'd sent Enzo. Where the fuck is Enzo?

"I'm R-Rayne," I say to him, trying to steady my voice.

Of course, he knows who the fuck I am, but he's making me jittery.

He grins, and it sends chills up my spine. This guy is not to be messed with; danger pours off him in waves.

"You're smaller than I expected," he says finally.

I just look at him, I don't know what to say. I have no idea what Angelo has told any of his men about me.

He folds his arms over his chest and sinks back into his seat, looking straight ahead.

We ride for a while and I manage to sit back a little bit and try to relax as much as possible. I make a mental note to reply to Melody and let her know I'm okay. There are a few messages from her asking me how my weekend was after the Gala, she has no idea what really happened of course, or why I left so suddenly. Angelo has also made it clear under no uncertain terms that I'm not to text or phone anyone.

"Do you know if I was followed to my apartment?" I whisper to Rocco when I finally have the courage to speak up,

knowing everyone in the car can hear me. I've no idea why I'm asking him that, why I'm whispering, or where the question came from, but the silence has been deafening.

He regards me slowly. *Man, he freaks me out.* He's a good-looking guy and all, but he scares the shit out of me.

"It's unlikely," he replies, folding his arms over his chest.

"Are you the brawn of the operation?" I fire back.

His mouth twitches and he laughs darkly. "Something like that."

"Is that why he sent you?"

He eyes me coolly, and I can't meet his gaze or even begin to describe the look on his face, so I clasp my hands tightly in my lap instead.

"Angelo sent me because I'm the most ruthless," he explains like we're discussing how chilly the evening has suddenly become. "So you're safe with me. I'm under strict instructions."

"Which are what, exactly?"

"You know, you ask a lot of questions, girly. We'll be there in a while. Why don't you just relax, we have it all under control."

I eye him a little dubiously. "When is Enzo coming?"

"Soon."

Darko turns around to look at me then. He opens his mouth momentarily but then thinks better of whatever he is going to say and closes it again. Probably to tell me to shut the fuck up.

I can see these guys are not the most verbose of the bunch, but I guess I'm not here to make friends.

The sooner we're at Falmouth and away from the chaos and prying eyes, the better. I don't know why, but I feel peaceful at Falmouth, which is ridiculous since my first time there was under duress.

I've never seen anything like it and in no way comparable to Fortress or even his townhouse. Falmouth is almost ... *homely*. That's one thing I love about Angelo, he's always unexpected. I would never in a million years expect him to have a house so inviting like that, so full of warmth.

I think about his conversation earlier with Marco. As much as those words hurt, I don't blame him. He's a good brother. In many ways, we're very alike. I can see how fiercely protective he is of Angelo, and I respect that. He hates me, and I'm okay with that. I'll have to deal with it and with him when the time comes.

At least the brother named Dante seemed to hate me far less. Under different circumstances, I'm sure we'd get along.

Then, all thoughts fade away when I think about Angelo confessing that he loved me.

In the short time I've known him, I've fallen hard. This wasn't supposed to happen, and I can't regret the decisions I've made because it wouldn't have led me to him.

Now I'm in love with Angelo Medici, head of the Boston Mafia.

In love.

Whatever I do next, I have to be sure of. And I'm sure that even though I should be fraught with the danger of being by his side, I wouldn't want it any other way.

I run my hand through my hair and sigh out loud, not even realizing I made a sound until Rocco turns his head and looks at me. He doesn't say anything, but it's like he's reading my mind with those dark, impenetrable eyes.

I look straight ahead and try to keep my vocals to a minimum until we reach Falmouth, it's safer that way.

I'm beyond tired when the car rolls up, though realistically, it's only been an hour's journey. It seems like a lifetime since I

was here last, yet eerily it was only yesterday. I'm losing track of time, but I certainly didn't expect to be back here so soon.

It's still a few hours from midnight, and I wonder what Angelo's doing right at this very moment.

I've no idea when I will be contacted, but I know it should be within the next twenty-four hours. The fact that I could have Mia's location soon sends a new thrill of adrenaline right through me; chasing the fear away, restoring my hope, overriding my questions and doubts. The need for vengeance runs just as strong. It's like it's lurking. A sleeping tiger waiting to strike.

I hear the crashing of the waves on the shore before I even see the ocean as we walk from the garage into the main house via the side entry; that sound alone makes me feel ten times calmer.

I really need to see Angelo; I need to be near him. I feel safe with him.

Rocco leads me inside, flicking on lights as he walks.

"Make yourself at home," he tells me. "Enzo will be here soon."

"What about Angelo?"

"You worry too much, princess. He will be here soon enough."

"Have you talked to him?" I press, grasping at anything to get him to talk.

His eyes flick to mine. "Everything is going to plan. Make yourself some tea or something, and enjoy the view."

I resist the urge to roll my eyes at his back while he steps toward the kitchen and drops my overnight bag down. Though I insisted I was fine, he insisted on carrying in for me. I'm sure he thinks I've got all the time in the world to just sit around and look out the window while drinking cups of tea, but that's the furthest thing from my mind.

He flicks on the kitchen lights and tells me he's going outside to check in with Darko and the guys. *The guys?* I

thought nobody knew this location. I wonder how much security Angelo has organized here. He said hardly anyone knows about this place.

In the meantime, I walk over to fill up the kettle. The kitchen window faces straight out over the sea; it's white with pale green bench tops, and the timber-lined ceilings and the beams are white, not dark and masculine like his apartment.

The large kitchen island overlooks the cozy sitting room. There's a pale green couch and two white wicker armchairs. Both face a large, floor-to-ceiling window with a breathtaking view. It's very calming here, I can see how he likes it.

I make myself a peppermint tea and sit over on the couch to wait, my mind ticking over with getting my phone call.

Darko and Rocco come in a while later but go upstairs. I have no idea where Gus disappeared to.

About an hour later, Enzo finally gets here with Dante. Thank goodness it's not Marco, I don't think I'd have the strength to have it out with him right now.

I get up as they both come into the kitchen. I draped a blanket over me, even after Rocco lit the fire earlier. The cold seeps deep down into my bones.

Dante greets me with a smirk as I smile tentatively.

"You all right?" Enzo regards me with a rueful smile, gesturing for me to sit back down again. "You must be shattered."

"I'm okay." I shake it off. "How did it go? Have you heard from Angelo?"

"He should be a couple of hours away at most, it's all in place." He nods, glancing up at the wall clock. "I'm expecting a call at some point from Vaughan. He's the guy that does the traces. Did Angelo tell you?"

"Yeah." I nod, "He said the encrypting was state of the art and everything's scrambled, which is why Vaughan is having so much trouble trying to get around it."

“The technology is always changing,” he tells me, “Trying to hack into these systems is getting more and more difficult.”

“We don’t have too much longer,” I say quietly, then I wonder when the news is going to break of Angelo’s death, or maybe it already has.

Dante’s phone rings when he stands up from the fire, and he rolls his eyes, and then I think I see him mouth the words *Allegra*. That kicks up my heart a notch, I’ve only met the woman a couple of times, but I didn’t exactly hit it off with the things she had to say, knowing she slept with Angelo too, even if it was all those years ago, made things uncomfortable.

“Allegra, I can’t talk right now,” Dante says when he answers after Enzo gives him the evil eye. “Because I’m busy with the guys. No, Angelo isn’t with me, I haven’t seen him all night, actually.”

There’s a pause on the other end, I can hear her babbling, but I can’t make out the words. “I’ll tell him you’re trying to reach him, no problem. Okay, see you tomorrow.”

He hangs up and flops down into one of the wicker chairs opposite me. “That woman won’t quit,” he says, running his hands through his hair and looking over at us. “She’s been trying to call Angelo all night.”

Awesome.

“No doubt,” Enzo mutters as he turns to look at me. “Make sure you don’t use your phone, even a text message at this point.”

I nod my head, “Angelo told me.”

Dante smiles, albeit a little wearily. “You always do what my brother tells you?” He tilts his head to the side.

“I think we both know it’s better for everyone if I remain compliant,” I reply.

Enzo laughs quietly next to me. “Keep it that way. If anyone has hacked or tapped your phone and you message Angelo, the jig is up.”

I nod and bite my lip. “What was his deal with Allegra?” I ask them both, though I’ve no idea why I would choose a time like this to bring that up.

They both share a look.

“What do you mean?” Dante asks.

“Doesn’t she have a thing for him?”

Enzo speaks before Dante can interject, “That was a long time ago. They remained friends, and she married Roberto after all,” Enzo says.

“Don’t worry about her,” Dante confirms. “She’s family, annoying, but family all the same.”

I’ve seen how she looks at him, and I can also see that the claws would come out if it came down to a duel. I wonder if Allegra is going to be a problem once this is all over with.

I stifle a yawn and Enzo looks at me.

“You need to get some sleep.” He nods towards the stairs. “One of us will wake you if there’s any news before Angelo gets here.”

I nod and clutch my phone as I get up. “Thanks,” I say to both of them, because the state I’m in is causing things to fly out of my mouth that ordinarily wouldn’t. “For believing me, for not making me feel like I’m the worst person in the world.”

Dante shrugs. “I’m just glad you’re not a cold-hearted killer, Rayne, and you spared Angelo. You made the right decision, there’s no way to win crossing a Medici.”

A cold chill runs through me at the thought.

“Get some rest,” Enzo says to me again, giving me a nod and a small, sympathetic smile. “You’re going to need it.”

ANGELO

IT'S ALMOST TWO IN THE MORNING WHEN I GET TO FALMOUTH.

It's only been twenty-four hours since the Gala fiasco, yet it seems like so much longer. The tiredness that aches through every muscle of my body seeps deep into my bones, threatening to overwhelm me.

On the one hand, I welcome the feeling, it reminds me that I'm still alive and that I have a heart beating in my chest. On the other hand, I wonder how long I can keep this up without choking someone.

I had a go at Enzo tonight, but that was for different reasons. He had no right to defy me and belittle my decision-making. Even if he was right about Rayne. *My little fox.*

I trust and value his opinion, but unfortunately, the Medici temper is legendary. Enzo, aside from Marco, is the only one who dares to stand up to me. For the sake of our long-standing friendship, I let him play a few rounds; I know he'd take a bullet for me, and we've been in worse circumstances that called for loyalty. I'd do the same for him. He's more like a brother than a best friend.

With Rayne and I, we've turned a corner. We may be at odds with this whole ludicrous plan, but the one thing I do know, is that nobody else will get to have my *Carina*. She's just that, *mine*. And I'll kill anyone who tries to take her from me.

What she doesn't know is Enzo has a trace on the location. We're honing in, and by daylight, we'll have it pin-pointed and

ready to strike.

One thing I don't do is pay my best friend, or my men, to not come through for me. This took a bit of time, but at least we have something.

At each passing second, my fear for Mia's safety grows.

I know how this game works.

Rayne is obviously nowhere near as experienced in the underworld, nor is she mafia enough to be able to grasp the situation. If I tell her that now, it'll ruin everything. She may be strong, but she's not ready to hear that yet.

It feels foreign, keeping things from her, but it must be done.

If Mia is actually dead... I swipe a hand down my face, and for the first time in all of this, I feel the trepidation creeping in. Having to tell her that her sister is gone is not an option. *It'd kill her*, the final nail in the coffin.

I've already seen the lengths she's gone to in order to get her sister back, and if I were a civilian and not the Don, I would have done precisely the same thing.

I kept her prisoner. Tied her up. I fucking drugged her, and yet her loyalty to me still supersedes all of that. Yes, I know she needs me to find Mia, yet something in my gut tells me that it wouldn't have mattered if her sister's life was hanging in the balance or not. She wouldn't leave.

Love. It's a powerful emotion, and it's not something I'm used to having to confront. It's something that I hide from. The more vulnerability you have, the more your enemies have to crush you. I suppose that is one of the reasons I've never been in a relationship since Lucia died. My enemies will always find a way to get to me, and it's through the ones I care about, the ones I love.

Rayne is strong. I try to tell myself that, but deep inside, I know she must be frightened out of her mind. She's not mafia *yet*, even if she is fit for a queen, *my queen*. But bringing her into this life isn't something I would ever want for her. I love

her enough to let her go. And let her go, I must. I've come to the conclusion that it must be done at some point.

I could set her up in an apartment, in a new city, somewhere far away from temptation. She deserves to have a life where she gets all the things she wants, and let's face it, she's never going to get all the things she wants from me. I can never give her the normal things a woman wants, and children would be completely out of the question...A cold shiver runs down my spine, thinking about the innocent souls that would be part of this family. I can't even think about Rayne being pregnant with my child.

I know people do it. They do it all the time. But I've attended more funerals in my thirty-eight years than I care to remember.

I would never be at peace when I wasn't with them. Nobody could protect Rayne and my unborn children like I could...*What the fuck am I saying?*

I need a fucking stiff drink because my mind is clearly out of control.

It's making me think back to the past, the devastation I feel over my wife and child all those years ago will never leave me.

It will haunt me forever how I wasn't there to protect them. I can't let that happen again. That mistake is on my head and I have to live with it.

No matter how much I want a future with Rayne, I know the rest is just a futile dream. One that I can never fulfill.

All of this is my fault.

I can't blame her for the fact that I've fallen, and fallen hard, that's on me. I can't take it back. Frankly, I wouldn't want to. But for just a moment in time, I got to experience pure bliss.

Even if she was hired to fuck me and turn me into this lovesick puppy, I deserved what was to come because I didn't stay vigilant. I let my guard down.

This is just a reminder, that in my world, you cannot trust anyone. It's fickle, and it'll slip through your fingers like quicksand if you don't stay alert. And the shots come from all sides when you least expect it.

I didn't see her coming. And to my dying day, that will allure me like nothing else ever has.

I'm a selfish son of a bitch, but I'm not going to keep her. As much as she fits into my world like a welcome glove, she would never want this for a life. And that's why I will let her go.

When I get to the gates at Falmouth, I punch in the code from my phone and the gates swing open. I drive down to the basement parking and take the stairs, not because I need exercise but because I need more time to think.

The house isn't lit up like I'd expected, though, it is the middle of the night.

I can smell cedar and furniture polish, and I know my house cleaner must have been here.

I also have received several messages from Allegra on my phone tonight, begging me to forgive her. She said she'd had too much to drink and regrets everything she said. In truth, I've barely thought about her indecent proposal. The very notion makes me shudder. I could never do such a thing to Roberto even if I did think of her in that way once.

I didn't reply back.

Allegra has been a good friend since Roberto passed, but I honestly just don't know what to make of her. She's a complication I don't need and a headache that will resolve itself.

I guess she'll hear about my death on the news in a few hours. Everyone will.

I toss my car keys in the marble bowl on the table in the foyer and glance around.

The house is entirely still like most houses are at this time of the morning.

I was only here less than twenty-four hours ago, but it feels like a lifetime.

I love this house. In my fantasy life, where I would have a wife and kids, this is where they would live. Safe enough to be away from the prying eyes and ears of the outside world and private enough to live a life without the scrutiny that being with me would bring.

Is there a chance?

I almost slap myself.

I'm turning into a fucking sap. This is exactly what happened to my father; look how that turned out. They shot him like a stray dog on the street while he bled in my arms.

The bitterness I feel over losing my father at such a young age is something that shaped me for manhood. I owe all of my loathing and anger to him; without it, I doubt I'd be up for the task once Mario stepped down.

I take the stairs again up to the second floor and head straight to my bedroom.

If Rayne isn't in here, I'm going to be pissed.

When I turn the handle to my room, I see her lying in my huge bed, her back to the door as the moonlight shines down, encasing her in a silver shadow that is so beautiful and ethereal, it doesn't seem real.

I can tell by the rise and fall of her chest as I get closer that she's asleep.

These last few days have been a rollercoaster for all of us.

I slip my shoes off and shrug my jeans down, then tug my shirt over my head and pad naked over to the other side of the bed, and for a moment, I indulge.

Her long, blonde hair is splayed out on the white pillow like spun gold. Her face is soft and enchanting while she sleeps. Her sweet, flowery scent encases me as I watch her.

I slide under the duvet, and I'm delighted to see she's naked. I chagrin in the dark, lifting the covers slightly so I can

see her beautiful, tanned skin. My cock wants to wake her up and sit her on top to ride me until we're both wild with hunger and need, but my hands around her body say something different. I want her to get some rest.

She murmurs as I study her face, her pouty, sexy lips and long lashes fanning out on her skin as I devour her with my eyes.

The comfort I feel swells in my chest, and I know any preconceived notion that I was ever mad at her for betraying, and ultimately trying to kill me, is long gone.

She's vulnerable, sure. She's also kind and cares about people, yes. But I've seen another side to her, one that appeals to my dark side more than it should.

She's a lot like me in some ways, as much as I never want to admit it. Obviously, not *all* ways – but there are things that just fit. I've seen her angry; I've seen the fury in her eyes. I know she wants justice, but could she be ruthless?

Could she honestly kill if push came to shove? That I'm not sure of, and I'd never want her to be, but she's right; she does need to learn how to defend herself.

Let's face it, she's got so little time to prepare, but it may just be the perfect distraction until she gets her phone call with Mia's supposed location.

I fall asleep quickly, tired and spent, as I wrap an arm over her body and pray to God that I always remember this brief moment in time and what it feels like to be happy.

I'll take that with me to the grave.

When I wake, a pungent smell has me cracking one eye open.

I see a steaming mug of coffee in front of my face. When I crack the other eye and let out a loud yawn, I feel the bed dip. I sit up onto my elbows as Rayne gives me a bright smile.

Taking the coffee out of her hand, I sit up, the covers pooling around me as her eyes drop down my body.

“Why are you so happy?” I grumble, taking a sip. I never told her how I take my coffee, but it tastes damn good.

“I figure there’s no point in wallowing, plus I’ll be getting a call soon. It’s all over the news.”

I try not to let the part about getting the call affect me because, when I glance at my phone on the side table, it’s already seven o’clock.

I reach for the remote control, flick the large, flatscreen television on, and switch it to the news. Sure enough....

....has allegedly been rushed to emergency for a suspected heart attack, the mob boss and renowned businessman was only just in attendance at the Gala on Saturday night. A representative of the Medici family has declined to make any comment at this time.

“So, they’re not announcing I’m dead yet,” I tell her. “This could delay things a little.”

She frowns. “Angelo, Mia, she’s not...”

I reach out and stroke her arm with my free hand. “She’s not what?”

“She’s not strong enough...she’s just a kid...”

I don’t want to lie to her, but I want to make sure that she’s calm, at least for the moment. “We’ll get her all the help we need. Don’t worry about that.”

She puts her head in her hands and shakes it. “I’m barely holding on here, Angelo.”

I place my coffee down on the side table. “Look at me, *Carina*,” I tell her.

She peeps through her fingers as I hold her wrists, revealing the rest of her face.

“I’ll do everything in my power to get her back, I promised you that, and I don’t break my promises.” *Here we go.* “But you also have to prepare yourself for what we might find.”

She regards me carefully, like she's digesting the words, trying them out before speaking.

Then she asks the dreaded question. "Do you think she's still alive?"

My eyes on her, I say, "Yes." For the moment. "But she will be traumatized. We don't know the severity of her injuries or what she's sustained, and I need you to be prepared for that. This is the time to be strong, to reach inside yourself and find the strength to get through this next day. If you crumble into a heap, that won't help bring her back."

She nods, taking in my every word like I'm some kind of fucking messiah. "I know, Angelo. It's just been so long since I saw her."

I reach forward and kiss her on the forehead. "Patience, *little fox*. We will sit and wait, and in the meantime, our training begins in ten minutes."

"Training?"

I glance down at her outfit, the warm pajamas my stylist picked out when I told her to send some warm winter clothes to my office.

"You'd better put on something you can be nimble in." I pull on the collar of the flannel pajama top, my fingers at the top button. "Something that I can slip off later."

She swallows hard, glancing down at my cock, which has come alive just from the mere sight of her in fucking flannel.

I lean up, and she leans down at the same time as our lips touch. I snake a hand into her top and squeeze her breast as she cups one side of my face.

Fuck, this feels like a real fucking Sunday morning, not the day after I'm pronounced dead and meant to be in hiding. It feels fantastic being here, just us, like this. Even though I know inside, she's in utter turmoil.

"I saw some yoga pants in the closet," she whispers.

"Good," I say. "Go be a good girl and put those on, or we'll never get to the gym."

She hesitates, her lips hovering close to mine as I fondle her breasts. It'd be so easy to straddle her over my lap and have her sink down on my cock.... maybe that's a good idea...

Ring, Ring.

I close my eyes as my burner phone rings. I glance over and see it's Marco.

Rayne sees too and gives me a tight smile, especially having overheard that conversation last night, I can't really blame her.

In time she will come to realize that Marco is a good man. The protector. Even more so than me. He is the one I'd rely on more than anyone in this family to take control, more than Mario, more than Enzo. More than even my own father if he were still alive.

We get each other, inside and out, and yet we're nothing alike. Marco is reasonable and more controlled, except when it comes to betrayal. It's why he's been so angry with my decision-making and why he hates Rayne and what she did. Betrayal runs deep for him...

"Good morning," I say answering my cell, running a hand through Rayne's hair, tempted to push her down into my lap so she can suck me off while I get rid of Marco.

"You sound chipper, considering you're meant to be dead."

I sigh. "I wish everyone would stop making those ridiculous jokes at my expense, it's getting old."

"Where are you?"

"You know where I am, so why ask?"

"She's there now with you, isn't she?"

One hand curls into a fist by my side as Rayne watches me. I uncurl it and reach up to her face and pull her bottom lip out from her teeth; the mark she leaves goes straight to my cock.

"Well, I didn't toss her out on the street, Marco. That isn't what you'd call chivalrous, especially since we made a deal."

“Well, that isn’t why I’m calling.”

I roll my eyes. “Under pressure already? I’ve barely been dead for a few hours.”

“Very funny. I’ve had Allegra calling all morning, as well as half the family.” He sounds stressed. I can imagine him pacing around in his three-piece suit, the man never wears anything else. He’s meticulous in his appearance, even more so than me.

“So, deal with it. You tell them nothing.”

“When do I actually announce you’re dead to the family?”

“Let’s just deal with this one step at a time, only our immediate circle knows, and when you deal with the media, they’ll know too.”

“I’ve had fifty fucking missed calls.”

“Welcome to the head of the family, brother.” I can’t help the smile that splits across my face.

All the while, Rayne watches me intently. “Is there anything else, or did you just call because you missed my voice?”

“Just watch your back,” he says. “I mean it, Angelo. I won’t hesitate when it comes to avenging you...”

“Lucky for you, you won’t have to. Goodbye, Marco.”

I hang up, tossing my phone onto the duvet as I glance back at Rayne.

“He worries about you,” she says, her eyes pained. “He’s a good brother.”

I chuckle. “Even though he hates you?”

“He hates me because he’s a good brother. I understand and I don’t blame him.”

“He’ll come around, when this is over...” *What am I saying? I’m giving her false hope.*

I can’t leave her here where she’s safe for the rest of her life, locked in a tower. That would kill her spirit, as well as

mine.

“I wish it were over soon.”

“Keep that cell phone on you.” I nod. “Once the call comes through, we’ll be ready to move.”

She goes to stand. “What happened to Enzo and Dante, by the way?”

“They left back to Fortress at first light since we’re fine here. I need them closer to the city now I’m here with you.”

She nods. “I’ll make us some breakfast.”

I watch as she strips off in front of me, going over to the dresser to find the yoga gear. It takes all my might not to drag her back to the bed and ravage her. However, I know we’ve got work to do; we both need a distraction.

“After,” I say.

She turns and looks over her shoulder as I pull the duvet back and sit on the edge of the bed, tousling my hair as I take another giant sip of coffee.

“After what?”

“Sparring.”

She gives me a strange look and I almost choke. “Don’t worry, *Carina*. I promise I’ll be gentle.”

She turns back to rummaging through the drawer, and I’m almost sure I hear her mutter, “Angelo Medici, gentle? That’ll be the day.”

I pad over to the walk-in closet and pull on some gray sweats and a t-shirt and begin to head downstairs. I stop midway as Rayne stands butt-naked, pulling on some underwear and tucking her large, beautiful breasts into a sports bra. I swallow hard.

Take her.

The urge to storm over there and bend her over the end of my bed is strong, but I know that if I do that now, we’ll never

get to the gym and there are some moves I need to show her in case things go downhill at the drop.

I have no idea if she's ever shot a gun, but I'll bet just by looking at her that she hasn't. I keep my legs moving as I head to the door with my coffee in hand.

It's best if I get the hell out of there, although lord knows how I'm going to keep a straight thought in my head while we go at it in the ring.

The idea turns me on so bad. When in reality, I should be taking this a lot more seriously than I am since the vultures will be well and truly swarming and working out their next move against the family.

Little do they know the only way to catch a snake is to creep quietly, moving with stealth and precision, then striking when it's quiet and calm. If Mario and my father taught me anything, it was neither to be seen nor heard, it was to be deadly. And the only way to do that is to keep your friends close and your enemies closer.

So let them come. If not for this whole sickening plot to end my life, I may never have had the foresight to watch my so-called compadres scatter to the next highest-bidder. And scatter they will.

In all this, I will find out who has my loyalty and who I need to squash.

I just don't know what I'm going to find.

RAYNE

WE HEAD DOWN TO THE GYM, AND I'VE NO IDEA WHAT HE HAS in store for me, but one thing is for sure, the views from up here are second to none. I still have no idea how he leaves this place; it would be so difficult when you could just have serenity at your beck and call twenty-four seven.

“So, Allegra has been calling you all night and all morning?” I say to him as we stand in front of the mirrors and do some warm-up stretches.

It's more than a little irritating, to say the least, even if she is classified as 'family'.

Angelo cocks a brow at me as I look at him through one of the large mirrors on the opposite side of the room; the whole wall is adorned with floor-to-ceiling mirrors.

“Why are you saying it like that, *Carina*?” He passes me some protective gloves to put on, while sliding some mitts on himself. I figure he's going to let me throw a punch or two before we get to the nitty-gritty.

“Oh, come on, Angelo. It was obvious at the Gala, and it was obvious that day she accosted me in the cafe, and it sure as hell is pretty obvious when she's calling you every five minutes. She has a thing for you, big time.”

“Rayne, you're forgetting they're all just getting wind that I died.”

“She called before that, Angelo, all night. In fact, she even rang Dante trying to find you.”

He sighs and runs his hand through his hair. “Really, we’re going to go there now?” He holds the mitts between us and tells me to follow his lead.

“Now is as good a time as any.” I place my hands on my hips.

He leans forward, looking more amused than annoyed at all the questioning, which I realize is exactly what he likes. He tilts my chin up with his hand and reaches down to kiss me.

“You have nothing to be jealous of,” he assures me. “Now, put your fucking guard up and punch into my palms.”

I do as he says but continue on, “Jealous?” I almost spit-laugh at the same time. “I’m not jealous of her, believe me.”

“Really? Then why are you asking me all this fucking shit after everything we said to each other? Whether she wants me or not, isn’t relevant. I don’t want her, period.”

He shows me a test jab and I practice the move in the air. I’ve done Tae Bo before, so this shouldn’t be too hard.

“But she’s family, right?”

“Unfortunately so, as fucked up as that might be, I have to grin and bear it for Roberto’s memory’s sake and Mario’s, for that matter. She knows anyway I only have eyes for you.”

I don’t say anything.

He holds the gloves up in front. “Hit me, Rayne, just take it slow at first.”

“So she tried to get it on with you recently?” He rolls his eyes and I push forward into the punch. “Angelo?”

“She propositioned me right before the Gala. She only wants to fuck, Rayne, not marry me.”

I stare at him incredulously as I jab a few practice shots with my right, then with my left. “Is that supposed to make me feel better?”

He sighs, “It is what it is. We have history and I guess she hasn’t let it go. Maybe it’s a lonely widow thing and it seemed

like a good idea to her at the time. She'd had too much to drink and probably regrets saying anything at all."

"Lonely widow, my ass," I scoff. I feel the anger bubble inside me. Even though they're long since over, I have a surge of jealousy peak inside me whenever she comes into the conversation. Maybe because she's a big part of his life and she knows him inside out.

I feel like I barely know anything at all.

"I know being the Don you must get a million women throw themselves at you, I guess that's what I have to contend with, I just don't want to contend with her."

He raises his eyebrow at me, "I don't want other women. I have had a million women throw themselves my way, that gets old after a while Rayne, even for me. You're not contending with anyone."

I make a noise in my throat that sounds more like a 'humph' but I don't respond.

Angelo regards me long and hard, the corners of his mouth turn up, and he momentarily drops his hands. "You have a little jealous streak, *Carina*. This we will have to stamp out."

I scoff. "I've told you, I'm not jealous!"

"What about at the Gala? When I touched Tiffany."

Ouch, that hits a nerve. I stand there staring at him, and I feel like knocking him on his ass while his guard is down just to spite him. "You did that to get a rise out of me. You said so yourself."

"That's right, and I got the answer I was looking for. Now, let's practice. Enough of this shit, jab like this, put your weight into it, quick and short, go."

I do as he says, and for the time being, we say nothing more about it. He teaches me to cross-jab and uppercut.

"You're a pretty tiny thing, but elbows can still hurt, so try this." And he gives me a demo before grabbing a larger bag, and I practice smashing my elbow into the soft pad as hard as I can, then I practice on the other side.

“Do you think I’m going to use these moves on someone one of these days?” I ask.

We move over to a stationary punching bag which he holds and gets me to pound punches straight into it. Then he calls out the different moves we just went over, and I switch my stance and jab on the other side.

“It’s a good thing to know. I hope you never have to, but training like this also increases your strength. It makes me feel better if you know how to defend yourself.”

“I could just carry pepper spray,” I quip with a little smile.

“And so you should anyway.”

That doesn’t have me feeling so smug. Next, he teaches me to use my knees to pound straight into the same bag, like it is my opponent’s body.

“Are you sure you’re not just killing time with me in here, trying to take my mind off things?”

He laughs playfully. It’s a side I’m not used to seeing, and I fucking love it. The sweats he has on, particularly the pants which sit low on his hips, are turning me on, big time.

Even in workout gear, he looks like he just stepped out of a men’s magazine.

“Stop looking at me like that,” he mutters. “Keep punching and using your knees, then we learn how to kick.”

“It’s not my fault you look hot.”

“I know what you’re doing.”

“Is it working?”

I lick my lips as he looks down at my chest, clearly distracted. What I want is for him to take me hard when this is over; there’s absolutely no doubt about it. My body pines for him like something I’ve never known before and probably won’t again. It’s like he owns it and everything else about me.

“It’s always up for you, *little fox*, you know that. We have a round in the ring to go yet, though, and I need to show you how to get out of a choke hold.”

“That sounds thrilling.”

“Not as thrilling as in real life when someone has their hands around your throat and is trying to kill you.” His eyes are serious. “Is it?”

“Better to be safe than sorry,” I concede.

Before I can do anything, he drops the bag and lunges for me, grabbing me from behind in a headlock. “How do you get out of this one?” he whispers in my ear darkly.

I try to struggle, but he tsks in my ear. “Struggling will only exhaust you, *little fox*. Think about it.”

I try to kick his ankles, but he’s too strong, holding me against his body. “You’re too strong,” I gasp.

“What about your arms?” he says. “Don’t try to escape my grip. You’re right, it’s too strong to break free from, but ears, eyes, nose, and groin—those are vulnerable places to attack.”

“You want me to scratch your eyes out?” His hold is barely letting any air into my lungs.

“Indulge me. If this happens for real, you wouldn’t have time to stop and deliberate how to try and subdue me.”

I reach up and grab onto an ear, and I pull.

“Pull backward, not toward you,” he tells me as his grip loosens, and I take the opportunity to elbow him in the ribs before slinking down and escaping out of his hold. He stands for a moment, holding his ribs, as I turn back to him, my face red and hot and my heart hammering. “Very good, *Carina*.”

“I didn’t want to hurt your balls,” I say, like I do this kind of thing every day. “They’re kinda precious.”

He coughs, then a slow grin sprawls across his face. “You’ve got some fire in you. Good, that’s what we need. In real life, try to turn your head toward the attacker’s arm so you don’t cut off your airway so quickly.”

“I’ll try and remember that the next time I get jumped.”

He stares at me as I keep my fists up, pointing them at him. “Do you give up?” I quip. “Or do you want some more?”

“You of all people should know, a Medici never gives up. We fight to the death.”

“Then why don’t you just show me how to shoot?” I blurt out.

His eyes look darker than ever before when he says, “The shooting range could be next.”

I frown. “You have a shooting range?”

“Yup.”

Of course, he does. “Where?” I splutter. “In the dungeon?”

He laughs. “Not exactly, but a dungeon could be arranged. The range is a few acres down on the property.”

“Here?” I almost laugh.

“There are thirty-odd acres.” He shrugs.

“You know, I’m not sure my hands are steady enough at the moment for target practice.”

“You’d be surprised what you can do when the time calls for it, not that I feel comfortable with you holding a gun.”

“I’ve never held one before,” I confess.

His brow furrows. “I should hope not.”

“I guess there’s a first time for everything?”

“Touché, now let’s try that chokehold again, and I’ll show you how to trip your opponent.”

“I think you just like putting your hands all over me,” I fire back, and I’m certainly not complaining. The man is made of steel so it’s hard to ever believe I could really get out of a situation with someone as strong as him. Then I think about Rocco and actually shudder.

“You know I fucking love it, but that’s not why I’m doing it. It’s important I feel confident that you know the basics and can defend yourself if the time comes.”

“Put your hands on my neck, then, show me.”

His eyes darken. “Don’t tempt me, little temptress. You may just regret it.”

I shake my head at him. “There’s nothing to regret where you’re concerned, Angelo.”

He grins and puts his hands around my neck, and we practice the maneuver a few times. Then, he shows me the foot sweep once I’m out of his grip. It comes out of nowhere, but he has hold of me so I don’t crash down onto the ground and lowers me gently onto the padded mat.

“Your turn,” he says, reaching a hand down to me and pulling me back to my feet.

I step toward him to get in place, and he reaches again for his hands around my neck. I use all the force I can to maneuver my arms up and over to break the contact, and as he goes for me again, I try the leg sweep, kicking him just above the ankle, sideways and inwards.

“More force,” he says when he doesn’t even move an inch.

I try it again and fail. I trip him by about the tenth attempt, but he doesn’t fall all the way down.

“Like you mean it, Rayne, try it from the top. This time, I’m going to come up behind you.”

He motions for me to turn around away from the mirrors, then comes up behind me quickly, grabbing me and taking his arm the whole way around my neck as he pulls me flush against his chest. I have to admit, having some form of defense, as measly as it may be, does give me some sense of power. I do as he says and, this time, stomp on his foot and give him a sharp blow with my elbow, which moves him backward. I’m pretty pleased with myself as I go in for the trip and we tumble to the ground.

He stares up at me from the mat, then he chuckles. It’s a deep rumbling sound as I sit up on top of him and adjust my ponytail. It’s hard to believe I managed to subdue Angelo Medici for a moment. “Take that, Medici.”

He holds my wrists as I pretend to give him another blow, then he rolls me over so he’s on top.

“You look fucking hot in yoga gear.”

I try to bump him off, but he holds my wrists over the top of my head and pins me down with his hips.

“Is this a new tactic to try and subdue your enemy?” I retort, giving up in the struggle to set myself free.

“That was a very clever move,” he says. “Maybe I’m teaching you a little too well?”

“Maybe you are.”

His lips twitch as his eyes graze down to my chest. “I’m like a starving man whenever I’m away from you.”

Before I know what’s happening, his lips crash to mine, his hard cock pressing against me, and he makes a groan in the back of his throat that goes straight to my core.

He’s wrong, though. I’m the one who’s starving. My craving for him will never diminish.

He yanks up my top unceremoniously and grasps one breast as he lets go of one wrist, sucking on my nipple with vigor. I cup his face, encouraging him as I try to grind against his body. Any kind of friction will set me off like a firecracker.

He dips his head to the other breast and repeats the same sweet torture as I buck up against him, crying out in frustration.

“I fucking love these,” he mutters, flicking his thumb over one nipple and sucking on the other. “So fucking perfect.”

I reach down and grasp his hard cock in my hand and he hisses. In grey sweats, he’s the epitome of sex on a stick, and I want him, right here, right now.

“Fuck me, Angelo,” I moan as he releases my other wrist and I cup his head, tugging on his hair. “I need you inside me.”

I dip my hand under his waistband when he lifts off me slightly, and I grasp his thick length. Never in a million lifetimes could I ever imagine a man’s body being so perfect,

and his cock is everything a woman could ever want; big and hard, and I can't get enough.

"I love it when you talk dirty, *Carina*," he whispers, biting down on my flesh as I cry out.

He rips my yoga pants down and lines himself up with my pussy, pushing into me without warning. He pulls back out and does it again, harder this time. It's agonizing when he does it like this.

It's nothing like last night, where the soft, sensual roll of his hips sent me to heaven and back. His words in Italian were sweet and seductive. Now he just sounds dirty. And I don't honestly know which Angelo I prefer, because this is just as good.

I can't move my legs because my yoga pants are just down past my knees, but Angelo moves in such a way that I feel every inch of him and being unable to move only adds to the heightening pleasure that courses through me.

This is dangerous. I shouldn't be enjoying myself like this when Angelo is assumed dead and I'm waiting on a phone call that could change my life forever. Yet I also know enough by now that no matter what happens, I want to remember every last moment I spend with him.

My lips part on a whisper of his name as he watches me intently. His hips roll over and over as I start to unravel. Our tussling and his touching me doesn't help matters, nor do his gray sweatpants... "Oh God, Angelo..."

He rolls his hips faster, hitting the very end of me as I scratch his back, raking my nails down as he hisses.

I start to shake as I come hard, the blazing inferno inside me erupting as I grasp his ass and call his name. He lets go, too, spurting inside me as he stills, whispering seductively to me as I gasp for air. *This man*. He will be the fucking death of me, no pun intended.

"You take my cock so well," he says, kissing me on my pulse point as I come down from the shocks. "Your pussy's made for me."

I stare up at him in awe. *I don't know how he keeps his composure.* Learning how to do that would certainly keep me in a good mindset to take on anything, and that's what I need right now.

He makes me strong. He makes me better, even though he really has no idea.

“Angelo, that was...”

Ring. Ring. Ring.

I jump as my cell vibrates in full succession in my back pocket.

Angelo pulls out of me as I lift to retrieve my phone.

“No number,” I whisper.

Angelo's eyes meet mine. “Answer it,” he says.

My hand begins to tremble as I sit up.

For the first time in all of this, I'm genuinely afraid. This is really fucking real.

I close my eyes and hit the green telephone icon and answer the call.

Nothing has felt more real or terrifying than this exact moment.

I've nowhere left to run.

ANGELO

I CAN SEE FROM THE LOOK ON HER FACE THAT THIS IS THE moment she's been dreading.

And that's saying a lot after all we've been through.

Her eyes are wide as she takes a breath, and I nod for her to answer with a single nod of my head. Not that she needs my permission, but the alarm in her eyes tells me as much.

"Put it on speaker," I tell her. "Remember, try to keep them on the line for as long as possible."

She bites her lip as she nods and swipes her phone onto speaker.

"Hello?" she says, her voice barely a whisper. She closes her eyes and raises one hand to her mouth to cover it as she listens.

"The location for your sister will be given in twenty-four hours, as soon as it is confirmed by the coroner."

"You don't have to do that. He's dead," she says, her voice stronger as I encourage her without words. "I've done everything you asked me to do..."

"And you will be rewarded. If you're lying or you've found a way to deceive me, I'll kill her."

Rayne swallows hard and says, "You have my word... trust me I want this to be over. Is Mia...is Mia okay?"

"Coordinates will be sent to your phone." The caller doesn't answer the question, which makes her tremble even

more.

“Wait!” she cries suddenly as she stares at me, her eyes unseeing. “I need to know something.”

There’s a long, insufferable silence, and seeing the distress on her face awakens the beast in me. They’re going to die a long, agonizing death, of that, I can be sure.

Then she says, “Why are you doing this?”

The robotic laugh that comes across the line isn’t of this world, and neither will they be soon; it sickens me to my core.

The phone clicks off.

Rayne holds her phone as she stares past me, tears welling in her eyes and a lump forms in my throat. I take the phone from her before she drops it, and then I dial Enzo on my burner cell.

He answers on the first ring.

“Vaughan got a location from a tower downtown, pinpointing the signal now. I’ll call you back when I have an address.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose. “They said they’ll give her the location once the coroner pronounces I’m dead. We’re on stand-by for coordinates.”

“And the likelihood of the coordinates actually happening is close to zero, you know it, and I know it.”

I glance at Rayne, but she’s staring ahead in a trance-like state, I don’t think she can hear what Enzo is saying.

“I know that, but what choice do we have?”

“Good point.”

“Keep me posted, I’ll talk to Rayne.”

“Got it.”

I hang up.

Rayne averts her attention to me. “What did he say?”

“Everything’s going to plan,” I say. “So there’s no need to worry.”

She scrutinizes me as she looks for something indifferent in my face, however, I’ve become very good at hiding any worrisome thoughts.

“You said what choice do we have. What did you mean?”

So she was listening. I sigh, and my eyes flick to hers. “Rayne, are you gonna let me handle this or not?”

“If there was a problem, would you tell me?”

“You know I would. I don’t want to get your hopes up, so that’s why Enzo is close to tracking an IP address as backup, just in case.”

“Just in case what?” Her eyes go wide.

I know I don’t have to spell it out, she knows exactly what.

I touch her chin with my thumb and forefinger.

“We need to have all bases covered. We can’t trust these people, look what they’ve already put you through.”

She nods slowly. “So there’s a chance they won’t even have her where they say they will, right? I’m not stupid, Angelo.”

Not if it’s the Russians. Fuck! I don’t want to take my train of thought there right now. I know the possibilities. She doesn’t.

“There’s always a chance they won’t hand a captive over. We don’t know who they are, so it’s hard for me to say what may happen, it’s purely speculation.”

“And she may not be alive?” she says quietly.

It’s difficult to find the right balance between keeping things real by letting her know the possibilities and freaking her the fuck out so she won’t even be able to function. I don’t want to lie to her, either. I don’t like the inner turmoil I’m feeling, but as usual, I choose to ignore it. Nothing will stop me from finding these people. Even if plan A doesn’t work, we have plan B.

Hell, I'll have a plan all the way to Z if it means we find her.

"There's every chance of that, *Carina*. That's why we're trying every avenue, if the pickup goes to shit, we need to be armed with something else."

"So, what is the plan?" she asks.

"We will go to the pickup location, where Mia's being held, once they send it to you in the next twenty-four hours. Gus will drive, and I'll have snipers on the ready and Rocco, of course, while he isn't the most discreet man on earth, you'll feel safe with him."

"Yes, he frightened the life out of me outside my apartment."

I smile wistfully. "Yes, he's good like that."

"Then what?" she prods.

"Enzo and my other brothers will check out the location Vaughn traced from a call that was made to you, when we have it."

"You make it all sound so simple." Her voice wavers.

"It *is* simple, Rayne. Remember, we have the advantage here. Everyone will think I'm dead, and then the circus begins..."

"I keep forgetting exactly who you are, Mr. Medici."

I grin. "It's going to be all right. I couldn't have planned my demise any better." I kiss her chastely.

"Another twenty-four hours, Angelo, this is like torture."

Seeing her like this makes me want to choke the bastards who have Mia and who are putting her through this. Hell will not be far enough away for my wrath to reach.

"Let's just get through tonight, then it's game on. Trust me?" I look down at her and take her in, all of her.

"I do trust you, Angelo," she whispers.

We both know she has little to no choice about that in this current predicament, however, I do see something else in her eyes when she looks at me. *Trust.*

“I think we need to get something to eat. For some reason, I’ve grown an appetite.”

I want to take her mind off things. She relaxes slightly in my arms, but I know she still feels tense. I wonder if we’ll ever get to the point where she isn’t on her guard all the time.

“That sounds like a good idea,” she says after a moment.

“You know, you listen well in the sparring ring.”

A small smile crosses her face. “Are you suggesting that that’s the only place I listen well?”

I stroke her hair. “I’ll kill them, *little fox,*” I say softly, and I’ll keep telling her if that’s what it takes. “For what they’ve put you through.”

She watches me with those big, green eyes. I sense no hesitation when she adds, “I know, Angelo. That’s what I’m most afraid of.”

I stroke her cheek. “Don’t be afraid,” I tell her. “Trust me when I say that I know what I’m doing.”

“Is that why you’re the King?”

I smile. “No, it’s why I’m the Don.”

We spend the rest of the day in the den overlooking the beach. We have a late breakfast and settle into some sort of relaxation mode. I know she’s exhausted from the last few days, and I haven’t slept well in almost a week. By nightfall, we’re both beat. I carry her up to bed and set her down on the covers.

I take a shower and make a call to Marco before settling down for something resembling a good night’s sleep. To say it’s been a long twenty-four hours is an understatement.

I need to know what’s going on over at Fortress.

I have a secure landline in my study.

“You good?” Marco immediately asks, there’s an edge to his voice, though.

“Yeah, can you talk?”

“Yes, I’m at Fortress with the others. Everyone’s worried about you, Angelo.”

“Well, contrary to the media, I’m doing just fine.” I can hardly hide the sarcasm in my tone.

“This is all a fucking circus, and you know it.”

“Like I’ve said to Enzo, and I’ll say the same to you, what choice did we have?”

“You and your fucking principals.”

“Trust me, I don’t like it any more than you do. But we need to know who has a target on my back, on all our backs. The rest of the family needs to lay low, just as we discussed. I don’t need anyone vulnerable while the heat is on and the media are circling my residence, Fortress, and Ma’s.”

“That’s exactly what we’re doing. I’ve added extra security detail as this all unfolds, Mario included, and Dom is with Allegra. She never made her flight to London.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose at hearing her name. She’ll be beside herself.

“As long as our circle knows the truth, it’s best everyone else is in the dark. Allegra included.”

Marco’s tone softens. “I know we’ve fought about it before, but you being alone with her gives me a reason to increase security at Falmouth, too.”

“Nobody knows about this place,” I say. “Only the Familia and the soldiers I trust.”

“Fine,” he sighs, “We want this over with as much as you do. It’s fucking crazy downtown.”

I’ve made arrangements for the coroner to make an announcement in the morning. Then the shit’s really gonna hit

the fan.”

Marco sounds as exhausted as I feel.

“How are Ma and Valentina?”

“Tense, Angelo, everyone is tense.”

“It’s going to be all right.” I try my best to reassure him, but this is uncharted waters.

“Do you know that for sure?”

“You know the answer to that as well as I do. I’m not some fucking fortune teller, but my gut tells me we’re going to get to the bottom of this, once and for all. That feeling has never failed me, Marco, and it’s not about to now.”

Neither is the fact that something still smells off about this, and I can’t put my finger on why. I’ve been in the game a while, long enough to smell a rat.

“I’d like to think you have more than your gut instincts riding on this, brother. That’s all I can say.”

I snort. “Have I ever told you that you worry too much?”

“Too frequently,” he mutters, then adds, “How is she holding up?”

“She does have a name, you know.” I know he won’t bring himself to say it, though.

“You’re a romantic at heart, just like our father was, you know that?” he retorts.

I’m surprised by his comment, but to some degree, it may be true.

“This isn’t about romance, Marco, it’s a lot more than that.”

“Well, I can’t wait to be enlightened when this is all over. It better be worth it, that’s all I can say. Or maybe I should be saying I hope *she’s* worth it.”

Little does he know that I have to let her go. I know I do. It’s just so fucking hard.

“You know what’s at stake here. At the end of the day, someone wants me dead, Marco, and that’s not a small thing, it’s a war. They declared it the day they sent in my would-be assassin.”

“I’m well aware that it’s not a small thing,” he admonishes. “The last thing any of us want is a war, although sometimes there has to be casualties. No matter our difference of opinions, I’m still here for you, Angelo. You know that, right?”

“Of course,” I say, “I’ve never doubted it for a second. We won’t lose what we have, Marco, what we’ve spent a lifetime building up; our father’s legacy, for Roberto, not for anything.”

“Ma is worried about you.”

“It’s under control, you have to convince her of that. She knows how it works.”

“She sees what happened to our father happening all over again. Did you know that?”

I run a hand through my hair. “Marco, if they were brazen enough, they’d hire a lackey to walk up to me and put a bullet in my brain. Think about it.”

“Don’t fucking put that out there, for God’s sake,” he grumbles.

“It’s the truth.”

“I hear it, brother, just be careful.”

“Same there. As long as the girls are safe, that’s all that matters.” I worry about them the most.

“They are. Nothing is going to happen. Let me know the minute you get more news.”

“I will. You also need to call Patricia on our behalf and let her know Rayne won’t be coming in to work. Period.”

“All right.” He sounds weary. This is taking its toll on everyone, and Marco is always the last to go down.

“Get some rest over there. Tomorrow is a big day. Be ready,” I tell him.

“We were born ready, we’re Medicis,” he says simply.

I couldn’t have said the words better myself.

We click off, and I go to the window and sit down again, looking directly out to the beach and trying to settle my thoughts.

He’s right, of course, there’s a reason we were born into the Medici family, and we are not going to lose our business or livelihoods in any way, not for anything.

I won’t allow that to happen, everything we’ve worked for, everything my parents went through, then losing my father... It can’t all be for nothing.

I refuse to believe that, as much as I struggle to see the silver lining in all of this, there has to be one.

My mind reels at who is behind this. Again, I flick through the list of enemies in my brain, but it’s a long list to sift through. The thing that unsettles me is the fact that we’ve not had any major rifts between other mafia families in years.

Things tick along, then out of nowhere, boom.

I can’t help but think it does have something to do with the illegal human trafficking ring we just uncovered. Even though Rombaldi is dead and the kidnapping took place weeks before the bust went down, I can’t help but think there’s someone else behind all of this.

Something or someone we’ve overlooked? It’s possible, but at the same point, it’s impossible to be everywhere all of the time, even I know that.

I have eyes and ears all over the place in this city and the outskirts, but it’s not guaranteed that we haven’t slipped up.

At least this morning’s announcement from the media will confirm that I’m dead.

The people I do feel at least some sympathy for are those loyal to me in my circle, such as Mario’s side of the family,

and certain employees, Sophia, for one, and Patricia at the gallery.

The thing I know for sure though, is that things continue even if I was really gone; the world I created will not be lost because I have my family—the Medicis.

My brother would always take over, and our empire would continue. Our enemies must seriously underestimate us if they think we are going to hand over Medici Enterprises and Fortress Security, plus everything else we've worked for our entire lives. To see that crumble would finish me off.

Marco is right; war is about to erupt and we will fight to the death.

I watch the waves roll onto the shore for as long as I can keep my eyes open; a certain calm and serenity wash over me, and I only wish it could last.

I may never have a simple life, but I crave the quiet and calm that comes over me when I'm here.

I walk back upstairs to the bedroom and sit for a while. My eyes flick to Rayne every now and again. I watch the rise and fall of her chest while she dreams several times before I move over toward her.

I don't know exactly when it started, my infatuation. Perhaps it was that first moment I saw her after all. I knew she was a woman to love even then. Maybe I was doomed from day one, not from her being sent to kill me, but for her to creep into my heart and open the gap that has been clamped shut for so very long.

My body stirs from just watching her, but I don't want to wake her, and I'm too tired to give her anything that would do me justice between the sheets. I strip down to nothing and let my clothes fall to the ground. Walking over to the bed, I peel back the covers and climb in, shifting my body forwards to her back. I wrap an arm around her waist and press my body to hers, my dick stirs, but it will settle eventually. She shifts slightly, so I pull her in closer. Enjoying the stillness.

“Angelo?” she whispers.

“Sleep, *Carina*,” I murmur into her ear, inhaling her sweet scent. “Just sleep.”

RAYNE

I WAKE BEFORE ANGELO. JUDGING BY HOW HEAVILY HE'S passed out, I can only assume he had a very late night. I get up to make coffee and he doesn't even move when I ease my way out of bed. I take a moment to stare at him in all his glory. It's not often you get to admire Angelo Medici while he's not aware of it.

I throw on his shirt and pad downstairs to the kitchen, stifling a yawn. I didn't sleep great; trepidation and angst kept me from losing myself in any kind of dreamless slumber.

I take the stairs and run my hand through my messy hair and try not to think too much about today. I can't stop thinking about Mia. I'm becoming so desperate to see her that I feel like I might explode at any given moment.

I get the fright of my life downstairs, I round the banister, and walk into the kitchen to see Rocco sitting there, the Hulk himself, eating pastries and drinking coffee.

He's facing away from me but freezes when I enter the room.

"Rayne," he says. He swings around the island seat to face me and grins. "Sorry if I scared you."

Yep, he still freaks the fuck out of me. It's no better by the light of day.

"Rocco." I nod, steadying myself as I tentatively walk towards Angelo's fancy espresso machine. "The house is so quiet I didn't realize anyone was up."

He shrugs. “Occupational hazard.”

I feel a little self-conscious, truth be told, utterly well aware that I’m wearing Angelo’s shirt as a nightie, bare legs showing with nothing but a lacy thong on underneath.

“Sleep okay?” he asks.

I open the cupboard where I’ve found he keeps the cups and flick the machine on.

“I did, under the circumstances,” I say while fiddling around with the contraption.

He keeps eating while I turn to the refrigerator to grab the milk.

I decide to make a cappuccino for me and a strong espresso for Angelo.

“Do you want a refill?” I ask him.

“Nope, I’m all good. I did buy breakfast, however.”

I look over my shoulder at him. Wow, that was kind of nice. “Thanks, that’s... thoughtful of you.”

He grins. “Don’t thank me, Angelo doesn’t want any of us to starve while we’re here. It’s all his doing, always is. Plus, I don’t cook.”

I smile. At least he’s trying to make small talk. “How long have you worked for him?”

“Fifteen years or more, I lost count a while back.”

“What is it you do again?” I ask. It’s a genuine question, though it may not come off that way. I put a coffee pod into the slot and pour some milk into the top.

He sobers for a moment. “There you go again with your questions.”

“It’s a normal thing to ask someone,” I point out.

“You’re forgetting one thing about that statement; I’m not normal.” He shrugs. “But to answer your question as best I can; I’m the top security personnel. I train all the bodyguards, keep the soldiers in line, and work directly with Enzo.”

As best I can?

“Were you the one who tracked me that night? Enzo said he followed me, but I assumed he wasn’t working alone.”

His lips quirk in a wannabe smile. “You’re a tough little lady to track down. You went through a considerable amount of effort to go unnoticed that night.”

“That’s true,” I concede. “It’s new for me, all the sneaking around, wearing disguises. It’s not really my thing.”

“It’s not meant to be easy,” he says. “Our world is very different to yours, to any civilian.”

Civilian? I bite my lip. Am I kidding myself by thinking that I could possibly be a part of this world?

It certainly rings true that up until I met Angelo, we were worlds apart. But looking at where we are now, our worlds have definitely aligned. The question is, how do I make it work if I want them to stay aligned and not collide?

“Do you enjoy what you do?” I ask.

“It’s a means to an end.”

“Pays the bills and all that,” I add, a little awkwardly.

Clearly, he’s a very private man.

He looks at me then and laughs. “I can see what he likes about you. You have grit. You’re not afraid to say what you think, are you?”

I blink a couple of times, focusing for a moment on the coffee-making, pouring Angelo’s hit of espresso, then putting another pod in for me.

“I’ve never had to hold my tongue until quite recently,” I tell him honestly. “The whole being Angelo’s prisoner kinda brought me up to speed.”

His lips twitch. “Well, you’ll get used to the lingo around here soon enough.”

I glance back at him. Little does he know that after this, I don’t know what me and Angelo really are. We confessed how

we feel, but that doesn't mean that it's all rosy or that we get a happy ever after.

This is a world that I've been thrust into—one that is dangerous, one that I know is a dark path. Yet, my love for Angelo feels as deep as if I've known him forever.

"You're coming with us today?" I ask when my coffee has finished pouring.

"Yes. That's why I'm here. Are you worried about it?"

"Of course I am. This may be an everyday thing for all of you, but as you said, I'm a civilian, and this isn't anything close to *usual* for me. I just want my sister back."

He regards me coolly, long gone is the smile. Something tells me I've hit a nerve.

"You're safer with us than you are with them," he says as he stands. "If that's any consolation."

"It is," I reply truthfully.

He dusts off the crumbs from his shirt and rights himself. "Well, if you'll excuse me, I've got rounds to do."

I nod.

"Thank you... for breakfast."

He gives me a curt nod, "Any time."

He vacates the room as I watch him leave. For a big guy, he moves pretty quickly. There's an air of sadness, or something I can't pinpoint, in his wake.

I make my way back upstairs with the coffee and pastries on a tray and nudge the door open with my foot. Angelo is just rousing. He rubs his face and runs a hand through his messy hair as sunlight streams through the sheer curtains and he winces.

"Morning, sleepy head," I say.

He turns and gives me a slow smile, his eyes adjusting to the light. He's so sexy like this, so different from when he's out in the world.

“You’re up early,” he mumbles quietly, propping up the pillows and stifling a yawn.

I set the tray down on the bedside table next to him.

“Yeah, I was just talking to Rocco in the kitchen.”

“Ah, yes breakfast. Normally, I have the fridge stocked, but I had little time to notify my housekeeper. I hope Rocco wasn’t rambling or scaring you.”

“Not at all. He’s kinda sweet.”

He frowns. “I’ve never heard anyone say that about Rocco in the fifteen years I’ve known him, including his mother.”

“I’m sure he’s just misunderstood.”

He snorts. “He’ll be even more so when I ram my fist down his throat.” Then his eyes drop to my bare legs as he assesses my attire. “You went out looking like that?”

“Yes.”

“Fuck, Rayne.”

I place a hand on my hip. “I wasn’t expecting to see him. He’s so quiet, you don’t even realize he’s there.”

“I really don’t need my employees getting an eye full of your pussy, or your ass for that matter.”

“Angelo! I wasn’t doing that. It’s not a big deal if he saw my bare legs.” I roll my eyes at his growliness. “He wasn’t even looking.”

“The fuck he wasn’t. He’s a man. Of course, he was looking.”

His protectiveness weaves a web around me that I love. I mean, I knew he was possessive the first time we fucked. He owned me then, and he owns me now.

“You got anything on under there?” he adds when I bite my lip and look up at him.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?”

“Get your ass over here,” he says in a low, sexy voice. “Show me what you’ve got on?”

I swallow hard. “Angelo, we have to eat...”

“Oh, I will be eating, I can assure you of that. Now, lift that shirt. Don’t make me come over there.”

I step towards him deliberately slow and pull the shirt off over my head, revealing my bare breasts and the La Perla thong he so graciously bought for me in that bag of tricks.

“Fucking hell, *Carina*”

He reaches forward and grabs me by the hips and pulls me toward him. I squeal but don’t protest as I slide over him, and we both look down to the sheet tenting between us.

“Happy to see me?” I muse. I like playful Angelo.

“I’m always happy to see you.” He reaches forward and sucks my nipple into his mouth and I arch backwards and moan.

“Angelo,” I pant, “we have a day to plan.”

“So let’s start it right, the winning formula.” He goes to my other breast, fondling both at the same time. His arm then snakes around my waist and pulls me flush against him. “I’ll be fast, I promise.”

I laugh a little and bite my lip. I feel guilty having this time with him like this when so much is at stake. Maybe in some ways, it takes both our minds off of things.

“You, fast?” I mutter. “That’ll be the day.” I reach down and grab his hard cock. He hisses when I fondle him and squeeze tighter.

“Fuck, baby...”

It’s that moment when my cell phone decides to ring I stop mid-squeeze; his eyes flick up from my chest, and his expression changes.

I scramble over the bed towards the nightstand.

“Rayne ... Rayne, take it easy,” he says, his voice calm.

My hands are shaking as I grab it.

“Wait—” he tells me firmly, “Take a deep breath, gather yourself. You’re gonna do fine.”

Just as I swipe to answer, I see the caller ID is Melody.

Fucking hell!

“Melody,” I rasp out, trying not to look at Angelo, but I can see his penetrating glare, and he’s not happy.

“Oh my God, Rayne! I’ve just heard the news. Are you okay?”

“I... I don’t know, Mel. I don’t know how I’m feeling about anything at the moment.”

“Should I come over?” Of course she thinks I’m at home.

“No!” I say quickly, not wanting to sound harsh, but I wasn’t prepared for this phone call or to have to explain. When I glance at Angelo, he’s telling me to wind up the call. “I just need some time alone, that’s all. To process everything.”

“Is he really dead?” she whispers.

I swallow the lump in my throat. “Yes.”

The lies just roll right off my tongue these days.

“It’s just so shocking,” she goes on. “He’s still young and seemed so fit and healthy.”

Angelo quirks an eyebrow.

“Maybe he had an underlying heart condition.” I don’t know what I’m even saying. “I...I don’t know the details.”

“I just don’t know what to say. You guys were so cozy at the Gala.”

Pain hits my chest as I remember everything that happened.

“I really can’t talk right now,” I say. “I have to obviously talk to the police...”

“Are you sure you don’t want me to come over? For moral support?”

“I’m sure, thanks though. I just need to get my head around...everything.”

“All right, but please call me if you need anything, Rayne.” She sounds so upset.

I run a hand over my face, hoping I won’t go to hell for this and she won’t notice I’m not crying. “Thanks, Melody, you’re a good friend.”

“I’ll let you go.”

“I’ll call you soon, I promise.”

“Anything you need, just pick up the phone,” she says.

“I will, ” I assure her.

We click off and I sit back and groan, dropping the phone on the duvet.

“Fucking hell, Rayne,” Angelo admonishes.

I glance at him, “I’m sorry, I’m strung so freaking high I didn’t even check caller ID.”

“Jesus Christ.”

“I’m sorry ... I didn’t know how to answer questions about it.”

He pulls me back towards him and kisses my hair. “I can only imagine the buzz going on out there.”

“It’s horrible,” I say, curling into him. “I don’t know how you can be so calm.”

He licks his lips and motions downwards towards his still, very hard cock. “Does that look calm?”

Without warning, he reaches forward and flips me over to my stomach so I’m sideways on the bed. I squeal and protest in case of the phone ringing again.

“You’re insatiable,” I mumble, my head buried in the bed covers.

He smacks my ass cheek and moves his body forwards, kneeling over me. “Bring that little ass here, *sweet little fox.*”

I pull backwards, resting on my elbows and scoot my knees up, so my ass sticks up in the air.

“So much better,” he breaths coming over the top of me and biting down on my neck.

“Now, Miss Michaelson, before we were rudely interrupted ... where were we?”

He was as fast as he could be given the circumstances. Even in my darkest hour, he sets me on fire; eating me out while I knelt on the bed and playing my body like a finely-tuned instrument. One that always has me begging him to do it harder, faster. And I love every second of it.

To keep from going insane, he has me spar with him in the gym again. I’m glad I remembered some of the moves and I didn’t fall flat on my face.

After my shower, I dress in sweats and towel off my hair. “I might take a walk on the beach,” I say. “It’ll help clear my head for a while.”

Immediately I can see he doesn’t like that idea so much.

“Angelo, you have thirty acres to roam, and this whole secluded beach, nothing is going to happen. I can’t be caged in here twenty-four-seven. You can see me from the window.”

He nods after a moment. “Fine. Take a walk, just don’t be too long.”

I slip my cell into my pants pocket and throw on a warm hoodie and a jacket. The sun is trying to break through the clouds, but it doesn’t exactly look warm.

I know that it’s probably Darko’s shift by now, and he’ll be watching me. I don’t plan on going far, I just need to feel somewhat normal for a few moments; the beach has always had a clearing and calming effect on me.

Just watching the endless stretch of sand and the waves rolling in. The ocean stops for nothing and no one. It’s

unforgiving. I know that's what I have to do, too; stop for nothing.

I wonder if there will come a time when I can be here under better conditions, enjoy the simple things again like sunsets and everything the seclusion of a property like this offers. Which is why I choose to enjoy it while it lasts.

I pull on my sneakers and make my way down the steps directly onto the sand dunes. I breathe in the air and take a much-needed moment. It's so clear here. The air around me feels magical, and the sun on my face warms me through just a little. I know Angelo is probably watching my every move, but I need this time alone.

My mind has been so focused that imagining Melody and my work colleagues finding out about Angelo has slipped my mind. Poor Melody, she sounded frantic.

I walk about half a mile, and for the first time in a long time, I enjoy it. There's nothing except endless miles of beach and fresh sea air.

I shouldn't be imagining myself here. It's not going to happen.

As I turn back toward the house, my phone vibrates in my pocket. I pull it out, and this time I check the caller ID. My heart races and my stomach plummets, all in succession.

I take a deep breath, looking at the house in the distance, knowing I need to get back fast.

"Clever girl," the voice echoes through the line when I answer. I start to walk more briskly towards the house. "You did it, I didn't think you had the chops to see it through."

"Just tell me where she is," I bite back bitterly.

There's an eerie laugh, it goes straight to my gut, threatening to bowl me over, as I wait.

"Head to Dot. I'll text the address."

"Dot?" I repeat, confused and annoyed with myself that I'm so far from the house.

“Dorchester. You do know where that is, don’t you?”

“Y- yes.”

“Head to the Neponset River, between Dorchester and Milton, there’s a warehouse.”

“Is she okay... please tell me.”

“Goodbye, Rayne.” The phone clicks off.

I stare at the phone, and I want to scream. Instead, I sprint toward the house.

I hear a message ping, but I don’t stop to check it, I just keep running.

My heart pounds, and like clockwork, the sun moves behind the clouds and the sky grays over, it’s like it knows. The drizzle comes from nowhere, but I run as fast as I can.

I hope to God, he can see me. *Where the fuck is Darko when you need him?*

It’s when I get a few hundred yards away that I see Angelo appear on the beach in front of the house. He’s seen me running. He knows, as he runs towards me.

The rain spills down, and my heart pounds in my chest. I can feel my hair starting to soak, the air escaping my lungs and I’m panting like a crazy person. Tears roll down my face as I sprint. *Could this finally be it?*

I slam into Angelo and wrap my arms around him, sobbing into his shoulder and trying to catch my breath so I can speak.

He holds me, “Rayne, tell me ...” he pleads.

“They...they called, they’ve got her in a warehouse between Dorchester and Milton,” I say, though I feel shaky as I try to slow my breath. “I asked if she was okay, then the phone hung up.”

“We have to leave now.” He pulls me by the hand, and we head up the dunes towards the house. He pulls out his cell and makes a call. A few seconds later, Rocco appears outside the back door. “I’ll call Enzo from the car.”

“Wait,” I stumble the words out as we crash through the hallway into the den. “You can’t be seen, Angelo, just in case this is a trap.”

“They think I’m dead, Rayne. You’re not going alone.”

“You said Rocco and Darko would be with me.”

“I need to be with you,” he says firmly. “I’ve decided.”

“You’re changing the plan?”

“Yes, I’m fucking changing the plan. Once we get there, the soldiers will storm the place.”

“Angelo, I have to go in I have to see...they could still be watching.”

“No. I won’t allow it. And there’s no reason for them to watch you now.”

“But—”

He ignores me and nods towards Rocco, who’s looking like he’s ready to pounce. “Snipers.”

Rocco nods his understanding. “Gus is getting the car.”

I pace a little, my hands shaking. I need to calm down.

It’s Angelo that steadies me once again. How he can be calm like this is anyone’s guess.

He places his large hands on my shoulders, “Rayne, you need to calm the fuck down and listen to me.”

“I k-know,” I stammer. “I’m trying.”

“Take a deep breath. I’m with you— look at me, *Carina*.”

I glance up at his piercing blue eyes. They’re darker than the deepest blue ocean and full of turmoil.

He takes my chin in his hand. “We will be there inside an hour, and you did brilliantly. You did it.”

“I just need to get there, Angelo. If anything has happened to her...”

He pulls me again into his embrace. “I’m with you. I’m with you all the way. Let’s see this through to the end.”

I nod against his hard chest and hear Rocco clear his throat behind us. I guess it's time to go.

“Always and forever,” he says, kissing me chastely. “Just like how you said.”

I bite my lip and nod. “Always and forever,” I murmur.

ANGELO

ONE HOUR EARLIER

ENZO CALLS MY CELL, AND I RETREAT TO THE STUDY, NOT that I need to hide since Rayne went for a walk on the beach, but I need privacy in case she comes back.

“We have a location on where some of the calls have been coming from.”

I run a hand through my hair. “Where?”

“The Wharf at Charlestown.”

“Prepare the soldiers. Marco will give the order when it’s time to move. I want all hands-on deck. More importantly, I want anyone you find *alive*.”

“Marco’s here with me now,” Enzo says. “Everyone knows what to do.”

I pace the room. “Once Rayne gets the call, I’ll text you. Team two will be in place to raid the building once we arrive.”

“We? So, you’re still going?” Marco butts in. “Don’t you think Rocco and Darko have this covered? They’ll have the entire team right behind them, there’s no need for you to be involved.”

“I’ll wear a disguise. And I’m not sending Rayne in there.”

“You’re right she shouldn’t go at all,” Marco replies. “The team can handle it.”

“She needs to be there if her sister is actually found.”

Marco sighs heavily. “Angelo, we both know that’s unlikely.”

“We don’t know that. I’m dead, remember.”

“Marco has a point, let the team charge in and wait in a safe place until the all-clear,” Enzo says.

“Did you honestly think I’d let her go charging in there?” I quip. “You seem to have forgotten, E, that I’m still the fucking head of this family. I’m not some fucking little junkyard dog who doesn’t know how to run things.”

“You’re being dramatic,” Enzo goes on. “As usual.”

“You and Rayne both need to stay out of there until our guys check it out.” Marco agrees with Enzo.

I think for a moment. “Under no circumstances would I agree to that if it were any of you that has been kidnapped and tortured, I’d want to be there.” Silence ensues, so I add, “Wouldn’t you agree?”

“Since when did you become the voice of reason?” Marco says.

“Since I had to pretend to be dead in order to kill those who betrayed me,” I reply. “I’ll call within the hour when we get closer.”

“Don’t do anything stup—”

I hang up and swipe a hand down my face.

To say I’ll be glad when this fiasco is over is the understatement of the year.

One thing I cannot guarantee is that I’ll be merciful. In fact, I know I won’t be.

Being violent is part of this business. It may not have been in my nature in the beginning, but it is now. In times like this, I have to call on my inner beast to do what needs to be done.

This mastermind tried to kill me.

I had no idea that I would fall for Rayne in such a way, and maybe they never planned on that, but I still can’t wait to see

their faces when I rise from the dead. The thought makes me chuckle, but I sober quickly when I think about my words to Enzo and Marco about Mia.

The simple fact is that we don't know if she'll be there, and we don't know if she'll still be alive.

I know what this will do to Rayne if she finds her sister is dead. The fact that we've got a trace on the caller puts my mind at ease, but we can't hold off forever. I, too, want to go in guns blazing, but that kind of irrational thinking is what gets you killed.

I'm a man of my word.

I just hope that it isn't too little too late.

TWO HOURS LATER

The coordinates Rayne's been sent lead to what appears to be a building in an abandoned part of Dorchester, just near the river, according to my navigation system.

Gus drives as we take the truck with tinted windows. I'm not taking any chances at being seen or being followed.

Rayne's holding up remarkably well, all things considered. We barely say anything as we make the hour trip from Falmouth. It gives me time to think, yet I've been stuck in my own head for so long now, I'll relish the chance to get this over and done with. I've told Enzo and Marco to hold fast on the plan B location, where the callers phone was traced, until we check out this one. I don't want things to go pear-shaped before we even have a chance.

As we near closer, I say, "The team will go in first. You will wait in the car until I get the all-clear."

She turns to look at me. "But, Angelo –"

"No buts, Rayne, it's my way from here on in."

"We're not far now," Darko says, turning his head to look back at us. "It's industrial, mainly storage and sea containers."

I give Darko a slight nod.

"Have you had any more word on how things are going back at Fortress?" she asks me.

"Everything is fine at Fortress; my cousins are with my mother and sister. Dom is watching Allegra's place. Enzo and my brothers are still standing by." Little does she know that we have the callers location now too, Vaughan finally coming through. I don't want to tell her because more questions will ensue.

She glances at me; she's not an idiot by any means. She searches my face for something hidden that I'm not telling her, but I show her nothing. She says nothing more and rests her head on my shoulder.

“We have to be cautious,” Rocco says from the seat next to me, talking to me over the top of her head. “You can’t go in with her, Angelo.”

“She’s not going in at all!” I snap.

She lifts her head and says, “Wait, what? I thought I was always going in Angelo, please? This isn’t what we talked about...”

I shake my head vehemently. “I’m sorry, Rayne, but this is my show now, and it was never going to come down to you storming in there, unarmed and unprotected.”

“But you have your guys with me, protecting me!” she protests. “And you’re here as well, for Christ’s sake. She needs to see me first.”

I shake my head because my mind is made up. “They’ll be in there in minutes. There’s no need to be in harm’s way.”

“It’s for the best,” Rocco says, “We just don’t know if –”

She glances at him quickly, and he shuts his mouth.

“You don’t know if what?” she repeats.

He looks at me again, and I shake my head.

Rocco stays quiet.

“If she’s not there? ... or worse?”

“Let’s not think about that right now, *Carina*,” I interrupt. “Or what scenarios we may be faced with.”

“You mean if we find her dead?”

I touch her cheek softly. “We don’t want to think the worst, but it is a possibility. There’s no point lying to you about it. Why they would kill her after what you’ve done for them makes no sense, but we won’t know anything until we get there. We need to move.”

She must know the possibilities. It’s also been a while now since we had any confirmation that Mia is actually alive and well.

“I can face it,” she says quietly. “It’s something I have to do.”

“You’re a brave little fox,” I reply, wiping a tear that is about to drop from her eye. “But you won’t fight me on this, you won’t have a choice in the end.”

She thankfully does not protest any further. She’s crazy if she thinks I’m going to let her anywhere near that building. She rests her head back on my shoulder, and we quietly ride the rest of the way.

The reality is, we won’t know a damn thing until we’re closer.

“We’re nearing the Neponset River,” Gus says.

“Almost there,” I whisper to Rayne.

We approach the industrial part of town, just as Darko mentioned. We weave our way through the streets, its full of three-story red brick buildings, some look occupied, but as we get closer to the river, most start to look vacant or abandoned—just the kind of place to hide a hostage.

When Gus pulls into the lot down the alleyway, I give Rocco the nod.

“Are you certain this is it?”

“Positive,” he replies.

“Shady ass fuckers,” I mutter.

I already secured two loaded guns into the holster around my shoulders and have another tucked into the back of my jeans.

I turn to Rayne. “You’re going to stay here with Gus.”

“Please?” she tries one more protest.

I push her hair back from her face. “You’re no good to me if you’re in harm’s way.”

“But what about all the self-defense training we did?” Her big eyes look up at me, confused.

“That was to keep you occupied, and it was two lessons, Rayne.”

She frowns. “Now you tell me.”

“We’re not having this discussion again.”

Rocco and Darko exit the car as I brush a thumb over her cheek. “I’ll call you the moment I have her.”

“Please be careful, Angelo,” she whispers.

I nod, pulling on the mask in case the lot is being watched. “Always.” I kiss her chastely before giving Gus the go-ahead to make sure she stays put, then I exit the car and nod to Darko as he also pulls his mask on. “We ready?”

He nods. “The team is in place.”

My eyes shift to Rocco. “Like you gotta ask?” he smirks.

I look back into the car, the windows are tinted, so I can only just make out Rayne’s silhouette. I turn back to the men and follow Rocco on foot as we approach a long stretch of industrial-type warehouses with our guns drawn.

As we get closer, I see half a dozen soldiers as we surround the building.

Darko motions for two men to go to the left and two to the right. We proceed to the large steel door, secured with a heavy bolt. Rocco makes short work of it with bolt cutters and he stands opposite me with Darko to my left and two other soldiers on either side.

I give Darko a nod, and we storm inside. I point my gun to the right as Darko points to the left. It’s dark inside, but Rocco immediately throws in a handful of glow sticks, and it sparks up the room. We scan the floor, walking slowly and carefully. It’s one ample square space with high ceilings and dusty floors. We quickly see it’s completely desolate, except for a few empty packing boxes in one corner and some spare lumber in another. There’s nothing else. No trace anyone was even here recently.

I see a door on the north side and nod over with my gun as we proceed towards it. On a silent count of three, courtesy of

Rocco's giant fingers, we kick the door in and aim. It's a small utility room with nothing inside.

"Jesus fuck!" I proceed to kick the nearest thing, being the open wooden door, over and over again until I hear it break.

"Fucking empty," Rocco mutters.

"There's an adjoining building," Darko states. "We should check that out just in case."

While I'm pissed, can I honestly say I'm surprised? *Motherfuckers.*

My fury builds as we exit the building and quickly move a few feet over to an adjoining structure exactly the same as the next door. Rocco busts in and throws the glow sticks as Darko and I point our guns in opposite directions, the same as before, with the soldiers flanking us. Again, there's nothing.

Completely fucking empty.

I yell obscene profanities in rapid succession, I actually think I'm going to explode.

"These fuckers want a war, they've fucking got one!" I yell.

"Dumb motherfuckers," Rocco grunts. "We still got location two from the caller, don't forget. We'll get the drop on them, Angelo."

I pull my phone out as we exit and dial Enzo.

He picks up on the first dial. "Fucking empty, the whole building," I tell him.

I'm out for blood more than ever now.

"We half expected it, but they obviously have their own death wish," he says.

"It's fucking on, Enzo, more than ever before. They chose to mess with this entire family."

"I know, Angelo, but we've got plan B. Remember, we're in position."

"I don't like plan Bs," I say.

“We’ve been here before, many times.”

I take a moment to compose myself. “I’ll meet you there. Text me the address and wait for me to get there.”

“What about Rayne?”

“I’m telling her nothing about the callers location for now,” I rub my chin as we walk out of the building, and I glance up as I see the car door open. “Gotta go. I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

We click off as I walk toward the car. I blink as I see her exit, and then she runs toward me, which doesn’t annoy me half as much as it should since I told her to stay in the car. She’s scanning all of us, trying to see where her sister is.

When I reach her, I hold my arms out to her.

“Angelo?”

“It’s a dud, baby, they stiffed us.”

“Stiffed us!” she cries, fighting against me as she tries to break free to go over to the building to check. “No!”

“Rayne, don’t fight me. The building is empty, we stormed the entire place. My guys will check the surrounds just incase.”

“I need to see!”

“There’s nothing to see, I’m taking you back to Fortress.”

I push her back towards the car as my men all wait back silently. I lift my mask when I finally get her on the edge of the seat at the open car door. “You need to calm down,” I tell her.

“I can’t calm down!” She bangs her fists on my shoulders, tears streaking down her face. “So, it was all a lie? Is that it? I did all this for nothing!”

“It wasn’t for nothing, *Carina*, we’re still trying. I’ll never give up.”

She scoffs. “Trying! Your guy has been *trying* for long enough, maybe if he knew what the fuck he was doing we

would have a trace on the caller by now!”

Yelling at me isn't going to resolve anything, but I let her rant for a moment because I'm as angry as she is. I pull her against me, but she fights and screams. It's so fucking sad.

I pull her into the car with me and usher the guys back to give us some privacy. Even though they're doing their best to look discreet, I pull the door closed.

“You need to trust me, Rayne, more than ever before. We're on the same side.”

She bursts into tears as she rests her face in her hands, her shoulders shaking. I let her sob, because she fucking needs to. “What if she's dead, Angelo? What if they dumped her body or...or...”

“Shh,” I tell her gently. “Let's not get carried away. I'm meeting with Enzo after this. I need you to go back to Fortress where you'll be safe, okay?”

She looks up from her tear-streaked face, not really hearing or seeing what I'm saying, but it has to be done, and we have to get out of here.

I hold her face in my hands and look at her. She's so vulnerable and overwhelmed, it's such a big letdown. I know she really thought this was it.

“I have another lead, *Carina*, but I don't want to get your hopes up. Enzo and I will check it out first. It's all going down as we speak.”

“W-why would they lie?” She looks into space. “I've done everything they asked. They even think you're dead, for God's sake. Who are these people?” Her eye gaze shifts to mine.

“Ruthless scum,” I concede, “nothing more than that.”

“I want revenge, Angelo, this isn't fair!”

I fucking know it isn't, but these things never truly are. I don't have the heart to tell her that.

“I know it's not, but I promise, every resource I have is now focused on finding Mia and her whereabouts.”

She wipes her eyes as I pull her into an embrace.

I open the door and nod to the guys we have to leave.

“What am I going to do while you’re gone?” she whispers.

I kiss the top of her head. “Just lay low, try to stay calm.”

“Stay calm?” She sounds so desperate it kills me.

“*Carina*, I don’t need to be worrying about you, so you need to stay out of harm’s way.”

“I can’t rest like this, Angelo. Can I at least return to your apartment? I left some of my things there.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea given the circumstances.”

“But won’t I have security?”

I sigh deeply. “I suppose Gus and Darko can go with you, then take you back to Fortress.”

Perhaps exiling her off to Fortress straightaway might not be the best idea.

At least Sophia can fix her something to eat when she gets there.

I tell Gus the plan while he drives.

After that, Rayne says nothing at all. You could cut the tension in the air with a knife.

It’s a rather fitting thought, because that’s precisely what I plan to do to these bastards when I have them at the warehouse; cut them. Every last one of them.

I will not bat an eyelid when I let their blood run into the River Charles, and only then will I rest.

RAYNE

I STARE AT NOTHING AS WE DRIVE. I FEEL MY INSIDES SHAKING, and not from the cold.

I'm in so much shock over not finding Mia, I think I'm actually going into some kind of mental breakdown. I feel as though there's nothing left inside me anymore, my insides churn and I don't know where to put myself.

Gus drives carefully through the city as the rain pours down and I stare at the traffic.

This is what true heartbreak feels like. I know Angelo told me to trust him and be strong, but why wasn't Mia there? *Where the fuck is she?*

My hands begin to tremble as my mind races at the possibilities. I don't know what to do with myself.

All this time, everything I've done, the people I have hurt and lied to, has it all been for nothing? Did they just kill Mia anyway? My head begins to swirl.

I want to scream out loud, but I'm so numb that I can't even bring myself to ask Angelo anything about where he's going.

He holds me in his arms yet doesn't say anything. I don't even know if I have the strength to keep breathing, let alone make it out of the car and into the house.

It doesn't take too long to reach his place. Gus pulls around the back laneway, not that there are any media around as the day slips into night, making my escape into the house

that much easier. Angelo slips a key off his keyring and hands it to me.

“Let yourself in. Sophia is home, so you don’t need the code. She’ll make you some food.”

“Thank you,” I whisper. “But I’m not hungry ...”

“You need to eat, Rayne, to keep your strength up. Darko will stay in the house with you, two of my guys will be outside keeping guard, and Gus will come back for you when you’re done, all right?”

I blink up at him and nod, hoping I remember all of that. He reaches down to kiss me chastely. “I’ll call you later.”

“Okay.” They are the only words I can form. My heart constricts at the enormity of what I’ve potentially lost. I can’t stomach it.

“They don’t fight fair, baby girl, but neither do we. This isn’t over, you got me?”

I nod again and bite my lip. “Thank you,” I whisper.

He kisses me again and opens the car door. I squeeze his hand as I step out.

Darko is already on the pavement waiting for me.

“Be careful,” I say to Angelo as I turn to face him. “The last thing we need is more casualties.”

He stares at me. Long gone is the sweet side to Angelo Medici. He’s been replaced with the Don, who’s out for vengeance. “It’ll be my honor to bring you some, though, so you can gut them yourself.”

I close my eyes and swallow hard, then lean in and kiss him softly. “Please be careful, Angelo. I mean it.”

“Always am.”

I step back, and Darko moves in to close the door.

I manage to put one foot in front of the other, and the car idles until I reach the back door and let myself in with Angelo’s key. Only then do I hear him drive away.

It's all just a big nightmare, but here I am, wide awake, living in the middle of it.

As soon as I enter the seemingly empty house, Sophia appears from nowhere, running toward me.

"Miss Michaelson, are you all right?"

"Hello, Sophia. I'm okay," I say. I'm sure she must think the grief over Angelo has brought me here, and that's why I look so pale and gaunt. Not finding your sister after weeks of daily torture will do that to a person.

Mia, where are you?

She looks visibly upset.

"I just came to get some of my things," I offer when she says nothing more.

She pats me on the arm. "Mr. Medici was such a wonderful, kind man." She dabs her nose with a tissue.

Does she really not know?

I nod. The lies and betrayal find their way to the pit of my stomach, and keeping them squashed is proving harder than I thought.

"Yes, I mean, I was only just getting to know him myself. All of this is just so sudden, it's so awful..." *Am I the world's worst actress?* I don't even know how the lies roll right off my tongue so easily, but they do.

"I really didn't have anywhere else to go since I reside here on weekdays. I wanted the house to be clean for Mr. Medici..." She trails off as mine and Darko's eyes meet while she sobs into a tissue.

Now it's my turn to console her. "I know he thought of you fondly," I say, like I would know. "You did the right thing; he would want the house clean and tidy."

She nods and lets go of me. "I'll make you a sandwich, while you gather your things."

"I really..."

She turns and heads to the kitchen before I can protest.

“The perimeter upstairs is secure,” Darko tells me. “You can get your things, but we leave in five minutes.”

I nod gratefully and make my way through the house and up to Angelo’s room. I grab a duffel bag from the closet and start shoving my things in. I go to the bathroom and pick up the cosmetics bag on the counter and throw that in, my father’s pocket knife falls out. I reach down to pick it up, running my fingers over the engraving, realizing it could be an omen. I shove it in the back pocket of my sweats.

The sooner I get out of here, the sooner I’ll have news from Angelo.

What I really want to do is punch a hole in the wall. I should’ve fought harder to go with him, it doesn’t matter if I’m in the way...I just wanted to be there...

I take a moment to gather myself and have a sob in the bathroom.

When I’m done, I head back downstairs and wander into Angelo’s study. I pour myself half a glass of scotch from the decanter and take a sip. I wince when the fiery liquid slides down my throat. The pain is welcome though, it’s a reminder that I’m still alive. Surely I would feel something if I’d lost Mia for good. Surely I would know?

I don’t know how long I stand there for, staring into space. But when Sophia knocks politely and enters holding a turkey sandwich on a plate, it takes everything inside me not to break down.

“Thank you,” I say, taking the plate from her.

She smiles kindly, her eyes still red. “I’ll be in the kitchen tidying up if you need anything else.” She pats me on the arm as I smile back.

I politely take a bite out of the sandwich as she leaves. Ordinarily, a turkey and cranberry on fresh wholewheat would be right up my alley, but I can barely swallow a single bite.

Taking the glass with me, I go out into the sitting room and perch on one of the couches as I try to think about what the hell comes next. I also need to wait for Darko to come back from wherever he's disappeared to.

I take another large sip of the whiskey and somehow keep it down as I hear a knock at the door. I automatically jump in my seat as I look around. Out of nowhere, Darko appears with his gun pointed at the door. He looks through the peephole and then opens the door a fraction.

"What are you doing here?" he asks, his tone clipped.

"Angelo sent me back instead of Gus," says the male voice.

He nods. "What about her?"

"She's on my watch."

I frown as Darko opens the door and Dom strides in with Allegra, of all people, on his heels.

"Oh God!" she cries when she sees me. I don't have time to react as she swings her arms around me into a tight embrace. To say I'm shocked is putting it mildly. This is the woman who hates my guts and told me she had a wild fling with Angelo and that he would be done with me by the time the sun came up.

"Allegra," I start, but she sobs into my shoulder.

"Tell me it isn't true!"

I swallow hard. "I'm afraid it is."

Jesus, having to keep repeating my lies is starting to grate on my nerves.

She pulls back to look at me, her tear-stained face a mess. This person is the most put-together woman I've ever seen, yet today, she seems more unglued than ever. She must have cared for him more deeply than I first thought.

I offer her my glass. "I know, I'm still coming to terms with it myself."

"How did this happen?"

I look down at my hands. “He had a heart attack. I...I don’t know what else to say. He had some chest pains one minute, and then the next, he had collapsed.”

She puts her head in her hands and sobs. *She really fucking loves him.*

A part of me wants to tell her that it’s all a lie, that Angelo’s okay, but one look at Darko’s face tells me that I need to keep my mouth shut.

“It all happened so suddenly,” I add, soothing her with a hand on her shoulder. “I’m so sorry, I know you were close.”

“And I was horrible to him before he died,” she cries. “And to you. Now I’ll never get the chance to say goodbye!”

I feel a lump rise in my throat at her distraught state. I feel the same fucking way about my sister.

“We need to go,” Dom says after a few moments. “She needs to get to Fortress. The family won’t be happy if we delay any longer, she’s under all of our protection now.”

Darko nods. “I’ll get the other car pulled in behind you.”

Darko disappears, and Allegra pulls on my arm. “We must go quickly. Now that Angelo is dead, the other Mafia families will be moving in to try and overthrow the Medici empire. This is how it works, we’re all in danger, Rayne. Nobody outside the family can be trusted.”

“I understand.”

“Do you? Because if that’s the case then you’ll have to trust me now.”

“Are you going to ride with us to Fortress?” Angelo never discussed this, but she is a Medici and still a part of their family.

“I think it’s best. Now that I have Dom watching me, I feel useless at home. I need to speak to Angelo’s brothers, and I know that’s where they’ll be.”

I nod. “All right.”

Dom picks up my duffel, swinging it over his shoulder, and gives Allegra a chin lift as she places the empty glass on the table.

I stand and follow them out the back door.

We climb into a black Mercedes, and before I can even blink, Dom takes off and pulls out of the laneway.

“How was he?” she splutters, turning to me as we sit beside each other in the backseat. “When you saw him last?”

I feel so fucking guilty... “He was...happy,” I say quietly.

She wipes her eyes and nose with a tissue. “We grew up together, as you probably know, and he was a huge figure in my life when Roberto died,” she tells me. “So much so that I always joked we’d be old and gray together, not *together*, in that sense, but as the oldest and best of friends.”

I smile as she looks up at me, and I know by the look in her eyes that she’s in love with Angelo. I’ve always known it, since her dig at me at the cafe and from what Angelo has told me, it’s obvious. She’s probably not a bad person. She just fell in love with a man that she can’t have. She can’t have him because he’s *mine*.

“I’m so sorry, Allegra, I really am,” I say. “Obviously, the family has a lot of questions for me since I was last seen with him, which is why I’m going to Fortress. I’m not sure what to actually do from there. It doesn’t exactly fill me with joy having to sit there and be fired with a million questions.”

“I can imagine,” she replies, dabbing her nose once more. “But I’ll be there with you. I’ll make them understand none of this is your fault. No one could have known.”

The afternoon turns gray with dark clouds looming as we drive. It looks like it’s going to rain down hard.

“I’m sorry you fought,” I go on. “But I’m sure Angelo wouldn’t want you to be upset. He lived his life to the fullest and was so well respected in this city, you’d know better than me I’m sure, but he wouldn’t want you to be sad.”

She stares ahead as she tries to make sense of it, her eyes not seeing. I've honestly never seen a woman so distraught.

She laughs almost bitterly. "I said some pretty awful things."

"I'm sure he knows you didn't mean them."

"Did he tell you what happened? Just before the Gala?" she goes on.

I shake my head, kind of awkwardly. "No, he never said anything."

She nods. "Typical of Angelo, always taking the high road. He always did see the good in people. That's his downfall, you know."

I want to fucking scream because I don't want to hear anything else about it. I want to find my fucking sister and see Angelo and get the hell out of this car.

"I only knew him for a few weeks, but he was a very generous, kind, and amazing man," I agree. "I can see how he would see the good in people, despite his flaws."

Dom takes the car across town toward Fortress. The rain begins to pelt down, the sky going almost black in its wake. It's fitting for the scene playing out in front of me.

My phone just about burns a hole in my pocket as I anxiously wait for it to ring. I don't know how I'm going to explain it to Allegra, but hopefully, she'll be long gone by the time I'm at Fortress and get Angelo's call.

"Angelo said you were having some troubles," Allegra goes on, shocking me out of my reverie.

I turn to her. "Troubles?"

"Your sister was in trouble, or something? I don't remember exactly. It was just like Angelo to take on the problems of the women he dated, not that I blame you one bit. He'd climb the highest mountain to keep a woman happy, he was not like other men."

A prickle of cold sweat runs through my body.

Angelo told Allegra about Mia?

“It can’t be easy,” she goes on. “Being in the shadows like that, his life was complex. I loved him dearly, but he wasn’t a loyal man, Rayne. If he told you he was, then I’m afraid he’s a liar. I’ve known the Medici brothers a long time. One thing Angelo couldn’t do was keep it in his pants.”

Why is she telling me this?

Something in my gut alarms me, but I push it aside. She’s bad-mouthing him already, when he’s not even technically buried yet?

I decide to lie when I clear my throat and say, “We weren’t exactly exclusive. In fact, we were just getting to know one another. It was early days.”

She sniffles, looking out the window. “He was a good man, the best,” she whispers.

“It has to be hard, I didn’t know him well...”

“Yes, yes, of course, I’m sorry. You never had the good fortune of knowing him like I did.”

I stay quiet, unable to respond to that. Meanwhile the tension brews inside me as the car hums along.

I glance through the lanes of traffic. “Dom, are we far from Fortress?” I ask, as the car cuts through three lanes.

“Traffics backed up,” he tells me.

Then Allegra says, “Can we make a stop off?”

My palms twitch. “I don’t think Marco will like it if we don’t get there soon,” I say, even though I know Marco hates my guts. “I had clear instructions.”

“You’re probably right,” she agrees. “I just didn’t want to go to Fortress empty-handed. I haven’t seen any of the boys since the news of Angelo’s...”

“I’m sure they’d be happy just you being there,” I reply, hoping that’s the case.

I get the feeling Angleo won't be pleased about her surprise appearance.

We settle into silence for a while as Allegra texts frantically on her phone.

Another fifteen minutes or so and a set of huge black gates appear, and I'm thankful we're finally here.

A slight wave of unease creeps over my body. Call it gut instinct, but I need to get out of this car.

When we drive up to the house, Dom puts the car in park and I reach for the door.

"Where is Darko?" I ask, looking behind us.

"He probably got lost in the traffic," she replies. "Dom likes to drive like a freak."

It takes me a minute to realize that the house is shrouded in darkness and there are no lights on.

I've only ever been to Fortress in the dark, and even then, we were parked in the underground parking lot, so I didn't get a good look around.

Allegra links her arm through mine as we start for the door. I know she must be in shock, as I don't think under normal circumstances she'd be this nice to me. I know how shock works so my suspicion quickly turns to sympathy.

Dom unlocks the door, and we step inside.

"I'm sorry, I would've cleaned up if I knew we were having company," Allegra says as Dom locks the door behind us.

The hackles on my neck rise when I realize we're not at Fortress. *Where the fuck are we?*

Dom exits the room to the right, trying the light switch. "Storm must have blown a fuse," he says. "I'll have to go check the box outside."

He walks back out the front, pulling out a torch as he shuts the door behind him.

“Ah, that’s so much better, don’t you think? Alone at last,” Allegra muses.

I stare at her as she watches me. “Why do you say that?”

“We’ve never really had time for a chat. I do like our chats.”

As I try to decipher what’s going on, a cold, creepy feeling comes over me. “Allegra, why did you bring me here? This isn’t Fortress.”

“I told you, I need to get something to take over to Fortress...”

“I had strict instructions to go straight there,” I say.

No Fortress. No Darko. Holy shit.

“From Angelo?” she says, shaking her head. “You mean before he died? It hardly makes much difference now.”

My heart starts racing faster, I don’t like where this is going. “What do you mean? That’s a little offensive given everything that’s happened.”

“Cut the crap, *Miss Michaelson*, you can’t keep playing this innocent little act with me. I know what you did.”

I stare at her unfathomably, trying to keep up with her shift in mood. “What I did with what exactly?”

She laughs haughtily. “You finished him off didn’t you? I know it, you know it. You might as well just say it.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Like hell you don’t,” she sneers.

“I really want to leave now,” I say, going to push past her to find Dom.

“I don’t think so,” she replies, shoving me back.

“What do you think you’re doing?” I spin around to face her.

She glares at me, gone are the niceties in the car, it’s replaced with hostility and anger.

“Why the hell would you think I killed Angelo?” I have a very bad feeling about this. The hackles on my back rise.

“I know more about it than what you think. Looks can be very deceiving, can’t they Rayne?”

Suddenly, everything falls into place. I stare at her, unseeing at first, but it all clicks into place in rapid succession. “It’s you, isn’t it?” I say from nowhere. “You have something to do with all of this don’t you?”

She fake smiles, “Whatever do you mean?”

“Are you the one who’s been blackmailing me this whole time?”

She smiles. “Blackmail? The next thing you’re going to accuse me of is kidnapping.” Her eyes flash darkly and I swear I see the devil in them.

I stare at her. “You set this whole thing up?”

“Are you talking in riddles now?”

“Don’t play coy,” I whisper-shout, backing away. “Was it you all along?”

“You think I couldn’t get that close to him if I really wanted? I know everything about the Medici family. I am one, after all.”

“You didn’t exactly answer the question.”

A smirk crosses her face. “I don’t have to answer to you, but you’ll be put out of your misery soon enough, so yes, it was me. No-one suspected a fucking thing did they?”

I shake my head. “Why? Why are you doing this?”

She taps her chin as if deep in thought. “One thing Angelo Medici can never do is toss me to the curb like some gutter rat, like I never mattered to him. It’s all a lie by the way, he denied it until he was blue in the face, but I know how he felt,” she says. “Trust me, I never expected him to have feelings for you. You were just meant to be a decoy and a play thing. That only expediated plan B as time went on.”

“Plan B?” I’m unsure if I really want to know the answer.

“That the worst thing I could do to him while he was still breathing, was to hurt you. It’s your own fault, you weren’t supposed to form an attachment to him, but that only made the game more enthralling.”

I swallow hard. “My fault?” I whisper in disbelief. “How the hell is it my fault being blackmailed? And what kind of sick twisted person finds this enthralling?”

She shrugs, “You tell me. Don’t say you didn’t enjoy being his temptress.”

I ignore her jibes because I’ve heard enough “Where the hell is my sister?”

A sinister smile spreads across her face. “Come now, Rayne. It’s not like you’ll be missed, in fact, you’ll be joining him soon enough. I have to hand it to you though, I never thought you’d have the chops to see it through, and as for your sister...”

My eyes go wide. “Where is she?”

I move toward her, but she quickly pulls a gun and waves it at me. “I wouldn’t do that if I were you.”

I stop in my tracks and take a step back, unable to believe what’s unfolding right in front of me. “Allegra, you’ve had your fun or whatever sick game you’re playing; you don’t need to do this.”

“Oh, I think I do.”

Just then, Dom returns, flashlight in hand. “The fuse box is fried,” he says, wet from the rain, then asks, “Did you get what you came for, so we can head out?” Then his eyes glance down at Allegra holding a gun as she turns it on him.

She smiles at him. “Well, as we know Angelo won’t be joining us. Poor, Dom, I made you believe that Darko was the one double-crossing us, you were so easy to convince.”

“What are you talking about?” The man is enormous and he towers over the two of us. “I got a text from Angelo’s phone, telling me...” He trails off, realizing his mistake as he pales.

“It’s a shame, Dom. You were loyal to the very end. It’s a pity all you’ll be known for is a coward and a traitor. I wish it could be different, but you’ve gone past your used-by date.”

He moves toward her, but she’s faster. I don’t even have time to react or realize what’s happening until the gun goes off.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

Then everything goes silent.

ANGELO

NOT HAVING RAYNE WITH ME DOES PUT ME BACK INTO A different frame of mind, and that's a good thing being my anger is at boiling point and I don't even care if she did get to witness me spilling blood.

I tap my foot impatiently as Gus makes his way to the address at Charlestown pier.

"This is completely fucked," Rocco comments next to me. "My fuckin' hands are twitching to murder someone."

My thoughts entirely. "Tell me about it, I passed twitching about a mile back."

"Does it feel to you that it's a little bit too convenient that it came from the Russian camp?"

I glance at him. "If anyone wants me dead, then it's obviously going to be the Russians."

He nods, deep in thought. "It just seems a little too...I don't know, cliché."

"Fuck knows, Aleksii Petrov loves playing games."

Just what we need on top of everything else, a further conflict with the fucking Russians. It'll be better when they're all fucking dead.

I flip out my cell and dial Enzo again.

"Angelo. How far away are you?" he asks.

"Approaching, about ten minutes away."

“We’re holding fast.”

“Good, find the building and wait for me, have everyone on standby.”

“Got it.”

“Make sure they wait,” I reiterate. “I want their fucking hearts on a platter. If anyone goes in before I get there, they’ll answer to me.”

“Holding fire until you get here,” Enzo says.

“Good.” I hang up and go back to tapping my foot.

Gus easily cuts through the traffic, never faltering, never even breaking a sweat.

We pass the Bunker Hill Monument which, granted, is a little hard to miss.

“We’re nearing Pier Five, it’s the Western end?” Gus asks me over his shoulder.

“Correct.” I reel off the address. “It should be an industrial block. I’m thinking it could be another abandoned or vacant space.”

Quite fitting, considering Pier 5 is currently a derelict empty pier with nothing going on there. It’s ironic because it stands where British ships fired on militiamen during the Battle of Bunker Hill, then it had to be rebuilt during World War II in order to repair battleships.

Battleships indeed.

I’ve always kinda liked the idea, though I never thought I’d end up here, fighting my own battle.

Gus pulls up close to where I see Enzo’s car, it’s parked across the street from one of the buildings. Good, that means everyone is in place.

It’s in the quiet end of the harbor, with large commercial buildings surrounding us. While it’s industrial, there are residential buildings and restaurants located not too far away. The address is half a block from where we’re parked.

I step out of the car onto the deserted street, gun in hand. I see Enzo and Marco under the eaves. Dante and Fynn are on the other side, along with two soldiers that I can see. I head toward them.

“Everyone is in place,” Marco says in a hushed voice.

“Good. Fynn, I want you to go back now with Gus to my apartment and escort Rayne back to Fortress and stay there with Ma and Valentina until I get there.”

He opens his mouth to protest at being the babysitter of the Medici women and then wisely shuts it again. “As you say,” he mutters.

I know he’s disappointed he doesn’t get in on the ram raid, but that’s just how it is.

“Let’s do it.” I nod, taking the lead.

Marco and Dante are close to my side, then Enzo and Rocco behind us. We’re flanked by my guys coming up along the other side of the building.

We approach the apartment building 501, and I motion for Rocco and Enzo to take the other side of the doorway. It has a similar padlock on the door as the warehouse, which Rocco quickly destroys. I grab the handle and on the count of three, wrench the door open and hold my gun out, ready to fire. My brothers step beside me, holding their guns as I do a quick sweep of the inside. We move in slowly, with Enzo and Rocco behind and the soldiers behind them as they surround the building. Rocco throws his glow sticks right out in front. It’s dark and musty, but the room lights up. It’s sectioned into two and it’s rundown. The smell hits me first, but I’m distracted by movement in one corner as I duck inside.

“Don’t move!” I bellow, crouching slightly and aiming my gun while moving towards the noise, but I see nothing. Probably vermin. The room is piled with boxes; it looks like it hasn’t been used properly in years, maybe just for storage.

I wave my gun over to the back left side of the room, where there are two other internal doors and one over on the far side.

I take the left side with Marco and Dante, while Rocco and Enzo take the right door, and the soldiers take the rear. Though Darko is the best soldier I have, I needed him with Rayne.

I reach the handle and find it locked. I shoot the lock with my silencer and push the door open, holding my gun out. The room used to be part of a kitchen, but it's long since retired.

It's then I hear Enzo yelling, "Freeze! Don't move!"

"Fuck." I scramble out with my brothers on my heels and charge into the room. It's a decent-sized space with a window boarded up. There's very little light, but I can see a chair in one corner, and it's moving, or rather, shuffling. It takes me a second to realize that there's someone tied to it.

Enzo moves closer and I join him nudging past Rocco, Marco is behind us shining a torch. When I get closer, I realize I'm pointing my gun right in a girl's face.

Her face. She's like a deer caught in headlights.

Holy fucking shit.

She has the same eyes as Rayne.

I know right away that it's Mia.

I quickly retreat my gun. "Fuck, it's her," I say to the others. I bend down in front of her. "Mia, is that your name?"

She's staring at me with big wide eyes, utterly terrified.

I don't fucking believe it. "Are you Mia?" I try again in a softer voice.

She nods, with tears streaking down her face. She's shaking like a leaf.

"I'm here to help you, Mia. Rayne sent us. I'm going to take this tape off now, okay?"

Her eyes search past me to the band of men behind me, and she visibly pales. Her eyes are so wide and frightened, it only urges me more to kill the people responsible for this.

Something is being said on Enzo's walkie-talkie behind me, but I don't hear it, I just kneel in front of Rayne's sister

and take her in for just a moment, relief flooding me that she's alive. I can see the similarity to her sister straight away, it's all in the eyes.

"You don't need to be afraid. I'm Angelo. I'm here to help you, to free you."

I carefully peel back the tape, I know it must fucking hurt, but the girl shows no reaction to it. That's a little worrying.

"P... please," she garbles out finally, "Please don't hurt me."

Her voice sounds like she swallowed razor blades.

"We're not here to hurt you," I say. "I'm a friend of your sister's. You're safe now."

Dante kneels down beside me. "We're going to untie you, okay?"

She blinks in rapid succession but doesn't say anything.

He kneels around the back of the chair and takes out his switchblade.

"There's another," she whispers. "Another one..."

"Someone get some fucking water!" I yell behind me before turning back to her. "There's another what, sweetheart?"

She swallows hard and whispers, "There's another girl."

I stare at her. "Is she here too?"

Mia nods.

Then Enzo says, "Angelo, they've found a girl in the other room, tied to a chair, same situation."

"Jesus fucking Christ," I curse. I look back at Mia. "Do you know who the girl is?"

She shakes her head.

"Almost free." Dante slices the last part of the rope where she's tied and lets the rope fall to the floor, her wrists are bloody and bruised. She brings her arms around to her front

and clutches them close to her. Her uncontrollable shaking and pallid skin tell me all I need to know.

She's going to need a medic.

Rocco hands me a bottle of water, and I unscrew the lid and help her take a sip. She can barely move she's shaking so much.

"Where is my sister?" she asks quietly as our eyes meet.

"She's waiting," I tell her.

"We need to get out of here," Marco says behind me.

No shit.

I look back at Mia. "I'm going to lift you in a moment and take you back to the car, okay?"

She nods, rubbing her wrists. Her eyes are still wild and searching all the faces in the room, she's terrified we're going to do something to her.

I look at Marco. "Go check out the other girl with Enzo. Make it quick."

We need to get out of this building pronto.

I reach down to help her up, and she stumbles but steadies herself by holding onto me. Dante is on her other side. I waste no time in hooking my hands under her legs and around her back and lifting her up into my arms. When I have her secured, I head for the entrance.

Rocco and Dante follow me out, at the same time, I hear a commotion coming from the other room.

There's a girl yelling and cussing. A few moments later, I see Marco carrying another girl in a similar state to Rayne, however, she isn't so quiet about it.

"If any of you fucking hurt me!" she yells, "My Uncle will rip out your throats when he finds you. You have no idea who you're messing with!"

For fuck's sake. There's also an accent, a very recognizable one; Russian, if I'm not mistaken.

Marco is doing his best to calm her down and keep her quiet. I feel for her though, we've just barged in with guns blazing, and now a dozen men or more are taking you against your will, telling you they're the good guys.

"You have no idea who I am!" she continues her barrage. "They know by now I've been kidnapped . You're all dead men, you hear me? Dead men!"

"We're not here to harm you," Marco grits out, dodging as she tries to head-butt him. Her hands and legs are still bound. "We came for the other girl Mia, you're the surprise we weren't expecting. Now, you need to calm the fuck down!"

She's scared, I get it, most people would be, but she's got some sass given the predicament she's in.

We keep walking toward one of the trucks. I scour the area around us while keeping Mia close. The snipers on the roof nearby will be following our every move, keeping us safe. Dante flanks me from behind. I won't let her go until she's safely back with Rayne at Fortress, then I will take them both to Falmouth to reunite and recuperate properly.

"Get the blankets out of the trunk," I say to Dante.

He quickly does as I ask and then opens the back of the car. I lower Mia in and take the blanket from Dante, wrapping it around her. "I'll be just a moment," I say, then nod to Dante, "stay with her."

Marco is stationed at the other truck behind us and has just lowered the lanky, raven-haired woman into the back.

"Listen, sweetheart," I say, sticking my head in the car. "We're here to help you. We'll take you to safety then get you back home, you got me? If you keep trying to kick and scream your way out of this, I'll have no choice but to gag you again."

She stops and then tucks her arms around her knees. All the while, she shoots daggers at me with her eyes.

"Have you been harmed?" Marco asks her.

She glances up at him with big fearful eyes, despite her courage to yell and scream at us moments ago. She shakes her

head but says nothing. It's unclear at this point if she's telling the truth.

Thankfully she stays quiet.

Both the girls look like they've been to hell and back.

"Meet you back at Fortress," I say to Marco.

"Got it."

I retrieve my phone from my pocket as I return to the truck in front. I see Dante kneeling down and talking to Mia softly as she continues to cry.

"Enzo, you go with Marco and two soldiers. Rocco let the other soldiers know to secure the area. I want to know if anyone comes back to this warehouse and if they do, I want them brought to Fortress alive."

"It's already done, boss," Rocco says. I give him a nod as Enzo watches me.

"She's in bad shape," Enzo says.

"I know," I mutter. "But she's got a pulse, that's all that matters."

"Thank fucking God. I'll see you back there." Enzo nods and heads off.

I dial Rayne quickly to tell her the news, so she can talk to Mia ... if Mia will actually talk.

The phone doesn't even ring, it goes right to voicemail. I tell her to call me back as soon as she gets the message. Tempted to call Darko, I refrain for the time being. If there was a problem, he would have called me.

"Let's go," I tell Dante as he steps out of the way to let me in the car. He goes around and climbs into the passenger seat as Rocco starts the engine. I look over at Mia, huddled to the other side of the car like she can't get any further away from me.

"Have you been harmed, Mia?" I ask her quietly. *Fucking please say no.*

If she's been raped or beaten, then I need to know.

I don't like the chances of these assholes and two innocent girls locked in a desolate, empty building for weeks on end, and they didn't lay a finger on them.

She looks at me with those big, startled eyes again; she blinks rapidly but doesn't say anything. Maybe she doesn't want to tell me. I'll call Sage shortly so she can come and check them over.

"It's okay," I assure her. "We'll be with Rayne soon."

She huddles the blanket around her and leans against the door. At least it's warm in the car and I have her, I fucking have her.

I dial Rayne again and hold the phone to my ear as I still watch her sister, unmoving next to me.

"How's she doing?" Dante asks me, turning from the front.

I flick my eyes to him, "She's okay," I nod. "I can't get hold of Rayne, though."

"She's not at Fortress yet?"

"I'll call Fynn, see what's going on."

Just as I'm about to dial him, Dante's phone rings.

"It's Fynn," Dante tells me before he answers. "Fynn, what's up?...." There's a pause. "What do you mean?"

There's a long pause and Dante turns to look at me. "They should have been there by now. Sophia said what?"

"What the fuck is going on?" I hiss.

Dante waves me away while he tries to listen to what Fynn is saying. "She went with Allegra and Dom?"

I'm getting increasingly agitated in my seat, but I try to remain composed because of the girl sitting next to me. I don't want to freak her out any more than she already is.

"All right, I'll talk to Angelo and see what he thinks. We should be at Fortress in about twenty minutes, judging by the traffic."

They click off, and he turns around to face me, briefly eyeing Mia, who is quiet and still.

“They haven’t made it to Fortress yet,” Dante explains, “Fynn’s been trying to call Darko. Rayne left your apartment with Allegra and Dom.”

“What the hell was Allegra doing there?”

“I’ve no idea.” He nods towards Mia. “You sure she’s okay?”

I glance over at her. “You okay, sweetheart?” I ask her.

She doesn’t answer.

“Call Allegra,” I say to Dante. “Find out what the hell is going on.”

He dials and holds the phone up to his ear, then straightaway, he hangs up. “Went to voicemail,” he says.

I pull my phone out to call Darko. I don’t know what the fuck Dom is doing at my house with Allegra, when he’s supposed to be at her place keeping guard.

My gut is telling me something’s wrong.

I don’t know what the hell Rayne would say to Allegra’s barrage of questions, but either way, Dom or Darko should have called me. Their heads are gonna roll for this.

I should never have let her make a stop off, she should’ve gone straight to Fortress.

I go to hit dial when I see his name pop up on the screen... he’s calling me.

“Boss ... we have a problem,” he says as soon as I answer.

A feeling of dread comes over me, an emotion I don’t have too often. When I do, I know it’s all bad.

“What?” I bark.

The only thing is I’m not prepared for the next words out of his mouth.

“It’s Rayne, boss she’s missing.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose, not realizing that I may actually be capable of killing one of my own tonight while I'm at it.

RAYNE

I JUMP BACK ON INSTINCT. *HOLY SHIT. THIS CRAZY BITCH JUST shot Dom!*

Before she can aim the gun at me, I start running. I feel a shot ricochet past my head as I scream and dive into the next room, scrambling to my feet when I fall over.

The house, being entirely in the dark, is my only ally. Finding my feet, I see a set of stairs and race up them frantically, trying to feel my way without falling.

“You know you can’t hide from me!” I hear her holler from down below.

When I fumble my way to the top, there’s a door and, thankfully, it’s unlocked. I close it and push the button to secure it. I’m sure it won’t hold her forever, but it should buy me some time. I tiptoe into the first bedroom, being careful not to make any sound. I need to get to a window. Maybe if I do that, I can shimmy my way down and make a run for it.

My heart pounds in my chest so hard that it threatens to overwhelm me. One thing is for sure, I did not see this coming. I knew she had a thing for Angelo, but this takes stalker behavior to a whole other level.

I fumble and try to pull my phone out of my pocket, when I hear her call out, “You’ll never find your precious bitch sister!” I listen to her coming up the stairs. “I’m having her shipped off tonight to the Middle East or maybe Ecuador, I haven’t quite decided which yet!”

I shudder at her words as I run to the window and try to open it, but the stupid thing is closed shut and won't move.

I run out of there and down the hall to the next bedroom. I can hear her on the landing now.

“And you and Angelo, what a joke! He wanted me, Rayne. At one point, he only had eyes for me, and I was his everything. Then he used me, chewed me up, and spit me out when he was done. Someone has to hold him accountable for his actions. He had to pay!” She laughs like a deranged hyena. “And you made it so much sweeter luring him in. Imagine how devastated the family will be when they learn it was you all along. I should keep you alive just for that alone. I'd love to see what they do to you.”

My heart pounds as I try the next window, and to my relief, I'm able to nudge it slightly open. They're the old-fashioned type that lifts up, and evidently, they haven't been opened in a very long time.

I'm able to pry it all the way up as the freezing cold wind hurtles in, blowing my hair behind me.

“I know you're up here, I saw you and you can't get away. Give it up, Rayne, at least die with some dignity, it's so tacky to run like a coward.”

I don't have enough time to get out of the window before she blows my brains out, so I duck down and slide under the bed, hoping she won't be able to see me under there in the dark. My heart races as I hope she takes the bait that I jumped out of the window and got away. Since she had no problem shooting Dom, I've no doubt that she'll live up to her promise and blow my brains out the second she gets the chance.

It was her all along. I can't even believe any of this is happening, the nightmare just continues, but the one thing I'm not going to do is go down without a fight. Fuck that.

If she does happen to kill me, Angelo may never even know the truth, and I'll never know what happened to Mia That anger inside me bubbles over to a boiling point. It only fuels my need to survive.

I hear her footsteps getting closer down the hallway. Trust me, if I had a gun, I'd take her out, no questions asked; not that I can even fire one. Maybe I should have taken Angelo up on the shooting lesson.

"Come on, Rayne, you can't hide forever," she sing-songs. "It's just you and me, and there's nobody looking for you."

My stomach churns when I come to realize it was her on the phone all those times, listening to my distress—toying with me while she got her kicks.

If she is so in love with Angelo, why in the hell does she want him dead?

Surely not just because he doesn't want her. She arranged all this before she even knew me. There has to be more to it, and I want to know what it is. She bribed me from the start to track his movements. Did she always want me to kill him? Was that always part of the plan? Or did it change? I find myself needing to know.

She makes light work of the lock, shooting the entire handle off as I cover my ears from the blast. As she enters the room I clap my hands over my mouth afraid she'll hear my breathing. She's trying the light switch, but the electricity is still out.

"You're never getting out of here, Rayne, might as well face it. You and your damned principals." Her heels clatter against the wooden floors as she walks past; I can see her feet from my position underneath the bed.

She goes over to the window, and I press my lips together tightly, holding my breath like that will help.

She turns on her heels after a few moments and leaves the room. I almost breathe a sigh of relief as I hear her down the hall, trying the next room. I quickly haul myself out and head straight for the window. It's open far enough that I can slide out onto the tiny balcony and then hopefully climb down the drainpipe without breaking my neck. Wouldn't that be a cruel irony?

I quickly glance behind me to check that the coast is clear and gasp as Allegra appears at the doorway. The sneaky bitch had kicked her shoes off and she is holding the gun out in front of her and firing. I duck as a stray bullet hits the wall to the left of my head. The sound is deafening.

“I knew you were in here!” she screams.

I don't get more than a few seconds before she lunges for me, and I turn and try to knock her off balance, fighting my way back at her.

I grab her hands to try and knock the gun away, and we wrestle back and forth as she tries to pull back from me, but I hang onto her.

“You'll never beat me.” She grimaces as the gun points upwards with both our hands on it. “I already played you all so fucking bad. You and Dom will get the blame in the end, conspiring together. At least, that's what it will look like.”

“Fuck you!” I spit back. My only goal is to get that gun away from being pointed at me.

We struggle back and forth, but I'm gaining some momentum. I hold my own. All the weeks I've had of pent-up emotion; anger, humiliation, and rage all come bursting out. And she's the lucky recipient of the fire inside me that has been unleashed.

I'll never give up. I refuse.

I remember what Angelo taught me about using my elbows in self-defense so I swiftly bend my right arm and launch my elbow towards her face as hard as I can. It knocks her head flying backward and she momentarily loses balance. It's enough for me to hit her arm and the gun clatters to the floor.

“You bitch!” she yells at me. I see blood pouring down her face from how hard I whacked her.

I waste no time going after the gun, but she's not going down without a fight either. I turn as I hit the ground and kick her in the stomach, sending her backward into a nearby armoire. I manage to get my hands on the gun, and when I do, I spin and point it at her.

“I’ll do it,” I say as she turns and spits curses at me. “Don’t test me. You will lose.”

“You don’t have the guts!”

“Really? Are you sure about that? I killed Angelo didn’t I, why not you?”

She narrows her eyes as I continue to point the gun.

“You’d better start talking Allegra, I want to know everything from the start.”

She watches my face intently and shakes her head. “You don’t want the truth, you want the fairytale, and this story doesn’t have one. Not where Angelo is concerned.”

I shake my head. “Why did you do it?”

“I don’t have to tell you anything...”

“Really? I’m the one now pointing a gun in your face. I’ve nothing left to lose, you took everything from me and I’m just a quarter past crazy. So fucking tell me now, or I swear to God, I’ll blow your brains out!”

She laughs, but I hear the nervousness in her tone.

“You mean to say, you can’t figure it out?”

I swallow hard. “Enlighten me. You say you loved Angelo so much, but you wanted him six feet under?”

She glares at me angrily in the dark. The moonlight is the only light we have shining through the room. “You know, I will let you in on a little secret between us girls. In the beginning, I wanted information on all his comings and goings. I hadn’t made my mind up to kill him at that point, but to make him suffer was my ultimate goal.”

“You’re not getting to the point,” I tell her.

“After Roberto died, Angelo took no responsibility for that. He was his right-hand man; he was supposed to protect him. It’s because of Angelo that my husband is gone. It should have been him in that casket, *him* made to suffer. Even after all of that, he didn’t even include me at the helm when he took

over. It's like he wanted the spotlight all for himself, leaving me widowed and alone and almost broke."

"I can tell from your lavish surroundings you're doing it tough," I throw back at her sarcastically.

"You don't know anything about what Angelo is capable of, and he had to pay the price."

"For not keeping you in the lifestyle you're accustomed to, or for your husband being taken out?"

She glares at me. "Both. You've no idea who he really was."

I frown. "You think Angelo set up Roberto's death?" I stammer.

She laughs like I'm hard of hearing, "You stupid girl. They'll do anything to have all the power. Angelo wanted Roberto gone, it was no secret. He wormed his way into Mario's heart and shunted me out, forgetting about Roberto in the process."

"All I hear in that sentence is *me*."

"You're forgetting I've been in this family a long time, I know them," she says. "I know how they work, how they operate, how they think. I know things that could bring this family down."

I shake my head. "That's all it's about, isn't it? Blaming Angelo, not for your husband, but for not loving you back, fuck knows you threw yourself at him enough times. You just couldn't take the rejection, could you?"

"Shut your filthy mouth, he did love me!"

"You're delusional. You really are pathetic and weak. You think destroying someone else's life to suit your own needs is quite acceptable, but that makes you a coward and nothing more. Nobody respects that. Nobody will remember you for anything good."

She rights herself and takes a step towards me. "Wanna bet?"

“I will shoot, Allegra, stay right where you are,” I warn. “I’m not in the mood for games.”

“You’ll never do it,” she taunts. “Despite what you did to Angelo, point blank isn’t your style. You seem to lack that killer instinct, not like I do. I have a law degree. I can get out of this, trust me. I can make all of this look exactly how I want it to. In fact, maybe I’ll keep you alive, give you over to the feds.”

I give her a smirk. “You’re truly fucking crazy.”

“Tell me what was it like, knowing what you knew but still pulling him into your bed, powerful, wasn’t it? Don’t tell me you didn’t enjoy knowing something the great Angelo Medici didn’t.”

“I’m not a narcissistic bitch, so I found no joy in my betrayal.” Her eyes narrow even more as I stand my ground. “I’m nothing like you. I actually cared about him.” I know she’s probably going to lunge again, and I might just actually shoot the crazy bitch.

“Did he tell you he loved you when he was fucking you?” she sneers. “Classic Angelo.”

“Oh, he told me a lot of dirty, disgusting things while he devoured my body like it was his personal playground,” I taunt, watching her nostrils flare. “We spent a lot of time in bed. I’m sure you know from personal experience just how insatiable Angelo is. We have, after all, enjoyed the same man.” Since I know Angelo’s her weakness, I’m going to use it.

She watches me like a hawk. “Do you want to know why I picked you?”

I roll my eyes. “If you must get it off your chest, go right ahead.”

“I had access to the Fortress Gallery database, and when I heard about this amazing new employee from Christie’s in New York coming on board, I hatched a plan. As I said, at first it was all about how to get to him, how to pin him down so I

could get him where it hurts. I never actually expected you to be anything more than a plaything.”

“You could have just hired some mug to walk up and shoot him if you truly wanted him dead that much.”

She laughs, shaking her head. “Where the hell would the fun be in that?”

“That’s sick, you know that, truly sick. You have a problem and you need to get help.”

“Oh, Angelo enjoyed the game himself. He knew how to play; he’s a master manipulator. There’s nobody he won’t crush to get what he wants, even you.”

“Sounds familiar.”

“You having a sister was the perfect coercion. I watched, and I saw how close you two were. And in turn, I got close to Dean.”

My eyes go wide. “My ex-husband?”

Her smile turns up at the corners. “I admit, it was scraping the barrel. I can see why you left the guy. What a waste of space.”

“What did you do to him?” I stammer.

She laughs. “What Angelo should have done after that altercation at the gallery. Let’s just say he’s fish food.”

I slap a hand over my mouth. I don’t love Dean anymore, but that doesn’t mean I wanted him dead.

I swallow hard and gather the strength to ask, “Where is Mia?”

I clock the gun. I may not have ever shot one, but I’ve seen enough movies to figure it out.

“I told you before, she’s been sold as a club whore to an Arabian Prince. I got good money for her. Working with the Rombaldi’s has its perks, and it pays for my Chanel. Pity he had to up and die, not that that would stop the smuggling trade. And don’t worry.” She gives me an exaggerated wink.

“The Prince has a penchant for young, pretty girls. He likes to work them extra hard.”

I don't think I've ever hated anyone as much as I do her right at this moment.

“You're going to tell me where she is,” I start, trying not to trip over my words. I need to keep it together for a few more seconds. “Or I'm going to blow your brains out.”

Her eyes lock with mine. I grip the gun harder, and my finger hovers over the trigger. She notices and grins like she has no care in the world, maybe she doesn't care if she dies. Maybe we're at that point.

“Even if I wanted to, which for the record I don't, it's too late. She's already on a ship. What a pity. She was a pretty one, but I can see where she gets that mouth on her.”

I grit my teeth. “You know Enzo traced what we now know is your phone,” I say out of nowhere. “He had a lead on where Mia was. He went to check it out while I packed my things at Angelo's house.”

“That's impossible,” she retorts. “I have firewalls that the best hackers in the world couldn't get through much less Enzo.”

I cock a brow. “Are you forgetting who Angelo Medici is?” I smile. “*He* has the best people. People who can get anything.”

It could be my imagination, but she almost pales a little. She opens her mouth then closes it again.

“Wouldn't you agree?” I prompt.

“What do you mean *who Angelo is*? Maybe you're the one whos delusional since you keep talking like he's still....”

I smile and shrug my shoulders. “Alive?”

“That's not possible, I saw it on the news ...”

“You seem to think a lot of things aren't possible Allegra, but it doesn't make them true. What's more,” I go on, going in

for the kill. “He’ll fit the pieces together, he’s a smart man. Not a man to be crossed, but I’m sure you know that already.”

She glares at me, “What the fuck are you saying you whore!”

I tut at her, “There’s really no need for name calling. You want to know I’ll tell you. We crossed you Allegra, big time. Angelo has been working with me, he knows everything, so does Enzo. I’ve been letting you believe I killed him, but it’s all bullshit, he’s very much alive and well. So you see, you’re not the only one who can play this game.”

She tries to lunge again but I step back and point the gun towards her face.

“Even if this is true, it’s too late for any of you,” she goes on. “Petrov’s involved now.”

I don’t know a lot about the Russians, but I know enough to know the name. “You mean you’re working with them or extorting them as well as us?”

“You catch on quick. Rombaldi, before his untimely death, was recruiting girls to be trafficked to Far East Asia and the Middle East, and he needed someone on the inside, someone who could work both the Italians and the Russians and keep them both in the dark, so with my connections I provided him with another outlet.”

“You rounded up young, innocent women like my sister to be sex slaves?”

“Your sister was an exception. Most of the girls are homeless runaways. Trust me, this was a better life than the one they were living before.”

I stare at her in disgust. “I somehow doubt that.” I want to smack the smirk off her face with the butt of this gun.

“Then I found a mafia princess.”

I frown. “What do you mean?”

“Aleksi Petrov’s beloved niece. He thinks she ran away from school, but I recruited her. You won’t believe what a Russian virgin princess gets on the black market. And, since

Angelo took out Rombaldi, it was easy to make it look like he was the one who was really behind recruiting the girls. Rombaldi was just a pawn in a much bigger game.”

“You’re sick, do you know that?”

She laughs. “None of it matters. I’ve sent photos to Petrov, showing him his niece, beaten, and tied up by the Medici brothers, being held at Rombaldi’s old warehouse. That was the icing on the cake. A turf war will ensue, of course, and the Boston underworld will be in chaos. So, you see, there’s a means to an end in all of this. In the end, I will always win.”

She lunges for me out of nowhere, and I fire the gun. It goes off, but she still comes at me, and I realize I just shot the wall.

“Fuck you!” I scream at her. “You won’t get to hurt anyone else!” I fire the gun again towards her chest, but it draws a blank and nothing happens, I pull the trigger again and again to shoot her, still nothing.

“Looks like you’re all out of luck,” she sneers as she swiftly recovers. She tackles me head-on but at the same time, I manage to push her off and run for the door. I throw the gun at her behind me, hoping to clock her on the head. As I turn to fend her off, I pull dad’s pocket knife out of my back pocket because it’s the only thing I have as a weapon.

I don’t even have time to think, she’s in such a rage to get to me as I approach the stairs, she doesn’t even see it coming. I flick the blade swiftly, and it sinks into her chest like a hot knife through butter. It takes a few moments before the realization dawns on her face.

I look down at the knife sticking out of her as blood appears through her crisp white shirt and she tries to pull the knife out of her chest. I stare at her as she starts to quiver, and then choke.

The enormity hits me, but I can’t honestly say I feel anything.

Instead of backing away, I swallow hard and say, “You see, people get what’s coming to them, Allegra. You won’t ever get

the chance to hurt anyone else ever again, as for Angelo and I, we will have our happily ever after.” I jam the knife in deeper as she gasps and gurgles and cries out. Shock mars her features as she tries to hold onto me.

I’ve never seen a person go sheet white, but it happens in front of my very eyes. I dodge her as I let go and she stumbles forward, narrowly missing me, straight to the stairs where she tumbles down. Her body lands awkwardly at the bottom as I clutch one hand over my mouth and the other on my stomach. *Holy fuck! I think I just killed her...*

I don’t have time to deliberate because I remember Dom is still downstairs somewhere, probably bleeding to death.

Darko knew I went off with Allegra and Dom, *where is he?*

I find my footing and tentatively walk down the stairs, slowly one at a time, toward Allegra’s lifeless body. I step around her and look down as the enormity of what I’ve done hits me. I can’t feel guilty. I won’t let myself. She’s evil.

Yes, I took a life, but she destroyed so many more, and I can’t feel one bit remorseful for that.

She deserved everything she got. And I have the blood on my hands to prove it.

ANGELO

THE FIRST THING I NOTICE WHEN WE PULL UP TO THE FRONT OF Allegra's house is that the gates are wide open and the house is in complete darkness.

The power's been out for a while now due to the storm, but the fact remains that when I called Darko, he said Dom took off before he was able to tail him over to Fortress. And that Allegra was with him.

I've been calling Dom constantly, but his cell goes straight to voicemail. When we drive closer to the house, I see Dom's car parked out front.

"What the fuck?" I say as Marco eyes me. The look says everything.

He opted to come with me after we safely delivered the girls back to Fortress.

I drove us over here because I'm like a cat on hot bricks. I can't sit still, and I know everything about this scenario stinks.

"I've got a bad feeling about this," he mutters, ejecting his seatbelt as we come to a halt. "Just as I have with that crazy girl we left at Fortress."

"We'll deal with her later. Enzo and Fynn will keep her safe and under guard until we get back," I say. "Fuck knows this night is full of surprises."

I didn't want to leave Mia's side, this was supposed to be a happy reunion for Rayne, but now it's turning into a fucking circus. At least Mia's safe until I can take care of business.

I'm out of the car in a heartbeat, meeting Dante, Rocco, and Darko as they pull up in the second car next to me. I follow Rocco's lead and draw my gun.

"What else do we need to know?" Marco barks at Darko.

"I'm not going to insult your intelligence by making excuses," he says. "But Dom said Angelo sent him back instead of Gus. By the time I pulled the car around to follow them to Fortress, they were gone."

It takes all that I have inside of me to not reach over and choke Darko to death for basically losing Rayne. He can say whatever he wants, but it's the truth, and consequences will follow. He let Allegra and Dom get the jump on him and that's unacceptable.

"Let's get one thing straight, that message didn't come from me," I inform Darko. "Right now we need to get inside."

"This is fucked." Dante says. "Either Dom's in on it and he's taken Allegra and Rayne hostage, or they're working together."

"Allegra?" Marco shakes his head. "Are you fucking crazy?"

Marco never wants to believe the evil that can be inside some people, it's one of his downfalls. I wouldn't call him a soft man by any means, but he was always the one growing up who had a soft spot for the underdog. When he loves, he loves hard, and Allegra is family. I know we've had our ups and downs, but could she or Dom really be capable of

A large banging noise rings out from inside the house as we all turn to look in that direction.

"Boss, you stay behind me," Rocco says with a chin lift as he proceeds to the front door.

The fucking thing isn't even locked. I step into the foyer behind him, our guns drawn, looking around the dimly lit room as Rocco points down toward the floor at the entryway of the next room.

It takes me a moment to realize there's someone lying there. "Fuck!" I mutter when I see that it's Dom. I see a figure stooped over him, it takes me a moment to realize someone is giving him CPR.

Carina.

I rush to her. "Rayne!"

"Angelo!" she cries as I drop to the floor, shoving my gun in my holster as I take her in my arms.

"Are you hurt?" I shout, checking her over, cupping her face in my hands as she shakes her head.

"She fucking shot Dom..." It takes her several moments to get that sentence out, and I push her aside and take over. "She...she shot him Angelo!"

"What the hell happened?"

"Jesus Christ," Marco says as he and Darko crouch down next to me.

Marco pushes me out the way and says, "Help your girl." He begins pumping Dom's chest while Darko stares down at his friend and his wound in dismay. He holds his hand over the sodden cloth soaked in his blood.

"Rayne," I say, taking hold of her head in my hands. "Is there anyone else here?"

Rocco and Dante move past me to check the area before she even answers.

She swallows hard then momentarily closes her eyes. "She's by the stairs," she whispers.

"Fuck," Darko mutters, following Rocco and Dante. "What the fuck did this bitch do?"

"She...she...tried to kill me," Rayne splutters. "She's behind all of it."

"We need to call 911," Marco says. "His pulse is weak, and he's lost a lot of blood."

“We need to get Sage over here before she gets to Fortress, the cops will ask too many questions.” Then to Rayne, I say. “Is she alive, *Carina*?”

She shakes her head just as Rocco comes back to stand in front of me and says, “Angelo, you better come see this.”

“Give me a second,” I say, as Rayne’s tear-stained face stares back at me. “Are you all right? Are you hurt?”

She shakes her head. “I’m just shaken up. Dom, is he going to be okay? I tried to stop the bleeding, but he was down for a long time before I got to him...”

“You did good.” I kiss her on the forehead. “You did real good.”

I pull her into a hug as she cries into my shoulder.

“She told Dom that Darko was working against you,” she goes on. “It wasn’t his fault...”

“Don’t worry about that now.” I glance sideways at Marco, who holds his hand over the wound and tells me he’s breathing. I purposely don’t make eye contact with Darko. This is fucked up enough as it is. I turn back to Rayne. “Stay here for a second, I’ll be right back.”

She makes a strangled cry as I pry her arms from me. It has to be done. I have to see Allegra to believe it’s true. I follow Rocco down the hallway, and sure enough, Allegra’s body is sprawled on the floor. There’s a lot of blood and a knife protruding out of her chest.

Jesus. Fucking. Christ.

I run a hand through my hair and bend down. I push back the hair from her face and shake my head. I can’t believe Allegra Medici was behind all of this.

Her beautiful, porcelain skin is paler than pale. Even in death, she’s like the ice queen. Her beauty camouflaged her ugliness. I can’t even bear to look at her, especially like this...

“What do you want me to do with her?” Rocco asks as Dante lingers nearby.

I give him a chin lift. “Sage will come to take care of Dom. She’ll call it in as a suicide. It’ll account for some of the damage control on my being presumed dead. It looks like Allegra Medici will be a stain on this family for some time to come.”

Dante looks stricken. I glance up at him. “Are you okay?”

He nods, but I see the confusion in his eyes. “She was like a sister to us,” he says. “Why would she do this?”

“Revenge,” Rayne says, coming to stand next to me.

“You don’t need to see this,” I tell her.

She shakes her head. “I have to, Angelo, it’s my doing. And she told me why.”

I frown as I cup one side of her face. “What did she say?”

“She blamed you for Roberto’s death, and when you refused her advances, it fueled her rage at being left in the dark. She wanted to be queen. She was involved with Rombaldi and his men, scouting for young girls to sell to him for the black market. She even killed Dean...” Rayne trails off, holding a hand up to her mouth. I pull her to me as she shakes her head. “Let me get this out, Angelo. I have to.”

I nod. “Go ahead.”

“She was obsessed with you, she told me you broke her trust. She kidnapped Mia in order to blackmail me, which we already know, but she also kidnapped another girl.”

“Who?” Marco butts in.

“She said it was Aleksi Petrov’s niece and that she’d sent him photos of her tied up and beaten, courtesy of the Medicis.”

“Fuck,” I say as Marco turns to look at me from across the room. “Are you for real?”

“Who’s Petrov’s niece?” Dante says, looking between myself and Marco.

“*That’s* Katiya Petrov?” Marco spits. “Should’ve known, her reputation is second to none.”

“Holy shit,” Dante says. “This just gets better.”

“She wanted to start a war, and she didn’t care who’s side she was on,” Rayne goes on. “As long as she got richer and had everything she wanted. It didn’t matter about anyone else. She kept saying that you left her behind, that she didn’t get what she was due. I think she actually did love Roberto, as twisted as it sounds, but her need for vengeance and greed just got in the way.”

“The only person Allegra loved was herself,” I concede. “The amount of destruction she’s caused...”

“I need to check the rest of the house,” Rocco goes on. “Santino is on his way with the soldiers. They’ll clean this up before Sage arrives.”

I nod. I know he can’t stand idle, even if for a few minutes.

I didn’t have time to send in the crew, and time was of the essence.

Cold seeps through me as I think about all the times Allegra and I were alone together and she pretended to care about me. Even the last time we fought, I didn’t suspect anything.

I just thought she was drunk and alone, not that she was a killer capable of all of this.

To hear she was involved with Rombaldi and his sex trafficking makes me sick. I just don’t understand what made her turn.

“We need to get back to Fortress,” Marco says as I let go of Rayne for a moment and walk back over to Dom. “Now.”

I crouch down. “He looks in bad fucking shape,” I say.

“Fucker better pull through,” Darko adds. “I got a bone to pick with him about who he thinks he takes orders from.”

“Dom said Angelo sent him a text, which we now know to be false.” Rayne informs us. “None of this was his fault. He thought he was doing the right thing and that Darko had been compromised.”

“She must have had her hacker send it to Dom,” I say as my phone vibrates. It’s Sage, she texts me to say she’s on her way.

“Stay here until Sage and Santino arrive,” I tell Darko and then turn to Rocco. “You too.”

“Boss, you won’t have any protection getting back to Fortress,” Rocco begins to protest.

I left Gus back at Fortress with Enzo, Fynn and Jonas to keep an eye over Ma and Valentina.

“I’ll be fine. I have my brothers.”

He gives me a curt nod which tells me he disagrees but won’t argue.

I hold onto Rayne’s arm and haul her closer to me. “We need to get out of here.”

She nods. I look over my shoulder at the others. “I’ll take Dom’s car. Follow us back. Rocco, make sure none of our prints are found anywhere, including Rayne’s.”

“Got it,” he says.

I feel a tug at my sleeve and look down.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, as I look up into Rayne’s very worried wide eyes.

“The knife,” Rayne whispers, “It was my father’s.” She nods to Allegra’s lifeless form on the ground.

I turn her away while I move to stand over Allegra’s body and pull the blood stained knife out of her chest, wiping it on the part of Allegra’s shirt not already stained with blood. I switch the blade in and slide it into my back pocket to clean up properly later.

Marco and Dante stand and follow me as I take Rayne’s hand and guide us through the door as Darko keeps watch on Dom.

I open the passenger door and secure Rayne in the seat beside me, taking off my jacket to lay it over her. She’s

shaking like a leaf. When I climb in next to her, I take her face in my hands and kiss her gently.

“You scared me, *little fox*.”

She smiles tentatively. “Angelo, this is so fucked up...I killed a woman.”

“It was self-defense. She was going to kill you.”

She shakes her head. “Still, I jammed the knife in her. The sick thing is, for a moment there, I felt absolutely nothing when I did it. Is that terrible?”

I kiss her again. “Absolutely not, not after all she put you through.”

She raises a hand to my cheek and caresses me. “I’m so sorry, Angelo, for all of this.”

“Stop apologizing. None of this is your fault.”

“What do we do now?”

I turn to look out of the windshield. “They clean up, and we go home.”

She nods and then says, “That’s it?”

“All part of damage control. You don’t need to worry about anything.” I pause for a moment, with all the commotion she doesn’t even know yet about Mia “Oh, and I have some good news.”

“Angelo?”

I stare at her, a smile creeping across my face. “We found her, baby.”

Her eyes go wide. “W-what?” she stammers.

“We found Mia. She’s back at Fortress as we speak.”

She’s momentarily stunned as I brush both my thumbs over her cheeks, wiping away her silent tears. “You found Mia?”

I nod. “Yes, and she’s alive and well, Rayne. Do you want to go see your sister?”

She closes her eyes momentarily. When she opens them, she pulls me to her, holding me so tight I'm taken aback. Her chest heaves with sobs and laughter at the same time.

"Yes, Angelo! I want to see her, thank you...thank you so much, you don't know what this means to me...you did it." She covers her face with her hands as the tears freely flow.

"No. *We* did it."

She lifts her head and leans over, crashing her lips into mine, and we kiss deep and passionately. My tongue seeks entry into her mouth as she grasps my shirt in one fist and kisses me with vigor. Even though she's cold and shaking, the fire burns between us.

It's there, it's always fucking been there.

"Fuck," I hiss when we pull apart. I'm hard as a rock.

She climbs over me and into my lap, pushing her whole body into mine. "Angelo, I can't believe you did this. You actually found her!"

I hold her to me, stroking her back as she cries again, her chest heaving.

"I told you I'd do everything in my power, baby, and I wasn't kidding."

"I love you so fucking much," she says, kissing me again, all over my face, my eyes, my nose, my cheeks. I laugh as I buck up into her and she tightens her thighs around my waist.

"Not as much as I love you."

"I want you so bad, I've never stopped wanting you."

"Not here," I say, in between kisses, though I could slide right into her sweet little pussy right this minute. Even if she's dirty, tired, and distressed and I'm covered in Dom's blood; I don't fucking care, and neither does she.

Suddenly, there's a tap at the window. We both look sideways.

Marco stands there and swirls one finger in the air, telling me to hurry it up. He gives an exaggerated eye roll when he

sees Rayne in my lap.

I turn back to her. “Gonna fuck you later, just how you like it, baby, but we gotta go. Your sister’s waiting.”

She pushes back off the seat as I reluctantly let her go.

“I owe you so much,” she says, as I help her climb off my lap and buckle her seatbelt. “So much I can never repay...”

I can’t help but laugh. “And you’ve repaid me tenfold just by being you. I’m so fucking proud of you right now. You fought and defended yourself. I’m sorry that it meant you took a life, but the damage Allegra has done far outweighs what you had to do to stop her.”

She bites her lip. I know this will hit her hard. Killing someone is never easy.

I start the engine and take off down the driveway.

On the way, she tells me about how Allegra orchestrated it all from the beginning and then how she shot Dom in cold blood. I know Darko will be blaming himself. He’s a man of few words, but I know this will haunt him for a long time. As it unfolds further, it seems she even made out to Rayne that I had told her about Mia’s situation, before she switched tact to psycho bitch.

I shake my head in disbelief but encourage her to go on.

“She said she did it all for a game, to have Mia shipped off to be sold as a sex slave. She never intended to give Mia back. All she wanted was revenge. When she knew you were alive, she said killing me would be sweeter than me ever having poisoned you, because you would finally suffer.”

I shake my head. “She’s sick. And it also makes sense to why she’s involved with Rombaldi’s ilk, and it tells me they’re still operating even with Rombaldi gone,” I say. “I never would have suspected Allegra of being caught up in that mess. What does that make me?”

“Human?” Rayne shrugs.

I link our hands and raise her knuckles to my lips and kiss them. “No, *Carina*, it makes me weak. I should have known

this. I should have seen the signs long ago. This is why I need to take a step back from trying to be in ten places at once and let my team do the groundwork so I can keep a level head. The trouble is, I can't help it, it's just how I'm made."

"I always thought you were a workaholic." She smiles and I can't help but smile back. "But maybe it's a good idea to take a beat. Maybe a vacation is in order?"

This is fucked up, no matter which way you look at it.

"I think that's the best fucking thing I've ever heard," I reply, imagining us sunning ourselves on my yacht in the French Riviera. I could take her there when all of this settles down. I'll fucking take her anywhere she wants to go.

"Angelo?" she whispers as I turn onto the darkened, deserted street. "Are we still in danger?"

I turn and give her a look. I don't want to lie to her. Not ever. "This is why we need to talk. The life you'd lead with me..."

"Shhh," she tells me, leaning over to rest her head on my shoulder. "I don't want to talk about that. I love you. It's you, Angelo, it's always been you, and that's all I need to know right now."

I kiss the top of her head. "Should've known you were trouble from the start," I muse. "We did it though. We really fucking did it."

For now, I'll enjoy the few moments of peace with her in this car; I know it won't last long.

I know that we're far from a resolution with our enemies, but at least I have a clearer picture of how everything went down and what I need to do.

I know what comes next, but the question remains; is Rayne strong enough to handle it?

When we pull up to Fortress, Rayne is eager to get inside and reunite with Mia. In fact, she can't get out of the car fast enough.

After this, I'll need to see Mario and tell him about Allegra in person. Then I'll drive the girls to Falmouth. It's best that I lie low until all of this blows over.

I'm at a loss as to why Allegra blamed me. I had nothing to do with Roberto getting killed. The life we lead is fraught with danger. I loved him like he was my own brother. How could she think I'd betray my own family?

The worst part is that she was right under my nose the entire time. The lies, the deceit, and the deception; you'd think I'd be used to it by now, but it never gets easier learning your own family has betrayed you.

Enzo vies for my attention, but I tell him to wait as I lead Rayne up to the guest suite. Nobody ever uses it aside from family or when I need to keep Ma and Valentina under lockdown.

I squeeze Rayne's hand as we stop at the bedroom door. I turn to her.

"Are you nervous?" I ask.

She shakes her head. "I can deal with anything, Angelo. Just to have her back..."

I smile, then lean down and kiss her on the head.

I tap on the door lightly, even though it's ajar. Valentina is sitting in a chair by the window. She leaps up when she sees us and rushes across the room and into my arms.

"Angelo, I'm so happy you're okay," she says, tears in her eyes. She looks up at me affectionately. "I was so worried about you."

"Of course I'm okay. Anyone would think I were dead or something."

She punches me playfully on the arm and gives Rayne a hug too.

And then I see Mia. She's sitting on the bed, her arms wrapped around her knees.

Rayne rushes past Valentina and launches herself at the bed, holding her sister in a tight embrace. Mia sobs as Rayne holds her close, whispering that she's here now and everything's going to be all right.

We need to give them some privacy. I quickly pull Valentina by the elbow and into the hallway.

"How has she been?" I ask quietly.

"I think it's a little early to tell. She hasn't said anything except thank you when I gave her a warm drink and a blanket. She had a shower. She's not in a great way, Angelo," she says. "I think she's still suffering from shock."

"That's very disturbing but not uncommon given the circumstances. Where's Ma?"

"She's in the kitchen making a mound of spaghetti since everyone is here tonight."

"What about the other girl? Has she done much talking?"

"She crashed as soon as she got here. I don't exactly think either of them have slept very well while they were captives."

She trails off when she sees my face.

"We need to have a family meeting when I've debriefed the boys."

"That doesn't sound good," she mutters.

"Comes with the territory, and most of it isn't for your ears."

She rolls her eyes. "I heard Dom got shot. Is he okay?"

"Sage will call when she's got an update, she will come over to assess the girls after that. He's one tough motherfucker, if anyone can pull through, it'll be him."

"Was this something to do with Allegra?" Her dark blue eyes pierce into mine, I know she's no dummy, but I can't talk

about this with her in the hallway without talking to my brothers first.

“Just sit tight and watch the girls, okay? I’ll fill you in soon enough.”

She nods, surprising me by not arguing or fighting me on it. “Okay. I’d better give them some time before going back in.”

I swipe a hand down my face. “Thank you. For being here.”

“I’m happy to help.” She smiles and my lips twitch.

I give her a chin lift and make for the stairs.

I’ve no idea how I’m going to explain this to Mario, but all I can go with is the truth.

Even if I know it’ll probably be the final nail in the coffin.

RAYNE

HOLDING MY SISTER FEELS LIKE NOTHING I COULD EVER PUT into words.

She cries in my arms as she mumbles her way through a string of sobbing that I can't decipher. It doesn't matter. She's back with me now, that's all that matters.

I hold her at arm's length to look at her. Her lovely dark hair is matted and has lost its usual soft sheen.

She's pallid and looks unwell. Red marks run across her face and the circles under her eyes are dark and puffy.

"I've never been so happy to see you," I say as she tucks her hair behind her ears.

"Me either," she whispers.

"Let me look at you. How are you feeling?"

"Better after a shower."

"Mia, I'm so sorry about all of this. I don't even know what to say."

"It's not your fault. I don't want to talk about any of that right now, I just want to be here with you."

I nod, a lump forming in my throat. "I do need to know something, Mia," I start as I interlink our fingers. "Did they touch you in any way..."

She shakes her head. "They pushed and shoved me here and there, yes. But they didn't..." She trails off, her eyes

closing. “She wanted me unmarked. Apparently, you get a lot more money when you’re not beaten.”

I close my eyes and momentarily imagine stabbing Allegra all over again, except this time, I have a smile on my face and no remorse. That fucking psychopath.

“I killed her,” I blurt out.

She looks at me sharply. “Who?”

No more lies. “The woman who set this whole thing up, she tricked me into going with her when Angelo came to find you. Then she shot one of Angelo’s men before chasing me through the house, waving a gun at me.” I don’t even know where to begin in explaining Angelo and this whole mafia business to her, let alone the fact her captor is related to them. I don’t know how much she even knows, if anything, from her psycho captors.

“That must have been terrifying. Are you all right?”

I brush a lock of her hair back as I smile at her. “Compared to you, I’m okay, kid. I’ve been so worried about you, the things she made me do...” I trail off, realizing she doesn’t need to hear this.

“I knew you’d come,” she whispers as our eyes meet again. “I, without a doubt, knew. Each time I struck out and thought it was the end, I just kept thinking about you and how much I wanted to see you again. How I missed my friends, my life, and everything I had to live for. It’s what got me through.”

I know no words can ever take away what she’s been through, but I’m proud of her for staying alive, for having courage.

“You’re so brave,” I tell her. “I know that I’ll never know what it was really like for you, Mia. I can’t possibly imagine how terrifying it was, but I do know that I’m here for you, no matter what.”

She nods, looking down at her hands as she tries to put on a brave face. “I know you are. All the time, I kept praying that mom and dad were watching over me and that they’d

somehow keep me safe.” Her eyes well up with tears as they fall down her face. “It was terrifying, Rayne.”

I squeeze her hands. “Just breathe, Mia. I’m here. You’re not alone anymore, do you hear me?”

“Yes,” she whispers. “I’m a mess, but I can’t tell you how good it feels to be back.”

“Nobody is ever going to hurt you again,” I promise her. “I’ll make sure of it.”

“Who are these people?” Mia whispers after a moment.

“It’s a long story,” I say, trying to shake off the memories of Angelo and everything we went through. “But we can trust Angelo.”

Her eyes narrow. “Is this *the* guy?”

I shrug. “I honestly don’t know what we are, Mia. This whole situation is so fucked up that I’m finding it hard to stay between the blurry lines. Everything’s off-kilter.”

“And this is the guy you were being blackmailed with, right?”

I nod. “Like I said, it’s fucked up.”

“I feel a ‘but’ coming on?”

She knows me too well. “I think we need to work on getting you better before we delve into all of that,” I muse. Typical Mia, always wanting to get to the nitty-gritty as fast as possible.

“I need some normalcy, Rayne. I need to hear something, *anything*, other than waiting for the guards to come down each morning and night.”

I swallow hard. “Trust me, this is about as far away from normal as you could get.”

“Did you fall for him?” she asks, her voice lowering several octaves.

I don’t know where to look. My little sister certainly hasn’t lost her ability to read me like a book.

“It’s not what you think,” I start.

She holds up a hand. “You just don’t want to tell me because you think I won’t approve. But you’re wrong. Surely, there has to be one positive thing coming out of all of this?”

I shrug. “I didn’t mean to fall for him. Trust me, every single day I was going out of my mind trying to find you, and I also had to live this double life where I seduced Angelo Medici, the King of Boston.”

Mia gasps. “Angelo Medici?”

Shit. So she’s heard of him then.

“Mia, did they tell you anything at all about this?”

She shakes her head. “Nobody will tell me anything, even the girl that just left.”

“Valentina,” I say. “Angelo’s sister. She’s a nice girl. Under different circumstances, you’d probably be friends.”

“I’ve got a feeling different circumstances could be the new theme.”

I look at her as she tries to put on a brave face, and I don’t want that. I really don’t.

“Mia, it’s okay if you want to talk to someone...”

“I don’t think the mob allows that,” she muses. “Kinda spells more trouble.”

I hadn’t thought of that.

“I just want you to know there are options, if you want to talk about it.”

She pulls back and curls her knees up to her chin and hugs her legs again. She looks like a frightened child. Not the kid sister I used to know with so much confidence she’d light up the sky. It makes my heart heavy.

“I don’t, at the moment, if that’s okay.”

I nod. “Of course. Can I get you something to eat?”

She nods. “That would be great. I could do with a decent meal instead of slop on a plate.”

She has lost an alarming amount of weight, and that plays heavily on my mind.

“Okay, I’ll go and rustle something up. Do you want to come with me?”

She shakes her head. “I’m okay here for a little bit. I might have a rest while you’re gone.”

I smile as I pull the wool blanket tighter around her. “That sounds like a good idea.”

She settles down, and I reluctantly leave her to go and find some food. As I’ve only ever been in the basement and Angelo’s bedroom at the other end of the house, I don’t know where anything is.

When I step outside, I hear voices and realize very quickly that Enzo and Valentina are having a heated argument just around the corner.

“...and I said it can’t happen again,” Enzo’s saying as my ears prick up. “If Angelo finds out, he’ll fucking skin my balls.”

“He won’t find out, E. And it’s not like we did anything. You got all pissy on me, *remember?* Oh, how I love being reminded of who’s little sister I am,” Valentina fires back.

“It was a whole lot more than *not doing anything*. I had my fucking hands all over you.”

“Your tongue too, E, at least you know what to do with one, unlike most of the other guys...”

“Shut the fuck up about other guys!” he hisses. “I don’t want to fucking hear it. And if I find out anyone has laid so much as a finger on you, I’ll cut out their eyeballs and feed them to the fish.”

“You’re so hot when you’re all possessive.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Really? Kinda sounded like it.”

“I’m supposed to look out for you, not try and get into your pants.”

“But you wanted to E, admit it, you wanted it as much as I did. I bet you can’t stop thinking about me, can you?”

I feel like it’s gone way past the point of eavesdropping, but it would be just a little bit awkward coming around the corner now, so I’m literally trapped.

I hear a commotion then Enzo’s voice drops a couple of octaves. “Don’t fucking test me, Valentina. This has to stop. The taunts. The flirting...”

“You liked the flirting when I had my hand in your pants.”

“Jesus, fuck,” he mutters.

I slap a hand over my mouth.

If I know Angelo, I *know* he won’t be happy about this union. While Enzo is his best friend, Valentina is his little sister, and he’s more like a father figure to her. I know that in his eyes, no man on earth is good enough for her. And getting together with Enzo will be seen as a betrayal. Unless they come clean...which it doesn’t sound like they’re going to.

“I’ve got to get back to Mia,” she whispers. “Come to me tonight, E.”

“You know I can’t...” He sounds pained.

“Yes, you can. If you really want to, you can.”

“You’re killing me, V.”

“Enzo?” Angelo bellows from somewhere down below. “Where the fuck are you?”

“We’ll finish this later,” Enzo growls.

“Yes, we will, in my bedroom!” Valentina whisper-shouts.

I turn toward the door in an attempt to make it look like I’ve just left the guest suite when she rounds the corner.

“Oh!” she says, as we run into one another. “Rayne...”

“I’m just going to get something for Mia to eat,” I say. I try to keep my face as neutral as possible. “Could you show me to the kitchen?”

She nods a little warily. “Sure thing.”

As we silently descend the staircase, she says, “How is Mia?”

I hug myself and rub my arms. “She’s going to need time to heal. I can’t even imagine how she’s feeling right now.”

Valentina gives me a small smile. “All you can do is be there for her. She’s lucky to have you.”

Guilt and pain hit me all at once. “I don’t know about that, but thanks for the vote of confidence.”

“None of this is your fault,” she goes on. “I truly mean that. The life we lead as part of a crime family, it’s never easy, Rayne. But one thing it does make you is resilient.”

“Why do I get the feeling you’re trying to tell me something?”

She turns to me. “My brother’s crazy about you, and I’ve never seen him this happy or caught up on a woman before. I love all my brothers equally, but Angelo is the one who took care of me when we lost Papa. He was the male figure in my life who taught me everything I know. The good, the bad, and the ugly.”

“Well, you turned out okay, so I think he did a pretty good job.”

She smiles as we bypass an empty den area where I once stood in handcuffs, sassing at Marco when he wanted to cut my eyeballs out.

When we get to the kitchen, a petite Italian lady in an apron looks up at us just as she tips a giant spaghetti pan onto a large serving platter.

“Ah, Valentina, finally,” she says, her accent thick as her eyes slide to me.

“Ma, this is Rayne. Rayne, this is my mother.”

“Pleased to meet you,” I say, feeling a little overwhelmed because I was not intending to meet Angelo’s mom like this. I can only imagine what I look like after the night I’ve had.

If she notices the bloody clothes, my disheveled hair, and my wrecked state, she doesn't show it. Nor does she say anything.

"Angelo has told me a lot about you," she says when she returns to her task. "I was wondering when I'd get to meet the woman responsible for capturing my son's heart. And you can call me Maria."

I swallow hard. At least she didn't mention anything about me being the one sent in to kill him. I am not sure what the chances are that his mom doesn't know the real reason I'm here, but I shake off that unwelcome thought.

"Ma, don't embarrass her," Valentina says, giving me an eye roll behind her mom's back. "I don't know if you realize, but it has kinda been a pretty big day for everyone."

"I'm not!" she fires back. "I had to bribe poor Gus to drive over here just so I could feed my own damn family." She leans toward me and waggles a finger in my face. "If you're to stay in this family, Rayne, be warned, you're going to need a punching bag because my children frustrate the hell out of me."

I bite my lip to refrain from laughing and at how she just said hell. Aren't Italians supposed to be religious? She's so small but also fierce. I can see where Angelo gets his strong personality and his principles from.

"I'm sure it can't be easy," I say. "Raising five children..."

She waves a hand at me. "You've no idea. Angelo was the worst of the bunch. The number of times he got into trouble. He's just like his father. Very capable, and smart, but stubborn as a mule."

I can't help but laugh out loud. "I'd say that pretty much sums it up."

I watch as she adds an obscene amount of chili and cheese to the massive plate of food. I have to admit, it smells delicious.

Just as I'm about to ask for a bowl for Mia, Angelo comes into the kitchen. He's not as tense as he was earlier, but I can

still see the strain in his eyes.

“I have to go talk to Mario,” he says. His arms reach around me as he pulls my back to his front, kissing the top of my head. “He needs to know...”

“I need to know,” Valentina butts in. “I know Allegra did something.”

Angelo and their mother both glance at her at the same time, and she zips her mouth.

“You should go to him,” Maria says. “But not until after dinner.”

“I should take some food to Mia if that’s alright,” I say. “She could use a home-cooked meal, it’ll do her good.”

“Listen to her, Angelo. A woman who puts spaghetti before business, is a keeper.”

“Ma!” Angelo scolds, but I feel his chest rumble with a chuckle.

She dishes up a large bowl and places it on a tray. “I take it Mia won’t be joining us?” she cocks a brow.

“She needs to rest,” I say as our eyes meet. “But thank you so much for the food, it smells delicious.”

“Ma loves to cook,” Valentina tells me. “Any excuse to shove carbs down our throats and berate us about our bad choices in life.”

Maria tsks and waves an oven mitt at her. “Valentina, wash your mouth out.”

Angelo places his hand on the small of my back as he leads me out of the kitchen as I carry the tray for Mia.

“You have a really great family, Angelo,” I say, unable to meet his gaze. I miss my parents so much. Not a day goes by when I don’t think about them.

“They have their moments,” he retorts. “And don’t worry about Marco, I know he said and did some things, but he’ll come around...”

We have so much to talk about, but for now, I need to be with my sister. “It’s okay, Angelo. He has every right to how he feels.”

When we get to Mia’s door, he kisses me softly. “I need to go see Mario, I’ll be back in a few hours.”

I nod. “Okay, but please be careful.”

“Let me know how she is.”

He opens the door for me, and when I turn to look back at him before he closes the door, my heart melts with the look in his eyes. I love this man more than life.

He closes the door gently.

Mia is curled up asleep, so I place the tray on the dresser and use the bathroom then decide to take a shower. Not having the guts to look in the mirror first, I strip off and run the hot water until steam is pouring out of the room.

I take my time, washing my hair and the blood from my skin.

Even though the water’s hot, my skin prickles cold when I think about tonight’s events.

The fact I killed Allegra.

I don’t know what Angelo’s family is going to say about that one. Attempting to kill him was bad enough. Now I’ve murdered a family member. I know she deserved all she got after what she did to Mia, Angelo and to me, but it’s not a small thing.

When I’m done, I towel off and throw on a robe.

I curl up on the bed and stroke Mia’s arm. She’s sound asleep.

Her pretty marked skin makes me close my eyes.

I’m grateful for small mercies that they didn’t touch her sexually, but I know that Angelo will want more heads on a platter. Let’s face it, Allegra didn’t do all of this by herself.

She had a team of people helping her, and I know that Angelo isn't the type of man to stop until he finds every last one of them.

I fall asleep holding her. When I wake up, I check my phone and see a text from Angelo.

He came in and saw us sleeping so he left us undisturbed.

I pull my arm out from under Mia's head and tiptoe out of the room and down the hall toward Angelo's suite.

I creep into his bedroom, surprised to see that he isn't awake. No phone or laptop screen like there usually is. I guess today has been an eventful day like nothing before.

I disrobe and climb into his bed.

It's warm, just like him.

"*Carina?*" he whispers, his voice hoarse as I run a hand over his stomach and he turns to me.

"It's me," I say, loving that he sleeps naked.

"I missed you."

I bite my lip. "I missed you too. I fell asleep."

He rubs his face with one hand.

"Get some rest," I go on.

He moves one hand to my face and cups my cheek. "Promise me, *Carina*," he begins.

I frown in question, even though his eyes are closed. "Anything, Angelo."

His eyes pop open, shining blue sapphires that I will be forever lost in.

"Promise me we'll always be like this."

I can't help the smile on my face. "Naked and ready to get nasty?"

His lips twitch. "No. Together. No more lies. No more deception."

"I want that, so very much."

“You should stay away from me,” he says. “You know the life I lead.”

“It’s a little late for that. And I don’t care about any of it. I know what you do. I accept it. You’re a good man, Angelo. That’s why I fell for you, you may not see it, but I see the good in you.”

“Being with me puts you in danger, even more so now.”

“Nothing could be worse than what I’ve just lived through. Nothing. And, I like having you around.” I try to sound playful because the thought of him pushing me away is too unbearable.

“Is that the only reason?” he quips.

I smile as I reach down and feel his hardened cock. “Not the *only* reason.”

He smirks, reaching over to kiss me softly. “Didn’t think so.”

“Are you always this annoying?”

He rolls on top of me as I squeal. He places a hand over my mouth. Everything he does to me ignites the fire. This man is the epitome of sex. And I can’t get enough of him.

“You know what you do to me when you defy me, *little fox*.”

He releases his hand so I can speak. “Maybe I like sassing you for that very reason.”

“You know I am counting the number of spanks your little ass is owed every time you talk back or defy me.”

I grin as he kisses me slowly, not letting me deepen the kiss even when I want more. “I guess I’m going to have to be extra sassy then, to keep you on your toes.”

“I guess you will.”

“I look forward to it.” I reach for him, wrapping my legs around his waist. “In fact, I can’t wait. That’s what you do to me.”

“The pleasure’s all mine,” he says, his lips hovering over mine as our bodies press together. “Now and forever, you’re mine, *Carina*. Don’t ever forget it.”

“Never,” I whisper, our lips meeting again. “I’ll never stop being yours.”

He grins against my mouth. “I’m counting on it.”

EPILOGUE

ANGELO

ONE WEEK LATER

I'M SHOCKED WHEN I SEE MARIO. HE'S TAKEN A TURN FOR the worst and refuses to see anyone, except me. I only saw him a few days ago, yet he seems to have aged overnight.

My heart literally breaks all over again knowing there's nothing I can do for him. I suppose I was hoping for a miracle. We all were. Even though he's been confined to a hospital bed for months, he's still very much the pillar of the Medici family.

When I went the other night to tell him about Allegra, he was resting. I really didn't want to be the bearer of bad news but he has to know the truth. He deserves it.

When I begin to tell him the whole story, he stops me halfway. "That bitch was never quite right in the head," he says. "I put up with her shit for far too long."

I run a hand through my hair as he coughs. I clench my jaw as I try and help him sit up. He's a stubborn old man, it's gotten worse with age, but tonight he lets me prop the pillows up.

"Go into the second drawer down and pass me the bottle. I think I'm gonna need it."

I stare at him, then follow his instructions. Sure enough, there's a bottle of scotch, half of it already gone.

"You sneaky old bastard," I laugh. "Having a regular nightcap when the nurses are tucked away for the evening?"

"Gotta relieve the boredom somehow."

"You could always come home," I suggest. "I could hire a nurse. You'd be comfortable."

"You think I want to die a sad, lonely existence?"

"You wouldn't be lonely. We'd all be there. You'd be home. In your own bed, surrounded by the people who care about you the most."

He snorts. “Sounds pathetic and weak. Did I teach you nothing, Angelo?”

I flick my eyes to his.

It’s crippling seeing the man I respect and look up to so much, a man who was larger than life when he ruled and very much the most feared man in Boston, ending up like this.

I swallow the lump in my throat along with the rip in my heart.

“It’s not pathetic and weak, everybody respects you. They need you now more than ever. You could move in with me. Falmouth is beautiful and quiet, it’s by the ocean.”

“I don’t give a fuck about the ocean.” He takes a long, hard pull as I watch. “You know what I do want from you?”

I give him a chin lift, though I’m afraid to ask. “What’s that?”

“I need you to be the one to do it.”

I frown. “You’re starting to babble. Should I take the bottle away?”

He smirks as I take it from him and take a mouthful.

“You once said long ago that you were my right-hand man, after Roberto passed.”

I swallow down the Scotch in one gulp. “I did say that. And I meant it.”

He holds a hand to my elbow suddenly and grips it hard. “Today is that day.”

“You know I’d do anything for you...but...” *What is he asking me to do?*

“No but’s. You’re the Don now, Angelo, and I’m proud of you. I’ve watched you grow into the kind of man your father would be proud of, too. You’re ready. You’ve never been more ready than right now. You’re already ruling, and what a fine King you’ve made.”

I shake my head. “I fucked up. Allegra. I couldn’t even see her as the enemy. She fucking played me for weeks, months, hell, probably years. What does that make me?”

“This is what it is to be human, Angelo. And you’ll learn from this. Sometimes the devil is in the details, and they hide themselves well, remember that. You can trust your brothers. But the rest, hold them at arm’s length.”

I nod, then say, “There must be another way.”

“There isn’t,” he maintains. “I want to be with Gloria. I want to be with her and Roberto. You must do this for me. It’s settled.”

I hand him back the bottle as I run a hand down my face. I seem to be doing that a lot lately.

He’s right, there is nothing I wouldn’t do for this man, except possibly *that*. I can’t kill Uncle Mario; he means too much to me.

“I...I can’t, Mario.”

He grips me harder. “Did I teach you anything?” he barks. “I need you to show me exactly what I taught you! Only then will I be able to rest. It’s my dying wish. Are you going to deny me my one last request?”

“What am I supposed to do?” I mutter. “Suffocate you with a pillow?”

He chuckles and has a coughing fit again. “That isn’t a half-bad idea.”

“I was joking.” I try not to wince as he tries to recover himself.

“I have morphine, I need you to up the dose.”

“Mario...”

“Don’t *Mario* me,” he says. “I’m tired, Angelo. I want yours to be the last face I see before joining my family.”

I bow my head. “We’re your family too,” I mutter. “Uncle...”

“You’re like a son to me. I couldn’t have wished for more. I know you’ll continue to take the Medici empire where it needs to go. You’ll watch over this city and our family. If anyone can do it, it’s you, Angelo. You’ve already proven you’re more than capable.”

“You know, you’re the only person I actually do like in this godforsaken place.”

He grunts. “Now I know you’re lying.”

We look at each other for a few moments.

I know I have to do it. I can’t deny him.

I have to kill my uncle.

There’s been enough bloodshed tonight, but to deny him this last request would be more disrespectful than if I slapped him.

This is the man to whom I hold everything dear. He’s the one I go to when I need direction, when I need advice. Panic rises in me at the thought of not having him around.

“I’ve done my job if I’ve left you speechless.”

I open my mouth, then close it again. I’ve never cried in front of him, and I never will, but I feel the lump in my throat as I imagine a world without him in it.

I don’t want to fucking do this.

There are no words to soften the blow. But he needs to hear it.

“You’ve been a father to me since Papa,” I begin. “I owe you everything. If this is what you want, I won’t deny you.”

“You owe me nothing. I’m going to die knowing that my legacy lives on. A man can’t want anything better than that. It means my life meant something.”

Our eyes meet again. I take a few deep breaths, knowing this is the end. I nod. His hand slips down to mine and he gives it a hard squeeze.

“I know, son, I know,” he says. “But the best man is left standing after all.”

I crawl into bed at some ungodly time of the morning. I’m thrilled when I see long, golden hair strewn across the pillows. I stand and stare at her for a long moment.

I undress and climb into bed.

I’ve spent the better part of the night drowning my sorrows in the bar downstairs. I know I’ve had too much to drink, but I’d say tonight’s turn of events called for it.

More than anything, I wish I could erase it from my memory forever.

“Angelo?” Rayne whispers as she turns to face me. “Where have you been?”

“With Mario. Go back to sleep.”

Her eyes flutter open, blinking a couple of times, then she reaches a hand to my face. “Angelo? What’s wrong?”

I swallow hard. “Mario’s dead.”

Her eyes go wide. “What?” She sits up but I push her back down.

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

She cups my face and leans up to kiss my face. “You loved him,” she says; it’s not a question.

“Very much so.”

“What will you do now?”

“What I always do, move forward.”

I rub her hip with my thumb as we look at each other. “I’m here for you,” she whispers. “Whenever you need me, I’m here.”

“At one point, not long ago, I thought I would have to give you up,” I say, remembering how I was *supposed* to give her

up. *She's so fucking warm.*

“And now?” she prompts.

“Now I know I could never let you go. I’m a fucking selfish bastard, but I want what I want, and I hope you want it, too.”

“Angelo, you’re the most giving person I’ve ever met. Mia told me how gentle you were with her, how you carried her out of that place and kept her safe. I don’t know if I can ever repay you...”

“That’s just the thing,” I say, my voice low. “You don’t have to repay me for anything. But, how do I know that you aren’t just in the afterglow of having Mia back? Maybe you’re confused?”

She shakes her head, then moves my hand to her heart and holds it over the top, squeezing. “Does this feel like I’m confused?”

“Everyone I love leaves me.”

“That’s not true. You have your brothers, Enzo, Valentina, your mom, and you have me, Angelo. I’m not going anywhere. I promise.”

I didn’t realize this was an issue for me until this very moment. The thought of losing her, *my Carina*, I couldn’t bear the thought, and that’s why I truly am selfish.

“I will never stop protecting you, as long as I live, until my dying day. I want you to know that.”

She smiles softly. “I do know, but there’s been enough death to last a lifetime. I just need to hold you, Angelo. Let me take care of you. It’s my turn now.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever heard such sweeter words. You have the lips of an angel.”

I close my eyes momentarily. I have too much weighing on my mind, so much has happened in the last week that I need to process it all, but I need to take a beat.

I need to take tonight. This moment is not mine, it's ours, and we're going to fucking take it.

If it's the last thing I do, I'm going to lie in her arms and feel the warmth. *Her* warmth.

I need to let her be my Queen, and so I shall.

RAYNE

SIX MONTHS LATER

“Keep your eyes closed, *Carina*, I mean it.”

He blind folded me while we headed downtown, and while my first impressions were some late morning kink in the back of his car, which I’m not at all opposed to, I realized pretty quickly he was serious about surprising me with something.

“You sure I haven’t seen whatever it is you’re trying to show me before?” I tease.

“Keep biting that lip, *Miss Michaelson*, and I’ll show you what this mouth is really made for before we get downtown.”

“Sounds promising,” I muse.

He made love to me in the shower this morning, so I wouldn’t say either of us has been deprived, and we certainly keep it interesting. The man cannot stop kissing me.

After the rescue, things somewhat returned to normal. However, it was slow progress with Mia returning back to an everyday life. We spent our fair share of time out at Falmouth, recuperating in the aftermath and enjoying the quiet. Angelo vacationed for two weeks and came back and forth after that. We’ve barely been apart for a day since.

The retraction surrounding his death was printed shortly after the rescue when it was announced Allegra Medici was, in fact, the one who orchestrated Angelo’s kidnap attempt and then took her own life.

Everything was very much a blur with the events from that night.

One thing I did know was that Angelo would come through. I never had any doubts about his loyalty, not after we got past everything. Keeping me as his prisoner was certainly

never mentioned again, only when we played dirty in the bedroom.

The fact that I killed someone was hard to take for some time, no matter how much she deserved it. The whole ordeal haunted my dreams for months and months afterwards. I would often wake up in heated sweats having nightmares about Mia's captors and everything else that happened in between. None of it has been easy to shake.

I know he sought out revenge against the remaining few in Rombaldi's team of sick, deprived individuals hell-bent on trying to keep his women trafficking ring going, but the Medicis hunted down every last one of them and irradiated the vermin out of Boston and into orbit.

I had very little to do with that, and as the months went on, I learned to ask fewer and fewer questions, it's better like that. Angelo prefers it that way.

Angelo is many things, but not a trafficker of people like Allegra suggested.

Marco stepped up while Angelo spent time with us at Falmouth, and we've mended our bridges. I've become very close to his family, especially Valentina and his Ma.

They saw pretty quickly the connection I have with Angelo, and how happy he is. I know that after losing Lucia and the baby, it took a long time for him to heal and find love again. I respect that.

Dom made a full recovery, though it was touch and go and took months of recuperation. He took a long and much needed vacation before he returned to being Angelo's bodyguard again.

Darko took over temporarily, Angelo allowed it after realizing that Darko wasn't part of Allegra's sick plan. I know the mafia are unforgiving, but I think even Angelo realized there's been more than enough bloodshed for the time being. Allegra had everybody fooled. Being Angelo's bodyguard was punishment enough for the head soldier, according to Angelo's brothers.

Darko wasn't to blame, Allegra was, and she's dead now.

It's taken Mia months to get back to anything resembling normal. She was afraid a lot when she first came back and wouldn't sleep well on her own. She's doing much better now, and we managed to explain her absence to her small circle of friends as a mystery virus. Mia didn't want to go through the ordeal of having to explain what had happened to her. Even she realized that outing the kidnapping saga would only open up a can of worms that didn't need to be opened.

Angelo offered her a counselor with whom she's been working through her issues with. The shrink is a trusted, close family friend, and they have an exclusive signed NDA.

Now that we're both involved with the most prominent crime family in Boston, things have changed.

I went with her to see her friends in New York a while after, but she couldn't settle and moved in with me in my apartment in Boston. She's now working part-time in Angelo's club Bijou as the new marketing coordinator as well as assisting me in the gallery when I need her. It's been slow progress building her confidence back in the world, but she is slowly getting her vigor back.

He's done so much to help Mia get on track, and I'm so thankful for that.

A few months after, I moved into Angelo's townhouse. I've been in his bed every night since.

No one was more pleased than Sophia that Angelo walked back through those doors, and that his suspected 'heart attack' hadn't claimed his life after all.

We try to get out to Falmouth as much as we can, and I've seen Angelo a lot more relaxed when he's out there, it's been an amazing haven for all of us. Somewhere we can all switch off.

I went back to the gallery as an associate after my extended leave with Mia. Claire Holdwright quit the business not long afterwards and Melody stepped into her shoes. To say I had some explaining to do was an understatement, obviously

I had to give her the sugar coated explanation to what was going on after she saw me at the Gala. However, it was no secret, Allegra's betrayal was splashed all over the news.

"Are you going to give me any clues?" I adjust the blindfold a little while he tuts at me.

"I said no peeking!"

"I wasn't, I was adjusting the damned thing."

He leans into me then and pulls me close. "We better save it for later, though. Rest assured, that's all you'll be wearing."

I lick my lips at the thought and squeeze my knees together. "Sounds tempting, but knowing you, you'll use it to tie me to the bedpost."

"Don't fucking tempt me," he says seductively in my ear, tugging on my ear lobe with his teeth.

I give him a playful shove. "Better stop whispering sweet nothings in my ear if you expect me to behave myself."

"I never want you to behave yourself, sweetheart, but we're almost there."

I have no idea what he has in store for me, none whatsoever, but I know he's been plotting something for quite some time. I know somehow this is going to be big. Angelo never does anything half-assed.

The car comes to a slow halt, and he takes me by the hand. I hear the car door open, and he helps me out onto a busy street. I can hear the traffic, so he wasn't kidding about downtown.

"What are you up to?" I whisper, realizing he has no regard for anyone else on the street probably staring at us, wondering why I'm blindfolded in broad daylight.

He never lets go of my hand, "Just wait another few minutes, and you'll find out."

He guides me a few steps across the sidewalk. "Two steps down," he tells me, directing me by the elbow.

I take the steps carefully. I can't help the nervous excitement circulating through me at what we're even doing, he hasn't talked about another apartment or moving or anything like that, so I'm completely mystified.

"Alright, let's stop here." He halts us in our tracks and moves to the front of me, taking me by the shoulders. "You ready, *little fox*?"

I laugh, biting my lip. "Ready as I'll ever be."

He reaches forward to loosen the blindfold. I inhale his scent and it takes me to heaven and back. His masculinity goes straight to my core every damn time. I clutch his waist to steady myself.

"Okay, here we go," he says, pulling it off and telling me to open my eyes as he stands back.

I flick them open and adjust to the light. We're staring at a building; it's newly renovated with huge ornate display windows and paper plastered the whole way across the front.

My eyes shift to him, "What is this, Angelo?"

He grins from ear to ear; I've actually never seen him this excited about anything before. "It's yours, baby girl. I bought it for you."

I immediately laugh and stop short, "What?"

"I bought it so that you can open your own gallery. It's independent from Fortress Galleries. It's entirely up to you if you want to collaborate from time to time."

I stare at him dumbfounded. One thing is for sure, I wasn't anticipating this, not by a long shot.

"My own gallery?"

It's been a dream of mine for so long. What amazes me is how he even knows.

He pulls me into him and kisses the top of my head. "Your own gallery, *Carina*, you do whatever you want; it's yours. You own the building. You're too good to be working for

Fortress Galleries as an associate, and I know it's not your passion."

"Angelo, I don't know what to say." I'm literally speechless.

He jangles the keys from his pocket. "Want to take a look?"

"I'd love to."

It's in the perfect location; right in the hub of the art precinct, with trendy cafes and restaurants nearby.

He pulls me by the hand to the front entrance. It's a beautiful heavysset wooden framed door that has the kind of eclectic gothic feel you would expect to see at Fortress itself, and I know that's where he got the idea from. I love that there's a bit of his taste here as well.

"How the hell did you even get this place?" I wonder as he unlocks the door and tugs me inside.

"You'd be surprised at what I can do, then again, maybe you wouldn't be that surprised."

"Trust me, I'm in shock."

He laughs and ushers me in to look around. It's a vast empty space with white walls and high wooden beams, it's a complete blank canvas and I love it.

"It's yours to do what you want, whatever flooring." He glances down to the concrete we're standing on. "Choose the lighting you want and decor, anything. There's a big office for you upstairs, two other rooms at the back, downstairs storage, parking at the back, and a kitchen and bathroom."

"Angelo, it's amazing." It's also huge. This is going to be one magnificent space to work with. "Thank you so much, baby."

He leans back on the door and smiles as I look around in wonder. "So, it's a good surprise?" he muses.

"Oh, Angelo, it's the best. I don't know what to say."

He chuckles. "I have one more thing..."

I step into him and wrap my arms around him before he can finish. I reach up and kiss him with vigor. He kisses me back and pulls me tight to him as our tongues circle, and I feel the heat rise all the way up to my face.

I pull back after a moment, and he grins looking down. “Careful, you’re getting me excited, and I haven’t shown you the best part yet.”

“There’s more?”

“There’s always more, let me show you.” He pushes off the door and takes my hand, walking the length of the massive space to the back. We go up the stairs and immediately step into a huge office loft space that already has a very large wooden desk sitting in the middle of it with a high-backed chair, which both look suspiciously brand new. It overlooks the main floor with a large tinted window.

As I turn, I notice a giant bouquet of pink roses lying in the middle of the table. I spin around to look at him as his eyes dance with amusement.

“You have been busy setting this whole thing up,” I say in wonder.

He laughs and gives me a nonchalant shrug.

I reach for the flowers and pick them up; there must be at least two dozen. “Angelo, they’re stunning.” I inhale the beautiful, sweet scent and turn around to look at him.

Suddenly, he’s looking at me strangely, in a way he hasn’t looked at me before. I’m a little taken aback because I’ve no idea what he’s going to say.

He swallows hard.

“Angelo? ... What’s wrong?”

He shakes his head and pulls the right leg of his trousers up slightly, dropping down to one knee. I stare down at him like it’s all happening in slow motion.

“Angelo, what are you doing?”

His beautiful blue eyes look up at me as he fishes a small box out of his pocket.

“Angelo” If this is what I think it is ... I’m pretty sure he’s only down on one knee for a specific reason, as my hands fly up to my face.

“Rayne Michaelson, I’ve loved you from the moment I saw you. There’s nothing I won’t do for you. I want to make it official; I want you to be my wife. Will you marry me?”

I gasp, and tears spring to my eyes as he opens the box. There’s a beautiful light green sparkling ring in the box, he’s anything but traditional, and it’s enormous.

“Oh my god, yes!” I shout out between tears of happiness. “Yes, I will marry you, Angelo. It’s so beautiful!” I drop to my knees, placing the flowers down, and wrap my arms around his neck. We embrace and then kiss deep and passionately for a few moments until he pulls back to look at me.

Tears stream down my face, I can’t contain my happiness. I feel like I’m the luckiest girl in the world.

“Let’s get this on you.” He pulls it out of the box and takes my hand, sliding it on my ring finger. “It’s a green diamond, *Carina*, set in white gold. I thought it matched the color of your eyes, it’s very rare. It’s almost as precious as you are.”

“I absolutely love it!” I squeal, holding it out to admire it. I didn’t even know there were green diamonds, it glitters in the light. “I can’t believe it, Angelo, I love you so much.”

“I love you,” he says, pulling me close. “We need to celebrate. There’s champagne chilling in the kitchen downstairs.”

I laugh brushing my tears away, still staring at the ring and wondering what just happened. “I guess you always knew I’d say yes.”

He grins breathing me in and pulls me up to my feet. “I just hoped,” he says, reaching down to kiss me. I pull him close and run my hands around to squeeze his butt. My urgency for him right here and right now overwhelms me.

He reaches up to my breast and gives it a squeeze as our lips lock, and we're lost in that sensual dance again; our tongues colliding, lustful and wanting. He breaks away suddenly to look around. "You want to do it here?" he asks with a chuckle since we both know where it's heading.

"Definitely here. You locked the door, didn't you?"

He kisses my neck, pulling me towards the desk. "I locked it, *my little fox*."

"Wait," I reach down to grab the flowers and place them carefully back on the desk.

"What better way to christen your new office," he says, staring at me in that way that I think will always make my insides melt.

"With my fiancé!" I squeal, flinging my arms around him again.

He reaches down to hitch up my dress and lifts me up so I'm wrapped around him. He turns and sits me on the edge of the desk. I start to unbutton my dress from the front as he watches me, our breathing rapid, and I know I need him to be in me, and fast.

"I like the sounds of that, though *wife* will sound a whole lot better."

"Oh, it will. We're going to be busy," I muse, reaching for his belt buckle, "planning a wedding and all."

"Other things too." He smiles down at me, spreading his legs further and pulls my body flush against him.

"What other things? Do you have any more surprises up your designer sleeves?"

He cocks his head to the side and very deliberately runs his hand down from my neck, skimming my breasts and trailing down to my stomach as he presses his hand there.

"I'm going to put a baby in there soon, mark my words."

I stare up at him, stunned. We have talked about kids recently, and I was very surprised to learn he would still

consider having children. It was a massive confession for him after what he went through so early on in his life, never knowing his unborn son.

“I’d like that. Barefoot and pregnant kind of has a ring to it,” I agree. I’d love nothing more than to carry his baby and make him a father.

He laughs from the heart. “We better buckle up, *Carina*, that’s going to be one hell of a ride.”

I couldn’t agree more. I smile up at him, happier than I think I’ve ever been in my life.

I know we’re going to make it work, no matter what life throws at us.

This is just the beginning. I have the man I love, and he has me, and that’s all that matters.

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Thank you Michelle - the outgoing Bookworm for alpha reading - hugs from across the ocean

Thank you to our ARC readers, we hope you enjoy reading about the Medici crime family – we have more planned for Enzo and the brothers. Stay tuned

As always, to our blogger friends and fellow indie authors out there who support, share, read, blog and send kind messages or comment on a post, thank you so much.

Keep up to date with all of what we're up to by joining our newsletter below.

Stay tuned for book 3, releasing on 1st September, and book 4 releasing on 29th September, both will be an interconnected stand-alone books without cliff-hangers.

Check out our links below to follow us on social media and keep up with our latest book news.

Love from Australia, Mackenzy and Dakotah x

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Mackenzey Fox is an author of contemporary, motorcycle, dark mafia and steamy themed romance novels. When she's not writing she loves vegan cooking, walking her beloved pooch's, reading books and is an expert on online shopping.

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#twinlife

#indieauthors

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<https://mackenzyfox.com>

WANT MORE?

**Blurb for FORTRESS OF THE HEART: BOOK 3
(unedited and subject to change)**

Marco:

She could ruin me.

Every part of her even being here is wrong.

For one; she's the enemy.

The high-profile niece of a man we despise.

The minute she explodes into my life, I know she's trouble.

Beautiful.

Alluring.

Enticing at every turn.

But I can't have her.

If I succumb, I betray my own family.

I lose everything.

Including control of my sanity.

Something Katiya Petrov won't win, is my heart.

It's as good as dead anyway.

Katiya:

He's not supposed to be this way.

He's supposed to be a monster.

Part of the Medici crime family, a man who shows no mercy.

Yet, behind his tough exterior, I see something more.

There's pain behind his eyes.

A storm cloud.

A mask.

I should leave, but I can't go back there.

I won't.

How can it be safer here, with him, on enemy turf?

How can Marco Medici be the one man I hate...

But also, the one man I can't live without.

This book is Book 3 in the Medici Mafia series: Fortress of the Heart, and will be filled with the usual steamy, suspense filled dark mafia drama with plenty of lies, betrayal, shocks and sexy scenes. Buckle up!

Marco and Katiya's story will have a HEA with no cliff-hanger and can be read stand-alone.

Release date: 1 September 2022, order here:

<https://books2read.com/MediciMafia3>