

A DARK MAFIA ROMANCE

BOOK ONE

LOVE ME

always

SAMANTHA JAYNE

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Content Warnings

Please note that there are themes that may be difficult to read. Those themes consist of the following:

Assault, blood, car accident, death, kidnapping/abduction, torture, violence, criminal activities, organised crime, sexually explicit scenes, food (force feeding).



LOVE ME
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Dedication

*To everyone who vowed never to need a prince... only to fall in
love with one in disguise.*



Playlist

Human – Christina Perri

Queen – Loren Gray

Kings & Queens – Ava Max

I Fell in Love with the Devil – Avril Lavigne

Into Your Arms – Witt Lowry feat. Ava Max

100 Ways – Austin Hull

Call Out My Name – The Weeknd

Lights Down Low – Maejor feat. Waka Flocka Flame

Under the Influence – Chris Brown

Middle of the Night – Elley Duhé

The Death of Peace of Mind – Bad Omens

The Truth Untold (English Piano Version) – Emma Heesters

Hunger – Ross Copperman

I Wanna be Your Slave – Måneskin

Can't Help Falling in Love with You – Travis Atreo

I Get to Love You – Ruelle

Met Him Last Night – Demi Lovato feat. Ariana Grande

If You Love Her – Forest Blakk

My Songs Know What You Did in the Dark – Fall Out Boy

Last Call – Jamie Miller

All For You – Dean Lewis

The High – Bryce Savage
Where's My Love – SYML
Follow You – Bring Me The Horizon
Lights Down Low – MAX
From the Ground Up – Travis Atreo

CONTENTS

1. [Anastacia](#)
 2. [Lorenzo](#)
 3. [Anastacia](#)
 4. [Lorenzo](#)
 5. [Anastacia](#)
 6. [Lorenzo](#)
 7. [Anastacia](#)
 8. [Lorenzo](#)
 9. [Anastacia](#)
 10. [Lorenzo](#)
 11. [Anastacia](#)
 12. [Lorenzo](#)
 13. [Anastacia](#)
 14. [Lorenzo](#)
 15. [Anastacia](#)
 16. [Lorenzo](#)
 17. [Anastacia](#)
 18. [Lorenzo](#)
 19. [Anastacia](#)
 20. [Lorenzo](#)
 21. [Anastacia](#)
 22. [Lorenzo](#)
 23. [Anastacia](#)
 24. [Lorenzo](#)
 25. [Anastacia](#)
 26. [Lorenzo](#)
 27. [Anastacia](#)
 28. [Lorenzo](#)
 29. [Anastacia](#)
 30. [Lorenzo](#)
 31. [Anastacia](#)
 32. [Lorenzo](#)
- [Epilogue](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)



CHAPTER ONE

Anastacia

TODAY WAS THE DAY.

A day I'd hoped would never arrive.

Unfortunately, that was not my decision to make.

It was in the hands of my father, and he'd already made it many years ago.

My heart beat as loudly as my feet along the uneven pavement as the rain pelted on my flesh. Running used to be my saviour and escape, but it didn't seem that way today. Today, I was drowning. For the first time in my life, I felt as if I were powerless, as if I had no control, and no matter how much I wanted to grasp it with both hands and never let go, I couldn't.

Growing up, I'd vowed to never fall in love, that I would never give my heart to anybody, whether to someone in the mafia or another. There's nothing wrong with marriage, per se; many mafia families find it a realistic option. I never considered it a possibility when I was younger. That was until I became eighteen. It was a typical birthday, and my parents went all out as they always did, but there was concern and anguish behind their smiles. Miles, my elder brother, had the identical look on his face. A few seconds later, I understood the reason as my entire universe came crashing down around me.

The news from my father slammed into me like a tonne of bricks: I was to be married at twenty-one. I'd been engaged to the heir of the Sicilian Mafia since before I was born.

Lorenzo Ricci.

It was finally time, after three years of keeping my distance, making myself inaccessible and scarce. Tonight, I was supposed to meet my fiancé. He was a man I'd only ever heard of in passing. Men quivered at simply hearing his name—a name that had shook the Mafia world since he was sixteen years old. He was set to become Don once his father stepped down after the wedding, but his father wanted to make sure he had me as his son's wife before allowing Lorenzo to take over.

Our fathers had become allies the day they were born; their fathers were already established allies, so it only seemed logical to continue the Bratva-Sicilian Mafia connection. When the boys were born, the alliance was naturally passed on to them. I often wondered what my role was in all of this. It was what my father wanted for me.

My father was the *Pakhan* of the Bratva.

Hated by many.

Respected by more.

I was his second and final child, and his dream of having a girl had finally come true.

He had groomed and readied Miles to take his position as *Pakhan*. However, despite being my father's son, he still had to earn it, work for it, and earn the same love and respect that my father had earned over the years.

My father had trained me too. He, my grandfather, and my brother took turns whenever they had the opportunity, around about the same time Lorenzo's name became well-known. It didn't concern me that Lorenzo was seven years my senior. It wouldn't change our fathers' plans.

I refused to be a trophy wife, or become submissive. That'd been what he anticipated or perhaps desired, but I wasn't going to give him the joy of adding another notch on his bedpost.

Whether I liked it or not, I was going to marry Lorenzo and bring our families together for the rest of our lives. Our fathers promised that our offspring would strengthen the tie between us all.

Before I had even drawn my first breath, my life was no longer mine; my fate had been determined, and with each passing day, I felt myself sinking... the surface becoming a faraway sliver of light.

I collapsed upon the sodden grass to the right of my route and buried my head back in the soil, oblivious to the fact that my icy-blond hair had become almost dark. For the thirteenth time, my headphones told me that my father was calling me. I could picture him; his deep silver eyes narrowing into slits, and his dark, thick brows furrowing into a snarl as he nearly smashed his phone down onto his desk. But I couldn't bring myself to respond because I knew what awaited me if I picked up his call, his disapproving, dissatisfied tone. The road was deafeningly quiet; not a single car or person had gone by in the last hour, and thankfully, no bodyguard had followed me when I crept out through the rear wall. *Amateurs.*

Our house wasn't straightforward to sneak out of since we had more guards than I could count. They patrolled outside the low walls, around the beautifully kept gardens, the front gates, and even the rooftop. Papa had the rooftop levelled and made accessible so we could have guards keep an eye on things from up there as well.

I couldn't picture standing shoulder-to-shoulder with Lorenzo, hundreds of eyes fixated on us as we recited our vows. I would have had both sets of parents and Miles if it were up to me, which it wasn't. My father had put his foot down once again by inviting all our partners, even the families who had missed out on an alliance because of my hand in marriage. They clearly didn't realise I'd been promised to Lorenzo since birth, so many attempted to persuade my father, and some resorted to even bribery, which almost got them a bullet in the head because my father loathed bribes.



The sun had fallen when I arrived at the rear gate. An enraged guard marched towards me, his face bloody and bruised. He put his hand up to his earpiece, presumably to alert my father I had finally got home.

“Your father is waiting for you in his office, Anastacia.”

“Artem, what happened to your face?” I already knew what must’ve happened.

My father.

“Your father was not pleased with the fact that you managed to slip away this afternoon.” He narrowed his eyes slightly, his frown still intact.

My shoulder collided with his bicep as I pushed past his tall figure. But before I went any farther, I glanced behind me.

“Papa wasn’t playing games, was he?”

“No, he wasn’t.” I felt a stab of remorse twist in my gut when Artem lowered his gaze.

For as long as I could remember, Artem had been one of my father’s main guards. He had been working for my father since he was nineteen years old, and I had just turned five. He had risen through the ranks to become one of my father’s most trusted lieutenants. Today, because of me, he was punished. Because every single one of those guards was under his direction, and if they messed up, so did he.

“Please accept my apologies, Artem. You were harmed as a result of my irresponsibility.”

“Anastacia, I’m sure this was nothing compared to the suffering you’re feeling right now.”

Artem was one of the few people I permitted to address me by my first name.

“How so?” I raised my brow.

“Being forced to marry a man you’ve never met and only ever heard of.” At that moment, he looked sorry for me. He looked at me as if I was fragile.

“Don’t look at me that way, Artem. I don’t have a choice. You know that as well as I do.”

As he was about to respond, my father emerged from the shadows. I could sense he was there long before I heard him.

“My office, Anastacia. Now!”

When I looked away from the guard, I expected to see my father’s huge frame, but he had disappeared.

“You know where I am if you need anything.” I heard Artem’s soft, calming voice behind me. The anger he once felt when he saw me striding through the gardens had vanished, and he was back to being the Artem I grew up alongside.

“Do you hate me?” My voice cracked a little as the tears gathered in my eyes.

“Anastacia, I could never hate you. You are family to me, and I could never hate family.”

I inhaled deeply before making my way to the office.

I’d kicked off my running shoes at the door before ascending the stairs to his office. The halls of our mansion were eerily quiet. I had half expected to bump into my mother or at the very least a guard. But it was just me, my thoughts, and the thumping of my heart.

Although our house was heavily guarded and secured on the outside, the interior was the opposite. It was all about our family; countless photos, including some from before my brother and I were born, decorated the walls. There was one in particular that I adored above all others, my parents on their wedding day. My mother was the picture of beauty, her piercing blue eyes locked on my father, as his silver ones were on her. He had reached up and tucked a stray ash-blonde curl behind her ear, and they appeared to be madly in love. We didn’t see that smile much from him anymore until we went beyond our limits to impress him. It was the final picture in the row before my father’s office.

I knocked on the hefty wooden door and waited for his permission to enter.

“Come in, Anastacia.” His voice sounded low and angry from the other side of the door.

I pushed open the door and stepped inside. He sat at his mahogany desk, his hands clasped in front of him, his fingers intertwined.

Over the years, his office had evolved into a haven for him, a place where he spent many hours after becoming *Pakhan*. There were bulletproof windows from floor to ceiling. After I was born, he relocated his office to this part of the house, and as we grew older, we used to see him standing by those very windows, watching Miles and I play beneath the trees and amongst my mother’s flowers.

He had always been an attractive man and ageing hadn’t changed that in the slightest. His deep brown hair was pulled to the side, which occasionally tumbled down over his brow, his beard was well-maintained, and he never once appeared unkempt. He was dressed in his usual black pants and a white dress shirt with the collar a tad undone. It displayed the top of his tattoo, which covered his upper half. My father had always exuded strength, it emanated from him. To everyone else, he was a well-respected *Pakhan* who had worked hard for his position. But to me, he was a father. A man who had adored me since the day I was born. He was always there for me. My first steps, my first smile, my first ballet recital, and my first target practice along with many other milestones I had reached in life. I stood in front of him, clothed head-to-toe in dirty mud-caked running gear. His eyes were disapproving of my appearance the moment he saw me.

“Anastacia, where have you been?” His voice was tinged with irritation.

“I went for a run.”

“It’s obvious from your appearance.” He leant back in his chair, his lips thinned, and matched the narrowness of his eyes.

“I apologise, I only wanted to clear my head.” That wasn’t a lie, and the tiny softening of my father’s look indicated that he believed me.

“I understand, Anastacia, I truly do.”

“But?”

“Your immature behaviour today cost me two of my best men.”

He got up, pushing his chair back slightly before striding around the desk to face me. His large hands gripped the wood as he perched against the desk.

“Papa, what did you do?” He punished not only Artem but two others as well.

“What I had to do, I don’t pay them to sit around and turn a blind eye to your behaviour.”

“Would it make a difference if I said I didn’t want to marry him?” I knew it wouldn’t, but I just wanted to hear it from him again.

“No, it wouldn’t. You’ve known about this marriage for three years now, and each day the answer has always been the same.” He knocked back the last of the amber liquid from his tumbler before carrying on his lecture.

“Anastacia, you know how important tonight is for both families. I need you to prove to them what an incredible woman you are. Show them what kind of wife you’ll be for their son.” His words might have softened, but he was still as enraged as he had been when I walked in.

“Stop behaving like he’s a rare fucking gift, because he isn’t! Lorenzo Ricci is a well-known assassin, fighter, and, of course, a playboy. Doesn’t that last one just roll off the tongue?”

How could my own flesh and blood behave this way? He couldn’t want me to marry someone like that, could he?

“Be careful of your words, Anastacia. You still live in my house, and as long as you do, you’ll treat me with the same respect as before.” I couldn’t help but roll my eyes at the situation.

“Franco and I had made this arrangement as soon as we found out your mother was expecting a girl, and there’s

nothing I can do to change this now. And even if I could, I wouldn't. You'll be good for one another, you'll see." His friendship, I supposed, was more important than his own daughter.

"I don't need someone to be good for me. I'm pretty damn good on my own. Mark my words, Papa, he'll need me more than I'll ever need him."

"You'll become his princess, Anastacia."

I'd heard enough, I couldn't listen to his bullshit anymore, so I stormed out of his office towards my bedroom.

Fuck being a princess. I'm already a motherfucking queen.



CHAPTER TWO

Loenzo

POWER.

That was how I felt as I took another person's life with a bullet.

There was never a need for me to load my gun with more than one bullet. The reason being, I never missed.

Some would consider me a heartless human being, a cold-blooded killer. Did I give a fuck what people thought about me?

No, I didn't.

I didn't become who I was by bowing down to others; rather, I became who I was as a result of them bowing down to me.

The Sicilian Mafia's future Don.

However, that title came with a hefty price tag. One that had weighed heavily on my mind, shoulders, and body since I was old enough to understand. I'd never understood what was going through my father's mind when he signed my fucking life away.

To a woman who I'd heard could kill a man with her beauty alone.

Anastacia Fedorov.

Apparently, she would be the best thing for me, the perfect person to stand by my side when I became Don. Little did my father know, I didn't require or desire a wife at all, let alone one to accessorise my arm.

I needed someone who could test me, who could give me a run for my money, who loved the chase as well as the thrill. How Anastacia Fedorov could be that woman, I had no idea.

“Clean this shit up, I have somewhere I need to be.” I lit a cigarette as I stood there, watching my men clean up the sorry excuse of a man who lay in front of me.

“That’s right, Boss is about to get a little virgin pussy tonight. Let’s not make him wait longer than he’s already had to,” Red piped up as he hacked off another limb.

“If you don’t want to end up like our friend over there, then I’d suggest you watch your fucking mouth, Red.”

“So, let me get this straight... you’re not planning on tapping that ass tonight?” Red rose from his work, wiping the sweat from his brow, smearing it with blood. It almost matched his cherry-red mane, which was shaved on the side and pulled back into a manbun at the top.

“No, Red. I’m not planning on tapping that ass this evening. Trust me, I have no desire to tap it, either. She’s just a pawn in a fucking arrangement.” I stubbed my cigarette on the floor beside our victim’s body.

“Boss, I apologise if I’m speaking out of turn, but maybe she’ll actually be able to tame you.”

“Listen clearly, Red, because I’m only going to say this once, there is no way Anastacia Fedorov will be good for me. No woman, not even the darling daughter of the *Pakhan*, would ever be able to tame me.” I turned my back on him and the others while rolling my eyes.

I could hear mumbling from behind me, they knew it just as well as I did, I was heartless, and Anastacia wouldn’t be able to change that. Despite how pure her heart was or even how beautiful she was. I would let her stand by my side as my wife, that was it. She would not be my equal nor would she be the love of my life. Behind closed doors, she wouldn’t even be my friend. She’d be nothing more than a doll to me, one that I could dress up and manipulate anyway I want.

My father had told me she had graduated first in her class with honours, that she had been trained to defend herself to some extent, and that she was a carbon copy of her mother. She was a pure beauty, the kind that can melt even the coldest heart.

But not mine.

Mine was never meant to be thawed.

“Where do you want him dumped, boss?” Red called out, jolting me back to the present.

“Wherever the fuck you want, Red. There’s a meat grinder in the back if you fancy a change. I’ve got to head out anyway, so have fun.” I stalked out of the room, only hearing a faint reply from him.

“Always do.” Following his remark, he burst out laughing, and the others followed.



Arriving home, I was greeted by my mother, who wore a tight-lipped smile along with a rather subdued expression. She was dressed head to toe in couture, obviously eager for us to make our way over to the Fedorov mansion.

“Where have you been, Lorenzo?” Her disapproving stare darted to the blood on my knuckles.

“I had some business to attend to. I apologise for my delay.” I shrugged off my jacket, hooking it on the coat hook.

“Really, Lorenzo? You decided to attend to business on tonight of all nights?” Her tone was harsh and forceful, with a hint of coldness hidden behind it.

“Correct me if I’m wrong and I’m pretty sure I’m not, isn’t tonight business as well?” I stood my ground, feeling her eyes on me even more so.

“Lorenzo, please don’t act this way. We only did what we believed was in your best interests.”

“Mama, why are you in my house?” I spoke before thinking, and seeing her expression pained me a little.

“Your father informed you just this morning that we would be travelling together this evening.” She placed her hand gently on my bare forearm.

“You do realise I’m old enough to not require a chaperone, don’t you? Or do you not trust me to make my own way there?” I scoffed a little, knowing full well that neither of them trusted me to travel alone.

“You know that’s not true.” She took my hand in hers.

“Lorenzo! Where the fuck have you been?!” Before I could respond to my mother, my father strode over to where we stood.

“What’s it got to do with you?” I snapped. I’d had enough of him speaking to me like I was still a damn child!

Looking at my father was like looking into a mirror, we were similar in so many ways but also different. The years had been good to him. He had barely aged, and like my mother, still had that young appearance. His jet-black hair was neatly brushed back, his thick, sharp brows sat proudly above his narrowed charcoal eyes. My mother had always been stunning, her kindness shining through everything she did, but her heart was the polar opposite of my father’s. Her rich dark locks were usually pulled precisely into a sleek bun that sat at her hairline; her eyes were almost the same as mine in every part except that hers were full of love and acceptance whilst mine were anything but. They were emotionless like my father’s. That would be the result of killing more people than you can imagine.

With each life that slips away, so do your emotions.

They leave hand-in-hand together.

You become someone you no longer recognise.

You no longer feel anything.

“It has everything to do with your mother and me. This evening, you have the most crucial meeting of your life, one that you can’t afford to miss and one that you can’t fuck up.” His dark brows knitted as he scowled.

“Well, since you put it so nicely, I wasn’t intending on fucking it up. As much as I don’t want to marry what I can only imagine as a stuck-up princess, I would never bring shame or embarrassment to the Ricci name. I would expect my father to know that!” My mother jumped out of her skin as I slammed my heavy palm on the cabinet beside me.

“I’ll have Gino pour you each a drink. Give me thirty minutes, then we can leave.” I nodded towards my parents before parting ways.



I stood with my palms flat on the shower tiles, head bowed, letting the scalding water run over my aching body. I saw the blood-tinged water trickling down the drain as I cast my eyes down. My hands were covered in fresh wounds and ancient scars. My body had suffered a lot of damage over the years, but that was how I came to be the person I was now. I proved to my father no one was more qualified to be a Don than me, not only because I was his son but because I fucking earned it.

If that meant sacrificing a piece of myself and marrying Victor Fedorov’s daughter, then so be it. If she expected this marriage to be pleasant, she’d be highly disappointed.

Perhaps, she hoped for me to treat her like a queen, as our fathers do our mothers. But not me; I wasn’t like them.

Because this king doesn’t need a motherfucking queen.



CHAPTER THREE

Anastacia

AS I HASTILY EXITED MY FATHER'S OFFICE, I STORMED straight towards my mother, and guessing by her current direction, she was heading straight to the place I'd just left. She had a much gentler expression than him, although she looked a little taken aback by my appearance. It was pretty shit compared to hers. She was dressed in a deep silver satin gown that complemented my father's eyes. Her ice blue gaze met mine, and her creamy blonde bob bounced with every stride she took towards me. She was about to open her ruby red lips to speak as our paths crossed, but I never gave her the chance. I continued on my way, not stopping until I got to my bedroom.

It was two levels above my father's office, I preferred it that way, being far enough from everyone meant I was rarely bothered. Heavily guarded but otherwise left alone, which suited me perfectly. I slammed the door behind me as hard as I could, and while the impact rocked the room a little, I knew nobody else would have felt it, let alone heard it.

I tried my best not to let the tears I'd been holding back fall, but for the first time in three years...

I cried.

I sank on to the plush carpet and pulled my knees up to meet my chest. A man like Lorenzo wasn't worth a single one of my tears, never mind the fucking river I was crying. Sometimes I thought my father only wanted a girl to marry off, that's how I felt every single day since turning eighteen. And it was exhausting, I was tired of having to pretend to be the perfect mafia daughter, of making sure my behaviour was

impeccable along with my manners and whatever else my father ordered of me.

Miles always took my side, reasoned with Papa to let me tag along on his missions until I proved I was ready to go it alone. I was sure that once my father saw how independent I was, he would call off this sham of a marriage, but to my surprise, he didn't. My brother tried as hard as I did. Our efforts never succeeded. I could see the pain in my brother's eyes every time he looked at me, every time our father quizzed me on the Ricci family, every time I stood by my father's side when he turned down the many marriage proposals he received.

I didn't hate my father, I loved him, and I knew he reciprocated my feelings. He used to sit me on his knee when I was a girl and tell me that no man would ever love me like he did, that no man would be good enough for his little girl. When all along he looked into my eyes knowing he had promised me to a self-made monster.

"Ana, are you in there?" a soft male voice came from the other side of the door.

"I'm getting ready, Miles." I tried to sound calm, as I didn't want him to know his sister was a crumpled wreck on the floor.

"Papa just wanted me to tell you that the Riccis are on their way. You've got about an hour." I knew he had his palm pressed against the door, I couldn't see him, but I knew him all too well.

"Then Lorenzo Ricci will have to wait until I'm good and ready." I jumped to my feet, pulling off my running gear.

"You know Papa won't appreciate you keeping them waiting."

"Of course, he won't, he won't appreciate anything other than perfection this evening."

"Do you want me to wait with you and walk you down?" His voice was calm, he was and always will be the best thing in my life.

“Don’t worry about me, Miles. I’ll meet you all downstairs with a fucking smile on my face.”

I stood for a moment, waiting for him to leave. It didn’t take long until I heard the heels of his loafers clicking along the marble hallway. No doubt he would be dressed as impeccably as my mother was. I stepped beneath the spray of the shower and let the dried filth wash away. As much as I longed to remain here all evening, lock myself away even, I knew I couldn’t do it for several reasons. Firstly, what was happening this evening was inevitable, and secondly, my father would hammer down the door if I wasn’t ready for when the Riccis arrived.

I no longer recognised the woman who stared back at me in the mirror after spending over an hour making sure I was presentable enough. Despite everything, I wanted to see the pride in my father’s eyes when he’d see me for the first time. I ran my delicate hands down the front of my form-fitting, deep red dress, which cut off mid-thigh, the low back ending in a V just before my ass. It may have exposed a little too much skin, but it was soon covered by my ash-blonde cascading waves. I had placed my nude lipstick on the vanity beside the mirror when there was a tap at the door.

“Anastacia, darling, they’ve just arrived. Please join us downstairs as soon as you’re ready, let’s not keep your fiancé waiting.” My mother spoke softly but firmly through the locked door, then disappeared.

I’d never be ready.

But there was no point in putting it off any longer.

Tonight, I would make my family proud. I’d show the Riccis that I’d grown into an exquisite woman over the years. I’ll be damned if I let Lorenzo Ricci get under my skin tonight, or any other night. I placed my hand shakily on the handle, resting my head on the door before letting out the breath I didn’t realise I’d been holding.

“Anastacia, it’s me. Are you ready?” Papa gently tapped his knuckles against the door, his soft tone bringing me back to reality.

“I’m ready, Papa.” *That was a lie.*

“Would I be able to escort you downstairs?” His voice was barely a whisper.

I opened the mahogany door to find him looking as handsome as ever. He was dressed in a dark blue suit, with a fresh white shirt open at the neck.

“Wow, Ana, you look incredible...” His eyes welled up slightly as he took a deep breath. “Stunning.” He extended his arm, and I took it without hesitation.

“Thank you.” I felt his other hand squeeze mine as it rested tensely on his arm; I wasn’t sure if he sensed my discomfort or simply wanted me to know he was there... but in that moment, I was grateful for him.

The silence was deafening as we walked arm in arm along the winding hallways. My heart was racing beneath my chest, while my expensive heels clicked against the marble.

“Flower, try to relax.” There it was... the one name my father knew could instantly soothe me, a name he called me on many occasions. It all began when he noticed me sleeping beneath my mother’s flowerbed, inhaling the fresh aroma that matched hers.

“That’s easier said than done, isn’t it?”

“Anastacia, it will be easy, being with Lorenzo will be easy, maybe not right away but over time, who knows.” I could tell he was trying, but the truth was I was sick of hearing it.

“No matter how much you, Mama, and his parents want it, I refuse to play happy families with him. There will be nothing except a contract between two individuals who despise one other. Do you understand?” I kept my voice calm and steady, but I was raging on the inside.

“So, no grandchildren then?” There was a hint of a smile on my father’s face as I glanced up.

“You kissed goodbye to the chance of grandchildren the day you signed that deal.” I huffed in annoyance, I never gave

children much thought, especially not with someone like Lorenzo.

“It is your duty to provide Lorenzo with an heir if he desires one. If he wants an entire football team, you’ll make sure you give it to him.” He kept a smile on his face the entire time.

“Whatever.” I scoffed.

I put on my finest smile, just as he did, and we continued our journey in silence.

As we got closer to the stairwell, I could hear my mother and brother’s voices, as well as what I assumed was Franco Ricci’s laughter.

“Papa, I’m not ready. I can’t do this.” I snatched my arm away, before turning my back to my father.

“Anastacia.” I didn’t get far before his hand gently caught my wrist almost immediately, pulling me back towards him. The expression he wore was nothing like I expected it to be, his eyes barely met mine as his large hands clasped my smaller ones.

“Flower, I know you hate this, and sometimes deep down, so do I.”

“Then, why carry on with it? I need a valid answer, one that doesn’t make me think it’s just to get rid of me. Did you do it because you thought I would grow up to be unlovable, that me marrying Lorenzo was a safe bet?” My voice cracked at the end.

“Anastacia, please tell me you don’t think that way.” As he held my hands between his, I realised that my comments had a deeper effect on him than I had expected.

“I don’t know anymore, Papa. I know you only wanted a daughter to fulfil this marriage arrangement. I understand I may have been a thorn in your side, and that I was only there for business.” My voice trembled with each word I spoke.

“Listen to me, you have never been just a business deal to me. I fucking adore you. Apart from your mother, you are the

most lovable woman I've ever known; Lorenzo will be damn lucky to be able to call you his wife. I didn't do it because I thought he would be a safe bet." He took a deep breath. "I did it because I knew there was no one else other than myself that I would trust more to protect you than him. I've seen the ruthless man he's become over the years, and while I used to be concerned, knowing that you'll be secured and protected when I'm no longer here gives me peace of mind."

"But you had no clue who Lorenzo would grow up to be when he was seven." I didn't know what else to say in response to his confession.

"That's completely true; I didn't. But I have trust in his father and his family." When his eyes met mine, I saw a mix of affection, concern, and sorrow in them. "Please, Anastacia, accompany me downstairs. He'll be waiting." He let go of my hands and extended his arm to me once again.

I knew deep down that if I backed out of this evening, if I backed out of this deal, my father's name would be ruined. He had worked too hard for me to ruin his reputation. I'll do this for him and him alone, so he won't become the Bratva leader whose daughter fucked everything up.

"Do you mind if I meet you downstairs? I need a few moments." As though he didn't believe me, he raised his brow. "Papa, I'm not going to disappoint you; I'll be there."

He lowered his arm before pressing a kiss on the tip of my nose.

"I know you will. You're a Fedorov."

"Not for much longer." I sighed.

"No marriage certificate will ever erase the fact that you're a Fedorov to me." He rounded the corner to take the stairs down into the lounge, leaving me alone once again.



CHAPTER FOUR

Lorenzo

THIS WAS FUCKING TEDIOUS; I'D RATHER BE SHOT AT THAN stand here waiting for the Fedorov princess. Her father emerged at the top of the stairs; the power radiating from him. He lived up to the expectations, that was for sure. Even though he acted as if everything was running smoothly, I sensed tension in his posture; something had happened before he joined the five of us.

“Lorenzo, welcome.” Victor swiftly joined us, his wife handing him a drink as soon as he arrived.

“Thank you for having me this evening.” I forced a tight-lipped smile, thinking I'd rather be anywhere but here.

“Anastacia will be joining us soon.” There it was again, that tension.

“Leave her be, Victor. She'll join us when she's ready.” My father raised his brow at his old friend to which Victor replied with a soft nod.

Did the pretty princess have cold feet?

If she couldn't handle it, then why not back out? Why go through with it?

Victor Fedorov... that was why.

I guess she would never want to bring shame to the door of her family. She was a woman who put her family before herself might not be as easy to push around as I'd originally thought. But then again, she hadn't met me yet.

“So, Lorenzo, are you ready for your father to step down?” Victor topped up my glass with what tasted and smelt like his

expensive stash of bourbon.

“I’ve been ready for a while; it’s your daughter I’ve been waiting for.” I raised my glass to meet his, and his expression changed.

I refused to stand here and make him like me. I couldn’t give a flying fuck if Victor hated me after tonight. He’d bound his daughter’s life to mine the day he signed on the dotted line.

“Ah, yes... my daughter is one of the reasons your father is allowing you to take over, isn’t it?” His smirk said a thousand words.

Touché, Victor, touché.

I was about to think up some smart-ass remark when the sound of heels clicking across the marble stopped me just as it did everyone else.

Fuck me.

As I watched this fucking goddess round the bend of the stairs, revealing herself to me, I almost choked on a mouthful of bourbon. She descended to where we were all waiting, holding her head high. She placed her delicate hand on the handrail to her right. As she peered up through the never-ending lashes that surrounded her translucent blue eyes, our gazes locked—if only for a second. There was no way I could deny just how incredibly beautiful she was, I was a man after all, and we all had needs and mine were what she would soon fulfil. Watching her was like watching a movie in slow motion, the room around us seemed to slow down a little with every step she took towards her father who couldn’t hide his smile. The dress she wore was obviously made for her as it molded around her petite frame and clung around her breasts, leaving little to my imagination. She was just as powerful as her father but in a completely different way. Now, I understood why men said she would bring them to their knees with her presence alone.

She neared the final step as she flashed Victor a smile that lit up the fucking room. If she were having cold feet, there was

no way you'd be able to tell. Her poker face could be better than mine.

Oh, shit.

Before she took her father's hand, I vowed to myself that no matter how stunning and well raised Anastacia was, I would never let myself fall in love with her. Maybe I'll allow her to provide me with an heir, because we all need someone that we can pass our inheritance to. My life was too complicated, too busy to have someone like her become a distraction. Looking at her, I could tell we were at different ends of the scale. You could tell her heart was pure, like she could hold the weight of the world on her shoulders and still wear that brilliant smile. As for me, well, I no longer had a heart, and even if I did, it wouldn't be as pure as hers; it wouldn't beat for anyone else other than myself.

I was too lost in my own thoughts to even notice she had come to a standstill in front of me. The subtle but sweet smell of her perfume that brought me back to the present.

"Lorenzo, this is my daughter, Anastacia." Victor placed his hand on the small of her back as she smiled up at me once more; it wasn't as genuine as the one she had given her father just moments ago, but it was a smile, nonetheless. "Anastacia, this is Lorenzo."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Lorenzo." Her voice was almost angelic. Maybe molding her into the wife I want will be easier than I originally thought.

"Likewise, Ana." The scowl on her face appeared almost immediately. Something told me she didn't like outsiders calling her anything other than Anastacia. *Did I care? Of course, I fucking didn't.*

Her once bright eyes had darkened as she narrowed them closer than what her father did moments earlier.

"Anastacia, why don't you show Lorenzo around the garden while we go and check on dinner?" Victor smiled at the pair of us.

“I’d rather not, Papa.” It was then that Victor gave Anastacia the look of all looks. The *you will do as I’ve asked* look.

“Yes, Ana, why don’t you show me around the garden that your mother has told me so much about.” I smirked as she scowled even angrier than before.

“Lorenzo, maybe we should take a look after dinner.” She raised one of her perfect brows.

“Then again, it’s nice to get some fresh air before dinner, wouldn’t you agree, Victor?” I went above her to her father, knowing he would follow.

“Flower, it’s just a walk in the garden. What’s the worst that could happen?” *Oh, Victor, you have no idea.*

“With someone like him, I’m going to say anything could happen.” She turned her back to me. She fucking turned her back to me, is she for real?!

“If you want a tour of the garden, I suggest you get a move on. I don’t have all day, Ricci.”

“Anastacia, that wasn’t very friendly, was it?” Victor glanced at her in the most disapproving way, and she fought the urge to roll her eyes.

“Excuse me, Papa. How rude of me.” She faced me once more, with a sarcastic smile on face. “Lorenzo, please follow me to the garden.” She curtsied, taking the piss once again.

This infuriating woman was about to see the man behind the mask, the side of me she wasn’t expecting, a side she’d fear.

I’ve always thrived off fear, and it would be no different with her.

I watched Anastacia saunter towards the double doors that led to the garden, and my eyes fell directly to her perfectly round ass as she walked away. I might not have wanted to marry her but that didn’t mean I couldn’t look at what was rightfully mine.

“Carmella, let’s go and see how dinner’s getting on. We’re not needed here.” My mother and Florence giggled as they hurried into the kitchen, pulling Miles along with them. *Poor guy.*

“I suggest if you want to keep those eyes securely in your head, you’ll move them away from my daughter’s ass.” Victor snapped; it was hilarious to see it didn’t take much for me to get under his skin.

“Oh, come on, Victor. They’re young. We were like that once, don’t you remember?” My father smirked, which only wound the guy up even more.

“Of course, I remember. That’s why I’m warning your son to keep his eyes and hands to his fucking self.” The steam was coming out of his ears, did that mean I was going to stop? No, of course, not.

“Victor, I hate to break it to you, but she’s been mine theoretically since birth, am I correct?” His expression went from a frown to a sinister look within a split second. “You signed her life away, to me. Am I correct?”

“I’m warning you.” Victor fisted his hands by his side, and my father squeezed his shoulder to calm him down, not that it did much good, he also shot me a ‘stop it right now look’ but I couldn’t, it was too much fun.

“Warn me all you like; but if I want to stare at my fiancée’s ass, then I’ll stare at her fucking ass and there is fuck all you can do about.” I winked as I raised my tumbler before knocking back the rest of bourbon. Then I followed Anastacia, who was already in the garden.

“I’m going to fucking kill him, Franco.” I heard Victor spit through gritted teeth as I closed the door behind me.

I stepped into the cool night air, there was something about being out here that I found soothing, relaxing even. My eyes darted around between the trees in search for *her*. I wasn’t in the mood for a game of hide and seek and I was already losing my patience. I was about to call her name when I saw a flicker of blonde hair from the edge of the garden. The moonlight

shone down on her, illuminating her flawless skin. She had both palms pressed flat against a small stone wall that separated her from her mother's flowers. I know it was wrong to stare, but I didn't see the problem. Even though I didn't want her, it thrilled me to know that no man would ever touch her body. Fucking her would give her hope that I may one day fall in love with her. Even if she begged me to touch her, to fuck her even, I wouldn't because she was just business, and I didn't mix business with pleasure. I never had, and I wouldn't start with her.

"That's quite an attitude you've got, Ana," I hissed, watching her body tense a little. It spurred me on to scare her, to piss her off even more than I already had.

"Only a select few call me Ana. You will never be one of them." She kept her back to me, her voice laced with anger. I didn't need her to turn around to know her face was the exact same as her voice.

I made my way over to her, the wind whipped softly through her hair, filling my nostrils with the smell of her sweet, floral perfume. I caged her against the wall, but she didn't stiffen like I expected her to.

"I don't care much for your sarcastic attitude, Ana." I smirked as I spun her around.

She let out a little gasp, as she tried to disguise it, but the garden was too eerie, too quiet for me not to notice.

"I don't care for you very much in general, but we can't have it all, can we, Lorenzo?" She had fire; I'll give her that.

"Oh, Ana, you obviously haven't heard much about me." Even though she was caged against the wall, I closed the remaining space between us. Her body dangerously close to mine.

"I've heard enough to know you're an absolute fucking asshole." She seethed, using her hip to push my arms away from her.

She was fast; I'd give her that. But I was faster.

I grabbed her dainty wrist in my much larger hand as she tried to storm towards the house. It seemed like it was about to snap beneath my fingers.

“Oh, Anastacia, where do you think you’re going?”

“I’m going back inside; I just want to get this dinner over and done with.” She tried to pull her arm free, but that only caused me to tighten my grip.

“Your words and comments break my heart.” I joked, keeping a straight face.

“Impossible, since you clearly don’t have one!” She seethed, her face radiated with hatred, anger, and annoyance.

“Let me make one thing very, very clear. I will not stand for this attitude, nor will I accept it.” I fisted her hair at the nape of her neck, causing her head to tilt back, her narrow eyes meeting mine.

“Fuck off, Lorenzo.”

“If you were one of my men, I’d—” I started.

“You’d what? Just remember something, Ricci, I’m not one of your men. I won’t bow down to you. I won’t be your loyal fucking servant either. A piece of paper bounding our lives together means nothing to me. You mean nothing to me.”

“You will be mine. Mine to do whatever the fuck I want with. If I want you to bow down to me, you will. If I want you to wait on me hand and foot, you will. If I want to fuck you, I will.” I towered over her petite frame as I pressed her against the wall once again.

“I would rather die a virgin than fuck you.” Her knee swiftly collided with my crotch, causing me to let go of her wrist long enough for her to hurry back towards the house.

That’s what you think, Miss Fedorov.

I’ll fucking break you piece by piece.

You’ll soon realise who you belong to.





CHAPTER FIVE

Anastacia

I TRIED TO CALM THE MURDEROUS LOOK ON MY FACE BEFORE entering the lounge where our parents were residing. The darkness hid me from them as I paused at the double doors. The two families were laughing and joking with one another. My father had his hand on the small of my mother's back. A smile split his lips as he focused on her; a smile only reserved for her. Carmella and Franco had adoration in their eyes; I could tell they also loved one another deeply. My mother told me it was love at first sight with my father. She embraced the world he lived in; she accepted him for who he was. I guess it's true what they say... if you really love someone, you'll accept the good, the bad, and the ugly. My father had many flaws, but that never put my mother off. She worshipped the ground he walked on as he did with her.

Miles directed his gaze to where I was stood, but soon turned away, not noticing my silhouette. He knocked back the last of his drink before pouring another one. He hated this just as much as I did, hated his sister having to marry someone she didn't want to marry. Hated the fact I was marrying someone he grew up alongside. He tried voicing out his concerns, but in vain.

"We'll never have that, you know?" Lorenzo appeared behind me as I continued watching my parents. My father's deep silver eyes were still fixated on my mother.

"I don't want that with you, or with anyone for that matter." I shuddered a little from the chilly evening air.

Lorenzo pressed his body up against mine, leaning down so his lips brushed my ear.

“Am I not good enough for you, princess? You want a knight in shining armour, a prince perhaps?” The warmth of his breath raised goosebumps on my skin, but in a different way to before.

“I’ve never been one to play dress up.” Taking a step forward, I put a little distance between us.

Holding the handle, I chanced a glance over my shoulder. Lorenzo had the cockiest smirk I’d ever seen; he was handsome, I’d give him that. His caramel eyes darkened as they met mine. His jet-black hair was tousled and pushed back in a minimal way, with strands falling onto his forehead. A deep scar ran across his cheekbone completed his rugged look. “You didn’t show me the garden.” He raised his thick, dark brow and laughed a sarcastic laugh.

“I don’t need to show you anything. I just want to get this shit show over with.” I pushed the handle down and strode inside. Five pairs of eyes fell on me.

“That was quick, flower.” My father’s inquisitive gaze settled on me.

“It’s a little too dark for Lorenzo to see anything, so maybe some other time.” I smiled sweetly as my brother’s eyes fell onto my wrist that now had a faint red mark. “If you’ll excuse me, I just need to nip upstairs for a moment.”

“Anastacia, is everything okay?” Miles jumped up from the armchair in the corner, his face full of concern.

“I’m fine.” I smiled, although I was anything but. “I’ll be back shortly; I just feel a little under the weather.” I gripped my wrist tightly between my delicate fingers and turned on my heel.

As I hurried through the dining room, I could feel their questioning stares following me intently. I fought back the tears; I wouldn’t give Lorenzo fucking Ricci the satisfaction. He’d probably get off on it.

“Wait, why don’t I walk you upstairs?” Lorenzo called from behind my father. “Since you’re feeling under the

weather, it would be a good idea to have someone accompany you, to make sure you're okay."

"That's a great idea. Thank you, Lorenzo. Please hurry back. We have plenty to discuss." My father stepped aside as Lorenzo passed him before making his way over to where I waited.

Why did I wait? God only knew.

He placed his large hand on the small of my back as he guided me out of the lounge and up the grand staircase. I couldn't even bring myself to look at his smug, scarred face.

"That was some little show you put on in there," he said through gritted teeth.

"I don't have a clue what you're going on about." I knew I was playing with fire, but did I care? No, I didn't. "I was trying to get away from our families so they wouldn't see the lovely bruise forming on my wrist!" I snapped as I pushed his hand off and stormed up the stairs.

I had only just rounded the top of the stairs to the hallway when Lorenzo caught up with me, his one stride matching my two. I felt as if the breath had been ripped from my lungs as he slammed my body against the wall behind me, the photographs rattled on their fixing as he caged me in. His six-foot-four body easily towered over my much smaller five-foot-five frame. Despite my best efforts, I couldn't manage to free myself from his clutches. A triumphant chuckle escaped from his carved lips.

"I don't like playing games, Anastacia." The way my name spilled from his tongue like acid was enough for me to know I was in trouble. "You seem to enjoy it though." The warmth of his breath brushed my earlobe as he bent his head lower.

"I don't see myself enjoying anything when I'm in your presence." I wasn't going to cower away from him like he wanted.

"I'm sure I'll change your mind when I bury myself balls deep in that soaking wet pussy of yours." He pressed a rough kiss on my neck, sucking slightly. "Or should I say mine, since

when you'll utter the magic words at the wedding, every inch of your body will belong to me." His hand tightened around my wrists he had secured above my head.

"Fuck off." I narrowed my eyes, but of course, he didn't back off.

"Carry on with that attitude and I'll fuck that pretty little mouth of yours until you're begging for me to stop." He ran his tongue across the mark he'd left on my exposed skin.

"I never beg, and trust me, I won't start when it comes to you." I tried to sound convincing, but the way he spoke to me clouded my judgement.

"Oh, you'll beg, Ana. You'll beg me to fuck you, and you'll cry out my name." He released my wrists but never once took a step back from me.

"Ana, are you okay?" A familiar voice came from the end of the corridor.

Both our heads snapped in that direction; I had never been so glad to see my childhood friend as I was in that moment. Chad worked for my family since his teens. His parents passed away, and he was left with nothing and no one. So, my father took him in and trained him to be one of his best.

"Can we help you?" Lorenzo maintained our closeness. I could barely look Chad in the eye, who knew what he must think of me right now, standing here between the arms of my so-called fiancé.

"As a matter of fact, you can." Chad stepped closer to us, revealing his face as the faint corridor lights illuminated his pale complexion. He was dressed head-to-toe in black with his pistol visibly tucked into his waistband. "I think it's better if you let Anastacia head to her room now, don't you, Lorenzo?"

"I think it's better if you mind your own business, don't you, Chad Williams?" A dick measuring contest had started between these two. Chad had never backed down, but this might just be the first time in this life he'd be forced to. "You seem to forget that Anastacia will become my wife in a matter of weeks, so, she no longer needs you to watch her every

move.” Lorenzo now towered over Chad as they stood toe to toe.

“While she’s under this roof, I’ll protect her. We all do, as per her father’s orders.” Chad didn’t cower under Lorenzo’s infuriated gaze, and it only seemed to enrage him further.

“Honestly, Chad, I’m fine.” I was anything but. The thought of being left alone with Lorenzo again caused my heart to pound and not in a pleasurable way.

“You heard her, she’s fine. Now why don’t you fuck off back to where you came from and leave me and my future wife to get acquainted.” My soon-to-be fiancé’s hateful words came out in a low rumble.

“Is that what you want, Ana?” Chad eventually shifted his attention away from Lorenzo and on to me. His hateful gaze had been replaced by one of worry.

“Please just go. I’ll speak with you tomorrow.” He stormed down the stairs and slammed the front door shut.

“I already hate that guy; his eyes have more than just worry for you.” Lorenzo’s eyes were also showing a lot more than he was letting on.

“Don’t be stupid. He’s a friend and one of my father’s best men.” For a split second, Lorenzo let his guard down as I pushed him away and made my way to the corridor towards the staircase that led to my room.

“Are you really going to walk away from me, Anastacia?” My pace increased at his words; I didn’t know why. All I knew was I had to get away from him.

I reached the bottom of the stairwell, then paused for a second and glanced over my shoulder. Surprisingly, he was still rooted to the spot with an intense gaze trained on me.

“I thought you were leaving, or do you want to stay?”

“No, I don’t want to stay, thank you for the offer though.” I refused his offer with a sarcastic smile.

“That’s a shame. I could make it worth your while if you stay.” A low chuckle left his lips as he leant against the wall

beside him.

“Enjoy the meal.” I hurried up the stairs, not once looking behind me.

Without further interruptions, I reached my room and closed the door behind me. I let my head fall back against the solid wooden door. Lorenzo was undoubtedly presenting himself in the best possible light downstairs. I pictured him attempting to convince my parents that he'd be an excellent and loving husband. My mother, who had adored him since he was a child, would undoubtedly love everything he says. My father, on the other hand, could be a little more difficult to persuade... he'd question Lorenzo until he was happy, which I'm certain Lorenzo could handle.

I was content to stay here in the comfort of my own room. I'd done what my father wanted me to do: I met him, I played nice, and now, I was over it... and over seeing him again.





CHAPTER SIX

Lorenzo

ANASTACIA'S HIPS SWAYED SIDE TO SIDE UP THE STAIRS TO THE floor above us. I continued to stand leaning against the wall for a few moments longer until I heard her door close behind her. She wasn't as scared of me as I'd expected her to be; I expected her to cower away from me, but she continued to hold her own. My cock twitched thinking about her submitting to me sooner rather than later.

I turned on my heel and headed downstairs to where our families were still laughing and joking.

"Is she okay, son?" my father asked after taking a sip of his bourbon.

"She's fine. As she mentioned, she's a little under the weather. She wants to lie down for a while." It was so natural for me to lie. Anastacia wasn't sick at all, she was perfect.

My name spilled out of her lips so seductively, even though I knew she didn't mean it that way. The image of her leaning against the wall, caged between my arms, was permanently etched into my mind.

"Lorenzo?" Victor clapped his hand on my shoulder, bringing me back to the present.

"Sorry, forgive me. What were we discussing?" I accepted the tumbler Victor that handed me and knocked it back, which earned me a disapproving look from my father and of course, my soon to be father-in-law.

"We were discussing the marriage arrangement." Victor placed his finger against his chin and watched me intently.

“I thought everything was already agreed. I make an honest woman of your daughter and our alliance remains as it has done for all these years.” I glanced at my father who was actually silent for once. “So, what else could you possibly have to add?”

“Unless you decide to divorce my daughter or commit adultery, the alliance will remain strong for years to come.” I assumed he was joking for a second, but when I switched my gaze between him and my father, I saw they were both deadly serious.

“Would the alliance still remain if it were your daughter who commits adultery?” I was testing Victor’s patience to the limit, and I was loving every fucking second of it. His mouth curved into a sneer as my father placed his hand on Victor’s shoulder.

“I can assure you that Anastacia would never do such a thing since she is fully aware of what is expected of her. I can easily say, without a doubt in my mind, she’ll be a perfect wife.” Victor couldn’t be more offended than he was right now. “Anastacia understands the significance of our alliance and would never jeopardise that.” He had finally realised what type of man he had arranged for his precious daughter to marry, and I could see I was slowly getting to him.

“I can promise you, Victor, Lorenzo will treat your daughter with the utmost respect and will be faithful and devoted to her until the end. Won’t you, son?” My father was attempting to diffuse the situation that was developing in the Fedorov household.

Victor didn’t need to be concerned with what I do with his daughter; I’ll show her as much as she deserves, which at present isn’t very much, given her actions and attitude.

“Indeed, she can expect nothing less than a perfect husband once she becomes my wife.” Nobody said I had to remain faithful from now until the wedding, so the only thing I was lying about was my ability to be the perfect husband.

That would never happen.

Not for her.

Not for anyone.

“Lorenzo, you must remain faithful to my daughter from now on. If I so much as find out you’ve had your dick in another woman, the arrangement is off, and you can consider yourself at war with your most trusted ally. Do I make myself clear?” Victor was infuriated at this point. His brows almost touched in the centre as he furrowed them, his hand tightened around his tumbler, and within seconds, it was nothing but shattered fragments on the marble floor.

“Crystal.” The scarlet red liquid fell from his palm onto the numerous pieces on the floor, yet he seemed unfazed.

“Will Anastacia join us for dinner?” my father asked casually as he wrapped a crisp white napkin around Victor’s hand.

“I didn’t inquire.”

“Why don’t you go check on her and see how she’s feeling?” As my father made a ridiculous suggestion, Victor’s nostrils flared with rage.

“I’ll have Miles check on her; I think Lorenzo should stay here so we can keep an eye on him.” Victor jerked his hand away and tossed the napkin onto the bar without hesitation.

“Victor, how can we expect them to get along if we keep them separated? I trust my son, and besides, he’s only checking up on her.” My father spoke in a much calmer tone.

“Fine, but if I so much as see a hair out of place on her head, I’ll take yours.” I laughed, which enraged him even more.

“I won’t lay a finger on her until the wedding night anyway.” I winked before heading towards the grand staircase.

“I’m serious, boy,” Victor called out from behind me, his tone tinged with rage and irritation.

“As am I.” As always, I made sure I had the final say.

I took two steps at a time and strode along the corridor, which brought me to the same staircase Anastacia had climbed not so long ago. A single door stood at the very end of the corridor, one secluded from the others.

Soothing music came from behind the large dark wooden door. It wasn't the melody I imagined her listening to, not that I had actually imagined it. I rapped my knuckles loudly enough to be heard, but there was no response.

"Anastacia?" Again, after knocking for a second time, there was still no response.

I placed my hand on the cool steel door handle, which was unlocked, surprisingly. Although she had a stranger in her house, she still hadn't felt the need to lock it. I called her name again, and I was not sure if she was ignoring me or if she just couldn't hear me, but it grated on my nerves all the same.

As I opened the door ever so slightly, I saw her. She stood in front of the full-length mirror, moving her never-ending waves over her right shoulder, revealing her sun-kissed bare back. My gaze followed her delicate fingers as she lowered the zip over her ass, revealing the ruby red lace beneath. I couldn't tear my gaze away from her as she slid the barely visible straps down her arms, letting the deep crimson fabric pool at her feet. My cock twitched at the sight of her in only a pair of skyscraper heels and skimpy lingerie.

"I'd appreciate you closing the door. I don't know why you opened it in the first fucking place." Anastacia's eyes met mine in the mirror. Even standing there naked from the waist up, she didn't falter; she showed no signs of weakness. But I was about to change that.

I pushed her door open just enough for me to step in before closing it behind me.

"What? You asked me to shut the door." I smirked as I turned the lock without taking my eyes off her.

"I meant with you on the other side of it." Her voice was laced with sarcasm.

“Unfortunately for you, that doesn’t work for me.”

She didn’t flinch as I stalked over to her as if I were the hunter and she were my prey. I wasted no time in allowing my body to collide with her back. I placed my hand flat against her toned stomach, pulling her even closer as her body burned beneath my touch. I dipped my head slightly as I ran my tongue down her elongated neck, and a small gasp escaped her as I grazed her skin, ensuring she understood who she belonged to. She tilted her head back against my chest as my hand went to her throat.

“I told you I fucking own you, Anastacia,” I whispered against her ear as I tightened my hold on her neck.

“Nobody fucking owns me. The sooner you get that in that thick skull of yours, the better.” She tried to push me off, and although she was strong, I was stronger. “If you don’t remove those vile hands from my body, I’ll scream bloody murder.” She jabbed her boney elbow into my ribs for a second time.

“It’s a shame nobody can hear you up here then, isn’t it?” I growled against her ear as I admired her naked body in the mirror.

“Listen here, you fu—” I spun her round to face me before she had time to finish her sentence, her eyes full of fire and hatred.

“I listen to no one. I never have, and believe me when I say I won’t be listening to anything my wife has to say either.” I ran the pad of my thumb over her plump bottom lip as she seethed with anger.

“Then don’t marry me. I have no desire to become a wife in general, let alone yours!” She swatted my hand away.

“That’s what makes it even better. The fact you don’t want to marry me makes it a whole lot more entertaining.”

“Go fuck yourself!” Anastacia was enraged as she fisted her hands against my chest, shoving me backwards.

“I’d rather you fuck me instead.” A small smirk reached my lips as I wound her up tighter than a rubber band. I dipped

my head, so our lips were brushing, the warmth of her breath mingling with mine as her nipples hardened against my chest.

“I think I’ll pass.” She had a smart mouth for someone so petite. Her tongue darted out and moistened her lips, and it took every ounce of me not to claim her right there.

“Your body tells me otherwise. You want me to fuck you, and I think deep down, you know you’ll love every damn second.” She stepped back as her back collided with the mirror, causing it to rattle slightly. “Looks like you’ve got nowhere left to run.” I smirked as I know this only angers her.

Before I’d had time to register what was happening, I saw the palm of her hand heading full swing for my cheek, which I intercepted by seizing her wrist.

“You son of a bitch.”

“Now that wasn’t very nice, was it?” As she narrowed her eyes at me, I rolled her hardened nipple between my thumb and forefinger. “Don’t worry about coming down for dinner; I’ll cover for you.” I stepped away, and the relief crept across her face.

“Get the hell out.” Her voice was louder than I expected, but despite how much I despised her attitude, I couldn’t help but notice my growing erection. “I’ll see you soon.” I leaned forward once more and roughly kissed her exposed neck harder than I had planned to.

I retreated towards the door, but then paused mid-way.

“You may try and deny it, Anastacia, but you know you fucking enjoyed it. If you didn’t, you would have pushed me away a lot sooner.” With those parting words, I unlocked the door and stepped out into the cool corridor.

“Arsehole!” she muttered behind me.

Fuck...

This woman was going to be trouble.

And for once, this was the kind of trouble I wouldn’t mind welcoming with open arms.

When I entered the dining room, I saw our families' faces fall as they realised Anastacia wasn't with me.

"How's she feeling?" my father asked, nodding towards my empty seat.

"Unfortunately, she's passing on the dinner." I took a seat opposite my mother, who smiled sweetly at me.

"You seem to have misheard me; I'm actually feeling much better." My head snapped towards the doorway behind my mother as that familiar voice sounded.

There she stood, as graceful as ever, without a single hair out of place. I leaned back in my chair and pressed my index finger to my lips. No matter how hard I tried to derail her perfect daughter display, she never once looked at me; the only man she looked at affectionately was her father, who now stood at the foot of the table as she sauntered in. Victor Fedorov may be a heartless bastard, but he cherished his daughter. He wasn't a man who bowed for anyone, but tonight, I witnessed his weakness.

Her.

His pride and joy.



CHAPTER SEVEN

Anastacia

LORENZO WAS ASTONISHED; HE MIGHT HAVE TRIED TO HIDE IT, but it was clear. Did he believe his performance in the bedroom intimidated me in the slightest?

It would take more than his dominance to intimidate a Fedorov.

Especially this one.

I accepted my father's hand and allowed him to pull out my chair, which was unavoidably next to Lorenzo. But, seeing the pride on my father's face, I didn't dare express my disappointment in the seating arrangement.

"It's lovely of you to join us, dear. Are you feeling better?" Franco spoke from the opposite end of the table.

"Much better, thank you so much for your concern." Playing the part was natural for me, and knowing how much it frustrated Lorenzo made every second worthwhile.

"I must say, my son could learn a thing or two from you. Manners, for starters." He had a playful smirk on his lips.

"My manners are just fine." Lorenzo scoffed from beside me.

This was too easy.

"I'd be happy to give him a crash course." Except from the miserable arsehole next to me, the rest of the family joined in on my genuine giggle as I reached for my wine.

As everyone engaged in conversation, a familiar hand rest on my knee, squeezing it firmly.

“Really, a crash course?” He leaned in close enough for his lips to brush against my earlobe.

“From what I’ve seen tonight, you seem as though you need one.” I placed my glass back onto the table as he turned his full attention to me. “Can I help you?” Just because I had his, that didn’t mean he deserved mine.

“I have to say you’ve put on quite a show tonight, playing the perfect daughter, playing hard to get. What was it you said to me in the garden? You’d rather die a virgin than fuck me?” The cockiness oozed from him, and my patience was tested.

“That’s correct, and for the record, you seeing me naked won’t be happening again,” I snapped in a controlled manner so as not to draw any unwanted attention.

“We both know it will happen again, and you’ll enjoy it just as much as I did.” He pulled my earlobe between his teeth, and I pressed my thighs together. “Your body gives you away, Anastacia.”

“Oh, Franco, they look adorable, don’t you agree?” Carmella’s soft voice brought me back to the dining room.

“Give them time, Carmella, but for now, I’m going to propose a toast.” Franco raised his glass with a beaming smile on his face. “To my son and his beautiful bride, may they have a marriage full of love and happiness until death parts them.” Everyone chimed in as they thrust their glasses in the air. Lorenzo however knocked back the remnants of his bourbon.

The rest of the meal went by pleasantly. The laughter around the table wasn’t as infectious as you’d think. Lorenzo either spent his time burning holes into my temple or on his phone. Despite the disapproving looks from his parents, he didn’t care.

“Lorenzo, you’re being rather rude,” his father snapped as he slammed his tumbler onto the table with a bang.

“Shipments don’t run themselves, Pa.” Wow, he couldn’t even look at his father when he spoke to him. It infuriated me as he typed out a long-winded message to someone named Red.

My father shot him a disapproving look before turning his gaze back to me.

“Anastacia, the night is pretty much over. Would you prefer to stay with us for a while or head to bed?” He smiled gently as he rested his hand over mine on the mahogany table.

“I wouldn’t mind going to bed. It’s been a long day.”

“Goodnight, darling.” Carmella warmly smiled as she exchanged giddy looks with my mother.

“I hope to see you all soon. Thank you for coming this evening.” I genuinely meant it. “Lorenzo, it’s been a pleasure.” I forced a fake smile as he looked up in my direction.

I turned on my heel and sauntered out of the dining room. I felt his eyes were on my ass as I rounded the corner, and I finally let out the breath I didn’t know I had been holding. I hurried up the stairs and carried on all the way to my bedroom, closing the door on my feelings and murderous thoughts of Lorenzo Ricci.



The next day was a blur. My mother barely spoke about anything other than the engagement party, closely followed by the wedding. I didn’t need or want a damn engagement party, everyone close enough to us already knew we were set to be married, so, I didn’t see the point in this whole charade.

My father’s chest was puffed with pride as he spotted us.

“Good afternoon, flower.” He beamed as he strode over to where we were sitting at the island. He planted a gentle kiss upon my forehead before he scooped my mother up into his warm embrace.

It dawned on me for the thousandth time that I’d never have that.

“How are the preparations going?” He lifted the tablet my mother had been typing on as he went over the plans, his free hand resting on the small of her back.

“I have to say it’s looking incredible, right down to the final detail.” He ran his fingers through my mother’s hair.

“Did you doubt me?” She raised her brow as a smirk crossed her lips.

“I would never, darling.” His smile matched hers as he grinned from ear to ear. “What are your thoughts, flower?” His gaze landed on me.

“Thoughts on what?”

“The engagement party, what else?” He chuckled as my mother placed an espresso down on the island in front of him.

“Do whatever you want, I don’t really care.” I straightened my back and allowed my eyes to bore into his.

“Ana, darling, this is your night. You can have anything you want, anything that makes you happy.” He sounded so happy, I hated to burst his bubble, but I hated everything about this engagement, wedding, and the devil himself... Lorenzo fucking Ricci.

“I want my life back!” I stood abruptly as my chair scraped across the marble. A mix of anger, hurt, and pure hatred coursed through my veins.

“Anastacia, sit back down!” His voice bellowed across the kitchen as I stood my ground. “Nothing will change, no matter how much you huff, puff, and storm off!”

“I apologise, I shouldn’t have snapped. I just need a moment.” I made my way towards the only place I was bound to feel any comfort right now. A place our father built for us.

The practice room.

I stepped inside the darkened room and flicked on the lights, then wandered over to the wall of weapons. I ran my fingertips across the blades that sat flush on the wall before reaching for my weapon of choice, my trusted go-to. The same

weapon that had taken countless lives in seconds. I didn't need a weapon to inflict pain and torture, but I had to choose one.

I ran the pad of my finger gently down the blade as it drew blood, it should have hurt a little, but I felt nothing. I twirled the leather handle between my fingers, watching as the freshly sharpened blade occasionally caught the light. With a swift push of a button, the training dummy fell before me. Targets were mapped out all over its body, I released the blade as it sliced through the air making the perfect sound just before it tore through the target where the heart would usually be. A sinister smile reached my lips as I reached for another blade, as deadly as the first.

"I wouldn't want to be the one on the end of that blade." Chad stood behind me, the scent of his aftershave filling the space around us.

"There have been many." The second blade hit the target right between the eyes.

"You want to talk about it?" He closed the distance and leant against the wall beside me, crossing his arms.

"What's there to talk about? I'm being married off to a fucking psychopath!" I slammed the third dagger onto the steel table in anger, the clang echoed the room.

"You want to know what I think?"

"Not really, but I'm sure you'll tell me anyway." I returned his smile, and for the first time in days, it was genuine.

"I think you're more than capable of holding your own against Ricci." He reached past me and retrieved the final blade from the table before releasing it. It basically kissed mine in the target's chest.

"Without a doubt..." I took a deep breath before allowing my eyes to meet Chad's.

"But?" Although I tried to hide the *but* at the end of that sentence, nothing got past him.

"It's nothing, let's just leave it now unless you want to swap places with the dummy over there?" I turned my back to

him, hoping more than anything he would just leave me alone.

“Always so feisty.” He chuckled, but thankfully, he retreated towards the door, but as he reached it, he paused, his hand on the handle. “Ana?” His voice was soft and caring.

“Yes, Chad?” My eyes were fixated on the dagger riddled dummy before me.

“You know I’m always here for you.” I knew he was. We always had one another’s backs since school. I had been there through it all, letting him cry on my shoulder many nights as the pain of losing the two people he adored the most weighed heavy on his heart.

“Believe me, I know. Thank you.” He departed, and I was left alone, just the way I liked it, although this time, thoughts of Lorenzo consumed me, the way my body betrayed me as he ran his fingers across my skin, the way his eyes made me want to submit within seconds, something I vowed never to happen, especially not for him.

The vibration of my phone in my back pocket brought me distracted me from my thoughts.

Unknown number...

Good afternoon, Ana.

What the hell?

I quickly typed out a response.

Me: Who is this?

I saw the three little dots automatically flash up on the screen.

Oh, come on, Ana. I think you already know.

Arsehole.

Me: No, sorry. I have a lot of admirers.

I had no admirers, well, none I knew of anyway, but he didn't need to know that.

I have no doubt you do, but from this moment on, consider each and every one of them a dead man. I don't share.

Is he for real?!

I'm not his to share anyway.

Me: I'm not yours to share, dickhead.

Lorenzo had begun a game of cat and mouse, and I intended not to lose.

Such a dirty mouth, I can't wait to see it wrapped around my cock.

Me: Burn in hell.

Oh, darling, I'm already there, I'm waiting for you to join me.

Me: You'll be waiting a very long time.

I don't need to wait much longer; the wedding is around the corner, but I guarantee you'll be begging to be made mine before that.

Me: Don't hold your breath...

Me: Actually, on second thoughts, perhaps you should.

Play all you want, but I felt your tight little body wither beneath my touch last night, and I promise it will do again. Mark my words.

Me: Goodbye, Lorenzo.



I showered and changed into a pair of ripped jeans, a plain white tee, and my battered Converse. I pulled my hair into a messy bun and kept my makeup to a minimum, only dabbing a little lip balm across my plump lips. As I hurried out of my room, I saw Chad leaning against the wall of the corridor wearing his usual attire and a soft smile. His dirty blond hair fell over his eyes as he still wore it in the same overgrown style that he had for the past however many years.

“Where might you be off to?” He pushed off the wall with his foot, stopping me in my tracks.

“I’m off to meet Robin and Tay. Why do you need to know?” I frowned, already knowing the answer.

“No reason.” Liar.

“Are you sure you’re not on babysitting duty?” I raised my brow as his smile soon vanished.

“Your father asked me, I’m sorry.” He shoved his hands in his pockets as he matched my stride down the corridor.

“You don’t need to apologise, I get it.” I let out a sigh, one deeper than I thought. “He’s your boss. What he says, goes.” I hurried down the staircase with Chad hot on my heels.

“But you’re my friend, and you have been for as long as I can remember.” There was an emotion in his voice, one I couldn’t decipher.

“Flower, where are you two off to?” my father called from his office at the end of the corridor.

I told Chad to wait for me downstairs as I entered my father’s safe haven. I closed the door behind me as he curtly nodded his head towards the chair opposite him.

“I’m not staying, I’m on my way out to meet Robin and Tay.” I stood rooted to the spot, hoping he wouldn’t turn whatever this is into a full-on conversation.

“Ah, say hello to the girls for me!” He treated the girls like family since they were almost here all the time. “What are you three planning on doing?”

“You mean what are us three and Chad doing?” I crossed my arms and pursed my lips.

“Don’t be like that. You won’t even notice he’s there.” He ran his slender fingers through his hair in irritation. “Anastacia, it’s for your safety. You have a tendency to do things you aren’t supposed to.” That might be so, but he didn’t always need to assign me a chaperone.

“We are going to buy our dresses for the engagement party you insist on throwing. I don’t think much will happen at a dress store, do you?” I let out an exasperated sigh.

“You never know. There are enemies everywhere, maybe even more so now that you are engaged to Lorenzo.”

“Brilliant. An even larger target has been slapped on my back, thanks to that dick.” I turned on my heel and headed for the door.

“Anastacia, please stop with the language. It won’t change anything.” He stood and rounded the desk.

“Well, if it doesn’t change anything, then it doesn’t matter what language I use or what I call him, does it?” With a slam, I shut the door and walked towards the garage, Chad following me.

“So, you really think he’s a dick?” Chad laughs as he turned on the engine.

“Isn’t it obvious? You saw how he acted last night. What is there to like about the guy?” I placed my feet on the dashboard.

“Can you get your feet down please; it makes me uneasy thinking of what would happen to you if we ever crashed.” He removed my feet as I slowly placed them in the footwell.

“Thank you. Now, dress shopping?”

“You don’t have to look so pleased with yourself.” I giggled.

“Considering you rarely listen, I’ll take small victories where I can.” He kept his eyes firmly on the road as we weaved through traffic towards the dress store. “So, explain to me why you need a new dress if you despise the man?”

“Do you really think my mother would allow anything less?” I scoffed, and Chad chuckled, knowing what I meant.

We arrived at the dress store, where Robin and Tay were already waiting outside for me. I glanced over at Chad, and I already knew what the answer to my question would be.

“Is there any way you can wait in the car?” I turned to face him as the leather of the chair crunched beneath me.

“Ana, you know I cannot do that. Your father’s orders.” He paused for a brief second. “You know what he will do to me. I could end up like Artem or worse. I’m sorry, but I can’t let you go alone.” He turned off the engine and stepped out of the car.

He was right; it wasn’t worth thinking about what my father could and would do to him if he didn’t do as he was instructed to. Even though he saw Chad as another son, he wouldn’t think twice of harming him. I jumped out of the heavily armoured Range Rover and caught up with Chad.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have asked you to do that.” I smiled as I touched his arm to slow him down. As if I had burned him, his eyes darted to where I had touched.

“It’s fine, forget about it now. I’ll stay out of sight, but I’ll be watching just in case, and I’ll be there if you need me.” His face remained impassive as I ran off to meet the girls.

Robin squealed excitedly as I approached. They looked incredible as they always did. Tay wore her strawberry blonde hair in waves as it cascaded around her porcelain shoulders and down her bare back; her lips were painted a deep cherry red, and her eyes were winged with a dark liner. Robin never wore much makeup; she didn’t need it; her olive skin was flawless. Her hair was braided into two neat braids that

stopped at her waist, one of her signature styles. I was a lucky woman to call these two not only my best friends but my sisters.

“There she is! Our little bride-to-be.” Robin clapped her hands gleefully even though she knew this marriage was the last thing I wanted.

“Please don’t. Last night was awful.” I rubbed my temple as her smile faded.

“What? Why?!” Tay asked with a confused expression.

“He was arrogant, rude, and a complete asshole.” I huffed as I pushed open the doors of the store.

The girls were hot on my heels as Tay protested. “Come on, he couldn’t have been that bad.” Chad scoffed from behind her.

“I thought my father said it would be as if you weren’t even here?” I narrowed my eyes, knowing his opinion already.

“My apologies. I’ll be in the waiting area.” He smiled sarcastically at me and left us.

“So, was he really that bad?” Robin quizzed.

“There are no words to describe that man. For starters, his mouth is crude and fowl, and secondly, he needs to learn to keep his hands to himself before he loses them.”

“Well, what he doesn’t know is that he has met his match in you.” Tay winked, and I laughed, softening the tension. “Now, let’s knock him dead with your dress choice.” Her mouth curved up into a wicked smile, and I knew that look all too well.

We scanned the racks and tried on countless number of dresses for the rest of the afternoon until we found the perfect one. I had to admit it was beautiful, and I looked beautiful. The deep red satin caressed my skin as the jewels sparkled beneath the light.

“I think your husband-to-be would appreciate this dress, since it has pretty easy access.” Robin winked as she directed

her hand that cradled a glass of champagne at the high slit that stopped at the top of my thigh.

“He won’t be gaining access to anything.” I winked at her as my eyes briefly met Chad’s in the mirror, eyes that burned with anger.

“Excuse me, I’ll be outside.” He stood from the chair, almost knocking it to the ground before he strode out the store.

“What’s eating him?” Tay eyed him as he stormed off.

“I don’t know. Since he and Lorenzo had a run-in last night, he’s been a little off.” I shrugged my shoulders, unable to say much else.

Tay appeared behind me and wrapped her arms around my waist while she rested her chin on my bare shoulder.

“You know what you need, don’t you?” She whispered quiet enough for no one to hear. “A night out, let your hair down, knock back some shots and just have a fucking good time!” Her devilish eyes met mine in the mirror, and I knew she was right.

“I’ll have to sneak out.” The nerves kicked in already. I knew my father had doubled up on security at the house for that very reason, especially after I managed it so easily yesterday.

“You’ve done it before, you can easily do it again,” Tay said as Robin joined the pair of us.

“Now buy this smoking hot dress so we can get out of here. We’ve got plans.” Robin downed the rest of her champagne and got everything packed up.

Once all the dresses were bagged up and ready to go, I put them in the backseat of the car before joining Chad in the front.

“Did you get what you wanted?” He never took his eyes off the road, not even once.

“Yeah, it will do.” I knotted my fingers in my lap and kept my gaze on the disappearing buildings of the city.

“You didn’t like it?” Chad sounded confused and a little surprised.

“I did; I just didn’t really need a new dress to wear once and then forever live in the closet,” I muttered as I sank into the warmth of the leather.

“Ana, regardless of if you wear a new dress or one you’ve worn a thousand times, you’ll always be beautiful.” He smiled, still keeping his eyes on the road ahead. His words made my stomach flutter and not in a pleasant way.



Later that evening, once my parents and brother were sleeping soundly, I snuck out of my room with my heels in my hand. I rounded the corner as I saw two men playing cards, sipping on what seemed to be their fifth bottle of beer if I counted right. I snuck past them with ease, and they didn’t bat an eyelid as I darted towards the side door, one I knew wasn’t heavily guarded since my father was sure I didn’t know about it.

As I made it to the back wall undetected, there was a rustle within the bushes on the opposite side of the garden. A familiar voice startled me, causing my heels to clatter onto the concrete.

“Ana, where do you think you’re going?” It was the soft voice of my brother, and even though he knew I was sneaking out, there was little to no annoyance in his voice.

“I couldn’t sleep. I thought a walk around the garden would help.” I lied, and I knew he could tell; I was sure it was written all over my face.

“Dressed like that?” He stepped closer.

“Miles, I—” He cut me off.

“Go.” He cut me off. His one-word reply had me gobsmacked.

“What?” That was all I could get out.

“Ana, listen, we all deserve a little fun. Go and have a good time and stay out of trouble.” His smile was as clear as day now as he stood before me.

“What about Papa?” I glanced towards my parents’ bedroom window that was in complete and utter darkness.

“Don’t worry about him. He’s out for the count.” Miles handed me my heels and hurried me out the gate, locking it behind me as though nobody had ever left.

“Thank you. I promise to stay out of trouble, don’t worry.” I winked and turned my back to walk away when his voice stopped me.

“I’ll always worry about you. You’re my baby sister.” He let out a sigh before he continued. “Be back before the sun comes up at least. I don’t think I’ll be able to cover for you after that. You know, he’s an early riser.” He walked back towards the house without saying another word, without even looking back. I smiled as I ran barefoot down the path to the waiting car Tay had arranged, never once looking back towards the house even though something niggling in the pit of my stomach told me I should have.



CHAPTER EIGHT

Loenzo

MY FISTS COLLIDED WITH THE HEAVY LEATHER PUNCH BAG once again. The pain radiating through my hands wasn't enough for me to stop. I had been at this for hours and the bruises forming on my knuckles proved it. Sweat trickled down my brow as my hair flopped down over my sweaty forehead. Anastacia's toned, naked body was now burnt into my fucking retinas. I'd never encountered somebody as infuriating as her, someone whose attitude caused my blood to boil and turn me on at the same time.

"Boss, Franco has arrived." I turned to see Red leaning against the doorframe, already dressed in black from head to toe for tonight's meeting. "You've been in here a while. Everything all right?" he questioned, genuinely concerned.

"Everything is fine; I was just releasing some pent-up frustration." I hissed as my fist struck the bag again. Only this time, I split it open along with my knuckles. The blood trickled down my hand before it decorated the floor.

"Let me guess... Ana—"

"Don't even think about finishing that fucking sentence!" I snapped as he stared at me with wide eyes and an open mouth.

"I take it last night wasn't successful, then?" Red quizzed, pressing his index finger to his chin.

"I don't want to fucking talk about it! I'd rather be sentenced to life in prison than marry her!" I was seething at her flawless act last night, which painted me as the villain in every way imaginable.

“Okay, consider it blacklisted.” As I finally stepped away from the bag, he nodded his head at me.

“Good! Tell my father I’ll be upstairs shortly.” I wiped the sweat from my chiselled torso as Red left me alone.

I needed to calm down and get that fucking woman out of my head before this evening. I couldn’t afford to blow this business deal. We needed this supplier, and I intended to make sure we get it.

Tonight, no tainted thoughts would flood my mind.

Especially not of her.



After a quick shower, I went downstairs to meet my father. He sat behind my steel desk, his right ankle resting on his left thigh.

“There’s my boy!” He beamed as he relaxed back in my chair.

“To what do I owe the pleasure, Pa?” My father had a habit of showing up unexpectedly, and as he often reminded me, he could check in whenever he wanted since he’s technically still the Don until I get married.

“Does there have to be a reason I come and see my only son?” He clapped his hands together, his smile never fading.

“Of course not, but you know I have a meeting with a new arms supplier in a few of hours, so I’m guessing you wanted to make sure everything goes smoothly?” I arched my brow, awaiting his response.

“That couldn’t be further from the truth; I completely trust you with this transaction.” He stroked his stubble with his thumb and index finger.

“Then what can I do for you?”

“I was wondering how you were feeling after last night?” That question earned him an eye roll.

To be honest, I wasn't sure what I felt. When she walked into the room, it was as if someone slammed a sledgehammer into my chest, something I hadn't expected. There was no denying how beautiful she was; some would even say she was a knockout, an angel to have on your arm. Despite that, she was about to be on the arm of a man who didn't even want her. I might despise the thought of marrying her, but that didn't mean I couldn't admire her beauty, right?

“Son?” *Shit.*

“Last night was interesting to say the least.” He sighed as I poured a bourbon from the liquor cabinet. “Want one?” I tipped my tumbler towards him before downing the amber liquid.

“No, thank you. And you should keep a level head for this evening.” He rose from my chair and rounded the desk.

“My head's always level.” I lit a cigarette and took my rightful place behind the desk.

Another eye roll, but this time, it came from him.

“Was it when you met Anastacia? Because from where I was standing, you appeared to be extremely uninterested.” He flattened his large palms against the cool steel in front of me.

“I don't want to speak about last night anymore. To me, she's just as much of a business deal as tonight is.” I leaned back in the chair as if I hadn't just insulted the darling Anastacia Fedorov.

“Lorenzo, Victor is trusting you with his daughter. I'm not sure whether you noticed last night because your head was somewhere other than where it should have been, but she means the fucking world to him!” He slammed his palms as hard as he could against the desk, attempting to make me give a shit.

“Listen, if she meant that much to him, perhaps he shouldn't have signed her life away. That woman no longer belongs to that family. She belongs to me and me only.”

“You will treat her with the utmost respect, do you understand me?!” He threw my tumbler against the wall.

“I’ll treat her the way I want to treat her. She will be my wife, a wife that obeys her husband.” I winked, and I knew at that moment I had crossed that invisible line.

“I am begging you, Lorenzo. Anastacia is a remarkable young woman. Someone who will be an incredible wife, who if respected and loved will remain by your side no matter what.” He sighed deeply, hoping that I’d eventually give in. But he should have known by now that I wasn’t the type to do that. I never had been.

“I’ll let you know how the deal goes this evening. As always, expect positive news.” I strode out the office door, leaving him alone.

Who was he to tell me how I should treat my future wife?



Sitting back against the plush velvet booth, I gazed down on the club I owned, which was packed with the usual crowd of groups, couples, and individuals looking for a good time.

“Boss, Rox has arrived,” Finn called from the door.

I stood to greet who would hopefully be our new arms supplier, if everything went as planned this evening.

“It’s a pleasure to finally meet you, Mr Ricci.” Rox swanned into the VIP lounge, a smile on his middle-aged face and his greying hair neatly slicked back. His silver chest hair crept out from under the collar of his open shirt, which he wore with slim-fitting black pants.

“The pleasure is all mine.” I firmly shook his waiting hand as he withered slightly beneath my grip.

“As you know, I’m a very busy man, and I had to pull quite a few strings to be here this evening, so I hope you’ll make it worthwhile for me.” He flashed a smile that even a snake would envy.

“I appreciate it. I assure you it will be worth your while and more.” I gestured for him to take a seat beside me.

“That’s music to my ears.” He clapped his palms together as he lowered himself into the booth beside me.

We spent the next hour going through every last detail of our partnership, including his cut and ours. When he learnt how much money he’d make from each transaction, his eyes lit up like a fucking Christmas tree.

“So, I take it we’ve got ourselves a deal?” I crossed my ankle over my thigh, awaiting his response.

“Indeed, we do, Mr Ricci.” He smacked his hand against the marble table before downing his shot of premium tequila.

“You’ll deal with Red regarding the contract.” I gave Red a quick nod as he set the contract down in front of Rox along with a pen.

“Contract?!” He could barely disguise his astonishment in his voice.

“Unfortunately, many people cannot be trusted with cuts and such.” He raised an eyebrow, as if to question me. “I’m sure you understand, don’t you?” I narrowed my eyes as he nodded. “Red, could you please get things sorted?”

“Of course, Boss.” He went over the contract with Rox, who instantly had his pen at the ready.

Once all the t’s were crossed and i’s were dotted, we sat back and enjoyed a drink with one another.

Red immediately caught the attention of a violet-haired girl practically wearing next to nothing; he wriggled his brows at me as a chuckle left my lips before I nodded, giving him the go ahead.

“Your men have exquisite taste,” Rox chimed in as he ordered another scotch on the rocks.

“That’s questionable at times.” I rolled my eyes as I checked my phone.

“I’ll tell you what isn’t questionable,” Rox responded, his focus elsewhere.

“And what might that be?” I still didn’t give him the attention he craved as I finished drafting a message to my father, informing him that the deal had been completed.

“That fucking blonde over there, the one with the gorgeous legs. Now, I wouldn’t mind wrapping those around my head while my hands explored that tight body of hers.” His tongue darted out and licked his bottom lip.

The woman he was salivating over was none other than...

My fucking woman.

Rox continued to make his interest known in Anastacia as she swayed her petite hips to the rhythm of the music. She might have played the perfect daughter last night, as if butter wouldn’t melt, but tonight she was a fucking siren. I drank in every inch of her, including the space between her stiletto heels and the hem of her black, figure-hugging dress that sat just beneath her ass. Her ash blonde hair was slicked back into a tight low ponytail which only highlighted her flawless features. Her lips were a deep cherry red, making my cock twitch. She dismissed any man who approached her, obviously too busy dancing with her two female friends.

Good girl.

Rox stood, no doubt trying to make his way to where my fiancée was.

“I suggest you sit down and keep those filthy hands to yourself if you want to keep them,” I snapped.

His face fell instantly as he settled back down opposite me.

“I-I’m sorry. I shouldn’t be trying to score when I’m here on business.” He leant back against the seat as he smoothed his sweaty palms over his slacks.

“I don’t give a shit if you want to score, get lucky, fuck, whatever you want to call it, but you stay away from that

woman. Do you understand me?!” He continued side-eyeing her even during my speech.

“I said, *do you fucking understand me?!*” I slammed my palms on the table as it rattled beneath me. My men stepped forwards, but I shook my head and they returned to their positions.

“I don’t see a ring on her finger, so she’s fair game.” He winked as he pressed his finger against his non-existent lips.

I didn’t know what came over me, I forcefully threw the table across the darkened room and had my hand wrapped around Rox’s neck in seconds, his eyes bulging as I tightened my hold.

“That woman is not and never will be fair fucking game. She belongs to me; she is set to become my wife. So let me ask you for the final time, *do you fucking understand me?!*” I snarled as I squeezed a little tighter.

“I... I understand,” he choked out, his hand clawing at my wrist. I released him gently, my eyes never leaving his beady ones. “Please accept my apologies, Lorenzo. I had no idea.” He rubbed his neck, the bruise already beginning to form.

“Well, now you do.” I smoothed down my dishevelled shirt. “Make it known to everyone that Anastacia Fedorov belongs to me and she’s off limits.” I knocked back the bourbon Gino handed to me. “Let it be known that I am an extremely patient man, but next time, I will not be as lenient as I was this evening.”

“There won’t be a next time.” His nerves were shattered.

“Damn right there won’t be.” I patted my hand against his cheek.

“I apologise again. I hope this doesn’t affect our working relationship.”

“Our working relationship will be fine as long as you keep your eyes and hands off what’s mine. Now if you’ll excuse me, I need to pay my fiancée a little visit. Gino will see you out.” I didn’t wait for him to respond, I strode out of the VIP

room, down the spiral staircase, and onto the crowded dance floor.

I spotted her immediately, her ponytail swishing down her back as she moved to the music. The thought of wrapping it around my fist while slamming into her tight pussy taunted me as my cock strained against the constraints of my jeans. I was mesmerised by her for a moment, at the way she moved in sync with every beat of the DJ's mix, the way her hands glided seductively all over her body, and how the dim lights illuminated her skin. I snapped out of whatever trance she had me in and remembered she was nothing more than a business arrangement to me.

I strode over to her, my steps doubling in size as I did. Once I was close enough, her intoxicating scent, that sweet yet delicate perfume, filled my senses. I invaded her personal space as I gripped her waist. She froze for a second before spinning on her heel to give me a mouthful. Her eyes spoke volumes; it was clear she wasn't expecting it to be me standing behind her.

"Before you open that pretty little mouth of yours, remember who you're speaking to." I smirked as my fingers accidentally brushed over her exposed skin.

"I know who I'm talking to, a grade A asshole." She spat as she tried to turn back to face her friends, but of course I wouldn't allow her to. "Get your fucking hands off of me!" Oh, she was livid, and I thrived off of it. Knowing I could easily rile her up made my night.

"My hands will remain exactly where they are. Come with me." She had no choice.

"I'm going nowhere with you." Her piercing blue eyes narrowed as she clenched her fists.

"It's cute that you think you have a choice." I immediately removed my hands off her and flung her over my shoulder in one swift movement.

I didn't hesitate as her friends shouted her name over the music; instead, I tightly held her legs against my chest, her

fists hammering into my back. I'd be lying if I said it didn't hurt a little. We made it through the sea of people, who were too preoccupied to care what I was doing. I raced up the staircase towards the VIP room.

"Listen here, you big brute! Put me down or I'll—" Since she was still upside down, her voice was strained.

"You'll what? Call Daddy Dearest and tattle on me?" I cut her off with a chuckle before setting her down, and for some inexplicable reason, I steadied her, so she didn't break her neck in those damn heels. "What are you doing here, Anastacia?" I dipped my head just enough for the warmth of her cranberry, vodka-infused breath to brush against my lips.

"How is that any of your business?" She never backed down; she had an answer for everything.

"I'm guessing your dear papa isn't aware you're here, is he?" Maybe one taste of her would remind me I didn't need her.

"Wow, well done, you." She giggled.

"Are you drunk?" I rubbed my temples as she giggled again, stirring something deep down inside of me. Something unknown, something I'd prefer to keep hidden.

"I might be, but what's it to you, Ricci?" She rolled her eyes and swayed slightly to the music.

"It has everything to do with me considering without you being alive and well, I cannot take over as Don. So, for the next few months, I would prefer you to stay out of trouble." I could tell she was barely paying attention; she was probably planning her next pain-in-the-ass remark.

"I think I'll pass on that request, because that's what it is, a request from an uptight asshole."

"Right, that's it. I'm taking you home." I took her hand in mine and led her towards the door.

"I don't want to go anywhere with you! Why can't you leave me the fuck alone?!" She snatched her hand away which infuriated me.

“Anastacia, I’m not playing games! It will be a hell of a lot easier if you comply and stop digging your damn heels in!” But she didn’t. She carried on stalking back towards the booth where Rox and I had sat earlier.

“Fuck’s sake!” I caught up to her in two strides and flung her over my shoulder once again as if she were a rag doll.

“If you don’t put me down, Lorenzo, I promise I’ll slit your throat in your sleep once we’re married.” She almost screamed as her head dangled down my back.

“I look forward to the challenge, darling.” I laughed as I met Gino waiting with the car.

“Lorenzo?” He raised his brow, as a questionable look appeared Gino’s face. He had been one of my best friends since I could remember. We were similar but also very different.

“Meet my fiancée who’s slightly intoxicated and very fucking irritating.” I rolled my eyes as Gino let out a throaty laugh. Anastacia continued to pound my back, and for someone so dainty, she could pack a punch. “I need to get her home and question her father as to why she’s able to sneak out at all hours.” I carefully placed her in the backseat, even though I could have simply thrown her inside, but I wasn’t as heartless as I thought.

“Front or back?” Gino asked.

“I’d better watch her in the back. I can’t have her puking all over my brand-new interior.” I slid in the back beside her.

“Put your belt on,” I ordered as I clicked mine into its holder.

There was no movement. I’ve only met this woman twice and already she insisted on making my life hell.

“Anastacia, I said put your fucking—”

“I heard you! Stop cursing at me! I’m not a child!” She reached over and clicked her belt into place before turning around to face me. “Thanks for pissing all over my night,” she snapped, her gaze locked on me.

“You’re welcome. I’ve had one of my men tell the girls you were with me, so they won’t worry.” I turned my face to the window as Gino started the engine.

Nobody spoke for a while. Gino played jazz music quietly through the sound system. Suddenly, I felt something on my shoulder, and I turned to see Anastacia had fallen asleep and unintentionally rested her head on me. I studied her for a moment, her face serene, as if she didn’t have a care in the world. Her lips curled upwards into a gentle smile, and it made me wonder what she was dreaming about. I know it couldn’t have been me, otherwise she wouldn’t be smiling.

“You’re not feeling something, are you?” Gino piped up from the driver’s seat.

“Do you know me at all?” I whispered.

“Of course, I do. It was just the way you were looking at her. It’s all right to feel something, you know? Especially for the woman you’ll soon call your wife. I saw how you reacted with Rox, it was a side I rarely see.” He glanced in the rear-view mirror waiting for my reaction, but I wasn’t going to give him one.

“Let’s just get her home.” I narrowed my eyes at him, and he dropped the subject.

We drove the rest of the way in complete silence as we soon pulled up to the Fedorov mansion. Anastacia didn’t even stir as the car came to a gentle stop.

“You going to wake her up?” Gino spoke as he shut off the engine.

“I don’t think there’s any chance of waking her up right now, she’s out for the count.” I exited the car and hurried around to her side. I removed her belt and scooped her up into my arms as she lay her head against my chest, I felt her warmth beneath the fabric of my shirt. Her never-ending lashes fanned over her cheek as the scent of her hair fucked with my senses.

“Gino, go and knock the door. I think Victor should see first-hand just how easy it is for his pride and joy to sneak

out.” I should have taken Ana back to mine, covered for her in a way but I had a better idea, and it involved me bringing her home.

He hammered on the door hard enough to make sure whoever was sleeping soundly inside would soon be woken up as I waited with Anastacia in my arms beside the car. Sure enough, within seconds, from each room a flash illuminated, and it was as if we were watching a game of dominos until the final light jumped to life in the lobby of her home. The door swung open to reveal a confused Victor. There were minimal words exchanged between the pair as Victor kept his eyes fixed on his daughter sleeping soundly in my arms.

“He isn’t happy.” Gino had a look of worry marring his face, but his professionalism never faltered.

“That’s what I was counting on.” I let out a sigh as I made my way towards her father.

“Lorenzo, what the fuck is going on?! Would you care to explain to me why my clearly intoxicated daughter is with you?!” Victor was furious, and rightly so, but it wasn’t my fault she was in this state.

“I will explain everything once I’ve put her to bed. I’d rather not talk about her evening’s antics while she’s sleeping in my arms.” I pushed past him and ignored everything he said after that.

Making my way to her room, I kicked my booted toe against the door as it swung open, revealing her darkened room and her unmistakable scent filling the air. The same scent that filled my nostrils whenever her head moved slightly. Before I could lay her down gently, I removed my hand from beneath her and pulled back the sheets, then untied those dangerous heels.

I pulled the blankets up around her barely covered body as I removed her ponytail from the hair tie, allowing her hair to decorate the pillow. I brushed a stray hair away from her angelic face. A face I vowed never to fall in love with because falling in love with someone like her would be a sign of weakness, something I cannot afford to have. It was easier to

have her hate me than it was to have her love me. I knew deep down I wasn't capable of love, but I wasn't sure if that was what she craved behind the wall she'd built sky-high. One thing I was certain of was that what happened tonight would not happen again, at least not if I had anything to do with it. I brushed the back of my fingers over her flushed cheek, taking in her beauty one last time before turning on my heel to leave, but not before I retrieved those awful fucking heels.

I made my way downstairs to where Victor, Miles, and Gino were waiting. I'd known Miles since we were kids and knew when he was hiding something. I'd always known.

"Is she okay?" Victor was a lot calmer than I had expected.

"She's fine or at least she will be once these shoes are disposed of." Gino arched his brow as I tossed them at him. "Could you please put those in the car? My fiancée won't be needing them again. I don't fancy a trip to the ER." He nodded with a smile.

"So, what happened? Did you sneak my daughter out on some sort of date?!" Victor folded his arms across his bare chest.

"Are you fucking joking?!" With each word I spoke, his brow furrowed a little more. "I found her in my club, where she shouldn't have been at. You're lucky it was me that found her and brought her home!" I mimicked Victor's posture as I abruptly finished my sentence.

"I appreciate that, and I apologise that you had to deal with my daughter in that state." He pinched the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger, unsure of what else to say.

"The issue I have is that my fiancée was able to sneak out unnoticed to an area of town she shouldn't have been in. Which leads me to believe your security isn't doing the job properly." I scowled as he interrupted me.

"Lorenzo, I can assure you—"

"I'm not finished. They let your daughter slip through their fingers, and I'm sure it's not the first time, and I think it's time we revise the contract, don't you?"

“And what exactly do you want to revise?” His jaw tensed as his body stiffened.

“Wait, she didn’t sneak out. I let her go,” Miles blurted out.

“You did *what?!?*” Victor’s words echoed throughout the lobby.

“She was sneaking out, it’s true, but I caught her. I told her to go and have a good time.” Miles’s body sagged, knowing he’d made a mistake.

“I can’t fucking believe you, Miles! How dare you defy me and the rules I’ve established for her?! It’s not your place!” I was sure Victor was going to pop a vein if not two. “We’ll discuss this privately.” He turned away from his son and faced me once again. “So, what do you want to revise, Lorenzo?”

“Well, hearing what just happened makes my decision so much easier.”

“Spit it out!” There was no calming him down now, and what I was about to say would only add fuel to the fire.

“After tonight, Anastacia will live with me.”

Check fucking mate.



CHAPTER NINE

Anastacia

I STOOD BENEATH THE SCORCHING SPRAY OF THE SHOWER, letting the memories of last night wash away, not that I remembered much. I somehow woke up dressed, minus my shoes, which I still couldn't find, and with a full face of makeup. I didn't recall an argument, which possibly meant I made it home undetected. I shut off the faucet and padded back into my bedroom, which still had a masculine aroma lingering in the air, one I recognised but couldn't identify. I grabbed a pair of sweat shorts from my closet and paired them with a basic tank. I pulled my towel-dried hair into a messy bun at the top of my head and applied some moisturiser to my face before heading towards the door to see why the house seemed eerily quiet this morning.

Upon hearing whispers near my father's office, I came to a halt as I stepped closer, immediately recognising the second voice on the other side. It was my future husband, the last person I wanted to see this early in the morning.

"Anastacia, my darling. What are you doing lurking outside your father's office?" As my mother approached, I practically jumped out of my skin.

"I'm not lurking, I'm just—"

"Eavesdropping?" She winked at me and smiled as she always did. "Let's leave the men to it, and I'll fix you some breakfast." She wrapped her arm around me.

My father's voice was no longer hushed as we prepared to proceed down the stairs to the rest of the house.

“I won’t fucking allow it, Lorenzo! There is no way my daughter is living with or anywhere near you until after the wedding! That was the agreement!”

What is he talking about?!

“Come on, Anastacia, let’s go. You don’t want to hear this.” My mother tried to pull me away, but I refused to budge.

“Victor, as I mentioned last night, the arrangement has changed and will be revised today. Your son allowed his sister to leave the house alone yesterday evening. She wasn’t protected, and anything could have happened to her.” Lorenzo bellowed over my father.

“What’s going on, Mama?” I turned to face my mother, but she could hardly look at me.

“Anastacia, I really think we should leave them be. I’ll explain everything over breakfast.” She pleaded with me to move, but I couldn’t.

Enough was enough, I couldn’t listen to them dictate my life more than they already had done, I flung the door open with such force it almost came off the hinges. All eyes immediately landed on me, but I didn’t care.

“You look remarkably fresh for someone who needed to be put to bed last night.” Lorenzo smirked like a cat who’d got the cream.

“Excuse me?! You did what?!” I shot daggers at the man who sat smugly in the chair opposite my father.

“I brought you home from the club and put you to bed as you were too intoxicated to manage it yourself.” He returned his gaze to my father as he spoke.

“When you talk to me, look at me, not at him!”

“Aren’t you a feisty little thing?” He stood slowly, shifting his focus to me.

“You know nothing about me, and I don’t expect that to change anytime soon if ever.”

“It’s a good thing I feel the same way then, princess.” His arrogant face begged for a punch.

“Papa, what’s going on?” I pleaded.

“Well, I can actually tell you—”

“I asked my father, not you!” I spat towards the pain in the ass that now stood beside me as he scoffed.

“Anastacia, I know Miles allowed you go out last night, which resulted in Lorenzo bringing you home intoxicated.”

“Miles isn’t to blame; I didn’t give him much of a choice.” I realised it wasn’t entirely accurate, but Miles didn’t deserve to be punished for what I wanted to do.

“We all have a choice!” My father’s voice was a little louder this time, but I stood my ground; I wasn’t one to back down, which he knew all too well because he taught me that.

“And sneaking out is mine! But you seem hellbent on fucking punishing everyone else!” I slammed my palms on the mahogany desk as I could practically see my father’s blood boiling beneath his skin.

“How dare you raise your voice at me, in my own home!” His chair scraped against the floor as he squared up against me.

“You won’t have to worry about that much longer since you can’t wait to marry me off to *that*.” I cocked my head toward Lorenzo.

“Actually, if I may.” Lorenzo interrupted. “Your father and I have reached a new, amended agreement. You’ll be living with me, under my roof, starting today.” As I struggled to pick up my jaw from the floor, he flashed his dazzling white smile at my now frowning face.

“Papa, is this some sort of sick joke? Please tell me you didn’t agree to this. Not without discussing it with me first!” And once again, my entire life had been turned upside down in the blink of an eye.

How could I possibly live with the man I despised? The man who, without a doubt, would treat me like a prisoner in

his house. My mother had tears streaming down her cheeks at the doorway. Miles stood along the corridor, not far behind her, helpless.

“Are none of you going to stand up for me? You’re just going to sit back and let this happen?”

“I apologise, flower. If I don’t agree, Lorenzo will walk away from the engagement, and I will be seen as the one who shattered the alliance between us. You know I cannot do that.” He sighed deeply.

“It’s funny that you won’t let the leaders see you that way, but you’ll allow your daughter to. Do you even care about me, or was I always simply a means to keep an alliance alive?” I knew my father loved me, but I wanted him to hurt as much as I was. No one could go toe to toe with Victor Fedorov and live to tell the tale except his daughter and what now appeared to be Lorenzo.

“You know that’s not true, Anastacia. You already know I’d give my life for you.” As he turned abruptly, his undivided focus returned to me, disbelief and pain were written all over his face.

“No, Papa, I don’t. Maybe once, but not anymore.” I turned to leave the office. “I guess I’ll go pack.”

“I’ll wait downstairs for you, just pack what you need. I can send Gino for the rest,” Lorenzo said as I took another step.

“You don’t need to wait; I can make my own way there.”

“As I said, I’ll wait but don’t be long, I have things to do.” And just like that, the smugness had returned.

“And as I already said, I am capable of making my own way.” I didn’t wait for his response; instead, I continued striding down the corridor towards the staircase, disregarding everyone as I went.



After packing up what I needed, I grabbed my bags and made my way downstairs. I considered looking back at my room, but what was the point? After what happened with my father this morning, I didn't feel like this was my home anymore. I didn't feel as though I had one, one I belonged in anyway.

"Ana? What's with all the bags?" Chad stood shell-shocked as I met him at the top of the grand staircase.

"I'm guessing my papa hasn't told the team yet, then." That figured; he was obviously waiting until I was gone to inform everyone. "Well, allow me. I'm moving in with Lorenzo," I blurted out.

"What?! But I assumed it would be after the wedding!"

"Not according to my father. It's the obvious punishment for me sneaking out and getting drunk last night." I continued my way down the stairs with Chad hot on my heels.

"You snuck out?! What the fuck were you thinking?" He grabbed my wrist, knocking my bag down a couple of stairs.

"I was thinking clearly in comparison to you right now. Get off me!" I attempted to snatch my arm away from him, but he immediately tightened his grip.

"Chad! Get—"

Within seconds, his body was slammed against the railing by the man I reluctantly called my fiancé. Chad cowered beneath Lorenzo's towering body; terror visible in his eyes despite his best efforts to hide it.

"Do you value your fucking life, Chaddie boy?" Lorenzo roared.

"Y-yes," Chad choked out.

“Lorenzo, leave him alone! That’s enough!” I cried as I tried to pull him away.

“Next time you have the urge to touch Anastacia, I suggest you suppress it!” He slammed Chad even harder against the railings, clearly intending to leave more than a mark, before stepping away.

Lorenzo smoothed down his neatly pressed black shirt as he returned his attention to me. His eyes momentarily roamed over my body, and I could have been mistaken but there seemed to be a slight worry hidden deep within them, but like I said, I could be mistaken.

“Ana?” Chad straightened as he whispered my name.

“Fuck off. You have done enough.” Lorenzo took my hand and retrieved the suitcase before tugging me down the rest of the stairs.

Chad’s gaze burned holes into Lorenzo’s back. His eyes met mine briefly, but his expression remained stoic; it was as if he looked straight through me, with no emotion other than hatred and anger. I gave him a shy grin, but he never returned it, not even slightly. Once we approached the front door, Lorenzo hurried out to the waiting vehicle at the bottom of the stone steps, Gino waiting with the rear door open.

“Let’s go, I have a meeting this afternoon.” Lorenzo’s voice was stern and demanding.

“Anastacia, baby.” I turned back towards the front door as my mother rushed out towards me. Her face was still smeared with tears, but she smiled as warmly as she could. “Were you planning on leaving without saying goodbye?” Her gaze darted from mine to Lorenzo’s.

“Forgive me, Florence. That was my mistake, I have a meeting this afternoon and I need to get back.” Lorenzo smiled at my mother, who was listening attentively as she clasped his hand in hers.

“Well, why don’t you get going, and I’ll drive Anastacia over to your place soon.” With a gentle smile on her face, she

patted his hand.

“I appreciate the offer, but I have plans to show Anastacia around the house before I have to leave.” He kissed my head whilst wrapping his arm around my waist.

This man is giving me whiplash.

My mother kissed my cheek and pulled me into her warm embrace, whispering how sorry she was. I clung to her a little tighter as Lorenzo cleared his throat behind me, and I knew that was my cue to finally let go. I said goodbye and entered the car as he slid into the back seat beside me. My mother wandered inside as the car pulled away, my father nowhere to be seen. As soon as we drove out of the driveway, I knew I was heading straight to hell with the devil himself.

“Why the fuck did you do that to Chad?!” I turned in my seat, awaiting his answer.

But he didn’t even look up from his phone as he typed out the message he was so engrossed in.

“Answer me!” I snapped as I snatched the phone from his hand.

“Anastacia, give that back to me now!” He shifted in his seat, his gaze fixed on me.

“Not until you tell me why you did what you did!” I tucked his phone into the waistband of my jeans behind my back.

“Anastacia. Don’t make me ask again.” He licked his bottom lip as his nostrils flared.

“All I hear are idle threats and no action.”

“Gino, stop the car,” he snapped.

“Boss, I don’t—”

“Stop the fucking car, Gino.” Lorenzo roared as Gino pulled down a secluded road, not far from my house. “I’m going to need you to give us a moment.” Gino eyed Lorenzo in the rear-view mirror before exiting the car.

Before I had a chance to say anything, Lorenzo unbuckled my seat belt and pulled me onto his lap, my legs straddling both of his. I tried to squirm free, but his hold was too firm, too powerful compared to mine. His fingers grasped my chin, forcing me to look him straight in the eye. His free hand restrained mine behind my back. He yanked me forward as our bodies collided, his lips less than an inch away from mine before he brought them to my ear.

“What were you saying about idle threats?” he whispered into my ear.

“Get your hands off me.” I shoved his head away with my side of mine.

“You’re the one who started these playground games.” The smirk played on his incredibly beautiful lips.

“Because you weren’t paying attention.”

“And is that what you crave, Anastacia, my attention?” I trembled slightly beneath his touch as his thumb brushed over my lower lip.

“Over my dead body would I ever crave attention from you. You’re someone I don’t want anything from. Remember you need this marriage more than I do; all it is to me is a pathetic piece of paper, one I would easily burn.” I let out a steady breath, awaiting his next move.

“You want more than you’re letting on. Lying isn’t a good look on you.” Within in one swift move, he fisted my hair causing my head to tilt back just enough, enabling him full access to my bare neck. His lips roughly sucked on my skin. That bastard actually marked me!

“What the fuck did you just do?!” I snatched one of my arms free as I angrily let it collide with his smug face as it fell instantly.

His hand gripped my face as I was forced to look at him once more.

“I do whatever the fuck I want Anastacia. You’d better start getting used to it because if you don’t, I can make our marriage and your life unbearable.” Pain radiated beneath his

touch as his hold on my face tightened. “And believe me, you don’t want that to happen.” His hand snaked around my waist and slid his phone from my waist band before he placed me back in my seat with ease.

Lorenzo tapped on the tinted glass to inform Gino we were finished. I turned my back to him and rubbed my freshly developed bruise with my fingers. He didn’t mutter a single word for the rest of the journey back to his house, the only words spoken were between him and Gino. As we neared Lorenzo’s house, my phone vibrated on the seat beside me. I grabbed it quickly to see the photo of me and Miles at the local fun fair when we were kids pop up on the screen.

“Miles, what’s up?” I smiled to make sure he knew nothing was wrong.

“Ana, I am so sorry! I would never have let you sneak out if I knew this would have been the consequence.” He was visibly upset, and for once, he didn’t try to hide it.

“It’s fine, honestly. It’s not ideal but it is what is what it is.”

“I can talk to Pa to see if he’ll discuss this with Lorenzo.” He spoke as if he actually had hope that would work when we both know it wouldn’t.

“Don’t worry; it’s not worth the hassle. I’ll be fine, and you know it.” I laughed.

“I know you will, but just in case, did you clear out your weapons from the practice room?” he quizzed.

” I did. I wouldn’t leave them behind. You never know when they may come in handy.” I glanced over at Lorenzo who was listening intently. “Listen, I’ve got to go, but I’ll call you later, okay?” I crossed my legs as Lorenzo’s eyes darted to where my shorts rode up slightly.

“Make sure you do. I love you, Ana.” I felt the warmth of his smile through the phone.

“I love you too.” I hung up before shoving my phone into my handbag that sat by my feet.

The car unexpectedly turned onto a long gravel driveway that led to a magnificent-looking house, maybe even grander than the one I shared with my family. We passed Lorenzo's fleet of men patrolling the ground. As the car approached the massive white mansion, I spotted a tall man with hair as bright as flames and a confused look painted on his face.

He wasted no time in striding to the car as Lorenzo exited, his confusion turning into a smile when he saw his boss. He glanced over Lorenzo's shoulder and spotted me sitting quietly in the backseat.

"Out," Lorenzo ordered as he pulled my door open.

"A please would be nice." I grabbed my bag and stormed toward the house, not looking back to where he stood beside an open-mouthed Gino.

"Anastacia, slow the fuck down! You have no idea where you're going!" He raced after me which spurred me on to move faster.

"Considering the house is right in front of me, I doubt I'll get lost." I flung the front door open as I entered the lobby. I was slack-jawed when I walked in, taking in how gorgeous and well-kept it was. The bay windows at the front of the house let in endless amounts of light and I can already imagine watching the sunset from there on a summer's evening.

The floating staircase was the key feature with pristine glass on either side. It parted at the top leading to opposite areas of the house. Although it was beautiful, it was sparse. There were no flowers or pictures. It just felt empty and lifeless.

"Welcome home," Lorenzo said from behind me.

"This will never be my home. My home is where my family is." I scoffed as I continued to look round.

"The day we say 'I do' is the day we become family, Ana. I'll be the only fucking *Daddy* you'll want and need, trust me." The warmth of his breath tickled my ear as he whispered seductively.

“Can you just show me to my room, please?” If asking politely was what it took for this game of cat and mouse to stop, then so be it.

“Your room? What makes you think you won’t be sharing mine?” He trailed his tongue over the hickey he left on my neck moments earlier.

“I know for a fact I won’t be sharing your room, not even after the wedding.” I smirked.

“I need to get off to my meeting now. Red will show you to your room.” With that, he turned to leave the house with Gino.

“Morning. I’m Red.” I turned to meet the deep jade eyes of the man I saw when we arrived; his face a lot softer now than it was then.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Anastacia.” I smiled and shook his waiting hand.

“Oh, I know who you are. You caused quite a stir last night.”

“I believe so since I’m stuck here now.” I rolled my eyes, and it was met by a gentle laugh from Red.

“It’s not that bad, and believe me, Lorenzo can be nice.” He patted my arm, and I felt a slight amount of comfort.

“I’ll have to see it to believe it.” I forced a smile as he picked up my bags before leading me up the stairs.

He led me down a brightly lit corridor, the sunlight streaming in through the floor-to-ceiling windows. The carpet was plush beneath my feet as we passed door after door and got further from the staircase as we reached the end.

“Here you go. Best room in the house.” He unlocked the door and pushed the door open to reveal a gorgeous bedroom something I didn’t.

“Surprised?” He chuckled as he placed my bags down beside the four-poster bed that sat in the middle of the room against the back wall.

“Just a little. I wasn’t expecting something like this.” I wandered over to the bay window that overlooked a well-kept lake at the rear of the house. The afternoon sun danced on the water as I felt myself getting lost in its beauty. I turned to face Red still standing at the foot of the bed, arms folded across his broad chest, analysing my every move.

“As I said, it’s the best room in the house.” He smiled.

“I doubt that. After all, he hates me.” I scoffed as I rolled my eyes. “Which is why I know this is the most secure room in the house, not the best. Am I correct?” I stepped closer to Red as his Adam’s apple bobbed in his throat.

“That’s between you and Lorenzo. He asked me to bring you to this room, no questions asked.” He stepped towards the door before glancing over his shoulder, his piercing green eyes meeting mine. “Would it kill you to give him a chance?” he asked.

“Yes, it would.” I turned my back to him and faced the beauty beneath my window.

The door closed behind me, and the latch clicked into place. I kicked my sneakers off as my feet sunk into the plush carpet. It was the brightest shade of white, perfect for seeing Lorenzo’s blood decorating it. I knelt beside my bags and unpacked the little belongings I had packed before neatly placing whatever I had in the vintage dresser. Undoing the tie, I let my hair tumble over my shoulders in natural waves. I slipped my feet into a pair of flip flops, pocketed my phone, and headed towards the garden.

The house was quiet, the only sound I heard was from the television in the front room. The bellowing voices of a few men rung out as I escaped through the double doors that led onto the patio, the warmth of the sun kissed my skin. The land on the opposite side of the lake stretched on for what seemed like miles, trees casting a slight shade on the water as the birds sang from within them. I couldn’t put into words how peaceful I felt while standing there. I made my way over to a secluded area beside the lake. The house was still visible from

where I sat, which meant once Lorenzo returned home, he would see me too.

I took out my phone and checked the messages I had received while I was busy unpacking. There were many from the girls and a couple from my father. I started by telling Robin and Tay what happened this morning and they couldn't believe what they were hearing, there was no hiding the fact they were furious at what my father had allowed to happen. After calming them down, I told them to come over in a few days once I had settled in, and they immediately agreed. I debated the reply to my father's messages. How do you reply to a message where someone asks if you are okay, when you're clearly not. I flipped the phone between my fingers before dialling his number.

Within two rings, I heard his familiar voice.

"Anastacia, are you okay?" Although he tried to remain calm, I could hear the worry in his voice; a worry I didn't understand since he was the one who allowed this to happen.

"I'm fine. I'm just exploring the grounds. I saw your messages so I thought it would be easier to call." I faked a smile, hoping he would believe I was fine.

"I'm glad you're okay and staying out of trouble. Is Lorenzo there?" he pried.

"No, he's not. He had a meeting." I lay back against the cool grass.

"So, he's left you alone on the day he so adamantly made you move in with him?" His voice grew angrier.

"It's fine. The less time I spend with him, the better." I closed my eyes as I finished my sentence, blocking out the sun.

"I'm sure it will get easier for you, flower. Listen, I know you hate what I did, but there was no other way." He sighed.

"There's always another way, Pa. Do you know how it felt to have no one fight for you, for what you want, for your feelings?"

“Ana—”

“I have to go; I’ll call you soon.” I hung up before he had time to answer. I threw it down onto the grass as my heart slowly sank.

“Sorry to interrupt. I’m Emmet. I saw you lying out here and wanted to check if you were okay.” I heard a gentle voice come from someone who towered over my head as I slowly opened my eyes.

Emmet gazed down at me with his amber-coloured eyes, his greying hair tied back at the nape of his neck as he was dressed head-to-toe in gym wear. There was a deep scar across his left eye and a small tattoo beneath his right one.

“I’m fine, thank you for asking. I’m—” I smiled as I sat up to face him.

“I know who you are.” He chuckled as he crouched down opposite me, his fingers steepled as his forearms rested on his thighs.

“That obvious, huh?” I smiled.

“Considering you’re the first woman to come around here except for Carmella, yes.” Seeing how friendly Emmet and Red were made me question how and why Lorenzo was so cold and heartless. “Boss should be home soon. Do you want to get ready for dinner?” he asked.

“No thanks, I’m not hungry.” I turned my head towards the lake, ignoring the rumbling in my stomach.

“Anastacia, you need to eat something. We won’t be there; it will just be the two of you.” He said that as though it was a good thing.

“That’s the problem.” I closed my eyes and let my mind wander to the last meal I had with my family, the one filled with love and laughter.

“Boss won’t be happy if you don’t join him.” He spoke softer this time, as if there was a plea in his voice.

“You can tell your boss if he wants us to have dinner, he can ask me himself. I would rather starve than sit across the

table from him.” I let out an exasperated sigh.

“It’s your call. Nobody can make you do anything you don’t want to do.” He stood up and offered his hand for me to take.

“That’s where you’re wrong. I’ve always had to do things I didn’t want to do.” I glanced at his outstretched hand, and his face fell.

“I’m sure that’s not true.” He cocked his head.

“Marrying your boss was what I was born to do. If I had my way, I would have fucked off a long time ago, but unfortunately for me, I wasn’t able to.” I was about to take his hand when I heard a roaring voice come from the doorway.

“Don’t you dare fucking take his hand, Anastacia!”

Brilliant, there he was.

The thorn in my side.



CHAPTER TEN

Lorenzo

ONCE MY MEETING WAS OVER, I ARRIVED HOME. THE football game was playing from the front room, and I could hear the cheering from my men along with the clinking of beer bottles and smell of cigarettes.

“Boss.” Red came into view as I entered the kitchen, his arms laden with snacks for the game.

“You got enough there?” I chuckled, pointing to his arms.

“It’s all I could carry; I’ll be back for more.” He cocked his head towards the fridge, indicating there was beer chilled and ready for whenever I fancied one.

“Thanks, Red, everything else okay?” He knew what I was referring to. Or *who*, perhaps.

“Seems to be. I think she’s all unpacked anyway.” He walked out of the kitchen until I stopped him once more.

“What did she think of the room?” I hedged. I knew I shouldn’t care, but if she was here, she should at least be comfortable.

“She was surprised at how nice it was. She couldn’t take her eyes off the view.” His lips tugged into the rarest of smiles.

“What is it?!” I couldn’t hide my surprise.

“It’s nothing.” Oh, it was definitely something.

“Red. Stop fucking around and tell me what you’re hiding.” I narrowed my eyes as I waited for his reaction.

“She seems nice, that’s all.” Was he taking the piss?! I couldn’t imagine her being nice.

“That woman is anything but nice.” I shrugged off my jacket and threw it over the stool.

“She was to me.” He smiled once again before shifting his gaze towards the lake. “I think Emmet would beg to differ with you on that one.” Red could barely get his words out as he realised how angry I was.

My eyes focused on no one but her. The way her hair blew in the breeze, the way the smile on her face was given to another man.

“Why the fuck is she smiling at him?” I seethed.

“Boss, calm down. We’re just trying to make her feel comfortable.” I knew that, but it still didn’t make it any easier seeing what’s mine smile at another. “Leave her. She will come inside in her own time,” he reassured me.

“You’re fucking deluded if you think I’m leaving her outside with Emmet.” I strode over to the back door mid-sentence.

“Enzo, please. How do you expect this marriage between you to work if you’re always butting heads and causing her to turn away from you?” There was a sternness to his voice I’d never heard before.

“I don’t need or want this fucking marriage to work! It’s a damn piece of paper, one that helps me take over what I’ve been moulded for!” I flung the doors open as I saw Emmet offer his hand to Ana.

“Then why are you so bothered? Why are you pissed off that she’s smiling at someone else if you don’t want to make her smile?” Red shouted. He had never raised his voice to me, and I didn’t fucking like it.

“Listen carefully because I’m only going to say this once. What happens between me and her is my business, not yours or anyone else’s!” And with that, I stomped towards the couple.

“Don’t you dare fucking take his hand, Anastacia!” I screamed as her eyes met mine instantly.

A sly smile reached her lips as she turned her attention back to Emmet who was about to take back his hand before she placed hers in his. He pulled her to her feet and dropped her hand as if it burned him. The fear in his eyes was apparent. Her face was impassive and full of anger. She stormed towards me, her feet moving as fast as mine if not faster. As she reached me, I expected her to stop, but she carried on walking in the direction of the house until I gripped her arm, stopping her.

“Where the fuck do you think you’re going?!” I spat.

“To my room. Does His Highness have a problem?” She smiled the most sinister smile that I’d only seen from my men.

“Watch your tone, Ana!” I tightened my grip on her arm, but she remained as calm as she was before.

“Or what? You can’t lay a finger on me like you would anyone else because you need me.” She pulled her arm from my hold and shoved me away from her.

“I would never lay a finger on you, not like that,” I screamed.

“I don’t want you anywhere near me!” She pointed her finger towards me before running away, her perfume filling my senses as she disappeared.

“Boss, I’m sorry,” Emmet spoke up from behind me.

“I’m not in the fucking mood, E.” I was fuming but only at myself.

I couldn’t stand this bloody woman; she was infuriating, but she was the only person that seemed to get underneath my skin. The one person who I couldn’t wait to piss off just because I secretly enjoyed the way she went against me.

“Boss.” Emmet spoke up again, grabbing my attention.

“What?” I asked.

“I apologise for allowing her to hold my hand, but she’s hurting. She doesn’t want to show it, but I could see it just as much as Red could.” His voice was gentle, and you could tell he cared like Red.

These men, my men, were loyal. They were brutal, but deep down, they all had the biggest hearts known to anyone. I wasn't like them; I had no heart to open. I had no heart to let her worm her way into.

“Boss, can't you at least try? Show her you aren't as bad as you made her believe?”

“No. That woman is just a business transaction.” His face twisted with disgust, but that didn't faze me. “That's all she is, just as that's all I am to her.” I rolled my eyes as I waited for Emmet's next move.

“Then let her see that you could be more than that. Let her see she could matter to you,” he pleaded.

“What's the point in lying to her? She means fuck all to me and it will continue to stay that way. None of you will change my mind.” I took a deep breath before I continued. “I want all of you to keep your distance from her, understand?” I asked.

“Boss, don't do that. She'll feel so alone.” His face fell.

“Do you understand me, Emmet?” I asked once again; my voice raised a little more than before.

“I understand, and I'll let the guys know.” He nodded and headed back towards the house.

I wandered towards the lake as I looked out at the sun setting beyond the trees. I could see why she liked the view from the room I gave her. I glanced over my shoulder towards where her bedroom window was, and much to my surprise, she was sitting on the window seat, her knees to her chest, her head resting against the wall behind her. I watched her for a moment, and suddenly, her icy stare met mine. I couldn't make out her expression, but I knew it wasn't a welcoming one. Why would it be? I was treating her like nothing; it was the only way I knew how. Emmet's words rang through my head. Letting her matter to me would show a sign of weakness, a sign of me wanting something more with her and that's not what I wanted. I turned my back to her as I ran my fingers through my hair. Maybe bringing her here was a mistake? I didn't even know why I did it. Perhaps, I'd never know.



Later that evening, I lay in bed. I hadn't seen Anastacia since we locked eyes from the window. I'd knocked on her bedroom door for dinner, but she shut me down, which wasn't surprising. She didn't even respect me enough to answer me. I didn't even want us to eat together but I also didn't want her to bloody starve just because she couldn't bear to look at me. I had Gino leave some food outside her bedroom door, which before I came to bed was still untouched.

I picked up my phone and typed out a message to her.

Me: Did you eat?

Anastacia: Why do you care?

Me: It was just a question.

Me: Don't read too much into it.

Anastacia: I didn't plan to.

Me: Good.

The status changed to read, and the three dots danced in front of me before they stopped as quickly as they started. I lay there for a moment longer with Anastacia crowding my mind. I placed my phone on the side and headed towards my door. I didn't know why my feet directed me to Anastacia's room or what I would say when I got there, but I wasn't one to apologise and I wouldn't start with her.

Her door was ajar, the lights were off, and it was silent. I knew she wouldn't have fallen asleep that fast, she had only just texted me. I pushed the door open slowly before stepping

inside. There was no sign of her. There was no opportunity for her to sneak out of here, so where the hell was she?!

“Anastacia?” I whispered. “Where the fuck are you?” My voice grew louder with each word I spoke.

Something wasn't right.

As if on cue, she appeared but not the way I imagined.

Her smooth, toned legs wrapped around my waist, her dainty hand pulled my hair, letting my head fall back against her shoulder while the other held a blade against my throat.

“Why the fuck are you creeping around?” she whispered in my ear, her lips brushing my skin.

“It's my house,” I replied quickly.

“It's my room.”

“Put the knife down, Ana. You don't want to shed blood, especially mine.” I smiled.

“Oh, really? For all you know, I would fucking bathe in it.” She pressed the blade against my skin, and I was sure she was drawing blood.

She was more powerful than I expected. She knew moves I didn't, and I should have been nervous, or even fearful. I was anything but; the warmth of her body around mine turned me on.

“If I didn't know any better, I'd think you liked wrapping your legs around me,” I joked, the blade biting at my skin.

“Go to hell.” She sneered.

“Only if you'll come with me,” I replied, lifting my free hand and disarming her in seconds, the carpet cushioning both the knife's fall and ours as I trapped her beneath me.

“You look good under me, sweetheart,” I said, my eyes adjusting to the darkness of the room as I noticed she was wearing an oversized t-shirt that had ridden up, exposing her skimpy underwear. “Did you wear these for me?” I whispered against her bare skin.

“In your dreams,” she snapped, pounding on my chest.

I secured her hands above her head as mine tightened around her wrists. My head dropped down as my forehead rested on hers.

“What do you want, Lorenzo?” she panted out.

“Right now?” I laughed. “You,” I whispered quietly against her lips.

“No, you don’t. You want a toy, and unfortunately for you, that’s not me.” She spoke firmly as she tried to wriggle free.

“Look me in the eyes and say you don’t want me to fuck you right here on this carpet.” I breathed against her lips as I took her lower one between my teeth.

“I don’t want you.” She pulled her lip free to speak as I tasted the metallic taste of her blood in my mouth. “Get out.” Blood pooled on her plump lip. “Please,” she begged.

Hearing the plea in her voice as she asked me to leave was a blow, but it also brought me back down to Earth. What the fuck was I doing?! I released her arms as I stood abruptly, Ana following quickly. She shoved me out the door and slammed it once I was in the corridor. The knife clattered on the bedside table as she let out a frustrated scream.

Is this what my life would become? A living nightmare?

I had no words to describe what I was feeling. I just knew I didn’t want to love her. I didn’t want her to rely on me. I didn’t want us to be anything other than a deal, an arrangement. But something drew me to her. She was the drug and all I needed was one hit.

Just one.

I slammed my door behind me and pummelled my fist into the wall with a scream. This fucking woman was driving me insane!

What the fuck was wrong with me!

I punched the wall again, but as I cried out for the second time, the door flew open, revealing Ana on the other side.

“What the fuck are you doing? Are you okay?” Her face fell when she noticed the blood dripping from my hand onto the carpet.

“I don’t need you here,” I snapped.

“Tell that to your hand.” She entered my room without permission and headed straight to the bathroom, returning soon after with a towel in her hand. “Sit down,” she ordered.

“I don’t need to sit down!”

“Suit yourself!” She scoffed as she took my hand in hers, my blood staining her skin. She wiped around the wound on my knuckles with a damp towel, her touch as gentle, soft and delicate as she was.

Her hair fell onto my arm, tickling my skin as her fresh scent invaded my private space, the one place that was mine and mine alone. I watched her intently as she tended to my wound. Her nose wrinkled with concentration as she cleaned away the last of the blood. I could tell she enjoyed my hands on her body, but I knew despite me wanting her, I had to ignore that niggling voice in my mind saying fuck her once and you’ll get her out of your system.

“There, you’re all done,” she said, breaking my thoughts as she wrapped a bandage around my knuckles. “Do you need anything else?” Not once did she lock her eyes with mine.

“No. Not from you anyway. You can go.” I turned away from her, unable to see the possible hurt on her face.

“How could I have been so stupid? Thinking we could actually get along. Wondering if I helped you, you wouldn’t be such a motherfucker to me. How wrong could I be?” The hurt was apparent in her voice as she left me standing alone.

Why did I do that?

Why was I so torn between letting her see who I was and letting her think I was an asshole?!



The next morning, I met Red, Gino, and Emmet in the kitchen eating breakfast. The amazing aroma filled the room, something we weren't used to.

“What the fuck is this?” I questioned as I eyed the plates full of pancakes, eggs, and bacon.

“Anastacia cooked us breakfast to thank us for welcoming her yesterday,” Red piped up as he shovelled a forkful of food into his mouth.

“I thought I told you all to keep your distance from her?” I slammed my injured hand onto the countertop, causing them to look at me.

“Boss, she just wanted to thank us, that's all,” Emmet chimed in. “We didn't ask her for anything,” he continued.

“Lorenzo, what happened to your hand?” Gino asked, distracting the other two.

“It's nothing, just a scratch.” I scoffed as I poured a coffee from the steaming pot.

“It looks a lot more than a scratch.” He raised his brow as he questioned me. “Looks well bandaged too. How did you manage that?” he queried.

“I didn't,” I mumbled.

“Then who did? Because I know it was none of us since we weren't here last night.” Gino chuckled knowing exactly who tended to my wound.

“If you already know the answer, why ask?” I muttered as I walked towards the back door. The sun danced on the lake as it always did, the trees swaying gently in the wind. “Where is she?”

“She said she was going for a run around the lake. Don’t you see her?” Red asked.

“No, I don’t. As long as she told one of you where she’s going, that’s fine.” I sighed. “Another order, if she needs to go out of the grounds, one of you will accompany her. Understand?” I turned and asked the three men sitting before me.

“Loud and clear, Boss.” Gino nodded as the others followed his lead.

“Good. Did you up the security so she can’t find a way to sneak out?” I questioned.

“Yes,” Emmet replied.

“Good! I would rather not have a repeat performance of what happened with her father the other night.” I sipped my coffee as she came into view.

She was a vision in the morning, her ash-blonde locks were thrown into a high ponytail that swished down her barely covered back. The sweat glistened as it trickled down her toned stomach, the sunlight highlighting her in all the right places, including how her running shorts barely covered her ass. My blood boiled as I clutched the cup. Knowing the guards on duty saw her like this infuriated me.

“So, her helping you last night made things a little more amicable?” Red asked.

“If that’s what you think, then you’re deluded,” I snapped.

“What? Why?” He was clearly taken aback as he spoke.

“Because I don’t want to be fucking amicable, not that it has anything to do with you.” I snarled.

I placed my cup down on the side with a clatter as I exited the double doors that led to the garden, which cut Red off from answering. I strode over to where Anastacia was resting, her back to me as she looked out over the lake. I wasn’t the man to capture moments on camera, but if I was, then this would have been the perfect one. But as I said, I wasn’t that man.

I could feel the eyes of my men burning holes into my back, but I would not give them the satisfaction of turning around. I noticed her breathing quicken with each step I took that brought me closer to her as if she knew I was there.

Did she know?

Could she feel my presence?

“What do you want?” She spoke softly, her voice remaining firm.

“I just came to—” I began, but she cut me off.

“You came to what? Apologise? Beg for forgiveness for how you acted last night?”

“Oh, darling, I don’t apologise, and I definitely do not beg,” I replied.

“Of course you don’t,” she exclaimed. “Then we have no reason to speak to one another.” She turned to face me, her makeup-free face fucking breath-taking. My gaze was drawn to her lip, which had a faint bruise from ripping it from my teeth so quick. I closed the distance between us, and I half expected her to move back, but she didn’t; she stood her ground.

“I’m going out today,” she stated, and I realised her voice had an angelic tone to it, one that both infuriated me and made me desire her more even when I didn’t want to.

“Take someone with you,” I ordered.

“No,” she replied with a smile.

“I wasn’t asking Ana,” I groaned. “I don’t want you going out alone!” I growled.

“I know you weren’t, and honestly, I don’t give a flying fuck.” She smiled again, and this time, it was so damn sweet it was sickening.

“Anastacia! Do as you’re fucking told!” I exclaimed.

“Who do you think you are to speak to me like that?! Don’t forget who I fucking am!” she shouted as she barged past me, but of course, she didn’t make it very far.

I spun on my heel and wrapped my injured fist around her ponytail, causing her body to collide with mine. My other hand splayed against her bare stomach just as it did in her bedroom.

“You are so fucking beautiful, Miss Fedorov,” I whispered against her ear as she closed her eyes and settled into my touch.

Why was she relaxing into me?

Was she trying to intimidate me by making me believe she desired me?

For fuck’s sake, this woman would be the death of me.

“You’re giving me whiplash, Ricci.”

“Because you’re driving me fucking insane. Do you know what it’s like to want someone yet hate them at the same time?”

“No, because I don’t want you. I hate you.” She smirked.

“You need to stop bullshitting, Anastacia,” I said calmly. “You want me to fuck you until you can’t take it anymore, until you beg me to stop,” I whispered as I kissed her neck in the exact place I had marked it in the car yesterday.

“I told you the first night we met that I don’t beg. I’ve had a gun to my head and refused to surrender and beg for my life. So, what makes you think I’ll beg you to fuck me?” she whispered quietly.

“Who the fuck held a gun to your head?!” I growled against her skin.

“Why do you care?” she demanded.

“Because I want to put him six feet under for touching what’s mine,” I murmured.

“I already took care of that. I’ve never needed a man before, and I certainly don’t need one now,” she said as she pressed her tight ass into my hardening cock, which made it clear how badly I wanted to fuck her. “Does the thought of me

killing someone turn you on, Ricci?" she asked as I tightened my grip on her ponytail.

"What do you think?"

"You'll have to take that dick somewhere else because it's not going anywhere near me." She laughed as she twisted out of my grasp, her leg swiping at mine, and before I knew it, I was on my ass with her standing over me, a beaming smile on her face. "Do you need a hand?"

I couldn't help but look up at her, dumbfounded. Had she played me? Had she been this strong all along, leading me to believe she would be easy to break and mould?

How wrong was I?

"Have a good day, fiancé." She smirked as she sauntered towards the house, her hips swaying in sync with her ponytail.

I knew I was in fucking trouble the night we met.

But I never imagined it would be like this.

I refused to fall for Anastacia Fedorov.

Not now.

Not ever.

Not even when she'd share my last name.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

Anastacia

I RETURNED TO MY BEDROOM AFTER LEAVING LORENZO IN THE garden on his ass. The scorching water was a welcoming reprieve on my aching body. His words replayed like a broken record in my head.

I stepped out of the shower and onto the heated bathroom tiles. I grabbed a fluffy white towel from the side and wrapped it around my body.

I leaned against the bathroom counter for a moment gathering my thoughts. I honestly didn't know how I would keep up with this stupid game of cat and mouse between us both. I couldn't deny I enjoyed keeping him on his toes, but his attitude was vile. Nobody had ever spoken to me the way he had; I could have slit his throat last night and let him bleed out, but something stopped me. Something I couldn't put my finger on.

Once I entered the bedroom, I walked past the window when I spotted Lorenzo talking with Emmet on the lawn. Emmet's back was to me while Lorenzo spotted me almost instantly, his eyes narrowing with what could have been anger, hatred, or desire. I leant across the seat that sat beneath the bay window as some of the scatter cushions tumbled to the floor. I pulled the top window shut as his eyes never left my towel-clad body. Lorenzo may have been listening intently to Emmet, but I knew a part of him was distracted just as I was.

My phone jumped into action over on the mirrored nightstand, the name of someone I knew all too well flashing up on the screen.

Chad.

“Hello.” I smiled.

“Ana! Thank fuck!” he breathed. “I’ve been worried sick!”

“Chad, I’m fine. Why would you think I’m not?”

“Your father didn’t give much away when I asked, nor did Miles.” He sighed. “I hated the way he marched out of here with you yesterday. Lorenzo’s a fucking animal.” He seethed.

“You need to calm down, everything is fine. I can’t say I love it here because I don’t think I ever will, but I don’t have a choice.” I let out a steady breath as I spoke.

“Do you want to marry him?” he asked.

“I don’t think I ever want to get married.” I padded across the crisp white carpet towards the window to see if Lorenzo was still there, but he wasn’t.

“We can talk to Victor, try to make him see sense. We can tell him you don’t want to marry Lorenzo,” Chad begged.

“There is no point. I’ve tried and not once has he ever shown any signs of budging.” I smiled, but it wasn’t real.

“Ana—”

“Chad, please, just drop it, what’s done is done.” I let my towel fall from my body as it pooled at my feet.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t interfere. It’s not my place.” He smiled through the phone as he spoke, but I was sure there was nothing genuine about it.

“Are you busy?” I asked.

“No, your father has meetings with Miles, so I’m not needed this afternoon. What’s up?” he questioned.

“I need to get out of here for a bit. Lorenzo wants one of his men to take me, but I would rather they didn’t,” I explained.

“Say no more. Send me the address and I’ll be on my way.”

“Thank you, I’ll see you in an hour.” I hung up the phone before throwing it on the bed.

I knew Chad's heart was in the right place, but he needed to let it go and realise there was nothing he could do to change that. In a few weeks, I'd be saying I do. I would always value his opinion and friendship, but he needed to remember nobody had ever stood against my father and lived to tell the tale.

Friend or not, he would take Chad's life without a second thought.

I hurried over to the walk-in wardrobe that lit up as soon as I walked inside. Lorenzo didn't do things by halves, everything was high-end, expensive and over-the-top beautiful. I would never tell him how much I appreciated how amazing the bedroom was. I didn't want him to think of it as a compliment, because he deserved none of those. I slipped on a pair of acid wash, mom jeans that were slashed at both knees. I teamed them with a skintight black, high neck body suit that about covered the mark Lorenzo so kindly left me yesterday. It was now a deep shade of purple. I slid my feet into my trusty Converse before I dried and straightened my hair, it tumbled over my shoulders as it stopped in line with my waist. I didn't bother with much makeup, my father always told me I didn't need much, I was beautiful the way I was, that beauty was one of the weapons in my arsenal.

I never really understood what he meant until I got older, when men would fall at my feet endlessly, only to have their life taken away within seconds because they let their guard down around the famous Victor Fedorov's daughter, one they thought was innocent, but little did they know I was anything but.

I grabbed what I needed and left the bedroom, as I almost ran down the corridor. I hoped for a quick getaway, hoped that nobody would be near the front door so I could slip out and meet Chad without questions. That was what I had hoped, but the reality was the complete opposite. I came to a halt halfway down the stairs when I heard Lorenzo and his men in the kitchen beside my only exit.

Fuck it. What was the worst he can do?

I darted across the lobby and almost had my hand securely on the handle when I felt a familiar figure hovering over me.

“Going somewhere?” he asked, the irritation clear in his tone.

I didn’t turn to face him; I kept my eyes trained on the door.

“I told you I’m going out,” I explained.

“And I told you to take one of my men with you.”

“I don’t need a chaperone. I’m a grown-ass woman,” I snapped.

“Oh, don’t I know it,” he teased. “You will take someone with you, and that’s not a request, Ana.”

I was about to tell him what I thought when he spun me around, so my back was now flush against the metal behind me. His eyes glistened with an emotion; one I didn’t know how to describe. It was an emotion I had never seen before. It looked as though he could devour me within seconds and murder me at the same time. I let out a throaty laugh, one that caused his brows to furrow, his eyes to narrow, and nostrils to flare with frustration.

“Something funny?”

“The fact that you think I’ll ever do as I’m told just because you ordered me to.” I smirked. “It’s cute actually.” I giggled.

“Cute?! Fucking cute?!” His face was hilarious.

“Actually, I take it back. That’s an insult to all cute things.” I laughed.

“Anastacia, don’t test me. I’m not in the mood!” He slammed his hand against the door beside my head as the sound vibrated through me. “Take Red with you.”

“There’s no need. Chad is on his way.” I smiled.

“Why can’t you do as you’re fucking told?!”

“I am. You told me to take someone with me. You didn’t specify who,” I explained.

“And you thought that prick was the best choice?” he growled.

“For me, yes.” I smiled once again, a smile I knew would irritate him.

“You’re not going with him!” he ordered.

“Yes, I am!” I argued back.

“Over my dead body,” he whispered.

“I’m sure that could be arranged, fiancé.” I winked.

“Anastacia, I’m fucking warning you.” His voice grew louder with each word he spoke.

“Warn me all you like, but that doesn’t mean I’ll listen.” I leaned into him as my lips brushed his ear. “You don’t want me, so maybe I should find someone who does. Someone who can pleasure me in ways I can only dream of, someone who knows exactly what I want. Maybe I should go and get fucked before we tie the knot, so I don’t stain your pretty white bedsheets.” I nipped his earlobe with my teeth as he inhaled a sharp breath.

“Go to your fucking room,” he barked.

“Is that a punishment for getting under your skin? Or maybe you’re ready to give into those urges and fuck me? Don’t tell me you haven’t thought about it.” My voice remained smooth and calm as I spoke quietly.

“Don’t test me,” he whispered.

“Or what? What are you going to do about it?” I challenged.

“I’ll fuck that pussy of yours until you’re sore, until you’re begging for me to stop, until you can’t take it anymore. So, are you sure you want to test me?” He smirked.

“I would love to see you try.” My teeth teased my lower lip as his gaze followed.

Lorenzo gripped my chin just as he did in the car and forced me to look up at him, his touch imprinting my skin. My heart rate quickened, and I cursed internally for letting myself get into this position. The warmth of his eyes burned into my coolness of mine as he slowly craned his head to bring his lips close enough to mine.

“Do you act like this to get my attention? Or is it because although you deny it and hate yourself for it, you want me?” He ran his tongue across the same place he had teased with his teeth last night which caused my insides to burn. With what, I didn’t know.

“Would you believe me if I said neither?” I asked breathlessly.

“No, I wouldn’t.” He smiled.

“Of course you wouldn’t.” I rolled my eyes as his hand moved from my chin to my throat.

“Why do you feel the need to lie?” he asked as he pulled my body into his. My breasts pressed against his body as I felt his heart beating as violently as mine.

“Why are you bothered if I tell you the truth or not? Do you care about me more than you let on?” I questioned.

“I don’t care for you. I never will,” he whispered with flared nostrils; his actions were different to his words. “But that doesn’t mean I’ll allow you to get into that man’s car. I don’t trust him.” He seethed.

“You don’t need to trust him. My father does, and that’s enough for me.” I shoved him away from me as I pulled the front door open, revealing Chad’s armored vehicle.

“Anastacia!” Lorenzo screamed.

I practically ran down the steps, I felt his eyes on me the entire time as he continued to bellow my name, his anger apparent. I jumped in the car and slammed the door behind me, the tinted windows now blocking Lorenzo’s view.

That man shouldn’t be able to get under my skin like this. He was an arrogant son of a bitch. I didn’t understand what

was going on in his mind, one minute he'd push me away and bark orders at me, and the next he acted as though he wanted to devour me.

"Everything okay?" Chad asked as I settled into my seat.

"Everything's fine. Why do you ask?" I couldn't bring myself to look at him. I kept my eyes trained on my seething fiancé who hadn't moved from the steps, his phone pressed against his ear then, no doubt calling someone to follow us.

"I don't think I've ever seen you run that fast," he joked.

"Fuck off, I have!" I laughed but the laugh was fake.

"Ana?" His voice was a mere whisper, which only hurt my heart more.

"Please don't. I'm fine," I lied.

The engine roared into action as Chad sped down the driveway. I watched in the side view mirror as Lorenzo threw his phone onto the ground in an apparent rage, it soon dawned on me that the person he tried to call was me, and my phone was still on the vanity upstairs.

Shit.

"Where am I taking you?" Chad asked quietly as he turned on the radio.

"To see my grandmother." I smiled as I relaxed a little.

"Do you need to stop anywhere first?" he questioned.

"Just the usual place, please." I didn't need to specify, he already knew. He had been accompanying me here for the past few years.

He soon realised I didn't want to talk. He knew I preferred to sit in silence, my thoughts tainted by the man I ran away from. It didn't take long before we pulled up outside our first destination, one I knew all too well.

"Do you want me to come inside?"

"It's fine. You can wait for me here."

I entered the old school flower shop situated on the main strip in town, an array of many flowers decorated the outside and the inside. There was something about this store I fell in love with as a child. I would visit weekly with my grandmother as we would collect her favourite flowers, pink lilies. I guessed, this was why I loved nature and all things floral. We would spend hours on end in the garden together tending to what my grandfather planted and spent his spare time on. My grandfather passed away far too soon, and it hit the family harder than we thought it would.

“Anastacia, my dear. I already have your order ready; they just need wrapping.” The owner, Marilyn, grinned as soon as she saw me.

“Thank you. You’re always so prepared.” I returned her smile, and for the first time since I left the house, it was genuine.

“Ana, you’ve been coming at the same time every single week since you were knee-high.” She giggled as she wrapped up the stunning pink lilies for me to take. “How is the lovely Evelina?” she asked.

“She’s good. I’m heading there to see her now.” I took the flowers she held out to me.

“Please send her my love. I miss her dearly.” Her smile faded and was replaced with sadness almost instantly.

“Of course.” I squeezed her hand as I replied.

“Is there anything else, darling?” she asked.

“Can I actually have a single white rose, please?” I questioned.

“Of course. For Aleksander?” Her face brightened but only slightly.

“Yes, they were his favourites.” I reached into my pocket and pulled out the money.

“Put that away. They’re on me this week.” She patted my hand that clutched the notes, before her hand reached up and

rubbed my cheek. “You’re a good girl, Ana. You make your family proud.” Her eyes twinkled with adoration.

I hope so. I’m never sure if I do enough.” I breathed out.

“Trust me, you do.” She placed her dainty hands on the tops of my arms. “Same time next week?” she asked.

“You know it.” I smiled as she pulled me into a gentle hug. This woman was my grandmother’s sister-in-law, my father’s aunt. She never wanted to be involved in the mafia like her brother was. She married young, and with her love of flowers, opened her own business. One that continued to thrive every day. I was proud to call her family.

I hurried back to the car where Chad was deep in thought as he scrolled through his phone. I tapped the glass as he unlocked it rapidly.

“All sorted?” he asked.

“Yeah, let’s go.” I smiled as I wound down the window and waved to my aunt.

Chad drove to the second destination, a secluded care home, not far from my family home but far enough. I took a deep breath as we drove closer. Each week I came here, it got harder. I knew my grandmother only had a little time left. She was getting worse day by day, and even though it killed me to see her that way, I couldn’t stop myself coming because I had spent at least one day a week with her since I was born, and I would do it until I could no longer.

“Ana, you can stop coming here, you know, if it’s too hard.” Chad spoke sympathetically.

“I would never do that to her. She needs her family just like we needed her.” I leant across the seat and retrieved the flowers from the back before I left Chad sitting in the car once again.

“You don’t have to wait. I’ll be fine.”

“I’ll wait for as long as you need. Don’t worry.” He returned my smile as I closed the door.

I watched as he drove off around the corner to the rear car park before I headed inside. The familiar smell invaded my senses as the same nurses welcomed me with joy as they did every week. The building was old but so beautiful, the beams that ran across the high ceilings were incredible, breathtaking. The walls were adorned with arts and photographs that went on for what seemed like forever. There were two double doors at the back of the room that led out onto acres of land, where the flowers bloomed and the trees swayed in the wind, but that beauty was lost when I laid eyes on my grandmother and there was nothing more perfect than her. She sat on a white wooden bench with a book in her hand as she read aloud, no doubt to my grandfather. Her stunning white hair was wrapped neatly into a chignon at the nape of her neck, her ageing face soft and gentle as she giggled. She wore a cherry red cardigan draped over her shoulders, one my grandfather had brought her the year he passed away, the one she always said held sentimental value because it was his last gift to her.

“Go on out, Anastacia. She’s waiting for you,” one of the nurses quietly said as she broke my thoughts.

“Thank you. How is she today?” I asked.

“She’s okay, today’s a good day.” She smiled as she wandered back to the other side of the room.

She missed my grandfather and living alone after a while got too much for her. She asked to move in here for company and had promised me she loved it. I wasted no more time as I hurried out into the garden, her face lighting up when she saw me.

“There is my darling girl. Come and sit beside me. I was just reading to your grandfather.” She smiled the most delicate smile I had ever seen.

“Were you reading his favourite story again?” I asked.

“Of course. What else?” She laughed.

“These are for you.” I handed her the flowers as I sat beside her.

Her frail arm wrapped around my back as she pulled me into her warm embrace.

“So, your father tells me you’ve moved in with your betrothed…”

“He told you right, unfortunately.” I sighed.

“Oh, baby, what’s the matter?” The worry took over as she stroked my hair.

“I hate him but—”

“But want him too?” she finished the sentence for me.

“What? No! He’s awful, he’s arrogant, he’s—” I couldn’t find the right words anymore.

“Irritating, insufferable, a complete mindfuck?” She laughed.

I bolted upright and stared at her, shocked at what came out of her mouth.

“Grandma!” I clasped my hand over my mouth to muffle the laughter I was trying to hold in.

“What? I can curse, you know.” She winked as I finally laughed a real belly laugh.

“Did you ever hate him?” I asked since she was arranged to my grandfather when she was eighteen.

“I loathed him, he was awful. I begged my parents to stop the wedding,” she explained.

“So, what happened?” I queried.

“I stopped fighting against him. I knew there was no other way. As soon as I stopped fighting, I allowed the feelings to come through thick and fast.” She smiled.

“But I feel nothing for him!” I rubbed my temple as I whispered.

“Not even the sexual chemistry that races through your veins?”

“He’s hot, I’ll give him that, but he’s so domineering, and I cannot stand it.” I rolled my eyes as she laughed. “What?”

“You remind me so much of me.” She smiled. “And believe me, that’s not a bad thing,” she continued.

“Then what is?”

“The fact that you won’t give him a chance.”

“Believe me, I tried,” I breathed. “Last night, he pummeled the wall, I bandaged him up, and all of a sudden, he snapped and kicked me out of his room back to mine, then he was all over me again this morning.”

“He sounds just like your grandfather; he was the exact same. The reason behind that is he doesn’t know how to react or act around you. It’s normal but believe me, if that man felt nothing at all towards you, he wouldn’t demand you move in, and he wouldn’t do whatever it takes to get under your skin.” She held my hand in hers.

“I’ve known him less than a week and I already want to murder him, hence why I tried last night,” I exclaimed.

“Oh, Anastacia, tell me you didn’t?” She giggled.

“My knife needed an outing.” I smiled sweetly.

“Well, lock it away. I want to see my only granddaughter get married before I finally join your grandfather.” She patted my knee as I knew what she meant. “I want to see a couple in love so I can leave peacefully.” She wiped the tear that had escaped my eye.

“Do you really want to leave us?” I asked, tears falling quicker.

“Your grandfather has been kept waiting long enough, but I told him I need to hold on a bit longer to see my darling girl get married and fall in love. I’m sorry I’ll miss the babies, but I’ll be looking down on you. I’ll see it all.”

“There will be no babies.” I scrunched my nose at the thought of having children with Lorenzo.

“There will be, I know it.” She lay my head on her lap as she played with my hair. “You’re an incredible woman, Anastacia. Lorenzo will realise just how lucky he is, you’ll see,” she said, her hand never leaving my hair.

“I doubt that, but only time will tell.” I breathed deeply as I closed my eyes for a moment.

The next few hours passed all too quickly, and the sun was already setting beyond the trees. We had spoken this whole time about her marriage and how my grandfather was with her and honestly, he sounded so much like Lorenzo, it was actually rather scary. He had treated her the exact same initially if not worse, but she gave as good as she got and soon enough my grandfather knew he had met his match. They tamed one another.

“I had better get going. I don’t want you to miss your dinner.” I kissed her cheek before I stood to leave.

“Get home safe, darling.” She stood with me as she swatted my hand away when I offered her a little help. “Oh, Ana?” she continued.

“Yes?”

“Tell that fiancé of yours that the next time he wants to decorate my granddaughter’s gorgeous skin with hickeys, put them somewhere her father won’t see.” My mouth dropped open as she giggled with pure delight.

“He did that because he’s an asshole who wants to mark his territory, not because I asked for it,” I declared.

“He did that because he wants you.” She winked playfully again, causing my mouth to fall open.

“I can’t listen to this anymore; I’ll see you next week.” I smirked.

“Bring Lorenzo with you,” she demanded.

“Not happening.” I arched my brow as if to ask her if she was for real.

“Bring him. I want to meet him,” she pleaded sweetly.

“I’ll ask him, but I can’t promise, he’s a dick.” I kissed her cheek and hurried towards the exit as I could hear her laughing more with every step I took.



After visiting my grandfather's grave, Chad dropped me home. We barely spoke on the drive back; I hated saying goodbye to my grandmother and seeing my grandfather's grave upset me more than usual.

As soon as we turned into the gates of Lorenzo's mansion, I saw one of his men I hadn't met pick up his phone instantly, no doubt to tell him I was home. The driveway was decorated with lights that lit up as we passed. My heart sank with each turn of the wheel, knowing Lorenzo was waiting for me on the other side of that door.

"You've been quieter than usual. Are you sure you're okay?" Chad asked.

"It was hard to hear some of the things Grandmother said today. She's waiting for me to marry Lorenzo before—" I choked back the tears.

"You don't need to say it. I know what you're trying to tell me." He sighed. "Listen, go and get some rest, okay?"

"Good night, Chad." I let myself out of the car and closed the door behind me.

I watched Chad leave as I began my ascend to the front door which opened as soon as I reached the final step. Much to my surprise, I was met by Red.

"Ana, where have you been?"

"I had things to do." I sighed as I walked into the lobby. The intoxicating scent of Lorenzo hit me like a tonne of bricks. "Where is he?" I asked.

"He's on his way home, he should be here in a few minutes if not less. You look drained, are you okay? Did you eat?" he questioned.

“I’m fine, I’m just going to go to bed.” I smiled softly as I hurried up the stairs.

As I was about to turn down the corridor, I heard the screeching of car tires outside the front and every part of me knew exactly who it was. The engine was shut off suddenly and it didn’t take long before his voice echoed through the entrance.

“Anastacia!” he screamed. “Where the fuck have you been?!” His voice was full of anger, and I wasn’t in the mood for that.

I didn’t even look at him as I walked away. I kept my eyes firmly locked on my bedroom door as I hoped to make it before he caught up with me.

“Don’t you walk away from me!” He continued to scream after me as I heard him getting closer.

“Boss, leave her tonight!” Red called after him.

“This doesn’t concern you, Red!” he snapped back.

I made it to my room before slamming the door behind me, not that it mattered because moments later, it nearly flew off its hinges as Lorenzo barged inside. He kicked the door shut as it rattled the room, his face a picture of rage, his knuckles white from clenching his fists.

“Leave me alone, Lorenzo.” I spoke quietly, my back still to him.

“Where have you fucking been?!” he screamed.

“Leave me alone,” I repeated once more.

“Not until you tell me where you’ve been!” He stalked over to me, but somehow, I remained as calm as I could.

My head was telling me to reach into the drawer beside me and drive the knife into his flesh, watch him slowly bleed out, but something stopped me once again.

“I’m not in the mood, I want to sleep. It’s been a long day.” I breathed out, waiting for him to royally lose it in seconds.

“I wasn’t in the mood for your fucking games today either, but you didn’t seem to give a shit when you drove off with that prick earlier!” he snapped.

“Because he is the one who has taken me to the same place every week for the past few years. Now go away.” I spoke calmer than I expected.

“No, I won’t fucking go away. Give me one good reason why I should.” I felt him behind me, the scent of his aftershave mingling with my perfume.

I turned around quicker than expected and pummeled my fists into his chest repeatedly. His hands gripped my arms to calm me down, but I’d had enough of his shit, his attitude, every damn thing about him.

“Are you done?” he asked.

“No, I’m not fucking done! Leave me alone!” I snapped, out of breath.

“What makes you think I want to?” He smirked, the pad of his thumb wiping away a stray tear I didn’t know had fallen.

“I don’t give a shit what you want. Just fuck off and leave me alone!” I slapped his hand away, and it was as if something in him had flipped.

Within seconds, my back collided against the wall, and I couldn’t help but wrap my legs around his waist as his mouth devoured mine. I didn’t know why I was letting this happen, but I was, and for the first time in my life, I felt powerless. One of his hands cupped my ass to hold me in place as the other one fistfisted the hair at the nape of my neck, causing my scalp to sting. The kiss was nothing like I had expected; it was full of hunger, lust, and desire. Something I had never felt and never wanted to feel, especially with him. I could feel his growing erection pressed against my pussy. His hand left my hair and gripped my throat as I let out a soft moan against his lips, a sound he loved, as his cock twitched in anticipation.

“Lorenzo, I need—” I breathed.

He stilled, his body stiffening almost instantly. He placed me down on the floor as I tried to catch my breath. He became

impassive and emotionless.

“That was a fucking mistake.” He smoothed out his shirt and stormed towards the door. “Don’t forget your phone again. It was incredibly stupid.” And with that, he was gone.

A mistake?!

Is that how he saw me?

That fucker stole my first kiss and called it a mistake?!



CHAPTER TWELVE

Lorenzo

I STALKED TOWARDS THE LOBBY WHERE RED STOOD WAITING. His face said a thousand words but none I wanted to hear. I probably made the worst decision I had ever made in my life. Kissing her was a mistake, one I couldn't take back no matter how much I wanted to.

She tasted fucking incredible, the subtle taste of mint mingled with the warmth of her breath, the saltiness from her tears she didn't know I noticed, and the sweet but warming taste of the honey and cinnamon lip balm she had glossed over her lips. I could have and would have got lost in her if I didn't stop myself.

Why did I stop myself?

Because if I didn't, then she would expect so much more than I was willing to give, and although she'd tried to kill me and was probably plotting her next attack on me, she had a pure heart. One I would only taint and ruin. She deserved someone to worship the ground she walked on; she deserved love and respect from her husband. I knew I wasn't the man to give her all the lovey-dovey shit, but I wasn't about to let anyone else give it to her either.

She belonged to me.

Whether she liked it or not.

"What did you do?" Red questioned.

"I'm going out!" I strode towards the door with Red hot on my heels.

"Where are you going?!"

“Out!” I snapped.

“I don’t understand you and neither does she.” He sighed.

“And what the fuck is that supposed to mean?!” I growled as I turned around instantly.

“You are my boss, and above all else, you’re my friend, but how you’re treating her isn’t fair.” He seethed.

“She—”

“She’s done nothing wrong. All I see when I look at her is the female version of you, only with a much bigger heart.” He spoke calmer this time.

“I have a fucking heart!” I screamed.

“Then show her. Show her you aren’t as awful as you pretend to be,” he pleaded.

“She already hates me, wants to kill me, so tell me? What’s the point?” I snapped.

I didn’t wait for him to answer as I finally reached the garage. The car I took Anastacia home from the club in was already open and waiting.

“Lorenzo!” Red called after me. “Please!”

“If you’re so bothered about her, then why don’t you go and check on her.” I slammed the door and revved the engine.

She had my men wrapped around her finger by just fucking existing and it was driving me to the edge. Maybe they saw things in her I didn’t see.

Or maybe they were just better than I was.



I had been at the same bar alone for hours, getting lost in a bottle of bourbon as I tried to erase the taste of Anastacia. I

didn't know why the fuck I thought her living with me before the wedding was a good idea. Her being around was already becoming unbearable. The way her scent lingered around every area she'd been, the way her laughter with Red travelled around the house, the way her body reacted to mine even though I knew she didn't want it to, and the way she tasted.

"Enzo?" Gino spoke from behind me.

"What can I do for you, Gino?" I asked.

"You can put the bottle down and come home," he ordered.

"Why is she so infuriating?!" I snapped as I slammed the bottle on the bar.

"Because you want her." He laughed.

"I want many things, and she's not one of them," I exclaimed.

"If you say so." He sighed. "Did you find out where she was earlier?" he asked.

"It doesn't fucking matter where she was. She went with someone I told her not to!" I seethed.

"She doesn't deserve this!" he growled as he slapped his palm against the bar.

"I decide what she deserves! Not you or anyone else!" I snapped.

Gino didn't reply. He didn't know what to say anymore. He knew when I was in a mood like this, he was fighting a losing battle. He stood beside me, watching me polish off the final glass of bourbon.

"Are you quite done?" he asked with an annoyance to his voice.

"What are you, my father?" I smiled.

"No, just a friend who cares. Fuck knows why." He rolled his eyes as he escorted me from the bar.

He snatched my keys as I struggled to get them out of my pocket. I didn't even kick up a fuss since there was no way I

could drive anyway. I'd had too much to drink.

"Get in." He shoved me in the front seat before he slammed the door.

Gino didn't say a word during the drive. His hands clutched the steering wheel as if he had to stop himself from saying something he knew he would regret in the morning. Suddenly, Red's voice came over the sound system, going through me like nails on a chalkboard.

"Did you find him?" he quizzed.

"Of course I fucking did! He was getting shit-faced at the bar downtown," Gino snapped.

"Prick!" Red laughed.

"I heard that!" I snapped from the passenger seat.

"You were meant to. I hope you're happy with yourself." Red seethed.

"Fuck off." I rolled my eyes and leant my head against the headrest.

"We are pulling in now. Come, give me a hand," Gino ordered.

"What? Why?" Red questioned.

"Because I don't fancy dragging his ass upstairs alone." Gino ended the call before Red had a chance to reply.

As if on cue, the front door swung open, revealing Red in a pair of sweats and nothing else, he stormed barefoot out to the passenger side and swung the door open.

"Out," he ordered.

I couldn't do anything other than laugh at one of my men ordering me around.

"Now!" he screamed.

I got out the car as Red and Gino supported me a little, not that I deserved it. We entered the brightly lit lobby, and although it was silent, my ears continued to ring from the music that played heavily at the bar.

“You can get off me now. I’m fine,” I snapped.

Red and Gino released me as I swayed slightly. Maybe I wasn’t fine.

Oh well.

“Anastacia!” I screamed.

“Shut the fuck up! She’s asleep!” Red snapped as his hand swatted the back of my head.

“Ana!” I called once more.

“Stop it,” Gino warned.

“A—” I started but didn’t quite finish.

Anastacia appeared at the top of the stairs. Her face was marred with worry. She looked like a damn angel dressed head to toe in white. The satin nightdress stopped at her knees as it covered her perfectly. The slit up to her thigh did nothing other than tease me. My eyes trailed over her body as her nipples pebbled beneath the material from the coolness of the lobby. Her hair fell around her shoulders and tumbled to her waist. Without a second thought, she rushed down the stairs towards me before stopping at my feet. She looked up at me with those translucent eyes full of concern.

“Are you drunk?” she asked.

“What does it matter to you?” I teased.

“It doesn’t. I’m just asking,” she softly replied.

Why did she make this so hard? Why be nice to me at all?!

“Well, don’t,” I snapped.

“I don’t understand you!” She threw her arms up in disbelief.

“I didn’t ask you to.” I laughed.

She turned to walk away, muttering something under her breath, but I couldn’t stop myself from trying to piss her off.

“Why don’t you make yourself useful and go and warm my bed for me, darling.” I smirked as she stopped dead in her tracks. Red groaned behind me.

She turned to face me, the concern now replaced with anger, shock, and a hint of sadness. There were no words involved until after her palm connected with my cheek with an earth-shattering crack. My face felt as though it was on fucking fire, which surprised me as I didn't expect something of such force from her.

“What the fuck was that for?!” I screamed.

“That was for that stupid ass comment you just made!”

As soon as she finished her sentence, her palm shattered across my cheek once more, the pain radiating through my head instantly.

“That was for throwing my kindness in my face over and over again despite me coming down here worried about you.” She seethed.

I expected her to finish and head to bed, but she had other plans. She backhanded my other cheek, and fuck me, that hurt like a motherfucker.

“What’s that for?” I growled through the pain.

“Because you’re the fucking prick who stole my first kiss earlier and then stormed off as if I was nothing.” She fought back the tears and it finally hit me what she had said.

That kiss was her first?

I fucked up her first kiss.

“Ana—”

“Stop talking. I don’t want to hear another word come out of that vile mouth of yours.” She turned on her heels and sprinted to her room, leaving me feeling like the biggest dick in the world right now.

Shit.

“Good going.” Red sighed before he made his way to the kitchen.

“Where are you going?” Gino asked.

“To get some ice,” he replied.

“For my face?” I questioned as my head felt as though it would explode.

“No. For Ana’s hand. You can fuck off,” he called before he ran past me towards Anastacia’s room, his hand wrapped around the bag of ice.

“I suggest you go and sleep tonight off and work out a way to grovel tomorrow.” Gino turned away from me. I knew my best friend was right, but I didn’t know how to grovel, how to apologise.

I shouldn’t have spoken to her the way I did, but somehow, I just couldn’t stop myself.

Like every fucking time.



The next few days, I barely saw Anastacia. She kept to herself. She spent most of her time in her room, by the lake, or in the gym. I wasn’t going to grovel like Gino told me I should. She didn’t look as though she was in the forgiving mood, so I ignored her just as she did me.

“What’s on your mind, Boss?” Red asked from across the kitchen island.

“Nothing, just making sure this shipment is perfectly planned. I don’t want any fuckups.”

“There won’t be. There never is.” Gino smiled.

Our shipments were always smooth and straight forward. My men knew how to do things, and I admired that about them. There was nothing they couldn’t get done if needed.

“How’s Rox doing?” I asked Emmet.

“So far, so good. Nothing to report.” He smiled as he swigged his beer.

“Perfect. One more fuckup and he’s dead. Understand?” I narrowed my eyes as I felt all of theirs fall on me.

“One more?” Red asked.

“He already fucked up once on the night we met. He had his eyes on something that doesn’t belong to him,” I answered.

“She doesn’t exactly belong to you right now either,” Red pointed out.

“Yes, she fucking does! She may hate me, but she’s mine,” I growled.

“All I’m saying is—”

“Shut up,” I interrupted.

My ears pricked up when I heard the familiar sound of heels clicking across the marble floor.

Anastacia.

“Don’t move,” I warned as I strode out of the kitchen.

“Boss.” They replied in unison, but I was already waiting at the foot of the stairs when she appeared.

She rounded the corner, and I could have sworn my heart stopped in that exact moment.

Why is she this dressed up?!

Where’s she going?!

Dressed like that, she’s going nowhere.

Dumbfounded, I moved towards her. Her hair was slicked back into the same low ponytail she wore the night of the club. The black dress she had worn only accentuated her figure as it fit her like a glove. It stopped just above her knee as she wore those fuck-me-red-bottom patent heels. I could have easily fucked her senseless on those stairs, letting every fucker watch as she screamed out my name.

Get a fucking grip, Ricci.

“Don’t wait up.” She smiled.

“Where the fuck do you think you’re going?” I asked, anger lacing my voice.

“Out.” *God, she was so infuriating.*

“Where?” I repeated.

“You lost the right to demand where I’m going when you threw my kindness back in my face over and over again,” she snapped.

The thought of punishing that smart mouth of hers did more than I would let on.

“Now move,” she ordered.

I stood my ground as I blocked her exit.

“I suggest you move unless you want ‘murdered by loving fiancée’ on your headstone.” She smirked.

“Not until you tell me where you’re going,” I demanded.

“I’ve got a date,” she replied with a cocky smile on her perfect lips.

“I don’t think so.” I laughed. “If you think I’m going to let some fucker out there take what’s mine, then you’re wrong.” I smirked.

I ran my fingertips over her exposed neck. The bruise had faded from where I’d lost control in the car, and I wasn’t a fan of it. “Looks like we’ll have to refresh this.” I winked.

“In your dreams. I’d rather gouge my eyes out,” she exclaimed as she barged past me, her ponytail swishing across her back.

She sauntered through the kitchen past the three men she knew and the many she didn’t, the ones who didn’t live here. They knew better than to say anything but that didn’t mean they wouldn’t look, which churned my stomach. The door clicked shut as she went to her over-the-top armoured Jeep her father had bought her. I wasted no time rushing into the kitchen.

“Red, get me my fucking car keys!” I snapped as I tucked my pistol in the back of my waistband.

“Boss, what’s going on? What are you planning to do to Ana?” he asked, worried at the sight unfolding before him.

“Not Ana. Some fucking weasel she’s going on a date with,” I growled as I swiftly caught the keys before barging out the door.

The guys called after me, but it was too late.

I trailed her closely as she weaved in and out of traffic a little faster and carelessly than she should have been. I honestly didn’t know how she drove in those ridiculous things she called shoes, but that was an argument for another day. Despite how much I hated those heels, I couldn’t stop my mind as it wandered to thoughts of her riding me wearing nothing else but those damn things.

I knew I should hate her mouthing off at me daily, but in all honesty, I didn’t. All I seemed to think about was how beautiful that smart fucking mouth would look as she gagged on my cock. I’m already rock hard at the thought of it.

I didn’t know who she thought she was, agreeing to a date with another guy while she’s fucking engaged to me.

She signalled off the freeway, I never took my eyes off her car as she turned into the car park of a prestigious restaurant in the heart of town. She shut off her engine as I parked up on the other side. She almost had to jump out of the car since it was a little higher off the ground than any of mine. I pulled out my phone and dialled her number. The phone illuminated her face but as she soon realised it was my number that flashed up on her screen, her slender finger stabbed the reject button before she shoved it back in her clutch bag.

I’m not fucking having that.

Who does she think she is?!

I didn’t think I’ve ever moved so damn fast in all my life; I was on her before she’d even had time to lock her car.

“Is that how you treat your fiancé?” I smirked.

“What the hell are you doing here?!” she snapped, her face still perfect even though she looked murderous.

“Answer my question, Anastacia.” I smiled as I trailed my finger along her clenched jawline.

“I don’t need to explain myself to you! If I want to ignore your calls, then I will!” She sneered as she tried to get away.

I gripped her waist and pulled her body flush to mine. The warmth of her minty breath mingled with my own, and I had to stop myself from devouring her right here, right now.

“Not so fast.” I tucked my head into her neck as I inhaled her heavenly scent. “There is no fucking way you’re about to go on a date. You’re mine, and the sooner you realise that, the better.”

“I’m not yours. How many times do you need to be told? Do I need to spell it out for you?” She laughed.

“Do you think this is fucking funny? I’ll turn your ass pink if you carry on speaking to me like a damn child!” I whispered as I ran my tongue along her neck.

“Stop acting like one, then!” She pushed me off her as she sauntered towards the restaurant.

I caught up to her quickly since her two strides matched my one.

“Anastacia, get back in the car and go home!” I ordered.

“I have plans. Ones you aren’t going to piss on!” she replied with smugness.

“I wouldn’t be so sure of that if I were you,” I snapped as I stormed towards the entrance of the restaurant until her voice stopped me in my tracks.

“You know what? Be my guest.” She smiled as I caught sight of her over my shoulder. It was the kind of smile that left me a little unsettled, but I no longer cared.

Entering the restaurant, I scanned the tables, looking for Anastacia’s date, but there was nobody single around. The restaurant was nearly deserted.

“Lorenzo, Ana never said she invited you this evening.” It was in that moment I heard a familiar voice; one I knew all too

well.

Victor.

I turned around, only to be met by five pairs of eyes trained on me. Victor, Florence, Miles, and two elderly ladies I hadn't met yet.

"That's because I didn't." Her soft, angelic voice sounded from behind me.

Victor stood up as he greeted his daughter with love and adoration. He wrapped his arms around her as he kissed her delicately on the head. Her carved lips turned up into a breathtaking smile as she allowed her father to hold her for a moment. I couldn't understand why she didn't just tell me who she was meeting. Maybe she just loved pissing me off a whole lot more recently. It was fun.

For now, anyway.

"Lorenzo, would you like to join us?" Florence asked from the other side of the table.

"I don't want to intrude. You all enjoy your evening." I smiled before turning my attention to Anastacia. "Ana, I'll see you at home." I nodded as I turned on my heel to leave.

"Not so fast, young man." The unknown voice stopped me instantly. "I told my granddaughter I wanted to get to know her fiancé and what better time than now." She smiled genuinely.

"Please, I—" I began.

"I won't take no for an answer. Sit your backside down beside me right now." She laughed.

It was right then that I knew exactly where Anastacia got her attitude from. This lady was fiery. I glanced over at the woman who infuriated and intrigued me all at the same time as she nodded her head with a gentle smile on her lips.

"I'm Evelina, Victor's mother," she said as she patted the seat beside her. "This is Marilyn, Victor's aunt."

“It’s a pleasure to meet you both this evening,” I replied. Relaxation slowly crept in.

As I sat down beside Evelina, my eyes moved to Anastacia lowering herself gracefully into the seat opposite me.

Why was I searching for her?

Why did I care where she sat?

The rest of the meal went by smoothly as Evelina spoke about her life as much as she asked about mine. Anastacia spent time catching up with Miles, Marilyn, and her parents. The love she had for her family was second to none. She was so at ease when she was around them despite the ups and downs her and Victor might have, she still looked up to him, and I admired that. Her eyes shone with brightness as she spoke, laughed, and joked with them. It made me wonder if someday she might look at me like that.

Do I even want that?

Why am I so torn between wanting her and not?

“So, Evelina, may I ask what’s the occasion for this evening?” I asked.

“Today is the anniversary of my husband’s death,” she whispered, her eyes brimming with tears.

“I’m so sorry. I shouldn’t have intruded,” I apologised.

“Please don’t apologise. It’s been wonderful having you here,” she said softly as she squeezed my hand. “Aleksander would have approved of you; he would have had some stern words to say regarding our beautiful girl, but he would have liked you.” She smiled.

“That means a lot, thank you.” And it did mean a lot, but it also hurt a little, and I wasn’t one to get hurt easily.

I hadn’t exactly treated Anastacia right since we met, and hearing Evelina say how much her husband would have liked me was a hard thing to swallow especially because I was treating their granddaughter like she was nothing. Originally, she was, but with each passing day, it was getting harder to see her as that. Her presence was known all over the house. If it

wasn't her angelic laugh, it was her intoxicating scent, and when it wasn't that it was the way she put me in my place many, many times. The list was endless, and it would continue to grow.

"Shall we move on?" Victor asked as he broke my train of thought.

"Yes," Anastacia answered.



I followed Anastacia to their final destination, which just so happened to be the graveyard. Her grandfather was placed in a family plot. I stood beside my car and watched her from afar. It was a rare moment to see Victor and his family out without security, but this time was precious no matter how vulnerable they might be.

I noticed Miles walk Florence and Marilyn to the car as Victor made his way to where I was waiting, leaving Ana and Evelina alone.

"They were incredibly close. Anastacia was the apple of his eye," Victor spoke softly.

"Wasn't that spot reserved for his wife?" I questioned.

"He adored my mother and Miles." He took a quick breath. "But he had a special place in his heart for Anastacia. I taught her well, but he was something else. He taught her everything she knows." He smiled.

"I heard remarkable things about your father. She was in good hands." I smiled.

"Indeed, she was. His weapon of choice became hers." He spoke in hushed tones.

"Trust me, I know," I tutted.

"Oh?" He sounded confused.

“Your darling daughter tried to slit my throat the other night.” I laughed.

“Of course she did. It will take her some time. Her life has changed drastically. We can’t just expect her to accept it no matter how much we push her to.” He sighed.

“I don’t understand,” I asked.

“That’s a story for another day. Maybe one she should tell you.” He smiled.

“That’s if she ever opens up enough.” I scoffed.

“Lorenzo, I have a feeling you aren’t exactly innocent in this partnership.” He sighed. “But beneath her attitude towards you, she’s still a woman who wants nothing more than to be loved even if she denies it.”

“I don’t think she will ever accept love between us. I don’t know if I will,” I replied.

“Only time will tell, and you have plenty of that.” He patted my shoulder. “Oh, but Lorenzo?”

“Yes?”

“The next time you think about marking my daughter’s neck, don’t,” he warned.

“That was—” I stumbled.

“I don’t care what it was. Don’t fucking do it again unless you want to sleep six feet under.” He smiled sinisterly before he walked back over to his mother and Ana.

Victor placed his arm around Evelina as she sobbed into his blazer, then I realised Anastacia had nobody to comfort her as she slowly broke down at her grandfather’s graveside. Without thinking, my feet moved instantly towards her. Seeing her break down stirred something in me. I felt like I needed to protect her somehow. As I stood behind her, I could hear the breathless sobs leaving her lips, and it hurt me. I placed my arms around her as I pulled her into me. I could have been imagining it, but when I held her, she seemed to relax.

“I’m right here,” I whispered unexpectedly.

Her hands clutched my forearm. It might have been the first time we had been this close without her trying to kill me or me trying to rip her clothes off. We stood in silence for however long until Anastacia wriggled free from my hold to place a single white rose on the gravestone.

“I love you,” she whispered. “You are and always will be my sunshine.”

We wandered back towards the cars in silence as I walked her back to hers.

“Are you okay to drive home?” I asked because I was genuinely worried.

“I’ll be okay. I need to drop my grandmother back as well.” She smiled, but it was dull.

“Okay, I’ll meet you at home.” I smiled as she then helped her grandmother into the passenger seat.

There was no way I would meet her at home. I would tail her to make sure she was okay. For no other reason than to make sure she got home safely.



We pulled up into the garage, and I knew I should prepare myself for the mouthful I was about to receive about following her home, about crashing her family meal, and most probably holding her at the graveyard, but when she appeared before me, there was none of what I was expecting.

“Thank you for tonight.” She smiled softly.

“It’s fine, don’t get used to it though. I felt sorry for you,” I replied.

“I don’t need your pity; I don’t need you to hold me either. I managed just fine before you.” She huffed as she made her way towards the house.

Well fucking done, dickhead.

I followed her inside as she walked past most of my men that still occupied the kitchen. Red, Gino, and Emmet said nothing, their eyes firmly on me as I entered the room. It was a shame that couldn't be said for some of the other members of my team. They watched her every single move right until she left the kitchen.

“Get back to work,” I snapped.

“Really, Boss? You're talking about work right now? You're not going to follow that pretty little thing upstairs and pound her pussy?” Joey smirked. “I know I would.” He laughed, and something inside me snapped.

I snatched the gun from my waistband and aimed it directly at Joey's head. Without thinking, I pulled the trigger, and his brain decorated the wall behind him. I slammed the gun on the counter as the men looked at me in shock while some of the others were stunned to silence.

“Nobody, and I repeat fucking nobody speaks about Anastacia that way! She is my fiancée, and she will be treated with the same amount of respect as you treat me. Do I make myself clear?”

Silence.

“I said, do I make myself clear?!” I roared.

“Boss.”

“Good. You three, dispose of that sorry excuse of a man. I'll be back shortly,” I ordered to Gino, Emmet, and Red.

“You got it,” Red replied.

I stormed out of the kitchen and made my way towards Ana's bedroom. I tried to calm the anger within me, but I couldn't. Hearing one of my most trusted men speak about Ana in that way was enough to send me murderous, and that was my warning to all the others.

I tapped Anastacia's door but there was no response, so I tapped again a little louder. Last time I entered without her permission, she tried to kill me, and if I was not careful

tonight, this could be round two. I entered slowly and carefully as I noticed the bedside lamp was still dimly lit. I stepped closer to her bed, and there she was, tucked up beneath the covers. Her hair fanned the pillow as her tear-stained cheeks finally looked peaceful. I sat down on the edge of the bed before I turned my attention to her.

“I’m sorry, Anastacia.” I sighed as I ran my fingers through her hair. I had to admit, being in her presence even though she was asleep soothed me.

“I haven’t treated you the way you deserve, and I know that. Maybe if I stop acting like a dick, you might be able to find me tolerable. And maybe if you stop having such a smart mouth, I’ll be able to tolerate you too.” I laughed quietly.

I stood up before I pulled the covers up around her a little more. She snuggled into them as she clutched my hand that lingered by the covers. I couldn’t deny I felt more than I was letting on in that moment. I stilled for a second, unsure what to do until I finally realised, I had to let go. She didn’t mean to hold onto me the way she was.

I had rules before I met Anastacia.

Rules before she moved in.

And the same rules I wanted to follow even after we said those famous two words at the altar.

But...

Rules are made to be broken, right?



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Anastacia

WHEN I WOKE UP THIS MORNING, I SMELT LORENZO'S cologne lingering in my room, a scent that toyed with my thoughts. A scent that made me want to hate him but also made me crave him.

What is wrong with me?!

Had he been in here again without my permission?

Was he okay? Did he need something?

Why did I even care?!

I thought we made a little progress yesterday evening when he comforted me, only for him to fuck it up by saying he just felt sorry for me. I couldn't understand why he blew so hot and cold all the damn time! I'd done nothing wrong, except maybe try to kill him, but that was a minor detail, right?

I slid my legs into my sweat shorts on the chair and threw on a plain white T-shirt before I headed downstairs to the kitchen. Despite his attitude when we arrived home yesterday, I was determined to make amends for everything that had transpired between us since we met. We were getting married within a few weeks and we should at least be friendly, shouldn't we?

I toyed around with Lorenzo's fancy coffee machine; I wasn't actually sure how he drank his coffee, but maybe I'd start with something simple for now.

I let the coffee fill the cup as my phone vibrated in my back pocket. I grinned when I noticed it was Robin, which also

meant it could be Tay too since they lived with one another.

“You’re up early.” I laughed.

“Tay’s brother is here, and you know how he is in the morning.” Robin yawned.

“How is Jack doing?” I inquired.

“Like any other five year old... lively.” She sighed.

“Why don’t you bring him over today with Tay?” I questioned, in hopes she would agree so I could finally have some girl time.

“That sounds awesome! Will Lorenzo mind?” she asked.

“He’s out today, according to Emmet. Come over at lunchtime.” I smiled.

“Perfect, I’ll see you soon! I love you!” she squealed as I hung up the phone and returned my focus to Lorenzo’s coffee.

I retrieved a small tray from the cabinet and loaded on his coffee, a sugar dish, milk, and a spoon. Maybe it was a little excessive, but I wanted him to know I was making an effort, and I thought he would want too as well. If things went south and he felt the need to open that vile mouth of his, he could always wear the coffee instead of drinking it.

I made my way to his bedroom and tapped on the door loud enough to be heard but there was no response. I confidently entered without his permission as I half expected him to still be asleep, but he was nowhere to be seen. I placed the tray on the dresser by the window.

“Is that coffee for me?” Lorenzo asked in a low voice from behind me.

I turned as I locked eyes with the man who stood before me in only a towel sitting low on his hips. I couldn’t help but notice the water as it trickled down his body fresh from the shower.

“Anastacia?” he asked.

“Sorry, yes, the coffee is for you.” I smiled. “Think of it as a thank you for last night, that’s all. Don’t read too much into

it,” I replied.

“That’s quite a thank you.” He smirked.

“Not really, it’s just a coffee.”

“It’s more than that. You brought everything up here so I could drink it exactly the way I like it.” He smiled that cocky smile.

He closed the distance between us almost instantly, his body suddenly towering over mine.

“How about I teach you how to make my coffee?” he asked as he spun me around to face the tray.

“What do I look like to you?” I scoffed.

“You look like my fiancée. Now, add in half a spoonful of sugar,” he ordered.

“Bite me,” I snapped quietly.

“I plan to,” he whispered against my ear. “Be a good girl and add in half a spoonful of sugar.”

He slowly trailed his fingertips down my bare arm as he took my hand in his. He moved them both in sync over to the sugar bowl before spooning in his required amount. He continued guiding me like a puppet as we reached for the milk, letting a small amount fall into the cup. He picked up the spoon and slowly stirred his coffee.

“That’s how your fiancé likes his coffee in the morning,” he whispered against my skin.

“This was a one-time thing; it will never happen again.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that. Don’t you want to please your man?” he asked, his lips trailing up my neck as he spoke.

“No, I have no desire to please you,” I replied.

“We’ll see about that, won’t we?” He spun me around. His gaze burned into mine and I couldn’t deny the chemistry I felt, despite him being a complete and utter dick.

His fingers toyed with the waistband of my shorts. How could this feel so wrong but so fucking right at the same time?

Lorenzo lifted me with ease as I wrapped my legs around his waist. His lips crashed against mine, and I lost myself in the moment as I felt his cock hardening. I was at a loss for words at how a simple kiss could make me forget everything that had happened.

“Lorenzo—” I moaned against his lips.

“What do you want, Anastacia?” he panted.

“I need to go. I can’t do this.” I sighed breathlessly.

“Can you tell me this feels wrong and that you don’t want me to fuck you senseless?” he whispered against my ear.

“I—” I stumbled.

“You can’t, can you?” he murmured seductively.

“I don’t want it. This is a mistake,” I mumbled as I broke free from his hold. I wouldn’t give in to temptation as easily as he expected me to. My mind might have wanted me to stay, but my heart told me to go.

I hurried out of his bedroom without looking back. I couldn’t bring myself to see the hate probably marring his perfect face.

What the fuck was that?

What was I playing at?!

The urge to kill him had subsided, and that was only since he showed me a little comfort last night, showed me he isn’t as heartless as he made out to be. The question I now couldn’t stop asking myself was—will we ever become something more than lust and burning desire? Could I learn to love him? Could he ever love me?

Only time will tell.



As I sat outside by the lake with Robin, Tay, and Jack, I finally felt as though I was back at home, even though this was anything but a home right now.

“Auntie Ana, why is this house so big?” Jack asked, making us giggle. “Does one man need such a big house?”

“There are others that live here too.” I smiled.

“That’s so cool! What are they like?” he pried.

“Everyone is very friendly. Only one of them is a little mean.” I winked.

“I’ll knock that meanness right out of him!” he growled as he balled his fists.

“I don’t think so,” Tay warned.

“You’re mean, too.” He stuck out his tongue before he ran off to explore.

“Be careful!” I called after him.

“I will!”

Tay and Robin turned their attention back to me. The look of excitement in their eyes filled me with dread. I knew they wanted me to tell them how wonderful everything was, how wrong I was about him and this situation.

“So, spill!” Robin clapped.

“There’s nothing to spill, it’s awful.”

“Awful? Really?” Robin questioned.

“Yes, I hate it here. He’s a vile man with no manners.”

“I can’t say I was impressed with his attitude in the club.” Tay rolled her eyes when she finished her sentence.

“I’ve already tried to slit his throat.” I sighed as I rubbed my temple.

“I take it you didn’t succeed?” Robin laughed.

“He’s still here, isn’t he?” I said in a short, clipped tone.

“What a shame.” Tay scoffed.

“My thoughts exactly.”

“I know he didn’t exactly win us over with his first impressions at the club that night, but I’ve thought about it, and I think he was just being protective.” Robin smiled.

“There is being protective and then there is being an ass.” Tay seethed.

“Tay, that’s enough. We haven’t even met Lorenzo properly; we can’t judge yet.” Robin folded her arms across her chest as she narrowed her eyes at her.

“That man has a lot of work to do before he becomes worthy of our girl, that’s all.” She picked at her nail polish as she tried her best to ignore Robin’s irritated looks.

“I know you didn’t expect to get on straight away but maybe just give it some time, you know?” Robin was right. She always saw the best in people even when others couldn’t. “Has anything happened since you’ve moved in?”

“Like what?” I couldn’t hide the surprise in my voice.

“Please tell me you haven’t fucked him yet.” Tay wrinkled her nose and shook her head in disgust.

“No, we haven’t fucked yet! Please give me some credit.” I sighed. “We have kissed... twice.” I hid my face in embarrassment.

“What?! When?! Tell us everything!” Robin squealed.

“The first time he called it a mistake, he kissed me out of anger.”

“Excuse me? He called you a mistake. What the hell is wrong with this man?” Tay was angry, and that usually took quite a lot.

“He called the kiss a mistake, not me.”

“He better fucking not have done or I’ll come for him myself.” I knew Tay would never but the fact that she cared enough made me adore her even more.

“What about the second kiss?” Robin asked.

“The second was this morning, and as much as I enjoyed the kiss, I stopped it.” I lay back on the grass as the coolness soothed my warm skin.

“Ana, this relationship isn’t exactly what you dreamt of for yourself, we know that. But maybe you two will learn to love one another.” Robin laid down beside me as she linked her hand in mine.

“And what if we never do? What if all we do is play this damn game of cat and mouse until we end up killing one another.”

“I may not be his biggest fan and I doubt many are, but if anyone can change his mind on love and relationships, it’s you.” Tay smiled as she twisted my hair around her finger.

“But I know nothing about love and relationships. I’m not exactly an expert on it.”

“Then you can help each other,” Robin soothed.

“We’ll see.” I sighed as Jack came bounding over to us.

“Auntie Ana, can you take me to the bathroom?” he pleaded.

“Of course, let’s go.” I pushed myself up from the grass as he took my hand.

Jack only had Tay and their mother; his father left when he turned one. Her mother and mine were friends so they spent many nights and weekends at our house. Jack was like a little brother to me, and hearing him call me Auntie Ana warmed my heart tremendously.

“Hey Ana, who’s this little dude?” I realised who it was before I even turned around.

Red.

“This is Jack, he’s my friend’s little brother.” I smiled as Jack waved at Red.

“Nice to meet you, Jack. I’m Red.” He beamed.

“Wait? Like your hair?”

“Exactly like my hair. It’s cool, huh?” Red patted the bun that sat on top of his head and laughed as Jack nodded his head enthusiastically.

“Auntie Ana, do you think my mommy would let me do that?” he asked as his deep hazel eyes stared up at me.

“Maybe when you’re older.” I ruffled his hair as he pumped his fist in happiness.

“Ana, have you seen Lorenzo?” Red quizzed.

“Not since this morning. Sorry.”

“I’ve got some jobs to do anyway. I’ll see you this evening.” He waved goodbye to Jack and flashed me his friendly smile before he left through the garage.

“He was cool! Now, where is the little boys room?”

“It’s just this corridor. We have to count five doors and then we will reach it.”

“I can count five doors; I can go alone.” He smiled as he ran off down the corridor

“Okay, I’ll wait right here for you,” I called.

I sat on the bottom step of the stairs as I picked at the frayed knees of my jeans. The afternoon with the girls had been exactly what I needed. I knew Tay didn’t approve of Lorenzo and his actions, but Robin seemed to get it, and even if she didn’t, she hid it well.

“Anastacia, what are you doing here?” I wasn’t expecting Lorenzo to still be at home, but he must have been holed up in his office.

“I’m waiting for Jack.” It then dawned on me that he didn’t know who Jack was.

“Who the fuck is Jack?!” Lorenzo demanded, his voice getting louder with each word.

“That’s me. I’m Jack.” A usually quiet voice had been replaced with a confident one as Jack waved from behind my fiancé.

Lorenzo stilled for a moment, unsure of what he had just heard. He turned so he now stood by my side as he came face-to-face with an adorable five-year-old boy.

“You just said a swear word.” Jack scrunched his nose like his sister usually did when she was displeased and furrowed his brows.

“I just said a what?” The look on Lorenzo’s face was priceless. I had never seen him looked so surprised and confused at once.

“A swear word, you know, a really bad word.”

“Well, I am very sorry, little man.” *Did Lorenzo apologise or was I hearing things?*

“Do you have ice cream?” Jack smiled his cutest smile, the same one that caused his eyes to twinkle.

“Yes, I do. Why do you ask?” Lorenzo crouched down in front of Jack, a gentle smile touching lips.

“Well, I can forget the swear word if I can have some ice cream?” he whispered near Lorenzo’s ear and Lorenzo’s chuckle practically melted my damn heart.

Oh, shit...

I’m in trouble.

“Okay, sounds like a deal. How many scoops?”

“Well, I’m five so how about five?” Jack said.

Clever kid.

“Five sounds like a pretty good amount.” Lorenzo scooped a giggling Jack into his muscular arms as they made their way into the kitchen.

“Auntie Ana, come on!” Jack called through his laughter while Lorenzo galloped into the kitchen as he obviously pretended to be a horse.

“Yes, come on, Auntie Ana,” Lorenzo called after Jack.

I rolled my eyes as I felt the smile leave my lips and reach my eyes; it was the first genuine smile I’d had for Lorenzo.

Had someone asked me this morning how I would have envisioned Lorenzo today, I would never have pictured him with his crisp white shirt rolled up to his elbows, his top two buttons casually undone, exposing the top of his sculpted pecs as it was tucked into his deep blue Armani suit pants. I couldn't take my eyes off Lorenzo as he scooped endless flavours into an ice cream sundae glass before he decorated it with sprinkles, a chocolate flake, and a wafer. He slid it across the island to Jack.

"Auntie Ana, he has sprinkles! I like him!" He beamed through his gappy smile as he had recently lost a tooth.

"It's a good job she's marrying me then, isn't it, little man?" Lorenzo winked, and Jack looked about fit to burst.

"You two are getting married? That's amazing! Will there be ice cream? Can I come? Can I wear my hero costume?" Jack rambled question after question.

"Why don't you go and find your sister? I'll be out soon." I ruffled his hair as he carefully retrieved the creation that now captured his full attention.

I waited until he had exited through the double doors that led out to the lake. I heard him squeal with excitement as he made his way to where Robin and Tay basked in the sun.

"I never knew you had it in you to be such a softy."

"I don't." He scowled as he muttered something I couldn't work out under his breath.

"You could have fooled me. You melted faster than that ice cream did when Jack came around." Winding him up was too easy, his eyes narrowed quickly, and it didn't take long before I knew he'd had enough of me. "That was after you knew Jack was a child," I joked whilst I tried to contain my laughter as I remembered how he had reacted after he heard the name Jack.

"What was I supposed to think? You said you were waiting for Jack, so I thought—"

"You honestly thought I would bring another man into this house?"

“No, but—”

“But nothing. You should know by now if I wanted to fuck someone, I would do it far from here. I wouldn’t want my future husband to hear me moaning another man’s name.” I smirked as I waited patiently for his reaction.

“Mark my words, Anastacia, no other man will have you. No other man will call you his and no other man’s name will leave those perfect fucking lips.” Shit, he was angry and borderline territorial.

“Or else what?” I was playing with fire right now.

“I’d torture him painfully and slowly before I killed him, all before bringing him back to do it all over again.” A sinister smile played on his lips and my stomach turned a little. “What? You think I would let another man walk free after he fucked what’s mine?” He rounded the island before I was able to blink and had my chin trapped between his thumb and forefinger. “You think you know who you’re messing with, but you have no idea. I’ve allowed you to play your games up until now, but that stops today.” His tone was impassive as was his face. It lacked the previous emotion he showed just moments ago.

“I need to go.” I didn’t know why I couldn’t get more words out. Something about his domineering presence stopped me. It was the first time I had looked into his eyes, and speckles of gold danced within his caramel-coloured irises.

“Are you scared of me, Ana?” He cocked his head to the side as if he was trying to figure me out.

“I don’t have time for your games, Lorenzo. My friends are outside.”

“I don’t give a fuck; they can wait all damn day. I’m not finished.” His hands cupped my neck as his thumb gently caressed my cheek. If it was anyone else, I would have seen it as a romantic gesture, but since it was him, I figured it was anything but.

“That’s a shame because I am.” I gripped his wrist to move his hand away, the surge of electricity undeniable once again

but that meant nothing, *right?*

“Ana.” His voice softened as did his expression. Something that I was sure was a rare sight.

I hummed as I relaxed my cheek into his touch a little more.

“Boss.” I heard Emmet’s thick English accent from the doorway, which shattered whatever moment we were so lost in. “Sorry to interrupt, but we need to finalise tonight’s shipment. Are you good to go, or do you need a moment?”

“It’s okay. We’re done here.” I peeled Lorenzo’s hands from me as he let out a sigh before he put his impassive mask straight back in place.

Our gazes lingered for a moment, and something tugged at my heart, something strange, something unusual.

Something I had never felt before. Something I feared.



Hours had passed and the house was eerily silent. Lorenzo and his team were out for the shipment they had been planning. I poured myself a glass of Pinot noir and curled up on the sofa to enjoy my guilty pleasure movie, *Mamma Mia*. I had adored this movie since its release and usually watched it with my mother, but tonight, I sadly watched it alone.

I must have drifted off to sleep because I was awoken by the sound of the front door. I ignored it because Lorenzo had his keys, fob, and door code as did his men, and I knew they didn’t all forget them. My phone buzzed beside me as I saw a message flash up from Chad.

Chad: Open the door, I’m outside.

I didn't understand why he was here, let alone how he was allowed up the driveway since Lorenzo warned his men about him. I made my way to the front door, wearing only sweats and an oversized T-shirt I wasn't sure was even mine, but it was comfortable and that was all that mattered.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, a little taken aback by Chad's appearance this evening. His clothes were dishevelled, his dirty blonde locks were a mess, and his bright eyes lacked their usual spark.

"Is that anyway to greet your friend?" His face fell more than it originally was.

"Sorry, it's too late. I wasn't expecting anyone." I blocked the distance between the door and doorframe with my body. He could tell I wasn't impressed with his unexpected visit.

"I know it's late, and I apologise. I just needed to see a friendly face." He sighed.

"Why, what happened?" I was worried. He looked as though he carried the weight of the world on his shoulders.

"Can I come in?" he questioned, and I felt uneasy.

"I don't think that's a good idea. Nobody is home." That wasn't a lie. I was alone and even though Lorenzo was an ass, I knew he wouldn't appreciate Chad being alone with me in his home.

"You can't have friends over now?" he asked his brow furrowing instantly.

"Of course I can, but you and Lorenzo haven't exactly seen eye to eye since you've met, and I don't think he would appreciate—"

"Since when did you care what he appreciated?" He cut me off mid-sentence as he slammed his flattened palm against the door.

"Since I have to live under the same roof as him," I defended.

"I've had a shit day with your father. I could use my friend right now."

“Then you have me, but we will remain right here, and you’ll calm the fuck down.” There was no way I was allowing Chad to enter Lorenzo’s home regardless of whether he was here or not.

“I am calm. Your father has hired another man to work alongside me!” He seethed. “Does he not think I’m capable of doing my job?!” He ran his fingers through his hair before fisting them at his side.

“I have nothing to do with what my father does, but I know he thinks the world of you. He is a heavily targeted man, and if he requires more protection, then that’s his decision.” I rolled my eyes before I rubbed at my temple.

“I get that, I do, but—”

“But nothing. He took you in when you had nobody else. He puts the clothes on your back, he feeds you, and pays you a fucking hefty sum. If you don’t like it, then you know what to do.” I was tired, irritated, and ready to go to bed.

“Ana, please. The house isn’t the same since you left. I miss my friend.” His eyes glistened with tears, and I felt a stab of guilt in my gut.

“You knew it was going to happen sooner or later.”

“I didn’t expect it to happen before the wedding though. That wasn’t the plan.” He reached for me, but I stepped back slightly, something I’d never done before but suddenly everything seemed different.

“Sometimes plans change and that’s what happened here.” I sighed. “I think you need to leave.”

“Really? You want me to leave?”

“Yes, I do. You are my friend and you have been for many years, but you’re only here to talk about what went down between you and my father. You know I don’t involve myself in his business, because that’s what this is, his business.” I felt the tiredness creep in as I waited for his answer.

“As always, you’re right. I shouldn’t have come here to moan about your father.” He smiled half-heartedly. “We will

catch up at the engagement, right?” he asked with a glimmer of hope in his eyes.

“We will.” I smiled. “Go home. Tomorrow is a new day. Remember, my father sees you as family. No new team members are going to change that.”

“I know. I’ll see you in a couple of days for your party.” He tapped his knuckles on the door before he headed down the steps to his car.

I was halfway up the stairs when the door nearly swung off its hinges. I didn’t need to turn around to know it was Lorenzo. I could hear his expensive shoes clicking across the marble as he stormed towards me.

“What the fuck was he doing here?” He bellowed from behind me.

“Good evening, dear fiancé.” I didn’t turn around; I had no desire to.

“Anastacia, don’t get smart with me. Why was Chad here?” His voice was low, and once I reached the top of the stairs, I stopped.

“How did you know he was here?” I knew his men at the gate would have called him right away when Chad arrived despite his answer.

“It doesn’t fucking matter how I know! Tell me what he was doing here,” he screamed as he ascended up the stairs towards me.

“He came to see his friend, which is what I am.” I let out a slow and steady breath before I continued, “His friend.”

“I don’t want him in my fucking house, especially when you’re dressed in my fucking clothes!”

I turned around abruptly as my hair whipped my face. His nostrils flared as his eyes darkened in anger.

“Firstly, I didn’t know this was your T-shirt if that’s what you’re referring to, and secondly, he didn’t come inside! I didn’t allow him to!” I snapped, not in the mood for his shit this evening.

“Don’t lie to me! His smug fucking face said it all when our cars passed outside.” Although he was fuming, I couldn’t help but breathe him in. His shirt was untucked and unbuttoned, and blood stained the white material of his rolled-up sleeves as it tightened around his muscular arms.

“I don’t need to explain myself to you. I know what happened.” I glanced to the bottom of the stairs as Red, Emmet, and Gino joined us. They were all wearing worried expressions at what one of us would do.

“Yes, you do!” He backed me against the wall as my hip bumped into a glass table that housed a beautiful antique vase that soon smashed to the floor.

“No, I don’t! You can believe what you want to believe.” He flattened his palms to the wall behind me, and I welcomed the distance between our bodies.

“I believe he was in here; I can see it in your eyes.” He slammed his palm against the wall as I flinched slightly, something I’d barely ever done.

“I hope you also see the hate I have for you in them, because I do fucking hate you.” My fists collided with his chest, and all that bastard did was smile.

“You don’t hate me, you want me. I bet your pussy is soaking for me right now.” He smirked. “How about I check?”

“Put those hands anywhere near me and you’ll lose them!” I ducked under his arms and made my way down the stairs.

“Red, can you drive me home?” He looked defeated, as if I had punched him in the gut.

“Ana—”

“Don’t you fucking dare drive her home, Red!” Lorenzo called from the stairs.

My eyes met Red’s for a moment, and I knew I was fighting a losing battle, for he had to obey his boss.

“I’m so sorry, Ana, I can’t go against Lorenzo.” He diverted his gaze past me.

“I understand, thank you anyway.”

I didn't even bother to find my shoes as I headed towards the garage.

“Anastacia! You aren't leaving!” Lorenzo was on me in seconds. His large hands gripped my waist as he turned me to face him, his chest heaving. “Did you fuck him?”

“I can't stay here with someone who doesn't believe me.” As much as I wanted to look away, I couldn't. I didn't want him to know he got under my skin with each passing day. I wanted him to know he didn't intimidate me. “If I wanted to fuck Chad, I would have done it already when we lived under the same roof! But despite what you think of me, I was brought up and taught to only give myself to the man I was going to marry. Now I wished I never listened or obeyed!” I pulled myself away from him as I stormed out to the car. I never looked back because although I said I didn't care, deep down, his accusations hurt more than I would ever admit.

I would never allow anyone to break me.

Especially not this bastard.



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Lorenzo

SHE WALKED OUT THE DOOR BAREFOOT AND EMOTIONALLY hurt, and I did nothing to stop her.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?!” Red’s angry tone broke my thoughts. I knew I had fucked up; I didn’t need a lecture from the three men behind me.

Despite them working for me, they were my friends, and sometimes I needed to hear the shit they had to say.

“Follow her.” I didn’t turn my attention to Red; I didn’t need to see their angry and disappointed looks that burned holes into my back.

“You didn’t want me to drive her safely, but you want me to follow her? Prick.” Red barged past me as his shoulder knocked mine. I fisted his shirt to turn his attention to me.

“You might be her friend now, but don’t forget who you fucking work for!” I snapped as I let him go and shoved him stumbling backwards.

“No chance of that!” He retrieved his car keys from the locked drawer and rushed out towards the door.

“What the hell was that?” Gino asked as he finally invaded the kitchen, Emmet hot on his heels.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“How could you let her walk of here like that? Why didn’t you let Red drive her? Anything could happen to her, aren’t you bothered?” he snapped, and I could hear the concern in his voice as I realised what I had done.

“I didn’t think—”

“No, you didn’t, and now she thinks she’s marrying a man who will never believe her word over his own thoughts.” Emmet rubbed his temples as he allowed his eyes to close momentarily.

“Are you seriously just going to let her go home?” Gino asked.

“This is her home.”

“Then fucking show it! You treat her like she’s fucking nothing in this house when you’re the one who wanted her to move in! Yes, you’re my boss and my best friend but what you’re doing is wrong and you know it!” He slid a glass of bourbon across the island towards me as he downed his own. “I won’t stand here and watch you continue to treat her that way. She isn’t just some one-night stand, she’s going to be your wife and she should have your utmost respect.” Gino poured another glass before he knocked it back once more.

“Either you want her, or you don’t. What’s it going to be?” Emmet asked as he lowered himself into one of the chairs at the table.

“It’s none of your business.” I threw the tumbler at the furthest wall as it smashed into a thousand pieces.

“So, what, you’ll marry her and treat her this way forever? If you’re lucky, she’ll give you an heir and you’ll just act as though she doesn’t exist?” he calmly asked, which pissed me off even more than before.

“No, of course not!” I turned to face him as he cocked his head to the side.

“Then what? You need to make up your fucking mind. You hurt her emotionally most days, yet she still comes to check on you when you’re a drunk mess. You speak to her like shit, yet she still brings you a damn coffee.” Emmet leaned forward and placed his elbows on his thighs. I knew he was right and that hurt more than anything else.

“Do you think I enjoy fucking up?” I asked as they stared at me with wide eyes.

“It sure looks like it.” Gino scoffed.

Before I could respond, my phone vibrated in my pants pocket.

“Red.” My heart dropped a little as I waited to hear if she made it home.

“She’s home, safe and sound, no thanks to you. She drove like a bat out of hell the whole way,” he snapped on the other end. “Chad was there. He was smoking at the gate with a couple of other men. He looked happy to see her home.”

“Send a couple of men to keep an eye on that slippery fucker. I don’t trust him.”

“Just like you don’t trust Ana.” Red hung up before I had the chance to respond.

“I’m off to bed, it’s been a shitty night.” Emmet patted his thighs before he left Gino and I alone.

“It’s only just after ten,” Gino called after him, only to be met with silence.

“How do you really feel about Anastacia leaving tonight?” Gino asked. He rounded the island and gently placed his hand on my shoulder. “You can look at the door all you want, but she’s not coming back.”

“I know. I deserve all the shit she chooses to throw at me after the way I’ve acted over and over again.” I pinched the bridge of my nose before letting out a sigh, one I didn’t know I’d been holding. “That woman will never love me. Why the fuck would she?”

“Could you love her?” That was a million-dollar question, one I didn’t know the answer to.

Could I love her?

“No, whatever I feel with her is lust and nothing else.” I didn’t even know if I believed the shit spewing from my mouth right now.

“Before you’re honest with her or anyone else, you need to be honest with yourself.” He patted my shoulder before he headed to the front door. “I need to head back to the

warehouse and clean up the mess we left behind earlier.” And with that, he left me standing alone.

Tonight, we had caught someone spying on our newest shipment. They claimed it was nothing but wrong place, wrong time, but it didn’t sit right with me. There was more to it than that and once we tortured the shit out of him, he sang like a canary. He was recruited by some small-town gang that thought they had a chance against me. Little did they know, my men were already on their way to inflict the same level of pain that we’d carried out on their newest addition if not worse. I should have been with them, but when I heard that fucker was on my premises, I lost control. I couldn’t explain why. Something inside me snapped, and knowing he was with my woman caused me to see red.



I leaned back in my office chair. I hadn’t yet changed out of my blood-stained shirt, I was on my sixth glass of bourbon, and nothing was taking the edge off. Gino had informed that the warehouse was as it was before we got creative with the fucker we found earlier, and Finn let me know they’d took the gang leader to the lock up for me to have a little fun with tomorrow before I ended his life excruciatingly slow. I’d teach him exactly why they don’t fuck around with Lorenzo Ricci.

I flicked through my phone as I landed on Anastacia’s earlier messages. There was nothing new, but why would there be? I debated sending her a message ordering her to come home, but I doubt she would listen, and I was in no position to order her to do anything if ever again. As I was about to down another glass, I noticed the three dots dancing on the screen. Ana was typing something and part of me panicked since I didn’t know what to expect from her anymore. I watched impatiently as the dots continued to taunt me until it suddenly

stopped altogether. I kept waiting for her to continue what she was obviously writing, but there was nothing.

I've fucked up this time.

“Son?” The familiar voice of my father came from the other side of the door along with his tapping against the wood.

“Come in, Pa.” I toyed with the tumbler between my thumb and middle finger as my father entered.

“Haven’t you heard of a light?” He scoffed as I knew the only light he could see was the lit cigarette in the ashtray. He flicked the switch by the door which illuminated the room instantly.

“Did you have to?” I moaned as my eyes adjusted to the brightness.

My father stood before me in his casual attire, charcoal grey slacks, a cream cable knit jumper rolled up to his elbows, and his polished Oxfords. His Rolex sat pretty on his wrist as it caught my eye once he folded his arms across his chest.

“Want to tell me what the hell happened?” he asked as he lowered himself into the chair opposite me.

“Nothing happened.” I polished off my drink as the amber liquid burned my throat, a feeling I welcomed.

“Not according to Victor who happened to be rather surprised when his only daughter burst through his front fucking door with no fucking shoes on.” He might have remained calm, but I knew deep down, he wanted to knock me through the window behind me. “You have no idea how long it took me to calm him down. He was so damn close to calling off the wedding. I wouldn’t have blamed him either.”

“Couples have arguments, don’t they?” I smirked, hoping he would mind his own business, but that was something my father wasn’t used to.

“Except you aren’t really a couple, are you? You put Victor in an uncomfortable position when you informed him Anastacia would be moving in here and you know you didn’t have to, but in true Lorenzo fashion, you did whatever you

wanted as usual.” He strummed his fingers on the arm of the chair as his disappointed gaze met mine.

“I know I didn’t have to but—”

“I know you and I know you probably haven’t treated her with an ounce of respect since you ordered her to stay here, have you?” he interrupted me and he had every right, because he knew what I was like. He was the same until he met Mom.

“I fucked up more than once, and yes, she probably hates me, and God knows I deserve it. Every time she tries to extend an olive branch or make amends, I fuck it up again.”

“We all fuck up, son, it’s part of who we are. We can’t be perfect no matter how much we try to be.” He leaned forward in his chair as he kept his eyes trained on mine. “Your mother and I—”

“You and Ma weren’t arranged. You met her unexpectedly,” I interrupted.

Arranged or not, I love her.” He ran his fingers through his hair. “Just as you’ll love Anastacia.”

“I shouldn’t feel this way about her. I wasn’t supposed to.” I sighed as I leant my head against the back of the chair.

“Feel what way?”

“I wanted to hate the woman you’ve tied me to, but she does everything in her power to stop that happening. Up until now, she’s taken all the shit I’ve said to her, and she always gives as good as she gets, but tonight...” I breathed before I continued, “Tonight was different. I saw the defeat in her eyes when I said things I shouldn’t have.” I slammed my fist onto the desk as my father raised his brow at my actions.

“Tell me something. Why did you comfort Anastacia at her grandfather’s grave?” he asked, a small smile playing on his lips.

“How do you know about that?” My money was on Victor.

“Victor called me this evening to discuss a few things and we got to talking about you and Anastacia.” He made his way over to the liquor cabinet to fix himself a drink.

“She was upset, and I’ll tell you the exact same thing I told her too—I felt sorry for her, that’s all.” I snorted.

My father slammed his glass down on the counter beside the cabinet.

“You really are something else, aren’t you?”

“Thank you, I appreciate it.” I crossed my ankle across my knee and smirked which angered him to no end.

“That wasn’t a fucking compliment, believe me.” He seethed. “I’ve lost count of how many times I’ve told you; Anastacia is a good girl.”

“She tried to fucking slit your son’s throat and you’re now telling me she’s a good girl?!” I laughed.

“That’s a small mishap. She wouldn’t have done it and you know it.” He leant against my desk as he continued, “She is a special girl; she’s been raised right. You are an absolute dickhead to hurt her, or worse, to let her go like you did tonight. Stop fighting your feelings if you’re feeling anything at all and start being honest and treating her with the respect and possible love she deserves.” He pushed himself off the desk and patted my back. “Think about what I’ve said. It will work wonders for you.” He nodded his head before he left me alone, no longer in the dark, although it sure felt like it.



Today was a new day and I’d arrived at the lock up earlier than planned to teach a certain gang member a lesson. I had to admit when I left the house this morning, I missed the disgusted stare I normally received from Anastacia, the house was too fucking quiet too, and her laughter had disappeared.

“Boss, you’re early,” Emmet called from the other side as he toyed with our newest captive.

“Get the fuck off me! I’ll skin the lot of you alive,” he screamed as his body fought against the chains that suspended his arms above his head.

“That seems a little premature, doesn’t it, Ryker?” I laughed as I stepped closer to him. The fear crept into his beady little eyes.

“What do you want?!” As he spoke, blood sprayed from his mouth.

“I want you to tell me how you think you stood a chance against me to fuck up my damn shipment.” I gripped his face as blood trickled down his chin from an earlier beating.

“I won’t tell you shit.”

“I don’t care what you do. Your life ends today regardless,” I whispered loud enough for him to hear, the menacing tone in my voice apparent. “But I think we’ll have a little fun before that happens.” I laughed a throaty laugh as Emmet joined in.

“It was just a stupid prank, a bet!” he screamed as Emmet handed me a blowtorch.

“Why?” I strummed my finger against my lips as my weapon of choice came alive in my hand.

“No reason. We wanted to see if we could get away with it, sell a few weapons, make some cash.” His wrists bled beneath the chains as he tried to cower away.

“Bet you’re regretting that decision now, aren’t you?” I stepped closer to Ryker who eyed the flames. The look of fear was something I thrived off.

Prank or not, this man was ready to fuck me over, and I didn’t take that lightly. A sinister smile played on my lips as I ran the blue flames along his inner bicep, his screams of pain echoing through the lock up walls as did Emmet’s laughter. The smell of burning flesh filled my nostrils as Ryker fought back tears.

“Let me redeem myself. I’ll work for you!” he shouted in pain as he resisted the urge to gag at his own stench.

“I think it’s cute you think I would ever allow a lowlife scumbag like you to work for me, someone who I met as he tried to fuck me over.” I ran the flames along his other inner bicep as I watched it slowly burn off what looked like a self-made tattoo.

“Please! I’ll prove myself to you!” he cried as I threw the torch down onto the concrete floor. I physically saw the relief wash over his body as he sagged against his restraints.

“Don’t tell me you’ve had enough? I’m just getting started.” I laughed menacingly.

“Please, let me go. I’ll never step foot near you again.” Tears finally left his eyes, and not once did I feel an ounce of remorse.

“You’ve changed your tune.” I wandered around his hanging body, torture techniques playing on mind. “Just for your information, I’ll be the one doing the skinning.” I removed my knife from my waistband and sliced a layer of skin from his back as he cried out for me to stop.

I stopped before him and held up the piece of flesh that finally caused him to gag before he projectile vomited on the floor in front of me.

“I thought you could stomach a lot more than this. You disappoint me.” I turned my attention to Emmet who was happily watching from the corner. “What about you, Emmet, do you agree?”

“I expected a lot more from a man who thinks he can go head-to-head with Lorenzo fucking Ricci.” He eyed the glowing cigarette in his hand.

“Be my guest.” I knew what he wanted to do.

Emmet stalked over to where we stood and stubbed out his cigarette on Ryker’s cheek, and the sizzling against his skin was like music to my ears as were the sobs.

“Hope that didn’t hurt too much.” Emmet shoved the cigarette end into Ryker’s mouth. “Swallow it.”

Ryker didn't comply as he spat the end out into his puke. *How charming.* Emmet didn't seem to care as he retrieved the vomit-covered cigarette before he shoved it forcefully back into Ryker's mouth.

"He said, fucking swallow it." Emmet covered our captive's mouth with his hand to assure it didn't happen again as we watched him force down his only meal of the day.

"Good boy." I patted his freshly burnt cheek as I patronised him much to his disgust.

"Now, where shall we go next?" I pondered as I placed my bloody knife against my lips.

I teased my blade along his side as I agonisingly sliced off another layer of his skin. My ears welcomed his screams once more. I tossed what was in my hand over my shoulder and sliced another layer from his chest, over his heart to be precise.

"Please let me go. I'll never come near you or your shipments again," he panted through the pain.

"Normally, I'm an extremely forgiving man, but not today. Unfortunately for you, today, I'm in a foul mood." I spun my blade between my fingers as I toyed with him a little more. "I'll tell you what, I'll give you a choice of where you want me to go next."

"Nowhere! Please, nowhere!" he pleaded.

I continued slicing off parts of his skin until he passed out beneath my blade. Blood soaked his khaki pants as his body was tinged red all over. I stepped back to admire my handiwork. By then, he looked like a damn jigsaw.

"Creative," Emmet joked as he elbowed my arm.

"Why, thank you, I think I'd have to agree with you on that one." I walked over to Ryker whose chin rested against his bloody chest. I pulled out his tongue and cleaned my knife before tucking it back into my waistband.

"What do you want me to do with him when he comes back around?" Emmet asked as he lit another cigarette, the

smell of smoke and blood filled the air, and it was a glorious fucking smell.

“Whatever you want, just finish him and then get Red to dispose of him in one of his fucked-up ways.” I winked before I left Emmet alone to deal with that in one of the many ways he knew how.

As I made it to the car, I saw a couple of missed calls from my mother before the screen jumped into action with her caller ID once more.

“Good afternoon, Ma.”

“Finally. Where have you been?” She sounded stressed, something that was new for her.

“I had some business to deal with. What can I do for you?”

“I’ve been with Florence all morning. The engagement party is all set and ready to go tomorrow evening. You just need to turn up on time with the ring you’re giving to Anastacia. You have it, right?”

“I have it right here in the car.” I reached over into the glove compartment and pulled a black velvet box that housed a pretty engagement ring. I stared down at it for a moment in my blood-stained hand and realised that was all it was. *Pretty.*

She deserves more than pretty, doesn't she?

Fuck it, it will do.

“What the hell is it doing in your car?!” Her tone changed instantly.

“It’s safe. Calm down before you pop a vein,” I teased.

“Lorenzo, you’re lucky that she’s even agreeing to turn up tomorrow after all the shit I’m pretty sure you’ve pulled,” she snapped, and I wondered if Anastacia had told her whole fucking family about what happened between us.

“What did she say?” I quizzed eagerly.

“She didn’t say anything. Florence just mentioned Anastacia was happy to be home, but I know exactly what

you're like. You'll present Anastacia that ring tomorrow night and you'll be on your best behaviour, nothing less."

"Why does she even need a ring?" I didn't even love the woman, she didn't need a ring, she probably wouldn't even want to wear it.

"Because she's your fiancée. Honestly Lorenzo, you really know how to test my patience, especially today." She let out an exasperated sigh.

"Fine, I'll give her the fucking ring." I clutched the steering wheel as thoughts of me sliding a ring on her finger flashed through my mind. "Ma?"

"Yes?"

"Did you see her today?" Not that I cared or at least I didn't think I did, but I wanted to know.

"Briefly. She greeted me when I first arrived but that glow she had the night you met her had dimmed slightly. Did you upset her?" *Yes, I did.*

"No, we just don't see eye-to-eye, that's all." I pulled into my space in the garage and shut off the engine.

"Don't lie to me." Her stern voice had taken over and she was in full mother mode now.

"We're getting to know one another, that's all. I fucked up." I slammed my hand against the wheel as I relived the words I spoke to Ana before she left. How I let her walk away without trying to stop her.

"This doesn't have anything to do with a certain blonde man, right?" She hedged, and my heart sank.

"What the fuck has Chad fucking Williams got to do with it?" I seethed.

"That boy was on the lookout for her all damn morning, but Victor had plans that involved himself and Anastacia, so Chad didn't exactly get a look in." That calmed me a little.

"He came over the house to see her last night, and I accused her of fucking him. She tried to correct me, but I

didn't believe her." I never realised how bad it sounded until I said it out loud.

"I don't know what you think you know or what she's told you, but she's a damn angel compared to you. Florence and Victor raised her to become your wife, to be able to defend herself as well as you if you needed it. To love and respect you as long as you showed her the exact same. She's your equal and nothing less." She let out a deep breath as everything she said hit me like a tonne of bricks.

"I've shown her none of that." Guilt washed over me instantly, and even though she was on the other end of the phone, she knew.

"Please don't beat yourself up over this. You haven't shown her those things, but that doesn't mean you can't. The only thing stopping you is yourself and that's something you can easily change."

It was time to fix the mess I'd made.



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Anastacia

TONIGHT, WAS THE NIGHT OF MY ENGAGEMENT PARTY. MOST of the day had been a blur. Hairdressers and make-up artists swarmed the house to get my mother, Robin, Tay, my brother's wife, Loreta, and myself ready. I would rather do my own hair and make-up, but my mother was having none of it.

"How are you feeling, Ana?" Loreta asked from the seat she'd been sat in to have her hair styled.

"Fine." I played with my nails as I couldn't bring myself to look her in the eye.

"Just fine? Aren't you excited?" Her face glowed with the same excitement I should have.

"Does she look like she wants to get engaged to that piece of—" Tay piped up from the corner chair, her hair already neatly styled into a chignon at the nape of her neck.

"All right, that's enough." My mother appeared in the doorway. "Can I get five minutes alone with my daughter?" She ushered everybody out.

"The ladies are ready to start your hair and make-up." She sat beside me on the bed as I picked at a loose thread on my comforter.

"It's too much, Mama, I don't need to go to this much trouble for him." She cupped my face as I gazed into her eyes.

"This is for you, not for him. I just hope he realises how lucky he is to be the man marrying you." She pulled me into her warm embrace as my face snuggled against the pure silk material of her robe.

“I don’t think he’ll ever realise. I guess I’ll have to learn to live with it.” I let a tear escape and despite her not looking at my face, she knew.

“You are a strong woman. You’re a Fedorov and you’re made of strong stuff. If anyone can give as good as she gets, it’s you.” She stroked my hair, and it was as though she realised it was the exact gesture I needed right now. “I’ll get you a glass of champagne and send the girls in to get started.”



I stood in front of the mirror as I tried to recognise the woman that stared back at me. My hair was styled in effortless waves that tumbled until they reached my waist, and although the make-up artist was adamant on a deep red lipstick to match my dress, I persuaded her to stick to what I wanted originally, a subtle nude which matched the rest of the masterpiece perfectly. I smoothed my trembling hands down over my dress. The details sparkled beneath the spotlights of my old bedroom as it was cut immaculately across the bust, the slit showed off the snake tattoo that sat pretty on my thigh, it matched the one Miles had on the middle of his back. This was one of the many things we did together; Miles was more than a brother, he was also one of my best friends. He never let me down, he always had my back, and he was the only one I spoke to about what happened when I was with Lorenzo. No matter how much he wanted to beat the shit out of him for the way he acted, Miles knew this was something I had to deal with alone. I didn’t need anyone to fight my battles for me.

I could fight them alone.

“Flower, are you ready?” My father tapped on the door, and my palms clammed up instantly.

Everybody would already be ready and waiting for our arrival in the ballroom, *yes, we had a ballroom at the far end*

of the house. My father didn't do things by halves and insisted we hold the party at home.

"Flower?" he called again from behind the door.

"I'm ready." *Ready as I'll ever be.*

The door slowly opened and revealed my father who looked handsome in his black tuxedo, his bow tie was neatly knotted, and for once, his top button was securely fastened.

"Wow, you look good, Papa!" I smiled as he closed the distance between us. His arms reached for me as he instantly wrapped them around my much smaller body.

"You're one to talk. You look stunning." His face was full of pride as he held me at arm's length to get a good look at me. His eyes welled up with tears, and that was something I rarely saw.

"Are you going to cry?"

"I just can't get over how beautiful my daughter is." He wiped away a stray tear before he offered me his arm. "Shall we go?"

I let out a steady breath as I tucked my hair behind my ear. He noticed the nerves as he gripped my hand with his free one.

"Yes." I couldn't bring myself to say more.

"Lorenzo is already downstairs; he is with his men at the moment." He smiled as we exited the bedroom.

"How did he look?" I didn't know why I asked; I just did.

"A lot more relaxed than you. Are you okay?" he asked, the genuine worry apparent.

"I will be." I squeezed his hand gently as we turned the corner to see my father's most trusted and oldest men lining the stairs.

"What is this?"

"I want to say protection, but they wanted to see you since most of them have been around all your life." They bowed

their heads and offered me their smiles, the ones I always found so warm and welcoming.

Waiting at the bottom of the stairs were Artem and Chad, in their three-piece suits. These two were more than just men. *They were friends.*

“They will accompany us inside. I know security is a little wild tonight, but the number of men in that ballroom that want to be Lorenzo right now is downright scary, so I would rather you be safe.” He kissed my temple as we reached the bottom of the stairs.

“I understand, Papa, you do what you think is best.” I smiled as we came face-to-face with Artem and Chad.

“Anastacia, I have no words to describe about how beautiful you look right now.” Artem beamed as did my father.

“Thank you, Artem, this is all a little much for an engagement.” I blushed under the dim lights of the lobby.

“Nothing is too much for you. You should know that by now.” He took my hand from my father and kissed my knuckles in a gentlemanly way.

“Ana, you look amazing.” Chad leant forward and pressed a kiss on my cheek.

As we made our way down the never-ending corridor to the ballroom, my father kept my hand firmly in his.

“Are you returning to Lorenzo’s this evening?”

“I would expect so.” I smiled, hoping he would drop the subject.

Before he could respond, we reached the double doors that opened up into the ballroom. The sounds of music, laughter and chatter came from inside, and I felt sick with nerves, but somehow, I ignored it and pushed it aside. Artem and Chad stepped around us and, in sync, opened the doors to reveal the crowded ballroom.

All eyes fell on my father and I as he led me inside. I instantly caught sight of my mother who stood beside Miles and Lorenzo’s parents. The look of adoration she had for the

pair of us was adorable. She wore her hair in an intricate style that matched the design of her emerald evening gown. The music continued to play as we stopped before my family. Miles pulled me into his embrace and kissed both my cheeks. Carmella and Franco greeted me as if I were their own daughter.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen someone so beautiful.” Carmella smiled.

“I hope my son knows how damn lucky he is,” Franco commented as he winked at my father.

“I’m starting to.” I stilled as I heard his low voice from behind me.

I turned around to face the one person I didn’t want to. *Not yet anyway*. I was taken aback by how drop dead gorgeous he looked and that was something I hated to admit. He wore a million-dollar smile that probably matched the price tag of his suit, which looked as though it was made for him as the dark material stretched perfectly around his muscles.

“Good evening, Anastacia.” His eyes never left mine as he spoke.

“Good evening.” My response was sweeter than he deserved.

“If you two will excuse us for a moment.” Our fathers made their way onto the stage where the band paused mid-song.

“Good evening, everyone.” All eyes intently watched my father and Franco. “We would like to thank everyone for coming to the celebration of our children’s engagement.” My father smiled as Franco took over.

“Lorenzo, would you like to bring Anastacia up here, please?”

Lorenzo held out his hand, and I took it as he led us onto the stage.

“Anastacia, we cannot wait to welcome you to the Ricci family, although it already feels like you are.” I swear these

men were trying to make me cry this evening. “Lorenzo has something he would like to give you as a sign of the first steps of your lives together.” Our fathers stepped away from the microphone and made their way down to meet our mothers who were only just about holding it together.

Lorenzo positioned me in front of him as he took both my hands in his. I couldn’t work out if this was all for show or some part of it was real. But I let him carry on especially with an audience as elite as this; I knew better than to disrespect my future husband.

“Anastacia, tonight we officially announce our engagement to one another, and I know many of the people in this room including our families would love to hear all the wonderful things I have to say about you, but unfortunately for them I want you to hear them alone first.” He smiled, and I blushed under his gaze. “Tonight, I’ll place this ring on your finger to symbolise the beginning of our future together.” He pulled out a small, black velvet box from his pants pocket and opened it to reveal the most beautiful ring I had ever laid my eyes on. It was a large oval diamond with smaller ones decorating the band. Each time he moved the box, it sparkled beneath the lights above us.

He slipped the ring onto my finger, and his touch lingered for a moment. It fit perfectly as I lost myself in its beauty.

“Dance with me?” It was a mix between an order and a question, but I took his hand once more regardless.

The band played as Lorenzo waltzed me around the dancefloor. I didn’t expect him to be so light on his feet, he was a lot more graceful than I expected.

“Surprised?” he whispered as he pulled me closer. His hand lay on the small of my back as our hips swayed in perfect sync.

“Just a little.” There was no hiding the slight smile that played on my lips.

“You took my damn breath away when you walked in here tonight, along with many others, I’m sure.” *Was that a*

compliment?

“As much as I hate to admit it, I only cared about taking yours away.”

As soon as the words left my mouth, Lorenzo dipped me suddenly. I clung onto his broad shoulders to steady myself, but for the first time, I could honestly say I felt safe in his arms. His eyes searched mine for what seemed like some acceptance. I parted my lips slightly as he brought his tenderly to mine. This was unlike any other kiss we had shared; those may have been passionate, aggressive, full of desire and need, but this was tender, romantic, and nothing like I’d ever imagined from him. My hand gently fisted his freshly cut hair as he moaned quietly, a sound I thought I never wanted to hear until now.

The band transitioned into another song as we pulled away from one another. It wasn’t until people clapped for us that we finally let each other go.

“Thank you for the dance.” I smoothed my hands across the shoulders of his jacket before I let them trail down his arms. *What was I doing?! Why was I acting like someone feeling something they shouldn’t?*

“You deserved a moment like this. Tonight is all about you.” He kissed my cheek, and his lips felt like velvet against my skin.

“Us. Tonight is about us.” He led me through the parting crowd as we met Robin and Tay at the bar.

“Good evening, ladies.” Lorenzo smiled at the girls.

“That dance was something else, a really beautiful moment.” Robin beamed as she sipped her mojito.

“You surprised me, Lorenzo.” Tay turned her attention from him to me. “Now, my gorgeous girl, show us that rock!” She clapped her hands together, and for the first time, she seemed to warm to Lorenzo.

“That’s my cue to leave.” My back suddenly felt cold as he removed his hand. “Ladies, I hope you enjoy your night. Ana, I’ll see you soon.” There was no denying the fact that I’d

noticed a shift in his behaviour tonight, but I couldn't shake the feeling that he was putting on an incredible act to paint himself in an amazing light.

I held out my freshly manicured hand to the girls as they gasped at the size of the rock Lorenzo had gifted me.

"Oh, Ana, it's magnificent." Robin squeezed my hand with delight on her face.

"That man sure has taste." Tay admired the ring and so did I.

"I don't even know if he picked it out." It was true. He could have asked anyone to pick up a ring in my size. Anyone who knew me better than he did.

"I don't want to hear any negative thoughts from this moment on. Let's dance!" Robin knocked back what was left of her mojito as she dragged Tay and I onto the dancefloor.

I felt Lorenzo's eyes on me, and sometimes, although I caught him staring, he never tried to hide it or turn away.

"Show him what he's missing, baby," Tay whispered in my ear to be heard over the music.

"I can't, not in front of my family."

"Your parents are so lost in one another right now; they aren't bothered about you dancing for your husband-to-be." Robin nodded her head towards my parents, and she was right, they only had eyes for each other. "Show him what he knows he wants but won't fucking admit." She winked as I glanced at Lorenzo over my shoulder.

"He's not missing anything." I threw back my champagne as Tay raised her brow as if she couldn't believe what she was hearing. "What? If he genuinely wanted me, he wouldn't have been such an asshole."

"Maybe he was just scared?" Tay's words surprised me.

"Of what? Showing me a little consideration?"

"Didn't you try to kill him?" Why on earth did I have to tell them about that small detail.

“Yes, but he deserved it after the shit he pulled.” I swapped my glass with a full one as the waiter walked past us. “I’m going to get some fresh air.”

I made my way outside onto the terrace that overlooked the garden. The warmth of the evening air kissed my bare skin as I looked down onto the beauty of the flowers in full bloom. I flattened my palms against the stone wall to steady myself as I felt the champagne slowly go to my head, and just as I was enjoying the time alone, I soon realised I wasn’t alone at all.

“You really do look beautiful tonight, Ana.” The deepness of Chad’s voice broke the silence.

“That’s nice of you to say.” I kept my back to him; his presence wasn’t what I wished for right now.

“You seemed incredibly close to Lorenzo, especially with that kiss you shared.” I was unsure how that concerned him. I couldn’t work out if he was being inquisitive or if there was something more to his comments.

“Why does it sound like there’s a problem?” I turned to give him my full attention, one he obviously didn’t deserve right now.

“Was it real?”

“Was what real?” This man was one of my closest friends, but right now, I wasn’t so sure if I knew the person that stood before me.

“The kiss, was the fucking kiss real?!” His voice bellowed through the evening air.

“That has nothing to do with you!” I’d had enough, I came out here for some peace and bloody quiet and he ruined it with his stupid questions.

I didn’t know if our kiss was real and even if I did, I didn’t need to explain anything to Chad, he crossed the line the moment he asked. I tried to sidestep him to escape back inside.

“It wasn’t, was it? That’s why you can’t tell me.” His hand gripped my wrist harder than I expected as he stopped me in my tracks.

“Take your hands off my fucking woman!” *Lorenzo*. His voice sliced through the air as Chad tightened his grip on me. “Don’t make me repeat myself.”

“We’re just having a conversation, do you mind?” Chad had some nerve to respond the way he did, there was no emotion on his face, no fear in his eyes.

“Yes, I do fucking mind.”

“Ana, tell me it wasn’t real. It can’t be real with him,” he pleaded as his eyes left *Lorenzo*’s and met mine.

“It’s not your business.” I snatched my arm away, and his emotionless expression morphed into to a wounded one.

“You heard her.” *Lorenzo* was beside me in a split second as he moved me behind him, not that I needed it, but I let him take action anyway. “Whatever happens between my fiancée, and I is between us. It has fuck all to do with you.”

“She’s my friend. Her safety and happiness are important to me.”

“Are you insinuating she’s not safe with me?” The gap between them closed rapidly as *Lorenzo*’s hand wrapped around Chad’s throat. “If I were you, I’d think very carefully about what comes out of your mouth.” His hold tightened, and I froze.

“*Lorenzo*, please stop,” I begged as I pulled on his arm. “Please.”

“You’re lucky she’s the one begging for your life right now. Otherwise, I would have gutted you for everyone inside to see.” He pushed Chad away as his back collided with the wall. “Now, do me a favour and fuck off before I change my mind.”

“Ana.” Chad’s voice was only a whisper as he clutched his throat.

“I thought I told you to fuck off, why are you still here?” Even though Chad overstepped tonight, a part of me couldn’t help but feel sorry for him.

There were no other words exchanged between any of us as Chad retreated back inside. I hadn't realised I was still clinging onto Lorenzo's jacket as he turned to face me once the doors to the ballroom had closed.

"You didn't need to do that." My voice was only a whisper as Lorenzo cupped my neck.

"He overstepped; he had no fucking right to put his hands on you that way."

"But it's all right when you did it?" His face fell as those words left my mouth, and I think he realised how wrong he had been.

"That's different." *Did he believe that?*

"No, it's not, and you know it." I sighed. "Was it real?" *I had to ask, I had to know.*

"Why are you allowing him to get into your head?" Lorenzo pinched the bridge of his nose with his free hand as he thought that was the case.

"Was it real or was it another one of our mistakes?" I removed his hand from my neck. I didn't need make-believe shit, I needed the truth.

"Anastacia, I—"

"Tonight was all a show. A show for our parents and, our alliances and friends, wasn't it?"

"Ana—"

"Wasn't it?!" I screamed. His face remained impassive as he struggled to get his words out. "Why do I always think otherwise? Why do I always try to give you the benefit of the doubt?" I turned my back to him as I watched the party continue in the ballroom. "I'm going to see if Red will drive me to your house. You can stay here and enjoy the party." For the first time, my heart hurt, there was a pain I couldn't describe, and I wanted it to go away.

"We'll go together. I have a driver waiting downstairs."



After we arrived home, Lorenzo and I parted ways at the top of the stairs silently, and I couldn't say it didn't hurt a little. Either he didn't want to speak to me in general or he genuinely didn't know what to say.

Why did I let myself feel something other than hate for this man?

Why did this hurt so much?

I had so many questions, but each one of them had no answer.

As I was about to unzip my dress, my phone vibrated on the vanity. I was in no mood to talk with anyone, especially not now so I ignored it.

Until it vibrated again almost instantly.

I let go of the zip to see who had texted me since we had already said goodbye to everyone less than an hour ago. The name that flashed up on my screen came as quite the surprise as I didn't expect to hear from him again tonight.

Lorenzo: Tonight was real.

Lorenzo: Tonight wasn't another one of our mistakes.

Lorenzo: You aren't and never were a mistake.

Did he just take the coward's way out and send me a damn text message? I wasn't having that; I deserved to hear it. I threw my door open, maybe a little more dramatically than I planned, but fuck it. I took off down the corridor until I reached his door. My fist collided with it anxiously.

“Ana?” I hadn’t even noticed Lorenzo had opened the door; I was too busy trying to work out what I planned to say.

“I don’t want to read it; I want to hear it.” I walked inside before I turned to face him. His shirt was half open and his jacket was now thrown over the back of the chair in the corner.

“It’s the same, isn’t it?” Why did he have to make this so bloody difficult.

“No, it isn’t the same! I want to hear it, is that too much to ask?” *Was it?* No, of course it wasn’t.

He stood there not saying anything, his hands remained in his pockets as his eyes bore into mine. So I waited until I couldn’t be bothered to stand there and look like a lovesick teenager any longer.

“Fuck this. I’m going to bed.” I broke the silence because he wasn’t about to do it.

I walked back past him towards the door but what he said next was enough to stop me dead in my tracks.

“Tonight was fucking real! Is that what you want to hear?!” *Yes, those were the words I wanted to hear, the ones I needed to hear.* “Tonight was in no way a mistake! You were never a fucking mistake.” I turned back to face him, so he now held my full attention.

“Lorenzo—”

“No, I’m not finished. You wanted to hear what I had to say, so here it is. You drive me crazy. You get under my skin more than anyone else ever has, but I realised that’s what I want! I can no longer hide the fact that I want you! I want your mind, body and fucking soul. I want everything you’re prepared to give me!” *Well, shit. I wasn’t expecting that confession.*

“What if I was prepared to give you nothing, then what?”

“Then it would have been my own fault for treating you as if you were nothing from the beginning.” His words were sincere, and honestly, I had never seen that kind of emotion in any man before, let alone someone like him. “Believe me

when I say I wanted to hate you. You were supposed to be the one thing I needed to gain the Don title, but when I first saw you, I knew I was screwed. I knew that I had to push all that shit aside, show you who I really was and force you to be the one full of hate.”

“I never hated you; I wanted us to get along. I wanted—”

“I know what you wanted. I just fought against giving that to you.” He closed the distance between us as his hands cupped my face. “I hate myself for putting you through all the shit I did and said.” My instinct took over as I mirrored his actions.

“I said and did plenty as well, so we’re both at fault.” My eyes roamed over his breath-taking face and my heart rate quickened. “How about we start again, forget everything that happened prior to this evening?”

“I don’t understand how you can be so forgiving; it doesn’t make sense.” There was a genuine confusion in his voice.

“There’s a lot you don’t know about me.”

“Not for long.” A smile spread across his lips.

I removed my hands from his face and walked towards the door. His smile faded almost instantly.

“You’re leaving?” The shock was apparent on his face and in his tone.

“Who said anything about leaving?” I closed the door, blocking out the rest of the house, and turned back to face the handsome man that stood before me, one I no longer wanted to bury six feet under.

I lowered the zip of my gown that ran along the side of the material as I let the satin pool at my feet. The only item I wore beneath my gown was a scarlet red lace thong. This may not have been the first time he’d seen me naked, but it was different to the first time. Within two strides, he had me pinned against the door, but this time I wanted it.

I craved it.

I craved his touch.

I craved him.

“You’re so fucking beautiful and to believe I almost fucked this up,” he whispered against my ear, my skin prickling beneath the warmth of his breath.

“You didn’t.” I ran my slender fingers over his shirt buttons as I undid them one by one. His darkening eyes never left mine as I reached the final button. I pushed his shirt over his shoulders as it fell to the floor with ease. The dim lighting illuminated his sculpted body. I traced my fingers over the tattoo that covered half his chest, stopping at his elbow, one I never paid attention to until now. His body was a temple. There was no imperfection, no scar, not even a freckle out of place... just pure beauty.

Lorenzo let me lose myself in his body, in his touch, in him, as he cupped my face. Although he was harsh and dominant, I noticed how gentle he was with me.

“I didn’t say those things to you tonight to fuck you, you know that, right?”

“I know you didn’t, but maybe I’m just ready to be yours, to give myself to you.” My voice came out as a hushed whisper, quiet enough to barely be heard, but I know he did.

His lips were on mine in seconds, the taste of bourbon burning my tongue as they finally danced in sync with one another. My body withered beneath his much larger frame as he kept me pinned against the door. The wooden design indented my back as I moaned into his mouth, which he only seemed to thrive off. I finally felt as though he wanted to kiss me. It wasn’t for show, or because of our previous hate for one another. It was because he actually desired and wanted me, wanted me to be his. My head spun with every stroke of his tongue against mine, my body trembled beneath his calloused hands, and he knew how his touch affected me. After what felt like years of slugging up a mountain, I was finally at the top. The top I never wanted to reach until a few days ago.

“I won’t do anything you aren’t comfortable with; I’ll be gentle.” His lips brushed my neck as he kissed the place he once marked.

“Do it again.”

“Do what?” He knew what I was asking as his teeth grazed my unmarked skin.

“Show the world I’m yours.” I spoke against his rough, stubbled jawline as he brought his face to mine.

“I don’t need to mark your flawless skin for the world to know you’re mine.” Despite his words, he sucked my neck, albeit gently.

“Fuck,” I breathed as he ran his tongue over the brand-new hickey.

“I love your filthy mouth, love.” He nipped at my jawline as his lips slowly made their way to mine.

“I know where you’d love it more.” The words were out of my mouth before I had a chance to think about what I was saying.

Lorenzo stilled.

“As much as I would love to fuck that pretty little mouth of yours, tonight is all about you.” His words came out as smooth as honey as he effortlessly lifted me into his muscular arms, the prominent veins apparent under the moonlight.

“Don’t be gentle with me.” I quivered as his large hands plastered our bodies together. I had always felt safe with him around, despite the fact he was an asshole, I knew he wouldn’t have let anything happen to me.

“You don’t know what you’re asking for, Ana,” he growled as his teeth nipped my earlobe.

“Then show me.” My hands fisted his hair as his tongue invaded my mouth almost instantly; the passion, the fire, the desire hung thick in the air.

“I’m going to destroy you.” He spoke in between aggressive kisses. His hand firmly cupped the back of my neck as if he thought I’d try to pull away.

“Then fucking destroy me, ruin me.” I didn’t know where this courage had come from. Whenever I was around him,

everything I knew changed. I faltered, I fumbled, and I fought harder than I ever had. I fought him to fight any unwanted feelings I had towards him, when in reality, they weren't unwanted, they were welcomed. It just took us a while to realise it and give in to them.

Lorenzo placed me down delicately on the floor once more. A rush of disappointment washed over me, but I tried my best to hide it, to push it away. My body suddenly felt cold and lonely as his chiselled torso was no longer pressed up against my breasts.

“Get on the bed. I'm about to lose myself in that dripping wet cunt of yours.” I froze for a moment as his words shocked me. The nerves swarmed my stomach as I stood staring at him for a moment. “Bed. Now, Anastacia,” he growled, all softness gone. I revelled in his filthy words and obeyed him. I sauntered over to the middle of the room and stood beside the bed. His eyes were hooded, dark and almost demonic. “You wanted me to ruin you? Well, I'm about to. Remove those too.” His voice dripped with ecstasy as he pointed his finger towards my lace thong.

With unsteady fingers, I slid my skimpy underwear down my freshly waxed legs. I didn't need to look at Lorenzo to know he followed my every move. I stepped gracefully out of them as I straightened my body.

“Good girl.” His reaction spoke volumes as his cock instantly hardened beneath his suit pants. “Now, do as I said and get on the bed.” His tongue brushed over his plump bottom lip as my mouth dried up more by the second. I sat on the edge of the bed, unsure how to sit. *What was wrong with me?!* “Spread your legs for me.” Dominance laced his voice, and it vibrated through me.

I let my legs fall open slightly as I leaned back on my hands to give him a full view of what he wanted. He unbuckled his belt, and it hung open from the loops.

“Wider, love, I want to see how fucking wet you are.” He wore a menacing grin as he spoke. I spread my legs wider and couldn't help but feel embarrassed, but I didn't want to show

it. I wouldn't show it. Thankfully, the lack of light in the room hid my flushed cheeks. I knew I asked for this, and I might be a virgin, but I didn't want him to treat me like one. My heart continued to pound like a drum in my chest.

"Play with your pussy for me," he directed as he toed off his Oxfords, he leant back against the vanity, watching and waiting. I noticed a glimmer of something between his fingers that I'd not noticed before, and it took a moment to realise that what he toyed with was his knife, the steel catching the moonlight with every spin.

"I'm waiting, Ana." His voice sliced through the silence.

I let out a slow and steady breath as I let my hands run over my pebbled nipples, across my trembling stomach and on to my already sensitive clit. Time stood still for a moment, everything slowed down instantly as I circled my swollen bud. The softness of my fingers against the wetness of my pussy was heaven.

"Don't you dare fucking come. I'm the only one to make you come, do you understand?" Lorenzo appeared as captivated by my every movement as I was by his. I ran the same finger across my slick folds, my arousal coating it immediately. The ache to cum crept in agonisingly as I moved back to tease my clit. Lorenzo placed the blade of his knife against his lips.

"Lorenzo, please," I whimpered, my teeth gnawing my bottom lip.

"No. Tonight and every night, I'll be the one to make you come, not you." He pushed himself from the vanity and strode the few steps it took to reach me. My fingers stopped fondling with myself as he stood before me. "Did I tell you to stop?"

"No, but—" I fumbled. "I can't, I'm so close, I need to—" I could feel the pleasure surging through my body, and I didn't know how long I could keep this up. My folds were slick and warm as the bed sheets beneath me soaked up my arousal.

I lifted my free hand up to my breast as I teased my nipples between my thumb and finger. I wasn't sure what came over

me. I was embarrassed before, but now, I wanted to scream at this man to fuck me. As my fingers played and tormented my swollen clit, Lorenzo quickly and smoothly ran his finger along my apex. He barely touched me, but with the way I felt right now, I could have combusted that second. I watched him intently as he brought his finger to his lips.

He's not going to...

Surely not...

Fuck.

Lorenzo made quick work in cleaning every last drop of my arousal from his finger. He pressed my body back against the sheets, so I now stared up at the ceiling. My mind went into full overdrive as he ran his fingers over my nipples. I instantly felt the rest of my skin pebble beneath his touch. He then removed his belt from his pants in one swift movement. My heart stopped for a second. The panic kicked in at what he planned to do with the expensive piece of leather.

“Give me your hands.” *Fuck...*

I immediately surrendered my hands to him as he skilfully bound my wrists together. Blood thundered in my ears as my skin burned wherever he touched, as if he was branding me with each torturous touch. He pushed my bound wrists to the bed as a sly smile spread across his lips.

“Good girl, now don't fucking move them till I say so.” The leather bit into my skin, but I was too far gone to care. *I was a sucker for the pain and the pleasure.* “I could get used to seeing you bound for my pleasure while your pussy soaks my sheets.”

His hand reached back into his pocket to show off the glimmering blade of his knife once again. I couldn't hide my nerves and my tongue darted out to wet my lips.

“Relax, just trust me.” Since we'd met, this was the first time he'd ever asked me to trust him. He'd never given me any reason to before. “Lie still and trust me.”

The only movement was the rapid rising and falling of my chest as I laid as still as I could. I closed my eyes, trying to

control my breathing, as the coolness of the blade slid gently across my breasts, teasing my nipples. His blade glided gently down my stomach with a feather-light touch, without leaving a mark. I didn't dare open my eyes once Lorenzo trailed the blade over my sensitive clit. The tip of the blade teased, scraped, and pleased my slick folds. This was new, unexpected, and something only I would let Lorenzo do. Something changed tonight with the pair of us. Lorenzo had wanted me since the moment we met despite his attitude and actions previously. My thoughts were interrupted as my eyes flew open the moment I felt the leather handle enter me, I instantly clenched around it. The pleasure was too much as the euphoria had taken over my body and my soft moans echoed in the room.

“Does my fiancée want to come this way?” he teased as he brought his lips down to my skin, his tongue expertly working my clit as he entered the handle deeper.

“Yes,” I cried into the darkness as my teeth clamped down on my bottom lip.

“That's not good enough, try again.” The warmth of his breath against my sensitive clit was enough to send me over the edge before his mouth devoured me once more.

“Please, Lorenzo, please!” I felt him smile against my pussy as he twisted the handle. My body trembled, my legs shook, and my mind switched off to everything other than us.

I arched my back into his palm, that was twisting and teasing my nipple, the sharp ache took over me as my bound hands fisted the sheets before I let myself go. The blood thundered in my ears as Lorenzo tightened his hold on my breasts, the throbbing of my clit was the most intense sensation I'd ever felt. The orgasm surged through me thick and heavy as if my body was on fire, the heat of his touch slowly becoming too much as his name escaped me without a second thought. I felt the tears roll down my temple, and for the first time since I'd met Lorenzo, they were anything but tears of sadness and pain. I'd had orgasms before, ones I had given myself, but none like this. This was earth-shattering, bone-melting heaven.

Lorenzo removed the knife from my pussy. He towered over me as he held the weapon underneath the dim lighting above the bed.

“Open that pretty little mouth for me, love.” My mouth dropped open. “Good girl.”

He brought the leather handle, now coated in my arousal, to my waiting mouth.

“Suck.” His voice was dominant once more as he ordered me to clean my arousal from his procession.

I had never tasted myself before, I never had to urge to but from how hard Lorenzo was, I could tell he was getting off on it. I wrapped my mouth around the hilt as I tasted myself. I removed my mouth with a quiet popping sound, and Lorenzo’s eyes darkened once again as he threw the knife to the ground. His lips devoured mine instantly.

“You taste fucking sensational,” he moaned into my mouth. His hand clutched my throat as he deepened our kiss. My breathing was ragged as if he was sucking every last breath I had to give. “Bend over, Anastacia,” he commanded as he flipped me over with ease. I was on all fours, my hands still bound before me.

His hand collided with my ass as I cried out, the spank stinging my skin.

“What the fuck?!” I screamed as another spank stung my skin.

“Watch your mouth unless you want me to gag you.” The gasp was apparent as it left my lips whilst his slow torturous kisses trailed down my spine until he reached my marked cheek.

His teeth grazed my welted mark. The pain radiated through my body, but I kept my words to a minimum because I was sure I could curse a whole damn dictionary at this rate with the words my brain was making up on the spot. Wherever he nipped, he licked to soothe the pain, wherever he spanked, he kissed to calm the sting. Tonight, I was his, and he was

making sure I knew it. I had no idea what my skin looked like, and I didn't even care.

“Are you ready to be fucked, Anastacia, or do you want to give up?” he taunted as my breathing shallowed, and my skin pebbled beneath every tormenting touch.

“Lorenzo, please,” I panted as my head dropped forward; I was a fucking mess.

“Please what?” *That bastard.* “Say it.”

“Fuck me, please,” I cried as he fisted my hair, my scalp burning beneath his hold.

I kept my eyes forwards as the sound of him removing his pants rung in my ears. I had only just about caught my breath and composed myself from his previous antics when he teased my entrance with his rock-hard cock. I rocked my hips backwards as he pulled back. He was driving me crazy. I needed him to bury himself inside me, but he continued to tease me with each passing second.

“Lorenzo, I—” I whimpered as he brought his lips to my ear.

“You have no idea how much I wanted to see you bent over for me.” He yanked my head back more than before as a squeak left my lips. “Those fucking noises are driving me crazy.” I was about to speak when he entered me, agonisingly slowly, and I stilled almost instantly.

“Do you want to stop?” His voice had softened, and so had his grip on my hair.

“Please don't stop,” I whispered as the leather continued to bite into my wrists. “I need to feel you, all of you. I don't want gentle.” His hand tightened once more as his other gripped my hip, hard enough to leave a bruise.

Those words were his unleashing. He thrust into me, burying every single inch of his cock.

“You take my cock so well, what a good fucking girl you are,” he growled as his fingers dug into my skin. “I never thought my fiancée would have such a greedy cunt.” The

adrenaline coursed through me. My skin tightened as my pussy clenched harder with each pleasurable thrust.

“Who do you belong to, Ana?” he moaned as his hand left my hip and circled my clit. I nearly fell over the edge on contact.

“Nobody,” I bit back. *I belonged to no one.*

“Who do you fucking belong to, Anastacia?” The dominant fucker was back.

I couldn't breathe as he entered me harder with each thrust, teasing me with my orgasm until I answered his question.

“Oh god!” I cried out as he let my head drop. His hand gripped my other hip to give him the edge over me, not that he never had it.

“Wrong name, love, try again.” *He was an irritating asshole.*

“Fuck, Lorenzo,” I panted between tormenting thrusts. “*You*. I belong to you.” That killed me to say, but after tonight, I couldn't imagine belonging to anyone else. “Please let me come. I need to come.” I begged for the thousandth time this evening.

“You'll come when I say, and you'll come with me. You're so fucking tight; you were made for me.” He was right, despite how big he was, we seemed to fit perfectly with one another.

I chased the orgasm despite his warning not to as I rocked faster against his cock. He realised what I was doing, and he fucked me harder as if this was not only the first but the final time. Like he'd never get to fuck me again. I could no longer hide how my body yearned to give in to the orgasm as it crept in before being ripped away every single time.

“Please, I need—” I cried out as tears fell from my eyes. The sheets soaked them up as quickly as they fell. “I can't—” I panted through ragged breaths.

“Come for me, Anastacia, come all over my fucking cock like the good fucking girl you are.” Those words were my undoing as I let myself go completely.

My body no longer felt like my own, the feelings I felt didn't feel like mine. The euphoria took over as I came all over my fiancé's cock as he pumped inside me. His moans matched mine as we moved one final time in sync, his cock pumped as my pussy clenched. I clawed the sheets with everything I had as he grasped my hips, his fingers burning my skin. My legs trembled and shook with exhaustion. Lorenzo's hands held me up as if I was boneless. My waves fanned the sheets as I tried to control my breathing. I had nothing else to give.

He pulled out of me, and I felt the warm mixture of our cum trickle slowly from my pussy. His finger tormented my sensitive and swollen folds.

“Open your mouth, love. Taste how fucking perfect we are together.” His voice was softer, but there was no doubt the dominance was still there until I'd obeyed his final order.

I glanced back over my shoulder as his finger found my mouth. I seductively sucked it clean, the saltiness of our arousal warm on my tongue before it eased down my throat. His face was almost as exhausted as mine, but his exhaustion was most probably from the confession he made before he took everything I offered.

This man had ruined me.

All because I'd asked him to.

And I didn't regret a damn thing.





CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Lorenzo

I SCOOPED A LIMP AND EXHAUSTED ANASTACIA INTO MY ARMS as she hung hers around my neck. Her body fit perfectly into mine. Her eyes fought to stay open, but it was no use, she was too far gone. Her lashes fanned her cheeks, her lips parted slightly as she drifted off to sleep. I didn't know how she'd feel about sleeping beside me this evening, but I wouldn't leave her alone after what happened between us. I pulled the sheets up around her naked body as I climbed in beside her. I pulled her into my embrace as she let herself wriggle into the crook of my arm. Her other hand laid delicately on my chest, and although she was already asleep, her fingers moved in circular motion, causing my skin to pebble beneath her perfectly manicured fingertips.

I watched her for a moment, the room still and silent, the only sound was her gentle breathing as her chest rose and fell steadily. There were no words to describe just how beautiful Anastacia was. She was a knockout, and I knew that from the moment I laid eyes on her; I was just too much of an asshole to pay attention to her. It took a mother, a father, and three best friends to show me the way... well, get me on the path at least.

Anastacia had kept surprising me every day since she arrived here. She had tried to kill me, pissed me off in more ways than I could count, including the evening she lied about a damn date. But no matter what she did, I always took it further and made it ten times worse.

I finally closed my eyes and let myself get lost in the scent of the woman beside me, but that was short-lived as my phone jumped into action on the bedside table. I wasn't in the mood

for whoever this was, but knowing my luck, it would be something likely to drag me away from Ana.

“Red, what’s up?” I whispered, to assure Anastacia wasn’t disturbed.

“Why did you and Ana slip out of the party?” he questioned eagerly.

“Ana was tired, and we didn’t slip out. We said goodbye to you.” I ran my fingers through her hair as she stirred in my arms, her breasts pressed up against my side as I let out a low moan.

“Wait a fucking minute...” The line went silent for a moment but not for long. “Are you with her?”

“No, why would I be?” I glanced down at Ana sleeping like an angel. The delicately small nose stud twinkled under the moonlight.

“We all saw that kiss this evening. There is a lot more to the pair of you than hate. We all saw it.” Red might be a complete pain in the ass, but his heart was in the right place. “Please tell me you apologised at least?” He let out a sigh as if he had already guessed the answer.

“Just drop it now, I want to get some sleep.”

“Shh,” Anastacia shushed me whilst she slept, I didn’t think she even realised what she was doing. Her finger went up to my shocked lips as she snuggled her head into my tattooed chest.

“Holy shit! Ana is there with you, isn’t she?!” His voice was worse than nails on a chalkboard as I moved the phone away from my ear to save my hearing. “Gino! Our guy is with Ana!” And as always, the secret was out thanks to Red and his massive blabbering mouth.

“Yeah, we know that. He took her home.” Gino spoke quietly from beside him, the music from the party playing faintly in the distance as I guessed they were outside on the terrace for a smoke.

“No, I mean, really with her. She’s asleep in his bed!” You could hear the delight in Red’s voice. “It’s about damn time, man!”

“Fuck off and get fucked, prick.” I laughed quietly, and for the first time in what felt like a long time, it was genuine.

“Sounds like you already did,” Red joked as I stabbed the disconnect button. I’d heard enough for tonight. The only thing I needed right now was to lose myself in a restful night beside *her*.



In the middle of the night, the bed had turned cold and roomy, I didn’t have a certain blonde-haired beauty invading my space. She was gone...

Where the fuck was she?!

I threw on some sweatpants as I padded bare foot over to the darkened bathroom. I knew she wasn’t in there, but it didn’t hurt to check. It wasn’t until I saw her evening gown had disappeared that I knew exactly where she was.

Did she just up and leave?

I made my way down the corridor and reached her door in a record number of strides, I tried the handle to see if she’d locked it behind her.

She didn’t.

I pushed the door open quietly and entered without a sound, like a thief in the night. Her dress was draped over the chair as she was tangled up in the covers. One of her naked, toned legs was on full display as I stood at the foot of her bed. I had to admit she didn’t look as comfortable as she did beside me. As I pulled the covers back, I realised she was still naked, obviously too tired to rummage around in her drawer for something to sleep in. The smirk on my lips was apparent as I

admired how fucking sexy she looked. Her cheeks were still flushed from how many times I made her cum this evening. I hurried in beside her, the bed dipped instantly as I did. I pulled her closer as she pressed that perfectly round ass into my cock that ached for her again. This woman was driving me downright insane. The urge I had to wake her up and fuck her until morning consumed me as she continued to squirm her ass into my throbbing cock. She switched positions and found the crook of my arm again; her leg claimed every part of me as it locked me beneath her.

I cupped her neck as she nuzzled her cheek into my chest. That same damn perfume fucked with my mind as it had done since day one with every movement she made. I pressed my lips on her forehead, a gesture I didn't even know I was doing, a gesture so small to me but to her, it would have been enormous if she was awake. I wasn't a romantic guy by any means, but this was as romantic as I'd ever managed to get. I drifted back off to sleep to the sound of her steady breathing and the feel of Ana wrapped in the warmth of my embrace. I couldn't remember the last time I felt this calm during the night, this relaxed, or this at ease. She had been the reason for the sleepless nights recently, my brain consumed by her even when I didn't want to allow it. But tonight, although she consumed my entire being I felt different, I felt she slowly let me in just as I did her.



“Lorenzo, what are you doing in here?” Ana’s voice was only a whisper as I peeled one eye open to see what she was doing; she’d pulled the covers up around her body as if to hide herself from me.

“Anastacia, it’s really fucking early. We’ll discuss this at a more reasonable hour.” I tried to slip back into the peaceful sleep I was having.

“I thought—”

I propped myself up on my elbow as my hair flopped down onto my forehead. Fuck, she looked beautiful, irresistibly fuckable.

“You thought what? You could up and leave in the middle of the night?” I said as she gnawed at her bottom lip.

“I thought you would have regretted how far things went last night and perhaps considered me sleeping with you a mistake.” Her eyes left mine, and guilt twisted in my gut. My actions had caused her to think everything we do was a mistake but that wasn’t the case.

“Let me make one thing very clear. I didn’t and won’t regret anything that happened between us last night and that includes you falling asleep beside me. I was the one who put you there and I wasn’t about to let you slip out without so much of a word.” I wrapped my arm around her waist and pulled her back down between the sheets as I threw my leg over hers just as she had done last night. “You can’t escape me, Anastacia.”

“What if I said I didn’t want to escape you.” She was nervous. Her chest heaved and her voice trembled. “What if I said I was sick of running?”

“It would be too late even if you wanted to.” A wicked smile played on my lips as I pressed my cock against her.

“The ring is beautiful by the way; I should thank whoever picked it out.” She was good at changing the subject.

“You’re welcome,” I whispered as I kissed the base of her ear. I knew she didn’t expect that to be my answer, and honestly, neither did I.

“You picked this out?” She whipped around to face me in shock and surprise.

“Don’t sound so surprised.” I kissed her gently as her hand cupped my face. The coolness from the platinum band caressed my cheek, a feeling I knew I would grow to crave, grow to want daily.

“I’m sorry, it’s just—” I cut her off because I already knew what she would say.

“You think this is a ring that someone has put thought and effort into choosing, right?”

“Right, and don’t get me wrong, but we could barely stand one another, so why would you pick something out that involved possible feelings you didn’t want to admit before yesterday?” Her question was valid, and I’d come to realise most were.

“I had originally picked out another ring, and yes, there was no thought behind it. I agreed to the first ring the salesman showed me. But after a phone call with my mother, I realised that the more I looked at it, it wasn’t you. You deserved so much more, so on the day of our engagement, I returned it and spent over an hour choosing the perfect one for you.” That might have been the mushiest thing I had said, but it was true, and she needed to hear it. She needed to know. “I meant what I said at the party too. I wasn’t going to say how I felt in front of a room of alliances when I hadn’t even told you.”

“Thank you.” Her gaze softened as she traced my tattoo delicately and gently.

“It’s just a ring, I don’t need a thank you for that,” I teased.

“Not just the ring.” I knew what she meant. I knew she was thanking me for confessing my feelings.

I pressed my cock against her hip as I waited for whatever abuse she had to throw at me.

“Lorenzo, stop rubbing your dick on me!” she squealed, and no matter how hard she might have tried, she couldn’t hide the delight and playfulness in her voice.

“I’ve got sweatpants on, and you didn’t complain last night,” I joked as I pulled her on top of me. Her hair fell around us as a veil that instantly blocked out the rest of the world.

“Looks like you now have the disadvantage, fiancé.” She smiled, her pearly whites nearly blinding me.

“I wouldn’t say having you on top of me is a disadvantage,” I teased as she rolled off me with an angelic laugh. “Where the fuck are you going?”

She jumped out of the bed; her naked body captured my attention instantly as she bundled the endless amounts of hair on the top of her head. Her eyes darted between me and the bathroom door. I could almost see her brain trying to work out her next move without getting caught, but no matter how fast she ran, I would catch her.

As fast as lightening she tried to dart to the bathroom, but I swung myself over the other side of the bed and captured her before she had even taken two steps. She let out an annoyed huff as I pulled her between my legs.

“I asked you a question, where the fuck are you going?” I trailed kisses along her exposed breasts as her nipples hardened.

“I was going for a shower.” My touch affected her I could hear it in her voice.

“Alone?” I took her nipple between my teeth. Her sharp intake of breath showed me just how much she liked it, how much she wanted it.

“Yes, alone.” Her voice trembled as I teased her slick pussy. She wanted me to fuck her as much as I did.

“The shower’s big enough for two, you know.” I thrust my middle finger inside her tight pussy as she clenched around it.

“I doubt it.”

“How about we test that theory, love.” With that, I threw her naked body over my shoulder as I strode towards the bathroom, while Ana squealed.

My hand swatted her bare ass as she gasped with surprise. Perhaps, she woke up expecting me to behave like the same dickhead she had grown to know. But that couldn’t be further from the truth.

She trusted me enough last night to take things further than I planned. She trusted me to take her virginity, and fuck, that

felt incredible. Her pussy was so damn tight, it molded around me as soon I entered her, and knowing no man had ever kissed, touched, or fucked her made me hard. I kicked the bathroom door shut with my bare heel.

“Lorenzo, you can put me down now.” She just about managed as she was still hung upside down.

“I’m not ready to yet.” I smiled as I quickly switched the shower on, and without giving the water time to settle and warm up, I darted underneath it.

“Fuck! It’s freezing!” she screamed as I placed her down beneath the cool spray.

“Are you sore, love?” I questioned as I caged her against the emerald tiles. Droplets trickled down her toned body as her breathing shallowed. Her chest heaved and her lips parted.

“A little.” She blushed as I fisted her soaking wet hair. She peeked up at me through her damp lashes and I was a goner for those baby blues.

“I won’t fuck you if you’re sore.” I didn’t want to push her; I needed to remember she wasn’t used to the sensation.

“I want you to, please.” That final word sounded like heaven from her lips. I was used to people begging me for something, including their lives, and I rarely listened, but when she begged, I was done for.

“Ana—” I started, but she stopped me.

“Please, I want to feel you again.” She inched her lips closer to mine as her hand palmed my cock through the sweatpants that clung to my legs.

“Get on your knees.” Her eyes widened. “I’m going to fuck your mouth.” Her tongue darted out over her already wet bottom lip; the nerves radiated off her, but I could tell she did her best to push them aside.

I half expected her to protest, to tell me she had no clue what she was doing, but she dropped to her knees as her hands started to slide my sweatpants down my legs. My cock immediately sprung free, the water washing away her blood

that stained my length from yesterday evening. Her eyes never left mine. She looked like a damn goddess on her knees for me. Water droplets clung to her breasts as the spray splashed off her.

“Open that pretty little mouth for me.” She obeyed frighteningly quick as her plump lips dropped open. “Good girl.”

Anastacia fisted the base of my dick before she ran her tongue along my shaft in slow, tormenting strokes. Considering this was her first time, she knew what to do, and I'd be sure to ask her how later. She swirled her tongue around the tip as a deep moan escaped me. A smile formed on her lips before she wrapped them sweetly around my cock, and it was as perfect as I imagined it would be. Slowly, inch by inch, she took me in her mouth until I thrust against the wall of her throat. The warmth of her breath made me harder by the second, and she knew it as she gripped the backs of my thighs to force the rest of me into that gorgeous mouth, a mouth I was about the ruin. Her eyes watered as she gagged a little, but I didn't stop. She took me too fucking well to stop. I couldn't take my eyes off the woman who had me buried deep in her mouth, the woman whose eyes never left mine even when it became too much.

“Fuck! Ana!” I hissed as I fisted the hair at the nape of her neck, hard enough to remove my cock from her mouth for a second. Her lips were swollen and ready for more. “You're going to swallow everything I give you. Don't waste a fucking drop, do you understand?” She nodded, her mouth already devouring my cock once more, her cheeks hollowed as I teetered on the edge.

“Fuck!” The air left my lungs as her nails dug into my skin. I'd been given head before but never like this.

I had lost all control; I fucked her mouth as the noises she made became too much. My head was ready to explode as my dick twitched against her tongue. My balls tightened as my skin prickled from the combination of her touch and heavenly scent. This woman had turned my damn world upside down and I had no doubt she would continue to do so every day

from this moment on. My grip on her soaking hair tightened, and she inhaled sharply, and that action caused my undoing. I coated her throat with my arousal as my dick pulsed rapidly. She sucked me bone fucking dry as her eyes burned with desire and need.

She removed my greedy cock from her mouth with a *pop* as a little of my cum remained on her lower lip. How the hell did she make that look so damn sexy?! I thought nothing could beat that until she swiped her index finger slowly over her swollen lip to remove what was left of me. She sucked the tip so as not to waste a drop, just as I told her. Her lips molded around her finger as she shut her eyes to enjoy what I gave to her.

I was still rock fucking hard as I effortlessly lifted her against the wall. She gasped as her back collided with the tiles. My teeth marked her breasts as her nipples hardened immediately beneath my palm. My other cupped her ass as I entered her forcefully. There was nothing romantic about this; I needed to fuck her senseless, show her she belonged to me. She was mine just as much as I was hers.

Her pussy clenched around me, and in that moment, I died and went to heaven. I knew for all the sins I'd committed, this would be as close as I'd ever get, but burying myself balls deep in my Ana's pussy was the only heaven I'd ever need.

“Lorenzo, fuck! Please!”

“That's it, baby, milk my cock,” I growled against her ear as I circled my thumb on her sensitive clit.

Her teeth grazed my ear as her nails dug into my back hard enough to draw blood, but I didn't give a shit. She could draw as much blood as she wanted. It would be my most treasured wound.

“I need to come, Lorenzo, please!” Her screams filled the bathroom.

“That's right, baby, wake up the whole damn house!” I moaned against her skin. “Let them hear who you belong to, let them see how fucking perfect we are for one another.” Her

hands tangled with my hair, our tongues clashed viciously as I fucked her harder, deeper and a whole lot faster.

“Please...” She panted against my lips. There was nothing sexier than hearing her beg for me.

“Cum all over my dick, show me what a dirty little slut my fiancée is.” The eruption surged through my body as I came for the second time this morning. Her arousal ran down the base of my cock as I pumped all of mine inside her. I didn’t even think to ask if she was on birth control, but there was no way I was about to pull out of the best damn pussy I’d ever had. Her head fell against the tiles, her cheeks flushed from her orgasm.

“Don’t get used to that in the morning.” There was no way she was serious with what she had just said. I’d definitely get used to it.

“Don’t say things you don’t mean.” I smirked as I lowered her gently onto the shower floor. “I told you there was plenty of room for two.” She giggled as she reached for her shampoo.

We showered with one another, she washed her hair before she lathered up her body, but I took over, I ran my soapy hands over every inch of her flawless skin, there wasn’t a scar on it and if there was, I hadn’t seen it yet. After I was done washing her, she returned the favour. When her hand palmed my dick, I had to fight the urge to bend her over.

“Get your mind out the gutter, Ricci. You’ve had enough for one day.” She remained straight faced and I had a hard time working out whether she meant it or not.

“Oh, is that so?” I stepped closer to her as she immediately ducked beneath my arm, grabbed a towel, and exited to the bedroom all the while leaving a trail of water behind her.

I stood beneath the spray for a moment longer to let her catch her breath and relax a little. I wouldn’t fuck her again... well, not yet anyway.



I found her again in the kitchen wearing a skintight tank top, fitted jeans and a pair of sneakers. Her hair was braided into two braids. How she managed that on herself was beyond me. Her face was fresh, and she looked stunning, my breath hitched in my throat as she finished making a coffee so specifically.

“That wouldn’t happen to be for me, would it?” I teased as she added the spoon in the dishwasher.

“Why would you think that? I can’t make a coffee for myself now?” That smart mouth was about to get another seeing to if she didn’t pack it in.

“I didn’t know you took your coffee the exact way I do.” I arched my brow as I made my way over to where she stood. “Hand it over.” I pressed a chaste kiss on her lips.

“No, it’s mine.” God, she’d be good under pressure.

“Anastacia, don’t make me take it by force.” She hid the travel mug of coffee behind her back and then it dawned on me as to why she would need a travel mug when she had no plans today.

“I’m quivering in my sneakers, Ricci.” That was the second time today she called me by my last name, and I had to admit I liked it, but not as much as the way Lorenzo sounded.

“You should be, did you forget how I can make you scream?” Her face broke into a smile as she toyed with the buttons on my crisp white shirt. “Thought I’d had enough for one day?”

I dipped my head to bring my lips to hers as I inhaled her scent. It wasn’t what I’d grown accustomed to. It was spicier than her usual floral scent, but I had realised that anything she wore smelt incredible on her skin. She tiptoed and I was

automatically under her spell as her lips finally claimed mine. *Could I ever get used to this?* The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end as I snaked my arm around her waist, her body flush to mine as her nipples pebbled underneath her black tank.

“Remove your jeans.” How is it possible I needed her again?

“Here, really?” Her voice was only a whisper as I flicked her button open.

“Well, well, well, would you look at that! Are my eyes deceiving me or do I see these two finally getting along.” *Good timing, Red, fucking brilliant.*

“No, I would say these two look a whole lot closer than before,” Emmet joked from the doorway. I quickly readjusted Ana’s jeans and fastened the button.

“Is he being nice to you, Ana?” Red said.

“Are you for real right now?” I snapped as I turned to face my two closest friends at the doorway.

“Yes, you haven’t exactly been the nicest, have you?” Red folded his arms across his chest.

“Thank you for pointing that out. Is there anything else?” Ana giggled from behind me. “We’re leaving in ten minutes. Go and pull the fucking cars around.”

“Boss.” They nodded and made their way towards the garage.

I stalked off to the hallway to hurry Gino along when that sweet, angelic voice stopped me in my tracks.

“Aren’t you forgetting something?” I turned on my heel. Ana held up the travel mug with a heart-stopping smile on her face.

She had made it for me.

Why did that make me so damn happy? Days ago, she would have probably poisoned it, but after last night, everything had changed. she managed to put a smile on that

grumpy, asshole face of mine, something nobody else had managed, and if they had, it wasn't a real one.

“So, it was for me?” I took the mug from her outstretched hand as it warmed my hand as well as heart.

“I was only winding you up.” She leant back against the counter as one of the hickeys I gave her this morning peeked out the top of her tank.

“And the travel mug?”

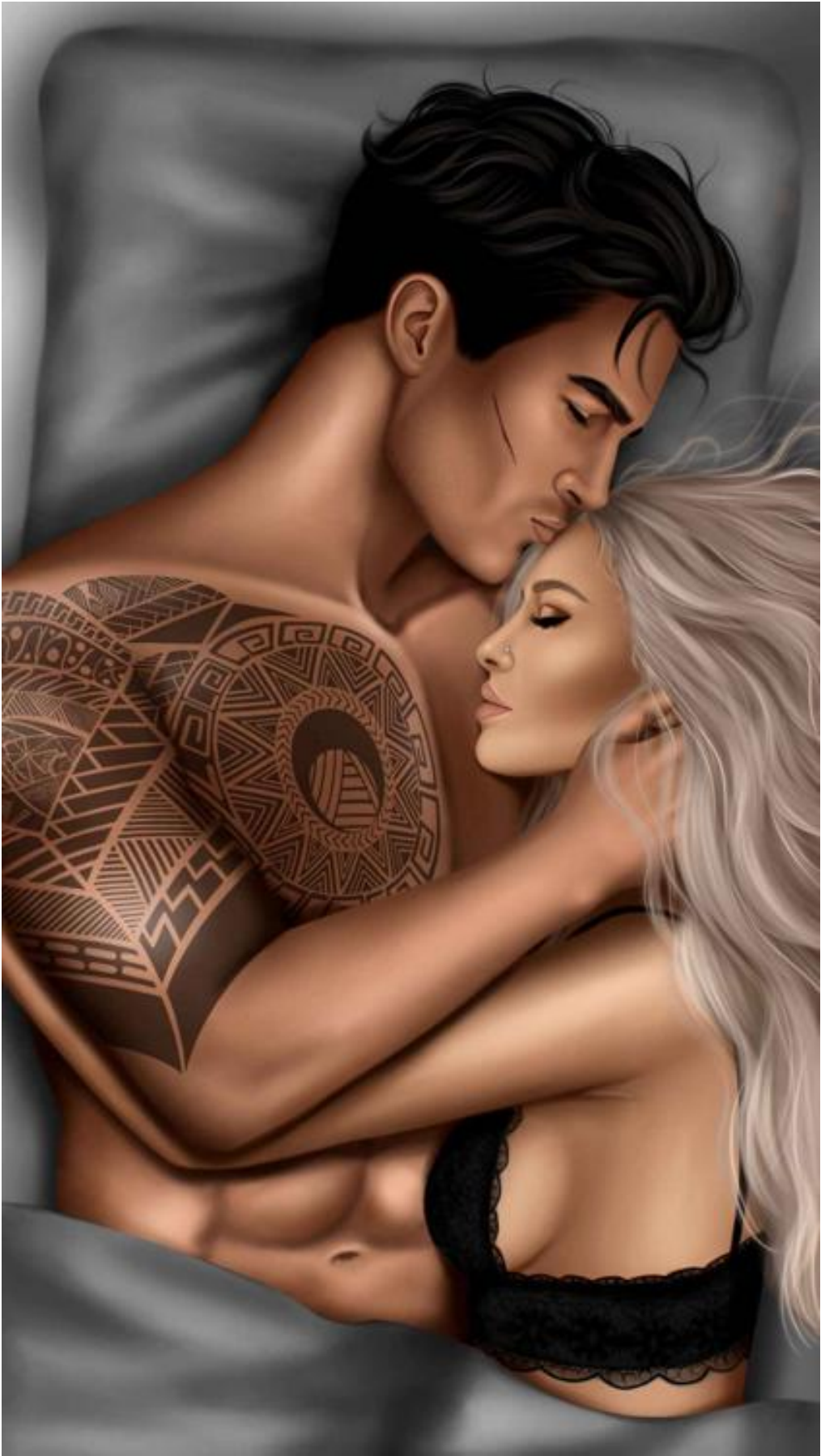
“I knew you were going to be out most of the day, so I wanted you to enjoy your morning coffee.” *Wow*. She really was something special.

“Be ready for eight tonight.” I smiled as I pecked her cheek. Her smile spoke a thousand words as a gesture so simple meant more than I thought.

“What, why?” Her smile had suddenly turned into a mixture of pure excitement and confusion.

“I'm taking my fiancée on a date.” I winked as I left her standing alone in the kitchen.

Tonight would probably be her first real date, but what she didn't know was that it was mine as well.





CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Anastacia

A DATE?

I've never been on an actual date since my father never allowed it. I was already promised to someone else.

I pulled out my phone and called the girls right away. They had been on more dates than I could count so their advice was needed. It wasn't until I went to call, one was already coming in... *Miles*.

"Good morning, Miles."

"You sound a little more chipper than usual, are you okay?" I could hear the surprise in his voice, and I knew his face was probably the exact same.

"I'm all right. Sorry we didn't say goodbye last night. You were too lost in Loreta's eyes to notice me leaving," I joked.

"That's what happens when you love someone. I don't think Lorenzo would understand that, would he?" He scoffed. Miles and Lorenzo had been friends since they were kids, but my brother couldn't stand Lorenzo's recent attitude and actions.

"Leave Lorenzo out of this." *Wait, did I defend him?* "We put any differences aside after the engagement. I think we'll be fine." I strummed my fingers on the counter as I waited to hear what Miles had to say.

"You did? I didn't think you'd give in so easily." His remarks were unwanted, but I understood where he was coming from.

“Listen, you’re my brother and you know I adore you, but last night, things changed for us. Sure, he can be a heartless bastard and I don’t think that will ever change, but we’ve managed to find a common ground and that’s all I needed. He showed me respect and it’s only fair I reciprocate.” I took a deep breath after getting my point across. “He’s taking me on a date tonight.”

“Fuck off! That man has never been on a date throughout his entire life!” His response wasn’t what I was expecting; it was quite the opposite actually.

Lorenzo had never been on a date. I knew he slept around plenty, but why wouldn’t he date? Too busy? Not bothered? Never mind, it wasn’t my business.

“Well, he’s taking me out tonight.” I smiled as I sipped my bottle of water.

“I hope you have a lovely time, and he treats you right because if I hear he’s fucked it up, he’s a dead man.”

“Calm down. I can handle myself unless you forgot that.” He knew I could, he helped train me as much as the others did.

“I know you can. I just worry, that’s all.” He did; he was always overprotective of me.

“I know, Miles. Is everything okay anyway? You barely have time to call since you’re busy,” I asked.

“I was just calling to check in on you, but now that I know you’re okay, I can sleep a little easier.” He laughed as did I. He always put a smile on my face when I needed it, but today, I didn’t need him to, I was already wearing one. “Loreta asked me to tell you she’s extremely excited about wedding dress shopping this weekend.” *Oh, shit.* I forgot about that. “You forgot, didn’t you?”

“How do you know I forgot?”

“The silence summed it up perfectly. Are you excited at least?” *Was I?*

“Possibly. I’ll see when I’m there how it hits me.” That wasn’t a lie. I didn’t know how I felt. Things didn’t just

change overnight, right? “Anyway, you better get back to baby making now,” I joked since he and Loreta have decided they wanted to expand their family.

“I am not discussing my sex life with my sister; you will, however, be the first to know when we’re expecting.” They wanted a child more than anything and I wanted nothing more than that for them. “I need to get going, but I hope you enjoy your date and that he treats you as you deserve, like a fucking diamond.”

“Goodbye, Miles.” I laughed as I hung up the phone.

I never dated, he and my father made sure of that. They kept the boys away no matter what, and at the time it pissed me off no end, but now I understood why they did it.



The girls made it to the house in record time. They couldn’t believe the ice king was taking me out on a date.

“What made him soften?” Robin curled up on the bed, a gleeful smile on her gorgeous face.

“After the engagement, we worked things out. He confessed he wanted me and said he couldn’t believe he almost fucked this up.” My cheeks blushed at the reminder of what happened after.

“Damn right he did. But the rock made up for it a little too. Who picked it out?” Tay questioned; I knew she was skeptical of Lorenzo, but she was a tough one to crack.

“He did.” I smiled shyly as I toyed with the band on my finger.

“Wow, I have to say I’m impressed. What else happened last night?” Her eyes gleamed with mischief. She knew what happened, but she wanted me to spell it out.

“We came home.” I blushed.

“Did he fuck you until morning? That’s what I want to know.” Tay giggled; her mouth was almost as crude as Lorenzo’s. “Did that hate finally turn into something else?”

“We had sex, yes,” I shyly responded while I waited for the eruption of squeals.

“Oh my fucking god, YES!” Robin jumped up on the bed, her hands clapping, as Tay squeezed me hard enough to snap me in half.

“Okay, calm down, it’s not that big of a deal.” I laughed as Tay dropped me suddenly.

“Not that big of a deal? You finally lost your virginity and to a man you hated! What the hell changed?!”

“A lot. I can’t explain it. Something clicked with us yesterday when we kissed, and the rest is history.” It’s true, something clicked with us. I know he felt it as much as I did, otherwise he wouldn’t have said the things he did.

“Well, I am incredibly happy for you, baby! I knew he would prove himself.” Robin jumped off the bed and wrapped her arms around me. “Isn’t that right, Tay?”

“Yes, I hope he continues to treat you right because I’ll castrate him if he doesn’t.” Tay winked as she joined in the embrace.

“I’ll keep that in mind, although I’m sure I can do it myself.”

“Where’s the fun in that?” These girls meant the world to me. They were with me through the good and bad times.

“Nobody is going to have to castrate Lorenzo, he will look after our girl.” Robin was always so sure, she tried to see the best in everybody despite who they were, and Lorenzo was no different in her eyes.

“So, are you going to give us all the juicy details?” Tay asked as we collapsed on the bed, and of course, I did.



I checked the time on my phone, seven fifty-five. I gave myself a once-over in the mirror since the girls had gone to town on my look tonight. My locks were poker straight without a hair out of place. Robin had outdone herself on my make-up. It was a hidden talent of hers, and boy, did she smash it tonight. Tay had chosen a skintight emerald dress that hugged me in all the right places before it stopped above the knee. We teamed it with black, barely-there heels with delicate straps. I picked up my clutch as I heard the front door close. My heart picked up pace thinking about seeing Lorenzo.

“Anastacia, are you ready?” His voice was faint from the lobby, but I heard him clear enough.

I hurried out of the bedroom as I made my way to the top of the stairs. If my heart quickened before, then it almost stopped as I saw him. He waited at the foot of the stairs dressed in what looked like another fresh white shirt open at the collar and rolled up to his elbows, he had tucked it into his freshly pressed black suit pants, concluding the look with his Oxfords. He stood with his hands in his pockets as he still hadn’t noticed me. I had to admit this man looked nervous tonight but somehow that only made him look sexier.

He glanced at his watch as I suddenly caught his eye. I hadn’t even descended the stairs yet towards him, I was too busy drinking him in because until this moment I never appreciated how handsome he was.

“You look beautiful, *amore*.” That was the first time I heard his mother tongue. He always called me *love*, and I liked it, but this gave me a different feeling.

“Thank you. I didn’t know what to wear since you didn’t give much away this morning.”

“Trust me, you look perfect, are you ready?” His smile melted, and just like that, I felt unable to move. “Anastacia?”
Fuck.

“I’m ready, let’s go.” I smiled as I hurried down the stairs, maybe a little too quick for his liking.

“Will you slow down; those shoes are a hazard.” His eyes rolled so far back they just about disappeared.

“Oh, behave yourself. They’re half the height I normally wear.” I smirked as I reached him. Even with heels, I still had to crane my neck to meet his penetrating gaze.

“I have no energy to argue with you.” He rubbed his temple with a defeated look on his face.

“Wait, are you admitting defeat?” I asked, shocked.

“You’ll be the one getting defeated tonight.” His smugness was second to none.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You’ll see. Now, move that cute little ass to the car so we can go.” His hand rested on the small of my back as he led me to the garage.



After what felt like forever watching the city disappear from the passenger window, we took a familiar turn, one I knew all too well as we arrived at our destination.

Bowling.

“Is this okay?” Lorenzo asked from the driver’s seat.

“How did you know?” My voice was only a whisper as my fingers touched the misted glass.

“I paid a visit to your grandmother; she told me you used to come here all the time with your grandfather.”

“You visited my grandmother?” I tried to hide the shock in my voice, hide the emotions that were more than obvious to notice. My back remained facing Lorenzo as I was in awe at what this man had done.

“I wanted to make this date something you would remember, and despite how close you are with your mother, I saw the relationship you and your grandmother have. She seemed like the perfect person to ask.” His large, calloused hand closed around mine that remained on my lap.

Emotions overwhelmed me. Not only did he ask my grandmother, but he also took me to the exact bowling alley my grandfather took me regularly. One we went to days before he passed away, it was our last outing together.

“Anastacia, look at me.” He spoke gentler than usual as he leant over and cupped my chin. My glazed eyes met his in an instant. “We can leave if this is too much.” The care in his voice was apparent.

“No, it’s perfect, thank you.” I blinked back the tears that threatened to fall as I nuzzled my cheek into his palm.

“Are you ready to kick my ass on the lanes?” he joked, and I was thankful for that.

“Oh, it’s on.” I winked as I almost jumped out of the car, Lorenzo hot on my heels.

As he led me inside, I noticed the whole bowling alley was empty, the only people around were the employees. I spun around to look at him as he stood there with a smile on his gorgeous stubbled face.

“Why is it empty?” I asked, although I knew the answer.

“I booked out the whole place for us,” he said as if it was the simplest thing in the world.

“It must have cost—”

“It doesn’t matter. I treated you like shit for too long and if this makes up for it in the smallest of ways, then fuck the money. Your smile is more than enough payback.” And like that, I was stunned to silence.

Tonight was everything I could have wished for in a first date. It was possibly the first time we relaxed around one another. I saw a side to Lorenzo I never thought I would see. His laugh was infectious; I laughed harder than I ever had. As much as it killed me to admit, Lorenzo was pretty good at bowling but not good enough to beat me, even after countless tries. I could tell he hated losing, which only made winning all the sweeter. He tried his absolute best to distract me by small touches here and there, subtle glances, and unbuttoning his shirt when I kicked his ass.

“This isn’t strip-bowling, pal.” I laughed as I picked up the fire engine red ball.

“It could be.” He smirked as he stepped closer. I somehow dodged his every advance.

“Not when there are people around.” My eyes darted to the teenage boys casually watching us from behind the snack bar.

“I can make them go away.”

“I’m sure you could, but leave the poor boys alone.” I tiptoed so my lips about brushed his ear. “Behave yourself and this pussy is yours when we get home.” His sharp intake of breath was enough for me to know he understood. “Oh, and by the way, I’m not wearing any panties.” I smiled against the warmth of his skin as I knew I had won this round and I wasn’t just talking about the bowling either.

“Get your fucking shoes. We’re going home.” I couldn’t tell if he was joking or being deadly serious.

“Good things come to those who wait.” I sauntered away from him but didn’t get far as his hands wrapped around my waist in less than a second.

“I waited long enough for you; I’m not waiting anymore,” he growled, the dominance in full force.

“How about this? If you get a strike next, we’ll go home, and I’ll let you do whatever you want to me, and I mean anything.” I lingered on the final word as Lorenzo kissed my neck from behind.

“And if you win?” He was intrigued. *Good.*

“Then I get to decide what we do next.” I wriggled from Lorenzo’s grip as I moved to take my turn.

I bent over slightly, just enough to allow my dress to ride up for him to see what he would win if I lost, and a low groan left his lips. I let the ball go, and as I expected, I knocked down every single pin.

“Whoops.” I spun to face an annoyed Lorenzo. “Looks like I won.” I smiled as he went to pick up his ball.

“No, no, I still have my turn.” He strode past me with a determined look on his face. He hadn’t managed a strike all night.

He released his ball as he stared intently at it, and what happened next caused my jaw to drop.

“Looks like I won too, love.” His smug face irritated me like nothing else. This man had never been bowling, let alone managed to make a single strike tonight, and just like that, he won too.

“So, how’s this going to work?”

“I’ll allow you to decide what we do after we leave this place, but later, you’re mine. Mine to do whatever the fuck I want with. I’ll fuck you until morning and you’ll come until you blackout.” His hand cupped my bare pussy as he teased my slick folds. “Do we have a deal?”

“Lorenzo—” I gasped.

“I said, do we have a deal?”

“Yes, yes, we have a deal.”

“I thought so. Shall we get going?”

“Okay.” Our eyes met briefly, and his gaze had softened.

After we retrieved our shoes, we stepped out into the coolness of the evening air. Rain threatened the sky as I hurried towards the car, but my efforts were in vain as he pulled me into his arms when the first droplet of rain landed on my bare arm.

“Lorenzo, stop!” I squealed as I tried to make a quick getaway, but it was hopeless.

“It’s only a little rain, does it matter?” Then the heavens opened, and the rain heavily bounced off the pavement. His breathtaking smile almost melted me into a puddle.

Lorenzo’s shirt molded to every muscle that graced his temple of a body. The black ink no longer hidden. His locks flopped down onto his forehead, rainwater clung to each strand helplessly before each one ran along his sharp and angular features.

“Kiss me.” The words left my mouth before my brain had even processed them; it was as if it were instinct, this man was destroying me, but in the best way.

He didn’t respond with words; his only response was the low moan into my mouth as his lips claimed my damp ones instantly. The rain beat down against our flesh whilst his hand tangled around my sodden hair. “You’re fucking killing me, Ana.” His tongue delved into my mouth as his feet led mine back towards the car, not stopping until my back collided with the passenger’s door.

Lorenzo palmed my breast over my soaking wet dress. This man gave no fucks about others, he didn’t care if he put on a show to the whole damn world, but I did.

“You can’t claim your prize yet, not until we’ve done what I want to do.” I smiled against his lips as he groaned with disappointment.

“Fair’s fair, you’re right.” He shimmied me to the side, letting him open the car door with ease. “In you get, love.” His genuine smile stopped me in my tracks as I continued to gaze at him like a lovesick teen. “You’ve got me for a lifetime, you don’t need to stare,” he joked as he brought me crashing back down to earth, hard enough that if it were real, it would have left a mark.

“I wasn’t staring, especially when you aren’t anything special to stare at.” I smirked as I slid as gracefully as I could

into the car. The thought of ruining his seats didn't occur to me as I settled into mine.

"If that's what you need to tell yourself." He closed the door and rounded the car.

Once he was inside the car, he twisted in his seat as his wet clothing crunched against the leather. I slipped my heels off and pulled my legs beneath me. His eyes darted to my feet to make sure I didn't dig my heels into his seats.

"So, where to?" He started the engine, and it roared into action immediately.

"The drive-thru!" I squealed.

"Are you high?!" The look on his face was everything and more. I doubted he'd ever been to a drive-thru, he didn't seem the type, but I was, and it was something the girls and I often did over the weekends.

"Only on life. Now, to the drive-thru!"

Lorenzo couldn't disguise his delight no matter how hard he tried; it was contagious, I had to admit, even if it killed me. He jammed his foot down and drove out of the vacant parking lot, not caring about anything other than us.

"Put the roof down!" I screamed over the soft rock that he'd turned up full blast.

"I don't think so. You'll fuck up my car!" He rolled his eyes. so hard I feared he'd lost them someplace in the back of his head.

"Oh, please!" I scoffed. "I'll pay to get your car repaired, if necessary, just so you can live a little and quit being such a damn robot."

"I'll show you what a fucking robot I am." He cast a glance in my direction, the image of him wet from head to toe already burned into my retinas.

The roof suddenly retracted, the rain whipped against my skin as we sped along the silent roads, and for the first time in a long time I felt free, as if I were someone else, someone I once desired to be. I flung my hands up over my head and

danced in my seat to whatever music Lorenzo's sound system was now blasting. I could tell he was a little uptight about his car but the fact he went along with my crazy idea made my heart soar and my mouth smile without even realising.

We pulled into my favourite drive-thru not far from the bowling alley. I directed Lorenzo to one my grandfather and I came to plenty of times without telling Papa, then after he passed away, Miles would bring me occasionally. As we pulled up the window, I placed our order, two of everything on the food menu and two milkshakes, much to Lorenzo's disgust.

"That was nice of you to get food for the guys too." He smiled as he settled in the soaking wet seat.

"Oh, shit! Drive back around!" I cried as his finger darted up to his ear.

"Seriously?"

"Fine, you wait here, I'll be back!" I jumped out of the car before he had a chance to mutter a single word.

Once I had picked up the other order, I hurried back outside to the car which Lorenzo had parked right outside the entrance. He raised his brows as I placed the food on the floor behind my seat which squelched as I sat back down.

"Ready?" he asked with an amused look on his face.

"Once you put the roof up, yes."

"Wait, why? You wanted it down before. Why the sudden change?" He revved the engine.

"I don't want the food to get wet."

"So, it's all right for my car to get fucked but not the food?" He was taken aback but not once did he show any signs of anger or upset.

"Ding, ding, ding, we have a winner." I kissed his cheek hastily which he clearly wasn't expecting. It was written all over his face that he'd never experienced small gestures such as this before, and honestly, I wasn't usually a fan of giving them.

The roof closed as quick as it opened as I clung to the warm bags of food. I kept my eyes firmly on Lorenzo as he drove. There was something about this man driving that caused my stomach to clench with desire.



Lorenzo threw me on his back as I wrapped my legs around his waist and bundled the food in his arms before he kicked the door open to the kitchen. Four pairs of eyes instantly fell upon our laughing selves, three of men I knew and one of them I'd never seen before.

“Welcome home, cousin,” the dark-haired guy drawled. He shared a few similarities to Lorenzo but only his skin tone and raven locks, everything else stopped there.

“Nicolo, is there a reason you're here?” Lorenzo snapped, which I didn't expect. I then realised my legs remained clung around Lorenzo's waist. I slid down his back until my toes touched the cool kitchen floor. I had discarded my heels in the car. It was quite the effort trying to wriggle free from his hold though.

“Aren't you going to introduce me to this little lady?”
Little lady?

“This is my fiancée, Anastacia.” There was a slight reluctancy within Lorenzo's voice. It was obvious he was pissed off and angry at his cousin about something. “Anastacia, this is my cousin, Nicolo.”

“Nice to meet you, Ana.” His voice unnerved me a little, but I let it slide.

“Her name is Anastacia, or did you not hear the fucking words that just came out my mouth?!” His vein bulged at his temple as if any second, he would blow.

“Lorenzo, it’s fine. It appears you have some catching up to do. I’ll take the food upstairs.” I smiled, unsure of what else to say in that exact moment.

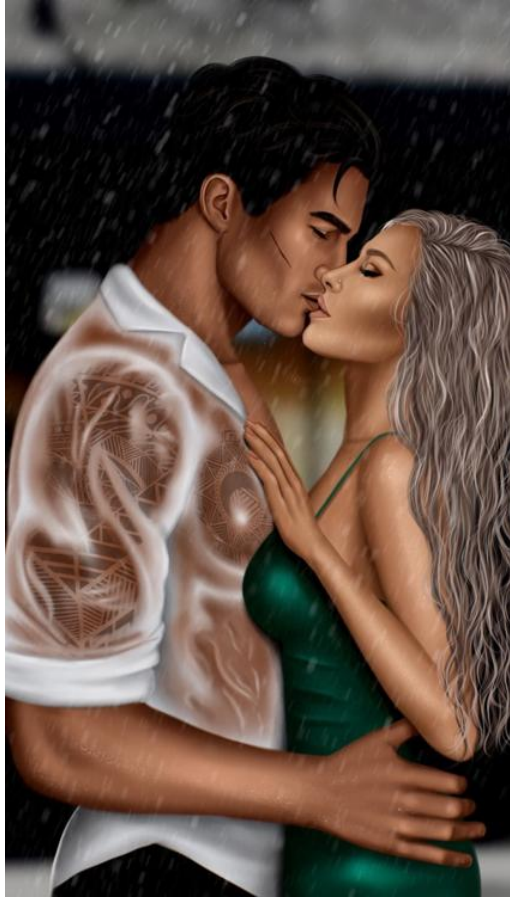
“I’ll join you.” His words followed mine quickly, and I knew he didn’t want to be there.

“It’s okay. I’ll see you soon.” I grabbed the two bags and the milkshakes and headed towards the lobby. “Oh, guys?” I called without turning around.

“Yeah, Ana?” Red asked.

“That bag on the counter is for you all.” I didn’t wait for a response. I had already made my way up the staircase, and my legs led me towards Lorenzo’s room rather than my own on instinct.







CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Lorenzo

RED HAD WOLFED DOWN ONE OF THE BURGERS ANA HAD brought him and had now begun his second. Nicolo stood opposite me with a double scotch, his drink of choice. He eyed the state of me, but I couldn't give a fuck what I looked like, I enjoyed my evening with Ana, and I would not let this asshole put a dampener on it more than the rain had.

“So, why are you here?” I was aware I came across abrupt, but my patience wore thin the moment I saw him standing in my house.

We were always close growing up, his mother was my mother's sister, my aunt. She passed away just over a year ago. He never knew his father, never questioned his mother about him. It was pointless. I tried to be there for Nicolo, but he pushed the remaining family he had away. I messaged, I called, I even visited when I had the time, but he threw my support back in my face. He was adamant I had everything good in my life handed to me, but I knew that wasn't true. Yes, my father will hand the Sicilian Mafia to me, but I've had to work hard to get it. He even had the audacity to say it should have been my mother rather than his and that is something I couldn't get over, not yet anyway, and now, he stood in my kitchen, swigging my booze, chit chatting with my men as though the past year never happened.

“I'm here to see my favourite cousin.” *Bullshit.*

“I'm your only cousin, so it's a moot point.” I eyed the guys as they lowered themselves into the chairs at the table by the window. They clearly enjoyed the food over this shit show of entertainment.

“I came to congratulate you on your engagement and upcoming nuptials.” He knocked the rest of scotch back before he returned the tumbler to the side.

“A simple card would have sufficed.” I scoffed.

“It wouldn’t have been enough to say how sorry I am for the shit I said.” There was something genuine about his voice, but he was like me... hard to read.

“I don’t want to discuss this tonight. Are you around tomorrow?”

“About that, I actually have nowhere to stay tonight. I didn’t want to wake your parents with my arrival.” He hinted at an invite to stay the night, and I was reluctant to give him it.

“There is a spare room down here, you can crash there tonight.” I walked towards the lobby. I needed to finish my evening with Ana and take whatever she owed me.

“Thanks, man, I appreciate it.” He smiled as Red tossed him a burger too. How many of those things did she get? The paper bag was never ending. “You not staying for a drink?”

“Not tonight, I have other plans.” I turned back towards the exit and hoped I would make it out without another word, but that was wishful thinking.

“Looks like that fiancée of yours is making you a little soft.” Those were the final words I heard from my cousin before I cut off his air supply in a flash.

“Let me make one thing very clear. I’ve not gone soft for anyone, and I never will. You’ll do well to remember that as well as my fiancée’s name.” He gasped for air, but I only tightened my hold. “The last person to pass a comment about Anastacia wound up with a bullet in his skull.” I shoved him against the wall as he clutched his throat. My men remained seated since they knew better than to interfere.

I stalked up the stairs while Nicolo coughed and spluttered. I calmed down a little as I reached Ana’s room. There was nothing but silence from behind her bedroom door which seemed odd since she couldn’t be anywhere else, could she?

I didn't even bother to check whether she was inside or not; I had a slight hunch where she might be and as soon as I opened my bedroom door, my suspicions had been confirmed. There she was, sitting cross-legged on the bed in one of my t-shirts that looked like a dress on her slender frame, her hair neatly tied into two braids that trailed down her back. She had food spread out on my fresh white sheets around her and had some romantic comedy blaring on my TV.

"Don't you look comfortable." I smirked as she looked up at me with surprised eyes.

"Sorry, your TV is a little bigger than mine and—" She racked her brain for any excuse possible, and seeing her flustered was something I quite enjoyed.

"I don't care. You don't need to explain why you're in here. Once we're married, this room will be just as much yours as it is mine." I discarded my damp shirt that still clung to my frame.

"What if I don't want that?" I knew she was fucking with me; it was written all over her face.

"The fact you think you have a choice is admirable." I pulled on some grey sweats from the walk-in closet and settled beside Anastacia. "So, come on then, where's my food? I want to see if it's as good as you claimed." I took the burger she handed to me and peeled off the paper.

As I took my first bite, I felt her doe eyes on me. I knew she was peeking at me through those never-ending lashes, the same ones that fanned her cheeks as she slept.

"Well..." she questioned as she fed herself one of her curly fries.

"I hate to admit it, but you're right." I took another bite as she clapped her hands gleefully.

"I knew you would."

"What are you watching?" It looked like a complete load of shit, but she seemed into it.

“Why? Are you planning on watching it with me?” She sounded hopeful.

“Perhaps.” There was no *perhaps* about it, she knew she’d won.

Once we demolished the food we’d brought home, Anastacia settled in the crook of my arm. She fit there perfectly; this woman was made for me, it just took me a while to see it. She made me lower my guard with each passing day.

“Ana, this is a load of shit,” I whined, and she swatted my bare torso.

“Stop complaining.” She tenderly brushed her index finger over the scar on my cheek.

The movie was only a short one, thank God. I couldn’t have endured that any longer than I did anyway. Ana seemed to enjoy it though and it was nice to see her relaxed beside me rather than her usual standoffish self, although I knew I was the reason for that. I provoked her again and again, and for what? I racked my brain to find the reason but no matter how hard I tried, the only reason was because it excited me to piss her off. I loved seeing her riled up, ready to murder me without a so much of a second thought.

Ana cleared the remains of our food away and left it outside the bedroom door. Closing it behind her, she lifted my T-shirt above her head and tossed it aside.

“I think it’s time to claim your prize, Ricci.” Her voice was low and seductive, a raspy whisper that caused my cock to harden instantly. It strained against my sweatpants, begging to be set free.

“Come here,” I ordered, and much to my delight, she obeyed.

She sauntered over to me as if she were the hunter and I the prey, but she couldn’t be more wrong. She stopped before me with dilated eyes. She wanted everything I had to give her.

“Get on your knees,” I ordered, half expecting her smart-ass mouth to fire a remark, but she immediately dropped to them between my legs.

Her tongue darted out to dampen her pouting lips, her fingers trembled as she slid my sweatpants down my legs and over my feet. I was unsure as to why she trembled as she did, she'd sucked my dick this morning and I can easily say considering it was her first time, I had no complaints. Maybe tonight would be different. We weren't half asleep or still on a high from the night prior. Tonight, we had relaxed a little with one another.

She ran her tongue along the tip of my cock, removing the pre-cum that had trickled out the second she stripped off my t-shirt. She kept her gaze fixed on mine as she took me in her mouth, and fuck me, she was breathtaking. Her hands had finally stopped trembling as she fisted one around my cock while the other grasped my thigh. The more she took me, the deeper her nails sunk into my flesh, and what I wouldn't give to have them claw my back. I wrapped one of her braids around my fist and forced myself as far as she could take. Watching tears spring to her eyes was like watching an award-winning movie, and her gags were the soundtrack I could listen to repeatedly.

I yanked her head away from my cock by her braid. Tears streamed down her makeup-free cheeks, and it was a beautiful sight. I could have wiped them away, but I was possessed. I needed to fuck her relentlessly, break her, ruin that pussy for anyone else. Nobody would dare lay a finger on what was mine, and that was what she was... *Mine*.

I tossed her onto the bed as if she weighed nothing. I wanted to bury my face in her soft pink pussy, but my need to fuck her was stronger. Tonight, I wouldn't fuck her from behind. I wanted to see her face as she moaned for me, and I wanted her to look into my eyes as I made her cum. I trailed my fingers from her lips to her throat, down the channel between her breasts to her navel, until I reached the tattoo on her leg. I'd never been a fan of tattoos or piercings on women, but with Anastacia, it was erotic. The tattoo on her thigh and the delicate stud in her nose turned me on in ways I couldn't even comprehend.

“Fuck me.” Her words shattered the silence, and I ached to hear them again.

“Say it again,” I demanded. Her eyes darkened with desire and need as her fingers stroked her clit without warning. If that wasn’t the most captivating sight I’d ever seen, I wasn’t sure what was.

“Fuck me, please.”

“Where would you like me to fuck you, love?” There was no doubt in my mind I would claim every hole, every inch of her.

“My pussy.” The boldness was commendable; I enjoyed this side of her.

“Not your ass?” Her panic was as apparent as the summer sky. “I intend to fuck you there, love, but not yet.” She relaxed subconsciously, but her intrigue was palpable.

I teased her with the head of my cock; it was clear she was sore, but if she thought I’d take it easy because of it, she couldn’t have been more wrong. I thrust into her without giving her a chance to take a breath, and her gasp as I entered her assured me that she was more than fine. Her fingers clawed at my back, drawing me closer to her. Her lips claimed mine for the first time. She demanded my attention, and I intended to give it to her. I lost control as I sank my teeth into her lip. She groaned into my mouth as I drew the smallest amount of blood, and the metallic taste took over my palate, and I thrived on it. My hand clutched her throat as she smirked at me... she fucking *smirked* at me as I repeatedly slammed into her. With each thrust, she clenched around me. My cock was perfectly snug into her tight pussy as I took her innocence, took whatever she gave me.

“Does my fiancée want to come?” I teased as I slowed my thrusts.

“Please,” she whimpered. “Please.” Hearing that plea from her lips was addicting, intoxicating, and pure ecstasy.

“Ask me again.” I smirked as I slammed into her pussy harder than she expected.

“Please, let me come!” she screamed as I released her throat.

“That depends on if I can fill that pretty pussy with my cum.” I thrust into her again as she almost drew blood from clawing at my back.

Her breathing was ragged, and her chest heaved as I yanked her away from her orgasm until I was ready to come with her.

I circled my thumb over her clit as my mouth closed around her hardened nipple. She was so fucking turned on and wet it was a surprise she held on that much longer. As her pussy clenched around me, ready to crest over, I pulled her back from the edge, teasing her time and time again. I slipped my thumb, now slick with her arousal, into her mouth, and she sucked on it right away, tasting herself.

When I couldn't hold back any longer, I released my thumb from her mouth. Her cries of ecstasy echoed throughout the room.

“Come for me,” I growled into her ear as she closed her eyes. “Look at me. I want you to look at me when you come.” I was welcomed by those mesmerising blue eyes, the ones that could burn holes in my soul if I let them.

My body erupted in pleasure as I roared her name as loudly as she cried mine. My cum filled her pussy, and there was no sweeter feeling. I leaned forward until my forehead brushed hers and tenderly kissed her lips as we descended from the high.

I pulled out from her carefully as my cum leaked out of her pussy.

“Push it back in,” I ordered.

She understood what I meant. I could have done it myself, but I'd rather watch her. And what a fucking sight it was when she caught my arousal on her finger and pushed it back inside her. But not as jaw-dropping as the next one, she swirled her tongue around her finger, undeniably enjoying the perfect mixture of our arousals.

“You’re fucking incredible, do you know that?” I said as I watched her from the edge of the bed.

“I do now,” she teased as she gracefully eased off the bed before she hurried into the bathroom. The next thing I heard was the bath rapidly filling. I placed my sweatpants and t-shirt in the hamper and followed her into the steamy bathroom.

She sat naked on the bath’s edge as her hand swirled the scented oils around the water. Her braids had been replaced with a mane of blonde waves around her face, finger marks decorated her skin from where I’d fucked her, her lips were swollen, and her cheeks flushed a perfect shade of pink. *She looked beautiful.*

“Do you need anything?” I asked as I turned to leave the bathroom.

“Where are you going?” Her voice was as soothing as an angel’s, and it sent goosebumps over my skin.

“I was going to shower and get into bed.” I glanced over my shoulder, her eyes wide with hope, her lips parted to protest.

“Stay with me.” She smiled an exhausted smile.

“Baths aren’t really my thing.”

She didn’t utter another word as she submerged herself into the water. Her breasts bobbed at the surface, and I couldn’t take my eyes off her. Her nipples hardened instantly as she caught me staring. A smug smirk touched the left side of her lips, and I had the sudden urge to become a bath kind of man.

Already naked, I had nothing to strip off. I slid in behind her as water sloshed out onto the tiled floor of my ensuite. She shimmied forward a little to let me nestle into the warm water.

“I thought baths weren’t really your thing?” She smiled as she rested her head against my tattooed chest.

“Things change.” I combed my fingers through the array of hair that surrounded us.

“It would seem so, quite dramatically, I might add.” She drew circles on one of my thighs that enclosed her.

“It would seem that way, wouldn’t it.” I leant down so my lips brushed her ear. “Would you really have killed me that first night?” I whispered.

“Oh, Lorenzo, you’ll never know.”

I chuckled and wrapped my arms around her as I relaxed into her just as she did me.

And that was how we stayed for the rest of the night... well, until the water cooled, anyway.



The next morning, I left Anastacia peacefully sleeping between my sheets and headed down to the kitchen to get my usual morning espresso. The place was quiet, which was exactly how I liked it. I wasn’t one for causing havoc and chaos in my home, and some might ask why I let my three closest men live with me, especially Red, but I needed them near, and they were undeniably loyal. I trusted them with my life, and they did me with theirs, and now I trust them with Anastacia’s too.

“Good morning, cousin.” Nicolo’s throaty voice came from the darkness, but that was no surprise; I could hear him breathing as soon as I stepped through the doorway.

“You still here?” I sneered as I flicked on the coffee machine.

“Obviously, you said I could stay the night.” His voice had a smug tone to it, but I opted to ignore it.

“Indeed, I did.” I took the steaming coffee and pressed it to my lips.

“Also, I thought it would be nice to introduce myself properly to your future wife. She seemed lovely on our first meeting.” *Is he fucking serious?!*

“You stay the fuck away from Ana, do you understand?” I almost growled.

“I think you should calm down and keep that jealousy to yourself. Your fiancée wouldn’t like that side of you.” It took all of my strength not to slam my fist into his damn face.

“Unless you want to discuss something other than my future wife, I suggest you spit it out or get the fuck out of my house,” I snapped as I slammed the cup on the counter.

“I came to make amends for all that I said after my mother passed. I was in a dark place, and all you wanted to do was help me, and I pushed you and your mother away. What I said about her was unforgivable, and if I could take it back, I would.” He took a deep breath to continue, but I could tell it was difficult for him. “I want to be a part of the family again; I want us to be how we used to be,” Nicolo said, and I could hear Anastacia’s voice in the back of my head saying how important family is.

“What happened is now in the past, but I’ll promise you one thing, if you ever disrespect Anastacia or my mother again, I won’t hesitate to end you, family or not. Do you understand?” I flicked on the light so I could see how genuine he was.

“I understand, I won’t. I can see Anastacia is important to you and I just want to get to know the woman who will join the Ricci family. Is that so bad?”

“No, it isn’t bad at all.” Anastacia appeared out of nowhere at the doorway; I hadn’t even noticed her. *Fuck, she was good.* “Lorenzo knows how much of a family woman I am.” She smiled sweetly at my cousin as he visibly relaxed.

“Thank you, Anastacia.” He returned the gesture, and a part of me despised her having shared a smile with someone who wasn’t me.

“I’m sorry for what happened to you, I truly am, but if you disrespect my husband and his mother the way you did again, it won’t be him who ends you, do you understand?” ” She remained firm, her gaze never leaving Nicolò’s. She was Victor’s daughter. She was more like him than I had anticipated and seeing her like this was so unbelievably sexy that I had to hold it together.

“I understand,” Nicolò said, almost speechless, which was unusual but yet endearing to witness.

Anastacia pushed off the doorframe and sauntered over to me as if we were the only two in the room. Her hair was tossed up on top of her head and she wore one of my t-shirts that covered her perfectly. I was still pissed that Nicolò got more than he bargained for this morning, and I could see his eyes following her every move.

“If you value your eyes, I’d put them back in your fucking head,” I snapped without taking my gaze off her.

He didn’t have to respond; I could see he now directed his gaze out the kitchen window to watch the sunrise on the lake.

“What can I do for you, love?” I questioned as she came to a standstill in front of me. I craned my neck to whisper to keep inquisitive ears from listening.

“Nothing. I simply wanted to know where you went,” she purred against my skin as her fingers toyed with the fabric of my T-shirt.

“Did you miss me?” I teased.

“I had to take care of myself if you know what I mean.”
She did what?

“It pains me to say I know exactly what you mean,” I groaned against her lips as she tenderly pressed hers on mine. “How exactly did you take care of yourself?”

“I guess you’ll never know, darling.” Oh, I’ll know, and she’ll never use whatever it was again.

“I’m going to take a shower and get ready to visit my mother.” She pecked on my cheek before heading back

towards the door.

“I’ll be up soon.” I smirked.

“No, you won’t. Spend time with your cousin.” She winked as she hurried up the stairs, the hem of my t-shirt rising with each stair she took, which caused me to groan in frustration that I couldn’t rip it off her right now.

“She’s quite something. Now I see why you’re happy to marry her.” Nicolo turned to face me, a smile playing on his lips.

“Indeed, she is, but that’s not the reason I’m marrying her.” I leant against the counter as he took a seat at the table.

“Ah, right, you’re just marrying her because you’re being forced to.” He chuckled as he lit a cigarette in the kitchen, something I despised.

“Again, not the reason, and get that damned thing out of here.” I furrowed my brows and narrowed my gaze. It took a split second for him to stub it out on the packaging because I didn’t have an ashtray in here.

“You don’t smoke now? She really does have you by the balls, doesn’t she?”

“Watch your mouth. What did I say about disrespecting her?” Within the blink of an eye, I’d tipped the table on its side and had my own cousin by the scruff of his T-shirt, his eyes widened as if I was ready to carry on my promise to end him if he dared disrespect Ana.

“It was a—” he struggled.

“Was a what? A joke? Why don’t you keep those fucking jokes to yourself,” I said as I pushed him and the chair backwards out of my personal space.

“Woah! What’s going in here?!” Red strolled into the kitchen. his hair was freshly washed and neatly twisted up in his red bun. He was dressed in his usual attire of black ripped jeans and a basic t-shirt, his battered leather jacket he wouldn’t trade for the world and a pair of boots that had probably

walked over more blood and body parts than you could ever imagine.

“I’m just keeping my cousin in check.” I smiled, but Red knew there was more to it.

“Just so you know, Nic, the last person to disrespect Ana sat in that very chair.” Red smirked, and I knew what story he was about to share. “Lorenzo put a bullet right there.” He placed his index finger between his eyes and shot Nicolo a wink.

“That’s how you treat your men, cousin?” The shock was clear in his voice.

“When they disrespect what’s mine, yes.”

“I didn’t mean anything by it, honestly.” Nicolo rose quickly and extended his hand for me to shake. “Let’s forget everything that happened and start over. I will not disrespect you or Anastacia.”

I contemplated taking his offered hand; after all, he was my cousin, and we were more alike than I cared to acknowledge. We spent a lot of time together growing up, he had my back just as much as I had his, and I hated that it had changed over the years, but I thought we were both to blame. I just didn’t want to admit it.

“One more word.”

“I won’t, I’ve learned my lesson already.”

“And it’s not even eight o’clock yet,” Red joked as he nudged my arm.

“When has that ever stopped us?” I chuckled as I tried to walk away from the guys.

“Not so fast, Boss, we have things to discuss.” Red smirked as he kicked his feet up onto the kitchen table.

“We’ll discuss them once you get your feet off the table.” He knew I hated shit like this, yet he still did it.

“My bad.” He swiftly removed his feet and planted them securely on the floor as he slapped his thighs.

“Now, what did you want to talk about? I have somewhere to be.” I cast a glance towards the door, as if I could hear the shower water running while Ana was all alone inside.

“The place you need to be is here, not between Anastacia’s legs.” He winked.

“I wasn’t even—”

“Yes, you were so don’t even finish that sentence,” he said as he kicked the chair out opposite him, inviting me to sit.

With Red and Nicolo’s eyes on me, I knew they were up to something, and despite Gino’s and Emmet’s absence, I knew they were already in on whatever Red had to say.

“Now, we know you’re getting married pretty soon, and there hasn’t been much conversation about your bachelor party, so we have everything planned out.” He rubbed his palms with excitement.

“Why can’t we talk about this at a more suitable hour?” I sighed, irritated at the prospect of a bachelor party.

“About that, why are you up already?” Red wrinkled his nose.

“I have a meeting with my father this morning, and you know how much of an early riser he is,” I said as I glanced at my watch. I rarely showed my face till nine o’clock, and today might have been later after waking up beside Ana.

“Ah, yes, he is.” Red laughed. “Well, we have a little time before you have to leave to go over the plans.”

“Let’s get this over with,” I grumbled as I prepared another cup of coffee; I’d need it if I had to listen to whatever shit they had planned and then whatever nonsense my father needed to talk about.

Red and Nicolo spoke nonstop about this bloody bachelor party for the next thirty minutes, Emmet and Gino joined in halfway through, and to be honest, I switched off until Red mentioned *strippers*.

“No fucking way!” I snapped.

“Oh, come on! What is a bachelor without a couple of strippers?” Red pleaded.

“I’m sure it’ll be a great one, and to be honest, I like my dick.” I laughed as I imagined what Ana would do if she discovered where I went.

“What will happen to your dick?” Nicolo asked; his face contorted with amusement.

“Ana would fucking castrate me if she knew you guys took me to a strip club.” I pinched the bridge of my nose as I shuddered at the thought.

“No, Ana would not,” her heavenly voice replied, drawing all the men’s attention to the entryway, where she stood wearing ripped jeans, a simple tank, and her beloved sneakers. Her hair was freshly waved as it cascaded down her back, and she crossed her arms with an amused look on her face.

“Excuse me?” I jumped up, causing the chair to topple over onto the marble tiles with a clatter. The guys seemed as amused as she did.

“I wouldn’t castrate you for having a lap dance, but if you put your dick in someone other than me, that’s a different story altogether.” She winked as she approached the front door.

“Anastacia Fedorov, get back here,” I called as I took off after her, and the laughter from the guys boomed throughout the kitchen.

They’ll pay for that.

“What can I do for you?” She spun to face me, grinning from ear to ear.

“So, you don’t mind if the guys take me to a strip club?” I questioned. I expected her to finally snap, but something told me she wouldn’t.

“Not at all, darling, have a wonderful time.” *Was she kidding me?*

“And you don’t mind if I have an endless number of dances?” I asked, as I trailed my finger across her exposed collarbone.

“No, I don’t. Will you be coming home to me?” she asked, her wide eyes looking for a response in mine.

“Yes.” *Where else would I want to go.*

“Then no, I don’t mind,” she said. Her smile remained despite her voice softening somewhat.

“Ana...”

“Honestly, I mean it.” She kissed my cheek swiftly but that wasn’t enough; she needed to know I had no interest in anyone else.

I gripped her face in my hands and claimed her lips with mine. They parted to allow my tongue access as she moaned into my mouth. The noises she made stirred something in me, and I was almost melting for this woman.

Some might say it was a swift turnaround, but something about Ana triggered that change in me, and I vowed to spend the rest of my life making up for the way I treated her at first. We were both to blame, but honestly, I provoked her repeatedly because I believed it would be an easy way to push her away, to destroy her, but I never expected her to give as good as she got, to be as powerful as she was. Others would have fallen over themselves for me, but not her; even today, if this hurt her, she wouldn’t show it; instead, she covered it to ensure I felt no ounce of guilt.

“I have to go. My mother is waiting, and it seems that yours is as well.”

“My mother?” I arched my brow as she wiped her gloss off my lips.

“They’re helping me choose my wedding dress.” She seemed thrilled for a woman who had refused to wear one.

“Oh, you’re getting married? He must be one lucky motherfucker. Do I know him?” I teased as I pulled her flush to my body by the waistband of her jeans.

“It’s possible.” She giggled as she wriggled free of my grip. “Stop playing around. I have to go.”

“I’ll drive you; I have a meeting with my father anyway.”

“Are you sure?” I didn’t answer her as I was already on my way to pull the car around the front.

To be honest, I’d rather drive her personally, and leaving earlier meant I wouldn’t have to listen to this bachelor party nonsense until later this evening.



CHAPTER NINETEEN

Anastacia

THE DAY OF LORENZO'S BACHELOR PARTY HAD ARRIVED. HE had spent the previous week and a half trying to avoid going, but the more he dug his heels, the more the guys pushed him.

"I don't need to go, Ana." He smiled as I handed him his usual pristine white shirt. No matter how hard I tried to persuade him to choose something different, he refused. "Are you going to be okay here on your own?"

"I'll be fine, Lorenzo. It's heavily guarded here; no one is allowed in without permission." I rolled my eyes as I flopped down on his bed I'd been staying in since our date night.

"That eye roll will get you in trouble." He chuckled as he buttoned his shirt before spraying himself with his signature cologne. The warm, woody scent filled the room, and I knew it would remain with me all night until he returned home.

"I'm counting on it." Playing with fire had become my favourite pastime.

"You're really tempting me to stay, aren't you?" His hands embraced me in an instant, his lips decorated my neck with kisses as his stubble scratched my skin.

"Not at all." I did up one last button as he let out a low chuckle. "That's better." As he chuckled quietly, I closed one more button. "That's much better." I patted his chest to signal him to move.

"Are the girls coming over for a bit?"

"To be honest, I might just have an early night." I hadn't intended on having one, but he didn't need to know what I had

planned for the evening.

“You never told me about what you decided on doing for your bachelorette party?” He placed his index on his plump bottom lip. “And I have asked many times.”

“Yes, I did tell you. I’m doing nothing.” His face fell a little. *Why was he so bothered?*

“A night with the girls, your mother and mine isn’t exactly a bachelorette party, is it?” Lorenzo wasn’t convinced, and I honestly didn’t think he’d want me to go out.

“It’s what I want to do,” I said sweetly, because it was never in my interest to marry this man, let alone have a bachelorette party, so I decided to have a girls’ night before the wedding.

“As you wish. I can’t force you, but you know you have full access to the club if you want.” He fastened his watch onto his wrist before he was finally ready to go.

“Thank you for the offer, but my decision has already been made. Now, quit chitchatting and get moving before the guys start looking for you.” As he dug his heels into the carpet, I ushered him towards the door. “Lorenzo, stop being so stubborn. A fun night out won’t kill you.”

“Wait up for me.” He sighed with a lopsided smile.

“You’re supposed to say don’t wait up.” I giggled as I leant against the doorframe, watching him walk towards the stairs.

“I can say it however I want to,” he called back as he disappeared, only to be greeted by the sound of the guys cheering at his arrival.

I listened intently as I heard them leave, and now it was my turn to get ready for what I had planned; I had schemed my exit route and was confident I wouldn’t get caught. If Lorenzo got word I was leaving the house, my night would be as fucked up as his.

I took out my phone and dialed Tay’s number; she and Robin knew the plan all too well as we had been planning and plotting for the same amount of time the guys had.

“Are you ready for tonight, baby?” Robin squealed over the car speaker.

“I will be when you get here. I need help getting ready.” I was a bundle of nerves, which was unlike me.

“We’re just pulling in. We had to wait for the guys to leave, and boy, did they take their time.” Tay laughed.

“Blame Lorenzo, he didn’t want to leave.” I hurried downstairs to open the front door for them.

“I bet he didn’t,” Robin joked as their headlights came into view.

I hung up the phone as they parked at the bottom of the steps. They were giddy with excitement as they got out of the car. Robin carried more make-up in her arms than a beauty boutique while Tay revealed a bag containing hair tools, pins, bands, products, and who knew what else.

“Here we are!” Robin squealed as they made their way inside.

We headed upstairs except Tay, who ventured into the kitchen to grab some wine glasses for the number of bottles she had brought with her.

“Why are we heading to what I’m guessing is Lorenzo’s room?” Robin asked, her perfect brow arched.

“Because that’s where all my stuff is now.” Under her astonished stare, my cheeks flushed.

“Wait a minute, what?!? When did this happen, and why am I only hearing about it now?” She almost shoved me into his room as she dumped her bag by the door.

“It just happened, we had that date, the one I told you about and since then, things have been different.”

“Shut the front fucking door! Different how?!” Tay appeared right on time. Her mouth was parted slightly in shock.

“I don’t know, it’s just different. He’s different.” I sighed because, to be honest, I didn’t know what to say or how to

even explain it.

“I don’t believe he can change completely in a matter of weeks; it doesn’t make sense to me.” Tay wasn’t convinced. She still wasn’t his biggest fan.

“Pack it in, Tay!” Robin scolded. “Carry on, Ana,” she prompted.

“I didn’t say he’s changed completely, but he makes me feel things... things I didn’t even know I was capable of feeling, especially towards him.” I took a deep breath before continuing, “He’s making an effort now. It’s as if he wants to make me happy.”

“And are you?” Robin asked while Tay watched me intently as she awaited my answer.

“To be honest, I think I am. All I could think of at first was killing him, but I no longer feel that way. I see a warmer side to him as I gradually let him see mine. Lorenzo is complicated, that’s for sure, but what is the point of always fighting one other when our future is inevitable?” I smiled as Robin returned it; she was a romantic at heart, always desiring the fairytale ending, and although Lorenzo and I were far from it, it didn’t mean we couldn’t get there in the distant future.

“So, you no longer want to kill him?” Tay laughed.

“Not every day, no.” I accepted the glass of wine she offered me as I smiled at the floor.

“That’s a shame.”

“Tay!” Robin interjected.

“Relax, I’m only kidding.” She giggled. “I only want you to be happy, and I know this arranged marriage thing hasn’t been easy for you, and I didn’t believe he could make you smile this way.” Tay took my hand in hers as Robin placed her arm around me.

“Are you sure you want to do this tonight?” Although the home was empty, Robin whispered as if she feared being heard.

“Positive.” I took a large sip of my wine, which instantly calmed my nerves. I wasn’t sure, but I planned it and intended to stick to it.

“Then let’s get you ready!” Tay said, excitement dripping from her.

After an hour and two bottles of wine, I was finally ready, and the girls sat on the bed to admire their work. “Well, I guess our work here is done!” Tay exhaled, a pleased and proud expression on her face.

“I thought you were coming along.” I winked.

“Oh, we are.” Robin smiled. I knew she was seeking for her happily ever after, and while I doubted she’d find it tonight, I was confident she’d find a man who deserved her and could make her happy.

I walked up to the floor-length mirror on the opposite side of the room. The girls had worked their magic on me this evening. My hair tumbled over my shoulders in large bouncy curls which complemented my smokey eye and ruby red lips flawlessly. Tay’s choice of outfit was an entirely different story. The skin-tight black fabric clung to me like a second skin. I had never worn something that short and revealing, mostly because my father would have marched my ass up the stairs so quickly that my feet wouldn’t have touched the floor.

“Is this a little...”

“No! Don’t you dare change!” Tay ordered. “You look incredible!”

“Okay, let’s get this show on the road!” I said.

We headed out to Robin’s waiting car, and I climbed into the backseat, lying down to avoid being seen. All it would take is just one guard noticing me to put an end to this evening.

“Nice ass.” Tay laughed as she shut the door behind me.

“Lorenzo seems to like it,” I joked as she entered the passenger side.

“Are you ready?” Robin asked as she looked down the long driveway.

“Yes, I just can’t wait to sit up.” I giggled; the booze was fully kicking in now.

Robin drove carefully down the driveway, which at this point, seemed never-ending. Tay waved to the guards we passed on the way.

“He was hot, remind me to introduce myself to him next time.” Tay placed her feet on the dashboard as one of the guards stopped the car at the gate.

“Fuck! Why is he stopping us? He knows you’re in here, doesn’t he?” Robin had gone into panic mode. She hated getting into trouble.

“Robin, will you calm down. He has no idea Ana is in here, but he will if you carry on.” Tay nudged her arm as she exhaled deeply.

Robin lowered down the window as Tommy approached her with a bright smile, which was unusual for him.

“Evening, that was a quick visit,” he pointed out.

“Ana was tired, so we decided to head into town instead,” Tay interrupted as Robin instantly relaxed.

I shimmied down onto the floor between the front and backseats the moment I saw Tommy glancing around the car.

“Ah, yes, Lorenzo mentioned she was going to have an early night and she wasn’t to be disturbed unless it was for you two.” His deep Irish accent echoed through the small space as he leaned forwards to rest his hefty hand on the door. “Right, well, drive careful.” He tapped his hand on the exterior as he backed away to let Robin leave.

Once the car turned the corner, I sat up before I glanced over my shoulder to check we were in the clear.

“Remind me to never do that again! My heart can’t take it.” Robin laughed.

Tay was in charge of the music as we cruised down the highway to our desired location.



As I arrived at the club, I felt sick with nerves, but it was too late to turn back now. I met one of the bouncers at the back entrance while the girls went in the front to make sure everything was happening as it should be.

“Evening.” He tipped his head as I approached.

“Hello.” I smiled as he held the door open for me. Thankfully, I now wore a jacket that covered the skimpy outfit I was wearing.

“Right this way.” He led me through the dimly lit corridors as the music boomed over the sound system.

My phone buzzed in my hand with an incoming message from Tay.

Tay: Lorenzo is on his way xx

I noticed the pair out the corner of my eye. Lorenzo looked pissed at Red that he was bringing him to a private room. I dashed behind the corner as the bouncer chuckled.

“He has no idea, does he?” he asked.

“None whatsoever.” I blushed, but thankfully, that wasn’t easily seen beneath these lights.

Despite the music effecting my hearing, I could hear Lorenzo protesting as clear as day.

“What the fuck did I say Red?” I knew he’d be angry, but this was another level. “I told you I didn’t want to come here, and now you’re taking me to a fucking private room. This better not be what I think it is.” Red patted his back to calm him down.

“Just wait and see, stop being so fucking stubborn, live a little! Ana said she didn’t mind.” He smiled since he knew

what was about to happen.

“Wipe that smile off your face, it’s pissing me off.” Red shoved Lorenzo through the door after ordering him to sit and wait for his surprise.

I couldn’t help but giggle as I stepped out from my hiding spot. Red’s eyes glistened with mischief.

“Right, I guess I’ll be leaving you now.” The bouncer smiled as he headed back to the main floor.

“Thank you!” I called but not too loudly as I didn’t want to be heard from where Lorenzo was waiting.

“I’m telling you; it was torture trying to get him here.” Red laughed. “I knew he was a stubborn fucker but tonight proved it and then some.” He huffed as he pinched the bridge of his nose.

“Let’s hope this calms him down,” I teased.

“Oh, I’m sure it will.” He winked. “Now, if you don’t you mind, I need to go and play matchmaker for Gino.”

“Oh, he’s got his eye on someone?” I pried whilst keeping my eye on the door I knew Lorenzo was behind.

“You could say that it’s Robin.” Red smiled.

Maybe Robin would get her happy ending after all. I knew the three guys all had their gentle side, but Gino was the gentlest and the one who I knew would treat Robin like the queen she is.

“Well, I won’t stop you! See you later.” I waved him goodbye and headed towards my waiting fiancé.

“I don’t think we’ll see you and Lorenzo again this evening.” He chuckled as he left me alone in the corridor, and maybe he was right. Maybe they won’t see us again this evening or Lorenzo might hate his surprise since he’d complained about them on more than one occasion.

I entered the dimly lighted room, where Lorenzo sat in the only chair available with his back to me. I tossed my coat to the side. His eyes never once turned to see who was

standing behind him, but the moment he heard the door close, his body stiffened.

“You can unlock that door.” His voice was harsh and commanding. “I’m not staying.” He rose from his chair, and I stopped him automatically.

I trailed my nails across the back of his neck as his skin pebbled beneath my touch. “Sit your ass back down, Ricci.”

“Wait a minute...”

Lorenzo settled back in his chair as I walked around to his front. His eyes darkened as he realised it was me standing before him.

“Anastacia.” His gaze wandered over my dress as his fingertips grazed the hem.

“It’s against the rules to touch.”

“When it comes to you, the rules don’t apply to me,” he teased as he pulled me onto his lap. My legs straddled either side of him.

“I thought you’d want a dance,” I whispered into his ear.

“Did you plan to dance for me?” He leant back in his chair as he rested his finger on his lips.

No more words were said as I slid off his lap before I took to the stage. I swung effortlessly to meet his gaze once more, wrapping my leg around the pole. I had no idea what I was doing and planned to go with the flow. As Lorenzo shifted in his seat, I let my hands run over the skimpy material of my dress.

“Take it off.”

“I’m not sure what you mean,” I teased as I toyed with the delicate strap.

“Take your dress off.” He leaned forward so his forearms now rested on his thighs. “Now.”

I lowered each strap excruciatingly slow as he moaned with each inch lowered.

“You’re fucking killing me.” Lorenzo bit down on his clenched fist as I turned my back to him.

I swayed my hips to the music as I placed my hands on the pole above my head, catching his gaze over my shoulder. His eyes followed every movement as if it were the last. I swung around the pole to face him, fighting back a smile as I lowered into the splits. My dress rode up to my waist to display the sexiest underwear I owned, black lace being one of his favourites.

“Come here,” he demanded as he patted his knee.

I slid off the edge of the stage and sauntered over to him but not to sit on his knee. I placed both my hands on his legs as I pressed my ass against his growing erection.

“What did I say about taking this off.” He tugged the skin-tight fabric down my body and over my ass until the only thing left to do was to step out of it. “That’s better. Now, dance for me, love.”

I lost myself in the music while keeping my back to him, my body sashaying in slow and sensual movements with my fiancé’s familiar hands fighting the urge to touch me. I rotated my hips seductively as my hands ran over every inch of my exposed skin. I lowered myself onto Lorenzo’s lap, and I could almost hear his breath catch in his throat. His dick pressed against me, and my pussy clenched thinking about him fucking me until morning.

“Turn around.” My body reacted far quicker than my brain as I obeyed immediately.

I straddled his lap as he tore open the flimsy fabric of my bra, letting my breasts spill out as the lace fell down my arms before joining my dress on the floor. His lips quickly closed over my waiting nipple as I moaned in sync to the music. I clung to his neck as my head fell back beneath the need and want for his touch.

“You interrupted my dance.” I just about got out through a moan of pleasure.

“The dance was fucking perfect.” His tongue ran up my neck until he teased my earlobe between his teeth. “I’m going to fuck you and I’m not waiting until we get home.” Before I had time to process what he’d whispered, I was in his arms and in one swift movement, my back was to the pole.

“Do you enjoy keeping secrets, Anastacia?” he teased as he unbuckled his belt.

“If it’s something for you, then yes.” He cocked his head aside. The dim spotlights illuminated the scar on his cheek and the speckles of gold in his eyes.

“Wrong answer.” He rounded me slowly, and I couldn’t move. I was frozen on the spot as my heart hammered violently in my chest. “I hate secrets no matter how incredible they are.” He gripped my wrists and skillfully looped his belt around them securing them to the pole. “And believe me, this one tops every single one.”

“Lorenzo…” His hand cupped my chin as his lips forcefully took mine.

His hold was as strong and dominant as it always was, and I crumbled beneath it every single time. He knew he owned every inch of my body, every moan of pleasure and every orgasm. This man had changed me into someone I barely recognised, someone I never thought I would become but someone I was coming to love. Despite being forced into this whole relationship, I felt freer than I ever had done.

He trailed rough kisses over my exposed skin as his fingers ran along the waistband of my lingerie, my chest heaved with every inch he toyed with.

“I hope you aren’t fond of these.” His devilish smile remained as he ripped apart the lace as if it were nothing, I gasped as the material bit into my skin. “That’s better.”

I couldn’t tear my gaze away from him as he took great pleasure in inhaling my scent on the tattered lace in his hand. I expected him to put them in his pocket, throw them on the floor, but he shocked me with his next move.

“Open.” He balled the lace between his fingers without taking his eyes off mine. “Now.”

He slipped my lingerie in my mouth to substitute as a gag, not that he needed to worry about us being heard since the music would have drowned out my moans and cries anyway. Lorenzo’s knee nudged my legs apart as his finger ran along my slick entrance. I narrowed my eyes as he leant in closer. His finger dipped inside my pussy as he brought his lips to my ear.

“It would seem you like being bound and gagged, *amore*.” His low whisper caused my pussy to clench around him. “You’re soaking my fingers like a dirty fucking girl.”

He circled his thumb on my swollen clit as his fingers entered me in perfect sync. His teeth grazed my neck as my pussy grinded against his fingers.

“I thought my fiancée was a good girl, but she’s anything but that. Good girls don’t keep secrets.” He lowered his mouth to my hardened nipple as his tongue teased me as much as his hands did. “I think I need to keep an eye on you, is that what you want?”

I tried to protest but I was in no position to. *Damn it.*

“Can you promise not to keep another secret?” My answer came out as nothing more than a muffled noise. “I’ll take your silence as a no.”

My silence? Very funny.

“I’m going to tease your pussy, deny you the pleasure of coming, and fuck you senseless until you promise never to keep another secret from me.” He brought his lips to my open ones, and the warmth of his bourbon infused breath sent my brain into overdrive.

He removed his fingers from my pussy, and I immediately felt my arousal trickle down my inner thigh. I dropped my gaze from his as my hair fell like a curtain around us. Lorenzo gripped my chin between his thumb and forefinger once again, and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t break away.

“I didn’t say you could take your eyes off me, did I?” He brought his fingers to his lips and removed the arousal that shone under the ever-changing light. Ungagging me, he tucked my panties into his pants pocket. “That’s better. Now I can hear you beg and moan while I deny you that orgasm, unless you want to promise me something?”

“Bite me.”

Childish reply? Sure.

Fun reply? Most definitely.

“Oh, don’t worry, I plan to, baby.” He dropped to his knees before me and if that wasn’t the hottest thing I’d ever seen, then I didn’t know what was.

“You seem to like being on your knees, Ricci,” I teased as I tried to close my legs with little to no movement as he held them in position.

“You are and always will be the only person I’ll ever kneel to.”

My eyes followed him intently as he lowered his face to my inner thigh. He ran his tongue along the path my arousal had made without so much as breaking eye contact. Fire burned inside me as my stomach flipped with need, it was clear I wanted him to fuck me. I needed it, needed him.

“Lorenzo, please...” I begged as he nipped at my inner thigh, his fingers tormenting my pussy.

“Please what?” He thrust his finger inside me up until his third knuckle as I gasped at the surprising entry. “Are you begging this early?”

“Fuck me, please.” And like that, I caved, I begged. “Please.”

“No.” A one-word answer left his lips as he thrust his finger in again without warning, but this time, it was two.

“Please...” I whimpered as he worked his tongue worked my sensitive clit.

“I love hearing you beg. So much better than those muffled screams.” His teeth grazed my clit. “You wanted me to bite you, hmm?”

“I—”

His teeth sunk into my clit as his fingers worked me relentlessly. I cried out as I tried to slide up the pole to get away, but he pulled me straight back down.

“Where do you think you’re running off too? I’m not finished with you yet.”

His tongue delved inside my pussy as it almost begged him to fuck me, he pinched my clit between his thumb and forefinger before he pulled away as I just about reached the edge. I gripped the pole as it helped cool down my scorching body. Every time he denied the orgasm, my skin prickled, and my body temperature soared.

“Tell me you won’t keep any more secrets and I’ll give you your release.” He sucked on my sensitive clit as my breath hitched in my throat. “Just two words, I promise.”

“Please let me come, please...”

“Say the words,” he ordered.

“No—” I panted as he thrust my body up the pole. The metal bit my back on the way up with the friction against my skin. I felt so exposed and I didn’t care, I just wanted him. My legs were now supported by his shoulders as my pussy was now with his eye level.

He ghosted his tongue along my slick folds, tormenting me still.

“Lorenzo, I—”

“I fucking love how greedy your tight little cunt is, it’s just begging to be fucked.” I watched him through glassy eyes as my legs shook from the pleasure. “I’m going to let you come, but it isn’t for you, it’s for me. I need to taste you.” He spat on my pussy as his tongue devoured everything I had, everything I could give. There was no holding back anymore. I trembled as tears prickled my eyes from the intense high of the orgasm.

He gently slid me back down the pole before he unbound my wrists, then led me back towards the chair as he pulled me on top of him. Without warning, he slammed his cock into me. The scream that left my body was one I never knew existed, but he seemed to thrive off it.

“Fuck me, please!”

“Is this not good enough?” he teased. “Bend over, now.” I scrambled to my feet and bent over on the floor.

“I’m going to fuck you until I’m close, then you’re going to choke on my cock like the good fucking girl you are. I want your fucking tears, Anastacia.” I nodded even though he didn’t finish that with a question. “How badly do you want that, Ana?”

“Please...”

“My cock loves the sound of you begging, but it would love the sound of something else more...”

I couldn’t hold back any longer; I couldn’t deny him of hearing those two fucking words he was dying to hear, so I said them.

“I promise, no matter how good the secret is, I won’t keep another one.”

“Say it again.”

“I promise.”

Lorenzo bent behind me as he gripped my hips. “Brace yourself,” he ordered as he thrust into me, every inch of him. I was shot forward like a cannonball from a cannon. “I fucking said brace yourself.” He held onto me as his fingers dug into my skin, the bruises already forming beneath them. I tried to find something nonexistent to hold onto, but there was nothing, only a threadbare carpet. I clawed at the material, but it was useless, my pussy clenched greedily around him as his middle finger instantly found my throbbing clit.

I maneuvered my hand under him as I tormented his balls between my palm and fingers, and his sharp intake of breath mixed with his hissed words told me he liked it.

“Seems like someone is eager to have me fuck their mouth.” I whipped my head around to catch his gaze over my shoulder. I teased my lower lip between my teeth and his hooded eyes darkened. “Get on your knees.” He pulled his cock from my pussy as I positioned myself at his feet. “Open and taste that sweet cunt all over my cock.”

As I opened my mouth, he slid his cock between my lips as he touched the back of my throat, I gagged almost instantly as he smirked with pleasure. His large hand gripped the back of my head as he fucked my mouth harder than he fucked my pussy. I tried to focus on my breathing, but I couldn't. Spit dribbled down my chin onto my breasts as tears leaked from my eyes with every thrust.

“You look so damn beautiful with my cock in your mouth.” He barely allowed me to catch my breath before his hips thrust once again.

“I'm going to come, baby. Stick out your tongue for me.” I obeyed him immediately. “Don't take your eyes off me. I'm going to watch as my cum dribbles down your chin.” He smirked, fisting his cock, as he placed the head on my waiting tongue as a low moan left his body.

“Fuck, Ana!” He covered my tongue in his cum as he admired the way some of it trickled down onto my chin before it joined my own saliva on my breasts. The rest of it pooled on my tongue as he tipped my head back, letting it slide down my throat.

He quickly pulled me from the floor as he cleaned up my face with his shirt.

“Come on, my naughty fiancée, let's go home.” His tongue passionately invaded my mouth, and it was obvious he didn't care about tasting his own arousal.

“Can we get some food on the way?”

“Whatever you want, *amore*.”

After we were clothed, we headed to the back exit, where the driver he hired for tonight waited.

Tonight, I stepped outside my comfort zone, and I'd do it again in a heartbeat.





CHAPTER TWENTY

Lorenzo

TWO DAYS UNTIL I WAS TO BECOME A HUSBAND.

Tomorrow, Anastacia would leave the house and the next time she returned, she would be my wife.

She had been adamant she didn't want a bachelorette party, so I didn't push it. There was no point; she knew her own mind, and that was one thing I'd grown to admire about her along with many other things. She didn't know just how much I admired it.

Tonight was the night I had planned with the help of my mother, a night that Anastacia deserved, a night she would hopefully remember for as long as life allowed. Red had taken her to visit her parents for the afternoon, so I had time to plan and prepare everything.

"Here, let me take those for you, Ma?" I asked my mother as she carried in the last dozen white roses.

"Oh, it's fine. I can manage a few flowers." She smiled as she placed the vase on the kitchen counter. "So, have you planned everything?"

"Pretty much, let's just hope she likes it." I returned her warm gesture as it was obvious, she wasn't used to it since I barely smiled until now even with my parents.

"What's not to like?" She patted my hand, the one that would soon wear a wedding band, one that Anastacia had chosen, one she wouldn't let me see.

"You're right." I looked at my mother's face, beaming with adoration.

“How long do we have?” She clapped her hands with delight and rolled up the sleeves on her cream cashmere jumper.

“A while. Red took her to see Florence and Victor.” I shrugged off my leather jacket and threw it on the back of the kitchen chair.

“Then we have plenty of time. I know Victor has missed his baby girl, so he’ll want to spend as much time with her.”

“Yeah, I kind of stole her away, didn’t I?” It was true; I backed Victor into a corner when I ordered Anastacia to move in before the wedding.

Honestly, it was to make her life a living hell. I wanted her to hate the thought of marrying me. I intended to watch her every move and ensure she wouldn’t be able to give my men the slip like she did with her father’s, but she proved me wrong time and time again. Anastacia Fedorov had captivated me in ways I never thought possible, I hated the idea of marriage, but now, I couldn’t wait to slide that ring onto her finger and have the whole world know Anastacia had become a Ricci.

“Lorenzo?” My mother piped up from the sink.

“Sorry, did you say something?”

“Yes, I agreed with you.” *First time for everything.* “The way you ordered Victor around was incorrect, but I can see it was the best decision for the both of you. You needed to find your footing with one another.” She smiled over her shoulder as I joined her to wash and prepare what I needed for this evening. “How do you feel about her?”

“What do you mean?” I knew what she meant but I was stalling.

“Don’t play those games with me. I know you better than you think.”

“She means a lot to me.” I sighed.

“Sure, that’s all?”

“Why wouldn’t it be?” I placed my palms flat on the counter, getting irritated slightly.

“Because the man who first met Anastacia did everything in his power to piss her off, did everything to act like an asshole.” She laughed as she turned back to the chopping board. “And now, the very same man takes her on dates, makes her smile, and even causes her to gush about him to her parents including her father.”

“She does?” The surprise on my face was apparent, especially to my mother who didn’t even to turn her attention to me.

“We met them last week and it was Victor who informed us of all your recent activities.” I could tell she was smiling; I could tell how happy this made her. “Your father is incredibly proud of you, Lorenzo; he knew you would open yourself up to Anastacia.”

“I don’t know how to deal with the shit I’m feeling, Ma,” I huffed out as she placed the knife down, her expression soft and loving. “Anastacia hated me just as much as I wanted to hate her. I wanted her to back out of the marriage, I wanted her to be the one to cause a war between the two families, but she didn’t. She stuck around, she took whatever I threw at her, she slowly let me in.”

“You say that as if it’s a bad thing.”

“Isn’t it?” I felt as though letting her see who I was deep, deep down was a weakness, one I couldn’t afford to have.

“No, it isn’t a bad thing.” My mother turned my body towards her, so my eyes met her much warmer ones. “There will be times in your life you’ll need someone to confide in, someone by your side when times get hard, someone who can love you unconditionally.” She placed her cool hand against my cheek as her thumb brushed the scar that sat proudly on my cheekbone.

“How can you be so sure she’ll ever truly love me?” *Why did it bother me if she loved me or not?*

“Why do you doubt it?”

“Because after being with her and seeing how pure and angelic she is behind that wall she puts up, it makes me realise that she is too good for someone like me.” It was true. As Anastacia and I grew closer, I doubted myself.

“I wish you wouldn’t put yourself down, you really are an amazing man and whatever happened when the pair of you first met is in the past and it will stay there.” My mother always knew the right things to say.

Over the next few hours, she helped me prepare one of my favourite family recipes, one I hoped Ana would enjoy as much as I did. It was nice to spend some time with my mother. I was usually too busy to spend time with her, but today, I needed her, and she was there, no questions asked.

As I made sure I had the small details prepared and ready, she arranged the roses around the lobby, bathroom and dining room. She scattered the petals throughout the entrance, up the stairs and the path that led to the bath. This was the most romantic thing I had ever planned. With help of course.

“You’re all set, darling.” My mother smiled as she pulled on her trench coat. “She’ll love it, trust me.”

“I trust you.” I pulled her into my embrace, my chin resting on the top of her head. “Enjoy tomorrow with my girl, and I’ll see you on the wedding day.” I smiled as I called Anastacia *my girl*.

Because she was and always would be.



“Lorenzo?” I heard that angelic voice from the entrance. Her footsteps came to a halt the moment she laid eyes on the sight before her. “Lorenzo?” she called my name once more as I appeared in the kitchen doorway. Her eyes darted from the petals to me. “What is all this?”

“Welcome to your bachelorette party, *amore*.” I smiled as I walked over to her. “I know you didn’t want one, but I thought that was quite unfair, so I planned an evening just for you.” I took her hand in mine and I could see the emotion in her eyes.

“You didn’t need to do this, you know.” I knew Victor gave her the world, but that wasn’t his place anymore, it was mine.

“I know I didn’t, but I wanted to.” I kissed her tenderly as I could feel her melting beneath my fingertips as I cupped her neck. “Come with me.”

I led her up the decorated stairs as her hand never left mine. She was in awe, looking around at the array of bouquets and candles as the soft music played quietly in the background. “Lorenzo, this is...” She paused as if she no longer knew what to say. “Beautiful.” I glanced over my shoulder at her as her hand tightened around mine.

“This is just the beginning, *amore*.” I scooped her up into my arms, and she threw her arms around my neck.

I carried her into the bathroom, and she gasped the moment I opened the door. The floor was covered in white petals, candles illuminated the room, and her bath was drawn with her favourite oils. I placed her down gently before I dropped to my knees before her.

“Lorenzo...”

I slipped her feet from her sneakers and socks before I unbuttoned her jeans. I lowered them down her legs as she clutched my shoulders to steady herself. I slid her lace lingerie down with ease as she stepped out of them. She had started to remove her tank before I’d even risen off the floor. Tonight, I would worship her in ways she deserved.

“Not so fast, love, it’s my turn to look after you tonight.” Her arms instantly went above her head as I pulled the tank over her head, her hair fell in waves behind her as she shook her head.

“I don’t understand why you’re doing this for me.”

“Because although we’ve grown closer than we ever thought possible, I’ve never fully treated you as you deserve, and you deserve the whole damn world.” I unclasped her bra and discarded it on the floor.

“Lorenzo, I—” Her words caught in her throat as she tried to speak. I saw the glassiness of her eyes and she fought back the tears of what I hoped was happiness.

“We’ll talk more over dinner, but first, enjoy your bath and champagne.” I kissed her forehead as she fisted my freshly steamed shirt. “Meet me downstairs in the dining room when you’re ready. There is a new dress in my closet for you.” I ran my thumb over her bottom lip as they parted slightly.

“Will you join me?” she whispered as I held her in my embrace a moment longer.

“Next time. I have dinner to finish up before you join me.” I smiled and hurried down the stairs before she had a chance to say anything else.



Dinner was ready, the wine was chilled, and all that remained was for Anastacia to arrive. I waited impatiently in the dining room, overlooking the lake. It looked magnificent; the guys outdid themselves with that one. I stood with my back to the door, hands in my pockets, mentally counting down the minutes.

“Wow...” Her voice caused my body to straighten as she finally arrived. Her subtle yet sweet perfume immediately filled the air between us, and I felt intoxicated. “This looks amazing!” Her smile illuminated the room far more than the candles did.

“Not as amazing as you.” Her giggle caused my stomach to clench with something I wasn’t used to. “And before you

crack some sort of joke about me sounding cheesy, I already know, and for tonight, I'm okay with that." I smiled as I made my way over to where she waited for me.

The champagne dress I'd brought for her fitted perfectly as it stopped above her knee and the low-cut neckline caused my eyes to drop there instantly without thinking. She cleared her throat softly as I returned my gaze to hers. Her hair was poker straight, tucked behind her ears as her make-up wasn't too much or too little, it was just right. She peeked up at me through those never-ending lashes as a slight smile played on her nude, glossed lips. I took her hand in my own and pressed a delicate kiss on her knuckles, the warmth of her velvet soft skin teasing my lips.

"You cooked?" she asked. The surprise in her voice clear as she looked past me towards the table.

"I did, but I had a little help." I placed my hand on her lower back and led her over to her seat.

"Thank you." I pulled out her chair before taking my own.

Tonight was the first time we had used this dining room. We usually used it for family meals, gatherings, parties, and fuck knew what else. Tonight, I sat at the head of the table where I always sat and she took a seat beside me, a seat reserved for my right-hand man, Gino, or my father. A seat that would now be occupied only by her. Anastacia would stand by my side as my *equal* and nothing less. She would be so much more than just my wife now.

"This was the reason I asked Red to take you to your parents and keep you busy."

"They were all in on this? Why didn't you tell me?" She lifted my hand that was double the size of hers and brought it to her lips, kissing the back of it as if to return my earlier gesture.

"Because if I told you, then it wouldn't have been a surprise." Without removing my hand from hers, I poured her a glass of champagne before pouring my own.

“You didn’t need to go to all this trouble for me. I feel awful; this must have taken you all day.” I placed the bottle back in the ice bucket and pulled her to face me by the arms of her chair.

“I did this for you because I wanted to. If it took all week I wouldn’t have cared, neither would I have cared if it had taken the whole fucking year.” I didn’t take my eyes off her as I made sure she understood what I meant. “Anastacia, you didn’t want to do anything, yet you planned something exceptional for mine. Did you really think I would let you marry me without doing something special for you as you did for me?”

“That was nowhere near as beautiful and special as this though. You can’t possibly compare.”

“Yes, I can, and do you want to know why?” I let out a deep breath as she watched me intently. “Because you’re special and beautiful, so yes, it was exactly the same for me as tonight is for you.”

“Where has this come from?” She blushed under my gaze as she gracefully twirled her spaghetti around her fork.

“I thought that from the moment we met, I just didn’t know how to, nor did I want to show it.” It was the truth, and I didn’t need to hide it from her. “Anastacia, you have opened my eyes to many things and although you have a hard exterior when you want it, I have slowly got to know the woman who constantly has a breathtaking smile on her face, eyes full of love and a personality that draws everyone in without even trying.” I smiled.

“Is that what I did with you, did I draw you in?”

“More than you know, believe me when I say I tried everything to get you to back out of our arrangement. I was ready to have an all-out war with your father and you would have been the one to cause it.” I felt awful even saying it out loud, but she knew how I felt at the start.

“And now?” She turned her attention from me, and I worried I had hurt her from speaking the truth.

“Now, I’m more than ready to have you by my side as more than my wife. I don’t want to push you away. I don’t want a trophy wife to just produce me an heir.” I pulled her from her chair in one swift movement and onto my lap. Her fingers knotted, and I knew she was doubting how I felt. “I’m sorry I can’t pour my heart out like you might want me to or how I know you deserve; it is something I’ve never needed to do. I just don’t know how to say the words you should be able to hear every damn day.” I cupped her chin as she turned her head to look at me. “Come and take a walk with me,” I asked as she peered up at me.

“It’s dark out,” she whispered as she slid off my lap and I instantly felt a loneliness I couldn’t explain.

“Just come with me.” I held out my hand and she took it.

I led her out through the double doors of the dining room that opened up onto the lake. The lights twinkled in every single tree; candles lined the walkway as did the exact same petals all over our house.

“Have these lights always been here?” she asked as her eyes darted around at the adoration, I was showering her with.

“No, I had the guys out here this morning sorting it so we could enjoy some time out here this evening.” I smiled as she wandered through the pathway of petals towards the lake where I had laid out a blanket for us. “Do you like it?”

“I love it, it’s perfect.” She kicked off her heels before she headed to one part of the lakeside that was a new addition surrounded by a small white fence. “What are these?” She spun around quickly, her face a picture of surprise.

“Roses.” I laughed, knowing full well they weren’t just any roses.

“I know that, but why are they lit up?” She crouched beside them to look closely.

“Because I know white roses are your favourites, and you used to plant them with your grandfather, and I know they don’t bloom all year round, so I had this made for you so when you want to take a stroll through the garden, you’ll see them

every single day of the year, day or night.” Her eyes fought back tears as she looked up at me.

“Lorenzo, this is...” Once again, she was rendered speechless. I could tell this was special to her which meant it was special to me. “I don’t know what to say.” She then noticed the plaque that I’d had made for her.

In loving memory of Aleksander Fedorov.

Her delicate fingers traced over his engraved name, and a tear fell on the golden plaque.

“This is a place just for you and only you. Somewhere you can go whenever you miss him, whenever you want to sit amongst the flowers or both.” I know it was easily seen from the house, but it was the place I always found her whenever she came outside.

“Thank you, it’s beyond perfect.” She stepped over the picket fence and closed the distance between us almost instantly. “I love it.” She smiled, and it reached her glassy eyes.

“I do have something else for you.” I reached into my pocket to reveal a small black velvet box.

“Lorenzo—”

“Wait, please let me finish before you say anything else.” I opened the box, and it took a moment for her to notice what was inside.

I carefully removed the white gold chain from the box and gently turned her around as I placed the dainty necklace around her neck. She spun to face me once more and her fingers went up to the delicate *L* that sat on her bare skin. It was small, but I knew she wasn’t big on wearing any jewellery except her engagement ring that she never took off.

“I know you aren’t a massive fan of jewellery, but I wanted to get you my initial.” I smiled as she glanced at the gift she held between her thumb and forefinger.

“Why your initial?” she teased, snaking her hands around my waist. Her chin rested on my chest as she gazed up at me, a

stray tear clinging to her lashes.

“Because even if I’m never in your heart, I know this is the closest I can get.”

“But you are.” She let out a shaky breath.

“Say that again.” A lump formed in my throat as Ana allowed the tear to trickle down her cheek.

I didn’t know if my ears deceived me, or she actually said what I think she said.

“You’re already in my heart, Lorenzo, you have been since the night of our engagement. I couldn’t fight the attraction and lust I felt towards you then, but it has become so much more than that.” She placed her hand over my heart that was violently beating against my chest. “I love you.”

There they were... those three little words I never expected to hear from Anastacia.

“I know you said you find it hard to say the words I need to hear, but I don’t need to hear them. I know you want to say them, you wouldn’t have done all this if you didn’t feel something for me.”

She turned away from me to continue admiring the garden of roses. I couldn’t believe she told me she loved me.

“Anastacia, can you look at me please.” She was emotional; she had just said the words I was sure she vowed to herself she’d never say to me.

“Lorenzo, we don’t need to talk about it. I understand, honestly, I do.” I knew she was trying to cover up the fact she was a little disappointed, maybe even upset.

“Anastacia, turn around,” I ordered as gently as I could. “I need you to look at me.” But she didn’t, she remained still as her body trembled slightly beneath my hold.

I didn’t ask her anymore. I spun her around and sank to my knees before her. Her lips parted as her tear-stained face caught my attention. I took her hands in mine as the coolness of her engagement band felt like heaven against my skin.

“I love you,” I whispered as she placed her palm flat on my cheek, her adoring eyes met my own.

“Do you mean it?” She dropped to her knees mirroring me. “You said you couldn’t say the words I needed to hear every day.”

“I guess I was wrong because I do fucking love you, Anastacia Fedorov.” Her smile was infectious as she threw her arms around my neck. Her lips greedily devoured mine, and if this was how love felt, I never wanted to feel anything else.

“Make love to me,” she pleaded against my lips while already unbuttoning my shirt.

“Here?” To say I was shocked was an understatement.

“Yes, here... please.” Her begging only made me want to fuck her senseless, not make love to her; but tonight wasn’t about me, it was all about her.

I slid the straps of her dress down her arms as the rest of it followed, and fuck me, she was naked underneath, not a scrap of lace graced her body.

I wasted no time in laying her down on the blanket, the only sounds being the ripples on the lake and Anastacia’s heart almost bursting out of her chest. As I unbuckled my belt, her legs dropped open, and I was transfixed for a few seconds until she took matters into her own hands. She sat bolt upright, dragging my suit pants and boxers down my thighs before wrapping her legs around my waist and pulling me down on top of her.

Her eyes shone with a mixture of emotions, but she was happy. I could tell she was happy and that stirred more in me than I’d ever imagined. Her smile was the one and only thing that could brighten a dull day within a millisecond.

I cupped her neck as I devoured her lips as tenderly as I could, but the way she moaned into my mouth made it harder than my dick was.

“Anastacia, keep moaning like that and I’ll *fuck* you,” I teased as I pressed the head of my cock against her tight pussy entrance. “You didn’t ask for that.”

She instantly pushed her hips up slightly; she knew what she was doing as I entered her.

“Fuck...” she breathed as I buried myself deeper.

“Do you want me to fuck you, *amore?*” I whispered between the rough kisses I decorated her neck with.

“Yes...” She gasped as I thrust inside her. Her fingers clawed my back, a feeling I reveled in. Knowing my back was being ripped to shreds by this woman made me fucking primal.

“Didn’t you say you wanted to make love?” I teased as I ran my tongue over the spots where I’d kissed; I’d made sure not to leave any marks on her neck just before the wedding, but that didn’t mean I wouldn’t leave them somewhere else. I lowered my mouth to her breasts and left several hickeys across the pair, one after the other. Her heaving chest and trembling breath only made me want to cover her with more.

“I was wrong... fuck me. I want to feel you while we’re apart tomorrow.” She crossed her ankles behind my back, pointing out exactly what she wanted.

She didn’t have to tell me twice. I thrust into her to guarantee she felt me until the wedding night, not just tomorrow. I seized her legs and threw them over my shoulders. Her ankles brushed against my ears as she cried my name. I leaned down to claim her mouth, but as I did so, her knees almost touched her breasts. I’d never been so deep in her before and I think it was my new favourite thing.

“You’re so fucking tight,” I growled against her lips as her teeth grazed my lower one.

“Lorenzo! Please...” Her hands scrambled over my torso as she looked for a place to grip onto as I fucked her harder every single time.

“Begging already?” I taunted since one of the first things she said was that she’s never begged, and she wouldn’t start with me.

Oh, how the mighty have fallen.

“Please.” Her eyes captured my attention as they pleaded as much as she did. Her cheeks had flushed the perfect shade of pink as her tongue darted out to dampen her lips.

“Come for me, *amore*.”



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE *Anastacia*

I HAD JUST ARRIVED AT MY PARENTS' HOUSE AFTER THE perfect evening and morning with Lorenzo. He had insisted on dropping me off at their door since Red wasn't back yet. I knew that wasn't the reason, the real one was because it would be the last time we'd see one another until I walk down the aisle.

"I'll see you tomorrow." He smiled as he kissed my knuckles on the hand he hadn't stopped holding since we left home.

"I'll be the one in white," I teased as I kissed him tenderly.

"Anastacia, out, now!" *Brilliant. Good timing, Papa.*

"Your father has a way with timing." Lorenzo rolled his eyes as I chuckled to the sound of my father tapping his knuckles on the passenger window.

"I have to go." I just about had my hand on the door handle when I was pulled back towards Lorenzo, his lips possessing mine, and just like that, I forgot where I was.

"Now you can go." He pecked my lips once more before my father impatiently yanked the car door open.

"I don't appreciate being kept waiting, Lorenzo, and I most certainly don't wish to see the display I just saw." My father's face was impassive, unable to read, but I couldn't control myself. I let out a soft giggle as Lorenzo chuckled from the driver's seat. "Well, I'm glad the pair of you find this funny." My father let out a sigh as he folded his arms.

“Relax, Victor, we’ve done plenty worse.” If the ground could open and swallow me up, that would be great.

“Goodbye, Lorenzo.” My father slammed the door once I was out. I’d never seen Lorenzo laugh as hard as he did in that moment.

I waited for him to go, but much to my surprise, he didn’t. He opened the window and leant across the passenger seat.

“You forgot something.” He smirked.

“No, I didn’t, my father already has my bag.” I cocked my head to the side until it hit me.

“I wasn’t talking about the bag.” He tapped his index finger against his lips as he waited for me to open my mouth and say what he wanted to hear.

“I love you.” I smiled as I heard my father’s breath hitch.

“I love you too.” Once those words left his lips, I heard the familiar sound of the revving engine as he sped off down the driveway.

“Love?” My father quickly broke the silence as I watched Lorenzo turn off onto the quiet road.

“It just happened, there is nothing to discuss.” I shrugged my shoulders as I turned towards the house.

“Nothing to discuss? Really?” I didn’t know why he was making such a big deal out of this.

“Papa, I know you were all in on the surprise he planned last night, so why are you surprised?” I ascended the steps to the front door where my mother appeared.

“Florence, did you hear this?!” my father called after me.

“Hear what, darling?” My mother smiled as she looked between the pair of us.

“Our daughter has declared her love to Lorenzo, and he’s only gone and declared it back!” I couldn’t work out what was going on with him right now.

“Is that a bad thing? This is what we’ve wanted, Victor, we wanted them to fall in love.” She looked at me with that flawless smile, the one my father adored and made well known any chance he got.

“No, I never said it was a bad thing! I just cannot believe our daughter; the same one who said she would never fall in love with him of all people has only gone and done it!” I didn’t even need to turn around, I already knew his smile could have been seen from space.

“Leave her alone, Victor.” My mother rolled her eyes as she opened up her arms. “Hello, baby,” she whispered softly into my ear. “Big day tomorrow.” I nodded against her shoulder as I inhaled her floral perfume.

My father wrapped me and my mother in his arms as he joined us at the front door and the moment would have been perfect if it wasn’t for the surprising appearance of my brother who jumped onto the cute moment, and yes, I meant jumped onto us rather than joining us.

“Miles!” my father snapped as he swatted my brother round the back of his head.

“Sorry, I wanted to join in, and it was just too good of an opportunity to pass up.” Having my brother here was the missing piece of the puzzle. I missed them since moving out, but it made coming home to spend time with them all the sweeter.

“Did I hear right?” Miles said.

“That depends on what you think you heard,” I teased as we headed in the front door.

“That you’re in love?” He made kissing faces that only spurred me on to want to punch him in the mouth.

“I’d shut that gob of yours if you value the tongue inside of it.” I swatted his arm as Chad came into view at the top of the stairs.

“Welcome home, Anastacia.” His tone was off, and his demeanor spoke a thousand words.

“Thanks.” I directed my gaze at anyone else but him, and luckily, nobody seemed to notice the frosty welcoming except one person... Miles.

“Chad, do you fancy sparring a little?” Miles asked as I silently thanked him.

Chad had always been such a happy guy; he had always been one of my best friends but since Lorenzo came around, everything was different.

“Sounds good, meet me there,” Chad curtly replied as he headed towards his bedroom.

“Why don’t you join them?” my father asked, still beaming from the revelation.

“I don’t think that’s wise, do you, Victor?” My mother arched her brow as she waited for it to register.

“You’re right. We don’t want any injuries especially not with the wedding tomorrow.”

“Why don’t you all go and do whatever it is you need to do and let me spend some time with my daughter.” My mother shooed them out of the kitchen.

The rest of the afternoon was spent watching movies in the front room with endless amounts of popcorn and treats, something my mother and I did often.

“So, love?” The moment the movie finished, my mother shifted in her seat to face me.

“Can we not make a big deal out of it?” My head fell back on the sofa as I hoped she would drop it, but knowing her, I had no such luck.

“I’m just asking, what changed? Was it his romantic evening last night?” She smiled as she placed her hand atop mine.

“It wasn’t just last night, Mama. He’s different... well, with me anyway.” I sighed as the thought of Lorenzo caused my heart to ache. I missed being around him, which was strange because at one point, I would have happily buried him six feet under. “He’s so heartless and intimidating, scary and

abrupt but not with me, not anymore.” I turned my head to meet her gaze, and I instantly knew she understood that Lorenzo wasn’t the nicest when we first met.

“You’ve never told me what he was like when you first moved in with him.”

“It wasn’t as easy as living here with you and Papa. He was unkind, a complete arsehole but then again, I knew exactly what buttons to push and how to get on his last nerve.” I smirked as she burst into a fit of laughter.

“I bet you did, you’re just like your mother.”

“You got that right!” I was a lot like her but also there were parts of me that were exactly like my father. I always wanted to be like him and Miles. I followed them around at any chance I could. I always knew Miles would take over; I didn’t care about that since I was never interested in the responsibility of leading the Bratva. Miles adored it; he was born to be a leader.

“But...” she started, and I could see the worried look in her eye despite me telling her yesterday how things were going.

“Mama, I am absolutely fine. After the engagement party, many things changed. I saw something I never thought I’d see. He looked sorry and somewhat remorseful of how he had acted towards me originally, and from that moment on, everything changed.” I squeezed her hand gently. “My heart began to let him in, I let my guard down and so did he.” I smiled sweetly as I awaited her response.

“Does he look after you? Protect you? Like your father and Miles did?”

“Well, one of his men ended up with a bullet between his eyes for a comment he made about me.”

Her eyes widened before they instantly softened. Nothing shocked her anymore.

“Oh, right, well, that’s...”

“Yes, indeed, it is.” I laughed as she pulled me into her arms. Her embrace was warm and soothing, an embrace I’ll never get tired of.

“Should we watch another movie before everyone arrives?” she questioned as she played with my hair.

“Mmm, sounds good...” I already felt myself drifting off to sleep, the sounds of the opening credits acting as a lullaby.



“So, did my son wow you last night?” Carmella asked from across the table.

Dotted around the dining table in their pyjamas were my mother, Carmella, my grandmother, Robin, Tay, and Loreta. The buzz in the air about the wedding was electric, everyone was excited.

“He did.” I smiled as she sipped her cocktail.

“You must have the patience of a saint; he isn’t the easiest to deal with.” She giggled; clearly the alcohol had already gone to her head.

“I have no doubts my daughter can handle your son; I’d even bet my life on it.” My mother winked at her.

“I guarantee that man is as smitten as they come,” Robin cooed as she tucked into her plateful of food.

“You sure it’s not Gino who’s smitten?” I teased as her eyes widened and her mouth turned up into the shyest smile I’d ever seen.

“Gino... what makes you think...” She blushed, and although she tried to hide it, she couldn’t.

“I already know. Red has quite the mouth on him.”

“It’s early days. He’s very sweet and as loyal and as devoted to your husband as they come.” Robin sang his praises as if she wanted the world to hear, not just me.

“He really is. The four of them have a wonderful friendship as well as work relationship. Lorenzo is lucky to have them just as much as they are to have him.” The four were a force to be reckoned with.

“Gino is a good guy, and he is extremely lucky to have someone like you if you choose to pursue a relationship with one another.” I smiled as Robin returned it with a matching one.

“I want to propose a toast to Ana, our best friend and the most wonderful woman we’ve ever met. I can finally say I approve of Lorenzo, and I know it took a while and believe me it’s not just because his mother is sitting right there.” Carmella chuckled as Tay continued. “It’s because he has shown just how much he deserves our girl; I had my doubts but last night he went above and beyond for her, and she deserves that and so much more. Ana, we adore you and are ready to take on the world for you anytime.” Her eyes were brimmed with tears as she sipped her cocktail.

“Wow, Tay... that was beautiful.” A tear fell and splashed on the mahogany table. “I would take on the world for the both of you, no questions asked, you aren’t just my best friends, you’re also my family and I love you.”

These girls were my everything, they had been since we met. There was nothing we hadn’t gone through together, and I was certain it would always remain that way no matter how old we got.

“They’ve grown up fast, haven’t they, Flor?” Carmella whispered.

“Indeed, it seems like only yesterday she was born and now she’s getting married.” My mother sniffled into her napkin.

“This is far from what I imagined the day our husbands made that deal, the day you found out you were carrying

Anastacia.” Carmella turned her attention to my mother as the I watched the pair of old friends talk about how they felt. “Lorenzo was adamant the moment he turned eighteen he didn’t need a wife. I never thought for a second they would end up falling in love. Seeing Lorenzo fretting about everything being perfect yesterday for Ana was a rare sight.”

“Well, I guess we can say our children have become a good influence for one another. Anastacia seems a lot happier with Lorenzo now than she did the evening before the engagement party when she turned up here barefoot, and exhausted.” I could tell my mother was irritated about that. She wanted to give Lorenzo a piece of her mind that evening, but I had stopped her.

“At least it’s all behind them now, no use dwelling on the past,” my grandmother interjected from her chair at the head of the table. “My Aleksander would have loved Lorenzo, he said he would grow up to be one hell of a man and the only one who would become the perfect fit for his flower, and I can finally hold my hands up and say he was right.” She directed her gaze upwards as if she was telling my grandfather he was right.

The rest of the evening was spent laughing and joking with one another as we sipped cocktails but not too many since none of us wanted a hangover in the morning. We helped each other with face masks while we had our manicures and pedicures by our usual beauticians that Carmella booked for everyone. It was obvious I was nervous about tomorrow, mostly because I didn’t want to fall flat on my face for everyone to see, but my father assured me many times that he’d never let me fall.

“What do you think, flower?” my grandmother asked, bringing my wandering mind crashing back to earth.

“Sorry, what about?”

“Tomorrow, you’ll have your hair and make-up done last to ensure it’s perfect for the big moment, yes?” She beamed; her cool hand cupped my face as I nuzzled into her touch.

“Yes, that sounds perfect.”

“Where was that head of yours?” she questioned.

“Nowhere in particular. I was just thinking.”

“About Lorenzo?” Her smile was genuine as it spread across her aging face.

“A little, but I am panicking about falling down the aisle.” I blushed as I let out a deep sigh.

“Your father will not let you fall, but I’m sure he’s told you that plenty of times,” she teased as she sipped her cup of tea.

“Do you all mind if I head to bed. I need an early night.” I stood up soon after Rosie had finished my nails.

“Of course not, you get some rest.” My mother smiled.

“Do you want us to come?” Robin asked as her nail technician started her second hand.

“No, you two stay here. I’ll see you all bright and early.” I waved, already halfway out the door to the united calls of good night.

I wandered the corridors towards my room. They were silent since my father and Miles were visiting Lorenzo at his house. I was about to take the first step to my room when I realised I was no longer alone. I recognised those footsteps, that breathing pattern before they even opened their mouth.

“Hi, Chad.” I sighed as I paused the moment the words left my mouth.

“So, you’re really going through with it, then?” he asked. He sounded his usual self, not like he had sounded the past few times we spoke.

“It looks that way, huh.” I smiled as I turned to face him.

“It sure does, are you ready to become someone’s wife?”

“If you mean Lorenzo’s wife, then yes, I am.” I folded my arms and waited for him to say something about Lorenzo.

“Do you love him?”

“Yes.” I was confident in my answer; the one thing Chad had hoped I wouldn’t be judging by his expression.

“Well, I wish you the best.” He turned his back as he walked down the darkened corridor.

“Thanks.” Years of friendship seemed a far cry from what we were now, he was like someone else completely.

“Ana, save me a dance tomorrow.”

“I don’t know if that’s a good idea.” It wouldn’t be a good idea. He and Lorenzo didn’t exactly fall under the best friend category and hell would have to freeze over before Lorenzo let Chad spin me around a dancefloor.

I ascended the stairs to my old room and flopped down on the fresh sheets my mother had put on this morning. There was a basket on the side with all kinds of gifts that ranged from my favourite perfume to chocolates with a card that read, *For the bride to be. Love Robin & Tay.*

I pulled out my phone and dialed the one person whose voice I needed to hear before I drifted peacefully to sleep.

“*Amore,*” he sleepily answered on the first ring.

“Sorry, did I wake you?” I wandered over to bed before I climbed beneath the sheets.

“No, I was awake.” That was a lie, there was only one reason his voice was as raspy as it was and that was because he had been asleep.

“Do you really want to go into our marriage on a lie,” I teased as he chuckled gruffly.

“I left everyone downstairs and came to bed. The scent of your perfume made me dose off.” My heart nearly jumped out my chest as he spoke those words. “I’ll let you in on a secret... if you want to know.”

“Enlighten me. What do you have to share.” I faced towards the window as the moon shone through the gap in the curtains.

“I’m using your pillow.” I could hear his boyish smile over the speaker.

“Why would you be doing that? Don’t you know I get territorial over what’s mine,” I joked.

“Because it’s fucking weird without you here, and this is the closest I could get.”

“Well, aren’t you just the sweetest, cutest...”

“Don’t you dare finish that sentence, Mrs. Ricci.”

“That’s a little early, don’t you think?” Hearing him use his surname for me was hot but I wouldn’t let him know that.

“This time tomorrow you’ll be my wife, so I thought I’d see how it sounded.”

“And how do you think it sounds?”

“Fucking perfect.” He smiled once more, and I swooned, my heart soared. “Ana, can I ask you something?”

“Of course, what is it?”

“Are you happy?” he questioned, his voice sincere.

“With you or in general?”

“With everything but mainly with me.” He let out a deep sigh, and I knew he was pinching the bridge of his nose; it was something he always did when he was stressed, angry or questioning things, and I knew it was the latter.

“You don’t need to ask me that, I wouldn’t have told you how I felt last night if I wasn’t.” I heard his sigh of relief. “What about you, are you happy?”

“More than I thought possible. I would wait all night at that aisle for you just to show you how much I want to marry you.”

“You’d freeze your balls off.” I giggled as I awaited his somewhat sexual remark.

“I’m sure you’d warm them up.” *And there it was.*

“Have sweet dreams, husband.”

“That’s too early, isn’t it?”

“This time tomorrow, you’ll be my husband, so I thought I’d see how it sounded.”

“Good night, *amore*, I love you.”

“I love you too.” I hung up the phone and drifted off, feeling ready for tomorrow and anything that followed it.



The giggling and laughter from down the stairs on the lower corridor woke me up. I knew the girls and my mother were excited as was my father, but he wouldn’t admit it as much as they did. I threw my legs over the side of the bed before I pulled on my robe.

“Anastacia, are you awake?” My father’s voice came from the other side of the door, he was never usually around at this time, but I guess today was different.

“Come in,” I called as I stood to welcome him.

“There’s my flower.” He smiled as he pushed open the door before it closed softly behind him.

“Morning, Papa.” I welcomed his embrace as his warmth and aftershave enveloped me, the spicy notes tickling my nostrils.

“How are you feeling this morning?” he asked, his voice calm.

“Well, I don’t want to run for the hills,” I joked as his arms dropped to his side so he could get a good look at me.

“You look like someone who is head over heels in love, so I doubt you’d want to.”

“Lorenzo would hunt me down if I did.” I laughed as did he. His laughter filled my bedroom, and it was a sound I loved to hear. He may have been a ruthless man, known for having

no heart by everyone who crossed his path, but with his family, he was the opposite.

It was fair to say we might have had a little hiccup when I discovered he'd promised me to Lorenzo, but nobody's prepared to hear that on the day they turn eighteen, are they?

"That's true, I've never seen that man with anything but a scowl on his face, but yesterday all I saw was a man that would die to protect my daughter and until then I had my doubts, strong ones, but seeing how he would burn the world for you filled me with hope that you'll be as loved and protected as you deserve to be, as much if not more than I have done." My father looked close to tears, and it may have been the first time I'd ever seen him this emotional. "Do you believe he can love and protect you?"

"Originally, no," I breathed.

"And now?" His brows knitted with worry as if I was about to turn his world upside down.

"And now, I have no doubts." I smiled as my hand went directly up to the necklace Lorenzo had gifted me. I hadn't taken it off since he placed it around my neck.

"That's new." My father arched his brow as the left side of his lips turned up into a smirk.

"Lorenzo gave it to me the other evening." I blushed.

"I figured as much, it's either a possessive thing to show the world you're his or another reason I can't put my finger on."

"You don't need to know the reason, just know it wasn't a possessive one." I smiled as I headed towards the bathroom.

"I'll take that as my cue to leave. I'll see you later when you're ready." He was halfway out the door when he paused. "I'm so incredibly proud of you, Anastacia, how you've taken this on for your family even though you didn't want to." He didn't turn to face me, he couldn't. I could hear his breath catch in his throat as he left me standing alone in the threshold of the ensuite.

After my shower, I entered the bedroom to see my dress was now hanging up high enough to not even brush the floor. *Mama*. We honestly picked a stunning dress, it was white with a champagne lining underneath, every time the light invaded the room each individual crystal sparkled, the detail was unmatched, everything about it was breathtaking from the lace to the Basque detail around the bust and rib area. It had delicate straps, ones you couldn't even hang the dress up with incase they snapped under the weight of the material, although everyone preferred the pure white dress I tried on there was something about this one I fell in love with, the way it molded my body, the way it fell to the floor perfectly, the way I could imagine myself walking down the aisle in it and the way I could imagine saying '*I do*' in it.

“Anastacia, are you decent?”

“Yes, Mama.”

My mother swanned into the room with a tray brimmed with juice, pancakes, fruit, yoghurt, and anything else it could hold. Her eyes shone with the same happiness her smile did, today was a big deal for her and although she never said much about this whole arrangement, I knew she wanted only the best for me. Her and Carmella weren't the ones who bound Lorenzo and I together, they wanted us to meet one another the old-fashioned way, hoping we would fall in love without the heaviness of the expectations.

“Carmella called. She is with Lorenzo, and between me and you, she said he's like a kid on Christmas morning; he can't wait to say *I do*.” Her smile was incredibly wide at this point, it reminded me of the Cheshire cat. She eyed me suspiciously as I started giggling. “Did I say something funny?”

“No, I was just thinking about how immensely happy you look.” She placed the tray down on the bed and joined me to admire the dress. “You really did pick perfectly; you went with your heart like you always have done.”

“Thank you, Mama.”

“Everyone has started getting ready downstairs, why don’t you finish your breakfast and then come down. They can get started on your hair once you’re done.” She gave me a reassuring squeeze.

“That sounds nice. I would like a little quiet time before chaos descends.” I smiled as I pressed a soft kiss on her cheek.

“Enjoy your quiet time.”

As I sat down on the bed to enjoy my breakfast in peace, my phone buzzed on the nightstand.

Lorenzo.

I swiped it open to reveal a message from him, and honestly, my heart burst and my smile was as wide as my mother’s was earlier.

Lorenzo: Good morning, amore, are you ready to be mine?

Me: I don’t know about that...

Lorenzo: Are you fucking with me right now?

Me: I mean, maybe a little.

Lorenzo: You’re already mine, love, just as I’m yours.

Me: If you say so ;)

Lorenzo: How about I show you just how much you’re mine later?

Me: I like the sound of that.

Me: Oh, and I hear you’re as giddy as a kid at Christmas :)

Lorenzo: How did you...

Lorenzo: Ah, my mother.

Lorenzo: Aren't you as excited to marry me then?
I'm quite the catch, you know.

Me: That's debatable at times.

Lorenzo: You'd better be joking.

Me: Most definitely. You're so easy to wind up.

Lorenzo: You'll pay for that.

Me: I'm counting on it.

Me: See you soon xx

Lorenzo: I love you xx

Me: I love you too xx

After breakfast, I headed downstairs to meet everyone. My mother was busy making sure everything ran smoothly. Hairdressers and make-up artists were scattered around the room working their magic.

"Morning." I smiled from the doorway of the dressing room.

"There she is! Our gorgeous bride-to-be!" Robin jumped up from the chair and flung her arms around me. Her happiness was infectious this morning as usual. "How did you sleep? Are you ready? Are you excited?" She fired out those questions quicker than a bullet left a loaded gun.

"Rob, give her space to breathe." Tay laughed from her chair.

"Sorry, I'm just so excited!" I could see it written all over her face and honestly, it was needed right now.

“You never have to apologise for feeling excited, I’d be worried if you weren’t.” I accepted the glass of champagne from my grandmother who was halfway through her own.

“Isn’t it a little early?” My fingers brushed the stem as I clutched it tightly.

“It’s never too early on your wedding day, flower!”

“Your grandmother is right, knock it back and come and get your hair done.” Tay smirked.

“As tempting as that sounds, I would rather have a clear head walking down the aisle, I’m nervous enough as it is.”

“All the more reason to knock it back!” This girl didn’t know the meaning of giving up, but I stuck to my guns and placed the glass down on the side where it belonged.

An hour and a half later, my hair and make-up were done. I had worn my hair down in tumbling waves. Lorenzo loved my hair down as he had made clear on the many times we’d laid in bed while he ran his fingers through it, everyone said an updo would have been better but as usual I didn’t listen, I stuck with what I wanted. We decided to tuck one side behind my ear and after taking my time to choose, we secured it with a dainty jewelled pin which matched my dress perfectly. My make-up was the borderline fully glam, but we kept it a slightly natural with the tones used. Once Emma, the make-up artist, had painted my lips the perfect shade of nude, I turned to see everyone’s reaction.

“Holy shit! I would!” Tay teased as she winked at me. Emma giggled beside me instantly.

“My son is one lucky man.” Carmella appeared at the doorway, looking like a complete knockout. Her floor-length navy gown hugged her perfectly as her hair was neatly swept up into a bun at her nape.

“Carmella, you look stunning,” I managed to say as I was too in awe to say anything else.

“Thank you. I have never seen a more beautiful woman in all my life.” She gushed as she fought hard to keep the tears at bay.

“How’s Lorenzo?” I asked, I already knew but I needed to hear it again.

“Sweetheart, he is absolutely fine. He is with Franco and the guys who also look very dapper in their suits.” She smiled as she pulled me into a hug. “I think hearing from you this morning calmed him down rapidly, he was beginning to lose his cool a little.” She giggled as did I as I knew what he was like when he lost it.

“Right, shall we get you into your dress?” my mother asked as she clapped her hands together to get everyone’s attention.

“Please, I don’t want to be late.” I smiled as I rose from the chair.

“A bride is allowed to be late,” Loreta pointed out.

“Just because you were nearly an hour late, that doesn’t mean I need to be.” I laughed as did she.

“That’s true! Now, go and get that dress on!” She blew me a kiss from where she sat as I followed my mother out of the dressing room and up the stairs to where my dress awaited.

I shimmied into my dress before my mother carefully pulled up the zip.

“Take deep breaths, baby, in and out.” Nervously, I mimicked her movements and, thankfully, it helped more than I expected. “That’s it, just like that.” She smiled sweetly as she held my hands in hers.

“Do you want to get changed? We need to leave shortly.”

“That would be a good idea.” She giggled.

As she hurried over to my walk-in to get into her dress, I stood to admire myself in my floor-length mirror on the opposite side of the room, and for the one of the first times in my life, I felt truly beautiful.

“I’m ready.” I spun around to the sound of my mother’s voice, and my jaw dropped.

“You look... you...” I was at a loss for words. She wore a floor-length scarlet dress that fit her as well as mine did, it was pure lace from the sweetheart neckline to the scalloped trim. This was the woman I looked up to, the woman who I always wanted to look like the older I got. “Mama, you look amazing.” My hands flew up to my cheeks with happiness.

“Thank you, baby, shall we go?” She held out her hand for me.

“What about my bouquet?” I panicked.

“Your father has it already, he’s waiting for you downstairs. We will all meet you both there, stop panicking.”

“You’re right. I shouldn’t feel this nervous, right?”

“You’re allowed to feel however you want to. I was sick multiple times on the morning of my wedding.”

“Really?!”

“I was a mess but you... you are anything but. You are so ready to marry that man and he is more than ready to marry you, so let’s go.” She held open the door and as I took the first step, she held up the train of my dress that easily bundled into her arms. “Take your time. Please don’t fall. I don’t fancy a detour to the emergency room,” she teased from behind me.

“Thank you so much for the vote of confidence, Mother.”

“Oh, it’s *mother* now, is it? Now I know I’m in trouble.”

“See, I did it without falling flat on my face, so far so good.” I smoothed my palms over my dress as I made my way to the grand staircase that led me to my father.

When I turned the corner, there he stood, looking handsome in his tuxedo, his hair was immaculately held in place as usual, his beard freshly trimmed, and his foot tapped repeatedly on the floor as he checked his Rolex.

“Victor.” My mother spoke from beside me which caused his head to snap up immediately.

“Oh, Anastacia.” He marveled as an emotional smile spread across his face.

“Doesn’t she look beautiful?” my mother asked as her hand rested on the small of my back.

“Absolutely breathtaking, just like her mother.” My father looked like the proudest man in all the world and maybe he was.

Artem appeared at his side within an instant as they made their way up to escort us down. Artem helped my mother and my father held out his arm for me.

My mother was helped into a car with Carmella and my grandmother while Loreta, Robin and Tay followed behind. I saw Chad waiting by mine and my father’s car which surprised me since Artem was the one driving us.

“Papa, I thought it was just Artem?” I whispered.

“I’m just being careful, flower, don’t worry.” He kissed the top of my head as he helped me down the steps towards the door Chad had rapidly opened.

“You look lovely, Ana.” Chad smiled as I reached him.

“Thank you.” My father directed me into the car before any other words were exchanged, and honestly, it hurt me a little since before Lorenzo, we were close.

The door closed gently behind me as Chad settled into the passenger seat, Artem in the driver’s side and my father slid into the back beside me. He handed me my bouquet as I clutched at the stems with all my might.

“Are you ready, flower?” my father asked calmly as he kissed my knuckles.

“As ready as I’ll ever be.”



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Lorenzo

AS I STEPPED INTO THE VENUE, I NOTICED HOW MUCH WORK our mothers had put into today. I had no words for how jaw dropping it looked. Flowers hung and decorated the ceiling, drapes were intertwined between the roses as candles lined the aisle. Petals decorated the white aisle runner, and of course they were rose petals. We had agreed on the first week of June since roses were in full bloom here then. I made my way to the floral arch at the foot of the aisle. I had never seen so many flowers in all my life, but I knew they would make Anastacia happy.

I joined Gino, Red, and Emmet at the foot of the aisle as I waited for Anastacia to arrive. I looked out at everyone dressed to the nines, it was a mixture of family, friends and alliances. Most men in this room would have loved to be in my position, to be the ones to marry Anastacia Fedorov, but only I got to. Only I got to see the heart she hid behind that hard exterior, only I got to kiss those fucking perfect lips, only I got to hold her in my arms during the night and only I got to see her breathtaking body naked. Come to think of it, I was probably the most hated man in here.

“How are you feeling, Boss?” Red smiled as he slapped his palm on my back.

“All right.”

“Not nervous at all?” Emmet teased. “She may not even show up.” Was he fucking serious right now? I promised no fist fights at the wedding, so unfortunately, he will have to take a beating later.

“No, Emmet, I’m not nervous, and I know she’s going to show up.” I didn’t look at him, I just looked towards the entrance where until I saw one of my men nod, I wouldn’t be turning around or looking away.

“Emmet, stop trying to deliberately fire him up, we all know she’ll show up. She loves him.” I hadn’t told anyone we had declared our love to one another, but I guessed Gino knew me too well to not notice.

“Wait, have you said those three magic words we were sure you were allergic to?” Red’s face was a damn picture as you could have scraped his jaw off the floor.

“Are you three hellbent on pissing me off today?” I could see the smug look on each one of their faces as they snickered like children.

“We’re just kidding, we couldn’t be happier. You deserve to be happy despite thinking otherwise.” Gino nudged my arm as we then stood in silence.

Minutes ticked by and they felt like hours until Lyle entered the ceremony venue and with one swift nod, I knew she had arrived. I turned on my heel to face the registrar who smiled politely at me and the guys as they followed my lead. I placed one hand on top of the other and crossed them at my front, my gaze remained forwards as I heard the heavy wooden doors open and the soft music play. The hairs on the back of neck stood on end almost instantly as I felt her presence the moment she stepped foot in the venue.

Loreta was the first to appear to my left, shortly followed by Robin and Tay. They lined up beside one another as they watched in complete and utter awe as Anastacia began her walk down the aisle. I could imagine how stunning she looked as she clung to her father’s arm. I knew she had a fear of falling but even if she did, I would be there to catch her before she even had time to think.

“She looks beautiful. Why don’t you turn around and appreciate the vision walking towards you,” Gino whispered without moving from his position.

“I won’t turn around until she reaches me, as much as it kills me not to, it’s tradition.” I had discussed this with my father this morning. He informed me that neither him nor my grandfather looked at their bride until she reached their side. It pained me not to turn around. I wanted to see her face smiling back at me. She was the only one who knew how to calm me down with just one look, and honestly, right now I needed calming down since the drum like beating in my chest had just about become too much.

“Calm down, she’s here.” Gino cleared his throat as he smiled softly over his shoulder at Anastacia.

“Who gives this woman to be married to this man?” the registrar asked directly to Victor.

“Her mother and I.” Victor spoke clear and confident enough for every fucker in the room to know Anastacia was about to become my wife with his blessing.

As Anastacia took her final step towards me, I turned to face her and it felt as though someone had taken a sledgehammer to my chest, my heart nearly stopped beating at the sight of her and for the first time in my life I might have had to fight back the tears that so willingly wanted to fall. She smiled up at me instantly and it was as clear as day how much she mimicked an angel. I held out my hand to her as Victor placed hers in mine gently.

“Look after my girl.” Victor smiled warmly and I knew that was hard for him to say. She had always been his little girl after all.

“With my life.” I smiled back with a friendly nod.

I helped Anastacia up the last step as she squeezed my hand. I felt her trembling, and I knew she was as nervous as I was; what a fucking pair we were.

“I think for once I’m at a loss for words to describe how beautiful you look,” I whispered as I leaned down to kiss her cheek. “I really fucking missed you.” I felt her body ooze confidence instantly as I spoke each word.

“I missed you too.” She smiled, and I wasn’t sure if it was the light peeking through the flowers or if it was genuine happiness, but her eyes shone brighter than they ever had.

I stepped back from her as I held her hands in mine. I didn’t have a damn clue if this was what we were supposed to do but it’s what they did in the movies Ana made me watch when we wanted some downtime together.

“Family and friends, thank you all for coming today to share in this wonderful occasion.” The registrar smiled at us both but neither of us paid attention, we were too lost in one another to listen to this part. “Today, we are gathered here to unite Lorenzo Ricci and Anastacia Fedorov and their families. I’ve been told you’ve prepared your own vows, is that correct?” the registrar asked politely.

“It is, well, from my side anyway. I wanted to surprise my fiancée with something heartfelt.” I winked at Ana who had done a complete one-eighty from emotional to half shocked, half surprised.

“I haven’t prepared anything; we didn’t discuss this,” she whispered quiet enough for only me to hear.

“I know and like I said it was a surprise from my end.” I smiled as Gino tapped my elbow to hand me the vows I wrote but I no longer needed them. After seeing her standing here made me certain of my words.

“Lorenzo, please recite your vows to Anastacia.”

“*Amore*, it’s safe to say we haven’t exactly had the easiest of times and that was mostly because of me.” Anastacia let out a soft giggle, the one I adored. “Hey, I can admit when I’m wrong... well, maybe not all the time.” I breathed deeply, as this was harder than I originally thought, but Ana placed her hand over my heart as it resumed beating at its regular pace.

“But seriously, those ups and downs—mostly downs—have turned what we have into something special, something I would only ever want with you because you are that sunshine I never knew I needed, that piece of heaven I know I’ll never reach, that light in the darkness that I used to prefer. I’ve never

met another with a heart as forgiving as yours, and somehow that same heart found a way to love me, found a way to see who I really am beneath the surface.” I cupped her face, and she automatically nuzzled her cheek into my touch. Her eyes never left mine. “I love you, Anastacia, I may have even loved you the moment we met, but I was too stubborn and proud to admit the one thing I tried not to, but you captured me in more ways than one and what a woman to be captured by.”

I saw Anastacia try to speak, but I stopped her as this was the one time I could get out everything I wanted to say.

“I can’t promise you a perfect life. I can’t promise I’ll be a perfect husband or even a perfect father to any children we may have, but I can promise you one thing. I’ll do my utmost best to make you happy and give you the life you deserve, the love you deserve and be the man you deserve.” I breathed a sigh of relief as I noticed Ana had let the tears fall, even when she was an emotional wreck, she was beautiful, and she was *mine*. “Anastacia, you are my *endgame*.”

“Thank you, Lorenzo.” The registrar glanced over at Ana. “Anastacia, do you have anything you want to say?”

Ana took a deep breath and composed herself like the queen she was, straightening her back as she stood tall and elegant.

“Lorenzo, I don’t know how I’m supposed to top that because it’s clear you have a hidden talent I didn’t know about.” She laughed as did I, and then I realised most of the allies in this room had probably never seen me laugh before. “You’re right, we didn’t have the best of starts but that doesn’t matter because someone once told me the past is the past.” She glanced over at her grandmother who flashed me her gentle smile. “You may not be the perfect husband, or father to however many children we may have but then again, I can’t promise I’ll be perfect either. I think perfects overrated anyway. As long as I have you, then I know everything will always be fine, better than fine actually. You are the rock I never knew I needed, the love my heart never knew it wanted and the thought that my mind just can’t seem to shake, and I wouldn’t have it any other way because Lorenzo Ricci, I love

you.” Now it was me who seemed to just about hold my emotional state together which I never wanted to show but fuck it, if you can’t show a little emotion on your wedding day, when can you? Anastacia gazed up at me with those heart stopping translucent eyes as we slowly became one.

“Thank you, Anastacia.” The registrar smiled as he continued, “Do you, Lorenzo Ricci, take this woman to be your lawfully wedded wife, to live together in matrimony, to love her, comfort her, honour and keep her, in sickness and in health, in sorrow and in joy, to have and to hold from this day forward, as long as you both shall live?” What once was a paragraph I swore I’d never hear was now one I welcomed with complete and utter happiness.

“I do.” I smiled as Anastacia mirrored my gesture, and I knew then that was the easiest ‘*I do*’ I’ll ever say.

“Do you, Anastacia Fedorov, take this man to be your lawfully wedded husband, to live together in matrimony, to love him, comfort him, honour and keep him, in sickness and in health, in sorrow and in joy, to have and to hold from this day forward, as long as you both shall live?”

“I do.” I could easily listen to her say those words repeatedly as though they were a broken record playing in my head.

“The rings, please.” Gino handed me the ring I had picked for Ana, as Robin handed Ana mine.

“Lorenzo and Anastacia have chosen rings to exchange with one another as a symbol of their undying love. Lorenzo, as you place this ring on Anastacia’s finger, please repeat after me. With this ring, I thee wed and pledge my love now and forever.”

I took Anastacia’s hand in mine and placed the diamond encrusted band at her fingertip.

“With this ring, I thee wed and I pledge my love to you indefinitely.” Of course, I put my own spin on it. I slid the ring over her knuckle and down her delicate finger as she admired the ring I’d chosen for her.

“Anastacia, please repeat after me. With this ring, I thee wed and pledge my love now and forever.”

Anastacia went through the same motion as I did, her angelic voice spoke as clear as day, she slid the black band down my finger, and I had to admit it looked fucking perfect.

“By the authority vested in me by the state of New York, I now pronounce you husband and wife. Lorenzo, you may kiss your bride.”

“It’s about fucking time.” I cupped her face as I immediately claimed her lips. I didn’t care who stared at us; I lost sight of everything the moment I kissed her. Everything about us was in sync, from the ways our tongues danced with one another to the way our hearts beat in the exact same rhythm. The guests erupted in cheers as I pulled Anastacia into my embrace, eliminating any space between us. Today, I vowed to not have a single inch of space between us ever again.



“Please welcome Mr. & Mrs. Ricci as they take to the dancefloor for their first dance,” the band our mothers had hired announced as we rose from the top table.

All eyes were on us once again, but the only ones I saw were hers as I placed my hand on the small of her back while the other held hers gently. I spun her around the room to the sounds of the band who played the one song I knew Anastacia wanted.

“I love you, wife.” I smiled as she rested her cheek on my chest, the subtle floral scent filling my senses automatically.

“And I love you too, husband.” I kissed the top of her head as I felt her smile against my lapel.

“So, how was the wedding you never wanted?” I teased.

“It became a wedding I never knew I needed.” She looked up at me, and I knew she was my happy place, my home.

I often dwelled on the past, thought I could have been kinder, softer, nicer towards Ana, but after speaking with a special lady in her life, it made me realise there was no point beating myself up about it. She said all great marriages must start somewhere and ours was just a little rocky and unexpected but with the love we shared we could get through anything, and she was right.

“What are you thinking about?” she asked.

“Nothing, I’m just looking forward to the future.” I didn’t need to explain every mere thought I had in mind.

“Me too.”

The song finished sooner than either of us thought. I lost her to her father who she also shared a dance with. I still had one more surprise for her and the moment this song finished, I’d be whisking her outside to tell her everything, well, almost everything.

“If the wind changes, your face will remain that way.” As I looked away from Anastacia, I came face to face with my parents. “Not that I’d complain since it’s a smile,” she teased as my father wrapped his arm around her.

“You and Florence pulled together a magnificent wedding, Ma.”

“Well, your money helped,” she joked as my father laughed alongside her.

“It was worth every cent to see her smile like that.” I shrugged off my jacket and placed it on the chair beside me.

“I’m incredibly proud of you, Lorenzo. I told you Ana would be good for you, didn’t I? As you said in your vows you were just too stubborn to admit it, too damn proud.” I rolled my eyes as my father continued. “Once you’re back from your honeymoon, we will get everything moving for you to become Don.” He held out his hand for me, and after breathing a heavy sigh, I shook it.

The moment I had worked for, the moment I had dreamed of, was finally happening and Ana would be the one I would share my happiness with.

“Thank you, Pa.” He pulled me into an embrace which was rare, but I guess I proved myself to him.

“Ah, here’s our gorgeous daughter-in-law.” My mother gushed as Victor led her over to us.

“My gorgeous wife.” I craned my neck and pecked on her lips as she placed her hand on my chest, something she seemed to do a lot lately. “I have a surprise for you.”

“A surprise?” Her face lit up.

“Come outside with me.” Our parents called their goodbyes as I led Anastacia out of the room, only to be intercepted by the one person we’d done well to avoid.

“Ana...” Chad spoke from the edge of the doorway.

“We were actually on our way out, is it important?” I snapped, and I knew I needed to keep my cool but with him it was so fucking hard.

“I just wanted to see if Ana wanted to dance before you head off to wherever it is you’re going.”

“There is no fucking way you’re dancing with my wife.” I pulled Ana close as her hand never left mine. I knew I shouldn’t have lost my cool, I knew they used to be friends, he used to be one of her best friends but there was something about him I didn’t like.

“I understand. Congratulations to you both.” His eyes swept over to my wife, and my blood bubbled beneath the surface.

“Thank you.” Ana spoke from beside me as I let out an irritated breath.

As we walked out of the room where the party remained in full swing, I pulled Anastacia into a darkened corner.

“Lorenzo!” she squealed as I backed her against the marble pillar.

“You’re mine,” I whispered against her skin, and it took everything I had to not rip that dress clean off her body, but I wouldn’t do that here, not with so many around since only I got to see her naked.

“Relax, I’m yours and you’re mine.” She ran her hand across my scarred cheek as I rested my forehead on hers.

“I don’t like him, Ana,” I breathed.

“He’s harmless. You honestly don’t need to worry about someone like Chad.” She smiled. “Do you trust me?” she asked quietly.

“Of course, I fucking do.”

“Then trust me on this, he’s harmless.” Maybe she was right, but that didn’t mean I would ever believe it or ever want to get to know the guy. I knew Victor trusted him and that would usually be enough but not this time. “Do you want to give me my surprise now?”

I composed myself as I led her out onto the patio draped in more flowers, an array of purple ones and they looked incredible as the sun set in the background.

“Lorenzo, this is beautiful.” Ana wandered around the patio, taking in the beauty of the floral arrangements while I took in hers.

“Come here.” She appeared and wrapped her arms around my waist.

“Today has been perfect. I don’t want it to end.”

“What if it didn’t have to, not yet anyway.” I smiled a pearly white smile as a look of confusion marred her face. “We aren’t going home. I am taking you away, just you and me.”

“A honeymoon?”

“Yes, a honeymoon, and before you ask, no, I’m not telling you where we’re going until we arrive.” I knew how impatient she was, but it was all part of the fun.

“Is that necessary?” She pouted.

“One hundred percent.” I draped my arms around her as our lips brushed one another’s.

“When do we leave?”

“Now.” I pressed my lips against hers as she melted into my embrace. I could taste the champagne with a hint of mint on her breath as our tongues mingled. If I could bottle this taste, then I would because it was the most intoxicating thing I’d ever tasted.



Ana had changed into the sweats and tank the girls had packed for her. Her hair was now wildly thrown up on top of her head and she’d swapped her heels for a pair of fluffy socks. She allowed me to remove her wedding gown in the private plane bedroom, which might have led to us joining the mile high club hence why she was now fast asleep in my arms. Today had been exhausting; but it had been wonderful, it had been everything and more.

The plane had already descended as I gave Ana a slight shake.

“*Amore*, we’ll be landing soon,” I whispered.

“Five more minutes,” she mumbled as she pulled the blanket over her head.

“Anastacia Ricci, wake that gorgeous ass up. The biggest surprise is yet to come.” I stripped off the blanket from her body as she curled up into a fetal position.

“You’re so mean to your wife.” She opened her eyes slowly which was accompanied by a scowl.

“Maybe once but not anymore. I’ve learned my lesson.” I scooped her up as I pulled her onto my lap, her head nuzzled into my neck as she hugged her knees to her chest. “Wakey

wakey.” I laughed as I tickled her in hopes it would wake her up fully.

“Carry on tickling me like that and you’ll lose those fingers, Ricci!” she warned. “And correct me if I’m wrong, but isn’t that your shooting hand.” She smirked as she finally returned my gaze with those mischievous eyes.

“Point made.”

“I thought it would be.” She slid off my lap.

“So, are you going to tell me where we’re going yet?” She folded her arms across her chest which only pushed her breasts up more.

“We’re in Sicily.” I smiled as I knew I’d had some fantastic times there while growing up, and I wanted to show Ana a part of me nobody else saw—one nobody else knew.

“Are you kidding?!” Her hands flew up to her cheeks in delight, the sound of her palms slapping her skin echoed the bedroom, but she didn’t seem to care, she was too happy. “I’ve never been to Sicily.” She practically bounced on the spot, watching her like this turned me into a damn puddle.

“Happy?”

“Happy?! I’m over the moon!” She jumped back on the bed and threw herself onto me, almost knocking the wind out of me.

“I can see that! I’m having a little trouble breathing.” I was only joking, but she scrambled off me so fast I barely had time to catch her.

“Okay! Get up. We need to get everything together!” She bounded around the room as she shoved her feet in those beat-up sneakers she loved so much. Her messy bun was lopsided, and her face was now make-up free. “Stop looking at me like that. I’m a mess!” Even when she claimed she was a mess, she clearly had no idea at just how breathtaking she was.

“Anastacia Ricci, you could never be a mess.” I stalked over to where she stood, and props to her for trying to dodge

my hold. “You’re the most heart stopping, jaw-dropping, breathtakingly beautiful woman I’ve ever laid eyes on.”

“You say that now, but just wait until we have children...”

“I’m going to stop you right there, because when you’re carrying our children, you’ll be absolutely stunning, and that bump will be the cutest thing I’ve ever seen, and I plan to take good care of you when the day comes.”

“You won’t let me do anything, will you?” She huffed.

“Not a chance in hell.” I scooped her into my arms as she wrapped her legs around my waist, crossing her ankles behind my back.

“Lorenzo...” she protested.

“I don’t want to hear it. You’ll let me take care of you for once like you seem to always do with me.”

“When have I ever taken care of you?” She arched her brow as she awaited my response.

“Well, other than sexually...” I winked. “You bandaged my hand when I used the wall as a punch bag, you tried your best the night I came home drunk...”

“Oh, the night I slapped you?” She smirked and if that wasn’t the sexiest smirk known to man, I didn’t know what was.

“I deserved it. I goaded you, and to be honest, I wanted to fuck you right then and there for the attitude you showered me with.”

“I would have probably fed you your own dick if you tried.”

“Then it would have denied you one of your many pleasures,” I whispered against her ear.

“I’m sure I could have found another way to please myself.”

“Those days for you are long gone, *amore*.” I kissed her with everything I had as she pressed herself against my

hardening dick that was now pitching a fucking tent in my sweats.

“This is your captain speaking, please take your seats as we will soon be landing.” What a fucking cockblock.

“Aww, has the captain ruined your fun,” she teased as she wriggled out of my arms, giggling as she did so.

“Too fucking right, he has!” I huffed as Anastacia was already out the door walking towards her seat. “Thanks for the support, love,” I called after her.

“You’re most welcome,” she threw back with a bout of laughter.





CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Anastacia

WE PULLED INTO THE PRIVATE DRIVEWAY. I NOTICED THERE wasn't another house around for a few miles, so we would be pretty secluded, and that was something I didn't mind in the slightest. Tall trees shadowed the driveway as we passed them. Lorenzo watched me from the driver's side as my face lit up like a Christmas tree as we got closer. As the villa came into view, I noticed how grand it was, standing at three stories high. It looked too big for what we'd need for the two of us, but I guess it was our honeymoon.

Lorenzo parked up just feet away from the door and I glanced up at the stone building. It was traditional, authentic and beautiful. There were wooden shutters on every window, and steps on either side that led directly up to the front door with a quaint balcony on the third floor overlooking the countryside we had passed on our way down the private road.

"What do you think?" The early morning sun lit up Lorenzo's sculptured face as he pressed a kiss on my knuckles.

"I love it!" I smiled. The tiredness I felt had now been replaced by pure excitement.

"You don't want to sleep, do you?" he teased.

"I'm too wired to sleep and, besides, we slept on the plane!"

I jumped out of the car and made a beeline for the front door, only to be stopped in my tracks by Lorenzo's booming voice. That was definitely something I can live without this early in the morning.

“Anastacia Ricci, don’t you dare walk up those stairs,” he called as he rounded the car.

“What? Why? And did you just full name me?”

“Damn right I did, Anastacia Ricci. We do this the right way or not at all.” I looked at his smirking face, a little confused, until that smirk was replaced with a mischievous grin that would make the devil jealous. He threw me over his shoulder like a ragdoll as he carefully walked up the stone steps.

“What on earth are you doing?” I called from behind his back.

He didn’t answer as he turned the key in the lock; I could hear and feel him chuckling as it vibrated through my body.

“I am carrying you over the threshold.” He laughed.

“Forgive me if I’m wrong, but this isn’t the traditional way to carry your wife over the threshold.” He carefully placed me on my feet on the porcelain tiled floor.

“Since when have we ever been traditional, *amore*, hmm?”

“That’s true.” A smile formed on his lips, and I pecked them hastily.

“So, what do you fancy doing today? We can have some breakfast and then head to the beach for a while?”

“The beach?” I had always loved the beach, the sounds of the waves lapping against the shore soothed me as much as sitting amongst my mother’s flowers did.

“If that’s what you want to do, then yes, we can head to the beach.” He smiled before he hurried out to the car to retrieve the two cases.

“Here, let me take these upstairs and unpack. You can make us some breakfast.” I went to take the cases, but he held them out of my reach. “Lorenzo, stop fucking around, give them here.” I sighed, frustrated.

“I’ll carry them upstairs, not you.” He tilted his head to the side with that cocky smile, the same one I couldn’t work out if

I loved or loathed.

“I’m not fragile, I can manage to carry two cases up the stairs.”

“I’m sure you can but that doesn’t mean I’ll let you.” Before I could protest, he was already halfway up the stairs laughing with each stair he took.

“Prick,” I muttered under my breath.

“I heard that.” He laughed.

“You were meant to.” I rolled my eyes as I moved towards the double doors that led out to the private pool. The early morning sunlight twinkled across the water, the birds chirped a beautiful melody in one of the nearby trees, and the sea air invaded my senses as I realised that we weren’t far from the beach.

“So, what do you think?” Lorenzo asked from behind me. He might have thought he was in stealth mode, but I could hear him the moment he reached the bottom of the stairs, the house and garden were too peaceful not to.

“It’s so peaceful and perfect.” His hands snaked around my waist as he rested his head on my bare shoulder. “Thank you for bringing me here.”

“We can come here anytime you want, *amore*,” he whispered before he pressed a gentle kiss beneath my earlobe.

“That would be heaven, but I guess it depends on if it’s available the time we want to come.” I smiled as I toyed with his wedding band that sat beautifully on his finger.

“I’m pretty sure it’s available all year round.” I could feel the warmth of his smile as he finished his sentence.

“That sounds like a guy who’s pretty sure.”

“Of course I am, since it’s ours.” He spun me around in his arms with a heart-stopping grin on his face as if he didn’t just spring some news on me.

“What do you mean?” My face must have looked like a picture of confusion right now because I couldn’t work out if it

was in the family already or if he'd just brought it, and judging by his happiness, it's the latter.

"This is my wedding present to you, *amore*, it's our own private getaway whenever we want it."

"Lorenzo, it's gorgeous, but it's too much." I wasn't one to need nor want to be showered with gifts, as long as I had his love that was enough.

"Nothing is ever too much for you and I won't hear anything different." I rested my head on his chest as I felt his heart beating against my forehead. "Can a husband not buy his wife gifts?"

"Of course you can, but you already gifted me this stunning necklace, a year-round rose garden, and now this. I just need you, I don't need gifts." I smiled as his lips met mine unexpectedly.

"You're incredible, do you know that?"

"You may have told me once or twice before." I giggled as my gaze met his. The butterflies swarmed my stomach as my heart quickened with each passing second.

"I buy you things because I can and because I want to, but the way you react makes it all the sweeter because I know you don't expect it and that warms this cold heart of mine." He placed my hand over his heart and covered it with his.

"As long as I have your love, I don't need much else."

"You already have it. Unconditionally."

He wrapped his arms around me and we stood in silence for a moment, the only sound was the birds tweeting as they darted between the trees and the fence. It was tranquil here and nothing and no one could rip this happiness away from me.

"How about that breakfast?" I asked as my fingers caressed his back beneath his t-shirt.

"I may need an assistant; I'm shit in the kitchen," he joked as he effortlessly lifted me into his arms, my legs latched around his waist as our faces were now at the perfect level.

“You cooked for me the other night,” I queried.

“You know I had help, stop being smart.”

“If you need an assistant, then I’m your woman,” I whispered against his now parted lips; my fingers brushed against the stubble that graced his jaw whilst my thumb traced his raised scar.

“Oh, that you are.” He pecked my lips repeatedly as he carried me back inside towards the kitchen.

The rest of the morning was spent laughing and joking whilst preparing breakfast with one another. Although I was supposed to be the assistant, it ended up the other way around... no, scratch that, Lorenzo just sat at the island watching me as I prepared and plated up our food.

“Thank you so much for your help. I don’t know what I would have done without it,” I joked, rolling my eyes in the process.

“You’re most welcome, love.” He rose from his stool and rounded the island.

“Lorenzo, you better sit your ass back down after I’ve stood here making this breakfast for you.” I placed the plates on the side as I slowly backed towards the other corner.

“Where are you going?” His lips twisted up into a subtle smile as two of his strides now matched my one.

I chose not to respond as I raced around the opposite side of the island towards the doorway; I was quick, but he was a touch quicker. As my back slammed with his rock-hard chest, his hands seized my waist.

“*Amore*, you can’t run from me. I’ll burn the fucking world to catch you.” His fingers toyed with the waistband of my sweats. “Are you wet for me, love?”

“In your dreams.” I wriggled, which only caused him to tighten his hold. “Lorenzo, what about breakfast.”

“Breakfast can wait. I feel like eating something else right now.” His hand slid beneath the waistband as he soon realised I was wearing no panties.

“Upstairs, now,” he growled, carnally.

“Why do we need to go upstairs? We have plenty of surfaces down here.” I rocked my hips back against his growing erection as his breath caught in his throat almost instantly.

“Do as you’re told and get up those fucking stairs. Now.” Dominance. Defying him was quite fun.

“No.” At my refusal, I could almost hear his jaw tense as his nostrils flared.

“Do you enjoy defying me, Anastacia?” He spun me around, my breasts were now flush against his front.

“What will you do if I do enjoy it?” I smirked, and in that exact moment, his eyes darkened as his fingers dug into my hips and I welcomed the feeling.

“Bend over the sofa.”

“I don’t think I will.” I was testing his patience. He cocked his head to the side as the bones in his neck cracked. “If you want me there, you’ll have to put me there yourself.” Playing with him excited me; I thrived off the little fear I had right now.

“You fucking asked for it.” His hand directly wrapped around my throat, and I welcomed it with a smile. “When I tell you to do something, you do it. Now, bend over the fucking sofa.” My heart violently hammered in my chest as my skin prickled beneath the warmth of his hand. “Now.”

He walked me backwards towards the sofa. The backs of my knees collided with the fabric, and I lost my balance as I sunk into the cushions.

“Correct me if I’m wrong but unless you’re sitting on my face, didn’t I tell you to bend over?” I jumped to my feet and kneeled on the softness of the cushions while my forearms rested on the back. “Good girl. See how much better it is when you listen to your husband.” I swallowed the nervous lump that bobbed in my throat as he lowered my sweats over my ass and down to my bent knees.

His hand flew through the air, reddening my ass.

“Fuck!” I cried as his tongue soothed my tender skin.

“That was for refusing to do what you were told.” As I caught my breath, his second palm reddened my other cheek.

“What the fuck was that for?!” When I turned to look over my shoulder, I was greeted with the sight of Lorenzo on his knees behind me.

“That was for me having to hear such shitty words leave your pretty little mouth.” His teeth grazed over my now-throbbing flesh as I resisted the urge to scream and curse.

“Lorenzo...” I grasped the back of the sofa until my knuckles turned white. With every nip of his teeth on my tender flesh, blood rushed to my core.

I waited for his response, but all I received was his third finger circling over my sensitive clit, the warmth of his breath caressing my entrance, and I could have succumbed then, but I didn't because I wouldn't give him the satisfaction of caving as quickly as he wanted.

“Your cunt is already dripping from two spanks. If I made it three, I'm sure you'd coat my fucking tongue with your cum.” As I bit down on the cushion, he ran his tongue along my wet folds, which helped muffle his name from escaping my mouth. His fingers dug into the raw skin of my ass, as his tongue teased and flicked over every inch of me until he lost himself in my pussy, alternating between being buried deep within me and tormenting my clit. “Come for me.” He somehow ordered as his teeth pinched my clit.

“Fuck!” I cried as pleasure surged through me like an electric current.

“Mouth!” Another spank was earned as my pussy clenched around his fingers. I felt my body tremble from the high of the orgasm I was riding. I had been clinging to the brink for far too long and it was finally time to let go.

My body relaxed against the sofa as it slowly went limp, but I should have known Lorenzo wasn't done with me yet, he had only just begun.

“Ride my dick, *amore*.” He pulled me up as he supported my legs that betrayed me by almost giving way.

He stripped himself of his sweats one-handedly as he did the same with mine and discarded them in an untidy heap at our feet. Without allowing my feet to touch the floor, he settled himself onto the sofa, the head of his cock pressed against my entrance as I hovered over his growing erection.

“Sit down.” My hands seized his shoulders. “Place your hands on my knees and arch your back.” As he entered me, the sensation was unlike any other, he was literally buried balls deep in my already aching pussy.

Lorenzo’s head fell on the back of the sofa and for the first time, I had full control of him. His eyes never left mine except to enjoy the sight of my bouncing breasts. His sharp intakes of breath made it known he was enjoying it as much as I was. His hands cupped my ass as my body fell against his. His hips rocked in sync with mine as his teeth pulled at my bottom lip.

I fisted his hair as our tongue ferociously danced with one another; it reminded me of our first kiss, the one he stole. Our teeth clashed as his hands tightened their hold on my back. We craved one another, the desire and need were above all else and it’s a feeling I knew I’d feel for the rest of my life.

“Come with me, now.” He breathlessly moaned against my ear, his hand grasping the back of my neck as my hair tumbled out from its bun. “You’re so fucking tight, so fucking perfect.”

Those were the last words he spoke before I coated his cock with my cum and he filled me with his.



After we enjoyed our post-sex breakfast, we finally arrived at the beach which wasn’t easy since I had to find a bikini that covered Lorenzo’s faint handprints that still decorated my ass.

In the end, I had to choose a sheer sarong that just about hid them. *Thanks for that one, dear husband.*

I settled back on the lounge, and after Lorenzo debated for a good thirty minutes about going to the beach bar or staying with me, the beach bar finally won. I had opted for something non-alcoholic for this time of the morning but the same couldn't be said for my relaxed husband and that's what he was since the moment we stepped on that plane... *relaxed.*

"What's a beautiful lady like you doing sitting alone?" A voice spoke from beside me. I didn't have to turn my head, I knew it wasn't Lorenzo. Beach boy's voice could have shattered glass with the way his speedos almost cut off his circulation.

"My husband will be back in a moment." I didn't even warrant his cheesy pick-up line with a smile, let alone a look.

"That's what they all say," he joked, and although he'd only spoken a few words, I could tell he was English, as he had a thick accent.

"Listen, with all due respect, my husband will be back in a moment, and he won't take too kindly to you chatting to his wife whilst your ass is sat on his lounge." I turned my head briefly to be met by a guy who couldn't have been older than twenty-five. His bleach-blond curls were styled messily on top of his head while the sides were shaved so short you could basically see his scalp. His eyes were the colour of the sand as he admired himself in my shades.

"I bet you use that line to scare the men away, don't you?" He leaned into me as his overpowering aftershave hit my nostrils, as his arms rested on his thighs.

"Trust me, I don't use my words to scare men away. Now, run the fuck along and leave me alone." I continued to type out a message to my mother in hopes he would get the hint.

"Feisty, I like it." I saw him turn his head to where a group of guys sat, obviously his friends.

"Look, I'm beginning to lose my patience, and you should think yourself lucky since the only person I tend to have

patience with is my husband.” Despite his eyes falling to my ring finger and seeing the rock that weighed it down, he still didn’t seem to believe me. *What else does this dickhead need?*

“So, tonight, me and the guys are heading out for a few drinks, why don’t you join us? We can show you a good time.” He winked, and I had to swallow the bile that rose in my throat.

“I’ll pass.”

“Fucking hell, come on. What are you, some kind of ice queen?” He snorted.

“Only to pricks who don’t get the message,” I snapped as I slammed my phone down onto the lounge.

“You fucking—” Suddenly, the guy was no longer illuminated by the sun but a looming grey shadow with an angry expression.

“I dare you to finish that fucking sentence, boy,” Lorenzo snapped but still remained calm.

“And what are you going to do about it?” He was brave, I’ll give him that, but that was short-lived the moment he stood and turned around.

“How about I put a bullet in that head of yours, turn your hair scarlet fucking red.” Lorenzo placed the drinks calmly on the table, but I knew deep down, he wanted to take this guy’s head off his shoulders.

“Mate, she wanted me to talk to her. I tried to leave but she practically begged.” And that was when Lorenzo snapped, and it was a pleasure to watch.

I sipped my drink and watched my husband in action as he gripped the guy’s neck, ready to snap. His eyes bulged, as Lorenzo lifted him off the floor slightly so only his toes skimmed the sand.

“Firstly, I’m not your mate, and secondly, one thing I think you need to know is that woman begs nobody except her husband when she wants to come. Now, be a good little boy and fuck off and the next time you want to make up a load of

shit, know who you're spewing it to." He threw him on the sand as his friends looked on, some in shock, some about to piss themselves laughing while I soaked my bikini bottoms from the display Lorenzo just put on.

Lorenzo turned his back briefly to check the harassing guy had left, but he was still coughing and spluttering into the sand.

"Man the fuck up. If my wife can handle my hand around her neck, I'm pretty sure a full-grown man can." I almost choked on my drink at his anything but romantic mouth.

After that sentence, the boy only just about got up and scurried off to his friends. His hand massaged his neck as he finally left us alone. Luckily, the onlookers weren't bothered about what was going since Lorenzo was well-known as the Don's son and next in line.

"That ring obviously isn't enough to show people you're taken." He relaxed beside me in the lounge as he spun my ring around on my finger.

"Just tattoo your name on my body and be done with it," I teased as I stuck my tongue out playfully which earned me a sexy chuckle.

"I might just do that; it may even be one of your best ideas." He took a swig of his beer as he glanced over to where the irritating guy now sat being laughed and joked at by his so-called mates.

"Make you feel good, does it?"

"A little, he was too easy, fucking pussy." He laughed as he turned his attention back to me, although his dark shades hid those breathtaking eyes I'd grown to adore.

"He was—"

"Don't you dare say he's harmless, you think too good of people. He was a complete and utter pest, and you know it." He downed his beer and placed the empty bottle down on the table. "Did the show make you wet, *amore?*" A cocky smile toyed on his lips.

“Playing macho man doesn’t appeal to me. I can look after myself.” I lowered my glasses down my nose as I watched him intently through my lashes.

“I don’t give a fuck. He had to go, and you were being too nice.”

“No, I wasn’t.”

“Allowing him to sit here for longer than a second is being too nice.” He scowled.

“Right, well, while you sit here with a face like a smacked ass, I’m going for a swim.” I smiled as I rose to remove my sarong. I let it fall onto the sand to reveal the thong bikini I had chosen underneath.

“Anastacia, put that back on. Now.” He hadn’t moved, *yet*.

“You aren’t supposed to swim in it, so wind your neck in.” I winked as I turned my back to him.

I sauntered a few steps towards the sea as I felt Lorenzo’s eyes burning holes through my skin as if that would add more layers to my barely dressed body.

“Nope, fuck this!” I heard him sigh as finally stood up and stormed towards me. I couldn’t help but giggle.

“Put your fucking eyes back in your head! I warned you once, and trust me, nobody gets more than one with me.” He pointed his finger at the group of guys that sheepishly turned away. I also noticed how many women were looking at my husband with that starved look which made me want to gauge their eyes out, slowly and painfully. Lorenzo must have noticed my abrupt attitude change as he threw me into his arms before running like a *Baywatch* actor into the sea.

“Is my wife getting jealous?” he teased as the warmth of the water enveloped us.

“You’re mine.”

“Indefinitely.” He smiled and cupped my face. “Just as I’m yours.”

“Those women—”

“Fuck those women, I have the woman I want, the woman I need.” His salty lips met mine and as if on cue my attitude was transformed back to one of peace.

“I love you,” he whispered between kisses.

“And I love you.” I smiled as we lost ourselves in one another completely. With my legs wrapped tightly around him, the only sound I now heard was the waves lapping against us as Lorenzo treaded water.



The days flew by, and I was despising the fact that soon we would go home, back to our usual life and the routines we carry out each day. This must have been the longest Lorenzo had gone without using his phone. He left Gino in charge and advised to only call if it was a life-or-death emergency.

The girls sent me a couple of texts, but they mainly wanted to check I was having a lovely time and if I was spending every day naked. Lorenzo took me sightseeing to all the places he loved visiting when he spent every summer here when he was younger.

“So, I have a surprise for you tonight.” He smiled as he pulled the covers up around our naked bodies.

“Lorenzo, what did I say about surprises.” I placed my cheek against his chest as he wrapped his arms around me.

“It’s something for both of us and trust me, you don’t have to go along with it, but I definitely will.” His smirk intrigued me as I traced my fingers over his tattoo that dominated half of his chest.

“Any clues?” I sat up as the covers pooled at my waist.

“Anastacia, get dressed.” Through hooded eyes, his gaze dropped instantly.

“Why?” I circled my fingers around my nipples as he let out a sigh of frustration. “Don’t you want to play again?”

“Don’t ask such stupid questions. I would love to play with you all evening, but we have an appointment to get to.” I couldn’t help but giggle at how stern he sounded. “Make sure you wear something comfortable.”

After an hour, we arrived in the town square and Lorenzo directed me towards a small shop situated down a quaint side street.

“Lorenzo, what is this?!” I stood rooted to the uneven cobbles. My hand flew to my mouth at the thought that this man had actually listened to what I had said days ago at the beach. “You can’t be serious?!”

“Deadly.” He grinned. “Scared?” His index finger traced over the tattoo that decorated my thigh. “I thought it could join this one.”

“You want us to get tattoos?” I mumbled, a little shocked.

“Not just any tattoos. I will brand your name on my body as you will mine on yours.”

“And if I don’t?”

“I’ll find a way to do it myself.” The fucking asshole laughed.

“I thought you said I could say no?”

“I’m kidding, you can but I’m doing it and it will be where it’s easily seen.” I glanced down at his forearms. “You guessed it.” He held the door open for me as the guy behind the counter greeted him as if they were old friends.

“Fine, I’m in and before you ask, no, I won’t need to hold your hand for the pain.” I smiled as I entered the prettiest tattoo shop I’d ever seen.

It was different to the one Miles and I had visited once I was old enough. This had the most beautiful hand-painted canvases on every wall, flowers filled the reception area, and there was only one small space behind the counter for the

tattooist to create his works of art. It was small, it was beautiful, and I was more excited than before.

“How’s it going, Lorenzo?” the heavily tattooed guy asked as he slapped palms with my husband.

“Better than the last time I was here.” He glanced over at me, but my attention was captured by the pieces on the wall. “That’s Anastacia, my wife.”

“Your wife, wow... didn’t expect that one.” The man chuckled as I finally wandered back to my husband’s side.

“Ana, this is Gabriele, he was the one who created that masterpiece you love to trace so much.”

“Ah, I should thank you then, Gabriele, it gives me hours of fun.” I shook his waiting hand, and for the first time, Lorenzo didn’t look murderous.

“You’re most welcome. So, who’s going first?” He clapped his tattooed hands together as his dark rimmed glasses slid down his nose slightly.

“Ladies first.” Lorenzo stepped aside to let me follow Gabriele.

I lay on the bed as Lorenzo said he didn’t want to see where I’d got his name until it was done. He did however call Gino to check in even though he didn’t need to.

“So, how did you meet Lorenzo? He never struck me as the settling down type.” Gabriele placed the stencil perfectly on my bare ribs as I positioned my arm above my head, giving him the access he needed.

“Our fathers are best friends; they were the ones who arranged our marriage.”

“Wow, and now you’re tattooing his name on your body, did he hold a gun to your head?” he joked and to be honest he was a breath of fresh air. “Who’s your father?”

“Victor Fedorov.”

“Fuck... how is it having him as a father? From the stories I’ve heard of him, it wouldn’t be easy.”

“Honestly, I understand why he’s the way he is. He has to be. He didn’t get the reputation he has by rolling over for people. But with my brother and I, he’s always been a loving father.” It was true, unless he was showering me with tough love on this whole marriage situation.

“And you were happy he signed your life away with marriage?” I could hear the shyness in his voice with this question, but I didn’t mind, I would happily answer.

“Originally, no, of course not, and Lorenzo and I didn’t exactly see eye to eye in the beginning, but now I’m thankful my father did what he did. It was a hard pill to swallow knowing that the day my parents were told they were having a girl was the very same day my father signed his name on the dotted line, as did Lorenzo’s father.” The tattoo gun buzzed into action as the scratching sensation was something I didn’t mind.

“Was it hard to grow up knowing that?” His eyes never left his masterpiece.

“I didn’t find out until I was eighteen and let’s just say I didn’t take it well, but then again, I doubt my father expected me to.” I barely knew this guy, but he was so easy to open up to and I was sure many did whilst lying here. “I remember the moment so well, the exact second he told me I was set to marry when I turned twenty-one was the same second my heart sunk, the exact second I thought my life ended and for the next three years, I rebelled, snuck out at any chance I got, people got punished and kicked out because of me, but back then, I didn’t care, I was hurt and thought the rest of my life was ruined.”

“And is it?”

“Ruined? No, it’s anything but.” I sighed as my ribs vibrated. “I just wish I acted differently about it then, but unfortunately, I can’t turn back time.”

“You reacted the same way many others would have. It’s nothing to be ashamed of.” He smiled a friendly smile, and I knew then why Lorenzo liked him. “All that matters now is

that you're happy with Lorenzo and can live a wonderful life together."

"Thanks, Gabriele." I didn't speak after that. I relaxed and let my mind drift to how I treated my father years ago.

He was only doing what he thought was best for me and the Bratva, creating an ally for long after he was gone.

"How's it going?" Lorenzo spoke from behind the curtain that blocked his view.

"Perfect timing, she's all done." Gabriele wiped away the excess ink and wrapped it up.

"Your turn, bud." Gabriele smiled as Lorenzo slipped through the curtain.

"Show me what you got, *amore*." His eyes dropped to my wrapped ribs and the smile that formed was heartwarming. "You went for the ribs then."

"Easily hidden," I joked as Lorenzo gripped my chin in his thumb and forefinger, his lips dangerously close to mine.

"You know that's not true." He kissed my lips roughly as Gabriele cleared his throat behind us.

"You know I'm still here, right?"

"I can make you disappear easily enough." I knew he was joking, but Gabriele looked instantly sheepish.

"He's joking!" I swatted Lorenzo's hand and lips away. He quickly positioned himself on the tattoo bed.

"I've known this dick long enough to know he's joking, so don't worry, Ana." Gabriele placed the stencil on the side of Lorenzo's forearm.

"That's pretty big." I peered over Gabriele's shoulder as the stencil took up the space between his wrist and elbow.

"Makes it easier to see." He winked as I headed back to the reception area to wait until he was done.

I relaxed on the sofa and flicked through the many pictures we had taken together during our stay here and I was enjoying

the one from the beach when my father's name popped up on my screen.

“Papa, everything okay?”

“Yes, of course, why wouldn't it be? I just wanted to check in and see how everything's going.” I could hear his smile through the phone.

“Everything is great, we're having an amazing time.” As I finished my sentence, the tattoo gun buzzed, and although I was far enough away, I knew my father would hear it.

“Where are you and what is that buzzing?”

“Lorenzo is getting a tattoo.”

“Doesn't he already have one? What's he getting?” he queried.

“That's rich coming from you since you're covered in them.” I scoffed.

“What's he getting?”

“My name just as I got his.” I smiled as I glanced down my tank covered tattoo.

“Please tell me you're fucking joking!” His voice went from calm to livid within a split second.

“No, I'm not joking, and besides, you have Mama's, mine and Miles', so what's the big deal?”

“You've been married five fucking minutes!”

“It's not as though you or Lorenzo would allow a divorce, so calm down before you pop a vein.” I laughed and even though I knew I shouldn't, I couldn't help it.

“I'll be having words with that husband of yours once you get back, branding my daughter, who does he think he is.” I couldn't quite tell if he'd calmed down or if he was ready to smash something, possibly Lorenzo's face.

“You already said, my husband.”

My father kept me company whilst Lorenzo inked my name permanently onto his skin, and honestly, it was nice to

catch up after the wedding since Lorenzo whisked me out of the reception pretty sharpish. I heard my name pop up behind the curtain a few times and although I didn't eavesdrop, I wanted to.

Once he was done, Lorenzo was beaming with his new addition as I held his arm to admire my name that now decorated his skin.

“My papa isn't happy with you.” I smirked, and he knew exactly why without me saying anything else.

“I'll handle your father. He's a pussy cat compared to me, don't worry.”

After paying for our ink, Lorenzo led me out of the door, his hand on the small of my back.

“Now, let's go home so I can decorate your skin in other ways.” Although he was behind me, I could sense his cocky smile and it lit a fire inside me and honestly, after that I didn't think I'd ever moved so fast to get home in my entire life and neither had he.



Unfortunately, after an incredible week in our secluded villa, it was time to return home. We touched down in New York late on the Friday evening. Lorenzo drove since he didn't want to wake the guys to collect us. It was nice having the last moments of alone time together though before morning where no doubt Red will irritate me for his gift and the others want to know how it was. Rain hammered down against the road as Lorenzo slowed down a little as he could barely see since the wipers were working overtime.

“I can see you worrying.” He glanced over at me briefly as to not take his eyes off the road for too long.

“I'm not, it's just a little dangerous and...”

“And nothing, I’m driving carefully, I wouldn’t risk harming you in anyway.” He smiled. “I promise.”

“I trust you.” He took my hand in his and brought it to his lips, pressing a gentle kiss upon my knuckles, and without thinking, he looked at me if only for two seconds.

“Ana, I love—”

“LORENZO! WATCH—” I screamed louder than I thought possible, but I never got to finish my cry.

Lorenzo swerved swiftly as he tore his hand from mine to grip the wheel. No matter how hard he tried to control the car, it spun out of control as it flipped into the grass verge.

Two seconds was all it took.

Two seconds to take his eyes off the road.

Two seconds for me to see the headlights speeding towards us with no intention of stopping.

Two seconds for the car to flip.

Two seconds for Lorenzo to black out.

I could see the blood stream from the gash on his forehead as I saw the light in his eyes dim just before he shut them. My screams still rang in my ears as did the screeching of the tires on the wet tarmac; it was a sound that would stay with me alongside the image of Lorenzo trying to protect me with his arm as we flipped.

They would never be forgotten.

“Lorenzo, open your eyes for me, please!” I cried, and although it felt like a cry, it came out nothing more than a mere whisper. “Please.” I hung from my seat like a ragdoll. Lorenzo hung lifeless and limp. “Please...” I felt myself slowly giving in to the darkness and although I tried to fight against it the way my papa told me, it had become too difficult.

The eerie silence was interrupted by the sound of a stopping car. I heard the door slam, and I knew we had been

found, we would be safe, and most importantly, Lorenzo would be okay.

“Miss, are you okay?”

“Help us...” Again, nothing more than a whisper.

“I’m going to get you out first.” His gentle voice spoke over the shards of glass falling beside my ear.

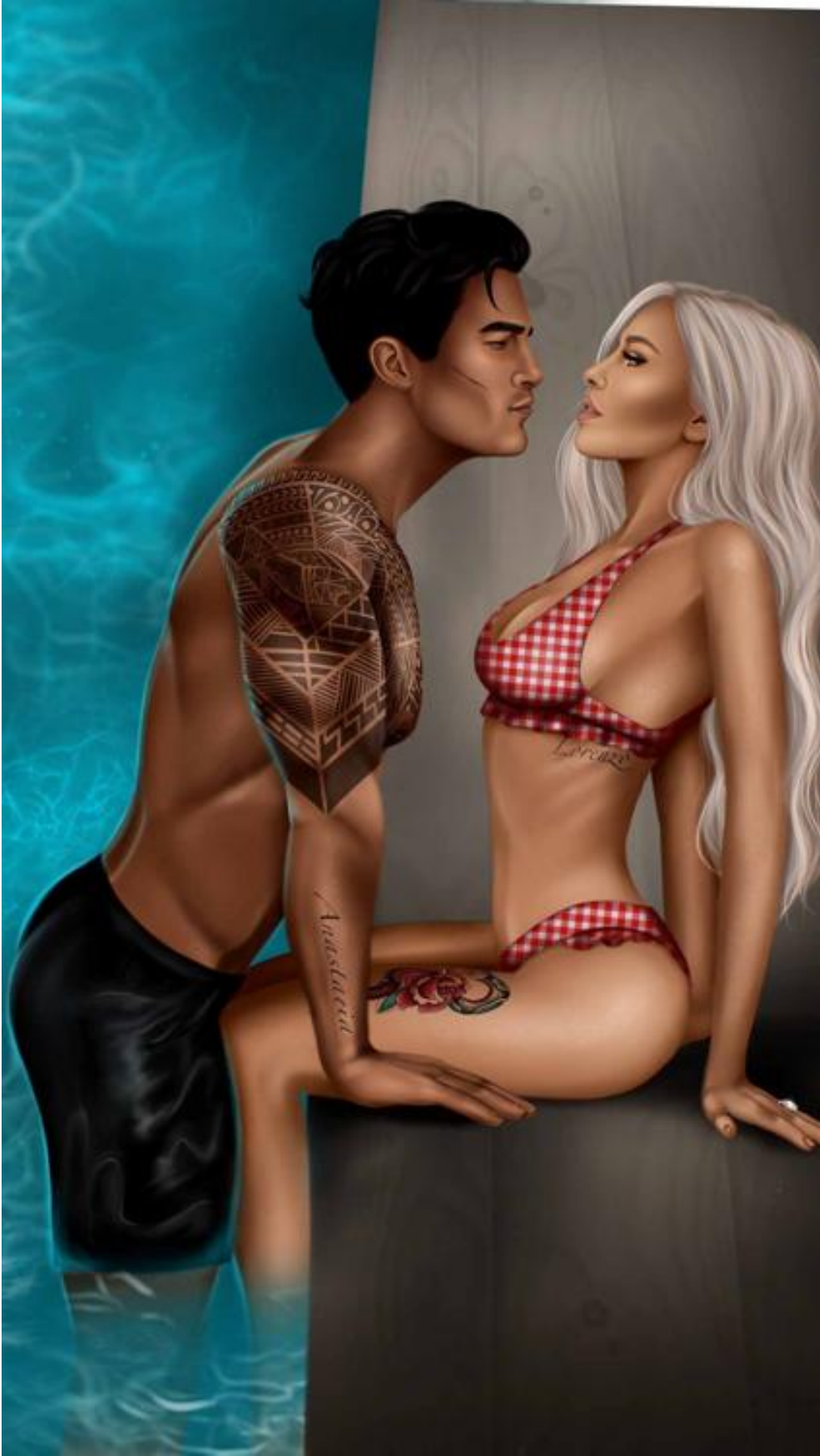
Slowly, the guy I couldn’t see in the dark clung to me to maneuver me out the broken window but not without a couple of scratches. The pain was nothing compared the pain in my chest, my heart.

The pain of Lorenzo being worse than I was.

The man held me in his arms, and he jogged up towards his car as I slowly gave in to the temptation of the creeping darkness.

“My hus—” I croaked.

“He’ll be fine, don’t worry about him.” He placed me in the backseat and that was the last thing I remembered before the lights finally went out.





CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Lorenzo

I COULD STILL HEAR THE GUT-WRENCHING SCREAMS THAT LEFT my wife's body as our car spun out of control, the ear-piercing sound of the glass shattering around us, and the silence that came after. I only just about heard Ana's plea for me to stay awake before my body gave in, then I felt nothing, heard nothing.

I could feel myself slowly coming to consciousness to the rhythmic sounds of the monitor I was obviously hooked up to. The tenderness from my body mixed with the throbbing in my temples was too much to handle. I was unable to move my shoulder, the same one that protected Ana when we flipped. I tried to stop it happening, I tried to control it, I tried but it wasn't enough.

I could feel a hand in mine, but I knew instantly it wasn't Ana's, it was my mother's.

Where the fuck was she?!

Was she okay?!

I fought to open my eyes, not for myself but for my wife, the one I wanted to see, the one I needed to see. I needed her to look at me with those translucent blue eyes of hers and know she was okay, that we were okay.

"Ana—" I just about managed, but the sound of my voice made it sound as though I'd been out a while.

"Lorenzo, baby." Again, not Ana but the soft voice of my mother.

I strained my eyes open as they adjusted to the fluorescent lighting of the room, but I wished I hadn't even bothered because Ana wasn't there. Only my mother and father looked as though they hadn't slept in days.

"Welcome back, my boy." My father smiled as he poured me a glass of water. *I just wanted her. My wife. Ana.*

"Where is—" I strained as I tried to shuffle up the bed a little.

"Lorenzo, Anastacia, she—" My mother choked out her words, and I instantly thought the worst.

"Ma, please don't say what I think you're going to say." My throat felt as though it was being sliced painfully by razorblades with every word I spoke. "Pa."

"We don't know where she is, son." My father bowed his head. He couldn't even look at me, neither could my mother.

"What do you mean? She was with me in the car!" I forgot I was hooked up to machines and the pain that radiated through my body. I sat bolt upright to look into the eyes of my father who now watched me intently.

"Lorenzo, lie back down." He soothed.

"No! I need to find my wife! Why are you here? Why aren't you looking for her?" I fought against the pain as my voice bellowed through the room.

"We've been trying, but there's no trace of her at the moment." He pinched the bridge of his nose, and I could tell he was distressed.

"So, you're telling me that between you and Victor and all our fucking men, you've found nothing? How is that possible? Who has taken my fucking wife?" I ripped the needles from my arm and kicked my legs over the edge of the bed. I wasn't going to sit here and wait around for someone to bring my wife back.

"Ana wouldn't want you out of bed, you're doing more damage than good," Victor spoke as he opened the door.

“Ana isn’t here, is she. I have to find her. I can’t lie here while she’s fuck knows where!” I stood unsteadily as I spied my bloody clothes on the chair beside my mother, one that was reserved for Ana.

“Lorenzo, I’m doing all I can to find my daughter and bring her home.”

“What you’re doing is not enough. How long has she been missing?!” I narrowed my eyes at mine and Ana’s father.

“A week.”

“A fucking week?” You could have knocked me over with a feather. I felt breathless and unsteady but at the same time the need to find her fueled my rage and determination to bring her home.

I glanced towards the door to be met by Red, Gino, Emmet, and Miles who looked the same as the two fathers did. I could tell none of them had slept and the looks of sympathy were too much to handle. I didn’t need nor did I want sympathy.

“Boss,” Red spoke, his eyes were on the verge of tears and my men never showed weakness until now.

“Tell me you have something. Anything.”

“Nothing.”

“What the fuck happened?!” I roared. “Somebody, tell me! Now!” I raged. My blood boiled as I clenched my fists at my sides to stop myself fucking up this entire room.

“We expected you back once we woke up, but there was no sign of either of you, luggage, nothing. We tracked your car and found you hadn’t moved since the night before, you weren’t far from home, maybe five, ten minutes tops.” Red took a deep breath before continuing, “You had been out there all night. You were lucky.”

“Lucky?! You call losing my wife lucky?!” I snapped and although it wasn’t Red’s fault, he was the one in my firing line.

The rest of the words spoken were a blur. I shut them out, I didn't want to hear anything else. I limped over to the chair and swapped the gown they'd given me for my bloody clothes. I wouldn't stay here another minute, if the group of men standing before me couldn't find her then I would, or I'd die trying.

"Lorenzo." Victor gripped my arm as he stopped me in my tracks. "Where are you going?"

"I suggest you let go of me, Victor," I spat as I ripped my arm from his hold. "You failed to bring your daughter home, so now it's my turn."

"Lorenzo! That's enough!" My father jumped to his defense, but I didn't want to hear it.

"It's enough when I say it's enough." I slammed my fist into the hospital door and although it should hurt, I was numb to the pain. "Anastacia is alone somewhere. Did you think about how scared she would be?" My face was inches away from Victor's as I stood my ground, anger radiated through my body.

"I taught Ana well; she isn't the type to get scared, she can hold her own."

"How are you so calm? Why aren't you burning the world for her? Do you give a shit about her at all?" I shoved him with all I had as he stumbled backwards. I knew I hit a nerve; it was written all over his face.

"I've been doing everything I can, but whoever took her knows what they're doing. It's as though she no longer exists, so don't you dare question how much I care for *my daughter*." His hands fisted my shirt at the neck, and I had finally woken up the man everyone feared.

"Don't give me a reason to then." I removed his hand in one swift move and exited the room. The guys were hot on my heels, but none of them dared to say a word.



Days had passed and the house was fucking quiet without her. All I was left with were memories in every part I looked. Memories I wish gave me some comfort, but they didn't. I couldn't sleep in the bed without inhaling her floral perfume. I couldn't take a shower without hearing her giggles inside. I couldn't even stand to make a fucking coffee since she banned me from making them. Everything was colourless and tasteless without her.

We'd hardly slept, and despite being told it wasn't good to carry on this way, I did. I had to bring her home; she'd be counting on me. I just knew it. There was nothing to track her with, the moment she was ripped from that car was the moment we lost all traces. Victor was right, it was as though she didn't exist, but she did, to so many people... *to me.*

She was the reason I fucking existed.

"I heard you might need some help?" Nicolo piped up from the doorway.

I had never been so happy to see my cousin. We needed all the help we could get. I didn't know how long he'd been standing there, but it must have been a while and frankly I didn't care.

"You heard right." I rubbed at my forehead.

"Well, nursing a bourbon at eleven in the morning isn't the way forward, is it?"

"Fuck off, Nicolo!" I rose from the chair, and it toppled onto the floor. I launched the full glass at the wall. "You said you came to help! I don't need your opinion on my drinking habits!"

"You're right, my bad. Victor is here, he is waiting in the kitchen." Nicolo nodded with a sheepish smile before he left

me standing alone.

I composed myself before I entered the kitchen where Victor leaned against the counter looking almost as sleep deprived as me, and beside him, the one man I didn't want in my house.

"Victor." I nodded, ignoring the blonde prick who outstretched his hand.

"Any leads?" he asked, the stress oozing from him.

"Fuck all. I take it you're the same?"

"You guessed right. I've had men out all night and nothing. They went to the sight of the crash, followed each way she could have been taken but each one was greeted with a dead end."

"She couldn't have just fell off the face of the earth, not our Ana." Was this guy for real? *Our Ana?!*

"She was and never will be your Ana. I don't understand why the fuck you're in my house!" I lost it, all the anger and pent-up aggression I felt, I released it on the man who clung to Victor like a lost little boy.

I shoved Chad up against the kitchen wall and held the blade of my knife against his Adam's apple that bobbed nervously in his throat.

"Scared, little boy?" I narrowed my eyes as I pressed the knife into his skin, enough to draw blood. "How does it feel to be on the brink of losing something?" I felt Victor try to pull me away, but it was no use, I was possessed.

"I have lost her. She was my friend." *Was?!* Why was he talking about her like she wouldn't come back, like I wouldn't bring her home.

"She's still fucking alive and if you were her friend, you would believe that. Not write her off!" I seethed as I was seconds away from opening this bastard's throat.

"*Lorenzo, he's harmless, please don't do this.*" I could hear her fucking voice in my head, begging me to stop. "*Bring me home to you, I'll wait for you.*" I threw my knife on the

floor before I clutched my head. I needed to hear her but at the same time it hurt too much.

“Lorenzo, I—”

“Get the fuck out of my house!” I’d had enough of Chad and his whining voice, it grated on me with each word he spoke.

“Lorenzo, he can help,” Victor tried to reason with me, but I’d made my mind up and it wasn’t easily changed.

“The same applies to you, Victor. If you want him here, then you aren’t welcome either.” I turned, giving Victor his ultimatum.

“Chad, go home, keep digging on whatever lead you can find. Leave no stone unturned,” Victor ordered as he handed a handkerchief to Chad to wipe the blood away from his neck.

“Nicolo, escort him out. I don’t trust this man around what’s mine,” I ordered, and my cousin instantly obeyed.

“Lorenzo, he can help, why won’t you let him?”

“Whose side are you on, Red?” I raised a brow to one of my closest men, and he quietened down almost instantly.

“Emmet, I want you to take the most trusted with you and question any locals that could have seen something. I don’t want them threatened or scared, just a gentle approach.”

“We’ve already done that.” He sighed.

“I don’t give a shit if you’ve done it a thousand times. I want it done again!”

“Boss.” Emmet nodded as he headed to the meeting room to choose his men.

“Lorenzo, do you want to get some sleep?” Victor placed his hand on my shoulder, a gentle, fatherly move.

“I’ll sleep when she’s home.”

“Lorenzo—”

“It’s my fault, isn’t it?” I slapped my palm on the marble island. “I took my eyes off the road for two seconds all

because I wanted to tell her I loved her. How was I so fucking stupid?!" I had tried to keep it together and now that it was just us, I finally felt as though I could let it out a little.

"It could have happened to any of us, you can't blame yourself."

"I promised to protect her, I tried my best, who hates me enough to take her?! What grubby fucker touched my wife!" I ran my fingers through my hair as I tugged at the strands harder than I should. "Someone planned it all, someone knew the time we landed, they knew our route home, they knew everything! They ran us off the road in order to take Anastacia."

"She's a strong woman but then again she has to be to deal with you." This wasn't a time for jokes, but hell, we needed it. "She won't give in to the shit they'll be throwing at her, you have to know that."

"I do know it, but that doesn't mean I can't worry about her. The thoughts that go through my mind at night are unthinkable." I checked my phone that still had a smashed screen. My eyes had met Ana's as she'd smiled back at me; it was a picture she'd captured of us just hours before tragedy struck. "I need to be the one to kill whoever took her." I captured Victor's gaze, and I knew he wanted the kill as much as I did but I wouldn't let him have it.

"Then they're yours." He slapped my shoulder as his eyes dropped to his daughter's name on my arm. "We'll discuss that when she's home."

"There's fuck all to discuss." I tried my best to smile, but I didn't feel I could anymore, nobody deserved it like she did.

"Boss." Red appeared at the doorway with a plate of food.

"Who this time?"

"Florence. I'll take it to the meeting room for the guys, they could do with something, they've been burning the candle at both ends and there's only so much they can do before they burn out." He was right, I'd been hard on them, but it was the way I had to be, especially right this second.

“Thanks, Red.”

Florence appeared behind Red with the exact same smile Ana had and it broke my fucking heart, she must have realised this as it fell as instantly as it appeared. Red left us three alone as he carried the large plate to the guys.

“Any luck?”

I could tell she was on the brink of falling apart, and I knew my answer would push her over the edge and I hated to be the one to do this to her.

“I’m sorry, nothing.” I sighed.

As if in slow motion, she collapsed to the floor as her sobs echoed the kitchen. They were as gut-wrenching as Anastacia’s screams the night of the accident. Victor fell to his knees before his wife and pulled her into his embrace and maybe it was wrong of me, but I was jealous. What I would give to hold Ana now even if it meant her crying in my arms.

“She isn’t coming home, is she?” Florence mumbled into Victor’s jacket.

“We will bring her home; I swear to you!” Victor soothed as he wiped away her tears.

“What are they doing to her? What if they hurt my baby?!” I watched as he rocked her in his arms trying to calm her down and although I was dying inside, I realised nothing must hurt more than parents going through what they were going through right now.

“Please don’t think that way. I’ve never let Ana down since the moment she graced this earth, and I won’t start now. Do you understand me?”

“I understand.” She trembled.

“Lorenzo?” Nicolo appeared at the doorway as Victor helped Florence off the floor. “Shit, sorry.” He held his hand up in apology.

“What’s up?”

“This was dropped off to me for you as I was showing Chad out.” He handed me a small box. “It’s what they found from the crash. Your luggage is in the hall.”

I placed the box on the side and ripped it open and right there on top of Ana’s phone was her necklace, the one I gifted her days before the wedding, the one I gave her on the night we exchanged I love yous. As I held it in my fingers, I noticed how it was splattered with her blood and scratched from the glass. It dawned on me that I didn’t know how injured she was, and I was in no position to check.

“Lorenzo, what is it?” Florence questioned.

“Nothing.” I fisted the metal and shoved it in my pants pocket as I heard a commotion at the front door.

“Papa! Where are you?!” Miles bounded through the kitchen to where we stood, leaving a mass of destruction in his wake.

“Have you found something?!” I interrupted.

“I wish. I’ve been trying to call you, Papa.”

“We’ve been a little preoccupied. What is it?” Victor couldn’t help but snap, but it was needed since we were all beyond breaking point.

“It’s Grandma!”





CHAPTER
TWENTY-FIVE
Anastacia

I AWOKE TO THE SOUND OF FAINT VOICES FROM THE ONES THAT patrolled the door, not that it needed patrolling since one of my arms was chained to this rickety bed with the flimsiest mattress I'd ever laid my head on. I'd be better off sleeping on the floor than this pile of shit.

I was in fresh clothes, freshly showered, all the remnants of blood gone. That was one thing they allowed as per their boss's requests. Apparently, me covered in my own blood, glass decorating my skin and greasy hair wasn't a turn on for him or so I'd heard.

I had lost count of how many days I'd been here. The days rolled into one and the only thought that kept me going was seeing my husband bursting through that door to take me home, but with each passing day, I was losing hope. I didn't know if I was in the same country anymore, I didn't know where I was or what my family must be going through, I had to remain strong like my father taught me.

"Wakey, wakey, pretty princess." The key in the lock turned as brute number one entered, wearing his balaclava which didn't hide the stench from his breath.

"Go fuck yourself." I smiled sarcastically as my free hand slapped the bowl of porridge out of his.

"Why can't you just play nice, you fucking brat?!" he snapped as he gripped my face in his tattooed hands.

"Where's the fun in that?" I snatched my face from his grasp, and I could tell he was about ready to break my cheekbone. "Go on, do it, I know you want to." I carried on

provoking him and I didn't know why but I guessed it was to show I wasn't to be messed with like they expected. "Ah, poor baby, aren't you allowed to?" I pouted as I tried to stifle the laughter I was holding in.

"Fuck you, bitch!" His hand whipped through the air before I had time to take my next breath as the back of it collided with my cheek and instantly the metallic taste of my blood filled my mouth.

Showing him my blood-covered teeth, I let out a maniacal laugh. I could see his face redden with anger behind his balaclava, and I thrived off it.

"Is that all you've got; my grandmother hits harder." I spat a mixture of blood and saliva on the ribbed material of his mask. "Pussy."

"You're just like your father! You fucking cunt!"

He knew my father?!

That was a clue but then again, my father knew many people.

"Get the fuck out! What did the boss say?! Not to harm a hair on her head!" Brute two appeared in the doorway and although I couldn't see his expression, I knew he was angry. "Leave her alone and get out, go and calm down before you get yourself killed!" he snapped, his patience wearing thin.

"She provoked me!" Brute one argued with brute two, and honestly, this was entertainment at its finest.

"I don't give a flying fuck who provoked who. Just leave!" Brute one skulked off muttering something under his breath.

"Why can't you just do as you're told, it would make this easier!" His face was now inches away from mine and I noticed something I hadn't before. His eyes, they were a near enough black with a hint of violet and I knew I'd seen them before; I just couldn't work out where.

"I don't want to make this easier. I want to go home, you uneducated prick!"

“You won’t be going home. Boss has plans for you, ones he’s planned for a good while and it’s been our pleasure to help.” He laughed in my face, and I was fucking done being a pushover.

I reared my head back and slammed it into what I guessed was his nose and judging by his piercing screams, I’d hit him in the correct spot. Without thinking, he ripped off his balaclava that he’d been wearing on each visit, and for the first time, I saw his face, and although it was pouring with blood, it was familiar. I racked my brain to work out where I’d seen him before, but it went blank.

“What the fuck is going on in here?!” Oh, how wonderful. Brute number three arrived. How many were there?

“Go and fix up your face,” he snapped.

“He’ll need more than a wet wipe and a bandage to fix that.” I laughed as brute number two ran back at me, only to be stopped by brute three.

As I said, entertainment at its finest. Some would say comedy gold.

“OUT!” he roared as he shoved brute two out the door, before he slammed it shut.

“Fucking behave yourself!” he snapped, and I was beyond bored.

“Behaving is overrated, don’t you think?” I teased as he pulled out his phone. “Better call in the incidents to your boss like a good little boy.”

The room remained silent for a moment until I heard the muffled sounds from the other end of the phone. He had the volume turned down and pressed firmly to his ear, so it was hard to listen.

“Boss, I just thought I’d let you know that we have one broken nose, courtesy of this woman of yours.” He sighed.

“I’m not his fucking woman! I’d rather burn in hell than belong to another man!” I pulled at the chain that dug into my

wrist, swelling formed beneath the bruises, but I didn't feel the pain anymore, I was numb to it.

“She's fine, yes, except she's spitting blood right now.” And as if on cue, I heard the raised voice on the other end but still couldn't work out who it was. “Boss, she provoked Ilya. He backhanded her across the right side of her face.” I knew then that Ilya was a goner; that prick deserved it anyway.

The rest of the conversation was carried on outside the door, with it still open slightly.

I kicked the metal bowl with the remnants of porridge in across the floor which earned a warning look from brute three through the crack in the door. I looked around the sparse room they'd locked me in. Four plain walls with a barred window up high enough for me not to see through but at least I could tell whether it was day or night. A dingy metal bed shoved in the corner with a blanket that just about covered my barely clothed body and a piss bucket close enough for me to reach if needed.

Some evenings when I laid back, I saw the tip of the moon and I wondered if Lorenzo was looking at it too, if we were feeling the same way, if he even made it out of that car alive. I didn't even know how long it was until someone found him or if he'd been found.

I used to love falling asleep, but now I dreaded it. I dreaded hearing the sound I never knew I was capable of making until that fateful night. I dreaded feeling Lorenzo's arm press my body into the seat, putting himself at risk. I dreaded reliving the moment I was stolen from the one man I love, the one man I worried I'd never see again. I may have put on a front when the brutes visited but deep down, I was broken, I was crumbling, I was empty. I wouldn't give them the satisfaction of seeing me cry, they didn't deserve it, they didn't deserve my tears, nobody did.

“Would you like some more food since the last lot didn't exactly end up in your mouth.” I saw the eye roll as plain as day from the door.

“I’d rather starve than eat the shit you serve me.” I narrowed my eyes and hid the pain I was feeling. I pushed it aside like my papa taught me. I showed no weakness, and they all hated it.

“Boss doesn’t want you to starve, don’t make me force feed you.”

“Fucking try it, I dare you,” I spat.

“That’s one dare you’ll wish you never made.” He laughed as he slammed the iron door behind him. The key turned in the lock instantly, and just like that, I was alone again.

I let the tears fall, the ones I only let fall at night, ones I could no longer fight.

“I’m coming for you, amore, I promise.” I heard him in my head, I could hear his voice as if he were here, and I wondered if he could hear mine.



Night had fallen. I hadn’t had a visit from the brutes but that didn’t mean I wouldn’t, one usually brought me food when the room darkened, then I was lucky enough to have the light on for at least fifteen minutes while I shoved the food around the plate.

As I lay in the darkness, I was startled by the noise of more than one person banging on the door with those pathetic voices, no doubt wearing their masks too.

“Dinner time, pretty princess.” What on earth is that damn nickname.

The door flew open to the irritating laughter of brute one, two and three. They flicked on the switch as I squeezed my eyes shut briefly until they finally adjusted to the lighting, no matter how dim. Once I flickered them open slowly, I noticed Ilya, who was previously known as brute two, was still nursing

a broken nose which had now turned a gorgeous shade of purple.

“I told you I didn’t want to eat anything.” I faced the wall, giving them my back.

“Did you hear her?” Ilya cocked his head to the side. “As if we’re going to listen to what you actually want. You blew that the moment you smashed my FUCKING FACE IN!” he screamed as I stared at the small hole I’d been picking in the wall.

“Get the bitch up.”

Suddenly I was pulled to my feet by Ilya and brute one who looked extremely happy with himself after seeing the bruise on my cheek. They dug their fingers into my forearm as I winced beneath their hold and the moment they knew, they smirked at brute three who held a bowl of stone-cold porridge and how did I know it was cold? Because it wasn’t steaming like usual.

“Open wide.”

“Over my dead body!” I thrashed in their arms as Ilya fisted my hair, which caused my head to tip back. The moment I gasped was the moment brute one plied my mouth open.

“You should have thought about that before you were a smart ass and dared me.” He leaned in close as his lips neared mine. “You’re going to finish every last spoonful and you’re going to be fucking grateful.” He scooped up the beige mush on the spoon and shoved it into my mouth, the ice-cold oats had to be forcefully scraped off the spoon since they were that old and swallowing them was even worse, as the lump wedged itself in my throat.

“Wow, she can do as she’s told,” Ilya whispered from beside me as he ran his tongue up the side of my ear.

“Ilya! Stop it! We have orders to follow, nothing sexual, no beatings and lastly, make sure she eats, which as you can see, I’m doing.”

The next ten minutes were spent by me having to endure being spoon-fed like a toddler. I gagged, I spluttered, and I

almost choked, but I did it. I showed them the woman I was, and they despised it.

“Now, open up one last time.” Brute three scooped out the last of the porridge on his boney finger and held it to my parted lips. “Don’t disappoint me.” He ran his finger across my lips as I had one thought in mind, and I planned to go along with it.

I opened my mouth without help and when he placed his grubby finger on my tongue, I clamped down as hard as I could, his roar mixed with a cry filled the room.

I barely had time to blink, let alone dodge the blow that landed on my stomach. *So much for no beatings.* I watched as the blood dripped from his finger onto the already blood splattered concrete. My stomach ached as I wheezed and tried to catch my breath. I had taken worse but this one caught me off guard, and I couldn’t lie, it fucking hurt! My hair surrounded my face as my body hung in the men’s arms.

“I think that one hurt.” Ilya laughed but not for long since he seemed to loosen his grip on my arm while he was having his outburst, which was the perfect moment to jab my elbow into his bandaged nose. He clutched his face instantly as the scarlet red blood joined his mate’s on the floor. “I should put you in the fucking ground!” He spat as his blood splashed on my bare skin.

“I’ll smile when you shovel in the mud, you pathetic prick!” I shook off brute one who stalked out of the room, unable to control his anger, and I was glad since he could probably knock me out cold.

“You don’t remember any of us, but we remember you, you little bitch, and keeping you here, hearing you cry during the night and watching you suffer the longer you’re away from your Lorenzo fucking Ricci and Daddy Dearest is what dreams are made of.”

“I thought your boss said no beatings.”

“Not without a valid reason and that gut punch had one.” He smirked as he shoved my aching body onto the bed with a

creak.

“They’ll come for me and then you’re all fucked!” I screamed at the top of my lungs although it came out hoarse.

“That’s where you’re wrong, flower, nobody’s coming for you.” He slammed the door behind him, and the lock clicked into place.

Hearing him say nobody was coming for me was worse than the gut punch I received, and I knew I shouldn’t second guess it, but I was beginning to...

He called me flower, and the only ones to call me that were my father, grandfather, and grandmother.



Days passed and they left me alone. They sent another brute in with food for me, but he had obviously been ordered to steer clear since he opened the door just enough to kick whatever they’d concocted across the floor.

“That’ll stay there until you eat it all up.” I was sick of being spoken to like a child, treated like one as well. “That’s if you can reach.” He laughed, and as usual, left me alone. I preferred it that way but that was when the thoughts crept in, the doubt, the hurt.

I knelt on the floor as I reached for the bowl that homed a slice of stale bread and a minuscule lump of cheese. I held whatever there was of it between my trembling fingers as I sunk onto the concrete, the stone somewhat comfier than the bed they’d given me.

Thankfully, I couldn’t see the rest of me but if my fingers were anything to go by, I must have been a mess, dried blood crusted beneath my nails, my hair knotted, and luckily I could only feel how swollen my eye was. I didn’t fancy seeing the

state my face was in. I didn't want to think of what Lorenzo might think of me when he arrived.

I heard the lock click once more and I jumped to my feet, the chain clanged against the bedframe as I hurried back to my usual place. My feet were throbbing, sore and cut open, they'd taken my sneakers and belt, obviously they believed I could use those as a weapon against them.

As the door opened slowly, I watched with widened eyes. They were too quiet for the original brutes, but it was quieter in general this afternoon, there was no hushed voice, no gossiping and none of the usual laughter.

I could have buried my head in the mattress, but I sat strong. I trained my sunken gaze on the door as someone new stepped inside.

But it was someone I knew all too well.

I recognised his well-worn boots, his sandy blonde hair, his emerald, green eyes that widened at the sight of me, and finally, the family crest that stuck out the open neck of his shirt.

“Chad!” I cried with happiness as I jumped to my feet. I tried to run to him, but the chains forced me back instantly as they sliced my skin.

“Ana, what have they done to you?!” His face fell with worry as he reached me in two strides.

He pulled me into his arms as I cried into his shirt. He stroked my hair and while I felt relief, I also felt devastation it wasn't Lorenzo that stormed through that door.

“Ana, talk to me.” He held me at arm's length as he ran his thumb across the bruise on my cheek. I winced beneath his touch. “Sorry, I didn't mean to hurt you, you shouldn't have had to go through this.” His eyes roamed over the rest of me and landed on the bruise that peeked out the bottom of my tank. “Show me,” he ordered; his eyes darkened with rage.

“Chad, please take me home,” I pleaded. “I want to go home.”



CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Lorenzo

“TELL ME WHAT YOU FUCKING KNOW!” I SLAMMED MY FISTS against the chair the unlucky man was strapped to.

“I know nothing!” He trembled as saliva trickled from the corner of his mouth. He was a fucking mess. “I got paid, but I never saw his face, that’s all!”

“What were you paid to do?! I want to fucking hear it!” I pressed my knife to his neck.

“I got paid to run you off the road. I only agreed because I needed the money... I didn’t know what their plans were, but they offered me a hefty sum.” He thrashed in his chair as the restraints cut into his wrists, drawing blood. “Please, I’m sorry!” His screams fuelled my fire as I trailed the tip of my blade from his neck to his hand where I stabbed it through the centre of his palm. His gut-wrenching screams were music to my ears.

“You’re sorry?” I laughed as I brought my face to his. “Sorry doesn’t help me find my wife, does it?” I ripped my blade from his hand as the blood seeped from it rapidly.

“I didn’t know who they were. They told me what I had to do, and I did it.”

“I think our little friend is about to spew up his guts.” Red laughed from behind me, spinning his blade between his fingers.

“A little blood too much for you, is it?” I tapped my palm twice on his cheek as he let out a sob, one that pleased me, one that made me feel as though I could walk on water. “Scared?”

“Yes! Please, let me go!” he cried. Victor watched the man beg in delight. A sinister smirk graced his lips, and I knew it was only a matter of time until he snapped.

“Funny. I bet that’s what my daughter’s been asking since she was ripped from our fucking lives.” Victor rose from his seat menacingly. His eyes narrowed as he gripped the man’s sniveling face between his fingers and dug his others into the knife-shaped hole I’d made. “Do you think whoever paid you is treating her with the respect she deserves?! Do you fucking think they’re listening to her?!” he roared as he backhanded the man’s snot-ridden face. His family ring cracked painfully across our captive’s cheek as his vomit now decorated the floor.

“I’m sorry!” he sobbed. Vomit clung to his facial hair.

“Sorry?” Wow! I forgive you.” Victor smiled as he clapped his blood-stained hands together with an almighty thud.

“Re-really?” His tensed body relaxed the moment Victor removed his fingers from his gaping wound.

“No, not really, you deluded fuck.” Victor reached into his pants pocket and pulled out his knife. “I’m about to show you what it really means to fuck with a Fedorov, a Ricci, and all in-between.”

“Wait... I didn’t know it was a Ricci and Fedorov in that car!”

“It was two fucking Riccis!” I screamed, the anger building with each passing second.

“It shouldn’t matter who was in the car. You made a grave mistake accepting their money.” Victor spoke calmly as he pressed his blade to his lips contemplating his next move.

“I needed it! I didn’t care where I got it!” he screamed, his voice hoarse from his previous screeching.

Victor sliced his blade through the air as he opened our little mate’s shirt in one swift movement.

“Red, hold him down.” Red rounded him instantly, and despite being tied, I knew what Victor had planned would need

extra restraint.

“Please... I’m begging you. I’ll help you find her.”

“Cute, but no thanks.” Victor smiled.

Victor ran the tip of his blade across the bare skin of his torso that was speckled with sparse hair. He tormented him with each gentle push of blade before slowly and painfully pressing the tip into his skin as he took his time to carve his initials in his chest. Blood poured and splattered from the perfectly cut *V*, soon followed by the *F*. I admired his handiwork, his precision was remarkable.

Blood-curdling screams filled the small room of our warehouse as his acid-wash jeans turned the perfect shade of red. Red whispered something quietly in the sorry excuses ear. I had no clue what was being said, and quite frankly, I didn’t give a shit; all I knew was that our toy was finding it hard to breathe. Tears streamed down his bruised cheeks, and all I wanted to do was end his life, but I knew how I could fill him with hope before I ripped it all away within a split second.

“Please, let me go,” he begged as he coughed up a considerable amount of blood, which missed Victor’s freshly polished boots by less than a centimetre.

“Get fucked,” Victor growled as he rammed his fist into the initials he’d freshly carved.

“Now, now, Victor, let’s be hospitable. It’s clear he knows nothing, we should let him go.” I smiled as Victor gawked at me. “But first, Red, you know what to do.” Red wore a joker like smile as he clutched his knife between his fingers.

“Boss.” He nodded and crouched behind the chair. In two precise cuts, he opened the Achilles of the man who looked about ready to pass out. Victor scoffed beside me, and it had finally dawned on him what a fucked-up mind his son-in-law had.

I held out my hand to Emmet who placed a steel bat flat in the palm. Victor took a step back beside Emmet as I swung the bat in one swift motion, shattering the man’s kneecaps.

“Fuck!!! You bastard!” he screamed out, and it was the first time he showed a bit of backbone.

“That’s no way to talk to the man who’s setting you free, is it.” I laughed as I brought the bat down on his injured hand. The bones cracked beneath it as he thrashed in the chair. His hips bucked as he threw his head back to an awaiting Red who headbutted him swiftly. “Cut him free,” I ordered as Red held his shoulders whilst Emmet and Gino made quick work of untying his wrists.

I curtly nodded towards Red with a wink as he shoved our toy onto the floor.

“Leave, if you can.” I laughed as Victor smiled proudly and somewhat menacingly.

We all watched on as he tried to pull himself across the floor, but with only one good hand, it was harder than he thought. I watched him struggle, and I felt no guilt, no remorse, nothing.

“This is painful to watch.” I scoffed as I debated what to do with him for a moment until the only thing to do was put the poor fucker out of his misery.

I crouched beside him on the balls on my feet whilst my forearms rested on my thighs, although we’d had our fun, we couldn’t stand by and watch this piece of shit struggle the rest of the day.

“You seem to be struggling a little there, fella.”

“I can do it; I want to leave,” he panted as he moved a mere inch.

“It’s a shame you won’t be then, isn’t it?” I laughed as I flipped him around on his back. His eyes widened with fright, and he knew these moments were his last.

“I’ll ask you one last time, who were they?” I knelt on his set of broken fingers as he gasped for air.

“I don’t know, I really don’t!”

“Then I have no use for you.” I cocked my head to the side as my mask slipped and all he saw was a stone-cold

expression.

“I’m innocent.” His cries fell on deaf ears. I was done listening to his whining.

“You’re anything but,” I spat as I opened his neck cleanly, I watched the life drain from his eyes as he took a first-class ticket to hell.

“Well, that was really something,” Red joked as he placed his knife back into his pants pocket.

“Clean this shit up, but there is no time to get creative. Not today,” I ordered the guys as they stood there, watching the blood drip from my blade as well as my hands. “Oh, and Red?”

“Boss?”

“Make sure you burn my father-in-law’s initials from his chest. There’s always a slim chance of him being found.” I was halfway out the door when he answered.

“He won’t be found, none of them will, that we promise you.” I knew he meant it; I knew they all did. They weren’t sloppy by any means, but they wanted justice for Ana just as much as I did, and they would do whatever they had to do to bring her home.



A couple of days had passed, and Victor had spent his time between here and the hospital. Ana’s grandmother wasn’t doing too well. She slept most of the time, and Victor’s hope was dwindling for her to recover or for us to find Ana first. I could only hope we do because if we didn’t and Ana didn’t get to say goodbye, she’d be inconsolable.

“Sorry, I’m late.” Victor looked like a defeated man as he entered the meeting room where we all racked our brains on how we could run with the little clues we had. This was the

first time I'd seen him look as though he was close to giving up.

“Victor, is everything okay?” I asked as I rose from my chair. His eyes were glassy, and I knew right then that what he was about to say wouldn't be good.

“We need to talk.” His voice was nothing but a croaked whisper.

“Let's go to the office.” He followed me out of the meeting room instantly as we headed down the corridor to where I'd been spending most of my time, even during the night.

“What happened?” I questioned as he slumped down on the sofa in the corner.

“I don't think she'll make it, Lorenzo.” He sighed. “She's not good, they said it's only a matter of time.”

“Then we need to bring Ana home.” I demanded.

“And what if we can't?!”

“We don't have a choice!” I slammed my palm on the desk. “We don't have a choice, Victor.” I pinched the bridge of my nose and hoped I could do it.

There was a frantic knock at the door before it flew open.

“Lorenzo.” Nicolo burst in with an expression on his face I couldn't quite place. “Victor. Good you're both here.”

“What's going on, Nic?!”

“There's something you both need to know, and you aren't going to like it.”

“Stop rambling and spit it out!” Victor screamed, jumping to his feet.

“I know where Ana is.”

“What?” I couldn't work out if I'd heard it him correctly or if my mind had been playing tricks on me, letting me hear what I longed to hear.

Nicolo closed the door and gave us his full attention.

“Then where the fuck is she?!” I snapped, and my cousin flinched.

“I first noticed how shifty he looked at the hospital when he was accompanying Victor, always checking his phone, and then when I escorted him out after you ordered it. I decided when I wasn’t needed that I would follow him, watch his moves, see where he went. I didn’t want to believe it but the exact moment he drove off road today, something didn’t sit right with me. So, I followed by foot, I didn’t want to leave a trace, so he knew he was being followed, but he led me straight to Ana... well, to the building she’s at.”

“Say his name.” I knew, of course I knew but I needed to hear it.

“He’s not alone. There were four other men there to greet him when he arrived, all wearing balaclavas except one, whose nose looked busted in.”

“Ana...” My heart and mind filled with hope and pride knowing she wasn’t giving in to them.

“I didn’t see her but she’s in there. I just know.”

“Who has my daughter, Nicolo?” Victor asked calmly and as rationally as possible.

“Chad.” There it was, the blow I had been waiting for, the man my wife claimed to be harmless had her, and he had the audacity to stand beside us and offer his help to find her, to bring her home when all along he wasn’t planning on it.

“Should I call Miles?” Nicolo asked.

“No. Nobody outside this house finds out we know where Ana is, not even the girls, no matter how worried they are.”

The girls practically lived with Florence and Victor whilst Ana was gone. They did all they could to help but there wasn’t much they could do in all honesty. The one thing I knew they’d do was be there for her when we brought Ana home. It was time to bring my *amore* home.

We stormed from the office towards the meeting room. The second we arrived all eyes fell upon us.

“We’re bringing her home.” I smiled. “Nicolo found her location.”

“Well done, Nic!” Red smiled, and for the first time, I noticed the men who adored Ana gradually light up.

“Nobody outside of this room should know about her whereabouts,” I ordered.

“That includes my wife.” Victor spoke from beside me. “I will inform Miles the second we have Ana, and not a moment before.”

“How bad is it, Boss?” Gino asked from behind his computer screen.

“Five men including Chad.” All heads snapped up since all the men in this room knew him as one of Victor’s most trusted.

“He’s always been obsessed with our Ana.” Artem, head of Victor’s security, rose from his seat. “We never thought anything of it since we knew they grew up together, but the older they got, the more he offered to drive her places, he always knew where she was. We thought nothing of it, but I apologise for not putting two and two together.” He hung his head as if in shame, but it wasn’t his fault. Chad was unhinged, I saw it the moment we met. I knew he was bad news.

“Artem, this is not your fault, you are the most loyal man I have, and we’ve been through some shit together and you will not apologise for something you couldn’t have seen. Nobody would have imagined he would have done something like this, not even me. I invited him into our home when he lost his parents because my daughter begged me not to leave her friend alone and all was fine until her eighteenth birthday when she told him she was set to marry Lorenzo at the age of twenty-one.” He captured the attention of everyone here. “We will bring my daughter home and Lorenzo will end Chad’s life, but the four others are mine, no matter who they are.”

“Can I play?” Red asked with a sinister smile.

“Yes, I’ll let you play before I end them.” Victor winked.

Tonight, I would hold her in my arms, make her see how much I love her, and how much I was drowning without her.

“So, Boss, what’s the plan?” Emmet asked with a lethal glee.

“Half of us will head in on foot, we don’t want to alert them. The rest will wait by the cars at the road, but the moment we’ve secured all five men and Ana, you may drive up and collect us,” I ordered. “I will bring Anastacia home; I want Chad and the others taken to the warehouse. Once Florence arrives to watch Ana, I’ll meet you there and that’s when the fun begins.”

“Perfect. I’m looking forward to it.” Red smiled as he leaned back in his chair.

Today was the day we would bring my girl home.



CHAPTER
TWENTY-SEVEN
Anastacia

CHAD DIDN'T ANSWER ME WHEN I BEGGED HIM TO TAKE ME home.

“Chad, take me home... please,” I pleaded again, my voice cracking with each word.

“No can do, I'm afraid.” He smiled, and I felt sick.

“What do you mean?!” His fingers twisted into my skin as it burned beneath his touch almost instantly. “Chad, you're hurting me!”

“That wasn't my intention. I apologise.”

“Great! So, let go!” I snapped as I struggled in his grip.

“Ana, you're making it worse!” He slammed his forehead against mine, hard enough for me to stop thrashing. “I'm not taking you home, nobody is coming for you either.” He laughed with a proud look painted on his face. “It's you and me from here on out.” He smirked as he brought his face to mine. I could feel his breath on my lips, and it took all I had not to vomit. “Anastacia, you are mine, not his.” He went to kiss me, but there was only one man I'd allow to claim my lips. I turned my head abruptly as he pecked my cheek.

“I don't want you, I never have, and I never will. My heart belongs to him. I'll never be yours,” I roared, my saliva landing below his eye.

“Yes, you will! I saved you from that monster, you ungrateful bitch!” He shoved me sideways as my head bounced off the concrete. “You could have loved me like I

loved you!” Next came swift boot to my ribs as I tried to protect myself, but it was no use.

“You claim to love me, but you’ve got a funny way of showing it!” I forced myself to stand up; I wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of letting him see I was too hurt to fight back.

“I do love you! I’ve loved you my whole fucking life! And I felt how much you loved me until he came along!” His hand strayed to caress the open gash on my temple.

“I never loved you like that; I loved you as a friend, there’s a difference.” He fisted my hair and the pain radiated on my scalp.

“Lorenzo can burn the world for you, but he will never love you like I can.”

“He doesn’t hurt me like you. He never has.” I yanked my head away, but he kept his hold firm. “Leave me the fuck alone, you psychotic bastard!”

“I’ll never leave you alone, angel. I bided my time. I watched you. I waited until I knew we had the perfect opportunity, and of course, I knew what time you were landing, what route you’d take, and that Lorenzo would be driving.” He smirked as his hand gripped my throat. “I paid some poor bastard to run you off the road, Lorenzo took great pleasure in ending his life according to your father. I’m still in the clear and it feels fan-fucking-tastic.” He laughed as his grubby hands made my skin crawl.

“Lorenzo will never give up on me. He doesn’t have it in him to give up on me, on us!” I choked; tears brimmed my eyes as his fingers tightened.

“We’ve covered our tracks well. They don’t have a clue. Just imagine two powerful leaders can’t find their most prized possession, it must be excruciating.”

“Oh, fuck off, Chad. Your voice is the most painful thing I’ve experienced whilst I’ve been locked in here.” I laughed, and honestly, I couldn’t care less. “You’re just as bad as those fuckers outside.”

He finally stepped away from me as he rubbed his forehead. His eyes roamed over every single inch of my body once more and it finally dawned on him the state I was in, the bruises that marked my skin, the welts on my wrist, the darkness beneath my eyes and the chapped skin on my lips from dehydration.

“Fuck! Ana, I’m sorry.” He stepped towards me sheepishly, I matched his steps in the same direction, I kept going until my knees hit the metal bedframe.

“Stay away from me! You were supposed to be my friend. I stuck up for you! Every single time Lorenzo had his doubts about you, I shut them down, and what did you go and do?! You proved him right. I should have listened to him, but I never thought you were capable of deceiving me and my family,” I shouted so loud he flinched; he always hated when I lost my temper, and as it seemed, he hadn’t changed. “Who the fuck are those brutes you hired to keep me locked in here like a damn animal?”

“Don’t.” He looked towards the door, and I didn’t understand how he could do a complete one-eighty in less than a minute and all because I raised my voice.

“Tell me. You owe me that much!”

“They were your father’s men, the ones he banished because they failed to do their job of watching you.” His dull emerald eyes met mine, and it finally hit me where I recognised them from.

They were the ones I gave the slip many times to sneak out, the ones who didn’t stand a chance against my father when he was angry.

“So, you just happened to create your own team to help you rip me away from the people that love me the most? Let me guess, you wanted me, they wanted revenge on my father, so you joined forces. How fucking original.” I rolled my eyes.

“It’s not funny! Stop laughing at me!” I could see how riled up he was, how I had chipped away at his confidence bit by bit.

“Why not? You’ve always been laughable, most would say pathetic, but again, I stood up for you. I was the one who held you on nights when you missed your parents. I begged my papa to take you in. I begged him to train you and mold you into the man you are today, or at least the man I thought you were, but the more I look at you, the more I despise you.”

“You’re wrong! You will love me. I will make you love me!” he spat, his anger worsened, it seemed he was on some kind of emotional rollercoaster.

“I’m getting bored now. Are we done here?” I flopped down onto the bed with a sigh.

“You’re never going home, when will you realise that?!” His eyes dropped down to the ring that sat pretty on my finger, the one thing that made me feel close to my husband. “Take that shit off.”

“You’ll have to pry them from my cold, dead fingers if you want them.” I fisted my hand tightly as his expression darkened.

“You won’t need them when you’re with me. Hand them over. Now!” he yelled, his spit flying across the distance between us.

“Fuck off.” I snarled.

His hand gripped my welted wrist as the chain slipped down my forearm just enough to reveal the open sores. Although I wanted to cry out in pain, I didn’t.

“If you want me to scream in pain, you’ll be waiting a long time.”

He raised his fist, and it collided with my eye socket. My ears vibrated as pain radiated through my head. I opened my mouth to speak, but no words came out.

I collapsed on the bed, still conscious but only just. He’d never been able to punch that hard, but I must have awoken something deep inside of him, something he’d kept hidden.

Suddenly despite the ringing in my ears, I heard a commotion through the closed door. I thought nothing of it

until I heard a few warning shots fired.

Have they come for me or is it just those brutes fucking around...

Silence...

The iron door flung open, and for a moment, I thought I'd dreamt it, or it was some sort of mirage until I heard the voice I'd longed to hear.

"I fucking warned you what would happen if you touched her." *He was real... he wasn't a fragment of my imagination.*

He'd come for me just like I knew he would.

I could barely see out of my left eye, but I knew he wasn't alone. I heard the familiar voice of my father as he entered the room.

"Lorenzo, get your wife. I'll take care of this two-faced fucker."

"Already on it," Lorenzo replied as my father rammed his gun into the back of Chad's head, knocking him out.

"Red, I need a hand." I saw a flash of Red as he rushed in, but he didn't grab Chad or help my father instantly like he was expected to; he froze the moment he saw me, and I knew then I must have looked like shit. "Now, Red!" my father ordered as he jumped back into action. They dragged Chad out of the room and the only ones left were me and my husband.

"I'm here, *amore*, I'm right here." I had never been so happy to hear his voice before. I could tell he didn't know how to touch me. I didn't even know if he wanted to. "I'm going to remove this chain and take you home." He ran his thumb gently across my swollen cheek as I sucked in a sharp breath. "Sorry, I'm so sorry."

"Take me home, please. I want to go home." I sobbed as tears trickled down my face and onto the stained sheets. "Please..." I could hear his heart breaking as he picked the lock of the chain, the relief I felt the moment it fell to the floor was indescribable.

“I’m going to lift you up, okay?” I nodded as strongly as I could as he scooped my limp body into his arms, and I instantly felt safe, enveloped in his embrace. I felt as if I was already home. “I thought you didn’t need a knight in shining armour?”

“Maybe just this once.” I tried to smile, but I couldn’t, it hurt too much. I rested my head on Lorenzo’s chest as I closed my eyes to the rhythmic sound of his heartbeat, and with each thud, I felt the darkness pull me in, and no matter how I tried to fight it, it was no use.

“Ana, don’t you dare shut your eyes. Do you hear me?!” I could hear him as clear as day.

Did I respond? No.

Could I? No.

“Anastacia! Please!” I heard his plea, the pain apparent in his voice. “Open those beautiful eyes, please.”



“*Amore*, can you hear me?” I could hear him, feel him, and I knew I had to open my eyes. I had to see him, but it felt as though I was being pulled under by a current, one I couldn’t escape, one that kept pulling me further and further away. “I really need you to open your eyes and look at me. I can’t take it anymore. I feel like I’m drowning without you, please.” I could feel his hand in mine, the softness of our bed and the familiar cotton t-shirt that covered my bruised body.

“How is she, Boss?” *I knew that voice, it was Red.*

“I just need her to open her eyes. I didn’t imagine it being like this, Red. I thought our reunion would be anything but this.” His voice cracked as if he was close to tears, but he couldn’t be, could he? “It’s been two days, why hasn’t she woken up yet?”

“She’s a fighter, her body is just exhausted, but she’ll wake up when she’s ready.”

“If you say so.” He sounded so defeated, so low.

“What’s going on in that head of yours?” Red quizzed when Lorenzo didn’t reply.

“It’s my fault she’s this way. I let them take her from that car. I let them do this to her.”

“Don’t start with that shit. I don’t want to hear it! There was nothing you could do; you’ve done all you could to find her and now that she’s home, she’ll need you to be strong for her and get her through this!” Red always seemed to be the voice of reason, and I adored him for it.

“How are the prisoners?”

“Untouched until you say otherwise.”

“The moment I know she’s okay and she’s awake, I will torture that motherfucker until he’s begging for his death. His screams will sound like music in my ears. I’ll wear his blood like a trophy, and I’ll rip him limb from limb after what he did to my Ana.”

“Have you thought about how you’re going to tell her?”
Tell me what?!

“No, I have no fucking clue. It’ll kill her.” *What will?*

It was torture, why couldn’t I just open my damn eyes, why did they feel as though they’d been glued shut?!

“You’ll work it out, you always do.” Red sounded hopeful.

“I don’t know about this time, but I don’t have a choice.”

Despite not wanting to, I drifted back into the land of sleep, dreaming of happier times.



“Good morning, *amore*, how about you open those pretty eyes for me today.” He was still here; he hadn’t left.

I didn’t know how long my body had been catching up on sleep, but it obviously needed the recovery time. Today was the day I would open my eyes. I could feel it the moment he entered the bedroom.

I slowly opened my eyes as they adjusted to the light that peeped through the drapes. Lorenzo had his hand in mine as he rested his forehead on my forearm carefully.

“Lo—” I managed, but my voice wouldn’t allow much else.

“*Amore*. You’re awake.” Tears fell from his eyes as his head snapped up, his eyes sunken and exhausted. “Oh, Ana, you have no idea how happy I am to see those fucking eyes!” I could tell he wanted to touch my face or hold me, but he didn’t know how. “I need to get your parents and Miles.”

“Stop,” I croaked. “Don’t go yet.”

“I’m not going anywhere.” He sat on the edge of the bed. “I’m right here.”

“Thank you for saving me.” I cupped his face which took every ounce of energy I had. He nuzzled his cheek into my palm as he supported my hand with his own.

“I would have gone to hell and back, to the ends of the earth, fuck, I would have burned it all down to find you.” He kissed my palm as his thumb caressed the bruises on my wrist. “What did they do to you?”

“Nothing.”

“Ana, I know that’s not true, please.” He carefully turned my face back towards him. “I need to know; I’ll make each and every one of them pay. I promise you.”

“I don’t want you to look at me different.” A tear escaped my eye as it streaked down my temple into my hair.

“Ana....”

“Okay...” I took a couple of deep breaths before I opened up to my husband. “It was fine at first. Someone would bring me food, then leave.”

“And then?”

“Then I’d had enough. I provoked them, each and every one and as you can see, they didn’t take kindly to it.” I wiped away the tears that wouldn’t stop as Lorenzo looked just as heartbroken as me. “I was beaten, force fed, locked up like an animal, and the moment Chad came, I thought I was saved, I thought he would have taken me home.” I sobbed. “But he said I’d never come home again; he told me he’d make me love him.”

“I’m going to kill him!” Lorenzo jumped to his feet.

“Lorenzo, please stay,” I begged as I tried to sit up, but it was no use.

“Your mother is downstairs; she’ll keep you company.” He turned to face me. “I will take your revenge on each and every one of them. What they did to you is just a dent in what I’m about to do to them.” He kissed my forehead lightly before he stalked towards the door. “I love you, Ana.”

“I love you too,” I whispered.



Not only did my mother rush into the room but so did Loreta, Robin and Tay. The only one to not sit beside me was my grandmother. I needed to see her the moment I was strong enough, she must have been worried.

“I can’t believe that two-faced, backstabbing snake. Lorenzo has big plans for him.” Tay’s sinister smile freaked me out.

“Let’s not talk about what happened anymore. He fooled us all and doesn’t deserve to be spoken about, no matter how

badly.” My mother stroked my hair as Carmella entered the room with a tray full of different foods.

“It’s so nice to have you back, Ana, we missed you.” She placed a bowl of porridge on the bed. Flashbacks flickered in my mind as I squeezed my eyes shut.

“Ana, is everything okay?!” my mother asked worriedly.

“Can you take the porridge away, please?”

“Of course.” Carmella removed it from the tray before I opened my eyes to watch her place it outside the bedroom door. “I’m sorry, I didn’t know what you’d want.”

“It’s okay, it doesn’t matter.” I smiled, but deep down, I was trying to work out a way to stop being so silly over something so small.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Robin clutched my hand as her warm eyes met mine. She knew something was wrong, she could read me like a book.

“Lorenzo mentioned something in passing to your father. He was livid.” My mother stroked my cheek as I felt all eyes on me.

“I was terrified; I hid it like Papa taught me, but I was so scared, Mama.”

“I’m so sorry, baby.” My mother held me tightly.

“He declared his love to me. He said he would make me love him, but how can you act this way to someone you supposedly love?”

“Because he’s a dick,” Tay muttered from beneath the huddle.

“I think that’s something we can all agree on,” Loreta spoke. “He deserves everything they plan on doing to him.”

“How about we put on your favourite movie? Try and forget about him, he doesn’t exist to you anymore.” My mother flicked on the TV, and everyone got into a comfortable position on the bed.

But was it easy to say he didn't exist when his murderous eyes haunted my dreams?



CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Lorenzo

THE DRIVE TO THE WAREHOUSE WASN'T A PLEASANT ONE. I was beyond murderous at what they'd put Ana through. He told her he loved her, well, if he did, he had a funny way of showing it. He was obsessed with her, and I knew he was the moment we met. I couldn't wait to hear him beg, make him cry like a fucking baby for what he'd put her through. If I had the power I'd kill him, resurrect him, then maim him again until I was satisfied.

I kept reliving the day I barged into that room and saw her lying there in and out of consciousness, her face bloody and swollen, her hair matted with even more blood, her arm chained to the bed as it probably had been since she'd got there, and the bruises. Fuck, the bruises that decorated her body was unlike anything I'd imagined. It was a sight I hoped to never see again. I saw him standing over her, his fist still tightly clenched by his side, his knuckles split, and no sign of remorse on his face. The only time his expression rapidly changed was when he saw us, and he knew he was fucked. The four guys in the lounge of the abandoned house were easy targets, considering they were once Victor's men it was amusing how easily they'd rolled over. Emmet and Gino fired a bullet in one of their knees before loading them into the van Nicolo drove up from the road.

I couldn't wait to get my hands on that vile bastard. Victor wanted to teach him a lesson too and of course I'd allow it, but I'd deliver his death. I wanted to be the one who watched the life drain from his beady little eyes, I wanted my face to be the last one he ever saw.

"How is she?" my father asked from the passenger seat.

“Honestly, I don’t know.” I gripped the steering wheel tighter as I imagined it was Chad’s neck rather than a piece of leather.

“What do you mean?” He sounded surprised and he had every right to because the moment she woke up and I knew I had her back was the moment I wanted to kill him.

“She told me what happened, and I knew I couldn’t be there anymore, I needed to...” I took a deep breath, and he knew what was racing through my mind.

“Listen, son, I know you want to make him pay for what he did to her, but she needs you right now.” He placed his hand on my shoulder before he continued. “Turn the car around. He can wait a few more days.”

“But I can’t. I want him gone. I want to return home to Ana and tell her how she doesn’t have to worry about him anymore, how she doesn’t have to be scared of him ever getting to her again. Is that so wrong of me?”

“I didn’t say it was wrong of you for wanting to take revenge for your wife. I will never ever say that, but I just think she needs her husband right now. She has the girls including her mother and yours, but they aren’t you.” He squeezed my shoulder, and I knew he was right.

“How can I look her in the eye when what happened to her was my fault?”

“Pull the fucking car over now!” His tone was stern and demanding.

I pulled over onto the grass verge and shut off the engine. My father got out of the car and ordered me to do the same. I had no idea what the reason of this was, but it was better to go along with things you didn’t want to sometimes, something I’d learnt from Ana.

“How the fuck was what happened to Ana your fault?! Please enlighten me because I’m confused!” He slammed his hand on the hood of the car.

“You wouldn’t understand.”

“Then fucking explain it to me!” He grabbed my shoulders as if he wanted to shake some sense into me.

“I could have tried harder to control that car, I could have fought harder to stay awake, to hold onto her when she was ripped from me. But I couldn’t. I feel like a damn failure and whenever I look at her, when I see the bruises, I’m scared to touch her, scared to hold her in case I hurt her!” My head fell back on my shoulders, and I tried to keep my emotions in check.

“You can’t think like that because it will eat away at you, maybe not all at once, but slowly overtime, it’ll break you down and that isn’t what she needs nor is it what you need. You need each other.” He gripped my face in his hands. “Go home to her. We will deal with Chad tomorrow.” It wasn’t an ask; it was an order, and it was one I wouldn’t obey no matter how much he begged me to.

“No. Let’s go.” I snatched my face from his grip before I returned to the driver’s seat. “You can either get in and join me or I’ll leave you stranded here until I return. Your choice.” I strummed my fingers on the steering wheel as my father returned to his seat. “Finally,” I huffed as I revved the engine before speeding off down the straight but narrow road towards the warehouse.

Everyone was there when we arrived, including Victor and Miles. Victor’s eyes landed on my father with a surprised look, and I shot him a mind your own fucking business one right back.

“How’s my daughter?” he snapped.

“Your wife is with her now. Why don’t you call and ask?” I spat back as I made my way to the room Chad was being held in.

“I have done, and guess what, my daughter is asking for her husband, fuck knows why since he’d much rather be here than with her.”

“Fuck you.” I seethed. “Are you telling me that if that was Florence, you wouldn’t want to skin the man alive?”

“This isn’t about me! It’s about you. Do you know she broke down to the girls, to her mother, and yours? No, of course not, because you’re not there. You don’t care.” That was the last straw.

I charged at Victor, but he didn’t move. My fist struck his right jaw and it felt as though I’d pummeled concrete for hours on end.

“Lorenzo, that’s enough. Anastacia wouldn’t want this, and you know it!” My father pulled me away from Victor who cracked his jaw with a scoff.

“Get the fuck off me! I’m going to end that fucker’s life, then I’ll celebrate it with a drink, whoever wants to join me, you’re welcome and the ones that don’t, well, you’re welcome to go fuck yourselves.” I couldn’t understand the shit that flew out of my mouth, I couldn’t stop, and the worst thing was, I didn’t want to.

I pushed my father off me as I carried on my way to Chad’s room. I heard my father apologising for me and I hated it. I didn’t need anyone to apologise for me.

“Don’t apologise for me, I’m not a child,” I snapped without looking back.

“Then stop fucking acting like one,” my father roared back at me, but I blocked him out. I blocked them all out. My focus was on one person and one person only... *Chad*.

“Lorenzo, what’s going on?” Gino asked as he pulled me to the side. “Let’s go out back.” He shoved me out the back door onto the dirt track at the rear of our warehouse.

“Nothing is going on; I have shit to do.” I turned my back to him.

“Don’t do that. It’s not the time to have a fucking pity party.” He gripped my arm and spun me around to face him.

“I’m not throwing a pity party. You can’t imagine the shit that’s going on in my head.”

“Of course we don’t. And why do you think that is? Oh, I know, because you don’t fucking talk to us.” He lit a cigarette

and brought it to his lips, taking a deep, long drag.

“Have you seen her?!”

“Who? Ana?” His eyes narrowed. “Of course I have, we all did as you carried her like a child out of that building. That sight was enough to fuck up anyone. But you cannot go blaming yourself for that.” He passed me the cigarette which instantly soothed the anger that bubbled beneath the surface. “She’s home, she’s safe, isn’t that all that matters?”

“I need to go.”

“Home?” he asked.

“No, to pay a certain lover boy a visit.” I flicked the smoking cigarette on the dirt as I made my way back inside.



“Good morning, lover boy.”

I entered the room where Chad hung by his wrists from the ceiling. The stench was enough to knock even the strongest of stomachs sick, a mixture of piss, vomit and tears.

“Fuck off!” he spat, the dribble sticking to his chin.

“Ah, and here I was, thinking you’d be begging for your life.” I laughed. “But seeing you try to fight back has added a little excitement, a little spice, and I fucking love it.” The maniacal laugh left my body as his mask slipped to reveal his shit-scared expression.

“I didn’t touch her!” he cried.

“That’s funny because I could have sworn, I saw you standing over her, clenched fist as she slipped in and out of consciousness. Don’t fucking lie to me, Chaddy boy.” I shrugged off my jacket and threw it over the chair in the corner. “I don’t like liars, and by the looks of things, you’re a very good one.”

“She’s too good for you!” He thrashed against his restraints as I stood back and watched him exhaust himself slowly.

“Oh, and I suppose she’s perfect for you, is she?” I strummed my fingers against my chin. “Let’s play a game, shall we?”

“Fuck you!”

“Oh, goody, you want to play.” I smirked as I cocked my head to side. His petrified gaze met my demonic one. “First question... how can you allow men, as well as yourself, to beat the woman you supposedly love?”

“I didn’t expect them to do that to her. She provoked them. They lost their temper just like I did when she belittled me,” he squealed.

“Okay, squealer, calm down, it’s too early for a headache and if you survive what I’ve got planned for you, we’ll be here a while.”

“I know you’re going to kill me, so get on with it.” He roared.

“That’s no fun, don’t rain on my parade.” I slapped my palms together as the door opened behind me.

“Room for one more?” Victor asked.

“Always.” Looked like I was forgiven for my outburst.

“Don’t forget us,” Red chimed in as he, Emmet, Nicolo, Miles, and Gino entered the room.

“What is this? Some sort of party?” Chad tried to crack a joke, how cute.

“If you want it to be,” Red teased. “You can be the human piñata.” He laughed.

“That’s not a bad idea, Red. Good shout.” I winked. “But I get the first whack, see what candy falls out.”

I retrieved the steel bat that Red was spinning in his hand. Chad’s eyes widened, and he knew he was fucked, and I loved it.

“You see, lover boy, we don’t play for candy. We play for body parts, but we realised if we called it candy, it’d sound less scary for someone like you,” I teased as I ran the end of the bat down his torso all the way to his shriveled-up dick.

“Get fucked.” He spat, his nasty residue landed on my shirt.

“I plan to once I’m done with you.” I smirked. “Now, where shall I aim for first?” I placed the bat to his temple. “How about here, make that pea-sized brain rattle for having my wife embedded in it.” I lowered the tip to his eye socket. “Or perhaps here, your beady little eyes for how many times they’ve admired what’s mine.” I continued to lower the bat down to his lips and tapped it gently against them. “Or maybe here, your smart-ass mouth for how many times you’ve spoken to her.” I trailed the bat up his arm to his fingers. “Or how about here, these grubby fingers of yours for the number of times you’ve touched her.” I tormented his body as I lowered the bat to his dick. “Or even better, here, your cocktail sausage-sized dick for how many times you’ve jerked it while you thought about my Anastacia.” I stood back and tapped the bat against my palm. “What do you think, boys?” I asked.

“Well, you gave us some good choices there, son, have at it,” Victor spoke from behind my left shoulder.

“I love those choices! I couldn’t have picked better myself!” Red said.

“Wow, thanks for the compliment, Red, it means a lot coming from you,” I teased as I saw the anger oozing from Chad’s pores.

“Just get it over with!” His voice broke mid-sentence, and I knew he was scared.

I whipped the bat through the air as the sound was perfection as was the crack of from his ribs. The yelp of pain only spurred me on. I thrived off every squeak, every cry, every yelp.

“Fuck!”

“That’s it, lover boy, enjoy the pain cause it’s the first part of a very long day.” I chuckled as with one swift swing, I broke the other side of his rib cage.

“Open his shirt,” Victor ordered, and I obeyed. I ripped open the vomit-stained shirt to reveal the tattoo he was branded with the moment he was accepted into the Bratva. “I’m going to need a blowtorch now.”

“Already on it.” Miles tossed his father a blowtorch from the table. Victor’s face lit up as much as the flames did.

“Victor, please! I’m sorry!” Chad pleaded. “I didn’t mean —”

“Didn’t mean what? Laying a finger on my daughter? Betraying our trust? Rallying men I banished for your own gain?! The list is fucking endless, and you know it! Shall I continue?”

“No! Please! I’m sorry!”

“It’s too fucking late. It means nothing to me, to any of us.” He flicked the blowtorch on and off as Chad’s gaze watched the flame wildly.

“I didn’t know they would treat her the way they did! I gave them orders, and they went rogue.”

“They fucking force-fed her, and practically starved her after that! They beat my flower!” Victor roared as he stepped towards Chad who thrashed and fought against the metal. “Do you think they gave a shit about her? I banished them and you gave them the perfect opportunity to get their revenge, but you didn’t see it that way, did you?” The flame was alight now and inches away from Chad’s skin. “I took their lives for what they did to her, and I’m going to watch as Lorenzo takes yours.”

The air filled with the stench of burning flesh as Victor removed the tattoo that tied Chad to the Bratva. The tears streamed from his eyes as the clattering from the chains could have woken the dead. His body shook profusely beneath the flame, and it was like we were watching an award-winning movie but in slow motion. His skin sizzled, and his body was a

mess after Victor had finished with him. His vomit covered the floor around him.

I slipped my knife from my pocket as I rounded his body slowly. I pierced it through his back, to the side of his spine as his cries echoed the room. Blood trickled down his back onto his pants as I plunged my knife into his side. I looked up at my men as they watched on with pride in their eyes.

“Now, I thought about cutting out your tongue, but then not hearing you scream is no fun for me or them really, and I feel we deserve to hear them.” I stabbed him once more in the back. “How does it feel to be stabbed in the back, you sniveling little cunt.”

“Ana is mine! She always has been!” This guy was getting on my last nerve.

“Ana will never be yours! What the fuck would she want with a rotting corpse?!” I ran my blade up his arm to his pinky as I gripped it between my fingers. The blade sliced through skin, flesh, and bone, before I discarded it onto the floor.

“She’s always loved me! She just didn’t give us time.” He screamed through the pain.

I moved across to his wedding finger, not that he’d need it where he was going. I repeated the same process as I did on his pinky.

“Did you tell her?! Did you tell her about your mother, Victor?” Chad spat, and even through the pain, he tried to be a cocky bastard.

“That’s none of your business!”

“She doesn’t know, does she? Wow, keeping secrets now.” He laughed as blood trickled down his chin.

“Shut the fuck up!” Gino restrained a livid Victor as Miles toyed with the knife in his hand.

“Tell me, Lorenzo, is fucking Ana’s tight pussy as good as I always imagined it would be?”

“You sick bastard.” Miles wasted no time in splitting his face in a self-made Cheshire cat smile. He couldn’t even

scream since Red had taken control of his moving head. He gripped it so tight; it looked fit to burst.

“Not fucking smiling now, are you?” Miles held out Chad’s tongue and cleaned off the blood that covered his knife.

“There’s a special place in hell reserved for you.” I squeezed his wounded cheeks together, his lips pursed in pain. “Now, beg me to kill you.”

“I-I’ll n-n-never.” He trembled as he just about got his words out through my grasp.

“That’s a shame, Nicolo, do you want to give him a little incentive?”

Without another word, Nicolo lunged for Chad as he gripped my bat in his hand. I saw it briefly flash through the air before it knocked out most of Chad’s teeth. They scattered on the floor like tic-tacs, as he hung there pretty much toothless.

“Hey! Look, he is like a piñata! Welcome to the party, Nic.” Red clapped his hands as Victor laughed, obviously approving of the joke.

“Nobody, and I repeat, nobody, disrespects Anastacia like that!” I didn’t expect that from Nicolo, but I was so damn proud.

Chad’s head hung limp as blood seeped from all parts of him.

“Is everyone satisfied?” I asked before bringing my blade to Chad’s neck.

“No, I’m not,” Emmet said from the corner. He rose from his seat before he reached into his bag to reveal a small plastic lunchbox. “He deserves to go through what Ana went through and we can’t kill him until then.”

“The floor is yours, just give me the green light when you’re done.” I settled into his chair as he called upon Red to pry Chad’s mouth open and Gino to hold his head back.

I knew what they planned to do, and I knew what was in that lunchbox, but Emmet didn't have a spoon, all he had was his knife which he used skillfully. He scooped up the exact same thing Ana was fed and let it fall into his mouth. Chad choked and gagged but Emmet made sure he didn't waste any. With each dollop he dropped in his mouth, he sliced his tongue with the sharpest part of his blade. His piercing screams were music to my ears as I watched Emmet get his revenge for Ana and I truly realised how much she meant to all the men in this room. The show he'd put on lasted a good twenty minutes until his arms fell at his side.

“Done,” Emmet declared.

It was time to end Chad once and for all.

“Time to die, lover boy.” I slapped his cheek. “Any last words?” I asked.

“Fu—” He was in too much pain to get anything out.

“Fuck me? How creative.” I rolled my eyes as I sliced his throat open. His head fell forwards, but I fisted his hair tightly, keeping it upright so he could watch us watch him as he took his final breath. We deserved it.

Finally, the light went out and he was gone.

For good.

“Who fancies a drink?” I asked as I turned to face the guys.

“I could do with one.” Victor raised his hand as a gesture.

“We'll clean up here and meet you, but I don't know how long we'll be. I feel like getting creative with this one.” Red smiled as he removed the chains that held Chad in place.

“Get as creative as you want.” I winked as I exited the room with Victor, Miles and Nicolo at my side.

“Did you have fun?” my father asked from the desk in the corner.

“You missed out,” Victor joked.

“Clearly.” He admired our bloody clothes. “Did you make him pay?”

“Painfully.” I smiled.

“I knew you would.” He stopped me in my tracks. “Are you going home?”

“We’re getting a drink,” I replied. “Are you coming?”

“Just one, then home,” he ordered.

“We’ll see.”



I returned home a little drunker than planned. One had turned into many since I wanted to wait for Red. We stumbled in, making more noise than we planned to.

“Shut the fuck up! Ana is sleeping,” I whispered.

“Look at the state of you all!” There it was... the angry voice of my mother. “And yes, she is asleep, but she won’t be if you carry on the way you are!” She stormed down the stairs and sent the three guys off to bed like naughty children.

“Good night, Mummy,” Red called from halfway up the stairs.

“Go to bed now!” she snapped as he swayed all the way to his room. “You too, Lorenzo.”

“Why are you still here?” I asked.

“Florence fell asleep. Victor and Miles picked her and the girls up ages ago. Where the fuck have you been?!”

“If you already know, then why are you asking?” That earned me a slap and one hard enough to sober my ass up. “Fucking hell! What was that for?!”

“That was for your attitude, the fact you’re as pissed as a fart, and that you left your wife alone for longer than expected!”

“Sorry. I’m as pissed as a what now?” I couldn’t hide my laughter any longer, this woman was hilarious.

“You know what Lorenzo, do what you want, but don’t come crying to me when she no longer wants to put up with your shit. Because carry on like this and she’ll walk away, I know I would if it were your father.”

“Well, luckily we aren’t you, are we.” I threw my keys onto the table behind her. “I’m going to bed.”

“Don’t you dare wake her,” she ordered as I stalked up the stairs.

“I’m not sleeping with her.”

“Lorenzo!” she called quietly, but I ignored her.

I headed to the room Ana once occupied before we were married and instantly fell asleep beneath the covers.

What was I doing?

Why had I come in here instead of our room?

Why was I finding it so hard to hold her?



CHAPTER
TWENTY-NINE
Anastacia

THE NEXT MORNING, I AWOKE ALONE. LORENZO'S SIDE OF THE bed hadn't been slept in, and I wondered if he even came home. I heard male laughter last night, but I was too tired to check it out, so I ignored it. I still felt sore all over, but I couldn't lay in bed any longer. I needed to take a walk around the house, maybe sit in the rose garden Lorenzo made me before the wedding. My stomach growled as I managed to gather what little strength I had and swung my feet over the edge of the bed, I wasn't even hungry, I just felt sick, I just wanted my husband.

I slowly made my way to the bathroom, each step I took hurt my body, it ached with each subtle movement. I didn't even know if I'd be able to manage a simple task like brushing my teeth, the pain already seemed too much. I clutched onto the sink as I tried to steady and compose myself. It was the first time I'd looked in the mirror for near enough two weeks and I looked like shit. My hair was filthy, my skin was dull and sunken, my eyes lacked the usual sparkle, and I looked frail. Different shades of yellow and purple decorated my skin, luckily Lorenzo's t-shirt drowned me more than usual and I knew that I needed to build my strength up again.

"Anastacia!" I heard the frantic voice of my husband as he burst into the bathroom. "What the fuck are you doing out of bed?!" He seemed angry, agitated, and I didn't know why.

Was it me?

Had I done something?

"I needed to use the toilet and brush my teeth, but I can't, it hurts." I hung my head in embarrassment.

Lorenzo let out a deep sigh as he pulled out the stool beneath the vanity, he guided me onto the awaiting seat. He proceeded to load my toothbrush with toothpaste. Surely, he wouldn't do that for me.

"Let me help you." He searched my eyes for a sign of acceptance, and I nodded softly. His hands were gentle as they cupped my face. I opened my mouth as much as I could from the bruising as he carefully and lovingly brushed my teeth. The look of concentration on his face was enough to cause my heart to somersault in my chest. "Is that okay?"

"Mhm."

Once he'd finished, he helped me rinse and use the toilet which wasn't something I was happy about, but he said I couldn't do it alone.

"Now, back to bed." He ordered, his voice a little too stern like I was an errant child.

"I need to wash my hair and I don't want to stay in bed anymore. I want to see you." I smiled.

"You have stitches in your head, so your hair will have to wait," he said. "I have work to do today. I don't know when I'll be home." He sounded as though he wanted to avoid me, as if he couldn't bear to look at me.

"Did I go to the hospital?"

"Our doctor came here the moment we got you home. He checked you over as best he could, but he said he'd be back once you woke up to give you another check over." He glanced at his watch. "I'll give him a call."

"I don't want you to leave today, can you stay?" I pleaded, but his face never changed.

"Ana, I have shipments that need dealing with. I can't." He went to touch me but instantly changed his mind.

"Why can't you touch me?" Tears pricked my eyes, and I didn't want to cry but I was an emotional wreck.

"Your parents are coming over today; they have something to talk to you about." Our eyes met but his were vacant, like

there was nothing and nobody there.

I couldn't stand here with him when he looked at me with sympathy anymore, like I was broken. I barged past him, and fuck, that hurt since he was built like a brick house. I fought against the pain as I made my way to the stairs, tears blurred my vision, I just wanted to be held, I wanted to feel safe, and right now I felt alone.

“Anastacia, go back to bed.” Although stern, his voice held a tinge of worry.

“No!”

“Why are you so fucking stubborn?!” I picked up pace despite the pain that stung my body. “Stop running, you're supposed to take it easy!” *And there was the irritation he'd been hiding.*

I came to a halt at the top of the stairs as they looked double the size they used to. I hated how I felt right now, I felt like I wasn't me at all, an outer body experience and not one I liked.

“Why can't you touch me?” I whispered as Lorenzo approached with caution.

“Anastacia...”

“Is it because I look like this? Do you see me as damaged now?” I let a tear fall as my heart was breaking. “They didn't touch me that way.” I sobbed.

“Anastacia, stop.” How could he be so harsh? I didn't understand, he couldn't wait to get me home, the girls had told me. But this whole situation wasn't how they made it sound or how I'd wished it to be.

“Just go. Leave.” I turned my head to the side, so he couldn't see how close I had been to breaking down. I expected him to pull me into his arms, hold me, say something, anything, but instead, he stepped around me and made his way down the stairs.

I saw Red, Emmet, Gino and Nicolo at the foot of the stairs, all their eyes glared into mine, showing that they'd

obviously heard Lorenzo's raised voice.

"Boss, what are you doing?" Emmet grabbed Lorenzo's arm, but it didn't matter what he did, Lorenzo had made up his mind, he didn't want to stay with me today.

"Get off me, Emmet." Emmet let go after a stern warning. "Anastacia's parents will be here shortly as will the doctor," Lorenzo informed them.

"You three with me, Nicolo you stay here with Anastacia." Lorenzo didn't once look round at me, he kept his gaze trained on the door and that was where it remained until he walked out of it.

I fell to the floor as I sobbed into my hands. I couldn't breathe. I felt as though someone was pressing against my windpipe, I was suffocating, and I didn't know what to do.

"Ana, look at me!" Nicolo was by my side in seconds, his arms wrapped around me and although they weren't Lorenzo's, they made me feel safe and that was all I wanted, all I needed. "Take deep breaths in and out." I mimicked his actions as I started to calm down. "That's it, just like that."

"I want him to hold me. I want him," I whispered as I choked back tears. "Why doesn't he want me?" My tears soaked Nicolo's shirt no matter how hard I tried to wipe them away.

"Oh, Ana, he does, he's just having a hard time coming to terms with what happened. He thinks it's his fault."

"But it wasn't. He couldn't have stopped what happened. I didn't blame him, not for a second." I searched Nicolo's face, and he knew I didn't blame his cousin.

"I know you don't but he's beating himself up. We've tried to drum it into him that it's not the case, but he won't listen." He gripped my hands in his. "Do you need a hand downstairs?"

"Please." Nicolo helped me off the floor as he carried me down the stairs just as Miles would have.

“Ana, are you okay?!” my father bellowed from the door. “Where’s Lorenzo?!” My mother was close behind him as she practically had to chase him down the way he bounded towards me.

“She’s fine, Victor, she just needed a hand getting down the stairs.” Nicolo smiled as he placed me down gently on the floor.

“Thank you, Nicolo.” My father shook his hand as he scooped me up in his arms like he used to when I was a little girl.

“Anytime, I’ll be down the hall if you need anything.” He directed that comment at me as he headed off towards the meeting room.

“I can walk to the lounge myself, you know?” I smiled as he looked down at me with worried eyes.

“I know, but why do you need to when I’m here?” He carried me into the lounge with my mother beside us. She was unusually quiet, and I couldn’t help but wonder why.

My father placed me carefully on the sofa as they sat either side of me, my father suddenly looked as though he carried the weight of the world on his shoulders.

“Papa, what’s going on?” My eyes flitted between them both.

“It’s your grandmother.” He sighed. He refused to look at me, he kept his eyes trained on my mother who reassured him with a supporting nod.

“I can’t wait to see her.” I smiled at the thought, but something deep down told me I shouldn’t have.

“That won’t be possible, flower, the day we saved you—” he exhaled shakily. “The day we saved you, was the day she left us.” Those words were the ones I dreaded, the ones I never wanted to hear, and although I knew I would have to hear them at some point, it didn’t make it any easier.

“You’re lying!” I whispered as my hand flew to my mouth.

“I wish we were, baby.” My mother squeezed my hand, but I ripped it away. *They had to be lying.*

I jumped up without thinking and ran to the coat cupboard. I pulled out any jacket I could find and shoved it over me.

I had to see her.

“Ana, flower, stop, please.” I gazed at my father and seeing the pain on his face finalised it for me, he wasn’t lying, neither of them were.

This was too much to take. My heart shattered as my knees buckled beneath me. I felt myself falling in slow motion until my father caught me. He wrapped his arms around me as the painful screams escaped me once again. It was one nightmare after the other and I couldn’t take another blow, not today anyway.

“Why didn’t you tell me yesterday, Mama?” I glanced over my father’s shoulder as we all sat huddled by the front door.

“You went through enough; we didn’t want to add to that.” She cupped my bruised cheek as he wrapped her other arm around the broad shoulders of my father. “How about I make us all some breakfast while you two head back to the lounge.”

“Come on, flower.” My papa helped me back into the lounge as I snuggled up to him on the sofa. He pulled the blanket over me.

“I’m sorry this happened when you weren’t here,” he apologised, and I knew it was harder for him than it was for me.

“I guess these things happen, Papa, it just hurts that I never got to say goodbye.” I sighed as the tears finally stopped.

“If it helps, I didn’t get to say goodbye either, it happened around the same time Lorenzo carried you out of that room.”

“I’m sorry, Papa, I’m sorry you weren’t there.” I looked up at him through wide eyes and he flashed me a heartwarming smile.

“It was a bittersweet day for me. I lost my mother, but I got to save my baby girl and I was where she would have

ordered me to be if she'd been awake." He kissed the top of my head.

"She was always the bossy one, wasn't she?"

"Your grandfather was a pussycat compared to her," he joked, and I knew that with time things would get easier as long as we all had one another.

"Papa, when's the... umm..."

"Everything is arranged. It's on Monday, if you feel up to it."

"This is our only chance to say goodbye. I will be there by your side papa." I squeezed his hand and I truly saw how vulnerable my father could be when he allowed himself to show it.

"As long as I have you, Miles, and your Mama, I'll be absolutely fine."

We stayed quiet for a few minutes, unsure of what to say until he was the one to break the silence.

"Where's Lorenzo?"

"He had to work, shipments he said, but who knows. Maybe he'll be downtown at the club." I shrugged my shoulders as I sat upright coming face-to-face with my father.

"He should be here with you, Ana." His face changed almost instantly as his brows knitted together in anger or disappointment. "You need him more than that shit does."

"I felt his love the moment I woke up, but after he found out how they treated me, he left and the next time I saw him was this morning." I sighed. "He could barely look at me, he looked through me. Do I look that bad?"

"You look as beautiful as always." He touched the bruise on my cheek. "Nothing will ever change that."

"Then why... you know what, it doesn't matter." I didn't fancy having a conversation like that with my father, so I dropped it instantly.

“I’m not sticking up for him on any level, but I know he’s finding it hard. Seeing you like this hurts him even if he doesn’t admit it. He doesn’t know how to deal with what he’s feeling right now because he’s never had to. But that man adores you. Give each other some time.”

I would never have thought my father would have been the voice of reason, but Lorenzo and I have both gone through something we never expected to, and I could only hope we would be able to get through them together.



Night had fallen already. The visit with the doctor went as well as it could have, he said I was healing well, and I was to call if I ever needed anything. My parents had demanded they stay with me while the doctor tended to me, which was fair enough, they wanted to be kept up to date on my progress. My mother wished I had been taken straight to hospital, but Lorenzo was adamant he only trusted his family doctor with me. Lorenzo hadn’t arrived home yet, none of the guys had. Nicolo tried his best to get in contact with my husband, but each call had been ignored. He ended up calling Red, who picked up instantly, he informed us that Lorenzo was wallowing in self-pity and he’d started to get sick and tired of it.

As much as I struggled to shower myself, it felt good as every droplet pattered on my back. I felt as if I was myself again. The doctor had even allowed me to wash my hair, but only if I was careful. Which I was. I didn’t have the energy to dry it, so I braided it as best I could, shoved on a pair of sweats and a tank. Which showed off more bruises than before, but I couldn’t care less, why did it have to be me that felt ashamed. *It wasn’t my fault. It was theirs and theirs alone.*

“Ana, what are you doing?” Nicolo came into the kitchen, giving me an unapproving look.

“I’m making dinner. I needed something to eat.” I stirred the sauce I had on the stove as he tutted in annoyance.

“That looks like a lot of food just for you.”

“I think I got carried away and made too much. I’ll leave it for the guys when they get back.” I smiled but I didn’t even know if they would be back tonight or if my husband would make an appearance.

“Do you need a hand?” he asked.

“I’ve pretty much done it now, thanks though.” I spooned some sauce over the pasta and slid a bowl over the island to Nicolo. “Enjoy.”

He kept me company as we ate so I wouldn’t feel so alone. I appreciated it, of course I did but I couldn’t help but wish it was Lorenzo sitting opposite me. He spoke a lot about his mother as I did about my grandmother.

“I couldn’t get her off the dancefloor at the wedding.” He laughed. “She wouldn’t let me sit down.”

“She had that effect on people.” He pulled out his phone to show me a video Red had taken of him and my grandmother dancing with one another, and I realised I would never get to see that smile again, but at the same time my heart swelled with happiness that I got to see her like this, enjoying life and bringing joy to others.

“That smells fucking incredible!” Red burst through the garage door. He shrugged off his leather jacket and threw it on the chair beside Nicolo. “I know you didn’t make that, Nic.”

“Damn right I didn’t, we have Ana to thank for this.” He smiled as he spooned the last bite into his mouth.

“Ana, shouldn’t you be in bed?” Red raised his brow as he piled the pasta in his bowl.

“I can’t stay in bed anymore, and besides, it’s just pasta.” I placed mine and Nicolo’s bowl in the dishwasher as I felt my husband’s presence instantly. My body stiffened as I wondered what he’d say or even if he’d say anything at all.

“Your wife made dinner,” Red said through a mouthful of food.

“I can see that, but shouldn’t she be in bed?” He sounded distant and it was safe to say that despite being out of the house all day he could’ve sounded more enthusiastic about being home.

“Why don’t you ask her for yourself instead of speaking about her like she isn’t here.” Red sat down at the table and waited for Lorenzo’s next move.

I closed the dishwasher as I turned to face him. His eyes fell to my bruises, especially the fingerprint ones that remained on my arm, his gaze travelled all the way down to the ones that were like a makeshift bracelet.

“I’m going to take a shower.” Once again, he disappeared quicker than he’d appeared and although my father tried to explain it earlier, it didn’t make it any easier.

“Lorenzo!” Nicolo called as he jumped up from the table.

“Not now!” he snapped. It was clear he couldn’t get away fast enough.

We all remained in silence for a moment, nobody spoke, nobody knew what to say and the second Gino and Emmet walked in they knew instantly that something wasn’t right.

“Glad to see you up, Ana, how are you feeling?” Emmet asked as he gave me a hug, something I hadn’t expected, but maybe it was clear how much I needed it.

“Fine, what’s done is done, I’m not letting it faze me. They don’t deserve it.”

“You don’t need to worry about them anymore. They got exactly what they deserved. We all made them pay, Lorenzo more so.” It was the first I’d heard of this, even my father hadn’t mentioned it but then again, we discussed other things this afternoon.

“Thank you. Enjoy your dinner, guys. I’m going to head outside for a bit.”

“Ana, wait, it’s getting cold out.” Gino eyed my attire and immediately handed me his jacket. “Take this.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“Ana, take the damn jacket.” I took it from his outstretched hand and pulled it on before heading towards the double doors that led me out towards the moonlit lake.

The soft leather drowned me as I walked bare foot through the grass towards the rose garden. Although it was dark, I hadn’t bothered switching on any lights, I didn’t need them tonight. I sat on the damp grass as I traced my finger over the plaque Lorenzo had placed for my grandfather. I would have to add one for my grandmother now too, that way they’d be beside one another here and in heaven. I liked to believe they found each other the moment she left us. She’d always say he’d be waiting for her, and I never doubted it.

“I hope you’re together again,” I whispered as the roses gradually lit up, row by row.

Lorenzo...

I tilted up head a little and noticed our bedroom was still in full darkness, but the room I once occupied wasn’t. He stood at the window, staring down at me. He wore a towel wrapped around his lower half and it was clear he had no intentions of staying with me tonight. No intentions of saying goodnight. No intentions of anything.

I would have preferred to be anywhere but here right now, but what would that say about me if I walked out.

I wanted and needed answers, and tonight, I had planned to get them.



CHAPTER THIRTY *Lorenzo*

I KNEW SHE WAS MAKING HER WAY UP HERE; I WATCHED HER movements carefully as she rose from the wet grass. It was obvious she was in pain, but she didn't let that faze her from getting what she wanted. I knew Gino had given her his jacket. I knew the guys would have shown her more love than I had done, but I was finding it so hard. I wanted to shower her in fucking love but there was something in my brain that stopped me. I never realised how hard it would be to see her in pain and covered in bruises, and how hard it would be to see her breathtaking face swollen. It broke me. The moment I entered that poky room they'd kept her in, I felt sick, seeing her lying on that brick of bed with Chad standing over her sent me rocketing over the edge. I knew he would pay for everything they put her through, they all would. Hell, they all did but that would never be enough, what I did for her would never be enough.

I was sick of everyone telling me to stop with the pity party, they didn't understand what it was like to see the one you loved that way. I understood they all adored her, but at the end of the day, she was my wife. I had fuck all to deal with today, I just couldn't be here, I couldn't look in her tear filled eyes and hold her like she wanted me to. I didn't want to make her cry. It was the last thing I ever wanted but I was at war with myself, and I didn't know how to prevent that, I didn't know how to wrap my head around everything.

I thought taking Chad's life would have made me feel better, but it only made a mere dent.

"I take it you'll be sleeping in here again tonight?" Anastacia spoke from the door. She'd removed Gino's jacket,

her bruises back on full display.

“Ana, please.” I pressed at my temples with my thumb and middle finger, hoping she’d drop it, but this was Anastacia, and I knew she wouldn’t.

“Please what? Drop it?!” she snapped. “Why should I?” She slammed the door as it rattled the frames on the walls.

“Ana!” I bit back, unable to hold back my anger and heartbreak.

“Don’t fucking Ana me! How long do you think it will take you to get over what happened?!”

I went to speak, to interrupt her, but she stopped me. I couldn’t remember the last time she was this angry.

“I get it. You had a hard time while I was away.”

“You weren’t fucking away. You were missing!” I screamed.

“Do you think it was easy for me? Do you think we were having tea parties and cosy chats in that ice box of a room?!”

“Of course I don’t!” I muttered.

“Then stop looking through me, stop treating me like a doll who’s about to break!” Her voice rose with each word, she really was her father’s daughter.

“You don’t understand.” I turned my back to her, and I hated myself for doing it.

“You’re right, I don’t understand.” She sighed. “Because you won’t stay long enough near me to explain it and I don’t know why. I don’t know how I can make it right. I don’t know what I can say for you to get it into your head that what happened wasn’t your fault.”

“You can’t say or do anything.” She couldn’t, this was something I needed to do alone as I always had done.

“Well, how about I give you space to figure it out.” She opened the door, and I knew she hadn’t left, yet. “I will be at my parents whenever you’re ready to be the Lorenzo I married and not the one I met.”

Was she really going to leave?

“Ana, don’t leave...” I pleaded; my eyes trained on the rose garden outside.

“You see that right there is where you just went wrong. I would have believed you wanted me to stay if you looked at me, but you didn’t.” I glanced over my shoulder as she stepped out of the room. “All I wanted was to feel your love, your touch, for you to hold me while I inhaled your scent, that’s what got me through every dark and lonely night, the fact that you’d find me, and I’d feel safe and home, but I don’t.” She waited for a moment until she realised I wouldn’t answer, then she left with nothing but the clothes she wore.

What the fuck was wrong with me?!

She deserved the world and what was I giving her?

Nothing...



The day of the funeral came around and I decided not to go. She didn’t need me there, not when she had her family beside her. The ones who had made her feel safe these last few days, the ones who had never let her down like I had.

As I entered the kitchen, I saw the four guys dressed in their best black suit, crisp white shirt, black tie, and freshly shined Oxfords.

“Where are you going?” I asked although *I already knew*.

“The same place you should be,” Red snapped as he straightened his suit jacket.

“Why aren’t you dressed?” Emmet asked as he eyed my attire.

“Because he’s not fucking going, that’s why.” Red was on fire today, his acid tongue having a great bloody time.

“Leave it, Red,” Gino advised, but I knew Red was right.

“No, I won’t leave it! I’m sick of leaving it!” He squared up to me, his finger jabbed into my chest and maybe before all this I would have broken it or worse but now I realised it was probably what I needed to hear no matter how much I hated it. “I’ve stayed quiet for too long, walked on fucking eggshells around you since the moment she came home, and it’s like you’re not even here!” He huffed.

“Red.”

“I’m not done, you’re going to shut up and listen to what I have to say whether you want to hear it or not. I drove her home the night she told me she wanted to leave, and I watched how strong she remained in the front seat although her heart was breaking. She went through shit, and you blame yourself for that and we get it, but acting this way isn’t going to make you feel any better. You’re pushing the one woman who can put up with you and your shit away and you seem to enjoy every damn second!”

“I fucking hate it!” I shoved him away from me with ease. “I should have got to her earlier, even if it was only thirty minutes. I would have saved her from some of the pain,” I cried. “I’ve never had to deal with this shit before and I know I’m cocking it up royally, but she’s the love of my life and—”

“Then show her, show her you’re there for her and will be until time allows.” Gino smiled. “She needs you just as you need her.” He looked at me with hope, but it faded quickly.

“Keep an eye on her today, she’ll need it.” I nodded as I watched the four of them leave through the garage door.

I knew they thought I was a prick or worse and I was, there was no denying that, and I wasn’t about to. I pulled my phone out of my pocket and flicked through our honeymoon photos. There were hundreds or more, and in every single one, we looked happy. So happy it would make many envious, even I envied us in those photos. I envied the carefree man I was on that trip. The one who showered her with love and affection, I didn’t even have to try to make her laugh, she did it anyway. I want nothing more than be that man again.

I longed to touch her, longed to kiss her, longed to hold her so fucking tight she'd have to beg me to let go, and she was right. I looked at her like she was about to break, and I should have known better than anyone she wasn't one to break easily. Even I didn't understand why I distanced myself from her, I couldn't comprehend why I did it.

But I knew what I had to do...

I had to shake this shit off and be the man she needed, wanted, and loved and I couldn't do that from here.

Thirty minutes later, I had showered, changed into near enough the same outfit the guys wore, and was almost at the church. I parked in the small gravel car park and made my way up the church steps to show Anastacia I was the only one she needed. The moment I quietly stepped inside, I was overwhelmed with how many people were actually seated before me, her friends, her family, and even a few of our closest alliances grandparents that knew her from when she was our age. But there was only one person I saw... *my wife*.

She wore a turtleneck fitted dress that stopped at her wrists and knees. Her usually bare legs were covered with dark stockings and a pair of black court shoes that added a few inches to her height. She looked elegant and graceful as she stepped up to the stand to recite whatever she held in her hand. Her hair fell around her shoulders as the light shone down on her, and she looked like an angel, and that was what she'd always been to me.

I stood watching her for a moment. I didn't want to interrupt her. I didn't want to throw her off. The moment she spoke, I realised how much I'd missed her, and I knew then and there I was ready to bring her home for good.

She recited the first paragraph of her poem perfectly, but the moment she reached the second verse, her voice broke little by little as I noticed the paper shaking between her trembling fingers. I couldn't stand here and watch her break down in front of all these people. *I wouldn't*. Victor rose from his seat to make his way to his daughter, but it wasn't his job today, *it was mine*. I ran towards her as her eyes met mine

instantly, and in that moment, all I saw was her, the way her lips parted, the way her eyes glistened with tears, and the way her face was clearly in shock to see me sprint towards her.

The second I reached her, I pulled her into my embrace, and it was the first time I had truly held her since she had been home, and fuck did I miss it.

“I’m here, I’m right here, *amore*,” I whispered into her hair.

“I thought you didn’t love me anymore.” She sobbed quietly enough to not be heard by the amount of people waiting.

“I’ll always love you, Ana, you’re my endgame.” And she was, she was my sunshine on a rainy day, she was my everything. “Do you want to continue?”

“Don’t leave me,” she pleaded as she gripped my hand.

“I wasn’t planning on it.” I wrapped my arms around her waist as she slowly composed herself to continue, making her grandmother proud.

I glimpsed at my father-in-law who looked like he wanted to shoot me right here, but I deserved it. I’d welcome a bullet for the way I’d treated her.

The rest of the service was beautiful, and Ana never allowed me to leave her side. Her hand remained in mine the entire time, even during the burial she wouldn’t let go, it was as though she thought I’d disappear, but I wouldn’t do that, not again.

Even though I was there, I wasn’t really, and I knew no matter how many times I’d apologise to her, it would never be enough.

“Are you joining us Lorenzo?” Victor asked through a pissed off expression.

“I was actually going to take Anastacia home.”

“Is that what you want?” He glanced at his daughter as he awaited her response.

“Lorenzo and I have to talk; it will be good to do it before everyone else gets back.” She smiled as she kissed Victor’s cheek.

He took his wife’s hand and led her to the car as Miles turned to look at me, his expression barely saying fuck all.

“Well, all I can say is it’s about damn time.” He slapped me on the shoulder as he winked at me. “If she forgives your shit, then you’re a luckier man than I am.”

“You’re plenty lucky enough, Miles Fedorov.” Loreta appeared right on cue to lead her husband away to the wake.

“Call me tomorrow. I love you, little sis.” He pulled Ana into a tight squeeze and my breath hitched in my throat at the thought of her being in any sort of pain.

“I love you too, Miles.”

“Shall we go, *amore?*” I asked as Miles finally let her go. He waved at us both and helped Loreta across the grass back to their car.

“Take me home.” She smiled, but it didn’t quite reach her eyes and I started to worry about what she really wanted to say when we got there.

Whatever she wanted to say, I’d shut up and listen for the first time in my life.



I’d vowed never to kneel to anyone but as I’ve said many times, Ana wasn’t just anyone. She was and always will be the love of my life, and the moment I closed the door behind us, I dropped to my knees before her.

“Lorenzo, please don’t.” She cupped my cheek, and I knew she still loved me. “I don’t need you to kneel for me.”

“I didn’t want to hurt you and the harder I tried not to the more I did. I just didn’t see it and for that I’m so fucking sorry.” I grabbed her hands in mine as our eyes fixated on one another. “I can’t lose you, Ana, you are and always will be the love of my life, is there any way you can forgive me?”

“Lorenzo—”

“I vow between us that I’ll spend my life making it up to you if you’ll let me.”

“Lorenzo...” she whispered, and hearing her say my name in such a gentle manner, washed away every bad memory, every asshole move I made and above all else, it soothed me. “There’s nothing to forgive. We both went through our own shit and it’s how we come out the other side that makes us who we are. That was just a bump in the road, a new emotion we unlocked, and a new fear we never knew we had.” She dropped to her knees as our noses touched.

“But you needed me, and I was a complete cunt to you.”

“I can’t deny that, and I won’t, but I’m here now as are you. So, we can either live in the past and let it break what we have and ruin what we have, or we can move on and live in the present and look forward to the future, together. The choice is yours.” There was no choice, I already knew.

“I want you for the rest of my life, I want everything with you, Ana.”

“And I want it with you.” She smiled as her lips brushed mine and fuck had I missed that. “Lorenzo...” Her voice trailed off as her fingers unknotted my tie with ease.

“Yes, love?”

“Fuck me,” she demanded in that seductive voice that made my cock twitch instantly.

“Ana, are you sure?” I asked, a little taken aback.

“I’ve never been surer. I need you to make everything okay. I need you and only you.”

And for the first time since our honeymoon, I kissed her, devoured her, claimed her, whatever the fuck you want to call

it, she was mine, and I made sure she knew it. I started to undo every single button that ran from her neck to her knee, it was tedious when all I wanted to do was rip the damn thing off.

“Don’t be gentle, please.” I didn’t know if what she was asking for was a good idea, but I wouldn’t deny her the only thing she’d asked. I ripped the dress open in one swift rip as her exposed breasts spilled out and I ached to touch them.

“Get on the bed, Anastacia.”

I observed and admired her as she sauntered over to the bed in nothing but lace-topped stockings and heels, and what a sight that was. She sat on the edge of the bed and parted her legs, seductively running her hands over her thighs to her knees and back again before stopping and working her clit through her deep purple lingerie.

“Are you trying to fucking kill me woman?” I was transfixed as she continued to pleasure herself.

“What good would you be to me if you were dead, Ricci?” she taunted as she curved her finger in a come here motion, as it was now my instinct to obey her.

I kissed and nibbled down her inner thigh to her ankle as I removed one heel and stocking before repeating the process on the other leg. I savoured every kiss I pressed on her body as I intended to worship every inch of her. I drew my knife from my pocket and slashed right through the waistband of her underwear, a gasp left her lips as the lace cut into her skin.

“Isn’t this what you wanted, Anastacia?” I murmured against her glistening pussy, her scent tantalizing.

“Y-yes.” Her chest already heaved as I slowly tormented her folds with my tongue; her moans were unforgettable.

“Tell me, what does my wife want?” I sucked on her clit as she screamed my name, a sound I’d missed but knew I’d hear for the rest of my life.

“I, Lorenzo—” She fisted my hair as I barely touched her; she was extremely sensitive, and I couldn’t wait to see the cum leak from her tight pussy.

“Tell me.” As I thrust my middle finger inside her, I blew cool air against her clit. “Do you want another one?”

“Please...” I entered another finger as she stretched around them instantly.

“I missed the feel of your pussy soaking my fingers.” I entered another as she clenched around me. Her clit practically throbbed beneath my tongue.

I sucked, licked, nipped, and continued to torment her as her hips bucked, her back arched, and she whimpered. I wanted to drag her to the brink and right back again. I didn't want her to come yet; I wanted to drain every ounce of pleasure from her and claim every second of it. As I lost myself in her pussy, I sank my fingers into her thigh, my tongue and fingers working in perfect unison.

“Fuck! Lorenzo! I'm—” I pulled my fingers from her as soon as I felt how close she was.

“Not yet, love; you'll come when I say, not before.”

“Please... let me come.” Her pleas were gentle but demanding, and who was I to deny her the one thing she desired.

I forced her legs even further apart and devoured every inch of her pussy, this is the sort of drowning I desired, not the shit I felt before, she was my heaven and hell all rolled into one.

“Show me what a dirty little slut my wife is and come for me.” I longed to taste her as I ate her pussy like a starving man. I could feel her temperature increasing as her chest rose violently. She fisted the covers, and I realised how close she was. “Come, now.”

And with those two words, she unravelled. I delved my tongue into her pussy to ensure I didn't waste a fucking drop of her.

“Oh, God!” she whimpered as she clawed at my shoulders.

“Not quite, baby, but thank you,” I teased as I picked up a stocking from the floor. “Give me your hands.” Her eyes

widened, and I understood why, but I wouldn't hurt her. "Do you trust me?"

"Always." She paused for a second, but after a quick battle with herself, she surrendered her wrists to me as I skillfully knotted the stocking around them.

"Good girl, keep your hands above your head and don't move them." The order was stern, and only time would tell if she complied. "I'm going to fuck you until you beg me to stop, and then I'm going to fill that greedy little pussy with my cum," I whispered as I threw her legs over my shoulders.

I wanted to see my cum leaking like a damn waterfall from her pussy. I wanted her to beg me to come for her, I wanted her to beg me to fill her. I slammed into her without warning as her piercing cry resonated throughout the room, her hands moving the second I entered her.

"Hands above your head!" I commanded as she obeyed, but this time she fisted the sheets to keep them from moving, something we both knew she couldn't do.

I fucked her like a man possessed, every single inch was inside her as she closed her eyes as she enjoyed the sensation.

"Open your eyes, I want to see them." They instantly flicked open as I gripped her throat tighter than usual. My eyes left hers briefly as I saw my name inked on her ribs, something I'd almost forgotten. "Who do you belong to?"

"You," she cried as I thrust into her harder with each one.

"That doesn't sound believable," I teased as I ripped my cock from her, making her gasp in disappointment. "Tell me."

"I belong to you... please..." she whimpered as she pushed her pussy up to meet the head of my cock. "Please..."

A sinister smile spread across my lips as I flipped her over no longer worried about the fact, I could have hurt her. Seeing her on all fours with her perfectly round ass in the air was enough to send me over the edge. I needed her like my next fucking breath, and I planned to take everything she'd give me.

I thrust my cock into her, near enough ripping her to shreds as she cried out, a cry I'd never heard before and it was anything but a bad one. "Are you okay?"

"Yes! Fuck me, please! Don't stop."

I knew the sensation she was feeling now was unlike any other she'd felt before. Her knees buckled beneath her, and with each breath she took, she tried to catch it quicker than the one before. I fucked her as if it were the last time but also the very first. Her pants and moans were the perfect fucking music, ones I'd happily play on repeat. She glanced over her shoulder as her eyes met mine, we were drawn to one another like magnets, and no matter the chaos, we always found each other. And if we couldn't we'd fucking die trying.

Come for me, she mouthed before she nibbled on her lower lip between her teeth. "Fill my pussy with your cum." There was nothing quiet about those words. She spoke confidently, and she didn't need to ask me twice.

I lost all control as I dug my fingers into her hips. I thought she'd wither beneath my touch, but she didn't. She rocked her hips to match my rhythm as I couldn't hold back anymore. I filled her sweet pussy like she begged me to, and after weeks of waiting, there was no other feeling like it.

"Are you okay?"

"Better than okay." She smiled as I reluctantly pulled out my cock from the warmth of her.

"I missed you." I leaned over her and pressed a kiss on her cheek.

"I'm here now and I don't plan on leaving you again, except to clean myself up and cook you something."

"That all sounds absolutely perfect except the part where you clean yourself up." I smirked as I pulled her into my arms and as always, she was the perfect fit, like a missing piece of a puzzle that was finally found and clicked into place. "Wear my shirt and nothing else, I want you to feel your husband's cum dripping down your legs while you're cooking for the same husband who filled you seconds ago."

She slid from the bed and covered her naked body with my shirt, and it was a disappointing sight but at the same time it wasn't.

“Come on, dear husband, let's make some dinner.”

“You go down, I'll be there in a minute,” She disappeared out of the room, and I finally felt as though a weight had been lifted, one I'd put there in the first place.

I dialled the number I needed and of course I was met by a smart-ass voice on the other end which was rare for Gino.

“You came to your senses, then?” Gino laughed.

“Eventually.” I sighed. “Listen, me and Ana need some time.”

“Say no more, we'll stay at the other house tonight, give you two some privacy.” I could tell he was smiling, and I was glad they no longer thought I was a dick.

“I appreciate it.”

“Has she forgiven you yet?” He quizzed and it was apparent he was a little unsure.

“She said there was nothing to forgive.” I didn't deserve her. I didn't think I ever would but she was mine anyway.

“She's a better person than I am. You really did hit the jackpot with her, mate,” he teased. “All jokes aside, we're happy for you, you both deserve the world.”

“Thanks, Gino, we'll see you tomorrow.” I hung up and hurried downstairs.

As I wandered into the kitchen, I saw her pondering about what to cook as she studied the contents of the fridge. It felt amazing to see her standing there again, her face lit up the moment she saw me. She had thrown her hair into a low ponytail as tendrils fell into her face.

“You know what I fancy?” I cocked my head to the side as she slammed the fridge door shut.

“Oh no, you don't. Keep those wandering hands to yourself,” she demanded, and I laughed at her. I couldn't help

it; her dominant attitude was cute.

“Anastacia Ricci, get your head out the gutter for five minutes.” I pulled her into my embrace as she pouted her plump lips. “I really fancy that pasta you made the other night.” It was true, that evening was the night she left, and I never came down from the room after that and I couldn’t lie it did smell incredible, I was just being a stubborn arsehole.

“Then that’s what we’ll have.” She smiled as she pecked my lips before getting to work.

“We have the house to ourselves this evening. The guys are staying out.”

“Did you banish them?” she teased.

“Something like that.” I wrapped my arms around her as she stirred the sauce in the pan. “That smells amazing, *amore*.” My shirt slipped down over her shoulder and she had never looked more beautiful, and I may say or think that every time but it was true.

“Thank you.” She turned her focus back on adding the final ingredients, and it was clear through her huffing that me being as close to her as I was made it harder, but I didn’t give a shit, I was enjoying this time with her.

“So, what are you doing next weekend?” she asked, her irritation gone.

“Working...” I didn’t actually have a clue what I was doing next weekend except the usual shit.

“Try again.”

“Fucking you?” She spun with a congratulatory smile on her face.

“There will be plenty of that if you agree to come with me.”

“There’s only one place I like to come...” I joked as I sat her on the counter. I invaded the space between her legs which was a bad move, since she was naked beneath that shirt.

“Lorenzo, be serious for a second, and you can come there too.” She traced her finger across my tattoo as I knew she was building up to ask me something. “My father has planned a ski trip to Austria for the family and that includes you.”

“Is that so he can push me off the highest fucking mountain?”

“Is that a yes?” She beamed and I realised I couldn’t say no to her no matter how much I’d rather not go.

“Yes, but only for you.” I kissed her gently as she melted into me almost instantly.

“I’ll be sure to reward you for putting up with my papa for the weekend.”

“Oh, I’m counting on it,” I whispered against her lips.

After she called her father to fill him in on the good news, the night was ours and we did absolutely fuck all except enjoy one another. We laughed, we joked, and we shut everything and everyone else out and to be honest, it was pure perfection.

She was home.

She was safe.

And we were okay.

That was all that mattered right now.





CHAPTER
THIRTY-ONE
Anastacia

WE ARRIVED IN HINTERTUX, AUSTRIA, A PLACE MY FATHER liked to ski at least once a year, preferably August time since the weather was perfect for him. He had reserved an over-the-top cabin which meant we all got to stay together, and Lorenzo wasn't best pleased about that, but he remained tight lipped on this one which I appreciated.

"Ana and Lorenzo, you're in the room beside us while Miles and Loreta are down the hall close to Franco and Carmella." My father smirked at Lorenzo, he knew exactly what he was doing.

"You'll just have to be quiet when I fuck you," I whispered as I elbowed Lorenzo playfully in the gut.

"What was that?" Papa asked.

"Oh, nothing, Lorenzo just asked if you're all ready to go out on the slopes." *Liar.*

"We planned on going out after we got changed. Are you coming with us, Lorenzo?" He smiled.

"I may give today a miss. Ana has been feeling a little under the weather the past week, so, I would rather stay with her." Lorenzo draped his arm over my shoulder, and it was true, the past few weeks I had felt a little off, but I put it down to the stress of what I went through and losing my grandmother.

"You can all go. I'm fine on my own, really," I urged Lorenzo to go with my family since all I wanted to do was snuggle up on the sofa by the fire with a hot chocolate.

“*Amore*, I’m staying.” That was an order if ever there was one.

“Come on, man, she’ll be all right here.” Miles smiled, but Lorenzo wasn’t convinced. “Get changed and let’s go. If you’re worried, you can come back here earlier.”

“You aren’t going to drop it, are you?” Lorenzo sighed.

“No, not at all.” Miles laughed as he went down the hall to change.

“Ana, would you like me to stay?” my mother asked from the kitchen.

“Honestly, I am okay alone, all of you need to stop worrying.” I headed off down the hall to our bedroom to unpack while Lorenzo followed on to change reluctantly.

“It’s not going to be the same without you.” He placed the case on the bed to make it easier for me.

“We will go tomorrow. I just want to relax and maybe read a little.”

“You sure you’re okay?” The look of concern on his face was extremely cute, but I wouldn’t tell him that.

“I promise, I’m fine.” I yawned as I handed Lorenzo his ski clothes.

“Are you still tired? You slept on me most of the way here.” He placed his four fingers flat on my forehead to check my temperature.

“I know it’s hard, but will you stop fussing. I’m fine.” I giggled as I swatted his hand away.

“Fine, but I’ll be an hour, tops.” He cupped my face with a look of adoration in his eyes. “Then we’ll go in the hot tub and have a little husband-wife time.”

“That sounds perfect.”



It had been a couple hours since they'd been out, and I was happy they were all obviously enjoying themselves. I had taken a walk to the on-site store to get some fresh air which seemed to ease the sickness I felt. I had actually enjoyed the peace and quiet while they were on the slopes, but I was sure it would be short lived the moment they returned.

I headed out the back of the cabin and watched the start of the sunset from between the snow-covered trees.

“There you are, I was worried when I couldn't find you.” Lorenzo's voice broke the silence the moment he stepped outside. “Why are you out here? It's freezing!”

“I was watching the sunset. Look at how beautiful it is.” The sky was mesmerising shades of pinks and oranges. It was completely stunning, and I could stand here and watch this every day for the rest of my life.

“Do you want to go back inside?” he asked, the snow crunched beneath his feet as he walked towards me.

“In a minute.” I smiled as I turned to face him. He had sprinkles of snow speckled throughout his hair.

“What's going on, Ana, are you sure you're all right?” He gripped my chin between his thumb and forefinger. “We can take the jet home, just say the word.”

“And leave our families stranded?!”

“I'd send it back for them, what do you take me for?!”

“Mhm, keeping my father out the way would please you no end, wouldn't it?” I teased as he picked me up effortlessly, his hands cupped my ass to keep me in place.

“Maybe just a little... but that fucker put us in the room next to his, so forgive me if I don't want to be his best friend.”

“It’s a few days. I’m sure you and your impatient cock can wait.” We both knew he couldn’t and wouldn’t.

“Just like your greedy little pussy can, then.”

“You’ll be begging for it before I will.” I raised my brow in a challenge, and I knew I would win, he always lost when it came to sex, his willpower was at an all-time low.

“Come on, let’s get you inside, our mothers are preparing something to eat.”

“Actually, there was something I needed to discuss with you.” He didn’t let me go, I remained in his arms as he gazed intently at my face, searching for a hint of what I was about to say.

“Are you happy with how we are?” I saw confusion set in as his brows knitted together.

“I wouldn’t wish for anything else; I love the life I share with you.” He held me tighter than I thought possible as he looked clearly worried.

“So, you wouldn’t want any single thing to change, even slightly?” This was fun... kind of.

“That depends on what that change might be, and honestly, you’re worrying me, and I don’t like it.”

“I want to put up a Christmas tree this year.” I smiled.

“I hate festive things at home. Do we have to?” He sighed.

“I mean, you should really start to get into the Christmas spirit since children like that kind of thing.” I smirked as I waited for his brain to absorb what I just said.

In three... two... one...

“Wait... are you trying to tell me what I think you are?!” For a man that used to hate to smile, he wore one so wide, his pearly whites were almost blinding.

“I’m pregnant.” Tears fell from my eyes and for the first time in a while they were tears of joy.

“When did you find out?!”

“About an hour ago. I was late, then I checked my dates, and it all made sense with how I’ve been feeling. I went to the on-site pharmacy and got a test just to see.” I cupped his face as his eyes welled with tears. “I’m sorry I didn’t find out with you.”

“I don’t care, Ana, I’m over the fucking moon! We’re going to have a baby!”

He was happier than I ever imagined he would be. His face was a picture of joy, and I loved seeing him this way. I much preferred this over the scowl he used to wear endlessly.

“No skiing for you tomorrow.” The protectiveness had already started, *how lovely*. “I’ll stay in with you, and you can take it easy.”

“Is it going to be like this for the next nine months?”

“Oh, abso-fucking-lutely.” He laughed as he spun me around in his arms and I was suddenly aware our families were watching us from the backdoor and probably wondered what on earth was going on.

“We have an audience.” I squealed with delight.

“I don’t care, I’m too fucking happy to care!” And it’s true he *really was*.

“Anastacia, Lorenzo, get back in here right now, you’ll catch your death out there!” Carmella had opened the door just enough to call us both inside.

“In a minute, Ma, can’t you see we’re having a moment?” Lorenzo called back.

“Children! Who’d have them?” she complained.

“We are,” he whispered against my lips before he claimed them instantly.

After we finally calmed down, we hurried inside into the warmth of the cabin where all eyes fell upon us.

“Why is my daughter crying?! What the fuck have you done now?!” My father jumped up from his seat ready to lose it.

“Calm down old man, don’t hurt yourself.” I teased and he absolutely hated it, but I loved it.

“I think I preferred it when you were miserable, I didn’t have to put up with whatever this is.” He sat back down, and Lorenzo looked at me with a hopeful face, I knew he wanted to tell everyone in this room, but I was worried to.

“I’m going to put my pyjamas on, I’ll be back.” I rushed down the corridor and I knew I wouldn’t be alone for long.

I stripped out of my oversized jumper dress as I rummaged in the drawer for my pajamas. I felt the draft of the corridor as Lorenzo entered just like I knew he would.

“*Amore*, what’s going on? You were so excited.” Lorenzo pulled the pyjamas from my hands and placed them on the bed. “Talk to me.”

“What if we share the news and something goes wrong?”

“Ana, you can’t think that way. We will get through everything together, including the birth of our baby.” His voice was incredibly soothing, and I was thankful he knew exactly what to say.

“We got pregnant on honeymoon...” I sighed.

“And you protected our diamond when I couldn’t, and I am so fucking proud of you.” He held my face in his hands as he tried to make me understand.

“But I didn’t know then, it was too early, otherwise I wouldn’t have provoked them the way I did.”

“Right, but you weren’t to know so, enough of this pity party. Let’s celebrate with our family and whatever happens, happens but I know everything will be fine.” He was right, and I hated to admit that. “You’re going to make an amazing mother, Anastacia Ricci.”

“I have no doubts in what a wonderful father you’ll make.” After I saw him with Jack once before, I knew he would make an incredible one.

“If we have a daughter, will you step down and hand everything to her?”

“Anastacia, son or daughter, it doesn’t matter, they are my heir, and I will hand over everything when the time comes. I won’t force them into a marriage for it either, no matter how amazing ours turned out to be.” He beamed as he sat me on the bed to help me into my pyjamas.

“It did turn out amazing, didn’t it?”

“Better than that, come on, let’s go.” He scooped me into his arms and carried me out of the room until the lounge and even then, he wouldn’t put me down.

“I don’t think you need to carry my flower around everywhere.” Victor rolled his eyes as he sipped his bourbon, he still hadn’t forgiven me for shutting Ana out when she came home and that’s understandable, I couldn’t blame him.

“I’ll be carrying her around a lot since she’s carrying something else.” Lorenzo smiled as nobody understood what he meant.

“What’s going on?” My mother and Carmella rounded the kitchen island.

Lorenzo placed me down on the floor gently as the family waited impatiently for what we were about to say next.

“We’re pregnant.” I squealed as Lorenzo’s hand rested on my small of my back while his other rested on my flat stomach until chaos took over.

“My baby’s having a baby!” My mother threw her arms around me as Carmella did the same to Lorenzo. “I’m so proud of you.” Her tears soaked my pyjama top, and I knew she was ecstatic. “Get over here, Victor!” She ordered and my father didn’t dare do anything other than obey.

“Congratulations, flower, you’ll make an outstanding mother.” He sounded happier than I’d ever heard him before.

“I learned from the best.” I lost myself in the hug.

“You sure you want to have a baby with him though?” my father teased, and I knew he was smiling without even looking.

“Yes, Papa, I’m sure.” I placed a gentle hand onto my non-existent bump as I firmly spoke.

“Uncle Miles has a ring to it, don’t you think?” Miles laughed as he joined in our embrace.

“I have a few other names for you,” my father teased, as we called Loreta over to join in.

“This calls for a toast!” Franco called from Lorenzo’s side, but he wasn’t there much longer since Lorenzo pulled me flush to his body. “It doesn’t seem five minutes ago since we signed on that dotted line to bring these two together and while we were adamant and confident it would work out; we also had our doubts but the two of you have squashed those doubts and we couldn’t be prouder of the pair of you and what the future holds for you and this new arrival. To Lorenzo and Anastacia!” Franco held up his tumbler as did everyone except me and Lorenzo.

“No drinks for you, sissy,” Miles teased as he stuck out his tongue like a child.

“That’s right, nor for me either,” Lorenzo chimed in.

“Bull shit!” Miles cried.

“Not bullshit, I want to support Ana throughout the pregnancy and if we go for dinner and she can’t drink then neither will I.” Lorenzo kissed my cheek tenderly, my skin burned beneath his lips.

“Congratulations to both of you. I always knew you’d win her heart, Lorenzo.” Loreta beamed as she nodded at him.

“I won a lot more than that.”

“You, Lorenzo Ricci, are truly one of a kind.” Loreta hurried off to see what Miles was doing leaving the two of us alone for a moment.

“It’s chaos in here.” I giggled.

“But isn’t this the best type of chaos?” Our families were overjoyed about us bringing a baby into the world. I don’t think I’d ever seen Lorenzo so happy, the smile he wore could easily be a permanent etch on his face.

“Indeed, it is.”

The rest of the evening, we ate, laughed, and everyone drank except for me and Lorenzo. Despite being told it was fine, he had already made up his mind and he'd vowed that until baby Ricci arrived no drop of alcohol would touch his lips.

“Thank you.” He pulled me onto his lap on the sofa as I relaxed into his touch, the tiredness setting in the instant I was enveloped in his embrace.

“For what?” I asked sleepily.

“For everything, for changing me in ways I could have only imagined before, for loving me and putting up with my shit, and of course, for giving me the best gift I'm sure I've ever been given.” He tucked a stray tendril behind my ear as his lips lingered near mine, the fear of once caring what others thought had disappeared and as always it felt as though it was just the pair of us in the room. “Anastacia Ricci, you are the love of my life, and without you I realised I was just a shell of a man and that's not one I wish to be anymore.”

“Take me to bed.”

“Are you tired amore?” he asked, his eyes searched mine for an answer.

“No, I want you to fuck me until morning.” I whispered against his lips; the warmth of his breath brushed mine the moment I ran my tongue along his lower lip.

“You'll have to be incredibly quiet; we wouldn't want anyone to hear the noises I hear when I fuck you.” He growled as his erection pressed against my ass.

“I guess you'll have to gag me then, won't you.”

“Sorry everyone, Anastacia isn't feeling great, we're going to head to bed.” He smiled as he'd already stood up with me still in his arms.

“Make sure you look after my daughter.” Papa narrowed his eyes and I think Lorenzo finally realised just how much of a grudge my father could hold.

“Oh, you don’t need to worry about that Victor. I plan to take very good care of her,” Lorenzo joked, and I could have died with embarrassment.

“Good.” Thankfully my papa didn’t think anything of Lorenzo’s comment unlike my mother who hid her sweet giggle.

Lorenzo carried me into the bedroom and from the moment the door closed he worshipped every inch of my body as I did his and when I told him to fuck me until morning, that’s exactly what he did... gagged, bound, and fucked... our new favourite way to play.



Months flew by and we had finally made it to the beginning of December. Although Lorenzo hated Christmas, he had taken me out to choose a tree, helped decorate it and made us hot chocolate for the afternoon. *It was absolutely perfect.* With February right around the corner everything was ready for the arrival and despite Lorenzo still having plenty of work to do, he made sure he was always home in the evening, the guys had stepped up for him as they understood he wanted to be there for me. I was fine alone but once Lorenzo made up his mind, there was no changing it.

“That looks magnificent.” I clapped with delight as we finally finished the tree.

“You did a fantastic job.” Lorenzo pecked my cheek as his hand rested on my ever-growing bump.

“Correction—we.”

“How are my babies this morning?” Lorenzo asked, his hand caressed my stomach gently.

Yes, that’s right... *babies.*

Lorenzo and I had been blessed with twins, which had come from Lorenzo's side of the family; his great grandfather was a twin, and it was something we had never expected or imagined, but after the initial shock, it was safe to say we were more than excited. I knew he was protective, but since finding out I was pregnant, he'd taken the whole protective thing to a whole new level. He wanted to carry me around the house despite me being able to walk just fine, he'd help me put my shoes on even though I'm still able, he had also started to let me fall asleep before him since it gave him the chance to speak to the babies about our love story. He would tell them that although it wasn't your average fairytale, it would always be his favourite.

It would always be mine too.

"Ana, are you okay? You zoned out." He immediately interrupted my thoughts.

"Sorry, I was just thinking. Other than fighting with one another endlessly, they're doing absolutely fine."

Lorenzo spun me around to face him the distance between us had grown with each passing day and it was a distance neither of us minded since our babies were now the ones in the middle.

"That's my boys."

"Boys? Don't be so sure." I raised my brow at his assumption; he was adamant it was two boys, but I wasn't too sure.

He wanted to find out, but I had wanted it to be a surprise and after pouting for long enough he caved as he always did.

"Holy fucking shit! That looks..." Red continued his sentenced with a chef's kiss gesture as I burst into a fit of laughter, Lorenzo on the other looked fit to burst, in three, two, one....

"Watch your language around the babies!" He snapped as I stood watching this hilarious overprotective man flip the switch to daddy mode.

“They aren’t even born yet.” Red rolled his eyes before he winked at me.

“They can still hear you!”

“Then they’re in for a treat with your vocabulary too.” Red laughed, and I had to admit this man could brighten up any dull day but not as Lorenzo does.

“Oh, fuck off, Red.”

“I knew you couldn’t do it.” He held out his hand to Lorenzo who looked at him like he’s sprouted another head almost instantly. “Dollar in the swear jar.”

“Fuck off, we don’t have a swear jar.”

“That’s another dollar, carry on like this and you’ll have college tuition without having to get your hands dirty with shipments and what not.” Red was a delight, that’s for a sure.

“Carry on like this and I’ll wring your neck.” I gripped Lorenzo’s chin to force his attention back to me.

“Ana, how do you put up with him and his shit?”

“Easily. I wouldn’t have it any other way. Now, stop winding him up,” I ordered as I glanced briefly at Red smirking in the doorway.

“You’re a saint, I couldn’t do it.”

“You already do, Red. I think you secretly enjoy it,” I joked as a smile played on Lorenzo’s lips.

“That’s debatable, he’s tolerable at best.”

“Do you enjoy living here, Red?” Lorenzo asked, his attention never once leaving me or the bump.

“You know I do... why?”

“Because you’ll be out on your ass if you carry on.”

“You couldn’t live without me, you adore me, you big softy.” Red laughed before he continued. “Anyway, I’m bored of this little back and forth banter now, me and the guys are going out to get the babies their welcome to the world gift.”

“You don’t know the sex yet, so how are you choosing a gift?” Lorenzo quizzed as we both automatically turned towards Red.

“We’re excited, leave us alone.” Red huffed as he turned to meet the others in the kitchen.

“We love you!” I called after him.

“And I love you, Ana. Lorenzo on the other hand, that’s another story.” He chuckled as Lorenzo tsked from beside me.

“Don’t hide your true feelings, Red!” Lorenzo joked as Red raised his hand in a ‘yeah, whatever’ action without turning around. “So, *amore*, what are your plans for the rest of the day?”

“I’m going to meet the girls for a bit and then relax in the bath.”

“I have some meetings down at the club and then how about I join you?”

“I don’t think there is as much room for the two of us like there was before.” It’s true, I needed more room now I was getting bigger and having Lorenzo in the bath frankly made it uncomfortable.

“Remind me why I got a small bath,” he prompted.

“Because you hated them, so why would you not have.” It’s safe to say, he loved them now.

“Can I drive you to meet the girls before my meeting? I’ll have Red pick you up and bring you home after. They’ll be done gift shopping by then.”

“I can drive myself, you know?” He knew but as I said, protective mode.

“Oh, I know but you’re not.” He smiled. “Are you ready to go?”

“Yes, I just need to grab my coat and shoes.” We headed to the coat closet as he helped me into my sneakers, lacing them tightly so I wouldn’t have to try to redo them later, he held

open the new coat he brought me for the winter months, one that fit perfectly around my bump and kept that warm too.

“You wait here, I’ll bring the car around.” He rushed out the garage door as I stepped out the front into the chilly afternoon air.

I was too tired to go out in all honesty, but I didn’t want to tell Lorenzo since I knew he would only make me stay home and rest. Me and the girls meet up at least twice a week, they usually come over but today we decided to head out to the spa together, they’d booked the pregnancy package for me, and I couldn’t be more excited, followed by food *it would be a perfect day*.

The moment Lorenzo pulled up I went to step down the stairs to meet him when he jumped out the car, a scowl marring his face.

“Don’t you dare walk down those steps alone!” he shouted as he rushed up to meet me.

“What? Why?” I couldn’t hide my surprise.

“Because they’re icy as fuck and I don’t want you to fall and hurt yourself.”

“That’s another dollar! These kids are going to be rolling in it,” I joked, which softened him a little. “Lorenzo, you need to stop worrying so much, I am being careful, I’m fine and the babies are fine.”

“I just want to protect you, it’s like I crave the need to protect you.” He sighed. “I can’t explain it, I just need it.” I knew why he needed to protect me, it plays on his mind daily although he assured me he’d gotten over the guilt from after the honeymoon, I knew it still played on his mind occasionally and this was his way of making up for that.

“Baby, it’s fine, I get it.” I ran my thumb across his striking cheekbone as his face relaxed instantly. “Carry me to the car.” I smiled as he scooped me up and carefully strode down the steps towards the car.

“I’ve put your heated seat on already.”

“What would I do without you?” He placed me down on the floor gently as he opened the car door.

“You’ll never have to find out amore, now in you get.” He smiled as I slid into the front seat, that smile was breath taking and one I didn’t think I’d ever get used to.



“Ah! Look at you!” Robin cooed as she cupped my bump now on full display in a bikini.

“I look...”

“Don’t you dare use anything negative in that sentence!” Tay ordered. “You look beautiful, and I cannot wait to meet these two!”

The moment these two discovered Lorenzo and I were expecting they’d been amazing, as I knew they would. Our children were incredibly lucky to have so many people who already loved them. Each time these two came round to the house they’d bring a gift of some sort, from a pack of diapers to a neutral outfit for each one of them. Even though they’d been told repeatedly not to, they still do and their reason... ‘because we want to.’

“So, pretty mama, you’re going to follow Carol and she’ll pamper you like you deserve, go and relax.” The girls shooed me away as they plotted something, I didn’t need to hear to know, their faces said it all.

Over the next few hours, I was pampered to within an inch of my life and of course, I didn’t complain once, it was heaven on earth and Carol knew exactly what she was doing.

“Thank you, Carol.” I wrapped my robe back around me as she returned my smile.

“You are most welcome, you’re positively glowing, congratulations!” She waved me off as I went to change before

meeting the girls in the restaurant which now included my mother, Carmella and Loreta.

“What’s going on?!” I asked, the shock evident.

“Happy baby shower!” Robin squealed; the restaurant was closed off to everyone except us.

“Guys, this is too much...” I burst into tears as I stood by the beautifully decorated table, everything was crisp white with subtle hints of pale yellow and green. Flowers adorned the table, as they’d placed balloons around the restaurant to match the colour theme, there was a flower arch made up of white flowers which the girls made me stand beneath to take a thousand pictures to capture the moment forever. Tay directed me over to the cake, which was too stunning to cut, I was in awe at what they’d done.

“That’s lemon cake, we know it’s yours and Lorenzo’s favourite.” Tay kissed my cheek. “We thought you’d take it home and enjoy it together.”

“Maybe eat it off one another.” Loreta winked.

“Loreta Ricci, this is a baby shower, stop being so crude.” Tay laughed; we all knew them two were more alike than they like to admit.

The room erupted in laughter as my mother made her way to me, Carmella followed as if they were joined at the hip.

“How are you feeling baby?”

“A little tired but I didn’t dare tell Lorenzo, he would have made me stay home.” I giggled and Carmella immediately rolled her eyes.

“I know he can be too much; do I need to have a word?” she questioned.

“No, it’s okay, thank you though.” I squeezed her hand. “He’s been amazing, a little overprotective but what’s new there?”

“That man adores you and I cannot wait till he holds his babies for the first time.” Carmella exclaimed, her face glowing with pride.

“We decorated our Christmas tree today!” I could no longer hide my excitement especially with Carmella as she knew her son wasn’t a huge festivity lover.

“Stop lying to me! My son decorated a Christmas tree?! Well, fuck me sideways, I never thought that would happen.”

We waited a moment until Carmella realised what she said, and we all burst into a fit of laughter, I swayed a little as the tiredness had finally taken its toll.

“Hey! You calm down, we don’t need those babies making an appearance just yet!” My mother led me over to the chair to relax a little.

“Mama, I’m fine, really.” I smiled as she held my face in her hands.

“I’ll call Lorenzo to come and take you home.” She smiled, but it was a worried smile.

“No, he’s at a meeting, Red is coming.” I didn’t want to interrupt Lorenzo, even though I knew he’d want me to, it wasn’t fair he was working.

“You can take the gifts home and open them together later, I want you home and resting rather than here, okay?” She wasn’t joking, she was deadly serious, and I knew not to mess with her when she acted this way.

Within thirty minutes Red had arrived and loaded up the car with the gifts and cake, he looked as worried as my mother did, but I had started to think this was Red’s face when it came to me and the twins.

“Ready to go?” he asked as he waited beside me.

“Are you sure you’re okay?!” Robin questioned as she pulled me into her embrace.

“I’m fine, just need to rest a little.” I smiled as Tay joined in. “Thank you both for arranging this, I’m sorry I can’t stay longer.”

“Don’t you dare apologise; you’re allowed to feel this way.” Tay rubbed the top of my arm. “Get some rest and we’ll come and see you later this week.”

“Thank you, I love you both.” I hugged them tightly as the babies somersaulted in my stomach.

“Ah! He kicked me!” Tay squealed.

“You don’t know it’s a boy.”

“We guarantee one is a boy.” Robin beamed, their prediction was one of each but only time would tell who was right and who won the bet everyone had going on.

“Let’s get you home before Lorenzo gets there.”

“You called him, didn’t you?” I eyed Red as I already knew he’d called him.

“I had to, he told me to call him no matter how small. I’m sorry, I know he’s protective.” He smiled sheepishly.

“It’s alright, don’t worry.” I followed him out of the room after I’d said another round of goodbyes.

The moment we arrived home I headed straight upstairs to run a bath but the moment I stepped into the bathroom I noticed something had changed.

What did he do?

“Welcome home *amore*.” He walked up behind me as his hands cupped the bottom of my bump to take the pressure off slightly. “How are you feeling?” He gently trailed kisses along my neck as my head fell back against his shoulder.

“I’m okay, just tired.” I sighed. “Did you change something in here?” I couldn’t put my finger on it until I could. “Wait... did you change the bath?!” I snapped my head up as the roughness of his stubble burned my neck.

“Mhm... now, it’s big enough for the two of us.” He smiled against my skin as he slowly unbuttoned my shirt. “You’re so fucking beautiful, Anastacia.”

“Thank you.”

“For what?” He sounded instantly confused.

“Everything, just everything.” He spun me around and slammed his lips against mine, his fingers skillfully lowered

my maternity jeans down my legs and discarded them on the floor, the panties followed as did the shirt. He stood back to admire my naked, pregnant body and he looked hungrier than ever as his tongue darted out to wet his lips.

“Lorenzo...”

“Tell me what you want,” he ordered.

“You...” I whispered.

“Not good enough, tell me exactly what you want.”

“I want you to fuck my mouth.” I gnawed at my bottom lip. He removed his pants and boxers as his cock sprung free from its restraints.

“Then get on your knees,” he demanded.

“Open that pretty little mouth for me.” I obeyed immediately as I was already dripping from how dominant he was. My mouth fell open as a smug smile spread across his lips.

“Good girl. I want to hear you fucking gag on my cock as tears stream down your beautiful face and spit runs down your chin, do you understand?”

“Yes.”

Without another word his cock instantly slammed against the back of my throat, the gag was impossible to hide and the moment he heard the noise he smiled, his eyes lit up as bright as the Christmas tree downstairs, he fucking loved it.

I fisted the base of his cock as I ran my tongue along his shaft, the sharp intake of breath was enough to inform me he liked it.

“I thought you wanted me to fuck your mouth, this is a little too gentle.”

“Just enjoy it and then I’m yours... my mouth is yours.” I never took my eyes off his as I lowered my mouth onto him.

I tormented him with every slow, antagonizing lick until the dull ache between my legs soon became too much, I

needed him to use my mouth, I needed him to use me in any way he wanted.

No... I didn't need it.

I craved it.

He looked down at me with hooded eyes and I no longer recognised them, they were dark with desire as I slid his cock into my mouth. With each suck I pushed him further, his breath hitched in his throat as his eyes rolled back, his chest now heaved as beads of sweat formed on his brow and I could tell he was fighting every urge he had to ruin my mouth.

“Are you wet for me?”

I nodded feeling a little ashamed.

He wrapped my hair around his hand as my scalp burned beneath his hold, he forced my head back as he craned his down slightly, he had a wicked gleam in his eye, one I'd never seen before.

“Grip my thighs, Anastacia.” His sharp breath was enough to tell me he would destroy me and turn me into a trembling mess. “You're about to get what you wanted.” I obeyed; I always obeyed this man.

I gripped the backs of his thighs and prepared myself but it wasn't enough, he slid himself into my mouth slowly at first but that was soon replaced and shit it felt good, I fought for breath as spit ran down my chin onto my breasts, the tears streamed down my face, new ones fell with every blink and he fucking revelled in it, with every tear that fell he fucked my mouth harder, faster and I was a mess, I must have looked it anyway. Each time I tried to move he gripped my hair tighter, but I welcomed it, hell, I thrived off it just as much as he did.

“Good fucking girl.” He hissed as he thrust his hips forwards. “Stick your tongue out baby.”

He pulled out from my mouth as I tried to catch my breath, but he grabbed my face in an instant.

“I said stick your tongue out baby... do as you're told and then I'll fuck you.”

I stuck out my tongue as I let my hands rest on my thighs, he fisted his cock as his breath hitched, his body trembled as his eyes were no longer on mine, he slammed them shut as he came all over my face for the first time. The warm, salty liquid coated my tongue while some ran down my chin mixing with the tears and spit.

“Swallow what I gave you and bend over the counter.” The second his eyes opened he threw his demands around.

I swallowed hard as his cum trickled down my throat, he used his thumb to clean up my chin before he pushed the pad in my mouth for me to suck clean.

“You look fucking beautiful,” he whispered as he helped me up and bent over the counter, his large hand splayed over my bump as a form of protection while the other dug into my hip.

“I want you to cum all over my dick although it looks like sucking already has you fucking dripping.” He teased as he slid his cock into my greedy pussy. “Your cunt is mine, your ass is mine, you’re mine.” He growled against my skin.

He thrust inside me, harder this time as his thumb pushed into my ass, I cried out sounds I didn’t even think were possible.

“Oh... fuck!” I whimpered, gripping onto the sink.

His body slapped against mine, I was so close, and he knew it, my entire body ached for him, my pussy clenched around his cock as he buried himself over and over.

“Lorenzo, please...”

“Does my wife want to cum all over my cock?” He moaned as he pushed his thumb further into my ass.

“Please...”

“Beg me again,” he ordered, his thumb working me in ways I never imagined as he pounded my pussy repeatedly.

“Please, let me come.” I screamed, catching glimpse of myself in the mirror, my cheeks were flushed, my lashes damp

as my eyes met my husband's automatically, like I said before... *magnets*.

"Keep your eyes on me, I want to see you come."

Our eyes remained glued to one another's as he mouthed *come* through our reflections and that one word had been enough to send me into a shivering mess beneath my husband's body. I felt every sense heightened the moment my body gave in, once he let me cover his cock in my cum, I clutched the sink tighter, until I had no feeling left in my fingers.

My knees weakened instantly as he supported me until it was his turn; my eyes never left his no matter how much I wanted to let them fall shut.

"Fuck!" He roared as he filled me, his cock pulsed as my pussy throbbed and I was done, my body couldn't take anymore and he knew it, he knew everything.

"Such an obedient wife." He pulled me flush against his body and smothered my damp skin in kisses.

"What are you, Anastacia?" he whispered.

"Your obedient wife," I panted out.

"Good fucking girl."





CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Lorenzo

February

I WALKED INTO THE BEDROOM FROM THE GYM AS ANASTACIA stood there, wearing a floor-length black lounge dress. Her bump couldn't possibly get any bigger and she looked drop dead gorgeous. With each passing day, she glowed. With each passing day I fell in love with her more, just as I hoped she did me.

We didn't have long left until the babies arrived; the doctor had said since they're twins, there was a high possibility they could arrive early, and it would be a good idea for everything to be prepared. Thankfully we were.

I had to admit, I had been a little on the protective side, but after Ana had told me to stop worrying so much and enjoy this pregnancy with her. Although I listened, that didn't mean it wasn't hard. Watching her struggle to do things as her bump got bigger was so damn hard, but I had to let her do them alone despite how I itched to take over most of the time. The only thing she could no longer manage was tying her sneakers. She had traded those for slip on sandals which in the winter was a terrible option, but I never said a word.

I stood in the doorway, admiring her for a moment until she caught sight of me, which I knew she would. *She always did.* Her hand cupped her bump as she gazed lovingly at it. Fuck, she was stunning. I must have done something incredible in my past life to have someone like her.

"I can feel you staring, you know." She smiled without moving her gaze an inch.

“I know but can you blame me?” I stalked over to her as I grasped her chin, to claim her lips, her hands left her bump as she caressed the side of my face. “Happy Valentine’s Day, *amore.*” I smiled against her lips.

“Happy Valentine’s Day.” She wore the new perfume I’d gifted her at Christmas, still floral but slightly different to her signature one and just as much as her others, it intoxicated me.

I dropped to my knees before her as I flattened my hands on her bump to kiss my diamonds good morning.

“Good morning, my diamonds, I hope you aren’t giving your mama too much trouble.” I’d called them my diamonds since the beginning since that’s what they were. Ana’s diamonds in the dark when we were ripped apart, it seemed only fitting that’s what they go by.

“They can’t wait to come out.” Ana sounded exhausted. The number of times she had to get up to pee during the night or toss and turn to get comfortable irritated me and not because I was awakened too, because I couldn’t do anything to help her.

“Anytime now.” I smiled as I rose to my feet. “Are you sure you’re okay if I head to the club today? I need to meet the shipment supplier to go over new numbers.”

“Lorenzo, go, it’s fine.”

“I’ll leave Nic here if you need anything.” Nicolo had moved in and was now a valued member of my team, we rebuilt our relationship, and we were more like brothers now rather than cousins.

“The longer you stand her rabbiting on, the longer you’ll be. So, get dressed and get a move on,” she ordered, and fuck, I loved it.

“Okay, I’ll pick you up some fries and an ice cream on the way back.” Her newest craving was fries dipped in vanilla soft whip ice cream.

“You’d better make that two lots, I’m not sharing with you,” she teased. I hated how right she was. She made me try

it one evening, and I couldn't hide the fact I actually liked it, so she shared hers with me until she made me buy my own.

“Okay, two orders.” I kissed her quickly before she left to head downstairs, and I got ready for the day.

I arrived at the dimly lit club with Red and Gino as Emmet waited for Rox to arrive.

“So, what are your Valentine's Day plans?” Red winked.

“I'm going to let Ana pick a movie while she eats what she's craving and hopefully she'll get a better night's sleep.”

“Ah, Gino, they grow up so fast, don't they?” Red joked as I swatted the back of his head.

“If you'd like to live to see the babies, then I suggest you shut your mouth, dickhead.” I rolled my eyes as Rox entered the room, stinking it up instantly with his cheap aftershave, all the money he makes with us you'd think he'd get something decent.

“Lorenzo, how wonderful to see you! How's married life treating you?” He smiled; his gold canine tooth gleamed the second the light hit it.

“Couldn't be better, which is why I don't fancy being here all day, I need to get back soon.”

“Don't you trust her home alone?” He smirked a devilish grin, and I had the urge to slice my blade across his neck.

“Remember who you're talking to,” I snapped, and he instantly backed down. *Pussy.*

“I apologise. I didn't mean any offence.” He sat down in the booth opposite me. “You did pull a cracker there though, if I remember rightly, she was a fucking knockout.” Does this man have a stop button?!

“If you want this deal to continue and for your head to remain on your shoulders, I suggest you shut the fuck up so we can begin the meeting, or you can get the fuck out.” I slammed my fist on the table as Rox flinched a little.

“Let me apologise over a drink.” He had already poured himself a bourbon from the bottle already and waiting on the table when we arrived.

“I’m not drinking.”

“Too good to drink with me?” Rox tutted.

I was getting incredibly irritated and I wanted nothing more than to tell him to get the fuck out but as annoying as his attitude is, he carried out business well and that’s what I needed right now especially if I wanted to take a little time off with Ana and the babies, I needed it to run smoothly so I could concentrate on them the first few weeks and the guys were in agreement.

“Not at all. Anastacia is pregnant.”

“But you aren’t.” He smiled as he poured me a glass and I was close to my edge.

“No, but pregnant women can’t drink, and since she’s my wife I do what I can to support her, you know, *the little things*.” I pulled out the paperwork and pen ready for Rox to sign the extension of our contract.

“But she’s not here.” Does he give up?

“Maybe not, but if she goes into labour then she needs me, and I can’t drive her anywhere if I’m over the limit. I wouldn’t risk hers or our babies lives like that.”

“Fine, you win. No drink.” He knocked back his before he poured another.

The meeting was pretty painless after that, his attitude remained in check the second I laid my knife flat on the table. His Adams apple bobbed hard the moment he saw it and once again he knew I wasn’t to be fucked with. Gino and Emmet stood by my side as Red slipped out to answer a call, I was deep in discussion with Rox to worry what he needed to do.

“So, everything is exactly the same, and we’re happy with how you’ve proved yourself, so we want to extend the contract.” I smiled as did Rox who near enough ripped the pen from my hand.

The door to the VIP room flew open, and Red rushed in. He looked flustered as he almost tripped over his own feet.

“Boss!” He stopped before me as we all looked at him a little bewildered. “It’s Ana!” he panted the words out.

“What the fuck do you mean? What’s happened to Ana?!” I jumped up from the booth as Rox sat there watching everything unfold.

“Her water just broke.” I didn’t hear that right, I couldn’t have. She said you didn’t answer your phone, and she’s panicking.” I searched my pockets, and I realised I left it in the car.

“Fuck! Fuck!” I hurried towards the door. “Where the hell is Nicolo?!”

“He’s getting the car ready with her bag and the babies one.”

“Call Nicolo and tell him to take Ana to hospital. I’ll meet them there.” I paused and turned to Rox who had a smile a mile wide. “Rox—”

“Don’t fucking Rox me, go and meet your babies! I’ll sort the contract with Gino.” He nodded at me, and for once, I didn’t think he was a total twat.

I had never driven so fast in all my life. I tried to call Ana, but it went to voicemail, my heart sank at the idea she might have them before I arrived, she’s closer to the hospital than I was, and the traffic was fucking dire!

I dialled Nicolo’s number as the dial tone surrounded the car through the speaker.

“We’re nearly at the hospital. How you doing?” he asked straight off the bat.

“Don’t worry about me, I’ll be there. Ana, are you okay?!” I near enough screamed to be heard over hers.

“It hurts,” she whimpered, and it broke my heart. I just wanted to hold her and get her through this.

“I know, *amore*, I know but I’m coming, and I’ll do my best to make it better, I promise.” Her painful screams erupted through Nic’s car as well as my own.

“Drive safe, our babies need you in one piece.” *This woman was in pain and yet, she worried about me.*

“I will, don’t worry about me.”

“We’re pulling in now; I’ll stay with her until you arrive,” Nicolo reassured me.

“Thank you! Ana, I love you,” I called out.

“I love you too,” she managed to say through pants and tears—almost like our sex session... *not the time, Lorenzo, not the time.*

The line went dead, and I drove like a bat out of hell until I saw the signs that directed me to the hospital.

Thank God!

I parked and sprinted towards the entrance, then followed the signs to the maternity unit which earned me a mixture of looks on the way.

“Anastacia Ricci. Where is she?!” My Oxfords skidded on the polished floor the second I tried to stop at the desk.

“Let me pull up her records and see what room she’s in for you.” The nurse, as lovely as she was, took her damn time, and I was running out of patience.

“Hurry, please!” I snapped in the nicest possible way; she peered over her tortoise shell glasses as if to tell me she’s going as fast as possible. “I said please, what more do you want?!” I had just about enough of this woman.

“She’s in room 309, just down the hall, last door on your right.” Another nurse appeared, and I guessed she was Ana’s since she knew instantly who I was here for and what direction to send me.

“Thanks.” I didn’t even finish my thanks before I sprinted off down the corridor to her room.

As I reached the door, I took a deep breath and had to mentally prepare myself for a moment that the next time we leave here, we'll have our two diamonds, and I couldn't pretend I wasn't shitting it, but with Ana, I could do it.

We could do it.

Once I entered the room, I saw Nicolo helping Ana as best as he could, she squeezed his hand she rode out a what I guessed was a contraction.

"Thank God! I can't feel my fingers." Nicolo whimpered as Ana tightened her hold on his hands.

"Thanks, Nic, I don't know what we'd have done without you today." I pulled him into a hug as he patted my back. "The guys are on their way, they'll be here in about thirty minutes, are you going to wait?"

"Of course! I'm not missing this for the world!" He headed out the room, probably to ice his hand as I made my way to Ana's beside.

"I'm here, *amore*." She glanced up at me, her eyes shone with tears, her cheeks were the perfect shade of pink and she looked breathtaking.

"You made it." She sobbed.

"Of course, I wouldn't miss this. I told you I'm here to make it better so if breaking my fingers helps, then go for it."

"Why would I do that? Then you can't help with the diapers." She laughed. "And besides, I only squeezed his hand like that to calm him down, he was freaking out."

"What am I going to do with you?"

"I'm sure you can think of plenty." She smiled up at me as she gripped my hand, but it wasn't to get through the pain, it was out of love. I ran my thumb over her knuckles as she breathed through another contraction. I was in awe of her and how well she made it through them.

"You're doing amazing, I'm so proud of you." I stroked her hair as he she flashed me a sleepy smile.

“*We’re* doing amazing,” she corrected but I did nothing, she was the one having to go through this.

“Trust me, this is all you, I’m doing nothing.”

“You’re doing more than you know, believe me.” She cupped my face as a single tear rolled down her cheek.

“Ana, are you okay?”

“I’m perfect. I was just thinking about how lucky the three of us are to have you.” She pecked my lips and I fell in love with her all over again.

“It is us who are lucky to have you.” We were lucky, I already knew it and the twins would soon know it too if they didn’t already feel it.

“Sorry to interrupt. I just need to check how many centimetres Anastacia is at the moment, you can step out if you like, Mr. Ricci,” the nurse said.

“There’s no way I’m leaving.” I tried to remain calm, but she’d already irritated me.

“Are you okay with this, Anastacia?” the nurse asked, giving Anastacia a look.

“Yes, I want him to stay.” Anastacia gave her a reassuring nod as she continued to do whatever she needed to do with my wife.

Anastacia squeezed my hand the entire time and no matter how painful that was, it couldn’t be compared to the pain that radiated through her right now.

“It looks like you’re ready to meet your babies, Anastacia.”

“What?! That fast?! She just got here!” The words came out as fast as vomit, I couldn’t stop them.

“Mr. Ricci, relax and take a deep breath. Babies don’t always wait around and it’s obvious that yours are eager to meet you both.” She smiled at me as I realised that she was only doing her job before, and some men may not have wanted

to stay with their wife but that wasn't me, I wouldn't leave Ana alone.

And I didn't the whole time she brought our babies into the world.



An hour and a half later, our babies were finally here, blessing the world with their presence, and we instantly fell in love, it was hard not to. Isabella and Luca Ricci. Isabella was born first with Luca not far behind, and I already knew the older she got, the more she'd never let him live it down.

They were Anastacia's carbon copy, everything about them—their dainty button noses, perfect pouty lips and even Isabella's hair matched her mother's. Luca had my hair. As for their eye colour, we'd have to wait and see.

I couldn't be prouder of Ana than I am now; she kicked ass during that labour, and although many tried to piss me off and wind me up by saying she'd probably want to smash my face in, she didn't. She repeatedly told me how I relaxed her, how my support had been everything she needed and how much she loved me. It's funny, I used to think I only wanted an heir to continue the family name, to continue the legacy our family had built but as I held them in my arms, I understood how having children isn't about that and how helping Ana with them was something I couldn't wait to do.

“They're absolutely perfect, just look at them.” I couldn't help but get emotional, the feelings I felt overwhelmed me. “You did that.”

“No, we did that.” She giggled and despite being exhausted, I saw her happiness just as she saw mine.

I rested my forehead on Ana's as I inhaled the same floral scent as I did this morning, Isabella stirred in my arms as she

obviously got comfortable while Luca slept peacefully in Anastacia's, not a stir out of him whatsoever.

“I love you, Anastacia Ricci,” I admitted. “I know I never wanted this life, but now that I have it, I know I'll never be able to live without it—without the three of you.” It was true. I might have dreaded the thought of a wife and children before, but now the only thing I dread more than that is losing them. How is that possible?

With her, that's how.









EPILOGUE

Lorenzo

THE PAST FIVE YEARS FLEW BY IN THE BLINK OF AN EYE, BUT many things remained the same.

Mine and Ana's love for one another was stronger than ever.

The alliance was well known to mafias across the globe, and we were a force to be reckoned with.

Isabella had grown into a sassy five-year-old, she always had something to say just like Anastacia did, she'd inherited her mother's eyes, two wide sapphires. She might have looked cute and dainty, but she could throw one hell of a punch.

Luca inherited mine, and the older he got, the more he looked like me, which I welcomed happily, he was a character and always made us laugh, but the main thing was he was always there for his sister. He enjoyed spending most of his time with me and the guys when we were home and honestly, we loved him being around.

"So, what do you think?" Red asked as he captured my attention, but not for long as I heard the familiar sound of heels coming down the stairs. "Lorenzo, will you fucking listen?!" Red waved in my face, as he still hadn't realised that my five-year daughter had heard his beautiful vocabulary.

"Oh, Uncle Red said a swear!" She giggled. "Wait till I tell Mama," she teased, and I knew she wouldn't, but it was funny to see Red sweat a little.

"You don't need to do that, Bells; I'll add a dollar to the swear jar." Red rummaged in his pocket to pull out a dollar.

“How about you just give me the dollar, and I won’t tell Mama at all? If you put it in the swear jar she’ll know someone swore.” *Oh, she was good.*

“Fine, come and get it.” He held out the money to Bella who wobbled all the way over in her mama’s wedding shoes.

“Like taking candy from a baby.” She smiled and it was the sweetest smile you’d ever seen, no wonder everyone was wrapped around her finger. Red huffed as he walked towards the kitchen.

“You’re lucky I love you, Bells,” he called which caused Bella to clap her hands before she shoved the dollar in my hand for safe keeping.

She was a breath-taking little girl; freckles decorated her nose and cheeks, and her ash blonde hair was in natural waves down her back with a few sparkly pins in the side. She’d dressed herself in a crisp white dress that had layers upon layers of tulle that stopped mid-shin.

“Well, good evening, Princess Bella.”

“Papa, I need a prince, and Luca doesn’t want to be the prince. He said he wants to be the monster.” She huffed.

“Well, you know you don’t *need* a prince.” I smiled as I dropped to my knees before her, I took her hand in mine as I kissed her knuckles like a prince would do to a princess.

“But I want one to kiss like you kiss mama.” And there it was, the words every father dreaded.

“Kisses are overrated.” I winked; I knew I shouldn’t lie but for things like this I had to.

“Make sure Mama doesn’t hear that.”

“Make sure Mama don’t hear what?” As if on cue, Ana swanned out of the kitchen with a grubby Luca in her arms, his hair had flopped over his forehead and his clothes were covered in dirt. That was the day in the life of Luca, he spent most of it outside and then proceeded to tread mud throughout the house.

“I think these two need a bath, so we can decorate the Christmas tree, don’t you daddy?” Ana smirked and she knew what she was doing, let’s just say it was a slip of the tongue one evening as I fucked her, but it had kind of stuck.

“Mama, can you bath me, and Papa can bath Luca?” Bella smiled sweetly as Ana handed a mud ridden Luca to me which meant I was as covered as the pair of them now, the only neat one in this was Bella.

“Of course, then we can put your Christmas pajamas on, decorate the tree and enjoy a hot chocolate before bed.”

Bella and Luca squealed with delight as Luca wriggled out of my arms to chase his sister up the stairs, obviously to wipe his hands over her dress. She kicked off Ana’s wedding shoes that were of course, too big and sprinted towards her bathroom.

“I don’t think they’ll ever get easier.” I sighed.

“Oh, stop that, you love it!” Ana kissed me quickly before she darted up the stairs to split the kids up. “Sorry, I forgot, kissing’s overrated,” she giggled, and I planned to show her later just how overrated they could be.



With the guys at the club, we had the house to ourselves to decorate the tree with the kids, who were extremely excited. They wore matching pyjamas; I’d opted for sweats, and Ana had pulled on a comfortable oversized cardigan.

“I’ll do this side with Papa, because he can lift me high, high up!” Bella beamed as she rushed to my side. Luca sat on Ana’s lap as they admired the decorations we had acquired over the years. This had become a family tradition since the kids were old enough and they loved the fact they got new pyjamas and a hot chocolate.

I lifted Bella for her to hang decorations as her delicate hand gripped onto my neck.

“Relax, my little diamond, I won’t drop you,” I reminded her.

“I know.” She smiled as she hung the angel wings on the tree, the decoration Ana had purchased to represent her grandparents, one that each year the kids took in turns to hang.

“These ones are my favourite.” She smiled up at me, as I handed her another decoration.

“Mama,” Luca spoke from the other side of the tree.

“Yes, my angel?”

“I love you lots, like infinity.” I could hear the smile from his voice as Bella whispered ‘*aww*’ in my ear.

“And I love you, more than you’ll ever know.” One thing about Ana, she might have been an incredible wife, but she was something else completely as a mother, these children were her world as they were mine but there was something about watching Ana with them every day that warmed me to the core. She doted on them, if she could do it, she would, no matter how hard it might be.

“Me and Luca will go and make the hot chocolates. We’re trusting you with the tree.”

“You got it, Mama!” Bella called as they left. “Papa?”

“Yes, Bella?”

“Will I meet a boy who is nice to me like you are to Mama?” she questioned, a little too early for my liking.

“You will when you’re old enough.” I smiled, but what she didn’t know was there’d be no boys until she was at least thirty.

“Did you love Mama when you saw her for the first time?” This girl and her questions would send me to an early grave.

“It was different when we met, but I wouldn’t change a thing, she’s the love of my life and always will be.” I touched

the tip of her nose with my index finger as she did the same to me.

“You are lucky to have Mama, she’s pretty and cooks good!”

“I’m lucky to have you all.” I kissed her cheek as she giggled instantly from the stubble.

“PAPA! I did it!” Luca came bounding in as he jumped into my other free arm.

“Did what, son?” I asked, as me and his sister awaited his response.

“I put the cream and marshmallows on! Mama let me!” He looked so proud as Bella high fived him.

“Did you put extra in ours?” she asked with a devilish grin.

“I put double!”

“Yes! That’s my brother everyone!” she cheered and Luca blushed at her compliment.

We continued decorating the tree until we were all satisfied it was complete.

“I think Santa will love this tree!” Luca clapped as he wore hot chocolate for a mustache.

“Me too, it’s the best one we’ve done!” Bella agreed and she looked just the same, except she also had dried whipped cream on the tip of her nose.

“Right, you two, let’s go and wash these faces and get to bed otherwise we can’t go to pop-pop’s house tomorrow.” They squealed as they darted up to the bathroom. Ana was already hot on their heels.

The kids referred to Victor as pop-pop and that’s where we planned to head to tomorrow for a family day followed by dinner, the kids loved it and since Miles took over, Victor had spent plenty of time with Florence and his grandchildren as had my parents who were also attending. Our parents tried to plan something once a month and although at first, I hadn’t been keen, we now enjoyed it as they tended to keep the kids

overnight which meant me, and Ana get some well-deserved alone time. We had a wonderfully supportive family and despite not always seeing eye to eye with Victor, especially after Ana disappeared years ago, but we managed to put all that shit behind us and get along.

“They’re in bed, not sure how long it will take for them to get to sleep since they are using those walkie talkies to communicate.” Ana appeared by my side, wrapping her arms around me instantly. “Do you miss it?”

“Miss what?”

“The newborn stage?” She smiled as I kissed her forehead.

“Honestly, I do.” That was true, I missed when they couldn’t sass me and ask about boyfriends and love.

“What would you say if I told you we’re about to go through it all again?”

Wait...

“Ana, are you?”

“I’m pregnant! She beamed as if it were our first child all over again. She couldn’t have been happier than she was in this moment. The swelling feeling I felt in my chest was second to none. “Merry Christmas.”

“Best Christmas present ever!” I smiled, pulling her into me to claim her lips. This woman had continued to surprise me over the years, and this was no different.

She was mine.

I was hers.

We were in love.

We were one.





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About the Author

Samantha Jayne is a UK romance novelist and Interactive Author for several story apps across the App Store. Her work in the novel app space fuelled her love of immersive narratives, which she now translates into the sizzling immediacy of her novels. Samantha's gutsy, gritty characters are rooted in reality and grow into the kinds of people she loves to read about (as well as create!). Samantha lives in Cheshire, England with her husband, two sons and their Shih Tzu, Coco.