



LUST

AMAZON AND INTERNATIONAL
BESTSELLING AUTHOR

J.L. LESLIE



LUST

SEVEN DEADLY SINS SERIES

J.L. LESLIE

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DEDICATION



I want to, first of all, dedicate this book to my mom, like I do all my books. I miss you!

A special thanks to my husband and kids for allowing me to go into my writing cave (which I do quite often) and for their love and support! Also, to my sister for listening to my ideas and never complaining! You're the best! I love you all!

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write and sometimes actually enjoy it!

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EPILOGUE

Untitled

Thank you

Seven Deadly Sins: Mafia Romance Series



*When I was just a little girl
I asked my mother, what will I be
Will I be pretty? Will I be rich?
Here's what she said to me
Que sera, sera
Whatever will be, will be
The future's not ours to see
Que sera, sera
What will be, will be*

(Song By: Doris Day & Frank De Vol)

How I wish that could be true.

TRANSLATIONS



Madre - Mother

Padre - Father

Mio figlio - My son

Scatola del tesoro - Treasure box

Segreti - Secrets

Mio piccolo tesoro - Little darling

Signora - Miss, Ms., or Mrs.

Cazzo di codardo - Fucking coward

Disgustoso - Disgusting

Mio amico - My friend

Deliziosa - Delicious

Maledetto lui - Damn him

Molto interessante - Very interesting

Invidia - Envious

Ben fatto - Well done

Excellent - Excellent

Cazzo in giro - Fucking around

Tesoro - Honey, darling, treasure

Bellissima - Beautiful

Infantile - Childish

Perfetto - Perfect

Figlio - Son

Mio dolce - My sweet

Mio caro - My dear

Amore mio - My love

Perdonami - Forgive me

PROLOGUE

SALVATORE



My father always told me life is full of devastation. What makes a boy become a man is how he reacts to it. Does he react like a coward? Or a leader? Which would I be?

I often asked myself this question, then realized early in life there are some devastations a boy should not witness, no matter which one he is. His favorite puppy getting splattered by a semi. His mother wasting away from cancer. His father balls fucking deep inside the woman he lost his virginity to.

To name a few.

I step away from the door, away from the grunts and groans, and walk calmly to my mother's room. Giacomo Puccini's "Madama Butterfly" plays softly while she lies in bed. Her eyes don't flutter open when I approach her.

I've been coming here for weeks, ever since she became bedridden. Sometimes my best friend, Millie, comes with me, a white orchid always with her, but mostly it's just the two of us. We listen to music, and sometimes, I read to her. My father is never here. Millie has been here more than he has, regaling my mother with stories of our nonexistent adventures. Not my father. I'm uncertain if it's because he can't handle this type of devastation or because it simply isn't devastating to him.

Sitting down, I reach for my mother's hand. It's cold and fragile, making me fear my grasp will break her tiny bones. I'm a scrawny boy, barely a hundred pounds. My father constantly reminds me that he'll figure out a way to make a man out of me. One of his ideas was sending one of our housekeepers to rid me of my virginity on my thirteenth birthday — the same housekeeper my father is fucking at this very moment.

My father, Stefano Moretti, is a man who takes what he wants when he wants. Throughout my childhood, I've witnessed despicable things at his hand and not a shred of remorse. He's stolen from his family and betrayed his friends.

I suppose he has to be ruthless if he wants to stay on the throne. He isn't confused about whether or not he's a coward or a leader. He's absolutely a leader. Too many others covet his seat, waiting for the day he'll slip up, and they can take him down — Millie's father included. I've been promised a future where I'm the leader of the families one day. Where we will rule together.

The part of me convinced I'm a coward is terrified, but the other part — the part that enjoys witnessing the despicable things my father does — relishes the thought.

"Salvatore," my mother whispers. "I will miss you the most."

"*Madre.*"

"Shh, *mio figlio*. You must be brave."

My mother opens her hand, a key resting on her palm. I take it, knowing exactly what it opens: her *scatola del tesoro* — her treasure box. When I asked her what it held, her response was simple: secrets.

Excitement and sorrow rush through me. I've always wanted to know what was inside her treasure box. All the secrets! All the treasure! I can't wait to tell Millie!

Watching my mother hide this very box underneath the floor, away from my father, I dreamed of the day she would reveal what was inside. I even thought of sneaking it away from her hiding place, but out of respect for her, never did.

My mother nods toward the floor and the thirteen-year-old boy who lost his virginity only two days ago has been replaced by the eager six-year-old I used to be.

I lift the floorboard and retrieve the box. Opening it, I frown at the contents. *Letters. Photographs. My birth certificate. A bunch of useless papers.* None of this matters to me. There aren't any secrets. No treasure. Nothing to tell Millie about.

The title of one document grabs my attention. *DNA Paternity Test Results.*

"Segreti, mio figlio. Segreti." Secrets.

I'm not a Moretti.

My eyes glitter with tears. From disappointment or relief, I'm not sure. Disappointment that the life I've always known is a lie. Relief for the exact same reason.

My father—well, the man I've always called my father—doesn't know I'm not his son. He can't. If he did, I wouldn't be here. He wouldn't be priming me to take over the business.

My father is a man named David Cosovo.

"He's dead, passed away many years ago," my mother whispers, a tear rolling down her cheek. "But I wanted you to know."

She wanted me to know...why? Why tell me this? This is *her* secret, *her* story and she's putting this burden on me.

Anger joins the disappointment and relief. Some secrets are meant to be kept.

“What about Stefano? The man you've told me my entire life is my father?”

“Be better than him.” Her breathing grows more shallow, her words barely audible.

“Yes, *Madre*.” I can't bear to be angry with her. Not when I'm losing her forever.

“Dethrone him.”

“Yes, *Madre*.”

MILANA



I stare at my reflection in the mirror while my mother hums the familiar tune of “Que Sera, Sera.” There was a time I believed the lyrics to that song — believed the future wasn’t all mapped out. That was a long time ago. I’m no longer that naive girl who thought she could make her own decisions.

I’m a Genovese. A female Genovese. My future was planned the moment I was born and didn’t have a penis between my legs. I may have escaped from here, but my future was never mine. I’ve been silly thinking it was.

My mother puts the brush down and surveys her work. I didn’t get her dark locks or blue eyes. I look like my father— wavy, blonde hair. Green eyes. My mother always says I have his ambition too, only I don’t believe she means it as a compliment.

That ambition drove me away from Birmingham toward bigger and better things. A college degree. Independence. Life experience.

Who am I kidding? That same ambition also drove me right back to my childhood home as if I’d never left.

I’m going to take over, Milana. I need your help.

Growing up, I always knew my family wasn't typical. Yes, we had summer vacations and trips to the Galleria. But those were accompanied by men with guns. We aren't celebrities, not in the usual sense. We're the Genoveses. Fifth-generation Italian mafia family. Might as well be celebrities.

When I left Birmingham, part of me knew I would always end up back here. My father had been under Stefano Moretti's command my entire life. As a child, I didn't comprehend what that meant. All I knew was my best friend was the son of my father's boss. The Moretti home is the only place I was allowed to go without my parents. I always thought it meant it was safer than my own. It simply meant they had more men with more guns.

Sal and I would do our best to sneak around the massive rooms in the house and outside on the grounds, see if we could escape the watchful eye of the guards. We would pretend we had these amazing adventures together, a life outside the family.

Sometimes, we were shipwrecked on a lost island. Occasionally, we would pretend we'd gone back to Italy, left all this behind. Other days, we were pirates, searching for treasure, hoping one day we'd get into his mother's treasure chest. That never happened.

Before I knew it, Salvatore was thirteen and different. Our fun little games no longer amused him. His mother had died, and he was heartbroken. And there was absolutely nothing I could do to fix it. One thing is for damn sure, his father never even attempted to.

So, when my father called and asked for my help, I didn't hesitate to return. I left behind my apartment, the man I was dating, and the few friends I'd made. If my father had a chance

to take the throne, I wanted to help him do it. Men like Stefano Moretti didn't deserve such power. Then again, did any man?

"You look beautiful, *mio piccolo tesoro*," my mother assures me, calling me her little darling like when I was a girl.

It's on the tip of my tongue to ask her what my father has planned. I came back like he asked and have been patiently waiting for him to clue me in on how he's actually going to take over. Was this all a ploy to get me back home? How am I supposed to help him?

"Thank you, *Madre*."

A knock on the door ends our short conversation. "The guests have arrived, *signora*."

She gives the butler a slight nod, and he waits at the door to escort us downstairs. Resting her hands on my shoulders, she sighs. I expect her to give me some advice, tell me to enjoy myself. Something. Anything. Instead, that heavy sigh fills me with dread as I stand.

I came home to be by my father's side, prove to him our family deserves to take the throne. That we deserve respect, the same as Stefano Moretti. The more time goes by, the more I'm left with this desperate desire to leave again. Leave before it's too late.

More than that, I'm left with this crippling fear it's already too late.

SALVATORE



My father puffs on his cigar, the stench from the smoke filling the car. My throat tickles, aching to cough, but I fight it. I've never understood his addiction to those things, especially when his wife died from lung cancer.

“He’s planning a move,” I warn.

My father shrugs off my concern. “He’s been planning for years. It’ll never come to fruition. Riccardo Genovese is a *cazzo di codardo*.”

“Perhaps. I don’t see him as a coward. Besides, he has the respect of the families, the guards, the workers.”

“And I don’t?”

“There’s a difference between fear and respect.”

The families, the guards, the workers...they fear my father. Their loyalty doesn’t derive from respect, and fear can eventually be conquered. Riccardo has the majority of them, and if he makes a move, he could win.

“I would rather have their fear,” he states with confidence. “A fearful man is a loyal man, Salvatore.”

In the years since my mother passed, I've watched my father become more and more ruthless. No one crosses him and lives. There have been attempts outside of the family, people who come into our city thinking because we're southern, emigrated here from Italy, uneducated and complacent. The Moretti family runs the largest illegal gambling ring in the south. My father controls it all.

“Is that what you're testing tonight? Riccardo's fear or his loyalty?”

“He invited us into his home. It would be disrespectful of me to decline.”

I snort. “Since when do you care about appearing disrespectful?”

My father chuckles, puffing on his cigar again. “You still have a lot to learn, Salvatore. It can be crippling to a man to see his rival seated at his table, eating his food, all the while knowing he will always cater to him. I own Riccardo. He won't forget that.”

The car pulls to a stop, and we wait for the doors to open before we climb out. Guards flank the car, much the same as they do the Genovese estate. It's a sight I grew accustomed to many years ago. Christ, I remember grabbing Millie's hand and running through the house, giggling as we tried to outsmart the guards. That was back when I was an innocent child, unmarred by my mother's secret.

“Hundred bucks says he has something atrocious for dessert, like coconut cake,” my father comments as we approach the door.

“I like coconut cake.”

“*Disgustoso.*”

We're shown inside, courteously greeting Riccardo Genovese as he thanks us for attending. I consider the possibility that my father is wrong. Riccardo could be inviting us here to show us he isn't afraid to have the enemy seated at his table.

"It's been far too long since I've welcomed you into my home, Stefano, *mio amico*," Riccardo comments. "Gabrielle and Milana should join us any moment. You remember my darling Milana, don't you?"

"Ah, yes, I remember that unruly child always ripping and running the halls of my home."

"Pretty certain your son was right there with her," Riccardo replies, chuckling. "The two of them used to be inseparable."

Yes, we were until my world was turned upside down. I haven't seen Millie in...twelve years? I heard she was back.

"There they are now."

I glance up at the two women descending the stairs. Gabrielle Genovese was always a classic beauty. Perfect golden hair, never a strand out of place. Tiny waist with heart-shaped breasts. Lush, plump lips. The epitome of a trophy wife.

But she isn't where my attention is focused. Millie. My Millie is all grown up.

MILANA



My lips part. A slight gasp escapes. Salvatore Moretti. My Sal. Only he isn't. The scrawny boy with unruly hair is at least six feet tall, his muscles filling out the taut sleeves of his crisp, black button-down shirt. That unruly hair...well, it's still slightly unruly, but now, it's sexy. Holy cow. Salvatore Moretti is sexy.

His chestnut brown eyes follow me as I descend the stairs. Not once when I was dating did a man look at me like this. Lust. Pure, unadulterated lust. A look that makes your body tingle and heat. That makes your nipples harden and your core clench. That makes you know, without a shadow of a doubt, sex is inevitable.

And not once when I was growing up did I imagine Sal as boyfriend material. Okay, to be fair, I wasn't exactly interested in boys. The boys I knew were all miniature versions of their fathers, assholes at the ripe old age of twelve. Sal was always different. And for a long time, I imagined he'd found an escape the same way I did. Left for one of the many places we pretended to go.

But he's here, standing right beside his father. Same clothes. Same arrogance. Same persona. How unfortunate.

“Mr. Moretti, how nice of you both to join us,” my mother states, playing the perfect housewife.

Stefano takes her hand, raising it to his lips for one of those linger-a-bit-too-long kisses. I can practically see my mother cringe. At least, I am for her. Rather than follow his father’s suit, Sal takes my hand, slowly leaning and kissing my cheek.

“It’s good to see you, Milana,” he says quietly.

Oh, now I’m Milana. Not Millie. He really has changed.

“Same to you, Salvatore.”

His brow arches slightly, a smile tugging at his lips. Two can play that game. He releases my hand, the warmth still on my fingers. That warmth is quickly replaced by a chill when Stefano grasps my hand, raising it to his lips the same way he did my mother. I fight the urge to snatch away, my skin crawling.

Stefano Moretti will always be the villain in my eyes—the man who treated Sal like crap, often humiliating him in front of me and anyone else. Not once when we were growing up did he compliment Salvatore. Not once did he tell him he was proud or loved him. I doubt he’s even capable of that emotion.

“Mr. Moretti.”

He smiles, and I hate to admit he’s a handsome man. Same wavy hair as Salvatore, only kempt. Dark, piercing eyes. His personality ruins his good looks, though.

“Call me Stefano.”

Nope. Not going to do that. I will never be on a first-name basis with Stefano Moretti. Rather than tell him that, I simply smile back, easing my hand away.

We take our seats at the table, my father at one end, and Stefano taking my mother's usual seat at the other. Without faltering, my mother goes to sit beside my father. I walk around the table, sitting across from her. Salvatore stops at the chair beside his father, then walks around and pulls out the chair beside me.

This man is certainly no longer the shy boy I once called my best friend. He's bold. Arrogant. The sexiest thing I've ever laid eyes on.

SALVATORE



My father thwarts Riccardo's every attempt to talk business. Riccardo brings up the underground casino we opened last month, and my father comments on how delicious the salmon is. Riccardo suggests adding a menu to the casino, my father asks for the fucking salmon recipe. It's damn near humorous.

"Studies show eating boosts endorphins. If you're feeling good, chances are you'll be willing to spend more money," Milana comments. "Besides, beautiful servers add to the appeal."

Riccardo glares at his daughter, shocked she's spoken up. My father ponders her suggestion, slowly nodding. I've suggested this exact thing on numerous occasions. Who the hell opens a casino and doesn't provide food? My father, that's who. No one has complained, but they wouldn't.

"I'll consider it."

Same thing he's told me. They aren't there to eat. They're there to win money. For the majority, to lose it.

"Riccardo, sounds like you need to appoint Milana as your business advisor," my father teases. "She certainly has a good head on her shoulders."

“Yes, she does,” Riccardo agrees.

I can only recall one time in my life when my father seemed proud of me. Once. That was after I lost my virginity. He came into the bedroom while she was getting dressed, placed his hand on my shoulder, and said ‘good job.’

Just once, it would be nice to be told I had a good head on my shoulders, that I bring great ideas to the table.

“We should include dessert. Coconut cake, maybe,” I suggest, arching an eyebrow at my father.

“I love coconut cake,” Milana says.

“It’s on the menu tonight,” her mother informs us. “Our chef makes a decadent coconut cake with meringue filling.”

“I’m sure it’s to die for,” my father replies dryly. “Milana, tell me what brought

you back to Birmingham. Weren’t you in school up north somewhere?”

“I missed the south. Missed *mi casa*.”

She’s lying. When we were kids, we always talked about moving away. Heading off to the west coast or up north to the concrete jungle. Home to Italy or Brazil. Any country. Anywhere but here.

Milana came back because her father is getting ready to make a

move. He wants everyone here who could have a stake in it. No doubt, being his only heir, Milana has a huge stake.

“What’s not to miss? You have everything you need here. I’m certain your parents are happy you returned. What are your plans?”

“Perhaps I can generate that menu you’re considering.”

My father smirks. “Perhaps.”

I want to vomit. I know this man. I know what the fuck he’s thinking. Problem is, I’m thinking the exact same thing. I want to take Milana, bend her over this damn table, and fuck her sweet pussy until she cries out my name.

The tomboy I grew up with, the one person who always understood me, is all woman. And I’ll be damned if I don’t want to explore every part of that.

MILANA



The rest of dinner goes about as expected. The men start chatting about the point spread for the next basketball game while my mother and I eat in silence. I could've put my two cents in again—tell them money line betting shouldn't be an option for our high rollers, but I keep my mouth shut. I said enough bringing up the casino menu. How in the world are you going to open one of the largest underground casinos and not provide food? It's ridiculous and a poor decision on Mr. Moretti's part.

“Please excuse me,” I say quietly, easing my chair back from the table.

I take my empty dessert plate with me, using it as an excuse, although my father won't question me. He's too ensconced in his conversation to pay me any attention.

Slipping to the kitchen, I compliment the chef on a job well done while loading another slice of cake on my plate. What can I say? I'm a sucker for sweets.

I'm halfway through when the door opens, and Salvatore walks in. He nods at the chef, slowly stepping toward me. My heart skips a beat when we're left alone in the kitchen.

“I thought I might find you here.”

“You know I always want seconds when it comes to dessert.”

Salvatore smiles. “That part of you could’ve changed like everything else.”

His dark eyes roam over my body, lingering a few seconds too long on my boobs. This should be weird. My reaction to my childhood friend. His reaction to me. But it isn’t.

“Nope, still the same old me. Can I say the same about you?”

His jaw clenches. “Am I the same cowardly little boy you once knew? That answer would be no.”

“Cowardly? I would’ve gone with kind and...I don’t know...fun.”

He takes the plate from my hands, picking up the fork. He captures a piece of the coconut cake and raises it to my mouth. Without hesitation, I allow him to feed me, licking the frosting from my lips.

“I can be fun, Milana.”

I roll my eyes. “Here we go again with this Milana bullshit.”

He puts the plate on the counter behind me, his body inches from mine. His breath fans my face as he reaches up, trailing his fingertip over my lips. I part them, aching to suck his finger inside and swirl my tongue around it. *Deliziosa*.

“Millie.”

Pulling away, he glances at his finger, icing on the tip, then tucks it into his mouth, licking it clean. My lips part with desire, lust, need. That simple gesture has my nipples straining against the fabric of my dress, thighs squeezing together.

“See? I can be fun.”

Is this fun or torture? I can't tell. My body practically hums, aching for his touch, while my mind reminds me this man used to be my best friend. We were once inseparable. Before I can make a decision, the butler clears his throat, gaining our attention.

“Your father has inquired about your whereabouts, Mr. Moretti. Your car is being brought around.”

“Thank you,” Salvatore replies, then looks back at me. “I'll see you soon, Milana.”

Maledetto lui. Damn him.

SALVATORE



My father arches a brow at me when I get into the car. I ignore him. I'm a grown man and don't have to answer to him. As far as he knows, I went to the fucking bathroom to take a piss.

"That was interesting," he says.

"What did you expect? Riccardo would outright tell you he's gunning for you? Not his style."

"Son, I am not the least bit concerned about Riccardo Genovese and whatever plan he's concocting. I found Milana *molto interessante*."

I'm not surprised. My father finds any woman with a nice rack and heart-shaped ass interesting.

"Apparently, she doesn't know her place."

Truth is, I found her interesting as well, but I despise that she caught my father's attention. I don't want him anywhere near her. I've witnessed the way he treats women. Fuck, the way he treats everyone. He's the king, and we're all supposed to be his loyal subjects. I don't want that for Millie.

"I want to put her in charge of overseeing the menu. I know a good idea when I hear one."

I snort out a laugh. “Is that so? I recall suggesting that very thing. What was your response then? ‘Men aren’t concerned with eating. They just want to win money.’ Fuck, even Riccardo made the same suggestion.”

“*Invidia* is not an attribute a Moretti man should have.”

“Let me be clear. I am not envious. I’m underappreciated.”

He laughs, fucking laughs. “And I was beginning to believe you weren’t a pussy. Such a shame.”

I clench my jaw in frustration, especially when he ends the conversation to answer the phone. It’s always the same old thing with him. Why am I even surprised? Nothing I do is good enough. Never has been.

“We have a problem,” he says, hanging up his phone. “Take us to the casino.”

“What kind of problem?”

“The kind where men think I won’t slice their fucking balls off.”

It always comes down to money and greed. Men want more than they have. In the betting world, they have the confidence they’ll win. Even when they don’t have the money to back up their bet. Never fails. My father is ruthless when it comes to money, especially when someone is trying to shit him out of it.

We arrive at the casino, a 5,600-square-foot business located beneath La Familia Grande, one of the many hotels we own. It’s the perfect cover for the casino, lots of people always coming and going—also the perfect way to launder money.

“Sir, it’s Malcolm again,” Duncan, the security for the evening, explains as we walk. “He came in claiming to pay his

debt from last week. Wanted to place another bet.”

“Did he pay?”

“No, sir. He asked for an extension on his credit line, making assurances his father was going to settle the debt. Now, he’s down over a hundred grand.”

“Where is he?”

“Still at the table. I didn’t want to cause a scene.”

My father stops walking and looks at Duncan. “When it comes to money, my fucking money, don’t ever be afraid to cause a scene.”

“Yes, sir.”

Duncan leads us to the roulette table where Malcolm is seated. The glass in front of him is empty, his eyes bloodshot and hair a mess from where he’s been running his fingers through it in frustration.

“Come with me,” my father says firmly.

Malcolm looks between the three of us and reluctantly rises. “My father is going to settle the debt. He’s on his way here now.”

“Good. He can take you to the hospital.”

“What? No!”

Malcolm tries to run, but I grab him, slinging him to the ground. Some of the patrons glance over at us, but no one intervenes. Before he can scramble to his feet, I grip his necktie and begin dragging him across the floor to the private room my father had made just for this purpose. It’s soundproof, windowless, and easy to clean. Coughing, Malcolm gets to his feet, panic in his eyes.

“A hundred thousand dollars, Malcolm. You think dear old dad is good for it?” Father asks. “I don’t think so. You see, your father made some bad investments. He’s broke. The only assets he has is the small amount of equity in the estate.”

Malcolm shakes his head frantically. “That’s not true.”

Only it is. Gilligan Arnold doesn’t have the means to pay his son’s debt. He’s been scrambling to make his own ends meet. He’s in serious debt with no means to pay it. Pretty soon, he’ll share the same fate as Malcolm.

“Take his thumbs.”

“No!”

Duncan casually walks over to the table in the corner and retrieves a bolt cutter. He moves toward Malcolm, but my father stops him. “Salvatore will do it.”

I take the bolt cutters and advance on Malcolm. He isn’t tied down or restrained, so I know he’s going to fight. I would fight if I were him, even if I knew this was inevitable. He takes a swing, and I clock him in the head with the bolt cutters. Dropping to his knees, he lets out a defeated cry. I use that opportunity to grab his right wrist, quickly snipping off his thumb.

There’s no fight left in him after that. He sobs and cries, clutching his hand to his chest. I don’t see the point in taking his other thumb. He’s learned his lesson. Losing a digit will do that for you.

“The other one,” Father says.

“He’s learned his lesson.”

“Son, when you are the head of this family, you can decide on leniency. Now, take his other thumb.”

That day is coming. I've been training for it my whole life.
I grab his hand and cut his other thumb off.

“Ben fatto, son. Well done.”

MILANA



I lick my lips, my heart pounding in my chest. My eyes can't read the words fast enough. Only a few chapters in, and I'm hooked, desperate to know what's going to happen with Caspian and Tatum. It's going to be explosive.

“*Signora*, you have a visitor.”

I consider ignoring him, but he'll just keep standing there until I respond. Reluctantly, I put my copy of *Mischief Night* by Delaney Foster on the table and get off the couch. I'm not really dressed for visitors, considering I'm wearing yoga pants and an oversized T-shirt that keeps falling off my shoulder. Maybe whoever it is will see how comfy I am and decide they're intruding on my relaxation time.

“Mr. Moretti, ma'am.”

This isn't Mr. Moretti. Stefano Moretti is who I think of when I hear Mr. Moretti. This is Sal. Salvatore.

“Hope I'm not interrupting anything.”

“Would it matter if you were?”

He grins, and I instantly regret not putting some decent clothes on. “Not at all.”

I cross my arms over my chest, the movement making the T-shirt slip farther down my shoulder. Heat fills his gaze, and I uncross my arms, standing up straight to see what kind of reaction I can get out of him.

“What can I do for you?”

That’s a loaded question. I’d really like to know what *he* can do for *me*. Thinking of him this way should feel wrong. I used to think of him as my brother. Now, the things I’m thinking are things you should never in a million years do with your brother.

“My father liked the idea of adding a menu to the casino. He wants you to come up with a proposal.”

“Doesn’t he have staff for that?”

“Are you declining his request?”

I shake my head. “Just trying to figure out why he chose me.”

Stefano Moretti doesn’t ask for help, certainly not from my family. He demands loyalty and respect, but help? Definitely not that.

“You should do it, Milana. It’ll be beneficial for your family.”

“How’s that?”

“When you present your proposal, make your demands. Your boldness is what caught my father’s attention. He’s challenging you.”

It caught my father’s attention as well. I was scolded for speaking up when it wasn’t my place to do so. My father feared I made him look weak in front of Stefano. How would he feel if I accepted Stefano’s request?

“I shouldn’t have said anything. All of you were talking business and I put my two cents in.”

“Jesus, you’re apologizing? I don’t recall you ever doing that before,” he teases. “Tell you what, we’ll brainstorm together over dinner.”

I laugh a little. “You and me?”

“We used to be inseparable.”

“I remember,” I reply. “Okay, we can brainstorm over dinner, but I get to pick the place.”

“I’ll pick you up at seven.”

“It’s a date.” My eyes go wide, and I shake my head. “Not like a date, date.”

He steps toward me, invading my personal space. Is this fun or torture? Still trying to decide.

“It’s a date, Milana.”

“Yes, sir,” I breathe out. Why in the world did I just say that?

Chuckling, Salvatore backs up, reminding me he’ll be here at seven. I opt not to respond, so I don’t say something ridiculous again.

SALVATORE



I pull up at the Genovese estate, and Milana walks outside before I can get out and go to the door. Clad in jeans and a T-shirt, she climbs into my passenger seat and looks at my suit, arching an eyebrow.

“You’re way overdressed.”

“Didn’t know we were going somewhere casual.”

“Brainstorming requires comfort. I know the perfect place.”

I drive off, one of my guys trailing us for protection. I’m somewhat shocked her father allowed her to leave without a guard. She tells me to take a left, being mysterious about where we’re going. Doesn’t bother me. Her excitement is enough. Makes me forget taking Malcolm’s thumbs. His screams. The blood.

My father believes I have to be more like him in order to be king. Willing to do whatever it takes. I convinced myself a long time ago I will never be like him. And would still be king.

Milana turns the radio down and angles herself toward me, breaking my train of thought.

“Tell me what you’ve been up to the past...I don’t know, several years.”

What have I been up to? Well, last night, I chopped off a guy’s thumbs. She doesn’t need to know that, though. I don’t want to see her disappointment.

“You know how our lives work.”

She nods. “I just thought we would both get out somehow.”

“You did, and you came back. Why’s that?”

“Are you saying you haven’t missed me?” she jokes.

I haven’t thought about that. When my mom died, I changed. I was angry and depressed and frustrated all at the same time. I had this knowledge that terrified me. Milana tried to help, but I shut her out. If I hadn’t, perhaps we could’ve escaped together.

“Turn right,” she instructs. “It’s ahead on the left.”

I follow her instructions, turning into a place called Yo Mama’s. It looks like a hole in the wall, with motorcycles parked out front with a few other patrons.

“This place?”

“Best fried chicken you’ll ever eat. Oh, and they have waffles, too.”

She climbs out of my car, then waits for me to get out and join her. I shed my coat, though even without it, I’m still way overdressed. We walk inside, ignoring the glares from the bikers. We don’t fit in here. We’re outsiders in their territory.

Milana finds an empty booth and grabs the menu the moment she sits down. I take a seat across from her, picking

up the other menu. When the waitress comes, we both order chicken and waffles with strawberry milkshakes. The nostalgia is damn near overwhelming. We're ten-year-old kids again, begging the chefs for strawberry milkshakes.

But we're not kids anymore. Life has changed us both. No amount of strawberry milkshakes can undo that.

"My father wants—"

"Eat first. Brainstorm later," she interrupts. "Tell me the last time you had a strawberry milkshake."

She's feeling the nostalgia too. I give her a shrug. "Don't remember."

"Such a liar."

"Fine. It was with you the day of my mother's funeral."

"Same."

I sip the sweet drink, letting the flavor soak into my tongue before swallowing. "Why'd you come back?"

"It was time to come home."

I know that's bullshit, but I'll let her have it. She could've stayed gone, lived her life. She was safe, free.

She came back for a reason. The only reason she would ever come back. Family.

MILANA



I finish off my second strawberry milkshake while Salvatore does the same. We've been here for nearly two hours. No brainstorming. Just catching up. I talked to him about school. He talked to me about the casino. The camaraderie we always shared is still there, but now, there's this underlying tension. Sexual tension.

“Okay, let's brainstorm,” I suggest, unsure if I want to start thinking of this as a date. “Most of the time, the men are busy with the card games, right? If we keep rounds of appetizers circulating, it will keep them minimally satisfied throughout the night. We can offer main courses and ensure the price is set to cover the cost. Hire some beautiful women to serve, and the men will tip well.”

“Sexist, are we?” he jokes.

“We both know what sells, and we're in the business to make money.”

“I agree. My father will want more. He'll want menus, chefs, pricing, the whole nine yards.”

I figured as much. “I'm too full to think of all that food.”

“Another brainstorming session?”

“Sure.”

He pays the check, despite my protests, then opens the passenger door for me once we get outside. Slipping inside the car, I wait for him to come around. I play with his radio while he drives, channel surfing until an old jazz song grabs my attention.

“You missed our turn.”

“No, I didn’t. You picked the first place. Now, it’s my turn.”

“And here I was thinking I was headed home to my book and vibrator.”

“Really?” Salvatore laughs.

“Did I say that out loud? Oh my God.” My cheeks heat in my mortification. What in the world is wrong with me?

“You never did have a filter.”

He pulls up to a gated building, enters a code, and we drive through, granted access. When we exit the car, he asks me to wait while he goes to talk to his guard, then returns, leading me to a private elevator and pressing the button for the top floor. The elevator opens to a suite, the room decorated in shades of black, gray, and red. The furniture is leather, expensive. The TV is nearly as large as the wall it’s on. The white orchids are the only feminine feature in the place.

“They’re beautiful.”

“My mother’s favorite.”

Mine, too. He eases my hair off my shoulder and leans down to kiss the curve of my neck. I sigh, resting against him as his hand skims my belly beneath my shirt before moving higher to cup my breast.

“I thought you brought me here to brainstorm?”

Salvatore unbuttons my jeans, dipping his hand inside to stroke my clit. I shudder, opening my legs to grant him better access.

“You’ll think better after you’ve had an orgasm...or two.”

He nips my ear and plunges two fingers into my cunt while shoving my jeans down with his free hand. I toe off my shoes and kick off my jeans, nearly falling over in the process. We both laugh, and he spins me to face him. That smile. So much like the guy I used to know.

“Perhaps we shouldn’t.”

He frowns. “Why is that?”

“It’ll only complicate things.”

“My whole life has been complicated, Milana. This isn’t complicated.”

Lifting me, I wrap my legs around his waist, and he carries me to his bedroom. He’s one hundred fucking percent right. This isn’t complicated at all.

SALVATORE



Fucking her will ruin our friendship. Those words run through my brain as I lower Milana to the floor and strip her naked. She drops to her knees, gazing up at me as she unbuckles my pants and frees my cock.

Friendship be damned. We haven't been friends in years.

Her lips close around me, and I let out a moan, slowly thrusting my hips. She sucks me, taking me deep to the back of her throat. I fist my fingers into her hair. She's a fucking goddess on her knees. She slows, pulling back, then licks my tip before taking me in again, bringing me to the brink.

Where'd the fuck she learn to do this? Honestly, I don't want to know. When she brings me to the brink again, I ease her back and pull her to her feet. I'll come in that pretty mouth of hers later. I shed my clothes, letting them join hers in a pile on the floor.

"Lay down and spread your legs wide. I want to see all of you."

Milana climbs onto the bed while I casually walk over to my nightstand and open the drawer, retrieving a condom. Laying on her back, she spreads her legs wide, completely unashamed. Her pussy glistens, wet and ready.

I sheathe myself, then join her, stroking my hands over her thighs and down her legs. Gripping her ankles, I raise them to rest on my shoulders. She lets out a moan as I push inside, her cunt taking me inch by inch. She gyrates her hips, rising to meet my thrusts.

“You like this, Millie? Like the way my dick slides into your wet pussy?”

“Yes, Sal,” she replies. “I fucking love it. And you love the way my cunt feels, don’t you?”

Fuck. “Yes.”

“Stop holding back. Fuck me hard. Fast. Deep. I want every damn inch of you. I want to ache from your cock.”

Jesus. This woman.

I pound into her and don’t hold back, diving in as deep as I can possibly go, giving her what she wants.

Of all the women I’ve been with, none of them fit around me the way she does. She grips the sheets, trying her best to keep her moans muffled. It’s the sexiest fucking thing I’ve ever seen. I dig my fingers into her hips and slam into her again and again until I come.

The temptation to collapse on the bed beside her, to hold her, is damn near overwhelming. Instead, I leave the bed and walk to my bathroom, disposing of the condom. When I return, she’s getting dressed. She picks up my clothes and brings them to me, grinning.

“I can definitely brainstorm now.”

I chuckle and slip my boxer briefs back on, not bothering with anything else.

Milana digs in my cabinet for a snack despite having just eaten only a few hours ago. She certainly isn't one of those women who act like they can't eat in front of a man. Opting for a bag of chips and a package of chocolate chip cookies—salty and sweet—she brings them to my couch and makes herself comfortable.

“Okay, so we need a menu and chefs who can cook it.”

“That's a start.”

We do some research on the top restaurants in the area, jotting down notes on their most liked appetizers and entrees. Neither of us has any issue poaching their chefs. It's nothing personal, after all. Our difficulty will be in finding a chef who can be bought and turn the other cheek at the fact they're working for an underground casino.

“We have to find a pastry chef, too. Desserts are a must,” she says, excitedly. “I'll reach out to these restaurants tomorrow and see who's willing to jump ship.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

“*Excellente.*”

“Milana, be honest. Why do you want to do this?”

“Your father asked me to.”

I roll my eyes. “That's not a valid reason. You wanted this before he ever asked.”

She nods. “I haven't quite found my place since I came back. I'm not sure what to do with myself. We both know what our families are, what we do. It's time I embraced that and stopped running from it.”

I hate that she's right. Neither of us really had a chance of becoming someone else. The future wasn't ours to plan.

MILANA



I walk into the house, trying to be as quiet as possible. Salvatore is already halfway down the drive. I lean against the door, taking in a deep breath.

Holy shit. I fucked my best friend. Okay, we haven't been close for a very long time. I haven't seen him in years. We haven't spoken either. We were just two adults who gave in to a carnal need. Who gave in to lust. There's nothing wrong with that. Well, lust is a sin, but the things Salvatore did to my body were downright heavenly.

"Long night?" my father asks, flipping the light on.

"Yes, sir. I apologize for coming in so late. Hope I didn't wake you."

"Did you think I brought you back home so you could spend your time *cazzo in giro* with Salvatore Moretti?"

"It wasn't like that," I reply, stepping past him to head to my room.

"My plans don't involve him."

I turn to face him. "Perhaps they should. He's always hated Stefano. He could be an ally."

“Don’t be blinded, *tesoro*. He may hate Stefano, but his loyalty lies with him.”

“Why did you bother asking me to come home if you aren’t going to let me help you? I thought you wanted to make a move against Stefano. This is how you do it. With Salvatore’s help. You can’t take him down alone.”

His jaw clenches, nostrils flare. “I know what the fuck I’m doing, Milana. This is a chess game. It takes calculated moves and risks. Stefano is an intelligent man. I cannot win the game if he knows my next move.”

I don’t even know his next move. Invite them to dinner again? Serve him steak and lobster next time?

“I understand,” I lie. “When you need me, I will do whatever it takes.”

He brushes his hand across my cheek. “That’s what I’m counting on.”

The look in his eyes is soulless. Not like the man who raised me. Who threatened to end the first boy who broke my heart. Who was present at every softball game. This man is different. I’m afraid to know what he has planned. Afraid it’s going to turn my world upside down, and I’ll never be able to set it right.

“*Padre?*”

“It’s late, *tesoro*.”

No more discussion. No more explanation. Just like that, when I have so many unanswered questions. What’s your next move? What role do I play? When will this be over?

“Good night, *Padre*.”

I find solace in my bedroom. When I left for college, my parents kept it the same — my books, clothes, and things. Of course, my style and book preferences have changed. I no longer wear crop tops and baggy jeans. My fictional crushes don't include Harry Potter and Ron Weasley. I much prefer the villains now. The morally gray alpha males who demand what they want and take it, no apologies. Men like Salvatore Moretti.

SALVATORE



I casually glance at my watch, annoyed my father is late. He set the damn meeting and doesn't even bother to show up. Meanwhile, Gilligan Arnold is fuming.

“His thumbs, Salvatore! You took my son's thumbs!”

“He owed a debt. The debt is now settled,” I reply calmly.

“You said you would be different from your old man.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “This conversation is not taking place here.”

Not in my father's home where I'm sure he's listening to every fucking word and watching everything we do. Stefano Moretti is always one step ahead. Riccardo won't make a move because my father will see it coming ten thousand miles away.

Me, though? He's been blind to the fact that I'm gunning for his seat. He may say he'll relinquish it to me one day, but there will never be a day he'll willingly step down. Doesn't matter how many thumbs I lop off.

“You made promises, and you treated my son like he was nothing.”

Slowly, I rise from my seat and approach him. “I’m a man of my word, Mr. Arnold. When I say I’ll slice your jugular with that letter opener, you should believe me.”

His face pales. He swallows hard. Without daring to utter another sound, he nods and sees himself out. I exhale, running a hand through my hair. That asshole could have ruined everything.

“Wow, you look stressed.”

Milana stands at the door, a half smile on her beautiful face. I didn’t even hear her come in.

“And you look *bellissima*.”

That half smile turns into a full-blown one as she approaches me. My gaze flickers to the camera in the corner. How often does he check the footage? I debate for a split second if I should stop her.

I lose that debate.

She threads her fingers through my belt loops and pulls me in for a kiss. Her tongue dances with mine, body arches against me. Three more seconds, and I’ll bend her over this fucking desk, hike her skirt up, and find out just how soaked her panties are. Reluctantly, I break away, hearing my father talking just outside the door.

“Later,” I promise, fixing my belt and stepping back as my father opens the door.

“Ms. Genovese, thank you for coming.”

“Thank you for having me,” she replies.

“You missed the meeting.”

My father glares at me, pissed I'm calling him out in front of Milana. "The only meeting that matters is the one I have right now. You're free to go. I'll take care of Ms. Genovese."

I brush my hand against hers as I walk past, the heat from our touch warming my skin. My father instructs her to have a seat, and I close the door, leaving the two of them behind, trying to shake the feeling that I've left a lamb alone with a lion.

MILANA



Be confident. I remind myself of this as I take a seat across from Stefano. He's relaxed in the chair, almost as though he isn't necessarily interested in what I have to say but is entertaining me regardless.

"You don't appear to be prepared, Ms. Genovese."

It would seem that way. I didn't bring a portfolio or documents. I don't have a slideshow prepared. I'm more of a hands-on type of girl.

"Don't worry, Mr. Moretti. I'm prepared. My driver is waiting out front for us."

He arches an eyebrow, curiosity getting the better of him. It's possible he has other meetings today. Plans that don't include my field trip. But he rises and escorts me outside.

We leave the Moretti estate behind, my driver knowing where we're going. When it comes to Stefano, telling him my idea wouldn't have been enough. Salvatore already told me he tried suggesting this very same thing to his father. He's a businessman. All about the money. He needs proof it's worth it.

"Mr. Moretti, I'm certain you're aware this is one the most popular restaurants in the city. Only the elite dine here. And

that's when they're able to score a reservation.”

We walk past the line and head inside, ignoring the frustrated glares as we're shown to our table. I basically had to promise my left titty for a reservation. Okay, not that extreme, but I did promise the host a credit to bet on the next game. Thanks to Salvatore, I was able to make that happen.

“Take in the atmosphere, Mr. Moretti. Notice how the people behave.” He looks around. People are ordering appetizers, desserts, and wines. “They appear happy, right? Food does that. Wine does that.”

Our waitress appears, a pretty blonde with big boobs and a bright smile. Mr. Moretti orders for us, not bothering to see if I like roasted duck.

“This isn't a casino, Ms. Genovese.”

“I'm aware. However, the atmosphere is the same. People come here to gather for a common purpose. Money. Satisfied customers spend more money. Distracted customers even more. There isn't a single unattractive server in this restaurant. Sex sells, and the men who come to your casino want to buy it. I'll be clear, I'm not suggesting you employ workers who are willing to sell it, but those who sell the idea of it. Let those men believe they have a chance by flaunting their money and wealth. The more they spend, the more attention they get. They can get their bellies full, and their egos stroked at the same time. All the while, you'll be making more money.”

The waitress returns with our drinks, ensuring us the food will be out soon. Mr. Moretti blatantly admires her ass as she walks away.

“My cut is ten percent.”

I don't have to explain myself. I'm bringing in the restaurant aspect and all that comes with it. The casino is all his.

"You get the restaurant up and running, and if there is a profit the first month, I'll agree to ten percent."

"And if we break even?"

"Then you failed."

It's a risk. Most restaurants don't turn a profit for a couple of years. Not with the start-up expenses and payroll. He's giving me one month. One month to prove myself.

"I won't fail."

SALVATORE



I review the bets placed this week, noting the high rollers who have a debt from previous losses. Gambling is addictive. Win once, you try to match that high. Not wanting to credit pure luck, you bet again. And again. Each time hoping for that big win. I'm not much of a gambler. Don't believe in luck. Sure as shit don't play games with my money.

Laughter interrupts my work. I recognize the sound and fight back the jealousy rising inside me. She's been with him all day. He blew off every damn meeting he scheduled, leaving me to handle business. It isn't that I'm not capable. It's the fact he didn't respect me enough to inform me he'd be gone.

"That sounds great to me," Milana says as they enter the office together.

My father takes her hand and brings it to his mouth, pressing a kiss to her skin. She doesn't flinch the way she did before.

"Until next time," he says, then turns to me. "I'll be meeting with Ms. Genovese at the casino tomorrow afternoon."

I'm proud of her for winning him over when I couldn't. My father has always had a weakness for the opposite sex. She's intelligent and determined. I hope he doesn't fuck that up.

"You have a meeting scheduled with our suppliers tomorrow."

He gives me a tight grin. "Handle it."

"I can come another day," she offers, clearly unwilling to be an inconvenience.

"No. My son will take care of it, especially if he plans to run things one day."

With that, he walks out, leaving me to take care of business. "Enjoy yourself?"

I'm unable to hide my annoyance.

"As a matter of fact, I did, but not as much as I enjoyed *our* date."

"You're calling them both dates?"

"Does it matter?" she asks, approaching me. She slides back onto the desk, placing one foot on each chair arm.

"You're right. It doesn't."

I stand up, stepping between her legs. I wanted her bent over this desk, but seeing her leaning back, being able to watch her, is better. Gliding my hands up her thighs, I find her pussy bare.

"Is this for me or for him?" I ask, slipping two fingers inside her hot cunt.

I don't want her to answer. I'd rather convince myself it's for me. And if he is listening somehow, I'd rather him wonder.

“You.”

She shudders as I press my thumb to her clit, massaging the sensitive bud. This is for me. Not my fucking father.

Milana sits up, unbuckling my pants and freeing my cock. She strokes the velvety head, smearing my pre-cum over the tip. I ease her back, pushing her legs open before thrusting inside her. She doesn't muffle her moans. Doesn't hide her cries of ecstasy. And when I come, I realize I was wrong about her.

She's not an innocent lamb. She's the fucking lion.

MILANA



I glance out the window, noticing Salvatore's car pulling into the lot. He steps out, rising to his six-foot-two height. As he walks, he adjusts his coat. I swear, no other man looks this damn good in a three-piece suit. The kid I grew up with preferred jeans.

“My apologies. My father couldn't make it as planned.”

“The suppliers, right?”

“Turns out they needed to see the boss. As you know, I'm not the boss. Right this way.”

He's all businesslike, behaving as though we haven't shared bodily fluids. Opening the door for me, he allows me to step inside before leading me to a service elevator. The casino isn't open right now, so there aren't any patrons there. It's empty, making the room seem cold.

“I suppose I should congratulate you.”

“I wouldn't go that far. I have one month to turn a profit.”

Salvatore chuckles, shaking his head. “He's trying to set you up for failure when he knows it's a great business venture. If you fail, he gets to keep pursuing it while you're out the ten percent you demanded.”

“Figured as much. But I don’t intend to fail.”

“Turning a profit won’t be so easy. Most restaurants fail their first year.”

I know he’s right. I’ve had the same exact doubts myself. But I refuse to fail. I’ve already drafted my budget, which I’ll have to tweak. My revenue predictions are on point.

“Great pep talk,” I reply dryly.

Salvatore grabs my arm. “I’m not here to give you a fucking pep talk. I don’t want to see you chewed up and spit out the way my father has done so many people.”

His sincerity makes me smile. Not so business-like anymore.

“I don’t want that to happen either,” I say. “By the way, thanks for helping me with the credit.”

“Not a problem.”

“Okay, the way I see it, the hotel already has everything we need for a restaurant. I don’t want to add the expense of a kitchen down here. We would need another entrance besides the guest elevator.”

“Shouldn’t be a problem. There’s a service elevator we can use.”

“I spoke with a few of the chefs we jotted down. In order for them to leave their current positions, we’d have to offer a substantial salary. It got me thinking. Why hire outside chefs when we have in-house chefs already? We could rotate the chefs who currently work at the hotel restaurant. Offer them a raise. Cut down costs.”

“Looks like you didn’t need that brainstorming session after all.”

“Definitely needed it,” I smirk.

“What about servers?”

“Hear me out. A friend of mine has a connection with the Femme Mystique escort service. Some of the girls are ready for something new.”

“You want to hire whores?”

I laugh. “No, I want to hire former escorts. They have a lot of experience handling rich men. If they make transactions on the side, that’s their business.”

“Good point. Do you need any renovations done down here?”

“Maybe a servers’ area where they can lounge while on break?” I suggest.

I survey the room, curious to see if there’s an area that would work. Spotting a door in the corner, I head over to it.

“What’s this room?”

Salvatore tries to stop me, but I’m already opening the door. The blood stains on the floor are the first thing I see. A chair is in the middle of the room, bolted to the floor, straps on the arms. A table is nearby. No telling what’s in the case.

“What *is* this?”

Salvatore shrugs. “Sometimes people don’t pay. Don’t worry. We won’t convert this into your lounge. We can use one of the VIP rooms for that.”

“Have you been in here? You know, to collect?”

“Yes.”

He doesn’t hesitate to answer. At least he’s honest with me —no point in sugarcoating the life we were born into. I know

exactly what happens in rooms like this.

People are destroyed.

SALVATORE



Milana's been quiet ever since we walked out of that room. Can't say I blame her. I don't like going in there myself. It has to be done, though. We both know that.

"Are you okay?"

She slows her pace, nodding her head. "Yes."

"You know how things can be in this business."

"Yes, I do. Just surprised, that's all."

I frown. "Surprised?"

"Things used to be so different for us. We had hopes, dreams. Plans outside our families. Now, we're both here doing exactly what they wanted us to do all along."

"You could leave again," I suggest.

With a half smile, she asks, "Desperate to get rid of me?"

I'm unsure how to tell her that's partially true. When she was away, she was safe. She was living her own life, most likely happy. Being back here only puts her in danger. I don't want that for her. Don't want her involved in what I know is to come.

“You know, I thought things would change as I got older. Figured the always-present threat of someone anxious to take down my father would cease. The families would accept he’s the leader and come together rather than plot his demise.”

“What do you think it would take to make that happen?”

“Honestly? I don’t know. My father’s been running things for so long, it’s difficult to question him. To suggest he should do things another way when his way has worked. The families have prospered, created businesses and obtained financial stability.”

I almost tell her what I’m planning. Almost tell her everything. But I can’t. That would mean involving her, and my goal is not to do that.

“Perhaps it *isn’t* working. Sure, money is great, but at what cost? The other families may recognize something he doesn’t.”

She’s too fucking smart. I’ve been telling my father this for years. There needs to be a change. We should treat the families as equals. Instead, my father takes a cut of all their profit, threatens to shut down their businesses, and has their family members maimed.

“Perhaps.”

“Take the casino, for example. Our families run the largest illegal gambling business in the state. It takes a team. But we don’t get an equal percentage or the profit.”

“We’re the ones taking all the risks.”

“You don’t have to. Your father chooses to do that. Why not enlist the other families to help? Use their guards, the guns, the muscle. Whatever you need. The burden shouldn’t fall solely on the Morettis.”

“Asking for help shows weakness. It’s not a trait my father has.”

If he asked the other families to pitch in on the dirty work, it’d give them an advantage. They’d assume my father couldn’t handle it. That *we* couldn’t handle it.

“Every man has a weakness, Salvatore.”

Pretty fucking sure I’ve found mine.

MILANA



I finish off the last bite of salmon and push my plate away. My father insisted we have dinner together. He was anxious to know how my meeting with Stefano went.

“He’s setting you up for failure, *tesoro*.”

“I’m aware. I don’t intend to fail, though.”

My father smiles, damn near appearing proud of me. He finishes his food, pushing his plate away much the way I did.

“I truly believe Salvatore is the way to accomplish your goals. He recognizes the families need change, possibly even new leadership.”

He shakes his head. “He is loyal to Stefano. I’m not willing to risk my life or

yours or your mother’s in the hopes he would take my side simply because you have a fondness for him. Don’t be *infantile*.”

“My judgment isn’t clouded by my fondness and I am not childish. I’ve known Salvatore for a long time.”

“You think you know him? Salvatore does anything Stefano bids him to, including using bolt cutters to chop off a man’s thumbs. He’s not the kid you once knew, *tesoro*. He’s as

ruthless as his father. And while I despise Stefano, at least he doesn't hide who and what he is."

As much as I want to believe that isn't true, my father is right. Salvatore is not the kid I once knew. Still, I think he would help us.

"You must trust me. I have a plan already in motion. It'll unite the families. Ensure our safety."

"I didn't realize we were in danger."

"We're always in danger."

"What about the other families? Do they feel the same?"

"I have allies. Milana, it's imperative you trust me. No matter what happens. I will always do what is best for you and your mother."

"I trust you, *Padre*. I simply wish you would tell me what's happening."

I uprooted the life I'd built to come here. Granted, it wasn't much. My apartment. A plant on its last life. A sexually unsatisfying relationship. But *I* had built it and hadn't relied on my father's name or money. I gave all that up to come home and help him, and he won't even tell me what he has planned.

"In time."

"Can I at least get a timeframe? Are we talking days, weeks, months...years?"

"In time, sweetheart. Everything is going to be *perfetto*. Now, how about dessert?"

I nod. "Sure."

He orders without asking what I prefer. Good thing I'm in the mood for chocolate. In fact, I'm always in the mood for

chocolate. The triple-decker chocolate fudge brownie just might brighten my mood.

We finish our meal, and my father stands first, helping me from my seat. Despite the conversation, I always enjoy spending time with my father. I don't do it often enough. Now that I'm home, I have the opportunity to rectify that.

Maybe if I spend enough time with him, he'll trust me and tell me his plans. Trust me the way he expects me to trust him.

SALVATORE



My jaw ticks, annoyed I'm out at three in the morning to settle a grown man's nerves. I don't have time for this shit, especially when Milana is naked in my bed. Jesus, I find myself craving her. Thinking of her when I shouldn't. Hard as a fucking rock fantasizing about her. I didn't give her a second thought while she was away. I simply hoped she was safe and happy. Now that she's here? My lust for her is insatiable.

"Things are not going as planned, Salvatore."

"You sound like Gilligan."

He scoffs. "You chopped off his son's thumbs!"

"He tried ripping us off," I reply with a shrug. "So, I'll tell you the same thing I told Gilligan. I am a man of my word."

"Prove it."

The fucking nerve. I've proven myself to the families over and over. My father may run things, but I'm the man in the background forming alliances and gaining loyalty. I'm the man they trust.

"This can't be rushed. Surely you know that."

“What I know is your father has issued an increase in his take, yet again. He wants twenty fucking percent of our profit. We all know what he’s doing! Ensuring the Moretti’s have enough money and power that you can wipe every damn body else out! Who needs the Arnolds and the Genoveses and the Russos? The fucking Morettis will own everything!”

Colvin Donovan is outraged. And with good reason. He’s been playing the game for years, giving my father whatever he demands. My father trusts him as an ally, and now, he’s trying to take everything from him. Stefano Moretti does want it all. And if my allies aren’t patient and don’t trust me, he’ll fucking have it.

“What I know is, I’ve spent years biding my time. Years in my father’s shadow, learning the business, making plans. I will not allow you or anyone else to fuck that up. Do not get in my way.”

My warning is clear. Fuck up, and I’ll kill you.

“It’s time we do this, Salvatore. The families need it.”

After my mother died, I was angry at the world. My entire life, everything I knew had been based on a lie. The man I’d looked up to, though I’m loath to admit it, wasn’t my father. Some stranger was, and I wouldn’t be granted the opportunity to meet him. Then her words sunk in.

And when the time is right, dethrone him.

I can’t be angry at my mother for straying. My father had done so right in front of her face for years. He hadn’t even attempted to hide his infidelity. My mother stayed because of me. Well, and because no one crosses Stefano Moretti.

Until me.

I've questioned it, postponed it, but the time is finally right. I'm ready. I've waited long enough to dethrone my father. To take his money. His power.

I will have it all.

No matter the destruction it causes.

MILANA



I use my toe to turn the faucet off and relax into the steamy water, letting the bubbles coat my chin. My body is exhausted. Okay, my mind is exhausted as well. I need to unwind.

I've been busting my ass at the casino the past two weeks. Stefano put me on a deadline. Be ready in two weeks, or the deal is off. My one-month deadline is already bullshit, but two weeks? It takes that long to train staff!

But tomorrow is the night, whether I'm ready or not. The casino is celebrating with a huge high-stakes poker game. All the families have been invited to play. Winner takes all.

And if I'm a total failure, everyone will know. Whether they'll care, I'm not sure. Thing is, I care. I'm not setting out to fail. I want this to work. For whatever reason, I need to prove to Stefano I can do this.

Frustrated, I mumble a curse to myself and close my eyes. I do have an ally in all this. Salvatore has been with me every step of the way. He offered advice when I asked for it and let me vent when I needed to. In between talking about business, we watched old nineties movies and vegged out on Chinese takeout and junk food. That same old friendship has

resurfaced, only now, there are benefits. Twelve-inch benefits that make my pussy ache.

I slip my fingers between my folds, anxious for some relief when my phone rings. Reluctantly, I dry my hands off and grab it from the stand. Salvatore.

“Please tell me you’re calling to let me know your father changed his mind. He’s going to be a reasonable businessman and give me more time.”

He laughs. “My father is never reasonable, Milana. Always remember that.”

“He’s proven that already.”

“You know, it doesn’t matter if you succeed or fail. He’s going to use your business ideas and take the credit. Cut you out completely. That’s the way he is.”

I’ve been afraid of that. It shouldn’t be important to me. The women in the families often bring profitable ideas to the table and don’t receive any credit. Why should I be any different? I sigh, shifting in the water so I’m sitting up more.

“Are you in the bathtub?”

“Yes.”

“Jesus, woman. What are you trying to do to me?”

That’s a damn good question. I have a better one: what are *we* doing? Men like Salvatore are supposed to get married and have kids to carry on their bloodline. Are we headed in that direction, or will I stand back and watch another woman walk down the aisle? Could he watch me marry another?

“I’m taking a bath. Soaking in bubbles that tickle my nipples. Rubbing a soft cloth over my pussy. Thinking of you.”

“I’ll be there in fifteen minutes.”

I burst out laughing, then realize he’s hung up. I suppose the real thing is a thousand times better than my imagination.

SALVATORE



The casino is full, the families all arriving for the big game. Everyone has a stake in it. In order to play, you have to be willing to sacrifice a piece of your empire. Not some shares in your company or a seat on the board, the whole fucking company, or something of equal value.

“You look sensational,” I compliment Milana, grabbing her arm to make her stop walking.

She takes a deep breath. She’s nervous, and I don’t blame her. Tonight is a big night for her. Although I know my father well enough to know he won’t honor their deal, I still want it to be successful for her.

“Thank you for last night. I needed that.”

I chuckle, releasing my hold on her arm. “You don’t ever have to thank me for an orgasm, Milana.”

Her cheeks blush as she smiles. “Some orgasms deserve a thank you.”

“In that case, thank you.”

She laughs, and for a moment, the stress of tonight isn’t a heavy weight on her shoulders. I wish again that she’d stayed away. She’s too fucking beautiful to be marred by the sins that run deep in this room.

“Are you playing tonight?”

I nod. “Yes. Each family is represented.”

“Hopefully this will bring some peace,” she suggests.

“Not likely. One family is going to win a massive hand. There can’t be peace when there are more losers than winners.”

“Then why play the game?”

“I suppose it’s worth it.”

A noise distracts her, someone calling her name. She politely excuses herself and walks off to a pretty brunette. The game is starting soon, so I need to focus. That’s difficult to do with her around.

Milana Genovese is all-consuming. Her touch lingers on my skin. Her scent is still in the air. Her voice echoes in my ears. I can’t do what needs to be done, consumed with thoughts of her.

Grabbing a glass of wine from a waitress, I head over to the main table. A few players are already seated, discussing business. I opt to stand back, take in my competitors. I’ve been playing cards since I was six years old. The majority of these men are twice my age. Still, they don’t stand a fucking chance. I have one goal: win.

“Lots of competition tonight,” my father states.

“Lots of rewards as well.”

“I trust you won’t disappoint me.”

“Trust is such a fickle thing.”

“Don’t fuck with me, Salvatore,” he warns, his tone serious.

“You won’t be disappointed, *Padre*.”

Like I said. I have one goal. I have to win.

Even if I’m winning it all for him.

MILANA



My feet hurt. My cheeks ache from plastering on a fake smile all evening. It's been a long night, but the game is finally winding down. In between checking waitresses and food orders, I've been watching the action.

Salvatore is seated at one end of the table, my father at the other. They're the final two left in the game. The dealer reveals the flop: king of spades, two of spades, jack of diamonds.

I study Salvatore and my father, looking for some kind of emotion. A tell. Neither of them give anything away. There's no way to know what's in their hands.

My father bets first, and Salvatore calls it. The turn card is a king of hearts. Interesting. If one of them is holding a king, or even one of the other cards, that's three of a kind. A nice hand in this game, considering there are no wild cards.

Being the aggressor, my father bets yet again and this time, Salvatore raises. He has more to bet, his chips stacking nearly double.

The river card is revealed. The ace of spades.

My father squirms. Barely, but I notice. He taps his cards with his finger,

contemplating his move. All in. Without a shred of emotion, Salvatore calls the same. I swallow hard, nervous. This could change everything. No. It *will* change everything. My father or Salvatore will finally have more power than Stefano.

“Three of a kind,” the dealer announces when my father lays down his cards. He was holding a king.

That’s a great hand! My father could win this!

“Flush takes the game.”

Salvatore stands, his cards on the table. He was holding pocket spades. He won. My heart pounds in my chest, unsure if I’m happy for him or disappointed for my father. The dealer pushes the chips over to Salvatore and hands him an envelope, my father’s name written across the front.

“Sweetheart, no matter what happens, please know I did this for us. For our family,” my father says, his grip on my arm tight. “I hope you understand.”

I furrow my brow, confused. “What are you talking about? What have you done?”

“Excellent game, gentlemen! Excellent game!” Stefano states, initiating a round of applause. “My son has already collected vacation homes, a yacht or two, and there was a jet, wasn’t it?” He chuckles as Salvatore opens the envelope. Stefano looks at my father and asks, “What have you contributed to this game, Riccardo?”

My father gives my arm another squeeze. “My daughter.”

The world seems to stop.

Salvatore doesn't even look at me, his gaze focused on the paper in his hands. I glare at my father. How could he do this? I'm not a prize to be won. I'm a human being! I haven't consented to this and refuse to be part of it.

"No, that can't be right," I mumble.

I'm desperate to scream out in protest but I've been raised not to cause a scene. I lean in close to my father, ensuring only he can hear me.

"Father, this is a mistake. What's happening?"

"Trust me, *tesoro*."

How the hell am I supposed to do that? He's bartered me! I blink back tears when my father joins the crowd in an applause.

It's Salvatore. This could be worse. So much worse. Slowly, I walk over to him, my fucking knees wobbly. Everyone is watching. I reach for his hand, but he pulls back.

"I'm sorry, Millie," he whispers.

Strong hands rest on my shoulders, rubbing my skin. Nausea ripples through me. This isn't happening. Can't be.

"I have to agree, Riccardo. Such a valuable possession," Stefano says, placing a kiss on my cheek. "And now, she's mine."

SALVATORE



The words on the paper sink in as my father kisses Milana's cheek.

Milana Genovese.

Riccardo gave up his own daughter. His own flesh and blood. I take a step back, leaving in order to allow my father to boast even though he didn't do a fucking thing. I won. And I have no official claim to the pot. It's the way it has to be. In order to destroy him, he has to continue thinking he's on top.

“Salvatore! Salvatore, wait!” Milana calls after me.

I can't stop. Can't face her right now. It's too soon. I'm too raw. I slip around the corner and press the button for the service elevator, needing to get the fuck out of here.

“So, that's it?” Milana asks, breathless when she reaches me. “It's over? Just like that?”

“What do you expect? It was always temporary.”

She frowns. “I didn't know what it was.”

“It was nothing.”

“You don't mean that. You can't mean that.”

“He won you, fair and square.”

“This is insane. *You* won me!”

“I didn’t—”

“You did, and you’re too fucking afraid to claim that—to claim *me*! You want change, Salvatore. You want change but you’re not willing to do anything to get it!”

“It’s not that simple, and you fucking know it. This is the life we live, Milana. This is the way it fucking is. The way it’s always fucking been! Arranged marriages have been happening with our families for decades. If it isn’t Stefano, it would be someone else.”

“It doesn’t have to be this way anymore! We can change it! The two of us!”

“Stop! Just stop!”

“I won’t do it,” she vows. “I won’t be part of this game. I’ll leave again.”

I shake my head. “And he’ll kill your father. Your mother.”

“I knew when I came back everything was going to change. I knew it and came back anyway. I was so fucking stupid.”

“This isn’t your fault.”

I reach out and take her hand, slowly pulling her to me. Tears glitter her eyes, her lips trembling. I trace my thumb over her bottom lip, wishing I could kiss her...wishing I could make all this go away.

Instead, I whisper another apology and take a step back inside the elevator. She watches me as the doors close, shutting me off from her. Rage bubbles inside me. I slam my fist into the wall, yelling out in anger. She’s no longer mine.

I hit the wall again.

She never was.

Again and again, until my knuckles are bloody and my throat is sore from yelling.

She belongs to him.

MILANA



The house is quiet when I arrive. My mother must be sleeping, and I assume my father is still at the casino. If I were him, I wouldn't want to show my face around here.

Rushing up the stairs, I grab my suitcase from the closet. Fuck all this. I'm getting the hell out of here. *And he'll kill your father. Your mother.*

My father made his bed. He can be the one to lie in it. Not me. And surely, Stefano would take pity on my mother.

I toss my clothes in as quickly as I can, desperate to go. Desperate to escape. This cannot be my fate. Stefano Morretti is a coldhearted, manipulative man. He only cares about himself.

"Sweetheart? Do you want me to help you pack?"

I turn around, facing my mother standing in my doorway. She wants to help me pack. Like all of this is normal.

"Do you love my father?"

She joins me, sitting down beside me. "I learned to. Being part of this family is not easy, my dear. But you are part of it, and there's no going back."

“But I can’t do this.”

“You can, and you will. Stefano Moretti can provide you a great life. Besides, you’re a strong, intelligent woman. You are a Genovese. We aren’t defeated easily.”

I rest my head on her shoulder, letting her rub my back the way she did when I was a girl. It used to make me feel as though everything was going to be okay. Not this time.

“No, I don’t want this.”

“I know. I wish there was something I could do. Some way I could change this for you. Your father...your father is ambitious and has plans. You were always part of those plans. We have to trust him.”

He’s told me this over and over. To trust him. After tonight, I simply can’t do that. I rise and grab the suitcase, ignoring my mother’s stricken look and protests.

“I’m not fucking doing this.”

If Salvatore had won me for himself, perhaps I would consider it. I’m already infatuated with him. He already knows every inch of my body. But Stefano? I can’t.

“Good. You’re already packed,” my father says, stepping inside before I can make my escape.

“Yes, but not for the Moretti estate. I’m leaving.”

I attempt to push past him. He strong-arms me, shoving me back. If he thinks I’m going willingly, he’s dead wrong.

“ You cannot make me do this!” I fight against my father, trying my damndest to get past him and down the stairs. If I can make it outside, I can be free. At least, that’s what I try to convince myself. I claw at him, scratching his face. Beat my

fists against his chest, kick his shins and knees. Undeterred, he manhandles me, keeping me from escaping.

“Take her suitcase,” he instructs the butler.

“No! If you want Stefano Moretti so badly, you go fuck him!”

The slap my father delivers sends me to my knees. Pain explodes through my eye. The metallic taste of blood fills my mouth. Without much effort, my father jerks me to my feet, tosses me over his shoulder, and makes his way down the stairs.

Coming back to my senses, I start fighting again. I slam my fists into his back and pull at his hair, screaming like a mad woman. He throws me to the floor, the impact knocking the breath from me.

“Stop this nonsense, Milana!” he yells, and tears roll down my cheeks.

The door opens and Stefano steps inside, patiently waiting for me.

“Don’t do this,” I plead with my father, but he ignores me, demanding that I rise to my feet.

I wipe away my tears and the blood from my lip before standing and smoothing my dress. I hate this. With every fiber of my being, I hate this. But my mother is right about one thing. I am strong and intelligent. I am a fucking Genovese. And we aren’t defeated easily.

My father reaches out to touch me but I avoid him. “You’ll understand why I did this one day.”

I shake my head. “I will never understand this.”

Without another word, Stefano leads me outside to his waiting car. My suitcase is placed in the trunk.

“I understand this is hard for you. Likely not the way you expected your evening to go.”

“That’s an understatement.”

“Although I understand, I will not tolerate that defiant behavior from you. You belong to me now. You’ll simply have to get used to the idea.”

I don’t argue with him. Instead, I keep quiet for the rest of the ride. I keep quiet when he shows me inside and to his bedroom. I don’t utter a sound as he strips off my clothes and shows me I’m no longer free. I flinch when he reaches up to touch my face, my cheek still throbbing.

“You don’t ever have to fear me, Milana,” he assures me. “But you will respect me. Get on the bed. I want you on your knees.”

I consider trying to make a run for it but that thought is fleeting. There’s nowhere to run to. There are guards everywhere and they don’t work for me.

Defeated, I do as he says, climbing onto the bed and settling on my knees. The bed dips as he joins me. His bare thighs rub against mine. His cock throbs against my pussy. And in one rough thrust, he’s seated deep inside me. That glimmer of freedom I thought I had is destroyed.

Tears roll down my cheeks. I belong to Stefano Moretti. And there isn’t a damn thing I can do about it.

SALVATORE



Stepping inside the kitchen, I swallow some Aspirin. I barely slept at all last night. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't erase thoughts of my father and Milana from my mind. I was fucking tormented imagining them in all the sexual positions we've shared. Even more tormented by the fact that I did this. I won her for him.

I place the glass in the sink just as she walks in. She's wearing a t-shirt and cotton pajama pants. Her long dark hair is down, but it doesn't cover the marks on her arms. Tiny bruises mar her perfect skin.

"How are you?"

She pours a cup of coffee. "How am I? Are you fucking serious right now?"

Facing me, she reveals that her right eye is bruised and her lip has been busted. I reach up, cupping her face.

"Did he do this?" I ask, and she pulls away from me. "If he hurt you—"

"You'll what, Salvatore? Come rescue me?"

One day.

"Good morning, *figlio*. Milana."

My father joins us and presses a kiss to Milana's forehead, pretending not to notice her body stiffening.

"You wanted me here at eight. Here I am."

"We need to finalize the documents from last night."

"Everything has been taken care of. I had the attorneys draft it all first thing this morning."

Figured I'd spend my time doing something useful since sleep wouldn't come. Besides, I knew he would ask me about it.

"Perfect. I knew you'd handle it. Cover my meetings today."

"I have plans," I lie.

"That's correct. You'll be covering my meetings while I take Milana shopping. She needs a wedding dress."

Her face goes pale. My jaw ticks.

"Marriage?" He nods. "You aren't a child anymore, Salvatore. And your mother has been dead a long time. It's time I remarry."

"I merely assumed if you had plans to remarry, you would've chosen one of your many consorts. Lord knows you've had plenty."

His gaze darkens. "None worthy of carrying my last name. Until now." He orders Milana to get ready. They'll be leaving within the hour.

"This is bullshit," I mutter once she's gone.

He slams his hand on the counter, anger radiating off him in waves.

“Your disrespect will not be tolerated. She will be my wife, and you will honor that. Am I clear?”

“I’m not calling her mother.”

He leans in close, his hot breath on my face. “And you certainly won’t be calling her yours.”

His warning is clear. He knows. He’s always known. The sadist in him relishes in the fact that he owns her.

And I can’t.

MILANA



When I was a little girl, I would fantasize about what my wedding would be like. Beautiful, white wedding gown. My mother's pearls. Sometimes it would be a big reception with a live band and lots of food. Other times, it would be more low-key.

What I never fantasized about was marrying a man nearly twice my age. A man who won me in a card game. A man I consider to be my enemy.

"I'm aware this arrangement isn't exactly conventional," Stefano says.

"Not at all."

"However, it is my intention to make the most of it. I'll provide you with everything you need, Milana. You won't desire anything."

Except your son.

"If you truly believe that, you must let me go. This isn't the way a marriage works."

"It is exactly the way marriage works with our families. You will fall in line, Milana. Just like your mother did."

"I'm not my mother."

“You’re right, *mio dolce*. You shall be so much more. As my wife, you’ll be able to relish in my power and money.”

“What about our business agreement?”

He smiles. “You made an excellent business proposition. The casino will absolutely see an increase in revenue. There’s no need for you to continue overseeing it. You’ll be my wife, Milana. That will be enough for you.”

Just like Salvatore warned. Stefano had no intention of honoring our agreement. He wants a damn trophy wife. I blink back tears, refusing to allow him to see me upset.

“I understand.”

He brushes his fingertips over my cheek. “I knew you would. Your father is going to regret giving you up so easily. He could’ve used you in his business.”

“We both know men don’t utilize women for business in our families. We’re more for decoration.”

He doesn’t seem to notice the bitterness in my tone. If he does, he doesn’t address it.

“We’re here.”

The driver pulls the car to a stop, and I wait while he exits then opens the door for me. Stefano steps over to me, holding out his arm. I slip my arm in his and fall into step beside him. He speaks quietly to the employee, no doubt throwing his power and authority around. This is Gilligan Arnold’s shop. Well, it’s most likely his wife’s shop, but like I said, women are more for decoration in our families.

“Milana, *mio caro*, there’s not an item in this shop you can’t have. Try on as many dresses as you wish. I’ll be back to pick you up in an hour.”

I won't be here. The moment he's gone, so am I. He presses a soft kiss to my cheek before leaving me in a room full of white wedding gowns. It should be every girl's dream. A no-limit shopping spree. But it's my nightmare.

As soon as the car pulls away, I head to the door only to be stopped by security. "Mr. Moretti will return in one hour."

"I'm not waiting." The guard crosses his arms, blocking the door and any chance I have at escape. "All of the doors are guarded. Mr. Moretti was clear with his instructions."

There will be more chances, I tell myself. I'll get out of this somehow. Gain his trust. Gain his love. Playing my part, I grab the first dress off the rack. A stunning A-line with a plunging backline.

"I'll try this one first."

Yes, it's my nightmare, but I'm going to fucking do it in style.

SALVATORE



I review the documents and file them in my father's safe, positive he'll check them when he gets in. He is a businessman, after all. A soon-to-be-married businessman.

All the years of friendship with Milana, I never imagined her getting married. Then again, it isn't like I imagined we would ever be married. She was just this constant in my life until my mom died. Then, I pushed her away. Perhaps things would be different if I hadn't.

I glance over at the photograph of my mother on my father's bookshelf. Funny how he's always had that picture there, even while he fucked other women in this room.

Will he do the same to Milana? Pretend to adore her while his attention is focused elsewhere?

"Damn it, Milana, why didn't you stay gone?" I mumble to myself and stand, getting ready to head to my place. The two of them can celebrate their upcoming nuptials without me.

"Going somewhere?" my father asks when I open the door. I wasn't hasty enough in my departure to miss them.

"Yes. Everything has been handled. The documents are in the safe."

“Good. Stay for dinner. We need to celebrate.”

I shake my head. “I’m good. Not feeling well.”

It isn’t exactly a lie. Seeing the two of them together churns my stomach. He opens his mouth to protest, but his phone rings. Without excusing himself, he walks inside, leaving Milana outside with me. My father’s driver is getting her bags out of the trunk.

“Don’t look at me like that,” she says, stopping right in front of me.

“Like what?”

“You know precisely what I mean, Salvatore.”

I resist the urge to reach out and touch her. To feel her soft skin on my fingertips.

“Like I’ve felt your tight cunt gripping my cock? Like I’ve heard you groan my name? Like I’ve jacked off to thoughts of you?”

She lets out a slight gasp. “Yes. Exactly like that. You don’t get to look at me like that.”

“I know.”

With that, I walk past her, grazing the back of her hand with mine. I don’t look back. Can’t. There’s too much of a possibility she’s watching me. If that’s the case, I’ll never want to leave.

Getting into my car, I drive off, seeing her step inside the house from my rearview mirror. I make some phone calls while I’m on the road. Things need to move faster. Much faster. Otherwise, I’ll be watching the woman I want marry the man I hate.

MILANA



Stefano's driver places all my bags into the room the late Mrs. Moretti occupied. It's where all my other belongings have been placed. Salvatore used to sit with her while she was sick, reading and listening to music. I would join them occasionally. Sometimes we'd play board games or cards while she slept. It feels odd being in here without her. Without Salvatore.

"It's time someone else occupied this room," Stefano says.

"I don't need something this extravagant. I'm certain your other employees don't sleep on four-poster beds."

"Is that how you see yourself, Milana? As an employee?"

"How should I see myself? Wait, perhaps as a slave. It's not like I'm getting paid."

"Enough," he says through clenched teeth, then his tone softens, once again hiding the tyrant that he is. "Make yourself at home."

"I'd rather be placed in another room. I'm certain this is a special place for Salvatore and I don't want to intrude on that."

He frowns. "Salvatore hasn't been inside this room since his mother died."

His tone makes him sound as though he were fond of her. All I remember is the two of them barely speaking. When she became bedridden, he avoided her as though her cancer were contagious.

“*Mio caro*, I will always take care of you.”

To him, that’s all that matters. To him, that is fondness. He couldn’t be more wrong. It requires so much more than material things. It takes love. And this isn’t love. Far from it.

“I’m going to go take a bath,” I say to excuse myself.

He nods. “I have some work to do. I’ll be finished by ten.”

It’s his subtle way of telling me to be waiting in his bedroom. I learned that right away. Last night, I was allowed to shower while he worked, then he had me join him in his room. At least here I can have the privilege of not sleeping by his side again.

I stare out the window a moment, considering what would happen if I pushed it open and jumped. I want to live. Not die from falling from a three-story bedroom.

Closing the door to the bathroom, I lock it behind me, although that’s probably pointless. I let the water reach a nearly scalding temperature, then put the plug in and pour some bath wash in to create bubbles.

When I sink down in the tub, I’m reminded of my conversation with Salvatore. How I told him I was naked, and he came to me. Things were simpler then. For a short time, we were all that mattered. Before I can change my mind, I grab my phone and call him.

“Milana? Are you okay?”

“I hate this.”

“Me too.”

“But you’ve accepted it,” I accuse.

He doesn’t respond to that, which makes the pain that much more unbearable.

“I thought I could do this...for my parents. But I can’t. I have to get away somehow.”

“You know that I’ll help you run if that’s what you truly want. Your father can deal with the fall out.”

He means it. He’ll help me. And if I run, my parents will most likely be killed. I can’t do that, despite their actions. There has to be another way. I have to find another way.

“Milana?”

“Do you miss me?”

I’m changing the subject and fishing for compliments, attention. I want him to miss me. Because I miss him. Not only the sex. Although, I do miss that. Being with Stefano feels degrading. And I can only pretend so much. I miss the conversations I had with Salvatore. The companionship.

“Yes.”

“Can you see me here? I mean, from the cameras?”

He’s quiet a moment, then finally answers, “If I wanted to.”

“But you don’t.”

“I won’t. Good night, Milana.”

He disconnects, and I toss the phone to the floor, letting the tears fall.

SALVATORE



Can you see me?

Jesus, it hadn't even occurred to me. My father invades others' privacy. Not me. Although I've had access for years, I've chosen not to check the cameras. Had no reason to before. I do now.

Her voice on the phone was tortured. She was in the bathtub again, but there wasn't a playfulness to her tone. I stood there listening to her, knowing she was naked, my cock hard as stone. And I disconnected, knowing the conversation was going somewhere I didn't want it to.

Yes, I fucking miss her. Every damn thing about her. But she's his now. If I try to take her, he'll kill us both. That's not part of my plans.

Still, an hour later, I find myself opening the home security app on my phone. My mom's birthday is the passcode. He hasn't bothered to change it. I lay back on my pillows, flipping from one camera view to the next. The kitchen. The library. The office. His bedroom.

A groan fills my ears. *His* fucking moan. I try to avert my gaze, but I'm drawn to the screen. It's like watching a car crash. You don't want to see it but can't look away.

“Fuck me, sweetheart. Ride my cock. That’s it, baby.”

Milana grinds on him, her movements slow and seductive. He pistons his hips, roughly squeezing her ass.

I’ve been there. Been so desperate to come while she fucked me slowly and deliberately. I reach one hand beneath my sheets and grip my dick, stroking in sync with her pace. Unable to keep my eyes off her.

She arches her body, her head falling back. The camera is right above her, providing me with a perfect view of her tits. She opens her eyes, her green gaze capturing my own. She knows I’m watching. She wants me watching. Wants to torture me with the fact that I did this. This is all my fault.

Tears streak down her cheeks, damn near breaking me. Then, she licks her lips, staring at the camera while she fucks him. I stroke my dick harder, faster, as if punishing it for letting her go.

Bringing her fingers to her mouth, she sucks them in one by one, then licks her middle finger, flipping me off, before trailing it down her body.

Fuck you, Salvatore.

She mouths the words, and I come all over my sheets.

MILANA



The next two weeks go by almost in a blur. I've spent the majority of my time in my bedroom, keeping my distance from Stefano as much as possible. The rest of my time has been spent shopping. He's tasked me with planning our wedding. I've used it as an excuse to avoid him.

My mother has been helping me but I'm lacking motivation. I can't say he's been unkind to me. That's not the case. If anything, he seems to be going out of his way to accommodate me. I keep waiting for that to change. For him to show me the real him lurking beneath the surface.

I don't love him and it's not possible that I ever will. He won me as a prize and he's treated me like a sex slave. He says this is normal, but there isn't a damn thing normal about this situation. It doesn't matter that this is common in our families. It shouldn't be. Women shouldn't be treated like cattle.

The money, the power...it's irrelevant. It won't change the fact that he's raped and held me captive. It won't change the fact that my parents are allowing this to happen. And it sure as hell won't change the fact that I'm in love with Salvatore.

Somewhere between the late night movies and take out, I fell in love with Salvatore. Marrying his father — no matter how it was arranged—is wrong in thousands of ways.

“Are you okay, *tesoro*?” my mother asks.

We’re at a cake tasting, and I have no appetite. I’ve told myself to be strong. I’m a Genovese, and we don’t run from adversity. I can do this. I can find a way out of this.

But I can’t. I don’t want to sound childish by whining about how unfair this is, but dammit, it’s fucking unfair. Why am I paying for the sins of my father?

“I’m marrying a man nearly twice my age that I don’t love. Am I supposed to be okay?”

“You’ll learn to love him.”

“No, I won’t. Honestly, *Madre*, you shouldn’t expect me to. You should want more for me.”

This isn’t the conversation I want to have with her. I want her to be my mother. To tell me I don’t have to do this. That she won’t go along with forcing me into a loveless marriage.

“*Tesoro*, this is a good match. A marriage to Stefano sets you up for life.”

“That’s what I don’t understand, *Madre*. Our family is already set for life. I don’t need Stefano for that.”

“Your father wouldn’t have made this arrangement if he didn’t believe it’s what’s best for you, for all of us.”

“I’m in love with Salvatore.”

She looks around nervously, seeing who could be listening to us. No one is paying us any attention. We look exactly as we should. Like a mother/daughter duo at a cake tasting.

“You cannot say things like that.”

“I can’t speak the truth? Please don’t take that away from me, *Madre*. Not with you. You told me to be strong. To be a

Genovese. You're asking too much of me with this marriage."

Reaching across the table, she takes my hand and gives me a sympathetic look. She didn't love my father when she married him. She may have grown to love him, but she was forced into it. Family alliances, money, and power always factor in.

"You can always talk to me. You know that. And I will always tell you the truth, even if it isn't what you want to hear. You belong to Stefano Moretti. Doesn't mean you have to give up everything you love."

"Are you saying I should—"

"I'm not saying anything except for you to do whatever it takes to be happy."

Salvatore is what makes me happy. If I did whatever it takes to be happy, I'd be putting us all in danger. Is he worth it?

SALVATORE



I've done my damndest to avoid my father's house ever since I watched him fucking Milana. Ever since I jacked off to him fucking her. If I don't distance myself, that will become my obsession, and it'll ruin everything I've planned.

"Do you have it ready?"

The attorney nods his head. "Listen, Mr. Moretti, I'm aware you understand the risks I've taken. If it weren't for my son, I wouldn't be doing this."

"I understand. I'll wire the money today. Get your son the treatment he needs."

I preyed on this man's weakness. His son needs a heart transplant. This is how he accomplishes that. The documents in my father's safe are fakes.

"Thank you. Best of luck."

I don't need luck. I need a damn miracle to pull this off and make it out alive. If that doesn't happen, I'll fucking take my father down with me. Standing up, I shake his hand before walking out. I don't plan to ever see him again.

I'm nearly to my car when my phone rings. My father. Reluctantly, I answer, knowing I can't avoid him forever.

“Come to the house. We need to talk.”

“I’m busy,” I lie.

“Be here within an hour.”

He disconnects with that order. Rather than go home, I go ahead and drive in the direction of the Moretti estate, anxious to get this over with. I walk inside, the scent of something baking in the air. I peek inside the office and find it empty.

I walk to the kitchen, curious what has the house smelling so good. Milana stands at the counter, spreading icing on what looks to be a carrot cake. She jumps when she finds me watching her.

“You scared the shit out of me. I thought I was finally alone in this house. Well, as alone as I can possibly be when I’m being watched twenty-four/seven.”

“I apologize. Carrot cake?”

She nods. “I needed a distraction. Baking it is.”

I approach her, eyeing her handiwork. “Looks delicious.”

I didn’t mean to get this close. Close enough to smell her perfume. Close enough to see her lips part. Hear her sharp intake of breath.

I’m fucking mesmerized as she takes her finger and scoops some icing onto it. She raises it to my lips, and I suck her finger inside my mouth, licking the sweet concoction from the tip.

Her cheeks tint pink, eyes hood with desire. How am I supposed to stand back and watch him marry her? She’s every damn thing I crave.

“Why are we torturing ourselves?” she asks.

“You know why.”

She sighs. “I know, but why can’t we say fuck it? To hell with our fathers and their impossible expectations of us. They don’t get to decide our futures.”

“Because that’s not the way this works.”

“You’re right. We’re supposed to pretend this is what we want. Me fucking your father, and you watching me do it.”

I start to say I hate it as much as she does, but my father walks in. He saunters right up to her and pulls her reluctant body into his arms.

“You weren’t in the office.”

He grins. “I didn’t call you here for a business meeting. Milana and I have set a date for the wedding. I want you to be my best man, Salvatore.”

She looks at me with sad eyes. Pained eyes.

“I’d be honored.”

But my father is wrong. This *is* absolutely about business, and Milana is simply another transaction to him.

MILANA



He'd be honored. *Honored*. Damn, he's a good liar. Or am I just that fucking stupid? Did he know what he was winning?

“If you're finished here, we're going to the casino tonight. We haven't made an appearance lately. Join us?”

Stefano looks to Salvatore, awaiting a response. We haven't been to the casino since he won me in the poker game. Guess he didn't want to show off his prize.

“Sure,” Salvatore answers.

I finish icing the cake and put it on a dish. So much for vegging out with carrot cake and Hallmark cozy mysteries.

“I prefer to stay here. Let you boys go have your fun.”

Stefano's jaw ticks. “Get ready. That's not a request.”

Annoyed, I remove the apron and toss it onto the counter. “I'll be ready shortly.”

Shortly is thirty minutes. I put on some light makeup, leave my hair down in long waves, and slip on a sleek black dress and heels. Considering I'm not in the mood for an outing, I think I clean up well.

“Stunning,” Stefano says, holding out his arm for me. He leans in, nipping my earlobe. “I can’t wait to strip this off you later.”

His words do nothing to arouse me. I wish they did. I’m aching for a good orgasm. All the more reason I’m living in a damn nightmare.

We stop by to get Salvatore from the office. The two of them are always working. I suppose running an illegal casino and owning a share in dozens of businesses will keep you busy.

I ride in silence, allowing the two of them to talk while pretending not to listen. Salvatore thinks Stefano should make amends with Gilligan. Why? I’m not sure on that, but I assume it has something to do with Malcolm missing his thumbs.

Once inside the casino, I’m like a trophy at Stefano’s side. The men make lewd comments under their breath, thinking I don’t hear them talking about how lucky Stefano is to share his bed with me. Yeah, he gets to come. I suppose he is lucky.

When he starts talking business, I quietly excuse myself. I chat with some of the waitresses, ensuring everything is going well for them. I knew this would be a success, and I don’t even get to claim credit.

As if reading my mind, Salvatore walks up and says, “You did a good job.”

“Glad someone noticed.”

He laughs a little. “I always notice you, Milana.”

I clench my jaw. “Is that right? Did you notice me come all over your dad’s dick?”

I'm being vulgar and rude and just...fuck it. I don't care anymore. I walk past him and out of the casino, straight to the elevator.

Everything I had, and hoped for, has been stripped from me as easily as my clothes. I've earned the right to be vulgar and rude. I've earned the right to say fuck it. Now, I just want to get the hell out of here.

"You were faking," Salvatore accuses, catching the elevator door before it closes. Once it does, he presses a button, locking the doors.

"Was I?" I ask. "Oh God! Oh yes! Fuck! Oooh! Wait a minute. I made those sounds with you, didn't I?"

Salvatore's hand is around my throat in a split second, shoving me back against the elevator wall. He's damn near trembling with anger but also aroused. His hard cock rubs my core. I do my best not to moan in ecstasy.

"You forget how well I know you, Millie," he says, reaching between us to unbuckle his pants. "I know your eyes go a darker shade of green when you're turned on. Just like they are now."

He hikes my dress up and rips my panties off, letting the tattered lace fall to the floor. When he thrusts two fingers inside me, I whimper.

"And that. You whimper when *I* touch your sweet pussy. And you groan when *I* fuck it."

He lifts me, urging me to wrap my legs around his waist as he drives inside me. I groan. Just like he knew I would. He fucks me hard, wild, relentless. I love every damn second of it.

Yes, everything I had and hoped for has been stripped from me.

Except this.

I lose all track of time as he drives into me. All I know is I don't ever want this to stop. My body reaches a crescendo, the orgasm sweeping over me. I moan out his name, and he does the same with his release.

My hair is a mess, breathing labored. He presses his forehead to mine, staying inside me while we both catch our breath. My heart pounds in my chest as he lowers me to the floor. My damn knees are wobbly.

“Fuck,” Salvatore mumbles, shaking his head.

That's exactly what we did. Fuck. And it was incredible. I hate that he regrets it. I don't. I can't. Not when I needed it. Needed him.

“Regret is a waste of time.”

He faces me, his brow furrowed. “Regret? I don't regret what just happened, Millie.”

“Then what?”

He runs a hand through his hair. “I regret that I can't save you. That I put you in this mess.”

I roll my eyes. “I put myself in this mess. I knew my life would change the moment I agreed to come home. You didn't do this to me. And I don't need you to save me.”

It's time I save myself. To hell with the consequences.

SALVATORE



Knowing we've been missing long enough, I press the button to unlock the elevator. Milana smooths out her dress and fixes her hair and lipstick the best she can, still looking freshly fucked. She pulls it off well.

“You won't belong to him forever,” I vow.

“Only until death do us part.”

His, not hers. The sooner, the fucking better. I need to move things along. I've been patient long enough. Knowing he's with her, has plans to marry her, well...that changes things. My timeline went from years to only months. Maybe weeks.

“Do you trust me, Millie?”

“Trusting you won't change anything. Stefano has all the power.”

The doors open. Her father stands there, his eyes narrow accusingly as she steps out and walks right past him. The tension between them is so thick, you could cut it with a knife. He should chase after her. Try to make amends.

“Mr. Genovese.”

He steps inside the elevator and waits until the doors close before letting me have it.

“It wreaks of sex in here! What the fuck were you thinking putting your hands on my daughter?”

“As opposed to my father doing it?”

We shouldn't hate people. I know that. Doesn't mean I don't fucking despise this man with every part of my being.

“You started this whole thing, Salvatore. You don't get to be upset when things go exactly the way *you* wanted them to.”

“She shouldn't have been part of this! How could you give her up so easily?”

He shakes his head, his expression saddened. “You should be asking yourself that.”

I am. Every single day. I did this. I won her, knowing I was playing for him the entire time. I'm one hundred percent to blame.

“Are the documents completed?” he asks, referring to the real docs the attorney drafted.

“Yes.”

“And the fakes?”

“In his safe. Listen, when this is all said and done, business between us is over. Don't come back to the casino. Don't come near me at all.”

“That wasn't the agreement.”

No, it wasn't. He's played his part. The new identity the attorney needed came from Riccardo's connections. Doesn't mean I want to continue business with him.

“It is now. Milana goes free. So do you.”

He understands my meaning. Still breathing or not is his choice. Either way, I'm finished with him.

MILANA



I've barely had time to compose myself before walking back into the casino. My father knows. There's no way he couldn't. Do I care? Absolutely not. He knew I was involved with Salvatore when he bartered me.

Was that his plan the entire time? Bring me home so he could sell me off? Makes me wonder what he would've done had I not come home. Put my mother on the list instead?

"Where have you been?" Stefano questions, quipping my arm tightly.

"I was stuck in the elevator."

Not entirely a lie. No need in telling him I fucked his son and loved every damn second of it.

"Don't make me wonder where you are again."

His tone is threatening, intimidating.

"Careful, Stefano. Your true colors are showing."

I know exactly who Stefano Moretti is. He's the man who cheated on his dying wife. The man who had Malcolm Arnold's thumbs chopped off. The man who sees me as weak and inferior. He's wrong about that.

“You be careful, *mio dolce*. Or I’ll show you exactly what it means to be my slave.”

He releases my arm, and the blood begins to circulate again. I reach up and rub the sore area, knowing it’s going to bruise. He slips his arm around my waist. His facade falling back into place.

To everyone in this room, we appear to be this happy couple. I’ve accepted my fate as Stefano’s bride-to-be. That couldn’t be further from the truth.

Being with Salvatore in the elevator made me realize I can’t stay here to save my parents. They’ve done nothing to save me. And I don’t deserve this fate.

Stefano picks up a glass of wine and a fork from a waitress’ tray and clinks them together, gaining everyone’s attention.

“I hope you are all enjoying yourselves and spending a lot of money.” A chuckle rumbles through the crowd. “I have a special announcement. I am marrying Milana Genovese this Sunday at two o’clock. We would be honored if you all would attend. Right, *mio caro*?”

I swallow hard, trying to find my voice. Stefano squeezes my hand to the point it seems as though my fingers may break. My eyes lock on Salvatore in the crowd. Anger emanates off him. It pisses me off. He could’ve claimed me for himself. *Should’ve* claimed me for himself. But he didn’t. He’ll never stand up to his father. The same way I’ve never stood up to mine.

“Yes, we’d be honored.”

Weak. Inferior. I don’t want to be these things. I *refuse* to be these things. While everyone claps and congratulates us for

our upcoming nuptials, I make a plan to get out of this. Dead or alive. I just need to be free.

SALVATORE



Sunday. Fuck, that really cuts my time in half. What the hell is he trying to prove?

“Can you get it done or not?”

Gilligan Arnold paces the parking lot. It’s two o’clock in the morning. The place is empty, as it should be at this hour. No surveillance cameras in sight. It’s underground parking for an old fabric company that shut down years ago.

When I called him to meet with me, he was hesitant. Fearful this plan of mine is going to get us all killed. So be it. Stefano has to be taken down, whatever means necessary.

“I can try.”

“You can try? That’s not good enough.”

After the whole thing with chopping off Malcolm’s thumbs, I advised him to complain about my father’s ethics. Downplay the amount owed as a minimum bet. Make it look like Stefano Moretti didn’t have mercy or compassion for fellow family.

He did that. Gained the sympathy of the other families. Suggested change. Invoked fear that Stefano won’t stop with his son. That he’s too greedy and power hungry.

Now, I want him to do more. No, I *need* him to do more. Call it a test of his loyalty if you want. Spreading rumors doesn't prove anything. He has to be willing to get his hands dirty. If he can't do that, he can't be an ally of mine.

"You want me to start a damn war, Salvatore. That's what you're asking me to do."

"I'm starting the war. You're simply choosing sides."

He shakes his head, glancing at the trunk of the car. The man inside is far from innocent. He's the head of the Colombo family and one of Stefano's closest allies. On the rare occasion Stefano doesn't want to get his hands dirty, he goes to Angelo Colombo. He's damn near as big a threat.

"I can't. I won't! You're trying to get us all killed! *Fottiti!*"

"Screw me? You really think Stefano will stop with your son's thumbs? He's already indebted to us again!"

Panicking, he reaches for his phone. I lunge to stop him before he can make a call. There's no way in hell this man is ruining my fucking plans. What I've worked for.

His phone falls to the pavement, the screen shattering. I keep my arm wrapped tightly around his neck, slowly lowering him to the ground as I choke him. He kicks and struggles, doing his best to get free, but it's not happening.

I wait until he stops fighting, stops breathing before I let go. This wasn't the plan. He was supposed to kill Angelo to prove his loyalty to me, then go back to his gossiping, tell everyone Stefano ordered the hit. See where *their* loyalty really lay. See if they were ready to make a move against Stefano. See if they were ready for change...with me.

Oh fucking well. Best laid plans don't always work out. I get the keys and open the trunk. Angelo looks relieved to see

me until I aim my gun at him. If you want something done right, you have to do it yourself. I pull the trigger.

MILANA



I close my book, knowing sleep isn't coming. It's the middle of the night, and I'm not even tired. My mind keeps going back to what happened.

The elevator.

The wedding announcement.

How did I get myself into this? By trusting my father, that's how. There was a time I truly believed he had my best interest at heart. The times he would blow off a meeting to come to my dance recital. Or when he gave me his blessing to leave home and go to school. But now? Now, I believe he's just as selfish as Stefano.

But this will all be over Sunday. I'm not marrying Stefano. He's promised that I have tomorrow night to myself. The whole bad luck to see the bride before the wedding tradition and I'm using it to my advantage. One last dress fitting. I'll make my escape then.

I climb out of bed, figuring I can grab myself a late-night snack and find a movie to watch to help pass the time and calm my nerves. I'm at the foot of the bed when I stub my toe, letting out a mumbled curse. Toe throbbing, I find the culprit

as a loose floorboard. I'm damn lucky I haven't tripped on it before.

Bending down, I try to push the board back into place, but it doesn't budge. I don't notice any other loose boards. Instead of pushing down, I try pulling it up. It takes a few minutes, but I eventually wrestle it up. I look down. Stashed inside is what looks to be an old treasure box. I remember Salvatore's mom having this box. We would sit around debating what she kept inside. Jewelry. Money.

Reaching in, I ease the dusty box out and open it, finding some papers inside. No jewelry. No money. No hidden treasure.

There are deeds and stocks, all belonging to Salvatore's mother. I assume they belong to him or Stefano now. Depends on what her last will and testament stipulated, if she had one. If she left all of this to Salvatore, he's a very wealthy man. Possibly even more so than Stefano.

Paternity.

I read over the document, shocked to find out the truth about the man I've fallen for. He's not a Moretti. Never was. I wonder if he knows. If his mother ever told him. Surely if she did, he wouldn't be so loyal to Stefano. Would he?

And it isn't possible Stefano knows. He wouldn't have raised Salvatore as his own. Wouldn't have brought him into the family business the way he has. No. He would've rejected him. I don't have a doubt about that.

I continue sorting through the documents. A certificate of death for Salvatore's biological father. Sad, he probably never met the man.

Then, I come across Victoria Moretti's last will and testament, dated only two days before she died.

I suppose there was hidden treasure in this box after all. I just have to decide what I'll do with it. Make my escape or expose her secrets and destroy the Moretti family?

SALVATORE



It doesn't take long for news of two murders to circulate. Nothing stays a secret in this city for long — especially murder among the families.

“What are the families saying?” my father asks, lighting one of his cigars.

“It isn't good,” I answer. “Everyone knows you had a disagreement with Angelo at the casino last night. And it isn't like you and Gilligan were on good terms. You did have his son's thumbs chopped off.”

My father scowls. “Someone is framing me.”

I shrug. “Been warning you for a while something like this was going to happen. You didn't listen. Loyalty is fickle when people believe you're betraying them. The Colombos want blood. So do the Arnolds.”

His eyes narrow. “Angelo warned me as well. Said I had a traitor in my midst. Now, he's dead.”

“What's your plan?” I ask, ignoring his comment.

He paces the room, thinking of how he should handle this while he smokes his cigar. Before he can answer, we're interrupted by a knock on the door. Milana walks inside, my father's driver at her side.

“I’m going to my final dress fitting.”

She doesn’t look at me, but I can’t keep my eyes off her. Her long blonde hair is down in soft waves. A pair of sunglasses rest on her head. The jeans she’s wearing are casual, but she’s paired them with a silk blouse and stilettos, classing them up. She’s too damn good for my father. Hell, she’s too damn good for me.

“Be back in two hours, *amore mio*.”

She nods and gives him a rehearsed kiss on the cheek. As she walks out, her hand casually brushes against mine. It’s a small gesture, fleeting, but the warmth remains. The elevator was too quick. Too rushed. It didn’t satisfy the craving I have for that woman. I doubt it will ever be truly satisfied.

Once the door closes, my father glares at me. He’s reminded me enough times Milana belongs to him. That I can’t have her. We’ll see about that.

When he’s rotting in the ground, she’ll be free of him. *I* will be free of him. And there will be nothing stopping me from claiming what’s mine.

“Contact everyone. I want them at the casino by six o’clock. Get rid of any outsiders. This is a family matter.”

I roll my eyes. “That’s your big plan? A meeting.”

But it’s exactly what I want him to do. Get everyone together so they can witness

his demise. So they can witness a new leader rising. Me.

“Just do what the fuck I ask. And make sure Riccardo is there. Time to expose the traitor.”

MILANA



The dress is a perfect fit. Go figure. I stare at my reflection in the mirror. It's beautiful despite the fact that I despise wearing it. I must play my part long enough to escape. I could stay and expose secrets that would ruin the Moretti family, but I'm going. I'm choosing me. I'll tell Salvatore the truth later.

“You look stunning, *mio piccolo tesoro*.”

Tears prick my eyes. My wedding day is approaching, and all I've done is dream of marrying another man, one I can't have.

“You are going to be fine. Stefano will always take care of you.”

Not if the truth comes out. Salvatore is the rightful owner to everything, including the estate. Turns out, Victoria's name was the only one on the deed. In fact, it was the only name on a lot of things. I suppose Stefano wanted to protect his assets should he ever be arrested.

“Your father is so proud of you.”

I frown at this. “Proud? How can he be proud of me for this?”

She sighs. “You’re doing what this family needs. That takes courage and strength.”

“It also takes courage and strength to stand on my own two feet, but you would both rather I marry a man I don’t love. A man who has kept me as his prisoner. A man who’s raped me repeatedly!”

“Don’t speak like that. The world is not always a friendly place, Milana. Our families don’t always have the luxury of marrying for love. I’ve told you before, you will learn to love Stefano.”

“And I told you before, I’m in love with Salvatore.”

She immediately shushes me as if someone will hear us. I don’t care who hears it. I am in love with Salvatore Moretti. I start stripping off the dress right there on the fitting stand. My eyes dart over to the guard, who is still blocking the door. A swift kick the groin will remedy that.

“My father bartered me off like cattle,” I say angrily. “I have been fucked and fucked over and I’m done.”

My mother follows me as I walk half-naked to the dressing room. She tries to talk some sense into me while I get my clothes on.

“We all have to play our parts, *tesoro*.”

“Father can play his part all he wants. He doesn’t get to assign them to me.”

The moment the words are out of my mouth, there’s a stinging in my neck. I stare in horror as my mother pulls a syringe away, whispering an apology as my knees buckle. I drop to the floor, trying to stay conscious, but it’s no use.

“I’m so sorry. *Perdonami*.”

My own mother drugged me. Betrayed me.

I suppose she's playing her role, too. Dammit, she played it well.

SALVATORE



I head inside the casino, acknowledging how strange it is not to have any betting or games going on. Several men are already present. My father should be here already.

I check my watch. It's a few minutes past six. Before I can comment on his tardiness, the doors open. My fucking breath catches in my throat as he drags Milana inside. She's naked, her stunning body on display for all to see. Stefano's fingers are tangled in her hair, roughly jerking her forward. Her wrists are bound, the ropes digging into her soft flesh. Riccardo is at Stefano's side, not doing a damn thing to help his daughter.

"What the fuck is this?" Colvin mumbles.

"My son! I brought you a gift!" he says, shoving Milana forward. She falls to her knees, biting back a sob.

Calmly, I remove my jacket and walk over to her. No one says a word, but their eyes are on me as I kneel down, covering her. A soft whimper escapes Milana's lips, and I do my best to maintain my control.

"You're going to be okay. I promise," I whisper into her ear.

I pray I can keep it. Stefano knows. He knows fucking everything. My plan. My betrayal. It's the only reason she

would be here like this.

“It’s going to be okay,” I assure her again, reaching into my pocket for my knife. I use it to cut the ropes loose, daring Stefano to say something. I start to stand, but she stops me.

“You own it all,” she says quietly. “Everything. Your mom left it to you. You’re not even his son.”

I shush her, not wanting him to hear us. I should’ve told her. Should’ve told her the truth. Fuck. I should’ve told her everything. Hell, I should’ve taken my mother’s treasure box from that house a long time ago. My father never even knew it existed, and I always thought it was safer hidden away.

“Isn’t this sweet? My fiancé and son are getting along so well. Imagine that.”

I rise up, masking my emotions, unwilling to show him how affected I am. I’ve been plotting this moment for years. This isn’t exactly how I planned for it to go down.

“Do you like my gift, son?” Stefano questions. “I know how much you’ve wanted her. I even know how much you’ve wanted my fucking throne. You wanted it enough to kill two innocent men!”

I don’t argue with him. I did kill two men. Their innocence is questionable. I’ll kill more for Milana. Hundreds. Thousands. Whatever it takes.

“You see, gentleman, my son, my own flesh and blood, has betrayed me. If it weren’t for Riccardo here, I wouldn’t have even known. I always thought you were a pussy, but bravo, *figlio*.”

I glare at Riccardo, his emotions masked much the same as mine. He doesn’t even flinch at the sight of Milana. I’m dying

inside. Dying to go to her. To pull her into my arms and shield her from the horrible reality she's been living in.

“Define betrayal. Did you betray your dear friend Angelo when you fucked his wife? Was it betrayal when you ordered the hit on Felipe's business because you felt his nightclub was bad for the casino? Or would you call it betrayal when you had illegal drugs planted in Colvin's son's car the night he was arrested? That kid's still doing time for that, right? But it kept his father in check, and that's what you wanted.”

Colvin's jaw clenches, hands turn into fists at his sides, but he remains still and quiet.

“We all know a desperate man will spout any lies he can.”

“You sound pretty desperate right now, father. Wait a minute. Father? No, that doesn't sound right. I suppose a wife knows what betrayal is also. All those times you were fucking around, I bet you'd never guess my mother did, too. Your blood doesn't even run through my veins.”

This gets a reaction out of him. His nostrils flare in anger, mouth snarls.

“That's not true!”

“You have no heir. In fact, you *can't* have any heirs. You're sterile.”

That blow gets some murmurs throughout the other families. It's one hundred percent true, though.

“You lying son of a bitch,” he mutters.

“That bitch you're referencing? She owned you. Every damn thing you had was in her name. Now it belongs to me. All those shares I won in the poker game are mine. You need to check the authenticity of the documents you review.”

“Fucking liar!” he screams in outrage.

“These men you made cower to you? They’re with me. Except for that piece of shit to your right. He gave up his own daughter to earn your favor.”

Stefano looks around, disbelief clear on his face. Yes, he figured out I was coming for the throne. Yes, Riccardo turned on me. But I never put my bet on him. Riccardo was always a coward. And I’ve just played my hand. It’s a fucking whopper.

“Turns out, loyalty trumps fear.”

Colvin wasn’t the only ally I established. The men standing beside my father step away from him, joining me. I hold out my hand, and one of the men places a 9 millimeter in it. Any other time, Stefano would’ve had their guns checked at the door. His intention was to kill me. To have them back him up. Not tonight.

“Thanks for the gift.”

I put three bullets right through his chest.

MILANA



“Salvatore, listen,” my father begins. “I was only looking out for my family. Your plan was too dangerous.”

“As opposed to what you’ve done?”

“What *I’ve* done? Did you tell her the truth? Did you tell her you knew all along you would be winning her for Stefano?”

I look at Salvatore in horror. He knew? He fucking knew?

“Oh, so, that’s the truth? That I’m the one who sacrificed her? You told me when it was too late. You were willing to sacrifice your own daughter! And for what? A seat at the table? You already had that!”

“Why? Why, *Padre*?” I ask, approaching him. “I came home for you. I’ve always done everything you’ve asked of me. Why did you do this to me? To our family?”

“You have no idea what Stefano is capable of! What *he’s* capable of!” he argues, referring to Salvatore. “Men, you know how ruthless he is! The things he’s done!”

“It’s why we stood with Salvatore,” Colvin says. “It was time for change. I thought you understood that, Riccardo.”

Stefano was taking everything from us, bleeding us fucking dry. He knew no boundaries. Respected no one. It had to stop.”

“I did! I do!” my father pleads.

“But you did nothing except use me,” I accuse. He knew all along when he asked me to come home that he was planning to marry me off to Stefano.

“We were in debt, *tesoro*. We were going to lose everything. The house. The business. All of it!”

A small part of me wants to sympathize with him. With my mother. But he knew about Salvatore’s plan. Knew he was fighting for change. And he still sold me off to the devil. And my mother did nothing to stop him.

“Material things. You were going to lose material things. Now, you’ve lost me.”

Salvatore comes to stand by me. For a moment, I feared my father’s accusations were true. That I was a casualty of the war against Stefano. But he wouldn’t do that to me.

“You want me to kill him?”

His offer is sincere, but I shake my head. I hate him at this moment, but he’s still my father, and the truth is, death would be too generous. I don’t want that guilt on my conscience.

“No. I want him to live with his regret, because you will regret this, *Padre*. You will regret that you’ve lost me. That you’ve lost one person who only ever loved you and trusted you.”

“One day, you’ll forgive me,” he vows.

“No, I won’t. If you ever come near me again, I’ll kill you myself. You can tell my mother I played my part. And she’s as dead to me as you are.”

“Get the fuck out of here,” Salvatore hisses.

My father doesn't hesitate a moment. He's lucky to be alive. Salvatore and any other man in this room would take his life if given the order. The moment he's gone, Salvatore pulls me into his arms.

“I'm sorry.”

He kisses my cheeks, my nose, then my lips, not giving a damn that a room full of men are watching us. He was plotting against Stefano all along. Proving to these men that it was time for a change. And they've been loyal to him. They trust him. And he respects them.

“Gentlemen, we'll meet soon. For now, I'm taking my fiancé home.”

“Fiancé?”

“I won you fair and square, didn't I? It's time to claim my prize.”

SALVATORE



I should've claimed her to start with. Instead, I let my own greed and desire to take down Stefano stand in my way. I'll spend a lifetime making that up to her.

“Let me get you home. To my place. I'll get this cleaned up and be there as soon as I can.”

The men are already gone, all agreeing to meet tomorrow. Stefano is dead. Finally out of our lives for good. We can start the process of healing from the fucking damage he created.

“I don't want to go. Not yet. I need some time for this to settle in.”

“It can settle in at my place.” She shakes her head. “You've been through enough.”

She laughs a little. “Yeah, I suppose I have, but I'm here, and I'm alive. To hell with Stefano! To hell with my father! With my mother even!”

I frown, concerned. “Millie—”

“You and I both know I'm not that little girl anymore. My dad sold me off to a monster. That monster used my body every single night, and there wasn't a damn thing I could do to stop him!”

“That’s over now! He’ll never fucking touch you again!” I vow, hauling her against me. “No man will ever touch you again. You’re mine. You hear me? You are fucking mine.”

“You let him take me,” she whispers, tears rolling down her cheeks in spite of her bravado.

I blink back my own tears at the sight of hers. I’m unsure when I came to love her so fiercely, but it’s there. This undeniable need to protect her, love her at all costs.

“I’ll apologize every day for the rest of my life.”

“I don’t need that. Don’t need apologies. What I need is you. All of you. Your heart. Your body. Your soul.”

“And my love. It’s all yours. Everything.”

I lift her into my arms and carry her out of the casino, not giving a damn that

Stefano’s body is still there. I’ll call in a cleaning crew. Right now, Millie needs me. I don’t want to let her go while I drive, but I place her in the passenger seat. We hold hands the entire way to my place.

“Come here,” I whisper when we arrive, helping her out.

I pick her up again, and she doesn’t protest, simply wraps her arms around my shoulders. My strong, beautiful girl is broken. No. Not broken. Just bruised. And I despise myself for that.

“It’s not your fault,” she says, as though reading my mind. “We didn’t choose to be born into our families.”

But we can choose to leave them. Milana Genovese is my family. I’m hers. We don’t need the power or the money. We only need each other.

EPILOGUE

MILANA



I laugh as I run down the beach, the water lapping at my feet. Salvatore is close behind me. In a matter of seconds, he whisks me into his arms, and we fall into the water. I splash him when we surface.

“Christ, you’re fucking perfect. You know that?” he asks.

“And what exactly is perfect about me?” I tease, wrapping my legs around his waist.

He grabs the straps to my bikini and unties them, pulling my top free and tossing it toward shore. I honestly don’t care if it gets carried away by the waves. We’re the only ones here.

“These are perfect. Soft. Sensitive. Responsive. Perfection when they harden beneath my touch.”

And they do. Like fucking pebbles. They ache for him. For his touch, his lips, his tongue. His damn teeth.

“And these, these are perfect,” he says, trailing his thumb over my lips. “Your taste. Your smile. The way they wrap around my cock.”

I kiss him, deep and sensual. My pussy is throbbing as I rub against him, reaching between us to free his dick. I slide my panties to the side and impale myself on him.

“And what about this? Is this perfect?”

He squeezes my ass, pumping into me. He promised me no one else would ever touch me again. I belong to him. I hated being a possession of Stefano's. Hated being owned by someone else.

Salvatore Moretti owns me. Every inch. Every part. All of me.

But I own him, too. We walked away together. Chose another life. Chose each other. He appointed Colvin as the head of the families. Made sure everything was in order. And we haven't looked back since.

“It's absolutely perfect,” he murmurs. “I love you.”

“Are you sure this isn't lust?” I joke.

He grins. “From lust to love, Millie. From lust to love.”

THE END

THANK YOU



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