



BOOK TWO OF THE
FORBIDDEN HUSBAND
DUET

my
OBSSESSED
husband

SHAYNE FORD

MY OBSESSED HUSBAND

FORBIDDEN HUSBAND SERIES BOOK TWO

SHAYNE FORD

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I SABELLA

THERE IS no doubt in my mind to keep our agreement in place the way it was intended, he needs not to like me, and I need not to like him.

He'll make my life a living hell and go bury himself in whoever happens to be in his way to tame that fire and erase the memory of last night with me.

Showing him I don't like him might do me more good than revealing my weakness for him.

I did that last night—showed my weakness for him—and his reaction was swift and brutal.

So no. That won't work.

But how could I do that any other way?

I don't know.

I didn't expect to see him when I entered the dining room this morning, dressed for work, wearing a long-sleeved, tailored dark blue dress and black heels.

Marge told me he'd have breakfast with me when I spotted the second plate, no one else was at the table, and I shot her a questioning look.

The food—omelets, fruit, croissants, and muffins—is now on the table, and she puts two espressos next to it as steps echo outside.

He swaggers in, clad in a navy slim-fit suit, a white shirt, and a blue tie like his eyes.

His face glows, a scent of aftershave wafting from his skin.

He looks like a legit businessman, and the torment I spotted on his face last night is now gone.

He must've slept well, which is not how I'd describe my night. I tossed and turned and caught maybe a couple of hours of sleep, and whatever I lacked in sleep this morning, I compensated for with extra makeup.

“Sleep well?” he asks, sliding into his seat near me.

I didn't realize someone had shifted the seats around, and now we are closer to each other than before.

“Yes.”

I lie, looking at my food.

Marge brings two glasses of water to the table and retreats to the kitchen.

We eat alone when sudden noise floods the house. He looks unfazed, which makes me think he expected it.

“Do you want me to put an extra plate?” Marge asks.

“Four,” Max says before running a napkin over his lips.

There is something about him.

He is different than last night.

First, he looks rested, and then he is in a much better mood. I can only imagine it has to do with his business. Or his other business. The shady one.

Seconds pass before four strangers enter the room. I've never seen these men before.

He introduces them to me like they're important or I'm important to them, and I can't catch one single name the moment he says I'm his fiancé.

Damn, this man.

A little warning would've helped.

Somehow I erase that feeling that my jaw just hit the floor and play my role well.

We all have breakfast, and they discuss business. The legal kind. Even so, I wonder whether they are completely clean.

I can't focus on that for long as they all seem to finish eating at the same time, and something about them going to De Lucca's office makes it to my ears.

He sets his empty cup of coffee down and shifts his eyes to me.

"Get ready. You're coming with me."

Oh. So we're going to his office?

"All right. Give me a minute."

I dab at my lips with the napkin, excuse myself and walk upstairs. I didn't know I'd travel with him or I would've brought my coat with me.

I collect my overcoat and bag, exit my room, and spin around to go downstairs when I bump into a hard body.

I jerk back, startled.

"Just don't scream," he says unhumorously, although I'm pretty sure that was a joke.

He goes past me, enters his room, and comes back a few moments later. I'm still there, waiting for him, thinking that this is what I'm supposed to do... *now that we're engaged.*

He opens the door and signals me to the stairs, and I start walking, followed closely by him.

"Thanks for breaking it to me that I'm your fiancé."

"No need to be sarcastic."

"I'm not."

We reach the bottom of the stairs, and I stop, waiting for his instructions, his guests all clumped up in the lobby not far

from us.

He pivots in front of me, a fake smile on his lips. Bringing his hand to my cheek, he brushes a strand of hair away from my face.

“This is real business, Bella,” he murmurs, his eyes sliding to my lips as if he’d love to kiss them. “They come to my office. We’ll all have lunch and a couple of meetings in the afternoon. I’ve already talked to your boss at the other job. She fired you. You no longer work there. Okay... Let’s go now.”

He smooths the lapel of my coat.

“I just wanted to expedite the process,” he says as I stare at him, floating somewhere outside my body.

He smiles.

Another fake grin for the audience.

“I also called your mother.”

“What...?”

“Shh...” he says, smiling and pressing his thumb against my cheek. “We’ll announce our engagement on Thanksgiving Day and have a big party that weekend. Your mother knows that already. She’s sending you her warmest congratulations. You and I will visit your family before Christmas since they won’t be able to make it to New York in November.”

His words come out smoothly and evenly like tiny summarized chapters of my life.

“And this is for you,” he says, reaching inside his jacket pocket. “Your engagement ring. Open the box when you’re alone.”

He hands it to me like it’s contraband goods.

Closing my numb fingers around the tiny velvet box with a firm hand, he leans closer and leaves a kiss on my cold cheek.

“Welcome to my life, sweet Bella.”



ISABELLA

AND JUST LIKE THAT, my two jobs have become one, and I've gone from being single to being engaged, soon to be married.

Once we walk side by side to the group waiting for us, I no longer have the chance to talk to him.

We travel with his bodyguards, his guests following us in another car.

When we get to his office, groups of people compete for his attention, and naturally, everything becomes about the business, meetings, presentations, snack breaks, and lunch, eventually.

Things are no different in the afternoon as we conclude the day with a dinner party for his guests.

We arrive home late and go separate ways as soon as we walk in. He showers, puts on some new clothes, and heads out to his other business while I crash on the bed, inconsolable.

Missa calls me at around nine.

Her enthusiasm is unquenchable.

“How could you not tell me that you'd found someone? Are you seriously getting married? Who is he? Mother said he looked fine. Mm-hmm...”

She's funny and makes me smile, although the reality is different than what she thinks.

“Can I see him?”

“You mean like a picture? I don't have a picture of him.”

“Why?”

How can I explain to my younger sister how this works?

It's not exactly like we're taking selfies, documenting every kiss and languorous gaze to show everybody else how great our life is every single day.

Holding my phone with one hand, I push to my feet, tug at the zipper, and slide it down before shimmying out of my dress.

"We didn't have the chance to take pictures. Everything happened kind of fast, and he's busy all day long. I'm busy too. This is serious stuff, Missa."

"I wish I could live some of that serious stuff. You're not going to forget about me, are you? Please, don't. If you're getting married, I could come to you next year. Get away from here for good."

"You need to go to school, Missa," I argue, knowing full well nothing will stop her from doing what she wants to do.

"I won't stay with you and your husband for long. Only until I find a job and a place to live."

The idea of having Missa in the house, a witness to what's going on between Max and me, not to mention his real life, makes me nauseous.

I sigh.

"We'll see. I may be able to help you with money at that point. Get you a place to live and give you some cash to get you started."

She's doing a happy dance at the other end of the line, and that will surely get her into trouble with my mother if anyone in my family notices her behavior.

"Chill for now, or someone will ruin your plans. They can't know I'm helping you. All right?"

"Yes. Yes... I'll do everything I need to do."

"Good. Now wait a second. I need to take a bath."

The water is running for a few good minutes while I take the rest of my clothes off and get ready to slip into the tub when another call flashes across the screen.

I turn off the water and wrap up the conversation with Missa.

“I need to take this,” I say, my voice soaked with concern.

She hangs up.

“Nor?? What is going on?” I ask suspiciously.

It can’t be anything good.

He hasn’t talked to me since... *forever*.

I knew something wasn’t right the second his name popped up on my phone screen. There is noise and shuffling and rustling in the background, and then he speaks.

“Do you know how to clean a wound?”

These fucking men. Can they ever ease me in before hitting me with their shit?

I have a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach, and then anger swirls through me.

Every single fucking day, something happens.

“It’s a superficial wound,” he adds.

“Him?”

“Yes, him.”

“I’ll manage.”

“All right. He’s on his way. I just wanted to give you a heads-up, so you don’t lose it. *Where we were...* We couldn’t take care of it, and he thought you could handle it.”

How thoughtful of him.

“Yeah... Okay.”

“Don’t lose faith. Things will get better.”

How?

How can he say that to me?

He continues.

“I know things happen fast, but it’s one of those shitty days when everything happens at once. Anyway... Is everything else good? Congratulations, by the way. I’ve heard the news.”

“Yeah... Thank you,” I murmur, moving back to the closet, where I put some clothes on, unable to focus on our conversation. “I’ll go now. I need to get the stuff for him,” I say.

“Sure.”

I end the call and go straight to Max’s bathroom.

My intuition serves me right. Everything I need is here, packed carefully. Just in case.

I can only imagine this is not the first time he has been injured.

This could literally happen every week. Or weekend. Or day. And if it doesn’t happen to him, it happens to someone else.

It could happen to me.

No.

He said it couldn’t, but I’m not so sure I can believe him. No one knows when this shit happens or why.

Tonight is a superficial wound.

What happens when it’s a deep wound, and I can’t clean it at home, and he needs to go to the hospital?

I imagine he has a doctor on call, but for some reason, he decided to come home tonight and ask me to take care of it.

At around ten, footsteps echo in the foyer.

He barks instructions at his people and takes the stairs up to this floor.

The door to his bedroom opens, and I watch in horror how the man who’s given me an engagement ring this morning peels off his coat, revealing his suit jacket and blood-soaked shirt.

How he is still walking is a mystery to me.

As Nor has said, maybe it's a superficial wound, although I don't trust these men to tell me the truth.

Normally, I'd ask what happened, yet that's not the case here.

Quietly, I pick up his coat and jacket.

"Toss them into a bag and destroy them," he says, his hard eyes meeting mine. "There's an incinerator in the basement."

My mouth stays open, my eyebrows lifted.

"It's easier than cleaning them," he adds.

I do as I'm told while he removes his shirt and shoves it into the bag.

Shirtless, he walks to the bathroom while I follow him.

There's some sort of blunt trauma to his shoulder and an open wound. He's put some pressure on it, and that piece of cloth is soaked as well, but he's no longer bleeding.

It's not a bullet wound. Maybe a knife did that? Or someone crushed his shoulder.

It looks horrific with all that blood around it, and it must hurt like a bitch. It's also hard to reach that area if you want to clean it yourself, and now I know why he needed my help.

Also...

He didn't need Nor's help? Or someone else's help? So many people follow him around. One of them, maybe?

Why the hell not?

Maybe it happened in some bad area, and going home was the wisest thing to do.

Not Nor's place. And not other places.

He came home tonight.

I don't know whether to feel flattered or scared. My heart flutters a little at the thought that maybe he wanted to come home because of me.

He removes the rest of his clothes down to his boxers while I get everything ready and put on some gloves.

Standing next to him while he sits on the edge of the tub, I start cleaning him.

I've seen this done once. One of my older sisters is a nurse, and a guy who worked for us had a little accident trimming our trees. That wound had been contaminated with dirt. This one is clean. No foreign objects. I've already checked.

I wonder what happened to the man who did that to him. He's probably dead.

He rests his elbows on his knees and looks down, his back arched, his shoulder tense.

Once in a while, I get a reaction from him when I touch a tender area, but for the most part, he suppresses the pain with stoicism I've never seen in a man before.

When I finish cleaning it, I apply a sterile bandage to the wound.

"Thank you," he says while I remove and dispose of the gloves.

He pushes up, and I'm suddenly dwarfed by him.

His body is so much bigger than mine it's hard to believe he was on top of me last night.

So many things have happened since that moment.

Life moves fast, especially in his world. Occasionally, I feel like I'm in a movie or a dream, and it's a matter of time before everything comes to an abrupt end.

Sadly, his life could end at any moment, and I begin to understand his anger about having feelings and getting attached and all that crap.

It makes no sense for so many reasons, and I start to side with him on this issue.

That doesn't mean we can't still have feelings for each other while keeping in mind at all times that anything could

happen to us, and everything could be taken away in a split second.

I'm sure that's how the people in his world live.

"I need to use the bathroom," he says, clutching the door and holding it open, inviting me out.

"Sure. Have a good night."

I exit the room without looking back.

Tonight is one of those nights when I need a moment to let everything sink in.

After doing what I've been doing for the man of the house for the past few minutes—and for the first time since I've been living here—I feel like this is my home too.

With newfound confidence, I walk down the stairs, heading to the kitchen.

Moments later, I search for wine and sweets in the cupboards.

I find a bottle of wine and a box of cookies, and I pick them up along with a clean empty glass before returning upstairs.

The water is cold in the bathtub, so I drain and replace it, and waiting to refill the tub, I light some scented candles and open the window to have some background noise.

It rains steadily, gusts of wind bringing in the smell of fall.

Minutes later, I lie in the bathtub with a glass of wine in hand, the cookies and the jewelry box he's given me sitting on the porcelain edge—I haven't even opened it yet.

Things unfolded so quickly this morning.

And then the memory of him giving me the news like it was some filthy secret had been imprinted so brutally in my brain that I had no curiosity to see my engagement ring.

Given the circumstances, the piece of jewelry has no sentimental value, and I'm in no way emotionally invested or anxious to celebrate the occasion.

It's a business transaction, after all.

First, I take a swig of wine, and then I pick up the box.

It's a tiny thing wrapped in cobalt blue velvet with a delicate inscription on it.

A custom thing, by all means.

IDL.

No way.

Isabella de Lucca.

Sniffing, I push the lid up.

Sitting in the small box is the beginning of the next chapter of my life.

A dainty, exquisite pear-shaped diamond platinum ring sparkling against the dark blue background.

It looks so perfect and different from the blood I wiped off my future husband's shoulder this evening.

It looks so innocent and timeless, safe and unbreakable.

Usually, that would describe a perfect love story, but most people know there isn't such a thing.

Love is imperfect, gritty, and raw.

Sometimes it's broken. And other times, it's a fleeting state of mind. A lot of time is work. And work pays off. Sometimes.

I touch the diamond that catches the light of a nearby candle and looks like a minuscule fire.

It fits perfectly on my finger.

Lifting my hand and fanning it in the air, I admire the little work of art. It must've been expensive too, but money isn't an issue for De Lucca.

Money is not even his drug of choice.

Power is.

And power is like an untamed horse. It can take you far, but it can also throw you out of the saddle and leave you for

dead when you least expect it.

Don't bet on that horse unless you hate your life.

A door opens at the other end of the corridor, and I flick my eyes over my shoulder and listen intently.

With only him and me living on this floor, the footsteps moving in this direction can only be his.

The door to my bedroom opens, and he enters my room before spotting me in the bathroom.

I set the box back on the edge of the tub and grab a towel.

"Is everything okay?"

I push upright, ready to rise all the way, when he stops me with a soft gesture.

"Everything is fine."

He wears cologne and button-fly loose-fit boxer shorts. Specks of water glimmer on his chest.

"Is there anything I can do for you?" I ask, dropping the towel on the side and sliding under the bubbles to cover my chest.

"No."

He looks around the tub, searching for something before meeting my eyes.

"Where is your phone?"

Why does he need my phone?

"In the bedroom."

"I need to use it."

"Sure..."

I give him my passcode, my voice trailing off, my stomach tied in knots. Is he doing something with my phone that will eventually incriminate me?

All that talk about me being safe.

How long will I be safe if I'm getting caught in this dark story more and more?

He makes a call in the other room.

He talks business, like real business, and I'm thinking... Maybe he needed to call one of those four men he had dealt with the entire day.

I can surely find out who he called. Will it do me any good? Probably not.

He brings my phone to the bathroom, although I don't exactly need it.

"You like your engagement ring?"

He tilts his chin toward my ring while dropping the phone on the edge of the bathtub.

Is it me, or is he stalking me?

"I love it."

The excitement isn't there, and I don't think he's asked me about my ring to check on my level of enthusiasm.

We both know what this is.

He sits on the edge, pondering, while I grow nervous by the second.

After a few uncomfortable moments, he looks at me and drops his hand into the water to pull out mine and check the ring for himself.

Sunk in thought, he brushes his finger over the stone.

"We should probably talk about this," he says.

His eyes are so beautiful in the trembling candlelight, and it's weird it catches my attention since his tone and words suggest bad things.

Does he have a change of heart?

Something happened, and our deal is off?

Will I always live in fear that something bad might happen and he might send me packing?

And that's not even the worst scenario.

If he releases me of my obligations, I'd be out of his life and with some serious cash in my pocket.

Who wouldn't want something like that?

Still holding my hand, he talks.

My fingers are swallowed up by his palm, and his touch feels warm against mine.

I listen to him, the rain crying outside the windows while I get ready for anything.

"I thought it would only be fair to tell you the truth and let you choose what you want to do. Be fully aware of the consequences."

He probably wouldn't say that to me if he didn't think I was a *'good kid.'*

Me being a *'good kid'* has changed his perception of me.

It's odd how sometimes the most solid principles and codes of honor find their home in the least honorable places.

Tilting his head to the side, he locks my eyes.

"I know money drives you, but I might need you to be in. Be part of my life... I thought I could keep you away from these things, and I'll try to keep that promise, but some stuff is simply impossible to hide. Like what happened this evening."

It's not like he's telling me what happened this evening.

"It's not only about that," he goes on, releasing my hand and tipping his gaze down. "You need to know a little more about my past, and why I'm here, and all that... Some bad people killed my parents, and it happened under my eyes."

He pauses before he continues.

"My father had a lot of power, many strengths, and a few weaknesses. One, in particular, had ended his life. He loved my mother," he says, looking at me this time. "And he was loyal to her. So everybody knew how important she was to

him. There's a reason, you know, men like him keep mistresses..." he says, a dark smirk pulling at his lips.

It fades quickly.

"He didn't," he adds soberly. "And his enemies knew that, so they targeted her before killing him. He made a mistake, and they both lost their lives."

I can't draw a breath.

"I'm not like my father. I've never been loyal to anyone and don't know how to be or want to be. On the other hand, the plan has never been for me to be what I am. My father wanted me to run a regular business and see about my life. Things didn't work out that way, and when my parents died, I inherited the family empire with all the problems that came with it. I swore I'd never put myself in a vulnerable position by loving someone people could use to take me down. One. And then. I didn't want that pain."

He reads my eyes for a second, but other than seeing me frozen, I don't know what else he can gather from my expression.

Am I surprised?

Hardly.

Where do I fit in all this?

It doesn't take a genius to realize I'm a pawn, and just because he treats me like a queen for a second doesn't make me less of a pawn.

Reluctantly, he continues.

"I didn't want an alliance. People came to me, offering me their daughters, but I quickly realized I'd complicate my life with responsibilities I didn't want. So I decided to hire someone, and you seemed like the right person."

What made him change his mind?

I'm too nervous to wait for him to elaborate, so I reach for the bottle of wine and glass.

He removes them from my hands and pours a glass of wine for me. I take my drink from him with both hands and bring it to my lips.

After a mouthful of wine, I decide it doesn't matter why he's changed his mind. I'll take my money, give him the ring back and leave.

My heart moves fast, like a rabbit.

But I don't. I stay put.

And more words come to me from him.

"I'm not in the habit of breaking people outside my line of business. And I don't want to break you. So if you want to stay, it's on you whatever comes your way. If not, I'm giving you the chance to reconsider your decision—something I've never done before—and walk away before it's too late. One thing you need to know. I can't tell whether we'll consummate the marriage or not. I have no idea... And even if we do, it won't be what someone like you would probably expect."

Stiff, I look at him, my finger tickled by the engagement ring that has no soulful value. It wasn't supposed to mean something, but things feel different in reality.

What can I say?

He is scary when he's mad, gone for days, or covered in blood, but not as frightening as he is right now when he's basically telling me what I've suspected for some time.

He will go out of his way *not to be* close to me.

He might be close to me in a different way, like when he's dealing with some shady stuff and needing some help—being partners in crime and all that—but nothing else.

"I wanted to tell you this and manage your expectations. And also to give you a way out," he says.

A way out? Is this a way out?

I look at him, cold as ice.

There is no way out. Oh, yes, there is. I could leave now, right? I could just go. Why didn't he tell me this from the

beginning?

Why was it all about the money?

What has changed since that night at the restaurant?

And why now?

He is so inconsistent he's driving me crazy.

I know what this is. He said it himself. He wants me to assume responsibility for my future.

But this is also a calculated move. It must be.

He wouldn't waste his time grooming me, knowing I might say no to him.

Sure, now he's giving me the opportunity to pull out.

Whatever.

And then there's another thing.

He's fooling himself into thinking *I might* have unreasonable expectations when *he knows* things might not be the way he has planned them to be.

Maybe I'll end up being more than a pawn.

And after what happened last night, he has to '*break up with me*' or '*break it to me*' that a real thing between us is out of the question.

Maybe there is a real thing, but he doesn't want to take that risk because he just stated it... He doesn't want that kind of ache.

Why would he go through all this trouble and end up with someone he cares for?

It'd make no sense.

But why is he afraid anyway?

He's never felt anything for anyone except, maybe, his parents.

He had to tell me we wouldn't have sex. Right.

Like it was hard to guess.

“Okay. You don’t have to give me an answer now. Sleep on it. And let me know. If you choose to stay, I’ll go over the terms with you.”

With that, he rises to his feet and leaves.

I SABELLA

I PROP the back of my head against the edge of the tub, close my eyes and listen to the rain.

Something hurts inside me.

I'm tempted to leave. Nothing can make me stay. Not his money or his power. Not the ring on my finger.

He makes it so easy for me to hate him, and he does it on purpose because that's his plan.

He just '*managed*' my expectations by telling me he's never been faithful to a woman.

Whether true or not, he compelled me to believe him.

I believe people when they say they're bad because they usually are.

I have no reason not to believe him, but I know he's using that to push me away.

The question is...

Is he afraid of me?

Or is he afraid of himself?

It's not like I had high expectations, to begin with. I wasn't the one climbing on top of the other person last night.

He was.

He pulled me under him, pinned me down, ripped off my clothes, and pressed his hard-on against my body.

He touched my pussy, kneaded my chest, and weighed his options.

I could tell he wanted to enter me, and maybe that vestigial membrane—ironically—had stopped him.

Had he done that, he would've been my first. Not that it would've meant something on its own, but it would've had some significance in his mind.

Like a line he had crossed, although, frankly, it would've looked more like a red flag in this case.

Everything is upside down.

He wouldn't have a problem taking a woman, any woman, if he wanted her.

He just doesn't want to indulge when it comes to me.

He's trying to protect himself by diminishing the idea of me, and that's why we're having this conversation.

And if I say yes, he'll make my life difficult.

The more attracted we'd be to each other, the more he'd give me every reason to resent him.

So, yes... I can go.

Leave.

Or I can make him hate me, and that will make things even easier.

Sucking in a long breath, I emerge from the water, move a towel over my body, and put my nightgown on.

It's a short piece like the one he ruined last night, and the neckline is held together by three tiny bows connecting the sides.

I put on my fluffy slippers and walk out of the room.

My hair is damp and draped over my back, while my heart is scared inside my chest.

A faint light comes from under his door. I knock softly.

He doesn't answer.

Initially, I swivel around to leave, and then his shaving machine starts buzzing.

So I walk in, expecting to see him fully dressed and ready to go out in the middle of the night.

He's in the bathroom, and the door is closed.

Maybe I should have this conversation with him some other time, but the machine goes quiet, and soon after, the door opens.

He doesn't seem surprised to see me here.

His face glows, and he smells fresh.

"Does the bandage sit all right?" I ask as if I came here to talk about it.

"Yes. Aren't you going to sleep?"

He moves his eyes over my nightgown.

The hemline hits below my butt and comes with matching panties. No bows this time, only at the neckline.

"I wanted to give you an answer first," I say.

"Okay."

He loses his shorts in front of me, palms his dick, and slides under the covers.

Pulling a pillow slightly higher behind his back, he looks at me.

I'm tempted to sit next to him, and then I remember it didn't work out that great the last time I tried that.

"I won't back out of this," I say firmly.

He doesn't flinch.

"But I want to know more about our final agreement."

“Fair.”

“Now.”

“Now?”

“Yes. I’d rather know now if it doesn’t work for me. In case I need to change my mind.”

“All right. Sit.”

He taps the spot next to him.

I take a few steps and sit on the edge of the bed, facing him, my knees drawn together, my hands keeping my skirt flush against my thighs.

He speaks first.

“I’ll pay the money in advance for each year you spend with me, so you’re not tied to me. But you’re bound to return it in case you change your mind and leave before the end of that particular year.”

He pauses.

“Okay,” I murmur before he continues.

“The prenup is simple. You have no rights to my money unless you’ve been with me for at least five years and one of the following conditions has been met. Children have been the product of our marriage, *and or* you’re a widow. In that case, you’ll be in my will. After five years, there is no yearly payment. If you ask for a divorce, and there are no children, you leave with whatever money you’ve earned initially. Nothing more. Nothing less.”

“Children?”

“I had to take that into account. And yes, our children will stay with me, provided nothing happens to me. You will be part of their lives, but I’ll have full custody of them.”

I’m cold as fuck.

“Earlier this evening, you weren’t even sure we’d consummate the marriage.”

“Anything can happen. I have to take into consideration everything. We may or may not consummate the marriage. Maybe we won’t get to that point. Maybe we will. If it happens and kids come, this is what will happen if things don’t work out between us.”

I swallow hard.

“I have a few conditions of my own.”

“I’m listening.”

“If you keep other women, I won’t sleep with you. Just to make it clear. And you don’t get to use your husband privileges to bend my will. You’re not very fond of consummating the marriage anyway, so there’s no loss there. And if you do have women, you need to keep the appearance that we are a real couple as long as you’re married to me. Once I bear your name, you have to be discreet and show me some respect. I don’t care that you’re not sleeping with me. This is about how it looks, and I don’t care how you do it. I won’t go to the parties where you bring your mistresses. I hope I’m clear.”

Our eyes stay locked in a silent war.

A faint light glints in his eyes.

“You know you can’t ask that of me.”

“I’m not asking. These are my conditions. I think you’re getting the better end of the deal anyway. I’m faithful and respectful, and I will keep your secrets. I will be the perfect wife for anyone who cares to look my way. You will be safe with me. And you don’t have to love me. I won’t ask you to love me. I can clean your wounds and keep my mouth shut. It’s in my best interest anyway. All I want from you is to make a slight adjustment in your behavior, which will serve you well. And we will be the power couple that everyone expects us to be.”

He observes me quietly, showing no emotion.

I can’t tell whether he agrees to anything I’m saying, considers different ways of killing me, or recognizes the value in my proposal.

Waiting for his response, I shiver.

“Are you cold?” he asks.

“No.”

My teeth chatter as I speak.

He rolls the covers enough for me to fit next to him without exposing himself to me.

“Lie here with me. I won’t touch you.”

That’s what he says, yet his eyes fall straight to the three bows crisscrossing my neckline.

I sit next to him, stiff.

“Relax. I’m not an animal.”

I’d breathe out a chuckle, but I don’t know if he meant it as a joke. I sag back against the pillow while he considers my request.

“I’ll accept your conditions if you accept mine,” he says eventually.

“It’s a deal.”

I roll the covers over to push out of his bed and go to my room when his hand falls to my forearm, and I turn to stone.

“Stay,” he says, and I slide back against the pillow, but mostly sit upright.

He shoots me a side-eyed glance before setting his pillow under his head.

“You won’t be able to sleep like that,” he murmurs, turning his back to me and pulling the covers to his chest.

He makes a good point, but how in the hell am I supposed to sleep with him naked next to me?

He makes himself comfortable when I hear his voice again.

“You can turn the light off when you’re done musing.”

I reach over to the nightstand and flick the lamp off.

A faint light glows over the floor from the bathroom.

I slide lower and turn onto my side, spooning him, but with space between us.

The wound dressing is crooked, so I touch his shoulder and right it.

After that, my hand stays on his back. He doesn't say a word, or maybe he's asleep.

And then he talks.

"I still don't know what I'm gonna do with you..." he says, speaking monotonously as if in a stream of consciousness. "You're growing on me. And I like how you make me feel, even when you make me angry. Strangely, you help me relax... Most of the time, anyway, and that's a first. It's never happened before. Maybe there's something to it. I don't know... I'll also say something else. Something I said to Nor before he sent you to me. I'll do everything in my power to protect you, but it will take a whole lot more to want to risk my heart for you. I think this pretty much sums it up. It can't get fairer than that."

He goes silent, and soon, his breaths roll in and out of his lungs, steady and paced.

The rain keeps falling, the sound making my eyelids heavy with sleep.

I move closer to him, rest my hand on his flank, bury my nose in his back, and soon after, fall asleep, dreaming of a different life with him.

I SABELLA

ON THE NIGHT of the engagement party.

AT DE LUCCA'S residence in Manhattan.

LEAVE it to a gangster to wear a sharp suit and make your panties wet with a glance.

The air he drags around stinks of danger and cologne, and he is sexy to a fault, coldness gleaming in his eyes and dark tattoos peeking from under his shirt.

His jet black hair catches the light, while his dark blue eyes look like polished gemstones.

I rarely see De Lucca smile. Most of the time, he's tense because his life is stressful and unpredictable.

With that being said, these past few weeks have been quiet, with no legal problems or incidents involving guns or blood.

Most nights, he slept at home.

We've never shared a bed since that night when we discussed our agreement.

I didn't sleep much that night.

That doesn't mean I left his side.

At times I drifted off to sleep only to step back into awareness and realize I was lying next to him.

He slept all right from what I could tell and even rolled over and faced me at some point.

That got awkward fast.

I don't know if it had to do with me, but he was hard as fuck.

The last thing I wanted was to touch him by mistake, so I turned my back to him.

That didn't work out that well either since he spooned me and pressed his hard-on into my lower back.

Man, the things that crossed my mind.

His breaths rolled into my hair while his arms snaked around my body.

I couldn't tell whether he'd had any experience sleeping with women in the same bed—not fucking them, I mean.

I, for one, had zero experience sharing my bed with a naked man, so I didn't sleep that much that night, and by the time I snapped my eyes open in the morning, he was already gone.

He went out that day to take care of some business.

And later that night, he gave me the paperwork I needed to sign before having dinner with me and retreating to his bedroom.

I haven't been invited to his lair ever since.

He must know having me in his bed spells trouble.

Other than that, our relationship shapes up to be what it was always intended to be.

At work, I'm learning the ropes, and it's huge in terms of gaining experience.

He's doing me a favor by allowing me to work in his firm and also doing himself a favor.

I'm someone he can trust, which is paramount in his business.

His life depends on trusting the right people and being suspicious of those who could create problems later.

These past weeks I've had the chance to learn more about him and his life.

It's lonely at the top—as they say—no matter how you define it, and he is no exception.

Although in his case, it's not apparent.

He belongs to a world built around families, and their ties are strong.

The only problem is there's pressure on those ties, and you can never tell when someone may just turn against you.

He's checking me out right now, running his eyes over my dress. My wardrobe has evolved from the frilly, bohemian looks I sported initially to more sophisticated outfits.

I wear a satin dress dripping with rhinestones and trimmed with long fringes that move every time I move.

The round neckline highlights my collarbones, and a long zipper up my back ensures it fits tight around my body.

My hair tumbles down in big waves, and diamonds adorn my neck, earlobes, and wrists. Not to mention my engagement ring.

He likes what he sees, his gaze drifting to my heels before going to my hair.

“What have you done to your hair?”

There's no contempt or disapproval in his voice, only curiosity.

“Dyed it a few shades lighter.”

My hair is fussy during the winter months, going from that warm wheat color of the summer to an unflattering darker shade.

I brought it back to how it looked last summer.

Although a much darker shade would probably do me justice too. It's just that it doesn't feel like me right now.

His eyes meet mine, and I notice fascination in his gaze.

Staying away from each other—intimately, I mean—has worked wonders.

We are the power couple I promised him we'd be.

From a business point of view, we're doing great, and administratively speaking, things couldn't be better.

We've agreed on all the details of our marriage, made amends to each other, and both signed the paperwork.

Stripped of love, sex, and emotions, marriage can be a workable proposition.

Sarcasm aside, this is my new reality.

"It looks good," he says, brushing away a strand of hair stubbornly sliding over my face.

Oh.

And talking about his secret life...

The life of crime.

It's been handled outside of our quarters.

And when it comes to women?

He kept his promise, and no crazy stories have marred our existence.

I don't know what he's doing or if he's doing it.

Verona is still here, yet she no longer has that smug smile on her face.

The nature of their relationship escapes me completely. It may have something to do with her family's connection to Max's father.

I have no way of finding out and no reason to dig deeper, so I stay away from that part of his life as much as I can.

For sure, behind this facade, he is a free man, but our understanding stands, and for everyone looking at us, he is

very much dedicated to me.

As he should be.

“I’m glad you like it,” I say softly, my eyes locked on his while I’m trembling from his touch.

One thing that hasn’t changed—and rather evolved like everything else in our relationship—is *my fascination* for him.

It has grown into something I can’t hide at times.

Even without the chemical bond Mara had warned me about, I’ve experienced withdrawal at times.

“All right,” he says. “We need to hit the road. Traffic is bad this time of day.”

He holds the coat for me and watches me put on my gloves.

It’s cold outside, and the last time I checked, it snowed, and dark clouds hovered over Manhattan.

By the time he puts his coat on, and we exit the building, the evening is already chasing away the grayish afternoon, and fuzzy lights line the street.

If someone had told me that this would be my life a few short months after moving to New York, I would’ve laughed in their face.

The idea of marriage had never percolated in my brain and had never been part of my life plan. And I think I’m doing all right, considering the circumstances.

We climb in and head east.

A long convoy of cars joins the early evening traffic, and two hours later, we enter a large estate on the North Shore of Long Island.

This is where he grew up.

He’s mentioned this property a couple of times—once when he talked about his family and the other time when we discussed the details of our nuptials.

After considering several options, he decided to go with this location for security reasons.

He's also confessed this is his least favorite place to spend time in because the grim past haunts the present here more than anywhere else.

He would sell it if he had a choice, but logistical reasons keep him from doing that.

It's now part of his real estate portfolio, and he's still unsure what to do with it. It sits unoccupied, although it's well-maintained and has a live-in staff.

I've never been curious enough about this place to ask for a picture, so when we enter the property, and I drag my gaze over the sizable lawn and the wrought iron lampposts surrounded by halos of fog, my mouth is open in awe.

Fluffy snow covers the area, but even so, I notice the ample open space, the imposing two-story brick house with white columns, and the rolling hills, meadows, and trees in the back.

This is a stunning country retreat, but I see the lack of appeal for Max.

With its large round driveway and pretentious set-up, it's not exactly inviting. But tonight, the staff has put some effort into transforming it into a charming place. And they've succeeded.

Christmas decorations adorn the massive entrance, large windows, and sizable rooftops, while a tall tree wrapped in tinsel garlands and pulsing lights sparks not far from the main door.

The windows are lit, and the staff is busy doing some last-minute preparations inside.

It looks like a place of celebration, and it's impossible not to feel the joy in the air, if only for a moment.

Everything is on point and feels so real even I get fooled by it, feeling all the emotions of a bride-to-be, forgetting that it's all fake.

The cars pull up in front of the entrance, the staff waiting for us outside.

There is curiosity when it comes to me, and for this to look real, no one has to know the truth, so we need to play our parts.

And we do.

We climb out, he takes my hand, and as soon as we enter the house, he introduces me to everyone.

Delicious food sits on the tables as our guests start to arrive.

Later, people have drinks, eat, and chat. The atmosphere is electric, to say the least.

Maybe it has to do with this special time of the year and the fact that the cars keep coming, bringing more guests.

Congratulations flow in our direction, and we received them with grace.

There's even a smile on the host's lips.

To say Max De Lucca is magnetic is like saying the Milky Way is astonishing. It's simply redundant.

The man is a great actor, I realize. Although a lot of it is authentic, and it's one hundred percent him.

Dark, dangerous, sultry, provocative, and alluring.

That's him.

When he flashes a smile, his eyes light up the room.

When he shoots his gaze to someone, you have a visceral need to know everything about that person.

Everything he does ignites something in my soul. I can't imagine someone hasn't already fallen hard for this man.

Maybe several women have.

Speaking of women... I look around the room and spot Verona. She wears a black dress—interesting choice since this is not a funeral—and her hair flows down her back in rings the size of my fist.

Holding a drink, she talks to the man on her right. Another man stands in front of her. Tullio de Rossi, her younger brother.

Unlike his sister, Tullio scans the room and has no qualms with holding my eyes. I read a lot in his stare.

Resentment and dangerous revenge.

He has a problem with Max choosing me over his sister, and it's not only about some misplaced love on De Lucca's part—there isn't such a thing, while Verona's affection for Max is well-known to everybody.

And maybe that's the problem.

She's been humiliated.

But... There must be more to the story, and it's easy to grasp what it is. The glint in his eyes and tension in his sculpted jaw and lips speak of immutable determination.

I'm sure Verona was not one of the daughters the mafia families had offered to De Lucca.

Still, a marriage of that caliber would've elevated her brother to unprecedented power.

He may be young, but he's not stupid.

Like De Lucca, he has that killer instinct in him and a dark spark in his eyes. He may have already gotten a taste of power and is thirsty for blood.

Defiant and undeterred, he doesn't move his eyes away from me, and I hold his gaze, fearless.

It's strange how living with a powerful man has changed me in ways I never expected.

Some of De Lucca's poise has rubbed off on me.

Luckily, Verona notices her brother's stare.

She glances over her shoulder and doesn't offer me the slightest greeting before moving her eyes away from me and talking to him in private.

Compelled by her plea for civility, he breaks his stare away from me.

For sure, I can't count him as a friend. He's on a special list right there with his sister.

The incident remains a vague memory when my cell vibrates with a call.

I answer my phone, and my best friend shouts in my ear.

“Are you serious?? Is this the place?”

I move quickly to the window and look outside.

“Where are you?” I ask.

“I just rolled past the gate after narrowly escaping a pat down.” Mara laughs, entertained. “Man, the security is top-notch.”

“Are you alone?” I ask, puzzled.

“Yeah.”

“I thought you two had hooked up again.”

“Uh-huh... And broke up again.”

“When?”

“Last night. It's a long story. And honestly, I don't want to talk about it. I've had enough of that shit. It's been going on for too long. I think he has some issues.”

“You think?”

She chuckles.

“I'm convinced. Anyway... There was a cute guy at the gate. Scary but cute.”

I smile, trying to figure out who's checking the guests at the gate. I can think of several people.

“Cute and scary? How would that even work? What does he look like?”

“Older than me. Looked like a man. Thirty-something, maybe? Great eyes. It was cold outside, and I felt like I was in

a sauna. And he didn't even blink or smile. Buffed up. I think he had a gun..."

She whispers the last few words, and I barely catch them.

"He had a scar on his—" she says in her normal voice.

"Nor."

"I don't know. Who is Nor?"

"A friend."

"Huh? Friend, friend?"

"He's, uh, a good friend of Max."

"Nor and Max. Is Nor taken?"

"Uh... Oh, boy. It's not like that."

"What?" she singsongs. "How is it then?"

"His fear of commitment is taller than the Empire State Building, although he doesn't call it that. He just has women. As in plural."

"They don't mind it?"

"Apparently, they don't."

"What does he do for a living?"

"Uh..."

I peer outside, hoping to see her approach the house and maybe cut our conversation short.

What am I supposed to tell her?

"He's, uh... Freelancing. Where are you?"

"Freelancing, in general? Or only when patting people down?"

"Yeah, something like that..."

I make no sense.

"Oh, there you are?" I murmur. "Pull up in front of the entrance. Someone will move your car. Did you rent a car?"

“What else? I hoped my man would join me today, and I wanted to impress him. And then he didn’t, but I didn’t want to cancel it and then take what? The train? A cab? No way. I want to enjoy myself.”

“I could’ve sent someone to pick you up.”

“No, thanks. Unless it’s Nor. Yes. Him picking me up. Mmm... That’s an entirely different story.”

I laugh.

“I had someone else in mind, but okay. I’ll keep that in mind for the future.”

“Yes, please. Like I believe you after you’ve already talked me out of him. All right... Let me get out of my ride.”

We end the call, and I watch her inch closer to the entrance.

A long line of cars fills the road, waiting to pull up in the driveway as I peek at her from the doorway.

Her eyes glint when she spots me.

I don’t know if me talking her out of Nor has done anything for her, to be honest.

I might’ve prevented her from pursuing the idea of him for a second, but I’m not so sure she hasn’t caught his eye.

Looking at her, I understand why he wanted to pat her down.

Her luscious hair reminds me of Verona’s. Only Mara is blonde and doesn’t have Verona’s wicked eyes.

Mara is Mara.

Her eyes burn like luminaries, setting a contrast to her skin.

Snow clings to her mane and lashes, some specks sticking to her red lips.

She wears a red cape.

At least it looks like an asymmetrical cape with one side thrown over her shoulder and the hemline high enough to

reveal her legs, high-heeled boots, and short cream dress.

She looks vivacious, and part of that has to do with breaking up with her man. She's in that kind of mood.

Her arms loop around me when we meet at the top of the stairs. A moment later, I invite her in.

I'm glad she's here, and she's practically swept away by the view in front of her.

A staff member collects her cape.

"Excuse me... I didn't know he was that rich," she whispers in my ear.

"If it makes you feel any better, I've never been here before and had no idea how this place looked. He hasn't even had the chance to show me the entire place this evening. We arrived an hour ago. The only thing I know is that he doesn't like it, and he'd rather sell it."

"Doesn't like it? Seriously?"

She looks around the dining room while I scoop two glasses of champagne from a server's tray.

"What's not to like?" she asks, taking one from me. "The house looks great, and the property itself... Have you seen that lawn? It must look great in the summer."

"Tell me about it. Let me show you something," I say, and tug at her hand discretely, pulling her away from the dining room and walking her to the back of the house where several arched windows spread across a wall and tall French doors open to an immense terrace now covered in snow.

I crack a door open, and we glimpse outside like two kids looking for adventure.

"Wow..." she murmurs, staring at the spread of land in front of us.

Everything is sparkling white right now, but even so, I can spot the alleys, the benches, and the pond. I'm sure there's more to it.

“See. I told you...” she says, pushing the door open all the way and stepping outside.

I stay behind, but even so, the cold air swirls around my legs, making me shiver.

The snow crunches under her boots.

“Why doesn’t he like this place?”

I shrug.

“Too many memories, I guess. This place belonged to his parents.”

“I see. What happened to them?”

“Uh... They died in a car accident.”

“Well... That would do it. Maybe the place is haunted.”

“I doubt it,” I say, inviting her in. “One thing is for sure. It doesn’t help that it hasn’t been renovated.”

“I like it,” she says, looking at the art hung on the walls and the fireplaces.

The place seems frozen in time.

It looks more like a museum than a place to live.

Changes have been made to render the dining room more welcoming and attractive for the guests, and more modifications have been planned for the wedding.

Other than that... Who knows?

Maybe he’ll sell it after we get married.

“It’s all right,” I say, talking about the house.

She chuckles.

“Look at you. Blue-blooded, and shit. Speaking of blue-blooded, where is your man?” she asks as we make the trip back. “I want to see what you’ve kept a secret from me for so many weeks.”

“I haven’t kept him a secret.”

I look around the room, searching for him, while she keeps droning on. “Is he much older? Not that attractive? Listen, I’m not judging. People have different tastes and needs. I’m not gonna yuk on your yum.”

I laugh quietly.

“You’re such a big mouth.”

“What? There must be something wrong with him. Strictly based on his wealth. He’s rich, right? He’s not doing some illegal shit or something. I mean, look at this place... It belonged to his family. He must be legit.”

I tune her out, less preoccupied with what she’s saying and more concerned with not finding him.

“Wait here,” I say, showing her to a chair and signaling one of the servers to bring her food.

I turn to Mara.

“Get started without me. I’ll be right back. I don’t see Max... He must be upstairs.”

“Okay. No problem.”

I pull away from her and pace down the corridor, not heading upstairs but straight to a room at the other end of the hallway.

It’s the only other chamber he had the chance to show me. There’s no one here.

I try a few other rooms. Some are locked, and some are open, but all are dying a quiet, desolating death.

Where is he?

I go back to the dining room and check the guests. Everybody’s here. Even Verona and her father.

Having no other choice, I take the stairs to the second floor and try every door.

The corridor takes me to a different part of the house with windows facing the back of the property.

Even though this is not the moment, I stop and glance outside. There's another lake and an old gazebo that looks like a ghost against the dark gray background.

The floors creak not far from me, and I swivel around fast, shuddering. I move closer to the source of the noise and notice an open door.

A silhouette moves inside the room.

I knock on the door.

"Come in."

I push the door open and step inside just as he turns away from a safe built into the wall.

"Hey. Is everything all right?" I ask. "You just vanished."

Preoccupied with a stash of papers he must've retrieved from the safe, he averts his gaze.

"Yeah. Everything is fine."

I choose to believe him, although he doesn't seem fine, but I know better than to argue with him.

He shoves the papers into a drawer and locks them.

"This was my father's home office," he says after a moment. "One of them. He had another place in Manhattan."

A strange idea pops into my head. Is that where he had spent his nights a while back before we struck a deal?

I say nothing, and he continues.

"It's strange how coming here after all this time feels like no one has ever lived in this house."

I notice something different in his tone.

He rarely has time for introspection.

His life is about killing before getting killed and trying to survive another day. And strangely, this place is a window into normality to some extent.

Normality that not even his father could afford.

I don't know what business Max has had with that safe, but he looks like someone who just came to terms with how brutal and nonsensical his life is in a way.

I don't hold hope this man will ever change his view on life.

He has become one with it, and there are aspects that he likes.

The power he's amassed comes with perks, and aside from the obvious ones—like the wealth and life of abundance he enjoys—some are hidden beneath the surface.

Like having absolute control over people. People like me and the others on his payroll.

He looks at me.

“Do you know what I mean?” he asks, still talking about how the house feels to him.

“Yes.”

Although not exactly.

Our family ranch only got livelier after my father's death.

Maybe the transformation had to do with my mother, who insisted on keeping everyone around.

Kids had come into this world, changing everything for us, and the house had zero chance of becoming a ghost of the past.

My perspective changes as I look at Max and realize he has no good memories of this place.

There's something else in his demeanor. Something I can't quite grasp and remains a secret to me.

With a short gesture, he signals me to the door.

We make the trip back, and I barely have the chance to warn him that Mara is here when her eyes come straight to us as we enter the dining room.

She stops chewing on her food, and for a moment, she looks like a hamster, turned to stone, with her cheeks bulging.

She moves her eyes to me and mouths something.

I read her lips.

'Is that him?'

I nod, and she chews quickly, swallows her food, and dabs her lips with a napkin.

Her expression says it all.

Shocked, she grapples with disbelief.

“Do you have a moment for her?” I ask quietly.

“Sure. Where is she?”

I lead the way while Mara pushes to her feet and stares at us expectantly.

He lets out nothing when I make the introductions. She can't contain her puzzlement.

“Nice to meet you...” she says, her voice withering away.

I've never seen her so nervous.

“And congratulations,” she says. “You've scored a great woman here.”

She's usually more tactful than that, but what can I say?

Things are awkward.

She's never had the chance to meet him. Partly because of me. And I've never given her his full name either. She would've found a wealth of information if she knew who he was.

Cringing, I wait for Max's reaction.

Surprisingly, he cracks a smile and loops his arm around my shoulders.

That's more action than I've gotten these past few weeks.

“I know,” he says and pulls me into him.

And it just happens that I'm taken by surprise and lose my balance, so I do the most natural thing, which is to wrap my arm around his waist and tilt my face up, smiling like we're truly *'in love'* and such a great couple.

I guess it works. I don't know. Everything happens fast.

And then the next most natural thing happens, and he tilts his mouth to me, and before I make sense of all this, his lips meet mine.

It's brief, almost impossible to capture. It's that short.

We both smile and look at her like we've done the naughtiest thing.

And I don't know about him, but that's how I hide my reaction to his gesture and my nerves.

He doesn't let me go just yet, having his arm around my neck and his lips in my hair, whispering something in my ear.

"Let's keep it that way for the rest of the evening."

He breaks away from me, smiling, and I use the opportunity to wind my arms around his neck, press myself into him, and whisper in his ear as well.

"Thank you," I say without elaborating.

When I pull back, our eyes stay locked for a second, and fuck me, if that was acting.

It all goes away in a split second, and his eyes fill with a smug grin as he lifts his arm and the live band starts playing, people clapping their hands.

I quickly lose him in the crowd before turning back to my friend.

She has tears in her eyes, and I don't know what to believe since my eyes are wet too, but for a different reason.

Or so I think.

M^{AX}

NOR PATS me on my back, and I shift my eyes to him to read his gaze.

“It’s done,” he says, his lips barely moving.

No one in the group notices the exchange.

I pivot to face him and make sure I heard that right, a shudder of satisfaction sweeping through me.

“Any problems?” I toss at him.

“No.”

I’ve been planning this ambush for a while.

I’ve had so many problems with these motherfuckers doing everything in their power to take over my territory, messing with everything and everyone, from suppliers to distributors and everything in between.

They killed, blackmailed, blew up, and snitched. And now they’re fucking wounded.

That will keep them in check for some time.

“Great. Let’s celebrate,” I say, flashing a smile and feeling like a weight has been lifted off my chest.

I signal a server to bring us two glasses of hard liquor.

Nor and I clink our glasses and down our drinks in one move.

The alcohol hits my blood, and I allow myself to relax for the first time in a long time.

It's been a shitty few months with everything that's going on. Too much at once, but that's how shit works, right?

"How's everything?" Nor asks, glancing around the room.

"If you're looking for her, she's in the other room."

I flick my chin toward the second chamber, where Bella and Mara sit at a table with a few other people.

Most of my guests are here.

His stare lingers on the two women, and as I study the direction of his gaze, I realize he's focused on Mara.

"Quite a firecracker that blonde, isn't she?" I taunt him.

He picks up another drink for himself and one for me.

"She's interesting. Not my type, though."

"Hmm."

He shoots his eyes to me.

"What's up with the smirk?" he asks.

"I never knew you had a type."

"Wasn't it obvious?"

He's fucking with me, finally letting it loose.

"I'd be hard pressed to describe your type, and of all people in the world, I'm the only one who knows everything about you."

He focuses on his drink.

"You know I'm not fucking regular women, and why else would I be with someone if not for fucking? She threw a fit at the gate, and I took my fucking time to inspect her car."

"She's Bella's best friend, so whatever you two have going on, you need to work it out before it gets out of hand."

He tilts his glass against his lips.

“There is nothing going on. Speaking of which... How are things with Isabella?”

I swivel slightly so I can have Bella in my line of sight.

Oblivious to my stare, she continues chatting with her friend.

“Great. The same...” I say evenly.

“So it works?”

I turn my back to the women and face the crowd. His eyes are rooted on my face.

“It works better than expected. Frankly, I didn’t think she’d be up for the task. Not only her. Anyone in her place. I know women. Their hearts often get in the way.”

“Are you talking about her or the other woman in the room?”

Flicking my eyes to the side, I spot Verona.

“The other woman in the room would’ve been the albatross around my neck. Not to mention Tullio, who has the kind of temper that gets people killed. She’s not much better, frankly.”

I move my gaze away from her and stare blankly at the crowd.

“I’m at war as it is. Imagine starting a war for Verona. Not only that. The implications would be significant. I know she hates my guts. She just needs to get in line. A lot of people feel the same.”

“She hates your guts because you kicked her out of your bed.”

“I kicked her out of my bed because she’s like a minefield. You never know what you’re stepping on with her, and there’s too much collateral damage. She’ll get over it.”

He takes another sip before he continues.

“If I know anything about women like her, you don’t want them to be your enemies.”

Smiling, I look away.

“Tell me something I don’t know. Strangely, it gets me hard.”

He laughs.

“Blood on your enemies’ necks gets you hard.”

“Sometimes,” I shoot back, chuckling.

There are many strange things that get me hard, and Bella is not one of them.

She is not strange, I mean. Not in the slightest.

She’s a mix of different things that separately wouldn’t work but together create a powerful combination.

Innocence? That’s never been my thing.

Genuine curiosity? Coming from anyone else, it would be unacceptable.

Eagerness to learn? On its own, it means nothing, and frankly, it’s expected.

And disarming lust?

I have no comment.

She’s not even aware she’s lusting after me, and in all fairness, she does everything she can to conceal it from me.

It’s not exactly working, maybe because I don’t need words or gestures to know what’s going on in her mind.

I’ve had the chance to observe her these past few weeks, and since I’ve never shared my space with a woman, it’s been an interesting experience.

I find myself looking for her every time I’m home.

I’m as curious as she is.

In my case, I’m curious about her moods and stupid shit I never cared for before. How she wears her hair, whether she’s tired, wet from the shower, or dressed up for work.

Her body is a dream.

And when I had her in my bed, naked down to her pussy, everything could've started and ended there.

And then I would've probably had another Verona on my hands. Someone capricious, possessive, and volatile.

She's already had a little meltdown.

As tough as she looks at the exterior, she's soft inside. And that's how she's supposed to be. Delicate inside, luscious outside, and mine one hundred percent.

The question is... Is my head in the right place for her to be all that for me? Probably no.

That doesn't mean I can't fantasize that she's all mine.

Or that I didn't think about walking into her bedroom, catching her in the bathroom—like that time when she jumped into my arms, butt naked—sweeping her off her feet, and crashing with her on the bed, spreading her legs open and just enter her, be done with it.

Yet every time I thought of that, something held me back.

A little voice inside my head asked me to reconsider doing that, and I listened to it faithfully.

It's kept me alive so far.

The flesh wants what the flesh wants. And then there's chaos.

“Time for a toast,” Nor says, pulling me out of my reverie.

Just in time.

Bella and Mara leave their seats, heading this way.

I signal Bella to come to me, ignoring the non-verbal exchange between Nor and Mara, and turn to the audience.

In a perfectly rehearsed move, Bella's hand slides into mine.

“I would like to thank everyone who's made it here today.”

Slowly I drag my gaze around the room, my fingers laced with Bella's.

“Something magical happens in a man's heart when he meets the love of his life,” I go on and feel the woman at my side trembling. “The once important things fade into oblivion while she becomes the center of his life. I'd like to thank my beautiful future wife for being courageous enough to share her life with me.”

I tilt my gaze to her, and she shifts her eyes to me, and I'm thinking... If she's bought what I just said, I'm sure everyone else has.

“I hope this is only the beginning of a life long love, and we will grow old together surrounded by our children and our children's children.”

Her eyes get wet with sincere tears, making everything even more believable.

Running my free hand into the back of her hair, I tilt my lips to hers, erase the space between us and kiss her in front of everybody else.

She tastes like strawberries and tears. And I never thought loyalty and candor could do it for me.

Her lips open for me instinctively, and for a second there, our tongues touch, and I instantly get hard.

We pull back from each other a little too fast and smile at our guests, ready for their congratulations.



ISABELLA

WHAT WAS THAT?

My heart races like a crazy beast, unable to slow down.

Everything becomes a blur as I shake hands with people I know nothing about, my brain still stuck on that fleeting

moment when he kissed me and we almost slipped our tongues into each other mouths.

That was the second strike this evening.

We've never touched each other's lips before. I get it. It's our engagement party, and we need to do *some of that*, but giving me a heads up that we were doing it would've been nice.

We've discussed so many things, and somehow we've forgotten about this—how to behave in public... now that our engagement is official.

Standing across the room, Max is enjoying himself, surrounded by his men, while Mara lingers at the table, studying Nor.

That's fucked up.

He completely ignores her, and I hope that's enough to deter her from pursuing him.

It's not that Nor is not smoldering hot.

Him buying lingerie for me to wear for his boss had posed quite a challenge for me. But Nor admittedly doesn't hook up.

As if my beautiful husband does.

Seeing him smiling like someone who's about to get married feels like a milestone in our convoluted, sometimes painful journey.

Long after midnight, the party winds down, and the guests begin to leave. I say goodbye to Mara, promise to keep in touch with her and go upstairs.

As much as Max dislikes this place, he has conceded it's better if we spend the night here. Plus, he's still downstairs with his men, drinking, smoking, and playing cards.

The room the staff has prepared for us has a fireplace with crackling logs, long velvet curtains to block the light during the day, and a large bed with a massive sculpted headboard.

The bed is made. I toss one look in that direction and can't wait to slide under the covers.

The pillows are plump, the sheets are clean and fresh and smell like flowers, and the blankets are soft and luxurious.

There are no separate rooms for us tonight.

For one, we're an engaged couple. And then, the house hasn't been redecorated, and most rooms are dusty and cold.

This would be the first time we'd find ourselves in the same bed after many weeks, although that is not a certainty.

He might spend the night downstairs. There are comfortable couches on the first floor.

Carefully I peel off my dress, stockings, and lingerie and kick off my heels before getting rid of everything.

I put them on a chair and go straight to the bathroom.

Whoever set up the room for us also must've thought about something for me to wear in bed.

I walk out of the shower, put a bathrobe on, and search for it. Eventually, I find something on a satin-padded hanger.

It's a cute babydoll-style cotton nightgown with cutwork embroidery. White with pink bows.

The straps run over my shoulders, cute bows holding them together. I remove the robe and put the nightgown on. It's quite short and hits right under my butt.

A bit concerned with the length, I search for the second piece.

Well, whoever bought it never cared to pick up the bottom.

I'm sure it came with shorts or panties, but they are nowhere to be found, so I sigh and just move on.

It's not like I'll get railed tonight, although I'm no longer sure whether Max de Lucca wants to keep his promise, respect our agreement, and stay away from me.

Nah...

He was acting this evening.

But what a good actor he is.

He fooled me.

I knew it wasn't real, but still, I wanted it to be real, and I wanted to believe that what he'd said was true.

His words were beautiful and sincere, and I shed a tear or two, despite knowing they meant nothing.

Sometimes a lie is better than the truth.

Barefoot I walk around the room and look outside. The only other light—besides the glow of the fireplace—comes from the glistening snow.

The backyard would look lovely with lights and a bit of work. I pull the curtains closed and pivot to the bed.

Moments later, I tuck myself under the covers and lie on my back. The mattress feels like a dream, and the fresh smell of the sheets is soporific.

This has been a long day, and I'm tired. So tired, yet so happy I've made it through.

This is either the beginning of a fantastic journey.

Or the beginning of the end.

I SABELLA

HOW LATE IS IT?

Two or three in the morning?

A thump awakens me in the middle of the night, abruptly pulling me out of my sleep. I jerk upright and look around, and as it happens in moments like these, I have no idea where I am.

Blinking, I look around. The room is dim, the only illumination coming from the fire.

Got it.

I sink back into my pillow and release a long exhale.

And then I hear another thump. And another one. My heart runs in circles like a little mouse. What the fuck is this?

Pushing up on my elbows, I crane my neck, trying to get a glimpse of the door.

It's pulled open, and I know it wasn't like that when I went to sleep.

It would be wise to climb out the bed and check the corridor, but the noise has finally stopped, and I give up on the idea.

The floors creak, and the silhouette of a man looms in the doorway.

It's him moving slowly, unaware of my presence.

A bottle dangles from his hand, an unlit cigarette flicking back and forth between his fingers.

He sets everything on the mantelpiece and loses his shoes and socks.

"I hope I didn't wake you..." he drawls.

I shift my position and look at him, propped on my elbow, my head against my hand.

"How did you know I wasn't asleep?"

He gestures slowly.

"I made some noise. I figured you'd heard me."

"That's not what I asked?"

"Hmm..."

He seems amused. Tilting his eyes down, he undoes his shirt.

"I know when people stare at me. It's one of my best traits. It helps me stay alive."

He balls up his shirt, sends it flying to the chair, and unbuckles his belt but doesn't shed his pants.

Shirtless, he shifts to me, forgetting about his drink and smoke.

A scent of both travels with him when he pulls closer to the bed. He crashes next to me and unfastens his watch, and then the metal clinks when he drops it on the nightstand.

His shredded abs and raised pecs move beneath his skin as he twists his body before pulling it back.

His head lines the pillow, and his face is pointed to the ceiling, his eyes already closed.

"I'm proud of you, Bella."

His words catch me gaping at his broad chest and bulging biceps.

“I couldn’t have hoped for a better woman.”

His voice is hoarse but warm and has this unique ability to dot my arms with goosebumps.

I’m in a baffling predicament, caught between his heat and the idea of him lying, half-naked, next to me.

How long will I be able to suppress how he makes me feel?

And then his words.

Why would he say that to me?

“You’re fucking with me,” I murmur.

“Watch your language.”

He doesn’t seem angry, although he sloppily extends his arm out to touch me—maybe punish me—without looking at me.

His hand lands on my hair and begins moving, feeling me up with fingers splayed over my face before brushing my lips and sliding to my neck and shoulders, crushing the little bows.

Moving down, his touch feels brutal against my soft cotton nightgown. Brutally good. And brutally wrong.

My nipples react to the proximity of his touch, and my thighs clench to hold onto the glimmer of pleasure he’s ignited between my legs.

Maybe sleeping together, I mean in the same bed, is not a good idea. Him being tired and possibly drunk for sure isn’t.

People tend to regret the things they do when their judgment is impaired, and I should know better than being so close to him.

His face seems sculpted in stone, and his eyes are shut while he plays with the bows of my dress.

Slowly I move away from his touch to the opposite side of the bed, leaving enough space between us.

His hand falls off me, and I get no other reaction from him. Maybe he's fallen asleep.

His other hand covers his eyes, so I can't tell.

And now, I turn my back to him and pull the covers to my chest, trying to nestle my head in the pillow and relax enough to fall asleep.

A few moments pass, and all I hear is the eerie silence, the fire snapping and hissing, and the wind whistling at the windows.

And then a sudden rustle, and his heavy hand lands on the back of my hair.

He pulls so hard pain shoots through my skull, and I yelp and react violently, trying to stop him from tugging at my hair.

His other arm falls over me, grabbing the front of my neck, and his chest lines my back, caging me.

This is so not him, and I get swept by horror.

"Never pull away from me, little girl..." he grinds out in a gravelly tone, half amused. "Do you understand?"

With my hair hostage and barely breathing, I nod.

"I may be lucky having you and buying your goodwill and loyalty, but that doesn't mean you can misbehave."

How am I misbehaving if I don't even know I'm in the wrong?

I don't like him right now.

I don't like him at all.

"You're hurting me."

He says nothing but tilts his head behind me as if nodding.

"I need to teach you a lesson or two..." he says quietly. "And trust me, there is no better teacher than pain. I'm in that business, remember?"

"Yes... Yes, I do."

He hardly needs my confirmation. But us talking might alleviate my pain.

He tightens his fist, rendering me powerless against his chest, and I lean back as much as I can, seeking some relief from pain.

He moves his head lower until his breath fans over my neck like he could take a bite of me and make me bleed to death.

He's fooled me all these weeks, prompting me to think we could have a smooth sail and make this workable.

"You're scaring me."

He snorts out a quiet chuckle.

"That's good. You should be scared."

He's drunk.

There's no other explanation.

"Something happened tonight? Other than the party?" I throw at him in desperation, and his grip slackens.

It takes him a moment.

"A lot has happened tonight. It's nothing you need to worry about."

He speaks against the back of my hair, and goosebumps erupt on my skin. I want him to move to the other side of the bed and leave me alone.

I also want him to stay.

And there's something else.

I wanted him to get close to me and even secretly swooned over him. And now, he's acting like this to accomplish... what exactly?

He wants to push me back? Make me hate him? Not want him? Keep me away from him?

Or is he putting me on notice he is not exactly the man I thought he was? The man I'd want? He said it, didn't he?

Is that it?

Is that why he scares the shit out of me?

And if it is... Why does a part of me want more of him?

He brushes all my hair to the side and nuzzles my neck.

“Didn’t I tell you I don’t know what to do with you? You are so fucking pure... It’s hard to wrap my mind around it,” he drones on, and I’m convinced it’s the alcohol talking.

Heart pitter-pattering in my neck, I say nothing.

“At times, I’d love to destroy you... Or tarnish you just a little.”

He runs his palm up and down my neck as if testing the best point to grab and squeeze and break.

“And then I’m thinking... Nah... Isn’t that why I paid you to be here? So I don’t have to be tied to you?”

He takes a long breath and exhales.

“But you’ve got your little claws in me anyway... Asking me to stay away from other women. In public, at least...”

I jerk in response, and he clutches me so hard I lose my breath for a moment while he laughs behind me.

“Didn’t I fucking say? You can’t stop me from fucking anyone I want, whether we’re married for good or not. That’s not how it works in my world. I have all the power while you have none...”

He stops while I listen to the weak drumming of my heart.

“*Or so I thought...*” he murmurs.

His husky voice turns my nipples into pebbles and my soft center into a pure desire.

Oh, how I hate him...

Wait. What?

What was he saying?

I hold my breath, hoping he’ll continue.

Moving his hand down, he slides it inside my neckline, ruining the bows while palming a breast.

A wet mess forms between my legs.

“I can do whatever I want... And you can only do what I allow you to do,” he professes. “But now I wonder. Was it all worth it?”

I have no idea what he’s talking about.

He makes absolutely no sense.

All I know is he’s growing hard and moving his hand to his fly. And I fear he’ll slide his zipper down, and this could be done and over in a flash.

It’s not like I haven’t fantasized that this might happen at some point. But I didn’t want it to be like this.

Something we might both regret in the morning.

He adjusts himself and brings his hand back, not to my chest, but to my thigh.

With one smooth motion, he rides my short nightgown up and crumples it between my legs while cupping my slit.

Half of his touch is straight on my skin, the other half against the fabric, but I feel it all the same.

“This is such a bad idea,” he says, and I couldn’t agree more.

His next move is at odds with his words since he inches even closer, presses his bulge against me, and firmly runs his hand between my legs.

Trembling, I close my eyes. Who knew I could be so sensitive and react so fiercely to his touch?

Tingles swirl across my skin while fear and pleasure are at war.

“I’m not going to do it...” he mumbles, mostly to himself. “You are too perfect for me to screw you.”

And I’m sure he’s not talking about fucking.

While saying it, he caresses me with great knowledge, arousing more than any other man before, and it appears that...

This is the beginning of a battle.

A delicious struggle inside him.

One I'll probably never see again once he sobers up and the man he shows me right now vanishes.

Max de Lucca dwells.

He's bought something and starts to have buyer remorse, not because he doesn't like it but because he likes it too much.

That's why he said what he said.

That it's not worth it in the end.

The thought makes me warm inside but still doesn't kill my fears.

I'm not in control.

He's right.

And whatever deal we have, it doesn't mean he'll keep his promise.

He could change it any time, except for the terms meant to control me. Nothing controls him, though, despite his confessed weakness for me.

So it's all bittersweet.

He continues to say dirty little things in my ear.

"So fucking perfect to be screwed..."

And now he's talking about fucking.

"But if I put my dick in you, everything will go to hell... It already does..."

He says the last few words with regret, tilting his head down, looking at something, while his hand finds its way around the fabric and now straightly palms my pussy.

He parts my folds and touches my clit, and I jolt back like electrocuted.

Slamming my back against his chest only enhances his pleasure.

“So fucking perfect... as I said.”

He drawls more and more, and then I hear the groan of the zipper pulling down, and soon after, I feel his warm, swollen cock against my lower back.

And I'm convinced it all ends tonight, and the morning will find me no longer a virgin and him no longer enchanted with his plan.

Sure, we could go on, but the aftermath would be as unpredictable as these next few minutes.

He pumps his dick, and I expect him to change the angle of his hips, line it up with my opening and just shove it between my legs, making me scream in pain without the slightest warning.

Something makes him change his mind, and he brings his hand back to my slit.

He rips my nightgown open and runs his hand up and down my front, grabbing a fist of my hair at the same time and, to my surprise, bringing his mouth to my neck.

“At least you've learned something valuable... And you know the best thing to do is *not* move.”

He doesn't know *I can't move*.

I'm so tense I'd probably fall to the floor, numb, if he took his hands away from me, and I'd be free to pull away from him.

Annoyed, he removes the tattered dress from my body, and in one swift move that makes me doubt he is as drunk as I thought he was, he loses his pants.

Naked, he slides back in.

Mara said I'd be nervous. I'm terrified. And my legs won't pull apart even with the help of pliers.

When he lines my back again, and I feel him hard, his frame muscular and heavy, I become one with the sheet.

And probably, just as white.

How could he take me from the confident, self-assured woman I was hours ago to the scared mouse I am now?

“I won’t do anything to you...” he reiterates for the umpteenth time this evening, and it’s mostly self-talk since the incriminating evidence bounces against my lower back.

“I’m just playing with you...”

The dark pleasure in his voice doesn’t go unnoticed.

“You probably knew this would come... At some point. And since you’ve never done it, and I’m not sure of how often or if I’d actually want to fuck you, let’s see what you’re made of...”

When he touches my breasts this time, his mouth is on my neck. He licks a long path before he bites my earlobe, and I jerk against his touch. Soon after, he puts his hand between my legs, and his teeth trace lower.

He kisses my neck, more like sucking my blood—I’ll probably be covered in hickeys tomorrow morning—and monitors my reactions.

When pain shoots through my bones, I react by pulling away, and he grabs me hard and holds me against him.

Now, I see what he meant by playing. He locks my legs with his, and I lose the last bit of control over my body.

Tugging at my hair, he kisses my neck hard, and the harder he does it, the more aroused I get, and my reactions become erratic and unpredictable.

And I don’t even realize he does it to provoke me, so when my instinct kicks in, I fight him, pulling away from him.

And when I do that, he overpowers me, exulting in his wicked pleasure.

“Turn to me,” he orders and moves back to give me room. “Turn around, Bella.”

Shivering, I roll over and face him. His eyes glint like the moon behind the velvet drapes.

He is so hard his erection points up, distracting me.

“Touch me,” he says, and I do it as if touching something I don’t know if it’s hot, cold, or bites.

Like it’s a living thing.

I’ve touched men before, but I wasn’t very convincing even then, and now it’s even worse since my life might depend on it.

“Lock your hand around it.”

He’s so thick I struggle with that.

“This is the last dick you’ll ever touch, beautiful Bella, unless someone blows my brains out and frees you from me. And even then, you might need to watch your back...”

Shuddering, I look up, my hand limp around his cock.

The amused glint in his eyes tells me he might be joking.

But it’s hard to forget how real this can get at a drop of a hat. And how he has the ammunition and drive to do whatever the hell he says he wants to do.

I can’t afford not to believe him.

Nobody can.

People lost their lives because they didn’t take his warnings seriously if they were lucky enough to get one of those.

I don’t want to be one of them.

So I believe he’s trying to make it sound like a joke so he doesn’t scare me more than he already has.

But that wicked little glint in his eyes doesn’t erase the effect his words have on me.

He may have said it to fuck with me, but everything he said is true.

Observing me with narrowed eyes, he nods in a silent threat, emphasizing the seriousness of his words.

“You want me to hate you...” I say.

His lips part into a crooked smile.

“I want to warn you. And then there is something else... Something you need to think about long and hard.” He no longer smiles. “Every day with me is a promise. And someday that promise might not deliver... You should never forget that. Everything else, it’s true.”

I never doubted it.

He continues, his mood changing.

“Some of my enemies have perished tonight,” he says, his eyes going blank, looking scary in the dim lights. “Tomorrow, it could be my turn. And you might never get to call me your husband. Or you might be a widow, a young widow at that if we get married. Do you understand what this is?”

The alcohol is taking him on a different ride, away from his most brutal instincts, wicked lust for me, and unfiltered thoughts, gifting him a moment of reflection on his life.

Now our life.

“Yes.”

“Good. Then you know why I’m on the fence.”

He might be on the fence, but he is so ready to take me that not even his words can soften his hard cock.

If this is him doing the honorable thing, how is he when he’s doing the nasty thing? The reprobable thing?

I remember when he asked me to assume responsibility for what was to come.

That was a month or so ago.

“Would it make a difference if I said I wanted you?”

He brings his hand to my face and strokes my cheek with his calloused fingers.

“You’re not at the point of wanting me. You’re just curious about me. Wanting me is a completely different thing. And then, wanting me won’t change the fact that, in the end, it’s all on me. I know better than you in this case. I’ve seen things

you can't even imagine. Watching you tonight with your friend, I realized how foreign my world is to you. And the truth is... I like that you're an outsider. You've proven yourself in so many ways, except for one. You're not tough enough to want me. Really want me. If you do, you'd have to be mine with all you've got, knowing full well that any kiss could be our last. And any moment could be our last too. And tragic things could happen to us. Things that don't happen to most people."

It's strange how he has sobered up.

There appears to be no sign of alcohol in his blood.

His eyes are clear, and his touch is set on my face, and with that, I know the moment is gone again.

And it will turn into another memory I carefully collect into a diary of broken moments.

I'm so right.

He leans closer to me and kisses my trembling lips like he did it downstairs in front of those people, only long enough that I drown in his heat and respond to him so timidly I'm ashamed of myself.

When my instincts dictate to me to press myself into him, his arm closes around me, and we have our first kiss.

A real kiss, stripped of any play, lies, and fears.

The experience is almost spiritual as it means so much, connecting me with him, the exact thing he has refused to give me for so long.

And as expected, it ends quickly without an explanation and with him reaching to the floor and picking up his pants.

He leaves a chaste kiss on my forehead and rolls off the bed.

"Go to sleep. I'll see you in the morning."

Stunned, I watch him slide his fancy pants up and wrestle with his erection before pulling the zipper up and collecting his shirt.

Without a word, he leaves the room while I crash back, my ripped nightgown and quivering heart the only proof that he was here.

M AX

“WHAT THE HELL HAPPENED TO YOU?” Nor asks, entering the room.

Sprawled in an armchair with my legs propped on the coffee table, ankles crossed, my shirt undone, and my belt unfastened, I take a pull on my cigarette, weighing my answer.

“Nothing happened to me.”

I lean over the table and pull the ashtray closer before tapping my cigarette.

“What are you looking for at three o’clock in the morning?” I ask.

His retort comes swiftly.

“You tell me what you’re mulling over at three o’clock in the morning.”

I don’t bother to answer.

He sits on the couch and rubs his hand over his face.

“I can’t sleep,” he says.

“Me neither.”

“Problems in paradise? Is it me, or I’ve heard your bride screaming?”

I click my tongue and take another drag before removing the cigarette from my lips.

“It was nothing. A bit of a rough play. I’ve given her a taste of what’s to come. Scared the shit out of her.”

He shoots me a long look.

“Don’t stare at me. I still don’t know what I want to do with her. I told her that too.”

“Since when do you talk to virgins?”

I throw a hard look at him.

“What? You think I didn’t know?” he says, smiling.

I waved him off, ignoring his comment.

“Since they happen to be naked in my bed,” I retort.

He cocks an eyebrow at me.

“Uh-huh...”

I chuckle.

“Don’t fuck with me, West.”

“I don’t.”

My grin fades.

“It was a good night.”

“Not because of her.”

“No. It had nothing to do with her.”

I put my cigarette out and cross my arms over my chest, pondering, all business again.

“Things will be quiet for a while. As they should. It’s enough time to travel down to Georgia, come back, and have the wedding. The sooner, the better, although I don’t see it happening before spring. By then, things might be different and not in a good way.”

“You’ve never planned so far ahead,” he comments.

“Yeah... I haven’t, have I?”

A few seconds pass.

“I need to make sure Isabella’s protected if something happens to me. I don’t want her to die because of me.”

His eyes glint in the dim room.

“What makes you think about that all of a sudden?”

“I don’t know. It’s a gut feeling. And I feel responsible for her. Don’t ask me why.”

I take a long breath and continue.

“Having her in my house made me gain a different perspective on things. I started to see the world through her eyes, and it softened me. See how this shit works.”

“You ordered a hit tonight. That’s not you being soft.”

“Yeah... I did it to prevent shit from happening because I looked at things in the long term, which ties into the whole idea of regarding things differently.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing. It’s just that I don’t want that fear that something might happen to her to take up space in my head. I want to be prepared. So, I have a plan in case it happens.”

A twisted smile creases his lips.

“What makes you think I’ll survive? Chances are we’ll both go down.”

“That’s possible... If that’s the case, someone else will take care of her.”

“You didn’t feel the same about Verona.”

“Verona was born into this world. Bella didn’t ask for it. Plus, Tullio has Verona’s back. Bella only has me.”

A few moments pass.

“You might need to keep an eye on Tullio,” I say. “He’d like nothing better than to be my right-hand man. Even replace me one day.”

“Over my dead body,” he retorts.

“I didn’t say it would happen, but he’s thirsty for power like his father. There’s nothing wrong with that. It’s just that he’s too damn crazy.”

He gives me that look again. Like he knows stuff.

“What? You think I’m like him?” I murmur.

“Aren’t you?”

“I’m older and better at keeping my impulses under control,” I say with self-deprecating humor.

The silence grows in the room when he pushes to his feet, ready to leave.

“I guess you’re not going back to the conjugal bedroom.”

“Your guess is right. I’m sleeping over there.”

I flick my chin toward the leather couch in my home office.

“Good luck with that,” he says and swaggers out.

His footsteps echo through the house before the door creaks open at the end of the corridor, and he enters his room.

What I said is true.

Isabella Carson had given me a glimpse of a different life, one I’d never been acquainted with.

No matter how much she tried to adapt, she couldn’t fight her nature.

She is still an oasis of normality in this crazy place I call life, and I feel increasingly remorseful for bringing her in.

I push to my feet to go to the couch before changing my direction and walking out.

Minutes later, I enter the bedroom.

She doesn’t move as I near the bed.

Rolled onto her side, the covers obscuring her body up to her waist, her hair fanned over the pillow, she is sound asleep.

I stare at her for a few moments before walking out of the room.

She's better off without me in the bed.



ISABELLA

I STRUGGLE to fall asleep for about an hour, and then I dream about him.

My dreams reflect me feeling anxious. Deep dark waters, falling bridges, people chasing me, and blood.

His face fades in and out, hovering over my battered psyche while everything I wish I'd dreamed about stubbornly pulls away from me.

A voice booms in my head, saying indiscernible things, and my eyes flick open.

The wall is right in front of me, and I don't move, my pulse racing, a warm bead of sweat rolling down my neck.

After a few seconds of teetering on the edge of awareness, I realize I'm not alone. I feel his presence in the room.

It can only be him.

No one in this house dares to enter his bedroom and peer at me unless they have a death wish.

It's him doing *nothing*...? Just looking at me?

I wait, and wait, pretending I'm asleep.

Eventually, he moves away, and I realize how stiff and terrified I am.

This man will be the end of me. And I don't even know how it will happen.

Despite an eventful night, the morning changes my outlook on life.

A sunny day replaces the fog and gray of yesterday.

In daylight, the property looks amazing, even covered in snow.

The staff does their best to accommodate me.

I serve breakfast on the first floor, and I'm not alone.

Nor and several other people join me as I get ready to grab a bite.

Max shows up fashionably late, wearing new clothes, and not a trace of the mixed feelings he revealed last night.

Despite sitting next to me, he doesn't look at me and never addresses me.

We go back home before noon.

He deposits me there and leaves the house, accompanied by Nor and his men.

I see him again on Monday morning just before the FBI picks him up along with several other people—Nor amongst them—and my entire day turns into a nightmare.

The few words we exchange before he's rounded up tell me he knows what is about to happen. He insists things will be all right, and I just need to do what I usually do.

Go to work and come home. Never go anywhere alone.

His lawyers will keep in touch with me. And there is nothing to worry about.

While I appreciate the heads up, things are not that easy in my head, and once I see him disappear in a black SUV, I feel like I'm about to collapse.

I go back to my room, call my workplace, tell them I'll be late, and spend an hour trying to calm down and pull myself together.

I wish I was more prepared for things like this.

Mara calls me to chat before leaving for work, and I barely unclench my teeth to speak.

"Are you okay?" she asks.

"Yes, I'm fine."

We talk about my engagement party and Nor, and I barely mumble a few words while changing my clothes, solely because I feel like wearing black instead of my first choice—a soft pink wool dress that now seems inappropriate and also reminds me of how dreary this weekend has been without him.

Mara and I end our conversation soon after.

What a horrible way to start the week.

If I am so affected, and I'm not even his wife, and I might not even be his wife in the end, how does a real spouse feel in a situation like this?

Tears pool in my eyes, and I fight them back as I pick up a black pantsuit and a white shirt from a hanger. I put my pants and top on, secure the fly and button up the shirt before throwing on the jacket.

Now my attire matches my mood. Sober and dark.

How can he say everything is all right?

Everything is not all right.

My fingers tremble when the ring catches my eye, and I stop and stare at it through a veil of tears.

This is not right.

And this is everything he's warned me about.

Only a few nights ago, he said what he said to me, making me feel physical pain and question my desire to be with him.

And I'm sure he didn't do me a favor. He just liked to do that to me, and yet... What he said to me was true.

Any day with him is a promise. And one day, that promise might not be fulfilled.

It was smart to look for someone who had no feelings for him, and he had no feelings for.

Max de Lucca did the right thing.

Running my fingers under my eyes, I remove bitter tears that prove him right. I need to take care of this. But how?

The rest of the week goes by uneventfully.

Ironically, I can't even tell if something is different. He's not home. Yes, he's not. That is not unusual.

His bed is made, waiting for him.

The house runs as it always does. People go about their business. The staff cleans and cooks like it's any other day.

Aaron and another man take me to work every day and pick me up in the afternoon. Come lunchtime, the driver takes me to my favorite restaurant and collects me later.

Nothing at the office seems different. The business runs smoothly, and the people in charge seem unaffected.

Per Max's instructions, I don't talk to anyone about him.

Friday morning, I get ready for work when Marge knocks on my door.

"Come in."

I move away from the mirror, running my hands down my skirt, smoothing the fabric.

She seems concerned, or maybe it's the constant worry nipping at my awareness.

"Is everything all right?"

"Yes. Yes... Uh..."

"Yes?"

She avoids my stare, making me even more nervous.

"I have some news."

Oh, shit.

Her tone doesn't suggest anything good.

"Mr. De Lucca said you shouldn't go to work today."

"He *said*? Did he talk to you?"

"One of the men received word from him."

"Why didn't he talk to me? Or why didn't that man talk to me?"

“I don’t know. He thought it was better if I delivered the message.”

“Is Max okay?”

“I think he is.”

“You don’t know?”

The woman shrugs.

“Okay. I’ll wait then. Maybe he’ll change his mind and talk to me.”

All the tension accumulated these past few days finds its way out in small outbursts of frustration.

“Sure. Breakfast is ready,” she adds before walking away.

I go to the French doors, push them slightly open, and peer outside. Snow lines the road, the sun shines over the rooftops, and the air smells like winter.

I walk onto the balcony and look up the street. There is no unusual activity. Nothing indicating that something is about to happen.

Even more frustrated, I head down to the dining room.

They’ve already set the table in the breakfast nook for me, maybe because they know how much I like to stare at the view.

The staff is considerate, trying to make my life as pleasant as possible. Fresh fruit, coffee, and pastries are on the table, waiting for me.

The first sip of coffee gives me a boost of energy and makes me look at the bright side of things.

At least he’s okay... And maybe, no news is good news.

Who knows how things really are in this line of business?

If only I could keep my head on straight and feel nothing for this man?

How silly of me to think this would be an easy job.

There is no easy job. Ever.

And then...

I sincerely don't know how what happens next actually happens.

Have I blacked out? How come I didn't hear a thing?

I see Max entering the dining room and looking around as if searching for me. The women greet him as they usually do.

As if he was out for a walk this morning and nothing more.

He wears the same clothes he wore on Monday, and they are not as sharp as they once were.

I don't even want to know what happened. Has he spent this entire time with the FBI investigators? Or has he been somewhere else? Maybe he had something else to do.

So maybe he was out much sooner than I thought.

I rise, scoop up my coffee, and head his way. He holds my gaze, and I quickly notice the look in his eyes.

This is taxing him, but what did I expect?

"Are you hungry?" I ask.

He clicks his tongue.

"Coffee then?"

"Yeah. Ask them to send it up," he says on his way out, and I relay his request to Lina before following him upstairs.

Moments later, the woman enters his bedroom with a tray.

"I'll take it from here," I say, setting the coffee and water on the nightstand while she leaves us alone.

He removes his suit jacket.

"Do you mind if I smoke?"

I look at him, surprised.

"No."

He retrieves a cigarette from his pocket and slides it between his lips before flicking his metallic lighter open.

He takes a drag and drops his jacket on the chair. His sleeves are rolled up, and he has bruises on his forearms.

Again. I'm not asking.

"Things all right?" he asks quietly before taking another drag.

"Yes. Everything is fine."

I move to the window and push it open, avoiding his scrutiny for a second.

"How about you? Is everything all right with you?" I ask.

His eyes meet mine when I turn around.

He reads every thought floating around in my brain.

"You don't seem fine," he says, ignoring my question.

"How can you tell?" I sort of snap.

Slowly, he leans against the wall table.

The waistcoat he wears has a low neckline, revealing his tailored shirt and the top of his muscular chest.

He's all ink and scars and now bruises.

He gives me a faint smile.

"I'm fine," I say.

I just want to move away from this topic, so I turn my back to him again and pick up a bottle of water.

"I'll be away next week," he says, and I spin around faster than a piñata.

"You what?"

He nods in response, observing me intently.

"Are you in some kind of trouble?"

"No. No trouble."

Interestingly, he looks calm and content, as if everything goes as planned.

"Do you want to cancel our trip to Georgia?" I ask.

“No.”

Now I feel relieved.

Because for a second there, I thought he'd go away for good, and none of this, him and I, will ever happen again.

I'm about to tell him I don't think I can do this... *actually*. That these few days have been horrible for me, and I couldn't sleep and eat and had to *pretend* everything was all right.

Sure, it might've had to do with me more than him.

Perhaps it was selfish.

Self-serving.

Maybe it had to do with me getting used to living in this big house but not accepting the danger he so easily accepted.

I can't get used to it.

I'm not a killer.

He is.

“So, I'll see you again...” I murmur, distracted by my thoughts.

“Sure.”

He seems indifferent.

At least, that's how I perceive him, and I try to come up with an excuse to leave.

Although, at this point, both options hurt.

Staying here with him, seeing how casual and cool he is about this whole thing, and leaving and returning to my room are equally bad.

“Why do you need me home?” I ask.

My voice is strained.

“Because we need to talk.”

That's a striking change.

“It's about the wedding,” he says.

“What about it?”

Is it finally off?

“We’re getting married before Christmas.”

The news leaves me breathless.

“That’s three weeks from now.”

He nods, blows the smoke out, and puts the cigarette out.

“Yes. First, we go to Georgia. And then we fly back and get married. We spend our honeymoon in Italy.”

My knees shake badly.

It’s not like we haven’t considered speeding up the process.

We sort of knew this could happen sooner than we’d originally intended, but I sense some urgency in his voice, and I can surely spot a rushed decision.

Maybe it has to do with his legal problems, although he says they’ve been taken care of, but still...

He’s proactive.

Marital privilege comes to mind as a pressing motive. It protects him. And it may protect me as well, making me less of a target.

That’s the only reason I can think of. My mind spins quickly in another direction.

“Italy?”

“Yes.”

“I need a wedding dress.”

“Don’t worry about the details. You’ll get help with that.”

“Shouldn’t I expect to have a say in it?”

He lifts an eyebrow at me, propped against the table, his arms crossed.

“You’ll have a say.”

“I there a church wedding ceremony?”

“Yes.”

I’m probably livid.

“Do you have a problem with that?” he asks.

“No. No problem.”

“What is it then?”

“The prenuptial investigation. They’re going to ask me about the four tenets of marriage. If I enter it freely, and it’s permanent, exclusive, and open to children. They question me under oath.”

“And?”

And??

“You enter it freely, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“It’s exclusive.”

“Is it?”

A smirk tugs at his lips.

“Do you doubt it?”

I can take this any way I want.

“What about being permanent?”

“It is permanent.”

He scares me.

“And open to children?”

“We’ve discussed this already.”

“You don’t know if you want to mess with me. Your words.”

“Do you want to have children?” he asks me directly.

“Well, we’ve discussed this,” I turn the tables on him.

But those were words. And words mean nothing unless they’re backed up by actions and become reality.

And in this case, I have a hard time reconciling this new reality with our plan.

I'll be asked important stuff under oath, and I may need to bend the truth a little.

Who knows if anything I say will prove to be true?

"You know what? I think this is more serious than anticipated," I begin, and his eyebrows move with displeasure.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

I flick my hand up.

"I understand what you're saying. And everything makes sense to me. But it's not as easy as I thought."

He runs the edge of his teeth across his bottom lip.

"Explain."

"There's nothing to explain. It's all I've got. Everything you said to me last week proved to be true. I don't know how you people do it."

"You people?"

"Yes. You. Maria and Giani. All the people who have families and do the things you do. How can they keep it together?"

The blood draws from his face, and tension sets in his jaw.

His arms uncross as he pushes off the wall table, and soon I stare at his back while he swaggers to the bathroom, shedding his clothes.

By the time he disappears behind the door, he's already shirtless.

That was a weak moment for me. Frustrated, I bite my lip, pondering ways to erase that stupid feeling.

The water runs in the bathroom when I leave his bedroom, go straight to my room, and change my clothes.

Later, I return, wearing sweatpants and a T-shirt, not exactly what I had in mind for a Friday morning.

Had I not worked for him, I'd be fired by now for not showing up at work.

I knock on the bathroom door. It's actually open, and I can see him sprawled in the tub.

"Do you mind if we talk?" I ask.

"Talk."

His voice is a bad omen.

"I didn't mean what I said."

He laughs.

"You think I'm mad because of what you said?"

I walk in front of him. The water hits below his chest, soft bubbles concealing the rest of his body.

I kneel next to the tub, set my elbows on the edge, and look at him. Our eyes are at the same level. His are clear, and mine are teary.

"I don't know whether you're mad at me or not. You look mad, from what I can tell. The thing is... I used the wrong words."

"No, you didn't. People do what they need to do. Life is not perfect. You can try to make it perfect and pretend it is, but it's not. Everything comes with good and bad. When you stare death in the eye every single fucking day, what you have is a gift. Because of that, we, *the people you were referring to*, live fiercely. We love deeper, feel stronger, and die sooner. That's how we live."

"And yet, you paid someone to avoid that kind of living."

"Yes, I did. I thought it would work in my favor."

He tilts his head back and rubs a hand over his eyes.

His entire arm is covered in bruises.

"How is it not working in your favor?" I ask.

"You whining is not working in my favor."

I bite my lip and lower my eyes to blink back the surplus of tears.

“It’s only been a fucking week. What happens if I go away for good, and you have my children, Bella? Are you going to have a meltdown every single fucking day? Allow your emotions to control you?”

I still muse over his words when he moves abruptly, rising to his feet and picking a towel to wrap around his waist.

“You know what? Forget it,” he says, royally pissed. “You follow my instructions from now on, and that’s all you need to do.”

He pulls out of the tub, leaving me next to it, on my knees, before I press my forehead against the cold edge and inhale the sweet aroma of the body wash.

The noise in the other room suggests he’s gone straight to the walk-in closet.

I shoot up and dart straight to him.

“You came back to the bedroom last week and watched me sleep in your bed,” I bark.

His back is turned to me while he puts on a new dress shirt, tailored pants, and a fitted vest.

“And?”

Removing his suit jacket from the hanger, he walks past me. I follow him into the other room.

“You can’t tell me you feel nothing for me.”

Sliding his jacket on, he spins to me. His blue eyes glint with irritation.

“I think I told you enough that night. You’re just wasting my time right now.”

I try something different.

“I was worried sick this week.”

“Don’t be.”

He slides his expensive watch on and fastens it around his wrist.

“It’s easy for you to say that,” I throw at him.

He huffs in disagreement.

“You really think that?”

“You show it to me every day.”

“You know nothing, Bella. Just stick with what you know. All right?”

He turns his broad back to me and heads to the door.

“Where are you going?”

“Excuse me?”

He stops and pivots back.

His eyes glint with darkness.

“You made me stay home today. Where are you going?”

He swallows his frustration before talking.

“To make the arrangements for our upcoming nuptials.”

“I want to go with you.”

He finds me so ridiculous he laughs.

“I’m not joking.”

“You don’t believe me or something?” he tosses at me.

“I do believe you. And that’s why I want to be a part of it.”

“Are you sure?”

“I want to go with you. You can’t keep me in my room like I’m some rare flower that withers away if taken outside. I need to live. Like you.”

“You don’t want to live like me.”

“That’s not what I said, and you know it.”

He ponders and then dips his eyes.

“Okay. Go get some clothes. I’m waiting downstairs.”

With that, he exits the room, and I head to my spot, frowning yet convinced I just scored a small victory and put my foot down.

How wrong.

How fucking wrong I am.

I SABELLA

THINGS HAPPEN FAST because things have been planned in advance.

He's not waiting for me downstairs.

He's waiting for me outside in a black Bentley with a driver and two SUVs parked behind it, making me think he is back to his glorious power, no longer targeted by the FBI but surely hated by his enemies.

A shift of power must've happened, increasing his relevance even more, and making him the indisputable King of the underground world.

Despite the frigid air, I'm breaking out in a sweat by the time I slide into my seat next to him.

His eyes go casually over my dress.

I only thought it was fitting to opt for something fancy that goes well with his light gray three-piece suit, white shirt, and blue tie.

Blue like his eyes, my wool dress has a round neckline, a pencil skirt, a fitted top, and three-quarters sleeves.

I also threw on a flared short coat in the same color.

I look presidential, but it fits the occasion, or I hope it does.

The next few hours go by in a breeze.

We stop at the church and then at the bridal salon, where we spend a couple of hours with me modeling dresses for him.

I grasp better now why Nor had been so picky with what I needed to wear for De Lucca.

He knows exactly what he wants me to wear and doesn't give two shits about not being allowed to see me in a wedding dress before the ceremony.

He selects two wedding dresses, one more modest for the church ceremony and the other for the party. To that, he adds a few more dresses, shoes, and lingerie.

In all fairness, the woman helping us makes the process really easy.

We have lunch at the restaurant where we met for the first time, on the same floor, guarded by the same men and meeting some of his *friends*.

I'm using the term loosely here since they are business associates but not the kind he does business with at the hotel.

The lunch is copious, joyful, and noisy, lasting for a while. By the time the servers bring out trays of tiny cannoli dusted with powdered sugar, strawberry gelato, chocolate biscotti, and zabaglione, the streetlights pierce the dark gray afternoon, and it snows again.

I'm not the only woman at the table.

Except for two men, all guests have female companionship.

They also have wedding rings, and the women keeping them company aren't their wives.

What gives them away?

They try really hard to get their men's attention, failing most of the time. Their women—mistresses—are beautiful accessories to show off and enjoy later but nothing more.

The women are young like me, and the men are much older than De Lucca.

The atmosphere is relaxed and celebratory, as if they are the Kings of Manhattan. I don't know about them, but there is only one King at the table, and that is De Lucca.

And he is their boss. That's a hard, cold fact.

He commands the room effortlessly, the men paying attention to his moods, expressions, and what glints in his eyes.

Darkness, approval, or satisfaction.

I study him too, but for a different reason.

It's hard to point to something in particular, but he's changed since that day, or maybe my perception of him has shifted.

The more I look at him, the more my twisted affection for him expands and the more determined I am to stay away from him.

It makes no sense to anyone else but me.

I can see how easily I can fall for his looks—it's already happened to an extent—the magnetism of his eyes, the air of inescapable power breathing through his pores.

It's not only his overpowering clout that makes me weak in my knees. The opposite of it gets me to a greater degree.

The moments I've witnessed in the privacy of our home when he's tired, exhausted, down, and cut or bruised.

The seconds of much-needed relief when he keeps his eyes closed, rubs his hand over his face, or stares blankly at the wall, a cigarette slowly dying in his grip with every speck of ash flying away.

The moments when he experiences tiny existential crises.

The seconds when I think or hope he is looking into a different possibility, maybe a life outside the world he's in.

Every single one of those moments has brought me closer to who he is, but it can't change the fact that he is dangerous.

For now, he seems lenient toward me despite me witnessing his down moments, but before long, he'll consider them his enemies and abhor their reflection in my eyes.

And then, he'll be back at this table with his friends and someone else in my seat. Someone like Verona, or maybe Verona, who would be back in good graces.

If not her, then a woman like the ones around the table, a willowy blonde, a temperamental redhead, or a snappy brunette.

Or any other way he'd like them.

She'd sit quietly, her lithe body wrapped in some sexy little number.

Or maybe she'd be loud, outgoing, full of life, and voluptuous. Like Verona in the good old days.

With her lips painted red and eyes shadowed by long fluttery lashes, she'd earnestly try to improve his mood.

And later, she'd get on her knees and suck his dick without a problem before he would come home to me.

Shuddering, I move my eyes away from him to erase that nightmarish view from my head.

For a few long moments, I focus strictly on the gelato in front of me. The fresh fruit pulp gets stuck to my teeth as I chew mindlessly, unable to regain my focus.

I hate him.

And what's worse...

I've already fallen for him.

It's hard to tell if he studies me as much as I analyze him.

If he does, he's discreet, and I can't tell since he, himself, is showered with so much attention from his guests his focus is on the people clamoring around the table.

It's getting dark by the time we leave the restaurant, and since we won't have time for shopping before traveling to Georgia, he takes me back to browsing the stores on Fifth Avenue.

We buy gifts for my family—my nephews and nieces included. He is patient, generous, and efficient, which scores points with me and makes my need to stay away from him even more dire.

One of the gifts he buys for me is a necklace that costs a fortune. The piece of jewelry is as beautiful as it is expensive.

A heart-shaped diamond attached to a delicate platinum chain that comes with a matching bracelet and drop earrings.

He insists on fastening the necklace around my neck, and when I find myself in front of him, inches away from his lips and glacial eyes, my skin reacts with tingles, and my heart screams in my chest, a voice in my head telling me to watch out.

I don't think he does what he does to charm me.

And it's still a mystery to me whether he does it because it brings him pleasure.

There is no indication he's done this often or ever. He might've confessed to that before. I think. I don't know.

My brain is in a fog as I watch every glimmer of expression sliding over his face.

"It looks beautiful," the sales clerk says, sounding sincere, although she might be motivated by her hefty commission.

He says nothing, his eyes diving into mine, creating storms of pleasure.

His stare is invasive and possessive, showing much more than I saw at the table, where he seemed detached. The man in public and the man in private are two different people.

The sales clerk pays little attention to us, tactfully retreating and allowing us to relish this moment in private.

“Beautiful, indeed...” he murmurs only for me to hear. “Look,” he adds, pointing to the oval mirror on the counter.

I swivel around and take a peek.

The piece of jewelry stands out against my delicate neck.

“Do you like it?” he asks.

“Yes.”

My gaze also dips to my bracelet and my ring.

There is so much sparkling light against my skin, coming with undeniable excitement and also a kernel of fear.

It’s what any bride-to-be would probably feel.

That existential threat that her life is about to change forever. Only in this case, there’s also the fear instilled in me by the unknown and danger marring his life.

The external threats.

A part of me shakes in horror at the idea of him.

Plus, given the circumstances, there is no genuine bond between us, only the promise that we will keep our end of the deal.

Despite all that, sweet memories lodge in my memory right now. The festive atmosphere in the store, the lights, soft music, and snow falling in long drapes outside.

And him looking sharp, outrageously handsome, with a modicum of contentment on his face.

It has little to do with me, I guess.

It’s been a rough week for him, and it must’ve been more than the legal problems. It was everything else I wasn’t privy to.

Whatever left his arms bruised.

When we walk outside, he suggests we take a stroll.

It’s as close as we can get to living a normal life, despite the cars following us closely and his men being permanently on the lookout.

Looping my arm through his, we walk past stores, people, and Christmas decorations.

Gleaming ornaments litter the store windows, and music seeps out every time the doors open, and customers walk in or out.

It's snowing like there's no tomorrow, and my eyes go up to the sky, and for a second, I forget my arm is linked to possibly the most dangerous man in New York City.

I guess life is never perfect, is it?

“Do you have snow like that in Georgia?”

I smile at his attempt to make conversation.

He must know there isn't snow like this back home.

“No.”

“You like it?”

“I find it fascinating.”

This is my first winter in New York, and while the snow is exactly how I envisioned it, walking side by side with someone like him has never crossed my mind.

“I love this whole thing...” I murmur. “New York is a beast.”

Why I've chosen that particular word remains a mystery, but he seems to get it, a knowing smirk tugging at his lips.

“Yes, it is.”

The Plaza Hotel looms in the distance, and we soon head there for dinner.

We get home late. The house is lighted and quiet, and the staff is already in their rooms.

“You want a drink?” he asks when we enter the dining room.

“No. Thank you.”

He pours himself a tumbler of bourbon and invites me to sit with him at the table.

This seems official, and if it wasn't for the gifts and everything else, I'd say this is the end for us.

"This week has been interesting..." he says before tilting his glass against his lips.

He places it in front of him and swallows the alcohol, wincing.

"I've scored a few notable victories on several fronts."

Are the marks on his arms a victory?

"I can't talk about them for obvious reasons, but I wanted to share that with you and warn you at the same time."

He pauses, leans back in his chair, and takes a long breath.

"I can never be too cautious because these things never go away. The situation is under control for now, but things might change in the future."

Why is he telling me all this?

"They will change for sure," he goes on. "At some point, you might be pulled into some shitty stuff. I don't want it to happen, but it might, and I want you to be prepared. You asked me how women do it. *Our women...*"

I stiffen in my seat.

"They don't think about it. They live each day like it's their last. They take care of their houses, kids, and men. Sometimes they do more than that. They just learn how to cope with it. I didn't say it was an easy life."

"We didn't discuss any of this in the beginning."

"Yes, we didn't... It was too soon to talk about things that might've never happened. But time has passed, and you've seen things. And you're already... You seem affected by them. There is nothing I can say other than that you need to be strong. But that stands true for anything that matters in life, so this isn't that much different."

He observes me while I push back anything that could bare the slightest significance.

“All right. I’ll take your silence as a sign of acceptance.”

He shifts in his seat and reaches inside his pocket before retrieving a small piece of paper.

“The first payment has been deposited in your account. This new bank account has been set up for you. Both our names are listed on the account, and this is where you get your money. You’re free to do whatever you want with it. It’s yours. You’ve earned it. Once we get married, we’re shifting to an annual payment schedule, as we’ve discussed.”

He pushes the piece of paper in front of me. I pick it up, glance at the number, and put it in my pocket.

“Thank you,” I say.

“Thank you.”

There’s a slight intonation in his voice, like he hasn’t expected to get so far with me.

Frankly, it’s a surprise for me too.

“Do you have any questions?” he asks.

I have lots of questions, and I ponder whether to get into that with him.

“There is something.”

“Yes?”

He tips his chin up, an eyebrow lifted, his eyes locked with mine.

“It’s not a question... More like a decision that I’ve made,” I say.

“I’m listening.”

“I don’t want to be in the same bed with you again.”

He tilts his head to the side, staring at me, intrigued, curious, and slightly entertained.

Yes, amusement glints in his eyes, and I find it fascinating.

“I’m serious. It messes with my head. I want to do this thing the best I can, and it doesn’t help me to be close to you.

And I thought you wouldn't be against it since it was your idea not to be too close to each other, to begin with."

I stop and hold my breath.

This is my first attempt at manipulating my husband. My future husband.

A bit of flattery, a reference to something he had toyed with in the past before he fucked with me in his bed, and a bold request.

Maybe a bit of reverse psychology, but truthfully, I want to stay away from him physically.

I don't want to be one of those wives who doesn't go out with her spouse while a mistress takes care of her husband's needs.

And I don't want to get sucked into him and have my heart broken every time he goes away, and I have no idea if he's coming back or not.

A knowing smile curves his lips. Is it because my ploy is outrageously simple and... *working*?

Or is it because it's never going to happen?

"You want me *not* to see other women... And *not* to have you in my bed."

"You said having sex was not a given."

"I said I couldn't promise that it would happen."

"Can you say now that it would happen?"

His eyes glint with a smile.

Seemingly, I got him.

"I can only promise to protect you. I've never promised you that this would be a real marriage."

"And that's my point," I say, slightly disappointed. "We're saying the same thing. I think we should stick with it. I still want you to show me some respect. If you respect me, they will respect me."

"You don't understand this world."

“I do. And you do too. Your father didn’t have less respect from his people because he was loyal to your mother. You’ve never mentioned it, anyway. Saying that your status depends on how many women hit your bed is a flawed argument. And it’s not an argument. It’s a pretext.”

He looks at me, intrigued by my new attitude.

I know what I’m asking of him.

And I know the whole point of this arrangement—the reason he wanted someone like me—was that he was afraid he’d walk into his father’s shoes, become loyal to his wife, and then risk everything for her.

I hope he notices I’m all for helping him here.

“So you want me to be celibate?”

He finds it so ridiculously amusing he laughs.

“And not lay a finger on you?” he continues.

“You’re not interested in laying a finger on me anyway. Are you?”

That’s a dangerous play on my part.

Taunting him is not a good strategy, but he kind of rolls with me, and I do my best to make my point, even though I risk a lot.

“I’m not trying to be disrespectful,” I say.

He narrows his eyes at me, waiting for me to elaborate.

“I know you have rights over me. Whether I want it or not, I point out. “And I know what I’m giving away by signing the contract. I even know how I felt when I was in bed with you. I think you know it too,” I say seriously, and his smile vanishes. “I don’t like emotional outbursts more than you do. And there is so much on the line when something happens to you that my emotions shouldn’t get in the way. This is not only about you. I am in the same situation. That’s why I’d prefer us to stay away from each other. At least to try to do that,” I add, attempting to reason with him.

He tips his gaze down, picks up his drink, finishes it in one gulp, and sets the empty glass on the table.

“We’ll see,” he says darkly before pulling up and walking out of the room, leaving me in the dining room, with only the old clock on the wall, prophetically ticking, bringing me closer to the moment of truth.

I SABELLA

AT HER FAMILY ranch in Georgia.

I KNEW my mother wouldn't let me down if I happened to marry someone loaded, and Max de Lucca is a giant when it comes to money.

The house looks like one of those beautiful Southern estates featured in lifestyle magazines, with Christmas ornaments, sparkling lights, red ribbons, fresh pine wreaths, white and crimson candles, and gold glitter everywhere.

Mick Branson has been entirely forgotten, like he's yesterday's news.

He is invited to our house for dinner, but no word about him having a crush on me is ever mentioned again.

Even Missa no longer comes into the conversation in connection to him.

Things have changed dramatically. And the gifts we brought from New York have also affected people's attitudes toward me.

I'm no longer regarded as the rebel, the problematic child.

What can I say?

It's good to be back home, and it's great to be treated like a princess.

We're not traveling alone. We couldn't. But my mother is more than happy to accommodate the men Max has introduced as his friends.

Luckily, Nor is among them, but even so, it's hard not to notice their dark, broody energy.

Even relaxed and in a joyful mood, they spell trouble.

We all pretend we're not noticing it while they're trying to enjoy the festive atmosphere.

Oh...

And do I have to mention my mother is spellbound with Max every time he talks?

I've never seen her so in step with someone since I was a kid, and she was enamored with my father.

We were that kind of family.

Although that sentiment has eroded throughout the years, she is still very much melancholic when it comes to my late father.

Currently, she's swapping out one addiction for another, and since Max is here, she's no longer bugging me with her shit.

Why would she?

Him having money has removed the friction between us.

My sisters and brothers simply accept the new reality, and everybody's happy.

And Max...?

Well, Max seems to enjoy the change of scenery as well.

Maybe it's the fact that he's gotten out of New York and taken a break from what he's usually dealing with.

Or maybe it's my big family that, in some ways, reminds him of the kind of crowd he's used to.

Whatever the reason, he's in a good mood.

The food is delicious and different than what we usually eat in New York. My mother has put a lot of effort into cooking and baking our favorite recipes, the ones she's been doing since we were kids.

Southern buttermilk biscuits, cornbread, ham, beef tenderloin, mashed potatoes, macaroni and cheese—my all-time favorite—and Ambrosia, layered cake, and brown sugar cookies.

At dinner, we're dressed casually yet still to the occasion, and despite many unknown and untold things, we manage to make it a success.

It's not easy to bring so many people together, especially on such short notice, right before a wedding, and still make it work.

No questions are asked.

No one wants to know how we've managed to have the shortest engagement in the history of engagements and when exactly love struck.

As I said, my mother can be quite the zealous enforcer of the rules when she's fully motivated.

Once the dinner party begins to wind down, my mother signals me to follow her into the kitchen and asks me if our guest—my future husband—would like to share a room with me.

"I appreciate your concern, but it's more about what I want," I say.

"Yeah... yeah. Of course."

I'm sure she just rolled her eyes.

Ignoring her, I pour myself a glass of water while she picks up a cookie from a tray.

"So what do you want?" she asks while I study her.

I always thought my mother was the most beautiful woman I've ever seen.

Her platinum blonde hair is short and has a lot of volume from a blowout treatment she got earlier today.

A dark purple blouse makes her blue eyes look almost violet, while her pink lipstick brightens her face even more.

She's the only person I know who can wear pink with anything and still look good. Right now, her capri pants and flats are pink like her lips.

"I can sleep in my old room if no one has claimed it yet."

She makes a quick gesture.

"It's yours. Any reason why you're asking for a different room?"

A smile tickles my lips.

"I thought you'd like my idea," I say facetiously.

"This is not the eighteen century. I thought things were different now."

"They are... Yes, they are." I avert my gaze. "But it's better that way."

Her stare is still on me.

"Listen, I know we've never talked about these things, but you two are either genuinely love struck, and he's in a hurry to marry you, or something else is going on."

I open my mouth to speak and possibly offer an explanation.

Her hand goes up as she swallows the last bite of her cookie, and she talks before I get the chance.

"No need to know. I'm happy with how things are. I think he's great. Way better than Mick. Or any other loser you could've fallen for, which was my greatest fear... Thank God I was wrong. I don't need to know more. You two look great together. The man is a catch, and he will treat you like a princess, but if there's anything I need to know, spit it out now while I can still help you."

"Oh, no... No, no. There's nothing like that."

“Then what is it?”

“Nothing. As I just said.”

I pull my stare away from her face, refusing to get into details with her.

There is nothing I can say.

I don't even know how to hide that we have an arrangement.

A crazy one at that, not to mention that we've negotiated the hell out of it and flirted with disaster every chance we got.

All this time, he's been polite but not affectionate, and anyone at the table could pick up on the slight tension between the two of us.

And there is tension.

Ever since we had that conversation—when I said I wanted to have nothing to do with him and *never ever* hit his bed again—we've been trying hard to pretend sex is not on our minds.

He was away for a week, not accountable to me, and when he returned, he avoided me as much as he could.

We flew down here on a private jet, surrounded by his people, so there was no talk, reconciliation, or opportunity to figure out how we should act in front of my family.

Or in public, for that matter.

It's a miracle that tonight has turned out as well as it has.

My mother gives up.

“Okay. What can I say? Good luck. I hope he is as good as he looks.”

Is her perception so off?

I smell danger from here, and he's in the other room.

He may look good on paper, but one glance at him and you get that feeling that he has a dark existence.

“You deserve a good man,” she adds, and I almost choke on air.

I don't have time to process my emotions when heavy footsteps ring in the kitchen.

Without turning around, I know it's him.

My mother's expression shifts from a blank look to a bright, glowing appearance.

She likes him, really likes him, and I'm stunned at how easily people get misled by a person's exterior.

Or maybe she knows something that I don't.

On cue, as if he knows what we've been talking about, he stops behind me, wraps his arms around me, tilts his lips to my ear, and murmurs sultrily.

“It's time for us to get some sleep. It's been a long day.”

He's not behaving overtly sexually, and I'm sure he's smiling for my mother, who flashes a grin in response.

“I'll get your rooms ready,” she says before leaving us alone.

He's still holding me in his arms, his lips pressed against my hair, while my skin breaks out in goosebumps, and I quiver against his chest.

Sexual tension blooms inside me.

I try to pull away.

He keeps me still.

It's not tenderness or sexual tease that courses through his touch. It feels more like a threat, its echo shooting through my bones.

With a little bit of effort, I break free from him.

“Everything goes well,” I say dispassionately when I turn around to face him.

His eyes hook their powerful fangs into me with so much precision my resolve is about to dissolve.

I could do so many stupid things for this man. Against my better judgment.

Painfully aware of his immense power over me, I step back, farther away from him.

He studies me as I play my little game, indulging in the illusion that I can control whatever happens to me.

Tonight, I can. And some other nights, I might as well.

But something in his smile tells me the clock is ticking, and time is running out for me, and soon, I'll have no say.

For now, he backs off, and I sigh, relieved, while he walks away and meets my mother in the other room.

Like the good hostess that she is, she shows him and the other men to their rooms when Missa sneaks by and enters the kitchen, radiant.

I flash a smile that feels so fake I have to bite it back.

“What’s wrong with you?” she asks, dragging around the kind of energy only a seventeen-year-old can have.

Her eyes flicker with excitement as we are finally alone, even if only for a few seconds.

“Oh, my... He is fire,” she says quietly. “Where did you find him?”

I fall back into a chair while she scoops up a biscuit from an oven tray and starts to munch on it.

“Believe it or not, at a career event.”

Her eyebrows slide up.

“Was he looking to hire people?”

“Something like that.”

“Did he ask you out?”

Innocence sparkles in her eyes.

“He asked me out,” I say, my eyes going vacant. “And it was love at first sight...”

Her gaze drips with fascination.

“Soon after, we knew we were made for each other,” I drone on, hating my life a little.

I sound heartfelt, though, and she believes me, maybe because deep down, I want to believe my story too.

Around midnight, the house turns quiet.

Faint lights glow around the first floor, and my mother is in the kitchen with one of my sisters while Missa is long gone, probably asleep, when I head to my room.

The floors creak as I enter it, and the view of what was once my childhood room sprawls out in front of me.

For the most part, everything had stayed the same, partly because my mother had preserved it as it was in my teenage years.

The large windows look out over the back of the estate.

If I crack the windows open—and I do—I can hear the horses neighing and the nocturnal sounds of the woods.

It’s cold outside, but the house is warm, despite only having fireplaces downstairs.

We rarely use central heating, and I’ve always slept with the window open during winter.

My niece’s voice seeps through the walls. Her mother talks to her, and soon the floor goes quiet again.

Two rooms are down from where I sleep.

Someone opens and closes a door, and then there’s silence again.

The guest’s room, where Max sleeps, is on the other side of the house. The corridor connects my room with his, but it’s a long walk with many doors on both sides, and the chance to run into someone is real.

Why do I think about that?

I don’t want to see him. Although it would look strange not to at least check to see if he likes the accommodations.

I’m sure he’s all right.

I turn on the pink lamp on the nightstand and turn off the ceiling lights.

This is much better.

Looking around, I realize the passing of time has never touched this space.

My childhood room is a mix of pastel blue and pink walls with a macrame wall hanging over the headboard, a vintage-looking nightstand, a minimalist desk, a loveseat by the window, hanging lights, and rattan furnishings.

It's a mix of old and new that evolved as I grew up and added things to my space. Stuffed animals litter the room.

I walk to the closet, shed my clothes, and head to the shower.

Later, I stroll out, wearing only my pajamas.

Sitting on the bed and looking out the window, I muse that things have changed a lot these past few months.

For a moment, I have a flashback of the last time I sat in this room and thought about my future.

It was right before I left for college.

Even then, I knew I wanted to get out of here. And now that I've accomplished that, I wonder if this is what I had in mind.

I'm out. That's for sure. I have money in my bank account. That's a reality. The risks are immense. And I've never been a risk taker.

If anything, I'm risk-averse.

The question is...

Am I here because of money, or is there something else?

The floors squeak outside—damn house, nothing is a secret here—and my eyes flick to the door.

I hope no one is lost.

My mother put the guests in separate rooms, away from the family, so no one runs into anyone in the middle of the

night.

The noise has vanished, and my hair bristles as I have this strange sensation someone has stopped in front of my door and is now pondering or staring at the entrance.

The doors are never locked in this house.

My pulse shoots through the roof as I push to my feet, approach the door, and crack it open silently.

I only have the chance to look left, and when I turn my head, a bare arm loops around my neck like a snake, a hand slides over my mouth to suppress an anguished scream, and I get shoved back into the room.

The door closes, and my back is pinned against it as Max towers over me, a grin spread across his lips.

He has fun for some reason while I'm terrified.

I swat his chest.

“What is wrong with you?” I chide him. “I almost had a heart attack.”

I study his eyes.

He's not drunk as he was that night at the engagement party. Or so he led me to believe. I don't trust this man.

Barefoot and bare-chested, he wears pajama pants.

I try to push him away. No chance. His arms brace the door, caging me in.

“What do you want?” I shoot out my frustration, not liking him so close to me.

“The man at the table...” he says hoarsely. “Is that the one who has a crush on you?”

Oh, Mick... I completely forgot about him.

Pressing my hand into his chest to keep him away, I search his eyes.

“How do you know about him having a crush on me?”

I can't imagine my mother was so foolish to talk about Mick's crush on me with Max.

No way.

She's worked so diligently to make this gathering a success, and the only reason she's invited Mick is that she still has plans for him, and then they have all sorts of business dealings.

"It wasn't hard to tell."

"Huh...? Is that why you're here?"

He says nothing.

"Many men have had a crush on me."

His eyebrows shoot up.

"No kidding?"

That sounds threatening.

I sag against the wall, flattered to a degree.

Who knew Max the Lucca had a jealous streak?

I thought nothing affected him, and now this?

"I can't control how men feel about me."

My tease is short-lived and ill-received.

His hand wraps around the root of my neck so fast before squeezing so hard that it jogs my memory in a second.

"I almost forgot I'm marrying a criminal."

How that thought has made it out is anyone's guess.

I don't remember not having a filter. I've always managed to keep my wildest thoughts private, but seemingly he's unearthed something in me—as much as I've learned how to push his buttons—and now I'm living the consequences.

His eyes become black as tar.

"Don't make me regret it, Bella," he pushes out through clenched teeth.

Regret what?

As brutal as his force is, even I can tell it's all sexual tension. And my dumb words must've come from the same pool of sexual frustration.

His jealousy is no different.

He's had full control of my life since we got together, and now he picks up a fight because of Mick?

Have they even talked to each other?

"What can you possibly regret?" I ask softly, and that's when I finally recognize my power over him.

Like magic, his grip slackens, and his eyes dip to my lips, and I might be onto something.

That doesn't change my mind. I want to stay away from him. Giving in to having sex with him could destroy me, and I'm not sure the price is worth it.

The question is...

Will I be able to stay away from him six months from now?

I don't know. Six months is a long time, especially when it comes to him.

Huh...

Have I just played with the idea that he might be gone in six months? Damn... Being so close to his crazy way of life has rubbed off on me.

His fingers fan around my neck, no longer squeezing.

"Tell me, Max."

I almost see his hair bristle, and his shoulders get tense.

I go on.

"I'm doing everything you want me to, down to the smallest detail. And you got pissed because Mick said something?"

"He's not that stupid to talk."

Who would be stupid enough to talk and anger those dark blue eyes of his?

“Why are you taking issue with him?”

He bites his lip, refusing to tell me, and I think I know what triggered him. He must’ve caught one of those puppy eyes looks Mick is so well known for.

It’s strange that Max feels threatened by him, although I doubt he actually is. Mick is like chewing gum on the bottom of De Lucca’s shoe.

He has no relevance, but Max is thirsty for blood. His killer instinct must be talking more than anything else.

I squeeze my brain in search of a diplomatic solution to our problem when something rustles behind the door.

His eyes turn to steel while my heart drops.

Something touches the door on the other side, and I jump away from it as Max is about to fling it open and take care of whoever dares to breathe outside my room.

“Isabella?”

My mother’s voice is followed by a soft knock on the door.

“Are you asleep yet?”

I shoot my eyes to Max, whose muscles bulge beneath his taut skin, and bring my finger to my lips, signaling him to keep his mouth shut.

He pivots and hides behind the door while I crack it open.

“No, I’m not. But I’m about to go to sleep. I’m tired,” I say, my hand wrapped around the doorknob, my frame blocking my mother’s view.

She wears pajamas, a robe, and slippers.

“I just wanted to let you know Tom will have the horses ready in the morning if you want to go horseback riding. I don’t know if Max likes horses, but he can join you. I know Missa wants to ride Peony.”

“Yes. Sure. I’d love to do that,” I say. “I don’t know about Max. I need to ask him. I’ll check with him in the morning.”

I smile to conclude our conversation, and my mother picks up on something strange in my behavior.

She stalls, the exact opposite of what I wanted her to do.

“Listen... About what we’ve discussed,” she murmurs, and my heart almost spins out of my chest.

This is not the moment to go back to our conversation, not with Max inches away from me, practically breathing on me.

“I want this to work for you, Issa. Despite what I said in the past, I never wanted you to be in a loveless marriage. I know it looked that way when I expressed my hope you’d pick Mick over everybody else. You know how much he wanted you, even now...”

I stop breathing.

“He keeps telling me he can’t stop thinking about you.”

Max grinds his teeth so hard it sounds like the wooden floor just creaked beneath my feet.

“What was that?” my mother asks.

“Nothing. I just shifted my weight from one foot to another.”

“Yes. Okay... Back to Mick. He keeps talking about you. Although, honestly, I thought he’d shift his focus to Missa, and maybe he’d grow on her. I know she’s not interested.”

Yet she keeps pushing the idea of him to her.

“At any rate. I don’t want you in a loveless marriage, as I said, or worse, a toxic one.”

“It’s nothing like that,” I say in a clipped voice, hoping to end our conversation. “Max is a good man. I know he comes across as rough at times, but he has a good heart. And sleeping in separate rooms has nothing to do with me being afraid of him or not liking him. I like him a lot...”

I pause, catching my breath.

She doesn't say a thing, so I continue.

"Besides, appearances can be misleading..." I smile. "We're still getting used to each other. That doesn't mean we don't love each other. For us, it was love at first sight. And I believe it was fate... Going to New York and finding him like that. So quickly. It's a sign he's my man."

It sounds genuine, and she looks at me, astounded, while Max no longer grinds his teeth.

The silence feels like ice against my skin.

"All right. I'm glad you feel that way. I like him. You know I do. But you also know I've always been a sucker for powerful men."

At least, she's honest enough to admit it.

"I'll see you in the morning."

"Sure," I say and close the door.

For a second, I stare at the door while he looks at my profile, his shoulder propped against the wall, his arms folded over his chest.

I tear my hand away from the doorknob and break away from him when he grabs me by the elbow and stops me.

Staggering on my feet, I turn to him.

"Are you lying to me too?" he growls quietly, partly entertained.

"I never lie to a business partner."

As much as I try to suppress it, anger threads through my voice.

Something happened tonight. Or maybe it happened before.

Whatever it was, it shifted the balance of power, affecting our dynamic.

I yank my arm out of his lock, but he's not the kind of man you get away from easily.

With one motion, he grabs my neck and brings me to him. I crash against his chest, gasping for air, not batting a lash.

He likes it.

He likes it a lot.

The glint in his eyes gives it away, his hard-on pushing through his pants, a testament to his sick pleasure.

I guiltily enjoy it too, seeing him tormented, boiling under the surface, reluctant to change his strategy. Move on from not wanting to have anything to do with me because of, you know, sex, emotions, and all that good stuff a woman binds a man with, holding him back, to admitting he's just as caught into me as I am caught into him.

He gets a full fist of my hair and tugs down, forcing my face up, my lips just under his, the other hand locked around my neck when he breathes over my mouth and murmurs quietly.

“You will never lie to me. All right?”

Clawing at his chest, I try to find support and not fall back.

“If you ever lie to me like you lied to your mother, I'll have your blood on my hands. Am I clear?”

“More than clear.”

“Good.”

He releases my hair and unlocks his hand from my neck, and I fall back a few steps, rubbing my skin, trying to alleviate the pain.

“And don't play games with me,” he adds. “Or try to tease me with another man.”

Biting my lip, I crush a nasty retort.

Another rustle comes from behind the door, and the blood draws from my body.

What the fuck is going on?

If this is Missa, I won't be able to lie to her about Max. She'll burst into my room and find Max here.

If it's my mother, that for sure won't be good news.

And if it's Mick by any chance, I might as well consider him dead.

"Max?"

I almost collapse inside.

Max opens the door, and a stunned Nor looks at the two of us.

He runs his gaze over me and shifts his eyes to Max before dragging his stare back to my hand as I keep rubbing my neck.

"She's fine," Max says. "What's the problem?"

"Nicholas. You need to take this."

He hands Max a cell phone. Max clutches it, zips past me, and exits my room, the door sliding shut behind him.

I let out a long exhale.

It's like I came back from the dead.

I SABELLA

THERE IS no horseback riding the next day, and for the first time since I had known De Lucca, I wholeheartedly resent him for messing with my life.

One of my all-time pleasures, horseback riding, is now in the rearview mirror because of a change of plans.

Whatever phone call he'd gotten turned out to be some kind of emergency, and now we're on our way back to New York.

Flying on a private jet with him on his phone and his goons downing drinks and speaking loudly.

"Are you okay?" Nor asks, taking a seat next to me.

"Mm-hmm."

He shoots a side-eyed glance at me, offering me a glass of champagne and a dish of peanuts.

"It will make you feel better."

He stretches his legs out in front of him and tilts his glass against his lips.

"Are things okay?" I ask, observing him.

Of course, no one has clued me in on what is going on.

All I know is that I had to cut my vacation short, although coming to my family's house was Max's idea.

I left Missa disappointed and my mother with a ton of unanswered questions.

Strangely, we had a chance to make amends, and things started well with that dinner party last night.

I wanted to spend another day with my family, ride horses as I used to before leaving for college, chat with Missa, and go out with them.

We had planned to go shopping downtown.

None of that happened.

Max changed everything for everyone, leaving everybody disappointed, myself included.

He had no problem doing that, and somehow he managed to make it up to my mother and the rest of my family, offering them an all-expenses paid trip to New York on his private plane to our wedding, which is two weeks from now.

With this kind of rush, no wonder everybody looked at me like I was pregnant.

They have no idea how far away from that I am.

"Yeah. Things are fine," Nor says.

His calm is reassuring and inspires trust, but it doesn't explain why we must go back so quickly.

"He doesn't like when you speak to me, does he? Privately, I mean," I murmur.

He shifts his gaze to me.

"I think you know him well by now."

"I do. But there's something I don't understand. He allowed you to spend time with me in the beginning. How come he was so lenient with you back then?"

"Lenient is not the word I'd use to describe him. It was convenient for him. Besides, he wasn't that much invested in the idea."

“The idea of me? Going through with it? Or making it a business transaction and nothing more?”

He flashes a smile and lifts his drink to his lips.

“You got it.”

Which one, really?

He probably dwelled, but he wanted it to be a business transaction and nothing more. I’m convinced of that.

He wasn’t sure of me? That’s possible too.

Huh...

“So the experiment has failed,” I say quietly, sagging back and keeping an eye on the dark-haired man with fiery eyes in front of us.

I doubt Nor knows what I’m talking about, but this feels less and less like a business transaction *only*.

It’s presumptuous of me to make a guess. Although deep down inside, I know there’s truth to that assumption.

He speaks, going back to Max’s behavior.

“You never know with him. That’s his nature... He only has two settings. Killing mode or taking over mode. I think the latter is better.”

I couldn’t agree more, but I still want to dig deeper.

I spend a moment studying Nor’s profile.

“You think it’s *still* only a transaction to him?” I ask.

For some reason, I’m interested in his opinion. But how honest could he be with me?

“It will always be only a transaction...” he says without looking at me. “Unless something dramatic happens.”

“Like what?”

He shifts his eyes to me, leans his head against the headrest, and shrugs softly.

“He doesn’t know. And I don’t know either. I always knew you’d be his bride. Other than that, I have no idea. He, on the

other hand, had fought me even on that. He didn't like that it was so obvious, and he thought it had defeated the purpose of having someone by his side without the complications of a real marriage. Eventually, he relented."

"I think we already have the complications of a real marriage."

"It was inevitable."

His quick admission doesn't make me feel any better.

I peel my eyes away from him and stare blankly out the window.

"So, um... What is your best advice for me since you know him better than I do?" I murmur.

His answer comes after a moment.

"I can't say much since my loyalty lies with him. Besides, I don't think there's a clear path ahead. You have to learn who he is—truthfully who he is—and then you have to walk that path alone with him. It will be dangerous, and I'm stating the obvious here since you already know that."

I shift my gaze to him.

"I'm convinced keeping it all business works in our favor."

My words are a trap since I was indulging in a different idea moments ago.

A faint smile tugs at his lips.

"It does. To a point... But life is much more complicated than that, and someday, he'll need more from you."

"What do you mean?"

Our eyes stay locked as he weighs his answer.

"Strong feelings are a formidable force when you're doing morally gray things. He won't ask you to do anything of that nature—he's not like that—yet the circumstances might require it."

"So he needs me to love him unconditionally?"

His lips curl into a grin.

“Money can buy only so much loyalty. After that, you need a little more than what you can get with checks. And yes, in his case, it has to be unconditional love.”

“Hmm...”

I move my gaze away again.

“It’s not a great deal if you ask me,” I say.

“Who said it was?”

I laugh bitterly, staring blankly at the clouds outside.

“Let’s be frank...” he continues. “There’s no way you don’t have feelings for him already, or we wouldn’t be chatting about him right now.”

I flick my eyes to him.

“Honestly, I don’t want to have feelings for him. And, uh... Please don’t tell him. I mean, I can’t stop you, but I’d rather keep this conversation private.”

I search his eyes, hoping for a favorable answer, but Nor is hard to read. Like Max.

He’s probably going to tell him about our conversation anyway.

Eventually, he gives me something.

“You can’t trust anyone, Isabella. And I’m no different. He and I have a special bond. And I may get away with a lot of crap, but if something happens one day and he puts the barrel of a gun against my head, I’ll do what I need to do. I’ll always side with him.”

“Even if he asks you to take me out?”

I’m dead serious, yet surprise swirls in his eyes as if I said that for shock value.

“He won’t ask me to take you out.”

“Because he’ll do it himself.”

“Are you afraid of him?”

“Wouldn’t you be if you were in my place? You just said something about the barrel of a—“

He flicks his hand up to stop me.

“He wouldn’t take you out.”

“You don’t know that.”

He doesn’t know that.

“He never...”

He stops abruptly and leaves his sentence unfinished.

He never killed a woman? I doubt it. Maybe not a woman he’d been involved with, although I doubt that too.

There are ways to kill someone without laying your hands on them.

I don’t think Verona is how she used to be. I remember her as the snappy brunette who was all sass at Belmont Park in September.

The way she looked at me with a playful glint in her eyes—as in *‘it’s on, baby’*—and a predatory smile on her lips, which wasn’t even for me—I was nothing to her back then.

It was all for him.

The way she had imagined things only fueled her confidence, and it was something I could only dream of.

She thought I’d be a placeholder, some insignificant character, a piece of the puzzle bearing little meaning, while she’d be the mistress and have his heart.

Her glow, the spark in her eyes, and the men drawn to her like moths to flames told a story of lust and passion for a man who ruled like a King.

A King he is, and she is nothing but a cloud of dust, compelled to witness his engagement to another woman.

Whatever business the two of them have on the side—the kind that put her at his place when she was in a bind and asked for her presence at his engagement party—is all that’s left of her now dwindling power.

So, yes.

The man can kill in more ways than one.



ISABELLA

THE WEDDING DAY

I NEVER IMAGINED I'd have a winter wedding.

Frankly, I never thought I'd have a wedding at all. There was no space in my head for that.

I was more focused on running away from home and not becoming Mick's wife by default than thinking about wedding receptions and ceremonies.

It wasn't something I would do.

Mara always said she'd love a beach wedding, be it in the tropics or even at her parents' home in Florida.

Even Missa, who's not even eighteen, has an idea of what kind of dress she'd like to wear and when she'd like to have the wedding. Spring has always been her favorite season.

Me?

Not so much, yet here I am, clad in my wedding dress, and shivering, not because it's cold but because I'm panic-stricken.

Mostly.

It's been a difficult, convoluted road to get here.

Nor was right about Max and me.

We each got what we wanted from our deal initially, and now we're spiraling out of control, struggling to suppress our needs.

He needs me to be faithful, and I need him to stay away from me. Every second I spend with him leaves me a mess.

I've gotten better at hiding my reactions and emotions and not revealing how much he affects me.

I try hard not to indulge in the tension he puts in me with his eyes and accidental soft touches that leave me trembling for minutes on end.

My composure goes to hell when I'm alone in my room, experiencing ambivalence and marinating in conflicting feelings.

Fear of losing control and sexual attraction are the two most powerful driving forces behind my fake resoluteness.

And then...

The more I stay away from him, the more irritated he gets.

His eyes always follow me around the house in silent harassment, regardless of where I am.

Even Nor noticed it one night and made a comment.

Max laughed it off, but we all knew it was a serious matter.

The staff has been walking on eggshells since we got back, and Max has become more prickly with every passing day.

Perhaps, he's nervous like me.

A mocking voice snickers in my head, contradicting me.

The man has nerves of steel. Nothing makes him nervous.

That doesn't mean he doesn't feel provoked. Although I haven't asked of him more than he's asked of me.

No sex. All business. If sex happens, we consider it an accident.

If children happen... Well, that's a whole other story.

Who's crazy enough to think about children now?

I don't know how he is as a husband, let alone a father.

And when it comes to fatherhood, I have a great example in my late father, and I wouldn't want my children to

experience anything less than that. But... What is wrong with me?

This is not the time to think about it.

My hands are clammy and cold, and my stare is pure ice as I look at my reflection.

Stunning dress.

Tailored to my body, with a long-sleeved top and a back closure. Made of a smooth jersey fabric with a revealing cleavage that's not too deep to call it outrageous, yet flattering enough for my chest.

My fingers move over the diamond necklace. It looks beautiful against my skin.

And then my eyes go over the rest of the dress.

A rich, layered full tulle skirt topped with the finest guipure lace money can buy flares out from my waist that looks even smaller in contrast to the bottom of my dress.

My hair is gathered into a sophisticated low bun with a few strands of hair framing my face and fresh flowers tangled in it.

My small wedding bouquet is made of the same flowers, white roses and freesias. Their sweet perfume hovers over me, a reminder that my life as I know it is now over.

I almost feel the prick of tears as I walk around like a princess, so beautiful. So scared. I'm fucking alone.

And I've sold my soul to the devil.

The rest of the day is a blur.

Once people start moving around me, and words flow like swarms of bees, it all turns into something surreal.

Walking down the aisle accompanied by my oldest brother, and then the people, the pews, the church, and the organ music.

The whispers I think I hear when he, the man I am about to marry, stands by my side, so ravishingly beautiful, I can't

breathe or think or unclench my hand from my bouquet to let it rest.

His gaze is cut in gemstones as he peruses my appearance with a glint of satisfaction in his eyes.

I am everything he wants me to be and everything he has painstakingly planned for me to be, *the best that money can buy*.

Like the lace on my dress.

And although nothing shows on my face, panic spirals in my chest as the unforgiving new reality rams through me, about to blow up my existence.

There is nothing fake in his eyes when they meet mine.

There is so much to read in them I'd probably need a notebook to put it all down and make a list of the things I should fear.

Satisfaction, pride, hunger, eagerness to undo me, lust, thirst for revenge, pleasure, curiosity, all sprinkled with depravity and viciousness.

There is nothing to grasp at the exterior other than that the man could stop traffic with his athletic frame smoothly hugged by a mid-blue three-piece Italian suit that makes me hold my mouth agape with legitimate admiration.

The hue is more like a steel blue color with added pigment for emphasis, highlighting his eyes with astonishing perfection.

The way it falls over his body is a work of art, hands down.

Slim fit, five-button waistcoat, pants showcasing his flat abdomen, trim waist, and hard butt without pressing against his bulge.

And also the support of a full canvas construction inside the jacket, giving it form and structure while molding to his body.

And a starched white dress shirt adorned with a blue tie.

His clothes are pressed to perfection, making a statement in their own right.

Even so, they hardly eclipse the power of his eyes.

When he slides the wedding ring onto my finger, I experience a full-fledged panic attack.

Despite my calm appearance, I feel like conflicting currents meet in a rapidly moving mass of water at my feet, and I'm drowning, unable to pull myself up.

The sensation is terrifying, causing me emotional anguish.

He touches my hand and holds my eyes, and I'm here, present, right in front of him, yet I feel removed, out of my body, floating, light like a butterfly, peering at my own demise before it all gets worse, and I can't breathe, speak, or act and everything becomes a nightmare.

I'm losing myself in this man when he kisses my lips.

His regal kiss seals my fate, the loud wedding bells making this moment impossible to forget, and with that, the most beautiful snapshot of us gets locked in my brain.

Along with a little story...

A vicious hard man runs into an innocent woman and makes her a proposal she cannot refuse.

As time passes, things shift, and they fall together into the trap they've set for themselves.

Locked together, they have to figure things out. The same things that have brought them together. The things that are now too big to ignore.

I SABELLA

IT'S a beautiful reception with hundreds of guests at a magnificent place on Long Island.

The wedding venue has everything I could dream of—a huge property with snaking gravel roads, an immense ballroom with a large dance floor, long tables, tall candles, sparkling silverware, and floral decorations that make it look like a royal palace.

The party lasts long into the late hours of the evening.

My mother only has praise for the event, and Missa is over herself.

I wish I could skip the bouquet toss, but it's not up to me, and to my chagrin, my younger sister catches it.

Although it's grim when I think about it, I laugh with everybody else, trying not to believe in superstitions.

Our exit at the end of the reception is formal and grand.

Fireworks, lanterns, sparklers, and glow sticks make it beyond lavish.

And absolutely real.

More than real, if that's even possible.

Once comfortably settled in the back of the car, we both look at the spectacular lights signaling the beginning of a new life, although strangely a fake one.

“We did it,” he murmurs, still soaking it all in and looking as dashing as he has looked the entire day.

I changed after we came from church, and now I’m wearing a more flamboyant dress with an enormous long tulle skirt and a romantic top with soft cups, spaghetti straps, and an embroidered floral pattern on the bust area.

My hair is all down, and two rings sparkle on my finger, a small cape draped over my shoulders.

Now more than ever, I wish this was real.

He turns his head back to me and runs his eyes down before ignoring me.

What was that?

He reaches inside his jacket and retrieves his phone.

The rest of the trip is mine and only mine to spend in guilty solitude.

He seems absent. There are no effusive moments, no tenderness, no kisses. No promises.

It hurts like a dagger slicing through my heart, but it’s the right thing to do.

Why doesn’t it feel right, though...?

I have no idea.

Or maybe I do, but I don’t want to get there.

Aloof, I shift my eyes to the road. Long Island is sleepy under a thick blanket of snow, the houses and Christmas decorations still looking bright, showcasing quiet beauty.

It looks like a fairytale.

And now it’s a beautiful memory.

The plan is to spend the night at his late parents’ home.

He had people over these past few weeks renovating the place. Somehow he'd reconsidered getting rid of the property.

At one point, I suggested it would be nice to spend the summer here instead of being stuck in Manhattan when the heat and humidity are brutal, making us feel like prisoners in our own home.

But Manhattan isn't only about picking a place to live.

He has to be in Manhattan, yet he has seen some value in what I said, so here we are.

My family spends the night at the hotel, and they'll be on their way back tomorrow morning.

A few of his men travel with us now, so two cars trail us. I don't think Nor is in any of them.

Minutes later, we enter the property.

The amazing house is lighted and decorated for the occasion.

It wasn't clear whether we'd have people over after the party. Just in case food and drinks are on the table.

He instructs the staff and his men to have a little celebration before he signals me to go upstairs.

He doesn't follow me.

The second floor is different now as white walls, dark wooden floors, long drapes, hand-sculpted furniture, and orange and warm caramel accents give it a more modern feel.

Flowers sit in hand-painted vases as I walk to his bedroom.

Our bedroom now. In theory, anyway.

The double doors are wide open, and the bed is covered in rose petals.

I won't sleep here. I don't think so.

The only night I'd spent here was twisted and scary.

That's not to say I don't like it.

The room is warm and smells like fresh pine as I spin to the fireplace and spend a few moments in front of the flames.

The hot air burns my cheeks.

Let's hope the fabric is not flammable. Because if it is, one little spark could put a hole in my skirt, and create a little crater with a dark edge all around it.

I hope it's not.

The thought sends a shudder through me, so to be safe, I step back without looking, my eyes still pinned on the blaze as I bump into something.

Startled, I jerk away and scream.

His arm locks around me, his hand going straight over my mouth, muffling the sound.

He is so strong that any attempt to escape is futile.

He smells like cologne, smoke, and burning logs.

His hand goes straight for my chest, and my cups get bent out of shape and slide down in desperation.

"How long do you plan to play with me, Bella?" he barks.

I try to argue with him, my voice muffled against his palm.

"Uh-huh..." he laughs darkly. "Sure. You think I don't know what you're doing. Staying away from me...? Right. Didn't I fucking tell you not to play games with me?"

He grips the front of my dress and pulls down, and the sound of ripped fabric echoes in the room.

"Not a fucking sound from you. I don't want to hear it."

He talks.

I argue.

"I'm not playing any games," I shout against his hand.

It sounds like I'm screaming into a pillow.

The straps fly off my shoulders like strands of hair blown by the wind while my breasts bounce out of my cups.

He doesn't stop, tugging at the back of my dress to pull it down, set on ripping off my wedding gown when I grip his hand and try to tear it away from my mouth.

A struggle ensues, but he doesn't budge or even move while I lose my balance several times, trapped in the voluminous skirt I drag across the floor.

A crazy idea pops into my head, and I try to get closer to the fireplace. I'm ready to set my dress on fire and show him I mean business.

He quickly unravels my plan, pulling at my neck and forcing me to walk back. Forget about my plan to free myself. I lean into him to steady myself as he jerks the back of my dress open.

The fabric begins to give in, sliding off my shoulders and torso and crumpling at my waist.

His iron grip slackens for a few seconds, and when the opportunity arises, I bite him.

The taste of blood rolls over my lips.

His first reaction is to pull his hand away, and just as fast, I scream again and dart straight to the door.

I doubt anyone in this house will try to stop him. That doesn't mean I'll stop fighting.

He grabs me seconds away from flying out the door and almost suffocates me.

One hand tightens over my mouth, allowing enough air to move into my lungs so I don't pass out, while his free arm loops around my waist before he starts dragging me back.

He must've shed his jacket and his waistcoat as only his perfect shirt rustles behind me while he brings me back to the bedroom.

I do everything I can to stop him as blood trickles from his hand, and it's warm and viscous and drips down my chin, my neck, and my chest.

I scream against his hand again, and he lifts me in response and tosses me onto the bed.

The shock makes me stop for a second before I roll out of his grip, fall over the edge, land on the floor, and crawl as fast as I can, like a toddler in a race for the most delicious applesauce.

He fucking dares to laugh behind me, gripping my ankle, ruining my effort, and making me flip over, my jaw locked while I'm cursing and kicking my legs.

I'm on my back, legs up, the tulle skirt fluffed up like a giant marshmallow I've fallen into.

My hair sweeps the floor, while I have diamonds in my locks, around my neck, on my finger, and around my wrist, and his blood *still* on my lips, my chin, and my chest.

Hand streaked with blood, he taps the nightstand, not taking his eyes off me, blocking my legs from touching him, and yanks a drawer open. A metallic sound precludes the glint of a blade in the dimness of the room.

He holds it by the end and gives it a half flip, using his thumb to spin the blade before catching it without even looking at it, which makes me think he's done it so many times before it has become his second nature.

Impressed with his performance, which proves to be a distraction in the end, I slow down, no longer kicking my legs, and it's exactly what he wants.

Taking me by surprise, he grabs the side of my skirt and puts the knife through it.

If my top whispered when he ripped it off, this sounds like tearing wallpaper off.

I kick my legs and try to pull away from him.

“What are you doing??” I shoot at him.

He sets a knee on the floor and butchers my skirt while I jerk upright and try to push him away.

“You shouldn’t fight me,” he says, darkly amused. “No one who thought fighting me was a good idea has lived another day.”

I use my hands and butt to crawl back and even manage to escape, push up and sprint away on my wobbly feet before he leaps at me.

Screaming, I push through the first door I see and run into the next room, his footsteps echoing behind me.

Zippering through the second door, I fall into a corridor and make a left, half-naked, holding my ruined wedding gown like it’s a dead body.

Strangely, by slashing the skirt, he’s made it easier for me to run.

He’s too close, though, and I’m hardly a challenge for him.

With one clipped motion, he tackles me down, and I fall at his feet, face down like a broken swan.

“Now kiss my fucking shoes, and I will let you live.”

He can’t be serious.

Lifting an eyebrow, I flick my gaze up, panting and shivering.

Holding the knife with his wounded hand, his beautiful shirt stained with blood, and a sinister smirk on his lips, he flicks his chin, pointing to his smooth Italian shoes.

“Do it,” he thunders, no longer smiling, his beauty tangled with the darkest, most vicious sights of hell.

I’ve never seen a more brilliant, venal man. Powerfully mysterious and corrupt. Ruthless and capable of anything.

There’s no need to ask for clarification. The sharp edge in his voice tells me everything I need to know.

I move my hands closer and splay my fingers over the welt and quarter of each shoe.

They’re sleek, shiny, brand new, and clean like he just took them out of the box, yet these are the shoes he’s worn all day.

He danced in these shoes. It's true. It only happened once.

The first dance of the wedding was a masterful performance.

We synchronized our moves, didn't think about it much, and smiled at the public. It was supposed to convince people of our blossoming love and the harmony characterizing our marital union.

It's unclear how many people bought it, but I'm sure everybody wanted to buy it.

They know better than to start a rumor this is pay-for-play.

It doesn't matter what it is or how it's been accomplished.

I can attest to that, bent over at his feet, touching the vamp of his shoes like petting a small animal.

"Your mouth on my shoes, Bella."

I start with his left shoe. It has a nice smell, not that I ever tasted a shoe, so I can't compare notes. An odd taste comes to my mouth when I press my lips on it. It's nothing familiar.

How could it be?

I press my lips on the toe box, the part of the shoe housing his toes, and go up, drawing a path to the throat of the shoe and the lace.

The more I do it, the more accustomed I get to it, forgetting what I'm doing.

I move to the other shoe and repeat the process.

"Tongue too."

I look up while doing it, swirling my tongue like I'm licking a dick. I've never taken a man in my mouth, but I know enough about how it's done. I'm sure a dick doesn't smell or taste like his shoes.

His eyes glint with infinite pleasure when I kiss his shoes the way he wants me to.

He has enough of me, so he bends over, grabs the back of my hair, and pulls me up, ignoring my loud protests.

It hurts like hell, and his grip gives me no break from pain as I walk by his side, staggering, unable to keep myself straight while struggling to keep my tattered top up.

We make the trip back to his bedroom, and once inside, he kicks the door to the bathroom open and drops my head to the sink.

“Wash your mouth,” he demands, tossing the knife on the sleek marble countertop only for a moment to pick up an immaculate hand towel and clean his hand.

I finish washing my mouth and glance at the knife as he drops the towel.

My mind is made up, so I snatch it and snap upright at once, my hand raised, the knife held high in front of me.

“Spunky little girl,” he mutters in mockery, not entertained at all. “What do you think you can do with that?”

I don’t have time to give him an answer—he’s only asked that to distract me—and he obliterates me in a second, snatching my forearm and twisting my wrist like it’s a slice of panettone.

The knife falls out of my hand.

Irritated, he collects it, his grip iron hard on my forearm.

I can still make a run for the door, and I actually do, but before I get the chance to dash out and scream for help, not that I’d get any, he shuts the door in front of me, grips the back of my neck like I’m some lost puppy and hauls me to the bedroom.

My back hits the mattress hard while he walks around the bed, calmly unbuttoning his shirt.

“What do you think you’re doing?” I hurl at him.

“Every time you open your mouth from now on, I’ll cut a souvenir of your skin. Think twice before doing that,” he warns me.

His shirt is open to his belt when he turns to me.

I run away from him. He takes hold of me, not nicely, and puts me back in the position he wants me to be in.

Now I'm getting really scared.

"We're not doing *that* tonight."

"What did I just say?"

He leaps forward, scoops up the knife, and before I have time to figure out what's going on, I feel a pinch, and a tiny opening on my forearms drips blood.

Fuck, he's crazy.

"What the fuck did you just do?" I bark.

He gets ready to give the first cut a little sister when all the power I have in me rises like a crazy twister.

I flick my hand, and out of stupid luck, I hit the blade and slap it out of his hand.

Sitting on his knees between my legs, he plucks it from the floor and raises it back up.

"Shut up," he thunders.

His eyes give me another warning, yet I don't seem to understand.

Using my elbows, I crawl back up against the pillows.

He sets the knife on the bed and starts unbuckling his belt before pulling his dress shirt out of his pants. The fabric waves in the dimness of the room like a hopeless white flag.

He's killed the hope for peace with that small cut in my skin.

The little fucker hurts, but I have no time for it, watching how his beautiful inked torso comes in full display.

He observes me with narrowed eyes, a faint smirk tugging at his lips.

My sense of what he's doing is so off I can't read his moves.

No wonder he catches me completely unprepared when he takes a break from unfastening his pants and reaches beneath layers upon layers of festive tulle, straight between my legs and directly to my panties.

His fingers slide between my pussy and the small triangle of lace covering my slit, and he surely drags my panties down.

A voice shouts in my head to do something.

I grab his arm and try to stop him.

Having no real success, I grab my panties and try to keep them up. He pulls them down. I pull them up. It's not hard to figure out who's winning in the end.

They snap open, the delicate fabric succumbing to his calloused hand, and here I am, wearing my dress like a coffin, my breasts bare, my nipples pointing at him, my smooth slit on display.

“Still shaving, huh? Good thinking, baby. I can't wait to see it smeared with blood.”

My hair stands on end.

“No, no...”

A scowl falls over his face, and the knife glints in his hand again. I fall back into the pillow like a dead fish, not breathing.

He doesn't go for the arm, instead cutting the last piece of dress still held together.

With one flick of his wrist, he opens it like it's nothing.

He could probably carve my heart out in five seconds flat and throw it out the window.

It would be frozen by the time the morning mist rolled over the already frosted ground.

His pace increases as he looks down with a ferocity that makes my hair bristle and my skin prickle with goosebumps.

His shirt flies off his shoulders and lands on the floor before the top of his pants falls open.

Furtively I try to close my legs and quickly slide away from him. If I could roll off the bed again, sprint to the door, and get to the corridor.

No one could help me.

I know that, but maybe I could find a nook or a cranny, a secret door in his house, and hide there till the early morning hours and then go downstairs, pretend that nothing happened, and never find myself alone with him in the room again.

Even without trying, he has an eye for this kind of crap, for cheating and sneakiness, and the rawest reactions of a threatened body.

He grabs my hips and pulls me down, my legs wide open, the whoosh of air rolling against my clit and untouched entrance.

I push up and hit his hard chest while he fights me back down and grips and pins my neck against the pillow.

Gasping in his lock, I uselessly flail my arms, choking and getting dizzy. A film of tears slides over my eyes, and I taste their saltiness on my lips.

I growl.

He cups my mouth and glares at me, his eyebrows pinched together, his eyes shooting daggers.

“The more you fight me, the worse it will get.”

I scream my powerlessness into the arch of his palm before I lose my breath, and he removes his hand from my mouth to drop his pants past his butt.

One glance at his big hard cock and every shade of fear grows in me at light speed. I’ve never imagined that it would get to that.

Him on top of me.

Me having no say.

I shoot my arms up and push his chest away, and after making no headway, I wrap my hands around his neck.

I can't even close my fingers, let alone squeeze.

"I like that you put up a good fight, but that's a stupid idea."

He removes my hands from his neck with one sweep, clips my wrists together, and yanks them above my head.

He tears his other hand away from my neck and grabs his erection.

"This will be over in no time," he says, crushing me under his weight.

He does only one other thing before my world begins to go down in flames.

Glancing down, he lines up the head of his hard length with my opening and brutally thrusts.

It all goes to hell.

The pain spearheads through me, shooting from between my legs straight to my chest, and the blood gushes immediately, warm and wet, trickling between my legs like some faucet has gotten turned on.

The fullness inside my body is intrusive, overwhelming, and unnatural, so I squirm beneath him, my hands free now to hit him as hard as I can.

And I do it frantically as the second thrust comes and the third. And the first dozen.

He doesn't stop, rocking his hips like he's killing me.

And every time he shoves his hard meat into me, it's like a blade cuts through me.

The more he moves, the more I hurt and bleed.

I can't look down there, but I imagine the sheet must be soaked. I'm half dead and frantically out of my body again as he invades me with a savagery not even the darkest part of my brain can grasp.

I don't think I can come to terms with it or look at him like I have feelings for him again.

Everything I thought about myself is now gone, ruined, and destroyed by him.

This is not even him wanting me.

That would've been a nice experience to have.

This is him punishing me. And I have to give it to him. He is the ultimate enforcer of the rules.

Tears of frustration stream down my cheeks as blood trickles down my legs. And when I think it can't get any worse, he becomes even more aroused and stretches me so much I can hardly take him.

And now that he has taken that away from me, he finds animalistic pleasure in it.

His breaths roll rapidly, and his heat runs over my skin as he moves faster and faster until his eyes go blank, and his release hits my core.

Warm tides of sticky wetness roll off my center, dripping down my legs with my blood and every bit of identity I've ever had.

I SABELLA

MAX DE LUCCA is not a man of half-measures.

He may have made me lick his shoes and pumped me like it was going out of fashion, but that was only the first act.

Without gracing me with a glance or a word, he pushes off the bed in his full glory, still hard, and with every ounce of hatred *I could muster* clinging to his skin.

His once-perfect pants get fastened back to their original state.

Numb, I watch him put on his shirt and buckle his belt before he picks up his waistcoat and jacket from a chair.

He throws them on, runs his fingers through his hair, produces a cigarette from inside his pocket, and lights it.

He swaggers out of the room like he's never seen me, and I'm not even here, opened in every way known to man.

To emphasize his point, he slams the door in his wake, and a tsunami of hate rises through me like poison.

“Ugh....”

My scream bounces around the room, with no hope of reaching an ounce of humanity in this house.

I lie on the bed for a few long minutes, quietly crying out of sheer frustration at first and then only staring out the window, finding relief in silence and the warmth drifting from the fireplace.

I hurt so badly I can't move.

Not to say that I lie in a puddle of semen, blood, and whatever else drips from between my legs.

We didn't even get to that point where a man used to say I was frigid and it was all my fault that things weren't working.

We didn't need to.

Whatever shit I did tonight had no impact on his erection. Or mood. Or determination.

When my tears dry up, I push up on my elbows and look around the bed. A lump lodges in my throat as I try to bring my legs together.

The pain is sharper than I thought, and I think I pulled a muscle. But then I realize it's in both legs, so it must be something else.

My abdomen hurts.

And my shoulders and my arms.

And the cut on my forearm stings, and my pussy is sore.

When I finally close my legs, it's like shards of glass have made their home between my legs.

Fuck that.

I can't move. Not like normal people move. Not like I would move if I didn't have him buried deep inside my body.

How can people find pleasure in that? How? I don't understand.

When I finally roll over, I'm so stiff I fall off the bed and plop onto the floor with a thud.

"Eww... Like I needed that."

My voice catches, and my throat is scratchy, dry like my lips.

I once fell off a horse and felt like shit for about a week. This is like that, only ten times worse.

Plus, I've been impaled. That's the only way I can describe it.

The smeared dress—or what's left of it—is glued to my butt. It must be the semen and dry blood that makes it sticky.

With great difficulty, I prop myself on a hand and pull up a little to tear it off my bum.

I fail and rest before trying again.

On the second attempt, I manage to pull it away from me.

Kicking it with my legs, I push it farther away as if it reminds me of everything I want to forget.

For the next fifteen minutes, I learn how to walk again and pull my thighs together, and I go to the bathroom, leaving a red trail behind me.

I refuse to turn the ceiling lights on. It would straight out scare me to see myself in the mirror now.

The water rises in the tub as I wait patiently, observing the process.

A few more moments and I slide into the warm water and cover myself in a thick layer of bubbles.

They smell like fruit and goodness, and I welcome them in my new screwed-up life.

I think I'll ask for a divorce tomorrow morning. I don't have to spend another day with him.

I got some money.

I'll lose everything else.

At this point, it's no longer about the money.

I have to cut my losses and move on. It's bad that I love New York as much as I do, but New York can't be my home.

Yeah, that's what I'm gonna do.

There won't be any trip to Italy for me.

There will be some explaining to do. My mother and Missa. My family. They need to get my version of the truth.

Not his. Whatever that may be.

I'd probably move somewhere else, let some time pass, and tell them what happened later when things cooled off.

I find a cute little bath sponge and run it over my body.

My chest first and then my forearm and the spot between my legs. Mara described it so well. How can you want a man on top of you again when this is what you get?

My head falls against the rolled towel placed on the edge of the tub at my back, and my eyes shut closed as I try to revisit what happened from the point he opened my legs to where he found his pleasure.

His body moving on top of mine, the sheer pain between my legs, his hot breaths over my face.

He was still beautiful in a sickening, psychopathic way.

He took what was his and did exactly what I'd asked him not to do.

Quietly, I start to laugh.

"It doesn't matter, does it?" I murmur to myself.

I wanted not to have sex with him, so I didn't catch feelings for him. With one swipe, he took care of two things, my V-card and my fears that I might get attached to him and get broken over him.

It's all taken care of. I no longer have that hanging over my head. And having feelings for him?

I laugh again.

The issue is moot.

The more time I spend in the warm water, the more I clear my head.

It must be one or two in the morning when I return to the room, wrapped in a fluffy bathrobe.

I tear the sheet off and collect my wedding dress.

In the bathroom, I find a black plastic bag and dispose of both. If I know anything about this family, there must be a cremation room in the house.

It's too late to make inquiries, and plus, I'm tired, so I go back to the room, use one of the extra sheets to replace the stained one, and slide under the light, nice-smelling covers.

This is now one of my favorite rooms in the house and one of my all-time favorite beds.

He's not going to break me as easily as he thinks, regardless of how much power he has and how viciously he bestows it upon me.

I fall asleep late, but not once do I dream about what happened.



ISABELLA

YOU KNOW when you're trying to break up with someone, and you can't find them.

Can't reach them over the phone, they don't answer your messages, and everyone who knows them is tightlipped like they are sworn to secrecy.

That's me the next day.

It takes me an hour to cover the dark circles under my eyes, the bruises on my neck, the cut on my forearm, not to mention my pallor.

Brushes and sponges try to do their magic on something that may have been cursed. Everything is acting out. My skin, my hair. Even my clothes don't fit right.

I wear a long-sleeved, black dress—how fitting—like I'm going to a funeral.

The minute I enter the dining room downstairs, I know he's gone. There's no trace of Nor or his men.

It's only the staff and me.

The housekeeper asks me what I want to eat. They have a great variety of food, yet the only things I can push past my lips and down my throat are a few slices of grapefruit, two pineapple rings, and coffee.

I ask her, but she doesn't know where my husband is.

No one does, and someone nice named Marjorie informs me the driver has been instructed to take me home—my Manhattan home—as soon as I'm ready to leave.

I look stupid asking them about my husband.

This is the first day of the rest of our lives, or so the saying goes, and I have no idea what's happening around me.

He's ghosted me. The man has fucking ghosted me.

A question burns my lips, and I'd ask them if he left last night, but what's the point?

He probably did.

And what's worse... Maybe he didn't go back to the city to take care of business. Maybe he went straight to a mistress.

I doubt it was Verona. But someone like her. Or maybe a high-end prostitute... And then he could finally get some relief, enjoying an a la carte menu.

No screaming and writhing.

No virgins.

Just pure, simple sex with women who clench around his cock, and slurp his dick like it's a cone of ice cream.

I leave right after I empty my cup of coffee, and nothing that follows helps me with my dilemma.

How do I ask for a divorce if he is missing?

Sure, a lawyer could help me. But I need more than that in this case.

I could just pack my stuff and leave. And go where? I need some time to plan this thing out.

Yes, I could book a hotel room.

How do I know if I can actually access my money?

He said it was only mine when we had a resemblance of a relationship, but now? What am I now to him?

Shit. The thought that I might lose everything and get kicked out without a penny in my name...

Imagine the humiliation.

It won't reflect negatively only on me but on my family too.

If I leave with a good chunk of money and his acceptance of the fact that we are not made for each other—what a big fucking stretch—I could invoke that we have consummated the marriage, and we are the mismatch of the year, which has created irreconcilable differences, and there is nothing we can do about it.

It wouldn't hurt anyone's reputation.

But with him gone...

Ugh.

Fuck him.

I hold no hope that I'll see him this evening.

I get home, and Marge cooks me a delicious dinner, yet I dine alone.

I also go to sleep alone.

Pampered, in a room with a view to die for, and tasty treats on the nightstand, plus champagne.

No one has ever found it odd that I'm not sharing a room with my husband and I'm alone, but that's how they keep their jobs.

They're not wondering, asking stupid questions, or ignoring the rules.

The opposite of what I've done.

I went down on a fucking list and disregarded everything he'd asked of me. Or served me well.

He didn't want to get attached to me.

I looped my emotional tentacles around him, creating tension.

He began to taunt and circle me.

I put a stop to it, invoking emotional hazard.

And then I refused to give in to him.

He showed me.

And that brought me here.

Oh, what a fucking mess we've made...

The next morning, there's noise in the house.

Elated, I shower, put some clothes on, and take the stairs down. Marge and Lina deliver the news. My suitcases are ready for Italy.

I need to be at the airport in a couple of hours.

Excuse me?

I swallow my question as they are so excited for me, and I should be too, but where is Mister De Lucca?

He'll join me later—someone tosses at me like an afterthought.

Whoever said that wasn't even talking to me.

He's dropped Max's name in an unrelated conversation. Something about celebrating New Year away from home.

My phone starts buzzing, and everyone I'm close to wants to talk to me as if they know I'm on my way to Italy.

In fact, they might suspect it since I talked about it at the wedding reception. I ignore all the calls and messages, focusing on the new development.

Trying not to raise suspicions, I go along with the new plan.

In a few more days and the year will be over. I can talk to him in Italy.

He'll come there. I'm sure he will.

But if I thought I'd travel alone, I couldn't be more wrong. Aaron and my bodyguard accompany me.

There's no way I can make a move, and with that, I take a break from plotting my escape.

We're going to Italy.

At least, I am.

I SABELLA

ROME, Italy

THE DAY before New Year's Eve.

"THE VIEW IS AMAZING," I say, holding the phone in front of me and taking snapshots of the magnificent red and orange sunset gleaming over Rome's rooftops, only enhancing the architectural splendor sprawled out in front of me.

I send Mara pictures as we talk, continuing our conversation about my honeymoon with her on speakerphone.

A few moments of silence follow as she reviews my photos.

The air is crisp, and it gets even colder as the sun is in retreat, giving way to a perfect winter night.

No matter how many pictures I send her and how much we chat about the Roman Forum and the luxury hotel I stay in or about tasting wine in semi-subterranean galleries, covered passageways with ancient walls and evocative lighting, the biggest question of all remains unanswered...

So she insists.

“So you say things are all right between the two of you.”

The air is really cold, and the sunset is a splash of brazen red across the sky when I walk into the penthouse suite, hugging myself.

A chromatic harmony greets me inside with tones of black and white and golden accents, classical furnishings with modern touches, and a dark ceiling studded with rhinestones that masterfully create the illusion of a starry sky.

Thick white rugs are leisurely sprawled across the black marble floors that are smoothly transitioning to the white marble flooring in the bathroom.

I slide onto the large bed, flawlessly made with wrinkle-free covers, sheets, and plump pillows propped against a chiseled golden headboard.

The bedding showcases the same chromatic theme.

“Yes, things are fine.”

Relaying trivial lies, my voice couldn't be more stripped of vigor. For sure, I don't sound like someone spending their honeymoon in one of the most romantic cities in the world, in a sumptuous place of all places.

“Fine?? How are things fine?”

Her laugh is nervous, and I get nervous too. We need to talk about *'the thing.'*

'The thing' that had been dangling over my head for so long and only recently she learned about.

What am I supposed to tell her?

“Explain to me.”

I fall back, clutching my stomach with a tense hand, my eyes lost in the myriad of rhinestones catching the room's lights and sparkling like a million stars.

What a beautiful sight it is.

I set the phone next to me and try to think.

“What do you want me to say?”

“Oh... That sounds bad. Did you do it?”

This is Mara.

What am I supposed to say to her?

That it's none of her business if I did it or not?

I can't do that.

She's my friend, and she'd be worried, rightfully so.

“Yes, I did it...”

It's like pulling teeth.

She reacts to the news regardless, cheering me on like it's a great accomplishment.

“I can't fucking believe it. And you didn't say anything.”

“I just did.”

“Is that why you're so pooped?”

“I'm not pooped.”

“You're not thrilled either. You didn't like it?”

“You didn't like it the first time.”

“Did you not like it?”

She can be so annoyingly persistent.

Did I like that I had fought him, and he had overpowered me? A part of me loved it and fed on it.

Did I enjoy being humiliated?

A part of me reveled in it. That part of me got teased, aroused, and wanted more.

When he had me at his feet, looking down at me, observing me as I had found my way around his shoes, my pussy pulsed.

It hadn't done that with other men before.

Not when they'd suggested sex or tried to have sex with me. I'd kept my virginity a secret because I didn't want to be treated differently. I wanted them to think I was experienced.

Regardless, nothing worked, and when I crawled to De Lucca's feet, it was like I'd found home.

Did I like him when he plowed into me and overwhelmed me with his hard body, masculine scent, and throbbing stiff meat inside me? Thrusting and stretching me?

Did I like his unwavering determination to punish me? Or simply to collect?

A sick part of me had cheered him on.

"It wasn't what I thought it'd be... Like you said."

Strangely, Max and I kind of bonded over that.

It was more than him deflowering me.

He tore down a wall and left nothing else between us.

He showed me the truth in its full unpalatable darkness and smashing brilliance.

I belonged to him.

The first step toward loving him was to belong to him.

He had asserted that right, and it took me some time to understand that.

And it happened after my tears dried up, and the initial reaction to completely remove him from my head began to wither away.

I hated him for doing that when I had no clue what he was doing, but then it dawned on me he'd opened up a path for us to find our way toward each other.

Regardless...

I'm still mad at him.

"Right? I told you it wasn't what I expected. Did he take his time with you?"

"Uh..."

I almost laugh.

I actually breathe a chuckle.

“What?” she murmurs.

“He was kind of... impatient.”

She giggles, amused.

“Didn’t I say? They always are. It’s so easy for men. They want what they want...”

“Yeah... They do,” I say, my smile fading.

“It’ll get better. Didn’t feel better the second time around?”

“The second time... Yes... It was great. Much better. I’m getting used to it.”

That sounds so fake that I’d probably get the faker of the year award if there was one.

What a liar I’ve become.

I haven’t seen my husband since that fateful night.

The night he fucked me like it was the last thing he was meant to do on this earth.

I’ve gotten no communication from him whatsoever. No directions have been relayed to me through his proxies.

I have no idea whether he’ll join me for the New Year celebration tomorrow or I’ll spend the night with Aaron, drinking wine, eating pastries, and playing cards.

At least the accommodations are great, and I’m getting the hang of going out, visiting places, and getting a feel of Rome since this is my first time here, and it surpasses my expectations.

I always thought I’d visit this place in the summer when the streets are crowded with tourists and the blistering heat hugs the city.

I didn’t expect to find a less crowded place, with so many things to visit, a slower pace, and a multitude of spots where an aroma-packed espresso and a seat next to a window can transport anyone into a world of reflection.

“You need more than *getting used to it*.”

Her voice chases away the nostalgic feel of this afternoon.

“Huh?”

“You need to... You know. Explore more. It’s getting better with time.”

Will my life get better with time? Sure. If I divorce him.

I wonder what people usually do to make sex more enjoyable, though.

Mara skipped that part, if I remember correctly.

She told me about her first time but never what came after that.

I guess it gets better... Maybe. Who cares?

“Okay,” I say in a different voice. “I need to get ready for dinner. I’ll talk to you tomorrow...? When are you going back to work?”

“The usual... Monday morning.”

“Good for you. Staying home tomorrow night?”

“Probably. It’s cold, and I’m just not in the mood to go anywhere.”

“I hear you. Okay. We’ll talk then.”

I tap the phone, end the call, and spend a few more moments staring at the ceiling. Thoughts swirl around in my head, making absolutely no sense.

I just want to get this over with, but time nips away at my resolve with any day that passes.

It’s good that I came here.

Why not drag it out a little longer?

Everybody knows I’m having the time of my life, which works in my favor and will hopefully allow me to let them down easy.

This will be the shortest marriage in the history of fake marriages, and sadly, just when I was about to collect an even larger amount of money.

My fucking luck.

The phone buzzes quietly against the dark arabesques and white background covers.

I accept the call with a soft tap on the screen.

“Yes, Aaron.”

“Do you want to eat out?”

“I’m still thinking about it... Um... I’ll eat here. I mean in the hotel. At the restaurant.”

I had dinner in the room last night.

The food was good, and the service was excellent, but the whole idea of me being confined to this beautiful suite by myself left me in a bad mood.

A repeat of that won’t be good.

“All right. I’ll make a reservation.”

“Thanks. Oh... Is there any chance you can eat with me? I don’t want to eat alone.”

The silence coming from the other end of the line is more than telling.

“Never mind. I’ll be fine. I’ll see you later.”

I hang up and roll over to the other side, and this time I peer at the view through the large windows and the doors leading to the rooftop terrace.

The night has taken over the city, quietly and with dignity and grace, as it has done from the beginning of time.

I can’t help but wonder... How many love stories live their little lives in this town at this very moment, concealed behind tiny lights in lavish rooms like mine or modest spaces where all valuables fit in a box?

And how do these stories look?

A soft knock on the door makes my heart leap to my throat.

Startled, I jump to my feet.

Fuck me. I didn’t need that.

Out of the haze of my mind comes this random thought that these are my freshly cleaned clothes for the evening.

Indeed, I receive them pressed and ready to wear.

A beautiful red dress, and a short black coat.

I've been obsessed with black and red lately as if my brain has tried to tell me something through chromatic messages.

Death and passion.

Black and red.

I need to put my mind in a different place, so I do. I make an effort, and an hour later, I leave my hotel suite, heading straight to the restaurant.

A few things have happened since the last time I saw my husband and one of them is striking.

My hair got a few shades darker, not on its own, of course.

I found a nice salon here in Rome—that came highly recommended—and my hair is now dark, shiny, and straightened.

I almost look unrecognizable with plenty of dark eyeliner, silky mascara, and red lipstick.

People keep talking to me in Italian until I open my mouth and tell them I'm American, and then they speak English with me.

The diamonds adorning my neck, earlobes, wrists, and finger sparkle even brighter against the crimson dress and dark coat.

I lose my overcoat as soon as I enter the restaurant.

After checking it in, the hostess shows me to a private table in the corner.

The view is as beautiful as it is for the rest of the guests.

A large panel of glass stretches from side to side, and some of the most iconic buildings in Rome rise right behind it.

Aaron checks with me to make sure everything is all right before he retreats.

At times it's a tricky balance for him to strike between providing me the security my husband mandates and giving me some room to breathe and not feel entirely like a prisoner.

The sommelier greets me and goes over my options with me. I can't follow what he's saying, but I nod at one of his suggestions, and moments later, I have a glass of wine in front of me.

I'm not ready to place the food order, so I politely decline when the waitress shows up, but I keep the menu and start perusing it with vacant eyes.

She moves away.

“American?”

The man's voice hovers over me, pulling me out of my daze.

I set the menu down and take the stranger in.

I didn't think someone could wander around the room like that. The man seems lost with a drink in his hand.

I thought you could only be here if you had a reservation.

“There's a bar over there.”

He talks to me, pointing over his shoulder with his finger, not looking in that direction, drinking me in.

He's Italian, and his English is good.

And he reads minds, apparently.

“What was your first clue?” I ask, dragging my gaze down over his attire. “That I was American?”

He's sharply dressed and attractive.

His presence here strikes me as odd, and I glance at the exit. Aaron and the other man can't be that far from here.

Am I getting paranoid since I have a security detail?

I can't imagine this man is after me or that he's trying to do something nefarious in the restaurant.

There's hotel security here too.

“Are you waiting for someone?” he asks.

I move my eyes to him.

“You glanced at the door,” he explains.

“No. Not really. You?”

I’m sure I’ll hear some cheesy line. Something like... ‘*Yes. I was waiting for a woman like you.*’

“The person I was supposed to meet stood me up.”

That’s a lie.

Why would anyone do that? This is a nice place. A great place to have dinner, even if you call it a night afterward and go home.

I don’t believe him, and my focus moves away from him as I lift a finger, hoping to bring the waitress back and discourage him from sitting at the table.

The woman notices me and smiles at me, almost finishing taking the order at a nearby table. In the meantime, I stick my nose in the menu.

Cacio e Pepe. Bucatini Amatriciana.

Artichokes stewed with mint, garlic, and parsley.

Greens sautéed with garlic, olive oil, and red pepper.

My eyes jump from one line to another as I wait for the man to move away.

He exchanges a word or two with the waitress as she approaches my table when voices ring in the hallway leading to the dining room.

Despite offering some of the world’s finest cuisine, this is a small space like almost every other eatery here in Rome.

Tiny, cozy spaces rich in culture and, in this case, luxury.

The clamor, if I can call it that, makes me flick my eyes to the entrance.

I don’t know what to expect.

Aaron and my security detail walking in and saving the day? Whisking this man away, who in all fairness poses no risk, yet he's still here?

“Have you made up your mind?” the woman asks with a smile.

My eyes are still on the entrance, maybe because my heart beats like a drum war, and a muscle pulses in my jaw.

I'm tenser than a chainsaw, and my lips are dry like hay as I stare at the opening in the wall, waiting to learn what the source of that cacophony of voices is.

Italian words are exchanged, which somewhat kills the fearful yet resigned feeling in my chest that something bad is about to happen.

I dip my gaze to the menu when I hear footfalls behind that wall.

My eyes move back to the entrance just as a tall, athletic silhouette veers left, and my knees start to shake, a shiver zipping down my spine.

I don't know how to warn the man in front of me. How to signal him to move away and find another romantic target.

Someone else to chit-chat with.

It's too late anyway as De Lucca's eyes sink into the clueless man lingering close to my table.

His eyebrow moves up slowly, his strides steadily bringing him closer to my table.

The waitress and the man seem both alerted to the danger inching closer.

The woman smiles, her intuition telling her the new man is my company for the evening while the unwanted guest grapples with disbelief.

When their eyes lock, a disaster is about to happen.

De Lucca opens his mouth to bark something, and just as swiftly, the guest's self-preservation instinct kicks in, the

blood drawing from his face, his hand trembling around his glass, his legs carrying him away from my table.

“Who the fuck was that?” Max shoots at me.

He crashes into the seat in front of me and sends the waitress away without waiting for an answer.

His eyes shift to me.

“I asked you something, Bella.”

He’s pissed, and I don’t know why.

Has he experienced turbulence on his way over?

Would it have killed him to give me a heads-up? *As fucking always...* Send me a note? A message? Something?

His eyes go to my hair, my dress, my lips. I feel like a kid playing dress up when parents aren’t home.

The irritation is discernible on his puzzled face.

“Why did you dye your hair?”

“Do you like it?” I counteract.

It’s not about that—we both know it.

He gives it another look as if he’s flown from New York to Rome to give me an insight into my hair styling choices.

“It’s not you.”

Oh, please.

Like... What is me?

He doesn’t get as much as a puzzled blink from me.

“Who was that fucker?” he asks.

I offer him a stony expression, perfectly glued to my impenetrable face, suppressing any bit of emotion that might clue him in to the fact that I find him as handsome as he was on our wedding day and just as dangerous.

I take a long breath and sigh, having a hard time dealing with this.

“Someone who was making small talk.”

“A male prostitute making small talk?”

My eyebrows almost fall off.

“Prostitute?? What are you talking about?”

“What do you think he is?”

He’s serious, and while giving me the scoop on my chit-chatting with that stranger, he soaks me in with voracious hunger.

Old memories come knocking at the door of my awareness.

It’s the first time our eyes lock since that night when he left me bloodied on his bed.

It’s also the first time we dive into each other, forgetting about our conversation about my dark hair and that intrusive man.

What I see in his eyes doesn’t remove my initial impression that he has thrown so many things at me since that happened that I now struggle to find my footing with him.

He left the house in the middle of the night, and I never heard from him again.

I can’t imagine someone like him—dealing with more pressing matters—would do all that crap on purpose.

On the other hand, he is ruthless and would do anything to accomplish whatever the hell he wants.

In this case, to fuck with me.

He doesn’t know how to do things half-assed.

His stare breaks away from mine when the sommelier approaches the table.

Max barks orders in Italian while I study his attire.

He wears black on black with great distinction, poise, and subdued sexiness, as he always has. Jet black fitted dress shirt, a one-button suit jacket, and matching pants. His watch glints blue-gray like his eyes.

His five o'clock shadow and shiny hair that practically beg for a woman's touch put a knot in my stomach.

He has that glow about him, different chemistry, and it's hard to describe it, although easy to spot when you see it.

He looks like he just fucked someone, his dark masculinity and hormones having nothing to do with me.

When he shifts his eyes to me to check my glass and dismisses the sommelier with a gesture, I'm cold as ice.

"What are you getting?" he asks, flicking his chin toward the menu lying dead in front of me.

"I'm getting a divorce."

I SABELLA

I THOUGHT I'd get a reaction from him with my words.

Well... I couldn't be more wrong.

He doesn't blink, only sends away the waitress who's been making these failed attempts to take the food order since I slipped into my seat.

"I don't need your money. I only want what I've earned. That's all. We can say we are incompatible. I don't care how you phrase it. I want out," I say.

Leaning back, he says nothing.

If we played poker now, I'd lose simply because I can't read a damn thing on his face.

He flicks his finger up, and the waitress practically glides to our table, ready to take our food order.

"Order what you want," he says to me before shifting his focus to her, speaking in Italian.

I can only imagine he's instructed her to send the food to our room as he pushes his chair back and rises to his feet.

"Let's go," he tosses at me, not looking in my direction.

Maybe a conversation in public would be better, but now it's out of the question.

Four men wait outside, besides Aaron and the other guy.

Aaron looks at me like I've been abducted and he might not see me again.

We leave in this formation, but his men eventually scatter and head to their rooms. Minutes later, Max and I enter our suite.

He holds the door for me, and once we're inside, he steps ahead of me, shedding his jacket and pulling a cigarette at the same time from inside his pocket.

“What makes you think you can ask for a divorce?”

His gruff voice is accompanied by unsmiling lips.

Sliding his cigarette between his lips, he shoots me a side-eyed glance.

I remove my coat and leave it next to my purse on the chair.

His eyes go down before he cups his cigarette, flicks the lighter open, and runs the flame across its tip.

His cheeks go hollow as he pulls in a large amount of smoke and just as quickly breathes it out.

“I thought we had an agreement,” I say.

A sardonic smile creases his lips.

He drops his jacket on the bed, and a tiny cloud of masculine scent floats in the air before reaching my nostrils.

Intoxicated, I look at him.

“I'm serious.”

He props himself against the back of a chair.

“We have an agreement. And that agreement brought us here. I'm paying you to be my wife. And now you suddenly think you don't want my money.”

I don't know where he's going with this, but a menacing threat threads through his voice.

He takes another drag, narrowing his eyes at me, and I squirm inside.

“You had a problem with me being gone, the uncertainty of it stressing you out,” he says. “I didn’t need that mess. You resented it yourself. And now we’re here doing what we’re supposed to do. What’s the problem then?”

Now if he puts it like that, I sound nuts for not wanting his money for doing nothing.

My gaze slides to his chest, and the thought that another woman ran her hands over his pees, touched his neck, and maybe kissed him makes me sick to my stomach.

As much as I want to block out that image, I get tangled in it, and my imagination feeds me even more bits, one more poisonous and painful than the other.

Her arms lopped around his neck, her voluptuous breasts pressed against his chest, and her legs locked around his waist.

Him fucking her the way he fucked me, only this time relishing the ecstatic pleasure on her face and having his ears filled with her moans.

I haven’t even had dinner, and I feel like puking.

My expression must’ve changed because he opens his mouth again.

“What’s the problem, Bella?”

If I say it, our little experiment has failed. That’s exactly why I said what I said when I talked to Nor on the plane back to New York.

This is the kind of failure that I had in mind.

That’s all I can say.

I broke my promise.

We’re no longer free.

We’re too caught in each other.

“There is no problem.”

He can't stand my weakness and celebrates it with a derogatory half-smile.

"You make no sense."

Let's be honest. He doesn't want me to make sense.

The knock on the door is quiet, yet we both hear it. I'm saved from embarrassing myself.

He, too, welcomes the pause in our conversation.

"Come in," he barks, and for the next few minutes, we watch the man and the woman setting the table for us.

Plates, silverware, flowers, drinks, and trays of food.

They leave a moment later.

He motions me to sit. I gingerly lower myself in my seat.

"You've seen someone else," I notice casually as if complimenting the sautéed greens.

He smiles around his cigarette, and I already consider this a big loss, a ball of tension spinning in my chest and, what's worse, a pull tightening in my abdomen.

This is new to me. Like epically new.

Noticing his self-assuredness, irresistible confidence, and pure, sexual, raw, animalistic power, I can't ignore the clues in my body as armies of chemical and electrical signals hurry to march through my nerve endings.

He's been a puzzle for me for so long, always holding back, hard to read, impossible to predict, and now he dispenses smiles freely, every grin bearing a different message like the one clinging to his lips right now.

Smugness meets amusement with a dash of consternation that I dare to tell him that. But he's less inclined to start a war as I've become his favorite pastime.

Watching me handle my demons with lamentable ineptitude must be at the top of his list of favorite things to do.

His cigarette dangles from the corner of his mouth while he scrapes his lip with his teeth, refusing to talk.

“We’re not together, remember?” he ultimately says.

A smile glints in his eyes.

Is he fucking taunting me? Have I read him wrong all this time? I try to find my answers in his eyes, but it’s like staring at the Milky Way, looking for a particular star.

I fill my plate, mumbling.

“People who are not together with other people don’t deflower said people.”

I flick my gaze up.

He says nothing, a smile embroidered in the blue silk of his eyes. Blowing out the smoke, he crushes the cigarette against a porcelain ashtray and moves them both away from the table.

His eyes dip to his food.

“You really think I paid for nothing?” he says, sticking his fork into his food.

I chew slowly, pondering his words.

Our eyes meet again as he continues.

“You never had a say in the matter. The decision to fuck you—or not to fuck you—was always mine. And I dwelled on whether or not to do it, but you made it easy for me to choose. Other than that, I think we’re good.”

Is he serious?

“Good?”

Chewing, he flashes a grin.

“Uh-huh. We’re here. As far as I know, everyone has bought into this. Mission accomplished. Not to say, you won’t cry for me if I go. And I won’t cry for you if you go. Stupid talk aside...”

He places his fork down and drinks wine.

“You’ll be so so much wealthier if you stay. Think about it.”

He rests his elbows on the table, tilts his head to the side, and gives me a taunting smile.

Every single thing he does makes me obsessed with him.

“Make a quick calculation in your head. Two million dollars a year, and it can end at any moment if I vanish. With that, you get another package. Money and things to use after I’m gone. Nothing to grieve. Nothing to lose. Everything to gain.”

Every word is a nail in my heart.

It sounds easy. How can I argue with him?

Reality is different, though.

“But if you want to go, by all means, do it. I won’t stop you.”

That is reverse psychology at its best.

I move my eyes to my plate.

“What about the other thing... Living like a husband and wife?” I murmur.

I lift my gaze in response to his silence.

He no longer smiles.

“Nothing changes. You’re mine. So... You figure out the rest.”

And here I am with my back against the wall.

A few moments pass.

“Are you seeing someone else?” I ask against my better judgment.

He wags his index finger at me, tilting his drink against his lips.

“No more questions.”

I can’t stop studying him, still very much fixated on him.

Although we are where we’re supposed to be, this has turned into such a horrible proposition that other than losing a big chunk of money and regaining my freedom and everything

else—which would be *maybe* better?—I seriously consider sticking with this.

The problem is I hate it.

And I hate him.

I don't hate him in the '*I don't want to see him again*' kind of way.

Quite the opposite.

I can't make him something that he's not or get from him something he's not willing to give.

I can only change what I'm doing, saying, feeling. Well, it's not that easy with how I feel.

Fuck. Him.

I'm so far from having that chemical bond with him—the one Mara had talked about—yet taking me the way he did that night is still fueling my fascination with him.

There was some dark, sick passion in his blood and mine.

He let me fight him, although the odds were clearly against me.

He wanted to prove a lot, so he had to reveal a lot but took it all back. He quenched his thirst without displaying the slightest weakness.

And a part of me still revels in it. I'm just as sick as he is.

We finish dinner, and off he goes. The initial plan was not to have dinner in, and he clearly opted against it because he wanted to avoid a scene downstairs.

Without saying a word, he walks out, and I take a long breath before crashing onto the bed.

Sprawled on my back, I look at the ceiling again.

He has all the power right now, but I must have some power too, or I won't be here.

Breathing out my frustration, I shift my position and snatch my phone from the nightstand.

Who can I talk to?

Who can I talk to without telling them anything about me? Mara would be highly suspicious of me. And my mother is out of the question.

My older sisters? No. I've never been close to them. Their lives couldn't be more different than mine.

I wish I could talk to my father.

What would he say to me if he were here?

He'd tell me I'm tough.

He always said that.

He'd also tell me no one could stop me.

If something gets in my head, it stays there forever.

He'd also remind me I never listened to anyone's advice, and he'd be right.

I never have.

After looking at me, he'd brush a strand of hair away from my face and tell me I must get what I think I deserve in this life. Be it big or small.

And then he'd tell me no one can strip me of my power. And he'd be right again.

No one has.

Biting my lip, I scroll through the phone book and tap Missa's name. I just need to hear my younger sister and fill my heart with her.

I SABELLA

LATER.

THE RHINESTONE STUDDED dark ceiling glimmers in the room like a fairytale.

I've been asleep for a couple of hours.

The wind whistles at the windows, and the night is pitch black outside. The hotel is quiet, and my eyes are open, pinned to the view.

A few minutes pass, the electronic lock beeps and the door to the suite opens.

Clothes rustles and footfalls echo in the hallway.

He goes straight to the bathroom, and I fall asleep again.

It's hard to estimate how much time has passed when the mattress dips behind me and the covers slide down over his side of the bed.

The smell of aftershave fills the room.

Fresh and disturbingly sexy.

There is space between us, and I don't know about him, but my back is exposed, and I'm cold. The nightgown, merely

a pretext covering my chest and butt, would be perfectly fine and more than enough if the covers were pulled up to my shoulders.

Everything was good moments ago before he came.

How come he's back?

And how come we even sleep in the same bed?

He moves, and his arm grazes my back—unintentionally, I believe.

I imagine him lying on his back, bare-chested, eyes closed, arm folded under his head.

We only slept together one other time. That time when I fell asleep behind him, and I thought he needed me.

I still think he needed me back then, but now things are different.

He's more secure when it comes to me and quite certain I'm not leaving him even when I say I am.

He doesn't stay long on his back and rolls onto his side, moving closer to me and spooning me.

At first, I'm convinced it's an accident. And then I turn to stone.

He pushes the covers down to our hips, and shivers shoot through me. I refuse to turn around and address the problem, yet he is not deterred in the slightest.

A man with a plan.

My shoulders are covered in goosebumps, and my hair bristles. I still don't know how I feel about this.

I'm dead like a rock, pretending I'm asleep while tendrils of panic wrap tightly around my neck.

He moves slightly, like easing the tension in his body or maybe his groin.

And then his hand comes to my hip with no concern I may be asleep. It rides the short silky nightgown up before moving

inside my panties and peeling them off, partly exposing my skin.

A dead would be brought back to life, yet I still pretend to be asleep.

“Does it still hurt?” he rumbles, pulling even closer and pushing his hand down.

When he cups my slit and rests his calloused fingers between my legs without exerting pressure, circling, or stroking, delicious tension blossoms in my core, and warm wetness pools between my thighs.

Does it still hurt?

I couldn't move or sit without a sharp pain between my legs after the wedding night.

“A little.”

I lie.

For sure it would hurt if he shoved his cock into me again.

“Good.”

“Good??”

It's the wrong reaction.

Laughing, he locks my neck with his arm, so I can't turn around and give him grief while he snaps my panties off with a quick, determined gesture.

When he brings his hand back between my thighs, I'm mortified but thirsty for his touch at the same time.

He pulls out his erection and gives it a few pumps before pressing the crown against my opening.

He does nothing to prepare me, and I swear he does that intentionally when he fills me to the brim without the slightest warning.

I yelp. He rocks his hips. And even though I'm getting wet around him, more like a reaction to friction, a faint flicker of pleasure comes from this weird sensation.

I'm still sore. And he stretches me. And moving inside me only heightens that sensation that he is trespassing and he has no business rocking his cock inside my body.

Shortly after, more than wetness trickles out of me, and I have that strange sensation that I'm bleeding again.

He must feel it too. Why else would he be so fucking hard? His arm is still wrapped around my neck when he brushes all my hair over my shoulder and runs his hand down my neck, maintaining his rhythm. It's not fast or slow. Just about right, and he enters me deep, the wetness or blood or both facilitating his movement inside me.

He runs his nails down the back of my neck, and my nipples harden, my center clenching around him for the first time.

With a rough sweep, he frees my breasts from my nightgown, sparing the delicate straps this time.

He has a way with my clothes.

He doesn't spend a nick of time kneading them or stroking them, and I quickly learn this is not about pleasuring me.

His pleasure comes from taking me, and that's it.

He moves hard, and that gives me an ounce of pleasure, and it's not because of what he does but in spite of what he does.

My physical reactions are weak as I witness everything in a frozen state, enjoying the humiliation before resenting it and then enjoying it again.

I like it more than I despise it, and maybe that is the most important single fact we have in common and an unexpected bonus for him.

He lowers his mouth and bites the smooth line of my neck, and my grip tightens on the sheet.

"It hurts..." I say softly.

"It's supposed to, baby. What else will you remember me by?"

Was that emotion in his voice.

If it was, it was dark, opaque, and meant nothing.

His words are nothing more than words. Empty vessels for nothing.

He's not trying to be overly dramatic.

He's only stated a fact of life. It's what keeps us safe.

He grabs a boob and squeezes it, and it's mostly pain, and that strange sensation between my legs that I'm sore and wet, and his dick is probably smeared in blood.

My long hair covers my face before he brushes it all back again.

And now things get worse.

One arm is still locked around my neck while the other is flexed behind my head, his fist wrapped tight around my hair.

He pulls his hand down, forcing my head to tilt back, my neck to extend, my spine to arch, and my bottom to thrust out and press into his body.

His breath fans over my face, his lips inching closer to my mouth. A kiss would never happen, although we've kissed before.

But not like this.

It was part of acting.

We've played everybody, and he's almost played me.

His grip tightens as he increases his pace, and my body goes from stiff to stiffer—if that's even possible—my heart beating frantically, my hand clawing at the sheet.

He doesn't do much else before chasing his relief, blasting his load, and making a mess between my legs.

Grunting, he claims his pleasure, and when you're doing it like me, witnessing everything as if it happens to someone else, it's a strange experience.

I practically collapse on the bed when he pulls away from me and heads straight to the bathroom.

Raw and quite emotional, I push up on my elbow and look between my legs. His warm release and some streaks of blood stain the sheets.

That's not my period.

It's the continuation of what happened last week.

Pulling my panties up, I move upright and sit on the edge of the bed, broken, but not for long.

The door opens, and I perk up.

"Are you done?" I ask.

"Uh-huh."

His blue gaze flicks in my direction as he picks up his phone, collects a cigarette from the nightstand, and moves to the other room.

I grip the corner of the sheet to remove it.

"Leave it," he barks from the doorway. "I'll take care of it."

The line is ringing.

Requesting that service at three in the morning must cost a pretty penny.

I won't argue with him, so I go straight to the bathroom.

On my way over, I collect my glass and the bottle of wine from the table.

Later, I enter the bathroom, lock the door and push out a long sigh of relief.



ISABELLA

MY NIGHTGOWN and panties go into the hamper.

I have no other set except for my pajamas in the other room, and I won't go back there for a while.

I draw a hot bath, have a soak, and scrub my skin with a rough sponge before pouring myself a glass of wine and relaxing in the perfumed water.

Man, it feels good.

The water is warm and soothing and exactly what I need. The tips of my hair float in the water as I prop my head against the porcelain edge and keep sipping wine.

Strangely I feel relieved.

Maybe not having the intense rise, pleasure, and explosive decay of an orgasm gives me this sensation that I've survived something bad.

By the time I pour myself a second drink, I'm entirely relaxed, buzzed for sure, and a bit dizzy.

My mood is affected too.

Smiling for no reason, I play with my hair, grab my boobs, and give myself the massage my new husband refused to give me.

The sensation is faint and insignificant, yet I hope there's plenty more where this came from.

So I abandon my half-empty glass on the edge of the tub, and looking out the window at the rooftops and the scattered lights in the distance, I move my hands over my breasts, pinch my nipples, caress my stomach, and eventually cup my slit.

A bolt of panic sweeps through me.

I feel nothing.

It's not even close to what I felt when I was in bed with him.

What if I'm really frigid?

Shit.

That would be a bummer, wouldn't it?

I laugh silly and quietly like it's illegal, and I don't want to get caught. Although, at this point, I'm too intoxicated to care.

I sing a song to myself and laugh again, and then I move my fingers over my clit.

It's like I'm rubbing my elbow or someone else's elbow. I'd probably get more excitement from that little piece of action.

Judgment impaired, I keep doing what I'm doing, garnering no pleasure, pushing myself to the point of sobbing.

But that's the thing with alcohol.

It drags you through a crazy range of emotions without an obvious reason, so just as easily, I zip away from crying and go straight to cussing and laughing again.

Eventually, I get tired.

Tired of trying.

So I close my legs, let half of my hair float in the water, and simply enjoy the view, going quiet.

Like graveyard quiet.

My eyes get heavy, and I feel small and abandoned—a good feeling, I'd say—as I give up on trying to control things that are not in my control.

I think I'm dreaming when I hear a noise somewhere in the back, like a metallic sound, and then the door handle rattling.

“Bella...”

His voice. Oh, his voice. I could get off on his voice. It's so sexy and masculine and dangerous and deep. Like those stupid treacherous waters, I keep thinking about.

Maybe Mick, what's his face, would've been a better option for me.

Had I stayed home, I would've been married to him by now.

And he would've worshipped me or pretended to give a fuck about me like some men do when it comes to their women.

Pretending.

Yeah...

And maybe I would've felt nothing with him too.

He's probably not even well-endowed or has a crazy streak in him like De Lucca.

Isabella De Lucca.

Bella...

My name is Bella.

Bella De Lucca.

I think I like Isabella De Lucca more.

The door handle keeps jiggling as I go on a wild ride of maddening frustrations—mostly sexual—and suppressed emotions laced with the best wine money can buy.

Slowly, I slip down, the water covering my mouth, when I think I start to snore.

The door bursts open, but I'm too tired to react. Or maybe I'm just too drunk.

Footsteps pound across the expensive marble floor before two strong arms lift me, and his smell—the signature De Lucca scent—invades my brain.

I dangle, limp in his arms like I'm dead, and I think I am despite the pulse and my slow breaths still rolling.

The room is upside down as my head is upside down, and my arms jolt with every step he takes.

He carries me to the other room and puts me on the bed, naked, on a clean sheet with no signs of blood or sperm.

And no smell of panic.

If he leaves me here, I'll kill him.

He does abandon me all the time.

Fuck him.

He wants me not to love him. I won't love him. I'm good at that. And I swear I'll show him... But for now, I don't want to fall asleep and dream alone. So he better stay.

He doesn't.

He never does.

So my brief ecstatic experience of having his arms around my body comes to an end.

He props a pillow behind my back, so I sleep mostly upright, probably anticipating that I'll be sick soon.

I slide lower when he swaggers away from the bed, and I cuss him out again.

What a terrible man. I laugh inside. And then I fall asleep. I think I do.

Several other things happen. Like... I don't know. Him talking on the phone, saying that he can't leave?

Who is he talking to?

And why can't he leave? Is this about me?

Is it?

A little girl inside my head claps her hands, giddy.

But the more mature me does not. And she talks to me too.

She's telling me shit about him. And people in general.

Shit like...

People are tough. And he is the toughest man I know. And he needs a tough woman like... I don't know. Not me, I guess.

Ugh.

I'm a disaster and make no sense right now.

I can't even have an orgasm. What kind of person am I?

Shit, the little girl starts sobbing, and I try to explain to her that she has no business crying. It's not about her, for fuck's sake.

Finally, it's quiet in my head. I need to keep these voices in line.

Slowly I drift off to sleep, stripped of hope, my hearing impaired, or so I think.

What other explanation could there be for the footsteps approaching me?

I'm clearly dreaming, and so fucking be it.

A presence joins me in bed under the covers, and muscular arms snake around me, pulling me into a hard chest while a smile tugs at my lips.

This is a dream, my dearest of all, and I intend to enjoy every bit of it.

I got what I wanted.

With that, I fall asleep for good.

I SABELLA

A SHAFT of light dances across my face while a throbbing pain jabs at my brain.

Despite an honest effort to open my eyes and figure out where I am, what time it is, and what I need to do today, I can't move, yet my phone keeps buzzing.

Fuck my phone.

Why couldn't I just turn it off last night?

I don't even know where the little fucker is.

Blindly I reach for it on the nightstand behind me.

It's not there.

It stopped. Lucky me.

I so want to fall asleep again, but sleep has suddenly become a problem with the pain shooting through my brain.

As soon as I remember this is the last day of the year, I also realize I don't want to wake up.

My cell starts humming again.

Oh... Please stop.

Aggravated, I roll over, and with half of my body dangling from the edge of the bed, I run my hand over the rug.

No fucking way.

Head upside down, I peer under the bed.

There it is.

I fall off and hit the floor hard before extending my arm the whole way to collect it.

It's sheer torture to peel my eyes open and read the name on the screen.

"Yes, Aaron. Something happened?"

"Mr. De Lucca is waiting for you downstairs."

"Mr. De Lucca? Downstairs?"

"He wants you to join him for breakfast."

Mr. De Lucca is such a cruel bastard.

Why would he want me to join him for breakfast?

And that means it must be early.

How early?

I check the time. Ugh... What a dick. It's eight in the morning.

He must be kidding me.

I'd rather be waterboarded than have breakfast with him.

"Is there a special occasion?" I murmur.

The thought of food hitting my palate and slowly moving down my throat floods my mouth with saliva.

Not in a good way.

He hangs up.

No...

Fucking no.

I dash upright and stumble to the bathroom, crashing through the door and dropping to the knees in front of the toilet, almost sustaining a gash on my forehead when flying the lid up and collapsing over the porcelain edge to throw up.

It's like my stomach wants to move out of my body.

Damn, that's bad.

Panting, I move my hair away from my face when a knock comes at the door.

That's exactly what I... Grr.

Growling, I zip up before spending a second steadying myself, cursing the pain in my brain, and pushing back that sensation that I could easily vomit again.

I reach down, snatch my phone from the marble floor, brush all my hair back, toss a robe over my naked body, and pull my lips into a tight line while pocketing my phone.

The stench is unbearable.

Slowly, I open the main door a few moments later as if everything is under control.

"Morning," Aaron says. "Is everything all right?"

I smile, squinting at him.

"Yes. Everything is fine. I just woke up. Tell Mr. De Lucca I'll join him momentarily. I just need to... you know... freshen up."

A soft gesture toward my face accompanies my words.

He gives me a swift once over to ensure I'm in one piece before I wave him away.

Later, I close the door and crumble.

Hunched over, I rub my temples, murmuring bad words.

"Why did he have to come here? He could've fucking stayed in New York and let me celebrate New Year alone. Oh, this man..."

Sucking a deep breath that sears my lungs, I feel my way back to the bathroom, bumping into things, almost breaking a kneecap as I lose my robe and enter the shower, snagging the glass door with my toe.

"Ouch. Like I needed that..."

The lukewarm water makes things better, waking me, bringing clarity to my head, and energizing me, pretty much like De Lucca. Only he is mean to me.

The migraine doesn't subside in the slightest, not even when I finish showering, blow drying my hair, and putting my clothes on—slim fit pants, heels, a push-up bra, and a skin-tight cashmere top.

I'm all for sex this morning. I'll show this motherfucker.

The pain is debilitating and makes me struggle with light, and there is plenty outside, a bright sky arching over the Eternal City, holding the sun.

After fiddling with my makeup, I manage not to look half as bad as I feel. I wash my teeth three times to remove the smell of vomit before popping a mint into my mouth.

I need some painkillers, but I have none in my purse because I rarely use them. In the future, I should be more prepared for this type of... *event*.

Drinking is not my thing, and it shows.

Luckily, my looks obliterate that horrible impression.

My hair moves like a veil—shiny, dark, and miraculously alive.

I snatch a pair of sunglasses and put them on.

I look weird, the mirror says, but I gesture at it in disagreement. I just don't look like myself.

Oh... There's something else.

I notice the bruises on my neck, the place where he squeezed and almost broke my bones.

I reach inside my suitcase and retrieve my favorite red scarf.

It's the only dash of color besides my crimson heels and purse. And here I go again, dressed in two colors only, black and red.

I don't have the bandwidth to read too much into it.

It takes me a few minutes to reach the stairs and make the trip down.

Only a few tables are occupied by the time I enter the restaurant. And my husband is here.

A couple of men notice my presence, exchange words with him, and leave before I get to the table.

A server sets a plate for me while I sit across from Max.

He can't take his eyes off me.

"Coffee?" the server asks me.

"Two double espressos," my husband says, observing me.

He's probably the only male I know who can pull off the turtleneck look without appearing one-notch less dangerous.

Maybe because the soft merino wool molds to his sculpted torso, highlighting his broad shoulders.

His dark cognac top is paired with black slim-fit pants and matching oxfords.

He looks more Italian than the Italians. And I think he just likes to dress nicely. It's in his blood.

"Care to lose those glasses?" he mutters, annoyed with my mysterious look.

I take them off and slide them into my purse.

Our eyes meet like two old friends, still not liking each other. That's not to say we're not getting closer to each other.

With every hate fuck—excuse me, lovemaking session—we're strangely getting more connected.

We're like a perfect couple.

"How do you feel?"

His gaze hovers over my eyes when the server brings the coffee to the table, and I take the first sip in a rush.

Oh, it feels good.

"You mean this morning?"

“I mean, how do you feel?”

“I’m okay. I didn’t hope for an early morning.”

My sarcasm is lost on him.

“We’re going out. I thought you wanted to see some points of attraction now that you’re here.”

He is so bad.

His smile is concealed, but the glint in his eyes gives him away.

“That’s everything I want,” I murmur.

Now that I’m here...

I tip my gaze down, defeated, and take another sip of coffee.

The caffeine seems to work its magic, making my headache somewhat bearable.

“Thank you for putting me to bed,” I say quietly, not looking at him.

“You’re welcome.”

I shift my gaze to him, and he sinks his teeth into his bottom lip, pulling half of it in at the same time.

His head is tilted to the side and slightly tipped down as if he’s taunting me to speak.

“I’m not used to drinking.”

“I figured that out.”

The waiter pulls up to the table, ready to take the food order.

“What would you like to eat, Miss De Lucca?”

Miss De Lucca?

I look at Max.

“I’m good,” he says.

I flick my eyes to the waiter.

“Me too. Thank you.”

Max tells him something in Italian. The man nods and pulls away.

“What did you tell him?”

“Asked him to bring you something.”

He rests his elbows on the table, tilts his head down, and runs his hand through his hair. I have to say, he doesn't look as content as he looked yesterday when he arrived.

Then he looked sexy, like he had fun with someone.

Now, he looks.... *married*. Consumed with my shenanigans. Disappointed. Not sexually satisfied.

Or is it me?

Projecting?

Moments later, two warm *maritozzi*—yeasted buns with chocolate chips—sit in front of me.

They look and smell delicious, and when I take a bite of the first one and pair it with coffee, my day improves considerably, and my life gets better.

For someone running a criminal empire, he surely gives me his undivided attention.

Doesn't he have someone to punish instead of observing me and making me struggle to swallow my food?

“Is something wrong?” I ask, chewing on small bites of food.

He clicks his tongue.

“You know...” I say, dragging my gaze down and still pondering whether I want to make my life more miserable than it is. “Not that I complain or anything,” I continue and sip coffee, nervous as fuck. “About us having sex...” I murmur.

No reaction so far.

I swing my eyes up.

His gaze is glued to mine, and I'm fairly certain he crushes a smile between his sensual lips.

“But I think my pussy is scared of you.”

My voice is soft and quiet and serious, like dead serious, and if it wasn't for the explosion of light in his eyes suggesting that amusement nips at his resolve, I'd think he hadn't heard me.

“What makes you say that?” he tosses at me, calm, serious, and casual like me.

“It's not working...” I lower my voice. “My pussy is not working,” I whisper.

His chest rises and falls with poorly concealed laughter.

Still, he bites his lip, pushes back his smile, and, unrelated to our conversation, flicks his hand up.

At first, I'm convinced he's signaling to the water for another *maritozzi*, but then I notice one of his men in the doorway.

He must have some business to take care of, yet he just sent his man away, fully focused on our conversation.

The man vanishes from our line of sight, and De Lucca looks at me.

“Explain,” he says, doing that thing again with his elbows on the table, his head slightly tilted down, and his fingers going through his hair.

But this time, he doesn't seem bored or bothered by me. Quite the opposite.

He seems very much entertained.

“Last night I tried to... You know, in the bathroom. The alcohol didn't work... My fingers didn't work. I did, you know... *My thing*.”

“Did you try *thinking* about me?”

For a second there, I don't even realize what he's saying.

The man is so good at bluffing.

He is the ultimate fucker when it comes to this, and I believe him. I believe that he is actually asking me that.

So my reaction is prompt, my mouth pulling agape and my eyebrows going up.

And then I realize he's fucking with me, and his dark sense of humor makes me smile.

He's truly fucking entertained.

And maybe this is what he's been doing all along, throwing stuff at me and getting off on my reactions.

But De Lucca is not one hundred percent play.

He never is.

He was dead serious on the wedding night. And the nights before, but I see the undercurrent of amusement threaded through his actions.

I learn now he is a complex man, and every side of him is more intricate and powerful than the next, and I'm no challenge for him, but I find my legs.

After all, he finds me amusing, and he just canceled or postponed his plans for the morning to listen to my story.

"*That* has crossed my mind..." I say. "But... As I said before. I think *it* is scared of you."

"And how exactly is *it*?"

The emphasis on '*it*' makes me avert my gaze.

For one, I struggle to keep my face straight, and then I realize this is my only chance to talk to him.

"*It* is... numb. Just doesn't want to react to anything. Like an animal rolling over and playing dead. Afraid it might get eaten..."

Did I just say that?

"You know when they roll over..." I murmur, looking at him this time.

His eyes look like the sunlit sky as he listens to me intently, as you'd listen to a child relaying a fantastic story.

“If I understand correctly, you’ve had that problem before.”

He looks straight at me, and strangely the topic of our conversation starts tingling.

What the fuck?

When he slowly parts his lips as if he knows my pussy is wet because of him, I pull my thighs together to experience more of the soft pulsations swirling between my legs.

He fucks me with his eyes, and unlike how he does it in real life, he fucks me slowly and intently, reading everything on my face.

And it doesn’t matter that I don’t say a word, and I probably have that deer-in-the-headlights look to me... He enters me in ways I never thought possible, and the tension in me rises, cresting beautifully, making my skin form goosebumps and my nipples morph into little pebbles.

A trail of wetness lines my panties, and that pull tightens inside my abdomen.

It’s one hundred percent real. And it’s pleasurable and satisfying.

He cocks an eyebrow at me and tilts his lips into a smile while I sense that superb build-up and the rush normally happening before reaching a mind-blowing high.

Fire spreads over my cheeks.

His eyes don’t stop, undressing me without dipping to my body, messing with my brain without using words, and sending messages that turn me on.

I clear my throat before I speak.

“The problem was different before.”

“How?”

“The... *thing*... didn’t feel either way about it.”

“Hmm... I see. And now you’re saying *it* has a strong opinion about me?”

A voice giggles in my head while I meekly nod my head.

“Yes, it does. It’s pretty much dead. And then it takes a while before I bring it back to life, but even when I do, it doesn’t want anything to do with giving me pleasure.”

“It’s useless,” he drops on me.

Blushing, I nod again.

“You can say that.”

“Sounds like a ‘you’ problem,” he tosses at me.

I swing my gaze to him.

His cheeks are flushed from a genuine reaction.

I’m sure he’d laugh his ass off if it didn’t chip away at his authoritative figure.

“Yeah... Okay. Maybe. Thank you for listening,” I say, quick at retreating.

He empties the espresso cup in a gulp.

“You want me to help you?” he reconsiders.

Is he genuinely asking me that?

“I thought you knew more than me about these things.”

“You think I’m an expert... Like a *pussy whisperer* or something?”

He doesn’t adjust his voice, nor does he smile, which is consistent with his brand of dark humor, and although there aren’t that many people in the restaurant, I die of embarrassment and shush him anyway.

“Please. I don’t want to make it a public matter.”

“Too late for that.”

But seriously, now. What if I’m one of those people who can’t screw without emotions?

Without being connected to the person I fuck?

Demisexual?

That’s what they call them.

What if?

That would explain my distaste for getting in bed with men. Well, it wouldn't explain the mixed messages I'd sent.

Wouldn't that be sad if it were true since our agreement clearly forbids having an emotional connection?

Now that would be a fucked up situation.

“What do you think would work for your pussy?” he asks quietly this time.

From afar, we look like two stylish people on vacation. True and true. Discussing important matters. That's true too. Perhaps with good chemistry between them. We have that in droves.

And settled into a nice relationship.

That's questionable.

Regardless of what people may think when looking at us, one thing is sure, we look serious despite the conversation that we're having.

“I don't know. I'm out of ideas,” I murmur. “As I said, I tried things. They didn't work.”

I know what works, but I can't tell him.

What he's doing with his eyes—even now as we talk—works.

It works so well that I feel the throbbing between my legs.

And I know what else has worked in the past.

Being real with me, the way he was before we started having sex. When I simply had him in my arms. And he let me see him how he *really* was.

Vulnerable.

When I cleaned his wound and fell asleep with my nose pressed against his back.

It felt as if we'd made it work. As if we'd stuck by each other through thick and thin...

And as twisted as it was, even what he'd done on the wedding night worked somehow.

And what he did last night could've worked had he not held his emotions back, assuming he had had them.

Taking me the way he did, killed my mood and rendered my pussy quiet.

Maybe it's better that way, preventing the chemical bonding nonsense from happening and getting us in more trouble than we already are.

He gestures at the waiter, signaling that our conversation is over, and this remains a '*me*' problem.

Later, we exit the restaurant, and before long, his men join us, and we head to the cars waiting outside.

I SABELLA

WE HIT THE SIDEWALK, followed by his men.

One bystander gawks at me as I hold onto De Lucca's arm, staggering on my feet, willowy and sexy, hair moving like the giant wings of a butterfly, lips painted red, and eyes hidden behind dark sunglasses.

I notice how the man's eyes slide down, taking in my thigh gap, which is pretty much the last thing he sees before De Lucca leaps at him, hitting him flush in the chest, and pushing him back.

Two of De Lucca's men rush to catch the bystander, so he doesn't smash his skull against the slabs of concrete, hardly doing it out of the goodness of their hearts, primarily concerned with the mess it would create.

Another man tries to reason with my husband, who eventually relents after shooting words at the one pushing to his feet, and hurriedly pulling back.

Max buttons his short coat, still swearing in Italian, yanks the door open, and invites me to step in with a clipped flick of his hand.

He wants me out of everybody's eyes as quickly as possible.

Regardless of how faulty and unresponsive my pussy is, I'm still his.

I fall back in my seat, keep my sunglasses on, and don't say a peep before the rest of the men climb into our car and two other vehicles, and we leave the place.

Quietly I let out a sigh of relief.

Shit, that was a close call. And it could've been way worse than that.

The day is mixed.

You never *not* work in De Lucca's world, and the more hours pass, the better understanding I have of what this honeymoon thing really is.

It's never been about us honeymooning, holding hands, kissing, fucking, and kicking back. And it isn't about seeing the most iconic touristic attractions either.

Colosseum, Foro Romano, Palatino, Pantheon, and Fontana di Trevi, just to name a few.

It's not about taking pictures, walking down the street hand in hand, sipping coffee, and eating pastries in some of the coziest places in the world.

This entire trip is only a front.

A facade.

The real reason we are here is the meetings he has with some men that are just as bad as he is.

And I—believe it or not—as insignificant as I may appear, provide some legitimacy to his actions.

We travel outside Rome, where he meets people in a lavish villa behind closed doors with me in the living room, tasting snacks and drinking coffee with the woman of the house.

Older than me, she is Italian and well versed at this game, while I'm still dealing with the remnants of a brutal hangover, the myriad of questions without answers in my head, and the pain between my legs.

Talking about priorities.

The woman in question makes conversation with me, our topics confined strictly to safe subjects. Food, Italy, seen through the eyes of a tourist, and New York, also seen through the eyes of a tourist.

The meeting ends around noon, and we have lunch at their place. De Lucca seems in a good mood, and the man he is talking to also has a good disposition.

But I know how these things work.

It's all about money, power, and alliances, and they're as frail as life.

But we all play this game, and I'm getting better at it. Coming out of my shell, as they say.

We're talking about my family history and my connection to Sicily.

I wish I knew Italian, but I'm picking up words and phrases here and there and realize it's not as complicated as I thought.

I can't say I'm not mesmerized with my husband and how easily he switches between English and Italian, and how sexy he looks no matter what the fuck he says.

I guess I'm horny. See. My pussy is working. It just needs a nudge or two.

The afternoon is all for me.

He said something about seeing places, and I didn't believe him. Well, he takes me to some of the local attractions as we head back.

We no longer travel in a large group, only us and another car following us from a decent distance, so we don't feel constantly watched.

If we are being watched, it's for our safety and not because De Lucca can't handle himself—he can—but because the kind of danger that typically threatens him doesn't come with a warning and routinely is a trap.

We return to the hotel around five and have enough time to prepare for New Year's Eve.

It's taken me the entire day to sober up and feel like myself again. And despite not sleeping much last night, I now bounce back after a short nap, feeling rested and energized.

After spending time in the shower and the front of the mirror, I'm finally ecstatic with the result.

I wear a long, one-shoulder, scarlet evening dress with a side slit up my leg.

It hugs me in all the right places while allowing me to move with ease. A small beaded purse and matching heels complete my look.

The rich, luscious red sets off the diamonds I wear, while my dark hair highlights the color of my eyes. The more I look at it, the more I relish it.

There is no trace of the woman with caramel blonde hair, innocent eyes, and nostalgic air. With a dreamy appearance and a soul so deep no one could ever reach its end, she roamed the virtual planes of longing until she found the destination she was looking for.

And there... She's gone. My eyes are still innocent, but I slowly turn into someone different.

Max enters the room, sporting a sleek tuxedo, looking ravishing like always.

His eyes are clear, his face glows, and his fingers are on the bowtie when he meets my gaze in the mirror.

No matter how cute the bowtie is, it can't diminish his villain air.

A flicker of light fleets through his eyes, suggesting he likes what he sees.

He rakes his gaze over me, taking in every little detail.

At least I have the *'arm candy'* part down.

His designer shoes snag my eyes before my gaze crawls up his athletic frame.

Casually, he closes the distance between us, brushing a few strands of his hair back before stopping behind me and snaking an arm around my waist.

He studies us in the mirror while I observe him.

He seems content with how we look together, yet he's still distant and unreadable as he usually is.

With an emotionless expression, he runs his hand up my body and palms my breasts one at a time without the slightest warning.

His other hand comes to my body, drifting past my hip, inching closer to my thigh, and smoothly sliding inside my dress.

Without the slightest detour, he goes straight for my tiny panties, and when he slinks his fingers inside, my body's reaction is immediate and organic.

Uncontrollable and unrefined.

I fall back into him, pressing my butt against his frame, thrusting it out to feel his bulge.

He has his eyes tipped down, his gaze averted as he barely touches the nub of pleasure between my folds, and I jolt against him while he hardens behind me.

He runs his fingers over my slit, touching my clit. Once, twice... Three times. And wetness trickles down, my center pulsing, my body tensing, my lips parting, and my head falling back against his shoulder.

The pull inside my body tightens deliciously.

My first instinct is to rub myself against him, rock my hips, and follow that road unknown to me.

The reaction of my flesh is pure, genuine, and uncalibrated, making me feel alive.

My pussy likes him, reveling in his touch that is merely a tease.

So tender and soft, giving me so much pleasure.

I get swept away for a few seconds, unable to breathe or move. I'm stiff again, but for a completely different reason, witnessing the little firecrackers in my body.

When he senses that I'm lost, he moves his hand between my legs, drives his fingers through my wetness, and comes back swiftly to grab my pussy hard.

Armies of tingles move fast across my skin, making me clench my thighs around his hand, the pleasure spiraling up so quickly as I'm about to have my first orgasm with a man.

My breaths roll out, ragged and shallow, while my pulse skyrockets. He squeezes my chest hard, and it's like I'm hit by a bolt of lightning.

His lips come to my neck, and he sinks his teeth into my skin, and I'm almost there when, just as fast, he tears his touch away from me and leaves me dazed and shaking in front of the mirror, unable to stop my throbbing or the sweat from dotting my skin.

Adjusting his bulge and pivoting, he signals me to follow him out of the room.



ISABELLA

THE ENTIRE TRIP to where we're supposed to celebrate New Year's Eve, I sit next to him in the back, my thighs still locked together, the reverberations of his touch still creating chaos in my body.

Everything I once thought would never be possible happens right now. The sexual tension in my body remains steady, with no sign of dying out.

I wear thigh-high stockings.

And he knew that back in the room when he stopped behind me and wrapped his arm around my waist.

He must've seen me pulling them on, so he knew he could easily touch me.

The thought that he touched me brings back flashbacks of that moment.

Furtively, I lean back in my seat, tilt my head toward the window as if looking outside, and close my eyes, reliving that moment.

How great it felt.

It gives me goosebumps even now. And those delicious tingles and pulsations swirling and swirling, building anticipation.

It feels so good I'm afraid to move in my seat and give myself away. Although he's not looking at me.

He's on the phone, and whatever he says to the person at the other end of the line goes past me.

At times he speaks Italian.

Again, even if it's about his shady business, I wouldn't know. I can't grasp the meaning of his words since I'm so pulled into my depraved little world, enjoying the memories he has given me.

I open my eyes and glance at him.

Now he ignores me, knowing exactly what he's done.

I'm sure his fingers are still sticky with my wetness. And maybe he's still hard. Or semi-hard.

There. I caught him.

He just shot me a side-eyed glance. And it quickly went down my legs.

I cross my legs, and the skirt falls open.

He gives me another look, talking on the phone.

I pull at the skirt to cover my legs, and he grips my wrist, stopping me.

I let it slide, and my legs are on display again up to the band of lace trimming the thigh-high stockings.

He tears his hand away and no longer looks at me, and I go back to daydreaming about those stolen little moments.

Minutes later, we arrive at our destination.

A line of cars awaits near the entrance.

“Make sure that skirt stays in place,” he says sternly, sliding his phone inside his jacket. “I don’t want to kill anyone tonight. I’m on vacation.”

De Lucca and his dark humor.

You can never tell when he jokes. Or if he means what he says when he mutters something crazy like that. With him, it can go either way, depending on the circumstances.

We pull up in front of the entrance, and several parking valets rush to the car.

Max steps out and holds the door for me, clutching my hand as soon as I step down before discretely signaling his men to follow us.

Despite permanently having them around, nothing I can see points to a dangerous situation.

It’s a big party in a beautiful villa, and the people attending know him.

My husband introduces me to the owner of the house and his family. I swiftly learn their families are related.

We indulge in food and drinks, and right before midnight, we witness the New Year’s Eve countdown and the fireworks lighting the sky.

The atmosphere is effusive, the energy high, and the emotions are intense.

Mine are all over the place as I look back at a year that has marked the arrival of so many changes, and the biggest one is right here next to me.

We clink our glasses, and he leaves a rushed kiss on my cheek, which is mostly acting, bearing no significance.

Other than getting a '*Happy New Year!*', nothing comes my way, and right after, he turns around and exchanges greetings with other people as he should.

Surrounded by a cacophony of voices, joyful music, happy people, and bright lights, I feel like it all gets swept away as I look at the sky as if I'm the only person here.

Alone in the entire universe, discovering a new world.

His hand is on me, but he is not emotionally close to me.

Frankly, I didn't expect that. I know what we are.

We're trying to redefine our interactions, and it's an imperfect work in progress that might never render viable results.

Reluctantly, I tear my eyes away from the sky and pull myself back into the present.

As the party winds down, he makes a few calls, and we head back to the car at around one in the morning.

"Do you want to go to sleep?" he asks.

Surprised, I look at him.

We barely talked to each other the entire night.

"Do you have something else in mind?"

He gives instructions to the driver, and instead of returning to the hotel, we head in the opposite direction.

I SABELLA

“WE HAVE this place for ourselves for the next three days,” he says, walking through the double doors of a villa outside Rome after climbing a couple of steps.

With a gesture, he invites me in.

I look around in awe.

After driving for about an hour, the scenery has changed dramatically, leaving behind the urban wonders of Rome.

The villa is surrounded by meadows, open land, and an olive grove.

A lake glistens in the moonlight in the distance.

The place comes with an indoor pool, an equestrian center, a chef, and live-in staff, but no one greets us at this hour, although freshly cooked food, warm cookies, and wine are set for us in the kitchen.

This doesn't look like an in-the-moment kind of thing.

Has he planned all this? Or is this just another cover-up for some meeting?

Right now, no one else is here, and his men go straight to the guesthouse. There are two other houses aside from this one, and they are big enough to shelter several people.

I imagine one of them is for the staff.

A car arrives right after we enter the immense hallway, and voices ring outside.

He seems unfazed while peering at the antique furnishings.

“They brought our things,” he says.

So this is part of a plan.

No more staying at the hotel for now.

I glance around.

This place must look great in the summer.

Large fireplaces are scattered around the house, warming the air and creating a cozy feeling, while tall windows usher in the pastoral view of the open space surrounding the property.

Perhaps there’s a meaning to all this, aside from wanting to spend a few days here with me—his new wife.

But I’m not one to complain. I love the place, and being alone with him no longer scares me.

Sometimes.

Lately...

Maybe.

“You want to go for a swim?”

Oh, my.

He’s talking to me.

“Yes, sure.”

Oh. I don’t have a swimsuit.

“What about the...?” I start.

Undoing his bowtie, he pushes the bedroom’s double doors open while I step behind him.

Windows line three sides of the room.

It reminds me of his property in Long Island, only there was only one wall of windows looking out over the gardens.

This takes my breath away.

“What about what?” he murmurs, flicking his eyes to me while shedding his jacket and unbuttoning his dress shirt.

Before long, his inked chest is visible.

“Are you telling me or...?” he presses on.

“I was thinking about swimming. I don’t have a swimming suit.”

He looks at me over his shoulder.

“You don’t need one.”

He unbuckles his belt and moves quickly to peel off his pants while I stare at him with my mouth agape.

“If anyone enters the place tonight, I’ll just shoot them.”

He’s not joking, is he?

Soon I gape at his V-shaped back while he swaggers away, wearing only his boxer shorts.

Okay. Cool. What can I say?

I take off my dress, heels, and thigh-high stockings.

Wearing only panties and hiding my breasts with an arm folded across my chest, I run down the corridor as if chased by a ghost.

Where did he go?

I look around.

The place is astonishing, with antique candleholders, dark wooden tables, old paintings, heavy drapes, and hand-carved chairs.

A trickling sound lures me to the other end of the corridor.

Somewhere in the back, a vaulted door opens into a large room.

Warm lights guide my steps.

I inch closer and peek inside.

A round chamber extends out in front of me, done entirely in marble, showcasing smooth floors, ceiling lighting, and lit candles on the edge of a crescent pool and a nearby jacuzzi.

Marble steps vanish into the water while rose petals float on the surface. This looks and feels like a real honeymoon.

He submerges and starts swimming while I move closer and dip my toe. The water is warm and smells like roses.

Gathering my hair into a loose bun at the top of my head and securing it with a strand of hair, I slide in and swim too.

The pool is large, so we don't bump into each other, and before long, I pull up to the edge and rest my elbows on the cold marble slabs.

My feet touch the bottom, and my bun barely stays in place. A whoosh of water curls around my legs.

He straightens out of the water and comes next to me.

I'm still panting.

He seems unaffected.

"I didn't think I'd spend the night here," I say.

"I didn't think that either..."

Somehow I doubt that. Everything he does requires preparation.

He can't go anywhere without checking the place first.

"I like it..." I say, and for some reason, my voice trembles.

It has to do with his presence.

His proximity.

Me being alone with him.

Both bare chested.

I get even more nervous when he brings his hand to me and undoes my bun. My hair falls down my shoulders, and the tips meet the water.

I shift my gaze to him.

“I like when you wear your hair down,” he says quietly.

His eyes are like the sea before the storm.

Deep sadness lives in them, something I rarely get to see because he always conceals it. He always wears a mask. A stern expression. Something impenetrable, hard to read.

Lust glints at the surface. But his lust is primal, generic, and shallow, like a cheap drug that helps him forget.

The way he lowers his eyelids and rakes his eyes over me forecasts nothing good.

Intuitively, I know what he wants, but I’m not sure I can give it to him.

I’m too new to this to give him the kind of experience that could help him forget.

Using sex to escape a fucked-up life is nothing new, but I’m more of a pain in the butt than the reprieve he needs.

Not that I don’t want him to get lost in me. I want that for him, and I need that for me, but I don’t know how to go about it.

And when he gets like this...

When he needs sex to get away from things, I’m stuck.

He grabs me by the neck and moves his thumb up and down my windpipe while sliding his other hand inside my panties and snapping them off me.

They flop and twirl and eventually meet the bottom while his hand goes straight to my clit.

When he crashes his mouth onto mine and slides his tongue between my lips, it’s like he fully rams into my body.

My back presses into the pool’s edge while he strokes my pussy without finesse, knocking the air out of my lungs with his intrusive kiss.

It’s like fucking me with his tongue and showing me what he wants.

I adjust and respond, bringing my hands to his neck, my tongue swirling with his, my pace matching his.

Grunting, he slides a finger into me, and I rock my hips, moaning.

Waiting has never been his thing.

Perfectly in sync with him, I hitch my thigh high on his hip while he drags his hand down, yanks me off my feet, and props me against the edge.

Arms wound around his neck, my legs wrapped around his waist, my hands framing his face as I passionately kiss him, I slide down until my entrance meets his erection.

He pushes his shorts down past his butt and fills me up.

It hurts.

It still hurts.

Maybe because I'm still raw. Or maybe because he's big, and I'm still unable to completely relax and get wet.

My wetness comes in spurts, a little more when he touches me gently and slightly less when I need it the most—when he's impatient and wants to take me immediately.

Once I'm filled up with him, the pleasure is more intense than the burning sensation at the entrance. For the first time, the fullness sensation comes with distinct pleasure.

He moves hard into me right from the get-go, and I'm amazed at how resilient my body is and how it takes his pounding.

We no longer kiss as he rocks his hips, his arm safely shielding me from the hard edge.

Grabbing the back of my hair and pulling, he forces me to look at him while he's fucking me raw.

He's getting me used to it. And I do get used to it. And since I have nothing to compare it with, this is my only point of reference.

Warmth disperses through my body from the brutal attack on it, my pleasure coming on the crest of a languid tide.

I'm nowhere close to experiencing an amazing high or satisfying relief, but I fully enjoy something else.

Feeling him inside me, the beast roaring in him and his hollow soul circling around me.

And it's not even about getting sexual pleasure.

He can get pleasure, buy pleasure, or have women at his feet, waiting in line to touch his dick with trembling hands and greedy mouths.

They'd do anything for him, and no sacrifice would be big enough to get fucked by him.

It's more than that.

This is about him ruining a pristine place.

No man has entered my body before.

And no man has left the footprints of his soul in mine.

He can leave his mark, destroy, burn it down, or build his safe heaven in my soul.

It's up to him, but my money is on the destruction.

That's what's giving him the greatest satisfaction.

The dark glint in his eyes tells me that while I stare at him in awe, numb, no longer feeling the pain or perceiving the attack on me as something strange.

The more he thrusts into me, the more I grow into a woman, although right now, I'm far from claiming him the way he's claiming me.

His eyes become unfocused as he gets closer to satisfying his needs. I don't expect much from this when a swirl of pleasure goes up and almost takes me to the edge.

Almost.

He comes, his grip hardening as he loses it for a moment, forgetting to spare my life.

I gasp, clawing at him, and only then does he let me breathe again, lowering his head to me and biting my neck as he usually likes to do.

As brutal and cruel as his fucking is, I see how I can easily get hooked on it.



ISABELLA

EARLY MORNING HOURS.

BRIGHT LIGHT ROLLS through the ceiling-height windows, spreading over the white sheets, wooden floors, cream walls, and the fresh flowers overflowing from ceramic vases.

From where I lie, sprawled on my stomach, I can see all the way in the distance. The lake is bigger than I thought, and the snaking road is longer than I imagined.

I was right.

This place must be amazing in the summer months. It's calming, even now, with the sun shining over the land.

Slowly, I shift my head and look over to the other side of the bed.

My husband sleeps on his back, an arm folded over his eyes as if shielding him from the light.

His chest rises and falls with quiet, paced breaths, and his features are smooth and relaxed. He has one leg stuck out, and the covers barely obscure his groin.

Taking my time, I indulge in the artistry that went into drawing his tattoos and the science employed in sculpting those hard muscles.

He doesn't work out like most men do.

He fights, his physique attesting to the grueling sessions. That's what I heard back home.

Another thing I've heard is that he's never let anyone sleep in his bed. I think it has to do with trust and being able to sleep soundly without the fear that someone might pull a trick on him.

And yet... He allows me to sleep with him.

A smile tugs at my lips.

His shoulder is so close to my lips I could crane my neck a little and kiss him, but I don't want to wake him, so I roll back and stare at the road.

Birds fly across the sky, and muffled voices drift from the guesthouses outside.

An aroma of fresh coffee wafts into the room.

Still smiling, I relive the moments we spent at the pool last night, and then something in the distance catches my eye.

A small moving dot at the other end of the grove. There are two dots. No... Three dots. And as the moments pass, the dots become larger and larger, and I make out three cars.

They move toward the house fairly quickly, and my heart thumps in my chest.

I shoot my eyes to Max, who's still sleeping.

I don't know what to do.

My gut tells me this is important and possibly dangerous, and I should warn him these people are coming.

The clamor outside fuels my suspicion. His men noticed the cars and darted outside.

Shaking, I assess the situation before making up my mind.

Butt naked, I leap to my feet, round the bed, and pull up next to him.

The self-preservation instinct in me wants me to be careful about delivering the news. He might have one of those swift

reactions and, in the confusion of the moment, attack me before I have the chance to tell him.

Sitting on my knees by the bed, I drag my fingers up his chest, barely touching him.

“Max... Baby.”

I practically whisper, so there’s no way he can hear me.

I push up a little and lean over him before pressing my lips against his chest.

He wakes at once, his hand shooting to my hair, yanking me back, his eyes peeling open in a split second. Fire burns through his gaze like he wasn’t sound asleep only moments ago.

I yelp, and his hand drops while he quickly scans the room.

“What’s going on?” he barks, jumping out the bed, hearing the voices outside, sensing the danger as rushed footsteps trail to the entrance.

“Three cars are coming,” I say just as fast as if I’ve done this my whole life. “And your men are outside.”

He’s already pulling his pants up before grabbing a gun from the table.

His reaction tappers off somehow, but the tension is still in his frame as he throws his shirt on and begins buttoning it up.

He glances out again as the three cars enter the gravel driveway, and men shout, nearing the steps.

Calm and cold, he rakes his fingers through his hair while I sit on the edge of the bed, shivering.

He tosses a vacant look at me.

“Put something on, and do not leave the room. No matter what happens, do not get out. Understood?”

“Yes.”

What if something happens to him?

I’m too terrified to even ask that question.

What then? Should I hide? Make an escape? How? Who could take me to the airport and then back home?

I've never been so stressed out, which says a lot considering I've been living with him for a few months.

I knew it... I fucking knew it. This was never about our honeymoon and spending time in this beautiful house.

He must've known these men were tracking him down.

I can't tell whether he knows them or not. Or whether he's surprised or not.

He pushes through the double doors and closes them behind him while I dart away from the bed and start digging in my suitcase, looking for something to wear.

I pull out my riding pants and a soft wool top.

I also slide my boots on. If I need to leave fast, as in run away, I better have warm clothes on and my travel documents handy.

What a fucking life.

I spin like a twister, pulling things from everywhere—things that go on me and things that get tucked in my purse—before scurrying away to the window.

By the time I get there, the cars are in front of the villa, engines running, not exactly parked, and voices echo in the house.

They are loud and menacing, and I listen to his advice, pack a small bag with necessities, and slide it under the bed.

He didn't say I should be ready to flee, but why else would he say what he said?

The minutes morph into what feels like hours.

Listening to the barked dialogue in the lobby, I remember to breathe, and just as I begin to feel less anxious, footsteps cross the hallway, echoing closer and closer.

Oh, shit.

I zip away from the bed and go straight to the closet.

That's a horrible idea.

The curtains. Yeah... No.

I look around the room, sweating, and then I notice a small porch under the window.

For that to work, I'd need to hop over the sill.

I open the window and pull it closed just as fast.

Getting outside is not what he has asked of me. I find a storage room and sneak inside just as the doors open.

"She's not here," the guttural voice says, and I recognize one of Max's men.

Why would he look for me?

His footsteps trail back before I hear tangled voices outside, go through another moment of panic, and sag against the wall.

That's not how I imagine this day. I was hoping for a nice breakfast and maybe a walk outside.

Just when the adrenaline tapers off, someone enters the bedroom.

"Bella?"

I practically jump out of the storage room and veer toward the bedroom.

A grin sits on my husband's lips.

"Where were you?"

He no longer seems tense and concerned, and the cars revving their engines outside suggest our unexpected guests are leaving.

"I was out of sight," I say, walking calmly past him.

His gaze moves over my pants.

"Do you want to go horseback riding?"

"What?"

I pivot to him.

What is he talking about?

“I see you’re dressed for it. We eat and go out,” he says in the most natural voice in the world, sliding his gun onto the table.

“Are your guests gone for good?”

“Yes.”

He doesn’t elaborate, only starts to take off his clothes.

“I need to take a shower,” he says.

“I need to shower too. I was in a bit of a rush.”

“Uh-huh...”

Averting his gaze, he flashes a faint smile.

“Is there a way I could wake you without risking getting killed?”

“You did well,” he says.

Right. My scalp still hurts.

“Kissing is good, but I’m not used to it, so tapping me on my shoulder works better.”

“Noted.”

He loses his shorts, grabs a towel from a chair, and wraps it around his waist while I stare at his butt.

He glances at me over his shoulder.

“Take your clothes off. I need you in the shower with me.”

With that, he strides away.

The door to the large bathroom remains open while the water starts to run.

Without wasting another moment, I peel off my clothes, set them on a chair, and, covering my chest and slit, sprint to the bathroom.

M AX

SINCE I CAN REMEMBER, the women I crossed paths with wanted something from me.

It started early.

At first, they wanted something from me because of my father, and later, they wanted something from me because I had tremendous power.

All women had acted to a degree, often unaware that they were trying to be someone else.

All of them thought I wanted it that way.

It all boiled down to getting my attention, my money, my protection, my body, and my dick.

Not necessarily in this order.

Some of the most sophisticated women I have ever met have tried to use their charms, physical beauty, and wits to distract me. And get something from me.

Except for Bella.

She has no clue how to do it, although she is the one who gets the most from me while trying to make our arrangement work.

Like two people stranded on an island, we need each other, and that makes her genuine and contradictory, something nice to watch. And hard to ignore.

I've been observing her since we cut the deal.

The first few weeks when she lived mostly alone at my place.

The moments she felt the need to baby me.

She must've known I wasn't the man who needed a woman's tenderness, yet she offered it regardless,

That's how Bella is.

I knew she had set me up when she asked me to stay away from her as she was trying to protect herself.

I couldn't hold it against her, although I wasn't crazy about her idea.

By the time she wanted to pull away from me, I had had my mind made up and wanted to give her a go.

It wasn't that easy, though.

We live in different worlds and understand life differently.

We're far from trusting each other or knowing how to make this fully work, but she's shown me she wants to give it a try by sticking with me all these weeks.

I'm already hard when I peel my towel off and step into the shower.

I push my erection down and try not to think about her much, but it's impossible.

Any man who's been around the block a few times will occasionally admit there's pleasure in initiating a woman.

I doubt women enjoy an inexperienced male, but we, men, like to walk that path with an inexperienced woman if given the chance.

That hadn't been something I looked for. With her, it was a surprise.

One I didn't think much of until I became obsessed with her.

Perhaps that was the leverage she had over me.

The fact that I could cut a path for her and me in this crazy life. Teach her stuff. Make her. Break her. Watch her. Grow with her into someone else.

No, it wasn't that she hadn't been with a man before.

Or that she could be anyone's wet dream.

Or that she hadn't experienced pleasure before and doubted that she could.

And then something else caught my eye. How fond she was of me. And honestly, who wants to love a monster?

I push those thoughts back.

Right now, my beautiful wife is not driven by her needs, although that is about to change. And has already started to change.

Water sprays over my chest as I brush my hair back. The door slides open, and she walks in.

Her simple presence makes my dick bounce. I drag my hand down to tame it, yet my fist locks around it instead and gives it a few tugs.

"Get in," I bark.

She closes the door and walks in front of me, her back turned to me, a glance going obliquely to my erection.

Her curiosity is stronger than her fears today.

This morning has been a test for her, one she's passed with flying colors.

She's learned she needs to listen to me. And she excels at what she does. It's not perfect, and she stumbles a lot, but that makes me even more addicted to her.

She stands in front of me because she's used to me taking her from behind, and it's not different now, so I close the space

between us and let my hard cock touch her lower back and the top of her butt.

A shiver runs down her spine as I put my hands around her shoulders and move a little closer.

My hard length presses into her body, and she quivers again, her reactions no longer suppressed.

Slowly I nudge her to the corner, where she braces her hands on the marble wall and leans back into me.

I wait for her, enjoying the tremors falling through her as she gets a feel of me.

A fine mist of water falls over us as I bring my hands to her stomach and run them up and down, caressing her skin and enjoying her as she leans more and more into me.

Her long hair tickles my chest while I palm her breasts and squeeze. Her tits are ripe, her nipples hard.

The more I get used to her body, the hungrier I get for her.

I knead them, and she gets tense, her breaths quickening. How could this woman think something was wrong with her?

I burn against her lower back, rock hard already, and the more I touch myself, the more I want to touch myself.

And the more I want to rock her body.

I push a hand down, part her folds and touch her clit. There it comes.

One, two, three...

Every time I caress her clit, her shoulders tap against my chest. It's like a secret code.

I push my dick down and pivot slightly, so I'm not flush against her back. My hard length bounces down now, veiny and thick, next to her butt.

"You can touch me..." I say when her hand wanders back.

Playing with her pussy, I watch her wrap her delicate hand around my girth, and it's like a ring of fire closes around my

flesh. Riding her fist back and forth, she matches the rhythm of my strokes.

I let her do her thing while I focus on her body, sliding my fingers over her clit while squeezing her chest hard.

She doesn't say a word, gripping me harder and moving her hand, no longer thinking about it, following her instinct.

Less aware of the circumstances and more in tune with me.

Maybe we can make this work.

Maybe we're in for the biggest surprise of our lives.

Something changes in her body as she presses herself more and more into me, and her motions are longer and slower, trailing my length from the crown to the root.

She touches my balls, and I harden even more, becoming more forceful with her as I feel her more confident and fiery.

I can tell her pleasure begins to spike by the way she arches her spine and breathes out quiet moans. And how hard she squeezes my shaft and no longer fears me.

When I brush her hair over one shoulder, revealing her spine, and then run my free hand down her back, goosebumps dot her skin.

Trembling, she rolls her hips against my hand, her pussy against my fingers.

With ease, I slide a finger into her, and she clenches around me. Then I take my hand away and tell her to turn around.

Our eyes meet.

Hers are foggy, unfocused, and yearning.

Mine are clear.

They've never been more clear despite the erection meeting her hand and hunger lapping at my patience.

"Get on your knees, Bella..." I say firmly yet quietly.

Swept in a trance, she slides to her feet, water dripping from her chin, the stream of water springing a fine cloud of

drops over her.

I don't have to tell her what she needs to do next.

Holding my eyes, she brings me to her mouth, her hands wrapped around my girth.

"I'll make you come if you suck me right," I say, bracing my arms on the wall in front of me while looking at her.

I doubt she knows what to do or believes that I can make her come, but she wraps her lips around my chiseled crown.

Not much of me goes into her mouth.

She moves her lips and swirls her tongue, pressing my meat into the softness of her mouth.

Before long, her hesitation is replaced by solid conviction.

Whether she likes the taste, the scent of my arousal or the smoothness of my skin is anyone's guess.

I can't get much information from her face, although her cheeks are flushed, and her eyes sparkle like she's discovered a secret.

I tilt my hips, so I get deeper between her lips, and she doesn't protest or pull back.

Bobbing her head, she takes more and more of me.

"You did that before...?" I ask.

She unclenches her mouth to answer.

"No."

She spreads the moisture over my cock with her hand.

"Now, do it harder."

A smile glints in her eyes when she opens her mouth and sucks me hard.

"That's better," I say, smiling.

Her eyes don't break away from mine, and of all our moments, I never thought we'd bound over her sucking my dick.

She looks at me with worshiping eyes, and that's a nice gift.

Most people worship me out of fear.

She's been fearful too, but now she cares less and less about her fears and more and more about pleasing me.

Pleasing me pleases her.

So yeah...

Most people look at me with fear in their eyes. The only exception is maybe Nor, who's like a brother to me, and a few family friends.

And now her... Mostly.

She's figured out I have a weakness for her when she's truthful with me. When she shows me a side of her, I haven't seen in a person in a while.

It's strange how things work. We're all actors in this life. Some better than others. And I've hired her to pretend, only to find out she's not very good at acting.

And right now, she is content that she can be on her knees in front of me, doing something she never thought she'd do for me.

Give me the ultimate pleasure of submission.



ISABELLA

I'M LOST. Completely lost. He stares down at me while I fill my mouth with him like I've done this my entire life.

It's the first time I've touched a man like this.

This has always been a contentious point in the past.

Whenever I started to make out with a guy, and things got awkward, blowing him was always suggested.

The thing was, I didn't feel like doing it. Because I couldn't do it. And then they got pissed.

But this... This is not what I imagined.

I always thought it was a thing women did to men because men had requested it. I couldn't see what the big deal was.

I found it erotic, maybe, but other than that, I thought it was just a thing.

Turns out it's much more than a thing... Licking his erection fuels the fire he's ignited in me with his touch.

For sure, I'm concerned with what I'm doing and how I'm doing it, but I'm mostly focused on his eyes.

The way he looks at me makes me pulse between my thighs and experience tingles and a different kind of longing.

The way he fucks me with his eyes feeds the growing anticipation, killing the last shred of fear simmering under my skin.

Chemistry is a force and can make me fearless.

I put my all into pleasing him, although I know I'm nowhere near where he needs me to be.

But he's made a promise to me, so I work hard for it when he touches my neck and nudges me up.

"Turn around."

This is a turning point in my existence.

He pulls my back into his chest, and there is nothing I want more than his arms around my body.

He unhurriedly kneads my breasts, flicking and squeezing my nipples until the tension climbs steadily.

His hands go down next and settle between my legs.

I'm half done when he touches me, giving me the perfect mix of pressure, tenderness, and roughness, so I never forget who he is.

He tilts my hips slightly and positions himself against my entrance. When he pushes the tip of his erection in, my core

hugs it and pulses around it.

I trust him more, and that makes all the difference.

Everything that happens next is exactly how I envisioned it.

He strokes my clit, palms my breasts, and pushes his hard length into me.

The more he pushes, the tenser I get.

“It’s easy, baby... It’s really easy...” he murmurs, slowly intensifying his strokes while filling me up. “Fucking is always the easiest part,” he says while I prop my hands against the wall in front of me. “You are made for fucking. Dirty, filthy fucking... You’re just not there yet.”

His words accompany his rhythmic thrusts into me.

And there comes the biggest revelation of all.

The tension spurred by his fingers only grows, spreading to my core and spiraling up.

He fucks me with steady long slow thrusts while my nails sing quietly against the wall.

Things that once seemed impossible start to happen.

My throbbing intensifies, my hips rocking, and crying moans leave my chest.

I push harder against his thrusts, and when he gets me going, sensing the fever in my blood, he holds me tight, grips my hair, strokes my clit, and destroys me for a few long moments, making me unrecognizable to myself.

The tension reaches the boiling point when my wetness soaks his throbbing hard-on.

What follows next is the most memorable part.

Clutching me to him and speeding up, he chases his high while I enjoy mine.

My first ever orgasm with a man.

And something tells me he is slightly more willing to show me who he really is.

If I could, I'd turn around and ask him to let me kiss him.

For now, his release trickles down my legs while he holds me tight, still rocking his hips, although at a slower pace, and I can only hope one day he'll hug me and maybe tell me he feels something for me too.

I SABELLA

GOING horseback riding makes me forgive him for pulling me earlier than planned from my family's home a few weeks back.

I felt bad for not getting the chance to ride with Missa—I know how much she wanted it—and also spend some time with my horse.

Max is an experienced rider, which is not surprising considering he owns several thoroughbreds and has already confessed his love for horses.

After a rough start, our day gets better. Much better.

He never makes a reference to what happened this morning, who those people were, and why I wasn't allowed to leave the room. His protectiveness is extreme, but so is his life.

Furtively, I study him as we guide our horses across the property.

It's a nice sunny afternoon, and although the air is crisp, I get warm, so I undo my muffler and take off my gloves.

We go far away from the house.

The property is huge, and so is the lake.

“Have you been here before?” I ask when our horses walk side by side down a large path along the lake.

“I used to come here every summer when I was a kid,” he says sternly, making it impossible for me to imagine him as a kid.

How was he as a young boy? Was he timid? I doubt it.

I bet he scared the shit out of people when he was ten, let alone when he was older.

“Have you ever imagined your life the way it is today?”

It sounds like I’m interviewing him for a magazine.

“Have you?” he asks, flashing a faint smile, and I blush.

“You mean you and me?”

“Mm-hmm,” he says, flicking his eyes in my direction.

His dark hair catches the light, his gaze dipped in gold from the sun, his raven lashes casting a shadow over his curious eyes.

He wears black riding pants and boots, a fitted waistcoat—no surprise there—and a white shirt, cuffed up for comfort.

I wear riding pants and boots, a soft wool top, and a short fitted jacket. My hair rolls down my back in big waves.

He rakes his eyes over my face and clothes.

“Have you?” he asks again.

“I didn’t know what to expect from life.”

Smiling, he looks away and nods to himself.

“Frankly, I didn’t think about it much,” I say. “But if you’re asking me if I thought I’d be with someone only months after coming to New York, the answer is no. Definitely no.”

A few moments pass.

“Tell me about the other men. The men before me.”

He swings his eyes to me, and I struggle to form a few simple, coherent sentences.

“I had a few failed attempts to connect with people. I wasn’t what they were looking for.”

He looks at me, expressionless, waiting for me to continue.

“One was Mick Branson, but we weren’t anywhere close to getting physical with each other. The rest were... You know. They wanted to get laid. I didn’t want to.”

“Why?”

“I didn’t see the point.”

He seems intrigued and amused at the same time.

“Why are you smiling?”

“That’s not what I usually hear from women.”

“No, no. Don’t get me wrong. I wasn’t *against* it. I just didn’t see the point of doing it with them, and they retaliated with words and stuff, but I paid them no mind.”

He observes me out of the corner of his eye.

“You were against me too.”

He’s setting me up.

“I wasn’t against you. I didn’t want to sleep with you and get attached to you when I knew bad things could happen to you, and I would be...”

I look away, annoyed that I have to admit something that is quite private.

“Heartbroken,” he says.

“Yes, heartbroken. I didn’t want anything different than what you wanted for me, and I thought we were on the same page.”

“We were. You also wanted to test my resolve.”

Averting my gaze, I look down, smiling.

“Maybe.”

He laughs.

“What did I tell you, Bella?”

“To never play with you.”

“What do you think would happen if you played with me?”

I tilt my eyes to him, shrugging.

“I don’t know,” I say quietly. “Kill me?”

He breathes a laugh again and then rolls his lip under his teeth, and I find him so sexy. I wish we could stop for a moment, and he allowed me to kiss him.

The thing is, I miss having a man in my life. For real. Like a male friend. The only man I was close to was my father.

My older brothers are much older, and they have families, and I’m not very close to them, not in that sense.

Not as in having a man’s arms around me and his full attention when I wanted to talk to him.

My mother has always been opinionated on everything, so I have to be very careful with what I share with her.

My father wasn’t like that, but anyway, Max de Lucca is not like my father. He probably doesn’t need to talk to anyone. Or he talks plenty with Nor and other people.

Maybe not.

Keeping your mouth shut is always the best policy unless you truly trust someone.

That doesn’t mean I can’t think about that kind of experience with him.

Even doing this, talking to him, is very much satisfying to me.

“You think I’d kill you?” he murmurs, briefly lowering his eyes to the reins.

“I think it has crossed your mind once or twice. It’s just that I’m too big, and disposing of me wouldn’t be fun at all. Too much of a mess.”

“As if you know...” he jokes.

“I can imagine...” I say, trying to stay serious while feeling the heat of his stare on my face.

“You’re not big.”

“So you thought about it.”

His chuckle is sultry and makes me warm inside.

“I’d never kill you, Bella.”

“Punish me then?”

“That’s a different story.”

I give him a side-eyed stare, but he doesn’t look at me.

Somehow I doubt he wouldn’t consider that kind of punishment for me if I crossed him.

He enforces that rule with everybody else.

Why wouldn’t he do it with me?

“You’re a smart woman. You must know it’s dangerous to mess with me.”

“I would never do it,” I say softly, glancing away.

Even so, I feel his gaze on me.

“It has nothing to do with you,” I say when I shift my eyes to him, and he’s still observing me. “That’s how I am. I just don’t do that kind of thing. It’s not in me.”

With that, I click my tongue and tug at the reins, and my horse starts galloping.

Moments later, I hear him right behind me, and we continue our ride without talking about it again.



ISABELLA

SOMEONE HAD the idea to set the dinner table for us like it was a special occasion.

The staff must know this is our honeymoon.

Either that, or he’s given them the instructions to do that.

After showering and changing our clothes, separately this time, we meet in the dining room.

I get there first.

Glancing around, I spot a variety of lit candles—short, tall, bulky, and skinny—glasses of champagne and roses.

Long drapes frame the view of the lake that glistens like a giant diamond eye in the moonlight.

The warmth generated by the burning logs comes with a pleasant scent.

I grab a glass of champagne and check the food on the table.

The antipasto platter has a sundry of cold cuts, cheese, and olives. Next, I spot a bruschetta platter, eggplant parmesan poppers, and warm calzone pinwheels.

My stomach growls, and wasting no time, I taste the food. It's fresh, delicious, and perfect for a winter night.

Footsteps move outside, piercing the silence. The rest of the people must be having dinner in the guesthouse.

Max and I are the only people in this house.

He swaggers in, and I apologize for starting to eat dinner without him.

He gives me a soft gesture and a few words.

“Don't worry. Go ahead.”

He pours himself a glass of bourbon and sits close to me, avoiding the other end of the table as he often does back home.

“Is everything all right?” I ask, noticing a shred of concern in his eyes.

“Yes. Everything is fine.”

Whatever that means.

“We need to leave tomorrow morning.”

His tone is dry.

Our stay is cut short every time we go somewhere, and I never know what happens next.

Everything is a volatile promise with him, which perhaps extends to how he feels about me too. Although I do understand it has nothing to do with me.

We left Georgia in a rush and then our hotel suite in Rome at a moment's notice, and now this is our last night here.

It's not like he's lying to me all the time. It's how things are.

They change so fast that he needs to react just as swiftly, so there is no time for meeting my expectations, whatever those may be.

I hate that we have to leave so soon.

"We'll come back," he says, tapping his pocket and extracting a cigarette before plopping it onto the table and leaving it unlit.

Coming back here is just another promise, and I tend to agree with my wiser self that getting attached to this man is asking for trouble.

Now he's here with me. Tomorrow, though... Who knows what tomorrow brings?

His eyes hover over the table, blank and stripped of emotion.

"Was there a real danger this morning?" I toss at him, watching his expression change as he shifts his gaze to me.

"With those men?" I murmur.

He nods softly.

"Was I in danger? You said I should stay inside," I drone on.

The ghost of a smile tugs at his lips.

"You're always in danger, baby Bella."

I like the tease in his grin, although what he says is true.

"How am I in danger?"

“You’re a part of me now...” he murmurs, staring at his drink again. “They hurt you. They hurt me.”

“Wasn’t that the whole point of having an agreement? Even if they did that, you wouldn’t be affected.”

“That was the whole point... Yes.”

There is something else there.

Something he craftily hides from me.

“That doesn’t mean I should invite trouble,” he adds before taking a sip of liquor. “I’m not doing anything different than what I’d do if anyone else had faced this kind of danger because of me.”

“Who were those people?”

His lips twist into a smile.

“Do you feel like being interrogated by federal agents next time they knock on our door?”

“No. Not at all. But I don’t think some general information they gathered from me would be of help to them. It’s not like I saw these people.”

“These are the people I have things to settle with.”

“Rivals?”

“You can call them that.”

“Did you expect them to come here?”

He flicks his forefinger up, signaling my inquiry has veered into different territory, and he’s unwilling to share that information.

“You thought they’d kidnap me,” I say.

“The man I met with this morning would have no problem making off with you and using you any way he’d see fit.”

“For ransom?”

“I doubt it. He has money.”

“Huh...”

I don't know how I feel about this. I never thought that would be a problem.

Raising to relevance by gaining visibility through sheer association with a mobster would bring so many nasty things to my step.

And this is exhibit number one.

“Would you come and save me...? If it happened?”

He considers the possibility, a faint smile tilting his lips.

“It depends.”

“On what?”

“If it's worth it.”

“You mean you'd run a risk-benefit analysis?”

“Correct.”

Is he serious?

“But you wanted to prevent that from happening.”

His smile fades.

“You wouldn't make it if he snatched you. I wouldn't have time to take you back.”

My mouth draws shut as I ponder.

“That's not very reassuring.”

He observes me quietly while I squirm.

“Do I need a gun, then?” I ask.

“You might.”

“You're having fun with me now, aren't you?”

He laughs.

“I'm serious.”

My lips curl into a smile.

“No, you're not. You're testing me.”

“Everything I said is true. He's known for doing that to his rivals' women.”

“Basically starting a war.”

“He doesn’t care. He’s just ruthless. And there isn’t always a war. Trust me. Many men run that risk-benefit analysis.”

“So you wouldn’t go to war for me?” I murmur, still smiling but somewhat disappointed.

He relishes my conundrum.

“Nah-huh.”

“Bummer.”

He releases another chuckle before emptying his glass.

“No one will ever take you away from me,” he says, this time not a hint of amusement in his voice. “He’d be dead before he laid a finger on you.”

And that pretty much sets the tone for the evening.

The only other question haunting me is...

Who will protect me from Max de Lucca if we experience a fallout despite what I’ve promised him today?

What I said was true. And my intentions are honorable. But what if life throws a wrench into my plans, and I fail to meet his expectations?

What will happen then?



ISABELLA

OUR LAST NIGHT here might as well be our last night together for a while.

After dinner, he steps out and spends some time at the guesthouse, talking to his people, I guess, while I go to the bedroom, shower, and slide under the covers.

Lit candles spread a glow around the rooms imbued with so much history.

How many nights like this have these walls seen?

Were there couples, lovers, men, and women quietly breathing out their desperation or experiencing unforgettable moments of elation while looking outside?

Probably.

Maybe.

All I know is that I'll miss this place.

Only a few short months ago, I was busy planning for the future. All I cared for was finding a good job, moving out, getting my place, and living on my own.

That sort of happened...

Although I no longer need a job, not for the foreseeable future. I live on my own, although I have to follow my husband's rules.

And I'm out of Mara's hair, even though she hasn't necessarily found the man of her dreams. Now that I'm gone.

Life has taken care of everything one way or another, but not how I imagined it would.

A while ago, I struggled with the idea of paying half of my salary for a tiny studio every month, and now I'm thinking about living in Long Island if he completely renovates his parents' house.

Talking about things changing fast.

The floors make noise, and I close my eyes, pretending I'm asleep.

A scent of musky cologne and smoke comes first, and then the sound of fine cotton brushing over his pecs and abs as he undoes and untucks his shirt.

I wish I could press my lips against his skin and inhale his scent.

His shoes hit the floor after he slides them off, and his belt buckle clinks. His dress pants meet the back of a chair, and another rustle suggests he's removed his underwear.

I expect him to go straight to the bathroom when his heavy frame hits the mattress, unsettling my body and making my skin react with tingles and goosebumps.

I don't know how long I can pretend I'm asleep. And I hold little hope he cares.

His hand takes the shortest route to my body before he practically rolls me to him, his breaths heavy with heat and a hint of alcohol, which seems great at killing his inhibitions.

The few that he has.

My back hits his chest while his hand glides down past my hipbone and grabs my pussy.

His strokes are strong and sloppy with no regard for tenderness, getting the job done just the same. As fast as, if not faster than, if he'd spend some time revving me up.

The sensation is addictive, fueled less by how deftly he awakens my senses and more by the entitlement in his touch.

He's already hard, his erection bouncing against my lower back. And him touching me like that has everything to do with it.

His pleasure comes first, and that type of autocracy makes me react with trickling wetness, ardent submission, and eager anticipation.

Whatever he's doing works.

When he tilts my hips back, nestles his erection between my legs, and slides it into me, I'm wet and willing. A quiver falls through me as I want him as deep as possible inside me.

He fucks me hard for a few good moments, enjoying how I jolt against his frame every time he shoves his hard dick into me, and then he slows down and starts playing with my pussy.

I squirm, and he's giving it hard to me again, and between the persistent motions of his fingers and his hard meat filling me to the brim, I ride a crest and begin to shudder.

Falling over that high in a split second, I experience true filthy pleasure for the first time.

My juices coat his cock when he pulls out of me, only to roll on top of me.

My legs are spread open under him as he pushes his monster cock inside me and rocks his body, propped on his elbow, holding my butt with his free hand, alone in his quest for pleasure. Not looking at me, not kissing me, not showing me emotions, only the simmering fire in his blood continuously hardening his cock, making him fuck me with so much dark passion as I enjoy everything about him.

As emotionally imperfect as it is...

Loving...

His muscular frame.

His hard rod inside my softness.

His balls touching me every time he plunges into me.

He comes grunting, accepting my surrender, not giving a fuck about anything else, and once he does, and the last explosions of pleasure disappear, he slides off and soon after falls asleep while I'm more awake than ever.

New York

SPRING TIME.

MY MARRIAGE IS like a big house with rooms I cannot access because they're locked.

Most of that big house symbolizing my marriage is easy to live in. And then there are the rooms where I meet my husband for filthy, guilty pleasures.

Infinite pleasure.

Pleasure I've never known before.

Some things have changed—a slow process inextricably linked to my metamorphosis into someone different.

I got used to living with Max, surrounded by people, staff, odd characters, and guests I knew nothing about.

It's easy to tell when I can stay and maybe participate in the conversation and when I need to make myself scarce.

I didn't go back to work because Max doesn't go to his office every day since other people run his real businesses, and he considers it a risk for me to be there.

He's never elaborated on the risk I'm facing, but it's probably the same risk everyone in his entourage is vulnerable

to. He's explained that to me several times.

So my life has become a smooth ride with almost no struggle. But there's a price to pay for anything in life, and this is no exception.

In my case, I live in a controlled environment, and that's only a small price to pay.

What taxes me the most is the fear that this could be taken away from me in a split second without the slightest warning.

That he could be taken away from me in a breath.

That one day, one night, or one evening I might get the dreary news that he's gone, and I might need to wear that smooth black dress he asked me to have ready just in case something like this happens.

We've talked about it like grown-ups. I know what would happen to me, and where I'd need to go.

How I'd access the money he left for me to live.

We're still within the five-year period, and I'm still paid to be his wife, but he's already talking like we're past that time.

I don't want to think about it, but he is constantly reminding me that this is not smooth sailing and that something bad could happen at any time.

And then there's another trade-off.

A different way of paying for what I've got.

The days he's gone are the worst.

The nights when he's not coming home are a nightmare.

And the evenings I eat alone are unbearable.

He does things that prevent him from being home, and I need to learn how to carry on without complaining or stumbling into an existential crisis.

That is the whole point of living this kind of life.

Life. Goes. On.

I've hardened myself, and for the most part, I'm cool with it, but mostly because a different side of me handles this shit.

And then another price paid for this kind of living is quintessentially our deal.

For him to function and for me to practically live alone when needed, I must control my emotions, so we can both stay away from this type kind of turmoil.

He can't afford to get caught in something like that. And I can't let myself slip into that kind of drama.

I can't say whether he struggles—probably not—but occasionally, I do.

Not visibly, of course, but when I'm honest with myself, I usually admit something's missing.

It's not like we don't have a certain connection.

He still seems fascinated with me.

And I try to be close to him as much as I can under these circumstances, but it often feels like I'm throwing myself against a wall.

Other than that, I'm everything for him.

I'm the body he slides his cock into. The woman he fucks without giving her the slightest warning.

He takes me whenever he feels like it, and the more unexpected his requests are, the more turned on I get.

I'm obsessed with how he's doing it.

He probably knows it.

He can tell. I'm wet as fuck. And I learned how to please him. A glint of satisfaction enlivens his eyes every time he makes me lose control, and I beg for him.

The days of no reaction from me are long gone.

I often lose it in bed.

He rarely allows me to have absolute power over him, but once in a while—rarely, though—he closes his eyes and fucks me like I'm everything to him.

Most of the time, he stares blankly at me, enjoying the pleasure but staying away from me.

I don't know what it would take to change that. The passing of time? Us getting older? Our lives becoming safer? Who knows?

But even if we last, things will change because we will change at some point, and the passion won't be there anymore.

And then what?

What will we do when everything else is out of the question?

Things won't be as clearly defined as they are now when we're younger and maybe... *in love*.

The question is... Are we in love?

Or is this pure lust?

The jury is still out on that.



ISABELLA

SPRING

“WE CAN MEET TOMORROW. Have brunch or lunch. Whatever works for you. You're free, right?” I say.

Mara answers with a yawn at the other end of the phone line before speaking.

“I'm sorry... Yes. Yes, I am. I so envy you,” she murmurs, half asleep. “I'm so fucking tired. I had so much work to do this week.”

Silently I grapple with guilt.

“I don't know if I could live like you, though,” she says. “Please don't take offense at my choice of words. It's not

criticism. I think it's great. It's just not for me."

"Don't worry. I won't."

"I'm talking about work."

"I know."

"But once in a while, it's good to just kick back and enjoy life."

"I agree."

Whichever way she goes, I go with her.

What else am I supposed to do?

"How are things with your new man?" I ask.

"Same old. Same old. Everything seems fine until..."

"It gets serious."

"Yes. Until it gets serious. I guess it's normal. People are not ready for this shit. What am I saying? I'm not ready for anything that requires long-term commitment. But this, on the other hand, feels like too much work for nothing. Frankly, it would be easier if we lived together. Money-wise, I mean. But we're not there. And you know how it goes... Well, you don't. But once you live together, you start thinking about marriage because you want that tax write-off, which is so stupid. Living with someone and getting married for practical reasons, I mean."

"What's wrong with doing it for practical reasons?"

I finish painting my nails and admire them.

They're luscious red.

"Yeah, what's wrong with that... I guess nothing," she muses. "I just don't want to have regrets later on."

"Regrets are unavoidable."

"Do you have any regrets for getting married so quickly?" she asks, her voice more clear this time.

"No. No regrets."

My tone is dull and emotionless.

“Things are good then?”

“As good as they can be. I’m trying not to look at the bad parts. There’s always something bad to focus on. I try to avoid doing that.”

“Are you talking about *me* doing that?”

I lean back against the loveseat, smiling.

“No. I wouldn’t do that to you. It’s just that this is how things are.”

“If you say so...”

She laughs.

“I would’ve never thought I’d get advice from a married woman, and that woman would be you.”

A knock on the door makes me straighten and flick my eyes in that direction.

“Can you wait a moment?” I say, sliding the phone onto the coffee table with Mara on speakerphone.

She mumbles an answer while I head to the door.

Marge waits for me outside.

“Mr. De Lucca will pick you up in half an hour.”

“For?”

“I don’t know, but he says you should dress nicely.”

“Okay. Thank you,” I say with some urgency in my voice.

I spin around and go back.

“Hey. I gotta go. I’ll talk to you tomorrow?”

“Yeah, yeah... Sure. Okay. Bye.”

I set the phone down and run to the bathroom. This is so like him.

He gets an idea in his head and relays it to whoever happens to be nearby, and then the message starts moving from one person to another until it reaches me.

I've gotten so used to this and perfected a system to get it all done—clothes, hair, and makeup—in mere minutes.

'Dress nicely' could mean anything from having dinner with a bunch of people to attending a social event or a party.

The last two are quite different, involving different crowds.

I pull on a black dress with tons of cleavage, a short skirt, and a back zipper.

Thigh-high stockings, black heels, dangling earrings, red lips, and dark mascara and eyeliner complete my look.

I've checked everything on my list.

Still orbiting around black and red, I have an entire wardrobe featuring these two colors.

My hair is still a few shades darker than my natural color.

And it still adds some magic to my eyes if I'm to believe his bewildered stare every time I put on eyeliner and mascara and straighten my hair.

Checking the time on my phone, I pick up my purse and slide it under my arm.

I'm late, yet I exit the room and head to the stairs, pacing myself, my eyes still on the phone screen.

A delicious smell of grilled food wafts from the kitchen when I walk across that floor, reminding me that I haven't had dinner.

I hope there's food where we go.

Aaron is in the lobby when I reach the first level.

"Is he here?" I ask.

He checks his watch.

"He'll get here in a few minutes."

Of course.

I had a limited time window because he wanted to make sure I'd be ready on time.

"Can I wait outside? The weather is nice."

“Sure,” Aaron says.

He opens the door and holds it while I stride past him.

Later, he strolls to his car, keeping an eye on me and the street.

It’s a nice evening.

The weather is pleasant, and the old trees are explosively in bloom along the sidewalks.

Max said the Long Island house would be ready this week, but he never followed up on that.

Walking down the sidewalk, I look at the buildings and the cars. The traffic is slow, and a soft breeze curls around my ankles.

Bright headlights come my way. I look at Aaron, who’s noticed them too.

Moments later, a black car glides slowly to a stop.

The back door slides open, and I climb in. Max sits in the opposite corner, his eyes going swiftly over my dress.

“I hope it’s a dinner party,” I say, closing the door.

His silence draws my eyes to him.

“I haven’t had dinner. And I’m hungry,” I add.

He instructs the driver to move, and the car swerves into the evening traffic.

My husband wears a fitted silver-gray suit and black dress shirt, emphasizing his impressive looks.

“You didn’t sleep at home last night, did you?” I say.

He shifts his eyes to me, and instead of an answer, he gives me a hungry look.

Like he’d like to rip off my clothes.

I like that look on his face. It gets me going. But fucking me in his car is not his style.

He can’t stand having people nearby, be it the car, the house, or a public space... When it comes to sex.

He always makes sure the floor is empty, the staff is away, and the house is all for us when he fucks me...

On the dining table.

Against the wall in his home office or the bathroom.

Or in his bed.

He doesn't answer me, clearly deflecting the question. That's probably a no.

He didn't sleep at home last night.

So, yeah... We are that kind of couple. I glance out the window and start mumbling stuff like he's my friend.

"I'll meet Mara for brunch tomorrow... If she still wants to do it. She was really tired when I talked to her."

I'm like one of those people who've been alone for so long they talk to themselves to hear their voices.

He doesn't talk to me, yet he doesn't check his phone either, so it's hard to tell what's going on.

Minutes later, we pull up in front of a hotel in Manhattan.

"Let's go," he says, looking more preoccupied this time.

He takes my hand and pulls me closer, knowing how much I cherish these rare moments, relishing the sparkle in my eyes.

"Stay close to me tonight. No talking to strangers. All right?"

This might seem overbearing, but considering his line of work, it's just another day in our lives.

Usually, when he says stuff like that, the crowd is mixed. Some friends. Some foes. You never know.

And it's a well-known fact these people are a bit on the crazy side, and they can stir shit up for nothing.

It's a sick pleasure in a way, but asking me to stay close to him is one of my favorite things to hear.

Usually, he has his hand on me, and I'm within inches of him. We breathe the same air, and his scent invades me.

If it's a good night, we end up back home and fuck well into the morning hours. I sleep all day after a night like that while he leaves the house and takes care of business.

I'm spoiled rotten, and because of that, I resent myself from time to time.

On the other hand, he's making it all worthwhile, and it's not like I'm not earning money doing that.

The crowd is loud tonight.

It's some sort of anniversary, and it's a mixed crowd, as I suspected.

Shady characters, fake smiles, women paid by the hour. I shouldn't judge. Some couples. And some people I know.

Verona is here. And Tullio. And Nor. Everybody's here, yet I only have eyes for my husband.

He knows I'm spellbound and likes it a lot.

I catch him quite a few times sizing me up, anxious to have me. Lust twinkles in his eyes every time his gaze glides over my body.

The food is all right.

People are not sitting at the tables, and it's more like a buffet-style situation.

I take a few bites to quench my hunger and drink wine.

At some point, I catch Verona looking at us.

She still has the hots for him.

Anyone could see it, yet she's too versed not to know how to play this game and make it look like she doesn't care.

So she has some male company tonight, two male friends, to be exact, and they give her all the attention that she needs.

Still, it doesn't affect Max either way, and he doesn't seem to be aware of her presence, let alone her suitors.

Nor has company, too, the woman at his side trying to grab his attention without much success. His eyes move over the crowd, scanning the room for potential danger.

“I need to go to the bathroom,” I say quietly, leaning closer to Max.

He listens to me and points to a side door.

“There’s a restroom at the end of the corridor. Make sure there’s no one there, and keep your phone handy in case you run into trouble.”

I doubt that would be the case.

He signals one of his men to keep an eye on me.

“Okay,” I say to appease him before pulling away.

Seconds later, I step through the side door and enter a dim corridor that takes me to the bathroom.

I walk in, use the toilet, and wash my hands when rushed footsteps ring outside. At first, I suspect it’s him, and then I realize it doesn’t sound like him.

A hunch makes me slide my hand into my purse and pull my phone out when a firm knock on the door makes me shudder.

I’m livid.

“I’ll be out in a minute,” I bark.

What the fuck. Why am I so affected?

My gut tells me something’s wrong.

I swipe my thumb across my phone screen when screams echo outside and, shortly after, gunshots.

I freeze.

Whoever knocks on the door pulls away in a rush, and it can’t be him.

It couldn’t be him.

Please tell me it wasn’t Max.

He would’ve said something.

He would’ve called my name.

A different feeling comes to me, as dark and troubling as the first one. Something is not right.

I hear more screaming and gunshots, and my hair stands on end.

In a complete state of shock, I stare at the door, trembling.

First, the worst scenario comes to mind. Something happened to him.

Or Nor. Or anyone I know in his circle. Or all of them.

And then, as my hands go cold and my eyes tear up, I realize I might be in danger.

What am I supposed to do now? Go? Not go? Suddenly I become claustrophobic.

Being stuck in a bathroom with no way out when I have no idea what is going on only fuels my panic.

Suddenly, I'm sick. My chest tightens, my stomach is tied in knots, and my hands are clammy.

What if something happened to him?

What if something happened to Max de Lucca?

My world suddenly becomes pitch black.

I can't even imagine my life without him.

Is this *that*? What Mara was talking about... Is this the chemical bond driving me crazy? Making me experience insane withdrawal?

How could it be if the pain is nestled in my chest?

Coming from my stupid heart?

Didn't I expressly tell it not to get attached to the idea of him?

I fucking did. And look what happened.

It didn't listen to me, and it hurts now like it's charred by fire. Not even the tears streaming down my cheeks can put out that fire.

I clutch the edge of the sink with an unsteady hand as some sort of struggle happens outside.

There's a gunshot nearby, and people bark and scream, and something hard and big gets smashed into the door.

Or was it the wall?

Was it the floor??

I have no idea.

Another thud as if someone has just collapsed. I can't even make out who's shouting.

Is this about that man who knocked on the door?

I turn to stone, my frosted fingers splayed over my mouth. Please don't tell me that man was looking for me.

My ears are still ringing, and I can't draw a breath while bile floods my mouth.

A fist hits the door several times.

"Bella? Open up."

I perk up at once and fly to the door. It takes one second to yank it open, and Max loops an arm around me.

"This way," he says, pulling me to the farthest end of the corridor.

One glance is all it takes, and I see more than I need to see. People fighting, and the carpet soaked with blood.

I break my gaze away from it and never look back.

He pushes the door open and veers with me into another hallway, and soon after, the exit door looms in front of us.

It flies open as he rams his shoulder through it, setting off the alarm.

People rush out of the hotel, and cars clear the area, accompanied by the jarring sounds of screeching tires.

We walk around the corner, where we climb into a black SUV.

He slides behind the wheel while I fasten the safety belt.

“You’re okay?” he asks calmly, checking the evening traffic in the rearview mirror.

“Yes.”

He looks at me.

“Sure?”

“Yes. There was someone at the door.”

He nods, acknowledging me, but doesn’t say a word.

Eventually, he talks.

“He was looking for trouble, and he found it,” he says, entering traffic and heading east to Long Island.

“We need a break,” he murmurs. “We’ll stay there until things settle down. I’m sorry things didn’t go as planned.”

I only grasp half of the meaning of his words.

He rarely apologized to me for anything, and I find it strange that he does it now.

I also don’t know what he means by things not going as planned. I’m sure I miss a piece of information.

Regardless, I’m too shaken to think about it.

He pulls his phone out of his pocket and makes a few calls while I study his attire and notice blood on his shirt by his diamond cufflinks.

I SABELLA

LONG ISLAND.

IT'S LATE OR EARLY, depending on how you look at it.

The house is dimly lit with candles, a subtle glow coming from the lampposts guarding the alleys outside.

The people working for him are in their rooms, so we are alone in the house.

I like to think I was instrumental in renovating this place and bringing it back to its former glory, as I insisted on making it a home for us instead of keeping it an old dusty box of mixed memories.

Essentially a historic mansion, the house had preserved the nostalgic air of yesteryear, making him think about his childhood often, so I insisted on keeping some of the good things of the past while infusing its most updated version with modernism and the optimism of a new beginning.

Now it looks like a labor of love.

It's cozy, welcoming, and refined at the same time.

The rooms are large, the walls are white, and the floors are dark.

The rugs and drapes give it a nostalgic feel.

The terrace is paved with colorful tiles and adorned with decorative plants, seasonal flowers, and colorful lanterns.

The backyard resembles a park with snaking alleys, wrought iron benches, romantic gazebos, sculpted fountains, and grassy meadows.

The luscious vegetation holds the promise of a beautiful summer.

Wrapping the long silky robe around my naked body, I glance in the bathroom mirror one last time before spinning away.

My heeled slippers click-clack across the floors as I move to the bedroom—where I can't find him—and then veer to the hallway.

The echo of my footsteps resonates all the way to his home office. The door is open, the orange dot of a cigarette gleaming in the dimness.

This is where I often find him when he wants to have a smoke and wrestle with his late-night demons.

It's the only room in the house with dark walls and furnishings and smells like smoke, old scotch, and wood.

The window is slightly open, letting in a mixed scent of grass, leafy trees, rain-soaked earth, and chilly air.

I find him sprawled in a large armchair, his forearms lining the armrests, his shirt undone at the neckline, his cuffs open, the diamond cufflinks abandoned on a side table.

A cigarette is tucked between his fingers, burning in solitude, ignored, a thin ribbon of blue smoke twirling lazily in the air.

He stares into the space in front of him, his gaze vacant, his mind blank.

The cadence of my heels alerts him to my presence, and in the glow of the fireplace, I watch his eyes come back to life.

Narrowing his gaze, he brings his cigarette to his lips and takes a drag. He drinks me in with beaming satisfaction, twisted pleasure, and unapologetic lust.

We've torn down walls since we came back from Italy while leaving the most important one untouched.

He is still the most emotionally unavailable man in my life. The only man in my life, and that's by design, of course.

He gives me everything I need besides his heart.

Sex is one of the things he gives me, and it's a hard-to-refuse, generous compensation for the lack of proffered love.

It's good, satisfying, addictive sex.

I no longer wonder whether I can have orgasms or not.

I know exactly how my body works because he knows exactly how my body works, although there might be more to it.

These days, he gets me wet with a sultry smile and a narrowed gaze.

Like now.

He has a way of tilting his stare and undressing me with his eyes, relaying things to me without words.

Like what he'd like to do to me.

And he likes to do a lot to me.

Strangely, sex has become our safe haven.

Our way of lying to ourselves that we don't have feelings for each other. And we are very much two players, partners in crime, although not literally.

Not yet, anyway.

He shields me as much as he can from that part of his life. In that regard, I'm lucky.

But tonight was a close call.

Something I didn't think would happen to me.

Strolling to him, I try to forget.

That's the other thing with sex.

It also helps us to forget.

I try to forget I live in a golden cage, and he tries to forget his life is constantly under attack.

It's a harsh way of life, and it requires a lot of forgetting, which in our case, means a lot of sex.

"Come..." he says, putting his cigarette out.

He finishes his drink and grimaces as the alcohol hits his throat.

I stop in front of him and wedge my knees between his legs, my robe tied loosely.

From the side table, I pick up a strawberry and pop it into my mouth, sensually closing my lips around the juicy pulp, my eyes linked with his.

His hands find their way inside my robe and pull it open.

He marvels at my naked body while I relish the ravenous spark in his eyes.

This never gets old, only better. His hands move over my skin, removing the robe.

With one smooth gesture, he yanks it off my shoulders and lets it fall to my feet. I pick up another strawberry and take a bite before offering him the rest of it.

He accepts my offer, his eyes on mine before focusing on my body.

Abruptly, he brings me to his mouth and sinks his teeth into a breast before moving to the other, lips rolling and tongue swirling, his hands splayed over my back.

Tucking my knees on either side of him this time, I open my legs and tilt my hips forward until they meet his torso, staining his dress shirt with my wetness.

Aware of how wet I am, he smiles, digging his fingers into my lower back and kneading my butt.

His mouth goes down while I push up until I have a knee propped against his shoulder, and I'm open across his lips.

The first surge of pleasure shoots through me with fury, giving me an instant orgasm.

The relief is smooth and transient, dipped in quiet moans.

Smiling, I accept his worshipping, his mouth still locked onto my clit, his tongue moving, awakening every bit of needy flesh.

The tension is spiraling up again, pulsations swirling, fueling my pleasure and voracious need for him.

He doesn't stop until my juices drip down his chin, and I shake against his mouth again, red marks on his neck from my nails.

He pushes out of the chair with me in his arms, pivots, and runs his hand across the desk, clearing the surface before laying me down.

My back meets the hard surface.

There's pain—I'm not gonna lie—but that's how I live with him.

Intense pleasure, bursts of pain, and uncertainty.

He likes to see me sprawled on my back on his desk.

The fire in his gaze burns a path through me like a firestorm, and when he pulls me closer to the edge and undoes his pants, I can't wait to feel him inside me.

He fills me up in one long motion while I push up on my elbows.

My chest jiggles every time he pumps me.

He fucks me raw, with no soft feelings, although sometimes, he gives me tenderness.

I've come to depend on him too much, and while he resents this aspect sometimes, he always comes back to me, asking for more.

He feeds on the idea that he is central to my life and way more than my protector, and deep down in my heart, he is revered, and I want much more from him.

That's our little secret.

Our little game.

I do want more from him.

It's just not possible, not now or in the future, and not only because of our understanding but because of the circumstances in which we live.

He thrusts hard into me, holding me against him so I get the brunt of his force, and little by little, the tension goes up, and I writhe and fall back, clawing at him, unable to touch him.

My legs look almost broken over his arms as he spreads me open and pumps into me while I witness the change on his face and everything else... The memories, the darkness, the blood staining his shirt, the lust for me, and the pleasure drawn from taking me.

A few hours ago, we were in danger.

He never admits it, but I know it's the truth. It always is.

There is no smile on his face, only his addiction to this life and me, his fix.

He blasts his load, flooding my center before shoving his dick into his pants, picking me up, and carrying me to his bed.

There we just start all over.

It's two or three in the morning when we finally fall asleep, embraced, exhausted, his arms wrapped around me.

Like he loves me.

It's happened before. But it's never felt so real.



ISABELLLA

I SNOOZE FOR A FEW MINUTES, maybe an hour, but not more.

It's not possible.

That's the thing with sex. It does the trick for the moment, but the effect doesn't last for long, and now I think about everything that happened hours ago and have a lot of questions.

I glance at him.

He's sound asleep, his lips parted, his chest moving rhythmically.

My fingers itch to touch his chest.

I could kiss his neck.

Yeah... I've tried it before and almost got myself killed.

He may look asleep, but he can go from sleep mode to killing mode in three seconds, so I give up on the idea.

Lying on my back, I dream about the tulips and daffodils in the backyard.

"You can't sleep."

His voice startles me, making me shoot my eyes to him.

"You can't either."

He rubs a hand over his face.

"I was asleep."

"Please don't tell me you know I stare at you even you're asleep," I say.

He flashes a smile.

"Something like that..." he murmurs, his voice hoarse.

His eyes are closed, a grin dangling from his lips.

This is my chance to talk. Being in bed with him and sleeping with him doesn't happen all the time, so we rarely get to talk.

I roll over to face him, drape an arm around his neck and push myself up until my lips meet his.

He doesn't react.

It may sound like a bad thing, but it's nothing like that.

It's a good thing.

It's so good, I insist.

I breathe into him, gauging his reaction—there's still none—and then I press my lips against his mouth again.

This could go either way, and after a few seconds of uncertainty and painful awkwardness, he locks his arm around me and takes my mouth.

Fireworks explode across my skin, nudging me to press myself into his body and rub myself against his hard length.

We kiss like two people on an amazing journey.

And I don't know what made him change his mind because this is not what we usually do.

There have been kisses. Open mouth, filthy kisses. Kisses before I went down on him. And kisses while he pushed his hard-on into me.

But not kisses that meant something on their own.

This is a different kind of kiss and feels like something we've needed to do for some time.

I fall into him as we get lost in a swirl of time, smoothly going from kissing to fucking again.

But this time, he moves slowly, unhurriedly, not needing to hide anything.

And I'm ecstatic over the difference, enjoying it thoroughly, convinced it's a natural development. Beginning to envision a new life with him. Something neither of us could've considered when our journey had gotten started.

Sex is even better now, the pleasure even more binding, more thrilling, the simultaneous orgasms a common occurrence.

It happens all the time.

It can't get better than this.

I can practically hear his lips moving and saying the words, admitting that he feels what I feel.

That we're fooling no one anyway, and it's time to come to terms with what this is.

The words never come, yet we continue to fuck like we matter to each other, and what happened at that dinner party cannot touch our story.

Although I know it can.

We probably catch about an hour of sleep after that, and when I slide my eyes open in the morning, he's no longer next to me.

And we are back to square one.



ISABELLA

IT'S a sunny day with a warm breeze and a handful of cheerful birds chirping their hearts out.

I put on a dress, brush my hair, and take the stairs to the dining room.

The doors to the terrace are wide open, and while the food is on the table inside, Max is on the phone outside.

"Would you like a cup of coffee?" a staff member asks.
"Espresso?"

"Yes, please."

The woman walks away while I move my eyes to Max.

He seems in a good mood, although it's hard to tell, and it may be misleading since his back is turned to me.

I came up with this assumption because of his stance and the fact that he is more animated, gesturing from time to time.

His dark dress pants and white shirt are a departure from his normal three-piece suit.

Maybe he'll stay home today.

The coffee arrives, and I take a sip before mechanically eating a pastry.

He ends his conversation soon and spins around.

I've been misled, by all means, a frown marring his brow as he looks down at his phone and swipes the screen irritated.

That is not a good sign.

Aware of my stare, he lifts his gaze and locks my eyes. No exchange there. Neither of us reacts.

A few more moments pass, and he heads my way.

"Would you like to eat outside, sir?" the woman asks when he nears the table. "The table is already set."

He looks at me as if needing my opinion—a rare occurrence, I can say—and I tip my chin down.

Minutes later, we have breakfast at a table dressed in a lavender colored tablecloth and adorned with white, purple, and yellow freesias.

Their scent cloys the air, mellow gusts of wind pushing it around.

"Are things all right?" I ask when we are alone again.

He brings his coffee to his lips.

The frown is still there, his gaze averted.

"Yeah... Everything is all right," he drawls when he sets it back and swallows the flavorful concoction.

We eat in silence before I continue.

"Is this about last night?"

Moments of silence follow.

Eventually, he sets his fork down and drinks water, studying my white dress.

He doesn't say a word, confirming my suspicion.

Unlike in the past, when I wasn't supposed to ask things, I have more leeway when it comes to making an inquiry.

“Should we expect trouble?”

“No trouble.”

He runs his napkin over his lips before focusing on his food again.

I suddenly have a hard time swallowing, so I give up on eating and lean back in my seat.

“There was a man outside the restroom last night. He knocked on the door.”

His expression remains unchanged. He seems focused and unconcerned.

I go on.

“It wasn't you... I don't think so. And there was a struggle outside the door. And then I notice the blood stains on your shirt. Who was he, and why was he looking for me?”

“What makes you think he was?”

He chews on his food, pushes it down his throat, and drinks more coffee before supplementing it with water.

There's a reason he is tense.

If I know anything about him is that he's never tense over meaningless shit.

Even the important things rarely affect him.

“Who was he, Max?”

He lifts his gaze to me, the sky throbbing in his eyes.

“It doesn't matter. He's no longer a threat to you.”

My lips part slightly, my pulse racing.

“What happened at that hotel last night... Was that because of me?”

My voice is strangled with worry.

“It can’t be, can it...?” I murmur, having flashbacks.

The event wasn’t different than other dinner parties.

There’s always security, and someone is always at risk. Us in particular.

But me?

I never thought I’d be targeted at a social event.

“Please tell me the truth. I need to know the truth.”

My voice quivers like the freesias blown by the wind in the plump vase.

He doesn’t say it, but I see it in his eyes.

“Why did you take me there?”

“I didn’t know it would happen.”

“You didn’t know it would happen? You knew it would happen since you met me for the first time and hired me to be your wife. That was the whole purpose, wasn’t it? The whole story about you not being attached. That’s what you had planned for. You didn’t want to find me dead someday and be emotionally crippled for the rest of your life because of some stupid feeling for me.”

His eyes darken, and the sky darkens even more as clouds rush frantically across.

It’s like the two are connected somehow.

I push up, tossing my napkin onto the table, very much demanding.

“Tell me,” I bark, something I’ve never done before. “I have the right to know.”

“Sit down, Bella,” he menacingly shoots at me. “And calm down. Nothing happened.”

“Nothing happened?”

Tears prickle my eyes.

“Nothing happened?? Everything happened. I shouldn’t be outside. I shouldn’t go anywhere. I’m like bait. That’s what I am. A fucking bait.”

He leaps out of his chair and wraps his hand around my neck, his eyes throwing flames.

“Watch your fucking mouth, Bella,” he growls quietly, his hand de-tensing somewhat. “Nothing happened. We’re here. This is part of my life. You knew that. There was no fucking secret.”

Tears fall from my eyes.

“You killed a man last night.”

A cold grin lines his lips.

“It’s not the first man I killed. By far, this one deserved it the most.”

I shake in his grip while my legs threaten to fold under me.

“Why was I a target?”

His grip slackens and slides off my neck while he pushes his chair back and walks away from the table.

“Why was I targeted, Max?” I bark in his wake, but I only stare at the expanse of his shoulders before he vanishes inside.

And now I know he’s out of the house as much as I know I was targeted last night.

I SABELLA

LATE AT NIGHT.

ON THE PHONE WITH MARA.

“I’M SORRY,” I say, my voice raspy. “We’ll do it some other time. I’m sure we can get together and have lunch sometime next week.”

“Yeah, yeah... Don’t worry about it. It’s not the end of the world. We can do that. I just hope that you’re okay,” Mara murmurs.

“Yes. I’m fine.”

I sound like I’ve been crying.

It’s not that far from the truth.

I told her I got the flu, and she graciously believed me, although I canceled our meet-up at the last moment.

“I drink plenty of tea, eat hot soup and have a ton of movies to watch. It will go away in a few days.”

Silence comes from the other end of the line before she speaks again.

“Are things okay with Max and you?”

The much-dreaded question.

I suck in a deep breath and let out a sigh she can't hear.

“Yes. We're good.”

My tone is different now. More assertive and clear, as if I've rehearsed this line in my head.

“I envy you sometimes.”

“Why would you envy me?” I mumble, no longer able to focus.

My eyes fly to the window before I stare at the lamps decorating the backyard.

It's late.

Past dinner time.

Past bedtime, to be honest.

The staff is in the guesthouse, sleeping by now.

The few people tasked with the security of the house are invisible to me, but they are there somewhere.

All I know is that I'm guarded ferociously.

I've always been shielded from a faceless enemy and bad scenarios that never happen. It's just that now there is a context to this palpable worry.

I know for sure something bad could happen to me.

She keeps talking while I walk through the house, inspecting it. Every room seems emptier than the other, and none of them are to my satisfaction.

He left the place this morning, and chances are I won't see him anytime soon. If our history together is any indicator, he may be gone for days.

What scares me the most is that I never know if something bad will happen to him.

I can't tell whether he is in harm's way, so I assume he is.

If something bad happened to him, I'd be the last person to know.

“Okay... I'll let you go now,” I say, entering his home office and going straight to the window.

There is no one outside.

I end our conversation before tucking my phone into my pocket and turning around to scan the room.

I won't find anything here. I mean, I could, but why would he keep information on his doings here.

I go through his stuff either way. It's not much. A few documents and cash. There's a safe, and I won't even try to open it.

There's nothing else.

Whatever part of his history he keeps away from me, I won't find it lying around in a document.

That's not how he does things.

An old photo album from a time when people documented every milestone in their lives with photographs and kept them organized, each meaning something shows me photos of Max and his family.

He was a cute boy but nothing like the stunning man he is today.

He barely resembles the skinny kid with a grin that seemed too big for his face.

He almost never has that smile these days.

And then there is a little girl.

She doesn't look like him. Maybe because her hair is a few shades lighter and curly at the tips. They were like, what? Six or seven years old?

I slam the album shut, put it back into the drawer and leave the room.

Moonlight glows along my path to the bedroom.

I take my clothes off and tuck myself under the covers before turning onto my side to face the view.

And then it strikes me.

I've never been so unhappy.

And I haven't gotten here because of some dramatic event—other than what happened last night.

But it's more than that.

The unhappiness is insidious, and it's been sneaking into my life for some time.

It's come wrapped in some good and some not-so-good, distracting things, and I haven't even been aware of it.

But now that I am, I almost don't recognize myself.

I wish I knew what to do about it.

I'm kind of lost in this maze that is now my life. And I see no way out, and that only feeds my sadness.

With that thought percolating in my brain for a little longer, I drift off to sleep.

I'm sure not even a few minutes have passed before I snap my eyes open, having this strange sensation that someone is in the room.

I push upright and look around, spooked.

Did I just have a bad dream? Where is this sensation coming from?

Dragging a sheet with me and pulling it closer to my chest, I slide off the bed and walk away.

The corridor is empty, and an unlocked window makes a stew of quick sharp knocking sounds as if someone rattles it.

“Fucking window,” I mutter, heading that way.

My hair bristles and my skin is covered in goosebumps as I dart in that direction.

I secure the window and turn around when I catch a dark silhouette sliding toward the end of the corridor.

My heart stops.

“Max? Is that you?”

He walks through the door, and I can't tell whether it's him or not. Who else could it be? The man is dressed like him.

My pulse explodes in my ears as I ponder whether to follow him or just dash outside, go straight to the guesthouse, and ask for help.

I'd look like a lunatic. Panicked, running around in the middle of the night. Barefoot, with a sheet around my chest.

Shivering, I tiptoe my way toward that man.

Once I reach the end of the corridor, I have no view of him.

Am I seeing things now? Am I completely losing it? Am I so stressed out that I imagine things?

It's not my imagination.

I hear his footsteps. Calm, even. It's him. Max.

I know everything about him.

How he walks. How he breathes. What he likes. How he fucks.

When he keeps secrets from me.

Shaking, I push the door to the bedroom open. He's not there, and no light comes from the bathroom. So he's not there either.

Where is he?

I spin around and sprint to his office.

I can't find him.

My heart hurts.

I'm seeing things now. Is that it?

And what if it's not even him?

Maybe it's one of his men, and I superimpose his image over that man's.

Because I need him? Because I want that silhouette to be him?

I spin around so fast and violently bump into him.

My eyes go wide, my scream shooting from my lips before he catches me and slides his hand over my mouth.

My reaction is harsh and laced with terror.

And it's prompted by emotions.

I'm relieved it's him, yet I'm scared at the same time.

"Chill, baby. Just chill..." he says quietly, and I agree, nodding multiple times until he releases my mouth but still holds me in his arms. "Why aren't you sleeping?" he asks in the same calm, quiet voice.

"I heard something. A noise. And then I saw you. But I wasn't sure it was you. I thought someone had entered our house, and I didn't want to go to the guesthouse and wake people up dressed like this."

My fist is latched onto the sheet.

He looks down.

"Why are you shivering?"

"I'm... "

All the tears I've held back these past few hours threaten to surface and trickle down my cheeks.

I must look pained when he looks at me.

Why else would he bring his fingers to my cheeks and gently move them under my eyes.

I tear up and get a ball of tension in my throat and a soft flutter in my chest.

"What's going on?" he asks.

My tears are about to fall.

"You tell me," I say.

Consumed with a thought, he studies my face.

His hands frame my cheeks while I look at him, so disappointed that he refuses to say something to me.

Anything.

“You can’t say this is still about our agreement...” I murmur. “Please don’t say that... We’ve outgrown it. And it happened a while back. You can’t convince me we’re still bound by it. We’ve stepped all over it. And made a mess of it...” I whisper, my voice heavy with tears. “You wanted me to be there by your side, so if you lost me one day, you wouldn’t miss me. At the same time, you promised me, and honestly, I believed you, that you would do anything in your power to protect me. You did everything in your power and much more. And I believed you again... But we’re past that time when you wouldn’t miss me if I was gone.”

His eyes glint with emotion.

Or maybe they’re a little wet like mine.

“Please tell me that I’m right.”

“You’re right,” he says quietly.

“Then...” I stop and taste a falling tear. “Why don’t you tell me everything?”

“What do you want to hear from me?”

“The truth. Why was I targeted at that party? And how come you knew something might happen to me?”

His hands rest at the root of my neck.

He takes a long breath before he speaks.

“I’m fighting a criminal syndicate. I’ve taken over a part of their territory these past few months to weaken them, and their threats haven’t stopped since. It’s a war I inherited from my father.”

“Why did you have to take over their territory?”

“If I’m not doing it, they’re doing it, and you know how it ends. We are at war, Bella. And you can’t stop a war by being weak.”

My tears finally trickle down.

“And I’m a casualty of war.”

“You’re not a casualty of war.”

“You can’t stop them from turning me into collateral damage.”

“I can, and I have.”

“You killed someone last night.”

A dark smile lines his lips.

“It was either him or you. I wanted you to live.”

He brushes my tears away.

“Is this how we’ll live from now on?”

He nods slowly

“This is how I’ve always lived.”

My eyes dart back and forth.

“Why me? I don’t understand.”

His thumb moves mechanically over my neck.

“They can’t get me. They’ve tried to so many times, and it never ended well. So they’ve targeted every person close to me.”

“Verona was one of them?”

Maybe he tried to protect her by pulling her away from him and hiring me to be his fake wife.

He enjoys my brief moment of confusion more than he should.

“Verona got in some trouble on her own. It had nothing to do with me.”

A pause ensues.

“You knew whoever would stand by your side would be in danger.”

His eyes go blank.

Life pours out of them, leaving them empty of emotions.

“I knew I was a dead man. And my days were numbered. They wanted me to cower in fear, make mistakes, and eventually perish. I’m not the man to walk away. And I don’t fear death.”

Hearing a powerful man like him making such a daunting admission gives me pause.

“Weakness. You fear weakness... You didn’t want to be vulnerable but what about me? Have you thought about me?” I ask in a hushed tone that sounds like the wings of a bird cutting its way through the room.

“I thought whoever would get hired would be wise enough to see it as a business proposition and handle the risk.”

“Handle the risk??”

I look at him with eyes made of panic, not believing my ears.

“That was then. I was that person,” I say, my tone changing. “It’s different now.”

“How?”

I look at him, not believing he’s still denying my truth... That things are not the same.

“You can do something about it,” I say, fingering his chest.

“There’s nothing I can do about it. It’s not my battle.”

“It is your battle. You just said it.”

“I said I’d inherited. What do you think would happen if I stepped away? If I showed weakness?”

I know what would happen.

I’m just afraid to say it.

“We’d all be dead,” he mutters.

“And what is the alternative? Do you want me dead so you can continue your war?”

Stern, he looks at me without saying a word.

I wait a few more seconds before I spin around and pull away from him in a huff.

He grips the back of my arm and spins me back to him.

He clutches his arms around me, forcing me to stay despite my struggle to peel away from him again.

“It’s not my war. It’s my life, Bella. And I don’t want you dead. I never wanted you dead.”

“Then stop it,” I say in a quick breath. “Stop the fucking war.”

He loosens his grip on me so I can straighten and look at him.

“Right now, there is no way out. The only way to accomplish peace is to win this war.”

“You’re not winning.”

“I think I do. Or you wouldn’t be alive.”

My eyes get blurry with tears again.

“I don’t want to live like that.”

It’s like I’ve hit him in his chest. His eyes darken, and he drops his hands.

“Then don’t.”

With that, he abandons me and pulls away from me. It’s the second time he’s done that today.



ISABELLA

I HIT the bed convinced he’s left the house.

He’s done it before. And he does it whenever he thinks I’m unreasonable and wants to spend some time away from me.

So when the door to the bedroom opens, and I hear the rustle of his clothes as he moves, gets undressed, and kicks his

shoes off, I play dead, listening to every sound.

He spends time in the bathroom, shaves, and showers, which makes me think he has an early meeting tomorrow morning.

And that is probably only a few hours away.

I don't feel like checking the time.

Moments later, he comes to bed.

As I said many times before, sleeping with him in the same bed is rare, and sleeping with him after having an argument is an exceptional occurrence.

There is no point in resuming a stale argument, so I lie on the bed, my back turned to him, imagining that he's trying to fall asleep when I hear his voice.

"I'll get us out of this war. It won't happen now. That's all I can say."

A few seconds pass before I roll over and look at him. A few drops of aftershave glisten on his cheek.

"You'll never leave this life," I say.

His eyes are shut.

"I never said I would."

My hope vanishes.

"How can you do it then? You'll never win this war. And even if you would, there will be another war."

He tilts his head to me and peels his eyes open.

They're barely open as he observes me through his lashes.

"They killed everything, Bella. Everything. My parents and my sister."

"Your sister... You had a sister?"

The photo of that girl comes to mind.

He tears his eyes away from mine.

“Yes. She was the first casualty... She was nine when she died, and they didn’t even make it look like an accident. They put ten bullets in her chest like she was their biggest enemy. Who the fuck does that?”

His eyes glint, and those, without a doubt, are tears.

Quietly, he continues.

“These people kill the ones you love first, and then they kill you. They can’t kill me. Frankly, I have nothing to lose, so they can’t touch me. If I die, I die.”

“You *had* nothing to lose,” I say.

His features relax somewhat.

“Yes. I *had* nothing to lose.”

He looks at me again.

“I won’t back down until they pay for what they did. My sister didn’t have to die. And my mother didn’t have to die. And you won’t die either. My father died trying to save my mother, shielding her with his body. And I’m like him. Do you understand?”

I look at him, frozen.

“I had this in my head even before I talked to you about this arrangement. Ask Nor. He’ll confirm it.”

“I believe you.”

“Good. Then you know where I stand.”

He puts his head back into the pillow and closes his eyes again while I drink in his face.

“I want out,” I say suddenly.

His eyes snap open at once, surprise flashing through his gaze.

“I want to break the contract.”

He cocks an eyebrow at me, searching my eyes.

“You want a divorce?”

“I want an annulment of the original contract. You pay me whatever you need to pay me and release me from my contractual obligations.”

“How would that work?”

“We stay married, and I have equal rights with you. Everything you said would happen after five years will start happening now. My inheritance rights in case you die, and even a divorce settlement in case we get a real divorce.”

“Aren’t you a sweet thing?” he tosses at me. “What’s in it for me?”

“I’m your real wife. If anything happens to me, you honor me as such. If I get a bullet for you, at least I know why.”

“You’re not being sarcastic now, are you?”

“I’m realistic. I want to know the risks and have the power to choose for myself and not be bound by your terms.”

A few moments pass while I wait for his verdict.

“All right.”

“All right?? Is that a yes?”

His eyes flicker as he brings his hand to my face and takes me in his arms, and I get lost in his hug.

“I don’t think you know what you’re asking for. Being with me for real...” he murmurs against my temple.

I tilt my eyes up.

“I think I know how it is. We’ve been doing it for a while. We just didn’t call it that.”

“Giving up on that kind of money is not smart.”

“You’ll make it up to me. I’m sure.”

He breathes a chuckle.

“With a welcoming gift in the form of a check?”

“I think you know exactly what I want.”

He gives me a long pensive look before pressing my cheek against his shoulder, hiding his gaze.

I SABELLA

A week later

“STILL RIDING in style with a fancy driver and bodyguards, huh?” Mara says, flashing a smile.

She wears a mauve dress and heels, her hair gathered back into a loose chignon.

“Yeah. Lucky me. Is this the place?” I ask, changing the topic.

“Yes.”

I instruct Aaron to wait for me around the corner before I walk into the restaurant with Mara.

“You want him out of sight,” she jokes while we stroll in.

“I want to be able to eat.”

She gives me a double take as the hostess leads us to a table in the back.

Moments later, we get settled.

“What’s bothering you?” she asks as we sit across from each other, and the hostess pulls away.

“Nothing.”

Even my snappy voice says something's bothering me.

She cocks an eyebrow, shooting me a questioning look.

I don't have time to answer before the waitress approaches us to take our order.

Mara goes for a double cheeseburger with a side of fries while I fiddle with the menu for way too long as I don't feel like eating anything.

I only had coffee this morning, and even that felt like rocks in my stomach.

I can't think of anything greasy, cheesy, or gooey.

I end up ordering a salad and grilled salmon, but I fuss a lot and ask for the fish to be lean, and this and that and the other, while Mara watches me with curiosity.

The waitress walks away as Mara speaks again.

"Are you on a diet or something? Suffering from a hangover?"

She laughs, her eyes going down briefly, taking in the red babydoll dress I paired up with my laced-up, cut-out spring sandals.

It's hard to tell how I look underneath this dress.

"No diet for me. I'm fine. I'm not that hungry, though."

"I can't tell. Things fine in paradise?"

I look down, smiling, a blush warming my cheeks.

"Things are all right."

I drink water.

There's no way she can tell I'm lying. I've perfected the art of lying since I live with my husband. I can't lie to him. He's too good at reading people.

Besides, it doesn't serve me well to lie to him.

But I still need to spruce up the reality a bit and offer half-truths to the people I care for.

It sounds strange, but it's true.

I can't say I have mixed feelings without getting into details, and that's something I can't do, so I focus on the good parts of my story.

“Sex?”

“Sex is hot.”

“Mmm... I so envy you. I want sex that's hot.”

“I'm sure yours is hot too.”

“When I have it.”

“When you have it.”

The food arrives a few moments later.

It smells delicious, and for a second, my mouth waters, but that sensation quickly changes, and I have that heaviness in my stomach again.

“You want to try it?”

She points to her food.

“I'm good,” I say, bile crawling up my throat.

Fuck, it feels bad.

Clearing my throat, I push my chair back.

“You know what? Start without me. I need to wash my hands.”

“All right,” she says, digging in.

The smell of grilled food nestles in my nostrils, enhancing the horrible sensation in my stomach.

I rush across the restaurant, hoping to smell something other than food once I enter the corridor.

Later, I walk into the restroom, and a different flavor messes with my sense of smell.

Whatever bathroom cleaner they've used feels like a straight-out assault on my nose.

Horrible.

I use the bathroom, wash my hands, and wait.

I don't feel like I'm close to throwing up, but I don't feel that great, either.

Maybe it's the fact that I only had a few hours of sleep last night. And I've been alone for the past two days.

Max is God knows where. With business, I guess. Top secret business.

And other than twisting and turning during the night and trying to do useful stuff during the day, there is not much I can fill my days with.

I started to do charitable work. I feel good about it, and I like the people I work with. But it's not enough.

Working for real is out of the question, as now more than ever, it poses a security risk—Max says—and I believe him.

Okay, the nauseating sensation is gone.

It came abruptly, and it vanished just as fast. I'm hungry now, so I rush back.

The time I spend with Mara is fun and helps me kick back after a strange morning.

At around two in the afternoon, we're getting ready to leave.

She makes a trip to the bathroom while I play with my phone, checking my wedding pictures. Mostly because I miss him. As much as I—sometimes—hate him, I miss him too.

Despite all that, an odd sensation sidles up to me.

I feel pain in my chest, and the clarity of the moment makes me sick with desperation.

Things won't work for us.

It doesn't matter what he says.

I know that, and he knows that.

He's granted me my request, and now we have a different understanding.

Regardless of his promise that things will be different someday, not everything is in his power.

He won't be able to change his life for me.

No one does it. Not even those who lead a relatively normal life. That's not how things work.

And this... Living life like this?

How long would I be able to do it?

I close the photo album and open a different app when a random thought pops into my head.

Wait a minute... I go back and check the calendar. The fucking calendar. I start counting days.

Ugh... Fuck it.

Why can't I be more organized? When did I have my last period? Was it this month? Last month? It can't be last month, so I count the weeks and days, trying to remember how many days there were before that party. Or was it weeks? I am completely lost.

Mara finds me sitting in my chair, frozen, my hand clutched around my phone.

The concern on her face is thicker than her hamburger.

"Are you okay?" she asks under her breath, sliding back into her seat.

I think I need a bit of truth in my life.

"No. Not really," I say, powering off my phone. "I think I have a problem."

I scan the restaurant looking for suspicious faces.

Sometimes the man hired to protect me are much closer than I think, and right now, I need a bit of privacy.

"What problem?" she asks softly when I shift my eyes to her.

Without answering, I pull a pen out of my purse and scribble down a few words on a paper napkin.

'I might be pregnant.'

Her face brightens for a second before it quickly darkens as I tear off the napkin.

“Is that a problem?” she mouths to me.

“For me, it might be. I need your help.”

She studies my eyes for a few seconds.

“Okay.”

“Let’s get out of here,” I say.

Minutes later, we set foot on the sidewalk, and I look up the road.

There used to be a pharmacy two blocks from here.

“Do you have cash on you?”

“Uh. Yeah...”

“Can you come with me and buy me a pregnancy kit?”

“Yes. Sure.”

“I’ll give you the money.”

“You don’t have to give me the money.”

“I’m sorry... I don’t have cash, and I only have a credit card, and it’s a long story... And I can’t use my debit card for this.”

“Don’t worry, silly. I got it. You need to figure it out on your own.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

Dress drenched in sweat, I turn on my phone and call Aaron to let him know I’m taking a few steps away from the restaurant.

There’s no way I can go there without him knowing, so it’s better to give him an explanation.

I tell him Mara needs to buy something.

It works.

We cross the street, and soon after, we walk into the pharmacy.

Kit in hand, I dash into the restroom after making sure none of Max's men are in the store, and indeed I get a positive result a few minutes later.

"Fuck. Fuck," I whisper to myself, shaken and grappling with disbelief.

It's not like we have taken precautions or used protection, but I didn't expect it to happen so soon.

The doctor he'd initially sent me to talked to me about several contraceptive methods after my first medical exam.

He didn't insist, and I said I'd think about it as I was squeamish about most of them, and taking a pill every day was out of the question.

Condoms would've worked. Yes. They would've.

We've never talked about it because we've talked about having kids instead.

But having kids now? Really? How?

How am I supposed to have a kid when I almost got killed a week ago? And what would that do to me? If I leave, the kid will stay. That part of our agreement hasn't changed.

Uhh... Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

My hands shake. How could I not think about this?

A soft knock on the door reminds me that Mara is outside, waiting for me.

"Is everything okay?"

I run my fingers under my eyes, removing a stray tear.

"Yes. Everything is fine. I'll be out in a minute."

My voice is dry, and I'm calm, as if this won't change my life forever.

Moments later, I open the door, and Mara reacts to my expression with lifted eyebrows, wide eyes, and glaring astonishment.

"Oh... What happened?"

Silently, I point to the test, and she gets it. My expression is also more than telling.

“We can’t talk,” I mouth to her.

Quietly, we exit the restroom and stop in front of the store, where it’s noisy and can exchange a few words.

“This stays between us,” I say cryptically.

“Okay.”

She swallows hard.

“What do you want to do?”

“I don’t know yet. Well... I actually know. I need to see a doctor before... anything else happens.”

“All right. Do you have someone?”

I shake my head.

“The one I have works for my... You know...”

She nods.

“Okay.”

She sighs.

“Is there anything I can help you with?”

I need money. And I definitely need some cash, so it can’t be traced back to a medical office.

“Find me someone, and call me. We’ll meet again for lunch or breakfast or something. A workday would be better, if possible. And if you can find a doctor’s office that’s close to where we meet. I need to sneak out of the restaurant, go there, and return without anyone noticing.”

“All right. We’ll do that.”

“Okay. Thank you so much.”

I hug her and kiss her cheek.

“I’ll find my way back. Thank you for your help.”

We go separate ways a few moments later, and I walk down the street back to the car in a complete daze.



MAX

TWO DAYS LATER.

MONDAY MORNING.

MANHATTAN.

A GRAY MORNING light slides across the rooms as I walk into the house. Marge greets me in the lobby.

“Usual breakfast? Coffee?”

“Both. Set it for two. Nor is right behind me.”

“All right.”

“Where’s Bella?” I ask, noticing the house is awfully quiet.

Marge is quiet too.

Like she’s trying to find the right words.

I spin to her.

She looks nervous.

“Is she upstairs? Sleeping?”

I reach inside my pocket, pull out my phone and check the time.

It’s early.

“She’s out.”

“Out?”

I lift my gaze.

“She left at... seven?”

“Where exactly did she go? She’s with Aaron, I assume.”

“Yes. Yes. Of course, she is. She’s meeting a friend for breakfast.”

“What friend?”

“Mara.”

“Okay.”

Something’s strange.

“Is something going on that I need to know?”

“No.”

She seems concerned. Tense and torn.

“If there’s something to this story, I need to know now.”

“There is nothing.”

Her tone is more trustworthy than seconds ago, although she averts her gaze.

“I’ll have the food ready for you in a few minutes.”

She scurries away while I remain in the lobby pondering when Nor walks in.

“What happened?”

“Nothing. I was waiting for you.”

He’s not convinced, yet he knows better than to ask me again.

Later, we drink coffee in my office.

“Where’s Isabella?” he asks, noticing how quiet the house is.

“Out.”

His eyebrows flick up.

“Out? At eight-thirty in the morning?”

“Apparently. She’s with Aaron.”

I put a cigarette between my lips, but I don’t feel like lighting it right now.

He looks at me, waiting for more information.

“Meeting her friend. Mara.”

“Uh-huh. On Monday morning?”

“What do you want from me?” I say, leaning back in my seat.

“You don’t seem to be okay with it.”

“Would you be okay with it?”

“No. Did she tell you she was going out?”

“Nope.”

I tear the cigarette away from my lips and lean my head back. I haven’t slept in twenty-four hours, and this is probably not the best time to deal with this.

I’m better when I’m rested.

“Did you tell her you’d be back this morning?”

“No.”

“Shit. Not good. Did you call her?”

I click my tongue.

“Something’s going on,” I mutter.

“What do you mean?”

“Marge was weird when I walked in and asked about Bella an hour ago. Like she knows something’s not right. She didn’t have much to tell me. Maybe things don’t add up for her either.”

A few moments of silence pass.

“Bella and I had a discussion a week ago after that night at the party.”

His eyes glint, yet he says nothing.

“She asked me to void the agreement.”

“No fucking way.”

I nod.

“She said she wanted to be my wife for real.”

“She is your wife for real.”

A cold smile tickles my lips.

“Yes, she is. You were right when you said she’d be my wife. What you didn’t know was that she’d ask me to do something for her.”

He clasps his hands together, waiting.

“She wants me to end the war.”

An expression of disbelief slides over his face.

“She has no idea what she’s talking about.”

“That’s what I said. And then she made a point. I told her I couldn’t stop it or I’d be dead. She reminded me that everyone who mattered to me was dead. And she was next in line.”

“You believed her?”

“Is that even a question? They wanted to kill her that evening.”

“You don’t know for sure.”

I tilt my head to the side, darkly amused.

“Kidnapping her and using her to blackmail me would’ve been the same. She would’ve ended up dead either way. I’m convinced they wanted to kill her that night. They’d sent that exact same message to me so many times before. It was a risk I’d taken and sometimes forgotten about. At any rate... I said the only way out was to win the war, weaken my enemies or straightly eliminate them. She said the only way out is to end the war no matter what.”

“You can’t do that.”

“I know.”

“So what’s the answer then?”

“To finish them first and then get out.”

I barely end saying that, and my phone beeps with an alert.

My eyes go down as I snatch my phone from the coffee table.

“Huh...”

“What’s that?” he asks.

I swipe the screen.

“It’s Bella. She just made a large withdrawal from an ATM.”

“What’s the address?”

I give him the address while I check it myself on the map.

“What is she doing there?”

“Having breakfast with Mara.”

I call Aaron.

“Where’s Bella?”

“Eating breakfast at a restaurant.”

I push up.

“Do you have a visual of her?”

“No. I’m waiting around the corner.”

“Is anyone else with you?”

“Benny. He’s buying coffee for both of us. Is anything wrong?”

“Don’t move,” I bark, sliding my suit jacket on. “Send him to the restaurant and call me when you can confirm she is inside. I’m on my way.”

Nor shoots up, still looking at the phone.

“Your car or my car?” he mutters.

“Mine. What’s wrong?”

“The ATM is not far from a doctor’s office.”

“What??”

“It’s a clinic. Look.”

He shoves his phone into my face, and I read the name of the clinic.

“Marge??” I thunder, and the windows shake.

She rushes up the stairs and looms in the doorway, panting.

“Spill it out,” I say before she has the chance to ask a question. “You seemed uncomfortable when you talked about Isabella. Now is the time to talk.”

The woman knows me well, so she doesn’t waste a second.

“Isabella is not well.”

“How is she not well, and why am I hearing about this now?”

“I’ve noticed these past few days. She has trouble eating and is pale like she’s never been before. I cooked her everything she asked me to, and it still didn’t work for her. Whatever she ate, she threw up. She couldn’t hold it down.”

“Next time, don’t fucking wait for me to ask you,” I throw at her, signaling Nor to follow me.

I call Aaron again and give him the address of the ob-gyn clinic and strict instructions.

“Cordon off that area if you need to. Nobody moves in or out until I arrive.”

I SABELLA

THE SAME MORNING.

LATER.

“ISABELLA CARSON?”

I push to my feet and pull up to the reception desk, where the woman gives me the total amount.

“It’s debit or credit?”

“Cash, please.”

She gives me a double take, and I expect her to say something else.

She doesn’t, so I push the money across the counter and pick up the receipt only seconds before a loud noise bursts into the air as if five cars have just piled up on top of each other outside.

Breaks squeal, and doors get slammed while everybody in the cute reception area decorated with live plants and glossy stickers flicks their eyes toward the entrance.

The doctor who examined me walks out with another patient, and her eyes go wide, her mouth open with disbelief.

A tech freezes by the wall.

More people, doctors, and medical staff rush to the reception area while I look at the scene unfolding in front of me.

Shit.

I turn to the receptionist.

Her mouth is open, too, a shocked expression gliding over her face.

“Is there another exit?” I ask, so disconnected from everything everyone else is experiencing.

Her attention is completely occupied with what’s going on outside.

I don’t need to look as I hear people barking, blocking the street, the entrance, and then the noise as the doors fly open.

The receptionist is completely oblivious to me, so I sneak behind a group of people and go back to the examining rooms, desperately looking for doors that open into storage rooms, a bathroom, someone’s office, or even a back exit.

Fuck. I fish out my phone from my pocket and call Mara. She doesn’t answer, and that’s my cue.

Max’s voice thunders in the lobby. I hear my name and then people screaming and shuffling. Chaos ensues.

Oh, no. No, no.

The exit door. Finally. There it is. I zip toward the exit and slam into it, hoping to open it with one quick shove. It’s locked.

Footsteps rush across the corridor when I notice the doctor’s office, and I walk right in.

The woman is at the front and probably knows by now why I’ve used my maiden name on the paperwork so I can have the medical exam.

More voices, more shuffling. Things tumbling down. I hope he doesn't do something stupid.

And then... His voice cutting through the air. Calling my name.

“Bella??”

My heart hurts. Back pressed into the wall, I hold my breath to the point of getting dizzy. My eyes well up as he gets closer and closer.

It comes as no surprise that he opens and closes doors, followed closely by a swarm of protests.

No one stops Max De Lucca.

They should know that by now.

Plus, he could sue them into oblivion for whatever reason his attorneys might come up with. He has the money and time.

Seconds later, he sounds really close, and the door flies open.

With one flick of his gaze, he finds me pressed into the wall, my eyes wide with terror and about to get blurry with tears.

“Bella? What the hell is going on?”

He's pale, livid, his eyes no longer blue, more like dark and stripped of life.

“Nothing.”

The office manager, a woman with a sweet face and thin eyebrows, who seems completely unaware of the danger, touches his hand and asks him to leave the premises.

A male tech joins her in that effort when Max turns around and instructs his men to move everybody to the front and stop them from calling the police.

It's quiet again.

He turns to me, his face made of stone, his eyes carved in ice.

“Why are you here, Bella?” he asks quietly.

I barely find the strength to unclench my teeth.

“You know why, or you wouldn’t be here, scaring people off.”

“No one’s scaring people off.”

“You’re scaring me off.”

“No. I’m fucking not.”

His eyes shoot daggers.

“I’m not,” he says in a calmer tone. “How long have you known?”

I say nothing.

“Did you know when you asked me to end the war?”

“I had no idea.”

His eyes glint with suspicion.

“I didn’t know,” I say, aggravated. “I asked you that because it made sense. I didn’t think about this... And you promised me you’d do it.”

“Then why didn’t you tell the first time you suspected you were pregnant?”

My eyes well up.

“Because I wanted to know for sure,” I say, my voice breaking a little. “And then I needed a minute.”

Tears start rolling down my cheeks while his features soften.

“I just need a minute to think this through... So many bad things could happen. When I asked you to do that... I feared for my life. And yours. I tried to argue the future was bleak... I hadn’t taken a kid into account. How would this work?” I whisper. “A week or so ago, I could’ve been dead at the hands of someone I had never met in my life. Someone who thought the time had come to settle accounts with you. And why? Because of some old feud that had lasted for years.”

A muscle pulses in his jaw as my words sink in.

He knows this better than I do.

He knew he'd get to this point one way or another, but he tried to avoid it as much as he could.

That's why he tried to fool himself and everybody else into thinking he could control what happens in this life.

He thought by bringing someone like me into his life, he could design his destiny and make himself invulnerable, impossible to take down.

No, not that last thing.

He always knew he could go in a second.

It had been his experience.

He'd seen everyone perish at the hands of his enemies.

He is the victor today, but how long would he be on top of things?

We already live like runaways. And that's horrible, considering he's reigning like a king.

But what man would walk away from that kind of power willingly?

That was the point I was trying to make as well.

"Tell me..." I say, watching his eyes change from dull gray to blue again.

He doesn't say a word.

"Or think about it for a moment," I continue. "Had that man gotten to me, you wouldn't have only lost me... You would've lost our child too."

He bites the inside of his cheek and looks away, his eyes misty, his lips tense, still very much expressing determination.

Resoluteness.

"I've made you a promise."

"And I believe you. But I also need to trust you."

He moves his eyes to me, holding his emotions under control, although his eyes express sadness and regret.

“I need to trust you too, Bella. You can’t hide from me and expect me to be there for you.”

I sink my teeth into my lip before I push out words.

“I’m not hiding from you. I’m only trying to pull myself together, so you can’t see what a mess I am.”

My lips are wet and salty from my tears when his eyes soften, and a smile lines his gaze.

He opens his arms for me and pulls me into his chest while I wrap mine around his torso.

I quietly start sobbing.

“I can’t do this if I’m constantly fearing for my life...” I say, and he holds me tight, his lips pressed gently against my hair.

He lets me sob and get it all out before wiping my tears away and looking into my eyes.

“You won’t fear for your life. Okay?”

I don’t know what to say.

A part of me wants to believe him.

A part of me has always wanted to believe him, and it’s not like he’s trying to deceive me.

“What if it’s not in your power to make this change for us?”

He brushes a strand of hair away from my face, smiling.

“How well do you know me?”

“Well enough to know you might be pissed and storm into a medical office.”

He flashes a faint grin.

“Then you know everything you need to know about me.”

His hands rest on my neck while my eyes still look for some answers.

“You know my father never wanted me to have this kind of life...” he says.

I nod.

“And there was a good reason for that,” he says, stern, no longer smiling. “My family paid the ultimate price, and I don’t want the same thing to happen to you and me. All right?”

He smiles again, tenderly moving his thumb over my cheek.

“I think we’ll do great things together...” he says, his eyes dipping to my lips. “Soon...” he murmurs, adding some mystery to his words. “Now let’s get out before they call the cops on us,” he says in a different tone, and he starts to move, but I don’t.

He turns back to me, and a few more seconds pass before he loops his arms around me again and gives me a tender, slow, trustful kiss.

And I kiss him back and shed some tears against his chest.

And he doesn’t rush me because I need a minute... As I have said before... To come to terms with the fact that this is my man. And in his arms and mine is also our child.



READ THE EPILOGUE NEXT

EPILOGUE

I SABELLA

MORE THAN TWO YEARS LATER.

A PRIVATE (UNDISCLOSED LOCATION).

A TROPICAL ISLAND.

THE HOUSE LOOKS out over the turquoise ocean, and my eyes can't stay still on the magnificent view for a second.

A large, crescent-shaped terrace spreads out in front of me.

The palmettos move their leaves lazily without a care in the world, and the clear pool water ripples from the breeze while people work around the house.

At a glance, it looks like the perfect tropical island.

A tropical paradise with luscious vegetation, flowers dipped in the most saturated colors I've ever seen, and birds that look like they've been painted by the anxious fingers of a child.

The ocean stretches out in the distance, where yachts slowly sail the waters. Some of those ships belong to us.

Like this island, this jaw-dropping estate, and everything else around me.

Hidden in this alluring tropical place are also the people who guard me.

As a precaution.

But I'm no longer at risk.

Most people don't know where I am.

For many, this island is not even on the map. And even if it is, nothing of significance shows on it.

Hands sweaty, I play with my phone while the breeze brings in the cute noises Annalise and Max make.

Impatiently, I put down my phone and exit the living room.

The breeze rolls over my face, the wind blowing through my hair and playing with my long white dress.

Long strands of wheat-blond hair tickle my nose.

Andra sees me first and starts clapping her hands while the little one, Max, tries to mirror his older sister.

He is so much like his father.

Quiet and full of determination.

Unless something doesn't go his way, and oh, my... For someone who's barely a year old, he can surely be loud.

He always gets what he wants.

But Andra is not much different. She only uses different methods. A charmer, like me... Her father says... She smiles and plays with you until she asks you to give her whatever she wants from you.

Now she's trying to close the distance between us, helped by Jan, our housekeeper, while Max squirms in his rocking cradle, and because he can't get out of it, problems ensue.

"Okay. Okay..."

I rush to pick him up before I meet Andra halfway. She's smiling at me with all her face and blue-gray eyes that look

just like mine.

I have no choice but to take them both with me, and we all nestle on the cushioned lounge sofa.

“Things are better now,” I murmur, picking up grapes from a bowl on the coffee table and munching on them.

“Do you want me to bring you a cup of coffee?” Jan asks.

“I’m good. Thank you. I think I had too much already,” I say, smiling.

I want to believe it’s the coffee. Or only the coffee. Truth is, I couldn’t get a wink of sleep last night.

Today is the day. The big day. The one I’ve been waiting for.

Months and months without him have taken a toll on me. I am patient, especially when I know the outcome. Or hope for a good outcome. But this is more than anyone could take.

Besides, today is the end of this convoluted story.

Andra tucks herself against my body, her eyes trained on the water, and she starts singing to herself while Max is already asleep in my arms.

Our dogs rush across the tiles and hop on the sofa.

“Easy, easy...” I say, hoping they didn’t wake Max.

No way. He’s sound asleep, and for a moment, I look at him. As tiny as he is, he looks so much like Max. And Andra too.

I always say I’m only the delivery guy. His kids look like him. One hundred percent. And Max laughs. It’s a good joke.

And then he says every bit of me is embedded in their features.

The faint smile tugging at my lips dies out.

We haven’t talked in weeks. Since it all started.

I wonder how he looks.

His lawyers say he’s okay. But they are paid to say that.

I wonder if he misses me as much as I miss him.

Luckily, Andra and Max are too small to realize what is going on. And there are so many things to keep them occupied.

When we're not here by the pool, we're at the beach.

They both like the sand and the water, and the dogs love to roam around as if they own the place.

They do own the place in many regards.

I look at them... How they pull close to us as if they want to protect us.

Everybody's trying to protect us, and the most important man in my life does that right now. He's been doing that since we had that conversation years ago in that clinic in New York.

When things slipped out of control a little. And he scared the shit out of everyone in that office.

Things turned all right, but it's been a couple of years that felt like a rollercoaster. A lot of planning went into this, and then it took a lot of strength and determination to make his plan work.

This week we'll know if it has.

But it has to. My chest is so heavy, and I can't think of anything to help me stop mulling over a catastrophic scenario.

What if things don't pan out?

I can't even think about that.

Many things have happened since he held me in his arms that day in that office. I never thought I could fall in love with him the way I did.

And I never thought it could be ten times harder when he loved me back.

Hate is safety. It gives you some leeway. It pulls you back. Loving fully has none of that.

And yes, people do crazy things when they're in love.

He knew that. And I learned that.

That year was tough.

Between making sure nothing happened to me and no word got out that I was expecting, it wasn't all roses all the time.

But we loved each other fiercely. I did everything he asked of me so I could get from him what he had promised me.

I left after giving birth.

That was his plan.

He couldn't stand the idea that I'd be at risk living in New York with him.

And I couldn't stand the idea that something might happen to him while he was away from me.

We had to make do.

And the second year was even more challenging.

But then we had Max Jr., and I saw that fierce determination in my husband's eyes, and I knew he'd take care of this problem once and for all.

These past few weeks have been the toughest of all.

I couldn't sleep or eat when everything happened.

For days, I was in a daze, and it didn't matter how beautiful this place was, how many fantastic things were around me, and how sweet our kids were.

My heart was in New York, bleeding for him.

I knew that the biggest battle of all was underway. And he could be its first casualty. And my heart would be next.

After striking a few alliances, he took out every last member of the criminal syndicate that plucked his family away from him.

The whole thing came with strings attached.

There was a reorganization of the territory. Everyone who played a role in that operation got rewarded.

There was something in it for everyone.

And then he found a politician eager to score some electoral points and get credit for the demise of that criminal faction, so federal agents were involved.

All hands on deck.

It worked.

He got the job done, but there were other things he needed to do.

For one, he needed to step down... for now. And put someone else in his place.

Then he needed to take the fall and at least be indicted for white-collar crimes, if not the blood he had on his hands from taking those people out.

He did a service to so many people.

Still, they needed to keep the appearances for the press and all that.

The deal was... *It was all for show.*

He'd get cleared of all accusations and walk free.

That was their promise.

They had nothing against him anyway, but he had to do it.

And now we'll see if what he has on these people is significant enough to keep them in line.

To give him his freedom.

That's why these days are the worst.

A lot of other things have happened these past two years.

Missa is now almost twenty years old.

She went to college and still didn't give up on her dream of making it in New York.

No one in my family has made the slightest comment since Max's indictment hit the news.

And there were worse things they'd never been privy to.

We met a couple of times after I left New York. I traveled to Georgia. They still have no idea where I live. And they have never asked me either.

My mother doesn't like the idea that she can't see her grandchildren but understands that big money comes with risks and different sets of rules.

Mara is still single, still in New York. She doesn't seem to be able to find someone, but she's never given up on dating.

She got a great job at Max's company. And came highly recommended by me. She's good at what she does.

Max confirmed it many times.

Nor has never left New York and has no intention of doing it.

I miss our place in Manhattan and the house on Long Island.

Sadly, we've never been able to return to Italy. The days we spent over there remained some of my dearest memories.

What a crazy start we had...

The waves lapping at the shore help me drift off to sleep.

Not much time passes—I don't think so—and footsteps trail the terrace in a rushed cadence.

I flick my eyes open, trying to stay still and not wake my kids.

Jan has my phone in her hand, and I push upright, tense like a rock.

"Someone from New York," she says quietly. "Do you want me to take them inside?" she asks, pointing to Andra and Max.

"Yes, yes. Please."

I help her while taking the call.

Soon she vanishes inside.

"Bella, here. I'm listening."

“He’ll be out in a few hours. The news will hit the headlines after he leaves,” Max’s attorney says.

“Okay. All right... Is everything good? With him?”

“Everything’s fine. He’ll be on his way, and you should expect him to get home around midnight.”

“Perfect,” I say before ending the call, crumbling inside.



ISABELLA

IN THE EVENING.

THE HOURS BARELY CRAWL BY.

I can’t eat dinner, although I try, and after making sure Max and Andra are sound asleep, I try to kill some time reading. It doesn’t work. I check the news on TV, my heart beating furiously in my chest.

I so don’t want to see him on TV.

What if he’s changed?

What if he’s pale? Weak? Exhausted? Sick?

What if he doesn’t look like him?

As much as I try, I can’t avoid the news.

Luckily, they don’t show much of him. He doesn’t speak to the reporters as he quickly vanishes inside a dark SUV.

Nor holds the back door for Max. He looks the same. You can’t read a damn thing on his face.

Nor West.

I miss him too.

“Okay...”

I turn off the TV and move outside. The lights blend into the background, and the sky is lit up by stars in the distance.

Somewhere up there, he's on a plane. On his way.

Maybe I should make sure I look all right. Yeah... That's a great idea. I spin around and go straight to the huge bedroom occupying half of the upper floor.

I enter the walk-in closet and shoot my eyes to the mirror.

Of course, I don't like my dress, and so it goes... I spend the next hour trying different outfits.

My body is more voluptuous, and some things just don't work anymore.

Brushing my fingers over my chest by mistake, I experience pleasure, a reminder that I haven't had a man's touch in a while.

"Like I needed that now..." I mumble, glancing at my reflection again.

I've worked out lately.

For one, to get in shape and, secondly, to keep my head straight. The stress of not knowing what happened to him was too much to take.

It helped a little.

Am I going to wait for him here?

No. I'm going there. I don't have enough patience to spend another second here.

So, I throw on a short white summer dress, put on my pink sneakers, grab the keys to the SUV and dart outside.

The night is quiet and breezy.

I talk to Jan first, making sure the kids are all right before I climb in. Maybe I'm going to the small airport strip on the other side of the island for nothing.

But I just can't wait.

The road takes me through a tropical forest that is loud, like a war zone, and before long, the ocean view lines the

horizon as I reach the other side.

Glowing lights line the landing strip, and houses providing shelter for a small army of people rise not far from it.

He may walk down for now, but he is in no way out.

He is the top mafia boss, even if he's in exile.

I stop the car, turn off the engine, and climb out.

From my vantage point, I have a good representation of the ocean, the sky, the landing strip, and the road leading there.

I check the time.

It's almost midnight.

Propped against the hood, I feverishly scan the sky. If only time could rush a little.

Before long, lights gleam in the sky.

This is him.

It can only be him.

My heart beats away from my chest.

I straighten and climb down the small hill, keeping my eyes on the sky. The lights seem closer. And closer. And my heart only sprints toward the man of my life.

Damn you, Max de Lucca.

Tears come to my eyes as I smile, silly.

It takes forever for the small private plane to land, and I can no longer wait. When the plane's stairs are out and the door opens, I start running to it.

Men other than him get out, and I stop for a second, no longer sure he is here. A pang of fear also sweeps through me, like this could be something dangerous. A threat.

I've been trained to spot it.

But no. I see his men waiting at the other side of the landing strip. Everything is fine. It must be fine.

And then I see him.

White shirt, inked forearms, his dark hair slightly shorter than usual.

He talks to someone inside, and when he turns around and looks outside from the top of the stairs, I'm convinced he's searching for me.

I flick my arm up and wave at him, and he rushes down the stairs, trying to make it look like he's not hurrying.

I'm doing the same thing, but once his sleek Italian shoes meet the ground and he heads my way, he's booking it.

I can't contain myself and start running again.

We collide moments later, his arms looping around me, mine snaking around his torso, my tears flowing, his smile pressed against the top of my head.

"We've made it, baby Bella. We've made it, beautiful girl..."

Crying and nodding, I hold him tight before our lips meet. Burning like the sun of the tropics. All his heart is in his kiss, and all my love is in my kiss.

"I've missed you so much," I say, pushing back my tears.

"I've missed you, too. Now take me home. I can't wait to see our babies."

He takes my hand and talks to his people, giving them instructions for I have no idea what.

I can't hear a thing. The fact that his hand is locked with mine gives me everything I need.

We walk up the slope to my car, and he slides into the driver's seat while I settle next to him.

"Things all right?" he asks, setting the car in motion and glancing at me from time to time.

The windows are down, the smell of the island tumbling in.

"Everything is good," I say, unable to take my eyes away from him. "Are you hungry?" I ask, seemingly incapable of

coming up with something less trivial than that.

He smiles, his eyes going down over me.

“I sure am.”

“That’s not what I asked.”

He laughs.

“It doesn’t matter what you asked. I had some food on my way over,” he says, looking at the road.

A few moments pass.

“So it’s over?” I ask quietly, still soaking him in.

His smile fades, the reality of these past few months and weeks surfacing from behind the joy of being reunited with me.

“Yes. It’s over.”

“You couldn’t convince Nor to come here too?”

He clicks his tongue.

“No. Besides, I need him there. He has to make sure things work all right. The way they’re supposed to. Especially now...”

My eyebrows go up.

“Especially now... what?”

He looks at me.

“Tullio de Rossi is running my territory.”

My mouth drops open.

“No way.”

I don’t know what else to say.

Tullio. Verona’s brother.

“Why him?”

I see why he chose him.

I think I know why him.

And no, it doesn’t have to do with Verona.

“He’s the craziest motherfucker I know. He’ll keep everyone in line. Before long, they’ll miss me,” he adds, smiling.

“You’re not going back.”

“I’m not going back. I need to live a little...” he says pensively. “We’ll see if things change in the future.”

“They will change. Once you forget about the past.”

He gives me a smile.

“Probably. But it won’t be enough. I don’t think so.”

Minutes later, we arrive at the house, and the news brings out most of the people working for us.

The housekeeper sets the table for us on the terrace, although our first trip is to the children’s room.

We tiptoe inside, so we don’t wake them and then touch them tenderly to make sure they’re all right in their cribs.

Max can’t help himself and takes them out one by one. He holds them in his arms, and they’re still asleep. And he presses his face against their little bodies, and the spark in his eyes tells me he won’t forget that easily the hard life he’s had until now, and it will take a lot longer than I thought for him to think about going back.

His heart is here. With them. With me.

Ask anyone, and there’s nothing sexier than a grown-up man having a soft spot for his babies.

He kisses their cheeks and tucks them in before we leave the room and head to the terrace.

Neither of us is hungry, but we have some food and drinks before we go to the bedroom.

From that point on, we are inseparable.

We get in the tub together and make love there first.

His touch is no longer brutal or scary, although it is as forceful as it’s always been. His lips are like ambrosia, making me hot, turning me own, quenching my thirst for him.

When he's finally inside me, and I come instantaneously, he knows what I know.

We've both missed this.

I love him with all I've got, killing everything that's been bad these past tumultuous months.

The tension, fears, and dread of the unknown.

And he gives me all his heart because right now, he has nothing to fear.

Nothing can't take me away from him.

Nothing can't break him or break me.

We fall asleep late in the night and wake up early.

The morning finds us where we were hoping to be.

His arms are filled with Max and Andra, who are both beyond ecstatic. I look at them, and my heart sings.

Smiling, he winks and quietly says to me.

"We love you, Bella."

And right after, a cacophony of voices ensues, Max Jr. and Andra clapping their little hands, expressing their love.

"I love you too..." "I say, my heart filled with all of them, my stare locked with the eyes of the man I want to spend the rest of my life with.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Shayne is a voracious reader and a prolific writer. She writes what she likes to read, and people who share her taste devour her books. Her love stories are layered, character-driven, have a dash of mystery, and a lot of depth. They feature hot-blooded men and adventurous, soulful women.

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