

SI OANF PETERSON



Mafia
BLOOD

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Mafia Blood

**The Mansolillo's
Vengeance
Mafia Series
(Books 1-3)**

1- Mafia Saints

2- Mafia Rising

3- Mafia Sins

By: Sloane Peterson

Mafia Saints

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty.](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Thirty](#)

[Chapter Thirty-One](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Two](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Three](#)

Mafia Rising

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty.](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Thirty](#)

Mafia Sins

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty.](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Thirty](#)

[Chapter Thirty-One](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Two](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Three](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Four](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Five](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Six](#)

Mafia Saints

By: Sloane Peterson

Chapter One

Adelaide

I keep my head low as I follow my father into the restaurant. It's unbelievable how much effort it took to get him to allow me to come with him. He spent the entire morning trying to convince me not to. The men wouldn't understand *why* I was, I would be a distraction. If they get distracted so easily, they're not worth shit. Might as well weed out the weak as soon as possible. It'll make things easier for when I take over.

I have to earn their trust first, their respect. They have to look at me the same way they look at my father. With fear and respect. I *will* earn it. No matter what it takes.

One of the security guards opens the door for us and my father gestures for me to enter the conference room first. Men stand but confusion crosses their face the minute I enter. I don't say a single word because I don't *owe* them an explanation. I'm Adelaide Mansolillo. I can be wherever I want to be, do whatever I want to do. I walk to the head of the table and glance over at one of the guards. Not a single word is spoken still, I just nod to where a chair should be. I'm not sitting with them.

I'm better.

A guard scrambles out to get a chair as my father makes his entrance. His men look at him, waiting for an explanation as to why his daughter is there. I don't have to speak to them to know what they're thinking. Why is *she* here? This is no place for a *woman*. Misogyny runs deep in these men. That's going to change. Whether they do it themselves or I force them to. It doesn't matter.

My father takes his seat, waving a dismissive hand to tell the men to sit as the guard brings me a seat. I sit

next to him, looking out at the table. It's hard not to lose myself in a momentary fantasy. This will all be mine one day.

"I want to discuss the rival territories today," my father starts. No one interjects, so he continues, "The Luppino family has been overstepping as of late. Antonio, you've had a few conversations with them about it, correct?"

Antonio is my father's right hand. Probably the biggest challenge to my position. If anyone is naturally poised to take over once something happens to my father, it would be Antonio. He's proven himself over the years. I rest my elbow on the table, chin in my hand as my gaze focuses on him, waiting for him to speak.

"Correct, Carlo," Antonio says. "We've had quite a few conversations, but they still insist on not listening. It's rather unfortunate." His tone doesn't match his words. He doesn't *care* that they won't listen. I think that's why he's done so well. Antonio is cold.

I'm colder. I just haven't proven that to them yet. All the men in this room underestimate me. To them, I'm just a little princess. Most of them have watched me grow into the woman I am today. They've been around that long. Eventually, the old guard has to give way for the new one. Don't they?

"Something needs to be done," Carlo says, looking out at his men. "Any ideas?"

"We take them out," says another one of my father's men, Damien. He's older than Antonio. He's been here for as long as I can remember and if the rumors are true...he had an affair with my mother at one point. Rumors spread in our circle all the time. So, who knows if it's true? Not that it matters. She's dead, out of the way.

I pull myself back to the now, back to reality. I can't help but scoff at Damien's idea and all eyes are on me again. Carlo turns to look at me, raising an eyebrow.

"Do you have an idea, Adelaide?" he asks. There are some snorts down the table. None of these men *know* me.

They don't know why I'm here. They probably assume that this is some cute 'take your daughter to work' thing for their head. There's no humor in my father's voice when he acknowledges me. Unlike them, he knows better than to underestimate me.

"Taking out the Luppino family ourselves is a dumb idea," I say. There's no fear in my voice. I'm not nervous. I know that this is where I'm supposed to be. I just have to show all of them. "They outnumber us by at least two hundred in their ranks. We start something and we lose a lot of our men. We run like scolded dogs with our tails tucked between our legs. What we do is we start a feud between them and the Papilla family. Get the two of them to go after each other. When their numbers are low, we step in and clean up. Two problems solved. We get rid of the Luppino's and we lower the ranks of the Papilla."

There's silence. Glances are exchanged among the men. I'd be a liar if I said there weren't just a few nerves I was fighting off. It's not accustomed for a woman to be in a meeting like this. It's definitely not accustomed for them to speak out, to come up with their plan. I'm not your typical woman.

Most would be happy to be a spoiled little princess. To me, that life sounds miserable. Why would I want *that* when I could have power? Everyone knows that power is so much better.

The silence is broken by my father's laughter. He leans over and presses a kiss on my cheek. I fight every instinct in me to pull away. It's embarrassing. Makes me feel like a little girl. If one of his men came up with an idea, they wouldn't get the same reaction.

"My daughter, the *genius!*" he exclaims with a smile. "All of you could learn something from Adelaide."

I don't try to fight off the proud smirk on my face. All eyes are on me, but for a different reason now. It's less 'why is she here?' and more 'who is she?' None of these men

know me outside of what I allow them to know. That's going to change.

"Sir?" A voice from the end of the table speaks up. All eyes turn to the source. It's one of the newest members, one that I've only casually seen a few times around the house. Christian. I don't know his story, but I know that he earned my father's trust easily. That's either a very good thing or a very bad thing.

"Yes, Christian?" Carlo responses.

"I don't wish to invalidate your daughter's idea –"

My eyes are locked on him. He has my full attention. Usually, when someone starts a sentence like that, they fully intend to do whatever it is they say that they don't. My eyes narrow as I wait for him to continue.

"What is it, Christian?" My father doesn't sound annoyed with him. Instead, his tone is more...fatherly with him. Close to how he speaks to me. That raises a few questions, but I don't say a thing, I let this play out.

"All I want to say is you should probably consider your own safety. By starting a feud between the two families, it may lead back to you."

I wait for it. Normally my father would be infuriated that someone spoke out like that, acted like he was an idiot who didn't think things through. Instead, Carlo gives him a gentle smile.

"You should know by now that we don't rush into things, Christian."

My curiosity when it comes to Christian is only growing. Why is my father so abnormally kind toward him? My father is not a cruel man unless he has to be, but the way he treats him is different.

I push that thought aside and choose to focus on explaining my idea a little bit better, relieving these men's minds of some worries.

I turn my attention to my nails, checking them for flaws as I speak. “That’s why we use street-level gangs to start. We work these people,” I say, thinking carefully. Every word that leaves my lips is chosen perfectly. There’s no room for mistakes. “Let it begin as a dispute over turf between two gangs working for both families. Slowly, quite slowly at that, the rivalry will move up until it reaches the top. A slow infection.”

My father is still beaming with pride. I can feel the pride bubbling off of him. It infects me and I fight the urge to smile. That could be seen as a weakness. I don’t want these men to think I’m some little girl who needs her daddy’s approval. I want them to view me as competent, a leader.

I save the urge to bask in my glory until later when I’m alone. For now, I’ll remain as cold as I have to be.

Until Antonio opens his mouth again. “Why is she here anyway?” he asks.

Chapter Two

Christian

I know of Adelaide Mansolillo. She's Carlo's only daughter. Everything in my file tells me she's your typical mafia princess. She wears designer clothes, spends her father's money without a care in the world. She never leaves the house without security. She shuts down clubs and raises hell. Before I took this job, I did my research.

The Mansolillo family may be one of the smaller ones in the city, but they're ambitious. They're more of a threat than the Luppino's or the Papilla's because they're ruthless. They're small because they're selective. They *run* things. There's not a thing in the city they don't have their hands in. From fixing horse races to drugs, prostitution, and gun trafficking. That's why I'm here to take them down.

I'll admit, I was a little disappointed when I got the assignment. Infiltrating the mob isn't the exciting FBI work you think you'll be doing when you sign up. At least not by playing the role of the computer geek. But it's a role that's worked well. Carlo Mansolillo trusts me, I'd go as far as to say that he likes me.

The others? Not so much. Maybe it's jealousy because Carlo treats me how they wish that he'd treat them. Like a son. Maybe he treats me that way out of pity. I think it's because men like them have to always shit on the underdog. They probably think I have no idea how to use a gun.

I've never agreed with Antonio on much. He's loud, annoying, and an asshole in general. But I have to second his question now. Why is Adelaide here?

She's trying to hide it, but she looks offended by that question. I can tell from the way her eyebrows furrow, the way her nose wrinkles and her eyes go back to her nails –

which are flawless, by the way. She keeps checking them for flaws, probably a nervous habit.

Carlo speaks before she can. I have to admit to myself that it would be hilarious to see her put Antonio in his place though.

“Because Adelaide is my only child,” he says, looking over at her. “It would do all of you good to respect her because unless she marries, everything will be falling into her hands when my time is up.”

There are gasps, whispers. No one expected that. Not even me. Antonio looks less than pleased with the answer, so do a lot of them. No one here wants to take orders from a woman much younger than most of them. So, Adelaide’s here to prove herself. She’s here to show that she can handle things.

That’s...not what I expected.

That changes things.

With that question answered, the meeting continues. Adelaide doesn’t say another word. She sits by her father’s side, dark eyes observing everyone in the room. I find her distracting. I want to know what’s behind those eyes. I want to know what she’s thinking. Adelaide is more of a threat than I realized.

As the meeting draws to an end, there’s murmuring among the men. None of them are happy about the revelation of Adelaide’s future. I’m sure most of the men in this room were hoping to somehow weasel their way in, become the ones set to take over for Carlo. In Antonio’s case, I’m sure he was *positive* that it was going to be him. He would’ve done anything – maybe even marry Adelaide for that position.

I can’t help but wonder if this is going to make my job easier. Maybe this will make these men more willing to testify against Carlo Mansolillo when I bring the family down. At this point, we have more than enough evidence. Carlo trusts me quite a bit. It’s just a matter of pieces falling into place.

Just as I gather my things to leave, I'm stopped by Carlo.

"Christian? May I speak to you for a moment?"

It shouldn't, but my heart drops in my chest. Every time Carlo asks to speak to me, I immediately assume I've been made. That doesn't really fill anyone with confidence. I just understand the risk I'm putting myself in by being here.

I hope the nerves don't show on my face as I approach the head of the table. Everyone else has emptied out of the room, except for Carlo and Adelaide. This close, I can see her features better.

Adelaide is gorgeous. I've seen photos, but they can be deceiving. Up close, she looks like she could be a model. Long dark hair, even darker eyes, tanned skin. Every detail is flawless, from her makeup to her manicure. Appearance is everything to her.

"Yes sir?" I ask, pulling my attention back to Carlo. I'm sure it's an unspoken crime in the family to stare at the boss's daughter for too long.

"This is my daughter, Adelaide. Adelaide, this is Christian. I don't think the two of you have had the chance to meet before?"

I shake my head. "No sir." Then I look back at Adelaide. I'm not sure how to greet her. I've never had to before. Should I bow? Shake her hand? Kiss her cheek?

Adelaide's attention is on me. It's like she can sense I don't know what to do, so she makes the first move. She extends her hand and I take it, shaking it gently.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Christian," she says.

And I still can't read her. I don't know if she actually means it and I don't know why I *care* if she actually means it or not. I shouldn't, considering just *who* she is.

“The pleasure is mine, Adelaide,” I respond before I drop her hand. My attention goes back to Carlo who I’m assuming I haven’t offended seeing as I’m still alive.

“As you heard, Adelaide has an idea. Christian, you’re my best man when it comes to strategy and numbers. I want you to work with Adelaide and crunch some numbers, help us come up with an exact plan. During this, you’ll report to her. She’s in charge.”

I catch the smug look on Adelaide’s face out of the corner of my eye, but I don’t look at her. I keep my attention on Carlo.

“Understood,” I say.

There’s no place to talk back to Carlo. I know that. I don’t know how I ended up here. So trusted by him. It’s like he sees something in me – or perhaps he *knows* and this is a ‘keep your enemies closer’ situation. What kills me the most is that I *don’t* know. All I know is that now I’m working side by side with Adelaide and I need to make sure the raid happens before her plan comes to fruition or else things in the city are going to get rough.

“Give me your address,” Adelaide *commands*. “I’ll come by later tonight and we can start working.”

And I do it.

It’s later in the evening when there’s a knock at my apartment door. It’s not my *real* apartment, of course. I’m renting it just for this purpose. I have a house in a different state, close to my family, who I’m sure are worried sick about this assignment.

I open the door to find Adelaide standing with two larger men, obviously security. She flashes me a smile before turning to the men. “You can leave now.” It’s an order, phrased with false sugar-sweetness. They don’t move

immediately, and she scoffs. “I *said* you can leave. Go downstairs. Christian and I will be working for the evening.”

She doesn’t give either of them a chance to respond. She doesn’t even give me a chance to invite her in. Adelaide steps right past me and into my apartment. I awkwardly close the door behind her, leaving the security guards standing there.

She’s looking over everything. Standing in the center of the room, not touching a thing. And once again, I don’t know how I’m supposed to interact. Should I ask her if she wants some water? Fall to my knees and thank her for being there? Okay, that one seems a little dramatic. The point is, I feel unprepared and there’s a terrifying feeling for me.

Adelaide takes a seat on my couch, crosses her legs. She’s wearing a dress – pink. Probably designer. It stops at her mid-thigh, and I have to forcibly tear my eyes away from her long legs. She’s wearing heels too. Every bit a princess, if the princess was the villain of the story.

“Sorry about that,” she says. “They insist on following me everywhere. Well, my father insists that they follow me everywhere. There was a kidnapping incident in middle school.”

I already knew about that. A rival family kidnapped Adelaide in hopes that Carlo would back off their territory. That family no longer exists these days. That was the first time the Mansolillo family fell onto the radar as an actual threat.

“That must have been terrifying,” I say, slowly coming over to sit next to her. My laptop is already on the table, I pick it up and open it.

“They were terrible kidnappers.”

Chapter Three

Adelaide

I didn't come here to unpack what most people would call 'childhood trauma'. I don't really see it that way. It happened. As far as kidnappings go, it was terribly boring. They threatened me but did nothing to make me believe those threats. That was the day I realized that I'm so much more powerful than most of these people.

Christian sits next to me, awkwardly fiddling with his laptop. I can't tell if *I* make him nervous, or if he's just a nervous person in general. He's a handsome man. Well-kept. Different from the other men who work for my father. His hair is blonde, he has blue eyes. He's tall, clearly well-built but slender. Like he doesn't spend all of his time in the gym lifting. He probably runs. I'd say maybe three miles a day? Tattoos go up both of his arms, highly detailed pieces. Expensive.

I did my research before coming over. Even if my father trusts him, that doesn't mean that I do. When I take over, I want to make sure I trust every man in this family. I want to make sure they all fear and respect me. Christian is a former hacker, has a rap sheet a mile long until he was jailed for hacking the feds. That's why my father sees him as useful.

His usefulness has yet to be proven to me. We're working on it. So far, so good.

"I already started crunching some numbers when it comes to the other two families," Christian says, pulling up a spreadsheet. "Trying to figure out where and when would be the best time to start things off."

I look at the screen. Numbers are not my strong suit. They don't need to be. That's why we have people like Christian, people we trust to handle that for us. But I still feel

like I need to know. There's only so much trust you can put in other people.

I lean back on the couch, tapping my heel against the hardwood floor. "Explain it to me. Every detail."

Christian nods. He goes back to the screen, bringing up the numbers. "So, the way it currently looks, we should wait three weeks. Both families do their biggest numbers at the beginning of the month. Attacking their profit is usually the best way to start an all-out war. I don't know exactly how you intend on doing that but –"

But I do. I have an exact plan that Christian doesn't need to know about. See, I've learned from watching my father over the years. You keep things close to your chest. The people who need to know, know. The ones who don't, don't. The more unnecessary people that know, the more likely things will go to hell. All I needed from Christian was the numbers.

"Don't worry about the how. I just needed the numbers," I tell him with a small smile. "Thank you, Christian. I appreciate the work. However, I'm going to ask you to run the numbers multiple times before I'm satisfied because I want to be sure. I'm sure you understand, right?"

If he's offended, he doesn't show it. Maybe that's why my father likes him so much. He listens. He doesn't talk back or make faces. Even some of his best men are too chatty.

Christian nods. "I can do that, Adelaide. Is there anything else you'd like?"

I shake my head. "That's fine. Just run them a few more times for me."

I don't get up to move. I stay seated comfortably next to him on the couch. My father might trust Christian, but he's going to earn my trust. I watch as his fingers slide over the keyboard, rapid-fire clicking fills the silence of his apartment. I don't fully understand everything that he's doing, but I watch as he does it multiple times.

I'm impressed. It's impressive.

About thirty minutes pass as we sit in silence, just the sound of Christian's fingers on the keyboard bouncing around us permeates the air. Gives me something to focus on. My mind starts to come up with a pattern, noticing what button sounds like what when Christian speaks again.

"Done," he says, turning to show me the screen. He slides the laptop into my lap, moving just a bit closer to me. He smells like expensive cologne. It's pleasant, not overwhelming like the body sprays so many men use these days. "I ran it again in different windows, if you click through, you'll see that the numbers stay the same. This is going to be your best shot, Adelaide."

I click through the windows, scanning over each one. It's just as he said. The outcome is always the same. Deep down, I wish I had another man to run this all by. Someone on *my* side, someone *I* chose, just in case. I have to trust Christian and the numbers on this.

"Great work Christian," I say, hoping it sounds genuine. I'll be honest, I don't pay compliments that often. Sometimes I feel like I'm surrounded by idiots. Christian might be different.

I can't help but notice the red that creeps onto his cheeks. I can chalk it up to him blushing over the compliment in general...or blushing because it comes from me.

"Thank you, Adelaide." He doesn't make eye contact and that tells me everything that I need to know.

I shift on the couch, handing him back his laptop. I turn my body to face his, quietly debating my next move. Go home? Why? The night is still young. This took no time at all. Let's see just how much I can trust Christian. Let's see that if when all is said and done, he'll be on my side.

"Let's go out." It's not an offer. It comes out more like an order. I'm going out either way. It's up to Christian if he wants to come. It's probably best if he chooses to come.

“What?”

“Go out. Have a drink or something,” I clarify. “We’re probably the youngest involved in this entire thing.” Not a lie. Christian is much closer to my age than any of my father’s other men. I’ve never had an interest in any of them. Some of them have spent years staring at me, watching me grow. It’s unsettling.

These are the same men who will never give me the respect that I deserve.

“I, uh,” Christian is stuttering over his words. It’s clear that I put him on the spot. “Should we do that?” he finally asks.

I shrug. “Why not? It’s just going out. One drink, Christian. Clearly, you don’t get out too much.”

If he’s offended by my statement, once again, he doesn’t show it. He just looks at me and runs a hand through his blonde hair. “If – if you insist, Adelaide,” he finally agrees.

I flash him a smile. “I insist. Now, there’s just a teeny, tiny problem.” He looks at me, already appearing to be exhausted, like this little game is just too much for him. He’ll just have to get used to playing. “We need to get past security.”

“What?! Why would we—”

Jesus. You’d think the man would be excited that I want to spend some time with him. Not everyone gets that offer. I roll my eyes. “Because then they’d want to follow me and honestly? It’s exhausting. They’re not very good at staying hidden. It always causes a scene.”

Christian looks at me and looks toward his front door where we both know that security is still waiting. “How are we supposed to do that, Adelaide?” he asks.

I don’t have a plan. I thought that he would, considering everyone is always touting how smart he is. No matter. I can figure this out. I glance around his apartment, before letting my eyes settle on the window.

“Do you have a fire escape, by chance?”

Chapter Four

Christian

So, I really, really don't know how my night ended up here.

But I'm pretty sure I *technically* just kidnapped a mafia boss's daughter.

Despite my entire being yelling at me to tell her 'no' when she asked if I wanted to go out, I said 'yes'. I don't really know why. It's not like I need to get close to Adelaide to complete my assignment. In fact, she's just a cliff note when it comes to this assignment. But ultimately, I agreed. I can figure out the reason later.

I helped her sneak out my window, trying not to notice how soft her hands were when I helped her out or how nice she smelled. My job doesn't leave a lot of time for relationships. Who wants to be with a man who disappears for months at a time? Who's always in danger? And being constantly busy doesn't allow for a lot of hookup time.

Definitely besides the point.

I help Adelaide down from the fire escape and lead her to my car. It's nothing special. I don't drive anything flashy because I don't need any excess attention. I can tell that Adelaide is *far* from impressed.

She looks at the car with a raised eyebrow when I open the passenger side door for her. "This is your car?" she asks. "Doesn't my father pay you more? I thought you were a hacker. Couldn't you just...hack your bank accounts and put more money in them?"

"If I wanted to get caught. I don't spend all my money on flashy things," I tell her.

Adelaide looks like she wants to say something else, but she doesn't. She gets in the car. As soon as I'm in

next to her, she's rattling off directions to a club. I don't argue, just follow said directions.

"So, what happens when they figure out that we're gone?" I ask. Why does it feel like I'm going to end up in a world of trouble? Carlo is going to have me *killed* – and I don't say that lightly.

She shrugs. "It's not the first time I've snuck away from them."

I know that shouldn't come as a surprise, but it does. Just a little. Adelaide comes off as someone who doesn't believe rules apply to her, probably because they never have. She's always been able to get away with whatever she wanted.

"Yeah? So, what happens?" I ask. "Is your father going to have my head?"

She snorts. It's the first time I've ever heard Adelaide be anything but put together and ladylike. She acts like my statement is completely ridiculous.

"My father never finds out. All I have to do is threaten security with their jobs and they won't say a word. After all, how good were they doing their job if I was able to sneak away so easily?"

Despite the entire situation, I find myself smiling. "You really have it all figured out, don't you?" I ask.

"Obviously."

The club is downtown. It's full of neon lights and blaring music. Adelaide gets us in without having to wait in the line outside. The world bows to her when she moves. She's every bit the princess that she's written to be in her file.

It shouldn't be a surprise that I don't hang out in clubs very often. I usually only bother with them when I'm undercover, like now. They've never been my scene. But I find

myself sitting at the bar as Adelaide orders us shots. She swears up and down that I have to try whatever she ordered. I try not to look like I'm counting down the minutes until we get the hell out of here.

The bartender puts two shot glasses in front of us, filled with a bright yellow liquid. It doesn't look appetizing in the least, but when Adelaide throws back the shot without a problem, I follow her lead. It's not awful. There's definitely a burn, and it's slightly sour.

I put my glass back down on the bar top. "So, we're not...drinking to get drunk, right?" I ask slowly. Because I really, really don't have to babysit a drunk Adelaide. She's already demanding enough. I feel like if she were to get drunk, she would be utterly exhausting, and truthfully, I don't know if I could handle it without saying or doing something that *would* result in my death.

How did everything get flipped so fucking quickly? I've been on this job for months now. Staying low, not getting noticed. Adelaide walked into that restaurant today and suddenly that all changed. Now I'm at the bar, throwing back shots with one of the people I evidently need to bring down.

At first, I was just going to ruin Adelaide's life. Not on purpose. Not out of cruelty, but by association. Once her father was taken down, all their assets would be seized. Adelaide would be left with nothing. Now that my reports will include her involvement...she's probably going down with him.

I try not to think about that as she smiles at me. Bright and beautiful, even with the neon lights reflecting off of her face.

"I don't drink to get drunk. I drink to relax a little and have some fun," she says, calling for another round of shots. "It helps ease things a little bit, y'know? Just to relax. You're not going to have to hold my hair back while I puke in a trashcan outside or anything. Promise."

Once the bartender brings the next round of shots over, I throw one back with Adelaide. She doesn't immediately go to order more once those are gone. Her dark eyes are on me, reflecting all of the lights from the club. They flash pink and purple and blue as that smile tugs over her face again.

"Do you want to dance with me, Christian?" she asks.

I smile back at her but shake my head. "I don't dance, Adelaide."

She makes a face before rolling her eyes. "You don't *have* to dance. All you do is hold my hips. I do all the moving."

It's not a lie. I really don't dance. And despite how much I want to say yes, I know that I shouldn't. I can't let things get too messy with Adelaide. That would make this all so much more complicated. I shouldn't be as intrigued by her as I am. I shouldn't want to dance with her. I shouldn't want to be close to her.

I shake my head. "You dance, I'll watch."

That doesn't please her. Her nose wrinkles and she pouts, just a little. Clearly, she's used to getting her way. She doesn't stomp her feet or anything. She doesn't throw a hissy fit. She just nods.

"Okay then. I'll dance. You watch. I'll put on a show for you." She lets that hang in the air, winking at me before moving away from the bar.

I can't stop my eyes from following her. Adelaide walks like she owns the entire place. Her hips sway with a purpose. She's confident. She's beautiful and she knows it. And...she's slightly cocky about it. Something that should be a complete turnoff, but I just find it pulling me in more.

She finds a spot toward the edge of the crowded dance floor, right in my line of sight. She looks back over at me, almost as if to check that I'm actually watching before she

starts to move. I watch her hips sway, watch her run her fingers through that long, dark hair.

I feel entranced. I feel like I'm being pulled toward her. She sees me watching and smiles as she continues to dance. I know I'm not the only person watching her. How can I be? She draws attention to her like a moth to a flame.

Like a siren, she starts to lure me in. She loses herself in the music, almost forgets that I'm there watching her. I find myself leaving the bar behind despite what I said earlier, moving closer to where she is. I just...want to be close to her.

It feels like I'm losing my fucking mind. I don't know why I have to be close to her, but I do. When Adelaide notices me, she smiles up at me. I slip behind her, putting my hands on her waist. She takes them, moves them to her hips. She doesn't say a word, just continues dancing, moving to the beat of a song that I couldn't care less about.

I feel like a man possessed. Acting entirely against my will. Her hand comes up, wrapping around my neck, pulling me in deeper. My face is pressed to the crook of her neck, and I breathe her in. She smells like honey and flowers. Completely intoxicating.

She's grinding against me, and I'd be a damn liar if I said it wasn't having any effect on me. As much as I try to think about anything else, I can't think of anything but her. She's consuming every single one of my thoughts.

The song she's dancing to comes to an end and Adelaide turns in my arms, her arms go back to around my neck, pulling me in close. "I thought you didn't dance," she purrs up to me.

I chuckle. I don't feel like myself, it's like she's making me into someone that I'm not. She's bringing out a piece of me that I don't recognize.

"You looked lonely." The line sounds so fucking dumb to me. I expect to get an eye roll but Adelaide laughs.

“I was lonely. I was hoping you’d come dance with me, Christian.”

Her fingers are playing with the hair at the base of my neck, sending shivers down my spine.

“Happy to please,” I murmur.

“Are you? Because I think there’s something else you could do to please...” she trails off, but I know where her mind is going. Only because mine is going to the same exact place.

Chapter Five

Adelaide

This was never part of my plan. Which is a first. Everything I do is thoroughly thought through. I don't leave anything to chance because that's how things get messy. That's when you slip up and make mistakes. I don't know if this is a mistake or not. All I know is there's something about Christian that pulls me in.

It's probably because he's gorgeous. Who am I kidding? I barely know anything about him, aside from what I found in my research. And...he acts as if he respects me. Not a lot of people my father is involved with act like that toward me. Especially when I'm the one giving them orders.

So, yeah.

I don't do a lot of casual hookups. It's not a choice; I just don't get the opportunity. It's not like I can bring men home with me and when I'm out, security likes to follow me constantly. Not exactly a sexy situation. Right now, I'm free. I have the chance and I want to take it.

Christian's hands are still on my hips, keeping me close to him. My eyes are locked on his, waiting to see if he picks up where I'm going. Of course, he picked it up, he's a genius, isn't he? Now it just depends on whether he's down.

"Adelaide..." he says and then trails off. His blue eyes are full of want. That mind of his is probably trying to come up with thousands of reasons why we *shouldn't* do this. I don't want to hear why we shouldn't. We can worry about all of those later.

"I'm not drunk. You're not drunk. You're not some random stranger," although he *is* a stranger for the most part. "I want you. You want me, I think. Why not?"

I can see it behind those eyes, behind that want inside of them. He's trying to figure out the 'why not'. I don't want him to do that and deep down, I hope that he doesn't want to do it. I decide to take it a step further. Leaning up, I press my lips to his.

Christian stills completely. Shocked. I'm sure he's not used to women just kissing him when they feel like it. Just as I'm about to pull away and write this off as a total mistake, Christian is kissing me back. It's uncertain, tentative. I can work with that.

I take the lead. Feeling his lips against mine. They're soft. When my tongue runs over his bottom lip, he opens for me, and I kiss him deeply. I taste him on my tongue. He tastes good. It sends electricity through all of my nerves. It feels all-consuming. I want more.

When it breaks, we're pressed tightly together. My fingers are in his blonde hair, eyes looking up at him. "What do you say, Christian?" I purr. Everything in me is hopeful that that changed his mind...because I want to kiss him again.

Christian helps me back up the fire escape. No one's called my phone in a panic, so I'm assuming that security doesn't know that I left. Let's keep it that way. What's a bigger turn off than two men yelling at you about what you're *supposed* to do?

We get back inside of his apartment without an issue, and I can see that Christian's nerves are acting up again. He looks uncertain. I reach out for him and pull him to me. This isn't fun if the consent isn't enthusiastic.

"Christian? Are you —?"

He cuts me off (something that I would normally find extremely offensive. Christian gets a pass this time), "I'm

sure, Adelaide,” he says. He reaches toward me, gets his arms around my waist. He pulls me to him and kisses me again. It’s less tentative than before, surer. It feels like Christian knows what he wants – and it’s me.

I kiss him back. No hesitation on my part either. I’ve known I’ve wanted this since we were back at the club. Now that Christian feels the same, what’s stopping us? As the kiss deepens, he lifts me without an issue. He’s deceptively strong. I don’t *expect* him to be able to pick me up like I’m nothing, but he can. He carries me toward the bedroom, dropping me back on the bed.

His eyes are on mine as he leans down to kiss me again. All these preconceived notions I’ve had about Christian are wrong. He’s coming off much more confident than I expected, and I love every moment of it. I kiss him back, closing my eyes and sighing as our tongues brush again. I like the way he tastes. It makes my head feel delightfully hazy. Like I’m drunk on him.

Christian’s hand skates up my side. There’s nothing tentative about anything we’re currently doing. It’s all very sure. My leg hooks around his waist, keeping him close. Wanting to keep tasting him, wanting so much from him.

The kiss gets sloppy. A lot sloppier than I expected from someone like Christian. Even now, my mind is racing. Questions about him. Curiosities. There are so many unknowns about him and normally that would send me running. I hate not knowing *anything*. But with Christian, all of those questions seem to pull me in deeper.

His lips leave mine and I whine, wanting to keep tasting him. Instead, they travel down my jaw, down my neck. I sigh at the soft kisses. It’s unspoken between us, but I’m sure Christian knows better than to leave a mark. That makes things a little *too* dangerous. Hard to explain to my father and everyone else.

He doesn’t. He stops his kisses and sits back before having me sit up so he can get me out of this dress. He

fumbles with the zipper for a moment, and it's a little adorable. I see his cheeks flush when that happens. I decide against teasing him, worried that that will scare him off. As if that will be the thing that pumps the breaks between us.

He gets my dress off, my bra follows. He lays me back again and I feel his eyes on me. He looks me up and down, red in his cheeks before he smiles.

"You're beautiful, Adelaide," he murmurs. "A work of art." The compliments he purrs sound genuine and despite myself, despite who I am, I know that my cheeks are now just as red as his.

Christian's lips go back to my body. Back to my neck where he leaves the softest of kisses that have me sighing, closing my eyes, and relaxing into the feeling. With the dress out of the way, the kisses continue lower. Over my collarbone and down to my breasts. He cups one in his hand before bringing his lips to the other.

When he takes my nipple into his mouth, I gasp, arching into him. His mouth lavishes my breast with attention, his tongue teasing my nipple until I'm wiggling beneath him. Only then does he switch breasts, repeating the same process with the other. My fingers run through his hair, eyes closing against, body arching desperately toward him.

Then his mouth goes lower. Over my ribcage and my abdomen. He slides down until he's on his elbows between my thighs. When I look down at him, he smiles up at me. Somehow sexy and charming and adorable and I *want* him. Maybe even need him. What the fuck do I know right now?

He kisses my mound through my panties, making me shiver again. That makes him smile as he brings his finger up, slowly running it up and down my slit. I want him to rip these damn panties off and give me what I want. I whine, arching toward him again. Christian is in no rush to give in to me.

He keeps teasing me, seeming to enjoy the way my hips arch toward him, the frustrated noises that I'm making. Not quite moans, *whines*. Whines of need.

Chapter Six

Christian

Adelaide is so used to getting what she wants. That much is obvious. Everything about her screams spoiled princess. Even now, she's expecting me to just give her what she wants. That would be too easy. Dragging it out is just as much fun. I'm loving every frustrated noise from her lips. I'm loving how she whines, thinking that'll get her what she wants. Her hips keep bucking toward my hand as if that'll convince me more.

I don't know how I ended up here. I don't know why I gave into her. This has nothing to do with my job. This isn't going to give me more information. The truth is, I get lonely and Adelaide is a beautiful woman. If she wants me, wants *this*, I'd be a fucking idiot to turn her down.

I'm sure that this will complicate things in the future. I'm sure this is going to get messy. It wouldn't be my life if it didn't. Right now, I don't care.

"Christian," she whines my name, fingers threading through my hair.

I want to see how far I can take her. There's a wet spot forming on her panties. Clearly, she wants this. As if her noises and begging weren't proof enough. I lean in and lick at it, not quite giving her what she wants. Then I look up at her and smile. "That's not the magic word, Adelaide," I chide before going back to just lazily dragging my finger up and down, watching her squirm.

I can see it on her face. She wants to defy me. People don't tell Adelaide to use the 'magic word'. She never has to. That's what makes this so much more fun. I've been trained to be a very patient man. I can wait. I just don't think that she can.

She makes a noise of frustration. It's like using that word will take everything from her. She's weighing her options before *finally*, I hear it leave her lips. It's so quiet, barely audible, but I hear it.

"Please?" she asks.

There's a darker part of me that wants to make her say it again. Louder. Make sure it's heard. But I don't want to push my luck with Adelaide too much this time. This time? There isn't going to be a next time. This isn't something that needs to continue.

I ignore that thought. I hook my fingers underneath her panties and peel them off of her. She kicks them off her ankles and onto the bedroom floor. I get back between her thighs, look at her, and smile. Fuck, every bit of her is beautiful.

Deciding that she's had enough teasing for now, I lean in and finally run my tongue up her slit. Adelaide gives a moan of approval, arching toward my tongue. I lap at her a few more times before I use my hand and spread her.

I want to taste every inch of her. I want to have Adelaide squirming beneath me, begging for more. I want her to completely lose herself, drop the act and see who she really is. Because...I feel like there's more to Adelaide than she lets on.

Or maybe that's just my horniness talking. Maybe I want to believe the girl that I'm sleeping with is so much more than what she lets on. I really don't care right now. I'm too caught up in the idea of making sure Adelaide feels good.

My tongue explores every inch of her. She tastes like heaven. My mouth moves up to her clit, teasing it with my tongue just like I had her nipples. It has her whining, squirming. The noises that she's currently making are music to my ears. I want to keep pulling them from her. I don't stop at the teasing. I give her clit a few full licks before gently sucking on it.

“Christian!” she gasps and that’s *everything* I’ve ever needed to hear. It’s fucking perfect. Everything about this is perfect.

I push a finger inside of her. She’s warm and tight, feels like velvet. I move it gently, letting her get used to it as my mouth focuses back on her clit. Adelaide is squirming against my lips, her fingers are tangled in my hair, trying to keep me in place. Even at a time like this, she doesn’t want to give up control. The problem is, I don’t want her to have it either. I want Adelaide to give it up completely. Just for a little bit.

My free hand moves to her hip, holding her in place to keep her from squirming anymore. I add another finger with the first, hooking it inside of her once I find the spot that makes her get *loud*. My mouth keeps switching from her clit to lapping lower down. I feel like a man possessed. Like I’m suffocating and she’s oxygen. I’m operating on this entire need to just make her lose it. To make Adelaide feel good.

It’s like even when she’s not in control, Adelaide is somehow in control. She doesn’t even have to try.

Her noises start to get louder, the fingers in my hair grip tighter. I know that she’s close, so I keep doing exactly what I’m doing. My mouth goes back to focusing full time on her clit. Her body starts to shake, fingers tightening in my hair as she keeps me in place. She comes with a cry, and I keep doing everything that I’m doing, let her ride it out completely.

The grip on my hair loosens and her body falls back onto the bed. She’s shaking and yeah, fine, I feel ridiculously proud about that. Part of me wants to make some quip, but I also don’t know how Adelaide would handle that. She’s completely unreadable. So, I give her a few more licks as she gets her breathing back to normal.

I pull away, sitting up on my knees so I can look at her. Really look at her. Her tanned skin has a red flush to it,

her hair is just a little messy, lips parted as she pants. Somehow, she *still* looks like she belongs on the cover of a fashion magazine. I don't understand how one person can look so perfect. It's mindboggling.

But I can't focus on that right now. I'm desperate for her. I'm achingly hard. I *need* Adelaide. I start to peel myself out of my clothes and her eyes are on me. She doesn't try to hide it. She's taking in every inch of me and deep down, I want her to be impressed. I don't know why it matters so much, but it does.

I strip down and slide back between her thighs. She runs a hand down my chest, over some of my tattoos, I can see her dark eyes studying them, but she doesn't say anything.

I slick myself up before starting to push inside. I take it slow, letting her take me inch by inch. I feel her stretch around me and watch as pleasure crosses over her pretty face. It's a sight that will forever be burned into my memory.

Every part of me knows that this is wrong. Wrong because of where we both stand. After today I know that Adelaide is a threat. I'm going to ruin her entire life and she has no idea. This feels like a huge betrayal, but I'm doing my best not to think about it. I just want to lose myself in her. That's all that matters at this moment.

Once I'm fully inside, I start to move. Adelaide wraps a leg over my waist, bringing her hips up to meet mine. We find a pace together, moving so perfectly as one. One of her hands grips my bicep, those perfectly manicured nails of hers biting into my skin.

I reach down and take her other hand, lacing our fingers together and pinning it above her head. She seems to approve. Our eyes are locked as we move. She tries to up the pace, so I give. I move quickly before leaning down, capturing her lips in another heated kiss.

Everything about this moment feels nothing less than perfect. She's kissing me back, taking just a little bit of control of the kiss. Her tongue pushes past my lips and I give into her willingly. I let her take control, at least for a moment. It's clearly where Adelaide feels most comfortable.

As the kiss deepens, our hips quicken. I don't think I'm going to be able to hang on too long. I feel like I'm drowning in Adelaide. In everything about her. She's driving me fucking insane. I just have to make sure this is good for her. I angle my hips a bit and her nails dig into my arms more, telling me that I'm doing something right. That's all I need.

Her kiss gets sloppier, and I know she's about to lose that control she fought so hard for. I quicken my hips, losing the pace that we set together so I can slam into her, angled perfectly to hit that right spot. The noises that Adelaide makes are my new favorite thing in the world. They're beautiful. I don't care if my neighbors hear us...I'm not even considering her security at the moment.

I feel her tighten around me, squeezing me. Her back arches off the bed and she cries out as she comes. Once again, it's forever burned into my memory how gorgeous she is. She's panting, sweat on her forehead. I let go of her hand, both hands going to her hips to keep her in place as I chase after my climax.

It's not long before I am following her over the edge. With a final thrust, I come. My head drops to the crook of her neck, my hips rolling into hers a few more times as I come down. I've never felt so thoroughly spent. I feel Adelaide's hands on my back, stroking it gently. There's something almost affectionate about it.

I have no idea where we go from here.

Chapter Seven

Adelaide

Christian falls onto the bed next to me. He doesn't try to cuddle, likely wondering if that's okay. He seems like the type to cuddle after sex though, so I take the initiative, curl my body into his. His arm comes around me without hesitation. I'm not some heartless bitch, despite what most people will say. I'm not going to just get my rocks off and leave him hopeless. Christian reminds me of a puppy. He needs some reassurance or something.

And even if he *doesn't*, I want to be close to him for a moment. That was...pretty fucking great for the first time. Definitely great for someone like Christian. He looks like he doesn't see much action but he's...surprisingly good. I'd fuck him again.

I don't quite voice it like that though. "That was fun," I murmur, my fingers tracing over the tattoos on his chest. There's a clock. A grandfather clock over his left pec. I'm curious about it. My fingers ghost over the outline.

I don't do tattoos. First, my father would *kill* me. Second, I don't want to deal with having to hide it or anything. That doesn't mean that I don't find them hot on guys.

"It was fun," Christian agrees. I think he's too scared to say much else like I'll have his head or something if he says the wrong thing. Well, he's not *completely* wrong. He notices my attention on his tattoo, watches as I repeatedly trace the outline. It's like he can read my mind. "I got it for my brother," he admits in a quiet tone. "The clock's set at the time he died. I know. It's morbid as hell but...it just always stuck with me. Felt like having the time he was born would be weirder."

I didn't expect us to start trauma dumping after sex, but I have to appreciate his honesty. So much so that I

decide to share my own story.

“I have a brother,” I admit, my fingers still tracing over his tattoo. I don’t know why I feel the need to open up to him. I know that he did, but that generally doesn’t matter. A simple ‘I’m sorry’ would usually suffice. “He’s locked up. My father refuses to acknowledge him as part of the family anymore because Mansolillos don’t get caught. Even when he gets out, he’s completely disowned. It’s weird, y’know? Having to pretend like my brother doesn’t exist when he does.”

Christian seems to hum it over. His hand is stroking my arm as he keeps me close to him. “That’s unfortunate. I guess, speaking from experience, I would do anything to have my brother around. I don’t think I could ever *pretend* he didn’t exist.”

“You don’t know my father. Not as well as you think you do. Talking to Mattia would be a sin in his eyes. We’re lucky that he didn’t rat us out when he got caught. My father even refuses to put money on his books.”

Why am I talking about any of this? I haven’t thought about my brother once during the three years he’s been locked away. Once the arrest happened, we washed our hands of his. But Mattia was a *good* brother. He was kind to me, took care of me. He was a good friend and losing him kind of sucks.

“My brother, Ronnie. He was a good guy. Never really did anything wrong. Even when we were kids. He watched out for me when he didn’t have to. He was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. Stray bullet got him. Total freak accident, but it really made me realize how fucked up this world could be.”

Silence travels between us. I don’t know what to say to that. I take a breath before I laugh. It’s totally inappropriate and I can feel Christian’s blue eyes on me. He probably thinks I’m a complete nut case.

“Sorry, sorry. It’s not your story. It’s...we just had really good sex and now we’re just talking about trauma? It’s kind of insane,” I say, really hoping he’s not offended. That was never my intention. I just find it...a little funny.

I watch Christian’s face for his reaction, trying to read him. Then I see it, amusement flickering in his eyes. “You’re right. It’s a little...insane,” he chuckles. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be such a downer.”

“No. No. You’re fine,” I promise. I lean in and kiss him. It’s soft and gentle. Nothing like the hungry kisses from before. “I should probably get going though.”

I can’t stay the night. We both know that. Or at least I hope he does. There would be far too many questions asked if I didn’t come home.

“Right,” he nods. Awkwardness balances in the air between us. Neither of us is quite sure what to say.

I’ve never slept with one of my father’s men before, despite rumors. None of them have ever been an interest to me. Until Christian. I’m going to have to see him around and pretend like we didn’t do this. I don’t – I’ll figure it out.

I slide away from him, finding my discarded clothes on his bedroom floor. “Um, thanks for your help?” I offer. “And I had fun. Dancing, drinking, sneaking out with you. Oh, and the sex was pretty great.”

He laughs, sitting up. Christian really is a gorgeous man. I take a moment to just stare at him before I continue getting dressed.

“You’re right. It was pretty great. And you know, don’t mention it, Adelaide. I’m happy to help anytime.”

“Is that a *sexual* thing, Christian?” I ask with a smirk. “Because if that’s the case...” I let that thought linger in the air before I blow him a kiss. I do a once over of myself in the mirror, making sure I look as put together as possible before I leave.

There's the most annoying spot on the window in front of me, like someone forgot to clean just that *one* smudge. If I squint just a little bit harder, maybe it's actually a small chink in the glass. I can't really tell from here. If I could get a little bit closer...

"Adelaide," my father's gentle voice brings my thoughts away from whatever is going on with the window. "Have you been listening?"

"Of course." No. I zoned out of his conversation about fifteen minutes ago. It's the same old shit. Just my father rambling about plans and needs. It's the same things that we always discuss. Excuse me for just not *loving* this little repeated conversation.

My mind is other places. Big surprise. Although, maybe what I *am* focusing on *is* a surprise.

I can't stop thinking about Christian.

Before any assumptions are made about 'big feelings' or whatever, let me backtrack. It's not the whole schoolgirl 'Christian is consuming my thoughts' situation. I'm not mentally doodling hearts with our names together (what even is his last name?). It's just...the sex was really good.

I don't get laid that often, so I can't stop hyper-fixating on how good it was last night. I remember just how good he was at driving me over the edge, the purr in his voice, his *mouth*. If I focus on it for too long, I'm going to start squirming in my seat. All I know for sure is that couldn't be the end of it. I need more from him – and I always get what I want.

I just have to make sure I don't come across as desperate. How unappealing is that?

Other than the sex, I can't stop thinking about my brother. I haven't thought of Mattia in years, but one

conversation with Christian and he's haunting my thoughts. I guess it's as simple as I miss my brother. I miss having him around. I miss being able to talk to him.

When Mattia was caught with drugs (something so, so small considering everything else we dabble in), we were all expecting a slap on the wrist for him – from the law and my father. But they threw the whole damn book at him. As soon as that happened, my father was so quick to write him off. I thought the fact that Mattia didn't squeal on the entire family should've been enough to keep him in my father's good graces, but it wasn't.

And even completely written off, Mattia still hasn't ratted on us. He's a good man – and I miss him. I just don't know how to approach that topic with my father. It's a forbidden one. When Mattia is released, am I still expected to act like he's dead?

“Adelaide,” my father says my name again. This time it's a little less gentle than before. He's completely over me zoning out. I figure I have one more opportunity before he just kicks me out of his study.

“I'm sorry, father,” I say in earnest. I don't like getting on his bad side. I don't like annoying him. “My mind just feels a thousand other places today. I promise that I'll get it together.”

The gentleness is back on his face. He nods once. “Alright, Adelaide. I was asking you about your work with Christian. Tell me about last night.”

I really, really can't.

Chapter Eight

Christian

When I woke up this morning, my bed still smelt like Adelaide's perfume. Honey and flowers. Just as intoxicating as the night before. I laid in bed for a long time, staring up at the ceiling in the dark, letting the full weight of my actions slam down on me over and over again.

I slept with Adelaide Mansolillo. There was no logical reason for me to do that. Nothing about sleeping with Adelaide would make my job more successful. I just did it because...I wanted to. Barely a few hours with her and I was successfully tangled in her web. I doubt I'm the first person to feel that way about her. How could I be?

That brings everything else crashing down upon me. Firstly, I feel like a total sleaze on multiple levels. I slept with a girl who doesn't *know* me. She knows nothing about me. Everything she knows about is fake – well, mostly everything. We'll get to the real part in a second. I'm actively trying to ruin her life. Now that I know how deeply involved she is, my goal should be to get Adelaide behind bars with the rest of her family. Let her stand trial.

As far as I can tell, she hasn't been a part of anything terrible. She hasn't put a price on anyone's head. She hasn't organized an international drug ring. This is her first venture into mafia activity, and she technically hasn't done anything yet. Maybe...maybe I can save her.

But that brings me to my second reason, why would I? Why would I want to give any of the Mansolillo's mercy? They're the reason that Ronnie's dead.

I knew the story about Adelaide's brother. I know that he's in prison. I know that he's been disowned. I know because Mattia is the reason Ronnie was shot. He was involved in a drug deal gone wrong. Tried to rip the guy he

was selling to off. The bullet that hit Ronnie was meant for him. Mattia was arrested moments later, pulled over for speeding and then they found the drugs.

But Mattia is alive and Ronnie isn't. That was the reason I agreed to take this mission. My superiors warned me that it would be highly emotional, and it has been. Looking at Carlo's face every fucking day kills me. I just want to get justice for Ronnie. No matter what that looks like. It's the least he deserves from me.

Security checks my ID and opens the gate for me to drive through. I've spent a lot of time at the Mansolillo Mansion. It sits just outside the city. Sprawling and decadent, just like something you'd see on TV. Carlo called for another meeting, this time at his home, meaning it's something he wants to play closer to the chest. The fact that I've been invited likely means it has something to do with Adelaide's plan.

I pull up the curved driveway, park my car right next to the fountain and kill the engine. I can understand Adelaide's distaste last night. My car looks severely out of place here.

The security at the front door takes one look at me before letting me inside. The mansion is gorgeous. The foyer looks straight out of a movie, all white with stairs on either side of the room, leading to the next floor. None of us are allowed upstairs. Everything up there is private. Sometimes it feels like we're barely allowed downstairs.

I'm not the only one waiting. Antonio is here (not a surprise), so is Damien. Carlo's two most loyal men. They both hardly acknowledge me when I enter, so I tuck myself to the side, pretending to be very interested in a statue of a goddess off to the side. I think it's Athena?

“Christian!” Antonio’s *shout* of my name pulls my thoughts from the statue. I hate when their attention turns to me. I’d prefer they keep pretending that I don’t exist.

“Hm?”

“What did Carlo want with you yesterday? You didn’t leave with the rest of us. Were you scolded for speaking out about *Adelaide’s* plan?” The distaste in his voice when he talks about Adelaide is *clear*.

“No. He just wanted to talk numbers. I helped Adelaide out with some probability stuff last night.” I feel like that’s safe enough to answer, right? It doesn’t give away too much. I know that Adelaide wants to keep this close.

“Oh? You got to spend time with Adelaide last night? What was that like?” Damien jumps in, waggling his eyebrows suggestively. “Is that going to be her role? Spending *quality* time with each of us? In that case, maybe having her around won’t be so bad...”

I don’t know *why* but I hate hearing them talk about Adelaide like that. I shouldn’t care, but I do. Because she’s not just a piece of meat. She’s a force in her own right. Lashing out could possibly blow my cover or give them more ammo. Standing up for Adelaide would probably offend her too. Make her feel like I think she’s weak or something like that. So, I don’t give them a response, knowing they’d just find another joke to make.

Hell, I don’t even *need* to give them a response for them to find a joke. Antonio laughs.

“Fuck. You know she’s probably into some dominatrix shit, right? I bet she stepped on him and sweet little Christian *loved* it. Take your shirt off, Christian. Let’s see those bruises,” Antonio prods, walking over to poke at my chest.

I want to hit him. I want to hit him *so* badly. Carlo doesn’t like fighting amongst his men and Antonio is his right hand. I don’t want to lose my spot here when I’ve come so far.

This whole thing is so close to being over. I don't want to press my luck. I just push Antonio's hand away.

"Your silence is so telling, Christian. Adelaide made you beg, didn't she? Had you on your knees? I bet you *loved* that."

"Antonio –" Damien taps him on the shoulder, but Antonio shrugs him off.

"I'm sure I could get you on your knees, Antonio. Make you beg. Probably not for what you *really* want though," a voice purrs and I now feel incredibly embarrassed.

I look up. Antonio steps away from me and turns around. Adelaide is standing there, every inch of her looking perfect. Another designer dress, expensive heels, nothing out of place. She doesn't look pleased in the least. Her eyes don't meet mine and I feel like somehow *I'm* in trouble. I don't know why I care.

"Adelaide," he starts but she shakes her head before cutting him off.

"I don't want to hear it, Antonio. You're in *my* home. You will respect me when you're at my house. Do you really think my father would like to hear about the comments you made about me? I'm not just some random woman. I'm your boss's daughter – and one day, if you make it that long, I'll be your boss. You *will* respect me."

Her tone is deadly. I see fear in Antonio's eyes; he doesn't try to hide it.

He swallows, hard. "Yes Adelaide, I understand. I apologize."

"Good. Now, go home."

"Excuse me?"

"Go. Home." Her tone hasn't changed. It's still enough to send fear running through a grown man. Even a made man like Antonio. Damien has made himself scarce, tucked away by the stairs as he watches. "You're no longer

invited to this meeting. You can go home and think about how actions have consequences. Maybe you'll be involved next time.”

She doesn't give him any room to argue. She turns and starts to walk toward the dining room, hips swaying, heels clicking. Both Damien and Antonio are wide-eyed. Fuck. I feel a little wide-eyed myself.

That was a power play. Adelaide just sent her father's best man home, told him to sit out. The problem is when Carlo asks why...she'll probably tell him the truth. Antonio is in trouble. He knows it. We all know it.

“Psycho bi—” Antonio starts but Damien is quickly shaking his head.

“Don't, man. That woman *hears* everything. Maybe she's a witch. Anyway, just go home before you make it worse. I'll talk to Carlo.”

Probably a big mistake. Carlo strongly believes in family. I'm sure that Adelaide can do no wrong in his eyes – and all things considered, I don't think she made a bad call sending Antonio home.

Chapter Nine

Adelaide

I didn't do that for Christian.

I did it for me. These men need to understand that they can't just blatantly disrespect me without *consequences*. Antonio being my father's right-hand makes that even more important. I can use him as an example. No one is safe.

I sit in the dining room, waiting for the men to appear. Christian and Damien enter in silence, taking their seats at the table. Damien doesn't even look at me. Good. That's exactly what I want.

You don't rule by having people love and adore you. You rule by making them respect you. Usually, that involves putting the fear of God in them. I want these men to fear *and* respect me.

But even I have to admit that sitting in the same room as Christian after last night feels a little...weird. Not in a bad way. I just...can't stop thinking about it. It's ridiculous. It was just sex. It wasn't *that* good.

Okay, it kind of was.

All those thoughts vanish from my mind as my father enters the room. Christian and Damien stand out of respect and watch as he approaches the head of the table. He sits down and so do they, then his eyes turn to me.

"Where's Antonio?" he asks. "I thought I asked him to come."

"I sent him home."

Carlo runs a hand over his face. I know that he's trying to keep his temper in check. He's a very relaxed, calm man most of the time. Except when people do exactly what he

doesn't want them to. That's the case here. But I'm not concerned at all.

"Why did you send him home, Adelaide?"

"Because he was making extremely disrespectful comments about me. Do you want to be associated with a man who treats your only daughter like that?" I counter.

I watch as Carlo's face softens. That's exactly what I thought. It's not like I *really* cared about Antonio's comments. Men can be utterly disgusting. Getting bothered by it constantly would just be exhausting. However, I needed to make an example. If Antonio isn't safe, who is?

"Of course not," Carlo says, shaking his head. "I'll speak to him later. You need to be treated with nothing but respect." He looks *disappointed*. I'm not convinced it's just not an act, that he won't call Antonio later and apologize for *my* misbehavior.

When this whole empire is mine, things will be run differently.

With Antonio's absence addressed, Carlo decides to focus on the topic of the meeting. My plan.

"Last night, Christian and Adelaide ran the numbers for her idea. From what I hear, we'll likely be able to pull this off. Christian, can I see the numbers?"

I want to scoff. Of course, he doesn't just take my word for it. He wants to see it for *himself*. But I can't blame him. I don't run things yet – and this is a huge move. If anything goes wrong, this entire operation will be a huge mess.

Christian nods and retrieves his laptop from his messenger bag. He stands and walks to where I sit with my father, sliding in between us. His cologne floods my senses and reminds me of the night before. I watch as he types on the keyboard, focusing on his hands. I remember exactly how they felt last night.

I press my thighs together, trying to fight this flood of feelings off. What in the fuck is wrong with me? No one notices my momentary distraction. Christian is explaining to Carlo exactly what he explained to me last night, even showing him where he'd run the probability multiple times. All with the same outcome.

“Thank you, Christian,” Carlo nods.

Christian mutters a quiet ‘you’re welcome’ before grabbing his laptop and going back to his seat. Briefly, our eyes meet. I wonder if he knows exactly what’s on my mind when I look at him now. I wonder if he’s still thinking about last night too – or if he’s completely over it.

I hate that I care so much.

Carlo clears his throat before addressing the table again. “We’ll be making the move at the beginning of next month. Damien, since Antonio isn’t with us, you’re going to be in charge of stirring things up between the Luppino’s and the Papilla’s. Effect their supplies and whatnot. Don’t make it obvious but begin the rumbles of a turf war. I want you to get our best men on it. Understood?”

“Yes, Carlo.”

“And you’ll be reporting to Adelaide, who in return will be reporting to me. Is that understood as well?”

That seems less pleasing to Damien who slowly nods. He doesn’t like it. That much is obvious on his face, but he doesn’t have a choice. Is he going to tell Carlo no?

I know that none of this matters. I’m still going to be reporting everything back to my father. It isn’t *real* power. Not yet. But it’s the closest I’m going to get until I manage to take over. I’m not waiting for my father to step down. I’m going to step up. It’s a dog-eat-dog world, right? Family is only blood. Power is all that matters.

“Christian, you’ll continue to work with Adelaide as well as your other weekly duties, understood? I expect you to keep us updated on numbers.”

“Yes sir.”

I speak up. “Christian,” his blue eyes turn to look at me when I speak, all of his attention on me. “How good are you at hacking?” I ask. It might seem like a repetitive question considering he was arrested for hacking the feds, but he got caught. I need him to *not* get caught.

His cheeks flush and he shrugs a shoulder. I already know I’m not going to get a cocky answer from him. That’s not who Christian is. “Decent, I think. Why?”

All eyes are on us. Everyone wants to know what I’m thinking. This isn’t something that I even discussed with my father. Sometimes you just have to make moves yourself. You can’t depend on everyone around you to do it.

“Would you be able to hack the Papilla and the Luppino’s communications? Like, compose text messages and whatnot that seems to come from them? Plant the seeds of a turf war? Or a *rumbling* of one?” I ask.

Christian seems to think over my question before nodding slowly. “I think I would be able to do that, Adelaide.”

“Great. Let me know and we’ll discuss it further,” I say before turning back to Carlo. “It’s an even better way to be hands-off. No one will ever expect us if it’s all via texts. Worst case, they’ll assume that one of their own is a rat – which makes their ranks even weaker.”

I watch as Carlo smiles. It’s the same smile I got as a child when I brought home good grades. It means that he’s proud of me. When I was younger, that was all I wanted. I wanted him to be proud of me. Now, that’s not enough. I don’t just want him to be proud. I’m not a little girl anymore.

“You’re a genius, Adelaide,” he says. And I know he means it. His voice is so full of love and affection, dark eyes full of joy. My father loves me. But that’s not what I want anymore. “I’m very proud of you.”

“Of course,” I respond.

With everyone assigned duties, the meeting comes to an end. Christian and Damien leave before I stand and follow, not lingering for conversation with Carlo.

I catch Christian outside, right as he's about to get in his car. "Christian."

He turns to look at me, pushes his glasses up on his nose. "Yes, Adelaide?"

"I didn't send Antonio home because he was being an ass to you." I don't know why I feel the need to tell him *that*. I don't know the point of it. It's like I want to clear up that I don't have feelings for him after last night, that I don't think he's weak.

"Okay." He nods, looking just as confused as I am. "I didn't think you did."

"...Okay. Just...wanted to clear that up." I feel so insufferably awkward. I don't do awkward. I do self-assured, confident.

"Right. I'm going to go home then. See what I can do about hacking the communications. That okay?"

"Yeah...that's fine."

Chapter Ten

Christian

That was...an interesting meeting.

Adelaide put me on the spot there for a minute. I can do what she asked, it's just a matter of if I'm going to. I need to speak to my higher-ups, see where we're taking this. How long does this need to go on? We need to stop it before the Mansolillo's start a full-on gang war in the city. I can only imagine how many innocent people will die if that happens. None of them care about innocents. They care about themselves.

Then, the confrontation afterward. Adelaide cleared up that she was standing up for herself, not me. I didn't even consider she'd be standing up for me. It's Adelaide. I've known her twenty-four hours and I know she's not the type to stand up for others. She's only looking out for Adelaide.

I make it back to my apartment, close the door behind me and do a quick sweep. It's a habit. I don't trust anyone, and sometimes I wonder just how trusted I am. Everything seems fine.

I go to the bedroom, open the drawer of the nightstand, and pull out my work phone. My *real* work phone. I power it on, go to my recent calls list and call Megan.

Megan is my handler. She's the one in charge of keeping me connected with everyone else. She answers the first ring, sounding just a little exhausted.

"Christian? It's been days. What's going on?"

"A lot," despite knowing that I'm alone, I keep my voice low. "Carlo's daughter, Adelaide, is much more involved than we thought. She's calling shots. I think she's going to take over for him."

“Wait? What?” Megan sounds *confused*. “Women don’t run things in the mob.”

“Well, she came up with a plan to start a war between the Papilla’s and the Luppino’s so the Mansolillo’s can take their territory,” I explain. I hear typing on the other end, knowing that Megan is taking note of everything that I’m telling her. So, I continue, “And...I think Adelaide is making me her right hand.”

The typing stops. There’s silence. “What?!” Megan loses her composure on that one. “Why would she – how do you know?”

“I think she trusts me. She trusts me more than any of the other men. Maybe it’s because I’m newer or because we’re closer in age. She wants me to hack communications between the other two families to help start the turf war, but I don’t know if I *should*. I also don’t think I can tell her no and remain in the family. She just kicked her father’s right hand out of an important meeting.”

Megan sucks in a breath. She doesn’t need to say it. She’s just as clueless as I am about this entire thing. How are we supposed to handle it without outing me?

“Give me a bit to discuss this with the others. Don’t do *anything* until we talk next. But...if this is the only way to keep your cover and your place, go ahead. We’ll figure it all out.”

It’s the same advice as usual. Don’t start a war, but don’t lose your cover. Those things aren’t always mutually exclusive.

“Got it. I’ll be in touch when possible.”

“Be safe, Christian.”

“Will do.” I hang up, turn the phone off and put it back in my nightstand, underneath a bunch of random junk. There’s no reason anyone would be looking in my nightstand, but I still want to be careful.

Just in case.

There's a surprising amount of downtime when you're undercover. It's not like you run around hiding behind bushes the entire time. You wait until you have information, write the information down and then wait for more. For me, it's a lot of waiting for Carlo and his crew to decide that I'm needed.

So, I'm half-watching TV. My mind is a thousand other places, not a huge surprise. Despite trying to brush everything off, I can't stop thinking about last night. I can't stop thinking about Adelaide and I know just how dangerous that is. *She's* dangerous.

There's a knock on my door. I wasn't expecting anyone and it puts me on edge. I'm always on edge when it comes to my job. I don't trust anyone around me. I constantly feel like it's only a matter of time before I'm outed. The knock comes again, so I get off the couch.

In the side table drawer, there's a gun. It's not my work-issued gun – just in case. It's a separate one, one strictly for protection from all of this insanity. I reach in and grab it, making sure that it's loaded. It is.

I flick the safety on and stick it in my waistband before going to the door. One breath and I open it, only to be greeted by Antonio. That's a new one.

“Can I help you?” I ask.

I'm *definitely* still on edge. I can think of a hundred reasons for Antonio to be here. None of them are good. We're not friends. He's spent my entire time in the family acting like a high school bully. Not even a good one. Like a caricature of a bully.

He looks at me with his dark eyes. Just like Adelaide and Carlo, all of his features are dark. “I want to talk,

Christian,” he says. His voice is low like he doesn’t want anyone to overhear him.

“We don’t have anything to talk about,” I shut it down quickly. I’m not interested in anything Antonio has to say. I’m sure whatever it is, it’s some new way to berate me.

“Just five minutes of your time, Christian.”

I’m reading his body language, trying to figure out if he’s a threat or not. From what I can tell, he doesn’t mean any harm. He’s not armed, which is strange. I’d expect Antonio to go everywhere armed.

“Fine. Five minutes.”

I’d be lying if I said a part of me wasn’t curious about just what he needed to talk to me about so badly that he showed up at my apartment. I’m sure it’s not an apology. I step aside, but I don’t turn my back on him. I keep my eyes on him as he moves inside. Just like Adelaide had the day before, I see him looking around, taking everything in. *Judging* it. But he doesn’t comment.

“Adelaide is going to try and take over,” he says simply.

“Once something happens to Carlo, yes, Carlo made us all aware of that yesterday.”

Antonio shakes his head. “Not true. She’s going to try *before* something happens to Carlo – or she’s going to get someone to do something to him.”

Great. Antonio is creating some conspiracy about Adelaide being some great mastermind and immediately takes it to *me*. She’s smart. She’s ambitious. I don’t think she’s going to have her father murdered to take over his mafia empire.

“I really don’t think –”

Antonio cuts me off, “Look at what happened today, Christian. I’ve been Carlo’s man for years and she just *sent me home*. None of us are safe. Not with her around. She’s

going to run this thing into the ground and kill us all in the process.”

“She’s really not –”

“We need to get rid of Adelaide,” he says simply.

First, I’m getting real tired of being cut off in the middle of my sentences. Second, is he...suggesting that we *murder* Adelaide?

Fuck. What have I gotten myself into?

“Antonio,” I don’t pause. I keep talking so he can’t cut me off this time. “Are you drunk? Adelaide sent you home because you disrespected her. She’s not out to get you or anything. Why are you even telling me this anyway?”

“First it’s disrespect. Next, it’s because she wants to replace me. And because you’re the only person to get close to her! She *likes* you. Are you in on her plan? Are you *helping* her?”

His dark eyes get wild, accusatory. I’m not doing this. *We’re* not doing this. I sigh and run a hand through my hair.

“Antonio, nothing is happening. Tomorrow, go apologize to Adelaide and you’ll see that she’s not some wannabe dictator. Get some sleep. Realize that you’re talking *crazy* and if Carlo heard that you were trying to convince people to ‘get rid’ of his daughter, he’d end you.”

Realization crosses Antonio’s face then. “You’re – you’re not going to tell him, are you?”

“Not if you leave now and pretend that we never had this conversation.”

He pauses, seems to think it over before nodding his head quickly. “Yes, okay. We’ll pretend this never happened.”

I manage to get him to leave after that, slowly pushing him toward the door. Jesus, what have I gotten myself

involved in? As the door closes behind him, I lean back against it.

Antonio's just talking crazy. Adelaide isn't going to start some coup for the position. She's loyal to her father. But...I think I need to talk to her anyway. I need to tell her what Antonio's saying. It's not out of loyalty or anything. I'm not *loyal* to her. She just...she needs to know when someone is going around suggesting that we kill her.

Who knows how many people he'll go to who won't shut him down? Who'll be just as upset as he is about a woman taking over?

I don't want anything to happen to Adelaide, and I have no interest in dissecting why that is.

Chapter Eleven

Adelaide

I get a call from security that someone wishes to speak to me. When I reach the top of the staircase, I'm looking down at Christian. I didn't expect him to just show up out of the blue. I don't say anything until I reach the bottom of the stairs, raising an eyebrow.

"You couldn't call?" I ask.

"I don't have your number, Adelaide," he says. "And I needed to talk to you. It's important."

I didn't realize that Christian didn't have my number. Oops. I'll rectify that. The fact that he says it's important has me raising my eyebrow again because I trust Christian. I don't expect him to say something is important if it isn't.

"Okay. Talk."

He looks around us before his blue eyes settle back on me. "Is there somewhere private we can go?"

"Of course." With no hesitation, I bring him to the conference room. We only use it for formal meetings, like when Carlo is meeting with the heads of other families. That doesn't happen much these days. Essentially, the room is forgotten, so no one's going to interrupt us. I lock the door anyway.

I walk over and sit on the edge of the table, watching as Christian runs a hand through his hair. He seems on edge. Whatever it is, it really is important and I'm worried. Is he unable to do what I asked? Are the numbers wrong? They can't be. This *needs* to work. There's no other way to prove to them that I can do this.

"What is it, Christian?" I ask, keeping my voice soft and gentle. I don't bark the order at him like I normally

would.

“Antonio came to visit me.”

“Did he threaten you? Over what I did earlier?” I’m enraged. I knew Antonio would be petty, but I didn’t expect him to use Christian to get to me. “I’ll kill him.”

“Adelaide,” Christian sighs and looks at me. “He didn’t – he wants to *kill* you. He thinks you’re setting up some hostile takeover, trying to stage a coup. He thinks you’re going to kill Carlo to take over everything and this is just the beginning. I don’t know if he went to anyone else with his little conspiracy theory. I told him no. I told him he didn’t want this getting back to Carlo so –”

“So, you brought it to me?” I ask with a sigh.

Fuck. I didn’t expect Antonio to become such a problem so quickly. I didn’t realize he’d be the one to realize everything that I was doing. Honestly, I expected Christian to be the first to piece it together. He’s the genius, after all. That was why I was so set on getting him on my side. Looks like I’ve succeeded.

“I – yes,” he answers, looking down.

“I appreciate it,” I say, looking down at my nails. Still not chipped. Still perfect. “This is a problem. If Antonio brought this to anyone else, I doubt they’d be as respectful as you about the entire situation. They might go along with it.”

My mind is racing. I have to do something, and I can only think of one thing. It’s also something I doubt I can tell Christian because he’d be so strongly against it.

He makes his way over to me, hesitantly reaches out to brush my hair from my face. Every movement is shy, but I don’t say anything. I don’t want to embarrass him. Truthfully, I don’t hate this. I normally hate anyone trying to ‘comfort’ me. There’s just something about Christian.

“It’ll be okay, Adelaide. Nothing is going to happen. Should we go to Carlo? Tell him everything.”

I shake my head immediately. “No. He’ll insist on dealing with it himself. I need to handle this. I can’t just be the girl that lets her father fight her battles for her. They’ll never respect me if that’s the case,” I admit.

“How are you going to handle it?” Christian asks.

“I’ll figure it out.”

I already have an idea. Christian will just try to talk me out of it. Antonio has to die. It’s as simple as that. If I let him live, he’ll assume he can just get away with everything that he’s doing. He’ll keep trying to break me down. I can’t let that happen. Unfortunately for him, this is the only way.

Although, I *am* impressed that he figured out my plan so quickly. Antonio is smarter than I gave him credit for. Too bad he wants to use those smarts *against* me. He’d be a useful person to have on my side.

“I’ll help you,” Christian promises. His voice is so soft.

When I look up at him, I can’t help but lean in, press my lips to his. Christian seems shocked, but he doesn’t hesitate. He kisses me back, puts his hand on the back of my head to keep me close. This time, he takes the lead. His tongue runs over my bottom lip, demanding entrance and I part for him.

I sigh when I taste him on my tongue. How he makes me feel is *dangerous*, I know that. Feeling anything in this business is dangerous, especially when we all know that in the end, it’s only going to lead to hurt.

Right now, all I want to do is use Christian – and he doesn’t seem to mind being used. I can consider what this all means later. His hands move to my hips, pulling me closer to the edge of the table. Calloused hands run up the sides of my thighs, underneath my dress, as we kiss.

He breaks for air, his forehead pressed to mine. “Is the door locked?” he whispers.

Yes, but I don't say that. "Does it matter? No one will find us," I murmur back. "And if they do, isn't that part of the thrill?"

He *groans*. He doesn't question it any further. He leans back in and our lips press together once more. It feels like every bit of me is on fire as I lean into the kiss, taste him again. The hands on my thighs skim over and I spread my legs.

There's just something about Christian that I find completely irresistible. Maybe it has something to do with his growing loyalty. He brought this problem to me without a second thought. Maybe it's just because he's cute and good in bed. The why doesn't really matter, does it?

Christian's lips leave mine, kissing a trail down my neck. Just like before, he's careful not to leave a mark. His tongue brushes over my pulse point, makes me shiver. The hands on my thighs are pushing them open just a bit further, touching me through my panties. I press my forehead against his shoulder, teeth sinking into my lip to muffle the noise I make.

Christian pushes my panties to the side, his finger brushing over me without any fabric between us. I sigh into it and his voice is in my ear.

"That excited already, Adelaide? Did you miss me?" he purrs.

I don't know how Christian does it. I don't know how he goes from regular Christian to *this*. Someone who knows all the right things to say. Someone who can push all the right buttons and make every nerve in my body light up.

Once he feels like his finger is slick enough, he gently pushes it inside. My head falls back; I clamp a hand over my mouth, just in case. With my other hand, I lean back on the table. His eyes are locked on mine as he pumps his finger, curling it expertly. My hips grind against his hand, following the pace of his motions. Christian adds a second

finger and I feel like I'm going to lose my mind. Pleasure washes over me and I want nothing more than to be loud.

Why do I come up with terrible ideas? Being quiet is more fun? Who the fuck thinks like that?

Right now, I can't think at all. Not coherently. All I can do is feel as Christian hooks both fingers, pressing up against just the right spot, bringing me toward the edges of heaven.

He stops. My eyes snap up to look at him. Just on the verge of yelling at him when I see him undoing his belt. Right. This has to be quick. Just in case.

I want him to play with me all night. I want to experience everything possible with him. I want to see exactly what he's capable of. That's going to have to wait for another time.

Neither of us strips all the way. Too hectic. Too needy. He gets his pants down just enough before pulling me to the edge of the table. He enters me in one swift thrust and I bite my lip so hard I'm sure it's going to bleed.

"Remember to be quiet, Adelaide," he coos to me. His hands are on my hips, gripping tight enough to leave bruises. He holds me in place, slamming into me. The conference table beneath us is squeaking with the pressure, rocking with our bodies.

My teeth have made a permanent indent in my lip as my hands grip his biceps, using him to keep me upright as he thrusts. He's angled perfectly, brushing that spot over and over again with each thrust. It's like one night together and he has my body memorized.

I can feel that spring in the pit of my stomach tightening. It's building already. We don't have forever. I was already hyped up from the thrill, from the way he was touching me. I know that Christian can feel me tightening around him. He knows that I'm close, so he speeds up just a

bit. The table is whining beneath us as I try to keep my noises silent.

“Let go for me,” he murmurs in my ear before nipping at my earlobe.

His urging was all that I needed. The spring unfurls. Pleasure shoots through my body. I press my forehead against his chest as tightly as possible, teeth still digging into my lip, muffling all of those noises as I come around him.

He speeds up again, willing himself over. Moments later, Christian follows me over that edge. He’s panting, blonde hair stuck to his forehead. He looks down at me with those blue eyes and without saying a thing, he presses a kiss to my forehead.

I feel myself melting and I have to ask – what the fuck is wrong with me?

“I have good ideas sometimes,” I grin up to him, ignoring the feeling of warmth that floods over me at the small bit of affection he just showed me.

Christian chuckles, nodding. “I think you do.”

Chapter Twelve

Christian

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

I don't know what happened. I don't know *why* I slept with Adelaide again. I fucking know better. I ask myself why the entire drive home. Obviously, she's gorgeous. I've been around gorgeous women before and I didn't find myself falling into bed with them over and over again. Bonus points, they weren't the people I was supposed to be trying to bring down.

Objectively, I don't think Adelaide is a bad person. Maybe I'm just trying to see the good in this situation. I think she's a product of how she was raised. Or maybe I'm just trying to justify everything. Maybe Adelaide is a bad person.

My head feels completely twisted. It's not like I'm in love with her. Love is so much more. This is lust. Attraction. I know nothing about her to *love* her. So, why does it matter? Why should it matter if we sleep together until this is all over? It's not like I'm manipulating her into sleeping with me. It's not like she doesn't want it too.

Why did I ever have to go and make this so thoroughly complicated? I never should've given into her.

I'm back in the conference room. The same conference room that I had sex with Adelaide the last time. She's pacing the floor in front of me like nothing ever happened. She's been so nonchalant about the entire thing and I've been trying to keep the same demeanor. If she's not thinking too much into it, why am I?

She runs a hand through her dark hair. I watch as her lip furls in frustration. We've been coming up with ideas for what the hacked texts should say. Nothing sounds right to her. I proposed we ask someone else for their opinion and almost got my head chewed off, so at this point, I'm just letting Adelaide think.

She makes a frustrated noise and I look up from my laptop. I don't say anything. I wait for her to speak.

"I can't fucking think of anything!" she hisses, slamming her hand on the table. The entire thing shakes. For a second, I wonder how we managed to have sex on it just the other day if it's so unstable.

I hesitate before saying anything, worried I'll say the wrong thing. It's not that I care so much. It's...I don't want to lose my position. I'm the only one currently locked away with Adelaide to help her think. If I lose this spot, I risk losing my mainline to the information I need.

At least, that's what I convince myself of.

I decide to speak, risking her snapping again. "Adelaide, why don't we go on a walk or something? Clear your head. Being locked in here can't be productive for creativity, right?" I don't know what the fuck I'm saying. I just hope it's useful.

Then I wait. I wait for the snapping, her telling me to shut up or for her to just send me home.

She sighs, runs a hand through her hair again. For the first time, I see it. The perfection cracking. Her never messed-up hair is now wild from running her fingers through it over and over again.

"Yeah...maybe."

I wasn't expecting that response. I shut my laptop and stand up, taking a few steps toward her. "Let's go on a walk. We don't have to talk or anything. You can just think." Then I hold out my arm. That little voice in the back of my head is screaming at me, asking what I'm doing. Why am I

helping her? I keep telling myself that it's because the closer we are, the more information I have to bring their entire operation down. That's the answer I'm sticking to.

Adelaide looks at me, skepticism is written on her face...but she takes my arm. She wraps her arm around mine and I lead us out of the conference room, toward the back.

The Mansolillo Estate sits on a good amount of land. It's well-kept because they only have the best. I've been out back for a few dinners before, ones when Carlo wanted to celebrate some success. Funnily enough, I never saw Adelaide at any of those.

I know I told her we could take this walk to think, but now I'm curious. We start to walk the little path from the porch, the one that leads past the pool and toward the gardens.

"Tell me to shut up if you don't want to hear me talk, but I'm curious about something."

Adelaide doesn't respond. She doesn't tell me to shut up either. She just looks over at me and raises an eyebrow, which I assume is a go-ahead from her.

"Your father. He's hosted celebratory dinners before. You never showed up. I would remember seeing you."

"Laying on the compliments so I answer you, Christian?" She smirks.

"No, no. It's just --"

"I'm teasing." She smiles. "I had no reason to attend. I wasn't involved. Why do I want to go hang around a bunch of men patting themselves on the back? I stayed upstairs."

"Oh," I nod. That makes sense. At least, considering Adelaide's ego. "Why...why are you finally involved? I mean, I know I haven't been around as long as some of the others, but I'm curious. What changed?"

"I thought this was a chance for me to think. Not some interview."

“I’m curious. I’m curious about you, Adelaide,” I admit – and I’m not just trying to stroke her ego this time. We stop walking and I reach over, smoothing some of her hair down. I don’t know why. I don’t know why I’m doing any of this. “You don’t have to tell me. I just...I’m curious,” I reiterate.

Adelaide seems to be thinking it over. Before she speaks, we’re walking again. I let her lead this time, following her. Just the way she prefers.

“I got tired of sitting on the sidelines,” she explains. “I got tired of watching all of the celebrations outside of my bedroom window. I thought it was time I finally did something. Pretending to be some boring heiress is, well, boring. It felt like a now or never moment, so I went to my father and told him either he let me in or I walked.”

“Walked?”

“I don’t know. I was bluffing. I’m sure I could get wrapped up in some other family and take over. Pretend I’m interested in marrying someone and go from there.”

I’m...a little impressed with her commitment. Also, a little terrified at how determined she is. It’s like everything Adelaide does is calculated. So, I wonder how much of this thing between us is calculated. I wonder how much of everything has been preplanned. Did she plan on sleeping with me the first time we worked together? Was it all some ploy to get me to be on her side?

“Would you?” I ask. “Marry someone just for power?”

“I don’t see myself marrying someone for any other reason. Marriage is like a business deal, right? Everyone has to bring something to the table.”

“I don’t think marriage is like a business deal, Adelaide. I think it’s about love.”

“Because we come from two different worlds, Christian.”

I don't think that that's a viable excuse. We come from two different worlds? Love is still love. Marriage is still an expression of love. It's not like this is some eighteenth-century romance novel where she's betrothed to some older man that she doesn't love to keep the bloodline pure.

"Is that really how things work?" I ask softly.

"Yes."

She answers me without hesitation. There's a part of me that wants to push more. I want to figure out exactly why that's how she views love. She sees it as something transactional. Why am I so fascinated by her?

But I don't push. I don't question her. We walk beside each other in silence after that. Her arm is looped through mine, staying close to me as we walk.

We get to the gardens, filled with beautiful roses and wildflowers when Adelaide speaks again.

"I got it!" She smiles over at me, light filling her eyes. It's probably the happiest I've seen her in a few days – including after sex. "I know exactly what we're going to say. Come on, Christian. We need to write this all down before I lose it."

I don't get a chance to respond before she's turning us around, pulling me back toward the house with her.

Chapter Thirteen

Adelaide

I make sure Christian writes down everything I tell him to. Word for word. It's all perfect. He was right, taking a walk helped me find my inspiration. After that, I sent him home. I don't have a use for him any longer today. There's something else I need to tend to now.

I find the number I'm looking for in my phone, make the call, and set a meeting for an hour from now. I don't have the time to wait.

I don't take security with me. I don't trust them enough to come with me to this. They're loyal to Carlo, not me. I sneak away when no one is paying attention. I'm sure I'll get lectured for it later, but I'll deal with it then. There are more important things to deal with.

The entire drive, I can't stop thinking about my conversation with Christian. Why was he so surprised that I don't view marriage as an act of love? Does anyone these days? First, you'd have to find someone from our generation that *believes* in love.

When I was younger, I did. I watched my parents and thought they were desperately in love. Carlo doted on my mother, Daya. He worshipped the ground she walked on, and I thought that she loved him too.

I was in middle school when the rumors started to spread. Daya was having an affair with Damien. He was younger than her, handsome. I never saw any *proof* of these rumors, but they swirled around us. I saw the effect the rumors had on my parents' marriage. Two people who were once warm and affectionate with one another changed. They became cold, distant. I watched them fall out of love.

Months later, Daya died. It was a car accident, but I wasn't convinced it was an accident. Mattia told me that I

was just making things up, but I always wondered if there was more that he wasn't telling me. If he knew something that I didn't.

I watched love die and I knew that there wasn't any room for it. In the end, love will be the thing that kills you. It's pointless. A weakness. I decided then and there that I didn't believe in it and I never would.

If I ever get married, it'll solely be transactional. For appearances or power.

I'm in the next city over, where hopefully no one will recognize me. I adjust my sunglasses when I see him sitting at a table. It's a small outdoor café. I know that it's him before I even reach the table. I'd know that bleached blonde hair anywhere.

His name is Yulian. We...were a thing once upon a time. A lot of people would call Yulian my first love, and maybe they're right. It didn't pan out. We're from two very different families. I walk over and he stands, a smile on his handsome face.

"Adelaide," he purrs my name, his Russian accent thick. He leans in and kisses my cheek before pulling out the chair next to him. I sit down and Yulian leans forward. "I have to ask, why did you want to meet me?"

I take my sunglasses off, look into those green eyes of his. "I have to ask a favor."

"What kind of favor?" his voice is still purring and truthfully, it's a little obnoxious.

Yulian is a terrible flirt. I think that's why I fell for him – well, that and the bad boy persona. What girl doesn't love a bad boy?

"Not what you think, Yulian," I roll my eyes. But...I do seize the opportunity to flirt back, just a little. It's

not a crime – and it’s kind of fun. “I need you to use your *other* set of skills for me,” I purr back.

That piques his interest. I’ve never shown much interest in what his other skill set is. Until now. He leans in just a little bit closer and I’m slapped in the face with the overpowering scent of his cologne. Christian’s is so much more pleasant.

Why the fuck am I thinking about Christian right now? Besides, if Christian knew what I was doing...he’d probably flip out. There’s a reason I didn’t tell him about this. He’d try to stop me. Despite working for us, Christian has a conscience. I can see it every time something *uncomfortable* is discussed. He said he’d help, but he wouldn’t be able to handle this. He wouldn’t *want* to help if he knew.

“What do you need?” Yulian asks.

“Do you remember Antonio? My father’s favorite man?”

There’s a scoff and an eye roll. That’s the answer I needed. It’s kind of everyone’s reaction when they meet Antonio. But Yulian gives me verbal confirmation as well.

“Of course. He’s an asshole. What does that have to do with me? I’m sure you’re not just here because he’s being an asshole. I have no doubt you can handle that yourself, Adelaide.”

“Flattery will get you everywhere,” I smirk. What? A girl likes to have her ego stroked. “Unfortunately, it’s not because Antonio’s being an asshole. He wants me dead.”

“Did he figure out that you wish to take over?”

I can’t help but laugh. Of course, Yulian remembers that little dream of mine. Like I said, first love. I talked to him about everything. “He did. I’ve been assisting my father with an idea lately and Antonio isn’t happy about it.”

“Ah. So, you...need me to take care of him.”

Yulian does hits for his family. The only son of the Andronikov family. He has no interest in taking over for his father one day.

Yulian and I didn't split because of what he was good at. Death is only part of what we do. Someone needs to get the job done and he's good at what he does. We split because he has no drive. I want someone who *wants* to rule the world by my side.

"I do," I answer. I don't feel any guilt or remorse. I don't feel like I'm doing anything wrong, because, in my mind, I'm not. It's quite literally kill or be killed. If Antonio approached Christian, I'm sure he approached others. Considering Christian is the only one who really likes me (or I'm hoping that that's the case), the others might agree to his plan.

I'm not willing to die.

Yulian shrugs a shoulder. "Alright."

I knew this would be an easy sell. It's his job. It's not like he's going to try to talk me out of it.

"How much?" I ask.

The missing sum of money will be hard to explain to my father, but I'll figure something out.

Yulian holds up a hand, shaking his head. "For you? Nothing, Adelaide."

"Yulian, are you sure? We both know that I'm good for the money." I'm pretty sure the Mansolillo's are worth more than the Andronikov's anyway.

He smiles at me, that killer smile. Yulian is a very handsome man. Green eyes and bleached blonde hair, perfect bone structure. It's such a shame that he's happy to coast through life. I think we would've made lovely children together – not to mention uniting our two families would be huge.

Such is life though.

“I know that Adelaide,” he assures me, reaching out to take my hand. “However, I care for you. We both know that. I never wish for anything to happen to you, even if you don’t wish for us to be together. Plus, I never liked Antonio anyway.”

I’m not going to beg Yulian to let me pay him. The fewer questions asked about this, the better. I’ll keep the money to the side just in case he changes his mind. The last thing I need is to start issues between our two families. Especially if his father finds out that he’s doing favors for me. Dmitri wouldn’t approve.

I squeeze his hand. “You know I appreciate you, Yulian.”

“Yes. I know, Ads.”

It’s the first time someone has called me ‘Ads’ in a long time. For a moment, the world feels like a different place. It feels lighter, a little less stressful. It feels like the weight of everything isn’t resting on me. It hasn’t felt like that for a long time.

“Let me know when it’s done,” I decide to settle on instead of taking a stroll down memory lane. That’s not what I’m here for. I’m here to get this taken care of.

“Of course. You be careful, Ads. It is a dangerous world for a woman.”

“Isn’t it always?” I ask. I lean in to kiss his cheek before standing. I take one last look at Yulian before walking away, letting the past stay where it belongs. I’m not young. I’m not carefree anymore. Yulian is temptation, but that’s what he’ll remain.

However, it’s good to know that I have an ally in another family. That’ll be useful for when I’m officially running things. Who knows? Maybe our families can unite after all.

Marriage *is* just a business deal.

Chapter Fourteen

Christian

Another week, another meeting. We're back at the restaurant, sitting in the backroom, waiting. It's one that Carlo owns. Something feels off about today. I just have this awful gut feeling and I don't know what it means.

The table is quiet. Notably, Antonio is missing. He's always the loudest in the room. He keeps the morale high between the men, despite all of his flaws. I wonder if he's still upset about Adelaide sending him home. Or maybe she uninvited him from this meeting as well.

The door opens. Adelaide and Carlo enter, still no sign of Antonio. I try not to let my eyes linger on her, but it's hard. I find that lately she's been consuming all of my thoughts. We haven't slept together since the afternoon in the conference room but there's a part of me that's craving her.

I push it down as deeply as possible.

We all stand before Adelaide and Carlo are seated at the head of the table. I study Carlo's face and find that he looks tired, more tired than usual. His age is showing. Something is wrong and my gut is telling me that I know what it is – I just don't want to consider it until it's confirmed.

"I know this meeting was unplanned," he addresses us, keeping his voice low. "I have unfortunate news to deliver to everyone. I wanted us to be together for this."

My heart is pounding in my chest. No. *No*. I know what he's going to say and my eyes travel to Adelaide. She couldn't...no. Have I underestimated her this entire time?

Adelaide is unreadable. That's not a surprise. She's always unreadable to me.

When no one speaks, Carlo continues, "Antonio was found dead last night. We're still trying to figure out

exactly what happened. Our best theory is that someone, either the Papilla's or the Luppino's, found out about the plan. Antonio was in charge of putting men on the job, so I fear one of our lesser men ratted him out to one of those families."

Maybe that would be believable, be possible...if I hadn't told Adelaide about Antonio's idea to have her murdered. Because I can't believe that it was someone else. I can't believe that she had nothing to do with it. I underestimated her.

Even now, she looks emotionless. She's making sure to hide her feelings, which tells me she feels *something*. If I had to take a guess with her, I'd say it's pride. She's proud of what she's done.

I have something new to report.

I don't stop to talk to Adelaide before I leave.

She doesn't try to stop me.

She knows that I know. She also knows that I wouldn't approve.

The entire drive home, I'm making plans. I'm going to call Megan and report that Adelaide had a man murdered. This case is no longer about Carlo. Adelaide's in deep. There's no chance she'll be offered immunity.

How? How did she do it? Who did she go to? It couldn't have been anyone from the Mansolillo family. All of them are fiercely loyal to Carlo, most of them would've sided with Antonio if he went to them with his plan.

I open the door to my apartment, plan to go straight to the bedroom, and call Megan. But I can't.

Because Adelaide is sitting on my couch.

That sends panic rushing through me. She's in my apartment. There's no telling how long she's been here.

There's no telling what she's done while she's been here. If she's gone through my things...it's likely she found something incriminating.

"Adelaide," I try to keep my voice calm. I try to keep it from wavering. I want to be as emotionless as she is. But if she's found anything linking me back to the FBI, I'm as dead as Antonio. "How did you get in?" I settle on asking, refusing to make eye contact as I sit my messenger bag on the coffee table.

"I noticed that you don't lock the window that leads out to the fire escape."

"You broke into my apartment."

"On the list of crimes that I'm guilty of, do you really think breaking and entering is what I should be concerned about?" she asks. She almost sounds *smug*. If I was wired, that would sure as hell be incriminating.

"You had Antonio killed," I say. Now I really wish that I was wired. I move carefully, not taking my eyes off of her. Just like I refused to take my eyes off of Antonio when he was in my apartment, just a few days ago.

Adelaide can't be trusted.

She shrugs, leans back on the couch, and makes herself comfortable. "I had to deal with the problem."

It eats at me how casually she says it. I also can't help but be impressed with how she still looks so put together if she climbed up my fire escape and in through the window. She's in heels. There's not a hair out of place on her head.

I take a seat in the recliner next to the couch, notably not sitting next to her. "You had him *killed*, Adelaide. You murdered a man."

"Yes, let's *all* mourn for Antonio. If I didn't have him taken care of, he would've had me taken care of. You haven't been in this whole thing a long time, Christian. You don't know how it works and if you do, you're acting like a

fucking idiot. There was no sitting down and talking to Antonio. His mind was made up. What was I supposed to do?"

I wince when she calls me an idiot. I don't know why I care so much about what Adelaide thinks, but I do. She's...right. To an extent. Antonio was going to have her killed or at least try to. That doesn't mean anything she did was *right*. I run a hand back through my hair, trying to gather my thoughts. Why...why do I care if she thinks whatever I say next sounds stupid?

"He would've had you killed," I say, trying to let my mind wrap around that. For some reason, it can't. For some reason, I don't want to consider Adelaide not being around. Something happening to her actively worries me.

I know that as much as I should, as much as I *want* to, I won't be able to report what happened to Megan. There's not going to be another smidge on Adelaide's file. If she...doesn't have anyone else killed.

"He would've," she says softly. "Considering you're the only person around here who really likes me, I figured you'd hate that."

"I would." No hesitation. I don't have to think about it and that should be *concerning* on so many levels. I don't have the time to read too much into it. Not right now. I swallow all of that down, look over at her. "Who?" I finally ask. I at least need that question answered. "Who did you pay to do it?"

"I didn't pay," she says, leaning back. She looks a bit more relaxed now that I'm not yelling at her about what she's done. "My ex did it for me."

"Ex?" I mean, obviously, Adelaide's probably dated people before. It would be dumb to assume that she hadn't. It just piques my interest. It's like unraveling another layer to her.

She sighs. "Yulian Andronikov."

The name sounds familiar. It takes a second for me to make the connection. Andronikov.

“The son of Dmitri? He’s your ex.”

“From when I was younger,” she says so dismissively.

I don’t know *why* I care about who her ex is. It doesn’t matter. There’s just a lot that I don’t know about Adelaide. Like her ex is a hitman. Like she actually...dated someone.

“Did you love him?” And I don’t know why I ask.

Chapter Fifteen

Adelaide

Christian's question hits me square in the chest. *Did you love him?* Is it strange that I've never considered that before? I shrug a shoulder.

"I...I guess I did. I guess you could say that Yulian was my first love," I don't know why I'm answering honestly. I don't even know why I'm here.

Why did I feel the need to come to talk to Christian? Because he wouldn't look at me at the restaurant. Because he left as quickly as possible and I knew that he was upset. The whole idea of Christian being that upset with me bothered me a lot more than I ever thought it would.

He nods at my answer, looking down at his hands. "And you don't love him anymore?"

Why all of these questions? Why am I still going to answer them? "I care deeply for Yulian. He was a big part of the whole 'coming of age' thing for me. But we have two different ideas in life. He wants to skate by and party. I want to rule. He would never be my equal."

"He killed a man for you, Adelaide."

"I was willing to pay. I needed to get Antonio out of the way before he got *me* out of the way," I say softly. "Yulian offered to do it for me. That's it. It's not like I slept with him to get him to do it."

"That's not what I was getting at Adelaide. I was just curious," Christian says. "You hide from me and the rest of the world. Someone knew you once. Someone knew you enough to want to *kill* someone for you with no real gain from it," he picks each word carefully like he's walking on eggshells.

He is. We both know that he is. We both know the minute he says the wrong thing, this conversation is over. There's no way around it.

"I was younger. Stupid. There was a part of me that still wanted to believe in love, so I let Yulian get close. Now he's a weakness. Now he knows too much."

"Why are you so scared to be known?"

Another question that hits me right in the chest. All I can do is look at him. I know it's a valid question. I know that he's not wrong. I *am* scared to be known. At least on that level again. I'm scared of having any weakness at all.

I open my mouth to answer but immediately close it again because I don't *know* what to say. I don't know the answer Christian wants me to give.

He gets up from the recliner, comes over to sit next to me. Reaching out, his hand takes mine. I don't pull away. I let his calloused thumb rub over the back of my hand.

I swallow. "Because it's weakness, Christian," I tell him quietly. "And weakness is how things fall apart in this business."

"Why are you so obsessed with the business? You could have the world, Adelaide. You have the drive. You have the brains. You could do anything. Why this?"

Because it's all I know.

Because it's where I'm comfortable.

Because it's the only way to avenge my mother and my brother and everyone else I've loved who's been wronged by this entire mess.

I don't answer his question with any of those answers. My guard is still up. I don't know why I can let it down, even for Christian, who's been nothing but kind to me.

"Ads," I say softly. "You can call me Ads."

His blue eyes light up in a way I've never seen before. A smile pulls over his handsome features. "Yeah. That sounds...less formal, Ads. It sounds good," he tells me softly, leaning over to kiss my cheek. My cheeks are warm and I try to ignore that feeling. I'm trying to ignore how it feels like everything has changed.

His arm comes around me and he pulls me into his side. I let him. I let him show me affection that I shy away from normally. There's this deep, dark part of me that wants to be known. That's so fucking tired of keeping all of these walls up. It's exhausting, constantly coming up with defenses and shutting people out.

But being known means risking being hurt. In this business, being hurt isn't just emotional pain. One thing goes wrong, and somebody wants you dead – and it can look like a complete accident.

I think...I think I trust Christian. He's done nothing for me to not trust him. Those walls are still up. I'm not letting him all the way in, but I think I want to see where this can go. Maybe he'll be the one to rule the world by my side if he can get over his squeamishness when it comes to murder. I don't want to make a habit out of just killing people who stand in my way. That's a kind of ruthlessness that even I'm not. But for everything to go as planned, there's one more death that has to take place.

We'll deal with that later.

I close my eyes and I lay my head on Christian's shoulder, breathing him in. He always smells good. He's solid and warm. He pulls me into his side.

"Do you want me to order lunch?" he asks softly, leaning back on the couch with me. "We can order something, watch a movie. For just a few minutes we can pretend like this is normal, like we're normal."

I don't think I've ever been normal. I've never wanted to be normal. I've never wanted to *pretend* to be

normal. Until now. Now...normal sounds kind of nice.

“Yeah,” I say softly. “Let’s do that.”

Christian is desperately trying to get to know me and I don’t know I feel about it. Being known. It’s kind of frightening, but I’m giving him...a little. I mean, we did do the whole trauma dump thing after sex the first time. That was a step, right?

We’re sitting on his living room floor. He was *very* insistent that we sit on the floor. ‘*We have to, Adelaide*’, he said. ‘*It’s just how it works.*’ It took a little bit more convincing, like the offer to let me borrow a pair of sweats from him in case I was concerned about sitting on the floor in a dress (not a concern and I wouldn’t be caught *dead* in sweatpants).

I just...don’t sit on the floor.

He finishes shuffling the cards and starts to deal me in. I take them slowly, turning them to face me.

“Are we really doing this?” I ask. “We could do other things.”

“You said you didn’t play a lot of board games as a child.”

“I didn’t.”

“So, we’re playing one. Do you have seven cards?” he asks.

I count the brightly colored cards in my hand. Seven. I nod in response. “We don’t have to. Why do we have to sit on the floor to play, anyway? Is it part of the rules?” I ask, reaching to snatch the rule booklet from his side of the board.

“No. It’s part of the *experience*, Ads.”

I try hard to fight the smile that pulls over my lips when he calls me ‘Ads’. He’s right, I did say I didn’t play a lot of board games as a child. There wasn’t...a lot of time. Or a lot of people willing to play. Carlo was busy. Daya was usually with him. Mattia didn’t want to play with his little sister all the time.

I played with dolls a lot. Sometimes I convinced the staff to play with me, just for a brief second or two. Just enough so I wasn’t sitting in my room, talking to myself all day. Maybe playing with dolls is where the whole ‘need to control everything around me’ thing comes from. Because I was always in control then.

“Fine. I’ll try to appreciate the experience,” I smile at him.

“Knew you would. Here, roll the dice. You know how to do that, right?” It’s not a dig. He’s teasing me. Something I don’t think he would’ve done only a few days ago.

I roll my eyes anyway. “Give me the damn dice,” I mutter, taking them from his hand. I shake them in my palm before giving them a roll. “Snake eyes. What does that mean?”

Amusement flickers in his blue eyes as he looks back at me. “It means you rolled a two, Ads. I go first.”

“That’s a stupid rule.”

Chapter Sixteen

Christian

This has been the weirdest week of my life.

Now, I've had a lot of *weird* weeks. There was the time I was undercover in some backwoods hillbilly drug trafficking situation and I realized the dude I was working with was in love with his *mom*. That one stands out as the weirdest experience I've had undercover.

This one has been weird because I've just been... spending time with Adelaide. We're still working on her plan because if we dropped that, people would start to notice. But, outside of planning to start a gang war, I've been getting to know the girl underneath the façade.

I've learned that her favorite color is pink and she spent a lot of her childhood alone. She likes musicals, but she's never been to Broadway. As a child, she wanted to be a chef. As an adult, she never learned how to cook.

I now know all of these little tidbits about Adelaide Mansolillo – and I still have to ruin everything for her. So, why did I do it? A study in psychology? Maybe I'm a sadist? Or...maybe after everything that happened with Antonio, I want to see her as a human again. Someone vulnerable. Someone *real*.

I decided...that I'm not bringing up Antonio's death to Megan. I'm not getting that added to Adelaide's file. I should. I could. But I'm not going to. She's already going to have everything stripped away from her, why make sure she's in jail for the rest of her life? It's a fucking dumb call. I know that. If I report her involvement in Antonio's death, I could also probably take down the Andronikov family.

Maybe I'm just not that ambitious.

Maybe I have a total soft spot for her and I shouldn't, but I can't help it.

Today was Antonio's funeral. It was a large affair. The man had a lot of people who cared, and maybe that should've made me want nothing more than to report Adelaide. Instead, I stood by her side as she pretended to grieve. I watched that beautiful face and I didn't see a single *hint* of remorse. She was a blank slate – and I understood.

Fuck. I shouldn't have, but I did.

Antonio was going to kill her. What options did she have? Go to the police? Tell her father? Carlo would've done the same thing. She was a woman who made the only choice that she could given the circumstances she was in.

Yeah, I understood.

Adelaide is draped over my chest, looking stunningly gorgeous. Her cheeks are flushed, hair just messy enough. Stopping sleeping with her is another thing on the list of things that I should do, but I haven't. And I don't know if I'm going to.

It's complicated. It's all so much more complicated than I could ever explain.

For now, I focus on the moment. I focus on keeping my arm around her, stroking the smooth skin of her back, feeling her relax against me. I want to keep her here. I want to stay in this moment with her. I know in just a few seconds she'll come up with some excuse to leave because that's Adelaide. For all the walls she lets down, there's still a thousand more that are up. That I can't seem to get past.

“What are you doing for the rest of the day?” I approach it casually, see if maybe...maybe I can get something out of her. Another little piece of who she is.

There's an eye roll. I can't see it, but I know it's there. "Working."

So, that piques my interest because Adelaide and I are...working together. If she's working on something, shouldn't I be involved?

"What else do you need to do?" I ask. "I thought it's just a matter of waiting until the beginning of the month, right?"

She shifts against me. She wants to leave. Wherever this conversation is going, Adelaide has no interest in letting it go there. I have to convince her to anyway because now I *really* want to know.

"It's another thing that I'm working on."

Yeah, I figured that one. I shift with her, keeping her pulled close to me for the time being. I run my fingers through her hair, smoothing it down for her.

"What are you working on, Ads?" I ask, keeping my voice soft. Trying to get her to open up.

"It's just...something."

"Something I'm not going to approve of?"

She scoffs, shifts away from me. "You're not my father, Christian. You're my –" she stops because neither of us is sure what this is anymore. Now doesn't seem like the right time to ponder it either. "It doesn't involve you. It's not important."

"What are you doing, Ads?" I ask as she gets out of bed, fumbling around the floor for her clothes.

"I'm – I'm working out how to get rid of my father, alright?"

That washes over me, over the room. I'm completely silent. I'm sure the shock is evident on my face. This was exactly what Antonio said was coming. I never expected him to be right. I know that Adelaide wants to take

over. I just figured she'd wait until Carlo stepped down, not that she'd make *sure* he stepped down.

“Adelaide...are you –”

She cuts me off. “It’s better if you don’t know, Christian.” She leaves it at that, pulling her clothes on.

But I can’t leave it at that. I *can’t*. If Adelaide succeeds, this will all fall on her. She’ll be the one that the feds try for everything, not Carlo. I won’t be able to protect her. Why do I care so much about protecting her? It doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter right now.

I scramble to get out of bed, completely forgetting about my clothes. I just – I need her to listen to me. I grab her by the shoulders, turning her to look at me.

“Adelaide, you can’t.” I need her to listen to me. “Carlo’s old. He’ll die naturally soon. You don’t have to kill him to take over.”

She refuses to look at me. She’s looking everywhere else in the room. “It’s not just about taking over, Christian. You wouldn’t understand. I don’t think you ever have.”

No, I haven’t. I don’t come from the same world. I don’t *know* her. I’ve been trying so fucking hard to get to know her, but I’ve been failing. How can I get to know someone who has so many layers? So many parts of her are hidden away, only revealed when she wants them to be.

Adelaide’s been in charge from the start.

“No, I don’t understand. I wouldn’t. Explain it to me, Ads. I can’t – you can’t do this.” Maybe I don’t understand, but neither does she. If she takes over now, she’ll go down for all the crimes her family is responsible for. All the death, the drugs, trafficking, prostitution. Every. Single. Thing. It will rain down on her and no matter what I say or do, I won’t be able to stop it.

Emotion flickers over her face. She's debating. That's good. That's something I can work with.

Reaching up, I take her chin in my hand and turn her to face me. "Ads, I need you to explain it to me. I want – I need to understand your choice here. We're partners, remember? You're not in this alone." I don't know if I'm just saying what I know she needs to hear to get the answers or if I mean it. Truthfully, I'm not sure of much these days.

She sucks in a breath. From the look on her face, I don't think that my pleading worked. I think she's going to just turn and leave, tell me to forget about it. But then I see something on her face. Realization. She knows that we're partners. I'm her biggest ally – and secretly her biggest enemy.

"He had my mother killed. I know it. He's gotten away with it for too long and –" She cuts herself off, but that's all that I needed.

Now, it makes sense. I don't know whether Adelaide wants to run the family or not. I think she does. But the real point of all of this is revenge for her mother. Daya Mansolillo passed away when Adelaide was still in middle school. Car accident. Evidently, she was rumored to be having an affair with Damien of all people at the time of the accident.

Adelaide doesn't believe it's an accident.

Her guard is down, I see the emotion on her face. For the first time, I see weakness. I feel like I've gotten somewhere with her. Like maybe I *know* Adelaide. Without a second thought, my arms come around her and I pull her to me, letting her cling to me. She sniffles. She's *crying*. Adelaide is crying. And I don't think she's faking it.

I don't say anything. I don't want her to feel like she's done something wrong for feeling. I just rock her in my arms, keeping her close. I understand why she's doing this... but I still can't let her.

Chapter Seventeen

Adelaide

I've never felt so fucking embarrassed. I'm crying in Christian's arms. Tears hit his shoulder and I regret everything in an instant. I shouldn't be here. I never should've let myself get close to him. Not like this, at least. Never like this.

I think the worst part is he's making me reconsider everything. He quietly brushes his fingers through my hair, whispering to me. Telling me that no matter what, I can't do this. I'll regret it. He doesn't get it. I've been thinking about this since I was young, since all the pieces clicked together for me. It's not just something that popped into my head recently.

Now just feels like the right time.

Everything is falling into place. I'm finally getting a chance to show what I can do, I'm finally allowed to step up. If I get rid of Carlo now, I get revenge *and* I can take over. All in one swoop.

"Ads, I need you to listen to me," Christian whispers into my hair. "You cannot kill Carlo. Not yet. Wait just a little bit longer, okay?"

"Why?" I ask as I pull away from him. Reaching up, I wipe the tears off my face with my palm. Mascara smears across my skin and for once, I don't care about looking perfect. "Why should I wait? I've waited for so long, Christian. I've waited –"

He cuts me off, using his thumb to wipe more tears off of my face. "I know you've waited, Ads. I get that. Just a little bit longer. Just...let's make sure it's not rushed."

Rushed? *Rushed?* How in the hell could this be *rushed* when I've been thinking about it for years? I'm not –

I'm not just going to jump headfirst into it without thinking it through. I'm not a child. I'm not acting irrationally.

I'm acting perfectly rational.

I'm offended. I can't hide it. I'm sure it's written across my face as I step away from him. I wipe at the remaining tears and pull myself together. I'm not dealing with this. I'm not letting him treat me like some overemotional mess. I know what I'm doing.

"Adelaide," he says my name, but I don't respond. I turn to leave the room as Christian calls after me again.

"I'll see you later," I mutter, not turning to look at him. I don't want him to see that he managed to get under my skin. I don't want to look weaker than I already have.

I feel like such an idiot.

I've given Christian the silent treatment for a week. We have another week before making our move with the Papilla's and the Luppino's, so I've had the opportunity to ignore him. There's nothing for us to work on together. When we're in the same room, I look anywhere but him. I can't. Not after everything. Not after I let my guard down and he made me feel *stupid*. This is why you don't open up to people. Keeping my walls up is the only option going forward.

Lately, I've been considering Yulian again. I know, I know. But I've gotten used to being around someone. I've gotten used to having a sex life. Yulian feels like a safe option. At least he's never made me feel like Christian did.

And maybe that's part of the problem. He's never made me *feel* like Christian did. Christian...took the time to get to know me. Actually, know me. It was weird and uncomfortable...and nice. But then he ruined it. He tried to talk me out of the one thing that I want.

But I currently have another problem. A huge problem. One that I have no idea how to address.

I've been waking up nauseous. At first, I chalked it up to maybe not eating enough. I've been stressed. Maybe there's a small part of me that feels guilty? About ignoring Christian. About my plans for my father. About...about Antonio. At least, that was my thought. Until the nausea continued.

And I realized that I was late.

I made up an excuse to run to the drug store and then ran upstairs. I feel like I'm in high school again, sneaking around, hiding things. I grabbed two pregnancy tests because I have to be *sure*. Now, I'm leaning against the marble counter in my bathroom, staring at a painting on the wall.

I'm not sure where the painting came from. I think my mom bought it years ago. It's bright, abstract. Pinks and purples and blues. I try to imagine what the artist was thinking when they made it. Mostly, I'm trying not to think about the timer counting down behind me. Three minutes, that's the rule. You wait three minutes and then your fate is revealed on a piece of plastic.

The alarm chimes. Loud and obnoxious. It pulls me from my thoughts and I jump. I grab it and silence it, turning around to look at the two plastic sticks sitting on the marble.

There are two pink lines on both of them. Faint. Not obnoxiously bold, but definitely there. There are certainly two lines.

Fuck. Fuck.

Fuck.

I don't know what I'm going to do. I never...I don't want kids. I don't have that dream like a lot of women do. Having children isn't in my plans. There's no time for children in the future that I want. So, what do I do?

I don't know.

I absolutely don't know.

The only thing I know is that it's Christian's. He's the only person that I've been with. So, do I bring it to him when we haven't spoken in almost a week? Do I just handle this on my own? I curse under my breath and snatch the tests off the counter. I need – someone else needs to know. I can't do this alone.

Christian is the only person I can count on.

I don't call on my way over. A part of me thinks that I should. What if he has another woman over? You know how it always works in those movies? The female protagonist realizes she was wrong for breaking up with the male and when she goes to confess her love, he's moved on.

Of course, this isn't like that. I'm not going to confess my undying love. And Christian isn't much of a lady's man. He's too awkward in that aspect. Where would he even meet another woman? All he does is bounce between his apartment and wherever my father needs him to be.

I'm panicking – and I'm trying really hard not to panic. I don't know what else to do. I park and take the wonky elevator up to his floor. I don't just knock on the door – I pound. And when Christian opens it, I'm quietly relieved that it's not some attractive blonde in his button-up or something.

“Adelaide?” he sounds confused as he looks at me. “What's going on? What – what did you do?”

“What did I do?” I repeat his question. “What do you mean?”

He shakes his head, stepping aside. “Just come in before my neighbors complain about you bashing my door in.”

He's upset with me. At least, that's how it sounds. I step into his apartment and I try to ignore the way it feels... feels like home. Over the past few weeks, I've spent a lot of time at Christian's place and it's begun to kind of feel like home. More than my actual one. But I push that aside before Christian's eyes are on me. I can feel them.

"What is this about, Adelaide?" he asks. "You stormed out of here a week ago. You've ignored me since. You won't even make eye contact with me when we're in the same room and now you just barge in and what? Expect everything to be okay?"

I know that I probably deserve it, but not right now. He can tell me off later. "Christian –" I try to cut him off, but he won't let me.

"All I tried to do was make sure you didn't do something you'd regret. All I wanted was the best for you. I let you in. I cared about you. How do you think it makes me feel that you can write me off so easily?"

"Christian –" I try again because *now* really isn't the time to talk about relationship problems. We have a bigger problem.

"Adelaide, I don't know what you want from me. I don't know what I –"

We're not doing this. We're not having some roundabout conversation. I'm here to get to the point, to tell him something important and he doesn't want to listen.

I reach into my bag and take the pregnancy tests out. I toss them onto his coffee table and wait for it to click for him. His face goes blank, blue eyes go wide. He adjusts his glasses a few times, looking at the table and then back to me.

"What?" is all he manages to get out.

Chapter Eighteen

Christian

I don't know if I'm being too harsh toward Adelaide. But I'm annoyed. She stormed out and proceeded to ignore me and...it bothered me. A lot. I was hurt because I guess...I guess I just invested a lot of time in her. I got close to her and then she just acted like I was nothing to her.

I probably shouldn't care, right? I mean, we all know how this is going to end at this point. I've been intentionally avoiding mentioning her in my reports, but how long can that last? Especially if she goes ahead and kills Carlo. And I can't explain any of that to her. Adelaide may not be loyal to her family, but she's loyal to the name. She's a Mansolillo through and through.

All those thoughts vanish as I watch her throw those two plastic sticks onto my coffee table. It takes way too long to click exactly what they are.

Pregnancy tests. I don't need my glasses to tell that they're positive, but I step closer anyway, looking down at them. Sure enough, two pink lines. I look at them, then back at Adelaide, then back at the tests.

I could lament over how this happened, but we both know. We were dumb. We didn't use protection and now...now we pay for that. I know that I should probably question whether it's mine or not, but I don't. Because I just – I know. Adelaide is a lot of things, but I can almost guarantee she's not sleeping with anyone else.

My tongue feels thick and heavy. I swallow hard, trying to form words around it. I don't know what to say. I don't know what she wants me to say.

“When did you find out?” I ask because that feels like the safest question.

“This morning. I drove straight here,” she answers. Her voice is soft, not filled with that usual Adelaide confidence. She’s unsure. Probably just as unsure as I am. Probably scared. I want to reach out to her but I don’t know if I should. I don’t know if she wants me to.

I nod. “What – what do you want to do?”

I decide that the choice is best left in her hands because I don’t – fuck. I don’t know what to do. This isn’t just me getting a girl pregnant. The girl in question is one I’m trying to put in jail. One that’s *going* to jail once I turn my report in. And now she’s so much more than just a random woman that I’m sleeping with. She’s more than someone that I developed feelings for despite knowing that I shouldn’t.

She’s the mother of my child. We’re having a baby.

“I don’t know,” she whispers, looking down at the coffee table, at the plastic sticks that decide our fate. “I’ve never wanted children.”

I don’t know what to say because I never considered kids either. They’ve always just been in the back of my mind. A maybe possibility. But in the future – and not with Adelaide. Guess I don’t get to make that choice now though.

I swallow, hard, forcing myself to form words although it takes me a moment to find my voice. “The choice is yours, Adelaide. I’m going to support you no matter what you choose. Do you need time?” I ask.

For a second, it looks like she’s considering that yeah, maybe she needs some time. That’s fine. It gives *me* time to panic, to figure out what my next move needs to be. Because now I’m in so much deeper. So much worse than before. It’s not just me caring about Adelaide. It’s the mother of my child. I keep coming back to that fact. And...I care about her despite knowing that I shouldn’t. Despite knowing that caring about Adelaide is the last thing I should do.

Well, getting her pregnant was probably the *last* thing I should do. Too late there though.

She's not making eye contact. She's looking at the tests on the coffee table, at her nails. Anywhere but at me. She's thinking, so I let her think. We stand in the middle of my living room, in the weirdest, most uncomfortable silence of my entire life. I don't know how much time passes.

Finally, Adelaide opens her mouth again. "I want to keep it. I don't expect anything from you. I can handle everything on my own."

I feel like...I feel like now would be the perfect opportunity for me to fess up. Tell her everything. Take whatever comes my way. If I was a good man, I think that's what I would do. I guess I'm not really a good man because I don't.

Instead, I step forward. I reach out for her hands and Adelaide stares at me for a solid second before extending her own. I lace our fingers together. She's tense, unsure. I can feel it. I can read it on her.

So, I unlace one of our hands, take her chin in my hand and force her head up to look at me. Initially, she doesn't want to make eye contact. Finally, she does.

"Ads, you don't have to do this alone. I know – I know you think you have to. I know you think you have to do *everything* alone because that's how it's always been. But I'm right here, I don't want you to have to do it alone. I want to do it with you."

I see it in her eyes. Something breaks, just a little. One of those perfectly placed walls she puts up to the rest of the world shatters, bricks crumble down. We made progress. I see the emotion and without a word, my arms come around her, pulling her in.

She sniffles against my shoulder. "I'm scared."

I am too. It feels like so much is weighing on this. I have no one to turn to, and I have to keep lying to Adelaide. I

don't know what feels worse.

"I know," I whisper into her hair. "We're going to figure this out, Ads. Okay? You tell me what you need from me and I'll do it. No questions asked. Tell me how we're approaching it."

She's silent again. I know that wonderful mind of hers is *racing*. I'm sure I don't want to know everything she's thinking, but at the same time, I do. I'm always so curious about her. I know I just saw one of those walls crumble down, but I also know that there are so many more ready to replace it.

Adelaide sniffles one more time before looking up at me. There are still tears in her eyes, but they're not falling. She's holding them back, keeping herself pieced together. I want to tell her to just let go. She'll probably snap at me if I do, so I just rub her back.

"I want to keep it a secret. I don't want anyone to know yet. The minute they know, I'm reduced to sitting on the sidelines again and...and I don't know how my father will react."

Fuck.

To be honest, I kind of forgot about Carlo. I've been thinking about Adelaide and myself. I forgot her father is a very dangerous man. Despite how much he likes me, I don't think he'll like me very much when he finds out that I knocked up his daughter. Definitely won't like me when he realizes that I've been undercover this entire time.

"Right...forgot about that," I mutter. "Yeah, we can keep it a secret. Like I said, just tell me what you need from me and I'll do it, Ads."

Then, I see it in her eyes. That wall that crumbled down? Came right back up. She's on guard again. The only positive is now I know her guard is up because she's scared, she's feeling things. I just wish I knew *everything* she was feeling.

“Right now...right now I don't want to think,” she says softly, brown eyes turning up to look at me. “I just want to feel.” There's a purr to her voice and I know exactly what she's asking for.

And it's not like there are any consequences to saying yes. Kind of got that covered.

I pull her close to me, wrap my arm around her waist. “As I said, anything you need. I'm yours,” I whisper.

Her lips come up to meet mine and I sigh into it. I've missed kissing her. I've hated being ignored by her when all I want is to be close. She deepens the kiss and I follow her head, letting her pull me toward my bedroom.

My mind is whirling, so I think that Adelaide has the right idea here. We can just use each other to not think for a little bit, to just feel.

And Adelaide is *very* good at making me feel things. Especially things that I know that I shouldn't.

We're not thinking right now, though.

Chapter Nineteen

Adelaide

No one needs to know until I figure out exactly how to handle this. I think...I think I'm set on keeping it, which is not how I imagined handling this situation. Here we are though. Of course, keeping it opens up so many doors, makes me uncertain of everything going on.

How am I going to explain this to my father? If he knows that I've been sleeping with Christian, he'll throw a fit. He'll probably kill Christian. I wish I was over exaggerating. But Carlo has always been strict. He wants the best for me. He wouldn't see Christian as the best because Christian isn't at the top.

What does this mean for Christian and me? Are we something serious? No...right? Because fuck. I don't know. I feel things for Christian. I feel all these things that I don't know how to describe, things that I've never felt before. Underneath it all, I don't think things could work between Christian and me. He doesn't understand. He'll never understand what I want to do.

And that brings me to the biggest problem with being pregnant. No one views pregnant women as *powerful* people. They see them as weak, fragile. People who need to be handled carefully. No man is going to take orders from a pregnant woman. Being pregnant risks losing my power. So, either I can be okay with that – or I can figure out a way to cement my power before people realize that I'm pregnant.

That means...moving my plan up. I can fix two of my problems by doing that. Carlo won't have to know about my pregnancy if he's not around for it. If I can get rid of him before I start showing, problem solved. It's not preferred, because it means rushing things. I don't like to rush. That's when things get sloppy, get risky. I don't think I have much of a choice though.

For now, I just keep putting on the façade that I need to. Nothing is wrong. I'm not planning a damn thing aside from what I'm *supposed* to be planning. Even Christian can't know about the Carlo thing. I told him I'd consider seeing things his way, that I wouldn't fixate on killing my father. What he doesn't know won't hurt him. And when he figures it out? I'm pregnant with his child. What's he going to do about it?

I have another meeting with Yulian. He's probably going to start thinking I have an interest in him again. I don't. I just know he has a use. He's someone that I can trust. Hopefully, he'll realize that before he gets too in his head about it.

Coming down the stairs, I hear voices. Not unusual. I try to figure out who they belong to. I can tell one is Damien, I've heard his voice around the house for years. The other, I'm not quite sure of. Doesn't matter. I'm more interested in what they're saying.

"Look, don't you think it's weird? I mean, he walks in and Carlo immediately trusts him. What could be on his file that makes him so trustworthy? And he's *smart*. He could totally be a rat," Damien says, his voice hushed.

There's a scoff. "You think geeky Christian of all people is some undercover rat. Which one of the rival families would be smart enough to get a man inside with us? *And* tell him to get close to *Adelaide* of all people."

I stop by the stairs, wanting to hear the rest of their ridiculous conversation. Christian, some undercover rat? *Please*. I saw his file. There's nothing in there that would make me believe he's anything but...what Christian is.

"Look, maybe the Adelaide part is a bonus, right? Like he got in and just so happened to get close to her. Think of all the information he's getting just by being close to her. What if he's not from another family? What if he works for the feds? Ever think about that?"

Whoever Damien is talking to is *laughing*. Loud, obnoxious laughter floods the room and I almost join. It's absolutely ridiculous. Christian couldn't be working for the feds. He has a rap sheet. Plus, and maybe this is the most ridiculous part, but I don't think he'd lie to me about that. I trust him. I've never trusted anyone the same way that I trust him.

Deciding I don't want to listen to any more of Damien's conspiracy theories, I turn to head down the stairs. I make sure they hear the clicking of my heels so they stop talking – and they do.

I stop in front of them, tilting my head to the side. “Damien, I think you of all people know that rumors can cost people their life, hmm? So, let's be careful what we say, understood?”

Damien's cheeks are flushed, his eyes refusing to meet my gaze. “Understood. I was just pulling Troy's leg here, Adelaide. He's...Antonio's replacement.”

I turn to look at Troy. Tall, skinny, blonde. He sticks out almost as much as Christian does. I don't recognize him. I tilt my head to the side and decide to put some fear into him. Don't want him to start overstepping as Antonio did.

“I've never seen you before, Troy. How do I know that *you're* not undercover?” I ask, raising an eyebrow.

His eyes go *wide*. He's trying to form words. I watch as his mouth opens and closes, over and over again. “I've – I've been working on the streets for years. I've always reported to Carlo and –”

I hold up a finger, smirking his way. “I'm kidding, Troy. Just wanted you to see how *scary* it can be when you stir up rumors like that. Enjoy the rest of your day, boys.”

I was going to meet Yulian, but I send him a text to reschedule. I want to see Christian and tell him all about Damien's stupid conspiracy theory.

Christian opens his apartment door, raising an eyebrow when he sees me. “Everything okay?” he asks.

“Aren’t you used to me just popping up without a phone call at this point?” I counter as he steps aside, letting me into the apartment. Like always, my eyes travel around, taking it all in.

His apartment is so simple. At first, I judged it. A lot. I’ll be honest. I didn’t know how someone could comfortably live somewhere that’s so small, but the longer I’ve spent in his apartment, the more I realized how...home-like it feels. There are not hundreds of square feet of empty space. It never feels cold and stoic. It feels...warm, welcoming.

Sometimes I feel like I could get used to it.

Other times I wonder what the hell I’m doing thinking like that. That’s never going to be my life.

“Yeah, but last time you just popped up at my apartment it was to tell me that you’re pregnant,” Christian points as he closes the door. I turn to shoot him a look and he rolls his eyes. It’s the first time he’s ever rolled his eyes at me. I don’t know whether to be offended or not. “My apartment isn’t bugged, Ads. No one is going to hear me. We can *talk* about it here. Unless you still don’t want to mention it whatsoever.”

Still undecided about that, truthfully. I’m keeping it, but I’m also...not sure I’m ready to think about it. It’s a lot.

“I had a meeting, but I decided to come to see you instead,” I tell him, successfully changing the subject. “My father has Damien training Antonio’s replacement. Some kid named Troy. Do you know him?”

“No. Don’t think so. You came all this way to tell me that Antonio’s already been replaced?”

“No, I came all this way to tell you what those two idiots were gossiping about when I came down the stairs this morning.”

Another eye roll from Christian. It’s getting slightly annoying. He’s not supposed to give me attitude.

“Ads, you know I really don’t *love* gossip. The less I know about everyone’s personal life, the better. They already hate me,” he says, moving toward the bedroom. “I’m going to shower. I just got back from my morning run. Can it wait?”

“Will your shower make you less grumpy? You’re in a mood this morning. I thought I was the...y’know one,” I point out, following him toward the bedroom.

He sighs. “You’re right, Ads. Let me hop in the shower and I promise I’ll be in a much better mood when I come out. Deal?”

Christian’s hand slips down to my hip, pulling me flush against him. I close my eyes, pressing my forehead to his chest. A wave of calm washes over me when he pulls me in. He tilts my head up and presses a kiss to my lips. Everything feels better at that moment.

“Deal,” I whisper against his lips before Christian slips away from me. I watch as he heads toward the bathroom. I listen as he gets the shower ready and if I didn’t still have a potential meeting later, I’d hop in with him. Really melt away some of his grumpiness.

Instead, I take a seat on his bed. I don’t intend to snoop, but I see something out of the corner of my eye that catches my attention. It’s just a regular manilla folder, a few pages sticking out. None of my business...but I see just a little bit of a seal on the pages sticking out and something in my gut is telling me to reach for it.

So, I do. I grab the folder just as Christian steps into the shower. I open it and my blood runs cold. My heart drops in my chest and I feel so many things at once.

The seal is the FBI seal, official documentation. It wasn't...it wasn't just gossip.

Christian is a rat.

And I don't know what to do with this information.

It feels like everything is crumbling down around me.

Chapter Twenty

Christian

I admit that I was probably a little grumpy with Adelaide when she got here. It's been a rough morning. They want to move up the date of the bust. They want to get it over with, say it's been taking too long. They have enough information, might as well get it over with. And...I've been trying to stall. I haven't figured out what I'm going to tell Adelaide, I have no idea how I'm going to handle this. Once I come clean, she's going to hate me. We're having a child together though.

I get out of the shower and dry off, changing into a pair of sweatpants. I drape the towel around my neck, turning to lean in the doorway of the bathroom. "So, you want to tell me about what Damien and –" I stop midsentence.

No.

No. No. No.

Fuck!

I'm always so fucking careful, but I got distracted when Adelaide knocked on the door. I always keep everything put away where I know that no one else will see them. This time I fucked up. I really, really fucked up. I left the file on my nightstand, the file that has all the information known about the Mansolillo's. The file that's very clear full of FBI paperwork – and now it's in Adelaide's hands.

I don't know what to do. All the training in the world never prepared me for this situation. Textbook says to deescalate any confrontation and get out immediately, let my handler know. The textbooks never said what to do when you fall in love and impregnate a target.

"Adelaide," I start, trying to get her attention. "I can – I can explain." Not sure about that one, but it feels like

the best thing to say. It feels like the only thing that could buy me some time here.

Her head snaps up to look at me. Her dark eyes are *furios*. I don't think I need to stress how not good this situation is. She tilts her head to look at me.

“Really Christian?” she asks. Her voice sounds like getting dunked in ice water feels. “Can you explain it? Please, try to. I'd love to hear it.”

She's not going to believe anything that I say. Doesn't take a genius to figure that one out. But I know that I have to try anyway. I slowly move out of the doorway, coming to sit at the foot of the bed. I don't try to touch her; I don't even reach out for her like I want to. I just sit there.

“I was going to tell you,” I say softly.

I can tell from the look on her face that wasn't the right thing to say. Adelaide slams her palm down on the folder. “You were going to *tell* me? When Christian? When I was being put in handcuffs? After I gave birth to our child in a *jail* cell? When was going to be most convenient for you?”

“Adelaide...I never intended for it to be like this. You just –”

“Right. This is *my* fault, right? I'm the one who lied the entire time. Or is it because I'm some evil seductress?”

“Adelaide, please. I swear, I've been trying to work out a plan and I was never going to –”

“What were you going to do, Christian? Turn your back on the fucking FBI? You've been telling them everything! I trusted you. I fucking trusted you more than I've ever trusted anyone in my life!”

I'm not able to get a word in. Adelaide is furious and nothing I say is going to change that. I don't know what to do. I really don't. She's so upset that tears are streaming down her cheeks and I can't touch her. I know if I do, she'll probably

try to strangle me and at this point, I can't say that I don't deserve it.

I've been lying to her this entire time. She's right. Adelaide has been upfront with her damage, with who she was. I knew what I was getting into every step of the way. She showed me every piece of her and I kept pursuing her. I could've stopped at any time. It never had to be this way.

But I wanted her. I still want her. I fell for her without realizing it and now I don't want to be without her. Too late for that one. In trying to be the hero, I successfully made myself the villain in her story.

I swallow, refusing to meet her gaze. The last thing I want is to see all the disappointment. I don't want to watch her go from being fond of me to hating me; I don't want to see the pain that I caused.

"I'm sorry," I whisper.

"You have no idea what you've done, Christian," she whispers. "You have no idea of the position that you've put me in."

I feel her shift on the bed, feel it dip as she gets up. I don't even have it in me to beg her not to tell Carlo. At this point, I'm sure it's what I deserve. But the fact she said 'position' tells me that she hasn't made her mind up yet. She doesn't know what she's going to do and that buys me time.

What the hell am I going to do with that time? When she leaves, I have to call Megan and tell her everything. At least...most of it. I still want to keep Adelaide as safe as possible. She's pregnant. My child isn't going to be born in some prison hospital, even if Adelaide wants me to have nothing to do with said child.

"Adelaide," I say one last time. Her footsteps stop. She's at least listening to me. "I'm sorry. I'm really, really sorry. I never...never meant to fall in love with you."

This isn't how I wanted to tell her that, but I'm in love with her. I think I've been in love with her for a while

now. Guess I should tell her because this is the last time that I'm going to see her.

I hear a scoff from the living room. No reply. Just her heels echoing on the hardwood until the front door closes. She left the paperwork, which means she's not taking it to Carlo immediately...I hope. I hope I have time.

I take a moment to collect myself. Deep breaths. I realize that I'm crying too. Tears are running down my cheeks. I'm scared, terrified. For my life, for Adelaide, for our child. She's right. I just put her in an impossible position and I'm sure that my last-second love confession didn't do much to help her out there.

I move over to the nightstand, dig out my phone. I turn it on, take a deep breath and call Megan. One ring and she picks up again.

"Christian, what's up? Didn't Marcus call you earlier about things?"

"Megan, I fucked up," the words spill from my lips before I can stop them. "I really, really fucked up." But I can't tell her. I can't tell anyone about Adelaide because when I cover for her, really cover for her, they'll know that it's all a lie.

"Christian, I need you to calm down. Breathe. What happened? Tell me what happened."

"I've been made," I tell her. The words leave my lips and I feel like a fucking idiot. Only an idiot gets caught. Only an idiot leaves FBI paperwork sitting out when he's fucking the daughter of a mafia boss.

I hear her let out a breath on the other end. "Okay, okay. Are you in immediate danger? Because if you are you need to get out of there. I can send someone to your location."

Despite knowing she can't see me, I shake my head. "No. I don't think I'm in immediate danger. I don't know if they're going to tell the others yet."

“What do you mean you don’t know?” Megan asks. “How did they find out? What did they say? I need as many details as possible.”

And I know I should give them to her. I should tell Megan everything. The more information they have, the better it’s going to be for me in the future. The problem is – I don’t want Adelaide to get caught up in this. I want to keep her as safe as possible because it’s Adelaide. I love her.

So, I lie.

“I was having a meeting with...fuck, what was his name? He’s newer in their ranks. Troy, I think. I turned my back to grab my laptop and he found my file. He didn’t say much, but he didn’t take the file when he left. I don’t think he’s going to say anything yet. He’s too new. He has less credibility than me. With no proof, they won’t believe him.”

It’s the best lie that I can come up with at the moment. It doesn’t discuss Adelaide’s involvement at all. Whatever I do, they can’t know about Adelaide.

Megan sighs on the other end. I hear typing before she sighs again. “Give me time,” she says. “Stay away from the Mansolillo’s for the rest of the day. I’ll report this and see what they want to do. If they ask you to come over, come up with a good reason why you can’t. If they insist or say they’ll come to you, call me *immediately*. We’ll take care of you, Christian.”

“Got it. Thanks, Megan,” I mutter. I’m not worried about myself. I’m worried about Adelaide.

I don’t know how to fix this.

Chapter Twenty-One

Adelaide

Everything keeps replaying in my mind. The file, opening it. All of the papers inside were everything that the feds have on our family. Carlo, Antonio, Damien...Mattia, me. They have nothing on me. As far as they know, I'm just a spoiled mafia princess. Except...except Christian knows that's not what I am. Christian knows everything I've done, everything I've planned to do.

I slam my hand against the steering wheel, biting back tears. I don't know what to do. Since I was a child, I was taught that family was the most important thing. Loyalty to the family is everything. But they'll kill him – and if they kill Christian, it gets them in much deeper shit.

“Fuck!” I scream at the traffic light. I'm sure I look insane. Maybe I am insane.

I barely knew Christian, and I let him inside. I trusted him. I made him my right hand. I made him...so much. This was all a game to him. I never intended on falling into bed with him, but maybe he planned that from the beginning. Get close to me and use me to take down the entire family. I gave him every-fucking-thing that he needed to do that. I've been sleeping with the enemy.

My chest aches. I've never felt so destroyed, so heartbroken. Then, *then*, the asshole had the nerve to say that he *loved* him. He loved me when it was convenient. When I have the power to have him killed. He didn't love me when I was letting him inside all of my walls. He didn't love me when I was crying in his arms, scared because I'm pregnant.

I'm fucking pregnant with his child. What am I going to do? I – I should keep it. It's not the kid's fault and I've already made up my mind that I'm keeping it. Even if I

have to deal with this alone. I'll suck it up and just do it. I think. Fuck, I don't know what I'm going to do.

I pull the car over to the side of the road, fish in my purse for my phone. There are missed calls and texts from Christian, but I don't have it in me to open them and read them. I don't want to hear whatever he has to say right now. Nothing is going to change everything that happened. Nothing is going to make me forgive him.

Instead, I find Yulian's number. I dial it and wait for him to answer. It takes a few rings compared to Christian who usually answers on the first ring.

"Da?" he says into the phone.

"Are you still able to meet today?" I ask.

I don't know why I want to talk to Yulian. It's not like I can tell him about Christian. It's not like I'm going to fall into bed with him. I don't have any interest in that. I think I've made that pretty clear to him. I just...don't want to go home and truthfully, I don't have any other friends. The only other person I have is...Christian...and I can't talk to him.

"Yeah, I can," Yulian answers.

"Same place as last time?"

"I'll be there, Ads."

When I arrive at the café, I spend extra time in the car to make sure I'm not crying. Yulian will see through it immediately and start asking questions that I don't want to answer. I take deep breaths, try to let this melt off of my mind. At least for now. I can think about it after this meeting. I sit there until my eyes don't look as puffy from the crying I've been doing.

When I walk up to the outside patio, I see his bleached blonde head immediately. He's facing me this time

and Yulian smiles when he sees me. He stands up, opens his arms. I hug him, let him kiss my cheek.

“What did you want to speak about, Ads?” he asks as we sit down. “I ordered a tea for you. Peppermint. You still like that, yes?”

“Yeah,” I say softly. “Um...two things actually.” He nods for me to continue. “What would you do if someone close to you betrayed you? Someone you cared about?” I ask.

I want advice from someone who’s not so roped into the family. Someone who might see things differently. Plus, Yulian doesn’t know about Christian. He doesn’t know that he’s the only person that I’m currently close to, so he’s not going to be able to piece it together.

He raises an eyebrow, tilting his head to the side. “Betrayed me? What do you mean? Like...how?”

I don’t say anything when our drinks appear. Yulian ordered something sugary and frozen for himself like always and my tea. I watch as the steam blows up from the cup, thinking over my words carefully. I can’t let on too much.

“Say you trusted someone to be on your side, but they were not. They were lying about the side they were on the entire time.”

“Ah,” he nods. “I’d kill them.”

Okay, fine. I should’ve expected that one. Especially from Yulian. Maybe I need to try a different approach with him, try to explain it differently.

“Fair,” I say with an eye roll. “Let me word it differently then. Say *I* betrayed you. What if I just used you to get to your family because I wanted to take over everything.”

He falls silent and I stare down at my drink while I wait for his reply.

“I would ask why you would do that,” Yulian says softly. “I would try to understand why you would hurt me

when I care for you. And...if you really didn't care about me, I would kill you."

"So, you'd hear me out and if I had a good reason, you'd forgive me."

"...Maybe not forgive. Just...I would try to understand. Because I care about you, Ads. I know that I am not what you want and that is fine. But I care for you anyway. I would want to know why someone I cared about would do something like that to me. Make sense?"

What I'm getting from Yulian is that I should hear Christian out. I should listen to the reasons he has for doing what he did. If the reasons aren't good, then I go to the family with the information. It makes *sense*, but I don't want to talk to Christian. I don't *want* to hear his reasons. I'm angry and hurt. I can't even put into words how upset I am. It feels like he stabbed a knife into my heart and twisted it – and then to say he *loved* me at the last minute? It all feels very manipulative. It sounds like...something I would do to get what I wanted.

I nod. "It makes sense. Thank you."

Yulian nods. "What's your next question?"

Right. The original reason I wanted to meet him today. I bring my teacup up to my lips, blowing on it to cool it before taking a sip. "I need another favor. This one you will be paid for. If you don't want to do it, I'd like you to help connect me to someone who will."

Green eyes settle on me from across the table. All the playfulness in them vanishes. It's like Yulian knows in an instant what I'm talking about. Probably because he *knows* me. We're not the same, but we're close enough. If he worked harder or if I slacked off more, we'd be the same. The only difference between us is our drive.

"Carlo," is all he says.

I nod. "It's time."

Maybe now is a terrible time to be moving forward with this plan. But it could be my last opportunity. If Christian reports everything to the FBI, we're going down anyway. If I'm going down, I'm going down on top. I'm going to go down proving myself. I'm going down with what I deserve.

Besides, consider it a mercy. My father wouldn't last in prison. He'd probably have a heart attack during his trial or something. This is the best possible choice for us.

He purses his lips to the side as he thinks. "I... cannot do it, Adelaide. You know I'd do anything to help you. However, this is something I cannot let my family get involved in."

As much as I hate his answer, I understand. Ultimately, Yulian has to look out for his family as much as I need to look out for mine. "Can you find me someone who will? You have more...connections."

"Of course, I will try," he says, reaching out for my hand. I give it to him.

In a perfect world, I would feel the way I feel toward Christian toward Yulian. He fits me. He understands. Unfortunately, it was like the moment I opened up to Christian, there was no one else in the world for me. At least Yulian doesn't try to push the situation.

"Thank you, Yulian. For everything. You know that I am grateful for your friendship."

He smiles, bringing the back of my hand up to his mouth. He presses a kiss to it. "And I am grateful for you, Adelaide. No matter what route you take, I look forward to our families being allies for years to come. You are...dear to me."

"As are you."

"And I hope that you work out the betrayal situation. If you...need that taken care of...that, I will do," he smiles.

I can't help but smile back. It's endearing. I don't have to give him the full story for him to know that my problems are relationship-related. And I appreciate him supporting it. *Mostly.*

"I'll keep that in mind," I promise, squeezing his hand before pulling mine away.

I still don't know what I'm going to do. I still don't know how I'm going to handle Carlo. I don't know what I'm going to do about Christian. I don't know if I'm even going to speak to him. I have a lot to think about and not a whole lot of time to do so. It feels like the clock is ticking down and I need to do something – quickly. I just don't know *what.*

Chapter Twenty-Two

Christian

I've spent two days sitting in my apartment. Just waiting. Waiting for the moment the door bursts open and my life is over. Waiting for Adelaide to call me, taunt me. Nothing. My phone hasn't rung once. No one's knocked on my door. Every time I hear a car outside, goosebumps pop up on my skin.

Megan says that the bust has been moved up a few days. Four, to be exact. As long as I'm not in immediate danger, and it doesn't seem like I am. It's been two days, and Adelaide hasn't done anything about it. But...this is Adelaide that we're talking about. She doesn't act rashly. She's cold and calculated.

And...I miss her. I can't begin to express how much I miss Adelaide. I keep wanting to reach out, talk to her, see her. I want to know how she is. I want to know how our child is. I look down at my phone. The battery is almost completely drained because I haven't charged it over these last few days. I've sat on my bed and tried to figure out what I'm doing with my life, how I'm handling this situation.

I suck in a breath, grabbing my phone. I find Adelaide's number and send a message.

'Can we talk?'

It's simple, straight to the point. I assume that that's what Adelaide would respond the best to. Nothing prose-y. Nothing full of sweet words to get her to change her mind. Just a simple question.

And I get a simple response.

'Yes. I'll be over in ten minutes.'

Now I sit and wait more. Try to figure out if I made a mistake by inviting Adelaide over. Well, if she kills

me...at least I get to see her one last time. Right?

It's exactly ten minutes later when Adelaide knocks on my door. My heart is pounding in my chest because I just – I don't know. I don't know if she's going to kill me. I don't know how this is going to go. I thought I knew Adelaide, or at least I was learning her. I've never been more unsure of anything in my life.

I open the door and she looks just as beautiful as usual. If this is bothering her, it doesn't show. Still in a designer dress and heels. She's not showing yet. Her dark hair is flawless, straight, not so much as a piece out of place. She's perfection.

She doesn't say a word to me, just steps inside. She doesn't look around the apartment like she usually does. She just walks over and sits on the couch, looking up at me with those dark eyes. I know her well enough to know that she's expecting me to start the conversation. Well, I did ask her here.

I walk over and sit on the opposite end of the couch, keeping a distance between us. I know she doesn't even want to be in the same room as me right now. Being close to me is completely out of the picture.

"How are you?" I ask, keeping my voice soft. "How's everything with the baby?"

At first, Adelaide doesn't reply. She doesn't even look at me. Her eyes are scanning the room. "Is this conversation being recorded?" she asks.

"Adelaide, I've never recorded any of our conversations."

"Right. I *definitely* believe that one, Christian. It's a yes or no question." Her tone is cold. It's the same voice she uses when talking to Damien, or in the past, Antonio. The

people she didn't view as worth her time. That's how she feels about me now.

"No," I answer. I want to really insist that I've never recorded our conversations. The FBI doesn't even *know* about Adelaide. At least of her involvement in things. They don't know that I'm close to her, that I've spent hours working with her.

"Okay." I can't tell whether she believes me or not. Either way, she continues. "I'm fine. The baby is fine. I have a doctor's appointment in a few weeks to check the growth and everything."

I want to be there. I want to see my child on the little screen. I want to hold Adelaide's hand and I want...I want it all.

"That's good," I nod. There's awkwardness. There's never been awkwardness between the two of us – at least not like this. It's never felt like this before.

"I haven't decided what I'm going to do," she blurts out. "I haven't...I don't know. I should hear you out, but nothing you say is going to change what happened. And I know I should try to be mature about the whole situation, but I feel incredibly betrayed, and looking at your face pisses me off."

Well, at least she's talking to me. I feel just a bit of relief knowing that Adelaide hasn't made up her mind on how to handle the situation. It buys me just a little more time.

"I understand," I say, staring down at my hands. "You have every right to feel that way. Do you want one free slap?" I ask, completely serious. "I'll give it to you. I'll keep the glasses on so you get the satisfaction of knocking them off."

Then I see it. It's the smallest, but there's a hint of a smile on Adelaide's face. It vanishes just as quickly as it appeared, but it was there.

“Hitting the father of my child isn’t a healthy habit to create,” she admits, settling back on the couch. “So, how does this work? Do I give birth in a jail cell and then you get custody? Do I get visitation or anything?”

“Adelaide...” I suck in a breath. “It’s not...”

“Because I could ruin everything for you right now, Christian. That’s the difference between the two of us. I’m actually considering things before I blow up your life. You never once considered what you were doing to me. You never cared.”

“I care, Adelaide,” I can’t let her create that narrative. Can’t let her get that in her head. “I never reported anything about you. All the hours we worked together, Antonio, nothing. None of it involves you. I couldn’t do that. As far as the FBI knows, you’re still a stereotypical mob princess.”

“...Why? Why didn’t you tell them about me?”

“Because I love you. Because I cared. I knew by doing this I would ruin your life. I didn’t want to send you to jail too.”

She falls silent at that as if she’s trying to think about it. “Why, Christian?” she finally asks. “Why do all of this? Why let yourself get close to me if you knew this was how it ends? Why did you make me trust you?”

“I...I fell for you, Ads. I don’t know why. I don’t know how. I asked myself every step of the way why I was doing this. Why didn’t I just pull the plug on us? Get pulled from the mission? The truth is I didn’t want to be away from you.”

It’s clear from her face that she doesn’t know how to address it. Adelaide isn’t used to being told that she’s loved and...the person that’s telling her that does *this* to her. I know she’s really, really going through it.

She tucks into herself then. I see her body language start to close off. “I don’t know what to do,” she

whispers. “There’s not a way this ends well for me, is there? I could have you killed – but they know we know, right? That means they’ll have more of a reason to come after us. I could do nothing, and lose everything. There’s no way to win.”

There is. There’s one thing that I can offer her. I already know Adelaide’s answer, but it’s the only way I can help.

I swallow and move just a little bit closer to her. Reaching out, I take her hand in mine. She doesn’t jerk it away immediately, which I take as a good enough sign.

“Adelaide, I can get you immunity. All you’d have to do would be –”

“No,” she cuts me off immediately, shaking her head. “*I’m* not a fucking rat, Christian,” she says as she jerks her hand away from me.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Adelaide

I had to give Christian a chance. That's the only thing I could come up with. I had to take the time to hear him out. I don't *owe* him anything, but I know I wouldn't feel okay if I didn't. So far, I'm just angrier at him.

He wants to offer me immunity. All I have to do is testify. I have to turn my back on my family to stay safe. Christian has been inside long enough to know that loyalty is everything. If I betray my family, I do it on *my* terms. I do it because it's what's best for me. Rattling on them? That's not what's best for me. I'll forever be known as the one who sold out. It's offensive that he'd think otherwise.

He sighs, takes back the hand that I jerked away from. "Adelaide, I need you to think about this. *Really* think about it. You're pregnant. You're having a baby that you plan on keeping. If you don't get immunity, no matter what I do, it's possible you'll wind up in jail. I don't want that. I don't want you to mother our child from a cell. I would never keep you away from them, but I want you to be involved."

It all feels like too much. I have to choose between my family and my child. Choose between everything I've ever been taught or everything that I have now.

"I – that's my family, Christian."

"You want to have your father murdered, Adelaide," he points out.

But that's *different*. He doesn't understand. He's never understood. Killing Carlo is a necessity if I want to take power. Now, I'll never be able to take that power.

"I –" I don't know how to explain it in a way that makes sense to someone on the outside. It's like no one

betrays the family *except* family. Like there's some weird exception.

"Ads," Christian sighs. "I have one final reason why you should take this chance. Why you should take the immunity deal. Besides the fact that you get to spend your life with our child, with...me. I have proof for you."

"Proof?"

He doesn't respond. He gets up and walks toward the bedroom. I can't lie, my heart is pounding. It's like a part of me is expecting him to emerge with five other FBI agents and they have a whole 'gotcha' moment. I try not to think about that, instead, I focus on...what am I saying? I can't focus on anything right now.

Christian returns with a manilla folder. He doesn't explain anything about the folder as he sits down and hands it to me. "This might have some answers you've been looking for, Adelaide," is all he says.

I open it. It's a different folder than the one that I found on his nightstand. This one is filled with stapled together packets of papers, full of text narratives that have parts blacked out completely. Redacted.

The first paper is titled 'Mansolillo Involvement in Ronnie Bahn's Death'. Ronnie. I perk up and look at Christian. Wasn't that his brother? I start to read over the pieces that aren't marked out. Ronnie was hit by a bullet meant for Mattia. My brother, inadvertently, had his brother killed.

I swallow that down, almost slightly relieved that it wasn't anything worse. Like, I know that that's bad. I know that my family is responsible for the death of Christian's brother...but at least we didn't put a hit on him or something. Not that that makes it any better for Christian.

I flip to the next page and I feel the color drain from me.

I have to read the title multiple times.

‘The Death of Daya Mansolillo.’

It takes me time to move on from just the title. There’s a part of me that isn’t sure I *want* to read whatever pops up next, but I force myself to anyway. I know that Christian wouldn’t hand this to me if he didn’t want me to read it. I know that it’s important.

I scan the report. There are just as many redacted parts as the first one, but I can piece it together. Like me, the FBI is suspicious of the circumstances involving my mother’s death. A lot of the details of the car accident don’t add up. It doesn’t tell me anything that I don’t already know, but it also confirms that I’m not fucking crazy. It’s not just some conspiracy theory that I made up to cope with my mother’s death.

But that also means Christian knew. When I was crying to him about it, he already knew. He knew I wasn’t crazy.

I lower the page to look at him, tilting my head to the side. “You knew.”

“I don’t know anything, Ads. Everything is just speculation. I just thought you should see that one of our goals is the same. Maybe multiple of them are. We want to take down Carlo. Just not in the same way that you do.”

I swallow, letting his words wash over me. Christian probably thinks that everything he’s telling me is making sense, but it isn’t. Not to me.

“If Carlo goes to jail, he’s going to be cushy for the rest of his life. He’s going to have three meals a day, probably an entire following of people who’ll still carry out things for him. Do you understand the amount of power that he has?” I ask. “The only way to stop Carlo is to *kill* him, Christian.”

“Adelaide, I can’t let you do that.”

“Right. Because you’re the good guy. Sorry, I keep forgetting that after all the *lying* you did to me,” I hiss. I

was trying to keep my temper tamed, but I'm struggling. This all feels too much. It's overwhelming and I don't really know how to cope with it – especially when I remember that I'm pregnant. With everything else going on, somehow what was the greatest problem in my life just a little bit ago, is easily forgettable.

He takes his glasses off, rubbing at the bridge of his nose. “That's not what I'm saying, Adelaide. This has nothing to do with morality. I'm saying I can't let you because I *love* you. I don't want that weighing on your conscience, because as much as you pretend not to, you have one. And I know no matter what happens, if I let you kill your father, you're going to wake up thinking about it in the middle of the night. It will haunt you.

I can't let you do that because people will know it's you. How quickly do you think your father's men will turn on you if they're offered a get out of jail free card? They have no loyalty to you. They don't respect you. They'll be perfectly fine being rats if it means getting rid of you. So no, I can't let you because I don't want you to be haunted. I don't want you to spend your life in prison. I want the best for you.”

I let him talk. I let him get it all out and his words wash over me. I absorb every one of them and it's *hard* for a myriad of reasons. A lot of it has to do with the fact Christian loves me. I don't believe him. I don't believe him because no one has told me that they loved me for the longest time. I don't know if any love in my life has even been genuine. How do I know Christian is genuine?

He wants something from me. He wants me to take the deal and let it be that. He wants me to do what's best for our child, which is something I intend to do. But wouldn't giving our child the world be best?

There are flaws. He's right. If I kill Carlo, his men will turn on me. I don't know how to work around that, but I can figure it out. I don't want to be a rat. I don't want to turn my back on everything I was taught.

I swallow, shaking my head. “Stop saying that. Stop saying you *love* me, Christian. When you love somebody, you don’t manipulate them. You don’t make them question everything they thought was true. Stop lying to me. I’m tired of it. I’m tired of all the goddamn lies around me.”

“Ads, I’m not lying. I know I picked the absolute worst time to tell you that I love you, but I wouldn’t say it if I didn’t mean it. I didn’t just say it to win you over. Nothing I did was to manipulate you, despite what it may feel like right now. Everything I did was because I *wanted* to. None of my orders involved getting close to you.”

I don’t know what to believe. Every part of me wants to believe Christian. I want him to love me, even if I don’t want to admit it yet. I want to be loved by him because I care about him.

Maybe I even love him.

“This is a lot,” I finally mutter.

“I know, Ads. I know this is. It was never my intention to overwhelm you with all of this. But I need you to make a decision. When the bust happens, I need to know what side you’re going to be on. I need to have the immunity orders in place. I need you to be safe and with me.”

Christian reaches across the couch and takes my hand in his. It’s warm and calloused and I want to keep holding his hand.

I don’t know what I’m doing.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Christian

Adelaide let me hold her hand, which feels like a world of progress. I look at her smaller hand in mine, at her manicure that is no longer flawless. There are chips in the polish, in the nails. Just another sign of how messed up everything is. Her perfect shell is cracking under the pressure. I want to fix it. I wish with everything in me that Adelaide didn't have to go through any of this.

Her eyes are lost in thought. Which, all things considered, should be a good sign. It means she's thinking over my offer. It means that she's not immediately writing it off. So, I give her time. I give her silence. I just savor the feeling of her hand in mine because I've missed it. I've missed her.

I'm absolutely crazy for this girl and I have every reason not to be. She's everything I should be against, but I love her. I loved her before she was pregnant with my child. I love her now.

Adelaide's dark eyes turn toward me and she takes a deep breath. "I don't know. I don't know what to do and I know you expect me to have an answer. I know it should be easy, but it isn't easy, Christian. None of this is easy. I need time."

"Adelaide —"

"I'm not going to do anything irrational. I swear. I won't make any moves until I give you an answer. I just need time, Christian."

We don't *have* time. This is going to be over any day now. It takes time to put this all into motion. If she wants an out, she has to take it as quickly as possible.

I shouldn't, but I trust her. I trust that Adelaide isn't going to make a move just yet. I can see it on her face. She's still unsure about what she's doing at all.

"There's not a lot of time," I whisper, squeezing her hand. I need her to understand that. I need her to realize that we're working on very short notice. "We don't have a lot of it left. It's going to happen soon. They know that I've been discovered. They want to pull me; they want to get this over with before they lose me. I need you to understand that, Ads. It could all come crashing down tomorrow."

"Then give me tonight. Give me just a damn minute to make an actual decision."

I don't want to. I need her to make a decision now, but I know she's not going to. I know when Adelaide asks for time, she means it. Ultimately, there's not a choice here. She's going to do what she wants to do.

I sigh. "Got it. I'll reach out tomorrow. I expect an answer, Ads. It doesn't matter what the answer is, I just need one from you. Okay?"

She nods, squeezing my hand. "You'll get an answer tomorrow, Christian. Promise."

I have no reason to, but I believe her. I watch as she sucks in a breath and drops my hand before standing up. "I have to go. There's a lot to think about if you want my decision ASAP."

I stand with her. She looks at me and I don't know what I'm doing until I open my arms. I need to feel her. There's a part of me that's terrified that this is the last time I'll ever be able to touch her. I want to savor it.

She looks at me, almost unsure, before her arms wrap around me. I breathe her in. Honey and flowers. Something that feels so distinctly Adelaide. I close my eyes and bury my face in her hair. Her arms stay around me for longer than a second. It's not a hug. It's an embrace. I just

don't know whether it's a goodbye or something more. A promise of tomorrow.

When she does pull away, she leans up and kisses my cheek. "I'll talk to you soon, Christian. I promise."

And with that, I watch her go. I watch her walk to the front door and I'm left hoping that Adelaide makes the right choice. The right choice for us, not whatever her morality is.

What do I know though? I don't even know if Adelaide *loves* me.

It's hard to sleep that night. I toss and turn. I get tangled in my sheets. I break out in a sweat. All I can think about is Adelaide. I fight every part of me that wants to call her, to ask if she's made a decision yet. I stare at my phone in the darkness, willing her to call me. I know she asked for a day, but maybe it was a quick decision when she thought about it? Maybe this wasn't a challenge.

Maybe I'm too hopeful.

By the time sun is breaking through my bedroom window, I think I slept maybe fifteen minutes. Most of the night, I lay in the darkness. Willing Adelaide to make the right decision, willing her to call or text. I let my mind drift off a few times, imagining a life with her. Something normal. We'd have a house, we'd raise our child. Maybe we'd even have one or two more kids.

I'm losing my damn mind. I'm slipping. This woman has shown no signs of returning my feelings, of wanting anything like that with me and here I am, somehow hopeful it'll happen. She has a hold on me like no other. I can't explain it. I'm not sure I want to.

When my phone does ring, my heart is pounding in my chest. It's Adelaide. It has to be Adelaide. When I reach

for it, I realize my phone *isn't* ringing. At least the one that Adelaide has the number to isn't.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” I say out loud as I scramble to the other side of the bed, searching the bedside table for *that* phone. I find it and grab it, answering it immediately. “Hello?”

“Christian?” Megan’s voice sounds just a little rushed on the other end. “They’re moving in. In a few hours, you’ll be pulled completely from this. We have agents headed to the Mansolillo residence now.”

“What? I thought...I thought we had more time, Megan!” My voice is full of panic. I can’t help it. Adelaide’s there. She hasn’t made a decision yet and they know. They know she’s at least *somewhat* involved. They don’t know how deeply...but she hasn’t accepted my offer yet.

“Christian, it’s fine,” Megan doesn’t understand and I know that that’s on me. I’m the one who didn’t explain a damn thing to her. I kept her in the dark when her only job is to keep me safe. I can’t get frustrated with her, but I *am*. I can’t help myself. “You’re safe. Just lay low and I’ll call when it’s over.”

“I’m going over there.”

“Where – to the Mansolillo’s? Christian? What the fuck aren’t you telling me?”

“I’m sorry, Megan. I can’t explain it right now. I just – I have to go.”

I hang up, toss the phone to the side of the bed because I know she’s going to be calling back. I don’t have time. I have to get to Adelaide. I have to tell her and maybe... maybe I can convince her to make the right choice.

I can convince her to save herself.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Adelaide

It was another restless night, another night where my mind wouldn't settle. All I can think about is the information that Christian shared with me earlier. The FBI suspects that Carlo was involved in my mother's death.

I remember her funeral. I remember watching him grieve. Was it all an act? Did he ever really love her? Then, I think about myself at Antonio's funeral. It's not the same. I had no real affection toward that man. But I faked it. I faked looking sad that someone who I should've considered family was dead, despite knowing I was the reason.

If I could fake it, so could he. Because...I'm just like him. That thought is going to forever haunt me. The man I...I hate, I'm just like him. A carbon copy. In trying to take him down, I became him. I became the very thing that I hate and now I'm pregnant. My child is going to end up just like me. It's a cycle that's forever going to repeat itself unless I break it.

By the time morning rolls around, my mind is made up. I have to see this through. Damn the consequences. Maybe it'd be better if my child didn't know me, but I can't let Carlo get away with what he's done.

My mother loved me. She spent time with me. She *cared*. He took her away from me over a rumor. If she was having an affair with Damien, why is *he* still alive? Because he's not my father's property?

Yulian won't do it, so I have to do it. I haven't had time to find someone else. I don't have the luxury of time now. It's not on my side. I get out of bed, my phone vibrating like crazy on my nightstand. I flip it over and see Christian's name on my phone. He probably wants to know if I made a decision.

I have, it's just not one that he's going to like.

It's a quiet morning. I don't think there's anything planned for today. No one is here. Just me, Carlo, and the employees of the home. It's perfect. It's the setup that I need. I swallow down any nerves I'm feeling as I walk into Carlo's bedroom.

We don't just keep weapons in the house. We don't have some huge stockpile, a secret armory. As far as weaponry in the house goes, Carlo keeps a pistol in the drawer of his bedside table. Just in case. I find it, check that it's loaded.

I was taught to shoot when I was fifteen, a few years after my mother's death. Mattia was already locked up. It was around that age that it was decided I would be stepping in for Carlo when the time came. I showed interest in the family business. I know that deep down his hope was always that I'd marry someone and they'd take over.

Not that that matters anymore.

The pistol is loaded. Safety is on. I slip it into the waistband of my jeans as I go off in search of Carlo. I feel this eerie wave of calm. This is what I'm meant to do. This is the right thing.

I make my way to Carlo's study, tap my fingers on the doorframe. He looks up from whatever he's been looking over and smiles at me.

"Adelaide, come in," he says, pushing away the papers on his desk. "I was looking over our reports from last month. Looks like, despite Antonio's death, things are going well."

"Mm?" I don't want to talk business, but there's the smallest part of me that's hesitating. I know that I should just do it. Hesitation is where people fuck up all the time. But I

just...he has to know why I'm doing it. I need to hear him confess.

He's looking at me with eyes that mirror mine. Just another way that I resemble him. I have his eyes, his drive. I'm just a miniature version of him.

I'm everything I don't want to be.

"Profits, Adelaide. And once we pull off your plan, it's only going to grow up. Come in, sit. We should talk. I have to be honest with you."

My heart is pounding in my chest. He has to be honest with me? What else is he hiding? Why do I even care? All I need to do is pull out the pistol, click off the safety and take the shot. Easy peasy.

But I can't. Curiosity has a hold on me.

So, I walk in. I don't take a seat, I'd rather not.

"I don't want to sit," I tell him and Carlo doesn't ask why. "What is it?"

"I was worried," he admits. "I knew word would travel that you were involved. I was worried people would stop wanting to do business with us. It's not typical for a daughter to be involved in the family business. A bunch of the older men are...well, they frown upon that kind of forward-thinking. I was one of them, in the beginning. I never wanted you to take over things, but I'd never tell that to your face. You were so excited about the prospect."

Excited isn't the word I'd use. It's not like I was bouncing around the house talking about being a mafia boss. I was driven. I knew it was something I could do.

"Nice to know that in the beginning, my father had the same views as all the other sexist old men," I mutter, just loud enough for him to hear him. I don't have to make eye contact to know that Carlo is shooting me a *look*.

It's the same look that ran my childhood, that put me in my place when I was acting out. Too loud, too messy.

Too much like a child.

He doesn't comment on my comment though, he continues, "But profits are up. I think people are interested in doing business with you. They see that you're different. They see that we're doing something different. After Antonio's death...they see that you understand what business really is."

"I –" I try to defend myself, but what's the point? What does it matter if Carlo knows that I had Antonio killed? He's going to be dead soon.

"Adelaide, I'm your father. I know you. I know that you had Yulian take care of Antonio. I was...upset, at first. Antonio has been my best man for years. Losing him was unfortunate. I'm sure you had your reasons. I know that he was upset about your ascension into power. If I had to guess, he was threatening to have you killed. You acted first, which is the mark of someone who knows what they're doing."

"It was the only way," I say. "Kill him or be killed. I'm not ready to die."

"Of course not. I'm proud of you, Adelaide. You're everything that I hoped your brother would be. You're smart. You're capable. You understand this business better than most of my men. I've been...considering letting you take a more front-facing role if this works out. I can take the backseat, let you drive for a little bit. I'll be around for guidance, but I'm tired."

I don't know if I believe a word he's saying. Carlo is good at lying, at manipulating. It's where I learned it all from. There's the smallest part of me, the little girl who wants to believe her father is proud. I want to be able to love him.

It's not like I ever set out to hate him. It's not like I *want* to have to kill my father. It's just the only option I see. He has to pay for what happened to my mother, but I just...I need to hear him say it. I need to know that he knows what he did.

“What about my mother?” I ask quietly. “What about Daya?”

“Oh, she wouldn’t be proud of you, Adelaide,” he says so nonchalantly. “Daya would be disappointed that this is the route you took. She wanted the best for you, and she wouldn’t feel like this is the best. She liked the money that our business brought in. She never liked the facts of it. You’re nothing like her.”

His words cut me like a knife and I don’t know if he’s trying to do so. I don’t know if that’s his intention. Does he want to wound me? Does he know what I’m planning on doing?

“I wish I could hear it from her,” I say, beginning to feel restless. The gun in my waistband feels like it’s weighing me down. It feels like I could collapse with the weight.

Carlo sighs. “I know that your mother’s passing really affected you, Adelaide. I miss her too. You know that I’ve never loved anyone as I did her. I didn’t even date after her passing. I’ve been faithful to your mother since the beginning. I don’t think Daya shared the same views...but I loved her, nonetheless.”

“You killed her,” I blurt it out without really thinking. The words leave my lips quicker than I can think. But I said it. My eyes are locked on Carlo’s face, but he’s unreadable. Just like I am. Another mark in the column of me being the same as my bastard father.

“Adelaide,” he says my name with a sigh. “Is that what you believe? Do you really think I’d kill her?”

“Yes. You thought she was cheating on you with Damien. You couldn’t handle the betrayal. You couldn’t handle that she wasn’t choosing you. She had to pay for her mistakes. Maybe you didn’t intend to *kill* her. Maybe you just wanted to hurt her or scare her...but she’s dead. The accident was your fault. Orchestrated all by you, Carlo!” I can’t control

my volume. I can't control the passion in my voice. I believe everything that I'm saying. It all comes tumbling out.

Carlo looks at me, raises an eyebrow. "How do you know, Adelaide? How do you know that any of that was my intention?"

It's always been a gut feeling, just a suspicion. At that moment, I realize that it's so much more than that. I realize exactly why I'm so sure of what Carlo did, or what he intended to do. It hits me like a bus. I almost feel breathless for a moment as the answer comes to me.

I look at him, take a breath. "Because it's exactly what I would've done," I whisper.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Christian

I drive recklessly toward the Mansolillo estate. My heart is pounding in my chest, I can hear it thrumming in my ears. I can't think about anything but getting to Adelaide in time, about beating the FBI to the house. I have to get to her and make her see. She needs to agree to the immunity deal. I know I don't have anything written up but it's fine. It's okay. All I need is for her to agree, and we can go from there.

I pull up to the gates and security just looks at me.

"Carlo isn't expecting anyone today," the guard says, sounding bored.

"It's important." I cannot stress that enough. I also can't stress just *how* important it is. I can't tip them off to anything that's about to come their way. "It's urgent," I emphasize again. I don't have it in me to argue with them. They just need to understand.

The guard looks unimpressed with my pleas, but he sighs, "It better be important or Carlo will have both of our heads. You know he doesn't like being disturbed on off days."

He opens the gate and I speed through, still driving like a bat out of hell. I do a terrible job at parking the car by the entrance and then I'm out, running toward the front doors. Security is looking at me like I'm fucking insane and maybe they're not far off from the truth. At this point, who knows? I'd buy it.

They open the door for me anyway and I turn to look at them. "Where is Adelaide?"

"In the home," one of the guards answers and I cannot stop the eye roll that follows.

"Thank you," I hiss, stepping into the foyer. I'll just have to figure it out myself.

It's a huge house. There are a hundred places that either of them could be, but I'm here. That's a good first step. I just have to hope that Adelaide is willing to listen this morning. Maybe she made her decision already. Maybe she's just still asleep and hasn't called to tell me.

It's Adelaide. She doesn't sleep in.

First, I stick my head in the kitchen. Empty except for staff. No one in the dining room either. I've never ventured upstairs. It's always been off-limits. Just before I can decide whether or not I'm taking that leap, I hear voices. One of them is distinctly Adelaide's. And she's talking to Carlo.

My gut drops.

A few steps down the hallway, I find the two of them in Carlo's office. Adelaide is hovering. Nervous energy is just radiating off of her. I don't have to read her body language to know that something's wrong and, in my gut, I know what it is. But...but at least I'm not too late. On multiple angles. The FBI isn't here yet. Adelaide hasn't killed Carlo. I spot the gun in the waistband of her jeans and I know that this is so much more severe than I thought.

She's willing to get her hands dirty.

Carlo turns to look at me, annoyance and confusion written on his face. "Christian, what are you doing here? There's no meeting today. You know better than to just barge in –"

I don't care. I don't give a fuck whether Carlo likes me anymore. I'm not here for him. "Ads," I say, ignoring him completely. "It's happening. I need your decision."

The nervous energy radiating off of her amplifies. It's brief, but she looks scared. She looks at Carlo for a moment and then back to me.

"Christian," she says softly. "I can't – I have to –"

She's hesitating. That's exactly what I need. Hesitation means she's unsure. Unsure is exactly what I need

her to be. It means I can talk her off of this edge. Hopefully.

I take a step toward her, still ignoring Carlo. He's not a factor here. He doesn't matter. Adelaide is the only thing that matters. Well, her and our child.

"No, you don't, Ads. You know that. This isn't your only option. I know how you feel. I know that you want to get revenge for your mother. I *understand*. Don't you think that's how I felt? Don't you think I've wanted revenge every goddamn day for Ronnie?" I ask, trying to make her understand.

What she's feeling? It's normal. So boringly normal. Someone she loved was taken away from her and it was unfair. She wants to avenge that person. I know how she feels because I've been there.

She doesn't know how many times I've wanted to storm the prison and find Mattia, scream that that bullet was meant for him but it missed. I'd make sure that I wouldn't miss. She doesn't know how many times I've thought about hurting Carlo because ultimately, it's on him. He controls everything. He's the puppet master.

But I know that I can't let myself go that far. I cannot become the judge, jury, and executioner. Avenging Ronnie doesn't bring him back.

Carlo is looking between the two of us. Confusion is written on his face. This is something he hasn't pieced together yet.

"What in the hell is going on here?" he asks. "Adelaide, what is he talking about?"

But she ignores him. She looks directly at me, shaking her head.

"Don't you understand, Christian? This is what I am. I'm *him*. I'm just like him. Everything I've ever done... it's what he would've done."

“And this is what he’d do, Adelaide. He’d do exactly what you’re thinking of right now. You have the chance to break the cycle. To stop being like *him*. Be like Adelaide. Don’t say you don’t know how because I’ve seen it.”

She looks so conflicted. Tears are forming in the corners of her dark eyes and her hands are trembling. Carlo still has no idea what we’re talking about.

“I need an explanation from one of you,” he says, and I see the façade that is Carlo Mansolillo melting away. “Now.”

Up until this moment, Carlo has presented himself to me as a calm, understanding man. He’s been kind, maybe a little too kind. I’ve never seen the real Carlo because he hasn’t wanted me to. He wants me to see him as a good guy. Seeing that mask slipping makes me understand Adelaide just a little bit more. Is this what she grew up with? Someone who can change in an instant, go from safe to dangerous?

“I don’t owe you anything!” Adelaide says, finally addressing him. “You killed my mother! You killed her like she was nothing because she betrayed you. Or you thought she betrayed you! Did you ever have any proof?”

“Did I need proof, Adelaide? You said it yourself. I did what you would do in that situation. What would you do if someone you loved betrayed you?”

Her eyes dart over to me before she answers, “I’d hear out why they did it. Maybe they did it because, in the end, it’s what’s best for you.”

I swallow. Did I – is Adelaide relenting? Is she realizing what the right choice here is? Maybe not the ‘right’ choice, maybe the only choice. Deciding to take the deal is the only way for her to stay out of jail, to stay with our child.

Carlo tilts his head to the side. “Right. Your mother was a whore because that’s what was best for me. We

both know that's bullshit, Adelaide. You're acting weak. What has gotten into you? I raised you better."

He's pushing all the right buttons and he knows what he's doing. Before I can say anything, Adelaide grabs the gun from her waistband. She pulls it out, her index flicks the safety off. I don't know why I'm surprised that she knows how to use a gun, but I am.

Her hands are trembling as she points the gun at Carlo who's grinning like a maniac.

"Ah, now it all makes sense. You think you're going to avenge your mother. You don't have it in you to pull the trigger. You couldn't even kill Antonio yourself." His dark eyes dart over to me. "You're in on this, aren't you?" he asks. "You've known this entire time."

I don't respond. Carlo is not my concern. Adelaide is. Making sure she stays calm is my job. Making sure she doesn't make that decision is the most important thing. I need to make sure her finger stays off the trigger.

"Adelaide," I say softly. "I need you to think about what you're doing. I cannot protect you if you do this. If you do this, there's no going back. I don't care if you don't do it for me. Don't do it for our child."

Carlo's eyes are wide, more amusement flickering over his face. "Isn't this just great? You got yourself knocked up by *Christian*, Adelaide? The first person I let you work with and you're pregnant. You know, your mother –"

"Stop!" she shouts. "Stop bringing her up! You don't get to talk about her. You don't get to tell what she would or wouldn't do. You took her from me!"

"I'm curious," Carlo says, sitting back in his chair. This man has a gun pointed at him and he's acting like it's just a normal day. Maybe it is for him. "Was this the plan all along? Were you going to shoot me? Or did you come up with it before or after you got knocked up? Christian, was this

your plan all along as well? Were you just in this to get close to Adelaide? After I treated you like a son? I'm insulted."

Adelaide's hands are trembling even more. I need to get the gun away from her before she does something she'll regret. I know that she wants to kill Carlo, and I know that he's pushing her toward it. He wants this on her conscience. He wants her to be just like him.

I take a step forward, praying to God that Adelaide's in her right mind enough to not turn on me with the gun.

"Ads," I say, reaching my hand out for her. "Give me the gun. I need you to give it to me before you do something you'll regret. We both know that you'll regret it. Give it to me and we'll leave. It's happening, Ads. I need your decision."

She doesn't hand me the gun, but she lowers it. Instead, she turns to me, eyes wild. At least she's not pointing it at me. "I don't know what to do, Christian," she whispers. "How can I just let him keep going? How do I keep going? If I do this, I don't know who I am anymore. Everything I am...he made me."

I take another step forward, reaching out to brush her hair behind her ear. She lets me. I see the panic in her eyes, the stress on her face. Adelaide is at the end of her rope here and I want to make it better, but I can't. Not just yet. I still need that decision from her. The last thing I want to do is force her hand and make her resent me. But if I do nothing, let her make the biggest mistake of her life, won't she resent me then too?

I feel like I can't win here.

"Adelaide, we'll figure out who you are together. You're not him. You're so much more. You're understanding and compassionate. You love people. You listened to me when you didn't have to. You decided to keep our child when you didn't have to. You've made mistakes, but so has everyone.

You're not in too deep, not yet. You can change it. You can make your own decisions and be your own person. I need you to give me the gun. I need you to make a decision. That's the only way we can move forward," I tell her, holding my hand out.

Now it's just a matter of hoping. Hoping I can get through to Adelaide somehow. Hoping that she'll give me the gun, finally agree to take the deal and we can walk away from this together.

I can't look at her. I can't look at Carlo.

All I can do is look at my hand and wait.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Adelaide

My mind is racing, my heart is pounding. For a moment, everything else melts away. It's just Christian and I in the room together. My father isn't here. But then I snap back to reality. I can feel his eyes on me. Full of judgment for things he doesn't understand. Now he knows that I'm pregnant. Now he can use that against me. Deep down, that's pushing me forward. All I have to do is turn away from Christian, raise the gun, pull the trigger. It'll all be over.

But if I do that, where does that leave me? I'll lose everything that I *could* have.

I'm forcing myself to think past the power. I think past what my life would be like if I take over for my father. That's not going to happen. There is no way this ends in a way that I become the boss. There's no way I wind up in power when this is all over. That's over now. Maybe I didn't want that, after all. Even if I did, again, doesn't matter. It's not happening.

I have to look toward the future now. I'm either going to wind up in jail, have no relationship with the child growing inside of me, lose whatever I *could* have with Christian...or I could be with him. I could be with him and our child and try something normal for the first time in my entire life.

Just as I'm about to hand the gun over to Christian, I hear the sound of sirens. They start in the distance and get increasingly closer. It all finally clicks. I've known this for days. I know Christian said that we didn't have time. It just didn't *click*. My mind was too focused on everything else for it to all make sense. Now that it does, I feel the panic rising. It's all crumbling down now.

Christian matches my panicked look. He looks between me and Carlo, before focusing back on me. He shakes his hand in my direction.

“Ads, the gun. Give me the gun and we need to get you out of here. We need to get out of here,” he says. “I should be able to pull some strings and –”

“What in the fuck is going on?” Carlo interrupts. His temper is flaring. I’ve never seen my father like this before. I didn’t even know he was capable of reaching this level of anger. In my gut, I know that the last person who saw Carlo like this didn’t live to tell the tale.

Christian doesn’t take his eyes off of me. He doesn’t bother to look at Carlo as he speaks, “It’s over, Carlo. Everything you’ve done, everything you think that you’ve earned, it’s over.” His voice is low, sounds completely distant from the Christian that I’ve come to know.

Carlo stands. I turn to look and I see the fear in his eyes. At least the three of us are all feeling it. Among all the emotions between us, we can all relate to fear. All for different reasons. In the end, Carlo has the most to lose.

“What are you talking about?” he asks.

“Right now, FBI agents are swarming the property. I’d bet money that they’ve already gone after your men. You’re all alone in this world now, Carlo. It’s all over.”

“You –” Carlo is stuttering over his words as the realization hits him. “The entire time?” It’s a quiet rage now. That almost feels more dangerous. “I let you inside, Christian. I trusted you with my daughter! I treated you like *family*.” His eyes flick toward me, that rage now aimed in my direction. “Did you know this entire time, Adelaide? Were you working to betray your family this entire time? I thought I taught you better. I thought you were *better* than that.”

I open my mouth but Christian holds out his hand, shaking his head. “No. Don’t respond. That’s what he wants, Ads. He wants to get under your skin. He wants to make you

feel guilty. You've done nothing wrong. You need to take care of yourself and our child. That's all I'm asking you to do."

His voice sounds gentle. Understanding. It feels like the first time in my life that someone is giving me an actual choice. Christian wants me to choose. I know what he wants. I know what my father wants. Ultimately, the choice is in my hands, and deep down, I know what the answer is.

I swallow, looking toward Christian. "I'm ready," I tell him softly. I feel hot tears sting the corners of my eyes. This should be a really fucking easy decision. It's so much more complicated than that. I'm turning my back on everything that I know. Everything that I was always so sure of. I'm entering the unknown and it's the only option. It's what I have to do. It's what's best for me and our child. And? I get to be with Christian.

His hand reaches for mine and I take it, lacing our fingers together. A wave of calm washes over me, sealing that this is the right decision for me.

"Then let's –"

It's Christian's turn to be cut off midsentence. The clicking sound of a bullet entering the chamber of a gun washes over the room. There's a pounding on the front door, shouting. At that moment, I can't think or hear anything. I feel frozen in place. It's like time is just a construct. I don't think I'll ever remember anything that happened in that until I hear it – a gunshot rings out in the room, making my eardrums ring.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Christian

This wasn't what I wanted.

This wasn't how it was supposed to go.

I acted purely on instinct. Just as I was about to lead Adelaide out of the room, Carlo pulled a gun from his desk drawer. It was pointed at *her* and I'll be damned if anything happens to her. Not when I could prevent it. Not when she finally made her decision.

I pulled the trigger. There was no hesitation. I saw a threat and I neutralized it. I shot Carlo in the chest. His body fell back into the desk chair, slumping over. I don't have to check to know that he's dead. Next to me, Adelaide is frozen.

Immediately, she's my priority. I do a quick look over her to make sure that she's okay. She's fine. She's in shock. I click the safety back on the gun and put it in my pocket before reaching out to turn her face away from Carlo's body.

"Hey, hey. Ads? I need you to look at me right now. Don't look at him. Don't – just look at me."

Selfishly, in the back of my mind, I'm scared she'll never forgive me. I can't worry about that right now. I need to get her away from the body. Before I can, the shouts are further into the home.

"In here!" I call out.

In seconds, we're no longer alone in the study. It's no longer me, Adelaide, and Carlo's body. My field supervisor, Mark, is first in. He has his gun raised until he sees me. He takes in the scene before gesturing for the other agents to lower their weapons. He doesn't say a word at first. Mark walks over to Carlo's body and checks his pulse, shaking his head.

“He’s gone,” he says.

Next to me, Adelaide remains completely still. I can only imagine what’s going through her mind.

“Mark, I need to get her out of here. Is EMS in route? She’s pregnant. Probably in shock.”

He looks at me and I can tell that he’s not pleased. I don’t know whether it’s because I killed Carlo or because I ignored orders to stay away from the house. Now I face the entirely new problem of praying that I’m able to talk my way out of this one. If not, hopefully, I can get Adelaide a deal before they fire me.

“They’re here already. We were expecting a fight,” he says. “Get her out to them and then we’ll chat.”

I nod at the order. At least I can follow that one. I wrap my arm around Adelaide, giving her a gentle push to get her walking. She moves slowly, still stuck in the moment. We’re going to have to have a conversation about it later. Right now, I have to make sure she’s okay. I walk her through the manor. It’s empty. The staff has already been pulled out, probably taken to the nearest police station where they’ll be questioned. Most of them are innocent. Just people working for a living.

I bring Adelaide to the ambulance waiting outside, gently letting the paramedic take her. “She’s pregnant. A few weeks. She hasn’t had her first ultrasound yet. She’s in shock, I think,” I tell her, and the medic nods. Just as she starts to lead Adelaide into the ambulance, Adelaide reaches out toward me.

Her dark eyes are full of panic, just like they had been moments before the world shifted. “Christian –” she says my name but she can’t get much more out.

“I know, I know,” I say. God, I want to be with her more than anything. I want to say damn my orders, but I know Mark needs to talk to me. I need to rally for her immunity. “I just have to talk to my boss really quickly, okay?”

She's going to take care of you, Ads," I say, gesturing toward the medic. "If they take you to the hospital, I'll be there as soon as I can. If not, I'll still be right by your side. I promise."

And I'm not going to break it. In the end, Adelaide made the right choice. She did what she needed to do. The fear is still in her eyes as I squeeze her hand before backing away. I don't take my eyes off of her until she's completely out of my view inside of the ambulance. Then I turn and head back into the house.

Mark meets me in the foyer. "She going to be okay?" he asks.

"Probably. She's agreed to testify, Mark. We need to get her immunity. She's innocent and pregnant. Now she just lost her only family and everything she knew," I lie, *again*.

This is a lie I'll go down with. I'm not throwing Adelaide under the bus. They know she was at meetings. They know she tossed around ideas. But ideas are just that. At worse, they could try and pin conspiracy charges on her. I don't want to risk it. I don't want to watch her go down when I tried so hard to prevent that from happening.

If I have to spend the rest of my life lying about it, I will. I don't care. It's for Adelaide and it's for my child.

He looks at me, raising an eyebrow. "A little late for immunity, isn't it? Plus, Carlo is dead."

"You realize how many men he has? We can still make an example out of them. We just leave Adelaide out of it. She'll tell us everything. Give every detail of the Mansolillo's crimes. We can shut it all down and then go after others. She's a woman, Mark. A pregnant one. Do you think she's dangerous?"

If Adelaide heard me say that, she'd kill me. I'm damn certain of it, but if it's the way to convince everyone that she's not a threat, I'll do it. No hesitation. I'll do anything to keep them safe.

Mark's looking at me and I can tell he feels like there's more to the story. He knows I'm intentionally not telling him something. However, he doesn't have any proof. My eyes lock on his, waiting for him to answer. The poor man looks stressed out of his mind, but I'm not moving until he says yes to Adelaide's immunity. It's one less thing she has to worry about.

"If she agrees to testify, she's going to have a lot of angry people after her," Mark says. "The Mansolillo's are known for loyalty. Why would she swing so quickly anyway?"

"She's pregnant, for one. Carlo killed her mother. She has no loyalty to him anymore." At least, I hope that's the truth.

He nods. "Stay by her side, Christian, unless she'd prefer a female agent. She knows you. If you got her to agree to testify against her family, there's a bond there." Mark's tone sounds suspicious, but he doesn't address it. Adelaide agreeing to testify, no matter the circumstances, is huge. Maybe we don't get to put Carlo behind bars, but we get the rest of the family.

It's still a win.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Adelaide

There's motion around me, but I still feel frozen. I still feel stuck in that moment in Carlo's office. It keeps flashing through my mind but it also doesn't register. I still can't believe that I'm living in a world where my father is dead – and I'm not the one who killed him.

It feels...weird. I don't know whether I feel upset about his death or not. There's a part of me that does, I think. The little girl who loved her father so, so much. The little girl who wants him back but knows that that's not possible. I don't think he was ever *really* my father. Biologically? Of course, he was. But he never operated as a father should. Everything he did was to manipulate me further.

The medic looking over me is quiet, taking my vitals, asking questions. Sometimes she has to ask them multiple times before I realize she's talking to me. Her tone is always gentle, understanding. She doesn't seem to get annoyed when it takes me minutes to answer a yes or no question.

Everything looks good, but she wants me to go to the hospital anyway, just to be on the safe side since it's so early in the pregnancy. I agree. It's not like I have anywhere else to go. My home has been seized. My assets are gone. I have no idea what in the hell I'm doing right now.

I think I'm in shock.

At the hospital, they hook me up to a monitor just to be on the safe side. I'm definitely in shock. At least, that's what they say. I don't know. I just feel...weirdly numb. I feel

like I haven't realized anything going on yet. It's all going to click in a few days and I'm going to have one hell of a breakdown.

I want Christian. He probably thinks that I'm mad at him. I'm not. I – he saved me. He did what he did to save me. Everything he's done has been to save me.

Just as I'm thinking about him, someone enters the room. For a minute, I think it's him. I perk up, but it's not. It's another man. Older, dark hair that's greying at the temples. If I remember correctly, Christian spoke to him back at the house. They know each other. His boss, maybe?

“Adelaide?” The man says as he comes over, taking a seat in the chair by the bed. “How are you feeling?”

“Okay.”

“Good, good. I know what happened today was a lot. Probably a shock to the system, huh?” When I don't respond, he continues, “I'm Mike. I work for the FBI, with Christian.”

When he says Christian's name, I turn my head to look at him. “Is Chris –”

He nods. “He's fine, Adelaide. He's here. I just wanted to talk to you first. Christian says that you're willing to testify in exchange for immunity, correct?”

If I would've made this decision days ago, we wouldn't be here. All I had to do was say yes right away. We could've ridden off into the sunset together. My father would be alive, able to pay for his crimes. I wouldn't be sitting in a hospital bed. Instead, I was an idiot. I thought I could handle things. And I tried to handle them until I broke.

“Yes,” I answer.

Mike nods. “Alright. Is there anything you need to confess to? Anything we should know before we offer you immunity? It won't affect the deal, but it'd just be nice to know.”

Antonio. Antonio is the immediate answer. But only three people in the world know for a fact that I'm the one who ordered Antonio's death. Christian, Yulian, and I. Christian isn't going to say anything, I trust him. If I don't bring up Yulian, he gets to stay safe for a little bit longer. I owe him that much. He'd been a good friend to me. It's not like he's going to seek out the FBI to confess to murder.

That leaves the last person – me. Am I going to be able to live with Antonio's death on my conscience? I know it's not the answer that anyone wants, but yes. I still don't feel guilty. I still don't feel like I've done anything wrong. I did what I had to do. It's not going to haunt me, and if it does, I'll deal with it.

“No,” I answer. “My father wanted to rope me into the business, but never got the chance to. At most, I gave him a few ideas but never made anything happen.”

I don't know if Mark believes me. He nods as he looks at me, rubbing his hands on his jeans. “Alright then. We'll get that paperwork started, Adelaide. Do you want me to send Christian in?”

I nod in response. Yes, I want to see Christian more than anything in the world.

Mark stands and leaves without another word. I hear chatter out in the hallway, but there are so many noises that I can't place the voices. A minute or two later, Christian steps through the door. He looks exhausted. His hair is a mess from running his fingers through it, he has his glasses off.

“Hey,” he says, his voice soft. Christian comes over, grabs the chair that Mark was in, and pulls it closer to the side of my bed. “How are you feeling?”

“Okay,” I say, keeping my voice just as soft as his. “They said that everything looks okay. They just want to be certain, so I'm here for a little bit longer. They said that I'm probably in shock.”

“Makes sense. You definitely disappeared there for a little bit,” he says, reaching out for my hand. I give it to him and his fingers stroke the back of my hand. “I’m sorry, Ads. I’m sorry. I hope you’re not too upset with me.”

I knew it. I knew that Christian would just assume that I’m upset with him. Maybe in another situation, I would be. Upset that he did what I wanted to do after telling me that I couldn’t. Upset because I didn’t want my father to die unless *I* was the one who took him out. It’s so complicated. I can’t begin to explain and with Christian, I know that I don’t need to. He always seems to understand me. I don’t know how he does it.

I squeeze his hand. “I’m not upset with you, Christian. You saved my life. You acted because you needed to. There was nothing selfish about what you did. There was – you did what was best for me.” Whereas I would’ve acted selfishly.

He nods, looking down at our hands. “I did. He was going to hurt you and I don’t want to live in a world without you in it, Ads. I know how dramatic that sounds. I know it’s probably the last thing you want to hear after everything today. But I love you. I really, really love you.”

He does. I know that he does. No one has ever loved me the way that Christian does. It was a big deciding factor when I made my decision. I don’t know what kind of future we have. I don’t know if we’re going to even be a thing after this, but I know no matter what, I want him with me. I’m in love with him.

“I love you too,” I whisper.

It’s the first time that I’ve said it. Maybe it’s terrible timing. I don’t know. It doesn’t matter. After everything that’s happened today, I have to say it. I have to get it off of my chest.

Christian looks at me with those blue eyes, the smallest of smiles pulling at the corner of his lips. “You do?”

he asks softly.

Now I'm fighting back a laugh because would I really lie about it? After everything that happened today, is now really the time for me to *pretend* that I love someone instead of being sincere about it?

Then I lose it. I laugh. I'm sure I look absolutely insane but I can't help it. After all the stress, after all the heaviness, it feels good to have something *light*. Something that makes the world feel a little bit better.

Christian looks at me, but it's not the 'she's insane' look. I can see that he's biting back his own laughter, but when I start laughing, so does he. Our laughter mingles with the chatter from the hallway and the sounds of the beeping from the machines inside the room.

For a moment, I believe that everything is going to be okay.

Chapter Thirty

Christian

Adelaide loves me.

In my wildest dreams, I don't think I ever imagined her saying it. It's Adelaide. I pictured her just *assuming* that I knew, even if we spend the rest of our lives together. I just pictured it as something unspoken between the two of us. I think I would be okay with that too because it's Adelaide. Actions always speak louder than words with her. And in the end, her actions spoke volumes.

When the laughter stops, Adelaide nods. "I do. I love you, Christian. I think I've loved you for a while now. I just...don't know how to express it. I still don't."

I bring the back of her hand up to my lips, pressing a gentle kiss to it. "You don't need to. You said it once and that's enough for me," I tell her, knowing just how sad that sounds. But I understand her. In the end, she chose me. She chose our baby. She made the right decision.

Silence washes over the room after that. I can see her mind racing. I know there are probably a thousand things going through her mind. I don't know how to help, but I'm here. I don't push. I just hold her hand as she sits in silence, listening to the rhythmic beeps of the machines.

After some time, Adelaide speaks again, "What next?" she asks. "Where do I go? What do I do?"

Her entire life has been taken from her. No one prepared her for this. I didn't have enough time. I look at our hands, thinking over my words carefully.

"You're going to sign the deal once Mark gets it put together. After that, you'll probably be in a hotel for a little bit. On the FBI's dime. I'll be close by. Since you trust me, they want me close to you, unless you want a female agent."

From the look on her face, I can see that Adelaide hates the idea of being with anyone but me. In any other circumstance, I'd feel honored. Maybe even special. "Then there's the trial, they'll decide if they need you to testify. All of that."

"I want you with me," she says softly. "Is that okay? I mean, are you okay with that?"

"Of course, I'm okay with that, Ads," I promise. There's nowhere I'd rather be than by her side. "I'll be by your side through it all. I swear," I say before stealing a quick glance out to the hallway. I don't see anyone outside, so I lean in and press a kiss to her temple.

The FBI puts her up at a fancy hotel. I have a connecting room, but I'm not going to be using it. I just want to be by Adelaide's side. I need to be close to her.

Everything at the Mansolillo house has been seized, tagged for evidence, or it's going to be destroyed because of *how* it was bought. I'll pull some strings to make sure she gets some personal items, like things from her brother and mother. Other than that, Adelaide's going to have to start over, and I'm going to be right here with her the entire time.

Unless she tells me to leave.

I'm still waiting for that. I'm waiting for her to tell me to fuck off, that I ruined everything. I'm waiting for the angry lash out in my direction. It hasn't happened yet because she's in shock, but I'm sure that it will.

For now, I watch as she washes her face and changes into the t-shirt I'm letting her borrow. She's quiet as she moves to the bed, sitting on the edge of it. Her body hasn't relaxed yet. She's still on edge. I don't say a word, I just come to sit next to her.

I don't know exactly what Adelaide needs from me, I just know that I'm willing to do it. Whatever it takes.

When she still doesn't say anything, I wrap my arm around her shoulders. She stays still for another moment before leaning into me and I pull her in tightly.

Now silence has washed over both of us. I don't feel a need to change it. She needs a moment of peace. Gently, I maneuver her with me further onto the bed, making sure she stays comfortable.

My fingers begin to rake through her dark hair and I feel her body start to relax. I'll sit here with her, doing this all night, if it keeps her relaxed.

"Christian?" she breaks the silence after what feels like forever. In reality, it was probably just a few minutes. She doesn't move to look at me or anything, just stays curled up against me.

"Hm?"

"Everything is going to be okay, right?"

I can't help but smile, leaning in to kiss her forehead. "From now on, everything is going to be perfect, Ads," I promise, and I'm going to make damn sure I stick to that promise. She deserves nothing less than perfection after everything she's been through. She deserves the peace that she's never had.

Chapter Thirty-One

Adelaide

I signed the immunity deal. There was the biggest part of me worried that it wasn't going to happen. That I waited too long and they weren't going to give it to me. But with Carlo dead, I have the most information on the family. Everything I'm able to give them is so much more valuable than locking me away. I guess I can be thankful for that.

I asked for one single thing in return. I didn't have much leverage. It's already a 'get out of jail free' card, but there was just one more thing that I wanted. I didn't even tell Christian about that part before walking into the room, but I still got it.

Now I'm sitting at a small table in a room with blank white walls, filled with other people just waiting. The fluorescent lights are giving me a headache. I can only imagine what being under them constantly does to someone.

The guard on the far side of the room opens the door and men in khaki jumpsuits start to walk through. My heart thumps in my chest and I wonder for a moment if I've made a mistake by coming here. It's been years. And now I'm officially a traitor. The entire world knows. Who says he's going to want to see me?

I see him step out of the crowd. He looks so much older but so familiar. His dark hair is buzzed, his eyes look tired. I can see tattoos covering his arms. He sees me and I can't read his face. Fear starts to take over as he moves toward me.

Then I see it, a smile. As he gets closer, he opens his arms and I stand, moving toward him.

"Ada!" he whispers, burying his face in my hair. "God, look at you. You're so grown-up."

I cling to him. He feels solid underneath his prison jumpsuit. “Mattia,” I whisper back until the guard is clearing his throat, telling us to separate.

I wanted to see my brother. It’s been years and I’ve missed him. Carlo gave strict orders that no one was to speak to him. It never really made sense. Mattia never ratted on the family, even when arrested. He never turned his back on us. Why should we turn our backs on him? But I didn’t make the rules. I just followed the orders that I was given. Going against Carlo wasn’t something I could ever imagine growing up.

We part and take our seats. I feel that awkwardness wash over us. What do we say after so many years apart? How do I apologize for being such an awful sister and leaving him here?

Reaching out across the table, Mattia takes my hand in his.

“I heard about what happened,” he says, keeping his voice soft. “And I’m proud of you, Ada. I’m proud that someone finally stood up to him.”

I tilt my head to the side, just a little confused. Mattia was always loyal. I expected anger. I expected him to ask me why I would dare turn on the family when he didn’t.

“I – what do you mean?” I ask, looking down at our hands. “I thought you would be –”

“Upset?” Mattia shakes his head. “You did what was right. Carlo had a chokehold on our lives growing up. I knew that once I went away, he’d put all that pressure on you. I tried to write you to warn you, but I guess he never gave you the letters.”

It’s my turn to shake my head. “There were orders to have no contact with you after your arrest.”

“I should have guessed. That’s the conclusion I came to after a few years. I understood why Carlo would be

disappointed in me, I was just worried that you were disappointed in me too.”

“No,” I answer immediately. “I could never be disappointed in you, Mattia. I’ve missed you,” I whisper the words as they really hit me. I’ve missed my big brother so damn much. We used to be close, and Carlo ruined that. Got in the way of our relationship as Carlo tended to do to people.

It wasn’t until I was finally away from him that I was able to see just how much he manipulated everyone and everything around him. He pulled me away from Mattia because he knew Mattia would warn me about him. He was the one who planted the seeds of my split from Yulian. Ultimately, it was the right move because splitting with Yulian left me available for Christian, but who knows what could’ve been if Carlo didn’t feel the need to interfere?

“I’ve missed you too. You’ve grown so much. You were just a little girl when I went away. You’re a woman now, Ada. I feel like I’ve missed everything.”

I can’t stop the bitter little laugh that leaves me. “You didn’t miss much. I was...under his thumb until I wasn’t. I don’t think you’d be proud of me.”

“I’d always be proud of you, Ada,” he promises. “You used to be my little shadow. I’m sorry one mistake took that away and left you with him. I wish I had a chance to redo it all.”

“What if you did?” I ask softly. “Carlo’s gone. His influence is no longer weighing on everything. What if you appeal your verdict? Maybe you could get out. It doesn’t feel right you’ve been away this long for something as simple as drugs.”

I don’t have proof, but I feel like it’s Carlo’s doing. I feel like he managed to influence that somehow. People always underestimated how many people he had in his pocket; what kind of power that man wielded. Police, judges,

lawyers. He had a lot of them under his thumb, enacting his will to keep him where he was.

Now that he's gone, there's no influence. The only successor he ever named was me, and obviously, that's not happening, so it leaves no one around to give orders from the Mansolillo family. Sure, Damien could probably *try* but no one's going to listen. The only person who would have that kind of power would've been Antonio.

Maybe getting rid of him was a good thing in the long run. Probably not the best place to be pondering having a man murdered though.

Mattia nods at my statement. "I've considered it. I agree that Carlo probably had something to do with it. Knowing him, he orchestrated the entire thing as a punishment. I'm sure when it was convenient for him, he'd pull some strings to get me out."

That's probably accurate. Carlo used people when he needed them. With me set to take over, he didn't need Mattia. A thought forms in my mind and I hate it. I also hate how accurate it probably is. Carlo talked about stepping back, letting me take control. I know that he still would've manipulated me. And if I didn't do what he wanted? He'd probably get Mattia out, turn him against me. Make us fight for the power for Carlo's amusement. Thank God that that never happened.

"So, give it a try," I say softly. "Live the rest of your life free. I know it's complicated out there. I know that we were raised to believe one thing and that's not how it really is. I understand all of that. The thing is – I'm pregnant, Mattia. I want you to be there for my child. I want them to know their uncle."

That information takes him by shock. I see it wash over his face. Dark eyes going from my face to my stomach, even though I'm not showing yet.

“You’re pregnant?” he asks softly. “Really, Ada? Is – is the father a good man?”

I laugh. Maybe a little too loudly because a guard shoots me a look. “Mattia, you won’t believe how good of a man he is. He’s probably much better than I deserve.”

I can’t tell him about Christian yet. Christian still hasn’t told his superiors, which is probably going to cause a shitstorm when they find out. I’m not exaggerating about Christian being better than I deserve. He’s been nothing short of a saint throughout this entire ordeal. Choosing him was the right choice.

“I don’t know. My little sister deserves the best,” Mattia says with a smile. “I’m happy for you, Ada. I really am.”

“Then try,” I tell him softly. “Try to get out. We can be a family. You’re all I have left. Maybe you’re all I’ve ever had.” As far as blood goes, at least.

“I’ll try. I can’t make any promises. Maybe I can offer to testify against the family as well?” he offers. “It’s not like Carlo can disown me even more.”

There’s a bitterness to his voice, and I relate to it. Processing that my father is dead has been complicated and while there’s still some sadness there, a lot of it is overtaken by my bitterness. Anger. Maybe even hatred toward the man.

I squeeze his hand one more time. “For the first time in our lives, we don’t have to worry about him,” I assure him.

It’s been a weird feeling to process. A strange back and forth. Torn between grieving and celebrating. I didn’t go to the funeral. I don’t think anyone did. Most of Carlo’s close associates are either out on bail or locked behind bars. Going anywhere to celebrate the life of the ringleader won’t look good during their hearings.

Christian offered to come with me, but I couldn’t bring myself to go. I saw him die. I saw his body. And I think I

made my peace with Carlo a long time ago, around the time that I decided he was going to die. There's nowhere to go from there, right?

I spend the rest of the visitation catching up with Mattia. There's not a whole lot to discuss about my life. I'm sure he's aware of how most of it has been. Working with Carlo. Working for Carlo. Mattia was in that position long before I was. I tell him a little bit more about Christian, leaving out some of the bigger details, like how we met, his job. I'm sure all of that will come up eventually.

When visitation comes to an end (and it feels like it was far too short), I wrap my arms around him. "I'll come to see you again soon, I promise," I say against his shoulder, hugging my brother to me.

"You better. At least write, okay? And I'll talk to my lawyer about filing an appeal. I'll see what I can do, Ada. I want to be around for your little one."

And I want him to be. I leave Mattia with his promises, following the rest of the visitors out of the prison. I scan the parking lot and see Christian's car parked at the far corner. I walk to it and open the passenger door, getting in wordlessly.

He doesn't speak. Just pulls us out of the parking lot and onto the main road. For a second, I'm worried that he's mad at me. I'm worried that he's upset that I went to visit Mattia. I know he has some complicated feelings there and we didn't address them before.

I never imagined I'd be the type of woman to worry about whether a man is upset about something that I did or not. Before, I just never cared. Christian changed that. He changed me.

"How did it go?" he asks, stopping at a traffic light. "How's Mattia?"

I swallow, almost afraid it's a loaded question. But I trust Christian. I trust him not to be a passive-aggressive

asshole. “It went well. I think. It was weird seeing him after so long. He’s okay. Excited to be an uncle, if he ever manages to get out. I told him he should file an appeal.”

Christian’s response is silence, stepping on the gas when the light turns green. Shit. He’s mad.

“You’re upset, aren’t you?” I ask, keeping my voice quiet. I don’t look at him, instead, I look at the trees as we drive past them.

“Not upset,” he answers immediately. Reaching out, his hand finds mine, lacing our fingers together. “It’s a complicated feeling, Ads. But if Ronnie was here, I’d do anything to connect with him. I can’t be mad at you for trying to have a relationship with your brother. I can’t be mad at him because maybe the bullet was meant for him, but he didn’t pull the trigger. It just – it just doesn’t make any of it any easier, y’know?”

His honesty is refreshing. I’d rather just know what’s on his mind than spend my time guessing. I nod, looking down at our hands. “I know, Christian. And I’m sorry. I wish things didn’t happen as they did.”

I wish so many things. I wish life was different, but if it was, I never would have met Christian. How can I regret that? I can’t.

Maybe everything happened just as it needed to.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Christian

I still haven't been honest about the nature of my relationship with Adelaide when it comes to my superiors. I know I need to. It's getting closer and closer to the trial date and I'm sure things will slip out. Even if they don't, once all of this is over, I plan to move her in with me. For now, the FBI's still been putting her up at a hotel. Keeping a close eye on her, just in case. There's been a few threats. She's a very important witness. She's going to take the entire thing down, put people away for years – and she has immunity.

I'm trying my best not to think about that today though. Today's an important day. We're sitting in the doctor's office, I've basically been assigned as her bodyguard until the trial. Which definitely works out for situations like these.

We're going to find out the sex of the baby. *Our* baby. When prompted, Adelaide hasn't revealed who the father is. She usually just shrugs and says that she doesn't know. It kind of sucks because I want the world to know. She's mine. We're having a baby together. I just have to appreciate what I can right now, like being able to be here.

She sits next to me in one of the forest green chairs with the cracking plastic, flipping through a magazine. She's showing at this point – very obviously pregnant. She had a breakdown when the weight gain first started. It took me five hours to remind her that it was natural and she'd be able to go back to looking like her old self once she had the baby. Adelaide's a perfectionist, change is hard for her. Especially when it's completely out of her control.

“Adelaide Mansolillo?” the nurse calls out.

Adelaide stands and I follow suit, following her back into the examination room. The nurse goes through the

rounds of questions, vitals, all the normality's before she smiles.

"I'll get the tech in here so we can find out the sex of the baby," she says, taking her clipboard and leaving.

Adelaide strips into the provided gown, I turn my head. Can't exactly be the creep caught looking at her, right? She climbs up onto the table and makes herself comfortable.

"It's a girl," she says after a beat of silence.

"I thought we weren't guessing the gender."

"We're not. It's a girl. I've known this entire time."

I raise an eyebrow, deciding to play her game. "And how have you known all along?" I ask.

"Gut feeling, Christian. You're not the pregnant one. You wouldn't understand," she says nonchalantly.

I know better than to challenge Adelaide. If she believes it's a girl, nothing is going to prove otherwise until she sees it for herself. And who knows? Maybe she's right. Mother's intuition and all.

I lean back into the chair, making myself comfortable. "I think it's a boy."

"You're going to be very upset when you're wrong, darling."

I feel like a teenage boy. The way I get when Adelaide uses pet names with me is just ridiculous. It's just not something I expect out of her. I guess with Adelaide I've learned to expect the unexpected though. She's unpredictable in all the best ways. She's amazing.

"We'll see, *darling*," I smirk, using her term of endearment right back. I don't have to be looking at her to know she's rolling her eyes. She barely tolerates nicknames most days. The fact that I'm allowed to call her 'Ads' is a

miracle. Darling may have me sleeping on the couch in the hotel room tonight.

Before she can retort, the door swings open and the tech enters. A smiley blonde who Adelaide has told me before she doesn't like because she's *too* sunshine-y. (“*No one is ever that happy, Christian.*”)

“Miss Mansolillo,” she smiles. “Ready to find out the gender of your baby?” she asks, grabbing the probe and applying the gel to Adelaide’s stomach. I see her face twitch and I don’t know if it’s because of the cold or if it’s because of the tech’s bubbiness.

“Ready,” Adelaide comments. She looks over at me and I know she wishes she could hold my hand. Or maybe I just want her to be wishing that. I want to hold her hand. I want to fully take part in this pregnancy, instead of having to stand on the sidelines the entire time. Unfortunately, I don’t get that choice. Even if things went perfectly during the end of my time undercover, I wouldn’t be able to do that. Our relationship has to stay a secret just a little bit longer.

After that, we all go silent. The only sound in the room is the thunderous thudding of our baby’s heart. At least they’re healthy. It’s a miracle considering all of the stress that Adelaide and the baby must’ve been under since the beginning.

“Mm,” the tech hums to herself, getting the baby in view on the monitor.

I can’t stop the smile on my face as I look at the little bean. Half me, half Adelaide. Complete perfection. I’m so excited to meet them. I can’t wait to be their father – even if I’m secretly terrified. I can’t tell Adelaide that because I know she’s terrified too. Neither of us is willing to address that fear though. We both want to pretend that we’re brave.

“It’s a girl,” the tech announces.

Adelaide looks over at me and she’s *smirking*. “Told ya so,” she says. She’s going to be absolutely

insufferable all night now, isn't she?

I can't even be mad. We're having a daughter.

"Yeah, yeah. You were right," I tell her, and I can see her smiling even more. There's nothing Adelaide loves more in this world than being told that she was right all along. "What do you want from me for being right?" I ask. I have to try hard to make it look like we're not flirting, but it's hard not to.

She tilts her head to the side. "Milkshake. I want a milkshake from that one place on the way home. You know the one that has that churro banana one?"

"Of course, you want that monstrosity," I laugh. "You got it though. A churro banana milkshake for being right," I promise her.

The smiley tech is still smiling, looking between the two of us. "You two are cute together," she says before standing up. "I'll give you a minute." She leaves the room, probably to print off the photos and let the doctor know so she can come in and check on things.

Adelaide looks over at me as soon as the door closes. "We're cute together. Did you know that?" she asks. She's still smiling and as much as I want it to be because of the compliment, I know it's because she's still on a high from being right all along. It's Adelaide. What can I do?

"I've had a feeling," I tell her with a laugh. "Does it feel good to have someone confirm it for you? Make sure you're not making the wrong choice here?"

Adelaide looks over at me before glancing toward the door. It's like she's weighing her options. When it seems like she's made a decision, she reaches her hand out for mine. I give her my hand and she holds it with a smile on her face.

"Never thought I made the wrong choice once, Christian," she says, keeping her voice quiet.

God, I love this woman.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Adelaide

This is nothing like I'm used to.

Growing up, my house was always kept pristine. Nothing was ever allowed out of place. Toys belonged in the playroom. If they left, they were thrown away. It was meant as a lesson – know your place. Know where you belong. For years, I thought I had that figured out. I thought I knew exactly where my place was, what I was meant for.

I was dead wrong. It was like I was a little girl, still trapped inside that playroom. Still staying where I was told to stay, doing what I was told to do. Operating only on emotions. Anger. *So much anger.*

It's not over. Not completely. I'm still angry. I'll probably still be angry for a while. I think I have that right after everything I've been through. The difference is, I learned how to handle that anger. Well, at least better than I had before.

Growing up, my house was always quiet. People moved in secret. Whispers in hallways, sneaking away to do less than savory activities. Everything was hidden especially intentions. No one was what they appeared on the outside.

And that's still true. That hasn't changed. I think that might just be human nature. Everyone hides who they really are – until they don't have to anymore.

I follow the sounds down the hallway, sidestepping a shoe here and a forgotten sock there. I'm still getting used to all of this, the...normality. The closer I get to the room at the end of the hallway, the louder the noises are.

I stop in the doorway and a wave of calm washes over me. It feels like such an unnatural feeling. This calmness, this peace. Something I've never known before. It wasn't until

after everything was said and done that I learned what peace felt like. It's this.

Christian notices me in the doorway. A smile crosses his handsome face as he adjusts the baby in his arms. "Kara, I think we disturbed your mama," he coos to the little babe in his arms before his eyes are back on me. "Did we wake you, Ads? I'm sorry. I was trying really hard to keep her quiet so you could sleep. I know you were up late last night."

"It's fine," I promise, watching the two of them. "I was probably going to wake up soon anyway. You know I hardly sleep in," I say, stepping into Kara's nursery.

I don't know what I expected her nursery to look like *before*, back when I planned on staying in my childhood home. Would it be the same sleek white as everything else around me? Would everything have its place? Or would it be like this? Soft yellows, pinks, and greens. Decals of butterflies and jungle animals on the walls. Her dresser is filled with stuffed animals she's still a little young to play with. Her window overlooks the backyard that's *not* perfect. The grass needs to be cut. We haven't even considered having flowers planted. Christian knows that I want roses, but we just haven't gotten around to it.

"I know," Christian says. "I just wanted to give you the opportunity to. Someone just feels *playful* this morning," he says, reaching down to playfully tickle the bottom of Kara's foot. She kicks at him with chunky little legs that are just learning to move.

She's four months old. I can't believe four months ago I gave birth to this perfect little creature. I can't believe I ever considered *not* having her. Like she was some sort of mistake.

I lean in, press a kiss to Christian's cheek. "I really appreciate it," and I do.

Honestly, it's probably the understatement of the year. I appreciate everything that Christian has done. He talked

me out of making a terrible mistake. He's looked past all of my terrible mistakes and still somehow managed to see *good* in me. *Me*, of all people. He lied about a few things but made sure I got immunity in return for doing what I thought I could never do. I turned on my *family*. I turned on my father.

I wanted to take down Carlo Mansolillo and I did – just in a different way than I ever planned. I planned to be the one to pull the trigger. Then I planned to have him put behind bars for the rest of his life. In the end, I decided that I couldn't. Carlo made his choice that day. Unfortunately, it ended with the loss of his life.

There are still people out there that support him. There were threats leading up to the trial, against me, against my unborn child. We couldn't get them traced back to anyone connected to the family. We didn't *need* to though. We both knew. We both know that it's something we'll likely have to deal with for the rest of our lives.

Carlo's never going to have to spend a day behind bars. His freedom is never going to be taken from him. But I'm finally free. Free from the pressure, the toxicity. I'm learning how to live – really live. It's not easy. I still struggle daily on how to be *normal*, the kind of normal that Christian is outside of his job. How to deal with everyday problems without jumping to conclusions, how to do things for myself. Having Kara helps.

Christian offers me the baby and I take her into my arms, walking over to the rocking chair in the corner of the room. I could spend all day holding her. She's just...perfect. The most beautiful combination of me and Christian. She has my dark hair, his blue eyes. I think her skin is going to be darker, like mine. But she has his nose and my cheekbones. Kara's going to be a real heartbreaker one day.

Luckily, that won't be for a long time.

Christian comes over and sits on the ottoman in front of the rocking chair, watching Kara and me. He got one hell of a lecture from his superiors when they found out about

our relationship. We both expected him to be fired, or at least wind up demoted. Neither happened. There was a lecture, but they were too satisfied with his work to do much else. He was told it better not happen again – like hell it will.

We moved in together. In his actual home. It's far from the city, somewhere out in the 'burbs with actual neighbors who know each other. We went through the Mansolillo trial together, dealt with the heavy press coverage, and when it was all over, we kind of just disappeared together.

"How are you feeling?" Christian asks, quietly broaching the subject we've been avoiding for a week. "I know we've kind of been avoiding the subject but..."

"But you leave tomorrow," I finish for him.

We've definitely been avoiding it. Well, I've been avoiding it. I don't want to think about Christian leaving for God knows how long. He has another assignment, undercover a few states away within a gun-trafficking operation. I thought we'd have more time as a family before he left. Selfishly, I kind of hoped that he'd never have to go away for months at a time.

"I leave tomorrow," he agrees, looking down at his hands. "If you're not okay with it, I can tell them no, Ads. They'll be pissed that it's so late, but I don't care. You and Kara are all that matter to me."

I shake my head. "No. I mean...I don't *want* you to go." I have to be honest. I don't think anyone *wants* their significant other to just go off-grid for months, risking their life the entire time. "But it's what you have to do. Kara and I will be fine."

"My mom and my sisters are going to be checking in on you daily. If you need anything, you know to call them. If you *really* need me, call Megan."

Christian's mom and sisters have been surprisingly supportive of everything. Considering my family is the reason their son/brother is dead, I expected them to hate

me. They don't. They've been loving and welcoming and I swear it has more to do with Kara than me. Christian swears that isn't true. He promises that they like me, but I just really doubt that.

Doesn't matter.

I nod. "I remember the discussion, Christian. Everything is going to be fine. A few months, then you're back home with us, right?"

He reaches out and puts his hand on my thigh. "Back home by Christmas."

"Better be. It would suck to celebrate Kara's first Christmas without you."

He smiles, just a little. "I wouldn't miss it for the world, Ads. You know that." Then he gets that wistful look on his face. Something is on his mind. Before I can pry as to what's on his mind, he's speaking again. "Speaking of Christmas..."

"Hm?" I acknowledge his statement, telling him to go on as Kara starts to calm in my arms. My fingers run over her dark hair just as her eyes start to close.

I can't help but think of just how much Christian is going to miss. Probably her being able to sit up, crawling, learning to walk. Maybe even her first word.

"So, normally, I wouldn't bring this up as just a question but it's...you. And I can never really get a read on you," Christian admits.

That pulls my attention away from dreading all of the milestones that he's going to miss with our daughter. I raise an eyebrow, nodding to tell him to go on.

"I was thinking...maybe when I get back, whether it's Christmas or not...I could propose. We could make it official official. We already live together. We're raising our daughter together. We love each other. So...why not?"

Christian and I have never discussed labels. I know how dumb that sounds. We do have a daughter, we do live together, and I do tell him that I love him. It's not often. I'm still getting used to freely using those three words. I didn't hear them often growing up. They feel scary, but I'm learning. Christian is teaching me that it's okay.

Still, his question makes me pause. It's not the romantic proposal most girls dream of. But it can't be. He knows I don't have the most positive views when it comes to marriage – so, he took the practical approach.

“I...I think we could do that,” I say softly, looking down at Kara.

“Ads, if you don't want to, that's okay. I'm not going to force it.” He moves his hand to my knee to get my attention. “I'm happy with you. I'm happy with how things are between us. I just thought...it'd be nice. It'd make my mom stop asking.”

I smile, just a little. “She does ask a lot.”

“Seriously. I need you to be honest, Ads.”

I want to marry Christian. The answer comes to me quickly. I want to marry him. I've never felt this way toward anyone. And it has nothing to do with my old views about marriage. It's not transactional. It's...because I love him.

“I'm okay with it,” I finally answer, bringing my eyes up to meet his. “However, I do expect a ring and a better proposal. Marriage isn't some business deal, Christian.”

He looks confused for the briefest moment, then he realizes that I'm teasing. I see the smile spread over his lips as realization dawns on him.

“Hey, I never know with you. You're the one who said marriage was just a business deal. So, when I propose... do I need to take you out to coffee? Bring some documents to sign?”

“If I wasn’t holding our daughter, I’d smack you,” I laugh. “Look, maybe I was wrong about marriage.”

“Did Adelaide Mansolillo just say she was wrong?”

“What is with you today?” I laugh again.

“The woman I love just agreed to marry me and I thought that’d never happen. Excuse me for being excited,” Christian smiles at me.

And it’s everything. This moment is everything. Loving him, letting him in, trusting him? It was the scariest thing I’ve ever done and it’s also been the most rewarding.

This is nothing like the life I imagined for myself. I always imagined one where I’d have power – not love. But now that I’m here, I realize that I’d trade power for love any day.

THE END

Mafia Rising

By: Sloane Peterson

Chapter One

Mattia

I'm hit in the face with the scent of fresh air for what feels like the first time in forever. Of course, I've experienced fresh air since I've been locked up, but not like this. Nothing like this. I stand right outside the gate and suck in a breath, letting it fill my lungs. For what *is* the first time in forever, I feel free. I *am* free.

Scanning the parking lot, I see exactly what I'm looking for. It's a simple looking car, nothing like the ones that I was used to before. Nothing glamorous or luxurious. I suppose that's what my sister gets for throwing away everything that we had.

I'm not a fool. I understand why Adelaide made the choice that she did. I do not hold it against her. Although... well, doesn't matter. All of that is over with, right? Now, I just need to figure out where I go from here. I walk towards the car and see Adelaide leaning against it. She looks good – healthy. Much better than the first time she came to visit me in prison.

“Mattia!” I watch as her face lights up when she sees me. She bounces on her feet, just a little, before rushing toward me and throwing her arms around me. It's not typical Adelaide Mansolillo behavior, but she's been without her older brother for years.

My arms come around her, clinging her to my body. I breathe her in, smelling her shampoo and perfume. Home. My little sister. Standing on the other side of the car is her fiancé, Christian. I haven't spoken much to Christian. He doesn't like me very much and I understand why.

He blames me for his brother's death. The bullet that struck his brother was meant for me. It's not my fault, per se, but I can see why he feels that way. Nothing I can do about it. I've apologized, but it doesn't change much.

Instead of focusing on Christian, I focus on Adelaide. I hug her, swaying the two of us back and forth until we part. “It feels good to be able to hug you without getting yelled at,” I say softly.

“Doesn’t it?” She tilts her head up at me, smiling. “Get in, get in. Kara’s in the backseat.”

Kara is Adelaide and Christian’s daughter. If my math is right, she’s almost a year old now. I’ve met her once. Christian never approved of Adelaide coming to visit with Kara and she listens to him. He saved her, but...it makes me uncomfortable. It’s nothing like the little sister I left behind when I was locked up. She was independent and strong. She would never let a man tell her what she could or couldn’t do with her child.

I keep my mouth shut and force a smile on my face. I should be thankful for the two of them. Christian is allowing me to parole to his home. There’s nothing parole officers love more than having their ex-con living with an FBI agent, right? Should make their job a little easier.

I open the door to get in the backseat and smile when I see my beautiful niece. She looks at me with curious eyes, tilting her head to the side just like Adelaide does. She looks so much like my sister, except she has what I assume are Christian’s blue eyes. I’ve never looked closely enough at him to notice.

“Hi little one,” I greet her as I buckle in. “It’s good to see you again, Kara.”

She’s curious, but also indifferent. I can’t remember the last time I really had to interact with a baby. If ever. I’ve been locked away for years on drug charges. Probably should’ve been out sooner, but my father used his power and influence to keep me locked away. It was his way of teaching me a lesson, punishing me for getting caught at all.

My father is no longer an issue, considering that he’s *dead*.

I've asked Adelaide the story time and time again, trying to connect it all. It still doesn't feel real. He pulled a gun, Christian shot him.

Carlo Mansolillo, head of the Mansolillo family, one of the strongest crime families in New York gone. Just like *that*. So simply. And instead of anyone taking his place, the Mansolillo's just moved on. Most of his men are in jail, Adelaide is a rat. Where does that leave me? Trying to figure out where I fit in this world again. I've been out of it for so long that I feel so incredibly unsure of who I even am anymore.

I'll figure it out. It'll be fine.

Christian pulls the car out of the parking lot once he's sure everyone is buckled in. I sit back in the back, watching him and my sister, trying to figure it out. What does she see in him? I don't get it. Last I heard, Adelaide was dating Yulian Andronikov. Now, that was a good match for her. Someone who would be happy to let her lead.

From here, it looks like Christian does a lot of the leading.

Mansolillo's are not followers.

We arrive at their home. It's in the suburbs, which is a whole new world for me. Adelaide and I grew up in a mansion. Their house is...nice. Quaint. Home. Adelaide gets out and opens my door, still coming off as an excitable little sister.

"Welcome home!" She smiles as Christian walks around to get Kara out of her car seat.

"Thank you, Ads," I say, reaching out and squeezing her hand.

I realize I'm coming off as just incredibly ungrateful. I'm not. Or at least I don't mean to be. It just feels like

everything I knew before has changed. Nothing is the same. My family, my world, my home. It's all new and I'm left wondering where I fit in. Where is my place now? I don't know anymore. I'm not even sure that I know *who* I am without the world I was raised in.

Chapter Two

Adelaide

“You were cheery today,” Christian comments as he slides into bed next to me. “It was nice, seeing you like that, I mean.”

“My big brother is home,” I say with a shrug, falling back onto my pillow. “It feels...good. I’ve missed him.”

Mattia and I were extremely close growing up. Father was always busy and mother just didn’t bother. Mattia was there. He spent time with me and played with me. I was still young when he was locked away and losing him *gutted* me. Then my father forbade any contact with him, saying that Mattia needed to ‘learn his lesson’. His lesson was being completely outcasted from the family. Financial support was cut off, no contact from the outside world and our father made sure he stayed locked away for far longer than he should’ve. Finally, I convinced him to file an appeal. That’s how we got where we are now. He’s home.

“I know,” Christian says, reaching out to stroke his fingers through my hair. “It’s good to see you happy, Ads. Really. So, where does he go from here?”

Christian and I both like to have plans. It’s something that we both share. The only difference is that I’m usually the one putting the plans into place. He’s happy to follow...most of the time.

“I guess...I guess we help him build a new life, right? Get a job, find a home, all of that. But he stays here until then, right?”

“That was the agreement.” He nods. “Adelaide, how are we supposed to help him build a new life? He doesn’t...he doesn’t know anything but how the two of you were raised.”

I've thought of that too. I just don't want to admit to it. Mattia, like me, was raised to assume he was going to take over for my father. Be the leader of the Mansolillo family. Every step we took was to become better suited for that role. We didn't *need* to know anything else. Except it's all gone. I took all of that from us.

I don't think I regret it. Not really. It's just... sometimes...never mind that.

I turn my focus back to Christian. "I turned around, right?" I shrug.

"It's a little different. You had a baby. You have me. You don't need to work or –"

I cut him off there. "Yes, Christian. I'm aware you pay for everything. Thank you for reminding me," I snap, and I know that I shouldn't. I *know* that that's not what Christian was getting at. Doesn't matter though because that's how it feels. I depend on him for everything. Getting a job is hard when you have no skills that translate to workforce experience. What am I supposed to list on a resume? 'Hired hitmen, organized the downfall of other families'? For some reason, that doesn't seem like it'll get me a very well-paying job.

I hate depending on Christian. I hate knowing that if this somehow falls apart, Kara will immediately be his because I have nothing. Because my face is associated with all the dirty things that my father's responsible for. It doesn't matter that I testified. It doesn't matter that in the end, I wasn't loyal to the man who raised me. What matters is that I gave up everything.

"Adelaide," he says my name softly, reaching out for me.

I don't want to talk. We've had this fight so many times now. I know it's stupid. It's me assuming the worst of Christian. Like he's going to get tired of me and kick me to the curb. It's my anxiety, my need to control everything around me. It's also an utter sense of hopelessness. That I can't take

care of myself or my daughter and it *sucks*. It sucks more than I'll ever be able to describe.

I reach over and turn off my lamp, making myself comfortable in bed. I know I'm not going to sleep. I'm going to lay here, figuring out my next step, figuring out how I turn all of this around. I'm not unhappy. I don't have a miserable life. There's just an emptiness that I don't know how to fill. How am I supposed to change any of this when the only thing I know is something that I can't do?

I don't see Mattia until Christian leaves for work the next morning. Things are tense between the two of them. It leaves me in an awkward position. Kind of like the mediator between the two of them when all I want to do is tell them to get over themselves. Men and their egos. It's why they always seem to flounder in positions of power.

He comes out of the guestroom, rubbing his eyes. "Coffee?" he asks.

I gesture toward the counter. "Make a cup. Sugar is in the bowl; milk is in the fridge."

"Aren't you playing housewife? Shouldn't you make my coffee for me?" he asks. There's an annoying smirk on his lips. Just like a damned brother. Years apart and he *still* knows how to get underneath my skin.

I pick up the plastic silverware that was left on the table from the takeout that we got the other night and toss it at Mattia. He dodges and it hits the floor. "Not funny," I scoff.

"Did I hit a sore spot, Ads?" he asks, already knowing that he did.

"I don't want to talk about it."

Mattia walks to the counter, finds a mug in the cabinet, and starts to make his coffee. "Really? Not even to your favorite brother?"

“Remember that dog we had growing up? Moe? Yeah, *he* was my favorite brother. You’re just the one that’s still alive.”

He snorts, shaking his head. “Never change, Adelaide. Never change. I was just offering my services. You know, since I’m not currently doing anything else with my life.”

“You need to fill out job applications. It’s part of your parole.”

“Thanks. Totally forgot that part.”

I roll my eyes at his sarcasm before going back to my coffee. Silence washes over the kitchen as Mattia makes his coffee, then he comes to sit at the table with me. The silence doesn’t last long. It never does with Mattia. He’s chatty.

“So, how bored are you, Adelaide?” he asks, and I know that question is loaded. It has the potential to get me in a world of trouble.

Even knowing that I don’t know why I answer: “So bored.”

Chapter Three

Mattia

I know my sister. Probably better than she knows herself. I know that this isn't how she imagined her life. I'm sure she's happy. On the surface level. She loves Christian. She loves her daughter. She'd do anything for either of them. But I know she's got to be so terribly bored of this life. I know she wants *more*. This is Adelaide. She's always been determined and I don't think that all died when she made her choice.

She says she's bored and that's all I need to know. I bring my mug up to my lips, take a sip from it, and let that sit in the air for a moment. "I know a way you could fix your boredom," I say as casually as possible. I don't need to elaborate. At least not yet. Adelaide will know what I'm getting at.

I watch her face closely, watch those dark eyes that mirror mine realize what I'm getting at. "No," she says after a beat, shaking her head. "I can't. You know I gave all of that up, Mattia." Then she points her finger at me. "You can't even be thinking about that. You're on *parole*."

I shrug a shoulder. "It's what I know best, Ads. I don't think a normal life is for me. I don't think it's for you either. I mean, do you really see me becoming a used car salesman or something? It's not in the cards. This is something we both know, something that we're good at. Why give it up?"

"Mattia," her tone is low, warning.

But I can see it. As much as Adelaide wants to reject everything that she used to be, everything that she *was* and *is*, she can't. The minute I brought it up, I saw a light in her eyes that I hadn't seen since she was younger when she thought the world was at her fingertips.

“Adelaide,” I counter. “We both know that this is something you want. Something that makes you *feel*. Why give up what you’re good at because of some *guy*? Look, Christian is *fine*. He’s a good guy. Your daughter is adorable. But we both know you’re forever going to want more, aren’t you?”

“We’re not talking about this, Mattia. It’s a stupid conversation. You can’t really be thinking about restarting a *mafia* family less than twenty-four hours after getting out of prison.”

I’ve been thinking about it long before that, truthfully. I hold no resentment toward Adelaide for turning. I hold no resentment over the death of our father. Carlo was a bastard. He deserved what he got. But isn’t the death of something just an opportunity for new beginnings? What if we could start over? Start fresh? Make this better than Carlo ever could? With Adelaide and I working together, we hold that possibility.

“Fine, I’ll just tell you that I’m not thinking about it,” I say after another sip of coffee. “What are you gonna do, Ads? Gonna tell your fiancé? Get me in trouble?”

She sucks in a breath, and I know that that’s her answer. She’s not going to say a damn thing. Her nails tap on the kitchen table as she looks at me, shaking her head. “No. I’m not. Because as far as I know, you’re not doing anything. You’re looking for viable jobs, not trying to be the head of the mafia. I’m completely out of this.”

That’s all I needed from her. I know Adelaide. I trust her. She’s not a rat. She’s loyal. She’d only rat if it benefited her and losing me again isn’t going to benefit her at all. She wants me around – and I want to be around.

“Exactly. And Ads? There’s always going to be a spot for you. You know that, right? I’m not just going to pull the offer because you naively said no the first time it was on the table.”

Every time I present her with that offer, I see the light flash in her eyes. I see how badly she *wants* this, but she's comfortable in her security now. She wants to stay where she is and I can't say I blame her. But I wish she'd take the risk with me.

Although...considering how things ended last time, maybe it's better if Adelaide stays out of it. Just for a little bit. No one's going to trust her, except for me. So, for now, it'll just be me. I know my sister, she'll say yes eventually. This is what she really wants.

"I'm not changing my mind, Mattia. Just don't get in too much trouble. There's only so much I can cover for you."

"I'm not going to get in any trouble," I promise.

It doesn't take long for me to reconnect with Damien. He was one of my father's favorite men. He managed to avoid jail time, probably the remaining connections that he had. People always forget how slippery the upper men in the mob can be. It takes a hell of a lot to put one of them behind bars.

I don't like Damian. Not as a person. Not as a righthand man. But he's a connection to a world that I'm no longer a part of. Without even asking, I know that he has his finger on the pulse of everything going on in the crime world. I know he'll be able to tell me everything I need to know. And you have to start somewhere, right? I can loop him in until I have someone I'm comfortable replacing him with.

We meet at some prissy-looking health club. The ones that have a sauna and massages, where rich people go to talk business and that's about it. No one *actually* works out at places like this. It's like a weird place to hold meetings. Whatever. I don't really care about where we meet. I just need to talk to Damien and see what he thinks about all of this.

I walk up to the desk. The receptionist looks up, with hazel eyes and curly blonde hair. She tilts her head to the side as she looks at me, and offers one of those kind smiles. “Can I help you, sir?”

I haven’t been called *sir* in forever. Feels a little weird, but I don’t hate it. Especially from someone as cute as she is. I lean against the counter, locking my eyes on her. “I like your tattoo,” I say, referring to the little bit of ink peeking out from underneath the sleeve of her beige cardigan. From this angle, it looks like it’s a bunch of flowers on her forearm. Intricately done, probably expensive.

I pull up the sleeve of my jacket, showing off my forearm. I have more, this is just the most appropriate to show off in public. I have a simple blackout band around my wrist. It was my first tattoo. I thought it looked kind of cool, still do. “I have a few too,” I smile.

Am I flirting? Absolutely. I haven’t seen a woman that wasn’t an onery guard or my sister in *years*. This one is cute. I lean forward just a bit more, getting a glimpse of the golden name tag on her cardigan. *Eleanor*.

“Oh,” she says, leaning a bit closer to get a look at my band. “That’s nice. I’ve been wanting to get a blackout tattoo with white ink. I think those look really, really cool.”

Fuck, her smile is *gorgeous*. Like it lights up the entire building. I know I’m here to talk to Damian, but now I just want to spend the rest of the day talking to her. She’s cute. I can’t help myself.

“Yeah? I think that would look super cool. Any idea where you’d get it at?”

“Probably my upper arm? At least, that’s my thought. I’d probably talk to my artist about it and –”

“Mattia!” Damien’s voice booms through the club, drawing both mine and Eleanor’s attention. He steps through the crowds of people, smiling at me. “I haven’t seen you in years. Look how you’ve grown!” His eyes flick toward

Eleanor and he smiles. “Ella, this is my guest. I got it from here.”

Now I have no interest in talking to him at all. I want to keep talking to her, *Ella*. I already like the way it sounds. It rolls off the tongue. But I know that this is much more important than me being some desperate horndog who hasn’t had female interaction in years. So, I offer Ella a smile. “It was nice talking to you, Ella. Thanks for entertaining me,” I say, winking back at her as Damien leads me away.

If I’m not mistaken...she blushes. At least I haven’t lost my touch.

Damien wraps an arm around my shoulder, which just looks hilarious because he is *much* shorter than me. He comes up to my shoulder. “God, I almost didn’t believe it when I heard you got out,” he says as we walk. “It’s been years. And with how things went down with the rest of the family...I just didn’t expect it.”

“Neither did I,” I shrug. I figured I’d get out eventually. There was no way they’d keep me locked away for the rest of my life on some drug charges. But I expected a few more years on my sentence. Amazing what happens when the man who wanted you to stay gone dies. “Adelaide’s the one who told me to file for an appeal.”

He knows that, of course. I’m testing the waters. I’m trying to get a read on where Adelaide stands. She told me there had been threats before the trial. Was Damien one of them? I wouldn’t put it past him.

“Mm. That was kind of her. You’re staying with her and...*Christian*, aren’t you?” he says Christian’s name with such venom. Clearly, Christian is more of a sore spot than Adelaide.

“I am.”

“How?” He pauses our walking and turns to look at me as he asks. “I mean, I know she’s your sister, Mattia. Don’t get

me wrong, but I don't see how you're able to be around her after everything she did. After she tore apart –"

I hold up my finger to cut him off. "I'm not here to speak about Adelaide, Damien. She *is* my sister and I understand her reasoning for everything. There is no bad blood between her and I. I'd appreciate it if we didn't discuss that right now. Right now, I'd like to discuss a few other things."

Sitting with a towel wrapped around my waist in a sauna is not how I envisioned having this conversation. Damien insists. Says it is the best way to maintain privacy. I think he's just a loaf who's used to luxury, but I keep my mouth shut.

"Tell me about what's going on. I want to know everything," I say.

"About?"

I roll my eyes. Why did my father surround himself with idiots? No wonder he failed in the end. "What's going on with the other families? Who stepped up when my father failed? And is there...is there a place for the Mansolillo's to slide back in?"

Realization takes over Damien's face and I'm pretty sure he *lights* up at the thought. This is the only thing that so many of us know. Most of my father's men were lifers and while a good portion of them are locked away, people like Damien are lost.

I can guide him. I can guide them all and take back what's rightfully mine. I can bring my family back to where it belongs.

Damien sits on the edge of his seat. I can feel his eyes on me and I look away, staring straight ahead at the wall. "Luppino's and the Papilla's are filling the gaps. Can't say they're doing an amazing job at it or anything. Personally, I

think they're floundering the opportunity presented to them, but what do I know?"

I bite my tongue and fight the desire to say 'nothing'. There is no love lost between Damien and me. He's a bumbling idiot. He was also having an affair with my mother. That's why my father had her killed. That's what led to every choice Adelaide made in her life, a desire to avenge her mother. If Damien knew his damn place and stayed in it, I'm sure my father would be alive, and the Mansolillo's would still have their place in power.

Maybe it's a blessing in disguise. If Carlo was still alive, I would be locked away in prison and wouldn't have the chance to take over everything. Quiet blessings, right?

I nod my head, signaling for Damien to continue.

"I think there's a place where the Mansolillo's could slide back in with ease, Mattia. Especially if you're leading. Everyone was hoping it would be you or Antonio that took over for Carlo. People will respect you as a leader."

If they don't, I'll make them respect me. I really don't care either way. I just needed to know if there was a *place* where I could fit in. Where I could slide in and take back power. Evidently, there is, and that's something I can work with.

"Great. I need you to get me as much information about the Papilla's and the Luppino's business dealings as possible. I want to know everything they have their hands in. I'm assuming you still have contacts, Damien?"

"I do. Are you – are you really going to bring it all back, Mattia?"

I shrug. "Sure as hell going to try. This is my birthright. A world without the Mansolillo's in power is a world that I don't want to see. It's where we belong." I turn to look at Damien. "Don't open your damn mouth to anyone. Not yet. This isn't a sure thing and we're moving in silence. I want this

kept a secret until we've already taken everything from the others.”

“Understood. It'll stay between us. I'll ask around, and get answers about everything else going on. See what I can find out. We'll do dinner in a few days. I'll call you?”

“No.” I shake my head. “I'll call you.” I can't risk Damien calling me and Christian finding out. I'm not worried about Adelaide. She already knows what I'm planning on doing and doesn't really care. She's not going to rat me out. I'm pretty sure Adelaide has never dealt with a guilty conscious in her life.

Christian is the concern here. I don't think he'll be as understanding.

Chapter Four

Eleanor

This isn't my dream job or anything. I mean, who wants to sit at the front desk of some rich people's health club and be treated like garbage all day? These people act like I don't even *exist*. I might as well be replaced with a robot or something.

I'm just trying to figure out where I go next with my life. I've never had a plan. That's probably my downfall. I'm not a planner or a schemer. I'm a dreamer, flying by the seat of my pants, jumping off things without looking. Life is too short and far too difficult to plan everything. At least, that's how I look at it. My mother would tell you that I'm terribly wrong and I need to learn how to plan *something*.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see *him* again. Mr. Tall, Dark and Handsome who walked into the club out of *nowhere*. He's not like the others. He spoke to me like I'm a human, made me feel little tingles and get all blushy. Definitely different. He's gorgeous, perfection in human form. And somehow, for some reason, he was *nice* to me. He's talking to Damien.

Damien is probably one of the only clients I remember by name. I only remember him because he's a creep. The way he leers at me makes me *unsettled*. Rumors say he used to be part of that mafia family that got taken down last year, the one where the daughter turned on all of them. Good for her, I guess.

The gorgeous man says something to Damien and smacks his shoulder before turning around to leave. I'm never going to see him again and that's going to be really unfortunate. I'll be kind of sad about that one. That doesn't mean I won't think about him. I pull myself from my thoughts long enough to wave bye...but he's walking back over to the desk.

I actually feel myself panic. You know, rising heart rate, I'm sure I'm blushing again.

"Ella?" he says my name and it sounds like angels are singing.

Fuck. I'm down bad. Like just because this man is gorgeous and kind to me...it means nothing. How desperate am I for decent human kindness? Clearly, very.

"Yes?" I put my customer service voice back on, looking up into those dark eyes of his. "How can I help you?"

He's leaning against the desk, looking like sin. He smiles down at me and I just know that I'm blushing all over again. "I'd like your number. Can I have it?"

I think I go silent. Dead silent. I can barely process what he just *asked* me. He...wants my number. This isn't real. It's not because I don't think I'm pretty enough or whatever. It's just...he's like out of a magazine. The type of guy you stare at photos of online and think that they don't actually exist.

Before I can force out words, he's speaking again. "Sorry? Was that too forward?" he asks with a small smile. "I'm a little out of practice. Um. Did I ever introduce myself? I'm Mattia."

Mattia. Even his name is *pretty*. What. The. Fuck.

"No, no." I'm instantly shaking my head, trying to save a bit of face. "Not too forward. Um, yeah. Here," I say, grabbing a piece of scrap paper from my desk. I write down my number and hand it over to him. "There."

Do I expect this man to ever call me? No. Absolutely not. Is this going to feed every one of my fantasies for the next year? Oh, *definitely*.

Mattia takes the paper and sticks it in the pocket of his jacket, smiling down at me. "Great. I'll call you," he promises. "See you later, Ella." He turns to leave and I'm left hoping that I see him later...because I really, really want to.

I push open the door to my apartment, ready to melt into my couch after a long day. My job isn't hard, but it's *exhausting*. Dealing with those people all day, trying to smile when they act like I deserve less than them. It's annoying. People are annoying. Sometimes I just need a break. I take off my cardigan and toss it on the armchair before I fall back on the couch, taking a deep breath.

As soon as my head hits the back of the couch, my phone is buzzing in my pocket. Probably my mom. She knows when I get off work, and usually likes to call at least once a week to ask if I've figured out what I'm doing with my life. When I tell her 'no', which I always do, she comes up with fifty plus jobs I could get. Her latest suggestion has been to become a baker.

I hate cooking. All cooking. Baking included.

I grab my phone and look at it. Not my mom's number. I don't know this number and that has my heart pounding just a little bit in my chest. What if it's...I answer a little too quickly.

"Hello?"

"This is an automated message from Lake Pointe Smiles dental office. This is a reminder that you have an appointment _"

I groan and hang up. Of course, it's the fucking dentist. Why would Mattia call me? Why would something like that ever work out for me? I feel dumb for even considering it. I get off the couch and head to the kitchen, trying to scrounge around for something to eat. Again, the whole not cooking thing. I live off microwavable food and takeout. It's probably a plus that I walk to work every day.

Opening the fridge, I find the noodles leftover from last night. Well, that's dinner for tonight. I pop them out of the takeout container and onto a plate before tossing them in the microwave.

I lean against the counter as I wait for my noodles to warm up. My phone rings again. Another unknown number. Stupid fucking dental reminders. I answer it and before the robotic voice has a chance to remind me about my upcoming appointment, I speak.

“Yes, I know I have a fucking appointment soon. You don’t need to keep calling to remind me and I know that you’re a robot but it’s just really annoying and –”

“I’m sorry?”

Shit! Shit, shit, shit! That’s not a robotic voice. That’s *him*. That’s Mattia. Now I just look fucking unhinged. I pull my phone away from my ear and stare at it for a minute. Mattia’s speaking on the other line still and I’m debating hanging up, throwing my phone as far away as possible, and moving to a new city. Who wants to live in New York anyway?

No. No Eleanor, you’re not allowed to do that. You see this through. If he thinks I’m insane, at least I’ll never see him again.

Hopefully.

I put the phone back to my ear and cringe. “Sorry. I – I’ve just been getting robocalls from the dental office and I... look really insane, don’t I?”

He chuckles. At least he hasn’t hung up and cut his losses yet. Maybe we’re getting somewhere. “Maybe a little bit. Crazy is cute though.”

“Oh,” I actually don’t know how to respond to that. “Well...maybe we’ll just pretend I didn’t embarrass myself when answering the phone and start over anyway?”

“We can do that.”

“Hello?” Great. Now I’m sure I just look like a dork.

Mattia chuckles again. I can only imagine how handsome his face looks right now. “Hello. Ella? It’s Mattia.”

“Oh, hi Mattia. How are you?” I’m biting back laughter and I can hear Mattia doing the same.

“I’m well. Probably a little better now that I’m talking to you. So, I have a question.”

“I have an answer.”

Am I squandering this? Am I being too dorky? I haven’t flirted with anyone in a long time. Especially with someone that I’m interested in, like Mattia.

If this is turning him off, Mattia doesn’t let on. Either he’s really into the dorky stuff or he’s good at faking it. “Perfect. So, I was wondering if you’d like to go to dinner tomorrow night? I mean unless you have a dental appointment to get to.”

I’m blushing. He can’t see it, but I’m definitely blushing. Dinner. He wants to take me to dinner. I’m nodding. He can’t see that either. “Yeah, yeah. I’d love to go to dinner, actually.”

“Great. There’s an Italian place on 5th and 34th. You can’t miss it. I’ll meet you there. Say...around eight?”

“Eight works. I will be there at eight. Tomorrow, right?”

Mattia laughs. “Tomorrow.”

Before I can think of something either super suave to say – or something new to embarrass myself with, the microwave is beeping in the background. “Well, that’s my dinner for tonight. I’ll see you tomorrow, Mattia.”

“See you tomorrow, Ella.”

Chapter Five

Mattia

I'm very much out of the loop when it comes to dating. I have no idea what I'm doing and very few sources for help. I'm sure that I could ask Christian. I'm sure he would even welcome any attempt at 'bonding' because it would please Adelaide. But I have a feeling that Christian isn't too familiar with the dating scene. How he ended up with my sister will forever be a question in the back of my mind.

I know, I know. I should be focusing on everything else going on. I should worry more about getting everything set up. But I'm waiting on information from Damien, so why can't I enjoy myself a little bit? Dating isn't against my parole and it could be a nice...stress reliever. Plus, Ella is very cute. How could I say no?

I hear Adelaide's voice coming from the nursery and follow it. Leaning in the doorway, I watch as she sits on the floor with Kara, playing with these soft-looking fabric blocks. Kara looks adorably happy to be spending time with her mom, and I don't want to interrupt it. I come over and sit on the floor with them.

"I have a question," I say, keeping my voice soft. It's not like Kara can understand anything that I say, but I'm admittedly a little embarrassed to be asking my *little sister* about this.

"My answer is still no," she says without even looking at me.

I roll my eyes. "It's not about *that*, Ads." Kara drops one of her blocks. I pick it up from the colorful rug and hand it back to her. She stares at me, stares at the block, and then takes it. She goes back to banging it against one of the others.

"Then what is it?"

“So, I have a date tonight.”

That gets Adelaide’s attention. She pulls her eyes away from Kara and the blocks, the expression on her face makes me chuckle. Complete shock. “I’m sorry?”

“A date, Adelaide.”

“No, no. I got that part.” Kara knocks another block over and before she can start crying over it, Adelaide grabs it and hands it back to her. Then she turns her attention back to me. “With whom? How? Where in the hell did you meet someone, Mattia?”

I lean back on my palms, watching Kara. Seeing my sister with a child is weird. Considering she was a freshman when I got locked away, it’s even weirder. It’s such a strange concept but she’s...good at it, the whole mom thing.

“Does any of that matter?”

Adelaide’s still looking at me, slowly nodding her head. “It matters. I’m not giving *any* advice until you give me details.”

Lame. I should have expected it though. It’s very Adelaide. If I didn’t desperately need her advice here, I wouldn’t have even brought it up. The truth is that I need Adelaide right now. Since getting out of jail I’ve interacted with *three* people (not including Kara or the girl I’m taking on a date). I don’t trust Christian or Damien with advice, so, it leaves me with her.

“Yesterday I went to meet Damien,” I tell her and Adelaide makes a fake gagging noise. I’m sure I’ll hear more about it later. She doesn’t interrupt so I continue, “It was at one of those health clubs. Anyway, the receptionist was cute. Thought I could take her out, and practice interacting with a woman who isn’t my sister again. Problem is, I don’t think I remember how to date.”

“And you’re asking me?”

“You’re my best source of information.”

She sighs. “Well, first I’m going to tell you that I think this is *stupid*. I don’t think you *need* to be dating with everything else going on in your life. Between just getting out of prison and readapting to life and the insanity that you’re trying to pull off... I know you’re going to do whatever you want to do. So, I’ll save my breath there. Truthfully, just be yourself. Leave out the prison and mafia shit. That’s not first-date material. Listen to her. Make her smile. Tell her that she’s pretty. Try to find common ground that doesn’t involve you trying to get in her pants.”

“That’s it?” I scoff. “You’re really just telling me to be *myself*, Adelaide?”

“I haven’t been on a lot of dates, Mattia.”

“Something I need to talk to Christian about?”

“Prefer it if you didn’t.”

I sense something off in her tone like maybe there’s trouble in paradise. I also don’t want to pry. Prying when it comes to Adelaide usually means I’ll get my head bit off. If she wants to talk, she’ll eventually implode and someone will be caught in the crossfire. Likely me. Before I can open my mouth, the front door squeaks open. Adelaide’s demeanor shifts completely.

“Kara!” she gasps, putting on a smile. “Your daddy’s home. Let’s go see him,” she says. She stands up before bending over to pick up Kara. She kicks her little legs with excitement as Adelaide starts to leave the room. She stops in the doorway and turns back around to look at me. “Look, it’ll be fine, Mattia. Don’t overthink it. And...be careful, okay?”

I don’t know what she’s warning me to be careful about. I’m sure Ella isn’t a threat. I’m sure nobody’s going to care if I go out on a date. Maybe she’s just worried I’ll end up getting in over my head with Ella as she did with Christian. She doesn’t need to worry – I’m not that type of guy. I don’t fall that damned quickly for anyone.

Honestly, I'm surprised that the owner of the restaurant remembered me. He paid the Mansolillo's a protection fee for years. I wonder who he's paying now. He was nothing but polite as he led me to a table in the back, somewhere nice and alone. Perfect for a quiet first date. My eyes are watching the front door, waiting on Ella. I don't have a phone yet. I can't text her and see where she's at.

What if she doesn't show up? I can't tell Adelaide I got stood up on my first date out of prison. She'll never let me live it down. I shift my gaze away from the door and look at the clock. It's eight. I said *around* eight. That gives her a little wiggle room.

But my heart is racing. I'm nervous. As nervous as I am that she won't show, I'm almost more nervous that she *will*. If she shows up, I still feel clueless. What am I supposed to talk about if she asks about me? Adelaide said not to bring up prison (wasn't in the plans anyway). Don't bring up the mafia either. Who am I without all of that? I wasn't even out of jail for a day before I was trying to get involved all over again.

The door opens and Ella steps in. She's wearing a yellow dress with little flowers all over it. It reminds me of summer, of sunshine. She's beginning to remind me of sunshine. She sees me and starts to make her way over. I stand, hoping that that's not too much.

"Hi!" she greets me. She sounds *excited*, which is good, right? I want her to be excited to see me. "Sorry I was a little late," she apologizes.

I shake my head. "Don't worry about it. I'm just glad you came. Was it the dental appointment?" I ask, pulling her chair out for her.

Her cheeks turn pink and she laughs. "God, I am not going to live that one down, huh?"

"Never," I say as I take my seat. "You look wonderful, by the way."

Her cheeks get even pinker. I'm never going to get used to the power I feel when I make her blush. How good it feels. I want to keep making her blush.

"Thank you. You look really nice too."

I don't tell her that I left an hour early after borrowing some money from Adelaide to go shopping at a nearby shop. Don't tell her that I changed in the bathroom of a public bathroom and left my old clothes in the trash. It makes me feel...awful. I already feel terrible that this date is going on Adelaide's credit card, which gets paid by Christian.

It won't be like this for long though. Soon, I'll be back to living the life that I was used to before. I'll be able to take Ella out to nicer restaurants and on fancier dates. Whatever she wants.

Maybe I'm getting a little too ahead of myself though. Who says she's even going to want to go on a second date? Who says she's even going to like me?

"Thank you," I say, reaching across the table. I lay my hand down palm up and Ella shyly places her hand in mine. "Everything here is delicious, by the way. I know the owner." As soon as those words leave my lips, I realize that they might sound ridiculously snooty. Before I can come up with an excuse (or apologize), Ella is talking.

"Really? That's so cool. I've always wanted to be able to say 'I know the owner' of some place. It just sounds *cool*," she laughs.

Crisis averted. At least I don't look like a jackass, yet. "Do you want any wine or anything? I...don't drink." I can't drink. Violation of my parole. Sure, it's likely they'd never find out but I'm not risking it. Funny how that works, right? I'm not willing to risk it over a glass of wine, but I'll try to restart the Mansolillo family.

She shakes her head. "I don't drink, actually. Just never really been my thing. Not for religious reasons or anything. Not that there's anything wrong with religion," Ella pauses

and shakes her head again. “Sorry, I ramble when I get nervous.”

I noticed. It’s adorable. Or maybe it’s just that I find Ella so attractive that I’m not picking up any behaviors as ‘bad’ or ‘unattractive’. I’m not going to think about that right now either. I wrap my fingers around her hand and bring it up to my lips, softly kissing the back of it. “Do I make you nervous?”

Her cheeks have gone from pink to red. She laughs, nodding. “You...you make me very nervous, Mattia.”

“I’m choosing to take that as a compliment.”

“It is one.”

The waiter appears and we order, water to drink and Ella gets seafood pasta. I get the same thing. I’m not feeling particularly picky. When you’re used to prison food and your sister’s (questionable) cooking, anything sounds good.

With that out of the way, I can focus a little bit more on Ella. “Tell me about you,” I say, tilting my head to the side. “I know you like tattoos, I know you work at the health club. And you evidently yell at automated voice messages from your dentist’s office,” I tack the last part on as a tease and smile when she giggles.

Speaking of tattoos, with her cardigan off, I can see a few more of hers. She has an intricate floral design on her forearm, black and white, and highly detailed flowers like I noticed earlier. ‘Fearless’ is tattooed on her collarbone. I see the start of something on her chest, but her dress covers up most of it.

How terrible am I that I’m hoping I get the chance to uncover it? At least sometime soon.

“Um, that’s really all there is to know about me,” Ella laughs, looking at her hands. “I’m not exciting, Mattia. I’m terrible at planning things. I usually jump without looking, which drives my mother insane. I love concerts and go to as

many as possible. I wish I could dye my hair pink but my job won't let me. I love cats, but I'm allergic."

This wasn't what I was expecting when I asked about her. I expected the usual. Talk about high school, college, and hobbies. Instead, I'm getting a bunch of random facts about her...and I kind of love it. It feels very...Ella. I know I don't know her well enough to know what 'Ella' feels like but I just...have a feeling.

Chapter Six

Ella

I've spent all day losing my mind over this date. It was all I could think about at work, which made for a lousier day than usual. Easily distracted receptionists don't make for happy rich people. I managed.

It's not like I haven't been on a date in a bit. Truthfully, I probably go on a *lot* of first dates. My mom would say way too many firsts and rarely any seconds. I just...don't want to waste my time. If I don't feel an immediate spark, some type of connection, why try to force it? That's what my mom did (she'll never admit to it) and that's why my dad peaced out by the time I was three.

Maybe I'm looking for my fairytale. Maybe I'm trying too hard to find something that isn't there. That doesn't matter right now.

Out of all the first dates I've been on, this is the first time since I was in maybe high school that I recall just feeling *nervous* the entire day leading up to it. Then it was like the minute I walked into the restaurant and saw Mattia, it all vanished. Call it stereotypical, but it feels *nice*.

It's almost like he finds my dorkiness attractive, which you know, is *always* a plus. He smiles and laughs and just looks gorgeous across from me. He asks about me and I give him the dumbest details. He only seems more intrigued.

"I think you'd be cute with pink hair," he comments after a bite of pasta, calling back to my earlier statement.

"See, I do too," I laugh. "But my job is really strict about those types of things. That's why I have to wear a cardigan to work every day. Even in the summer."

Mattia's nose scrunches when I tell him that. "I think that's stupid."

“You and me both, but what do I do? They pay my bills. Gotta play by their rules for now.”

He tilts his head to the side in agreement. “So, I know you’ve said the receptionist gig is just a ‘for now’ thing. What are you thinking about for your ‘for later’ thing?”

I hate this question. I’m almost positive that Mattia can see it on my face. The issue is, I just don’t know. Nothing has ever stood out to me as my ‘dream’. Again, another example of me having no plans for anything in my life. Another reason I drive my mother insane.

“I don’t know,” I admit. I wish I had some impressive answer. Like maybe I want to somehow change the world for the better or something. This is the part where the whole demeanor of the date changes. Guys don’t like it when you have no ambition, no plans. Especially when they’re looking for something serious. “I keep thinking one day I’ll wake up and I’ll just *know* what I want to do with my life.”

I wait for the change in Mattia’s face. I wait for him to look annoyed or something with me. For him to make up an excuse to leave. His face doesn’t change. He brings his glass of water up to his lips and takes a sip.

“I understand,” he says. I feel like I could fall out of my seat when he says that.

“You do?”

“I do. I also feel a little...aimless with my life right now. I know what I *want* to do, I want to get back into my... family business, but the family business was destroyed. I have to start from the bottom and there’s a piece of me that isn’t sure that I can. I’m not my father, you know? But if I don’t do this, I don’t know what I’m going to do.” He shrugs before turning his eyes back to mine. “I understand that this isn’t the *exact* same as what you’re going through, but I figure it’s close enough.”

It’s not the same but somehow it makes me feel a little less...lame that I don’t have every step of my future figured

out. Mattia's the first guy I've been on a date with that has admitted to not having all of the answers. It's charming.

"It's close enough," I agree with a little smile. "And... thank you for sharing that with me, Mattia. I believe in you. I'm sure that sounds dumb and cliched, but I think you'll be able to get back your family business. You don't have to be your father, I'm sure. You can just be yourself."

I'm cringing at myself here. Is that too try-hard? I don't know. I just... like him. I want to know all the right things to say and maybe impress him like he's impressing me.

He chuckles, smiling back at me. "Thank you for the vote of confidence. I'm not sure anyone else I've told believes in me like that."

My cheeks heat up, just a little. I think I'm over the stage of blushing at every little thing Mattia says. God, I hope that I am.

"Well, I'm here for moral support," I smile back at him. Still feeling cringy and like I'm trying a little too hard here, but Mattia seems to not think so. I'll take it.

After dinner, Mattia suggests we go on a walk. This means that this first date hasn't been a complete failure. It means it's looking good so far, right? He holds my hand as we walk through the park, fairy lights in trees and streetlights illuminating our path.

I thought I was over the first date blushing thing, turns out I'm not. The minute he took my hand, I felt my cheeks get pink again. Mattia noticed. There's no way he didn't, and he just smiled the entire time.

"Tonight has been wonderful, Ella," he says.

I'm waiting for the 'but'. The 'it's been wonderful but...' that usually happens at the end of dates. The moment it's decided that things just aren't working out.

The ‘but’ doesn’t come. I’m probably uncomfortably silent for a few beats and Mattia doesn’t elaborate on any of it. So, I assume I’m in the clear here.

“It has,” I agree. “I can’t remember a first date that’s gone as well as this one has. You’re a good date, Mattia,” I smile.

“You think so? Because I was wondering...would you go on another with me?”

I think I freeze for a minute. A second date. Mattia wants a second date with me. I want a second date with him. Maybe I’m blinded by how gorgeous he is and how kind he is, but I think this might have the potential to go somewhere. At least I hope that it does.

“I’d love to go on another date with you.”

Mattia smiles. God, have I said how gorgeous he is? Because he is *gorgeous*. It feels like he’s not even real. He stops walking and keeps my hand in his. “Really?” he asks, tilting his head to the side.

“Really,” I say as I come to a stop, standing in front of him.

Mattia seems to hesitate for a moment before his hand comes out, cupping my cheek. My heart is *pounding* in my chest. I can’t express how nervous I feel right now. I think I know what’s coming. God, I hope that that’s what’s coming.

“I’d like to kiss you, Ella.”

“Please do.”

I don’t have time to worry about whether that was a weird thing to say or not. Mattia’s hand slides to the back of my head, cupping it as he leans in. His lips touch mine and I feel it. I feel all of those little electric sparks. What I’ve spent so long searching for. It’s all right there. I lean into the kiss. When Mattia tries to deepen it, I let him almost immediately.

I never want this moment to end.

Chapter Seven

Adelaide

“Is Mattia really on a date? He’s been out for what? Two days?” Christian asks as we go through Kara’s bedtime routine. “I can’t believe he works that quickly. Is it even a good idea?”

I shrug. “Not my business,” I tell him as I grab Kara’s pajamas from the closet. “Maybe it’s good for him. He can relearn to socialize.”

“I guess. I just...what if she finds out who he is?”

“I told him not to tell her. Don’t mention any of the stuff about his past.”

Christian sighs. “Is that really a good way to start a relationship, Ads? I mean, lying –”

He stops midsentence when he sees the look that I’m giving him. No. Lying is not the best way to start a relationship. However, it can work out. Look at us. Christian lied to me about who he was for the entire beginning of our relationship. I thought he was just the numbers guy my father had hired. I had no idea he was undercover.

No one did.

“It’s just a date, Christian. He’s not going to propose to this girl tomorrow or anything.” I hope. I really hope. Mattia is meticulous and planned, just like I am, but he can also be a bit of a dreamer. A romantic. He’s not good at staying grounded.

Christian sighs. “I guess we should be proud of him getting out there at all. You said he met her at a job interview?”

“Mhm,” I murmur, getting Kara changed into her pajamas. “Some health club downtown or something. I don’t

think he's actually interested in the job, but at least he got something out of it."

"At least he's trying," Christian says, coming up behind me. His arms wrap around me, his chin resting on my shoulder.

We haven't talked much since our argument the other night. We haven't addressed that. I know I was in the wrong, exploding on him like that. I don't need to tell him that. I'm sure he knows that I know.

I just feel so *stuck*. I'm sitting here, watching Mattia pursue what I've always wanted for myself, and I can't go after it with him. I have to stay on the nice, safe, *boring* side of the line. I have to try and figure out what I'm doing with my life that doesn't involve doing what I want to do or what I'm good at.

I don't want to just spend the rest of my life being a wife or a mother. It's not who I am. I love Christian. I love Kara. This isn't satisfying. I'm not getting anything out of this...not what I want, at least.

"He's trying," I agree softly before tacking on. "I'm trying too."

"I know you are," Christian says, pressing a kiss to my neck. "And you're doing amazing, Adelaide. I'm proud of you." He presses another kiss to my neck. "After we get Kara to bed, why don't I take the time to show you how proud of you I am? Mattia's out of the house."

I melt for him. I always do. He has the key to my heart. I just wish things were...easier. I wish that I was clearer about my path in life like I was before I fell in love with him.

I lean back into him, closing my eyes. "Think we can do that."

"Perfect. I love you, Adelaide."

Those three little words still make my heart hammer in my chest. I haven't fallen out of love with Christian or

anything. I guess I'm just tired of being complacent. I guess Mattia just has me wanting more for myself. Maybe he's gotten in my head. Wouldn't be the first time. He's my big brother. It's his job to drive me insane, right?

"I love you too," I promise.

I can't sleep.

It's nothing new. I slide away from Christian. He doesn't wake, except for a hand that reaches out to pull me back. When he doesn't find me, he rolls over and goes back to sleeping peacefully.

Getting out of bed, I go out to the couch. For some reason, sitting in the dark living room brings me more comfort than laying in the dark. Something about it feels less depressing. I curl up in the corner of the sofa, my mind racing and none of it feels like it's connecting. Sporadic thoughts that I can't exactly add up. Did I make a mistake? Am I *making* a mistake? Is thinking that all of this may be a mistake just a mistake? I've strived for perfection for so long that even now anything less feels like a death sentence.

The front door creaks open. I glance toward the clock. It's just a little before midnight. Mattia is trying to move quietly through the house. If I wasn't already awake, I wouldn't notice. He stops in the living room when he sees me. Without a word, he comes to take the spot next to me on the couch.

We sit in silence. I don't know how long. I don't think either of us really knows what to say, what to talk about.

We end up speaking at the same time.

"I kissed her," he says.

"Why Damien?" I ask.

Two completely different topics. I tilt my head to the side, glancing over at him. “You kissed her?”

He shrugs. “It felt right.”

“So, you really like her?”

“I think so.”

I shrug. I don’t really know what to say. I still think it’s much too soon for Mattia to be jumping into a relationship, but what am I supposed to say? Tell him not to? He’s my older brother. He doesn’t need my permission to date. Plus – that feels a little weird.

Mattia continues, “She’s pretty. Funny. Interesting. She’s different from the girls that I used to date. You know, back in the day.”

“They were all bimbos,” I scoff. Maybe that’s a little harsh. But they were all the type who was only interested in Mattia for money and power. Mostly money. I don’t think any of them were smart enough to put together the power thing.

“You’re not wrong,” he snorts. “I asked her on a second date.”

“Did she say yes?”

“She did.” Mattia pauses and turns to look over at me, eyebrow raised. “What do you even do on a second date?”

“I don’t even know what you do on a first.”

Dating has never been normal for me. Before Christian, I had Yulian. Our dates consisted of just disappearing somewhere and being together. Nothing normal. While it wasn’t a Romeo and Juliet type of situation, sometimes it felt like one. Two separate families. Families who would be a combination of excited and distraught at the idea of our families combining.

Mattia shrugs again. “Guess I’ll figure it out.” Then he jumps to the real topic at hand, what I deem much more important than his first and second date worries, why Damien?

“I didn’t know who else to reach out to. I would’ve taken suggestions.”

“Yulian,” I answer with his name without a single moment of hesitation. Is that weird? I just...ended up going to Yulian for a lot toward the end. He was always happy to help, always understood that our relationship ended up becoming strictly platonic. Maybe there’s always a bit of me who’ll wonder what if it wasn’t?

“Yulian? Your ex-boyfriend?”

“Shush. Don’t speak so loudly.”

“I’m speaking at the same volume I’ve been this entire time, Ads,” he scoffs, rolling his eyes. I don’t have to look at his face to know that he’s smirking. “You’ve been thinking about Yulian. You don’t want Christian to know.”

It’s nothing like that. At least...I don’t think. I think Yulian represents what could have been for me. The life that a part of me still craves. The excitement, the power. Everything that I could’ve achieved if Christian didn’t step in. Doesn’t mean that I love him any less.

“That’s not the point,” I point out. “Focus on the question.”

“Right. Because Yulian is an Andronikov, Adelaide. I don’t think he’d freely give *me* information. You, maybe. Damien is connected to us. Bringing the family back means giving him power again. He’ll tell me whatever I want to know to make that happen. You know how he is.”

I know exactly how Damien is and that’s why I don’t like this in the least. He’s a piece of shit. Probably one of the worst men that I know. He’s the reason my life went up in smoke when I was a teenager. If he never pursued my mom, she’d probably still be alive.

My lips scrunch to the side in annoyance because I *know* that Mattia has a point. Damien is good for information. He’ll do anything to grasp for that power that he once had

before I took it all away. It's the only thing that makes him feel worth something in the world.

"I don't like him," I mumble. I don't care how childish it sounds, I know that it does. Mattia's my older brother. He has to deal with the childishness sometimes.

"Neither do I," he agrees. "That's why he's out as soon as I find someone to replace him. For now, Damien is good information. He'll get me back to where I want to be. Once I'm there, hopefully, I'll have someone that I can replace him with." His eyes shoot over to me and I know exactly what he's going to ask. "Like you. You know that spot is always yours if you want it, Ads."

I groan. I don't think Mattia knows how tempting it is. Maybe he does and that's why he keeps offering it to me. I was fine until he brought it back up. Now I can't stop thinking about all the possibilities. What I could have. Everything that I wanted for so long. Then I consider everything that I have to lose. It's not worth the risk.

"I can't, Mattia," I tell him softly.

"Just offering."

Chapter Eight

Mattia

“I’m not paying for lunch,” I tell Damien as we sit down in some fancy steakhouse. I called him this morning to check if he had any information, and he did. He asked to meet for lunch, and I swear that he purposefully chose the most expensive restaurant in the neighborhood.

“Aren’t you using the rat’s money? I don’t see why not,” Damien says from across the table, there’s a glimmer in his eyes like he thinks he’s funny.

He’s not.

As much as I wish I could hate Christian, I can’t. He’s just a man who did his job. My father should’ve vetted him more carefully. Although I suppose we’re all just one step away from a fall from grace, hm? I can’t even hate Christian for ending up with my sister because she loves him.

I don’t see why. I don’t think he’s on her level, but I know that she does. I don’t question it. If I start involving myself in my sister’s love life, she’ll start involving herself in mine and that’s the last thing I want. Adelaide will one-hundred percent scare Ella away. She’s downright frightening when she wants to be.

I shrug. “Just trying to stay on his good side for now. Now, what do you have to tell me? You said you had information,” I say, looking over the menu in front of me. I’m no longer touching on the topic of who’s paying for lunch. Damien suggested the place, he’s the one covering the bill. End of story there.

“Right. So, the Papilla’s and the Luppino’s are floundering, just like I thought. They’re too busy fighting with each other to take advantage of the opening that your family left. Drug trafficking is down, and suppliers and customers are getting pissy.”

There's my opening – and I hate it. Drugs feel so low-level. Drugs are why I ended up behind bars in the first place. Dancing around with them again feels like a fucking mistake, but it's the first opening that I see. I don't take my eyes off of the menu, my mind racing as I consider my options here.

Wait until Damien finds another opening, something else that I can exploit or take what's right in front of me. Walk through that door and take a huge risk. Isn't this whole thing a risk though? It's gotta be worth it in the end.

Adelaide's going to fucking murder me. I can tell you that much. Especially if I wind up back behind bars.

I look at Damien and nod. "Do it. Schedule me a meeting with our old suppliers. Tell them Mattia Mansolillo would like to speak to them," I say, keeping my voice low. "Tell them I know about the cracks in their business and I may have a solution."

Across from me, Damien lights up. "Yeah? This quickly?"

"Strike while the iron's hot, right?" I offer with a shrug. "Nothing's set in stone yet, Damien. Don't get too excited. We have to try and work out a deal and then find men willing to work with us again."

"You don't have to worry about finding interested people, Mattia. Everyone knows who the Mansolillos are. People are going to line up to follow you. Your family is practically royalty around here. It would be an honor."

I scoff at how much brown-nosing Damien is doing. He already knows that he's my right hand, at least for the moment. He's just trying to seal his spot long-term. Nothing is going to do that. I don't want him around. No matter how much he kisses my ass. Just like everything else right now, he's just a means to an end.

I also highly doubt anyone's going to be lining up to work with the family whose own daughter ratted them out to

the FBI, who testified against them. Adelaide's done damage, but I'm confident that I can change that around. I can fix it all.

"We'll see," I mutter.

I don't know what time the health club closes. I don't want to look it up because I'd have to use Adelaide's phone and then she'd have too much information. I don't want her scaring Ella away, not yet. I like her too much for that. She's... something different. Something special. So, I've been waiting around since maybe five? I know, I know, It's a little creepy.

I just wanted to see her again.

I probably should've called yesterday or something.

Actually, I'm considering now that all of this is a terrible idea, but I've waited too long at this point to just call it off. I'm going through with it. Maybe she'll never want to see me again after this but if she knew who I was, she probably wouldn't want to see me again anyway.

It's eight. I see the lights flick off inside of the building and a few seconds later, Ella comes walking out. She locks the door behind her and pulls her beige cardigan tighter around herself. Adjusting her purse on her arm, she starts to walk and then pauses by the bench that I'm sitting on.

"How long have you been out here?" she asks.

"I don't think you want that answer," I tell her, deciding that maybe honesty is the best policy here. "I wanted to see you again. So, I thought that maybe...maybe I could walk you home."

She looks at me. Blinks once, twice. "You could've called."

"I got ahead of myself."

"I'm going to go with the option of finding this flattering instead of a little weird," she smiles at me and I

breathe a sigh of relief.

I stand up, offering my arm and she loops her arm through mine. “Seriously though. You could’ve called.”

“I know, I don’t have a cell phone and I was on this side of town.”

“You could’ve come inside.”

“Didn’t want to get you in trouble. Your job’s strict, remember?”

Ella tilts her head to the side in agreement. She knows that I’m technically not wrong. But then she pauses and quirks an eyebrow over at me. “Wait. You don’t have a cellphone?”

Right. Should’ve guessed that that was going to get questioned. I don’t really know what to say. I haven’t thought up a good lie yet about why I don’t have a cellphone when most people our age live on theirs. I don’t want to completely bullshit her and tell her that I’m anti-technology or anything.

“Oh. My niece dropped mine in the toilet. My sister says that she’s going to replace mine. She ordered a new one and it hasn’t arrived yet.”

Sorry, Kara.

Chapter Nine

Ella

Sure, maybe it's a little weird to get out of work and the first thing I see is the guy I went on a date with once *waiting* for me. I could choose to look at it that way, or I could just find it endearing that he wanted to see me that badly. Considering how much I like Mattia, I'm going with the latter.

With my arm looped through his, he walks me to my apartment. Maybe it's a little early for him to know where I live or for me to invite him up. I barely know this guy, but again, I *like* him. It feels like there's something here. When we're together, it feels all sparky. I feel like this is one of those things that I'd be an idiot to not take a chance on.

When have I ever felt this way with anyone else?

So, I lead Mattia up to my floor and dig in my purse for the keys to my apartment. It's not impressive or anything. It's just your basic apartment. One bedroom, one bath. My furniture is on the cheaper side, but it's comfortable. It's not my *dream* apartment or anything but we'll get there.

Hopefully.

Once we're inside I throw my purse down on the armchair, and my cardigan follows. My shoes are off next. I turn to look at Mattia and smile. "Make yourself comfortable, yeah?"

I don't know where to go from here. I feel awkward, but I don't want to. I linger in the area between the kitchen and the living room as Mattia plops down on my couch. He keeps his jacket and shoes on. Maybe he's not planning on being here long?

"I'll be honest," I say. "I don't cook. Never really learned. Never wanted to. I'm kind of terrible at it anyway."

So...if you want dinner we could order something or I have a frozen pizza we could share.”

This is it, I think. This is the moment that Mattia loses all interest in me. What’s less attractive than a woman who can’t even make herself dinner? I know that I should learn. I just...don’t want to. Why should I spend my life doing things that I don’t want to do? Now I’m just waiting for his reaction. The excuse about why he needs to leave, the decision that this is the last time he waits for me outside of my job.

Mattia smiles at me. “What kind of frozen pizza?”

“Supreme.”

“I don’t like mushrooms.”

I can’t stop myself from smiling like an idiot. I feel it pulling over my lips as I look at him. “I like mushrooms. I’ll move all the mushrooms over to my side.”

And that’s that. It feels so easy with Mattia. I head to the kitchen and get our frozen pizza in the oven, with all the mushrooms moved over to one side. When I come back out to the living room, I notice that he’s finally decided to make himself more comfortable. The jacket is off, tossed on the armchair with my cardigan.

I take the spot on the couch next to him and Mattia wraps an arm around my shoulder, pulling me into his side. “This isn’t our second date,” he clarifies.

“It could be.” I don’t care. I don’t expect fancy restaurants or outrageous date ideas. I just want to spend time with him. I like doing it. I want to get to know him better. So, I decide to focus on something he said earlier. “So, your sister?”

“Right. Baby sister. Adelaide. She has a daughter named Kara. I’m currently staying with them. I just moved to the area, grew up a little bit from here, but I’m trying to find my place. Figure out where I belong and all that jazz. And there’s the whole family business thing.”

“Adelaide,” I repeat his sister’s name, trying to commit it to memory. “So, she’s letting you stay with her? She sounds like a good sister.”

Mattia chuckles, shaking his head. “She’s...great. She’s a little rough around the edges when you first meet her. It takes a little bit for her to warm up to people, but she’s a good person. Always tries to do what she thinks is right, even to her own detriment.”

“I’m an only child,” I shrug. “After my dad left, mom was never interested in anyone else. I guess she thought that all men would be just like him, so she kind of wrote them all off. Not exactly the best life motto.” It’s just a little funny considering how hard she’s been pushing me to settle down. “I always wanted siblings though.”

“It’s nice, most of the time,” Mattia shrugs. “Growing it up it kind of sucked, you know? She wanted to follow me around everywhere. Now she’s pretty much my best friend.”

I want to mention how I hope to meet Adelaide one day, but I worry that that’s rushing things too much. So, I just nod. Reaching out, I grab the remote from the coffee table. “Do you have a preference over what we watch on TV?” I ask.

“Whatever’s fine with me,” Mattia smiles.

We’re on the couch, pizza on paper plates, and some movie that came out a few years ago is on TV.

I take a bite of my slice, raising an eyebrow over at Mattia. His dark eyes are locked on the screen, completely enticed by what’s happening. I can’t stop myself from smiling. “You seriously haven’t seen this yet? It was a huge blockbuster. Everyone was talking about it.”

He pulls his eyes away from the screen and gives me an adorable, sheepish smile. One that feels just a little out of character from Mattia, but I like it. It shows that he has layers.

“Never saw it. I kind of went through a phase where I didn’t watch a lot of movies,” he admits. “It was dumb. Guess I have a lot to catch up on.”

“Good thing I’m kind of a cinephile,” I smile over at him. “I can help you catch up on movies.”

We go back to eating out pizza and watching. I find myself more focused on his face, watching his reaction to the big fight scene, watching as a smile crosses over his features when the hero wins the girl’s heart. We finish our slices and put the plates on the coffee table, then Mattia’s pulling me to his side so we can finish out the movie.

Mattia may think that this isn’t our second date or claim that it doesn’t have to be, but it feels pretty perfect to me. What’s a better way to unwind after work than decent pizza, a good movie, and the cute guy you’re kind of beginning to obsess over?

Chapter Ten

Mattia

I keep trying to play it safe with Ella. Every time she asks a question, a fresh wave of panic hits me because I don't know how to answer. Lying feels wrong. How am I supposed to build a relationship off of lies? But I can't tell her who I am. I can't let her know about any of that yet. Maybe one day. If we make it that far.

So far, so good, I think. I think I've done an okay job at answering her questions, or maybe everything I say is suspicious and she's never going to want to see me again after tonight. I hope that that's not the case.

Sitting here with Ella right now...it feels right. Having her tucked in nice and tightly to my side. She fits so well against me.

I know that I may be jumping to conclusions because Ella's the first woman that I've been around since I was locked up. I could just be feeling all of these emotions because of how nice it feels to be with someone again. But I think she's special. I think we were destined to meet. I don't know why. I don't know how. None of that really matters.

The screen fades to black and the credits begin to roll. I suppose now is when I should head home, right? Spend the rest of my night thinking about her...but I don't want to leave yet. I look over at Ella, who's still looking ahead at the screen. The minute she feels my eyes on her, she looks over and raises an eyebrow.

"Did you like it?" she asks, smiling at me.

"I liked it," I tell her, smiling back. "It was good." I can't stop myself from reaching out, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. She leans into the touch and I just – I have to go for it.

I don't ask like I did the first time. I lean in and press my lips to hers. Ella seems caught off guard for a single second before she's leaning right back in, letting her lips meet mine. I take it slow, just for a minute, let both of us get used to the feeling. I amp it up a little, my tongue tracing over her bottom lip. Her lips part and my tongue slides into her mouth. She sighs, her hand pressing against my chest but not pushing me away.

My heart is pounding. My blood is rushing. Do I dare take it further? What if Ella thinks that this is all that I'm after? I can't help myself. It's been so fucking long and she's perfect. The kiss stays deep, my passion only growing. I'm throbbing in my pants, especially when she makes all of these beautiful little noises into the kiss.

My hands are reaching for her, slipping around her waist, and pulling her into my lap. Ella doesn't put up a fight. She bends like putty to my will, sitting comfortably on my lap. I know she can feel how hard I am and she grinds down against me.

"Vixen," I hiss against her lips, breaking apart for air.

Her cheeks are flushed and she laughs. It's the most beautiful thing to me. She throws her head back and I see an opportunity, leaning forward and licking a trail up her neck. She shivers, that red flush across her cheeks growing darker.

"Ella," I say her name, letting it roll off of my tongue. "If you don't tell me no right now, I'm going to absolutely *devour* you," I purr up to her. The pupils of those hazel eyes are blown. She wants this. I want this. I just...need her to be sure. Because as much as I desperately want her, I don't want to ruin whatever we've started here.

Her response is her hips grinding back down against mine, her lips coming to capture mine in another kiss. I sigh into it, put my hand on the back of her head, and tangle my fingers in her hair, keeping her in place. The kiss deepens again and I'm taking this as all the go-ahead that I need. That

tonight she's mine and we're both okay with it. Thank God, because I need her.

I memorize the taste of Ella on my tongue, knowing that I'm going to be craving it again later. My hands slip down to her hips and she starts to grind down against me like she's unable to help herself. I groan into the kiss, feeling her fingers move to my hair.

I need more. I need her right here, right now. I secure my hands underneath her perfect ass and stand up. Never have I been more thankful for all the time I've spent working out while locked away. Makes me look a little sexier, a little smoother. Ella's legs wrap around my waist, one arm around my neck, the other still in my hair. The kiss doesn't break. If anything, it gets hungrier.

Looking over her shoulder the entire time, I somehow manage to navigate my way to her bedroom (not a real feat, there are only two other rooms. I had a fifty-fifty shot here). I drop Ella back on the bed, my eyes looking down at her, studying her like this.

She's a goddess. Her blonde curls are sprawled out around her head like a halo, hazel eyes with blown pupils looking up at me. Ella is the type of girl I used to only dream about. The type I thought was way too good for me. Let's be honest here, she's definitely way too good for me.

Unfortunately, it's been a while. I don't expect to last long, so I have to blow her mind in other ways. My eyes lock on her face and I smile. "I told you that I wanted to devour you," I purr. She makes the cutest little gasp before I'm on top of her.

Another kiss on her lips. I don't let it linger like the others, I have other places to taste. I kiss a trail down to her jaw, down her neck. Her shirt is in the way. I slid my hands down and slip them under the fabric, my hands touching soft skin for the first time. She feels as perfect as she looks.

I help her out of her top and just admire her for another second. So goddamn perfect. I can see the tattoo on her collarbone fully, so I lean down and press my lips to it, listening to the little sighs that she makes.

Finally, I get a better look at the piece on her chest. It's more wildflowers, just like on her forearm, except these have color. The stems of the flowers dip down into her cleavage, so I trace my kisses down those stems until I reach the annoying material of her bra. Got to get rid of that too.

So, I do. The bra is off, joining her top forgotten somewhere else in the room. I don't care where. Right now, all I can do is focus on her. My mouth is drawn to her breasts. She made the prettiest noises earlier just from kissing, I have to hear more from her. Leaning down, I take one of her nipples into my mouth.

Ella sighs, fingers moving back to my hair. I feel it harden in my mouth, swirling my tongue around it, flicking it. Experimenting. I need to know what makes her lose her fucking mind. I need to know what makes her continue to make those noises.

There's a worry, deep in the back of my mind, that I'm rushing into this. I'm too out of practice. It's been too long. What if this is terrible and ruins any chances for a future with Ella? That's the last thing that I want to happen. I just have to focus on making sure this is as good for Ella as it possibly can be.

My worries are quelled, just a little, when her chest arches up toward my mouth. She makes another sexy little moan as I switch nipples, repeating the same motions, remembering what got the strongest reactions out of her.

I kiss from her breasts over her stomach, over the 'v' of her hips that has her squirming. "Mattia," she whines my name as I kiss along the waistband of her jeans, not quite giving her what she wants. Not yet. I want to make sure this is memorable. I want to worship her as she deserves.

Finally, I give in. I unbutton her jeans and pull them off of her hips, her panties following down, joining her other clothes in the void on her bedroom floor.

I take a deep breath and sit back on my knees to fully take in the woman in front of me. I can't tell her she's the first woman I've been with in years. She'll have way too many questions that I'm not yet ready to answer. Instead, I just focus on how goddamn beautiful she is. I'm obsessed.

The teasing doesn't stop. Why would it? I have to get her squirming, begging for my mouth to taste where she desperately wants me to. I lift one leg, bringing it up to my shoulder. I kiss from her ankle to her knee, soft little kisses that have her shivering, making the most desperate little noises.

I do the same with the other leg, my eyes locking on hers for a moment. "Words help, Ella," I purr to her.

"Mattia," she whines my name.

I slow the kisses on her other leg, stopping midcalf. "Better than that," I murmur against her skin.

"Mattia, please."

"Better."

She grumbles in annoyance, so I pull my lips away from her skin completely. Another whine from her before she finally gives me what I want.

"Mattia, I might die if you don't touch me," she hisses.

I smile and tilt my head to the side. Oh, she's so fun to toy with. I don't want to stop. "Magic word, Ella."

If looks could kill, I'd drop dead right now. She's so annoyed with me, and it's kind of cute. She forces the word out instead of talking back, "Please."

It's a whisper – but it's enough.

Chapter Eleven

Ella

This man is making this excruciating. Finally, I give him what he craves, I beg. He settles on his elbows between my thighs, planting soft kisses on the inside of them. I don't push it. I close my eyes and just let him do what he wants. He's closer to where I want him to be, which is all I can focus my attention on. I'm dying for him to touch me though.

Finally, *finally*, his tongue licks up my slit. My head falls back against the pillow and I close my eyes, moaning. Good. Better. Mattia's fingers spread me so he can lean in and get a better taste. His tongue brushes over me again, lapping curiously. His tongue is warm and feels like absolute heaven. He tries out a few different things, I feel him pause and start again, trying to figure out exactly what I like.

Mattia figures it out pretty fucking quickly, it doesn't take him long to have me moaning out for him, fingers tangling in the sheets beneath me. One hand moves to my hip, holding me in place so I don't start squirming too much. His mouth moves to my clit and I feel like I've ascended to heaven.

He groans, flicking his tongue over my clit, tracing it in small circles. I feel like I'm losing my mind. The hand that isn't holding me in place moves so he can gently push a finger inside of me.

"Fuck," I hiss when he curls it, finding that spot and stroking it perfectly.

I can't think of anything else except for how perfect this feels. I don't care if it's too soon. My only real hope is that Mattia doesn't just disappear after this. I hope that this wasn't his end game. Because it's too damn good to just be a one-time thing. And, you know, I like him.

Can't focus on that right now. He pushes another finger inside with the first, curling it just the same way. His mouth is assaulting my clit in all the right ways. I can feel the familiar spring coiling in the pit of my stomach, threatening to push me over the edge.

"Mattia," I cry out. "I'm going to –"

I don't get to finish the sentence. Mattia amps up what he's doing and it sends me over the edge. Despite his hand holding me in place, I arch up, my fingers gripping the sheets beneath me. I cry out his name over and over again like a prayer and the man doesn't stop. He keeps lapping at me as my body quivers from the orgasm. Only when I whine does he stop.

He pulls away, still supported on his elbows between my thighs. He looks up at me, lips slick with a mixture of spit and my juices. Mattia smiles. The man *smiles* at me. "Take a breath, sweetheart," he purrs, running one of his hands down the inside of my thigh. "Relax. I'm not done yet."

I'm pretty fucking sure my eyes go comically wide at that. "W-what?"

He smirks. He looks like goddamn sin when he looks at me like that. "I said I was going to devour you, darling. Do you think I'm through?"

I – I don't know how to respond. I end up whimpering because the thought has all the blood rushing back down there, excitement building all over again. Mattia has me completely under his spell. He smiles up at me one more time before his tongue is back to work, taking it slow, building me up again.

Once again, his mouth sends me over again. Once again, he licks up as much as he can. When he looks over at me, his eyes are dark. He looks desperate – and I'm desperate for him. Somehow, I still want more from him. I want to feel him. I want to be able to get him off too. I want to make him feel good.

Mattia sits up onto his knees and gives me a second to relax as he strips himself down. I'm completely in awe as his shirt comes off, observing nothing but fine muscle and tattoos. I can barely make out what's tattooed on his body, there are so many of them. I want to spend the time exploring every one of them.

His pants come off. He's throbbing, large and hard, and desperate for me. I can see it in the way his hands shake as he spreads my thighs, sliding between them. I didn't expect to have this effect on him, but I am not complaining. It makes me feel good.

He guides himself in slowly, taking his time. I feel him enter me inch by inch. I feel myself stretch around him. It feels like heaven. I close my eyes, sighing once he's fully inside of me.

"Fuck," Mattia groans and that makes me shiver. My eyes open and I see his dark ones peering down at me. His hands are on either side of my head as he starts to roll his hips, taking it slow.

I let him set the pace between us. I've gotten mine, this is about him. Once I figure out the rhythm he's using, I start to follow it. I move my hips to meet his, my eyes locked on his.

He murmurs something in a language I don't know. I tilt my head to the side; sure, I look confused. I see him smile down at me.

"I said you feel like heaven," he whispers to me before our lips are together again.

I taste myself on his tongue and I whine at that, licking it from his lips. That makes his hips stutter before he starts to quicken his thrusts and I follow the pace, still focused on making sure he feels good.

His hand slides down my body, stopping at my thigh. He grabs it and wraps it around his hip as he continues to thrust. My eyes are locked on his, watching the pure pleasure that dances across his face as we move together. Everything

feels heightened. All of those sparks I feel whenever we're close together, whenever we kiss, are only amplified right now. My hands grip his biceps, feeling the muscles tense underneath my fingers.

I can feel it all building again. The familiar tightening feeling growing in my stomach, the tingles spreading out throughout my entire body. "Mattia," I whisper his name, my lips brushing over his as I speak. "I – I—"

I don't need to finish that sentence. He smiles against my lips, sweat beading on his forehead. "Let go for me, sweetheart. I want to hear you one more time," he purrs, his voice sounding like velvet and sin. Perfection.

He keeps the pace, keeps the angle. His hand grips tighter to my thigh, making sure our bodies stay flush together. His other arm slides underneath me, cradling me to him. A perfectly angled thrust sends me falling off the precipice. I cry out for him, hiding my face in the crook of his neck to try and muffle the sound. I still have neighbors to worry about. Mattia doesn't approve. His fingers move to my hair, tangling the strands between his fingers and giving a gentle tug.

"I said I want to hear you," he growls down to me, sending shivers through my body.

I want to utter an apology because now I feel like an idiot. Instead, his lips are crashing against mine. Another deep, passionate kiss that has me licking at his tongue, tasting him. Mattia moans into the kiss as his hips speed up, pumping into me. The grip he has on me tightens and then his hips stutter a few times before coming to a slow stop.

He loosens his grip but doesn't pull away from me. Our eyes lock and while I find myself at a loss for words, I smile up at him. Then my heart is pounding because what if that was stupid? What if this whole thing has been stupid? What if this was all Mattia wanted from me and I gave it to him? Now I'll never see him again.

All of those worries are quelled when he smiles back before leaning down, pressing his lips to my forehead.

Chapter Twelve

Mattia

I didn't intend to sleep with Ella so quickly, but it happened – and I don't regret it. After that night, I've spent a lot more time with her. The last thing I want is for her to think I was just using her. Maybe...maybe when I first laid eyes on her, that was my intention. She's beautiful. I've been lonely for so long. But the more time I've spent with her, the more I realized how amazing she is. She's funny and interesting and I'm *comfortable* with her. More comfortable than I've ever been with anyone in my life.

Obviously, that presents the biggest problem. Ella knows nothing about me. I've kept her at arm's length. Everything she's learned has mostly been a lie, a half-assed one at that. I should just own up to it. I should tell her everything and let her make her choice from there. But that means I might lose her and I don't think I could handle that.

This is one thing that I can't ask Adelaide's advice on. She'd tell me to keep lying and while that's probably what I *should* do...it still feels wrong. I feel guilt every time I have to craft another barely believable story.

But if I tell her, not only do I risk losing her, but I also risk putting her in danger. If she, for some reason, still decides that she wants to keep seeing me, and she knows about all of my business practices, she could be in danger. I don't have a lot going on right now. Damien has connected me with a few of the old suppliers and I've been in and out of meetings all week. No one's completely agreed yet. I have to reestablish trust and I know I can do that. It's not too hard. At least...I don't think it will be.

But once we're fully back in power, I'll have the means to protect Ella. I can tell her then. That's how I justify it to myself as I arrive at her apartment. Instead of going out for dinner tonight, we decided to stay in. Order something, watch

another movie I didn't even know existed. It sounds like a good night to me. Then again, any time spent with Ella is amazing to me.

I make my way up to her floor, knock on the door and Ella opens it, greeting me with a bright smile. "Hey!" She throws her arms around my neck and I pull her against me, feeling every bit of tension exit my body when I'm close to her like this.

"Hey you," I smile as I breathe her in before she's letting go, stepping aside to let me into her apartment. I take my jacket off, depositing it onto the armchair in the corner before heading toward the couch. "So, what are you thinking for dinner? I'm game for whatever."

Ella makes her way over to the couch and tucks herself into my side. Right where she belongs. "Dunno. We've done Italian, pizza. We had Chinese the other night. How do you feel about Mexican? I know a place that has the *best* tacos in town. It's a little shop right down the street but they deliver."

"As I said, I'm game for whatever. Tacos work," I agree, reaching into the pocket of my jeans. "We can order them on my cellphone," I grin, waving it at her. I know it's childish but I literally can't remember the last time I had my own phone and technology has advanced *so* far since then.

I kind of feel like an old man. Christian spent a good hour explaining everything to me earlier, which was probably the longest time we've spent talking to each other. He showed me how to work apps and everything so I don't look completely lost in front of Ella.

The phone was a gift from Christian, not Adelaide. She doesn't care whether I have a phone or not. She just happened to make a joke at dinner one day that Christian was going to end up sending her a risqué message while *I* had her phone and it was going to be really awkward. Evidently, that scared him enough to buy me a phone. Sure. I'll take it.

Ella's eyes light up, mirroring the childish joy on my face. "Yeah? Exciting! You can actually text me now."

"I know." I've already been looking forward to it. I think about her all the time and being able to have constant communication between the two of us sounds...good. Maybe that's a little much but I just...I like her. A lot.

I hand the phone over to Ella, letting her be the one to order the tacos. She asks what I want and I tell her whatever she recommends. I trust her – as long as it doesn't involve mushrooms. That gets a laugh out of her and she orders our tacos.

Afterward, she hands my phone back over to me and I think about how I want to approach the next topic. Maybe I should wait until after dinner, in case this ends up awkward. But putting it off just makes the anxiety in my chest grow heavier. I need to know her answer.

Ella is flipping through movie options, giving me a list and I can honestly say that I've caught none of it. Too distracted, so I force the words out instead.

"I have a question," I tell her softly.

She drops the remote and tilts her head to the side as she looks over at me. "Okay. Shoot."

The anxiety grows stronger in my chest and I'm beginning to regret even opening my mouth. I should've waited. I should've kept pushing it off until I couldn't anymore. But that's not staying true to myself.

With Ella, I feel so out of my element. I feel unprepared for everything. She makes me feel unlike anything I've ever felt before. She scares me. In a good way. The kind of fear that you need in your life.

"Okay, so," I turn my body toward hers, giving her all of my attention. Reaching out, my hand slips into hers, lacing our fingers together. "I need you to be honest, okay?"

“...Okay.” She seems completely thrown off by this. I should’ve waited. It’s too late now.

“Ella, I really like you,” I start. “Spending time with you is the most alive I’ve felt in years. You’re something special. You make me feel different, in all the best ways. And I want to keep spending time with you. I want to explore whatever this is between the two of us and see where it goes. And – and I was wondering if you’d like to be my girlfriend?”

It’s out in the universe now. My eyes are studying her beautiful face, trying to read her. Her hazel eyes are wide, trailing over my face like she’s waiting for me to tell her that it’s all a lie. Some weird joke. A beat of silence passes between the two of us, then another. Neither of us speaks and I wonder if I messed up. Did I read everything wrong?

Before I can open my mouth and figure out a way to backtrack, Ella is speaking. “Are you – are you serious?” she asks, her voice soft.

“I’m serious.”

Then it’s back to silence.

Chapter Thirteen

Ella

Mattia wants me to be his girlfriend. I didn't picture this. Wasn't prepared. I thought...I don't know. I thought that everything between us was just fun. I don't like to think my self-esteem is super low or anything, but I just feel like he could do better. It feels like he's completely out of my league. I keep waiting for him to tell me this is all some cruel joke, but he doesn't. His eyes are locked on my face and I feel the pressure building.

I want to say yes. It feels like the most natural thing in the world. Because I like spending time with him, I like him a lot. He's swept me away more than any guy in my life ever has. I just have one issue.

I don't know him.

Not like I should know my boyfriend. I've never really called him on it, but I feel like Mattia lies...a lot. Maybe he doesn't *lie*, but he doesn't give me the whole truth. There are missing pieces in his story. I don't even know his last name. All of these should be reasons that I say no.

But if I say no, I risk losing something that I know can be special. I risk losing something that I know is good. I risk losing what is potentially the best thing that could ever happen to me.

I feel stuck.

"Mattia, I feel like I don't know you," I tell him softly, looking down at our hands. "I feel like you're hiding a big part of who you are from me. I feel like something is missing. I've never pushed because I know you'll tell me when you're ready but --"

He cuts me off, "It's not a secret life or anything, Ella. Adelaide really is my sister. She really does have a daughter. I

can let you meet them if that helps ease your decision. I'm just a private person but I can change. I can let you in. It'll be a slow process, but I'm willing – for you.”

I feel like an idiot because that has me sold. Like I trust him almost *immediately*. I know that I shouldn't. I fucking know better. There's just something about Mattia that checks all of these little boxes in my head. Everything I've ever dreamed of in a partner. That little fact helps him slip right past my logical defenses.

I chew on my bottom lip, letting my eyes drift back up to his face. “And you promise?” I ask, despite feeling ridiculous doing so.

“Promise that I'm willing to let you in? Of course. Promise that I'm not hiding some insane secret life from you? Also of course,” Mattia says, bringing the back of my hand up to his lips. “It'll be a process, Ella. I keep walls up but I *am* willing to let them down for the right person. I feel like you're the right person.”

He's saying everything that he needs to say. This is a situation where my logic just isn't going to win. I'm not going to make the logical choice here. I'm going to go with my heart and my heart tells me that Mattia is the one for me.

How do I know? What has he done outside of just being gorgeous and charming? Honestly? Not a whole lot. He hasn't done some sweeping romantic gesture or anything. I don't *need* that. I don't want that. It comes down to how I feel around him. Calm, relaxed. I feel like I can be myself, flaws and all and Mattia is okay with that.

And logically? Maybe that *should* be a red flag. I mean, what man wants to be with a woman who's a complete fucking mess? Evidently, Mattia does.

My cheeks are pink. I can feel how warm they are as I smile at him. “And you're sure, right? This isn't something that you can easily take back, Mattia. Once I'm your girlfriend, I'm your girlfriend.”

He smiles at me. “Kind of why I asked, Ella. I’m sure. I want you to be my girlfriend. I want us to be serious.”

And I give in. I fell way too quickly for this man. Everyone in my life would be screaming at me about it. Another example of Ella not looking before she jumps.

Isn’t that the best way to live life though? If you spend all of your time thinking about what *could* happen, you’re never going to do what you want to do. You’re not going to take risks and risks make life worth living, right?

“Then yes, I’ll be your girlfriend,” I answer, a smile spreading over my lips.

Mattia reaches out for me, pulling me close to him before our lips crash together. All electricity. All of those sparks that I crave between the two of us. It doesn’t take long for Mattia to have me in his lap, the kiss deepening pretty fucking quickly. It’s all chemistry between us.

When we break for air, I’m laughing, my cheeks are even redder. “We have dinner on the way,” I whisper against his lips.

“They can leave it at the door,” he growls back to me, scooping me up and carrying me toward the bedroom.

Chapter Fourteen

Mattia

Staying the night at Ella's is becoming a common part of my life. Neither Adelaide nor Christian have commented on it. I think Adelaide's just avoiding talking to me so I don't bring up the family thing to her or somehow read her better than she's ever read herself. I think Christian is maybe hoping that I fuck up so he gets rid of me. Of course, he'd never say that out loud. Adelaide would throttle him. It's just a gut feeling that I have.

I get in from my night with Ella and find the two of them eating breakfast in the kitchen. Kara is in her high chair, banging a bowl against the tabletop to get attention. I walk in and scoop her up, taking a seat with her in my lap. At least that way my sister can eat her breakfast without having to worry about the baby.

"Thank you," Adelaide says. I can tell it's genuine too, which is always weird coming from her. "Long night again?"

"Oh, you know," I shrug and she snorts. Christian's silent across from her, like he's judging the entire situation. Maybe that's what I don't like about him. It always feels like he's *judging* me. He probably is. I already know he doesn't like me.

Again, I don't blame him. I just wish he'd be a man and say it to my face.

"I take it you were with Ella?" she asks.

"Mhm," I nod, bouncing Kara on my knee. "I asked her to be my girlfriend. She said yes." Just throwing that one out there. "I told her that she could meet you if she wanted to. To prove that you're my sister and not some secret wife."

Adelaide's face twists up in utter disgust. She drops her fork, completely forgetting about her eggs. "Fucking excuse

me? *Gross.*” Then she chooses to focus on everything else that I just said. “Girlfriend? She’s your *girlfriend* now?”

“Yep.” I knew this was coming. They’re going to think this was a dumb choice and maybe it was. Point is, it was *my* dumb choice. I like Ella too much to not take things to the next level with her. This was something I knew that I had to do.

“Do you even know Ella’s last name?” Christian speaks up for the first time.

I fight the urge to roll my eyes at him like some rebellious teenager. “I can learn it. Did you know everything about Adelaide when you two started seeing each other?” And I really, really can’t help myself when I tack on, “Wait. Don’t answer that one.”

Adelaide’s glaring at me now and I offer her my most charming smile. It doesn’t work on her. Didn’t expect it to, but a man can hope.

“Mattia, are you sure about this? She’s going to be *destroyed* when she finds out that you’re lying to her.”

“I’m hoping things are solid enough between us when I end up telling her the truth. I think that Ella will understand.”

Adelaide scoffs. “Trust me when I tell you that no matter how *strong* and *solid* you think things are between the two of you, she’s going to be crushed when she finds out that you’re lying to her.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I see guilt wash over Christian’s face. Ah. So, like everything else, this has nothing to do with me lying to Ella. This is about everything between the two of them.

Well, at least it doesn’t involve me.

“Guess we’ll see then,” I say.

And honestly, I hope that this little lie doesn’t destroy everything between us.

I'm beginning to get nervous. I don't like waiting. I don't like being told to wait. I'm a Mansolillo, we're usually the ones that people wait on. I tap my feet against the concrete floor of the warehouse. Mansolillo's also don't like warehouses as a meeting place, especially when they're alone.

I don't have anyone on my side. Damien wasn't answering his phone. Adelaide wants nothing to do with it. I've established nothing that'll make people interested in working for me. All I can offer them right now is a promise that 'someday it'll be good' but no one's going to believe a damn thing out of my mouth. Because I'm a Mansolillo. Right now, we don't have the most amazing reputation.

I'm surprised someone even agreed to take this meeting to begin with. It's Gerard. He's roughly my age, grew up the ranks as a low-level dealer, and is now one of the biggest suppliers in the state. Maybe even the country. He likes risks, so maybe him agreeing makes a little sense.

The doors of the warehouse creak open, and I hear footsteps. I let my eyes close for a minute as I try to count how many separate steps. How many people are coming? Right now, I can pinpoint three. Three is doable. Three isn't a threat. At least that's what I tell myself.

"Mattia Mansolillo!" Gerard's voice booms. "Is that really you?"

I turn around to look at him. "In the flesh, Gerard."

Gerard looks inconspicuous. That's probably why he was able to grow as quickly as he did. He...reminds me of Christian in a way. Able to present himself as just some geek. Not a real threat or anything. No one ever expects those types to be the ones who're dangerous.

I don't know the two men with him, but I'm keeping an eye on them, just in case.

"I didn't believe what Damien was telling me when he reached out. I still don't think I believe it. Do you really think

you can rebuild what your family lost?”

“I do.” I don’t hesitate with my answer. I don’t need to. I’m very certain of what I can do, of what I’m *able* to do.

“I gotta tell you, Mattia, not a lot of people are so willing to trust you. Half of my men told me not to meet with you. Worried that you were bugged or something. But I had faith in you. However, I’m not sure I have as much faith when it comes to you being able to rebuild.”

I expected this. I just shrug and offer him a little half-smile. “That’s the thing then, Gerard. I have faith in myself. And I do appreciate you taking this meeting. I’m willing to strip for you if you don’t trust me.”

“Oh, I trust you,” he says, finally coming to a stop a few feet in front of me. His men are right by his side and I let my gaze leave them for the time being, looking over at Gerard instead.

“I guess you know why I’m here then. I need to get back into the game, Gerard. I need someone who can supply me with the necessary tools to do so. I know drugs were only a minor part of the Mansolillo dynasty, but it’s a start. I heard from Damien that the Luppino’s and Papilla’s aren’t moving product the way you’d prefer.”

“They aren’t. Too busy fighting over territory to actually put in the work,” Gerard shrugs. “But what can you offer me, Mattia? Your family name is worthless to us right now. After what your sister did...trust is not there. A lot of people are *angry*. Your sister’s little stunt caused a lot of people to lose their jobs and their families. It tore a lot of things apart.”

“Well, I can tell you that I’m not –”

I’m a fucking idiot.

I don’t see it coming. I’m too distracted by trying to prove myself and my word to Gerard. I should’ve kept my eyes on his men. By the time I realize what’s happening, it’s too late. The crack of gunfire rings out through the warehouse

and suddenly there's a searing pain in my arm. Immediately, my vision starts to get blurry from the pain. I see one of Gerard's men tucking a gun back into his jacket.

I've been shot. I bring my hand up to the wound and feel blood seeping through my fingers.

"You upset a lot of people, Mattia," Gerard says. "Including me. Your family was my biggest customer and without your business, I've been suffering. You don't really think I'd so willingly work with you again, do you?"

I can't think. Not about what he's saying. The only things that I can think about are the pain and how I'm going to get out of this one. My knees start to buckle and I feel everything around me start to get woozy. Shoulder wounds aren't *deadly* if you get them taken care of in time, but they bleed like a bitch and they hurt like a mother.

As my body slumps to the ground from the pain, I see Gerard and his men leave the warehouse. That's the last thing that registers in my mind before everything is black.

Chapter Fifteen

Ella

I don't know what time it is, all I know is that it's the middle of the night. Outside my window, the city is still asleep. Streetlights twinkle, the sun isn't out. My phone is buzzing like crazy on my nightstand. The first time, I ignored it. I put my pillow over my head and prayed for it to stop. But it's buzzing nonstop, so it has to be important.

I roll over and grab it, seeing Mattia's name on my caller ID. I didn't see him last night. Which is fine. I don't need to see him every day or anything. That would just be insane. But usually, he at least calls or texts me at night. I didn't hear anything from him last night. A little weird, but I can deal with it. I'm not clingy.

So why is he calling me so late? My mind immediately jumps to the worst conclusions. He's drunk. He went out last night, got drunk, and fucked someone else. It's happened to me before. But Mattia is different and he doesn't drink. Does that make it worse? If he wasn't drunk?

I force myself to stop overthinking like this. All I need to do is answer the phone. So, I do.

"Hello?" My voice is still sleepy, obviously so.

"Ella, can you open your door?"

I blink a few times, trying to process what Mattia's saying. Open my door?

"Are you outside?" Now I'm even more confused.

"Ella, *please*." His voice sounds urgent, rushed.

This is one of those situations where I should ask questions, but I don't. I just listen to him. I get out of bed and take a second to get myself together before padding to the

front door. I unlock it and open it. Sure enough, Mattia is standing in the dark hallway.

I step aside so he can come in, still trying to figure out what's going on here. "Mattia, what's wrong? What's going on?" I say as he stumbles over to the couch. He falls back on it and I flick on the living room light.

That's when I see it. His shirt is covered in blood, his hands are covered in blood. Now I'm panicking. I feel my heart rate rising. My mind is racing. I have no idea what in the hell is going on here. I don't know how to connect these pieces.

"I need your help, Ella," he says.

"My phone's in the bedroom. I can call 911. Just – just wait a second." I start toward the bedroom, focusing on the task at hand. Call an ambulance. Get answers later. Take care of Mattia. Try not to think about the fact my boyfriend is covered in blood in the middle of the night.

"No!" His voice is *firm*. It's the loudest he's spoken since arriving at my apartment, maybe even the loudest I've ever heard him. "Don't. Ella...come here."

Don't? Don't call 911? None of this is registering for me. My mind is telling me one thing, my heart is telling me another. Logically, I should call for help. But for some reason, I listen to Mattia. His voice sounds too desperate, like calling for help would be a bad thing. I slowly walk over to the couch. The closer I get to him, the stronger the iron scent of blood is. It hits me square in the face and almost makes me nauseous.

"Mattia, you need help," I say softly.

I'm not prepared for this. This is not something that I know how to handle. No one's ever walked me through this. None of my dating experiences have ended with my boyfriend bleeding on my fucking couch.

"You can help me," he tells me. His voice is softer now, tired sounding. "I can walk you through it, Ella. I've been shot, okay? It's in and out. You just need to stitch it up."

“I’m fucking sorry?” The words leave my mouth before I can stop them. I don’t want to stop them because...fucking what? “I’m a *receptionist*, Mattia. Not a nurse.”

“I can walk you through it,” he says again. “*Please?*” That desperation is back in his voice.

So, this is a situation where I shouldn’t listen to him, right? This is a situation where I ignore what he wants and call for help. If that causes him to break up with me, oh well. Would make a hell of a story.

‘Why did you get broken up with Ella?’

‘Oh, my boyfriend was bleeding out on my couch after being shot and I called an ambulance. Silly me, right?’

When it comes to Mattia, I feel like I’m under his fucking spell. It’s like he has a chokehold on me. Makes me act illogically. I do that enough already myself. I’m already a ‘jump before looking’ type of girl and Mattia just amplifies all of that.

I swallow, forcing my eyes to settle on him. “Do you – do you know how to stitch something?” I ask.

“Yes.”

And that should raise a thousand more questions – and it does. For the first time, I realize how in over my head I am here. How dumb I am for dating someone I barely know. I should’ve asked more questions. I should’ve called him out for everything that felt like a lie or a half-truth. Maybe then I wouldn’t feel like I’m currently drowning.

“Okay, okay,” I say, although I’m certain I’m speaking more to myself at this point. “Walk me through it.” And then I have about a million questions to ask.

Dried blood stains my fingers and palms. I want to go wash it off – but I’m terrified to leave Mattia alone. I had a

small bottle of vodka leftover from my birthday last year and some sleeping pills. After he walked me through how to stitch him up and disinfect it, he popped the pills with some of the vodka and passed out on the couch.

I'm not bothered by the blood on my couch, on my hands. I'm bothered by everything else. The questions that Mattia hasn't answered. The reason *why* he got shot. And now I'm worried that he's going to stop breathing.

I'm sitting on the floor in front of the couch, in the dark. Outside, the city is beginning to wake up. I'm sure the first cracks of light are going to break through my window at any moment. I'm already planning to call into work because I'm in no way prepared to work after everything that's happened.

Everything feels still, quiet. I can hear the shallow breaths from Mattia. I'm keeping a quiet track of them, just in case. If he stops breathing, I'm calling 911. He can't stop me if he's fucking dying. I should've called in the first place.

Fuck.

I rake my fingers back through my hair. My mind won't stop racing. I feel so stupid. I've done some dumb shit in my life. Never anything as dumb as this. I feel *stupid*. I feel lost and unprepared. I don't know what I've gotten into. I want to shake Mattia awake and demand answers. I want to let him rest and make sure he's better when his eyes open.

My eyes settle on the bottle of vodka left on the table. I'm not a big drinker but right now...right now feels like the right time. I grab it and take a sip, immediately regretting it. It burns. It makes me want to puke. I close my eyes and force myself to keep it down before swallowing just a little bit more. Like I'm going to find the answers I'm looking for at the bottom of this bottle.

Deep down, I know that I won't but right now...I really don't care.

I think I eventually fall asleep. Or maybe I just dissociate enough that I lose track of time. When my eyes

open again, the sun is up, breaking through the curtains in my living room. I don't hear the sound of Mattia's steady breathing, and a fresh wave of panic hits me. I jump up, turning around to look at him. He's sitting on the couch, awake.

"I didn't want to wake you up," he says, his voice soft.

"You didn't want to wake me up?" I repeat like it's the dumbest thing he could say right now. "Did you have the same thought last night?"

"Last night was different," he answers. Mattia isn't looking at me. He refuses to make eye contact, looking down at the dried blood on my couch. "I'll pay to get your couch cleaned, Ella."

I feel like I'm in complete fucking disbelief right now. I'm looking at him, but I'm not sure I'm processing anything that he's saying. It feels like we're existing on two different planes. He's completely avoiding the topic of anything that happened last night, dancing around it. I have a million questions and I don't know how to ask any of them.

"I don't give a damn about the couch, Mattia. You were *shot*. You came to my door fucking bleeding out and asked me to stitch you up. What the fuck happened?" I'm trying my best to stay calm. It's not working. I'm coming off way more aggressive than I planned, but I also feel like I have a right to be aggressive.

"It's nothing. An accident. You don't need to worry about it, Ella," he says and it sounds so damned dismissive like he's talking to a child. Not his girlfriend. His very concerned, very upset girlfriend.

"The hell I don't need to worry about it, Mattia! I really need some kind of answer. I haven't asked a damn thing about anything else. I've accepted all of your half-truths, all your obvious stories because I care about you. I like you a lot...and I think I was blinded by how much I like you. But I can't overlook this. We can't just brush this off. I need you to tell

me what happened.” I look at him, even though he’s refusing to make eye contact with me. My eyes are pleading, begging him to just give me something here. “Please, Mattia?” I ask, my voice just a little softer, a little less angry.

He’s not looking at me at all now, focused on the couch. Silence passes between us. I wonder if he even heard a damned thing that I said to him. His good hand comes up, covering his bandaged shoulder. I can almost see the wheels turning inside his mind like he’s trying to think of another story to tell me.

“I can’t handle any more lies,” I tack on, just in case. “For once, I really need you to tell me the truth, Mattia, *please*,” I plead with him again, hoping that somehow it’ll appeal to him.

“Ella,” as he says my name, his dark eyes turn up to look into mine. I don’t like anything that I’m seeing in them. Just from the look on his face, I know that I’m not going to like whatever answer he gives me. “I know that you have a right to answers. You have a right to ask questions, especially after last night. But I – I can’t give them to you. Not yet. I really hope you understand that.”

My heart is sinking in my chest. He can’t give me answers. He can’t answer the simple question about why he was shot last night. I’m not asking for an explanation for all the other lies, not yet. I just need one straight answer and he won’t give it to me.

I can’t do this. I can’t spend the rest of my life being lied to, being left to wonder if he’s going to get killed one day. Or if *I’m* going to get killed one day because of him.

I give him one last chance to come clean. One last plea. “Mattia, just tell me what happened last night. That’s all I’m asking,” the desperation is leaking through my voice and I don’t care.

I just need one honest answer from him.

Chapter Sixteen

Mattia

I can't give her what she wants from me.

This isn't on Ella. I'm very aware of that. I should be able to just fucking be honest with her – but I can't. Maybe if I would've just been honest from the beginning. Maybe I shouldn't have gotten as involved with her as I did. Definitely shouldn't have asked her to be my girlfriend without giving her *something*. Everything is falling apart, and it's my fault. Ella deserves the truth and I can't give it to her.

I look down, paying more attention to my dried blood on her couch. It doesn't matter what she says. I'm still going to pay to get it cleaned. I know from experience that blood is a bitch to get out of things.

"I can't do that, Ella," I tell her softly. Telling her what happened last night means telling her everything. I don't have the means to protect her just yet. I can't promise that she'll be safe, especially after what happened last night. I can't protect myself, how can I protect her? "I'd just lie to you. I can't tell you the whole story, not yet. It's not time."

"Time?!" This is the first time I've heard Ella sound *angry*. And normally, I'd respond with the same anger. I grew up with Carlo and Adelaide. If someone is angry, you respond with anger or your voice gets drowned out in the process. I don't have it in me to be angry. I deserve her anger. "When is it *time*, Mattia? After you propose? When I wind up pregnant? That's bullshit and you know it. You just don't *want* to tell me the truth."

She's right. Sort of. I don't *want* to tell her the truth. I never have. Because the truth paints me as the type of guy that Ella shouldn't be with. The truth is that she deserves better. I'm a monster. Maybe I'm not as bad as I could be, but I

deliberately lied to her from the very beginning because I didn't want her to form a bad opinion of me.

How'd that work out for you, Mattia?

"You're right," I say softly. My arm is killing me. The vodka is wearing off and I need actual painkillers. Another problem I'm going to have to solve. Where the hell am I going to get pain medication or antibiotics to make sure this doesn't get infected? "I'm sorry, Ella."

She runs her fingers through her blonde curls. Distress is written on her face and I can't do anything about it. I'm the one who caused it. She shakes her head. "Can you – can you just leave, Mattia? I can't do this. I don't want to deal with you. If you can't tell me the truth, for just one fucking minute, I want nothing to do with this anymore. *Please*. Just go."

I've been expecting this since the beginning, but I can't fight the sting. There's a part of me that wants to fight back, beg her to give me another chance. There's another part of me that wants to just break down and tell her everything. I can't. Maybe it's my stupid pride standing in the way. Maybe it is because I feel like I'm protecting her by doing it this way. I don't think it matters. Not right now.

I swallow and nod. "Alright then. I'll go." I stand up, wincing just a little. At least the pain in my arm keeps me distracted from everything else. I take one last look at Ella, who's still on the floor, as I leave her apartment. As soon as I hear the door close, I hear her sobs start. Every part of me wants to back in and comfort her.

I can't. She doesn't want me. Not in the way that I can currently offer her myself. I have to let her go.

There's got to be a little luck on my side today. Christian is out of town on another undercover gig. Kara is with his mom. When I get home, it's just Adelaide. She's on

the couch, looking incredibly bored. She looks up at me when I step into the room, raising an eyebrow.

“You didn’t answer your phone. I called and texted you last night. You didn’t say anything about staying with Ella. I was worried.”

I hate that I can tell that she’s being genuine. It makes me feel even worse. I use my good arm to fish my phone out of my pocket and toss it onto the couch. “Phone died,” I say, plopping down next to her. “I got shot last night.”

Silence. Adelaide turns to look at me, eyes wide. I can tell from her face that she doesn’t know if I’m serious or not. So, I move slowly to get my jacket off, peel it from my body and wince as it brushes over my hastily bandaged arm.

“I walked Ella through how to stitch me up. I didn’t tell her what happened or anything else. She broke up with me after.”

More silence. I’m trying to read Adelaide and I can’t. It’s not some huge fucking surprise. Adelaide’s always excelled in being unreadable. It’s something that she’s always been able to use to her advantage.

“You got shot?” she finally asks. “By who? Where the fuck was Damien? I thought he was your right hand. Why was he not there?” There’s the anger that I was expecting. At least it’s not directed at me...I think.

I let my head fall back against the back of the couch and close my eyes. I still feel weak, feel exhausted from everything. “Gerard. Remember our old supplier? Damien set up a meeting so I could get back in with him. See what we could work out. Turns out, Gerard’s still pissed about the collapse. One of his men shot me in the arm. I don’t know where Damien was. He said he couldn’t make it.”

“Does that not seem suspicious?” Adelaide asks. “He couldn’t come with you to one of your first meetings? With a big-name dealer like Gerard? Carlo never would’ve let that shit fly and you know it.”

I don't know if I have it in me to argue with Adelaide over suspicion or not right now. Sure, maybe it is a little suspicious but why would Damien be trying to get me killed when I'm trying to put him back in a position of power?

"Ella broke up with me," I reiterate that fact in case she missed that point. Despite the pain in my arm, that's what my mind is more fixated on. That's the part that hurts worse.

"She should. Good for her. Anyway, have you heard from Damien at all today? That should be even more telling."

"Dead phone, remember?" I open just one eye to look at her. "And good for her? Who's side are you on here?"

"You've literally spent your entire relationship lying to her, Mattia. As someone who's experienced that, she deserves better. She deserves better than you showing up at her door, bleeding in the middle of the night and not telling her why. That's kind of fucked. Anyway, the important thing is you need to charge your phone and see if Damien has said anything to you."

I don't know why I was hoping for a little bit of sympathy from my sister. It's Adelaide. I don't know if she's ever felt sorry for anyone in her life.

Deep down, I know that she's right. I deserved Ella breaking up with me. Doesn't make it suck any less though.

"My arm really fucking hurts, Ads. Do you have any painkillers? Any antibiotics?"

She shakes her head. "No. I'll put your phone on charge." She doesn't ask. It's kind of just a statement. She stands up and grabs my phone off the couch, disappearing down the hallway to throw it on a charger. When she returns, she falls back next to me on the couch. "I knew this was going to be dangerous, Mattia."

"So did I. It's worth it. I can't – I can't imagine working some nine to five. I can't imagine doing something so soul-sucking. Life is about taking risks, Adelaide. We both know

that. This is a risk that I have to take. This isn't going to stop me. I'm still going to rebuild."

"I want to call you an idiot."

"What's stopping you?"

"The fact that I think...I think you're right. Life is about risk. This is something that we both need, isn't it? I know where we can get you some pain killers...and maybe find a reluctant ally."

"Ally?" I raise an eyebrow, turning my head to look over at her. "What are you talking about?"

"I can't believe I'm saying this, but I'm going to help you. Just on this. I'm still hands-off with everything else, deal?"

I don't know what she's offering, but I know I can't turn it down. If Adelaide is willing to step up, I'm going to let her. Plus, the promise of painkillers would get me to do anything right now.

Chapter Seventeen

Adelaide

I can't believe I'm doing this. I was going to stay out. I know that I need to stay out of this. I have so much to lose, but my brother was *shot*. That's a personal attack if you ask me. I'm not going to let anything happen to my brother. Now that he's back in my life, I can't risk losing him. If he needs someone to help...I'm going to help.

There's one contact from my old life that I can still depend on...I hope. I haven't reached out because I've been trying to be good. Everything last night changed that.

It's night when Mattia and I leave the house. I drive us outside of the city, back toward where Mansolillo Manor used to be. It still stands, foreclosed. A ghost of our past. We're both quiet on the drive. I'm sure he has a million questions and I'm not going to answer any of them. Not until we get where we're going.

There's a clearing between Mansolillo Manor and the next mansion over. No one owns the land. I used to sneak out to it all the time as a teenager. Used to be my favorite meeting spot. I pull the car up the dirt road, ignoring the pounding in my chest. I'm nervous. After what happened to Mattia last night, I'm scared that anything and everything could be a possible ambush.

There's only one other car in the clearing. I only see one figure in it. Both are good signs. I kill the engine and wait a second. Mattia lulls his head over to look at me.

"Adelaide, what's going on?"

"I already told you, I'm getting us help. Stay in the car for a second, okay?" It comes out as a question, but it's more like a demand. I get out and the other car's door opens at the same time.

I'm face to face with Yulian for the first time in well over a year. My closest ally, despite everything. His eyes look me up and down before he opens his arms. I hesitate but I fall into them, squeezing him to me. Everything between us is platonic, but Yulian represents everything that I could have. Everything that I was supposed to have. He smells good and I linger for a minute.

"You look good," I tell him softly.

"As do you, Ada. I heard about your daughter, congratulations." There's nothing but honesty in his voice and I appreciate it. Makes this whole thing feel just a little less weird.

"Thank you, Yulian. I...I need your help."

"I figured," he smiles, leaning back against his car. "Tell me what you need and I'll see what I can do."

"It's a big ask."

"It always is when it comes to you."

I can't help but roll my eyes. He's not wrong, I guess, but I hate feeling so predictable. I cross my arms over my chest, shifting my weight to one foot. "First, did you bring the painkillers as I asked?"

Yulian reaches into his pocket, pulls out a bottle, and hands it to me. "I did. Now, can I get some answers of my own?"

I guess that this is the real test. Just how much can I trust Yulian. Is he really on my side or is he just out for himself? My eyes shift over to the car and I nod toward Mattia, knowing he sees me. I know he's been watching this entire exchange.

And I know he hates it. I know he doesn't want Yulian's help. I respected that until I realized that my brother was in over his head. We can't trust Damien. I don't care what he says. Mattia's far too trusting if you ask me.

The car door opens and Mattia steps out, making his way over to where Yulian and I stand. “Yulian,” he nods. His voice is short, curt. “Good to see you again.”

“Mattia,” Yulian nods, looking over at me with a raised eyebrow. “I heard you got out. That’s good. You were locked away for bullshit reasons.”

Mattia nods in agreement and then looks at me. “Adelaide, can we talk?”

I shake my head. No. Talking means he’s going to ask me a thousand questions and try to talk me out of my decision. I’m certain. I’m not going to give him the opportunity. I didn’t want to get involved. Mattia got me involved. We’re doing this my way.

“We don’t need to,” I say before I reach over, handing him the baggy of pills. “Those are for you. Say thank you to Yulian.”

That earns me a very dramatic eye roll from Mattia, who takes the baggy from me. “Thank you, Yulian.”

Yulian nods before his eyes are locked on me. “I also have questions, Adelaide. May I have some answers?”

“Everyone can have answers,” I scoff. “So, Mattia wants to restart our family business. He’s been working with Damien, and I think we all know how I feel about him. Last night, he tried to meet with a possible supplier and ended up getting shot,” I pause, gesturing toward the arm that’s hanging limply by Mattia’s side. I leave out all the Ella information. Not important. “I wasn’t going to get involved. My brother getting shot kind of changes that.”

There’s silence as Yulian takes it all in. His eyes shift between Mattia and me throughout the story. “Trusting Damien is a terrible choice.”

“Of course, you’d agree with my sister’s paranoia,” mumbles Mattia.

Before I can argue with Mattia about whether or not I'm 'paranoid' (I'm not), Yulian speaks, "I know how it seems with Adelaide sometimes. She's not paranoid this time, Mattia. There have been rumblings ever since the fall of Carlo that Damien was aiming to take over. He avoided jail, so people are assuming he has the same contacts that your father had. I know he's met with my father, but I've advised my father not to trust him."

I feel justified. Barring the 'how it seems with Adelaide sometimes' comment, I'm glad that someone else sees it. I know my grudge against Damien is *personal*, but I have my reasons. That man obviously cannot be trusted. He's slimy.

"See? Not paranoid. It's totally plausible that he set you up, Mattia. We'll figure that out, get proof of that and deal with it accordingly."

"Fine, we'll talk about this later," Mattia rolls his eyes. "That didn't explain why we're here though, Adelaide. What else are you thinking?"

Right. The bigger part here. I turn to look up at Yulian, my eyes meeting his. "I'm proposing a temporary alliance. The Andronikovs can help us get reestablished, earning profit in the process. It'll help rebuild trust because of the respect people have for your family. It'll help get the Mansolillos back on their feet and taken seriously. Yulian, you can be Mattia's right hand until things are rebuilt. After that, I can take over."

Both the men are exchanging looks before their eyes settle on me. It's not a bad plan. Neither of them can tell me that. Sure, Mattia needs to push his pride aside. Yulian needs to convince his father that this is a good idea...shouldn't be too hard. I know that Dmitri always had a soft spot for me.

"Adelaide," Mattia says my name slowly. He's trying to gather his thoughts but doesn't get the chance.

"I'll speak to my father, Adelaide," Yulian says. Mattia's gaze shifts toward him and before he can argue, he's speaking again. "I've always had the utmost respect for the

Mansolillos. There's nobody my family would rather do business with. I don't mind being your right hand, Mattia."

Mattia wants to argue. I can just see it on his face. He wants to say how stupid this all is and how he doesn't need Yulian, how he doesn't *want* Yulian involved. Fine. I get that. But he wants me involved and if I'm risking everything for him, for this plan...then we're going to do this how I'd do this.

He opens his mouth and then closes it repeatedly, trying to perfectly gather his thoughts, trying to think of the best way to tell me how stupid he thinks this is. I know my brother better than he'll ever give me credit for.

Then I see the defeat cross his face. He can't. He can't tell me that it's a bad idea because it isn't. He just hates that I'm right. He hates that he was wrong and he hates that he has to work with Yulian.

"Fine," he says, shrugging his one good shoulder. "I'm in. We'll work with the Andronikovs until we're established. After that, we'll move forward as business partners." He extends his hand and Yulian takes it, shaking it.

"Deal."

Chapter Eighteen

Ella

I feel so stupid.

Despite everything, I can't stop thinking about Mattia. I can't stop looking at my phone, expecting to see a text or a call from him. When that doesn't happen, every part of me wants to call him and ask if he's okay. How is he healing? Is he sure he can't give me just one simple answer? That's all I'm asking for from him. It doesn't feel like a lot, but when it comes to Mattia...evidently it is.

I'm going about my life without him and everything just feels *dimmer*. I know we weren't together long but things felt magical. It all felt right and now it just feels crushing to know that it wasn't. Maybe it was all in my head. Maybe it wasn't as deep as I thought it was between us. I wasn't worth the truth to him. That should tell me everything that I need to know.

It's hard to focus on work. My eyes keep shifting to my phone, or I keep getting lost in my thoughts about Mattia. I know I'm going to wind up getting in trouble for all of this, but I don't know how to get him out of my mind. I don't have anyone I can reach out to about this.

I never told my mom after Mattia, knowing she was going to tell me how stupid I was, dating someone that I barely knew anything about. Turns out she would be incredibly fucking right. Surprise, surprise. None of my friends will get it. They'll agree. How could I fall so completely for someone who couldn't tell me the truth?

It has everything to do with how he treated me, how things felt when we were together. It felt right. Every single moment of it. I didn't need to question anything when I was distracted by all of it.

"Ella? Eleanor?"

I realize that someone is saying my name, repeatedly. I have no idea how long they've been trying to get my attention. I'm going to end up losing my job. I turn my eyes up to look at the guest.

“Sorry, sorry. How can I help you today?”

It's Damien. The reason I met Mattia in the first place. How many lines would I be crossing if I bring him up? Just casually ask if he's doing okay? Maybe Damien knows more about him than I do.

“I was wondering if you were okay. You look...a thousand miles away from here,” he says, his voice soft. “When's your lunch? I can take you out, buy you something.”

Damien has always given me the creeps. There's something about the way he leers, the way he talks to me. It's like he just assumes that I'm interested in him. I'm not. I have never been. He's older and he's attractive *enough* but something just screams ‘sleaze’. Plus, all the former mafia rumors surround him.

I shake my head. “I'm fine, honestly. Just had a long week. And I actually brought my lunch so...”

“Ella, how long have we known each other? You've never let me take you out. I'm not asking for anything else but your company. Promise,” he says, holding up his right hand. “Just give me that opportunity. Please?”

I can't. I'm not going to just give in because he says please and promises that he doesn't expect anything else from me. It wouldn't be genuine. Especially right now, I'm not going to be able to think of anything else except for Mattia. Even if I did like Damien, it wouldn't be fair to him.

I shake my head. “Damien, I really can't. It would be against policy for me to go out with a guest like that. I'd get in trouble. And...I'm just not in the right headspace right now. I'm sorry.”

He raises an eyebrow. “Something happen with Mattia?”

Nope. I'm not doing this. I'm not giving him any information about my personal life. It's not necessary. He doesn't need to know any of that. I don't answer, turn my attention back to the computer like I'm trying to work.

It doesn't work. My silence makes Damien push just a little bit more. "Guess I should've guessed. I haven't heard from him much these last few days. We're business partners," he explains...which is more information than I ever got from Mattia. "I've known him for years. He's kind of immature. I wouldn't take it personally. I'm sure he's going to realize what an idiot he was for whatever he did because I just *know* that this was his fault."

Something hits me then and I know that it's wrong. It goes against everything I stand for, everything that I am. I still have curiosities about Mattia. I still want to know things. Maybe if I know more, I can understand him. I can see why he wouldn't tell me everything that I desperately *needed* to know about him.

Would I be using Damien? I would. But...it's worth it. Worst case, I learn nothing about Mattia and maybe I can convince myself to move on. Best case, things start to make more sense than they currently do. Plus...Damien clearly isn't the *best* man. I don't think he'll care if I use him.

I look back up from my computer after stealing a glance at the time. "I go on lunch in forty-five minutes. We could grab something quickly if you'd like."

He smiles, eyes lighting up. "That sounds great, Ella. The café down the street is perfect. I'll be back in forty minutes to grab you."

I don't feel guilty. If anything, this will get him off my back. If I spend the entire lunch casually asking about Mattia, he's not going to want to take me out again. Two birds, one stone, right? What could possibly go wrong? As far as I can see it, absolutely nothing. It feels like a win-win situation for me.

Sitting across from Damien is probably the most uncomfortable I've ever been. I don't know what to say. This was yet another terrible idea on my long list of terrible ideas. They're beginning to get a lot more obvious. I was hoping that Damien would give me answers about Mattia, that I'd walk away from this lunch with a better understanding of why he's so closed off from me.

Instead, I'm picking at my salad while Damien talks about himself. He's doing the same thing that Mattia used to do – never quite telling me the whole truth. I can tell that he's cherry-picking every word out of his mouth, carefully crafting how I view him. The difference is I was interested in Mattia, so I let him get away with it.

With Damien, I feel nothing but indifference.

“So, yeah. I was the youngest person to be employed by Mattia's father. At least as high up as I was. When their family business collapsed, it sent my entire world into a spiral.”

“Isn't Mattia trying to rebuild?” I ask. It's the first question I've asked this entire time and it's about Mattia. If that bothers Damien, he doesn't show it.

“Oh, that's not likely to happen. The kid has dreams, I'll give him that but after what his sister did, I don't think anyone's going to want to work with him. I haven't had it in myself to tell him that,” Damien explains, taking a bite from his sandwich.

“Adelaide? What did she do?” Okay, now I'm prying. If I couldn't get answers from Mattia, I have to be able to get something from Damien.

Maybe I'd be better off if I just let all of this die. I mean, probably, right? Forget about the attractive guy who came out of nowhere, changed my view on love, and then just left me with more questions than answers. But I can't. Letting

it die isn't in my personality. There's nothing I can do about that.

Damien shakes his head. "Nothing important. You don't really want to get involved in all of that drama. It's messy as fuck. Honestly, it's probably for the best if both of them stay out of the business. I know that Mattia won't and he's going to get in over his head even further but," he shrugs. "What can you do? He's gotta learn, right?"

Despite every single one of my previous actions, I'm not an idiot. Can I be a little blind when I'm trying not to see giant red flags? Yeah, can't everyone? But I'm not avoiding red flags when it comes to Damien. From the way he talks, it sounds like he has an obvious dislike toward Mattia and his sister. Also...further in over his head? Does he know something about Mattia getting shot?

Or am I just hopefully piecing things together?

"Guess so," I mutter in response. I want to ask more questions. More direct ones about who Mattia is, about how he's in over his head, about the family business that keeps getting referred to in the vaguest language. But I also don't want to push my luck. If I annoy Damien too much, he's not going to give me *any* information.

"So, what about you, Ella?" he asks, looking at me from across the table. "Any hobbies? Are you from the area? I know absolutely nothing about you and I've been talking about myself this entire time."

How nice of him to notice. I fork another piece of lettuce into my mouth, thinking it over. "I like roller skating, photography. I'm really into tattoos. I love movies. New, old, doesn't matter. I think they're all a work of art," I tell him. "I grew up a few blocks from here. Been in the city my entire life. Currently living in the building down the block, the one close to the park."

I think nothing of telling Damien where I live because I don't tell him the exact building. Not which way 'down the

block', not which side of the park. Plus, he knows where I work. The guy might be weird, a little full of himself, but I don't think he's a stalker.

"Ah, okay," he nods. "Maybe I could take you out roller skating sometime. I haven't been in years. You could teach me," he smiles and I find it anything but endearing.

I have no interest in going out with him again. No interest in spending time with him. Not even in the 'maybe it'll make Mattia jealous' aspect of things because even if it does...that doesn't mean he's going to start telling me the truth and I *need* the truth. I can't go forward in a relationship filled with lies. It didn't work the first time, it's not going to work the second.

"Maybe, yeah," I force a smile back in his direction. "I'll check my schedule and see if I can make something work."

"Just let me know, Ella."

I nod in response. "Absolutely. Well, thank you for lunch, Damien. It's been nice. I should probably head back to work though." I want to get out of here. I'm done with the uncomfortableness of this entire situation.

Before I can stand and make my escape, Damien opens his mouth. "I'll walk you back. It's only proper, right?"

Every bit of me wants to say 'no' and keep walking. But I don't want to come off as rude. That could ruin any future potential information I could get out of Damien about Mattia. It's a dumb thing to hope for, but I can't stop myself. I want to figure him out. He's still an enigma.

One thing is for sure, I'm not going out of my way to go on a date with Damien. I'm not feeling it. I swallow it all down and nod.

"Only proper, yeah," I say.

Damien stands and throws some money on the table before holding his arm out toward me. I swallow down

feelings of disgust when I take it.

Chapter Nineteen

Mattia

This is just uncomfortable.

I don't think I've ever spent time alone with Yulian before. I don't really *know* him. All I know is he dated my sister once upon a time. I was locked up when it started, just heard the rumblings from people I knew. I know, obviously, they're not still together. I know the Andronikovs are a respected family. They tend to stay in their lane. Not like the others who constantly seek out more power, they take what they have and make it work for them.

Now, I'm sitting in a car with him. Neither of us has said a word since he picked me up. Adelaide waved goodbye to me, looking like a mom dropping her kid off at soccer practice or their first playdate. She's way too proud of this. I get it. It's Adelaide. Her plan working out just feeds the God complex that's been buried since she had a baby.

"I'll do most of the talking," Yulian says, breaking the silence between us. "It's not that I don't trust you. I know that others do not. They will trust me."

How quickly he justified what he says tells me that he's spent *a lot* of time with Adelaide. A comment like that would send her in a spiral.

"I have no plans to open my mouth and fuck everything up. Clearly, this isn't something I'm able to do alone."

Understatement of the year there. I tried to do it alone and ended up shot. People in this world don't let grudges go easily. They hold it against you until they either get revenge or someone else fucks up enough that your mistake seems small.

Adelaide's mistake will never seem small to them. She turned on everything and everyone. In this world, the sins of your family are also your sins. I still can't bring myself to hold

a grudge against her. I never would've made the decision that she did, but I can see why she did. Although, it brings me to one question.

“Why are you still helping Adelaide?” I ask Yulian. “Everyone else has written her off. I would expect you to too.”

His fingers grip the stirring wheel tighter. I guess he didn't expect me to ask such a big question so quickly. Or at all. I don't delve into Adelaide's life much, because that gives her a reason to do the same. That's something I don't want.

“Adelaide is...special to me,” Yulian admits. “She always will be. She is the first person that I ever loved, including my own family. She made her choices. She had to protect her child and herself. I will never abandon her.”

“She's going to marry Christian,” I tell him like he doesn't know that. Do I think the wedding's going to happen? Not if Christian finds out what she's up to. I don't think there's any way he can approve of things going like this. She's taking a huge risk, and I hope that I can make it worth it for her. I hope I don't cost her everything.

“I know,” he says, his voice soft. “She loves him. I was never...able to change in the way that she needed me to. I was too immature then. Unable to be what Adelaide needed from me. I have no intentions of ruining her life or trying to split up her relationship. That is something the immature version of myself would do. But I would still do anything for her on any day.”

“And if they ever split, let me guess, you'll step in?”

Yulian shrugs. “If that's something that Adelaide is interested in. I wouldn't force it. She deserves to make her own decisions. I know that that is important to her.”

Shit. I like Yulian. I've just had a deeper conversation with him than I've ever had with Christian. And I know that that's because Christian and I are natural enemies. We have something we need to work out between the two of us and I don't know if we ever will. There's the smallest part of me that

is now hoping this does implode things for Adelaide, just so she can be with Yulian.

That's wrong. That's selfish. I would never say it to her face. Despite being her big brother, I don't get to make that decision for her.

"Sounds like you grew up."

Yulian is silent, focused on the road. He takes a turn, double checks the GPS, and then says, "I lost the woman I loved. Of course, I grew up."

"I think I was falling in love with someone." Why am I opening up like this? Why did I start such a deep conversation? Why does it feel good to talk to someone about all of this? "She dumped me because I couldn't be honest with her about who I am, what I've done."

"Yes. I've heard it's hard for men like us to find real relationships. It's a world that not many understand. Did you ever try to explain it to her?"

I shake my head. "No. I can't even keep myself safe right now. I'm scared that if I got her involved, I wouldn't be able to keep her safe. I was going to tell her once I was in a better position. I just didn't get the chance."

"So, you missed your chance."

I did. It sucks to hear. Sucks even more to admit. I lost my chance with Ella because I was too scared of everything else. Now I'll never know.

"Guess so," I mutter.

"If there is one thing that I've learned, it is you cannot just give up. You have to keep some hope alive. I'm sure that sounds cliched and stupid. If things are meant to be, they will be. Sometimes you just have to hold out hope."

Listening to him, I can tell that Yulian is speaking from experience. And I'd bet anything that it has to do with Adelaide. I don't want to get involved here. Adelaide will murder me if she finds out that I said too much. Or anything at

all. So, as much as I would like to poke around and get advice from someone actually willing to give me some, I decide to change the subject.

“So, who are we meeting again?” I ask. It’s a nice shift from the subject at hand, and arguably more important. It’s not that I was distracted and not paying attention. No one told me. Yulian is supposed to be my right hand but I’m beginning to feel more like *his*.

“Another supplier. Goes by Charles, although I’m not sure that’s his real name. He’s been supplying our family for years. Good man. I’m going to try to convince him to cut you a deal.”

Right. Back to drugs. It’s exhausting. I feel like I can’t escape damn drugs, but I know they’re an easy in, an easy way to get started. Then we can move up to protection rackets, fixing races, arms dealing. All of the things the Mansolillos were doing before it all came tumbling down.

Yulian notes my silence and shrugs a shoulder. “I know. Drugs seem so low-level, but it’s a good way to get followers. People will depend on you. We’ll work from there. We will visit all the businesses that used to pay the Mansolillos next week.”

“All of those businesses are now paying new families,” I point out. “The Luppinos, The Papillas.”

“Worthless families. They haven’t done a thing. Paying them is pure stupidity. People will be eager to pay you for the same services. You just have to prove that they can trust you. That is why I’m here.”

I trust Yulian. I have no real reason to. He could be out for himself and I couldn’t blame him if he was. But Adelaide trusts him and that translates. From the way he talks about her, I know she’s right to trust him. Tentatively, I think Yulian is my friend now.

Feels weird to have one.

This meeting feels nothing like the one with Gerard. It's not in some warehouse in the middle of nowhere. It's a rather nice house on a hill, expensive looking. Not quite like the one I grew up in, but still nice. We're sitting at the dining room table. Charles has offered us wine. I accepted because I don't want to offend him. Maybe I'm playing it a little bit on the safer end of things because my arm still really fucking hurts. I'm not looking to get shot again.

"Yulian, we've done business with your father for years. There's a trust established there. I've heard about the Mansolillo family. I heard about their downfall. Now you're saying that they want to step back in. Why should there be trust?" Charles asks.

"Because the Andronikovs trust them. I trust Mattia. He is like a brother to me," Yulian's stretching the truth there, but the way he says it makes it sound so damn believable. "The mistakes made are not on his shoulders. He wants to do what is right and I believe he should have the opportunity."

"Opportunities are fine and all. Trust is important. I understand that you trust them. That is on you. Why should I do the same?"

Charles is asking the important questions, expecting no bullshit answers and Yulian is giving him what he wants. That doesn't mean anything. I feel like I should speak up, but what would I say?

"You can trust me"? Of course, I would say that. Everyone wants to be trusted. 'I won't make any mistakes', again, something anyone would say. Nothing I can tell Charles will convince him to believe me. I just have to hope that Yulian's word counts for something here.

"Because I am willing to vouch for him, Charles. I am putting my family name on the line here for Mattia and the Mansolillos. If anything goes wrong, you are free to take it out

on us and our dealings with you,” Yulian says, making eye contact with Charles.

I didn’t expect that. I didn’t expect the Andronikovs to be willing to put everything on the line for us. No pressure there, right? But I know I have this under control. All I need is a chance and if I’m offered one, I can show them exactly what I can do, the power I can wield.

Charles raises an eyebrow. “You’re fully prepared to put your family name and reputation on the line here? For the Mansolillos?”

“Yes.”

There is no hesitation in Yulian’s answers. No add-ons. No ‘ifs’ or ‘buts’. I realize then just how much respect they have for Adelaide. Not our entire family. Just Adelaide. Because Dmitri agreed to this and he does not know who I am. This is all about her. My sister will forever impress me.

Just can’t say that to her face because that God complex will grow and she’ll be impossible to live with.

Charles nods. “Okay then. I will work with Mattia Mansolillo. If anything goes wrong, it falls on *both* of you. The Andronikovs and Mattia, understood?”

I don’t hesitate to nod my head in response. “Perfectly understood,” I agree.

“Understood,” Yulian seconds.

Charles stands and walks around the table, approaching me. Nerves rise in the pit of my stomach, but I stuff them down. I don’t want to think about them, don’t want to *look* nervous. This is one moment where I need to be nothing but sure of myself and my decision.

He extends his hand and I take it, shaking it slowly. “I look forward to working with you, Charles.”

“I’ll be in touch,” he promises.

And that's that. Nothing else needs to be discussed. Now it falls on me to find men to sell...and to figure out if Adelaide is right about Damien or not.

Chapter Twenty

Ella

Damien is driving me insane. The man doesn't leave me alone. I went out to lunch with him one time, and if I'm honest, I'm pretty sure I was a shitty date. I didn't care about what he said, I didn't really talk. But he shows up every day, asking me to lunch or dinner or *something*. He tries to talk to me while I work and I want to just pull out my fucking hair. I don't know how to tell him to screw off without being rude... and risk losing my only connection left to Mattia.

At night, I stare at my phone. I expect Mattia's name to pop up. A text, a phone call, an apology. Nothing. The only thing close to contact I've had with him since that day in my apartment was when someone came over to clean my couch. He paid for a cleaner, just like he said he would. I thought about texting him and thanking him but I don't want to be the first to reach out. Especially since I'm the one who broke things off between us.

Sitting at my desk, I feel eyes on me. I'm expecting to look up and see Damien standing there, like every day. It's getting close to lunch, which means I need to come up with another excuse about why I'm skipping lunch today. I turn my eyes up and see a woman there instead. She has sunglasses on, concealing her face. It looks like she's doing that on purpose.

That's nothing new for a place like this. Some of the clients are actual celebrities. I study her features for a quick second, trying to see if I recognize her. I don't.

"How can I help you?" I ask, putting on my customer service voice. You know the one, that overly bubbly, happy voice that sounds so sickly sweet. I hate it, but if you don't use it, people think you're being rude.

"You're Ella, right?"

I glance down at the name tag on my cardigan before nodding. “Yes ma’am. How can I help you?” I ask again.

“Have lunch with me. We need to talk.”

It takes me a second or two to process what she said. I have no idea who this woman is. For a second, I wonder if I’m just hallucinating like maybe it’s Damien and my mind is just *so* tired of seeing him it painted a mysterious woman in his place. I blink and the woman is still there. She looks annoyed, impatient that I didn’t answer immediately.

“I’m sorry? I don’t – I don’t know you.”

“It’s about Mattia,” she says, annoyance clear in her voice.

Every doubt I have vanishes. How does she know about Mattia? What does she possibly have to tell me *about* Mattia? My heart is pounding in my chest. Logically, this feels like a terrible idea. Going off with a mysterious woman just because she knows my ex? It sounds like a thriller waiting to happen.

But I think it’s clear how deep my curiosity runs when it comes to Mattia. I’ll do a lot of dumb things to get the answers that I want. Everything except demand them from my boyfriend from the beginning, I guess.

I swallow before nodding slowly. “Okay...okay, I can do lunch. Where at?”

“Café. Two blocks over. Try to make sure you’re not followed. Especially by Damien.”

She knows about Damien too?

“O-okay.”

I arrive at the café just like the mystery woman instructed. I’m beginning to accept that I’m the character in the horror movies who dies first because they’re a dumbass. I

took my lunch early, leaving before Damien had a chance to appear and trail me.

I see the woman sitting at a table toward the back and I approach, my hands trembling at my sides as I take the seat across from her. She still has the sunglasses on, which just adds to the creepy ambiance of everything.

“Before I say anything, I was never here. We never had a conversation. Mattia will be very upset and I don’t want to deal with it. I’m not supposed to get involved in his business, but he got involved in mine.”

“Um, okay.” Yeah, all of this is very weird and very dramatic. I haven’t talked to Mattia since we broke up. I’m not going to just randomly text him about a mystery woman. Unless she says something...important. Like something incredibly revealing about what he’s been hiding from me this entire time.

She removes her sunglasses. Her eyes are dark, the same dark color as Mattia. It clicks before she’s holding out her hand toward me, a small smile on her perfectly outlined lips. “I’m Adelaide.”

“You’re Mattia’s sister.”

“I am.”

I don’t know what to say. I have so many questions, but I have a feeling that Adelaide didn’t come to meet me just so I can ask her questions. I’m quiet, and she takes that as the opportunity to speak.

“As I said, Mattia got involved in my business, I’m getting involved in his. I understand why you broke up with him and honestly, good for you. You deserve better than him constantly lying to you. I told him that from the beginning, but I also didn’t see any other options.”

I blink at her. “The truth?” Seems easy enough, right? To just tell someone the truth?

“Unfortunately, the truth isn’t always an option. Or it is but the truth would probably have cost Mattia you earlier. Sometimes honesty isn’t the best policy. Look, like I said, I’m here to get involved. He likes you. He likes you a lot. He still talks about you. His lies were never meant to hurt you, but I know that they were wrong.”

“So, what are you suggesting? Do I get back together with him and deal with the lies until he feels like he’s ready to tell me the truth? No matter how long that takes? He was *shot*. You know that part, right?”

I’m just trying to understand what her point here is. I miss Mattia. I didn’t want things to end between us. Things felt like...magic. Like there really could’ve been something there. But I also know what I deserve. I deserve someone who’s going to tell me the truth about important things, you know, like why he was *shot*.

“I know he was shot,” Adelaide says before rolling her eyes. “And no. I’m not suggesting you get back together. Not without the truth involved. You deserve to know what you’re getting involved with and *who* you’re getting involved with. That’s only fair to you.”

Okay, so she’s not insanely suggesting I just take her brother back. I don’t get what she’s getting at. Call me dumb. I don’t get the entire point of this meeting outside of Adelaide getting back at Mattia for meddling in her life, whatever that means.

“What’s the point then? Mattia won’t tell me the truth. Are you going to tell me everything?” I ask.

“I would, but that’s not my job. What I’m saying is... sometimes you have to find the information for yourself, Ella. I’ve been in your position. There was a guy who lied to me about *everything*. I know how you feel. There were a few extra factors in the picture then, but this is similar. He didn’t come clean until I had the facts and I could confront him with them.

And when you have that information, you can make an informed decision. You're letting Mattia force your hand because of what *he* thinks is best for you. Maybe he's right, but that's up to you to decide," she finishes with a shrug.

I'm debating whether this is better or worse than lunch with Damien. Better, because at least Adelaide isn't creepy and leering at me the entire time. Worse, because it feels like having lunch with a sphinx. No real answers here. Just her dancing around the subject and telling me what *I* should do to get the answers that I need.

I sigh. I'm only going to play this guessing game for a little bit longer. I don't have time for this – even if I did, I don't want to deal with it.

"Yeah, it is my decision. How am I supposed to find answers though? I know next to nothing about Mattia."

"You've been spending time with Damien lately."

Okay, cool. She completely changes the subject. Am I talking to myself? Have I finally lost my fucking mind and Adelaide is just a figment of my imagination or something?

"Yeah?" I answer slowly. "Can we get back to talking about Mattia and answers?" I feel like we were getting somewhere there. Maybe. Shit. I don't know at this point.

Adelaide looks away. There's something written on her face. Contemplation? Annoyance? She turns to look back at me and says, "I don't recommend doing so. Damien cannot be trusted. If there is one thing you take out of this *entire* conversation, it's that Damien is not someone to waste your time with."

"I've only been spending time with him because I want answers about Mattia."

I don't know why I tell her that, like that somehow negates everything that she just said. I don't *care* about Damien. I don't trust him. We're not best friends. I just... thought he'd have answers.

“Damien knows next to nothing about Mattia. Nothing of substance, at least. Just...I need you to trust me on this one, alright? Don't trust him. Don't listen to him. Don't let him get close to you. Damien will use you as a weapon or a pawn.”

“A pawn? For what?” Still getting next to zero answers here. Just feeling more confused about everything that's going on.

“His games. His own gain. All the things that people use pawns for. Telling you too much would get you too involved in everything, and that's a decision that you need to make for yourself, Ella. I know the secrets and the roundabout bullshit is exhausting, but no one wants you to get involved in *anything* unless you're certain of it.”

Before I can ask one of the thousand questions floating around in my head – you know, things like getting involved in what? What is the big secret that I have to choose to know? What does Damien gain from using me as a pawn? Why? Before any of that, Adelaide looks down at her phone and sighs.

“I have to get going.”

“...Okay.” Well, what a great lunch. I feel like I'm in a shitty detective novel now. Went from rom-com to horror to detective noir. I'd like to go back to the rom-com, please.

She stands up and throws some money down on the table. “Mansolillo,” she says, keeping her voice low. “That's where you should start.”

And that's it. Just one simple word and a vague explanation about starting there. Adelaide puts her sunglasses back on and then she's gone, leaving me alone in the café and more confused than I was before I met her.

Guess I know what I'm doing tonight.

Chapter Twenty-One

Adelaide

I'll admit it. I shouldn't have gotten involved in Mattia's life. I shouldn't have met up with Ella. I have my reasons. I was curious. I wanted to know the girl that has my brother hooked.

At first, I wasn't quite sure he was hooked. But since they broke up? He's been floating around the house like a ghost. He plays with Kara. He works on things with Yulian. But it feels like he's lacking something he had before with her in his life.

Then Yulian reached out to me. Mattia should know that Yulian's going to tell me everything. He told me that they talked about me, about my relationship or what *had* been my relationship with Yulian. Mattia got involved in my life, I get involved in his. Simple as that. That's what siblings do.

I like Ella. I know our meeting was short and to the point, but I like her. I feel like she's something special. Maybe a little naïve, but we've all been there. Once she understands what's in front of her, she'll hopefully understand why everyone has been so vague. I like her enough to be worried about her.

Damien set Mattia up. Neither Yulian nor I can prove it, but we both know that's what happened. The fact that he's getting close to Ella now tells me that he's trying *something*. He's going to try using her as a pawn or something. Something to try to make Mattia bend to his will. Men like Damien have no shame.

So, while we work on proving that Damien is trying to make a mess of things, I gave Ella what she needs to make an informed decision. It's only fair, right? Sometimes I wish someone gave me everything that I needed to know before I

got so deeply entwined with Christian. I don't *regret* it, but sometimes it feels like my hand was forced a little.

Getting home, I find Mattia at the kitchen table. He has Kara in her highchair, feeding her lunch. "I wasn't sure what you usually feed her so I made her pasta. It's just pesto with some veggies. The internet said it was okay."

"You looked up how to feed my child on the internet like she's some exotic pet?" I ask, raising an eyebrow as I take a seat next to her. I have no qualms that he actually fed her or anything. I'm impressed. More than I expected out of him, to be honest.

"Yeah. That's what the internet is for, right?" he asks, watching as Kara picks up a noodle and pops it into her mouth. "Where have you been?"

"Nosy," I snort. My eyes are on Kara, refusing to look at Mattia when I answer because I know that he's going to get all feisty about it. "Before I say anything, remember that my daughter is in the room," I say.

"Ads, what did you do?"

"I went to meet Ella." The emotions that cross Mattia's face are almost amusing. Confusion, shock, anger. I don't give him the chance to express any of them before I keep speaking. "You talked to Yulian, it's fair. Plus...I'm kind of worried about her."

That replaces all the anger pretty fucking quickly. His face softens and concern takes its place. "Why...why are you concerned?" he asks softly. "What's wrong?"

I sigh, debating just how much I want to tell him. I don't want to freak him out too much about things, but he needs to know. "Evidently Damien's been trying to get close to her. I told her to stay away, that he can't be trusted, but I don't know if she'll listen to the random woman who she had lunch with."

"You had lunch with her?" Mattia sighs. "I'm very upset with you about this, Ads. Don't forget that for a minute. But... she admitted to spending time with Damien?"

“Don’t tell me you’re jealous. That’s not the proper response here,” I point out with an eye roll. *Men*. “She says she’s only doing it because she wants to get closer to you, which is a problem all on its own.”

“Not jealous,” he mutters. “Concerned. If Damien is as much trouble as you and Yulian seem to think he is, which I’m not entirely sure I believe just yet, then I’m worried about Ella too. Do you think she’ll listen?”

“Hopefully,” I say, redirecting Kara to put the noodle in her *mouth* and not on the floor. “You could always reach out but let me guess, you can’t do that. It’s too dangerous for her.”

“It’s too dangerous to get close to her,” Mattia says. “I can’t protect myself just yet. How can I protect Ella?”

“Maybe she’s a big girl and should be allowed to make her own decisions.”

“She’s not you, Adelaide.”

Ouch. I get what he’s going for. I really do. I’ve always been able to fend for myself. Something terrible happens? I’ll adapt and move on. It’s the only option for me. Not everyone is like that. Ella seems...softer. That isn’t a bad thing. It’s a bad thing when you’re in a situation like this though.

“Fine,” I shrug. “Don’t reach out to her. I’ll have Yulian put someone on detail though. Keep an eye on her. Does that work for you?”

“I thought you were going to be hands off until things are established. Instead, you’re running things like you’re pulling the strings behind the scenes,” he comments.

And...you know, he’s not wrong. I’m a hands-off type of woman. I’ll admit that ever since I’ve gotten reinvented with things I’ve felt more alive than I have in a long time. There’s probably a problem there, but I can’t help it. It just feels... good to be back where I feel most like myself. I think it makes me a better person. A better mom to Kara, maybe a better wife to Christian.

As long as he doesn't find out.

"Is there a problem with that?"

"Nope. Just an observation," Mattia shrugs. "So, you'll make sure Ella's being watched?"

"Yes." No hesitation. Ella is important to my brother. She's innocent. She's not getting caught in the crosshairs of this, not if I can prevent it. I'll do everything in my power to prevent it. "Consider it done. Now, how are things with everything else? Have you and Yulian found men yet?"

Mattia leans back in the kitchen chair, steepling his fingers as he thinks. "A few. Not nearly enough. Most of them are just willing to push product, but it's a start."

"It's a start," I agree. "We can only move forward from here. We get product back on the streets, we move in on other ventures. The other families won't know what hit them. We'll be back in no time."

That's the hope, at least. If I'm dedicating myself to this, there needs to be a payoff. If I'm taking a risk, I need to know it's for the better of my life *and* Kara's. Christian won't agree, but this is the best way to give her the life that she deserves. A position of power, a life of having whatever she wants. I just have to hope that in the end, Christian will understand.

"Yulian and I have a few more meetings this week. Not drug-related. Working on old protection deals and whatnot."

"Have you heard from Damien?" I ask. I have to know. I know that Mattia doesn't see it the way that I do. I know that he doesn't think Damien is much of a threat, but I know better and I'm not the only one.

"He's reached out. I haven't told him anything. Haven't told him about Yulian or getting shot. Anything like that. Trying to see if he brings it up as you suggested."

"He's been reaching out to Ella too."

The rage that crosses my brother's face is unlike anything I've ever seen before. He's *angry*. For a second, I

wonder if I should've brought it up again but no, this is good. If he doesn't buy that Damien is a threat to the empire we want to build, maybe he'll realize that he's a threat to other things he cares about.

“What? Reaching out how?”

“From what I hear, not from Ella herself, but others,” I begin. Yulian's connections. We're watching Damien. Mattia doesn't need to know that just yet. We have to let him conclude that he can't trust Damien on his own. This seems to be pushing him there. “He's been harassing her at work, trying to take her out to lunch constantly. Looks like he's trying to move in there. Which, she *is* a pretty girl.”

“Not helping, Ads,” he sighs. “What did she say? Is she going to stay away from him? Why would he even be stepping in like that?”

“I don't know how much she trusts me,” I say with a shrug. “I did just come out of nowhere and get myself involved in her life. Hopefully, she trusts me *enough* to not keep hanging out with Damien. We both know that never ends well.”

Mattia looks stressed. More than I've ever seen him. He rakes his hand through his hair and sighs. “Right. Look, maybe I'll reach out to Damien and talk to him. Not about Ella or getting shot or anything. Just *talk* to see if he says anything. Men like him like to talk, right?”

No. Men like Damien are the worst because they don't talk. They don't brag about things. They keep quiet as they make big moves. It's the smart way to play the game. It's how *I* play the game. Damien's not going to knowingly give us any information.

I shrug again. “Do what you think is best here. I don't think you'll get anything from him. At least not anything *huge*, but maybe? Just...don't meet him in private, all that jazz. I don't trust him. I'd say bring Yulian but that shows our hand too much for my taste.”

Damien has his hands in a lot of honeypots. He's going to know that we're involved with the Andronikovs sooner or later. I'd prefer later. Once we're reestablished and certain where Damien stands.

Mattia gives me a half-smile, tilting his head to the side. "Adelaide, I'm always careful, aren't I?"

"How's that arm healing, Mattia?"

Chapter Twenty-Two

Mattia

If I didn't have fifty thousand other things to deal with, I'd get myself even more involved in Adelaide's life, just to return the favor for her reaching out to Ella. What the fuck was that? I know that she thinks she's doing what's best for me but...I didn't need her involved. Nothing has changed. It's not like Ella has reached out to me since then or anything. That's always been the hope. I want to reach out to her, but I know better. She called it quits between us. I'm sure she doesn't want to hear from me.

And she's been spending time with Damien. What if that becomes something? I can't spend all my time thinking about that. We're so close to getting something started here. We're so close to the return of the Mansolillos.

I asked Damien to meet me for lunch at that stupid, pricy steakhouse he suggested last time. He agreed. I don't know what we're even going to talk about. Guess I'll figure that one out too.

I see him walk in, sunglasses on, hair slicked back. He greets the hostess with a flirty smile before spotting me and making his way over. I stand up and offer my hand. Damien shakes it before pulling me in for a hug. I'm instantly uncomfortable with the situation and my arm that's still killing me. He slaps my back before we part and we take our seats.

"It's been a long time since I've seen you," he says. "Not a whole lot of contact. Beginning to worry you were backing out of everything, Mattia."

I probably should've kept in contact more. Would've made things a little less suspicious but I'm not sure what I'd even say. With Adelaide quietly running things again, there's not much I can say.

“Been busy with some things,” I tell him with a shrug. “I’m still invested. What about you?”

The smile that he gives me makes me uncomfortable. Maybe it’s because Adelaide and Yulian’s words are filling my head now. Maybe all of that is filling my head and making me imagine things. Or maybe I’m beginning to realize that they’re right. Why would they lie about this?

Then again, Adelaide *does* have a grudge against Damien. Yulian’s in love with her so he’s going to agree with whatever she says.

I don’t know what to believe.

“I’m always invested, Mattia. This is all I want,” is how Damien answers the question. The waitress comes by and we order. The conversation fades for a minute before he speaks again. “So, I heard about you and Ella.”

I cringe. I don’t even mean to, but that’s not what I want to talk about. I don’t want to hear his opinions about that. I simply shrug. “It’s unfortunate.”

“It really is. She’s such a nice girl. I guess men like us don’t really get the nice girls, do we? Maybe it’s better that she’s not involved in all of this.”

That gets under my skin. I’ve had those same thoughts. I’m pretty sure I said something like that to Ella. It’s close to what Yulian said too. I don’t want to believe that there isn’t a place for Ella in my life. I just need to get in a better position to offer it to her.

“Maybe not,” I mutter. I want to avoid this conversation. I don’t know what to change the subject to, so maybe if I don’t give him a lot of information, Damien will just change the subject naturally.

Doesn’t happen.

“She’s seemed pretty down about it, actually. I tried to talk to her but she just didn’t want to talk. Whatever happened

must've been pretty rough. I hope you weren't too much of an asshole."

Now I realize the exact game that Damien's playing. It's one that I've played before. He's throwing information out there to try and get information out of me. He's hoping he'll push the right buttons and I'll tell him something. I can't express how hard it is *not* to tell him what he wants to know. I want to defend myself, but I can't give him too much. Asshole.

"I hope I wasn't. I hope she's well. As you said, she's a good girl. I only want the best for her. Guys like us aren't that, you know? Anyway," I try to move on, hoping there's another subject we can talk about.

"How did the meeting with Gerard go?" Damien asks. "I didn't hear from you afterward so I'm assuming it didn't go too well or else you'd have me out searching for men to get this thing started. I'm sorry I wasn't able to come with you. Family stuff, you know how it is."

Great. Another subject I desperately didn't want to talk about. I guess this makes sense though. Damien and I aren't best friends. There's not a lot we have to talk about outside of all of this. It's not like I'm going to share childhood memories about how he was screwing my mother behind my father's back or anything.

"Gerard didn't want to make a deal," I say. "We're going to have to try and find someone else." I'm not going to tell him about Charles. See what he says. Maybe Damien will show his hand.

"Mm. I'm not sure who else I can set you up with. Gerard worked with your family for years. I can check my contacts. Have you...reached out to anyone else? Anyone else who used to work with your father or anything?"

My eyes study Damien's face, trying to read him better. Trying to see if he's still digging for information or if it's a genuine question. I can't tell. I wish I could, but I can't. I

scrunch my lips and shrug. “The only people I talk to who even knew my father are you and Adelaide. Adelaide isn’t much help.”

“No, obviously not. She’s made a lot of enemies. It’s probably a good thing she lives with her FBI husband or whatever. Keeps her safe. How’s that going, by the way? Is he as much of a control freak as I think he is?”

Okay. A little bit better of a subject. I mean, I don’t want to hear Damien’s opinions on Adelaide because I know none of them are positive. I don’t *like* hearing people talk shit about my sister. For all of her flaws, I love her. She’s my little sister. It makes punching him tempting, almost as tempting as when he talks about Ella.

“Haven’t spent a lot of time with Christian,” I answer with a shrug. “He’s out of town right now for work so, it’s just me, Adelaide, and their kid. I don’t think he’s too bad though. Just kind of quiet. Kind of serious. We haven’t built a relationship or anything.”

“Still don’t see how you do it. Hell, I don’t see how Adelaide does it. How does she fall asleep next to him every night knowing what he did? Guess I never really understood your sister though.”

“Not a lot of people do.”

Damien nods. “Guess not.”

The waitress returns with our food and we go silent as we start to eat. Well, this has been an uncomfortable, uneventful lunch. I have no idea whether Damien’s involved with me getting shot or not. I haven’t been able to tell. He hasn’t even glanced once at my arm.

He cuts into his steak before speaking again, “Did I tell you I’m moving? Found this cute apartment building by the park. Thought it’d be a nice change of pace.”

There’s something weird about that. Nothing clicks. Maybe it should. Maybe there’s a big piece to the puzzle that

I'm missing. I just shrug. I don't care where Damien lives. I don't even know where he currently lives.

"That's nice. I didn't know you were looking for a new place," I say, only half-interested.

"Well, an opportunity came up. As I said, I thought it would be a good change of pace. Probably won't be there long though. Once we're up and running I can hopefully afford my old condo again. Or maybe even a better one. That's the goal, right? Do it better than Carlo ever did?"

I take a bite and nod. "That's always been the goal. Do it better, do it bigger."

"I think we're well on our way to that, Mattia."

"We haven't made any progress."

"Oh, but we will."

Chapter Twenty-Three

Ella

Lunch with Adelaide was weird. I tried to brush it off. Like, I don't need to get tangled up in any more weirdness, right? If this is what being with Mattia is like, I don't need it. At least, that's what I'd tell myself if I wasn't in as deep as I am when it comes to everything involving Mattia, and I wasn't a curious person. Yeah, yeah. Curiosity killed the cat. I guess I'm going to have to learn that lesson the hard way.

I sit on my living room floor, leaning back against the couch, laptop on my lap. Part of me feels like I need a glass of wine to get through this. Another part of me wants to be one-hundred percent sober when I do this.

Adelaide told me to get my own answers. I deserve the truth and if no one is going to give it to me, I need to figure it out myself. I suck in a breath before typing 'Mansolillo' into the search bar.

I have half a second before it loads to be sure that this is what I want to do. I could just close my laptop and forget about all of this. Maybe load up a dating app and see if I could find – *oh*.

The page loads and I'm left staring at it. Thousands of hits on the name 'Mansolillo'. None of looks positive. I click the first news article I see entitled, 'Mafia Princess Testifies'

Then I'm left staring at the page. The picture up top? It's Adelaide. I've only seen her once but I'm one-hundred percent sure that it's Adelaide. Everything is only confirmed as I start to read the article.

'It was the day that everyone has been waiting for, a very pregnant Adelaide Mansolillo took the stand to testify against her family. Months ago, her father, head of the

Mansolillo crime family, was killed in an FBI-involved shooting at their home. Today, Adelaide testified to the horrors of what her father and his associates had done.

There have been rumblings since the beginning of the trial that Adelaide was more involved with her family's dealings than is being let on with the trial. Many of Mansolillo's associates have mentioned that she was involved in meetings and plans. Some have gone as far to say that Adelaide ordered a hit of her own, but there's been no proof provided.'

I stop reading. Let it all process. I do another double-check of the photo like maybe there's another Adelaide Mansolillo out there. Like maybe I met a doppelgänger or something. It's just a lot for a person to take in, right?

Mafia. Adelaide and Mattia come from a mafia family. One that was very publicly tried a year ago. I remember it on the news. It was huge. I just never made that connection. Didn't know Mattia's last name. Didn't remember Adelaide. I go back to the article, reread it and notice no mention of Mattia.

So, I go back to the search bar and change my search from '*Mansolillo*' to '*Mattia Mansolillo*'.

I see another news article pop up, but before I click it, something else catches my attention. It's from the Department of Corrections. Which is...*fuck*. I wish I had that wine I was thinking about earlier.

I click it, feeling my heart pound as it loads. It's slow. Slower than the news article was and that only fuels that anxiety more. I feel like I can barely breathe as I wait for it to load.

And then it does.

I'm looking at a mugshot of Mattia. He's younger in it, by years at least. It's most definitely Mattia though. I'd know those eyes anywhere. My heart is still racing. Confirming all of it doesn't make it any better. I'm left staring at it for longer

than I realize before it registers that maybe I should scroll and read more.

So, I do. I scroll down the page to the list of charges. ‘Possession with Intent to Distribute’ is the main charge. Everything else is drug-related, as well. So...at least he didn’t murder anybody. Which seems like a very low bar to have, but here we are.

Everything starts to click into place. Everything is beginning to make sense. Mattia being so completely unaware of things like movies and technology, always talking about the family business, he got fucking *shot*.

He’s trying to restart the family. He wants to get reinvolved in *all* of this. So that’s why he was keeping me at arm’s length. He didn’t want me to know. It makes sense, doesn’t mean I love it or anything. As the pieces click, I just feel a headache coming on. Everything floating around makes sense now. Everyone I’ve met is somehow tangled in this twisted web – including me now.

And...it doesn’t change my feelings about Mattia. I mean, I guess that makes sense. I didn’t find out anything too terrible about him or anything. He’s not a murderer. His family is though. Mafia shit is a lot darker than I want to get involved with.

What do I do now? Do I let it go? Do I reach out to him and tell him that I know? This information is overwhelming because I don’t know what to do. I don’t know what I *want* to do.

That wine is beginning to sound better and better if I’m being honest.

Well, at least I know I’m not going to sleep a fucking wink tonight.

I still haven't decided what to do. I've typed out texts to Mattia time and time again. Ones saying that I know everything, ones saying that I miss him and want to see him. Basically, I don't know what to say because I don't know what to do. This definitely isn't something I can just do a quick internet search about, '*How to Handle Your Boyfriend Being in the Mafia?*', isn't exactly something people have written how-to articles about.

Maybe I can be the first?

I know I need to talk to Mattia about this face-to-face. It seems like the only way to handle any of it. I can get answers from the internet and make conclusions all I want. I know the facts now and I need actual answers from *him* before I make any decisions. It feels like the only way.

I'm sitting at my desk at work again, typing and deleting yet another text to Mattia. What words do I use? Before I can think of them, I feel eyes on me. I don't even have to look up to know who they belong to. It's Damien.

I've been avoiding him since talking to Adelaide. For some reason, I trust her. She gave me the answers I need and...I don't know. I just have the feeling that she wouldn't get involved unless she felt like she needed to. It's given me a better reason to avoid Damien anyway, outside of just not wanting to talk to or associate with him out of lack of interest.

I look up anyway and immediately put on my customer service voice. "How can I help you?" Just keep it professional. Don't want to lose my job or anything.

"I haven't heard from you in a bit. I was beginning to worry you quit or something without telling me," Damien says as he leans against the counter. "We never made plans for that follow-up date. You know, the roller-skating one? I was thinking maybe this weekend?"

I try not to physically cringe. I don't want to go on a date with Damien. Obviously, attempting to get closer to him to know more about Mattia was wrong. Definitely didn't work

out. I have most of the answers I need. Everything else, I should hear from Mattia himself. Not Damien. Not Adelaide. Not the internet.

“Um, actually, I don’t think that that’s going to happen,” I answer, trying to come off as kind as possible. No one likes getting shut down. I don’t get some sick pleasure from shutting someone down or anything. “You’re really nice Damien, but I’m not looking to date or be with anyone like that right now.”

I see it on his face. The mask of a good man falls. He’s angry. Instinctively, I back my chair up a little bit. Just in case he lashes out. He doesn’t. I see him push that all back.

“Oh, hey. That’s fine. All you needed to do was say something, Ella. No worries. I had fun getting to know you a little bit,” he says with the smallest smile. “And in case you ever decide you do want to go on a date or anything, just let me know. I’ll be around.”

Well, that was easier than I expected.

It’s been a long day. I still haven’t decided just how to reach out to Mattia about everything. I know that I have to. Tonight. As soon as I get in, I’ll heat up something for dinner and write a text message. All I have to do is press send. There’s no guarantee he’ll even respond to it.

I get up to my floor and something just feels *off*. I don’t know how to explain it. Just a feeling in my gut that something isn’t right. Building anxiety that’s getting worse and worse, making me feel like I’m going to pass out. I try to push it aside, chalk it up to maybe I didn’t eat enough today or maybe it has to do with reaching out to Mattia.

It gets worse when I reach my front door. It’s unlocked. I know for a fact that I locked it this morning. As much of a

scatterbrain as I can be, I always lock my door. I always double-check before I leave.

My mind is instantly trying to justify everything. Maybe the landlord needed something. Maybe maintenance came by. The instant I'm inside, what's wrong is very, very *clear*.

My apartment is trashed. Things are broken, tossed on the floor, just a complete mess. On the wall behind my couch, the word 'Next' is scrawled in...I take a few steps closer. That terrible feeling in my gut getting worse. I want to say it's red paint, but I don't...I don't think it is. The closer I get, the easier it is to confirm that it's not paint. It's *blood*.

The word 'Next' is written in blood on my wall.

That's a very obvious threat. *Fuck*. On the coffee table, there's an envelope. My name is written on the front in very messy handwriting. With shaky hands, I reach out for it. There's something inside and I'm terrified about what I'm going to find. I open it anyway – there's a bullet. Just a single bullet.

I drop it onto the coffee table. I feel the room start to spin around me. Hyperventilation starting. I should call the police, but what do I tell them? What if Mattia gets in trouble? He's got to be on parole and I know that he didn't do this. I just...don't know who did.

I'm terrified.

I didn't want any of this. I didn't want to get involved like this. I just fell for the wrong guy. He doesn't feel like the wrong guy and fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

I reach into my pocket for my phone. My fingers hover over the keypad, right on the verge of dialing 911...but I stop myself. I go right to my text messages and compose a message I've been on the verge of writing for days now.

Now, I just have a reason to write it. I type in Mattia's name and send a simple message, '*Can you come over? I need you. It's important.*' I press send and it's done.

I feel dizzy. I feel like I'm going to pass out. Every time my eyes go up to the message on my wall, I feel so fucking sick. I don't know how I'm supposed to handle this at all. I don't think I can.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Mattia

I wasn't expecting Ella's text. I didn't hear from her immediately after Adelaide reached out, so I assumed that that was it. I assumed if she didn't have anything to say after that, it was over. I've been doing my best to stay distracted and do things that keep me from thinking about Ella. Yulian and I have made progress – lots of progress. In just a few short days, we have men back on the street to move product, a few of the businesses involved in my father's old protection racket immediately came back to us the minute it was an option, and we have a few more meetings in the next few days to get more going on. The rise is happening.

When Ella texted me, none of that mattered. She said it was important. She said that she needed me. That was all I needed to know. It made everything else slip away and I was on my way to her as quickly as possible. I don't care if it's important because she needs to yell at me, tell me what a horrible person I am, any of that. All that matters is her. That's how much she means to me.

When I get to her apartment, I knock on the door and just wait. My heart is hammering. I just realize that I haven't seen her since we broke up. I haven't been creepily watching her job or her apartment. I let her go the best that I could because I genuinely want what is best for her. That doesn't mean I stopped caring about her or thinking about her. Definitely haven't stopped thinking about her. Ella has haunted my thoughts.

The door opens and Ella looks...shaken. I notice it right off the bat. Her hair is disheveled, her eyes look puffy like she's been crying. Whatever happened is serious.

"What's wrong?" I ask immediately. "What happened?"

Ella doesn't speak. She looks at me and it looks like tears are about to well up in her eyes again. Seeing her cry is the last thing I want to do. I open my arms and she falls into them, burying her face in my chest. I let her cling to me, swaying her in my arms as she cries. I don't push anymore, just let her let it out. I've never seen her like this. All the alarms in my head are going off.

She hugs me a little bit longer before she looks up, hazel eyes still filled with tears threatening to spill over. "C-come in," is all she says before letting go.

She steps aside and I follow her into the apartment. As soon as I'm inside, horror washes over me. I realize what's wrong. I see the threat scrawled on her wall, the way her apartment is trashed. *Fuck*. This was what I was trying to avoid. Ella is being threatened. She's in danger. It's my fault. I should've never gotten involved with her. All it's done is put her in danger. Even after I walked away.

I can't panic. At least not on the outside. I have to stay calm for Ella's sake. I wrap my arm around her and pull her to my side. "Okay. Okay. Were you home?"

"No. I – I just got home from work and – and -" She's so shaken up that she can't finish her sentence.

"Shh. Shh. Okay, so you have no idea who could've done this?" I ask and she shakes her head.

I want to get her to sit, but I don't want her to sit in the living room. Seeing the wall and the chaos is only going to make her panic more. I keep my arm around her as I carefully guide her toward the bedroom. I do a quick once over, making sure it's untouched. Whoever was here did this hastily.

I sit her down on the bed and take a seat next to her. "I know it's hard, but I need you to try and breathe for me, Eleanor. I'm going to ask you a few questions, okay? I just want to try and figure this all out. I'll try to keep them very yes or no."

I don't want to push her too much. I know she needs time to calm down – if she can calm down from this. It's a lot for anyone. It's even more for someone who never meant to get involved in any of this. I'm the only reason she's involved at all.

“When you met with Adelaide, did anyone see you?” I ask.

Her face scrunches as she thinks before she shakes her head. “Not that I know,” she says quietly. “But we didn't meet in private or anything.”

Anyone could've seen them. But...I have to believe that Adelaide would've noticed something. She's normally very attentive. If something was off, if someone weird was watching too closely, she would've noticed. I hope.

“Okay. I'm guessing...Adelaide told you our last name. I'm assuming you searched it and found things out. Did you tell anyone what you found? Talk to anyone about it?”

She shakes her head again. “No. I mean...who was I going to talk to?”

I'm running out of guesses here. I need to figure out who did this to her, who's threatening her and why. Wait. Wasn't Yulian supposed to have someone watching her constantly? Because of Damien? I swore Adelaide said she'd talk to him about it. I reach for my phone.

“Okay. I'm going to make a few phone calls, take some pictures and clean everything up, okay? You stay in here. Try to relax. Nothing is going to happen to you, Ella. I swear that to you. Have you eaten? I'll get you dinner after everything is sorted out.”

I don't give her time to respond. She's probably going to tell me not to or that she's not hungry. She's probably going to suggest calling the cops, which can't happen. They can't get involved in this. I stand up and walk out of the bedroom, pulling the door so it's only cracked before I dial Yulian's number.

“Hey. I need you,” I say before hanging up.

I’m standing in Ella’s kitchen, listening as Yulian yells at someone on the phone. I don’t understand a damn word he says. It’s all in Russian. But I can tell just how pissed off he is about *something*. This is a side I’ve never seen from Yulian before. He sounds more dangerous than I ever imagined and that makes me realize that I don’t know my new best friend as well as I think I do. All I know about him is from what I’ve picked up from others – mostly Adelaide.

He hangs up the phone and rolls his eyes. “So, the man I had keeping an eye on things went to dinner,” he says. The anger is evident in his voice. “He will be dealt with accordingly.”

“Yulian—” I start, but he cuts me off.

“No Mattia, there are no excuses for things like this. Ella could’ve been hurt,” he says the last part quietly, knowing that Ella is still in the bedroom. “We’re lucky this is all they did,” he gestures toward the living room, toward the blood on the wall.

I know that he’s right. Ella could’ve been seriously hurt – or killed. There are no excuses for a job not being done right. Especially when it was something this important. What would my father do in this position? What would Adelaide do in this position? The answer is easy.

“You’re right,” I agree. “Take care of it however you deem necessary.”

He nods and then the attention falls back to Ella’s place. “We should clean this up,” he says. “She doesn’t need to keep seeing this. Is not good for her.”

So, we clean. It’s a very weird situation and in any other circumstance, I would be laughing about it. Hell, I know Adelaide would. Yulian and I pick up knocked-over furniture

and broken glass. Keeping a record of what was broken so it can get replaced. Ella never asked to be involved in any of this, so I'm not going to let her pay for it. She doesn't deserve that. The bloody message is washed from her wall, scrubbed away, and hopefully soon forgotten.

"Did she have any idea who it could've been?" Yulian asks as he fixes the pillows on the couch, actually taking the time to fluff them before putting them back in their spot.

"No. She says that she hasn't mentioned it to anybody. She says that no one saw her and Adelaide meet. I haven't been around in weeks, so nobody could've followed," I sigh. It's frustrating not having any answers. I've been racking my brain, trying to figure out who could be threatening Ella.

The 'why' is the easy part this time. It's because she's connected to me. They're threatening Ella to get to me. There could be any number of people who want to get to me.

My mind keeps going back to one.

"What if – Gerard?" I ask, looking over at Yulian. "He clearly has a grudge, so do a thousand other people, but he's already tried to get to me once. This could be another attempt to finish what he started," I offer. It's not much. Just a theory, but it's the only one we have.

"I'll have someone look in it," he promises. "It doesn't make sense. How would he know about Ella? Why wouldn't he just try to get to you again? Why go through her?"

I shrug. "No idea. I'm just throwing something out there. I'd rather have some idea rather than not know anything."

"As I said, I'll make sure someone looks into it. I have someone new set to watch the apartment tonight. He's a good man. Has worked for my father for years. He'll do exactly what we need him to."

I nod. "I'm going to stay here tonight too. I don't want to risk leaving her alone until we figure something out."

Yulian looks back toward the bedroom. “Does Ella know that?”

“I’ll sleep on the floor if I have to. Hell, I’ll sleep in the hallway. I’m not leaving her alone.” It doesn’t matter where I sleep, I just know that I’m not going to sleep much tonight. There’s too much to worry about. I can’t risk letting my guard down.

He nods. I can tell that Yulian understands. If this were Adelaide, God only knows what he’d do to keep her safe. “Do you need anything before I leave?” he asks.

I shake my head. “No. I don’t think so. I’m going to make sure she eats and see where it goes from there. If she thinks of anything that can single out who did this, I’ll let you know.”

“I’ll be in touch,” Yulian says, holding out his hand. I take it, shake it, and pull him in for a hug. It doesn’t feel awkward like it did with Damien. Yulian feels like my brother at this point. He’s a good man. Someone I know that I can trust.

I see him out before heading back toward the bedroom, finding Ella still on the bed. She’s clutching the pillow to her chest. I can tell that she’s been crying again. I quietly take a seat on the edge of the bed again.

“We cleaned up everything out there,” I tell her softly. “I have someone looking into things. We’re going to figure out who did this. We’re going to make sure no one hurts you, Ella. I promise.”

“I didn’t – I didn’t do anything,” she says quietly, looking up at me. “I didn’t do anything to get involved.”

“I know,” I say softly, reaching out to brush her hair behind her ear. “I know you didn’t.”

This is all on me. Now I just have to fix it.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Ella

It still feels like I'm in shock. I'm barely able to process anything that's going on. It's confusing and frightening and Mattia is...here. He brought me dinner an hour ago, ordered pasta from a place down the street, then left me alone. I don't know if I *want* to be alone right now. I also don't know if I want to be around him.

Logically, I understand that this isn't his fault. At least, not directly. Mattia isn't the one who wrote on the wall, who left the bullet, who trashed my apartment. But the only reason I'm in this situation to begin with is because of him. If he would've been honest with me from the beginning...I can't guarantee I'd change anything.

I liked him. I *still* like him. Knowing what I know now, I think I'd do it all over again. There's just *something* about him that I'm a complete sucker for. I feel like there's a spark, a connection. Not that I'm thinking about that right now. Right now, I'm trying to figure out if I have enough in my savings account to get the fuck out of the city and start over somewhere. Maybe then I'll feel safe again.

Hopefully.

I hear the TV out in the living room, Mattia's still here. Maybe I should go talk to him. What would I even say? I sigh, deciding to just test the waters a little. Bring my dishes out to the sink and check the vibe? I don't know. I'm more lost than I've ever been in my life.

I leave the bedroom, walking quietly down the hall and into the kitchen. The plastic takeout container goes in the trash and the dishes in the sink. Mattia is on the couch, jacket off, TV on. He looks comfortable. The living room is clean. If I hadn't seen everything for myself, I'd assume that nothing had happened here.

I'm still quiet as I make my way into the living room, taking the spot on the couch next to him.

He turns the TV down and looks over at me. "Are you okay?" he asks, his voice soft. "Was dinner alright?"

"It was fine. It was good," I tell him. "And I'm...here." I can't say that I'm okay because I'm not. I don't feel okay. I don't know when I'll feel okay again.

He nods. Mattia doesn't push. He keeps the TV down low, his face scrunching as he seems to consider every word before he says them. "I'm sorry, Ella. For lying, for not telling you everything that you deserve to know. I should've been honest from the beginning."

"You should've," I agree.

We go back to silence after that. I slide back on the couch, making myself a little more comfortable. Every fiber of my being wants to curl my body into his like I used to. I fit perfectly against his side. It's warm. It...*was* safe.

"What are you watching?" I ask. I don't like silence. I don't like sitting with Mattia in silence even more.

He shrugs. "This old sitcom. Ads and I used to watch it growing up. Felt weird to watch a family be...*normal*. We both thought it was the funniest thing in the world. Dinner together? Family outings? The kids actually talking to their parents about things? It was all so foreign to us."

I want to laugh. Not at Mattia's childhood memories, but because this feels like the most he's ever opened up to me. It feels like it's about time I get to know the *real* Mattia.

"Yeah? I can only imagine," I say softly. Despite it all, I still feel sympathy for him. I know that Mattia is an adult. He's had to make choices that could've changed everything for him. He's had every opportunity to change his life around, but he's also a product of his environment.

Back to silence. I let it linger for a second, seeing if Mattia is going to break it or not. He doesn't. So, I do, *again*.

“You cleaned up,” I comment.

“Yulian helped me. I thought not seeing everything so destroyed would be easier for you. I’m going to cover anything that was broken. There were a few picture frames,” he pauses, those dark eyes turning to look at me. “Before you say that I don’t have to, I want to. I owe you this much, Ella.”

I was absolutely going to tell him not to worry about it, but I’m not going to argue with him over a few picture frames. I could pick fights about more important things if I wanted to. Surprisingly, I don’t. I just want to be close to him.

“Okay.”

“I’m staying here tonight. I’ll sleep on the couch, on the floor, in the hallway. It doesn’t matter. Yulian says he has someone watching, but I don’t care. I want to make sure that you’re safe,” he says. From his tone, it’s obvious how serious he is.

“Okay,” I agree again. I’m not arguing. Despite everything, I know that I’ll feel much safer with Mattia staying with me.

He nods once I agree and we go back to watching TV. Just complete silence. So much to say, neither of us says anything. I watch the sitcom with him until my eyes start to feel heavy and the weight of today starts to weigh on me. I quietly tell Mattia goodnight and head to bed.

My eyes shoot open. My heart is pounding, I’m sucking in breaths but it feels like my lungs are on fire. My eyes wildly search around the room and immediately stop when I see Mattia sitting on the side of the bed. His face is soft, concern etched on it.

“You were having a bad dream, Ella,” he tells me softly, reaching out to brush the hair away from my sweat-soaked forehead. “Are you okay?”

Logically, yes. Am I okay right now though? No. I look up at him and slowly shake my head. Because no. None of this is okay. I'm scared to be in my own apartment. I'm scared to be alone. I'm being threatened and I haven't done a fucking thing wrong. It's all because of him and despite that, I just want to be close to him.

Mattia grants me that wish without me having to ask for it. His arms open and he pulls me to his chest. His fingers run through my hair and his forehead presses to the top of my head.

"I am so sorry, Ella," he whispers. "I am so sorry that I got you involved in all of this. That was never my intention. I just...felt so strongly for you. I fell for you and I thought...thought I could get my shit together quickly enough that you wouldn't be affected. If I thought for a second this would happen, I would have stayed away from you," he promises.

I shake my head. "Never would have wanted you to stay away," I whisper. Because I wouldn't. There was an instant attraction. Sparks flew. The more I got to know him, the more I wanted to know Mattia. I fell for him without knowing all the important details about him. That's why I never pushed for more information, never pushed for the truth. "All I wish was I was able to choose this for myself," I add.

The power of choice is important. Would I have chosen to get involved with Mattia if I knew everything there was to know? Yes. This wouldn't have shaken me *as* much, because I'd know what I was walking into when I chose to be with him. Instead, it was all forced on me. I understand now what Adelaide was saying. This is all up to me.

Tonight though, I don't think I can make any decisions. I don't think Mattia would ask that of me either. My arms wrap around him, fingers pressed against his muscular back.

"I know," he says. "And I wish I gave you that choice. I was just scared you wouldn't choose me. I wanted you to choose me so badly that I put my own needs before yours. That was unfair of me, Ella. I apologize."

I'd forgiven him the moment he came as soon as I needed him. The second he put me first, all was forgiven. Am I over it? No. I'm still shaken. Still trying to figure out what to do with me. I don't know where I go from here. Tonight, none of that matters.

"Will you sleep with me?" I ask, turning to look up at him. "I just don't...want to be alone."

"Of course." Mattia squeezes me to him one more time before pulling away.

I watch in the darkness of my bedroom as he pulls his shirt off, as his shoes get kicked off to the wall by the door. He walks over and slides into the other side of my bed. A spot that he slept in night after night. A spot that is still his in my mind.

Once he's comfortable, I scoot over and lay my head on his chest. Peace washes over me. Maybe I wish it didn't. I wish I could stay angry with him for lying to me, for hiding what he did. I'm too weak for him.

We're both quiet but neither of us is sleeping. It's like we're waiting for the other to break the silence again. I'm good at doing it, so I do.

"Did you mean it?" I ask. "That you have feelings for me? Like...that you really care about me?" It seems like the stupidest thing to be asking right now. With everything going on, with everything that I need to worry about, why am I so concerned with whether he cares or not? We're not together. I broke things off.

He chuckles. See, even Mattia thinks it's a stupid question. Before I can backtrack and blame it on lack of sleep or just nerves, he answers. "I love you, Ella," he tells me.

My heart is pounding in my chest. All these little firecrackers going off. God, this is the worst time to be feeling this way but he just said that he *loves* me. It makes me feel... amazing. Despite it all.

"You do?"

“I do. I realized it as soon as you weren’t in my life anymore. The colors didn’t sparkle. It was like an eternal night. I’ve never felt the way I feel about you before. I knew you deserved better, someone who could tell you the truth, so I stayed away. All I wanted was what was best for you. The answer was right in front of me – the truth. I should’ve given that to you in the beginning.”

“You should’ve,” I agree. At least that’s something we can both accept. I should’ve known the truth from the beginning, but we can’t go back. I roll on his chest so I can look up at him, and make sure we’re making eye contact. “But I love you too, Mattia.”

His face looks like it’s glowing in the darkness. I don’t think I’ve ever seen Mattia smile like this before. It’s beautiful. And I know we have so much to figure out. I know I need to make sure that this is something I want to move forward from. I don’t want to get into a relationship and end up holding onto his grudge the entire time. That wouldn’t be fair to either of us.

Hell, I need to figure out if I’m going to survive this.

But right now, tonight, all I need is to hear that he loves me. Everything else can be reserved for tomorrow. I lean up and press my lips to his, still feeling all of those delicious sparks that I get from Mattia. He kisses me back, his hand on my lower back pulling me closer to him.

This is enough.

At least for now.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Mattia

There's so much I need to atone for when it comes to Ella. I have so much to make up for. I can start by making sure she stays safe. I wake up when Ella's alarm goes off. She's curled up on my chest, fingers pressed against my skin to keep me right next to her. Leaning over, I softly kiss her temple.

"You should call out today," I whisper as her hazel eyes start to flutter open.

"Mm," she grumbles, her voice sounding half-asleep. It's cute. She rolls and hides her face in my chest, my fingers stroke her back, keeping her close to me. "They'll be pissed."

"They'll get over it. You had a traumatic day yesterday. You need to stay home with me," I whisper to her. "Let me protect you."

I feel her body shiver as I whisper those words. It's all I want, to take care of her. Treat her just how she deserves. Make up for what I've done. She makes a noise and just presses her face further into my chest.

I keep stroking her back, giving her a chance to wake up. Finally, Ella grumbles and reaches over, grabbing her phone from the nightstand. She dials her job and calls out, citing family reasons. After that, her phone is tossed back onto the nightstand and she snuggles back in.

Ella falls back asleep and I let her, content to just hold her. I slept better next to her than I have in the longest time. I need her in my life, but I need to make sure I can take care of her. My mind races while Ella dozes off. I'm tracing back through every interaction I've had with people since I've been out, trying to figure out who could be behind this.

The answer is pretty easy. It has to be one of the rival families, someone whose toes we're actively stepping on to

make our lives better. We're taking back territory, taking back customers. They're going to be angry, but how could they know about Ella?

The sound of Ella's soft breathing ends up lulling me back to sleep. I wake up when I feel her fingertips sliding down my cheek, soft kisses along my jaw.

"Good morning," I mumble, once again pulling her tighter to me. I just want to be close to her, feel her next to me.

"Come take a shower with me," Ella whispers.

That has my eyes shooting open. "Ella."

She presses her index finger to my lips, shushing me. "I'm a big girl, Mattia. I'm old enough to make my own decisions, right? I want to take a shower with you."

Every part of me is screaming that I should not be hopping in the shower with someone who is still *technically* my ex-girlfriend. Someone who I feel like I need to prove that I deserve. Someone who I still have so many things to work out with.

Except logic isn't going to win this fight. My body has missed hers more than I can put into words. The moment Ella is away from me, walking toward the bathroom, I'm following like she's a magnet.

She doesn't say another word, turns the shower on, and starts to strip down. It feels like I'm seeing her body for the first time. All I can do is stare. She's so goddamn gorgeous. Every curve of her body is perfect, every inch of skin. By now, I have all her tattoos memorized – and all I want to do is trace over each of them with my lips.

Ella gets into the shower and I watch her body through the frosted glass for a moment, still mesmerized by her. Finally, I get my shit together enough to strip out of my clothes and toss them to the side. I step into the shower with her. Her blonde curls are soaked, sticking to her skin. She looks at me with water dripping down her face and I feel like a man possessed.

Reaching out, I pull her toward me and press our lips together. I know there's so much that needs to be said, but not right now. Right now, I just need her and I hope Ella understands that. From the way that she's kissing me now, I can tell that she does. It's passionate and desperate. I turn her body away from the spray of the shower and press it against the cool tile behind her. She gasps into the kiss, her fingernails digging into my shoulders.

The moment the kiss breaks, my eyes meet hers. I want to tell her that she's all I think about. I want to tell her that I will get on my knees and beg her to give me another chance. None of those words have the chance to leave my lips, instead, I'm just pulled back to her.

I lift her, her legs wrap around my waist, and I slip one hand between us. I need to touch her. We both know where this is going. I slide my hand between her thighs and feel the heat radiating from her core. Ella needs this as much as I do.

Part of me wants to bring her back to the bedroom and worship her. Take hours. Make her see just how much I need her, how much I love her. But the desperation is high in the air. Neither of us wants to take our time. Not right now. We've been without each other for too long.

I press a finger inside of her and Ella breaks the kiss between us, gasping out. Her forehead falls to my shoulder as I stroke her with my finger, finding that one spot that drives her crazy. I still have everything about her body memorized. I never want to stop getting this reaction out of her.

When I feel like she's ready, I push another finger inside of her. It joins the first one, stroking that spot that has her squirming against my fingers. She moans in my ear, desperate for me. Desperate for *me*. I twist my hand, get my thumb on her clit, and start to rub it in little circles.

The noises that Ella is making are beautiful. The sweetest little moans and whines in my ear.

“Good girl,” I whisper into her ear. “You keep making those noises and I promise I’ll give you what you really need.”

Her noises get louder. I don’t give a damn if everyone in the damn apartment building knows. This is something just for us. I feel her start to tighten around my fingers...so I pull them away.

Ella looks at me, eyes wide, annoyance painted on that pretty face. She opens her mouth to say something as I bring the fingers that were inside of her up to my lips. I make a show of sucking them clean, my eyes rolling back.

“You taste wonderful, darling,” I purr to her and all the annoyance fades from her face. Instead, she just looks... completely drunk on this. Her hips press against mine instead. I chuckle. “Do you need something, Ella? Try using your words, darling.”

And the annoyance is back. “Was...was so close,” she pants out.

“I know,” I murmur. “Trust me, I know, darling,” I say, reaching down. I’m throbbing. I’ve been hard from the moment she stripped down. I haven’t been with anyone since her. No one else can compare. I tease her folds, slicking myself up before I start to slide inside. I lean in, whispering in her ear, “I want you to come on my cock, Ella. I want to *feel* you shudder around me, is that so wrong?” I ask before I push inside.

She cries out, her head falling back against the tile. Leaning down, I lick a trail up her neck. Pleasure washes over me. Being back inside of her feels like coming home in the strangest of ways. I’m going to fuck my beautiful girl senseless.

I make sure that she’s secure against the wall before I start to pound into her, angling myself to hit the right angle, the one I know will make her lose her mind. That’s all I want.

Our lips crash together, all tongues and need. My hands hold her tightly as I pound. Ella moans into the kiss and I

swallow them down. “Good girl,” I whisper against her lips when we break for air. “You look so pretty when you’re taking me like this, Ella.” Another whine from her.

Everything is so fucking pent up between us that I don’t think it’s going to last much longer. That doesn’t matter. All I need is to send her over the edge. I can feel her squeezing around me again, right on the crescendo. And then she’s falling apart. Crying out for me, I don’t try to muffle her noises. I want to hear all of them.

I fall apart right after her, my hips stuttering as I pump into her a few more times. Then I hold her there against the shower wall, my legs shaking. This woman has me under her spell.

When we leave the shower, Ella leads the charge to the kitchen because coffee is a necessity. “Would it be okay to go out and grab breakfast? Lunch? Brunch?” she asks as she starts the coffee pot. “I don’t really know much about the etiquette here.”

I shrug. “It could be safe. It could be a risk. I can’t make any promises.” I just want to be as honest with her as I can be now. No more half-truths or secrets between the two of us. She deserves better from me.

Her nose wrinkles at that, clearly not the answer she was looking for. “I guess I’ll think on it while the coffee makes then,” she decides.

I let Ella get to work on the coffee. I grab my jacket from the chair it was discarded on and reach into the pocket, finding my phone. I unlock it and immediately find what feels like hundreds of missed calls and texts, all from Yulian and Adelaide.

That makes me panic. Adelaide would never blow up my phone if it wasn’t important. Did they figure out who did

this to Ella? Did they fix the problem? I don't bother to look at any of the texts before I'm calling Yulian back. The much safer choice. If I missed that many notifications from Adelaide, she's going to be extra pissy.

Ella looks over at me and I hold up a finger, telling her to give me a minute. Yulian's phone rings once and he answers, "Why the hell haven't you been answering your phone?" he asks. It's the angriest that I've ever heard him.

Fuck. That's not a good sign.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

I hear him sigh. "Your sister needs you, Mattia. It's important. We can talk about it when you get here – just fucking get here, okay?"

"Is...is she okay?"

Yulian's silent on the other end. I hear him mutter something and then a few seconds later, he speaks again. His voice is much softer like he's trying to hide what he's saying to me. "Okay is debatable. Just get here." That's all he says before he hangs up.

Now I'm worried all over again, feeling like an absolute *asshole*. I ignored my phone and something happened with Adelaide. Ella is looking at me, confused.

"Mattia, is everything okay?"

I look at her and shake my head. "I don't know. We just...we need to go to Adelaide's."

Her eyes go wide. "We?"

"I'm not leaving you alone, Ella. Come on," I say, putting my jacket back on. "Just put on shoes and a jacket. Nothing else matters. We just have to go, okay?"

Ella looks at me, but she doesn't question it. For that, I'm grateful for her. I don't know if I could answer any questions right now. Especially when I have no answers of my own.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Adelaide

“No, no. You don’t need to tell them to get in touch with Christian. It’s fine. Everyone’s fine. Just shaken,” I say into the phone, trying to quell the worries of Christian’s mother. His sister, Kayla, just picked up Kara a few minutes ago and I’m beyond thankful for it. I don’t think I can handle her right now on top of everything else.

I was home alone last night when a fucking Molotov came through my dining room window. A whole half of the house went up in flames. The fire department took care of everything before the house could burn down, but the damage is done. Christian is going to freak out. Luckily, I don’t need to explain myself just yet. It’s common knowledge that I’m a target. Just because the trial is over doesn’t mean people aren’t still holding grudges for what I did.

Yulian came immediately. Mattia didn’t answer his fucking phone.

“I finally got a hold of him,” Yulian says, walking back into the living room. He’s been trying to convince me to come and stay with him for now, but I worry temptation will be too strong if I do. Also, I can only imagine how terrible that’ll look to Christian – who I can’t even tell about this right now because he’s undercover doing God knows what. “Mattia is on his way.”

He comes to sit next to me on the couch, tentatively wrapping an arm around my shoulder. I allow it, but I don’t lean into his touch too much.

“About time,” I respond.

We’re quiet. I’m lost in my thoughts because this is beginning to feel a lot like a planned attack. Something that was targeted. They went after Ella. They went after me. It’s all

aimed at Mattia, they're going for the heart. This is someone that knows him well enough to know where to aim.

There's only one person I can think of that would be capable of this.

Yulian and I sit in silence. Occasionally his fingers stroke my upper arm, nothing over the top or too intimate. Just him offering me comfort. I don't need comfort. I need payback. I need revenge on whoever is fucking with my family and I swear I know who it is, I just need *proof*.

The front door opens and I immediately know that it's Mattia. Footsteps follow after him which tells me that Ella is with him. He comes into the living room, dark eyes traveling over to the burned remains of what was the dining room. At least we didn't use it much?

"Ads, what happened?" he asks.

I glare at him. I look at him like it's the stupidest question in the fucking world. Next to me, Yulian opens his mouth to answer for me but decides against it. Probably for the best. Next to Mattia, Ella tucks herself behind him.

Poor thing didn't want to be involved in this shit at all and now she's all tangled up in it. I feel for her, I do. But I can't think about that right now.

"What the fuck do you think happened, Mattia?" I ask, standing up. "Someone tried to burn down the fucking house with me in it. And we both know –"

"Adelaide, are you okay? Is Kara okay?"

"No. Don't fucking cut me off, Mattia. You couldn't answer your fucking phone *once* last night? I needed you. I – what if something more serious happened?"

I'm stressed. I'm worried. I was so fucking scared last night and I was...alone. Christian wasn't here. Mattia wasn't here. The two people in my life that I've allowed myself to trust like this. Neither of them was here and it was not a good

feeling. I don't know what I would've done if everything *wasn't* okay.

I watch Mattia's face soften. He reaches out his hands and puts them on my shoulders. It takes everything in me not to slap them away. I'm trying to calm down. Screaming at him isn't solving anything.

"Adelaide, I am sorry. I never considered something like this could happen. If I even thought it could, I would've been here with you. You know that."

"Adelaide?" Ella speaks up. She peeks around from behind Mattia, her voice ridiculously soft. "I'm very sorry. If I hadn't –"

I hold up my finger, cutting her off. "No. No apologies, Ella. This is not your fault. You went through something terrifying yesterday as well. You've done nothing wrong."

I don't want her to blame herself. I'm not angry at her. I'm not really angry at Mattia. But he's my brother, it's easy to take it all out on him. Should I? Probably not. I sigh and run a hand through my hair. I can only imagine how disheveled I look right now. I haven't slept. Don't know when I'll be able to sleep again.

"I'm going to ask again," Mattia says, keeping his voice gentle. "Are you okay? Is Kara okay?"

I nod. "Christian's sister came to get her."

"What about you?"

"What about me?" I ask. "I'm fine. I'll survive. I always do, don't I?" I can tell from the look that Mattia shoots Yulian that he doesn't like my answer. He doesn't press on from there.

For the first time since Mattia and Ella have arrived, Yulian speaks up. "We need to get to the bottom of this. This is clearly something personal. First Ella, then Adelaide. Someone is after you, Mattia. Are you sure you have no idea who it could be?"

“I told you. Gerard is the only person I can think of,” Mattia sighs.

“I had someone look into the Gerard lead last night,” Yulian says. “It wasn’t him. We can be sure of that. It takes us back to square one.”

I sigh. Completely irritated because I feel like no one has been listening to me here. We know who it is. We’ve *known* who it is. “It’s Damien,” I say.

“Adelaide, why would Damien be behind all of this?” Mattia asks with a sigh. He walks over and takes a seat in the recliner, reaching out he pulls Ella into his lap. Looks like they fixed their problems. Not the time to ask about that though.

“*Because,*” I roll my eyes, falling back in my spot next to Yulian again. “Think about it. He has a reason to want me gone. I took everything from him. Fine. Whatever. Think about it *harder* though. If you start things up again and Damien is your right hand, he gets rid of you, he gets to take over. He gets to finally run the Mansolillo family. Why do you think he was fucking our mom to begin with?”

Mattia cringes at the crassness. Poor Ella looks terribly confused. He can fill her in later. We don’t have time for all the exposition.

“That’s assuming a lot,” he points out and I fight the urge to roll my eyes again. “Damien would have to know where Ella lives, know when –” He stops midsentence, his eyes widening.

Something is happening. “Mattia, what is it?”

He runs a hand through his hair, his head falling back against the back of the chair. “Fuck! Fuck, fuck, fuck!”

“What? What is it, Mattia?” I’m not in the mood to play any games. I need to know whatever has him freaking out like this. Knowing Mattia, whatever it is, can’t be any good.

“When I had lunch with Damien the other day...he basically told me his plans. I just didn’t connect it.”

“Fucking excuse me? I need more information than that because right now, I want to slap you. How did he tell you his plans and you didn’t do a damn thing about them?”

Why am I always surrounded by idiots? What is it with the men in my life and not being able to aptly take care of themselves? Like I genuinely don’t get it. Why do I have to handle everything? If Mattia’s explanation isn’t a good one, I can’t promise I won’t punch him. I’m good at punching things. He taught me how, after all.

“Yesterday you said you had no idea who it could be,” Yulian says from beside me. “Now you say that Damien told you his plans? What the fuck?”

“If everyone would give me a fucking second, I’ll explain,” Mattia sighs. His grip on Ella tightens, pulling her closer to him like he needs the comfort right now. “When we had lunch, he asked me about you, Ads. He was asking about you and Christian and I wasn’t thinking anything of it when I mentioned that Christian is currently out of town and then,” he looks at Ella and sighs.

Then he continues, “He mentioned moving into a place by the park. I wasn’t thinking about where Ella lives. Her building is right by the park. He was literally hinting at it to me. I just –”

Ella’s eyes go wide. “I told him where I live. Sort of. I told him it was by the park. I didn’t say what direction. He must’ve followed me one day or something. Shit. I’m sorry,” she says, keeping her voice soft.

Poor thing has nothing to be sorry for. How was she supposed to know any better? She only just found out about everything she was so unwillingly involved in. We’ve sucked her into this little game of ours. Now she has to pay for it.

On the other hand, my brother is a fucking idiot. I thought prison was supposed to make people more street smart. It made Mattia dumber. He should’ve seen what Damien was doing immediately. Digging for information that

he didn't need to know. Pointing things out. He played his hand and my brother didn't realize it. I'm fucking livid.

"So, it was Damien," I mutter, throwing myself back on the couch. "Well, guess we finally have proof."

"Adelaide, I'm sorry," Mattia is apologizing immediately. "If I even thought –"

"That's the problem. You didn't fucking think. I've told you from the beginning that you couldn't trust Damien and you *ignored* me. In case you forgot, Mattia, only one of us has been in jail. The other has been out here the entire time, learning how to survive, learning how to play this fucking game better than anyone else."

Poor Yulian and Ella look incredibly uncomfortable, caught amid the arguing siblings. Neither of them look like they knew if or when they should speak up. Probably shouldn't. I'm not liable if I bite someone's head off right now.

Mattia looks like he wants to yell back at me, but he doesn't. He relents, which is probably for the best. His face scrunches and then he taps Ella's thigh. "Get up."

"Where are you going?" she asks, concern etched on her face.

"Yulian, you're coming with me." Mattia just ignores her question and we're not doing this. I'm not letting him storm off with Yulian without telling me the plan – if he even has one.

"Answer me, Mattia. Yulian, you're not leaving until Mattia answers the question," I say. Am I pulling rank? Maybe. I just know that Yulian will listen to me. He always has. I know where his loyalty lies.

Mattia sighs. "We're going to take care of the problem, Adelaide. That's what you want, right? Damien came after Ella. He came after you. He came after *Kara*. I'm going to fucking deal with it as I should've from the beginning. It's about time I do this, isn't it?"

“Yes.” There’s no hesitation with my answer. It’s about time Mattia thinks for himself and does what’s necessary. I know he doesn’t want to get his hands dirty after just getting out of prison, but with what we’re involved in, sometimes you have to get your hands dirty.

“I’m gonna take care of it, Ads. You and Ella stay here, okay? Take care of each other.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Ella

Just like that, Mattia leaves me with Adelaide. I'm uncomfortable. No idea what I should do or say. I feel like I've been forced into a situation that I have no business being in. This is not my fight. Or...it wasn't. Now I'm in over my head, completely tangled up in this mess. My eyes keep traveling over to her as she sits on the couch. I feel like I should say something, but I don't know what.

Is it weird that I'm like...slightly terrified of her? Not because of her last name or anything but because Adelaide is...kind of who I feel like I should be. Assertive, stands her ground, sure of herself. I mean...she's also a little terrifying with how she refuses to back down. Not a bad trait but...

"Are you okay?" she asks, breaking that uncomfortable silence that had settled between us. "I heard about your apartment, obviously. If this hadn't happened, I was going to come over and check on you later today."

That's pretty endearing. I give her a little shrug. "I think okay is a relative term right now. It's...a lot."

She nods in agreement, shifting a little bit on the couch. "This is what Mattia was trying to protect you from. I guess he should've known there's no protecting anyone from this life." Adelaide goes quiet after that before she adds, "My daughter could've been hurt last night."

I...don't know what I'm supposed to say. Am I supposed to offer Adelaide comfort? Am I supposed to just let her speak? I don't know her like that. All I know is that she's my...Mattia's sister.

"I'm not as mad as I should be about all of it this," I admit softly. "Maybe I like Mattia too much to be mad but," I shrug. It's the first time I've said any of that out loud and weirdly enough, Adelaide feels like the safest place to admit it.

She's not like my mother or friends. It's like...maybe she'll understand. Hopefully.

"Because you love him?" she offers up. Her body relaxes a little bit on the couch. Her nose scrunches just a little and she sighs, "So, might as well just get this out there. My fiancé, Christian, is an FBI agent. Maybe you've picked that up?"

I open my mouth to say something and she holds up her index finger, telling me to hold that thought. It feels like something only Adelaide could get away with. So, I nod and let her continue.

"When I met Christian, he was undercover. I thought he worked for my dad. Before I knew it, I was getting more twisted up with him than anyone I've ever known. And then I was pregnant. In pretty much the same week, I discovered that he had all these files about me and my family. He was trying to take us down. I didn't know how to react. I was pregnant. I was angry. I was confused.

He told me that he loved me and I didn't know how to believe him. If he loved me, why would he lie? How could I love him after all of that? I made my choice the day my world went to hell. There was no other way out of that mess. Kara needed her father. I needed Christian. I chose him and... I know I made the right choice. But I also lost myself in the process."

Well, that was something. I'm blinking at her, trying to take it all in. Wow. Okay. So at least now I know how she can relate to what I've been through, about not knowing the truth and having to find out for herself.

"Wow," is what I get out and feel like a fucking idiot. I'm half expecting Adelaide to snap at me for that very insightful comment, but she doesn't. She just shrugs.

"You're not in the same position. Not yet. You can still choose Mattia, but if you choose Mattia, this is what you're choosing. This is who he is, who our family is. If you don't

choose him, your life isn't going to fall apart. We'll still make sure that you're safe. You just need to be sure, Ella. Otherwise, you'll wake up one day and you won't know who you are."

I know that Adelaide is speaking from experience, but the thing is, I'm sure. I've been sure since the beginning, before I even knew about all the risks, about everything that Mattia is involved in. I know what my answer is.

"I love him, Adelaide. This is not the life that I ever envisioned for myself. If I had a choice, maybe I wouldn't choose it. Maybe I'd make sure I fell in love with a lawyer or a stockbroker –" Adelaide snorts at that before I continue, "But I love Mattia. I'm in this. Whatever this is."

That makes her smile and she nods. "As long as you're sure. Because he loves you too. Trust me, he was fucking *insufferable* after you two broke up. It was like living with a depressed ghost."

I laugh. It's such a weird thought – Mattia wandering around the house like a ghost. It's strange to me to know that I had that effect on him, but he's had the same effect on me. Everything has felt weird without him. With him, even with the drama, everything in the world feels *right*.

"Well, now that we've had that conversation, I need to consider how I'm going to explain all of this to Christian when he gets home because, um...yeah."

"I guess the truth isn't the preferred option?"

She snorts again. It's the most relaxed I think I've ever seen her. "Not in the least. It should be. I think that's the lesson we should all take away from this but he's not going to approve that I'm back in this."

"Even though it's who you are?"

"Even though it's who I am."

Yeah, that makes sense. I have no helpful advice to offer because the truth is my go-to. Especially after everything that I've been through with lies. But I can see how the truth may

not be helpful here. It's like Adelaide has to choose between her livelihood and her relationship and I couldn't imagine being in that position. I don't know Christian. I can't form an opinion on how he'd react.

Considering he works for the FBI though, probably not well. I don't think any FBI Agent wants to know that their fiancée is tangled back up in the crime family he helped take down.

I let the silence fall between us after that, quietly searching for the right thing to say. I can't find it. Instead, I change the subject and hope that Adelaide understands.

"Is Mattia going to be okay?" I ask. I mean, he left out of here in such a rush. I don't have to ask what he's going to go do. I have a gut feeling and I don't want to think about it. Just because I'm accepting it, just because I'm not running, doesn't mean *I* want to be involved in their mess.

"He's going to be fine. Yulian is with him," Adelaide says. "This is...good for Mattia. It shows that he understands what he has to do. It shows that he knows how important all of this is. It's a big step."

It's such a casual way to talk about murdering someone. I know to them this is nothing huge. This is like everyday stuff. To me, this feels like a complete mind fuck. It leaves me unsettled. It makes me feel like *I'm* in the wrong for not trying to stop any of it. In the same breath, I understand. It's conflicting and confusing and I sigh.

"Will I ever get used to this?"

Her eyes are soft as she looks at me. "Honestly? Probably not."

At least she was honest, didn't cover this in some candy-coated bullshit about how I'd stop feeling this uncomfortable about it. Maybe ignorance is bliss. Maybe I shouldn't be with Mattia, but if it was wrong, why would it feel so right when we're together?

So, I'll just focus on other things and hope that in the end, Mattia is okay.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Mattia

I'm seeing red as I speed toward Damien's apartment. His actual one. Not the fake story he gave me that I should've seen right through. *Of course*, he was trying to see if I'd pick up on things and I was too much of a fucking idiot to do so. Next to me, Yulian is quiet and maybe that's for the best. I'm not even sure what I'd say at this point. I'm trying to sort out my thoughts and it's not going well.

Ella could've died. Adelaide could've died. *Kara* could've died. I could've lost my darling niece because of my own ignorance. I don't think I would be able to live with myself if anything happened to her. Ella and Adelaide are one thing. Kara's a baby. She has no idea what's going on. She's not involved in this at all.

I'm going well above the speed limit. Nothing matters right now except getting my hands on Damien's slimy fucking neck. I want to strangle him with my bare hands and watch the life drain from his eyes.

"Am I coming up with you?" Yulian asks, speaking for the first time since we've gotten in the car. "I've already called some of my best men to let them know what's happening. They'll be downstairs, just in case."

He doesn't need to elaborate on the just in case part. I know what he's getting at. Clean up, or if Damien tries to run, or if he has his men waiting for us. We still don't know what he's playing at, who he's working with. I just know that this chaos isn't entirely Damien's idea. He's never been smart enough for that.

"Yes," I answer Yulian. I don't give him any more than that. I want him up there, just in case I'm too much of a coward to do what needs to be done.

I've never killed anyone before. I've never ordered a hit. The closest I've ever gotten is when Christian's brother was murdered by a bullet meant for me. Adelaide's ordered hits. Yulian's killed people with his own two hands. I need to get on their level or step back.

I need to have it in me to do what needs to be done.

We arrive at Damien's apartment and I kill the engine. We get out, walking in silence up the stairs. I hesitate – just for a second by the front door. Then I knock. It takes a beat but Damien opens it. He looks confused, head tilted to the side.

“Mattia? How can I help you? And...is that the Andronikov kid with you? What's going on? Did you try to call me or something?”

“We need to talk,” I don't answer any of his questions. Answers are not something that he deserves right now. “May we come in?”

“I was actually in the middle of something and –”

I cut him off. “I wasn't asking, Damien. Let me in.” I'm fully prepared to strongarm my way into his apartment, but I don't have to. He steps aside and lets me in. Yulian follows.

Damien officially looks nervous. His eyes keep darting around his living room, refusing to look at us. “What is this?” he asks. “What is he doing here?” He jerks his thumb toward Yulian.

He still doesn't get any answers. I have my own questions right now. “Who are you really working for, Damien?” I ask.

He looks taken aback. “What? What are you even talkin' about, Mattia?”

“Who are you working for? It's a very simple question. I suggest that you answer it, Damien.”

I don't have it in me to play these games. I just can't. I know now that I should've listened to Adelaide from the beginning. It's clear that she's the one who should ultimately

be in charge. Can't think about that right now. I just have to focus on what I can control – and that's how this ends.

Damien's eyes are scanning the room. I watch as Yulian's follow, trying to figure out if he's looking for a weapon or not. Instead, I think Damien is just trying to buy himself time, think of a good lie.

Not happening. He doesn't get time. He doesn't get to lie anymore. I turn to Yulian. "Take care of him," I order.

When Damien comes to, he's tied to a kitchen chair. Yulian has thoroughly checked him over for any weapons. We were in the clear. He didn't have anything on him. Adelaide talked earlier about how she knew what people would do because it was what *she* would do. She played the game how others play it.

I see now that Damien is a lot like my sister. Adelaide would never get her own hands bloody. She'd have people do it for her. That's how it worked when she had Yulian kill Antonio. So, if Damien works like Adelaide that means two things. One: he hasn't gotten his hands dirty at all. He's had someone carrying all of this out for him. Trashing Ella's apartment, trying to burn down Adelaide's home. He's just been orchestrating all of it. And Two?

He's not alone. I'm sure people are watching him right now, looking for the right time to strike out at us. We have our men on their way. If this ends in absolute bloodshed, so be it. Maybe that's the way it was meant to end.

Yulian handed me his gun after we got Damien tied up and told me to take the lead. This was my family he was threatening. This is my job. He's just here for assistance. My right hand, right?

I've never been in this position before and if I'm being honest, I feel a little uncomfortable. The gun feels heavy in my

hand, uncomfortably so. It feels like it weighs a thousand pounds, pulling me down to the floor. I close my eyes for a moment and think back. I think about the tears in Ella's eyes, the fear I've never heard in Adelaide's voice before. This is no longer about the Mansolillos returning to any form of power. This is about standing up for my loved ones.

"M-Mattia?" Damien stutters out. "What is going on? What are you on about? I didn't do shit. I don't even know what you're –"

He's lying. I can't stand here and listen to him fucking *lie*. I backhand him across the face with the butt of the pistol and listen to the crack of metal against his skin.

"We're not playing games, Damien. Not anymore. Playtime is fucking over, okay? I need the goddamn truth from you."

"Mattia, Yulian's gotten in your head. Think about it. What do I have to gain by fucking you over? Yulian has the world to gain. Gets back on Adelaide's good side for protecting you, his family gains more and – and you gotta believe me, alright?"

I almost would. I look over at Yulian. His green eyes are studying my face, trying to see if I believe what Damien is saying. Unfortunately for Damien, I don't. Yulian is family to me at this point. Maybe he has something to gain from all of this, but I trust him. Most of all, I trust Adelaide. She'd see through his bullshit if there was any to see through.

The butt of the gun smacks Damien's face again. This time, he spits out blood. His lip splits and he looks up at me, dark eyes wide. "You seriously believe him over me?"

"Yes," I answer without a second thought. "Yulian is family. You are not, Damien. You tried to be for so long, but you were just never able to get close enough. My father never saw you as worthy to take over for him. He'd rather groom Adelaide for that over you and that ate you alive, didn't it?" I ask, tilting my head to the side.

I watch as the mask falls. As I remind him of everything that he couldn't have. Carlo was never going to see Damien as worthy, no matter what he did. He worshipped the ground my father walked on and when that didn't work, he slept with my mother like that would earn him some favor. It never did.

“She had **everything** and she threw it all away!” he hisses. “Who does that? She ruined everything for everyone. Then you get out of jail and expect to be able to build it all backup. Both of you are fucking crazy.”

There it is. We're getting down to it now, aren't we? Yulian is pacing, looking out the window, trying to keep an eye out for anything going on out there. I'm focused on Damien.

“Fine, so you target Adelaide. You target me. You tried to scare me off, got Gerard to shoot me, right? Scare Adelaide away by having someone try to burn her house down? What about Ella? Are you really the type to stoop that low and get someone so innocent involved in all of this? Carlo would never approve.”

He scoffs, more blood drips down from his lip. “Carlo had a shitty way of doing things. He didn't know there was a traitor in his midst and look what happened? He died. Like father, like son, right?”

My eyes focus on him, my finger sliding to the safety of the gun. I click it off and turn the muzzle to face him. My heart is hammering away. I've never done this before. I've never really considered doing this before. Like Carlo, like Adelaide, I've always had someone to take care of things like this for me.

I ignore his goad. I want answers. “You didn't answer the question, Damien. Why Ella? What did Ella do to get involved in your shit like this?”

“She was using me. Trying to get to you. I bet she thought I didn't realize it. Ella got involved without meaning to and she was going to pay for it too. I was hoping I'd get a

chance to swoop in. Play the role of Prince Charming for her while you were made out to be the bad guy. Guess that got fucked up, huh?”

That works its way underneath my skin. Ella was never meant to get involved in any of this. She was just a pawn. A bonus for Damien. Something else he wanted to steal away. I look at him and shake my head. “Who else?” I ask in a hiss. “Who are you working with? We both know you didn’t do this all by yourself.”

“I’ve been feeding information to the Luppinos. They reached out after Adelaide’s testimony. They saw my value. They saw what your father never did. I took the opportunity. When you reached out after you got out, I saw an even better opportunity. I brought it up to them and well, you see where we are now,” Damien says. His dark eyes leave my face, locking on the gun in my hand. He tilts his head to the side as he looks at me. “So, are you going to do it?” he asks. “Do you have it in you to pull that trigger, Mattia? Are you really that type of man?”

I’ve never been asked that question before. I’ve never had to think about that question before. Now, I do. Is this the man that I am?

I spent years in prison. Longer than I should’ve been in there because I was being punished by my father. I got out and immediately went back to what got me in trouble in the first place. This is in my veins. It courses through me and defines who I am. I am never going to be the type to work a cushy office job or sell cars. This is who I am, what I am. I have to accept that.

This is where I feel comfortable, feel whole. All I want out of life is to keep feeling like this. I want to rebuild this better than my father ever could. Even if that means Adelaide is in charge. Sometimes going after what you want means doing things you never imagined doing. I look at Damien and I ask myself if I could pull the trigger. The answer comes to me easier than I ever imagined it would.

“Yes,” I answer quietly. “This isn’t because you betrayed me, Damien. Don’t get it twisted. I don’t care that you’ve been feeding information to the Luppinos. Even in doing that, Yulian and I have built things up better than they ever were. This is because you threatened the people close to me. They are not dispensable.”

That is where Carlo and I differ. Carlo would willingly use the people around him as pawns. If they got hurt, it was just a price that he had to pay. He killed our mother when she crossed him and then pretended to be the heartbroken widower at her funeral. That’s not how I choose to do things. I am not going to risk the people I love for any of this. And anyone who crosses them is going to have to learn that for themselves.

I press the muzzle to Damien’s head. I’m trying to ignore the sound of my heart in my ears. Yulian is lingering close by and I already know what he’s thinking. If I can’t do it, he’ll do it for me. I appreciate it – but this is something that I have to do for myself. It’s the only way I’m going to feel okay about this.

Damien is looking up at me. I see it in his eyes. He doubts me. He doubts that I’ll do this. He doesn’t even try to talk me out of it. He just doesn’t think I have it in me.

I turn my eyes toward Yulian, just for a second. “Did we get everything we needed out of him?”

“A confession, who he’s working for, all his bullshit reasons? Da. I think we’re good,” he says with a shrug.

That’s it. That’s all we need. I take a deep breath and look back toward Damien. I press the muzzle of the gun tightly against his forehead, relax and pull it. I hear the crack and feel the blood splatter back against me. His body slumps forward from where it was tied to the kitchen chair.

I click the safety back on the gun, wipe it off and hand it back to Yulian. Silence washes over the apartment. I don’t know how I feel. All I know is that I did what was necessary.

Maybe this will haunt me in the middle of the night. Maybe it won't. I guess we'll see. What is done is done.

Yulian is tucking the gun back into his waistband when he speaks, "Adelaide's going to be pleased."

"She will."

"And what about you? How do you feel?"

He knows. He knows this is the first time I've taken a life. It's far from Yulian's first experience doing so. He excels in this. I could've just had him do it, but I know this is something I had to do for myself.

"Better now that the problem is solved," I answer. "Adelaide's safe. Ella is safe. Now all that's left is cleaning up this mess and moving on from here, right?"

"I'll have our men come up and take care of it. No one will know what happened here. No one will probably even wonder."

I nod in agreement. "Guess we should get back to the girls, right?"

Chapter Thirty

Ella

Time ticks by without the boys and I can feel the anxiety building between Adelaide and myself, more so than it was when they left. Adelaide keeps checking her phone, like clockwork, every two minutes she's unlocking it and staring at the screen. Neither of us knows what to say and for once, I think I'm more comfortable in the silence.

I'm worried about Mattia. I'm worried about the tentativeness of our relationship. Nothing has been established between us. Things have been too hectic, too up in the air to put a label on anything. I love him. I'm pretty sure he loves me. It leaves me with...all of this. Can I live with it? Can I live with knowing what Mattia left the house to go do?

From their eyes, I can see how this is necessary. This is how they handle problems. Is this the life for someone like me? I don't know. But I'm aware that if I want to be with him, this is a choice that I have to make. No one can make it for me. It's up to me.

The sound of a car in the driveway pulls both me and Adelaide from our respective thoughts. She tenses up for a moment and so do I. What if it's not Yulian and Mattia? What if it's someone else...someone like Damien?

Tension drains from the room when Mattia and Yulian enter. Adelaide is off the couch immediately, throwing her arms around her brother. Much different from how she was earlier. She looks up at him, giving him a quick scan. "Are you okay?" she asks softly. "Did...is it taken care of?"

Mattia smooths his sister's hair, nodding. "I'm fine, Ads. It's all taken care of." His arms wrap around her again, squeezing her to him. "I'm so sorry that I didn't believe you the first time. I should've listened to you from the beginning."

“Yeah, that should’ve been obvious,” she says and just like that, she’s back to the regular Adelaide. She lets go of Mattia and moves to Yulian, wrapping her arms around him.

I still haven’t figured out their relationship. Never really thought about asking. It doesn’t feel like my place. All I know is that she has a fiancé and it’s not Yulian. Although they’re kind of sweet together and he’s obviously a puppy for her.

Mattia’s eyes land on me and I swallow, standing up from the recliner. He holds open his arms and I’m immediately in them. At that moment, it feels like nothing else matters. I just want to be close to him. I feel his heart hammering in his chest as I press my cheek to it. His arms tighten around me, swaying the two of us in the middle of Adelaide’s living room.

She doesn’t let us forget that she’s here. “Well, since this is...mostly settled, I guess I need to figure out where we’re going from here. And...how I’m going to tell my soon-to-be husband about all of this.”

I look over Mattia’s shoulder, raising an eyebrow. “You’re actually going to tell him?” It’s not my place to ask, but it felt like her mind was completely made up earlier. I’m curious what changed.

I’m half expecting a snip from her about how it’s none of my business, maybe even Adelaide just ignoring me completely. Instead, she shrugs. “Guess we should all learn how important the truth is. I gotta be honest with Christian and see what happens. He’ll probably want to leave me. Maybe he’ll be okay with it as long as he doesn’t know any details.”

I can tell from her voice that she’s hoping for the latter. I hope for it for her too. She looks back over at me and Mattia before wrapping her arm around Yulian’s.

“Come along, Yulian. We’re going to go find a contractor and perhaps go shopping. I clearly need to redo my dining room,” she says, tugging him out of the room. I can tell what she’s doing. Giving Mattia and me some space, which I

appreciate. “We’ll be back shortly. Please don’t fuck on the couch!” Adelaide calls before I hear the front door close.

I snort and Mattia rolls his eyes. “I feel like I should apologize for her. She’s...something.”

“I actually kind of like her.”

“Wait. Are you serious?” Mattia’s looking at me like I’m sick. He even goes as far to press the back of his hand against my forehead, laughing when I swat it away. “Like...you’ve actually talked to her right. She’s a lot.”

“She’s very sure of who she is. It’s not a terrible trait,” I shrug. I didn’t grow up with Adelaide, so what can I say? Maybe the way I’m seeing her is just the ‘light’ version. The easier side to deal with. But, yeah, I like her. I could see myself getting along with her. “She’s kind of insightful when you talk to her.”

Mattia shrugs a shoulder. “Guess she can be insightful.”

This is the part where silence would linger between the two of us but I refuse to let it. Not today. There’s a very important issue in front of us and it needs to be addressed, not ignored. Not pushed aside. Not this time.

“How are you?” I ask, focusing on what feels just a tad bit more important at first. “I don’t know what happened but _”

“I killed him,” Mattia cuts me off with that. “I killed Damien. He’s the first person that I ever killed.”

How terrible is it that a bit of relief floods through me when he mentioned Damien is the *first* person that he’s killed? Like somehow one is a justifiable number. Considering the mental hell I’ve been in for the last twenty-four hours, I can almost justify it.

“I figured,” I say quietly. “The first part at least. That’s why I’m asking.”

“I don’t regret it,” Mattia says quickly. “I don’t feel like I’ve done something terribly wrong and maybe I should, but I

don't. But I also don't feel the urge to ever do it again. I wasn't...wasn't going to do it. But he came after you, Adelaide and Kara. The three most important people in my life."

I step away from him and he looks concerned for a minute, worried that I'm scared of him. I'm not. I sit back on the arm of the recliner, looking up at him. "This isn't going to become a habit?"

"Killing people?" He shakes his head. "No. I don't have any interest in doing it again unless it becomes necessary. I can leave that to other people. How do – how do you feel knowing that I did it though?"

"Conflicted. I feel like I should be angry about it or disgusted or not want to be around you. My brain is trying to justify why you did it and I understand why you did it. It's a lot."

"The world isn't black and white, Ella," Mattia tells me. "That's something you learn from experience. There aren't good guys and bad guys. Some people do what they have to do. Things generally make a little more sense when you look at it that way, you know?"

I get what he's saying. But it also feels like a way to justify doing horrible things. Like sometimes you just gotta kill a guy. I'm not sure I'm okay with that. I sigh, running a hand through my hair.

"I love you, Mattia. I love you and I want to be with you but I don't know – I don't know if this life is for me. And I also don't want to make you give it up because it's who you are, it's what you do. So that leaves me with needing to choose between a life with you and a life without you."

Mattia doesn't say anything. He doesn't have to. I can see it all on his face. He looks stressed like he's searching his brain to come up with a way to get me to stay. He crosses his arms over his chest, opens and closes his mouth a few times, and comes up with nothing.

I know that I don't need to make this decision right now. My life has just gone completely topsy-turvy in the last twenty-four hours. I'm not sure of much right now. But I look at Mattia and I feel sure about one thing. I love him. What he's done in the past doesn't matter. What he'll do in the future is...a little more complicated.

I meant everything I said. I don't want him to give this up. I know that he won't and even if he did, he'd probably be miserable. I also don't want to be in a situation like Adelaide's fiancé where she hid it from him and now she's stressed, trying to figure out how to tell him about it.

"I want to be with you," I say quietly. Mattia perks up, but I hold up a finger. "But I have one rule. I don't want to know about this stuff unless it's going to directly affect me. I don't know if that's a dealbreaker for you but I don't want to hear about your day at work, I don't want to hear about business dealings. I don't want to be involved at all."

I know that doesn't absolve me of any sins or anything. I am *very* aware of that. I'm already involved. I already know that Mattia killed a man today and every logical part of me knows that I should go to the cops with that – but I won't. I'll keep it to myself, take it to my grave.

But it keeps me from getting further wrapped up in all of it. Nothing else needs to rest on my conscience. And I still get to love Mattia the way that I want to love him – as long as this is all okay with him.

His dark eyes are on me, eyebrows raised. "So, you want to be completely uninvolved? Don't want to talk about my day over dinner? Don't want to know about anything going well? Anything that went wrong?" he asks.

I swallow and nod. He hates it. He's not going to go for it and we're not going to be together. That's beginning to sink in and the smallest part of me wants to backtrack it and say that I'll be as involved as he needs me to be. But I can't. I wouldn't be able to live with myself. I need to stand my ground on this one – no matter what happens.

“Okay,” Mattia says. “If that’s what you want, that’s what we’ll do. I want to be with you, Ella. I can follow that one rule. Especially since I don’t want you wrapped up in this. I want to keep you as far away from it as possible. I love you.”

Relief floods over me. I’m off the arm of the chair and wrapping my arms around his neck again. Leaning up, I press my lips to his. I feel at peace. Every muscle in my body relaxes when Mattia kisses me back and pulls me close to his body. My heart is pounding in my chest. This is everything. This is all I need.

I can handle it all as long as I’m with him. It’s the only thing in my life that has ever made any sense.

When the kiss breaks, he’s smirking down at me. Before he can even say anything, I shake my head. “Adelaide will kill us if we fuck on her couch,” I remind him.

“She doesn’t have to know. But that wasn’t what was on my mind. I guess – guess I gotta ask you a question all over again, Ella,” he grins, brushing his fingers through my hair. “Will you be my girlfriend?”

I smile up at him, my fingers resting against his cheek. “Absolutely,” I say before I pull him in for another kiss.

Mattia is the only thing in my life I’ve ever been sure of – baggage and all.

THE END

Mafia Sins

By: Sloane Peterson

Chapter One

Adelaide

People always talk about love as being some amazing high. They say it makes you feel like you're floating, on top of the world. Clichés. They make movies about it and feed into this dream that people have. I've been in love. I fully understand how it can make even the sanest person act insane.

Do you know what's a better feeling than love though?

Power.

Power is more addicting. You get the highs, but you get to keep your sanity. You keep your wits about you. They don't make movies about how drunk power can have you feeling because power doesn't give you that fairytale. You don't always get the white picket fence dream. With power, you sometimes have to get your hands dirty. The high is worth it though.

I should be planning my wedding; the thought vaguely crosses my mind as I look down and remember the ring on my finger. Christian has been asking me a thousand questions about it. What would I prefer to do? Have I looked at venues? Do I want to go with his mom and sisters dress shopping? I could always bring Ella. It's *exhausting*...especially when I just...don't want to worry myself with all of that right now. There are many more important things that I could worry about other than some dumb wedding. Christian will have to understand.

"Adelaide," Mattia saying my name brings me back to the present. "What are you thinking? Should we take the risk?"

We're currently in a meeting, talking about the next step for the family business. My brother, Mattia is on my right side and Yulian is on my left. I guess Yulian could be considered our right hand at this point. It's complicated, just like everything else involving Yulian.

It's been only a few months since I let my brother convince me to restart the Mansolillo crime family. After the death of my father, it went dormant. I tried to move on, act like this wasn't who I was deep down. When, in reality, this is the one thing that makes me the happiest. Not my fiancé, not my daughter, *this*. I am not a white picket fence girl.

I look over at Mattia before turning my attention to our men. It's amazing how many were willing to fall in line as soon as they realized that the Mansolillo's were back. Even if I was leading it. They don't trust me, but they trust Mattia. Somehow, it works out.

"I think we need to lay low for a bit, wait and see what happens," I decide without a moment's hesitation. "I know how that sounds but think about it. Every other family in the city is going to try and make a move to take over the spot left by the Papilla. It's going to be a blood bath, so we wait for them to take each other out and make a move on the winner."

For the longest time, the Papilla family could've been considered our biggest rival. Not anymore. Someone massacred the entire family. Every member got a bullet right between the eyes. They're without a leader now, lost and eager to continue making a living. Everyone's going to want to swoop in and take over.

Personally, I'm more interested in who did it. It wasn't us. I don't think it was one of the other families either. Someone executed an entire crime family and hasn't claimed it. Someone is working smart. It's a concern, one that I don't share with anyone else because I don't need them to worry. We'll be fine.

We've already risen from the ashes once.

"Are you sure that that's the smart move? What do you think, Mattia?" asks Gar. He's...a new kid. New to this life. Yulian and Mattia think he'll be a fine man once he learns the ins and the outs of this business. He's loyal and dedicated. He's also a bit of an idiot though as if that wasn't clear by the mistake he just made.

Questioning me? Going over my head and asking Mattia for his opinion over mine? We're supposed to share the role as 'lead' but Mattia is more than happy to allow me to run things. He prefers to be seen as the face since people immediately don't trust me. I get it. I sold my family out once. As I said, love makes someone lose all common sense.

Next to me, Yulian gets tense. He's waiting for me to say the word. He'll make an example out of Gar. I don't want that – not yet. I don't want to be seen as completely merciless. That gets me nowhere. I need to take no shit, but I will give people a chance to learn their lesson.

I hold my index finger up before Mattia can speak. "Gar, is there something you'd like to say? Do you have an opinion?" I ask, keeping my tone even.

I'm used to this. It's annoying, but I'm used to it. Ever since my father started shaping me for this life, people have questioned me. How can a woman run things? What does she know? People thought my father was insane for wanting me to be his successor.

Gar immediately looks uncomfortable when I address him. Good. Let him realize what a mistake he made. Let it sink in for him. He doesn't say anything, eyes going to the table instead.

"No, please. Go ahead and say whatever it is. I want to be able to address whatever concerns you have," I tell him.

He swallows before finally finding his voice, "I just – doesn't waiting make us look weak?" he asks. "Doesn't it make us look scared to fight more than one family at once?"

Yulian is still tense next to me. I put my hand on his arm, making sure he stays calm. You can never be too sure with his temper.

"That's an understandable worry, Gar," I assure him. "It might look that way to some but think about it this way. If we get involved in some all-out gang war with multiple families, we risk losing a good portion of our men. If it's just us against

one other family, we risk losing less. You don't want to make big moves just to look tougher," I say. "You have to think smarter. Does that answer your question or do you still need Mattia to tell you what *he* thinks?"

Mattia looks uncomfortable. I see it from the corner of my eye. Leadership is not his strong point. He wishes it was, but he's not good at it. He'd rather *pretend* and let me really call the shots. Maybe it'd be smarter if I just handled things from the sidelines, but I'm not a sideline kind of girl. I prefer to be the main character.

Gar swallows again. He can't look me in the face, which is probably a good thing right now. It means that worked. It means that (hopefully) going forward he won't question me again. He nods his head. "Understood, Adelaide. Thank you for explaining it."

Exactly what I wanted.

The meeting winds down. Everything else that needs to be addressed is small and doesn't take long. Our men file out of the conference room, leaving Mattia, Yulian, and me.

"You handled that surprisingly well," Mattia comments, once he's sure that everyone else is out of earshot.

"I was willing to punch him anyway," says Yulian.

"If he questions me again, you can handle it," I tell Yulian softly. "I don't want to rule by fear. I want fear to be a tool I can use, not my default."

"You're really growing as a person, Ads," teases Mattia.

"It's a start," I shrug. I can't just have everyone that I dislike getting beat up. I mean, maybe in a perfect world but I want to be a good leader. I want to be successful. If this falls apart again, I'm left with nothing. I can't start all over again.

"What are you doing next? Want to get lunch?" Mattia asks. "Ella's at work. I have time."

Mattia and Ella are still going strong. He moved out of my and Christian's house into her apartment. They're always

together, but not in that annoying, overly clingy couple way. They're actually kind of cute together.

"Next time. Christian's home and he wants to talk about the wedding." I don't bother to suppress my eye roll. It's not like I can roll my eyes about it in front of Christian. It'll start a fight.

"You know you don't have to get married, Ads," Yulian points out. "No one is making you."

"No, no. I know. I want to." Do I? "I just care nothing about the planning portion and Christian is convinced I need to give my opinion over every single fucking detail."

"You *are* very opinionated. He probably just wants to make sure you don't freak out if he makes a terrible choice or something," Mattia says.

Chapter Two

Christian

I love her more than I've ever loved another person. She's the love of my life, my fiancée, and the mother of my daughter. I tell everyone that everything is perfect between the two of us, but that's a lie. One I keep telling myself to make me feel better. The truth is it feels like everything is falling apart. Ever since I've gotten back from my last undercover job, something has felt off with us. Maybe it was there before that and I was just in denial.

The problem with Adelaide is she doesn't address emotions. Ever. She would rather stew in whatever she's feeling – positive or negative, doesn't matter. She doesn't like being that level of vulnerable with anyone. Not even me. It creates problems, but I've always chosen to look past them.

She goes out with Mattia often lately. I'm not jealous. He's her brother. He was locked up for years. She's making up for the lost time by spending all that time with him now. If my brother was still alive, I'd be spending as much time as possible with him. He's not though. He's dead because of Mattia, so there's no love lost between the two of us.

I'm worried though. She's not talking about what she's up to. I try not to assume the worst but in my line of work, you have to assume the worst in people.

And I know if I ask her what's going on, she'll lie. I feel stuck. Do I blindly trust my soon-to-be wife, or do I follow my gut and figure out what she's trying to hide from me? If I do the latter, I know I risk losing her.

The front door opens. I hear the familiar sound of her heels on the hardwood floor as she gets home. I don't bother getting up from the kitchen table. I guess if she wants to talk she'll come to me.

God, when did we end up like this?

The footsteps come to the kitchen. I'm almost a little shocked when she takes the spot at the table next to me.

"Where's Kara?" she asks.

"With my mom. She hasn't had her this week and missed her," I explain. Is this what our relationship has become? Just talking about our child? Unable to talk to each other.

Adelaide nods. "Yeah, okay. Are you going to pick her up later?" she asks.

Yep. Evidently, this is what we've become. "Probably. Should I pick her up later? My mom could watch her tonight if you wanted. You know she never minds."

She pauses before nodding. "Pick her up later. I like my baby being home."

Not exactly what I was hoping for. I guess I have to be more direct with Adelaide. "What are you doing tomorrow?" I ask.

"Probably seeing Mattia. Why? Did you make some sort of appointment for the wedding?"

"No. I mean...we should really get started planning it, Adelaide. But I was wondering if you wanted to go out. Together. Like a date night?" I don't know why I feel so dumb suggesting it. She's my *fiancée*. We're supposed to go out and do things together, right? Especially when there feels like there's a gap between the two of us. We're supposed to work together to figure it out.

Adelaide doesn't look amused with the suggestion we need to start planning the wedding. She'd probably prefer if I took care of everything, but as far as I know...most women *like* planning their weddings. Or at least having some kind of input. I worry if I plan everything, she'll hate it.

"Sure, yeah. Tomorrow night?" she agrees.

That feels almost too easy and I feel terrible for even thinking that. Isn't love supposed to be easy? Or at least feel that way? I'm not supposed to overthink everything I say to her. Deep down, I know that this is part of a bigger problem but I'm so willing to just write it off as the end of the honeymoon phase.

Something is going on with Adelaide. When I got back from my last undercover op, half of the house had been burnt to the ground. Adelaide and Mattia were quick to say that Damien had found out where we lived, and I let myself believe them because I *wanted* to. It's not like I can accuse anyone of anything without any proof.

So, I nod. I accept her offer. "Yeah, tomorrow night works. Anything, in particular, you want to do? Go to that Italian place that you like so much?"

Adelaide shrugs. Every interaction I get out of her feels so damn indifferent. I feel like I could offer her a trip to Paris and she'd just give a simple nod over it.

"Italian works, Christian," she says, leaning over to kiss my cheek.

I hate everything about this. It feels so cold between us. Did I do something wrong? Is it my job? Is it because I shot her father before he could shoot her? Maybe I'm genuinely overthinking everything. Maybe all we need is a date night. A chance to reconnect before it gets really bad. Maybe Adelaide just feels underappreciated.

"Yeah, okay. Great," I say. Then silence lingers between us. The uncomfortable kind. The kind that I'm desperate to fill with *something* but I don't know what. I don't know what to say to fill it.

And Adelaide doesn't give me the chance to. She kisses my cheek again before standing up and slinking toward the bedroom. She doesn't invite me and I don't follow, despite how much I want to.

I miss the woman I fell in love with, the woman I thought I knew. That leaves me to ask the question though – did I really know her at all? Or did I just hope with everything in me that this was some fairytale?

Chapter Three

Adelaide

I feel awful.

Any other adult could open their mouth and just come clean about everything. If I was a better person, I would've told Christian how unhappy I am a long time ago. It has nothing to do with him. Not really. He's perfect. He's done anything and everything that I could ever ask for him to do. What it comes down to is simple – I cannot be myself with Christian.

He wants me to not be Adelaide Mansolillo. He wants me to be little pieces of her but not the whole person. He wants the girl who wants love, not power. I tried to be that girl. I tried so fucking *hard* and I just couldn't. I felt like I was drowning and no one was there to save me. Until Mattia offered a chance to restart what I was missing. Once I got a taste, I couldn't let it go.

And I can't tell any of this to Christian. How do you tell your FBI agent fiancé that you restarted the crime family that he shut down? How do you tell him that that's all you really want out of life? Not marriage or motherhood. Not even love. You want power more than anything.

You don't. You can't. If you do, you risk losing it all. There is no way for me to have the man I love *and* the career I want and if it came down to having to choose...I'm scared of what I'd choose.

I agreed to get brunch with Ella, Mattia's girlfriend. She's a sweet thing, probably way too good for my brother. She loves him despite everything he's done, everything he's involved in. Probably helps that she doesn't work for the government. She operates strictly off of the rule that Mattia isn't allowed to tell her about what's going on. She'd prefer to stay clueless about details but at least she knows the truth.

“I have a date with Christian tonight,” I say, taking a sip from my cappuccino.

“That’s sweet,” she says with a bright smile. “It’s sweet that he still wants to take you on dates, right?”

“I don’t want to go,” I admit and immediately feel awful for saying that. “It’s just...it’s really hard being around him right now. I don’t *like* lying to him. I just want to come out with the truth and I know that I can’t. It makes it all really difficult.” I know I kind of just word-vomit all of that to poor Ella but what is one of my only friends for if not to vent to her? It’s not like I can vent to Mattia about my relationship problems, he knows less than I do. Yulian is my ex. Obviously, I can’t talk to him about my *current* relationship.

Ella sighs. “Why can’t you just tell him the truth, Adelaide? I mean, he’s your fiancé. What’s the worst that could happen?”

I look at her, blinking a few times. It’s well established that she makes terrible choices, so it probably shouldn’t be a surprise that she’s not exactly the best when it comes to advice.

“Sure Ella, let me just tell my fiancé who just happens to work for the FBI about all the illegal activities I’ve been involved in lately. Remember how we met? He wanted to take my family out for good. I don’t think he’s going to love the idea that I restarted it.” I can’t help but be snarky. It’s just who I am. Ella knows that.

She blows her bangs out of her face, takes a bite of toast, and thinks it over. “I mean, he’s your *fiancé*. Do you really think he’s going to just take you down? Have you arrested?”

I don’t know the answer. That’s what makes this so fucking complicated. I want to believe that Christian would support me in the same way that Ella supports Mattia. Like maybe he’d be fine if I didn’t tell him any details about what I was up to. Deep down, I don’t think that that’s the right

answer though. Christian has a very strong sense of right and wrong. He's already bent that once for me. I don't think he'll do it again so willingly.

"Maybe. I really don't want to risk it," I sigh. "So, I have to keep lying to him and it makes everything really complicated. It makes staying together hard."

"Do you want to just leave him?" she asks, her voice soft. There's not a hint of judgment behind her hazel eyes and I fucking appreciate that because I wouldn't be able to stand being judged right now.

Ella is asking the hard questions. I don't know what answer to give her because when it comes down to it this is much more important to me than anything else. Maybe I'm built wrong. Maybe I'm just fucked up. Maybe it's impossible for me to be normal and happy because of my childhood. I don't know.

She's waiting for me to give her an answer and all I can do is stare back at her. Finally, I force myself to speak, "I don't think so." It's not the resounding 'no' that I should be able to give. I know deep down I should be able to say 'no' without a second thought, but I can't. I hate myself for that. It feels like I'm just wasting my time, wasting Christian's time. He deserves so much more than I'm giving him.

The looks Ella gives me are sympathetic. Now I'm wishing she was being judgmental. I hate it when people pity me. "Maybe you need to take a break," she offers. "Tell Christian that things are a lot right now, that you need some space. That doesn't mean it's over. It just gives you space to think."

I've had space. Christian is out of town for work a lot. I've had all the space in the world, and I still don't have an answer. I don't think space is going to help. There's only one way for this to end and I have to tell him the truth. I just don't think I'm ready for that yet.

I don't tell Ella any of that. I don't want to shoot down everything she suggests because I know that she is genuinely trying to be helpful. "Maybe," I answer. "I'll think about it."

I won't.

This is not how I intended to spend my afternoon. I have a date with Christian. Italian. I agreed to it, but now it looks like I'm not going to show up. I drop my head to the table, feeling the weight of the world pressing down on my shoulders. I feel like it's all too much.

Gar is dead.

The little idiot went and got himself in trouble after our meeting yesterday. After everything I told him, he ignored that. He thought he was being smart by making a move. He wasn't. He went into territory that wasn't ours and pulled a gun. There was no other way for this to end.

Mattia puts a hand on my shoulder, sighing. "I know. I didn't want to tell you, but I knew that you needed to know."

The kid was dumb, but he had *potential*. I could see him as a real leader one day. He asked questions and I thought he understood the answers. Guess I was wrong there. Is my sense of judgment off? Am I the one to blame?

"No, I know. I needed to know. Was it the Papillas?" I ask.

Neither Yulian nor Mattia speak for a moment. I'm about to open my mouth and snap at them, demand a fucking answer because I deserve it. Yulian speaks, probably because I'm less likely to snap at him than I am Mattia.

"Yes. From what we know, the Papilla's were the ones who killed him."

I nod. "Okay. We get revenge. We make them pay for taking one of ours. Gar deserves it." I know acting in revenge

is messy. I know that it's something that I *shouldn't* do, but I have to. It's only right.

Mattia's hand doesn't leave my shoulder. "Are you sure?" he asks.

He never second-guesses my decisions unless they are the wrong ones. I don't have time for him to second guess me today. "Yes, I'm sure. Make the order. Make sure they know you don't fuck with the Mansolillo's."

The look my brother gives me is telling but he doesn't argue. He nods and stands, leaving the room. I assume he's going to make the call. It leaves me with Yulian, who slides into the seat Mattia had previously occupied.

His green eyes are on me, soft, worried. "Are you sure you're okay, Ads?" he asks softly. "I know you saw something in Gar."

"Are you questioning my decision too?" I snap.

"No, I'm just making sure you're okay. Is there anything I can do for you?" he asks.

I don't know how to answer his question. I know that logically I should just tell Yulian that there is nothing he can do. There's nothing anyone can do. Things happen. Gar made a dumb choice and he paid for it. It happens to the best of us, doesn't it? We all make very dumb mistakes and then we have to pay for them. Slowly, I'm realizing that I'm learning that lesson too.

But I don't want to sit here and think more about Gar, about what happened to him, about how a good life was snuffed out. He had such a bright future. Now it's all gone. I sigh, tilting my head back and taking a deep breath. "Why... why don't we grab a drink?" I offer. As soon as the words leave my lips, I know that it's a mistake.

I have a date with Christian tonight. He's going to know that I was drinking. He's not going to *love* that I was drinking with Yulian. I don't plan on getting plastered though. I never

do. Just a few shots to ease this pain, to replace it with a comfortable numbness.

Yulian's eyes are on me, and I can tell he's questioning whether he should agree or not. He's wondering whether he should just take me home. To his credit, he's very good at putting me first. Ahead of his wants, his desires. Lately, it's been a lot of him putting me ahead of his own family. His father expects Yulian to be *his* right hand, but lately, he's been mine.

He pauses and swallows before speaking. "Are you sure about that, Adelaide?" he asks, keeping his voice soft.

I know what he's doing. He's giving me a chance to back out, to change my mind. Logically, every bit of me is screaming that I should take that chance. Go home to my fiancé, go on the date that he wants us to go on. But I'm also putting myself first tonight. It's just a few drinks. It's not a big deal.

"I'm sure, Yulian," I say, standing up. "Now, are you going to get a drink with me or am I going to be drinking alone?"

Chapter Four

Christian

I check my phone for what feels like the thousandth time. Still nothing from Adelaide. I'm beginning to worry. I'm trying my best not to let my mind go to all of those dark places, but I can't help it. Someone tried to burn our fucking house down while I was on my last job. Someone who wanted my fiancée and child dead. That's kind of worrisome, but Adelaide was very relaxed about the whole ordeal.

'Things happen' is what she said with a nonchalant shrug while talking about it. I get it. It's how she was raised. As the daughter of a powerful mafia boss, I'm sure that she's been kidnapped once or twice too. She never speaks about these things, like they're nothing to her when that sort of trauma shapes a person. I guess that's why our house catching on fire was no biggie for her.

These things are huge for me. I take her (and Kara's) safety very seriously. She's been gone since this afternoon. Headed out to meet Mattia and I've heard nothing from her since. I'm half-tempted to text Mattia and ask, but if it's nothing, Adelaide will be upset that I was trying to track her location or whatever. I give in. I can deal with her being upset as long as she's safe.

'Have you heard from Adelaide?' It's a simple text that I send Mattia. We're not close. We're never going to be close. But I think he knows that I genuinely love his sister, so at least I have that going for me, right?

As I wait for his reply, I feel my anxiety beginning to build even more. I'm worried that someone has harmed her. Someone saw her leave wherever she was with Mattia and grabbed her. They're holding her hostage. They're doing terrible things to her. She's dead. All of these concerns flood over me.

My phone vibrates. I'm hoping it's Adelaide, but it's Mattia. At least he replied quickly enough.

'No. Last I saw her she was with Yulian.'

That allows a new fear to flood over me. Yulian Andronikov. Son of Dmitri Andronikov, head of the Andronikov family. They're a vicious family who had a truce with the Mansolillos for years. We've never been able to pin anything on them and they keep everything very low-key. No one dares snitch on them, so we've been letting them go. To make matters just *slightly* worse, Yulian is Adelaide's ex. Her first love. The only reason they're not still together is that she's much more ambitious than he is.

I know he means a lot to her. I know she cares about him still. I don't like that they're still in contact. I don't like that she spends time with him, but I trust Adelaide. At least, I thought I did. Now that she's ghosting me, now that things feel like they're shifting between us, I can't help but wonder if I've been an idiot this entire time and something is building between them again. Maybe it already has. Maybe they've been together since the last time I was out of town.

I don't want to think like that though. I want to give Adelaide the benefit of the doubt. She doesn't seem like the cheating type. She's a good mother, a good partner when whatever else is going on with her isn't happening.

Headlights pull into the driveway. I hear a car door slam, and footsteps approaching the front porch. A key shuffles in the lock for a minute before the door opens. Relief floods over me when I hear the familiar sound of Adelaide's heels on the hardwood. The car drives off and the relief starts to vanish. All those terrible feelings are back.

When she appears in the living room, her skin is flushed. The feeling builds. It's not until she sways just a little that I realize it's (hopefully) not some post-sex glow. She's drunk. I'm...biting my tongue and trying to hold back my anger. Did she skip our date to get drunk with her ex?

“I know, I know. We had a date,” she says. Okay, so she’s not that drunk. She makes her way over to the recliner, not the couch next to me. She plops down in it, leaning her head back against the back of it. “Something came up though.”

“You couldn’t text me and let me know?” I ask, still forcing back my anger. “I was worried about you, Adelaide. I thought you were kidnapped or murdered. Instead, you were out drinking with your ex? Seriously?”

She rolls her eyes. Her body language changes. She’s no longer relaxed. She’s on guard, ready for an attack. That’s more telling than she wants it to be. “It’s not like that, Christian. I didn’t just decide to go drinking with Yulian for fun. Something came up. I needed someone to talk to.”

I can’t express how fucking frustrated I am. It always feels like a battle with Adelaide. It always has. Getting her to communicate with me is like pulling teeth. I understand. I get it. She was raised in a family that views communicating feelings as some sort of weakness. Fine. But...she hasn’t even tried to change. And when she *does* communicate, it’s with her ex. Not me. Not her fiancé. Not the father of her child, the person she’s building a future with.

I run a hand through my hair, taking a breath. I don’t know how much longer I can contain any of this. “Talk to *me*, Adelaide! It’s not that hard. What have I done to make you think you can’t have a goddamn conversation with me? Have I ever pushed you away? Have I ever lashed out? Yeah, I’m pissed right now because I don’t know what’s going on. I don’t know what you need from me.

Things are changing between us. You know that. I know that. I thought maybe we could go on a date tonight and that would help. Be a good step forward, you know? Instead, you decide to go drinking with your ex to talk about your feelings. I don’t get it. Do you even want to be with me?”

Asking that question is fucking *painful*. I don’t know if I want to know the answer or not. It had to be asked though.

We need to just get it out of the way. If this is the end, we need to accept it and move on.

Her face changes. Previously, she looked like a wild animal ready to lash out. Now she looks...wounded? She kind of shrinks back. I've never seen her react like that before. Fighting is Adelaide's go-to. She doesn't back down.

"I want to be with you, Christian. At least I...I think I do," she admits quietly.

Well, that wasn't the fucking answer I wanted to hear. She *thinks* she wants to be with me? That's not a resounding yes or anything. Before I can respond, Adelaide's talking again.

"Nothing is going on with Yulian and me. I haven't discussed our relationship with him if that's what you're worried about. It was about something else. I just...it feels like we're two different people, Christian. It feels like I have to change who I am to be with you and I was okay with that for a little bit. I thought I could do it, but then I realized how miserable I was. When we're together, I'm someone that I don't know."

None of this is anything I want to hear. It tears my heart and I don't know how to respond. I was making her miserable? I thought she was happy. We have a home, a child, a life together. Is it so bad? Is being with me so bad? In the beginning...she seemed so happy. I saw her eyes light up in ways that I never had before.

"Adelaide, why didn't you say anything when you noticed?" I ask her quietly. "Why wait until now? Why keep all of that inside? We could've done something about it. We could've...I just want you to be happy."

"I know. I just...felt awful telling you that I wasn't. I know how much you've sacrificed for me. I know everything you've done for me. I don't want to seem unappreciative, because I'm not. I just...don't know if I'm built for this life with you, Christian. I'm sorry."

She gets up and starts to leave the living room and I can't let her go. Nothing has been solved. All I know now is that my fiancée is miserable with me and I can't have that. I stand from the couch, dropping my phone onto the cushion as I follow her. Before she can leave the living room, I grab her wrist. It's a risk. It's possible that it'll set her off.

She turns to look at me and I see so much turmoil in those brown eyes. There's something else she isn't saying but I don't know if I have it in me for any other big reveals tonight. That's dumb, I know that. But I just...I don't want to lose her.

I reach up, brushing her hair out of her face. "I love you, Ads. I do."

"I know," she says. She won't make eye contact. She's looking anywhere but my face.

Is it over? Are we so broken? My fingers thread through the hair at the side of her head, pushing it away from her face. My hand cups her head and I lean in. She doesn't pull away. I take that as a sign that this is okay, so I kiss her. I kiss her softly, still able to taste the alcohol on her lips. But she doesn't pull away. She kisses me back.

Deep down, I'm very aware that this isn't going to solve all of our problems, but for tonight, it can be enough. I can just pretend like it's all okay when she's kissing me like this.

I'm such a goner for her, it's not even funny.

I press her back against the mattress, her dark hair fanning out around her on the pillow. She still tastes like the shots she was downing with Yulian, but I do my best to push that out of my mind. The last thing I want to think about is Adelaide and Yulian. Why she was with him, what they had to talk about. I just want it to be us tonight. It's not the date night that I planned, but it's what we have. Maybe we can reconnect. Maybe we can fit the pieces back together again somehow.

No one can say that I'm not hopeful.

I kiss a trail down from her lips, over her chin, and down her neck. I stop at her pulse point, my tongue flicking over the sensitive area and making her shiver. At least I can still do that. At least she still responds to me.

My arm wraps around her body, helping her sit up. I find the zipper on the back of her dress with ease and peel it off her body. She looks like a goddess in the low light of our bedroom. Perfect body, perfectly tanned skin. She's flawless. I want to worship her. I want her to know just how much I appreciate her. How lucky I feel that she even graces me with any attention.

Her bra follows after her dress, both of them falling into the void of our bedroom floor. My lips continue their trail downward. Over her collarbone, down to her breasts. I just barely flick my tongue over her nipple and her body jumps, head falling back. I pull a moan from her lips and I feel like maybe all isn't completely lost. Maybe I'm lying to myself; it doesn't matter. As long as we have this, maybe we have *something*.

I take her nipple into my mouth, swirling my tongue around it as it hardens beneath my tongue. Her hands grab the sheets underneath her, body arching up toward me. My hand goes to her other breast, taking her nipple between my forefinger and thumb, teasing it, feeling it harden, and listening to the beautiful little gasps that Adelaide makes.

One of her hands leaves the sheets, moves up to my hair, and tangles there. She pulls me closer, desperate for more attention. I switch nipples, offering the one that was previously being toyed with by my hand the same attention as I had the first one.

She squirms beneath me. The noises that Adelaide makes have me feeling like I'm losing my damn mind. They're everything. Absolutely beautiful, just like she is.

Satisfied by the attention I've given her breasts, my mouth continues lower. Over her abdomen, over her hipbones. I give her gentle little nips, feel her sigh, and her body relaxes until my fingers slip underneath the waistband of her panties. I tug at them and she lifts her hips, making it easier to wiggle her out of the fabric. They join the rest of her clothes in the void on the floor.

I slid down between her thighs, spreading them apart and taking in the gorgeous sight in front of me. "So pretty," I whisper up to her, watching little goosebumps form along her skin. Adelaide never gets tired of being complimented and I will never get tired of complimenting her.

I drag my finger down her slit. It's wet when I pull it away and I can't help but smile. "Look at you, all wet for me already, love?" I purr, bringing it to my lips. I make sure her pretty eyes are on me as I lick my finger clean.

The response I get is a very uncharacteristic moan. That means it's doing something to Adelaide. *I'm* doing something to Adelaide. I love making her fall apart for me. I love making her weak. It's the only time it feels like we're on an equal playing field.

"Christian," the way she says my name is music to my ears. If I was mean, I'd make her beg. I'd make her tell me everything she wants me to do to her and then *maybe* do them, but that's a fight I'm not prepared for tonight. There's nothing Adelaide hates more than submitting to someone. Tonight, I just want to make her happy.

So I lean in, slide my tongue down her slit and listen to the pleased sound that she makes when I do so. "Delicious," I whisper against her folds. I spread her lips with one hand while I dive in, sliding my tongue up and down her slit. She tastes like honey. Perfect on my tongue. All I want to do is keep tasting her, keep making sure she feels good.

Her hand is back in my hair as I lap at her, taking my time. We don't have to rush tonight, so why should I? Why shouldn't I just appreciate her while I can? I lick at her slowly,

making sure every bit of her gets the attention that it deserves. My tongue finally makes it up to the spot I know she's been waiting for it to touch. I lick her clit once and she *shivers*. It's perfect.

That's where I focus. I circle her clit with the tip of my tongue, listening to her moan, feeling her squirm. One hand goes up to her hips to hold her still and keep her from jumping away from me. With the other, I gently push a finger inside of her. Just one, curling it up until I hit that sensitive spot inside of her. I apply just the right amount of pressure, something that's become common knowledge over the time I've been with her. I know her body like the back of my hand.

My mouth and finger rile her up perfectly. The noises she makes are getting louder, more frequent. She squirms, despite my hand on her hip to hold her in place. I can feel myself getting harder and harder in my pants, desperate to find my own relief but all I can do is focus on her. This is about Adelaide. This is about making sure she knows how much I appreciate her.

Her hand in my hair starts tugging me up. My eyes turn up, meeting hers to acknowledge that she wants my attention.

"Inside," she breathes, chest heaving. "Want you inside first."

I want to argue. I want to tell her that we have all the time in the world, that we don't have to rush it tonight. I want to tell her how badly I want to worship her, but the truth is, it's all in Adelaide's hands. I'm not going to argue. If she wants me inside, that's where I want to be.

I lick her clit one more time, watching as her body jumps at the sensation. "Okay," I say softly, sitting up on my knees. I stare down at her, just taking her in. She makes a very cute, impatient sound and I start to strip. Shirt, pants, boxers, all of them join her clothes on the floor.

I position myself between her thighs but Adelaide's putting her hand on my chest. I raise an eyebrow, waiting for

her next command. Has she changed her mind? Is this too much? Instead, she pushes me back and climbs on top.

My hands go to her hips, helping as she positions herself over my erection. She starts to lower down, taking me inch by inch. I watch pleasure cross her face before my head falls back and I sigh. *Fuck*. She feels like Heaven wrapped around me, warm and wet. She takes me all the way and stills, letting her body adjust.

Her hands go to my chest, using me to balance before she starts to rock. My hands stay on her hips, letting her take control. Adelaide's in charge of everything – all I want to do is sit back and watch the goddess on top of me. It's hard to think of anything else but her.

Once she sets the pace she wants, I move to meet her. We move together, in perfect rhythm. At least in the bedroom, we're still in sync. At least now we still have it together. Everything doesn't feel so fucking split between us. She picks up the pace, bouncing on top of me. My fingers bite into the flesh on her hips to help her.

Her cries become louder and more frequent again. I know that she's not going to last much longer, so I keep allowing her to stay in control. Let her do whatever she needs to get herself off. I live to please her. My hips start to snap up to meet hers, my desperation building.

“Christian!” she cries out my name and it's fucking music to my ears. She sounds so beautiful when she's falling apart for me. I don't let her slow down, don't slow down the snapping of my hips. She tightens around me as she falls over the edge, squeezing like a vice grip and that throws me over with her. I plummet, my hips bucking up as quickly as possible to meet hers.

My head falls back against the pillow as I come, filling her. I'm breathless. She's breathless. Adelaide collapses on my chest and my arms wrap around her. There's so much I want to say but I know that words will only make it worse. Nothing I

can say will fix anything between us right now. But I know that it can be fixed. I'm sure of it.

Nothing is too far gone. Not yet. Not if our bodies still fall in sync like that, not when she still looks at me with those pretty eyes.

Chapter Five

Adelaide

I don't want to say that sleeping with Christian last night was a mistake but...maybe it was. We had just had a conversation about whether or not we should stay together. Nothing was resolved, but I just...I wanted him. I love him. That's never been a doubt or a question. I love him very much, but love isn't everything. Not everyone realizes that.

We fucked and now I can't stop thinking about him. I can't stop thinking about how good it was. I want to do it again and normally that wouldn't be a problem, but it is when I still can't tell him whether I want to stay together or not.

How fucked is it that I'm hoping this meeting today keeps my mind off of things? We weren't going to meet today. Take a day off to honor Gar, but Yulian called this morning and said that he had information that he thought we'd want. I rushed to make plans with Mattia so Christian wouldn't think anything was off. After last night, I don't think I can tell him that I want to have lunch with Yulian or something.

We're in our usual backroom of the restaurant, the nice conference room we always use. Hopefully one day soon either Mattia or I will be able to buy a house and we'll have an *actual* conference room to meet in.

"Any idea what Yulian wants to talk about?" Mattia asks me, resting his chin in his palm. "I promised Ella that we could go to the waterpark today."

"Waterpark? Is she five?" I roll my eyes.

"It's called having fun, Ads. You should try it. Don't you have a kid? Maybe you could take her one of these days. Father never did that shit with us and look how you turned out – you don't know what fun is."

I roll my eyes again. "I know what fun is, you dick."

Mattia opens his mouth to say something but is cut off by the door opening. Yulian doesn't say anything as he enters, just walks over to the table and tosses down a manilla folder.

Almost immediately, my gut is telling me that something is wrong. The last time I opened a manilla folder, it told me that Christian had been building a case against my entire family. I push those thoughts away and turn my gaze up toward Yulian.

"Care to explain what you're trying to show us or are we all about the dramatics today?" I ask, trying to keep myself together, trying to keep in character. I don't want to look weak.

I know that I can. I know I can let my guard down around Yulian and Mattia. They're probably the only two people in the world that I *can* drop the act for, but I'm also in charge. No one wants to see their leader look weak, right?

"I was getting to that, Adelaide," he says. There's nothing playful about his tone. Something's wrong. I don't know what and I'm almost scared to ask, but I know that I need to know. Yulian wouldn't have called a meeting if it wasn't something serious. He wouldn't be acting like this if it wasn't serious. Yulian isn't a serious person.

"Go ahead then," I say, gesturing toward the manilla folder.

Yulian nods and flips the folder open. There's not a lot inside and I wonder how much of the folder was for dramatic effect. There are maybe two sheets of paper and a single blurry photograph inside. Both Mattia and I look up at him, waiting for further explanation as to what we're looking at.

"His name is Connor Todd," Yulian says, tapping his knuckle against the photograph. "And he's the person who killed the Papilla family."

Silence washes over the room. I don't know what to say and I'm sure Mattia is in the same boat. I take a second to compose myself before I reach out, grab the paper with the blurry CCTV screengrab on it, and look it over.

I don't know why I have to see him. Maybe because I don't believe it. This is just one man. He looks roughly Mattia's age. He has dark hair and no real distinguishable features in this crappy photograph. He looks tall? I don't know.

"It was just one man?" I finally ask, dropping the paper. "Are you sure? How can you be sure?"

I trust Yulian. It's just...how can one man be responsible for the death of an entire family? If what he's saying is true, Connor took out all the big players in the Papilla family in one swoop.

"It was just one man. I am sure, Adelaide," Yulian's tone is dead serious too. I can't bring myself to doubt him. "From what we know, Todd has military training. Special ops. A lot of his information is redacted, so my father has men looking further into things, reaching out to old contacts. All of that. But I'm sure."

"How?" Mattia asks. "How can you be sure?"

"Because he reached out to my father," Yulian says. He sits on the edge of the wooden table and I look at him, really look at him. He looks exhausted, with dark circles underneath his green eyes. His skin looks dull like he didn't sleep a wink after he dropped me off last night. His blonde hair is messy like his fingers have been running through it.

"What did he want?" Mattia asks. I don't need to – I think I already know what the answer is.

"He wants my father to hand over control of the family or else we'll wind up the same as the Papilla's."

Silence hits the room again. I feel like I can see the weight of the world hanging on Yulian's shoulders. Then it hits me. If Todd wants control of the Andronikovs, it means he'll come after us next. This man is coming after all the families in the city, seeking control. He wants to monopolize the crime in the city. I don't need to know why or what his plans are. All I know is that this feels like a threat I've never heard of before.

I wish my father was here.

Carlo would know what to do. Now it feels like the weight of the world is on my shoulders and I haven't been approached yet. I try to push that aside for now. Standing up, I walk over to Yulian. Reaching out, I put my hand on his cheek. "Thank you for telling us, Yulian," I say, keeping my voice soft. "And you're dismissed. Mattia and I can handle everything from here. You need to be with your family right now, help your father figure this out."

Yulian has been with me since the beginning of this fresh start. I like having him by my side. He helps me move forward and helps assure me that I'm making the right decisions. But he needs to put his own family first right now. Not mine. He was only supposed to be Mattia's righthand until we figured things out and had men of our own. Instead, Yulian has stuck with us.

His hand comes over mine, eyes turning up to meet mine. "No," he says, shaking his head. "I'll help my father handle this, Ads, but I also want to stay with you. I want to make sure if Connor Todd comes for the Mansolillo's, I'm here for you. I've been here for months now. I have no plans to step back."

"You need to help your father right now," Mattia chimes in, leaning back in his chair. "Todd obviously means business. He assassinated the Papilla family. If Dmitri doesn't plan on handing everything over to him, then he may try to do the same to your family."

I didn't want to exactly phrase it that way, but Mattia is right. It seems that Connor's giving the Andronikovs a chance before they end up underground as the Papillas did.

"Mattia has a point, Yulian. Your family needs to come first."

Yulian's eyes are soft as they flash between my brother and me. "I understand what you're both saying, I do," he assures us. "And I plan to be there for my family. I need you

two to understand that the Mansolillos are *also* my family. I care deeply about what happens to the two of you. Who says I cannot be present for both of you? I've done it so far."

My eyes meet his and something is exchanged in the look we pass. I don't want to think too into it because it'll make me feel dirty and wrong. Like everything Christian was worried about last night is correct. I push those thoughts aside and nod. I'm not going to argue with Yulian. He's a grown man and I have faith that he knows what he's doing.

"Okay," I say, gently patting his cheek before taking a step back. "I expect you to come to me if anything changes though, understood?"

"Understood Adelaide."

"Good. Thank you. And thank you for bringing this to our attention. Now that we know that this may come and we know what his MO is, maybe we can prepare ourselves."

How? I have no idea. But I won't be caught by surprise. If Connor Todd wants a fight, if he wants to take my family, he'll have to pry it from my cold, dead hands. Seeing how he operates...that may just happen.

I walk out of the restaurant with Yulian. Mattia is on the phone with Ella behind us, quietly promising that they can still make it to the waterpark. I hear him sigh before he calls out, "Ads? Yulian? Do you want to come to the waterpark with us? Ella wants to know."

Yulian and I exchange a look and I bite back a snicker. "I'm fine. Tell Ella I said thank you for the invite!" I call back to him.

"I should be with my father right now," Yulian adds. He walks me to my car, opening the door for me as I slide inside. "I would've said yes if you wanted to go, you know," he says.

“Really? You’d go to a waterpark?” I scoff. “Actually, why am I not surprised?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Yulian grins at me. It’s the first time all afternoon and it makes relief flood through me. Seeing him seem more like himself makes me feel like maybe the world isn’t ending.

“It means you haven’t changed a bit,” I tell him. Yulian’s always been...immature? Taking things seriously has always been a bit of a struggle for him. It’s why we didn’t work out. I want to rule the world. Yulian was just too immature for that. No ambition. The differences between us felt too deep.

He tilts his head to the side. “I like to think I’ve changed quite a bit, Ads,” he says, his voice uncharacteristically serious. Our eyes meet again for a moment before he drops it. “Stay safe, okay? Let me know if you need anything. I’ll see you again soon.”

It felt like a moment there. Or close to it. I don’t want to think too much about it. There are too many other things going on in my life right now, so I don’t let myself think about it. I’ve gotten very good at just ignoring things.

“Of course. The same for you. If you or Dmitri need anything, please reach out.” His father has always been kind to me and has always treated me like a daughter instead of a possible rival. There’s not a lot I wouldn’t do for Dmitri or Yulian.

Chapter Six

Christian

I'm wrong. I know that. Stalking my fiancée? What kind of man does that? A man who fucking wants answers. We slept together and I know that that's not an instant fix for anything. I'm not that delusional. I was just...hopeful that maybe we would reconnect. The sex was good, I know that. Adelaide would never lie about that. She fell asleep in my arms and I was hopeful that maybe we could continue our conversation before my mom dropped our daughter off.

Instead, she woke up, looked at her phone, and said that Mattia needed to talk to her. She rushed to get ready, looking the same level of impeccable as Adelaide always does. I tried not to let that set off alarm bells in my mind, but it did.

So, I did something that I'm not proud of. After she left, I followed her. I followed her to some restaurant and watched her go inside. Minutes later, Mattia followed. That should've been it. She didn't lie to me. She was just having lunch with her brother. Maybe he's having issues with his girlfriend. Maybe he wants to propose and needs advice. I don't know.

But then I saw Yulian go inside, a folder tucked underneath his arm. That set off the alarm bells all over again. Mattia and Adelaide were meeting with Yulian. There's only one thing the three of them could be discussing and I don't want to be right about that. Maybe they were all just having lunch? So...I went inside. I could deal with the consequences if Adelaide caught me, right?

They weren't inside. At least not at a table. That confirmed everything I needed it to. I worked with the Mansolillo family long enough. I remember how many times we met in secret rooms in the back of restaurants, restaurants that were paying them for protection.

I'm not the type of man who eagerly jumps to conclusions. Not like others do. I wasn't going to just let one instance prove to me that my fiancée is back in organized crime, so I went home to do research.

That's where I'm at now, sitting in my bedroom with my laptop in front of me. I'm quietly debating everything that I'm doing because I'm just *unsure*. What if I'm ruining everything? What if I'm being an idiot? What if I'm inventing a problem that doesn't exist? This is a moment where I need to use logic instead of following my heart. My gut is usually right. It's never led me wrong in situations like this. I'm a damn good agent.

If I was at work, this would probably be easier. I could just drive to the office, but I don't want anyone else to know what's going on. My co-workers are already very unimpressed when it comes to my relationship with Adelaide. They don't see what I see in her. Now I'm beginning to wonder if they were right in the first place.

Without my work resources, I'm left with a simple internet search engine and hopefully a bit of luck. Like trying to figure out if there's been an uptick in gang-related crimes lately, an uptick in drugs, weapons trafficking, all of that. Things that I know the Mansolillos would have their fingers in. I hit gold a lot quicker than I expected.

One of the first things I see is a headline about the deaths of most of the upper members of the Papilla family. The Papillas have always been an enemy of the Mansolillos. Back when I was undercover and working for Carlo, they were planning on a way to take them out. So, my suspicion is raised. It looks like Adelaide and Mattia are resorting back to the family business and now the Papilla's are dead? It's suspicious. I know they had something to do with it.

The next article I find highlights the death of a young man, someone named Garfield Alto. His death lines up with Adelaide being upset yesterday. A lot of this could be purely

circumstantial. I can admit that, but I also know how the Mansolillos work. I know how Adelaide works.

What if the Mansolillos placed a hit on the Papilla family (which would explain Yulian's involvement, maybe?), and in retaliation, the remnants of the Papillas killed Garfield?

Maybe this is my smoking gun.

When Adelaide gets home, I'm sitting in the living room. I asked my mom to take Kara again, because either way, I know that tonight isn't going to end well. Either we're going to have a huge fight over her getting reinvolved in things she shouldn't be or I'm going to look like a giant asshole for accusing her of things?

She comes in, walking quietly. She finds me in the living room again, raising an eyebrow. "Everything okay?" she asks.

I'm trying to read her. It still feels like the hardest job in the entire world. Reading Adelaide. I don't know if she's playing dumb or if she's genuinely wondering if everything is okay.

"Can we talk?" I ask. As much as I want to, I don't jump straight into questioning. That'll put her on the defensive. It'll be an immediate fight and she'll shut me out immediately. I'll get nowhere. All I need now are *answers*. I need to know what my fiancée is doing.

"...Yeah? Something wrong?" She comes over and sits on the other end of the couch. Unlike yesterday when she sat as far away from me as possible. I don't know if that's a good sign or bad. Is she trying to make me feel secure? Are we just dancing around each other?

I debate over what I say next. Do I lull her into a false sense of security? Do I just come out with it? Maybe I don't know Adelaide as much as I want to think that I do, but I know

her enough to know that she's going to appreciate just getting to the point over dancing around it.

“Did you know Garfield Alto?” I ask, still playing it just *a little* safe. “I heard about his death on the news and thought it was...unfortunate.” I put the idea out there and see how she feels about it. Maybe this one time I'll be able to read her.

Chapter Seven

Adelaide

This feels like an ambush. I feel caught. I know I have two options here. Tell him the truth or play it off. If I tell him the truth, I watch everything I have explode. It's going to lead to a fight, I know that. I also know Christian. I know that he wouldn't have brought this up unless he had a suspicion. I know that I'm caught.

I'm willing to be the bigger person here and just come out with it – and hope I don't end up in jail.

“How long have you known?” I ask. That's no admittance in that statement, but Christian will know what I'm talking about.

“I followed you today.”

That feels like a stab of betrayal. I know by all logic I don't have a right to feel that way. I'm the one who's been lying to him, doing shit behind his back. I started the betrayal in our relationship. But being followed? That's an awful feeling.

Before I can open my mouth and come up with some snippy comeback about how shitty it is of him to follow me, Christian is defending himself.

“You've been acting suspicious, Adelaide. If it wasn't an affair, I wanted to know what it could be. I was okay at first. I saw you go inside the restaurant. I saw Mattia go in. And then I saw Yulian. I sat through enough of your father's meetings to know something was going on. I came home and did research. Now we're here.”

I nod. I don't know what to say. Should I have a lawyer present? Is this questioning? I...decide to trust Christian. Nothing is telling me that I should. He followed me. I lied to

him. Why would he be fair to me at this moment? It feels like everything has already blown up around us.

“Now we’re here,” I agree quietly. “What do you want me to say, Christian? Do you want a full confession? Am I going to be seeing my daughter during prison visits from now on?”

“Adelaide,” he says softly. “We both know that’s not what I want. We both know that wouldn’t be good for our daughter. But...you know what you are risking, didn’t you? Was it worth the risk?”

I turn my gaze up to meet his. I know by answering this question, I’m sealing our fate. I can’t lie to him, not right now. We’re in this position because of lies and he already figured out the biggest one. “Yes,” I say.

His face falls. He wanted me to say no. He wanted me to come off as remorseful, as someone who understands what she’s done. He wants me to beg him for forgiveness. I can’t. I’m not sorry for what I’ve done to save myself.

He swallows and nods. “You were that unhappy with me?”

“It –” How do I tell him it’s not *him*? Not directly. It’s the life we live. It’s so boring. It’s nothing that I wanted. I never dreamed of a white picket fence or a giant wedding. I’ve always dreamed of an empire. I dreamed of *power*. “It’s not you. I just wanted more, Christian. I wanted to be more than your *wife* or a mother. This was never my dream.”

“And running the mafia was?”

“Yes,” I answer honestly again. It’s all I wanted since I was old enough to understand what my father was involved in, since he started bringing me to meetings. The first time his men bowed their heads to me, showed me respect...I knew I wanted that feeling for the rest of my life. I was nine.

“So...you put a hit on the entire Papilla family?” he asks. “That wasn’t ever your MO. You were never ruthless, Adelaide.”

“I didn’t do it.” I’m almost a little insulted that he thought I was that reckless. Killing the heads of an entire family? It’s insane. Connor Todd is *insane*. And I don’t know if I should bring him up to Christian or not. Feels like a huge risk. “Someone else did. Gar got caught in the cross hairs.”

“Is that what you had to talk to Yulian about? Gar?”

“He was a good kid. He did something stupid, but he didn’t deserve to die.”

“That’s what you don’t seem to understand, Adelaide. People die. People die because *you’re* involved in this life. Remember Antonio? He disrespected you, so you had Yulian kill him. Your father was going to kill you, so I shot him. And now Gar.”

“Damien,” I say. “You’re forgetting one. Damien’s dead because of me.”

“Damien? When? What?”

“When Mattia was trying to restart things, he went to Damien. Damien was working against us. He tried to have Mattia killed. When that didn’t work, he went after Ella. He’s the one who threw a fucking Molotov through our dining room window. I told Mattia to deal with it. He did. If you’re going to list all of the deaths on my conscious, Christian, make sure you list them all.”

He drops his head into his hands, rubbing at his temples. “Adelaide, this isn’t a personal attack. It’s – you’re really doing this? You’re really doubling down on all of this.”

“You’re the one who brought up all the people that died because of my choices. I was making sure you listed them all. Wouldn’t want you to forget one.” It’s a fight now. Staying calm is not going to be possible. At least, not for me.

Christian acts like these deaths don’t haunt me. He acts like I don’t feel bad. Well, I don’t feel bad about Antonio or Damien. Antonio proved a point. Damien started it. I feel remorse for my father every day. He wasn’t the best father, but he was still *mine*. And Gar...Gar’s the first one that’s really

haunting me. My soldier, my fault. I didn't make things clear enough for him, I guess.

He's quiet. He doesn't want to fight. I could walk away. Cool down. We could try to have a productive conversation about this later but...where would that lead us? Nowhere. Being cool and calm isn't going to fix any of our problems. Christian's still going to know the truth and he's still not going to accept this side of me.

"Adelaide, what I'm saying is...you can stop. No more deaths on your conscious. You had a chance to walk away. You jumped right back into it. I'm assuming that it's Mattia's fault."

"It would be easy to blame him," I muse. "But the truth is, I could've said no when he brought it up, Christian. I did. A few times. But...this is when I'm happiest. I can handle the guilt. You wouldn't get it. This is the first time in a long time that I don't feel like I'm drowning."

"So being with me is that miserable then? You feel like you're drowning? I'm *so* sorry, Adelaide. I'm so sorry I gave you a home, that I support you. We have a *daughter* who loves you, who I thought you loved—"

"Don't you dare doubt my love for my child!" I can't help but raise my voice. That crossed a line.

"If you loved her, you wouldn't be doing this shit!"

I shrink back. It's the first time I've heard Christian raise his voice. It takes me off guard, but I immediately steady myself. I'm not scared of any man.

"You don't get to tell me how much I do or don't love my daughter," I warn. "She can stay out of this conversation."

He runs his fingers through his hair. "She literally cannot, Adelaide. She's involved now. She could've died. She still could die. You're putting her in danger and I can't *let* you do that. I can let you ruin your life, my life. Fine. Kara's though? I can't."

His words feel like a knife through the heart. I'm taken off guard. All of the fight in me feels like it dies for a moment. Kara's safe. She's always been safe with me. I would never let something happen to her. I'm not like my father.

"Christian," I say his name slowly, bringing my eyes up to meet his. "What – what are you saying?"

He sighs and stands from the couch. His hand goes through his hair again, stress written all over his face. "I'm saying," he pauses, and swallows hard. "I'm saying that I'm going to go to my mom's and get Kara and then...then I don't know, Adelaide. I'll get a hotel for the night or something."

"Christian –"

"If I stay here, I'm going to relent to you. I love you, Adelaide. I love you more than you'll ever comprehend because I'm not sure you *can* love somebody that much. I don't know if you're made that way. I'm saying that we need some time apart."

I don't know how to process what he's telling me. It's like I hear his words, but none of them quite register. I'm left blank, staring at him, blinking slowly as I try to understand.

"Are – are you leaving me?"

Christian takes a deep breath and shrugs. "You said that you didn't know what you wanted, Adelaide. I made that choice for you."

Chapter Eight

Christian

This has to be the right choice, right? But if it's the right choice, why does it feel like my heart is breaking? I wasn't expecting Adelaide to actually look bothered by any of my choices. I was expecting her to just let me go – and she does. She doesn't beg me to stay, but I see the pain on her face. I hurt her. She hurt me first.

Does any of that matter?

I don't know what choice I would make if we didn't have a child in the picture. I don't know what I would do if it wasn't for Kara. Would I stay? Would I report what she's doing? Would I leave anyway? I don't know. I'll never know. All I know is that I have to put my daughter first.

Adelaide doesn't see it. She grew up around all of this. She doesn't understand how it changes a person, how it affects them. She thinks her life was normal – maybe even better than anything close to a *normal* childhood.

I can't have Kara growing up around that. Thinking that violence is normal. Thinking that power is worth more than love, more than happiness. I made the best choice for my child. I just wish Adelaide could clear her mind and do the same.

I pack a small bag in the bedroom. It's my house. I could be sending Adelaide to stay in a hotel or with her brother. But I'm not going to do that. I'm already taking her child away. I'm not going to take the only home she has.

Tossing my bag over my shoulder, I walk back to the living room. Adelaide is still sitting on the couch, blankly staring ahead. I don't know if she even realizes that I'm there until I talk.

“I’ll text you when I get to the hotel, okay? I’ll let you know where we’re staying. We’ll work out a schedule so that you can see Kara.”

“Did you – did you get her teddy bear?” she asks, slowly turning to look at me. “The one with the pink bow? It’s her favorite.”

“She had it when I gave her to my mom earlier. She has some spare clothes and everything, so I’ll just grab those, and go from there.”

She nods. “Okay. That’s – that’s good.”

She’s shaken. It’s been a long time since I’ve seen Adelaide so out of her element. At least she’s still human. At least she still cares enough to *feel* something.

“Alright. I’m – I’m gonna go,” I say, because if I stay any longer, I may break. I may give in and decide to stay because I *love* this woman. She’s everything to me. I just don’t think she feels the same way. “I – I love you, Adelaide.”

That makes her eyes go to me, staying there for a few seconds, unblinking. She looks taken aback, shocked that I would say such a thing to her right now.

“I...I love you too, Christian.”

I wish that I believed her, but I don’t. I’m still not sure Adelaide knows how to love. I know that she tried. I know she’s done her best, but I don’t know if that’s something she’s capable of. At least not when it comes to me.

“Bye Adelaide.”

I can’t sleep.

Kara is asleep in the crib the hotel provided. I’ve been tossing and turning for hours. All I told my mother is that we were having issues. I didn’t give her the details about what was going on with Adelaide because what the hell was I going

to say? My fiancée decided that being a mafia boss is more important than anything else. That I'm scared she's going to get herself and our daughter killed in gang wars that she's starting? That I covered up how deeply involved she was in her family in the first place because she was pregnant with my child and I wanted to marry her?

I've been going back through my memories, trying to figure out when it all went wrong. When did Adelaide start becoming miserable? Was there a sign that I missed? Could I have done something?

And where do we go from here?

It's not nearly as easy as I wish it was. I don't know what to say or do. I don't know what the right answer is. All I know is that my only goal now is to take care of my daughter. Everything else comes secondary. All I can do is hope that Adelaide wakes up before it's too late.

But when is it too late? Is it too late when Adelaide's dead on the ground because of this shit? Is it too late when my daughter somehow gets involved in all of this mess because of her mother? Or is it too late already?

I stare at my phone on the nightstand. I texted Adelaide when I got to the hotel. I told her what hotel, what room. I told her that Kara was okay. I asked if she wanted to call and tell her goodnight and she didn't respond. I sort of expected it.

I expect anger. I expect lashing out, shouting. A real fight because that's who Adelaide is. She's a fighter but what if she doesn't fight? Does that mean she's really over all of this? Does that mean that she made her choice without realizing it?

I want to call her. Every fiber of my being is dying to reach out and grab my phone, make a call, and see if she's okay. I want to tell her everything that I didn't say earlier. That I want to be with her. That I want all of this to be over. I need her to choose me, to choose Kara. I need her to wake up and realize that we need her.

But I don't call her because this is a choice that Adelaide made. I know her well enough to know that when her mind is made up, there's no talking her out of it.

Chapter Nine

Adelaide

“Will you tell your boyfriend to stop fucking calling me?” I groan, rolling over to bury my face in the pillow on the couch. I couldn’t bring myself to sleep in my bed last night. *Our* bed. I’m still processing it. Christian is gone. He took Kara. This is what I wanted, right? Then why does it feel so empty?

“He’s worried,” Ella sighs, leaning her head back against the couch. She’s on the floor, sitting next to the couch.

I called her after Christian left last night because I didn’t want to be alone. I couldn’t call Mattia. He’d instantly start doing that big brother thing, but probably worse because of who Mattia is as a person. He’d probably start threatening Christian or whatever and I don’t need that mess.

“He doesn’t need to be worried.”

“You called me last night, told me it was important and told me I wasn’t allowed to tell Mattia what’s going on. For all he knows, we’re being held hostage somewhere.”

“Ella,” I sigh, turning my head to look at her. “Why in the *fuck* would I call you if I was being held hostage or someone was threatening me? I feel like in that situation I would, I don’t know, call anyone else that I know.”

“You don’t need to be rude,” she scoffs.

“I’m sorry that I’m not all sunshine this morning. My fiancé left me last night. He took my child. Basically implied that I was so awful that I was going to get my daughter killed. Remember all of that?”

“He wasn’t implying that you were *awful*, Adelaide. He’s just insisting that the thing you do is dangerous. You know that. I know that. I had to accept that to be with Mattia. Remember that whole internal debate I had?”

Yeah, yeah. I remember all of her issues with what Mattia did and I get it...sort of. But my brother is kind of an idiot. He made things messy with Ella from the start. Lied to her from the very beginning. I just...lied to Christian for the last few months. It's not the same problem.

"I know it's dangerous, but I would never let something happen to Kara."

"I know that. Everyone knows that. But as much as you hate to acknowledge it, some things are just completely out of your control, Adelaide," she sighs, reaching up to brush my hair out of my face.

I want to snap at her not to touch me, but I understand that she's just trying to be comforting. What I hate more than anything is that Ella is right. I hate not being able to control things and protecting Kara is not something I can control. I can do everything right and something can still get messed up.

Especially with the Connor Todd situation going on. He hasn't directly threatened the Mansolillos yet, but if he went after the Papillas and the Andronikovs, I know that it's only a matter of time before my name is thrown in the mix. I need to figure out how to deal with that before it becomes a problem.

"I should call Yulian," I mutter.

"You didn't want to tell Mattia about Christian but you'll tell Yulian? That seems a little bit more dangerous. He's kind of a..." she pauses, trying to come up with the word. "Loose cannon."

"No," I roll my eyes. "I'm not going to tell him about Christian. I have a strict 'don't talk about my current relationship to my ex' policy. Makes things less messy." At least, I hope it does. "I just want to make sure he's okay. There's some family stuff going on with him."

Ella doesn't like to know anything going on with mafia stuff, so I do my best to dance around it with her. I try to respect that because I'm not an awful person...right? I'm not some monster. I'm not who Christian currently thinks I am.

Or am I?

“Right,” she says. “Do you know where your phone is? I think you threw it last night.”

I did throw it last night. After Christian confirmed he was at a hotel and not coming home to finish talking things out, I threw my phone across the room so I wouldn't call him and beg him to come home. I couldn't do that. I won't sink that low.

I will never beg someone to stay.

I sit up, running a hand through my hair to push it out of my face. I feel like a mess. I need a shower. I need a coffee. Shit. I need another drink.

“I don't know where my phone is,” I tell her.

Ella sighs, getting up off of my living floor. “Right. Then you're going to go take a shower and piece yourself together. I'll make coffee and search for your phone.”

“And not tell Mattia?”

She rolls her eyes and I don't have it in me to snip at her for it. “I won't tell Mattia,” she promises.

Chapter Ten

Yulian

I didn't sleep last night.

That's something new for me. No matter how many terrible things I've done in my life, I've always been able to sleep that night. Nothing has ever bothered me. This is different. It is a situation that's completely out of my control. I don't know how to keep my family safe.

I thought about calling Adelaide.

I know, I know. That's a terrible thought. She has a fiancé and a child. She's trying to keep all of this away from Christian and I understand. I know that she believes this is for the best and I don't know. I'm not going to question her decisions. I just...I wanted to hear her voice last night. I wanted her to tell me what to do or what she would do. I needed her guidance.

Deep down, I know exactly what this means. I still have feelings for Adelaide. That's not a surprise. I've known that for a while. But I care about her enough not to get involved in her life. She chose Christian, not me. She has a family with him, a ring on her finger. I'd never do anything to ruin that for her. I'd never cross any of those lines.

I wish I could go back in time and right my mistakes with her though. Prove to her that I'm more than some goof who doesn't care about anything. I wish I could show her that I can be ambitious, or whatever she needs me to be. I wish I could change something to keep her from leaving me.

I climb out of bed, giving up on sleeping completely at this point. The sun is shining through my bedroom curtains; sleep is just not going to come to me. I'll try again tonight.

I make a beeline for the bathroom, washing my face, hoping that'll make me look a little less half dead. It doesn't.

The black circles underneath my eyes still look ridiculously bad. I hope I don't have to see Adelaide today. I know she'll call me out on it without hesitation.

I brush my teeth and brush my hair from where my fingers have been running through it. I try to piece myself together into a decent human being. I change out of my clothes from the day before, tossing them into the corner for the maid to grab later.

Before I can head downstairs, my phone starts to ring. Speaking of the devil, I see Adelaide's name on the caller ID. I'm torn between rushing to answer it and completely ignoring it because she's going to be able to tell something is wrong just by my tone. She's good at seeing through people.

I answer it. I can't help it. "Hello?" I say as I take a seat on the edge of my bed.

"How are you?" she asks.

I try not to read into things, but it sounds like something is wrong with Adelaide. She sounds...like something is bothering her. She sounds just as exhausted as I am.

I try to hide my exhaustion by chuckling. "Did you really call just to ask me how I am?"

"Possibly. Is that so wrong?"

"It's very strange for you, Adelaide," I admit. Adelaide isn't...touchy-feely. She doesn't do emotional. She doesn't normally care how people are doing. I know all of these things about her and I still adore her. How pathetic does that make me?

She snorts on the other end of the phone and it makes me smile. "I just want to know if Todd's said anything else. Has your father come up with any ideas?"

Yeah, that makes sense. She's worried that he's going to come after the Mansolillos next. She's worried about Christian and Kara. I understand that. I wish I had a better answer to give her than I do.

“The good news is I’m *pretty* sure he only focuses on one family at a time so you probably have time to figure something out before he kills all of us,” I tell her.

Adelaide finds no humor in that. She’s quiet for an uncomfortable amount of time. “Not funny, Yulian. Everything’s not a joke, you know.”

I sigh. “I know, Ads. I do. We haven’t figured anything out yet. We haven’t heard from him. I’ve been trying to figure a way out of this all night and I haven’t been able to.”

“Right. Okay...will you keep in touch with me, Yulian?” she asks. “I mean...as much as you can. I just...” she trails off.

I know that I shouldn’t say anything. I should keep my mouth shut but it feels like Adelaide’s left a perfect opening for me to make a stupid comment. I feel a smile tug on my lips. The first real one all morning.

“Are you implying that you’re worried about me, Ads?” I ask.

She immediately scoffs. I wish I could see her face, see if she’s blushing or if she’s just utterly annoyed with me. Just because I refuse to overstep my boundaries doesn’t mean I can’t playfully flirt with her. I know that she’ll never choose me over Christian.

“Don’t flatter yourself, Yulian. You’d just be hard to replace.”

“I’m choosing to take that as a compliment.”

“Do whatever you want, I’m not in charge of you. Most of the time.”

It’s my turn to snort. “I’m going to be fine, Ads. Okay? Take care of yourself. If you need anything, you have my number.”

“I’ll see you soon, Yulian,” she promises before she hangs up.

I run my fingers through my hair as soon as I drop my phone, undoing all the work I did combing it. I'll never be able to understand how she has me under such a spell.

I skip breakfast and just grab a cup of coffee before I head into my father's office. Dmitri Andronikov does not look like the head of a crime family. He doesn't have slicked-back hair. He isn't covered in tattoos. Nothing about my father screams *danger*. He looks like a nice, older man, maybe someone who's spent their life working in banking or insurance.

He doesn't run things like a typical crime lord. He doesn't fight for territory. He doesn't start wars. He keeps to himself and his family and has been successful in doing that. He's always preached that violence doesn't solve everything.

I'm sure he's disappointed that I tend to prefer violence.

He looks up when I step into the office, tilting his head to the side. "Yulian, you do not look well."

"Didn't sleep well," I admit, flinging my body into the plush leather chair in front of his desk. "Have you come up with anything about the Todd situation?"

"Not sleeping does not help anyone, Yulian," he says before shaking his head. "I find that he means everything he says. He is a dangerous man and he wants to take over New York's crime scene. He wants to be a *king*. I think he is a very foolish man."

"Thought you said he's a dangerous man."

"Dangerous men can still be foolish," he warns. "I will admit that his threats have made me think, Yulian."

This doesn't sound like it's going in a good direction. I don't like the tone of my father's voice. I swallow before I nod, gesturing for him to go on. I'll hear him out.

“I believe that maybe, just maybe, it is time for the Andronikovs to make their exit. I can try to make a deal with him. We take what we have earned and he gets the rest. I can retire.”

Everything my father says takes longer than usual to compute. Giving it all up? Making a deal? *Retiring?* I never imagined my father saying any of these things.

Maybe I’ve lived in some foolish dream. I imagined that I would take over for my father when he decided to call it quits, despite having no proof that he wanted me to.

“Isn’t that just giving him what he wants?”

“I’m not saying that it is my final choice, Yulian. I am saying that it may be our best option. I would prefer for all of us to not wind up dead. Besides, you have been spending quite a bit of time working with the Mansolillos.”

“Because Adelaide needs help. I thought that was okay.”

He holds up his index finger. “I did not say it was not okay, Yulian. What I am saying is that perhaps you should continue focusing your attention on helping Adelaide. Perhaps that is your path.”

I sit forward in my chair a little bit more, running a hand through my hair. I’ve given up on looking presentable today. “Is – is that something you’re okay with? Giving it all up? Having me work for the Mansolillos?”

Dmitri stands up. He is not a tall man. I’m not sure where I got my height from. He walks around his desk and puts a hand on my shoulder. “Yulian, you are my only child. I wish for you to be happy. You adore Adelaide Mansolillo. Even if you are just working for her, you are happier than you are without her. As for giving it all up, I am getting old. Perhaps I could enjoy my retirement back home.”

Chapter Eleven

Adelaide

After I get off the phone with Yulian, Ella insists on making sure I eat breakfast. We order something because she cannot cook to save her life and I have no interest in eating anything right now. I'm just doing it so she doesn't look at me with those pathetic hazel eyes and embarrass both of us by begging.

"Should I call Christian?" I ask, staring at my phone on the kitchen table.

"If you want to," she says.

I scoff. "That doesn't *help*. I need solid advice, Ella."

"I don't know. I've never been through this," she sighs. "But I mean...it wouldn't hurt. You don't even have to call him. Send a text and check on Kara. You're her mother."

Right. I can do that. I grab my phone and go to my messages with Christian. I start to type and stop immediately, time after time, trying to think of how to word the message. I've never been like this before. I've never had to second guess things like this. I just don't know what to say. What if I just ask how Kara is and Christian thinks I don't care

anymore? What if I say too much and look desperate? What if he thinks I already want reconciliation?

I don't even know what I want.

Ella watches me before snatching my phone out of my hands. "What the fuck are you – "

"Sent," she says, handing me my phone back. "You are being *ridiculous*, Adelaide. All you had to do was send a simple message. I didn't know you were going to overthink it so much."

I look at the message she sent. *'Good morning. How is Kara doing?'* I roll my eyes. "Christian is going to know that it isn't me. I never say good morning," I grumble, dropping my phone back on the table. "You're lucky you're my brother's girlfriend or else I'd kick you out of my house."

Ella laughs at that. *"Please. You'd kick me out anyway. The only reason you're not going to is that you don't want to be alone right now."*

I roll my eyes. She's right on the nose with that and I don't want to admit to it. I normally don't mind being alone but there's just something about being alone *right now*. After everything that happened with Christian last night, I just want to be around someone. Ella seems like the safest choice to be alone with.

After brunch, Ella offers to go and I decide to let her. I don't want to keep her. I'm sure she wants to get home to Mattia and dance around telling him what happened between Christian and me. I'm willing to bet money that she's going to tell him before the day's out. I'm going to have to deal with a worried older brother before the night's out.

She leaves and I don't know what to do with myself. The house feels empty. I'm used to Kara's giggles or the sound of her favorite show. I'm used to Christian listening to music as he works in the garage, fixing up his car or that dumb motorcycle he spent money on yet doesn't know how to drive.

I keep myself busy by cleaning up. Ella did most of the cleaning this morning and I should be appreciative of that. She tried to help while I showered, but not being able to clean, and not having a meeting today leaves me with way more free time than I'm comfortable with. I find the little things to clean. Corners that often get forgotten, underneath the couch, the bottom shelf of the coffee table. A knock at the door pulls me from my cleaning.

Deep down, I hope that it's Christian. I know, I know. Why would he knock? It's his house. He would just walk in the door. Or he'd call before coming home. But I want him to come walking through the door and tell me that everything is going to be okay. I want to hear him tell me that he still loves me and we can work this out, that I can have it all. My passion and my family.

Those hopes disappear when I open the door and see Yulian's face. I try not to look *too* disappointed to see him, but I can't help it. He's not who I wanted to see. "Yes?" I ask, putting myself together. Can't let anyone know what's wrong. Especially my ex.

Yulian never comes to the house – at least when he knows Christian is in town. It keeps – kept – things peaceful.

"Can I come in, Ads?" he asks. "I need to talk."

Every bit of me wants to tell him 'no' because I don't want to hear his problems right now. I never claimed to not be a selfish person. Right now, I'm feeling pretty selfish but maybe listening to his problems will be a welcome distraction to everything else going on right now? A girl can be hopeful. I sigh and step aside.

"Yeah, come in."

Yulian steps through the door and makes his way to the living room. The last time he was here, was when he was helping me move furniture after Damien had the house firebombed as a warning to Mattia. It feels like that was ages ago with everything else that has been going on. He takes a seat on the couch and I sit next to him.

"Okay, what's up?" I ask. "You never come over unless it's important. You sounded okay when we talked earlier?"

He sighs and runs a hand through his hair. His hair is currently a mess, blonde pieces stick out in different directions instead of his normal slicked-back look. "It was okay and then I talked to my father."

I raise an eyebrow. "What did Dmitri say?"

Yulian flops back against the back of the couch, sighing. “What didn’t he say? He can’t figure out how to outsmart Todd, so he’s considering making a deal with him.”

Immediately, that pulls me away from my personal drama, which is a welcomed distraction but not the one I wanted. Dmitri giving up means I’m going to have to figure out how to get out of this myself. I never thought I’d see the day that Dmitri Andronikov willingly gave it all up. Is this Todd guy *that* scary?

“What?” I ask, blinking slowly. “You can’t – you can’t be serious. Dmitri is considering *giving in* to him?”

“That’s what I said. He says it’s not worth our lives. He wants to make a deal where he just hands operations over to Todd and we keep what we’ve earned so far.”

“Isn’t the family your birthright?” I ask him softly.

Yulian scoffs. “That’s what I thought, but Dmitri was insistent that I’m happier working underneath you. I was never going to take over things.” He sighs, opening one eye to look at me. “Maybe he’s right. Maybe I was never going to be head of the family. Maybe it was all going to die when he died or retired anyway. I just – I wish he gave me the choice, you know?”

I nod. Yeah, I get it. I know what it feels like when you don’t have a choice. I also know what it feels like when you *have* a choice and you maybe make the wrong one.

“So, does that mean we’re next?” I ask softly.

“I don’t know, Ads.”

“I don’t know what to do, Yulian. I was hoping your father would figure something out.”

“So was I.” Both eyes are open now. He sighs and reaches out, taking my hand in his. I don’t pull away, maybe I should. “But I will be by your side, Adelaide. We’ll figure this out together.”

“Because I – I can’t lose this. Not now.” I know I said that I wasn’t going to do this. I wasn’t going to tell my ex about my relationship problems but I want to unload on someone who’s not eternal sunshine like Ella. “I chose this over Christian. He found out. Gave me a choice. I chose this and he left with Kara.”

Yulian’s silent. I don’t know if I said too much. He came to me to unload his damage and I gave him mine. His hand is still holding mine and he gently squeezes it.

“I am so sorry, Adelaide. Is there – is there anything that can change it?” he asks.

I sigh. “I don’t know. I don’t know if it’s fucked beyond repair because I chose this over him and Kara. I care about power more than love, I guess. I’m probably just wired wrong or whatever.”

“I don’t think so. I think you’re...ambitious. Maybe you don’t value love over power. Maybe you just know what you want and Christian prevented you from getting it?” he offers.

“I don’t know.” It’s the best I have. I’m not 100% sure of anything in my life at the moment. Everything feels very up in the air. The one thing I thought I had – my position – now feels even more endangered than it had before. If Dmitri is giving up power, where is that going to leave me when Connor Todd comes knocking?

Yulian nods and keeps my hand in his. “Whatever the case, we will figure this out, Adelaide. Losing is not an option that you’ll accept – I won’t let you accept it.” He smiles a little bit and I can’t help but smile back.

“When did you become the optimist?”

“I haven’t. I just know that if you lose power and my father loses power, then I have nothing.”

“Ah. Selfish motivations,” I tease.

Yulian shrugs a shoulder and smirks over at me for a second. Then it fades, his face softening again. “Christian will

come back, Adelaide. You'll be able to work this out. He loves you dearly, you know that."

"Is love always enough, Yulian?" I ask softly.

"I hope so, Adelaide. I really do."

Chapter Twelve

Christian

It's been two weeks since I walked out on Adelaide. Our contact has been...minimal. For what feels like the first time, it's been awkward between the two of us. She texts me about Kara. She calls me to talk to Kara. We meet for lunch every other day so she can see Kara.

And I sit across from her, just like today, and think about how much I miss her. God, she looks gorgeous today. Her dark hair is straightened, extra shiny underneath the lights of the restaurant. She's wearing the perfect amount of makeup, that one shade of lipstick that makes me want to kiss her. She's in a burgundy dress that looks absolutely stunning against her tanned skin. It hugs every curve and makes her look like the goddess she is. And of course, there are the heels. The same heels she always wears that I miss the sound of clicking against the floor.

She's talking to Kara because we don't talk these days. Whatever she's saying has our daughter giggling before she opens her mouth for another bite of macaroni and cheese. It's that weird gourmet kind that Adelaide loves. It seems she's passed that love onto Kara.

I have to say something. I have to just force it out there.

“Adelaide?”

She looks away from Kara, her dark eyes meeting mine. I can't read them. I don't know if she hates my guts or not right now. “Yes?”

“Would you...I don't know. Would you like to get dinner tomorrow night? Maybe we could talk? Civilly?”

It's been two weeks. That's enough for things to calm down, right? Then again, Adelaide is a Mansolillo. They hold

grudges. Maybe she isn't interested in things being civil between us. Maybe she's already moved on.

I don't know what I want. Should I stand my ground and be firm about her staying away from the mob shit if she wants Kara and me in her life full time? Should I give in because I miss her so fucking much and it makes her happy? I don't know. It's the worst feeling in the world because all I know for sure is I miss her – and Kara misses her.

I see it when we get lunch. She looks at her mother with excited little eyes and looks so confused when we part ways. I'd say Adelaide could take her home with her for a night, but then I'd be worried the entire time. Our house was already hit by a Molotov while Kara was inside. If that wasn't a wake-up call to Adelaide about how dangerous this is, what will be? What will be the final straw?

She tilts her head to the side and goes back to Kara, airplaning another bite into her mouth. "I could do dinner tomorrow night," she finally agrees and relief floods over me.

"Yeah? Um. I'll make a reservation at that one place you like. Is that okay?" Because I don't know what's okay anymore.

"Yeah, that's fine," she agrees.

And I wish for the second time in five minutes that I could read her. I don't know if all of this is fine. I don't know if she's even going to show up. I'm half-expecting her to stand me up and maybe I deserve it. Maybe I don't. This entire situation is something I don't know how to navigate. Everything feels so out of my element.

"Great, yeah," I say, and then it falls back into an uncomfortable silence as she goes back to talking to Kara and not saying anything to me.

I spent way too long getting ready. I wasn't sure what to wear. Dress up? Don't dress up? Is it a date? No, right? This isn't a date. I settle on a navy blue button-up and a pair of jeans. Nice enough, but still casual. No pressure. When I get to the restaurant, Adelaide isn't there. I wait outside for a few minutes before going in and grabbing our table. I made sure to get the one we usually get. It's toward the back of the place, away from everyone else because my girl likes her privacy.

Is she still my girl? Is it okay if I even think of her like that anymore? I don't...I don't know. I wish I knew. I sigh and check my phone. Maybe she's not even showing up. Maybe something came up or she changed her mind. Just as I look up from my phone, I see her walking in.

It feels like my breath gets ripped away from me. She just...she's stunning. Her hair's still straight, still has on the perfect amount of makeup, and my favorite shade of lipstick. She's in a black dress. And the darkest parts of my mind go to thinking about how that dress would look on our bedroom floor. *Our* bedroom floor. Not my stupid hotel room.

She makes her way over toward me and gives me the slightest smile. It's more than I can ask for. I stand to greet her and Adelaide slides into the seat across from me. I wish I could hug her. I wish I could take her into my arms and smother her with kisses. Obviously, I know the boundaries that I have to abide by right now.

Once we're both seated, I feel the awkwardness wash over us. Kara isn't here to break that. We can't turn the conversation to our daughter. I didn't plan what I was going to say. Okay – that's a lie. I've been planning on what I'm going to say to Adelaide every day since I left. I've had conversations in the shower, conversations while lying in bed at night, or driving to work. Sitting across from her, all of that vanishes.

“I – I'm glad you decided to come,” is what I settle on for now.

“I thought about not coming,” she admits in that very blunt Adelaide way. I wouldn’t expect anything else.

“I figured you wouldn’t,” I shrug. “That’s why I’m glad that you did.”

Then the silence comes back between us. That’s always the problem, isn’t it? There’s so much to say, but neither of us knows exactly *what* to say. There’s silence that neither of us knows how to fill right now. How do we start this conversation and continue appearing to be adults about the whole situation?

“Um. Order whatever you want,” I say and feel like an idiot for even saying it. It’s Adelaide. She’s going to do that anyway. “I ordered your favorite wine while I was waiting. I hope that’s okay?”

“That’s fine,” she says, looking over the menu. Long, acrylic nails tap against the back of the paper menu. The only sign that she’s as nervous as I am.

The waitress returns with the wine and we order our food. Then we’re left without menus and conversations over what’s good to eat to fill the silence between the two of us.

I swallow down those nerves (and a mouthful of red wine) before forcing myself to speak, “I miss you, Adelaide.”

Her dark eyes meet mine and she tilts her head to the side before shaking it. “You walked out on me, Christian.” It doesn’t sound...*angry*. It sounds...*hurt*. But she’s not *wrong*. I did walk out.

“You lied, Adelaide. You told me you weren’t sure what you wanted and – and I couldn’t stand there and not know whether you wanted to be with me or not. Not to mention, you’re putting all of us in danger.”

I want this to go civilly. I don’t want to sit here and play the accusatory game. Whose fault is it? Who made the biggest mistake? Was it Adelaide lying to me? Was it me for just walking away? Neither of us will agree on that answer.

She sighs and takes a sip of her wine. “And I understand that, Christian. Fine. I lied. What I do is dangerous, but what *you* do is dangerous. Do you not remember how things almost played out with my father?” she counters. “The only difference between what we do is some petty morality.”

“Is morality really that petty, Adelaide?”

She scoffs. “Christian, consider this. You will never stop crime. You will never eradicate what people like me do. It’s been going on for years. In every country, on every continent. Wouldn’t you rather the people involved not be ruthless, sociopathic monsters?”

I don’t know if she actually has a point or if I just believe her because it’s Adelaide and she’s very convincing. If the mafia doesn’t work out, she has a very bright future as a cult leader. And I know how terrible of a thought that is. It makes it worse when I can acknowledge that I’d follow her down whatever rabbit hole she preached. The only thing stopping me now is our daughter.

“And I understand that, Adelaide. I do. But does my fiancée really have to be the one so deeply involved in all of this?” I ask with a sigh. “Why can’t you – I don’t know. If this is what you really want, let Mattia run things. Take an advisory role?”

From the look on her face, I can tell that I just insulted Adelaide. Right. The idea of her not being in charge is completely terrible for her. I brace myself for an outburst, for the end of our civility.

“I *tried*,” she sighs. “And Mattia needed me to continuously clean up his mess. He doesn’t know what he’s doing, even if Yulian is by his side. They *need* me to take control of everything or else they’d both be dead in a ditch somewhere.”

“Do they really need you to take control, Adelaide? Or is that just you refusing to sit on the sidelines?” I have to ask. I know my fiancée – or at least I think I do. I know that she

doesn't like not being involved. I know that she's always been very insistent on being the head of the Mansolillo family. It's always been her main goal in life.

Chapter Thirteen

Adelaide

Christian knows he's right. That's why he called me out on that little bluff. It wasn't a complete lie. Mattia and Yulian *do* need me. In time, I'm sure Mattia could've learned how to navigate things on his own. He would've made a hell of a lot of mistakes, but he would've figured it out.

It's not even that I couldn't sit back and watch my brother flounder. That's not what bothered me (although it was a bit embarrassing). It has more to do with my need to be in control, the fact that *I* am the rightful heir to the Mansolillo family. I'm the one who was raised to take over.

And Christian knows that. He knows me better than I give him credit for. I take another sip of my wine. What the fuck am I doing here? Why did I even agree to this dinner? It feels like the dumbest choice I could've made – especially when I have the Connor Todd drama to navigate.

“Fine,” I say softly. “This is what makes me the happiest. It doesn't mean that I love you and Kara less. It just means that this is what I'm good at, what I like to do. It's my passion and it doesn't feel fair to have that taken away from me. I know you wish I had other passions. That I could be like some boring housewife and take up a hobby like scrapbooking or knitting or –”

Despite knowing how much I hate it, Christian cuts me off. “I'd never want that for you, Adelaide. I love you for who you are. I wouldn't want you to change who you are just to make me happy.”

I look at him – really look at him. Does he hear himself? His words and his actions are telling me two completely different things. “Christian, that's exactly what you're trying to convince me to do,” I tell him softly. “You say that you know who I am. You say that you love me for who I am. But

the *minute* I start doing something that goes against what you expect of me, I'm the bad guy here."

He goes silent, taking another drink from his wine. I can tell that this conversation is getting uncomfortable. Personally, I feel like we both have valid points here. Christian wants me to change who I am to make him happy, what makes me happy is too dangerous in his eyes and doesn't align with his morality.

"That's not – I worry about you, Adelaide. I worry about our daughter. What happens if my job finds out that you're still involved in all of this? Especially if I know. It looks bad on me and we could lose everything."

I want to point out that I *could* support him. Things are going well. Once they start getting even better, Christian wouldn't need to worry about working. But I'm sure that would just insult his masculinity or whatever. That's also not adding in the Todd factor and whether he's going to murder us and take everything we've worked for away – I'm trying to avoid thinking about that one.

"Not if we play it the same as Mattia and Ella," I point out. "You don't ask. I don't tell. Play blissfully ignorant about what I'm doing in my spare time," I shrug. It works for them, so it should work for us too, right?

Christian sighs. "And what about the danger, Adelaide? How does ignoring what you do avoid the danger that you're putting us all in?"

I take another sip from my wine, my eyes meeting his from across the table. "That involves a lot of trust, Christian. That involves you believing that I'll do everything in my power to protect us because I will."

He sighs. I can see the conflict on his face. I didn't expect this to be an easy sell, but it's the only way. I can have him. I can have my family – and I can have my dream.

"I just – I miss you, Adelaide," he admits, his voice soft.

“And I miss you, Christian. That’s why...this is the only way, isn’t it? I mean, I’m not backing down. I’m not giving it up.” I want that to be clear. I am not walking away for a second time. I am not changing who I am, or what makes me happy. I need him to understand that. It has to be clear before we move forward. “But that doesn’t mean I want to choose between you and the job.”

“If you had to, you’d choose the job, wouldn’t you?” he asks. I hear the defeat in his voice.

I wish I could give him the answer that he wants. I wish I could tell him that I’m wrong, that I would give all of this up for him. I tried that and I couldn’t. So, I give him the truth, “I would,” I admit.

He nods and swallows a few more mouthfuls of wine, pouring more into his glass. “It’s a lot to ask from me, Adelaide.”

“I’m not saying you have to make a decision tonight, Christian. I’m saying that it’s something to think about. It’s in your court now. I’ve given you the options.”

Is that harsh? Am I expecting too much out of him? I just want to keep what I love. I want to keep it all. What can I say? I’m a selfish person and I know that.

He takes another sip of wine. “I have to think about it, Adelaide.”

It’s my turn to down half my glass before pouring more into it. “That’s fine. Think about it. Let me know what you decide, okay?”

He nods. “Are you just going to get up and leave now?”

Admittedly, I considered it. I didn’t come for dinner, I came to talk. The truth is though, that I miss him. I miss being able to be around him, so I shake my head.

“We haven’t eaten yet, Christian,” I smile over at him.

Dinner didn't end with Christian and I deciding to go back home together or him inviting me back to his hotel. It didn't end with a kiss or even a peck. We hugged and I promised that I'd call him tomorrow.

It would be easy to fall back together but I don't think that would be good for either of us. I don't think we'd get anywhere if we do that. We'd just fall back into old habits. If we're going to do this – we need to be *sure*. Both of us need to know for a fact that this is what we want. And personally? I'm still not a hundred percent. I know that I miss him. I know that I love him. But I also know what I want. I can't compromise.

Now I'm sitting with Mattia, awkward silence settling between the two of us because he's being a child. He's mad at me for not telling him *immediately* that Christian and I split. I waited a solid few days before even mentioning it. Now he's mad that I had dinner with Christian. He keeps side-eyeing me like we're children. If he has something to say, he can say it.

“Adelaide,” he starts. There it is. I turn to look at him, nodding for him to continue. “I don't think you should get back with Christian. You seem happier without him. Even before the two of you split, you were happier when he was away for a job.”

I sigh. I feel like this is the eighth time we've had a different version of this conversation. Not only do I feel like I'm going around in circles with Christian, but it also feels like I'm going around in circles with Mattia. Joy.

“That's because I was tired of hiding everything,” I sigh. “When he wasn't around, I didn't have to hide. Now, I don't have to hide.”

“If you try to do things like Ella and I do, you still have to hide. It's not like you get to come home and tell him about your day,” he points out. “It's still a weight you have to carry by yourself.”

“Maybe, but I don’t have to *lie*,” I remind him with a small shrug. That’s all I’m asking for. I don’t want to come home and tell Christian everything. I have Yulian and Mattia to confide in about these things. I don’t need Christian too. It’s not like he’d even understand half of it.

“Is it not still a lie?” he asks.

I open my mouth to answer but I don’t get the chance to. The door to our private backroom opens. Yulian steps in and I instantly notice that the vibe is off. Something is *wrong*. My gut is telling me that I know exactly what it is – but I also try not to jump to conclusions. I could be wrong.

I hope that I’m fucking wrong.

For all of our sake.

Chapter Fourteen

Yulian

My father and I stopped discussing what he was going to do about the Connor Todd situation. He didn't want to hear me tell him that I thought it was a terrible decision, especially when he couldn't come up with anything else.

I know that he tried. I watched his men file in and out of the house, giving him information. I know he stopped sleeping. I know he tried his best...but it wasn't enough. There was nothing he could figure out, which is why we're in the position that I'm in now.

As of noon today, the Andronikov family will be no more. At least not in the sense of a crime family. Every operation will be handed over to Connor Todd. My father gets to keep everything he's earned up until noon today. After that, all of it goes to fucking Todd. He told me over breakfast this morning and admittedly, I didn't handle it the best.

I stormed out and went out to the field by the house for hours. It's all over. Everything I've known is gone. My father handed over the family business, the one I never dreamed of taking over. But now that it's not even an option? It stings. It burns a fucking hole in my chest and I don't know how to handle that.

More than that, it means it leaves the Mansolillos without answers. It leaves *Adelaide* without an answer and now I'm terrified. I know her better than anyone in the world. I know that she's not going to hand over the operations as my father did. She will go down fighting and from what we've seen...she *will* go down. I can't let that happen. If anything happens to her... I don't know what I'll do.

I didn't want to show up today. I spent a good twenty minutes trying to come up with an excuse that I knew Adelaide would buy, but then I realized she was going to find

out one way or another. She'll be even more pissed if I don't tell her immediately.

Her dark eyes look up at me and I swallow, nodding slowly. "It's over," I tell her. "Dmitri gave everything up to Todd."

And then I watch. I watch light drain from her eyes. Every bit of hope we had disappears from her face. It's only obvious for a moment before she steels herself. Instantly trying to fall back to who Adelaide is as a person. She doesn't want to show weakness – even in a room with just me and her brother.

"Alright," she nods. "That...that doesn't mean that we'll be next, right? It's always possible that Todd will go after the Luppinos, right?"

It's very uncharacteristic to hear Adelaide try to be so optimistic. That's how you know how worried she is about everything. I walk over, sitting on the edge of the table next to her. "It's possible."

Mattia finally speaks, "And if he doesn't go after the Luppinos?"

"Then it'll be us," she responds softly.

Silence washes over the room. The uncomfortable kind as everyone tries to process that. We don't have answers. All we have is the fact that this feels hopeless. We either give up or we die. There are two options and I know for a fact Adelaide doesn't want to take either of them.

"What do you think we should do?" Mattia asks. "Reach out to Todd? See if we can strike a deal early before things start getting dangerous? Because – because I can't put Ella in danger again, you know that, Ads."

"We're not reaching out to him," she says quickly, shutting that down immediately. "Reaching out to Todd just invites him to try and take something from us. We wait."

I raise an eyebrow. "Is waiting the best option?"

“Well, I’m not just going to find a way to contact him and offer up everything I have,” she scoffs. There’s danger in her eyes. Arguing with her on this is not a possibility. “That’s dumb. We wait to hear what he wants.”

Mattia slams his hand down on the table. Adelaide doesn’t even jump, she just turns to glare at him. “Something to say, Mattia?” she asks, her voice eerily calm.

“I just told you that I can’t put Ella in danger, Adelaide. What if Todd doesn’t send a warning? What if he just starts going after the people we love? What if he starts going after Kara? Christian? Are you really okay with that happening?”

“And are you really okay giving it all up?” she shoots back. “You got out of prison and this was all you wanted, Mattia. You *begged* me to help you. You were desperate for this. You wanted to make our family name mean something again.”

“After *you* destroyed it!” he yells.

I’m...really uncomfortable. I don’t want to be here between the two of them, knowing that it’ll only get angrier as time goes on. I shift a little and I can’t stop myself from opening my mouth.

“Don’t yell,” I tell Mattia, keeping my voice low. “People may hear us. We try not to make a scene, remember?”

If looks could kill, I’d be dead. It also wouldn’t be the first time I would die by a look from one of the Mansolillo siblings. They’ve mastered the death glare over the years, probably from giving it to each other.

“Right. Sure. It’s not like you have anything to lose, Yulian,” he scoffs. “Your father just gave into a fucking psychopath. I’m sure he’ll be Todd’s pet next.”

“What the fuck, Mattia?” I hiss. “You don’t get to do that. You don’t get to fucking attack me because you’re scared.”

“I’m not attacking you. All I’m saying is that your father made a real bitc –“

“Stop,” Adelaide hisses, cutting the two of us off. “Todd hasn’t even reached out to us and he’s already tearing us apart. We can’t do this. We can’t fracture right now. We can’t be weak.”

And I know that she’s right. I also know that Mattia is only lashing out because he’s terrified. I know that Adelaide is terrified too. I can tell from how both of them act. They just show it in different ways.

Mattia sighs, leaning his head back. “You’re right. Yulian, I’m sorry. Adelaide, I just want us to think this through. I don’t want anything to happen to our loved ones. We know that this man fears nothing. I don’t want anything to happen to Ella.”

She reaches over my lap and puts her hand on top of Mattia’s. “Nothing is going to happen to Ella,” she says with a sigh. “We’re going to figure this out. As long as the three of us are together we can, right?”

The hopefulness, the optimism, coming from Adelaide is throwing me off right now. It would probably be more appreciated if I knew that she wasn’t only acting like this because she’s scared. This is how she’s trying to cover that up.

But she has a point. The three of us were raised to be the heirs to the two biggest crime families in the city – in the *country*. We were raised to think we could own the world. I know that sometimes I still feel that way. I know that Adelaide does too.

Mattia is always a wildcard. I don’t think I know him as well as I’d like to. I have a gut feeling that if the decision was in his hands, he’d be doing the same thing that my father did. He just wants to protect Ella. Adelaide feels like she has nothing to lose since her split with Christian.

“Adelaide is right,” I finally say, looking over at her. She looks relieved that I agree with her. “We need to wait this out,

stick together. We'll figure something out. Connor Todd is just a man. He's not invincible."

She smiles up at me and I feel my heart flutter in my chest. Not the time for that, I know. Terrible time for that, but I can't help it. It's Adelaide. She's forever going to be my weakness. There's no way around it.

"Exactly," she smiles. "So, we're going to brainstorm options that don't involve any of us or our loved ones dying or giving up everything to some spoiled brat who thinks the world owes him something for some reason."

Mattia nods and I slide down into the chair between the two of them, probably for the best because knowing the two of them, I fully expect a 'brainstorming' session to start to turn into another argument.

"Okay, so ideas?" Mattia asks, looking between the two of us.

I look at Adelaide and she looks at me. Neither of us has anything.

I sigh. "We could...try to kill him?" I know it's a jump, but what other option do we have? If we can't come up with anything else, maybe killing him *is* the best option.

Adelaide sighs, shaking her head. "Let's not jump to that."

Chapter Fifteen

Adelaide

Killing Todd would be the easy way out and maybe I should take it. I don't want that to be who I am as a person. I don't want murder to be my go-to. Maybe it's because I'm not ready for any more deaths to be on my conscious. Maybe it's because I want to prove that I'm not some ruthless sociopath like Christian tried to insist I was becoming.

Other than killing Todd though...we come up with *nothing*. Mattia, Yulian, and I stare blankly at each other, trying to figure out what the best thing to do would be and we wind up with *nothing*.

I don't know if we have time, but I hope that we do. My gut tells me that we don't though. Last time he moved from the Papillas to the Andronikovs quickly. There were maybe a few days between families. He's trying to take over the crime scene quicker than anyone ever has before.

And as I leave the restaurant, I try not to think about it. I try not to think about how we have no answers. We have no solutions to what is going to wind up becoming a huge fucking problem.

Another few days slip by. Christian still hasn't given me an answer, but we're in contact constantly these days. Over things other than Kara. I invited him over for dinner. To which he responded, '*You don't know how to cook, Adelaide.*'

I just smiled and reminded him that I could order something. At least that made him laugh. It...felt good making him laugh.

So, I've focused today on trying to make everything look good enough to have Christian over. I straightened up,

especially the kitchen. Then I called Ella, explaining the situation to her. She told me to light candles and I asked her if that seemed like something I would do.

Then I put candles on the dining room table and throughout the room because I don't know a lot about this kind of stuff, but I trust Ella's opinion. She's much better at the 'sweet girlfriend/wife' thing than I am.

I spend the rest of the day with anxiety building in my chest. I don't know why I'm so nervous. I've already had dinner with Christian once. But this is *private*. This is just between the two of us. And maybe...maybe it'll end just the way I want it to.

To try and ease my nerves just a little, I turn the TV on. Not paying attention to it. I'm lost in my little fantasies. Maybe tonight will be amazing. Maybe Christian will decide that we can move forward together and...and we'll just be together with Kara and it'll be everything I've ever wanted. I'll finally be able to have it all.

I'm pulled from my little fantasy world by a knock at the door. I quickly check the clock, panicking that it's Christian already. I haven't even started getting ready yet. I breathe a sigh of relief when it isn't him.

Sighing, I get off the couch to answer the door. Mattia is standing there, dark eyes wide with panic.

"We're next, Adelaide," he tells me.

I don't *need* anything else. That's enough for me, but I tell him to come in anyway. He takes a seat on the couch with me and the two of us fall into silence.

Finally, I force myself to speak, "How do you know?" I ask quietly.

Mattia is looking down into his lap, fingers running over his jeans. "He reached out to Yulian. Not that hard considering he has all of the Andronikov operations under his control now."

“Why are you here? Why isn’t Yulian?” I ask.

“Because Yulian was scared to tell you. He’s still trying to figure out a way out of this.”

“Did he tell him that we’re not striking a deal?”

“He did.”

“And?”

Mattia sighs. The look on his face tells me that he doesn’t want to give me the answer. He forces it out, refusing to look me in the eyes, “He said, ‘they will’, and that was it. That was all Yulian would tell me.”

I’d be one hell of a liar if I said that I wasn’t just a little bit scared. I’d have to be a fool not to be. It’s been made clear that Connor doesn’t play around. His threats aren’t just threats. They wind up becoming promises. I curse under my breath.

“Adelaide, I know that you’re set on not striking a deal but maybe...maybe we could figure something out. I know you don’t want to hear it, but we have people we need to protect. Clearly, he’s not afraid to just waste someone’s life, right?”

Deep down, my gut tells me that Mattia has a point. Trying to figure out a deal is the best option, but my pride is in the way. I willingly gave up everything for this. If I make a deal to just give it all up now? Then I gave it all up for nothing. I can’t do that. I owe it to myself to hold onto this with everything that I have.

“I – we can’t, Mattia. You know that. There is nothing more for us than this. Are you going to get some nine to five?” I ask.

“If – if I have to...I just...I can’t let anything happen to Ella, Ads. I need you to understand that.”

I reach out, taking my brother’s hand in my own. “Nothing is going to happen to Ella, Mattia,” I promise him softly. “It’s not like anyone really knows about you and Ella. She’s so far removed from all of this, you know?”

And I know that I shouldn't make promises that I can't keep. I have no idea what Connor knows or what he doesn't. I'm just hoping that I'm not lying to my brother.

From the look on his face, I can tell that he doesn't quite believe me.

Chapter Sixteen

Christian

I've been considering things between Adelaide and me. Logically, I know what the *right* choice should be. I should stay away from her. I should keep things the way that they are. I just...I can't do that. This is Adelaide and she's my weakness. She's everything to me and I just want to be with her. So, I can either compromise and be with her or stand my ground.

What she proposed...it's worked so far between Ella and Mattia, right? They seem happy together. Ella lives her own life, knowing nothing about what Mattia gets up to. Her lack of knowledge means she's not a real target. Most families have a code. They don't go after innocents. The ones that do are quickly outed by the others. It's not like we're dealing with *real* psychopaths.

I think that it's clear my decision has been made. I'm going to tell Adelaide tonight that if she's sure that this is what she wants, we're back together. I'm hers. She has me. She can have it all, just like she wanted. But the first time something threatens our daughter, that's it. I'm walking – and I'm not coming back this time.

Before dinner, I decide to stop by the florist. Adelaide and I didn't have a normal courtship. We didn't go on dates. I never had the chance to surprise her with flowers – or maybe I did and I never quite took it. That changes tonight. I want to show her that I *do* adore her, that I *do* want this between the two of us.

I spend way too long in the florist, looking over every option, discussing as much as I can with the kindly woman working behind the counter. I tell her that my fiancée and I have been separated because of 'different views' but tonight I'm telling her that I'm sorry, that I want to fix things between the two of us.

She just smiles and points to a bouquet of bright red roses with baby's breath sprinkled between the stems. "You can't go wrong with a classic," she winks and I go with that.

I check my phone as I leave the store, double-checking that I'm still on time. I spent longer than I planned on trying to figure out flowers for her. That's also when I notice that I have multiple missed calls from Mattia. I don't think too much about it. Mattia's been trying to reach out to me since Adelaide and I split. I haven't returned his calls because I know exactly where this is going to go. It's going to be full of Mattia trying to be the big, tough big brother. I don't want to get into it with him. If he calls again, I'll answer.

I guess checking my phone is the slip-up I make. My guard is down. I don't notice anything about my surroundings. All I think about is how tonight is going to be amazing. Everything's going to fall back into place. The wedding is going to be back on. We're going to have the life that I dreamed of for us and Adelaide's not going to have to give up anything.

Just as I go to put my phone back into my pocket, there's a *crack* sound and it takes me just a second to realize what had happened.

Everything goes dark.

Chapter Seventeen

Adelaide

Christian's late.

That's so unlike him. He's always on time. Annoyingly so. I've tried calling him, but he hasn't picked up.

Maybe he changed his mind. That's my first thought. He's had all day to sit with it and decided that he has no interest in reconciliation between the two of us. He doesn't want to act like he doesn't know what I'm doing. He doesn't want to be with someone like me.

The thoughts are driving me insane. I keep calling him, probably looking like an absolute psychopath, blowing up my ex's phone, demanding an answer from him about what's going to happen between the two of us. Is he standing me up? Seriously? Who stands people up nowadays?

The clock ticks, getting later. Still nothing from Christian. I almost call his mom, but that seems like a step *too* far. I'm sure she knows that we've split at this point, I don't think she ever really liked me much anyway. Calling her seems too stalkerish. Christian is a big boy. He'll give me answers. I'm sure there's a perfectly logical reason for everything that's going on.

The doorbell rings. I breathe a sigh of relief. There we go. Christian's going to tell me how there was a terrible wreck and his phone died, or his mom needed him to help her move something heavy.

I open up the door to see Yulian and Mattia standing there. Confusion washes over me. Mattia was just over earlier. They both know that I have plans tonight.

"Guys, I really can't – I can't talk tonight," I tell them.

Mattia sighs. "Ads, we have to come in. We have to talk to you."

“This can wait. It really can,” I say, shaking my head. “Christian will be over any time and I really don’t think I need my brother and ex here when he comes over. That kind of looks bad, you know?”

“Adelaide,” Yulian starts this time. “We – we do need to talk to you. I promise that it’s important. I would not lie about that, you know me.”

“Can you...can you at least tell me what it’s about?” I ask. “That way I can decide whether it’s important or not for myself?”

You know that feeling in your gut when you *know* something? Like you have no proof that something has happened, but you have that nagging, anxious gut feeling. You know something is wrong, really wrong, but your brain has been telling you nothing *is* wrong because you don’t have solid proof?

I’ve had all the evidence in front of me. Christian is late, and not answering my calls. Signs that something is differentiating from the norm, but since I haven’t had someone tell it to my face, I’ve been ignoring all those signs and justifying everything.

When Mattia sighs and says, “It’s about Christian,” all of those feelings come back to the surface and I realize that I’ve known all along.

I swallow and nod, finally stepping aside to let the two of them in. My heart is pounding away in my chest as I try to avoid *those* thoughts. The ones that tell me that I know exactly where this is going, I just don’t want to acknowledge it.

Everyone is quiet as we walk to the living room. I sit on the couch while Yulian takes the spot next to me, Mattia is in the recliner.

They exchange a look like they’re trying to decide who talks first, who tells me what it is about Christian that they have to tell me. Who gets to break the news?

Mattia takes point. He looks at me, running his hands over the arms of the recliner. “Ads, Dmitri got a call from Connor Todd earlier. He said that he already knew you weren’t going to be willing to strike a deal, so he...went ahead and made a choice that would help *persuade* you. Yulian came to me and we went to find Christian and Kara.

Kara was with Christian’s mom. Christian wasn’t in his hotel. He wasn’t answering his phone. We didn’t know where he was. We couldn’t reach him. Ads...Christian...he... Todd...” Mattia can’t find the words and that is how I know just how bad this is. I wait for him to say it. He has to say it. “Christian’s dead, Adelaide.”

I stare blankly ahead. Both of them say my name but I don’t have it in me to answer it. The words wash through my mind again and again, ‘*Christian’s dead*’. I don’t think they click at first because I don’t *feel* anything. I feel just as much emotion as I would if Mattia told me that he went grocery shopping earlier or that his favorite TV show got granted a new season.

Then it hits me all at once.

Christian is gone.

The person that I was going to spend the rest of my life with is *gone*. The first person to love me so openly, the person who fathered my child. He’s gone and all I did was treat him like trash. I decided that I wanted him too late. I wanted it all and it cost me dearly. If I just stepped away when he asked me to, would he still be alive? Did I just kill him?

I’ll never hear his terrible music playing in the garage while he works on his stupid motorcycle, the one that he’ll never learn to ride. I’ll never hear his laughter as he plays with Kara. There will be no more Saturday morning pancakes. No one will force me to play dumb board games that I couldn’t care less about. He won’t be here to watch Kara grow up.

Now I have to do it alone.

Chapter Eighteen

Yulian

My heart shatters in my chest as I watch Adelaide break. I've known her for years – since we were children. I have never seen Adelaide Mansolillo cry before. Until now. The tears run down her cheeks, makeup smearing in their path. She falls from the couch, onto the living floor onto her knees. Her sobs make her entire body shake. The sound will haunt me forever.

Mattia and I exchange a glance. He should be the one to comfort her. He's her big brother. She needs him right now, but I can't stop myself from reaching out to her. I get on the floor next to her, wrapping my arms around her. Adelaide doesn't fight me as I pull her to my chest, clinging to her as she falls apart.

On the ride over, neither of us said anything. The moment we found out Todd had murdered Christian, we had nothing else to say. If I know Mattia like I think I do, I know he was thinking the same thing that I was: how are we going to take care of Adelaide? We owe it to Christian. We owe it to *her*.

Adelaide has been there for both of us – in her own way. She's not the best emotionally supportive person, but she's there for you. She helped Mattia through his problems with Ella, supported both of them, and stuck her nose in their business when she didn't have to. She helped him pull his shit together and take care of business.

She was there for me when Todd was coming after my family. She called to check on me and was there if I needed her. Her own life was falling apart, but she listened to me vent about how I don't get something I felt like I was owed.

So, I hold her to my chest as her body shakes. She cries and cries and all I can do is hold her and rock her. I don't tell

her to stop. She needs to feel this. She needs to let it all out. I don't tell her that everything is okay. It's not. I don't know if things will ever feel 'okay' for Adelaide again after this. I'm not going to lie to her.

My shirt is soaked through with her tears and snot, and I don't care. I just keep holding her until her body starts to get tired. Until the tears turn into little sniffles. She doesn't say a word. Her fingers cling to my arms and I just hold her.

I love her.

I'll always be here for her.

For the next few hours, we bounce back and forth between moments of quiet and moments of Adelaide's heartbreaking sobs. Eventually, she tires herself out. I don't say anything, just pick her up off the floor and carry her to bed. I tuck her in, knowing she won't sleep much. I know she'll be awake in a few hours, hoping that this is all just a terrible dream and Mattia and I will have to be the assholes who tell her that it isn't. We're going to have to break her heart all over again.

I come out of the bedroom as Mattia is hanging up the phone. "Christian's mother says she'll watch Kara as long as Adelaide needs," he says.

He doesn't say what we're both thinking – that Christian's mother would probably prefer to keep Kara. Adelaide has always been convinced that his family didn't like her and doubted her parenting skills. I don't know if their son getting killed is going to help that any.

At least, if we're lucky, she won't know how involved Adelaide is in all of this.

I nod and sit on the couch, running my hand back through my hair. "That's probably a good thing. We...we need to figure out how we're going to handle this."

Mattia takes his spot back in the recliner, leaning back in it. “I already have it figured out,” he says, like the typical older brother. “We’re not leaving Adelaide alone. Even if she tries to push us away. You, me, and Ella will take her in shifts. As for business, I’ll step up. I’ll run things for now. Maybe forever. We’ll see how Adelaide feels as she heals from this all.”

I want to tell him that Adelaide might never heal. She just lost the person that she loved. But I’m sure Mattia knows that. I’m sure he’s just trying to think positively because neither of us wants to think about the other possibility. We don’t want to think that we may have lost Adelaide completely if she isn’t able to recover from this.

“Okay,” I nod in agreement. “Just tell me what you need from me, Mattia. Whether it’s on the Adelaide or the business front.”

I prefer being Adelaide’s right hand, but I’ve pledged myself to this family. Their business is my business. I’ll serve Mattia just as well as I’ve served Adelaide.

“I want to have men with Ella all the time. Doesn’t matter whether she’s okay with it or not. I want her guarded at work. I want someone driving her home from work. I want someone crossing the damn street with her. We’re not losing anyone else.”

I nod. “I’ll get on that.”

Neither of us says what’s unspoken between us – Adelaide was too sure of herself. She expected Todd to *ask* first, to give her a warning that he might strike. He didn’t. He predicted what she would do and then struck. No warning. No chance for anyone to act.

He’s even more dangerous than we expected him to be.

“Christian’s mother says she’ll handle the funeral details,” Mattia says. His hands are running over the arms of the recliner again, his little nervous tick. “I’m sure Adelaide’s going to want to take that over though. She’s going to be clinging to as much control as she can right now.”

He's right. Control is how Adelaide makes herself feel safe. "We'll work it out," I promise. "I'm going to make some calls. Get protection for Ella, Adelaide, and Christian's family. We can't guarantee that Todd won't try to go after Kara," I say, keeping my voice low.

"I'll be here," he says.

Neither of us is going anywhere tonight. Neither of us is going to sleep tonight. We don't want to leave Adelaide. It sounds like a terrible idea. I know that between Mattia and me, we'll be taking the first few shifts with her. Leaving Ella alone with her could be dangerous. Adelaide might be unpredictable and if she gets too aggressive, she might actually hurt Ella's feelings. At least Mattia and I can take whatever she dishes out.

I come back inside from making calls, using every man that we have and every resource at my disposal when I hear shouting. I sigh. We should've expected this. I head toward the bedroom where I see Adelaide, awake, shouting at Mattia.

"How do I know you're not lying to me? How are you so sure? He goes undercover. What if he's undercover?" There's something heartbreakingly childlike about Adelaide's voice like she's trying to convince her big brother to tell her that it's all a lie.

"Adelaide," Mattia is handling it softly, the best that he can. "I wish I could tell you that I'm lying. I'm not. I'm sure I can get someone to pull the police report. I can call Christian's mother and she'll tell you that it's not a lie. What do you need me to do?"

She looks at him with sad brown eyes and shakes her head. "Nothing. Nothing! You can't do anything! You can't bring him back, Mattia!" she yells.

“I know, honey. I know,” he says, sitting on the edge of the bed.

Adelaide looks at him, tears threatening to spill over again. “It’s – it’s my fault, Mattia. Christian’s dead because of me. I – I killed him.” The tears start. My heart breaks and I can tell Mattia’s does too.

He takes her in his arms, pulling her close as he promises her that it’s not her fault. I don’t know if Adelaide believes him, but I choose to quietly back out of the room. This feels like something she needs her big brother for, not her ex-boyfriend.

I head toward the kitchen and put a few more pieces together. Dinner is cold on the table, and unlit candles are laid out everywhere.

Christian and Adelaide were going to reconcile – or at least try to. They were going to get back together and have that happily ever after that Adelaide deserves...and now they’ll never get the chance.

Chapter Nineteen

Adelaide

Life passes by in a blur. Day one. Day five. It's all the same to me now. They blend into a mess that I don't know how to sort out properly. All I know is that I'm exhausted. Sleep comes to me in pieces. An hour here, thirty minutes there. All I can think about is Christian, and how I let him down. I lost him because of my choices.

And I know, *I know*, that most people would use this as their opportunity to get their shit together. This would be a wake-up call. This would change everything for them. But as I stand next to Mattia, my hands shaking as I try to hold my daughter, all I can think about is doubling down. If I lost everything because of this, what else is there to lose?

I've been fighting with Christian's mother every day leading up to today, the funeral. We have different views as to what his funeral should look like. Ella told me to just back down, but I refused. Don't they know that this is all I have still? Christian needed to be dressed in his *favorite* suit, the one with burgundy accents. Not the plain black one that she thought.

In typical tradition, at least for *us*, I wanted his tombstone decorated. Not something simple. He deserved more. She fought me on that one and said that Christian wouldn't like all the attention. I relented on that one. Fine.

Christian's casket is lowered to the ground in front of us. My grip on Mattia's arm tightens and he pulls me into his side, likely the only thing keeping Kara and me standing at the moment. If Mattia wasn't here, I'd feel so alone.

All of these people... don't like me. They know who I am. They always thought that Christian deserved better. Now I know that they were right.

Ella couldn't come. She had to work and the amount of protection detail Mattia has on her would be suspicious. As it is, I'm surprised Christian's mother hasn't noticed the people constantly watching over her and Kara right now. Yulian couldn't come because that would be way more suspicious. Dmitri Andronikov's son? It doesn't matter if he's my friend or not. All they see is the side of the line we generally align ourselves with.

The priest speaks but I don't hear a word. I'm lost in my thoughts, holding Kara just a little bit tighter. She doesn't understand a second of this. She doesn't understand that her father isn't around anymore. She doesn't know that this is her mother's fault.

All I know is that I have to do something about it. I cannot let Christian die in vain.

"Mattia! You're being *stupid!*" I hiss, slamming my hand down on the kitchen table. The whole thing shakes beneath the impact. Fine. Let the fucker break.

"And you're being *rash*, Adelaide!" he yells back, standing up from his chair. "You want to send every man we have after Todd and his fucking *army?*" he asks, disbelief clear in his tone right now.

"What other option do we have? Are we just going to hide for the rest of our lives? Are you going to have men follow Ella around forever?"

"If it keeps her safe? Yes!"

It's my turn to look at him in disbelief. He's being dumb. Playing this so close to the chest is what Connor's going to expect of us. He expects us to be scared, hiding away until we finally break and give in to his demands. Or until he can pick us off one by one.

What he's not expecting is a full-fledged assault. No one has tried that yet, as far as I know. Nobody has come after *him*.

"If we don't do *something*, it's going to be Ella's funeral next!"

"Don't you fucking *dare* say that, Adelaide," he hisses.

"Tell me I'm wrong, Mattia! Do it. Tell me I'm fucking wrong about this." He can't. He knows that he can't. I stand across from him, my dark eyes focused on his.

"I think you're being irrational, Adelaide. I think you're trying to fulfill some suicide mission because you feel guilty and awful, but that's on you. We're not getting ourselves, our loved ones, and our men killed because you feel sad."

My eyes narrow when he calls me irrational. Isn't that just a word that men use to shut women down? The anger increases when he says this is just because I feel *guilty*. It's not. It's the only plan that we have. I don't see Mattia opening his mouth and offering something *useful*. Neither has Yulian. Speaking of, where the fuck is Yulian?

"Give me a better idea then, Mattia. Tell me what we should do since you know *so* much," I say, keeping my voice low. "Right. You can't. Because without me you can't do anything. You don't have ideas of your own. You can't figure it out. You *need* me. So either listen to what I say, come up with something better or get the fuck out."

There's the smallest voice in the back of my head telling me to stop. Stop trying to fight one of the only people that's been with me through this all. Stop pushing my brother away. Stop trying to lead some suicide mission. Deep down, I think I know that this is what this is – a suicide mission.

That voice doesn't get far with me. I don't give in to it. I barely listen to it. I stare Mattia down and he opens his mouth. It looks like he desperately wants to say something, but he doesn't. He looks at me and shakes his head.

"I'm not fighting you, Ads. I'm not giving you what you want," he says. He turns and walks toward the door, leaving

me standing there.

“Mattia! Come back! We’re not done with this conversation!” I yell after him.

He doesn’t. I just hear the door slam behind him and I fall into the kitchen chair, running my hands through my hair.

Chapter Twenty

Yulian

I arrive at Adelaide's house just as Mattia is storming out. His eyes meet mine and I can tell immediately that whatever happened inside didn't go well.

"She's fucking impossible," he hisses to me. "I can't be in there with her, Yulian. She's losing her fucking mind. Maybe you can deal with her."

I don't know what he expects me to do. It's not like Adelaide listens to *anyone*. I don't know why she would listen to me out of all people. I sigh.

"She just lost Christian, Mattia. Of course, she's going to be a little...rough," I choose my wording carefully. "We just need to give her time, support her."

"She wants to launch a full-fledged assault on Todd, Yulian. She wants to go after him and get everyone fucking killed. I don't think we need to support that."

I sigh again, running my hand back through my hair. We should have expected this. Adelaide wants revenge. It makes sense. It's going to get her killed if she chases after it too much. It's going to put us all in danger. I nod.

"Fine, fine. I'll try to talk to her. Just – just don't do anything stupid until I convince her not to, Mattia."

I feel like a babysitter stuck between two fighting siblings, and honestly, that's not a far-off comparison. The Mansolillo siblings both have terrible tempers and they both are always convinced that they're right. I've heard them fight since joining their little venture, but I've never seen Mattia's eyes look like *that*. I don't trust him not to do something stupid while I try to talk Adelaide out of launching a fucking war.

“You don’t have to worry about me, Yulian,” he says before getting into the car.

Yeah, that sounds like a big fucking lie.

I watch as he pulls out of the driveway before I go inside the house. I find Adelaide in the kitchen, sitting at the table. I don’t say anything at first, trying to judge exactly how to approach her or this situation.

She looks up at me and anger is still on her face. The fight between her and Mattia must have been bad. Great. “You’re late,” she hisses.

She’s turning her anger to me. Double great. I need to do my best to calm the situation before we end up in a screaming match too. She’s hurting. She wants to pick fights and push people away. We can’t let her do that. Adelaide doesn’t need to be alone right now.

I take the seat next to her, shrugging a shoulder. “I was with my father. He’s moving back to Russia,” I tell her.

I watch some of the anger melt from her face. She looks over at me, eyebrows raised. “Are you going with him?”

“Do you want me to go with him?”

She shakes her head quickly. “No.”

“Well, I wasn’t going to. I still have things to do here,” I say. What, I don’t quite know. Keep working for the Mansolillos? Is there even going to be a Mansolillo family after all of this? Maybe if Adelaide and Mattia don’t kill each other in the process. I use this opportunity since some of the anger seems to melt away, to carefully approach the subject. “Ads,” I say, taking her hand in mine. “I know you’re hurting.”

Her eyes flash to me and she shakes her head. “You don’t know shit, Yulian. You don’t know what it feels like to lose the person that you loved the most in the world.”

“Not in the way that you lost, Christian, no,” I say, agreeing with her. “But I know you’re hurting. I know you’re

falling into self-destruction because that's the easy way out. It helps justify what you're feeling. If you're alone, then you feel better feeling alone."

She looks at me, dark eyes narrowing. I know then that I hit it on the nose. She's pushing people away because it's the easy part. She looks down at the table then, shrugging her shoulders. "So what," she mutters.

"So, you're not pushing everyone away, Adelaide. You're not pushing me away, at least. You can try but I'm not going anywhere," I promise her softly.

I know how fucking pathetic that is. She broke up with me years ago. She chose another man, who she now lost. She's never given me any hints that she feels that way toward me anymore. It doesn't matter, I still feel things for her. I still love her and I always will. Nothing is going to change that.

And since I love her? I can't let her do this. I can't let her push people away. I can't let her hurt herself because that's easier for her to do. She's not going on some suicide mission. Not with me by her side.

She looks down at me, looking at our hands. Her nose wrinkles and she sighs. "You're very annoying, Yulian."

"I know. Now, Mattia told me about your plan. It's not... it's not smart, Ads."

She looks at me, that anger coming back. I can handle it. Whatever she wants to say. However, she wants to lash at me. If she wants to tell me how awful I am, I can handle it. If she wants to hit me where it hurts, I'll take it. I don't know what else to do. I just know that I can't let her do this. I can't let her make this mistake.

Then something happens that I don't quite expect. Her face softens and Adelaide nods just a little bit. "I...I know you're right, Yulian. I know that. I just don't know what else to do with this. I'm – I'm lost."

I never expected Adelaide to admit that she's lost.

I listen to her and sigh softly. I don't know what to tell her. All I know is that I have to be here for her. I keep her hand in mine, rubbing my thumb over the back of her hand.

"It's okay. We'll figure this out together," I promise.

I don't have any more answers than she does at this point. If anyone can figure out how to take Todd out, I always thought it would be Adelaide. But when she's at her best. Right now, she's not and that's understandable.

We'll get there.

Chapter Twenty-One

Adelaide

Mattia doesn't even want to look at me and I can't blame him. We... fought. Neither of us is going to apologize because neither of us thinks that we're wrong. It's just how we are.

It feels like the weight of the world is on my shoulders. Christian's death? My fault. If we lose everything that we've worked for? My fault. *Again*. I can't do that. I can't throw it all away for a second time. Mattia will never forgive me. I'll never forgive myself. I wanted this. I chose this over my relationship with Christian. I owe it to him to at least make sure I keep it.

Yulian's stuck in the middle, quite literally today. He's sitting between the two of us, looking back and forth, waiting for one of us to say something. When neither of us speaks, Yulian runs a hand through his hair and sighs.

"So, what are we doing about this?" he asks, tapping his index finger against the letter on the table.

Connor Todd, on top of being a ruthless piece of shit, evidently has a flair for dramatics. He wrote me a letter.

Dearest Adelaide,

I hope you're not holding what happened with Christian against me. It wasn't as personal as it seems, honest. I just needed to get your attention. I needed you to understand that I mean business. Everything I know about you, I like. I respect you. In respecting you, I know how you think. I knew you weren't going to give in to me. I had to make sure you really understand.

Please understand that I have no intention of hurting you or anyone else in your life, as long as you give me what I'm asking for. I want control. I want the Mansolillo name and

operations. In return, of course, everyone will be safe and fine. On top of that, perhaps you can rule by my side.

All my love,

Connor P. Todd

Ever since I read the letter, I've been feeling sick to my stomach. It *could* have something to do with the lack of food I've been eating since losing Christian. Or it could have something to do with his killer writing me what sounds like a fucking love letter.

I look at Yulian and take a breath. "My original idea still stands," I mutter. I can practically see the annoyance on Mattia's face. He disagrees and he's trying his hardest not to start an argument. Fuck it. Maybe what we need is another argument. Maybe that'll *somehow* flesh out an idea. "Do you have anything better, Mattia?"

I hear Yulian sigh as he leans back in the chair between us, essentially moving out of the way so Mattia and I can go back and forth. He knows how this tends to work.

"I just know going off half-cocked like a lunatic isn't going to do anything, Adelaide," Mattia sighs.

"Fine. Fine. Give me a better idea, Mattia. I'd love to hear what you can come up with."

He rolls his eyes. "Ads, I'm just saying...we need to think, right? Maybe we can convince Todd that our operations aren't that successful yet. Why would he want something that's basically useless?"

"Even if we're not successful, he wants the *name*. You know how respected the Mansolillos used to be. You know what we mean. We're trying to get back to that level of respect. That's what we've been working toward, right?"

"Yeah, sure. But is that name worth our death, Adelaide? The death of more people that we love? Or people that

surround us? Clearly, Todd isn't going to discriminate over who he does or doesn't hurt to get what he wants."

My head falls back and I groan. I know that Mattia has a point. But I also refuse to ruin what I've sacrificed everything for. I need him to understand that. He needs to get that. I don't have anything outside of this. I have no other way to give my daughter the life that she deserves, the life that I dreamed of for her.

"I ruined the Mansolillo name once, Mattia. I've never forgiven myself for that. I never will. I have to fix that. I have to fix every mistake that I've made."

"Adelaide, how are you going to fix all of this? What are you going to do? Learn to bring people back to life? Reverse time? None of that is going to happen. Sometimes we have to live with the mistakes that we made. I did. I still do. I spent *years* behind bars because of a mistake."

"And the second you got out, you started trying to right that mistake, didn't you?" I counter, knowing that I'm right. "You immediately wanted to rebuild the family but you *couldn't* because you didn't know how. You're not a leader, Mattia. I am."

"And you're doing a really shitty job at leading, Adelaide. Gar is dead. Christian is dead. Connor Todd is writing you fucking love letters and your only idea is to kill him. What would our father think?"

His words cut and I know that that was Mattia's goal. He wanted to hit me where it hurts. It's how we fight. We search for those weak points and call them out. If someone's wounded, they're less likely to fight as hard. We learned that as children.

I take a breath and try to steady myself. I don't want him to see how hurt I am. I don't want him to see that he got to me. However, before I open my mouth, Yulian is shifting in his seat.

“Enough,” he hisses. He’s angry. His accent is more obvious, just like it always is when his anger is spiking. “What good is the two of you arguing going to do for us? Please, tell me. All we’re managing to do is split things apart even more.”

Mattia scoffs. “You just don’t want to listen to me tell her the truth because you know that it’s going to hurt her. That’s all you’ve ever cared about, Yulian. Adelaide.”

“I’m not taking sides,” Yulian rolls his eyes. “Both of you are acting like children fighting over a toy. Neither of you has any ideas but you hate everything that the other suggests. We’re going to get nowhere like this – and you both know that I’m right.”

“So, what’s your idea, Yulian?” Mattia asks. “Because if you’re criticizing us, I’m sure you have one of your own, right?”

“I think...” Yulian taps his fingers against the wooden table, looking between the two of us before sighing. “I think that perhaps we follow Adelaide’s train of thought. We don’t have to kill Todd, but we scare him. Injure him. Let him know that we mean business.”

“Great. Sounds perfect. And when he sends his entire fucking army after us, Yulian? Or did you forget that your father just handed over his men and everything else that he’s built over the years?”

“Mattia, what do you suggest that we do? Sit and wait? Wait for him to get bored of being patient and come after us. Which one of us has a remaining significant other? I’m single. Christian’s dead,” he says those words, and I wince – so does he. I know that he’s just trying to prove a point. Doesn’t mean hearing it stings any less. “That just leaves Ella, right? Is she the next point that he makes?”

Anger flashes on Mattia’s face, just like it always does when Ella is brought up. It’s his weakness, understandably so. Doesn’t matter though. Yulian has a point. If we just sit around and wait it out, how long before Todd decides to strike again?

If he doesn't go for us, he'll go for the people that we love. Mattia has Ella. My money says Todd will go for her next.

"Fine. You know what? Fuck it. It's not just us involved, is it?" Mattia asks, standing up. "Why don't we ask our men? See what they think about your plan of leading them to death. I'm sure they'll just love it."

"Mattia –"

"No, Adelaide. Fuck it. You want to be a leader. Part of being a leader is having the support of your people. If they agree with you, we'll go with your plan."

"And if they don't?"

"We'll go with mine."

"You don't even have one," as soon as those words leave my lips I realize how childish they sound. I can't help it. Mattia's being naïve.

He doesn't even respond. He gets up from the table and storms out of the room. The door slams behind him, shaking the walls, and then silence washes over us.

Anger floods through me. Not the first time during all of this. My emotions feel like they've been overloaded lately. Everything going on all at once. Once again, the weight of the fucking world is on my shoulders. I grab the closest thing to me, a glass of water, and chuck it across the room, shrieking in frustration.

It hits the walls and shatters. It doesn't make me feel any better like I really hoped it would. Instead, I still feel just as lost and angry.

Yulian looks over at me and I shake my head. "Don't even ask what you're going to ask," I say. I know what he's going to ask. He's going to ask if I'm okay because that's all he's been asking since the beginning. The answer is always the same. I'm not okay. I don't know if I'll ever be okay again.

"I wasn't going to ask anything," he says, looking over at me.

It's a lie. We both know that. But it's a lie that I appreciate.

I look at him, taking a breath. It doesn't help like people think it does. "So, what happens? What do we do if our men agree with Mattia? Do we go along with his plan?"

I can't do that. I can't just sit here and do nothing. I'm not just going to wait for Connor to decide he's given us another time. I'm not dying. I'm not losing everything. I refuse.

Yulian looks at me and sighs. "We'll...we'll figure it out when we get to that part, Ads. We can't make plans for what we don't know. I doubt they'll agree with Mattia's idea of 'do nothing'."

"Maybe not. But are they going to love my idea of 'risking their lives'? Because I've come to learn that people really like living."

That gets a chuckle out of Yulian before he sighs, reaching out for my hand. I don't hesitate. I give it to him, feeling just a little wave of calm wash over me when he rubs his thumb over the back of my hand.

"Yeah, well. Again, we'll deal with that when we get there, okay Ads? I don't want you stressing about all of that right now. You have other things to worry about. Don't you get Kara back tonight?" he asks.

He's right. I almost forgot that. Christian's mom is letting me have Kara tonight. I should be excited but I'm terrified of being around her. What if I don't remember how to be a mom? What if I'm terrible at it because of everything that's happened?"

"Right," I say softly.

"Isn't – isn't Ella coming over?"

"If Mattia doesn't forbid her from being around me."

"Well, if he does...I'll come over instead," Yulian promises softly.

I don't know why it gives me comfort, but it does. I guess I just don't want to be alone.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Yulian

I never thought it would come to this. When I started working with Adelaide and Mattia, I saw things working out one way. It felt like there was only one outcome. Adelaide was going to lead and Mattia was going to be happy to listen to her because that's who they are. Adelaide's the one with ideas. She's the one with the tenacity and fortitude to lead a family. Mattia's not even an ideas person.

This proves that more than anything. Adelaide has an idea – Mattia does not. His only idea is 'not doing Adelaide's idea' which I don't consider a viable idea. But here we are, looking at a possible split between the family because of this.

Adelaide is trying to keep it together. I see that on her face. She's sitting on the table, giving off the impression that nothing is wrong. She looks put together. Pretty dress, straightened hair, perfect makeup. Her heel dangles from her foot, giving her that nonchalant look. If you look closer, if you *know* Adelaide, you can see the faults.

There are black circles underneath her eyes that the makeup doesn't quite hide. That could easily be blamed on her having Kara last night (which I still haven't had the chance to ask her how that went) or it could be because she wasn't able to sleep out of worry. She never dangles her heel from her foot unless she's nervous. She's not wearing lip gloss. Her lipstick is a nude color instead of the berry red that she usually wears.

I realize that the way I *know* Adelaide is maybe a little insane. It's come from years of watching her, being around her, observing her because Adelaide Mansolillo is the type of woman you *observe*, you admire, you wonder how she wakes up every day and becomes who she is.

Then you get to know her, *really* know her and realize how much of an act it all is, how human she is underneath it

all. Then you still wind up amazed by her.

Mattia stands in front of the table. I don't know him as well as I know Adelaide. I can't tell if he's nervous. I can't tell if he slept well last night or not (I'm going with not because Ella was with Adelaide). He readjusts his jacket as he stands in front of the men – *their* men. Everything that the Mansolillo siblings have worked to rebuild.

“I understand that this is untraditional,” Mattia starts. “But the way we run things, in general, is untraditional. Adelaide and I are at an impasse – Yulian claims to be impartial,” he looks over his shoulder at me and I wince.

We both know that I'm not impartial. We both know whose side I'm on here but Mattia wants to write it off as my love for Adelaide. Maybe he's not wrong. Maybe I only agree with her because I adore Adelaide and I'd follow her to the ends of the Earth without quite thinking about it. I'd do anything asked of me.

Maybe it's because of my draw toward violence, that belief in the fact that violence can solve anything. Obviously, I'd be drawn to the violent option. Or it could be because I have a personal vendetta against Todd now. It has nothing to do with Christian. It has everything to do with him somehow convincing my father that giving up *everything* was the right option. That our family needed to be just tossed to the side and handed over to Todd. I no longer have what I thought was my birthright.

Or maybe, just maybe, it's because I like the fact Adelaide has an idea and Mattia does not.

Mattia continues, “So we leave it to all of you. The problem is Connor Todd. I'm sure most of you know what happened to the Papillas when they turned down the option to give Todd everything that they had. When confronted by Todd, Dmitri Andronikov handed all operations over to him instead of going up against him.”

I cringe again when Mattia brings up my father and the downfall of my family.

“Todd murdered Adelaide’s fiancé, Christian, as a warning. He’s reached out to us. That brings us to the problem. We don’t know what to do. Adelaide, explain your idea.”

She rolls her eyes. She doesn’t even try to hide it in front of everyone else. Adelaide slides her shoe back onto her foot and stands up, pulling her dress down. She’s trying her hardest to give off the appearance that she just doesn’t *care*, that she’s not worried.

“The way I see it, there’s only one option to deal with Todd,” she says. “We have to take him out. We have to kill him. At the very least, we have to *scare* him. Mattia thinks that’s a terrible idea because that’s what he’d expect out of us. He thinks it would be a suicide mission for all of us if we go after Todd. If we do *nothing*, we’ll all probably die anyway. I’d rather die knowing I tried rather than sitting around just *waiting* to die,” she finishes, crossing her arms over her chest.

Mattia steps up again, “I think it’s a terrible idea because it’s a suicide mission. Anyone involved would die because Todd would be expecting us. He has the Andronikov men. He has the remaining Papillas. He has his *own*, as far as we know. We’d be outnumbered. I think we need to wait and see if he’s going to strike again. Maybe there’s the option to work out a deal.”

“Or we could just all die,” Adelaide interjects.

I’m half expecting this to turn into *another* yelling match between the two of them. I’m not going to lie, I’m a little tired of stepping between the two of them when they decide to go at it. The men don’t need to see the fracture lines. They’re already revealing themselves now that they’re wanting their men to take sides.

Mattia rolls his eyes, but at least he doesn’t start an argument with her. “I’m not saying that we wait forever. I’m saying that we wait until we have more information. The

longer we take to decide, the more information may possibly reveal itself to us. The better chance we all have at surviving this, instead of charging in without any more information than we already have.

That's why we bring this to you. This is ultimately your fate as much as ours. We want to know what you would prefer to do. No one will be punished for their opinion. This is the one time we *want* your opinion," he says.

If looks could kill, Mattia would be dead on the floor. Adelaide has not stopped glaring at him since he started talking. When he finishes, her attention turns away from him. "Since we're doing this as fairly as possible and it would be impossibly annoying to count votes or listen to all of you speak your piece, we're doing this easily. If you agree with Mattia, go to the right side of the room. If you agree with me, go to the left. If you're undecided or you just don't care, stay in the middle and grow a backbone."

It becomes a game of waiting to see. It becomes a game of building anxiety. Adelaide sits back on the table in front of me and I can see how tense she is while she keeps trying to give off her 'I don't care' demeanor. I can see that she's trying *not* to watch as people follow the orders and start to take sides.

I'm watching closely. This doesn't have a whole lot to do with me, but I can feel my own anxiety starting to build as I watch. At first, it starts pretty even. An equal amount of people on the left and the right. Then I see it start to shatter. More people on the right. I can see Adelaide getting tenser. I can see Mattia starting to relax. *Fuck*.

When all is said and done, no one decided to stay in the middle. No one didn't have an opinion. Mattia won out. The men decided that Mattia had the right idea instead of Adelaide's suicide mission.

I know the fallout from this is going to be...rough.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Adelaide

Earlier today, I watched it all fall apart in front of me. I watched everything I built get ripped away from me. They chose Mattia over me. They chose to do nothing over actually being productive. I left after that. Clearly, I have no reason to hang around. I don't care how childish walking out looks. What was I going to do? Sit there and listen to them talk about how they're not doing anything to solve the problem?

I came home to my empty house. Or Christian's empty house. I'm almost positive the only reason his mother hasn't kicked me out is because of Kara, but she has Kara more than I do. I feel like I'm losing everything in my life. I feel lost and hopeless and I don't even know where to turn to.

I can't start over again, but it feels like Mattia just took the only remaining thing I had left.

I hear a knock on my door and immediately sigh. There's only one person who it could be. I get up and sigh again, taking my time to walk to the front door. I open it and just like I expected, Yulian is standing there.

"I don't want to talk," I say, preparing to just shut the door in his face. "There's nothing to say."

"Luckily for you, I don't want to talk," he says, holding up a bottle of vodka. "From my father's stash. He didn't give *everything* up to Todd."

I look at him, look at the vodka and decide to let him inside. The house is a mess from our sleepover with Kara last night. I'm a mess because I gave up when I got home. My shoes were kicked off by the door, I changed out of my dress and into a pair of sweatpants and a tank top. My hair is up in a ponytail. Nobody sees Adelaide Mansolillo like this. It ruins my reputation.

I lead Yulian back to the bedroom, where I've been hiding in the darkness. I realize how *pathetic* that sounds. I sound like I'm living in some pit of depression. Maybe I am. I don't know.

He raises an eyebrow as I sit on the bed and I roll my eyes. "I'm not trying to seduce you, Andronikov."

That makes Yulian chuckle, his head tilting to the side. "Good. It takes a lot more than *this* to seduce me, Adelaide. I'd hate to shut you down and make things worse."

It's my turn to roll my eyes as he takes a seat next to me on the bed. That used to be *my* side of the bed. Now I sleep on what had been Christian's side because...I miss him and it makes me feel closer to him. I don't know if that's silly or not.

"If I wanted to seduce you, you'd know."

"Would I? Good," Yulian says, opening the bottle of vodka. "Straight fine with you or do you need a chaser?"

"I have lemonade in the fridge."

The look on Yulian's face makes me laugh for what feels like the first time all day. "Adelaide, I just sat down. You could've said something *before* I sat down." But he gets up anyway, heading toward the kitchen to find the lemonade that I mentioned.

Yulian returns with the lemonade and two glasses, taking the spot next to me again. He doesn't ask. He just pours lemonade and vodka into one of the glasses, handing it to me. I nod in appreciation, taking it and taking a sip. The vodka burns the back of my throat, but there's something *refreshing* about it. Maybe I'm just feeling masochistic.

Yulian pours a shot of vodka into his glass, drinking it straight. He downs the shot and doesn't even wince. There's something simultaneously impressive and attractive about that. I don't know why the latter thought slips into my mind, but it does and I can't stop it. Annoying.

We sit in silence, just like he proposed. Neither of us really wants to talk. If we did, I don't know what I'd say. Everything I want to say probably sounds whiny and childish. Things aren't going my way. Not enough people took my side. I don't know where to go from here.

He pours himself another shot and offers the bottle to me. My glass is barely half-empty but I add more vodka anyway. Just because I can. We go back to sipping in silence until Yulian is on his third shot. Evidently, that's enough for him to forget the agreement for silence and he opens his mouth.

"All is not lost, Adelaide."

I can't stop my eye roll. Who would I be if I didn't roll my eyes though? "Yulian, that sounds like a load of shit right now. Considering everything that's happened lately, it really feels like all is lost. Everyone agrees with Mattia's lovely plan of 'do nothing and wait for death'."

"That was your plan at first," he points out gently. "Then Todd made things personal and you decided to go with *my* idea of murdering him."

I turn to look at him, my stare hard. He's right, of course. I was originally planning on just waiting things out, seeing what we could figure out. But that was a terrible plan. Out of the three options we have, it may be the worse. We sit and wait and then we die. I'm not ready to die. I can't fail.

"And it was a terrible plan," I tell him lowly, taking a sip from my drink. "I should've come up with something so much better. And I didn't. Now we're stuck and everyone's going to die. Once again, that's going to be on *me*."

Yulian sighs as he looks at me. "You're feeling guilty, aren't you, Ads?"

"What gave that away?"

Chapter Twenty-Four

Yulian

I guess I should've known that guilt would be eating away at Adelaide. I guess I just...thought she wouldn't feel that way. That's kind of crappy of me, huh? Assuming that because of who she is she wouldn't feel things like guilt or whatever. I look over at her on the bed, taking another sip from her cup.

"None of this is your fault, Ads," I tell her.

I need her to know that. This is not on her. Not as much as she wants to think it is. Men like Connor Todd will strike whether you give them a reason to or not. I'd willingly bet money that even if Adelaide answered him immediately and gave him what he wanted, Christian would still be dead. It sends a message. Men like Todd rule through fear, exactly what Adelaide didn't want to do.

Ruling through fear isn't sustainable. Eventually, you run into someone who *isn't* scared of you, and then you have nothing. You can't control everyone. Adelaide's smart to not want to take that route. She just doesn't see it right now because she's angry and hurt and she wants revenge.

I don't blame her.

She blinks at me, slowly. She opens her mouth to respond but doesn't. She takes another long drink from her glass before holding it out toward me. I pour more lemonade and vodka into the cup and she brings it back up to her lips, drinking from it again.

"It is though, Yulian," she says finally.

"It's not. How is this your fault?"

She scoffs, another drink. "*Please*. I'm surrounded by death. I'm like a bad omen."

I wasn't expecting that out of her. I almost take another shot to figure out how to follow her thought process, but I decide against it. If we both get shitfaced, I can't guarantee that this conversation is going to stay productive.

"How? I need a reason besides you thinking you're some omen of death or whatever, Adelaide. That just sounds *ridiculous*."

Another sip as she leans back against the pillow. She's no longer looking at me, just staring straight ahead. "My mother. Antonio. My father. Damien. Gar. Christian. Everyone around me *dies*. The only thing they have in common is *me*. It's all on me, Yulian. You or Mattia will probably be next."

I sigh. I sit the lemonade, vodka, and my glass on the nightstand. Reaching out, I take Adelaide's face in my hand, making her turn to look at me. "We're only going over this once, Ads, so I need you to listen, okay?" I say. I don't give her a chance to answer before I continue, "Your mother? Was killed by your father because he was a jealous man. Antonio? I killed him because he was probably going to kill you. You needed me to take care of a problem. You never *asked* me to kill him. I could've just scared him." I watch her open her mouth to argue, but I hold up a finger, shushing her.

I know Adelaide is *at least* tipsy because she doesn't slap my hand away when I do that.

"Your father? Was also going to kill you. Christian pulled the trigger because he *loved* you and Kara. He wasn't going to let anything happen to you. Damien? Mattia killed him. Damien burnt half of your damn house down. Gar? Was an inexperienced child who didn't want to listen to people who knew what they were talking about. He was never going to listen to you. Okay?"

And Christian...Christian was an unfortunate target, Ads. It's not on you. He's probably avoided death so many times. It just crept up on him. I need you to understand what I'm saying, okay? I need you to *believe* me, sweetheart."

She looks at me with big, dark eyes. It's the most innocent I've seen her look... probably ever. I see all of her walls crash down. It feels like it's been a long time coming for this. Even after Christian died, it felt like Adelaide was still trying to keep those walls up and keep everyone out. And I know that's who she is as a person. I know that's just how she protects herself.

Slowly, I reach out and take her glass. I sit it on the nightstand with mine, deciding that maybe alcohol was a poor idea. "Ads," I say softly.

There's more breaking. A tear rolls down her cheek. I don't know how to deal with a crying Adelaide, but all I know is that I don't want to see it. I don't want to witness her hurting because it hurts me.

"Come here, sweetheart," I reach out and take her in my arms. I hold her close to my chest and there's an initial bit of resistance. She's tense in my arms, but then I feel her start to melt. Her body starts to shake before the sobs come. She lets herself break and all I know to do is hold her and let it out.

It's healthy. She holds it all inside, acts like everything is okay, and puts up walls and this façade. That's fine. That's how she stays strong in front of other people, but Adelaide can break around me. She's always been allowed to. I held her hand when her mother died. I saw a little girl die then and become replaced with this version of Adelaide, the one who pretends as if nothing has ever or will ever bother her.

After that, each death has just made her harder. Made her give less of a care about anything else. Christian was just what broke her completely. She stopped caring.

She cries in my arms and I hold her, my fingers stroking through the ends of her ponytail. I rock her gently and she doesn't tell me to let go. She clings to my t-shirt again and I just hold her, relaxing with her there. If she needs me to, I'll stay here all night. There's nowhere else I'd rather be than helping her pick up the pieces.

“It’s okay,” I finally whisper into her hair. “It’s not your fault, Ads. It’s never been your fault. But it’s going to be okay. I’m here. I’m always going to be here. I’m never leaving your side. Whatever happens, we’re going to make it through together,” I promise quietly.

That makes her pause and look up at me. Her face is red and puffy from crying, snotty-nosed, and tear-filled eyes. I still think she’s gorgeous. There’s a moment there and every fiber inside of me is pulling me toward her. I want to kiss her. I want to kiss her for the first time in years. That’s nothing new. I’ve wanted to kiss Adelaide every day since we broke up.

It’s stronger than ever right now, but I’m not going to be that guy. Adelaide doesn’t need me to be here for her because I want something out of it. She doesn’t need me using her weakness as an opportunity to get what I want. I don’t want to just be a rebound. I love her too much for that and I value her friendship.

So, I lean forward and kiss her forehead. It’s not as satisfying physically, but emotionally I know that I’m doing the right thing right now. It’s what she needs from me.

“What if something happens to you too?” she whispers, curling back into my chest. She has her cheek pressed against my chest, comfortably positioned in my arms.

“Nothing’s going to happen to me, Adelaide.”

“Can you promise that?”

I sigh. I want to lie to her, but I know that I can’t. I can’t promise that something’s never going to happen to me. We live dangerous lives. If Connor Todd wasn’t the threat, something else would be.

“No,” I say softly. “I can’t. But if something ever *does* happen to me, it won’t be on you. And it won’t be for a long, long time. I have too much to do right now. I have to get you through this. What kind of right hand would I be if I didn’t help you pull things back together?” I ask, trying to take her mind off of the whole ‘everyone around her dying’ topic.

“I’m pretty sure our fathers didn’t lay in bed and cry in their right hand’s arms,” she mutters.

I can’t help but snort. “Probably not. But are you really complaining right now? I can leave.”

Her fingers cling just a little bit tighter to my t-shirt and she makes a point of snuggling right into my chest just a little bit closer, shaking her head. “No. No leaving. Not tonight.”

Once again, I feel all those feelings of want and longing stir up within me but I know I can’t do that. I can’t feel that way right now. I need to be what Adelaide needs me to be.

“No leaving tonight, Ads,” I promise, pulling her in just a little bit closer.

I don’t leave. We sit like that for God knows how long. Sometimes we make quiet comments, and little jokes just to make the other snort, but other than that it’s just silence. I hold her, fingers running through her ponytail as she clings to me. Eventually, she stops making jokes and I hear her breathing deepen. She falls asleep in my arms and I realize how insane I am then.

Because being able to hold her while she sleeps? It feels like the highlight of the last few years of my life.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Adelaide

I found comfort in Yulian last night and I don't know if that's okay. I don't know if I'm a terrible person for finding comfort in my ex-boyfriend after my fiancé's death. It's not like we slept together. It's not even like we kissed. He just held me and allowed me a moment of weakness. After everything that's happened...it was the most refreshing moment I've had in a long time.

I woke up this morning and felt none of that same comfort. Everything I tried to release last night is back. It feels like the weight of the world is on my shoulders still and I have to do something about it. I think I know what.

I don't know when Yulian fell asleep last night. I just know he's still asleep next to me, snoring on the pillow. Guilt slams over me once again when I think about just how beautiful he is when he's asleep. I shouldn't be thinking of Yulian – or anyone, in that way right now.

I shove him and he doesn't wake up. Of course not. Yulian always slept like the dead. I give him another shove and he groans, burying his face in the pillow.

"Yulian," I sigh his name. "Wake up."

He groans again and peeks up at me, one green eye open. "How early is it, Adelaide?"

"It's nine o'clock, Yulian. It's not early at all," I scoff. "Wake up."

He groans and hides his face back in the pillow again, refusing to look at me. "It's early when we went to sleep *late* last night," he mutters in annoyance. "Can't we just sleep in a little?" With his face still hidden, he reaches out and tries to grab my arm.

I feel awful when I consider *letting* him. I think about how nice it would feel to just fall back into bed, and sleep in. *Sleep* next to someone again. I can't. Not with Yulian. Not with anyone. It would be wrong.

I smack his arm. "No, come on, this is serious."

There's another groan before he sits up, running a hand back through his blonde hair. Still just as handsome in the morning as he is at any other time. He rubs his eyes, trying to convince himself to wake up.

"What's so important? And is there coffee? I need coffee."

"You're a child," I scoff. It's not the first time I've called Yulian that. It probably won't be the last. I'm reminded of the reason that we broke up in the first place – Yulian's lack of ambition. I grew and he didn't.

Sometimes I wonder if I was just looking for an excuse. Would I have been happy with someone just as ambitious as I am?

Not that that matters right now. Yulian's eyes are still on me, waiting for an answer and I sigh. "Yes. I'll make coffee. Just get out of bed. And wash your dishes."

"You drank last night too. They're *our* dishes."

"You brought the vodka into *my* house. They're *your* dishes."

It takes a few more minutes of pushing before I manage to get Yulian out of bed. Once I do, he listens and washes the cups from the night before as I get the coffee started. We sit in silence, waiting for the coffee to be finished before we start discussing what's on my mind.

With two hot cups in front of us, I take a breath and just say it.

“The family needs to split.”

Yulian looks at me with wide, shocked eyes. There’s more silence as he processes what I just said. He takes a sip of coffee, winces as it burns his tongue, and then finally speaks.

“Adelaide...are you sure?”

I sigh, staring down into my mug. Am I sure? No. I don’t like the idea. It’s not what I want. It’s never been what I wanted. Mattia and I are supposed to be in this together. Running things as (mostly) equals. But...I don’t see another way. I can’t just sit by and allow him to wait and see what Todd does.

Maybe that was my first instinct, but it’s the wrong one. Waiting is just going to end up with more of our people killed. If we don’t act, we’re just sitting ducks, and then all will be lost.

“No,” I answer truthfully. Yulian is safe. Yulian is someone I can let my guard down with and just be honest. “I’m not sure, but I don’t see another way. Mattia’s idea is going to end with more of our people dying. The last thing Todd is going to expect is Mattia and me to split.”

He nods. “You’re right. He’s not going to expect that, but you know that means our numbers are going to be weak, right Ads? More people agree with Mattia’s tactic of wait and see.”

“We’ll have to make do with what we have, Yulian. I’m not saying it’s the best idea. I’m not even saying it’s the right one. I just know that I can’t sit around and wait. We strike. We *do* something.”

“Well,” he pauses to take a sip from his coffee. “You have me. I don’t care how *batshit* this idea sounds, and it sounds pretty batshit, Ads. I’m going to stick by your side. If this is the call you’re going to make, I’m making it too.”

The absolute faith that Yulian seems to have in me warms my heart. I can’t begin to deny that. It makes me feel... things. Things that I probably shouldn’t feel for at least the

third time this morning, but I don't think too much into it. I'm probably just glad that I'm not doing this alone. I don't know if I could.

At least I won't have to find out.

“Okay, as long as you're sure.”

Yulian flashes me the most gorgeous grin. The one I know for a fact that he uses to impress girls and get his way whenever he wants. “I'm with you till the end, Adelaide. No matter when that end is.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

Yulian

Looking at Adelaide like this, she's in her element. Gone is the woman who was breaking down in my arms just last night. Her hair's flawless, her makeup is beautiful, her dress is expensive. She looks like she stepped off the cover of a magazine and for what isn't the first time, I find myself just staring at her and admiring her.

Not just because of her beauty, but because of how she controls the room. She demands attention without falling to tactics like revealing more skin or putting on some sickly-sweet demeanor. In control is exactly where Adelaide needs to be.

She's leaning back against the table, staring at the few men I could gather. These are the ones who agreed with her yesterday, the ones who thought Mattia's idea of 'waiting and doing nothing' was just as dumb as Adelaide did. They're the ones who'd rather go out fighting than do nothing. These are the men like me, the ones who feel like violence is the only option.

"I'm pleased that all of you decided to come today," Adelaide's voice purrs. "It means you're not afraid. It means you understand that sometimes you have to take big risks to get things done. It means you're exactly the type of men that I want in my life and by my side."

She lets that sink in and I watch as a room full of men becomes weak in the knees for Adelaide. Again, not the first time.

"I'm not going to take too much of your time today. Yulian and I are still building a *real* plan on how we're going to do this. Despite what my brother wanted you to believe, we're not just going into this half-cocked. We're going to have a plan – multiple plans. The main point I want to communicate

today is that from now on...there are *two* Mansolillo crime families. Mattia's and mine. Going forward, you only work for me."

There's quiet discussion as she says that; men muttering back and forth. That's the part I was worried about not going over well. A lot of people only agreed to work with us because Mattia was there because there was – *is* – a serious lack of trust when it comes to Adelaide.

Not to mention not a whole lot of men love to take orders from women. There's inherent sexism there. Men in our line of work were raised to treat women like princesses, to take care of them, and to want the best for them. We were not raised to take orders from them. Adelaide's an exception. She always has been.

Her arms cross over her chest as she leans back against the table, waiting to see if anyone is going to say anything or if anyone is just going to walk out because of that. I notice a few look just a *little* uncomfortable, but no one walks out of the room.

Either they're scared to walk out now – or they believe in her idea over Mattia's. Or maybe...maybe there are a few who don't *mind* working for Adelaide directly.

"Well, good," she says after that. "We'll be in contact in a little bit once we have a solid plan. Otherwise, consider everything work as usual. Any concerns or questions, you're expected to reach out to Yulian or me. Understood?"

"I think it went well," Adelaide says, holding her hand out toward me so I can help her down from where she made herself comfortable on the table.

I take her hand and help her down, dropping it immediately despite not quite wanting to. I can't make things

weird with her. Not right now. Not when things are going well. ...Or as well as they can, considering everything.

Just as we're about to leave the room, the door swings open and Mattia enters. He looks between the two of us, confusion crossing his face. "You two are early," he says. "I actually wanted to talk to you, Ads. You just left yesterday and _"

"We really don't need to talk, Mattia," she says, brushing him off. "Everything's fine."

This is not what Mattia was expecting. It's clear from his face. Adelaide is not ever this calm. Adelaide never says everything is fine. Confusion is apparent on his face as she starts to walk toward the exit and I feel like my only choice is to follow her. I'm in this deep with Adelaide – and I promised her until the end.

"What – Why—" Mattia is trying to put his thoughts together. "Why are you here then, Adelaide? Did you really just show up to blow me off? All I wanted to do was apologize for how things went over yesterday. I know that I didn't handle it the best. I just wanted you to see that your idea was... reckless. It wasn't the best for us."

She doesn't hide her eye roll. For the umpteenth time, I am stuck watching the two siblings fight. It's beginning to feel like my job is to just navigate their arguments – or just make sure they don't escalate to violence.

"And that's what you believe, Mattia. That's why we're no longer working together. As of today, you have your men. I have mine."

Realization dawns on Mattia. He's shocked and then angry, full of disbelief that Adelaide is doing this. "Are you saying – Adelaide, please. You're being irrational."

"I'm *really* tired of you writing everything I do off as irrational, Mattia," she hisses. "It's demeaning and just a little bit sexist. What would Ella think? It's like you think just because my fiancé is dead, everything I do is insane. It's like

you forget that *I* am Adelaide Mansolillo. I am not irrational. I am not emotional.”

Mattia looks like he doesn't want to touch that for the life of him. His eyes flash over toward me and I feel his glare. “And you're just going along with her on this, Yulian? You can't tell me that you agree with everything she's saying.”

I don't want to be yanked into this. I don't want to get involved. I wish I wasn't here right now. My eyes turn up to meet his and I shrug a shoulder. “Even if I don't completely agree with Adelaide's idea, I know that I completely disagree with you, Mattia. It was an easy choice.”

My loyalty has and always will be to Adelaide. I helped Mattia because Adelaide asked. I stood by his side because Adelaide needed me to. I know there are a lot of words that could be used to describe me. Pathetic. Whipped. Stuck.

I don't do any of this with a head full of expectations. I don't think that standing by her side and doing what she asks of me is going to make her want me again. I don't have ridiculous fantasies about us falling back together. I don't think I deserve her love and affection. All I know is that everything I do is out of love.

Mattia scoffs, “Of course. I forgot how it works. You think being nice to Adelaide is going to make her want you again. That makes you incapable of telling her when she's out of her fucking mind. All you want is for my sister to give you a crumb of attention. You're like a puppy, Yulian. I thought your father taught you better than to act so pathetically.”

I hiss and Adelaide reaches out, putting her hand on my chest. “Mattia, I don't know what's gotten into you. It's not like you lost anyone. It's not like *anything* in your life has changed. You're fine. I lost my fiancé. Yulian lost his family. Out of everyone involved, you should have the least of an opinion right now. You should be doing everything you can to make things better for Yulian and I.”

“You think because you lost something I have to bow down to you? You’re delusional, Adelaide. You’re going to get yourself killed. You’re going to get Yulian killed. I hope you’re okay with that.”

That cuts her deep. That’s exactly where Adelaide is weak and I don’t know if Mattia knows that. I don’t know if he realizes he just hit his sister hard. I hope he doesn’t. I hope he didn’t intentionally hit her there.

“Go fuck yourself, Mattia,” she hisses. “When Ella winds up dead because you’re too much of a fool to make decisions, don’t expect any sympathy from me. You don’t deserve it.”

This is what I was afraid of. Both of them are striking where it hurts the other the most. I’m not involved. I don’t want to be involved. Luckily, I don’t have to be. Adelaide slips her hand into mine and starts to pull me out of the room, leaving a steaming Mattia behind us.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Adelaide

Another night that I don't have Kara. I'm convinced that Christian's mom doesn't think I deserve her or am capable. Maybe it's for the best today because I'm steaming after my earlier encounter with Mattia. He hit me exactly where I was weak. My heart aches. All it did was stir up everything I feel underneath it all. Yulian broke out the vodka again when we got back to my place. I didn't tell him not to. I also haven't told him to leave.

We're on the couch tonight, the TV playing in the background but being ignored. I swirl the alcohol in my glass before bringing it to my lips, taking a small sip. I'm not drinking to get drunk tonight. I'm drinking to just...process. Think. Feel okay for a moment.

"Are you okay?" Yulian asks.

I think it's the first time we've spoken since leaving the restaurant. He asked if I wanted a drink when we got home, but that was it. I look over at him and sigh, shrugging a shoulder.

"Undecided," is the best answer I can give him right now.

I don't know if I'm okay. I don't feel okay. Nothing feels okay right now. I feel like I'm losing my fucking mind. I barely have my daughter and there's a dark part of me that's beginning to think it's for the best. Maybe Christian's mom has the right idea. Maybe Kara is better without me. What kind of mother am I anyway?

What if this does go wrong? What if Mattia is right and I end up getting Yulian or Kara killed? I'm not quite worried about myself. But I don't want anything to happen to them. I won't be able to handle it if I lose another person or if there's another death on my shoulders.

“Is talking going to help?” he asks softly. “Or is silence better tonight?”

There’s a flood of relief when he doesn’t *expect* me to talk. I think that’s one of the pros of having someone in my life who’s known me for so long. He knows that talking is not my favorite. He knows that talking doesn’t always help either. I appreciate that there’s no pressure to tell him every single thing on my mind.

I look over at him and I can’t stop the little smile on my lips. “Is undecided still an okay answer?” I ask.

He chuckles, nodding. “It’s fine, Ads. Just let me know if you decide. We can sit here until you do.”

Then it goes back to silence. It doesn’t quite feel uncomfortable. It’s the kind of silence that I don’t mind sitting in. There doesn’t feel like there’s any pressure to change the silence, to fill the void with something else. Say things that may or may not matter in the long run.

“We need to come up with a plan,” I say after a few more sips.

Yulian looks at me and chuckles again, taking another drink. “Is that what’s really on your mind now, Adelaide? Do you want to plan?”

No. Not really. But I just...don’t want to sit around and do nothing. Does that make sense? The longer we sit around and talk about planning yet do nothing is more time for Todd to strike, to realize that there’s a divide in the family right now and use it to strike. I don’t want him to find the opening. I want to take him by surprise.

I shrug a shoulder as I look over at him. “We should... have a decent idea about what we’re going to do. We can’t just expect Todd to sit around and wait for us. Every second we don’t do something is a second that he has to strike. We need to come up with something as quickly as possible.”

Yulian sighs. “I could...I could probably figure out where he’s holding out. I can’t make any guarantees or

anything, but since he's using most of my family resources..." he trails off and the disgust in his voice is clear.

"We also need to decide exactly how we're launching the assault, Yulian. Who do we trust to be there? Who do we trust to get the job done and not run if things get dicey?"

"...I'm going to be there, Adelaide. I'm the only one that we'll both trust enough to get it done. If I'm there, I know you won't be sitting around, worrying if something is going wrong."

It takes a few seconds to process what Yulian just said. I just...I don't want him to be the one leading. I don't want him going anywhere. If this goes wrong, something could happen to him. I can't let that happen. I can't lose him. I just can't.

My eyes focus on his face, trying to formulate what to say. I don't know how to tell him he can't go. I don't know how to express that I don't know how I'll survive if something happens to him. I *need* him.

"Adelaide? You're going all spacey on me," he says, reaching out toward me. "What's wrong? What are you thinking?"

I still can't put it into words.

Everything happens suddenly. The next thing I know, I'm leaning forward and pressing my lips to Yulian's for the first time in years, tasting the remaining bits of vodka. I take him by surprise. I take myself by surprise.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Yulian

Adelaide kisses me. She presses her lips to mine and I don't have enough sense to put an immediate stop to it. I kiss her back. I put my hand on the back of her neck and kiss her back for a good few seconds until I realize what I'm doing. Then, I stop. I pull away.

She's looking up at me with wide, surprised eyes and I immediately feel like I need to apologize to her. I crossed a line by returning the kiss and not pulling away immediately. I take a moment to gather my thoughts, to try to think of the right thing to say.

"Ads, I—" Nothing is coming to me. I don't know what the right thing to say is. I swallow and start over again, "We shouldn't."

The surprise shifts into confusion on her pretty face, brows wrinkling in the center. "Why not?"

I blink a few times as I look at her, trying to think what the right way to answer that is. I don't want to imply anything. I don't have the right to assign Adelaide emotions, but I owe it to both of us to *at least* be honest about things.

"Because you just lost your fiancé and I don't want to be the guy who takes advantage of you in that situation. And..." I pause and sigh, reaching for my drink. I definitely need it for this next part. "And I still have feelings for you, Adelaide. I don't want to put myself in a position that'll hurt me in the end and leave us feeling awkward together. I don't think I could handle that."

Adelaide is quiet, looking at me with her head tilted to the side. She's taking it all in before she opens her mouth, "Yulian, I...I'm not using you," she says with a breath. "I didn't...if I just wanted someone I could kiss, I could find someone without a problem."

I can't argue that point. She's gorgeous. Any man would be lucky to *touch* her, to be in her presence. But I don't know if this is the right thing for her at the moment. I don't want to tell Adelaide how to feel, but I don't want to put myself in a position to wind up hurting more in the end.

"I know but Adelaide..." I don't want to make this about me. It isn't. It hasn't been about me in a long, long time but I don't know how else to talk about this, to make sure it's all on the table. "I love you, okay? I have never stopped loving you and I'm not okay putting myself in a position where I end up hurting again. I can't stand the idea of not being able to be around you because things are too hard. Do you understand that?"

She shifts on the couch. She moves closer to me before just climbing into my lap. I don't know how to handle it. My first instinct is to pull her closer, to get my hands on her hips and kiss her again. Properly, this time. Just the way that Adelaide deserves. But I'm still trying to play it safe. A first for me.

"Yulian, I – I can't make any promises," is the first thing out of her mouth, which doesn't quite sound...positive. "But I...I know for a fact that I'm not using you as a rebound. You're more than that. You'll always be more than that."

I know now that this is the closest I'll get to Adelaide discussing her feelings. She rarely does that in the first place, especially when she's not drinking. I know that she's also trying her best to just be honest with me. My hands slowly go to her hips, tracing circles on her skin through the fabric of her dress.

"I'd never ask you to make a promise, Adelaide," I tell her softly. "I don't hold any expectations for you. I just want things to be open and honest between the two of us. If...if you're sure about this..." I trail off.

I want her to make this choice. If we're going down this rabbit hole, I want Adelaide to be the one to lead us down it. I'll follow her. I will always follow her – to the ends of the

Earth. I pledged myself to her a long, long time ago. I will always be hers.

Her dark eyes are on mine, unreadable in that usual Adelaide way. I want to think that she's deeply considering this. Maybe she's going to decide that it's a terrible idea and ask me to pretend like this conversation never happened. I can do that. If that's what she needs from me, I can do that.

Instead, her hand slips up to my cheek, resting there. "I'm going to kiss you again, Yulian," she says softly. "And I expect you to kiss me back this time. *Really* kiss me."

She doesn't give me a chance to respond. She leans forward and presses her lips to mine again and I don't hesitate. There's not that initial shock this time. Adelaide kisses me and I kiss her back. My hand slips up to the back of her neck, tangling in her dark hair and pulling her closer. My heart is pounding away in my chest as the remaining hand on her hip grips her that much tighter.

My tongue runs over her bottom lip, asking for her permission to deepen the kiss and Adelaide grants it without hesitation. She parts her lips and my tongue slips into her mouth, tasting her. She's sighing happily. It's something my senses have been missing for years. I taste Adelaide and she tastes just as good as I remember. She's like my own personal slice of heaven.

She's kissing me back with matching desperation, her fingers clinging to my shoulders to keep me where I am. I have no intention of leaving until she does. As the kiss continues and I desperately hope that I can hold my breath just a little bit longer, she grinds down against me.

It takes everything in me to hold back the groan that I want to let out. My fingers dig deeper into her hips, holding her there as her hips start to roll against mine. She has to know that she's driving me to the brink of sanity here. She has to know that I desperately need her.

The kiss breaks and I'm sucking down air as quickly as possible, my lips needed to be back on hers right this second. I need her. She's panting, cheeks just a little flushed. Her lips are just a little swollen from the kiss and I feel that pull to press my lips back to hers.

Her fingers slowly release my shirt, sliding down the thin cotton material. I can feel the heat of her fingertips through it. Her hands skate down to the bottom of my shirt and she gives a little tug. She doesn't say anything, but her eyes say everything.

She wants more.

This leaves me at a complicated crossroads because I need her like water. I want to touch her again. I want to take away every thought in her head until all she thinks about is me. At least for tonight. Am I doing Adelaide wrong if I do that though? Am I being unfair to her and her needs? Am I taking advantage of a complicated situation?

I'm just going to have to trust that Adelaide knows what she needs. If this situation ends up even more complicated, I'll just have to handle it.

Because I don't think I can tell her no at this point.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Adelaide

I don't know if this is okay. I don't know what I'm even thinking. Definitely not thinking with my head right now. I just know that I want Yulian. I want to be close to *somebody* and he's the only person I can picture being close to.

If I was a better communicator, I'd tell him that I think...I think I still have feelings for him too. Maybe they never left or maybe they came back since we've been spending time together. That they've been in the back of my mind, even when Christian was alive, but I would never admit them out loud. Maybe I'll try to communicate that later. Right now, I'm terrible and I only want one thing.

Yulian gets the hint. He lifts his arms and lets me pull his shirt over his head. I don't hide the way my eyes slide over his body. Yulian is thin – but his muscles are gorgeous. Tattoos cover his torso along with a few scars. There are new ones since we were last together intimately like this. I trace my finger down one of them, likely to ask him about it later.

His eyes are searching mine like he's looking for confirmation that we're doing this. I give him that confirmation by pressing my lips back to his, roughly, desperately. I don't wait for him to deepen the kiss this time – I do. My hands travel down his body, feeling him shiver with my touch. My hips grind against his as his tongue brushes over mine and I allow myself to just taste him, to savor every moment of it.

I feel his body twitch, rolling up to meet my touch. My lips leave his, kissing a trail down to his neck. It all comes back to me so easily, remembering every bit of Yulian's body. What he likes, what he doesn't. I nip right over his pulse point and hear him *whine* at the feeling.

That feeds confidence that has long since been forgotten. My hands trail down his abs, to the top of his jeans. I sit back on his knees, fingers nimbly working on the button to get them off. Yulian helps me work them down, his boxers following. He's hard, throbbing...and I feel like I'm exactly where I need to be.

I wrap my hand around his shaft, stroking him slowly, just teasing. I watch his head go back and his eyes close. He's beautiful like this, lips slightly parted as he groans. Leaning forward, I get my lips back on his pulse point, flicking my tongue over the skin.

The grip he has on my hips tightens, fingers pressing hard into the flesh through the fabric of my dress. "Adelaide," he hisses my name. "You are criminally overdressed right now."

I smirk against his neck, my hand continuing to teasingly stroke him. "Yeah? Ask nicely and maybe you'll get what you want."

This is what I've missed about Yulian. The chemistry, the feelings. It's never been like this with anyone else. The feeling of having him completely under my thumb when we're like this. For a man who's as dangerous and powerful as he can be, he has no problem handing control over to me.

He growls, low in his throat and it gives me those beautiful tingly feelings all over. "Adelaide."

"Mm. Wasn't nice," I whisper, my breath tickling his neck.

"*Please* Adelaide, I just – let me see you, at least. God, please let me see you."

I let that linger in the air for a moment. If *I* wasn't as equally worked up, I'd probably make him ask again. Just to hear that little tremble in his voice when he asks.

I sit back, my hand leaving his shaft and he groans at the loss. Poor thing can't have *everything*, can he? "You can see me, Yulian. Just take my clothes off."

The quickness at which he goes for the zipper of my dress is impressive. He's careful with it, knowing not to tear it. He works it down and slowly slides the dress down my body. I stand up, leaving the warmth of his lap to let it slide down my body completely.

Yulian's green eyes are on me, staring at my body. "More?" he whispers. "Let me see more of you?"

And I cave. My panties drop to the floor with the dress, and my bra follows. The way he looks at me...it's something that I'll never get tired of. Yulian looks at me like he'd worship at my feet if I asked him to – and a dark part of my mind almost wants to ask him to.

Instead of letting that thought win, I climb back into his lap. My hand wraps around his shaft again, stroking just a little quicker this time. His head back against the couch again, eyes closed, lips parted. His hips buck up in time with my strokes as he bites back little moans and groans.

"It's been so long, darling," I whisper, watching him through heavy-lidded eyes. Seeing Yulian like this just stirs something in me. It turns me on beyond a fucking doubt. It's everything. "Have you missed me?"

He opens one eye – all pupil. He's completely blasted. "More than you know, Adelaide," he whispers. "More than you'll ever know."

"Poor, poor Yulian," I mock pout down at him and he groans again.

"No one compares to you, Adelaide."

"Oh, I know that, darling. No one can compare," I laugh, slowing my strokes and hearing his groans become more frustrated. His hips slow, trying to match the speed but they're impatient. Yulian is terribly impatient.

"Can I touch you?" he asks. "Please...just let me touch you."

I think about telling him no. Really, really consider it. If I wasn't so desperate to be touched, I'd probably do it. But I want to feel his hands on me. I want to be touched too.

"You can touch me," I tell him.

Some of the frustration leaves Yulian's face as his hand slips down from my hip, sliding to my thigh. He strokes the skin slowly before moving to my inner thigh and moving his hand up. He brushes over my slit and I can see him biting back a comment about how wet I am. I know him well enough to know he wants to say *something*. But he also knows that I currently hold all the power.

He presses his finger between my lips and my head goes back. I can't remember the last time I've been touched and it feels amazing. Little electric shocks shoot up through my body. I sigh, grinding against his finger as he slowly pushes one inside. We both hiss at the feeling.

Yulian maneuvers his finger skillfully, twisting it up to find that sweet spot. I grind my hips a little quicker and he presses another finger inside of me. It joins the first, hooking up against that spot, teasing it, and letting all those feelings build up in me again. He twists his hand, thumb going to my clit and rubbing it slowly.

I have to force myself to focus while also enjoying myself. I try to keep my mind on stroking him, keeping it at that still frustratingly slow pace. I can hear his groans becoming more and more desperate while he focuses on making sure I feel good. He's working to get me off, and I'm working to drive him insane until he's a desperate mess. Clearly, we're both two different types of lovers –yet we blend together perfectly.

Pleasure flows through me and I can't stop myself from whining, grinding against his hand quicker. I try to keep my focus on him, but I'm also focusing on myself. On making sure that, at this moment, I keep feeling *this* good with Yulian. I don't remember the last time I allowed myself to just feel something.

My focus keeps waning. I forget what I'm doing and slip up, speeding up my strokes more than I mean to. His hips buck in response to my sped up touches and I suck in a breath, reminding myself that I need to hold back. Just for another moment.

I stop touching him completely, knowing that I won't be able to keep my focus. Yulian lets out a frustrated groan, his head falling back, but he doesn't stop the motion of his fingers inside of me, hitting that sweet spot over and over again. His thumb manipulates my clit with pure skill and I feel that familiar feeling building in me.

It's like little electric shocks spread over all of my muscles, shots of pleasure going up through my spine. My head falls back and I cry out for him as I come, grinding against his hand like I'm a woman possessed. Desperate. Needy. Just for him.

Yulian brings me now from my corner of heaven, leaving soft little kisses on my shoulder until my head snaps back and I look at him through half-lidded eyes. I try to catch my breath. Yulian looks even more blasted than he had before. His hands go to my hips.

"Adelaide, I need you," he breathes. "I need to feel you, *please*."

Somehow, I have enough sense to smirk down at him. "Do you?" I ask, still trying to gather my breath completely. It's a struggle. "Try asking a little nicer, darling."

The frustration becomes more apparent on his handsome face, his fingers digging into my hips just a little more. "Adelaide, I *need* you."

"Beg." The word leaves my lips before I even think about it. It just slips out and I see the danger flash in Yulian's eyes. This is a game that he wants to play with me. Good, because I really want to play it.

His head falls back against the couch again and he rolls his hips, making a point to try to convince me to at least *touch*

him. “Ads, I need you. I really fucking need you. Please,” his breath hitches, and he’s whimpering out his pleas to me. “God, fuck. I need you, Adelaide. Touch me. Fuck me. Do something, *please*.”

That dark little voice in the back of my mind wants me to make him beg some more. The not-so-twisted part is satisfied with what I got though. He’s gorgeous like this. I lean forward, pecking his lips.

“Of course, sweetheart.”

I lift my hips and wrap my hand around his shaft again, maneuvering him inside of me. My head falls back at the initial contact, feeling myself stretch around him. It’s a perfect feeling. Yulian hisses out in pleasure, his fingers digging into my hips to keep me in place. Worried that I’m just teasing him.

Once again, a part of me wants to.

But then I start to rock against him and both of us are now only focused on pleasure. I close my eyes, my hands on his shoulders for balance as I roll against him. He keeps his grip on my hips, fingers digging into the flesh once more. I’m sure I’m going to have bruises from the roughness with which he’s holding me, but I’m more than fine with that.

“God, you feel perfect, Ads,” he whispers, opening his eyes to look up at me.

“So you do,” I respond, my nails gently biting into his shoulder.

“I’ve missed you.” The way he says it – I believe it. I know that this isn’t just Yulian talking because he’s horny. I know he means it.

And so do I, as I say it back, “I’ve missed you too.”

The motion of my hips speed up and Yulian’s grip on my hips starts to help me move. We’re trying to climb this mountain together, both of us desperate for the release at the end. We don’t speak anymore. Don’t say anything that either

of us might want to say. Instead, we're just moving together. Our moans and whines of pleasure fill my living room.

I feel myself start to hit that crescendo again. The same feeling as before, only amplified this time. Stronger than the last time. I focus on myself, rocking at the speed that's going to get *me* off. Yulian is just along for the ride and judging from the noises that he's making, it doesn't seem like he has any complaints.

"Yulian!" I cry out his name as it hits me, as I fall over that edge. Squeezing tightly around him, nails digging even deeper into his shoulders. I ride out my orgasm before my body slumps, forehead pressing against his shoulder.

His grip on my hips tightens one last time. I got mine. He needs his. He bucks his hips up into my body, each thrust forcing a cry out of me. He whimpers my name in the sexiest little voice as he comes, clinging my body to his.

We don't say anything as we both come down from the ride, still holding onto each other. As I sit up, our eyes meet. Yulian looks like he's genuinely worried that he made a mistake. He didn't. He really, really didn't. Everything that happened between the two of us was something that I desperately wanted.

I still don't have it in me to say all of those unspoken words. Not yet. Maybe it's too soon. Maybe I'm just scared of what they mean. I lean forward and press my lips to his, hoping that the kiss speaks volumes for what I'm not saying.

Evidently, it does, because Yulian's hands slide underneath me as he picks me up, carrying me to the bedroom.

Chapter Thirty

Yulian

When my eyes open, Adelaide is still asleep next to me, comfortably tucked underneath the covers. She's sleeping with her back toward me, peacefully out of it. I don't know where we stand. I don't know where I stand after that. I know she says that it was okay. She's not acting like she feels taken advantage of, but I still feel...wrong. At least a little bit. Like I wasn't supposed to touch her, that I wasn't supposed to tell her how I feel. She doesn't need that kind of pressure right now with everything else going on in her life.

A stronger part of me feels like I did the right thing. This is Adelaide Mansolillo. She doesn't get taken advantage of. If anything, she takes advantage of people. If anything, she didn't want to happen, happened, I'd be the first to know about it. She never gave me any signs that she didn't want this. Even after I carried her to bed last night. She curled up against my chest and I held her until we both drifted off.

Tentatively, I reach out. My fingers start to draw shapes on her bare back, just like I used to when we were together. She makes an annoyed sound as she starts to stir. It takes a moment, but she slowly rolls over. One eye is opened, glaring at me.

"You could at least wake me up with coffee," she grumbles, pulling the blanket tighter around herself.

"I don't know how to use a coffeemaker," I grin.

Both eyes are opened now. She looks amused – not angry. "This morning would be a great time to learn, wouldn't it?" she muses, reaching over and running her finger down my bare chest.

"My clothes are in the living room."

"Good thing you can walk."

Nothing feels off. There's no uncomfortable tension between the two of us. If anything...it feels like this is how it should've been from the beginning. It feels right.

I decide to make the smallest move and see just how much things have shifted. I could die a happy man right now, so if I get rejected, I'll be able to handle it.

I smirk over at her, reaching out to brush pieces of dark hair from her face. "Maybe I'll learn to make you coffee, Ads. But I do require payment."

She raises an eyebrow. "Yeah? What kind of payment, Andronikov?"

"A kiss," I say, leaning in just a little bit closer.

She smirks back at me, tilting her head to the side. "Yeah? What if I tell you I don't give kisses before coffee? I have standards, you know."

"I'd say you're a damn liar because I know you. You've never had a problem giving kisses before coffee in the past."

"I'm older now."

I'm not going to push. If she doesn't want to give me a kiss, who am I to force it? I go to get out of bed when I feel her hand on my bicep, fingers gently pulling me back to her. I fall back in bed, raising an eyebrow before she leans over and presses her lips to mine.

It's soft and sweet and everything I was wanting from her. It tells me everything that I need to know. Everything that lies unspoken between the two of us no longer matters because I know how Adelaide feels. She cares. She wants this. I don't need some loud confession of love. I don't need an official title.

I'm happy working this at whatever pace she needs me to.

When the kiss breaks, I smile down at her. "Let me find my clothes and get the coffee started. You want it in bed?"

“Duh.”

I don't admit to Adelaide how much I struggled with her damn coffeemaker. I'm sure she knows though, considering how long it took me to return. In my defense, I was raised with staff. Coffee was always ready in the morning. I never had to do it myself. I can learn though. I've never had a problem with learning.

She sits next to me, quietly sipping out of her mug as she wakes up. “We can't die, Yulian,” she says, breaking the silence.

“I normally like to get through a cup of coffee before I talk about my impending death, Ads.”

“I'm serious. I need to buy new bedroom furniture.”

“You can't die because you need to buy new furniture... for your bedroom?”

“Exactly,” she says like that answers every question I have. It doesn't, but I let her have it. If buying bedroom furniture is what keeps her from dying, so be it.

We go back to silence as she reaches over to the nightstand, grabbing her phone. She looks at it for a moment, tilting her head to the side. I don't ask. I'm sure if it's major, she'll tell me.

She reads my mind. “Mattia called me. Like five times.”

“Oh?”

“He hasn't called me since our fight. The first version of it.”

I've lost count of how many ‘versions’ of their fights they've had these last few weeks. I take it from how she says it that it's been a long time since she's heard from her brother.

“Did he leave a message?” I ask.

I don't know Mattia as well as I know Adelaide, but I don't think he's the type to call just to continue where their fight left off. If anything, maybe he's going to try and talk her out of splitting the family. Although, I know for a fact that that's going to lead to another fight.

Her nose scrunches. "No," she says. Her fingers are hesitating. "I should...probably call him back, right?" she asks, looking over at me.

"That's your call, Adelaide. He's your brother. Do what you think is best."

She groans in frustration. She's glaring at me again before pressing the button to call Mattia back and holding the phone up to her ear, waiting for him to answer. I'm not trying to spy on the two of them, but I'm right here. I kind of can't help it.

Mattia answers on the first ring and I watch as Adelaide's face scrunches as he speaks. "Hey, hey. Chill. I can't understand a word that you're saying," she says. Then a pause. "Oh. *Oh*. Fuck. Okay. Um...Yulian and I can be there in like an hour?" Another pause, Mattia says something. "Okay. Just relax. We'll be right there. I promise." Then she hangs up.

Her eyes flash over to me and her expression is different. She's gone from soft morning Adelaide to the Adelaide who can whip an entire room of men into shape. "Do you have a gun in your car?" she asks.

The question takes me off guard. I forget to answer it until Adelaide snaps her fingers in front of me. "Yes or no question, Yulian. Kind of on a time crunch here."

"Yes, yes," I answer. "Why? What's going on?"

I don't get an answer. Adelaide chugs the rest of her coffee before getting out of bed and going to her closet.

And like the idiot I am, I'm still ride or die for her.

Chapter Thirty-One

Adelaide

I shouldn't be doing this. I should still feel angry and betrayed and let down when it comes to Mattia, but I can't. He's the only family I have left – outside of Kara. He *needs* me. More than that, I need him. I need my big brother. I can't lose him. So when he calls and tells me that shit has hit the fan, that he *needs* me, of course, I'm going to be right there.

I make Yulian drive like a bat out of hell. He doesn't ask any questions. He just follows everything I say because he *knows* me. He knows that I wouldn't be rushing him if this wasn't important.

On one hand, at least I don't have to think about what happened last night. I don't have to sort through my feelings like an adult. Everything is happening so quickly that I don't have to process any of that right now. And Yulian knows he'd be a damn fool to ask about it.

We pull into the parking garage of Ella's apartment and I get out. Yulian goes through the glove compartment to grab his gun, tucking it into the waistband of his jeans before getting out. He falls into step next to me as we take the elevator up to Ella's floor. Silence settles between us. I'm trying to think of how to proceed. Yulian is just cluelessly following along – my loyal soldier.

I knock on Ella's apartment door and Mattia opens it. My brother looks stressed. We exchange a look that says everything. Everything between us is buried. We're not going to touch on it again. No big, showy apologies. No long conversations. The point is, that we're here for each other when we need each other.

He lets us in. Ella is sitting on the couch, a blanket wrapped around her shoulders. She looks up and offers a weak smile and I return it.

“Ella shouldn’t be here for this conversation,” I say softly, turning to her. “I know that you don’t want to be involved.”

Mattia nods. “Ella, can you go to the bedroom, darling?” he asks gently, his eyes very soft when he looks at her. It’s not forceful. It’s respectful. They have their understanding. No matter what, Ella doesn’t want to be involved in our mess. She wants as little knowledge as possible. He respects that.

And for a split moment, my mind drifts to Christian. Could it have worked between the two of us like that? Would he have been happy to stay away? Would he have been okay going to a different room while Mattia, Yulian and I plotted and schemed?

I pull myself away from that fantasy world as Ella leaves the room, taking the blanket with her. All of us are quiet as we wait to hear the bedroom door close. Once it does, my attention flashes over to Mattia.

“Tell Yulian what you told me on the phone this morning,” I tell him, going to sit in the recliner.

Mattia sighs and nods. “I went out to grab breakfast for Ella and me this morning. I did my usual check on the men we have watching the apartment. Both of them were dead in the car. I think...I think we know who did it.”

Yulian hisses out a breath, running a hand through his hair. “It’s a warning, isn’t it? He’s saying that no matter what we do, he can get to us. No one is safe.”

“Exactly,” I say from my spot in the recliner. “He’s going to keep coming until he gets what he wants and at this point? I’m not quite sure what it is. Does he want our business? Or does he want all of us dead at this point for not giving in immediately?”

“Does that change how we handle things?” Mattia asks quietly. “I – I thought maybe more information would come out. Like you thought originally. That’s the whole reason I

changed my idea. I thought that the more we found out about Todd, the better chance we had of dealing with this threat,” he sighs. “And I was wrong.”

There’s a part of me that really, really wants to hiss out an ‘I told you so’ but I can’t. Not right now. Once I help him figure out how to fix this, I can give him all the ‘I told you so’s’ that he can handle.

“It’s fine. We’re going to figure this out,” I say. The truth is, I don’t have an idea. My idea still remains the same as it had before. We get rid of Todd. Scare him. Kill him. It doesn’t matter *how* to me. All that matters is we get rid of him.

“We only have one option left, Adelaide,” Mattia says, looking over at me. “We have to kill him before he kills one of us. Before he takes away someone else we love.”

I’m quiet, trying to think. Really think. Everything has been such high emotions lately. Every idea that I’ve suggested has been suggested because I wanted revenge – and I do want revenge. But revenge is an easy way to get someone killed. Revenge may not always be the smartest move. Playing it smart is exactly what I need to do now. It’s the last option.

“I think...I think it’s time I meet Connor Todd,” I decide.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Yulian

My eyes flash over to Adelaide as soon as she suggests whatever fucking idea she has. She has to...meet him?

“No,” I say before I realize the words leave my lips. I already know that there’s going to be a huge deal because I told her no. I can already see the anger flashing in her dark eyes. Mattia’s gaze tells me *immediately* that I fucked up.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t realize that you were in charge of me, Yulian?” Oh. Her tone is *dangerous*. “Do I need your permission before I do anything?”

Normally, I’d back down. I wouldn’t challenge Adelaide on, well, most anything. Putting her life at risk like this? I’m not letting her do it. I can’t. She keeps saying that she can’t lose me, that she’s not willing to just let me die. Doesn’t she know that it goes both ways? I can’t lose her. I’m not just going to let her die.

“Adelaide, you know for a fact that I never tell you no. I never talk back. I never put my foot down when it comes to you. This isn’t just *anything* though. This is you putting your life at risk. Why? What’s the point? I can’t – I can’t let anything happen to you.”

She sighs, rolling her eyes. “Connor Todd isn’t going to kill me if I just ask for a meeting with him.”

“Why? Why in the hell do you want to meet him, Adelaide? Do you not remember the note he wrote you? He’s...like weirdly obsessed with you.”

“Or it could be a way to get under my skin more.”

Mattia’s eyes are flashing back and forth between the two of us before he sighs. “Ads, I think I have to agree with Yulian here. I don’t know what you’re thinking but going to a

meeting with the guy who wants you dead? Who wants to take over our entire family? Isn't exactly your *smartest* decision."

She sighs. "That's right. Neither of you knows what I'm thinking. This is not some suicide mission. I have a daughter. A daughter that I need to build a better world for. That better world doesn't involve losing both of her parents to some utter psychopath. I wouldn't be offering this idea unless I think it's our best option. I'm thinking more clearly than I have in weeks."

There's a softness, something completely unexpected from Adelaide. An honesty. She's not giving orders. This idea is something that she believes in. And I want to give her that opportunity. I want to trust her. I mean, I do trust her but this...this is a lot.

"Ads," I say softly. "I believe you. I believe in you. The problem is, he's like no one we've ever dealt with before. It's not like he's going to be willing to have a stable conversation. The man is insane. Maybe if this was a normal person, you could hold a meeting and fix things. Connor Todd is not normal."

"I know. Yulian, Mattia, please. I'm not saying I walk into a locked room with him unarmed or alone even. I'm saying that this may be our only option. I think we need to take it before things go terribly. Before it's more than just our men who get shot in their cars. Until it's us or our loved ones."

Mattia sighs. His eyes glance over at me and I shrug. I'm at a loss here. This deeply feels like a situation where we're not going to be able to talk Adelaide out of doing what she wants to do.

"Adelaide, is this something you're absolutely positive about?" he asks her softly. "Before I say anything, I need to know. Are you sure that this is our only real option left?"

"I wouldn't have suggested it if I didn't feel like it's our last real shot. If this doesn't work, fine. We launch a full-scale

assault and we all probably die. Just...give me this. Give me this chance.”

Mattia nods. “Fine. This is our chance. This is our Hail Mary. You’re going to try and what? Charm him to death? Because I adore you, Ads. But you’re not *that* charming.”

She scoffs. “I *am* that charming, Mattia. But no, I’m not going to try and charm him. I’m going to try and make a deal with him. One that benefits us more than him, but hopefully I can convince him that that’s the right call.”

We’re both left blinking at her again. A deal? I thought a deal was completely off the table. Adelaide didn’t want it.

“Please, *please* tell me that it’s not the same deal that my father made,” I say, running a hand through my hair and sighing.

“Absolutely not. I’m not selling out to Todd. I’m going to make sure that this deal *mostly* benefits us in the long run. But I’m going to convince him that it benefits him right now.”

Mattia sighs. “Ads...I don’t know what you’re planning and at this point, I don’t think I care. I just want Ella to be okay. I want you to be okay. If you think this is the best choice, I’m in. We’re doing this.”

All eyes are on me and I sigh too, relenting. I’m not letting her do anything this insane alone. I promised Adelaide that it would be the two of us until the end. If this is the end, then it’s still going to be us.

“You know you have me,” I tell her softly.

All I hope is that this doesn’t end as terribly as I think it’s going to.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Adelaide

Am I making the biggest, dumbest decision of my life? It's entirely possible. Every time I feel like I've reached the catalyst for my stupid decisions, I find a new one that I can make. The truth is, I don't know if this will work in my favor. I may walk in there and Connor may kill me before I get a chance to speak.

What I'm counting on is judging people by who I am as a person. I went to the darkest place I could go. I knew what desperation felt like and I'm beginning to wonder if that's what Connor Todd is – desperate.

I have Yulian make the call. His father's old men are connected to Todd. He's the only in that we currently have. He asks them to pass on a message that I'm willing to meet and discuss things. He sets a meeting place – the warehouse by the docks where Mattia was shot a few months ago.

If this goes badly, I don't want innocent people in the crossfire.

I don't tell him to come alone because I'm not going to come alone. I don't tell him to not bring a weapon, but I'm going to make sure Yulian has one. I just have to hope that he cares more about making a deal than he does about murdering people for no real reason.

We all stay at Ella's apartment that night. Yulian and I take the living room. I'm on the couch. He's on the floor. Neither of us speaks. We don't drink. We just lay in the silence. Yulian's hand reaches up to where I am on the couch and we lace our fingers together. It provides just a bit of calmness in all of the insanity going on in my head.

Tomorrow, I'm going to look the man who killed my fiancé in the face. I'm going to have an actual conversation with him – hopefully, one that remains cool and calm. I have

to push all of that pain aside. I have to focus on protecting the people I have left in my life – and my business. I can't lose it all now.

I don't think any of us sleep. Mattia is up every half hour, walking down the hallway, looking out windows. Yulian and I just lay in the darkness, closing our eyes for a few minutes at a time, but sleep just won't come. Not tonight. Tomorrow night we can rest.

I hope.

Dawn breaks and we all start to wake up. Ella comes out of the bedroom, wrapped in her robe to make a pot of coffee. I don't know if Mattia told her the plan. It's not my place to fill her in if he didn't. She doesn't want to know the details, but I also think she deserves to know about this. If we don't come back...well, hopefully, Todd will leave her alone. He'll have our operations; she knows nothing about any of that.

After coffee, it's time to leave. Mattia and Ella embrace for what seems like forever. He holds her in his arms, pressing soft kisses to her forehead and cheeks. He murmurs soft 'I love you's' that Yulian and I pretend that we don't hear. We look away, trying not to be voyeurs of a moment that doesn't belong to either of us.

I hug Ella too, telling her that I'll see her soon. Even if she doesn't know the dirty details of what's happening, she knows that it's serious. I can see it on her face as she hugs me. She gives Yulian a little side hug before the three of us leave.

On the car ride to the docks, I call Christian's mother. I apologize for being so distant lately. I apologize for leaving Kara with her more than she's with me. I tell her that it's been hard. That I've been trying to process what I lost and my guilt about it. I thank her for stepping up for Kara. I ask if it's okay if I get her tomorrow night. She agrees. I then ask her to make sure Kara knows how much I love her before I hang up.

We pull up to the docks. Silence has lingered the entire drive over. Yulian looks over at me and takes my hand in his. He seems to forget that Mattia is in the backseat, or maybe he just doesn't care today. He brings the back of my hand to his lips, kissing it softly.

“You're sure about this, Adelaide?” he asks.

I nod.

“Okay. I just – I had to be sure that you're not doubting this at all. I'll be there with you. Till the end.”

I smile. It feels weird smiling today, but Yulian pulls it out of me. I lean over and kiss his cheek. “Until the end.”

There's so much more that's unsaid between the two of us. So much I could say, but I don't want that to be a distraction during this interaction. I don't want to sit there and wonder if I said too much or not enough. If we come out of this in one piece, I'll tell Yulian everything that I have to say.

Mattia clears his throat. “I think it's time,” he says. “I just saw them walk into the warehouse. Are we – are we ready?”

“We're ready,” I say. If we're not, we're going to have to fake it until we make it. Pretend that we're not being eaten alive by our nerves. Without anything else being said between the three of us, we get out of the car and head inside.

Standing across from Connor Todd feels like the most surreal thing in the world. One of the first things that I notice, and I *really* hate that I notice it, is how attractive he is. Tall, muscular, tattoos going up both arms, dark hair that's buzzed on the sides, and long on top. His skin is tan like he's been in the sun, and both of his ears are pierced. And I hate myself a little bit more for finding him so nice to look at, considering what an outright *bastard* of a man he is.

“I was surprised you finally wanted to meet me, Adelaide,” Connor purrs. His eyes shift to Mattia and Yulian before settling back on me. “Truthfully, I was hoping it would be alone but I understand why it’s not. Did you get my letter?”

I hold back all the attitude I want to throw toward him. The point of this is to get out alive. Infuriating him probably won’t give me that. He has two men flanking him. They’re armed. He’s not trying to hide the fact that *he’s* armed. I’d willingly bet money that he has more armed people outside. All I have is Yulian and Mattia.

“I did get your letter,” I say and let that end *that* line of conversation. Can’t let him get me off topic. “I’m not here to bullshit. I want to cut a deal,” I say, arms crossed over my chest.

This is the part that I’m concerned about. I’ve been thinking over this deal since yesterday. I haven’t told Mattia or Yulian because I knew it would be just *another* thing that they try to talk me out of. I don’t even know if Connor’s going to buy it. I just know that it’s all we have right now. Our Hail Mary.

“A deal?” He tilts his head to the side. “Go on. What are you thinking, beautiful?”

I’m left trying not to puke again. I’m not convinced his flirtations aren’t just another way to throw me off my game and distract me. I can’t let it. “I’m not handing over my family or my business. I know that’s your ultimate goal, but I’m not doing that. However, I thought perhaps we could reach an understanding.”

He doesn’t seem to like that I’m not just going to pass the torch to him. I see annoyance flash over his features, but he nods his head anyway. “What kind of understanding would that be, Adelaide?”

“You have the Papillas, the Andronikovs, after the Mansolillo family, you’d be going for the Luppinos, correct?”

Connor nods in agreement. “Correct.”

“What if my men help you take out the Luppinos? Make quick work of them? In return, I get to keep my operation and my men.”

That makes Connor laugh. His laugh makes me uncomfortable. It’s cold and unsettling like it’s forced. Not quite real. “What makes you think I need help taking out the Luppinos, Adelaide? I think I’ve done quite well for myself, so far.”

“Oh, you have. There’s no denying that. You probably don’t need our help. You didn’t let me finish my offer. You get the Luppinos, solely, of course. Even after our assistance. I’m also willing to allow you all the territory you’ve earned so far. Papilla, Andronikov, and Luppino turf will all be yours. All I ask is that you let me continue operating on my side of town.”

Connor hums. “Mm. Now we’re talking about a *deal*. So, you just get a little bit of turf. Maybe that *would* be fine, but the truth is...I want all of New York, Adelaide. I don’t want to share.”

It’s exactly what I expected. I’m not thrown off by his instance denial of my request. I shrug. “I don’t want to lose everything either, Connor. It seems like we’re at an impasse. I didn’t come here to be your enemy. Believe it or not, I admire you.”

Switch tactics. Suck up to him. Bat my eyelashes and pretend that I admire every disgusting thing that he has done. The truth is, it’s not a *whole* lot of pretending. Everything he’s done has been despicable, but the way he’s taken everything that he’s wanted? Someone like me can’t help but admire that in a way. If I didn’t have things to ground me, I can’t guarantee that I wouldn’t be taking things over the same way that he is.

“You admire me? *The* Adelaide Mansolillo admires me?” Connor smirks. “I heard that you’re a hard woman to impress, Adelaide.”

“I am. Ask anyone. But you’ve really taken what you want, Connor. You came into this scene as basically someone unknown and now you’re running it. No family name to make it easier for you.”

“Oh sweetheart, if only you knew,” he says. “That’s a story for another day. I like the fact that you admire me, Adelaide, and that you respect me. That’s why I wrote you that letter. I admire you. I respect you. Women don’t just step into this game and run things every day. Men *fear* you. That’s why I wanted you to work with me. I wanted to see what you could really become.”

An opening. All you have to do is flatter a man enough and they’ll give you everything you need. I take a step toward Connor. Yulian and Mattia tense behind me, his men tense behind him. Connor doesn’t even flinch.

“Isn’t that just another reason you should give me this opportunity, Connor? We can run New York together. You’ll have the ability to really watch me bloom, see exactly what I can do. I guess, since you’ll have the majority, I’ll technically be *under* you, right?” I don’t try to hide the purr in my voice. I’m not above using what tactics I have to to save everything that I have. Even if it means making someone like Connor think I like them more than I do.

“You know...I think I’m coming around to the idea, Adelaide. I think I can see what you’re getting at. You want to work underneath me,” there’s a purr to his voice there that I don’t *love*. “You want to prove yourself to me.”

I have never – and will never – desire to prove myself to some man. Especially one like Connor Todd. However, I know that this very well may be my only option now. Sometimes, you just have to lie through your teeth and hope for the best.

“Exactly,” I say.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Yulian

Everything that's happened so far has thrown me off guard entirely. Adelaide told neither of us about her plan. I find myself continuously looking over at Mattia like I'm double-checking that he sees everything that's going on. He does. He looks less than pleased with her.

But I think I see what Adelaide's doing. Lure Connor Todd into a false sense of security. Flatter him, make him think that she admires him. It buys us the time that we need – it gives us the chance to get to *know* him. It's smart. A lot smarter than he realizes. But hearing Adelaide talk about how she wants to prove herself to someone? Very uncomfortable.

He's smiling at her. The way he looks at Adelaide makes me even more uncomfortable. He looks at her like he wants to just take a bite out of her, as if she's some piece of meat. Adelaide's playing to that, I know that she is, but I can't help the little bit of jealousy flowing through me. I can't even shift my hands in my pockets because I know we're being watched. Every movement could be considered a threat and throw everything off. It could get us killed.

"I like what I'm hearing. I think...I might need one more thing from you, Adelaide," he says.

All of us tense again. I think we're all expecting the same thing. He expects Adelaide to sleep with him. And that terrifies me. How will she say no? *Will* she say no? How am I supposed to just stand by and allow that to happen? Out of love for her, I can't.

Adelaide steels herself and nods her head, gesturing for him to continue.

"Just as an act of good faith, to prove that this is truly a partnership, perhaps even a mentorship?" he pauses before shrugging. "Doesn't matter. Anyway, I need you to kick up

thirty percent to me. In return, the Mansolillo family will be allowed to operate as you wish. In your turf, with your men. I won't bother you."

I don't know if I believe him. I know Adelaide doesn't. I can see it in her eyes. They're scanning his face, trying to figure out if he's lying or not. After a moment, she extends her hand toward him and nods.

"You have a deal, Connor. I expect you to hold up your end of things."

He reaches out and takes her hand, shaking it. "You came to me today, Adelaide. You...expressed exactly what I needed you to express. I'll honor the deal as long as it benefits me." Then he brings her hand up to his lips and kisses the back of it. I internally cringe.

There's a strange part of me that...sort of admires him for his honesty. I know that I shouldn't. I know he's a piece of shit. The man in front of me is one of the lowest, dirtiest humans that I've ever had the displeasure of meeting. *But* he's honest, to an annoying extent. I guess even the worst people can have *some* redeeming qualities.

"I'm going to hold you to that," Adelaide says as she drops his hand.

"As a show of respect for our new partnership, I'm going to leave first," he says. "Prove that I'm willing to turn my back on you and expect you not to stab me in it."

It's not a sign of respect. It's because he *knows* that we're not a threat right now. Even if one of us were to get lucky, one of his men would avenge him within seconds. It's not the opportunity that we need or want.

She smiles anyway. "Of course. We'll be in touch." Then she leans forward and presses her lips to his cheek. That sickening grin of his is back. He's enjoying that way too much and there's nothing I can do about it except let it happen.

When she pulls her lips away, Connor whispers something to her that I can't make out. Then he and his men

start toward the door they came in. He turns his back on her and Adelaide doesn't need anyone to tell her to stay perfectly still. Can't risk him thinking we're making a move. All three of us watch in silence as he leaves the building. We wait until we hear a car outside start-up to be sure – and just to be on the safe side, we wait a little bit longer after that.

Adelaide turns to us and lets out a heavy breath. “Well, I guess that went...okay?” she offers, just a hint of hopefulness in her voice.

“We're not dead,” Mattia agrees with a shrug.

“I – I didn't know what I was doing. I was just...playing to all my theories about him,” she says.

Mattia wraps an arm around Adelaide's shoulder and starts to lead her toward the car. I hesitate, staying back just in case. I'm not sure how much I trust everything going on here, so I make sure that they're safe.

They are. Once I'm sure of that, I follow them to the car and get in the driver's seat. I start it up and silently we're leaving the docks, heading back to Mattia's apartment to discuss and figure out where we go from here.

Once we're clear of the docks, Adelaide starts laughing next to me. It's so sudden that it makes me jump. Mattia and I both stare at her like she's lost her damn mind and then she looks at us, a smile on her beautiful face.

“I just – holy *shit*. I can't believe that worked. I can't believe we did that,” she says.

Neither of us can believe it either.

“What did he say to you? Toward the end?” I ask. I can't help myself, my curiosity was raised.

She scoffs. “You really don't want to know,” she says and leaves it at that.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Adelaide

I think I'm still in shock or disbelief or *something* as we pull into the parking garage of Ella's apartment building again. I think a part of me was expecting something to go wrong on our way home. Like maybe our brakes were cut or someone crashes into us. *Something*. Nothing happened. We made it back safely.

I know that we're not out of the woods just yet. I don't think we'll ever truly be out of the woods until we take Connor out once and for all or figure out a way to lessen the threat that he proves to be. For now, I'll take any small victory that I can.

Even if it means I have to spend the next few months of my life sucking up to the creep. It kills a little part of me, but if that's what I have to do, so be it. I'll manage.

We get back up to Ella's apartment and everything is in place. She's not being held at gunpoint. She's not dead. We might be in the clear. Mattia immediately wraps his arms around her, picking her up off of the couch and just clinging to her. Ella buries her face in his shoulder and clings back. Yulian and I just stand back as they embrace each other.

She looks at us as Mattia puts her down. "Did you – did you figure it out?" she asks.

"Yeah. All I had to do was sell my soul to the devil for a bit," I smile back at her, giving her as much information as I can without telling her *too* much. Ella's preferences. "Wouldn't be the first time, honestly."

We settle in and Ella offers to order food for us. We did skip out on breakfast. No one wanted to die with a stomach full of pancakes. She makes sure to reiterate that she's only ordering because she can't cook to save her life.

“Breakfast sounds good,” Mattia agrees with a little smile. “You have my card, right? Use that. Adelaide, can I talk to you in the bedroom for a moment?” he asks.

I look between Ella and Yulian before nodding. It’ll give them a chance to awkwardly bond. I stand and follow Mattia back to the bedroom he shares with Ella, taking a seat at the foot of the unmade bed.

“Are we good?” he asks as he closes the door. “We both...we both said and did some shitty things.”

“I said some shitty things. I did nothing shitty. That was all you,” I remind him.

He sighs. “Fine, fine. I said and did some shitty things. Point is, are we good, Ads? Are you still mad at me?”

“No,” I answer a lot quicker than he expected me to. Some things just outweigh my tendency to hold grudges. Mattia needed me today and I came. I’ll always come when he needs me. It’s what family does. “I’m not mad, Mattia. You were doing what you thought was best.”

He breathes a sigh of relief before going to the dresser. He opens a drawer and hesitates for a minute. “Okay, are you sure? Because I – I want to get your opinion on something and I need you to not be pissed off at me when I ask.”

“Mattia, even if I *was* still pissed off at you, I’d give you my honest opinion.” He looks at me and I sigh before relenting, “I’m sure. I’m not mad. What do you need?”

He turns around with a small black velvet box in his hand. He opens it and reveals a princess-cut engagement ring. Simple, but stunning. The diamond is sparkling underneath the lights of the room. I feel a smile tugging over my face.

“You’re going to propose to Ella?” I ask, keeping my voice at a whisper. Just in case.

“I am. At least...I think I am. Should I? I should, right? Is the ring okay? I mean, what do you think?”

He's asking a thousand questions a minute and I have to take a minute to process everything that he's asking.

"Okay, first, breathe," I say, waiting for him to do so. "Firstly, yes. Yes, you should propose to her. You love her more than anything. She loves you too. Life is short, Mattia. Take the chance. Second, the ring is stunning. It seems fitting for Ella. Honestly, I'm impressed that you picked it out by yourself. I mean, it's not *my* type of ring, but it's fitting for Ella."

"What – what do you mean it's not *your* type of ring? Is it a bad choice? Should I get something else?"

I sigh. "What I mean is that Ella and I are two different types of women, Mattia. She's going to like the ring. It fits her. Okay? So, how are you going to do it? When? Do you have any plans?"

"Well," he starts, tucking the ring away back in the drawer before walking over to the bed. He takes a seat next to me and sighs. "I was thinking...Christmas is soon, right? The park across the street is where we had our first date and I thought...since the lights would be up and it would be pretty...would that be a good idea?"

"I think that would be a very good idea, Mattia. It's sweet. It's thoughtful. It's better than some restaurant."

"Are you – you're sure, right?"

I sigh, wrapping my arm around his and leaning against him. "I am so sure, Mattia. And when Ella says yes and comes to gush to me about how perfect everything was? I'm going to get to tell you 'I told you so' nice and loud."

He leans his head on mine. "You think she's going to gush?" he asks. I can hear the smile in his voice.

"I know so," I promise, pausing for a minute. Fuck it. Why not? Why not just tell *someone*? "I – I think I'm still in love with Yulian," I confess, keeping my voice quiet as I speak.

Mattia looks at me and grins, just a little bit. “Do you? Really? Because I could’ve told you that *months* ago.”

I feel my cheeks flush but I shake it off. “No. I mean – what are you even talking about? This is new.”

“It’s not. I don’t think you’ve ever really gotten over him,” he tells me with a shrug. “Let me guess, the two of you slept together.”

“I’m not talking about that with my brother,” I scoff, arms crossed over my chest.

“Good, because I don’t *want* to know. All I’m saying is...it’s okay to feel things, Ads. It’s okay to move on. You’re not required to dedicate the rest of your existence to Christian.”

That’s the biggest thing holding me back, the thing that’s weighing on my mind right now. Is it too soon? Am I just using Yulian as a rebound? Or am I doing something wrong by Christian? I know that I loved him. I did. But maybe...maybe he wasn’t my soulmate in the way that I thought he was.

Sometimes different people come into our lives for different reasons, right? Just because I loved Christian doesn’t disqualify me from loving Yulian too. I guess I just need to learn how to navigate all of this. Somehow. Some way.

I lay my head on my brother’s shoulder again, sighing. “Is it too soon?” I ask quietly.

He wraps an arm around my shoulder, pulling me against him. “Only you can decide that one, Adelaide. Seeing as how you’ve known Yulian for what feels like your entire life and how he genuinely cares about you too...I don’t think so. What do I know though? You’re the one who knows everything,” he teases.

I laugh, looking up at him. “When have I ever been wrong, Mattia? Tell me.”

“If I thought hard enough, I’m sure I could come up with something.”

“But you have to *think* about it,” I smirk.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Yulian

When we leave Ella and Mattia's place, I don't know what to say. There's the obvious relief that I'm feeling, but now that the Todd situation is (hopefully) out of the way, for at least a little bit, it feels like Adelaide and I are forced to figure out how to navigate our situation.

The car ride back to her place is silent. It's not quite the comfortable one that we've settled into recently. It's not entirely uncomfortable either. I want to fill it though. I just don't know with *what*. I pull into the driveway and hesitate for a moment before she looks over at me.

"Are you coming in?" she asks.

"Do you want me to?"

"Of course."

I kill the engine and follow her into the house. There's more silence as she heads to the living room, flopping back onto the couch. I, pathetically, can't look at the couch without thinking about what transpired between the two of us on it the other night, but I flop down next to her.

"Yulian," she says my name and my stomach tightens.

I'm waiting for it now. The rejection. The realization that what happened between us was just because of how stressed out she was. And I'll accept it. It's not like I'm going to sit here and beg for her to change her mind. I'm not going to be angry at her. I kind of expected it...I just hoped that it wouldn't be the case.

I realize she's waiting for me to respond. "Yes?" I answer, unable to bring my eyes to meet hers.

"I – I don't know how to start this," she says, twisting on the couch to look at me. She swallows hard and steels

herself. That typical Adelaide behavior of just forcing whatever she doesn't want to say out. "I have feelings for you."

I'm still waiting for the 'but'. I know it's there. I know there's going to be a 'but'. "You know how I feel about you, Ads," I say.

"I know. But," Fuck. There it is. It's my turn to steel myself before she continues, "I don't know how to navigate this."

Okay. Not the terrible 'but' I was expecting. I think. "What do you mean?"

She sighs. "My fiancé just died. I don't know if it's okay that I have these feelings for you because a part of me still...still misses him. It doesn't feel like you're a rebound because I have feelings for you. Legitimate feelings. I had feelings for you since before Christian died," she admits. "I was just ignoring them because they were wrong. And maybe they're not wrong now but I don't – I don't know if it's fair to you."

I listen to the roller coaster ride she takes me on. She misses Christian. I'm not a rebound. She has feelings for me. She's *had* feelings for me. She doesn't know if any of this is fair. I try to think about how to respond. I want to make sure I handle this *properly*.

"Adelaide," I reach out and take her hand in mine, running my thumb over the back of it. "I know you miss him. You're always going to miss him. I need you to understand that I'm never going to try to replace Christian. I'm also never going to be him. I'm always going to be me, the guy you developed feelings for back then.

I can't tell you if those feelings were wrong or not because you never acted on them. Neither did I. We did nothing to hurt Christian. I'm not asking you to marry me tomorrow. I'm not asking you to move me in. I have no expectations between the two of us if we're being honest. I

didn't expect you to return my feelings. I never will. I don't know a lot, but I also know that you can't spend the rest of your life thinking you can't move forward because of what you had with Christian."

I finish and wait. I don't know if anything I said was too insensitive. Neither of us knows how to navigate this situation. I just know that I *want* to. I also want to make this easy on her. She deserves something easy for once. She has any out that she wants. She just has to take it.

"I have a daughter," she says quietly.

"I know you do. And I adore Kara," I tell her softly. "And I'm never going to try to *be* her father. She had one of those. I didn't know Christian well." Probably for the best all things considered. "But I know that he was a damn good father. I'm not going to replace him."

"If we – if we do this...I think I want to wait a little bit before introducing the idea to Kara," she tells me. "Like... maybe you don't stay over the nights that I have her?"

"That's fine," I say softly. I get it. Kara is still so young. She doesn't understand what happened to her father. She doesn't understand why her mother has been so absent lately. "We're doing this on *your* schedule, Adelaide. I have no expectations."

"Are you sure?" she asks. "Because I can't handle any expectations right now, Yulian. I can't handle the idea of you expecting me to fall into some happily ever after with you or _"

I cut her off. Always a terrible idea, but I don't want her to continue her sentence and wind up spiraling. "— I have no expectations," I say again. "I don't expect to move into your home. I don't expect to become Kara's stepfather. I don't expect to fall asleep with 'I love you' every night. If you tell me you don't want things to progress, I need you to understand that I'm going to be okay with that, Ads."

“But I want things to progress,” she says, looking up at me. Thank God she’s not pissed that I cut her off. “I’m just... I’m scared.”

It takes a lot of Adelaide to admit that she’s scared, but she’s been doing it a lot lately. At least to me. It feels like some progress there. I smile, just a little bit before I drop her hand. I reach out and wrap my arms around her, pulling her into my lap. I make sure those pretty dark eyes are on me as I speak.

“I’m scared too, Ads. I know this is a big step. But I promise that we’ll take it at your pace, deal? If you ever think that it’s too much, just tell me to pump the breaks and we can go back to phone calls every other day and only see each other during meetings.”

“No matter what you’re going to be in my life, right?”

“I said till the end, Adelaide. I meant it.”

I swore my life to Adelaide a long time ago. Longer than either of us realize. All I want to be is by her side. Whether it’s as a partner or a friend. I adore her. I love her. I’ve loved her for years. Just being in her presence is addicting to me. I’m going to be there for her forever, no matter what. Even if she shatters my heart again, and decides that I’m not good enough.

She smiles a little bit, leaning forward and pressing her forehead to mine. “No matter what?” she whispers.

“No matter what, Ads. Till the end means just that.”

She leans in and presses her lips to mine. I can’t explain the feeling that washes over me. All that calmness, the good heart flutters. Being this close to Adelaide is where I feel like I belong. Kissing her makes me happier than I can ever put into words. I kiss her back, running my fingers through her dark hair. I don’t try to deepen the kiss, but she does, and I open myself up to it.

When we part, she’s smiling at me. Her forehead is still pressed to mine as she speaks, “I want to give it a try. As long

as we take it slow.”

“As slow as you need.”

I don't know what slow means for Adelaide, but I'm just going to follow her lead. I'm pretty good at doing that. She leans in and kisses me again. A quick little peck this time, nothing deep, before she's removing herself from my lap. I feel myself pouting at the loss of her warmth, the feeling of her just being close to me.

“What should we do for dinner? Want to go out or order in?” she asks, now standing in front of me.

I feel like this is a test. I feel like there's a right and a wrong answer. I just don't know which is which. I look at her for a minute, tilting my head from side to side as I weigh the options presented. Then I decide to take a shot in the dark.

“Want to go out?” I ask her with a small smile. “Wherever you want. My treat.”

That smile pulls over her lips a little bit more. “Is this going to be a date, Yulian?”

“Do you want it to be a date?”

“I don't think I'd *complain* if it was a date,” she grins.

I feel myself grinning back at her, shifting on the couch. “Well, guess it's a date, Adelaide. Go get ready and figure out where you want me to take you.”

She blows me a kiss before she disappears into the bedroom. I hear the shower get started up and I know that it's going to be a little before Adelaide emerges. I just relax back on the couch, content with waiting.

Maybe I don't know where things are going from here. I don't know if there's going to be a future between the two of us (although I really hope that there will be). All I know is... I'm happy that this is where we ended up. It feels like everything is right where it needs to be, despite all that happened for us to get here.

THE END

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