



*Marco*

DELUCA

CASSIE VERANO

# Marco DeLuca

SAVAGE BLOODLINE SERIES



By Cassie Verano



HIS LOYALTY TO THE family is unparalleled. However, when someone murders the woman he's pledged his life to, Marco will get revenge, sanctioned or unsanctioned. Setting off on a deadly trail of retribution to avenge her murder and cleanse his conscious causes him to cross paths with someone from his past.

The only woman he could ever be faithful to is the one he vowed to stay away from.

***Get ready for the shakedown! There's more jaw-dropping action and panty-wetting moans.***

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## CHAPTER 1 – MARCO

“Baby, do you have to leave?” Serena whines, pulling me back into the bed.

She spreads her legs wide, and I nestle my bulk between her thick thighs and bury my face between her tits. My hand plasters against her heat, and I insert one finger inside her, smiling at her moans. Knowing she loves this, I insert two more, pumping into her heat at an erratic pace.

My teeth bite down on her nipple causing her to arch off the bed. “Marco! Mmm, it feels so good,” she moans.

When she’s finished, I sit back on the bed and suck her juices from my fingers before I wink and say, “Good night.”

“I thought you were staying?” she pouts.

“Serena, I told you I have to go home. I’ve got a wife,” I say as I climb off the bed and get dressed.

“And *I* have a husband,” she points out.

I smirk as I pull on my dress shirt. “A very rich, very old husband who only married you so he wouldn’t die alone. The poor bastard’s what...eighty?”

“He’s seventy-six, and he’s a sweetheart.”

“Yeah, but you and I don’t got the same fucking commitments. He knows he can’t get you off. He was never interested in that. You two don’t even fucking love each other. Hell, he gave you a free pass to fuck anybody you choose.”

“You love her?” she asks, sitting up in bed and pulling the covers up to her breasts.

“That’s beside the point.”

“No, it’s not, Marco. Do you love her?”

Shrugging, I sniff. “Always have. You know that. She was my friend before she was my wife. I will never forget that.”

“I don’t understand your marriage, Marco. You cheat, and she doesn’t care but you say you love each other. It makes no



sense!” she rants before switching to Spanish.

Serena is half Italian and half Dominican. She was born in the Dominican Republic, moved to the States when she was ten, then to Italy with her mother at eighteen, and this is where she’s remained.

“Serena, I’m not fucking doing this with you tonight,” I snarl, grabbing my suit jacket off the back of the chair and heading for the front door.

“Marco! If it’s not your wife, it’s some other bitch! You don’t think I smell their cunt on you when you leave their house and come to me?”

I glance at her over my shoulder. “Why do you think I always shower when I get here? I shower before fucking you. After I fuck you, I’ll go home and shower again.”

“And what? Then fuck your wife?”

“Not your business.”

I make my way from the guest cottage where Serena lives to the front of my brother’s mansion where my car is parked and hop inside.

The last thing I want to do is argue with a bitch who doesn’t have my last name. I like Serena well enough, but I’ve told her one too many times that I don’t owe her an explanation.

If we have this conversation again, I’ll have to cut ties with her.

My mind goes over my upcoming trip to America. Father expects nothing from me. He has high expectations and standards for Alessandro, Massimo, Tony, and even Niccolò, but he expects nothing of me.

I sneer and open my window, spitting out of it at the thought of our fractured relationship. Alessandro has fallen into his good graces lately which isn’t easy. I think that has something to do with his wife, Mila, and their two children, Bianca and Aris. He’s proud of them. We all are.

He sees me as a failure for not giving him grandchildren before now to extend the empire built between the DeLucas and the Morettis, my wife's family.

My mind turns over the news I received two days ago, and I know my father will be proud. Except I won't live a lie, not again.

When I pull up to the mansion, I see that the downstairs and Graziella's bedroom lights are still on. That means that she's up and waiting for me. Although I told Serena that I had to get home to my wife, I hoped my wife would have fallen asleep by now.

Looks like that hope is dead in the water. She's expecting me to have the conversation I've been avoiding for two days.

I hand my keys to Joe, the caretaker of all my cars, and head into the house. Graziella is standing in the drawing room to my immediate right as soon as I clear the doors. Dressed in a pink dressing gown and matching high-heeled slippers, she's holding a glass of wine. From her heavy-lidded gaze, I can tell she's already had a few drinks.

"Glad you could make it home," she slurs, glancing at the clock on the wall.

I look too and I know I'm almost an hour late, but at least I made it. That's a lot more than I've done in the past.

I head for the bar and pour some gin before I turn around and face her where she's reclined on the chaise lounge.

"We have to talk about this, Marco. You can't keep avoiding the conversation."

"Told you two days ago there's nothing to talk about."

"There is, Marco. Don't you see? This changes things," she says, sitting up and spinning around so that her long legs are curved to the side. The dressing gown parts showing me a glimpse of her creamy thighs.

My dick jerks in my pants as though he hasn't feasted enough tonight, and when I look up into Grazie's eyes, I see

the knowing smirk. She knows me almost as well as I know my damn self.

“You know why I won’t do this, Grazie!” I say through clenched teeth.

“You’re not being fair, Marco! This isn’t all about you!”

“It fucking is if I say it is!” I shout, tossing my drink back and throwing the glass into the fireplace where it shatters.

The flames dance on the broken shards of glass creating illusions of amber-colored beauty when all I see is pain, deception, and rage.

“You haven’t even given me a chance!” she cries out.

“A chance for what? To pull the wool over my eyes again and to fall for your lies? To get my family excited and anxious that the DeLuca bloodline is growing? Or what? To get me hopeful that I have a fucking heir to inherit the wealth I’ve built with the blood on these hands?” I ask, standing over her and shoving my hands in her face.

“Please, Marco,” she sobs.

“Please what, Grazie? Please. Fucking. What?”

“You weren’t always this angry.”

I sneer at her. “You made me this way. You and that bastard father of mine.”

“Don’t say such horrible things,” she pleads and the tears fall from her eyes like they always do, but I won’t fall prey to them this time.

“Every now and then, you show me a glimpse of the man I fell in love with. You show me a peek at the man who was my best friend who cared about me.”

Graziella stands and places a hand on my chest, and I cringe.

“You still care about me. That man is still there inside of you, Marco. I know it. I can feel it when you kiss me. When you hold me and make love to me, you drive deep inside of me and expel the demons from your soul. It was on a night like

that a few weeks ago that we created this child,” she says softly, grabbing my hand and placing it on her belly.

Do I dare dream again? Should I even hope?

No, I won't. She fucking killed all of that years ago, and I won't be her fool again. Choosing to believe her has sentenced me to a lifetime of misery.

“You have to trust me this time, Marco.”

“Trust you? I trusted you when you told me you were pregnant at the beginning of our marriage. I was devastated when you lost that baby. I remained by your side through your grieving and all only to overhear a conversation between you and your mother, God rest her soul, that you'd lied to me. She was begging you to tell me the truth. The truth that you'd never been pregnant in the first place!”

“Your attention was wandering. It was the only way that I could keep you with me!”

“By lying to me? My attention wasn't wandering. I was struggling with my cousin's murder!”

I don't dare tell her I'd been on a killing spree because of the murder.

She waves off my explanation. “Look, I don't want you going away to America with us on bad terms. Please believe me. I've grown from all that stuff which sometimes feels like a lifetime ago,” she pleads.

“It was just yesterday in my head. I relive it every single fucking day of my life; my life that's built on a lie,” I growl.

“Please. You have to forgive me, Marco, for our unborn child's sake. It's time we put the past to rest. Please let me tell our families that we're expecting a child.”

“No!” I shout before heading for the door.

“You're being unreasonable!” she shouts. “Don't fucking turn your back on me!” she seethes, grabbing me by my arm as I reach the doorway.

“What do you want from me, Graziella?”

“I want my husband back. I want you to be faithful and stop fucking everything in a skirt! For the sake of our child, please stop cheating on me!” she shouts.

“You’re such a fucking dramatic bitch,” I grumble.

“Don’t ever speak to me that way,” she hisses before she slaps me.

Everything within me goes cold as I freeze and stare at her. I have to get away from her before I hurt her. She doesn’t realize how close to the edge I am because she doesn’t stop even when I turn away.

“Get out of my way,” I growl as she throws herself in front of me.

“No! Not until you agree that we will tell our families!”

“I fucking won’t.”

“You will tell them or I will!” she shouts, repeatedly punching me in the back.

I swirl on her, grab her wrist, and push her against the doorjamb.

“I hate you!” she shouts as she kicks me.

My hand goes to her throat, and I squeeze. Our faces are merely an inch apart when I snarl, “Don’t ever fucking touch me again!”

I see a flash of movement out of the corner of my eye, but when I turn, no one’s there. It pains me that my house staff has to tread lightly in our home. They often avert their eyes from me for days after one of Grazie’s and my big showdowns. I know it makes them uncomfortable but sometimes she won’t rest until she gets a rise from me.

“Don’t come to my room tonight.”

“I’m leaving.”

“So, you’re not going to even spend your last night at home before leaving tomorrow?”

“Why the fuck would I want to?” I growl, storming off.

I don't need to bother to pack anything. I've got enough clothes at my apartment in America.



## CHAPTER 2 –PIPER

“Yes,” I say, forcing a smile to my lips.

The room erupts in cheers as Kenneth slides the ring onto my finger before lifting me into the air. He spins me around, releases a whoop and then kisses me as he sets me back on my feet.

“You’ve just made me the happiest man in the world,” he whispers.

I look around at all the eyes still on us and keep the eye roll internal. To the rest of the room, I display the classical smile they’ve become accustomed to and tell Kenneth, “I’m glad.”

“Can I steal your new fiancée for a minute?” Kortland, Kenneth’s brother and one of my close friends, asks.

“Where’s your wife?” Kenneth asks.

Smirking, Kortland says, “Fuck you.”

I laugh before saying, “Play nice, boys.”

They don’t get along all that well and the fact that Kortland and I are such good friends aggravates Kenneth beyond measure. It’s okay, though, because I won’t give up my friendship with Kortland for any reason. If it wasn’t for him, Kenneth wouldn’t even know me.

I used to hang out at Kortland’s house with my other close friend and his now wife, LaToya. Whenever we came over, Kenneth would come around eyeing me. Initially, I was attracted to him and liked the attention he showed me until I popped up at their house one day and he was walking out of his bedroom with some girl who was zipping up her pants.

Kortland had seen the disappointment on my face and warned me away from his brother. Realizing that I had a major crush on Kenneth that I thought was reciprocated, Kortland warned me that his brother wasn’t about shit.

“Seriously, Kenny. Let me dance with her for a bit.”



“Kenneth,” my fiancé corrects his brother.

That’s another thing about Kenneth; everything is so proper with him. I shudder thinking I’ve just agreed to a lifetime of his conservative bullshit. He wasn’t always that way; not until he got elected to the city council thanks to the partners at his law firm pushing him into that arena and backing him.

I let Kortland tug me onto the dance floor where he gives his DJ a nod. I laugh when DMX’s *Get It On The Floor* starts to play. One glance at Kenneth at our table shows he’s not happy about this.

Kortland and I love DMX to Kenneth’s chagrin.

“You would do this just to mess with him,” I say, laughing.

“I can’t help it. He’s a bitch. This nigga got the nerve to propose to you at my reception. Everything has to be about him,” Kortland says.

“I don’t think that he means any harm,” I soothe. “What did Toya have to say about it?” I ask, looking at his new wife as she dances on the floor with her brother.

“She cheered me on. Knowing that it would get under his skin hearing DMX. Gotta tell you that she was pissed you accepted his proposal, though. She was hoping you’d leave his corny ass on one knee.”

I laugh loudly and snort as I dance and bounce to DMX’s song. Turning away from Kortland, I shake my ass and peer at Kenneth. He’s red as fire, but I’ll make it better later tonight.

LaToya and I met in middle school, and we both met Kortland in high school. They’ve been dating since our freshman year of college, so I don’t know why Kenneth is so jealous of my friendship with Kortland. He’s tried to do everything possible to strain our friendship.

“Seriously, why’d you accept his proposal? You know what you got on your hands?” Kortland asks.

I stop dancing for a moment and stare into his eyes. “Your brother is a good man, Kortland. You and I both know this.”

“Now he is. That doesn’t mean he’s not still a hoe deep underneath. Once a hoe, always a hoe. Besides, he’s boring as hell these days and too conservative. You need a man who gets you not one who’s trying to shape you into his image of the ideal woman. Just don’t get hurt, a’ight?”

“I won’t,” I say softly.

“No, seriously. I worry that your dreams will get lost in his. You know my brother has a one-track mind and tunnel vision. He doesn’t stop until he gets what he wants.”

“That’s called determination and that’s what makes him successful.”

“Yeah, or take advantage of those who love him.”

“He won’t,” I say.

I can never tell Kortland that Kenneth has made me feel as if my dreams don’t matter and that he makes me feel incompetent sometimes in so many ways. Yet, I know he loves me.

It’s more important to me to have a solid, stable man with a bright future ahead of himself. One willing to commit to me and won’t have to hide me away. That’s better than a man who heats me up but always puts me second. A man that can never be mine.

I start dancing and smiling again to press those depressive thoughts out of my head. Today isn’t a day for sadness or regret or hopeful maybes. Today is a day of celebrating two of my closest friends.

“Piper, may I have a word with you?” Kenneth whispers in my ear while staring at his brother.

“We’re dancing, Kenneth. Can’t you wait until the song is over?”

He sighs dramatically. “It’s important. Besides, you’re making an ass of yourself out here on this floor in front of all the guests.”

I roll my eyes and seethe internally. “Am I, Kenneth? Or are you just ashamed of me? Because if so, then I’m not sure

why you proposed or why I accepted.”

I’ve stopped dancing, and I know people are looking our way.

“Yo, chill,” Kortland says, tensing up.

“Little brother, this is between my fiancée and me,” Kenneth corrects.

Kortland snorts. “And it’s *my* wedding day,” he replies in a dark tone.

“Kortland, it’s okay. I’ll go see what he wants. This is *your* day, and I want you to enjoy it. Not get caught up in our situation,” I say, pressing a hand on his arm.

Kortland sucks his teeth and then saunters off as Kenneth grabs my hand and damn near drags me off the dance floor.

We don’t speak a word until we’re outside the convention center where the reception is being held.

“What the hell was that back there?” Kenneth asks through clenched teeth.

He’s shoved his hands in his pants pockets and paces back and forth in front of me.

“I don’t know, Kenneth. I was hoping maybe you might let me in on it.”

He stops and stares at me as if I’m the one that just lost my mind.

“You’re my fiancée, Piper. I thought you knew what that meant when you accepted my proposal and that you accepted everything that comes along with that. I thought that you were ready to represent me and the Paxton name!”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“That!” he says maniacally, pointing at me. “You can’t continue to use such coarse language. If you’re going to be my wife, the wife of a council member with aspirations of running for Congress in a couple of years, then you need to start behaving like a lady.”

I cross my arms over my breasts not because of the chill in the air but to hold in the hostility and rage flaring inside me.

“Kenneth, I didn’t sign up to change who I am or for you to reshape me into someone I’m not. I thought you asked me to marry you because you love me, the woman you’ve spent the last few years with.”

“I do love you, Piper. Can’t you see?” he pleads, grabbing my hands and holding them in his.

“No, Kenneth. All I see is a man that’s not only trying to control his future but the lives of those around him who...who love him,” I manage to say.

He releases my hand and pulls a hand down his face. Pushing his coat lapels back and pressing his hands against his waist, he says, “I’m sorry. That’s not what I was trying to do. Would you please forgive me?”

I blow out a breath. Before I can answer that question, I have something that I want to get off my chest.

“That was really selfish of you.”

“What was?”

“Proposing to me at your brother’s wedding reception.”

“I thought you would have liked that; to have the surprise of your life in front of those you love.”

“Except the people that I know and love aren’t here. I mean, a few of them, yes. But these are your brother’s and Toya’s family and friends. Not mine. Even if they were here, it wasn’t our time, Kenneth. Tonight is their night, and you stole that to gain their attention for yourself. I don’t like that. It was selfish and thoughtless of you to take any moment away from them to have the spotlight on you.”

“I can’t believe this. I thought you would be happy and appreciative that I proposed to you. Isn’t that what you’ve been waiting for the last year?”

“Yes, Kenneth, but not like this! Why don’t you get it?”

“So, what are you saying? You don’t want this?”

I hesitate for a moment. I'm emotional and don't need to speak from those emotions. Tonight, I witnessed two of my closest friends pledge their lives to each other. The love and passion they share are evident to anyone who watches them. It's easy to burn from the heat flaring between them at any moment.

I want what they have. At one point in my life, I thought I had it, but I learned it wasn't for me. I've had to settle and a part of me resents that. I tried to recapture that with Kenneth, a man I had a crush on for years. They say to be careful what you wish for.

"Yes, Kenneth," I lie. "I do want this. I need you to accept me as I am and stop trying to change me."

"Okay, I promise that I won't do that again. We'll work together, but I need you to ensure that you understand appearances matter now. If we live in the public eye, we must be mindful of our choices."

"I didn't ask for that, Kenneth."

"But you accepted that, Piper."

I sigh and roll my eyes. "One more thing."

"Yes?" he says in a way that tells me he's coming up short with the ability to continue negotiating.

"Don't antagonize your brother especially on his wedding night."

"Don't push it, Piper."

"Kenneth."

"Okay. Okay. I'll let it go for tonight. Just remember what I said...future Senator's wife," he says, smirking and pressing a kiss to my lips.



## CHAPTER 3 – MARCO (6 Weeks Later)

“Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust,” the priest intones in a weary voice.

I step up to the casket and toss the white rose onto the coffin. Briefly, I pause in front of the beautiful, dark-haired woman with red, pouty lips and swollen blue eyes. She casts her mysterious glance at me, and I can read everything she’s thinking in that gaze.

My eyes flick sideways, and she shuts out all the emotion before she bows her head again.

“I’m sorry for your loss, Maria.”

She nods, and I move on to Johnny’s daughter next as the person beside me exchanges a hug and condolences with Maria, my late cousin’s wife.

My cousin Johnny died in a car accident. The idiot had been drinking and driving again, as was his custom, on a rainy night. He’d had one too many drinks and had driven into a tree. Luckily, no one else lost their lives in the accident. There was a woman in the car with him, but she’d survived and was still in the hospital recovering.

The graveside service doesn’t last much longer, and before I knew it, we’re in the car being whisked to our next destination; a meeting with some of the other family heads.

After the meeting, I know we’ll return to Maria’s home. Despite her appearance as the grieving widow, I know the minute that no one is looking she’ll be all over me. It’s always been that way with us since we were teenagers.

We don’t love or even like one another that much anymore, but our sexual chemistry is undeniable. I’m no stranger to her body just as she’s not one to mine. The order for my cousin to marry her was nothing more than a distraction to keep me away from her. My father had greater

plans for me but that didn't stop me from fucking her whenever I could.

Not even their move to America interfered with that. Not when I came to the States for a visit. My cock tightens in my pants as I think about what I'll be doing as soon as this meeting is over.

"Marco!" my father's tone snaps me out of my reverie, and I pull my gaze up to meet his as he occupies the car seat across from me. Tony sits at his right, and Alessandro is at my right.

"Yes?"

He glances at my brothers, and Tony grimaces with an uncomfortable look while Alessandro appears impatient.

"There will be some changes that will directly impact you."

"Changes?"

"Yes. Your cousin Johnny's death has left an irreplaceable void in our hearts," he says, staring blankly at me. "There are some responsibilities that cannot be filled."

His silence after that statement lets me know that he saw the visual exchange between Maria and me.

"And?" I prompt impatiently.

"There are others that can be filled."

"Such as?"

"His position as the capo of the southeastern region based here in Atlanta."

"The fuck?" I explode.

"The order came directly from the don."

Tony shakes his head. "What?" I challenge.

"Your fucking temper is worse than Ales'. I don't understand why he thinks you could be in charge of anything," Tony says.

"Antonio, your place is at my side learning from me. Why do you envy your brothers' positions?"



Tony shakes his head. “Marco will screw this up. If you think that Ales created a bloodbath before he left America, what do you expect from Marco? Wouldn’t Massimo be the better choice?”

“Massimo has commitments in Cagliari.”

“And I don’t?” I say to my father.

“Massimo has a child and a fiancée.”

“I have a wife,” I argue.

“That you don’t care about,” he sneers.

I roll my eyes. “So, what am I supposed to do? Pack up and move to America and leave her behind?”

“No. The conversation will be had with Graziella. She will do what is expected of her as a dutiful daughter.”

I scoff, shaking my head. “Let me guess, you’ve already spoken with Giuseppe?” I ask of my father-in-law.

“Of course. I spoke with Giuseppe when the order came down from the don. He knows that he does not have much choice in the matter. You are the right person to take over this region, Marco. Your soldiers both fear and respect you, and your presence is commanding. I may not agree with or like your tactics, but you get things done.”

“So, when is this supposed to happen?”

My father clasps his hands together and sits straighter in his seat. My father is a shrewd man with a commanding presence. I know I won’t like his next statement from that subtle movement, but it would be futile to argue since the order came from Don Enzo.

“The sooner, the better, obviously, but he’s giving you until the end of next month to make the transition.”

I hold my head down and shake it as I think about Serena. She won’t be happy about this, but I will find someone to replace her. That’s the least of my problems.



“THE FUCK IS WRONG WITH you?” Tony asks me as I toss down another drink.

“Shit.”

The music is loud, the air is smoky, and there’s plenty of food, drinks, and ass everywhere.

“You’ve been in a shitty mood all day,” he grunts as he watches the ass of a dancer passing by.

We’re at *Bellezza Rosa*, the new strip club I’ve opened in America, playing a game of poker in a private room.

During our first week and a half here, we were hard at work going over Johnny’s books, possibilities for expansion, and other business matters. We’ve also been checking out our investments, and it’s been a rough week and a half with little sex and plenty of work.

Today was all about the Colombo matter so tonight is supposed to be all about play.

I’ve been flying over once a month to check on my business since I opened it six months ago. *Bellezza Rosa* is a strip club catering to the elite. The best drugs, guns, and pussy are all found behind these doors.

“Maybe you should have gotten a massage,” Alessandro says sourly, glancing at the woman giving me a lap dance.

“Fuck you,” I snarl and turn my attention back to her.

“Mr. DeLuca, I have other ways to relax you,” she whispers.

After all the business I’ve been handling, that’s what I need. The only way that I know how to do that is by getting my dick sucked. This pretty little bitch will do whatever I ask her to, but I’m not really in the mood.

“You need it,” Tony encourages me, knowing what she’s offered me.

“Are you ready to go upstairs, Mr. DeLuca?”

“Yeah, let’s go,” I say, standing and helping her to her feet.

She sashays out of the room in her shimmery pink skirt with silver fringe. She's not wearing a top, and I suspect she isn't wearing anything under the skirt.

She takes my hand and leads me to a back stairwell where she presses a keycard against a small back box once we arrive at the top. When the door opens, there are three armed guards, and she shows her badge.

They barely glance at her badge but instead look at me and say, "Good evening, Mr. DeLuca."

I nod and walk past them until we get to the elevators at the end of the hall. Once inside, she prepares to swipe her badge again, but I push her hand aside. I press my hand to the metal square above the black box and then press the sixth floor, the top floor, and the only floor that no one can access except for my brothers, me, and the club manager.

Five rooms on that floor work out perfectly because this building is shaped like a pentagon.

No sooner than the elevator starts moving, I push the stop button on the elevator stopping us somewhere between the first and second floors. Unzipping my pants, I say, "Drop to your knees."

She does as I ask and licks her lips as I whip out my dick.

"It's pretty, Mr. DeLuca."

"Baby, my dick is a lot of shit but pretty ain't one of them. It's long, it's hard, it's strong, and it'll fuck your muthafuckin' brains out. My dick is capable of murdering a bitch," I sneer. "But it ain't pretty," I finish.

"Murder me," she pleads.

I laugh and grab the back of her head and shove my shit into her mouth, forcing it towards the back of her throat.

Slob drips from her mouth down my shit as she gags and struggles to fit me properly inside of her mouth. My fingers tighten in her hair as I jerk her head backward. Through gritted teeth, I say, "Suck my shit until my fucking eyes pop out of my head! Suck my shit like it's the last dick you'll ever suck!"

She groans and reaches her hand out to cup my balls, caressing and squeezing them before she pulls free of my grip, dips her head, and sucks my balls. Her slob drips down my thighs before she pops her head back up and takes me down her throat again.

The elevator begins to move, and she looks at me with wide eyes.

“What the fuck?” I push the stop button, and she returns to what she’s doing.

Her head bobs back and forth expertly as she sucks me down, playing with my nuts. Just as I start fucking her mouth fast, the elevator moves again.

“Muthafucka!” I grumble.

I push the stop button once more, look at her, and say, “Don’t fucking stop sucking unless I tell you to. I don’t give a fuck if the elevator falls and we’re about to die in this bitch. You suck my shit until my nut is all over your face and down your muthafuckin’ throat! You got that?”

She nods because she’s eager to please me and keeps sucking me off. The elevator starts again, and my hands knot into fists in her hair as I pump her mouth furiously. The heat from her mouth and the intensity with which she’s sucking me lets me know that she’s trying to make me cum soon.

When I’m done, I’ll bend her over and fuck the shit out of her until she’s begging for her daily job to be my fuck bunny. She’s got a pretty, tight little ass on her that I can’t wait to slip inside of.

I nut on her face and down her throat just as the elevator reaches my floor. The doors open to a well-lit lobby area at the top of the pentagon. White couches and chairs are arranged in sitting groups and there’s a bar at one end. The club manager, Michael, runs up to me.

“Oh sorry, sir,” he says as I slip my dick into my pants and the woman wipes nut off her face. He discreetly passes her a napkin and then turns his back to us.

“Michael, it’s okay.”

He nods and smiles at me. “Mr. DeLuca, I didn’t realize that was you coming up with a guest. I thought the elevator was getting stuck and kept using my pass key to force it to move again.”

“It’s fine,” I grumble again.

“Mr. DeLuca, we have the best beverages in your suite tonight or would you care for something from our well-stocked bar?” he asks, pointing to the station manned by a bartender.

“No, thanks,” I grumble.

“I’ve carefully curated your entertainment tonight according to your tastes. Your guests are ready for you,” he says, turning and pointing to two beautiful women sitting in chairs beside the bar.

I slowly take them in. There’s a raven-haired woman whose skin is so pale I can see her blue veins. Although she looks delicate, she’s beautiful. The other woman is a red-headed, shapely Asian woman whose seductive glance and posturing make me know I’m in for a treat tonight.

Yet, I’m not in the mood for some strange reason. I look at the glass wall surrounding us and walk to it, looking down through the tinted windows into the club.

I’m bored with all of this and my spirit is restless tonight. I have no fucking idea why; I just know that it is. Maybe I’m bloodthirsty. It’s been a while since I’ve catered to my brutal, savage instincts.

Someone catches my eye just before I turn away from the crowd below. My breath hitches in my throat, and I think I must be seeing things, but I know that’s not true especially when she angles her head to the side and laughs.

It can’t be! There’s no way in hell...but her gaze goes up and stares directly at me. If I didn’t know any better, I’d swear that she could see me, but I know that she can’t not with the tinted windows.

“Michael,” I say to the manager without turning to look at him. I’m about to break a vow that I made eight years ago.

There's no way that I can keep it; not when she's this close and within arm's reach. It's like the universe sent her straight to my lair. Who am I to tempt fate? But who am I to ignore the powers that are greater than me?

"Yes, Mr. DeLuca?"

"Send the girls away. Pay them double what they would have received," I say when I hear one of the girls exhale her disappointment behind me.

"Yes sir, Mr. DeLuca. Should I send someone else?"

"No one that works here," I say.

I pull my phone from my pocket and dial the number at the main bar. It rings twice before it's answered by Nina, my head bartender.

"This is Nina," she says over the loud music.

"Nina, it's Marco."

"Mr. DeLuca!" she greets excitedly.

"The young woman you just served, would you please tell her that the club owner requests her presence in his private suite in about ten minutes?"

"Sure, Mr. DeLuca. I'll tell her now."

"Tell her simply that Marco says 'Ciao, mia bella.'"

I end the call and watch and then wait.

She glances up again, eyes not quite meeting the space I'm in. I watch as she holds her drink up for Nina to refill it. She greedily downs that one and says something to the ladies that she's here at my club with.

Nina waves over one of my servers, Portia, and talks to her for a moment before introducing her to the woman.

"Follow me," I say to Michael.

I walk to the left and head to the rear of the building where my suite is located. I press my hand against the metal palm reader. Once my palm is scanned, the door opens, and I step

into a cool, bright room where the drapes have been pulled providing a beautiful view of Buckhead at night.

“Close the drapes,” I order.

We never go too close to windows in large open spaces like this especially when we’re not protected. Anything can and has happened in the past, and I’m not about to be a victim because my dick is causing me to forget the basic rules of being a part of the family.

Once the drapes are drawn, I thank Michael for his services and ask him to escort my guest to my suite once she arrives on this floor. I head into the bathroom, clean myself up, and quickly change my clothes. The last thing that I want is for her to smell another bitch on me.

No more than fifteen minutes pass before I see her on the TV screen in the bedroom where I have the channel tuned in to the cameras that monitor my club. Michael slides a key into the lock and holds the door open for her.

She glances nervously at him and blows a breath before closing her eyes. Michael asks her if she’s okay, and she nods before stepping over the threshold and the door closes behind her.

She turns and locks the door, and I shut the cameras off. It’s been too long, and I’m struggling to keep my excitement in check as I slowly leave the bedroom and find my way to her.

Her fragrance is soft and subtle; a clean, crisp scent with a gentle mix of honey, coconut and freesia.

“DeLuca,” she breathes when she sees me.

She always called me by my last name instead of my first name.

“Piper.”

“I can’t...I can’t believe it’s you,” she says softly.

“Would you like something to drink?” I ask, changing the subject.

When we last parted, we weren't on good terms.

"No, I'm good."

I walk up to her and grab her hand, pulling her close to my body. She doesn't say a word and we remain that way for several minutes.

I can feel her heart thudding in her chest, and I'm sure she can feel mine doing the same. My dick is so rigid I swear it'll break off if I tap it against something. There's no way that she can't feel it, too, and she confirms it.

"He always was excited to see me," she says, smirking.

I pull back and hold her face, looking down at her.

My eyes slowly search hers wondering if the years have been kind to her and what she's done in the last eight years of her life.

I bend down and kiss her lips. We don't take the kiss any further than that. It's just a meeting of our lips as we drink in one another's presence.

I pull back and stare into those large, brown eyes that have haunted me for the last several years.

"I had no idea you owned this club."

Smirking, I reply, "You know all the best clubs and restaurants in this city are owned by a DeLuca."

"Yes, but the only two DeLucas I know were in Italy last I heard," she says sadly.

"Your tattoo business is doing damn good. No?" I ask, changing the subject.

She lifts an eyebrow and pulls back, folding her arms.

"How do you know that?"

I look her up and down before my gaze meets hers again. "My last name—"

"Is DeLuca. I know," she says, repeating the words I often spoke whenever she asked me how I knew something.



I watch as she walks away from me, the tight white dress fitting her curves so perfectly. Thick black curls frame her face and hang to the middle of her back.

I recall my fingers being tangled up in those curves as I drove into her from behind.

“To answer your question, I’m here celebrating tonight.”

“Celebrating?”

“My engagement,” she says.

My heart drops, and though I have no right to feel this way, jealousy burns its way through me, searing everything inside.

My steps to the couch are measured and slow.

“Engaged?” I say, dropping down beside her.

“Yes.”

“What’s the bastard’s name?”

“You don’t need to worry about that.”

When I keep staring at her and don’t respond, she says, “You knew I’d go on with my life. Didn’t you?”

I don’t answer the question. Instead, I cup her face and lean in to kiss her lips again. She doesn’t move but lets me kiss her. Slowly, I suck on her lips until she opens them, allowing me deep inside her warm mouth.

The taste of gin, cherries, and amaretto coats her tongue. She’s delicious just like she’s always been.

Piper moves back and pushes her hair away from her face.

“Sorry.”

“You have nothing to apologize for, mia bella.”

A smile tilts her lips, and she shakes her head. “I have no reason to be up here.”

“Why not?” I ask.

“You’re my one weak spot, DeLuca.”

“Is that so bad, mia bella?” I ask, running my finger across her bottom lip.

“Damn it! I’m getting married,” she moans, standing and pulling her fingers through her hair.

I stand up and walk up behind her wrapping my arms around her waist. I press a kiss to the back of her neck.

“You’ll always be mine,” I whisper.

She turns around in my arms and stares up at me.

“I’m not. I can never be yours. You know that, and so do I. It’s why I had to leave you alone the first time. I can’t do this roller coaster ride with you any longer.”

“If you believed that shit, you wouldn’t be standing in my arms, enjoying the feel of my dick pressing against you or letting me kiss you the way I am.”

She exhales deeply and ends it with a groan.

“Fucking bastard. He doesn’t know that you’ll never be his?”

Shrugging, she says, “I suspect that somewhere deep inside he knows.”

“He doesn’t care. I can see that in your eyes. You’re a hell of a catch.”

“Too bad it wasn’t enough for you, huh?”

“You know that’s not true, Piper. From the moment we met, you knew that I was married, and you knew that I couldn’t walk away. There was never a time that I withheld the truth from you. You told me you respected me more because I was honest with you.”

“I know. It was just too hard. DeLuca, you opened up another world for me and made me feel things I only read about in books. Not being able to claim you as mine was my undoing. I can’t...I won’t go back down that path again.”

“I’m not asking you to. Just asking you to be truthful with yourself.”

“About what?”

“That I’m the one you love.”

She averts her eyes and then presses a hand against her eyes, covering them from me. She’s hiding from me.

“Hey,” I say, tugging her hand away. “Ti amo.”

“Don’t do that! That’s not fair!”

She always grew weak whenever I spoke Italian to her in the past, and I would use it to get her to do whatever I wanted her to.

“Just saying. I have no problem letting you know that I still love you. What about you?”

“I’m getting married, DeLuca.”

“I know that, but that doesn’t mean you don’t love me.”

She looks away from me, and I grip her chin, turning her to face me again. “Do you love him?”

“I do.”

There’s something in her voice that I don’t trust. There’s something that she’s not saying.

“Do you?”

She rolls her eyes. “Yes, but I miss you. I’ve never stopped and probably never fucking will! Okay?”

“Good.”

“No! It’s not good because you’re married. I can never have you, and I’m getting married.”

“Why?”

“Because I want a solid, stable life with someone who’ll protect my heart and cherish the ground I walk on. My fiancé plans to give me a beautiful life and family. I can’t do the roller coaster ride with you again.”

“Not asking you to, Tesoro.”

“Then what do you want?” she whispers. “You could have ignored me when you saw me down there.”

“You could have declined my invitation to come up here.”

“Could I?”

My hand drags down her arm and lingers at her waist. We start moving slowly from side to side as my other hand rests limply on her right hip.

“You always heard music in your head,” she says softly, resting her head against my chest.

“It’s the sound of our hearts beating that makes me dance, Tesoro.”

“Such a romantic,” she laughs softly.

“Don’t fucking tell anyone that. Might have to kill you,” I tease.

She’s the only one that I allow to see my humor and the more compassionate side of me.

We keep moving until I roll her dress over her hips and ass.

“No, DeLuca,” she mutters half-heartedly, grabbing the hem of her dress to stop me.

I stare into her eyes and lick my lips. “Is that a no or a fuck me, please?”

She looks away, and I continue rolling up her dress. She’s wearing a thong, and I pull it aside, slipping my fingers inside.

“Mmm,” she murmurs on a deep inhale as my thick digits penetrate her wet folds.

My hand cups her while my fingers slowly work her insides. She leans further into me, wrapping her arms tightly around me as though holding on for dear life. She rocks her hips back and forth and her little huffs of breath conveys her satisfaction.

The moment she clenches around my hand to the point it feels like she’ll fucking break it, I count to five. Satisfaction floods me when her juices come pouring out and drenching my hand. I pull it free, licking my fingers and the palm of my hand as I wink at her.

I drop to my knees and spread her wide, licking up the juices she just released. Her hands clench my head tightly as I devour her pussy, enjoying the heat, the sweet and tangy taste. She's been sweating from dancing which enhances her savory flavor.

Piper rocks back and forth on ridiculously black, high heels almost losing her balance until I grip her tightly. My mouth covers her mound as I tongue fuck her and I'm ready for my dick to replace my tongue.

"Fuck!" she screams as I lap her up when she cums for the second time in less than ten minutes.

I stand up and lick her lips, kissing her until we part to catch our breaths.

"DeLuca. You're gonna be the death of me, I swear," she moans, dropping to her knees.

"Hey," I say, grabbing her arm. "You don't gotta do that."

"You know I could never resist the taste of you," she murmurs, jerking away from me. "Besides, if I don't do it, one of those poor girls will get fucked to death tonight. You'll have them limping for a week."

"You're into community service now?" I snort but I don't stop her when she unzips my pants and sets me free. Her lips are made for my dick and she works her lips and jaws like she's slurping a milkshake through a paper straw.

Gahdamn, she's sucking the fucking life out of me!

She sucks me until I'm dry, and then she licks her lips and looks up at me with big, round brown eyes.

"I'm not fucking you, DeLuca. Just so you know."

I had planned on bringing that tight-ass bitch back up here to fuck tonight, but I think I'm just fine. And as much as I want to bury myself in Piper, I know she's right. Fucking will only drag us back to the whirlwind that once defined us.

Letting Piper go is my one regret in life.



## CHAPTER 4 – GRAZIELLA

“Why won't you tell him the truth?” he asks.  
“Are you mad? He will kill us both!”

Luca drags a hand up my thigh before moving it around to cup my ass, pulling me closer to his heat. His rigid cock prods my opening, and I lift my leg allowing him to slide right into my slick entrance.

His lips press against mine, and I open wide for him allowing him to suck my tongue and stifle my moans.

Luca's not as aggressive as Marco in bed, but he's just as skilled. He uses his hands, tongue, and teeth for every pleasurable purpose, and they compete with the pleasure his cock brings me.

Marco is a very skilled lover too, and his cunnilingus skills surpass any man I've met. None of the lovers I've had before and during my marriage have skills that compare to Marco's tongue and lip tricks.

Unfortunately, he no longer pleasures me that way no matter how much I beg.

Luca grabs my face, and his kisses become more passionate and demanding. He rocks in and out of me and shifts slightly allowing me to reposition my right leg and bring it around his back to meet my other leg.

How he drives himself inside of me and stretches me is so satisfying that I wish this moment would never end. Unfortunately, it will at some point.

The reality is that I will have to return home to my cold, unloving home and my distant and distracted husband. What I wouldn't give for Marco to look at me the way he did when we first met. If I could have him touch me that way again, have him speak to me that way again, and call me “il desiderio del mio cuore” again.

None of that is to be. Why? Because I became desperate, I lied to my husband. I betrayed Marco as a friend, lover, and potential husband. Marco “Il Maniaco” DeLuca is an unforgiving and unyielding man. After eighteen years of marriage, one would have thought he would have forgiven me for my untimely deception and trickery, but he hasn’t.

“Baby,” Luca whispers as he plunges deeper inside of me. “How long do I have with you this time?”

I know that Luca knows how long Marco will be gone. There almost isn’t a move Marco makes without telling Luca, his right-hand man and best friend.

“He’ll be away for two weeks. Where does he think you are?” I ask.

Luca accompanies Marco on out-of-town trips whenever possible, but lately, Luca’s been making excuses to get out of those trips.

“London and Switzerland. Family business.”

My eyes widen with the shock of how he stretches me and the pain that bursts forth in my abdomen. Luca is a large man. Compared to Marco, he’s as big and almost as wide as my husband. Unlike Marco, Luca is a merciful lover not taking out his rage, frustration, and anger on my body when I allow him inside.

That’s a joke. I don’t allow Marco inside. He takes what he wants; what I would freely give. Only he seldom does anymore.

I know all about his whores especially the one he’s taken to lately. He keeps her at his brother Alessandro’s house and visits her whenever possible. She’s a married woman too but that hasn’t stopped Marco before.

I’m starting to worry though because he seems preoccupied with her more than with any of the others. There was only one other woman that he would place before me. Only one other woman made him forget that I existed altogether.



That woman was the one that lured me out of Italy and having me follow my husband on a trip to America. That woman was the one I saw him escorting from Alessandro's restaurant all those years ago and taking her to his apartment in Atlanta, Georgia.

That was the same woman that he continued to see for two fucking years! The entire time he was with her, he didn't touch me.

I don't mind the occasional fling. I've become accustomed to those. I don't want my husband to fall in love with another woman. If I can't have Marco's heart, neither can they.

Luca's fiery tongue licks down my collarbone, forcing thoughts of Marco and his women out of my head. His hands roam over my body; gripping, squeezing, and caressing as he rises and lowers again.

With every descent into the dark recesses of my body, Luca makes me feel like a treasured woman. One who needs and deserves to be loved. Why can't I love him the way that I love Marco? Why can't I love Luca the way that he loves me?

Because the two of us could never be. Not in this lifetime. Marco wouldn't have it.

"Are you okay with what we're going to do, my love?" Luca asks.

"Yes, and you have to be too. It's the only way," I mutter against his lips.

Luca's eyes darken, and he nods while his forehead rubs against mine.

"God, I want you so badly," he moans as he plows into me again.

We take freely from each other while enjoying the pleasure we receive from these stolen moments. Thanks to Marco's newest tryst and distraction, we've had more of them lately but that's not what I want. I want my husband; all of him.

And though I enjoy Luca's attention, the way he pleases my body and listens attentively to my conversation, he could

never be Marco DeLuca. He could never replace my husband in my heart or in my bed. He could never have my soul the way Marco has captivated it since we met at the tender age of sixteen.

It doesn't mean that he can't give me what I need at this moment though, and he does as he slams forcefully into my body, rocketing me to places unknown. Within seconds, we've been catapulted over the edge, and our dynamic collision forces us to cry as we orgasm.

When we're finished, Luca moves to grab and prepare a cigar for smoking. I turn over onto my side closing my eyes and wondering how I will fix this predicament. Because Marco isn't accepting what I'm telling him, something has to give.

Now that he knows I'm pregnant, he refuses to believe this child is his. Only he must. If the truth were to be known, this child, Luca, nor myself would have any chance at survival.

Marco "The Maniac" DeLuca would kill us all.



## CHAPTER 5 – PIPER

My eyes shutter close after a wisp of smoke curls lazily in front of me, tainting the air with a faintly sweet, herbal but pungent aroma.

“So, what’re you gonna do?” Lethal asks.

“About?”

“This engagement. That dude is gonna try to turn you into a society lady. Right?” Lethal asks.

We’ve been talking about Kenneth and all of his plans for our impending nuptials which I have yet to get on board with.

Lethal is my assistant at my tattoo shop. Besides booking appointments, ordering supplies, and handling all the marketing tasks, he does the occasional piercing job. I have two other tattoo artists who work for me and one full-time piercer.

My last client just left, and Zoey and Jason, the tattoo artists, are still working. Sean, the piercer, has left for the day, and Lethal and I are sitting on a couch in my office smoking a joint.

“He knows better than that, Lethal.”

“You’d think so,” he remarks.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I ask, rolling my head sideways and giving him some serious side-eye.

“Just that there’s nothing ladylike about you. Which is why I love you so much,” he coos.

“Fuck you. I’d make the perfect society lady,” I say, my eyes rolling down to my mustard-colored cargo pants and scuffed black Chucks on my feet.

“Mmm, showing off boobs and all, huh?” he asks, reaching over and flipping my cut-off t-shirt up.

Granted, it is cut short enough that anyone under five feet can look up and see the underside of my tits. I’m not wearing a

bra, and aside from the shirt being cut short, it's ripped right over the cleavage area. My nipple piercings press against the fabric of the t-shirt.

"I'd be the best fucking society lady they ever saw. Get a load of me, the next Senator's wife," I chuckle, leaning forward and shaking my tits.

"Grow up."

As if the thought occurs to him late and it probably has, thanks to the joint we're finishing up, Lethal says, "Wait! Senator? That corrupt miserable fuck is running for Congress?"

"Not now," I grumble. "But he does have dreams of it for the future. He's not corrupted, Lethal."

Lethal rolls his eyes and pulls his combat boots onto the table beside my feet.

"Every member of the Atlanta City Council is—"

"Don't start!" I say, shooting him a glare before he gets on his soapbox.

"You've got to be kidding me. Your children will be the most screwed up and conflicted kids on the planet."

We both snicker, and I pass the joint back to him after taking a long drag.

"I can't even imagine having kids," I sigh dramatically.

"Really? Never? Cuz I don't get those vibes from you. As crazy as you are, as off-beat, I still sense a nurturing spirit inside you."

I'm scared of having children. Not because I don't think that I'd be a good mother or that I wouldn't love them. My fear is bringing them into a home without true love between their parents. I love Kenneth but not in that dying, passionate, I can't live without you sort of way.

Shriving my nose, I take the joint back from him, what's left of it anyway. Lethal watches me, starts chuckling, and then says, "On second thought, maybe not."

I start to choke, and he grabs the joint from my fingers and stubs it out in the ashtray.

When I've finished coughing, I turn to him and say, "Why? Can't you see it now? I'll have two little boys flying around the house high as a kite off my smoke, little hellions. Then there'd be the little girl who'd be a goody-two-shoes like her daddy sitting at the table studying."

"With little glasses perched on her cute, button nose as she writes campaign speeches."

"Why does my kid have to wear glasses?" I whine.

Shrugging, Lethal says. "Don't know. I imagine she will. Maybe because her dad's a geek?"

I nudge Lethal and say, "Shut up! He's not a geek."

Lethal wiggles his eyebrows, and I fall out laughing.

A knock sounds at my office door and I say, "Come in."

"The hell are you two giggling about back here?" Zoey asks, walking into my office and waving her hands around.

"Piper's kids."

Zoey pauses for a moment, wrinkles her nose, and stares at me. "What kids?"

"The ones she's going to have with Egbert one day. They'll be little fucking Cush monsters," Lethal says before breaking into a full-on hacking half-cough, half-laugh.

"Cush monsters?" Zoey asks, turning her lips down.

"Yeah, with one geeky little girl with glasses," I input and then sputter into laughter.

Jason peers his head into the door behind Zoey. "What's going on here?" his deep voice queries.

"This is drugs," Zoey says, pointing at the ashtray. Then she points at us and says, "And this is your brain on drugs."

Lethal and I look at one another again and then fall into another fit of giggles.

"I'm out. See you guys tomorrow," Jason says, smirking.

He's the most serious of all my employees. He's chill as hell with a dry sense of humor, but we love him.

"Or maybe he won't," Zoey says, glaring at Lethal and me. "Please don't do drugs and drive," Zoey says.

"What about biking?" Lethal asks, chuckling.

He rides a bike to work every day. He doesn't live very far from the shop and it's done wonders for his muscles and overall tone and conditioning.

"Don't run down any pedestrians," Zoey says deadpan and turns to leave.

Right after that, Lethal says, "Gotta go, sugarplum. Sorry I can't stay and commiserate with you over your boring fiancée."

"Be careful on the sidewalks. Wouldn't want to see you on the news hitting any pedestrians," I shout after his retreating form.

He chuckles and closes the door firmly behind him.

I swivel my body around on the couch until my feet are resting on the end of the sofa and my head is at the other end. Closing my eyes, I think about the funk that I'm in.

I'd been excited about our engagement until last weekend. The adrenaline rush I was on hit a wall, and I tanked and crashed when I ran into Marco at his club. The guilt of what I allowed him to do and what I did to him slams me against the wall whenever I think about it. And when I recall how I felt being with Marco again, the shame and disappointment impale me hard against a wall of lies.

I've never told Kenneth about Marco. During the short two years that Marco and I were together, Kenneth had moved to North Carolina for a stint and then returned home after he attempted to open his own law firm and failed.

Marco was a dark spot in my life that can either lift me or crush me when I revisit that time in my life for too long. My memories of him are powerful, beautiful, and haunting all at

once. I loved that man with all my soul, and I know I'll never love another man like that.

He took my body to heights I'd never experienced; easily able to suck the breath out of me with just one kiss and set my body on fire with a brush of his fingertips. He could have me climaxing and calling his name in one moment and then have me cursing him out the next.

I firmly believe that Marco is my soulmate. Unfortunately, I can't have him, and we don't always get what we want so I decided to move on and forget about him.

Only that was a lie that I decided to tell myself. That lie ended when I saw him and felt his lips against mine and his fingers inside me. The part that seared me was taking him into my mouth. I've never done that to another man, not even Kenneth. Not that he wants me to.

Only Marco. Always Marco. He could get me to try anything.

Our sex life is okay; nothing to call up your best friend and chat about. But when I compare it with Marco, it's like I'm a nun.

My phone buzzes, and I glance at it. A moan escapes my lips when I realize that, like an annoying fly interrupting a nice summer evening, it's Kenneth interrupting my daydreams about Marco.

The annoyance that instantly rises in me at the sight of his name during my musings is quickly followed by shame. This has become a recurring theme in my life over the last few days.

Once again, I can't forget Marco no matter how hard I try. Once again, my body yearns for him, and I want to push Kenneth away.

I grunt, pushing the answer icon on my phone.

"Yes?"

"Hey, we have a photoshoot scheduled for tomorrow afternoon."



“For what?” I ask through clenched teeth.

“*Atlanta Spotlight Magazine* wants to feature us in next month’s issue. It’s all about the city’s up-and-coming black wealth and power. I was hoping that we could announce our engagement by then in a more public venue,” he says.

“Kenneth,” I say in a warning tone.

“Baby, I told you that things would start moving fast. You have to be ready to move when I say move,” he answers.

“Look, I have a business to run. I can’t just drop what I’m doing to come running when you shout. Besides, I’m all booked for tomorrow,” I explain in a wary tone.

“You’ll need to reschedule. You have four other people working for you.”

“Of those four, only two are tattoo artists and they have their own clients. Besides, my clients are very particular about my ink.”

“We’ll talk tonight. You’ll have to make some hard calls regarding your business, Piper. What we’re building is more important.”

“Than my business?” I ask with a hitch in my tone.

He’s ruining my goddamn high!

“Hey, I have to go. I’m going into a council meeting, and I can’t be late.”

He hangs up before I can say goodbye. Rolling my eyes, I turn my phone on vibrate and pocket it.

Yet, I’m worn out at the end of each day and today is no different. On Sunday, I spent a grueling day with my mother, father, brother Grant the second, and his wife, Samaria.

They had initially refused to acknowledge my engagement to Kenneth. My father criticized Kenneth for not asking him first, and my mom went on and on about how selfish it was to not ask me in front of my friends and family. I didn’t tell her I agreed because that would have started another issue altogether.

It is always a hectic day as I watch my parents gush over my older brother and how he gets everything right. If that's not bad enough, they go on and on about his wife who couldn't be more perfect with her flawless skin, perfect size eight body, gleaming chiclet teeth, her boarding school manners, and her career as a director at some foundation for the arts. If that's not bad enough, they announced this weekend that they're expecting a child.

My parents were elated and as talk usually does, it moved to me and how my biological clock is ticking and I don't have much longer to become pregnant. Never mind that Samaria is a year older than I am and is on her first pregnancy. Somehow, they view me as an old maid.

It didn't matter, though. All I went through with them didn't faze me like it normally would. I was so lost in my thoughts about Marco that I drowned my family out.

I was stuck with them through church service until I left their house after dinner at eight. That was when I got a chance to truly reminisce and remember how he looked, smelled, and tasted. I recalled how his fingers felt inside of me.

After I sucked him off, I texted my best friend letting her know that I was okay and was ditching the party meant for me.

After all, when would I get a chance to be alone with Marco DeLuca again? When would I ever see him again?

We talked for three hours as we reminisced on old times and caught up on the years we'd missed from each other's lives. Then we said goodbye, and he had his bodyguard drive me home.

It feels as if I've been trying to catch up on the sleep I missed over the weekend all week. Every night my dreams have been full of Marco DeLuca. Every day my thoughts have been full of breaking off the engagement with Kenneth.

Pushing myself off the couch, I head back into the studio and go through my closing ritual before I lock the door behind me. We quit pretty early today closing the shop a little after six-thirty.

A whistle from somewhere behind me draws my attention back to the present, and I notice that the sun is dipping down in the sky.

The whistle sounds again, and I smile when I look over my shoulder and see my best friend, Rashida McIntyre, coming up behind me.

Rah, as I call her, is a social worker at a high school in our community.

“The sexiest forty Double-D tattoo artist I ever saw!” she sings and whistles again. “Got them tits on display again I see.”

I do a little dance and then laugh. “Hey, girl. What’s up?”

“I was in the neighborhood and thought I’d stop by to see if you were close to quitting time.”

“Girl! I am. I only want to head home with a bottle of wine and a pizza. I doubt I’ll make it to bed. Probably fall out on the couch, eat the pizza, and drink the whole bottle of wine. I won’t be washing my body until Monday morning when it’s time to do it again.”

She chuckles and shakes her head.

“I hope not. After all, you’re someone’s fiancée now,” she says gaily. “Besides, don’t you have to work tomorrow?”

“I do.” I groan, walk around to the side of the building, and unlock my car.

“Mm-hmm. Come on. Let’s go,” she says, aiming her key fob at her SUV.

“What?” I groan.

“You’re not getting out of our weekly Thursday night dinner at my place. It just changed up a bit,” she says.

We have Thursday night dinners weekly, alternating between her place and mine. Fridays and Saturdays rotate for our hang-out days depending on our plans with our significant others.

“How so?”

“We’re having it at your house, and I’m paying. *Farina’s Pizzeria* and a bottle of Stella Rosa Black! I’m even supplying plastic plates and dollar store wine glasses. No dishes for you to wash and no need to drive home. Get as drunk as you want as long as you show up sober tomorrow to keep pushing forward on this project,” she says, cheekily grinning at me.

Laughing, I say, “I’ve got the paper towels! Let me shut down, and I’ll meet you at your car.”



RAH ORDERED THE PIZZA and picked up the paper and plastic supplies at the dollar store while I went home, showered, and got into comfortable clothes.

Once I’d finished showering and dressing, I found out that Rah had let herself in and the pizza had been delivered. We settled in for our dinner.

“Do you think the other ladies bought it?” I ask.

I’d told her what the bartender had shared with me the night I met up with Marco, and then I slipped off on the pretense of going to the restroom. After a while, when I texted Rashida to let her know I wouldn’t be returning, she told the girls that I’d caught an Uber home because I didn’t feel well.

“They bought it but had a lot of questions.”

“Like?”

“Like, why the hell you didn’t tell them so that we could take you home? You looked okay to them. What did the bartender want?”

“What’d you tell them, girl?”

“Made up some bullshit. You wanted everyone to have fun and didn’t want to ruin it so you didn’t tell anyone that you weren’t okay. Told them that the bartender said all the drinks for the rest of the night were on the house in honor of your engagement.”

Laughing, I reply, “It’s a good thing that he came through on that one, huh?”

“Those drinks were no skin off Marco’s nose.”

As my thoughts meander from that night to today’s work progress, we eat in silence.

“What’s so urgent about having a speedy wedding?” Rashida asks, changing the subject after she chews the last bite of her first slice of sausage, pepperoni, anchovies, and pineapple pizza.

“It’s what Kenneth wants. It’s all a part of the plan his committee is laying down to prepare for his run in a few years,” I say before taking a bite into my veggie supreme pizza.

“I don’t understand it. You’re going through an awful lot to please Kenneth’s ass these days. I remember there was a time if he got too far out of line, you’d kick his ass back in line.”

I slowly chew my pizza as I consider my words trying not to sound too desperate.

“Well, I’m about to be a wife, and it’s time I start behaving as one especially a Senator’s wife.”

“Biggest crock of shit I’ve ever heard,” Rashida murmurs, rolling her eyes and taking a sip of wine before reclining on my couch and kicking her feet up and down over the arm of the sofa.

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know...I get the feeling that you’re more in love with the idea of being in love than you are in love with Kenneth.”

“Don’t say that, Rah.”

“Girl, please. You still haven’t told me what went down in that exclusive suite you were invited to. Every time I bring it up, you shut your mouth tighter than a five-dollar hooker shuts her legs after she’s been stiffed by a john. When I asked what happened between you and Marco, your mouth wasn’t open as wide as I bet your legs were when you were with him.”

I don't utter a word. I shove a slice of pizza down my throat. If only she knew. It wasn't my legs that were open wide but my damn mouth.

She rolls her eyes and sucks her teeth. I watch her lift another slice of pizza and fold it in half before taking a bite.

"Mmm," she groans wickedly as if she were getting the best sex in the world. When she finishes, she bites her bottom lip and narrows her eyes.

"What?" I ask.

"What do you mean 'what'?"

"You only start doing that when you've got something to say that you know I don't want to hear."

"Well, oookaaay, since you asked."

It's my turn to roll my eyes. "Quit with the theatrics and get to the point, Rah."

"I just don't think that you've loved anyone since—"

"Don't you dare!" I hiss, tossing my pizza slice back onto my plate and jabbing the air with my finger as my other hand tries not to spill a drop of wine from the plastic wine glass. "Don't you dare compare the two of them!"

"I'm just saying that you really loved that man."

"I said 'don't,' Rah! I've gone on with my life, and he's in my past. Discussing him only dredges up bad feelings, and I'm walking into my future now. My new and improved future. The other night was a mistake. One I'd like to leave in the past."

I don't know what it is about men and me. I seem to choose all the wrong ones and be seriously unlucky in love. When I'm just dating a guy, we have fun, wonderful conversations, and great sex. Yet, when I decide to catch feelings, it always goes horribly wrong super quick.

"Not so far in the past that you didn't kick your girls to the side and spend the night with him."

"Didn't spend the night. I came home that night."

“How can you go into this marriage when you know you have unresolved feelings for another man though, Piper?”

I breathe and turn my attention back to my pizza slice. Lifting it, I bite although I’m no longer hungry. It gives me something to do though; anything but respond to her.

“You know I’m right,” she persists when I remain silent too long.

“I don’t have unresolved feelings for him. I have no feelings for him anymore because I’ve made peace with that part of my life,” I explain.

“I wish you believed the shit you’re saying. It sounds as if you’re trying to convince yourself more than you’re trying to convince me.”

Shrugging, I say, “Well, I’m not. I love Kenneth.”

“Let me ask you this. When he kisses you, do you get wet like you did with Marco?”

“I’m turned on, yes,” I deflect.

“When he touches you, does he make you shiver, make you think about having sex with him when he’s not around and orgasming at the thought of him inside you?”

“Rah!”

“Well, those are things you eagerly shared in the past what Marco made you feel. So, I’m just doing a comparison, that’s all. If you’re not gonna be honest with me, at least keep it a buck with yourself,” Rashida says.

“I keep it real with myself and this is what I’m doing. This is what I want for my future. You know, you’ve got to make peace with my decision. This is my life to live, Rah. I don’t tell you how to live yours or who you should love.”

“That’s because I’m nobody’s fool. I know when to get my ass on and keep it moving. I know when the spark ain’t there, and you believe in true love like me.”

She hops off the couch and squeezes into the recliner with me. Wrapping an arm around my shoulder and pressing her

head against mine, she says, “Honey, I just don’t want to see you hurt even more than you already are.”

I press into the one-armed hug as she leans closer, resting her chin on my head.

“I know,” I mumble. “I know.”

“I sometimes wonder how your life would have turned out had Marco remained in it,” she says.

“I don’t,” I lie.

She nudges me with an elbow. “Seriously?” she asks.

Laughing, I shake my head and say, “No,” as I swipe at the tears forming in my eyes.

“Aww, honey, please reconsider what you’re doing. You deserve to be happy. Even if it’s not Marco, the right person will come along who deserves your love and make you feel all the heat, the passion, and the panty-wetting moans that Marco gave you. Jackass doesn’t deserve you,” she says.

I’ve shared a bit too much about how condescending Kenneth can be one too many times. It hasn’t helped formulate a positive opinion about him in her mind, and he isn’t exactly friendly when she’s around.

“Promise me something.”

“What’s that?”

“You’ll remember how you felt when the two of you were together. When you do, be honest about whether you have even a fraction of that with Kenneth.”

My mind takes a tour down a dangerous and dark path.

Eight years ago, I pushed the love of my life away. I knew he was in an arranged marriage from our first meeting.

Not trying to eavesdrop on a private conversation, I’d been exposed to the DeLuca family business unwittingly. An argument between my boss, Alessandro DeLuca, and his older brother, Marco, alerted me to the elder brother’s unhappy arranged marriage.



At the time, he was seeking a way out of it and Alessandro was laying out all the “whys” he should remain in the marriage, not the least of which, was his loyalty to the family and to the vows he made. It sickened me to hear that, but I was a lowly waitress at the time and had no business overhearing what I did.

When Alessandro finished his phone conversation which he’d had on speakerphone, he stepped into the private dining area connected to his office where I’d been setting up his dinner.

It didn’t seem to bother him that I’d been in there, and he’d carried on as though he didn’t see me. It wasn’t until later that night when the restaurant was closing that I met Marco. The introduction was brief, but he’d stared at me long after my boss had changed conversations effectively shutting me out as though I were another shadow in the room.

When Marco spotted me an hour later at the bus stop on the corner in the dark, he’d had the driver pull over. After insisting that I accept his ride home several times, I conceded.

Marco was in town for a month on business, and during that month, he’d come into the restaurant whenever I was working. He would wait until I got off work and insist on taking me home until it became routine. I’d gotten to know him, and I fell in love. We’d had sex six nights after our initial meeting, and I was hooked from that point on. He told me even more about his marriage and didn’t withhold anything.

Whenever he left the country, he would only be away for a few weeks before returning for one or two weeks to spend time with me. Sometimes, we’d stay at my place. Other times, we’d stay at one of the exclusive *Black* hotels the entire time he was in town.

Those were the best two years of my life until I realized how much I had lost myself to him. That day, I ended the relationship abruptly. The ending of our relationship shortly after that began a renewed friendship with Kenneth. He was there for me while I nursed my broken heart.

Kenneth was a great friend while I cried over another man. He was patient, kind, reassuring, and always giving me a shoulder to lean on. He was so sweet that although he knew I was upset about another man, he never questioned the “who” or the “what.”

Being with Kenneth was different than being with Marco. None of the excitement or headiness I’d experienced with Marco was there, but he gave me a sense of stability and security. Everything that I needed to overcome my broken heart Kenneth gave to me without thinking twice.

I was forever grateful for his role in helping me get over Marco DeLuca. No matter what our future might bring, I owed him my gratitude.



## CHAPTER 6 – MARCO

“Just for tonight,” she begs, rubbing her hand between her legs.

“I need to go, Serena. It’s late. We can do this again tomorrow night, no?”

She pouts and inserts one finger inside herself before removing it and then lifting onto her elbow. She rubs her finger across my lips, and I open my mouth sucking her finger inside, reveling in her essence.

She purrs her pleasure before she straddles me and slowly works her way up my body until she’s sitting on my face. She’s got me right where she wants me because she knows I love pussy. I could eat pussy all day and night if I had the time.

I love eating pussy more than I love eating food. It’s a fucking fetish of mine.

I lift her just a little and part her lips, my nose rubbing against her folds as I inhale her scent. I close my eyes and take one long lick that makes her purr again before I settle in to devour my meal.

“Umm, Marco,” she moans feverishly, working her hips back and forth.

My fingers clench tightly into her hips, stilling her from the force of pain that I use to keep control. I don’t want her navigating this moment. I own it, and, at the moment, I own her.

My tongue is thick and long, and women love it not just for those reasons but because I know how to use it. After several long, slow swipes of her pussy from the clit to the rear, and I’m ready to demolish her.

My greed overrides everything else, and my lips purse around her to draw out her succulent juices. My tongue scoops it up, and my thumbs open her wider while my index finger rubs her nub in tight circles.

“Ride me, baby,” I murmur when she readjusts her position.

She unleashes like a wildcat, hips twerking, ass bouncing, and tits jumping. Serena claws at the headboard as her head thrashes wildly back and forth, her dark hair falling forward on her face and further down to rest on my head.

This right here? It’s my addiction, my weakness. I might have to attend a PEA class. Wonder if they’ve got that? Pussy Eaters Anonymous. Shit, it’d be a shame if they do. But if they don’t, I need to start one up.

I forget about every fucking thing with the offer to eat some pussy. Like, I know there’s a reason I’m supposed to be home right now, but I can’t for the life of me recall why. Shit. It doesn’t matter. I’ll deal with it later.

Serena’s hips roll forward and backward, soaking my beard. I hear the headboard slam against the wall as she cries out and lifts, and I snatch her down again.

Reversing our positions until she’s on her back and my face is buried between her legs, I never disconnect from her.

“Please, Marco! I can’t breathe! I’m about to die!” she screams, bucking up from the bed.

My arms wrap around her thighs in a vise grip, and I push up until her ass is completely off the bed and her chest is pushed up towards her face. In this position, she can’t move, and I know that her neck is at an awkward angle.

I don’t give a fuck. I’m not done. I hate when bitches try to control me, stopping me before I’m done. I say when the fuck it’s over.

Anger wells up within me, and I shake my head violently back and forth, soaking my face in her and drowning in her essence. Her feet cross behind my neck as she cries.

“Oh, God! Oh, God! I can’t breathe, Marco. It’s too much!”

I suck and suck until she’s dry, and there’s nothing left to consume. That’s when I sit back on my haunches, letting her

down.

Licking my lips, I wipe the juices from my nose and beard and then lick them from my hand.

“Mm,” I grunt.

Serena’s chest is heaving. “That was...intense.”

“Told you about fucking stopping me, didn’t I?”

“Yes, Marco,” she moans, still trying to catch her breath.

“Serena, you know what to do,” I say, standing from the bed and fisting my cock.

Angry purple veins rise to the surface, and Serena smiles, licking her lips as she climbs off the bed and bows before me. I smack her in the face and head with it as she licks her lips, sticking her tongue out, barely grazing me with it.

When she reaches her hands out to clasp me, I pop her in the face with my cock once more before finally rubbing it across her lips. She licks away the precum, closing her eyes and moaning as she enjoys my taste the way I previously did her.

“Please let me suck your dick, Marco.”

“How bad you want it?”

“So badly. I’ll stand on a street corner and beg to suck your dick,” she moans.

Smiling, I grant her wish, releasing myself to her.

Serena sucks me in, her nails raking across my balls and her cheeks hollowing out as she sucks me further down her throat. Grabbing her by the head, I shove her toward me causing her to gag as saliva drips from her lips and dribbles down her chin and me.

“Open wide and take me, Serena,” I command.

She does as I ask, crying out as I wrap my fingers in her hair and jerk her head backwards.

“Open your eyes.”

She does, and I sneer at her. “Love the fucking way you look down on your knees begging to suck my shit. Tears rolling down your face while you choke on my shit.”

She sucks me back into her mouth with one hand working her spit up and down my shaft while her free hand works my balls over. Serena’s good at what she does, and in no time at all, I’m about to cum.

“Open your fucking mouth wide,” I order.

She does as I say, and I let a little dribble into her mouth before letting more dribble on her face. When I’m done with that, I put my cock back into her mouth.

“Swallow all of it. Don’t leave a fucking drop,” I command, letting my nut spew down her throat as I release a roar.

Tiny pinpricks take over my face and my vision is dotted with black spots. I close my eyes, trying to control the feelings taking over and to stabilize my shaky movements.

When I’m done, I open my eyes and watch her lick away the last drops from my dick. She opens her mouth and smiles as she swallows.

“Fuck!” I growl, my cock instantly jerking to attention again.

“Damn, Marco,” she whines.

“Hey, you know how it is. Let’s smoke first, and then I want you on your knees, ass in the air.”

“Okay,” she says, getting up to head to her dresser.

While she rolls the joint, I head to the bathroom and take a piss. I flush the toilet and turn on the water to wash my hands. Staring into the mirror, I remind myself that I need a haircut in the morning.

My hair has grown out longer on the top than I normally keep it and streaks of grey highlights are growing into the faded sides. I rake my fingers through my hair, pulling it back from my eyes.

“Shit!” I recall what I was supposed to be doing.

Graziella wanted me to check the security features tonight. She swears someone has been spying on her in her room once everything settles down for the night. Claims that she hears a noise around the same time every night in her room but I haven't found anything so far.

I think it's a tactic to keep me at home. She's trying hard to force me to tell my parents about the pregnancy. I pull my hands down my face and close my eyes momentarily. Don't really feel like dealing with that shit right now.

I won't tell anyone shit until I have proof that the child is mine.

I'll go home in the morning, apologize, and keep my ass there tomorrow night to check it out again. If it's anything, it's probably an animal that has gotten into the attic, but she denies that. She says she feels someone's watching her.

If I'm not crazy enough on my own, I swear that woman will drive me batshit crazy with her constant need for attention and whining. She knows it's not like that with us, but when I give another woman too much attention, she creates reasons to draw me back into her web.

“Marco,” Serena calls out to me from the bedroom.

Yeah, it'll be easy to stay at home tomorrow. Serena will be off tomorrow afternoon for the next three days, and she'll go back home to her husband. She stays here in Alessandro's carriage house whenever she's working.

“What's so funny?” she asks when I walk back into the room, chuckling.

“Us.”

“Why?”

“We're quite the fucking pair. Both married. Me because that bitch lied to me and trapped me. You because your old ass dying husband didn't want to be alone in his final days.”

“Don't be so cruel,” she says, passing the joint she just took a hit off to me.



I take a couple of deep puffs before passing it back to her.

“Not cruel. Just honest.”

She takes a couple of puffs and passes it back to me. When I finish, I pull her into my arms, blowing smoke into her mouth.

She flops down on her belly, and I repeatedly rub my hand over her ass.

Serena’s husband, Lorenzo Bernardi, hired Serena as his cook ten years ago. She’d been cooking for him for five years when he added to her salary if she would be his companion to various functions. In need of the money at the time, she’d taken him up on the offer.

A year after that, he’d proposed to her, telling her that she was the best thing that had happened to him. He said she showed him a love his family wasn’t willing to give. While he wasn’t expecting her to have sex with him, he did indeed want a wife for his last years. She’d been reticent to agree until he’d kept at her.

Serena had asked his adult children and siblings to visit him but no one wanted to see the cranky old man. Out of sympathy, she gave in and married him. He changed his will so that she would inherit every penny upon his death. In the marriage contract, he even included a clause stating that he wanted his wife to seek sexual fulfillment outside the marriage because he could not nor did he want to provide her with it.

Lorenzo is a business partner of my father’s. At a dinner at Lorenzo’s house one night when we were all there, Alessandro asked if he could pay his personal compliments to the cook. From there, he’d hired her as his chef to work four days a week. That’s how I met her.

No one knows about our affair though. Not that she has to hide it, but I have every reason to.

“That was good. I could float on air now, Marco. You’re good for my body and soul,” she says with her face buried in the pillow.

Smacking her ass, I say, “Get that ass up in the air. I’m not done with you yet.”

“Marcooooo,” she whines, doing what I say.

I part her ass cheeks and get right behind her.

“This ass is tight and sweet, girl.”

“No, Marco. Please, not tonight.”

I growl, running my fingers over her pussy before I part her and slide inside.

“Ahhh, you feel so good,” she moans.

“Just like I like it. Soft, wet, and hot,” I grunt, sliding deeper inside her.

She closes around me and seeing how I sink inside her is enough to drive me wild. I pick up speed. My balls are slapping against her as I hammer her insides, loving how she feels wrapped around me.

Our breathing is rough, ragged, and loud in the room. The headboard is banging loudly against the wall, and Serena’s losing the arch in her back. I reach underneath and lift her again, furiously knocking and slamming into her.

I know that at this rate, her pussy will be red and sore for the next couple of days. That’s just how I like it. She’ll stay that way long enough until we see each other again, and I can do it all over again.

We will never have more than this, and we’re fine with it. We don’t love each other. She will never commit to a member of La Famiglia.

And me? I’m not capable of love.

There’s a louder banging that I’m starting to hear over the headboard. I feel a gust of wind on my ass and look over my shoulders, but I don’t stop fucking this pussy. Can’t stop.

My younger brother and Serena’s boss, Alessandro, stands in the doorway.

“The fuck!” I holler.

He turns his back as though he expected to find the two of us together; as though he's not shocked that I'm fucking his cook.

"Marco, get your clothes on."

"What the fuck is wrong with you? Haven't you heard of privacy? Just because it's your carriage house—"

"Get your fucking clothes on and let's go! I'll meet you at the car!" he orders.

Instantly my instincts go on alert. Alessandro talking to me like he's lost his fucking mind is out of character. It's got to be about the family business.

I turn back to Serena and pump harder while stroking her clit.

"Give it to me, sweet girl."

She works hard for hers, and she gets it. Several seconds later, I'm cumming deep inside of her. I pull out, grab my clothes off the chair and tug them on.

"Hey, I gotta go. Business calls."

"Yeah, I know," she mutters, rolling her eyes.

She says something else, but I don't hear it because I'm out the door and running to the car.

"So, what's up?" I ask my brother as I sit on the seat opposite his.

Pushing up the privacy window, Alessandro glares at me.

I glare back at him, huffing loudly and folding my arms over my chest. I don't want to fucking play games with him right now. Not when he just pulled me out of some wet pussy.

"Your wife."

"What about my wife?" I ask in a bored tone.

I know she didn't call Alessandro with that stupid shit! Worse yet, I hope she didn't call my father.

"She's dead."

“Dead? What the fuck you mean ‘dead’?”

His words hit me like a bullet to the chest. Sickness overwhelms me and disbelief fills my insides.

“There’s been a hit at your house.”

“A hit?”

A loud humming sound fills my ears and my eyes only see a cloud of hazy, black smoke.

What motherfucker had the fucking balls to come into my home and kill my motherfucking wife? Who the fuck is it, and what do they want? These bitches came to my shit!

I feel the rush to my head; my thoughts spiraling out of control as I wonder if it’s a statement. Was her death caused by something that I did? My heart is beating wildly in my chest. I’m trying to be cool and think my way through this shit, but it’s impossible.

This shit is a game changer. I’m about to shoot every motherfucking body until I get answers.

Over the last several years, I’ve tried to be strong and control myself. All bets are out the window.

Fuck! The Maniac is back!



## CHAPTER 7 – MARCO

“Who the fuck ordered Santino’s crew to come out?”  
Alessandro roars when we arrive at my house.

“Just wanted to make sure that anything that needs to be cleaned or covered is done before the cops come,” Rocco, our security chief, says.

I don’t have time for bullshit talk. I have to see this with my own eyes. I jog up the steps and into my mansion past the security and clean-up men.

At the top of the stairs, I head past my bedroom and to the end of the hallway to the second master suite. I don’t want to fucking open these doors and see bullshit waiting for me. This has got to be a cruel joke.

Pushing the doors open, I stagger into the doorway as my eyes rest on her beautiful body lying on the bed as if she’s sleeping peacefully. That’s what this has to be. She’s asleep.

I rush to the bed, grabbing her. My fingers fly over her feeling for a pulse, but I don’t find one.

I feel Alessandro’s hands pulling at me, but my mind is still whirling. My heart is breaking, but I have to figure out how to handle this situation before it runs me. How deep does this fucking betrayal go?

“She’s gone, Marco.”

His words break the dam on the last bit of control that I thought I had. Fire rushes from somewhere deep within, tearing at my belly and heart and unleashing from my throat in a vicious roar.

I didn’t hate her. I hated what she did to me and who she became. Who she made me become.

“Marco, come on,” Alessandro pleads, trying to pull me again. I release her body and turn around. I’m surrounded by blackness.

My brother’s arms pull me close, but I feel nothing.

“Stay with me, Marco. Don’t lose it now.”

I know it’s Alessandro, but I recognize nothing he’s saying.

“Let me go.” The voice coming from me doesn’t sound like mine.

“Come on, Marco. We’re going to handle it our way.”

“Alessandro. Fucking. Let. Me. Go.”

His arms fall away from me, and I rush from the room, heading straight to my artillery room.

I’ve turned this room into my personal arsenal in times of war. Walls of bulletproof cases hold all types of guns, knives, and bombs. I grab a couple of handguns and a shotgun.

“Marco, what’re you doing? Marco, who are you going to shoot?”

“Everybody.”

“You know who did this?” Alessandro asks.

I cock my head to the side and snarl, “Nah, but I’m about to go find out.”

“So, who do you think did it, big bro?”

“Don’t know, but I know a few people who might be interested in giving me some answers.”

“So, who’s this?”

“Manfredi Rossi and Giorgio Esposito.”

“Let Rocco go pick them up and bring them back here. That way, we control the fucking narrative.”

A shadow appears in the doorway behind Alessandro. What sounds like Rocco’s voice says, “I heard ya. I’m on the way, boss.”

I leave them behind, heading back to Grazie’s bedroom.

Graziella’s still lying where I left her.

She’s so beautiful with her long, gold hair spread across the pillow. That hair that she took such pride in brushing it for

several minutes every night before she went to bed. My gaze lifts to that damned hole in her forehead before dropping to the ones that spatter her chest.

The air reeks, and I know she was scared when she took her final breath.

Alessandro steps up to the bed.

I watch as his hand hovers over her face and then closes her eyelids.

My rage slacks off a bit, and I slump against the wall. I feel the moisture slipping down my face.

The rage within turns into a vibration rushing through my body. I will find who did this to her, and the bastards will pay. They'll pay with their wives' lives, their parents' lives, their children's lives, and finally, their lives.

"You know they're gonna want to know who would have reason to do this, right?"

I look up at Alessandro, my jaw clenching as I try not to take my fury out on him.

"Anything you need from us, boss?" Ermes Greco, one of my soldiers, asks as he enters the room.

I push off the wall and stand by the bed before dropping beside her.

"Have the men check the cameras to see if we can use anything. Ensure everything that needs to be secured is taken off the premises," I hear Alessandro instruct.

"Marco, we have to call the police."

I nod at my brother and disappear into the dark space of my mind. Memories of how we used to be long ago when I trusted her and she was my friend run through my mind.

The next voice I hear is that of my father.

"Mio Dio," I hear my father. "Marco! Get up! What is this?" he shouts, his hand outstretched toward the bed.



I don't want him to see me this way. Can't stand the fucking disappointment that reflects in his eyes when he sees the other part of me. As much as he hates that part of me, that part of me hates him, if not more.

I try to control the insanity within me. My body trembles and shudders.

My twin, Massimo, drops onto the bed beside me and places his arms around me. The darkness recedes just a little. I can see Massimo. The tiny part of me that disappeared reaches out to my twin, begging him to save me.

Massimo and I press our foreheads together, and Massimo speaks in a low tone to me, shutting out the others.

“Stay focused. I'm here with you. Keep the darkness at bay, Marco. Don't let the rage take over. I'm right here,” he whispers.

“I can't,” I whimper, feeling weaker than ever.

“You can do it. I won't let you go. Marco, you're stronger than this. Just believe.”

“I let her down, Massimo.”

“No, you didn't.”

“Yes, I did,” I grunt.

“Marco! Perché l'hai fatto?” my father accuses when he's had enough.

I find strength and pull myself to my full height for the first time. The rage is flaring, burning brightly at full capacity, and the dark energy takes over when I look at my father.

“I did not do this! You always cared more about her than me! In everything, it was always about their family. You never cared what I wanted! I was your son, and you sold me out like a slave to the highest bidder!”

“Explain this!”

“I can't!”

“How can’t you? Where were you when this happened? Why is she not in the master suite?” my father demands.

“Why weren’t you sleeping in here with her? How could someone get past this armed fortress? How didn’t you hear someone doing this to her?”

I stare back at him, fighting the urge to say, “Vaffanculo, Padre!” If I say that, then it’s all over.

“Where were you, Marco?”

“I wasn’t here,” I grit out.

“Were you in that whore’s bed?” my father’s shadow sneers.

I glare at him. How the fuck does he even know about Serena? I thought none of them knew, but Alessandro proved me wrong earlier. Now my father, too?

“Has everything been taken care of?” my father asks, turning to Alessandro when I refuse to answer.

“Yes, sir. Waiting for the team to tell me what’s on the camera feed. After that, we need to call this in. Can’t wait much longer, or we’re going to look suspicious,” Alessandro says.



## CHAPTER 8 – MARCO

**T**hese fuckers are in my home touching shit that they can't afford. Leaving their dirty smirch marks on everything and sticking their fucking noses where they don't belong.

I should put a bullet in all of their foreheads, right between the eyes.

“Mr. DeLuca, we understand that there was tension between your wife and you,” the reed-thin man with muddy brown hair asks.

I stare at him and imagine three specific ways to make the man suffer. I don't need more than that. Whoever the fuck in my camp has been talking to the police will get a bullet. Loyalty means everything in my world.

“Mr. DeLuca, did you hear me?” he repeats.

“I heard you.”

“Why aren't you answering?”

“I didn't hear a fucking question.”

He sighs, consults the little notepad again, and looks back at me.

“Who would have a reason to murder your wife, Mr. DeLuca? Did you perhaps have a reason to get rid of her? Maybe she found out about your mistress that you keep at your brother's place.”

This asshole knows too much about me, and I don't like it. Alessandro catches my eye and nods before he heads out of the room.

“Do you think that if I'd done that, you'd find her body in my home? On my fucking property? Do you even think you'd find a fucking body at all? You think I'd do anything to let your punk asses in my house?”

There's tense silence before I speak again.

“Are you charging me with murdering my wife, Mr. Greco?” I ask in a tight voice.

“No, sir. I’m just doing my job, checking off the boxes and asking all the questions to ensure we get justice. You do want us to get justice, don’t you, Mr. DeLuca?”

“I don’t need your fucking justice, Mr. Greco. The only thing I want right now is for you fuckers to get off my property.”

“Well, we are in the middle of a murder investigation, so —”

“Mr. Greco, we appreciate your commitment to your job. As you may appreciate, my son is devastated and in shock over losing his wife. Perhaps, you may give us some time... a day or two, to come back and ask the pertinent questions. No?” my father asks.

It’s not really a question but a suggestion. A strong one that Franco Greco recognizes as such.

The policeman eyes my father candidly before turning his gaze back to me.

“I just want to get to the bottom of this situation and give your son the answers he deserves, Mr. DeLuca.”

“I’m sure you do, and that’s what we also want. As I said, he needs time to process. His life has just been devastated. Surely, Chief Esposito will appreciate that you have taken good care of his dear friends, the DeLucas,” my father says.

There’s no accident in him mentioning the chief. My father is good friends with the chief of police, and I know he’ll smooth things over. I’m not worried about that shit. They’re holding me up from searching for the bastards who dared think they could touch a DeLuca; the cunts who dared step onto my property touching anything that belonged to me.

I’ve been worse since they rolled her body out of our home; the home we’ve shared for the duration of our marriage.

The police leave, and my father returns to the den with Antonio and Alessandro.

“We must find who did this before the police,” my father announces after the doors are closed and locked.

“Think it may have something to do with the Colombo family?” Antonio poses.

“I don’t know, but I’ve got a guy checking into it,” Alessandro says.

My father discusses the plan to inform Graziella’s family of her demise. Then he discusses having the family look into the murder. None of this bullshit matters to me.

The only thing I can focus on is someone dared step foot on my property. They dared touch my wife. Our marriage wasn’t traditional, but still, she was mine.

I drown everyone out as I battle with the shadows and darkness. I think that I’m winning; at least for now. I may succumb when everyone goes away. Let it take over because it’s easier than dealing with the shitshow that’s about to come.

When I recede into the darkness, no one fucks with me. Not even my father. I don’t realize that the meeting is over until I hear Alessandro speak.

“Who’s staying?”

“I’m staying,” Massimo answers. “My men too.”

“Who’s at your house?”

“Regular guards plus an additional ten.”

Massimo and his live-in girlfriend have a two-year-old daughter, Ilaria.

“Same here and Giulia’s at the palace,” our oldest brother, Antonio, says, referencing his wife who was at our parents’ home.

Our youngest brother, Niccolò, still lives with our parents.

“I’m heading back home,” Alessandro says.

“Why isn’t Mila at the palace with the children?” my father asks.

“I haven’t told her anything.”

“Ales,” my father warns.

“I’ll let her know. She didn’t need to worry about anything while I was away.”

“She should be at the house with Angela and Giulia.”

“Papà, she’s fine. Bones is there with her and our team of security. Bones texted me that Sabrina’s with him now too.”

“Be safe, Alessandro.”

“I will.”

“I have to call the chief. I’ll be back,” my father says quietly, eyeing me carefully.

I want the rest of them to leave with Alessandro, but I know my father won’t. So instead, I’ll go.

“Where are you going?” Antonio asks after my father steps out to call the police chief.

I don’t respond to Antonio but head out the back. Once in my garage, I enter a code into the lockbox and grab a pair of keys.

I hop on my motorcycle, start it up, and roll down the driveway. My father stands to the side, waving me down.

Fuck him. Fuck them. Fuck everyone!

I keep riding until I arrive in the open country. A quiet little place that Graziella and I would spend time at when we first married.

I climb off the bike and walk until I stop at the river’s edge. Sitting down in the grass, I seek the peace I need to plan. If I don’t find my peace, I know that I’ll start a war in this bitch.

Cagliari, Italy will be fucked up by the time I’m done.

Dropping my arms over my knees, I bow my head and close my eyes. The first thing I’ll need to do is find out if the kid is mine.



I HAD A LOVER WHEN I first met Graziella. It was Maria, my deceased cousin's wife. They hadn't married yet and it was before they even knew one another. We were all teenagers at the time, having fun. I was sowing my oats, but I knew both girls were infatuated with me. I found a good friend in Graziella who listened to me and cared about what I wanted.

In Maria, I had a passionate lover who was fun to be around, witty, sassy, and challenging the way I liked my girls. Graziella and I were still friends and hadn't moved beyond the kissing stage. She was a virgin who would allow me to kiss her all over her lips, neck, breasts, and even her pretty pussy. She wouldn't have sex with her so I remained with Maria.

By the time I turned nineteen, I was becoming more serious about Maria and Graziella and I spent less time together because we were attending two different universities. Maria wasn't in school but always there waiting for my return.

My father couldn't tolerate Maria. He said she was not good for my future and came from a weak family. They were good enough to be our servants but not good enough to hold a position of power.

I hated that my father thought about Maria, or anyone for that matter, in that way but there was little that I could do about it. While I stopped bringing her to the house, I didn't stop sneaking around with her.

That continued for about a year and a half until she became pregnant when we were twenty-one. I had just returned to school in October when I found out about it, and I returned home a couple of months later during the Christmas holidays ready to do right by her and hoping to convince her to come and stay with me in my apartment at school.

When I returned home, I found Maria at her mother's house and a shell of the girl she had been. I told her of my plans, excitement filling me with the prospect of starting my own family with a girl I cared about. I'd hoped that my excitement would be contagious.

Maria turned to look at me with tear-filled eyes.



*“It’s too late, Marco,” she says softly.*

*Pressing my forehead against hers, I stare into her large, brown eyes. “What do you mean too late? You found another guy while I was away the last three weeks?”*

*I chuckle, hoping to lighten her mood.*

*“There will be no baby,” she says, pulling away from me.*

*I stare into her red-rimmed eyes, and I now know that she’s been crying. The swollen eyes and the red in them had nothing to do with her being tired as she’d initially said.*

*“What do you mean there will be no baby?”*

*“The baby is gone.”*

*“The baby is gone where?” I demand, panic filling my insides.*

*She turns away from me, but I cup her chin and turn her around to face me again.*

*“Gone where?”*

*“I took a trip. To America.”*

*“I don’t understand. You lost it?”*

*She shakes her head no. “I went to America to stay with my aunt for a couple of weeks.”*

*Maria breaks down on me, unable to finish her explanation. Confusion, anger, fear, and worry all swirl around in my brain, and I shake my head to clear it. She’s trying to tell me something, but my brain won’t accept it.*

*“Maria, you have to tell me,” I pleaded. “I don’t understand what’s wrong.”*

*She’s fucking scaring me.*

*“She aborted the baby,” a voice behind me says.*

*I see Maria’s mother standing in the doorway with one arm crossed over the other. She’s wearing a red scarf on her hair, matted in place with sweat. Over her yellow and brown*

*dress is a white apron coated with flour. A cigarette dangles from the corner of her mouth.*

*“You did this?” I seethe.*

*“No. But it was for the best. No grandchild of mine will ever carry the DeLuca name. Crooks, extortioners, drug dealers, and murderers; that’s what all of you are.”*

*My eyes narrow, and my fists clench and unclench.*

*“He’s not like them, Mama,” Maria defends.*

*“You don’t have to defend me to her,” I say with my back to Maria. “What did you do with my child?” I demand.*

*“I accepted the money your father paid me to send my child to America to get rid of your seed.”*

*My heart shatters on the floor. When I turn back to look at Maria, her eyes are downcast.*

*“Why didn’t you tell me? Why did you lie and say that you were going to visit your grandmother for a few days?”*

*“I had no choice,” she says softly.*

*“You had every choice!”*

*“Your father is a bad man, Marco. A scary man,” she cries.*

*“I would protect you from him,” I grunt.*

*“You weren’t here! You weren’t here! I did only what I could,” she cries.*

*“Getting rid of what belongs to me...you just cut my fucking heart out!” I grunt and turn away from her.*

*As I expected, Maria’s cunt of a mother is nowhere to be seen when I leave. My only choice is to face the man who did this to me. Maria’s cries and pleas for me to forgive her fall on deaf ears.*

*I can’t deal with my father or anyone in this situation. I head straight for Graziella.*



## CHAPTER 9 – PIPER

“What’s wrong?” I ask, looking over Kenneth’s shoulder as he looks through the proofs of the pictures on his desk we took for the magazine.

He’s been rattled since I stepped foot in his office. I didn’t knock, I just entered, and he had the phone on loudspeaker. I guess the woman was a city council member although I thought I heard a child in the background.

“Nothing,” he mutters.

“Then why are you frowning?” I ask, handing him a glass of wine I’ve just poured him and swiveling his chair just enough so I can sit on his lap.

Kenneth looks up at me and forces a smile to his lips. “Are you happy, Piper?”

My face contorts just a bit as I try to control it, wondering where this line of questioning is coming from.

“Of course I’m happy. Why would you ask me that?”

He sighs. “I wonder if you agreed to marry me because you thought it was the right thing to do. Because we’ve been together for so long.”

“No, Kenneth. I agreed to marry you because that’s where my future lies. By your side, making a home with you, starting a family, and growing old together,” I say, removing his wineglass from his hands.

I loop my arms around Kenneth’s neck and press my forehead against his.

“You haven’t seemed excited about it since I asked you.”

I close my eyes but don’t like what I see resting behind them so I open my eyes again, pull back just a bit and stare at Kenneth as though memorizing his features. Because those are the ones that I need to see when I close my eyes.

There’s something there that I can’t pinpoint. I’d call it guilt if I didn’t know any better, but I doubt he has anything to

feel guilty about. That must be my conscience speaking.

“I’ve been excited, Kenneth. There’s just so much that I have to get used to. This is a new thing for me, and I...well, I’m not sure what to feel so I’m cautiously navigating the waters.”

“Cautiously?”

“Uh, yeah. You ever been engaged before?” I ask.

He stares blankly back at me again before he says, “Of course not.”

“Ever been married?”

He stares blankly at me before saying, “Come on, you know better than that.”

“Right. So, this is new for us, and we must move through it carefully. Figuring out what we want our future to look like, what’s important and what’s not.”

“I thought we knew all those things already, Piper.”

“We did. As girlfriend and boyfriend but not husband and wife. Everything changes.”

“It doesn’t have to,” he argues.

“Yeah, it kinda does. This is a different level of commitment, Kenneth. I’m surprised you don’t realize that,” I say, pulling back further and preparing to get off his lap.

Kenneth quickly loops an arm around my midsection holding me in place.

“No, you don’t go anywhere. Tell me more.”

“About?”

“This new thing. This different relationship.”

“I don’t know what it’s going to be like. That’s what I’m saying to you. We have to figure this out together and how to positively work through things without holding grudges or allowing animosity to build up because one of us won’t express our true feelings on any given topic.”

“You mean how’re you still mad that I asked you to marry me at my brother’s wedding?”

“That’s one issue, but I’m getting over it now.”

“Are you?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“You said that’s one. What’s another?”

“How we want to rear our children could be an issue and what schools they’ll go to. What our careers look like and who’ll sacrifice what.”

“Well, as a Senator’s wife—”

“You haven’t even started campaigning yet.”

“That! You have to stop doubting me.”

“I don’t doubt you, Kenneth. You’re a remarkably intelligent man. I believe in you. I don’t believe in politics. It’s not about the people or what they want; it’s about the select few, the elite who have the power to do what they want and keep the people brainwashed into believing we have a choice when we know all along that we fucking don’t.”

“We’re not about to do this,” he says.

I shift in his lap.

“Right,” I agree.

“I think it’s time to think about handing over the reins of your company.”

“Excuse me?”

“You’ll be on the road with me sometimes when I begin to campaign. There’s a lot of travel required and eventually, you won’t be there to oversee your company’s daily operations. I’m just saying you should consider hiring someone to manage it. You’ll have the final decision on everything, but...”

“But?” I prompt, wanting to hear more of this bullshit he’s spouting so I can curse him out when he’s done.

“Tattoos. It’s a bunch of grimy customers with questionable character not to mention the ones you work with.

All that smoking, drinking, and cursing...that's not the image I want to be associated with my wife. You're supposed to be a lady; a true Southern woman who cultivates an image of charm, intelligence, and supporting her man."

"And what I do doesn't do that, Kenneth?"

"It...c'mon, Piper. We both know the image you're portraying now isn't compatible with the one I'm cultivating. It may, in fact, work against me."

"It's who I am, Kenneth! I'm an artist, and you're trying to take away what makes me who I am. What I live and breathe for."

He sighs heavily and pulls his hand over his fresh cut. "It's not a profession. It's a phase."

"You're pissing me the fuck off, Kenneth," I warn in a low grumble.

"See that right there. You didn't use to curse like that. It's the influence of the people you surround yourself with. If you truly want to go somewhere, you've got to get off the porch. Change your image, remove the grunge wear you normally wear, and cover up the tattoos. I don't like that look associated with you."

"Yet, you met me this way!"

"I thought it was a phase, and you'd grow out of it."

"You want I should wear dresses, heels, and pearls?"

He nods. "That might be a start."

"I don't believe this. You're right. There's so much to discuss."

"I think we'll take our time exploring those things and discussing them, Piper. We'll cross each bridge when we get to it."

"No, we need to figure it out now and make sure we're on the same page because once we're married, we're stuck in that and there's no going back. Not for me anyway."

"Stuck, Piper?" Kenneth asks, stiffening underneath me.

I get up from his lap, and he doesn't stop me this time. "Yes. Stuck."

"Wow! I mean, fuck. Stuck? Is that how you feel about me?" he asks, massaging his temples.

"No, Kenneth! I...look, this is what I'm saying. We need to make sure that marriage is right for both of us and that we're right for each other."

"If you haven't figured it out in all these years, then we have bigger problems on the table," he says. "And I don't know if what we thought we had really existed."

I look at him. "Yeah, I don't either." Shaking my head, I walk to the door.

"Where are you going?"

"Away. I need time to think," I say, slamming the door behind me.

As I pass his secretary, she eyes me the way she always does when I arrive. Damn the fact that my top is a pretty, white collared shirt, my tits are covered up today, and I bothered to wear a bra, or that my dark jeans fit every curve of my body accentuating my feminine form.

The fact that I wear combat boots instead of high heels and have on a tattered jean jacket with patches on it instead of a cashmere coat is beneath her. I can tell by how she looks me up and down and how her lips turn down into a sneer.

Just as I don't bother saying much to her whenever I arrive, I don't bother saying anything when I depart. I have even less to say today now that Kenneth has pissed me off.

Storming from his office, I head out into the chilly weather, hop into my car, and drive a few blocks away. I had no idea this was where I was headed when I started driving here, but somehow my heart led me to this place.

I stare at the outdoor park. It's odd in its placement surrounded by several businesses. The DeLuca family chose to make this a memorial park rather than rebuilding their restaurant after it was blown up three years ago.



People lost their lives in that explosion, and although I was no longer working there, I knew Alessandro. Most people who know he has ties to a crime syndicate assume he's a thug. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Yes, Alessandro DeLuca is a dangerous man, one that no one would want to cross, but he's also a committed and loyal man who cares about others. So, I know that he cared about the victims of the explosion.

I pull around the block and park my car before getting out. Shoving my hands in my pockets, I walk down a few spaces before paying the meter.

Once that business is finished, I return to the park and sit on one of the wooden benches.

My fingers trace over the engravement there. Each bench placed in this park has an engraved plaque with four or five victims' names.

This one reads:



*KANE MAXWELL, HEAD chef*

*Lori Jones, sous chef*

*Carlo Valentino, patron*

*Zahra Valentino, patron*

*Zoe Valentino, patron*



I KNEW KANE. HE'D BEEN working there when I was, and he was a kind, loving family man. Lori wasn't working there by the time I quit so I don't know her. The other three I never met, but I knew the family owned a vineyard. Their faces and stories were plastered on the news for weeks more than most victims.

I turn my back to the plaque and rest against the bench. I close my eyes and allow the early spring sunshine to warm my face against the still, late winter temps.

I listen to the faint sounds of traffic that are mostly silenced as the buildings around the park create somewhat of a barrier. I inhale and shake my head at the scent of car fumes, stale piss from a homeless person nearby, and the sweet pastries from the doughnut shop across the street intermingling with the outdoorsy fragrance.

Not for the first time, it occurs to me that perhaps Kenneth Paxton was never meant to be my husband. Maybe I made a mistake all those years ago.

Shaking my head, I force those thoughts from my mind. No, I didn't make a mistake. I did the right thing. Marco had already told me that he would never be mine. I could never have him completely because he could not leave his wife.

My face stiffens as I feel a warm trickle of tears flowing down my cheeks, breaking through the dry surface of my skin. God, how I loved that man.

I had no right loving a man like Marco; a married man with known ties to a crime syndicate stemming from a family who was the head of organized crime. But how could I not love a man like Marco? One who loved with his entire being.

His loyalty to his family and to the mafia knows no bounds. It allowed him to deny what his heart wanted most, me. Why? Because he'd already pledged his fidelity to *La Famiglia*.

Besides, it wasn't just me who walked away.

Marco walked away too.



## CHAPTER 10 – MARCO

*“What do you mean that I have to marry her?” I ask in disbelief.*

*“Marco, you are undisciplined and unruly, and you’re becoming a threat to this family!”*

*“A threat?”*

*“More like a fucking disgrace to the DeLuca name! You can’t control yourself, and it’s getting harder for others to control you. It’s time to settle down and learn some discipline. Along with the responsibility of caring for a family comes discipline.”*

*My heart constricts in my throat. I’ve never been particularly close to my father. As an eleven-year-old boy, I’d caught him fucking my mother’s sister, my aunt Contessa, when my mother was in the hospital giving birth to Niccolò. He saw me watching, and I’d run, only for him to finish fucking her. I could hear her moans. Later, he found me and told me that a man has needs. He’d said I wouldn’t tell her the truth if I loved my mother.*

*I never did because I didn’t want to hurt my mother, but I always wanted that bastard to wonder when I might say something. We’ve been at odds since. He only tolerates me.*

*“What is it that you want from me?”*

*“To redeem the name. Redeem yourself by doing this one thing.”*

*“Marrying Graziella isn’t—”*

*“It’s what you need. She loves you, Marco, and I know you care greatly for her. She’ll be what you need to strengthen you and prepare you for your position of power in the family when it’s time.”*

*“I won’t do it.”*

*My father’s jaw clenches.*

*“Very well. We’ll be visiting the don.”*

*“For what?”*

*“It is his wish that you marry Graziella. Forging the Moretti empire with the DeLuca empire will give us unlimited power in areas we aren’t as strong as we’d like. The don has spoken. If you’re man enough to disobey a direct order, you should be man enough to tell him why. You will do that in person.”*

*My heart sinks because I’m loyal to the family. There isn’t anything that I won’t do for this family.*

*“And Maria?”*

*“Maria is married to your cousin, Johnny. Didn’t she tell you? She must have written to you while you were in Spain.” He’s now animated and happy, and I want to puke.*

*She didn’t. I was in hiding after going on a murder spree, and I was still angry with her for aborting our child. I thought that going to Spain on my father’s orders would be the distance Maria and I needed to find healing.*

*I sink down into the chair and drop my head into my hands.*

*“Surely, you weren’t thinking of marrying her?”*

*“No, Papa. I wasn’t going to marry her. But Johnny?”*

*“It was the don’s order.”*

*I look into my father’s evil eyes and know he’s lying. Perhaps the don did order Johnny to marry her, but it would have come only at my father’s request.*

*And the one thing that we don’t do is disobey the don. Not if we value our lives or our position in the family.*

*“So... Grazie? Does she know?”*

*My father smiles. “She and her parents are expecting us tonight for dinner. I have already picked out the ring for you. Giuseppe was so excited to hear you wanted to marry his daughter.”*

*I’ll just bet he fucking was.*

*And just like that, I feel the cell doors clanging closed on my freedom and my heart forever.*



I'M SITTING OUT AT the back of my house on the loggia smoking a cigar when I hear angry, rushed footsteps behind me. I already know that he's coming. No one catches me off-guard in my home.

I slowly spin around to face my accuser.

"You stole my daughter's life!" Giuseppe Moretti accuses, jabbing a thick finger in the air toward me.

My men pull his arms back to keep him from lunging in my direction. He's come to my home every day since his daughter died and this is the first time I've seen him. The other days I couldn't be bothered to deal with him.

His concern for his daughter and his supposed upright pillar of society façade is bullshit that I don't have time for. He's so deep in the mob's pockets that he can't find his fucking way out. He's photographed with the Prime Minister and dines with the mayor regularly. Then he sneaks around back corners to seal political deals with my father, uncles, and other men like them that go against everything that the former group represents.

"Let him go," I instruct my men as I stand from my chair.

When they release his arms, Giuseppe straightens his jacket.

He's a short, rotund man with a head full of thick, wiry hair, wild bushy eyebrows, and a mustache. It's good that Graziella took her looks from her deceased mother.

I take a few steps to him, and Giuseppe straightens his jacket once more, leans his head back and glares up at me.

"I am not scared of your kind, Marco."

"I wouldn't expect you to be."

“You killed my daughter with your dirty ways. Your father and your father’s kind were real businessmen who honored family and their reputation above all. This new generation, you respect nothing. You have no respect for your marriage vows and hold nothing sacred. You’re nothing more than a bunch of thugs who don’t know your dick from your head!”

“Is there something that you would like to say, Giuseppe?”

“The police are investigating my daughter’s murder. I have no reason to not cooperate with them, Marco. And God help me if I don’t personally bring you down myself if there is any indication that you had something to do with it!”

As I step closer to him, my jaws clench and my fists ball in my pockets.

“If I thought that you gave a fuck about Graziella, then I might look the other way at the threat you just fucking issued in my home. Against me. Since I know that you don’t give a fuck about her as nothing more than a negotiation tool, I’ll give you ten seconds to get out of my fucking house. If you don’t, I swear I’ll carve your fucking heart out of your chest right now and sit over you and drink the blood as it oozes from your heart. Then I’ll piss on your corpse before I burn it,” I reply with an upturn to my lips.

He continues to glare at me.

“Three...two...”

Giuseppe turns and damn near runs back into my house. I close my eyes and tamp down the anger that burns within me. Between him and the police, I swear they’ll give me a fucking heart attack.

“You ready, Boss?” Ermes asks.

“Yeah.”

Ermes walks back into the house to have my car prepared. I turn my face up and look at the clouds puffing overhead. There’s a slight chill in the air, but the day is warm at fifty-seven degrees despite the cloudy weather.

Even the weather agrees with my fucking mood today. It's time for somebody to start dying. It's taken three days to find these bastards, but I've finally found them. I'm going to take care of what my men failed to do.

“Questo è per te,” I whisper to Graziella's memory and put my burning cigar in the ashtray.

Turning on my heels, I head back into the house.



MANFREDI ROSSI AND Giorgio Esposito run a chop shop. They traffic guns and drugs out of here, and the chop shop is just a front to launder their money. Most people aren't aware that the two business partners have offices in the back of the shop.

I climb out of the backseat of the car, and my driver and bodyguard, Gino Ferrari, falls into step with me and Ermes is on my right.

There's a car behind the one that I rode in where the rest of my men sit waiting to get a signal if their help is needed. I don't need any fucking help today, but Ermes and Gino insisted on going inside with me.

The odor of car fumes, oil, and other mechanical fluids fills the air. A couple of men talking to a woman look my way, and I see their eyes widen in fear along with the whispered, “Is that Marco-fucking-DeLuca?” “What the fuck is he doing here?”

A few mechanics look up and call out, “Aye! What're you doing?”, “Hey! You can't go back there,” or “Hey, can I help you with something?”

I keep walking right by them until someone else jumps out at me as I continue to walk by.

“Aye, what the fuck do you think you're doing?” he asks.

When we push past him, he runs up to us and jumps in front of me. “Aye! You can't fucking—”



A well-placed bullet right between his eyes silences him. I'm not in the mood for anyone's bullshit today. The thud of his body falling to the ground registers in my mind as do the men scurrying behind us.

I don't give a fuck. My men will take care of them if necessary. I only have two concerns on my mind, and that's the men I'll find right behind the door in front of me.

I kick the door in to find Manfredi and Giorgio sitting at desks across from each other.

"What the fuck?" Manfredi asks as Giorgio slowly stands and asks, "What's going on?"

My men post up next to Giorgio as I snatch Manfredi to his feet by his collar.

"Who did it?"

"Who did what?" Manfredi asks, his ruddy face turning redder with anger.

I punch him in the side of the head and let him go long enough for him to stagger backward. When he stares at me, I hit him in the side of the head again long enough to daze him.

"Aye!" I hear Giorgio shout from behind me.

"Shut the fuck up if you don't want the same," Ermes warns.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" Manfredi growls.

"This is your last fucking chance to answer me. I'm not fucking playing your games," I warn in a cool tone.

"Okay, but please...tell me what you're talking about," he pleads.

I tell him what happened to my wife at our house and end with, "Your signature kill mark was found on my wife."

His eyes widen in horror. "I...I didn't do that," he stammers as Giorgio whines behind me, "That wasn't us, Marco. I swear to God it wasn't us!"

“A bullet to the forehead is either personal or a signature mark. More specifically, your signature mark. My wife hasn’t done anything to anyone for it to get that personal so I’m at your fucking doorstep.”

“It wasn’t us!” Manfredi cries out.

“Then tell me who the fuck it was,” I growl.

“I don’t know. I swear I don’t know, Marco. If I did, I’d be the first in line to tell you,” Manfredi says.

“Then you need to figure it out because I’m not leaving without fucking answers!”

“I...I don’t know. I’m not lying to you, Marco,” Manfredi says again.

“I don’t want to hear what you don’t fucking know! I want to know what you do know!” I shout, grabbing him by his collar and slamming his head into the wall until his face screws up and he starts whimpering.

“Come on, man. We really don’t know,” Giorgio whines behind me.

“Shut the fuck up!” Gino grunts.

“Tell me!” I shout again with another hit to his gut.

“I swear! I don’t know...I wish I did,” Manfredi groans.

I sniffle and wipe the back of my nose before taking a step back.

“I don’t fucking trust you!” I grunt, pulling out my gun again.

“Trust me or not, Marco, but it sounds like an inside job. What the fuck kinda security you got that would let someone get that close to your wife to do some shit like that? Maybe you should be kicking their asses instead of mine,” Manfredi snarls. “Looks like they pulled the fucking wool over your eyes and set our asses up.”

I’ve been operating purely off emotion the last few days, and what he’s saying to me now registers something in the back of my mind. Alessandro did discover that the security

cameras were off. Rocco had mentioned a technical issue a few days before but swore he was on it.

When I asked about it this time, he said the system was hacked, and they were all over it trying to figure out who was behind it. Shit's not adding up, and it's looking like Rocco isn't being honest with me. Something that I haven't allowed myself to consider because what the fuck?

Loyalty is everything to a man like me, and those who aren't fucking loyal pay with their lives. Like my wife.

I turn back to the little shit in front of me and kick his ass a bit more before walking to the office's other side.

"Move," I snarl at Ermes and Gino.

They step back, and I backhand Giorgio and punch him in the gut before I take a step away. Looking between both men, I say, "I'll fucking find out what's going on. And when I do, I'll be back if I smell your stink on this shit."



## CHAPTER 11 – MARCO

Every day I wake up, I face the reality that Grazie is no longer here. I can't seem to accept the truth of that. One and a half weeks ago today, my wife was murdered. A week ago today, I picked up the autopsy results and gave a sample of my DNA for the paternity test.

One agonizing week where I've held onto a glimmer of hope that maybe she was telling the truth. When I got the report this morning, it crushed all hope and all belief.

I read the report for what feels like the millionth time. My eyes always seem to zero in on the two bottom phrases with numbers behind the colon.



COMBINED PATERNITY index: **0** Probability of Paternity:  
**0%**



I HAVE A FRIEND IN the morgue who owes me. Thankfully, he was able to run the paternity test that I needed. Because I never held my wife to certain obligations, I suspected the child was not mine.

I knew that I couldn't commit to her intimately so I gave her free reign to do what she needed to fulfill her needs. While I've never questioned her about her personal life with other men, I have always insisted that we use a condom. There was only one occasion that I forgot to, and she swore that was the time that I impregnated her.

Edoardo and Angela DeLuca didn't raise foolish men. We may be crazy, brutal, and savage, but we're not stupid. I would never take my wife's word that the child was mine. Although she claims that she doesn't freely use the extension I gave her to engage in extramarital affairs as I do, I know that she wasn't completely faithful to me.

A knock sounds at the door of my den. Two walls with glass shelves run from the ceiling to the floor. Each of these cases holds an arsenal of weaponry from the most medieval to the latest high-tech rifles.

Two armchairs sit in front of a fireplace that takes up one large wall with a little round table beneath it. To the fireplace's right is the door leading to the hallway. Above the fireplace hangs a sixty-five-inch TV.

The rear wall is filled with soccer posters and memorabilia I've collected through the years. A bar sits in front of this wall.

"Come in," I call.

The door is opened by Carmine Romano, one of my soldiers, who sticks his head inside.

"Silvio is here, Boss."

I nod and wait as the door opens wider and the other man steps inside.

He waits until I extend a hand to the chair across from me.

"Sit," I order.

He does as I ask and looks hesitantly at the glass of rum I shove toward him.

"Drink."

He tosses it back and sits the glass on the table, looking nervously at me. My wife's bodyguard was hired by her. He's not part of *La Famiglia*, and he was always loyal to her and that's all that I could ask.

She told me early on not to interfere with the work he did for her, and I respected that as long as he protected her. However, he failed to protect her that night, and I need answers as to why.

Why wasn't he on the estate? Why did he leave when he did?

I haven't had much success finding my wife's murderer, but that doesn't stop my determination. I won't be stopped until I find her murderer and avenge her death.

I get straight to the point of his visit, refusing to make small talk and waste any more time.

“Did you notice anything suspicious over the last few weeks with Mrs. Moretti-DeLuca?” I ask Silvio Caproni, my wife’s bodyguard.

“No sir. Nothing beyond the normal. She stuck to her same schedule,” he answers, staring at the carpeted space between his feet.

He knows something he’s not telling me, and I’ll be damned if he walks out of here alive without letting me know everything he knows.

“Silvio, you told the police that she left the house only once on the day of her murder. Where did she go?”

“To the bank.”

“I’m told that she left the house with you in the morning around ten and then again around five in the evening, and you didn’t return until a little before eight. She walked into the house, you drove the car around back to the garage, and then you left in your own vehicle.”

“She gave me the night off, sir.”

“Yes, but where was she for almost three fucking hours, Silvio?” I snarl.

His hands grip the arms of the chair, and his knuckles turn white with the force of holding on.

“Silvio,” I grumble in a low warning tone.

“Sir, she went to visit your friend, Mr. De Santis.”

“Luca?”

“Yes sir.”

“Do you know why?”

“No sir. I remained in the car as I often did.”

*Often did?* A rush thunders through my head like a raging river barreling downstream.

“How often did these visits occur, Silvio?”

“Weekly, a couple of times a week.”

“What days?”

“They fluctuated, sir. Typically, when you were away on business or away for the weekend.”

“Where did she visit him?”

“At his home, sir.”

“When I went to America for the two weeks before she was murdered, did she visit him?”

He rolls his eyes away from the carpeted space and gradually meets my gaze as he nods slowly. “Yes sir.”

“How often?”

“She stayed for a week and a half, sir.”

The bastard told me he was going to London and Switzerland for two weeks. I’d invited him to accompany us on the trip, but he’d turned me down.

“The Thursday before I left for America, when I took a flight to Bari, did she visit him?”

“Yes sir.”

“How long?”

“Six hours, sir.”

“Did they ever leave the house?”

“No sir. He walked her to the car before we pulled off, but before that, they were in the house from the moment he opened the door for her until he walked her out to say goodbye.”

The entire time I visited the don, she was screwing my best friend.

“Thank you, Silvio.”

“Will that be all, sir?”

I pause and consider something else.



“No. Do you believe that any of my staff knew about the relationship between my wife and my right-hand man?”

“I don’t know if anyone knew, but I suspect Rocco may have.”

“Why?”

“I overheard them arguing one evening, sir. Maybe a couple of weeks before her murder.”

“What did you hear?”

“I heard Rocco ask if you were aware of her visits to Luca. She denied it, and then Rocco told her he could prove it. Things were silent for a minute, and then he asked if she wanted to rethink her response. After that, she told him that she knew he was involved with the Colombos, and if he spoke a word about her and Luca, she would tell you about his involvement with the Colombos. After that, they lowered their voices.”

“Thank you, Silvio. That will be all,” I rumble.

Fucking traitors in my camp! Two of the men that I trusted most have betrayed me. Darkness creeps in at the edges of my consciousness and all I can smell is freshly shed blood. A maniacal chuckle emits from deep within my throat.

Silvio glances over his shoulder from his place in the doorway, and I can see that he’s uncomfortable as he should be. The sinister plan unfurling in my mind to avenge my wife’s death and the betrayal of my trust is nothing short of diabolical.

Rocco is conveniently in America on vacation. I’ll take care of Luca first, and then I’ll head to the States to get some answers from Rocco.

When Silvio leaves my office, I pick up the phone and connect to one of the guest homes on my estate.

“Boss?”

“Gino, get the car ready. Tell Ermes to get ready. We’ve got a trip to make,” I say.

“Yes sir.”

I stand and head out of the den.

“You got what you needed?” Carmine asks.

“Yep. Let’s go,” I say as I pass him in the doorway.



“SO, HOW’S THE MURDER investigation going?” Luca asks as he pours himself a drink and then me.

I cross an ankle over my knee as I take in the appearance of my life-long friend and right-hand man. He’s got dark circles beneath his eyes and a beard that’s grown quite long where he once was clean-shaven. The long hair that should’ve been cut more than a week ago brushes the tops of his ears.

His pretty boy looks that he takes pride in are still evident beneath the sallowness of his skin. I briefly consider he’s got a death wish. Not because he looks like he’s not taking care of himself, but because he dared to cross me the way he has.

“They’re not getting anywhere,” I mumble, swirling the clear liquid in the glass he hands me.

“That’s too bad,” he says sourly, sitting opposite me.

I toss the drink back and set the glass on the table beside me.

“How’re you holding up?” he asks.

Shrugging, I say, “Staying focused on business as usual. It’s all I know how to do.”

“Yeah, me too.”

“How’s business been going for you lately?”

Although Luca is my right-hand man, he’s very involved with his family’s shipping business.

“Looking into a couple of new ventures to invest in. Need to check a few things out, but I’ve got a business proposal I want to share with you. When things check out first, of course,” he says, tilting his glass to me.

“Of course,” I mutter. I finger my beard for several seconds before I continue. “Remember that business venture you worked on when I went to the States a couple of months ago?”

“Uh...”

“The one about the delivery service you wanted to break into.”

“Oh, yeah, yeah, that one,” he replies offhandedly.

“Whatever happened with that?”

“Oh, um...you know it didn’t quite pan out as I’d hoped.”

“You met them when I went to Bari, right?”

“Um, yeah.”

“On that Thursday?”

“Yes, I met with them that afternoon for lunch.”

“The lunch didn’t go well?”

Shrugging, he says, “I thought so at the time. In hindsight, it seems two hours were wasted now that things aren’t panning out.”

“You had a two-hour luncheon with them that day?”

“Yeah. Went back to the office to report to the board and tried to get any suggestions they could offer on how to seal the deal, but...” he shrugs, leaving off his statement.

“What about the two weeks that I was in the States? Didn’t you go to London on some business? That didn’t work out either?”

“I went to London for a week and then spent another four days in Switzerland. The London business was related to our current business which went well. Let’s say the Swiss affair was more fun than business because the business didn’t yield the sales we’d hoped it would,” he chuckles.

“Was the ass worth it?” I ask.

“Every. Single. Thrust. That was the best pussy—”

I grab the vodka bottle so quickly and hit him across the head with it that I know he doesn't know what happened. Just like that, he drops to the floor with a thud.

I remove my phone from my pocket and dial a number.

“Come through the front door,” I instruct.

Within seconds, Ermes, Carmine, Paolo Pelosi, another soldier, and Gino are in the room with me along with a crew of four other soldiers and the clean-up crew. Paolo and Carmine toss a bag over Luca's head and lifts his limp body from the floor.

“Clean this place up,” Ermes instructs as I leave the room and head back to the car.

I know they'll wipe everything down thoroughly, and Ermes will go through Luca's phone and security cameras scrubbing every trace of our visit clean.

Gino opens the car door for me and asks, “Where to, boss?”

“The morgue,” I say as I make the phone call. “Gabriele, I'll be there in ten minutes. Can you do me another favor?” I ask.

I turn the broken bottle over in my hand, eyeing the blood and bits of the scalp. “Good. I'll be there soon.”

No sooner than the call ends, my phone buzzes again.

“Take him to the warehouse. I need you to hold him there for as long as it takes for me to get the answers I need. Be prepared to hunker down for a few days,” I say.

I click the call with Carmine off without saying goodbye.



## CHAPTER 12 – MARCO

Three days. That's how long I had to sit and wait for the DNA test results on Luca to come back. Gabriele wasted no time calling me to tell me the results. His messenger boy delivered them to my estate half an hour after our phone call ended.

I was hoping it wouldn't be true. Hoping some other poor bastard was the father of my late wife's child. At this point, I was ready to kill any fucker that fathered her child. It didn't matter if I'd given her freedom to fuck around the way that I was doing.

When rage and fury take over, logic and ration cease to exist. That frame of mind easily mimics insanity and that's where I'm operating from.

Once again, I glance down at the paper in my hand and take another shot of bourbon before I set the glass back on the pull-out table in front of me. My head is pounding, and I don't see the words on the paper; just a grey and red haze.

A rapid knock on the window lets me know that we've arrived. I pull my hand down over my face and let the privacy partition down, clearing my mind and vision.

"I'm ready, Gino."

I look at the paper again and fold it, stuffing it into my coat pocket. When the door opens, I swiftly step out of the car and the words repeat in a scrolling manner like a teleprompter in my head.



COMBINED PATERNITY index: **533,475** Probability of Paternity: **99.9998%**



FURY RACES THROUGH me as I step from my car. The gravel under my shoes makes a loud crunching noise as each step brings me closer to the galvanized steel door. Before my feet can touch the concrete stairs' top step, the door pulls open.

"He's in here, boss," Ermes says as he holds the door open for me just as my phone rings.

"Ales," I say into the phone.

"We've got a problem."

"Can't talk about it now."

"No, we need to. I've just got some disturbing news. We need to head to America."

"When?"

"Yesterday."

"The fuck are you saying, Ales?"

"Rocco went there on vacation. Marco, we've chased down every fucking lead, and Grazie's death only leads to one direction. Rocco. Nothing makes sense about how your estate was infiltrated, and he's the fucker in charge. I just got off the phone with him, and the answers he's giving don't add up. I've learned that the security system wasn't hacked like he initially said nor was there a glitch. They were fucking turned off."

"You sure about that?"

"Tommy says so," he says of a guy that works for AD Logistics, the family's transportation company.

That's all the confirmation that I need. Tommy knows his shit, and he's never been wrong.

"You and I both know that Rocco's the only one that can do that," Alessandro says.

"I'll carve his fucking heart out of his chest and deliver it to his mother's doorstep. Then I'm gonna cut his small pecker off and have it delivered to his wife!" I explode.

"Where are you?" Alessandro asks.

"Handling some other business right now."

“Finish up and get ready. We’re heading out in the morning.”

“No, we’re fucking leaving tonight,” I say before ending the call.

I can’t fucking believe this. There’s no one I can trust now; neither my security man nor my best friend. As much as I don’t want to, I can’t help but eye all the motherfuckers in my camp with suspicion. I trust no one except for my brothers.

I step inside the semi-dark warehouse flanked by Gino and Ermes, pushing thoughts of Rocco to the back of my mind. His betrayal will be dealt with later.

Inside the warehouse, I’m greeted with nods from Paolo and Carmine.

The two men stand on either side of a sloped plank where Luca’s face is covered with a towel. I look to Carmine.

“He’s said nothing yet, boss.”

I haven’t spoken a word, but Luca knows I’m here.

“Marco, please!” he begs.

I rip the towel back from his face and look into the cowardly blue eyes of Luca De Santis. He’s always had smooth, polished good looks compared to my rugged, outdoorsy looks. Luca’s pride and joy were his dark, wavy hair and long, black eyelashes.

Today his hair has been shaved from his head, and his eyelashes clipped off. He looks like a fucking bald eagle.

“Acqua!” I order. Paolo pulls the towel back over the man’s face, and Carmine starts pouring water.

I don’t find satisfaction in the gurgling, choking sounds he makes.

“Fermare!”

They stop, and both men look at me confusedly.

“Luca,” I breathe as I unstrap him from the board.



“Boss,” Carmine says hesitantly, but one glance from me silences him. He knows better than to ever question me.

Luca struggles to catch his breath as he coughs and sputters. It takes a while before he finally gets it together long enough to stagger off the board. Once he’s steady on his feet, I hit him with a right cross knocking him off balance, but he doesn’t fall. I quickly follow that up with a left hook before I lose my mind and begin to bash the shit out of him.

Luca goes down, and I beat him until his face is bloody and unrecognizable. Only then do I snatch him to his feet and shove him against the wall.

“You were my friend!” I spit out.

Trust doesn’t come easily for me and neither does making friends. I have many business associates and even more men who kiss my ass because of who I am, but I don’t have friends. Aside from my brothers, Luca was the only person I allowed close to my life.

We’ve been best friends since our youth, and I’ve trusted him with almost everything in my life. I guess that wasn’t enough for him because the greedy bastard betrayed me.

“You fucked her!”

“You screwed over her,” he moans. I punch him in the gut and watch him crumple.

It takes a minute, but he gets to his feet again.

“She loved you, and she was a good girl. She just wanted to be loved, Marco. That’s what I gave her...love,” he spits out.

A swift blow to his head and he’s on his knees.

“Don’t. You. Fucking. Talk. About. Her!” I grit as kick after kick lands on his ribs with each word.

Carmine and Paolo lift Luca to his feet again and look to me for more instructions. I step closer, leaving barely enough breathing room between Luca and me.

“I trusted you, muthafucka! Would’ve given you the world! Anything you asked for, but not my wife.”

“Why, DeLuca? You didn’t fucking want her!”

“She was mine!” I growl and headbutt him.

“Mine!” I roar and punch him in the chest.

He mutters something I can barely hear.

“Say it again, muthafucka!” I shout.

“Mi dispiace,” he apologizes repeatedly.

“You’re not sorry. You left your sorry fucking seed inside of her! She was carrying your child not mine! And she tried to pass it off as mine! You know how much I wanted a son! You know that should have been my child!”

“How...how do you know?” he slurs, looking at me through one partially closed eye and spitting blood from his mouth. The other eye has already swollen shut.

I glance back at Ermes and hold out a hand. He reaches into his briefcase and pulls out the document. Snatching it from his hand, I shove it into his face.

“Your filthy DNA says so,” I growl in his ear.

He shifts terrified eyes my way. Tears fill them, and the man I once loved like a brother means shit to me now.

“She was willing to raise him as yours...she knew what it meant to you!” he cries.

“And you’re such a sack of shit you’d allow another man to claim your seed!” I spit at his feet. “Ain’t that a bitch?”

I hit him in the ribs again, stepping back and rolling up my sleeves.

“Take his shirt off and strap him to the board!” I order.

The men know that once my work is done tonight, they’ll clean this place up and take Luca’s remains to be burnt and disposed of in the Mediterranean.

My men do as I say as I remove the Italian loafers on my feet and begin removing my clothes until I’m down to my

underwear. Gino hands me a white hazmat suit and booties which I don in no time.

Ermes hoists the leather case at his side and rests it on a shelf overhang above the plank where Luca lies. He unzips the case, removes a bowie knife from within, and wipes it down with the cloth. He hands it over to me when he's finished and makes eye contact.

I shake my head. I don't want his reprimands or his warnings. Not tonight.

Tonight, all the fucking rules are off the table. My father believes I should stand down because of who my wife is and let someone else in the family get revenge. Her murder is a high-profile case in our country and has drawn lots of national and international attention.

Even my cousin, the don, has weighed in on it, telling my father to make sure that I don't take revenge with my hands.

I fucking won't stand down! How the fuck does anyone expect me to not get involved with someone so close to me?

I'm even more committed to this cause. Graziella Ann-Marie Moretti-DeLuca may have been many things, a lying cunt, a sneaky bitch, and a cheating whore, but she was still my wife! Mine, damnit! If I didn't kill her for the scandalous shit she did to me, no one else had the right to.

The polizia can't give me the justice that I need nor the justice that Grazie deserves. Her betrayal knows no bounds, but I can't allow her murder to go unavenged. On the path to finding justice, I'll take out anyone.

Anyone who pisses me off. Anyone who offends me personally will catch hell starting with this bastard.

The killing starts now!

I press the knife against his golden skin and watch as a single drop of blood appears on the shiny blade. Lifting the knife, I inhale the metallic scent and press the tip against his back again, watching as it slices cleanly through his skin and flesh. I savor the eerie sounds of his howls of pain knowing I'll soon send him to see his Maker.

My slicing is clean and precise with the attentive detail of a surgeon. The vision of Grazie being fucked by this animal for months fills my head drowning out his screams. I no longer see what I'm doing as I pull his skin away from his flesh and then his bones, separating his ribs from his spine until I've formed a set of wings with his skin and bones.

The blood eagle is one of the most savage and brutal execution techniques known to man. Derived from the Vikings, it sends a message of honor and revenge.

I am not to be fucked with!



## CHAPTER 13 – MARCO

“What’s wrong? You’re not into it,” Serena whines.

“W I’m laid back on her bed with my arms propped under my head, staring at the ceiling. She’s got my dick between her hands, saliva on her lips, and a lusty look in her eyes.

“Keep sucking. Don’t fucking worry about if I’m into it or not,” I grunt.

My mind is filled with thoughts of revenge, guilt, and how the fuck I’m about to tell Serena that I’m relocating to the States. Not that I really give a damn about how she’ll take it because I don’t tend to give a fuck about things like that.

But in the big scheme of things, she’s been a pretty decent girl. Of all the women that I fuck around with, she’s been around the longest, and she’s the one whose company I prefer the most.

If I took time to think about it for too long, I’d know exactly why. Parts of her remind me of being around Piper. She can be laid back, a good listener, one of the few who smokes and never asks questions about the family business. She accepts that some things don’t concern her and that she’d be better off not knowing.

Most women I fuck with ask too many questions or want me to give an account of my time if I’m not with my wife. I owe no bitch that type of loyalty.

The thing about Serena that differs from Piper is that Serena has an air of entitlement, and she’s spoiled as hell when she can’t have her way. Piper was more of an independent woman, and she cherished the time that I gave her.

Until she realized that she deserved better than me. One day she just woke the fuck up and realized that as much as she wanted to have my back, there was more that life had to offer, and she wouldn’t get it waiting around on me.

Saying goodbye to Piper and letting her walk out of my life was the hardest thing I've ever done. I've killed men in their sleep, in front of their wives and children, and some shit I don't like thinking about anymore. None of that compared to walking out of her apartment for that last time.

I glance down at Serena, and she's working the hell out of my cock. I close my eyes and allow my thoughts to travel back in time.



*“WHEN YOU COME BACK, I won't be here.”*

*“Whaddya mean you won't be here?” I ask, pulling my pants up and zipping them.*

*“Just what I said.”*

*“Picking up another shift? What's going on?” I ask, buttoning up my shirt and searching the room for my shoes.*

*“I'm moving.”*

*“Moving? Where?” That's enough to stop me and force me to turn around and look at her. I mean, really look at her for the first time.*

*She's got her knees pulled up and a pillow rest between her legs and chest. She's looking at me with those beautiful, wide brown eyes that seem to know everything.*

*“If I told you that, then you'd find me.”*

*“The fuck is you saying, Piper? Of course, I'll find you.”*

*She chews on her bottom lip, frowning at me. “I mean, I know that you can find me. It won't take a lot for a man like you, but I don't want to be found, Marco.”*

*“Whaddya mean you don't want to be found?”*

*She inhales deeply and tosses her pillow to the side as she swings her legs over the bed. With a quick flutter of the spread, I can see my shoes underneath the bed. I bend down and slide them from under there before standing and slipping my feet into them.*

*Piper's standing in front of me with her hands on her tiny waist, and her red nipples looking tender where I've been biting on them all night, and her pubic hair is on glorious display, making me want to bury my face there once more. But something tells me that I need to pay attention.*

*"Marco, these last two years with you have been beautiful. I've created some awesome memories with you that I will treasure forever."*

*"The fuck are you saying to me, Piper?"*

*"I'm saying that I...we have to stop."*

*I grab her and pull her naked body against mine, kissing her shoulder and then up to her chin before I take those big, luscious lips into mine. The way that Piper moans and does that little hum that she does whenever she's turned on, I know that it isn't over. Her mouth can talk all the shit she wants, but her body says differently.*

*My hands drop to her naked ass, cupping it and kneading it. She presses further into me, and the fingers on my other hand drive into her wetness. She hisses against my lips, moaning. Moving my hands around her waist, I lift her and walk her back to the bed, still sucking and licking her lips.*

*When I drop her onto the bed, I spread her legs wide, burying my face between her thighs, sucking out the wetness and sucking at her clit. She fists her hands into my hair and arches her hips into the air. I make love to her pussy with my tongue and kiss it like we were French kissing.*

*"Marco!" she hollers as her thighs tremble around my head.*

*I've got a fucking pussy demon when it comes to eating snatch. I swear I can't get enough of it. I do it more for myself than the woman. It's just an added benefit that they love what I do and that I can drive them wild with it.*

*As my tongue devours her, I add one and two fingers inside, twisting and plunging them in and out of her dark depth.*

*"Pulllleez!" she cries. "Release me, Marco! Release me!"*



*My hands grip her thighs tightly, and I know they'll be bruised in the morning. I don't give a fuck. I pull them further apart until she's splayed out in front of me. My tongue slides from her pussy down to her ass, where I work my tongue around.*

*"Oh fucking goodness!" she screams as she tries to pull away from my grasp.*

*She's the only woman whose ass I've eaten. The only one that I ever will. I'm the only man she's ever allowed to play around in her ass; fingering it, eating it, and fucking it.*

*That's how I know she's mine no matter what words she spoke earlier. And when I'm done eating her, I drop my pants once more, cover up and plunge my dick deep inside her until she's crying.*

*"You're snatching my fucking organs out, Marco!" she screams at one point. "You ruptured my fallopian tubes!" she hollers at another.*

*I fuck her hard and long, letting her know that she will never leave. No other man will ever love her or pleasure her like I do.*

*And then she's releasing her milk on my dick once more, and her pussy lips are clenching tightly all around me. And like the savage I am, I roar my release and my entire body is one taut muscle.*

*When I pull out of Piper, she flips onto her side away from me.*

*"That doesn't change anything, Marco," she mutters.*

*"The fuck you mean that doesn't change a thing?"*

*"We're good together sexually."*

*"And in more ways than that, Piper. You know we are."*

*She sits up in bed and stares at me.*

*"You're right. But I deserve more than that, and I'm giving myself more. I've never asked anything of you, and I'm not about to start now. But I know you'll return to Italy to be with*

*your wife when you leave here. I'll be here alone and try to hold it all together. But in three days, I'll fall apart. I'll miss two days of work crying and not eating, my eyes will swell, and I'll cry until I'm sick and vomiting. I'll ignore all of Rashida's calls and my family's.*

*"Then by the third day, I'll pull myself together, get out of bed and end my pity party. I'll tell myself I'm over you and won't allow myself to go through this again. But the truth is I'll take you back again when you show up at my job or if I come home from work and you're in my bed. I'm tired of the merry-go-round, Marco. I'm getting off. You can go back to your wife; I won't begrudge you of that. That's where you belong. Just know that you can't have her and me. I'm only built for one man, and that's for a man who's only built for one woman. So, don't return to me if you walk out that door."*

*"You giving me fucking ultimatums, Piper?"*

*"No. I'm telling you my decision. I will take my heart back when you walk out, and it's no longer yours. All I'm asking you is, please don't come back."*

*Anger fills me at her words.*

*"How fucking dare you give me a demand like that. Do you know who the fuck I am? I can have any woman, any time, any place, and in any position that I want. I fucking chose you to be mine!"*

*"Except I'm not! I'm not yours any more than you're mine, Marco! You have a wife! A whole fucking wife, and I'm tired of being your side chick when you come to Atlanta! God only knows how many others you have!"*

*"You! You're the only fucking side chick!"*

*She laughs and crosses her arms. "And there we have it, ladies and gentlemen. He acknowledges that I'm just a piece of ass to him."*

*In a calmer tone, I reply, "I never said that."*

*"That's exactly what you said, and that's exactly what I am. We both know it."*

*“You know that I’m not with my wife. Not intimately. It’s family business that I can’t walk away from.”*

*“It’s always about the family business, Marco. Maybe that’s another problem that I have. Even when you’re in town to stay, I worry that you might not come back to me that night. Every time you leave, I’m scared something might happen to you. Who’s going to notify me?”*

*“Ales would! Massimo would!”*

*“When they remember to think of me. I’m not the priority, Marco.”*

*“Is that what you think? Because you are. You’re my priority, and that’s why they’ll prioritize you.”*

*“I’m sorry; I can’t wait to see if you’ll make it back alive. You don’t even bother to call me when you’re away. Just a phone call is all I need.”*

*“I can’t. You know this. Part of it is to protect you, not lead anyone back to you. The other part is keeping my focus on what it needs to be. The slightest diversion could cost me my life. You’re a beautiful distraction for me, Piper. One I can’t afford to take when I’m out in the streets.”*

*“And I understand that, though I don’t like it. Your life was set up the way it was long before me, and it would be unfair to ask you to change. The reality is I’m young. I’m only twenty-five, and I’m not ready for what your life brings. So please, Marco. Do us both a favor and walk out that door.”*

*“I’ll be back.”*

*“Don’t bother. Don’t return unless you’re a free man divorced from your wife.”*

*“We both know that can’t happen, Piper. You understand why.”*

*“No. The only thing that I understand is that I want and deserve more. It doesn’t have to be you, but it will be someone.”*

*“You’ll always belong to me.”*

*“My heart can’t take you, Marco. Can’t you see that you’re destroying me? You’re fucking breaking me piece by piece, and one day I’ll be this empty shell. I have nothing left to give you. If you loved me, you could see that!” she cries.*

*It’s breaking me to see her like this, and I know she’s right, but I can’t admit that to her. Admitting that out loud would be like giving up hope.*

*“Goodbye, Marco.”*

*I watch as she gets off the bed and walks into the bathroom closing the door behind her. I sit back on the bed for several long minutes, thinking about what she’s asking.*

*I’m a selfish bastard, and I don’t want to give her up but she’s right. She deserves better than me. I’ll never be free to love her the way that she deserves. Who the fuck told me to open my heart in the first place? I know I’m unlucky in love and have no business considering it.*

*I get up, grab my wallet, keys, and jacket, and walk out the door. I don’t bother looking back as I get into my car and head for the airport. Every article of clothing and shoes that I’ve left at her place, she can have it or she can burn it.*

*I will stay away. It may eventually cause my destruction or even my demise, but I promise with my last breath that I will remain out of Piper’s life. I love her too fucking much not to.*

*I feel the cells clanging into place over my heart like the bars of a jail cell. They are enclosing my heart inside and keeping everything out. I’m shutting down, and I feel the demon inside of me waiting to come out. He’s like a fire-breathing dragon waiting to lick up everything in his path and salvage nothing.*

*I no longer give two fucks about anything. Or anyone.*

“That’s it, baby. Milk me dry,” I say when Serena cups my balls in her hands and deep throats me. I grab the sides of her face and pump deep inside her just how she likes it until her mascara smears, and she’s choking off my shit.

My grunts are hurried and loud as I pump harder and harder, trying to chase thoughts of Piper away. I finally give up and imagine her mouth working me over. That’s when I cum.



SERENA HAS THREE PLACES. She’s got the little cottage in the back of Alessandro’s house that she stays in when she’s working; she’s got the big mansion that she lives in with her feeble, dying husband; and she has a little apartment that she kept even after agreeing to the marriage arrangement with her husband.

He pays for the little apartment because although he doesn’t mind her having sex with other men since he can’t, he doesn’t want her doing it in his home. The entire shit is a joke to me.

I’m getting ready to leave, and it’s reminiscent of the time that I walked away from Piper. When I walked away from her, I gave a damn though I tried to pretend I didn’t. I had to shut off my feelings and haven’t turned them back on until I saw her again.

“What do you mean that you’re moving?”

“I’m relocating to the States.”

“What the fuck for?”

“Business.”

“You have a life here, Marco!”

“One that is coming to an end.”

“You fucking selfish bastard!” she shouts at me. “I have given you all of me for the last couple of years, and you find it this easy to walk away? Did I not mean anything to you?”

“What do you want from me?”

“Your wife is dead. You don’t suggest I leave with you. You toss me aside like a piece of trash in the garbage! You owe me more than that!”

“I owe you nothing. I tried respecting your feelings by telling you instead of disappearing. Do you want the truth? I really couldn’t care less.”

“I hate you! You fuck me, use me, and then march out of my life as though I don’t matter! I vow to make every day of your life miserable until you leave this country, Marco DeLuca!” she screams, grabbing a vase and throwing it at me.

I dodge it, and the vase shatters to the floor. I move so swiftly across the floor I don’t even realize that it was a thought in my mind before I’m on the other side of the room with Serena pinned against the wall and my hands around her throat.

“Don’t you ever fucking threaten me again. Do you know how easy it would be to end your life? How easy it would be to make you disappear?” I whisper in her ear. “Stronza, I will kill you!”

Her bottom lip trembles, and I release her. “You might be stupid, Serena, but you’re not fucking crazy,” I sneer.

I turn and walk out of her apartment, knowing I’ll never see her again.

“Mr. DeLuca!” I hear a shout behind me as I lean into my car. I turn around only to see Detective Greco slithering his way to me.

I stare him up and down as Gino steps from the car and stands beside me.

When Greco comes closer, Gino steps in front of me, blocking the detective from my path. I’m not a small man by any means. At six-three and two-fifty, I’m no small guy, but three inches taller than me and two-seventy-five Gino makes even me look small.

The detective is lanky and looks like a strong wind might blow him over.

“Stand down, Gino,” I say.

Gino steps beside me, glaring at the detective.

“You know what I think, DeLuca?”

“Don’t give a shit,” I snarl, spitting beside his feet.

He glares up at me, pulls out a cigarette that he sticks in his mouth, and lights it.

“I think your wife found out about your mistress and confronted you. I think things got ugly, and maybe you didn’t mean to, but Graziella was all in your face. Maybe she threatened to rat you out to the public or divorce you and take away the millions you have access to through her family.”

I chuckle and glance at Gino. Jerking a thumb at the detective, I say, “This guy is clever. He thinks I give a shit about millions.”

Gino laughs and shakes his head.

We’re fucking billionaires, and if this asshole had done a portion of his homework, he’d know that. I don’t care to enlighten him though.

He nods and holds out his hands. “That’s okay. So maybe it wasn’t for the money, but I think she said some things that got under your skin. I think she pushed your buttons, and you lost your temper. Then you had your guys come in and stage it to look like a random murder.”

“You’re a dumb prick, you know that?”

“Either that...or that pretty little lady up there may have gotten jealous because you refuse to leave wifey, and she decided to end it for the Mrs.,” he says, swiping his hand across his throat.

“You know that might be a great idea if she’d been....” I slice my hand across my throat, mimicking him. “But seeing as she had a bullet to the fucking head and several in her chest, I don’t think your theory works,” I grunt, struggling not to beat the shit out of him.

“I think you know what I mean.”

“If you’ve got nothing but a bunch of guesses that you’re trying to trip me up on, I’ll be saying ciao!”

I turn away from him, and Gino opens the back door of my Bentley. Just as I sit down and before Gino closes the door, the detective leans down and says, “Think I’ll be paying the pretty lady a visit. I wonder if she thinks that she’s about to go down for the murder of her lover’s wife will she sing like a pretty little bird.”

I smirk at him and then wink. “You do that. Tell me how it goes for ya.”

Gino closes the door, and I sit back in my seat, closing my eyes. It’s time for a change.

My relocation can’t come soon enough.

America, if you thought Alessandro’s retaliation was a muthafucka, I’m your fucking worst nightmare.

Il diavolo sta arrivando!





## CHAPTER 14 – MARCO

**M**y transition to the States was delayed because of my wife's murder and subsequent investigation. Although the investigation is ongoing, I've been cleared of all charges.

My new home is purchased, furnished, and secured. All of my personal belongings I chose to take with me have been shipped to my new home. I wasn't initially happy about relocating, but now that my life has drastically changed, I'm ready for a fresh start.

The only thing I was required to do was fly to the States, which I did on my father's private plane accompanied by my brothers.

I'm sitting outside an apartment building in my new car as it idles. My first order of business was to get Piper's address, which was easier than it should have been.

After a couple of business meetings earlier in the day, I decided to drive by her shop, but I didn't go inside. The last thing I wanted to do was interrupt her business or bring unwanted attention to her.

Leaving there, I returned home to have dinner but couldn't move past the restlessness and irritation that have become close companions of mine lately. I glance at the clock on the dashboard again and breathe through my nostrils.

It's five minutes until eleven, and I know she's in there alone. When I last saw her, she did nothing to encourage my pursuit of her. If anything, she reminded me several times that I was married and she was about to be.

My situation has drastically changed, leaving me free to pursue her. As far as her fiancé is concerned, I could give a fuck about him. Thinking about how she moaned and squirted all over my tongue the last time we were together has my dick straining in my pants. When I remember how her lips fit perfectly around my cock, I damn near bust a nut.

That's all the motivation I need to get my ass out of this car and head to her apartment.

She answers the door within seconds.

"I don't think I've seen you in my dreams as much as I'm seeing you lately," she says, smiling.

I cup her face and she leans into my palm.

"You dream of me, Tesoro?"

Her eyes flick up to mine and she replies, "All the time."

My chest heaves up and down as I barge into her apartment, closing the door behind me.

"I know that look in your eyes, Marco," she says, backing away.

"What look?"

"The hungry look that tells me you're about to eat."

"You ready to feed me, Tesoro?" I ask, dropping to my knees on the oak hardwood floors and reaching under her nightgown.

I pull her panties to her ankles, and she steps out.

My fingers swipe across her slick entrance. "Already wet. Hmm...dreaming about me or fantasizing about someone else?"

"Truth?" she asks with a sparkle in her eyes.

"That's all I'll accept."

"I was just masturbating while I thought about the last time I saw you."

"You ain't gotta fucking masturbate when I'm around," I say, leaning in and pressing my tongue against her clit.

She arches and cries out. "Marco!"

I love how she calls my name at the height of pleasure.

Grabbing her legs, I lift her as I stand. When her pussy is positioned at my lips, I walk a few feet to her couch and sit down, maintaining our connection.

Piper releases a loud exhalation when I push my tongue into her flesh. She's pleased and her moistness greets my tongue, sending off explosive, delicious flavors. I've always loved eating pussy, but this woman was the one that made it a special treat. The first time that I ever tasted Piper's raw muskiness with its hints of honeysuckle, I was addicted.

Even now, I suck on her like I've just found my way home after losing my way for years. Maybe I did. When I walked out that door all those years ago, I lost a part of myself, and I gave up on the world.

It's not as easy to say 'I don't give a fuck' as people might think especially when you know there's someone out there that means more to you than your own life. Only one problem has stood between us all these years; my vow to the mafia to marry a woman I didn't love.

Graziella is gone, and I plan on making Piper mine forever. Before I go that route, though, I have to finish the mission I have started. When Grazie's murder is avenged, I will be free to be with Piper how I want.

She's like an uncaged animal who has been kept caged for years. Watching her arch her back, gyrate her hips, and beat her fists against the wall behind my head is liberating. Her arms shoot about wildly before settling into her hair, pulling at it as her face contorts into a cry.

Whimpers fall from her lips while tears seep from her closed eyelids. As beautiful as those expressions are, none matches her orgasmic face.

When Piper cums on my tongue, her brown eyes fly open, sparking lust and happiness. Her mouth opens wide, and no sound comes out, but a small smile drifts onto her lips as her eyes close again.

She slides down my face moving off my lap until she's standing.

"Come on," she says, reaching for my hand.

I take her hand and follow her as she leads me up the steel steps to her bedroom in the galley above the living area of her

loft apartment.

I look around the room with its large windows looking out onto the other buildings and the skyline of Atlantic Station. Exposed pipes and beams hang from concrete ceilings, and her glossy oak floors reflect the moonlight shining through the floor-to-ceiling windows.

A large platform bed takes up most of the room with its tufted brass headboard. Piper climbs onto the bed and gaps her legs open, beckoning me to come to her.

After I've removed my clothes and covered myself, I join her on the bed, laying my massive body on top of her thick one.

When I slide into her body, my jaw clenches. How the fuck did I manage to stay away from this woman for so long?

We move together as though our bodies are in perfect sync and harmony. Piper's tiny hands across the expanse of my back and her lips tasting every part of me that she can reach heats me up.

The deeper I ground into her flesh, the wider she opens herself to me. We can't get enough of each other, nor can we get close enough.

Our mouths meld together, and we hungrily drink from each other. Moans and groans disappear under the sound of our wet kisses. I graze her cheeks with my lips before pulling out of her to suck at her breasts.

Piper pulls me close with her legs, and I dive in, losing myself again. We are a rolling wave of crests and troughs until we're lost in the wave of a violent orgasm.

She screams and I roar as my dick jerks several times during my release. Her body clutches tightly all around me, locking me into place.

We lay there until our breathing evens out, and then I roll off her. I turn onto my side to face her and brush my lips against hers.

“What are you doing here, Marco?” she whispers as our lips brush.

“I relocated.”

“Here?” she asks, pulling back.

Smirking, I reply, “Yes.”

“Why?”

“Family business.”

She goes silent and closes her eyes.

“You don’t seem too happy about that.”

“I don’t know what this means, Marco.”

I brush my palm over her cheeks and then push a tendril of hair from her face.

“What do you want it to mean?”

She sits up and drops her head into her hands. She resists when I reach for her and try to pull her down again.

“You can’t pull me in and out of your world like this, Marco. It doesn’t look like it, but I have a life now.”

“Why did you let me in then? Why let me in your body as you did if you’re so committed, Piper?”

“The shit between Kenneth and myself isn’t so cut and dried. It’s convoluted, okay?”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning that he isn’t innocent himself and....”

“Why the fuck do you put up with him then?”

She whirls on me. “Because unlike you, he is good to me, Marco! He has given me a safe, stable, and secure life. He loves me. No, he isn’t perfect, but he’s what I need at this stage in my life.”

I watch as she gets up to go to the bathroom. Fear fills my insides because this reminds me of the last time she kicked me out of her life.

How can I argue with that when I know I'm not ready to commit to her the way she deserves? She deserves more than I can give her right now. To pull her into my life right now might destroy her.

I'm unsure if I have enough time before she's lost to me forever.





## CHAPTER 15 – PIPER

I blink my eyes open when the humming of the coil machine stop. Jason angles his head to the left and right before crossing an arm on top of the other. He glances at me with a thoughtful expression.

“Is that what you wanted?”

He uses his foot to pump the chair from a reclining position to a fully seated one, so I can see the mirror on my right. Black crossed swords etched in the middle of a red broken heart decorate the space behind my ear and hairline.

A sad smile lifts my lips. “Thanks, Jace. It’s beautiful. It’s better than I could have imagined.”

“Cool. I’m glad that you like it. I added the broken heart to soften the look of the crossed swords. Without the heart it has a more masculine look. The heart lends a feminine appeal to the tattoo, but it doesn’t take away from the edginess of the swords.”

I bite my bottom lip to keep my emotions in check. I will not cry about my past no matter how much it hurts.

This tattoo is a representation of what I had with Marco. I will always keep a little part of him with me. Jason’s decision to add the broken heart was perfect, and he has no idea why I think so. This fractured heart represents my pain when reflecting on my past with Marco. It’s a symbol of the piece of me that I gave away eight years ago and that I can never get back.

I decided to get this tattoo when he left my apartment this morning.

“You care to tell me what the crossed swords represent?” Jason asks as he grabs the cleaning solution to sanitize my tattoo and the surrounding area.

“No.”

“You’re being awfully close-lipped about this tattoo. Your tats have a story, and you’ve shared each with me. I’m guessing this has to do with something from your past?”

“You’re nosy, is what you can guess,” I reply sarcastically, giggling when he pokes me. “Hey! Quit that!” I laugh some more.

“Okay, mystery girl. I’ll let you keep your secret but remember that you owe me,” Jason says, grabbing the Dri-Loc pad to cover my tattoo.

“Thank you. A girl has to have her secrets.”

“Mm-hmm. Try telling your fiancé that.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Shrugging, Jason answers, “I thought I heard you say that he hates tats and didn’t want you to get any more.”

I leave my chair and turn to face Jason with my arms crossed. “I’m a grown woman. I decide when and if I’ll stop getting tats.”

He holds his arms up with his palms facing forward. “Hey, just an observation, is all.”

He winks and turns to clean his station.

“Thanks for the work, Jace.”

“Any time, doll,” he says, blowing a kiss at me.

I leave the work area and walk to the front where Lethal’s manning the reception desk.

“You can cut out early if you’d like,” I tell him.

“Can’t, doll. It’s almost the first of the month, and I have bills to pay.”

“I promise that you’ll have the same number of hours. Cut out and go home and enjoy your evening,” I say.

“Seriously?” he adds.

“Yep,” I reply, popping my lips and taking his place behind the reception desk. He lifts his black leather bag and heads for the door.

“You only have to tell me once especially if I’m getting paid. The bars are calling my name!” he shouts on his way out the door.

I chuckle and shake my head as I open the appointment book. There’s no one else on the schedule, so I will close the shop. We typically close at eight, and it’s a few minutes before seven.

“Jace!” I call out.

He pops his head around the doorway a minute later. “You call, Boss?”

“Yeah. I don’t see any more clients on the books for tonight for you or Zoey. Sean cut out earlier, and Lethal just left. You guys want to get out early too?”

“Sounds good to me. Maybe I can convince her to catch a movie before going home,” he says.

“You’re getting close,” I tease, winking my eye at him.

He’s had the biggest crush on Zoey since he came to work for me two years ago. The two of them have a beautiful friendship, but he wants more. I suspect she does too, but she’s always dating some random guys.

“We’re out of here,” Zoey says about five minutes later, with Jason hot on her tail. “We’re gonna catch a movie. Do you want to come?”

I see the look of disappointment on Jason’s face. “No thanks. I have a few things to finish here, and then I’m heading home for a hot bath and a glass of wine.”

“And that fine ass man of yours?” Zoey says with a glint in her eyes.

“No. He has some important meeting this evening, and I’m fed up with the politics. I’m going into hiding,” I say in a bored monotone.

She smiles. “Girl, appreciate the man. He wants to take care of you.”

I smile and don't tell her the truth. If I let Kenneth take care of me the way he wants, all of them will be out of a job or under new management.

After they leave and I lock up, I head to my office to finish some paperwork. The sound of keys rapping against the glass door breaks my concentration. When I glance at the clock, I realize it's well after nine, and I can't imagine who would be at the shop.

I stretch and yawn as I wonder if Kenneth stopped by on his way home. It would be out of his way to do it, but I can't think of anyone else who would be here at night.

I push back from my desk and head to the front. My heart pounds wildly in my chest as I look at the person peering back at me. He's almost a shadow in the darkness except for the light coloring of his tanned face.

My feet feel like they have leaden weights holding them in place. When he knocks harder but slower, and in measured beats, I have no choice but to move forward.

I lick my lips and try to tamp down the nervous butterflies in my belly.

Unlocking the door, I peer into the dark night to ensure I see no one out there that shouldn't be. I only see the usual crowd heading into the bars up and down the block.

"What are you doing here?" I ask after locking the door behind him.

"You know why I'm here, Piper."

I shove my hands into the back pockets of my jeans and rock nervously back on my feet.

"I don't know why."

"It's too fucking hard to stay away especially now that I'm here."

"We can't do this, Marco," I whisper.

He steps closer to me and bends his head looking into my eyes. "Didn't hear you. Say it louder," he challenges.

I glare up at him. That bastard heard me. He knows it's hard for me to speak those words, and now he's challenging me.

"I'm getting married, Marco."

"That supposed to mean something to me?"

"It means something to me," I argue.

His hand goes to the back of my neck, and he bends his head instantly, claiming my mouth. I feel powerless and rooted to the spot as he plunders my heart, wrecking my determination and destroying all my good intentions like the savage he is.

His kisses are what I once lived for. The touch of his hand at the nape of my neck and the tiny circles he makes behind my ear where the bandage is shoots desire in my heart and fire in my belly.

When he finally pulls back, his dark eyes narrow. "You keep telling me that you're getting married, but I can't tell that it means a damn thing to you."

"Because you keep doing shit like this!" I shout, pointing between us.

"If you really loved him then you wouldn't let me. If you gave a fuck about being his wife, I wouldn't be here doing this," he says, wrapping his arms underneath me and lifting me from the floor.

My legs wrap around his waist, and I don't feel powerless this time. If anything, I've intentionally pushed all thoughts of Kenneth and my fidelity to him out of my mind. I don't even try to ration what I'm doing the way I did last night when I thought about all the shit Kenneth is putting me through.

Instead, I lose myself in the feeling of what Marco stirs inside of me. He walks us back to the inking room with a platform bed and opens the door. This room is where we do tattoos for our clients' intimate areas.

After he closes the door, Marco lays me on the bed and covers my body with his. Hungrily he kisses me, demanding

that I open my mouth and legs wider for him as he presses against my core.

Once again, my legs wrap around his waist, and his fingers work between us as he unfastens my jeans. His cool hand slides down my panties and strokes me three times before inserting a finger inside me.

“Ahh!” I cry out as I arch my back and press against his fingers.

He clamps his lips over mine again as he continues fingering me. There’s only so much I can take before I’m flooded with passion. I tug at his pants. Marco lets up long enough to undo them and then covers himself with a condom.

When he slides inside of me and ruts around, I feel whole. I didn’t know how badly I needed him until this moment. How the fuck can I deny him anything that he asks when he makes my body feel this way? Marco keeps me on fire with his kisses and his touch.

Can I live a life with a man who doesn’t make me feel this way?

Don’t we both deserve more?

Marco thrusts into me hard and takes ownership with unapologetic aggression.

“God!” I scream, arching off the bed.

His arms wrap around me, pulling me close as he frantically pounds deeper inside me. Squeezing my eyes shut, I bite into his neck. Marco releases a guttural groan, but he doesn’t let up.

The faster and more intense he thrusts inside me, the only sound I can hear is his coarse breathing, random curse words flying from his lips, and the sound of him pounding into my wet flesh.

I don’t expect to cum so fast, but we haven’t been at it for long before he has my body clenching from head to toe. I hold my breath as the ferocious waves of orgasm take me under.

Marco cums seconds after me as his large, muscular arms clamp around me.

Although he's holding me tight, I feel secure and...right. As if this is where I belong.

When he finishes, he peppers my face with kisses and then brushes my lips in the sweetest kiss he's ever placed on me.

"What's this?" he asks, fingering the bandage behind my ear.

Marco is still inside me, and I know he feels my body tense when he asks that question.

"A tattoo."

He pulls back to gaze into my face. "Piper."

"It's a symbol of your name," I whisper.

He smirks. "Warlike. You remembered."

"Yes," I whisper.

Marco told me all those years ago that his name means 'warlike' or 'warring.' He'd said he felt his parents created his destiny when they named him that. Alternatively, his twin Massimo's name meant 'biggest,' 'greatest'.

"Why would you want to remember that?" he asked.

"To always keep a part of you with me. You are a warrior, Marco. Besides, it's what you do to me," I reply, sliding back from him.

He grabs his penis and staggers to the wall where the tattooing supplies are set up. I fix my clothes as he removes the condom with a paper towel before he pulls his pants up.

"What's that?"

"You keep me at war with myself, Marco. I know we're no good for each other, and I promise to stay away from you. That promise flies out of the window the minute I see you."

He's back at my side, fingering the bandage again. "I never meant to break your heart."

"Yeah? We all have good intentions, Marco. You never—"

He stops me midsentence by placing his hand against my lips. “Shhh.”

The frown that mars his face tells me something is wrong as he cocks his head a little.

“Someone else got the key to this place?” he asks.

My mind races frantically.

“Shit! Kenneth!”

“Your fiancé?”

“Yes. Lay on the bed on your side,” I whisper, grabbing a can of disinfectant spray and spraying the room.

“Why?” Marco grunts.

I glance at him, knowing he’s ready for a confrontation. Marco isn’t the type of man to avoid a confrontation and will stand strong against the repercussions. I don’t know if I can, though.

“Stay here and trust me. Please...lay on the bed,” I whisper, rushing to the door.

I throw a pleading glance in his direction, and though his nostrils are flared and his jaw is clenched, he does what I ask of him. I slip out of the door closing it behind me.

“Kenneth!” I say, forcing a smile to my lips and the nervousness out of my voice.

He grabs me and pulls me close to him before kissing my lips. “Thought I’d drop by your place to surprise you, but when I didn’t see you there, I came here instead. Figured you were working late.”

“Umm...yeah. A client needed a later appointment because of a late work schedule.”

“She in there?” he asks, nodding towards the closed door.

“Um, yes. *He’s* in there.”

“He?” Kenneth asks, lifting an eyebrow.

“Yes. He.”



“I thought that room was for tattoos in intimate spots.”

“It is.”

“Where could you possibly be tattooing a man at?” Kenneth asks, scrunching his face up.

“He’s getting Jacob’s ladder.”

“What?”

“It’s a piercing.”

“And you can’t do it out here?” he asks, spreading his arms around the shop.

“Not this type, no.”

“What type?”

I chew my bottom lip before I say, “It’s a penile piercing.”

“What?” he shouts angrily.

I pray Marco doesn’t come running out here feeling like I need him to rescue me.

“Look. I need you to calm down. I’ve been doing this for years, Kenneth. It’s not my first one, and it won’t be my last one.”

“Like hell, it won’t if I have anything to do with it.”

“And you won’t because this is my business.”

“I don’t like it,” he growls.

“Yeah? I don’t like it when you come to my house or shop smelling like another woman’s perfume. I have to grin and bear it and accept your explanation of ‘hugging voters and kissing babies,’” I say, using air quotes.

He works his lips furiously and shakes his head. “I’ll wait out here.”

“No. You’ll go home, and I’ll call you when I get home.”

“I’m not leaving you with—”

“You will. Look, Kenneth, this isn’t about your ego. This is my place of business, and my clients have the right to feel

comfortable getting serviced and not being evil-eyed by my fiancé and their city councilman. Besides, I just started this, and it will be hours before I'm done. Go home. I promise to call you when I'm done," I say, grabbing his hand and leading him to the door.

"I don't like this."

"I understand, but you have to trust me," I say, cringing at the irony of my words.

Kenneth shakes his head and kisses me on the cheek. I watch as he storms out the door and stomps down the street where his car is parked half a block away. My heart starts to settle down after I see him drive away.

"Say the word."

I turn to see Marco watching me in the doorway.

"What word?"

He shakes his head. "Tell me you want me, and I'll make him a memory."

"That sounds like a threat."

"I don't make threats, Tesoro. That's a promise."

A chill runs through me because I have the feeling we're discussing the murder of my fiancé. That's the last thing that I want.

"I'm fine, Marco. Please leave him alone."

He presses a kiss behind my left ear where there's no tattoo. "I'll always give you what you ask."



## CHAPTER 16 – PIPER

“What are you planning to do this weekend?” Rashida asks as we recline in the salon chairs side-by-side.

Business has been hopping lately, and the only thing that I want to do is rest. Unfortunately, that won't be happening. My weekend is starting with a gala at the High Museum of Art tonight.

Kenneth wastes no time getting his funding together for his future Senate campaign. It's slated to be an all-night event, and the first thing I've been commissioned to do is get my hair, nails, and feet done. My hair appointment was earlier this morning, and I'm taking care of the mani-pedi situation while getting some much-needed girl time in with Rashida.

Kenneth will accompany me at noon for a light lunch followed by a fitting with a professional dresser because he doesn't trust my taste in evening gowns.

“All I want to do is read a good book, binge-watch some movies on Netflix, and pig out on a gallon of cherry-walnut ice cream. Yum!” I giggle.

“Then why don't you do that?”

Rolling my eyes and turning my head to the side to make eye contact with Rashida, I reply, “You know why.”

“Do you really have to attend those business luncheons with him?”

“Yes. Two of them, a fundraiser and a dinner.”

“Damn, what would he have done if you couldn't get someone to cover your clients?” she asks.

“I don't know, Rah, but I'm starting to worry.”

“About what?” she asks, lifting and propping her elbows on her armrest.

Her nail tech pats her arm firmly and admonishes her about potentially messing up her freshly painted fingernails.

“Sorry,” she says, wrinkling up her nose at the woman before turning her gaze back to me. “What’re you worrying about?”

Shrugging, I stare at the grey color I’ve chosen and second-guess it for the thousandth time. I know that Kenneth wanted me to wear a nude shade on my nails, but I never get manicures and damn sure don’t wear polish.

“Just that...well, Kenneth’s occasionally mentioned something about my business.”

“Something like?” Rashida prompts, lifting an eyebrow.

“Like one day I won’t have to work so hard, and someday soon I’ll have my hands full with our children, and there’ll be no time for my business.”

“So, what’re you saying? He wants you to sell your shop and give up your life’s work?”

I nod slowly. “I think he might eventually ask me to.”

“And?”

“And what?”

“What’s your response? I mean, you love what you do, P.”

Inhaling deeply, I reply, “I do.”

“Why the hell am I hearing a ‘but,’ Piper? I’d better not be hearing a ‘but’! His ass put that ‘but’ there, didn’t he?” she says, getting louder with each question.

Her nail tech taps her on the back of her hand and frowns.

“Sorry,” she says and then turns back to me. “No ‘but,’ Piper,” she comments sternly.

“Look, I’m not about to close my shop if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“Good!”

“I may take a sabbatical though.”

“For what?”

Shrugging, I reply, “Not right away, but there will come a time when I need to dedicate myself to helping Kenneth on the campaign trail. I want to be there by his side helping his dreams come true.”

“What about your dreams, P? You’ve dreamt of owning your own shop and being a tattoo artist since Mrs. Foster-Martin caught you spray painting the side of the gym and took you under her wing in fifth grade.”

I smile at the memory of my old fifth-grade teacher. She was so loving and patient when I struggled in school after my leukemia diagnosis. I missed weeks from school at the end of my fourth-grade year and a couple of months at the start of my fifth-grade year. Mrs. Foster-Martin helped me catch up and stay on track so I wasn’t kept back. She was an artist too who painted at night when she didn’t have classwork to grade.

“Dreams change, Rah. I want to be a wife and mother and...maybe do my part in the community.”

She lifts an eyebrow and says, “This is news to me.”

“Yeah.”

“Since when have you been a ‘do my part in the community sort of person’?”

“I’m growing and maturing,” I defend.

“Mm-hm.”

“What? I am!”

“I’m not saying that you aren’t. I’m just saying that be sure the change in you is manifested by a sincere desire to grow and develop as a person not because someone is forcing you to.”

“I know. I think that together he and I can do great things.”

She shakes her head and mutters, “Okay, I guess.”

I reach across the armrests of our chairs and grab her free hand with mine. Giving it a gentle squeeze, I offer her a smile and say, “This isn’t only about him. I know what I’m doing, and I won’t get hurt. Okay?”

She forces a smile to her lips, nods her head, and says, “Okay.”



I LOOK AROUND THE ROOM at the guests, and I can't help but think that tonight is a Who's Who of Atlanta socialite and celebrity life. The governor, mayor, and several city councilmen and women are here along with key figures from the local media. CEOs of well-known businesses, attorneys, athletes, and other notable celebrities all rub elbows.

“How do you know all of these people?” I whisper to Kenneth.

He smiles down at me and winks an eye. This man of mine is arrogant on top of everything else that he is.

“You underestimate your man, my love. I've worked hard to cultivate my network, but aside from that, people want to see me in the Senate.”

“Why though? You've not proven yourself yet.”

“Proven myself? I worked my ass off to get the resolution for three-quarters of a million dollars worth of training for our police officers each year,” he hisses.

“Yes, and as I recall, that was up against the resolution to provide funding for new computers for the inner-city schools in the metro area along with services to provide summer lunches for those same children and starting the plans for a new park in Old Fourth Ward,” I argue.

“Something has to take a back seat, honey,” he says, squeezing my fingers.

“Will it always be this way? The things that serve your best interest take precedence over mine?”

“I didn't know that those things mattered to you. There will come another time when you can get your interests served.”

“Or what about when a constituent presses you to vote a certain way? Is that the way you’ll lean regardless of my feelings or the impact it may have on me?” I ask.

“She’s starting to think like a Senator’s wife, my boy,” Graham Parks, a local judge, says, coming up behind us and clapping Kenneth on the back.

Kenneth’s red skin turns redder after realizing our argument was overheard.

“And the sooner she realizes the argument is a moot point, the happier she’ll be,” Graham’s wife, Amy Parks, says, smiling comfortingly at me.

Kenneth smiles and says, “Your Honor, Mrs. Parks, this is my fiancée, Piper Chambers. Piper, this is the Honorable Graham Parks and his lovely wife, Amy Parks.”

I shake Mrs. Parks’ hand and smile at them both. “It’s a pleasure to meet you both.”

“The pleasure is all mine,” Judge Parks says, taking my hand in his and then kissing it as he looks up at me and winks.

I feel slimy and even more so when I notice that Mrs. Parks looks away wearing an uncomfortable smile. Something about how she’s handling this says that it’s not the first time and that she’s accustomed to his behavior.

I pull my hand back, and he lifts an eyebrow. Kenneth squeezes an arm tightly around my waist.

“We were just discussing—” he begins before the judge cuts him off.

“Oh, I heard what you were discussing. There’s someone else that I’d like you to meet,” the judge says, nodding his head toward a group of men across the room.

“Someone that will be beneficial to raising funds for my future campaign, I hope,” Kenneth says teasingly as he walks away with Judge Parks.

Mrs. Parks and I follow behind the men, and I hear Judge Parks say, “These men could fund your entire campaign if they chose to or they could kill it so make sure that you kiss ass.”



“Grown men still playing little boys’ games,” Mrs. Parks mutters.

I smile wanly at her. “Does it ever change?” I ask.

She rolls her eyes and then gives me a warning look. Mrs. Parks stops walking and places two hands on my shoulder, turning me to face her. “Honey, the sooner you learn to accept that they will never see things our way and getting in the way will only get you hurt, the sooner you’ll find peace and happiness.”

“But I don’t want to sit back and accept whatever comes. This city means a lot to me, and I’m passionate about it, the families that our communities serve, and—”

“So, take that passion and pour it into a charity, a function, or a foundation even.”

A smile comes to my lips no sooner than she speaks the words. My mind turns back to earlier when I was talking to Rashida. I don’t know where all this passion comes from because I’ve never concerned myself with things like this.

Could it be that I’m finding ways to challenge my fiancé and looking for reasons to be combative even to the point of breaking up? If I am, that reason is none other than Marco DeLuca. I douse that thought because I don’t want Rashida to suspect anything. I haven’t shared our two nights together with anyone.

“I would even be willing to help you,” she says, placing a hand on my arm.

“Really?”

“Yes, I would—”

“Honey, come here. I want to introduce the two of you,” Judge Parks says.

We turn and see him waving us over, and Kenneth is smiling a broad smile as well, waving me over.

My feet are firmly rooted in place as is my smile. I don’t fucking believe it.

All three of them are sexy, gorgeous men. One is beautiful, that would be Alessandro, and the twins are ruggedly handsome in a thuggish sort of way. The earring Marco wears in his right ear is not in place nor is the rope chain he usually wears around his neck.

Those two pieces of jewelry have been a consistent part of his attire since I've known him. Tonight, Marco looks like a different man; dangerously so. I'm familiar with every inch of his body, but most of that is covered tonight. He's wearing a black suit with a bow tie. He has a cigar in his hand, and his dark brown hair is carefully smoothed into place and the errant loc that usually goes astray is missing.

He's staring dangerously at me, and I'm scared as hell that he's about to ruin my night.

What the hell is he doing here? I've never known him to attend functions like this in the past. I can feel the fury seeping off him as we draw nearer to him.

His twin, Massimo, looks concerned, but Alessandro is smirking.

"Kenneth, this is Mr. Alessandro DeLuca and his brothers, Massimo and Marco DeLuca. Gentlemen, this is Kenneth Paxton, tonight's guest of honor."

They exchange greetings, but my eyes never leave Marco's and his never leave mine. My heart is thundering loudly in my chest.

"Gentlemen, this is my fiancée, the lovely Piper Chambers," Kenneth introduces me.

Somehow, I pull my eyes from Marco's as I shake Alessandro's hand first and then Massimo's, saying to both men, "It's a pleasure to meet you."

Alessandro is still smirking, but Massimo now looks even more concerned than before. Of course, they know who I am and what I was to Marco. Thankfully, they play along for my sake, but no one knows what Marco will do or say.

When I shake his hand, he grabs mine, turns it over, places his lips against my palm, and kisses it sweetly.

“Ma come sei bella! Piper, tu sarai mia.”

There’s a titter of nervous laughter all around us when he releases my hand, and Alessandro clears his throat while Massimo shoots a warning glare at Marco.

“What did you say?” Judge Parks asks.

“It was for the lady’s ears only,” Marco remarks in a reprimanding tone.

“It sounded lovely,” Mrs. Parks responds.

Kenneth is chuckling nervously by my side, but I can feel his anger.

“Well, Mr. DeLuca, should I watch my fiancée before you sweep her off her feet?”

Marco does not respond and keeps his gaze trained on me. I shift uncomfortably as Kenneth drapes an arm around my shoulder, and he, Alessandro, and Judge Parks talk about donations.

“Excuse us. I need to have a word with my brother,” Massimo says, nodding at the group as he plants a firm hand on Marco’s shoulder.

Marco glances at me one final time before leaving with his identical twin. Though they look exactly alike, they’re dressed differently and their mannerisms are completely different. Massimo was always the relaxed twin who was easygoing and mild-mannered. Although I believe, like the other brothers, he’s as dangerous. Fortunately, he’s not as quick-tempered as Marco, and his anger doesn’t seem as difficult to restrain as Marco’s can often be.

“If you gentlemen don’t mind, I’d like to share a dance with my fiancée,” I hear Kenneth finally say beside me.

I guess they have finished talking about donations, but I don’t know. Honestly, I haven’t been paying any attention since Marco said those words to me. I wonder what he said. Whatever it was, it didn’t feel like a threat but something delicious and exciting.

Chills flowed over my arms and down my back, and heat spiraled in my belly melting into a liquid pool of desire between my thighs when he spoke. I'm thankful for the crimson dress that I'm wearing tonight. I'd initially wanted a black sleeveless gown, but Kenneth was outraged at the thought of everyone seeing the tattoos on my arms, neck, and shoulders.

The gown that I'm wearing has long sleeves and a plunging neckline that cuts a deep path between my breasts. The cut is so deep that I don't wear a bra, but after he worried that people might see my nipple piercings, I conceded to wearing pasties.

On the other hand, the slit in my gown is high enough that depending on how I turn, you might see the beautiful African American woman with long, flowing braids on my thigh. She's my vision of the symbol of Virgo which is my zodiac sign.

Kenneth's hand wraps around my waist, and as I stare at him, he gazes over my head. I'm only a couple inches shorter than him in the heels which reduces our height's six-inch disparity to two inches.

"What the hell was that all about?" he asks me through clenched teeth.

"What?" I ask, playing dumb.

"You know what. The Italian lover spoke to you in a language only you and he understood."

"I didn't understand him, Kenneth. It's presumptuous of you to believe that I understood him when you and I both know the only language I speak is English."

"You seemed comfortable with him, and he seemed awfully familiar with you."

My gut is clenching and twisting me inside out with what I need to share versus not sharing with him. Before I can make up my mind one way or the other, Judge Parks taps Kenneth on the shoulder and says, "Senator Umboldt is here."

Kenneth's eyes light up, and he smiles. "We've been waiting all night for him."

“Exactly. This isn’t an introduction that you can afford to miss,” Judge Parks says.

“I’ll be right back, honey,” Kenneth says, kissing me on the cheek.

Standing in the middle of the dance floor alone, I see people dancing, drinking, and chatting. I hurry off the dance floor as my cheeks redden with humiliation. The least the asshole could have done was escort me off the floor or take me with him to meet whomever he was meeting. I guess he’s embarrassed by what happened earlier.

I don’t give a shit. I sit at the bar, and Massimo sits next to me moments later. I can tell them apart because Massimo wears his hair in a much shorter cut than Marco’s, and he wears a grey suit tonight and Marco is in all black.

“Are you okay?” he asks.

I nod, and he signals the bartender.

“What are you drinking?” Massimo asks.

“A cosmopolitan,” I reply, hoping my choice of drinks doesn’t embarrass my fiancée.

“A cosmopolitan for the lady and a scotch on the rocks for me,” he says.

When the bartender leaves to make our drinks, Massimo turns to me. “Are you sure you’re okay?” he asks, glancing at my trembling hands. Thankfully, he can’t see the butterfly storm parading in my belly.

“I will be. I just...it was uncomfortable, you know?”

“My brother did not make that any easier for you, I presume.”

“No, he did not. I don’t understand why he would do something like that. I mean, I left him alone. He went on with his life, and I went on with mine. It was foolish of me to become involved with a married man all those years ago, but I don’t want to go down that road again. Besides, I’m about to get married myself, and I don’t need Marco ruining that for me.”

The bartender returns with our drinks.

“Thank you,” I say softly. He nods and goes to attend to another customer.

Massimo is staring at me and there’s sadness in his eyes.

“What?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “Nothing. Nothing at all.”

“Why do people say that when there really is something?”

Massimo narrows his eyes. “Would it make a difference if you knew?”

“It might.”

“Would it change whether or not you marry that man or how receptive you were to my brother’s advances?”

My eyes widen, and I want to know more than ever what he’s not sharing with me. Yet, I know that I can’t risk my heart again.

“No.”

“Then as I said, ‘it’s nothing’.”

“Where is he now?”

“He left.”

“Without saying goodbye?”

“Did you see the way that your fiancé looked? He was uncomfortable with Marco’s attention to you. The worst thing Marco could do is remain here and have another encounter with your fiancé. If he were to say or do anything to offend Marco, we both know that would not end well,” Massimo says, and I know he’s telling the truth.

He downs his drink and places his glass firmly on the bar. “It was a pleasure seeing you again, Piper.”

“Thank you, Massimo. It was a pleasure for me, as well.”

As he begins to walk off, I think about something. “Massimo?” I call out.

He turns back. “Yes?”

“What did he say? When he was speaking Italian, I mean.”

Massimo’s eyes lower to the floor, and when he looks back at me again, the sadness is gone and in its place is concern.

“He said you were beautiful and will be his.”

Massimo turns and walks away, and my heart rages in my chest in confusion, fear, worry, and anticipation.

I don’t know when or how, but I know it will happen because Marco DeLuca is a man of his word.





## CHAPTER 17 – MARCO

I press the knife deeper into his face until a sliver of blood seeps to the surface. Grabbing his jaw, I squeeze it hard enough to break it but stop just before I do. I pull the knife back and look at the bright drop of blood on the gleaming surface of the blade.

I squeeze the man's neck tightly until he opens his mouth gasping for air. I place the knife into his mouth and force his jaws shut.

“Do you like that, huh? The taste of your own blood?” I ask as he gags. “The taste of blood excites me,” I growl so low that only he can hear me.

His jaw clenches, and I squeeze harder. “You want to try me muthafucka!”

His nostrils flare, and snot drips from his nose. He can't move his head to indicate 'no' or his mouth to say it. He closes his eyes tightly, and the first teardrop seeps from under them.

“We'll ask you one last time. Where can we find Rocco Albero?” Alessandro asks.

“Let up so we can hear him, Marco,” Antonio says.

I don't listen but squeeze harder still until he pisses himself.

“Marco!”

“Tony, I will fucking kill him!”

Antonio steps beside me and whispers, “I know you will, but we need the information. Otherwise, it's a waste of energy.”

I slam Eric's head into the wall before walking back to the door.

“Where're you going?” Massimo asks.

“Smoke.”

He nods and turns back to where Antonio and Alessandro are cornering the bastard. When I step outside, the sunshine hits my face like a blinding light after being in the dark for so long. I pull the pack of cigarettes from my pocket and tap one out.

Lighting it, my mind travels back thinking about Grazi and how I failed her. Sure, she fucked me over, but she didn't deserve to die because I didn't protect her. I should have let her go from the start instead of keeping her around. All it did was create more pain for her. For me. I should've said, 'fuck the commitment,' and 'fuck the vow'.

Fuck!

I recall the scent of blood that stained her bed, the pale tint of her skin, and how I'd never told her that I forgave her even after she'd begged me repeatedly. I was so intent on punishing her that I never gave her a chance.

The bastard who did this to her deserves to die and so does his family. Every. Fucking. Single. One. Of. Them.

I will kill each of them after they suffer executioner style.

I take one last puff and toss the cigarette to the ground. Stomping it out with my shoe, I kneel and pick up the cigarette butt, tucking it into the front of my trousers. I hop into the car, leaving my brothers and this miserable scene behind.

Only for a moment.

My phone doesn't ring until ten minutes into my drive. Seeing Massimo's name, I ignore it and keep driving. He calls again and then when he can't get me, Tony calls next and then Ales.

It takes me eighteen minutes to get to my destination. A drive that might normally take thirty. Pulling around into the back alley, I park my car between the buildings and leave it idling. No one can see it from here.

Ermes is a brilliant motherfucker. Not only was he able to find out where Rocco was staying, although he's moved on since yesterday, he was able to give me details on the cousin he's here to visit, Eric Marino.

I grab my gun and check it before I run to the building and tap on the back door. Since I discovered that Rocco was involved, I've had men watch his family's movements. I've learned that they're creatures of habit, sticking to a solid routine. That's the dumbest fucking thing anyone can do especially when you're into criminal activities.

I glance at my watch and count down from ten. Stepping to the left of the door, I hide behind the garbage can just as the door opens. She steps out her hair pulled back in a long, blonde ponytail, and looks around before she lugs the large, black bag to the dumpster.

She hoists it up and over her shoulder and just as it lands with a plop in the bottom of the dumpster, I step out from the side, gun aimed at her head.

"If you utter a fucking sound, I will put this bullet in your head right now."

Her blue eyes stretch wide, and she nods.

"Your husband wants to see you one last time before he dies. Figure I can grant him that one wish."

"Eric? Where's he?" she cries.

"You don't get to ask fucking questions. Walk to that car at the end of the alley."

"I...I..." she stammers.

I slap her.

"Do what the fuck I say before you get worse than that," I growl as her hand goes to touch the red handprint on the left side of her face.

Despite the innocent victim role she's playing, I know who this bitch is, and I know what she did.

She nods and begins to turn around slowly. I stay a few paces behind, refusing to get close enough for her to try fast moves. When we reach the end of the alley, I click the button on my key fob to open the trunk.

"Get in," I growl.

“Please, Mister. I...I can't take dark spaces or....”

“You'll take what the fuck I say take, or you'll be taking my cock down your throat and a bullet in your head,” I bluff.

Hell yeah, I'll kill her, but I'm not into sharing my dick with anyone who isn't a willing participant. The threat works so that's all that matters. She climbs into the trunk, and I close it and hop inside the car. Just as I pull off, I see the back door to her restaurant begin to open.

The ride back is a twenty-minute drive. This time when Tony calls, I answer.

“Where the fuck are you, Marco?”

“Doing what the fuck you couldn't.”

“Get your ass back here so we can do what we came to do and then get out of here.”

“I'll be there in five minutes. You got a location yet?”

“No. Not really.”

“Tony, you and Ales are getting soft on me. I expected more from you,” I grunt as I hang up the phone.

When I pull up to the abandoned cabin in the woods, I head back inside and tell Nico and Massimo to join me outside.

“Cover this trunk while I open it,” I instruct.

“The fuck have you done, Marco?” Massimo asks, getting into position as he aims his gun at the trunk.

Nico nods, wanting the same answer. I unlock it and then pop open the trunk. She's cowering inside with her face a mess of tears.

When I pull her from the car, my brothers glance at me, and Nico grimaces while Massimo rolls his eyes.

“Get the fuck out of the car,” I order, jerking her forward.

She climbs out, and when she stands before me, she looks between the three of us.

“Please...don't hurt me. Don't rape me.”

“Nah, it’s not that type of party, Ms. Irresistible,” Nico sneers, looking down at her in distaste.

“Yeah, just the revenge business,” Massimo says.

“I...I haven’t done anything,” she whimpers.

I snatch her by the arm and pull her forward toward the cabin.

The sliver of light shines through when the door opens again and outlines Lauren’s form.

“Lauren!” Eric screams, and she bolts to where he’s tied to a chair.

“You bastards!” he shouts as his wife throws her arms around him, almost knocking him back.

Antonio is quick to jerk her back and away from Eric.

“Give us the answers we need, and you can have your wife all to yourself again,” Alessandro says. “Fuck us around, and she’ll be eating the same metal that you will.”

“Eric, please,” Lauren cries. “Tell them what they want to know!”

“I told you! I don’t know a damn thing!” he barks, glaring at me.

I slowly stalk towards him with my eyes on his wife, never breaking her gaze.

“Eric! Tell him something!” she cries as I snatch her arm.

I pull her body close to mine and grip her tightly. Pressing the blade of my knife against her throat, I wait until I see that trickle of blood, and then I sniff it, causing her to shudder.

“I’ll fucking kill you!” he screams.

“The way that you fuckers killed my wife?”

I take the knife and throw it, landing it in his thigh. He screams bloody murder, and Lauren jerks trying to break my grip on her.

“Please,” she whispers.

“You knew. You knew what they would do to her and did nothing to stop them.”

“I didn’t know!” she cries. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You fucking knew!” I growl.

“Marco! Right here! Now!” Massimo growls, standing in front of me.

My eyes meet his.

“Are you going fucking insane?”

Laughing, I remind him, “Did that years ago.”

“She doesn’t know anything, Marco,” Alessandro says.

I look at her as I answer Alessandro. “This bitch was there. Rocco told me his cousins from America were in town on vacation. He left early the day before to spend time with them. I thought nothing about it when he came back by the house that evening. I saw them on the cameras in the car with him. At the time, I thought he was stopping by to pick up something he’d left behind, but I know better now. He was plotting. This bitch knew about the planned break-in and did nothing to stop them.”

I hear a faint gasp, which lets me know I’ve guessed right.

“You knew your husband and his cousin were coming to my house, and you heard their plans. Did you call the police? Did you tell them not to do it? Did you even fucking call the police when they came back with her blood on their hands?” I thunder.

She sobs and shakes her head. “I...I couldn’t. I was scared of them!”

“I want her tied up,” I say to Nico.

He nods and grabs the rope to secure her hands like he’d done her husband earlier.

“All I want is Rocco’s location,” Alessandro says.

“Rocco is at a little cottage in Jackson. I think it belonged to his brother-in-law,” Eric cries out as I place my gun to his wife’s head. “He’s hiding there until the heat dies down.”

“Twenty-three Rhodes Place. It’s...it’s...a little br...brown and white c...c...cottage,” Lauren stammers.

I shove Lauren towards Nico. “I want her on the ground now!”

“What if we don’t have all the answers yet? Maybe hold off on what you wanna do,” Nico suggests.

I look at Eric and his wife, ignoring my brother. “Get on your knees and beg my brothers for your lives!”

They do as I order, begging and crying to Ales, Tony, Nico, and Massimo.

As soon as they start, I press the gun to the back of Lauren’s head. I cock the pistol and pull the trigger and the blood splattered all over Nico’s shoes.

“What the fuck!” Eric shouts just before I turn and do the same thing to him.

Massimo jumps back out of the way.

“Goddamnit!” Nico cries out. “You didn’t have to fucking mess up my suede shoes!” Nico says, staring down at his black suede shoes in irritation.

“Shut the fuck up. We’ll get you some more god damn black suede shoes,” Massimo says before staring at me.

After several seconds he takes a step forward and rests one hand on my shoulder, his gaze meeting mine.

“We’ll get him.”

I nod and stalk off.

I don’t bother trying to explain my insanity anymore. People are always trying to figure out what triggered my madness. There’s nothing to figure out. Like most people, I haven’t gone through a traumatic situation in life.

I was just fucking born this way.

Full of rage. Full of madness. Full of insanity. A fucking  
savage to the heart.





## CHAPTER 18 – PIPER

**K**enneth announced his intentions to run for city council president the night of the ball. He hadn't even discussed it with me yet, but I know our lives will be scrutinized now. With Marco's threat hanging over my head and knowing the public will look closely at Kenneth and me, I can't breathe.

There's an ominous cloud hanging over my head most days, and on others, I feel as if I'm buried under a ton of sand. There's no one that I can talk to. Telling Kenneth the truth would destroy him and damage us, leaving Rashida.

She's so pro-Marco I know that she'd run and tell Kenneth herself to get him to leave me. She loves me, but sometimes I think she hates Kenneth more.

Of course, I can't talk to Marco because he wants me bad enough to hurt Kenneth.

I stare at the papers in my hand again, and my stomach knots up. I'll confront Kenneth about this tonight when he comes to my place. How dare that asshole try to sell my shop from under me.

Lucky for me, the owner of the antique shop next door has connections. Ron Walker came to my shop earlier this morning with some paperwork he'd received from his friend. Apparently, Kenneth has been negotiating to sell my shop behind my back.

The document is a contract with a realtor permitting him to find a buyer for my shop. Sadness fills my heart when I look at the hastily scrawled signature closely resembling mine.

I swipe at the tears filling my eyes when I hear the chimes tinkle over the shop door. It's a few minutes after eight on a weekday, earlier than our normal opening time.

"Hey," I greet Marco as he locks the door behind him.

I called him last night and asked him to meet me before the shop opened.

He sits in the chair opposite mine, his eyes narrowing as he watches me closely.

“Am I the reason for those tears?”

“No,” I say softly, smiling at him as I place the document on the counter behind me. “There’s so much going on in my life right now, Marco.”

“Your fiancé?”

“Among other things.”

“All you have to do is—”

“I know, Marco. Say the word, and you’ll give me the world. Unfortunately, when I wanted the world from you, you weren’t willing to give it to me.”

“What do you want, Piper?”

“I want to know why you showed up in my life again. I want to know why you’re coming after me and don’t respect that I’m getting married.”

“Are those questions you need an answer to?” he asks, glaring at me.

“Yes.”

“I think you already know the answers. When I walked away, I thought I was doing the right thing. I thought I was protecting your heart, and all I did was make a mistake that cost us years apart.”

“We should never have been, Marco. You know this as well as I do.”

He stands and comes to lean against the counter behind me. I swivel in my chair to face him.

“We always should have been.”

“All we had was hot sex, Marco, and the thrill of being together, knowing we shouldn’t have been. It was nothing more than an adrenaline rush between two people. People could have gotten hurt...if they didn’t,” I add, thinking about his wife and myself.

“People did get hurt. I hurt you. I hurt... losing you hurt me more than staying did. It was what I was willing to do to give you what you thought you needed.”

“It was what I needed to become stronger, Marco. You didn’t need me.”

“Yes, I did.”

“For what? You could have had any woman to have sex with.”

“Do you think that’s all I wanted you for? Don’t you know you were the first woman I’d been with who got me? You were the only woman I could be around who expected nothing from me. I could let my guard down and be myself with you. The life that I live isn’t an easy one, Piper. I need a place where I can go to hide away from the world and still be safe. You were my place. You gave me the peace and freedom I needed to be myself.”

“I wanted to be that for you, but I needed more, Marco.”

“I know that, Piper. Why do you think that I walked away when you told me to? I don’t take orders from people; I give them. But I loved you enough to give you what you thought you needed, even at the cost of hurting myself.”

Tears fill my eyes because I know what I must say to him won’t be easy. We’ve been down this road before. Even with what I know about Kenneth, he’s my safer bet. I can talk to Kenneth about the shit he’s pulling and get him back in order. I can’t compete with the mafia, and I damn sure can’t compete with a vow made to the don.

Hell, I don’t think I want to. They’d fuck my life up as easily as I can step on an ant outside on the sidewalk.

“I need you to do that again, Marco. Love me enough to let me go.”

“Why are you asking me that, Tesoro?” he asks, kneeling before me.

“Because I’m not strong enough to do it. I’m not strong enough to walk away from you again or resist you when you

return,” I whisper.

“Then why are you doing it?”

“Because I love you so much that it hurts me. I’m not strong enough to be with you either, Marco. I can’t be what or who you need me to be. I need the safety net that Kenneth’s lifestyle provides. Worrying about you every time you walk out the door isn’t the life I want to live.”

He doesn’t say anything. His eyes close as if he’s trying to shut my words out, but he and I both know the truth. We know that his life is dangerous and unpredictable. Beyond that is the fear that he’ll never completely be mine.

I refuse to live as a side chick or compete with his wife. I bite my bottom lip and press my thumbs into my eye sockets.

“Tesoro, I can try to stay away from you, but I can’t promise it will be successful. Living in your city will always keep you in my mind. Your fiancé is running for city council president. I’m sure we’ll run into each other again, and if we do, I don’t know how easy it will be to keep my hands, lips, or dick to myself. You have no idea how hard it was not to snatch you up that night at the gala and fuck you in a closet, in a stall, or out in the fucking parking lot.”

“You scare me, Marco.”

His fingers swipe across my lips. “I don’t mean to, baby.”

“I know you don’t, but every time you come around, I’m worried that you’ll tell Kenneth who you are. I worry that you’ll tell him what we’ve done. Losing that man is not an option for me now. If anything, it would destroy me. It would give them ammunition to drag his name through the mud if anyone found out about you and me. I’m not sure that my relationship with him could withstand that.”

Marco’s head tilts and his nostrils flare. “You’re fucking asking me to walk away again.”

It’s a pronouncement, not a question, but I nod.

“I’ll try, but I can’t promise you what the results will be, Tesoro. A subtle scent, the sound of a woman’s laughter, a

gentle smile, or a beautiful tattoo is all it takes to bring back memories of you. Then like a hound dog with a scent, I'm on the hunt for you, searching everywhere until I pick up your trail."

I bite my bottom lip as my heart threatens to rip from my chest.

"Can you at least try?"

He stands and pulls me to stand with him. I want to melt into him when his arms wrap around my waist. My head rests on his chest, and he buries his face atop my curls.

"Ci proverò. I'll try," he whispers reassuringly into my hair.

I tilt my head back as I look into his eyes. I can see the hurt and pain there, and wish I weren't the cause, but I know I have no choice.

Marco lowers his head and presses his lips against mine as his hands cup my ass. He pulls me into his rock-hard cock, and I bounce, jumping into his arms. I press my core down onto him, knowing he can feel the heat between my thighs.

"Damn it, Marco!" I moan as he rocks into me.

He walks me back to my office, and I wonder if I'll ever look at this place the same as when he sits me on the couch. While he undresses, I pull my leggings and panties down and spread my legs for him.

Damn it, I'm such a whore when it comes to this man. I often tell myself that if I were to see him after I'm married that I wouldn't fuck with him, but I don't know how true that is.

His teeth jerk the hem of my tee shirt up until it rests just over my breasts. Marco kisses my belly and the space between my breasts before he bites one nipple and then the other causing me to hiss.

My eyes close when he licks my earlobe and sucks my lips into his. Every touch and every kiss this man shares with me makes my body come alive. He makes me feel like a woman who is desirable and sexy and very much wanted.

When he slides into me, I lose myself in the high of Marco DeLuca. When our bodies come together this way, he takes me higher than any joint ever could.

I feel like I'm entering a dreamlike state I never want to escape. My legs wrap around his hard back, and I love how we're connected; my honeyed, supple body against his tawny, rough, hard body.

We slide back and forth, up and down each other's body exchanging kisses, touches, and little pinches. If this is my last time saying goodbye to this man, why shouldn't it be this sweet and passionate?

With that realization come the tears that seep from my eyes. I will never know this again. I will never be touched, kissed, or made love to like this again.

Marco's hand smooths down the curve of my breast before he palms it while covering the other with his lips. When he bites into the flesh, I arch my back, rocking my hips to meet him on a downward thrust that steals my breath.

The pain, the pleasure, the torment is more than I can withstand, and before I know it, I'm cumming all around his hard, throbbing dick. Marco keeps pumping and huffing little puffs of breath as he gives more than he takes until I feel the telling jerk of his dick inside my slit.

When he finally pulls free, it's not to catch his breath. He lowers to his knees and spreads my legs wide before clamping his mouth over my pussy and greedily sucking. He's loud and boisterous with it, and his head moves in furious, uncoordinated circles.

His finger slips between his lips and my pussy to pinch my clitoris, and I cry out as another wave washes over me.

"Damn it, Marco!" I scream, grabbing a handful of his hair as my back arches so that my pussy meets his mouth, giving him all that he demands.

I thought I was done when he made me cum with his dick, but that was just an appetizer. Nothing more than a teaser for the real meal. Although he's feasting on me, I'm being fed too.

His tongue, lips, and teeth serve me the most pleasurable and intense course I've ever enjoyed. Who needs fireworks when a man can make your pussy explode the way that Marco is doing mine?

"Fuck!" I scream, pumping my hips vigorously as my toes curl and my body clenches around his neck, head, and shoulders.

He slurps me up and cleanses me with attentive licks until he's done, and I'm left panting on the sofa. I lay here trying to catch my breath as he washes with the wipes on my desk.

By the time I come down again, he's ready to leave. I follow him to the door, and we don't say a word until he unlocks it and stands in the doorway.

"I promise that I won't fuck up your life, Piper," he says.

When he leans down and kisses me, he finishes our rendezvous with the best dessert I've ever tasted. My mouth explodes with a multitude of savory flavors. His tongue is coated with the essence of me.

When he breaks it off, he turns and walks away from me without so much as a 'goodbye' or 'good luck.'

Tears fill my eyes as I watch him cross the street to his car. Not once does he turn around and look back. The first time that he left, he ripped my heart. This time it lies shattered on the ground, and so many pieces are missing that I can't assemble the puzzle again.





## CHAPTER 19 – MARCO

**I**t's time to relieve myself of the rage boiling within me. I sit outside the little brown and white cottage and stare at the window, watching the occupants move from one room to the next. It seems as if they're arguing about something. What about? I'm not sure.

It's been months since Graziella was murdered, and I'm finally about to come face-to-face with the demon that started my killing spree. It's been years since I last went on a killing spree, and that was when I was in my early twenties.

One of our cousins had been killed by a jealous husband. DeLuca men haven't been known for keeping our dicks in our pants and especially not when it comes to unhappily married women. The husband came home and found my cousin and his wife in bed fucking. He shot and killed my cousin on sight.

He instantly went into hiding. I'd gone after him and killed his wife, sister, father, uncle, and two brothers until I found him. Then I tortured and killed him.

My father had sent in the cleanup crew behind me, and at that time, I'd been sent away to Spain for a year until things could be cleared up and the chaos died down. That was a year after the debacle over Marie's abortion. When I returned, I found myself engaged to Graziella.

My father had decided it was best for me to settle down. According to him, my life and emotions were out of control, and he thought that Graziella would be instrumental in helping me mature. Later, I learned that the truth behind our marriage was to strengthen the DeLuca ties in the financial industry in Cagliari.

Our family's alliance with the Moretti's sealed our hold over the insurance, investment, and banking industries in our region. The Morettis were the largest business owners in all three areas of Italy.

The don at that time, my father's first cousin, had shared with my father that my marriage to Graziella was a two-fold

resolution. It would allow the DeLucas to claim complete ownership of the financial arena in Italy, and it would serve to settle me down.

For the Morettis, they gained the protection and backing of the mafia.

Pulling away from the house, I drive further down the road and pull into a wooded lot.

I turn off the ignition and step from the rental car. Lucky for me, the little cottage is down a dark country road and there are no other residents for miles around. Pulling on my leather gloves, I close the door softly and walk through the woods.

A cool, crisp breeze blowing is rare for May in Georgia. It almost feels like the first part of spring tonight. The woodsy and earthy scent of the outdoors fills my nostrils, but my heart is yearning to smell the scent of freshly shed blood.

When I walk out of the clearing, I keep to the tree line at the back of the house until I'm sure there's no one on the backside. I sprint towards the house and stop outside of the kitchen door. Jiggling the handle softly, I shake my head at the ignorance of people who presume they're safe in their homes and that harm couldn't possibly come their way.

I listen for a moment before I push the door open and slip inside, quietly closing the door behind me. Now I can hear their voices.

“You shouldn't have come here!”

“How could I help myself? There's no way that I could remain where I was. It was only a matter of time before he found out that I was the one who did it.”

“You're a foolish man, Rocco!”

“I couldn't let him find out that I was in bed with the fucking Colombos! Do you know what would have happened if he'd learned that? Do you know the danger I would have been in? If only that cunt hadn't seen me at that hotel that day with them, I wouldn't be in this position! If only she'd kept her fucking mouth shut instead of threatening me!”

“No, if you hadn’t been so greedy, you wouldn’t be in this mess!”

“I had over a hundred thousand dollars worth of gambling debt in the Colombos casinos. There’s no way that I could pay that off. The only way I could was to do whatever they wanted me to do, including conspiring with them against my boss! They wanted information on him to retaliate against their family for killing Frederico!”

“Stupid! You could have explained to him, and he would have understood!”

“You don’t fucking know Marco DeLuca. The only thing he hates more than a man who can’t take care of his family and business is a liar and a betrayer!”

“So, you bring your shit to my doorstep?”

I draw closer to them as I creep down the hallway, knowing they’re in the last bedroom on the right.

My hand goes to the doorknob, and I wait for a few seconds as I hear sobbing. When the door jerks open, it’s not my hand that does the pulling but Rocco’s.

His eyes are wide as if he’s seen a ghost and his face is pale, but in his hand is a gun pointing at my face.

“Dunque, mio disonesto amico, - è il suo giorno fortunato.”

Rocco chuckles and says, “It’s funny how one dishonest bastard can call another man crooked. You know what’s even funnier, Marco? It is the fact that you’re right. Today is my lucky day. I’ll take your ass out, and I won’t have to stop running.”

“If you believe that, then you’re a bigger fool than I thought, Rocco. Don’t you know that if you take my life, a million DeLucas will hunt you until they find you, torture you and every family member you have, and then burn your corpse and laugh as your soul screams in purgatory?”

“You’ll be meeting me there,” he snarls.

“You’re right. But I won’t be going first. I can promise you that,” I snarl back.

“Oh? How’s that?”

He crumples in front of me, and the woman stares at me with scared eyes. She’s holding the bat in her hand and staring at me as the tears seep from those beautiful blue eyes I once adored.

“Why, Maria?”

She walks away with her back to me and slumps on the bed.

“Because it was always you that I loved. Unfortunately, after you returned from Spain, your father decided that it wasn’t me that you should marry but Graziella. I know that it hurt you as much as it hurt me.”

“He’s your brother,” I say, nodding at Rocco who’s out cold on the floor.

She nods. “I know, but he’s always been shit for a brother. Always tortured me when we were younger, and now, I live under his constant threats.”

“About?”

“Telling Johnny about you and me. Do you know what would have happened to either of us if people had known the truth? That I was still carrying on an affair with you whenever you’d come to town or that you were messing with another man’s wife who’s in the family? Your family, at that.”

Cocking my head to the side, I kick Rocco in his side, but he doesn’t move.

“Yeah, but they’re used to my brand of madness. There’s no real rhyme or reason for why I move the way I do.”

Her shoulders shake as she drops her face into her hands. I step over Rocco’s body, bend down and remove the gun from his hand before sitting beside Maria.

“We were never meant to be, Maria. You’re a good woman. I would have only corrupted you and broken your

heart. A man like me can't be faithful and settle down with one woman. You know that."

"I could've tried."

"It would have broken you," I reply.

"More than being with a man I didn't love and who didn't love me? A man who punished me daily for loving his cousin a little more than I should?"

I angle my head sideways, watching her.

"I would have destroyed you, Maria. Besides, you didn't love me. You loved our memories, and being together would've assured you that I'd forgiven you. I think you hated being forced into a marriage and circulated from one man to his cousin. That wasn't my doing. You must find a good man who loves, cherishes, and protects you. I'm not him."

She's the first to break my gaze.

"Did you ever forgive me for aborting our child?"

I didn't think that I had until this moment. So to give her the peace she needs, I say, "Yeah."

"Can you...would you make love to me once more?"

Shaking my head, I say, "No. It'll only make it harder for you to walk away."

She chews on her bottom lip.

"Get packed. Go home to Italy for a while. If anyone asks, tell them you're grieving Johnny too hard and don't want to be alone."

She stares at me for a second longer before nodding her head. "Hand me your phone," I say.

She does as I ask, and I order her an Uber while she gets packed. Then I send a text from my phone to a burner phone.

When Rocco starts to stir a little while later, I grab his head and bang it against the floor again, rendering him unconscious.

“So, this is goodbye?” Maria asks, standing at the bedroom door facing me moments later.

“Goodbye for now, Maria,” I say.

She tips up on her toes and presses her lips to mine. Our kiss is sweet and brief. No tongue action and no passion. The first kind I’ve ever experienced.

I watch as she walks down the hallway and wait until I hear her close and lock the front door behind her. I return to my seat and stare at Rocco until I’m sure the little Uber car is long gone. Just enough time for Rocco to start moving again, and I don’t stop him this time.

When he sits up, he glances back at me.

“That puttana! I always hated her. Betraying fucking family! Where is she?”

“Someplace that you can’t harm her anymore. You’ll never see or hear from her again.”

“Vaffanculo!”

“No thanks. But I might fuck your mother or wife when I’m done with you.”

Foolishly, Rocco jumps up and lunges at me. We’re both big men, and he’s a couple inches taller than me, but I outweigh him by twenty pounds of muscle.

I dodge him and catch him with a blow to the side of the head, causing him to stagger backward. Taking advantage of the opportunity, I use my momentum and run into him, knocking him to the floor. He’s quick but not quicker than me, and I’m straddling him, pounding his face until it’s bloody and almost unrecognizable.

I stand and stare down at him as he rolls onto his side spitting out teeth.

“Why did you kill my wife?” I ask as if I don’t already know.

“She talked too much and didn’t know when to shut the fuck up,” he snarls, spitting again.

“About what?”

When he doesn't speak, I say, “You might as well tell me. Your life ends today.”

“I was in bed with the Colombos.”

“Why?”

“Fucking gambling debts! Okay?”

I jump onto the floor, straddling him again, and begin choking him until he turns pale. “You fucking sold me out for money! Money that I could have easily given you!”

When I release him, I don't move off him but continue staring as he chokes until his color returns to his face and he plops his head onto the floor again.

“You killed her because she threatened to tell me about your betrayal. How fucking long did you know that she was fucking Luca?”

“Seven months,” he spits with more teeth falling from his mouth.

“You never told me. What the fuck did I do to you for you to betray me that way?”

He sneers at me and stares through the only eye that can still partially open. The other is completely shut.

“You think that you can fuck over anybody and don't owe any apologies. Why should a bastard like you command loyalty when you're loyal to nothing and no one!”

“You don't know shit about my loyalty!”

“I know you weren't loyal to my sister. Your wife. Or even that stronza Serena!”

“You don't fucking deserve to breathe the same air as any of those women let alone say their names!” I roar, grabbing him around the neck as I remove the machete from my sheath. I wait until he can no longer breathe, gasping for air and grabbing his neck.



With the precision of a surgeon's knife, I cut his tongue, severing a portion. Rocco spurts blood from his mouth as he chokes. As I remove the handcuffs from my back pocket, I see a beam of light flash through the window.

I wait until I've cuffed him before looking out and spotting the navy-blue truck in the front yard.

Within seconds the front door opens, and I hear the storm of feet coming in my direction.

"Ready?" Gino asks.

"Yeah. Take his ass to the Lodge," I mutter.

I nod to Paolo, who like Gino, relocated with me. Carmine remained behind in Italy, and Ermes will be over at the end of the month.

"We've got a cleanup crew on the way. I'll meet you there," Paolo says.

He's already coordinated with Johnny's cleanup crew to clean this house and destroy any evidence that either Rocco or I left behind. This house was Johnny and Maria's getaway; one that no one in the families knew anything about. They didn't even share its location with their mothers. The only way that Rocco found Maria was because he'd followed her from her home yesterday to this destination, and he'd foolishly shared it with his cousins.



OUR DRIVE IS ONLY TWENTY minutes before we arrive at our next destination. One of Alessandro's former torture houses in the woods is known as the Lodge.

"We're waiting for Paolo?" Gino asks.

"Yeah," I say, lighting a cigar as I lean against my rental.

"I can haul him in, Boss," Gino says.

Shaking my head, I say, "No. I'm taking no fucking chances on shit going wrong."

"He's almost dead, Marco."

“The fuck I say!” I holler.

Gino waves his hands and says, “Sorry.”

Shaking my head, I glance up at him. “No, I’m sorry.”

Gino’s eyes widen because I never apologize for my actions. I know a thousand emotions are whirling in my head, and I don’t want to attack Gino because of them. I remove the keys from my back pocket and toss them his way.

“Make sure everything’s in place as it should be. It’s been years since this place has been used.”

Gino nods and disappears inside.

While he’s checking the equipment, I’m lost in my thoughts. Now that I’m back in Atlanta, keeping Piper off my mind is hard. It would be my fucking luck that the moment that I’m free to claim her as my own that she belongs to another.

I’ve made men disappear for less. But could she ever forgive me?

Anger and jealousy have my jaw clenching. I’ve never been jealous about a bitch before, but neither have I ever wanted someone as badly as I want Piper. She’s not a bitch. She’s completely a woman.

I want that girl so badly that I’d give up eating pussy for a lifetime to make her mine. I’d give up fucking all the beautiful women at my disposal if she’d just be mine. If it hadn’t been for my vow to my father and the don, I’d have left Grazie long ago.

I may be a cheating bastard, a maniacal murderer, and I may have respect for nothing and no one, but I am a man of my word. It’s all that I have when it comes to values and morals. If a man doesn’t have his word, he’s got shit. No matter how wealthy he may be or the harem of women at his beck and call. Doesn’t matter the power he wields or the number of men he commands. None of that means shit without his word. That’s the only lesson I ever learned from my bastard of a father.

I know Paolo has arrived when I hear gravel crunching down the road. Gino steps outside, and I realize he's been in there quite a while giving me the space he knows I need to clear my mind.

I don't utter a word, stand back, and watch as Paolo and Gino pull a handcuffed Rocco from the covered truck bed. He doesn't have much strength, but he's trying to kick up a fight as they drag him into the Lodge.

It's an old cabin that's been in the family for decades but has been transformed into a torture chamber. When we step inside, the musty scent of the place being closed for so long hits me, but it's nothing compared to the memories of the stench of old blood, rotting flesh, and death.

This place has been cleaned a thousand times; but I know what it smelled like all those times, it's ingrained in my memory. I know that's what is assaulting my senses now.

I follow my men as they walk through the living room with its old, dusty beat-up furniture and to the rear bedroom. Within less than five minutes, Gino and Paolo have Rocco strapped to a wooden contraption formed in the shape of a capital T.

His head hangs off the end of the T, and his arms are stretched out on the wings of the T. After strapping two fifty-pound weights to a pulley system, Gino places a weight in each of Rocco's hands.

"Aaaah! Preparati a morire, testa di cazzo!" Gino mutters, stepping back.

Paolo sits on the floor in the corner of the room, fiddling with his phone as Gino steps outside.

I take a seat on a chair across from Rocco.

"Gino has nothing to worry about, Rocco. You don't need to get ready to die. You're already a dead man. The moment that you can't hold those fifty-pound weights up anymore, you know what will happen, don't you? Your arms will strain from the weight and stress of holding those up, and eventually, they will begin to weigh you down. Your arms will begin to sink causing those boards under your arms to lower."

I cross one leg over the other and lean back in my chair, crossing my arms over my chest.

“As the boards lower, that pulley system is designed to lift that dagger you’re staring down at straight up and into your right eye. I will sit here as you try to scream and beg for your life, but you won’t be able to because your tongue has been cut out. I’ll watch you die, and then I will have satisfaction. Then I will go after the Colombos. I promise I won’t be satisfied until every last fucker has been killed and Graziella’s death has been avenged.”

Rocco is lying on the contraption with trembling arms, tears falling down his face and snot dripping from his nose.

Alessandro’s plans to take out the top Colombo men have been implemented. There’s one final one to take out, and it will be my pleasure to do so.

I glance at my watch and stare back at Rocco.

“You hungry, Paolo?”

“Yeah, Boss. Hopefully, the food will be here soon,” he says just as I hear a car door closing.

“Looks like your wish has been granted,” I say as Paolo hops up from the floor and heads out of the room.

I stand and walk to Rocco, kneeling in front of him. A grin crosses my face as I pat his head.

“The funny thing is that you thought you could fucking outwit me. Don’t you know that you instantly crossed my mind when I heard that my security cameras had stopped working? You were on my mind when I learned there’d been a flower delivery that day but not the van that comes every day. The delivery driver wasn’t the same. It was your cousin.

“You used that van to sneak on the grounds that day because you were supposed to be on vacation. The cameras weren’t working, but the housekeeper was. While Anna was busy with our two other staff accepting the large floral order as they always do, you snuck into the house and hid until the perfect time to get to Grazie. There were too many anomalies for me to not think it was you.”

He snivels some more.

“Dumb fuck. I wanted to believe that you wouldn’t be that stupid. That you, like Luca, wouldn’t be committing suicide. But look at you, my boy. Guess that’s exactly what you’re doing,” I say as I tap his left arm, and it begins to lower.

Panic fills his eyes, and frantically, he raises his arms again.

“Brought you a change of clothes,” I hear Massimo say from behind me.

“Good,” I say, looking down at the blood spatters on my jeans and my collared shirt.

I take the bag of food that Massimo hands me and take my place again on the chair.

“How much longer?” Massimo asks.

“The bastard’s only been there for fifteen minutes. Can’t have much longer now,” I grunt as I open my food and grab the plastic fork.

I take my first bite of tortellini from Casa della Gioi, an Italian restaurant in Atlanta opened by my cousin, Tommy, and his wife, Luna.

“It’s good!” I gush around the food in my mouth as more snot pours from Rocco’s nose. “Hey,” I say, walking to Rocco. “Every man deserves his last meal. I remember you love tortellini. You want a bite?”

He makes a noise, and I stare at him, drawing closer. “Shit. I forgot you probably couldn’t taste it, huh?”

I return to my chair, and Massimo shakes his head. “If you weren’t my brother, I’d swear you were a few screws loose.”

I shrug.

“On second thought, I take that back. Because you’re my brother, I know you’re a few screws loose.”

“I’ on give a shit.”

“What’re you going to do now? It’s time for you to focus on the business and the family now that you’ve got what you need,” my twin says.

“One more,” I grumble around my food.

“Then will you move on?”

“Don’t know what to move on to.”

“You’ve been thinking about her?”

I don’t say a word.

“She asked about you that night after you left. She loves you, you know.”

I snort.

“She does. You were always foolish when it came to women and their feelings.”

“The only woman that I ever...” I cut myself off, refusing to use the word love in the same sentence as any woman. I could never allow myself to indulge in foolish dreams of the heart. That’s not what my life is cut out for, and my insane mind won’t allow me to live a normal life.

“You love her. There’s no shame in admitting it.”

“I’d fuck her life up, Mass. You know that.”

He shrugs. “I don’t think so. I think you don’t give yourself enough credit. Unlike us, you’ve never been allowed to make decisions where women were concerned. Not the ones that matter anyway. You had those choices taken from you by Dad’s hands. He worried that you’d become weak with Maria and that she wasn’t strong enough to push you to get the best out of you. On the other hand, he knew Grazie had enough balls to do just that.”

“Yeah, so he forced me away from the first girl I ever truly cared about to a girl who was my best friend but who I no longer wanted like that.”

“And fuck partner.”

“Eventually. That was a while later though. She was a tease at first. Sometimes she was a fuck buddy, but I didn’t care about her enough to marry her.”

“Right. So you rebelled all your life by fucking anything that came across your path until you truly felt what love was.”

I shake my head. Massimo plants a firm hand on my shoulder.

“It’s okay to admit it. Take a chance on her, man. That guy isn’t for her. You’d save her from making the biggest mistake of her life. Just don’t fuck over her.”

I shake my head again and pinch the bridge of my nose as I stare at Rocco. Massimo has no idea of the promise that I made to Piper. I won’t break it.

“Have you told her?”

“No,” I grunt.

“Why not?”

“I refuse to have her thinking I only returned because Grazie died. She’s too important to me to destroy her that way.”

“It won’t,” Massimo argues.

“It will!”

“You’re delusional.”

“Maybe, but I’m doing this my way. Besides, I can’t drag her into my world right now. I still have a mission to complete. After thinking about it, I realize that I need to stay away from her for her sake as well as my own.”

“Why?”

“The attention. The heat. If people connect her to me then she’s in danger. I can’t put her life at stake that way. Going after the Colombos will draw heat. I don’t want that type of heat on her.”

For the first time, my twin understands me. “You’re right,” he concedes.

“Muori!” I roar at Rocco who’s straining now to keep his arms lifted.

Sweat drops have formed a little puddle on the floor beneath him, and I watch as the dagger lifts just a little more.

“Don’t worry,” Massimo says. “Sei, cinque, quattro, tre, due, uno!” He counts down in Italian, starting at six.

As he shouts “one,” Rocco’s arms drop, and the dagger shoots up, plunging into his right eyeball.

I stand as my jaws and fists clench. Massimo grips my shoulder tightly.

“You did good, lil bro.”

I step from the room with Massimo behind me. The guys are sitting on the dusty couch, eating their meals. Massimo orders them to clean up the place as I step outside into the darkness and head for my rental car. I’m still wearing my blood-splattered clothes, and I really don’t give a fuck.

Three people that I cared about very deeply betrayed me. Two of them were people I loved in my own way; the only way that I ever knew how to love anyone.

Now my brother is asking me to take a chance on the only woman that I ever loved. He has no idea that I’ve promised to let her go. I don’t think I have the motherfucking mental capacity to go back on that vow not if it means hurting her. If I were to hurt Piper, an entire country might go up in smoke.





## CHAPTER 20 – PIPER

“**W**hat the fuck is this?” Kenneth shouts at me as spittle dribbles onto his chin.

The envelope he’s thrown on my dining room table slides, sending a stack of pictures flying out of it.

My mouth drops when I see the images on the pictures, and the only retort I can think of comes flying out my mouth. “You’ve been having me followed?”

“That’s the only goddamned thing you have to say for yourself?”

“You had me followed, Kenneth? You don’t trust me?”

I’m defensive as hell because I’m guilty and desperate for this to be a nightmare. I want to wake up, but the pictures of Marco kissing me at my shop door ground me at the moment. There are several pictures of us, including him arriving at my shop that morning a week ago and leaving. There is a picture of me in his arms before he took me to my office to fuck me.

Then the most damning pictures are the ones of Marco kissing me at the shop’s door. My hair has that just been fucked look and is wild all over my head when it clearly wasn’t that way upon his arrival.

“You’re fucking around on me, and that’s all you have to say? You’re going to turn this shit around on me now, Piper?” Kenneth growls.

I’ve never seen him so angry, not that he has no right to be, but he’s scaring me.

“So what was it, Piper? Did his brother give you his number that night that he sat beside you at the bar, or did you chase after him whoring yourself out?”

“Fuck you, Kenneth!”

I know I’m wrong, but all I know is how to be defensive right now because I’m scared and ashamed. Only because I got caught, though.

“That’s what I’m wondering. Did you fuck him, Piper?”

I sneer at him, but I don’t answer him.

Kenneth shakes his head, laughing. “This is fucked up. Can you imagine how my political opponents would have a field day with this? My fiancé, the one I’ve had splattered over every local magazine sporting my ring, is fucking the mafia. You do realize that’s who he is, don’t you?”

I don’t say anything, but something in my eyes must give it away because Kenneth takes a step closer to me, and his eyes narrow.

“You already knew him. That night at the ball wasn’t your first time meeting him, was it?”

I shake my head because I can’t get the words out.

“I fucking knew it. He was too comfortable with you,” he sneers. “God! I can’t believe how fucking stupid I’ve been!”

I turn my back on him, and he grabs me by the shoulder and spins me around. “Why? Why couldn’t you tell me the truth, Piper?”

“I wanted to,” I say softly, finally finding my voice. “I just didn’t think that was the right time or place in front of everyone.”

“You could have said something when we were dancing or even when we went home later that night,” he grumbles.

“I know, but I wasn’t sure how you’d take it because I didn’t say anything immediately.”

“So, what? Did you decide to hook up with him and fuck him? How do you know him, Piper? How long have you known him?”

My shoulders slump, and I walk to my couch and sit down. The story spews out about how I first met Marco and how we became involved. I let Kenneth know that when he first returned from North Carolina, Marco and I had just broken up, which was the reason for my depression. I share the truth with him about how I saw Marco again at the strip club the night of my bachelorette party.

To Kenneth's credit, he listens without interrupting me and lets me get the story out. I tell Kenneth everything and feel like shit when I'm done.

His head rests in his hands, and he says nothing. If it weren't for the sharp inhalations and exhalations, I'd wonder if he was alive.

I'm scared to say anything to him, but I touch his back. Kenneth tenses under my touch, then stands, shoving his hands in his pockets.

He turns and stares at me, shaking his head.

"Do you love him?"

My eyes drift from his, and when they return, I see he knows my truth.

"So, what are you going to do?" he asks.

"About?"

"About him. Do you want to be with him?"

I'm unsure why he's asking me this question because does it matter in the scheme of things?

"I cannot be a part of his world, Kenneth."

His jaw clenches, and I see his hands ball into fists in his pockets. "That's not what I asked. Do you want to be with him?"

I stand and walk to him. "I want what you and I were building, Kenneth."

What else can I say? That's the truth because I know that being with Marco isn't an option. Yes, I've fucked things up, but I can't have what my heart wants. I allowed myself to become lost in the tsunami known as Marco, but reality has hit.

The waves of lust have receded, and the winds of passion have settled down. Now when I look around, all I see is the devastation left by the storm. It's not the first time; if I keep returning, it won't be the last. It's time for me to call in the troops and do a major cleanup after the storm.

Kenneth's jaw clenches, and he pinches the bridge of his nose.

When he looks at me again, I get a glimpse of what he must look like in the courtroom when he's faced with defending a challenging case or in city hall when faced with a problem. His eyes are clear, his mouth is drawn tightly, and his shoulders are set back.

"Who knows about your past with him?"

"Rashida and my parents."

I see the ugly sneer that crosses his face, but it doesn't stay in place for long before he has the mask back in place.

"Anyone else?"

"His brothers."

"Who knows what's happened between you two since we've been involved?"

"No one. I haven't told anyone about what's happened, not even Rashida."

He nods and walks to my balcony doors, leaving me alone. I stand watching him for several minutes before I return to the pictures.

Marco's face is so open, and every emotion is played out on the planes of his face in each picture. He's never been an open book to the world, but he is in these pictures with me. I see passion, love, protection, and pain.

Am I making a mistake pushing him out of my life again?

I don't know, but I must focus on the future and let go of the past.

I drop the pictures when I hear the door sliding open behind me, and Kenneth is upon me in no time. He grabs the photos from the table and walks to my fireplace. My heart clenches in my chest as I watch him turn on the electric fireplace and toss them into the fire to burn.

The flames crackle and spit as they eat up the photograph paper, contorting the images into something twisted and

horrible, making our beautiful exchange unrecognizable. I look at Kenneth's face and wonder what he thinks and feels.

When the last picture is destroyed, he turns to me with a glare of anger in his eyes. Jabbing a finger at the pictures, he says, "That never happened. No one knows about it, and from this moment on, we will never discuss it again. Is that understood?"

Relief and confusion flood me at the same time. "Yes."

"What?"

"What about the person that took the pictures?"

"It was me."

"You...you took those?"

"I knew something wasn't right about you two that night. I followed my instincts, and while it didn't happen immediately, I eventually found what I was looking for. I'm working on a plan for my life, Piper. You're supposed to be a part of that plan, and I have no time to start over or create another plan. My circle of influence and power in this city is growing. My plan is to have you at my right hand. I love you, but I won't be your damn fool. If you ever do something like this again, I swear you'll regret it."

I want to argue against what he's saying, but he glares at me when I open my mouth.

"Do you know how it felt watching another man grope the woman I plan to pledge my life to?"

Sadness fills me as I wonder what he must have felt sitting there watching us. I feel like such a bitch right now, and I know I don't deserve Kenneth.

"By the way, I think that you should know that I've been working on looking for new business opportunities for you."

"Excuse me?" I say, remembering the document that I'd come across.

We hadn't had a chance to discuss it because he's been extremely busy with city business lately, and I have been in a

slump of depression since Marco left.

“I’ve met with a realtor to discuss the possibility of selling your shop.”

“Without my permission?”

“Piper, your shop is in a prime position to get a pretty penny. It’s excellent real estate and—”

“You have no right!”

“I know, but I only want what’s best for you. If our lives are going in a new direction, Piper, one that will bring us great success and wealth, you need to learn to trust me.”

My heart thuds in my chest, and I’m torn. I want to rip him a new asshole for what he did, but at the same time, how can I when I’ve not been the best woman that he deserves?

“I don’t want to sell my shop, and I don’t want you going behind my back making negotiations,” I seethe.

“I promise to discuss everything with you before I do it in the future. Just as I expect the same,” he says, leveling a serious gaze at me.

I wonder what price I’ll pay for my infidelity because Kenneth hasn’t let me off the hot seat this easily.





# CHAPTER 21 – PIPER

(1 Year Later)

**M**y eyes feast on him, wondering if my mind is playing tricks on me. That can't be because my mom just cursed us both out and gave me a warning not to fuck up my wedding to Kenneth.

Rashida pinched me, and it still stings.

So no way my mind is playing tricks on me. He is here in the flesh when I thought I'd never see him again. We stare at one another for several long seconds, drinking each other in.

His tux looks good on him, outlining all his muscles and highlighting the breadth of his chest and shoulders. I note he still has a flair for fashion as I see the black and white polka-dotted handkerchief peeping from his jacket pocket.

There are so many sides to this man. He was as comfortable in a suit or tux as in jeans, sweats, or a t-shirt or button-down.

He still wears his hair long on the top and faded on the sides, but now little grey streaks are threaded through the faded part. A diamond in his right ear flashes at me like a beautiful wink.

He's perfect and handsome, but I can't help wondering why he's here. There's a haunting look in his eyes as though he's in pain. His features, though handsome, look tormented, as though he's in agony over some undisclosed tragedy.

Seeing him like this on what's supposed to be my wedding day has my stomach in tight knots.

A part of me wants to kick him out because it can't be good, and whenever Marco is around, it signals trouble. The other part wants me to pull him close and draw him further in as he drags me back into his world, a world he's tried to protect me from.

The irony about how he's showing up on my wedding day doesn't escape me. A day that I'd been in turmoil about and had several second thoughts about, leading to our wedding being much later than Kenneth originally wanted. Is this a symbol? Is his appearance today a sign that I should pay attention to?

"Piper," he says.

God, how I love the way that he says my name.

"What're you doing here?" I ask after the door closes on my mother and best friend.

"I heard you were tying the knot today."

"Yeah, I am."

"I thought you knew that you would always belong to me, Piper. I thought you said that I owned your heart. What happened?"

"Life, Marco. Okay? Life happened, and things changed and...I mean, what did you expect? You won't leave your wife and...I couldn't continue being a yo-yo for you. In and out of my life, playing with my emotions."

"I never played with your emotions. You always understood what it was."

"I did. Then one day, enough was enough. I could be your rock and hold you down, but at some point, I had to choose me, Marco. So I did. You popping up all these times—"

"Was never planned," he grunts angrily. "You showed up at my bar."

"And you showed up at a gala for my fiancé, the man I'm about to marry today."

"I had no idea you two were together. How could I?"

"Same as you've always known everything else."

"Forgive me for fucking up because I didn't know that one."

“I don’t believe it. Sides, all those years ago, you let me walk away. You didn’t try to stop me. Then that night at the gala, you walked away. Not even a goodbye was I worthy of.”

His jaw clenches, and he bows his head. When he opens his eyes again, he shakes his head.

“You’ve always been worthy of more than I could give you.”

“I had to do what I needed to protect myself.”

“Walking away from you the night of the gala was the best thing I could do to protect you. I wasn’t in a good place, Piper. I would’ve hurt you too badly. Don’t you know that I—”

“I know,” I say, cutting him off by placing a finger to his lips.

He bites my finger, forcing a smile to my lips. “Know that it hurt me to hurt you. I didn’t want to do that.”

“I know. Marco, I’ve always known your heart. Where nobody else might understand, I always did. No matter how hurtful it was, I understood.”

We stand there for several seconds, staring at each other.

“I still...” I turn my head away, blinking back the tears.

Not after I spent a grip to get renowned cosmetologist Champion Smith to fly in to do my makeup and hair today.

“You still?” Marco prompts.

“I still love you, Marco.”

A scowl crosses his face, and his eyes close for a minute. I see the tattooed brass knuckles on his neck move as he swallows.

“I’m sorry. I know that I seem to be all over the place, but...I just had to say one last thing. Someone asked me a few days ago what I would say to you if I ever saw you again. What one thing would I want you to know. That’s what it would be. That I love you.”

His nostrils flare, and he grips my waist bunching my silk gown in his hand. Marco dips his head, hungrily claiming my lips with his own. He does what he always does when I don't open my mouth; bites my bottom lip until I feel the saltiness of blood there.

Marco licks it away, and I open my eyes. His tongue invades any barrier that I seek to impose with my teeth. He sweeps around my mouth and then sucks on my tongue.

My hand flies up to his face, loving the soft feel of his facial hair against my palm and my fingers. Marco presses his forehead against mine, breathing heavily as he walks me backward until I feel the wall pressing against my back.

He angrily claims my mouth this time before he pulls back and drops to his knees.

He slides my panties to the side and presses his nose and then his lips against my pussy lips. I thought I'd never have my pussy eaten this well again. Marco is a professional at what he does, and I love his lips on me.

His slurps, licks, and bites are greedy, and he's like a hysterical man between my legs. I know not to stop him when he's like this because he can become brutal when you get between him and pussy eating.

I arch my back from the wall with my hips jerking forward, feeding him how I know he likes. I don't withhold anything from him, and when he's finally finished, I need a damn wheelchair. He's taken everything that I had. Hell, when he finishes fucking me, I'll need a gurney to make it out of this bitch!

Marco stands, grabs my leg, and hefts it up until my leg is draped over his arm. My gown which I've been so careful with all this time will surely get wrinkled.

No matter what I've decided to do today, I know I'm wrong. I don't give a fuck. When it comes to Marco, I don't ever have it in me to give a fuck about anything else including his wife who I know is somewhere waiting for him.

The rustling of my dress subsides when I hear his zipper slip down, and then he wrestles with my dress some more. He hands me a condom.

“Here,” he says.

I take it, ripping it open with my teeth, and then we manage to cover him. When Marco slides inside, stretching me to capacity and taking full possession of my body, I feel like I’ve found my way back home.

For several years, I’ve been wandering around this world with no clear destination for my journey. From the day he walked out of my life, I was lost and pretending that I was living. In fact, I was simply existing.

This right here, connected to Marco this way? This is living.

“Ahhh!” I breathe loudly as he thrusts hard and heavy up into me, causing me to be shoved further up the wall.

He maneuvers slightly to grab my other leg and pushes it aside. He growls, and then I hear a ripping sound.

“Marco!” I gasp. “Did you just fucking rip my dress?”

“No. Panties. In the way,” he grunts as he continues thrusting.

Relief flows through me, and I gyrate as much as possible in this position while he has his way with me. If even a quarter of my guests knew what I was in here doing, they’d be shocked out of their fucking shoes. Too bad my girls wouldn’t be. Most of them know how I am when it comes to Marco.

Though they don’t know him, they know how I feel about him. They’ve also heard accounts from Rashida about how I was with him. So no, they wouldn’t be too surprised.

“You’re killing me, Piper,” he grunts in my ear.

“No more than you’re killing me, Marco. I...I feel like I’m in the middle of a cruel, beautiful dream,” I gasp when he shoves himself deeper into me.

He licks my neck, scooping my collar down to force one of my tits up. His mouth clasps around it, and he sucks greedily until it almost becomes painful.

That was always Marco, blurring the lines of pain and pleasure as only he can.

“He’ll never fuck you like I do,” he promises.

“I know, Marco. I know,” I moan, my hands running across the planes of his face before I press my lips to his again.

Pressing his lips to my neck, he begins sucking. I know that he doesn’t give a fuck, but am I really going to go back out there and face that man with Marco’s mark on me?

We never did this in the past, so I know that he’s doing this to fuck with Kenneth. If my guests saw it, they’d assume that Kenneth put it there, but my mom would know and so would Rashida.

Most importantly, Kenneth would know. That devious smile I always wore when I was with Marco in the past makes its presence known now. I don’t stop Marco. Instead, I go harder with my gyrations as his pumps grow more aggressive and his sucking grows harder.

I know I’ll be sore when he’s done with me, and I don’t care. It’ll be a nice reminder when I’m lying in my bed alone tonight instead of on the honeymoon that Kenneth and I planned.

I hiccup a cry as I begin to cum, and Marco presses his lips to mine, swallowing the scream that he knows I’m famous for. He always makes me scream. God, how I miss those screams and how I miss him.

He’s not far behind me. I feel his arousal grow inside of me. Then I feel it pulsating before he slumps against me where he’s got me pinned to the wall.

Our breathing is ragged as I smile at him, and he dips his head again to kiss me. When he slides out of me, I reach up and wipe my lipstick from his lips.

I hear my mother pounding at the door, saying that we've been here long enough and that it doesn't look nice.

"Look at you. Giving your mother a heart attack on your wedding day," he jokes, removing the condom with a tissue that he's swiped from the dressing table while stashing something else in one of his pockets.

Marco balls it up and tosses it in the trash while I adjust my dress.

"No, that would be you. Showing up here today of all days. What's wrong with you?" I teasingly admonish him.

I grab a tissue from the same box and rub his lips vigorously.

"What's wrong with me? You're about to walk down the aisle to another man with my cum all inside of you."

"It's not inside me. It's in that damn condom in the can."

Shrugging, he says, "It burst."

"Marco!" I shriek.

He laughs and shakes his head. I now know that he's playing. He was the only one that could ever get me that way.

"You don't love that man?"

"I did, or I think I did, as much as I could love anyone whose name isn't Marco DeLuca," I say honestly.

"Why did you let me do that to you?"

"I told you. I love you. Any part of you I can have is more than enough, Marco," I say softly.

He tears his gaze away from me.

"We need to talk. Can we talk before the wedding? I need another ten minutes."

"I can't."

"Why?"

"I have to be downstairs soon. We can talk afterward."

"It'll be too late, Piper. You'll be married and—"

“I have to go,” I say.

“Please don’t go, Piper. Can I have five minutes?”

“No, not right now. I have to go before they carry my mom out on a stretcher,” I reply, opening the door as my mother rushes in with the coordinator and a smirking Rashida.

The coordinator shoos Marco out into the hallway, and though he doesn’t want to, he allows the little five-foot-one coordinator to bully him out of the room.

Mom sniffs the air and looks around with a scrunched nose.

“What’s that I smell?” Mom asks. “Piper Juliette Chambers! Did you have sex with that man? I smell sex in the air!” she gasps horrifiedly.

“No, Mom,” I lie in an outraged tone.

“Oh, thank God!” she whispers.

Rashida looks at me from behind my mother, widening her eyes and nodding her head.

I wink at her, and she fist pumps the air.

“It’s time to go, ladies,” the wedding coordinator says, poking her head through the door again.

“Show time,” I say as my mom tugs me into the hallway where Marco is leaning against the wall opposite our room.

As I’m rushed down the hallway, I hear Marco call after me.

“Piper!” he calls out.

I look over my shoulder and he says, “I love you.”

I smile at him even as my mother gasps and hollers, “No, no, no, no, no!”

How I’ve missed that beautifully crazy face of his and that thick, Italian accent. Mom always said he looked insane and out of his mind. Rashida agreed that he looked like a deranged lunatic.



They were both right but so wrong. Yes, Marco DeLuca is crazy as hell, but I love his crazy ass. I get him. All he's ever wanted was for someone to accept and love him for him and not try to change or make him over.

When we gather downstairs with my other bridesmaids and my mother is paired up with my brother, Rashida whispers, "So, what's it going to be? Are you going to become Mrs. Piper Paxton, or are you going down there to tell him you're in love with another man?"

"Can you imagine people calling me PP for the rest of my life?" I joke, causing Rashida to laugh as my father steps up and takes my arm.

My father smiles down at me and whispers, "Are you sure?"

"Yes, Daddy."

"You know that I've got your back."

"You always have," I say, smiling up at him as we proceed down the aisle.

My daddy is the only one who knows what I'm about to do. My mother would have a damn fit if I told her but my daddy will protect me from whatever is about to come, including my mother's wrath.

Kenneth stands at the end of the aisle smiling at me and my gaze flits to Kortland and Toya. She's wearing a sad smile and Kortland is shaking his head. He and Kenneth aren't even on speaking terms anymore. They constantly butt heads and Kenneth takes every opportunity to disrespect his younger brother.

Everything is a blur from that moment on as my daddy places my hand in Kenneth's and we turn to the minister. I don't hear his words or his instructions about what a marriage entails.

Kenneth turns to me and smiles at me as he says his vows.

"Piper Juliette Chambers, the day that I met you I knew that I would marry you. Although I knew that neither of us

were ready for that sort of commitment yet, I understood that I would need a talented, creative, and feisty woman by my side for the brilliant future that I had planned.”

*Lying bastard!* I smile despite the thoughts flowing through my mind.

“As the years passed, I had the pleasure of watching you grow and you surpassed my wildest dreams. I prayed that God would mold me into a man worthy of your love and one who was strong enough to lead and guide you, and that he would give me a vision for our future broad enough and beautiful enough that you would never grow bored. With this ring, I pledge to always protect you, love you, shelter you, and encourage you to follow your dreams,” he says, sliding the ring on my finger.

My heart beats wildly and I look out at the audience oohing and ahing. My daddy gives a nod and then I turn to look at the minister who smiles his encouragement. Instead of accepting the ring that’s being handed to me I reach inside of the hidden pocket in my wedding gown.

I pull out a small sheath of papers and a photo. Kenneth frowns as he watches me unfold the paper.

“I thought you remembered your vows by heart,” he whispers.

“I did,” I whisper back. Smiling I go on. “Kenneth Edmond Paxton, I fell in love with you the moment that I laid eyes on you. I was just a boy crazy little girl, but I wrote our names down in entwined hearts in my diary and my first name and your last name in every notebook that I had.”

The audience laughs and I go on.

“I imagined what our children would look like and what a future with you would be like. The first time that you ever broke my heart was when you stepped out of your bedroom with another girl and I realized that maybe the feelings weren’t reciprocated. They say that when a person shows you who they really are believe them. You showed me that day and I believed it.

“What are you doing?” he hisses.

I ignore him and continue.

“Unfortunately, you came back in my life at one of my darkest hours and I forgot who you were. I fell for the words that you used to woo me, the polished new attorney who gave me a glimpse of a different future. Selfishly I wanted everything that I thought you could bring to my life. I have spent the last eight years loving you and overlooking your flaws as any wife would be expected to do. So, I tried to prepare myself for becoming a wife. Your wife.”

“What. Are. You. Doing?” Kenneth grunts.

“This last year has shown me we weren’t meant to be. You’re marrying me to get your hands on the deed to my tattoo shop. I learned that it’s a valuable part of an annex for a multi-million-dollar project the city has plans to implement in the next three years. Three of the businesses have signed off on the sale of their shops, and two are in consideration, but mine is the only one that’s required to complete the deal,” I say, waving the emails between him and two other council members at him but keeping them out of reach.

“Baby, give me a chance to explain,” he begins.

“Even with that we could have worked through it like we’ve worked through other things. It explains now why you were willing to overlook the fact that I cheated on you.”

There’s a loud collective gasp behind me and I hear my mother shout, “Piper!”

“What I cannot overlook is the fact that you have a three-year-old daughter and an ex-wife in North Carolina,” I say as Melanie Richards, Kenneth’s ex-wife walks into the church from behind the pastor, carrying their three-year-old daughter, Kari.

She walks up with their child and glares at him before turning to the congregation.

“Kenneth has hidden our child and me from his family and friends. He told me that he was estranged from his family, and he sends payments every month. When he visits me in North

Carolina, I'm told he's been telling everyone he was on business trips. We had still been involved up to three weeks ago," Melanie says.

Everyone begins muttering in the church.

"When you started spying on me, I decided to look closely into your background. I paid a pretty penny to learn what I've learned today, and it was well worth every dime! Live your life, Kenneth. I'm about to live mine!"

I walk away ignoring the shouts, the arguments, his mother's crying, and people calling my name. I have one thing on my mind and one thing only.

I hop into the limo we reserved for the day and ask them to drive me to Marco's strip club, Bellezza Rosa.



## CHAPTER 22 – MARCO

I'm sitting on the bride's side, pondering Piper's wedding. Her fiancé has been nervously glancing my way, and I know he wants to say something to me. He's whispered to his best man and a couple of his groomsmen who have glanced my way on multiple occasions.

I'm fucking armed and ready for whatever is about to come. People are smiling and looking around chattering about the day.

The music starts, and everyone turns to see the bridal procession.

Rashida is glancing all around, and when her eyes land on me, she smiles and gives a little finger wave.

Rashida was the one that contacted me and told me that Piper was going to get married today. She visited my club last weekend and specifically asked for me.

Of course, getting to me is not easy, but the club manager asked for her card, promising to pass it along. It took me three days to get that information, so I fired my club manager.

I met with Rashida the next day for brunch, and she told me about Piper's impending wedding. Much like Massimo's warning a year ago, she warned that this was my last chance to save Piper from making the biggest mistake of her life.

I had to let her go back then. Not only because I had promised her that I would but because I knew I wasn't mentally right, and I couldn't afford to hurt her any more than I'd already done. I wasn't in a place mentally to love or be loved. Yet, every day I spend in one of my clubs or with the architects and construction workers building my new casino, something reminds me of her.

Whether it's the flirtatious way a dancer performs for me with a myriad of tattoos on her body or the foreman constantly complaining about rerouting the piping system, I can't help but think of Piper. My Piper.

It's been hard, but I vowed to stay away, promising I wouldn't hurt her again. That I wouldn't come to her until I was whole. Although I haven't closed the last loop in my vengeance plan, I'm better than I was a year ago.

So when Rashida showed up and told me about the wedding, I took that as a sign that it was my time. She said she knew I was married and wasn't trying to disrupt my marriage, but she hoped I could talk some sense into Piper.

She said marrying Kenneth was like sentencing her to a lifetime prison sentence. Piper learned that he had forged paperwork with her name and entered negotiations to sell her tattoo shop. Although Piper had apparently been angry, she still hadn't broken off the engagement.

I shared with Rashida that my wife had died. A sad smile had formed on her face, and she'd begged me to please tell Piper. She'd thought that news needed to come from me. She immediately apologized after saying she shouldn't be happy about a thing like that, and I'd assured her that I understood and that she was okay.

Some days I realize that I'm more hurt by the betrayal of those I love than by losing Graziella, a woman I deeply cared for but couldn't trust.

Other days, I realize the pain I carry is the least of what I deserve for all those I've hurt.

I know now that I am worthy of love and that despite all the fuckups I've made, everyone has a person out there for them.

Piper is my person. Always was, and I was too foolish to see it. I've spent most of my life honoring a commitment to those who weren't committed to me.

When Piper passes me by, I stand and turn along with the rest of the guests, and I see the fury in Kenneth's eyes as he looks at me and then at his bride. He quickly replaces it as though recalling that he has an image to uphold.

Everyone settles down again once Piper takes her place. My nerves are on edge as the minister talks about the vows of

love and quotes some scripture from the Bible about what love really means.

Not long after that, Kenneth speaks up and says his vows.

I can't stomach much more. I'd decided to speak up and object to their vows, but I won't. I've hurt this woman enough, and if she's determined to go through with it, who the fuck am I to stop her? She has placed her life on hold for me long enough, and it's not her fault I couldn't get my shit together. I exit the sanctuary, through the church hall, and into the bright sunny late afternoon.

This day shouldn't be as beautiful as it is. Lives are changing worldwide today; some are for good, and others are not for good. Unfortunately for me, none of it is positive. Not even what I'm about to do now.

I glance at my watch. It's now four-thirty, and I must be somewhere in five hours.

Time to head home, eat and shower, and prepare for the final phase of my vengeance plan.



THE DRIVER PULLS UP to the club, and one of my men waits outside to open the door for me. No sooner than my feet hit the pavement than my men flank me on either side as we step inside the club. I have men across the street on the jewelry store roof and men on the bank roof behind this club.

This shit is going down tonight, and if I'm going out, I'm going out in a blaze of fucking glory, baby! I ain't got shit to lose! For the time that I had Piper, I enjoyed her. Whatever happens tonight, I hope I walk up out of this shit alive.

But when it comes to my name, I have nothing to lose. I'll sacrifice it all to let these muthafuckas know who they're fucking with!

The security at *Club Fiamma* instantly goes on alert when they spot me. Most people would have snuck into or infiltrated the club using special tactics. I ain't that muthafucka.



Whatever I do, I'm gonna do it right in your face, and I make no apologies for it or who I am. I'm not a sneaky muthafucka, but I'm an "In-Your-Face-Muthafucka!"

"Sir, we're at capacity right now," one bouncer says.

"I suggest you clear this bitch out then because I'm about to exceed the maximum capacity and violate every fucking fire code in Atlanta," I growl.

The other two bouncers stand side-by-side with him crossing their bulky arms over their chests.

"We have to enforce the code. Sorry, we've been given strict orders that no one else is allowed in."

"By who? The owner?" Ermes asks.

"No, the fire chief," the second bouncer smirks.

Paolo chuckles to my left, and Gino steps closer to me. Before another move could be made, I pulled my gun out and pressed it against the first bouncer's head.

"Consider me the muh'fuckin' fire chief, and your ass has been violated," I snarl, flipping my gun around and hitting the first bouncer in the head.

Before the other two can respond, Ermes and Paolo do the same.

"Stay out here. I'm sure our friend Alberto has been warned," I instruct Paolo and Ermes.

Gino and Carmine step around the bouncers who are leaking from the head thanks to the flesh wounds they're sporting courtesy of my boys and me and follow me into the club.

Smoke and red strobe lights create a hazy red cloud. Bodies flail everywhere in the club, and those who aren't dancing are either drinking, smoking, or groping in a corner somewhere.

There are loud hisses and gasps as some people recognize us. They know this is Colombo territory, and I shouldn't be on their stomping grounds. I don't give a fuck.

They should know better than to fuck with the DeLucas. I promised I wouldn't stop until I got the man who took my wife's life. It may have been Rocco who pulled the trigger, but he wouldn't have had the balls to do it without it being sanctioned by the bastard who owns this club.

My eyes do a quick scan. There are two sets of drawings for this building, one on file for the public and the other that only a few people have access to, including the fire chief, an old friend of mine.

I've seen the schematics of the building, and I know the entire layout, including the secured room hidden from the naked eye.

We walk up to the bar and sit, waiting for the bartender to serve us. Gino and Carmine have their backs to the bar, scanning the crowd.

"What can I get for you gentlemen, tonight?" the bartender asks after a couple of minutes.

"Three Black Russians," I order.

The bartender walks away and becomes engrossed in flirting with a woman at the other end of the bar and fixing our drinks. The other bartender is slipping some pills to a customer at the opposite end of the bar.

"Gotta be quick. When we move, Alberto will be warned that we're here."

The three of us are seated in the middle. Just as the music switches to DMX's *What's My Name*, I jump over the bar, and Gino and Carmine quickly follow.

"Wait! You can't do that!" the bartender, who was selling dope, says as he comes running up to me.

I backhand him and say, "Stay out of grown men's business."

"How fucking fitting is this music?" Gino gloats as Carmine laughs.

The other bartender remains at the other end of the bar, his face struck with fear. Glad he doesn't plan to try me as I turn

my attention to the wall before me.

I kick a glass shelf filled with expensive liquor. It looks like nothing more than that on the surface, but the glass mirror doesn't shatter but turns inward.

Gino locks the door behind us, and we take the path down a short hallway to a door at the end. Gunshots ring out through the door from the other side.

We duck to the side, and I look at Gino as he slides a wire with a tiny scope at the end under the door. With a click from a remote in his pocket, he releases a gas that in five, four, three, two, one second has the door opening and two women and three men stumbling from the room.

The bodyguards are the quickest to recover, and they go for their guns. Gino puts a bullet in three men in rapid succession, and Carmine grabs the women and shoves them roughly to the ground, aiming his gun at them.

I step inside the room to find it empty. A quick look around, and I see another door that's locked. It takes no time to shoot the lock off, and I step inside to find an empty bathroom.

There's a hatch on the floor that I pull up and climb down. I see Alberto running down a passageway no sooner than I get through. I'm not about to run after him, so I take my time walking.

I remove my cuff links and watch and stick them in my pants pockets. Releasing the top buttons of my shirt, I pull my shirt tails free of my pants and then remove my shirt.

I know where the exit leads, and I'm not worried about him getting away.

Pulling my cell from my back pocket, I send a quick text.



**ME: *I've got my man. Meet me at the spot.***

**ALES: *All others hold your positions on the roof.***



WHEN I ARRIVE AT THE end of the tunnel and climb up the ladder that leads to another building across the street, I'm down to a wife beater and my slacks.

Alberto is standing in a small semi-circle of my men headed up by Alessandro.

I empty my pockets and hand all its contents and my shirt to Alessandro. Massimo holds a box out to me and lifts the lid. I remove a ring one by one and place them on my fingers until all eight digits are covered.

I sniff and wipe my nose with my thumb pad.

"It wasn't good enough. You grimy bastards tried my brother and came into his house. You fucked with a trusted member of my circle who was stupid enough to kill my wife trying to hide his connection with you. He ran. He was scared of me. I guess the message wasn't clear enough at that point. Well, let me make it clear for you."

My men hold him up as he takes the first blow to his face. He sneers at me and spits the blood out of his mouth.

I hit him two more times until my men let him go, and he crumpled to the floor, and I'm right on his ass like a lioness with prey. I'm beating the shit out of him until his face is nothing more than a bloody pulp.

When I stand, I spit on him and shout, "Antonio!"

Four men tied with ropes are shoved into the room with a gun trained on each. Niccolò, Antonio, and two of his men are behind them, and they force them to walk in our direction until we're all standing in a small circle.

"Grab his ass back up!" I demand, and Massimo snatches him by the back of his collar until he's standing.

"Fuck you!" Alberto croaks between his busted lips as he stares dead into my eyes.

I punch him in the gut forcing him to his knees, and step back just in time to avoid his vomit from covering my shoes.

“Damn it!” Nico groans as his Italian suede shoes get covered.

“We’ll buy you some more. Quit bitching,” Alessandro says.

“Your bloodline ends here today. The Colombos are a distant fucking memory.”

Niccolò, Tony, and his men move out of the path as I grab my gun from its holster and put a bullet between his son’s eyes.

The groan and the cry that Alberto releases aren’t satisfying enough.

I turn back to him. “Dio riposa la sua anima.”

I don’t waste another minute sending him to the place he was destined for anyway.

“Clean up,” I say dully to those around me.

I look at the mass carnage behind us and head out the door.

Once I’m back in the car and Ales, Nico, and Tony have gone their separate ways, I look at Massimo who sits across from me.

“Rest easy now, Marc,” Massimo says.

I don’t utter a word. The memories play out in my mind like a film reel. The devastation and the pain are just as real as if all this shit happened yesterday.

I’m rocking on the brink of insanity. The carnage I’ve reined on their heads isn’t enough to bring her back, but it will send a message not to fuck with the DeLucas. It’s time to put all those ghosts to rest.

Graziella. Luca. Rocco.

We quietly ride the rest of the way until we arrive at my club. As I step from Massimo’s rental car, my driver and car are waiting in the rear parking lot.

Massimo steps out with me and says, “Get in your car and relax.”

“Yeah, okay,” I mumble. “Thanks for coming through for me on such short notice.”

“Any time,” Massimo says, climbing back into the car. “Atlanta’s just a jet ride away.”

I smile and watch as his car pulls away.

“Sir, are you ready?” my driver asks.

I’ve hired another driver for the evening while Gino cleans up.

I walk to the car and wait for him to open the door. I smell her before I can see her. The scent of her Jimmy Choo perfume beckons me like a finger, welcoming me into a place so different from the one I just left.

I open the door and stare into those beautiful brown eyes, amazed that she’s here. I climb into the back of the limo and notice that the partition window is already up.

“Piper. My sweet free bird. You flew away. Why did you return?”

She lowers her head.

“You know the old saying, ‘If you love something, set it free. If it comes back, it’s yours. If not, it was never meant to be.’”

“You got married. What are you doing here? Is it my turn to be the side bitch?” I half tease, smiling at her as she instantly climbs out of her seat and straddles my lap once the door closes on us.

Piper brushes her lips across mine. “Waiting to welcome my man back home. To take you back to your haven,” she purrs, and my dick hardens at her tone.

She feels it and smiles at me as she slides off my lap, landing on her knees.

“Who told you to come?”

“Your brother, Massimo. I saw him leaving your club when I arrived earlier. He told me to go home and wait because he would send a car for me. He said that you needed me more than anything else right now.”

I silently thank my twin because he knows I’m not in a good place. I was slipping back into the darkness after this controlled murderous rampage I’d been on.

It’s not easy pulling back from that darkness, either. I’m thankful she’s here so I close my eyes and succumb to new darkness which creates a cocoon and a haven.

Piper sucks and massages and eases all my stress and tension.

My hands loop into her hair as I pull her closer. My damn toes curl in my shoes as her jaws clamp around me, sucking me deeper into her mouth. Piper drains my vein, and she doesn’t stop until I’m completely empty; not only of the nut I’ve released but the tension, the lies, the pain, and the past.





## CHAPTER 23 – PIPER

I relax on the white silk sheets and close my eyes. It's been several hours since I've heard from him, but I know my man is okay. Some would think that I'm crazy for trading in my relatively safe and boring life for the one that I now have with Marco.

I want to remind them that you can't purchase passion, adoration, or heat. It comes with certain blends of people, but when you love the person you have those things with, it's a beautiful combination you'd do well to hold on to with your life.

I had it once before, and I let it walk out of my life. Never again will I make that mistake. I'm willing to fight for Marco and me until the end. He was designed for me, and I was created for him.

I chose a quiet, stable, boring life because I couldn't have what my heart wanted. I was a foolish girl for thinking those things.

Marco had the car drop me off at his home while he left to handle some other business. His team of security and staff are in the house, and I know I'm not alone, but I feel alone in his absence.

I won't be satisfied until he's lying in this big bed with me, resting in his arms. I never intended to fall in love with a man who belonged to someone else, but my heart made a choice. Not me.

I stare at the ceiling as Nao's *Adore You* plays in the background. I close my eyes, wishing his arms were wrapped around me and his lips were on my body.

He said he had to take care of business, but I hope business didn't take him back to Italy. After all, my phone calls have gone straight to voicemail. I don't dare allow the thoughts of worry and fear to come into my consciousness because I can't afford to put that negative energy into space.

Instead, I let the lyrics of Nao's song wrap around me, and I drift off to sleep.



MY DREAM IS SO PERFECT and sweet. The sweet sensation of Marco's lips against my eyelids and his fingers cupping my ass. The swell of his dick presses against my thighs and then my pussy. The stretch and pain between my thighs let me know this is more than a sweet dream. It's a blissful reality.

My eyes open, and I smile at him.

"I thought you'd gone back to Italy," I whisper in a husky voice.

"Why? My home is here."

"Your wife."

He sits up and frowns at me, and I'm instantly sorry that I reminded him that we can't be together.

"No one told you?"

"Told me what?"

His eyes lower, he scrunches his thick eyebrows, and darkness fills his eyes. I reach up a hand and smooth the frown from his face, softly dragging my finger over his full lips in the most tender caress.

My heart clenches in my chest, wondering what the news is he needs to share with me. It's bad enough that he'll never be mine, but I've made a bold decision partially based on his reappearance in my life and partially on my truths about my relationship with Kenneth.

"Graziella died."

My eyes widen, and I sit up in bed. That explains the haunting look in his eyes and the torment on his features.

I pull him into my arms and kiss his head.

“I didn’t know. I’m so sorry for your loss, Marco,” I say as tears drip from my eyes.

I’m not selfish like most women would be in this situation. The first thought isn’t that he can finally be mine now. No, I wonder how hard her death must have been on him and what it sent him through. I think about the pain and grief he’s had to carry around and wonder how long he’s held it and what regrets he’s dealing with.

His arms wrap tightly around me, and he holds me close. After a couple of minutes, he pulls his head from underneath my chin, where it’s been resting against my chest.

He flips onto his back, pulling me down on top of him. Now it’s my turn to rest my head on his chest as my legs straddle him and his arms hold me close.

“If you didn’t know she’d passed, why did you return?”

“Because you’re right. I am yours. Always was and always will be.”

“You’re a pretty special girl, you know that?”

“You’re a pretty special guy, and I’m a lucky girl to be loved by you,” I reply.

His fingers flick up to wipe away my tears. “Don’t cry for me, love. I’ve grieved and avenged. Now it’s time for me to move on.”

“How long has it been?”

“A year and a couple of months.”

“What? Why didn’t you say anything?”

“That’s what I wanted to talk to you about at your wedding.”

I close my eyes, thinking about how I shut him out because I was focused on my pain over my decision. I rest on him as he tells me what has happened in the last year and couple of months of his life, from his wife’s murder until tonight.

“Why are you here in my arms instead of on your honeymoon with your husband? It’s four in the morning, and

you were saying vows when I left you yesterday evening.”

“*He* was saying his vows. I never said them. I explained to Kenneth that I could not marry him. How could I ever trust a man who’d forged paperwork with my name on it to sell my shop from under me? How could I trust a man who made negotiations to have an entire apartment complex razed to the ground and hundreds of families displaced? That same man signed off on paperwork to shut down a shelter for abused women and children, and all for what? A jail, a government complex, and a strip club to be built.”

Marco flinches.

Laughing, I say, “I know what your business is, but I also know that family means everything to you.”

“It does,” he says softly.

“Those things matter to me, but they weren’t the deciding factor. The deciding factor was that I also learned that Kenneth was married for seven months when he moved away for a time. He had the marriage annulled, but he and the woman had a child. One that I never knew about until a month ago. A child and a former wife that he hid from me. So yes, I’ve done my share of shit, but I can’t overlook his fuckups. I confronted him at the wedding with all of that.”

“Did he deny it?”

“No. I had proof of everything. Documents. Ex-wife. Child.”

“So...”

“So, I’m a single woman looking for a man who will accept me as I am. A man who wants to claim my heart and love me, and I can have his heart and love him as he is.”

Marco’s hands ruffle across my ass as he parts my cheeks and slides a finger into my asshole. My eyes flutter closed as I moan, pressing my face into his neck as he fucks me in the ass with his fingers.

Marco bites my ear and whispers, “I’m that man.”

Those words and his fingers paired together are enough to make me cum. Pulling his fingers out, he smacks me on the ass and says, “You know what I want. Climb onboard.”

I crawl up his body and settle onto his face, loving how his wiry beard tickles my thighs. I wiggle from side to side as I secure myself on my throne.

The way his large hands firmly grip my honey-colored thighs, I know I’ll be bruised when I wake up. His tongue is something fierce, this pussy-eating lover of mine. I swear, I believe he loves eating pussy more than having sex.

Not that he comes up short of giving me the dick, but when he pleasures me like this, I wonder if it’s for him or me that he’s doing it. I think it’s more for him.

His moans match mine in intensity and volume. My hips grind on his face vigorously as if I were on a pole twerking.

My ecstasy rains down on him, drenching his lips, mustache, and beard with my bliss. My body shakes, and I sway from one side to the next until he grips me holding me in place.

When he’s finished, Marco undresses and hovers over me. His hand runs the length of his shaft up and down in repeated slow motions, and I watch as he grows in length and width.

Angry purple veins pop out, and I can’t help but push him onto his back and take him into my mouth.

“Piper!” he grunts, sending a heady sensation through me as I suck my way down his shaft and work his balls with my hands.

Our sexual chemistry has always been strong, but our connection runs deeper than that. Marco pulls free from my mouth, tosses me on my back, and enters me raw without permission.

This is the first time that we’ve had sex without protection in more than eight years, and I feel our deeper connection through the physical contact that we now share. Marco’s eyes are on me as he drives deeper into me, hooking my legs over his shoulders.

He has me so wide open that I feel like I'm splitting in two as his balls press against my asshole.

Marco grabs my legs and holds them up and back as his hands form cuffs around my ankles.

He and I are free to be one for the first time since I've known Marco. I don't know what the future holds, and I know that I've chosen a risky lifestyle, but never have I felt freer or safer.

My body clenches around his coaxing him to the conclusion because I cannot hold mine in any longer. I inhale a deep breath as I cum, tears slipping from my eyes that have finally closed.

"Piper, I love you," he grunts as he cums inside me.

"I love you more," I reply softly as he falls onto me, burying his face in my neck.



## CHAPTER 24 – MARCO (Epilogue – 14 Months Later)

A year ago, I was a broken man. A monster raged within me because of the demons that haunted me. I've slayed every one of those bitches, and I'm even more savage than ever.

Only now, I'm not so broken. I have a good woman's love. A woman who's down for whatever I need her for.

I hurt her in the past, and my pride wouldn't allow me to apologize, surrender to my feelings, and break the vow I'd made to my wife, father, and don.

Today, I'm ready to right the wrongs and tell everyone to kiss my ass.

"Where are we?" Piper asks as Gino pulls the Bentley up to a two-story red brick building with tinted windows, wrought iron gates around it, and wrought iron balconies on the upper floor.

"You'll see," I say, straightening my suit jacket and pulling a hand through my hair.

I reach inside when Gino opens my door to grab Piper's hand. She's dressed in a short-sleeved, fitted black lace mermaid gown. I glance at her breasts and upper abs on display through the sheer material of the dress.

"What?" she asks when I glare down at her as Gino leaves to secure the building before we walk in.

"This dress was the perfect idea until you stepped out in public with it."

"What's wrong with my dress, Marco?"

"It's begging me to bend you over this Bentley and fuck you out on this street."

"Gino will be back soon."



“Yeah, and every other fucking bastard that will lay eyes on you will have the same thoughts I have,” I growl.

She smiles up at me, winks, and then leans into me. When she kisses my lips, the jealousy within instantly tamps down, and I’m reminded that she’s all mine. My hands drop to her ass that’s barely covered, and cups it.

The dress is sheer from top to bottom with nothing but lace and sequins except for her belly and hips. Silk, lace, and sequins make up the bodysuit that looks more like a deep plunging, high-cut bathing suit than a dress.

“Settle down, baby. My eyes are only on you, and this ass and this pussy belong to you,” she says, pulling back from the kiss.

I can’t help the low growl that rumbles deep in my stomach.

“What?”

“You shouldn’t say shit like that. Makes me want to say to hell with tonight and all this,” I say, waving my hand at the building.

“And do what?” she teases.

“Fuck you in the back seat of my car.”

“And what about Gino?”

“He can fucking walk home for all I care.”

“From Atlanta to Roswell? I don’t think that would be a good idea.”

“I look like I give a fuck?” I grumble, pulling her against me again and thrusting my hips against her.

She groans and reaches between us to cup my dick as I suck her lips into mine before sucking on her tongue. I hear a voice clearing behind us, and as I turn to curse out Gino, I’m shocked to see my twin.

“The hell are you doing here?” I grunt, bearing something that resembles half a smile.

My brother pulls me into a hug and slaps me on the back. He whispers, "I wouldn't miss this for the world."

We laugh before he turns to Piper, hugs her, and says, "Hello, beautiful."

She smiles back and asks, "To what do we owe this pleasure, Massimo?"

His girlfriend, Luna, stands behind him and hugs Piper before answering my brother's question. "A million horses couldn't pull him away tonight."

"Oh. I still have no idea why we're here or what this building is," Piper says.

Luna smiles and says in an Italian accent slightly thicker than mine and my brother's. "Another one of Marco's business ventures."

"Oh," Piper says, a frown slightly marring the space between her eyebrows. I rub that space like I'm erasing the frown when she looks at me. Luna looks at me, winking and smiling, before turning back to Massimo.

"Well, while the two of you continue making out on the sidewalk, I think I'll escort my lady inside," Massimo says.

"We're not far behind," I smile.

I'd known that Alessandro and Niccolò would be here, but Massimo said he couldn't make it because of business. I was glad that he had shown up.

"Business venture?" Piper asks, looking at me in askance. "Why don't I know about this new business?"

Piper had moved into my house almost a year ago, and she knew practically every detail about my life except the family business. I protected her from that by keeping it away from home and allowing my soldiers to perform most of my dirty work these days.

"Family business," I say, leaning down to kiss her.

She takes a couple of steps back, and I miss my aim. I bite my bottom lip to keep from laughing.

“Luna knew about it.”

“That’s because Massimo doesn’t protect her the way I protect you. She shouldn’t know anything about the family business,” I lie.

My brothers are as protective of their women as I am.

“Then why are we here tonight if we shouldn’t know anything about the family business?”

“Well, I’m trying to keep this one on the up and up, but... do you trust me?”

Her eyes widen, and then she frowns. “Baby, you know that I trust you.”

“Then trust me on this too.”

She sighs deeply and wraps her arms around my waist before laying her head against my chest.

“I’m sorry, Marco. I will always trust you. I didn’t mean to make you feel as if I didn’t. It’s just...it’s not always easy to be left out of things. It reminds me of another time when I couldn’t trust the man I was with.”

Her ex-fiancé, Kenneth, had done enough to make her mistrust any man. “I’ve never given you a reason to doubt me. No matter how horrible the truth is, I’ve always told you the truth and always been honest with you. I’m not about to stop now.”

“I know,” she says, caressing my face. “Forgive me?”

I lean close to her ear and whisper, “I forgive you. But don’t think that means you won’t get your ass spanked tonight.”

She shivers. “Mmm, I look forward to my punishment,” she purrs.

Gino chooses that moment to return and nod. “All is well, Boss,” he says.

Looking down at my lady, I ask, “Are you ready?”

“Always,” she says, smiling cheekily up at me, and I know she’s not talking about tonight’s event but the punishment I promised her later. My lady loves the feel of my hand on her ass and beats me home every night.

Despite our house staff being in attendance, she’s always waiting pantiless for me in our bedroom. She’s the first thing that receives my attention when I step inside. My staff knows not to bother me when I run up the stairs to see my woman.

After eating her out, I give my attention to whatever else warrants it. We might not make it home tonight before I feast on her. I’m already famished just watching her hips sway in her lace gown.

We step up to the black glass double doors no sooner than hired staff open them for us.

“Surprise!” everyone shouts as the servers greet us with “Welcome, Mr. DeLuca, and Ms. Chambers.”

“Thank you,” I say as my eyes remain on Piper.

Her mouth is open wide, and her eyes are tearing up. She’s not a woman easily given to tears, so I know her emotions are overwhelming. She’s taking in the leather chairs and couches, the marble stations, and the gleaming stainless-steel equipment. Her eyes pore over the photographs of clients she’s branded through the years and whose images hang in black frames on the exposed brick walls.

Piper looks up at the bright lights hanging overhead from the exposed beams and then at all the guests gathered; my siblings and their significant others, her staff from her original shop and their significant others, her best friend, Rashida, and her boyfriend, Nolan, her friends Kortland and Toya Paxton, and her brother Grant and his wife, Samaria.

Unfortunately, her parents haven’t welcomed me with open arms like my sister-in-law, Mila’s, welcomed my brother, Alessandro. Her parents were more understanding since they’d come from a life of crime.

Piper’s parents, on the other hand, are a church deacon and deaconess, and they serve on the hospital board and the

community outreach board. They're basically fucking do-gooders who look down their noses at everyone else. I know she loves them, but they turned it down when I sent them an invitation.

That's okay by me because she's surrounded by people who love and care for her. There are several other business owners in the area in attendance. They too have bought their significant others, and the shop is crowded with people waiting for the party to start.

"Happy Birthday, Tesoro mio," I say, pulling her into my arms.

"What do you mean 'Happy Birthday'?" she asks. "That was almost a week ago, and you bought me a bracelet. What's this?" she asks, sweeping one arm out and I release her.

"This is Marchiata. It means *Branded* in Italian."

"Like my tattoo shop?"

"Exactly," I say. "This is your new shop."

"Mine?" she gasps in just above a whisper.

"Yours."

"That's why we're here tonight?"

"Yes, baby. To celebrate you."

"Thank you," she says to me, kissing my lips.

I suck them in deep and slowly slip my tongue into her mouth. My cock is growing hard in my pants, and I think about her office upstairs. Yeah, I won't make it home tonight.

"Okay, can she get some air?" Tony asks, making everyone laugh.

I pull back briefly and see my sister, Gaia, giving me the thumbs up. She's been back and forth from Italy helping me plan tonight. I wink at her, and she dims the lights.

There's a collective gasp in the room as everyone goes silent. Soft piano music fills the room in a haunting melody

before Rihanna's voice begins to sing about a relationship she wants to take to the next level.

I pull Piper closer and begin to sway to the music. Soon after, Mikky Ekko sings the same lyrics.

I'm not a singer and never plan to be, but my voice isn't horrible. I find myself singing the lyrics *I want you to stay* in Rihanna's song *Stay*.

Piper rests her head against my chest, and I can feel her heart beating loudly against my body. My arms tighten around her because I want her to know she will always be safe and secure in my embrace.

The guests are gathered around the edges of the shop and on the second floor, where the balcony overlooks the shop. She hasn't had a chance to tour it yet, but when she does, she'll find that she has three private inking rooms upstairs and two office spaces, the larger of which belongs to her and has a private bathroom.

On this level, there are four inking stations, a breakroom, a set of bathrooms, and a little store where she can sell merchandise.

"You're too good for me," she whispers as the song nears an end.

I step back and release her hands as I kneel. The lights come up just a little, and I can see Piper's chest rising and falling dramatically in her sheer, come-fuck-me-now dress.

"Sometimes they say that a person's timing can be off. Maybe they met the right person but in the wrong lifetime. Or maybe they met at the wrong time in their lives. That didn't happen with you. I met you when and how I was supposed to meet you, Piper. I met you at a time in my life when I was bitter about my life being controlled by and deceived by others. You taught me that despite what I'd gone through, there was still trust and love in my heart, Tesoro."

"Marco," she whispers.

"Shh," I say, pressing a finger against my lips.

“We had two beautiful years of loving each other before you couldn’t take the pain anymore. You told me I had to go, and I vowed to stay away from you. Not because I didn’t care for you but because I loved you. I loved you enough to not continue hurting you and pulling you back into my whirlwind. In the eight years that passed, I was a broken man, not giving a damn about anyone or anything, not even myself. I knew I was foolish the first time I saw you in my club again.

“I could no more stay away from you than a fish can stay out of the water. I wasn’t sure how I would make you mine, but my heart knew I needed you. Foolishly, I stayed away for another year, working through my grief because I couldn’t come to you in pain and sorrow. Piper, what I’m trying to say is *mi vuoi sposare?*”

When she stares at me in confusion, my heart thunders in my chest, and I’m worried for the first time that maybe she doesn’t want what I want. Perhaps this life is too much for her.

“You asked her in Italian, dude,” Nico dramatically stage whispers, causing everyone to laugh.

Yeah, guess I was more nervous than I thought. Before I can repeat myself, my lady kneels in her tiny form-fitting dress, clasps her hands against my face, and kisses me. Her fingers stroke the hairs of my beard, and I’m lost in her essence.

“Is that a yes?” Gaia shouts from somewhere behind us.

Before Piper can answer, I pull back and ask, “Piper, will you marry me?”

Piper laughs and says, “Yes, I’ll marry you, Marco!”

Our kiss is punctuated with a dozen cheers around us as I’m thudded on my back with my brothers congratulating me. When we finally pull back from our kiss, Alessandro teases, “Do you think at the age of forty-two you can get your ass up from the floor?”

I stand with ease, pulling my fiancée with me. “I’ll knock your ass flat out. Wanna try me?” I challenge my brother, who smirks and winks at me.

“Not on my best day,” Alessandro replies.

Champagne flutes are being handed out, and the speakers are blasting rock music.

“Hey, can you keep everyone busy while I give my fiancée a tour of her studio?” I ask Alessandro.

“Sure, we can,” his wife, Mila, says with a knowing glint in her eye. “Girl, tell me how that desk feels when you come back,” I hear her whisper to Piper, who laughs loudly.

“Come on, let’s check out my office!” Piper says, tugging me by the hand.

“It’s just getting started, Marco!” Alessandro shouts over the music behind us.

Laughing, we run up the steps together, and I lead her straight to her office space.

The walls in this room are black brick with one pink accent wall. More photographs of her artwork hang in black frames in this room, but the pictures are of family and friends she’s inked in the past.

Behind her desk is a painting of her lying on her side with a cover draped across her hips and ass to cover her assets. The parts that remain uncovered display her finest work. Tattoos cover her thighs, back, neck, and arms.

“Where did you get that?” she gasps, teary-eyed again.

“Took that picture not long after you moved in and paid an artist to paint.”

“It’s beautiful.”

“As are you.”

“This is a beautiful night,” she says, looking beyond the double glass doors that, like the rest of the doors in this building, are tinted black. You can see out but not in. The doors lead to a balcony where she can relax and smoke in the middle of her workday.

My woman doesn’t have to work, and I’ll always provide for her even after my death. But she’s an artist and an



independent woman, and I treasure and respect that about her. I'll always do what I can to support her and never stifle her creativity or desire to work.

“Get your ass up on that desk,” I say, pointing to the long L-shaped desk that takes up one wall and half of another wall.

“My desk is empty,” she observes.

“All your supplies will be bought up tomorrow, including your computer equipment,” I say.

“Mm. Is that right,” she asks, climbing onto the desk, parting her legs, and unsnapping the body suit between her thighs.

As I expected, she's wearing nothing else.

“Damn right. I didn't want shit to get in the way of me feasting on this pretty pussy,” I say, swiping a finger through her slick juices before I pinch her clit.

Piper instantly reacts with her back arching and her nipples tightening against the lace. Pulling my finger out, I suck on it before dipping two more inside her, and then I suck on those.

“You're such a fucking tease, Marco. Just eat this pussy already!” she commands.

Laughing, I kneel and whisper, “Your fucking wish is my pleasure.”

My first swipe of her slit has my tongue reeling with pure delight. My woman tastes so delicious; better than the best Kobe beef. I could eat nothing but her and have all the nourishment I needed for a lifetime.

I suck, and she moans loudly, and I don't worry about the noise she's making. Beyond these locked doors, no one could hear us even if we turned down the music thanks to the soundproof walls I had installed.

When I vowed to stay away from Piper all those years ago, I never imagined we would be here one day. People like me don't often get second chances especially not with the only person they've ever loved.

I'm a fuck up, and I know it. I deserved the punishments I've endured, but they were all worth it in exchange for the best reward.

"Eat me, Marco!" she screams like a fucking demon.

I slurp, bite, finger, and plunge through her cavern with my tongue and fingers until her legs are locked tightly around my neck, and she's lifting off the desk and causing me to rise with her.

"Are you ready for me?" I ask, unbuttoning my pants and spreading her collapsing legs.

"Mm-hmm," she purrs in a tired tone.

It doesn't take long before my pants are kicked off, along with my shoes, and I'm driving my dick inside her. The thought of being so deeply seated in her the way I am causes my nuts to tighten, and I want to explode, but it's far too soon.

We rock and pound our way through the night even as I can feel the vibration of the music changing. I pull out of her and smack her thigh with her rendering of the Virgo.

"Turn over!" I grunt, and she does.

I slide her off the desk until she's bent over it and holding onto the edges firmly with her fingertips. Piper's knuckles are turning red as I slide deep into her. My strokes are long, strong, and hard. I can't take too much more of this, even as I pick up my pace.

The desk is banging against the wall loudly, and I make a mental note to have someone come out tomorrow to touch up the fresh paint job that we're fucking up now.

"Get in this ass, boy!" Piper shouts, and I do as she asks, looking at her most prized tattoo on her lower back. There's an image of a shattered red heart with her name on one side and mine on the other.

Underneath in fancy script, the words are tattooed:

*We're fucking savages for life!*



# ITALIAN TRANSLATION

**T**esoro – Sweetheart  
Ciao, mia bella – Hello my beautiful one  
Ti amo – I love you  
Il desiderio del mio cuore – My heart's desire  
Il Maniaco – The Maniac  
Si calmi – Chill out  
Figlio di puttana – Son of a bitch  
Vaffanculo, Padre – Fuck you, Father  
Acqua – Water  
Fermare – Stop  
Mi dispiace – I'm sorry  
Polizia – Police  
Il diavolo – The devil  
Il diavolo sta arrivando – the devil is coming  
Dio riposa la sua anima – God rest your soul.  
Ma come sei bella – How beautiful you are.  
Tu sarai mia – You will be mine  
Ci proverò – I'll try  
Dunque, mio disonesto amico, - è il suo giorno fortunato –  
So, my crooked friend, today is your lucky day.  
Puttana – whore  
Stronza – bitch  
Aaaa! Preparati a morire, testa di cazzo! – Get ready to die,  
motherfucker!  
Muori – Die  
Dio riposa la sua anima – God rest his soul

Mi vuoi sposare – Will you marry me?



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# ABOUT CASSIE



CASSIE VERANO PENS romance for readers of all cultures and backgrounds. Her love of romance is borne from the beauty and joy she sees in the relationships around her. She enjoys creating fiction about women discovering true love and women who aren't afraid to explore their sexuality.

As a professional administrator, she dreamt of the day she could toss her paperwork aside and craft stories that inspired love and romance in women's hearts worldwide. As a wife and mother, she enjoys playing quirky games and singing with her family.

This southern belle is a native Georgia Peach who enjoys reading, writing, and trying different cuisines from around the world. On rainy days she can be found cuddling under a blanket with a good mystery book in her hands or watching a romance movie on Hallmark or LMN.

Connect with Cassie via email to find out how to join her newsletter. You'll receive news and updates about new releases, upcoming projects, giveaways, teasers, sales, and more when you join her mailing list:

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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Continuing the Savage Bloodline series with Alessandro's big brother, Marco, has been a wonderful privilege. I've connected with some more amazing authors and readers that I hadn't known before.

I enjoyed exploring how a savage would react when he starts on a murderous path for revenge, denying himself his greatest pleasure. Marco's grief and denial of what his heart truly wanted only fueled his pledge for vengeance and the fury that ignited his path. However, deep inside, Marco wanted what all of us want, to be loved and accepted at the end of the day. In the end, he proved that he could be just as sane and loving as any other male while holding onto his savage identity.

Thank you for your continued support and your encouraging emails. You make this journey worth every step. Don't forget to share Marco and the entire DeLuca series with someone else so they can enjoy it. If you enjoyed this, please consider leaving a review. Reviews help spread the word to other readers and bring in new readers. I don't take them lightly or for granted.

Follow along in my newsletter to see what I've got in store for you, and check out my writing partner, Tiye, and my [podcast: Cozy Sips with C.a.T.](#)

Last but certainly not least, Mr. V, sei l'uomo dei miei sogni. Thank you for being my number one support and fan. Thank you for pushing me beyond what I could envision.

THERE'S STILL TIME  
TO LEAVE A REVIEW