

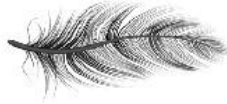


OATH OF
REDEMPTION

LUCIANO MAFIA 2



aj wolf



Oath of Redemption

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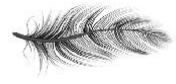
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CONTENT WARNING

Cheating (NOT between main characters), blood/torture, expeditionism (sex in public places), pregnancy related trauma



You've ***always*** been mine.

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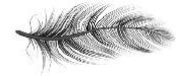


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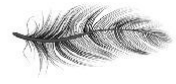
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CHAPTER ONE

REMY

The soft murmur of footsteps overhead is barely heard over the water gurgling in the pipes on the wall, one of them rattling inside a broken wall bracket at the flush of a toilet. Boxes are stacked to the right of me, my father casually leaned against them as he puffs on his cigar. Blood drips from my busted lip and my left ear, the ringing now gone but a deafening shadow of sound has replaced it, like my head is stuck underwater. My gut sucks in with the next punch that lands against my ribs, a hiss whispering through my clenched teeth.

I've nearly become numb to the pain at this point, my aching body nothing but a giant throbbing. I flex my fingers where I sit, my hands unbound and resting at my sides despite taking a beating. I know it was intentional on Geo's part; he wanted me to retaliate during my punishment—if I hit him back my father would be forced to extend it. And even though I had nothing to do with my father's decision to use Julian as blackmail against me, I know Geo blamed me. That, paired with me taking Beverly's virginity was enough to push Geo over his limits of tolerance where I was concerned.

And I wasn't about to encourage him or my father to extend my beating or my pier duty, so I sat in silence as my ribs were bruised and my body was pelted with punches and kicks. And even though I was in pain, I'd make the same choices that got me here. I'd take a beating every day just for one more night with Bev. And realistically, I might if they ever found out that I hadn't stopped seeing her.

"Geo, it's been over two and half hours, I think Remy has gotten the message by now." My father's voice comes from the corner, the smell of his cigar melding with the earthly stench of mold that clings to the basement air.

Geo's breaths come in quick pants as he bends at the waist, his bandaged knuckles resting on his knees as he looks over at my father. Dark, graying hair sticking to his forehead despite the cool dampness of the space. "Perhaps." His head turns to face mine, his tongue wetting his lips as he glares. "I have to commend your son on his ability to take a hit."

He and my father share a chuckle I don't find amusing. My shoulders shifting with a pained grunt as I adjust in my metal chair.

"But fine," Geo speaks again, straightening to wave his hand at me. "You're done. I'm still pissed you touched my daughter, but I feel a little less murderous." His eyes flick to my father's, one of his fingers pointing at him. "I'm still mad at you, though."

My father scoffs, snubbing out his cigar on the water-stained brick wall. "Come now, Geo, when will you forgive me? *Ho già chiesto scusa.*" *I already apologized.*

I stay in my chair while they talk, the ringing in my head slowly starting to dull but my hearing not yet back as I ignore their conversation. I stay in the chair, waiting for permission to leave before I dare move. I already know it will be pure agony, my muscles cold and sore from both the beating and sitting in place for so long. I can already feel the tingling, tiny pinpricks of glass making their way up my legs as I wiggle my toes.

"Remy, go get cleaned up, you look a mess." My eyes flick to my father's look of annoyance. "You have pier duty starting tomorrow afternoon."

“Yes, sir.” It rasps from my throat, my jaw aching from the several right hooks I’d taken and clenching my teeth. I swallow back the blood that welled up from my lip, speaking reopening the cut. I give myself a moment to wake up my limbs before I dare try to stand, my hand cradling my side when a sharp ache stabs through my ribs with such intensity it knocks the breath from my lungs.

Figlio di puttana.

Son of a bitch.

My teeth grind as I shuffle toward the doorway, each step growing a little stronger, but so does the pain. Instead of braving the stairs, I turn left, cradling my ribs with one hand and using the other to support each step as I make my way to the locker room. A slightly renovated old-school house, this warehouse has both a kitchen and a locker room with showers in the basement. It’s one we use often for beatings because it’s easy to clean up after.

Instead of pulling my shirt over my head, I grab the hem and yank, a grunt of pain echoing around the locker room as I rip my shirt down the front. Closing my eyes, I peel the stiff, bloody fabric off, letting it drop to the ground as I clench my teeth and toe off my boots. My fingers undo the button on my jeans, bare feet cold on the tile floor as I walk stiffly to the shower stall and turn the water on hot. Water sputters from the showerhead, hard and loud as it sprays the tile floor and splashes up onto my legs. Bracing myself on the wall, I struggle to get my jeans off, hissing through my teeth as I jerk the cuffs over my ankles and leave them on the floor.

The water is brutal on my sore, broken flesh, but it’s welcoming. The heat sinks into my cold body, warming my muscles and helping soothe the ache. Grabbing the cheap bottle of soap that’s sitting on the stall divider wall, I lather it in my palms, closing my eyes to the sting as I soap up my body, a mix of blood and suds twirling down the drain at my feet. I can only raise one hand to wash my hair, so I do it half-assed, letting the soap run down my face. Once the water between my toes runs clear I shut the shower off, my skin immediately pebbling with gooseflesh as I make my way to the utility shelf holding towels and spare clothes.

It takes me some time but I eventually dry and get dressed, leaving my old clothes on the floor where I discarded them as I scoop up my boots and fight them on. My lip has started to scab up so it’s no longer bleeding, but my left eye feels puffy and nearly swollen over. My hands clench at my sides as I eye the basement steps, eyes momentarily closing as I grab onto the banister with one hand and cradle my ribs with the other, taking each step with an internal curse and a hiss through my teeth.

The men on the upper deck don’t dare look over at me as I enter the room, all of their heads purposefully turned away or bowed over paperwork as I make my way toward the exit. It takes my eyes a moment to adjust to the darkness, the only light coming from the floodlights on the side of the building as I make my way to my SUV.

“You’ve certainly looked better, brother.”

My fingers tighten on the side of the car door at Gavino’s voice, the door held partially opened as I adjust to see him leaning against his car. I don’t answer him, just hum, swallowing as I open the door farther and prepare to climb inside.

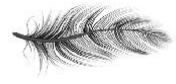
“I can’t imagine how you feel right now.”

His voice is closer, but I don’t look, holding the grunt that wants to come out inside of my chest as I get into the driver’s seat. Once I’m settled, I look over at him, his smug face begging me to shuffle

over and break his jaw.

“You got your ass kicked for a woman you don’t even get to be with.” He chuckles and I start my car, eyes flicking from his as he continues, “I’ll tell her you say hi during our date this week.”

I swallow hard, not allowing his goading to get to me. My body is screaming but I have somewhere to be. My eyes meet his just as I pull out. “You do that.”



CHAPTER TWO

BEVERLY

“Just a minute.”

Wringing my hair one last time with my towel, I toss it into the laundry bin on my out of the bathroom. In my hurry to get to the door, I grab the first thing I can find to cover up—an oversized tee that used to be Julian’s—and throw it on. I’m digging through my dresser to grab a pair of underwear when I hear the door opening.

“Julian?” There isn’t a response, but I stop rushing since he’s already in the apartment, tugging my underwear up my legs. Searching for a pair of shorts, I yell over my shoulder out the cracked bedroom door, “Go ahead and start the movie, I’ll be out in a minute.”

At the creak of my door opening farther I frown, spinning with the shorts in my hands. “Hey! Get ou—”

My words die on my tongue, my eyes landing on Remy. He is standing with his hands casually tucked into the pockets of his denim jeans, a dimple winking at me from his left cheek. My heart tightens painfully in my chest. *I’ve always loved his damn dimples.* A shaky breath leaves my lips as I try to keep my composure, confusion mixing with my elation at seeing him, cementing my feet to the carpet.

Every time I see him now, I can’t help but scan him from head to toe, see if there are any differences from the last time my eyes were on him. His almost black hair is a little longer on top but still cut short on the sides, the black tattoo peeking out of the top of his dress shirt bringing attention to the light stubble on his jaw. I can see the ache in his eyes as he looks at me, though, practically feel his need to put his hands on me and wrap me up in his space.

More importantly, I see the bruising. And the cuts.

I see the black eye and the busted lip.

“Bev, get that look off your face, I’m fine.” The deep baritone washes over me, sinking into my skin and thrumming my blood. I watch as he pulls his hands from his pockets as he moves closer, a slight limp in his stride, his left hand rising to cradle his ribs.

“What did they do to you?” It hurts looking at him, but I can’t look away. I know it’s my fault he looks like this. Julian had told me he would be punished for what we did. He didn’t go into details, but he didn’t have to.

His dark eyes sit heavily on my face, the attention tugging at my carefully placed mask of composure. “Nothing that won’t heal.”

He hisses as he lowers himself to the edge of my bed, the movement drawing my attention to a patch of blood on the light gray cotton of his shirt, and I toss my shorts back into my drawer, moving to him. “You’re bleeding.” Dropping to my knees, I reach for his shirt but he stops me with a hand on my wrist.

His grip is warm and reassuring, his thumb stroking along my pulse point as he forces my gaze up to his golden orbs. “It’s old, *cuore mio.*”

My heart.

The endearment hurts more than it should, clogging my throat as I gaze up at him. “Why did you come here?” It’s a whispered question, one I don’t want to ask because I wish it didn’t have to be asked. “They won’t be happy if they find out.”

He swallows, a slight narrowing of his eyes the only indication he cares about what they think. “They’re always unhappy.” He tugs me closer to him by my arm, bringing my palm to his lips. “They won’t find out. Viva expects me to be out of town and our fathers are probably getting drunk and playing poker over a job well done.”

Viva.

Her name sits in the back of my throat, bitter as bile.

The only time we ever get now is like this, in secret. Before I would have done anything to avoid spending any amount of time alone with this man, but now? I count the seconds between our stolen moments and hidden touches. They are few and far between, each one feeling a little more *forbidden*. He has a wife and I’m betrothed to his brother. And seeing him now, beaten for touching me before our marriage—a marriage that never got to happen—really settles those thoughts in my mind.

I’m the other woman when I should be the only woman.

“Bev.” Remy’s deep voice pulls me out of my thoughts, bringing my attention back to him. “It’s fine. *I promise.*”

I nod, lightly tugging my fingers from his grasp to stand up. “I think Julian has a pair of sweats here you can change into.” I pause, my eyes wide. “Shit, Julian is supposed to be coming over—”

“I sent him on a job across the city,” he interrupts, grimacing as he reaches back to grab the back of his shirt to tug over his head. “He won’t be coming over tonight.”

Letting out the breath I was holding I nod while watching Remy shift uncomfortably out of his pants. I move forward and grab the edge of his cuffs, meeting his gaze as I help pull them the rest of the way down his legs to drop on the floor.

“Come here, *cuore mio*,” he says to my kneeling form, his voice stroking along my skin.

I do as he instructs, stepping up between his thighs. He’s just wearing his briefs now and all the cuts and nicks and bruises covering his inked body are on full display. His fingers chuck me under the when my eyes linger on them for too long, twinning our fingers together once my eyes meet his. I lean forward so he doesn’t have to, lightly pressing a kiss to the corner of his lips that isn’t busted. My heart thumps at the warm, sweet smell of his skin, familiar and safe.

Softly pulling his hands from mine, he runs a palm along the outside of my bare thighs. He leans down to press his lips on mine for another whisper of a kiss. “*Siamo solo io e te ora, il mio cuore.*” *It’s just you and me now, my heart.* His lips brush mine as he speaks, and I suppress a shiver as they move to my jaw and trail along my neck to our matching tattoo. After placing a kiss on the ink, his lips skim the shell of my ear. “It’s been a long day, I don’t want to talk about them anymore. I just want *you.*”

I turn my face toward his, pulling his lips to mine with my fingers at his nape. His fingers are biting into the flesh of my thighs, meeting my soft, desperate kisses with his own. My palms cup his jaw and run along the thick column of his throat, scared to touch him in a spot where he’s hurt. But Remy isn’t having any of it, reaching down to grab the backs of my thighs and tugging me up onto him so that my legs straddle his waist. He hisses with the movement, maneuvering us backward

until he's resting against the headboard, but he won't let me pull away, his hands running up the back of my shirt, warm palms pressing along my spine.

His fingertips pinch into my skin as he slowly pushes my shirt up, skimming my waist and ribs, thumbs running along the edge of my peaked nipples. The fabric glides over my raised arms and he tosses it away, leaning to kiss the space between my breasts as his hands squeeze my breasts in his palms. A throaty groan slips from my lips as his hot mouth sucks one of my nipples into a tight, aching bud, his teeth scraping over my sensitive flesh as he switches sides to give my other nipple just as much attention.

My hips grind against his clothed erection, palms carefully running over his broad shoulders, corded arms, and ridged stomach as I silently give us the touch we both crave, that we both *need*. I reach between us, fingers sliding along the deep V on his abdomen before gripping the waistband of his briefs. He helps me tug his briefs off the best he can, his eyes burning along my skin as he watches me tentatively grab his dick, my thumb rubbing the few drops of pre-cum along the tip as I lick my lips.

I'd never given him head before. *Or anyone*. But I want all of him tonight.

His touch. His sounds. His taste. *Everything*.

He hums in appreciation as my hand slowly pumps along his thick base, my eyes meeting his. "Is this right?"

With a nod, one of his palms cradle the side of my head, his fingers tangling in the damp strands of my hair. "*Perfetto*." *Perfect*. He pulls my face closer until my lips brush along the throbbing mushroom head of his cock.

My tongue comes out to tentatively swipe across the tip. Swallowing down the salty pre-cum, another hum vibrates from his chest, his hips lightly pushing up to press against my mouth.

"Open for me, *cuore mio*."

I do as he instructs, the soft, velvety skin of his dick slipping past my lips to sit heavy on my tongue. His teeth clench, jaw flexing as I look up at him through my lashes, the hand in my hair gently guiding my movements. He doesn't push my head all the way down, just keeps my mouth on the tip, letting me adjust as he moves me up and down. With his other hand, he guides my palm, working the base of his cock.

"Just like that, Bev. Fuck, your mouth feels good." His praise swells in my chest, my movements growing a little bolder as I attempt to suck him deeper. He moves his hand from mine, his hips rising to meet my mouth in short little thrusts, encouraging me to keep going. "That's it, *fuck*, that's such a good girl."

Emboldened, I work him faster, his hum of appreciation strumming along my skin.

He hisses through his teeth, hand sinking deeper into the damp strands of my hair to tug at my roots as he pushes my head farther down. My eyes rise to find his through my lashes as I oblige his not-so-subtle request. "*Puoi andare più a fondo. Bavaglio per me, piccola*." *You can go deeper. Gag for me, baby*.

His hips shift, encouraging me to do as he instructed, and I take a deep breath through my nose and flatten my tongue, taking him deeper until I'm forced to break eye contact and my lips meet my fist. Remy's fingers loosen in my hair as I bob on his dick, spit dripping from my lips to slicken the path for my hand as I work him. His sweet little murmurs are stroking along my skin, every syllable curling my toes into the sheets as he hums his appreciation. Knowing I'm the reason for his pleasure

turns me on, each shallow breath making me squeeze my legs together, thighs slippery with my own slick as I drench my panties.

I fight back a gag as Remy thrusts hard into my throat, my face pulled from his lap and shifted so that he's peering down at me with blown pupils. His palm wipes the spit from my chin, tugging me up so that I'm sitting on my knees, and his tongue is swiping the taste of him from my mouth. Palming my waist, he flips me onto my back, his body rolling with me to pin me under him with a hiss of pain.

"I want to watch you come, *cuore mio*."

My panties are tugged down my legs, the slight pinch of Remy's lips the only indication that he feels pain with the movement. Large, warm palms run along the inside of my thighs, spreading my legs wide for him. Two thick digits run along my slit, dipping into my slick so that he can drag it up to my clit, soaking the throbbing bundle of nerves with my own cream. His dick presses into me, slipping into my pussy with a wet slap as his fingers pinch and tease at my clit. It's almost too much at once, my back arching at the overwhelming sensations running along my spine.

Sitting up on my elbows, my lips press to his, the kiss growing deeper as our tongues fight to taste each other. His fingers pinch into my waist as he slaps into me, thumb pressing against that bundle of nerves as he trails wet kisses over my chest, leaving marks in his wake. I'm already close to an orgasm, my teeth biting into my lip as his tongue wraps around one of my nipples. Three more wet slaps of his balls against my pussy and my orgasm bursts through me, drawing his name from my throat like a raspy prayer as I sink my nails into the skin of his shoulders. He continues pumping through it, groaning against my clammy skin as I clench around him.

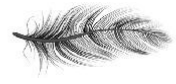
Remy's lips move up to find my neck, and I raise my heavy arms to hold him to me, bringing his lips to mine for another soft kiss. His thrusts are growing more erratic and choppy, lips brushing along mine with his movements as we share breaths. I let my legs fall to the bed, butterflying for him as he gets closer to losing himself. Remy palms my face with one hand, groaning against my mouth as he sprays my insides with his cum, sucking my bottom lip into his mouth as he works his hips in slow, lazy thrusts to draw out his pleasure.

Honey browns stare down at me as we both breathe heavily, our skin sticky and hot against each other. His dimples flash, tugging a smile from me. I don't even know why we're smiling, but it makes my heart thump for an entirely different reason. He drops his face into my neck, arms pushing up under my head and back to hug me, his weight heavy but comforting. I loop my arms around his neck, mimicking his posture, and press a kiss to his ear.

My eyes land on the clock hanging on the wall, gut twisting at the time. My nose snuggles deeper against his skin and my eyes shut, breathing him in. I know I'll fall asleep and he'll be gone by morning, but for now, *he's mine*.

"What are you thinking, *cuore mio*?" Remy adjusts slightly, but stays inside me, his breath warm against my cheek.

I swallow, turning my face to look at his with a smile I don't completely feel. "Nothing."



CHAPTER THREE

BEVERLY

My fingertips burn around the edges of my to-go coffee cup, my throat burning as I swallow it down even knowing it's still too warm. It's the only thing I can do to keep both my hands and mouth busy as I sit in the library with Gavino. Thumbing the soft edges of my book with one hand, I keep the cup in the other, pretending to be hyper-focused on the ink-lined pages in front of me.

When Gavino had asked me out today, I obliged out of duty, but in all honesty, spending time with him now isn't nearly as pleasant as it was before. Whether it's because I knew he'd snaked his way into marrying me or because I continued to fuck his brother, a married man, behind his back, I don't know. The latter makes me feel dirty when I really think about it—so I just *don't*. But I *did* do everything within my power to avoid conversations that involved Remy or his wife.

Especially with Gavino.

I jump at the slight brush of Gavino's fingers along the top of my hand, my eyes snapping up from where they'd blurred along the book page to his face.

"Thank you for joining me today."

I smile, knots twisting in my gut as his fingers brush along mine, twinning them together. "Of course. Thanks for inviting me." My skin burns where it's connected to his, the touch is strange and inherently feels *wrong*. I lightly pull my hand away with an excuse to do so heavy on my lips. "Sorry, I need the next page." I give him an apologetic smile while flipping the page, my hand dropping to hide in my lap once I'm finished.

Gavino has become very touchy-feely since the wedding announcement. It's partially my own fault, considering I never told him I *didn't* want the affection, but would it matter even if I had? We were arranged to be married by the coming spring, I should want his affections, shouldn't I? Even if I wasn't stuck on Remy, a part of me knows that Gavino never would have been more than a friendship to me, despite how many times my mother has tried to say otherwise.

"You know, I thought about this often," he says, drawing my attention from where I'd been pretending to read.

"What?" I ask, taking a drink of my coffee to stop myself from pulling away when he reaches to brush a piece of hair from my cheek.

"The two of us hanging out as more than just friends."

I suck down more coffee, delaying having to respond. Thankfully he either doesn't notice or doesn't care, continuing to talk.

"You know how I feel about you, Bev. I hope that one day, you can feel the same way."

The same coffee I just chugged down threatens to rise, nausea roiling in my stomach as I set my half-empty cup down. "I—" I pause, smiling in place of forming a sentence when my mind draws a blank in response. "I enjoy spending time with you, Gavino."

The response seems to placate him because he smiles, his dark blue eyes shifting from me to sweep around the room. Despite his gaze being off of me, my stomach still feels sour. *I shouldn't have drank all that coffee so quickly*. Or perhaps, it's the conversation in general. My eyes flick

back to my book, skimming more than reading, to take my mind off my stomach. Just when I'm at the point of just forgetting about it, Gavino's voice draws my attention, breaking my concentration.

"Pronto," he says quietly into his phone, his hand casually falling to my thigh with an apologetic smile.

I want to push his hand away, but I don't. Instead, my eyes wander back to the page I've pretended to read twenty times over.

"What?" His voice rises just a tad, eyes quickly flicking to me as I keep my attention on the page, only watching him from my peripherals. His voice is even lower when he asks, his shoulders slightly tilting away from me, his palm sliding from my thigh, "When was this?"

The only reason I look up at his profile is because of the tone of his voice, the annoyance evident in it. One of his hands rises to run through his short brown hair, his knuckles dropping to rap against his thigh.

"And you didn't think to tell me this when it was happening?"

I look away from him when he glances my way, dropping my attention back to the book. If I've learned anything about growing up in the Mafia, it is that the men don't like the women getting in their business. Even the nice ones like Gavino. I can't help but eavesdrop, though, my interest piqued merely because I've never seen this side of Gavino. He'd always done a good job to keep his business out of our time together.

He clicks the phone shut, hanging up, and I do my best to act like I was engrossed in my book when he touches my arm. "You haven't heard from Remy, have you?"

My heart thumps hard in my chest at his question, my breath catching. I quickly recover, shaking my head and flicking my gaze from his face to my book. "No." Once I feel like I have some semblance of control over the whirlwind of panic crashing against my windpipe, my eyes meet his once more, adding, "We don't hang in the same circles anymore."

For a moment, though brief, I almost think he doesn't believe me. My fingers scrunching in my lap the longer he stares without a word. His smile is like a weight lifted off of my shoulders, but guilt quickly burrows in the place the panic left.

You're such a liar, Beverly.

"Does it make me an ass to say I'm happy about that?" He chuckles and I fake a returning smile. "Can I tell you a secret?"

I swallow, my throat burning as bile threatens to rise, stomach churning. "Of course, you can tell me anything."

He leans in close, so close I can feel the heat of his breath fanning my cheek. Everything in me wants to pull away but I don't, reminding myself that he is who I *should* have feelings for.

"I picked out your ring this morning."

If possible, my stomach sinks even further with his words. He's smiling, reaching into his pocket as he leans to the side. I bite the inside of my cheek, forcing a smile when he holds a black velvet box in front of me. He opens the box and pulls the diamond ring from its holder, his warm fingers lifting my hand from where they are clenched in my lap. I force myself to go soft under his touch and swallow hard when his eyes meet mine to slip it onto my finger.

It feels heavy.

Like a sack of bricks tied around my neck, ready to sink me to the bottom of the harbor.

I know I have to say something, but I don't think I can, not without expelling all the coffee I've just drank onto the front of his shirt. So instead, I sit there with my mouth gaping like a fish until a breathy, "It's beautiful," forces its way past my lips.

And it is beautiful.

And large.

A classic princess cut, easily three carats, and lined with tiny diamonds that wrap around the entire silver band, no one would miss it sparkling on my finger. And part of me thinks maybe that is the point.

"I'm happy you like it," he finally says, my eyes peeling from the stone on my finger to his face. His face that is *very* close to mine. "You didn't get a ring last time, I thought you'd like one this time around."

My heart just about cracks in two at the thought, another wash of nausea rising to the surface. I force a smile past it, hoping my face doesn't look like the grimace I am feeling. "That was—is thoughtful of you." I swallow. "Thank you."

"Anything for you. I wanted it to be as beautiful as you are."

I feel him shift closer, feel the phantom press of his lips before he even starts to shift forward. I try to stay put, my hands clenching in my lap, the diamonds on the band of my ring cutting sharply into my fingers. It's just a barely-there press of his lips, but it burns like acid, scalding me as his lips press into mine.

Before I know what I am doing, I'm leaping up from my chair, a hand slapping over my stomach and another over my mouth. Gavino frowns up at me, a question on his lips as I run toward the bathrooms. I barely make it inside before I am gripping the edge of the toilet seat and expelling everything I've consumed in the last hour. I choke back bile as I dry heave, my stomach tight as I breathe through my nose and try to get a hold of myself.

When I feel like I'm not going to throw up again, I stand and wash my hands. Bending, I suck water into my mouth from the faucet and rinse my mouth, repeating the process several times before I feel clean. Grabbing a paper towel, I wipe off my hands and mouth, my heart racing as I make my way toward the door.

Gavino.

How would I possibly explain to him what happened? I'm not even sure.

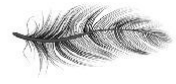
Taking a deep breath, I push the door open, my eyes immediately flicking to Gavino who is stood outside the door. His shoulders are stiff despite the kind look on his face. Guilt pools in my gut, filling the space the nausea had just left.

"I'm fine," I reassure him, forcing a smile. "My stomach has been feeling off all morning, I think I just ate something funny last night." He doesn't say anything right away, but I can feel the shift in the air, that uncomfortable feeling I'd always get when he spoke with Remy. So I try to joke my way out of the situation. "Bad timing, huh?"

He smiles, but it doesn't reach his eyes. "Impeccable." I bite the inside of my cheek. He continues, a hand falling to my arm to guide me back to the table with my things. "How about we swing by the drugstore on the way back to your place? You can get something for your stomach."

I nod, reaching to collect my book and phone. "Yeah, that's probably a good idea." He hands me my now cold coffee, and I smile despite nausea roaring back to life at seeing the ring shining on my

finger when I grab it from him. "Thank you."



CHAPTER FOUR

REMY

Taking a drag of my cigarette, I gaze up at the sky, chewing on the inside of my cheek as I hold the smoke in my lungs until they burn. Even then I don't let it out all at once, relishing the pain as I let the smoke seep little by little from my nose as I exhale. Seagulls chirp and shrill in the distance, the sound of water smacking against the steel docks nearly loud enough to drown out the sharp mechanical sound of men loading up trucks at my back.

I'm stuck on the docks for another month as part of my punishment from my father and Geo. That was my father's addition because, of course, he had to have one. Turning around, I watch as counterfeit paintings are carefully examined in the interior of the building through the open bay door, a flawless counterfeit of *Le Rêve* currently under inspection. I hear him before he speaks, casting a quick glance his way before snubbing my smoke out onto the steel banister I'm leaning against.

"How much longer are you on dock duty?" Andrea asks, his golden hair shining in the sunlight. A curl drifts over his forehead with the breeze, his eyes falling on the same team I was just watching inside.

"A month." My tongue runs over my bottom lip, catching on the healing split. "Give or take a few days."

"That's some shit, yeah?" Donatello comments, coming to stand next to us, his hands sliding into his pockets.

Andrea eyes him, his big arms crossing over his chest. "What are you doing here? I thought you had a job over on the east side." His eyes are narrowed in suspicion with the question, but Donatello doesn't seem to notice, or at least, care.

"What? Oh yeah, I finished that shit already," he replies offhandedly, nodding toward me. "You see Gavino got Bev a ring?"

My teeth clench.

Figlio di puttana.

Of course, he'd gotten her a ring. That gloating *bastardo* is hellbent on rubbing his engagement to Bev in my face any chance he gets.

"*Che due coglioni?*" *What the fuck?* Donatello hisses as Andrea smacks his arm, scowling at him. "It's just a fucking question."

"You're always starting shit. You can't ever keep your mouth shut," Andrea says with a shake of his head, his eyes flicking from Donatello to me.

"You saw it?" I ask him as he sneers at Andrea.

"No, but Luca saw him buy it. Said he spent a pretty penny on it too."

One of my cousins, Luca, had a knack for being annoying. It wasn't surprising he was the one to share the news.

Andrea snorts, shaking his head, but I don't respond, chewing on my lip as I look over the water instead. *If Beverly is going to get a ring from the weasel, the least he can do is spend a fortune on it.*

“I have a meeting with my father in a few minutes,” I finally say, changing the subject. Talking about Bev with Gavino in any capacity makes me feel like tearing through the entire organization with a Tommy gun, and I can’t handle even a moment more. “Donatello can stay and supervise the shipment in my place.”

He scoffs, looking between Andrea and me. “Why the fuck do I have to?”

I stand up off of the railing, smirking at Andrea. “Because you’re done with your job.” I start to walk away, speaking over my shoulder. “And you don’t know how to keep your mouth shut.”

“Oh, fuck you!” he yells at my retreating back. “You owe me, Andrea, I’m cashing in.”

I hear Andrea’s reply as I’m getting into my SUV. “Can’t, I have other business finish up.”

Smirking, I shut the door.



My thumb swirls around the plain silver ring on my finger, my eyes on the band as I wait for my father to be ready for me. *I hate the damn thing.* I only wear it when I have to, like at events and meetings. Otherwise, it’s dropped in the cup holder of my SUV or shoved in my back pocket. Time has moved in slow motion since the wedding. One big, *long* nightmare. I’ve found myself grappling to find extra jobs, any extra task to keep me from having to go home. My home doesn’t even feel like home anymore, not with Viva there. She’s a constant reminder of what I had to give up. *Who* I had to give up.

Every day is the same. Wake up, work, go home, sleep. The only reprieve I get are the stolen moments I have with Bev. Few and far between, those moments are the only reason I haven’t lost my sanity yet.

“Capo Famiglia will see you now.”

My eyes flick to one of my father’s lackeys and I rise from my seat. My knuckles lightly rap on the doorframe before I step into my father’s office, my teeth already chewing on the inside of my cheek as the door shuts behind me. Crossing my hands in front of my waist, I stand in front of his desk, my eyes wandering across the space instead of watching my father scribble notes. Once the sound of his pen pauses, I feel his eyes on me and meet his gaze.

“It’s been what, three months since the wedding?” I know he isn’t looking for an answer so I remain quiet, watching him set his pen down and lean back in his chair. “I think it’s time you’ve made an heir.”

My heart thumps hard, but I don’t give him a reaction, swallowing as I keep my face neutral. Despite what I’ve led my father and his men to believe, *I don’t fuck Viva.* I didn’t touch her on our wedding night and I still haven’t, despite her protesting and advances. The thought of touching her, of fucking her, let alone having a *child* with her, makes bile coat the back of my throat.

“And if I don’t? I can’t control that kind of thing.”

He scoffs and my hands tighten where I’m holding them, my knuckles turning white. “Fuck your wife more often and make it happen. You’ve had time to adjust to your marriage, now it’s time to reproduce.”

His hand waves, signaling he’s done hearing from me, making sure my eyes are on his before he speaks again.

“I know how you feel about this marriage, you’ve made it perfectly clear, but this merger has generated over a million dollars in the last four weeks alone.” He pauses, probably for dramatic effect more than anything. My father had a knack for dramatic pauses. “Your mother and I were a contracted marriage, and as you can imagine, neither of us was happy about it. But it doesn’t matter, because with the marriage, the Famiglia gained Empire Airlines. You know what you would have gained marrying Beverly Esposito?”

Hearing her name on his tongue spikes my temperature with anger. He doesn’t deserve to say it. I don’t answer his question, remaining quiet, mostly because I don’t think he’s actually looking for one.

“Nothing but a strong heir. Now I’m not saying that couldn’t be enough, I obviously made the arrangement,” he adds, the leather of his chair squeaking as he shifts in his seat to get more comfortable. “But you can’t compare a strong heir to an income stream that will help the Famiglia for years to come.”

I swallow, doing my best to feign interest in the conversation despite the rage blurring my vision.

“You can thank your lucky stars that Viva is at least attractive and I’m not asking you to fuck a *bertuccia*. I was equally as lucky with your mother.” He pauses, his fingers pinching around the top of his coffee mug, bringing it to his lips to take a sip before setting it back down. His dark eyes flick back up to mine. “You don’t have to love a woman to make an heir, you and your sister are a testament to that. I’m not asking you to love Viva, Remy, I’m asking you to fuck her. And once she’s pregnant, feel free to find another bitch to fuck, just make sure to wrap it up, or else you’ll end up in the same situation I had with Gavino.”

His sentence ends with a slight chuckle, like the conversation is amusing to him.

My jaw tics but I dip my head in a slight nod, acknowledging I’ve heard and understood him. “Is that all?” I want nothing but to get the hell out of this room before I lose my shit.

He waves his hand in my direction, dismissing me. “Go, fuck your wife and make an heir.” He pauses, catching my gaze before I turn and leave the room. “That’s an order.”

The door shuts quietly at my back despite me wanting to rip it off its hinges, the metallic tang of blood welling on my tongue as I chew on my lip, busting open the previous cut. The back of my hand swipes over my mouth in annoyance, wiping the blood away as I make my way back to my SUV.

Just as I’m about to get in my SUV, a vehicle pulls up beside me, the window rolling down. “You just getting here or are you leaving?”

Looking over at Julian, a large German-shepherd-looking dog shoves his head between the seats, snarling beneath the muzzle strapped around his snout.

“Leaving. What the hell is that?”

Julian looks at the dog with a smile, patting its head despite it trying its damndest to tear his fingers off through the muzzle. “A dog. Andrea found him out at that dude’s house we took care of last week and he nearly ripped his pants off chasing him. The other guys wanted to kill him but I’ve never supported animal abuse so I caught him and now he’s riding around with me until I can figure out what to do with him.”

I hum, eyeing the mutt as he continues to growl. “Is he safe?”

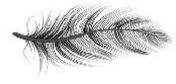
Julian shrugs, watching slobber drip from the muzzle onto his center console. “Yeah? I mean, he’s just a dog. What can he do?”

He’s smiling, but I don’t return it.

The dog looks feral.

“Try not to let it kill you,” I say as my parting remark, opening up my door and climbing in. Julian snorts at my back and I give him a two-finger wave as I pull out. My momentary reprieve from my father’s current order is gone now that I’m back to myself.

My palm slaps the top of my steering wheel as I drive. “Fuck!”



CHAPTER FIVE

BEVERLY

My stomach is still churning as I blindly search through all the medicines in the aisle. Part of it I'm sure is that every time I reach for something, the ring on my finger catches the light, blinding me with the reminder it's there. I fiddled with it the entire ride from the library to here, my apprehension with wearing it mistaken as joy by Gavino. I can't take my eyes off of it, so I must love it, *right?*

"Have you found anything?" Gavino's shoes tap lightly on the tiled floor as he moves toward me, his hand tucking away his phone into his pocket.

"Uh, no." I sigh, letting my arms drop to my sides. My eyes meet his before I look back at the shelf in front of me. "I don't know what to get because I don't really know what's wrong."

He nods, reaching out to finger a box of laxatives. "You sure you're not just backed up?"

I snort at his joke, shaking my head. "I assure you, I am not."

His arm moves, wrapping around my shoulders to tug me into his side. I swallow but don't resist him as his fingers run along my upper arm. "Why don't you go and ask the pharmacist if they have any recommendations?"

Chewing my lip, I nod, catching his eye. "Yeah, that's a good idea."

He smiles, his arm dropping as he shifts to the side. "Okay, you go do that and I'll meet you in the car, I have to make another call."

"Yeah, okay." My smile stays in place until his back is turned, a deep breath whooshing out of my nose, and I swallow back more nausea.

Get a grip, Beverly.

Spinning on my heel, I make my way to the back of the store toward the pharmacists' desk. Thankfully there isn't a line and I'm able to step up to the counter right away.

An older woman with graying hair at her temples smiles at me over the counter, "How can I help you today? Are you picking up a prescription?"

Shaking my head, I place my hands on the counter in front of me, leaning against it. "No, I just haven't been feeling well and I'm not sure what I should get for it—I was wondering if you could help me?"

She nods, setting down a clipboard she was holding off to the side. "Of course, what symptoms have you been having?"

"Um, mostly just nausea. I threw up earlier." I chew on my lip as she nods.

"Okay, do you have a fever or chills?" I shake my head no and she continues, "What about any aches or pains you don't have an explanation for?" Another shake of my head. "Have you had any questionable food in the last twenty-four hours?"

"No, not that I can think of. All I had this morning was some coffee and a bagel."

She smiles, nodding. "Okay, well, that pretty much knocks out any standard illnesses. Do you mind if I ask if you're on birth control?"

A man walks by behind me and I eye him over my shoulder before looking back at her with a shake of my head, my voice lowered. "Uh, no, I'm not."

"And are you sexually active?" I feel the pink bloom over my cheeks but I do my best to ignore it when I nod. "Ah, okay. Do you think there may be a chance that you could be pregnant?"

I laugh despite the surge of panic that clenches my heart in its fist. "No, no, there's no way." *Absolutely not. I am not pregnant,* My

brain screams in reassurance, my hand waving the suggestion away. “No. I’m not pregnant.”

I’m not sure if I’m telling her or myself at this point.

She holds her hands up in a placating manner, a smile on her lips, “Okay, I just want to make sure we cover all bases so I can recommend the best product for you.” I nod, reining myself in and trying to settle my rising pulse. “Since all you have is nausea and you’re pretty sure you’re not pregnant, I suggest you pick up some Zofran or Dramamine from aisle seven. It’s usually used for motion sickness but should help with your general nausea as well. I also suggest drinking a bit of water—sipping, not chugging—and lying down for a bit. If your nausea doesn’t go away, I recommend scheduling a visit with your primary healthcare provider.”

I nod, smiling in thanks. “Okay, I’ll try that. Thank you.”

“Of course, honey. Have a good day, I hope you start to feel better.”

Pushing from the counter, I head toward aisle seven. It takes me a moment to find the nausea medication she was talking about, my thoughts racing. The pregnancy tests are located near them, just down the aisle a bit, and my pulse races as I stare at the boxes. *I’m not pregnant. I can’t be pregnant.*

“Hey, you find what you needed?”

I jump at Gavino’s voice, dropping the box of nausea medication I was holding. My palm presses to my heart, a small smile directed toward Gavino. “You scared the hell out of me.”

He leans to pick it up, handing it back to me, “Sorry, I thought you heard me walking up. You ready to go?” he asks, nodding toward the medication that’s back in my hand.

My eyes flick to the pregnancy tests before landing on his face. “Uh, yeah, I think this should help.”

“Good, you ready to go?” he repeats, already walking toward the front of the store.

I nod, following behind him when my feet stop, my eyes lingering on the tests. “You know what, I think I’m going to use the restroom first, do you mind checking out for me?”

He stops, reaching for the box of medication I hold out for him. “Sure, I’ll wait for you at the front.”

“No!” I smile, trying to compose myself. “I mean, no, go ahead and go to the car, I’ll meet you there.”

Gavino’s brow dips slightly but he doesn’t argue. “Are you sure?”

I try to keep my smile from looking too desperate. “Yeah, I’m sure.”

“Okay.” I can hear the question in his voice but thankfully he doesn’t press me any further, leaving me with a, “Meet you in the car.”

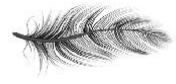
I wait until he’s left the aisle, the sound of his footsteps disappearing before I snatch one of the pregnancy tests off the shelf, tucking it into the waistband of my shorts and covering it with my shirt. Doing a double look around the aisle, I make sure no one saw, walking toward the front. It’s wrong to steal, *I know that*, but at the moment, I think stealing an eight-dollar test is the least of my potential problems. The box cuts into the skin of my stomach with every step I take toward the door, my heart thumping, nausea roiling as I walk past the store clerk and out the automatic doors.

My breath leaves my lungs in a whoosh, my heartbeat pounding in my ears as I move toward where Gavino is parked. My reflection stares back at me in his dark, tinted window, the panic I feel crawling underneath my skin at least not visible on the outside. Pulling the door open, I slide inside and pretend the box I have wedged in my shorts isn’t stabbing me painfully.

“You all right?”

I smile in Gavino's direction, taking the bag he hands me before shifting the car into drive.

"Yeah, I'm fine," I lie, clicking my seat belt in place as he pulls from the parking lot. "Everything is fine."



CHAPTER SIX

BEVERLY

The second hand on the clock ticks in slow motion as I sit on my couch, staring at the pregnancy test sitting on the coffee table. I can't read the lines from here, but I know they are there. The three-minute mark had come and passed five minutes ago. I know I have to read it before ten minutes—I'd read the instruction manual about fifty times just trying to get the nerve up to take it—but I haven't gathered the courage to look.

My body thrums with unease the longer I sit here, my heart beating roughly against my ribs. My throat burns as I swallow, those passing seconds a noose around my neck. Before the last minute can pass my hand reaches out, snatching the test up off the table. My heart thumps in my ears as I look at it, the lines blurring.

I'm pregnant.

For a moment, a tiny minuscule fraction of a second, my heart thuds with something akin to elation. Because I know without a doubt, this baby is Remy's.

Remy and I are going to be parents.

But in that same second, it breaks. Shatters, tears so solidly down the center, I lose my breath.

I'm pregnant with Remy's baby.

Squeezing the test in my palm, I sink to the floor, heart pounding in my ears while I try and fail to keep my resolve. My tears hit the carpet as I bend at the waist with an unrestrained sob. A pain bone deep pangs in my chest as the thought is repeated over and over in my head, bouncing along the walls of my brain.

"Hey! Bev! I brought you some—what the fuck? Bev?"

Julian's voice echoes in the background, my thoughts too muddled to think past the giant dog that's wedged himself between me and the floor. I blink, tears falling from my lashes to land into his dark fur as my free hand aimlessly strokes the soft hair on his side.

Julian's freckled face drops into view, his hands reaching for me, but the dog in my lap growls, and he pulls back with an annoyed frown directed toward it. "Bev, what's wrong? What's happened?"

My mouth opens and then closes, my sobs turned to hiccups, and I try and fail to find the words to say. Instead, I pet the dog's head, frowning at the muzzle I didn't notice before. "Whose dog is this?"

Julian gives me a look like he knows I'm diverting, but he eyes the two of us and answers anyway, "I guess yours."

"What do you mean?" I ask past a hiccup, trying to force myself to take a deep breath as I undo the buckle of the muzzle just as Julian's yelling, "Don't!" It slides off and hits the carpet with a soft thud.

I frown at Julian, running my hand over the dog's ears. "What? Why? He's fine."

With a look of uncertainty, Julian reaches a hand toward the dog, only for it to snap at his fingers, forcing him to pull back. "Fucking mutt, I saved you!" he hollers, a hint of hurt edging his tone

before his eyes fall back to me, a seriousness settling over him. “Bev, enough diverting. What the hell happened?”

Instead of trying to tell him, already feeling my throat growing tight with tears, I shift below the dog, tugging my hand out from under his chest to hold out the test. When it becomes apparent that the dog isn’t going to let Julian come any closer to see what I have in my hand, I toss it to him, watching it slide on the carpet and bump up against his boot.

He doesn’t bend down, his eyes just flick to it and then back to my face. For a moment, it’s silent, nothing but the sound of the dog panting in my lap.

“What. The. *Fuck*, Beverly!” Each word is progressively louder, loud enough that the dog in my lap jumps up, his teeth bared and tail arched as he watches my brother.

I use the opportunity to stand, running my fingers through the dog’s coat in a way that I hope tells him that Julian isn’t a threat, and then step around him, allowing him to rest his head against my leg but blocking him from getting to Julian.

“Where did you get this dog? He seems to hate you,” I say, breaking up the tension-filled silence.

“He fucking hates everybody,” Julian mumbles, eyeing the dog in question. “Everyone but you, I guess.” He shakes his head, hazel eyes snapping to mine. “Stop distracting me. What the hell is this test about, Bev? Please, for the love of all things holy, tell me that it isn’t yours.”

I don’t have to say anything, because he already knows. He probably would have guessed from the beginning if he hadn’t been distracted by the dog.

“*Porco cane!* Holy shit! His hands rise to scrub against his head, fingers running through the short growth. My eyes fall to his scorpion tattoo, focusing on it to avoid looking at the disappointment and mild panic on his face. “Please, Bev, *please* tell me it’s Gavino’s baby.”

My lips suck between my teeth. “You *know* it’s not.”

I flinch at his angry, “*Fuck!*” My eyes closing.

I know how he’s feeling because it’s what I am too. The dog at my side barks with warning and I open my eyes, seeing Julian pointing at his face with warning and frustration while taking a step back from me.

“What are we going to do?” I blink, watching him scrub a hand over his face. “What am *I* going to do? If Gavino finds out—” I shake my head, whispering, “If his *father* finds out—”

Julian interrupts me, “You should be more worried about if *Remy* finds out.” His jaw flexes, his eyes flicking around the room with thought. “His sanity is hanging on by a thread as it is over the marriage. He can’t handle this. Your baby will be illegitimate just like Gavino. They’ll be looked down their entire life.”

He’s rambling, talking more to himself than me at this point. Until his gaze settles on me once again.

“You need to sleep with Gavino.” I’m shaking my head, a question on my tongue, but he continues, “You need Gavino to think that baby is his, Bev. You need *everyone* to think that baby is his.”

“How will that work?” The question all but whispers from my chest, my body and mind exhausted from everything.

“If that baby is Gavino’s, it’ll be legitimate, Bev. You won’t send Remy spiraling and you’ll avoid a lifetime of torment for your child.” He moves like he’s going to grab my shoulders but then

pauses, eyeing the dog currently sitting at my side. “You *have* to do this, Bev.”

I swallow, knowing he’s right—that this *is* the best option. “I don’t even know how far along I am,” I mutter, more to myself than anything. *When was the last time I got a period?* I was so convinced I wasn’t pregnant and held on to that doubt until the last minute that I never thought about how far I’d be if I were. I scramble to count the weeks since I last bled. The last few months of my life have been so tremulous that I didn’t question when I was late, chalking it up to stress.

“Seven or eight weeks,” I finally say, my eyes lifting from where they’d wandered to the carpet. “I have to be around that.”

He chews on the inside of his cheek, his hazel eyes flicking over me. “You’ve been engaged to Gavino for, what? Nine weeks?” I nod and he continues, “Then people will talk but they won’t question the kid is his.”

I nod, knowing he’s right. “Gavino might question it. He obviously knows we haven’t been sleeping together,” I finally say, running my fingers over the dog’s head when it bumps into my leg.

“Then we fake the due date. When you deliver, you’re early, that happens often enough that it won’t be questioned.”

“You don’t think people will notice that I delivered a baby that’s full term when I’m supposed to be eight weeks behind?” I scoff, tears pricking at my eyes as panic settles into my bones. The plan was seeming solid, but now the light is shining through the holes, tearing apart our plan.

“Bev, listen.” Julian presses forward, eyeing the dog. “This is the only option we have. Sleep with Gavino, make him think the baby is his, and do whatever you have to do. And we’ll figure out the details when we get there.” His hand reaches out, wiping a tear off my cheek when the dog doesn’t react to his nearness. “It’s going to be fine. We’ll figure it out. Just—just stick to the plan, okay?”

I nod, swallowing the lump down my throat. “Yeah, you’re right. It’ll work. It *has* to work.”

There’s a silence that settles over us and I take a deep breath, my gaze falling on the dog that’s sleeping soundly at my feet.

“Where’d you say you got this dog?”

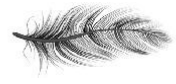
Julian snorts, looking down at the dog in question. “On a job. He’s been an absolute terror to everyone but you.” His eyes meet mine, a smirk on his freckled cheeks. “You should keep him, he seems to like you.”

Leaning down, I thumb the tag that’s nearly hidden in his fur. *Dylan*. “Do you want to live with me, Dylan?” His ears flick at the mention of his name, but he otherwise stays asleep and I smile, standing up. “I have always been a dog person.”

“You’ve never owned a dog.” Julian laughs.

“That doesn’t mean I’m not a dog person.” My eyes meet his, the fear from before only slightly quenched, but I embrace the distraction Julian is currently offering.

“Whatever you say, Bev.”



CHAPTER SEVEN

I gave myself this week to process. I spent it mostly throwing myself into acclimating Dylan into my home and now I'm ending it hanging out with Delaney. The shepherd is surprisingly well-trained, which makes me think he's had actual K-9 training before, but he definitely *hates* men. I haven't been sleeping because my mind does nothing but race the seconds my eyelids close, every worst-case scenario popping up to keep me awake. For the first time in a really long time, I'm scared. And even though I know what I have to do, I just... feel frozen and unsure.

Laney and I are currently sitting out in the grass outside the guest house on the edge of the Luciano estate where Delaney has been staying, watching Dylan play with a ball and basking in the early fall sun. Running blades of grass through my fingers, I sigh and flop onto my back to watch the clouds. The one directly above me looks like a pony or maybe a dragon—no, definitely a car. I feel Delaney lay next to me and ask, "Have you seen him lately?"

I know she knows I'm asking about Remy. "All the time. He's made it his personal mission to know all of my business all of a sudden." She nudges me playfully with her elbow before continuing, "So thanks for that, because it's clearly a distraction ploy." I don't laugh at her joke, a deep sigh falling from her lips after a moment's pause. "Bev, don't ask questions you don't want to know the answers to."

I feel her gaze on me and turn my head to look at her. Her long dark hair is up in a sleek ponytail that I could never pull off, long legs dressed in riding pants with tall boots and a black tee. She has all the same features as her brother and the resemblance pangs in my heart. "I have to, Laney. I'm fucked up like that."

She looks up at the sky, another big breath puffed toward the clouds as she shakes her head at me. "He's fucking miserable, a shell of himself pretending to be fine." She picks some grass at her side and tosses it. "Just like you, really."

I twist to lay on my side, facing her, cheek propped up in my hand. "Is it that obvious?"

She nods, playfully throwing her next handful of grass at me. "It is. And it's depressing." She gets up, brushing grass from her clothes. "I'm lucky to be the baby of the family because I'm not expected to marry for money or power. I'm not even expected to do anything spectacular with my life. I have the privilege of just existing."

I stand up, meeting her smart-ass smile with pursed lips. "Life is *so* easy for the sweet and humble Delaney Luciano."

We both know that's not true and although part of what she says *is* the truth, her life isn't as unproblematic as she likes everyone to believe.

She steps forward to wrap me in a hug. "Well, I have to go give a riding lesson up at the stables. You can stay as long as you want, I think the swans haven't left for the season yet."

I squeeze her back, smiling when she pulls away. "Thanks for inviting me. I needed this."

Reaching out, she squeezes my hand softly before bending down to give Dylan goodbye scratches. "Call me, okay? I'm Remy's sister but I'm also your friend, Bev. I'm here if you need me."

I do need her, but the secrets I'm keeping aren't things I can share. At least not without putting Delaney in a situation that isn't fair for her to be in.

“I will.” I wave as she starts to back away, watching her retreating back for a moment before bending to scoop up the wrappers that had been left behind from our snacks. Dylan is back to playing happily with his ball, so I leave him and head for the kitchen trash. Looking out the window, I smile, seeing one of the made men attempt to play with him when his ball rolls in his direction. I’m putting away the things we left on the counter when I remember how Dylan is with men, rushing to look out the window at them.

They’ve started a game of tug-of-war with a toy I can’t see from here, Dylan’s tail wagging happily. *That’s sweet.* The made man looks over and notices me watching the two of them and waves, still holding strong onto the toy. *That’s kind of weird.* Smiling, I awkwardly wave back.

“Who are you waving at?”

Jerking around with a hand clutching at my chest, I find Donatello walking toward me, his head bent to look out the same window I had been peering through. He flashes a lopsided grin at my reaction, narrowly dodging the hand I smack at his arm. “You scared the hell out of me, Donatello! Why the hell are you sneaking around like that? And why are you even in Laney’s place?” He chuckles and looks outside while I add, “I was waving at that guy playing with my dog, Dylan. He waved first, by the way.”

With a loud guffaw, Donatello pulls out his phone, eyeing me. “Dylan is ripping that guy’s shirt off, Bev. I don’t think they’re playing.”

I look again. “Wait, is he really? That’s not a toy they have?”

Donatello has his phone up to his ear but tips his gaze to me again, his head shaking. “No, that’s definitely his shirt.” He looks back out the window, talking into the phone. “Where are you? Bev’s dog is attacking the guards at Laney’s place. Huh? No. I told her, but she said they’re playing.” He looks over, sees my scowl, and puts a hand over his mouth to prevent a laugh from coming out. “Okay, I’ll tell her. Send Andrea over here. What? No. Just do it. Okay, bye.” Hanging up and slipping his phone into his pocket, he looks back at me, “Julian says you need to get your dog, but I think you should wait for Andrea to get here and make him do it.”

I shoot him an annoyed glance before looking back outside, my feet already moving toward the door. “I don’t know, it seems like maybe I should intervene.”

His phone is pulled from his pocket once more at its chime, his fist pressed against his lips as he practically yell, “Andrea’s already pulling in!”

Flashing a wild grin, he’s completely oblivious that he just blew my eardrum.

“Dylan fucking *hates* Andrea.”

Wait, what?

Before I can reply, Donatello is tapping the window at Andrea, who is oblivious to the scene he is apparently walking into. “There he fucking is! *Fuck*, this is going to be great!”

My hand is on the sliding door, tugging it open while Donatello giggles like a schoolgirl. My eyes momentarily drift to him as I’m stepping outside until a *very* high-pitched scream draws my attention back to the yard. Andrea is sprinting back toward his car—*damn, he’s actually really fast*—with Dylan hot on his tail.

Okay, that’s concerning.

Donatello is wheezing behind me, mumbling incoherently through howls of laughter, but I ignore him, jogging in the same direction they took off to. “Dylan? Dylan!”

I can still hear that awful screeching, so I pick up the pace to the back drive. Rounding the corner, I stop dead in my tracks, then go flying because Donatello was clearly right on my ass. Thankfully he snatches my arm before I face-plant, and I send a glare his way before taking a second to figure out what the hell is going on.

Dylan is barking beside Andrea's car while Andrea screams like a banshee from the hood. The whole thing causes Donatello to lose it again and I smack his arm, whistling and calling for Dylan. "Dylan, come here, puppy, come here!"

Tongue lolling, he trots happily to my side and I pat his head while eyeing a cackling Donatello. Regaining some control, Donatello takes a step back from us—away from Dylan, I note—while wiping tears from his eyes. "I fucking told you!" he wheezes out, trying to contain even more laughter.

Andrea is still on the car hood, not screaming, but glaring at Dylan. I yell up to him, "Andrea, you can get down now, I promise he won't chase you again."

Eyeing the dog, Andrea scoots off of the car, his eyes narrowed on Donatello. "You knew he was out here and you didn't think to message me?"

"Why would I?" Donatello smirks. "You made me cover pier duty when you *owed* me."

Andrea scoffs, ready to keep arguing, but I speak up, "Maybe if I introduced you two, Andrea, he wouldn't hate you so much? You can come pet him now that I'm here."

"Absolutely not," he replies, his head shaking, hand blindly searching for the car door handle behind his back.

"Andrea, this is silly. Dylan's a sweet boy and this could be a good learning moment for him. *Get over here.*" I emphasize the last bit with a 'come here' wave.

"Sorry, Bev, but something came up. Maybe next time." His smile is anything but genuine as he hops into the car, slamming the door shut and backing out while I frown at his retreating form.

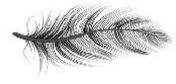
"I guess I can't blame him, you did chase him pretty far," I say to Dylan, my eyes finding a smirking Donatello when I look up. "You never said why you were here."

He shrugs, his hands in his pockets. "I was going to stop by and see Laney, but I guess she's not here."

"Do you hang out with her a lot?" I question, watching the way he shifts in place.

"You're noseey," he finally responds, backing away from me. "I'm out of here. See you next week for boxing?"

I smile but don't push him further. "Yeah, sure."



CHAPTER EIGHT

REMY

“This isn’t what I ordered.”

My eyes close momentarily as I look down at my phone, flicking through messages instead of watching Viva’s latest meltdown.

“I’m so sorry, Mrs. Luciano, we had you down for the lobster stuffed rigatoni, is that not correct?”

Mrs. Luciano.

The vile woman doesn’t deserve my last name, let alone being called it in public.

Clicking my phone shut, I sigh, watching as Viva sneers at the waitress. “No. I’m not eating gluten right now, why would I order pasta?”

“She’ll eat it.” I take the warm plate from the waitress, dropping it loudly in front of Viva. “Thank you, we’re good for now.”

The waitress smiles, her eyes nervously flitting between Viva and me before a quiet, “Please enjoy your meal,” is said and she hightailed it away from our table.

At Viva’s scoff, I lean back in my seat, grabbing her glass of Cuvée S, Blanc de Blancs to toss back. *I need it more than she does.*

“Some date this is.” She snorts, her bright red fingertips pushing her plate away from her. “Why did you even bother bringing me out tonight? We both know you *loathe* my company.”

I hum, leaning back in my seat as she picks up her fork to scoop the lemon from her water glass—the lemon she specifically requested. “I really do.” Her nose scrunches, dropping her soggy lemon slice onto the table linen. “Because you do shit like that.” I nod toward her lemon and she rolls her eyes, starting to pick at her rigatoni.

“Why didn’t you order anything? Now I just look weird eating by myself.”

My fingers scrub at my eyes. “Trust me, Viva, I’m not the reason you look weird right now.”

“Daddy told me I’d live a life of luxury being your wife.” She takes a small bite of her food and apparently decides it’s worth the gluten because she takes another. “So far all you’ve done is ignore me.” Bite. “And refuse to have sex with me.” Bite. “Which is ridiculous because I’m hot.” Bite. “I *know* I am.”

“Yes, poor Viva,” I mock, leaning back in my seat. “I can’t imagine how hard it could possibly be to spend your days wasting Famiglia money on endless amounts of clothes, shoes, and spa days.”

“Whatever, Remy. You just don’t get it.” Her hand rises as she summons a passing waitress, her scowling face directed toward them once they get to our table. “Can I get another glass of water? This time *without* the lemon.”

Looking away from her, I don’t catch whatever snotty comment she added before the waitress left, my eyes flicking over the other guests at the restaurant. The drink I try to pick up from the table nearly slips through my fingers, my heart thudding as Gavino and Bev take a seat in the middle of the dining room. Taking a sip, I watch as Bev sits, the skirt of her dark burgundy dress rising with her movements. Her back is to me, and bare, the smooth skin of her shoulder blades flexing as she settles into her seat.

The long, dark strands of her hair are pinned up on her head, and when she turns her face to the side to look up at the waitress, her tattoo peeks out from under a loose lock of hair. I itch to get up and go to her, to disrupt the apparent date she seems to be on with Gavino, but I don't.

Instead, I force myself to look away and down my glass before setting it next to the one I'd stolen from Viva. Seeing Bev with Gavino hasn't gotten any easier, if anything, every time I get a little more angry and bitter over the situation.

I just need a little more time.

Then this entire nightmare of a situation will be dealt with.

But it's hard being patient, especially when I'm constantly tempted to rip my brother's eyes straight from his sockets for even looking at Beverly.

"Where are we going after this?"

My attention is momentarily drawn back to Viva. "Where do you want to go?"

Her slender blonde brow rises. "You're actually asking me what *I* want to do?"

I hum in response, sitting back in my seat and intentionally giving myself a straight view of Beverly and Gavino.

"I think I want to go see a movie," she finally says, sipping from her fresh lemon-free water.

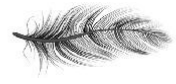
"Great. I'll have the driver take you." I ignore her scoff, my eyes on Beverly as Gavino stands from the table.

Figlio di puttana.

I'm standing before I even realize it, my body screaming for violence at the look on Bev's face as she stands up to follow him out of the restaurant.

"Where are you going?"

My eyes snap to Viva. "To the bathroom." I start to move, speaking over my shoulder, "The driver will be ready for you when you're done. Don't wait up."



CHAPTER NINE

BEVERLY

Leaning forward, I apply gloss to my lips, lightly smacking them together when I stand. It's the final touch to the outfit I'm wearing out to dinner tonight. After taking a week for myself to process everything, I finally gave in and messaged Gavino, inviting him out to dinner; he had agreed right away, even offering to make our reservations. The plan is to seduce him, a task I don't think should be overly difficult, considering his affection toward me, but one that makes me nervous nonetheless. I don't want to sleep with Gavino. I don't want to even *think* about sleeping with Gavino. But the time has passed for me to be hung up on it because I *need* this plan to work.

For both Remy and our baby.

There's a knock on my door that I know is Gavino and I quickly adjust the gold sunflower chain around my neck that he'd gotten me for my birthday, my heels sinking lightly into the carpet as I hurry to open the door. Taking a deep breath, I turn the knob, smiling at Gavino standing in the hall.

"Wow." He pauses, eyes flicking along my burgundy fitted dress and black pumps. "You look great tonight, Bev."

I smile, a soft, "Thank you," parting my lips as I move forward and shut the door at my back. I eye his navy suit. "You look really nice also."

His fingers lightly brush along my arm, guiding me out of the building toward his car.

"Where are we eating tonight?" I ask while bucking my seat belt, my fingers lightly tugging the end of my skirt so that it sits farther down my legs.

"I made reservations at Aviary 76," he says, pulling out of the parking lot.

My thumb lightly scrapes against the ring sitting heavily on my finger as we drive, my eyes on the passing cars. "That sounds perfect."

"That's the first time I've seen you wear that."

My face turns to look at Gavino with a frown, momentarily assuming he's thinking about the ring. "Wear what?"

"The necklace I got you." He nods toward the golden chain and my fingers lightly rise to skim the dangling sunflower.

"Oh, I guess I've just been scared to lose it." I smile when his eyes meet mine, my hand falling back in my lap. Shifting in my seat, I roll my shoulders a bit. The bare skin of my back and arms feel sticky against his leather seats, the conversation making me uncomfortable.

"Well, I'm happy you wore it."

There's a silence that settles over us, like neither one of us can find anything worth talking about. It's awkward, to say the least. If it wasn't for the soft hum of the radio, I think I would have lost my mind as I stare out the window. And thankfully traffic is on my side because we get to the restaurant in record time, my heels lightly tapping on the concrete as I step out of the car, smiling at the valet as he holds the door open for me.

"Thank you." He nods at my thanks, my arm lightly grabbed by Gavino as he joins my side.

"You've eaten here?" I nod at his question, my eyes scanning the people around us as we make our way to the hostess's table.

“Yeah, once or twice.” My eyes find his. “It was good.”

“Oh really?” He hums, looking around the room as we wait. “Who did you come with?”

“Uh, I think Julian one time and my mother the other.” I pause, my gaze flicking over the dark walls and chandeliers. “Maybe it was both of them both times. I don’t really remember.”

“If you don’t remember, then how could you remember if the food was good?” He laughs, knowing the people around us heard his question, his attention shifting toward the hostess as I stare at his profile. “Reservation for two under Luciano.”

I smile awkwardly at the woman next to us, looking forward to avoid the surrounding gazes.

“Ah yes, Mr. Luciano, I hope you’re having a good evening so far?” Gavino nods and the hostess smiles, flipping through her book. She pauses with a frown, a perplexed smile on her face. “I’m sorry but it seems that Luciano, party of two, has already checked in?” She fumbles under Gavino’s gaze, scuffling through her pages.

“That’s impossible.” Gavino chuckles, but it’s not a warm sound, his Adam’s apple bobbing as he swallows. “Clearly, you’ve made a mistake.”

My brows dip at the tone of his voice, my hand rising to touch his sleeve and tell him it’s not a big deal, but he shrugs me off.

The woman’s cheeks have turned red, her chest rising and falling as she shakes her head. “You’re right, sir, it must be a mistake. I’ll just go ahead and get you seated. My apologies.”

She scuffles from behind the counter, smiling nervously at us as she starts to walk through the restaurant, leading us to our table. She stops at one. “Does this table work for you, Mr. Luciano?”

“It’ll do.” Gavino nods, moving to pull my chair out for me to sit in as the woman hurries off after shakily telling us that the waiter would be with us shortly.

I wait until Gavino is seated before I try to speak to him, sensing his annoyance. “It’s prettier in here than I remember.”

His eyes flick around the room as he settles, his hand smoothing back a stray piece of hair that fell on his forehead. “Yes, it’s nice.” It’s said almost absentmindedly as another waitress approaches us.

“Can I get started on any drinks?”

“We’ll have two glasses of Château Lafite?” Gavino smiles, his eye flicking to me.

Shit, I can’t drink.

The waitress nods, “Yes sir, I’ll be back in a moment to get your order.”

“Um, actually,” I stop her, giving Gavino what I hope is an apologetic smile and not one that looks as panicky as I feel, “can I change my wine to sparkling water?”

“Of course.”

I smile at her retreating back, feeling Gavino’s gaze heavy on my profile. His eyes are narrowly margined when I meet them.

“You’re not drinking? I thought you loved wine.” It’s not said rudely, but the way he shifts in his seat and adjusts the napkin over his lap has me fidgeting in my own.

“I do and I really love Château Lafite, I’m just—” I pause, my brain scrambling to come up with a good reason for me not to be drinking. “I don’t want to get too drunk. You know how I can be a bit of a lightweight.”

He chuckles, leaning forward so that his elbow rests on the tabletop, opening his menu. “I don’t think one glass is going to push the limits, Beverly.”

I just force a laugh in response, deciding to change the subject as I pick up my menu. “I don’t know what I’m in the mood for.” My eyes flick up to him. “Do you have any idea what you’re getting?”

“Maybe the crab cakes? They sound good.” His dark blue eyes rise to mine. “They have beef wellington, I know how much you love that.”

“Ha, ha, ha.” He smirks at my response. “Would it be lame if I just got the mac and cheese? It sounds so good right now.”

Shutting his menu, he shakes his head. “No, I’m sure it’s a lot fancier than what we get from a box.”

I shut the menu. “Okay, then mac and cheese it is.”

There’s a genuine smile on my face for the first time since we left my apartment. When Gavino is being *just* Gavino, the one I’ve always known, I enjoy our time together as I used to. These kinds of moments are the ones I thought of when I needed to remind myself of how much I enjoy Gavino—that being his wife might not be the complete worst.

After ordering, I feel more relaxed, sipping my water as Gavino tells me about his day.

“You know,” he says after he finishes, reaching over the table to grab my hand. The diamond glitters in the low light of the chandeliers, beautiful and unsettling. “I thought about this a lot over the years.”

I swallow, fighting the urge to pull my hand back. “About what?”

“About us.” His thumb brushes over my fingers while he speaks, making my palms feel clammy. “I guess I was always a little jealous of Remy. Not because he’s the future Capo Famiglia, but because he got you.”

I don’t know what to say, so I just sit there for a moment, my eyes flicking to the passing waitstaff and back. My mind scrambles to think of something to say that won’t offend him. Instead, I get distracted when the waitress comes with our food and end up saying, “You’re so sweet.”

When my hand pulls from his so that our plates can be set down, I try to pretend I don’t notice the way his face twists. And when the waitress leaves us, my heart thumps as I try and reach for Gavino’s hand again, only to have him pull it back.

“When will I be good enough for you, Beverly?” My mouth gapes at the question, taken aback by the amount of anger in the quiet tone of his voice.

“Gavino, I wasn’t trying to offend you. I—”

He cuts me off, his shoulders straightening as he fidgets with his suit jacket. “I’ve always been there for you, haven’t I? I go out of my way to do things that you want to do.”

“You don’t have to do those things, I never asked—”

“Exactly,” he interrupts again, speaking louder than before. I feel the eyes of others around us and I shift uncomfortably in my seat. “You never ask and I still do them because I love you, Beverly. And you can’t even bother to pretend you like me.”

“What?” My head shakes with the question, one of my hands rising to swipe some hair away from my face. “You’re being ridiculous, Gavino! I do like you. You’ve always been a friend to me.”

“I’m going to be your husband, Beverly. Not just your friend,” he snaps, his eyes shifting to the other tables before his voice lowers. “At some point, you’re going to need to accept that.”

I don’t understand how this dinner went so far south so drastically, but it’s making me sick. Reaching for my water, I sip it, closing my eyes on Gavino for a moment. I open them when he speaks.

“I’ll just see myself out.” He stands, his chair obnoxiously loud as it scratches against the floor, money thrown onto the top of the tablecloth as I sit there staring up at him. “I’m not hungry anymore and I think it’s safe to say the date is over.”

My cheeks heat, my skin flushing with embarrassment as I look down at my untouched plate of food instead of Gavino’s retreating back. After a moment of indecision, I rise, my heels clicking on the floor as I toss my napkin into my chair and follow after him. It’s not until we’re both outside that I dare call his name, watching him turn sharply to go toward the adjacent park and gardens.

“Gavino, wait!” He slows but doesn’t stop and I have to jog to catch up to him, my hand landing on his arm. “Gavino, please stop.”

He pauses, eyes flicked up with annoyance before landing on my face. “What, Beverly? Are you going to stand here and say that everything that was said back there wasn’t the truth?”

My lips rub together, fingers scrunching in the fabric of my dress as a couple walks past us. “I’m not pretending anything, Gavino.”

His scoff hits the breeze as he moves forward, walking away from me and deeper into the park.

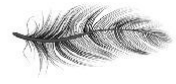
“Gavino!” I yell at his back, watching him walk away. “You’re just going to leave me here?”

He pauses, his hands tucked into his suit jacket. “Just give me a minute, Beverly. Walk around the gardens or something. I’ll find you later.”

Now I’m the one that scoffs, my hands slapping down at my sides. With a quick glance at the people around me, I turn in place, walking toward one of the adjacent gardens as Gavino said.

This night couldn’t possibly have gone worse.

On that thought, I’m grabbed and jerked backward, a palm slapped around my mouth as I’m tugged into the shrubs.



CHAPTER TEN

BEVERLY

My heart thuds in my chest, ringing in my ears as my fingers dig into the hand covering my mouth. It takes my brain a minute to figure out the same thing my body already has, the soft smell of vanilla and bergamot softening my limbs as his breath warms the shell of my ear.

“Facile, sono io.” Easy, it’s me.

The soft gravel of his voice vibrates against my back, rumbling along my skin to raise gooseflesh in its wake. I settle back into him, welcoming his warmth as he presses us back into the shadows of the surrounding shrubbery. The fingers that were previously clutching in panic are now sliding over his skin, settling onto the forearm he has rested against my collarbone.

“What are you doing here?” It’s barely a whisper, my heart hammering over the thought of Gavino walking back this way.

“I had to take Viva out for dinner.” I feel the sneer as he continues, “It makes sense now why the restaurant already had a reservation held for us, I’m assuming Gavino made one for you two tonight?”

I nod rather than giving him another whispered answer, my face shifting on autopilot as his lips skim the sensitive flesh of my throat.

“Why did he leave you?” One of his hands presses against my side, fingers bumping along the side of my breast. His lips press to my jaw, tongue swiping along my skin to taste me. *“Come ha potuto allontanarsi da una persona bella come te?” How could he walk away from someone as beautiful as you?*

I turn to face Remy, my head tilted back as he gazes down at me, honey dripping over every freckle. My pulse skyrockets, the want to blurt out that I’m pregnant sitting heavy on my tongue, but I shove it down, locking it away.

“He’s angry and he has a right to be.” I won’t go into details, because even I know I’m already riding a slippery slope where Remy is concerned with my current relationship with his brother. Let alone the newest development of secrets and schemes.

His palms have fallen to my hips but one rises now, thumbing my bottom lip. “I can’t imagine any of his reasons are good enough.”

I smile, his fingers dusting along my jaw before sinking into my hair. “You wouldn’t.”

My breath whooshes from my chest as I’m spun, my back pressed against the stone wall at my back. “I’m done talking about my brother.” His head dips, lips brushing mine with every word. “We only have a short time and I’m not wasting any more of it.”

My fingers dig into the fabric of his dress shirt at the press of his lips, my tongue licking the burnt sugar from behind his teeth. The smell of him, the taste of him, the feel of him; it’s all comforting to my confused mind. I let him pull me in as he always does, let him distract me from the pressure of what’s going on in my world. His knee pushes my legs apart, my dress dragging up my thighs with the motion. The hand in my hair tightens, and I know that it’s all falling from my carefully done updo. I can feel the strands as they tickle along my bare shoulders.

His lips break from mine to trail over my jaw, pressing to my ear at the same time his hand drops between my thighs. *“Calma il mio cuore, non vuoi essere trovato.” Calm my heart, you don’t want*

to be found.

The soft warning barely registers before he grabs my ass, my back jolted up higher on the wall and his hips pushed between my thighs as I stifle a surprised gasp. My legs wrap around his waist on instinct, my dress pulled high so that the red lace of my underwear flashes between us. Remy's eyes drop to the thin fabric, the cut of his jaw hard and eyes dark as they flick back up to mine. A hand leaves my hips, his stance adjusting a tad so that it can trace the curve of my thigh.

"You wore these for my brother?" he questions, a hint of murder lacing every syllable, the thick, rough pads of his fingers skimming my clit through the red lace. A quiet pant slips from my lips, his head dropping so that our noses brush. "Were you going to let him see them tonight, *cuore mio*?"

My heart thumps so hard in my chest, I'm sure he can feel it pressed so close. Guilt gnaws at my gut, but it's quickly replaced by the sharp ache of need as he presses harder on the tight bundle of nerves. My mouth opens, gaping as I fight to keep enough thought in my head to give him an answer—a safe answer. "He *is* my fiancé."

My hips shift against his hand, my panties damp with my gathering slick as he continues the slow, torturous circling on my clit.

"For now." His tongue slips between my lips before I can even consider asking him what he means, tangling with mine as he moves to unzip his trousers. His dick is hard, the tip weeping and warm where it presses against my thigh. My panties are shoved to the side, his knuckles brushing along my wetness. One of my hands braces on his thick shoulder, the other brushing along the short hair at his nape.

His hips grind against me, the thick head of his cock pressing into my inner thigh as his fingers sink inside of my pussy. My lips break from his on a gasp, the back of my head rubbing against the sharp wall at my back as he licks and sucks a wet path along my throat. My dress catches on the stones with each thrust of Remy's hand between my thighs, my pussy dripping down his fingers as I bite my lip to keep quiet, tiny moans leaking through my teeth. I can hear the sound of others talking and walking around the park, and the honks and engines of cars in traffic. It adds an air of excitement to each secret touch we share, the thought of being caught thrumming my blood with adrenaline.

"What would my brother think if he found us like this? Hmmm?" Despite myself, my pussy clenches around his fingers at the question, my chest rising and falling in quick, unhindered breaths as one of his dimples winks at me from his cheek. "Do you think your *fiancé* would be man enough to fight me? To defend your honor?" With each jerk of his fingers, my pussy makes wet slapping sounds, his breath hot on my lips as he goads me with his questions. "Or would he run with his tail tucked between his legs?"

When I don't answer with anything but a pained grunt, he hooks his fingers inside of me, his lips smothering the moan that tries to escape my lips. He shifts us, his tongue running along the seam of my teeth as the head of his dick presses to my dripping slit. Our eyes lock as he presses up, splitting my pussy wide with his cock, his palms gripping my hips to stabilize our new position.

Palms on his shoulders for support, I shift my hips up and down, my pussy swallowing his length, and revel in the way his jaw tics with barely constrained pleasure. My braless tits nearly shake from the top of my dress as he starts to piston his hips, his arms lifting me up and yanking me down hard onto his thick cock. His eyes flick to them, a hand rising to jerk the soft fabric down so that they spill over the top. The cool night air pebbles them even more, the tight buds aching to feel the attention of his hot mouth.

Bending his head, he obliges my silent request, the flat of his tongue lapping at one stiff peak and then the other, a tease of touch that has my lip screaming when my teeth bite into it to keep from moaning aloud. I can feel my slickness dripping down his cock, the wetness coating my inner thighs and running down the crack of my ass. One of his arms rises, resting his forearm against the wall beside my head, our breaths shared as he uses the wall at my back to pump deeper into me with every thrust.

My nails dig into his scalp, my nipples lightly scraping the front of his buttoned dress shirt with each movement, driving me closer and closer to blinding pleasure. I'm so close, I can barely contain my noises, my hips grinding erratically to reach that heavenly finish line.

"Beverly?"

My eyes shoot open at my name.

Please don't let this be happening.

Despite Gavino entering the courtyard, Remy doesn't stop fucking me, and I'm so close I can't stop myself from continuing to meet him thrust for thrust. Remy's head turns to look over his shoulder in the direction of his brother, his eyes dark and dimples flashing with a challenge when they land back on me. His lips press to mine when he speaks, "Sshhh, baby, you don't want to get caught, do you?"

His smile presses to my teeth, the thought of Gavino walking another ten feet forward and seeing us shooting a mixture of panic and thrilling pleasure straight into my gut.

"Beverly?" Gavino calls again, the sound of his dress shoes scuffing along the walkway skyrocketing my pulse.

Remy's lips find my ear, panting, "*Vieni per me, cuore mio.*" *Come for me, my heart.* His mouth sucks the skin at my pulse point, hips rocking into my pussy relentlessly as I watch Gavino go in and out of sight behind the shrubbery while he looks for where he'd last seen me. "Cream my cock while my brother calls for you."

Despite knowing how wrong it is, his words sink into my pores, flooding me with pleasure as I do what he commands, my mouth gaping silently as my pussy clenches around his thick cock with wave after wave of ecstasy. I watch as Gavino finally turns, his form shifting from sight as he turns back down the path he came from as Remy grunts against my skin, his cum dripping from my slit as he continues to pump through his release.

Our breaths are loud and unhindered as he gently unwraps my legs from his waist and pulls back from me to tuck himself away into his trousers. I use the wall at my back to keep me upright, my face tilted back to look up into Remy's blown pupils as his hands run over me, fixing my clothes. When he's finished, his fingers pinch my jaw, his tongue lapping out to stroke mine in a slow, sweet kiss that has me clutching at the wall against my back.

Our lips break with a soft, wet pop and I gaze up at Remy as he speaks, "My brother may be your fiancé, but you're mine." He bends, capturing my lips once more, my tongue chasing his when he pulls away. "*Sempre e per sempre.*" *Forever and always.*

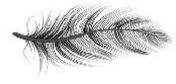
With one last lingering kiss, he pushes away from me, his eyes eating me up where I still brace myself against the wall until his feet carry him out of sight in the opposite direction Gavino went. My palm rises to swipe away a lone tear that snuck its way out, my hand falling to my stomach.

I don't think I can do it.

I don't think I can make myself sleep with Gavino.

I feel sick at the thought. My heart is pounding at the selfish, greediness of just thinking about it.

But if I don't, *what then?*



CHAPTER ELEVEN

BEVERLY

Sweat drips down the side of my face, my oversized shirt clinging to my back as I hop around the ring. Donatello smirks at me as he climbs through the ropes, his chest glistening. My fingers flex as I ready myself to spar with him, toes lightly tapping as I shake out my already warm limbs. I wait until he's standing across from me, his neck twisting side to side before I talk.

"We have rules this time, Donny boy."

"And what are those, baby Bev?" He smirks, his foot swiping out as if to knock me on my ass, but I sidestep it.

"No stomach or face shots." My bandaged hand rises to point a finger at him. "Keep it clean."

His palm slaps against his chest, a faux wounded scoff leaving his chest, "As if I don't always follow the rules."

Eyeing him, I fight the smile that wants to work its way out. "I'm serious, Donatello."

He shrugs, readying his stance to fight. "Fine, I'll follow the rules." He sways, bracing his feet. "Now let's fight."

After a second, I take my stance, my feet crossing as I move around the ring. Knowing Donatello won't make the first move, I lunge forward, kicking out at his hip. He blocks it, shifting to kick my leg away with his. Our shins connect with a loud crack, both of us immediately moving to attack differently. We've boxed so many times now that we are familiar with each other's moves, so much so that it's difficult to actually land any real hits.

After about ten minutes of sparing with no clear winner, we are breathing heavily, my shirt drenched down the front of my chest, clinging to the sports bra underneath. Thankfully, I'm wearing shorts, but it doesn't feel as if they're doing much to cool me down. We've gathered a crowd at this point, Julian and some of the other guys sitting around the ring watching. Donatello, always being a showboat, prances around the surrounding ring, goading and taunting.

"Not getting tired, are you, baby Bev? I thought I taught you better than that."

I snort, working my neck to the side before I'm back on my toes, eyes tracking him. "Ha, ha. Are you done running around the ring, or are we going to finish this?"

My arms are sore from where he's landed several hits, my shins aching from both being kicked and kicking. But I don't let it slow me down, the pain pushing me forward as we go back to sparring. I see his shoulder dip, see the left hook coming my way, and try to counteract it by turning to the side to kick his leg out from under him, but I stumble on the mat, shifting the trajectory of his hit. Donatello's fist lands into my side with a loud thud, making me double over.

Julian is in the ring before I even realize what's happening, his hands shoving into Donatello's chest so that he stumbles backward.

"What the fuck?" Donatello slaps Julian away, stepping up to him. "Do we have a fucking problem, *barstardo*?"

"Do we?" Julian challenges, and I shove up from where I'd been kneeling on the mat to stand between them.

"Hey! What the hell?" Pressing a hand on each of their chests, I shove them backward and then hiss at the sting that shoots through my ribs. "Stop! It was an accident, Julian!"

Donatello steps back from my hand and I let it drop, cradling my side. Julian stays in place, his scowl now directed toward me. “You’re done. Meet me outside.”

We both watch him stomp angrily through the ropes, Donatello’s hand falling to my arm to get my attention, “You good? What’s going on, Bev?”

I swallow, shifting away from him. “It’s nothing. Julian is just overprotective lately.”

Donatello’s eyes narrow slightly and I know he’s not buying my lie. “Why?”

Shrugging, I work myself out of the ring, Donatello hot on my heels. My hand rises to hold my ribs, and Donatello grabs my arm.

“Let me look. I hit you pretty hard.”

I stop his hand, keeping my shirt down. “I’m fine, Donatello.” I smile to break the tension. “Really, I’m fine. Julian is just making you nervous.”

“Yeah, why is that, Bev?” I can tell he isn’t buying my excuse.

“Ask him, how would I know?” I deflect, grabbing my bag off of the bench near the wall. “Apparently, I have to go talk to him.” I pause, smiling to change the look on Donatello’s face. “We’ll pick this back up again when Julian isn’t here to over, alright?”

Donatello’s palm goes to the back of my head, lightly shaking it. “Yeah, yeah. Go deal with your brother baby, Bev.”

My eyes blink against the sunlight pushing through the gym door, quickly adjusting to my brother as he leans against his dark SUV. He doesn’t even wait for me to get to him before he’s ordering, “get in the car.”

With a heavy sigh, I round the car and climb in, clenching my teeth as I twist to toss my bag into the back. I barely shut my door when Julian turns on me.

“What the hell are you thinking?” He shakes his head, shifting the car into gear to pull out.

“Me? What were *you* thinking? Do you know how suspicious it looks having you jump in like that?”

“Are you kidding me right now, Bev?” He eyes me before looking back at the road. “You’re pregnant. Did you forget? You shouldn’t be up there boxing fucking Donatello. What if he had hit your stomach and not your fucking side?”

“I—” He’s right. Even knowing I was pregnant, I don’t think it has really settled in until now. *It’s real.* I’m actually having a baby, and the choices I make from here on our matter. “You’re right. I wasn’t thinking.”

“No, you listen to me—wait, did you say I’m right?” He pauses, his eyes flicking to me. “I mean, yeah, I am right. And you need to be more careful.”

“I guess I thought I was taking this seriously, but I really haven’t been.” I swallow, feeling tears pricking my eyes. “I tried to go on a date with Gavino, and it totally backfired. He hasn’t even talked to me since. I don’t think I can sleep with him, Julian. And even if I did, I don’t think he’d believe the baby was his.”

Julian says nothing, his fingers tapping on the steering wheel.

“Gavino has always been a friend to me. Do you think it would be so bad if I just told him? He’d understand, wouldn’t he? He’s already marrying me, knowing I slept with Remy.”

Julian sighs, “I honestly don’t know, Bev. I’m not close to Gavino. I’ve never been. All I know is that Remy *cannot* find out.” His eyes find mine at a stoplight. “I still think you should try to stick to the plan, but if you can’t, then—” He pauses, shaking his head. “I don’t know. Maybe you can just tell Gavino, beg for his silence, and hope he listens and understands.”

I chew on my lip a silence spreading over the car until Julian speaks again.

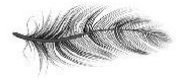
“What will you do if Gavino says you need to end the pregnancy?”

My heart thuds. “He wouldn’t do that.” I swallow, repeating myself. Whether for Julian’s or my benefit, I didn’t know. “He isn’t like that. He wouldn’t do that.”

“Maybe not, but it’s something you need to consider and have a plan for if he does.” Julian pulls into our apartments, shutting off the engine. “You can’t go to Capo Famiglia if he does, because they’ll tell you the same thing. You can’t go to Remy. You can’t go to our parents. I don’t have a solution for you, but you need to figure something out, just in case.”

I feel ill with the conversation, nausea roiling in my gut as I take the bag Julian hands me from the back. “I’ll think of something.” I grab onto his hand before he pulls it back, lightly squeezing it. “Thank you.”

He squeezes back before gently pulling away and getting out of the car. “I have done nothing Bev, it’s all on you.”



CHAPTER TWELVE

BEVERLY

My phone tings, a message lighting up the screen while I cook.

You free? I'm stopping by.

Wiping my hands off on the kitchen towel, I pick the phone up, opening Gavino's message. My pulse races as I respond, knowing the last time we truly spoke didn't go so well.

The door is open.

Setting the phone down, I hurry and unlock the door before padding back to the food on the stove, flipping the chicken in the sauce and turning the heat down before it can burn. I'm straining my pasta when I hear the door open, looking over my shoulder to see Gavino coming down the hall.

"Hey, I'm just cooking dinner." Dumping the fettuccine back into the pan, I turn to face him. "Are you hungry? There's enough if you'd like to join me."

"Ah, no, I just ate." He slides into a chair at the barstool, watching as I mix everything together. "I was just in the area and thought I'd come by since we haven't spoken much since dinner a few days ago."

Swallowing, my back is to him as I grab some parmesan from the fridge. "Yeah, about that." Turning, I set the cheese on the counter, leaning against it to face him. "I'm sorry. I don't know how everything got so out of hand."

Gavino shrugs, his fingers tracing a vein in the marble countertop as he eyes me. "I set my expectations for the night too high. It was my fault."

Frowning, I don't know how to respond, so I turn back to my food. Reaching up to grab a plate from the cabinet, I hiss, grabbing my side before readjusting to get a plate down.

"You're hurt?"

My eyes find Gavino's over my shoulder, lightly waving his concern away. "It's nothing." Using tongs, I dish up my food, sprinkling some of the pre-shredded parm on top. I spin once I've grabbed a fork, choosing to eat at the end of the barstool but not sit. "Donatello accidentally hit me in the ribs today during our spar. It's no big deal."

Gavino watches me as I eat, his fingers tapping. "I don't think you should continue boxing. Especially not if you're getting hurt."

I shrug, taking a bite of food. "I've been boxing for years, Gavino. Sometimes you get hurt. It's not a big deal, like I said."

"You're going to be my wife, Beverly. I don't want you boxing. I don't even want you working out with Donatello anymore, if I'm being honest." He says it casually, but there's an edge to his voice that grinds on my nerves.

I had already decided to step back from sparring with Donatello after the accident today, but something about Gavino all but telling me I couldn't do those things didn't sit right with me.

"I didn't think that becoming your wife meant you could dictate what I could and couldn't do, Gavino." I push my half-eaten plate aside, my teeth gnawing on my lip.

“That’s exactly what it means.” He lifts out of his chair, moving to stand in front of me. I take a step back on instinct, blinking when he grabs my upper arms. His thumbs stroke the skin despite the sharp grip. “When you’re my wife, you represent me, Beverly. I can’t have you running around with other men. I don’t want my wife acting like a man, for Christ’s sake. You are a woman, *my* woman. And my women don’t box.”

My lip curls, my body fighting the urge to pull from him. “Are you kidding? You’ve been my friend for how many years now? You’ve never once expressed these kinds of feelings, let alone tried to tell me what to do.”

His fingers tighten against my skin when I shift, holding me in place. “That was before, Beverly. This is now, why don’t you start living in the present, huh?”

Scoffing, I finally knock his grip away, backing up. “I used to think I knew you. But over the last few weeks, I’ve come to realize I never truly did.” I pause, watching his jaw tick. “I think it’s time for you to leave, Gavino.”

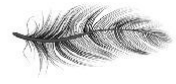
His tongue comes out to wet his lips, his arm reaching to grab his phone and tuck it into his pocket. “You know, pretty soon you won’t be able to kick me out just because you don’t like what I have to say.”

My heart hammers in my chest. In a small way, he’s right. I can’t keep pushing him away, especially not if I want him to accept my pregnancy.

“Wait, Gavino.” My fingers sink into the fabric of his sleeve, stopping him. “I don’t want us to fight. And despite what you probably think, I’m not purposefully starting arguments with you. I’m trying to adjust to this new dynamic. It’s not fair of me, but I’m asking for just a little bit of patience.”

He turns under my touch, the pads of his fingers lightly skimming my jaw, and I let him. “I’ll try, Bev.” His fingers press against my lips before he drops his hand away, stepping back. “But I’m just about out of patience.”

I watch his back as he leaves, my skin tingling where his fingers had just been. At the click of my door, I grab my plate of food and dump it in the trash before dropping the dishes into the sink. I’m over today. I might as well go to bed and try again tomorrow.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

BEVERLY

The sun is warm on my shoulders as I pin the top of my hair back. The loose, long-sleeved dress and thick tights I've chosen to wear to lunch with my mother cover the little bump of my belly well enough, but I can't help but feel anxious that she'll notice, anyway. My first real doctor appointment was early last week, and the sonogram I'd carefully tucked into one of my recipe books weighs heavily on my mind as I get ready to leave. I'm sixteen weeks pregnant and I still haven't found a good time to tell Gavino. I walk on eggshells whenever he is around, tiptoeing conversations to make sure an argument doesn't break out. We aren't even married yet and somehow we argue more than I ever saw my mother or father do. Everything I say or do seems to tip him over the edge; every remark he takes as a personal attack.

I have to sneak my prenatal vitamins, hiding things in my cupboards so that no one will find them if they come over to my house. My visits with Remy are far and few between the last couple of weeks, which is probably a good thing since I needed to distance myself, but it is still hard to accept. I feel as if every day I am just riding the waves, moving and acting in any way I can to avoid issues. My entire life I had a plan set before me, one that I had no say in, and the only time I have ever felt as if my thoughts and opinions truly mattered was when I was with Remy.

I played the role that was expected of me my entire life until I made the choice to give up my virginity, and now, that same choice was taunting me. I feel like I'm crumbling. My castle loses another pebble every day. I constantly feel overwhelmed or tired. I don't know how much longer I can keep up the charade that I'm fine, hold the illusion that my castle is made of steel instead of stones. I'm tired of feeling tired. I'm tired of feeling sad. I'm tired of everything all the time. *And that makes me angry.* I can feel myself turning into this angry, sad, confused thing. I'm swimming in the deep end and the sun is setting, the shore drifting out of sight.

Julian blames my thoughts on the pregnancy hormones, and maybe he's right, but I know it's more than that. Every day is a new obstacle, a new challenge with Gavino and my *familgia* duty to be a good fiancée—I do not know what is in store for me, have no say in what happens next, and the unknown makes my skin itch.

Standing from my chair, I double-check my outfit, smoothing my hand over my stomach before making my way out of the room. Snatching my phone off of the counter, I jog down to the car waiting for me and climb inside. With a quick hello from the driver, the car leaves my parking lot. My mother has been busy with Francesca planning the upcoming holiday parties and fundraisers, so I haven't had the pleasure of spending time with her. Our relationship has been strained, to say the least, since my engagement with Gavino. I can't help but think it's because she finds me weak for giving in to Remy prior to our marriage.

Maybe it was ridiculous of me to think that, but the look of disappointment on her face when she found out has been ingrained in my memories. I didn't really even want to meet her for lunch today, but it's necessary for me to keep up appearances. I need my mother to think that I am happy and that my current relationship with Gavino is nothing short of fantastic. That way, it's more believable that the baby I'm bringing into the world is Gavino's. Granted, I haven't even gotten Gavino on board yet, *but I will.* And having everyone else on my side will help in the long run.

Stuck in my head, it doesn't take very long to get to the restaurant and I'm quickly standing outside of it, my arms crossed as I wait for the hostess to locate my mother's table.

“Beverly, you look very nice today.” My mother’s voice finds me before I’m even in my chair.

“Thank you.”

She’s smiling when my eyes finally land on her, a mimosa in her hand and a bowl of fruit in front of her. She pushes the fruit toward me as I get settled in my seat, nodding to the other mimosa on the table. “I ordered mimosas and fruit, but told them we’d wait for real food until you got here.”

Picking up a strawberry, I take a bite of it before eyeing the drink. “Thank you. I’m actually not drinking right now, though.”

“You’re not? Why?” Her eyes flick over me, starting from my head and dropping to my toes before coming back to settle on my face. “You look different.”

“No, I don’t. I look the same as I always have.” Her eyes narrow marginally and my pulse spikes at her appraisal, shifting in my seat to further hide my waist behind the table. “And I’m just not, I’m—trying a detox for my health.”

She hums, lips pursed as if she’s not completely convinced, but convinced enough that she won’t question it again. “Fine, pass your drink and I’ll have it instead.”

I do as she says, picking up a grape to pop into my mouth as she sips her drink.

“How have you been? I feel as if we haven’t talked in ages. You haven’t even been by the house to read in the conservatory.” Her head is tilted thoughtfully, dark hair styled in perfect waves that sit prettily on her shoulders and complement the light tan of her skin.

“I’ve been fine. Busy.” I take a sip of the water on the table and pretend my every move isn’t being scrutinized.

“Busy? Beverly, you don’t have a job. What could you possibly be doing?”

“I don’t know why you’re saying that, like I’m some degenerate living off my daddy’s money for the hell of it. I’m not allowed to get a job, remember? When I tried, I was told it was *unbecoming* for a future wife.” I pick up another strawberry, eyeing my mother before I pop it into my mouth, speaking around it. “But if you must know, I’ve been spending time with Gavino, for the most part.”

“That’s great to hear.” She says quickly, a server joining us. I let my mother order for the both of us, continuing to pick at the fruit. Once we’re alone again, she turns back to me. “Has Gavino told you that Remy and Viva are trying for a child?”

I just about choked on the grape I’m swallowing, hacking so aggressively that the people sitting at the surrounding tables look over their shoulders with concern. Taking a drink of my water, I try to regain composure.

“You really should take smaller bites, Beverly. Are you alright?”

“I’m fine,” I say, waving away her hand that tries to fix the hair around my face. “What did you just say? About Remy? I don’t think I heard you correctly.”

She tuts, sitting back in her seat with her mimosa back in hand. “Oh, Francesca said that he and Viva were trying to get pregnant. She’s very excited about it.” My mother’s hand smooths over her tablecloth, one of her dark brows arched, “Although I’m not sure why, she doesn’t particularly love children. At least she didn’t with her own.”

My ears are ringing, ears falling deaf on whatever else she continues to prattle about. What she says can’t be true, Remy would have told me. I’m not naïve enough to think he hadn’t slept with Viva. They have been married for months, but I hoped that he wasn’t. I’m certain he would have told me if they were trying to have a baby together—*wouldn’t he?*

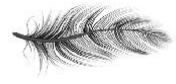
“You’ve got that look on your face, Beverly. Don’t you worry about it. Finish that fruit and your lunch when it gets here and forget I even mentioned it.” She drinks the rest of her mimosa, reaching for the one I’d discarded earlier. “Why don’t we talk about your upcoming wedding? Hmm? What colors are you thinking?”

My fingers shake in my lap as I smile politely up at the server who comes by to drop off our food, using them as a distraction from the question. I haven’t thought about my wedding with Gavino, besides knowing it was happening. I already picked out my dream wedding, and it was given to Viva. I have zero interest in going through that process again.

Picking up my fork, I stab a piece of chicken, feeling my mother’s eyes on me. “I haven’t really thought about it if I’m being honest.” My stomach feels sour over the conversation, but I force myself to eat.

“You can’t be serious?” My mother all but yells as she twirls pasta around her fork, her dark hair shaking around her head at me. “We only have a few months to plan, so we need to get started soon.” She takes a bite of her food, her finger rising to dab at the corner of her lips, “I want you to pick the colors at least, and I’m sure Francesca and I can handle the rest.”

The chicken sits heavy on my tongue as I nod, forcing myself to swallow. “I’m sure I can handle that.”



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

GAVINO

My fingers twitched behind my back as I stood before my father and Geo. Nearly four and a half months ago, I was in this same position, but this time, I was more confident that I'd get what I was asking for.

"Let me get this straight." Geo says before my father can answer, earning himself a raised brow, "You already asked to marry my daughter and now you're asking for her to move in with you months before the wedding is even supposed to take place?"

With a deep breath, I nod, "Yes, sir."

Geo snorts, his attention moving to my father. "I will admit, your *bastardo* sure has some enormous balls on him."

My father tuts, eyeing me where I stand. "Gavino just knows what he wants, and he isn't afraid of asking for it. It's a quality you should find admirable for someone marrying your daughter." His tongue picks at his teeth as he continues to stare at me. "But he does a lot of asking, doesn't he?"

Sensing the pair is about to shut me down, my confidence falters. "If I may speak, *Capo Famiglia*?"

His hand waves as Geo props his hip against my father's desk, both of their eyes heavy on me.

"I am marrying Beverly because she is impure, correct?" Geo's eyes narrow, but my father nods. "She's currently living alone in her own apartment with no security. I can provide for her and keep her safe if she moves in with me now. And knowing how women can be, is it wrong of me to be worried she might stray again?"

"Are you insinuating that my daughter is a whore?" Geo steps forward, voice raised.

I'm preparing to answer, and in a manner I don't think he'd like, but my father interjects.

"Of course he isn't, Geo. Calm down." My father waves him off, leaning back in his chair. "What he says has some value, though. Beverly would be safer if she lived with Gavino, and he can start providing for her, so you no longer have to." His neck bends as he lazily looks at Geo. "It seems like a win-win situation, Geo."

Geo's jaw works as he glares at me, but he nods reluctantly. "Fine. Beverly can move in with Gavino, but the wedding date stays the same." One of his hands raises, scrubbing the side of his head as he speaks to my father. "She deserves more than a shotgun wedding, especially since she's already marrying your *bastardo*."

My father claps, sitting forward in his chair. "Great, then it's settled." His eyes lock with mine, my heart pounding in my ribcage. "You can move Beverly in with you, but I'm tired of hearing your questions, and we both know Geo is."

Wetting my lips, I nod, my eyes flicking between the two men. "Understood. Thank you, *Capo Famiglia*."

He waves me out and I quickly turn to exit the room, my gut tight with excitement as I make my way out to my SUV. Beverly had mentioned last night that she was having lunch with her mother today at Du Pointe Lounge—perhaps I'd drop by and tell her the good news.

There's a smile on my face as I start my rig and pull from the lot, an excitement I haven't felt since being granted permission to marry Beverly tingling along my limbs. We've had a tough couple of weeks, and I try to remind myself that Beverly needs time to adjust, but I can't help but feel like she's *had* the time. Viva and my brother have been married for months now, Beverly has no reason to still be hung up on him. Not when I'm here, doing my best to make her love me.

And why doesn't she love me?

I've asked myself that question countless times over the years, and I have yet to come up with an answer. I've always been the one that was there for her, always been a friend to her. Remy was a bully, yet she fell for him—something I have yet to fully understand. And even now my brother somehow keeps her under his thumb, despite her being mine now. But things will change once she's living with me. I'll be everything she needs from the moment she steps foot through my door.

Pulling up to the restaurant, I shoot Beverly a text.

I'll be out front when you're done.

I watch as she exits the building with her mother, her eyes dropping to look at my text before she scans the parking lot for my car. *What great timing.* The dress she's wearing sways around her thighs as she walks toward my car, her long dark hair lightly blowing in the breeze. Her cheeks are pink from the slight nip in the air, the soft scent of lavender wafting into the cab as she opens the door and climbs into the passenger seat.

She smiles at me once she's inside, her fingers adjusting the skirt that sits over her thighs, one of her arms looped across her stomach after she buckles up. "I thought you had meetings all day." She says, her voice warming my chest.

"I finished them." Backing out of the parking spot, my gaze flicks to her for a moment before I pull out onto the road. "I actually have some good news."

She's looking out the window, her eyes following the passing cars. "Oh? What is it?"

"You're moving in with me." I'm smiling, the sentence making me happier than anything has in a long while.

"I'm what?" The tone in her voice hits me in the gut, my mood slipping with the shock dripping from each syllable.

"*Capo Famiglia* and your father have agreed to move you in with me." I can feel her eyes on my face, but I don't look, merging in traffic.

"What do you mean, they have agreed? You asked them?"

My jaw works at her increasingly bitter tone, fingers pinching around the steering wheel. "I thought you'd be happy to know you'd be living with me," my eyes find hers briefly, "your future husband."

"And did you not think to ask me, *your future wife*?" She scoffs mockingly, pulling against her seat belt to get more comfortable in her seat.

Before I can even attempt to answer her, she's continuing her angry rant, white knuckling the skirt of her dress. Her voice is deep, hiding tears.

"Does nobody care what I think about anything? I have no say?" Her face turns away from me, looking out the window, presumably to hide the tears she couldn't keep back. "First it was Remy and now it's you, but at least with Remy, he cares what I had to say."

Remy.

Even when he shouldn't be involved, my half brother always wedged himself where he shouldn't be—I was sick of it. The sound of his name leaving her mouth sent a wave of nausea in my gut, heart racing with angry. Whipping the car to the side of the road, the sound of horns blare as cars race past, Beverly jerking forward in her seat at the abrupt stop.

“What the—”

My hand whips out, body leaning over the center console to grab onto her chin. Her eyes go wide, her hand reaching up to grip my wrist, my skin pinching beneath her fingers. “I'm only going to say this once, Beverly, so it'd be in your best interest to listen.” Her lips purse below my gaze, eyes slightly narrowing, but she remains quiet. “You will move in with me and you'll start acting how a wife should act.” My fingers pinch tighter and she tugs lightly on my grip, but I don't release her. Warm tears slip from her lashes, to glide along my skin. “I don't want to hear you speak of Remy ever again. He's nothing to you. Do you understand me?”

I wait until she nods to let her go, her body recoiling from me as she sits back in her seat and angrily wipes the tears from her cheek. My gut tightens watching her, but I don't regret what I did. It's time she got over Remy and accepted this marriage. Eying the hard set of her jaw, I continue the previous conversation. “I'm bringing you to my place. The movers will bring your things over. I think it's best we get you set up immediately.”

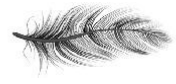
“And what about Dylan?” I frown, but she answers my unasked question, still not facing me, “my dog?”

“You have a dog?”

“Yes.” Her eyes finally flick to me, her lips tight. “And I won't go *anywhere* without him.”

Releasing this isn't a fight I want to partake in, I sigh, putting my blinker on to pull back onto the road. “Fine. I'll let them know to grab your dog as well.”

“*Great.*”



CHAPTER FIFTEEN

REMY

I'm not sure why two men are currently fighting for their lives trying to catch Dylan out in the parking lot, or why there are movers in Beverly's apartment packing up her things, but I watch from the side of my SUV. My lungs sting as I suck in smoke, slowly letting it out through my nose. I haven't been around as much as I'd like the last few weeks. To avoid having to be home with Viva and fulfill the order from my father to get her pregnant, I've been taking jobs that require me to travel or stay out. And now, during the only few free hours I have, I find Bev's stuff being taken from her place.

Julian pulls up as I'm snubbing my smoke, the look on his face telling me he isn't as surprised to find the movers here as I was, but he is surprised to see me here.

"Where's Bev?" The question is simple enough, but I know he reads all the things I want to ask along with it. Like why the hell there are movers to begin with?

"At the park last I heard." His hands go to his pockets. "She's, uh, going to be living with Gavino. *Capo Famiglia* and dad agreed to let her move in early." He eyes me as I hum. "What are *you* doing here?"

My tongue picks at my teeth, eyes flicking from him to the men still struggling with Dylan. "You should help them. Bev will lose it if that dog gets hurt."

"Shit." Julian says, almost like he just realized they were all out there.

Opening my SUV door, I get inside as he runs off toward them, chest burning with what Julian just told me. How fucking dare Gavino ask for such a thing. *And for my father to agree to it?* I'm getting pretty fucking sick of living under his thumb.



I find her at the pond on the edge of the park.

She's sitting in the grass, her knees drawn up to her chest. Silky, long dark strands of her hair fall in soft waves down her side as her cheek rests against the top of her knee. I know she hears me coming because she shifts in place, her head rising as her gaze stays on the water. I don't say anything, just move down beside her, my arm pressed against the soft cotton of her sleeve as my eyes flick along every freckle I can see in her profile.

Maybe I've been away too long, but there's something different about her, a slightly softer curve to her cheek. When her hazel eyes turn to me, mossy green in the dying sunlight, she nearly takes my breath away. *She grows more beautiful every time I look at her.* A small smile ticks at her lips, one that doesn't reach her eyes as she looks back out at the pond. I feel her sink into our small amount of contact, her shoulder resting against my arm, the soft strands of her hair tickling my skin as she shifts marginally closer.

"I'm moving in with Gavino." She says, breaking the comfortable silence we'd been sitting in. My fingers reach for hers where they rest in the cold grass, pulling them into mine. Her fingers are warm despite the chill in the air, the soft smell of lavender riding the breeze.

“I saw that.” Her face turns to mine again and I raise our joined fingers, my lips finding her fingertips.

Her gaze drops to them, throat working. “I’m going to miss you.”

My other hand rises, thumb brushing along her lips, parting them. “Stop. You won’t miss anything, Bev. This is temporary.”

She pulls from me, her eyes blinking closed. “How can you say that?” It’s a whisper, but it’s full of grief and anger. “You’re married, Remy. You’re getting ready to have children.”

My stomach tightens. I knew she’d have heard about it, but I was hoping she hadn’t. Simply because I wished I wasn’t. I didn’t want children with anyone but her.

She swallows, breath shuddering as she fights for composure. “I’m marrying Gavino and—and I just don’t see how *any* of this can go in our favor, Remy.”

Shifting, I turn to face her more fully, my hand tangling in the soft strands of her hair as she closes her eyes, face tilting into the touch. “Don’t give up on us, baby.” The tears she’d been fighting finally fall from her lashes, warm and sticky as they slide beneath my palm. My other hand wipes them away. “Look at me, Bev.”

She does as I ask, water gaze flickering over my face.

“*Sei il mio cuore.*” *You are my heart.* Her lip trembles and my thumb strokes her jaw, my head tilting to kiss away a lone tear. Her hand rises to wrap around my wrist, her fingers resting on my pulse point. “I can’t live without you.” My lips press to hers, soft and sure as she clutches to my skin. “I won’t.”



“Remy!”

Air blows through my nose as I drop my keys on the console table, eyes closing at the shrill sound of Viva’s voice. *Dio dammi forza. God, give me strength.*

“Remy?” I hear her bare feet slapping against the floorboards as she searches the house for me. Turning the corner, her eyes flick to me, her glossy lips pursed into a smirk. “There you are.”

“Here I am.” I mumble, making my way toward my room. I want nothing more but to shower the day away.

“Look at this.” Her footsteps pound behind mine, my gate pausing when she grips my arm and pulls me to a stop.

With a sigh, I turn to look at her. “What, Viva?”

A little white stick is pulled out from behind her back, smiling as she waves it before my face. “Do you know what this means?”

My eyes find hers, shoulders shrugging. “I have no idea. Enlighten me.”

An annoyed huff hits my back as I turn away from her, proceeding toward my room.

“It means,” she grabs onto my arm again, stopping me once more. She waits until I’m looking at her to keep speaking, “that I’m ovulating.”

I feel the sneer on my lips as I pull from her once again. “So?”

“Ugh.” She jogs beside me, moving to stand in front of me to block the stairs. “So, you need to have sex with me. My daddy told me that *Capo Famiglia* said we had to work on having children. You can’t deny me sex anymore.”

She ends her sentence with a smug smirk, her arms crossed over her chest, the test dangling from her fingers.

I grind my teeth at the mention of my father’s request. I know I can’t keep holding off, that my father will become suspicious, but tonight, *I don’t care*. “Not tonight, Viva.”

Her voice hits my back as I push past her, descending up the steps. “You *have* to, Remy!” When I don’t stop she stomps her foot, almost screeching, “I’m going to tell your father if you don’t!”

Pausing, I look over my shoulder, “I don’t care, Viva.” My tongue wets my lips, watching her fume below me. “Tell your daddy, tell my father. I don’t care.” I turn away, talking over my shoulder. “While you’re at it, why don’t you tell them how you lost your virginity to my guard, Hosea?”

She had started stomping up the steps after me, but I hear her feet falter. “How did you know about that?”

I stop at the top and look down at her, “Open your mouth about this Viva and I’ll tell them you lost it before we were married. I’ll tell them that they got pig’s blood on our wedding night to hide my embarrassment.”

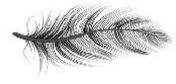
“They wouldn’t believe you.” She says, but her sails have started to deflate.

“Maybe. We sure can find out together.” My arms cross as I watch her eyes narrow, her lip working as she glared up at me. “That’s what I thought, Viva. Now leave me be for the night.”

“I have needs too, Remy! You can’t blame me for that!” She yells at my back as I leave her on the stairs.

Shrugging, I’m not sure if she can even see me still, but I know she can hear me. “Our father’s can though.”

The last thing I hear as I shut my door is her scream of annoyance.



CHAPTER SIXTEEN

BEVERLY

Staring at the wall, I'm doing everything in my power to pretend I'm enjoying my breakfast and not look as if I'm being forced to spend time with Gavino. Despite my constant reassurance, kind remarks, and smiles, Gavino is constantly comparing our new relationship to what I had with Remy. I'd known I'd fucked up by even mentioning Remy that day I'd found out I was moving in here, but I don't think I'd realized how much it affected Gavino until I was living with him.

It's been just over a week.

And I've only managed to keep my pregnancy a secret by the skin of my teeth. I have a room to myself, but every night there's a pressure I can feel crushing my shoulders when Gavino walks me to bed. I know he wants more intimacy in our relationship, and I know I should give more than the brief touches and cheek kisses I've provided, but *I'm scared*. The Gavino I know now isn't the same one I thought I knew before.

Part of me, the foolish and hopeful part, was expecting Remy to barge in to save me within the first two days of being here. Logically, I knew that wouldn't happen, but it didn't make the disappointment any less. He asked me not to give up on us—and I haven't. I know he will eventually get me out of here.

I just pray it's sooner than later.

Gavino doesn't trust me as much as he pretends to because he's diligent about locking up his phone when he leaves, and he's gone out of his way to take mine. I don't know what he fears I'll do, I willingly came into his home just as was agreed upon. I've done everything he's asked of me, spent every waking moment with him when he has been home. When I step foot outside, I'm greeted by his men. No one, including Gavino, has said I can't leave the property, but it's a nonverbal command. It's obvious by the way I'm constantly watched, in the way I can't even take a walk around the property without being tailed by a made man.

The only time I get to myself is when I'm in my bedroom—and I can't even spend too much time in there without Gavino searching for me. My only solace at this point is Dylan, who thankfully Gavino hasn't forced me to get rid of even though Dylan can't stand him.

That just about makes two of us at this point.

Gavino's palm is currently hot on my knee as he reads from a folder at the dining table, his thumb stroking back and forth as I aimlessly stroke Dylan's head on my other side. It's taken some time, but I finally got Dylan to stop growling at Gavino whenever he stood too near to me. *I think I preferred it when he did*. Rain is pelting the windows outside as I stare out, my tea mug cooling on the table as it sits undrunk. A soft kick flutters in my tummy and I resist the urge to place my hand there, my eyes flicking from the window to Gavino as he reads.

I started feeling the little kicks just after I moved in here. I wish I could share them with Remy, or really, *anyone*. But I get to experience them alone—It's something I find myself quite bitter about even if it's a situation I brought upon myself. I'm supposed to have a sonogram in a few weeks to find out the gender of my baby and the thought makes me anxious. How will I get out of this house to do that if I'm basically on lock down? I barely managed to sneak my prenatal vitamins into the house, having to beg Gavino to let me go through my things that he'd deemed as "donateable," which included all of my recipe books.

Apparently, I didn't need them anymore because he had a personal chef. Just as I *didn't need* most of my things because he could provide everything I would need from here on out. It was a subject I let go instead of arguing about. I had far more important things to worry about than not having my things.

"You didn't eat much at dinner tonight." Gavino's voice shakes me from my thoughts, my gaze clashing with his. "You didn't like it?"

Shaking my head, I raise my hand from Dylan, wrapping my fingers around the cold tea cup. "No, it was good. I just wasn't very hungry." Taking a sip of my tea, I sigh, placing it back down. "I'm actually tired, though. I think I'll head to my room."

"About that." Gavino says, catching my hand as I stand. "I was thinking we could share a bed tonight."

My pulse races at the suggestion, my heart thumping so loudly beneath my rib cage that I'm sure he can hear it. "You want to sleep with me?" The question barely comes out above a whisper, fear clenching my throat as I scramble to come up with a reason why we can't.

His brow dips, his hand leaving my skin to stack his papers neatly on the table before carefully placing them into the folder. He looks up after everything is nice and tidy. "You don't want to."

It's not a question, but a statement. One that I can feel pushing us into dangerous territory.

"I didn't say that, Gavino." Swallowing, I watch as he rises from his chair. "I merely asked a question."

"It's been a week, Beverly. I think I've been patient with you as you got acclimated to being here, haven't I?"

My eyes find his as he looms over me, one of my hands falling behind me to steady Dylan, who's gone stiff near my legs. "I never said you weren't."

His hand snaps up to pinch my cheeks between his fingers, bringing me closer to him as if to kiss me, but all sweetness is gone from his touch. Dylan barks at my side and his eyes narrow. "Call your dog off, Beverly. I have half a mind to get rid of the damn thing. I can't even touch you without him barking half the time."

Swallowing, I fight for composure. "Out, Dylan." Reluctantly, the pup moves from me, his nails lightly tapping along the kitchen tile as he makes his way slowly from the room. I hear his dog door squeak open, flapping shut as he disappears outside. "He responds to your aggression. It's what he was trained to do."

Gavino's scoff hits my face, blowing the bits of hair from my forehead. "I'm not aggressive with you." His fingers pinch harder, and I blink at the pressure. "I could be. Is that what you want?"

He takes my silence as an answer, releasing my cheeks but moving closer, so that my chest presses against his. I move to step back, worried about my belly, but he stops me, gripping my upper arms hard. "Is that what you liked about my brother? You liked that he took what he wanted from you?"

My hands push against him, trying to break his hold. "What? No. Gavino, stop."

One of his hands has found my hair, jerking my face up toward his as his lips press to mine, hot and unwanted. My face turns, fighting his kiss. "Gavino!" I shove back hard, pushing him away from me. "Stop it! What is wrong with you?"

"With me?" He yells back, rushing forward to grab me once more. "What's wrong with you, Beverly? What do I need to do to make you love me? Am I not good enough for you?" His lips slam

to mine once again, knocking the breath from my lungs with the force my body is jolted into his.

This time I don't just shove him back, I swing at him, landing a solid punch into his lip that snaps his head to the side. The room goes silent. Gavino's fingers rise to press to his lips, pulling it back to look down at the bit of blood smeared on them. Before I can react he's grabbing me, jerking me by the front of my shirt toward him.

"I don't know what kind of nonsense Remy tolerated, but I will not." I try to yank from him as he continues, using his strength to fight me. "If you want to act like a child, you'll be treated like one."

"Gavino! Let go of me!" I jerk hard, his hand grabbing at my shirt when I break free from him. With a loud rip the front of it is torn, dangling from his fist. Realizing, I try to grab the edges of it, pulling it over my belly before he can.

But it's too late.

"What the fuck is this?"

I pause, heart thumping erratically in my chest, my breaths coming in and out in quick pants and I scramble to think of what to do or say. In my panic I decide to run, attempting to sprint toward the door, but my arm is snagged. I cry out at the contact, both startled and riddled with fear as I'm jerked backward and spun, my hips pinned against the kitchen table.

His palms grab onto the ripped sides of my shirt, yanking it apart even further until it's torn all the way to expose both my belly and the lace of my bra. "You're pregnant?"

Fear is gripping my throat, squeezing so hard I can barely breathe. I don't know what's going to happen, if Gavino will try to hurt me or if he'll leave me be. "Yes." I finally squeeze out, fighting the tears that are burning my eyes. "I'm so sorry. I wanted to tell you—" I swallow, one of his hands leaving the ripped cotton of my shirt to lightly skim his fingertips along my belly. It takes everything in me not to pull back. "I was scared."

His eyes don't leave my exposed skin, touch burning as it rims my belly button. "This is my brother's child?"

His tone is so calm, I'm scared to answer. Scared of what his reaction will be when I confirm what he already knows. His eyes flick up to mine, his slow dragging movements on my belly not stopping. "Yes."

"Then this is a bastard child." He doesn't say it with malice, but the soft tone of his voice is almost worse. His eyes haven't left mine. "Does Remy know?"

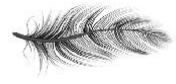
I shake my head, swallowing hard when his fingers graze higher up my belly, toward the valley between the swell of my breasts. "Good." His eyes harden, my chest rising and falling quickly below his fingertips. "And he will continue not knowing." His fingers trail back down, hot palm cupping my belly as he steps closer to me, his breath hot on my lips as I stare up at him, "This baby is *mine*."

His other hand rises, knuckles brushing along my cheek while I blink, hot breath blowing along my lips. "Just as *you* are mine."

The sentiment sits heavily in my gut, the weight of his words making bile rise in my throat. His lips press to mine in a hard, desperate peck, as if he's solidifying his words before he pulls from me, jaw hard as he eyes my ripped clothing.

"Get your dog and go to bed, Beverly."

Chewing on my cheek, I do as I'm told, a sinking feeling in my chest telling me that even though I've gotten the outcome I wanted with Gavino accepting my pregnancy, *this is far worse*.



CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Fuck, I'm sick of this shit.

Tapping my cigarette box against my palm, I pull one out, holding it in my mouth as I grab my revolver off the passenger seat. The clock on the dash says I need to hurry the fuck up unless I want to be late to my meeting. That doesn't mean I'll move any quicker, though. Exiting my SUV, I tuck my gun into the waistband at the back of my jeans, reaching back into the cab to grab my zippo off the seat. Lighting the cigarette, I toss it back in, taking a long drag as I stare at the building in front of me.

"Aye! Look who it is!" At the voice, I glance over my shoulder, slamming my door shut as they continue yelling. "You off of pier duty?"

Blowing smoke through my nose, I turn to eye the man coming to slap me on the back in greeting. I really fucking wish he wouldn't. His arm pauses mid-swing with the look on my face, dropping to casually slap his thigh like that was his intention the entire time.

"We thought you'd be back sooner." He says, still smiling despite my lack of camaraderie.

"I was." He laughs, clearly not taking the hint that I don't want to deal with his chit chat right now. *Luca has always been a fucking moron.* "Where's the package?"

"Oh, we have him inside. He was—" He starts to say more, but I'm already moving toward the doors, his words lost in my wake. Not discouraged in the least, he jogs to catch up, continuing like I didn't leave him mid-sentence. "He was getting mouthy, so we put a gag on him."

The creaking of the metal door is loud and echoing in the open space as I push inside, every head turning my way as I do. In the middle of the room is my package, sitting pretty on a metal chair that's been bolted to the floor. Bound, gagged, and bleeding, sits none other than Chancler Fitzpatrick, uncle of The Bratva's underboss.

I take a drag as I eye him, my jaw working. Handing it off to Luca, I hold the smoke in my lungs until I'm standing in front of Chancler before tugging his gag from his mouth and letting it all out. I smile with a deep chuckle as he sucks in a heavy breath, immediately followed by hacking coughs.

"Have your fun now!" He hacks, the words yelled through his coughs, eyes burning with rage as he watches me stand straight. "Any second Aleksy will have men in here!"

"Who do you think hired us to get you?" His face falls just the slightest bit at my question, giving away the fact that he already knew that could be a possibility. I smile again, watching as his chest quickly rises and falls in growing panic.

"You lie! Why would he do that? I'm his flesh and blood!" His nostrils are flare, sweat dripping from his balding head and down the sides of his face.

I pull the revolver from my waistband as he watches, cock the hammer back as he stares. His body is shaking now, arms pulling at their restraints in a futile attempt to get free. We rarely bother with Bratva business, but Aleksy came to *Capo Famiglia* with a problem he apparently couldn't solve himself; needed help from our Wolf connecting the dots. Lucky for him, *Capo Famiglia* was feeling generous enough to loan the both of us out.

"Typically, stealing and selling product to make your own profit is frowned upon in this business Fitzpatrick. But to also sleep with your Boss's wife?" I shake my head with mock disappointment, pursing my lips at his denying head. "That's just rude."

He sputters at my accusations, face getting red as he tries to find something to say with the hope of delaying the inevitable. “I—”

His sentence ends almost before it began, his head snapping to hang backward as blood drips from the bullet hole scored through it. Tucking my gun away, I hold my hand out to Luca, who passes back my cigarette, watching silently as I finish my smoke. “I’m going to need the warehouse cleared. Wolf will be here soon and I have a meeting with him.”

Luca gives me a stupid little salute, smiling as he shouts to the men standing near us. Finishing off my smoke, I drop the butt onto the concrete floor, snubbing it out with my boot. I silently watch as the other men file out the door, my pulse picking up just the slightest bit as I stand quietly, waiting. My gaze shifts over to the door of the warehouse, finger tapping inside my pocket to match the soft ticking of the clock hanging on the opposite wall.

Depending on what news Wolf has for me, *I’m one step closer to getting Beverly back.*

At the sound of the creaking open I watch as wolf makes his way to me, a hand lightly running through the silver strands of his hair as he comes to a stop. I keep the bored expression on my face, not letting him see how much I depend on this conversation going my way. My arms cross as I address him, “Jessie.”

He tilts his head in acknowledgement, eyeing the dead man behind me like he’s admiring a painting. “The package was taken care of I take it?”

I hum. “Have someone pass the news on to Aleks. I’m sure he’ll be pleased.”

His hands clasp before him with a nod. His bright blue eyes flicker up to mine, waiting for me to initiate our real meeting.

“What did you find?” It’s asked casually, but I feel anything but, my muscles wound up tight.

“It took me a while, but I found what you needed.” He says, reaching into the inside pocket of his coat to pull out an envelope.

My fingers wrap around it when he holds it out to me. He continues speaking as I wordlessly go through the contents.

“Travis Castello, you ever heard of him?”

I nod, flicking through the unfolded paperwork in my hands. Travis was an old capo that worked under my father years ago. After he retired he spent most of his time across the country in Las Vegas gambling.

“Well, Francis Delfino made a deal with him. He borrowed a bunch of money to buy the same piers that the *famiglia* gained for your and Viva’s marriage.” I hum, looking through some camera screen captures of the said exchange. “Travis Castello’s money was the *famiglia*’s money.” He says plainly waiting for me to connect the dots myself.

My eyes flick up to his, the photos still pinched between my fingers. “Francis bought the piers with *famiglia* money, meaning they should have already been owned by us, and then used them as leverage to have his daughter marry me?”

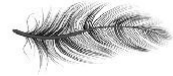
Jessie nods, his smile making him look every bit of the wolf he’s nicknamed as. “And Travis was conveniently found dead in his Las Vegas home not even two weeks after the marriage announcement.”

Interesting.

I feel my smile, tucking the contents of the envelope back inside of it. “Good work, Wolf.”

He takes the praise as the dismissal it is, turning away with a nod, his hands tuck into his jacket pockets. I watch him leave, tapping the envelope in my hand against my fingers.

It's time to meet with my father.



Knocking my knuckles against the doorframe to my father's office, I watch his head raise from whatever he was looking at on his desk.

"Remy." My father shifts in his seat, signaling for me to come into the room. "I wasn't expecting to see you today. Here to tell me you've impregnated your wife?"

Shaking my head, my hands rest in front of me. "No. I'm here on other business."

His brows furrow, lips pursed. "Frankly son, that's the only news I'm interested in hearing from you. I gave you an order, remember?"

Narrowing slightly, his eyes flick to stare into mine, making sure I understand him.

"I have news that I know you'd be interested in regarding Francis Delfino." I see his interest has peaked, so I continue. "Wolf has found evidence that Francis borrowed *famiglia* money to buy the piers he used to arrange mine and Viva's marriage."

My father's jaw works as he thinks, leaning further back in his chair. "Where did he get the money?"

"Travis Castello, apparently. Who was found dead after the marriage was announced," I pull the envelope from my back pocket, placing it on the desk in front of my father. "All the receipts and photographs are there. It's not in the envelope, but I'm sure we could find evidence to link him to Travis's death to cover up the deal."

My father's fingers grab the envelope, flipping it up to dump the contents out onto his desk. His fingers run over them, his tongue picking at his teeth. It feels like an eternity that he sorts through everything at a leisurely pace, until he finally leans back, his hands crossed lazily over his stomach.

"So, what are you going to do about it?"

I hold his gaze for a moment. "I need permission to kill Francis Delfino."

"Granted." He leans forward, eyes flicking over the documents on his desk before meeting my gaze. "I don't enjoy being disrespected."

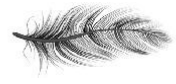
"And what of Viva?" My pulse races as he takes his time to answer, reaching for his cup to take a sip of his drink.

"Do whatever you please. She's useless now."

My lip tics into a smirk.

I'm one fucking step closer to getting cuore mio back.

It's already been almost a full month since she's been living with Gavino. *I don't want to wait any longer.* I give him a nod of respect before turning around and walking from the room.



CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

BEVERLY

I missed my sonogram to find out the gender of my baby.

The reasoning being that Gavino wants the gender of *our* baby to be a surprise. He said it would be more exciting that way. Every other visit he attended by my side. I'm sure we were picturesque perfection of what a happy couple should look like at those doctor visits. I was told by many women how lucky I was to have a man that attended to me the way Gavino did. That I should be so proud to have such a man by my side during my pregnancy.

And maybe I would be if I wanted to be with him.

If I thought I was forbidden from leaving the property before, *I was wrong*. Now I really am being held under lock and key, forbid from doing anything without Gavino by my side. He can't risk anything happening to our baby. Not to mention, my belly is well past the stage of easy hiding at twenty-two weeks. Most of my days consist of lazing around the house and sitting outside with Dylan. Each passes in a haze, exactly the same as the one before. I'm not even sure how long it's been. Another week? Three? A month? I only ever see Gavino. Only ever physically talk to Gavino. I have been given my phone back, but with limited screen time. The only two contacts I am permitted to use with supervision are Julian and Delaney.

If I so much as mention leaving, to go anywhere, that isn't an appointment, I am all but screamed at. I've become a prisoner to Gavino's estate. A prized gem he can't bear to lose. *The thought is terrifying*. There is a fine line between love and hate, and Gavino constantly rode it. I wasn't positive if his obsession is because he actually cares about me and the baby or if he is riding some insane high on having something held over Remy.

Since finding out I was pregnant, he hasn't pressured me to share a bed with him again, but I know he still wants to. The bigger my belly gets, the longer his gaze stays on my skin. *It makes me uneasy*. Every night I expected him to tell me to join him, and every night I didn't have too I breathed a sigh of relief.

I was running out of excuses to keep Julian away and the more I lied, the guiltier I felt. It was ridiculous living like this—I logically knew that. But there is nowhere else for me to go. Each day my heart turns a deeper hue of red, edges slowly fading to an inky black. Each night I wish upon the stars outside my window for Remy to come for me, to take me out of this living nightmare, and each morning I wake up to find them ungranted.

"I got you something. For your baths."

My eyes shift over to Gavino in the doorway as he speaks, eyeing the bath salts he's holding. In an attempt to keep my sanity, I've been taking baths. I nearly had them taken from me when my doctor suggested I only take warm and not hot baths, but after many reassurances, I finally convinced Gavino it was fine.

At my nonresponse, Gavino walks to the table and sets them in front of me. "They seem like something you'll enjoy."

I probably will enjoy them, but it would have been nice to pick something out for myself for a change. Instead of saying that I force a smile as I stand, grabbing the salts while reading the label. *Fatigue and stress relief*. "Thank you. I think I'll use them now."

Thankfully, he doesn't follow me as I make my way to my room's ensuite bathroom like I half expected him to. Clicking the door shut, I set the salts on the counter and rest the back of my head against the door, closing my eyes for a moment. For the next thirty minutes, I can pretend that I'm okay, that it's just an ordinary day of relaxing in the tub. That I'm not living day thirty—whatever at Gavino's estate.

Opening my eyes to my imagined bliss, I turn the water on and dump the salts in. Hopefully, they can actually help with my fatigue. *I'm exhausted.* Physically and emotionally. Stripping and sinking into the water, I roll a towel to support my neck on the edge and watch my skin turn pink. Shutting my eyes again, *I imagine I'm free.*

"Beverly. Beverly!" I jump, frowning up at Gavino in confusion. My water is cooled and my fingers pruned.

I must have fallen asleep.

"What? Why are you shouting?" I don't bother to hide from his gaze. Who knows how long he's already been watching me.

"You've been in here for a few hours." I sit up to get out of the water, but he stays in my way, crouched by the tub. "I was worried."

There's something about the way he says it that puts me on edge, makes the hair on my arms stand that doesn't have to do with the cold. "I must have fallen asleep. I'm ready to get out now, though."

After a small pause, I lean toward him, expecting him to move, but he doesn't. I'm forced to catch myself on the edge of the tub, my wet naked chest accidentally pressing against his clothed one as my fingers pinch around the tub lip. I can feel his quick breaths as he grabs onto my wet arms, pulling me closer and I swallow hard, my heart hammering in my chest.

"Gavino?" My soft voice breaks the silence, water dripping from my arms to splatter onto the floor as he holds me in place. He licks his lips, the edge of his tongue so close to my mouth I nearly feel it on mine. I resist the urge to shutter, my back starting to ache at the angle I'm sitting at.

"You're a beautiful woman, Beverly."

I swallow, not sure how to answer—I choose to ignore his statement. "I'm cold, Gavino."

My words have the effect I was hoping for and Gavino shifts, guiding me up from the bath. His touch still burns my skin even when he lets go, my towel wrapping around me not making me feel any more covered than when I was naked as he stands and watches me dry.

"You know, it's safe to have sex while you're pregnant."

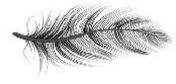
My heart nearly stops at his comment. My back is turned to him as I take another towel from the cabinet to dry my hair. "I know."

I hear his shoes on the tile bringing him closer, but feel the warmth of his palms as they land back on my arms, stroking from my elbow to shoulder. Holding my breath when his puffs along the back of my neck. "I've been thinking—"

His sentence is interrupted by the ring of his cellphone and I silently praise the heavens above for the distraction. When he pauses to answer it, I quickly move away from him, shifting out of the bathroom to practically run to my closet. Pulling on clothing I leave my towels on the floor, my hair still dripping when Gavino finds me in the doorway.

"I have to go." His jaw is tight, the expression on his face hard. "When I get back, we'll continue this discussion."

I nod, simply because I don't know what else to say, watching his back as he leaves the room.
Hopefully, I'm sleeping when he gets back.



CHAPTER NINETEEN

REMY

Francis Delfino, if nothing else, is a man of punctuality.

After following him for a week, I would know. And currently, Donatello, Andrea, and I are waiting outside of his office for him to get off of work. If I know anything about the man, and I think I do, he'll walk out the door in precisely one minute according to the dash clock.

"There he is." Andrea nods toward the front of the building where Francis is walking down the sidewalk. Briefly making eye contact with the two men in the car, we all get out. Francis's eyes flicker between the three of us as we approach him, confusion titling his brow.

I speak before he can. "You've got an appointment, Francis Delfino."

He starts to say something, but Donatello lands a left hook to his chin, knocking him out cold. We all collectively watch as he crumples onto the ground, Donatello winking at a lady who stops in her tracks and then spins to go the other direction on the sidewalk. Andrea bends down and grabs Francis, tossing him over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes.

Walking in front of them, I open the back of the SUV, watching as Francis is not to carefully tossed in, his head banging against the back of the seats. Grabbing some zip ties, Andrea secures his hands behind his back before looking over to me. "Should I cover his mouth?"

Donatello speaks up before me, snatching the roll of duct tape that was already in the back. "Fuck yeah. Tape him, put a couple pieces so it really sticks. Ripping it off is one of the best parts."

Andrea gives him a look but grabs the tape, slapping one long piece over Francis's mouth.

"Do another piece." Donatello reaches for the tape but Andrea pulls it back, tossing it into the SUV.

"That's enough."

Donatello tuts at him and I shake my head at them both, reaching up to slam the trunk shut. "Let's go."

We bring him to one of the off-site warehouses. Donatello brakes harder than necessary when we get there, grinning at me when we hear Francis's body thump against the back of the seats. Getting out, Andrea opens the trunk, a groggy and confused Francis falling onto the dirt lot since he was leaning on the window. I nod to Andrea and he reaches down, ripping the tape from his mouth before jerking Francis up by his arm so that he's facing me.

We both ignore Donatello's grumbled, "I wanted to do that."

"What is going on? What is the meaning of thi—"

His words are cut off with my right hook, his lips splitting against my knuckles. Flexing my hand, I revel in the sting of a good hit before laying another one on his cheek. "Oh good, I'm glad you're awake." His body sways slightly at the blow but Andrea keeps his stumbling form up. "We never got to know each other through this whole wedding business, but I think it's time we had a chat."

Turning toward the warehouse, Andrea tugs Francis along with him as Donatello opens the door. Francis is sat in the chair bolted to the floor in the center of the room, his binds adjusted so that he can't fight his way up. My eyes find Donatello's for a moment, a lopsided grin on his face as he tosses me a set of brass knuckles before leaning against the table behind him.

Sliding the brass knuckles on my fingers, I move to stand in front of Francis. His eyes shift nervously around the room, his sweaty chest rapidly rising and falling. I could end this quickly, just shoot him and get it over with, but I want to draw it out.

Make him walk himself to his own death.

“Remind me, Francis, what was the deal you made with the *famiglia*?”

I cross my arms as I look down at him, gesturing for him to hurry things along when he looks around the room instead of answering. “You were to marry Viva and in exchange the *famiglia* would get complete access to all the south Piers.”

I nod, running my tongue over my teeth. “You must make good money at your job to be able to buy out the piers like you did.” He shrugs in a noncommittal way, eyes leaving me to warily look at Andrea when he grunts. “Why the south Piers, though? I’m just curious why a simple man such as yourself would feel the need to invest in something so large. You’ve been an associate of the *famiglia* for years, why suddenly feel the need to dive in so deep??

He swallows at my questions. I can tell they’re making him nervous by the way his foot unconsciously taps on the floor with each one. “I just thought it would be a good investment.”

I nod, looking over his shoulder at Donatello and then to Andrea.

“Seems fair.” My gaze turns back on Francis’s frowning, I tap the side of my head with the brass knuckles. “You wouldn’t happen to know Travis Castillo, would you?”

His eyes widen marginally before he masks it, and I smirk.

“Because if you did, and knew him well, you would have known that he’s been a member of the *famiglia* for decades. And a little Wolf told me that you borrowed money from him to buy the Piers. Which, there’s no big deal there, as the *famiglia* is always happy to lend a hand, but you tried to pull a fast one on us, didn’t you?”

My hand shoots out, pointing at his face when he starts to shake his head no, my tone turning dark. “Lie again and see what happens, Delfino.”

His head abruptly stops. The sides of his face starting to perspire under my gaze.

“Using *Famiglia* money to buy those piers would have been perfectly fine if you hadn’t decided to turn around and use our money against us for your own gain. We don’t tolerate that kind of disrespect.”

He starts shaking his head no again, mouth opening to say something, but I knock the lie about to come off his tongue with my brass knuckles, soundly punching him in the cheek so his head flies sideways and a nasty crack sounds throughout the warehouse. “We talked about lying.”

He whimpers to himself, eyes pinching closed around the pain. I wait until he looks at me again before continuing our very one-sided conversation.

“I have to admit, buying the south piers, knowing they’re the only ports we’re able to get ammunition in, was pretty smart on your part. You had a good idea but the wrong execution.” I smile at Francis, rubbing my chin with the edge of my brass knuckles. “The funny thing about working with the *famiglia*, Francis, is that the *famiglia* will usually find a way to fuck you over, so even if you hadn’t bought those piers for your own gain, we’d be here eventually, anyway.” I shift, making him flinch, and Donatello chuckles at the small whine that leaves Francis’s chest. “And since we’re being honest here, I’m also pretty fucking pissed at you for making me break my girl’s heart to marry your brat of a daughter.”

He shakes his head at me, mouth sputtering as he tries to find words through his growing panic. “I just wanted what was best for my daughter. You can’t fault me for that!”

“What a good father. Selling your daughter to the most dangerous crime organization on this side of the country so that you could sit at the big kids’ table.” His face blanches at my mocking. My next jab bloodies his lips, sending a spray of it across the already stained cement at his feet. “You’re either a compulsive liar or just not very fucking smart.”

Viva is a fool if she thinks her father actually had her best interests in mind. *No*, Daddy Delfino wanted his own piece of the power and thought he could get that with the *famiglia*. And he may have, *if he hadn’t fucked with me*.

I squat down so we’re face-to-face, resting my forearms on my knees as he groans in the chair. “There is one major flaw in your plan, Francis. Do you know what it is?” I continue before he can respond. “When you signed that contract, you made me the sole beneficiary to any and all of your assets when you die. Did you know that? Or did they forget to mention that part?” By the way his eyes have turned into saucers, I’m assuming they didn’t. “Do you see where I’m going with this?”

“*You can’t kill me!* What about my wife? And Viva! She’s *your* wife!”

My head shakes at his panicky yells, my tongue swiping out to wet my lip as I smirk at him. “Viva and I won’t be married much longer. I can promise you that.”

He just gapes at me like a fish, and I reach out, tapping my knuckles along the side of his head, “Every action has a consequence, Francis. This is what happens when you meddle where you don’t belong.” I lash out with another punch, this time to his ribs, bending to speak to the side of his face. “These next few are for Beverly.”

Letting my anger loose over the last half of the year, I lay my entire weight into every hit. There’s a crack here, a pop there, blood staining my hands and arms, sprayed across my shirt. I put every ounce of hatred into my fists. A hit for everyday I’ve been forced to be away from *cuore mio*, a hit for every fucking tear she shed that was at the expense of the *famiglia*. I don’t stop until my breathing is ragged and my knuckles are split and bruised. Not until the man in front of me is no longer recognizable as any kind of person but *a thing*. My hands are shaking as I stand there, watching the sluggish way Francis breathes, listening to the watery sound of it.

Holding my hand out, Donatello steps up, dropping a gun onto my palm. I raise it up, pushing Francis’s head back so I’m looking into his face. Both of his eyes are swollen shut, the other crushed inside his skull. Leaning forward, I can speak into his ear, “And this is for the *famiglia*.”

Standing straight, I pull the trigger, passing off the gun to Andrea and walking from the room as Francis’s head drips blood and other matter onto the floor. A cigarette is tugged out of my pocket and lit, my eyes rising to look at the pinks and yellows of the sunset. Holding the cigarette between my lips, I pull the brass knuckles from my fingers, wincing slightly as they run over the raw flesh.

Donatello comes out to stand next to me, eyes going to the sunset as I blow smoke into the sky. “Andrea called some of the soldiers to come take care of the body.” I nod, more smoke leaving my lips. “Where are you going now?”

I look over at him, taking the cigarette from my mouth and snuffing it on the warehouse wall. “To take care of Viva.”



Walking through the front door I listen for Viva, knowing she usually spends her evenings watching TV. Sliding my brass knuckles from my pocket, I set them on the console table before walking toward the living room. The back of her golden head comes into view where she's rested against the couch and I make my way to her. Leaning over the back, I reach around to grip her throat, thumb stroking along her jaw when she jumps. Her face tilts back under my palm, eyes finding mine, and she relaxes after realizing it's me. I press my lips to her ear when she looks back at the TV, "Get out."

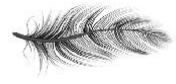
She twists on the couch, watching me pull away from her as she sits on her knees, frowning with confusion. "What?"

"Your father had an accident." I pull my bloody shirt over my head and toss it away as she gapes in silent shock. "He's dead." Her eyes flick over my body like she's just now seeing the blood. I washed my hands and arms before coming here, but my bruised knuckles and bloodied clothes couldn't be washed away. "You're going to move back in with your mother."

"You killed him, didn't you? Didn't you?!" She's yelling from the couch, hands gripping the cushions while her eyes well up with tears. When I don't answer her, she screams at me. "You're a fucking monster, Remy!"

Walking to her, I raise my hand to wipe away the tears that are falling down her cheeks. "Maybe. Good thing we're getting a divorce." I lightly pat her cheek at her stunned silence, watching as she tries to piece together everything that's happening. My hand drops from her. "A car will be here in fifteen minutes to pick you up. My lawyer will be accompanying you to finalize the divorce papers." My eyes leave hers as I turn away. "I suggest you hurry it along, Viva, you won't like what happens if you're still here when I get back."

She yells at my back as I leave the room, voice shaking as she cries, "Fuck you, Remy! Fuck you!"



CHAPTER TWENTY

GAVINO

“Where is he?”

My pulse races as I meet up with some of the made men on guard, swallowing hard as they lead me to the edge of my property. Remy was here to speak with me. About what, I had an idea after hearing the news of Francis Delfino’s death. *And it wasn’t good for me.* Just the fact that Remy was basically out of his contracted marriage meant that I was running out of time where Beverly was concerned.

Remy gets whatever he wants—he always has his entire life. He has always been everyone’s favorite, even as a child. My father’s favorite, my sister’s favorite. He always had girls obsessing over him and men emulating him. Being Remy’s brother is like being the moon to the sun. Everyone basks in the sun’s glow, wakes up to it, plans their days around it, but they sleep when the moon rises. The few that stay awake are only looking at the stars, not paying attention to the moon, neither caring nor aware of its importance.

Only one person ever looked at the moon, the one person *I had first.* Beverly was mine—*until he made her his.* But I finally got her back, and I wasn’t going to let her go so easily. He had the *famiglia*, he had the power, all things I didn’t want or care about. He didn’t get to have her, too.

I feel his eyes on me before I even crest the round in the driveway. It’s dark, but the decorative lamps that sit atop the gate arches cast an eerie glow on the drive, making it light enough to see. When he comes into sight, he’s leaning casually against his SUV, a cigarette held between his lips as he lights it with his zippo. The men standing on guard radiate a nervous energy, eyes flicking to me once I come into view. The men I’ve hired to watch my estate are *famiglia* men. They were raised to respect Remy as the future *Capo Famiglia*, but they’re also lower-level men. Meaning the money I give them is enough to make them respect me more.

In theory.

I can see from here that his knuckles are freshly cut and bruised, can see the gleam in his dark eyes that he only ever gets after bloodshed. My father raised him to be a predator through and through, and in moments like this, I hated myself for the hint of fear I felt approaching him. I wasn’t naïve enough to think that I could take Remy full on. His reputation of being a monster was well earned and properly titled. And when my eyes finally met his, my feet planting in front of him, I felt the monster he kept on a leash below his skin.

“What a pleasure to see you, Remy.”

Smoke blows from his nose as he watches me, his head tilting like he’s sizing me up. “Cut the shit, Gavino. I’m not in the mood for games tonight.”

I bristled, but did my best to hide it under his heavy gaze. “What do you want, Remy? It’s dark, nearly time for bed.”

“Past your bedtime?” He mocks, taking another drag of his cigarette. He’s wearing only a tee shirt and denim jeans, seemingly unbothered by the cold that I feel nipping my fingertips. “Where’s Beverly? I want to see her.”

I snort. “She is sleeping.” I lie, watching his smoke billow up into the air. “And even if she wasn’t, I don’t have to let you see her. This is my house, Remy. She is *my* fiancée.”

He chuckles; the sound crawling up my spine, a warning tickling along my skin that makes the hairs on my arms stand on end. Even his amusement comes out as a threat. “Not for long, brother.”

My blood runs cold at his threat, sheer panic racing through my limbs. *He can't take her from me.* “The arrangement has already been made. You can't change it.”

His brow arches as we lock eyes, the moment stretching into a heavy silence before he speaks. “Says you.”

Wetting my dry lips, I sneer. “Says our father, actually.”

His dark eyes pass over me in contemplation, their phantom weight heavy on my shoulders as the corner of his lip tips slightly, an almost invisible smirk. His following hum settles in my bones, rattling me to my core. Smoke billows around him as he takes one last drag before dropping his cigarette onto the ground, his booted foot snubbing it out as he watches me. “Tell Beverly I'll see her soon.”

My teeth grind together as I fight the urge to say anything else, not willing to buy into his taunting. As soon as his SUV starts up, headlights glaringly bright, I turn, walking back toward my house. Each step I took fueled my anger, burned my heart with a punishing need to make Beverly wholly mine.

I won't let Remy have her.

She'd be mine.

Even if that required her death.



BEVERLY

I jump as my door is slammed open, startling me from where I sat on the edge of my bed. It'd only been an hour or so since Gavino had left, and I was hoping he'd be gone longer. Much to my surprise, though, he was stomping through my room toward me, his face scrunched in anger. Standing, I braced myself for it, meeting his gaze. “Are you okay? What's the matter?”

His cold palm snatched out to grip my arm hard, shoving me so that I land back on the bed. “You're mine, Beverly.” I crawl backward as he rips off his cuff links, the metal tinkling onto the wood floor. “You're mine, and I won't let him have you.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” My pulse raced, my eyes flicking around him toward the door he'd left open.

Gavino doesn't answer me, just rips his shirt from his shoulders to toss onto the floor. He reaches for me, but I kick away, dodging his grasping fingers.

“What are you doing? Get away from me!”

His warm bare chest lands heavily on my side as he jumps to grab my escaping form, breath hot on my cheek as I fight below him. “Stop this, Beverly. You owe me this. I've been so patient with you.”

The words come out in struggling breaths as he fights to keep hold of me.

I elbow him hard in the chin, his face snapping back with a pained groan. Scissoring my legs beneath him I'm able to gain enough room to slide out of his grasp, knocking him off balance. My

butt hits the floor hard, jarring my teeth in my head. The back of my shirt tears with a loud rip as he fists the fabric, pulling tight as I get up on my knees and fight his hold to push to my feet.

“Beverly! Damn it!”

His footsteps are loud as he pounds behind me, running to catch up to my now sprinting form. I’m out of breath, both from the adrenaline and extra weight of my belly, my bare feet slapping against the cool hardwood flooring as I outrun Gavino’s stretching hands. Reaching the bottom of the steps first, I take off, swinging around the banister toward the front door.

My pulse spikes, pounding in my ears when I hear the heavy thud of Gavino’s feet hitting the landing. “Get back here, Beverly!”

Arms pumping, I press forward, my feet sliding on the flooring when I take a sharp turn to run through the kitchen. Dylan comes bursting through the dog door in the kitchen, either sensing or hearing my distress. With a quick pat, I swing the door open and he follows, the tags on his collars jingling. A guard meets me outside, assumingly alerted by Gavino, and I point at him, “Get him!”

Dylan moves instantly, teeth flashing as he launches toward the guard. The made man sees him coming and tries to turn and run, but Dylan’s too fast, biting down on his arm and yanking him to the ground before he can get away. I rush him, my hands moving frantically as the kitchen door bangs open. Light from inside illuminates the yard, Gavino’s silhouette streaking across it as he runs toward us.

My fingers barely gasp onto the made man’s cell phone in time to get up and run, my whistle calling Dylan off a second later. Arms pumping, I mentally scold myself for not thinking to grab the guard’s gun, my face looking down as I fumble to dial while running, my breath panting and lungs burning. Hightailing it in the direction of the driveway, I hear Gavino yelling at my back, but I don’t listen, frantically trying to work the phone on my hands.

Two more guards come running down the driveway and Dylan instantly goes for them, knocking out one of them as I sprint past. My heart beats in my throat, eyes trying to track the other guard in the dark as I hear the ringing of the phone in my hand, my call finally going through.

Lodare Dio.

Please pick up, please pick up. It’s all I think as the gravel cuts into my bare feet, Dylan rushing past me to knock the guard down that’s come dangerously close to reaching me.

“Pronto.”

Remy.

His name echoes in my head like a silent prayer.

“Remy!” I can barely get words out through my heaving breaths, my lungs burning and my legs starting to shake. I can feel my feet bleeding, but I push forward, knowing Gavino is catching up and more guards are coming.

“Beverly? Where are you? What’s happening?”

Breath fogs in front of my face with each puff of air that heaves from my lungs, the sting of the breeze cutting into my bare arms and legs, the cotton tee and sleep shorts I’m wearing doing nothing to keep me warm. “Gavino—he’s after me. The guards won’t let me leave.”

“I’m coming, baby. Fight, baby.”

I barely hear his words as my arms drop to run faster, whistling for Dylan as a guard comes rushing from the side. He’s not fast enough though and I grunt when I’m slammed to the ground, a

loud cry leaving my lips as I scream in pain. The phone goes flying from my hand, skidding over the gravel, my exposed skin scraping along the rocks and tearing. Fighting through the pain, I kick and hit with all I've got, struggling to get the man off of me before Gavino can catch up. I hear Dylan snarling and snapping near me, my head turning just enough that I catch a glimpse of him fighting off another guard.

"Stop!" Gavino's voice is too loud for comfort, and I feel myself panicking.

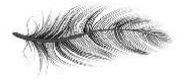
My hand reaches for the gun that's currently clutched above my chest in the guard's fist, a feral yell exploding from my chest as I try to yank it from his hands, my body rolling underneath him to toss him off balance. He crashes to the side, still holding on tight. We both see Dylan at the same time, summoned by my yelling, and he raises his gun to fend him off.

"No!"

I grab onto his hand, jerking it down as Dylan lunges, the loud *bang* of his gun ringing my ears. For a moment, *there's nothing*. A chilled numbness that tingles along my limbs, a deafening silence as my eyes frantically blink trying to get my bearings. The weight of the guard has been ripped from me, Dylan's back hunched as he tears into the man. My fingers grasp at the gravel as I try to sit up, a cry slipping past my lips at the wracking pain that shoots blinding white light behind my eyes.

Looking down, I see my shirt is stained red, blood dripping onto the driveway from a bullet hole in my chest. My head feels dizzy from the pain, my sight blurring as Gavino's face rushes into view. My body recoils on instinct as he hovers over me, his face marred with worry, eyes flickering over the blood. I see him reach for the phone, his eyes growing wide as he holds it to his ear before letting it drop back to the ground.

I swallow hard as he stands, his head shaking, swiveling on his neck. His eyes meet mine one last time before my head hits the gravel, too heavy to hold up any longer as he takes off. I barely register the sting of the rocks against my cheek, my hand falling to my stomach as fleeting thoughts of my baby settle into my mind. My eyes close of their own accord as I vaguely feel the heat of Dylan's body pressing to mine, my body feeling strangely warm as I drift off into blissful darkness.



CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

REMY

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

My mind races as fly down the road, tires spinning and skidding when I rip the wheel into a sharp turn. Dirt flies up behind the SUV, gravel spitting and hitting the sides of the car, and I rev it faster. Andrea and Donatello are coming behind me, but I'm driving much faster. My body went cold when I heard the gunshot ring out, but I refused to believe Beverly was hit. She was fine.

She had to be.

The SUV slides sideways as I slam on the brakes in the middle of Gavino's driveway, my heart racing as my eyes lock onto Dylan lying in the middle of it, a body sprawled beneath him.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

I'm slamming the car into park and ripping the door open before I've even come to a complete stop, the SUV jolting as I sprint toward them. Dylan growls, his white teeth stained red, blood smeared along his face and coat. My mind barely registers the two men lying on the gravel near them, clearly torn apart by the dog, but I don't care, pushing forward. He snaps, a loud bark echoing in the trees as he hovers over Beverly's still form, ears pinned to his head when I move closer, my speed not slowing.

"*Piede!*" I yell the command to heel as I get within biting distance, hope guiding my movements that he'll listen. Begrudgingly he does, but he doesn't go far, pacing just within arm's reach as my knees slam to the gravel to reach for Bev. My eyes flicker over the blood that's staining her shirt, a puddle that's partially absorbed into the rocks and dirt below. Palms cupping her cheeks, I straighten her head, looking down into her face, as my fingers feel for a pulse, "Cuore Mio, come back to me, baby."

I give her a small desperate shake as I the blood still seeping from her wound, adjusting her body to frantically begin CPR. I'm moving on autopilot, heart thumping wildly in my ears as I hear Andrea running toward us. He drops to his knees beside us, checking for a pulse as I continue to pump her chest with trembling hands and breathe into her lungs. I'm vaguely aware of him yelling to someone, feel a hand on my shoulder that I shove off, all my attention focused on Beverly.

"Remy! Let the Paramedic see her!" Donatello has my face gripped tightly in his hands to get my attention, pulling me up by my arm and away from Beverly as two EMTs rush to take my place—one starts CPR while the other stops her bleeding.

I realize I'm shaking as I stand uselessly behind them. My throat is so tight I'm almost choking on my fear. I've never been so scared of anything in my life.

I can't lose her.

She's my fucking heart.

Without her, I cease to be.

They're hooking her up to a defibrillator, her beautiful face turned my way as the first shock shakes her body. I sink to the floor, head in my hands as they shock her a second time.

I hear their words, but they don't sink in right away.

"How far long is she?" It's repeated, louder this time.

I blink, my brain slow to connect to my mouth.

“She’s pregnant. How far along is she?”

Both Donatello’s and Andrea’s eyes are on me, waiting for an answer. *She’s pregnant.* My eyes flick over her form, noting the bump beneath her torn and dirty shirt. New anger rises in my chest, a bitter answer finally making its way out of my mouth. “I don’t know.”

Beverly is pregnant.

And I know the baby is mine.

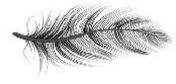
I know it as surely as I know Gavino is the reason she hid this from me.

A new panic bangs in my chest as I watch them shock her a third time, her body jolting.

Beverly has to live. My child has to live.

And Gavino will die.

My eyes lift to meet the EMTs for a fleeting moment, sharing a wordless conversation as my bleeding heart pauses its frantic rhythm in my chest to match the tune of Beverly’s.



CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

REMY

Almost six hours later and Beverly still hasn't woken up. The in house doctor has her on a drip IV and two heart monitors; one for her and one for her belly. The beats are steady as I bend over her sleeping form, my palm wrapped around hers to rest my lips against her knuckles. Julian had shown up to help the second he was back in town—he was the only one that was able to control Dylan once I had left with Beverly in the ambulance.

I'd sent Him, Donatello and Andrea home an hour ago, telling them to get some sleep because we had business to take care of that they'd need their rest for. I should have been heading my own advice, but I couldn't sleep even if I tried. Not until Beverly woke up.

The bullet went straight through her chest. A clean shot. *Lucky*, the doctor had said.

It didn't look clean.

It didn't feel lucky.

Beverly had needed blood transfusions and stitches, and three shocks to come back, *but she was alive*. I'm told she'll be *fine*. Such a simple word to sum up her state of being.

There's a light rapping on the door and I lift my head, watching as the doctor comes into the room. Gregory has been part of the famiglia for as long as I can remember. He's old and grey but he's experienced. I wouldn't have trusted Beverly with anyone else. He smiles at me, eyes wandering over Beverly's form. "You should rest. She'll wake up soon and you'll want to stay awake to speak to her."

I nod. "I should." My eyes flick briefly back to Beverly. "But I can't."

His fingers tap on the packet in his hand. "Well, you should try." He smiles when my gaze clashes with his again. I don't try to smile back.

"This is for you." He says, stepping forward to hand me the file. My brow raises as I wordlessly take it. With a slight nod and a lingering look at Beverly, he turns to head out the door. He pauses with a hand resting on the doorframe. "Oh, and congratulations."

I wait until the door is shut before I slowly untwine my fingers from Beverly's, my fingers deftly opening the folder to spill the contents into my lap. My heart thumps when I realize what I'm looking at, when my sleepy eyes are able to focus on the page and the lines stop waving across the paper.

My hand grips Beverly's once more, bringing her fingers to my lips.

Mi hai fatto il più prezioso dei doni. You have given me the most precious of gifts.



BEVERLY

Beep. Beep. Beep.

It's the first sound that filters in. My body feels heavy, my brain foggy as I try to piece together what is happening. I vaguely remember seeing Gavino's retreating back before I blacked out, flashes of light and sounds randomly filtered into the darkness. My head is pounding against my temples.

Rubbing shaky hands over my face, I look around the room, my breath catching when the door opens, Remy walking inside.

I know the moment it sinks in that I'm awake, because the door slams at his back, his feet rushing forward as he drops beside me. Warm palms lightly scrape across my flesh, fingers sinking into my hair as he presses a kiss to my forehead. My eyes flutter closed, but only briefly, watering as he gazes down on me. His thumbs stroke my cheeks, breath warm as it fans over my skin, his eyes touch silently reassuring himself I'm here. That I'm awake.

"You found me." My words scratch past my dry throat, my tongue thick when I swallow.

"Sempre e per sempre." Forever and always. His words rumble from his chest, the sound of his voice a soothing balm for my tired, bruised body.

For a moment I just breathe him in, letting his warmth, his closeness settle over me. Until I remember—

"The baby!" I jerk, my hands flying to my stomach as a hiss of pain slips through my lips at the twinge in my chest.

"Easy, easy, Bev. The babies are fine." His palm is warm where it presses against mine, holding onto it and my belly.

Relief washes over me, allowing me to lean back until realization hits me. *He knows I'm pregnant.* I open my mouth, but I don't know what to say.

"It's fine, Bev. I know." He must sense the feelings roiling under my skin, know that I'm lost for words because he moves closer, pressing his lips against our joined hands over my belly, his honey eyes finding mine. "I'm sorry I couldn't protect the three of you."

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you. I was scared. You're married. I was recently arranged to be married to Gavino. I didn't want our child to be considered a bastard." My heart thunders, my fingers sinking into his hair, running along his jaw.

"Children." Remy corrects me, his lips brushing along my knuckles where he rests. "I don't judge your choice, Beverly. I understand it. I just wish you'd trusted me to know. I would have figured out a way to get you out of that house sooner."

My mind is reeling from the first part of his sentence, not able to process the rest of it. "What do you mean, children?"

He blinks, his face lifting, the mattress dipping under his elbow. "We're having twins, Beverly."

Twins.

"What?" The question is just above a whisper, my eyes flicking to the bump of my belly beneath the blankets.

"You didn't know?" I shake my head at his question, my other hand falling to my stomach. "They're both girls."

"I'm having girls?" Tears prick at the corner of my eyes, watery when they land on Remy.

He nods, leaning forward to press a kiss to my belly before sitting forward, carefully hugging me to his chest. His breath whispers against my ear, "We're having girls."

"I love you." I blink, the words quiet. "I love you, Remy." Louder this time, his jaw works, as he leans in to press a kiss to my lips.

"Ti amo più della vita stessa." I love you more than life itself.

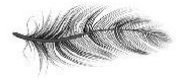
For the first time in a month, *I let myself cry.*

I'd been so determined to stay strong in that house with Gavino, been living each day in a fog, that I never let myself feel the emotions of each day. I clung to Remy as I cried a mixture of happy and sad tears. His lips pressed to my hair, to my forehead, his hands wiping away the tears that dripped from my chin and stained his shirt with wet dots. I breathed in his vanilla and bergamot scent and just *let go.*

Sweet nothings and reassurances were whispered against my skin until I cried my last tear, my breath coming in soft shudders as I calmed. Remy's eyes flickered over my face, the deep circles under them showing just how tired he was. Carefully scooting over, I gripped his shirt in my hand, wordlessly asking him to lay down. He obliged my silent command, snuggling up next to as carefully as he could, burying his nose in my neck and settling his heavy palm on my stomach.

Just as I feel the vestibules of sleep gripping me, I speak up, "Swear it." I swallow, throat scratching past the lump threatening to suffocate me. "Swear, you'll make him pay for this."

His answer rumbles against me, the promise in his words seeping into my pores. "On my dying breath, *coure mio*, I swear it."



CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

GAVINO

My heart is racing watching her sleep.

I waited with bated breath to hear the news. I almost didn't believe it when they told me that she lived, that Beverly hadn't died in my driveway when I'd run off like a coward. Swallowing hard, I shift closer to the bed, my eyes flickering over her. I hadn't meant to leave her, but after I heard Remy's voice on the line, I panicked. I knew he would have killed me on sight if he had found me there.

So I did what I had to do to save myself.

Even now, my skin is pebbling with gooseflesh, my senses running off of adrenaline as I creep closer to her bed. Remy left twenty minutes ago to speak with our father, and I took the opportunity to give the guards false information about my whereabouts so that I could sneak into the doctor's house. I have one last chance to make Beverly mine and I'm not losing it.

Not again.

My fingers run along the edge of Beverly's arm, her body starting to stir from sleep. They must have had her IV removed earlier because it's gone now. The only evidence of it is the bandage taped over her forearm. The late setting sun shines on her face through the window, her freckles glowing and beautiful under the light. I crouch next to the bed, my fingers rising to brush the hair from her face.

"Beverly."

Her eyes shoot open at my voice, her body recoiling. The reaction *hurts*. My hand slaps out to cover her mouth, my voice low, "shshshsh it's okay. I'm not here to hurt you."

She fights below me, her movements hindered by her chest wound. Her nails scratch at my arms, the heart monitor still attached to her beeping wildly. Eyeing the door, I reach out with one hand and rip the cords off and shove the monitor so it unplugs from the wall.

Beverly manages to jerk away for a moment, a strangled, "Help!" screaming past her lips before I cover it back up.

"Stop it!" I hiss, barely managing to grab the duct tape from my jacket pocket. Struggling, I tear a piece and slap it over her mouth. Breath whooshes from my lungs as she lands a solid punch to my chest, but I fight through it, grabbing her arms and wrapping the duct tape around her wrists. She screams against the tape, her legs kicking out at me, but I dodge them.

I know that my men should be nearly done swarming the building by now and the bindings aren't necessary, but I don't want to hear the vile things I'm sure she has to say. I stand back from her, watching her heave on the bed.

"You know I didn't shoot you, right?" I ask exasperated, my heart aching at the venom in her glare. "I never would have done that to you."

I step forward, stopping just out of reach of her kicking leg. My hand falls to my chest. "*I love you, Beverly.*"

She screams beneath her bindings and anger settles in my gut.

“You’ve always been ungrateful of my love.” My hand reaches for her arm but she wiggles, fighting me. Anger simmers below my skin at her rejection and my hand slaps out, smacking her face so hard her head whips sideways. Her movements momentarily still, her cheek bright red and my palm stinging.

“Stop this.” I swallow. “I won’t let you get away again, Beverly.”

Her face turns to meet my gaze, the light shining in her hazel eyes from the window making them look a brilliant green.

“We’re getting married.”



BEVERLY

My skin burns beneath the adhesive of the duct tape as I glare at Gavino. My heart races, fear shooting through my veins as he smiles at me. As if on cue, a man comes through the doorway, carrying a garment bag toward us. I jump at Gavino’s clap, my eyes following the man as he hangs the bag up on the edge of a shelf at the corner of the room. Breathing heavily, I watch as he pulls the zipper down, revealing a billow of white lace and chiffon.

He brought a fucking wedding dress.

Swinging my legs to the side, my toes hit the cold flooring as I make a wild attempt to get away, despite my ankles being wrapped tightly together. I kick my knees as much as I can, thrashing madly until Gavino grabs me up and pins me back onto the mattress. Sweat drips from his forehead as he fights to keep me still, landing in warm, drops on my skin. My gun wound is screaming at me to give in and be still, my body sore and tired, but I don’t give in.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see the other man coming nearer to the bed; the dress draped over his arms. If he thinks he’s getting that dress on me without a fight, he has another thing coming.

“You’re an ungrateful, stubborn bitch!” Gavino yells above me, using all of his body weight to hold me while the other man starts to work the skirt of the wedding dress up my legs.

I scream beneath the duct tape as he strong arms me, pinning my chest down as he rips at the medical gown I’m wearing. It rips apart easily, the buttons unsnapping along my arms. Pain rips through my chest as he presses down on my wound, my body kicking and fighting with new vigor as the gown is yanked off of me. The air is cool on my naked flesh, the chiffon of the wedding dress scratchy as it’s dragged up my skin. The man dressing me has done a well enough job not to touch me while getting the skirt up my hips, but now his knuckles press into my sides, grazing the edges of my breasts as Gavino holds me down.

Once the fabric is high enough, I’m forced to roll over, a sobbing cry muffled from my mouth as I’m pressed roughly onto my stomach so that the strapless dress can be zipped up. Angry tears trickle down my cheeks, tracing the edge of the duct tape on my mouth as I’m yanked up to stand near the bed. I have to rely on Gavino to keep me upright with my ankle still secure and I glare at him as he shifts me to face him.

“You could have made that a lot easier.” The other man is dismissed as Gavino narrows his eyes on my face. “I’m going to untie your ankles so you can stand properly. *Do not* kick me.”

He stares at me until he thinks I’ve given him some kind of nonverbal agreement, ducking down to lift my skirts as I teeter against the bed. Slipping a knife from his pocket he eyes me before I feel

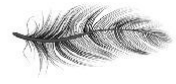
him saw at the duct tape. The second I feel the pressure around my ankles release, *I kick*.

Gavino goes smacking backward onto the floor, his head cracking against it with a loud *thwack* as I rush toward the closed door. Wrist still bound I reach with my fingers, just managing to grab the doorknob, when I'm smashed into the door. My face smashes up hard against the wood, cheek feeling instantly bruised as Gavino hikes me up by my hips to toss me backward. My shoulder crashes into the bedframe, the air whooshing from my lungs with the shock of pain that radiates from my chest.

Gavino uses the moment of my instability to march over to me. Blood runs from his temple, matting the light brown hair along the side of his head, and I can't help but feel a glint of satisfaction at finally being able to make him bleed. Gripping my upper arm, he hoists me up, yanking me along behind him at a pace I can barely manage with the pain lacing my body.

We stomp through the house and out to the back driveway, my eyes clashing with a priest's that stands nervously in front of Gavino's car. It's sunny, but the air is cold, my skin pebbling as I'm dragged through the cool, damp grass toward him. I can see from the reflection in his car window that my hair is an absolute wreck, hanging around my shoulders in a tangled, curly mess. I scowl at the priest as I'm placed before him, Gavino's voice scratching along my eardrums.

"We're ready to be married."



CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

REMY

“Where is Geo?”

My father shrugs where he stands at his drink cart, pouring himself a glass of bourbon. “Probably home.”

Air stings my lungs as I hold my breath, mentally trying to control my annoyance. “I requested he be here for this.”

Capo Famiglia’s eyes flick to mine, narrowing slightly. “And I don’t follow your orders, do I, Remy?”

Teeth grinding, I say nothing, watching my father move to lean against his desk, drink in hand.

“Now, what’s this about? You know I prefer not to have meetings on the weekends.”

Deciding it’s best to cut straight to the point, I don’t hesitate. “Beverly is currently staying at Gregory’s because Gavino attacked her and she was shot in the process of trying to get away.” His drink pauses on its way to his lips. His gaze growing more serious. “She is pregnant with twins.” I pause, working up the nerve to finish. “And they’re mine.”

My father’s drink never makes it to his mouth. Instead, it’s thrown against the wall, glass smashing onto the floor while amber liquid drips down the wallpaper. “*Porca Miseria!* For God’s sake!

My heart thunders against my ribs as he paces, angrily swiping some paperwork off his desk.

“What the fuck is wrong with you children? Eh?” I blink, knowing he’s not looking for an answer. “Fottuti idioti!” *Fucking idiots!*

Despite my better judgement, I interrupt his rant. “Gavino needs to be punished.”

He spins, staring at me with wild eyes. The look on his face was one I had been raised to fear, but now, I saw it as only the look of an old deranged man. “No!”

My head tilts at his response, my eyes narrowing on him.

“No, you should be lucky if that bitch dies.” He spits, his face red and shaking. My hands pinch into tight fists as he continues to yell, skin growing hot with rage. “She has caused nothing but trouble. What is it about her that makes you and your brother so weak? Eh? Does she have a pussy of gold?”

I step forward the same time the door slams open, Wolf interrupting the meeting with an ungraceful entrance. A half hearted nod of respect is given to my father before his eyes find mine, his chest heaving as if he ran here. “Gavino is marrying Beverly. He’s taken over Gregory’s and is having a priest brought to the house.”

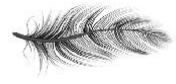
Boots pound on the floorboards, Donatello, Andrea, and Julian’s head’s coming into view behind Wolf’s.

“What is the meaning of this?” My father bellows behind me, a sideways glance seeing him move forward toward us.

My eyes flick to each of theirs individually, my chest rising and falling, heart pounding as I get the wordless confirmation I need from each one. Without another thought, I draw the gun from the back of my waistband and aim it at my father, pressing the tip against his chest.

His movements halt, eyes narrowing as he looks between me and the other men.

“Gather my father’s men.” I don’t dare take my eyes off of him, my teeth grinding when he presses harder into my gun with challenge. “His time as *Capo Famiglia* is done.”



CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

REMY

We're running out of time.

I know that. But I have to handle my father, and his men before I can proceed with handling Gavino.

The tension in the room is thick as fog as I stand before my father, his eyes bleeding with rage where he's strapped to a chair. His underboss and consultant are beside him, equally pissed as Andrea and Julian hold them at gunpoint. Donatello is set to arrive at the warehouse any moment with my father's Capo's.

None of them fought us bringing them here. I think we all knew that at some point this would be how my father and I exchanged positions. We'd always had a volatile relationship. One ruled predominantly with a heavy hand for violence. I was raised to take over the *Famiglia* one day—it was my birth right.

The *Famiglia* always does what's best for the *Famiglia*.

And I was the embodiment of the Famiglia.

Flicking my eyes over to Julian, his jaw is tight as he stares down his gun barrel into his father's face, his hand untrembling as he stands at my side. He doesn't show it, but I'm sure there is a war brewing inside of his chest over the situation. Even so, I know I can trust him to what needs to be done. We hear them before we see them, the scraping of boots filing into the warehouse. It echoes inside of the nearly empty room, bouncing along the concrete walls and cement floors.

"What's the meaning of this?" One of them asks once they realize who is sitting in the chairs.

I don't look at them, my eyes finding my men's as they move from the wall toward the Capos. My voice rises over the growing chorus of concerned voices, silencing them.

"My father can no longer make the right decisions for the *Famiglia*." Turning sideways, I eye the older men. My gun held casually at my side. "Therefore, he's retiring."

Bang. Bang. Bang.

My wrist jerks back with the recoil of my gun, my father's head snapping backward with the shot. Andrea and Julian turn around to face the Capos with me, the men at their backs dead, the *tink, tink, tink*, of their blood dripping onto the cement, the only sound for a moment. "Unlike my father, I consider myself to be merciful." I pause and my men all raise their guns in the Capos faces. "You all have the choice to follow me or be replaced. *Choose now.*"

The weight of my words settles heavily over the older men. Without pause, some of them raise their hands in submission, the rest shot without hesitation, dropping to the ground with heavy thuds. Tucking my gun away, I address the ones who are still standing. "Go, spread the word of my father's death."

My eyes catch on Julian as they all scramble to leave.

"You can leave to tell your mother if you want. I wouldn't fault you for it."

He shakes his head, a hand roughly running over his short, dark hair. "Let's get my sister—"

"And kill the *bastardo* that has her." Donatello finishes his sentence, booted feet stopping beside us. My eyes flick to Andrea, who nods, Wolf untucking his hands from his pockets beside him.

“Let’s go.”



“There are going to be men both inside and outside.” Wolf says, checking the clip in his gun as we ride in the SUV to Gregory’s.

“About how many?” Andrea asks, his hands working his hair into a bun.

Wolf shrugs, pulling another gun from the inside of his jacket after tucking the first away. “Uh, maybe thirty?” His eyes rise, head flicking some silver hair from his brow. “I bet some will scatter once they here about Remy being the new Capo Famiglia. He scared most of them already. That will fuck with their heads.”

“Where’s Bev?” Julian asks, his fingers cracking as he adjusts in his seat, smashed between Andrea and Donatello.

“I don’t know.” Wolf’s brow dips in thought. “If I had to guess, I’d say he brought her outside so they can leave quickly after they’re officially wed.”

I sit in silence, soaking up all of the information, Jessie has to offer. Although he’s young, a year younger than Julian, he’s the best there is at tracking. He can find any lead that’s gone cold just as effectively as he can make any man disappear. He’s proven his worth time and time again under my father, but he actually gained respect with me. I knew he was worth putting time and effort into and now, he’s one of my most effective weapons.

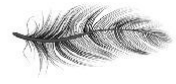
All the men in the car are.

My eyes flick to each of them, muting out their conversations. They each know where they stand beside me in the ranks. I’d chosen them years ago; hand picked them the moment they took the Omerta. Andrea was smart and well respected by both the old and new Capos—He was to be my underboss. Donatello was my consigliere; although goofy as hell, he thought quickly, seeing all angles of situations to find the best course of action, all while being able to kill a man with his bare hands. Julian was already in line to be a Capo, but I’d had already been giving him jobs that strengthened our ties with the Bratva, training him for a task only he could fulfill that far surpassed the role of Capo.

As the SUV came to a stop out of sight of Gavino’s men, but in walking distance of Gregory’s, I pushed the thoughts aside. Now wasn’t the time for it. We wordlessly exit the vehicle as more of my men pull up behind us, filing out of their rigs to stand around me, waiting for my orders.

The sky is growing dark, dusk settling over the tops of the trees and providing the perfect cover for us to sneak in.

“Kill anyone that doesn’t surrender. They are to be considered as traitors.” My order hangs in the cool breeze, head nodding. “Beverly is to be unharmed, and Gavino is mine.” My eyes meet each of theirs, slowly, deliberately. “Besides that, no method of death is too brutal.”



CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

BEVERLY

The priest before us shifts on his feet, his fingers trembling as he holds his bible in his hands. He refuses to meet my gaze; even he knows what he is doing is wrong. A bird caws in the distance, a flock rushing from the trees at the other end of the house. My eyes shift in that direction just as a made man jogs toward us.

“What? What is it?” Gavino’s hand angrily wipes at the blood still dripping down the side of his head, frowning at the man.

If could probably break free from his hold if I tried, but I know it’s futile with so many men around, and I’m hesitant after what happened last time.

“There’s news of your father.” He huffs out, breathing hard from running. “He’s decided to—” His eyes flick to me then back, “Retire.”

“What?” It’s a whisper, but it comes out as strongly as a yell, the shock in Gavino’s voice obvious.

I smile beneath the duct tape, a laugh slowly working its way out of my chest. If their father is dead, *Remy is Capo Famiglia*. My face burns as it’s slapped to the side, my already bruised cheek screaming, but I only hiss, amusement still burning in my ribs.

“Hurry up.” Gavino’s voice rasps at the priest, his free hand waving at him impatiently. “Marry us.”

As he says it, there’s a pop on the breeze, the familiar sound of a gunshot floating toward us.

“Hurry up!” His face is red, hand trembling where it grips my arm, fingers sinking painfully into my bicep.

“She needs to be able to speak.” The priest says, his breathing starting to quicken as more gunshots ring through the air.

My eyes squeeze shut, a hoarse, “ow”, hissing through my teeth as the duct tape is ripped off.

“There. Get on with it.”

My bound hands rise, my fingers rubbing at my sore lips. “It won’t matter. Remy is already here.”

“Shut up!” Gavino all but screams, his furious gaze narrowing on the priest.

“To love, you must both enter your life together with—”

The priest’s shaky words are interrupted by Gavino’s hollered, “Skip to the end!”

Shots have grown louder, the sound of men yelling just on the other side of the house making Gavino’s head whip around.

“Do you, Gavino Luciano, take this woman, Beverly Esposito, to be your lawful wedded wife?” The priest jumps at the slamming of doors in the house and the scream of a man that’s cut short.

“I do.” It’s said as Gavino yanks me closer, his hot breath puffing quickly on my face, his eyes flickering nervously to our surroundings.

“And do you, Beverly Esposito, take this man, Gavino Luciano, to be your lawful wedded husband?”

I smile at Gavino, hearing the footsteps running toward us in the house. He shakes me hard, whispering through his teeth, “Say it.”

My lips brush his as he bends low, “I’d rather hang from the rafters than spend another second breathing the same air as you.”

“She does.” He says, answering for me and pressing a chaste kiss to my lips.

The priest’s words are filled with panic, his body already turning to run for the hills as he yells, “I now pronounce you husband and wife.”

I shove back from Gavino at the same time the priest’s limp body hits the ground, rolling down the little hill to bump against his car’s tire. My eyes find Remy immediately even in the growing darkness. His silhouette moves toward us at a leisurely pace, every step that brings him closer allowing me to see more of him. Blood is splattered across his arms and face, staining his shirt and jeans. His lip is split, blood dripping from his brass knuckles that sit on his right hand.

Gavino grabs for me, almost desperately, angling me in front of him. “We’re married!” I hear his gulp in my ear, feel his clammy hands as he grasps onto my upper arms. “There’s nothing you can do Remy, she’s mine now.”

Remy’s pace doesn’t slow, his left hand rising to shoot someone who tried to sprint from the bushes away from the house. Gavino jumps with the shot, his breath panting in my ear.

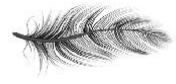
“There’s nothing you can do broth—”

I jolt at the abrupt silencing of his sentence, warm liquid spraying the side of my face and arms. It takes me a second to realize that Gavino’s been shot, his hands trailing down my skin as he slowly slumps to the ground. I don’t look back at him, a sob I didn’t realize I was holding in my chest, working its way from my throat as I run the rest of the way to Remy. I fall into his chest, allowing him to lift me up into his arms.

“I got you, *cuore mio*, I got you.” His words rumble against my ear, his arms wrapping around me, the cool metal of his gun pressed to my arm as he holds me close.

My palm finds the beat of his heart, using the soft thumping to help quiet my own as he walks us back to the front of the house. His lips press to the side of my head and my eyes close at the contact, the lump in my throat making it hard to swallow as he hugs me to his chest. I feel the hands of the others on my skin, silent reassurance as we get into an SUV. I don’t even try to process anything that’s happened, not yet, just let myself fall into Remy.

“We’re going home now, Bev.” His breath ruffles my hair, blowing on my face as he cradles me, “You’re safe, baby.”



CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

BEVERLY

My teeth are chattering with caged adrenaline as Remy carries me to the bathroom. Rough fingers graze my cheeks as he cups my face in his hands, drawing my gaze to his. “Beverly, I’m going to put you in the shower, okay?” At my shallow nod, he leans down to kiss my forehead, reaching past me to adjust the shower.

After a moment, the zipper on my dress is undone, the bloody, dirty fabric falling into a giant chiffon puff onto the floor that Remy grabs with his foot to kick to the side. Lowering so his face is level with my navel, he presses a kiss to my belly before hooking his fingers into the sides of my underwear to slide down my legs. He lifts each foot with gentle fingers, unhooking it from the material to toss away like my dress, his thumbs stroking the inside of each ankle before setting it back down.

Rough, calloused palms slowly run up each calf, stroking the outside of my thighs as his dark gaze searches mine. I can see my anxiety reflected in the pools of honey, but his worries are of me instead of mentally reliving the past month like I am.

Reaching for him, I run my fingers along the short hair at his nape to pull him to me. Placing another soft kiss on my belly, he wraps his arms around my hips, resting his stubbled cheek against my skin. He lets me hold him for a moment before he slowly stands and pulls off his bloody shirt, letting it fall from his shoulders and onto the floor. His boots and socks go next, tossed loudly to the side, before his boxers and jeans find the floor with them. Stepping into the shower, he holds his hand out for me, and I take it, letting him pull me into the warm spray of the water.

Gently tilting my head back, he moves me under the spray, working the water through my hair. Grabbing his shampoo, he lathers my hair up, finger sinking into my scalp in soothing motions. Using a soapy cloth, wipes down my jaw and chest while it rinses, blood running down my body to swirl into the drain. He shifts us with light fingers on my shoulders, moving me so I’m out of the direct spray before running conditioner through the ends of my hair. Washing his own head and body quickly, he moves me back under the water, fingers running over my scalp.

Taking my face in his palms again, his thumbs brush along my cheeks, eyes scanning mine. “Are you starting to come back to me, *cuore mio*?”

I hadn’t noticed until now that my hands are steady, the pounding of my heart a softer rhythm. I nod up at him, and he gives me a sweet smile, his left dimple winking from his cheeks. I trace my fingertips over it, then skim his skin to run them over his lips before letting my hand drop.

Taking one of his hands in my own, I run my thumb gently over his bruised and split knuckles. “Is it over? You’re really Capo Famiglia now?” My words are a low whisper, gaze still on his knuckles.

Raising our hands, he hums, lips pressing to my palm before bringing it up to his cheek. “It’s over.” Letting my hand slip away, he grips the back of my head and pulls me up so our noses just brush. “Every day from here one out, it’s just you and me, Bev.”

“And the babies.” He smiles against my lips, palming my cheeks while he places soft, sweet kisses on my mouth.

“And the babies,” He mumbles in confirmation, lips brushing mine.

I smile at him, reaching back to turn the shower off as I add, "And the dog." Pulling from his grip, I step out of the shower and grab us both a towel, holding his out for him.

Taking it, he chuckles, "And the dog."

Dropping my towel to the floor, I scoop up one of Remy's tee shirts off of the edge of his hamper, pulling it over my head as I walk into his bedroom. Flicking off the light, I hear Remy's feet padding on the floor behind me as I climb up onto his bed. Vanilla wafts from the sheets, the scent warm and inviting as I crawl under his blanket. It's dark, but there's a small streak of moonlight shining through the room, casting long shadows along the floor. Remy's body walks through them, his face illuminating for mere seconds before the mattress dips and he's climbing up next to me.

I reach for him in the dark, my fingers skimming the warm contours of his skin as he pulls me close, sharing my breaths. His palm settles heavily on my side, his legs snuggling between mine. His nose skims mine as I break the silence. "What happened to Viva?"

Remy's fingers trail up my thigh, pushing the fabric of my shirt high on my hip. "I killed her dad and gained all of his piers." His breath fans my lips as he shifts, his arm looping up under my pillow. "We got a divorce, and I kicked her out."

The casual way he discusses it makes my heart pound. The man really was a monster, a product of his conditioning. The question I want to ask is on the tip of my tongue, but it takes me a moment to gain the courage. "You were trying to have a baby with her?"

Remy sighs, the hand on my hip pausing, his face scooting back so he can look at me more fully. "No. That's what my father wanted, but I didn't touch her. I couldn't." His hand moves again, fingers pressed lightly into my flesh. "Not while I had you."

His words make me smile, my heart thumping as the silence stretches between us. Movement flutters in my belly and I smile, quickly grabbing Remy's hand to place it on my belly. "They're moving."

I hear Remy's breath hitch, his palm spreading wide over my stomach. After a particularly strong kick he chuckles, shaking the bed with it. "*Saranno forti come la loro madre.*" *They will be as strong as their mother.*

Once they've settled again, my fingers trail up his arm, brushing over his lips. "I want you. I *need* you." Palming his face, I bring our foreheads together and close my eyes. I don't want to talk about Viva. I don't want to think about anything right now. *I just want Remy.* "I need you."

My palm finds the beat of his heart, his lips finding mine in the next breath. Hand rising between us, he uses his fingers to brush the hair from my face, running his thumb along my cheek and jaw. Shifting, kisses are pressed along my neck and back to my lips. His grip tightens as he tugs me closer, my chest pressed against his as holds me close.

My fingers push into Remy's skin, running along the hard ridges of his chest and stomach, reveling in the feel of him under my hands. His lips separate from mine for only a second, as he adjusts us, lifting up onto his forearm so he hovers above me. His hand grips my thigh, fingers kneading the flesh as he holds me to him with as much manic need as I'm feeling. With frantic movements, my shirt is stripped, lost in the sheets before I'm lifted, my naked body sat in Remy's lap as he grabs my legs, wrapping them around his back.

His erection juts between us, hard inside of his sweats, and I grind against it, my belly rubbing against his. My head falls back as his hands grip my hips, rubbing a wet spot to stain the front of his joggers while his lips taste the arch of my neck, my hair tickling along the bottom of my spine. His

tongue finds my collarbone, and I sit up, hand reaching between us to slide my fingers under his waistband, stroking the length of him as I tug his dick free from its confines. Rough palms pinch into my sides as he lifts me, teeth scraping along my jaw as his thick cock slips inside of my wet pussy, my knees squeezing his sides as I bottom out on him.

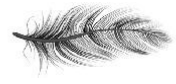
It's been so fucking long since I had this kind of intimacy, felt this kind of sweet affection, and our frantic movements pause for just a moment, both of us savoring the feel of one another. One of Remy's hands wraps around my hair, cradling the back of my head as he pulls my forehead to his, sharing my breath as he holds me close. Unable to stay still any longer, I start to shift my hips, clit grinding against his hard belly with each slow pivot.

I get lost in him, my skin heated as we become a tangle of legs, arms, and hands, both of us using each other as a balm for our burned hearts. My fingers dig into the damp skin of his shoulders, run through the soft hair at his nape as he devours every inch of skin his lips can reach. His hands have taken over my hips, building our rhythm into a faster pace that has me openly moaning, my gut heating with my climax.

Remy claims my lips with his, swallowing down my sounds as I come unglued in his lap, the hot spurt of his own release pushing me into a blinding orgasm. My forehead falls to his shoulder as I catch my breath, his palms running the length of my sides as he kisses my neck and shoulder, whispering sweet nothings into my skin that I can't quite hear, but can *feel* wrap around my heart.

He lifts me up, shifting just enough to pull from me and tuck himself back in his sweats before he rolls backward with me. Tucking me against his chest, he tugs the sheet over my legs, placing a kiss on my forehead. "We'll figure it out, *cuore mio*."

I don't answer with words, instead, I place a kiss over his heart and press my face into his warm skin. My heart is flickering with a soft glow that it hasn't felt in such a long time, and I know he's right. *We will figure it out*. Closing my eyes, I let the jagged tune of his ragged breaths lull me to sleep.



EPILOGUE

“If this is a joke, Beverly Marie, I will kill you.” Delaney yells from across the room, and I roll my eyes, pulling on a plain white sundress.

“My middle name is Hunter, not Marie.” Grabbing a scrunchie off of the shelf, I throw my hair up into a messy bun before coming out of the closet. We didn’t get to celebrate Delaney’s birthday while she was away for her equestrian tournaments, so Remy hired a circus to have a late party. “And it’s no joke.”

Squealing, she launches toward me to squeeze me in an obnoxious hug. “When is the party?” Pulling back, she gives me a wide smile. “And I know what your middle name is. Hunter is an awful name, so I changed it to Marie.”

“You can’t just change my middle name. I like my middle name. But they should be here Friday.” I notice my sonogram gripped in her fist and reach for it. “Hey, don’t steal that. I only have one copy left.”

Giving me a look, she sets it on the bed before bouncing toward the door. “I wasn’t stealing it, I was just looking at it. Next time, get more copies.”

I shake my head, running my fingers along the fabric of my skirt as we walk down the hall. “Maybe you can convince Andrea to give you his.” She chuckles, the sound light and airy as it bounces down the hallway.

She catches my eye, whispering very loudly, “I think he’s more excited than I am, but don’t tell him I said that.”

I’m not sure why she’s whispering, but it compels me to whisper with her. “Why does it matter if he knows that?”

She’s leaning toward me, our faces huddled together as we stand in front of the sliding doors. “I don’t know.”

I laugh, but it’s abruptly ended when Donatello sneaks up next to me, startling us.

“What are you guys whispering about?”

“Donatello, what have I told you about sneaking around? You scared the hell out of me.” I frown over at him, but not as harshly as Laney is. Her scowl could strip paint from the wall; but Donatello doesn’t even notice because he’s avoiding looking at her. *Awkward*. “Laney, you want to go outside? Gretchen already brought out a bunch of snacks.”

Bringing her attention back to me, she smiles and pushes the door open.

“Yes. I’m sure you’re starving now that you’re eating for three.” She comments, slapping the door shut in Donatello’s face.

“Why are you mad at Donatello? You practically skinned his nose with the door.” Grabbing a lawn chair from my the patio, I pull it further into the yard and sit down. People should be coming over soon, and I want to make sure I get a good seat. Not that it really matters, I’m sure Remy would kick someone out of one for me if I requested.

Delaney rolls her eyes at my question before plopping into a chair next to mine. “Because he’s an ass.”

“Oh.” I don’t comment further, leaning my face back into the sun to bask in its warmth. It’s the first warm sunny day we’ve had all spring, and I plan on taking full advantage of it—hence the sundress. My chair rocks slightly as Dylan squishes his big body under my chair, the feel of a pair of large, calloused palms running over my shoulders making me smile as Remy wraps me in a hug from behind.

My eyes open at the soft press of Remy’s lips on my neck, as he crouches behind my chair. “Dylan stole a package of hotdogs from Gretchen, and now he’s hiding from her wrath.”

Laughing, I lean over to see a very guilty looking pup avoiding my eye contact. Remy comes in front of me as I reach down to pet his ears, taking my hands when I’m finished to pull me up for a proper hug. He murmurs against my skin, “You look beautiful, *cuore mio*.”

I smile up at him, my fingers curling into the soft fabric of his shirt. “Thank you.”

Today’s barbecue is something just for friends and family, so Remy’s allowed to dress casually. All I ever find him in nowadays are perfectly tailored suits to fit his new role as *Capo Famiglia*. Remy makes it a point to keep me out of most of the famiglia business, but I know the first month was a difficult transition even if he didn’t say it. Our fathers’ didn’t receive a burial, or at least not a traditional one, and that was harder to process than I thought it would be. Julian is gone often, growing ties with the Bratva, and our visits are fortunately far and few between. My mother was moved to live closer to my grandparents with a hefty retirement fund and Francesca ran off with her latest boy toy.

For the first time in a long while, life was, to some extent, peaceful.

Remy’s hands grip my hips pulling me from my thoughts and tugging me as close as he can with my giant belly between us. His voice drops lower, honey gaze melting over my skin. “I bet your dress would look even better pushed around your hips while I fuck you in the grass.”

I can feel my cheeks heating at his words, one of his dimple winking at me. Every day it feels as if I get larger, and I would have thought it would turn Remy off—but it’s the complete opposite. The bigger I get, the more insatiable he’s become. Something I haven’t minded in the slightest.

“What if someone hears?”

He chuckles, bending to pick me up, easily carrying me bridal style despite my belly. “Let them.”

“Where are you going? People are going to show up soon.” Laney yells at his back, but he ignores her, bypassing the sliding doors to walk down the path that circles the property.

He doesn’t stop until I can barely hear the sounds of the house, setting me on a big rock just off the trail. Settling between my legs, he takes my face in his hands, brushing his thumbs along my cheeks. He leans forward, but I stop him with a palm on his chest.

“This isn’t grass, Remy.”

My heart is pitter-pattering in my chest as he looks down at me, a dimple winking at me as he holds back a smile. “I have something I want to do first.”

My eyes narrow on him suspiciously as he reaches into his back pocket, a hand on my thigh. Before I can question him, he grabs my left hand, my eyes flicking down to the giant ring he’s sliding on my finger. “What’s this?”

His lips meet the tips of my fingers as he raises my hand. “Your wedding ring. The one you should have gotten before.”

“Are you asking me to marry you, Remy Luciano?” My eyes flick from the ring up to him.

His lips drop to mine, soft and lingering. "I'm not asking." His lips press to the corner of my mouth. "I'm hoping." Another kiss. "I'm praying." Another kiss. "*I'm begging.*" He smiles against my mouth, his nose brushing mine. "Marry me, Bev."

I swallow back the tears that prick at my eyes, smiling when Remy's hands cradle the sides of my belly, patiently waiting for me to answer the question he already knows the answer to. "Since you beg so well, I guess I have to say yes."

His honey browns sweep my face, leaning to rest his forehead on mine. "*Sono l'uomo più fortunato della terra.*" He kisses my nose, then drops between my legs to kiss my belly through the fabric of my dress. Looking up at me with a dimpled smile, "I am the luckiest man on Earth."

Smiling down at him, I run my fingers through his hair. "Are we not having that quickie, then?"

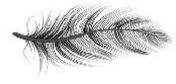
He kisses my exposed thigh on each leg before standing to lift me off the rock to set me on the ground. "Oh, we are." He links our fingers as we start to walk back toward the house. He tugs me close so that I'm walking in front of him, his free hand grabbing at my tit. "But after I show off my future wife to the party."

"Deal." His lips trail up the side of my neck, slowly walking us forward. "Have you thought about names yet?"

He stops us in the path, spinning me so that he can look down on me. "I have, but I want to hear yours first." It's whispered against my lips, and I smile against them, heart thrumming happily in my chest.

"You're lying." He chuckles against my lips. "*But* I was thinking Bria and Carmella."

Remy hums, the sound vibrating against my fingertips. His lips fall to mine in a lingering kiss. "They're perfect."



EXTENDED EPILOGUE

REMY

“How are you expecting this meeting to go?” It’s murmured from across the armored SUV by Donatello as we head to our meeting with Aleksi Ivanova.

Blowing smoke out of the crack in my window, I shake my head. I always thought the Famiglia should work closer with the Bratva than my father did. We’ve worked with them well enough in the past. It makes sense to create a relationship with them that would tie us together.

“I don’t have a lot of expectation over anything. This is mostly to introduce myself as the new Capo Famiglia.” Finishing my cigarette, I crunch it and look over at Donatello. “Aleksi already knows who I am, I’ve worked with him before and so has Wolf.”

Donatello nods, ringed knuckles brushing his chin in thought. “Then we should be in and out in no time.”

I hum, pulling out my phone to look at the time—we better be. I promised Bev I’d be home for dinner and I’m not about to miss anything with her even as simple as that after working so hard to get her back.

Feeling us come to a stop, I do a mental catalog of what weapons I have on my person, tapping my fingers on the brass knuckles I keep in my inner pocket. They’ll make me strip my guns, but I’ll be keeping these. Glancing at Donatello I see him do the same before we both get out.

My men wrap around us as we walk toward the door of an old Russian Orthodox church, and I raise my brow at the look Donatello gives me. Aleksi is quite the bible thumper for someone who slit throats and runs a prostitution ring. Walking past the pews and empty benches, the smell of dust and potpourri make the air feel thick and heavy. Giant old iron windows cast yellow beams of light along the floors, the light tapping of our shoes on the marble floors echoing up to the high ceilings.

Finally, stepping up to what I assume is an office, two men approach our group, wordlessly demanding our guns. I hand mine over to my own men, who pass it along and I watch as they drop them into a cardboard box by the door. *Really trying to impress us, I see.* Donatello does the same, following me through a door that clicks shut at our backs.

“Remy, you look like shit.” Aleksi rasps out from behind his large oak desk, casually leaning back in the black leather chair. His words are heavily accented, and if I wasn’t familiar with him, I would have a hard time understanding it.

Aleksi’s light brown hair has receded from his forehead more than I remember, but he otherwise looks the same.

“Running an empire isn’t as easy as it looks.” I sit across from him, and Donatello mimics me. Aleksi gives a loud laugh, smacking the desktop with his hand. “I’m sure you’re aware that my father *retired* recently.”

Settling himself, he nods. “I heard.” He raises the glass that was already sitting on his desk. “Good for you.”

I snort, feeling the corner of my lip ticks with amusement. “You worked with my father before, I’ve worked with you and so have my men.” I start, watching his face as his head tilts as he listens. “I see no reason why we can’t create a merger of sorts. The Bratva owns a good portion of the South

that I could use for imports. We on all of North that you could use. Working together would be mutually beneficial.”

His tongue picks at his teeth as he considers my words. “I agree, we could work very well together.” He pauses, eyes flicking between Donatello and I. “I would like help with one more job before I make my decision.” He leans back in his seat, fingers crossing over his stomach. “Consider it a test of trust for both parties.”

My eyes narrow. “What’s the job?”

“You know I’m a collector, yes?” His brow raises and I slowly nod as he continues, “Diamonds, gems, jewelry, that kind of thing.” He waves his hand, “Well, one of my diamonds has gone missing. And I think I know who did it, but I need help proving it and getting my diamond back.”

I share a brief look with Donatello, his elbows dropping to rest on his knees as he leans forward. “That’s it? Wolf could figure it out in a week, tops.”

He smiles but shakes his head, “I don’t want Wolf. I want that one boy of yours that has been running jobs a few years now, ah, the one with the tattoo.”

He points at his neck and I nod, “Julian.”

“Yes, him. I like him.” He licks his lips, “I want him to do it.”

I shrug. Wolf would get the job done sooner, undoubtedly, but I had faith Julian could handle it as well. “Done.”

Aleksi claps, bright teeth flashing. “Fantastic. Send him over this week. I’ll give him all the details he’ll need.”

Standing, Donatello rises with me. “He’ll be here.”

The leather chair creaks as Aleksi pushes out of it, nodding as I move toward the door, “I sense this will be a great start to our partnership.”

I pause as the door is opened from the outside, locking eyes with him, “Let’s hope so.”



JULIAN

My eyes skim over the crowd, flicking from one mask to the next. Remy sent me to the masquerade ball tonight for one reason, to find Anya Petrov. Despite my own doubts, Aleksi Ivanova was positive the woman stole a rare cut diamond from his vast collection of jewelry. Actually, he was convinced she has stolen something from nearly every rare gem collector this side of the nation—he believed her to be some kind of grand jewel thief. Finding people and information isn’t my fortay—I am no Wolf—but since I have been the one working closely with Aleksi for the last few years, he only trusted me.

Luckily, I have one main task—seduce the minx and get the information I need to bring her down. Theoretically, it should be easy enough. The night air is warm, almost too warm, with my black dress shirt and slacks. The silver mask on my face feels itchy, the shiny edges lightly scraping against my cheeks when I move. Pressing forward through the crowd, I move to get a better view of the entrance, knowing Anya was set to arrive any minute. As of yet, it was the only actual information I was able to gather about the woman.

She walks through the doors almost on cue, pale skin nearly shining in the dim lighting as she stands at the top of the stairs, eyes flickering leisurely over everyone else. The black and gold half skull mask she's wearing blends seamlessly into the thick white gold braids that loop on the top of her head. A long, pale leg flashes from the high slit in her black fitted gown, the material hugging the small curve of her breasts and wide hips. A flash of red peaks out from the bottom of her stiletto as she starts down the steps and I move forward, trying to keep my eyes on her as she drops into the mingling bodies below.

My heart thumps in my chest as I watch the way she glides along the floor, moving effortlessly through the crowd as people part for her almost on instinct. Besides knowing she frequented these types of gatherings, no one had any solid information about where she came from or who she really was; it was all speculation. Despite that, I watch with fascination from the edge of the room as she moves, blending into the masses seamlessly, engaging in conversation with minimal effort.

She holds herself as if she were an elite.

Looking away for only a moment, she disappears. *Damn it.* Crossing my arms over my chest, I scan the area I'd seen her last. My back stiffens at the light drag of fingertips that starts at my shoulder and sinks across my upper back. My head swivels as I catch a hint of white blonde, my coming forward as Anya's heels click to stand in front of me.

Her gray eyes are bright behind her mask despite the dim lighting, a slender golden brow arched as she walks her fingers up my chest. "You've been watching me."

I grab her hand, stopping her fingers before they land on my throat. She doesn't resist me. "Can you fault me for admiring a beautiful woman?"

She smiles, a sharp toothed grin that doesn't match the soft slope of her cheek. "You're not from this side of the city." She says plainly, her fingers growing warm in my palm. The soft, floral scent of rose wafts around us as she presses closer, the bare skin of her breasts brushing our joined hands with each level breath she takes. "I know every face here, and I've never seen yours."

My tongue swipes out to wet my bottom lip, her eyes flicking to the movement. "*Mi hai peccato.*" The small hairs around her face shift with my breath, swaying at her temples. "You caught me." Her pulse pounds in her throat despite the cool look of nonchalance on her face, her lips parting as I bring her fingers higher, brushing the tips with my lips. "What will you do now?"

"That depends." She finally says, her swallow visible as she gazes up at me through her mask. "What are you here for?"

Heart thumping with the thrill of the challenge she exudes, I lean down, lips ticking at the slight hitch in her breath as my nose skims the shell of her ear, "You."

I feel her free hand move at her side, my fingers pinching tighter around hers in a warning she doesn't heed. I barely catch the knife she tries to wedge in my belly, my much larger hand squeezing her fist as it shakes between us. Jaw tight, I goad her, nipping at the skin just below her ear. "That's not very ladylike, Anya."

Our hands shake between us, the tip of her knife pressing dangerously hard against one of the buttons on my dress shirt. Her face pulls back enough she can glare at me, ruby lips tight as she fights my hold. "Who are you?"

"Someone you really shouldn't be trying to kill in the middle of the masquerade." My words make her eyes flick around us, the knife against my gut pulling back a bit. Her reaction makes me think she forgot we were in the middle of a public function.

“Tell me.” Her lips part, chest rising and falling in soft pants. “Or I’ll gut you, anyway.”

I can’t help the chuckle that winds its way from my chest, the woman glaring up at me nothing like what I expected. “I’ll tell you,” I start, surprising her by spinning, her grip faltering on the knife enough I rip it from her as her back smacks against the wall nearest us. Her now free hand clutches the front of my shirt, her other crushed between us as I press hard into her. The tip of the knife presses against the hollow of her throat, the tip lightly indenting the skin with every inhale. I smirk down at the anger burning in her eyes, continuing from before, “If you dance with me.”

“Why would I do that?” The words bite from her lips, a small hiss leaving her teeth when the knife nicks her skin with her movements.

“Because if you don’t,” My face drops low as someone walks near us, the action hiding the knife as I share Anya’s breaths, “I’ll slit your throat.”

Her jaw works, lips pursing. “Weren’t you the one that said you shouldn’t kill someone in the middle of a masquerade?”

The soft floral from before wafts up from her heated skin, enticing me to dip lower, brush my nose along hers. “I said *you* shouldn’t.”

Silence stretches between us, the soft distant sound of music rising above the noise of chattering and clinking glasses. Slowly pulling from her, I remove the knife from her neck, shoving it next to the one I already have hidden in my waistband. A single drop of blood beads up from where she was nicked, and I swipe it away with my thumb, Anya’s soft inhale drawing my gaze back to her face.

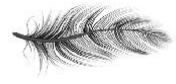
“What’s it going to be, angel?” If possible, her eyes narrow further with the nickname. “*Ballerai con il diavolo?*” *Will you dance with the devil?* I know she can’t understand me, but no translation is needed—I’m sure she can figure it out.

“Do I have a choice?” She finally asks, the hand against my chest still gripping my shirt, the tips of her fingernails lightly digging into my skin.

“No.”

I step back, but don’t release my hold on her, stretching our hands between us. My eyes don’t leave hers until I manipulate her into a spin, her heels tapping as she collides into my chest once more. My hand settles low on her back, pressing her hips flush with mine. Her eyes scream murder, and I can’t help but smile.

This might be my favorite job yet.



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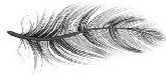
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ABOUT AJ WOLF

AJ is a self-proclaimed coffee enthusiast who loves reverse harem books and is addicted to adopting animals. She digs crows, witchy things & anime. She lives on a small hobby farm surrounded by her favorite people and growing animal family. She writes under two pen names—AJ Wolf & [Halle](#).

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