



Downed
By the Italian

MAFIA BOSS

ROSALIE ROSE

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Owned by the Italian Mafia Boss:

**A Dark Mafia Arranged Marriage
Romance**

By: Rosalie Rose

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Prologue

Delilah

No one expects their nightmares to haunt them in real life. No one ever plans for the worst to happen. And *no one* believes that ‘the worst’ could ever happen to *them*.

We’re on the run because my father owes a very dangerous man a lot of money. Money we don’t have. Our house was shot up with what felt like a thousand bullets last night, and my heart still pounds voraciously when I remember that they were meant for us.

We barely escaped with anything. We have the clothes on our backs and what we managed to shove into a suitcase.

“Lilah, please,” my father begs me to look at him, but I can’t.

How does he expect me to be okay with everything that’s happened? We’re in a rundown motel on the outskirts of town. We ditched our car a few miles back and grabbed a taxi so they couldn’t track us.

“Please talk to me.”

“What do you want me to say, Dad? You sacrificed everything. Our home. Your shop. Us! We have nothing. They took everything. Everything, Dad. How did you get involved with Carmine Milazzo?” I drop my head into my hands to try to think of a plan. Nothing will get done if I leave it up to my dad. “He *is* the mafia. The worst of the worst. You know he runs the city. He owns us now.”

“He owns me, Lilah. Me. You’re free.”

“I’m not leaving you!” I’m appalled he would even think that. “Every problem has a solution. We need to think of it.”

“He won’t stop until I’m dead.” Dad reaches for my hand from where he sits on the twin-size bed. “No one fucks over

Milazzo. The men who shot up our home? Those are his jockeys, but now that I'm on the run, he'll find me and kill me. That's what he does, Lilah."

My eyes water as the horror of his words freeze the blood in my veins. "No. I refuse to believe that." I kneel on the floor and squeeze his hands in mine. "Why would you do it?" The tears begin to drip, searing down my cheek.

"The shop wasn't doing well. We were drowning."

I rear back as if I've been slapped. "What are you talking about? We were fine."

He rips his hands from mine. "No, we weren't. We haven't been fine for a long time. No one brings their cars to shops like mine, not anymore, not in today's world. We were barely making the mortgage payment on the house, so I went to the one man I knew would save us."

"Dad." I hang my head in disappointment.

He hits his chest with his hand and raises his voice. "I did what I had to do to protect my own. That money saved the business and our home, fed us and gave us hot water. It saved us, but when it was time to pay, I only had a third of what he needed."

"How much?"

"Delilah, please don't make this harder than it is."

"How. Much?" I bite.

"Two hundred thousand dollars," he whispers, unable to look me in the eyes.

I fall backward, my back hitting the edge of the second bed in the room. I probably shouldn't sit on the floor. The red carpet is old and matted and covered in questionable stains. I rub a hand over my mouth, staring at the nicotine-yellowed wallpaper peeling from the walls.

"I didn't want to tell you. I didn't want you to worry because I know you would have tried to help—"

“—Yes, I would have tried to help!” I yell, getting to my feet. “I would have gotten a job—”

He stands, too, towering over me. “And I didn’t want that. I wanted you to focus on school, your friends, or dating. Whatever you kids are doing these days. Taking care of our family is on me. Not you.”

“And now look where we are.” I spread my arms out to remind him of our situation. “We are hiding out in a motel that probably hasn’t been cleaned since the fifties, and it’s only a matter of time before they find us. He will have men everywhere. No matter where we go, even another state, we aren’t safe.”

He lies down on the bed, the mattress squeaking from his weight, and he presses his hand to his chest.

“Are you okay?” I hurry to him, hoping he isn’t on the verge of having another heart attack.

“I’m just tired. Let’s rest, and we will figure it out when we wake up.”

I nod but don’t say anything else. Instead, I sink onto the edge of the other bed. I should probably sleep too, but I know I won’t. I’m exhausted, but after everything that’s happened over the past twenty-four hours, I’m too wired to sleep. After a while, the crow’s feet spreading from the corners of Dad’s eyes deepen as he sleeps. His silver hair is thin, and he has a round belly from eating junk food all the time at the shop. He isn’t doing well.

But I’m going to change that.

I’m going to talk to Carmine Milazzo myself. I’ll see if there is anything I can do to make things right. There aren’t many horrors in this life that scare me. I believe in facing an issue head-on, swallowing my fear even if it turns my stomach sour.

I snag my bag from the end of the bed and head to the bathroom. I ease the door shut, so I don’t wake Dad. When I look in the mirror, the events from last night have caused circles under my eyes and my skin to be pale.

To see a man like Carmine, a woman has to look the part.

I toss my long black hair in a high ponytail, showing the elegant curves of my neck. While I stare at my reflection, I think of the dreams I wanted for myself. I wanted to travel, or study abroad. Now, none of that can happen. Tears redden the whites of my eyes, and I stare at the harsh light in the bathroom to dry them.

Deep breaths in and out.

I do that until I don't feel like I'm about to completely lose control, and control is the only thing I have going for me right now.

"You can do this. He's just another man, and men always want something," I say to my reflection, my green eyes bright against my fair skin. Grabbing my blush from the bag, I pinken my cheeks and apply a generous amount of mascara. My lashes are long naturally, but the mascara darkens them and makes them thicker.

After I undress, I throw on a simple black dress and slip on the black flats that I happened to be wearing when I ran from my childhood home last night.

"That will have to do," I say to myself, rubbing my hands down my body to smooth out the wrinkles of my dress.

I peek out the door and hear Dad snoring, telling me that not even a bomb could wake him. I tiptoe in front of the bed, grab my purse from the table, and the floorboards creak under me. I stop, side-eyeing him. He snores louder, then snorts, rubbing his nose before flipping to his side.

I love that man, but no wonder mom could never sleep well.

I ease the door open, only cracking it wide enough to wiggle my body through. When the air hit me, I wrinkle my nose. It smells of hot trash and cigarettes.

How is this my life?

Did we live in luxury? No. We had a comfortable lower middle-class life. We never went without. Money was always tight, but we made it work.

At least, I thought we made it work.

And now we are hiding in a motel with roaches crawling up the beams; the paint is chipping away from the cement siding.

Shoulders back, chin high, I march into the parking lot, the gravel digging into the thin soles of my shoes. Looking left and right, I see only cars across the street at a junkyard. Digging out my phone, I order an Uber and then remember, I have no idea where Carmine Milazzo lives.

Someone has to know.

I wait outside the motel for my ride, biting on my fingernails, and think about what I'm going to say to him. What am I going to offer? Could I work for him in exchange for my father's debt?

A light blue Nissan rolls to a stop, its tires crunching, as the Uber driver slams on the brakes to avoid the pot of dead flowers but hits it anyway. The vase cracks, and the soil spills free.

He rolls the window down to ask, "Delilah?"

"That's me." I open the back door and slide in; it smells much better in this car than out there.

"Where to? You didn't provide an address."

"Carmine Milazzo's house please."

He grips the steering wheel until his knuckles turn white, and his eyes widen in the rearview mirror before he spins around to look at me. "Lady, I don't know what the hell you're thinking going there, but I'm not taking you to that man's house. You won't be walking out of it."

"I need to talk to him."

"People don't *talk* to Carmine Milazzo."

I lean forward and tilt my head. "Well, I'm going to, so that's where I need to go."

"Your funeral, lady."

His concern has nervous turmoil brewing in my belly, and I started biting on my nails again—an awful habit I need to break. I have no idea what I’m doing, but something needs to be done, and I can’t just sit by and do nothing. I stare out the window, watching the trees rush by in a blur, and memories of my dad playing dress-up with me as a little girl run through my mind.

He’d even put on a tutu, which looked ridiculous, but mom left, and he had to play both parental roles. He’s an amazing father, so trying to settle this for him is the least I can do.

“We’re here,” the driver says.

“That was fast.”

“It’s been twenty minutes. You’ve been quiet, probably wondering what your fate is. Good luck.”

The moment I slam the door closed, the tires of his little Nissan spin burning rubber, and he speeds away.

And I’m left standing outside a fifteen-foot iron gate. It’s the only break in the giant metal wall that wraps around the entire property, and I can’t see anything behind it.

“You’re doing this. You are doing this,” I pep talk myself and walk up the driveway, then press the button on the intercom.

“What?” a man barks with a slight accent.

“I’m here to see Mr. Milazzo.”

“Do you have an appointment?”

“No—”

“You can’t just demand to see Mr. Milazzo. He’s a busy man.”

“I’m Delilah Reynolds. His people shot up my house last night because my father owes him money. I need to talk to him.”

Silence answers back, and then a growl. “We didn’t know he had a daughter.”

Something in the man's voice sends a shiver down my spine, and the gate creaks open.

"Mr. Milazzo will see you now."

"Thank you." I want to hit myself. Why am I being nice to the people who ruined my life?

I step through the gate, and my breath catches. "Wow."

Blood must pay well because this house is beautiful. It's a large ivory-colored mansion with huge windows and round pillars bracing the front door. Green vines spread across the front of the house, giving it an inviting appearance in spite of the building's intimidating size, and a fountain gurgles cheerily from a pond in the middle of a gorgeous green lawn.

I don't allow people to make me feel less than, but as I walk up the marble steps and face two massive cherry-stained wooden doors, I feel small. With an exhale, I wrap my fingers around the metal ring hanging from the devil's mouth, but the door opens before I can knock. A man dressed in all black is standing in the opening.

"Follow me," he says, walking away without giving me a chance to respond.

I follow, but it's hard to keep up when the inside of the house is just as beautiful as the outside.

Not wanting to be caught gawking, I keep my head down and follow the heavy footsteps in front of me. The click of the man's expensive shoes echo down the vast hallway. Expensive paintings from the walls on either side of us, but I barely glance at them as we pass.

We came to a set of white double doors with sleek black handles.

"Mr. Milazzo? Ms. Reynolds is here." the man speaks into his wrist. He must have received an answer because he swings the door open.

"Good luck." He shoots me a predatory smirk and steps back so I can pass.

I wish people would stop saying that to me.

I enter what looks like a spacious office. The stranger shuts the door behind me, and a click sounds from the handle. I'm locked inside the room.

It's brighter than I expected. Sunshine spills through a large bay window my left; bookshelves run along the walls to my right. In the center of the room, directly in front of me, stands a long desk with two leather chairs facing it for... clientele.

"Sit." His voice permeates the air. There's a hint of impatience roughing the back of his throat.

He is sitting in a chair that's turned away from me, so I can't see his face. The rich ink color of his hair peeking over the top of the seat is the only thing hinting at what he looks like.

"I don't know whether you're brave or stupid to come to see me, Ms. Reynolds."

"A little bit of both," I answer honestly, my throat suddenly dry.

He spins the leather throne around, and his hands splay across the desk.

My lips part when I see him. Carmine Milazzo is a beautiful villain. His eyes are so dark that they match his soul, and his skin has a gorgeous tan. His face is clean-shaven, which highlights the sharp edges of his features—high cheekbones, square jaw and plump lips.

I'm insane for thinking that the man who tried to kill my father and me is attractive. I need my head examined.

"My time is valuable, Ms. Reynolds. What do you want?" He uncuffs his shirt sleeves and begins to roll them up to his elbow.

"I want to talk about my father's debt."

"There's nothing to talk about."

"There's plenty to talk about," I argue.

He smirks and pours a glass of whiskey from the decanter on the edge of his desk, then he grabs a second glass and

brings it over to me.

“Take it.” He towers over me like a giant, using his power to sway my mind into doing anything he wants.

I wrap my fingers around the glass, trying to stop my hand from shaking. I wind up having to hold the glass with two hands to steady it. “There’s plenty to talk about. “There must be something I can do. I’ll work for you to pay off the debt. Please, my dad is a good man.”

“Good men make bad decisions all the time, Sweetling,” he calls me, taking the second chair. He reaches between my legs, and I hold my breath wondering what the hell is he doing, when he grips my chair and yanks me closer. “Good men keep bad men like me in business.” He tucks a piece of loose hair that’s fallen from my ponytail behind my ear, and I tremble from how cold his touch is.

Every glide of his fingertips promises wicked things. It isn’t just pure terror weighing down my bones, but the lust causing my panties to become wet.

“Your father can only pay the debt with *his* life. That’s the term of the agreement we made, Sweetling.”

“I am not—” I hiss through tight teeth, “—Your Sweetling.”

“You’re the sweetest thing to have ever walked through my doors.” He grabs my chin and forces me to meet his dark gaze. I can’t tell where his irises end and pupils begin. “Do you know what they call me?”

I shake my head, gasping when his thumb brushes against my bottom lip.

“Carmine ‘The Devil’ Milazzo. I take, Sweetling. I punish. I demand. You’re an innocent soul, and now you’re trapped in the Devil’s lair.”

My breath hitches, and he tilts his head, but we don’t break eye contact.

“Your bravery impresses me. Even through your fear, you’ll take anything I give you, won’t you?” he whispers in awe,

dragging his fingers across my jaw and staring at me as if I'm an exotic animal in a zoo.

"I'll do anything for my family," I answer, honestly. "Even if it means making a deal with a so-called devil," I reply, unable to stop my voice from crumbling.

A sly, conniving grin spreads across his handsome face, showing rows of straight white teeth. He leans back, crossing one ankle over his knee while sipping his whiskey. His bottom lip shines from the amber liquid, and for some inexplicable reason I want to lick it clean.

What is wrong with me? This man is a monster, a devil like he claims. I'm disgusted with myself.

He sets his drink on the desk with a hard clunk, leaning forward again. Only this time, I can smell the alcohol on his breath. Palms twice the size of mine land on my thighs, and he yanks them apart. A whimper crawls up my throat, but I keep it locked inside my chest next to my pounding heart.

"I'll forgive your father's debt on two conditions. You marry me, and you give me a child. You do that, and your father lives."

"What? No! I'm not having sex—"

He wraps a hand around my throat and leans closer, his lips almost touching mine. "You'll be begging me to fuck you, Sweetling. And you'll be screaming my name *when* I do, not if. Everything about you will be mine. Those are the terms. Deal or no deal."

Something about that sounds so good, so wrong, so tempting, but I ignore my body's reaction and think of my father.

"Deal," I grit, yanking free from his grip.

I can still feel the sear of his hand around my throat, hating how much I now crave his touch.

I'm a horrible daughter for liking how this man makes me feel.

I'm in hell, the soon to be bride to The Devil, himself.

Chapter One

Carmine

What I love about innocence is how easy it is to take.

Delilah has no idea what she has agreed to. I'm not a man who will change my mind because she bats those pretty eyes at me or pins those pink, full lips. While I want to ruin her in the best and worst ways, business is always first.

If there is one thing I've learned in my life, it's to always protect yourself no matter the cost.

And beauty like hers, if I allow it, will cost me.

She's sitting there with her arms crossed, her chin up, and a hate-filled glint in her narrowed eyes. Weaker men might choose to die to gain a single glance from a woman like Delilah.

A sweet little flower.

And she's made a deal for me to pluck every petal from her soul.

She'll be ruined for everyone else.

I have a feeling she'll ruin me too, but I can't decide if it's for the best or not. I don't like how my hand still burns from touching her. I don't enjoy touch. Touch has only ever inflicted pain in the past, so now I decide when and where touch happens.

Delilah is already making me forget my own fucking rules. Gripping her neck wasn't planned, and everything I do is calculated and thought out in detail.

But I couldn't help myself. I can't help myself. Not when her skin reminds me of the finest silk, aching to be appreciated and dying for someone to wrap themselves in it.

"I'll have a contract delivered to you shortly."

“Excuse me?” she scoffs, slapping her hands on the chair’s leather arms before pushing herself to her feet.

I lean against my desk, the edge digging into my lower back. “Is there an issue, Ms. Reynolds?”

“Yes, there’s an issue. You want me to sign a contract? I’m not a transaction—”

A rumble crawls its way up my throat, and impatience blinds me for a split second, but one second is all it takes. I grip her wrist and swing her against the desk. A harsh exhale escapes her when the edge digs into her back, taking the place of where I was standing. I lean forward, bracing my hands on either side of her.

Her warm, unsteady breaths are pure temptation against my lips, but I refuse to give in. Her eyes widen while she leans away from me, but there’s nowhere for her to go. Invading her space is what I’ll live for the moment she signs the dotted line.

Lowering my voice, I meet her eyes, mapping every expression crossing her face. “You are a transaction, Sweetling.” I curl over her. “You.” I lean forward, even more, her body brushing mine, and I try to ignore how good she feels pressed against me. “Come.” I whisper across her cheek, and she turns her head away, but the goosebumps across her skin speak the truth. “To.” Images of her naked across my desk or bent over, taking my cock, screaming my name fill my mind. Or she’s under the desk between my legs, sucking me down her throat while I take care of business. “Me.” I kiss her cheek and lift my hand, pressing my fingers against her jaw to force her to look at me.

We stare each other down, pride against pride clashing, neither of us wanting to show weakness. “You came into my home, wanted to speak with me, to save your father’s life, and made a deal. I do not do business with a handshake, Sweetling. This is real business. You’re getting something out of it, and I’m getting something out of it.”

She curls her lip and sneers. “I bet you are.”

A dark chuckle escapes me; it sounds like a laugh echoing down a tunnel. It's one of disbelief. My hand roams to her neck, my fingers easily wrapping around the back of it. My grip tightens, and she gasps. I pull her forward until we're both standing straight, nose to nose.

"Make no mistake; you will be in control of when we have sex. I'm not the type of man to force myself on anyone. You will beg me to fuck you, Sweetling. You'll do anything for me to ease the ache that will be burning inside you."

"You'll be waiting forever then," she tries to sound smart as if she has the upper hand.

"I highly doubt it." Without breaking eye contact, I press a button on my phone because I can't tear my gaze away from the fear and bravery staring back at me. "Gianni, please escort Ms. Reynolds to my room. Lock her in there too. I don't trust her," I say to him, loving the fight burning in her irises.

"On my way," he replies.

"You'll like Gianni. He's my righthand man." I don't have friends, but Gianni would be my only one if I did. I don't let anyone get close. Close means strings.

And strings always end up needing to be cut.

"I'm sure I'll like him more than you." She tugs free from my grip, but I let my fingers graze the softness of her nape.

Accidentally.

Because sneaking soft touches is something I do not do or know how to do.

The doors to my office open, and Gianni, without breaking stride, grabs Delilah by her arm to lead her out.

She yanks herself free. "I'm capable of walking with you without force. I'm not a fucking damsel."

And yet, she came to me to be saved.

"Don't count that out just yet, Sweetling."

She whips around, hair spinning like an angry tornado, and marches up to me. Gianni grabs for her, but I hold up my hand,

too interested in her fire to even consider extinguishing her flame.

Delilah shoves me in the chest, but I don't move. Her attempt to punish me has me smiling, and her cheeks flush with anger as she lifts her index finger at me. "I am not your Sweetling. I am not your anything. It's business, and I'll be counting the days until this transaction is complete." Her eyes waiver, skimming down my body to reassure the lie she's just told herself.

"We'll see about that." I step forward, my chin hitting my chest to look at her. My presence swallows Delilah's stature, a sight I love to see. She's so small, and I want to wrap my arms around her fragility to keep her safe.

What the fuck is wrong with me?

"There will be nothing to see, Carmine."

No one calls me Carmine. No one.

Coming from Delilah, though, my entire body reacts, my cock twitching in my pants from how gentle and breathless my name sounds from her lips, in complete contrast to the hate-filled gaze.

Gianni clears his throat to remind her to leave.

Delilah rolls her eyes. "Impatience is an annoyance in this house." When she walks away from me, her hips sway, and her soft skin gleams in the sunlight peeking through the windows.

Gianni lifts a brow at her as she walks by him without breaking her stride. Licking my lips, I watch her stroll down the hallway until she must choose whether to go left or right. She looks over her shoulder and waves her hands.

"Well, do I have figure out where to go myself, or are you going to show me to my room, Gianni?"

I chuckle. "She's something else, isn't she?"

"We'll see if you still think so tomorrow." He grabs the door handles and walks backward out of the room, closing the doors.

I exhale a weighted breath, thinking about the last time I felt so out of control. I despise it. My hand flies to my chest, and the raised skin of the scar left from father begins to itch. A phantom reminder of how many years I was out of control, and I refuse to fall back into weakness because of a pretty woman with prettier eyes.

The scotch glass scratches along the desk as my fingers push it across the polished surface where I sit. Lazily, I step around until I'm clutching onto the leather chair, anger rising with every breath I take.

What have I done?

I'm not getting any younger, and an heir is something I've wanted for the last few years, but it can't be with just anyone. It had to be with someone who tests me, who challenges me, drives me insane, and has me question everything.

In the short amount of time I've spent with her, Delilah not only challenges me but also makes me wonder what it would be like to change.

Change isn't a luxury I can afford.

With an impatient sneer, I snatch up the glass and hurl it against the wall with a savage roar. Glass shatters hit the floor and spin out in all directions. Alcohol drips down the wall, reminding me of blood splatter.

Sagging in my chair, I rub a hand down my face and slam my fist against the desk. Before calling the attorney who only works for me, I need to figure out the terms of our agreement because this maddening woman will try to find a way to slip through my fingers.

I can't allow that to happen.

Just one look at her, one experience of her rage, one sniff of her sweet perfume that reminds me of freshly picked flowers, sweet and fresh, and all I want to do is chain her to my bed so she has no way of escape.

She's mine.

After snagging a pen, I rip a page from my notebook and begin to write. I only use the laptop when necessary. Writing, seeing the ink on paper, the glide of the pen against paper, feels indefinite, as if nothing can change.

Terms to settle Mack Reynolds's debt (Delilah Reynolds's father):

-An agreement has been made between the two parties. Delilah Reynolds has agreed to marry and have a child with Carmine Milazzo to save her father's life and settle his debt.

-She will choose when sexual intercourse takes place. Every move after this agreement is in her hands.

-She agrees to stay in my bed and no other.

-We are to raise our child together. She will be a part of this baby's life. A child needs a mother.

-She will agree to wear an engagement ring.

-She will not ask for a divorce for three years.

"Not that she'll ever divorce me. I won't allow it," I say, but I want her to feel like she has options. Three years from now, she will have learned to love me.

Licking the tip of the pen, I begin writing again.

-Financially, she and our child will always be taken care of.

-The only way to break this agreement is death because that's The Devil's way.

-She is to kiss me every night before we go to bed. The first time she initiates the kiss, every night after that, I will expect said kiss.

I reread what I just wrote and tossed my pen on the desk, staring at the sentence and trying to figure out why I'd want such an absurd term.

Because I've never been kissed at night, not even on the cheek by my mother because my father killed her in a fit of rage.

This isn't about love. It's still about control. It's about me wanting moments of good. That's all. There's no more meaning behind this.

A kiss at night because going to bed in a rage only leads to death.

Chapter Two

Delilah

“How long am I going to be in here?” I ask Gianni as I step into the bedroom.

“As long as it takes.” He slams the doors shut, causing me to jump.

I gasp, run to the stylish French doors, and then hear a click. Jiggling the door handles, I yank and pull, realizing I’m locked inside. With my fists, I pummel the wood as hard as I can. “Let me out of here, Gianni! I will not be held prisoner. Open the damn doors!” I try jiggling the handles again, sneering when they don’t give. I plant my feet against the ground and pull, hoping the lock breaks, but all I hear on the other side is a chuckle.

Gianni is laughing at me.

I kick the door for good measure. “You should be ashamed of yourself. Who locks a woman in a room?”

“The kind who don’t trust women who make deals to clear their father’s name. You can’t be trusted, Delilah. Not yet. And I won’t risk Carmine’s safety. For all I know, you’re a crazy person.” His voice is muffled from the door between us.

I growl with impatience, beating my fist against the door yet again. “I’ll show you crazy!” He pays me no mind. I hear the expensive clicks of his loafers carrying him away. “Hey, I’m talking to you! Get back here!” I slap a hand over my mouth when a booming laugh echoes down the hall. It goes on for a few minutes.

What have you gotten yourself into, Delilah?” I whisper to myself, pressing my forehead against the door as I take a few deep breaths.

I really did this. I came to a mafia boss to save my father’s life, made a deal to marry him, and give him a child. My pulse

begins to race, and my breathing becomes erratic. Holy hell, my entire life is in this man's hands.

What have I done?

I toss my hair in a messy bun and massage my neck. "You're going to be fine. You don't have to like him. Your father will be alive. That's all that matters."

I spin around and sag against the double doors, fanning my eyes around the room for the first time.

For a guest room, it's huge. The bed itself is the size of my room. The paint is masculine yet elegant, a light grey on three of the walls, and the fourth is a navy blue. The ceramic floor tiles are breathtaking, probably imported from Italy. They are an array of blues, greys, whites, and opals, creating a gorgeous mosaic.

I bend down and trace the tile's grout, a stark black, such a contrast to the light design. I straighten myself up then explore my prison cell. Overhead, a mural reminding me of the night sky was painted on the domed ceiling. Intricate patterns of vines, leaves, and grapes were carved into the moldings.

"Wow." I am in awe, impressed by the detail that's gone into this room.

Wrapping my hand around one of the bedposts, I spin then slide my free hand across the fluffy, white comforter. The bathroom has the same ceramic tiles on the floor to the right. Flipping on the light, my brows raise at the extravagance. A chandelier hangs from the middle with crystals reflecting and shining on every surface. There are twin sinks; the counter is made of gorgeous, polished, purple stone.

Is it amethyst? There's no way. That would be so expensive. The soaking tub matches too, and it's big enough for three people. If I'm going to live here, I will use that tub daily.

The shower is nothing to sneeze at, either. There are no doors, no curtain, just a huge walk-in stall made of onyx that glimmers when the light hits it. The rainfall showerhead takes up the ceiling, and I bet it would feel like standing under a giant waterfall.

“Wait.” I turn my head to see a toothbrush in its holder, and then there’s water sprinkled on the silver drain as if it were used this morning.

There’s another door, and I fling it open, revealing a giant closet lined with suits and shoes.

This isn’t the guest room.

It’s *his* room.

“Oh, no. I did not agree to this.” I sprint into the bedroom and slip on the floor, latching onto the handles just in time before I slam onto the ground. I pull myself up and try to open the doors again, frantic when I realize I’m in his private space.

A bed he sleeps in.

A bed he fucks in.

And it’s all too much.

He surrounds me, and I don’t want to be. He affects me in ways where I need to be ashamed because he isn’t a good man. He isn’t giving me options that do not require my body to save my father. Good men don’t do that.

I’ve never had sex. I’ve been too focused on school. That’s not to say that I haven’t had the opportunity, but I’ve never wanted to have sex with a frat guy three beers in.

“Come on,” I continue to try the doors, but it’s no use.

I’m trapped.

I stare at the bed, and the white blanket and sheets mock my innocence. Is this where he plans for us to have sex? Is this where my entire life will change? Maybe I was too hasty in accepting the offer to clear my father’s debt. But what other choice did I have?

And if I give him a child, does he expect me to give up my rights as a mother? I can’t do that. No way will I leave my baby in the hands of a monster.

My phone chimes, and I’m reminded I could call the cops if I wanted, but then I remember my dad. He’s counting on me even if he doesn’t know it yet.

When I dig out my phone from my purse, I see it's from my best friend, Christy. She's been with me since freshmen year in college. We were roommates, and we immediately hit it off. We were inseparable. She must know something is wrong.

"Hello?" I need to get this conversation over, but I sound defeated. I head to the bed and sit down, sinking into the comfort of feathers and foam.

Why do I hate this while this is the most comfortable mattress I've ever been on? I lie down, put my head on the pillow, which is just as comfortable, and stare up at swirl of colors on the ceiling.

"Where are you?" she screeches. "Your house is on the news, Delilah. The. News. There are thousands of gunshots in it, yet no bodies were found. Apparently, you're alive. Thanks for telling me. Here I am, in our advanced Anatomy and Physiology class, thinking your body is decomposing somewhere because that's the only reason I can think of for you to miss class. Where are you? What happened?"

"Christy, you can't take phone calls in class," I hear the Professor say in the background.

Books slam and I hear her backpack zip. "I'm going. Sorry, Professor Wakins. It's an emergency."

"You shouldn't have called me during class."

"You shouldn't have left me wondering if you were dead," she snaps. I hear the lecture hall door close behind her.

I sigh, pinching the bridge of my nose. "You're right. I know. I'm sorry. I can't tell you everything, but I'm okay. I'm safe." Sort of.

"You can't tell me? You better tell me. You know I'll find out. I'll hire a hacker to trace your every move and find out what's going on."

"Christy, I need you to leave your curiosity at the door this time because this situation might get you killed if you aren't careful."

“Well, now I’m more interested. You can’t say things like that and expect me to lay this to rest. I’m your best friend, Delilah. You can trust me. I won’t tell anyone; you know I won’t.”

I exhale, debating if I want to burden her with this. I can’t remember a time when she gave me a reason not to trust her.

“My dad got involved with Carmine Milazzo,” I admit, the words bitter on my tongue.

“What!” she screams, then lowers her voice. “What? You did not just say that. He kills people, Delilah. Kills. Gets rid of the bodies. He never gets caught because he has police and FBI in his pocket. He has so much power. Oh, this is bad. This is so bad. Where’s your dad?”

“Hiding. He’s okay for now, and he will be. I’ve taken care of things.”

Silence hangs between us for a few seconds before static rustles the phonenumber from her breath. “What did you do?” Dread fills her question, and she doesn’t give me a chance to answer. “You can’t always be the solution for your father’s mistakes, Delilah. You did something bad, didn’t you? I’m going to want to strangle you, aren’t I?”

I pick at a loose thread on the hem of my skirt. “Maybe,” I mumble. “I can’t tell you. Not yet. Just know everything is going to be okay.”

“Remember, I’m going to find you. I’ll get the truth.”

“You’re going to be the death of yourself.”

“Just tell me where you are,” her voice softens. “Please.”

My gaze shifts to the locked doors, and I remember the agreement I’ve made. Being locked in this room reminds me that none of this is a dream. This is real life, and now I have to pay.

“I’m at Carmine Milazzo’s house. I’m locked in his room.” I prepare myself for her scream, for curse words flying, for something other than the silence, but instead, I hear a sob. “Christy?” I sit up, wondering if I’m hearing her correctly.

“What did you do, Delilah? Oh my God. What did you do?” she cries. “You never think things through. You react. You fly into action.”

“It was the only option, Christy. Death is the only way out of debt with Carmine if you don’t pay up. That’s his rule. I can’t let my dad die. He’s all I have.”

“What deal did you make?”

“I don’t want to tell you yet. I need to talk to him and work out the details. Once I know everything, I’ll fill you in, okay?”

“If I see on the news you’ve gone missing, I will kill him myself.”

“I believe you.” I smile, thinking of her four-foot-nine frame trying to attack a man well over six feet tall.

“Keep me updated. Please. I’m going to be worried sick. We have finals soon. What does this mean for you?”

“I’m not quitting school because of him. He can go fuck himself if that’s what he thinks.”

“If Carmine fucking Milazzo wants you to quit school, I have no doubt that will happen.”

“My goals and dreams do not end because of him. I’m still my own person. I want things for myself that are not just him.”

“You want him?”

I scoff. “I did not say that.”

“You did. You so did. Oh my God, you want the big bad mafia boss, don’t you? Is he hot? I’ve heard rumors.”

“He’s...” gorgeous. “He’s okay. In a serial killer kind of way, if you’re into that.”

She chuckles. “You like him. In some twisted way, you like him.”

“I do not. There is nothing to like. He’s demanding, controlling, selfish, domineering, stubborn, and I do not like those qualities.”

“You forgot hot.”

“It’ll take more than good looks to win me over, you know.”

“Listen, I need to go to my next class, but be careful, Delilah. This isn’t some guy from college. This is a man who makes a living making people bleed. He runs drugs and weapons. He gambles. He wins. All the stories we have heard are true. If you find yourself attracted, just remember that.”

“Believe me; I won’t forget.”

“Okay.” She doesn’t sound convinced. “Love you. Keep me updated. I promise I won’t tell a soul.”

“Love you too.”

I drop my phone and cover my eyes with my hands, wondering how deep a grave I’ve dug myself.

I’m not sure how long I lie there, but I fall asleep, and when I dream, much to my dismay, it’s Carmine who takes over my subconscious.

I want to call myself crazy, but if I’m honest, I’ve always been lured by darkness.

Chapter Three

Carmine

When I got the contract from my lawyer, I first read it to make sure he didn't miss any terms. Pleased with the outcome, I fold it into an envelope then left it on the middle of my desk.

I need to run an errand.

After grabbing my blazer from the back of the chair, I slip my arms through the sleeves. While I button my cufflinks, I stare out the bay window overlooking the garden, and I dream about playing with my son or daughter.

A dream I should not have.

But I want it regardless.

Tugging the lapels of my suit, I head out of my office in search of Gianni but instead ran into Matias and Aristide, my younger twin brothers. Ari wipes his hand on a handkerchief, staining it with blood.

"Caleb is taken care of," Matias informs me, unbuttoning his ruined shirt.

"Will you do that in your rooms?" I don't want Delilah to see them. They are closer in age, and she might find herself wanting one of the twins. I know they enjoy threesomes, and that isn't something I want Delilah to be exposed to.

She's mine.

Ari's lips twist in a wicked smirk, his eyes firing with questions. "Why, brother? This is our routine."

Before I could answer Ari, Gianni exists in the hallway leading to my wing of the house. "Delilah has been quiet in your room, Carmine. I'm not sure what she's up to. I haven't unlocked the doors." Gianni exists in the hallway where my wing is.

“Delilah?” Matias questions. “A woman in your room? Since when?”

“And you locked her inside? I didn’t know you were so desperate, Carmine.”

I bite back my immediate response. I don’t want to seem affected by their jabs, but Delilah’s quickly becoming a weakness for me, a dent in the armor I always wear. “She’s a means to an end,” I say, which isn’t a lie.

“Carmine—” Ari wraps his hand around my arm to stop me from walking out the front door, Gianni instantly at my side. “What are you doing?” He searches my eyes for answers he won’t find.

“My room is off-limits, do you understand? She is off-limits. You are not to speak with her. I’ll be back in an hour.”

He wants to fight me on it, but releases his hold on me and runs his red-stained hands through his hair. “Fine. Matias and I will wash up, but I want you to know that it isn’t the end of the Romanos trying to bribe our people. One death isn’t going to change that.”

“You don’t think I know that? One person dead is a warning, and another dead will mean war, baby brother.” I tap his face, something he can’t stand. He scowls, pulling away from me.

“I hope you’re prepared.”

“I’m always prepared.” I go to shut the door, but stop. “Delilah is off-limits,” I remind the two troublemakers. “She is mine. Do you understand?”

They both nod before disappearing into their wings. We all have a separate area of the house.

“Where are we going?” Gianni asks, walking around the black Mercedes G-Wagon and hopping into the driver’s seat.

After opening the passenger side door, I slide in. The tinted windows conceal us, preventing us from becoming anyone’s target. “We’re going to that shitty motel on the city’s outskirts. Do you know the one I’m talking about?”

“I do.” He cranks the SUV, and the engine rumbles to life.

Looking at the house, I think of Delilah and how I’m leaving her alone in a mansion full of monsters.

Why do I care?

“Her father is there. It’s cute he thinks he can hide from me, but I know his every move.”

Gianni drops his hands from the steering wheel and stares at me with disapproval. “You told the girl you wouldn’t hurt her father. She made a deal with you, Carmine. You aren’t a man that goes against his word.”

“I’m not going against it.” I slide on my sunglasses and stare through the window toward the sun, which is hot and uncomfortable, and if I stare at it long enough, I won’t be able to see. Something shouldn’t have so much power, should it?

The sun and I have that in common.

I want to remind Mr. Reynolds that he will not be able to see his daughter again if he tries to interfere with my demands. I’ll give him his life back, his shop, his home, but Delilah is no longer his concern.

She’s mine.

Gianni sighs, clearly not believing me, and I don’t blame him. Gianni is the closest person I have to a best friend, but men like me don’t admit to having friends. We have business partners. We’ve known each other for a long time...too long. He’s the one person who knows everything about me. While my blood relatives surround me in this business, Gianni is different.

My father took him in when he was just a boy, and poor Gianni thought he was being saved, but he only went from a bad situation to a worse one. My father was not a kind man to children. He bought them if he could, beat them until death or until they fell in line, and Gianni was one of those purchases.

A sick, skinny boy with hollow cheeks took the punishment from my father every day without shedding a tear.

Strength like that is almost impossible to find, but I know Gianni, and still, he finds a way to care about others.

Unlike me.

He is a stark reminder of the humanity I lost long ago. On the day I killed my father, I killed that part of me as well.

I might be a dangerous man and kill those who wronged me, but I don't kill, beat, or torture for sport.

My father was sick in the head and no longer fit to lead the Milazzo organization.

Luckily, the twins were only three then, so they don't remember their father's cruelty. It's a blessing. Sometimes I wake up screaming, remembering the hot blade searing into my skin. From when I was six years old until I turned eighteen, I had broken bones or was used as a sculpture for my father to carve his hate into.

Life is cruel, and now it's up to me to decide how that cruelty should be gifted.

"The girl," Gianni starts. "She's scared."

"She should be."

"Why are you doing this? There are other ways for her to work off her father's debt. We always need runners."

The thought of her putting herself in danger like that, like some cheap and useless drug mule had me seeing red.

I yank the emergency brake, and the car fishtails to the side until it completely stops. The rancid smell of burning rubber infiltrates the vents.

"She is more than that. She isn't a whore. She isn't a drug mule, Gianni. I decide what I want to do with her, and I have. Your opinion is irrelevant here, and if I find out she's been put in danger, friend or not, I will kill you. Do you understand?" My hand tightens around the brake until my knuckles are white.

He grins, my threats useless since he knows me all too well. "You like her."

“She’s a means to an end,” I find myself repeating.

“So, you say, Carmine.” He pulls the car onto the road again without regard for the traffic streaming past us. Cars honk from him cutting them off.

Men like me don’t *like*. I know how to lust, to want, to take and to steal.

I’ll make her feel things she’s never felt before.

And she’ll make you feel things you have never wanted to feel.

I’m lost in those thoughts until the annoying crunch of tires hitting gravel yanks me from my mind.

“Delilah was staying here?” Gianni asks, repulsed.

I am too. I don’t like that she stayed in such a dangerous part of town. The motel is old and has seen better days. The windows are either broken or painted black. The sign that says ‘motel’ flickers on and off. To the right, the dumpsters are full of trash; even from where I sit, I can see the flies.

“This piece of property is now ours,” I say, unbuckling my seatbelt and getting out of the SUV.

“You can’t be serious, Carmine.” He hisses his disapproval. “It’s a dump. The paint is peeling, and the roof is sagging. It reeks of piss and cigarettes.”

I stare at my new investment, the beams holding the roof are nearly cracked in half. One of the faded red doors to a room opens, revealing a high prostitute who is half-naked. Her lipstick is smeared while she counts the money in her hands.

“Delilah stayed here. She was here. The vileness of this place touched her beauty. I don’t care if I have to renovate or tear it down, but it will never touch her again.” I sidestep a used needle and head to the front office. I’m furious at myself for putting her in this position.

The sun’s warmth heats my shoulders and doesn’t ease even when I enter the motel. There’s no air conditioning.

There's no air conditioning. Behind the counter sits a man without pride. His tank top is stained with sweat and food. He watches T.V. while scratching his stomach, but what's behind him captures my attention.

I take off my sunglasses, tuck them into my pocket and ring the bell but it doesn't make a sound. I grit my teeth.

Even the fucking bell doesn't work and this asshole is only looking at the T.V.

My way it is.

Unbuttoning my blazer, I pull my Desert Eagle with an extra-long barrel from the holster and aim it right beside his head. Gianni screws the silencer on the end of the barrel, and I nod in thanks.

I shoot, the bullet splicing the air before slamming into the wall and leaving a hole in the concrete.

The guy jerks and tilts back in his chair before falling back and hitting the floor. When he sees me, fear whitens his face, and the front of his pants darken with piss.

"Do I have your attention now?" I ask, sounding bored, but really, I'm having a great time.

He nods, not getting up, but continues to tremble in his own urine.

"I have two questions." I reach for the logbook recording where all the guests stay. "May I?"

He whimpers in agreement.

"Thank you. See, this wasn't so hard." I run my eyes down the page until I find the room I'm looking for. Only people on the run, who aren't used to being on the run, use fake names like John Smith.

"What's the number there?" I point with my gun. "What does three-hundred-and forty mean?"

"Pe...people who...who...who...have...died here," he stutters.

"You keep track of deaths?" my brows raise.

“I have to...to...get my kicks where I can.”

“Well,” I smile. “I must say, you are an honest man.” I lift my gun and aim it at his head. “This motel is mine now. I’ll make sure to change the count to three-hundred-and-forty-one.” I pull the trigger, and the bullet pierces his chest.

Not saying a word to Gianni, I push by him and head down the sidewalk, passing a few doors before I get to one at the end.

I tuck my gun away and lift my leg, kicking the door in and ripping it right from the hinges.

Her father rolls from the bed, phone in his hand, tears streaming down his face.

“Kill me,” he says, taking me by surprise. “I know you have her. I’ve been calling, and she won’t answer. Don’t kill her. She didn’t do anything wrong. She’s my daughter. Please.” He falls to his knees to beg. “Kill me.”

“I’m not here to kill you, Mr. Reynolds. I’m here to warn you and tell you how brave your daughter is.” I step over the broken, cheap door and look around the room. “I hate she let this place touch her,” I say, quietly. No one else can hear.

Taking my gun out again, I place it against his head and cock it, loving the sound of the bullet sliding into place. “Do you feel the heat of the gun? Is it hot? Does it burn?”

“Y...yes.”

“That’s because it’s just been used. This motel is mine now, Mr. Reynolds. You rent from me. Make one wrong move from here on out, and the agreement your daughter and I made is void. Do you understand?”

“Agreement? She went to you? Stupid girl.”

“Impressive girl.” I correct him. “She is strong, and I’m here to tell you if you try to take her from me, if you try to interfere, if you try to warn her away from me, I’ll kill you. And wouldn’t that be a shame after she made a deal to save your life.”

“No, no, no.” He begins to cry, loud, obnoxious sobs that shake his shoulders as he rocks back and forth. “She deserves more—”

I grip him by the oil-slickened hair and yank his head back, shoving my gun between his lips. “I will give her everything you could never dream of giving her,” I sneer. “She is no longer your daughter. She is mine. She belongs to me now. Your home is yours. Your shop is yours. Your debt is clear. But I am not a man who forgets, Mr. Reynolds. Make the same mistake twice, and you will never see her again. Do you understand?”

He stares up at me through wet lashes. “I understand,” he relents, and I push him away.

“We’re done here.” I step over the disaster of the door and head outside, the air rotten with trash.

“Mr. Milazzo?”

I stop when I hear her father call me, but I don’t turn around.

“She’s a good girl. Don’t hurt her, please,” he begs. “She’s too good for this world.”

Which means she’s too good for me.

“You have my word; she’ll never experience a second of pain for the rest of her life,” I vow.

If she does, I’ll torture the world and everyone it, bring them to their knees so she can take her revenge.

Why? I ask myself.

Because Delilah and I have a deal.

And what I want from our agreement deserves to be protected at all costs.

Chapter Four

Delilah

The sound of a door clicking has me opening my eyes from a deep sleep. I won't admit to Carmine that it's been my best night's sleep in a while. My back doesn't hurt from an old mattress, and the comforter is thick and warm, cocooning me in peace. I never want to leave this bed.

Sitting up, I stretch my arms above my head. I know I need to get up and face the reality I've put myself in, but the silence is nice. There are no questions, tears, or expectations to meet. I'm alone with no one to answer to, and it's nice.

I have time to consider my decisions and why I made them without asking for anyone else's opinion.

I sling the blanket off and toss my legs over the edge of the bed, my feet dangling above the floor because the bed's so high. Rolling my head over my shoulder to stretch my neck, Christy's words echo in my head.

"You can't always be the solution for your father's mistakes, Delilah."

And while putting himself at Carmine's mercy was one of my father's solutions to his problems, it wasn't the first.

Dad is horrible at managing money.

I never discussed my dad's irresponsible spending because I never wanted him to feel bad. I knew he did his best with me, especially after mom left and he had to take on both roles. It couldn't have been easy, so I helped whenever I could.

The shop has been in trouble more than once.

Dad tends to get desperate and wants a solution right away, but it always gets him in trouble. He gambled away the shop's money reserve for emergencies. He lost every cent.

And I took out a student loan to replenish it.

I knew I didn't have to pay it back immediately, so deciding to take out the loan was easy. He thanked me profusely and told me he'd pay me back monthly.

He never did.

He spent the money on a new truck—that he totaled because he was drinking and driving.

I had to take out another loan to bail him out of jail.

And then I had pay for another car.

Suddenly, I had racked up thirty thousand dollars of debt, and none of it was for school because I was on an academic scholarship.

It's not that he isn't a good father, He is. Never once have I questioned if he loves me. He always lets me know, but Dad has always been a mess. He's never made great choices; before I cleaned up his messes, it was mom.

Now that I'm older, I understand why she left. She was tired,

exhausted from taking care of Dad.

After this, after agreeing to carry Carmine's baby and marry him, I am done too. I can't continue to pay for Dad's mistakes. There's nothing left for me to do. There's nothing left for me to give. I've given up my credit, my life, and now my body.

I love my dad so much it hurts, but I realize he isn't good for me.

Family or not, he is toxic and wearing me down. I'm young. I'm only twenty-one, and I'm already tired of life. I'm tired of fixing him.

Maybe that's selfish of me, but it's about time I was selfish.

I deserve that much.

Standing, I notice a note on the nightstand with my name in elegant script on the front. Of course, he had handwriting like this—the kind angled with precision, the loops sharp and to a point. It's almost romantic, but I knew everything he signed meant death.

I trace my name with my fingers, the letters telling a story with how perfect they are, as if the person writing is daring to be told otherwise. There's a hidden challenge here, one of a man always in control, and nothing, not even little ole me, can ruffle his feathers.

I can't wait to be the reason for his downfall.

Delilah,

When you awaken, dinner is in the kitchen, and in the closet are fresh clothes. Please, get comfortable and meet me so we can review the contract.

Your Dearest Future Husband,

Carmine

I scoff, my fingers twitching to crumble the paper and throw it across the room.

Husband.

Out of all the people I thought I'd marry, I never once thought it would be someone like him. So cruel, so calculated, and so necessary.

Sighing, I fold the note and place it on the nightstand beside the bed. The moon's bright glow shines through the window, giving me enough light to walk to the bathroom. Looking at myself in the mirror, I wince when I see the woman staring back at me.

My hair is a mess from sleeping, and I have indents from the pillow on the left side of my face. My lipstick is smeared, and my mascara has darkened my eyes.

With an annoyed groan, I flip the light in the closet and freeze when I see the clothes he talked about in the note.

One half of the closet is filled his with his pristine suits and Italian leather shoes. Even his plain white T-shirts are hung with care, aligned perfectly on black velvet hangers.

"Of course, you hang T-shirts on velvet," I mutter.

I double-check to see if I'm alone and touch the deep blue suit jacket, loving how soft it feels. It's like silk. Feeling bold, I drag my fingers over every suit hanging, ranging from black to blue. There's even a dark purple blazer.

I bet it looked beautiful against his tanned skin.

I jerk my hand back as if burned. Being a captive shouldn't look so good. Is he trying to buy my trust by filling the closet with pretty clothes and expensive purses? Everything is here.

Dresses, skirts, blouses, shirts, heels, sandals, belts, jeans, anything I could ever want is here. How did he know my size?

"Oh my God," I whisper, in awe. I'm completely in love with the emerald green satin gown. I pull off the velvet hanger. There's a full-body mirror in the corner, and I hurry to it, pressing the dress against my body to see what it would look like without playing dress-up.

The straps are thin, and the neckline plunges low, showing my cleavage. The bottom of the dress hits the floor—nothing a pair of heels wouldn't fix. Hell, heels lined half the wall. I had an array of Louboutin's, which red bottoms you'll know immediately. I have them in every color to ensure I had a pair to go with everything.

After hanging the dress up on a hanger that probably costs more than my cell phone payment, I open the drawers next, only to slam them shut again.

He. Did. Not.

The audacity.

I take a deep breath through my nose and out through my mouth; my cheeks were on fire with what I've just seen. There's no way Carmine bought that because if he did, he assumed I'd be wearing that for him.

How cocky is he to think I would want to wear lingerie for him? When I sign my life away to marry him and have his baby, I plan on lying there and waiting for it to be over.

Surely, I won't want him.

But as I open the drawer again, taking the fine red lace in my hands, tracing the thick wire lining the cups that will hold my breasts, I know, I'll want him.

Because I do want him.

I want the evil that cloaks him to darken my body and spiral me to the edge where his madness lives.

"I'm so fucked," I sing, folding the lingerie in the drawer.

The other drawers contain sleepwear. They match and are made of cozy material, but I didn't feel like being cozy. I wanted to ruffle his perfect feathers.

I undress, leaving my dirty clothes in the middle of the floor. Snagging his large black shirt off the hanger, I tug it on over my head and let it drop to my knees.

Even his plain shirts are softer than fresh clothes from the dryer.

I bet this shirt cost more money than my student loan payment.

After turning off the closet light, I wash up at the sink, then brush my hair and toss it up in a messy bun before heading to the doors that have kept me prisoner.

Quickly, I grip the knob and yank open the door. I'm almost surprised it opened easily, revealing a long hallway to lead me to my execution.

Or your salvation.

The floor is cold under the pads of my feet as I venture deeper into the mansion. I take my time, staring at the expensive paintings hanging on the wall, each with a light to illuminate the canvas.

Having no idea where to go when I get to the end of the hall, I continue straight to the living room. There I find a black-painted brick fireplace that takes up most of the wall. On most mantels, people usually display pictures of their family to make the place feel more at home, but not Carmine.

Some candles that have never been lit along with a small chest directly in the middle decorate the narrow ledge. The chest isn't locked. Curious, I lift the lid but can't see inside. I stand on my tiptoes and see rows of cigars.

I don't know why I'm disappointed. I expected something darker...bloodier.

“What the fuck do you think you're wearing?”

I jump when I hear his voice right next to my ear, his breath warm against my cheek. I spin around, my breasts rubbing against his chest. My nipples harden from the friction. His hands fall on my hips, and his fingers grip the shirt as if he wants to rip it off.

“Your shirt is huge. It fits me just fine. It's like a dress. No one can see anything.”

“I bought you clothes.” His chest heaves, and he steps forward. Somehow, I find myself pinned against the fireplace. One arm is stretched to my right, his hand gripping the mantel as he leans forward.

I need to stop finding myself pinned against surfaces of this house with Carmine. Though, something about him trapping me affects me in ways that would disappoint a normal person. I press my thighs together, fighting the ache growing between my legs.

“I don't want my brothers or anyone else seeing you in my clothes, Delilah. Go change.” He tilts his head to the side and leans forward. “Now.”

His lips are a ghost over mine, and my skin erupts in goosebumps alarming me of danger.

“No.”

His hand wraps around my throat like a necklace, and I tilt my head back, staring into the void of his eyes.

Except with him being so close, I notice a gold ring around his pupil with flecks of garnet dotting the iris—as if specs of blood have permanently found their home in his vision.

His lashes are long and dark. A man has no business with lashes like that. It's dangerous for a woman like me because those eyes make it that much harder to fight the lust I deny I have for him.

"No one tells me no, Sweetling." Wickedness laces his words.

His voice is rough, low and smoky, as if he just smoked a cigar.

"Get used to it. I won't bow down to you, Carmine."

His thumb presses against my bottom lip, and a slight smirk tilts his lips. "You'll bow, eventually." He kisses my cheek and brings his mouth to my ear. "Eventually, you'll even get on your knees for me."

I swallow, not wanting to give into the darkly decadent spell he is casting over me. "I'll never get on my knees for you, Carmine."

A soft chuckle grazes my neck as he leans closer. He'll be able to feel the erratic pulse of my heartbeat if he places his lips against the side of my throat. All I have is the mask I'm wearing, and I can't have him taking it off.

I can't let him see how weak he makes me, how terrified he truly makes me feel.

"Want to bet?" he pulls away, a glint in his eyes tells me he knows something I don't.

"You'll lose."

He tucks his hands in his pockets and stares at me with amusement. "There's one thing you need to know about me, Delilah."

I cross my arms over my chest. "Let me guess, you never lose?"

My stomach takes that moment to remind me I haven't eaten, and I stroll by him toward the kitchen open to the living room.

He grips my arm and yanks me back. “I don’t put myself in a position to lose, Delilah. If I am, I deal with it.”

“So you cheat?”

“I don’t fight fair, Sweetling. I fight to get ahead. I fight to get what I want, and I don’t care whom I hurt.” He reaches out to touch my face, and I cringe, closing my eyes so I don’t see what he is about to do. He tucks a piece of my wayward hair behind my ear. “But the last person I will hurt is you.”

I open my eyes and get lost in his, the intense depths having me hold my breath. The contact is unnerving. I’m not sure if I believe him. I know what he is capable of, and if I make him upset, will there be a time when I’m facing the barrel of his gun?

“I will also hurt whomever puts one hand on you. You are mine, Delilah. Your worries, laughter, fears, the air in your lungs, belong to me.”

“They don’t belong to you until I sign that contract,” I remind him, overcoming the loud thump of my racing heart.

Carmine gestures toward the kitchen. “After you, Sweetling.”

His fingers brush my leg when I walk by him, and his footsteps sound behind me.

I don’t need to see him to know he’s watching me. I can feel his gaze roaming my backside, and a flush warms my cheeks from the weight of his stare. What kind of woman does it make me to enjoy the attention of a villain?

In the kitchen, my fingers skim the breakfast bar’s granite countertop. The stools are strategically placed the same width apart. All the appliances are stainless steel, and light bulbs hang in various lengths above a kitchen table that can easily sit twelve people.

A glossy and matte black mural covers the wall facing me. The more I look at it, the more confused I am trying to interpret the random angry, tear-like slashes. It’s emotional, and the longer I stare at it, the more I fall into the abyss of emotion.

“It’s called ‘Oblivion.’” Carmine slides out a chair for me, and I take a seat. The shirt I’m wearing rides up my thighs a few inches.

“It’s haunting,” I say, honestly, folding my hands on the table.

Carmine sits at the head of the table. His chair is different from the others, larger with carvings engraved in the wood. He leans over, slipping one arm behind my chair and gripping the edge of the seat between my legs with the other. He yanks my chair forward, dragging me closer to him.

I yelp, slapping the table with my palms.

His fingers tease my inner knee before drifting up my leg and tracing circles on my thigh, close to where I’ve been hiding how much I burn for him.

“And so are you,” he whispers into my ear, gripping the hem of the shirt before tugging it down to cover more of my legs. “You will test me, I can already tell, but you will not show anyone what is mine. We are not the only ones who live here. Do you understand me? I’d hate to have to blind one of my brothers.”

“You wouldn’t.” But as I search the inky pools of his eyes, I know he’s telling the frightful truth. “They are your brothers. You couldn’t possibly—”

“—It would be hard for me, but I would.” He toys with the collar of my shirt. “They would do the same to me, to anyone who threatened to take advantage of a sight that did not belong to them.”

“That’s barbaric.” The words are strangled in the back of my throat from the terror of his inability to tell lies and the lust clutching my tongue. I don’t know what’s scarier, the fact that I love how afraid I am of him or how much his intensity turns me on.

“It’s the way we are. It’s how we live.” He says it easily, matter-of-factly, as if anyone who doesn’t understand must just accept it as the way things are.

A banging of pots and pans sounds in the kitchen, and I jump.

“It’s only Marie, my private chef,” he explains.

Of course, he has a private chef.

A silver platter is placed in front of me, and I lean back surprised by the presentation. I’m used to either takeout pizza or anything I can pop in the oven to heat. Ramen is good, too. It’s cheap and fast.

“Chicken Alfredo with steamed broccoli with a side of lemon arugula salad.” Marie lifts the lid, and steam billows from the pasta to my nose. As I inhale, my mouth waters from the delicious aromas.

Marie sets down Carmine’s plate next. He gives the older woman a small, genuine smile.

He seems to care for her in his way.

“Thank you, Marie. It looks wonderful, as always.”

“Of course, Mr. Milazzo. I’ll be right back with your drinks. A nice simple sweet tea.”

She hurries away in her apron, vanishing into the kitchen. I pick up my fork, but my appetite has vanished. How am I supposed to eat when my freedom is on a timer? I’m about to be shackled.

“You need to eat everything on your plate.” He points to my food with his fork.

“How do you expect me to eat when we have so much to discuss?”

Marie takes that moment to return with our drinks before disappearing into the kitchen again.

“Don’t worry about Marie overhearing anything. She knows not to say a word. She’s trustworthy,” he explains.

“I’m not worried about her.” I push the pasta around, and with a clatter of his fork, he drags me closer to him, the legs of the chair rubbing against the floor.

Next, he grabs my plate to bring it closer. “If I have to feed you myself, I will, Sweetling.”

“I’ll eat after we sign the contract,” I say, anxiety twisting my stomach. I don’t know what a contract is supposed to look like, or what to expect. How do I know he won’t be asking for more than he’s already asking for?

What else is there to give?

“You’ll eat now.” He stabs a piece of broccoli from his plate and begins to eat.

“Carmine, please, I’m too nervous.” I decide to answer honestly, wanting him to hear just how scared I am.

He swirls the pasta and lifts the fork in the air, bringing it to my lips. “There’s no need to be nervous. I’m going to take care of you. Now, open.”

“You aren’t feeding me.”

“I will if you won’t eat. I won’t have you starve, or worse. Now.” He leans forward; the shadow of his body covering his plate. “Open.”

“This is ridiculous.”

“Then stop acting ridiculous and open your fucking mouth.” He doesn’t say it with harshness but with want instead.

I part my lips and sit completely still.

“Good girl,” he praises, pushing the fork between my lips.

The flavor of the perfectly seasoned cream sauce bursts over my tongue. I moan as I chew, my stomach awakening with hunger again and my nerves settling. I reach for my fork, but his hand falls over mine stopping me.

Without a word or explanation, he wraps the pasta around the fork and lifts it to my mouth again.

Confused, I open my mouth. I want to ask him why he’s doing this, but I know he won’t answer.

“You like being taken care of,” he says, staring at me with that familiar hard edge he shows all his enemies.

“Who doesn’t?” I retort and dab my mouth with my napkin. “Everyone likes to be pampered.”

I reach for my glass of tea and take a few sips. The tea is sweet and refreshing. “Who doesn’t?” I retort and dab my mouth with my napkin. “Everyone likes to be pampered.”

“We’ll have to agree to disagree.” He stabs a piece of broccoli and holds it in the air.

“I’m not the biggest fan of broccoli.”

“That’s too bad. You need your vegetables.”

With a roll of my eyes, I zip my lips and place my hands on my lap. “I’m not twelve, Carmine. I won’t grow if I eat my greens.”

He prods my mouth. “No, but you’ll have nutrients and be strong, which you’ll need for the things I have planned for you.” A promise of something dark drifts over his features. “So, open your mouth, Delilah.”

I shake my head, defying him.

“Eat three pieces of broccoli. That’s all I ask.”

“What do I get if I do?”

He leans back, sets his fork down, and wipes his mouth with a napkin. Pushing his plate to the side, he reaches into his back pocket, and an envelope appears. “We will go over this contract right now, Sweetling, and put your fears to rest.”

I tap the table with my fingernails and stare at the contract that holds the rest of my life in his hands. “I just have to eat the broccoli?”

He flashes an oddly endearing lop-sided grin, showing a hint of dimples. “That’s it. See? I compromise.”

I immediately pop three broccoli pieces in my mouth, now overflowing with nasty trees, and hold my breath while I chew.

Disgusting.

I swallow; one of the branches catches in my throat, and I cough to dislodge it.

The attempt doesn't work.

I slap my chest, and green sprays from my mouth. Tears brim my eyes as I struggle for breath. A chair clatters to the floor, and hands pull me to my feet. Carmine wraps his arms around my waist, tucking my back against his chest to perform the Heimlich maneuver.

I'm gasping for breath, clawing at my throat, tears drip from my eyes, and my vision blurs. Carmine squeezes me so hard that pain seizes my ribs. Finally, I cough, sending broccoli chunks flying across the kitchen.

Strings of spit drip from my mouth as I struggle to breathe again. My nails dig into Carmine's hand which is still pressed against my stomach.

I almost died from fucking broccoli.

"I have you. You're okay. You're safe." He spins me around and buries my face in his chest as I cry in relief, the gasps still coming out loud and panicked. His fingers comb through my hair while he shushes me, crooning sweet nothings I can't understand because I can't focus on anything beyond my ragged breathing and burning chest.

Gently, he swings me into his arms and sits down on a nearby chair, so I'm curled up on his lap, cheek pressed to his shoulder.

Leaning away from me, his hands fall on either side of my face. "You scared the life out of me." An hint of anger edges his tone. "If you don't want to be treated like a child, don't stuff three pieces of broccoli in your mouth at once, Delilah. I never want to experience fear like that again." He wipes my mouth clean and brings water to my lips. "Slow," he warns, fingers still slicing through my hair that's long since fallen out of my bun.

I didn't argue. The cold water soothes the rawness of my throat, easing the ache. Carmine takes the cup away from me, setting it next to the golden plate with my half-eaten dinner.

Sagging against him, I shut my eyes and take a deep breath while he rubs my back.

The soothing circles are nice, and soon, I'm relaxed and breathing normally. I turn my head on his shoulder until my nose is pressing against the side of his neck, and I inhale the spicy scent of his expensive perfume. "Thank you," I croak, my throat hoarse from that damn piece of broccoli.

"I said I wouldn't let anything hurt you. Even wayward broccoli."

I chuckle and lift my head, wanting to see the humor in his eyes, but there's none. He's serious.

"It was only broccoli," I rasp. "I shouldn't have put so much in my mouth. I was eager to get to the contract."

His fingertips are under my chin, and he leans closer to me, irises as dark as a starless sky. "There will be plenty of times where your eagerness will be rewarded and your mouth will be full, but only when I say, okay, Sweetling?"

"There you go, speaking things you know nothing about." I reach for the water again and take a sip, continuing to sit on his lap.

"I know enough." He slides the envelope to me and taps the contract with his index finger. "Open it. You'll find I've already signed it."

"I think it's best to look this over while I'm not in your lap." I slide off his thighs and I'm surprised he lets me go. By the way his jaw clenches, he isn't happy about it.

Still, I appreciate him giving me space to read this. I've seen many sides to Carmine Milazzo, depending on his mood, and I never know which side I'll get.

Opening the letter with shaky hands, I take a deep breath, unfold the paper and read:

This contract is entered into by Carmine Milazzo (First Party) and Delilah June Reynolds (Second Party). The term of this agreement shall begin within one week of Ms. Delilah

Reynolds staying in the Milazzo Estate and shall continue through the end of three years.

The specific terms of the Contract are as follows:

Delilah Reynolds has agreed to marry and carry Carmine Milazzo's child in return for her father's debt to be paid.

When the two parties have sexual intercourse for the first time, Delilah Reynolds will choose when it happens.

Delilah Reynolds agrees to share Carmine Milazzo's bed and no other, not even her own.

If/When the two parties have a child together, both parties will raise said child together. Delilah shall be a part of the child's life always, at all times. The mother will always have access to her child.

Delilah Reynolds will agree to wear engagement and wedding rings provided by Carmine Milazzo, as will Carmine—no exceptions.

Delilah Reynolds will not request a separation or divorce for three years—if she wants one, only when the contract has ended.

Carmine Milazzo will financially support Delilah Reynolds and their child for the duration of their lives. If Mr. Milazzo passes away prior to Ms. Reynolds or their child, his estate will continue to provide for their needs.

This agreement will only be broken should one or both of the parties expire prior to the terms of the agreement being met.

Delilah Reynolds must kiss Carmine Milazzo before the parties go to sleep. The first time is to be initiated by her, but every other time, Carmine Milazzo will not rest until the kiss has happened.

Carmine Milazzo vows to protect Delilah Reynolds and their child at all costs, including with his life, finances, and well-being.

This Contract may not be modified. This Contract is legally binding until either Party amends and/or signs a new

agreement.

Carmine's signature is in red ink, the perfect cursive hugging the black line along with the date. My spot is empty and waiting to be signed.

"Do you have any questions, Sweetling?" he asks, placing the red fountain pen in front of me.

"If I did, would you answer honestly?"

For some reason, he grabs my water glass and hands it to me. "Drink. You need to stay hydrated."

I do as he says, pausing as I swallow because why am I doing as he says? Do I like not having to think for myself?

"I'll always be honest with you, Delilah. Lies do not make a good man."

"But killing does?"

He stands, bending down until his face is close to mine. His hand braces against the chair while his other grips the table's edge. "There's a fine line between good and bad. Good men do what it takes to protect themselves; bad men only do what it takes to protect themselves."

"You consider yourself a good man, then?" I dare to ask.

"Mmm," he hums, softly, playing with my hair while he considers my question. "I'm a good man with very bad intentions." He grabs the pen and places it in my palm, curling my fingers around it. "My intentions with you are purely selfish, Ms. Reynolds."

The hurt in my throat flares to life as I gulp. "Those intentions aren't listed. They weren't part of the deal."

He sits back down slowly, and a smug look crosses his face. "Sign the document, Sweetling. I don't want to waste another second where you aren't mine."

But did I want to be his?

The voice in my head says, 'hell yes.'

Pen to paper, the red ink reminds me of blood as I sign my life away. As I carve my name into the paper, I glance at the terms again. Every single one of them protects me in some way.

“Why do you want a kiss at the end of every night?” I sign the document and gently set the pen down. “That’s very intimate.”

“That isn’t up for discussion.” He snatches the document from my hands and points it to my plate. “Eat your food, and don’t choke on it this time.”

I sag against the chair and push my plate away. I’m starting to think understanding Carmine’s mind is an impossible task I shouldn’t attempt.

A kiss doesn’t sound that bad, does it?

Chapter Five

Carmine

“Is she okay?” Matias asks as he blows cigar smoke into the air in the cigar room.

I fold the contract and slip it into my back pocket, forgoing the cigar and heading straight for the whiskey in the crystal decanter.

This woman has a hold on me that I can't seem to shake. The moment she stepped foot into my home and confronted me, I was drawn to her bravery; not even grown men would dare to do such a thing.

She's strong-willed, sassy, reluctant, annoyingly beautiful, making me...feel things.

Things I don't like to feel. Things I work hard to never feel. I numb my heart and soul because when I kill, I can't let myself feel remorse or guilt.

It's taken my entire life to become the man I am, to kill without blinking, to torture without an afterthought, but one look from her and something inside me unravels.

It's aggravating.

“She's fine. A little shaken up, but fine,” I answer, then down my whiskey in one gulp. I pour another, probably a little too much, but I need a buzz caused by anything else besides her.

When she choked on her food, an emotion welled inside me for the first time since I was a boy, and my father held a blade against my skin.

Fear.

I was afraid she would die before I even had a chance to experience the kind of life we could have together. Her face

had turned red, her eyes watered. She'd clawed at her throat, and for a moment all I could do was sit there and watch.

I had no idea what to do because I've never had to save someone I cared about—and yes, I care for her. I just haven't figured out what that means, or how she's managed to sink her claws into me so easily.

But when I'd finally got my head on straight and I saved her, anger was the first emotion I felt. Why the fuck would she put herself in that position? Who shoves food into their mouth like that? And she says she doesn't need anyone to take care of her?

I scoff at the idea.

How has she lived this long without someone looking out for her? Her father hasn't. I know all about his mistakes and what she's done to make sure he stays afloat.

My poor Sweetling. She is always sacrificing herself, but I won't let that happen anymore. Even if she's willingly sacrificing herself to me,

it will be the last time she ever has to again. She'll never have to try to protect others or herself again.

"I sent Marie to her quarters and had the broccoli from the kitchen cleaned up," Ari says, snagging a book from one of the shelves.

"Thank you," I answer, finding my voice at last.

"I don't think I've ever seen you like this, Carmine," Matias adds. The airy breath he exhales tells me he is still enjoying his cigar.

My fingers curl harder around the glass as I stare out the window, daring my reflection to lie to me, to tell me I'm not bothered by the woman in my home. "I'm not like anything," I answer, my voice so gruff that even I don't believe what I'm saying.

"I know you want a child, but dare I say," Ari sounds amused, and in the glass, I can see him lean forward, bracing his arms on his knees while he smirks, "you like her."

Matias grins, too, a cloud of smoke leaving his lips as he tilts his head back.

“I don’t like her. Men like me don’t like anything,” I state. “Or anyone.”

“Right. Right. The Devil isn’t allowed to want for himself, right?”

“It’s business.”

“So, I can ask her out? Right?” Ari tests the waters of my anger, and I take a deep breath, images of them together flooding my mind.

She’d be happier with someone like him—*if* I cared about her happiness. I’m twenty years older than her, and if I were a less confident man, I might not believe I had anything to offer her.

But I know exactly who I am.

My brothers are too soft. They haven’t earned their title of bloodthirsty killers yet. They roll over too easily during a fight. I have them do easier jobs or clean up my mess. And I have a feeling Delilah likes a challenge; she doesn’t want someone who will just give in.

She wants a fight.

She likes the resistance she finds with me.

“I’ll take her out, brother. I’ll show her a nice time. Don’t worry. I won’t put my baby in her unless she asks for it.”

My temper snaps. Hot rage burns me from the inside out. I spin around and roar, throwing my glass across the room. The glass shatters against the wall, and I remember I’ve done this twice today.

Has it only been a fucking day since Delilah came into my life? Already I feel like I’m losing control over myself.

I stomp forward and pick my baby brother up by his collar. Ari looks smug as if he won, and Matias stands to act as mediator.

“You won’t fucking touch her, Ari.”

“Why not?” he probes, and I push him against the bookshelf. “You only want her for business. What if I want her for more? What if I saw her wearing your shirt and saw those mile-long legs? I bet they would look good spread out on my bed, Carmine.”

I thrust him against the shelf, knocking a few books to the floor, then throw him down to join him. I draw back my fist in the air, then let it fly punching him in the face. Knuckles meet skin, and he is still smiling like a sick bastard despite the

blood flowing into his mouth staining his teeth red.

Matias tackles me to the ground, and I fight against him. My usually styled hair falls into my face. My knuckles are bleeding, my heart is jackhammering in my chest, and my anger has only reached the surface.

I’m far from being done.

I rip myself free of Matias and lunge forward again, only to have Matias stop me before I beat his twin to death.

Ari is sitting up, his back against the shelf and he rips a page out of a book to use as a napkin to wipe the blood from his lip.

“Talk about her like that again and I’ll fucking kill you, Ari.” I pull myself away from Matias and rub a hand over my mouth while Ari chuckles.

“I’m right,” he says, red saliva dripping from his chin. “You like her.”

“All this to prove a point?” I stretch my fingers as the ache spreads across my knuckles.

He stands and spits blood onto the floor. His lip is split open, and he has a bruise across his cheek. “Yes, all this to prove a point. You won’t let anyone else touch her, but you say she’s only business? Transactions don’t have feelings, Carmine. If she makes you feel this unhinged, she isn’t business. She’s more.”

“I’ve known her a day.”

“As if that matters,” he scoffs, snagging the decanter full of whiskey as he swings open the door to leave. “I’m going to get some ice and get drunk. Don’t interrupt me,” he announces, keeping the door wide open.

“You need to get your head on straight.” Matias shoves me with his shoulder. “Whatever this girl is to you, figure it the fuck out. The last thing we need with our Romano issue is you losing your mind over a woman. You can’t afford to even look like you have a weakness.”

“You think I don’t know that?”

“No,” he says, a little too honest for my liking, and my eyes turn to slits as I look at him. “I think some of the power has gone to your head, and now you have something worth taking, Carmine. Do you get that? This woman will be your wife, the mother of your child, and she will be a target. Your child will too. This situation doesn’t only complicate things for you, but all of us.” Matias exits the room next, and I’m left alone in the cigar room, staring at the destruction I’ve caused.

“Damn it,” I hiss, kicking one of the fallen books across the floor. “What’s gotten into me?” My brothers are right. I am quickly becoming unhinged.

It’s time to fix that.

I leave the cigar room, climbing up the steps to the hallway that leads to my wing. When I open the door to my room, it’s empty. She isn’t in bed, and after I check the bathroom, she isn’t there either.

Needing a break from her presence, I see having the room to myself as a victory. Exhaling, I fall against the sink’s counter and hang my head, the cuts on my knuckles burning. Cracking my neck, I push myself away, turn on the shower, then undress.

The scars on my chest, abdomen, shoulders and back reveal themselves. The twins didn’t have to deal with our father’s abuse. I killed him before he could do the same to them. Every morning, every night, my father would want me to learn how to become a real man...the lesson carved into me with a knife.

The day I stopped crying was the day he was no longer able to inflict pain on me.

It took years to build up the strength to not flinch, to not make a sound, to not scream, but eventually, I did. Now, I bear the marks that show my weakness.

Someone gasps behind me,

and without a word, I turn around. My pants are undone, and I let Delilah see the monster she's tied to.

Nothing but death can separate us now.

Without blinking, I slam the door in her face, and punch the wall with my injured hand. My reflection mocks me, and without giving it another glance, I step out of my pants and head to the shower.

I toss my head back, letting the hot spray rush over me, coating my flesh. Spinning around, the water's pressure beats against me. Chin to chest, I watch the water turn a light pink from washing off the blood from my knuckles.

I won't apologize to Ari. He provoked me on purpose. Apologies are for people who feel regret and recognize what they've done wrong—I don't fall into either category.

My life would have one less complication if I released her and let her go home, let her live the rest of her life without me—another shadow darkening her every step.

I press my palms against the wall. The water rushes down my back, and all I can think of is her fucking someone else, having someone else's child. I can't let that happen.

I won't allow it to happen.

Her experiences are mine.

I need to accept that now. I'm not the same man I was this morning before she walked into my home. This man that I have become is confused, trigger-happy, and restless.

A new normal I'll have to get used to with her around.

After washing, I turn off the water and grab a towel from the built-in shelves. I wrap it around my waist after drying

myself and open the door to the bedroom.

She's still standing there, looking pissed-off. Her hand is on her hip, but her eyes trail down my body slowly.

I grip the top of the doorframe and lean forward. "Look all you like, Sweetling. After today, it's all yours."

Her cheeks turn pink, and she steps away. Her attention moves to the scars, but she looks away and doesn't ask about them.

Good. It's none of her business. If I want to share it, I will.

"Sit down, please." She points to the bed.

I let go of the doorframe and stalk forward. "Since you asked so nicely."

I brush by her and sit down, the towel parting enough to show everything but my cock.

She gasps, flustered, takes my injured hand and places a frozen bag of peas on my knuckles.

"You act as if you've never seen a man naked, Delilah. You don't have to play coy with me," I say, enjoying the softness of her touch as she presses the bag against my hand.

She doesn't say anything. Delilah won't even look at me. Instead, she examines my knuckles and grabs the first aid kit. She sits out on the bed.

"What happened?" she asks, cleaning the wound with alcohol.

I hiss when it begins to burn.

"Really?" She lifts a brow at me. "Big bad Carmine Milazzo can handle gunshot wounds, but he can't handle a little disinfectant?"

"It's different," I say, bristling at her criticism.

"Mm-hmm." She doesn't hide her humor well. Her lips are tightly rolled against one another, but the smile is still there. Lifting my hand, she peeks up at me through her dark lashes and blows cool air over the cuts and bruises.

I hold my breath, staring at her with wonderment.

“Better?” she asks, before dabbing more ointment across my knuckles.

I nod without saying anything. I don’t trust my voice.

No one has ever taken care of me before. I’m not sure I like it.

She wraps my hand in a bandage and places the icepack on it again, every movement gentle and careful, as if not wanting to hurt me more.

Nothing she could do to me could hurt.

“Thank you,” I say honestly, our eyes meeting in a heated embrace.

Time seems to slow, and the air in the room stills, making it hard to breathe. I lean forward just an inch to make her wonder if I will kiss her.

I’m won’t, but I want to.

I won’t break my word or the contract. The ball is in her court.

Her gaze drifts from my lips to my chest and to my cock, then she scrambles from the bed. “You need to be more careful. Make sure your cuts don’t get infected.”

She tries to run into the bathroom, but I’m there in a flash, grabbing the door before she can shut it.

I kick it open, take her in my arms, and force her to look at me by tugging on the thick of her hair. “Have you ever seen a man naked before, Delilah?”

“Yes,” she says, as if she’s offended.

I drag her hand across my chest, and a dark purr builds inside me. “Have you ever touched a man? Have you ever been fucked?” I pin her against the wall and hold her hands above her head, shoving my knee between her legs. The towel around my waist holds on for dear life. “Have you ever orgasmed on another man’s cock?”

“You’re foul. And that’s none of your business,” she seethes, our lips mere centimeters apart.

One hand drifts to her waist and clutches her hip. “It’s my business. Everything about you is my business now, Delilah.”

“No,” she whispers. “No, I’ve never been with anyone.”

An unstable breath floats between us, and I realize it’s from me. My cock hardens beneath the towel, my lust climbing to new heights. I shut my eyes, trying to calm down.

“How unfortunate,” I mutter, snapping my eyes back open while trailing my finger over her hip bone. “Your first time will be with a man like me.”

I back away, not bothering to hide how she affects me. I want her to know.

“Only when I’m ready.” She dares me to say otherwise, but I would never.

It’s important that when we have sex, she want me so much, she’ll beg for me, plead for me to ease the ache I’ve created. That she makes the first move is an essential aspect of the agreement that I will never change.

I’ll die holding to that agreement.

“Only when you’re ready,” I repeat softly, the nerves in her voice loosening the tight string managing my arousal. “I swear it.”

“How do I know you mean it?” She pulls at the hem of my shirt she’s still wearing, her gaze locked on the floor.

I don’t like that. I want her attention on me. I know our relationship is unconventional, but it is one I want to build. I have a lot to learn, and I will for her.

“And how do I know you won’t bring other women to bed? I’m supposed to trust that you only want me. We just met—”

With a growl, I wrap my hand around her nape. “I take my agreements seriously. I am not a fucking twenty-something-year-old idiot who doesn’t know what he wants. I don’t take time to make decisions. I know what I want. I take what I

want, Delilah. No other woman will warm our bed for as long as you lie in it.”

I’ll sleep well tonight in that bed, knowing I’ll be her first, and I don’t care whom I’ll have to kill for me to be her last.

Chapter Six

Delilah

I can't sleep.

How can I when Carmine's body is so close to mine I can feel his heat? I can feel his breath against my skin with every exhale. The man is pure seduction wrapped in barbed wire, and I know if I get too close, he'll cut me and make me bleed.

I look at the clock on the nightstand and see it's only five in the morning. All I've done is toss and turn all night. I can't stand it anymore. How am I supposed to be in his bed and fight the temptation he causes?

Turning over, I watch him sleep. Even resting, he carries the weight of the world on his shoulders. His brows are furrowed, causing a wrinkle in his forehead, and his lips frown. Perhaps some sins can never sleep.

I scoot closer, tracing the scars with my eyes. Everywhere I look, there's another. They are smooth, sharp, and vary in length. One travels from his collarbone, down his pec, and then his abdomen. I can't see the rest because of the blanket.

I have so many questions, but I know he won't answer them. He won't answer anything I ask, but he expects me to answer all his questions. I don't like it, and I'll fight tooth and nail until we are on an equal playing field.

He's handsome, annoyingly so. I don't want to be attracted to him, but I am. I find myself wanting to get closer, wanting to get every story of every scar. I want to ease the wrinkle between his brow, and I want to kiss away the frown on his lips. He pulls me into his darkness without trying. He is overly possessive and arrogant.

So damn arrogant.

And I find it sexy.

What does that say about me?

Especially when he wants to keep me locked inside the house, barefoot and pregnant. That's not okay with me. I won't be a hostage. School isn't mentioned in the contract. He might want to take everything from me, but I won't let him take this.

A small part of me feels bad for deceiving him, but he'd deceive me, wouldn't he? Without a blink of an eye. Without a second thought or glance.

Inching backward, I keep my eyes trained on his face to make sure he doesn't wake. His black lashes flutter over his sculpted cheekbones, his eyes moving behind his lids as he dreams. For a split second, just one, I consider staying in this bed.

My butt hangs off the edge of the bed, and I'm about to roll away and make a run for the bathroom when his arm wraps around my waist and tugs me against his chest. I gasp, holding my breath as I feel his body against mine. His skin is warm, and he smells so good like a bonfire and whiskey rolled into one, and I know fire and alcohol combined are deadly.

But here I am, putting myself in harm's way and becoming his target.

His arm around me is weighted like a blanket, and I feel safe. I stay there for a minute, letting his heat seep into me, his flaccid cock still huge in the confinement of his underwear as he presses against me. His lips find my forehead, kissing me gently before rolling over and giving me his back.

I cover my mouth when I see the scars. Tears prickle my eyes. There are so many; I can't even see smooth skin. I want to reach out to comfort him, but I know he won't take it well, especially after how he reacted when I saw him in the bathroom. So, touching them will be out of the question. Plus, I want to go to school, and I won't be able to if I wake him up.

I take my time slipping out of bed, careful not to move too fast. Slow and steady, I ease the blanket down on the mattress and stand as soon as my feet hit the floor.

For a long moment, I don't dare move. I wait. I watch to double-check he doesn't wake or sense that I'm gone. After a few minutes, I tiptoe away from him, slip into the bathroom, and dodge into the closet.

Pressing a hand to my chest, I let out the breath I had been holding the entire time. My heart is racing, and I throw off the shirt I'm wearing. I snag a pair of comfortable leggings, an off-the-shoulder shirt and a tank top to wear underneath, then finish getting ready.

Looking in the mirror propped in the corner, I brush my hair and do a quick side braid before sliding on a pair of black flats. I wash my face with the faucet barely running so I don't make any noise, brush my teeth, and just as I'm about to leave, I remember I don't have my backpack.

I can borrow paper and a pencil until I can get my bag.

After slipping through the bathroom door, I tiptoe across the bedroom, pausing when I hear the bed squeak. Wincing, I turn to see if Carmine's awake, but he's flat on his back, arm over his face, sleeping soundly.

I pull open the double doors, wincing when the hinges creak.

I open them just enough to slip through then quietly hurry down the hall. I relax when I'm far away, knowing I left the wolf's den without getting caught.

The entire house is dark, quiet, and eerie. It's hard to believe a fortress like this knows how to rest. Walking down the stairs to the front door, I have a smug pep in my step. Did they not think I'd try to escape somehow? I mean, I'm coming back, but I'm going to fight for my freedom, no matter the cost.

“Going somewhere, Princess?”

My hand slaps against my chest, and I sag against the front door. Footsteps thud against the expensive floor, and a bruised face appears from the shadows, the stench of alcohol following him.

I think back to Carmine's knuckles and piece together what must have happened.

“I’m Ari. To clear up any confusion,” he says. “You might get me confused with my twin, Matias.”

“Well, with bruises on your face, I doubt it,” I sass, opening the door to get out of here when he places his hand against the door.

He moves closer, invading my space. “I’m not going to stop you from going, Princess. It will infuriate Carmine to wake up and to know you’re gone, and you need to be ready for those consequences when he finds you because he will. And I won’t lie to him. Tell me where you’re going, Delilah,” he orders, keeping his hand on the door so I can’t escape.

“You’ll figure it out.” I fight him, struggling to open the door, and he pulls out his phone.

The light shines from the screen, illuminating the bruises on his face, and they’re gruesome. I have to look away.

“You don’t like what you see? Well, that’s just a taste of what Carmine does when someone says something he doesn’t like. He got very bent out of shape when I talked about you. Nothing personal. I wanted to rile him up.”

Did he beat his brother for me? Do I find that romantic?

In a sick and twisted way, I do.

“Do you see this button?” he shows me a screen with different views of the house, and there’s a red button at the top. “I press this, and the entire house goes on lockdown. The doors will seal into place with steel bars, and steel sheets will cover the windows. If you don’t tell me where you’re going, I will press this button and wake Carmine up. He is not a morning person. He isn’t an anytime-of-day person, actually. So, he’ll be furious. Where are you going, Delilah?”

He has been so rude. “I’m going to school. I’m in college, and I will not let him stop me from earning my degree. I’ve already had my dad do that one too many times, and I won’t let Carmine’s need to control me pick up where my dad left off.”

Ari grins, a side smirk that tells me he likes what I’m saying. “You won’t have much time, but if I were you, I’d

expect to see us in a few hours.”

“You’re going to let me go? You aren’t going to stop me?”

“Why would I do that? Plus, if I do this, I’ll be your favorite Milazzo in the family, making Carmine angry too.”

“Why do you like to make him mad?”

“It’s fun. He’s always so put together. Plus, it’s what little brothers are for.” He tucks his phone into his pocket and opens the door, allowing me to leave. “Be careful.”

I snort and step outside, but Ari’s hand grips my arm. “I’m serious, Delilah. Be careful. You have no idea what we are capable of. If anything happens to you, expect my brother to burn the city to the ground.”

“He barely knows me.”

“Doesn’t matter. You’re his. And he always takes care of what’s his. You’re family now, Princess. We protect family.”

“Not according to your face.”

“Even families fight,” he corrects me. “Plus, I basically asked to get my ass kicked, and it was all for you. Have fun at school. Learn something.” He slams the door in my face, and I hear a click.

Panicking because I don’t know if I made the right decision going out, I try the handle, wiggling it for good measure.

Nothing.

He locked me out.

“Damn, Milazzo men.” They are all the same and oddly intense, which should be a con on my pros and cons list, but I’m finding my pro side longer.

What’s that say about me?

Wanting to get out of here before the sun is officially up, I run down the path that leads to the gate, passing the stone fountain.

I notice coins at the bottom, as if someone has made wishes. Why make wishes when you already have everything you

could ever want? Maybe they were their victims' wishes, made before someone put them out of their misery.

I look up at the balcony belonging to Carmine's room. The sun is creeping over the roof, telling everyone it is time to get up. Guilt eats away at me, but I stick with my decision and begin to climb the gate. Since it is a tall piece of solid metal, no one can see through it. I have to place my feet on the beams that stabilize it to hoist myself over.

Climbing the gate and grunting, I realize how weak I am. I need to work out.

At the top, I take a deep breath, already exhausted, and then look down.

Oh, this is high.

Too high.

Closing my eyes, I grip the top of the gate and swing my body down, stretching until I'm as close to the ground as possible before letting go.

Releasing my hold on the gate, I freefall and keep my knees bent so I don't hurt myself. I grunt when I land, holding out my arms to steady myself, and I'm impressed.

I didn't think I had it in me.

The university is a few miles away, so I decided to walk a block and call an Uber to take me the rest of the way. I have class and then a study session at the library. No one will interfere with my success.

Not even Carmine Milazzo.

Plus, I hear the Devil likes to chase, so I might as well give him something to catch.

Chapter Seven

Carmine

I don't need to reach for her to know she isn't there. I felt her get out of bed, but I thought she was just using the restroom. I let my guard down. I became so comfortable in bed with her, loving the feeling of having someone there to warm the usually cold and unforgiving side that I didn't think she wouldn't return.

Furious doesn't begin to describe what I feel, or worse; it's nearly nine in the morning. I never sleep in that late. Business doesn't get done, and money doesn't get made, but right now, I don't care about any of that.

Where. Is. Delilah.

Throwing the covers off, I swing my legs over the bed and slip on my sweatpants, barreling out of the room and down the hall.

"Well, good morning, sunshine," Ari greets, crunching on a piece of bacon. "Marie made a wonderful breakfast—"

"I don't give a fuck about breakfast. Where is Delilah?"

He hides a smile as he eats, and that's how I know he knows something.

Biting back my anger, I glance at Matias and take a deep breath. "Can you please pull up the security footage? I need to know where she is."

"Sure. Let me get done—"

I roar into the kitchen and startle Marie. "Now!"

"All right, Carmine. I'm going. I'm going." He places his fork down, scrambled eggs still attached, and pulls out his phone and taps the security app we have installed.

"No need for that. I know where she is."

I run around the table and grip Ari by the back of the neck. “I don’t know what games you’re playing here, but I am getting fed up with them, Ari. Where is she?” My entire body shakes with rage, and I’m seconds away from slamming his face into the counter.

“I’ll tell you what you want to know, brother. I planned on it. You never give me a chance.”

“Because you never take the chance to tell me immediately. You like to get me angry.”

“She climbed the gate.” Matias shows me his phone, and I watch as Delilah, my clever little Sweetling, climbs the steel without any issues. “And this dumbass,” he points to his twin. “Let her out the door.”

My temper rolls through my shoulders, and I have to take a deep breath, grinding my teeth together to keep myself from killing him.

I take a step away, my chest rising and falling in dangerous pulses. I flex my fingers, staring at my injured hand, the fresh scabs across my knuckles remind me of how Delilah took care of me last night, how she tended to my wounds, and how I liked it.

I liked her attention.

“Why?” I seethe, my vision clouding as my anger rises. “Why would you let her leave?”

“Why won’t you?” he asks, not bothered by my fury. “She’s a human being, Carmine. The more you treat her like a prisoner, the more she will resent you. If anything, I helped you. She wants to have her own life too. You need to remember that. Her wants and dreams won’t go away because of you. And if you try to take them, she’ll hate you. By the look in your eyes, I don’t think you want that.” He takes a bite of his biscuit and groans in delight. “Marie, this is fantastic. You did such an amazing job. Thank you so much.” He takes another bite of the biscuit and licks his fingers. “So good. Carmine, you want one?”

“No. I don’t want one. I want to get Delilah. I need to know she’s safe.”

“I think you should take your time. Get ready, have breakfast, and then we will go. The more time you give her alone, the more it will work in your favor,” he suggests.

And I hate him more when I know he is right.

I pull a stool, harshly dragging it across the floor, and sit down.

“You’re like a child in a tantrum,” Ari says, as if his life isn’t already on the line.

“Your fiancé didn’t escape you. She didn’t leave in the middle of the night because she’d rather be anywhere else but with you. So, you’ll excuse me if I don’t have the temper to handle that.” I clench the silverware in my hand as Marie sets a plate full of eggs, bacon, and toast in front of me.

I’m not even hungry.

Do I repulse Delilah so much that she needs to escape me? Is she afraid of me? I would have given her whatever she wanted if she had talked to me.

Not if it meant leaving.

My brother is right.

I would have never allowed her to leave the house, but it’s only for her protection, and now she’s out there all alone. No protection, nothing. Anyone could take her. Anyone could use her against me. Anyone could hurt her.

“Where did she go?” I ask, defeated. The fight has left my system.

He wipes his mouth and takes a sip of his coffee. “She went to school. She has class.”

That’s right. My Sweetling is intelligent. She’s missed the last few days of school because of everything with her father, and because of me.

I nod, wishing I was by her side. She needs to be always in my sight. After today, this will never happen again. If she

needs to go to school, I will take her. I will sit with her, help her study. She will not be able to get rid of me.

But her little stunt today will have consequences. It may not be today or tomorrow, but when she initiates sex, I will not go easy on her. She needs to know it is me in control. Her disobedience, her reluctance to give in to me, has my cock hardening in my sweatpants. I love a strong-willed woman. She's going to fight me every step of the way.

It will be worth it for me, but will it be worth it for her? I can only hope.

I pull out my phone and bring up the tracker I have on hers. It takes a moment to load, and I chew on a piece of toast, then take a bite of eggs. Marie does make the best food. I need to give her a raise.

"She is at school," I'm surprised. I figured she'd be halfway across the state by now.

"That's what I just said," Ari says, swinging his fork around and throwing the egg onto the ground without realizing it.

"Clean that up. Marie dusts and vacuums, but she is not our mother. Clean up after yourself."

He glances at the floor and winces. "Shit. Sorry."

He takes a paper towel and scoops up his mess. Ari has never been hyperaware of his surroundings.

I zoom in on the map and notice she's in the library. Why didn't she tell me? I could call her, but I want my presence to be a surprise.

Then my mind takes a turn. I have been almost patient.

Almost.

Then, I wonder who the fuck she's with.

Were there other men there? Men her age, men flirting with her, touching her...

I growl low in my throat, my fists clenching at the thought of another touching what is mine. I grip the edges of the plate as I'm assaulted with images of her in someone else's arms.

Some faceless stranger with greedy hands, grabbing at her, their lips touching. She gives into him.

Gives him everything.

Everything that is meant to be mine.

Her sounds, her orgasms, her virginity, it's all meant to be mine.

The plate breaks in half and yanks me from my vile thoughts. Ari and Matias are staring at me. Matias looked concerned. Ari is grinning.

“You have anger issues. Anyone ever tell you that?” Ari asks, leaning back and drinking his coffee. “They have therapy for that. You should consider it, brother.”

I snarl at him. He's right, though, and that's what angers me most.

I clean up my mess and throw it in the trash. Marie minds her own business, humming a song she's listening to as she chops vegetables. This is why I like Marie. She ignores us for the most part, does her job, and works around our brutal natures.

She's the mom we never had, even if we never say it out loud. Marie is the heart of this household. If anything ever happened to her, we would avenge her without blinking an eye.

“We are leaving in ten minutes. Be ready.” I stroll down the hallway and slam the door to my room. I try to calm down, but Ari is right; I've always had anger issues, issues with things I cannot control.

How do people keep people in their lives? This situation with Delilah is already maddening. I'm obsessed to the point of wanting to kill everyone who looks in her direction.

“She's agreed to be yours. She will not break the contract,” I mutter to myself, sounding like a man about to jump off a cliff if he doesn't rein himself in.

I roll my shoulders to loosen the tension and step into my closet. I dress in a deep purple blazer paired with black trousers. Purple isn't a color I wear often, but I do when I want to feel empowered. I want the upper hand; right now, Delilah thinks she has it.

She's wrong.

We can play. She can be a mouse; I will be the cat, hunting her until she's in my hands. Delilah needs a reminder that I'm a predator, and she's my prey.

And prey gets devoured.

I tuck my gun at the back of my shirt so my blazer covers it. The last thing I need is for a professor to catch sight of my gun's handle while I'm on campus—,

a campus I donate to, actively. So, they won't be surprised to see me on campus checking how my funds have been allocated.

Strolling through my room and back down the hall, I'm confident, yet, rage still tickles my senses.

Ari, Matias, and Gianni wait at the end of the hall. I don't know what comes over me, but I land a punch in Ari's stomach. He tries to double over, but I hold him up by the back of his suit.

I lean closer and whisper, "If you ever let her walk out that door alone again, I will pull the nails from your fingers, Ari."

Ari wraps a hand around my throat and shoves me against the wall. "Fuck with me, and I'll fuck with you, brother. If I don't challenge you, no one will. And someone needs to exist to bring you down a few notches."

Matias pulls Ari away from me, and I straighten my blazer. They watch me, pure hatred shining in their dark gazes. Finally, I hold out my hand in a truce.

Ari shakes it, and the brotherly dynamics are back, the anger and violence forgotten. Ari makes it so damn easy to lose my patience. He pokes at me, but I need to be better.

We all climb down the steps and swing the door open, my eyes zeroing in on the gate. “I want more men on security at the gate. The new rule is that Delilah is not to leave without an escort. It will normally be me, but if by some chance it isn’t, then someone needs to be with her at all times. Okay?”

“Agreed. No one will fuck with our sister-in-law,” Matias says, the bloodlust in his voice evident. He barely knows Delilah,

but because she belongs to me, that’s all he needs to know.

“Shotgun!” Ari shouts, quickly jumping into the passenger seat.

Matias and I curse as we climb in the back.

Calling shotgun is an absolute rule. Whoever calls it first gets to ride in the passenger seat for the day. It’s the one thing I’ve always done since the twins were kids. With such a large age gap between us, I need to remember that their mindset differs from mine. Ari calling shotgun reminds me of that every time.

The engine rumbles, the gate swings open, and all the while I’m staring at my phone to make sure she doesn’t move from the fucking spot she’s in. I feel the muscle in my jaw twitch, knowing she snuck away from me so easily. I’ve never slept so hard before. I wake up at the slightest noise, gun at the ready, but with Delilah by my side, I slept better than I had in my entire life.

“You might not want to go there raising hell,” Matias suggests. “We will be around people. In public. You can’t do anything drastic.”

“I’m not going to do anything drastic.” Except maybe wrap a hand around Delilah’s throat, press her against the nearest wall and slamming my lips to hers so she knows who is in charge. The contract be damned.

I can’t do that. I can’t go back on my word. It’s all I have with her right now, and if I let her come to me, then there is a chance for us to be more than a business arrangement.

The school is only a few miles away, and I'm curious how my little troublemaker got there. If she walked...

I don't even want to think about that. Surely, she wouldn't put herself in harm's way. She's stubborn, though. She might have walked just to prove that she could.

She'll be my reason for insanity, but it's a good thing I love the madness.

"So, what are you going to do when you see her? Talk? Yell?" Ari asks.

"It's good to come up with a game plan." Gianni rolls down his window and lights a cigarette. "We can't just barge in there. Campus security will kick us out."

"Please," I scoff, looking out the window and watching through the tinted glass as the town passes. "I pay their fucking salaries. They would be idiots to do that. There won't be any issues."

"Good because we are pulling into the campus now." The blinker clicks as Gianni takes a left, and immediately we are staring at tall buildings and dormitories. We follow the signs, passing college students along the way, and Ari is distracted by every woman he sees.

If they only knew the danger of just stepping on campus, they wouldn't dare walk around so freely.

Gianni finally parks in front of a modern two-story building with large windows to let in the natural light.

I donated the money for their new library after a snowstorm caved in the roof and ruined all the books, computers and printers. Now, they have a state-of-the-art library with private rooms for studying, laptops for the students to rent, the best desktop computers and any book they could ever want.

This is my city, my people, and it's up to me to take care of them.

Even if it means getting my hands a little bloody.

I step out of the car and stride to the front entrance of the library. I don't wait for my brothers to follow me. I leave them

behind, my legs carrying me faster. A few students see me and stare. A guy wearing glasses grabs his friend's backpack and yanks her back, so she's out of my way.

When I reach the doors, I yank them. Steel and glass clang against the library walls

and every head turns.

Including hers.

Chapter Eight

Delilah

I hear the echo of the library doors slam, and I rip my gaze from my book.

“Jesus,” Christy jumps, startled by the noise.

“Right? Who enters a library like that?” her boyfriend, Caleb, leans his elbows on the counter and watches the person in question.

I turn my head, and my eyes widen when I see Carmine coming straight toward me. Rage doesn’t even begin to describe the look on his face. His chin is tilted down, and his dark eyes are pools of toxic poison as he stares me down.

“What’s wrong?” Ethan, my friend since freshmen year, places his arm on my chair, which makes it appear that his arm is wrapped around me.

Carmine’s eyes slide to Ethan, and I watch the murderous veil drape across his face. I don’t know what gets into me, but I run without looking at any of my friends. I hurry through the library, dodging people in the aisle grazing the bookshelves.

“Sorry, I’m sorry,” I say after running into someone, knocking the books right out of their arms. I stumble, righting myself before I crash into a bookshelf.

“What the hell?” Another person says as I duck right before bowling over another guy.

I don’t say anything. I’m too worried about Carmine finding me. I look over my shoulder and don’t see him, but people are giving me odd stares. When I get to the staircase, I hurry down where most people don’t go because it’s darker and the books are older and less interesting.

“Excuse me. Excuse me, sorry.” I wiggle my way through a couple. The guy had her back against the wall, his hand above

her head, leaning down and trying to charm the pants off her.

When I get to the basement, a sea of books becomes the only thing I see. The lights flicker. The smell of musty old books assaults my senses. I hurry down the main aisle, finding an empty row.

I dip to the right, pressing my back against the shelf, and take a deep breath. It's hot. Sweat sheens my forehead. I sidestep to the left, sinking further into the darkness of the aisle, so he can't find me.

Placing my hand against my chest, I try to settle the rapid thud of my heart thumping against my breastbone. My chest heaves from running, and the more I try to calm down, the more dust tickles my nose. A burning begins, but I try to hold the sneeze in. My eyes water. I cover my face with my arm and muffle the sneeze the best I can.

Then listen for any sign that Carmine is here and if he heard me.

Silence.

I let out slow breath, feeling ridiculous for running away from him. I should have confronted Carmine, but if there's one thing I know about him, it's that he is possessive. He has taken this agreement seriously, to the extreme.

“Bless you, Sweetling.”

A scream catches in my throat when one hand comes from behind me, through the shelf, and wraps around my mouth. I try to pull away from him, even with my hands against his, but he's too strong. Books upon books clatter to the floor at my feet as he drags me to the end of the row.

When we are there, he lets my mouth go for less than a second, and I take that second to try to run. He grabs my shoulder and pushes me against the shelf.

His eyes get lost in the shadows surrounding us, and he stays quiet. Only our rapid breaths make any sound. Carmine leans forward, one hand gripping the middle shelf and his right hand grabbing the shelf on the other side of me. Carmine has me caged in.

He presses his body against mine, and the memory of him pulling me close this morning lives in my mind. I'm reminded of what's underneath the pristine clothes.

And I was right—that purple blazer on him looks fantastic.

The weight of his body shouldn't feel so good, right and safe. The last thing I should feel is safe with a man, a killer, such as Carmine.

The heat of him, God, it's like a drug.

One hand drifts up my body slowly—painfully, achingly slow. The callouses of his fingers scratch against my skin. He places his hand on the side of my neck, wrapping his fingers around my nape. His thumb pressed against the middle of my throat. I feel the pressure as I swallow. He leans in, his head tilting to the side. I part my lips, ready for his kiss.

“You. Left.” The words are bitter as they are bitten out.

“You wouldn't have let me come otherwise.”

His knee presses between my legs, and his thumb rubs back and forth over my bottom lip.

“Where you go, I go,” he states, staring at my mouth and completely ignoring what I have to say.

I lick my lips. The tension between us stretches and twists, just waiting to snap.

“You wouldn't have let me come to school, and you know it,” I muster up the courage to say. “And I'll remind you every chance I get that while you might own my body, you do not own my mind.” I think of the day when the contract will end, and we will be able to go our separate ways. “One day, I won't need you.”

He growls, tightening his hand around my throat.

But I continue. “I'll be damn if I'm left with nothing because of you. I'll be somebody other than the woman you owned. I'm more than that.”

I press my hands against his chest and attempt to shove him away.

“Is everything okay here?”

We turn our heads to see my friend, Ethan standing at the end of the aisle. His arms are crossed, showing his muscles. He’s a big guy, in shape, and on the football team. I’ve always known he has had a thing for me, but I don’t return his feelings. He’s my friend, and I want to keep it that way.

“Everything is fine, Ethan.”

With a sneer, Carmine shoves away from me and stalks toward Ethan, managing to look down on Ethan’s six-foot-two frame.

“Do you know who I am, Ethan?”

“I don’t care who you are,” Ethan replies. “You’re scaring my friend.”

Carmine laughs, grips Ethan by the shirt, and throws him against the bookshelf.

“Carmine!” I cry out, taking a step forward. He holds up his hand in a stop gesture, which has me freeze in my tracks.

“Carmine? Milazzo? Oh fuck, Delilah, what have you done?” Ethan swallows nervously, and Carmine stares at him as if he is about to enjoy the torture he will inflict on him.

“I don’t give a fuck who you are, Ethan.” Carmine keeps a grip on Ethan’s shirt, staring him dead in the eye. “What business Delilah and I have is none of yours. All you need to know is she isn’t available to you, and if I catch your arm around her again, even one fucking finger,” Carmine lowers his voice, “I will cut them off one by one. Do I make myself clear?”

“Ye...yes,” Ethan’s voice shakes.

Carmine lets go of Ethan’s shirt. “Leave. Before I decide to kill you right here and now.”

Ethan doesn’t spare me a glance as he runs away, leaving me alone with a stone-cold killer.

“That was unnecessary!” I hiss at him. “Ethan is a good man—” I’m silenced when thrown against the shelf again,

another book falling at my feet.

He points his finger at me, so close to my face he's nearly poking me. "I don't want to hear his fucking name coming from your mouth, Delilah. I don't care if he is good. Do you know what he is? A coward. He left you with me, a bad man, the villain, the monster," he whispers the words, but I can tell he is on the brink of losing control. "Good doesn't live here, anymore, Sweetling. As you said, you're mine now, and if good is what you are looking for, you're about to live in a nightmare."

"I already am." I stick my neck out and touch the tip of our noses together.

His eyes turn to slits. Carmine reminds me of a snake about to strike, but I won't know when. He'll attack when he's ready.

The smile he wears is one of a man about to say checkmate. "Tomorrow, we will get married. You'll wear my fucking ring. I'll come to school with you. I am by your side. Always." His lips drag across my cheek, and an uneven breath quakes in an exhale. "You will go to school. You will become whatever you want to be, dreams are meant to be chased, but make no mistake, Delilah..." His lips hover over mine, the flesh tickling my own, and I want him to lean in and kiss me. Let's get it over with. Let's prove it won't feel as good as I think it will.

I want to be disappointed.

I know I won't be. I bet Carmine's kiss is as deadly as his gun.

"I am part of your dreams now, so you better start making room because my dreams are the same. I'll make sure they happen." Those lips move against mine, tempting me, and the solid length of this hard cock presses against my thigh. "Or I'll make sure they don't." He steps away, leaving me hot, my pussy aching, and my lips tingling from an almost kiss. I need to know that he keeps his word, and that he won't break the contract.

He begins to walk away when I take his hand. I stare out of our intertwined fingers, wondering what I'm doing, and lift my gaze to meet his.

It's heated. Lust brews the same as anger, and I tug him toward me.

"What is it, Sweetling?" His fingers slide under my chin, my nerves coming to life and igniting something sinister in my soul.

He brings out the worst in me.

Or maybe, this is me at my best.

I've never been braver than I am when I am with him.

Grabbing the lapels of his blazer, I stand on my tiptoes and stare at his lips. The top one is thinner than the bottom, and I want to know if he kisses as firm and rough as he speaks. "I hate this color on you," I say, lying through my teeth.

He combs his fingers through my hair, then yanks me closer to him by fisting the roots, sending a sting down my spine. "No, you don't."

I crash my lips against his, the contract in place since I am the one that made the first move. He doesn't give me the chance to control it, dominate it, or do anything other than make the first contact. Carmine grabs my face with both hands and backs me into the shelf. All I can hear are the smacks of our lips in the quiet, secluded basement of the library. Our breathing is heavy, sliding down one another's throats as we take from each other.

He is taking my ability to make rational decisions.

His growl slides down my throat, and his tongue dances along mine with soft, gentle strokes so different from the force of lips. Soft, firm, yet demanding. There's nothing that could rip him away from me.

My hands claw at his back, trying to find leverage, anything to hold onto as he steals the air from my lungs. With one hand, he cups the back of my head, while the other slides down my body, grips my leg and hooks it around his hip. He's able to

step closer, filling the space between my thighs. It's a preview of how well we will fit together in the future.

His cock presses against my heat, teasing me with his size, and I whimper into his mouth giving into the temptation of the Devil himself.

Carmine grabs my ass, keeping a firm grip on the cheek as he groans, kissing his way down my throat.

"Fuck, you're delectable," he murmurs against my skin, before owning my lips in another savage kiss.

I slip my fingers under his shirt to trail up his abdomen, but he grabs my hands and pins them over my head without breaking the kiss.

He doesn't want to be touched. The rejection is short-lived because he is kissing me as if we are dying and this is the last kiss we will ever have.

Our lips move in complete harmony, and we hardly come up for air. He's aggressive, pressing harder, moving faster. He bites down on my bottom lip before sucking it into his mouth. He lets it go with a soft pop and slows our kiss, taming the urgency, controlling the lust and redirecting it.

Every muscle in my body trembles from that kiss. It's one I'll never forget; one no one will ever be able to top.

"Good girl," he praises me, letting go of my wrists and placing my hands at my sides. "Thank you for coming to me first."

If it's possible, I blush from the appreciation and feel shy enough to look away.

He turns my face by applying pressure to my chin, making me look at him. His lips are swollen and red, the arousal in his eyes has not faded, and his cock is painfully hard, pressing against my thigh. "Good girls get rewarded, Sweetling." He rubs his thumb across my lip again, and I wonder why he likes to do that so much, but I won't question it.

I'm unable to find words. I like the praise a little too much. How my body reacts has me wanting to strip naked in front of

him now.

“You’ll pick out the ring you’ll wear,” he says, lifting my hand that will be officially promised to him tomorrow. “No limit. My Sweetling gets what she wants.”

He leans in and steals another kiss, holding me by the top of my neck while he turns my body to mush. I feel like I’m floating, and Carmine is the only thing holding me down.

“Expect me to take your mouth whenever I fucking want now that you’ve given the green light.” He keeps our hands together as he begins to walk out of the row and toward the steps.

“Where are we going?” I manage to form words after the best kiss in my entire life. I deserve a trophy.

“You have studying to do.” He slows, placing his arm around me as he walks to the study group.

We get a few curious glances, but nothing too questionable. When we return to the table, Ethan isn’t there, and his stuff is gone.

“Where were you? I was getting—Oh, hello,” Christy greets Carmine, holding out her hand. “I know who you are and what you want with my best friend. Your secret is safe with me, but if you hurt her, I’ll find a way to kill you.”

I gasp, about to apologize to Carmine and beg him not to kill her, when he tosses his head back and laughs, dragging Ethan’s chair closer to mine.

He sits down and gestures for me to do the same. His arm wraps around the chair, his fingers grazing over my shoulder.

“I take threats from best friends seriously. You have my word. I’ll never hurt Delilah.”

“Good,” Christy says with the jut of her chin. “This is my boyfriend, Caleb.”

“Hey, Mr. Milazzo.” Caleb holds out his hand, and Carmine takes it.

“Any friend of Delilah’s is a friend of mine. Call me Carmine.”

Carmine’s words are a trap. He’s playing dress-up for my friends. He’s Satan in a Sunday hat, and my friends have no idea of the man sitting in front of them.

Men like Carmine do not have friends.

They have enemies, and they love to keep them close.

Chapter Nine

Carmine

Love isn't what makes this world spin. Money does. Power does. Everything else is considered details. Everything else is insufficient.

At least, I thought so.

Until her lips met mine, and the entire fucking world stopped. That kiss is the only thing I've been able to think about. Watching her study was torturous. I wanted nothing more than to slam her against the shelf again and slide between her legs, showing her what life with me could be like.

I'll give her pleasure.

I'll give her pain.

I'll give her everything she fucking craves.

Anything she wants. Whatever she asks for. I'll give it to her.

If she thought I was intense before, if she thought I was possessive and controlling, I'm unhinged now. I'm addicted.

She won't ever be able to escape me. I'll hunt her down and bring her home if she tries to. She is meant to be at my side. A king needs a queen, and Delilah deserves the throne.

My cock has been stone since that heated, forbidden kiss in the library, and I know she must be in need too.

Delilah is in bed now, sleeping soundly, and I lean against the wall, arms crossed over my chest, thinking of how she hasn't spoken to me since our kiss. And she went to bed without kissing me, breaking the contract we agreed upon.

I won't be able to lie with her for a few hours. I have business I need to attend to, but I still want my kiss.

“Carmine.” Matias peeks his head into the room. “We’re ready.”

“Give me five minutes,” I say to him, never taking my eyes off Delilah.

He nods, closing the door to leave me alone with the woman who has taken over every aspect of my mind. I push off the wall and lean over her, my fingers brushing the hair out of her face.

“Delilah,” I whisper, wanting to wake her up gently. “Sweetling, wake up.” I brush my lips across her ear and kiss her cheek. Finally, she shifts and stretches her arms over her head.

“Carmine?” My name sounds drugged from how sleepily she is. “What’s wrong?”

“You forgot something,” I remind her, rolling her onto her back.

“What?”

“I want my goodnight kiss. You went to sleep without giving it to me, and I really want my fucking kiss,” I say, skimming the tip of my nose across hers. I want her lips again, before I must deal with the real world.

Her eyes widen, suddenly wide awake, and she sits up, rubbing her eyes. “I’m sorry. I was tired; I didn’t fall asleep to ignore it—”

I press my finger against her lips to silence her. “It’s okay. I need to go somewhere, Delilah. Before I go, I need you to kiss me goodnight.”

“Where are you going?”

“There’s work that needs to be done,” I say without context, not wanting to let her know. She already thinks so little of me. I don’t want to give her extra ammunition. I keep my voice easy and gentle, not wanting to cause her any panic. I want her to remain calm and sleepy—she’s beautiful like that.

“Carmine, what is it? What’s going on? Is it my father?”

I shake my head and kiss her forehead. “No, Sweetling. Your father is safe. Always. You have my word on that.”

“Then why do you need to leave in the middle of the night? Come to...” She swallows, unsure if she wants to finish her sentence. “Come to bed.” She scoots over and pats my side of the bed. “I promise I won’t leave in the morning. Is that what this is about? That I’ll leave?”

She sounds so damn sleepy, and it’s making me feel those things I don’t want to feel. I think any good I have inside me, anything worth saving will be only for Delilah.

What’s she doing to me? I can’t afford to get soft. I have too many enemies. My job consists of having my blood on my hands and wiping them clean as if the murder had never happened.

“No, Sweetling, no, and even if you did, you know I’d find you. You can’t get far.” I brush my knuckles down her hot, flushed cheeks, the pillowcase imprint indented into her skin, and I find it charming because she looks so at home. “Remember the kind of man I am. I have business I have to attend to,” I remind her, staring into her innocent emerald irises.

I wait for her to be repulsed, to fight me, but she places her hand on my cheek and leans forward.

“Then you’ll come to bed?” she asks, pressing a soft kiss against my lips. There’s no urgency or lust like there was in the library. It’s a long, tender peck, and I find myself being pulled into her, cupping the back of her head to apply more pressure.

I break the kiss, then press my forehead to hers before standing. I don’t know what’s gotten into me. I’m a different man at night now, knowing she’s in my bed. “And then, I’ll come to bed.”

“Okay,” she whispers.

“Go on, lie back down.” I ease her back, fluffing the pillow under her head and bringing the blanket to her chin. “Rest. I’ll be in soon.”

“Be careful,” she mutters, eyes already falling shut. “You’re not as bad as you think you are.” Her whispered words come out slower, as if she’s losing the energy to speak.

“You’re wrong,” I say, sitting on the edge of the bed and hanging my head. My elbows are on my knees, and exhaustion settles in my bones. “I’m worse,” I correct her, but she doesn’t say anything in return. Her steady, even breaths tell me she’s fast asleep.

With one last look at the woman who I’m forcing to marry me, I stroll out of the room, closing the door as quietly as I can.

Victor is standing on the other side, his back against the wall, stoic and at attention.

“Nothing happens to her; do you understand me? If I come back and she’s injured, I’m going to kill you,” I warn him.

He doesn’t blink or flinch. Victor nods. “She’ll be safe, Mr. Milazzo.”

“She better be.” I don’t trust anyone else with her, not even my best men. I will only know she’s truly safe as long as she is by my side.

When I get to the end of the hall, Gianni, Ari, and Matias are waiting for me. They are my most trusted. They are my inner circle, but I try my best to care for anyone working for me.

“Where is he?” I ask, renewed energy coiling through my soul like a serpent.

“Here.” Gianni gestures with his chin toward the couch.

Nicky, Alex, and a few others surround me, men who are my runners, for the most part, delivering messages, figuring out trade spots, cleaning crew, etc.

I step into the living room and walk around the couch, surprised when I see a kid who can’t be older than nineteen.

“What the fuck is this?” I point to the teenager sitting on my couch, half beaten and pale. “I said I wanted insight. I wanted proof. This is not proof.”

“The kid is the proof,” Ari says, flipping a switchblade in his hand. “And we didn’t do that to him. We found him like that. He was on our way when we were heading to the docks. He says he has intel to help us move in and stake that territory once and for all.”

I crouch and tilt my head, staring at the kid who has his arms wrapped around himself. His eyes are cast on the floor, and he won’t look at anyone. He’s soaking wet from the rain outside, quietly pelleting against the roof.

And he’s on my fucking couch.

Wet.

I’ll deal with it later.

“Do you know where you are?” I ask him, and he remains silent, still staring at the floor. “Look at me,” I bite, my patience wearing thin. “I said fucking look at me!”

Finally, he lifts his head. The whites of his eyes are red from the abuse he took before coming here. He’s shivering with goosebumps along his skin, and he rubs his hands up and down his arms. I snap my fingers. “Get him a blanket and start a fire.”

Nicky tosses the blanket over the kid’s shoulders, and the whoosh behind me with the heat tells me Ari has started the fire.

The kettle on the stove whistles. Marie is in the kitchen making tea. She pours honey into the steaming mug and stirs it, the ceramic and metal clinking together.

Ari chuckles behind me, and Nicky smiles then ducks his head when he sees my annoyed expression. I’m trying to interrogate someone, and Marie is making tea.

She holds the mug out in front of her and carefully moves her feet, so she doesn’t spill the scalding liquid.

I rub my temples and check the time.

It’s two in the morning. I wanted to get this interrogation done and bury the body—if I needed to—before three.

Selfishly, I want to crawl into bed with Delilah. Not that I'd ever say that out loud. That fact is for me and me only.

"Here you go, dear," she says, handing the boy the cup of tea.

"I didn't realize we entertained the enemy, Marie," I say, letting my annoyance show.

She turns to me and glares. "We do when they are just children. He is cold and soaking wet. Where are your manners? He'd talk easier in some dry clothes. The poor thing. He's been through it. Can't you tell?"

Marie rarely takes the time to tell me how she feels or what she thinks. She typically stays quiet, but right now, in her frilly apron tied around her back, her concerned eyes staring daggers at me, I realize she's in mother mode.

Now, all the attention is on me.

The kid sips the tea and sighs, wincing when he licks the wound on his lip.

"Christ." I tuck my hands in my pockets and motion for Ari. "Get him some of your clothes."

"You can't be serious. He's not—" Ari is silenced when Marie cuts her stare to him, and he sighs, giving in. "Fine. I'll be back. Unbelievable," he mumbles as he heads down the steps. "We are Milazzo's. We do not get fucking tea and clothes..." his voice trails off until none of us can hear him.

The slurping of tea has me looking down at the kid, and Marie is wrapping him up in the blanket as if he's a baby.

"Okay, enough of this. This isn't a fucking hotel." I take the cup from his hands and set it on the table. Marie goes to say something, but one look from me, knowing my patience is up, and she quiets. "Kid, what's your name."

He's still shivering, and he eyes the fire. "Can I sit close to the fire?"

"Sure, dear. Come on." Marie wraps her arm around his shoulder and helps him up.

I lift my arms in frustration, letting my guest get treated like family. “Are you warm and cozy now? Can we get started? I’m two seconds away from saying fuck it, pulling out my gun and putting it right between your eyes,” I tell him. “Marie is kind, and she will be the only kindness you experience here. You are nothing to me, kid. Do you understand that?”

He readjusts the blanket around himself and laughs. “You think I don’t know that? I didn’t mean anything to him either. I’m used to it—being unwanted. There’s nothing you can say to me that will scare me.”

I reach behind my back and pull my gun out from my waistband. Scratching my eyebrow with the barrel, I try to calm down. “Let’s start over. What’s your name? Why were you coming to see me?”

“You won’t kill me, right? I didn’t do anything. I swear. I was done with the Romanos. I wanted fair treatment, that’s all. I wasn’t going to snitch. I wasn’t, but I’m tired of being their punching bag. I can’t take it anymore.”

My heart...does something odd. It twinges. The parts I’ve let die are coming back to life. I find that I care this kid has been hurt, and I wouldn’t have before if it weren’t for Delilah. I can’t let it show.

“What’s your name?” I ask again, hating that I need to repeat myself.

“Ryan Romano,” he answers, flicking his eyes from me to the floor.

“You’re Ray Romano’s kid?” I jerk back, my instincts telling me this could all be a setup.

“I was—I’m not—I mean—No,” he says, lifting a shoulder. “He learned I wasn’t his son. My mother had an affair. He found out today.”

“We have that in common,” Ari decides to chime in.

I spread my arms out, questioning why he was speaking.

“What? I’m just saying. Our Dad was the same way. We have different moms.” He points between us.

“Could you give any more of our personal information out to a stranger?” Matias slaps him on the back of the head for me, reading my mind. I drag my attention back to Ryan.

“Ow.” Ari rubs the spot Matias hit. “I’m trying to find common ground.”

“Anyway,” I’m getting too tired for this bullshit, “my men were on their way to our docks, picking up merchandise, and that’s where they ran into you, correct?”

“Yes, Mr. Milazzo,” he says, his gaze flicking onto his cup of tea.

Feeling generous, I hand it back to him.

“Thank you,” he says.

“My dad—Mr. Romano—” He corrects himself but doesn’t sound too upset about it. “He beat me, calling me a bastard, saying I didn’t belong. They hit me until I passed out, but when I woke up, I heard them talking. They said someone is getting close to you to find out more information. They know about Delilah. Their informant has seen you with her.”

“Are you saying I have a rat in my organization, Ryan?”

“I-I don’t know,” he stutters. “Romano didn’t clarify if the person was in your home. So, I listened to their conversation and found out they planned to take her and sell her to one of their overseas connections. There is a boat coming, I don’t know when, but usually, the boats carry drugs, weapons, sometimes animals, people.” He says the last word quietly because it’s atrocious to trade people and animals in my book.

I’m in weapons and drugs.

My men distribute and sell, but I sell most drugs to motorcycle clubs or high-end casinos for their VIPs.

“They plan on having her on one of those boats. They will come after you when you’re distracted and looking for her and claim your territory. They want the south docks for themselves.”

They know if they ever got the south docks, they would get east and west too. Romano has never liked that I have more

traction than him, a stronger hold on the community. Especially when it comes to law enforcement. No matter their job, people will do anything for money if it means providing for their families.

We are all the same on the inside. We always want more. If anyone becomes desperate enough, they will sell their soul to me, and money won't ever have to be an issue for them again.

But wealth doesn't come for free—Delilah's position is the perfect example of that.

“And what do they expect to do with her?” I ask through gritted teeth, thinking about who could want Delilah. I've run background checks on all her friends. Every person in this house has been cleared, so someone is outsmarting me, and I don't like it.

“They want to show you they are stronger. They will auction her off first, and then she'll get on the boat, drugged, and you'll never see her again.”

I launch myself at the kid, a hand wrapped around his throat, and the mug drops to the floor, tea spilling everywhere.

“I will burn everything to the ground that threatens her. They won't live to see their attempt.”

“It's why I'm here. I'm telling you everything,” he gasps through the hold I have on him. “I swear, I'm not lying. His plan revolves around her. After everything he did to me, I didn't want to stay there a second longer. I thought—” he licks his lips, “I thought maybe I could have a chance here.” He trembles under my grasp and stares at Ari, his eyes filling with tears. “I swear, I'm not the enemy. I swear,” he promises. “I have dealt with too much. You have no idea...you don't know what they have done to me. You don't know how long it's been going on for, please,” he begs, gripping my hand for dear life, his fingernails biting into my skin. “If not, just kill me because I can't take it anymore.”

Marie gasps, the implication of what has been done to him is not difficult to figure out. He doesn't need to say the words.

I let go of his throat, staring at him with sympathy. I'm a monster in many ways. I kill. I steal. I threaten.

I torture.

But I do not hurt, take advantage of, or touch children.

That's another level of monster, not even I would dare touch. It's repulsive.

"Please," he begs, seemingly so much younger than nineteen. Tears roll down his cheeks. "Please, just kill me; I don't want to return." The plea of a man who has given up.

Marie takes his hand, and I know I will be taking in another stray. Most of the men here stumbled upon me, asking for a chance to prove themselves if they could just be part of something bigger.

"I'm not going to kill you, kid. You're going to tell me everything you know about Romano, though. I don't trust you."

"I know," he says quickly. "I'm willing to do anything to earn your trust. I don't have anywhere else to go. This life, it's the only one I know and—"

"Someone just tripped the security alarm," Gianni says, grabbing the tablet from the counter. "We have uninvited guests." He tosses the tablet at me, and I see a few men dressed in black circling my house to try to find the best way in. "Do you want me to activate protocol?"

"No," I grit my teeth. "Silencers on your guns, no alarms. I don't want them to know we know." I point the gun at Ryan's head. "Did you bring them here? Was this a setup? You better tell the truth because your life depends on it."

"I don't know. I swear I don't know." He huddles against Marie. "They don't know I'm here. I wouldn't do that. I wouldn't put anyone at risk. I didn't hear anything about them trying to come here tonight."

"Where's your phone?"

"What?" He asks, patting his pockets.

“Your phone. Give it to me.” He tosses it to me, and I throw it on the ground, smashing it with my foot. “They’ve tracked him here. They probably want you back or want to kill you. You know too much.”

Pure terror falls over his face. The color drains from his skin, and I know the kid is genuine. He wants safety after a lifetime of abuse.

“Matias, I want you to take him to the panic room. Him and Delilah, do you understand? I want Victor with them. And they better be alive when all this is said and done.”

Matias nods, grabbing the kid by his arm and tugging him to his feet.

“Thank you. Thank you. I swear, I won’t disappoint. I’m good. I’ll be good, I swear,” he chants as he is dragged away, thankful for his life, but the words sound like he has said them too many times.

“Poor kid,” Nicky says, lighting a cigarette before getting his gun out. “He’s had it tough.”

“Tougher than most,” I say, checking how many bullets I have. “Marie, go with them. I don’t want anything happening to you either. Stay there until I say otherwise.”

“Yes, Mr. Carmine,” she says, scurrying away.

I crack my neck and walk through the cloud of smoke Nicky blows out. We have people to kill and bodies to deliver to the enemy.

There’s no time to waste.

Chapter Ten

Delilah

My entire body bounces on the bed, and the force wakes me up.

“Carmine? Are you finally coming to bed?” I wish I could say I know what has gotten into me, but I want his presence. He’s terrifying, but it’s the last thing I feel when I’m with him. And if I’m ever afraid, it isn’t because I’m afraid of him.

I’m afraid of how good the bad in him makes me feel.

It’s addicting.

“Carmine?”

“Not Carmine.” Arms slide under me and bring me against a foreign chest, but I know the voice.

“Matias? What’s going on?”

“I’ll explain later. We need to move. Now.”

There’s a stranger in my room, a guy closer to my age, but he follows us out the door. A loud crack rings, and I scream, ducking my head as the gunshot echoes.

“Carmine!” I scream for him, but he doesn’t answer.

“He’s fine. He has this under control.” Matias enters what looks like a guest bedroom and rushes to the closet. He presses a button on the shelf, and the back wall opens to a huge, steel room. He sets me down, and I walk into the room, the stranger behind me and then Marie. Matias enters last. He closes the door behind him, turning the silver wheel until six bars slide into place.

One wall is made of screens. Matias presses a few buttons and the security footage pops up, showing the house from different angles. I can see the endless backyard, the miles of trees that would be great hiding places. The front gate isn’t

open, and the garden seems unbothered, but gunshots crack the air; I can hear them through the steel.

Matias points his gun at the door. “I want you all to stay behind me at all times.”

“What is going on?” my voice quakes. “Where is Carmine? Why isn’t he in here with us?”

“Because he is the boss, and he never hides. The Romanos are coming back for their toy; no offense, kid,” Matias says to the stranger next to me.

“Offense taken,” he mumbles. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know they would come for me. I didn’t think they cared. Maybe if I go with them, they’ll leave.”

“Not a chance. You’re worth more here. Sorry, Ryan.”

“I’m Delilah.” I introduce myself, not wanting to come across as rude when he’s obviously been through so much. “When we get out of here, I’d like to look at your eye. It’s swelling fast, and I might need to decompress it.”

“How?” He flinches when he touches it. “How would you know how?”

“I’m studying to be a doctor,” I explain, watching the screen, looking for any sign of Carmine. I see a flash, and my gaze drifts to where the garage is. Sparks flash white across the screen, and I cover my mouth to hold back my gasp when I see someone go down then don’t move or get up again from the cement floor.

I press my hand against the screens and watch men run across the yard, Carmine leading the way. He lifts his gun, firing until the clip is empty, then reloads. Matias presses a few buttons and the screens change to the cameras inside the house.

“What are you doing?” I yell. “We need to see if they’re okay. Switch it back!” I slap his shoulder.

He covers my mouth with his hand and points to the top right screen. “Do you see that?” he whispers, showing me a broken window. “Someone is in the house. Be quiet.” He flips

through the angles of the cameras, trying to find the one that shows where the intruder is, and when he finally lands on it, he stares at the door protecting us. Matias lifts a finger to his mouth, telling us to be quiet. Ryan, the new guy, grips my hand without tearing his gaze from the screen.

They are in the guest bedroom.

“They have to be here.” The volume on the TV is so low I can barely hear it. “They couldn’t have gone far. There’s a cigarette in the living room still burning.”

I cover my mouth with my hand to keep from screaming. My heart is thudding against my chest, and bile is working its way up from my stomach when I see the intruders creep into the closet.

Matias is at the ready, aiming his gun at the door.

“No one can get in without scanning their approved fingerprint,” he whispers. “And it’s bulletproof steel, but just in case—” He cocks his gun, the barrel pointed directly in front of us.

They whip around, and that’s when I see men coming in through the front door, Carmine leading. Gianni is carrying someone, but I can’t tell who. Carmine runs down the hall, and the intruders lift their guns, getting ready to fire. When Carmine bursts into the room, firing without hesitation, the gunmen drop.

“I don’t give a fuck if you know there’s no one left, Victor. Check the house again and again and again!” Carmine roars, rushing to the panic room. The door clicks, the steel wheel spins, and the bars release from the wall. The door isn’t done swinging open when I hear Carmine call for me.

“Delilah? Delilah! Are you okay? Talk to me, Sweetling.” He rushes into the room and is on me instantly, checking my entire body for injury. His hands skim my legs, arms, and stomach. He checks me everywhere. “Are you hurt?” He cups my jaw, and he wipes away the tears.

He has blood all over him. There are splashes of red against his cheek. His white shirt is stained, reminding me of spilled

wine. Both his hands are bleeding, the skin of his knuckles raw and open.

“I’m okay. I’m fine. Oh my god, what happened? Carmine, so much blood—” It’s my turn to look him over, but he takes my hands and kisses them.

“It isn’t mine. I’m fine, but it’s Ari. Matias—he’s been shot. We don’t have time to take him to the doctor. We have backup blood; we can rig it. Someone dig it out and transfuse him.”

“I can do it,” I volunteer, wiping the tears from my eyes, not that it helps. “I can get the bullet out. I’m studying to be a doctor remember? How bad is it?”

Matias flees from the room to find his brother, and Carmine guides me out of the panic room, then lifts me into his arms. “Bury your face in my shoulder and close your eyes. I don’t want you to see any of the carnage. And you better not look —” he presses his hand against the back of my head. “I’ll know.”

I do as he says, hiding my face in his chest as he walks. His strides are long, as if he’s stepping over something. I curl my fingers into his suit jacket when I realize what.

A dead body.

His footsteps grow quicker. “Okay, you can look now.”

I lift my head and stare at the holes in the wall. There must be at least a dozen. When we get to the living room, one man is lying on the ground and another is sitting in a chair holding a hand to his shoulder.

Matias kneels on the ground, applying pressure to his brother’s wound.

“Set me down. I need to look at him.” I’m reminded that I only have Carmine’s shirt on again, but I don’t care. There’s no time for that. I rush to Ari’s side and give him a gentle smile, running my fingers through his hair. “You’re not so tough now, are you?” I say with a smile to ease the tension. He laughs, wincing from the pain.

“Whatever. I’m tougher now. Women love scars.” His skin is pale and clammy, while Matias’s hand is covered in blood.

“I need scissors, some type of sewing kit, vodka, and a belt,” I say.

“You’re going to spank me? You’re going to beat a man when he’s already down? That’s rude,” Ari jokes.

At least his sense of humor is intact.

“Someone needs to remind you of your place, right?” I wink, grabbing the supplies and thrusting them in my face. Belt, scissors, vodka.

Where are the needle and thread?

“How do you expect me to sew him up without a needle and thread? Hell, I’ll take wire. Anything.” I cut Ari’s shirt, and Matias moves his hand. A river of blood drips down his chest and abdomen.

“Is he going to die?” Matias asks, staring at the blood on his hand. He looks like he’s in shock.

“No, he isn’t going to die,” Carmine answers for me. “He isn’t, right?” Carmine kneels next to me.

“I don’t know. He’s bleeding a lot. I am still learning about medicine. I’m not perfect. I need that blood. Set up the transfusion. He needs it now.”

“I have it,” Alex calls from downstairs, and then into the living room blood bags in hand, along with the necessary equipment.

“You have that, but you don’t have anything for sutures?” I say to Carmine in the stress of the moment, my statement ending with a bite.

“We don’t usually have injuries. I used to have a doctor, but he was killed.”

“That’s reassuring,” I say, sarcasm dripping from my voice.

I lean over Ari. His eyes are closed, so I gently tap his face. “Ari, I need you to wake up, okay? Wake up. Talk to me.”

Marie is patting his forehead with a washcloth, and he finally rouses, groaning. “Fuck, it hurts.” He tries to roll away from me.

“Stop, Ari. Stop. I need you to lie down.” I grip his arm to hold him, but he rips it free. I’m able to see his back. There is no exit wound.

Shit.

“Let me go. I’m fine. Let me fucking go!” he roars.

Matias sits on his legs to keep him still, and Carmine is there to hold his arms down.

“Ari, listen to me. Listen, hey—” I grip his chin and force him to look at me. “I know it hurts. You’re in shock, but I need you to relax and stay awake. So, talk to us. Tell me about your childhood. Any good memories?” I untwist the cap of the vodka bottle. “This is going to hurt.”

“Wait!” His chest heaves just as someone shoves the needle into his arm to start the blood transfusion. “Give me some of that.” He snatches the bottle from my hand and chugs three big gulps. “Fuck!” The vodka spills from the corner of his lips. “Just do it.”

I start to take a swig myself, but Carmine rips the bottle from my lips. “What are you doing?”

“Believe me, I don’t want to be sober for what I’m about to do, and neither does he,” I say, not even giving Ari a warning before I douse the wound in vodka. Ignoring Ari’s agonized cries, I wash my hands in the alcohol. “There’s no exit wound. I’m going to have to dig the bullet out, Ari.”

He bites his bottom lip and nods. “Fucking perfect.”

“Heat up something metal too. I need something big and heat it until it’s orange.”

Ari’s eyes widen. “What? Why? Why do you need to do that?”

“Don’t worry about that right now.” I dig my fingers into the hole, and he screams, arching his back, nearly lifting Matias off the ground.

Carmine presses down harder on his arms, and Ari cries in pain while I dig into his body for the bullet.

“Come on, pass out,” I say under my breath, hoping the agony will be too much for him to take.

“Oh my god, can you feel it yet? Jesus Christ, Delilah! We don’t know each other well enough for you to be inside me like this,” he shouts, which causes a few people to laugh.

“Only you would be making a joke right now,” Carmine says, slightly amused.

“Better than admitting that I’m dying,” Ari grumbles, his eyes hooding.

“You’re not dying,” I state, twisting my hand again, and it causes Ari’s body to jerk. Finally, I feel something against my fingertips. “Don’t move. Don’t move, Ari. I have it. I know it’s hard but stay still.” I lift a shoulder to wipe the sweat off my brow, my hands covered in blood.

He takes fast breaths, his nostrils flaring as he prepares himself. “Okay. Okay,” he says. “Get it over with. God, I’m fucking tired.”

He blinks rapidly, and Marie is there to catch the sweat dripping from his brows.

Ari stills, but tremors cause his body to spasm. His skin is wet with sweat and blood...so much blood. I’m concerned. I don’t know if this will work.

I’m in over my head.

Pinching the bullet between my fingers, I pull it free, and everyone takes a breath.

“Give it to me,” Carmine holds out his hand, and I place it in his palm. He inspects it. “I’ll use the same bullet to kill Romano.”

“That’s the revenge story I love to hear about,” Ari’s teeth begin to chatter.

I pour more vodka on the wound, and he curses at me, “You fucking bitch! Warn me next time.”

“Watch it! She’s trying to save your life, Ari,” Carmine hisses. “You will not speak to her like that, or I’ll kill you myself.”

“Sorry. I’m sorry. It just hurts,” he says.

“It’s okay.” I forgive him easily. “You can call me a bitch all you want for the next part.” I fold the belt in my hand and push it into his mouth. He mumbles, and I know what he’s trying to ask.

Why the belt?

“Did anyone heat anything for me?”

“Yeah. This decorative iron poker? We have a gas fireplace —”

“That’s fine. Bring it.” I moved it over, Alex, if I remember correctly.

The tip of the iron is a brilliant orange. Smoke wafts from the tip, and Ari’s eyes widen. He begins to thrash, fighting against the men’s hold on him.

“I know.” My voice catches. “I don’t want to, but this is the only way to seal the wound. I’m not going to lie to you, this is going to really hurt. You’ll probably pass out, but I have to do it.”

He bites down on the belt, his jaw muscles flexing and the tendons in his neck protruding. Marie can’t wipe the sweat away quickly enough.

“Ready?”

He gives a slight tilt of his chin.

“I’m so sorry,” I whisper, then I press the searing hot iron into the wound. The flesh sizzles, the heat cauterizing the muscle and vessels so it no longer bleeds. The smell of his skin cooking has me holding back my sick. I try to hold my breath, but it isn’t enough to block the rancid scent.

Ari finally falls limp. The pain is too much for him, and I burn the surface of his wound to make sure it’s sealed.

I toss the poker to the floor, and the adrenaline begins to fade. I sway and fall to the side, Carmine catching me.

“I have you.”

I gag, then flip over, releasing the contents of my stomach on the floor.

He holds my hair and rubs my back. “It’s okay. You did so well, Sweetling. So good. You saved his life.”

“Not yet,” I correct him, wiping my mouth. “I need supplies. Antibacterial ointment, antibiotics to fight infection. I need to ensure he doesn’t react badly to the blood. I need a hospital wing.”

“Consider it done,” Carmine says.

A scream has me sitting up and staring at Nicky. Alex is taking the poker to Nicky’s gunshot wound, and since it’s a through and through, there’s no bullet to fish out.

Nicky punches Alex in the face and then passes out, both men falling unconscious.

“Jesus,” Matias sighs, sagging against the floor.

Everyone is tired. Exhaustion fills the room, and we sit in silence for minutes, maybe hours, I’m not sure. I’m too tired to care.

“Gianni, dispose of the bodies. Matias, settle your brother in an upstairs room so we can check on him as needed. Victor, deal with those two idiots.” Carmine points to Nicky and Alex. “I’m taking care of Delilah. Marie?”

“Yes, Mr. Milazzo?” her voice is steady as if she’s seen disasters like this before.

“Get cleaned up and go rest. I’ll hire a crew to repair the house and clean it.” Carmine slides his arms under me and lifts me. “Sweetling, you impress me so much. Let me take care of you.”

I don’t have the energy to fight him.

The reason is, though, I don’t want to fight him at all. Not anymore.

Chapter Eleven

Carmine

It's been a stressful night, but Delilah made me proud throughout the evening's chaotic events. I had doubts whether she'd be able to handle this life, but I think she was made for it. She's a quick thinker, decisive, and thrives under pressure. Those qualities will make her a fantastic doctor.

But she didn't expect to be a doctor so soon, and the trauma she's had to endure tonight is more than the average person could have handled.

The door is open to the bedroom, and I turn my body to the side, stepping into the space. With my hip, I ease the door shut.

"I'm so proud of you," I tell her, lifting her so I can kiss her forehead. "You did so well tonight. I know it wasn't easy." I keep my tone soft, so she doesn't feel afraid.

Something has shifted between us since the kiss in the library. She's softer toward me, more accepting. There's more give with her. Whatever slack she's feeling for me right now, I'm going to take it, and I'm going to hold onto it, run with it.

"I can still smell his skin burning," she whimpers as I place her on the vanity. Her skin is so pale, like Ari's but from shock and sickness rather than blood loss. She has dark circles under her eyes and dried blood on her hands. She holds them out in front of her, and they shake uncontrollably. She inhales deep, fast, and in a panic; her watery gaze meets mine.

"I know, Sweetling. I know." I undress her, tugging the shirt—my shirt—over her head, revealing her bare breasts. They are perfect. All I want to do is show her body the attention she deserves, but I know now is not the time. She's still in the beginning stages of trust when it comes to me. I need to show her she can.

I tug off her panties, tossing them to the floor. When she's naked, I undress, too, dropping my clothes next to hers. I make a mental note to burn them later.

After turning on the shower, I check the temperature of the water. When I'm satisfied, I lift her from the counter and carry her into the shower. The water sprays my back, and I keep her body tucked against mine.

Her slick skin slides against mine, and I can't help my body's natural reaction.

My cock hardens and settles between the crease of her ass as I set her down. She's frozen in place, holding her hands to her chest, and she begins to shiver. I switch spots so she can be under the hot spray and begin to wash her. Squirting the soap I bought her in my hands, the lavender rose scent joins the steam, and I immediately wash her hands first. The water turns red, at first, then fades to pink. I clean under her nails, too, getting the blood that made its way under when she dug into the meat of Ari's body to get the bullet.

I squeeze more body wash in my hands and wash her hands again, ensuring I wash away all the blood before I grab the loofah.

"You're so lovely, Sweetling," I croon, wanting her to feel better, even in the smallest way.

Yet she doesn't move.

She doesn't acknowledge my existence at all. She stares blankly at the floor, hair hanging over her shoulders like oil spilling across the ocean.

I scrub her entire body, careful not to let my eyes linger too long on her perky breasts or the strawberry blush of her tight nipples. Her body is very distracting, and I want nothing more than to kiss the middle of her stomach, praising it with love so she will carry my body without risk.

"I'm going to clean between your legs, but I promise I won't do anything else."

She doesn't look at me.

“Sweetling,” I kiss the side of her cheek to get her attention, “I need you to tell me it’s okay.”

She holds her hands to her chest and widens her stance, giving me a slight nod.

“Okay, I promise, I won’t do anything else,” I say again, looking directly into her eyes. Her lashes are dark spikes from the water, but her pupils are black pearls. I reach down and clean her, easing the loofah with a delicate touch.

I’ve never bathed a woman before. This is a first for me, and I refuse to do anything that makes her uncomfortable.

My cock is aching, weighted, and heavy between my legs, wanting nothing more than to ease through her virginity and spill inside her, but she needs to trust me before that happens.

She gasps when she finally sees my arousal, but I tilt her chin up with my fingers and shake my head, stealing a kiss from her immobile lips.

“This isn’t about sex. I want to take care of you. I can’t hide what your body does to me, but I will not act on it. You have my word.” I rinse the loofah out and grab the tea tree oil shampoo, filling the middle of my palm.

After gathering her hair from her shoulders, I wash the strands and massage her scalp. She groans and the sound goes straight to my cock. It still isn’t enough to make me lose focus—when it comes to Delilah, nothing will.

“Feels good,” she finally speaks, and I breathe easier knowing she’s aware of her surroundings and what’s happening.

I bend down to taste her shoulder, giving her a quick kiss. “I’m glad. You did very well tonight. I know it was a shock, but you handled it with grace.”

“I threw up.”

“I also threw up the first time I smelled burnt flesh. It’s a smell you will never forget.”

She gags again. “Please, don’t bring it up.”

“Anything, Sweetling.” I continue to massage her head, and her body falls back against me, back to my chest and round cheeks to my cock. No other woman has ever affected me like this. I’ve never cared about comfort before. No one else has ever mattered.

She’s all consuming.

Every aspect of how I think, how I feel, how I make decisions all revolve around her.

I rinse her hair, add conditioner and rinse it away, then make quick work of washing myself before I turn the water off. I grab towels from the heated shelves and wrap one around her, then myself. I use another to squeeze the water from her hair.

“Come on, let’s go to bed, Sweetling.”

“But…” Her eyes flick down to the tent in my towel.

I shake my head. “We need to sleep. Let me hold you, so I know you’re safe. Nothing else.”

I finish drying us off, grabbing a brush for her hair, then toss the towels aside and draw her into bed with me.

She comes without hesitation.

“Turn around. I don’t want you to wake up with a nest.” I wave the brush in the air, and she complies. I know if she were in her right state of mind, she’d snatch the brush from me and comb out her own hair because she’s so damn insistent on not needing me.

I start at her ends, easing the comb through her hair.

I think I’m doing it right. I’ve never brushed a woman’s hair before. I’m finding that even though I’m not a saint, I’m still experiencing first times with Delilah.

“Have you done this before?” the question was monotone and tired.

“Is it obvious that?” I’m trying to be as gentle as possible. The last thing I want to do is hurt her.

“I’m just wondering.” She turns her chin to her shoulder. “I like that you haven’t. It feels good. Thank you for taking care

of me.”

“It’s a pleasure I find great satisfaction in, Sweetling.”

We fall into a comfortable silence, and I know that in this room, at this moment, things are very different. Tomorrow will be a new day, and the softness of this moment will be gone. I’ll be back to needing her glued to my side while she fights me every step of the way.

I’ll be turned on half the time and want to strangle her the other half.

It’s a concoction I find highly intoxicating.

When all the knots are gone, I place the comb on the bed and lie her down, tucking the covers up to her chin.

Then, and only then, do I get settled in bed.

“I’m sorry,” she apologizes, tears in her voice. “I’ve never done anything like that before. You must think I’m so weak.”

Pulling her close to me, I nuzzle my chin against the curve of her shoulder. “The opposite because even terrified, you faced fear. You are brave in a world that constantly tests someone’s courage. You are not weak. Weak is a mindset, and you, my Sweetling, have the strongest mindset I’ve come across in a very long time.”

Yet she is becoming my weakness.

Chapter Twelve

Delilah

Last night feels like a dream. I can't believe what happened was real. I dug my fingers into a man's shoulder and pulled out a bullet.

I should feel like a badass because it was completely badass. But that the scent of burning flesh is still embedded in my nostrils.

"Are none of these rings to your liking?" Carmine asks, pulling me out of my thoughts and pointing toward to jewelry case.

He rented out an entire jewelry store, and Gianni and Victor are outside the doors. The only people inside are me, Carmine, and the salesman.

"What?" I blink at him, pushing the memory of Ari screaming from my head.

The muscle in his cheek jumps with annoyance as he marches over to me.

"We are doing this," he grits. "We are getting the rings, getting married, and then we will go to your evening class. That's the schedule for the day."

"I don't want to look at rings, Carmine." I keep my voice low, so the salesman won't hear me.

Carmine scratches his nose and gives the salesman a kind head tilt before crowing at me, towering over my small frame. "That's too bad, Delilah. This is the agreement. You agreed to wear my ring, and I expect you to live up to our agreement. Do you understand?"

"So, pick any of them for all I care. Just because I wear it, it doesn't mean it means anything."

We hold eye contact, neither of us looking away, neither of us backing down.

“I guess the man from last night is gone,” I say.

“The man from last night doesn’t exist,” he replies. “Not right now, and very rarely will he ever make an appearance. That ring might not have meaning now, but it will.” He grips my arm and tugs me closer. “But you’ll learn to love me, Delilah.”

Maybe last night *was* a dream. Maybe the memory of him washing me, taking care of me and speaking to me with such tenderness was something I made up in my head. This man was completely different from the one who brushed my hair last night then held me until I fell asleep.

What happened to him?

“Pick a ring,” he says, again. “Any ring you want.” His dark, husky tone lightens, and he cups my face. His touch sends a spark across my nervous system, reminding me of how he makes me feel.

And why he is right.

One day, I’ll learn to love him. It’s inevitable. He’s that guilty pleasure that I shouldn’t indulge because I’ll want to keep returning for more once I do.

He’s *that* regret too. The one where I’d wake up the next morning, asking myself what the hell I did? If it weren’t for the contract, he’d probably be the guy who kicked me out of his bed half-dressed. He wouldn’t care about me otherwise.

Then, I’d be the girl who always thought about the mean guy who gave her the best sex of her life.

He’s a complete asshole and arrogant. His mood swings are like night and day.

It’s a vicious cycle—*he’s* a vicious cycle.

And this ride with him is going to be the death of me.

“Any ring will do. I don’t care.” I bump my shoulder against his before walking up to the counter and look over the

extensive selection of diamond rings. I point to one randomly. “This one’s fine.”

He peers over my shoulder and growls in disapproval. “It’s too small.”

“Why does it matter? It’s a ring. The sooner we get out of here, the better.”

“You’re acting like a brat.” His fingers curl around my wrist again. At this point, he might as well make them a bracelet.

“And you’re acting like an ass,” I hiss.

The salesman clears his throat, reminding us that we are not alone. “Perhaps another time would be better, Mr. Milazzo?”

“Now. Not tomorrow, not next week, or next month. Now!” He slaps the glass display case with his palm, and I jump. He spins to me. “We had an agreement.” His words are laced with anger. “You are breaking that agreement. I don’t know why you are being so difficult—”

“I don’t know why *you’re* being such an ass.”

“Because you’re being hardheaded.”

“And you’re a controlling asshat, but here we are, getting nowhere, as usual. I don’t know how this is going to work. Maybe...maybe we go to a clinic and have the pregnancy happen that way.”

“What did you just say?” he pushes me against the glass, arms bracing either side of me, and he looks over my shoulder at the salesman. “Get. Out.”

“Yes, Mr. Milazzo.”

I hear the rustle of footsteps and a door closing behind me. Carmine presses forward, and I lean back to get away from him. He wraps that damn hand around my throat again.

I’m becoming all too familiar with the feel of him around me and threatening my existence.

It shouldn’t feel so damn good.

“Repeat that, Sweetling. Repeat what you just said.”

“I said we are getting nowhere. As usual.”

“No, not that.” His thumb presses against my airway, not hard enough to impact my breathing but I feel the pressure. “You know exactly what I am talking about.”

“I said you were being an asshat.”

“An asshat?” he repeats. His thumb slides up my neck and rests on my bottom lip. “Explain that to me.”

My eyes flutter when his fingers dig into the back of my neck, and his other hand grips my right hip.

“Tell me,” he rumbles.

“It’s when a person is an ass so often, it’s as if they wear an ass as a hat they can’t seem to take off.”

“Take off?” His lips inch toward mine.

My breath catches and my heart thrums. A warm buzz hums just under my skin. With his knee, he forces my legs apart and stands between them. Every time he inches closer, the heat taking over me becomes a few between my thighs, and I’m wet.

I ache for him, for when he’s close like this.

“The asshat. When you take it off, you’re a different person, but when you leave it on—”

“I rule an entire city, Delilah. I have a kingdom, an empire, and I am at war. I have to wear this hat you speak of because kindness doesn’t win wars.”

“You’d be surprised the power kindness holds.”

“Not between enemies. Not between threats. Pressure builds; it’s always there, isn’t it?” His hand slides from my hip to my thigh. He tilts my head back and exposes my throat, bending down and skimming his lips across the column. He doesn’t kiss me. He antagonizes me, forcing me to feel the scratch of the stubble along his cheek and the soft caress of his lips. “It builds and builds, the pressure reaching new heights.”

I whimper, and the bastard smirks against my throat.

“Until it explodes.” He backs away, leaving me flushed and aroused.

He doesn't bother hiding his arousal. He shows it off, liking that I can't seem to take my eyes off his cock. “Pick out a ring. One that isn't embarrassing, Sweetling. And then I'll think about taking the hat off.”

“Tempting,” I answer, finally turning around to look at the rings.

He dips his head and smirks, rubbing his mouth with his hand. The expensive Rolex on his wrist shines against the light, and I'm reminded that with money comes power and control.

He has all three.

I run my fingers across the glass, staring at all the rings. He wants me to wear a big diamond? I'll pick the biggest damn diamond I see.

“That one.” I point.

“Excuse me?” Carmine shouts to get the attention of the salesman.

“Are we ready, sir?” the guy pokes his head out from the other room with a smile. He skips with an energy I've never had before and clasps his hands in front of him.

“Yes, we are ready,” Carmine states, standing next to me to see which ring I am pointing to. “Really?” he huffs, placing his hand on my lower back. “You're being very stubborn, Ms. Reynolds.”

I scoff, pointing at the large, hideous diamond. “You wanted big; I picked out big. Isn't it to your liking? Who is being difficult now?” I cross my arms and arch my brow.

“Don't play dumb with me, Sweetling. You and I both know you went for the ugliest ring you could find. Get the ugliest fucking diamond in the world, one you hate. One day, you'll look at that ring and love it.”

I roll my eyes, unravel my arms and tap my nails on the glass. “And why would I love it?”

“Because one day, you’ll look at it and realize how beautiful it is, how beautiful we will be. You’ll love it because not only will you love us, but you will love me. So, pick the ugliest ring you want. It won’t change the inevitable.” He leans down and brushes his lips across mine for the first time today, and the action makes me hold my breath.

“And if I got the pretty one?” I ask him and then swallow, trying to hold in how much he affects me.

“Then, one day, it will match what you feel for me. One day.”

“So optimistic. I’ll take that one, please,” I say, knowing he expected me to pick the pretty one.

“Embarrassing,” he mumbles, placing his hand in a steeple position against his mouth.

“What does it matter? As long as it will have meaning for us one day?” I hold out my hand, and the salesman slides it onto my finger.

“A perfect fit.”

Carmine sounds shocked, but he lifts my hand to his lips and kisses my knuckles as if he were a gentleman.

We know better.

“You were the beauty it needed, Sweetling,” he says.

As much as I got the ring out of spite, the more I look at it, the more I like it. The band is too wide, but it’s a gorgeous gold, and the diamond is huge and awkwardly set.

I do love it.

“It’s perfect,” I whisper, the entire ring changing before my eyes.

“I’m glad.” Carmine slaps down a piece of paper, and the moment is ruined when I see what it is.

A marriage license.

“I thought we had to go to the courthouse for this.”

Carmine signs his name and hands me the pen. “Anything can be done for the right price. You, of all people, should know that.”

His words make me feel like a whore, and before I can calm myself, I pull back my hand and slap him across the face. Tears sting my eyes.

“Looks like you can’t leave the hat off for long, can you?” I scribbled my name on the paper, signing away my life.

I’m married to the Devil.

And no amount of money can change that.

Chapter Thirteen

Carmine

The last two days have been horrible.

She won't look at me. She won't speak to me. She kissed me goodnight, but they were emotionless and meaningless, and I found myself hurt by them. I miss her playfulness, her anger and her lust. Anything is better than the cold shoulder she's been giving me.

When Gianni stops in front of the library, Delilah doesn't even wait for the SUV to stop before climbing out of the car, throwing her backpack over her shoulder and walking to the entrance to meet her friends for the study session.

I sigh and start to get out, but Gianni stops me. "She's very strong, but you'll need to soften a bit if you want this to work."

"I can't." I hang my head, watching her vanish into the library without even looking back at me to see if I'm following. "I can't afford to be soft."

"If you don't try, even a little, she'll resent you. I don't know what happened, but tensions are high enough; we don't need it high at home too. Fix it, Carmine. We need her. She's the reason Ari is alive."

"I don't know how to apologize for what I did." I rub my temples when my head begins to pound. "I was an asshat. Her words, not mine."

He chuckles and pats my leg in reassurance.

"I called her a prostitute. I didn't mean for it to come out like that, but I was..." I don't know how to explain it, and I wave my hand in a circle over my chest. "I was feeling things."

"Ah." He says, nodding. "Things. They get us every time."

“I pushed her away. It’s what I do. It’s what needs to be done in this line of work. If she ever dies, I can’t waste time grieving.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. You’d get revenge. You’ll kill anyone that hurt her. It’s okay to admit you feel something for her. It’s obvious you already do.”

I step out of the car and try not to be bothered by his honesty, but I am.

“Remember,” he adds. “Soft.”

Soft.

What the fuck do I know about soft? I kill people, torture, trade weapons, and sell drugs. I’m not a good man.

What the hell do I know about being soft?

I slam the door shut, and Gianni drives away leaving me in front of a college library. What the fuck am I doing here?

I build places like this. Hell, there are probably college kids here who buy drugs from the runners I have in the city.

I remember being a low-level runner, being the one doing the shady deals and following orders to work my way to the top.

Well, I did.

I killed my way to the top.

My father didn’t treat his men with the same respect as I give mine. I don’t kick my men when they’re down, and I pay them fairly. Some have families they have to support, and I know this isn’t an easy world to live in. Making good money makes it a little easier.

With confident strides, I make my way to the front door. The breeze picks up, and a leaf hits me on the shoulder. I watch it fly away, getting carried through the wind, a promise of a storm swirling above me in the sky. Not even that leaf will have peace. Soon enough, it will be soggy and worthless, stuck on the ground and stepped on or in a gutter somewhere.

Because that's life if you don't know how to survive it—you'll be caught in a storm, and you'll drown if you're not careful.

I survey my surroundings, noticing a café to the right and the smell of freshly brewed coffee captures my attention.

Soft.

I can...try. I combed her hair. I can be soft.

That's when no one was looking.

Not knowing where she is, I pull out my phone and use the GPS to locate her. I follow the trail, passing a few people, and pretend not to hear their whispers about me. I do enjoy knowing people fear me. I like passing a group of people and knowing they recognize me.

Fear is the most powerful resource on the planet, and once I have someone's fear in my hands, I can use it against them to get what I want. It's an indispensable tool.

I stop at the door and realize it's a private room. I don't bother knocking. I stroll in, and Christy looks up, surprised, but Delilah doesn't.

She isn't wearing her ring.

I grind my teeth together to stop the rage, causing my fists to clench at my side.

"Oh, hi." Caleb waves, but I ignore him.

Ethan is there, but he is sitting next to Christy. Good. I'm glad he took my ultimatum seriously.

I stand at the head of the table and splay my hands across the surface.

Soft. Be soft.

"Would anyone," I try to relax the tightness in my jaw, "like a coffee?"

"You're offering to get us coffee?" Christy sets her pen down and crosses her arms, looking from Delilah to me, knowing something is going on.

I nod. "I am."

"What's the catch?" she asks. "I don't have a thousand bucks or anyone for you to take a hit out on."

"Christy!" Ethan hisses.

"What? We all know that what happened at Delilah's house wasn't an accident or so-called," she makes air quotes, "old fireworks going off." She props her head in her hand and blinks at me. "Right?"

"I don't know what you mean." I'm not going to admit the truth. The less she knows, the better. I don't like to be spoken to like that, and it's taking every bit of my self-control not to show her the consequences of her disrespect. But Delilah would never forgive me. "There's no catch. You're studying hard. I want to help. So, would anyone like a coffee? Perhaps, some snacks?"

Delilah still won't look at me, but her chin quivers. Her lips pinch as she blows out a breath. She's trying not to cry.

I did that.

That's my fault.

"I'll take a large coffee with two shots of espresso and three pumps of caramel with the drizzle too. And I want whipped cream on top."

"I'll take that too," Caleb says, kissing Christy on the cheek.

"Me too. If that's okay," Ethan asks, quietly. He doesn't want to cross the line again.

"Sure. Delilah?" I ask her, hoping she'll say something to me. Anything. I'll take her cursing me out at this point, but the silence has to stop.

I didn't realize I'd care so much so quickly. Even though she's only been in my life for less than a week, I feel like I've known her forever. We fight like we have known each other forever, as if it's a habit we can't break.

"She'll have the same thing," Christy speaks up for her friend, knowing Delilah is angry with me.

My heart sinks, doing that fucking thing I don't like for it to do. It's annoying. How have people dealt with this constantly?

I bend down and move her hair from her shoulder. I don't miss how she moves away from me, but I wrap my arm around the back of the chair so she can't go anywhere.

"Sweetling, please talk to me," I whisper into her ear, aching to hear her voice, needing to hear her anger.

Something is better than nothing, and I've been without anything for far too long to ever give up on the *something* I have with her.

She remains silent, and I sigh staring down at her bare ring finger. I hate it. She's mine, and everyone should know it. I look at my hand; a black band settled to show everyone I'm hers.

Delilah doesn't know I wear it for her. She thinks it's all a show, but I happen to like knowing I belong to someone, that I am a part of something other than the job.

I'm hers.

"I'll be back with the drinks," I say, kissing the top of her head. "I miss you." I bend down on her other side, uncaring if anyone sees. I go to reach for her hand,

but I pull away instantly.

Maybe she no longer wants my touch. Christy gasps, but I take that moment to leave, hitting the door on my way out.

I leave the study room and march toward the café. It's welcoming for the most part, with a fake wood counter and grey chairs around square tables where a few students are seated.

"Excuse me," I say, cutting through the line, and when people see it is me, they move. "I'll only be a moment. Thank you." I ease the fear on the short blonde standing behind me, wide-eyed with her mouth open. I pay attention to the lady behind the counter, probably a student at the school. She's wearing a purple apron that says Café Books on it. "Four large coffees with three pumps of caramel and drizzle with whipped

cream on top. And two shots of espresso.” I hand her a hundred-dollar bill, and the register ding open for her to give me change. “Keep it for the tip.”

“That’s like eighty bucks, dude.” Her black eyeliner is penciled on thick and appears unfriendly.

She must not know me, or she wouldn’t call me dude.

“Fill your car up with gas. Buy beer. I don’t care. Please, get me my coffee.” I twist the wedding band on my finger, wondering if Delilah would love me in another life. The machines behind the counter steam, buzz, whisk, and the barista pours. I know coffee won’t be enough to earn her forgiveness.

I need her to be patient with me.

I’m trying to be softer, but every attempt feels wrong.

“Here is your coffee. Have a good day,” the clerk says, sounding bored out of her mind. “Next.”

Suddenly nervous, I return to the study room with the coffee. Me. Fucking Carmine Milazzo. A man who kills and takes without question, yet this woman is bringing me to my knees.

I’m close to begging her.

I don’t beg. Not for anything or anyone, but I think I would for her.

Taking a deep breath, I march into the room and place the coffee on the table, handing everyone their own, then slide Delilah hers.

She stops writing on her piece of paper and her eyes catch the ring on my finger. With a shake of her head, the chair squeaks across the floor as she bolts from the room.

“Delilah!” I call after her. I start to follow, but Ethan stands to block me.

Without question, without hesitation, I slam him against the wall, pull my gun from the waistband of my pants and press it under his chin.

I cock it so he can hear the bullet slide into the chamber.

“Oh, fuck.” He tries to turn his head away from the gun, but I’m stronger than he is, and I keep him locked in place.

“Jesus,” Christy says, from behind me.

“I will fucking kill you right here and now if you try to get in my way again. I warned you once. I don’t give warnings. Delilah is your friend, so I’ve made an exception. Try to stop me again, and I’ll make sure I spend the rest of my life begging for her forgiveness.” I shove the barrel harder against his chin before I uncock the gun and tuck it back into my waistband. Then I go after Delilah.

I’m not sure where she went.

I pull out my phone and track her. She’ll catch on to my little GPS soon, so I’ll have to be more creative in hiding a location device on her. Perhaps in a necklace or her ring.

I head downstairs to the basement, where we had our first heated kiss. I quicken my footsteps, following the direction the GPS is telling me to go. I notice a bathroom in the corner. I push my phone into my pocket and open the door, hearing small sniffles from the stall.

“There’s someone in here,” she says, her voice echoing off the walls.

I lock the door behind me, and my Italian leather loafers thud against the disgusting tile of the bathroom floor. Standing in front of the stall, I test the door to see if it is open, and it is, so I pull it, revealing Delilah sitting on the toilet and wiping her eyes with the toilet paper.

She lifts her head and blows out a breath, sagging in defeat. “Will you please leave me alone, Carmine? I can’t do this right now.”

“No.” I lift her to her feet, then press her against the wall. There are names written in permanent marker on the blue stall, years of college students embedding their memory here forever. I pin her arms against her sides and hold her close. “I’m sorry.”

“Let me go.” She struggles against me, shoving against my chest.

“No. Stop it. Stop it, Delilah.” I struggle against her as she uses every part of her body against mine. “Delilah!” I raise my voice, and she freezes, sobbing as she leans her head against the wall.

“Carmine, please.” Her fists stay on my chest as she gives in. “I can’t do this with you. You intentionally hurt me the other day. I can’t.”

“Shh, I know. I know I did. Sweetling, I’m so sorry.”

She stares at me with absolute hatred. “Your apologies mean nothing to me because I know you’ll intentionally hurt me again.” Another tear drips down her cheek.

I wipe them away and pin her still, pressing my entire body weight to hers. “I don’t like what you do to me; that’s why I hurt you. That’s why I insulted you. You unravel every barrier I’ve ever created, but I feel...” I deepen my voice as I exhale. “Very deeply for you. I’m sorry,” I say again, holding her face in my hands so gently. I’m afraid she’ll break if I press too hard.

I lean in, wondering if she’ll deny me, but she doesn’t try to push me away, so I take that as a good sign. Owning her lips with mine, I pour every ounce of regret into the kiss, hoping she can feel it. I taste the saltiness of her tears, and my cock hardens.

She cries because she hurts, which means she feels something for me.

She sighs against me, relaxing in my arm, meeting my tongue with hers, and the kiss becomes frantic. Her hands grab my blazer, and I grip her ass, lifting her from the ground and wrapping her legs around my waist.

“You aren’t wearing your ring.” I bite her lip hard, showing her how I feel about that.

“I did it to piss you off,” she admits, her hands reaching for my cock.

I grip her hand and pin it against the wall. “The first time I have you, the first time I get to experience your hot fucking cunt will not be in the filth of a college bathroom. I’ll have you in bed where I’ll feast on you for hours, pouring every drop of my come inside you, so I know you’ll get pregnant right away.”

She moans, rocking herself against me. “Carmine.”

“I’ll take care of you,” I say, carefully. “If you’ll allow me.” I know we haven’t done that yet. We have barely held one another at night, but it doesn’t stop me from fantasizing about her body at night, wishing it was against mine. “I’ll be gentle,” I whisper against her ear, nibbling her earlobe. “I don’t want anything in return except your pleasure. All I want is for you to feel good.” The thought makes my cock harden more, the blood rushing south.

Her cheeks are red, and she nibbles her bottom lip with uncertainty.

“But you’ll come while you wear my ring. Where is it?”

“My hoody zip pocket,” she answers breathlessly.

There’s a small pocket above her right. I unzip it, grab the ring that only Delilah can make beautiful, and slip it on her finger.

“That’s better. Never again, Delilah. You are not allowed to ever take off your ring. If you do, you don’t come. Do you understand me?”

She nods fast, her cheeks still wet from her tears, and I clean them off with my tongue, drinking them in. Delilah feels something for me, and I want to fucking taste it.

I nibble my way down her throat. “Do you want me to make you come, Sweetling? Right here. Right now?”

“Yes,” she whimpers, rocking her hips against my cock, and my hands squeeze her hips to get her to stop.

I wrap my hand around her throat and squeeze tight, lust boiling and threatening my impatience. “You better stop doing

that, or I'm going to fuck you right now, not giving a damn about the place, Delilah."

She's gasping for breath and freezes, pulling her hips away from me for the final time, dragging her heat across my entire length.

"Do you feel what you do to me?" I speak, staring at her lips and kissing them between words. "What you always do to me." I smooth my hands down her front, cupping her breasts. I moan so she can hear how pleased I am by how perfect they feel in my palms. I don't lift her shirt because I didn't ask if I could see them, but I remember them from showering together.

So, fucking perfect; her naked body has haunted my dreams. I've awakened in the middle of the night, my cock aching, hot, throbbing, and leaking pre-cum for her. I'd taken myself in my hand and stroked, watching her sleep, coming into my palm with every rise and fall of her chest.

I dip my hand in her leggings and cup her pussy, already so wet and warm, just waiting for me to pay attention to it.

"You're soaked for me. Have you been in need, Sweetling? You need to tell me when you are so I can take care of you." I slip my fingers through her silky petals, the dew covering my fingertips, and she moans when I skim over her swollen clit.

"No other man has touched you like this?" I ask, my lips moving against hers.

"No. Only you, Carmine." Her eyes close, and she pinches her lips together to keep quiet. Her fingers dig into my shoulder, unfamiliar with the intimate touch, and somehow, it turns me on more than anyone and anything ever did. "Only you."

I dip my finger inside her virgin hole, inhaling a sharp breath when I feel how tight she is. "You have no idea how much I treasure this, Sweetling. I love knowing I'm your first in every single way." With my other hand, I tug her leggings down to her knees so I can have more room. "You feel so good. I can't wait until I feel this untouched pussy around my

cock. When you're ready," I add, not wanting her to feel any pressure.

In and out, in and out, languidly feeling her soft walls hugging my finger. I groan and

press deeper. She whines from pain. Her barrier prevents me from going any farther, and I must stop, my entire body shuddering with need. I want to fucking claim her in all the right ways. I watch her face as I speed up my shallow thrusts, not sinking in too far. I want her virginity on my cock. I want to feel myself sink in and settle in her depths.

"Oh god, Carmine," she groans, then covers her mouth with her hands.

I yank them down and press the heel of my palm against her clit. Another loud moan reverberates off the walls, and I hope someone in this basement reading a book can hear her. Let them listen to me claiming my wife.

My. Fucking. Wife.

"I want your sounds. Do not hold back from me."

"Someone might... someone might hear." She pinches her face to stop herself from crying out as I speed up.

"I said," I crouch down, tug the leggings off, and lift her leg onto my shoulder, "fucking scream." I bury my face between her legs, lashing my tongue across her clit as I keep a fast pace with my finger.

"Carmine. Oh my, God!"

"God isn't the one on his knees for you right now, the Devil is," I say, sucking her clit into my mouth and pulling a scream from her throat. I moan in approval.

She rocks against my face, sweetness dripping from my chin, and her whimpers turn shorter. Her hands run through my hair, tugging on the strands, and her head bangs against the wall while she rides my face.

"Carmine. Carmine!" She warns me before she orgasms, but I don't move. I lick her honey, letting it slide down my throat,

and hum in approval as she comes crying out as spasm after spasms rock her body.

My cock is raging. There's a wet spot on the front of my dark trousers, unable to be seen, but I know it's there. I feel the pre-cum oozing from my slit.

I slow my attention, kissing her clit and licking her pussy clean. I kiss it. "Such a good girl coming for me like that." I kiss her again, never wanting to leave the space between her thighs.

"Carmine."

I love how she says my name when she's breathless.

I did that. I caused that.

I ease my finger free of her pussy and stand, sucking my finger into my mouth, licking it clean. She gasps as she watches me.

"I knew you'd taste so sweet," I say, then steal her lips in another kiss, letting her taste herself.

"Nothing tastes better than my wife." I bring the kiss to an end, and her eyes are glazed. She's still running off the high from her orgasm.

"Good girl crying out my name for everyone to hear." I grip her chin between my fingers and look her in the eye. "You are mine, Sweetling." I bend down and pull her leggings up, dressing her since she can't seem to move.

I hold out my hand and open the door. "Your friends will be wondering where you are. We need to show them you're safe."

She stares at my erection and reaches for it, but I snatch her hand and bring it to my mouth. "Don't worry about me. This was for you. Tasting you and watching you come was very pleasurable for me."

Delilah blushes, suddenly shy and unsure after being so intimate. I love it. I love that there's an aspect where she doesn't feel confident when she should. That's okay. I'm confident, and I will guide her there.

“Let’s study, Sweetling.”

“Yes, Mr. Milazzo,” she whispers, following me out the door, and I groan in delight.

“Mrs. Milazzo better never call me anything else after she comes,” I say, loving the hitch in her step as she stumbles to unlock the bathroom door.

I’m wondering if perhaps we have a chance at making this work after all.

I just need to remember one thing:

Be softer with her

and she’ll forever be mine.

I’m afraid I have to admit I might love her to an extreme.

A catastrophic extreme could hurt many people if they ever got in my way.

Chapter Fourteen

Delilah

It's been two weeks since we married, and the best and only sexual experience of my life. He's been different during that time. He's been...sweet.

And sweet is not in his nature. That's how I know he's trying.

Every day for the last two weeks, he has come to the library with me, gotten everyone coffee and stayed at my side. Ethan stays far away from Carmine, and Carmine tends to give him deadly stares, but the last two weeks have been great. He's even helped me study for the exam that I have tomorrow.

We've stayed up late studying, fallen asleep, and woken up with flashcards sticking to our cheeks. We've laughed and kissed, but the one thing I haven't been able to do is to take the next step with him. After Carmine gave me that amazing orgasm, I felt like I couldn't please him and turned him on myself.

Sexually, I've kept him distant.

But we've grown closer.

The laughs, the coffee, the study sessions, all because of my big exam tomorrow.

And he never missed a day. He never told me he couldn't because of work.

He was—*is*—there for me.

“No! Not again, not again. Please, not again.”

Unable to sleep because I was thinking about Carmine and worried if I pass my test tomorrow, I flipped over to see what Carmine was talking about.

“Don't. Father, not again. Not again.” The pain in his voice has me scooting closer. He still won't talk about the scars on

his body, and I still can't touch them.

"Carmine?" I whisper, trying to wake him gently from his nightmare.

He begins to scream. It's loud and heart-wrenching, the kind of sound that reaches into the soul and shreds it to pieces. The tendons in his neck are tight, and he is gripping the comforter for dear life. He begins to thrash, and I want to cry for him.

I've never seen him like this. I've never seen him in a nightmare. He doesn't dream.

"Stop! I'll be a man, just stop!" he screams, a singular tear running down his chin.

"Carmine!" I roll on top of him and shake him awake, needing him to see that his real life is with me now. He doesn't wake up right away. "Carmine! It's me. It's Delilah. Wake up, my dark side, wake up," I beg him, hoping he knows what it means.

He's my dark side, the darkness I've always craved.

"Carmine!" I take his face in my hands and press my lips against his. His chest is sweating, his forehead is hot and his breathing is fast.

His eyes snap open, and I'm flipped to my back.

There's no recognition in his gaze. His pupils are blown wide, his hair is a disaster and his fist is held in the air.

"Carmine! It's me. It's Delilah. Your Sweetling, it's me," I sob, closing my eyes to prepare for the hit. "It's me."

I press my hands against his chest to push him away, my fingertips drifting over the puckered scars, and he finally blinks, shaking the dream from his head.

Sweat drips from the ends of his hair, and when he finally sees me, he drops his hand and jumps off the bed to get away from me.

"Why did you do that?" he yells at me, pain and regret clear in his tone. "Why did you try to wake me? Never, ever do that again. I almost fucking hit you!"

I sit up and knee-walk on the bed to the edge. “It’s okay. You weren’t in your right mind, Carmine. You had a bad dream.”

“It isn’t okay!” He roars, slapping his chest. “I never want to hurt you. Ever. Hurting you would kill me.” He grabs at his hair and rubs his hands down his face. “Fuck!” he punches a hole in the wall, and I jump. “I can’t believe I did that. I almost attacked you,” he says through broken breaths. “Stay away from me. This can’t work. It can’t. I’m not good for you. You don’t get it. You don’t understand,” he mumbles while not looking at me. “How did I ever think this could work? I’m a fucking idiot.”

“Carmine—”

“I almost hit you!” he yells at me again, taking a step forward and reaching out to me, but he drops his hands. He’s afraid to touch me now. “Do you know what I would have done to myself? I am a man of many sins. Sins that will follow me forever, but that is one I refuse to live with. I’m ashamed. Tomorrow, I’ll cancel the contract. You can go home.”

I jump off the bed and run to him, but he backs away from me, holding out his arms for me not to come closer.

“Carmine, no. No! I refuse to give up that easily. You don’t get to give up, either. You were in a nightmare. You can’t control that. Next time, I won’t wake you. I’ll go into another room, okay? We don’t give up. Not after...” I try not to let my emotion show. “Not after everything we have been through the last few weeks.”

“I’m a man who is always put together,” he says, tracing the scars on his chest and shoulders as he speaks. “I am not weak. I am not a weak man. I’ve proved myself. I’m not weak.” He sags against the wall and bends over. “I’m not weak.” He runs his hand through his hair, and I take a step forward, touching his face to bring him to the present with me.

He flinches but then leans into my touch.

“I know you’re not weak,” I say. “You’re the strongest man I know.”

“You’re a fool for staying with me. What if you’re pregnant, and I hurt you? I can’t do that. I couldn’t live...” he swallows, staring at the floor. “I couldn’t live if I hurt you.”

“You wouldn’t. I believe that. You’ve had plenty of chances to hurt me, and you haven’t. This won’t be any different.” I slide my fingers down his neck and touch a scar. “What happened? Why do you have these? Your father did this? That’s who you were yelling at in your dream.” I take his hands and drag him back to bed, wanting him to be comfortable talking to me, but I can’t get him to move.

“He cut me with a knife. Some are deeper than others. He was teaching me how to be a man. He cut me every day when I was a child, until one day I didn’t cry anymore.”

“Carmine.”

“I’m not proud of this,” he begins. “I never wanted you to see me like this. I’m not this man.”

“I wouldn’t care.”

“I fought every day. The pain was so much. Sometimes, I’d wish he would kill me. It’s been so long since I’ve had a nightmare, and I almost hurt you.” He grasps the back of my neck, and his brown eyes lock on mine, filling with tears. “I’ll never hurt you, Delilah. With my last fucking breath, I’d never put a hand on you, but I am not a good man. I’m damaged. I am unable to be put back together. Too many pieces of me have been taken. My mind is broken.”

He winces when I touch the scars on his chest, his skin still damp and sticky from sweating during his nightmare. He’s trembling, barely able to keep still, and his nostrils flare as I examine every battle scar. His fists flex, and his veins protrude as his muscles bulge.

“You are not broken,” I whisper, and kiss the scar running from one shoulder to the other. “You are not weak.” I kiss another scar, and his shoulders relax. “You *are* a good man.” He turns his head but doesn’t look at me. “You’re a good man to me, and that’s all that matters. I don’t care what you do to

anyone else, as long as you come back to me.” I stand in front of him and kiss the scar on his chest.

His chest heaves as he stares at me, then, with his signature hand around my throat, he drags me to bed, slamming me on the mattress.

We’re naked.

I don’t know how I’ve forgotten that in the last ten minutes, but his cock is hard, curving up to his stomach to his belly button. The head is flared, a dark blush color, while he’s thick and long. He trimmed around the base, and as he curls over me, his thumb pressing against my jugular, I know I want him more than ever.

“If you knew the things I want to do to you, you would not call me a good man.”

“Then don’t be a good man right now, Carmine.” I fight against his hold on my neck and push forward until we are nose to nose. “Show me how bad you’ve been dying to be.”

He slams his lips to mine, skimming his fingers down my arms. Goosebumps rise in their wake. Carmine intertwines our hands, clutching them together as if it’s the only thing holding him to the ground.

The way he kisses me this time is different. It’s desperate like he’s searching for anything to help him make sense of his life. His tongue slides against mine, and he settles himself between my legs. His cock slips between my pussy folds.

He moans, breaking the kiss to catch a breath before melding our lips together again.

“You feel so good,” he mumbles. “Already so wet, so hot for me, Sweetling.” He lets go of one hand and grabs the meat of my thigh, digging his fingers into the flesh. “Are you sure? Delilah, there will be no turning back,” he growls, dipping his hand between us to align it with my entrance. “I’m going to fill you with my come over and over again until your body has no choice but to have my child.”

“I don’t have a choice anyway,” I remind him, nipping at his chin. “I agreed to it. Take me, Carmine. Take the last thing

that's meant to be yours."

He rips the covers off the bed. "I want nothing in my way."

He curls over me, a flash of worry pinching his brows as he inches his way in.

I release his hand and grab his shoulders. He pauses, staring at where I'm touching his scars, but it's brief.

"Hold onto me, Sweetling." He kisses either side of my cheeks before settling against my lips.

My fingernails dig into his skin, and I hope I don't add more scars to him.

While I whimper, he moans, struggling to breathe as he sinks further.

"Fuck," he curses, then owns my mouth in a searing kiss.

I squeeze my eyes shut when he hits the barrier. He stretches and fills every part of me.

"You feel so good, Sweetling," he croons in my ear. "Nothing, no one, has ever felt as good as you feel to me. Your pussy is perfect. All mine. I know it hurts."

I nod, biting my lip as he presses a little harder. Tears fill my eyes as I open them, staring directly at him.

"I'm going to make you feel so good, I promise." His hand automatically lies across the side of my neck, his thumb sliding back and forth across my jaw. "So beautiful," he whispers in awe, before dipping down and sucking a nipple into his mouth.

I cry out when he slams forward, claiming my virginity as his while lashing his tongue across my hardened peak. He cups my breasts, groaning as he has his way with my body.

He kisses his way up my chest, sucking gently on my throat, before taking another kiss.

"You're all mine now," he states. "The only cock you'll ever know." He kisses me again, gently and sweet, and doesn't move. He gives me time to adjust to his size, the pain and intrusion.

“So big,” I mumble, wiggling under him.

“And your pussy is taking every inch it was meant to.” He plucks my left nipple, pinching and tugging until I’m moaning in pleasure.

“Move,” I beg him. “Please, move.”

“Why is every part of you perfect.” He wonders aloud, as he slides out only to ease his way in again. His eyes close, and his mouth opens as he makes pleasurable noises I never thought I’d hear from him. He is a very vocal lover, and I want more.

“More, Carmine. Please.” My hands wrap around his firm ass, gripping his cheeks to pull him tighter against me, Another inch invaded my sensitive entrance.

Hooking one hand around my shoulder, he leans on his elbow and stares at where we are connected, watching himself sliding in and out of me.

“Ah, damn,” he groans, throwing his head back in ecstasy. “Delilah.” His nostrils flare as he picks up speed, our skin slapping in the room that will hold this moment forever.

“Oh god,” I shout, scraping my nails down his chest.

He slams against me now, gripping the headboard for leverage as he thrusts his hips with more force. “That’s it, Sweetling. Take my cock, take the only fucking cock you’ll ever know. I’ll be the only man you’ll ever need. I’ll give you everything.”

He reaches down and circles my clit, sparks flying through my body.

“Carmine!” My thighs begin to tremble, and I become wetter, the space between us slippery.

“Yes, call out my name, Sweetling. Let me hear you.” He moves us suddenly, standing beside the bed; he drags the edge, lifts my legs to place them on his shoulders, and fills me once more. We moan in unison, and as he begins a punishing pace, my breasts bounce with the force he uses. He stares, watching the movement hungrily.

He’s obsessed.

“I can’t wait until you’re pregnant. I can’t wait until your tits fill with milk and your belly becomes round. You’re going to be so fucking sexy. I’m going to love it just like I love you,” he admits, and doesn’t catch himself.

I don’t say it back because it has to be the heat of the moment. I don’t think he means it. I’ll wait until he says it while we aren’t having amazing sex.

“Carmine. I’m...I’m...”

“Yes, that’s it, Sweetling. Come.”

On his command, unable to disobey, I do as he says and shatter. My muscles clamp around him as spasms work their way through my body.

He spreads my legs apart and aligns his chest with mine, kissing me again before his breath becomes unsteady and sharp. Carmine groans and gasps. “Ah, fuck, Delilah.”

He plants himself as far as he can and fills me with every stream; he thrusts harder, wanting to claim my womb.

When he is done, he doesn’t roll off me. Instead, he kisses me tenderly, slow and easy, both of us trying to catch our breath. Our bodies shake from the explosive orgasms, and without breaking the connection between us, he moves us up the bed.

“We’ll fall asleep like this, so nothing drips free,” he says, wrapping his arms around me and kissing the side of my forehead.

I don’t know why that makes me smile, but it does. Maybe this life with him won’t be so bad. Maybe we will be happy.

“Are you okay?” he asks me, trailing his hands up and down my arms. “Did I hurt you?” he asks.

I sigh in contentment, not ever wanting this moment to end. I’m falling in love with him, and I want nothing more than to tell him, but I can’t. I want us to tell one another when sex isn’t involved. Only loving me while he’s inside me isn’t love.

It’s just sex. It’s use. It’s a transaction between two people, as we originally agreed upon.

“No. You didn’t hurt me. I mean, it hurt at first, but it doesn’t hurt anymore. It felt good. Really good,” I admit, and I’m happy he can’t see my face because I blush, suddenly feeling shy.

“You feel amazing. I’m addicted.” He presses a kiss against my shoulder, and I involuntarily contract my muscles around him. Carmine hisses, gripping my hip with force. “You better stop if you don’t want another round.”

“Who said I didn’t? You’re the one who stopped. Do you think you can go again? Is your age catching up to you?” I tease, wanting to take it a step further. “You probably can’t keep up with a young woman like me. Maybe one of your brothers can help me out.”

He flips me onto my back; this time, both hands are wrapped around my neck, squeezing tightly. I can’t breathe, and my entire body reacts. I love it.

“You fucking dare bring my brothers into our bed while it’s my come inside you, my cock, me with my hands wrapped around your throat. It’s your virgin blood on me.” His cock is still solid as he begins to thrust. Lifting me by my neck, he tosses me off his length and throws me onto my stomach. His hand shoves my face into the mattress, and I struggle, wanting to get away but driving him crazy.

“Where the hell do you think you’re going?” He wraps my hair around his wrist. “And to think I was going to take it easy on you because you were a virgin, but now I’m wondering if you just want to be my slut.” He grips my hips to keep me still enough for him to thrust inside me.

“Yes,” I groan, loving this position, loving the sting of pain from losing my virginity.

“Bring my brothers into this bed again, and I will make sure you can’t walk for a fucking week, Delilah. Do you want them?” he sneers, driving unapologetically into me again. “Are you imagining them inside you right now?” I hear the insecurity in his voice. It’s barely there, a slight hitch in his throat, but it’s there. “No one will be able to fuck you better

than me,” he threatens. “And I will kill them if they ever laid a hand on you. You know I would.”

My screams are muffled by the mattress. I move up the bed with every thrust until my head hangs over it.

“They will never get the chance to touch you like I am!” he roars, thrusting harder, and the urge to come hits me full force. All I feel is pressure. It builds and builds until I don’t think I can take anymore. I turn my head to look at him, but he shoves me back down. “You don’t get to watch me fuck you.”

“I don’t want them! I don’t.” I shake my head, my fingers curling over the edge of the mattress. “I only want you. I only wanted to make you angry.”

He yanks me back by tugging my hair, bringing his lips to my ear. “I am. Mission accomplished. I’m furious, Delilah. Tell me again. Tell me you only want me. Tell me it’s my cock that you want. No one else’s.”

“Yours, Carmine. I’m yours. I’m yours. Oh, God, I’m so close.”

“You come when I tell you to, damn it. You better not come, or I won’t fuck you again for weeks.”

“Carmine,” I pout. “That’s not fair.”

“Life’s not fair. I don’t give a fuck what you have to say right now.” He continues to batter me, his cock plummeting in and out, his sack slapping against me while I hold in my orgasm. Tears brim my eyes, and a burn begins to spread through my stomach.

“I have to, please,” I sob. “Carmine. Carmine. Carmine,” I chant his name with his every thrust.

I’ll have bruises on my ass from how hard he is holding me, but I don’t care. I want them. I want every mark he wants to give me.

“You’re not so sweet, but this pussy is,” he grabs my cheeks and thrusts me back, fucking me harder. He pauses, shouting his pleasure as he comes. “Now, Delilah. Now!”

And I do; I stop holding it in and cry into the mattress, milking his cock of every drop.

My vision sways, and darkness creeps in from the sides.

He pulls out of me and rolls me over. He kisses me, and I taste his sweat, the heat of his breath, and I drink it all in.

“You’re mine, Delilah,” he repeats. “I own you.”

“I know,” I say, our foreheads pressed together as we try to catch our breath.

I never expected to be owned, but I am in every single way. My life is his.

And I wouldn’t have it any other way.

Chapter Fifteen

Carmine

It's been five weeks of the same routine with Delilah. We get up, go to school, study, and have sex anywhere and everywhere. I'm able to lie her down or pin her against a wall. Anywhere with a fucking surface, I'm sinking my cock into her tight pussy.

It's more than wanting a child now. It's more than me wanting an heir, but I need to get her pregnant. I need to. I want to breed with her every morning and every night, her pussy filled to the brim with my come, so the only choice her womb has is to open up and let me in.

I thought that when I came up with the idea of having her marry me and give birth to my child, love had nothing to do with it. It was about not being alone anymore and the child, well, I wanted a son or daughter to love me. It was the one love I knew I'd be able to have without question or fight. I don't care what anyway says; love is important for humans to function.

But then Delilah surprised me left and right, carving her name into my heart.

I want more than what we agreed upon in the contract. I want a family. Our family. We can spend the rest of our lives happy and ruling this city. She'll be a queen, a place she deserves to be since her father couldn't put her there.

And I haven't forgotten I told her I loved her five weeks ago. I haven't said it again, and she hasn't brought it up, but I've been waiting for her to ask if I meant it.

I did. I do.

I love her intensely. She's more than my wife. She's my fucking obsession, and if anyone dares to touch her, I'll skin them alive and use their flesh as a rug under my feet.

The thought of someone touching her has a blind, murderous rage burning inside me. I don't regret killing Romano's men. I hope he took the bodies being dropped in his territory as the only warning he'll ever get. Ryan has been forthcoming about everything regarding my enemy, and with the life he has endured with Romano, it's my job to protect him now. And when Ryan told me about Romano's plan to kidnap my Delilah?

It sends me in an untamed fury. Only she can bring me down.

"Are you ready for your exam today?" I ask her, buttoning the tailormade shirt while she throws her hair into a messy bun.

She's very casual compared to my expensive suits, and I love that. I love those tight leggings and baggy sweatshirts. I know what's hiding under there, and it brings me satisfaction knowing no one else can see the curves of her body. They belong to me anyway.

"Yeah, I hope everything is okay with the professor. To cancel an exam and leave for weeks due to a family emergency couldn't have been good. I know his mom was sick for a long time, so I wonder if she passed. That's sad. I hope it isn't the case."

"You're sweet." I kiss her cheek, inhaling the sweetness of her skin. "But death is a process of life."

"I know that," she sighs, gripping the counter with two hands. "Is that how you'd feel if I died? You'd be that nonchalant about it because death is a part of life, so there's no reason to be sad?"

"Don't ever talk about yourself dying. It's unacceptable, Delilah. I won't hear of it." I tuck my shirt in my pants and walk out of the room because I don't want to hear more of that nonsense.

"So, someone else dying isn't a big deal to you, but me dying is? That makes no sense, Carmine."

I spin around so fast; I surprise her and pin her against the wall near the bathroom door. I stare into her eyes so she can see how serious I am.

“Because I don’t give a fuck about anyone else. I don’t care about your professor’s mother. I don’t care about anyone other than you, Delilah. No one else. So yes, everyone else in this world could die, but not you. Not ever you. I feel no sympathy for your professor. I feel no empathy. I do not care about him. I do not care about her. You? You are the exception, Delilah. You have broken all my rules. The death of you would kill me.”

Her breaths are hot puffs against my face. Her palms are flat against the wall, one knee bent, and that damn sweater hangs off her shoulder showing the soft skin I want to mark as mine. With ravenous need, I tug her leggings down her thighs, then spin her around. Pressing a palm between her shoulders to keep her bent over, I use my other hand to unzip my pants and free myself.

“Carmine, what are you—Oh!”

I silence her in one deep stroke, sinking into her pussy that’s still wet from last night. Wrapping her hair around my wrist, I tug her head back and press my mouth against her ear as she moans. “You aren’t allowed to ever talk about dying again, do you understand me?” I groan from the feel of her and how tight she is. I quicken my pace. “Tell me,” I sneer.

“I won’t...ever...talk about...that again.” She struggles to speak every time I fill her, giving her every inch of me.

“You are the only one who matters to me. You.” I pull my hips back and slam forward. “I’d kill everyone for you. If it meant keeping you safe, keeping you here with me, by my side, with my children.” I continue the brutal beat, her cheeks shaking with every driving force, and that fucking sweater she’s wearing drifts down her shoulder more.

I bite her there, marring her flesh before lapping at it with my tongue. She becomes wetter, her walls contracting around me, massaging the long length that’s made for her.

Circling my hand around the front of her neck, I squeeze. I don't know why I love doing that so much. Perhaps it's because she's at my mercy or in my control, but I love seeing my hand as a necklace. Only her throat column could make my hands seem clean and pure. I touch heaven every time I try to get her to experience hell.

"Carmine! Carmine! Oh, God. Don't stop. Don't stop."

Someone could hold a gun to my head, and I wouldn't stop. "You're mine, Sweetling. Say it. Tell me you're all mine."

"Yours. Yours," she reassures, as she meets me thrust for thrust.

"And you'll never die," I say, holding her to my chest. The need to feel her against me consumes me. There's a burning in my chest, one I can't explain because I've never felt it before. It's clawing at me desperately, needing more of her than ever before.

She doesn't say anything.

I ram into her harder, slamming her flat against the wall, then yank her head to the side. "Tell me you'll never die."

I bury my face in her neck, squeezing my eyes shut and gripping her hips as hard as I can. I need to engrave myself in her body. I need her to always feel me. With every thrust, I lift, sliding upward so gets more of me with every push. "Damn it, you feel so fucking good."

I press my forehead against her shoulder. I glide my hands up her waist, grasping and clutching every part of her. Sliding her shirt up, I palm her breasts under her bra, and she whines, pressing her ass against me, meeting my strokes. "Tell me," I beg her with a gasp. "Tell me." I thrust. "Tell me." I. "I slam home. "Fucking tell me."

She shouts her orgasm, her nails clawing at the paint on the wall.

"Delilah," I growl my release, pushing as far as possible, holding her shoulders tight, so she bears down on me. "Fuck, yes. Take everything, Sweetling."

She sags against the wall, and I fall against her, kissing the sweat-slicken skin of her nape. Dragging my lips across her bare shoulder, I embrace her tightly. I'm not ready to be free of her. I want to stay inside her all day, all night. I never want to leave this room.

She's safe here. The harshness of the world can't touch her.

"You never told me." My voice rasps as I palm her breasts and kiss between the middle of her shoulders.

She slides out from under me, and my release drips down her thighs. Something about that uncages something primal, instinctual.

I tuck myself back in into my pants and zip up. Bending down, I tug her flimsy leggings back into place, but she stops me.

"I need to clean up."

I watch my come slide down her freely, and that burning appears in my chest again. Skimming my fingers up her legs, gathering the white liquid, and then pushing it back inside her where it belongs.

She gasps. "Carmine. What are you doing?"

"You won't clean up. You'll feel me all day. I want you to know I was here. No cleaning up, Delilah." When I'm done, I slide her leggings up her legs, settling them just above her hips.

"Carmine." She suddenly sounds shy.

"I'll get you pregnant one of these days, and I can't do that if I'm not inside you, Sweetling." I hide my smile as she blushes, her cheeks a gorgeous shade of rose. I brush my knuckles across them, loving how I can feel the heat radiating from her. "You never told me."

She tilts her head to the side and frowns, her palm rubbing across my heart. I hold it there and take a deep breath to calm down, but I can't. I can never seem calm when it comes to Delilah.

“Carmine, I can’t promise that, and you know it,” she says. I shake my head in complete denial of what she’s telling me. “One day, I will die, but I don’t plan on dying anytime soon. We can’t live forever.”

“I want you to live forever. With me. Always. I meant it,” I say fiercely. “No one else matters to me the way you do. I meant what I said. I am not a good man. You know that. I care about no one.”

She bites her lip, standing on her tiptoes as she wraps her arms around my neck. “But you care about me.”

“But I care about you.”

“I’m the exception,” she repeats happily.

I nod, smirking, playing with a piece of loose hair that frames her face; then, I become serious as I stare at the woman who has become my entire world in a very short time. “Yes. Yes, you are,” I state.

“I have to go. I can’t be late for my rescheduled test, Carmine.” She kisses my cheek before heading to the chair in the corner where her backpack sits. “You still can’t come?”

“I’m sorry, Sweetling. I can’t. I have business down at the docks that I have to be at. Victor will be going with you.”

“I don’t have to have someone with me, you know. I can take care of myself. I can call Christy to come to pick me up before class starts. It isn’t a big deal.”

“Absolutely not.” I throw on my blazer. “That isn’t up for discussion. I won’t risk your safety.”

“My safety is fine. You know, Ari could go with me. He’s healing, but he’s up and walking now. I’m sure he’d like to get out of the house.”

“No. I’ll never have anyone assigned to you that isn’t at one hundred percent strength. Plus, I don’t like how Ari speaks to you. He flirts. Even with warnings, he still manages to put his foot in his mouth.”

“He does it to get under your skin. He doesn’t mean a word of it. Can you imagine if he ever found anyone? I hope she

doesn't give him the time of day and gives him a run for his money."

"Mmm, as you do me?" I slap her ass as we make our way out the door and walk down the hall. The smell of breakfast hits me instantly, and my stomach rumbles, but there's no time to eat since I have derailed us from our schedule.

I had to have her again.

"Just like I do you." She takes my hand as we enter the kitchen, and I watch our fingers curl in on each other. I never want to let go.

I've never held hands with anyone before. I don't enjoy the attention.

But I do and I will for Delilah.

"How are you doing, Mrs. Milazzo?" Marie gathers Delilah in a hug, and I pause. I haven't heard Delilah be called by her new last name yet, and a wild possessiveness swells inside me. "I packed your breakfast, snacks, and your lunch. I know you have a busy day today. Good luck with your exams. I'm sure you will do well."

Ari groans from the barstool. He's pale with dark circles under his eyes.

"Are you okay? Are you in a lot of pain?" I ask, concerned for my brother. We might fight, but we are family.

I love him.

Even if we never say it.

"I'm fine. The pain is bad today. I think I will go back, lie down and take that pain medicine. I'm trying not to take it, but I'm sore. I have a gnarly scar, though. I'm going to look so badass when I'm healed."

"Only you would like a scar caused by a bullet and a hot poker."

"Makes a good story for the ladies." He tries to laugh but grimaces instead. "I hope all of you have a good day. If you don't mind, I'll be seeing myself out."

“But, Mr. Ari, you need your strength. You only took a bite of toast. Sit down and eat. I’ll get your medicine. You shouldn’t take your pills on an empty stomach. I want half of that plate gone, Mr. Ari.”

Ari pouts, slouching in his seat. “Yes, ma’am.”

Matias chuckles, leaning back to watch his twin. “That woman has magical powers for us to listen so well.”

“Someone has to,” Delilah says, reaching into her bag and grabbing a blueberry muffin Marie packed for her.

“Are you ready, Mrs. Milazzo?” Victor peeks his head into the kitchen. “Good morning, Mr. Milazzo.”

In three strides, I’m standing in front of him, leaning in close so only he can hear. “If anything happens to my wife while she’s in your care, I will kill you, Victor.” I brush off a few pieces of lent on the lapels of his jacket. “I will torture you first like her missing or dead would torture me. If she comes back into my arms with one scratch, I’ll make sure you have two to match. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Mr. Milazzo. I promise nothing will happen to her. I will make sure of it.”

I study his eyes for any lies, any deceitfulness, but I find none. I also do not find any fear. I like Victor. He hasn’t ever caused me any issues. He’s never lied or flinched because he always says there was nothing to fear if the truth was told.

I liked that about him. He was honest, but I’ve known honest men who have mastered lying.

“Okay, I have to go.” Delilah rushes by me and kisses my cheek. “I love you. Bye. Have a good day. I’ll be back soon. Don’t stain that blazer with blood. I like it too much on you.” She gives me a wave with a gentle smile before rushing down the steps, and Victor follows.

I stand motionless, staring at the door as it closes. “I love you too,” I whisper too late.

I haven’t said the words again since I said them weeks ago and she didn’t respond. Now, she says them so casually as if

we say them all the time.

“Love?” Matias whistles under his breath. “That’s new.”

“I think it’s great,” Ari says, dropping his toast. Marie slaps his hand with a spatula. “Ow, I’m eating. I’m doing it. God, you’re so mean,” Ari grumbles, scooping eggs into his mouth.

Marie pinches his cheeks. “Only because I love you.”

Ari’s demeanor brightens, and he smiles, eating happily as the stress leaves him. He looks like a child, looking at a woman who is like his mother. And a child would do anything to make their mother happy.

“I like how casually she said don’t get blood on your suit. It’s an interesting way to leave for the day.”

“She understands how my days go. Now, are we ready to go to the docks? We have merchandise to pick up. And we need to stop by Lucky Sevens. They haven’t given us a cut in weeks, and we know what happens when we aren’t paid.”

Matias cocks his gun and smiles. “I’m ready when you are, brother.”

“Let’s go.” I turn to leave and see Nicky on the couch, sleeping, his arm still in a sling. Alex is next to him, watching TV and keeping an eye on his best friend. I have too many men out. “Alex, you’re coming too. We need all the backup we can get.”

“Yes, Mr. Milazzo.” Alex stands, looks at Nicky, and joins us in the kitchen.

“You’ll be okay, Ari?”

“I’m fine. I’ll stay on security if you want.”

“No, just get some rest. I can’t have your focus split with the pain. We will see you when we get back.”

I turn and leave. Matias, Alex, and Gianni following after me. As I open the front door, I found a few men outside

playing dice and smoking cigarettes, laughing and having a good time. I slap one of them on the back of the head. “You five are coming with me too. We are going to the docks. Make sure your weapons are ready. The Romanos won’t blindsides me. We’re at war, so remember that.”

Victor took the G-Wagon, and we climbed into the Tahoe. Tinted windows and bulletproof glass protect us just as the G-Wagon does. Every car I have is equipped with safety features from top to bottom.

The ride to the docks will take about an hour. It’s out of the way and in the middle of nowhere, which is perfect because the fewer people know about it, the better.

“I hope Romano is there,” Matias says, popping his fingers as if he is ready for a fight.

I don’t want to fight, but I’m always prepared to. I don’t like Romano just as much as he doesn’t like me, but neither of us wants to lose men.

The war between us has caused us to bury too many. Now that I have Delilah, I need to be extra careful. I always want to come home to her. I’ve never had to worry about that before. Coming home during a war is a luxury and an afterthought. In this life, tomorrow isn’t promised.

But I need it to be now. I always want to come home to my wife.

I think I might need her more than she needs me.

“How much longer until we arrive?”

“Another half hour, give or take,” he says.

So we’ve been driving for thirty minutes already and I haven’t heard from my wife. I check my phone and notice Delilah hasn’t called or given me an update.

Neither has Victor.

Victor never fails to check in with me.

I try calling her cell phone, but there is no answer. It goes straight to voicemail.

“Fuck,” I curse, dialing Victor next.

No answer.

“What is it?” Matias asks from the backseat.

“Delilah isn’t answering her phone.”

“Well, she’s taking a test, right? She won’t be able to.”

That’s true, but she knows to check in with me if she’s ever without me. Maybe she forgot because I’m always with her.

“But Victor didn’t answer either.”

Gianni pulls off to the side of the road and puts on the hazard lights. “Try again, and I’ll start the location search.”

He opens the middle console and pulls out a tablet, turning it on to start the software.

I try Delilah and Victor again, texting them both with no luck.

“Something is wrong,” I say, cold coiling in my gut like an icy snake. “Turn around. Go back.”

“We can’t go back. We have to go to the docks, Carmine. There’s no way around it.”

“Then call a fucking Uber to take you there because I will not have anything happen to Delilah!” I roar at my brother.

“It shows Victor’s car is two miles from the school, but Delilah’s signal is coming up differently. She’s not in her classroom.”

“What are you talking about?” I lean over just as Gianni does, holding the tablet between us.

He points to two green dots. “That’s Victor. He isn’t moving, so he can’t be driving, and this is Delilah.” Gianni moves his finger up the screen, then across it. “She’s supposed to be here. This is where her classroom is, but she’s here.”

“And where is that?” I grumble, snatching the device out of his hands to get a better look.

“According to the blueprints, it’s a basement.”

My heart stops beating, and I hold a hand against my chest as fear possesses me. This is why love is so complicated for me. Everything is different when the heart is involved. I'll sacrifice anything for her right now to know she's safe. This is my weakness, and she'll forever be used against me.

"Who is staying, and who is coming?" Unbuckling my seatbelt and opening the door to get into the driver's seat.

Everyone gets out of the car, but Matias speaks first. "I'll go with you."

"Me too." Ivar lifts his hand, then cracks his knuckles. "I don't like it when someone decides to hurt a woman."

"Everyone else, call an Uber. I don't care how you get to the docks; just get there. I'll keep you updated on Delilah." I climb into the driver's seat, and Gianni is tapping away on his phone.

"Dimitri is on his way," Gianni informs.

Dimitri is a dirty cop who likes to get in on the action every once in a while. I've tried to get him to work for me full-time as security, but he almost has his thirty years in before he can retire and have a pension. He said after that, he would take me up on my offer.

"Tell me if there are any issues at the docks. If I don't hear from you in a few hours, I'm going to assume things went south."

Gianni nods. "Sounds good."

Without saying another word, I slam the door. Matias takes the front seat, and Ivar takes the back while everyone else is waiting on the side of the road for Dimitri.

Slamming on the gas, the tires squeal, and the scent of burned rubber fills the cabin of the SUV. If I get there too late, I'll never forgive myself.

And the lack of forgiveness will fuel my need for vengeance.

Chapter Sixteen

Delilah

“Are you doing okay, Mrs. Milazzo?” Victor asks, looking into the rearview mirror for a moment to check on me.

“I’m fine. Just eating my breakfast.” Which is amazing. This muffin is so sweet and fluffy. She packed me orange juice too. The kind in the box with the tiny straw. I don’t know what it is about those kiddy boxes of juice, but I love them. I don’t care what anyone says, the juice always tastes better.

“We’ll be there in a few minutes, Mrs. Milazzo. Just sit back and relax before your exam.” He stops at the red light, and I look out the window, getting lost in the thoughts of Carmine. Life has been different from what I imagined it would be with him.

It’s hard, and we fight a lot, but it’s always about him being overprotective and controlling. It’s always about me and his fear of losing me, and it’s hard to stay mad at him when he cares about me.

And I like to be called Mrs. Milazzo. There’s a flutter in my chest, the kind I get every time Carmine kisses me or is possessive. He’s insane when it comes to me, and I love it. I’ve never had anyone care about the way he does. With every touch, with every word, he is intense.

That intensity is why I love him and was so nervous to tell him I was pregnant. I knew it would happen soon with how often we have sex and how he refuses to never pull out.

I found out last night, and I have the test and packaging in my purse, so he didn’t see it. I want him to find out, but I want to surprise him. He’ll be so happy, and it makes me smile so hard my cheeks hurt. There’s doubt in the back of my mind, though, and I can’t help but wonder if this is all about the business transaction between us.

Once he gets what he wants, will things change between us? I'm in love with him, and he says he loves me. Well, he did once but hasn't said it again, and I don't want to pressure him. I place my hand on my stomach, knowing how much this will change my life—our lives.

I play with the ring on my finger. He was right. I've grown to love it just like I've grown to love him. I expected this life to be ugly, for him to be ugly towards me, and for me to hate everything about Carmine, but I don't. He's a diamond in the rough, just like this ring, and I couldn't be happier.

The light finally turns green, and Victor presses on the gas. Straight ahead is the entrance to the school, and we get to the middle of the intersection.

"I wonder how he'll react to you," I whisper to my belly as I rub it, hoping our child is happy and healthy. "You're all he has ever wanted." And there's that familiar pang in my chest again, the one telling me he never really wanted me to begin with but only wanted a baby. I was only a piece of the puzzle he needed to make his dream happen.

Would I be his dream?

My body is slammed against the door, and my head smacks on the window as metal crunches against metal. Everything slows as the car is pushed to the side. Tires squeal, and glass shatters, flying through the cab of the G-Wagon.

The car flips, and the vehicle that hit us reverses. Victor hangs in his seat; the only thing keeping him in place is the seatbelt.

"Victor?" I groan as blood rushes to my head. "Victor? Are you okay?"

Silence.

I hiss when I try to move my legs, and pain ignites across my thigh. I look down, and a piece of glass is sticking out of it. It doesn't look close to the artery, so I should be okay, but I'll still lose blood. Footsteps sound outside, and I tug on the seatbelt to get free, to try and get out, but it's too late.

The door opens, allowing the sunlight in, and I cringe, holding my bloodied hand in the air to block out the sun.

“Hello, Delilah.” A dark, unrecognizable voice greets.

He crouches down, elbows on his knees, and his face comes into view. I know him. I mean, I’ve seen him around. He is in a few of my classes; he transferred into them around the time I signed the contract with Carmine.

“I’ve been watching you for some time.” His hand reaches out, tucking a piece of my hair behind my ear. “I get paid well, too,” he says. “So pretty, Delilah. I hate this has to happen, but Milazzo can’t have you.”

“Please,” I beg him. “Don’t do this.” I tug on the seatbelt, trying to get free, but I know it’s useless. I’m trapped.

He pulls out a knife and cuts the seatbelt free, catching me with an arm by wrapping it around me before I hit the car’s roof. “I got you,” he croons. “It will be all right.”

He drags me from the car, glass catching onto my clothes. The shard in my leg moves, and I cry out in agony. “Aw,” he pouts as if he feels sorry for me. “That looks like it hurts.” He wraps his hand around the piece of glass and yanks it free. I scream and sob at the same time.

He should have left it in. I’ll lose more blood now.

“Mmm.” He licks his fingers clean of my blood, and my stomach turns. I roll over and vomit, the orange juice and muffin wasted. “You taste delicious. I’m hired for a specific reason.” He slides a needle into my arm, and I whimper. What if it hurts the baby?

“No,” I beg, tears wetting my face as I try to get away. “Please, don’t do this.”

He injects me, the medicine clouding my judgment quickly, and his voice sounds far away. “You won’t feel a thing.” He lifts me into his arms and places a kiss on my cheek. “I’ve been instructed to give Carmine little pieces of you. I’ll send fingers, toes, arms, legs, and everything else. He has to know he can’t fuck with the Romanos.”

“Help,” I croak, weakly, sounding more like a groan. My vision blurs, and I notice we are the only cars on the road.

He opens the back door to the ruined SUV he’s driving and lies me down across the seat. My limbs feel heavy. I can’t move.

“No one can help you. I made sure of that,” he says, slamming the door shut.

Shutting my eyes is easier as we move. I can’t handle watching the motion of the car. I try to open the door, lift my arm and reach for the handle, but my limbs are too heavy to move.

Sweat breaks out over my skin, the wound on my leg throbs, and my head hurts. Blood wets the seat below me. I don’t want Carmine to find me like this, but I hope like hell he does. I don’t have my phone with me, so there’s no way for him to track me.

Tears drip down my cheeks, and I think of the memories I’ve created with Carmine—the sweet ones, the bad ones, the arguing, the love, the baby.

Our baby.

The baby we will never experience together.

The car stops, and the driver’s door slams, causing an ache to spread through my head. He opens the back door and drags me out, lifting me into his arms. I don’t know where we are going, but I hear the creak of metal.

Opening my eyes, I notice we are behind a large building and have just stepped into a cellar. He closes the door behind us and descends the steps before flipping the light on. I wince from the brightness, and I’m set in a chair. I groan, unable to fight him as he pulls my arms back and ties my wrists together. He does the same to my feet.

Lifting my head, I sway, trying to open my eyes. I notice old lab equipment and a metal table off to the side. There’s a stained plastic curtain blocking the stairs. When the blurriness creeps into my vision again, I squeeze my eyes shut and take a breath.

“He’ll find me,” I slur, trying to scare my captor. “He always finds me.”

“How? You don’t have your phone, Delilah. You have no tracking device on you at all.” He lifts a large knife into the air, and the light reflects off it. “I think we will start small. A pinky finger to give him a warning.”

“Why not...” I try to focus on my words. “Why not just take me to Romano?”

He laughs and slides the knife under my chin. “Silly little girl. You truly know nothing of this world. Romano won’t be associated with you. It’s a way to keep his hands clean. He can say he never touched you. I’m paid very well to make sure I handle all the dirty little details. I’m a professional.”

“I see,” I mumble, my fingers tingling from the tightness of the ropes. “Why...” I swallow. “Why now? Why stalk me and go to my classes?”

“I had to learn your schedule, to make sure you were really with Milazzo. I don’t kill unless I’m certain I have my target.”

“Carmine will pay you more not to kill me. I’m worth more than anything Romano could pay you.” I don’t want to tell him about the baby because I’m not sure how he’ll react. What if he finds joy in cutting me to pieces so he can hold the little bundle of cells forming? I can’t risk it. “I swear, anything you want, any amount of money is yours.”

“I’ve been very loyal to the Romano family for years. Nothing could make me betray them.”

He slices through a piece of my hair and brings it to his nose. His eyes close as he inhales, his body trembling from the scent. “God, you smell so fucking good. A shame to destroy such a beautiful thing.” He tucks my hair into his pocket. “For later.” He winks at me.

I gag again, but I hold it down. I don’t want to show him he is affecting me. I can’t afford to show him so much weakness. He’ll get off on it.

“You’re sick.” I roll my head across my shoulders, the dizziness making it hard to keep my head up.

“I’ve been called worse.”

He drags the knife down my chest, cutting through the material of my sweater and exposing my skin. I roll my lips together, holding in a scream as the tip of the blade kisses my flesh.

“Your skin is like butter. It’s perfect.”

“Please...” A tear breaks free from my lashes. “Please, don’t do this. I’m begging you. I’ll do anything.” A sob shakes my shoulders. “I don’t want to die.”

“Oh, I know. I know you don’t,” he croons at me, straddling my lap as he hugs me. He rubs his fingers through my hair, and my tears drop onto his shirt. He smells of cigarettes and sweat. The smell causes me to turn my head so I can breathe. “I know you don’t want to die. No one truly wants to die. How about this,” he cups my face, and his brown, lifeless eyes dart between mine, “I’ll make sure you’re already dead before I start cutting parts. I’ll kill you quickly. It will be fast. You won’t feel a thing. You’ll be here one second, and in the next...” he curls his fingers, explodes them free from his palm and blows. “Poof. You’ll be gone. It isn’t a kindness I give to everyone because the best part of my job is hearing the screams, the pleas.” He leans in, tilting his head as his lips come close to mine. “Fuck, I love the pleas, but I find you very beautiful. I’ll give you that peace.”

There’s no getting out of this, I realize. I’m going to die. As I accept my fate, I stop crying, stop begging, and let the tears dry on my cheeks.

If I had known the last time kissing Carmine was truly the last time, I would have savored it more. I would have savored him more. I’ll never be a mother, and I’ll never give Carmine what he truly wants.

“How will you do it?” The question is completely monotone as I stare over his shoulder, and as he swings his leg off me to get up, my thigh throbs from the wound. Blood pulses out, dark and oozing.

He grabs a needle from the counter and holds it up. “I’ll inject you with a medication that will paralyze you, then another that will stop your heart. You’ll fall asleep, and you’ll never wake up. It won’t feel like you’re dying.”

I nod, still weak from whatever he injected me with earlier. I tilt my chin and stare at my flat stomach, tears falling to my thighs.

I’m so sorry, little one. Maybe in another life we will have what we deserve.

I’m devastated. I want this. I didn’t think I did when I met Carmine, and he gave me the ridiculous contract, but I want this life with Carmine and our child.

“Unless...” he suggests, rushing over to me.

I keep an eye on the needle he has in his hands, and his other one skims down my face. “I’ve watched you for so long and find you so beautiful. What if you became my partner? Just me and you? I studied this scenario so many times. Do you know how hard it was to find a place to bring you? I wanted it to be a place that meant something to you, to me too. I watched you in your classes and knew whatever I needed to do had to be done here. And when I searched the campus and found this cellar, it was like a beacon shined down on it. Like this was meant to be. We were meant to be.”

I’m left with a decision to either die or to kill him.

Only one option gives me the chance to kill the man who kidnapped me.

He leans down, face directly in front of mine. “What do you think? Do you want to join me?”

My fingers tingle as life is breathed back into them. I focus on that, studying how my body is coming back to life. I hold my head up and look into his lifeless eyes, nothing but corruption and insanity staring back at me.

“I would rather die than have anything to do with you. I couldn’t stomach the thought of being by your side.” I reared my back and throw myself forward, slamming my forehead against his nose.

I won't go down without a fight, though.

He screams, holding a hand over his face as blood trickles down. "You fucking bitch!" He backhands me across the face and then grips my chin, red pouring from his nose into his mouth. "You just signed your death warrant."

I gather all the saliva I can and spit in his face. "Fuck you," I sneer. "The moment you kill me, you'll be dead too." I smile, knowing Carmine will come for me. I don't know when or if he will make it in time, but this man is dead when he does.

The idiot comes closer again, and his eyes drop to my lips. He inches in, and with a throbbing head, I still gather enough strength to hit my forehead against his nose for the second time. Bones crunch, and this time, he howls in agony.

"You broke my nose!"

And I don't care what I have to do to keep him busy. If it means I have to break every bone in his face, I will.

Even if it kills me.

Chapter Seventeen

Carmin

“Oh my god!” Matias sits forward when we come to the intersection where a car accident occurred. It’s the G-Wagon.

Police, firefighters, and paramedics surround the Mercedes. I slam on the brakes, throw the SUV in park and fly out of the vehicle.

Victor is on a gurney, oxygen mask over his mouth and blood smearing his face.

“Sir, I’m sorry. You can’t—”

“He’s fine. That’s Carmine Milazzo, and this is one of his men.” Officer Gabriel DiMartino tells the paramedic.

“Carmine, I wish I could say it’s good to see you but circumstance say otherwise.”

“Can I talk to him? What happened?”

“We don’t know. Traffic cameras are out. Traffic was rerouted. It looks like a hit-and-run, but I feel like this wasn’t an accident. Not when it comes to you. And no, you can’t talk to him. He’s alive but unconscious. You can talk to him at the hospital.”

“Was there a woman? Was she hurt? She’s my wife. She was with Victor.”

“No, there wasn’t a woman. You’re sure someone was with him?” DiMartino’s hand grabs his radio on his shoulder.

“I’m positive. They left the house together.”

“There was no one else in the car, but there are signs of foul play. There’s blood in the back.”

“Blood. There was blood,” I repeat, running my hands through my hair in panic. “I need my wife. I need my fucking wife!”

“What does she look like? Calm down. Breathe. Focus.”

“Don’t tell me to fucking focus.” I get in his face, debating if I want to put a bullet between his eyes. “You have no idea what this means. I will kill everyone in this city, including you, until I get her back.”

“Do not make threats, Carmine. I can arrest you right now.”

“Good luck with that.”

“Carmine! She’s close. Look.” Matias brings the tablet over, and I wipe my eyes clear of the tears.

I turn my attention to the tablet. The green dot is close to us. She could have climbed out of the car to try to flag down help. She’s on campus, just like Gianni said.

“Matias, you climb into the ambulance with Victor, so he isn’t alone. Ivar, you’re with me.” Without saying another word, I run to the car. Ivar is already in the passenger seat, and without another word, I step on the gas.

DiMartino jumps out of the way and heads to his cop car to follow me, but I don’t stop. Nothing will make me fucking stop. I listen to the beeps of the tablet. The quicker they become, the closer I know we are.

“It should be right up here. On the right,” Ivar points.

Sirens ring behind me, and DiMartino is on my ass.

“Get rid of him, Ivar.” I don’t want my plans derailed.

“Yes, sir.” Ivar rolls down the window and aims his gun out the window.

“Don’t kill him,” I warn. I won’t admit it, but I like DiMartino. He is an honorable man with strong values, but he understands my position in the city and doesn’t try to step on my toes.

Ivar fires the gunshot, ringing out. I check my side mirror and watch a tire blow. The car fishtails before jumping over the curb and slamming against a tree.

He’ll be fine.

As I take another turn, DiMartino disappears. An SUV appears up ahead, and I slow down. The college isn't too busy due to exams, and I'm thankful. The fewer witnesses, the better. It would mean more people I need to kill. More bodies to dispose of.

I jump out of the car and hit the ground running, gun in hand. Ivar falls into step beside me.

"Where is she?" I yell at Ivar, looking around frantically.

"She's here. She's right here, boss. The tablet says she's here."

I spring to the SUV parked behind and look inside.

Empty.

"Well, she isn't fucking here! Fuck!" I shout, slamming the butt of my gun against the window. The glass cracks. I keep surveying the area, searching for anything to tell me she's okay, her voice, her cry, fucking anything.

I'm desperate.

"I don't understand. It says she's right here, Mr. Milazzo."

I look behind Ivar and notice two black metal doors in the ground. A cellar. I sprint ahead and swing open the door, taking two steps at a time through the dark.

A man I have never seen before comes into view, and he is holding a needle. Without question, without hesitation, I lift my gun and pull the trigger, not giving him a chance to say a fucking word. His head snaps back, and he falls to the floor.

Dead.

I hurry down the steps and load my clip into the man for good measure until his face is unrecognizable. Blood is everywhere, and a whimper comes from my left.

That's when I see Delilah.

She's tied to a chair, her sweater cut, and blood dripping down the middle of her chest. I grab the knife from the table and cut her bindings. When she's free, she falls forward, and I catch her, holding her head against my shoulder.

I can't help it. Tears break free. I stare at the ceiling, hoping the harsh lights will dry the water building in my eyes. I do not cry.

She sobs against me, tugging at my suit. "You're here. You came. You found me," she cries so hard I can barely understand her words.

I squeeze her tighter. I'm so afraid if I let go, she'll vanish. "I'll always come for you. I'll always find you. Just like I said I would." I lean back and cup her face, trying to wipe away the tear streaks on her cheeks. "I'll always come for you."

I look her over, checking her injuries, and I growl when I see her gorgeous flesh cut. It will leave a scar just like mine. She's too beautiful for something like that. I press my hand against her chest, then shuck off my suit, wrapping it around her shoulders. "You're okay. You'll be okay. I have you, Sweetling."

"Romano. Romano hired him. I just want to go home. I want to go home, Carmine. Take me home," she rambles into my shoulder.

"We are. I'm going to call a doctor to look you over, okay? You're all right." I swing her into my arms, and she places her head against my chest.

"You found me."

"I placed a tracker in your engagement ring. I stole it off your finger while you were sleeping, and Matias did it."

She chuckles, but it's full of emotion. "I'm so happy that you're so psycho when it comes to me. Place a tracker on me any day."

I kiss her temple as I climb up the steps. "You're getting one embedded in your damn skin after this. I'm not kidding."

"Whatever you want," she slurs with sleep. "He injected me with something that makes me weak." Her big, gorgeous eyes look at me, her wet lashes blinking. "I don't know if it's bad for the baby. The baby, Carmine."

I almost fumble up the steps and stare down at her, stopping for a moment. Her eyes hood, and I shake her, then knock on the metal doors. “Delilah, what did you say? What did you say? Tell me again. What about the baby?”

The doors open, and the sun beams in.

“I can take her, sir,” Ivar says.

“Not a chance in hell. Open the back door for me.”

“Put the girl down, Carmine. You’re coming with me to the station.” DiMartino has his gun raised and pointed directly at me.

“I’m not putting my pregnant wife down for anything. You’ll have to fucking shoot me if you want that to happen, but let me make myself perfectly clear, if you want a career, you’ll step aside or never have a job again. You know I hold that kind of power.”

DiMartino debates for a second before lowering his weapon. “Do I need to call an ambulance?”

“No, I’m taking her home and bringing a doctor to her.” I climb into the backseat of the SUV and settle her in my lap. Ivar shuts the door. The thud wakes her.

“Hey, Sweetling. Hey.” I smile at her.

“You’re here. You came,” she mumbles, repeating what she said earlier. “The baby! Carmine—” She grips my forearm. “The baby.”

I can’t help but smile and lay my head across her stomach. “You’re pregnant?”

“I wanted to surprise you. I wanted to make it a big deal because I know the baby is all you want, but I’m afraid whatever he injected me with did something. What if it did something? I want this baby with you.” She begins to cry and shakes her head. “I don’t want anything to happen to our baby.”

I pull her closer, and she wraps her limbs around me. “I don’t either. Oh my, God, my Sweetling. You’ve given me everything. I love you. I love you so much.”

She snuffles and leans away. “You love me?”

“So much, Sweetling. So much. And if anything happens to our baby, I promise I will kill Romano at your feet and let you bury his bones.”

“His bones don’t deserve to be buried if anything happens to our baby.” She intertwines our hands and places them across her stomach; then, her cheek falls on my shoulder. “I love you too. Please, just make the pain go away. It hurts. I hurt everywhere.”

“I will. I’ll always make all your pain go away. Always. Just rest. We will be home soon,” I say, gently.

She’s pregnant.

And someone dared to take my family from me. There isn’t a soul in site who is safe.

I’ll kill. I’ll burn. I’ll tear it apart.

No one fucks with my family and gets away with it.

And she’s right; Romano’s bones don’t deserve to be buried. We’ll keep them as trophies.

They will stand as a reminder of everything I’ve ever fought for, and she will be right here in my arms.

“I have you,” I whisper into her ear as she sleeps soundly. “I will always have you.” I cradle my wife as calm anger swoops over me, a demon landing on my shoulder and telling me I know what I need to do to make my wife and child safe.

And if my attempt kills me, a part of me will live on through Delilah.

Chapter Eighteen

Delilah

It's been two weeks since I was kidnapped. Two weeks of staying in bed has bored me out of my mind. I just might die if I watch another T.V. show or read another book. I throw off the covers, and as if Carmine can hear the rustle of blankets from the kitchen, he zips into the bedroom quicker than I can take my next breath.

"Sweetling, you know you need to be in bed." He comes around the corner and sets a water bottle down on the nightstand.

"No, I don't. The doctor cleared me a week ago, Carmine. It wasn't even needed. Whatever that guy injected me with is out of my system. The baby is okay. We're healthy." I place my palm on his chest and smile. "I want to feel the sun. I want to take my test, graduate and attend medical school. I have to live my life. *We* have to live our lives. We can't do that if we're stuck in the house. There's an entire world to see out there."

"I can bring the medical school to you," he offers, as he rubs his hands up and down my arms. "I need you near me."

"I need to be near you too, but I can't be afraid. You and the guys have been on the lookout, right? Has Romano made a peep?" I ask, dipping my chin as he looks away. "Has he?"

"No." He grits his teeth. "It's as if they have gone underground. Coward. He knows I'm going to kill him, and he can't show his face." Carmine's fingers drag across my flat stomach, and I lean my weight against him enjoying his touch. He's made it a habit. He always finds a way to touch my stomach. It's as if it's his way of protecting me, protecting our baby.

"So, let's go. I've only seen Christy, Caleb, and Ethan—"

Carmine growls when he hears Ethan's name, and I slap him on the shoulder.

"Really? I'm married to you and pregnant with your child. Yet, you still have it out for Ethan?"

"He loves you."

"And I love you." I step close to him, sliding my fingers under his shirt. "Ethan doesn't love me. He's a good friend. Nothing more."

"Silly woman." He backs me against the bed. His eyes close for a moment as I skim the waistband of his pants with the tip of my finger. "You're you. Of course, he loves you."

"I don't want him, Carmine. I'm yours." I reach into his pants and wrap my hand around his cock, giving it a firm stroke. He is already hard and straining against his sweatpants. He hasn't touched me sexually since he found me. I appreciate his concern, but I'm not made of glass. I stand on my tiptoes and delicately speak against his lips as I stroke him. "My thigh is better. It doesn't hurt anymore. The stitches are gone. I'm all better now, Carmine. What are you going to do about it?" I stand on my tiptoes and delicately speak against his lips as I stroke him.

"Delilah." My name is a rumble of warning, sending a sliver of fear down my spine.

"What?" I flick out my tongue and lick his bottom lip. "What are you going to do, Carmine? Anything?" I pull the strap of my tank top down my shoulder, and his nostrils flare. I squeeze the base of his cock harder, and he groans, flexing the muscle in his jaw as he tries to deny me.

I stroke him faster, and he grips the bedpost, catching himself as he falls forward.

And he still doesn't break, but I need him to. I need him to erase all the bad off my skin and remind me I'm his. I need him to do this without me saying the words.

"You're so big, Carmine. So hard, long, and thick. I miss having you inside me, stretching me." I nibble his earlobe, and the post creaks. I look up to see that his knuckles are white

from his grip. “Fuck me,” I beg him, licking up the shell of his ear.

“Delilah, we can’t. You’re healing,” he says, just as I swipe my thumb across the head of his cock. I tug his pants down and sink to my knees. I suck the length of him down my throat, and he shouts. “Fuck! You look so good on your knees, Delilah, Sweetling, mmm. Damn it; you’re breaking me.”

Good. I want him to break. I need him. He has no idea how much. I’ve been afraid every night, every day, every time I shut my eyes; being taken happens all over again. And then I feel Carmine, his arms wrapping around me, whispering into my ear that he has me, that everything is going to be okay.

I miss him.

I miss feeling owned by him, claimed, and possessed. Ever since he found me in the basement of the science building on campus, it’s as if he’s afraid to touch me.

But I’m afraid of him not touching me.

Am I ruined? Is that why he doesn’t want me?

Tears brim my eyes, and I suck him harder. He moans, yet still won’t touch me. I can’t take it anymore. I let him slip from my mouth, pull up my shoulder strap and wipe the tears from my cheeks.

“Just forget it, then. If you don’t want me, just say so.” I climb onto the bed since I’m trapped between him and the edge, and it’s the easiest way get around him so I can retreat to the bathroom, but he grabs me by the ankle and

yanks me across the bed.

“Carmine! Let me go.” I try to kick free, but he holds my legs down while pushing my panties to the side.

“You think I don’t want you? Are you out of your fucking mind?” Keeping me pressed to the bed, he climbs on top of me and uses his chest on my back to hold me in place. He doesn’t check to make sure I’m wet enough. He already knows when he sinks into me my pussy will be soaking wet and needy for him.

We moan in unison as he fills me for the first time in weeks.

“It’s been too long since I’ve felt you.” He pulls my head back by my hair, exposing my throat. “How could I not want you? Do you know how hard it’s been to lie next to you and not fuck you every night?”

“Why haven’t you? I’ve missed you. I’ve needed you,” I admit, just as he shoves my face back into the mattress, pounding into me relentlessly.

“Sweetling, I’m sorry. I didn’t want to hurt you. I’ve been afraid. I’ve only ever wanted you to be okay. Your life, safety and health have been so important to me.” He grips my waist and lifts my hips. His hand splays my stomach. “I’ve needed you too. I’ve needed you so much.” He drives into me, his thick shaft piercing a depth only Carmine can reach. “You’re mine, Delilah. All mine.”

I don’t know why I need to hear those words so badly, but something releases inside my chest. Emotion wells in my eyes, and I hide my relieved smile in the bed, stuffing my face in the blanket while he rails into me hard and fast.

He flips me onto my back, gathers my legs, and hooks them over his shoulders while he watches himself slide in and out of me.

“You were made for me, made to take my cock. You were made just for me, weren’t you?”

I can’t answer. A moan is trapped in my throat. He tugs the front of my shirt to free my breasts and dips his head down. He sucks a nipple into his mouth, then releases it with a pop and brings his nose to mine. His erratic thrusts slow.

“I was so scared,” he admits, languidly kissing me. His breath comes out in broken beats, and when he looks at me, I see the fear and the pain. “I thought I lost you.” He places his hand on my hip and sinks in slowly, taking his time.

Time he has never taken before.

“You don’t know what that did to me.” He groans while he curls his hips, robbing me of my ability to breathe. “You’re too good for me and my world, but I won’t let you go. I’ll hunt

you down. I'll always find you because you belong with me, Delilah. The thought of something happening...I can't. I can't take something happening to you again." His face pinches with pain before our mouths lock together, kissing and moving in harmony.

He always feels so good, as if he's become a part of me. He's somehow made my soul his home, and I never want him to leave.

"You're all I have to keep me sane." He drags his lips from mine and slides them down my neck. The pace of his cock dragging in and out slows, until it hurts. My insides burn with need, and my orgasm has been teetering me on edge. "Nothing can happen to you, Delilah. Nothing. If it means locking you away from life and keeping you to myself, then that's what I'll do." He punches his hips forward and grabs every part of my body, his fingers digging into the flesh. He kisses the scabbed cut in the middle of my chest then turns his head, resting his cheek against the superficial wound.

He squeezes my hand in his, pushing it further against the bed with every pull of his cock. We are lost in one another. The pleasure is too much, too intense, but it's everything I need.

We aren't even fully naked. His sweatpants are pushed to his knees, and I'm still dressed in my tank top and panties. Still, I feel closer to him than I ever have.

"I never want to leave this bed," he mutters, against my skin.

Wrapping his arms around me, he changes positions until he is on his back. He's staring at me with dark chocolate eyes full of wickedness and sin. He tugs my tank top off and hums in approval. His wedding ring catches the light as he rubs his palms over my breasts.

"So perfect. I want to see these tits bounce as you fuck me, Sweetling," he says, pushing my panties over more. "Look at you, taking all of me. You're so wet for me. Do you hear it, Sweetling? Do you hear how much your pussy craves my cock?"

I close my eyes and cup my tits, pinching my sensitive nipples.

“Mine.” He slaps my hands away and replaces them with his. “I can’t wait to see them full and leaking.” His eyes roll back as his hips thrust forward. “That turns me on so much.” He leans forward, lapping at each nipple. “I can’t wait to taste it.”

“Carmine,” I gasp in surprise, but the thought of him wanting that part of me has me moving my hips faster.

“That’s it. Ride me. Fucking take this cock, Sweetling.”

His fingers find my clit, rolling it between his fingers, and I cry out. Falling forward, I press my hand to his chest to get leverage and fuck him harder.

“I can’t wait to see your belly round with my child, Delilah. You’re going to be so fucking sexy. How will I take you out in public when every man will want you?” He flexes his hips from the bottom to give me a sharp spike of pain.

My orgasm swirls, a light buzz swirling in my lower belly, and it causes me to move faster. With every slide of my hips, my clit rubs against his pelvis.

“That’s it. Use me. Take me. Take everything, Sweetling. I am yours.” The sheen of sweat gathered on his chest shines in the sunlight coming through the window, and the muscles across his broad shoulders flex.

His words send me flying over the edge. I come, and my orgasm lasts longer than ever before. He grips my hips and spears himself in and out of me before driving in one last time. His warmth fills me, then drips between us and causes a mess.

Carmine wraps his hand around the back of my neck and lowers me to his chest, our lips meeting and our tongues dueling while his fingers skim up and down my back.

I break the kiss and nestle my head against his shoulder.

He continues the gentle attention until my eyes grow heavy, and just before I fall into a peaceful sleep with him still inside me, I think

that I'm safe.

I'm home.

I'm his.

Chapter Nineteen

Carmine

Delilah has been different ever since the kidnapping. She's been closer to me and more affectionate, and I've been the same. I don't hide how I feel in front of my men. I can't. I won't. She's changed me, and I have become softer. There's no denying that. She deserves softness, silk, and velvet. I want to give her all of that.

I also want to give her some responsibility in this life. The last thing I want is for her to feel like she has no decisions in how our world works. So right now, we'll talk to Ryan Romano, the teen who ran from his father's clutches—who isn't his father. Poor kid probably doesn't know who his father is.

We haven't seen much of him since he came to us. He stays in his room. Marie brings him food, or he wouldn't eat. I don't want him to think he is a prisoner here. He isn't. If he is going to be here, I want him to feel welcome. The last thing I want is for him to feel afraid of everyone in this house, so I want Delilah to speak to him. After that, I'm going to take her to school so she can talk to her professor to see if she can make up her exam.

I also plan to surprise her with a visit to her father. She deserves to speak to him. While I want to be the only man in her life, I know that eventually she will come to resent that mindset. I can't live with that knowledge. Her well-being and happiness are all I care about now. No matter what her father has done, she still loves him. She'll need him in her life, especially with the baby. She'll never forgive me if I kept our child away from his or her grandfather.

If there is one thing I won't live with, it's her hating me.

Now that I've experienced her love, nothing else will satisfy me. Her love is like fresh air after being drowned in hate and

darkness. There's no replacing that. It's impossible to think anything could come close to the feeling of freedom she gives me.

"How are you feeling?" I ask, handing her a fruit smoothie with whipped cream on top. I didn't ask Marie to make the drink—I wanted to. I want to pamper Delilah myself, so she feels my love.

"Sleepy," she grumbles as she plops on the barstool. "And I'm wondering if everything that happened was real? I'm hoping it was a terrible nightmare. I can't understand why this would happen, and why I matter so much so someone who doesn't even know me. I was scared," she admits, rambling in her sleep-filled voice.

I bet she doesn't even realize she's doing it. Her eyes are still half closed, and a yawn interrupts her.

"I can't get him out of my head. He was crazy. I've never met anyone like him. People like that should only exist in movies, but I know now that they don't. He would have cut me up. He would have—"

"He wouldn't have had the chance to touch you, Sweetling." I turn her face by cupping her jaw. "I will always come to you in time. I will always save you."

"But what if you can't?" she whispers, the question breaking my heart. I hate that fear has been instilled in her now.

"You never have to worry about that."

"Carmine, you don't know if you will get to me in time!" she shouts, slamming her palms on the counter. "You don't know." The words are a whisper. "No matter how much you wish otherwise. You don't know."

"I do know. That is one thing I always know. Look at me."

She doesn't.

In a move I can't help but love it because it makes her submit to me, my hand naturally wraps around her throat and squeezes.

I see it. The relief. The way her eyes shut, and her shoulders rise with every breath she takes.

“Look. At. Me.” The demand is sardonic and her eyes fly open. Her fear and vulnerability are clear as day in the gorgeous pools of her irises. Not in fear of me after what has happened. “I will always fucking be there. Do you understand? I will always save you. I will always protect what is mine.” I bring my lips to hers, not kissing her, but to make my promise known. “You. Are. Mine. Delilah.” I tighten my grip and she gasps. “I will spare my life to get to you. Make no mistake; there is nothing and no one that will ever get in my way to having you safe in my arms.”

She presses her lips to mine in a kiss, the smallest sob escaping her, and I swallow it down quickly so no one can hear.

“Wow, hey, I don’t want to see that. Gross.” Ari laughs.

I break away from Delilah and narrow my eyes at my brother.

“Kidding. Lighten up.” His attention falls to Delilah. “You look like crap, sis.” Ari sits next to her and tugs on a piece of her knotted hair after a restless sleep.

She kept having nightmares. I feel like we’ve switched places. She calmed my nightmares, and now hers are just beginning.

“Shut up.” She slaps his hand away and pulls her hair into a messy bun on top of her head.

I love it when she does that. She looks so beautiful, but it’s the comfort I like the most.

“I’m just kidding. You’re pretty and stuff.” Ari boops her nose, and she rolls her eyes.

“I feel like you’re a child,” I say, pouring Ryan a smoothie.

See? I’m welcoming. I’m a nice-ish guy. I can do...things.

“Growing up sucks. Who wants to do that?” Ari stretches his arm back and winces, but he looks better than he did. He

has color to his face again and is no longer taking pain medicine.

“You have great movement in your shoulder,” Delilah notices, taking the straw between her lips.

I’m reminded of yesterday when I got to feel them around my cock, and I had to hold in a grumble of pleasure. I want nothing more than to throw her in bed and have my way with her. Ever since she’s been pregnant, my appetite for her has increased to dangerous levels.

The thought of her growing my child, completely full of me, of us, it unlocks something very primal inside me.

“Thanks. Granted the botch job that was done.” He grins, teasing her a bit before getting up and heading over to the coffee pot, but even hearing the tease in his tone, her eyes well with tears.

“I did the best I could with what I had. I’m sorry,” she sasses, but she’s hiding her emotions. Her tears cause her eyes to become glassy. In true Delilah form, she does her best to make sure not one tear falls.

“Fucking fix it. Now. If one tear falls, I’ll burn you with the same poker,” I say to him.

Ari frowns and heads over to her, taking her hand in his. “Listen to me. Hey, come on, look at me.” He sounds so serious. I’ve never heard him use that kind of tone before. She finally gives him her attention. “I appreciate what you did. You saved my life. I’m only ever teasing you, and I’m sorry. You did everything you could; without you, I would have died. I don’t care how gnarly my scar looks. I’m standing here because of you. I’m alive because of you. Anything I say to get a rise out of you, ignore me. I’m an asshole, but I’m a thankful asshole. You’ve come to mean a lot to me, Delilah. You’re the sister I wished I had instead of my brothers.”

She giggles at last, and my chest loosens with relief. I don’t ever want to see her cry. I always want her to be happy, and Ari, with his big mouth, will probably make her cry more often now, especially since she’s pregnant.

“You aren’t allowed to cry,” Ari states. “You’re cooking my niece, and she needs to be happy.”

“Cooking? Really?” He drives me nuts.

“What? She’s cooking. She’s baking. She’s doing something I can’t do.”

Delilah takes a sip of her smoothie. “How do you know it’s a girl?”

“She needs to be because another man in this house is going to drive me crazy. I want to have pretend tea parties. Kids are fun. Adults suck. It better be a girl, Delilah,” he points at her. “I won’t accept anything else.”

She slides off the barstool and comes to my side. I wrap my arms around her and kiss her cheek. “Well, don’t be mad at me. That isn’t up to me. That was up to him. If boys run in the family, which seems to be the case, then I’m sure we will have a boy. You can still have tea parties with him.”

“But it won’t be as fun without the outfits, Delilah. The tutus, crowns, and then the cute stuffed animals around the table. That’s the fun stuff.”

“You’ve thought about this a lot.”

“Well, maybe I have,” he sasses back at me, exiting the kitchen in a blaze.

Delilah chuckles. “He’s something else.”

“He’s something,” I mumble. “Ready to go see Ryan?”

She nods, taking the smoothie out of my hand, and I follow her from the kitchen, down the steps, and then down the darkened hallway where the suites are. Every member who lives here has their own room.

Delilah finds the third door on the left and knocks. “Ryan? It’s Delilah. I brought you a smoothie.”

There’s a rustling behind the door, and a second later, it swings open, showing an exhausted Ryan. He has dark circles under his eyes, but his smile seems genuine. His gaze shifts me, and his smile falters.

“Mr. Milazzo, how are you?”

“I’m good, Ryan. How are you doing?”

“I’m okay. Thank you for bringing me breakfast. I’m starving.” He takes the glass from Delilah and bypasses the straw, gulping down half the smoothie.

“Ryan, I wanted to ask you a few things.” Delilah enters the room, and I’m right behind her.

“You can shut the door, Ryan. We need privacy for this conversation.” It wasn’t a question but a statement. I don’t want anyone listening in on our conversation. I have told Delilah what I would like her to ask, questions I believe will be easier coming from her than me.

Ryan swallows, wiping the corner of his mouth. “Right,” he whispers, his hand trembles as he grabs the handle and shuts the door.

I look him over to make sure he’s okay. His bruises have faded to pale yellow, and he has a small scar near his eye from where Delilah had to relieve the pressure. A lot of blood poured out, but the swelling immediately went down. He seems like he is on the mend, but I don’t like that he stays in his room alone so much. He came here for sanctuary and has yet to treat this house as his home.

“You aren’t a prisoner, Ryan. You’re able to come and go as you please,” Delilah informs him.

He stares at his feet,

scratches the back of his head and he nods. “I have nowhere to go. I’m afraid they will find me and kill me if I leave. I’m only safe in this room. This is it for me.”

“Romano has been very quiet since my kidnapping.” Delilah begins to tiptoe toward what I want her to ask. “Do you know why? I thought you said he had a plan.”

Ryan’s brows pinch together as he thinks, taking a seat on the bed. “He does. He did, from what I heard. His plan fell through if the man he hired to kidnap you went off the rails. I

know he wanted you alive, and from what I understand, you said this guy wanted to kill you, right?"

Delilah snorts. "To kill me and chop me up into bits."

I growl, wishing I could kill that asshole all over again. Delilah pats my arm when Ryan flinches.

Ryan takes another drink of his smoothie. "You're worth more to Romano alive than you are dead. He wanted to make a show of having you. You'd earn him money." He flicks his attention to me and winces. "I'm sorry. I don't like saying things like that in front of you, Mr. Milazzo."

"It's okay. All information is good information." I try to keep my mouth shut so Delilah can lead the conversation. Ryan is afraid of me, and it's best to remain calm and collected.

"Do you know why he's been quiet?" Delilah asks, her voice gentle and kind. It washes over me like a warm blanket, and I'm less stressed after I hear it.

"His attempt to kidnap you failed. You lived. He's probably hiding to buy some time to figure out his next move." His leg begins to shake with anxiety, and he rolls his head over his shoulders.

Delilah takes his hand, holds on to it, and takes a deep breath to calm herself. "Do know where he would hide? Even his docks have been empty. No boats, no merchandise in or out, there's nothing. It's like he disappeared."

"I'm so sorry I don't know. If I did, I'd tell you. I'd tell you in a heartbeat because I hate him. I want him dead. I never got that information. Anything I know is because I listened when I wasn't supposed to. I wouldn't let your guard down. He's out there. He's waiting for the right time. And now that you're pregnant, he will only want you more."

"I won't let him get near her," I sneer, and Ryan flinches at my tone.

Delilah switches gears. "Well, I get to leave the house today and go on a little adventure. Do you want to come with us? Carmine will be there, along with Matias. We will be

protected. I think it will be good for you to get out of the house.”

Ryan chews on his thumbnail as he thinks, then crosses his arms over his chest. “I don’t know. It’s safe here. I like safe. I’ve never been safe before. There’s no one here taking—” He shuts his eyes and shudders. “I haven’t been touched. I like my room.”

“We don’t want you to think you’re unwanted here. You can come upstairs and socialize. It is your new start in life. Come with us today, and then you can stay in your room all night.”

Ryan stares at her for a minute and agrees. “Okay.”

“She’s pretty persuasive when she wants to be.” I can’t hide how proud I am of her. “Just to be sure, there’s nowhere you can think of where Romano would go?”

“No, I’m sorry. I was...” his throat bobs, and his cheeks turn pink. “I was kept in a windowless room. I slept on the floor on a thin mattress with a ratty blanket. I wasn’t allowed to know anything that happened in the organization. I was kept away from it all. From everyone.”

“Oh.” Delilah throws herself at Ryan, wrapping her arms around his neck and pulling him into a tight hug. “That won’t happen here with us. Don’t lock yourself away here. Promise me you’ll try to give yourself a chance.”

“I promise.” Ryan lifts his arms, unsure of what to do with them until finally, he wraps them around her.

The poor kid is touch starved—for positive touch. His fingers curl into her back, and he holds onto her for dear life, burying his face in her shoulder.

He doesn’t want to let go.

I wait for the jealousy, my possessive nature to burst free, but it doesn’t. The kid needs someone, and there isn’t anyone better than Delilah.

“We’re leaving in a few minutes. Meet us upstairs.”

“Yes, Mr. Milazzo,” he says, still not letting go of Delilah. As Ryan squeezes his eyes shut, a tear drips free, and I have to

look away.

Suddenly, I want to find anyone who has ever hurt him, or allowed him to be hurt, and wipe away their very existence. Somehow this kid came to mean something to me. I know what it's like to be abused by someone who is supposed to love you. Ryan reminds me too much of myself when I was younger. I lift my hand and let it hover right above his shoulder, debating for a moment. I let it fall and squeezed his shoulder.

His eyes snap open, fear glazing from the pupil to the whites of his eyes.

“You're safe here, Ryan. You have my word.”

“I'm sorry, Mr. Milazzo. A man's word means nothing to me.”

Delilah lets go and cups Ryan's face like a child needing love. “I can promise that Carmine's word is the only word you'll ever need to trust.”

“I'll try to believe you. It will take time.”

“I understand.” I open the door, needing to escape all this vulnerability and emotion. It's bringing back too many memories and too much pain. I'm not good at emotions or trying to understand them. I either hate or love; I have never spent much time concentrating on anything in between.

Everything in between is nonsense and inconsistent, but with Delilah, I'm learning the feelings between hate and love are defining and leave marks.

Delilah is love.

And everything in between.

Chapter Twenty

Delilah

Ryan is fidgeting in the backseat with Matias and Ari. He's smooshed between them and looks like he'd rather be anywhere else.

"Hey, want to see my cool scar?" Ari asks, tugging the neck of his shirt down to show the nasty-looking burn.

"Oh my god." Ryan rolls his lips together, and the color drains from his face.

"Wicked, right?"

"It looks painful."

"Don't let Ari fool you, Ryan. He isn't in pain."

"I was in pain. I was in a ton of pain."

"You aren't now," Matias mumbles.

I watch in the rearview mirror as Ryan looks back and forth between Ari and Matias, bickering, and I put a hand over my mouth to stop myself from laughing.

"It's like having children already. It's a great test run," Carmine says.

"He started it!" Ari defends himself, reaching over Ryan to shove Matias.

"I'll fucking finish it too." Matias pushes Ari back.

"That's enough!" Carmine barks, yanking off his sunglasses as he lifts his eyes from the road to look into the mirror. "I will pull this car over right now, and none of you will get ice cream after the work is done. Except for you, Ryan. You can get ice cream."

Ryan beams and places his hands in his lap, a new mood completely taking him over.

“How can he get ice cream? That’s not fair, Carmine.” Ari crosses his arms over his chest and looks out the window while I’m laughing so hard, I have tears spilling down my cheeks.

“Life isn’t fair. Maybe don’t act like a brat.” Carmine flips on his turn signal and takes the next right, which isn’t toward the school at all.

I sit up, ignoring the harsh whispering in the backseat while I look around. “Where are we going?”

“We are making a quick stop before going to the school. I promise,” he squeezes my leg, and I relax against the seat.

The longer we travel down the road, the more familiar it looks. My heart races when I realize where we’re going.

“Carmine?” I can’t keep the struggle out of my voice.

“Yes, Sweetling?”

“Are we...” I have to take a breath. “Are we going to see my dad?”

He takes my hand in his and nods. “I wanted to surprise you. I feel like you need him right now, and while I will forever protect you and not understand why he did the things he did, he’s still your father. Your professor’s office hours are only for another two hours, so we can’t stay long.”

I lean over and kiss his cheek, then press my forehead to his shoulder. “Thank you.”

“I’ll unblock his number from your phone,” he says. “I’m not as stubborn as you think. I needed time with you first.”

I wasn’t sure if I was ready to talk to my father, anyway. I’ve been mad at him. The more I think about everything he did and the ways I’ve had to clean up his messes over the years, the angrier I felt. It’s been nice not having that pressure on my shoulders.

Not only has Carmine forgiven my father’s debt, but he’s paid the debt I had to take on, bailing my dad out of bad situations.

Carmine has saved me in more ways than one.

We slow as he turns on the blinker and pulls into the parking lot of my dad's mechanic shop.

"Where are we?" Ryan asks.

"We're visiting Delilah's father first," Ari says.

"You knew?" I gape at him. "And you didn't say anything?"

"And risk the wrath of Carmine? No thanks. No ice cream is worth that." Ari climbs out of the car, and Ryan debates following him or not, then Matias gets out, leaving Ryan all alone.

He scurries out of the backseat, and I stand outside the door, looking up at the old building. The white paint is chipped and peeling from the cement blocks. Two cars are taking up the two bay areas. They're up on lifts, and Dad is under one tinkering away. He hasn't noticed me yet.

I take a step forward, but Matias is in front of me, Ryan and Ari are behind me, and Carmine is at my side.

We're safe at all angles.

Our shoes scuff on the floor, and the clinks of tools come in and out of the red toolbox I got him a few years back. It's beaten up and rusted, but he always told me he refused to get a new one when this one was bought with love.

"We're booked for the day," he says, without taking his eyes from the car. "If you see Mikey at the desk, he can make an appointment for you." Something in his tone sounds absent as if he isn't there or something is on his mind.

"I'll keep that in mind, but I'm not here to make an appointment."

The tool in his hand crashes down when he hears my voice, and he rolls out from under the car. He stands, wiping his greasy hands on a stained rag. There's a black smudge on his cheek, and his overalls need washing. Dad has never been good at taking care of himself.

Tears spring to my eyes as I take a step forward. “Hey, Dad.”

“Lilah? Is that really you?” He drops the cloth from his hand and rushes forward, nearly tripping over his feet.

I step to the side so he can see me. “Hey, Dad.”

“Lilah.” He runs to me, slamming against me so hard my breath is knocked from my lungs. He holds onto me tight, and I do the same, missing how he smells of coffee. I inhale him and cry, sobbing against his chest.

“I’ve missed you,” I whisper.

“I’ve missed you too. Let me look at you.” He grabs me by the shoulders and leans away, smiling. “You look beautiful, Lilah. You look good. He’s been good to you, then?” His eyes are red-rimmed, and he wipes a tear away.

“Yes,” I reply, holding my hand for Carmine to take. “He’s been very good to me, Dad. We’re married.”

“Married?” He narrows his eyes at Carmine, putting the pieces together. “Lilah...”

“Don’t, Dad. Just don’t. Not this time. I’m happy; that’s all you need to concern yourself with.” I place my hand on my flat stomach. “And you’re going to be a grandfather.”

“What did he do to you? Did he force himself on you? Did he hurt you?” he shouts, and Matias has a gun pointed at my dad’s head in the next instance. My Dad freezes.

“Careful,” Carmine tsks. “We wouldn’t want things to get out of hand here.” Carmine’s arm wraps around my waist.

“Please, put the gun away from my dad, or I swear, Carmine, you’ll be sleeping alone tonight.”

Carmine gestures for Matias to listen, and his brother does, tucking it into his waistband. Ari closes the bay doors to give us privacy.

“You married him, and you’re pregnant? God, Lilah. Why would you do that to yourself? Why would you put yourself in that position?”

I take a step forward, scoffing at his words. “I put myself in that position? You really think my first thought was, hey, I’m going to find the mafia boss, marry him, and have his baby?” I chuckle. “Do you want to know who put me in that position? You.” I stab my finger against his chest. “I saved you. Again. I agreed to marry him and give him an heir, to save you. Luckily, I fell in love with him. and what we have is more than a transaction. This is my life. So, I guess I should thank you because I’m happy. I’m happy for the first time in a very long time.”

“I’ve been watching you, Mr. Reynolds. I’ve been making sure you haven’t done any dirty dealings again,” Carmine says, which has me holding my breath. I didn’t know he was keeping an eye on my father. “You’ve been doing well. You’ve paid down some of your credit card debt, fixed your house, and your business is doing better. It seems you’re getting back on your feet. If you keep at it, I’ll allow you and Delilah to have more time together.”

There’s a moment of rage, just a moment, that builds inside me. I almost want to ask just who the hell does he think he is deciding how much time I can spend with my own father. Then I remember Carmine is the boss. There are rules to consider, things we agreed upon in the contract.

I know Carmine wants to be the number one man in my life, and he is very protective. At the end of the day, I know putting trust in my father not to hurt me again is a big deal. He doesn’t want me to clean up any more messes my dad creates.

And I would.

Carmine knows it.

He’s protecting me from myself and the absolute disappointment of my father failing me again.

“Who are you to say when I can see my daughter?”

Carmine blows out a slow breath, and his fingers curl against my hip.

“Dad—” I whisper in a warning.

“I think I’m the man to whom you owed a shit ton of money, money you couldn’t pay up. I think you’re the man who lets his daughter pick up too much slack. You never took care of Delilah. She’s mine now. Mine. Do you get that? She’s my wife. The mother of my child. My entire fucking world, and what was she to you? A person to clean up your messes. Do not fuck with me again, Mr. Reynolds, or the slack I’ve given you, will burn.”

“Say your goodbyes, Delilah. We need to go.”

I hug my dad and sigh, wishing things could be different, but I can’t fall back into the mindset of always needing to take care of my dad. He’s a grown man. It shouldn’t have to be this way. “I love you. I’ll call you later, okay?”

He squeezes me tight. “I love you too. I’m sorry for everything. I’m sorry I can’t be better.”

“It’s okay. Maybe things will be all right when the baby comes.”

“I can’t wait to meet him or her. Take care of yourself, and don’t be a stranger. I have a lot to improve on, but I miss you. I love you. I never meant for things to be so messy.”

“I know, Dad. Let’s just take things slow, okay? I know this isn’t the life you expected for me, but I’m happy. That’s enough, right?”

“Yeah, Lilah, it’s enough.” He gives me one more hug before letting go, and Ari opens the bay door.

We start walking out, and Ryan is the first one to get in the car, accompanied by Ari and Matias flanking him.

Carmine opens the door for me. “Are you okay, Sweetling?”

“Yeah, I’m sad. It makes me wonder how damaged our relationship was before you came into the picture,” I say, trying to remember a good moment with my dad.

He grips my chin and brings his lips down to mine. The kiss is quick, but it’s enough for me to feel better. Carmine’s good at that. Always making me feel better. “I’m sorry, Sweetling. You don’t deserve that. You deserve nothing but the best.” He

manages to put a slight smile on my face as he shuts the door, leaving my stomach in an array of butterflies.

I look out the window to see my dad watching us, and I lift my hand to wave goodbye, but it's just my palm in the air, not moving.

Dad does the same, regret swimming in his eyes. Carmine starts the car and drives away, forcing me to break eye contact with my dad as we get back on the road. The car is silent, and I lean my head against the window, watching the trees blur as we pass them.

"Are you okay, sis?" Ari asks, gently tugging a piece of my hair.

"I'm okay. A little sad, but I'm okay."

"Well, um, you know, we're here, I'm here, if you ever want to talk," Ryan mumbles, rubbing his hand up and down his arm as he chews on his lip. "You don't know me very well, but you've been so kind to me. I'm a good listener."

"Aw. You're so sweet." Ari puts Ryan in a headlock and rubs his knuckles across Ryan's head.

"Ow. Ow. Ow. Okay, stop."

Ryan laughs. A genuine laugh. The kind that takes me by surprise because I've never heard him laugh before.

It all feels...normal. This is my family now. When this first started between Carmine and me, I thought he'd be the death of me, and maybe he is, but it's the old me that's died. I'm someone else now, someone better. Coming to terms in the beginning was impossible. I wanted to fight Carmine tooth and nail. I wanted to be difficult. I didn't want to accept my reality.

This reality is better than any dream I could have made up in my head.

Fifteen minutes later, with me still lost in my thoughts, we are pulling into the school. We park near the science building.

The cellar is right there, attached to the side of the building. The metal doors are locked with a chain, but being drugged

and taken down there, threatened to be cut into a million pieces and delivered to Carmine has me frozen in place.

“Hey.” Carmine’s fingers graze the side of my face, and I slowly blink away the haze and turn to him. “He can never hurt you again. I killed him. I burned his body and tossed his ashes into the wind. He can’t hurt you, and anyone who try will have to deal with my wrath because I will bring hell to them. You’re safe.”

“I’m safe.”

“That’s right,” he says, kissing my right cheek, then my left. “And you’re here with us. No one here will let anything happen to you.”

“Anyone fucks with you, sis, I’ll blow out the back of their head. Scouts honor.”

“Oh, shut up. You were never a fucking scout, and that’s not even the gesture for it. That’s Lowe’s promise.”

“Well, Lowe’s is a great place. Their promise should hold up.” Matias is the one who gets out of the car first.

Ryan laughs again, holding his stomach, and then snickers, covering his mouth as he tries to calm himself. “I can’t offer anything. I might be able to trip someone for you, but I don’t know how to fight or shoot a gun, so if you’re stuck with me, you’ll probably die. I’m sorry.” Ryan is laughing so hard that he has tears leaking from his eyes. “Sorry.” He clears his throat and awkwardly gets out of the car too.

Ari grins like a madman at me before standing outside the car, leaving me alone with Carmine.

“Gianni is already here. He scoped out the entire place to ensure everything was okay before entering. He was the one who put the lock on the cellar.”

I don’t know why that makes me breathe easier, but it does.

“Okay,” I say, with a fall of my shoulders.

“It will be okay. We will be okay.” He leans over the middle console and grabs me by the back of the head, smashing his

lips against mine. “We will talk to your professor. I might threaten him if he says no.”

I giggle, leaning into his palm.

“And then we will go home, where I’ll rub every inch of your gorgeous body. How does that sound?”

“Sounds like a dream.”

But that’s Carmine. He’s always wanting to make my dreams come true.

Chapter Twenty-One

Carmine

It took everything I had not to inflict pain on Delilah's father, but here I am, trying to be soft like Gianni suggested. His advice plays in my mind a hundred times a day.

Soft.

Stay soft.

Be softer.

So instead of putting a bullet through anyone's head that makes Delilah unhappy, I think about her and how she'd feel.

Well, I think about how much she'd hate me if I killed anyone she cared about, and that right there makes me want to be soft. So, it's progress. On the inside, I'm still a raging killer with a hotter temper than flames, but Delilah helps with that. She cools the anger constantly flowing through me.

There's a small coffee cart in the science building, and Gianni is there ordering coffee for everyone.

"Ryan, I didn't know what you wanted, so I got you a caramel...something."

"Thank you," Ryan says in a small, fragile voice, as if he's wary of Gianni possibly tossing the hot coffee on him.

Delilah gets hot chocolate, and the rest of us get plain black coffee.

"Are we ready?" She chirps nervously. "What if he says no? I don't want him to say no. I need this exam to graduate and attend medical school."

"I think the whole being kidnapped thing will be reason enough, but if he doesn't say yes, I have this to change his mind." Carmine flashes his gun that's tucked in his pants. "No one says no to me, and no one will say no to my wife. Ever."

“I want to throw up,” she groans, taking my hand as she leads me down the hall and then up the stairs where her class is. Everyone follows behind us, and Ryan looks spooked. He looks like he’s going to run any second.

When we get to the top of the stairs, Ari whistles when a college student with long red hair walks by. She gives him a flirtatious grin, and he tries to go after her but Gianni stops him with a hand on his chest.

“We are here for something else. Don’t lose focus.”

“Right. Sorry.”

“

The woman you want one day; I hope she gives you a run for your money,” Delilah says over her shoulder.

Ari scoffs. “Please. I’ll never be tied down.”

“Yeah, I can’t wait to see your downfall.” Delilah takes a left down another hallway, and we come to a closed door with her professor’s name on it.

Matias, Gianni, and Ari have their hands on their weapons. Ryan is leaning against the wall, staring at the floor, not wanting confrontation. Delilah takes a breath and knocks, waiting for the professor to say something.

“Get back,” Gianni whispers, lifting his gun when he points to the floor.

We all look down, and Delilah gasps when blood pools from underneath the door.

I wrap my arms around Delilah and spin her until she’s beside Ryan. “You two stay together. Do you understand me?”

“Carmine.”

“Do you understand me?” I repeat.

Her eyes are round, but she nods vigorously, taking hold of Ryan’s hand.

“Good.” I take out my gun, and Ryan turns three shades of white.

“Ready?” I mouth to my men. They all nod. I lift my leg and kick the door open, letting out a string of curses at what I see inside.

Impossible.

There’s no way I could have missed this. Caleb, Christy’s boyfriend, has Delilah’s professor on the ground, gripping his head by his hair and a bloody knife in his hand. The professor isn’t dead, though. He’s barely alive, but he won’t be for long.

“Caleb!” Delilah sees him from behind me. “Oh my, God, what are you doing? What did you do!”

“Oh, shut the fuck up, Delilah.” He wipes the blood on his jeans, dropping the professor to the ground. “I can’t stand you. I can’t stand him either.” He lifts the knife and points it at Carmine. “Is it nice to have the life I deserve? Is it everything you thought it would be? Do you know how exhausting it is to try to ruin your fucking life? You’re like a cockroach that won’t die. You keep coming back. I hired the kidnapper, but he goes off the rails. I tried to kill your professor so you couldn’t take your test, yet here you are. You’re fucking everywhere!” he shouts at her.

I cock my gun, and Caleb maniacally laughs.

“You aren’t going to want to do that. I know something you don’t,” he sings.

“Why would you do this? What did I do to you?” Delilah cries. “And what about Christy?”

“What about her? She’s so fucking needy.”

“You better shut your fucking mouth,” Gianni steps forward, aiming his gun at Caleb’s head. “Don’t talk about her like that.”

“Why not? Do you want to fuck her too? I’ll let you have a shot. She’s a prude, though. She won’t give it up. So good luck with that.”

Gianni goes to pull the trigger, but I place my hand on his arm to stop him.

“What do you want, Caleb?”

“My name isn’t Caleb. It’s Caleb Milazzo.”

The room becomes dead silent. I can hear the blood dripping from the professor’s throat onto the floor and his gurgles as he struggles to breathe. I want to help him, but as long as Caleb stands over him with a knife I can’t.

If he can just hold on a little longer.

“That’s impossible,” Ari spits venomously. “We would know if we had a brother, and we wouldn’t have left you alone.”

“Your dad fucked around, cast me out, and sold me to Romano when I was just a baby. A fucking baby!” He roars. “You don’t know what it was like growing up in that household.”

“I do,” Ryan steps forward, putting on a brave face.

“I don’t know you. I would know you if we ran in the same circle,” Caleb, whatever he calls himself, says.

“You wouldn’t have. He kept me locked away. I escaped, and I came here. These aren’t the bad guys, Caleb. They would have taken you in if they had known.”

“I grew up in violence and pain, and I was constantly unwanted. I want everything you have, Carmine. I want to bring down the empire you’ve built, and to do that I started with Delilah—the only person you seem to give a damn about other than yourself.”

He’s obviously lost his mind.

“Romano had nothing to do with any of this. It’s been you the entire time?”

Caleb tosses his head back and laughs. “Romano hates you. He doesn’t give a fuck about what I do, but since I made a mess of things, he’s gone quiet. I don’t know where he is.” He sniffs, rubbing a hand under his nose.

I'm sick of this. Obviously, my father was a real piece of shit, but I won't allow anyone to come near Delilah.

I lift my gun, sick of the game Caleb is playing.

"You aren't going to want to do that." Caleb lifts the knife against the light to see it shine.

"Why not?"

"Because if you want to find Christy, you won't let anything happen to me."

"What!" Delilah steps forward and tries to launch herself at him. "What did you do to her, you fucking sick freak! She loved you. She fucking loved you!" She screams, trying her best to get out of my hold. "Where is she?"

"She's somewhere she can't be found without me."

Gianni pulls the trigger first, and the bullet rips through his shoulder, keeping him alive. Caleb drops the knife, and Matias kicks it to the side and aims the gun at his head.

"I will pluck out every hair, every nail, and cut every toe off your fucking body until you tell me where she is, brother or not," I say. "You are nothing to me, Caleb. And if you think this is how you thought you'd get my attention, you are very wrong. No one threatens what is mine, and Delilah is mine which means so are her friends. You made a mistake."

"Romano will come for you if you hurt me."

I grin at him, taking his hand and snapping his wrist. He almost crumbles to the ground, but Matias keeps him on his feet. "I hope so. I have business with Romano that needs to be solved once and for all, and you're just making a bigger mess of things. Did you think this would get me to sacrifice anything for you? My money? My power?"

Ryan is on the ground, yanking off his shirt to press against the professor's throat while we try to get the truth out of him.

"This is what I'll do. You tell me where Christy is, and I won't make your death painful. I'll make it quick, but either way, you'll die, that I can promise. If you don't tell me, I'll skin you alive and burn your flesh right in front of you. You'll

be nothing but meat. And then, while your heart is still beating and you're crying and begging for me to kill you, I won't. I'll let you cry and hope for death because that's so much worse, isn't it? You brought the wrong fucking mindset to this game of chess. I'm a master, Caleb."

Matias presses the gun to Caleb's cock, and I chuckle.

"She's buried in the woods!" he sings like a canary. "You have an hour before she runs out of air. She's off Route 5 near the mile three markers."

"That wasn't so hard, was it." I snap my fingers. "Load him up and call an ambulance for the professor. Ryan, Ari, stay here with him, okay? Text me for updates."

"Sure thing."

"Wait, you said if I told you—"

I punch him in the throat, which has him gasping for breath. "And I lied. No way would I ever let you die peacefully." I step over the blood and hold Delilah in my arms. "She'll be okay. We will find her."

"I don't understand," she says, as I push her out into the hall. "I don't understand why he'd do this. It doesn't make sense." She trembles as if she's cold. "I can't lose her, Carmine. She's my best friend. I can't lose her. I can't."

"And you won't," I say, taking her face in my hands. "I promise. I won't let anything happen to her."

"Something did happen to her!" she yells. "We trusted him, and look what he did." Delilah holds her stomach and throws up the hot chocolate.

"I ran a background check on him. Nothing came up, Delilah. I'm so sorry." He must have had someone erase his real name and forge another identity, or there's no way I would have let him get so close. I swing her into my arms and hurry out of the building and down the stairs. I hear the ambulance's sirens in the distance, and I hope the professor can hang on, but he's lost a lot of blood, so my hopes for him aren't high right now.

Matias and Gianni are behind me, and Matias has an unconscious Caleb thrown over his shoulder, blood trickling down his arm from the gunshot wound to the shoulder.

“We need to find her,” Gianni states, running his hands through his hair frantically. “I have to find her.”

We climb into the SUV, tying Caleb’s hands and feet together, then toss him in the trunk. Delilah is in the front seat, looking paler than I’d like, while Matias and Gianni climb in the back. Without putting on my seatbelt, I slam on the gas and head to Route Five.

Luckily, we aren’t far.

Pushing the hazard lights on, I max on the speedometer as we drive down the highway.

Delilah hasn’t stopped crying, and I couldn’t let Caleb live for that alone. He nearly took her life too many times, and now he’s taken one of her few comforts.

Gianni doesn’t seem too happy either, which makes me wonder if he has feelings for Christy. I don’t remember them interacting often. He’d stand to the side and listen to her, watch as Caleb kissed her and made her laugh.

If he does have feelings for her, that couldn’t have been easy.

I slow when we start passing the mile markers.

“I’ll stay with Caleb and make sure he doesn’t cause any trouble,” Matias says, the gun still aimed at Caleb. “I could just kill him and replace his body with Christy’s. Two birds, one stone, and all that.”

I don’t hate the idea. We are already here. A hole is already dug.

I want to torture him, but it would be helpful to get it over with, especially with Christy. She probably won’t want to see her ex-boyfriend ever again.

“Christy will probably want to shoot him when we get her. We have to get to her,” Delilah wipes her cheeks and climbs out of the SUV before it stops.

“Delilah! Don’t ever get out of a moving vehicle.” I shout after her since her door is wide open, and she’s stalking toward the woods.

Gianni climbs out next. Finally, I slam the car into park and run after her, checking her over to make sure she isn’t hurt.

“I’m fine. Let’s not waste any more time. Christy needs us. How far back? Is it a straight shot, left or right?” Delilah asks, taking a step into the woods. The pine needles snap under her feet, and she crosses her arms over her chest. “Oh my, god, I’m going to be sick.” She holds her stomach again, and I’m at her side instantly.

“Listen to me, listen,” I grip her with rough hands. “We will find her, but you have to relax. The stress isn’t good for you or the baby. I can’t have anything happen to either of you, do you understand? I can’t. So, breathe for me. We have forty-five minutes. That’s plenty of time to find her.”

“Hey!” Matias calls from the car. “It’s straight back about a mile—” His head turns, and I assume he’s talking to Caleb. Even from here, I can see his sneer.

“Shut the fuck up!” A gunshot rings out. “Shut the fuck up!” He looks in our direction again. “I didn’t kill him!”

He looks so proud of himself and way too much like Ari at the moment. For twins, yes, they look alike, but their personalities are different—except for right now.

Gianni power walks ahead of us and calls out her name. “Christy! Christy, it’s Gianni. Delilah and Carmine are with me. Scream if you can hear us.”

We wait for something, for anything, but silence speaks in return.

“Oh god,” Delilah sobs, covering her mouth to hide the sound as we listen.

I keep alert, gun out, taking soft steps, so I make quiet sounds.

Birds caw above us and fly away when they see us.

“Christy!” Delilah calls out. “Christy! Please, answer!”

The desperation in her voice kills me. If I don't find her friend, my Sweetling will never be the same.

"Shh, I hear something." Gianni turns his head, and we all stop walking.

Delilah's fingernails dig into my skin as we wait.

"There isn't anything—"

"Shh," he cuts me off.

Anyone else would have gotten a punch to the face.

A muffled shout comes from ahead, and all of us look at each other before sprinting in the direction it's coming from.

Delilah trips over a fallen log, and I catch her before she hits the ground. Gianni gets to the freshly dug mound of dirt first. He falls to his hands and knees, scooping the dirt with his palms.

"Help me!" Christy cries from underneath us, banging her fists against something. "I can't breathe." Her voice sounds so far away, but she's so close.

"Hang on, Christy. We are right here. Just keep breathing." Delilah is digging, too, while I'm using my entire forearm to scoop dirt out.

By the time we get to the wooden box, I see we have dug about three feet. Christy isn't making any sounds; we are all sweating and covered with dirt. Gianni and I grip the edge of the lid, then pull. It's nailed shut. There's no way she could have escaped.

We roar in unison, our strength being tested, but finally, the wood breaks, and we almost fall over.

"Christy?" Delilah whimpers, as she looks down.

"I have her." Gianni scoops an unconscious Christy from the box and lies her on the ground. He presses an ear to her chest. "I don't hear a heartbeat."

"Oh my, god."

Gianni begins CPR, giving her air before pressing against her chest.

Christy gasps for breath as she opens her eyes before coughing, then loud sobs follow.

Delilah falls to her knees and gathers her friend in her arms. Gianni and I fall back, exhausted. Sweat stinging my eyes. There's dirt under my nails, pants, suit, and face. I haven't been this dirty from the soil in a very long time—if not ever. I'm typically washing blood off my hands and clothes.

Christy lets go of Delilah and throws herself at Gianni. "Thank you for coming after me."

He wraps his arms around her and holds her as if she's something precious. "Always," he whispers.

"I brought him for you. The car got boring," Matias says, holding a beaten and bloody Caleb.

Christy stands to her feet, and I notice her busted lip and a black eye. That mother fucker hit her. She has tears streaming down her face, and Caleb has the audacity to look smug.

"I see you found your way out of the hole I made you," he says, blood dripping down his shoulders.

Christy reaches for the gun tucked in Gianni's holster.

"And you're about to find yourself in it, you fucking asshole."

We can't move quick enough to stop her, but Christy fires, the bullet puncturing his heart.

He falls limp in Matias's hold, and my brother drops him to the ground. "Holy shit, that was badass."

Christy's hand is shaking, and the tremors cause the gun to rattle. Gianni lowers her arm, taking the weapon from her.

"I told you she'd want to shoot him herself."

"I'll bury him myself." Christy kicks Caleb's dead body and drags him across the ground. Gianni tries to help her, but she smacks his hand away. "I can do it."

When she gets Caleb to the edge of the hole, she pushes him with her foot, and he lands with a hard smack in the wooden box. “Time to bury the past.”

I walk around Delilah, hand pressed against her stomach, kissing her cheek. “I think she might be okay. She’s taking this oddly well.”

“Christy is badass, but this will catch up to her. You don’t get over the man you thought you loved trying to kill you so quickly.”

With every angry scoop of dirt, Christy cried, and Gianni helped her, burying a love that was always meant to die.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Delilah

It's been months since the chaos with Caleb. Romano is still underground, and no one has heard a peep. Carmine doesn't believe Romano will be hiding forever. Our enemy is planning something—in Carmine's opinion.

I was able to take my test too. My professor hasn't gone back to work. He hasn't been able to talk since the attack and near-death experience, so he took a leave of absence from teaching and hired a temporary replacement. The university let me make up my test due to my kidnapping and my professor being attacked. I was finally able to graduate, and I was able to go to medical school.

But being six months pregnant and pre-labor scares was a no go, so I've been ordered to stay home. Medical school will have to wait.

But there's something else happening in the meantime.

Carmine is giving me a real wedding. Today. I have the dress, the maid of honor, and my father walking me down the aisle.

I have it all because Carmine wanted me to have it all.

"You look so beautiful," Christy says, as she zips up the back of my dress.

I look in the mirror and smile, feeling beautiful. The dress is strapless and simple and hugs my top until it flows over my stomach, so I'm comfortable. The tulle has crystals that add a hint of shine over my dress's bottom half. For a last-minute addition, Christy places a real diamond necklace around my neck with a ten-carat blue sapphire Carmine bought me as a wedding gift.

"Jesus, this weighs a ton. Don't fall over from it." She clips it in place, and we stare in the mirror at our reflections. "You

look so gorgeous. I'm so happy you get this day. You deserve all the good things, Delilah."

I turn around and hug my best friend. "So do you, you know. I know what happened—"

"—I don't want to talk about him. I don't ever want to talk about him. Today is your day. Okay?"

"Okay." I smile, dropping it for now. Christy hasn't brought up what happened once. She won't talk about it, and it makes me worry about her. "Is Ethan here? He's your date, right?"

"Yeah, but it's not like that. I don't want to date."

A knock at the door interrupts us, and my dad peeks his head in. "Oh," he gasps. "You look stunning, Lilah."

"Thanks, Dad."

"I'm going to go. I hear the music, and that's my cue to start the show. Don't be late."

I roll my eyes. "I won't be. Carmine would never allow it anyway."

Christy is wearing a light purple gown with a long train that drags behind her as she walks away, looking like a goddess. I take one more look at myself; for some reason, I'm nervous. I'm already married and pregnant. There's nothing to be nervous about, but this moment with Carmine is different. It isn't forced. It isn't angry.

"You're happy," my dad says out of nowhere.

"I am. I'm..." I can't find the words to describe it myself. "I'm right where I need to be."

My Dad holds out his arm for me to take, and I loop my hand through it. "As long as you're happy, that's all I care about."

We step outside the bedroom and walk down the hall. The marble floor is littered with red roses, petals, and candles.

I take a deep breath as I walk down the hallway that will forever change my life. We head down the stairs, my heart skips the closer we get to the front door. They open when Dad

knocks on the wood, and I gasp when I see my dream wedding right in front of me.

The sun has set just enough for the twinkling lights in the garden to come to life, reminding me of fireflies during summer nights when I was a child. The rose petals and candles drift down the steps and the stone pathway.

Gianni is standing next to Carmine in front of the gate, which makes me laugh because Carmine says he wants to claim me in front of the one thing I claimed to escape him.

Christy is standing up there, holding a bouquet of white roses while she sneaks peeks at Gianni. I'll have to make a note to ask her about that later.

While Matias, Victor, Alex, Nicky, and Ivar watch from the grass where they stand, Ryan and Ari are on my side.

Carmine's eyes heat as I get closer and roam down my body, his attention locked on my belly.

Every single night, he shows me how much he loves my pregnant belly. He gets so turned on, he fucks me to sleep after so many orgasms before he fills me with his own.

“Who gives this woman—”

“He does,” Carmine answers for my dad. “She's mine.” He takes my hand and grabs my face. “I fucking do. I do, I do, I do,” he growls, kissing me in front of everyone.

“I haven't married you yet,” the minister mumbles.

“Get on with it,” Carmine groans.

“Do you take this woman—”

“Yes. I do. She's mine. Where's the ring?”

Gianni holds out the ugly engagement ring I've come to love.

Carmine slides it on my finger. “I still want to get you a nice one.”

“Don't you dare,” I whisper.

“And do you take Carmine—”

“I do. Always.”

“You two are horrible to marry. May the power—screw it. You’re married.”

Carmine yanks me to him and dips me over his knee, kissing me senseless. “I do want to get you a better ring,” he says, so only I can hear. “It’s ugly.”

“Just like we were in the beginning.” I kiss him again, gasping for breath, my hormones raging and wanting him to take me inside. Why did I want this wedding again? “And I’ve come to love it just as I love you.”

Sometimes, it’s the diamond in the rough that is the most beautiful.

Carmine

I’ve waited hours for everyone to leave. Weddings. They are useless. I don’t like them but seeing the happiness on my wife’s face is worth it. I knew it was time to cut the evening short when I saw her grabbing her stomach, so I made everyone go home.

My wife’s health was more important than them getting free booze from me.

“Are you okay?” I ask her, kissing her neck as I unzip her dress.

“I’m fine. The baby was kicking so hard earlier.”

I slip her out of her dress and spin her around, her round tits swollen. I can’t wait until she leaks it. I hear a mother’s milk is so sweet it’s like sugar. And I want to try it.

“I couldn’t fit into a bra. It was too uncomfortable.”

“Good. It’s one less thing for me to take off.” I lie down on the bed and undress in front of her, loving her eyes as they glaze over to watch me. She’s so tiny and all baby belly. I love seeing her body change and adjust for me.

I rub my palms over her stomach, my cock aching and hard. I want nothing more than to slip inside her, but I'm feeling...

Soft.

"I love you," I say to her, my hands getting a mind of their own as I explore her body. "I love you more than any man has ever loved another woman."

"I know," she replies. "Just as I love you."

I bend down and kiss my wife, easing her lips apart and sliding my tongue into every corner. I'm not sure how long we kiss, but it turns heated and desperate. I lift her leg around my hip without breaking our lips apart and thrust into her. Both of us groan in unison.

"Oh my god," she moans. "I've missed you."

"It's only been since this morning," I chuckle, easing out before driving back in and causing her to cry out. "You're so wet for me, Sweetling. Is this all for me? All for my cock? Your sweet little pussy can't get enough, can it?"

Her fingers grip my shoulders as her teeth sink into her lower lip. "No. I always want you. Always."

There aren't many positions we can do now that her belly has gotten bigger. She gets winded, and her back hurts, and I'll be damned if she's in pain because she's riding me. I'll fuck her every day just like this, and it will be the best fucking sex of our lives because it's us.

I hold onto her stomach, a feral force pulsating through me as I pick up the pace. My sack slaps against her with every hard drive, and her cries echo in the room. The bed begins to rock, and a hard kick hits my palm causing me to stop.

"No! No, Carmine, keep going. I'm so close."

I lower myself and kiss her stomach, igniting another jab against my palm. I don't know why, but my heart, soul, and lust all soften, and I begin a different pace.

I'm still dying for her.

I'm still needing her like I need air.

But she's my everything.

"Carmine," she whispers, feeling the change.

I need to show her how much I love her. I wrap my arms around her, bringing my forehead to hers. Our breaths mix, and it hits me that my entire life is in my arms.

"I love you, Sweetling."

"I love you too, Carmine. So much."

Delilah's whimpers become more frequent, and her pussy becomes wetter, so slick and warm. I don't stop the constant, slow movements of my hips. I take my time, dragging my cock in languid, tormenting strokes.

She's close.

We always fuck hard, and I rarely take my time because I want her so much.

This will be the first of many times tonight.

"Carmine." She whines my name as her muscles spasm around me.

"That's it, wife. Come all over me. Show me how much you love me."

And she does. She shatters, pulling my orgasm from me.

I don't stop. I fuck her through it; my come adding an extra layer of lubricant. I become so sensitive it's hard to catch my breath, but it passes eventually, and I keep going wanting nothing more than to bring her pleasure.

She shatters me.

And I'm a better man for it.

She's shown me even the ugliest of hearts can soften to deserve such beautiful things.

After countless orgasms I've wrung from her, she falls asleep before I even have a chance to slide out from her. My entire body trembles when I do, and I watch my cock ease from her heat.

Such a beautiful sight.

I cover her up, kiss her cheek, and roll out of bed, needing some water. I'm a bit restless. My head is too busy with everything going on. Tucking her in, I throw on a pair of sweatpants and quietly sneak out of the room.

A frenzied Gianni running smack into me.

"Carmine, I have a call you will want to take," Gianni informs me.

"Shh." I look over my shoulder to check on Delilah. She's still sleeping. I shut the door. Who could be calling me at this hour? My brows furrow. "From whom?"

"Romano," he says, darkly. "It's a video call."

"I don't want Delilah to hear."

"He is on the screen in the security room."

"Do not under any circumstance allow Delilah to enter that room. If she wakes up, she'll come searching for me and probably curse Romano out herself. I want this call traced; do you understand?"

"I'm already working on it."

I roll my shoulders to contain my rage and hurry past Gianni, down the steps to the lower floor to the security room. With a swipe of my finger, the screen taking up the entire wall lights up.

Romano's face comes into view.

He looks tired, pale, and afraid.

He should be.

I'm going to fucking kill him.

"Carmine," he greets, when I come to view.

I sit in the large leather chair, and Gianni sits next to me.

"What the fuck do you want? Are you so much of a coward you can't come out of your hole and face me like a man, Romano?"

"You won't be able to trace this call," he says, taking a drink of what I assume is whiskey. It's a little early for that,

but I'd do the same if I were in his position. "I no longer plan to come after Delilah or you. Caleb went off the rails. I trusted him, but he went too far. He did everything I didn't want him to do. I'm calling for a truce—"

I slam my fist against the table and stand. "You dare call me to beg for peace? After you tried to take my pregnant wife from me?"

His eyes round. "I didn't know she was pregnant; I would never—"

"You would." I silence him. "Ryan is proof of that."

His gaze darkens, and the facade breaks. "He's always been weak. He won't be worth it to you."

"He's already proven himself." I slide my eyes over to Gianni, who is trying to trace the call but shakes his head.

No luck.

"What is it that you want, Romano? I don't have time to waste. I find this call odd and out of nowhere."

"One of us had to reach out to the other. I might as well make the first move. In truth, I want an alliance. I want us to rule together. If we don't, imagine how many people will be killed."

He's trying to save himself.

Nothing can save him from my wrath.

I laugh, then sigh. "What a desperate plea from a scared man. Never in your wildest dreams. I will hunt you, Romano. I will hunt you down for what you did to my wife, her friend, and Ryan. There is no place in the corner of this earth you will be safe from me. I will never want to work with you. I will never want to be your friend. You are calling me out of fear because you know I am stronger, have more reach, and I am capable of more than you could ever imagine. I will fucking kill you, Romano. I'll kill you and all your men, dance on your bones, and I won't bother to bury you. I'll let dogs feast."

"I'll run forever," Romano states. "You won't be able to catch me."

I glance over to Gianni, and he writes something down on a sheet of paper. Holding it up, it reads. *“Located him. He’s overseas. London, to be exact. I’ll send men over now.”*

I hold in my grin, not wanting to give anything away.

“I’d consider your days numbered, Romano.”

An evil grin spreads across his face, the expression of a psychopath. “I love a good chase.”

I end the call without another word, checking the call is disconnected. “You found him. You’re sure?”

“Positive. I’ve pulled up video cam footage from the traffic cameras there. He isn’t that good at hiding his tracks. He uses advanced technology. We need to make sure we get there soon, or he might catch wind of me hacking his systems.”

“I want him dead by this time tomorrow. Don’t send men. Call our contacts over there and pay whatever you need to. I want this done now. Delilah deserves peace.”

And if there is something I’ll always do, it is to give Delilah every ounce of peace this world offers.

Epilogue

Delilah

Five years later

Medical school was exhausting, and I'm finishing up my last year as an intern at one of the best trauma centers in the city. Being a full-time doctor, wife, and mom can be tiring, but it's worth it. Not only do I get to save people, but I get to save the men for Carmine whenever they get into a scuffle.

Which are more times than not.

"I have a surprise for you," Carmine whispers, helping me put on my jacket before we go outside. "The kids are with Uncle Ryan and Uncle Ari. I have you all to myself for the next few hours, but I've been working on something since we met."

The last surprise I had was showing proof of Romano's death. I had been too excited to know someone's life was over, but I was glad. I was relieved.

I'm still relieved.

He had Romano killed for me, Ryan, and Christy.

There's something very romantic about a man that will kill for you.

And Ryan quickly became part of our family when he came to us five years ago. He's gone to school and has changed his last name to Milazzo with Carmine's blessing. Carmine has taken him under his wing. Ryan is the youngest brother now.

"Color me curious," I say with a raised brow.

"Good." He opens the door. "Okay, don't kill my kids. We will be back soon."

Ari steps in front of us, two kids are hanging off his arms, and one is attached to his legs. Carmine kept me pregnant all through medical school, and I loved it. No one thought I could do both. My teachers and peers doubted me, but I showed them how wrong they were.

“Them?” Ari gapes at us. “It’s *my* life you need to be concerned about.”

“I’m only here for pictures,” Ryan says, lifting his phone to record. “You’re a great jungle gym, Ari.”

“I know.” He lifts the kids hanging on his arms in the air, and they chuckle, the noise music to my ears.

“Okay, we will be back. We love you.” Carmine kisses each head, two sons and a daughter. I know she’ll be a handful, and he will be overly protective.

He drags me out the door, the winter air harsh as it whips around us. We hurry to the car and jump inside. I groan when my ass is met with seat warmers. He remotely started the car.

This is why I married him.

“We will be back for dinner. I know your dad wants to see the kids.”

As we pull out of the gated driveway, I think back to all those years ago when I was forbidden to see my father. We’ve come such a long way since then. Dad and I have a better relationship; he is amazing with his grandkids. I know it took a lot for Carmine to give in and have that relationship form because all he ever wants to do is protect me, but he put those feelings aside for me.

“Where are we going?” I ask, narrowing my eyes at him.

“You’ll see.” He kisses my knuckles, and my eyes catch the ugly ring I picked out of spite. No matter how many times he says he’ll get me a new one, I tell him I don’t want a new one.

No ring could top this one, not with the meaning behind it.

The drive is about twenty minutes, and when we pull into the paved parking lot, I have to do a doubletake.

“Carmine...” It’s the motel my dad and I hid in after our house was shot. “It’s...” I have no words. It looks nothing like the motel we stayed in. Honestly, I haven’t given much thought to this place since. It didn’t hold good memories.

“It’s your new doctor’s office. I tore down the old building because it was not good enough for you. I made it two stories. Clinic and surgeries. Your private practice.”

“Why here? Why this place?”

“This was the place you hid from me. Your new journey started here, and I didn’t want it to end. All I knew was that I wanted to be a part of it. Do you like it, Sweetling?”

“I love it! Oh my god, are you kidding? I love it!” I jump out, not bothering to close the door and run around the car. When he steps out, I tackle him, peppering his face with kisses as he pushes me against the SUV.

“You want the grand tour?” he asks, kissing down my neck.

“Yes,” I groan.

“I can’t be held accountable if I find a flat surface to fuck you on.”

“We have to celebrate the right way, right?”

He swings me into his arms and rushes to the front door.

This is my life.

And I love every second of it.

Carmine Milazzo is the beast everyone believes him to be, but for me, he’s the man I’ve always needed.

THE END

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