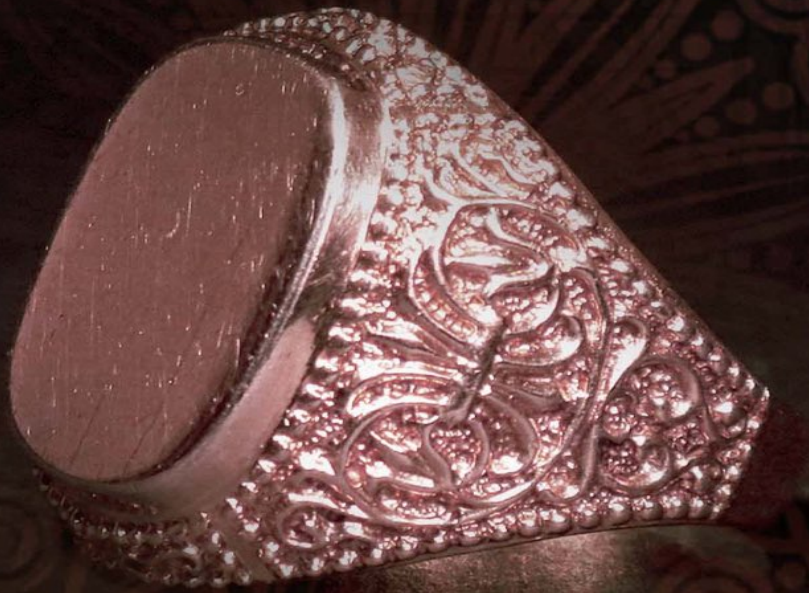


The Moretti Family Series

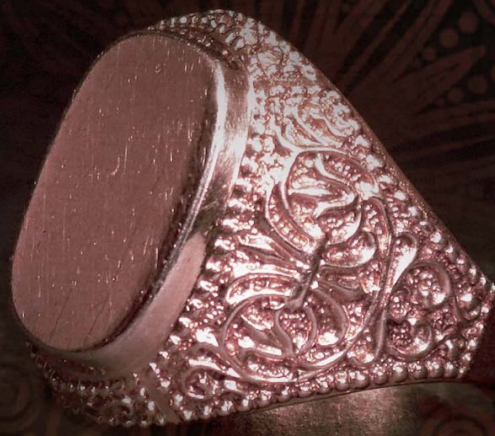
Sasha
and the
HEIR



STEPHANIE KAZOWZ

The Moretti Family Series

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HEIR



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SASHA AND THE HEIR

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KAZOWZ PUBLISHING

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*To my partner Jordan—I love writing the smut and seeing how
you react. <3 I also love your notes.*

THIS PERSONAL!

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Sha-La-La - Al Green

Stand by your Man - Kari Kimmel

Content Warning

This book includes:

Coarse language

Alcohol use

Drug use

On page panic attack

On page nightmares

Fatphobia from a parent

Slut shaming

Biphobia

Fake pregnancy

Pregnancy

Pregnant woman in peril

Kidnapping

Explicit sex

Gun violence

Graphic violence

Graphic deaths/murder

ONE

“Fucking cops,” I mumbled, glaring at the line of police cruisers outside the cathedral. Frankie’s lips twitched, but he didn’t smile. He was too focused on protecting me while never touching me, which was for the best. With the heat and humidity, he was in danger of physical harm if he got too close.

Sweat beaded on my forehead and upper lip as I maneuvered my heavy gown, cursing the complicated, unbreathing undergarments my mom convinced me to wear. The smell of vomit mixed with mint wafted into my nose with every huff, making me queasy all over again.

“Why are they still here?” I zeroed in on a particular asshole. “They already have the groom. Are they looking to get the set?”

I raised my hand to flip off Detective Bennington’s smug ass, but Frankie caught it mid-gesture. “Get in the limo.”

“You’re no fun.”

“And you’re a fucking headache.”

“Love you too, Frankie.” I kissed the air as I got in the back with my mom, my dad followed right behind me, sandwiching me between my parents.

Frankie closed the door, shaking his head, no doubt happy to be rid of me.

“Sasha! What’s going on?” Mom gathered my hand in hers. “Why would they arrest Luca? And on today, of all days?”

I shook my head and turned to my dad for help. With his massive build stuffed in a tux, I wasn’t sure if it was the ninety-degree weather or the situation making his face as red as his hair.

He wiped his brow with a handkerchief. “Maggie, let the girl breathe. It’s been a long day.”

“I just don’t understand how they can do that to a man like Luca Moretti. Do they know who he is?” She squeezed my fingers so hard my pinkie throbbed. I slid out of her hold, wincing as the blood flow returned, flexing my hand repeatedly to regain feeling.

“I guess his name doesn’t matter much when it comes to murder,” Dad offered like he was helping.

He wasn’t.

“Well, I don’t believe Luca is capable of something like, like . . . that.” Mom huffed and settled back in her seat while she glared out the window at the police. “And for them to do all this on your wedding day?” She gripped her leather clutch so hard it creaked. “Despicable.”

I patted her thigh. “It’s okay, Mom. Luca and I are already married.”

Her head whipped my way so fast I worried she hurt herself. “What do you mean?” she shrieked, brushing her auburn hair from her cheeks.

“We eloped weeks ago. Just in case.”

Mom blinked, her mouth falling open. “You expected this?”

I looked away, my reflection in the partition the perfect manifestation of the day. All the beauty of the morning was gone. In its place was a hot damn mess of smudged makeup and flat hair. “We knew there was a possibility we wouldn’t make it to the wedding day.”

She laid a hand on mine. “And you still married him?”

I jerked away and slammed into Dad. “Yes, I still married him,” I hissed, turning my rank breath into a weapon against my mom. “If you have a problem with me, my choices, or my husband, you can go.”

The limo eased out onto the street, but I kept pointing at the door because she could tuck and roll for all I cared.

“Sasha—”

“I don’t mean to be a bitch, Mom, but today isn’t the day for your shit. I get it. I know what I signed up for.”

She gasped, her lips flapping. “Greg, aren’t you—” Mom leaned forward to look him in the eye, her beaded gown dragging against the seat.

“No, Maggie. Sasha’s a big girl. She knows what she’s doing.”

Like hell I did, but it was nice Dad had my back. Mom’s gaze ping-ponged between the two of us before nodding. This wouldn’t be the end of her worrying, but it was nice to not add it to the day.

“At least you’re already pregnant,” she muttered.

So much for peace.

How the woman went from outrage to content, future grandma was baffling. I ignored the tapping of her manicured nails and Dad's body tensing next to me and promised myself I would clear up the pregnancy confusion once I wasn't wearing a wedding dress and fleeing a press bonanza. For now, I'd let the parents dream of chubby babies if it kept them off my back.

The three of us rode in silence, my mom's hand resting on my knee while Dad stretched his arm behind both of us, creating a Mitchell cocoon. The tinted windows kept us hidden from the flashing lights of the photographers as we drove through the city streets.

In the silence, dread crept in, allowing the drama of the day to finally settle over me.

Luca was arrested.

I fucked his cousin without knowing it—and surprise—he was at my wedding.

Our parents think I'm pregnant.

And how could I forget?

More than one person wants me dead.

Being Sasha Marie Mitchell-Moretti was a-fucking-lot.

The convoy of shiny black cars pulled in front of our house, and I took a deep breath. "You guys can go home."

"We don't—"

"You sure, honey?" Dad cut Mom off, his stare calculating.

I folded my hands in my lap to keep from fidgeting. "I want to be alone."

He nodded and kissed my forehead. Slipping out of the backseat, he held open the door for us.

“Great,” I groaned as Morettis invaded my home.

Dad helped me out of the car, pulling me into a hug. His familiar cologne—the good stuff my mom bought him every year for their anniversary—wrapped around me, soothing my frayed nerves. “You want me to kick them out?”

I chuckled, thinking about my dad taking on the mob for me. “I got it. Just get Mom home and calm her down.”

“Her daughter married a murderer. I don’t know if she’ll ever calm down.” He kissed my forehead and pushed me toward the house. “We’ll check in tomorrow.”

I waved as he got back into the limo.

“Sasha!” Sarah called from a black sedan down the block. She gathered the skirt on her emerald gown and rushed toward me. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.”

I grunted when she slammed into me, wrapping me in a hug, her small baby bump poking me in the stomach. “What are you doing here?”

Sarah loosened her hold but didn’t let go. “Luca was just arrested, and the family’s closing ranks. Where else would I be?” She scanned the street as she led me to the wide-open front door. “But don’t worry, Morettis don’t do time.”

I came to an abrupt stop, making Sarah trip. “You know?”

“Of course I do.” Sarah rolled her eyes, tucking a loose red curl behind her ear. “Did you think Michael didn’t warn me about his family’s less-than-legal enterprises?”

“I guess I thought because he’s so far removed, maybe you didn’t know. Why didn’t you ever say anything?”

“Michael and his family made it very clear it wasn’t something I was free to share.” She gave me an apologetic smile. “Besides, would it have changed anything?”

I bit the inside of my cheek and shook my head.

“That’s what I figured. Now, let’s get inside.”

I followed, more confused than I was five minutes ago. Sarah knew. Sarah knew, and she never said a damn word. Maybe we were more alike than I’d ever realized.

Groomsmen still dressed in black tuxes zipped by us, carrying trays of food to the kitchen. We barely cleared the front door before we ran smack dab into the pile of wrapped gifts stacked along the entryway. My tranquil home was in utter chaos.

“Put the cake top in the fridge. Sasha will want to save it for when Luca gets home,” Rosa ordered from the kitchen.

I knocked into a particularly shiny package, toppling the small pile on top of it and drawing the attention of everyone in the room. “Uh, maybe we can put these somewhere else?” Little pieces of crinkled tissue paper slipped out of my shaking fingers as I tried to shove them back into a white glittery bag.

“Malcolm, start moving these into the dining room,” Ashley yelled over her shoulder as she joined Sarah in dragging me away from the festive mess. “Does that work for you, Sasha?” Her warm brown eyes searched my face.

Unable to take the scrutiny, I focused on brushing a piece of tinsel off the skirt of her plum bridesmaid’s dress. “Yeah. That’s fine.”

The men carted the gifts away, slowly clearing my entryway. Ashley and Malcolm shared a serious look, and she shook her head, sending her natural curls bouncing around her chin. The press of her lips deepened the dimples in her cheeks. Their silent conversation continued until Malcolm frowned and took the last box away.

I grabbed her hand. "It's okay if you need to go. I understand."

"No. I'm here until you're settled. You've had a hell of a day, and I'm not leaving you alone."

I scoffed and gestured at the people milling about my crowded house.

Ashley sucked her teeth. "You know what I mean."

"Yeah, I do." I pulled her into a tight hug. "You're the best friend a girl could ask for."

"We're family. It's what we do."

I took a deep breath and let her go. Everyone was trying to help, and I appreciated it, but it was a bit overwhelming. Eyeing the stairs, I wondered if everyone would leave if I went up to bed.

"Sasha." Rosa's gentle voice drew my attention from the top of the steps. "My sweet girl. Are you doing okay?" She acted like we hadn't just been together. Like she hadn't just watched me anxiety puke in the bridal suite.

"I'm fine," I said with as much enthusiasm as I could muster. Her sad smile let me know I had missed the mark.

"Let me make you a plate." Rosa took my hand and pulled me with her, leaving no room for disagreement. My two bridesmaids trailed behind us, letting Luca's mom call the

shots. “Despite what happened today, we need to make sure you and the baby are taken care of.”

Ashley and Sarah started to argue, but I raised my hand to stop them. There was no point correcting her. She wouldn’t listen to me when my head was in the toilet back in the bridal suite. Why would she listen now? I’d probably have to pee on a hundred sticks to prove to her I was indeed not pregnant.

“Frankie, stay out of the food until Sasha eats!” Rosa left me at the bar stools and stormed over to the stove.

Frankie dropped the cover on whatever he was about to pick at and leaned against the counter. “You’re right. There’s not enough food.” He gestured to the dozen or so containers scattered about the kitchen.

Rosa ignored her nephew and loaded up a plate while I watched from the kitchen island. My stomach turned as I imagined eating, but it appeared as if I had no choice. “Did Marco leave with Adriana and Dante?”

Rosa shook her head as she snagged a piece of bread. “He’s on the phone with the lawyers in the office.” She lifted her chin toward the hallway. “If we’re lucky, Luca will get a bail hearing Monday morning.”

Two nights.

My husband would be spending at least two nights in jail.

With a hand resting on my churning stomach, I rounded the island. “I’ll be right back.”

Rosa said something, but I was already halfway down the hall and couldn’t hear her. Whatever she had to say didn’t matter. The only thing that mattered was getting more information about Luca.

The office door was shut, but I could make out Marco's deep voice ripping someone a new asshole. Instead of knocking and waiting like I usually would, I slipped inside, closing the door behind me.

Marco glanced up from the desk and held up a finger. "I don't care if Judge Tripp's on vacation. Get a hold of him. He owes us." He ended the call and tossed his phone on the desk. "What's up?"

"Your cousin Lorenzo."

Marco pinched the bridge of his nose and shut his eyes. "What about him?"

There was no tactful way to explain, so I got straight to the point. "When Luca and I broke up, I went to Mexico on vacation. I met a guy there, never got his name, and fucked him. It was Lorenzo. I'd never seen him before the breakup or after we got back together, but I saw him today at the wedding. Is there any way he didn't know who I was?"

Marco's jaw clenched, and he stood. "Jesus Christ." He flattened his palms on the desk and hung his head—the perfect picture of exhaustion from bullshit. "No. You've been on the family's radar since the first night you were with Luca. He would've known exactly who you were."

A skeeved-out shiver went down my spine. "Why would he pretend not to know me? Why would he want to fuck his cousin's ex?"

Marco's gaze swung to me. "Lorenzo's a fucking asshole. He's always done shit like this."

"That's reassuring."

"I'm not trying to be reassuring. Did he say something to you?"

I leaned against the door, ready for the whole day to be over. “No, but he had a front-row seat to Luca’s arrest. And he had my bouquet.”

Marco raised an eyebrow. “Your flowers?”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t even know what to do with that.” Marco shook his head and went to the drink cart. “I guess I’ll add Lorenzo to the list of shit to handle for Luca.”

“Wait. How long are you expecting Luca to be in jail?”

He looked up from the ice bucket, silver tongs in hand. “The bail hearing should be Monday, but there are no guarantees.”

“But Morettis don’t do time.”

The corner of Marco’s mouth turned up, and he nodded. “You’ve been talking to Rosa?”

“Sarah.”

He sighed as he swirled the crystal tumbler in his hand. “Morettis go to jail, but usually not the boss.” He took a sip. “No. In true Luca fashion, he’s the first Moretti boss to get arrested. Now I have to keep the family afloat, get his ass out, and figure out what the fuck Lorenzo was thinking.” He tilted his glass toward me in an offer.

I tsked and crossed my arms. “Being the underboss is no joke.”

He snorted. “Make sure you remember that.”

Silence settled between us as he took a hearty drink. The distant look in his eyes made me wonder what he had planned. “Do you need me to do anything?”

Startled by my question, he frowned and set his glass down. “You’ve been a Moretti for five minutes, and you’re ready to go to war with us?”

“Absolutely.”

Marco gave me a rueful smile. “I can’t believe how wrong I was about you.”

“Eh. As long as you get Luca out of jail, consider yourself forgiven.”

“Knock. Knock.” I startled away from the door as Rosa called out in rhythm with her knocks. She poked her head in and said, “Your plate’s on the counter.” She looked past me at Marco. “You hungry?”

“No, Aunt Rosa. Thank you.”

She eyed him for a moment but didn’t argue. “Come on, Sasha.” The door swung open. “Let’s get you fed and out of that dress.”

Marco chuckled, and I shot him a glare over my shoulder as Rosa led me out of the room. Every person we passed on our march through the house gave me the same bullshit tight-lipped smile.

Slowing my pace, I pulled her back. “Uh. I think I’d like to get out of this dress, then maybe try to eat something. I’m more uncomfortable than hungry.”

She pursed her lips but changed directions. When we reached the bedroom, I paused, and Rosa had to guide me to the mirror.

“Wow,” I muttered. To say I looked rough would’ve been a massive understatement. I struggled to reach the line of

buttons on my lower back, the tips of my fingers just brushing them.

Rosa chuckled as she gently pushed my hands away and started to undo the tiny satin buttons. “Looks like Luca inherited my wedding day bad luck.”

I made a noncommittal noise, twisting my hands in front of me. The wrong Moretti was helping me out of my dress. Disappointment and nagging guilt weighed heavily on my heart. As the fabric loosened, so did the hold on my emotions. Blinking back tears, I tried to focus on the mundane things around me. The dull hum of the house, the clean Luca smell that saturated the room, the pictures of us that lined the walls—anything to keep me in the present. My eyes swung back to the mirror, and I caught a flash of Rosa’s black hair behind me.

“At least Dante and I got to have our wedding ceremony,” she scoffed, her fingers shaking against my back. “We got to the reception, and one of the capos who didn’t want to see our families unite shot up the hotel lobby.”

Unsure if I heard her right, I twisted around, and her hands fell to her sides. “What?”

Rosa’s lips curled into a bitter smile. “I got one dance with my new husband before he left me to handle them.” She huffed and turned me back around. “So, there I was, newly married and in a strange home with my future brother-in-law. It was terrible.” She laughed. “I was stuck in my dress and starving, but I didn’t want to spend any more time with Lorenzo. So, I sat in our bedroom eating strawberries and drinking champagne until I passed out. In the middle of the night, Dante comes in, and I think he’s an intruder, so I shot at him.”

I let out a breathless laugh. The image of Dante Moretti ducking a shot by his new wife was a balm to my aching heart. If only I could've watched the motherfucker dance.

“You could say our wedding day set the tone for our marriage. The outside world coming at us, Dante handling them, and me handling Dante. For nearly forty years, it worked. Until—Well . . .” Rosa unfastened the last button and took a step back. “There. You’re free to get comfortable.”

I braced the front of the dress with one arm as I turned to her. “Thank you.” I grasped her hand and squeezed. “And thank you for being here.”

Rosa wiped under her eyes. “I wouldn’t want to be anywhere else.” She gave me a watery smile, then walked away from me, smoothing the comforter as she went to the door. “Get changed. I’ll clear the house so you can have some peace and quiet.” She closed the door behind her, finally leaving me alone.

Blowing out a breath, I let the dress pool at my feet. The beautiful cream lingerie I’d chosen was an unfriendly reminder of how differently the night should have gone.

In a daze, I changed and went downstairs. The house was quiet, but I knew Rosa and at least a few Moretti men were still with me. Thankfully, no one was in the kitchen. I peeked in the oven, and sure enough, a foil-covered plate waited for me.

Alone, I picked at the delicious meal Luca had chosen for our big day, and the ache in my chest intensified. While the food was prepared by Loretta and her kitchen, the details were all my husband. Every bite was a piece of our history, a little “I love you” in the language Luca knew best.

When I finished, I put my plate in the dishwasher and went to the refrigerator. Tears welled in my eyes as I stood, staring at the white box that held the top of our cake. As confident as everyone was that Luca would be home in a matter of days, doubt scratched at the back of my mind.

I picked up the box, surprised by the heft of such a small piece of cake. Setting it back on the shelf next to the lifetime supply of gourmet food, I eyed the raised gold circle sticker holding the lid closed. All it would take was the slide of one fingernail, and I would see the final design. Luca and Paul had been very hush-hush about it, and I'd been looking forward to the big reveal. It looked like I'd be waiting a little longer.

Ryan circled my feet, knocking his furry head against my shins. "He's going to be home soon." I reached down to scratch behind his ears, and he meowed, his tail flipping. "Morettis don't do time." He flashed his green eyes up at me and strutted away.

"Your support is overwhelming," I muttered.

TWO

“Please explain to me why I’m not on Luca’s visitor list.” I tapped the bottom of the steering wheel, praying the asshole had answers.

Marco didn’t respond.

“Hello? Am I talking to myself?”

“Sasha, can we do this later?”

I vibrated with annoyance as I glared at the jail. It was a welcomed change from the aching sadness that had filled me since the judge denied Luca bail. With nowhere else to point it, Marco bore the brunt of my emotional whiplash.

Every single Moretti had lied to me and had given me false hope. Luca was decidedly in jail, the judge at the bail hearing was *not* the one who “owed” the family, and I hadn’t seen my own fucking husband in two weeks. Annoyance was quickly escalating to anger.

“No. You’ve put me off for weeks, and I’ve let you, thinking you were handling shit.”

“I’m in a meeting with Aldo and Joey. I’ll call you back later.”

“Don’t bother.” I ended the call and tossed my phone on the passenger seat. My body tensed with pent-up emotion, and

my breaths came out in heavy pants. The rest of the world was carrying on while it left Luca behind, and there was nothing I could do to save him. I slammed my palms against the steering wheel and yelled, “Motherfucker!”

A woman walking by jumped, her hand flying to her chest. I gripped the steering wheel and gave an apologetic Midwestern tight-lipped smile. Of course, she couldn’t see through the tinted windows of the luxury SUV Luca gifted me right before the wedding. So I was sitting there, looking like a dumbass for no reason.

I made it home just as angry as I was outside the jail. Sitting in the driveway, I stared up at the beautiful brick house I shared with Luca. The cliché of a house not being a home echoed through my mind, making me even more irate.

I roughly grabbed my belongings and stomped up the walkway and through the door. My piss poor mood didn’t improve when I caught sight of the disaster inside. Unopened gifts spilled out of the dining room, blankets and pillows covered the couch and floor, and I shuddered thinking about the mess waiting for me in the kitchen.

Ryan blinked awake on his cat tree, a wide mouth yawn welcoming me home.

Dropping my purse on the cluttered entryway table, I grabbed my phone and hit Jazz’s contact.

“Jazz Graves.” The sound of shuffling papers muffled the voices in the background.

“Hey.” I smoothed the corner of the rug on my way to the kitchen.

“Give me a second.”

“Okay.” The line went silent as I opened the fridge and stared at the barren shelves. The freezer wasn’t much better and had the added pain of seeing the cake box. A few days after they denied Luca bail, I broke down and shoved it in the freezer between plates of wrapped meals. Now, all that remained was the cursed cake and a pint of freezer-burned chocolate chip cookie dough ice cream.

I eyed the empty takeout containers on the counter above the cabinet that held the trashcan, wishing I hadn’t finished off the Pad Thai.

Luca’s beautiful kitchen was an absolute disaster.

“Hey, how are you?”

“Ya know, my husband’s in jail, I can’t go into the office because the media is camped out waiting for me—oh—and I just found out I’m not on Luca’s visitor list. So pretty shitty. How about you?” I got a trash bag out of the pantry.

“Doing better than you.”

Wedging the phone between my ear and shoulder, I slid the boxes off the counter.

“Geez. Thanks, Jazz.”

She laughed. “I’m sorry. I’m deep in this negotiation and in full bitch mode.”

“You’re fine. I was wondering if you had Fern Robison’s contact info or could get me a meeting?” I tied off the bag and leaned it against the cabinet. Since they insisted on invading my space, one of the guys could take it out to the trashcan.

There was a moment of silence before Jazz said, “Isn’t his family handling his legal?”

“Yes, but I can’t say I’m too impressed.” I grabbed a bottle of expensive red from the rack and went to my little fort in the living room. Flopping on the couch, I realized I’d left the opener in the kitchen.

Typical.

“They couldn’t even get him bail. More money than God, and he’s sitting in jail.”

“Okay. I can get you her direct phone number but not a meeting. Sorry, but I need to keep my name out of the mix.”

Nodding, I fell back onto the couch, cradling the wine to my chest. “I understand. Imani and your career come first.”

Jazz let out a breath. “Thank you. When we left the cathedral, Imani read me for filth, but I knew you’d get it. With me up for partner and it being an election year for my dad, well, you know.”

And I did. Jazz worked damn hard to grow her career, and while I admired Imani’s loyalty, I would never want my friends to make unnecessary sacrifices for me. No. We could support each other from behind the scenes while they flourished.

“Think you could explain that to Ashley? They won’t let me sign over my share of the company.”

Jazz chuckled. “I knew that wouldn’t go over too well.”

“Ashley says the damage is already done, and there’s no point in cutting me out.”

“She’s got a point.”

“Shut up.” I rolled to my back, and Ryan climbed on my chest, forcing the cabernet onto the floor. “I’m still working from home until things die down.”

“Makes sense.”

We fell silent, and my mind wandered. “I’m going to miss your engagement.”

“Yeah.” Jazz’s voice was soft.

“I’ll send a gift.”

She chuckled. “You better.”

Tears filled my eyes, and I hugged Ryan to me, interrupting his purring. “I’m going to miss you.”

Understatement of the year. Jazz had become one of my chosen few. When I was at my lowest point without Luca, she was there to keep me company and keep Ashley off my ass. Now I wasn’t going to be there to support her through this amazing time in her life.

“I’m going to miss you too, but it’s not like we’re dead. You can call me anytime.”

“Same. I’m here for whatever you need.” I mentally started a list of fantastic gifts and reservations for them.

There was a knock on Jazz’s side, and she groaned. “I’ve got to go. I’ll give you a call later this week.”

“Go get ‘em, tiger!”

Jazz’s laugh was the last thing I heard before the line went dead.

I flopped my head to the side and was met by the sight of a stack of empty plates and a pizza box. “Luca would throw a fit if he saw the house this way.” Sighing, I set Ryan on the floor next to the unopened bottle of wine and started to clean up.

Around seven, the house was in a more livable state, and Marco was at my front door scowling. Rolling my eyes, I left

him there and flopped back down on the couch, unpauseing the sex room home reno show I was binging.

“You can’t just call and expect me to jump.” Marco shut the door behind him and stalked toward me. “I get you’re going through it, but we’re doing our best—”

I held my hand up and paused the show. “Don’t. Don’t fucking say you’re doing your best.” Glaring up at him, I reclined onto the arm of the couch. “I texted you Fern Robison’s info. Call her. Retain her.”

“I don’t think you understand what you’re asking for.”

“I’m asking you to hire the best defense attorney in the state to get Luca out of jail.”

“Fern Robison abandoned Luca and this family. She would never help us.”

Doubt crept in, but I wouldn’t be deterred. Fern was my last hope. I crossed my arms and leveled him with an even look. “Did you try?”

Marco grimaced and sat in the armchair across from me. “No. We have counsel.”

I lifted an eyebrow.

“You really want me to drag Luca’s ex—an ex he was planning to propose to—back into our lives? She wanted nothing to do with us when she was with him. What makes you think she’ll help now?”

Pursing my lips, I retreaded the same line of logic I’d gone over a million times since they denied Luca bail. “Because he needs her. I know what it means to love Luca Moretti, and it doesn’t just stop because you walk away. She left him because

she was scared, and now—well, now, she can save him from the very thing she feared.”

Marco’s lips twitched into a sad smile. “You’re one hell of a woman, Red.”

“Or I’m a manipulative bitch. Take your pick.”

“Why not both?”

We shared a laugh, and I playfully glared at him. “So, you’ll call her?”

Marco threw his head back and groaned. “Yeah. I’ll call her.” He heaved his big body out of the chair and grumbled, “I can’t believe I’m going to talk to the granola princess again.”

“She can’t be that bad.”

He looked back at me over his shoulder. “You’ll see.”

And out the door he went, locking it behind him, and I settled on the couch and watched yet another couple get the sex room of their dreams.

“Still begging for Moretti crumbs?” An unfamiliar feminine voice sweetly asked.

There was a bark of laughter. “You can’t still be upset about me fucking Luca. We were seventeen.” Nicki’s monotone voice held an edge I’d never heard coming from her. I stopped in the hallway and looked both ways, hoping no one would stop Nicki Ricci’s showdown with what I presumed was Luca’s newest attorney.

Fern Robison.

“Like I could be jealous of someone like you. And don’t pretend Luca was special. You were fucking his brother too.”

“Jealous? Wish you had a shot with the real boss?”

“You’re disgusting. I can’t believe he ever—”

“You act like he cheated on you.” There was the sound of papers shuffling. “Wait, did the golden boy cheat on you?” Nicki sounded positively gleeful.

“No! Will you shut up?”

“Worried Sasha will hear us?” Nicki stage whispered, and I had to bite my cheek to keep from laughing. I kind of liked this version of Nicki.

“No.”

“You should be.”

“I’m helping Luca—”

“Her husband,” Nicki cut her off.

“Yes, her husband,” Fern gritted out. “I’m helping her husband get out of jail.”

“Why?”

“What?”

There was a thud, and Nicki asked, “Why are you helping Luca? You didn’t want to be a part of this life. Remember?”

“Luca needs me.”

“No. Sweetheart, Luca needs a miracle. You’re here because you realize you made a mistake when you left him.” The room was silent for a beat, and I struggled to stay put. “The problem is, you’re too late. He’s married.”

“I know.”

“She’s pregnant. Did you know that?”

“Wait. She’s pregnant?”

Nicki cackled, making me rethink everything I thought I knew about her. “Yeah. He married her, and now she’s having his baby. You’re here to get him out so they can get their happily ever after. Once you’ve served your purpose, you’ll crawl back to whatever yurt you came from.”

“God, you’re such a bitch.”

“No. I’m honest. Sasha’s the bitch. If you think I’m mean, wait until she catches wind of your desperation. I hope I’m there to see it.”

I took immediate offense until I remembered how much I wanted to pull a gun on Zoe for just having seen Luca’s bare chest. Maybe I was a bitch. Shrugging, I went into the conference room, and both women froze. Nicki’s features smoothed to her classic bland expression as she greeted me.

“Did you guys get started without me?”

“No! Sasha—Mrs. Moretti.” Fern stumbled over her words and feet coming over to greet me. “Fern Robison. It’s nice to meet you.” Her handshake was firm, and her face was professionally neutral. The only hint of the awkward conversation with Nicki was the pink tint to her pale cheeks.

“Please, call me Sasha.” I smiled and looked past her to Nicki. “Are you staying?”

“Yes. My dad got hauled into a meeting about the casino, so I’m here.” Her lips thinned into a tight smile.

I took the chair at the head of the table, letting the women figure out where they’d sit. “Marco should be here in a minute.”

They both nodded, simultaneously choosing a chair one down from me and across from each other. Nicki's blank expression gave away nothing, but I couldn't help but wonder if she picked that seat on purpose.

Fern's strawberry blond hair was woven into an impressive braid, so I had an unobscured view of her delicate, freckled features locked in a severe expression. Despite her scowl, something in her brown eyes gave away her vulnerability to the venom Nicki spewed. This woman wasn't as hard as she wanted to be.

I took a bottle of water from the middle of the table and settled in for what I hoped would be a short wait because I didn't think Fern could survive much more of Nicki's ice queen act.

"Sorry I'm late. I—" Marco paused in the doorway, assessing the three of us with curiosity before joining us at the table. "My meeting ran late."

"No problem." Fern grinned, standing. "How are you, Marco?" She went to hug him, and he gave her his side, shooting me an annoyed look.

"I'm fine." He patted her arm and took the seat in between Nicki and me. "So where are we at?"

Fern frowned and sat. "Bail's out of the question."

It took everything in me not to flinch.

"I've only had a few days to review the case, but they have everything they need to keep Luca in jail. It doesn't help that the judge is determined to make an example out of Luca."

"But they don't have any bodies." Because said bodies were out in the world hiding from the Moretti and Chronis families.

Fern gave me a sad smile. “They don’t need bodies when they have witnesses and physical evidence.”

And now I felt stupid. Why hadn’t I watched more true crime documentaries? Damn those children’s pageants and fighting housewives for being so bingeable.

Fern continued to talk, Marco and Nicki occasionally asking questions while I sat there numb, blinking absently at the three of them as they discussed Luca’s future. The fact that I’d really believed Fern could fix everything right away was embarrassing. It would take time and effort to free Luca, and now that I was out of plays, it was time to figure out my new normal.

After an hour of going over the case at a high level, Fern confirmed a date to meet with Luca, assuring me I would be immediately added to the visitor list. Then Nicki left without saying anything, and Marco had to take a call, leaving Fern and me alone.

“I really appreciate you helping Luca.”

“Of course. He doesn’t deserve to be in prison.” Fern stood tall, her light eyebrows drawing together as her honey eyes studied me. I’d been silently judged by more intimidating people, so this brilliant, waif lawyer couldn’t rattle me.

“No, he doesn’t.” I tilted my head, and she shrunk under my scrutiny. The predator in me rejoiced that she recognized me as a threat.

Fern looked away, her hand holding her elbow. “Congratulations.”

Was she congratulating me on the marriage or the imaginary baby everyone was so desperate to believe in?

“Thank you. Well, I need to be going. I have another appointment.” I didn’t. I just wanted to escape the conference room and my stifling disappointment.

Fern opened her briefcase and started packing up. “It was nice meeting you.” Her voice was sincere, but the fact she was talking to the table suggested it was bullshit. Who wants to meet your ex’s wife and baby mama?

“Same. Have a good one.” I halfheartedly waved and rushed to my car, giving small smiles to the people I passed.

Once I got home, I stood in the entryway. The silence of our city home was oppressive, reminding me I was alone and would be for a long time.

Ryan glided down the stairs, not bothering to even greet me at the door, before heading toward the kitchen.

“Happy to see you too,” I mumbled as I eyed the banister, the stairs, and then the pictures along the wall. After the bail hearing, I’d moved my hygiene and beauty products to the guest bath downstairs and gathered enough clothes to last a while. It had been nearly three weeks since I slept in our bed or even stepped foot upstairs. Squaring my shoulders, I started a slow trudge up to our room. At our bedroom door, I took a deep breath and stepped inside.

My perfectly tailored black suit from the hearing lay balled up in the corner. Random pieces of clothing trailed from the closet to the bed, where the sheets were still ruffled from a sleepless night before my hopes were dashed.

Everything was as I left it.

I kicked off my shoes as I walked over to the bed and face planted into Luca’s pillow. The faint hint of his mint shampoo

made me tear up, but I kept breathing him in. It was the closest I was going to get for a while.

In the privacy of my own home, I let myself crumble. Tears soaked the pillowcase, and the air grew humid as I breathed in every exhale. Heaving sobs shook my body as I tightly clutched the pillow. Turning my damp face to the side, Luca's dresser was in my line of sight, and on top of it was my favorite of his colognes. I rubbed the tears off my cheeks and staggered toward it, my foot catching on a pair of jeans. Tripping into the dresser, my hands slammed on top, knocking the bottle right into my fingers. Grateful it was still half full, I held the heavy bottle to my nose. Even with the cap on, the rich earthy notes came through.

My gaze fell back to the bed, and I took off the cap. In a move that would have made past Sasha cringe, I spritzed his pillow, pulled back the covers, and gave the sheets a once over.

Was it the move of a desperate woman?

Yes.

Did I care?

No.

I stood in the midst of Luca's scent and breathed deeply. If I closed my eyes, I could almost believe he was in the room with me. As I put the cover back in place, I dropped the cap, and it hit my foot, bouncing away. "Why?" I groaned, setting the cologne on the side table and dropping to my knees. Feeling under the bed, my hand ran over a small square.

"What's that?" I frowned as I pulled out a small white box. The same box Maria gave me after Pete's funeral. The same box Luca never mentioned after that day, and I finally knew

why. Hauling myself up, I set it next to Luca's cologne and stared.

"He didn't open it." I brushed my fingers across the top and sighed. The thought of Pete and his last gift to Luca being forgotten made my heart ache, and I resolved to bring this small token to Luca when I was finally allowed to see him.

Thinking back, I couldn't remember Luca actually mourning Pete. He'd been upset the night he died and vengeful after that, but he'd never talked about how he felt about everything. And I hadn't pushed him to. Tears ran down my cheeks as my heart broke for everything Luca had lost, all the sacrifices he'd made. Knowing it would be a while before I could hug and love on him, I rolled under the duvet and breathed deeply.

This would have to do.

THREE

When Marco and I arrived in the grand ballroom, the Fourth of July gala was in full swing. Women in long gowns and men in tuxes danced to live music, waiters circulated carrying trays filled with food and drink, and everyone stopped and stared as we passed. “Are you sure it’s a good idea for me to be here?” I squeezed his bicep as he escorted me through the throngs of rich and powerful. “I mean, who wants to hobnob with Mrs. Murderer?”

“Red, calm down.”

I scoffed and gave a trio of older gentlemen a polite, tight-lipped smile. “I could be in pajamas eating pizza right now.”

“Or you could be here, helping the family put on a united front.”

We approached a table surrounded by Morettis, and I put on a bright smile. Aldo stood huddled with Nicki, neither looking particularly happy, but that was nothing new. Mickey sat next to an absolutely gorgeous blond woman. His attention was locked on his phone while she looked around, tapping her long decorative nails on the table. Joey Moretti, a cousin from the other side of the family, delivered a drink to Rosa and smiled at Adriana, apologizing for not bringing her one.

“Joey,” Marco commanded, and boy, did Joey hop to.

“Excuse me,” Joey murmured to the ladies, and then he joined us. “Marco, Sasha.”

Marco smoothly untangled our arms and took a step toward Adriana. “Take Sasha to get a drink, and then come find me.” He gave us his back and joined Adriana and Rosa’s conversation.

“Such a charmer,” I muttered to Joey, and he laughed.

“He really has a monopoly on the family charisma.”

I looped my arm through his and started to walk toward one of the well-stocked bars. “Let’s get that drink.”

We ordered, then waited for our drinks in comfortable silence. As the COO of Moretti Properties, Joey had been in a few meetings regarding the casino project, but beyond that, we hadn’t spoken much.

As the bartender set drinks in front of us, a familiar voice said, “Sasha?”

My fingers tensed around the cocktail glass as my eyes slid shut. “Dimitri,” I groaned.

Joey positioned himself between us, not letting Dimitri within a foot of me. Still, Dimitri kept talking like there wasn’t a whole human between us. “I didn’t expect to see you here.”

“Well, here I am.” I took a huge gulp of my gin and tonic, turned, and gave him a flat look.

“Are you okay?” His eyes darted to Joey and back to me.

I cackled and took a step away from the bar. “Just fine. My husband was arrested on my wedding day for something he didn’t do, but hey, whatcha gonna do?”

Dimitri frowned but said nothing. What could he say?

I touched Joey's shoulder. "Let's go."

"Sasha—" Dimitri reached out to me.

"No, Dimitri. Leave it."

Joey ushered me away, and I caught the hoity-toity people near the bar smirking as they looked away.

"He's a bold one."

"Sometimes." I glanced over my shoulder, and Dimitri was still standing there, staring as we walked away. I hated it, hated him, and hated how everything about our easy friendship was shot to shit because of family vendettas and secrets.

"Good way to wake up dead," Joey said as he pulled out a chair for me. I frowned up at him, and he winked, leaving me with Adriana and Mickey's date.

"What was that about?" Adriana whispered.

"Dimitri." I jerked my chin to where he stood, only now Daphne was at his side, a scowl on her face as she glared my way.

"Those two better look away before they lose their eyes." Adriana popped an appetizer in her mouth like she hadn't threatened bodily harm. She might not have been born a Moretti, but you'd never know it.

"Charming," I muttered, watching Daphne and Dimitri walk away. Relieved, I threw back the rest of my drink. "I guess I should get used to seeing them at this kind of thing."

Adriana made a noncommittal noise.

"So, what's the plan? Do we plot world domination now or after the floor show?" I gestured to the big band in the corner.

She grinned, her eyes glossy and a little red. “I think Marco’s going to drag you around and let everyone get a look at the new Mrs. Moretti while Rosa gets to kick back and enjoy the night.”

“Lucky her.” I glanced around the room, overwhelmed by all the people. “Where’d she run off to?”

Adriana picked up her champagne flute and pointed it to where Rosa swaggered through the crowd, giggling as she passed the older gents ogling her.

“How much has she had to drink?” I asked as I turned to get a better view of the salt and pepper fox chatting her up at the bar.

“That’ll be drink number four.” Adriana laughed when Rosa patted the man’s cheek and then gave him her back. “Brutal.”

“Besides Rosa’s femme fatale act, what did I miss?” I settled back in my chair, smiling at Mickey’s date, who had been abandoned at the table with us.

“You missed the crowning of the Queen of Beauty and Love—” Adriana dead eyed Nicki as she took a seat across from us. “But besides that, nothing too exciting.”

When it became apparent that Adriana wasn’t going to say anything else and that Nicki was determined to outlast her in their brief battle of wills, I turned my attention to Mickey’s date. “I’m Sasha.”

She perked up and gave me a little wave. In a sweet voice, she said, “I’m Alicia.”

From the corner of my eye, I noticed Nicki watching our interaction, Adriana completely forgotten.

“So, you’re with Mickey?”

Her glossy pink lips spread into a polite smile. “Something like that.” She tilted her empty glass back and forth and set it down. “Excuse me, I need to use the restroom.”

As Alicia smoothed her fitted white gown, Adriana stood and stomped from the table. Nicki’s lips twitched but flattened quickly. When her dark stare landed on me, I knew I didn’t have it in me to deal with the energy vampire.

Pouncing on the opportunity to escape, I said, “Uh, I think I’ll go with you.”

Alicia frowned but didn’t protest.

We made it a few feet from the table before Alicia chuckled. “Never a dull night with the Morettis.”

“That’s for sure.” Tommy and Frankie materialized out of thin air behind us, their gait casual, but everything else about them screamed high alert. “How’d you meet Mickey?”

Alicia gave me a playful smile as she held the bathroom door open for me. “I met him through a client.” We went to the mirror and pretended to freshen up our perfect faces. “When he needs a date, he gives me a call.”

“Ah. Gotcha.” I fished the lipstick out of my clutch. “What’s he like around you? Because I’ve only ever seen the douchebag version of Mickey.”

Alicia let out a tinkling laugh and flipped her wavy blond hair over her shoulder. “He’s a bit rough around the edges, but he’s not so bad.”

“A ringing endorsement.” I cleaned up the lipstick at the corner of my mouth with my fingernail, shooting her a sarcastic look.

“I mean it! He’s corny but kind of funny. And he can be sweet when he wants to be.”

I chucked my lipstick in my purse. “Sweet? The same man who taught Dante the phrase, ‘bros before hoes?’”

“No,” Alicia whined as she playfully crumpled against the sink, careful to keep the beautiful fabric of her dress from getting wet. “Okay, he’s a jackass, but he has his moments.”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

Alicia opened her mouth just as the door opened, and in floated Beth Cooper—Mayor of St. Louis and over-the-top ex-girlfriend.

“I thought I saw you in there,” she said as she considered Alicia with interest before her eyes flitted back to me. “How are you doing?”

“Great. Living the dream,” I deadpanned, and Alicia laughed behind her hand.

Beth huffed and joined us at the sinks. “I’m sorry you’re going through all of this.” She wet her fingers and ran them over the stray hairs falling from her elaborate updo.

“I’m sure.” I crossed my arms and leaned my ass against the edge of the wet countertop. “I bet every night you lie awake wondering how I’m doing with my husband being locked up.”

She rubbed her bare lips together, taking a minute before she answered. “I told—”

“You so. I told you so. There it is.”

Beth’s palms smacked the counter, making water splatter the front of her dress. “What do you want me to say, Sasha?”

You knew what you were getting yourself into. Now's the time to face facts and make some changes. I'm here—"

"To what? Save me?" I scoffed and closed the distance between us. "I don't need you to save me. I don't need anyone to fucking save me. What I need is for you to stay the hell out of my way."

"You're throwing your life away for a criminal!" she shouted. Her eyes darted behind me, and her practiced, socially appropriate mask fell into place as she squared her shoulders. "Sasha, I worry about you and just want the best for you."

"The ridiculous part is, I believe you." I shook my head, the anger seeping out of me. Beth meant well, but she had no idea who I was or what I was capable of. "Come on, Alicia."

I pulled open the door and ran smack into Daphne Dukas—soon to be Daphne Chronis—as she pushed into the posh bathroom.

"You've got to be kidding me," I muttered as I stepped aside to let her fully enter, catching Frankie's eye as the heavy door silently shut.

"Sasha," she said my name like it was a four-letter word.

"Daphne. Have a good—"

"We need to talk." She looked at the women behind me as I took another step toward the door.

"No, we don't. In fact, you should probably stay the fuck away from me."

Her head snapped my way, and she glared down at me from her impressive height. "Is that a threat?"

I just smiled and waltzed out of the bathroom, Alicia slipping through the door as it closed.

Frankie stepped up to us, scanning my body as if something could've gone wrong in the three seconds I was out of sight. "Marco wants you to meet some people." He gently cupped my elbow and guided me away from the bathroom and all the assholes inside.

"Great. Let's socialize."

Frankie grunted, and I glanced at him. A bold script G peeked out of the collar of his shirt, catching my eye. "New tattoo?"

"Mhm."

"They say hand, neck, and face tats mean you've given up on traditional employment. No desk jobs in your future?"

Frankie gave me a bland look as he delivered me to Marco. As soon as I was safe in a circle of important people, he disappeared into the crowd, leaving me to the boring wolves.

I smiled prettily as I met alderperson after alderperson. Everyone was polite, but there was an edge of discomfort to the conversations. And why wouldn't there be? When Joan Banks moved on to her next small-talk victim, I swayed into Marco. "Any more local politicians?"

"I'd usually touch base with the mayor, but—" I backhanded his stomach. "I'm having a sit down with Nikos and Alex Chronis in about twenty minutes. But before that—"

"Marco Moretti!" A deep voice with a Spanish accent called from behind us.

"Ah, Benny!" Marco met the man halfway, and they hugged, slapping each other on the back. "Where's Natalia?"

“She stayed home. Her mother wasn’t feeling well, and you know Talia.”

“Of course. Family comes first.” Marco gestured for me to join them. “There’s someone I’d like you to meet. This is Sasha Moretti, Luca’s wife. Sasha, this is Benjamin Pérez, our South American contact.”

Benjamin’s dark gaze swept over me, a handsome smile lighting his face. “It’s a pleasure to meet the woman who brought down the Butcher.”

“You say it like it was hard.”

We shared a laugh, and Marco directed us to an empty corner of the room. “I appreciate you making the trip up.”

“Of course! With Luca—” Benny grimaced and collected his thoughts. “Well—I’m happy to help keep business flowing.”

Marco turned to me. “Why don’t you go back to the table while Benny and I catch up?”

I narrowed my eyes but gave them a sweet smile and a nod. “I’ll go get another drink.”

“Thank you.”

I made it five steps before Frankie was at my elbow and directing me to the bar.

“How do you do that?”

“Do what?” Frankie lifted an eyebrow.

“Sneak up on people when you’re that fucking tall.”

Ever the chatty Cathy, Frankie grunted and tapped the top of the bar, sending both bartenders into a rush to help us. Cold

drinks in hand, we leaned our backs against the bar and watched the pair of men.

Marco and Benny shared a few laughs, settling on a few low-sitting couches with serious faces.

“I know I have nothing to add to that conversation, but damn if I don’t want in on it.”

“Sasha—”

“I know, I know. Stay out of trouble.”

“That’s not what I was going to say.”

Surprised, I jerked my head back, giving him my full attention. “Really?”

“No. Because I know it’s pointless to tell you to stay out of trouble.” I scoffed, and he rolled his lips in, holding back a smile. “What I was going to say was if you want in on that meeting, you’re going to need a reason to go over there.” Frankie tipped his chin back at the corner where Nikos and Alex Chronis had joined Marco and Benny, all four men straight-backed and grim. “Although I have no idea why you’d want to sit with that pack of assholes.”

I barked out a laugh, covering my mouth when a few nearby party guests looked my way. “I just want to know what the plan for—” I jerked my chin toward where Cy danced with Alicia near the red, white, and blue bandstand.

Weird

“The plan is to kill him.” Frankie threw back the rest of his drink.

“Thank you for your insight.”

He sighed and set his empty glass on the bar. “You guys overcomplicate everything. We don’t need some elaborate plan. We just need a bullet and a clear shot.”

“You know what? I can see the beauty in your simplicity.”

“My dad always said to keep it simple.”

“Stupid.”

“What?” Frankie frowned.

“K.I.S.S. Keep it simple stupid. You’ve never heard that?” He shook his head. “Huh. My dad always tells the guys at the firehouse that.”

“My dad didn’t make a habit of calling people stupid.”

“The difference between a Mitchell and a Gambini, I guess.”

“Yet another reason you fit in with the Morettis.”

We stood in silence as the band started yet another dance standard. I tried to make out their expressions, but of course, Marco had chosen a darkened corner like the criminal mover and shaker he was. Tapping my foot, I sipped my drink. Laughter and good humor surrounded me, but all I could focus on were the four men that could bring my husband home.

What was there to talk about? The Chronis brothers knew their cousin Cy tried to kill Zoe, yet here they were, partying with the bastard, acting like they had no recourse.

But then Frankie made it so simple.

Shoot him in the fucking head.

I finished my drink and gestured for another. Fresh gin and tonic in hand, I turned to Frankie. “I’m going over there.”

He hung his head and let out a sigh. “I can’t talk you out of it?”

“Nope.”

“And you’ll make a scene if I throw you over my shoulder and carry you out.”

“I think the sight of you going all caveman will be what makes the scene.”

Frankie studied me, his mouth tight and eyes narrowed. “Fuck it. Hey—” He waved down the bartender. “I need five scotches, neat, on a tray.”

A slow smile spread across my face. “Are you helping me disobey Marco?”

“If he asks? No.”

“Why?”

Frankie was one loyal motherfucker. The fact he was willing to let me barrel into a meeting I was explicitly told to leave was weird.

“Maybe I’m sick of all the hurry up and wait shit they’ve been spewing. It’s time for a change. Time for shit to pop off.”

Shrugging, I took the tray from the bartender and started to walk away. When Frankie didn’t follow, I turned. “You’re not coming.”

“Not my battle. I’ll keep an eye out from here.”

“Coward.”

“Nah. I just know my place.” He shooed me away as he crossed his ankles and relaxed against the bar.

Somebody was ready for a show.

FOUR

I slowed my steps as I approached the foursome, trying to catch a little of their conversation.

“No more. If I catch wind of another street skirmish, you can expect a halt on all product shipments.” Benny sat in a chair between Marco and the Chronis brothers.

Alex shook his head. “We don’t know—”

“Bullshit. You know. We know. Everyone knows. You’re just too fucking lazy to handle it,” Marco spat, leaning forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “We need him handled.”

“Need a fresh drink, gentlemen?” I set the tray on the table, putting myself in the middle of the tense mobsters glaring at each other.

Perfect

“Sasha—”

Nikos and Alex stared at me, their pissed-off faces dropping into polite smiles.

“It’s nice to see you again, Sasha,” Nikos said, knowing full well we’d only ever been to one or two of the same events and had never been properly introduced.

“Mhm.” I handed out the glasses, saving the last for Benny. He accepted it with a grin.

“Why don’t you join us? We were just discussing Luca.”

“I shouldn’t,” I said while hovering next to Marco. He rolled his eyes and scooted over to make room for me on the couch. I sat on the edge of the stiff cushion and cautiously smiled. “So, how are we getting my husband home?”

Or better yet, when will Cy be dead? But that wouldn’t be tactful to say.

The Chronis brothers understood what I was asking and shared an uncomfortable look. “We need a little more time to get proof before we can act.” Alex sat still as a statue, his gaze on me.

I scoffed and grabbed the remaining scotch from the tray. Taking a sip, I fortified my strength under the watch of these terrifying men. “We don’t have time. My husband is in jail for something he didn’t do. And we all know it.” I glanced at Benny to confirm he was in on the whole Zoe and Tootsie are alive and on the run thing. He tilted his head but gave nothing away. “You know what needs to happen to bring Luca home. What’s it going to take to make it happen?”

Marco’s arm stretched along the back of the couch, visibly uniting us against the assholes across from us and signing off on my questioning.

“We need more proof, and it can’t come from a Moretti.” Nikos lifted his lip as he said the name.

“What about Zoe?” I said just loud enough to carry over the brass band.

The brothers flinched, her name enough to make their confidence waver. Alex licked his bottom lip and begrudgingly

said, “It’s not enough.”

I frowned. “Why not?”

“She’s our sister, and he’s our cousin and only rival. No one’s going to believe that she’s not just backing us. No, we need to catch him in some shit before we pull the trigger.”

“What if we did it?” The words flew out of my mouth before my brain caught up and stopped me from offering an assassination special.

“We?” Marco said, a hint of humor in his voice.

“Oh, I didn’t mean—”

Marco’s amused expression turned into a smirk. “No, Sasha brings up an interesting idea. What if we took care of your problem?”

Nikos looked off into the distance, then frowned. “What would you want?”

Hope sparked in my chest, something that had been in short supply. This was a step toward a concrete plan—a plan that had more of a chance of working than relying on Fern and the legal team.

“I’d need to discuss it with Luca, but I think he’d settle for the peace treaty he’d negotiated when he was going to marry Zoe.”

I internally winced at the reminder that I fucked up the whole delicate criminal ecosystem.

“That was when he would’ve been protecting her.” Alex sat up straight.

“He’s still protecting her,” Marco bit out. “And we’d be getting rid of a known threat. What’s your problem?”

“The chunk of our territory in St. Louis you’d be stealing.”

“Nah. You’d be delivering it as payment. And on top of that, your seat at the head of the Chronis family would no longer be contested. How much longer can you survive with a rival so close? Your father . . .”

“Enough,” Alex gritted out, dragging a hand down his face. He shared a look with his brother, and they both turned to Benny. “There won’t be any more problems. We’ll handle it.”

Nikos gulped down his scotch and set the glass on the table. “I’m sorry about Luca.”

With that, all four men stood, shook hands, said things about “being in touch,” and the Chronis brothers walked off, leaving Marco, Benny, and me alone.

“Well, that went better than I thought it would,” Benny joked, his eyes never leaving Nikos and Alex as they crossed the room to the exit. “Nothing was resolved, but at least they know they’re being watched, and there will be consequences.” He clapped his hands and pulled his phone from his pocket. “If you’ll excuse me, I need to call my wife.”

As Benny walked away, Marco said, “You were supposed to stay with Frankie.”

“Uh-huh.” I refused to meet his eyes, so I watched the couples dancing cheek to cheek.

“But I think you just got us the upper hand, so I’ll let it go.”

“That’s mighty kind of you.”

“Shut up,” Marco threw over his shoulder as he walked away.

For the first time that night, I was free of a chaperone. The doors to the balcony were to my left, so I side-stepped until the hot, humid summer air hit my face, then booked it outside. A few couples stood around tall cocktail tables chatting, leaving the railing and the fantastic view of the city free for the taking.

I posted up in the corner, and the tension from going toe to toe with the Chronis brothers, Benny, and Marco slowly left my body. A sense of pride settled in my chest. I was *the* Mrs. Moretti and had kicked some serious ass in there. I may have offered to murder a man, but the guy had it coming at this point. Letting out a laugh, I shook my head and focused on the night.

The lights below were mesmerizing as I sipped the expensive scotch. The arch loomed over the outline of the city, creating an iconic silhouette that was just minutes away from being illuminated by fireworks. Much to my dismay, people started to pour out of the ballroom, shattering the tranquility of the balcony.

After the first boom and flash of white light, a tall man slid behind me. “You look amazing.”

I cringed and folded over the railing, pressing myself against glass and metal. Panic seized me, and my first instinct was to curl into a ball.

“Oh, don’t be that way.” Lorenzo moved next to me, and I took a step away, stupidly cornering myself.

“What do you want?” My voice came out strong but was overpowered by the loud pops and explosions.

“To offer my condolences. It’s a shame you’re spending the first days of your marriage alone.”

“We’re all doing our best to get him home.”

He tilted his head, a sneer curling his lips. “I’m sure Marco’s in a hurry to get the little prince home.”

“King. Luca is a king. The boss,” I shouted to be heard.

Lorenzo closed the distance between us. His face was lit up by a flash, distorting his features and making him all the more menacing. “And that makes you the queen, right? What happens when there’s a new king? Does he get the queen? I seem to remember the last time Luca couldn’t live up to expectations, you were more than willing to find a replacement.”

Regret for having ever met Lorenzo turned my stomach. I swallowed the bile on the back of my tongue, vowing to make Lorenzo suffer. You know, once I wasn’t terrified and surrounded by a crowd.

He took one step, pressing me against the wall without even touching me. The people around us oohed and aahed at the fireworks display, unaware of the danger I was in. “You’re not ready, but you will be.” He ghosted his knuckles down my cheek, and I cringed away. His face softened as his hand fell to his side. “I’m sorry about Pete.”

His voice was somber, but the way his eyes lit up was all wrong. Tears stung my eyes, and my breath caught in my throat. “Stop.” I choked on the words, my body trembling with a silent understanding of the monster in front of me.

“I couldn’t make the funeral, but luckily, I got to see him before he died. Great guy. It’s unfortunate how much tragedy this family has gone through in the past year. But I don’t have to tell you, do I? You were there when Dante died.” Lorenzo bit his bottom lip, a predatory glint in his eyes.

I flattened my hands against the plexiglass behind me, ready to push off. “That was a tragic accident.”

Lorenzo leaned down, his breath caressing the exposed skin on my neck as he whispered, “I’m sure Dante was as much an accident as Pete was.” He took a step back and grinned down at me.

That was it. I was done. I shoved past Lorenzo, bumping into other partygoers. Weaving through the crowd, I muttered apologies until I reached the French doors. Cool air slapped me in the face as I stumbled toward the bathrooms.

“Sasha!”

I picked up my pace, sprinting away from the voices calling out to me and toward the exit.

“Sasha! Stop!”

Air whooshed out of me, my breaths coming out in pants, but I didn’t stop until a large hand grabbed my bicep and spun me around. Marco braced me against his chest, holding me tighter when I tried to push away. “Jesus Christ. What happened?”

I shook my head, the fabric of Marco’s jacket itchy against my damp face.

“Frankie, round up the guys and meet us in the penthouse. Sasha, come on.” Marco gently turned me from his body and led me to the elevator.

I kept one hand on my chest, my heart thundering under my palm, while I wiped under my eyes with the other. A handkerchief materialized in front of my face, and I glanced up at Marco, who was watching me with concern.

“Th-thanks.”

“Anytime, Red.” He wrapped a protective arm around my shoulders.

The elevator opened to a modern suite that I’m sure would’ve wowed me if I wasn’t a hot fucking mess. I plopped down on a couch, fisting Marco’s soaked hanky.

Not five minutes later, the elevator door opened, and the gang of huge mobsters spilled out. Frankie and Tommy made a beeline to me and flanked the couch. Mickey fell into the chair across from me, eyes bloodshot, knees bouncing as his gaze darted from man to man. Aldo, Joey, and Lorenzo stayed near the elevator with three guys I’d only ever seen in passing.

“Sasha, what happened?”

Marco’s laser focus stayed on Lorenzo, who rubbed his chin, the rasp of his hand against his five o’clock shadow audible in the painfully quiet room.

I opened my mouth, but Lorenzo cut me off. “It was me.”

Aldo and Joey moved in front of the elevator, stopping anyone from leaving. Frankie and Tommy stepped in front of me, blocking me from Lorenzo’s view.

“Explain,” Marco barked.

“We took a trip down memory lane, and Sasha got upset.” His voice oozed with douchebag.

“What are you talking about?” Marco said, his voice not giving away that he knew the truth. This was a test, and I knew Lorenzo was going to fail.

“Come on, Marco. Luca’s been locked up for weeks. You can’t tell me you haven’t had a taste. She moves on qui—”

Marco took three long steps and punched Lorenzo so hard that he fell to the ground. “I’d be very careful with what you

say next.” The sound of a gun being cocked echoed through the room, and I peered around Tommy’s thick frame.

In the middle of the swankiest hotel room I’d ever been in, Lorenzo was on the ground, nose gushing blood, with Marco pressing the tip of the silencer between his eyes.

Lorenzo looked my way, and Marco backhanded with the gun. “You don’t look at her. Now tell me why the fuck Sasha was crying.”

The tension in the room ratcheted up with every passing second Lorenzo stayed silent. Finally, when I thought my heart would beat right out of my chest, Lorenzo said, “I was an asshole.” His voice came out nasally, proof Marco had fucked him up.

“And what do we say when we’re an asshole?” Marco shoved Lorenzo’s head with the gun.

“Sorry.”

Marco squatted down and said, “What the fuck is wrong with you? What you did was bad enough, but cornering Sasha and upsetting her? I should shoot you between the eyes, but Luca will want to handle you when he gets out. If I were you, I’d go into hiding. You’re a dead man.” He stood up, his gun still trained on Lorenzo. “Get the fuck out of here, and don’t come back to St. Louis.”

Lorenzo pushed off the floor, his movements slow. Once he was at full height, he stared Marco down. “You sure you want to do this?”

Marco laughed. “Oh yeah. This is one thing that I’m happy to do.”

“All this over a woman?” Lorenzo met my eyes between Tommy’s and Frankie’s bodies. The corner of his mouth tilted

up, and he nodded. “Worth it.”

Marco turned to the three men I didn’t know. “I want you to make sure he leaves town. Report back as soon as he’s gone.”

“You got it, boss,” the smallest of the three said, gesturing for the other two to follow him into the elevator with Lorenzo. The doors closed, and I let out a relieved breath. Lorenzo was gone, and I wouldn’t have to see him again.

Frankie and Tommy sat next to me on the couch, leaving enough space that our thighs didn’t touch.

“Now that it’s just us, what happened, Red?” Marco settled in the chair across from us and next to Mickey, who looked ill.

“He said he was sorry that Luca was in jail and propositioned me? I don’t know. It was weird. And then he mentioned seeing Pete before he died, and my gut told me to run.”

Marco nodded, then turned to Mickey. “Has he been acting weird?”

“Uh, not that I’ve noticed. He’s never even mentioned Sasha. Or Pete, beyond being sad that he couldn’t make the funeral.”

Aldo, the oldest of the cousins on the other side of the Morettis, paced near the floor-to-ceiling windows. “Lorenzo has always been a greedy bastard. This isn’t the first woman he’s tried to scoop up from a cousin.” It was the first time I’d ever heard Aldo have passion about anything.

“I don’t think it’s about me. He called Luca the little prince, and I—”

All the men laughed, and Marco said, “That was Luca’s nickname in the family until he became the Butcher.”

Frankie shook his head. “It’s amazing that you all kept calling him that after all those ass beatings.”

“It was all in good fun.” Joey adjusted his cufflinks. “Now look at him, the head of the family and feared by most of the country. I’d say we did him a favor.”

“Bullying, a real character builder,” I scoffed, folding my arms under my chest.

“Sorry, Red. Go on.”

I bit my lip, measuring just how much shit I was going to get. “I may have defended Luca and called him the king and the boss. And then he made it sound like he was gunning for Luca’s spot.”

Mickey shifted in his seat and frowned at Marco, who only shook his head.

“Lorenzo has always had delusions of grandeur.” Marco glanced at Aldo. “You remember what he was like with Dante Sr. died? Insufferable, but ultimately harmless.”

I scooted to the edge of the cushion. “But—”

Joey sat on the arm of the couch. “Sasha, Lorenzo will be handled.”

“If you’re sure.”

Marco stood, straightening his jacket. “Lorenzo’s all talk. He did this same song and dance when Dante was killed, and Luca stepped up. Then again, when Luca set his sights on Zoe Chronis. He’s always trying to rally the troops, but he’s got none.” The rest of the guys stood, and I followed suit. “Now, what he did to you, that signed his death certificate.”

Aldo checked his watch. “I need to get out of here. We good?”

Marco nodded and one by one, the guys left until it was just Marco, Frankie, Tommy, and me.

“Now that we’re alone. There was something else.”

Marco frowned and gestured for me to continue.

“He mentioned the family going through so much tragedy and then said, ‘I’m sure Dante was as much an accident as Pete was.’ There’s no way he could know, is there?”

Frankie sucked his teeth and pulled out his phone.

“After Dante Sr. died in the car accident.” Marco lifted an eyebrow, and Tommy nodded. “There was talk that the brakes had been tampered with, that Pete drove into oncoming traffic on Luca’s orders, or that Rosa had her husband offed for fucking around. Lorenzo hasn’t let it go. It was the same shit when Dante Jr. was shot. Suddenly, Luca was this game player gunning for the top spot, which, as you know, is bullshit. I’ll look into it, but it sounds like the same ole shit coming from Lorenzo.”

I nodded, not fully relieved but less worried than before. “Okay. That makes sense. Just keep an eye on him?”

Marco agreed but didn’t seem to be concerned. I guess, to him, Lorenzo was a nonentity seeing as his days were numbered.

“You ready to head home?” Frankie asked as he tapped away on his phone.

“Yeah. I’m all patriotismed out.”

“Tommy, clean up the floor, then meet me back at the warehouse.” Marco handed Tommy a card and ushered me to

the elevator.

Frankie trailed behind us but didn't get in with us. "I have a pickup to make, so I'm going to stay here and take Tommy."

"You expecting a problem?" Marco held the door.

"No, but I figured it would be a good idea to get the kid's feet wet."

"Okay, then I'll see you later."

Frankie lifted his chin and then went back to the couch, leaving the twenty-year-old kid to clean up Lorenzo's blood from the carpet. As the doors closed, Tommy stared at the red puddle with his brow furrowed and his hands on his hips. Hopefully, he had someone to call and get supplies from because with the way Frankie was kicked back on the couch, I knew he wasn't going to be any help.

"Poor kid," Marco muttered.

"Imagine Frankie being your mentor."

We shared a smile, blessedly cruising to the lobby with no stops.

FIVE

If you said that the smell of marinara was an aphrodisiac, I would agree without hesitation. Now the smell of marinara and the sight of Luca cooking in our kitchen—his broad shoulders pulling at his white dress shirt, his thick thighs and round ass making his pants work as he bent over to take things out of the oven—*that* was pure seduction.

“Food almost done?”

“Patience, Sasha.”

“I don’t know the word.”

Luca chuckled but kept his eyes on the stove. “How about the word distraction? I have the feeling you know that one pretty damn well.”

“If you want me to leave you alone, let me help.”

Horror-stricken, Luca asked, “And ruin our anniversary dinner?”

“Then be prepared for my distractionary tactics.” I stood from my barstool and fingered the zipper tab on the side of my dress.

Luca stayed where he was but watched me out of the corner of his eye. At the zziipppp, Luca’s shoulders tensed, and he licked his bottom lip.

“You just focus on what’s important, and I’m going to get a little more comfortable.”

“Sasha,” he warned.

“No, no. You keep cooking, and I’ll be over here doing what I do best.”

Luca hung his head, resting his hands on his hips. He was putting up more of a fight than usual.

I shrugged down the straps, pushing my arms together to keep my dress up, but slouched. “Nothing feels better than taking off your bra after a long day.” With one hand, I unhooked the clasp and pulled the lace from my body. Dropping it on the floor, I sighed.

From his bent position, Luca turned his head, and his black hair fell over his forehead. Hunger of a different kind lit his eyes, and a thrill ran through me.

“I guess I’ll go grab some sweats from upstairs.” I passed Luca, letting my dress drop from my arms. It fell to my waist, stopping at the swell of my hips.

Luca growled—literally fucking growled—and grabbed my hand, bringing me to his chest. “Always ruining my fucking plans.” And then his lips were on me, devouring me. He ran his hands all over my body, squeezing and caressing his way to my ass. Pulling his mouth away, he nipped my earlobe and husked, “Always begging to be fucked.”

I moaned, arching my neck to give him more skin to kiss. He trailed hot, open-mouthed kisses down my neck as he walked me backward until my back hit the fridge. In a matter of seconds, I was putty in Luca’s capable hands.

I gripped his hair by the root and pulled him back until our eyes met. “Fuck me. Please.”

Luca hooked his hand under my knee, wrapping my leg around his hip. The skirt of my dress bunched up to my waist, and cool air kissed my skin.

“I got you,” he muttered into my hair.

In a confusing whirl, I was on my back, Luca on top of me. Instead of fucking me, he was convulsing, the sound of bullets and shattering glass filling my ears. I wrapped my arms around him, and my hands landed in warm liquid. “Luca?” His eyes squeezed shut, and his body went limp, pinning me to the ground. The dead weight pressed all the air from my lungs, and I struggled, taking short, panicked breaths. Pushing the hair from his face, my fingers left streaks of dark red. “Luca!”

More gunshots rang out as I screamed for Luca to wake up, trapped under his weight, unable to get myself free. Blood dripped onto my nose, sliding down my cheeks and into my ears. A trickle turned into a gush, pooling around my head.

I couldn't breathe.

I couldn't move.

I was trapped.

No matter how much I flailed, I couldn't get free. With every breath, hot, thick liquid filled my lungs.

I shot up from my pillows, soaked in sweat and panting. Another nightmare. I no longer dreamed of the night I killed Dante. Now I had nightmare after nightmare of Luca dying in my arms. It was always the same. Some pleasant, hornt up memory, then BOOM I'm trapped under a dying Luca, drowning in his blood.

I yanked off the sheets and got out of bed on shaky legs. Luca's old school alarm clock read 4:12 a.m., but there was no point trying to sleep. I didn't need to find out how many

creative ways my unconscious mind could come up with to kill Luca.

Ryan followed me to the kitchen, where I gave him a little bump of food and poured myself a glass of water.

The room was dimly lit by the light over the stove—the one Luca always left on. In the weeks since he'd been locked up, I hadn't touched it. I often sat in the dark, staring at the stove as if Luca would walk in the door any moment.

Dejected, I logged onto my laptop and checked my email, hoping for an update on when I could visit Luca.

Nothing. Nada. Zilch.

Instead of wallowing, I opened the revised plan for the casino that would have us opening on Halloween instead of New Year's Eve. After the Fourth of July fiasco, Marco asked me to look into the logistics of moving up the opening date. I told him there was no way, but I was wrong. With Michael's help, we discovered that we could get it done with a hefty increase in budget and a little contracting.

As I sent the changes to Ashley and the team, a shadow passed by the French doors. I jumped off the bar stool, water glass in hand, ready to throw it with the aim to maim. The silhouette walked past the window, and my body sagged in relief when I recognized the man's gait.

“Fucking Frankie.” I slammed the glass on the counter and stomped outside. “Come inside, you fucking creep.”

Frankie looked over his shoulder. “I'm doing rounds.”

“Fine. Finish your rounds, then come inside. You're freaking me out, lurking around in the dark, making me feel like someone's casing the joint and just biding their time.”

He sighed and went around the corner of the house. I stood on the patio, waiting for him to return, annoyed that any of this was necessary.

As he closed the side gate, he said, “You shouldn’t be wandering around half-naked. And I shouldn’t be coming inside in the middle of the night while you’re half-naked.”

“If I promise to get dressed, will you come in and have some coffee? You’re one of the few allowed in the house.”

Frankie scanned the backyard like he was hoping for a masked gunman to hop out of the bushes and save him from spending time with me. But all that was there was our manicured lawn, the sounds of insects, and the neighbor’s water feature. “Fine. Go put on some clothes and I’ll start the coffee.”

I rushed away before he changed his mind, grateful to have someone to talk to, or more accurately, talk at.

When I returned downstairs, two immaculate lattes—complete with foam art—sat on the kitchen island. Frankie stood at the counter mixing something in a big bowl.

“Holy shit, Frankie. You know how to do latte art?”

He shrugged and poured some batter on a skillet.

I took a sip and hummed. “Delicious. Maybe you should forget all this mob shit and go into the barista business.”

Frankie shook his head and poured another pancake.

“Maybe one of those hipster diners since you seem to know your way around that frying pan.”

“Can you shut up and drink your latte?”

Silence settled around us as I drank half my coffee. As Frankie made pancake after pancake, my heart started to ache. The sight was so familiar, but at the same time, wrong as hell. A Gambini where my Moretti should be.

Frankie set a short stack in front of me, along with butter and syrup. “Here. Eat.”

“Well, if you insist.”

That first bite was disappointing because I was expecting the gourmet experience of one of Luca’s masterpieces. But there was no mistaking that Frankie was a good cook. We ate in companionable silence until he collected our plates and took them to the sink.

“Those were pretty good. Where’d you learn to cook?”

Frankie rinsed the dishes, then loaded them into the dishwasher. “My mom.”

“Of course. I’m sad I didn’t get to talk to Mama Gambini more at the rehearsal dinner.”

“She liked you,” Frankie said with a bit of reluctance like he was giving up state secrets.

“You sound disappointed.” I tried not to laugh at him as he scowled.

“No. But I can’t think of a worse situation than you, my mom, and my sisters being in the same place.”

“Ah. So they’re trouble.”

“You’re trouble. They’re a whole other category of anarchy.”

“Noted.”

Frankie checked his phone and frowned. “You should try to get some rest before heading to Moretti Properties.”

“Are you my escort today?”

“Nah. Tommy’s with you today. I have to sleep and then . . .”

“Something I’m not allowed to know about.”

Frankie shrugged, and I sighed.

“I guess I’ll watch some tv.”

“Good plan. I have to make my rounds, then Tommy will be here. He’s not to come inside.”

“Yeah. Yeah. Go neighborhood watch.”

He scoffed but didn’t argue as he slipped out the back.

Before Luca was arrested, the casino planning meetings were a fun little treat. We’d share ideas, flirt, and then go home and fuck, or go to his office and fuck. I wasn’t particularly picky about where we ended up.

But post-arrest, the meetings were frustrating and ended in no satisfaction for anyone involved.

“We’re comfortably on track for the big New’s Eve opening. I don’t see why you want to push for earlier.” Aldo clicked his pen as he reviewed the updated timeline I’d put together.

Marco cleared his throat. “We’re bringing Luca home and need an alibi for the whole family. The casino opening is perfect. Based on Sasha’s projections, Halloween is doable. Make it happen.”

Joey groaned and turned his chair toward Marco. “You pulling rank on us?”

“If I have to, but I’d rather not.”

“It’s going to cost us,” Aldo mumbled as he scrolled through the figures on his laptop.

“Luca’s worth the cost,” I said, closing my packet.

The three men stewed until finally, Joey threw his head back and conceded. “Fine. No matter the cost, we’re moving up the opening date.”

Aldo abruptly stood, collecting his laptop and files. “I better get going on all this.” Calm, cool, and collected, he left the room.

“The threat of a twenty percent increase in costs, and it’s like we told him our lunch plans changed.” I stared at the door in disbelief.

“Aldo is as patient as they come. I’m not surprised he’s excelling at his new position as CFO.” Marco gestured to Joey. “The other side of the Moretti family was made for all this corporate wheeling and dealing.”

Joey laughed. “Coming from you, I’m not sure if that’s a compliment.”

Marco shrugged and turned to me. “That all you need?”

“I think so. I really expected more of a fight.”

“When it comes to family loyalty, there’s nothing to argue about. And anyway, it was my idea to push this up, so thanks for getting this done.”

“Make sure you thank Michael. I have a feeling he’ll be the one suffering from these changes. And with Sarah

pregnant?” I grimaced.

“I’ll send him a gift basket.”

The doorbell rang, and I checked my phone. “It’s about time. How does it take an hour to deliver a sandwich?” Unfortunately, it wasn’t the delivery guy. “Rosa. What a surprise.” I stepped back, and she breezed into the house.

“Sorry to drop in on you, but it’s been a week since the Fourth of July gala, and I haven’t heard from you.”

Guilt settled in my gut, and I struggled to act normally.

“Can I sit?”

I shook my head to clear it and gestured toward the couch. “Of course. Do you want a glass of water or a cup of coffee? Tea?”

“No. I’m fine.” Rosa’s voice was clipped, something I’d never been on the other side of. She sat, pulling her phone from her purse. “I need to show you something.”

“Okay.” I cautiously joined her.

She pressed play on a video. In a clear, unblurry shot, there I was, coming out of a hotel room, beaten and covered in blood, being propped up by Marco. From the doorway, Luca watched our slow progression down the hall, a pained expression twisting his gorgeous face. As he turned back into the room, the video cut.

“Rosa,” I choked out.

“Did you kill Dante?” Her beautiful brown eyes burned into me, hard and full of hate.

“It’s not what you think. I—”

“The only reason you’re not dead right now is my grandchild in your womb. I would never do anything to hurt a child, so I’ll keep this secret. But if you ever cross my son, I will gut you like the bitch you are.”

I blinked back tears, my lungs screaming for air. She stood and walked to the door as I struggled to follow. “Rosa,” I squeaked as her hand landed on the doorknob.

She turned just her head, the pure loathing on her face a punch to the gut. “The worst part? You roped my son and nephew into your lie. You turned family against each other.” With that final blow, she left.

I clutched the arm of the couch, afraid I would fall over. I’d never corrected Rosa’s assumptions that I wasn’t pregnant. The woman must have been hammered at the Fourth of July gala to not notice I was drinking. I’d never been so thankful for my nonexistent pregnancy than while being threatened by a mafia widow.

My chest was tight as I slid to the floor in front of the couch. Sweat beaded on my forehead as I struggled to breathe.

She knows.

I laid a hand over my chest, trying to keep my heart from beating out of my body. My fingers tingled, so I flexed them until they felt more normal.

She wants to kill me but won’t because of the baby.

Staring at my stomach, the band around my chest loosened. I had some protection, even if it was based on a willful misunderstanding on her part.

My hands shook as I picked up my phone and dialed Marco. As soon as he answered, I started rambling. “She knows. Rosa knows. She had video, and then the baby, and now—”

“Sasha. Stop.” A door slammed. “I’ll be there in ten.” And then the bastard hung up on me. I was having a complete breakdown, and he hung up on me.

For ten minutes, I paced the house, trying to mentally work through every possible endgame. Most ended in Rosa killing me, sometimes so brutally they’d never find all the pieces.

“Sasha?” Marco called through the house.

“In here.” I reached up and set my empty glass on the counter.

“What are you doing on the floor?”

I patted the tile and crossed my legs to make room for his long body. “It’s as good as any place to sit.”

Marco sighed and sat across from me, leaning his back against the fridge. “The floor’s cold.”

“Refreshing in the summer heat.”

“You have air conditioning.”

“Ah, but nothing beats the cool feel of ceramic against your ass. Just ask dogs worldwide.”

“So, you’re comparing yourself to a dog?”

The corner of my mouth tilted up but quickly fell as I looked at Marco’s somber expression. “She knows.”

“I gathered that. Walk me through what happened.”

“She had a video of us in the hallway after I killed Dante. A clear fucking shot of our faces and everything.”

“Shit,” Marco muttered, running a hand down his face.

“She was so mad, which I get, but she wouldn’t even let me explain.” My eyes burned, and I tried to swallow the lump forming in my throat.

Marco shifted his position and propped his arm up on his knee, his forehead wrinkled in concentration. “It’s fresh, and she’s still mourning. I bet when she hears what happened—”

“She’ll what? Get over it? I killed her husband. A husband she was in love with.”

“Who tried to kill you.” Marco flicked his wrist.

“I don’t know if that will matter.”

Marco scoffed. “You can’t be serious.”

“Rosa knew who she married and still loved him. She saw how beat up I was and still threatened my life. I don’t see this getting better any time soon.”

Marco frowned at the floor, tapping the tip of his middle finger against his thumb. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure.” Ryan strutted over and plopped down on my lap, nudging my hand for pets. I tunneled my fingers through his soft fur, leaving little trails along his back. It’s like he knew I needed him and was not above getting some lovin’ out of the deal.

“If you were in Rosa’s place, what would you do?”

I bit the inside of my cheek, the skin raw from the constant gnawing. The answer made me feel like I’d lost my ever-loving mind, which was a real possibility. “Probably the same.”

Marco’s head jerked up, disbelief written all over his face.

“I know it sounds ridiculous, but I know who Luca is, what he does. And even knowing all of that, I don’t think I could ever forgive his killer. That’s why I’ve been a coward when it comes to Rosa. I should’ve told her when it happened, but I knew it would be like this. I knew I’d lose her.”

SIX

“You got a minute?” The wind gusted, muffling Marco’s voice.

“Sure.”

“I need you to—” and he cut out into static.

“Marco?”

The other end finally quieted down, and I could hear his voice. “Sorry, this storm is ridiculous. I need you to go see Beth. Michael called and said she’s pushing back against some of the permits we need, and Joey says the licenses are being held up too.”

“What am I supposed to do about that?” I closed my laptop and set it on the coffee table.

“Try to grease the wheels.”

“She’s never listened to me before.”

“There’s a first time for everything,” I scoffed, but he continued. “Look, I’m just giving you the opportunity to play good cop before I have to play bad cop.”

The idea of Marco shaking Beth down was enticing, but I let it go. It would be wrong to sick a Moretti on her, no matter how much I’d love to see it. “Fine.”

“Great. Call me when it’s done.” And then he hung up on me.

“Ever the gentleman.”

Sighing, I trudged up to the bedroom and proceeded to get gussied up for my ex. It felt wrong, but apparently, convincing exes to bend to the family will was just one more facet of being Mrs. Moretti. Correction. Mrs. Mitchell-Moretti, but the bastards were in the habit of dropping the Mitchell.

I prayed for traffic that never manifested. I hoped parking would be impossible, but we found a spot right outside the front door. As I got out of the car, I calculated the chances of serious harm if a vehicle just clipped my hip and sent me down.

Unfortunately, we made it to the door safe and sound, all our limbs intact.

Tommy walked me into city hall, and every woman in a twenty-foot radius zeroed in on the handsome young man. The only proof he noticed was the red tip of his ears.

When we made it to the top floor, I pulled Tommy aside. “I need you to stay out here. One look at you and Beth will be itching for a fight. It’s better if she’s relaxed.”

Tommy’s eyes darted to the door of Beth’s office, then back to me. “You sure?”

“Yep. I promise not to start a brawl.”

“If you do, I’ll be right there,” Tommy said, earnest as all get out.

I patted his chest and left him to guard the hallway.

Right inside the door, a woman with salt and pepper hair and a kind face sat at a wooden desk, taking down a message.

When she hung up the phone, she smiled and asked, “How may I help you?”

“I’m here to see Beth.”

She frowned and glanced at her monitor. “I don’t see an appointment.”

I let out an airy laugh. “I was in the neighborhood and decided to pop in on an old friend. Is she not here?”

Her friendly smile back at full force, she pushed up from her seat and shuffled around her desk. “Let me poke my head in and see if she has a minute. What’s your name?”

“Sasha Mitchell.”

“Be right back.”

I ran a finger over the top of the nameplate while I waited for Florence to return. There were so many other things I’d rather be doing at that moment, and a very large part of me hoped Beth would turn me away, and I could leave it to Marco to deal with her.

“You can come right in. The mayor has a short break before her next meeting.”

So much for hope.

“Thank you, Florence.”

She grinned. “Not a problem.”

I took a fortifying breath and threw my hair back. It was go time.

“Knock, knock,” I called out as I stuck my head in the doorway.

Beth gave me a confused smile and gestured to the chair in front of her desk. “To what do I owe the pleasure? The last I

heard, you wanted me to stay the hell out of your way.”

I settled into the chair, arranging my skirt. “That’s why I’m here. Apparently, we’re having problems with building permits, business licenses, etc., etc. And through the grapevine, I’ve heard you’re the one to talk to. So, what’s up?”

Beth pursed her lips. “You know I’ve been on the fence about the casino, and now that you’re pushing up the opening, we’re just trying to make sure The Palace is what’s best for the city.”

“Beth,” I sighed. “The time for this was before we broke ground, not when we’re nearly done with construction.”

“With Luca in jail, the project seems in flux.”

I curled my fingers over the arm of the chair. “That’s bullshit. Joey and Aldo are more than capable of heading the casino renovation.”

“Their CEO is up on murder charges, one of his victims being his own cousin, and you think the city should just welcome his new casino?” She tilted her head, her cheeks reddening. “At this point, the Moretti name is *persona non grata*.”

I shook my head and stood. “You’re unbelievable.”

“And you’re delusional.”

“The casino is good for the city. It would mean jobs, taxes, tourism, and entertainment.” I jabbed my finger in her direction. “This is personal.”

“Believe it or not, my life doesn’t revolve around you.”

“No, but your shitty choices do.”

Beth scoffed and threw her pen on the desk. “Shitty choices? You’re the one who married a criminal, and now family members are dropping like flies. Don’t even get me started on the gun violence linked to this turf war. And there you are at the center of it.” She stood and rounded the desk, resting her ass on the edge with her arms crossed. “For a smart woman, you certainly make some asinine decisions. What is it, Sash? Does the danger make you feel alive? Does it make you feel good to put all your loved ones in harm’s way? To put yourself in the path of destruction?”

My body shook, and no amount of deep breaths calmed the rage building in my chest. Those pesky tears burned at the back of my eyes, making me blink furiously. Overwhelmed and frankly at my wit’s end, I shouted, “Stop!” Swallowing, I took a step back and lowered my voice. “You have to stop this. I’m exhausted and don’t have the energy to deal with your shit. I thought I could come here, and we’d talk like two professionals. Obviously, I was wrong.”

The first angry tear rolled down my cheek. I wiped at it fiercely, annoyed that I couldn’t get mad without crying. “You can expect a visit from Marco.”

Beth watched me with pity and reached behind her, picking up a business card. “Sasha, you’re not okay.” She tapped the card on her palm before holding it out to me. “Here. My mom’s been pestering me to call her, but I haven’t yet. You might need her more than I do.”

I frowned at the business card, pinching it between my thumb and middle finger. “A psychiatrist. You think I need a shrink?” My voice came out breathy.

The audacity.

This stalking-ass, judgmental bitch thought *I* needed help?

I spun around and stormed out of the office, not bothering to look at Florence as I flew out the door.

“Are you okay?” Tommy’s steely gaze flickered behind me, where the office door quietly clicked closed.

“I’m fine. Let’s go.”

Tommy didn’t argue, but he did hover much closer than he did on the way up. Once we were in the car, I told him to take me to Moretti’s and turned up the radio.

It didn’t take long until I was strolling through the empty restaurant to the bar. “Marco here?”

Trip looked up from the glass he was wiping down and smiled. “He is, but he’s in his weekly scheduling fight with Loretta. You might want to have a seat. This can take a while.”

“I got time. Can I get a Shirley Temple?” Might as well live up to my fake pregnancy, aka the only thing keeping Rosa from gutting me like a fish.

“You got it.”

Halfway through my sugary drink, the front door opened, and Alicia walked in. The sun from outside added an extra glow to her full blond waves. In her white dress, she looked like a literal angel. “Sasha?”

I gave her a little wave. “Hey! What are you doing here?”

“I wanted to talk to Marco about something.”

I perked up. Someone else’s drama was a delightful distraction from the cesspool my life had become. “He’s in with the chef, but you can keep me company while we wait for the yelling to stop.”

“What are you drinking?”

“A Shirley Temple.”

She lifted a light brow, then shrugged. “I’ll have what she’s having.”

The muffled sound of “If you don’t like it, you can quit” and “This is why you’ve gone through five chefs in three years” floated into the bar area. Trip handed off her drink, then excused himself, leaving us alone with our non-alcoholic, sugary concoctions.

Alicia took a sip, winced, and stuck her tongue out. “Holy shit, that’s sweet.”

“Yeah.” I sucked down a third of my drink, the sugar removing some of the foul taste that seeing Beth had left in my mouth. “I had a rough meeting and needed a little pick me up. What’s up with you?”

She looked toward the kitchen door and bounced her leg. “I don’t know—”

I held up my hands. “Hey, feel free to tell me it’s none of my business.”

“It’s not that. I just don’t think Mickey would want me talking about him, and I’m already kind of going behind his back by coming to Marco.” She took another drink and winced, frowning down at the glass. “Whatever. I think Mickey’s in trouble.”

“Yeah.” I leaned in.

Alicia nodded, biting her full, pink bottom lip. “He’s always partied, but recently his coke use has been out of hand. And he’s always so jittery. I feel like—”

“I’m taking my break before dinner service. Is that all right with you, Mr. Bossman?” Loretta hollered over her shoulder in

that sweet southern drawl. The kitchen door swung shut behind her as she barreled through the restaurant, her cheeks pink, her jacket even pinker.

“We weren’t done! The schedule isn’t set.” Marco shoved open the door, following in her wake with a frown so severe I worried it would be forever etched into his face.

Loretta spun around, stopping Marco dead in his tracks. “Then set it. I’m done having this fight with you, sugar. Every week we fight, and in the end, you end up doing whatever the hell you want. I’m done.” She yanked open the door, a gust of hot air filling the room as she stepped into the summer afternoon.

I let out a low whistle. “That did *not* go well.”

He glared at me and stalked over to the bar. “Why are you here?”

“To chat about my meeting with Beth.”

“Great.” Marco grabbed the back of his neck and tipped his chin up. “And you?”

“Mickey.”

“And the hits just keep on coming,” he muttered. “Why don’t you both follow me back to the office?” Of course, he didn’t wait for us to join him and disappeared through the swinging door.

“Oh, I guess we should go before he changes his mind,” Alicia said as she shuffled off her bar stool.

We walked through the kitchen, apologizing to the cooks for getting in their way as they prepped for dinner. One of the line cooks pointed us past the long metal table covered in chopped and diced vegetables to a wooden door marked

OFFICE as if we could miss it in the small space. Peeking in, I internally sighed. The back office was a cramped, dark, glorified closet. No wonder Luca had never taken me back there.

“Well, this is nice.” I sat on the edge of a scarred wooden chair, and it squeaked in protest.

Marco glared at me and gestured at the door. “Close it.”

Alicia did and stayed standing.

He heaved a sigh, leaning back in the creaky, ancient office chair. “Now, what’s going on with my brother?”

“He’s doing a lot of coke and acting like someone’s out to get him, which I don’t know if that’s because of the drugs or something else.”

Marco exhaled loudly. “Anything else?”

Alicia shook her head, and Marco dipped his chin. “Thank you for telling me. You can go.”

She silently left the stuffy room. As soon as the door closed, Marco’s dark gaze fell on me. “Beth didn’t budge?”

“Not only did she not budge, but she gave me a psychiatrist’s business card.”

He threw his head back with a laugh. “No. That’s amazing.”

“Apparently, marrying a Moretti is a reason to seek help.”

“I mean, she’s not wrong.” Marco unwrapped a mint and popped it in his mouth. “I guess it’s time for me to formally meet our new mayor.”

“Do your thing.” I slouched in the chair and noticed the pictures lining the back wall. “Is that your dad?”

He didn't bother looking behind him. "Yes."

"Then that's you and Mickey?"

He spun the chair around. It groaned loudly under his weight and the movement.

"You should really grease that thing."

Marco ignored me. "That was the day Dad took over. The first Moretti to run the place, but not cook." He glanced over his shoulder and then back to the wall, pointing to the next picture. "And that's little Luca cooking with our great uncle."

I leaned forward, smiling. "I know that look. Whatever's on that spoon doesn't taste right."

"Always the perfectionist." Marco rubbed his jaw.

"A family trait."

Marco turned back around, a sad smile on his face. "Tommy drive you here?"

"Yep. I should get out of here before the dinner rush."

He walked me out, waiting with me at the curb. "I talked to Rosa."

"And how did that go?"

"She's going on a trip."

The sun was setting, but there was no relief from the heat. Sweat on the nape of my neck soaked into the collar of my blouse. "That's probably for the best."

"I agree. Give her time to clear her head."

I nodded, dabbing a bit of sweat from my lip. No amount of time would change what happened, but I hoped Rosa would

eventually find it in her heart not to hate me. An ugly, prickly emotion grew in my gut.

What if she didn't?

What if I'd lost her forever?

"There he is." As soon as Tommy stopped, Marco opened the passenger door. "I know better than to try to put you in the backseat."

"Good man. I'll be in touch."

Marco patted the roof of the car and went back into Moretti's.

"Where to now?" Tommy asked as he waited for me to buckle my seatbelt.

"Home. I'm officially done with the day."

"You got it."

The same pop radio station I'd put on played softly in the background as we drove away from the restaurant. We'd made it a few blocks when three huge SUVs surrounded us, and Tommy slammed on the brakes. The only path was backward.

The windows of the SUV in front of us rolled down, and a masked man drew a massive fucking gun.

"Get down," Tommy yelled.

"Who—"

"I said, get down." He grabbed the back of my head and shoved my face to my lap, the seatbelt clicking with the sudden movement and digging painfully into my chest. He unclicked the buckle and pushed me to the floorboard, my legs and sides banging into the hard interior. I swallowed a yelp of pain, my hands flailing to grab hold of something. There was

just the smooth leather seat and accents, the center console, and the door handle, which was attached to the door that was currently being shot at. No matter how bulletproof the car was, there was no way I'd touch it while it was being used as target practice.

There was barely enough room for me to fit below the windows, so I tucked my chin to my chest and covered my neck—the epitome of a worthless gesture. Should the door fail, my hands wouldn't save my neck from the very real, very deadly bullets. Tommy threw open the glove box, and the hard plastic smacked me in the back of the head as he pulled out a gun and floored it in reverse. “Stay down.”

Gunfire sounded all around us, the bulletproof SUV rocking as it was hit from all sides. I bit the inside of my cheek to keep from screaming. Tommy needed to focus, and I needed to keep my wits about me, but my body didn't get the memo as it trembled and jerked with every new shot.

Tommy tossed a burner to me. “Call the first contact. Put it on speaker.”

My hands shook uncontrollably as I followed his direction.

“Yeah?” Marco's gruff voice rang out, and it took everything in me to stay quiet and let Tommy handle it.

“Three black SUVs, six guys, no plates, firepower at the corner of Flora and 39th.”

“Got it. Head to Juniper's.” And click.

“Hold on. I got you.” He whipped the car around, the back bumper crashing into something, but it didn't stop us. Tommy let out a laugh and sped up.

The gunfire grew distant, and the SUV no longer shook, but I wasn't about to look up.

Tommy made a few sharp turns, jumped a curb, and drove us into a garage. The doors closed behind us as he parked. “You can get up.”

I stayed curled in a ball, gripping the burner so hard the plastic creaked. After trying to unfold my body, I shook my head. “Not sure I can.”

“Shit.” Tommy got out of the driver’s seat and came around to my side.

When he opened the door, my tense body followed it.

Moving quickly, he caught me before I fell face first onto the concrete floor. “Easy there.”

“What just happened?” I pushed away from him, my ass landing on the floorboard as my legs hung out the door.

“We’re finding out. We need to hang out here until Marco gives us the all-clear. Then we’ll switch cars and get you home.”

“Okay.” I slid out of the SUV and avoided touching the exterior. There was no reason I needed to feel proof of every bullet meant to kill me. Tommy stayed close but let me wander the bays of the garage. Beautiful classic cars in various states of finish sat lined up with mechanics pretending to work on them, while casting sidelong glances at my ruined SUV.

“Tommy? What the hell?” A handsome man with sandy brown hair and piercing blue eyes stormed out of the office. His face flushed as he stared at our vehicle. “We’re not closed.”

“Marco will be here soon. He’ll explain.”

“Fuck.” He grabbed the back of his neck and looked up at the ceiling. “Take fifteen, but stay in the building,” he shouted

to his employees.

The mechanics shuffled out of the car bays, grumbling about missing the action.

“I’m going to go lock up. Let me know when Marco’s here.”

“You got it, Chase.”

“Where are we?” I trailed my fingers over the hood of a cherry-red Mustang. I knew nothing about cars, but I did know pretty things, and that car was a beaut.

“Juniper Automotive. They’re a friend to the family.”

“Ah.”

It wasn’t long until car doors opened and closed outside, and one of the bay doors rolled up.

“You okay, Red?” Marco gave me a quick once over, his shoulders relaxing when he found no wounds.

“Just peachy.”

Marco grabbed Tommy’s shoulder and pulled him into a quiet conversation. Tommy nodded and left the building. “I’ve got Frankie at the house checking everything out. Once it’s all clear, Tommy will take you home, and I’ll follow.”

“Marco. I thought we had a deal.” Chase called out from the doorway of his office. “After hours and make a phone call before.” The man joined us near the Mustang, buffing away what I assumed were my fingerprints.

“It was an emergency. This is Luca’s wife.”

Chase turned my way, his bright eyes assessing me. “Well, shit. Should I tell the guys to get the big guns out?”

“Shouldn’t be necessary. We’ve got the guys who—” Marco jerked his chin toward my ruined SUV. “Just waiting on the all-clear at the house.”

“You need me to call in my brothers?”

“Not yet, but I’ll keep it in mind.”

Chase nodded. “You do that.” His face finally slipped into a smile as he looked back at me. And wow, what a smile. “It was nice meeting you.” He gave me a brief nod, then went back to his office.

“Is he in a gang or something?”

“Or something. His brother runs a motorcycle club up in Kirksville. Real one percenters. We have a mutually beneficial relationship.” Marco’s phone vibrated in his hand, and he quickly read a text. “We’re good to go.”

Marco started toward the door, and I grabbed his arm. “You’re sure it’s safe.”

“Absolutely.”

The silent part was that I was as safe as the wife to a mafia don could be, which wasn’t that safe. But at least I had guards with guns prowling my yard.

SEVEN

“It’s good to have you back, Red.” Scott squeezed my shoulder as he sat next to me in the conference room.

It was weird to be back in the office. Good, but weird.

“I figured it was the least I could do after moving up the opening date for The Palace. Now that the press has gotten bored with me and decamped from in front of the building, I should be able to resume my normal schedule.”

Ashley handed me a bottle of water. “They packed it up after *someone* leaked that contract you had Jazz write up to sign over your shares of SA Designs.”

“Ka Chan wrote it up.”

“Fine. The contract you had Ka Chan write up. Know anything about that?” She tilted her head, a perfect eyebrow raised.

I shook my head as I uncapped the water. “No idea.” The Moretti PR team advised me to not leak the contract since they were showing support for their wrongfully accused CEO. Still, I couldn’t stand the thought of my friends being harassed by the media. Eventually, they relented, leaked the contract, and we were free of the bloodsucking assholes, at least for the time being.

“Mhm. Just know I destroyed the contract. You’re stuck with us.”

“Yeah. Yeah.” I tossed the cap at Ashley, and she caught it out of the air. “Miranda.”

Her head shot up at the sound of her name.

“I think it might be time to move you up to the offices. With me coming back, I don’t want you to be shoved back into reception.”

“Yeah?” She gave me a cautious smile as Ashley slid a nameplate engraved with Miranda Garcia across the table.

“Welcome upstairs, Ms. Garcia.” Ashley clapped, and Scott joined in.

Miranda picked up the silver rectangle and held it to her chest, wiping away a fake tear. “You like me. You really like me.”

“It’s more than like, lady. We love you. We need you. You stepped up big time over the last month while I was out. And for that, I will be forever grateful. It’s time for you to find your replacement at the front desk.”

“On it.” She tapped away on her laptop with her long-manicured nails, her ponytail swaying. Knowing her, she’d have interviews scheduled for that afternoon and her replacement onboarded by Monday.

Axel strolled in, surprisingly late. “Sasha.”

“Axel. It’s good to see you.”

“Same.” He sat next to Ashley and opened his Moleskin notebook. When he looked up, I started the meeting. “I wanted to check in with you on the new timeline and ensure you weren’t plotting my death.”

Scott dramatically flipped open his laptop, and his fingers flew over the keyboard. “From where I’m sitting, we should be fine. It’ll be tight, and I’ll have to hire some temporary help, but we’re good as long as the construction crew keeps to their schedule.”

“I’ve made a few alterations to my designs to allow for the time crunch. The updated files are in the project folder.” Axel jotted a note, no doubt already working on the next project.

“Perfect. Ash?”

She smiled and leaned back in her chair. “One perk of all my binders is I have a plan for every possibility. We’re now operating on the ‘everything is perfect, and money is no object’ timeline.”

“You’re a goddess. A saint. I should’ve never been worried.”

Thanks to my amazing team, about two tons of stress melted off my shoulders. I was relieved to not only have this project well in hand but to still be able to call these people my friends and co-owners. In the end, I was grateful Ashley didn’t accept my offer to walk away.

Scott shut his laptop. “Now that we’ve gone over all the work stuff, why don’t you fill us in on what’s going on with you?”

I sighed as everyone cautiously watched me. “Not much has changed since you saw me flee my own wedding. We hired new counsel, but I still haven’t seen Luca.”

“It’s been a month.” Ashley tilted her head, a frown creasing her brow, her full lips pulling down.

“Just about. I have a meeting with Fern and the Morettis this afternoon to see what’s being done, but I’m tired.”

“I can’t imagine.” Ashley reached over Scott and squeezed my hand

“It’ll be okay, or it won’t. Honestly, I’m relieved to have a little normalcy back.” I dropped my gaze to the table. “I just want to thank you guys for letting me stay.” Tears filled my eyes as I traced the grain of the wood. “It was the wrong choice, but I’ll be forever thankful.” Smiling up at them, I wiped my cheek.

They laughed and shook their heads.

Ashley handed me a box of tissues. “What fun would SA Designs be without your chaos?”

“You’ve got a point.”

“We’ve actually had an uptick in requests for proposals,” Miranda said, twisting the ends of her hair, her attention still on her laptop screen.

Scott grinned, his blue eyes sparkling with mischief. “Everyone wants a piece of the infamous Sasha Mitchell-Moretti. Won’t they be disappointed when they find out you don’t design murder rooms?”

“Keep it up, and I might start.” I threw a balled-up piece of paper at him, but Scott deflected it. “I’m glad you find humor in my misfortunes.”

“No, I wasn’t—” Scott’s normally rosy cheeks went full-blown tomato red.

“Just messing with you. I’m glad this isn’t hurting business, but I’ll walk if you guys ever change your mind.”

“Yeah. Yeah.” Ashley rolled her eyes as she smoothed her hair to the poof at the back of her head.

“If Sasha’s done with her whole martyr thing, can I go?”
Axel looked at his watch. “I have a delivery in ten minutes.”

“And just like that, Axel sets me straight.”

Ashley, Miranda, and Scott laughed as Axel stood.

I shooed him out the door. “Go, see to your wood.”

Rosa’s mansion loomed ahead as Tommy drove up the long driveway. We were all meeting Fern for an update and then having a family dinner before Rosa left for her vacation. Tommy stopped at the front door, but I didn’t get out. It had only been a few days since Rosa threatened my life but allowed me to live, so it made sense I was sick to my stomach at the thought of seeing her.

I rested my hand on my baby-less stomach. My period had come and gone, but there I was, pretending to be pregnant to save my life. Absolutely ridiculous. Visions of me shoving pillows under my shirt or going so far as to buy one of those fake bellies clouded my mind.

I would never take the lie that far. I didn’t have that kind of lying stamina.

Someday, Rosa would find out I wasn’t pregnant, and I could only hope that she wouldn’t be murderous by then.

A knock on the window sent me flying out of my seat. My head hit the roof, and my elbow smashed into Tommy. Clutching my chest, I glared out the window at Frankie. “You stupid son of a bitch,” I muttered.

I got out of the car, my heart still racing. “Don’t sneak up on people.”

“Sorry. I said your name first.”

Tommy pulled away, and I swear to God I heard laughter.

“Well . . . Next time, be louder.” I tugged the strap of my purse up my arm and stared at the front door, the car pep talk no longer giving me the oomph I needed to cross the threshold.

Frankie passed me. When he reached the first column, he looked over his shoulder and lifted an eyebrow. “You coming?”

Eyes pinned to the front window where Rosa stood chatting with Marco, I nodded and slowly joined Frankie.

“You’ve got to relax, or Aunt Rosa will be all over you.”

That’s what I’m afraid of.

I stopped dead in my tracks, but Frankie placed a hand on my back and gave a little push.

At the door, a maid greeted and ushered us toward the sitting room.

“Look who I found,” Frankie announced, getting the attention of everyone.

“Perfect. Fern should be here soon.” Marco joined us while Rosa went to the drink cart.

She gave us a constipated smile. “Do either of you want a drink?”

“Yes please.” I met Rosa’s impassive stare and added, “A sparkling water.”

“You got it.”

Frankie followed Marco to the bar, and I was left standing in the middle of the room. I couldn’t come up with one time

that I hadn't felt like a total outsider in that house. Even married into the family, I was still on the outside looking in.

Pressing my luck, I spoke directly to the fuming matriarch of the Moretti family. "Hello Rosa."

"Sasha," she responded with none of the warmth I was accustomed to, but at least she wasn't threatening me. That was an improvement.

The doorbell rang, and everyone tensed. The click-clack of heels got closer, announcing Fern's arrival.

Marco brought me a sparkling water, and I downed half of it. Regret was immediate as I started coughing, the bubbles going down the wrong pipe.

Unperturbed by my fit, Rosa met Fern in the doorway. "Fern."

I let out a silent breath of relief that Rosa's voice had gone absolutely arctic. At least there was one person she hated more than me.

"Mrs. Moretti. It's good to see you again." Fern's stiff body language and stilted words suggested otherwise, but as a newly sworn-in member of the "Rosa hates you" club, I understood.

"Mhm. Follow me to the office." And off Rosa went, leaving us to scramble in behind her.

When I entered the office, Rosa gestured for me to sit next to her while Marco sat behind the desk. Fern took the last seat in front of Marco and the firing squad while Frankie shut the door and leaned against it.

Once she'd shifted in her seat for the fifth time, I finally asked, "So?"

She cleared her throat and took out a pad of paper. “After reviewing the evidence, I think we’re in a good place to make a deal that would get Luca out of prison in under ten years.” Her smooth voice grated on my ears, but she wasn’t done. “When I met with Luca yesterday, he—”

My heart started to race, and my cheeks were hot. “Yesterday?” I gritted out.

Fern swallowed, and all the color drained from her face. “Yes. I went to discuss the case and hear the facts straight from him.”

“You were supposed to check with us.” I poked my chest and stood. “We were supposed to be in that meeting.”

“I thought it was best—”

“You—” I took a step forward, but Rosa’s smooth, warm hand wrapped around mine and, she gently pulled me back.

“Fern. I think it’s best if you tell us how we’re moving forward and then leave.” Rosa grimaced as I gripped her hand, fighting the urge to rip Fern’s strawberry blond braid from her fucking head.

“Of course. I have a meeting with the prosecution and then we’ll have to discuss Luca’s options.”

I parted my lips, ready to demand more, but Rosa squeezed my fingers.

“That’s it?” Marco tilted his head.

“Until we get an actual offer from the prosecution, yes.”

“Then you can go.” Marco stood and gestured toward the door, which Frankie shoved off and opened.

Fern blinked rapidly, her mouth hanging open until it finally snapped shut. Her hands shook slightly as she put her pad of paper back in her bag. “I—well—” She looked from face to face, not finding an ounce of warmth. Dipping her chin, she stood and walked out of the room, braid swinging to and fro, begging me to wrap it around my fist as I bashed her head into the historic floors.

Frankie followed behind her and left the three of us alone in the office.

Rosa dropped my hand and stood. Losing her warmth was hard to swallow.

“Thank you for that.” I gestured toward the chair where Fern had sat.

Her dark brown eyes, so similar to her son’s, studied me with disgust. “No need to thank me. I couldn’t let you make a fool of yourself and this family. If you’ll excuse me.”

Marco and I watched her disappear out the door.

“Dinner’s going to be fun.”

“Not helping, Marco.”

“Wasn’t trying to help. Let’s go get a drink. Adriana and Dante should be around here somewhere.”

“Thank God.”

The cocktail hour was awkward and quiet. Taz and Mickey joined us and stood in the corner, drinking. Classical music played in the background as the adults avoided each other, and Dante sat subdued despite his free access to a plate of cookies.

When dinner was announced, we shuffled to the dining room and sat.

“I’m going to Italy,” Rosa said over her vibrant salad.

Dante set his fork down and looked up at his grandma.
“Are you visiting Nonna?”

“No, honey. I’m going on a three-city tour, and unfortunately, Nonna doesn’t live in any of the cities.”

“You’ll get me a present, right?”

“Dante!” Adriana gasped.

The table chuckled, some of the tension lifting at Dante’s oblivious sweetness.

“I’ll do you one better. How would you like a gift from every city?”

He nodded and took a hesitant bite of arugula. The kid may have been a foodie, but greens were still hit or miss.

The waiters brought out the entrees, and I’d just taken a bite when buzzing sounded through the room. Marco and Taz took their phones out and jumped out of their seats while Mickey’s face twisted into a grimace.

I wiped my mouth and pushed my plate back. “What happened?”

“Lorenzo,” is all Marco said before storming from the room, followed by the other men.

Setting my napkin down, I said, “I’m going to find out what’s happening.”

“It’s not our place,” Rosa answered.

Adriana shrugged as she took another bite.

Part of me wanted to stay at the table and be the daughter she thought I was before she knew I killed her husband, but I couldn’t. Standing, I stared down at her, and she locked her

jaw, daring me to disobey. It was time for Rosa to see yet another side of Sasha Mitchell-Moretti.

I pushed away from the table and slowly rose to my feet, and Rosa's tan skin flushed, turning her a terrible shade of red. I broke eye contact and left with Rosa shouting my name.

The men's voices grew louder the closer I got to the office.

"Three of my capos are dead, Marco!"

"I know, Taz."

"What are you going to do about it?"

"Fucking kill him."

I pushed open the door, but no one noticed. They were too wrapped up in the crisis at hand.

"You should've killed him on the Fourth."

Marco shook his head. "Luca said—"

"Luca's not here. He's locked up! You're in charge, so fucking act like it!" Taz bumped Marco's shoulder as he passed him, and that's when all four men spotted me.

"Fucking perfect." Taz turned back to Marco, and the two men both swung. Taz's hit made Marco stumble, but Marco's sent Taz tumbling to the floor.

The room froze as Marco straightened his sleeves, glaring down at his cousin. "You're right. I am in charge. Don't fucking test me."

Taz scowled at Marco as he used a chair to help him stand. Rubbing his jaw, he said, "I'm heading back to Chicago. You ordering the hit?"

Marco nodded, and Taz stormed toward me and the door, his stride eating up the distance between us. At the last

moment, I stepped aside, and he blew out of the room.

Frankie stood by the window, running his tattooed fingers through his hair. “Sasha—” I heard the exasperation in his words, but I didn’t feel an ounce of remorse for intruding. The more I stuck my nose in, the easier it got to forget I shouldn’t.

“I fucked up,” Mickey groaned, dragging his hand down his face.

Marco and Frankie turned toward the inebriated man, his cheeks red from too many drinks before dinner and whatever internal torture he was enduring.

I closed the door behind me and plastered myself against it.

“Explain.” Marco stood in front of his brother with his arms crossed.

“Lorenzo told me he was just trying to help you guys by taking care of Chronis, but it’s clear he had bigger plans.”

“Are you saying he killed Yanni Chronis?” Marco’s voice was vicious.

Mickey nodded, pressing himself deeper into the chair.

“Do you realize Lorenzo started a street war when he killed him?”

Mickey held his hands up. “The Marino twins—”

“You’re the one who knew,” I muttered.

“What was that?” Frankie asked, his hands curling around the back of the executive chair, the leather crinkling under his tight grip.

“Earless. He said ‘he knew’ when you guys interrogated the Marino twins.” I took measured steps until I was next to

Marco. “My brakes, the club shooting.” Disgust turned my stomach. “He knew Tootsie was still alive before we did. You’re the one they were fingering.”

“You stupid bastard. What was the plan? Take out Yanni and his kids, then what?”

“Lorenzo said we were proving our worth, that it was what was best for the family. It made sense. The twins tampered with Sasha’s brakes to make it look like the Chronis family had done it. After we took care of Yanni, we leaked info about Luca being at the club, hoping they’d kick-start the war. Then you asked us to deliver Zoe . . .” Mickey swayed in his seat, his blood-shot eyes having a hard time focusing on any one of us.

“What about Pete?” I hazarded.

“That wasn’t us. I’d never.”

“But you’d let them kill Tootsie?”

Mickey struggled to sit up, shaking his head violently. “No! They promised it was an accident, and that he made it out alive.”

“You let us think he was dead. We had a full service planned until he reached out. Uncle Telly, Taz, and Tizzy were devastated.”

“I know.” He sniffed, scratching his jaw.

“Because of Lorenzo, Luca’s in jail.” I leaned down, getting in Mickey’s face.

“I kn—”

I slapped him across the cheek, bringing my hand back and hitting the other side. “You and that fucker are the reason my husband was carried away on our wedding day. All because

you wanted to kill a woman who had done *nothing* wrong beyond being born a Chronis.” I wrapped my hands around his throat and squeezed. “You stupid son of a bitch. I—”

“Sasha.” Marco pried my fingers from his neck, his blunt nails digging into my wrists as he handed me off to Frankie. Turning his focus back to his brother, he bent over, gripping the arms of the chair. “What else do you know?”

“Nothing. After the Marino twins, Lorenzo told me he was done, that he’d made a mistake.”

“Did you know about Lorenzo going after Sasha?”

“No, I swear. You have to believe me,” Mickey pleaded.

Marco slammed his hand on the desk. “Fuck! Mickey, I don’t know what to do. If Taz finds out you knew about Tootsie, he’d kill you himself. I can’t trust a word coming out of your fucking mouth.” Gut-wrenching pain filled his voice, every word hitting like a physical blow.

“You can!” Tears spilled down Mickey’s cheeks as he reached for Marco, but his hands were brushed away.

“No, I can’t. At best, you helped Lorenzo start a turf war. At worst, you helped Lorenzo try to take over the family. We’re in a two-front war, and you helped start it!” Marco walked to the bookshelf and gripped a high shelf, stretching his long frame out. Mickey silently cried, staring at his older brother. I got the sense he was waiting for Marco to make it all better, but that wasn’t possible.

My murderous rage faded, replaced by hopelessness. Mickey was a dead man if the truth came out.

I tried to shrug Frankie off, but he tightened his hold. “You can let go. I’m not going to kill the bastard.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah. He needs coffee and a good night’s sleep if we’re going to get any more information out of him. And Marco needs to take a walk before he snaps that shelf in half.”

Frankie let me go, taking a step back. I approached Marco, laying my hand on his shoulder. He tensed under my touch but didn’t brush me off. His eyes stayed locked on the first editions Dante Sr. was so proud of.

“Come on, big guy. Let’s get you some air.”

He hung his head and let out a ragged breath. “Okay.”

I followed him through the house to the kitchen. He went out the back door, and I started the coffeepot. Things were getting worse and worse, and I wasn’t sure how we would dig ourselves out of all the shit.

EIGHT

I stared across the hallway at Ashley's office while the hold music played on loop. Fern Robison was giving me the run-around, but I was determined to track her down and twist the screws until I was on that damn visitor list.

Malcolm's booming laugh traveled into my office, making me wish I was joking around and not enduring easy listening. After ten minutes on hold, Fern's assistant came back on the line, his voice hesitant when he said, "Ms. Robison has left the office for the rest of the day. Can I make an appointment for you?"

I balled up the top piece of paper on my notepad. The bullet-pointed questions were no longer necessary if Fern wasn't available. "I did that, and she canceled on me. Twice."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Mitchell. I—"

"Mrs. Mitchell-Moretti. Do you know what that means?"

"N-no," the little fucker squeaked out.

"It means you and your boss are keeping information about my husband from me."

"Mr. Moretti—"

"Is locked up, but I am very much free. Free to get in my car, drive to your office, and camp out in the lobby until I have

squatter's rights. You got me?"

The young man lowered his voice to a whisper. "She's meeting with him today."

Rage burned through me as a plan formed. "What's your name again?"

"Taylor Murphy, ma'am."

"Perfect." I hung up and started throwing everything in my bag. An empty green folder caught my eye. An idea sparked, and I shoved some random paper into it. "I'm leaving!" I shouted, hoping everyone heard me as I ran through the building. Tommy jumped up from a chair in the conference room and raced after me.

"We need to stop at home, then you're taking me to see Luca."

Tommy smiled as he rushed to the driver's side. "Fern finally got that all sorted?"

"Something like that."

We made a quick stop at the house and then sped all the way to the jail. There was no way to know when the meeting was scheduled, but I couldn't give up a chance to see Luca.

Tommy parked and started to get out.

"You stay here." I grabbed his arm.

He frowned down at my hand. "I'm supposed to stick with you."

Tommy was a good soldier, and at times like this, it was really fucking annoying. "How about you walk me to the door, and I'll take it from there?" He looked undecided, so I

softened my approach. “I just want some alone time with Luca.”

Tommy let out a big sigh. “Okay, but keep your phone on you in case there’s trouble.”

“Deal.”

Taking a deep breath, I rushed inside, holding the green folder in the air. “Oh my God. Is Ms. Robison still here?”

The older man in uniform at the desk looked at me with concern, then back at the monitor. “And you are?”

“Taylor, her assistant.”

“Do you have some id?”

“Of course,” I breathed out in false relief, rooting around in my bag like I was searching for my wallet. “Oh no.” Throwing my arm on the counter, I dropped my forehead on it and groaned. “I left my wallet at the office. Could you just let me back there? You’d be saving my ass.”

Indecision warred on his face as he fingered the phone next to his keyboard.

Was I that transparent? Was he about to bust my ass?

“Let me call back and clear it with Ms. Robison.” I nodded frantically, and he picked up the phone. “I have a Taylor—”

“Murphy,” I whispered.

He smiled and added, “Murphy here with a file for you?” After a short back and forth, the guard hung up. “She said to send you back. Let me make you a name tag.”

“Bless you.” I sagged against the counter.

It worked. It actually worked.

Grinning, he handed me my guest pass. “Head back that hallway and make a left. She’s in the last interview room on the right.”

The door buzzed, and I hurried through it, shouting a thank you over my shoulder.

Shoulders back, I acted like I belonged until I reached the last door on the right. Through the small square window, I caught a glimpse of Fern’s braid. Swallowing thickly, I pushed open the door. Luca’s chuckle was the first thing I heard, and I swear it was all I could do not to go nuclear.

“Taylor, I don’t know—” Fern stopped talking, her mouth falling open when she caught sight of me.

My eyes immediately left her and landed on Luca. My Luca, who was currently sitting very close to his lawyer, with white boxes of takeout in front of him, and the ghost of a smile on his lips.

“Well, this looks cozy.”

“Sasha?” Luca stood, his body shaking as his palms flattened on the table.

“She’s pregnant,” Fern blurted, and Luca’s face swung down to her, then back to me, where his eyes zeroed in on my stomach.

“Can you give us the room?” I stared down at Fern, going full queen bitch on her.

“Sure. Sure.” She dropped her chopsticks and rushed to the door. I didn’t step out of the way, forcing her to squeeze past me.

Slamming the door behind me, I looked back at my husband, who was frozen in the same spot. “You’re pregnant?”

His voice was full of wonder. He rounded the abused metal table in the middle of the room, reaching for my stomach.

Before he could touch me, I held up my hands. “I’m not.”

Luca dropped his arms to the side. “Then why—”

“Because I’m pretending to be to keep your mom from killing me.”

He frowned. “What do you—”

“You’d know if you took my fucking calls or visits. But no. I’m not on the list, so I have to sneak in here and find you canoodling with Fern, laughing, and having a good time—” I pointed at my chest, then the door. “While I’m out there miserable, alone, and trying to stay strong.”

“Sasha.” Luca cupped my face, his rough thumb brushing away the tears that were apparently falling down my cheeks. “I’m so sorry.” He pulled me to his chest, my arms bent, fists pressed against my collarbone.

I tried to shove him away, but his hold only tightened. “You’re not. If I hadn’t crashed your little meeting today, I would still be on the outside looking in. And what was so fucking funny? From where I’m sitting, you and Fern don’t have anything but the case to discuss.”

He sighed, the warmth of his breath on my ear sending a shiver down my spine. “She was telling me about your meeting at Mom’s house. I was laughing because you scared her shitless.”

“Still. A little luncheon?” I struggled to turn my head and peek at the table. “Not a single fucking piece of paper or laptop out.”

“She just got here and brought my favorite Chinese. She was filling me in on your meeting before we got into the case.” His hand rubbed soothing circles on my back as his words riled me up.

“How kind of her. I’m thinking I was wrong to hire her.”

“No. You made the right call. They’re already talking deals. Gabe’s guys weren’t getting that far.” He kissed the top of my head. “I can’t believe you’re here.”

Ignoring his attempts at sweetness, I said, “Clearly, we can’t trust her. She didn’t even tell you I was pregnant.”

“But you’re not.”

I narrowed my eyes at him, and he rolled his lips in.

“She doesn’t know that. No, she’s using this to get close to you. The food, the omission, the dodging my calls—it’s all making her seem pretty fucking shady.”

“She’s dodging your calls? That’s not right. I’ve told her to share everything with you, that you have full access to the case.”

“Just not access to you, right?” I shoved at him, but he didn’t budge.

“I’m sorry.”

I glared at him, wishing that, for once, looks could cause bodily harm. “It’s been a month, and you wouldn’t let me see you, wouldn’t take my calls. What the actual fuck?”

“Sasha, I—”

I turned my face toward the table, the white boxes taunting me.

Luca cradled my cheeks with his large hands, forcing me to look him in the eye. “I wasn’t strong enough to see or hear from you while I’m stuck here. The thought of watching you leave—” he cleared his throat, “I needed to be strong, to have my wits about me while I’m surrounded by enemies but having you here right now—” He pressed a sweet kiss to my lips. “I can see I was wrong. So fucking wrong. You’re my strength. I’m sorry.”

“You said that.”

“I mean it.”

I sighed, flattening my palms on his chest. His heart raced under my hand as I curled my fingers into the rough fabric of his jumpsuit. “You have to stop deciding what’s best without discussing it with, ya know, me.”

He nodded. “I don’t know if I even thought it through.”

“Makes me feel so much better,” I deadpanned.

“I’m an asshole.”

“You’re a martyr. That’s worse.”

“But you still love me, right?”

I rolled my eyes. “Yeah. I guess I do.”

Luca backed me into the corner of the room, away from the door’s line of sight. “Tell me. Tell me you love me. I need to hear it.”

“You first.”

He rested his forehead against mine. Despite the harsh smell of whatever soap they had him using, there was still his essential Luca-ness. “I love you, Sasha. I’ve loved you from

the moment I saw you and have only fallen more in love with every passing day.

“I love your fire, your loyalty, your strength. I love your forgiving heart and the fact that, for some reason, you see something in me worth saving. I love that you’ve given me a reason to live outside all the bullshit in my life.

“I’m yours, Sasha. Always have been. Always will be. You want me on my knees?” He dropped to the ground, placing a kiss on my stomach. “I’ll live on them. You want me to crawl through glass? You got it. You want me to cut out my heart? Done. I’d do anything for you.”

I burrowed my fingers in his hair, pulling his head back. “You can never shut me out like that again.”

“I promise.”

Seeing Luca on his knees, begging and pleading for my love, was a heady thing. “I love you, Luca.”

He smiled up at me, his eyes shimmering. “I’ve missed you.” He wrapped his hands around the back of my thighs and slid them up. “How did I think not seeing you would be easier?”

“You’re a fool.” My breath caught as his fingertips played with the edge of my panties.

“Mhm.” Luca’s head disappeared under my skirt.

I turned my head and realized that if I could see the hallway out the small square window, anyone walking by could see inside the room. “I don’t know if—” Luca’s nose running along my pussy shut me right up. He gripped my ass and tried to shove his face between my legs. “This skirt doesn’t really allow for that.” I rested my hands on top of his head.

Luca came out from underneath, his black hair disheveled. With a wicked grin, he shoved the whole damn thing to my hips, sliding my panties to my ankles. “We probably have five minutes before they do checks. What do you want?”

There was no question. I kicked the scrap of lace across the room and grabbed ahold of his messy waves, pulling him to his feet. “Fuck me.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He quickly shrugged off the top of his hideous jumpsuit and pulled out his already hard cock. Hooking my knee around his hip, he thrust into me, and we both groaned. “Fuck, I’ve missed this.”

“Me too,” I panted, grabbing his shoulders as he pounded into me. Cupping his cheeks, I kissed him, biting his bottom lip when he grabbed my other leg and slammed me against the wall. Every thrust drove me into the cinderblocks, rubbing my shoulder blades against the ridges. The bite of pain reminded me this was real. Luca was real.

When I broke the kiss, our foreheads stayed pressed together, our eyes burning into one another. The hollowness I’d felt in his absence slowly filled as our breathing fell in sync.

“I love you,” Luca rasped out. Small beads of sweat rolled down his temples as he hefted me up, repositioning his legs and thrusting deeper. I tightened my thighs around his waist and searched above me for something to hold on to. Stretching an extra inch, I curled my fingers around a metal bar.

Luca buried his face into my neck, kissing and biting the sensitive skin there. Every word of praise and love intensified my determination to get him home, re-energizing my resolve to take down every obstacle. I grabbed the back of his head with one hand and pulled it back, catching his half-lidded

gaze. Those expressive brown eyes that were always watching me made the warmth in my chest explode. How had I survived without him for a month? I needed him. I needed this.

Heat radiated to the tips of my fingers and toes. My skin tingled as I slid against him, making everything sensitive to his touch. I fought against the growing tension in my body, not wanting the moment to end.

Luca kissed me, his tongue gently caressing mine. The sensation was directly opposed to the brutal pace of his hips or the concrete wall behind me. Moaning into his mouth, my back bowed, pressing my chest to his. Our hearts raced against each other as our lungs fought for air. He snuck his hand between us, his thumb expertly finding my clit. The pressure from his hand, and the motion from his thrusts, set me off like a firecracker. Wave after wave of pleasure passed through me, ringing me out as I clung to him. I grabbed his cheeks, crushing my lips to his as he groaned out his release, his jaw going slack under my hands.

Biting my bottom lip, Luca pulled back and mumbled, “Fuck.”

“Yeah.” I stayed wrapped around him until he softened and slipped from me. “We should probably . . .”

Luca cleared his throat. “Yeah.” He eased one of my legs down, then the other, smoothing my skirt, so I was presentable. Caressing my cheek, he shook his head. “I was so fucking wrong.”

I bit the fleshy part of his palm, and he jerked it back. “You were. Imagine thinking us being apart was the right choice.”

He chuckled and pulled me to the table. “I’ll spend the rest of our lives making it up to you. You want some rice?”

“I ate but go ahead. I’m guessing the food here doesn’t live up to your standards.”

Luca took a bite and closed his eyes with a hum. “You’d be right. Luckily, there’s commissary and a guy in here runs a cooking show from his cell. I’ve learned some tricks.”

“A cooking show?”

“Oh yeah. It’s pretty easy to sneak in a cell phone.”

“So you could’ve been calling me?”

Luca swallowed and set down the container. “Yes. And from this point forward, I will call you every day. I promise.”

Nodding, I pushed a stray piece of rice around the table. “It’s going to take some time for me to get over all this. You get that, right?”

“Yes. Be mad at me for as long as you need to, but please give me a chance to make it right.”

Luca ate while I filled him in over the past month, then I remembered what I’d grabbed from home. “I found something in our room.”

He tilted his head, chewing the last bite of lo mein as he wiped his hands with a thin, cheap napkin. When I pulled out the small white box, Luca’s expression fell.

“You never opened it.”

“Yeah.” He eyed my extended hand with apprehension. “I wasn’t ready.”

Frowning, I brought the box to my chest. “Oh. It was under the bed, so I thought maybe you had misplaced it.”

I moved to put it back in my purse, but Luca caught my wrist. “Just give me a minute.” He dropped his hands to his lap, rubbing up and down his thighs.

“Okay.”

“It’s just a lot. I’ve seen a hundred guys come and go, but Pete was different.” Luca bit the inside of his cheek and hung his head. “Opening this would mean he’s really gone.” When his eyes met mine, they were full of tears he hadn’t shed before or after the funeral.

“Why don’t we wait until you’re home?” I rested my hand on top of his and squeezed.

He shook his head. “No. Let’s do it now.”

Guilt that I hadn’t thought through bringing the box to Luca in jail ate at me as I watched him hold it. Fingers shaking, he gently opened the paper top. Inside was a square, velvet jewelry box and a folded piece of paper. Luca set the box on the table and hesitantly removed the piece of paper. “A note,” he croaked out.

While he read, the paper creased in his tight grip, and Luca sniffed. After a couple minutes, he handed me the letter and took the jewelry box in his hand. When he snapped it open, a sob left his lips.

Cushioned in black velvet was a signet ring with an engraved M. I dropped the letter on the table and scooted my chair closer. “Luca?”

He wiped his eyes and took the ring between his thumb and forefinger. “It’s my dad’s ring.”

I gasped and looked between him and the ring. “But I thought . . .”

“Me too. Apparently, Pete took it and saved it for me.” He leaned his head toward the letter. “He thought I was better than my dad and would do the right thing for the family.” A sad laugh fell from his lips. “He’d be so disappointed.” His pained eyes stayed on the ring as he mumbled, tears streaming freely down his cheeks. “I haven’t even found his killer.”

“I might have an idea on that.”

Luca frowned at me, fisting the ring in his hand.

“Lorenzo.”

“How do you know?” He sat up, his sad gaze hardening into anger.

“He said something at the Fourth of July Gala that makes me think if he didn’t do it, he ordered it.”

He slammed his fist on the table. “Fuck. And I’m stuck in here.”

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have told you.”

“No. You did the right thing.” He exhaled deeply and picked up my hand, kissing each knuckle. “You’re one of the few people I know who will tell me how it is. It’s one of the things I love about you.” The fluorescent light above us flickered, sucking some of the warmth from the moment. Luca put the ring back and snapped the velvet box closed. “Can you take this home with you? I don’t want anything to happen to it.”

“Of course.” I put it in my purse while he folded the note and slid it into his pocket. “How much time are you allowed with your lawyer?”

A knock at the door startled us. Through the tiny window, Fern stared at me with an awkward smile. At least the bitch

could read a room.

Luca turned away from the door and used the sleeve of his jumpsuit to wipe his face. When he turned back around, he was a blank slate.

Fern inched the door open, sticking her head through the gap. “Sorry to bother you. I left my purse.” She pointed to the large tan tote in the chair next to me.

Standing, I picked it up and took it to the door. The heel of my shoe caught on something, and when I glanced down, Fern did too. My black, lacy underwear stood in stark contrast to the sterile white tile. Grinning, I handed her the bag and scooped up my panties. “Oops. Almost forgot them. How embarrassing.”

Fern stammered, slowly disappearing out the door until it clicked shut. I watched her race down the hallway through the tiny window, laughter bubbling up when she struggled to get buzzed out.

“Should we get new counsel?” Luca asked from behind me.

“No. Let her keep doing what she’s doing, but I think it’s time to bring in some help to get Tootsie and Zoe home. Then we won’t need her.”

“You have a plan?”

“I think so.”

NINE

Frankie hovered over my shoulder as I turned off the burner on the boiling potatoes. “Can I help with anything?”

“No. I got this.” I checked the time on the oven clock, pleased that, for once, I timed everything exactly right.

“O-kay,” he sang and sat at the kitchen island.

I glared over my shoulder as the steam from draining the potatoes in the sink hit me in the face. “It’s been a while since I burned anything.”

Frankie lifted his eyebrows and pursed his lips as he tapped away on his phone.

“And there he goes. A tap, tap, tappy.” I mashed the potatoes with butter, heavy whipping cream, milk, salt, and pepper. The timer dinged, and I took out the pot roast to rest on the stovetop. I was the very picture of a domestic goddess. “I feel like I’m forgetting something.” The dining room was set, the wine uncorked, and the dessert from Loretta sat on the counter under the glass cake holder to keep it safe from Ryan.

“Salad,” Frankie said without looking up.

“Thank you.” I pulled the undressed mix from the refrigerator, begrudgingly thankful for my taciturn companion. “I always forget something.”

“Mhm.” Frankie stood and left the kitchen. Just seconds later, the doorbell rang.

“Freaky,” I mumbled as I poured Loretta’s homemade dressing over the salad and shook.

“It smells good in here,” Marco called from the hallway.

“Don’t sound so surprised.”

Frankie and Marco laughed and joined me in the kitchen.

Marco dropped a kiss on my cheek and asked, “Can I help?”

“You can carry this into the dining room for me?”

“You got it.”

I ran my hands down the front of Luca’s “I am the heat in the kitchen” apron—a joke gift I got him for his birthday—and untied it.

“Did Loretta make the cake?” Marco lifted the glass lid and inhaled. “Triple chocolate.” He closed his eyes and groaned.

“You know it’s your fault you have to eat secondhand cake, right? Why don’t you try being nice?”

He set the top down gently and shook his head. “I wouldn’t give her the satisfaction of knowing her cakes are the best I’ve ever had. Outside of her cooking, she’s insufferable.”

“She’s sweet, and you’re an asshole.”

“So?” Marco shrugged as the doorbell rang again.

“Showtime!” I threw the apron over a barstool and rushed to the front door. Swinging it open, I smiled at Ashley and Malcolm. “Welcome! Come on in.” As they passed me, I

quickly stepped out onto the porch. “You hungry? I could bring you a plate.”

Tommy’s cheeks darkened, and he pushed off the railing to stand straight. “You don’t have to do that.”

“It’s no problem. Sorry, you can’t join us.”

“I’m on the clock, ma’am.”

I grimaced. “Nope. We’re not doing the ma’am thing. I get you’re eighteen—”

“Twenty-one.”

“Potato, poh-ta-toe. You’re a fucking baby. Anyway. Call me Sasha, or avoid addressing me at all.”

He gave me a shy smile and nodded.

Back inside, Ashley and Malcolm had joined Frankie and Marco in the kitchen. They stood on either side of the island, politely smiling but not speaking.

“Can I get you a glass of wine?”

“Yes please.” Ashley smiled.

As I poured, she inspected my dinner offering. “This looks amazing. You’ve really perfected your mom’s pot roast.”

“It was all Luca. The man has a way with seasoning and herbs.” I handed everyone a glass and then plated the food, just how Luca had shown me. “Why don’t you all go have a seat? I’ll be right there.”

The men left the room, but Ashley hung back. “I’ll help you carry the plates in.”

“Bless you.” I pointed the big fork I used to carve up the pot roast. “I like this dress.”

“Thank you. And did you see how Malcolm matched?”

Sure enough, Malcolm matched Ashley’s vibrant yellow dress with a softer yellow button-down shirt that popped next to his dark brown skin. “Did you pick it out?”

She shook her head, a grin lighting her face. “Nope. It was an accident.”

“Ah. You’ve officially hit the accidental twinning level of your relationship. Congratulations.”

“The dream.” Ashley fluttered her eyelashes, her hand on her chest, before picking up a couple of plates. “Let me carry those.” She picked up two, and I balanced the remaining three like the Moretti’s waiters do on a busy night.

I ran a plate out to Tommy, and by the time I was back, the guys had served the salads. Once everyone settled in with their meals, we ate, politely chatting until I cut and served the cake.

“So, Malcolm, I, uh, have a question.”

He covered his mouth while he chewed, nodding for me to continue.

“We need you to find someone. Two someones.” I glanced at Frankie and Marco, who were busy enjoying Loretta’s perfect dessert.

Malcolm swallowed and took a sip of his coffee. “Who?”

“Zoe Chronis and Torquato Adamo.” I cut a small bite with my fork and quickly shoved it into my mouth. The decadent chocolate hit my tongue, but it couldn’t distract me from the look of shock on his face.

“They’re alive?”

I took a sip of my coffee. “Yes.”

“But Luca is locked up for killing them?”

“Yes.”

Malcolm took the napkin off his lap and balled it up on the table. “But they’re actually just missing?”

I looked at Marco and Frankie for help, but the assholes were already working on a second piece of cake. “Luca’s lawyer is proving to be a dud, so we need to bring those two home breathing so Luca can walk. They’re on the run from both our families, and we’re having some internal issues.” I tapped my nails against my coffee cup and sighed. “We need to hire someone we can trust, and that’s you.”

He lifted a thick black eyebrow and glanced at Marco. “So there’s no bad blood from my brother-in-law following Sasha?”

He shrugged and tilted his head as he considered Malcolm. “You told Sasha as soon as you found out. As far as I’m concerned, that’s the kind of man I can trust.”

“You jumped him,” Malcolm said with no heat in his voice. He seemed more confused than upset.

Marco stone faced him, neither confirming nor denying the Morettis gave the beating. A minute passed, and zero blinking occurred. Their eyeballs must have been so dry. I considered getting a spray bottle and misting them.

Frankie broke up the stare-down when he asked, “Is it cool I have a third piece?”

I rolled my eyes and shoved the cake platter toward him. The greedy bastard took yet another slice while the rest of us sat tense.

“Okay. I’ll do it. Any info on their last known whereabouts?”

Frankie groaned around his fork, completely unbothered by the awkward tension that had settled in the room.

Marco pulled a slip of paper from his pocket and slid it over. “This is the last place I traced them to.”

“They’re still in Missouri?” Malcolm put the scrap of paper in his pocket and frowned. “Shouldn’t be too hard to track them down if they’ve stayed close.”

“Really?” A glimmer of hope in the shape of a tall, handsome, tracker man sat in front of me. “You think you can find them?”

“If they’re alive and local, it shouldn’t be too hard.” He was so nonchalant. I truly believed him.

“Perfect!” I clapped and picked up my fork, taking a celebratory bite.

Marco took his phone out and quickly typed away. “I just wired you a retainer. The rest will come when you find them.”

Malcolm pulled his phone from his pocket, nearly choking when he saw the amount Marco had sent over.

“That enough?” Marco finished his coffee.

“More than.”

The night wrapped up pretty quickly after we cleared the dessert plates. Ashley and Malcolm basically ran from their dinner with mobsters—which was understandable—while Frankie waltzed out of my home and into the night.

“You rinse, and I’ll load the dishwasher?” Marco rolled up his sleeves as I put the stack of plates in the left side of the

sink.

“You don’t have to help.”

“It’s no problem.”

“If you insist.”

Marco chuckled and motioned for me to start. “How are you doing with everything?”

The plate in my hand needed more than a rinse, so I soaped up the sponge. “You want to have a heart-to-heart?”

He shook his head. “Forget it.”

“No, no. If you want to chat, let’s do it.” I flicked water in his face, and he frowned, making me laugh. “Now that I’ve seen Luca, and Malcolm is on board, I’m feeling a lot better. What about you?”

“Eh.” Marco took the plate from me and put it in the dishwasher.

“Come on. You’ve got to give me more than that.”

He worked his jaw and sighed. “It’s nothing I can’t handle.” He took a handful of silverware out of the sink. “But I won’t lie—I can’t wait for Luca to get out.”

“That’s fair.”

We fell into a companionable silence as I rinsed and he loaded the dishes. As he hit the start button on the dishwasher, I finally worked up the courage to ask about Adriana. “I hate to ask, but is everything all right with Adriana’s mom?”

Marco’s face hardened. “She started treatment and feels like shit, so Adriana’s been staying there as much as she can before school starts for Dante. After that, the plan is for them to go up on the weekends.”

“That’s rough.”

“Yeah. But Dr. Wilson’s optimistic since they caught it so early. He was a tremendous help in convincing her to start treatment.” Marco frowned as he washed his hands.

“You don’t sound happy about that.”

He thoughtfully dried his hands, his lips pressing into a hard line.

“Forget I said anything.”

I’d just settled into bed when I got a call from an unsaved number on the burner Marco had given me.

“Hello?”

“Sasha?”

“Luca,” I shouted as I sat up, knocking Ryan off my stomach. Petting him in apology, I grinned. “How are you?” Luca laughed, and I rolled my eyes. “Right. You’re in jail, so not great.”

“I’m doing exponentially better than I was before yesterday.”

“Oh. You mean when your amazing wife busted in that joint, set you straight, rocked your world, and officially hired a PI to find our missing friends?”

Luca chuckled. “Malcolm agreed?”

“That he did. So now we have plans A, B, and C to get you out.”

“You’re amazing.”

I fell back into my pillows with a sigh. “I’ll never get tired of hearing that.”

“Fern came back today to apologize and show me the prosecution’s first draft of a deal.”

“Fuck that deal. Either we handle that little rat bastard and they come home, or we find them and drag them back. Fern’s just there as window dressing at this point.”

“I’m sure she’d love to hear that.” Luca’s deep voice vibrated through my phone, and I closed my eyes, savoring it. “I miss you.”

I rolled to my side. “I miss you too, but I have a confession.”

“What is it?” Luca’s voice held a hint of worry.

“I don’t miss your rules for the bathroom.”

Luca laughed loudly.

“You would be horrified to see how many things I leave on the counter every night.”

“The horror,” he said, his voice light. “And I can assume you’re leaving dishes in the sink?”

“Most of the time, yes, but not tonight.”

Luca gasped. “Are you telling me that Sasha Mitchell did the dishes after a meal? A meal with guests, no less?”

“That I did, but I had some help.”

“Frankie?”

“Marco.”

“No way,” Luca said loudly, then lowered his voice. “He hates doing the dishes. When we were kids, his dad put him on

dishes at the restaurant, and he swore he'd never do another dish."

"I rinsed, and he loaded. Pretty impressive, huh?"

"Indeed. What else? Tell me everything."

For the next ten minutes, I filled him in on everything I'd done that day, down to how many sprigs of thyme I used for the pot roast.

"That's one too many, Sash."

"It was delicious, so shut it."

Luca laughed and then sighed. "Thank you for taking my call."

"Thank you for pulling your head out of your ass and making the call."

"Touche. You have no idea how much I appreciate you, Sasha."

Playfully, I said, "Why don't you give me a small taste of that appreciation?"

"Go get your pink vibrator," he ordered, surprising me in the best way.

"Yes, sir!" I reached into my side table and pulled out ole faithful. "Got it."

Luca laughed at the obscenely loud buzz. "Been keeping it close?"

"Let's just say this little guy has been earning his keep. He deserves all the double As money can buy. Name brand even."

"I don't doubt it." Luca cleared his throat, and when he spoke, the mood shifted. "Take off everything but your panties." His deep voice sent a thrill through me.

I whipped my top off. “Done.”

“Turn on the side lamp and prop yourself up on some pillows. I want you to be able to see what you’re doing to that beautiful body.”

My skin flushed as I clicked on the light. Once I was situated, I murmured, “Okay.”

“Tell me what you see,” Luca husked.

“Goosebumps.” I blinked, watching them spread down my limbs. “I have goosebumps. My nipples are rosy and hard. I wouldn’t know I was wearing underwear if it wasn’t for the hint of blue lace on my hips.”

“Turn the vibrator on and circle your nipples with the tip.”

I swallowed and put it on its lowest setting. Grazing my nipple, my breath caught in my throat. With every brush against my skin, the throb between my legs intensified, and my skin tingled.

“Your little gasps are making my cock hard.”

“Touch yourself,” I moaned out.

“You’re not in charge right now. Just for that, turn up the vibrator and slowly drag it down to your pussy, but don’t you dare touch it.”

The vibrator revved, and I shivered when it touched my breastbone. Luca’s breathing over the phone increased, and all I could picture was the way he looked the day before. I stopped above my underwear—the vibration making me ache to be filled.

“Are you wet, Sasha? Is your cunt dripping for me?” I gasped at the harshness in his voice, the crudeness of his

words. “Are your panties drenched? Touch them, but no stroking.”

I ran a finger over the damp fabric and bit back a moan.

“I said no stroking.” He gritted out. “Your body is mine, Sasha. You don’t touch it until I tell you. Understand.”

“Yes.” I swallowed thickly. “I’m so fucking wet for you.”

“Slide your fingers into your panties, get them wet, and taste yourself.”

“Luca,” I moaned.

“Do it, Sasha.”

Maneuvering around my stomach and planting my feet flat on the bed, I watched my red nails disappear under the blue lace. I ran my fingers through the wetness, my slick flesh sensitive and wanting. “God, Luca. Please.”

“Fingers in your fucking mouth, Sasha.”

Dragging my hand up my body, the smell of my arousal hit my nose before I closed my lips around my fingers, and my eyes fluttered shut.

“I’m so fucking jealous. There’s nothing like the taste of your pussy. Suck your fingers clean, baby. Don’t waste a drop.” He waited a moment before giving me my next command. “Turn the vibrator on low and run it over your pussy but keep your panties on.”

“O-okay.” Letting my knees fall open, I tentatively dragged the tip across my lace-covered pussy.

“Does that feel good?”

“Yes.” I shivered, my clit pulsing, demanding more.

After a torturous few minutes, Luca rasped, “Turn it up.”

I groaned but followed his direction. The more intense vibration offered zero relief to the ache building deep inside me. “Luca, I need—”

“What do you need?”

His cock.

“More.”

“Always so greedy.”

“Luca,” I whimpered, my legs trembling.

“Take off your panties.”

Relieved, I dropped my phone and vibrator and shimmied out of the damp lace. When I picked up my phone, Luca chuckled.

“Now what?” I couldn’t function outside the little game Luca had set up. Nothing existed but his voice on the line.

“Tease yourself, Sasha. I want to hear you pant.”

The vibration against my clit pulled a loud moan from me. I did exactly what Luca asked and teased my slit, never sliding the vibrator in, no matter how much I wanted to.

“That’s it, baby. Don’t let go until I tell you to.”

My skin grew damp with the effort it took to stave off my orgasm. I closed my eyes, focusing on Luca’s deep breathing, the cool air on my skin, and the unbearable feeling of want between my legs. The anticipation of what promised to be a glorious climax cleared my mind.

“Come.”

With that one word, I slid the vibrator inside, and my pussy gripped it. Waves of pleasure exploded and radiated through my body making my back arch off the bed and my

hand still. The sound of my heavy breathing nearly drowned out the noise of the vibrator, but not Luca's voice in my ear.

“Beautiful,” he said, his voice thick with lust.

“What about you?” I lay limp but ready to use my words to get him off.

“That's not—” Luca hung up, leaving me dazed.

Clandestine phone sex while your husband is in prison was unsurprisingly complicated. There wasn't even time for goodbyes.

I tossed my vibrator on Luca's side of the bed and burrowed under the covers, thankful that I had my Luca back but still missing him all the same.

TEN

“I guess just call me back.” I hung up and frowned at Ashley. “I haven’t heard from Adriana in weeks. She’s been back and forth so much I keep missing her. I hope she’s taking care of herself.”

“Is her mom doing any better?”

“No idea. Marco told me she started treatment, and now they’re waiting to see if it works.”

Ashley took a sip of her coffee and leaned back in her office chair. “I’m sure she’ll reach out when she gets a minute. Sounds like she’s going through it.”

“I know. I just wish I could be there for her. Have you talked to Jazz recently?”

Ashley smiled and picked up her phone. “I did. Here, check out the pictures she sent me from the proposal.”

That bittersweet feeling hit me square in the chest as I scrolled through the beautiful pictures of my friends smiling and kissing on the beach. Jazz and Imani were perfect for each other, and I couldn’t be happier for them.

“It was sweet of you to book the trip,” Ashley said, pulling my attention from the pictures.

I handed her back her phone. “It was the least I could do. Just wait until their bachelorettes.”

“Maybe by then—”

“I’m not holding my breath.” Choices have consequences, and my ass was catching a lot of them.

I bit the inside of my cheek and opened the email Joey sent over from the city. “The building permits are a go, but they’re holding the liquor licenses over our heads, and Beth’s mom has pulled some strings with the gaming commission. So, I guess we continue on and hope Marco can grease some wheels.”

Ashley laughed and shook her head. “Spoken like a true mob wife.”

“I would do a Godfather impression, but my impressions are terrible.”

“Your self-awareness is a gift.”

“Thank you.” I sighed and glanced at the clock. “Woof. It’s seven? I think it’s time to pack it in.”

We started straightening up, and Ashley’s phone dinged with a text. She excitedly grabbed it. As she read, her face fell.

“You staying with me again tonight?”

Ashley absentmindedly dropped the phone in her bag and looked up at me. “No. I need to be able to sleep at my house without Malcolm.”

“If you say so.” When Ashley didn’t laugh, I added, “I’m sorry.”

She waved me off, and I followed her to the door. “No need to apologize. I’m just being a big baby. He’s only been

gone four days, and he said he should be back tomorrow.”

Excitement coursed through me. “Really?”

“I bet he’s emailed you an update.”

Scott was still banging around his workshop as we went out the front door. Ashley walked to her car, and I yelled, “Call me if you change your mind!”

“Will do.”

“Sasha.”

I yelped, spinning around, my bag flying, ready to attack, but it was only Frankie. “A bell. You need a fucking bell.” Slapping his arm, I pushed him toward the car.

“Or maybe you should pay more attention to your surroundings. It’s like you have no survival instinct.”

“Shut up,” I grumbled, getting into the passenger’s seat of Frankie’s luxury ride.

“I have a pickup to make and don’t have time to drop you off.”

“Okay.” I set my purse at my feet, curious about where we were going.

He side-eyed me as he drove through a part of the city I didn’t recognize. Turn after turn, and I was completely lost. Ten minutes later, he parked in front of a pawn shop that already had the metal gates down.

“You stay here.”

“Okay.” I shrugged and looked out the tinted windows at the three men standing under the neon sign.

Frankie paused with his hand on the handle. “That’s it? Okay? You’re not going to argue? This feels too easy.”

“If you say so.” I took out my phone, eager to check for an email from Malcolm.

“I don’t trust this,” he mumbled but still got out of the car, the locks sounding behind him.

Sure enough, buried in between coupons and sale ads was an email from Malcolm.

Found them. Details to follow.

“Amazing.” Tears burned at the back of my eyes. I tapped my foot, staring at the pawn shop as if I could draw Frankie out with the power of thought.

As the minutes ticked by, I had to accept that my mind wasn’t that powerful. Bored as hell, I answered a few emails and texted Adriana.

ADRIANA: I’ll call you tomorrow.

“I’ll believe it when I see it.”

The tiny interior of the foreign sports car left my legs cramped and my toes tingling in my heels. Try as I might, no amount of shaking would fix it. Despite my assurances to stay in the car, I was tempted to get out. When I was two seconds away from being the pain in the ass Frankie always accused me of being, he walked out of the alley between the Golden Pawn Shop and New Nails Nail Salon carrying a duffle bag. He tossed it in the trunk and got in the driver’s seat.

“Took you long enough.”

“Sorry. These old guys can be chatty.”

“What’s in the bag?”

Frankie pulled onto the street, not answering me, which in Frankie meant, “none of your fucking business.”

Such a sweet guy.

He drove across the city toward the river and away from home. The farther we went, the darker it got outside. “Where are we going?”

“The drop,” he said as he pulled into a vacant lot next to a warehouse. One lone floodlight illuminated the front of the building. “Stay here.”

“No.” I took off my seatbelt. “My leg is asleep, and if you get to gossiping in there, it might have to be amputated. Let’s go.” Sliding my phone into the pocket of my dress, I didn’t wait for him as I got out of the car.

“Motherfucker,” Frankie hissed as he went to the trunk and then rushed to catch up. “Keep quiet and try to make yourself less . . . noticeable.”

“No way, no how, baby cakes. This girl was born to shine.”

“You’re going to get me killed.”

I gasped and looped my arm through his. “Never.”

Frankie held open a rusty metal door, and we went inside. My eyes slowly adjusted to the dimly lit bay while Frankie walked ahead of me. “Carmine here?” He threw the duffle bag over his shoulder.

“Yeah. Up in the office. Who’s that?” A short guy leaning against the wall gestured to me. “You know Carmine doesn’t like women in his warehouse.”

“I think he’ll make an exception for the boss’s wife.”

The chatter died down, and suddenly, all eyes were on me. Four men sat at a card table, cigarettes hanging from their lips. Big stacks of money were piled in front of them, hands comically suspended in the air holding grimy dollar bills.

Toward the back of the cavernous room were rows of tables stacked with bundles of plastic-wrapped cocaine. A few young guys bustled around, moving boxes and loading a truck.

A second-floor door opened, and Tommy rushed down the shaky metal stairs toward us. When he saw me, he came to an abrupt stop. “Mrs. Moretti?” His dark eyes darted to Frankie, then back to me.

“Keep an eye on her while I go talk to your uncle.”

“Yes, sir.”

Frankie gave me one last stern look, then jogged up the steps, the structure barely moving under his sure steps.

“Would you like a coffee or water?” Tommy guided me toward a long fold-out table set with an ancient coffee machine and an assortment of paper and plastic eat ware.

Eyeing the sludge at the bottom of the pot, I opted for a bottle of water from the dinged-up white fridge.

The short guy pushed off the wall and sauntered over. “Sorry about the boss.”

“Thanks.”

He nodded as he poured burnt coffee into a Styrofoam cup. “Can’t remember the last time a boss got locked up.”

Tommy cleared his throat, and the older man held up his free hand as he took a sip of coffee, wincing at the temperature—or maybe the taste. He joined the money guys, and they went back to shooting the shit, unconcerned with my presence, which was a relief.

“I lost a good chunk of change on that fight.” A middle-aged man with dark, slicked-back hair took a rubber band off a

stack of hundreds. He was one of Lorenzo's escorts out of town.

"You shouldn't have bet against the kid, Johnny." a man I recognized from the night Lorenzo was run out of town gestured at Tommy with a stack of hundreds. "He's a sure thing."

Johnny glared at Tommy. "Motherfucker shouldn't have been able to take out Sammy, but here we are."

The other two guys at the table laughed, and I realized one of them was also in the penthouse on the Fourth.

I glanced at Tommy, and he gave me a pained smile. "Sammy's my older brother."

"And he's a fucking beast," Johnny chimed in from the table.

"You fight? Where?"

Tommy opened his mouth to answer, but the short man beat him to it. "The kid here does more than fight." He slapped Tommy on the back and then pointed at the table. "Lenny, Jackie, and I cleaned up last Saturday. I was able to take my wife out to dinner and a show at the Fox."

"What show?"

"Les Misérables."

"A classic." I pointed at Johnny. "So it's Johnny, Lenny, Jackie, and . . ."

The guy with a low ponytail waved a handful of bills. "Dan."

"Dan."

“And I’m Big Al.” The shortest guy’s name was Big Al. Of course it was. “Tommy, get the missus a chair.”

Tommy’s cheeks flamed, and he ran to the back of the warehouse and back carrying a metal folding chair. He set it up at the empty table next to the money sorting, brushing dust off the seat.

“Thank you.” I smiled at him and sat. “Why don’t you join me?”

He looked at the guys, then toward the office upstairs.

“Unless you have something else you need to do, I’m fine here with the guys.”

“No. I can take a break.” And he was off, jogging to grab another chair and back. The chair was placed between the other mobsters and me, Tommy sitting perfectly straight and at the ready.

Johnny tapped the table to straighten the bills, and the other guys got back to feeding the counting machines, bundling, and stacking.

“You heard about Chicago?” Big Al asked the guys while giving me a sly look.

Johnny scoffed. “I’ve never been happier to be in St. Louis. Shit’s going sideways up there. My sister’s husband is thinking about moving down here and getting hooked up with Carmine.”

Dan grunted, his focus on feeding money through the counter.

“Here, there. Shit’s been weird for a while.” Lenny shrugged and looked my way. “No disrespect.”

He wasn't wrong, but he was abso-fucking-lutely disrespectful.

"None taken. When things are in flux, only the strong survive." I smiled and took a sip of water as Tommy grinned at me.

Big Al slapped Lenny on the back. "You better watch your mouth, or natural selection just might bite you in the ass." The guys laughed, but Lenny didn't. No, he scowled at Al.

The table fell silent as the counting machines whirled. I took out my phone, and Tommy shook his head. Frowning, I dropped it back in my pocket, and he nodded.

No cellphone in the warehouse. Got it. Settling back into the squeaky metal chair, trying to get comfortable despite my thighs hanging over the tiny seat, I looked around the room. Drugs, dirty money, and mobsters? I'd walked into a fucking Scorsese film.

The door to the office upstairs swung open, and Frankie flew down the stairs. When he got to the bottom, he jerked his chin at me. I stood with my hand on my chest. "Me?"

"Time to go," he gritted out and left the warehouse without waiting for me.

"Well, it was nice meeting you fellas. See you around!" The guys shouted their goodbyes as I booked it to the car. With how he was acting, I wasn't sure if Frankie would wait.

The sleek black sports car sat outside the door, running. Frankie jumped out and ran around the front to open my door. While I folded myself into the rich interior, he ran back to the driver's seat and drove off before I even had my seatbelt on.

"You okay?" I stared at his profile, not expecting an answer.

His jaw clenched, and he scratched the side of his neck. He twisted his lips to the side and took the on-ramp to the highway. After a heavy sigh, he said, “Carmine.”

That was it. How enlightening.

So, I waited, and eventually, Frankie turned off the radio. “Carmine took over the Gambini territory when my dad got sick, and now I’m stuck.”

“Is there anything you can do?” He glared at me, and I held my hands up. “Sorry. I’m sure you’ve considered every angle.”

“I don’t want to talk about this.”

“Consider the topic dropped. Oh. I heard from Malcolm.” I took my phone out and frowned at the dozen missed calls from Ashley. “I wonder what—” Hitting her contact, I nervously waited for the call to connect.

“Sasha?”

“Ashley, what’s—”

“Malcolm’s in the hospital. We’re at Mercy. Get here now!” The line went dead.

I dropped my hand and stared at the screen. “Uh. Take me to Mercy.”

“What’s going on?”

“It’s Malcolm.”

Frankie evaded traffic like a pro, driving through the city like a maniac. Screeching to a stop in front of the ER entrance, he said, “I’ll meet you inside.”

“Great.” I sprinted through the automatic doors and searched for Ashley among the people in the waiting room.

Not finding her, I went to the reception desk. “Excuse me?”

The nurse smiled up from her clipboard. “How can I help you?”

“I’m looking for Malcolm Bello.”

“Your relation to the patient?”

“Friend.”

She sighed and picked up the phone. “Ms. Brooks, I have a —” The nurse looked up at me with her eyebrows raised.

“Sasha Mitchell.”

“Will do.” She hung up the phone. “She’s coming out here to take you back.”

“Thank you.”

I stepped away from the desk and stared at the hallway that led back to the rooms, rocking back on my heels. The doors flew open, and out came my best friend, still dressed in her work clothes and looking mad as hell.

“Oh my God. Ashley, what—”

“Wait until we get to the room.” She gave me her back, and I had no choice but to follow, biting back the million questions running through my mind. Her small and quick steps created distance between us, giving me a perfect view of the tension in her shoulders.

When we got to the door, Ashley paused. “Let me be clear.” She glared at me. “Malcolm told me to call you. We will be having words once he tells you what he needs to tell you.”

“O-okay.” I was beyond confused.

She exhaled and shook her shoulders, forcing a smile on her face that made her dimples pop. As we entered the room, Ashley gently said, “Baby? Sasha’s here.”

“Good.” Malcolm sat up, wincing and grabbing his side. “I’ve got an update.” The fluorescent light overhead made him look ill, and for the first time since we’d hired him, I didn’t care about the update.

“That’s not important right now. What happened? Did you get in a car accident?”

Ashley pushed another pillow behind his back and kissed him on the cheek before sitting next to the bed.

Malcolm shook his head slowly, cautiously. “No. I found Tootsie.”

“Tootsie did this?” I dropped my purse on the tile floor and fell into the chair opposite Ashley.

“Yeah. He snuck up on me outside The Side Pocket, down on Cherokee.”

I scanned the bandages covering his head, his swollen left eye, and his split bottom lip. “I’m so sorry.”

Malcolm chuckled, then grabbed his ribs, shutting his good eye. “Shit.” He shoed Ashley’s hand away from where she was fussing with the blanket. “You’ve got nothing to apologize for. I got sloppy and didn’t blend in like I should have. I’d stepped outside to call Marco, and the next thing I know, I’m waking up in an ambulance.”

“They’re here in the city?”

“Probably not anymore.”

I nodded. “Well, I’m glad you’re okay.” We shared a smile, and I was relieved. That is until Ashley snorted, drawing our

attention to her fierce expression.

“You call this okay?” She gestured at his prone body.

“Baby—”

“No, Malcolm. When this job was explained to me, you weren’t supposed to make contact, and you said you’d come home as soon as you found them. Instead, you were beaten and left for dead in an alley.”

“If Tootsie Adamo wanted me dead, I’d be dead.”

Malcolm was right, but that fact did little to settle Ashley. If anything, it revved her up. “Oh! Well, that makes it all so much better.” Ashley looked at me and sucked in a breath. “You knew this could happen, and you asked him to do it anyway.”

I shook my head. “I didn’t think—”

“You never do. Why do we have to keep having this same conversation?” She started pacing the small room. “Only this time, instead of Malcolm’s asshole brother-in-law, it’s him! Which now that I say it, I can hear how stupid I sound. Why did I assume it would be different this time?”

“Ashley,” Malcolm groaned, throwing his head back on the pillow. The rage drained from her, and she was back at his side, ghosting her hands over him. “Can you check with the nurse and see if it’s time for more pain meds?”

“Sure.” She shot me a look as she left.

“Sasha, there’s one more thing. While I was running all over Missouri, I crossed paths with a couple of Chronis trackers. One of the guys was even at the bar tonight.”

“Fuck.”

“They may have tracked them down to The Side Pocket, but I don’t think they have any more intel than we do. Tootsie and Zoe are moving through the state using Moretti connections. Specifically motorcycle gangs and other small outfits.”

“That gives us something to work with. Thank you, Malcolm.”

“No need to thank me. Marco paid me an obscene amount of money, remember?”

“Yeah, but I get the feeling you went above and beyond.” I raised my eyebrow, and he shrugged, the dressing gown straining on his broad shoulders. “I’ll make sure you get the beat-down bonus.”

Malcolm swallowed back a laugh. “I appreciate it.” He took a drink of water, keeping the cup off his lip. His movements were awkward and stiff as he placed his empty cup on the mobile tray. “And don’t worry. I plan on keeping up surveillance remotely. Now that I know their habits, I should be able to keep tabs on them until you’re ready to bring them in.”

“Perfect.” I glanced at the door. “She’s so mad.”

“Yeah.”

“I keep fucking up with her.”

“This isn’t on you. I’m my own man and took the job, knowing the risks.” He scratched his jaw. The rasp of his five o’clock shadow against his manicured nails drew my attention to how disheveled he was beyond the bumps and bruises. His fingers tugged at the collar of his cotton gown, a sigh leaving his lips. “Ashley’s lashing out at you because I’m laying here

in this bed hurt. I bet once the swelling goes down, she's going to tear into my ass."

I picked up my purse. "I suppose I should prepare for my ass beating."

"It's going to take time for us all to get used to the new normal. She'll get there." Malcolm gave me a sympathetic smile.

"I hope you're right. I can't lose her."

He held his hand out for mine. "You won't."

I took it and gently squeezed. "I hope you're right." My eyes welled up. There were a lot of things I could handle, but Ashley hating me wasn't one of them.

The door swung open, and I dropped his hand, discreetly wiping under my eyes. A nurse went to work checking on Malcolm, and Ashley waved me to the door. I followed her down the hall and into the waiting room, where Frankie sat in one of the padded aqua chairs. She passed him without a look and walked straight out the sliding doors.

As soon as my foot hit the sidewalk, Ashley turned on me. "Let's get something straight." She glanced at the people trying to leave the ER behind me and grabbed my elbow, dragging me into the grass. "I'm mad."

"I know. And I'm—"

"Stop it," she hissed, glancing around until she locked eyes with Frankie. He lifted his chin, then gave her his back and some privacy. "No more apologies that you don't mean or that change nothing."

She looked at me expectantly, and I quickly nodded. "Okay."

“Malcolm is in there because of Luca’s family.”

I nodded.

“He’s in there because he got roped into all the shady shit. And right now? I need some distance from the shady shit.”

“Okay. I understand.”

Ashley narrowed her eyes, but the tension in her shoulders lessened. “That means he’s off the case.”

I licked my lips. Ashley and I had always been honest with each other, even if it was days later. “You might want to talk to Malcolm.” She arched her eyebrows, and I rushed to add, “He said it’ll all be remote.”

Her eyes darted toward the hospital and back to me. “I get that he’s a grown man and chose to take the job. Knowing him, he won’t give up until it’s done. But that doesn’t mean I like it.”

“Got it.”

Ashley’s expression softened, and her shoulders sagged. “Are you okay?”

My lips twitched. “I’m okay. Are you okay?”

“No,” she choked out, her face crumpling. I immediately hugged her tight, and she melted into me. “I was so scared when I got the call, but when I saw him?” Sobs shook her body, making her words broken.

“Shh. I know. I know.”

Her thin arms squeezed me. “Of course you do. You’ve been here more than once with Luca.” She let go, wiping her cheeks. “How do you do it?”

I shrugged, taking a tissue from my purse and handing it to her. “With a lot of wine, and you. You got me through.”

Ashley rolled her eyes and huffed.

“I’m serious. Being with a man like Luca means this kind of thing is always possible, but having you in my corner gives me the strength to keep going. You’ve never given up on me, and I don’t plan on giving up on you.”

“I don’t like this.” She licked the tears from her lips, her usually cheerful face drawn into a miserable frown.

“Me neither.”

Ashley sniffled. “I better get back in there before he makes another enemy.” She gave me a tight-lipped smile and turned back to the ER.

I watched her walk away, feeling useless as hell. Malcolm and Ashley had a lot to work through. The man worked with a PI, accepted a job from the mob, and he took a beating like it was no big deal. My gut told me this wouldn’t be the last time Malcolm stepped out of bounds.

Ashley was in for more than she expected, and I promised myself that I would be there to help her along the way. Like everything else we’d experienced since college, we’d figure it out together.

ELEVEN

After watching Ashley walk away and struggling to free my heels from the mud they'd sunken into, I limped to the car, feeling emotionally drained.

"Where to now?" Frankie asked as we got into the car, his voice void of emotion.

I sighed and leaned against the headrest. "Can we stop at Schnucks? I need to pick up a couple of things."

"Didn't Tommy go grocery shopping?"

Rolling my eyes, I flopped my head to the side and gave him a flat look. "I ran out of tampons, and I can't exactly put them on the shopping list, can I?"

Frankie nodded and left the parking garage. "I'll run in and —"

"I'd rather get them myself." He opened his mouth to argue, so I held up my hand. "I also want to wander the snack aisle. After all that—" I gestured toward the hospital as we passed. "I think I need to veg out and watch some trash on tv."

Frankie looked back to the road, and his hand flexed around the wheel. Alert and focused, he settled into silence.

I relaxed into the supple leather until Frankie made a sudden right-hand turn, then a left. "What the fuck?" I yelled

as I grabbed the door.

“An unmarked police car has been following us since the hospital.”

“Shit.”

The bright red Schnucks sign came into view, and I shut my eyes against the bright white lights of the parking lot as Frankie parked. “Let’s make this fast.”

I squinted at him and squeezed my purse against my stomach. “Wait. We’re not going home?”

“Fuck no. Cops are a hassle, but they aren’t going to do shit to us at the grocery store.” Frankie adjusted the gun under his jacket.

“If you’re sure.” I grabbed the handle and waited for him to give me one last nod before I opened the door and got out.

Frankie had just rounded the hood when a tall woman approached us. He quickly got between us, his hand on his gun, out of sight.

“Sasha?”

I let out a sigh of both relief and annoyance. “Daphne?” Frankie let me move to his side but grabbed my elbow when I went to take a step closer. Shaking off his hand but staying next to him, I asked her, “Were you following us?”

“Yes. We were at the hospital because of Malcolm Bello, and when I saw you, I took a chance. We need to talk.”

I frowned at her, crossing my arms, my heavy bag hanging from my fingertips. “So, talk.”

“Hand off your side piece, pretty boy.” Daphne jerked her chin toward Frankie.

“Get to the point, cop.”

Daphne scanned the parking lot, her eyes lingering on an old woman loading her trunk. “Zoe’s still alive.”

I laughed.

“Of course you know,” she mumbled. “Well, Cy Chronis doesn’t know that and put a hit out on Luca.”

Oh, yeah. Cy doesn’t know. Delusional.

Frankie glanced at me, then back at Daphne, removing his hand from his side.

“I’m doing all I can to keep Luca separate from gen pop, but Cy is greasing palms, and the warden doesn’t look too fondly on doing favors for the mob.”

Worry gripped me, but I kept my back straight and face neutral. “Okay.”

“Okay?” Daphne said coolly and took a step back. “You know, if we brought Zoe back, all this would go away.”

“And if the cops did their fucking job, they’d see there was no way that Luca did what he’s been accused of, but here we are.”

She scoffed. “If you told me what you know, I could help.”

“Or I could handle it myself and leave you to whatever it is you do to fill your time.” Daphne’s mouth opened, but I cut off whatever she was about to say. “Look, I appreciate what you’re trying to do here, but there’s no way I’m working with the cops. I’m sure you can appreciate that.” I started toward the store.

“You’re making a mistake!” She called after us.

“And you’re not a very good cop,” I said with a wave of my hand.

Frankie laughed, and I cut my eyes to him. “Can you believe that? Asking me to do her job for her?” I politely smiled at a mom and her kid as we went through the automatic doors.

Frankie grabbed a basket and handed it to me. “You get your snacks, and I’ll grab the tampons.”

We split up, and I raided the snack aisle, grabbing the staples for a relaxing night in. As I picked out a bottle of wine that Luca would turn his nose up to, Frankie rounded the corner, holding a big box of my preferred tampons.

When he dropped them in the basket, he eyed my bounty. “Got what you need?”

“Yep. Let’s go.”

An hour later, I was curled up on the couch, ready to watch nineties romcoms and veg out, when the burner phone rang.

“Luca?”

“Hey. What are you doing?”

“Getting ready to watch a movie and space out.”

He chuckled and sighed. “That sounds nice.”

I sat up and set the box of candy I was holding down. “You sound tired. Everything okay?”

“Just ready to be home with you. Tell me about your day.”

“Tootsie put Malcolm in the hospital, and now Ashley’s pissed. I can’t say I blame her. Seeing the person you love most in the world lying in a hospital bed is horrible.” I picked at the loose string on the quilt covering my lap as I confronted what was really bothering me. “I might’ve lost the last person not related to me who was on my side.” Rolling my eyes, I fell back into the couch. “And how fucking selfish do I sound?”

“It’ll be okay. You’ll help her through it.”

“Yeah. If she’ll let me.”

“She will. I have a feeling this won’t be the last time Malcolm gets into a scrape doing his job.”

“I hate that I’ve pulled her into all of . . . this.” Tommy walked past the window, making his rounds. When had I stopped jumping at their shadows? When had I memorized their security schedules?

“Baby, Malcolm has been in the game a lot longer than you’ve been with me. Ashley was always going to see some of this. Beating yourself up isn’t helping anything. Just be there for her and help her while Malcolm’s healing.”

I pursed my lips to keep from arguing. Luca would never allow me to take the blame for anything. It wasn’t in his DNA.

“A certain FBI agent followed me to the grocery store.”

“Oh, yeah?” Luca sounded surprised. Daphne Dukas was a source of both amusement and annoyance for him. She was always five steps behind but bold enough to come in, guns blazing.

“Please make sure you’re being careful. Cy is gunning for you.”

Luca let out a humorless laugh. “What’s new?”

“Luca—”

“I promise. I’m doing everything I can in here to keep out of trouble.”

I bit my lip to keep my smart remarks to myself and listened to Luca’s quiet breathing. Closing my eyes, I pretended like he was next to me. On a typical night at home, we’d be cuddled up, chatting and touching. “I miss you.”

“I miss you too, Sasha.” His gravelly voice was barely audible.

A tear rolled down my cheek, and I quickly brushed it away with a dry laugh. “I’m going to come see you this weekend.”

“Good.” Luca cleared his throat. “I have to go. Same time tomorrow night?”

“Mhm. I love you.”

“I love you more. Don’t stay up too late.”

“Yeah, yeah. You don’t do anything stupid.”

“Never.”

And the line went dead, which wasn’t surprising. Luca never said goodbye. Sometimes it was because he had to abruptly hang up because of guards and other inmates. Mostly it was an unspoken agreement to never utter those words to one another. Ending the calls was hard for me, but I knew it was even harder for Luca.

About halfway through the movie, my phone buzzed for the tenth time. It was a text from my mom. I hadn’t talked to her

in a couple of weeks and knew I needed to, but I wasn't ready to sort through what she could and couldn't know. Putting it back on the table, I settled back into the cushions.

When the doorbell rang, I sat down my gigantic bowl of popcorn and wiped my hands off. "I'm coming!"

Before I got there, the door swung open, and my mom stomped in. Red-lidded food containers filled her arms, and a joyless smile pulled at her lips. "Oh, good. You're still alive." She pushed past me and went straight to the kitchen.

As I stood stunned in the entryway, Tommy gave me an apologetic smile and gently shut the door. I was locked in the house with my angry mother.

Perfect.

Reluctantly, I shuffled toward the banging in the kitchen. "Mom?"

She turned dramatically, her eyes darting around the room as her mouth formed a perfect circle. "Oh! You remember who I am. I was worried you wouldn't recognize me."

Rolling my eyes, I sat at the island. "I get it. I should've called."

"You're damn right." She aggressively slapped a square of lasagna on a plate. "Imagine! Not hearing from your daughter for over a month. Your father is beside himself."

No, he wasn't. I knew my dad. The man was the most unbothered human on the planet.

Mom eyed me and huffed. "I bet you haven't had a home-cooked meal since Luca was taken in."

"I've cooked." Once, but she didn't need to know that.

“I’m sure.” She slid the plate toward me and started putting the containers she had brought away. “Eat.”

It was ten o’clock at night, and I’d had my fair share of snacks, so I wasn’t really hungry, but the look my mom gave me made me cut off the corner of her four-layer lasagna and take a bite. It was hot, meaning it must’ve just come out of the oven. “Did you just get off a shift?”

Mom nodded as she filled a glass of water from the tap. “Your dad is at the station for the next couple of days, so I figured I’d bring you a real meal.” She slammed the glass on the counter in front of me and crossed her arms. Her eyes fell to my belly. “You need to make sure you’re taking care of yourself.”

I shoved another bite in my mouth to keep the truth from spilling out.

Mom fidgeted with her wedding ring before sighing. “How are you doing?” She rubbed my arm and sat on the stool next to me.

Taking a sip of water, I rocked my head back and forth. “I’m okay. Just taking it one day at a time.”

“Oh, honey. I can’t imagine.”

I bit the inside of my cheek. There were so many things I wanted to tell her, but I couldn’t.

“Well, your dad and I are here for anything you need.”

I covered her hand on my arm and squeezed. “I know.”

We shared a small smile, and she left me to finish my food as she explained what was in all the containers. “There’s one more thing.”

“Yeah?” I dragged the garlic bread through the last of the sauce, hoping there was a pan of her fudgy brownies hidden somewhere.

“After the wedding, I started therapy.”

I jerked my head back. “You did what?”

Mom blew out a breath and looked at the ceiling. “Started therapy. When you said what you said—” I sat up straight, ready to defend myself, but she held up her hand and shook her head. “Your father gently suggested I talk to someone before you cut us out completely.” Her eyes shined with tears, and she wrung her hands in front of her. “He was right. I’d been so caught up in what I thought was right that I didn’t bother asking you what you wanted.”

“Okay?” Unease spread through me. Mom never apologized.

“Now, I’m not saying I’m okay with murder and all of that. But there was a time and place to talk to you about it, and thirty minutes after your wedding was ruined by the cops arresting your husband, wasn’t it.” She took the cover off a glass dish, and sure enough, there were a dozen of her fudge brownies. “As much as I wish you walked away from all this mess, I know Luca makes you happy. At the end of the day, that makes me happy.” She placed a chocolate square on a plate and pushed it toward me. “Happy Birthday, Sasha.”

My Birthday. I’d forgotten my birthday. Again.

Last year, it was my spiraling obsession with being and not being with Luca. This year was much the same, but we were married.

“Thanks, Mom.”

She grabbed a brownie and took a bite. Wide-eyed, I watched her eat the whole thing and then let out a content sigh. “Damn, I’m good. Aren’t you going to eat that?”

Nodding, I took a bite. But honestly? I didn’t taste it. I was too mesmerized by this strange creature in front of me. In all the years of her making fantastic treats, I’d only ever seen her nibble at crumbs. Something inside me settled at this tiny gesture that felt monumental.

Curiosity got the best of me, and I asked, “Who are you seeing?”

Mom tilted her head. “Are you thinking about seeing a therapist?”

“I wasn’t until now.” I let out a laugh and took a sip of water. “A couple of weeks ago, I had to see Beth about the casino, and she gave me the card to a therapist her mom wanted her to use. Seeing you all peaceful and eating chocolate makes me think I shouldn’t have thrown it away.”

“You wouldn’t want to see anyone recommended by that *woman*. I’ll text you my therapist’s information. She’s a part of an all-woman practice. There’s a young therapist who you might hit it off with.”

“You make it sound like dating.”

“I saw a couple before I landed on Linda. It’s important to find the right fit.”

I blew out a breath and nodded. “Okay. Yeah. Send me their info. I think it would be good to have someone to talk to that isn’t—” The doorbell cut me off, and I frowned. “I’ll be right back.”

“Let me just take care of these dishes.” The heavy conversation was over, and in true Maggie Mitchell form, she

was tidying up.

Whoever was at the door rang the bell another two times before I jerked it open and came face to face with Marco. “What?”

Marco grinned down at me. “Hello to you too, Red.” Walking past me, he took a deep breath. “Is that lasagna?” He patted his stomach and disappeared around the corner.

As I went to shut the door, Frankie shoved in. “Is there enough for me?” He jogged away from my swatting hands.

Peeking my head outside, I eyed Tommy. “You planning on coming in too?”

“No, ma’am—I mean Sasha.”

I sucked my teeth and shut the door. In the kitchen, I heard mom telling “the boys” to take a seat and that she would make them a plate.

Defeated, I turned off the tv, my movie night was clearly over.

Frankie was thoughtfully chewing when I joined the most ridiculous late-night dinner crew I’d ever seen.

“It’s my recipe, but Luca gave me a few pointers.” Mom clasped her hands in front of her and rocked on her heels as she awaited the verdict.

Marco gave mom a tight-lipped smile as he chewed, and Frankie bobbed his head, shoveling more in his mouth.

“Oh, good.” Mom beamed at me. “I’m going to head to bed.”

As she turned to leave, I called out, “You’re staying here?”

She looked over her shoulder with a frown. “Obviously. We have a month of not talking to make up for. Tomorrow, you can fill me in on what happened to Malcolm. Maxine called and told me Ashley was beside herself. I can’t imagine.”

I watched her flounce from the room, knowing there was absolutely nothing I could say to make this little sleepover not happen. Mom may have been working with a therapist, but that didn’t mean boundaries would suddenly be respected.

“This is pretty damn good,” Frankie mumbled around his fork.

“I’m glad my mom’s cooking meets your standards.” I crossed my arms and asked, “Why are you here?”

Marco wiped his mouth with a napkin and set it next to his plate. “We need to talk.”

“Okay?” The doorbell rang yet again, and I groaned. “Who the hell is that? Adriana finally showing her face?”

“She’s in Chicago.” Marco grimaced and quickly left the room.

Frankie gathered their dirty plates and put them in the dishwasher. As he washed his hands, he said, “We should go to the office.”

“What’s going on?” I leaned against the counter, unmoved by his annoyed sigh.

“Go to the office, and you’ll find out.” Frankie gestured for me to lead the way.

I shoved off the island and shuffled down the hall. The sound of low voices floated from Luca’s office, and I groaned. Pushing the door open, my shoulders slumped. “Why?”

Joey and Aldo turned away from the drink cart, crystal tumblers in hand.

“Good to see you too, Sasha.” Joey raised his glass toward me before taking a swing.

I made a beeline for Luca’s chair behind the desk and threw myself into it. Flopping my hand in a come-and-get-it motion, I said, “Hit me with it.”

The door clicked closed, and Frankie nodded at Marco.

“We’re all set to take out Cy Halloween night.” Marco gracefully sat in the wingback in front of the desk. “Frankie lined up a guy, and Cy has given us the perfect opportunity to carry out the hit.”

A cautious smile pulled at my lips. “So why the need for this late-night meeting?”

Joey leaned against the wall, clearly enjoying Luca’s top-shelf scotch. “We need you to get Beth to fall in line ASAP. Nothing we’ve done has swayed her, and we need our permits in place immediately. The opening needs to happen as planned to give us all an alibi. Otherwise, we’ll have to wait for another opportunity for the jackass to put himself in a vulnerable situation.”

“What’s so special about Halloween?” I tapped my nails on the desk, realizing I’d never asked any questions. I’d been so content that we were moving up the timeline on Luca coming home that the details didn’t matter to me.

Frankie grinned. “It’s Cy’s birthday, and he’s throwing himself a party at the strip club he just bought.”

“A club that the Chronis brothers have no stake in,” Marco added with a smirk.

From the drink cart, Aldo flatly said, “So it’s not on Chronis-protected territory. In fact, it’s two blocks deep into Moretti property.”

“Oh wow.”

Joey smiled. “Yeah. He kind of handed his head to us on a platter, which makes it even more important that you handle the mayor. We’ll be hard-pressed to have such a public alibi as the casino opening and the cover of a huge party for taking Cy out in the champagne room. After this mess with Luca, we need to make sure we’re all above suspicion.”

“And it doesn’t hurt that he’ll assume he’s safe.”

Frankie scoffed. “That fucker thinks he’s untouchable.”

“His arrogance will be the death of him. The Chronis brothers have signed off on the plan and will be attending the casino opening. We’ll all be present and accounted for when the body’s found.” Marco finished his drink and set the glass on the desk. “Then Tootsie and Zoe come home, and Luca is released.”

“It’s almost over.” I collapsed back into the leather chair.

“As long as you handle Beth,” Joey reminded me with a smirk.

“At this point, I’ll kill the bitch if she doesn’t get in line.”

TWELVE

Déjà vu hit like a motherfucker as Tommy and I rode the elevator to Beth's floor.

"Unless you hear gunshots, stay in the hallway," I whispered, making Tommy freeze in place.

"I don't think—" He tried to catch my elbow, but I dodged him and slid into Beth's office, gently shutting the door behind me.

"Florence! It's nice to see you again." I placed a white bakery box on her desk. "A little something sweet for you."

She smiled awkwardly as her eyes darted toward Beth's office. "Um, Ms. Mitchell. I—ah."

"I'll show myself in." I moved quickly so Flo couldn't stop me.

"Ms. Mitchell!" she yelled as I busted in, shutting the door behind me.

Beth's head shot up from her desk, a red line running across her cheek. She wiped the drool from the corner of her mouth with a grimace. "What the hell are you doing here?"

She looked downright pathetic.

Should make this easier.

“Stop fucking around and get our permits approved.”

Beth sighed and turned on her laptop. “Like I told Marco and Joey, it’s out of my hands.” She kept her eyes on the screen, her blank expression pissing me off just like it had the millions of times she’d shut down in the middle of a fight. It was her “I’m better than this and you” face.

“Beth?”

Nothing. She started typing, her head tilting as she considered her words.

“Beth?”

This time when she ignored me, I slammed my hands on her desk. Her head jerked my way, and she frowned as her tchotchkes resettled. “What is it, Sasha?”

“You’re going to make sure everything is in place for our Halloween opening.” I leaned forward, my palms flat on the smooth surface.

Beth squared her shoulders and met me halfway. “No. I’m not. Now get the hell out of my office.”

I smiled and took a step back, reaching into my purse. “You know your mom is still making payments? It would be a shame if her little secret got out. Wonder if it would hurt your future aspirations for governor.”

Her jaw twitched, but she didn’t respond.

“Is that still the plan? Or have things changed?” I picked up a framed picture from her desk. It was Senator Cooper, Beth, and the president. I waved it at her with a mocking smile. “Does mommy want more? Is she having visions of the White House?”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” she sneered.

I laughed and put the picture down gently. “Oh, I know the Senator, and I know you. She says jump, and you say how high. What I’m wondering is how far will you go to protect her? Come on, Beth. You wouldn’t want to let mommy down.”

“My mom was right. You’re trash like the rest of the Morettis.”

Nodding, I reached into my purse and pulled out a handgun. “You’re right, I am. Only I’m much worse.” I tapped my chin with the end of the barrel. “While everyone may think they know my husband’s sins, they have no idea about mine.”

Beth’s eyes widened, and her mouth fell open. Blinking rapidly, her focus never leaving the gun in my hand as she searched the desk wildly for her phone. I snatched it, tossing it behind me. By some stroke of luck, it landed with a soft thud in the blue recycling bin.

Satisfied that I had Beth right where I wanted her, I sat in the guest chair across from her. “Now, I’m not leaving until you’ve sent the necessary emails, made the necessary calls, or whatever the hell it is, you politicians do.”

She nodded, tears welling in her eyes.

“Bring your laptop over here and sit next to me. Don’t want you getting any ideas.”

“O-okay.” Beth rose more gracefully than the situation should allow, picking up her laptop. Her steps were sure as she rounded the desk and sat. The only thing that gave away her nerves were her shaking hands and the tears sliding down her cheeks. “I just need to send off this email, and everything will be processed by the end of the week.”

“Great!”

As I watched her type the email that put us one step closer to Luca coming home, I dug deep, searching for the guilt that should have been front and center. I mean, holding your ex at gunpoint and blackmailing her mother should elicit some remorse, right?

Listening to the click-clack of Beth's typing, I realized I didn't give a single fuck. This was for Luca, my future, and no one was going to mess with that. No one would come between me and the man I loved.

"There—" Beth cleared her throat. "All done. You can put that away." Her eyes darted to the gun resting on my lap.

"Oh! Yeah. Sorry." I chuckled, checking that the safety was still on, and dropped it in my purse. Slapping my knees, I stood. "I guess I'll get going." When I got to the door, I turned to take one last look at Beth. "If something should happen and everything isn't in place by next Monday, I'll be back."

Beth wiped under her eyes and gave me a jerky nod.

I opened the door, and as I left, said over my shoulder, "Make sure you get one of these cinnamon rolls. They're to die for."

Florence sat at her desk, happily taking a bite of her treat. She covered her mouth and mumbled, "Have a good day."

"You too." I grinned and floated out of the office.

Tommy silently pushed off the wall and joined me at the elevator. "Everything go okay?"

"Easy peasy." The elevator arrived, and we stepped inside. As the doors were closing, Beth stepped out of her office. Our eyes met, and I watched as the last bit of her affection drained away. Her hands fisted at her side as I smiled and waved, wiggling my fingers as a final fuck you.

The doors closed, and Tommy let out a low whistle. “You making enemies?”

“Nah. Just setting things straight.”

Tommy left me in my office to call Marco while I went through Ashley’s notes on casino floor plans.

“Axel has the tables framed out, and Scott has finalized the chair and stool designs.” I clicked through the pictures Axel had saved to the project.

“Perfect. Once I’m back in the office, we can pick the art for the hotel rooms.”

“There’s no hurry. Stay with Malcolm as long as it takes for him to be back on his feet.”

Ashley laughed. “It’s only been a day, and he’s sick of me.”

“Well, he’s just going to have to deal.”

“Exactly. If you don’t want me to smother you, don’t get jumped in an alley.”

The casual joke pulled a surprised laugh from me. “Ashley!”

“What? He got released this morning, and we had a nice long talk. Apparently, this kind of shit has happened before, but I never knew about it because we were *just friends*.”

Luca’s words came to mind, but they wouldn’t help Ashley right now. “Are you okay?”

She huffed. “Yeah. Just pissed off, which I guess is better than terrified. Oh! And I had to deal with our parents.”

“Ouch.”

“Yeah. As you can imagine, I’m feeling a little irritated.” A door closed, and a gust of wind muffled Ashley’s words. Even though she’d stepped outside, her voice dropped to a whisper. “His mom is staying with us for a couple of days.”

“No.”

“Yes!” she hissed. “And she didn’t even ask. I love Dee, but she’s rearranging our kitchen and has already commented about the sheets in the guest room.”

I swallowed back a laugh. There was no reason to draw her anger toward me. “Do you want to come into the office? Take a break?”

Ashley clicked her tongue. “No. There’s no way I’m giving her any ammunition.”

“Then get back in there and defend your casserole dish placement.”

“They’re in the island! Why would she need to move them?”

I couldn’t hold back the laughter any longer, and eventually, she joined in.

After a deep sigh, she said, “Okay. I feel better. Thank you.”

“No problem. Call me if you need to vent. Give everyone my love.”

“Will do. Bye.”

An hour later, it was time for lunch, but Tommy wasn’t back. Grabbing my purse, I left my office and checked the warehouse floor. When I didn’t find him joking around with

Scott and Axel, I went around the front and waved at Lara, our new receptionist. “Have you seen Tommy?”

She pointed out the glass doors with a smile. “He’s been out there pacing on his phone.”

“Thanks. I’m going to go grab lunch. Can I get you anything?”

“Nope. I brought some leftovers.”

I grinned. “Lucky. I’ll be back.”

As I walked outside, I caught sight of Tommy disappearing around the building. “Tommy?” I called out, but he didn’t answer. Jogging to catch up, I yelled his name again. The sound of feet pounding on the sidewalk came my way, and I stopped dead in my tracks as a man carrying a gun rounded the corner.

Without thinking, I reached into my bag and pulled out my handgun. Taking the safety off, I pointed and yelled, “Stop right there!”

The man lifted his gun and kept charging at me. Before he could aim at me, I fired off two shots. The first hit him square in the chest, and he took two more steps, his hands flying to the wound. The second bullet went through the hand holding his gun and into his chest.

Tommy rounded the corner as the guy fell to his knees, groaning in pain. “Sasha. Go inside.”

“Who the fuck is that?” I shrieked, pointing my gun at the man bleeding out on the sidewalk. My heart beat wildly, and sweat beaded on the back of my neck under the heat of the midday sun as I stood frozen.

“Go inside. I’ll handle it.”

“Are you okay, Sasha? I called the police!” Lara yelled from the front door, her head peeking out.

Tommy cursed as he stooped down to the man writhing in pain. “Who sent you?”

I turned to Lara and gestured for her to go back inside, assuring her I was okay while hiding my gun from sight.

Tommy gripped the man’s jaw and jerked it back and forth. “You work for Cy?”

The man grunted as he pressed on his chest with his uninjured hand. “Help me,” he rasped out.

“Answer my question. Who the fuck are you? And who sent you?” Tommy’s voice was hard. He dug his fingers into the man’s face, keeping their eyes locked.

“Jones. I’m Jones,” he struggled to get out.

“And?” When Jones didn’t continue, Tommy pinched the wound in the hand wrapped around the gun.

Jones cried out, “I don’t know. It was an anonymous hit.” His words were garbled, but that didn’t stop Tommy’s interrogation.

“Bullshit.”

“I swear!” he cried as Tommy bent his bleeding hand backward.

Sirens blared down the street as four cop cars sped into our parking lot. I slipped my gun into my purse and turned toward the cops, hoping to block the scene behind me as Tommy worked the guy for info.

Blinking rapidly, I worked up some tears. “Thank God!” I rushed toward the first two cops, waving my hands around and

explaining what had happened.

“Sir, I need you to take a step back,” the officer called out to Tommy.

“I’m giving him CPR,” Tommy calmly said. Sure enough, when I turned around, Tommy was compressing away.

“I appreciate that, but we’ll take it from here.”

An ambulance skidded to a halt behind the police cruisers, and a couple of EMTs rushed to Jones’s side.

“Mrs. Moretti?” I knew that voice. It was the King Douchebag himself, Detective Bennington.

I wiped away the lone tear on my cheek. If he was here, my tears wouldn’t do shit. “Mitchell-Moretti.”

“Apologies.” He smiled as he shooed the officer away. “Can I ask you a few questions?”

I crossed my arms and cocked my hip, ready to tell him he could talk to my lawyer when Lara ran out. She rushed me, nearly knocking me over as she wrapped her arms around my waist. “Thank goodness you’re here. He came out of nowhere and aimed a gun at Sasha! I saw it on the CCTV.”

“Lara. Why don’t you go back inside and set up the conference room for us?”

She nodded but didn’t budge. “Thank God you’re okay.”

I patted her back and gently slid from her grasp. “Can you find Scott, Axel, and Miranda and tell them what’s going on?”

“Absolutely.” Lara ran back into the office, and I turned back to Bennington. “Any more questions?”

“Who shot him?” His cocky smile made my hand itch. I wanted to give him a little taste of what I gave Jones.

“I did. I have a conceal and carry.”

“Probably for the best when you marry a murderer.”

“Let’s go with that.” I checked over my shoulder and made eye contact with Tommy. “You have my contact information. Let me know if you have any more questions.”

The EMTs pushed a stretcher with Jones strapped to it by, rushing him to the ambulance. Tommy joined me, and the two of us walked back into the building as Bennington tried to get in a parting shot but was drowned out by the ambulance’s sirens.

The glass doors closed, muffling the noise in the parking lot.

“They’re going to want to talk to you,” Tommy muttered as we passed a frantic Lara on the phone.

“I’m sure. I need to call Nicki.”

Tommy lifted an eyebrow but silently followed me to my office.

I flopped in my chair and hit Nicki’s contact. The phone rang twice, and she answered, “Ricci.”

“Hey, it’s Sasha. I need you to come to my office. We have a situation.”

“I’m not a criminal attorney.” She sounded skeptical.

“No, but I trust you to come down here until I can get a hold of the big guns.”

“You trust me?”

Did I? Weirdly, yeah. Nicki had proven herself time and time again, with the added bonus of not being her creepy-ass father. “I do. Are you coming?”

“I’ll be there in ten.”

“Thanks.”

I spun my chair around and pulled the burner from the bottom of my bag.

SASHA: Call me

The phone immediately buzzed in my hand. “Sasha?”

“Hey,” I croaked out. Hearing Luca’s voice broke down the strong front I’d put up to deal with the cops.

“What happened?”

A female voice murmured in the background, and he let a terse no.

“Are you meeting with Fern?”

“Yes, but she’s stepping out of the room. What’s wrong, baby?”

“A man pulled a gun on me outside the office, and I shot him.” I sucked down a deep breath.

“Shit. Are you okay?”

“I think so. They took him away, but that Bennington asshole is here.”

There was a knock at my office door, and Tommy opened it and slipped out.

“Did you call Gabe?”

“Nicki.”

“Nicki, huh?” Amusement laced Luca’s voice.

“She’s not as creepy as her dad.”

“That’s true. Who was guarding you?”

I glanced over my shoulder. Tommy stood outside my office, blocking Bennington from entering.

“Tommy. If I hadn’t gotten the guy, Tommy would’ve.”

Luca grunted.

“I’m serious. Tommy has saved my ass enough times to know the kid would do whatever it takes.”

“Maybe you should work from home until things are settled.”

“As much as I hate it, I think you’re right. I can’t put everyone at risk. Who would’ve guessed these fuckers would be so bold as to try to kill me on my lunch break?”

“This shit won’t happen again. Call me once you’re home.”

“Will do. Love you.”

“I love you, Sasha. Don’t get locked up.”

We shared a laugh, and then he ended the call. I stashed the burner in a locked drawer in my desk, just in case the cops took me in. No need to take the prison burner downtown.

Tommy looked into my office and lifted his eyebrow. There was no way I wanted that fucker in my office, so I took a deep breath and joined them in the hallway. “My lawyer should be here soon if you’d like to go to the conference room to wait.”

I led them downstairs and gave Lara a reassuring smile as we entered the conference room. The poor woman spoke quickly over the phone as her eyes darted from the front door to where I sat at the head of the table.

The police officer and Bennington sat in the seats across from me, and Tommy loomed behind them.

Bennington turned in his seat and eyed Tommy. “Why don’t you take a seat? We have a few questions for you too.”

Tommy stood at the credenza, wiping blood off his hands with paper towels, his brow furrowed. “When counsel gets here, I will.” With that, Tommy opened a bottle of water and wet the paper towel in his hand.

“Why don’t you use the bathroom?” The cop lifted his lip in disgust as a pile of pink and red paper towels filled the trashcan.

“I’m not leaving her alone with you.”

“We’re the good guys,” the cop said, clearly confused.

Tommy scoffed but didn’t say anything else.

I took a dark chocolate from the candy dish in the middle of the table and gave them a tight-lipped smile as I unwrapped it.

“We got word that the man you shot died en route to the hospital,” Bennington said casually, assessing me for reaction, which he would never get. I didn’t give a fuck about the guy I killed on the sidewalk. I only cared that I was almost shot.

“He didn’t have any ID on him. Any idea who he was?”

I shrugged, keeping my eyes locked on the front door, praying Nicki wouldn’t hit traffic.

Bennington sighed. “We could always have this conversation at the station.”

“Am I under arrest?”

“No.”

“Then I think here will work just fine.”

“Is it all right if we check the security videos?” the cop asked, slowly rising from his seat.

Before I could respond, Nicki glided into the room. “I need a minute alone with my client.” She sat beside me and stared at the two lawmen until they awkwardly got up. As they reached the door, she said, “And don’t touch those videos until we give you permission or you have a warrant.”

Bennington’s eyes narrowed, but he gave her a terse nod.

Once the three of us were alone, Nicki took out a legal pad and asked, “So what happened?”

“A guy came around the corner with a gun. I pulled mine and told him to stop. He didn’t. Instead, he pointed his gun at me, so I shot twice.”

Nicki jotted down some notes and swiveled to Tommy, pointing her pen at him. “And you? You were chasing him?”

“He was lurking, and when I asked what he was doing, he ran.”

“That’s it?” She frowned at him.

“Yes.” He tossed yet another pink paper towel in the trashcan.

She let out an airy laugh. “Bring them back in.”

Tommy stuck his head out of the conference room and whistled obnoxiously.

When everyone was settled at the table, Nicki said, “I’m going to record this conversation.” She tapped her phone, then looked at Bennington. “I understand you have some questions?”

Over the next thirty minutes, he had me tell, retell, and then tell him out of order what happened. Eventually, Nicki asked if they would like to review the security footage to speed things along. Copies were made of the footage as well as my statement, and I was warned to stay in town.

Once they were gone, Nicki laughed. “They were really hoping to get you. The look of disappointment when they watched that video.” She shook her head and fell back into her dead fish persona. Checking her phone, she said, “I need to go. Call me if they give you any more trouble. I don’t think you need to get Fern on this, but if you don’t believe me, call her.” She shrugged and left Tommy and me in the lobby.

I looked at the large clock above Lara’s desk. “I’m calling it a day.”

“That’s probably a good idea. Marco wants to speak to you at the house.”

Perfect.

THIRTEEN

“It’s so good to see you,” Luca murmured as he pressed a kiss to the top of my head.

I lifted our entwined fingers to my lips, kissing each bruised knuckle. “These are new.”

He huffed, blowing hair into my eyes. Pushing it behind my ears, he stared down at me. “After that guy showed up at your office, things got rough for a couple of days. It’s settled down.”

“You sure?” I searched for any signs he was holding back the truth.

“Absolutely. The warden and I have come to an understanding.” He kissed the tip of my nose and leaned back. “How are Malcolm and Ashley?”

“Better. His mom went home, and Malcolm is already up and moving around. Ashley will be back in the office next week.” I opened the pastry box Loretta had prepared per Luca’s request. “Thank you for the extra security, by the way. It makes everyone feel a lot better after the shooting.”

“Anything for you.” He grinned as I handed him a gooey butter cake square on a napkin. “But you’re still working from home, right?”

“I am. It sucks, but what can I do?”

He squeezed my knee with his free hand. “It won’t be forever.” The silent promise of Cy’s death hung between us. In a month and a half, the bastard would be dead, Tootsie and Zoe would come home, and Luca would be free.

“I know.” I took a bite and groaned. Covering my mouth, I muttered, “Loretta’s amazing.”

“She really is. I hope Marco doesn’t fuck it up.”

“From what I’ve seen, she’s not backing down from his bullshit.”

“Good. People have always deferred to Marco, and for good reason, but he can be a real asshole.”

I laughed and brushed off my hands. “Pretty sure Loretta let him know.”

Luca chewed thoughtfully, a little wrinkle between his eyebrows. Despite the fluorescent lighting in the interview room, his garish orange clothing, and the metal chair digging into my thighs, for a moment, everything felt right. We might as well have been at home in the kitchen, trying out new recipes.

A knock on the door jarred me from my brief happiness, shattering the illusion of normalcy. Through the small window, a guard pointed at Luca and gestured.

Luca chuckled, shaking his head. “The cameras are cut, and the guard won’t be back for twenty minutes.”

“Why, Mr. Moretti, what do you think is about to happen?” I fluttered my lashes, laying a hand on my chest.

“This.” Luca grinned as he went to the door, and the guard opened it, handing in a boombox. “Let’s see what he was able

to get.” He hit play, and Al Green’s voice filled the room. Swiveling his hips, Luca smoothly danced my way, humming along. He held out his hand and smiled. “May I have this dance?”

As soon as our fingers touched, he pulled me up from my chair, and a shocked laugh fell from my lips. Bringing me close, we bumped into the chairs as he spun me around, crooning low in my ear words of love and forever. The bass of his voice sent shivers down my spine, making my knees weak.

“You planned a little dessert and dancing.” My lips grazed his cheek. As I caressed his face, the stubble along his jaw rasped under my nails.

Luca spun me out and brought me back to his chest, wrapping our arms around my middle. “Just because I’m locked up doesn’t mean you don’t deserve a little belated birthday celebration.” He pressed a kiss behind my ear as we swayed to the new song.

I tilted my face up and kissed under his jaw. “I love you.”

“There aren’t enough words to describe how I feel about you, Sasha, but we have a lifetime for me to show you.”

“I can’t wait until you’re home.”

He held me closer. “Things are going to be different when I get home.” I tried to turn in his arms to look him in the eye, but he held me in place. “Since I’ve been in here, Marco’s proved he’s more than capable and willing to pick up some of the slack.” Luca moved my hands up and placed them on the back of his neck. His fingers traced down my sides, making me tremble. “And with Tootsie back, we will be positioned to solidify the Moretti hold in the Midwest.”

I gasped, my stomach quivering as he cupped my breasts. He roughly squeezed, drawing a moan from me. “That means I’ll be able to be home more. I’ve learned my lesson, Sasha. Going without seeing you every day is killing me. I can’t believe how much I took for granted. Being able to walk into a room and smell your perfume, knowing you’d just been there. Catching a glimpse of you as you get out of the shower. Having you curl into me in the middle of the night with your cold feet.”

Tears filled my eyes, and I was torn between his sweet words and his hands dipping into my dress. Luca teased my nipples, and I arched against him, my ass pressing into his hardening cock.

“Tasting your pussy on my tongue long after you’ve allowed me the pleasure of having you for breakfast. Feeling your perfect cunt wrapped around me, taking what you need.”

“Luca,” I whimpered.

“I love when you say my name like that, knowing I’ll give you anything you want. Tell me what you need, baby. I got you.”

I swallowed. Words. He wanted words. Words were suddenly very hard to form.

One of Luca’s hands trailed down my body, bunching up the skirt of my dress until his fingers slipped beneath my panties. He pinched my nipple as he found my clit, and my eyelids drooped. I looked at us in the two-way mirror, enraptured by our reflection. Luca’s back blocked us from the door, but anyone could have been behind that glass.

“Wonder if anyone is watching,” he murmured in my ear.

I parted my legs in answer, giving him plenty of room to stroke me.

Luca huffed against my ear. “You like the idea of one of these cops seeing you fuck my hand?”

I bit my lip to keep from answering. Exhibitionism wasn’t something I’d ever thought much about. Stripping down to tiny panties was one thing. Fucking my husband with an audience was quite another.

Luca let out a ragged breath against my ear. “You’re going to come on my hand, and I’ll kill every fucker that watches.”

“Luca, I—” Two thick fingers filled me, and my hands fell to Luca’s forearm.

He pinched my nipple, his nails grazing my skin as he pulled his hand from my breast and circled my neck, holding my back to him. In the mirror, we were the perfect picture of possession. Luca owned me, every inch of me.

“Look at that blush.” He nipped my ear as his fingers curled, making my eyes shut at the sensation. “Open your eyes.”

Taking a deep breath, I slowly opened my eyes and met Luca’s stare in the reflection. I pressed back into his cock, rolling my hips as I lifted my hands and grabbed the hair on the back of his head. The hand around my neck tightened, forcing my chin up.

Luca thrust in rhythm to my movements, his fingers massaging that spongy wall until the first waves of pleasure radiated. I needed him inside me—my pussy, my ass—it didn’t matter. “Fuck me.”

He let out a huff and shuffled us toward the table bolted to the floor. My thighs hit the edge, and he said, “No.”

“But—”

“Come on my hand. We’ll see if we have time after.”

I glared at him, dropping my hands to the table and pressing my ass against his cock. The hand around my throat kept my chin up and watching us. Circling my hips, I rode his fingers, rocking my clit against his palm.

Luca licked his lips, his eyes falling to where my breasts spilled from my dress. “Fuck.” He thrust into me like he was fucking me. I wanted to hold out and push him until he gave me what I wanted, but before I was ready, I was moaning and coming around his fingers. Luca’s hand slid from my neck to my chin, keeping my eyes on him in the mirror. “My perfect wife. Look at you.”

Panting, my fingers curled, and my arms locked straight. Luca’s hand continued its perfect torture until my body settled.

He gently took his hand from between my legs, bringing his fingers to his lips and sucking them clean. His eyes flashed to the black and white clock on the wall. I could see him trying to decide something, but I never gave him a chance to come to a conclusion.

Gathering my skirt in one hand, I leaned over the table. “Luca?” I grinded back into him.

“Sasha, we’re supposed to—”

I went down to my elbows, my tits pressed against the scuffed tabletop, my ass at the perfect angle.

“You know what?” Luca’s hand came down with a hard smack, and I yelped. He spanked the other side, his fingers digging in as he shook. My panties wedged between my cheeks and rubbed against my clit, making me shiver. Twisting

the band in his hand, he tore them away from my body, brought my mangled lingerie to his nose, and inhaled.

When he shoved them into his pocket, I frowned. “That’s two pairs. Are you starting a collection in here?”

Luca grinned, rocking against my bare ass, the rough material sending goosebumps all over my body. “It’s the closest thing to you I can get in here.”

His words intensified the ache of need between my legs. I licked my lips and begged with my eyes for him to give me what I wanted. Like always, Luca caved, and I felt the tip of his dick nudge at my opening. Spreading my legs, I arched my back.

Luca looked down and then back at the mirror as he dragged his dick through my wetness. “Do you want my cock, Sasha?” I nodded vigorously, shoving back, trying to make him slip in. His hand on my hip tightened as he thrust into me, and we both let out satisfied moans. Luca slowly slid in and out as he circled my clit with his thumb. “So fucking sexy.” He lifted my leg, resting my knee on the table and opening me up so he could go deeper.

“Luca,” I whimpered as he sped up, our skin slapping loudly in the small room.

Winding my hair around his fist, Luca pulled my mouth to his and kissed me viciously. His teeth tugged my bottom lip. “Heaven. Your body is fucking heaven.”

My mouth fell open when he pinched my clit, sending flutters through my body. I was beyond responding or doing anything. I was at Luca’s mercy.

“Play with your tits. Give them a show.”

Not knowing if anyone was on the other side of the mirror sent a thrill through me. I lifted my hands from the table, leaving my leg and Luca's hand in my hair as the only things holding me up. Barely aware of my stinging scalp, I ran my long nails over the soft skin of my breasts, pushing my dress completely aside.

Luca groaned as I tweaked and pulled my hard nipples. Our eyes stayed locked in the mirror as we worked my body with a precision that only came with time and experience. I hovered on the precipice of another orgasm, my body still recovering from my first.

Luca pulled out and spun me around, setting my ass on the table before he thrust into me. Our foreheads fell together as we moved. Staring into Luca's dark brown eyes, everything else melted away. My heart raced in my chest as I panted, breathing in Luca's exhaled breath. Gripping his shoulders, I thrust back, chasing my final release. Luca's hands fell to my ass, sliding me closer, grinding into me every time we met.

Frantic, I dug my nails into the course material and kissed Luca with every ounce of love and longing coursing through me. When I came, it was a blinding flash behind my eyelids. Luca followed me, groaning into my mouth as I swallowed his pleasure with deep kisses. We came down from our highs, kissing and caressing each other.

I leaned back and smiled up at Luca. His half-lidded eyes and swollen lips begged for more. "You got something there." I wiped my red lipstick from under his lip with my thumb.

"Thanks." Luca looked down at my chest with a sigh before putting my bra and dress back in place. He glanced over his shoulder, then back at me. "We're out of time."

“Yeah.” I nodded and slid off the table, my skirt falling back in place.

Luca pulled his pants back up, then gave me a once over. “Let me—” He ran his fingers through my hair, yanking out the snarls. A sweet gesture but painful as hell.

We’d finished adjusting ourselves to near pre-banging perfection when there was a knock at the door. Luca handed off the boombox, and we sat back at the table. Luckily, the gooey butter cake had survived. I served us both another piece, and I’d just taken a bite when there was another knock, and the door swung open.

“Oh. Sasha.” Fern’s smile fell, and I had to bite my lips to keep from smirking. “I didn’t know you’d be here.”

“She’s my wife. Why wouldn’t she be?”

Fern straightened, bringing her briefcase in front of her. “Right.”

“Gooey butter cake?” I grinned and held up a piece of the delicious treat.

Luxury cars lined the driveway all the way up to Rosa’s house. Frankie assured me that a spot near the house would be open for us, and sure enough, he was right.

A perk of being the Mrs. Moretti.

Frankie parked, but I didn’t get out. Instead, I checked my makeup, checked my phone, and checked to make sure I had a gun in my purse.

“It’s not going to be so bad.”

“Uh-huh.” I shut my eyes and took a deep breath.

“Quit being a coward and get out of the car,” Frankie said as he slipped out of the car, laughing at my outraged face.

Rushing after him, I swatted his arm. “You’re an asshole.”

“And you’re out of the car.”

Sure enough, we were at the front door, being ushered inside. Frankie left me standing in the main hall as he walked toward the office. Before I could follow, Rosa was in front of me. “Come greet everyone.” Her grip on my elbow left no room for argument.

We swanned into the parlor and were greeted by Marco’s parents, Arturo and Karina. Mickey stood off to the side, looking rough. He said a quick hello, then left the room.

His mother watched him with a frown. “I’m sorry. Mickey has been a little off today.”

“Don’t worry about it. Today is a hard one for all of us.”

She gave me a grateful smile and followed Mickey, leaving her husband to excuse himself for the bar.

I proceeded to shake the hands of every Moretti that lived within fifty miles of St. Louis. Most were polite and asked after Luca. Some of them were cold and standoffish, which made sense because Luca had replaced them with younger blood. At the back of the room stood Adriana and a sulking Dante.

“Hey, guys. What’s going on?” I hugged Adriana and gave Dante’s shoulder a squeeze.

Adriana sighed, giving Dante a gentle smile. “Dante’s a little upset.”

“That’s understandable,” I said, hoping I sounded the right amount of sad for being at a memorial dinner for my father-in-law.

Dante lifted his chin defiantly. “She’s making us move to Chicago.”

I frowned at Adriana, and she pursed her lips.

Dante glared at his mother, his cheeks a vibrant shade of red. “I don’t need a new dad. I don’t want to live with Grandma Salvo. I want to stay here with my friends.”

“Dante,” Adriana reprimanded, her voice quiet but stern.

His head dropped, his chest rising and falling rapidly. The kid was in turmoil, and Adriana looked at her wit’s end.

“Why don’t I take Dante to get a drink from the kitchen?”

“Thank you. I need to check with Rosa on something.” Adriana patted my arm as she passed.

“Let’s see if she has any of those Frostie Root Beers.”

Dante glumly wiped his nose. Arm around his shoulder, I maneuvered us through the crowd, relieved when we reached the hallway. Caterers zipped past us as we entered the kitchen, trays piled with dainty hors d’oeuvres that I hoped I would get a taste of later.

I sat Dante at the kitchen table and went to the fridge, praying Rosa had stocked the damn soda. Behind trays of food ready to be served and prepared was one lone root beer. “You’re in luck!” I popped the lid off and set the glass bottle in front of my mopey nephew. “Want to tell me what’s going on?”

“No.” He picked at the edge of the label, slowly peeling it from the bottle.

Sitting across from him, I snagged a puff of some sort from a tray. “Did you know it was my birthday last week?”

He looked at me in disbelief, his hands stilling. “It was?”

“Mhm. And can you believe I forgot?”

“No way.” He leaned forward, his face softening. “How’d you forget?”

I shrugged, innocently eating what ended up being a crab puff. “I guess with your uncle in jail, I’ve been a little scatterbrained.”

Dante nodded. “Things haven’t been great. I’m glad Grandma Salvo is better, but I don’t want to live with her in Chicago. I’ve been stuck up there all summer while my friends have been doing camps and whatever.”

“I’m sure your mom is doing what she thinks is best.”

The nine-year-old rolled his eyes with a scoff. “You mean what she thinks is best for her?” he mumbled, finally taking a sip of soda.

“Hey, now. That’s your mom.”

He scrunched his face before exploding. “It’s not fair! I’m going to have to change schools and lose all my friends. All so she can marry Dr. Wilson.”

“I—”

Dante slammed down his soda and pinned me with a serious look. “It was supposed to be her and Marco, not some doctor in another city.”

I was out of my depth. So out of my depth.

“And I won’t be a Moretti anymore.” Dante’s eyes welled up, his lower lip trembling as he sucked in a deep breath.

“Oh, honey.” I opened my arms, and he jumped right into them. Rubbing his back, I shushed him. “You’ll always be a Moretti. There’s no getting away from us.” I held him until his tears stopped, and he was no longer hiccupping. “You ready to go out there?”

Dante shook his head. “I think I’ll go up to my dad’s room. Can you let my mom know?”

“Of course.”

He picked up his Frostie and shuffled out of the kitchen, leaving me in the way of the caterers.

“There you are!” Rosa exhaled, her face in the same scowl it had been since she’d told me off. “It’s time to be seated for dinner.”

“Okay,” I demurred. There was no way I was going to rock the boat on Dante Sr.’s death anniversary.

We walked in silence to the dining room. At the archway, Marco took Rosa’s hand and escorted her to the head of the table, where she sat to his left.

“Sasha?” Taz touched my elbow, and we shared a sad smile. “Let’s get this over with,” he whispered. Morettis and Moretti associates moved out of our way as I was led to the chair across from Rosa.

Fantastic.

Every chair at the impossibly long table filled, and Marco stood. “Thank you all for coming to honor Dante Sr. It’s been a tough year for the family, but we’ve made it through in a way that would make him proud.” He glanced down at Rosa, who was trembling but kept her head held high. “Please raise your glass to the memory of Dante Moretti.”

After a solemn toast and prayer, the first course was served, and the long, quiet dinner began. Marco tried to draw me into a conversation, but his heart was clearly not in it.

No.

His attention was on Adriana and Dante. He didn't talk to her, and she didn't look his way, but his attention stayed on them all the same. The whole situation was heartbreaking.

And poor Dante. He behaved respectfully with his mom, but his spark was gone. There was no trivial chatter about his obsession of the week, no silly faces while the adults droned on cryptically about serious matters, and the most troubling thing was him pushing away his dessert. The kid had the biggest sweet tooth I'd ever seen. For him to pass on a chocolate torte with a scoop of ice cream was an unmistakable cry for help.

Adriana rubbed his back. "Dante, don't you—"

Marco's quiet curse drew the eyes of the whole table. He had his phone in hand, his expression morphing from resigned sadness to pure rage.

"Sasha, get your phone and meet me in the office."

"Oh-kay." I balled up my napkin and set it on the table. Rosa's ice queen act softened to concern as I stood to leave the room. As quickly as I could without full-out running, I rushed to the kitchen and snagged my clutch from the table.

The bag vibrated as I picked it up, and I fumbled with the latch, ultimately dropping the small bag on the floor. My lipstick rolled under the table, but I was too engrossed in answering the call from the jail to dive for it.

"Hello?"

“Mrs. Moretti?”

“Yes?”

“There’s been a situation.”

I fell into a chair, muttering, “What happened?”

FOURTEEN

The words stabbed, hospital, and critical condition floated through the phone as it fell from my trembling hand and clattered on the floor. My heart beat stuttered as I struggled to suck down enough air.

“Ma’am?” A panicked young woman in all black kneeled before me, her hands stopping just shy of touching me.

I opened my mouth, desperate to assure her I was fine, but no words came out. Only a strangled cry echoed through the small room. The edges of my vision blackened as I sagged back in my chair, a dizzy spell making it hard to stay upright. Sweat beaded on my forehead as I struggled to swallow, my mouth suddenly dry.

Luca was hurt. Luca could be dead.

The girl in front of me disappeared, and in her place was Rosa, saying my name.

“Sasha. It’s going to be okay.” She stroked my hands, making calming sounds. “I need you to take a deep breath.”

I stared into her eyes, following her example.

“That’s it. Keep breathing. It’s all you need to do.”

Breath after breath, Rosa kept holding my hands, lifting them with every inhale.

“Thank you,” I croaked out, tears filling my eyes. “Luca —”

“I know. Let me help you to the office.”

I nodded and let her lead me to where Marco, Mickey, Taz, Aldo, Joey, and Frankie were gathered around the desk, watching something on a laptop. “What’s that?” My voice was quiet but carried through the silent room.

Marco frowned at me, then he and Rosa had a silent conversation.

Clearing my throat, I pointed a shaky finger at the laptop. “What are you watching?”

Frankie stepped between the guys and me, his face uncharacteristically soft. “You don’t need to see that, Sasha.”

I blinked at him, unable to comprehend what could be so bad. My husband was in critical condition. How could a video be— “Is it of—”

Frankie gave me a terse nod, and I pushed past him, shouldering Joey out of the way. On the screen was a freeze frame of Luca on the ground, surrounded by three men, holding what looked like shivs, but the grainy video made it hard to discern. “Oh, God.”

Two big hands landed on my shoulders and guided me to the high-back chair, gently pushing me down.

“Aunt Rosa, can you let everyone know we’ll be out shortly?” Marco asked, and as much as I wanted to see her reaction to being sent away, I couldn’t take my eyes off a prone Luca.

“Of course.” The door clicked closed, and the men circled around me.

“Did the warden call you?”

“Yes.” I waved away the question and hit play on the video. It started over, and I had the terrible privilege of watching Luca be surrounded and get a few solid hits in. Ultimately, he was no match for being stabbed from three directions. “These guys?” My voice cracked, so I swallowed. “I want them dead. I want them bleeding out slowly, tortured in ways I can’t even imagine, but I’m sure you guys can figure it out.”

“Done,” Marco said as he closed the laptop, finally breaking my stare and earning himself a glare. “We wanted to make sure you were okay.”

“I’m not.”

Frankie laughed, and the other men looked at him like he’d lost it. “What? You guys are terrible at being a shoulder to cry on. Of course, she’s not okay. Tell her how you’re going to make it right, and let’s get back out there and eat whatever magic Loretta made.”

Aldo shifted in his seat and nodded. “Frankie’s right.”

“Let me assure you, these guys will be gone by tomorrow morning.”

“Okay.” I tried to give Marco a small smile but couldn’t. “Can I see Luca, or—”

“And what about Lorenzo?” Taz asked from the couch. “When is that going to be a priority?”

“Taz—” Marco closed his eyes, his nostrils flaring.

Taz jumped up, his face beet red. “No. I’ve got four dead soldiers and an interrupted supply chain.”

“Enough!” Marco shouted, his fist slamming on the desk. “Our top priority is bringing Luca home. We’ve done what we can to pin down Lorenzo, but he’s in the wind. With our supply lines and territories under threat, we can’t be playing whack-a-mole in Italy for that crazy fucker. When he surfaces, we’ll deal with him. Until then, we kill Cy and get your fucking brother home. Unless you’ve magically convinced him to end his little vacation with the Greek Princess.”

The room was silent as Taz and Marco stared each other down. Marco didn’t give an inch. He was the acting boss, a proxy to Luca until he was out of jail, and the set of his jaw told everyone he wasn’t backing down.

Taz rolled his lips in with a terse nod and left. With him gone, the tension slowly lifted until the guys were no longer frozen in place.

Standing, I gestured to the open door. “Can we go? Or is there more?” I planned to pass right by that fucking memorial dinner and get to the hospital.

As if reading my mind, Marco said, “The hospital will call when you can see him. There’s no point heading up there just to wait.”

“Okay.” Rejected, I walked through them and returned to my abandoned dining room table seat. The guys trickled in, but I kept all my attention on my dessert. We ate, toasted, and then I was left with Adriana, Rosa, Marco, Frankie, and a few bottles of wine.

“Dante is out,” Adriana sighed as she dropped into one of the kitchen chairs.

The caterers were long gone, but they’d left out a few trays of the canapes that hadn’t circulated.

“You’re both welcome to stay anytime,” Rosa said from behind her full glass of red.

Adriana tensed. “Thank you. And I promise we’ll come down at least once a month. I have no plans of taking Dante from you. From the family.”

Marco’s gaze fell to his fingers on the stem of his wine glass. His expression remained stoic, but there was no mistaking the resignation in his eyes. He was losing Adriana again, but this time he was losing Dante too.

“When’s the big move?” I tried to keep my voice light, but damn if it didn’t crack.

Adriana swallowed and set down her glass. “We’re pretty much moved. I just need to pack up some knick-knacks.”

“Oh.” I took a big swig of wine, this loss compounding with every other emotional hit I’d taken.

Adriana shifted in her seat, her eyes falling on Rosa as if begging for an out, but our mother-in-law was all out of sympathy for her daughters.

“Everything happened so fast that I guess I forgot to—”

“Return my calls?” I took a breath and shrugged. “I should’ve guessed something was going on. I just wish you would’ve told me.”

Adriana glanced at Marco, and her mouth turned down. “There was a lot to figure out.”

Marco all but chugged the insanely expensive wine, then stood. “I need to make a call.”

“Marco,” Adriana called out, but he kept walking. She shook her head and cursed under her breath.

“I’ve always let my children make their own decisions, but let me give you this piece of advice.”

Adriana’s eyes welled as she nodded.

“Your son is a Moretti and, at present, the heir to the family. Now, no one expects you to be with a man you don’t love, but we do expect that little boy to be raised knowing who he is. If you can do that with this doctor as your husband, great. But if for any reason we feel like he’s being taken from this family, well, decisions will have to be made.”

Rosa’s stare was expectant, and Adriana did not disappoint. “I understand,” she choked out. “Dante is a Moretti. I understand the responsibility that name holds.” Standing, she wiped under her eyes.

“Good. And don’t forget you’re still one too.” Rosa looked Adriana up and down and added, “At least for now.” Rosa dismissed her, turning toward Frankie and asking him about his sister Val.

Adriana wasted no time fleeing the room and the arctic chill Rosa was blasting her way.

“More wine?” Rosa’s voice pulled my attention from the empty doorway.

Frowning in confusion, I shoved my glass toward her. “Sure.”

“I should probably check with Marco.” Frankie left Rosa and me alone, a nearly empty bottle of wine between us.

“You really aren’t pregnant,” Rosa slurred, pointing her glass at me.

Taking a healthy swig, I fortified myself for what was sure to be a fucking nightmarish conversation. “Nope.”

“You tried to tell me.”

“Yep.”

“I should fucking kill you.”

“Why? Because your piece of shit husband tried to kill me, and I defended myself?” Her mouth fell open, but no words came out. “Or because your son loves me so much, he helped me hide it?” Based on the stark red staining her cheeks, I figured I was two seconds from being shot between the eyes. Why not go out with a bang? “I have literally fought for my place in your son’s life—for a place in this fucking family. The only way you’re getting rid of me is in a body bag. So, go for it. Kill me and explain to your son why you snuffed me out.”

Wineglass in hand, I dramatically held my arms out, waiting for her final verdict.

Rosa slowly closed her mouth, her lips pressing together and her eyes narrowing. For a minute, she inspected me and then abruptly pushed her chair back. “I’ve always admired your honesty. It’s something my Luca needs in his life.”

She rounded the table and gestured for me to stand. Swallowing back the ball of fear sitting in my throat, I gracefully stood, arms still extended like I was ready to be sacrificed.

Rosa’s eyes shined as she clenched her jaw. “You were the answer to my prayers. But you killed my Dante.”

“I know.”

“He tried to kill you.”

My stomach twisted. Rosa weighed her options while staring me in the eye. “He did.”

“I miss him.” A tear rolled down her cheek.

My chin trembled. “I know.” I reached out to hug her and was met with her palm cracking against my cheek. The wineglass fell from my hand as it flew to my face, my fingers prodding the smarting skin. “Rosa?”

She took a step back, running her fingers through her perfect hair. Strands fell around her face as she reached under the table.

“Rosa?” My voice shook as she pulled a gun out of thin air.

Slamming it on the table, she dropped her chin to her chest. “Why did you go to that room that night?”

I stared at the gun, struggling to find my words. Glass crunched under my heel as I took a nervous step to the side. Rosa swung toward the sound, and I held my hands up in defense. I pushed back the urge to cower in fear and rushed out, “Luca texted me, and I—”

“You’re telling me you didn’t know it was Dante?”

“N-No. I thought it was Luca. I thought he changed his mind about us, but when I got there, Dante ambushed me.”

Rosa let out a humorless laugh and straightened, her hand tightening around the gun handle. “And I believe you.” She pounded her chest with the gun. “But what am I supposed to do with all this pain? I’m in hell. I miss him every—” She shook her head, dragging her teeth over her upper lip. “When I got that video, it was like I finally had somewhere to put all the ugly.” She pointed the barrel at me carelessly. “You. I could do what I’d been brought up to do. Get even. You take the love of my life—I take your life.”

I nodded, silent tears streaming down my face as Rosa broke down.

“The problem is my son loves you so much he’s willing to betray his family. I have no doubt I wouldn’t live to see tomorrow if I killed you.”

The ease and comfort she had while speaking about both of our deaths made my whole body shake.

Rosa sobbed out a laugh. “Who am I kidding? I love you like you’re my own. You’re exactly what this family needs. Exactly what Luca needs.” She gestured toward me and lost grip on the handle. The gun fell from her hand and went off, the bullet hitting the wall behind me.

I dove in the other direction, my hip hitting the table and knocking the bottle of wine on the floor. “Fuck!”

Not a minute later, Marco and Frankie rushed into the room.

“What’s going on in here?” Marco took a quick inventory of the scene, eventually falling on the gun. With a scoff, he scooped it up.

“We had an accident,” I said, giving him a shaky smile.

“Uh-huh.” He eyed Rosa, and all she did was shrug, grabbing her wine glass off the table. “Aunt Rosa?”

She glanced at him with bloodshot eyes, her chin definitely raised.

“Does Frankie need to sit in here to make sure you don’t kill Sasha?”

A crunching sound drew all of our attention to the other side of the kitchen, where Frankie leaned against the counter, eating an apple. “What?”

Marco muttered something, went into the pantry, came out with a broom and a dustpan, and then got to work sweeping up

the broken glass.

Rosa and I silently watched as he took care of the mess, cursing as he picked up the now-empty bottle. When I caught her eye, her entire face crumbled, and she sagged against the table. Without hesitation, I was at her side and guiding her into a chair. Squatting in front of her, I gave her a napkin and held her free hand.

“I’m so sorry, Sasha.” She squeezed my fingers, licking a tear from her lips. “All we’ve done is put you through hell. This is why Adriana is running away.”

Behind me, a cabinet slammed closed.

“Growing pains. I want you to know that I would do anything for Luca, for this family. I never wanted to take anything from you.”

She closed her eyes, taking a deep breath. Her shoulders sagged as her eyes opened. “I love you. Thank you for being you.”

“Thank you for not shooting me.” I bit back a smile.

She chuckled, wiping her eyes. “For the first time in my life, I couldn’t pull the trigger.”

“If that’s not love, I don’t know what is,” Frankie said as he flopped down in a chair holding a full bottle of wine and two more wine glasses. “More wine?”

Rosa playfully glared at her nephew but scooted her glass toward him.

Frankie poured four glasses of wine, Marco finished mopping the floor, and I sat in the chair next to Rosa.

“So, you guys are good? No more threats of homicide?” Frankie hazarded, handing us each a glass of wine.

Rosa's hand covered mine, and she gave me a watery smile. "We're good."

"And are we going public with the no baby thing?" Frankie gave my belly a pointed look. "Pretty soon, people are going to wonder where's the kid."

"I think we should keep the story going until Luca's free. Gives us a family PR spin if Halloween doesn't go as planned." Marco rubbed his forehead, accepting a glass from Frankie.

"It better go as planned." I glared at him for even putting those bad vibes into the atmosphere.

Frankie and Marco shared a serious look but didn't say anything.

Sitting up straighter, I set my glass on the table. "I mean it. Cy dies on Halloween even if I have to do it myself."

"It won't come to that," Marco assured me. "You worry about making the opening the distraction of the century, and we'll handle the rest."

"Fine." I bumped his knee and leaned back. "You okay?"

"About?" He raised an eyebrow.

I jerked my chin toward the door, and he scowled.

"I'm fine. She's made her choice." The silent part being—and yet again, it wasn't me.

"We're going to be okay," Rosa said, her voice resolute. "Luca's coming home, and we'll all be okay."

"Hear, hear!" Frankie raised his wine and waited patiently for us to clink glasses. After the least enthusiastic cheers I'd ever experienced, we fell into a companionable silence.

The wine was good, and before I knew it, we'd finished another bottle.

"Should I open another?" Rosa giggled as she danced back to the wine rack.

"I probably shouldn't. The hospital could call any time now, and I don't want to be trashed." I shoved the glass away and grabbed another tiny appetizer.

Rosa sobered at the thought of Luca. "Of course. We should—"

"Rosa." I patted her chair and gently smiled. "If you want to open that bottle, do it. Today has been a hard day for you."

"I'll drink with you, Aunt Rosa." Frankie escorted her from the middle of the kitchen back to the table. "If Sasha's DD'ing, I'm free to get sloppy."

Marco checked his phone and sighed. "It's getting late. I'm going to head to bed. Wake me up when you head to the hospital."

"You got it, boss." Frankie saluted.

Marco rolled his eyes and went to the fridge. He came back with three water bottles. "Make sure you drink these. Tomorrow's going to be a long one."

"Consider them drank," Frankie said as he uncorked another bottle. "Now get to bed. You need your beauty sleep."

Rosa cackled and got up to give Marco a hug. In what I assumed was a whisper to her drunk mind, she said, "That girl never deserved you. Your soul mate will come. Just hold on." She gave him a loud kiss on the cheek and shoved him toward the door.

When it was just the three of us, Rosa let out a heavy sigh. “You know, when Dante told us he was marrying Adriana, I was shocked.” She smiled to herself and shook her head. “I loved my son, but a man like Marco doesn’t come around very often. I always figured it was better for him that things happened the way they did. What I didn’t account for was how much Marco loved her.”

“He’ll bounce back,” I offered weakly.

“It’ll take a hell of a woman to break Adriana’s hold on him,” Rosa mused.

I stared off into space, feeling tired to the core. “It’ll happen. I refuse to believe he’ll never find what I have with Luca.”

Frankie pretended to gag. “Can we stop talking about Marco’s disastrous love life and talk more about what happened before Aunt Rosa tried to put a bullet in you?”

FIFTEEN

“You look like shit.” I handed Frankie a cup of burnt hospital coffee.

Struggling to sit up on the teal polyester chair, he grimaced as he sloshed coffee on his fingers. “Thanks.” He blew on it and took a sip, wincing at the scalding heat. When I’d gotten the call from the hospital at six a.m., I found Frankie alone in the kitchen.

I sat next to him and hazarded a taste of my own dark brew. “Remind me never to drink with Rosa. Looking at you, I don’t think I’d survive.”

Frankie grunted but didn’t add anything else as he massaged his forehead.

Marco was pacing outside the waiting room on the phone while Rosa was at the desk asking for the millionth time for an update.

In a huff, she rejoined us. “Five hours, and they have no updates. Ridiculous.”

A couple of cops passed Marco, and he stopped walking, eyeing them with extreme disgust. Since we arrived at the hospital, we’d fallen into an uncomfortable standoff with the

police guarding Luca's room. While we kept being told there was no information, we knew exactly where he was.

"Fern said it shouldn't be much longer." I'd been doing everything I could to distract myself from the office behind the desk that Fern disappeared into with the head of security. The door opened, and I jumped to my feet. Unfortunately, a lone cop stepped out, not the lawyer that was costing us an arm and a leg to do absolutely nothing. Grumbling, I slid back in my seat. "Of course, that was four hours ago."

With his eyes closed and head resting against the wall, Frankie mumbled, "If I get locked up, I hope you guys are just as pushy."

"You get locked up, and my sister will kill me." Rosa absentmindedly patted his knee as she watched the hallway.

"Nah. Ma would be too busy at church praying for me." His lips pulled into a small smile, making him look like a man having a pleasant dream.

"Mrs. Moretti?"

"Yes," Rosa and I said in unison.

The cop looked between us and directed the rest at me. "You can come see your husband now."

"Thank you." I grabbed my purse as I followed him closely to the door with two guards on it.

He opened the door and said, "You have an hour."

"Thank—" I took a step into the room and stopped dead in my tracks. "You." The officer shut the door, and I bit the inside of my cheek. Sitting beside my sleeping husband was Fern, but what had me seeing red was her pale hand wrapped around his limp fingers.

“Get your hands off my fucking husband,” I hissed, careful to keep my voice down.

Fern jumped, immediately dropping his hand. With wide eyes, she backed away from the bed and my injured husband. “I-I—”

“Just thought you had the right to touch *my* husband? How long have you been in here? I never saw you leave the office.”

Fern shook her head. “There’s another door. I’ve only been in here a couple of minutes.”

I stalked toward her, pinning her against the wall without laying a finger on her. “I’ve been nothing but polite to you, but that ends now. You see that man?”

She glanced at him. Her gaze lingered longer than I liked, so I grabbed her jaw and yanked her focus back to me.

“I own every part of him. His mind, body, soul, and heart. He branded himself with my fucking name. If you ever think of putting your grubby disloyal hands on him, I’ll cut them off.”

Fern trembled under my touch, her eyes welling with tears. “I’m not disloyal. I’m helping him.”

I leaned in, nose to nose with her. “You left him for being who he was. You’re helping because you know you made the wrong call walking away. The only problem is he moved on, and he moved on with me.” I tightened my hold, and she winced. “So, I recommend you act strictly professionally if you don’t want to find out just how perfect I am for Luca. I’m not afraid to kill for what’s mine.”

“You can’t threaten me.” She tried to break my hold, but I only dug my fingertips in more.

“It’s not a threat, sweetheart. It’s a fucking promise.” I pushed her face away, the back of her head bouncing off the wall.

Fern cried out, her hands going to where she’d made impact. “Okay. I understand.” Her voice had no defiance, so I took a step back, letting her squeeze past me. “Is there anything else?”

“Stay away from my family and do your job.”

She nodded once, then ran from the room.

“That’s my wife,” Luca croaked from behind.

I spun around and rushed to his side. “Oh my God. Luca. Are you okay?”

He gave me a flat look.

“Right. Of course, you’re not okay.”

“I’ll be fine. They didn’t hit anything important. Lucky me.” He grimaced as he tried to sit up, a guttural groan leaving his parted, chapped lips.

“Don’t move.” I waved my hands, trying to keep him from moving anymore. “Let me—” The bed remote wasn’t visible, so I searched the blankets carefully for it. “Got it!” With a loud whirl, the head of the bed slowly rose, and Luca winced the entire way until he was upright.

“Thanks,” He mumbled, holding his side. “I can’t believe those fuckers got to me.”

“How did this happen?” I sat on the edge of Fern’s vigil chair, hating that she got to Luca first.

Luca glared at the door. “The guards told me the warden wanted to see me, which was bullshit because they led me to

the laundry room to get jumped.”

I grabbed his hand, and he gently squeezed.

“Without the shivs, I would’ve had them.” Luca’s jaw twitched as he stared at the door, his ego trying to mend itself.

“You cannot be mad that three men with weapons bested you.” I maneuvered, trying to catch his eye, but his stubbornness was in full effect, so all I got was his strong profile. “Luca. You aren’t invincible.”

“No. But I hate how little power I have in this situation.” He shifted toward me and cupped my face. “I’m sick of making you cry.” His thumb brushed under my eye.

I turned my cheek and kissed his palm. “It’s almost over. You’ll be home soon enough and ruling over your subjects like the merciless boss you are.”

Luca tugged my ear and fell back with a sigh. “I was serious when I said I plan to delegate. No more taking on everything myself. That was how my dad led, and it’s fucking miserable.”

“I imagine your dad had a hard time trusting people. From what your mom has told me, it wasn’t easy for him.”

He raised an eyebrow. “You’re defending Dante Moretti?”

I shrugged. “The last few months have been eye-opening.”

“You’ve definitely earned your stripes. Word’s gotten out about you killing your would-be assassin.”

“Good. Maybe they’ll leave me alone.”

“Doubt it, but at least they won’t be stupid enough to think they can take you out in the middle of the afternoon.”

Luca reached for a cup of water on the tray next to the bed but couldn't stretch his arm out all the way.

I jumped up and rounded the bed. "Let me."

"Thank you." He slumped against the pillows, letting me pour a glass and maneuver the tray closer

"Drink up. Your lips look dry."

Luca playfully glared but listened. When he drained the glass, he made an obnoxious "ahh" noise. "How are my lips now?" He grabbed the hem of my shirt and pulled me closer.

"Looking pretty good." I carefully rested my hands next to his legs, still unsure of where the damage was.

He grinned, the split in his bottom lip reopening. Trickle of blood and all, I closed the distance between our mouths and gently kissed him. Letting out a disgruntled noise, Luca cupped the back of my neck and deepened our kiss. The taste of copper did little to ruin the feel of his tongue against mine. The joy that he was still alive and well fueled me.

Luca grunted, and I stepped back, breaking his weak hold on me. "Are you all right?" I searched his body for any signs of a new injury.

"I'm fine. Come here." He tried to pull me closer, but I took another step back. "Sasha."

"Luca."

He threw his head back with a groan, but I was unmoved.

"You were just in surgery for being stabbed. We're not going to—" I waved my hand around.

Luca chuckled. "Fine. I'll be good."

"I'll believe it when I see it."

The door swung open, and a couple of nurses and a guard came in. “We need to check his vitals,” the short guy in teal scrubs said, his voice cautious as his eyes darted between Luca and me.

“Check away.” I stepped back against the wall, giving them the room they needed to make sure my husband was okay.

While I waited, I made the mistake of looking at the guard. The middle-aged man stared at me like I was the spawn of Satan. I tilted my head, raising an eyebrow, and suddenly I wasn’t so interesting. The guard’s face turned red as he dropped his gaze to the floor.

The perks of being married to a murderer.

By the time the nurses were done poking, prodding, and making notes, my hour with Luca was nearly over.

“I’ll be home soon.”

“I know,” I whined, laying my forehead on our interlaced fingers.

“Knock, knock,” Fern tentatively said from the door, not entering the room.

“This bitch,” I mumbled before giving her an insincere smile. “Yes, Fern?”

She cringed and took a step back, so only her face was visible in the doorway. “The police would like to have a quick word.”

Luca and I shared a disappointed look, and he squeezed my hand. “Send them in. The pain meds are kicking in, and I feel like I’m about to fall asleep.”

Two police officers came in, followed by a cautious Fern.

“Mr. Moretti, we want to assure you that your attackers have been moved into isolation, and the guards have been suspended.” The cop showed my husband a level of respect that screamed he was in The Family’s pocket.

“My client will need a few extra days to recover, and we’d like them to be here in the hospital.”

“Get the doctors on board. It’s the only way the warden will allow it.”

Fern grinned, pulling out her phone. “Done.”

The three of them quietly chatted while Luca grew more and more drowsy.

“If that’s all,” I said, raising my eyebrows in question.

“Of course! Let us get out of your hair.” The cops were gone in a flash, leaving Fern alone near the foot of the bed.

“I’m glad you’re okay, Luca.” Fern rocked on her heels, her eyes staying on my husband, never daring to stray to me.

Fucking coward.

“Thanks,” Luca said, not sparing her a look. He pulled my hand to his lips and pressed a soft kiss to my knuckles. “You’ll come back tomorrow?”

“I’ll be here.”

He sighed and leaned his head back against the pillows. His breathing slowed, and his hand went limp in mine.

I stood up and kissed his forehead, moving the tray with water as close as possible in case he woke up thirsty. When I turned to leave, I was shocked to see Fern still standing there with tears in her eyes.

“Oh.” Fern’s chin trembled as she sucked in a shaky breath. “I’ll make sure you have visitation approved for tomorrow and will send you the times.” She squared her shoulders and calmly left.

“What a fucking day.” I glanced at Luca one last time, making sure he was, in fact, safe and sound, before heading back to my family.

As soon as I reached the waiting room, Rosa jumped up and joined me. “How is he?”

“As good as a guy with nine stab wounds can be.” We shared a small smile and started toward the exit, Frankie and Marco following in our wake. Once we got in the SUV, I leaned between the front seats and asked, “Everything’s in order for Halloween, right?”

Marco nodded as Frankie pulled out of the parking garage.

“I swear to God, if you guys don’t pull this off, I will handle it myself.”

Frankie smiled to himself, changing the radio station.

“This isn’t for you to worry about. One way or another, Luca’s coming home.” Marco pulled his phone from his pocket, dismissing me.

“These fuckers,” I grumbled as I put on my seatbelt.

“I’ll drive the getaway car if it comes to it,” Rosa whispered loud enough for me to hear.

I reached out and grabbed her hand. Things with Rosa weren’t back to how they were before she knew I was Dante’s murderer. Instead of fear of her finding out, and guilt at the memory of taking his life, there was a level of understanding and respect between us. I had to believe this new development

would lead to good things. Otherwise, I'd always be waiting for the other shoe to drop.

SIXTEEN

Through Fern's excellent legal skills and Luca's above average-acting abilities, the hospital kept pushing back his release. After two weeks of daily visits, I had to watch as they loaded him into a police cruiser and drove away.

His return to the cell wasn't without complications. His attackers had mysteriously disappeared. Into the system? Into the morgue? No one could figure it out. A rumor was spread that Luca was next, so they kept him nice and cozy in isolation.

No one needed to know we'd spread the rumor.

With my husband away from gen pop and SA Designs absolutely killing it when it came to deadlines, I was cautiously optimistic. The morning of the casino opening, I was ready for my life to finally be put right by the death of Cy Chronis.

Ashley, Axel, Scott, and I walked through the slot machines, doing last-minute checks as if there was time to make any changes.

"Goddamn, those chairs are sexy," Scott shouted over the noise of the machines as he ran his fingers over the fabric.

“Can you believe the smoke smell is gone?” Ashley took a deep breath and smiled. “Amazing what new carpet can do.”

“Miranda was 100% right about this layout. Somehow this huge room feels cozy.” The sparkling light fixtures above us softly lit the space.

We all looked at Axel, waiting for him to give his own musing, and were gifted with a tight-lipped smile.

I checked my watch and sighed. “I think it’s time for Ashley and me to head up to the suite and get ready. You guys want to come or . . .”

“We actually need to run to the office, but we’ll be back in time for opening.”

We hugged and lingered in the middle of the casino floor together.

“This is a big deal.” Axel shook his head as he took in the room. “We really did this.”

“Yeah,” the three of us agreed with dreamy smiles.

He grinned and gave my shoulder a gentle shove. “Go. Knowing you two, you’ll need the whole afternoon to get ready.”

Ashley gasped. “How dare you?” Her hand flew to her chest. “Come on, Sasha. It’s time to get even more beautiful.”

The guys laughed and split off toward the exit while we went to the bank of shiny elevators. “When’s Malcolm getting here?” I pressed the button, and the doors immediately slid open.

“He’ll be here at five.” Ashley rubbed her arm and stared at our reflection in the flawless metal. The numbers lit up quickly as we rode up to the top floor.

“Everything okay, or . . .”

She rolled her eyes. “We’re fine. He’s been working a case, and I’m learning to trust that he won’t end up beaten in an alley.”

The doors opened, and we got out. “Ah. Yeah. That’s a tough one.”

“It’ll be fine.” Our footsteps were muffled by the plush carpet as we made our way down the hall. “I just can’t get the image of him in that hospital bed out of my mind. And then he’s all ‘I can handle myself’ in his stupid, deep, sexy voice.”

I couldn’t help but laugh as I let us in the room. Floor-to-ceiling windows with a fantastic view of the city greeted us, and for the millionth time that day, my chest swelled with pride.

“Shut up. If Malcolm thinks he can sex me into submission . . . he might be right.” Ashley cackled and ran toward the garment bags in the bedroom. “Did you bring more than one outfit?”

Tearing the foil off a bottle of champagne, I popped the cork. “Yes. Just in case I need a dramatic reveal later.”

“Ever the performer.”

I poured two glasses and groaned. “It’s been so long since I’ve had a show. When Luca’s home and things calm down, I’m getting back on stage.”

“Good for you.” Ashley carried out her opened garment bag, the sun catching on the beaded skirt of her flapper dress.

“That dress is amazing.”

“I know, right?” Ashley danced toward me and accepted a glass. “I found it in the back of my mom’s closet. After a few

alterations, it's absolutely perfect.”

I eyed the dress with a smirk. “You’re telling me Maxine Brooks had that hot number in her closet?”

“She watched a show about decluttering and made me come over and help clean out the closets. Some of the things we found—” Ashley shuddered and took a swig of champagne.

“I can’t imagine what my parents have hidden in the depths of their bedroom. You’re a brave one.”

“Are your parents coming tonight?”

“Like you could keep them away.” I smiled, thinking about how great things had been between us. Mom had been by a couple of times and even stayed with me the night after Luca was stabbed.

“I love this new era in your relationship with your mom.”

“Me too.”

At some point, Miranda showed up, and we all shared the bottle of champagne as we got ready.

As we slid into our dresses, Miranda said, “I want you both on your best behavior tonight.”

“Okay?” Ashley asked as she struggled with her zipper.

“Oscar’s coming, and I don’t want you guys to scare him away.”

I smiled softly at Miranda as I helped Ashley. “We promise to be as normal as we can be.”

Miranda blew out a breath and inspected her reflection. “Thank you. It’s just that he’s a serious introvert, and you guys can be a lot.”

“I can see that.” Ashley joined her by the full-length mirror. “We’ll be good. We want Oscar to feel comfortable with us.”

I whistled low as we turned and checked our outfits from every angle. “We might’ve gone a bit generic with our costumes, but damn, we look good.”

“It’s not like we could go all out,” Miranda said, adjusting her modest princess gown.

I fluffed my hair one more time. “I’m starting to regret not getting the witches hat.”

“Eh. It would’ve smooshed your hair.” Ashley checked her phone and grinned. “Believe it or not, but we’re right on time.”

“Shall we?” I held the door as Ashley and Miranda filed out, taking one last fortifying breath before I followed.

The grand opening was in full swing when we got to the lobby. Local celebrities, officials, and rich folks milled about with stylish cocktails and complimentary buckets for their winnings. Miranda split off to find Oscar, and Ashley wanted to check with Joey and make sure they had looked over our final numbers, so I was left alone in a sea of happy gamblers.

In all the years of seeing our hard work turned into reality, this casino was different. Not only was it a testament to the genius of SA Designs, but it was also another opportunity to grow the Moretti fortune. A fortune my children would inherit. My hand fell to my stomach, imagining the next generation and what it would mean to raise a Moretti heir.

“Mrs. Moretti?” A deep voice behind me interrupted my daydream of children with black hair and green eyes.

I turned and came face to face with Judge Graves, Jazz's father. "Oh, I'm so glad you could make it." We shook hands while keeping a comfortable distance from one another.

"Thank you for inviting us. This is quite the place." Judge Graves gestured to the bright lights and chiming machines.

"Thank you. We're hoping The Palace will become yet another gem of St. Louis."

Judge Graves studied me before nodding. "I appreciate your discretion regarding your friendship with my daughter. Jazzlyn is a promising young woman, and I'd hate to see her rise stilted by inappropriate friendships."

I smiled, admiring the man in front of me. "I'd never want to do anything to keep Jazz from being the very best she can be. She's too important to me."

"Good." He cleared his throat. "I hope your husband comes home soon. This whole thing has set the city on its ear. I'll be happy for things to get back to normal."

"You and me both."

We shared a tight smile, then Judge Graves looked over my shoulder and lifted his chin in acknowledgment. "I need to go collect my wife from the craps table. Congratulations." He gently touched my elbow and walked around me.

I watched the sophisticated couple sneak peeks at me before moving deeper onto the casino floor.

"That went well." Jazz handed me a drink. "Looks like you could use that."

"Thanks." I took a big sip and sighed. "Your parents love you."

“Yeah. They’re a lot, but I’ve never doubted that they love me.” She bumped my shoulder and lifted her drink toward the slots. “I talked to your mom for a few minutes. She is over the moon about the casino. I don’t think proud is a strong enough word.”

Mom whooped as her machine whirled, slapping Maxine’s thigh and pointing. The two women fell into a fit of laughter as they pressed the buttons again.

I smiled, happy our moms were enjoying themselves. “Things are getting better. She’s really trying.”

“I won at blackjack!” Imani rushed up to us, shaking her bucket. Her red sequined gown and purple gloves gave her a beautiful Jessica Rabbit illusion—all sparkling curves from the waist down.

“Good job, baby.” Jazz dropped a kiss on her forehead as Imani straightened Jazz’s black tie and tugged on the lapels of her beige coat.

“Are you going to come play?” Imani playfully pouted her crimson lips.

“In a minute. I wanted to check in with Sasha.”

“Don’t take too long. My winning streak might cool.” Imani hugged me tightly, and the sequins on her dress scratched my arms. “Congratulations. The casino is amazing.” She stood on her tiptoes and whispered, “And thank you for the engagement trip.” When she pulled back, her eyes were shiny with tears. “You’re the best.”

“Don’t mention it.”

She squeezed my hands and slinked off toward the gaming tables.

“She says she won’t get married until you can come.” Jazz chuckled.

“Oh, you don’t have to—”

Jazz lifted her hand, shaking her head. “Honestly, it’s going to take at least a year to plan the wedding. I assume by then, things will be back to normal.” She lifted her eyebrow.

“If I have my way, it’ll be handled tonight.”

With a thoughtful nod, Jazz tapped my glass with hers, then strutted off, the tails of her trench coat billowing behind her.

The Chronis brothers walked by, politely dipping their chins, but thankfully didn’t stop for a chat.

Thank God.

An hour later, I was at a poker table with Jazz, Adriana, Sarah, and Ashley. Imani flitted back and forth, bringing us drinks and stories from the other side of the casino while Michael hovered protectively behind his *very* pregnant wife. Miranda and Oscar had slipped away for some air. Based on the lovey-dovey eyes they were giving each other, I’d bet my last dollar that she was showing him her hotel room.

Mid trash talk about the last hand, none other than Beth sat in the last seat at the table. Across from her, Ashley glared, but it didn’t deter Beth from changing out for more chips and settling in next to me as if I’d never threatened her with a gun.

“Congratulations,” Beth said with a strained smile on her face.

“Thanks.” I shared a “what the fuck” look with Sarah, then turned to Beth. “Are you having a good time?”

She nodded, her dark straight hair sliding over her shoulder. “I am. I decided I might as well enjoy myself. I mean, I don’t really have a choice, do I?” Her dark eyebrows arched as she looked at the cards she was dealt.

I let out a humorless chuckle and slid my cards to the dealer. “You don’t, but there’s no point in being a sore loser.”

Beth’s cheeks crimsoned. Everyone placed their bids, and Beth kept matching. Although if her forefinger rubbing her thumb was anything to go by, she was bluffing her ass off. When it was time to finally flip their cards over, Sarah screamed in excitement, then in agony as she held her stomach.

“I think it’s time.” Her wide green eyes were full of tears as she stared up at Michael. “The baby’s coming!”

We all jumped up, circling around Sarah. I waved down a floor security guard and had him call for an ambulance. Cautiously, we guided Sarah to the front exit as Michael ran to the car to fetch their go-bag. The ambulance pulled up, and the EMTs quickly loaded her into the back. Michael tossed his car keys to me and climbed in after her.

“I’ll bring your car by later. Call us when the baby’s here!” I shouted as they shut the doors.

We stood in a cluster watching the taillights disappear around the corner.

“Never a dull moment.” I bumped Ashley’s shoulder, and she sighed.

“It’s not our style.”

Marco and Frankie stomped outside, and for a second, I prayed they’d keep walking and leave me be for once—but that’s not how my life worked.

“Sasha. A word.” Marco gestured for me to join him.

I dropped my chin to my chest and took a deep breath. “Excuse me,” I mumbled to my friends.

When Marco, Frankie, and I stood in the building’s shadow out of earshot, Marco turned us, so our mouths were obscured. “Our guy fell through.”

“What do you mean?” I rasped, the air suddenly gone from my lungs.

“It’s not happening tonight,” Marco said, his voice full of barely contained rage.

“No.” I violently shook my head and looked behind me. My friends stood together, watching us with concern. Glaring at Marco, I fisted my hands at my sides. “Then go and do it yourself. It needs to happen tonight. Luca’s not going to survive in jail. They’ve almost killed him once. What’s to say next time the warden won’t let him bleed out?” My voice was so shrill I wasn’t sure if they understood what I was saying.

Marco reached out, but I took a step away. “No! Fix this.”

Frankie glared at Marco, then turned to me, his face softening. “We can’t do it tonight. We don’t know if Cy was tipped off or what’s happened with our guy. It could be a trap.”

I nodded. “So that’s it? What happened to, ‘We just need a bullet and a clear shot?’ Isn’t that what you said, Frankie?”

He frowned. “We have another plan in the works. Be patient.”

I sucked my teeth. “Be patient.” I poked the inside of my cheek with my tongue. “If Luca gets hurt again, you’ll bleed right there with him.” Baring all my teeth, I walked backward until I spun and rejoined my friends. “I need to change.”

Adriana, Jazz, Imani, and Ashley followed me silently. In the elevator, they shot worried looks my way. It wasn't until we were in the suite that someone finally spoke.

“What’s going on?” Ashley asked as she took the garment bag from my hands.

I reached for it, but she held it behind her back. Irritated, I started to pace. “It’s not over. Luca’s not coming home unless I do something.”

She slid the zipper down and took out the classic Playboy Bunny costume inside. “This was your backup costume for the opening?”

“No. It was for later. For Luca.”

We’d planned a celebratory video chat, but now there was nothing to celebrate unless I made a move.

“So, why are you putting it on?”

Hands on my hips, I stared my friends down. “Leave now if you don’t want to be dragged into some shit.”

No one left. In fact, all four women settled on the edge of the bed, waiting for me to continue.

“Fine. I need to change costumes and slip out of here without being noticed to take care of a problem the men have failed to eliminate.” I looked at the alarm clock on the bedside table and frowned. “I have probably a two-hour window before anyone misses me. So, either you’re helping me get out of here, or you can go back to the casino and enjoy the rest of your night.”

Ashley laid my costume on the bed and stood. “Let me help you out of your witchy dress.”

“And I’ll get the makeup out,” Jazz said as she went into the bathroom and raided my makeup.

“I’ll go arrange a car service for you.” Adriana already had her phone in hand. “Where are you going?”

“Get me a block from The Velvet Lounge.”

Imani frowned as she fluffed the white tail on my costume. “A strip club?”

“There’s a dance club on that block. We’ll have them drop you there.” Adriana left the room with her phone to her ear.

I stepped out of the dress as Ashley gathered it from the floor. “Imani, can you get me a bottle of water? I need to sober up a little.” Adrenaline coursed through me, but so did a good amount of gin.

“I’ll do you one better. How about a cup of coffee?”

“You’re an angel.” She beamed at me and rushed to the small kitchenette.

“Come on.” Ashley pushed me toward the bathroom. Once I was sitting on the toilet lid, she turned to leave. “I assume you have your wigs somewhere in here?”

“There’s a blond wig in my bag.”

Jazz handed me a makeup wipe and sat on the edge of the tub. “You sure you want to do this?”

I pulled my false eyelashes off. “I have no choice.”

“You could wait and let the guys take care of it.”

“Not after Luca was stabbed. I don’t trust he’ll be safe in there.” I faced the mirror and gently wiped away my eyeshadow. “This happens now, even if I have to do it myself.”

“You’ve got a burner?”

“Yes.”

“Leave your cell here. Don’t take it. Don’t leave anything behind at the club.”

I nodded.

“Your bunny costume come with gloves?”

“Elbow length.”

Jazz nodded and handed me tissue paper to dry my eyes. “No matter what, keep them on.”

“You got it.” I grabbed my smokey eyeshadow palette and let out a heavy breath. My heart raced, making me tremble all over. “Do you think you can?” I held it out to Jazz, and she silently took it.

“And you have a gun?” She whispered.

“Yeah.”

Jazz worked quickly while the others filtered in and out. Imani brought me a bottle of water and a cup of coffee, Adriana confirmed the hired car under the alias Ms. Buck and programmed the number in my burner, and Ashley helped me put on my wig so well that the motherfucker was never coming off. With a basic black face mask, my look was complete.

As I stepped out of the bedroom, Imani rushed into the suite. She gave me a quick once over and smiled. “Your car is waiting in the loading area, and Malcolm has the cameras along the way on a loop.”

Startled, I looked at Ashley.

She shrugged. “What good is it to have a computer genius for a boyfriend if he doesn’t help my best friend do something extraordinarily foolish and dangerous?”

“That’s the spirit.” I laughed and hugged her. “Thank you.” Glancing around, it took a lot not to cry. “You guys are—”

There was a sharp knock at the door, and we all froze.

“Sasha? It’s Rosa.”

“Shit.” I rushed back into the bedroom.

“I’ll handle it,” Adriana whisper yelled.

From behind the cracked door, I listened closely.

“Rosa! What are you—”

“Not now. Where’s Sasha?”

“She’s not—”

Rosa shoved the bedroom door open, and I jumped away, the door just missing my face. “I talked to Marco. Are you okay?” When she caught a glimpse of my new outfit, she frowned. “What happened to your black dress?”

“I-I—”

“Are you going somewhere?”

“Yes.” I jerked my chin up.

Better own my shit.

The corner of Rosa’s lips twitched, and she stepped out of the doorway, gesturing for me to lead. “Well, let’s go.”

“I’m going alone.”

“Do you have a plan?”

No. “Yes.”

Rosa shook her head. “Show me your gun.”

Hesitantly, I gave her my handbag, and she rifled through it. “This registered to you?”

“Yes.”

She dangled the small handgun from her fingers. “Is this the same gun you shot that guy with?”

“Yes.”

“Not smart.” She placed it on the coffee table and reached into her purse, pulling out a slightly larger handgun. “Take mine. We wouldn’t want there to be any crossover in the ballistics.”

Rosa had saved my ass. I’d never have thought about that connection. “Shit.”

She laughed as she shoved her gun into my purse. “You don’t do illegal murders with legal guns.”

The other women stood frozen around the room, staring at my mother-in-law like she was a total stranger. To be fair, this version of Rosa was. By the shocked look on Adriana’s face, I knew she’d never seen this side of Rosa Moretti.

“Makes sense. I wasn’t expecting to . . .”

“Always be prepared, Sasha. I can’t stress that enough.”

I nodded and adjusted the top of my gloves before taking my purse back. “Always have a dirty gun on hand just in case.”

“Exactly.” Rosa tilted her head with a soft smile. “You’re going to be okay.” Checking her watch, clicked her tongue. “Better get going if you’re going to make it back in time for the midnight toast.”

I inhaled deeply and slowly exhaled as I put on my coat.
“Okay, so where am I going?”

“I got you.” Imani reached out to take my hand. Before I could tell her to stay in the hotel room, she was dragging me down the hallway toward the service elevator. When the doors closed, Imani squeezed my hand. “Please be careful.”

“Mhm.” That was all I managed. I would throw up if I thought too much about what I was about to do.

The elevator opened, and we rushed past a few casino employees to the loading dock, where a town car waited.

“Good luck.” Imani hugged me and then watched until I slid into the back of the black sedan.

“Ms. Buck?”

I blinked a few times, realizing the driver was talking to me. “Uh, yes.”

“Would you like the partition up?”

“That would be great. Thank you.”

Once the glass was all the way up, I was able to stew in my anxiety. As we crossed the bridge to East St. Louis, I checked my purse, tracing the edges of the burner and gun with my fingers. All too soon, we stopped in front of a club that had a line of attractive, barely dressed people wrapped around the block.

“Ma’am?”

I jumped, not having noticed that the partition had lowered. “Yes?”

“I’ll be waiting in that parking garage. Just text me, and I’ll pick you up.”

“Great. Thank you.”

Taking my coat off, I left it on the seat. There was no need to carry extra shit. Honestly, my nerves were making me sweat up a storm.

I stepped onto the damp street, the people in line paying zero attention to me as I made the chilly walk past them toward The Velvet Lounge.

SEVENTEEN

A large man in an extremely tight black shirt that said “security” opened the door. As I passed, he leered down at me. “Enjoy yourself.”

“Thanks,” I muttered, relieved he didn’t ask to see my ID.

The chill from outside was replaced by the warmth of the club as I navigated the dim space. Bright lights shined down on the two stages where nearly naked women danced, leaving the rest of the room dark.

“Scuse me, hon.” A busty pirate brushed past me with a tray of shots.

Glancing around the packed room, I found a flight of stairs that led up to the second floor and what looked like a VIP section. I needed to get up there. Squaring my shoulders, I went straight to the bar where the bottle girls lined up to collect their drink orders.

A woman in a set of white lingerie with red crosses over her nipples jammed bottles of expensive champagne in ice buckets. When I stepped up, she asked, “Hey, you new?”

“Yeah, a last-minute cover.”

“Here are the buckets for the VIP. Why don’t you take them up and find Honey? She’ll show you the ropes.”

Surprised that I was being handed my ticket to get closer to Cy, I grinned and grabbed the two buckets with a grunt.

The bartender chuckled and jerked her chin toward the stairs. “Next time, send Toby down. Those buckets suck to carry.”

“No joke,” I huffed, doing my best to elegantly walk in my platform heels while burdened with impossibly heavy buckets. Each step was a test of my ankles and determination. At the top of the stairs was another beefcake. This one watched me with an apologetic smile.

“Oh shit. You shouldn’t have gone and gotten that.”

“No worries.” I puffed out a breath that sent my blond bangs flying up.

“Toby!” he shouted, and a smaller guy with a buzz cut rushed to his side.

“Yeah.”

“Grab those buckets from her. And next time the girls send an order down to the bar, make sure you’re the one to get them and bring them up here.”

“Shit.” Toby met me in the middle of the stairs, took the handles from me, then ran back up to the VIP like they weighed nothing.

The big guy took my hand and helped me up the last few stairs. “Dimitri’s in the corner and completely shit-faced,” he mumbled in my ear and gently pushed me in that direction.

I forced on a smile and gave him a thumbs up over my shoulder as I walked toward absolutely the last person I wanted to talk to.

“Motherfucker,” I grumbled as I approached the couch where my former friend and lover sat.

“You’re new.” He frowned, his eyes traveling from the top of my bunny ears to the tip of my shiny heels. “Come get to know me.” I allowed him to pull me down next to him, grimacing when I caught a whiff of his breath. “I thought tonight would be a total waste.”

Twisting the cap on a bottle of water, I giggled. “Drink this.”

Dimitri’s eyes narrowed, but he took it and drank half. “I know you,” he slurred.

“You’re drunk.” I laughed and swatted his arm, swinging my hair to create a barrier between us.

“I’m wasted, but you’re—” Dimitri crowded me until my back was pressed against the couch. His eyes widened, and he rasped, “Sasha?”

“Shut up.” I grabbed his cheeks to keep him from making a scene. If anyone looked our way, they would think we were having a little kiss.

“If Cy sees you here, you’re dead.” He blinked rapidly, his skin heating under my touch.

“And that’s why you need to keep your cool. No one here knows me. As far as they know, I’m the new girl filling in at the last minute. So why don’t you point me in the direction of Cy?”

Dimitri’s expression hardened, and he pried my hands from his face only to put his lips to my ear. “Sasha. I will throw you over my shoulder and carry you out of here.”

“And I will shoot you in the gut if you try. Now, I’m only going to ask one more time. Where’s Cy?”

Dimitri huffed against my bare neck, sending goosebumps down my arms. “He’s in the VIP rooms. You can’t just go back there. You need to be with a customer.”

I turned into him, his stubble rasping against my cheek. “Then take me back there.”

“No.” He pressed a kiss to the shell of my ear and leaned back. “I’m not letting them turn you into some assassin.”

“Then I’ll find someone else to get me to Cy.” I scooted to the edge of the cushion, ready to get up, but Dimitri pinned me back.

“You’re serious about this?”

“Yes. I get he’s your brother, but—”

“Fuck him. I’m only sticking around to keep tabs on what he’s up to and try to keep you safe.”

I bit the inside of my cheek, nostalgia for our past friendship hitting like a freight train. “So, you’ll help me? Because this is the only way I’ll ever be safe.”

“And the only way to bring Zoe home,” he muttered, his eyes dropping to my mouth, his tongue skating across his lower lip.

“You know?”

He nodded and said, “Daphne.”

“But Cy doesn’t know, you know, right?”

“Right.”

“So, are you going to help me?”

Dimitri sighed, his forehead landing on my shoulder. “Let’s go to the champagne room.”

He struggled to get to his feet, and once he was standing, his body swayed.

“Dimitri, I—”

“Come on, Trix. Let’s go.” He held his hand out for me, his bloodshot eyes half-lidded and in danger of closing altogether.

I stood and wrapped my arm around his, using all my strength to keep him upright. Together we staggered toward the back of the VIP, avoiding the dancers making their rounds. Halfway to the beefy dude guarding the hall, a tall, stunning blond crossed our path.

Alicia.

My heart stopped at the arrival of the familiar face. While she was clearly loyal to Mickey, I couldn’t be sure she’d extend that to me, especially if she was partying with the enemy.

“Sorry,” she said, her voice free of inebriation. Her eyes widened as she studied me, her mouth forming a small O. If I had blinked, I would have missed the moment of surprise because her features quickly smoothed, and she turned back to Dimitri, who was leaning against me. “Hey D, can you say my goodbyes to the birthday boy? I’m not feeling well.”

“No problem. Get home safe.”

“You got it, big guy.” She tilted her head at me. “You stay safe.”

Dimitri wrapped his arm around my shoulder and squeezed. “I got her.”

Alicia smirked. “I have no doubt.” She spun around and made a quick exit down the stairs. No hesitation. No looking back. Self-preservation at its finest, and I admired the hell out of it.

“Come on.” I wrapped my arm around Dimitri’s waist and all but dragged him to the bouncer. “Dimitri wants a private dance. Are there any free rooms?”

The guy nodded and led us to the first room on the left. “Let me know if you need any help.” He glanced at wobbly Dimitri, then back at me with an eyebrow raised.

“Will do.” I winked, all but shoving the drunk bastard inside.

My shoulders sagged as soon as the door shut, and I dropped Dimitri on a leather chair. Wanting to keep up appearances, I went to the sound system and picked a song. A slow sensual beat pulsed through the room, and I joined him on the chair, sitting carefully on his lap.

“Sasha?” He smiled dreamily up at me. “You’re really here.”

“Which room is Cy in?” I whispered in his ear, and he shivered.

“He’s always in the last one on the left.”

“Did he go in there alone?”

Dimitri nodded, his eyes sliding shut. “He went back just before you got here. He’s waiting for his present. The boys paid for an extra special night,” he slurred.

“Are there cameras in the rooms?”

“Yeah, but Cy always has his off. Privacy, or whatever.”

“I’ll be right back.” I kissed his cheek, and he sighed as his head lolled to the side.

Climbing off his lap, I gave myself a pep talk. “You can do this. You have to do this.” I straightened my spine and confidently walked to the door. I was banking on the whole “look like you belong” thing carrying me through. With one last check that I still had my phone and gun, I opened the door and stepped out into the hall, letting the door close behind me.

I turned toward Cy’s room, not bothering to check the other way for fear of looking sketchy. Much to my surprise and relief, no one shouted or told me to stop, and I reached the last door on the left. I took a deep breath and sashayed in like I was meant to be there.

“Are you my present?” Cy mumbled from an extra wide chair in the back. The lines of coke and the half-full bottle of champagne on the table gave me an idea of how fucked up he was.

“Yep. I’m Trixie,” I said, lowering my voice. Music was already playing, so I swayed my hips as I dropped my purse near the stage.

“Did my brother pick you? He knows I like ‘em big.”

“Mhm. Dimitri and I go way back.”

He grinned. “Nice. Why don’t you come over here and wish me a happy birthday?”

“Patience.” I giggled as I stepped up onto the small platform with a pole.

“Not one of my virtues.”

“I’ll make it worth the wait.” It had been a minute since I’d danced on a pole, but after a few passes, I was moving

smoothly. Twisting around, I slid down into a split and bounced to the rhythm.

“Fuck,” Cy grunted, his hand gripping the front of his slacks. “Get over here.”

“Not yet.” The song changed, and I told myself I had until the end of it to get my ass over there and end this nightmare.

Cy groaned, and the unmistakable sounds of a belt buckle loosening met my ears through the heavy bass. “The longer you make me wait, the more I’m going to make it hurt, baby.”

“Don’t threaten me with a good time.” I simpered at him over my shoulder, my skin crawling at the feel of his eyes on me.

“Take your top off. I want to see your tits.”

And I want to see you dead.

I averted my gaze from where I was pretty sure Cy’s dick was out, standing at attention, and focused on the wall behind him. Years of teasing and stripping with the Shimmy Sisters allowed me to move on autopilot. I loosened my corset until I was left in black elbow-length gloves, bedazzled bunny pasties, and cute panties complete with cotton tail. The room was warm, but a chill ran through me every time Cy spoke.

He’ll be dead soon. Just one more song.

I pulled out every trick in my book, then the song changed, and it was time to finish this horrific night. Stepping off the stage, I kicked my purse closer to the chair, Rosa’s gun springing free and stopping a few inches from Cy’s Italian loafer. “Whoops.” I smiled, using my arms to press my tits together to keep his eyes up and on me.

My heart raced the closer got to him, the gun sitting in my periphery, taunting me to speed things up before I was caught. Swallowing back the bile that threatened to spill out as he stroked himself, I stopped a few feet away. “Hands to yourself, and I’ll give you a big surprise.”

Cy glared up at me, and my breathing stuttered. I worried he noticed the slight tremble of my body, but instead of calling me out, he smiled and laced his fingers behind his head. “Show me what you’ve got.”

I slithered toward him, keeping my eyes on his hands until I was sure he was following my rules. Barely touching his shoulders, I wound my hips, my tits just out of reach of his mouth. I took my ass to the floor, dragging my fingers down his body, purposefully avoiding his dick because there was no way in hell I was going there. His thighs twitched under my palms as I shoved them wide, kneeling between his feet.

I ran my left hand back up toward his dick while I used my right to slide the gun closer. It was now or never.

“God, you’re sexy. You gonna suck my cock, Trixie?” Cy licked his lips, his eyes moving down my body to where my hand sat inches from his dick. “You want to choke on me, baby?”

“I’ve got a better idea.” In one motion, I grabbed the gold satin pillow Cy was leaning on and shoved it in his face. His hands flew to my wrist, but I was too quick. Pressing the barrel to the shiny fabric, I squeezed the trigger twice. Two loud pops filled the room, the pillow doing little to muffle the sound.

With my ears ringing, I jerked my hand back, and the pillow fell to his lap. I grimaced at the sight of the entry

wounds between Cy's dead gaze, the slate of his eyes so similar to Dimitri's, making my stomach turn.

I'd killed another man. This time, I'd been the predator, the hunter. There were no self-defense claims to hide behind. It may have been last minute, but it was undoubtedly premeditated. I left the casino knowing the night would end with either Cy Chronis dead or me bleeding out in failure.

But I hadn't failed, I'd succeeded, and it hadn't been as hard as I thought it would be.

Shouldn't murdering a man be harder?

I sat between Cy's legs, staring at his slouched body, waiting for someone to rush into the room. As the minutes ticked by, and it became apparent no one was going to bust in and fill me full of bullets, disbelief took the edge off the fear twisting my stomach.

All that was left was my getaway.

Holding on to Cy's knees, I carefully stood, my legs asleep from kneeling for God knows how long. I slipped the gun into my purse and texted the driver to meet me in front of the club. My corset proved to be a bit tricky to get back on without help and with gloves on, but I managed to rig it closed. I checked my face and hair in the mirrors lining the wall and prepared myself to put on the show of my life.

With my hand on the door handle, I said a little prayer. I would need all the help a higher power could give me. As I opened the door, the club's music drowned out what was playing in the room, making it clear why no one had heard Cy's execution.

I passed the room I'd left Dimitri in and went straight to the bouncer, tapping him on the shoulder. "Dimitri passed

out.”

The guy turned to me and rolled his eyes. “Thanks for the heads up. I hope you got your money.”

“I got what I came for.” I smiled and went straight to the stairs, flirting my way through the club. A misty rain hit my heated skin as I stepped outside, sending shivers down my arms. It took everything not to sprint toward my waiting town car, but I didn’t want to arouse suspicion.

Focusing on the click-clack of my impossible heels on the wet sidewalk, I finally made it to the waiting car.

“Back to the casino,” I said as I closed the door, grateful for the heated seats.

The driver nodded, and the partition raised. For the first time in forty minutes, it was quiet.

I slipped on my long coat, buttoning it to the top, and took off my bunny ears.

The driver pulled up to the loading dock. I thanked him and rushed to the back entrance. The door flew open, and Marco stood there, stone-faced. “Where have you been?”

“Nowhere,” I said as a kitchen employee passed us. “I need to get ready for the toast.” Brushing past him, I breathed a sigh of relief when he didn’t follow me.

When I got to the elevator, the doors opened, and there was Frankie smirking at me like an asshole. He gestured for me to enter, and I had no choice but to get in.

“Marco’s pissed.”

“What’s new?” I scoffed, noticing the red speckle in my white hair. “Son of a bitch.” Brushing the hair from my face, I

could see my cheeks were covered in freckles I didn't have before I shot Cy in the head.

Frankie chuckled, and the doors opened. "You're lucky it's Halloween. A little blood splatter is easily overlooked."

I brushed the spots with my fingertips, blinking slowly as if it would make the blood disappear.

I was covered in Cy.

The adrenaline that had powered my little mission, plus the knowledge I was wearing a dead man's DNA, made my legs buckle, and I felt faint.

Frankie grabbed my elbow and guided me toward my suite. "Let's get you cleaned up."

"Okay," I said weakly as he let us into the room.

"I've got her from here." Rosa dismissed Frankie and took me to the bathroom. "Have a seat."

Obediently, I sat on the closed toilet seat and took off my mask.

Rosa picked it up and dropped it in a plastic bag. "Take your gloves off and put them in here."

"Oh yeah." I slid them off, cringing at the line where the speckles started on my biceps. "Thanks."

Once I got the wig off, Rosa handed me the makeup wipes and went to work on my shoulders and upper arms while I took care of my face. "You did the right thing." She dropped the washcloth in the bag and grabbed another. Tilting my chin up, she cleaned my neck. "I'm proud of you." Tears welled in my eyes as she checked the other side. She inspected me and smiled softly. "Are you all right?"

I shrugged. “As good as can be expected.”

Rosa squeezed my shoulder, then went to the sink and washed her hands. “You’ll be okay.”

I laughed and joined her at the mirror to put on fresh makeup.

“I mean it.” She dried her hands with the plush hand towels I’d picked out. “You did what you had to do to bring your husband home. Wear that with pride.”

Her words buoyed my spirits, reminding me I was no longer an everyday civilian but a mob wife.

The Mrs. Moretti.

“Let me get you a bottle of water.”

Rosa left, and I stared at myself in the mirror. Without the makeup and costume, it was hard to believe where’d I been and what I’d done. I felt like I was in a weird dream I would never wake up from.

A smile slowly spread across my face.

Fuck Cy Chronis.

Luca was coming home.

EIGHTEEN

“There she is!” Ashley waved at me from the makeshift stage on the casino floor. “Get over here!”

I smiled, greeting people as I passed. When I reached my colleagues, Ashley grabbed my hand. “Everything okay?” Her warm brown eyes looked me head to toe.

“Perfect.”

Scott threw his arm around my shoulders. “Where’d you run off to?”

“Last minute snafu. It’s all taken care of, and I’m ready to celebrate.” I snagged a champagne flute off a passing tray and followed my co-owners onto the stage.

Joey was already up there, microphone in hand. He thanked the crowd for coming, SA Designs for our excellent work, and the city of St. Louis for being the best hometown he could ask for. There was cheering, clapping, and a call for more champagne.

I walked the floor, getting lost in the lights and sounds. Not in my wildest dreams did I expect the casino to turn out so well. The night was a success on all fronts.

“Mrs. Moretti. You’re needed up in the boss’s office,” a suited floor security guard discreetly said while maintaining a

respectful distance.

“Tell them I’ll be right up.”

He gave me a firm nod and pressed his earpiece while relaying the message. “Ma’am. I’ll escort you up.”

“Wonderful.”

I followed him through the maze of machines to a set of stairs leading up to the casino’s control center. Past the bank of security cameras was an executive office with one-way glass that looked over the gaming tables.

The guard opened the door for me but didn’t follow me inside. Instead, he closed me in with Marco, Joey, Aldo, Frankie, Mickie, and Taz.

“Gang’s all here.” I sighed and leaned against the door.

Marco sat back in the chair behind the desk, a frown so deep on his face I was sure he was creating new wrinkles. “What the fuck were you thinking?”

“What? No thank you?” I shoved off the door and downed the rest of my champagne. “I did what you couldn’t. You’re welcome.”

“Sasha?” Luca’s voice filled the room, and my step faltered.

“Luca?”

“Baby, what were you thinking?” He sounded tired, and I glared at Marco for dragging him into this mess.

“I was thinking that if I didn’t handle it, you’d be spending the next twenty years behind bars.” I slammed the empty champagne flute on the desk. “A better question is if anyone

has let Zoe and Tootsie know.” Everyone fell silent. “What now?”

“Now, we pick off any remaining Cy sympathizers.” Marco glanced at Frankie, who nodded.

“Round them up.”

“Sasha, sit down.” Marco pinched the bridge of his nose.

I set my palms on the edge of the desk and leaned forward. “Marco, fuck off.”

“Sasha,” Luca called out. “You need to calm down.”

“No! They were going to let tonight slip away, expecting me to wait while they came up with a new plan.” I glared at Marco. “I did what I had to. It’s done.”

“I never wanted—”

“For me to be a part of this. I know. But Luca? I am.”

Marco’s face softened as he stood. “She’s right. We’re going to proceed as planned. By the end of the week, it should be safe for Tootsie and Zoe to come home.”

Taz stood in the corner, silent, looking equal parts relieved and annoyed.

“Now that we’ve cleared that up, can we celebrate the bastard being dead?” Frankie went to the bar in the corner and started pouring amber whiskey from the decanter. He lifted a glass toward me, but I shook my head. I’d already had my fair share of celebratory “Cy’s dead” drinks.

“Frankie’s right. We may not like how it happened, but it’s done,” Mickey added, taking a tumbler from Frankie.

I picked up the phone and took it off speaker. “You’re coming home.”

The guys pretended to give me privacy as they gathered around Frankie.

“Thanks to you. God, I love you.”

“I love—”

The door to the office swung open, and two of the guys from Carmine’s warehouse rushed in with their guns drawn.

As I turned, my hand dropped from my ear, and I found myself face-to-face with Lorenzo and his gun.

“What are we celebrating, gentlemen?” Lorenzo asked, wrapping his arm around my waist and pressing the muzzle of his gun to my temple. The phone fell from my hand and bounced under a chair.

“Let her go,” Marco bellowed, his gun pointing at Lorenzo, unconcerned that he had two guns trained on him.

Lorenzo’s hold tightened, and he brushed his nose along the shell of my ear. “I don’t think I will.”

“Lenny. Johnny. You’re fucking dead,” Frankie spat.

“Please. What are you going to do, pretty boy? Tell Carmine?” Johnny laughed and nudged Lenny. “What do you think, Len? Should we be worried?”

“Nah,” Lenny sneered. “Carmine’ll be too busy being dead.”

Another dark-haired man came in, closing the door behind him.

“Vinnie?” Frankie scoffed. “Un-fucking-believable. Is Franco coming too? Are you and your brother really siding with this asshole?”

Vinnie wiped his nose, smirking. “Franco’s loyal to Luca to a fault. He’s too close-minded to see the future of the family.”

“And what exactly is the future of the family?” Marco stepped out from the pack, and Lenny took a step back. “Enlighten me.”

Lorenzo gave him a feral grin. “Me.” Marco barked out a laugh, and Lorenzo’s hand twitched, making the gun dig into my skin. “What’s so funny?”

“You. What do you have to offer the Morettis?”

“You’ll see.”

Aldo and Joey took small steps, putting themselves in line with Marco, their hands resting near their sides.

“Ah. Ah. Ah.” Lorenzo pointed his gun at them, and they froze. “Stay where you are. Your turn is coming. How are you doing, love?” he whispered in my ear.

“I’d be a lot better if I could put a bullet in you too,” I said without thinking. Apparently, murder made my mouth reckless.

“Too?” Lorenzo raised an eyebrow.

“Uh, boss,” Lenny muttered, staring at his phone.

Lorenzo huffed against my neck, making me cringe at his closeness. “What?”

“Cy’s not coming.” Lenny held his phone, so Lorenzo could see it. There, in high resolution, was Cy’s dead body, just as I’d left it, crumpled on that leather chair.

“How is this possible?” He turned us toward Lenny and Johnny.

“It wasn’t us,” Johnny stuttered, his face stark white.

In a flash, Lorenzo pulled his gun from my head and shot Johnny in the foot. Johnny screamed, jumping back and knocking a painting to the ground. Blood pooled under his shoe as he leaned against the wall, moaning.

“How did this happen? Who killed Cy?” Lorenzo yelled, his fingers painfully digging into my soft belly. Vinnie and Lenny stood tall, but their expressions gave them away. They were scared shitless.

Me, on the other hand? I fought back the urge to laugh. Without knowing it, I’d ruined a coup to unseat my husband.

“You were working with Cy?” Marco said through gritted teeth, shooting Mickey a sharp look. To his credit, Mickey looked just as confused as the rest of us.

“That idiot?” Lorenzo jabbed his gun at Mickey. “Mickey thought I was helping you by starting a war with the Chronis family. He never realized Cy and I were using the conflict to gain footing.”

Mickey’s hand went to his stomach, his face contorting in pain. Not only had he plotted behind Luca and Marco’s back, but he’d betrayed the entire family.

People died for less.

Lorenzo shuffled me in his arms, the gun knocking into my cheek, sending a bone-deep shock of pain. “Who’s missing?” When no one spoke up, he pointed his gun at Marco. “Who killed Cy?”

Maybe it was the champagne, maybe it was the fact I was tired of all the bullshit masculine posturing, or maybe it was the trauma of killing yet another person—but before I thought better of it, I said, “I did.”

Grabbing ahold of my jaw, Lorenzo turned my face to his. “You?” His lips twitched. “I guess it wouldn’t be your first kill.” He smiled, his eyes lighting up. “You sure are full of surprises, Mrs. Moretti.”

“So, what’s your plan?” Marco asked, drawing Lorenzo’s attention from me. “You’ve got us here. Now what?”

The mirth left Lorenzo’s face, and he scowled at Marco. “You all die. I take Sasha, and Luca stays locked up because I’ll kill Zoe and Tootsie if they ever show their faces again. Pretty cut and dry.” He glanced down at me and let go of my jaw, dragging a finger over the tender skin. “How’s that sound?”

I arched an eyebrow, and he chuckled, letting me turn away.

“You aren’t touching my fucking brother!” Taz spat.

“Without his guardian angel, I don’t see him and that bitch surviving to the new year.” Lorenzo’s body tightened around me. “Since Cy’s not coming, I guess we’ll handle this here.” He backed us up to the door and whispered in my ear, “Watch this.”

Lorenzo’s guys raised their guns but looked decidedly less confident than when they crashed our party. It didn’t help the tough guy illusion that Johnny was standing like a flamingo, sweat pouring down his face as he grunted in pain.

Marco was the only one with his gun out, but the other guys had their hands at the ready.

“Kill them,” Lorenzo said blandly.

Without thinking—a recurring phenomenon that night—I stomped the spike of my heel into the middle of Lorenzo’s foot and shoved his hand holding the gun toward Johnny. Grunting

in pain, he squeezed the trigger and shot Johnny in the arm. Johnny cried out, falling over.

Aldo, Joey, Frankie, and Mickey pulled their side arms, and gunfire filled the room. Johnny took a bullet to the neck, his cries becoming a gurgling noise. Lenny hit Aldo in the shoulder, and his second shot grazed Frankie's arm, but he was taken down by Joey before he did any more damage.

I struggled against Lorenzo's hold, fighting to take cover as stray bullets hit the door and walls behind us. "Stop moving," he grunted, banding my arms down.

"Let. Me. Go." I thrashed, elbowed, and tilted my head to try to bite him.

Lorenzo grunted when I landed a well-placed shoulder to his chest. He raised his gun, and the warm metal kissed my cheek. "You can bite and scratch all you want, but it won't change the fact that you're coming with me." He pushed open the door, and I shrieked, throwing myself against his hold.

"Lorenzo!" Marco yelled, taking two steps toward us.

Lorenzo pointed his gun right at him and fired. My eyes widened, and I jerked forward as if I could stop the inevitable. Marco swerved his body, but it was unnecessary because Mickey stepped right into the bullet's path. We all watched in horror as his head flew back at impact.

"No!" I screamed, going limp and sliding from Lorenzo's arms.

The gunfire ceased. Johnny, Lenny, and Vinnie lay on the floor, bleeding out, dead, or on their way to dead.

Marco cradled Mickey's head in his lap, his face red, the veins in his neck popping out as he yelled, "Call an ambulance."

Frankie darted past me through the wide-open door while Aldo stepped around puddles of blood to help Joey into a chair.

“We’ve got about five minutes until the cops are up here. The ambulance is on its way.” Frankie grabbed his arm and winced. “Lorenzo fucking vanished.”

“Where are the security guards?” Marco gritted out, staring down at his little brother.

“Two guards are unconscious out there. I have no idea where the rest are. How are you guys?” He lifted his chin at Joey and Aldo.

Aldo gingerly touched his shoulder. “Fine. Bullet went clean through.”

“Lucky.” Joey held his side as he shifted in the chair, blood soaking through his white shirt. He looked down with a sigh. “Media’s going to have a field day with this one.”

“We’ve been through worse.” Aldo stared out the big windows at the casino floor. “Found the guards. Looks like something’s going on down there.”

I stepped around the bodies and joined him. “Who’s that?” Two men were being escorted from the craps tables, shouting and fighting against the guards.

“Those are some low-level soldiers from Chicago.” Taz thumbed his nose. “They’re dead.”

Footsteps drew our attention away from the window and to the police entering the room.

“Oh shit,” a young officer muttered, then his mouth snapped shut as he looked at his superior.

“Outside, Dunn.” The middle-aged man took in the scene before him, a deep frown etched on his forehead. “Anyone want to explain what’s going on here?”

“Once my brother isn’t in my lap dying, I’d be happy to explain,” Marco said, his eyes never leaving Mickey as he checked his pulse.

“Aldo. Join me in the hall?” the officer asked.

A sharp nod and Aldo disappeared with the cop while another stepped into the room.

“Uh, I’m supposed to check his vitals.” The cop rocked on his heels.

Marco didn’t look up but said, “One step closer, and I’ll fucking kill you.”

Before Marco made good on his promise, three EMTs pushed past the cop. They said something into their little radios, and while two went straight to Mickey, the other checked the dead bodies, then Joey and Frankie. Somehow, Taz and I were left unharmed, although the large wet spot on my side let me know Lorenzo hadn’t been as lucky.

A stretcher was brought in. The EMTs strapped Mickey to it and took him out of the room. Marco tried to stand and follow his brother but fell back on his ass with a grunt. “Fuck. I think I was hit.” Mickey’s blood made it impossible to see where Marco’s injury was, but the EMTs were able to get him up and out the door.

Joey was next, and Aldo came back into the room only to be escorted out to have his shoulder examined.

Taz and I were left with three dead bodies and the police.

“Officer Russo,” I greeted the familiar officer.

“Mrs. Moretti. You want to give me a quick rundown of what happened?”

I gave the barest-bones account of events, which suited the cop just fine. Being on the payroll meant he didn’t actually care what I had to say because it’d be Marco or Luca who told him exactly what to report.

As we talked, the dead bodies were bagged and carted away. The cops said they’d be in touch and left us in the bloody office. I wondered if I should get someone to clean it up.

“You okay?” Taz asked, discomfort clear on his face.

“Eh.” I flopped down in a chair and started picking at the exposed stuffing and holes. “A crucial night in my career, and there’s a body count. I’ve been better.” Something caught my eye. “Luca,” I muttered, falling to my knees and crawling to the other side of the room.

“Sasha, what are you—”

I grabbed the phone from under the destroyed leather chair, held it in the air triumphantly, and then pressed it to my ear. “Luca?”

Of course, he was no longer there. I quickly found his contact and dialed.

“Marco?” Luca yelled, then his voice fell into a rushed whisper. “What happened? The phone cut out. Is Sasha—”

“Luca?”

“Sasha,” Luca breathed my name out like a prayer. “Baby, are you okay?”

Warmth spread through me. Just having Luca’s voice in my ear soothed me. “I’m fine. But Mickey . . .”

“No,” Luca whispered.

“They took him to the hospital, but I don’t know. It didn’t look good.”

“But you’re okay?” he choked out.

“Yes.”

“Listen to me. Stick with Frankie, Marco, Tommy, and Taz. When I get out, I’ll handle the rest. These fuckers will pay.”

A smile tugged at my lips. Luca was so afraid to show me this side of him, which was absurd because it was simply an extension of all the parts of him I adored—his loyalty, his passion, his love.

It may have taken a prison stint, but I finally had all parts of my husband.

“Sure thing, boss.”

“How are you getting home?”

I glanced at Taz, who pretended not to listen. “I think I’ll stay in the suite. With all the guys getting patched up, it seems safer.”

“Good call. Keep Mom with you.”

“I will. I better go downstairs and talk to the guys. I’m sure folks are freaking out.”

“Okay. I love you, Sasha.”

“I love you too.”

I hung up and put the phone on the desk.

“Take that with you. You don’t know who’s going to be coming through here.”

“Got it.” I picked it back up and gave him an awkward smile. “Well, I better go.” Stepping over the dark spots on the carpet, I maneuvered to the door. “Think you can find Rosa and fill her in? Luca wants her to stay here with me tonight.”

“Sure. I’ll escort you both up.”

We rode the elevator down to the lobby in silence. When the doors opened, I expected mayhem, anarchy, bedlam but was instead met with happy people laughing and carrying on. “Uh, where’s the—”

“Ruckus?” Taz offered.

“Yeah.”

Ashley caught sight of me as I walked onto the casino floor. “Sasha!” She rushed to me, looking over my shoulder at a blank-faced Taz. “What in the world was going on upstairs? I caught the tail end of the cops and EMTs leaving out the back.”

Ah. Aldo had orchestrated a stealth exit.

“I’ll tell you about it later. If you’ve got everything handled here, I think I’ll head up to bed.”

Ashley pouted. “Of course you’re tired. You want me to go up with you?”

I gave her a side hug, careful to keep the bloody spot away from her, and said, “That’s okay. I’m going to grab Rosa and call it a night.”

“Okay. Call me tomorrow.”

“You got it.”

Ashley bounced off to the bar where the rest of our friends were congregated and having a good time.

“Why don’t you wait here? I’ll find Rosa.” Taz walked away before I could do anything.

Taking a few steps back, I leaned against the wall behind a particularly loud slot machine. Watching my friends laugh and joke around after the night I had was surreal. It gave me insight into how Luca must have felt the first time we were together. The strangeness of knowing that you are capable of terrible things, but, at the same time, exist in a beautiful, loving world. The urge to cling to that happy, shiny life but knowing the dark and ugly parts would always keep you one step removed.

I was now one step removed.

But I wasn’t alone.

I had Luca.

NINETEEN

“Things are moving so fast. I can’t believe today is the day that Tootsie and Zoe come back to life.” I spritzed perfume in the air and walked through the mist. “You’ll be home any day now.”

“It’ll take a little time for me to be processed out, but I have Fern at the ready.”

“Fern,” I scoffed, going downstairs to the office, where I’d set up shop until Luca was officially home.

Luca laughed. “How’s Marco doing?”

“Not great. Mickey’s been in a medically induced coma for a week now, and nothing’s changed.” I logged into my laptop and scrolled, looking for an email from Ashley. “Add to that, Adriana officially lives in Chicago now, and the guy is going through it.”

“I can’t wait until I’m out of here. There’s so much shit to clean up.”

“Just so we’re clear, I get you first, then you can play Mr. Bossman.”

“Sounds good to me.”

My actual cellphone rang, and I sighed. “Your mom’s calling.”

“Answer. Fern will be here soon.”

“Fern,” I grumbled.

“I hate her too,” Luca said, and then the line went dead.

“Rosa. How—”

“When will you be here?” Rosa rushed out, a little out of breath.

I checked the time and frowned. “Around six. I thought that was the plan.”

“Things have changed. I overheard the boys saying that they already have Tootsie. It might be better for you to get over here now.”

Closing my laptop, I mentally ran down all the other things I needed to get done. “Okay. I’ll have to do a little work. Is that all right?” I packed my computer bag, double-checking I didn’t leave anything behind.

“Sure. Sure. I just need you here.”

Rosa had no idea how much her words meant to me. Since the night I killed Cy, Rosa and I had become closer than ever. She was the only person I knew who’d lived this life and survived, so naturally, she was the perfect confidant.

“Of course. I’ll be there soon.”

“Perfect.” And just like her son, she hung up without saying goodbye.

“Frankie!” I yelled, gathering my stuff.

He joined me in the hallway. “You shrieked?”

“We need to go to Rosa’s.” I brushed past him on my way to the front door.

Frankie followed with his hands in his pockets. “What’s up?”

“Oh, you know, girl stuff.” I grinned as I slipped on my jacket.

He gave me a flat stare.

Flipping my hair out of the collar, I sighed. “Fine. Apparently, Tootsie’s already back, and Rosa wants me at the house now.”

Frankie pinched the bridge of his nose. “I think I liked it better when she wanted you dead. The two of you together are dangerous.”

“Ah. Don’t be like that.”

He snorted and walked out the door before I could further torture him.

Made men prowled Rosa’s mansion with stern faces, lifting their chin Frankie’s way as we passed.

“Did someone call in the troops?” I muttered.

“Taz. This is the Chicago branch of the Moretti family.” He leaned down and whispered, “He’s afraid Marco will kill Tootsie. Or you will.”

I hit his arm, and he yelped. “Shit! I forgot about your arm.”

“I’m going to go check my stitches.” He glared at me, holding where the bullet had grazed his bicep as he walked away.

“Frankie!” I called after him, and he flipped me off.

“You did that on purpose,” Marco said from behind me.

I turned and gasped at the accusation. “I did no such thing.”

The corner of his mouth turned up, but it did little to soften his tired face. He’d aged a decade since Luca got locked up. “I assume Rosa called you.”

I didn’t answer him. There was no point. He knew the score. The former Mrs. Moretti was passing the baton to the new.

“Well, I guess you should hear it from me. Tootsie and Zoe are back, and Officer Russo will be here soon to confirm they’re alive.”

“He couldn’t take your word for it?”

Marco rolled his eyes and gestured for me to follow him. “I trust I don’t have to remind you to keep your cool when you see them?”

“I swear I’ll behave.”

“Mhm.”

We entered Dante Sr.’s office, and I was shocked by how many bodies were packed in the small room. At the center of it all was the tall, the blond, the beautiful Zoe Chronis. When her crystal blue eyes landed on me, she leaned back into Tootsie. The wall of a man wrapped around her, his chin resting on top of her head.

“Welcome home,” I bit out, anger I hadn’t expected warming my whole body. Perhaps if Luca hadn’t suffered multiple stab wounds, I could have gotten over that their absence meant my husband was wrongfully imprisoned.

The ten suited men parted, giving Marco and me a path to the couple.

“Sasha. Congratulations,” Zoe said, a strained smile on her lips.

I looked up at her, noting her bare face and grown-out roots. Not even trying to match her fake positive energy, I said, “Thanks. It’s been hard to celebrate much with Luca in jail, especially after the attempted murder.”

“We couldn’t—”

I raised my hand. “I know. I don’t care.” Looking at Tootsie, I said, “You were told to come home. You didn’t, and Luca spent months in jail and almost died. That’s what I care about.”

Tootsie studied me, then moved Zoe behind his colossal body, blocking her from my view. While his cousins and brother were tall, Tootsie was somehow taller. When you added in how thick he was, I felt like I was staring down a mountain. “Sasha. I apologize.” I narrowed my eyes, and he quickly added, “I’m sorry. I love Luca like a brother. I would never put him in danger.”

“But you did.” I wrapped one hand around the handle of my computer bag, fisting the other so tight my nails bit into my palm.

Tootsie nodded, then looked around the room. “Get out.”

The men immediately followed his order, leaving Marco, Tootsie, Zoe, Taz, and me alone.

“Do what you need to do to make it right, Sasha.”

I studied him. He meant it. There was a peace about him that hadn’t been there when I found them at the cabin. I set my

bag on the floor and took a step closer. “Because you wouldn’t come back, and because the Chronis brothers couldn’t handle their fucking cousin, I had to kill him to bring my husband home. I decorate rooms for a fucking living, but now I’m moonlighting as an assassin.”

Tootsie grimaced, and he glanced at his brother, who nodded.

“In just over a year, my life has been completely upended, but I figured it was all worth it because I had Luca.” I tried to swallow the emotion tightening my throat. “But he was taken from me.”

Tootsie cautiously reached out, taking my hand in his. “And I didn’t help.”

“No. You didn’t.” I looked down to where he was prying my fingers open. Bright red crescent moons marred my palm. Yanking out of his hold, I slapped him.

Taz took a step toward us, but Marco held up his hand.

“That doesn’t even begin to make things right. Luca will be the one to deal with you.”

Tootsie moved his jaw back and forth and nodded. “Understood.”

“Move.” I fanned him to the side, but he didn’t budge. “I mean it. I want to talk to Zoe.”

Zoe stepped out from behind him, but he moved to the side to block her once again. “Jesus, Tootsie. She’s not going to kill me.”

He looked at her with a raised brow.

“Probably,” Zoe added. “I’m sorry you ended up taking care of Cy. I’m sorry all the men were fucking worthless.”

I snorted, fighting the smile that threatened to ruin the whole vibe I was going for.

Shrugging, she pushed Tootsie aside, and he let her. “It’s been over a year since Cy tried to have me killed. Believe me, I’m pissed it took this long, and I’m sorry you were the one to do it. I wish I would’ve been the one to pull the trigger.”

Flashes of Cy with his dick out seconds before I killed him filled my mind.

If only she knew.

There was a knock at the door, and Tommy stuck his head in. “The Chronis brothers are here.”

“Bring them in,” Marco said as he sat at the desk.

Zoe curled into Tootsie’s side, and he pulled her close as if it was the most natural thing in the world. The sight tugged at my heart, and for the millionth time, I longed for my own human security blanket.

The door opened again, and the Chronis brothers entered, flanked by two other men. Nikos Chronis ate up the space between him and his sister, his arms wide open. “Zoe.”

She stayed wrapped around Tootsie, shaking her head.

Nikos’s arms dropped as Alex joined him.

“Torquato.” Alex nodded, his expression grim. “How kind of you to bring our sister home.”

I cleared my throat, and every head in the room turned to me. “I hate to break up this heartfelt reunion, but I think there are bigger things to discuss.”

“Sasha’s right. Please, sit.” Marco gestured to the set of wingbacks in front of the desk.

The brothers shared a silent conversation, then sat in unison. I wondered if they were always so in sync.

“With Cy out of the picture, we need to solidify the relationship between our families.”

Alex nodded. “A promise is a promise. You handled the Cy problem. Now we’ll honor the peace between our families.” He glanced at his sister and pursed his lips. “Is that going to be a problem?”

Marco didn’t spare the couple a look. “I don’t know why it would be.”

“Do you want a Moretti marrying a Chronis?” Nikos asked, clearly disgusted by the idea.

“Who’s getting married?” Taz snarked from the drink cart where he was pouring scotch.

Alex waved his hand at Tootsie. “He kidnapped her.”

“Kind of,” Zoe said, frowning at her brothers. “And I’ve gotten over it. He did what he did to keep me safe.”

“So, because it was just light kidnapping, you want to marry him?” Nikos shouted, jumping up from the chair, sending it rocking.

“I—” Zoe’s cheeks reddened as her eyes dropped to the floor.

Marco stood, slamming his hands on the desk. “Enough.” The room fell silent, and he pushed his hair back. “Until Luca is free, Tootsie will remain here in St. Louis under the family’s watch.”

“I understand,” Tootsie said, running his hand down Zoe’s back.

“Then I’m staying with him.” Zoe set her chin defiantly.

“No. You’re not.” Her brothers said at the same time, both radiating anger.

“I have to agree with your brothers.” Tootsie tucked a lock of her hair behind Zoe’s ear. “You won’t be safe with the Morettis until Luca and I have it out.”

“Neither are you.” She gripped his leather jacket, pulling him closer.

Taz slammed his glass down. “No one’s touching Tootsie.”

“Then it’s settled. Zoe, you’re coming home with us, and Torquato will stay with his family,” Alex said, taking a step toward his sister. “You weren’t on the run for a year, only to come back and be killed by the Morettis.”

Tootsie kissed the top of Zoe’s head, then let her go. She stood there for a moment, staring up at him. To her credit, she didn’t cry, didn’t plead, but man, did she give good face. The two of them were wrapped in their own little bubble, and the rest of us were just spectators.

The doorbell chimed through the house, getting Zoe’s attention. “They’re here,” she lamented.

“So Zoe goes home with her brothers, and we have a truce,” Marco said.

“Done.” Nikos held out his hand, and this time Zoe went to him.

Another knock on the door and Tommy showed in a smiling Officer Russo and a sour-faced Detective Bennington.

“Then it’s true. You’re alive,” Bennington said, disappointment clear in his voice. He took his phone out,

tapping away. "Excuse me." With his phone to his ear, he left the room, Tommy hot on his heels.

"You've just ruined his whole year." Russo chuckled and took out a small notebook. "All right, what's the story?"

Marco relayed the story that put both families in the best light, playing up Zoe's fear for her life from an unknown enemy. No one was about to incriminate a Moretti or a Chronis.

After about ten minutes, it became clear that Bennington wasn't coming back. "I guess I should go see where he ran off to." Russo sighed and shoved his notes in his pocket. "I'll make sure this info gets to the right people, and we get Mr. Moretti out ASAP."

"Thank you." Marco shook his hand and held the door for him.

With the cops gone, the Chronis brothers prepared to leave. "We should be going. There are a few things we need to handle before Zoe's resurrection becomes common knowledge. Come on." Alex waved his sister to follow.

Zoe passed Tootsie without a word, both keeping their eyes on the floor. The tether between them stretched, pulling until Zoe left the room, and Tootsie sagged, his hand going to his chest.

I went to his side, touching his elbow. "You okay?"

He let out a heavy breath and nodded. "It has to be this way. You saw her brothers. They don't want me with their sister."

"So?"

“Let’s get through Luca kicking my ass. Then we can worry about the woman who might not even want me.”

I laughed, taking a drink from Taz. “Believe me, she wants you.”

Tootsie walked over to his brother, and they started a hushed conversation.

“Ready to call Fern?” Marco settled back into his chair. He seemed lighter, less burdened.

“You have no idea.” I sat in front of the desk

He put his phone on speaker.

“Fern Robison.” Ah, the direct line. In the months she’d been on retainer, I hadn’t been gifted with her personal number.

Another reason to hate the bitch.

“Marco Moretti. We have some news.” His eyes lit up, and he looked happier than he had in months.

“Okay?”

Marco grinned at me, gesturing to the phone and giving me the floor.

“Tootsie and Zoe are alive and well.”

“Sasha?” She sounded beyond confused. “What are you talking about?”

“The police should be contacting the DA right about now, letting them know the alleged victims are up and walking around. We wanted to give you a heads-up to start working on getting Luca released.”

Silence. Sweet, stunned silence.

“Say hi, Tootsie.”

“Hi,” he said flatly, not nearly as amused by my antics as I was.

“Oh. Wow. Okay. I need to—They’re really alive?”

At that moment, it dawned on me that she never believed Luca was innocent. “Yeah. They are. Get Luca out.”

Marco shook his head. “Let us know if you need anything. We’ll be in touch.”

“Okay.”

He tapped his phone and let out a bark of laughter. “You enjoyed that, didn’t you?”

“You know what? I did. The only thing I’d enjoy more is slapping her across her smug face.”

Marco hopped up, slipping his phone into his pocket. “There’ll be time for that. Let’s go fill Rosa in. I’m sure she’s losing it.”

“Nah. If anything, she grabbed Russo on his way out and pumped him for info.” I followed him out of the office and down the hall. The guys milling about respectfully dipped their heads in my direction before averting their eyes. “Weird.”

“You’re the boss’s wife. Get used to it. Now that word of your vicious nature has made its rounds through the family, no one’s going to fuck with you.”

I blinked at him. “They know?”

“Lorenzo told everyone about Cy.” Marco led me to the kitchen, where Rosa was having tea. Bending down, he kissed her cheek, then went to the cabinets and pulled out two teacups. “Do I need to boil more water?”

“I have plenty.” She patted the table, inviting me to sit. “The meetings go well?” Picking up her teacup, she kept her face carefully blank.

I sat down, thanking Marco when he poured our drinks.

“As well as can be expected.” Marco smiled at his aunt, taking a sip of his steaming tea.

“Oh. That’s good.”

The three of us silently drank tea and ate delicious cookies that I suspected came from Loretta’s kitchen. She’d become the unofficial cook of the family since Luca had been locked up.

Watching Rosa feign disinterest was a fascinating study of proper mob wife behavior.

“Well, I need to make a few calls. I’ll see you both at dinner tonight.” Marco cleared his cup and left us alone.

Rosa’s eyes followed Marco until the second he was out of sight, then her gaze fell to me, and she tilted her head.

“Oh! You’re good.” I laughed, tossing a balled-up napkin at her.

“There’s no point in trying to pull anything from Marco when you were in the room.”

“And I’m sure you know as much as I do from your command center here in the kitchen.”

Rosa grinned, and we fell into a back-and-forth gossip session.

TWENTY

“I’m picking Luca up.” I reached for the handle on the driver’s side, but Frankie batted my hand away.

“No. You’re going to let us bring him to you.”

With the adrenaline of yet another nightmare pumping through my veins, I glared up at the tattooed asshole who’d become the little brother I never asked for. “Get your hand off my fucking car before I chop it clean off.”

He rolled his eyes and took a step back. “You know what? Go ahead. Drive to the jail. Just know you will have an entire convoy with you.”

“That’s a big 10-4, little buddy.”

“Fuck off.” He chuckled, walking to one of the many black vehicles parked on our street.

Positively giddy, I hopped into the car and started the defrost. The early December cold snap was annoying but wouldn’t crush the joy radiating through me.

It had taken nearly a month of bullshit and processing, but Luca was finally being released. Bennington had done everything in his power to keep him locked up, hating the fact that the Moretti boss was slipping from his hold.

I backed out of the driveway, shaking my head as five blacked-out SUVs pulled out behind me. My amusement turned into gratitude when I saw the crowd of reporters surrounding the gates of the jail. Whoever was in front of me didn't hesitate to drive right through them, clearing the way for me. I parked, and my phone rang.

"Stay in the car. We'll bring Luca to you." Frankie hung up before I could even respond.

I'm embarrassed to say that I was relieved to not have to trot out in front of the flashing lights and cacophony of unintelligible questions.

I turned up the radio to drown out the hum of the crowd.

"Luca Moretti will be released today. No word yet on whether the CEO of Moretti Properties will press charges. His attorney Fern Robison has cited gross negligence by lead detective John Bennington and a pattern of harassment of Moretti and his wife as possible complaints."

Changing the station, I sang along to nineties pop hits, gazing at the door, waiting to catch the first glimpse of Luca emerging from jail.

The door finally opened, and Tommy and Frankie walked out, followed by Luca. The crowd erupted into a mess of shouting and flashing lights. I glanced their way, wondering how the reporters talking into cameras would be understood over the yelling.

The men rushed down the stairs, more soldiers joining and flanking them until Luca was at the passenger side of my SUV. He ripped the door open and jumped inside.

I squealed, leaning across the center console and throwing my arms around his neck. "You're out. You're actually out."

Burying my nose in his neck, I finally relaxed.

His arms wrapped around me, pulling me closer. My hip knocked a nearly empty coffee cup onto the floorboard by his feet. He jerked but didn't let go. "Thank you." Leaning back, he cupped my cheek and gave me a watery smile. "You made this happen, and I can't believe how lucky I am to have you."

"I would do anything for you."

"And I never thought I'd find that." He cleared his throat, tracing my bottom lip with his thumb. "Let's go home."

I wrapped a hand around the back of his neck and pulled him closer. "Give me a kiss."

He gave me a quick peck.

"That was weak." I pouted.

Luca slid his fingers into my hair, gripping it at the root, creating a delicious sting. Tilting my face up, he looked me in the eye before nipping my bottom lip. His tongue brushed against the punished skin before his mouth slanted over mine. The pressure was exquisite as he molded his lips to fit perfectly.

I twisted my fingers in the hair at the nape of his neck as I tried to get closer. Luca groaned and unbuttoned the top of my coat. Pulling back, I fumbled with the rest of the buttons, eager to have his hands on me. I leaned back too far, my ass hitting the horn and scaring the absolute shit out of me. My hand flew to my chest as I looked all around.

Luca threw his head back with a laugh. "Let's get home before we give the press something more interesting to report on."

I huffed out a breath, blowing the hair from my forehead. “Fine. But your ass is mine the minute we walk in that door. I’ll shoot anyone who tries to rope you into any business.”

Luca smiled and took my hand, kissing my knuckles. “I’m at your mercy.”

“As you should be.” I settled back in the driver’s seat and put on my seatbelt. “Do you mind if I turn down the heat? I’m hot all of a sudden.”

“Be my guest.” He grinned.

On the drive home, Luca toyed with my fingers, twisting my rings with a serene smile on his face. While he seemed to be at peace, the feel of his rough touch stoked the fire in my belly that was hard to ignore. Luca had a knack for turning the mundane downright sensual.

“You know, I missed holding your hand.”

“Yeah,” I choked out as he traced the lines in my palm.

Placing a kiss on the pad of my thumb, he hummed. “They’re so soft and always cold. I love warming them up.” He placed my hand between his, gently rubbing them together. “I’m glad I got out before you had to live with ice blocks for fingers.”

I laughed, gently pulling my hand from his so I could turn the massive SUV into our driveway. “Home sweet home.”

Luca let out a content sigh and laid his head against the headrest. “You have no idea how happy I am.”

“Me too. Come on. Let’s get you all cleaned up for family dinner.”

He turned his gaze my way, mesmerizing me with the heat there. The past five months taught me our time together wasn’t

guaranteed, and we had to make the most of it. Fisting the front of his shirt, I yanked him to me, crushing my mouth against his. Before we could get carried away, I pulled away and jumped from the car.

Luca gave a predatory grin and slowly followed me up to the house like he was on the hunt.

I walked backward, keeping my focus on him, but out of the corner of my eye, I caught sight of the Moretti men pulling up and getting out of their vehicles. Holding my hands up, I laughed. “Luca . . .”

He took two giant steps my way, and I squealed, turning to sprint up the stairs only to have two strong arms catch me at the waist. “Not so fast, Mrs. Mitchell-Moretti.” Luca’s warm breath on my ear came out as a white puff in the winter air.

All of a sudden, I was upside down and over Luca’s shoulder.

“Stay outside,” Luca shouted as he stomped up the stairs to the front door. Once we were inside, he sat me down and made quick work of the buttons on my coat. He shoved it off my shoulders and shrugged off his jacket.

Wrapping my arms around his neck, I whispered against his lips, “Welcome home.”

Ryan meowed from his cat tree but didn’t bother to come greet Luca. Wrapping his tail around his face, he fell back asleep, clearly not interested in celebrating with us, which was probably for the best.

Luca chuckled, his fingers flexing against my lower back where my shirt was riding up. “Never been happier.” He brushed a kiss against the corner of my mouth as he pulled me

closer. My heart beat wildly in my chest as Luca's hands explored every dip and curve of my body.

Everything clicked into place. Luca was home, we were married, and the threat of incarceration was gone. We were free to live our lives.

Energized by the thought, I tore myself from his hold and kicked off my boots. Panting, Luca followed my lead, and we left a trail of our clothes from the front door to our bedroom. I kept just out of his reach, teasing him with every dropped piece of clothing.

On the top step, I slid out of my panties, dimpled ass in Luca's face, earning me a sharp bite to my dimpled cheek. I yelped and fell forward onto my hands and knees. As quickly as I could, I crawled to the bedroom door, Luca's heavy footsteps following closely behind.

"What a beautiful sight." Luca's hand landed with a sound smack.

I laughed and looked over my shoulder. Sunlight streamed through the hall window, hitting Luca in all his naked glory. Falling back on my heels, I turned to appreciate my husband. "Right back at ya." It had been months since I'd seen him completely bare in person. His body was bigger and more cut than before he went to jail. Shiny pink reminders from when those bastards tried to kill him littered his skin, and I had to remind myself they'd been taken care of. The urge to bring them back from the dead and kill them all over again was strong.

He fisted his cock as his eyes roamed down my body. "Your beauty is meant to be seen in person. No memory will ever live up to the reality."

My breath hitched, and a flush crawled across my chest and up my neck.

“And there’s that blush I love.” His throat bobbed as his gaze fell to my thighs. “Spread your legs. Let me see your pretty pink pussy.”

Biting my bottom lip, I traced my fingertips down my breastbone. My stomach contracted under my light touch and Luca’s intense stare. As I spread my knees, I cupped my cunt, and Luca groaned. “What?” I smirked, using my other hand to cover my breast, my arm conveniently covering the other.

“You’re a fucking tease.” The corner of his mouth lifted, and his hand stilled on his cock.

I lifted an eyebrow and spread my fingers to give him a peak of my nipple and pussy. Luca shook his head, then pounced, lifting me off the ground, carrying me into the room, and dropping me in the middle of our unmade bed.

One bounce, and he was on top of me. Brushing the hair from my eyes, he smiled down at me. “Hi.”

“Hi.” I craned my neck and kissed his chin.

“I can’t believe I’m home. I’m so fucking lucky.” His eyes dropped to my lips.

I wrapped my legs around him, tilting my hips up. “We’re both lucky. Let’s never forget that.”

“Never,” he whispered against my lips as he thrust into me.

We moaned, and his forehead fell to mine. Our breath mingled together, the lack of oxygen making me lightheaded, creating a bubble I never wanted to leave. I kissed his cheeks, nose, and chin, nipping his jaw before Luca claimed my mouth.

The taste of him on my lips and the feel of him between my legs were intoxicating. Every passing second sent me deeper and deeper into Luca bliss.

For the first time in months, we knew we had the time to enjoy each other, to appreciate each other's bodies without fear of being interrupted. I basked in the high of having him back and all to myself.

Luca's thrusts were slow and deep, his hips rocking against my clit, making me tingle. I fought his hold, the desire to touch him overwhelming me.

"Luca," I panted, our eyes meeting. "I love you."

His brown eyes glowed, and he let go of one of my wrists to cup my face, his thumb caressing my cheek. "I love you, Sasha."

I grabbed the back of his head and pulled him down, unable to keep myself from kissing him. Trailing my fingers down his spine, he shuddered against me and pulled back. "Do that again."

I dragged my nails across the expanse of Luca's back, and he groaned. He let go of my other wrist and planted his hands next to my head, giving me complete access to his body. With all the gentleness he needed, I caressed every inch of him I could reach.

Luca shut his eyes for a moment, and when they opened, they were glossy. "Never again. I can't survive without you."

My heart cracked wide open. All the walls I'd built up while he was away came tumbling down. To the outside world, we were cold-hearted murderers, but here, together, we could be soft and vulnerable. I finally understood Luca in a way I never dreamed I would.

I framed his face with my hands. “You’ll never have to.”

Luca smiled down at me, and the dam inside me broke. Wave after wave of exhilaration rolled over me, my body trembling under him. His deliberate movements prolonged my orgasm, his eyes watching my face contort in pleasure.

Leaning down, he pressed his lips to mine, his hips stilling as he groaned.

We lay in a useless heap, neither willing to break apart.

“We need to shower,” I said, nuzzling his neck.

“Mhm.”

Rosa and I organized the yearly Moretti Christmas dinner a couple of weeks early so it could coincide with Luca’s release. Morettis from St. Louis, Chicago, and New York were seated along the extended dining table. Unlike the previous dinner I’d attended, there were no children or women besides myself and Rosa.

Luca stood, and the room fell silent. “Thank you all for coming. The past year has been a chaotic one for our family. From the loss of my father to my arrest to the very real betrayal committed by blood, it’s become clear to me that some of you are confused about who is in charge.”

The room became still as Luca focused on some of the men at the table.

“I tried to ease you all into the changes that were necessary to see the Morettis forward. That was my mistake. So now we’ll do it the way my father would’ve.” Luca mindlessly

twisted his father's ring on his finger as he surveyed the Morettis.

Marco glared down at the table, every bit the underboss Luca needed. Tootsie sat beside him with a busted lip and a scowl on his face. Earlier, the three cousins went into the basement and came out an hour later, Tootsie sporting a bloody mouth and laughing. Now the three sat as a formidable force to be reckoned with.

Rosa grabbed my hand under the table. Her expression may have been blank, but a tremor went down her arm. She'd questioned Luca about having us at the dinner but, in the end, trusted him to do what needed to be done.

Squeezing her fingers, I tried to lend her some of my calm.

Luca zeroed in on his father's former underboss, Giuseppe Moretti. "Gus. While I was in prison, you made moves to back my cousin Lorenzo in his bid to take over the family—sneaking him into St. Louis and tipping him off when we were closing in. You risked the lives of all the people in this room. You jeopardized everything we've built."

Chairs creaked as the men shifted in their seats, eyeing Luca as he pulled a gun from his side.

Joey looked at his father with contempt, the frown on his face making the Moretti family resemblance complete.

Gus stood, his hands out, "Luca—"

Luca pointed the gun and shot him clean between the eyes. Gus crumpled, knocking his chair over. The two men beside him stared at Luca with wide eyes, their hands reaching for their sides. Before they could even touch metal, Luca shot them in the head. Their bodies slid off their chairs and landed on top of Gus.

I flinched with each gunshot but wasn't surprised. In the shower, Luca explained he was going to clean house and wanted me there to show us as a united force—the vicious wife and the Butcher. Glancing up at my husband, a shiver went down my spine. He was impossibly handsome and cold, something I'd only recently accepted I found terribly attractive.

I was fucked up, but I didn't care anymore. This was who he was, and I loved him.

Luca calmly set the gun on the table. “Going forward, let there be no confusion—cross the family or me, and you die.” Luca gestured my way, his face softening for a fraction of a second as he looked at me. “Touch one hair on my wife's head, and I'll kill you if she doesn't first. It's not complicated, but in the interest of fairness, any questions?”

Tearing my eyes from Luca, I hazarded a glance down the table. The young guys were intrigued, excited even, by the bloodshed so casually on display, while the older men eyed the dead bodies with apprehension.

Luca waited for a beat and then carried on. “In the spirit of new beginnings, Tommy and Frankie, join me up here.”

Rosa and I stood, wordlessly leaving the room. A few minutes later, the young guns trickled out, high off the night and excitedly chatting about when it would be their turn.

Frankie and Tommy were being officially initiated into the family, and only other made men were allowed to witness the ceremony.

Half an hour later, the rest of the men left the dining room. Tommy was grinning from ear to ear, while Frankie looked as bored as always.

“He’s the youngest made man in the family,” Rosa whispered as she smiled at Tommy. “His father would be proud.”

“What about Frankie?”

“Maybe now he can take back his father’s territory from Carmine, but that’ll be tough.”

“You really know everything, don’t you?”

She bumped my shoulder and headed toward the bar to help make drinks.

Standing in the entryway, I watched a few of the young guys go back into the dining room and come out carrying the bodies rolled in plastic. They headed out the back, while Rosa played perfect hostess in the front of the house.

“You okay?” Luca wrapped his arms around me from behind.

My birth control alarm went off, and I fished it out of my purse and deleted it, making sure he saw it.

Luca muttered, “Don’t you need to take that?”

“My last pack ended a week ago.” I looked back at him and smiled. “Is that okay?”

His face split into a huge grin. “More than okay. Are you sure this is what you want?”

Leaning back into him, I kissed the underside of his jaw. “I am.”

He nodded, holding me tightly to his chest. “Do we really have to go to the club? I want to go home and—”

“Yes. Everyone wants to welcome you home, and I think the boys deserve a little celebration. Don’t you?”

“Fine. But we’re going home early.”

TWENTY-ONE

We walked into Red, and it erupted in applause. Between the crowd and the music, you had to yell to be heard.

“Welcome home, baby.” I kissed his cheek, leaving behind a faint red imprint.

Bottle girls lined up with champagne topped with sparklers, shouting over the music blaring through speakers.

“Thanks,” Luca groused, completely put off by the scene before him.

Frankie disappeared into the crowd, and the beautiful women of Red circled Tommy, offering him champagne and whatever else he might want.

“I forget he’s twenty-one.”

Luca nodded and said into my ear, “He’s twenty-two in February.”

“A fucking baby.”

Luca laughed and pulled me past the crowd toward the VIP section. With drinks in hand, Ashley, Malcolm, and Adriana were waiting for us.

“Luca!” Adriana launched herself at him, and he hugged her back loosely, his eyes darting to me. Tensions between

Adriana and the family were at an all-time high now that she was not only living in Chicago but moving in with her doctor boyfriend. “Welcome home!”

“Thanks.” He patted her back and took a step back.

Not letting his standoffish behavior dampen her mood, Adriana hugged me. “How are Sarah and the baby doing?”

“Amazing. You should visit her before you head back to Chicago. Get a baby cuddle in.”

“I might do that.”

Just then, Tootsie stepped into the VIP, and Malcolm exploded off the couch, tackling him to the ground. “You motherfucker!”

A circle formed around them as Malcolm rained punches down on Tootsie.

“Should we do something?” Frankie materialized out of nowhere.

Luca shook his head. “This is part of his punishment. Malcolm owed him a beating for that stunt he pulled in the alley.”

Tommy hopped over the railing, pushing through the suited men and flashy women. After a particularly vicious blow, he gave Luca a pointed look.

“Enough,” Luca said, and all the guys jumped into action, pulling Malcolm off Tootsie.

Malcolm stared down at Tootsie, a grin. “Consider us even.”

Ashley wrapped her arms around him, her eyes wary as she looked at the mobsters in front of her. Out of instinct, I

took a step her way, placing my body between her and the men.

Tootsie rolled to his side with a groan, clearly in no hurry to get up. I wasn't even sure he could get off the floor. Swatting away helpful hands, he said, "I'm fine." He propped himself into a sitting position and leaned on one hand, tentatively touching his cut cheek. Staring up at Malcolm, he nodded, and the two men came to a silent agreement.

"Torquato!" a woman shrieked over the thumping bass.

No matter how much I craned my neck, I couldn't see who was screaming Tootsie's name. Luca pushed me behind him, and Frankie and Tommy flanked him, blocking me in.

"I thought we were meeting tomorrow," Luca yelled. His words could barely be made out over the loud music.

"Talk to our sister." I knew that voice. Peeking through Luca's and Frankie's arms, I caught sight of the Chronis brothers, with about a dozen men, all standing around Zoe Chronis.

Luca sighed, and I instantly regretted making him come out. We could be at home fucking and cuddling, but now he was handling yet another situation.

"Why is my fiancé on the ground, beaten to a bloody pulp?"

I squeezed between Tommy and Luca and stared at her in disbelief. "Fiancé?" Since when?

"Based on your faces, I'm guessing you didn't know that these two are engaged." Nikos chuckled, shaking his head at the whole scene. His eyes strayed to the women shamelessly watching the confrontation, making his disinterest in whatever his sister was up to clear.

Zoe took a step toward Tootsie, and a few Moretti men stepped in her path. “I’m not going to hurt him,” she spat.

“How do we know that? You’re a Chronis.” One of the guys called out.

Zoe reached into her bag and pulled out a gun. “You’re right. I am a Chronis, and if you know anything about us, we don’t hurt what’s ours. Unlike you Morettis.” She snorted, her features twisting in disgust. “Get out of my way.” Behind her, Nikos rolled his eyes but drew his gun. Within seconds, both sides were armed and just one asshole comment away from mowing each other down.

It didn’t take long for clubgoers to notice the armed standoff outside the VIP section. Women shrieked, and there was a great stampede from the dance floor. We were left alone in the large, cavernous space, the loud music still blasting.

Luca reached down and helped Tootsie to his feet. “You think we did this?” I could hear him trying to hide his amusement. He studied Zoe, unbothered that she had her gun pointed at him.

“Who else?” Her eyes fell on me for a brief moment, and she frowned. “Hand him over, and there won’t be any problems.”

“Alex, Nikos, are you ready to go to war over this? Because your sister is upsetting the very delicate treaty, we just put in place.” Luca adjusted a groaning Tootsie.

“My ribs. Shit.”

Zoe took a step toward the wall of men with guns, her focus never leaving Tootsie. “Let me get him help!” She screamed.

Luca bent his head and said something to Tootsie, getting a grunt in return. “Let Zoe, Nikos, and Alex through. The rest of them can wait outside the VIP.”

With their sister between them, the brothers shrugged and passed through the first ring of Moretti defense. When they got close enough, Zoe ran to Tootsie’s side, taking some of the weight off Luca’s shoulders. She scanned his injuries, gently touching him and whispering in his ear.

I motioned for my friends to move to the other side of the VIP. Adriana immediately went, but Ashley had to coax Malcolm to listen. As they sat, she took some cocktail napkins and dabbed his bloody knuckles. Wrapping up a couple of ice cubes, she held them to his hands as they quietly argued, shooting quick looks at the deadly standoff happening between them and the exit.

Luca and Zoe carried Tootsie to the farthest couch, settling him in the corner to help keep him propped up. I grabbed a bottle of water from the table and handed it to Zoe. It was abundantly clear she wouldn’t let anyone else care for Tootsie, and you had to respect that kind of possessiveness.

Nikos, Alex, Luca, and Marco sat in the chairs around the table. I perched on the arm of Luca’s chair, and he wrapped his arm around my hip. The music had been turned down, but heavy bass still vibrated through the building, creating a strange setting for such an important conversation.

Zoe boldly broke the silence, saying, “I want to take Torquato home with me. I don’t trust you won’t kill him for disobeying your orders.”

Luca’s fingers tightened on me, but he didn’t speak.

Marco leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “You think we brought Tootsie to the club to kill him?” He arched an eyebrow, a wry smile on his face.

Zoe lifted her chin, unwilling to back down. “Look at him.”

“Zoe,” Tootsie choked out. “They didn’t do this. I earned this beating.” He laughed, but it quickly became a wheeze as he grabbed his side. “I think my ribs are broken.”

“What?” Zoe’s confidence faltered.

“Torquato,” Luca said his cousin’s given name with a certain amount of flourish. “Is my consigliere. Why would I kill him?”

She flinched. Tootsie being Luca’s advisor added a new barrier to their relationship.

“Maybe a better question is, would Tootsie be safe with you?”

Luca’s words landed like one of Malcolm’s punches, and Zoe slumped. Looking at her brothers, her eyes turned glassy, begging for them to make everything right.

Alex scratched his jaw as he looked at his sister. His brow wrinkled, and he slowly nodded. “Okay. We’ll make the same deal with Tootsie as we did with you. Consider it another guarantee of peace.”

“Are you okay with that, Zoe?” Luca looked at his former . . . girlfriend? Former arranged marriage fiancée?

“I assume I won’t get to continue working the books with you?” She looked at Nikos, and he shook his head.

“Sorry, Zoe. You’ll be a Moretti.”

Zoe bit her bottom lip. She was willing to marry Luca to escape her family, but now that Cy was no longer a problem and the Chronis family had ferreted out the traitors, she didn't have to run away.

Tootsie curled himself around her, pain contorting his face, but it didn't stop him from giving her the comfort she needed.

Safe in his arms, Zoe wiped the lone tear from her cheek and nodded. "I understand."

Her brothers stared at her like they'd never seen her before. I could only imagine how hard it was to watch their sister choose the enemy.

In one day, so many things had changed, and so many futures were altered.

"Now that we're all on the same page get your men out of my club." Luca stood, offering me his hand.

Tootsie remained seated, but the Chronis siblings stood and met on the other side of the low table and had a quiet conversation. Zoe tilted her head back and huffed. "I'm a thirty-year-old woman. I think it'll be okay if I live in sin for a few months. And look at him." She gestured at Tootsie. "Someone needs to take care of him."

The brothers shared a look before they each pulled Zoe into a hug. When they stepped away, Alex pinned Tootsie with a glare. "You take care of my sister. If anything happens to her, I'll kill you. Truce or not."

Somehow, Tootsie pulled his huge body up and stood. Sweat poured down his face as he held his hand out. "I would kill myself if anything ever happened to her." They shook hands, Alex putting more oomph behind it than necessary.

As soon as the Chronis brothers disappeared into the crowd, Tootsie collapsed onto the couch, groaning in pain.

Zoe jumped to his side, cooing and wiping his forehead. “We need to get home and get a doctor.”

Marco pulled out his phone, and within minutes, three big guys were at his side and being given orders. “They’re going to take you two to Rosa’s, and a doctor will be waiting for you when you get there.”

“Rosa?” Zoe’s face dropped. I could understand the desire to stay away from the Moretti matriarch, especially as a Chronis.

“Don’t worry, my mom loves Tootsie,” Luca said with a grin. “Just stick by his side.”

I slapped his stomach with the back of my hand. “Stop it.”

Luca hugged me to his side. “What’s the point of having a Chronis in-law if we aren’t going to have a little fun?”

“Asshole,” I muttered.

Zoe bounced back from her terrible surprise quickly. She started directing the men on how to lift Tootsie, move Tootsie, and talk to Tootsie—it was adorable. The group went out the back door and took all the remaining tension with them.

Marco gestured to the DJ, and the music got louder.

I leaned up, putting my mouth to Luca’s ear, and asked, “Do you want to go home?”

He looked around and shook his head. “With all those extra people gone, this isn’t so bad. Let’s get a drink with them and then dance.”

Grinning, I dragged him to my friends, who were still stiff and watching the Morettis with apprehension. “Sorry about that.”

Adriana laughed and downed her champagne. “It wouldn’t be a Moretti party without a little violence.”

I rolled my eyes and sat next to Ashley. “You guys okay?”

“Fine. Just a little worried about all the hulking men in suits casually carrying guns and staring at my boyfriend like they want him six feet under.” She subtly nodded toward a few soldiers standing at the entrance of the VIP section. “How are we going to get out of here?”

Luca jerked his chin at the menacing assholes, and they scattered. “Don’t mind them. You’re safe.”

“You sure?” she asked, still icing Malcolm’s hands.

While Ashley was a mess, Malcolm sat there, calm as fuck.

“Malcolm showed his loyalty to Sasha. He’s untouchable.” Luca picked up the empty bottle of champagne and sighed. “I guess we need to get one of those girls over here.”

As if his words summoned her, a tall, slim woman strutted over with a fresh bottle in a bucket of ice. Without a word, she set it on the table and left.

“It’s good to be the boss,” I said, pouring a glass for Luca and myself.

After a few drinks, Luca led me to the dance floor. The club had refilled, and the dance floor was packed, but a path cleared for us to the middle.

Luca pulled me to him, pressing a kiss to my forehead. “You look beautiful.”

“Aw, you’re not so bad yourself.” I ran my hands over his broad shoulders. “I can’t believe it’s over.”

“Thanks to you.” He licked his lips, and an emotion flickered across his face that I didn’t recognize.

“What?” I brushed the overlong hair from his forehead, smiling at his glassy eyes and rosy cheeks from all the drinking.

“It might be fucked up, but I find it incredibly sexy that you can take care of yourself. That you—” He gave me a meaningful look. “You did that for me. No one’s ever done anything like that for me. Fuck, you did what my family failed to do.”

“And I’d do it again.” I nipped his bottom lip, and he groaned.

“Let’s get out of here.” Luca dragged me from the dance floor. I laughed obnoxiously and waved at our family and friends as we passed. When we got to the coat check, our coats were ready for us, but he didn’t give me a chance to put it on.

No.

Luca pulled me out into the frosty night air before shoving me into our waiting town car. He slid in behind me, said a terse, “Home,” and his lips crashed into mine as the partition went up and the driver pulled onto the street.

I shoved him back, climbed onto his lap, and claimed his mouth. Running my fingers through his thick, coarse hair, my heart stuttered.

Luca was with me. Everything we had fought for was finally ours.

The desire to consume him, to make him a part of me, was overwhelming.

He must have needed the same because his kisses became hungrier, his hands touching me everywhere.

I broke away from his mouth, sucking in a deep breath, the top of my head brushing the roof of the car. Every pass of Luca's fingertips against my bare skin was electric, sending shivers down my spine. I came alive under his touch in a way I'd only ever felt with him.

Luca kissed down my neck as he kneaded my ass, pulling me down against his hard cock. I rocked against him, my head thrown back, giving him more skin to love.

His teeth grazed my pulse, and I moaned, my thighs tensing around his. He sucked the sensitive skin there, and I hoped he could feel how my heart raced for him, how he alone made it beat.

"Luca?" I rolled my head forward, my eyes meeting his. "I need you."

He nodded, spreading my knees wider, his hand slipping under my dress. The warmth of his palm was sublime, and I pressed into it. Running his knuckles over me, I jumped when he passed over my clit. He did it again, and again, and again. The pressure was so light that I chased his fingers, hoping to create more friction.

"Hold this," Luca said as he handed me the skirt of my dress. He pressed his thumb over my clit, his eyes looking up at me, watching my response.

Letting out a pleased sigh, I rocked against him, creating a pressure that wasn't enough. The bright flavor of champagne lingered on his breath as I grazed my lips against his. Needing

more, I brushed my tongue against his. The taste of him was more decadent than anything I'd ever consumed.

Luca pushed my panties aside, his fingers continuing to explore and caress me. He teased my entrance, and my body ached to be filled. No matter how much I moved, he kept playing with me, swallowing my frustrated moans.

Taking matters into my own hands, I leaned back and slid off his lap and onto the floor between his legs. Even in the spacious town car, my ass hit the divide between the front and back seats.

Luca smiled down at me, and as I undid his belt, he ran his thumb across my bottom lip. "You're perfection."

I licked my lips and pulled him from his pants, the sight of his erection making my mouth water. It had been months since I tasted him, owned him this way.

The pass of my tongue on the underside made his throat bob. Circling the head with my lips, I gently sucked, and Luca's hips moved toward me.

He gathered up my mess of curls, balling them in his fist, creating a sting in my scalp. I took as much of him as I could, using my hand to work what my mouth couldn't reach. Every dip down tugged my hair, making my eyes water. As I looked up into Luca's half-lidded gaze, he wiped away a tear from my cheek and rasped out, "Touch yourself. I want you wet."

I only had a few inches of legroom to spare, but I was able to slip a hand between my legs, touching myself in time with my hand on him. Spit slickened his shaft as I sucked his cock, my grip tightening as I stroked him with it. Luca gently thrust, his head falling back with a groan before he quickly yanked

me off him by my hair, making me wince. “Turn around,” he panted, sitting a little straighter.

I gave him my back, and he pulled me onto his lap, putting my knees on the outside of his. He tugged the front of my dress open, my bra slipping to my waist with a pinch of pain. That was immediately forgotten when his hands cupped my breasts, kneading them until the tips of my breasts poked out between his fingers. With every squeeze, his knuckles pinched and rolled my nipples until I was writhing in his lap.

Luca dropped one hand, caressing down my body until he reached my thighs. Tapping my cunt with his fingers, I moaned and spread my legs even wider. “Lean forward,” he ordered, biting my ear lobe.

I hovered over him as he slid my panties to the side, the head of his cock brushing my ass as he positioned it. “Sit.”

Lowering myself slowly, I sunk onto him, arching my back to accommodate my ass in his lap. I grabbed hold of Luca’s thighs and rode him, my body primed and ready to come. He held my hip tightly and, with the other hand, circled my clit.

I bounced on him, both of us moaning until my pussy started to flutter around his cock. Luca thrust up, hitting the same spot over and over until my legs shook, and I had no choice but to come.

Luca’s arms caught me from falling forward as he fucked me from behind. His attentions prolonged my orgasm until he came, falling back into the seat with me wrapped in his arms.

“I don’t know if my legs work anymore.” I laid limp in his arms as he caressed my trembling thighs, his fingers lightly brushing my pussy, and I jerked. His tired laugh vibrated through me, but I couldn’t find it in me to react.

Looking out the window, I groaned. A few guards were on the porch, but more startling was the driver standing on the sidewalk, scrolling through his phone.

“What?” Luca’s hands stroked my belly, a content sigh leaving his lips.

“We’re home.”

TWENTY-TWO

The first week Luca was home—outside of the little bit of murder and the awkwardness at the club—was pure bliss. He didn't go into the office, and Marco kept the Morettis at bay, meaning we got a little staycation honeymoon to hold us over until our real honeymoon in February.

The second week, Luca went back to being the Moretti boss, but with the added benefit of having Tootsie as his advisor and Marco taking care of local skirmishes. We had dinner together every night and breakfast every morning.

The third week, Luca went back to Moretti Properties for year-end. The employees were relieved that things were returning to normal, and Joey and Aldo were happy to go back to their regular responsibilities. As with the family business, his load was lighter because tasks had been more evenly distributed.

Luca came home on Christmas Eve ready to celebrate with his family and friends. The next morning, we packed up the SUV with an obscene number of gifts and headed to Rosa's for brunch.

“You know, soon it will be up to us to host holidays,” Luca said as he glanced at me from the driver's seat, his eyes hidden behind classic black sunglasses.

“But we don’t have that kind of space.”

“Mom and Dad didn’t always have it either. We lived in my old townhouse until I was about seven. In those days, the family spilled out the front door, but you better bet when Dante Moretti called, they came.”

I laced our fingers together on his lap. “I had no idea.”

He nodded. “Before Dad took a loan from Nonno Carlo and started the construction company, all the money coming in was from less than legal sources. Back then, the family had money, but nowhere close to what we have now.”

The large columns of Rosa’s mansion came into view, and I shook my head. “I still can’t believe this is my life.”

Luca lifted our hands to his lips and kissed each of my knuckles. “Same.” He smiled sweetly and pulled into his spot. “You ready for Christmas overload?”

“As long as your mom has those gingerbread cookies, I can endure all the yuletide they throw at me.”

Unlike the first Christmas dinner I attended, this was a laid-back affair with only the inner circle and close family. We found everyone spread out in the informal living room, sipping coffee and munching on pastries.

“Uncle Luca!” Dante shouted, sprinting past the twelve-foot Christmas tree. He jumped into Luca’s arms and burrowed his face into Luca’s black cashmere sweater.

“Hey, buddy. Merry Christmas.” Luca held the boy, swaying gently. He whispered something in Dante’s ear, and the kid broke into a fit of laughter, violently shaking his head. They carried on for a few minutes, unbothered by being the center of attention.

I glanced past them, wanting to distract everyone and give Dante and Luca a bit of privacy, but there wasn't a single person looking my way. Rosa sat in a plush chair, discreetly wiping under her eyes while Frankie stood by the fireplace with Marco's parents, their faces soft as they looked on as the two caught up.

I'd spent some time with Marco's mother, Karina, at the hospital, sitting with Mickey while we waited for him to wake up. Initially, she struggled with coming to celebrate while her son was still in a coma, which was completely understandable. But Arturo convinced her that family time was exactly what they needed.

Adriana sat on the loveseat by the window, gently wringing her hands, tears freely falling down her cheeks, and behind her stood Marco. While everyone else watched Dante and Luca, he only had eyes for Adriana. The sight was heartbreaking because I knew that this may very well be the last time she would celebrate the holidays with us. She'd be making a new family, and we'd be losing her to Chicago and her doctor.

"Sasha?" Dante slid out of Luca's hold and came to hug my hip. "He's really home."

"I know, honey. Isn't it great?"

He nodded. His dark waves, so much like Luca's, rubbed against the wool of my sweater dress and got staticky. "Can I stay with you guys tonight?"

My eyes instantly went to Adriana, and she shrugged, her face drawn.

"Why don't we see what happens? You might change your mind once you see all the socks we got you for Christmas."

Dante jumped back from me, his arms out to the side. “You’re kidding, right?” He whipped his head toward Luca and the bag of gifts in his hand. “You didn’t just get me socks, did you?”

The tension in the room broke, and we distracted Dante by having him hand out presents. Once we all had a nice pile of perfectly wrapped gifts, Dante tore into his. Every present was cooler than the last, and by the time Luca rolled out his new bike, Dante was screaming and zipping around the room on the skateboard Marco had gotten him.

Being the only kid on this side of the family certainly had its perks.

Dante disappeared down the hallway, Rosa shouting after him to mind the carpets, when Luca announced it was time for me to open his gift to me.

He handed me a gold rectangle box with a big red bow. “Merry Christmas, Sasha.”

Easing the lid off, I shoved the tissue paper aside and cackled. A long-stem wine glass with “The Mrs. Mitchell-Moretti” etched in gold on the goblet laid on glittery tissue paper.

I pulled him down to my level, pecking his lips several times. When he pulled away, he whispered in my ear, “Your real gift comes later.”

“Looking forward to it.” I grinned, handing him his family-appropriate gift. “A little token of my affection”

Luca lifted an eyebrow as he unwrapped the small box. He pulled out the apron and started laughing, shooting me a look that told me I’d be in trouble later.

“Mr. Sasha?” Frankie said from across the room. “Amazing.” His lips twitched, and I knew it was taking everything for him not to laugh. He went back to flipping through the dark romance novel I’d bought him. Little did he know, I’d talked to his mom, and it was the next read for the Gambini Girl Book Club. I couldn’t wait to see his face when I showed up to discuss the kidnapped nanny and her mafia don.

Karina smiled at Arturo. “You remember that apron I got you after you took over Moretti’s?”

“World’s worst chef,” Marco offered from the Christmas tree. “The restaurateur that can’t cook to save his life.”

Arturo threw his hands up with a good-natured smile. “Not all of us were born to slice and dice in the kitchen.” He smirked at Luca.

“I’m a man of many talents.” Luca leaned back in his chair smugly, hanging the apron around his neck that marked him as mine. And goddamn, did he look good wearing my name.

While our friends were out drinking and partying on New Year’s Eve, Luca and I had planned an elaborate night at home.

“You look just as beautiful as you did on your wedding day.” My mom dabbed a tissue under her eyes, trying not to ruin her makeup.

“Thanks for coming over to help me into my dress. I want it to be a surprise.”

Mom squeezed my hand and gathered her things from my bed, leaving behind a brown bag from the pharmacy. “You’re

going to knock him dead.”

“You’re one to talk. Has dad seen this getup?” I smiled as she blushed, smoothing the silk on her hips.

“Not yet. I’m meeting him at the hotel.”

“Dirty.”

She pursed her lips, but her eyes sparkled with humor. “Stop it.” Her cheeks reddened as she slid on her jacket. Flipping her hair out of the collar, she said, “I better get out of here before my curls fall. Love you.” She air-kissed my cheeks and rushed out of the bedroom.

“Bye,” I called after her, happy that we were finally in a good place.

Checking my appearance, I was pleased that I’d come very close to matching my wedding day look.

“Sasha! Dinner’s ready!” Luca called from downstairs.

“Showtime,” I mumbled as I tossed the paper bag in my skin product drawer in the bathroom. My hands shook with nerves and excitement, but I promised myself I’d wait. I gathered my skirt and took my time descending the stairs.

Luca came out of the kitchen, his mouth open like he was about to yell for me again, and stopped dead in his tracks. His eyes roamed over me as he pulled the kitchen towel from his shoulder and wiped his hands. “Baby, you look—” He cleared his throat. “I never thought I’d get to see you in that dress again.”

“I thought it would be a nice way to ring in the new year. A third celebration of our marriage.”

Luca sauntered toward me, flipping the towel back over his shoulder. “Do you know what I made for dinner?” He met

me at the bottom of the stairs and took my hand.

“No.”

His fingers were warm around mine, the callouses on his palm rough and comforting.

“The menu I choose for the wedding.”

I smiled, allowing him to lead me to the dining room. “I set the cake topper out to thaw.”

Luca pulled out my chair and helped me with my skirt as I sat. “You’ve thought of everything.”

“So have you.”

“I’ll be right back.” Luca left me in the candlelit room, soft music playing through the downstairs, creating the perfect ambiance.

“Here we are.” He set a plate in front of me and in front of his seat.

I stared down at Luca’s perfect egg raviolo. “We’re doing courses?”

“Of course.” He grinned and cut into the pasta, nodding as the yolk oozed out. The pleased look on his face made me bite my lip to keep from laughing.

My perfect perfectionist.

I put my napkin on my lap, cut into my pasta, and took a bite. Since Luca had been home, we’d been eating like kings. He’d missed his kitchen, and I’d missed the magic he worked in there.

“So, what are your hopes for in the new year?” I asked as Luca took a sip of his wine.

“Time,” was all Luca said, the candlelight dancing in his eyes as he gazed at me.

“That’s it?”

He set his glass down and nodded. “I want us to start our life together, free of the bullshit of the past few years. If a baby happens to be a part of that, I wouldn’t be upset.”

Avoiding my wine, I took a sip of water to hide my smile.

Luca didn’t know my period was a day late. My OB told me it could take up to a year to get pregnant after getting off birth control, but it looked like we may have gotten lucky. I’d decided there was no better way to kick off the new year than to find out if we were going to be parents, so I counted down the minutes until I would take the pregnancy tests stashed up in our bathroom.

“What about you? Any New Year’s resolutions?” Luca wiped the bottom of his plate with fresh bread.

“Grow the business and hopefully grow our family.” We shared a dreamy smile. I wondered if he was picturing a little baby with his dark hair and my green eyes. “Maybe not so many dead bodies.”

Luca laughed loudly, leaning back in his chair. “That would be nice. I’ll do my best to keep you clear of all that.”

“I know.” I took the last bite of raviolo.

“Thank you for being there when I took care of my father’s men. I know it was hard, but I needed them to see your strength. They need to know you could’ve just as easily shot them. If I’m going to run this family, I want them to respect you and if they can’t do that, fear you.”

“After Cy—” I waved my fork in the air before setting it on the plate. “Watching you take care of your father’s lackeys was nothing.”

Luca’s face glowed as he looked at me. “And that’s why you’re their worst nightmare. You’re a legend at this point, and they don’t even know about my dad.”

“I’m surprised Lorenzo hasn’t ratted me out.”

“Me too.” Luca stood and stacked our plates. “I’ve actually been thinking about that. It would be such an easy way to put a target on your back and destabilize the family, but he hasn’t pulled the trigger.”

As I tried to figure out the ass-backwards logic Lorenzo might have been using, Luca went to the kitchen.

The Fourth of July gala stood out in my mind. The way he talked about me and my relationship with Luca was unhinged. He thought if he was the boss, he would be entitled to me, that I’d swoon just because he was the head of the family.

How ridiculous.

I didn’t fuck the last boss. I killed him.

Luca set a beautiful plate of scallops in front of me, the smile on his face dimming as he caught my expression. “What’s wrong?” He sat, covering my hand with his.

“I think I know why he hasn’t told everyone I killed your dad.”

He squeezed my hand in encouragement.

I swallowed and said, “He wants me.”

“We know that.”

I shook my head. “No. I think he wants me by his side. Like the spoils of war or something.”

Luca considered me, his eyes thoughtful as he worked through what I said. “I can’t wait to kill him.”

“I guess there’s no point in stressing about him now. Let’s just enjoy our dinner.” I took a bite and closed my eyes.

“Good?” Luca asked.

I nodded slowly, enjoying every chew until I swallowed.

Our conversation fell to less serious topics as we finished our scallops and main courses.

“I’ll be right back.” I took our plates to the sink and went to the fridge. There, thawed and ready to eat, was the top of our wedding cake. Carrying the box carefully to the table, I hummed the wedding march.

“Are we really going to eat that?” Luca playfully sighed.

“Of course! It’s tradition.”

“Stale cake.” He sat taller, laying his napkin back on his lap with a flourish. “Let’s do it.”

I opened the top and pursed my lips to keep from smiling. The icing was nowhere near as precise as I assumed it was on the day, seeing as so much of the cake was peeking out from underneath. “Looks great.”

Luca gave me a flat look.

“Oh! I forgot the knife.” I went to stand up, and Luca caught my hand.

“Forget the knife.”

I frowned. “But how are we—”

Luca grabbed a hunk of cake with his bare hands and held it up. “Like this.”

“You just—How very uncivilized of you.” I took a bite from between his fingers. It tasted like the freezer.

“Good?” Luca smirked, reading the disgust on my face.

I grabbed my own hand full and shoved it right in his face. “Delicious.”

His tongue tickled my palm, and I jerked away, dropping cake all over the table.

“You should’ve probably put it in Tupperware.” Luca stood and walked out of the dining room.

“Hey! You can’t leave me to finish this.” I shook the icing off my hand, splattering dollops of cake on the table.

He came back carrying a pastry box and a glass container. “I had Paul make up a new cake top, but we can save a bit of that for our first anniversary.” Carefully setting the box on the table, he transferred the half-smooshed cake to the glass dish.

“Perfect.” I looked in the new box and smiled at the delicate piping. Closing the lid, I said, “We should save this for breakfast.”

Luca pressed the lid on and nodded, licking the icing off his thumb. “Sounds good.”

We put the cakes away and washed our hands before going to the living room, where Luca had set up candles and had music playing.

“I thought we could do a little dancing before midnight.” Luca held out his hand with a small bow.

I took it and stepped into him. “You made a playlist of our songs.”

Luca turned me, bringing me to his chest. “I did.”

“A perfect reception.” I rested my cheek against his shoulder, and we danced in circles around our living room. He held me close, placing sweet kisses to my temple and hair. As he hummed along to the songs, his throat vibrated against my ear, lulling me into a relaxed, if not aroused, state. His hands smoothly caressed my body, his knuckles sliding along my spine, circling the row of buttons above my ass.

This was my happiness. Luca, me, and an entire night before us.

“It’s almost midnight,” He mumbled against my ear. “Let me go get the champagne.”

I turned my head, kissing the corner of his mouth. “Hurry back.”

When he stepped away, I instantly missed the heat of his body, the feel of him holding me.

“Here we are, and—” Luca set the champagne flutes down, then turned off the music and turned on the tv for the countdown. With a grin, he said, “So we’re celebrating on time.” He tossed the remote and joined me behind the couch.

“10,” the crowd downtown cheered.

Luca pulled me into him.

“9.”

I wrapped my arms around his neck, staring into his dark brown eyes.

“8.” The crowd was getting louder.

Luca tucked a loose curl behind my ear, his touch warm against my cheek.

“7.”

“Beautiful,” he muttered as he cupped my jaw, his thumb ghosting over my bottom lip.

“6.”

I caught the tip of his thumb between my teeth, flicking my tongue against it.

“5.”

His eyes rose from my lips and met mine, an intensity there that made my breathing stutter.

“4.” The crowd was getting more enthusiastic by the second.

My lips parted, and Luca’s hand fell from my mouth.

“3,” Luca said along with the partygoers as he ran a finger over the neckline of my wedding dress.

“2,” I said, tilting my chin up to bring our mouths closer together.

“1,” Luca breathed against my lips, claiming them as the sound of horns and fireworks filled the room.

The gentle way he held me was nothing like the harshness of his kiss. I melted into him, letting his body hold me up while Luca took and took from me. My lungs burned for air, but there was no way in hell I was breaking the connection. I needed Luca more than I needed to breathe.

Backing us up until my back hit the cool wall, Luca got as close as my dress would allow. He slid a hand between us and let out a frustrated groan when the fabric didn’t allow him

access. His hands went around, roughly grabbing my ass and thrusting into me.

Tearing his mouth from mine, he kissed over to my ear. “Let’s get you out of this dress.” Luca grabbed my hips and spun me until I was squished against the wall, my tits lodged in my throat. His hands roamed my body before landing on the small buttons with a curse.

I let out a breathy laugh, and Luca grinded his hips against my ass, his cock sliding between my cheeks. Cupping my breasts, he pulled me back from the wall and tortured me through my clothes. “What’s funny?” he rasped in my ear, his voice dangerous and low as he moved my body as he saw fit.

“N-nothing.” I moaned loudly when I was forced back to the wall, Luca still winding his hips against me.

The fabric of my dress started to loosen as he undid the buttons. When the back was open, Luca turned me around, his mouth finding mine as he yanked my dress down until it was a pile at my feet.

Resting his hands on my hips, he moved back, his eyes scanning down my body. “Is this what you were wearing?”

I nodded, trying to unbutton as much of his shirt as I could before he stopped me.

“I’m going to kill Bennington for making me miss our wedding night.”

“Second wedding night.”

“Right. Our second wedding night.” Luca ran his fingers down my stomach, tracing my stretch marks and stroking the soft skin sweetly. His hand disappeared under my belly, sliding into my barely there silk panties, and I let out a shaky breath. My eyes shut as my head fell back against the wall.

“Look at me,” Luca demanded, pressing his thumb to my chin to tilt my face toward him. “I want to see it all.”

Biting my lower lip, I fought to keep my eyes open as two of his fingers easily slipped inside. He curled them in a come-hither motion, pressing his palm against my clit, so every simple move brought double the sensation.

Luca’s hand dropped from my chin to my throat, his thumb caressing my racing pulse. “Utter perfection.”

I groaned, my back bowing from the wall as I felt that familiar tension in my belly. Being under Luca’s watchful gaze as he expertly drew pleasure from me accelerated my climax until I clamped down on his fingers. My hips bucked against his hand, and white splotches filled my vision. Short, harsh breaths fell from my lips as I sagged against the wall.

Luca gathered me in his arms, hugging me tightly and kissing my hair. “Beautiful,” he murmured as he trailed his fingertips over my heated skin. The simple gesture stoked a new fire in my body, feeding the part of me ravenous for Luca.

Leaning back, I unbuttoned his shirt, kissing his skin as it was exposed. He shrugged off his shirt, and I undid his belt, eager to help him along.

“Do you want to go upstairs?” he asked, brushing the hair back from my face.

“No time.” I yanked his belt off and tossed it aside.

Luca backed away from my hands as I tried to pull his zipper down. His grin was all the challenge I needed to rush him and shove him down on the couch.

He laughed, his hands landing on my hips as I scrambled to straddle him. “Now that you’ve got me where you want me, what are you going to do?”

I reached behind me and unclasped my strapless bra. “If you have to ask, either I’m doing this wrong, or you’re not as smart as I thought you were.”

Luca’s hand came down on my ass hard, then he rubbed the sting out.

I propped up on my knees, freeing his cock from his pants. Spitting on my hand, I locked eyes with him and started stroking him. His abs contracted as I worked him, a deep flush creeping up his neck. This powerful man falling apart at just the touch of my hand was surreal.

Even before I knew who Luca was, I could feel how special our connection was. He fell first, and I fell despite myself. Loving Luca was easy, so easy I never noticed it was happening.

He licked his lips and tweaked my nipple, tugging it gently. I arched into him, silently begging for more, and he obliged. We played with each other, sharing lust-filled looks and smiles.

Trailing kisses across my collarbone, Luca ran his fingers up and down my sides. He surrounded me with his gentle touches and the soft press of his lips against my hot skin.

My hand faltered on his cock, unable to focus as he caressed me into a state of mindlessness. He squeezed my ass, moving down to my thighs as I started to rock against his legs.

I pushed to my knees, sliding my silken panties to the side, and placed the head of his cock at my entrance. Luca’s mouth left my skin, and his hands stilled on my legs as I eased him inside. His lips parted in a moan, and I kissed him, swallowing the sound and all that followed.

What started slow and sensuous turned into me riding Luca until my thighs burned and sweat dripped down our bodies. Luca met my movements with thrusts from below, hitting so deep that I cried out over and over. I held on to his shoulders, my nails scoring his skin as I instinctually moved with him.

“Sasha,” Luca rasped, drawing my eyes open. His hands tightened on my hips, and he tilted them just so, hitting the same spot repeatedly until I couldn’t take a full breath and my lungs ached for oxygen.

Luca groaned as he came, his hips continuing their assault. He watched my face as he circled my clit with his thumb, setting off an explosion in my body that sent shivers through me. I went limp and fell against him, sucking down the air my lungs desperately needed.

“Goddamn,” Luca groaned, wrapping his arms around me.

I nuzzled his chest, peppering kisses all over and biting his nipple. He tiredly laughed, giving my side a pinch.

TWENTY-THREE

Luca was still lying on his stomach, snoring up a storm, when I snuck out of bed. It was only five a.m., but I couldn't sleep thinking about the pregnancy tests in the bathroom.

I rolled away from Luca, but he threw his arm out, trapping me under the massive dead weight.

“Goes to jail, gets arms the size of a tree trunk,” I mumbled as I struggled to shimmy down the bed.

Finally free, I tiptoed to the bathroom, looking over my shoulder every few steps until my feet hit the tile. Shutting the door, I squeezed my eyes shut as the click sounded. The bedroom went silent, and I held my breath, waiting for Luca to call for me. Instead, I was met with a very loud snore, and my body relaxed.

I moved carefully through the bathroom, cringing as the brown paper bag crinkled. Everything is always one hundred times louder when you're trying to be stealthy. I quickly read the instructions and readied two tests to be peed on, complete with stacked toilet paper to put them on.

No one ever prepared you for how bizarre it is to hold a stick between your legs and hope you're peeing where you're supposed to. The alternative was to pee in a cup and dip but

sneaking down to the kitchen and back up seemed like the harder option.

My hands shook as I peed, the stick hitting my thigh, and I took a deep breath to relax. I stopped midstream, switching out for the second test. Popping the caps on the tips, I washed my hands and sat on the edge of the bathtub. After the longest three minutes of my life, I stood and inched my way to the sink.

“Oh my God!” I said, my hands going straight to my belly.

The bathroom door flew open, and Luca stood there with a gun pointing directly at me.

“Luca! Put the gun down!”

He immediately lowered it, his tired eyes scanning the room before falling on the tests. “Are those?” His throat bobbed as he swallowed.

“Yeah.” I smiled.

“And are you?” he croaked out, setting the gun on the counter.

I slowly nodded, my vision blurring with tears.

In a second, I was in Luca’s arms as he spun me around, burrowing his face in my chest.

Laughing, I slapped his shoulders. “Put me down!”

He lowered me to the floor, positively beaming. “We’re having a baby. You’re having my baby.” His hands went to my belly like he’d be able to feel something. “I can’t believe it.”

“Me neither. I thought it’d take a little longer, but here we are.”

Luca bent down, framed my face with his hands, and kissed me hard. He poured every ounce of love and excitement into that kiss, leaving no room for confusion about how he felt. Pulling back, he pecked me a few times, then scooped me up.

“Luca!”

He smacked my ass and carried me to bed. “We have something to celebrate!”

“We have mass in four hours.”

“I’ll be quick.” Luca laughed, diving on top of me.

“Why did your mom insist on New Year’s Day mass?” I yawned, closing the visor and sliding my sunglasses down to cover my tired eyes. “I look like I spent the whole night fucking my husband. And that’s after a shower and getting all gussied up.”

Luca turned into the church parking lot and smiled. “You look gorgeous.”

“Uh-huh.”

“You have a glow.” He smirked as he parked.

Swatting his arm, I laughed. “Don’t start that shit.”

“You’re in luck. That’s the only cliché I know about pregnant women. Let’s get in there before Mom starts—” His phone vibrated, and he gave me a look as he answered. “Hey, Mom. Uh. We’re here.” He pulled the phone from his face and frowned. “She hung up on me.”

“Sounds about right.” Sighing, I took one more look in the visor mirror, then said, “Let’s get this over with.”

Luca got out and came around to my side of the SUV. Opening my door, he looked around the lot, his passive mask slipping into place.

He helped me out, and I kissed his cheek.

“Don’t smile,” I whispered in his ear, delighted when his cheek twitched.

Parishioners greeted us as we all funneled through the enormous doors. The Morettis attending mass together was a big deal.

The urge to urinate struck as we crossed the threshold. “I need to use the restroom. Save me a seat?”

“You got it.” Luca kissed the top of my head, then went into the sanctuary.

I walked against the crowd, weaving around the latecomers as they rushed to the pews. Tommy stood by the front door, chatting with another young guy. He dipped his chin my way and went back to his conversation.

“Finally,” I sighed. In the grand tradition of church bathrooms, the stalls were a seventies beige, the floor tile was off-white and cracked in a few places, and a floral border lined the walls. The automatic air freshener let out an intense potpourri puff right in my face, and I gagged. Coughing my way into the stall and peeing, I wondered if I would get morning sickness. It sounded terrible.

The door opened as I washed my hands. I looked up in the mirror, smiling politely, but was in for a terrible surprise.

“Hello, Sasha,” Lorenzo said as he locked the door behind him.

I took a deep breath, ready to scream, but Lorenzo crossed the room in two steps, covering my mouth with his hand. The ring on his finger dug into my lip, making my bottom teeth cut the soft skin on the inside. A copper taste hit my tongue. At the same time, that damn air freshener puffed again. Bile rose up my throat, but there was no way to know if it was from the synthetic flower smell, Lorenzo, or the ball of cells setting up shop in my uterus.

“You have two choices. You can leave with me without causing a scene, or I will shoot you and leave you here for Luca to find.” He pressed a gun to my side. “Now, I’m going to take my hand off your mouth.”

Lorenzo dropped his hand but wrapped his arm around my upper arms.

Working my jaw, I touched my bruised lip.

“Are you going to be a good girl?”

Rage simmered in my gut, but I nodded.

“Good. Let’s go.” He offered his arm, and I reluctantly took it.

He guided me out of the bathroom and down the hall. The lobby was empty, and the doors to the sanctuary closed, but the congregation’s voices filled the space. As we neared the front doors, I noticed a man lying on the floor.

“Tommy?” I tried to go to him, but Lorenzo tightened his hold on my arm.

“Leave him.” Lorenzo shoved open the door closest to us, dragging me from the church. We reached a black sedan, and he popped the trunk. “Get in.”

“In the trunk?” I looked around the parking lot, wishing someone would come along.

“Yup. I threw a blanket back there so you’ll be comfortable. Get in.” He flashed his gun.

“Fine,” I gritted out, hiking my skirt up as I eyed the trunk, unsure how to get in. “How am I supposed—”

“Let me help.” Lorenzo gave my shoulders a shove, sending me in head first.

My ass hit the opening, and even though I tucked my legs, they banged against the car. “Fuck! You don’t shove a fat woman in a trunk, you stupid mother—”

He slammed the trunk closed, his laughter muffled by metal.

Thinking back to all the movies I’d ever watched with my dad and all the comments he made while watching them, I felt around for wires. Maybe we’d get pulled over if I could take out his taillight. I made three passes before giving up and kicking the other end. My dad’s voice was all I could hear as my toes bled inside my Louboutin. Turning to the other side, I slipped off my shoes and kicked backward.

I didn’t have any more luck with my heel and rolled onto my back with a huff.

The car hit a pothole, and I flew up, my hands banging into the roof. “Son of a bitch!”

After a few turns, the car sped up. We were definitely on the highway, which was a clusterfuck of epic proportions. The initial adrenaline of being kidnapped was crashing, and I felt ill. I placed my hands on my stomach, the only protection I was able to offer.

The longer we drove, the colder I got. Regret for not wearing a weather-appropriate outfit plagued me. For once, I should've listened to my mom's wisdom—tights are not the same as pants. Feeling around, I found the blanket and did my best to tuck it around me.

Note to self: Don't get kidnapped in the middle of winter. It's fucking cold.

I must've fallen asleep because suddenly, the sun was pouring in, and a sound slap landed on my cheek.

“Oh, good. I was worried you froze to death. Time to get out.”

Squinting, I tried to sit up, but my body was too stiff.

“Let me help.” Lorenzo reached in, but I hit his hand away without thinking.

“I got it.” Summoning an inner strength I didn't know I had, I swung my legs out of the trunk. Under my breath, I mumbled, “One. Two. Three.” I slowly came to a sitting position, dodging the opening. My head swam, and I closed my eyes to the bright light. The sensation of pins and needles went up and down my legs as feeling returned to them.

“Why don't we go inside?” Lorenzo gently said, his hand gripping my elbow.

I pried my eyes open and frowned. “Are we in the Ozarks?”

“That, I can't tell you.”

There were trees, a small cabin, and the sound of running water. “Great. My worst fucking nightmare. Nature with a psychopath.” I slid from the car. The minute my feet hit the rocky ground, I crumpled, falling onto my hands and knees.

Lorenzo looked down at me, disappointment evident on his face. “I’ll be waiting on the porch.” Then that bastard walked away, leaving me there in the dirt.

My leather gloves kept the small rocks from digging into my palms, but my stocking-covered feet and bloody toes weren’t as lucky.

Taking a deep breath, I lifted my hand, placing it before me and shuffled my knees. “At this rate, it’ll be dark before I make it inside.”

“That’s a girl! You can do it!” Lorenzo called out.

“This motherfucker,” I mumbled under my breath. Leaning back on my heels, I glared at him.

There is no way we’re both getting out of this alive. I’m going to kill this bastard.

Struggling, I stood, my arms out to the side for balance. Every step toward the cabin sent pain from my foot up my leg, and Lorenzo watched on like it was the most entertaining thing he’d ever seen.

I breathed a sigh of relief when the soles of my feet hit the smooth wood of the cabin steps.

“That wasn’t so hard, was it?” He got up from an old-fashioned rocker with a big smile.

“I need to pee,” I answered, making my way to the door before he could respond. Of course, the door was locked, so I had to wait for Lorenzo to saunter over and open it.

He looked at me as if he was waiting for me to say something before he let me inside. My bladder was on the brink of bursting, so I swallowed my pride and muttered, “Thanks.”

His smile was so bright I had to fight the urge to hit him. I didn't think a slap would earn me any points, so I chewed the inside of my cheek as he directed me to the tiniest bathroom I'd ever seen. The cabin was barely warmer than outside, and I prayed he had a heater or something. Otherwise my toes were going to fall off.

When I turned to close the door, there he was. "Uh. Do you mind?"

"Are you going to behave yourself?"

"I'm going to piss myself if you don't get out," I said sweetly.

Lorenzo chuckled, closing the door behind him.

As soon as I was alone, I searched the room. Above the toilet was a small window I would never be able to climb through. Giving up my escape plan for a moment, I peed. The entire time I stared at the door like Lorenzo was about to bust in and watch like the creep he was.

Because I was in my very own version of hell, there was no toilet paper. Ultimately, drip drying gave me plenty of time to survey the room for possible weapons.

I came up empty-handed until I chanced opening the cabinet under the sink. The hinges squeaked terribly, so I looked quickly. On the very bottom shelf, behind an oddly placed phone book was a very old, very rusty disposable razor.

Snagging it, I closed the cabinet door, purposefully breaking the plastic off the razors. A filthy rag sat at the bottom of the shower. In a flash of reluctant brilliance, I took a deep breath and picked it up with my thumb and forefinger. Completely disgusted, I wrapped the razors in the smelly washcloth.

“I’m coming in,” Lorenzo called, the handle on the door already turning.

I shoved the rag in my cleavage, sure to push it down, so it wasn’t visible, doing my best not to think about what was growing on the damp cloth.

“Why are you just sitting there?”

“No toilet paper.”

“Shit. Give me a second.” He left the door wide open as he disappeared. “I’m not sure how long we’ll be here, so I brought a whole pack.” I caught the twelve-pack of gentle comfort toilet paper, promising myself I wouldn’t be here long enough to even finish a roll.

“Thanks. Can you—” I gestured to the door with the tp.

“One more minute.” Lorenzo left, but the door was wide, fucking open.

Rolling my eyes, I quickly wiped and pulled up my tights. I didn’t care much for being caught with my panties around my ankles.

An ancient bar of soap was stuck to the sink, and I fought to pry it off just to wash my hands in water that smelled like rotten eggs.

There was no way you could confuse this cabin with the kind the Morettis owned.

When I looked up in the mirror, Lorenzo was creeping around the doorway, watching my every move.

I turned and leaned against the sink. “So, what’s the plan? Are we going to rough it here for the foreseeable future, or—”

He held up a finger and put a phone to his ear. “Marco?”

When I opened my mouth, Lorenzo shook his head and pointed his gun at me. Marco shouted on the other end of the line, but I couldn't understand what he was saying.

"If you want her back, I have some demands." He winked at me and casually leaned against the doorframe, his gun hanging limply in his hand like he didn't have a care in the world. "I'll send the location, and I want Luca to come alone. If I catch sight of any of you, Sasha dies. Got it?"

Marco said something, and Lorenzo hung up.

"We'll see if they can follow directions. Now come out here." He turned, leaving me to follow.

Hope flared in my chest. They knew I was gone and who I was with. Luca was clever enough to outsmart Lorenzo. I just needed to be patient.

Not exactly my strong suit.

I took a moment to collect myself before I left the bathroom. Lorenzo sat sprawled out on a ratty old couch, leaving a full-size bed in the corner as the only place for me to sit. I walked across the roughest, ugliest crochet rug and perched on the edge of the mattress. The bed creaked loudly, and I sunk in more than I expected, sending my legs flailing.

"Get comfortable." Lorenzo laughed and tossed the blanket from the trunk to me. He threw a log into a wood-burning stove, making the flames jump up. "It'll take a minute for this place to warm up."

I folded my legs, covered as much as possible with my dress, and then wrapped the soft blanket around me. Holding the top of the fleece gave me easy access to the razors.

Lorenzo sat back on the couch, propping his elbows on his knees as he leaned toward me. We sat there, staring at each

other—me in apprehension, wondering if I could dig the rag out of my cleavage fast enough to attack, and him with open curiosity as he spun a gold ring on his finger.

Squinting, I was just able to make out the design. “Is that an M?” I blinked, hoping my eyes were playing tricks on me.

He glanced down at his hand with a cold smile. “It is.”

Things started to click in place, and I shut my eyes, dread twisting with the fear of my current situation. “Why do you have the same ring as Luca?”

“You know why.” He laughed, and I heard the couch squeak.

My survival instinct kicked in, and my eyes flew open. The fact I took my eyes off him for even a second was foolish, but luckily Lorenzo had only leaned back and thrown his arms over the back of the couch.

“Your father was Lorenzo Campori.”

He scoffed. “That’s what my mother told everyone.”

“But she was Rosa’s sister. How—”

“Don’t be dense, Sasha. Dante Moretti was the future boss and fucked every woman that looked his way, sister of his fiancé or not. Hell, he had a few affairs once he was married too. If I hadn’t watched you leave that hotel room, I would’ve bet good money that Aunt Rosa killed him.”

“But your dad—”

“Lorenzo took on the boss’s bastard and spent every day of the rest of his life reminding me of it.” Lorenzo stood up and started pacing.

My mouth fell open, the desire to ask questions strong, but my sense of self-preservation stronger.

“You can’t imagine how satisfying it was to squeeze the last bit of life from his body.” He smirked at me. “But that’s not right, is it? You know a thing or two about the joys of killing a man.”

I shook my head, biting the inside of my cheek to keep quiet.

“I’ve wondered how you killed Dante. That car accident ruined a lot of the physical evidence, so looking at the autopsy didn’t give me too much information. Did you stab him?” He stopped in front of me, bending over with his hands on his knees to bring us eye to eye. “Strangle him?”

Despite my best offer, I flinched.

A grin split his face. “Goddamn, you’re perfect.”

I glared at him, and he laughed.

“Just wish I was the one to kill that asshole.” He scoffed, leaning in, his voice dropping to an intimate volume. “You know I was supposed to take you that night? Dante wanted you gone, and I offered to help him out.”

Chills went down my spine. How different would my life have gone if Dante’s little plan had worked out?

Lorenzo reached out to caress my face, but I reared back, hitting my head on the wall.

He frowned but took a step back. “We could’ve been good together. We were good together.”

I tucked my lips in and gave him a dead stare. The delusion was real. It’s like he conveniently forgot I called out

Luca's name as he fucked me. Imagine romanticizing a one-night stand like that.

"Pete gave me the same look when I told him to help me or die. That kind of loyalty is totally wasted on Luca." He glanced down at his ring. "Even his father knew he wasn't good enough to lead the family."

My eyes narrowed, but I kept my composure. He wanted a response. Wanted to rile me up. I wasn't going to give the fucker a reason to strike.

"After Dante Jr., the douche, was killed, Dante Sr. suddenly took an interest in me. He started to train me to take over since Luca was off fucking around in the kitchen. Imagine everyone's surprise when the little prince decided to come back into the fold."

Lorenzo flopped down on the bed next to me, and I pressed myself against the wall, making sure no part of him was touching any part of me.

"Then you happened." His face softened as he looked at me. "When he met you, he became unfocused and distracted. But when you left? He became a fucking monster that no one knew how to handle. Dante was ecstatic. Luca was brutal in a way his brother never was."

Lorenzo ran his thumb across my cheek, wiping away a tear. "Wow." He licked the pad of his thumb. "Luca's a lucky son of a bitch."

"I'm cold," I stuttered out, putting on a show of shivering.

He eyed me before going and throwing on another log. Opening a trunk by the door, he pulled out thick blanket. "Here."

I reached a hesitant hand out from my cocoon and grabbed the itchy wool. As I struggled to unfold it with one hand, Lorenzo's phone rang.

“Yeah?”

He gave me his back and walked straight out of the cabin.

I took it as an opportunity to pull the rag from my tits and tuck it into my coat pocket. With two layers of blankets, I was pretty sure that Lorenzo wasn't going to search me.

When he came back inside, he was smiling. “You should rest. We're meeting Luca in a few hours.”

The sky was dark with an impending snowstorm. “What time is it?”

“A little after one.”

I curled into a ball, my limbs finally starting to warm up.

Lorenzo put on a kettle and tapped away on his phone. There was no way I could let whatever he had planned happen.

Carefully, I unwrapped the razors in my pocket and pinched them between my thumb and forefinger. I closed my eyes and took deep, slow breaths to mimic falling asleep.

The kettle whistled, and Lorenzo let out a curse and poured water down the drain.

If this was going to work, Lorenzo had to believe I was truly asleep. It was hard to keep my face relaxed as he moved around the cabin, coming close to the bed and then backing away. There was no mistaking the crawl of his eyes on my skin.

The feeling in my legs was back. Unfortunately, that meant I could feel all the damage to my feet. I tensed and released

the muscles from my ass to my toes, ensuring I was ready to spring up.

I didn't know how much time had passed, but he answered his phone, and this time, he didn't step outside to take the call.

“Everything in place?”

He tapped his foot.

“Yeah, she's fine. Have the car ready to take us to the airfield. I don't want to waste any time getting to Mexico.”

Lorenzo sighed, and the couch creaked. I let a little more time pass, and when the cabin was completely silent, I started screaming at the top of my lungs, thrashing around the lumpy mattress.

“Sasha!” Lorenzo was immediately at my side.

I opened my eyes and struck out with the rusty razors, slicing a jagged line down his cheek to his neck. His hands flew to the wound, and he fell backward off the bed. Jumping up, I sprinted toward the door. A gun sat on top of the trunk, and I grabbed it but didn't stop moving. The sound of Lorenzo scrambling up from the floor and banging through the cabin urged me forward.

So much for a head start.

The cold slapped me in the face as I threw open the door. I flew down the stairs, my feet slapping against the rough wood before hitting the rocky driveway.

“Sasha!” Lorenzo shouted. A gunshot shattered the serene landscape, but I kept moving.

Looking behind me, I shot twice and heard a grunt. Sprinting into the tree line, the ground was softer, and I was able to get some distance between Lorenzo and me. His steps

were uneven as if he was limping, but I didn't risk looking back.

Branches whipped against my arms, snagging on my coat. Bushes tore up my tights, leaving my feet bare. Holding my arms up to block my face, I caught sight of a river through the trees. I could follow the river. While running along it would put me out in the open, it would keep me from running in circles.

Another gunshot went off, and I yelped, panting as I jumped over a log and into the untouched underbrush. It was all downhill to the riverbank, but I made a point to zig-zag around tree trunks. The adrenaline kept me moving despite the cold and physical pain.

The rush of the river muffled the sound of me trampling through the bushes, but it also made it harder to keep tabs on Lorenzo. As I reached the tree line at the riverbank, I glanced over my shoulder and caught sight of him tumbling down the hill.

I could barely take a full breath, my lungs aching with every inhale of frosty air. The years of dance did nothing to prepare me for this life-and-death run through the woods. My calves burned, but I kept pushing, extending my stride until it felt like my hips would come out of their sockets.

Ahead there was a wooden bridge, and I felt a spark of hope that there would be a road.

“Sasha!” Lorenzo bellowed as I scaled the hill up to the bridge.

My head popped over the ridge as a truck drove by. I lunged up the last few feet, scrambling on the cold mud while I waved my arm in the air. The two men in the cab were

decked out in hunting gear, and there was something vaguely familiar about them. Before I could place their faces, I was staring at the taillights.

“Fuck!” Limping my way up to the asphalt, I shoved my hair from my face, desperately looking for any hint of another car coming.

I’d just reached the other side of the bridge when Lorenzo surfaced on the road.

“Sasha, stop!” He pointed his gun at me, but his arm was unsteady.

“No!” I fired a shot at him and jumped behind the bridge’s structure.

A black SUV stopped abruptly behind Lorenzo, and as he turned to look, I stepped out and shot him in the stomach. He curled over, his dark eyes falling on me in disbelief. Stumbling toward the railing of the bridge, he steadied himself.

All the doors of the SUV flew open, and Luca jumped out of the passenger seat.

Lorenzo turned, leaning his back against the metal, a smirk on his face. “You’re—”

Luca didn’t let him finish. Raising a gun, he shot Lorenzo in the chest. The force of the bullet sent Lorenzo over the edge and into the icy water below.

I stumbled toward Luca, my eyes locked on the spot where Lorenzo was just standing.

“Baby?” Luca made it to my side in a matter of seconds. “Are you hurt?”

“No.” Every ache in my body roared to life as soon as the word left my mouth. “Yes.” I grabbed his arm and lifted a foot

so he could see my raw skin. “The woods . . . and running.” Panting, I limped toward the SUV.

Luca tsked and gently picked me up. “Let me.” He carried me to the backseat and set me inside. The heat was blasting, and my skin tingled painfully in response.

Behind us, a pickup truck stopped, and two men in hunting gear jumped out. “Where’s the body?” Alex Chronis asked as he scanned the road ahead.

“The river.” Frankie lifted his chin, leaning against the railing as he looked below.

The Chronis brothers, Frankie, and Marco gathered to discuss their next move.

Luca opened a first aid kit and gently cleaned the wounds on my feet. “I think these toes are broken.”

“I kicked the taillights.”

“Of course.” He focused on rubbing ointment.

“He was your brother.”

His hands slowed. “What?”

“Lorenzo was your brother. That’s why he was so-so—”

Luca’s eyes closed, and he nodded. “My fucking dad.”

“Are you okay?” I pulled my foot away and grabbed his hand.

“I will be.”

TWENTY-FOUR

“I’m exhausted.” I pulled my eyelashes off, contemplating whether it was worth doing my entire night routine.

Luca pulled his Waterpik from his mouth and straightened. “No one said we had to stay until the reception ended.”

“But I was having fun.” I gently wiped off my eyeliner, tossing the cotton rounds into the trash can. “And if you leave early, you miss that shift in the party when all the grandmas are gone, and suddenly everyone’s shit-faced and dry-humping on the dance floor.”

“Things really got out of hand.” Luca laughed and put toothpaste on his electric toothbrush. “I hate to say it, but the Chronises know how to have a good time.”

“Right?” I did a half-assed job with a makeup wipe and grabbed my toothbrush. “I think Tootsie and Zoe will be happy.”

Luca nodded, the buzz of his toothbrush echoing through the room. As I brushed, I watched Luca carefully spit, then rinse the sink. He wiped down his side of the counter, leaving the hand towel out for me to do the same when I was done.

“I’m going to go give Ryan a little extra food so he lets us sleep in tomorrow. Do you need anything from downstairs?”

“A glass of water? I need to take my vitamin and anti-nausea pill.” I put my toothbrush in my mouth and turned it on, and a little toothpaste dribbled out the corner of my mouth

Luca kissed my forehead, tactfully avoiding the whirling mess. “You got it.”

By the time he came back upstairs, I was sitting in bed with the pills in hand. “You’re a saint.” I took my pills and finished the rest of the water. “Did you get a chance to talk to your mom?”

Luca took the empty glass and set it on a coaster on the side table. “Yeah. She’s going to stay in Italy for another week.” He pulled back the comforter on his side of the bed and aggressively organized his pillows. “If I could bring my father back to life and strangle him myself, I would.” He sat facing me with his forehead scrunched up. “Mom’s a fucking mess, and there’s nothing any of us can do. Aunt Gina’s dead, Dad’s dead, Lorenzo’s dead. Anyone that could give her any answers is dead or keeping their mouths shut.”

“I can’t imagine.”

Luca sighed and laid his head in my lap. I ran my fingers through his hair, and he hummed.

“It’s obvious Lorenzo was conceived before my parents were married, but who knows how long the affair went on for.”

“Your mom said Dante stepped out on her a couple of times in their marriage, but with her sister? There’s no coming back from that.”

Luca’s body tensed, and he looked up at me with serious eyes.

“Baby?” I scratched his scalp.

“You know I would never do that to you, right?”

Giving his hair a tug, I smiled down at him. “I know.”

“I mean it. I’m nothing like my dad and brother.” He reached up, running his thumb along my jaw.

“No, you’re not. You love like Rosa. With your whole heart and beyond reason.”

Luca cupped the back of my neck and pulled me down for a kiss, folding me in an awkward position.

“Ouch,” I mumbled against his lips.

He laughed and rolled off my legs. “Sorry.”

I slid down, trying to get comfortable. “You know what I need? One of those gigantic pillow things. A pillow between the knees isn’t cutting it anymore.”

Without a word, Luca jumped up and left the room.

“Luca?”

A minute later, he returned carrying a U-shaped pillow that was as long as he was tall. “Adriana told me she got one of these at the end of her first trimester.”

“It’s fucking huge.”

“Get up.”

I hopped up and got out of the way.

Luca pulled the comforter back and tossed my pillows on the floor. “It will cradle you.” He arranged it carefully, taking a step back to make sure it was just right. Picking my pillows off the floor, he said, “As your stomach gets bigger, it will prop it up and support your back.” He frowned when he placed my pillows on top of the comfortable monstrosity. “That might be too many pillows.”

“No such thing.” I climbed into the middle of the U and fell back. “Okay. I might not need all of these.”

We laughed as I tossed the extra onto the floor and settled back.

“Oh, wow.” I rolled side to side. “This is amazing.”

Luca grinned and sat, grabbing one of my feet. “I’m glad you like it.”

I shut my eyes as he massaged my heels, erasing the pain from hours of dancing. His hands drifted up my calf, working the tight muscles until he delicately placed it on top of the pillow. He gave the other side the same treatment and set it on the other side of the U, leaving my legs spread.

“Are you ready for your Valentine’s Day present?” He kneeled between my feet, caressing my thighs.

“You mean this piece of bedding heaven isn’t it?”

Luca scoffed. “The pillow is a necessity to keep my beautiful wife comfortable.” He reached into his sweatpants pocket and held out a black velvet box. “This is because you deserve all the beautiful things. Happy Valentine’s Day, baby.”

Inside the box was a pair of earrings that matched the emerald necklace he gave me for Christmas when we first got together. “Oh, Luca. They’re beautiful.” I set the box on the side table and motioned for him to come closer.

Grinning, Luca crawled over me. “I’m glad you like them.” He pecked me a few times and rested back on his heels. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m feeling good.” I toyed with the hem of my nightie. “But I could feel better.”

Luca ran his blunt nails up my calves, stopping at my knees. “What can I do?” He circled my kneecaps.

“I have a few ideas.” I reached into the side table and my pink vibrator.

Luca grinned and held his hand out. “I’ll take it from here.”

I laughed and gave him my favorite toy. Seeing his large hand wrapped around the cute pink silicon was fascinating. The comfort with which he wielded it was so Luca.

He turned on the vibration and dragged the toy up my thigh and back down. I shimmied down my pillow mountain, eager to be closer.

Luca smiled down at me, tracing the edge of my panties until I was squirming and shoving the hem of my nightie up. I reached down, trying to direct his hand where I wanted it.

Of course, that didn’t fly, and he took the vibrator away.

Pushing up on my elbows, I watched as he ran the tip of the vibrator over his sweats. A blush spread across his chest and traveled up his neck.

He let out a shaky breath and pinned me with those deep brown eyes. “Hands to yourself.”

“Okay.” I pulled my nightie off and tossed it across the room. “Hands to myself.” Laying back, I caressed my breasts.

Luca’s throat bobbed, and he went back to teasing me with the vibrator. “Put your knees up.”

I did as he asked and was rewarded with direct stimulation to my clit.

“More,” I moaned out as I pinched my nipples.

Luca crawled closer and pulled my panties off. The cool air of the room hit my wet flesh. He dipped between my thighs, his warm tongue running across my pussy, teasing my opening before flicking my clit. A tingling sensation went through me, and my whole body shivered in delight. When he sat up, his eyes were half-lidded, and his lips were shiny with my arousal. “Delicious.”

A slow smile spread across his face as he put the vibrator back on my cunt. He reached into his boxer briefs and stroked himself as he played with me, inching the toy in and allowing it to do its job.

I pinched my tight nipples as my hips moved against the vibrations. It was amazing how different it felt to have Luca using ole faithful versus doing it myself. Having him between my legs gave me the added stimulation that only his presence could provide.

He turned up the setting, and I cried out. My fingers itched to touch him. My body ached to be filled by him.

“Luca, I need your cock.”

He shoved his sweats down and slid the toy from my pussy but kept the vibrations on my clit. Stroking himself, he lined up the head of his cock with my opening. In one easy move, he thrust inside, letting out a groan. “Fuck.” His hips rotated, hitting deeper. “The feels amazing.”

In no time, I felt the first waves of pleasure cresting over me. The vibration on my clit and Luca’s deep, slow fucking were the perfect combination to bring me to an earth-shattering climax.

I gasped, bowing off the pillows and grabbing hold of Luca. The vibrator wedged between us as he fell forward in a

desperate kiss. The muscles in his back jumped as I ran my fingers down his back, savoring the feeling of him being so close. He moaned into my mouth, coming in jerky thrusts.

We held each other as our heartbeats slowed, our kisses becoming less intense until they were just playful pecks at each other's cheeks.

Luca broke away, lifting his hips, and the buzzing toy fell to the bed. "I'll be right back." He pecked my lips and rolled away, hot pink vibrator in hand.

While he was gone, I peed, cleaned up, and dove under the covers.

Butt ass naked, Luca came back with the clean sex toy in hand and put it back in my side table. "Want some more water?"

"I'm okay."

Luca nodded and hopped into bed. For about five minutes, he struggled to get close to me, but the big-ass pillow wouldn't allow it. "Huh. Well, this fucking sucks."

I laughed and threw that leg of the pillow up so he could spoon me. "Better?"

He nuzzled my neck as his arms tightened around me. "Much. Are you ready for Bora Bora?"

"Yes," I groaned. "I can't wait to do nothing with you for two weeks."

"Heaven," he mumbled into my hair. A minute later, his breathing evened out, and his body went limp.

Unfortunately, the pregnancy had turned me into an insomniac. After making sure Luca was truly out, I slipped out of bed, threw on a robe, and went downstairs to the office.

Settling in to do a little work, I was surprised to see an email from my mom with the information for her therapist's office. I'd figured she'd forgotten.

“Alexandra Collins.”

I thanked mom for the info and filed it away for when we got back from our honeymoon. While my nightmares had become fewer and far between, they still happened. Add to that the anxiety of becoming a parent, and I figured a little professional help couldn't hurt.

Like I did every night, I searched the local news for any dead bodies found floating in the Missouri River. We'd never found Lorenzo's body, and he hadn't surfaced publicly, so I had the irrational fear that he was out there plotting his revenge.

The guys had combed the area, but the river had been at an all-time high, so there was a very good chance that Lorenzo had floated down to another body of water. As time passed, I became less worried about him showing up, but the lack of closure was unsettling.

Another thing to work through with a therapist.

Ryan strutted into the office, his tail flicking back and forth in annoyance. Ever since I'd found out I was pregnant, he'd been acting weird. Call it animal intuition, but the cat would not leave me alone. He'd even taken to sleeping in our room, much to Luca's annoyance.

He leapt up onto the desk and nudged my hand.

“Hey there, buddy. Are you having a good night?”

Ryan meowed and stretched out across the glossy top.

“That right there is why you’re banned from the office. You’re getting fur all over Luca’s pristine desk.” I absentmindedly pet him as I read over my morning to-do list before Bora Bora. “Do you think you can manage to not scratch Tommy while he cat sits you?”

I scratched behind Ryan’s ears, and he purred.

“I’ll take that as a yes.”

Tommy got lucky on New Year’s Day. Lorenzo had only hit him on the back of the head. Of course, that caused a pretty serious concussion that took him out of the boxing ring for two months. During his downtime, he’d become a staple around the house.

After finishing up the specs for an office renovation, I went back upstairs. Luca laid on his back, mouth hanging open, with the most ungodly noises coming from his throat. Careful as can be, I slipped back into bed, holding my breath until it was clear he wasn’t waking up.

I cuddled up to my new pillow, situating myself just right when Luca rolled over and threw his arm and leg over me.

“I love you, Sasha,” he slurred in my ear, his hand resting on my tit with a gentle squeeze.

“I love you too,” I whispered, shutting my eyes and letting the warmth of Luca’s body and love lull me into a blissful sleep.

EPILOGUE

“Are you ready to introduce Mia to the family?” Luca asked as he unbuckled our three-month-old from her car seat.

“No, but I figure it’ll be more fun than last year’s Christmas dinner.”

Luca laughed, cradling Mia to his chest. “Not too hard to accomplish.”

I grabbed my purse, the diaper bag, and a cooler full of breast milk. “We might’ve over-packed.”

“It’s her first night away from us.” Luca shrugged, closing the door on the family SUV.

Frankie walked out the front door with his arms extended. “Mia!”

“Hello to you too,” I grumbled, hefting the heavy bags over my shoulder.

Frankie didn’t spare me a glance as he carefully took our daughter from Luca. “Merry Christmas, beautiful girl.” He kissed her forehead, tucking her blanket tightly around her, and started toward the house.

“You think she’s here?” I asked Luca as Frankie disappeared inside.

Luca shook his head. “She just had the baby, and I get the feeling she’s not really sold on the family.”

“Fair.” I handed him the cooler, and we walked toward the house. “Aunt Gia’s going to try and get her to come to book club next month. She told me not to tell Frankie.”

Luca laughed, holding the door open for me. “I’m sure Frankie will just love that.”

“If he’s serious about her, she’ll have to spend time with the family eventually.”

“You’re right.” Luca lifted the cooler and nodded toward the back of the house. “I’m going to take this to the kitchen.”

“Okay. I’m going to drop this stuff in your room.”

When I made my way down to the party, I found Rosa showing Mia off to her sisters.

“Oh, Sasha. She’s beautiful,” Michael’s mother, Teresa, gushed as she gently caressed Mia’s hair.

“Thank you.”

“It’s the eyes,” Aunt Gia said with a nod. “They’re mesmerizing.”

“Just like my little Connor.” Aunt Teresa looked over to where Sarah and Michael sat on the floor by the window with their one-year-old, playing with some blocks. “I’m excited for the slumber party tonight.”

Rosa grinned, the grandmothers clearly in their element.

Mia’s green eyes met mine, and she gummed her fist.

“Are you okay holding her?” I asked Rosa.

She playfully glared at me, holding her granddaughter out of reach. “We’re doing just fine. Why don’t you go get a

drink?”

“Don’t mind if I do!”

It would be my first baby-free night since Mia was born, and I planned to take full advantage of it.

Gin and tonic in hand, I mingled with the Morettis. The wives were warm and welcoming, and the husbands smiled politely, giving their congratulations on Mia’s birth. The shift in the family’s attitude was refreshing, even if it came at the expense of murdering the old guard.

After putting Mia down for a nap, Luca escorted me to the dining room, and we claimed our seats at the head of the table.

The rest of the family filed in, and once they were seated, Luca stood. “Thank you all for being here to celebrate what has been an amazing year. From record-breaking profits to family additions, the Morettis have been blessed beyond measure.

“Looking around this room, I’m filled with pride.” He looked down at me with a smile. “I’m not much of a public speaker—” Light-hearted laughter filled the room. “So, I’ll keep this brief. I want to thank you all for your dedication and loyalty as we navigated through the changes of the last year. Now, let’s pray and eat this amazing meal Loretta has made for us.”

Loretta beamed from the doorway, and Marco gave her a disinterested look.

“Don’t be an asshole,” Tootsie muttered, just loud enough for those of us at the head of the table to hear.

Zoe and I shared an amused look as the cousins bickered quietly.

Dinner was delicious, and we had a good time. The only thing that could've improved the night was if Adriana and Dante had made it. Unfortunately, they were snowed in at O'Hare. Plans were being made for them to spend Christmas Day with us, and Adriana planned on bringing Dr. Wilson.

Say what you want, but that man had balls.

After the extended family left, Rosa and Marco walked us to the door. I held Mia to my chest, starting to regret that I agreed to let her sleep over at Rosa's. Kissing her chubby cheeks, tears filled my eyes. With a laugh, I passed her to Luca. "I didn't think I'd be weepy about leaving her." I wiped under my eyes, careful not to smear my makeup.

"It's totally normal." Rosa smiled.

Luca cleared his throat, and we all turned to him and caught him whispering to Mia, his eyes glassy.

"Not you too." I laughed, rubbing his arm.

"She's so little," he said, hugging her to his chest.

"You've got nothing to worry about." Rosa reached for Mia, and Luca reluctantly handed her over.

"I want pictures," Luca demanded as he straightened his cuffs.

"Every hour." Rosa's smile grew as she looked down at her granddaughter. "Tell Mom and Dad we're going to have a good time."

"If she's too much, just call us, and we can come get her," I offered, worried that the two a.m. feeding might make Rosa regret offering to babysit.

"We'll be fine. Now get out of here before you're late."

I checked my phone. “We better go. Malcolm’s texted me five times.”

We said our goodbyes, giving Mia one more kiss, and rushed to Moretti’s.

“You’re late,” Malcolm said as he wrestled with a bouquet of roses.

“Sorry! Is everything ready?” I tossed my coat into the office and followed him to the swinging door.

“Yes. Her parents snuck in and are at the bar. Jazz, Imani, Sarah, Miranda, Scott, and Axel are waiting out front. My parents are sitting in the corner. We were just waiting for you.”

I shot a text to our friends to come in and smiled. “Well then, let’s do this!”

Malcolm cleared his throat, moving the bouquet into his other hand. “Okay. Wish me luck.”

“You don’t need it.” I patted his back and followed him into the dining room, hanging back so Ashley wouldn’t notice me.

“Malcolm?” Ashley eyed the roses with a confused smile on her face.

“Ashley Brooks—” He fell to one knee, and the whole restaurant froze. “For years, I’ve loved you. As my best friend, as my girlfriend, and now, I hope you’ll do me the honor of allowing me to love you as my wife.” He popped open a ring box. “Will you marry me?”

Tears rolled down Ashley’s face as she nodded. “Yes, Malcolm. Absolutely.”

The room erupted in cheers, and Malcolm let out a breath, dropping the bouquet of roses to the floor and scooping her up

into his arms. Her feet dangled in the air as he kissed the ever-loving hell out of her.

The kiss went on so long that Mr. Brooks said, “Save some for the wedding.” And everyone laughed.

Malcolm set her down, wiping the tears from under her eyes with his thumbs as she held his wrists and smiled up at him, her dimples on full display.

“Can I have my ring?” She asked, holding out her hand.

“Oh, yeah.” He took the ring from the box and slid it on, kissing the diamond as it sat on her finger.

Ashley stared down at her hand with a dreamy smile on her face.

“Congratulations!” Maxine Brooks had waited long enough to hug her daughter and future son-in-law. The Bellos filed in after the Brookses, giving heartfelt congratulations and hugs.

Once the family had their turn, Ashley noticed me and screeched, rushing over to me. “I’m engaged!” She flashed her ring and threw her arms around me.

“I know!” I squeezed her tightly, closing my eyes to enjoy the moment a bit longer. My best friend deserved the greatest things in life, and it looked like she was getting them.

Before long, all our friends had swarmed us, and the champagne had circulated. Moretti’s became a late-night party spot.

Ashley’s sorority sisters and more of the future bride and groom’s families showed up.

Luca came up behind me while I was chatting with Sarah and wrapped his arms around me. “I want to show you

something,” he whispered in my ear, placing a kiss on my neck.

“Excuse me, I need to—”

Sarah laughed and shoved us away, her eyes already scanning the room for her husband.

Luca pulled me through the now clean and empty kitchen to the office. He shut the door behind us and leaned against it.

“This office gets worse every time I see it.” I gently pushed aside a stack of blank order forms and wiggled up onto the desk.

“Marco’s not one for organization.”

“Hard to organize when there’s no space.”

Luca flipped the lock and sauntered toward me. “You look sensational tonight.”

“Thank you. I’m finally starting to feel a little bit more like myself.”

Three months post-partum, and things were starting to settle into a new normal. The pregnancy gave me new stretch marks and made my boobs a wild shape, but it was completely worth it to have my little Mia.

It didn’t hurt that Luca took every opportunity to worship my new body.

He nudged my legs open and settled between my thighs. “You know, I always wanted to have sex in here.”

I wrapped my arms around his neck. “Oh yeah? Is this another teen Luca fantasy?”

He nodded, brushing his lips against mine. “I may never get to be the chef here, but I can fuck my wife in the office.”

I smiled up at him and brought his mouth down to mine in a punishing kiss. His hands pulled the front of my dress down, careful with my sensitive nipples as he caressed my breasts. Moaning into his mouth, I undid his belt and unzipped his zipper. He tilted his hips to give me more access, but it wasn't enough.

I shoved him back and fell to my knees as I yanked his pants down. His cock sprung free. Arching an eyebrow at him, I grinned, "No boxers?"

He shrugged and gathered my hair in his hands, guiding my mouth to the head of his dick. "Open."

My lips parted, and he thrust into my mouth, hitting the back of my throat. I gagged, and he pulled back, letting me adjust before he did it again. His hands in my hair tightened as he fucked my mouth, taking what he wanted as he looked down at me with half-lidded eyes and parted lips.

I held on to his thighs, my nails sinking in as I focused on breathing. My eyes watered, and spit ran out of the corner of my mouth as he grunted in pleasure.

He abruptly pulled out, yanking my head up slightly, bringing my chest level with his dick. "I want to fuck your tits." His throat bobbed as I held them around his cock.

Luca pulled my hair, and I arched my back as he thrust into my chest. He moaned and did it again, his cock sliding between my tits easily.

"Come on me," I moaned out, my scalp burning.

He shook his head and pulled me to my feet before bending me over the desk, pressing my face against the order forms.

Holding me down, he flipped the skirt of my dress up and ripped down my tights. “No panties?” His hand landed hard against my ass.

“Great minds,” I mumbled into the paper, my mouth too smushed to form complete words.

Arching my back, Luca grunted, and I knew he had caught sight of my little surprise. He ran a finger over the bejeweled butt plug, turning it until I moaned out. “Fuck.” His fingers gripped my fat ass and spread the cheeks, and he hummed. “Always begging. Look at your cunt dripping for me.”

He ran a finger over me, and I squirmed. Without further warning, he slammed into me, grinding until I scrambled to hold on to the desk, the feeling too much.

“You’re so tight,” He growled, slapping my ass and sending a flutter through my pussy. He started to thrust, his hand coming down when I least expected it, making everything clench. I felt so full, knowing full well I wouldn’t last long.

“I assume you have lube. You wouldn’t make your ass this pretty if you didn’t want me to fuck it.”

I groaned at his words and pointed a shaky finger at my coat sitting in the chair.

Luca thrust deeply and reached for it. As he checked the pockets, he rotated his hips, sending shock waves through my body.

I heard the cap open, and Luca pulled out of me, leaving me bereft. The butt plug was gently removed, and I went from feeling wonderfully full to empty. Cool liquid spilled down my crack, and Luca massaged my asshole, dipping in a finger,

then two, then three, stretching me. I pushed back against his hand, moaning, aching for more.

He removed his fingers and replaced them with the slick tip of his cock. Easing in the head, we both groaned, and I shoved my ass back. After a few thrusts, his hips met my backside, and he cursed, slapping my ass. I clenched around him, and he choked.

Rocking into me at an easy pace, he wrapped his clean hand around me and stroked my clit, eventually sliding three fingers into my pussy, keeping his palm pressed to my mound.

I gasped as he moved his hand in time with his hips, never giving me a moment to breathe.

My limbs turned to jelly as I came, shouting his name. Luca cursed behind me, pulling out and coming all over my ass. He fell back in a chair, heaving deep breaths.

“You okay?” he croaked out.

“Mhm,” I said into the weekly schedule.

“You going to stand up?”

“Nah. I live here now.”

Thank you for reading Sasha and the Heir, Book 3 in The Moretti Family Series.

Keep your eyes peeled for Book 4 in the series featuring a certain couple on the run!

Want to get sneak peeks, free short stories, and stay up to date on new releases? [Join Stephanie's mailing list!](#)

Acknowledgments

I want to thank all the readers that have made it through the Sasha and Luca trilogy. When I started this series, I had no idea if anyone would want to read about my fat heroine and her cinnamon roll mobster, but here you are!

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On to the next!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

After becoming something of a romance fiend, Stephanie Kazowz decided to try her hand at writing some good old-fashioned love stories. Never one to narrow her focus, she plans to write the banging multiverse, weaving as many tropes and subgenres together as her smut-loving heart can handle—and it can handle a lot.

Stephanie lives in St. Louis, Missouri, with her husband, two bonkers babies, two codependent dogs, and two cats who are perpetually staring at her like she betrayed them by bringing the motley group home.

