A romantic close-up of a man and a woman about to kiss. The woman has long, wavy brown hair and is wearing a white top. The man is shirtless, has a beard, and is wearing blue jeans. They are both looking at each other with soft expressions. The background is dark and moody.

SCARED
TO Love

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
SIOBHAN DAVIS

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NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

This is an interconnected, stand-alone, friends-to-lovers romance set in the same world as *Condemned to Love* and *Forbidden to Love*. While you don't have to read those titles to enjoy this book, as it focuses on a new couple, it is highly recommended as there are some spoilers to the earlier books contained in *Scared to Love* and there will be minor scenes that might be confusing for new readers.

For those readers who have read CTL and FTL, this story occurs, in parts, across the same timeline, and then it picks up where things were left in *Forbidden to Love*.

This is a dark mafia romance with mature themes and content. Some scenes may be triggering. I can't be specific without ruining the story. If you are concerned about a particular trigger, please email me – siobhan@siobhandavis.com

Thank you for downloading my book, and I hope you enjoy it.

PROLOGUE

SERENA – CHICAGO

“Yes, whore. Just like that.” Alfredo grunts as he slams his vile cock inside the busty blonde. The woman is bent over a table in the unoccupied small ballroom of the hotel where my father is hosting my mother’s annual charity gala. For a second, I think it’s my sister Saskia—until she angles her head and I see her features more clearly. I have never seen her before, and I’m pretty sure she isn’t attending the gala. Which means my husband arranged for her to meet him here.

Pivoting his hips, he continues thrusting into her as he holds her body down on the table with a firm hand. She moans and writhes underneath him, and she’s either a fantastic actress or he actually manages to make it good for her.

I wouldn’t know.

Because sex with Alfredo is a torturous chore and never pleasurable for me.

I feel nothing as I watch my husband fuck another woman. He doesn’t know I’m here because the door is only open a fraction, which is enough for me to see what’s going down. He wouldn’t care if he did notice me. There have been occasions when he’s tied me to a chair and forced me to watch him screw other women.

When he disappeared from our table in the main ballroom, I knew he had either left to attend to Outfit business or to get up to no good with one of his many whores. Considering the rest of the dons were still in the room, I figured it was the latter, and my suspicions were confirmed when I discovered

him having sex with a woman young enough to be his daughter.

Alfredo Gifoli disgusts me more and more with every passing day, and if it wasn't for my children, I would have checked out of this life a long time ago.

Elisa and Romeo give me the strength to go on because I would never leave my kids with that bastard who fathered them. So, I put up with his abusive treatment and do what I can to shield my children from the truth of who their papa is.

Quietly, I close the door, drawing a deep breath as I head toward the bathroom to compose myself. Sierra would take one look at my face and know something is wrong. My younger sister has been noticing the bruises lately, and she hasn't hidden her disdain for my husband.

I can't drag her into this because I'm fearful what Alfredo would do if he even suspected Sierra knew the truth of our marriage. It's not like we could rely on our father to protect us. He was the monster who sold me to his best friend in an arranged marriage when I was twenty-three and Alfredo was forty-nine.

Alfredo's cruel treatment began the night of our wedding, and at first, I refused to believe my father knew this was the kind of man he had entrusted me to.

I'm no longer so naïve.

My father knew. He knew how much of a bastard Alfredo is. And he still gave me to him, knowing what he would do.

I hate Joseph Lawson as much as I hate Alfredo Gifoli.

I hope, when their time comes, they both rot in hell.

Rounding the corner, I slam into a solid wall of muscle, and I lose my balance. Teetering on my high stilettos, I drop my purse, and my arms flail about as I struggle to remain upright.

"Woah," a man with a familiar deep voice says as his arms wrap around my back, halting my fall.

Lifting my head, I suck in a gasp as I stare into Alesso's warm chocolaty-brown eyes. Concern is etched upon his face as he stares at me. "Sorry about that. Are you okay?" Keeping ahold of me, he bends down and swipes my purse off the floor, setting the strap back on my shoulder.

"I'm fine," I rasp, and it's no lie. My skin is on fire where his large, warm palm resides on my lower back, and I feel his touch even through the material of my dress. I'm suddenly conscious of how closely we are pressed together, and intense need infiltrates my body, causing a delicious coiling sensation to swirl in my tummy and a throbbing ache to take up residence in my panties. A flush blossoms in my chest, creeping up my neck and on to my cheeks as we stare at one another, neither of us making a move to separate. "I wasn't watching where I was going. It's my fault," I say, drowning in the decadent depths of his stunning eyes.

Alessandro is gorgeous. He's tall, broad, and muscular with dark-brown hair and matching eyes, a strong Roman nose, olive skin, and a stylish layer of stubble on his chin and cheeks. I have felt an attraction simmering between us from the moment I met him—when Sierra introduced him as her new bodyguard. He's her date tonight, so I should not be entertaining the thoughts I'm entertaining right now. Except I know my sister isn't interested in him like that. She has told me explicitly, and I know she only brought him tonight to avoid our father finding her a date.

Visions of Alfredo fucking that woman resurrect in my mind, and instead of my usual numbness, I'm angry. Fuck him. Why does he get to cheat on me and I'm expected to be the dutiful, loyal mafia wife who turns a blind eye to his cruelty and his constant whoring? I have never taken anything for myself, and right now, I want to kiss this man. Perhaps it's the champagne sluicing through my veins, or a sudden reckless urge to throw caution to the wind, but I am braver than I ever thought myself possible.

Without stopping to think about it a second longer, I slide my hands up Alesso's impressive chest and tip my head up as I slant my mouth over his. My hands land on his shoulders as I

kiss him, and a delicious tremor ghosts over my skin at the feel of his lush mouth underneath mine.

He responds immediately, kissing me back without hesitation as he simultaneously moves us over behind the pillar, hiding us from view. The hand on my back presses me into his body, and his other hand clasps the nape of my neck, tilting my head to the side so he can deepen the kiss.

I fall into him, melting against his body and his warm lips. Readily opening my mouth so his tongue can slip inside. We groan as our tongues perform a sensual dance while our kissing grows more frantic.

I am on fire.

Every single nerve ending and cell in my body has awoken as if I've been sleeping my way through life up to this point. Hormones are going crazy inside me as my body responds to his touch in a way it hasn't responded to any touch before. Sliding one hand down from his shoulders, I explore the hard muscles of his back through his shirt. My fingers sweep lower until I'm grabbing his ass and thrusting him against me, needing him to quench this intoxicating lust taking control of my body.

I'm aching down below. My pussy is pulsing and throbbing with potent need.

Lifting one leg, I wrap it around his outer thigh, grinding against his erection and wishing I wasn't wearing this heavily layered designer gown so I could feel his hardness pressing against me.

He groans into my mouth as he palms my ass, squeezing and kneading, and I rock my hips against him, ready to drag him into a room and have my wicked way with him.

The sound of approaching footsteps brings us crashing back to reality with a jolt. Our lips part as Alesso reacts fast, moving us back a few steps and spinning me around so my spine is pressed against the wall. Covering me with his body, he shields me from view. "Don't move," he whispers as he presses his forehead to mine. His minty breath coasts over my

face, and our chests heave in sync as we gradually come down from our high.

“I want your cunt again later,” my husband says as he passes by, presumably with his fuck buddy in tow.

“That can be arranged,” the woman says in a girlish voice before giggling. “What about your wife?”

“What about her?” Alfredo says. “I could bring you home and fuck you in front of her, and she’d say nothing because she knows her place.”

The girl says something in reply, but they have moved too far away now to hear.

My cheeks burn with humiliation. I’m so embarrassed Alesso heard that.

“Serena.” Removing his forehead from mine, he tips my chin up with his finger. Anger commingles with sympathy on his face, and I hate it.

I hate to be pitied.

I hate that I’m so fucking weak I’ve become a perpetual object of pity.

“He’s a fucking prick,” he says, clasping my face. His fingers sweep over my heated cheeks. “Don’t be ashamed. That is all on him. Not you.” He brushes his lips against mine in an agonizingly slow fashion. “He’s an idiot for not appreciating what he has.” He trails a line of kisses from my mouth, across my cheek, and to my ear. I shiver as his lips graze my earlobe, and he gently sucks on the sensitive skin just under my ear. “You are beautiful, Serena. Inside and out.”

Tears prick my eyes because no one has ever said anything like that to me before or made me feel more cherished. In just a few moments, Alessandro has made me feel worthy and desirable, and he can’t know how much that means to me. “Thank you,” I whisper, running my hands through his hair.

“You don’t need to thank me for speaking the truth,” he says, straightening up and smiling at me. “And I wanted to kiss you.” Taking my hands, he brings them to his mouth,

skimming his lips against my knuckles. “I have wanted to kiss you from the moment we met.”

“You have?” Surprise is evident in my tone.

He nods, smiling again, and I bask in the glow emanating from his face. “I know you felt the attraction too. I saw it in the way you looked at me.”

I guess I need to work on my poker face. “It can’t go anywhere,” I say, hating to admit it. “I wish it could. I wish I was single and I could explore this connection we have, but I’m not. I’m married, and Alfredo would kill you if he ever found out what just transpired.” He would see it as a mark of disrespect and waste no time taking Alesso out. That would be a pretty shitty way to repay him for the hottest make-out session of my life.

“He could try,” Alesso growls, a muscle popping in his jaw. “But you’re right. Us starting something would not be wise.” He steps back, and I instantly miss his warmth and his touch.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper.

He shakes his head. “Don’t apologize. I don’t regret what happened and...I’m here for you. If you need me, for anything, Serena, you only have to ask. You have my number. Use it.”

I open my mouth to respond when we are interrupted again.

“There you are,” a tall good-looking man says, striding up to us. I spotted him earlier. He came with Bennett Mazzone. Tonight, I discovered my sister’s ex-boyfriend is the acting don of the Mazzone *famiglia*, one of the five New York mafia families. This man must be an underboss, like my husband, or maybe he’s Ben’s *consigliere*. The man looks at me, nodding respectfully. “Mrs. Gifoli.” He extends his arm, gripping my hand in a firm handshake. “I’m Leonardo Messina.”

“Hello.” I flash him a soft smile. “It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“The pleasure is all mine.” His gaze bounces between me and Alesso, a frown appearing on his brow. “I need a word in private,” he says, eyeballing Alessandro.

Alesso bobs his head before turning to face me. “Will you be okay?”

“I’m fine. I should get back. Sierra is probably looking for me.”

“Remember what I said,” he says before spinning on his heel and walking off with Leonardo. Their heads are bent close together in conversation as they stride in the direction of the main lobby.

Composing myself, I forget about visiting the bathroom and head toward the ballroom, wondering how Leonardo knows Alesso and what business they need to discuss.

SERENA – CONNECTICUT

3 months later

“**B**ye, Mommy.” Elisa kisses my cheek. “Don’t worry about Romeo. He always stops crying after you leave.” Elisa is eight going on eighty sometimes, and I worry that I haven’t done enough to shelter my daughter. She shouldn’t be reassuring me. That’s my role. One I feel I’m failing at these past six weeks since Alfredo was killed during the mass shoot-out at the New York hotel where Ben and Saskia’s fake engagement party took place.

I hug my daughter close. “Your brother is a sensitive soul, but he’ll be fine. I get sad thinking of him crying, but I’ll be okay too. You don’t need to worry.” Though it kills me to leave Romeo at the school gate each morning, watching tears roll down his handsome little face, I know he will adjust in time. It helps that Rowan goes to this school too, and while it’s a new experience for all the kids, Romeo has had the hardest time settling in.

He misses Chicago and our old home. Misses his school and the friends he made there. And he cries for his grandma, because Mom didn’t relocate to Greenwich with Sierra and me, and she’s busy now that she’s taken back control of Lawson Pharma, the pharmaceutical company that’s been in her family for generations.

It’s so hard to explain it all to a four-year-old. All he knows is his papa is dead and we now live with Auntie Sierra, her new husband Ben, and Rowan. Rowan is Ben and Sierra’s

five-year-old son, and he's Romeo's best friend as well as his cousin. Having him here has been a godsend. Especially in the early days when Romeo cried himself to sleep every night, missing his papa.

"Love you, Mom." Elisa hugs me one final time before slipping out of our embrace.

"Love you too."

"Bye, Auntie Sierra." She waves at my sister before turning her head and smiling at the two men standing guard behind us. "Bye, Alesso. Bye, Frank."

Frank nods. Alesso waves, his face briefly betraying emotion before he dons his usual *mafioso* mask. Discovering he is a made man, and one of Ben's *soldati*, was a massive shock. I'm equally surprised he made out with me at the ball. I thought, at the time, he wasn't aware of who Alfredo was and he didn't understand the risks. But he did. And he still kissed me. I'm not sure what to make of it.

"Have a good day, sweetie." Sierra waggles her fingers at my daughter, and I'm wearing a proud smile as I watch Elisa thrust her shoulders back, lift her head, and walk confidently through the gate and up the steps leading to the private school in downtown Greenwich.

"You are raising one confident little girl there," Sierra says, looping her arm through mine.

"I am in awe of her inner strength," I admit. "I've been a basket case these past six weeks, and she has taken it in stride. It concerns me. I think she's hiding her feelings because she doesn't want to burden me."

I know from personal experience that bottling all your feelings up inside can have disastrous long-term consequences. I haven't even begun to deal with mine. I don't want my daughter suffering in silence because she thinks she's protecting me. It's my job to protect her, and I need to do better.

"Do you want me to talk to her?" Sierra asks as we begin walking. "If she is trying to protect you, she might open up to

me.”

Frank retreats to his car, where he will wait outside the school until the kids are done for the day. Technically, he is Rowan’s bodyguard, but he watches my children too, and I’m grateful.

After everything that went down in Chicago, I am nervous. I’m scared of retaliation and wondering what it means for our future now my husband is dead. Although Ben is president of The Commission—the governing body that aims to unite all Italian American *mafioso* in the US—and he is ultimately in charge of what happens to The Outfit in Chicago, I still don’t know what it means for me. Especially with the Sicilian family connection.

“There is no harm in trying. Thanks.”

“I love my niece and nephew, and I feel an additional responsibility toward them now we are all living under one roof,” Sierra says as we walk toward the parking lot with Alesso in tow.

“One very big roof,” I joke, but it’s the truth. Ben bought a large plot of land in Connecticut years before he reconnected with Sierra, or knew about Rowan, and he built a massive house on the grounds. The property boasts a few luxurious guesthouses as well as a house where the security team lives. Ben built a large playground in preparation for Rowan living there one day. There are walking and biking trails in and out of the large, wooded area at the back of the grounds, a basketball court, and a tennis court. Inside, there is an Olympic-sized swimming pool, a modern gym with all manner of weights and machines, a home theater resplendent with a popcorn machine and soda counter, and a ginormous kids’ playroom.

We live in our own private rooms in the west wing while Sierra and her family live in the east wing. The second floor of the property houses the staff accommodation, but it’s largely unoccupied because this house is just that big.

“Let’s grab a coffee,” Sierra suggests as we approach her SUV.

“I thought Ben didn’t want us socializing in the town.”

“He’d prefer if we didn’t. Keeping a low profile is key, and he doesn’t want anyone to know where the house is, for security reasons. But we can’t isolate ourselves completely from the community. The kids go to school here now, and I’ll be opening my new holistic center in a few months. We can’t hide completely. At least this way, we appear less mysterious, and that should garner less interest than if we isolate fully.”

The biggest smile graces her mouth as she utters the words. After they got married, Ben surprised her with a building in the town. He purchased it so she could open her own practice. Sierra is a qualified acupuncturist, and she plans on furthering her studies in due course. For now, she is busy pulling a team together to remodel the premises so it suits her needs. Then, she’ll begin recruiting other alternative therapists to work with her because she wants to provide a whole range of services to the local community.

I’m happy for my sister, but it only serves to highlight how much I lack purpose in my life.

“Serena?”

I blink, snapping out of my head. “Sorry. What did you say?” Out of the corner of my eye, I notice Alesso frowning as he stares at me. As Sierra’s bodyguard, he goes with her everywhere, and there is no avoiding him, even if I wanted to. I catch him watching me a lot, and I wonder if he thinks back to the night of the gala ball as much as I do. I know it’s not healthy, but I can’t stop reliving the feel of his hot mouth against mine and remembering how incredible his hands felt touching my body.

“Coffee?” Sierra repeats.

I nod as I open the passenger door of her luxury, armored SUV. “Sure. Sounds good.”

“Have you given any more thought to NYU?” my sister asks when we are settled at a small table in the back of the cozy coffee shop, nursing cappuccinos.

“Not much.” I dump a spoonful of sugar in my drink and stir it. “The kids are my priority right now. Romeo is still having nightmares and talking incessantly about his dad.”

“What have you told him?”

“That God needed his papa and now he’s guarding us from heaven.” I snort out a harsh laugh. “It’s a miracle I don’t choke on the words, but he can’t know the truth. At least, not until he is older.”

Sierra nods as she licks the back of her spoon. “No good will come from revealing everything now.”

“I dread the day when I have to tell him how it went down because it will shatter everything he believes he knows about his father.” I rub at my arm, right in the spot where I was shot. It still aches on odd days, especially when it rains for some weird reason. My finger glides over the puckered, indented mark on my skin that serves as a constant reminder of how close I was to death. “There’s no way that monster is in heaven. I hope he’s being tortured in the darkest, most depraved pits of hell.”

“Me too. He deserves to suffer for everything he put you through. I still can’t believe he used you as a human shield to try to get out of that hotel alive.”

After things turned to shit at the party when my father was killed, the *soldati* belonging to The Outfit were split in two—some fighting the New York families while others, who were in the know, joined forces with them. Alfredo knew his days were numbered and he tried to make his escape by using me to fend off the incoming bullets. His final act spoke volumes about the type of man he was. He died without honor, and there was never a more deserving man.

“I still can’t believe what Dad and Saskia did to you,” I say. They betrayed Sierra and Ben in the worst way, and they died for their sins.

Karma kicked butt that day.

I hated my father for many things but mostly for forcing me into marriage with his despicable best friend. And when I found out what Saskia had done to me, I turned my back on her and cut her out of my life, as much as I could.

I can't say I have shed any tears for either of them, but I am sad Saskia's life ended up like this.

However, they both got what was coming to them.

Silence descends as we get lost in our thoughts. I sip my coffee to ward off the full-body shiver I sense coming on. It's the same every time I think back to that night. To how close I came to exiting this life. I shudder at the thought of my kids being left with Alfredo. If Alesso hadn't killed my husband, that is the reality that would most likely exist. I owe him so much, and I don't know how I will ever repay him.

"Our family is fucked up," Sierra says, eyeing me over the rim of her mug. "But the best parts survived, and this is a new beginning. A new chapter." She slides her hand across the table, resting it on mine. "I know it's so much harder for you, Rena. Like I know you still haven't told me everything, and that's okay." She rushes to reassure me. "But I'm here for you. I'm ready whenever you want to tell me the rest, and you will get through this. At least you are free of that asshole now. He's dead, and he can't hurt you anymore."

I wish that were the truth. But I'm still trapped in a vicious cycle that began the first day he raised his hand to me. Nine years of emotional, psychological, and physical abuse tear your self-confidence to shreds, leaving you a shadow of your former self. I can't even remember who I was before I became this shell of a person.

I wish I was free, but the truth is, I'm still a prisoner to the man who shattered my soul. The legacy he left behind can't be undone overnight, and I have never felt more frightened, more alone, or more lost.

“I see you’re perfecting your stalking skills,” Brando says, materializing at my side. I’m outside watching the kids play on the playground while Sierra, Serena, and Natalia—Ben’s sister—take a stroll in the near distance. Ben’s property has tons of walking trails, and the girls make the most of them.

I flip him the bird as I reluctantly drag my gaze from Serena.

“Kissed her again?” he asks, his lips curving into a smirk.

“I told you that was a onetime thing, and for the millionth time, I wish I’d never confided in you.”

Brando slaps a hand over his chest. “You wound me. Deeply.”

I grin, nudging his shoulder. “You’re such an idiot.”

“That, my friend, is the very definition of you.” He casts his glance over my head in the direction of the women. “She’s single now. Why haven’t you made a move?”

There are a bunch of reasons why I haven’t, but it’s not something I want to discuss with anyone. “It’s only been six weeks since that asshole she was married to died. Rena’s got a lot on her plate. She doesn’t need any additional complications.” As much as I’d love to complicate her life, I can see how badly she’s floundering.

“It’s Rena now, huh?” He flashes me another smirk, and I briefly consider punching him, purely to wipe it off his face.

“We’re friends.” I shrug. “That’s what her friends call her.”

“You could do the whole friends-with-benefits thing,” he adds, still wearing the smug grin. “Nothing too complicated about that.”

“Are you kidding me? Friends having sex is as complicated as it gets.” Besides, Serena is skittish as fuck, and I’ve noticed how she sometimes flinches when touched. She’s relaxed when Sierra or Natalia hugs her, but I’ve seen how jumpy she is if Ben or Leo gets close, and I have purposely kept a physical distance between us so as not to scare her.

I know she married that bastard Gifoli when she was twenty-three. It’s tradition for *mafioso* wives to be virgins upon marriage, so I’m guessing her only sexual experience was with her husband. I can’t imagine he was gentle with her or cared enough to attend to her needs. If Rena is anxious when any male gets close, I can only imagine how closed off she would be to intimate contact. Even if she seemed to enjoy our make out session that one time, the last thing she needs is me hitting on her and making her uncomfortable. “Besides, I like her for way more than her looks and the obvious chemistry we share. A guy can like a woman without wanting to get her into bed.”

Brando bursts out laughing. “Are you trying to convince me or yourself?”

Checking the kids aren’t looking, I flip him off again. “I like spending time with her. We are getting to know one another slowly, and I’m fine with that. If it develops into more over time, I wouldn’t say no, but I have no expectations either.”

Finally, he loses the grin, angling his head as he stares at me. “You really like her.”

I drill him with a look, spotting something out of the corner of my eye before I respond. I shake my head at Rowan as he lowers himself onto the top of the slide on his stomach. Frank is halfway up the ladder to stop the little daredevil. The last time he slid on his stomach, he flew off the end and bumped the side of his head on the edge of the climbing frame.

He had a goose egg the size of a golf ball for days after. Frank and I take our bodyguard roles seriously, and anyone getting hurt on our watch is an epic fail. Ben's little guy is *not* getting injured again.

I return my gaze to Brando when Frank reaches Rowan, forcing him to sit up on the slide. "I do. I like her."

"Good for you, man." He thumps me in the arm. "I never thought I'd see the day you gave up your one-night-stands for a hot, older woman, but if she makes you happy, I say go for it."

"She's not that much older," I grumble. "Six years is nothing."

He holds up his palms. "I meant that sincerely, and there's no judgment here."

"This is a pointless conversation. We're *friends*. Stop stirring shit." Out of the corner of my eye, I spot Ben and Leo exiting the side of the house. "What are you doing here, anyway?" I ask. Brando isn't on the security detail at the house or on the bodyguard team, so it's unusual to see him at the house.

A proud smile lights up his face. "Ben asked me to drop by. He just made me capo."

"No shit?" I clamp a hand on his shoulder. "Congrats, man. That is amazing news. You deserve it." Brando has been a loyal *soldato* since he turned eighteen. He was close with Mateo, the half-brother Ben never met because Mateo was gunned down when he was twenty-two. He is also close with Leo, Ben's underboss, so I'm surprised his promotion has taken this long.

Brando had to take a couple of years off a few years back, and I imagine that delayed his promotion. I have no idea why Brando needed the time off, and while we are friends, we don't have that kind of relationship. He didn't volunteer the information, and I didn't pry. Anyway, it wouldn't have looked good for Ben to make him a capo before letting him take some

personal time, something that is not usually done within *la famiglia*.

But Ben is shaping a new world order. Determined to do things differently. Angelo Mazzone passed recently, and Ben is now the official Mazzone don. He's held the role for years in an unofficial capacity because Angelo was ill with cancer, something we kept quiet to keep enemy threats at bay. But Ben has been in charge the entire time in everything but name. The men respect him, and the official transition has been smooth.

Our soldiers no longer sell product on the streets or extort money the old-fashioned way. Through Caltime Holdings—the business enterprise Ben spearheads—he has legitimized a lot of the operation. The sleazy clubs have been replaced with high-end sex clubs boasting VIP clientele. We still deal in drugs, but they are only supplied to VIP clients through the club network, and we no longer have bodies selling to kids on the streets. Ben's acquisition of key tech companies has enabled him to digitize a lot of the business. Now security is provided through online support services, protecting local businesses from hacking and online fraud, and he created an internal team to develop tools to aid us in the field.

All made men within the Mazzone *famiglia* have a locator chip in their arms, and Ben runs a strict no-drugs policy with random drug testing. His clubs, casinos, and construction sites wash money from the illegal operations, while a lot of his *soldati* are hired through one of his private security firms and not of Italian American descent, like me.

“Thanks. The timing couldn't be more perfect,” Brando says.

I arch a brow, and he grins again. “I'm going to propose to Marlena.”

My brows climb to my hairline. “Didn't see that coming, but congrats. And good luck.” I don't know the full story on his relationship, because Brando is as guarded as me when it comes to women, but they always seemed to be more off than on, and I just assumed they'd break up for good one day.

“I’d better head back. I have a few things to sort out in the city.” He rubs at his prickly jawline. “Do you miss it? Being in the middle of all the action?”

I shrug. “Sometimes, yeah. But it’s an honor to guard the boss’s wife. And I’ll go wherever Ben needs me to.” That’s no lie, and I have the added bonus of spending time with Serena and her kids. This is a difficult time for all of them, and I like that I’m here to watch over them, even if Serena keeps me at arm’s length much of the time.

“If things ever change, and Ben wants you back in the city, let me know. I’d welcome you on my crew any time.”

“I appreciate that, man.” Brando will make a great capo, and any made man working under him is lucky. “I would be honored to work with you.”

“Later.” He thumps my arm, spinning around to leave before turning back around. “A word of advice from someone who hasn’t always made the smartest choices when it comes to women. If you really like her, fight for her. Make her see it could work.”

“I’ll consider it,” I say before he walks away, heading toward the front of the property where his car is parked.

Truth is, this is new for me.

I don’t get attached to women.

I have never bought into relationships or marriage. Casual one-night stands have been my go-to stress reliever for years, and I’ve been content with that.

Until Serena stepped into my life, and intense attraction sprang up immediately between us. I can honestly say I have never felt the same draw to any other woman at any time in my life. But Serena has a ton of baggage, and I’m not sure it would work. I have no experience with relationships, and it looks like her only experience has most likely damaged her for life. The last thing I want to do is add to that. While I’m attracted to her, I enjoy her company, and I want to ease her burden, I’m not sure I’d be good for her.

So, keeping our distance is probably a wise choice.

Fighting for her doesn't seem like the best option for either of us, even if it's what my heart is telling me to do.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spot Romeo hurtling down the slide, and I dart forward, catching him in time. "Nice job, little dude." I scoop him up into my arms.

"I wanna go on the swing." He wriggles in my arms, and I set him down on the ground. His small warm hand curls around mine. "Can you push me?"

"Sure thing, buddy. Let's go."

I take turns pushing Elisa and Romeo on the swings while Frank watches Rowan mount the climbing frame.

"Tough day?" Ben asks, materializing at my side, wearing a slight smirk.

"The toughest," I joke.

"Leo will watch the kids with Frank," he adds. "I want to have a word with you in private."

"Okay."

We don't speak as we walk back toward the house, and I'm wondering what Ben needs to talk to me about. My eyes drift in Serena's direction as the girls make their way toward the playground, and I'm pleased to find her gaze already locked on mine. Her reddish-brown hair is tucked up in a cream wool hat, granting me an unencumbered view of her stunning face. Her delicate features are almost too perfect, save for the smattering of freckles dusting her rosy-red cheeks and the slight upturn of her cute button nose. Her wide, expressive hazel eyes look more green than brown today, and warmth sinks into my bones as her lips curve into a barely discernible smile.

Ben walks to his wife. Wrapping his arms around Sierra, he tilts her back a little as he kisses her passionately.

"Ah, young love. It warms my heart," Natalia says, beaming at her brother and her new sister-in-law.

Serena looks wistful, so fucking sad as she watches her sister with her husband, and I have an almost overwhelming

urge to reel her into my arms and comfort her. It's not an unusual sentiment around her, but it doesn't stop surprising me.

"You two are so sweet together," Serena says when Ben finally lets go of his wife.

"I hate having to work on the weekend," Ben says before brushing his lips against Sierra's one final time. "So, I'm going to take every advantage to love on my wife any chance I get."

"Whipped," I murmur behind an exaggerated cough, ducking down when Ben swings his arm in my direction.

"You say that now." He grabs me into a headlock, dragging me away from the women. "But wait until it's your turn. Love changes everything you ever thought you knew about yourself." He lets me go, and I straighten up. "When you find your person, you'll understand."

I don't admit I think I may have already found her.

Or that I'm unsure if I will ever have with Serena what Ben has with Sierra.

“Have you given much thought to your future?” Ben inquires when we enter his home office.

I drop into the seat in front of his desk as he moves to his liquor cabinet to fix us some drinks. “In what way?” I ask, a little confused. When Ben literally plucked me off the streets and explained who he was and the kind of life he could offer me, I always knew it came with limitations. Because I’m not of Italian American descent, I can’t progress any higher than *soldato*, and I have made my peace with that. I’m luckier than most because Ben took me under his wing from that day forward, and I have access to opportunities most *soldati* don’t. Like getting to run personal jobs for the boss and protecting his new wife.

“If there were no restrictions on your progression within *la famiglia*, what would you aspire to do?” He gives me a scotch and sits down in his leather chair, nursing a glass of bourbon in his hand.

“I don’t know,” I truthfully reply, frowning a little as I wonder where he is going with this. “I’ve never thought about it. I am happy to go where you need me to go and do what you need me to do.”

“Loyalty is at the core of everything *Cosa Nostra* stands for.” He swirls the liquid in his glass as I sip my whisky. “And you are one of my most loyal men.”

I shrug, leaning back in my chair. “It’s easy to be loyal when you’re the boss. And I’m not saying that to blow smoke

up your ass. You saved me when no one else gave a shit about me. More than that, you gave me a purpose in life, and I appreciate all the opportunities you have given me.”

“And that is one of the reasons why you would make the perfect *consigliere*.” His earnest blue eyes drill into mine, and I can tell he means every word he just said.

But I don’t understand.

I blink repeatedly, sitting up straighter. “What?” I splutter.

“Have you never wondered why I haven’t appointed one?” he asks.

“Well, yeah, but I figured you and Leo had it covered, and there weren’t any suitable candidates for the job.”

Ben nods, and a hint of a smile graces his mouth. “Correct on both counts. I like that about you. You quietly observe, and nothing gets past you. It’s one of the reasons I chose you to be my personal bodyguard and one of the reasons I asked you to protect Sierra when she came back into my life. The role of a made man is changing. Not just because I have big plans for the business. The way we do things has to adapt with our environment. RICO laws are an ongoing concern, and the days of using our fists or our guns to settle disputes and win territory is over. The qualities I look for in my men is constantly evolving.” He taps his temple. “Smarts are as valuable to me as physical prowess. Both are things you have in abundance.”

“So does Leo,” I blurt, taken aback by the direction of this conversation.

“Leo has many qualities I admire and value, but he doesn’t have your restraint. Leo is an excellent underboss, but he would not make the perfect *consigliere*.”

“I have no experience, I’m too young, and most importantly, I’m not of Italian heritage.”

Ben takes a mouthful of his bourbon, watching me intently as I sit rigidly in my chair. I’m shell-shocked and struggling to process what he’s saying. Ben sets his glass down on the desk.

“Do you not want a promotion? Have I misread your ambition?”

I shake my head. “Yes and no. I’m just a little shocked right now. While I appreciate you thinking of me for such a high-profile role, I won’t be the reason the men turn against you. You must know installing me as your *consigliere* would cause outrage. The men would not take kindly to it.”

“I’m the boss. They support my decisions or face the consequences. I didn’t say it would be easy, and it’s not something that could or would happen overnight. There are obstacles to overcome. All I want to know now is do you want it?”

“Yes. Of course, I want it. We already discuss strategy, and you and Leo include me in a lot of the decision-making.” Something I have always loved, because it’s not every day a man as powerful as Bennett Mazzone asks a lowly *soldato* for his opinion in pressing matters.

“Did you never wonder why?” Ben asks, and then he raises his glass to his lips.

I gulp back a mouthful of my scotch. “Honestly, no. I was thrilled you sought out my opinion, and I never read anything into it.”

“Leo and I discussed it, and we decided to include you in some things to see how you responded.”

“You were testing me?”

He nods, looking contemplative as he finishes his drink. “I think you would make a fine *consigliere* in time. I am glad you are interested. But I want you to think about it carefully, and if you are in agreement, I will start training you. We can work in the evenings and on weekends, and it’s the perfect opportunity to do this under the radar while I figure out a way to present this to the men.” He leans his elbows on the desk, eyeballing me. “I would like your permission to dig into your background. To try to identify your father.”

I stare at him silently for a few beats before clearing my throat. “You know my mother never told me anything about

my father. It would be like looking for a needle in a haystack, and she told me point-blank he wasn't Italian when I asked her why she named me Alessandro. She always insisted she just liked the name."

"Did you ever stop to think she protested too much?"

I shrug again. "Not really. I didn't care who my father was, not even during periods when I prayed he would show up and rescue me from Mom. Back then, I didn't give a shit who he might be. I just wanted him to exist to take me away from that life."

Ben nods in understanding. It's something we have in common—shitty, drugged-up moms who didn't give a crap about their kids.

"I can relate to that," he agrees. "And I felt the same. But after Angelo found me, I regularly wished he had remained a figment of my imagination. Yet it turned out for the best, and I think finding your father could end up being a good thing for you too."

"You think he is Italian? And it would justify my appointment as your *consigliere*?"

He bobs his head. "That is my main goal, but it could have added benefits for you. You could have family out there."

"You're my family. The business is my family. I don't need anyone else." I drain the remainder of my drink and put the empty glass down on the desk.

"I don't disagree, but there could be a Natalia out there somewhere for you. Could be any number of siblings who don't know about you and who would be happy to have you in their lives."

"No offense, Ben, but you totally lucked out with your sister. I seriously doubt most *mafioso* siblings would be so charitable and welcoming. Especially, if I have a brother or brothers who might see me as a threat."

"You aren't a threat because you're a part of the Mazzone *famiglia*, and that won't ever change. If anything, you'll be an asset."

“I don’t know.” I rub a hand across my chin. “Going there could cause more problems than it will solve. Maybe it’s best left alone.”

“Let me make some tentative inquiries. Phillip is discreet, and he can dig around without anyone knowing. If he finds something, then you can make a call on how to proceed,” Ben suggests.

Phillip is an IT genius we acquired with one of the tech companies Caltimore Holdings took over. Ben appointed him as his personal technical investigator, and he has more than earned his salary. The guy is a freaking whizz at gleaning intel, and he has already proven trustworthy, so I don’t see any harm. “Okay. Let’s do it.”

“Good.” Ben stands as the door opens, and Sierra pokes her head in. “Dinner will be ready in five minutes. Natalia has cooked up a storm.”

“We’re just about done here,” Ben says. “We’ll be out shortly.”

“Good.” She blows him a kiss before leaving.

“For now, let’s keep this between you, me, and Leo.” He rounds the desk as I stand. “Reflect on it.” He clamps his hand on my shoulder. “And if you are still interested, we can start work as soon as you are ready.”

“Thank you.” I pin him with grateful eyes. “Your faith in me means everything, Ben.”

“I see a lot of myself in you, Alessandro.” His Adam’s apple jumps in his throat. “I know what you’ve been through, and you’re a survivor. I only want to surround myself with the best, and you’re one of the best. This isn’t charity. If I didn’t think you had the skills and ability to do this job, I wouldn’t be considering it.”

“I know that.” Ben doesn’t let emotion interfere with his business decisions. He isn’t at the top of his game without being a shrewd player and a smart strategist. “Just like I won’t consider formally accepting it until I have thought it through

because I would never take a position I couldn't fulfill to the best of my ability."

Ben lets loose a wide smile, clamping me on the shoulder again. "That is exactly why you will make a formidable *consigliere*."

“I want my papa!” Romeo cries, thrashing about in my arms as I attempt to dry him after his bath.

“I know, sweetie.” Wrapping the large fluffy white towel around his small body, I bundle him against my chest. “It’s okay to miss him. It’s part of grieving.” I wish I knew what was going on in his head so I knew best how to help him.

“Why did God take my papa?” he sobs, giving up fighting and pressing his wet face into my shoulder. “It’s not fair.”

I rub a hand up and down his back, holding him close as he cries, selfishly wondering how long this will last because it’s getting harder and harder to comfort my son when I feel such relief that Alfredo is gone.

He falls asleep in my arms, and I carry him into his bedroom, carefully dressing him in his pajamas and tucking him under the covers. I switch on his nightlight before I tiptoe to the door. Turning off the main light, I stand in the doorway watching my son as he sleeps. Romeo is such a sensitive soul, and I know that comes from me because there wasn’t a single sensitive bone in Alfredo’s body.

Not that I would ever begrudge my son his mourning, but it frustrates me sometimes because Alfredo didn’t give him much of his time, and he hated how “soft” his only son was. It was something he often threw at me in the midst of an argument, blaming me for the fact our son has no trouble expressing his emotions. Something that is not sought after in a made man. At least not in Alfredo’s generation of made men.

Slowly, I close the door and step away. I walk to Elisa's room, halting when I hear Alesso's dulcet tones. A smile ghosts over my mouth as I pause just behind the open doorway to listen to him reading my daughter a bedtime story.

Elisa is rather taken with Alesso. While I love she is forming a bond with a decent, kind father figure, I don't want her growing too attached because Alesso won't be around forever. He is young, skilled, and ambitious, and he won't remain Sierra's bodyguard for long. I doubt Ben wants to waste his talent, and frankly, I'm surprised he hasn't already appointed one of the guards who protect the property as Sierra's bodyguard now that she is living permanently here.

Alesso's involvement in our lives will be short-lived. Something I try to remind myself of regularly when I find I'm at the risk of growing too attached.

"She's asking for you," Alesso says, appearing in front of me.

A squeal leaves my lips, and I jump, caught off guard by his unexpected presence. That's what I get for daydreaming. "Oh my God." I slap a hand to my chest, silently urging my rapidly beating heart to calm down. "You almost gave me a coronary."

"Sorry." He chuckles, sounding completely unapologetic. "But you know what they say about people who eavesdrop." A cheeky grin slips over his mouth.

I purse my lips. "I wasn't eavesdropping. I didn't want to interrupt story time. Elisa loves you reading to her."

"I love reading to her." The amusement disappears from his face, replaced with a sincere expression. "She's a remarkable little girl. You must be so proud of her."

"I am." I step around him because the way he's staring at me makes me uncomfortable, in a thrilling sort of way. "I better say good night."

"I'll pour the wine." He waggles his brows before walking down the hallway toward my living room. I should probably squash this nightly tradition, but I enjoy his company too

much. Besides, I like to keep my mind occupied so it doesn't wander to topics I'd rather not think about.

"Hi, Mom," Elisa says in a sleepy tone as I enter her bedroom.

I walk to her bed, perching on the side. Brushing dark strands of hair off her brow, I lean down to kiss her cheek. "Did you have a good day, honey?"

She nods, and her eyes light up in a way I have come to notice is associated with Caleb Accardi. Caleb is one of the twins who are Natalia's stepsons. "Caleb let me watch some of the movie with him and Joshua, and he even made me popcorn."

Hmm. I hope it was suitable. I thought all the younger kids were in the playroom after dinner, but Elisa must have snuck out to join the twins in the home theater. At thirteen, the boys are now made men and aware of everything that goes on in our world. They are nice kids, but I wish Elisa didn't have a crush on Caleb because I want to keep her as far away from made men as possible. Which feels a little mean because Caleb is still a kid, and he is sweet to her, even though I'm sure it must be annoying for him to have an eight-year-old hanging off his coattails.

Despite how much I don't want my daughter to have any association with made men, I'm not naïve. It's impossible to shield her from this world. I know my sister shares similar concerns about Rowan. Sierra is married to a powerful don, and her son will always be at risk because of who his father is. Ben has sworn Rowan will have a choice as to whether he wants to get involved in the business or not. But I really don't see how there is a choice. It's the same with my children whether I like it or not. The thought pains me considerably.

None of us have a choice.

It's what we were born into.

Except Sierra was kept outside of this world until recently. Not out of protection. No, our father saw her as a loose cannon, and he made Mom, Saskia, and me lie to her about our

true heritage. Something I equally hated and loved him for. Sierra was pissed when she discovered the truth and that I had known and said nothing, but I always believed she was better off not knowing. Her life was better for being kept in the dark.

Not that it mattered.

She's as entrenched in this world now as we all are.

Which reminds me. I need to have a conversation with Ben, and it can't wait any longer.

After asking Alesso to keep the wine on hold, I walk to the east wing where Sierra and Ben have their private quarters. I knock on the heavy mahogany doors, and Sierra appears a few seconds later. "Rena." She leans in and kisses my cheek. "Is everything okay?" Concern is etched upon her face.

Although we all spend most nights together, there's an unspoken rule that Saturday nights are private time, so it's not like me to interrupt her with Ben. But I have put this off long enough. While I'm feeling brave, I want to ask this favor of my brother-in-law. "Everything is fine. I just need to ask Ben something."

"Come in." She steps aside, letting me into her living room. Ben is seated on the long leather couch in front of a roaring fire, clutching a glass of bourbon in his hand. He's wearing jeans with a fitted black sweater, looking relaxed and happy.

"Sorry to interrupt," I say, taking a seat on the comfy leather chair.

"Would you like a glass of wine?" Sierra offers, hovering behind me.

I shake my head. "This won't take long, and Alesso has wine waiting for me."

Sierra grins as she sits down beside her husband, snuggling into his side. "Does he now?" She waggles her brows as her grin expands.

"For the umpteenth time, we are friends." She has been softly teasing me about him since we moved in here.

“I didn’t say anything.” She smirks as she lifts her wineglass to her lips.

Ignoring my younger sister and her deliberate innuendo, I focus on her husband. “I need a favor.” I sit up straighter, clasping my hands on my lap. “I know you have a lot on your plate, but—”

“Whatever you need, it’s yours,” Ben says, cutting across me. “You’re family, Serena. I take care of my family.”

A lump forms at the base of my throat. Ben is such a good man, and I’m so happy my sister has him. I don’t have to worry about Sierra or Rowan, knowing Ben will always keep them safe. It’s one less thing to concern myself with.

“I know you do. I’m not sure I thanked you for taking me and the kids in. Everything has been such a blur these past few weeks.”

“You have thanked me profusely, Serena, and it’s not necessary. Our home is your home, and we have tons of space. I’m happy you are here, and I know how happy it makes my wife. You have a home here for as long as you need or want one.”

“You’re one of the good guys, Bennett, and my sister is a lucky woman.”

Ben slides his arm around Sierra’s shoulders. “Trust me, I’m the lucky one.” He beams at his wife, and they share an intimate look. One I have seen them exchange several times. One day, I would love to have someone look at me the way Ben looks at my sister. But with my issues, it’s highly unlikely I would be so lucky.

“What do you need?” Ben asks, finally dragging his gaze from Sierra.

“I’m worried about retaliation,” I blurt. “And I’m wondering if there are more DeLucas in Sicily we should be concerned about.”

Ben nods, swirling the bourbon in his glass. “Those are valid concerns.”

I love that he is honest and he doesn't sugarcoat anything. "I feel safe here, but I can't hide forever. I need to be able to live my life, and I can't do that constantly looking over my shoulder."

Ben winces a little. "I'm not sure it's possible to avoid that forever, even if we can discount immediate threats. Whether you like it or not, you were married to the man most of the *soldati* of The Outfit considered their boss. Gifoli had his fair share of supporters and enemies. We are working to turn that loyalty toward Barretta. It's why Gino is in Chicago." Gino Accardi is Natalia's husband, Ben's brother-in-law, and one of the five New York dons.

Ben clears his throat before continuing. "Gino will help to smooth things over and reassure them that a new don, underboss, and *consigliere* will be appointed in due course and to remind them The Commission has their best interests at heart. I have confidence we can win them over in time, and anyone who may be resentful of you will come around."

I'm not naïve. Ben isn't either. I know he believes what he says, but it won't be easy. I know there are factions within The Outfit who resent me because I have sided with the enemy in their eyes.

Tensions have traditionally been high between New York and Chicago, and the fact Ben and The Commission have swooped in—in the aftermath of Alfredo's and my father's deaths—will have only increased suspicion.

Even if they believe Don Giuseppe DeLuca is still alive and has rubberstamped his approval.

Even with Thomas Barretta, their previous *consigliere*, now in the acting underboss-slash-don role.

"I don't think anyone within The Outfit would be stupid enough to make a move now," I admit. "I'm more concerned with any relatives that might surface from Sicily as soon as they realize Giuseppe is dead."

Our father went by the name Joseph Lawson in the US to mask his true identity. He was really Giuseppe DeLuca, don of

The Outfit, the man most believed ruled, through Alfredo, from his home in Sicily. But it was all a ruse. All part of the ultimate power play. Father had planned on taking control of the newly reformed Commission and ruling over all Italian Americans in the US as the most powerful mafia don of all times.

But now he's dead. Shot by Barretta in retaliation for the death of his only son. It would be complete mayhem if the made men of The Outfit discovered DeLuca was dead, so Ben and The Commission have kept him "alive" until the time is opportune to announce his passing. As DeLuca never officially stepped foot in Chicago, and he reigned through my dead husband, the men had no trouble accepting the explanation. As far as The Outfit is concerned, DeLuca is now committed to The Commission and he approves of the succession plan that Gino is in Chicago to enact with acting underboss Barretta.

"I have already hired a PI in Sicily and sent some men there," Ben supplies. "They will trace the family tree and identify if there are any living relatives. If anyone poses a threat, they will be dealt with." His sincere eyes probe my face. "You don't need to worry, Serena. I will take care of it."

His words go a long way toward reassuring me. I stand, smiling softly. "Thanks, Ben."

"No one is going to hurt you, sis." Sierra climbs to her feet and pulls me into a hug. "We will make sure of it."

“Do you think, maybe, Romeo should speak to someone? A child psychologist or someone who specializes in grief counseling?” Alesso asks as we are situated on separate ends of the couch in front of the fireplace. He lit the fire while I was talking with Sierra and Ben, and the room is toasty warm.

I swirl the red wine in my glass as I contemplate his question. “Perhaps.”

His Adam’s apple jumps in his throat as he looks at me, his features softening. “Maybe you should talk to someone too?”

My hackles are instantly raised, and all the muscles in my back lock up as I stare at him. “Have you been talking to my sister about me?” The things I told Sierra were private and if she has mentioned any of them to Alesso, we will be having stern words.

A frown mars his smooth brow. “What? No.” Awareness sparks in his eyes. “Has Sierra made the same suggestion?”

I relax marginally, nodding as I take a mouthful of wine.

“She cares about you. I do too, and I can tell it’s been a difficult time for all of you. I only mentioned it in case it would help.”

I gulp over the messy ball of emotion in my throat. “I know I need to speak to someone,” I whisper, staring at the flames jumping and crackling in the hearth. “But I can’t deal with it yet. I’m not ready.” My eyes lower to the floor as my chest tightens in a familiar way.

“That’s understandable, and you should go at whatever pace makes you comfortable.” His words ooze with compassion and sincerity.

Lifting my head, I turn to face him. “I can’t think about it because the pain is too much, and my children need me to be here and present. They are my priority.”

“I know they are, and you’re a fantastic mother.”

Sadness washes over me. “Not so much lately. It feels like I’m barely hanging on some days.”

“Trust me, I know bad mothers,” he says, angling his body and pulling his legs up onto the couch and crossing them, “and you’re definitely not one. What you just said proves it. You are willing to ignore your own needs to ensure your children’s needs are taken care of. That is admirable, Rena. My mom never made any sacrifices for me. First opportunity she had, she threw me to the wolves.” A muscle clenches in his jaw, and he swipes his glass up, swallowing a healthy mouthful of wine.

Alesso has alluded to a difficult childhood before, but he hasn’t gone into details, and I haven’t pressed because it’s hypocritical to ask him to open up when I guard my secrets so closely. I reposition myself with my back against the arm of the couch and tuck my knees into my chest so we are facing one another from opposite ends. Cradling my wineglass against my chest, I say, “I’m sorry you didn’t have a good childhood. My father wasn’t a great parent, but my mom made up for it.” I chew on the corner of my mouth. “Even though he punished her for it.” Tears stab the backs of my eyes as I think of what Mom has gone through for us. Compassion is etched across his face, and it encourages me to be brave. “I knew he hit her, though he was usually careful not to leave bruises where anyone could see. I didn’t know the true extent of her suffering until recently, and it hurts. I hurt for her,” I choke out over a sob.

Placing his glass down on the coffee table, he very carefully slides closer to me until our sock-covered feet are

mere inches apart. "I can empathize because I hurt for you," he quietly admits.

"Don't." I swipe at the tears sneaking out of my eyes. "I don't want to be pitied." Knots twist in my gut, and I look over at the fire, unable to say this while looking at his face. "The truth is, I was weak. I should have fought back or found a way to leave him. Instead, I stayed and I just took whatever he threw my way." Self-loathing crawls up my throat as I turn my gaze away from the fire. His warm brown eyes are focused on me, and sometimes it's hard to breathe when he looks at me like that. The urge to reach out and hold him is riding me hard, even though I know I could never do it. "I swore to myself growing up that I would never let any man treat me the way my father treated my mother, and I ended up in the same situation." I gulp painfully as I shake my head. "Some days, I don't know who I hate more. Alfredo for inflicting such cruelty or me for letting him."

"It's not your fault."

I shrug, drinking slowly from my glass. A familiar heavy weight presses down on my chest while inside I silently scream.

"I get why you might feel like it is," he adds, running a hand through his dark hair. "For years, I felt it was my fault my mother was so neglectful and hurtful growing up. I used to think if I had been more lovable and less demanding she would have treated me better." He barks out a harsh laugh. "I stayed so quiet I was like the invisible man. Afraid to tell her I was hungry, that my shoes were too tight, or how I'd ripped the side of my shirt in a fight at school. I tried to fix problems myself so I wouldn't have to burden her. I cleaned the house and used any money I had to buy groceries. I even stole cigarettes for her off the grumpy old man who lived in the condo beside us, but nothing worked. Nothing made her love me, and in my head, I blamed myself for not being good enough."

I hang off his words, feeling his pain and torment as if it's my own. A tortured expression splays across his handsome face, and I long to wipe it away with my kisses. But he'll have

to settle for my words instead. “You were only a child, and it was her job to take care of you. She failed, not you. Knowing you now, I can’t imagine it was in any way difficult to love you. In fact, I’m sure it was super easy.” My cheeks heat as the ill-advised words slip from my mouth.

A smile curves the corners of his mouth. “I don’t feel like that anymore. I know I’m not to blame. She was a drugged-up whore who tried to pimp me out to make a fast buck. I have long since abandoned the notion I’m responsible.”

I wonder if that’s the truth though. Alesso is far more put together than I am, but he’s still concealing broken pieces inside. On rare occasions, I catch glimpses of it. “How did you overcome it? Did you speak to someone?”

He shakes his head as he raises clenched fists. “I used these. I beat those johns bloody before I took off that day for good. Slept on the streets for a while until I realized I could make decent money fighting. I channeled all my aggression into my fights, and I quickly made a name for myself on the underground circuit. The payouts meant I could afford to get my own place, and I had regular food in my belly for a change.” He drags his lower lip between his teeth. “I guess I vented a lot of my emotions that way, but I still suffered with low self-esteem. After Ben found me and gave me a new purpose, I promised myself I was going to turn my life around.”

A faint blush blooms in his cheeks, and I’m so intrigued by this man. I cock my head to the side, watching him as I sip my wine.

“I took up meditation, and I started reading. Self-help and inspirational books and, uh”—he drags a hand across his stubbly jawline as the color on his cheeks darkens—“books on overcoming trauma.”

“It helped?” I inquire, wondering if I should try some of those methods.

“For me, it did, but the one thing I learned is everyone is different. Everyone needs to go at their own pace. Healing can’t be forced, and no one else can do the legwork for you.”

“You’re incredible. Looking at you now, no one would know you had a harrowing childhood.”

“If you look closely, the cracks are there, but I refuse to give that woman power over me anymore. I answer to one person and one person only—me.”

“Why did you kiss me back?” I blurt, and I’m blaming the alcohol for my brutal honesty tonight. “I thought at the time you didn’t know who Alfredo was, but you did, and yet you still did it and I don’t understand why you would take that risk, and…” My verbal diarrhea ends when I need to pause to draw a breath.

A gorgeous smile lights up his face, and I’m lured into his gaze, devouring him with my eyes because I’m incapable of looking anywhere else. “I told you already. I wanted to kiss you. Had wanted to for a while. I didn’t give a fuck about your prick husband. I wasn’t aware of all the facts, but I didn’t need to be to see he was an asshole who disrespected you.”

“Does Ben know?” I ask something I have often wondered. I didn’t tell a soul. Not even Sierra because I wouldn’t take risks with Alesso’s life like that, even if I was sorely tempted to tell her.

“No.” He huffs out a sigh. “Ben isn’t old school, but he still wouldn’t have approved. I’m sure I don’t need to tell you that making out with another made man’s wife is akin to committing a mortal sin in our world. Even now, if anyone found out I kissed you while you were married, it would be frowned upon.”

“Yet you still did it.”

His grin expands. “And I’d do it again. A million times over.” Very slowly and with exaggerated moves, he reaches out to brush his thumb against my lip. A delicious shiver skates over my body as I feel his touch in every cell and molecule of my being. “You were worth the risk, Serena.” His eyes dart to my mouth, and I suck in a gasp as tentacles of desire spread throughout my limbs. His gaze latches on mine, and I see the same desire burning behind his retinas. “You will *always* be worth the risk.”

Pain radiates up my arm, and I scream out in agony. Alfredo's nails dig into my flesh as he drags me across the room, shooting indiscriminately while he attempts to make his escape. Gunfire flies in all directions, the noise piercing my skull, and I'm shaking all over. I'm terrified. Scared I won't make it out of this ballroom alive. That thought keeps me from dissolving into tears and fuels my desire to survive. I thrash about, fighting to free myself, but it's no use. My husband's hold on me is too strong. He will never let go. He will never stop hurting me.

I bolt upright in the bed, gasping for air, my chest heaving painfully, as I struggle to take a breath. A multitude of emotions swirls inside me, like it does every night when I wake abruptly from my nightmare. They are not always the same. I have a concoction of horrific memories my subconscious draws inspiration from, but reliving the night of the shoot-out in the ballroom is my most recurring nightmare. And my most hated.

Sweat plasters my hair to my brow and my nightgown to my body. The raised marks on my back burn, almost as intensely as the night I received them. Bending forward, I arch my spine, attempting to alleviate the pain. They are a constant reminder of the man I loathed with every fiber of my being, and for as long as I live, every time I look at those scars in the mirror, I will see his evil grin as he stood over me, brandishing a blood-coated whip, his dark eyes smoldering with sick satisfaction.

Pulling my knees up to my chest, I wrap my arms around myself and quietly cry.

The door crashes open as Elisa races into my bedroom. Fear is etched upon her pretty little face, and I wipe my eyes, attempting to dry my tears. “Mommy! I heard you screaming!” She crawls up onto the bed, flinging her slim arms around me. Her entire body is shaking, and I’m instantly awash with remorse.

“I’m okay. It was just a bad dream.” I bundle her in my arms, running a soothing hand up and down her long, dark, wavy hair. She has her father’s thick, dark hair, but if you look closely, you can see reddish hints in the strands. “I didn’t mean to scare you.”

Sierra and Alesso are right. I need to talk to someone. I can’t keep doing this to my daughter. There have been too many occasions when she has run in here to console me and it’s so wrong. I need to get over my fear of talking about my past and make an appointment with one of the people on the list my sister compiled for me.

“Some nights, I wake thinking Papa is back,” she says in a small voice. “Your screams sound the same.” A full-body shudder rips through her as she looks up at me with troubled blue eyes. “I think I’m a bad person, Mom, because I don’t want him to come back. I don’t want him to ever come back and hurt you again.” Her eyes blaze with determination and compassion.

Pain slams into me on all sides, and tears well in my eyes. I have done such a shitty job of protecting my children from the horrors of the life I endured, and I feel like the ultimate failure. But this isn’t about me. This is about Elisa. Romeo too. I wish I could say he was unaware, but he has listened to his father constantly putting me down, and I don’t know what kind of sick shit Alfredo used to whisper in his ear. That bastard tried his best to drive all the softness from our son, spouting shit no child should have to hear. Especially one as young as Romeo. I know he’s confused, struggling to understand his feelings, and I hate that for him. I can only hope he will forget it in time. He’s not five yet, and it’s

unlikely he will remember much about his father with the passing years.

Elisa is another matter entirely. She won't forget. She is older and has seen and heard way too much. I won't lie to her. I won't attempt to sugarcoat the truth. I can only imagine what she must have felt hearing me scream and suffer at the hands of her father's depravity. "He's not coming back, sweetie. He won't ever hurt me again."

At least, not physically.

Emotionally, though? I bear more than just external scars, and it's the internal ones that will take the longest time to heal.

"And you are not a bad person, Elisa." I press a fierce kiss to her brow. "You are my beautiful, brave, kind warrior." I hold her face in my hands, peering into her trusting eyes. "I know you want to protect me, but it's my job to protect you. I promise I won't let you down again."

"I love you, Mommy." Her arms tighten around me. "So, so much. I thank God every day for giving me you as my mommy."

My heart swells with tenderness. This girl. She makes me so damn proud. Her trembles are subsiding as I hold her close, pressing kisses into her hair and smoothing my hand up and down her back. "I love you so much, Elisa. Your brother too. I am lucky God graced me with such amazing children." I kiss the tip of her nose. "But I need you to promise me something."

"Anything, Mom."

"Please don't worry about me. I'm going to be okay. Things have been tough, but they will get better for all of us. Right now, I just want you to be a little girl. To make new friends at school. To play with your brother and your cousin. To laugh. To be happy. To not worry so much."

"I can't help it," she whispers, kissing my cheek. "I don't want anything to happen to you."

I pull her onto my lap and cradle her close. "Nothing is going to happen to me. Uncle Ben and Frank, Alesso, and Leo, they are all keeping us safe."

“I like Alesso,” she says over a yawn.

“I know you do.” I lay her down on the bed beside me, pulling the covers up over us.

“Do you like him too?” she asks, turning on her side and snuggling against me.

“I do,” I truthfully reply, watching my daughter close her eyes with the ghost of a smile on her lips. “Too much,” I whisper before sleep pulls me under.

“I made an appointment with a therapist,” I tell Sierra as we roll up our mats at the end of our yoga class. “And I made a couple of appointments for the kids too. They need more help than I can give them.” It’s been a couple of weeks since I realized the best way I can help my children is to help myself, first and foremost, and it’s taken me that long to pluck up the courage to make the call. But I did it, and I’m proud I took the first step on the road to recovery.

I found a practice in town that caters to all of our needs. We each have our own therapist, but they can consult with one another while treating us individually, and I think that’s the best way of managing this so we all get the help and support we need.

“That’s great.” She squeezes my hand. “Let me know when you’re going, and I’ll stay at home so Alesso can go with you.”

I blow a few stray strands of hair out of my eyes as we walk toward the door with the other women. “I’d rather he didn’t come.” I have no idea what state I will be in after my first session, and I really don’t want the man I have feelings for there to witness any meltdowns. He has already seen enough embarrassing things.

“You can’t go out unprotected.” Sierra pushes out through the doors and across the hallway toward the locker room.

“Maybe we should ask Ben to assign you your own bodyguard.”

“No.” I vigorously shake my head, following my sister into the locker room. “I have spent my entire life shadowed by bodyguards. The men that bastard used to assign to me had no concept of personal space and regularly invaded my privacy.” We reach our lockers, and I drop onto the bench as Sierra removes her bag and dumps it beside me. I rub my suddenly aching temples, feeling a headache coming on. “Though I’m worried about threats, I refuse to have unfamiliar men all up in my business again. Maybe Frank could come with us?”

Sierra peels her yoga pants and cropped top off her lithe body, balling them up and stuffing them in her bag, standing unashamedly in just her panties, as she grabs a towel and toiletries. I wish I had her confidence. I think back, and there was a time when I definitely did, but I can scarcely remember who that girl was anymore.

She wraps the towel around her torso and shimmies her panties down her legs, adding them to the other items in her bag. Sitting beside me, she takes my hand in hers. “I thought Alesso was your friend? Wouldn’t you be more comfortable with him? Or is this about something else?”

I exhale heavily as my eyes lower to our conjoined hands. “I don’t want him to see me as weak. I’m sure he already thinks I’m a basket case.”

“He doesn’t think that. I’ve seen the way he looks at you. It’s the very opposite of that.”

I raise my eyes to hers. “I’ve seen him looking at me too, but it won’t go anywhere. I’m too broken. He deserves so much better than me.”

“Stop that.” She squeezes my hand tighter. “I hate to hear you putting yourself down. You’re an amazing woman, Serena. So strong and brave and kind. Alesso would be lucky to win your heart.”

I bark out a bitter laugh. “No one wants to win that mangled thing.” Tears prick my eyes. “I don’t think I can ever

open myself up to a man. Not the way you have with Ben. The thought fucking terrifies me.”

“I know.” Her eyes glisten with unshed tears as she enfolds me in a hug. “I know you’re scared to love, but there is no rush, Rena.” Her warm embrace is everything I need and nothing I would have asked for. “You have been through a huge trauma, and it will take you time to heal. There is no ticking clock. Heal and maybe then you will feel differently about love. Feel ready to take a risk on a guy, whether it’s Alesso or someone else.”

“I like him,” I finally admit as we break our embrace.

“I know you do.” Her face lights up in a smile.

“It’s crazy how my heart beats faster the second he walks into a room and how I can often tell where he is before I’ve even seen him. It’s like I feel his presence coming before he’s even stepped into the room.”

“You’re crushing on him.” She can’t disguise her gleeful tone. “This is wonderful.”

“No, it’s not. It’s...terrifying.”

“The things worth fighting for usually are.”

“It’s pretty pathetic I’m experiencing my first crush at thirty-two. I have been thinking back to when you were crushing on Ben, and it’s so amazing you got your guy.”

Her expression takes on a dreamlike quality, as it does so often when she’s talking about her husband. The man she has loved since she was a young girl. “It is, and he was worth every moment of pain I endured to get to this point. I always knew the way I loved him was more than just some childish crush though I didn’t fully understand it when I was thirteen.”

“You give me hope,” I admit. “And you inspire me every day.”

She gives me a quick hug. “I love you, sis, and you inspire me too. You have so much inner strength. I wish you could see yourself the way others do.”

“So, you’re not mad at me anymore?”

She stands, securing the towel firmly around her chest. “I forgive you, and I forgive Mom. I know you were both protecting me. And even if I don’t agree, I can’t deny I had it easier growing up in blissful ignorance.”

“All I wanted was to shield my little sister.”

“I know.” She shuts her locker, glancing down at my workout clothes. “I take it you’re showering at home?”

I nod because there’s no way I can shower in public without risking a panic attack. Sierra knows this now although she doesn’t understand why. I go to great pains to hide the scar tissue on my back.

“Okay. I’ll be quick. Then we’ll have time to grab a takeout coffee before we head to the school.”

Fifteen minutes later, we head out onto the sidewalk. It’s a brisk February morning, and I welcome the zinging breeze blowing across my face. It reminds me I’m alive, and there is still a lot to be grateful for. Alesso pushes off the wall, rubbing his hands together and lifting the collar of his coat. “Ladies.” He nods respectfully, quickly checking us out, ensuring we’re intact after our yoga class. His eyes linger on me a few seconds longer, and warmth blossoms to life in my chest. I shoot him a shy smile before looking away.

“We’re going for coffee.” Sierra points at the coffee place at the end of the street. “You look like you could use one.”

“For sure.” He steps into line behind us as we start walking in that direction. “It’s fucking freezing today.”

Prickles of awareness skate across the nape of my neck, and my breath stalls in my chest. My eyes dart around, and I tune out Sierra and Alesso as they talk, scanning the area for the source of my anxiety. I can’t shake the feeling I’m being watched, but I don’t spot anyone or anything out of the extraordinary.

“What’s wrong?” Alesso asks, and I realize we have come to a stop in front of the coffee place and my sister and my crush are staring at me with growing concern.

“Nothing.” I’m probably just being paranoid, and I don’t want to worry anyone without reason, so I plaster a smile on my face and hope it’s reassuring. “I just zoned out for a bit.”

“You’re sure?” Alesso probes.

“I’m sure, and the coffee is on me.”

Serena's been spooked since earlier, and I know she lied to me. I don't know what put her on edge in town, but she's been jumpy and out of sorts ever since. I'm hoping she might open up to me later, over our usual nightly glass of wine.

I'm by the front door when Ben arrives from New York with *Ciro*—his bodyguard—in tow. My brows lift when *Nario* steps into the house behind them. *Nario* is another one of Ben's *soldati*, and his bloodthirsty legacy is widely known within *mafioso* circles. Ben tends to bring him along if he wants to intimidate the fuck out of someone or he wants to deliver a particularly vicious beatdown. So, it's surprising to see him at the house.

"We need to talk before dinner," Ben says to me, as *Nario* closes the front door behind him. Ben's gaze swings in *Ciro*'s direction. "Let *Sierra* know we have an additional mouth to feed and then show *Nario* to one of the guest rooms to drop off his bag."

"No problem, boss." *Ciro* strides in the direction of the kitchen with *Nario* at his side while Ben and I head to his office.

I fix drinks as Ben removes his wool coat and scarf and settles into the chair behind his desk. I hand him a bourbon and sit down across from him, sipping my whisky. "What's up?"

"I attended a Commission meeting today, and a plan is in place to reclaim Vegas. I need to visit *Salerno* tomorrow, and I

want you with me and Leo.”

“Nario is here to watch over Sierra,” I surmise.

Ben nods, draining his drink, and I arch a brow. “Today was the day from hell.”

“What else happened?”

“Barretta is growing restless already.” He gets up to refill his glass.

I frown, sitting up straighter. “He was the one who insisted he be instated as acting underboss-slash-don. What am I missing?”

Ben drops some ice into his drink before turning around. He walks over, leaning against the side of his desk. “I thought he was invested. Assumed he’d take the crown permanently, but he’s saying now he only did that to smooth the transition. He asserts if we’d stepped in and appointed Gino as acting underboss we’d have met strong resistance. I don’t disagree with his assumption, but now it seems he has cold feet, and he has made it clear he wants out.”

“Why? What’s changed? It’s barely been three months.”

“I don’t know. He was acting a little cagey today. We had asked him and Gino to attend our session to provide an update on the situation in Chicago because progress is grinding to a halt, and we’re concerned.”

“Perhaps you should switch their roles. Make Gino acting underboss and reinstall Barretta as *consigliere*. He might be more comfortable if he’s not in the main driving seat.”

“It’s too early to make any big moves. Gino has not won the trust or respect of the men.”

“Yet.” Accardi is a decent don and well respected by his men in New York. He’s been in the game a long time, and I’m sure he’ll turn things around. Unless there’s something I don’t know.

Ben sighs and returns to his seat, glancing at his watch. “I’m not sure what is going on with Gino, but Barretta wasn’t the only one acting cagey.”

“Well, shit.”

“Exactly my sentiments.”

“What are you going to do?”

“There isn’t much else we can do. We need to let this play out in Chicago for the initial six months as planned. Making any bold moves would only serve to worsen the situation. The Commission made our position very clear today. Both men went back to Chicago understanding they have committed to their roles for six months and we are relying on them to restore peace and order. It’s been agreed that I’ll head to the Windy City once a month to keep an eye on things, and they’ll provide reports to me there, rather than having them fly out to the city to update us. Right now, our main priority is regaining control of Vegas in Salerno’s name and finally consolidating The Commission’s position as the sole governing body of *Cosa Nostra* in the US.”

“I doubt you’ll get much resistance from Salerno. He’s champing at the bit to return home and destroy Gambini for his betrayal.” Gambini was Salerno’s underboss for years before he sold him out to the Russians. They seized his territory and have been lording it over Vegas ever since. I can’t wait to wipe them from existence.

“Saverio is itching for revenge. The challenge will be restraining him and making him stick to the plan.” Leaving his half-empty glass on the desk, Ben strides toward the door when someone knocks. “We’ll leave first thing in the morning,” he calls out over his shoulder as he opens the door to Ciro.

“Dinner is ready,” Ben’s grumpy bodyguard says, and I finish my drink and stand.

“This is divine,” I say, cutting into my chicken parmigiana.
“Do I detect a Mazzone *famiglia* recipe?”

Sierra nods. “Natalia has been giving me some of her mama’s recipes, and Rena and I are slowly mastering them.”

Natalia is an amazing cook, and I look forward to the weekends she stays with the twins as much as Leo does. For different reasons though. It’s obvious Leo has a real hard-on for Ben’s married sister, and I feel for the guy. Natalia is married to Gino Accardi, and there is nothing Leo can do to change that. I have some understanding of what it’s like to pine for a married woman, but my situation hasn’t changed even if Serena’s marital status has.

She’s as closed off to me as ever.

But I’m a patient guy.

I can wait.

She’s worth it.

“I can’t claim much credit,” Serena says, picking at her food. “I only made the salad.”

“You were bathing the kids. It was a team effort.” Sierra is so loyal and protective of her sister. It’s lovely to see.

“That kids show on Broadway has opened to rave reviews,” Ben says, putting his silverware down on his empty plate. “I thought we could all spend a weekend in the city next month. We’ll ask Nat and the twins and Leo too.” He laces his fingers in Sierra’s. “Take the kids to the show and out for pizza and ice cream, and then we can head out for the night. I think we could all use a break. What do you say?”

Sierra squeals and bounces into his lap. “I say I love you.”

Ben chuckles, but his laughter is muffled when Sierra plants a firm kiss on his lips.

Those two are couple goals for sure. My eyes wander across the table to Serena’s, as they often do, and I catch her watching me. A blush spreads across her pale cheeks, and it does funny things to my insides.

It’s only the four of us at the table because the kids are asleep, Frank ate earlier, and Nario and Ciro chose to eat in

their respective rooms. I'm glad. I like the intimacy of these small dinners.

"Want to take a walk?" I mouth to Serena as Sierra and Ben show no sign of slowing down on the PDA front.

She nods, and her chair screeches when she stands.

Sierra tears herself away from her husband's lips. "Don't go on our account."

"It's fine." Serena reaches across to take my plate. "We are going out for a walk."

I shake my head. I don't expect or want her to clean up after me. I'm capable of cleaning up after myself.

Serena frowns, scooping up Ben's and Sierra's plates and taking them to the sink. I come up alongside her, careful to keep a distance between our bodies in case I freak her out.

"I would have done that," she murmurs while rinsing the three plates.

"I know, but I don't expect you to pick up after me. I'm used to cleaning up after myself."

Our hands brush as she retracts from the sink, and I move forward to wash my plate. Tingles spread up my arm from that subtle touch, like it does every time our skin comes into contact. I've been with my fair share of women, but no one, and I mean *no one*, has ever made my body come to life the way Serena does, and we have barely touched.

It's as confusing as it is exciting and scary.

I'm stumbling blindfolded around Serena, terrified of saying or doing the wrong thing, because I don't want to upset her or hurt her. But I don't want to treat her with kid gloves either. She's a fucking warrior, and she deserves to be respected as one. I wish I could talk to Ben about this, but I have a feeling he would tell me to stay away from his sister-in-law, and I don't want Serena to become an obstacle between us.

In a surprising move, Serena leans in and kisses my cheek. "You are the most amazing man, Alessandro. Someday, you

are going to make some lucky woman very happy.” She jerks back, as if she’s just realized what she did and what she said.

Acting on instinct, I lean a little closer to her face and lower my voice. “Play your cards right and that lucky woman could be you.” I waggle my brows, lightening the moment, even though I wholeheartedly mean every word I just said.

Her cheeks are on fire, and all it does is endear her even more to me. I want to relax her because I feel the strongest, most protective urges whenever I’m around her, so I cease flirting. “All I did was take my plate to the sink and rinse it. I’m not sure it’s worthy of such accolades, but I’m too needy to shun praise, deserved or not.”

“You deserve it,” she quietly says, ripping the plate from my hand and placing it in the dishwasher before I can stop her.

“Do you want to tell me what happened in town earlier?” I ask as we walk the lit path through the forest at the back of Ben’s estate. Armed guards roam the perimeter twenty-four-seven, and the high walls are topped with barbed wire and a succession of cameras. I would have said this place is impenetrable except security was breached a few months ago and Sierra was kidnapped from inside the house. Since then, Ben has gone into overdrive with protective measures, replacing all the guards and cameras and adding extra precautions and extra bodies to the protection detail.

“What do you mean?” An anxious tick pops in her jaw.

“Don’t lie to me, Serena. I know something freaked you out.”

A heavy sigh filters into the air, accompanied by little cloudy breaths. “Nothing gets past you.”

“Keen observational skills were a necessary survival tool in the house I grew up in and later when I lived on the streets. I think you’ll find it’s not so easy to deceive me.”

She slams to a halt, turning to face me. “I would never deliberately deceive you. That’s not who I am.” Fire underscores her tone, and I like hearing it.

“I didn’t mean it that way. I know who you are.”

The saddest expression washes over her features. “If that was true, you wouldn’t be standing here with me now. You wouldn’t be spending time with me each day. You would run a mile if you realized exactly who I am.”

I risk stepping a little closer. “I have known you long enough to know the kind of woman you are, Serena. I’d like to think you’ve known me long enough to know you could tell me anything, and it wouldn’t scare me away.” Reaching out slowly, I take her gloved hands in my bare ones. “I spend time with you because I enjoy it. I want to get to know you better. I want to support you as you deal with the things you need to deal with.”

“Why me? I’m too old. Too broken. I have kids. I come with so much baggage I’m completely weighted down with it. I—”

I can’t listen to her beat herself up any longer, so I place two fingers over her mouth, quietly shushing her as I prepare to negate each of her concerns. “One. You’re not too old, and I’m not too young. Age is just a number, and I refuse to allow stupid societal norms to dictate who I spend my time with or categorize the nature of that relationship. Two. Broken is subjective, and we all have our broken parts, but guess what?” I move my fingers from her lips to her cheeks, silently rejoicing when she doesn’t flinch or shy away. “Broken parts can be glued back together. Three, I adore your kids, and they are the cherry on top. And four, every single person in the world has some kind of baggage. It’s called life.”

Tears glisten in her eyes, spilling onto her cheeks. “You’re not real,” she whispers. “You can’t be.”

My heart aches for her because I see the mistrust and disbelief in her eyes. “I’m real, Rena.” Taking her hand, I slip it under my coat and over my shirt-covered chest, where my heart is currently jumping cartwheels in honor of her presence.

“I’m as real as it gets. I’m guarded until I get to know someone, and I don’t readily volunteer information about my life, but I will always, always, tell you the truth. I don’t play games, and you can trust me to be honest with you.” I want to tell her I have strong feelings for her. That I see us moving beyond friendship someday. But I don’t want to scare her or force her into acknowledging something before she’s ready to confront it. It feels hypocritical not to admit my feelings when I’ve just told her I’ll be honest, but I’m walking a tightrope here. One misstep and I could plunge to my death. “Like, right now, I really want to hold you.” I peer earnestly into her eyes. “Would that be okay?”

“My heart is going crazy,” she admits, and I silently fist pump the air. “You make me feel things I’ve never felt before, and I’m so freaking scared.”

“Ditto, sweetheart, and I would never do anything to hurt you or rush you into something you aren’t ready for.”

“I know that.” She audibly gulps as she moves her hand slowly up my chest and around my neck. “I think I…” She swallows and her anxiety is palpable. I wish I could eradicate it all, but she’s the only one who can control her reactions to others. Steely determination appears in her eyes, and she tips her beautiful face up. “I would like you to hold me. I’d like that a lot.”

Taking her other hand, I place it on my free shoulder before slowly reeling her into my body. Then I slide my arms around her waist and pull her in close. “Is this okay?” I ask, resting my cold cheek against hers.

“Yes,” she rasps, in a breathy voice, while I silently caution my dick to stay down because he’s excited to finally be close to her again. I’m terrified of getting hard and frightening her. I rub one out daily in the shower—to thoughts of the beauty in my arms—and that’s the only reason I can control my body’s natural reaction. It’s been months since I got laid, and my dick yearns to bury itself inside her warmth.

I bite back a sigh of contentment when she rests her head on my shoulder, and her warm breath ghosts over the skin on

my neck. Closing my eyes, I savor the feel of her in my arms, and that same intense, protective instinct washes over me. I want to bundle her up. Elisa and Romeo too, and keep them safe so nothing or no one ever hurts them again. The sentiment goes against everything I believe I wanted for my future, and I can't make sense of it, but I know what I'm feeling in my heart.

Conflicting emotions flow through my veins as I hold Serena close against the dark backdrop of a wintry Connecticut night, but there is nowhere else I would rather be. Holding her like this just feels so *right*. Like I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be.

After a couple of minutes, she pulls back, her red cheeks matching her rose-tipped nose. "Thank you," she whispers.

"You don't have to thank me. I wanted to hold you." Gingerly, I reach out, casually cupping one side of her face. "You are beautiful, Serena, and I love being with you." My tongue darts out, wetting my lips, and I'm veering into dangerous territory. "I care about you. Elisa and Romeo too. And I feel extremely protective toward all of you." It's way more than that, but that's as much as she can hear now. "Which is why you need to be honest with me. At all times. I can't help if you don't confide in me."

"It's hard for me to trust, Alesso." She removes her hands from my grip and wraps her arms around her torso. "But if I could trust anyone, it would be you."

"So, tell me what happened today."

Air whooshes out of her mouth, and I can visibly see her withdrawing. "It was nothing. Just my paranoia."

"Let me be the judge of that."

She stares at me for another few seconds before she relents. "I couldn't shake the feeling I was being watched, and it's freaked me out a little."

I nod slowly. "I felt apprehension too," I admit. "It's why I called one of the guys and had them come downtown to sweep the area."

“That’s what you were doing on your phone?”

“Yeah, but it was a false alarm. They didn’t find anyone or any evidence someone was following us.”

At the time, I believed I was overreacting.

But now I’m not so sure.

“Fuck, no,” Ben hisses, between gritted teeth, the following morning as we step out of our car and spot Anais waiting on the doorstep.

Anais is Salerno’s almost eighteen-year-old daughter, and she is the personification of trouble. The spoiled *mafioso principessa* believed she would marry Ben at some point, and she delighted in rubbing Sierra’s face in it. Though she knows Ben is married with a son, and he has no interest in her, Anais doesn’t stop throwing herself at him any chance she gets. “I do not have the patience to deal with her today,” Ben grumbles, motioning for *Ciro* to stay in the car.

“What the hell is she wearing?” I mutter under my breath as we approach. Anais is a beautiful girl—until she opens her mouth—but someone needs to tell her less is more. Her large tits are spilling out of a low-cut, red silk top that also ends high on her belly, showcasing a lot of toned skin. Her tiny silk shorts barely cover her ass, and I purposely avert my eyes. If she was my teenage daughter, I’d lock her in her room rather than have her shamelessly parading her nubile body around men who are mostly double or triple her age.

“She’s a knockout, but no made man with any shred of sanity would ever marry her. Salerno has his work cut out for him with that one,” Leo adds, grinning.

“As soon as things have blown over and Vegas is his again, I doubt he’ll have too much trouble finding a match for her,” Ben says. “She’ll hoodwink some poor sucker, and he’ll only

realize what he's gotten into after the wedding. Good luck to any man taming that brat."

We walk side by side toward the door as Anais preens in Ben's direction, thrusting her chest out and pouting her full lips. It's part comical, part sad, and I wonder how much of her behavior is due to having no mother growing up. Apparently, Salerno got rid of her mother when she was very young, and he's raised her alone ever since.

It definitely shows.

Leo and Ben helped Salerno purchase this property after he fled Vegas. The large two-story mansion straddles the borders between New York and Connecticut, and it's prime real estate. The old stables were converted to apartments by the previous owner, which came in handy. We arranged for the remaining members of Salerno's men to be flown here, and the grounds are teeming with made men. The last thing Anais should be doing is flaunting her body in front of them.

Like I said. She's trouble with a capital T.

"Bennett. What a wonderful surprise." Anais leans seductively against the doorway, her gaze skating over Ben from head to toe, her eyes filled with unconcealed want. I cringe a little for the boss.

"Anais." Ben's tone is clipped, and he avoids looking at her, purposely looking over her head. "Where is your father?"

"I'm here." Salerno materializes behind his daughter, wearing a black suit with matching dress shirt and shoes. He's standing tall, all trace of his serious injuries now a thing of the past. "Cover yourself up." He slaps his daughter on the ass and shoos her out of the way. "Show Don Mazzone some respect, *principessa*."

"Of course, Daddy," she coos while ogling Ben. She wiggles her fingers at him before skipping up the stairs, and I swear I feel the relief oozing from the boss.

Salerno chuckles as he watches her departing back, enjoying her antics. "She's a live wire. She gets that from her mother, and her half-sister is a fully-fledged bona-fide bitch,"

he adds, stepping aside to let us enter. “Thank fuck I married her off and washed my hands of her a long time ago.”

I have no clue who he’s talking about, and I don’t care either. We are here to discuss the plan to reclaim Vegas. As far as I’m concerned, the quicker we get Salerno and his mob out of our territory, the better.

We trail Salerno into his office, taking the high-backed leather chairs in front of the roaring fire. I accept a scotch although I have zero intention of drinking it. We’re made men. We drink a lot, and drinking during meetings is not uncommon. But come on. It’s eight a.m. That’s early, even for *mafioso*. Still, to refuse would be insulting to Don Salerno, and he’s known for his short fuse. I have a role to play, and I’ll play it.

“I don’t believe we’ve met.” Salerno eyes me over the rim of his glass, and though I want to punch him in the face for the slight, I give him a tight smile instead. I’ll let Ben handle this because I’m sure he intends for me to observe and not intervene, unless asked. He has made it clear no one is to know I’m training to potentially become his future *consigliere*. I won’t jeopardize my future

“Come now, Saverio.” Ben drills him with a sharp look. “You know who Alessandro is.”

A smirk curves the corners of Salerno’s twisted mouth. “I’ll rephrase. Why is your wife’s bodyguard here?”

“Who I bring to our meetings is none of your concern,” Ben coolly replies. “Unless you no longer want my help?”

Saverio chuckles, crossing an ankle over his knee. “Touchy this morning, aren’t we?”

“Ben has a full schedule today,” Leo says. “I suggest we get down to business.”

“I see you got out of bed on the wrong side too,” Salerno says, because the man’s clearly an idiot. “Drink up.” He jerks his head at Leo’s untouched scotch. “It might help to loosen you up.”

“So would my foot up your ass.” Shrugging, Leo puts his drink down on the side table. “I enjoy my scotch but not for breakfast.”

Ben’s mouth twitches, and I set my drink down when he does. Salerno is now the only one drinking, and I can tell he’s pissed, but his hands are tied. He needs Ben and The Commission, so he’s got to bite his tongue. I bet it’s the first time in his life he’s had to do it, and it grates on him.

We spend the morning going over the plans Ben and The Commission have drawn up. I play devil’s advocate, as requested, challenging and questioning the strategy, and we make changes until everyone is satisfied.

By the time we are leaving, several hours later, Salerno’s mood has vastly improved. “Stay for lunch. I insist.” He slaps Ben on the shoulder, grinning like a maniac. The scar on his face pulls tight, and he’s like a walking nightmare. It doesn’t seem to hamper his ability to get women though. Go figure. Ben would have probably accepted the lunch invitation except Anais chooses that exact moment to saunter down the stairs in a minuscule, tight black dress and heels that wouldn’t look out of place in a nightclub.

“I thought we’d go out for lunch, Daddy.”

“Great idea.” Salerno pulls her in close, smacking a loud kiss off her cheek. “You look ravishing, and I should show you off.”

“We’ve got plans,” Ben says. “Maybe some other time.”

Anais steps forward, placing her hand on Ben’s chest and tilting her head up. “You could change your plans,” she purrs, and I’m sure she thinks she’s seductive. But it’s like Kim Kardashian attempting to impersonate Marilyn Monroe—all kinds of wrong and nothing remotely sexy about it.

“I can’t.” Ben pries her hand off him like it’s poisonous. Leo chuckles under his breath. Ben can barely hide his intolerance for her.

“Anais.” Salerno’s tone holds warning, along with his expression, and it’s good to see he doesn’t always give her free

rein to do whatever she pleases. “Stop disrespecting Don Mazzone. You can’t go around touching made men.”

“Bennett and I have a special relationship.” Her words are loaded with innuendo, and Leo’s not laughing anymore.

“Control your daughter,” Ben says, glaring at Salerno. “And ensure she’s locked in her room the next time I call or you and I are going to have a falling out.”

A muscle clenches in Salerno’s jaw, but he’s smart enough not to go there. “My apologies. She means no harm.”

“I very much doubt that,” Leo supplies, folding his arms and slanting a stern look in her direction. “That mouth is going to get you in big trouble one day.”

“We need to leave,” Ben says, subtly shaking his head at Leo. “We’ll be in touch,” he tells Salerno before we exit the house.

“You shouldn’t have stopped me,” Leo says as we walk toward the car, and *Ciro* starts up the engine. “Someone needs to tell that girl to button her mouth and shut her legs.”

“There is no point going to war over *Anais*,” I say, my feet crunching on the gravel as we approach our car. “We have bigger problems to worry about.”

“Exactly.” Ben agrees, opening the front passenger door. “And though Salerno is weakened right now, we can’t afford to lose him as an ally. He owes me one now, and I know the time will come where I’ll need to call it in.”

The next few weeks pass by in a whirlwind of activity. I spend every evening and most every Saturday afternoon training and strategizing with Ben while the preparatory steps for reclaiming Vegas are put into action. Phillip hasn’t unearthed any information on my birth father yet, so he’s digging deeper. I still believe it’s a futile task, but I’m self-aware enough to understand my subconscious wants to believe that. I’m not

sure I'm ready to learn the truth about my father. I have a sixth sense I am better off not knowing.

"Come in," Ben calls out from his home office Friday night as we are finalizing plans for the trip to Vegas tomorrow.

Serena steps into the room, and my heart does a funny little jump in my chest. She is wearing tight-fitting jeans, which hug her long, slim legs, and a shapeless sweater that hides her womanly curves. Her reddish-brown hair is pulled up in a messy bun on top of her head, and she hasn't got a scrap of makeup on. Yet she is still the most gorgeous creature I have ever seen.

I shove my hands in the pockets of my pants to avoid the almost insurmountable urge to touch her. I haven't had much downtime lately, and I have missed our nightly talks over a glass of wine. Ben keeps me occupied most nights, and I haven't gotten to spend as much time with her as usual. I know she is seeing a therapist now, which is a good thing. But I have also noticed she seems even more withdrawn and quiet, and I wish I knew how to support her. I haven't wanted to pry so I haven't asked her about it, hoping she might volunteer to share what's going on in her life. Yet, we are rarely alone, so there has been no opportunity to talk.

"I see you are in the middle of things. I can talk to you another time," she says, turning to leave.

"It's fine, Serena." Ben straightens up and walks toward her. "I have time. Do you wish to speak in private?"

She knots her hands in front of her in an anxious tell, and I'm instantly on high alert. "Has something happened?" I walk to her side, my brow puckering.

She shakes her head. "It's nothing like that. I was just wondering if Ben had discovered anything in Sicily." Her eyes latch on to mine for a few seconds, and color rises in her cheeks.

Ben clears his throat, watching both of us with an astute gaze. "I was planning on talking with you about it when we returned from Vegas on Sunday, but now is as good a time as

any.” He steps aside, gesturing for her to take a seat on the couch in front of the fire.

“I’m going to steal another piece of cake,” Leo says, moving past us. “I’ll be back.”

“Don’t feel the need to leave on my account,” Serena says.

Leo smiles, rubbing a hand over his toned stomach. “I never could resist Natalia’s apple cake.”

I smother a snort of hilarity as I wonder if apple cake is code for a certain part of Natalia’s anatomy. I know Leo has a past with her. A few things slipped out when he was drunk one time, but I’m not sure if he remembers telling me. Leo is one of the good guys, and we’re close. But we don’t go deep when it comes to women, so I don’t know exactly what’s going through his mind when it comes to Ben’s sister. One only has to look at the way Leo stares at her to know he’s hopelessly in love with her.

I feel for the guy.

And I’m terrified I could be turning into him.

Leo closes the door after him, and I take a seat beside Serena on the couch, keeping distance between us though I wish I could slide my arm around her and hold her hand. Ben sits on the leather chair in front of us, softening his features as he looks at his sister-in-law. “You can rest easy, Serena. There is no one in Sicily who poses a threat.”

“There isn’t?” Disbelief underscores her tone.

“Your father was the youngest of three brothers. His eldest brother died from TB when he was four, and the middle brother died when he was gunned down at twenty-eight. He had a young son and a daughter with his wife at the time of his death. His son died in a boating accident when he was eighteen. The daughter lives in Spain now with her non-*mafioso* husband and their family.”

“That’s actually really sad,” she says. “There is so much death in our family.”

“Things might be altering in our world, but unfortunately, that’s the one constant that remains unchanged,” Ben says, drumming his fingers on the arm of his chair.

“What about cousins or other distant relatives?” I ask.

“Phillip is checking into the extended family line now, but I don’t expect to uncover any threats. The DeLuca line is pretty much extinct now. And even if there was an heir somewhere, they have lost power and control in Sicily. The Cinisi *famiglia* owns the territory there. I have reached out to their don, and I intend to broker a friendly alliance with him. We have a mutual interest in ensuring the DeLuca line remains powerless in the region. He can be our eyes and ears on the ground.”

“Thanks, Ben.” Serena’s shoulders visibly relax. “That’s a weight off my shoulders.”

“No one is getting to you, Serena,” I add. “You’re safe.”

She turns to face me, and the bruising shadows under her eyes are hard to miss. She looks exhausted, and I wonder what horrors are keeping her awake at night. “Safety within the mafia is an oxymoron,” she says, standing. “But I appreciate the sentiment.” Her soft smile bounces between the boss and me. “Good night, and good luck tomorrow.”

“When did it happen the first time?” Pamela asks in the same gentle tone she uses every session with me. I suppose it’s the voice and the face she uses with all her clients. Though I seriously doubt anyone is as messed up as me.

“One month after our wedding,” I croak as pain climbs up my throat. This is my third therapy session, and it’s only getting harder. In the weeks since I first began revealing the secrets buried deep inside me to a virtual stranger, I have been more on edge than usual. I can’t sleep because I’m too afraid to succumb to slumber. Terrified of what repressed memory may rise to the surface while I’m unconscious.

Reliving some of the most traumatizing moments of my life is both cleansing and debilitating. It feels like every time I claw a few inches up the dark tunnel toward the light, I am dragged back. Weighted down by my past and the resulting torrent of emotions unearthed along with the recollections of the abuse I suffered at my dead husband’s hands.

I reach for my glass of water on the coffee table with trembling hands. Pamela notices, but the same steadfast, calm, encouraging smile remains on her face as she retrieves a few items from the end table beside her, handing them to me. “These might help to soothe you,” she says as I put my glass down and accept the heavy pillow and soft, squishy ball. Placing the weighted pillow on my lap, I run my fingers back and forth across the deep purple material. It’s velvety soft on each side with a corduroy strip in the middle. The contrasting sensation is pleasant as I continue to touch the pillow, and I

feel myself relaxing. Sinking back into the couch, I settle one hand on the pillow while I clutch the squishy ball between my other hand. Pamela waits patiently for me to compose myself, and I will my shaking to subside.

“It’s so embarrassing to admit this,” I whisper, forcing my eyes to meet hers.

“There is no judgment here, Serena. And no pressure. If you would rather we didn’t talk about this now, that is fine.” The older woman tilts her head to the side, smiling serenely at me. Her hair is like spun gold, the thick masses pulled into an elegant chignon, and she carries herself with poise, in a way which reminds me of my mom. Her warm brown eyes convey kindness, and her gentle manner gives me the courage to go on.

“He told me I needed lessons in how to please a man.” I continue, squeezing the ball in my fist. “Apparently, I wasn’t responding the appropriate way when he raped me.” Tears burn the back of my eyes, but I latch on to my anger instead.

“How often was that?” she quietly asks.

“Every night.” I squeeze my eyes shut to ward off the memories, but it’s futile. There is no escaping them now I have opened the door. “From the moment he ripped my wedding dress off the first night and thrust inside me without any regard for my comfort or my needs or my fear.”

“You must have been so afraid.”

“I was.” I bite the inside of my mouth. “I was a virgin forced to marry a man as old as my father. While Alfredo had been kind and patient during our engagement, he showed his true colors on our wedding night.” A shudder works its way through me. “It hurt, and I cried. He slapped me and told me I was a mafia wife now and to start acting like it.” I gulp back the bile swirling at the base of my throat. “He told me the next night, when he forced his way inside me again, that he wanted an heir and he expected me to get pregnant quickly.” I wrap my arms around myself as an icy chill seeps into my bones. “It wasn’t enough that I lay there and let him do what he wanted to me. He wanted me to like it. To touch him in ways that

pleased him.” I feel sick as I remember it. “When it was clear I wasn’t making the effort, he hit me, careful not to leave bruises in visible places. Then one night, he dragged me into our bedroom and he...he had a woman on our bed. She was sitting up on her knees facing the door, completely naked, grinning as we entered the room.”

My breath oozes out in panicked spurts as the memory rampages through me. It’s as if I’m back there now, terror racing through my veins as all manner of thoughts flew through my head. “He stripped me naked and tied my wrists to a chair. Then he put me at the end of the bed and made me watch as they fucked.” A sob rips from my throat, and I pause for a second to calm down. “I shut my eyes, but every time I did, he punched me until I could barely breathe. So, I gave in and watched.” I avert my eyes as heat warms my cheeks. “He always chose enthusiastic women who couldn’t get enough. And they were always blonde. I only found out the significance of that later. He always chose big-breasted women too, and he liked to taunt me for having a B-cup chest. It wasn’t enough to humiliate me by fucking other women in front of me while I was forced to watch and learn. He had to belittle me too. Mocking my performance in bed, criticizing my looks, and calling me out on my failure to get pregnant.”

“Do you want to take a break?” Pamela asks, leaning forward to hand me a tissue.

I take it from her, mopping up the silent tears I hadn’t felt rolling down my face. I shake my head, preferring to expunge it all. “He used to examine me in front of them,” I whisper, and fresh repulsion spins in my gut. “He would stick his fingers inside me and call me defective when he found me dry.”

“He expected you to be aroused watching him fuck other women?” Pamela asks, a hint of horror laced in her tone.

I nod, sniffing. “He thought it would turn me on when it had the completely opposite effect. I couldn’t tolerate his touch. I flinched when he came close to me, even if we were fully clothed. It only enraged him more.” I bend over as intense pain lashes me from all sides, and I’m in agony. I

clench and unclench my hand around the stress ball. “Then he began taunting me about being a lesbian. He couldn’t fathom that I loathed him and how my body visibly cowered from his. To most women, he was an attractive older man. The women he fucked looked like they enjoyed it. But to me, he was the most hideous creature. A monster sent straight from the fiery pits of hell to torture me.”

“I think we should stop.” Pamela moves over to the couch beside me. Very carefully, she places her hands down on mine. “You’re distressed, and I think that’s enough for today.”

“He made them touch me,” I whisper, admitting one of my biggest shames. I can’t stop now. I need to get it all out because I don’t think I’m brave enough to revisit this again. “The women,” I clarify, and this time, Pamela can’t disguise the horror on her face. “To test his lesbian theory and to humiliate me further. He would make them use their fingers and their mouths on me.” A harsh half laugh, half sob escapes my lips. “He got even more enraged when they couldn’t bring me to climax. I suffered one of my worst beatings the first time it happened. He cracked a couple of my ribs and broke my arm. After, he whisked me overseas on a belated honeymoon so my family wouldn’t see what he had done to me.”

Pamela pats my hand while she stares into my eyes, her gaze swimming with compassion. “There is nothing wrong with how you responded, Serena, and you have no reason to feel ashamed. Your reactions were normal and understandable. Your husband was the one in the wrong, and you were powerless to stop him.”

“You mean weak.”

She shakes her head. “You are the very definition of strong.”

I bark out a harsh laugh. “If you were in my head, you would not say that. I let him win. Every time I let him hurt me was another win for that bastard.”

“You didn’t *let* him, Serena. He forced all of this on you. You were not complicit in the abuse, and that is something we

need to work on.” She pats my hand again. “And he didn’t win. You survived despite all the ways he tried to break you.”

“This doesn’t feel like much of a victory to me,” I admit in a trembling voice. My lower lip wobbles, and moisture pools in my eyes as tears threaten again. “And I’m so broken I don’t know if I can ever feel whole again.”

A soft rap on the door to our private rooms shakes me from the destructiveness of my inner thoughts. I’ve been trapped in my head since I returned from my therapy session earlier, and it’s not a pleasant place to be.

“Come in,” I say, hoping it’s Alesso but praying it isn’t him too. I can’t understand how I crave the comfort of his presence when I equally dread it because I don’t want him to see me like this. The conflicting sentiments are a regular internal battle, and it feels like I’m at war with myself constantly.

My sister steps into the room, and I’m both relieved and disappointed. “Hey.” She carries a bottle of white wine and a box of chocolates from that French chocolate shop Natalia loves. “I thought you might like some company, but if you’d rather be alone, that’s fine too.”

“I’m pretty lousy company today, in case you hadn’t noticed.”

She closes the door and pads toward me. “I noticed. It’s why I wanted to check in with you when the kids were asleep.” She walks to my small kitchen and grabs two wineglasses. Sitting beside me on the couch, she pours two large glasses and hands one to me. “You don’t have to tell me. We can just watch TV or sit here drinking, but I didn’t want you to be alone.”

Concern is etched upon her face, and tenderness blooms in my chest. My sister has the biggest heart. “I love you,” I whisper, leaning in to hug her.

“I love you too, Rena, and I’m here for you.” She tucks my hair behind my ears, inspecting my face. “Is therapy tougher than you thought it would be?”

I ease out of our embrace, lifting my wineglass to my lips for a quick sip before replying. “It is. It’s been hard reliving everything.”

“Is it helping yet?”

“It will be worse before it gets better. I have spent years denying shit to myself. Not wanting to think about it because it made me feel so damn weak. Shaking that mentality is one of the hardest things. I keep thinking of all the things I could’ve done differently.”

“It’s not your fault, and you did your best. It’s not like you had many options. Look at Mom. She was trapped too. You need to cut yourself some slack.”

“Do you know Saskia was supposed to marry Alfredo?” I tuck my legs up to my chest and settle into the arm of the couch.

Sierra’s pretty green eyes widen. “What?” she splutters. “Is that true?”

I nod. “I only found out after I married Alfredo.”

“It kinda makes sense,” Sierra muses, after a couple beats of quiet contemplation. “She was the eldest, and he held a position of power. More powerful than Felix.” Saskia had married Felix Barretta, Thomas’s son, who was destined to become The Outfit’s next *consigliere*. Until he was gunned down in cold blood.

“It does, but I never stopped to question it when Dad told me I was promised to Alfredo.”

“How did you find out?”

“Alfredo told me. He loved reminding me of all the ways I was a failure, and he taunted me with the fact I was second best.” Anger burns in my blood as I recall the conversation. “I told him I would happily trade places with Saskia, and he threw me halfway across the room. I slammed into the grand

piano, whacking the side of my head against the edge, before I slumped to the ground. I was bleeding and crying when he crouched in front of me and told me he regularly fucked Saskia behind Felix's back."

Sierra's face inflames with righteous anger. "That fucking bitch!" Her nostrils flare. "That's why you fell out," she surmises, but I shake my head.

"Honestly, I couldn't have cared less about the sex. If she wanted to fuck that monster, she was welcome to him. I didn't even care how much he was obsessed with her." Choosing big-busted blondes made so much sense after that revelation. I guess he was imagining all his whores were Saskia when he fucked them. "It was how Saskia set me up. That's what I couldn't get over."

"Tell me everything," she demands, leaning toward me.

"I confronted her when I found out she was screwing Alfredo, and she told me it was my own fault for not satisfying my husband. I threatened to tell Felix, and she turned nasty. She told me it wouldn't take much to kill me and Alfredo needed little motivation to end my life. She gloated as she told me how she was supposed to marry him, but she didn't want to be saddled with an old man for a husband. She knew she'd be a laughingstock. She also knew he liked to hit women, and no man was laying a finger on her." I make air quotes with my fingers, quoting her verbatim.

"So, she got Dad to agree she could date for a while before the official engagement announcement would be made," I continue explaining, "and her plan all along was to have fun dating and then fuck Felix so her engagement to Alfredo wouldn't go ahead. She had deemed him the most worthy of potential other mafia husbands though she didn't really care much for him. He was a means to an end. When Ben came along, and they discovered his heritage, she was going to trap him, only he got out in the nick of time."

"I'm glad she's rotting in the ground," Sierra hisses, grinding her teeth. "She was poison, and she didn't care who she hurt."

“She didn’t. She knew Alfredo would be promised to me next. She knew what my life would be like, and she didn’t care as long as it wasn’t her life. She didn’t even warn me. She let me marry him knowing what was lying in wait for me.”

“And she still fucked him,” Sierra adds, vibrating with rage.

“Because she liked the feeling of power it gave her. Knowing my husband was obsessed with her and she was the woman he wished he was married to.”

“God, Rena. Why didn’t you tell me?”

I shrug, taking another mouthful of wine. “I was pregnant with Elisa by then, and you were in college. You were ignorant to this world, and I wanted to keep it that way.”

“That’s why you pulled away from me,” Sierra muses, her brow puckering.

“I was trying to protect you. It wasn’t because I wanted to drift apart.”

“Always trying to protect others,” she murmurs, shaking her head sadly. “Promise me you won’t do that again. We’re sisters. We need to lean on one another. I want to be here for you in the way you have always been there for me.”

“You helped in more ways than you knew,” I truthfully reply. “And I couldn’t have gotten through the past few months without you and Ben.”

“Saskia didn’t know what it meant to be a sister. She was far too narcissistic and vain.” Sierra moves over and wraps her arms around me. “But I’m here for you, and you are going to get through this, sis. You are way stronger than you give yourself credit for.”

I wish I could believe that, but for now, I savor my sister’s words and her comfort, willing my heart to believe I can get through this intact and come out the other side a better version of myself.

ALESSO

“I feel like James fucking Bond,” one of Salerno’s men says as we suit up in an empty warehouse a few miles from Saverio’s Vegas estate.

“James Bond always gets the girl, and he always emerges victorious,” Salerno says, strapping a Kevlar around his upper torso. He jabs a meaty finger in the man’s direction. “And so will we.”

“Fuck yeah.” Leo buckles his black pants. “We’re going to annihilate these Bratva bastards.”

We are all wearing black pants and long-sleeved shirts with bulletproof vests. It’s part of our stealth strategy. Gambini and the Russians are holed up in all of Salerno’s strongholds, like sitting ducks waiting for us to attack. Except they won’t expect us this late at night and by the time they realize they’re under siege, it will be too late to stop us.

Dark streaks paint the sky outside the warehouse as night rolls in, and I stretch my arms out over my head, clenching and unclenching my fists, as anticipation mixes with the adrenaline flowing through my veins.

“I know you didn’t need to be here, and I’m grateful for the show of support,” Salerno says, eyeballing Ben in a rare glimpse of sincerity.

It’s the truth. Ben and Leo could have left it to our *soldati* and *capos* to handle. Thanks to The Commission, we have men from *famiglias* within Arizona and California hiding out in similar warehouses and outbuildings around Salerno’s

properties and businesses around Vegas, ready to launch a coordinated attack when the signal is given. We weren't needed. Hell, I'm not even part of the main rank and file right now, but none of us wanted to miss the opportunity to spill some Russian blood.

And this is the way Ben rolls.

It's why he has earned the undying loyalty of his men.

"I won't forget this," Salerno adds.

"I won't let you," Ben coolly replies. "You owe me."

"I am well aware," Salerno says, a familiar scowl returning to his scarred, pockmarked face. He doesn't like to be reminded how the tables have turned. He watches the men packed into the warehouse as everyone gets ready for war, flexing his arms and rolling his shoulders. "Gambini is mine," he grits out through clenched teeth.

"Ours," Russo—Salerno's elderly *consigliere*—amends. "He betrayed both of us."

"He betrayed all of you," I say, my eyes darting around the room. "Every man here has beef with your underboss for selling you out. Every man here has lost someone in this battle. When you kill him, you kill him for all of us."

Salerno clamps a heavy hand on my shoulder. "Well said, boy."

My fist itches with the need to punch his lights out. If I was Leo, I'd probably retort with some old-man comment, but I grind my teeth to the molars and leash my anger.

"Listen up," Ben shouts, instantly commanding the attention of the room. "Weapons are in the back, and every man must wear the headgear supplied. The goggles have a thermal image sensor installed that means we can see in the dark up to a three-hundred-yard radius. The battery charge is three hours, so only put the goggles on as we are leaving."

We expect the battle to be bloody and protracted because most of the Russians are holding fort up the road at Salerno's vast property. We have a lot of ground to cover, but thanks to

our extensive drone surveillance over the past few weeks, we have strong intel on where Gambini has men stationed around the house. The raids on the other properties should be handled quickly, and once those places are back in *Cosa Nostra* hands, surplus men will be sent here.

We go over the plans one final time with the capos, ensuring each group knows their position. Then we wait.

Ben and Salerno check in with the capos in other areas a couple of hours later, and the time for action has arrived. I pull the black balaclava over my head and face, positioning the high-tech night-vision goggles on top of my head. Ben's internal tech team created the lightweight ski mask and goggles for scenarios like this, but this is the first time we are testing them in the field. Dressed all in black, with our ability to see in the dark, we plan to sneak onto the grounds through an old drainage tunnel and surprise the enemy.

"This is it," Salerno shouts, his deep voice booming across the warehouse. "Our moment of retribution has come. Let's make these Russian scum pay!" he hollers, and a rousing chorus of approval bounces off the walls of the derelict building.

"Stick to the plan. Stick to your capo and your team. Do *not* deviate," Ben adds, projecting his voice. "Kill and move forward until they're all dead."

Salerno thumps Ben in the shoulder, grinning like the psychopath he is. "Let's do this." He turns to Russo. "It's time to go home."

"Fuck. This place reeks," Leo grumbles as we climb down the rusted ladder into the old sewer tunnel at the rear of Salerno's property. Saverio wasn't aware this sewerage system even existed until Ben had Phillip locate the original plans for the property. Using drones, we discovered this was a viable way onto the grounds of the house, but no one prepared us for the ghastly smell.

“I don’t even want to think about what could be down here,” I murmur. Or wonder about how much worse the rotten-egg smell would be without our face coverings.

“The enemy will probably drop like flies the second they smell us,” he deadpans, and I chuckle.

“Wouldn’t that be a result.”

“Focus,” Ben says, coming up behind us. “We can’t afford to let our guard down. Not even for a second.”

Suitably chastised, we make our way along the narrow stone wall that runs on each side of the barren sewer. The stench gets worse the farther we advance, and my nose scrunches as unpleasant reminders of my brief time living on the streets resurrect in my mind. Those were dark days I don’t like revisiting. Scuttling sounds raise all the hairs on the back of my neck, but I avoid thinking about rats and concentrate on the task at hand.

“The others are in position and ready for the signal,” Ben says, updating Salerno through the earpieces they are both wearing to keep communication open. Salerno, Russo, and their men are on the opposite side of the tunnel, and excitement is palpable in the air.

There’s nothing like a bloody *mafioso* battle to get the adrenaline flowing.

When we reach the end of the tunnel, scouts are sent up the ladder, through the grate, and onto the grounds to scan the area. A couple minutes later, Salerno presses on the device secured to his ear. “It’s clear,” he says, his loud voice carrying across the gloomy dank space. “We’ll head up first.”

Brando makes a gagging sound as we wait to exit the tunnel, and I grin behind my mask. Once we are all outside, we split into our assigned groups and take off running in different directions. Salerno’s property is vast, and there’s a lot of acreage to cover. I’m with the boss, Leo, Brando, and his crew of ten soldiers. We race around the perimeter in a northwesterly direction with weapons armed and ready and our eyes peeled for the enemy.

The first couple of guys we come upon are easy targets, and Ben and Leo snap their necks before they've even realized they're under attack. That all changes a few minutes later when gunshots ring out, peppering the air with bullets.

Our element of surprise is gone, like we knew it would be the closer we got to the house. The large sprawling structure is clearly visible in the distance, surrounded by tall trees and dense woodland at the rear, rising ominously from the landscape like some creepy haunted mansion. The main body of the building is three stories, propped between various-sized turrets that stretch skyward. The gray stone brick façade is barely visible behind dense ivy crawling up the walls on all sides.

We sprint toward the house, watching for other guards on both sides as we run. Up ahead, Salerno and his motley crew converge on the enemy from the other side, and it's game on.

"Fuck me," Leo says as we approach the front of the building, and I know he's not referring to the stream of Russian mobsters pouring out the front doors. The house is like some twisted gothic mansion conjured from a nightmare, complete with a monstrous fountain out front that is decorated with hideous statues of gargoyles, werewolves, demons, and other mythical creatures.

"This place is creepy as fuck. I almost feel sorry for Anais having to grow up here," I admit before firing my weapon at the brawny Russian charging toward me. Men spill out onto the front lawn from the house and the main outbuilding, swarming us in droves. I shoot at will, ducking and diving while keeping Leo and Ben in my sights. This location is remote, but it'll be a miracle if the cops don't appear at some point with the volume of gunfire crackling through the air and the bodies already dropping like flies.

We push forward slowly, and I narrowly miss getting shot when a barrage of bullets sails over us from above. Behind us, our team of snipers swings into immediate action, retaliating and trading fire with the Russians perched in the turrets. Bullets whizz over our heads as we continue the good fight on the ground. The Russians are everywhere now, coming at us

from all angles, though it looks like our numbers are evenly matched.

I briefly glance in Salerno's direction, and he's like a man possessed, swinging an axe—a goddamned *axe*—at anyone in his vicinity. I punch a guy moving in on me from the left as I chuckle at the Bratva who are actually *running away* from Saverio. He's a complete maniac, and he could probably take them out single-handedly, such is his thirst for revenge.

Still, I'll rest easier when our backup arrives.

Leo covers me while I reload my rifle, pressed into the alcove behind one of the large turrets. Lifting my head, I spot a creeper sneaking up on Ben. The boss has a guy in a headlock, and he's angling to get the right position to snap his neck, so he hasn't noticed the second guy coming at him. There isn't time to warn him, so I shove Leo out of the way and fire, taking the guy out with a bullet in the side of his skull just as he aims his gun in Ben's direction. The boss whips around, nodding in my direction, as he snaps the other guy's neck, and it's lights out for the Bratva bastard.

Leo and I rejoin the melee. A guy lunges at me, hands poised to curl around my neck, but I swing my leg out, taking him down in an unexpected move. Pointing my gun, I pop a bullet in his forehead, and the light instantly dies in his eyes. A callused hand wraps around my neck from behind, and I shove my elbow into the man's gut while thrusting my head back into his face with force. The dude stumbles, and I grab his weakened arm, throwing him over my shoulder. The stocky guy lands on the gravel driveway with an oomph, and I kick him in the balls for fun while I plant a nice, neat hole in his head.

All around me, men are fighting for supremacy, and broken, bullet-ridden bodies litter the ground. We knew we couldn't get through this day without casualties, but I hate seeing men lose their lives because Salerno was too pigheaded to heed Ben's warning about the Russians.

So much needless waste of life.

Sweat glides down my back as the fight continues, and most everyone has downed weapons and is using their fists now. Ben hollers for Leo and me to follow him, pointing in Salerno's direction. Punching the guy in front of me, I kick him in the gut before yanking his head back and slitting his throat. I drop him to the ground and race after Leo, jumping over the motionless bodies lining the space in front of the open entrance doors.

A few blacked-out vans come careening up the driveway and screech to a halt behind us. We swing around, with our guns out, ready to handle anything the enemy throws at us, because we may not be the only ones with a backup plan. Doors slide open, and I breathe a sigh of relief when our reinforcements jump out, instantly swarming the Russians. They are considerably outnumbered now, and the battle is entering its final stages.

"Come on," Ben yells. "They've got this. Let's head inside."

Salerno charges through the front door of his house, firing from a gun in each hand, and we reload our weapons, grinning conspiratorially as we follow him inside.

ALESSO

Salerno strong-arms me into the room where his men are enjoying the spoils of war. “Have a drink. Pick a whore,” he says, waving his arms around the large room like a triumphant king. In the past, I’m guessing this room was a traditional ballroom, but Salerno has transformed the space into a den of iniquity. The walls are painted a garish red, and thick black and gold drapes cover the windows, shielding the festivities from prying external eyes. Overhead, the antique chandeliers are covered in some type of black mesh material casting a creepy lens over the proceedings.

All the furniture is black leather, and there are various stripper poles and sex equipment dotted around the room. A fully stocked bar resides against the wall on the other side where the surviving made men are partying up a storm.

Everywhere I look, I see naked women—young sex slaves Salerno keeps for his personal use. God only knows what they have been subjected to these past few months under Russian control. Most look emaciated and weary beyond their years. Salerno’s men have them bent over couches and coffee tables and sprawled across sex machines as they fuck the last of the adrenaline from their system. The girls stare straight ahead with emotionless expressions, and it sickens me to my stomach.

No wonder Ben chose a torture session with Gambini over this. We are strictly anti sex trafficking in New York, and though Ben has pleaded his case with Salerno over the years, the asshole refuses to give up this part of his lucrative

business. Tales of mammoth drink- and drug-fueled orgies in Vegas are legendary within *mafioso* circles.

“The boss needs you,” Leo says, materializing at my side. He narrows his eyes as his gaze roams around the room.

“Tell Ben to leave the traitor and come celebrate,” Salerno says, slapping the ass of a skinny brunette with massive fake tits as she passes by tucked under the arm of a pot-bellied guy with a bad combover.

A woman with coppery hair shrieks as Salerno scoops her into his side. “Where’d you think you’re going?” He leers at her before grabbing her hand and shoving it down the front of his pants.

“And that’s our cue to leave,” I murmur, striding across the room with Leo trailing behind me.

“The men will be talking about this for years to come,” Leo says when we exit the room into the much quieter hallway.

“You’re not staying?” I inquire as we walk. Leo doesn’t do relationships either, and he’s not opposed to screwing whores.

He shakes his head. “There’s a difference between fucking whores who are into it and a girl who’s been kidnapped and forced into the sex trade. I might have indulged in Vegas a few times, but that was only to appease the asshole back there.” He jerks his head in the direction of the ballroom. “That shit ain’t my scene.”

“Glad to hear it,” Ben says, stepping out from the door that leads to the basement. He wipes his bloody hands on a towel while kicking the door shut with his foot. Before it closes, Gambini’s anguished howls waft up the stairs. Salerno really wants to make him pay so he has him strapped to a chair in the dungeon with his guts hanging out. “And our men will know after tonight it won’t be happening again.”

Disgust radiates from his eyes, and I know he’s not happy some of our soldiers are in there enjoying Salerno’s twisted hospitality. To refuse would have insulted the newly reinstated don, and Ben can’t afford to piss him off. Not now he finally

has all *Cosa Nostra* in the US under the control of The Commission.

Most of our *soldati* are just drinking and observing, but a few idiots are indulging in everything on offer, and their days are numbered. Intelligence is a quality Ben looks for in all of his men, and he's expecting them to use their smarts today. To party without shitting all over the values and qualities the boss has instilled in us. "I'm tempted to use my favor to force him into quitting the sex business." Ben says, throwing the dirty towel away. "But I don't want to be hasty either. We may need it, and he wouldn't go for it anyway."

"Did you get anything out of the traitor?" Leo asks as we walk in the opposite direction, away from the party room.

"Nothing. Gambini's loyal to the Bratva. I suspect he's probably been a plant for a while, and they were biding their time to strike." We follow Ben into Salerno's office. Leo walks to Saverio's liquor cabinet to fix us drinks while Ben and I drop onto a drab-green velvet couch, with suspicious-looking stains, positioned in the corner of the big room. Ben kicks his feet up onto the coffee table, stifling a yawn. "I wish we could get the fuck out of here and head home, but Salerno would not take kindly to it." I know he's anxious to get home to Sierra and Rowan, and this isn't how I wanted to spend my Saturday night either.

"We'll leave early." Leo places an unopened bottle of Old Rip Van Winkle on the coffee table along with three glasses. He grins as he opens the bottle, pouring generous measures of the expensive bourbon into our glasses. "Figure we're owed this after today."

Ben smirks as he raises his glass in a toast. "Hell yeah."

The door swings open, crashing against the wood paneling on the wall with a loud thud, and I grab my gun from my holster, jumping up as I spin around and face the entrance.

"Where's Daddy?" Anais asks, pushing into the room uninvited. A gleeful smile glides across her mouth when she spots Ben.

“He’s indisposed,” I say because no young girl should be subjected to the shit going down in that party room.

“How are you here?” Ben frowns as he stands. “Your father said you weren’t arriving home until tomorrow.”

“I got bored.” She drops the fur coat she’s wearing on the ground, sauntering toward the boss with clear wicked intent. “But I’m not bored anymore,” she purrs, lifting her hand to touch Ben.

Ben grabs her wrist before she can touch him. “Put your hand on me one more time and we have a problem. I’m sick of telling you I’m happily married and you can’t go around touching me or flirting with me. It’s disrespectful to me and my wife, and if you continue, you will cause issues for your father. Is that what you want?”

She bats her eyelashes and smiles. She really is something else. “Aw, Ben. You’re no fun. You know I’m only teasing.”

“Cut the crap, Anais,” Leo drawls. “No one’s buying it.”

“You should be hanging around kids your own age,” I say, putting my gun away and sitting back down. “And not hitting on men old enough to be your father.”

“He was my fiancé at one time,” she protests.

“I was never your fiancé. You’re a kid, and the last thing I wanted was a child bride. Whatever fantasy you have in your head ends now, Anais,” Ben says. “I mean it. I’m done putting up with your shit. Your father may indulge you, but I most certainly won’t.”

Color blooms on her cheeks, and for a split second, she looks embarrassed. But she recovers fast, and I’ve got to give her kudos for springing back so fast. She shrugs, pushing her shoulders back, as if it’s no big deal. “Alessandro is right,” she says. “You’re way too old anyway.” She peers into his face. “You’ve even got wrinkles. I’m not into creepy old dudes.”

Leo breaks into a coughing fit, attempting to disguise his hilarity. Ben has a face like thunder, and Anais’s mouth is digging her into an even bigger hole. “Girl, quit while you

can,” I suggest, gesturing toward the door. At this rate, she’ll be lucky to leave this room alive.

Her eyes glimmer with mischief, and she licks her lips as she blatantly checks me out.

Oh, hell to the no. This shit is not happening. I narrow my eyes at her in warning.

She twirls a lock of her hair as she drills me with a piercing look. “You’re not that much older than me and you’re still single, right?”

“Get lost, Anais,” Ben snaps, losing the tenuous control on his emotions. “Go to your room, and play with your dolls. There’s a good little girl.”

I stuff my hand in my mouth to conceal my laughter when I see the look on her face. Her eyes darken, and a muscle pops in her jaw as she shoots daggers at Ben. I think the infatuation has definitely ended. “There’s no need to be rude.” She flips Ben the bird before spinning on her heel and trotting out of the room, slamming the door behind her for extra dramatic effect.

Leo and I burst out laughing while Ben glowers at us. “Go ahead and laugh, assholes.” A smug grin plays over his lips as he points at me. “It won’t be long before you’re her new obsession.” Grabbing his glass, he leans back and grins.

“Fact,” Leo agrees after finishing his drink. He reaches for the bottle of bourbon. “We’re too old and wrinkly, but you, my friend, are fair game.” He flashes me a mad grin. “Good luck handling that!”

ALESSO

My cell phone rings as I stagger into my assigned bedroom, cussing as I knock my knee against a dresser while my fingers search the wall for the light switch. Locating it, I flick the switch, squinting as bright light floods the ghastly room. “Fuck my life,” I mumble, fumbling in my pants pocket for my phone as a full-body shudder works its way through me. I try to focus through bleary eyes as I extract my cell, and warmth swells in my chest when her picture lights up the screen. “My angel,” I say when I press the button to accept Serena’s call. “I miss you.”

Initial silence greets me.

“Rena?” I ask, and I have a sneaky suspicion I’m slurring my speech.

“Are you...drunk?”

“Maybe a little.” I kick off my unlaced boots and stagger toward the bed. “Fuck, this bedroom is straight from *The Addams Family*. I’m not kidding. It has this dark wooden four-poster bed, ugly, brown-patterned wallpaper that is half-peeling off the walls, and a moth-eaten rug I’m considering burning.” I look up at the copious cobwebs clinging to the corners of the room, and another shiver runs through me. “Honestly, I’m tempted to sleep in the garden.”

“Sounds creepy for sure.” There’s a brief pause. “Are you okay?” she asks. “I mean, you weren’t injured, right? You’re not drinking to blot out the pain.”

I feel her worry filtering down the line, and my heart swells behind my rib cage. “I’m fine, Rena,” I say, sniffing the heavy old-fashioned quilt covering the bed, wondering if I should take my chances and sleep on the floor. “Don’t worry about me, even if I’m glad you care.”

“Of course, I care. You’re my friend.”

“Ouch,” I truthfully reply, hissing as I stub my toe against the heavy leg of the bed. “Hit a guy where it hurts.” Taking a risk, I pull back the quilt, surprised to find crisp white bed linen. I always thought the Russians were smelly bastards, but maybe I’m being too judgmental.

“I didn’t mean to offend you. You know you’re important to me.” Serena backpedals, and I picture her at the house, chewing on a fingernail, like she does sometimes when she’s anxious.

I put my phone on speaker, setting it down on the bedside table while I shuck out of my clothes. “I’m only teasing, and you’re important to me too. So fucking important.” My brows knit together as I spot the time. It’s almost one a.m. here. “It’s nearly four o’clock there, Rena. What the hell are you doing awake?” I ask as I move across the room to switch off the light.

“I couldn’t sleep,” she quietly admits.

“Another nightmare?” I inquire, stumbling back toward the bed.

“What?” she splutters, and I hear the panic in her tone.

“Elisa mentioned you wake up screaming some nights,” I supply, climbing under the covers. “I was going to ask you about them, but we haven’t had much opportunity to talk lately.”

Stone-cold silence greets me, and for a couple seconds, I fear she’s hung up on me. “It wasn’t a nightmare,” she eventually says. “I would have to sleep for that to occur, and I couldn’t sleep because I...well, I was worried about you.”

Warmth spreads around my body, filling every cold part of me. “I should have called you, but Ben assured me Sierra

would update you and Natalia.” I had wanted to phone her, but I didn’t know if it would be crossing some boundary. I’m still treading on eggshells around Serena.

“She did, but I wanted to hear your voice. To know for myself you were okay.”

“I wish I was in Greenwich. If I was there right now, I would take you in my arms and never let you go.”

“I would like that,” she whispers in a barely there voice. “Even if it would terrify me.”

My heart hurts hearing the longing mixed with fear in her voice. “I don’t want to scare you.”

“You don’t.” She’s quick to reassure me. “It’s more the thought of it and what it represents.” There’s a brief pause, and I wait her out. “I just want to be normal,” she quietly admits. “To be a normal girl with normal responses and desires, but I fear that will never be me.”

I’m surprised she’s being so honest. Maybe she thinks I won’t remember because I’m a little drunk, but I have a memory like an elephant. And every word she has ever said to me is imprinted in my brain. I could never forget. “You could never be normal, Rena, because you’re too damn special to merge with the crowd. You will always stand head and shoulders above every other woman because you have this inner bravery and this quiet determination that differentiates you. I know you feel lost, but it won’t always be like this. You will find your way, and when you do, I’ll be there by your side, patiently waiting for you to take our friendship to the next level.”

She sucks in a small gasp, and I worry I’ve said too much. “I should go,” she says after a few beats of tense silence. “It’s late, and we both need our sleep.”

“Can we do something together when I get back?” I ask. “We should talk.”

“I...sure. I’ll talk to you tomorrow. Good night, Alesso.”

“Good night, Rena.”

Neither of us hangs up, and a chuckle rips from my lips. “You hang up first.”

“Alesso?” Indecision underscores her breathy tone.

“Yes?”

“I...uh.”

I wait with bated breath.

“Nothing. It’s nothing. I’ll see you in a few hours.”

She hangs up, and I feel a little dejected, wondering what it is she wanted to say but felt she couldn’t. I roll over onto my side, and my eyes have only just shut when the door creaks open, letting a sliver of light in from the hallway. Smothering a yawn, I force my eyes open and prop up on my elbows in time to see a pile of silk pool on the wooden floor. I blink profusely as I watch the figure walk across the room, sure my eyes must be deceiving me.

But nope.

Anais really has removed her silk robe, and she’s walking toward me, completely naked.

This cannot be happening.

“Stop right there,” I growl, sitting up and swinging my legs over the side of the bed. I purposely lower my eyes to the floor, avoiding her gaze. “What are you doing?”

“What does it look like I’m doing?” The floorboard creaks under her weight as she takes another step forward.

“Don’t come any closer.” I throw out my arm. “Do you want your father to murder me? Is that it?”

She makes a scoffing sound. “Daddy’s too busy drinking and fucking whores to even know his own name. I’m the very last thing on his mind right now.” The bed dips as she crawls onto it. “I have been blind. Too fixated on a stupid crush on Bennett to notice you, but I see you now, Alessandro. I see *all* of you.” Her hand touches my bare shoulder, and I jump out of the bed like I’ve been electrocuted.

“This isn’t happening, Anais,” I growl, stomping across the room, grateful for the bit of light that guides my way. I snatch up her robe and stalk back to her, sobering up instantly. I thrust it at her without looking at her naked body. “Put that on and get back to your room.”

“I don’t want to,” she says, and I hear the pout in her voice. “I’m going to sleep here.” The bed moves again, and I grind my teeth. “Look at me,” she says in that orchestrated seductive tone I’ve heard her use on Ben before. “I know you want to. I’m touching myself, imagining it’s your fingers sliding into my cunt and your hands pinching my nipples.”

Holy fuck. I need to get out of here. Keeping my gaze away from the bed, I grab my clothes off the floor and snatch my phone from the table. “I’m not interested, Anais, and you need to stop this.” I pull on my pants and shove my feet into my boots. “Keep this up, and one day, you’re going to flirt with the wrong man, and then you’ll be sorry.”

“Why aren’t you interested? What’s wrong with me?” A glimmer of vulnerability lingers behind her words, and I remind myself she’s only seventeen and impressionable.

I pull my shirt on and keep my back to her as I say, “There is nothing wrong with you, Anais. But you don’t need to do this. You should *stop* doing this. No decent man would respond to this behavior. The type who would are the type you don’t want to get mixed up with.” I can’t help feeling some sympathy for her because she has grown up in this house, exposed to things no young girl should be exposed to. From what I know, she’s had no motherly figure to help guide her, and it’s clear she’s craving attention. “You’re a beautiful girl, and you’re the daughter of a don. You command respect from your name alone, but you should want to command respect by your actions too.”

“You can help me,” she says. “And we can have fun while doing it. Daddy would never have to know.” She climbs off the bed and clutches my arm.

I still refuse to look at her because I don’t know if she put the damn robe back on. “This won’t happen, Anais. You’re too

young, and I'm in love with someone else." My mouth hangs open as the words leave my lips unbidden. I can't even blame the alcohol because Salerno's *principessa* bursting into my room sobered me up superfast.

Shit. Is it true? Am I in love with Serena? Is that what this feeling is?

"She doesn't have to know," she adds, refusing to give in. She's tenacious. I'll give her that. "It can be our little secret." Her hand moves lower on my body, and that's my cue to hightail it out of there.

"That's not how I roll. Take the room," I offer, walking toward the door. "I'll find someplace else to sleep."

Leo holds his stomach, cracking up laughing, as I fill him in on my eventful night last night, omitting the part where I blurted I loved Serena. "I would have paid good money to see that," he says in between bouts of laughter. "You poor sucker. She's going to flirt with you relentlessly now."

"She won't get the chance." I crick my neck from side to side, attempting to loosen my tense muscles. My back aches from sleeping on the floor of the van, but at least I didn't have to worry about horny *mafioso* princesses crawling over me during the night or ghosts of generations past creeping me out. "We're leaving shortly, and now Salerno has reclaimed his throne, there will be no need to see the little troublemaker again."

"Famous last words, my friend." Leo slaps me on the back, and I groan as pain radiates up and down my spine.

"I kinda feel sorry for her," I admit. "It's obvious she's desperate for attention."

"She's desperate all right," Leo says as we walk through the entrance hallway and take a left, heading in the direction of the kitchen. We're going to grab something to eat, round up our men, and get the fuck out of Dodge.

“This place gives me a bad case of the heebie-jeebies,” Leo admits, keeping pace with me, as we stroll along the dreary hallway filled with large gold-framed photos of family members dating back through the ages. I noticed these walls were bare last night, so someone—a staff member, most likely—must have hidden them for safekeeping and hung them up after Salerno regained control of his ancestral home. “I spent most of the night with one eye open, expecting to see ghosts.”

“You’re not wrong. I had similar thoughts.” I slam to a halt when I spot the photo of a teenage Saverio Salerno with a young boy who looks to be about eleven or twelve. Prickles of apprehension creep over my neck and sprout goose bumps on my arms as I stare at it in a kind of daze.

“What is it?” Leo asks, peering at the picture.

“Do you know who that is?” I ask, pointing at the boy. Leo shakes his head, his brows knitting together as he stares at the photo beside it of a good-looking woman with a baby.

“That’s Saverio with his younger brother when they were boys,” Russo confirms, coming up behind us.

“I didn’t know he had a brother,” Leo says. “Why have I never met him?”

“Amadeo was his half-brother,” Russo explains. “They had different moms. It’s why they looked nothing alike, but they grew up together, and they were close. Amadeo died when he was just eighteen. Taken out by Irish scum who had some beef with their old man.” He scrubs a hand over his chin. “It’s been twenty-six years, and Saverio still isn’t over it.”

“Is that Anais?” Leo asks, motioning toward the picture of the woman and baby. I’m not really paying attention because my brain is mentally calculating timelines, and my stomach is ready to expel the remaining alcohol sloshing inside.

“Yep. That’s our little *principessa* with the whore who birthed her.”

“Why does her mother look familiar?” Leo asks. I jerk my head to the image, desperately needing the distraction, but the woman is unfamiliar to me.

“Maybe you stuck your cock in her one time.” Russo guffaws. “That woman had more cock than most men have hot dinners.” He slaps me on the back. “You should hurry if you want breakfast. I doubt the food will last long.” He walks off, his shoes making a squelching sound on the old wooden floor as he retreats.

“You look pale,” Leo says. “You going to puke, lightweight?”

“I might,” I mumble, pulling my wallet out of my pocket, in a state of shock. “But not from drink.” I extract the dog-eared photo with shaky fingers, handing it to Leo.

His brow creases as he stares at the faded photo. “I don’t understand.” Lifting his head, his gaze jumps between the photo in his hand and the photo on the wall. “Why do you have a photo of Salerno’s brother in your wallet?” His puzzled gaze meets mine.

“I don’t.” Taking the photo back, I prod at the image. “That’s not Amadeo Salerno.” Panic swims up my throat as I force the words out. “That’s a photo of me as a kid.”

SERENA

“Find anything you like?” Natalia asks, standing beside me, holding a couple of hangers in her hand. Most of the gowns she has chosen to try on are red, which will look stunning with her dark hair and olive skin. Though Nat could wear a black sack and look sexy as fuck. She is one of those women who just oozes sexuality from every pore, and she’s not even aware of it.

“I like this one.” I run my fingers over the gorgeous green metallic-weave minidress on the rack in front of me. “But I’m not sure I have the boobs to pull it off.” I like it because it has a high back. Unlike a lot of dresses in this haute couture boutique that dip way too low at the back. This one plunges to mid-chest at the front, exposing a lot of cleavage, and while I’m not opposed to this neckline, I’m not very big in the chest, so I’m unsure if it will look good on me.

“Big boobs would look slutty in that dress,” Sierra says, popping her head over Nat’s shoulder. “It’s perfect for your curves, and your legs will look fantastic in it. I saw a beautiful pair of black knee-high stiletto boots in the front window. You should ask if they have them in your size. They would look amazing with that dress.” She darts in, pressing a quick kiss to my cheek. “Try it on, sis. I promise you my husband is good for it.”

“I’m not letting Ben pay for this too,” I say, snatching the dress off the rail. “He has already done too much.” Earlier, we took the kids to a matinee Broadway showing of *The Lion King*. Ben arranged a private box with perfect views of the

stage. After, we took the kids out for an early pizza dinner, and the guys took them back to the apartments while a limousine whisked the three of us to a salon, where we got our hair and makeup done, before depositing us at this exclusive boutique. I don't even want to know how much it cost Ben to book out the entire store for an hour.

I know he is wealthy, but it's not like any of us are struggling for money. I have more money than I know what to do with, and I can afford to pay for my own dress.

I'm actually really looking forward to tonight. Ben has reserved a private section at a trendy bar, and then we are going dancing at one of his mainstream clubs. I cannot remember the last time I went out and let loose, and I'm giddy with excitement at the prospect of a night out with my friends.

"Knowing my brother, he's already left instructions not to accept payment for our purchases today," Natalia says, walking with me toward the changing area. "Let him do this." She shrugs, like it's no biggie, and I guess it probably isn't for her. It's no secret Ben is an amazing brother, and those two have the most incredible bond. "It makes him happy."

"It does," Sierra says, coming up on my other side. "He wants us to have a great weekend, and this is only part of it. He has something else lined up for tomorrow though he refuses to tell me what." The biggest smile spreads across her mouth. "I tried bribing him with sexual favors, and he still wouldn't budge. Though I had fun attempting to get him to concede." Her cheeks turn pink, and her eyes take on a faraway glaze.

Natalia's face turns a sickly shade of green. She thumps Sierra lightly in the arm. "Cut that shit out. I do not need to think about the things you and my brother get up to in the bedroom." She visibly shudders. "I probably should have brought earplugs for tonight. It's not like the penthouse walls are that thick."

Ben keeps the penthouse in one of the buildings he owns, overlooking Central Park, for his own personal use. He used to live there during the week—to be close to the Caltimore

Holdings offices—only traveling to his Connecticut estate on the weekend. Now that Sierra and Rowan live at the house, he commutes to the city daily via private helicopter, and he only stays at the penthouse if he has a late or early meeting or at times like this, when we all come up to the city to blow off some steam.

Ben also retains a couple of other floors in the same building with several apartments that are used by his *soldati* and other *mafioso*, as the need arises. Alesso, Leo and Ciro all have apartments there. “You can always stay in one of the vacant apartments,” I suggest, but I suppose she could also just head back home. The twins are with their father in Chicago this weekend, hence why Ben suggested Nat stay over. I know he hates to think of her all alone in her Manhattan apartment, even if Gino has twenty-four-seven security protecting his wife.

“Ben likes having his sister close,” Sierra confirms as we enter the changing area. “And you don’t have to worry, Nat. We won’t be getting up to much with Rowan in the next room.”

“A likely story,” Natalia teases, opening the door to the middle cubicle.

“You must miss Gino,” I say, heading into the cubicle on the left while Sierra takes the one on the right. The doors are three-quarter length, so while we have privacy to change, we can still talk.

“To be honest, it’s not that much different from when he was living with us. He’s a workaholic who is rarely home.”

I often detect more behind Natalia’s words, but she is notoriously private about her relationship with her husband. She seems sad a lot of the time, and while Gino appears to be a decent guy and there is respect between them, it’s not the happiest marriage. I asked her one time if he was ever abusive, worried that might be behind the vibes I sometimes get from her, but she assured me he has never laid a hand on her.

“Ladies. How are we getting on in here?” the owner asks, stepping into the changing area.

“Good,” Sierra says. “My sister would like to try on those boots you have in the window.”

“Absolutely,” the woman says, coming up to my door. I confirm my size, and she disappears, returning a few minutes later with the gorgeous boots. Sitting on the small bench in my cubicle, I pull the boots on, the soft leather covering my legs like a second layer of skin. Pleasure trickles through my veins as I stand in front of the mirror, admiring my reflection.

“Get your sexy ass out here, sis.” Sierra calls from outside.

Natalia whistles under her breath when I step out of my cubicle. “You are one smoking-hot mama.”

“You both look gorgeous.” I smile at the vision that is my sister in a tight bejeweled little black dress and her sister-in-law in a knee-length, flowy, strapless red dress.

“We will be the talk of New York tonight.” Sierra waggles her brows.

I smooth a nervous hand down the front of the dress, biting on the corner of my lip. “Are you sure this dress is classy enough for where we’re going?” I stand beside Nat and Sierra in front of the floor-to-ceiling mirror.

“It’s perfect,” Sierra says. “You look elegant and sexy.”

“That dress was made for you.” Natalia looks wistful as she says, “I wish I had your height. Your legs are enviable.”

“I wish I had your boobs,” I reply, cupping my modest chest. “Nature wasn’t overly kind to me in the boob department.”

“Nonsense.” Sierra tilts her body, twisting and turning, as she inspects herself in the mirror from all angles. “Your boobs are perfect for your shape, and it’s not like they are small. Why are you always so hard on yourself?”

“Alfredo hated them,” I blurt. “He was always pestering me to get a boob job. All his whores had big breasts, and he loved throwing my inadequacy in my face.”

Natalia's mouth drops open, and Sierra's fists clench into balls at her side. "I want to dig that motherfucker up and beat the crap out of his lifeless body."

A throat clears behind us. "I'll flip you for the privilege," Alesso says, and embarrassment floods my cheeks. I keep my head down, unable to look at him, knowing he heard what I just said.

"You can't be in here!" Sierra shrieks, rushing toward her bodyguard. "You can't see Rena until later."

The blush deepens, and my cheeks are on fire. I am going to throttle my sister!

"I just want to remind you that we have ten minutes before we need to leave," he says. "The boss was very specific in his instructions, and I don't want us to be late."

"We won't be late. Go back outside and wait," Sierra demands while Nat reaches out, squeezing my hand.

I only lift my head when I hear his retreating footsteps. "Oh my God." I whirl around, pointing my finger at Sierra. "I can't believe you said that to him! And I can't believe he heard what I said." I bury my face in my hands. "I want the ground to open up and swallow me!"

"Don't be embarrassed," Nat says. "If the look on Alesso's face was any indication, I'm pretty sure he doesn't agree with your asshole husband."

"Truth." Sierra gently prizes my hands from my face. "And he only saw the dress from behind. He was like a dog in heat." She grins, waggling her brows again.

"It's still embarrassing," I grumble, fanning my face. "And you need to stop saying things like that. I'm not his girlfriend."

"Yet." Sierra fights a wide smile.

"Have you been holding out on me?" Nat inquires, taking one last look in the mirror. She peers directly into my eyes. "Has something happened I don't know about?"

I vigorously shake my head. "Nothing has happened. We're friends. That's all. I have hardly even seen him in the

two weeks since the guys returned from Vegas,” I say as I walk back into my cubicle to get undressed. I don’t think Alesso remembers our late-night phone call because we have barely talked, let alone spent time together, like he had suggested on our call.

“Friends don’t look at friends like that.” Nat calls out from her cubicle. “And if he’s been a bit more distant, it’s probably because my brother is keeping him busy.”

“Or he’s taking his cues from you,” Sierra says from behind her closed door. “You have withdrawn a little in recent weeks.”

“You know why,” I reply, staring at myself in the mirror, trying to see what Alesso sees when he looks at me.

“You should open up to him. I know he’d understand,” Sierra says, sounding closer. She pops her head over the door, and I’m glad I haven’t taken the dress off yet. “Please tell me you’re getting it.”

I spin around. “I am. I like it.”

Her face lights up. “Good. You look like a million dollars, and I want you to have the best time tonight.” Her eyes sparkle with mischief. “Maybe tonight is the night something finally happens between you two.”

“Sierra.” I send her a warning look. “I know you mean well, but I need you to stop. I can’t contemplate anything like that right now, and I don’t want to give out mixed signals or have Alesso feel compelled to act a certain way around me just because you want us to get together.”

“I just want you to be happy,” my sister quietly says. “I want you to be in love like me.”

“You can’t force it,” Nat says, materializing at her side. “And timing is everything.” She visibly gulps, and that sad look appears on her face. “Rena needs to go at her own pace, and it seems like Alesso understands that. If it’s meant to be, it will happen.”

“Do you really believe that?” I ask.

“I do.” Her firm assertion rings clear in her voice. “Sometimes, that belief is the only thing that helps me to get out of bed each morning,” she admits, staring off into space. Sierra and I share a look. Natalia shakes her head, brushing off her brief melancholy, and smiles. “Anyway, I’m going to get this. I’ll meet you outside.” She walks off as we watch.

“I want Nat to be happy too.” Sierra stares in the direction where her sister-in-law disappeared. “I want both of you to be happy.” She turns her head, eyeballing me. “I’m sorry if I’ve been pushy. I don’t mean to be. Don’t take this the wrong way, but I think you need a subtle nudge here and there, but I don’t want to interfere or upset you. I’m sorry. I’ll try to rein it in.”

“I love that you want that for me. I want that too, but...”

“But?” Sierra lifts a brow, encouraging me to continue.

“But I don’t know if that’s in my future. If it’s something I’m capable of, and I don’t want to set myself up for disappointment. I’m taking it one day at a time, focusing on self-healing and my kids, and that’s all I have the capacity to handle right now.”

“I hear you.” She nods. “And you’re doing great. I’m proud of you.”

I move to disagree before I stop myself. Pamela says I need to break the cycle, and that starts with being kinder to myself and reacting positively to compliments instead of the automatic inclination to put myself down. “Thank you.”

My sister smiles. “I’m going to take this to the checkout. You better get a move on.”

“I’ll follow you out.”

Sierra leaves the changing room, and I unzip the boots, carefully placing them back in the box. Then I slip out of the dress, holding it in my hand as I reach for the hanger.

“I like that color with your skin tone,” a man with an unfamiliar deep voice says, startling me.

I shriek, clutching the dress to my chest as I stare at the stranger peering over the door at me through the mirror. My

heart picks up, beating frantically against my rib cage as anxiety sits firmly on my chest. A shrill ringing blares in my ears, and blood rushes to my head. Every cell in my body is on high alert, and I'm shaking as I slowly turn around, facing a tall, good-looking man. My mouth opens—to scream or speak, I'm unsure—but no sound comes out. It's as if my vocal cords have packed up and gone home. Panic claws at my throat, making speech impossible.

He grins, and I notice one of his front middle teeth slightly overlaps the other one. “My boss says hello, and he looks forward to making your personal acquaintance real soon.” He pronounces boss with a flat, nasal tone so it sounds more like *bawwss*, confirming he's local. Goose bumps sprout along my arms, and all the tiny hairs lift on the back of my neck. He taps two fingers off his brow. “You enjoy your night, Mrs. Gifoli.” He winks before disappearing, and I stand frozen to the spot, nausea swimming up my throat and acid churning in my gut.

Until I snap out of it, dashing out of the changing room in my bare feet and racing to the front of the shop. I dart past a shell-shocked Sierra and the boutique owner at the register, yanking the door open and almost barreling into Alesso. He's talking with Natalia outside while our limo idles at the curb. “The man!” I blurt in a high-pitched tone. “Where'd he go?!” I whip around, looking left and right, ignoring the curious gazes of the people walking by.

“What man?” Nat asks, looking concerned.

“There was a man in the changing room,” I explain as the door opens behind me. “He knew who I was!” My voice sounds hysterical, even to my own ears.

“No man came out the...” Nat trails off, her brow puckering as she looks behind me. “What is it?” she asks as I turn around, meeting my sister's glassy gaze.

“Rena,” Sierra whispers, clasping a hand to her mouth as shock splays across her face. My eyes flit to Alesso's as a fresh wave of panic lets loose in my chest. His jaw is clenched tight, and his eyes swim in a multitude of emotions as he stares horror-struck at me.

An icy wind whips through me as Nat sucks in a gasp from behind.

Suddenly, I'm aware of reality.

That I'm standing in my underwear, on a semi-busy New York street, with the dress clutched to my front and my scarred back on full display, showcasing what I have tried so desperately to hide.

ALESSO

Unbridled rage lays siege to my insides as I look at Serena. My head is swirling with conflicting emotions. I want to yell. To roar my frustration at a world that would inflict such suffering on someone so pure and so good. My broken angel. The woman who has endured unimaginable horrors, if the raised angry scars on her back are any indication. I want to wrap her in my arms and never let anyone or anything ever hurt her again. But she's like a brittle doll falling apart before our eyes as realization dawns on her face.

Snapping out of it, I swing into action. Removing my suit jacket, I carefully drape it over her shoulders to cover her. Bending over, she wraps her arms around herself as she shakes and trembles. An anguished sob rips from her mouth, and I can't hold back. Slowly, I slide my arm around her shoulders, but she immediately ducks out of my grasp, and the jacket falls to the ground. "Don't." She shakes her head while circling her arms more tightly around herself, still clutching the dress in her clenched fist. "Don't touch me." Her voice wobbles, but the expression on her face is devoid of emotion.

"We need to keep you safe," I say, glancing all around as I open the door. "All of you. Inside now."

Sierra drapes my jacket over her sister from behind. "Rena." Sierra reaches for her, but Serena sidesteps her sister, darting through the door and across the main floor before any of us can stop her. We pile inside the store, and I lock the door before racing after Serena to check the changing area is secure.

When I enter the changing room, the door on the end cubicle is closed. “Serena, it’s just me. I’m securing the room,” I say so I don’t panic her. “Are you okay?” She doesn’t reply, and I frown as I check the other cubicles. “Rena, I need you to answer me.” Squatting on my heels, I inspect the floor of the cubicle she is in to ensure there is no one else in there.

“I need to be alone,” she whispers, her voice threaded with pain.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea. Not until I know the threat is contained. I’ll send Sierra in,” I add, hating to leave her, but duty calls, and I need to know the girls are safe. On the way back to the front of the store, I spot a side door ajar and curse under my breath. I exit through it, and it opens onto a dark, narrow alleyway running in between the boutique and the adjacent building. It’s empty, so whoever stole into the boutique is long gone, I’m guessing. I scan the area, but there are no cameras out here.

Fucking typical.

Heading back inside, I lock the door before walking out to rejoin the others. Nat and Sierra are talking in hushed whispers. “Go be with Serena,” I tell Sierra. “See if she will tell you about the man.” Sierra nods, still looking shell-shocked, as she rushes past me to go to her sister. I stride to the counter where the perplexed owner stands behind the register. “The side door was open. It seems that’s how the intruder got inside.”

Her brow puckers. “It shouldn’t have been. I know it was locked. I only use it when I have deliveries, and there haven’t been any this week.”

“He probably picked the lock.” Alarm skates across her face. “I need access to your security cameras right now.” It’s probably futile, as there are none in the changing area or in the alleyway, but I won’t leave any loose ends.

She bobs her head, her eyes widening in fright. “I access it from my computer. It’s in my office back here.” She points behind her.

“Write down your log-ins. Our guy will remotely check the feed,” I explain as I punch Ben’s number into my cell. I update the boss quickly, relaying the log-ins, and we hang up with him promising to get Phillip on the case immediately. While we were talking, Ben dispatched a couple of his *soldati* to the store as backup. He had a few guys in the area, so they should be here shortly. Ben wants us home ASAP, but I decide to give Sierra a couple more minutes with Serena to help calm her down.

The guy is gone. He’s unlikely to come back. Still, I prowl the space between the front and side entrances, keeping my eyes peeled. “Are you okay?” I ask Nat, spotting the tears welling in her eyes.

“I’m okay, but my God. Poor Serena. I knew Gifoli was a bastard, but I didn’t know it was that bad.” Anger flares in her eyes, mixing with the same heartache I feel.

“He was a fucking monster,” I snarl through gritted teeth. “My biggest regret is killing him quickly. He didn’t deserve mercy. Not when he didn’t show Serena any.” Two guys arrive outside, and I nod in acknowledgment, breathing a little easier with backup here. I press my forehead to the wall beside the door, breathing heavily. Now that I’ve done my job, the reality of the discovery hits me full force, and I’m devastated for Rena.

“I can’t even begin to imagine how much that must have hurt,” Nat says, scanning the street outside as I grapple to get a hold of my emotions. “Jesus.” She props her hip against the wall, looking at me. “It’s no wonder she’s struggling.”

“I don’t know how to help her,” I admit, feeling guilty I have spent such little time with her in recent weeks. Especially when I mentioned doing something together. It’s mostly because I’ve been busy. But I also didn’t want to burden her with my problems. I was afraid if I spent one-on-one time with her that I’d blurt out the whole fucked-up truth of my parentage.

“Can you be honest with me?” Nat asks, and I lift my head, turning to face her. I nod. “Do you have feelings for

her?”

I hesitate for a moment for two reasons. One, Natalia is super close with her brother, and I’m not sure I want Ben aware of how I feel about his sister-in-law. And two, I haven’t shared my feelings with Serena, so is it right to talk to her friend about it?

“It’s not a betrayal if you tell me,” Nat says, correctly reading my mind. “And you can trust me to be confidential. I won’t tell anyone.”

Her words lower my walls, and I nod. “I care about her. A lot.” I won’t tell her I think I love her because the only person who deserves to hear that truth is Serena.

“As a friend or more?” Nat cocks her head to one side.

“More, but I know I can’t push for that. Not until she’s ready.”

“That’s all I needed to know.” She kisses my cheek. “Serena needs the gentlest touch, and I can think of no man I would trust more with her than you.”

“I want to be there for her, but I have no experience with this.” I throw my hands in the air. “With relationships. I don’t want to fuck anything up or upset her. She has already been through so much.”

“She has. More than any of us realize.”

Her words hang heavily in the air.

“How could anyone hurt her like that?” I rasp, almost choking over the lump clogging my throat. Tears prick the backs of my eyes. “How long was she subjected to that?” Leaning my head back, I close my eyes momentarily as a fresh wave of anger burns through my veins.

I jerk upright at the sound of approaching footsteps, shoving my emotions back inside. Serena needs me to be strong, and I won’t fail her. Sierra emerges, holding her trembling sister under one arm. Nat takes the two bags from Sierra’s free hand, her features softening as she glances at Serena. Rena’s head is down, her hair curtaining her face.

“Let’s get out of here,” I say, deliberately gentling my tone.

We say quick goodbyes with the boutique owner, and I make a mental note to get Ben to have a word with her about her security. It’s really not adequate and requires upgrading.

Our *soldati* remain alert as I escort everyone outside. I stride to the limo, opening the door for the ladies. Serena doesn’t look up as she scrambles into the back, pressing her body in close to the side of the car, as if she wishes she could disappear inside it. She wraps her arms around her torso and looks down at her lap, letting her hair shield her again. Sierra looks at me with the saddest expression as she climbs in beside her. Nat and I sit on the opposite seat, and one of the soldiers gets in with us while the second one takes shotgun up front.

The atmosphere is thick with tension as we drive toward Ben’s apartment building, and no one speaks.

Serena avoids eye contact with all of us as we ride the elevator, and I can almost see Sierra’s heart breaking on the inside. She looks as helpless as I feel. Sierra glances anxiously at her sister as Serena stares at her feet. “Do you want to come up to the penthouse?” she softly asks.

We had previously agreed that Serena and her kids would sleep in the guest room in my apartment, one level below Ben’s penthouse. He only has three bedrooms, and they are all occupied. I even had bunk beds delivered this week in anticipation of Elisa’s and Romeo’s arrival as the double bed in the guest room would not have been big enough for all three of them. I was looking forward to spending some time together this weekend, and I don’t want Serena to hide away in the penthouse.

But if that’s what she needs, I won’t protest.

This isn’t about me. It’s about her.

Serena shakes her head, and relief washes over me.

“Do you want me to come to Alesso’s apartment with you?” Sierra inquires, sharing a strained look with Natalia.

Serena shakes her head again, and Sierra eyeballs me with evident concern. We exchange a silent communication where I reassure her I will take care of her sister. The elevator pings when it reaches our level. “We’re here,” I say because Rena still has her head down. Without speaking, she shuffles past me, out into the hallway.

“I don’t much feel like going out now,” Sierra says as I wedge my body in between the elevator doors to stop it from closing.

“Serena would hate it if she ruined your night.” I take the bag with Serena’s dress from Nat. “You should still go out. I will try talking to her, and I will stay with her if she would rather stay in.”

Sierra nods, reaching out for my arm as I move to step into the hallway. “Be very careful with her, Alesso. She’s extra fragile right now.”

I pierce Sierra with a solemn expression. “I am always careful with her, and I won’t do anything to make it worse. I promise.”

“Text me,” Sierra hollers as I exit the elevator and the doors start to close. I nod and turn around, striding down the corridor toward my broken angel.

ALESSO

Serena is standing outside my door, hugging herself like that's the only thing keeping herself together. I open the door and step aside to let her in. Nario gets up from his position on the couch, his brow creasing as Serena rushes past him toward the bathroom. He pins me with an inquisitive look. One I ignore.

"We need a bit of alone time." I jerk my head toward the door. "I will call you when you are needed." The agreement was Nario would babysit Serena's kids while Ciro will watch over Rowan at the penthouse. Nario cracks his knuckles and bobs his head while hurrying past me. When the door closes behind him, I head to my kitchen and grab a couple of cookies and make a cup of hot, sweet tea for Serena.

She is just coming out of the bathroom when I appear in the narrow hallway, which houses the bedrooms and main bathroom, carrying a plate and a steaming mug. "Do you want to use my bedroom, or would you like to come into the living room?" I ask, knowing she won't want to disturb her kids while they are sleeping.

She stares at me with the most heartrending expression, and I would happily chop off a limb if it would remove the misery and shame from her face. "The living room," she croaks, and I press my back against the wall to let her walk past me without touching.

I follow her over to the couch, placing the cookies and hot drink down in front of her. "I made you some tea, and you

should eat something.” Grabbing the plaid blanket off the back of my couch, I hand it to her. “Put that on until the room warms up.” Using the remote, I switch on my electric fire, cranking it to the max, because she’s still shaking, and I know she must be feeling cold. Silently, she drapes the blanket around her shoulders, diverting her gaze again. A little bit of the tightness eases in my chest when she grabs the mug, wrapping both hands around it and taking a small sip.

I lower myself into my recliner chair, hating the strained silence that engulfs us. I am not sure how to handle this, but if she is embarrassed by what we saw, she needs to know I don’t pity her. I never could. Not when she’s one of the strongest women I have ever known. She shouldn’t be ashamed, and I’m guessing she must be because she had kept this a secret from her sister and her best friend. I wish she could see herself how we see her. To know that none of us judge her for the things she was forced to endure.

“I know you probably don’t want to talk about it,” I say, wetting my lips. “And that is totally fine. I would never force you to discuss anything you didn’t want to, but I need to get this off my chest.”

She lifts her head and looks at me.

“If you think I think differently about you after seeing your back, know that I don’t. I have always believed you to be one of the bravest women, and now I know it is undoubtedly true. You’re a fighter, Serena. A survivor. And I fucking admire you so much.”

She examines my face closely.

“I hate the things you must have gone through, but I could never look at you as anything less than you are. Please don’t be ashamed because you have nothing to be ashamed of.” My Adam’s apple bobs in my throat as I drink in the vulnerability on her face. “I care about you. How can I help?”

Tears well in her eyes. “I don’t even know how to help myself,” she whispers, clutching the mug in her hands. “I don’t know what to tell you.”

My heart is breaking. I just want to take this pain away. “Should you call your therapist?” I suggest.

She shrugs, taking another sip of her drink.

“If she was here, what would she say?”

I wait her out while she considers it. “She would tell me to talk about it. To trust my friends and my family. To unburden the truth.”

“I’m a good listener,” I say. “If you want to talk, I will just listen.”

“I don’t want you to think less of me,” she admits, and I consider that a breakthrough.

“That’s an impossibility. I know who you are, Serena. The things that bastard did don’t change who you are to me.”

She looks into my eyes for a few moments, biting on her lower lip. Her chest heaves as she considers it. I’m not expecting her to confide in me, so I’m hugely surprised and enormously pleased when she does.

“He used to whip me when he considered I’d stepped out of line.” A glaze comes over her eyes as she meanders through the nightmare of her past. “If I messed up dinner, or the house wasn’t tidy enough, or I answered him back, or if I even dared to look at him when he was in one of his moods.” She knots her hands in her lap, and her cheeks turn red. “A lot of times it was because I disappointed him in the bedroom.”

I want to dig that bastard up, resurrect him, and spend days—no, *weeks*—torturing the fuck out of his pathetic ass.

“He was disgusted his firstborn was a girl, and he whipped me regularly when I failed to get pregnant fast enough the second time. My only saving grace was pregnancy. He left me alone both times, and I actually wished I could get pregnant again. Not just for the reprieve,” she says, setting her tea down. “My children are my greatest achievement, and I love being a mother. I wanted more kids, but it didn’t happen.”

I’m hardly surprised. That level of stress would not have made it easy.

“He hated how soft Romeo was, and he wanted another son.” Anger coats her face. “Another heir.” A muscle clenches in her jaw. “Every month when I got my period was when he was the most savage.” She leans back into the couch, pulling her knees into her chest and tucking the blanket around herself again. “He would strip me naked, tie me facedown, by my wrists and my ankles, to the bed, and whip me over and over until blood covered my back, pooling onto the sheets.”

She reaches for her mug, clutching it in a tight grip. Her voice has a faraway quality when she speaks, and she stares straight ahead. “He did it when my parents had the kids and the staff had the night off so no one would hear my screams. He would leave me there overnight, bleeding and freezing, my wrists and ankles so numb they felt like phantom limbs. One time, he forgot about me for a whole weekend. When our housekeeper found me on Monday morning, I was severely dehydrated and barely coherent. The wounds had gotten infected, and the doctor had to come. I ended up spending a week in bed, which, you know, was my fault.” A bitter, empty laugh escapes her throat. “Our housekeeper quit after having it out with Alfredo. He hit her. Threatened her. A week later, her brutalized body washed up on the shores of the Hudson. After that, none of the staff ever challenged him and everyone was too afraid to leave. He didn’t bother hiding his abuse from them after that.”

Jesus Christ. No wonder she’s so skittish. Anyone would be under the circumstances. I suspect she has never known a tender touch from a lover, and the ache in my chest expands. “I am so sorry you went through that.” I want to say more, but I’m at a complete loss for words. “He was a monster.”

She nods, still looking and sounding like she’s a million miles away. “I have thought of cosmetic surgery,” she supplies, staring into her mug as she speaks. “I know it wouldn’t completely repair the damage. It’s too severe. But it would make it more palatable, so I could maybe wear a bikini again or a lower-cut top.” Her hazel gaze pins me in place. “But I don’t want to erase them. At least, not right now. Every time I look in the mirror and see them, it reminds me of the torture I endured at his hands. One part of me hates to be

reminded, but another part of me never wants to forget.” Her eyes burn with quiet resilience. “I want to remember I survived. That he tried his best to break me. And while I’m not whole, I’m still here. I still get up every day determined to do better. Determined to overcome the things he did to me. To know I’m worthy of a life and I can have one. That he didn’t take everything from me.”

I nod, understanding that sentiment, maybe more than most.

“They hurt sometimes,” she adds, taking another mouthful of her tea. “But the pain ensures I can’t forget what it was like. I want the reminder so I never end up in a situation like that ever again. I never want to experience the loss of control I felt every day of my marriage. The helplessness. The frustration. The anger. The fear.” Shucking the blanket off, she rolls her left sleeve up, her fingers tracing over the indent from the bullet wound in her arm. “And this reminds me how close I came to death. That I persevered.” A small smile turns up the corners of her mouth. “Thanks to you.”

“Thanks to *you*.” I won’t let her pass all the credit to me. “I heard you screaming. I saw you wrestling with him. You fought to get away. You didn’t cower or shy away. You did everything you could to save yourself.”

“I didn’t today,” she whispers. “When that man appeared in the dressing room, I froze. I was so scared I couldn’t even scream or tell him to fuck off.”

“What did he want?” I ask, still not privy to how it went down. Serena tells me everything he said. “And he definitely sounded like a New Yorker?” I inquire.

She nods. “Yes. He wasn’t from Chicago. I would have known.”

I scrub a hand over my prickly jawline, confused and wondering what the fuck is going on.

“I knew someone was watching me that day when we left the yoga studio,” she adds, staring absently at the flickering blue flames of the fire. “I knew this was the likely

consequence. That we might pay the price for Alfredo's sins." She puts her empty mug down. She hasn't eaten the cookies, but at least the hot tea seems to have helped.

"We will find out who it is and deal with it."

Her tongue darts out, wetting her dry lips. "I'm scared."

"I know, but I'm not going to let anyone hurt you again. I promise."

"Don't make promises you can't keep." Her eyes bore into mine.

"I have every intention of keeping this promise. I would die before I let anything happen to you."

Her eyes fill with tears, but she doesn't let them fall. She nods, wrapping her arms around her knees as she hugs them to her chest. "I know you would. Thank you, Alesso. Thank you for always being there for me. I appreciate it more than I can say."

"Thanks isn't necessary."

"If I have to learn to accept compliments, then you do too." A soft smile ghosts over her gorgeous mouth, and it's like being sucker punched in the nuts. "Thank you for listening to me. For not judging. It..." She tugs her lower lip between her teeth, and my cock jerks at the motion. "It helped."

I can't contain my smile. "I'm glad. And I'm always here if you want to talk some more."

"Pamela—my therapist—will be very proud of me when I tell her about this." A light blush stains her cheeks. "She assigns me homework every week. Little things I have to do to push myself out of my comfort zone. Telling you about this is a big step for me."

"You're amazing. Truly."

She beams at my compliment, and truth be told, I'm feeling a little proud of myself for helping her to get a handle on this.

Abruptly, she stands, and the blanket pools at her feet. “Is it too late to go out?”

I glance at my watch. “The others have probably left, but I know where they are going. We can catch up.”

“Good.” She steps around the coffee table. “I have been looking forward to this night for weeks. I’m not letting what happened ruin it for me.”

My heart swells behind my chest. She is so goddamned brave. “I’ve been looking forward to it too.” And I can’t wait to see her in that dress, but I’ll be fighting a hard-on all night, I’m sure. I only got a look at her from behind, and it was enough to turn the snake in my pants rock-hard. It will be an exercise in self-control tonight, but I wouldn’t have it any other way.

Serena is turning a corner.

I feel it in my bones.

And if she can find a way to move on from her past, maybe there is a future for her and me after all.

SERENA

I'm feeling nicely buzzed, and it's helping to keep thoughts of the earlier incident from my mind. Ben's club is crazy busy, but we are in the VIP section where it's not as crowded. There is actually space to move on the dance floor, and I'm enjoying myself. I move my hips to the hypnotic beat, thrusting my hair back over my shoulders as I let loose.

"Are you having a good time?" Sierra hollers in my ear while we dance. Natalia has just left the dance floor to go to the bathroom.

I nod, smiling at my sister. "This is exactly what I needed to take my mind off things."

"Good." She gives me a quick hug. "I'm glad." Her lips curve at the corners as she looks over my shoulder. "He hasn't taken his eyes off you all night."

"I know." Butterflies swoop into my tummy, like they do any time I recall the look on Alesso's face when I first emerged from the bedroom in my new dress and boots. He looked like he wanted to devour me whole, and I briefly contemplated letting him. Losing myself in him would have worked to distract me from my pain and my fear. But as much as the thought tempted and thrilled me, it also terrified me. I have never been the object of such blatant desire before, and all the usual insecurities came rushing to the surface.

"I'm not going to pressure you," Sierra adds, pressing her mouth to my ear. "But I want you to know I'm rooting for you

both. I have gotten to know Alesso well, and he's a good guy, sis. I know he'd treat you well."

I know that too, and sometimes I wonder why I'm holding back. It's been over four months since Alfredo died, and Alessandro is nothing like my husband. He has only ever shown me patience and kindness. I still reminisce over that hot make-out session we shared last year, and my body tingles when I remember how good it felt to have his lips on mine. Pamela says I need to stretch myself out of my comfort zone in order to move forward, so maybe I should stop denying my feelings for Alesso and let the chips fall where they may.

I'm feeling braver than usual because I dealt effectively with my shame earlier tonight. I managed to throw off my humiliation and come out to socialize. That was a huge step for me, and I'm proud of myself. The few cocktails I have consumed are boosting my confidence too. Before I talk myself out of it, I grab my sister's hand, tugging her off the dance floor. Sierra gives me a funny look. "I'm going to ask Alesso to dance," I explain as we head toward our booth in the corner where the guys are sitting, nursing beers and a bottle of expensive bourbon.

"Yes! Go for it, sis." Sierra grins, squeezing my hand as we make our way to our table.

Natalia is sitting beside Ben when we arrive. "Water break," she explains, unscrewing the cap off a bottle of water.

"I hear you." Sierra drops onto the seat alongside Leo, snatching another bottle of chilled water from the bucket in the center of the table. My sister slants me a purposeful look, subtly angling her head in Alesso's direction.

Nerves jangle inside me, and I feel a little sick to my stomach. Rubbing my sweaty palms down the side of my dress, I awkwardly clear my throat as I look down at Alesso. He's peering up at me with an expression I can't decipher. "Do you want to dance?" I blurt before quickly averting my eyes. Warmth creeps into my cheeks, and I'm as anxious as a teenager asking her first crush to dance.

Except I'm a grown-ass woman, and it's pathetic.

“I would love to dance,” he says, rising to his feet.

My smile is automatic as I lift my head. The look of adoration on his face is unmistakable, and I think how easy it is to please this man. He is happy just to be in my company, and I have never had that before. Very slowly, Alesso takes my hand, his eyes probing mine to ensure I’m comfortable before his shoulders relax, and he leads me away from the table toward the dance floor. The feel of his warm hand in mine makes me all giddy inside. I hold his hand tighter, loving the feel of his rougher, slightly callused palm against my softer one, and my heart feels like it could burst.

Alesso leads us into the far corner of the dance floor, where it’s a little less crowded and away from prying eyes. Leaning in, he places his mouth next to my ear. “I’m not the world’s greatest dancer. Not by a long shot, so go easy on me.”

I grin as he starts to move his hips in time to the music, keeping a hold of my hand as he dances. I move my body a little self-consciously at first, but the longer we dance, the more I loosen up. Alesso’s gaze never leaves me, and I’m unused to such avid attention. It makes me feel special. Like I’m a desirable woman. And it gives me the confidence I need to truly let go, to forget about whoever might be watching me and just enjoy this simple pleasure in life—dancing with a man I’m attracted to. A man who seems to be attracted to me too. I don’t miss the heat flaring in his eyes when his gaze drops down my body or the slight bulge tenting his pants.

The song changes to a slow, sultry beat, and Alesso tightens his grip on my hand, asking a question with his eyes. I nod, letting him slowly reel me into the safety of his strong arms. With skill, he maneuvers me so I’m in front of him with my back against his chest. His arms come around me again, lightly resting on my hips as his mouth brushes against my earlobe. “Is this okay?”

Gulping over the lump in my throat and ignoring the butterflies cartwheeling in my chest, I nod, forcing my limbs to remain supple. All around us, couples are smooching and dirty dancing. The way we are pressed against one another is hardly scandalous, but it’s exhilarating to me. We move

together, our hips in sync, as we sway to the hypnotic beats, and this feels like another giant step for me.

I'm not freaking out. Not even when I feel the tip of his erection brush against my lower back. It's virtually impossible to feel anything but safe and protected when Alesso holds me like this. He has this gentle manner that belies his tall broad physicality. "Rena," he murmurs, pulling me in a little closer as his mouth nuzzles my neck. "You smell amazing." He plants a feather-soft kiss just under my ear, and a delicious shiver coasts over me. "Taste so damn good too." His fingers toy in my hair. "Getting to hold you like this is everything I have dreamed of."

Warmth blossoms in my chest at his words and the hidden meaning. Ignoring the fear waiting in the wings, I tilt my head back and lift my gaze to his familiar warm brown eyes. There's a hunger on his face I remember seeing once before, and when his eyes lower to my lips, they darken with abject need. My heart is thrashing against my rib cage, and my palms feel sweaty as I rest them on the arm that is still around my waist. Willing the rampant pounding in my chest to subside, I pull up my big-girl panties and lean toward him, staring at his mouth like a woman who has never been kissed. He angles his head down, and his lips draw nearer. His fingers leave my hair, and his other arm goes around me. I clutch his arms and lean back against him, needing him to keep my wobbly legs upright as I slowly close my eyes and pucker my lips in anticipation of his mouth.

Without warning, we are jolted as someone crashes into us, and the moment is lost. I blink my eyes open, clinging to Alesso as he steps back, away from the drunken girl who has just taken a tumble at my feet. The contents of the wineglass in her hand land on my dress and splash my chest with a layer of sticky alcohol. Two bouncers approach and haul the girl away as the manager rushes to our side. "I'm so very sorry about that." He hands me some paper towels. Over his head, I spy Ben approaching with a face like thunder.

"It's okay," I say. "It wasn't your fault, and it's nothing a trip to the bathroom and some water won't fix." I look down at

myself, and there is no noticeable stain, so I'm guessing she had white wine in her glass.

"I'd like a word," Ben says, when he comes to a stop beside us, glaring at the manager.

"Don't make a fuss on my account," I tell my brother-in-law. "I'm going to go and get cleaned up." I wrench out of Alesso's embrace, but he snatches my hand, guiding me off the dance floor.

"I'll come with you." He firmly clasps my hand like he's afraid to let go in case we don't get to do this again.

"I can go to the bathroom by myself."

He stops, turning to look at me. With measured movements, he raises his hand, sweeping some stray strands of my long hair back off my face. "I know you can, but I'm not ready to let you go, and I like looking after you. I'll only be on edge otherwise, and the guys will give me shit."

I have a sudden uncharacteristic urge to fling my arms around him. He says the sweetest things, and I know if I could only let go of my fear that I would feel so much for this man. Lifting my hand, I gently cup his face, enjoying the feel of his five o'clock shadow against my fingers. "Well, we can't have Ben and Leo doing that." A teasing grin whips across my face.

"Serena." He utters my name like a reverent whisper as he leans his face into my palm. "Do you have any idea how completely and utterly stunning you are tonight?" His hands land on my waist as he maneuvers us back against the wall. "I never knew such perfection existed until I met you."

Tears prick my eyes, but for once, they are the happy kind.

"I want to kiss you. *Need* to kiss you. So badly." His eyes glimmer with the truth of his words. Briefly, his gaze darts over my shoulder, and a resigned groan slips from his mouth. "It seems the universe has other plans," he mumbles, letting me go.

I turn around as Sierra reaches us, her concerned gaze ghosting over me. "Are you okay?"

“I’m fine, but I need to freshen up before I start smelling like a brewery.”

My sister loops her arm in mine, pulling me away from Alesso. “Let’s go.” She casts a glance over her shoulder. “I think some champagne is in order when we return,” she shouts at Alesso before dragging me in the direction of the bathroom.

SERENA

I sit at the table beside Alesso drinking champagne and chatting with my family and our friends until the early hours of the morning, and I can't remember the last time I felt so alive. My body is coiled tight, my limbs buzzing with sensations I haven't felt since the night I made out with Alesso at the charity gala ball. Our thighs are pressed together, and he holds my hand under the table, and I'm close to combusting. All night, we've been trading heated looks, and from the way his gaze fixates on my mouth, I can tell the urge to kiss me hasn't gone away. I know he won't make a move in front of everyone, which I respect, because I'm nervous enough at the prospect of kissing him again, and I don't need an audience. So, I'm anxiously excited when Ben announces our car is here, and we follow him out of the club.

I decline more champagne when we are seated in the limo, wanting to be fully alert for whatever will happen when we get back to Alesso's apartment. I'm nicely buzzed, and it's the right amount to take the edge off my nerves. Any more and I risk verging into dangerous territory, so I accept a bottle of water instead. We are quiet as we travel back to Ben's apartment building, listening to our friends joking and laughing as we sit pressed against one another, anticipation fizzing in the air.

I can't wait to tell Pamela about tonight. How I managed to turn a scary and humiliating event into a night where I pushed several of my boundaries. If anyone had asked me a few months ago if I could have sat so close to a man, danced

provocatively with him, and held his hand all night, I would have asked what they were smoking. But it's more than that.

I want Alesso.

I want him so badly.

And while I'm not about to sleep with him, because that's something I will have to work up to, I am ready to move our relationship out of the friend zone. The thought scares me, but I'm excited too.

I want to try with him.

No other man has ever made me feel the way Alesso does, and I want to experience new firsts with him.

"You doing okay over there, sis?" a drunken, giggly Sierra asks as the elevator doors close to take us up to the highest levels of the building.

"I'm peachy." I shoot her a smile, and she winks as she notices how close I'm standing to Alesso and how we are still holding hands. "How about you?"

"I'm a little teeny-tiny bit drunk," she slurs, giggling again.

"No shit, Sherlock." Ben draws her in closer, pressing kisses to the top of her head. It never ceases to amaze me to see him like this. If someone saw Don Mazzone with my sister, they'd never believe he's the same man who runs a multimillion-dollar enterprise and commands the mafia underworld like the badass boss he is.

"Remind me why we didn't get Rowan to sleep in Ciro's apartment?" she says, grabbing handfuls of his butt, uncaring who sees. I wonder if, one day, I'll be carefree enough to make grabby hands at my man.

"Because we both know you can't bear to be parted from our little prince for any length of time." Ben purposely removes her hands from his ass as Leo chuckles.

"True, but I really need to get our kink on." Sierra's hands return to her husband's butt as she peers up at him with puppy-dog eyes. "We can be quiet."

“Nope.” Natalia waggles her finger in Sierra’s face. “I do not want to hear any kinky times you have with my brother. Certainly not up close and personal. You’ll just have to control yourselves.”

“You’re a spoilsport,” Sierra slurs, but there’s no malice in her tone. She wraps her arms around Ben’s back, snuggling into him as she closes her eyes. Alesso squeezes my hand, and when I look up at him, there is no disguising the blatant desire on his face.

Knots of anticipation coil in my gut, and I discreetly squeeze my thighs together.

“Don’t worry, sis,” Ben says, holding his wife upright. “This one will be passed out stone-cold and snoring within the next five minutes.”

“Will not,” Sierra sleepily protests, fighting to keep her eyes open. “And I don’t snore.”

We all laugh as the elevator pings when it reaches our level. We make hasty goodbyes and walk side by side, with Leo, along the corridor toward the guys’ apartments. Leo ducks into his place, and we continue toward Alesso’s apartment, the sexual tension ratcheting up a few levels the closer we get to his door. Blood rushes to my nether regions when he pins me with a searing look while he fumbles with his wallet, eventually extracting his key card.

Butterflies are going crazy in my chest and swooping into my belly as he leads me by the hand into his place. Nario is sprawled across the couch, guffawing at something on the TV. The coffee table in front of him is littered with cups and candy wrappers, and he has truly been making himself at home.

“Out,” Alesso says in a commanding tone, switching the TV off.

Nario arches a brow, his all-seeing gaze looking at me and our conjoined hands. A sleazy grin slips over his mouth. “It’s like that I see.”

“Mind your own business.” Alesso’s tone is a little harsh.

“Thanks for watching the kids,” I softly say. “I really appreciate it.”

Nario pulls himself upright, slipping his feet into his unlaced shoes. “They’re good kids. Not a peep out of them all night.”

That’s a relief. Romeo hasn’t had a nightmare in weeks, thank God, but I was worried the change of environment might unsettle him. Both Elisa and Romeo are doing great in therapy, and I can see it’s clearly helping. My therapy is still a work in progress, but I’m glad I decided to pursue it for all of us. I think we would all continue to struggle otherwise.

“Thanks, man.” Alesso slaps him on the back, looking a little apologetic. “You can see yourself out.”

Nario chuckles, waggling his brows at his colleague, before he saunters along the hallway, whistling low under his breath. Alesso and I stand in the middle of the living room, staring at one another as we wait for Ben’s bodyguard to leave the apartment. My chest heaves as adrenaline surges through my body the longer we stare at one another.

It seems to take forever for the audible sound of the door closing to prick our ears, but I’m sure it was only seconds. Expectation is rife in the air as we stand frozen to the spot, devouring one another with our eyes. It takes me a few seconds to realize he is waiting for my cue, and although I’m nervous, that is exactly what I need to know this is right. Summoning bravery from some long-buried place, I bridge the gap between us, press my body against his, and wind my arms around his neck.

Then we move like magnets. Heads tilting at the perfect angles and faces moving closer until our lips meet, and I fall into his arms. The feel of his mouth moving against mine is heavenly, and I easily get lost in our kiss. He holds me close, while still maintaining a little distance between us, as we kiss, but it’s not enough. My core pulses with need as our kissing grows more heated, and it feels like I’ll explode if he doesn’t touch me. The thought shocks me as much as it exhilarates me. I groan into his mouth as his tongue tangles with mine, and it

feels like every inch of my skin is on fire. “Alesso,” I purr into his mouth. “Please.” I grip the back of his shirt, grinding my hips against his, shivering when his throbbing erection pushes against me.

“What do you need, Rena?” he asks, planting a slew of drugging kisses along my neck. “You’re in control. You tell me.”

I arch my head back, clinging to his strong biceps as he worships my neck, and the most delicious tremors skate over my skin. The sensations he’s coaxing from my body are wholly new, and I could get addicted to this feeling. The only thoughts in my head are how he’s making me feel, and I never want this to end. “Touch me,” I whisper, thrusting my pelvis at him. “Please touch me.”

He straightens us up, pulling his mouth away and tilting my chin up with his fingers. His hungry eyes bore into mine. “We don’t have to rush, Rena. We can take things slow. I’m perfectly happy kissing you, so don’t feel you need to move faster than you’re ready.”

My eyes examine his as confusion sets in. “You don’t want me?” I attempt to wrestle out of his grip, but he’s having none of it, keeping his arms banded around me and holding me close.

“I want you so fucking badly, you’re like the air I need to breathe,” he admits without hesitation. “Don’t ever doubt my feelings for you. You are all I see, Serena. The only woman I have ever wanted like this. This isn’t about me. This is about you.” He brushes his lips against mine, inhaling deeply as he pulls his mouth back. “You’ve been drinking and—”

“I’m not drunk,” I blurt, cutting across him. “I’m a little tipsy but fully in control of myself. I...” My cheeks inflame, but I force myself to hold his gaze. “I want you,” I whisper. “You make me feel things I’ve never felt before.”

His features soften into blissful adoration. “Yeah?”

I nod. “Yes. This...” My cheeks darken further. “Intimacy is hard for me, but not with you. I want this in a way I’ve

never wanted it before.” His eyes blaze with molten heat and my pussy flushes with liquid need. “Not sex,” I whisper. “I... not yet, but we can do other things, right?” My burst of bravado is floundering the longer we are speaking, and I just want to return to the kissing. To drown in the way he makes me feel.

“Are you really sure?” he asks, tucking a piece of my hair behind my ear. “I don’t want you to do anything you might regret. I can be patient, Serena. I can wait for you for as long as it takes you to be ready, so don’t rush on my account.”

“I’m not.” I press my chest flush against his and tighten my fingers on his biceps. “You make me feel good. I want to feel good.”

“God. You fucking undo me, Rena,” he says, before claiming my lips in a searing-hot kiss I feel all the way to my toes. We are both panting when we break apart a few minutes later. “I’m going to carry you into my room now,” he says before tenderly scooping me up and carting me into his bedroom. Cradling me in his arms, he closes the door with his foot before setting me down on his bed with deliberate tenderness. He sits beside me and cups my face between his large, warm palms. “Where do you want me to touch you?” he asks, a look of complete seriousness on his face.

My face is on fire as I say, “Down there.” With trembling fingers, I take his hand and guide it down over my stomach, placing it between my legs. “Here.”

Leaving his hand on my pussy, he bends down and kisses me before standing. He tugs his shirt out of his pants, grabbing the hem. “Shirt on or off?” he asks, stalling mid-lift.

I wet my suddenly dry mouth. “Off. Always off.”

He sends me a saucy grin, licking his lush lips as he slowly removes his shirt and tosses it across the arm of the club chair in the corner.

A shirtless Alesso is truly a sight to behold. My God, he is ripped and utterly gorgeous. It’s as if the gods carved him from precious material, sculpting and perfecting every inch of

his delectable torso. His broad shoulders give way to a toned chest and an impressive six-pack, and I don't even care that I'm drooling. He is the most beautiful man I have ever seen, and I can't believe I'm here with him in this moment. Noticing my slack jaw and panting chest, he waggles his brows, his grin expanding. Then he moves to the end of the bed, kneeling on it with one knee. His hands gravitate to my boots. "I love these, but I'd like to take them off. I want to run my hands over your legs."

I nod over the messy ball of emotion clogging my throat. My heart is slamming against my rib cage, and every nerve ending in my body is primed for his touch.

"Someday, I want you to wear these when we make love." His eyes spear into mine. "Wearing only these," he clarifies, and the image he conjures awakens something primal inside me.

"Touch me. Please, Alesso," I beseech, arching my spine and lifting my pelvis. "I need. *Need.*" I can't even continue my sentence because the intensity of the ache throbbing at the apex of my thighs has rendered me speechless.

He watches my reaction carefully as his fingers move to the zipper on one boot. No one has ever treated me with so much reverence and respect, and I almost cry. I urge him to hurry with my eyes. But he takes his time unzipping one boot and then the other, carefully placing them on the carpeted floor. Then he pushes my legs apart and kneels in between them. Keeping his eyes locked on mine, he slowly begins moving his hands up my legs, taking the time to map out every curve as his fingers trace slowly and carefully up my legs.

SERENA

I am barely breathing. My body is locked up tight in anticipation, and it feels like I could die from pleasure, and he's not even touching me intimately yet. His fingers dance along my overheated flesh, and I feel it everywhere. It's like his fingers are electrically charged, and every touch ignites a spark inside me. My pussy clenches and unclenches, like a greedy shrew, as his hands glide closer to where I need him.

At the same time, I'm battling the anxiety lingering on the edge of my need, ready to take charge and force me to get lost in my head if I lose focus. I'm not about to let that happen, so I concentrate on breathing evenly and absorbing the feel of his hands on my skin.

"Do you trust me?" he asks, stalling his large palms midway up my thighs.

"I do," I reply without hesitation because it's the truth.

"If I do anything you don't like, you need to tell me. I will be gentle, but the second you're not enjoying this, we stop. Okay?"

Tears stab my eyes again, and my body shakes with powerful emotion. "Okay." My voice trembles. "I will tell you to stop if I need you to." I sense renewed reticence as he scrutinizes my clearly emotional face. "I want this," I remind him. "I love the feel of your hands on me."

"Good." The lines on his brow smooth out. "What about my mouth and my tongue?" He tilts his head as his hands start moving again. "Do you want me to use those on your pussy?"

Red heat floods my body at his words and the thought of his mouth on me down there. Alfredo never did that, but—I stop that train of thought before it derails me and ruins the moment. I want that with Alesso, but it seems so intimate, and this is all new, and I know I need baby steps. “Just your fingers,” I whisper, and he nods.

“Keep looking at me,” he says as my gaze lifts to the ceiling. “I need to look at you to know you are enjoying this.”

A fresh wave of nerves fire at me when his fingers brush over my vagina through my lace panties. “You are so beautiful, Serena. Your legs are the stuff of dreams. Your body the ammunition for all my fantasies.” He speaks in dulcet tones as his fingers sweep back and forth across the front of my panties. His other hand slides up and down my inner thigh in feather-like strokes, which helps to relax me. “That’s it, my angel. I’m going to make you feel so good,” he says, slipping his hand under my panties and cupping my sex.

My chest seizes and I stop breathing. His hand remains still, giving me a minute to get used to his touch down there. “Do you want me to stop?” He peers deep into my eyes.

“No,” I whisper. “Keep going.”

“I’m going to remove your panties.” He looks to me for permission, and I nod, willing my pounding heart to calm the hell down. Lifting my hips, I breathe heavily as he slowly removes my underwear, tossing it aside. “Beautiful,” he murmurs, staring at my most intimate parts, and the urge to clamp my thighs shut is riding me hard. Thankfully, he doesn’t stare for too long, understanding it makes me uncomfortable. Crawling up my body, he kisses me softly, over and over, until I’m sinking into the bed, a veritable puddle of lust. “Thank you for trusting me with this.” He peppers kisses along my jawline and my neck. “Now lie back, but keep your eyes on me, and let me give you pleasure.”

Prickles of anxiety sprout on my skin as he returns to between my legs, but I fight it off.

I want this.

His touch leaves hot shivers in its wake.

He doesn't make my skin crawl like—

Nope. I'm not going there. Working hard to blank my mind of hideous thoughts, I focus on the gorgeous man brushing his fingers lightly up and down my slit and the pleasurable sensations coursing through my body at his touch.

"I'm going to move my finger inside you. Just one to start. Okay?" His eyes look to me for approval again, and I'm close to tears for the umpteenth time.

How am I here with him? What did I do to deserve this sweet, patient, loving man who automatically knows what I need and how I have to be treated? I don't even have to say it for Alesso to know what I need. I don't want to mess this up. I want to be able to do this with him. "Do it," I say. "I want your fingers inside me."

He slowly works one finger inside me, and my inner walls clench around him. He moves his finger in and out while his free hand moves to my clit and he rubs me gently. "Does that feel good?"

"Yes," I pant, resisting the urge to squirm as his finger glides in and out of me.

I work hard to stay in the moment, but my head is fighting my body for supremacy. Ignoring the screaming pressure gathering momentum in my head, I inhale and exhale and concentrate on the feel of his fingers moving in and on me. He adds a second digit into my vagina, stretching me a little, and I arch my hips. "I'll go nice and slow until you tell me to speed up." My eyes drift to the bulge in his pants, and the fact he's so aroused should make me happy, but it conjures unpleasant images. I squeeze my eyes shut to ward off the incoming barrage.

"Do you want me to stop?" he asks, slowing down.

"No!" I almost shout it. "Keep going." Uncertainty flashes across his face, and I can tell he's considering stopping. "Please, Alesso. Don't stop." I can't tell him I want him to keep going because I need to do this. I need to let him touch

me and coax an orgasm from me to know I'm normal. That the desire I have for him is normal and I can relax at his touch and my body will finally concede to pleasure the way it's supposed to. He can't know I have never climaxed at anyone's touch but my own and how much of a freak that makes me feel. "Go faster," I plead, bucking my hips up in what I hope is an encouraging motion.

Indecision crests his face again, but whatever pleading he sees on my face is enough to spur him on. He picks up his pace, thrusting his fingers into me faster and a little harder while he rubs my clit with a little more pressure.

My heart careens around my tight chest as I watch Alesso's hands work between my legs. Sweat beads down my spine, and my pulse vibrates in alarm, pounding steadily in my neck. I grab the covers, internally talking myself off a ledge, fighting the sea of memories resurrecting in my mind, but it's no good. I'm not strong enough to resist, and they break free, raining havoc.

Alesso's elegant, skillful fingers are replaced with Alfredo's thick, stubby fingers as he forces his way into my dry body like he has the right.

Instead of Alesso's handsome young face, I'm accosted by the wrinkled, overly tanned face of my husband.

Losing my grasp on reality, I thrash about on the bed, clamping my legs shut and shoving at my husband, screaming at him to leave me alone, to not touch me, telling him I hate him, how his skin makes me crawl, and I wish he was dead.

I have succumbed to the darkness, drowning in the nightmares of my past, as a succession of memories lays siege to my mind until it feels like I'm going mad.

I'm sobbing and shaking with my knees tucked into my chest and my arms wrapped around my legs as the sound of someone repeatedly calling my name tickles my eardrums, and I slowly start to come to.

"Serena. Please come back to me," Alesso pleads, raw anguish threading through his tone. A sob sticks in my throat

as I lift my head, staring into the room with blurry eyes. I glance down at myself, discovering a blanket draped around my panty-less bottom half. “Serena?” he says, and I’m vaguely aware of him shifting on the bed. “It’s me. I’m here. You’re safe.”

I swipe at the hot tears continuing to trek down my cheeks. “What happened?” Slowly, my vision comes into focus, and my stomach knots painfully when I see the tormented expression on his face.

“You didn’t seem to see me,” he croaks. “You thought I was Alfredo. I didn’t know what to do.”

“I’m sorry.” I pierce him with remorseful eyes. “I’m so sorry.”

“You have nothing to be sorry for. I’m the one who should be apologizing. You weren’t ready. I shouldn’t—”

“The kids!” I exclaim, my voice rising in concern. If my episode has woken Elisa and Romeo, I will only hate myself more.

“They are still sleeping. They don’t know anything.”

Relief descends, but it’s minor. Everything that happened crashes into me, and I’m so embarrassed. “I’m really sorry, Alesso.” What must he think of me? I know he must be experienced with women. Most Italian American men of his age are. So how embarrassing is it for him to have a woman fall apart when he’s barely even touching her? “This is all my fault. Not yours.”

“Don’t do that. I—” He exhales heavily as he tentatively reaches out to me. Indecision radiates from his eyes, and I hate how upset and confused he looks.

I did that to him.

I have made him doubt himself, and I can tell he’s self-flagellating. He doesn’t deserve it. He did nothing wrong, and I’m imbued with flagrant self-loathing. The tenuous hold on my control slips, and I burst out crying. “I’m such a fuck up. I’m the abnormal one! Not you. Don’t blame yourself. Please. I can’t bear it,” I sob.

His eyes are suspiciously glassy as he opens his arms, letting me make the call. There is no decision to be made though. I collapse against him, sobbing into his shoulder, needing him. Needing this.

“You’re not abnormal. You’ve been through a huge trauma, Rena. More than most people will ever endure in an entire lifetime. That bastard was the only man you have slept with, am I right?” he asks, his gaze full of compassion. Very carefully, he runs a soothing hand up and down my back.

Hiccupping, I nod before lifting my chin to look at him. He deserves some of my truths. I owe him at least that much. “I snuck a few kisses with guys when I was in college, but I wasn’t intimate with anyone until Alfredo.” A shudder works its way through me. “We probably should have talked about this first, but I didn’t want to think too much. I just wanted to enjoy sex like a normal person. I wanted you to touch me, and it felt so good until it didn’t. Until you disappeared and it was Alfredo with his hands on me. My skin was crawling, and I needed him to stop!” Hysteria is waiting in the wings, ready to complete my crazy nutjob transformation.

“I’m no therapist, but it seems like maybe you moved a bit fast.”

“I wanted it,” I whisper. “I really did. You make me feel desired. I just got all up in my head and ruined it.”

His face oozes compassion, but there is pity there too, and I hate that. How will I ever face him in the cold light of day? How will I ever move past this? Past him? Because there’s no way he’ll be interested in taking our relationship beyond friendship after this. Not now he sees exactly how damaged I am. No sane man would. And even if he feels the need to stay the course, for fear of hurting me with his rejection, I know it will be out of pity, not any real desire to form something more permanent with me.

I can’t let him do that.

I won’t.

Lowering my eyes, I drop my head to his chest and cling to him, knowing this will be the last time I get to hold him like this. Selfishly, I want to soak it all up so I can commit it to memory, to have something to remember our precious moments by. I relish his smell and absorb his touch and the solidity of his body holding me. I admire the quiet strength he brings to everything. The woman who ends up with this man will be a lucky bitch because he truly is one of a kind.

“I’m worried about you,” he quietly says, smoothing a hand up and down my hair.

“I’ll be fine,” I lie, dredging up the last of my bravery and extracting myself from his comforting embrace. I might as well get this over and done with now. “I’m continuing my therapy, and I’m considering attending NYU in the fall, and I have the kids. Those are the things I need to focus on right now. This.” I point between us before averting my eyes. I can’t say this to his face and pull it off. “This was a mistake. I shouldn’t have pushed for more. I’m not ready, and I think it’s best if we remain friends.”

Awkward tension bleeds into the air, and like the chickenshit I am, I wrap my arms around myself and avoid looking at his handsome face. Silence ticks for a couple more beats before the bed dips, and he clears his throat. “Whatever you need, Serena.” He stands, and a tight pain spreads across my chest. “You can take my room. I’m going to sleep in one of the other apartments.”

“Okay. Thank you,” I say, only lifting my head when his soft footsteps trek across the room. A pang of longing accosts me as I watch him cross the room, hating the slight stoop of his shoulders and the sadness that seems to cling to him.

He stops at the door, looking over his shoulder. “Good night, Serena.” A muscle clenches in his jaw, and he doesn’t wait for a reply before stepping out into the corridor and closing the door behind him.

I manage to hold my tears at bay for a couple of minutes, only letting the dam break when I’m confident he has left the apartment. Then I throw myself down on the bed and give in

to my self-inflicted misery. I didn't want to end the potential of an *us*, but I had no choice. It's not Alesso's fault I'm a pitiful broken mess. I was a fool to think I could be normal. Could be happy.

It's never going to happen.

The truth is, Alfredo has ruined me for all men, and Alesso deserves so much better than me.

ALESSO

“Let’s talk,” Ben says, when we return to Connecticut on Sunday evening. We spent the day with the kids at the zoo and the aquarium, and Serena managed to say a grand total of zero words to me, so I’m in a pretty shitty mood.

I trail the boss to his office and flop into a chair in front of his desk while he fixes drinks. “Let’s sit over here,” Ben says a couple minutes later, handing me a scotch and walking toward the cozy seating area in front of the fireplace. He sits in one of the high-backed leather chairs, and I sit in the other one across from him. “I know your personal life is none of my business,” he starts, drilling me with a look. “Except where it concerns my sister-in-law. I need to know what your intentions are toward Serena.”

Nice of him not to sugarcoat it. “It doesn’t matter what my intentions are. Or were,” I correct before gulping back a mouthful of whisky. “Serena has made it clear she wants us to be friends and nothing more.”

“It looked like she was interested in more than friendship last night.” He swirls the bourbon in his glass.

Air whooshes out of my mouth. “She thought she was.” I rub my tense jaw. “But she’s not ready.” I feel sick to my stomach every time I recall how it went down last night. I want to punch myself in the gut for not reading the signs better. There were a couple moments I thought I should stop, but her body seemed to enjoy my touch until her head got involved and ruined everything. Not that I am in any way

blaming Serena. I know she has been hurt by that prick she was married to. That he's thwarted her trust in men and made her wary of intimacy. I had suspected as much. Now I know for sure.

"Did something happen?"

"I don't want to talk about it. It's between Serena and me, and I won't disrespect her by talking about it with anyone. Not even you."

"I respect that, and I would never ask you to breach her confidence." He sips his drink. "My wife is worried about her. Last night, Sierra and Nat were as giddy as schoolgirls watching you and Rena make googly eyes at one another. I wasn't aware you felt that way about her."

"I haven't even discussed it with Rena, so I couldn't tell you." I rub the back of my neck with my free hand. "I wasn't sure you would approve," I truthfully add.

"You're a good man, Alessandro. As long as you treat her right, I have no issue with you being with Serena. She's a free agent."

"It's not going to happen." I almost choke as the words leave my mouth. "At least not now. I can't push her, and she needs more time. If she thinks I'm giving up though, she's sorely mistaken. Serena is running scared, and she thinks I deserve better than her. Which is such fucking bullshit. She is traumatized after her experiences at the hands of her husband. They were married for nine years, and I'm pretty sure the abuse went on for as long. It's not something she can get over in a few months. My experience pales in comparison to hers, and it still took me a good while to heal and come out the other side."

Ben nods contemplatively while sipping his drink. "Sierra hasn't disclosed any confidences, but from what I've been told, it started from the minute she married him. The trauma runs deep."

"What would you do in my shoes?" I ask, needing his advice.

“Be there for her in whatever capacity you can. If she says it’s friends, then be her friend. Continue doing what you are doing. Sierra says you are helping more than you know.”

“I care about her. Elisa and Romeo too. They deserve happiness after all the shit that bastard put them through.”

“They do,” he readily agrees, sitting up straighter in the chair. “But it’s a lot of responsibility to take on. Are you ready for the additional effort required to be with a woman with two kids who have just lost their father? There are easier women to date for sure.”

“You make it sound like a chore. Like I should just give up because it’s too much work.”

“It’s just an observation. A lot of made men in your shoes wouldn’t be considering tying themselves to a woman who comes with two traumatized kids.”

“I’m not like other made men,” I snap, irritated by his words, even though I know he means nothing by them. He is just pointing out a truth. “As far as I’m concerned, they are the cherry on top. They’re great kids. Clearly, they take after their mother.”

A wicked grin spreads across Ben’s mouth, and I know he said that to feel out my intentions. I flip him the bird. “Asshole,” I mutter as he rises.

He takes my glass. “You’re going to need a drink for what I have to say next.”

I grip the armrests of the chair, bracing myself for what I suspect is coming. I eyeball the boss when he has reclaimed his seat and we are both nursing fresh drinks. “You have proof.”

Ben nods, crossing his ankles at the feet. He hands me a photo he must have retrieved from his desk when he was fixing our new drinks. “Phillip found that online.”

I stare at the photo of my mother. She’s so young and more beautiful than I ever remember her being. She is tucked under the arm of a handsome, tall guy, and they are looking at one another with stars in their eyes. There is no mistaking his

identity. It's Amadeo Salerno for sure. "So, it's true. He is my father."

Ben bobs his head as I clutch the photo in my hand. "The blood tests confirmed the biological link."

When Saverio fled Vegas last year, he was severely injured, and Ben's personal doctor attended to him. He took blood samples at the time, and while it was unethical of him to test my blood against Saverio's, it's a mild offense when you consider all the other shit *mafioso* get up to.

"Fuck." Resting my head back against the chair, I briefly close my eyes. Since I spotted that photo in Saverio's creepy mansion, I have suspected this was the truth. Yet I was clinging to the slightest hope it wasn't true, and I successfully blocked it from my mind, reckoning there was no point worrying over something until I knew it to be true.

"There's something else."

I blink my eyes open and stare at Ben.

"Your mother is dead."

I test that out in my mind, but nope. I feel nothing. "She was dead to me a long time ago." Ben nods in understanding. "Did she OD?" I ask because she was only seventeen when she had me, so she's too young to have died from natural causes unless she got sick.

"Yes," Ben confirms, and it's just something else we have in common.

"When?"

"Fourteen months ago." Ben takes a drink of his bourbon, watching me as I process these new revelations. "Amadeo's middle name was Alessandro."

I exhale heavily. "She lied to me." I snort out a bitter laugh. "Not that it surprises me."

"She was probably protecting you."

"She wouldn't know how," I snap, remembering all the ways in which she didn't protect me. "More likely she was

running from my father. Or maybe she wanted to punish him by taking me away.”

“Phillip has worked out the timing. Amadeo was gunned down before you were born. He might not have even known she was pregnant. As you know, Monique didn’t grow up in Vegas, and we can find no record of any residence for her in the state of Nevada. It’s likely she met him on vacation.”

“She must have known him well enough to know his middle name,” I counter.

“Saverio may know.”

I bolt upright at those words. “We can’t tell him.”

Ben pierces me with a knowing look. “If you want the *consigliere* role, we have to tell him.”

“Then I’ll forget about it. You can appoint someone else.”

“What are you afraid of?”

“Him digging his claws in.” The only family I have ever known is the Mazzone *famiglia*, and I don’t want to move to fucking Vegas. We don’t share the same values, and I have zero desire to be around his sex slaves or Anais. I scrub my face in my hands. Fuck. She’s my cousin, and she tried to get me in bed. Sweet Jesus.

“You know I won’t let that happen. Just like I won’t let you walk away after months of training because you think I can’t keep Saverio in line. He owes me, and if it comes down to it, I’ll call in the favor.”

I gawk at him. “You can’t be serious? You can’t use the favor for that!”

“Why not? It’s as good a reason as any.”

“Things are messy in Chicago. The Russians are still a concern. You may need to call in the favor for more pressing problems.”

“That’s for me to decide.”

The stubborn outline of Ben’s jaw tells me this is an argument I won’t win now. “We’re getting ahead of

ourselves,” I say, forcing myself to calm down and think logically. “I still have lots of training to do, so I suggest we keep this knowledge to ourselves until the time comes when we need to seriously consider the matter.” I am not letting Ben waste that IOU on me. Not a hope in hell it’s going down like that.

“Okay.” He slowly bobs his head. “Let’s continue as we are and deal with it when we are forced to confront it.”

I drain my drink, so ready to be done with this day. Yet there is one final piece of business to discuss. “Did Phillip ID the guy from the boutique?”

“He was able to hack into the city camera network, and he found the guy via one of the traffic cams. He’s a native New Yorker. A petty criminal. Has a bunch of arrests and priors for carjacking and stealing. All low-level stuff.”

I frown, not understanding this at all. “Any connection to The Outfit? Or any local gangs or other *mafioso*?”

Ben shakes his head, before finishing his drink. “None that we have found so far. I sent a few guys over to the address on file for him, but he’s no longer living there.”

“Great.” I rub at my sore temples. “So, the guy has a hard-on for Rena, and he’s in the wind.”

“I’m assigning Fabrizio as Rena’s permanent bodyguard. He’ll escort her any time she leaves the property. He will keep her safe. And I’ve suggested she lay low for the moment while we investigate further.”

“I don’t like it,” I say as we walk toward the door. “I don’t like it one little bit. What are we missing here?”

“I don’t know. But we’ll find out.”

SERENA

Bending down, I squint at the corner of the cake, frowning at the lopsided frosting on one side. Wetting the flat knife in the cup of warm water, I attempt to even it out. “I should have asked Nat to bake Alesso’s birthday cake,” I grumble to my sister while she helps Rowan and Romeo add the finishing touches to the cupcakes they made for the surprise party. I’m not the world’s greatest baker, but I’m decent. I’m sure the cake tastes fine, but my icing skills could definitely use some work.

“It looks fantastic,” Sierra says, skimming her gaze over the cake.

Red velvet with cream cheese frosting is Alesso’s favorite cake. While I could have ordered one from the local bakery, I wanted to make it for him myself. Alesso does so much for me and the kids, and when I discovered his birthday was in the middle of July, I decided we were going to do something special for him.

In the initial aftermath of breakdowngate, things were strained between us, and we spent weeks barely communicating. I talked it through with Pamela, and with her support, I offered him an olive branch one night—a glass of wine and a return to our usual routine. Alesso accepted my peace offering, and things settled back into place. He still works with Ben late some nights, but on other nights, he spends time with me. Our friendship is intact, and neither of us ever brings up that awful night. He doesn’t look at me the way he used to anymore either, which is how I know I did the right

thing. That night taught him how damaged I am, and me ending things at that point meant it saved him the hassle of doing it.

“Mommy.” Elisa rushes into the kitchen, her excited face covered in multicolored paint. “I finished my painting for Alesso. Come look.”

I smile at my sister as I let my nine-year-old daughter pull me out of the kitchen. Elisa babbles excitedly about the party as we walk over to the artist’s studio at the side of the house. Sierra introduced my daughter to the wonderful world of art, and it’s fair to say Elisa is addicted. So much that I have to force her outside to play every day. Summer is in full bloom, and the weather is glorious. Far too glorious to stay indoors all the time. Some days, Alesso takes her easel and paints outside so she can paint while her brother and her cousin play on the playground.

Sierra is pretty busy now her holistic center is open, even though she is only working part-time. Business is booming, which is wonderful, but she spends plenty of nights pouring over client records, paying bills, and running the administration side of the business. I think it’s a lot more than she realized, which is why I offered to manage the bookkeeping for her, despite how much I hate the soul-sucking work.

It reminds me of the time I spent in the accounting department of Lawson Pharma. But it’s different doing it for my sister, and I’m not in a toxic environment where my family business was being used to launder money for the mob. I’m happy to support Sierra because she and Ben have done so much for us. Plus, they recently announced they are pregnant, and Sierra doesn’t need any additional stress. I may not love numbers, but I’m content assisting my sister with her new business. It will help to keep me occupied when the kids return to school in a few weeks. Especially if my NYU dream doesn’t come to fruition.

“Here, Mom.” Elisa drags me to a stop in front of her canvas. “Do you think he’ll like it?” she asks while my heart pounds in my chest.

She has painted a family in front of a house, and I can guess the inspiration. Ignoring the emotional lump clogging my throat, I smile at my daughter. “It’s beautiful, Elisa. Alesso will love it.”

“This is Uncle Ben’s house.” She points at her picture. “And this is Alesso, me, Romeo, and you.” I note we are all holding hands and smiling, and my chest aches with longing and regret. Perhaps, if I hadn’t tried to rush things with him, this kind of reality might be in my future. *Our* future.

But I tried to fast-track my healing before I was ready, and I ruined any potential we had.

Crouching down, I peer into my daughter’s happy trusting gaze. “You know Alesso is just my friend? And he might not always live here.” I don’t want to burst my daughter’s bubble, but I can’t have her believing in something that isn’t likely to come true. I have taken to gently reminding her as things crop up because I see how attached she is to him.

“He told me he will always be my friend and always be there if I need him,” she replies. “And he said it was the same for you and my brother.” She takes my hand, tugging me toward the door. “He’s not going anywhere, Mom, and you worry too much. Now come on. Let’s get our party dresses on!” Schooled by my daughter, I follow her out of the studio, wishing I had even one-tenth of her natural confidence and exuberance.

“Surprise!” everyone collectively hollers when Alesso appears on the patio a couple of hours later. Ben took Alesso into the city today, to help get him out of the way, while we got everything set up here. Sierra had a gorgeous outdoor area built last month just for parties. The large circular beige paved stone floor is covered by a wooden gazebo. Underneath it are a few round tables with matching chairs and some comfy wicker sofas grouped around stylish glass-topped wicker coffee tables. Strips of string lights crisscross the ceiling and hang

down the wooden pillars. Large, flowering plant pots inject some vibrant color, and scented candles add to the gorgeous fragrance in the air. It's a beautiful space and the perfect location to host Alessandro's surprise twenty-seventh birthday party.

"What is all this?" he blurts, looking shell-shocked as his gaze wanders between the friends and family congregated in his honor. Nat is here with the twins—Gino is still in Chicago and doesn't make it home much. Leo, Nario, Ciro, and a few other made men who are Alesso's friends are also here. Brando brought his fiancée, Marlena, and it's the first time us girls have met her. She seems like a sweet girl and very smitten with Ben's capo.

"Happy birthday." I smile as I approach Alesso with Elisa and Romeo by my side. "You didn't think we would let the occasion pass without celebrating, did you?" I hand him a glass of champagne as Ben raises a toast to Alessandro. He looks a little embarrassed as everyone lifts their glasses to him, which is endearingly sweet.

"We made you cupcakes," Romeo says, looping his arm through Rowan's.

"They're yummy," Rowan adds, grabbing Alesso's free hand. "Come try one."

"I painted you a picture," Elisa interjects. "It's over here." She tugs on his arm, trying to pull him in the opposite direction.

"I drew you a card!" Romeo screams, as if Alesso isn't standing right beside him. He shoves the hand-drawn card in his face. "It's you pushing me on the swing!" he exclaims, pointing at the stick figure drawing.

"Mommy baked you a cake. Red velvet," Elisa says before Alesso can get a word in edgewise. Elisa glares at Rowan as they each try to drag Alesso in an opposite direction, and it's priceless.

Alesso chuckles, and his eyes are alight with happiness as his gaze snags on mine. For a second, I forget how to breathe.

Is it possible he's getting even more good-looking? Because damn, the man is hotness personified. Snapping out of it, I gently release Elisa's and Rowan's hands before they pull Alesso's arms out of their sockets. "I know you're excited, but you can't bombard Alesso the instant he arrives. There is plenty of time for everyone to show him what y'all have made. Let's see what Alesso wants to do first. Okay?"

Alesso hands me his champagne before crouching down in front of the three rugrats and opening his arms wide. "First things first. I need a hug." They descend on him with their usual eagerness, and I laugh as he almost falls backward. Alesso regains his balance, hugging the three kids as Sierra steps up alongside me.

"He's so good with kids," she whispers in my ear.

I nod because it's the truth. He's so patient and kind, and he seems to derive genuine enjoyment out of playing with them and taking them places.

I trail alongside them as Alesso tastes one of the boys' cupcakes and admires the cards both Romeo and Rowan drew for him. His eyes flit to the cake, occupying center stage on the long table where the food is laid out. Our guests are helping themselves to food while Ben and Sierra distribute drinks. None of his friends have approached yet, happy to let him entertain the kids first. "You made this for me?" he asks, his voice sounding a little hoarse.

I nod, fighting a blush. "I'm not as good as Natalia, but it tastes pretty good, if I do say so myself."

"Thank you." Leaning in, he brushes his lips against my cheek, leaving a trail of fire every place he touches. "That is the first time anyone has made me a cake for my birthday. It's the best damn cake I've ever seen."

I stare at him in shock. "Please tell me that's not the truth."

"My mom couldn't cook for shit. When I was little, she'd buy me a premade cake for my birthday, but most times, she couldn't be bothered." He shrugs, like it's not a big deal when it is.

“That is so sad. I’m sorry. Every child should be made to feel cherished on their birthday.” He has mentioned bits and pieces about his mom and his childhood, and I’m so angry she neglected him. That he has turned into such an intelligent, compassionate man is even more impressive knowing the kind of environment he grew up in.

Alesso is just good to his core.

“I couldn’t help thinking how blessed Elisa is to have you as a mom when I saw the party you threw for her birthday. I would have loved that when I was a kid,” he admits.

Without thinking about it, I loop my arm in his and start moving toward where my daughter is impatiently waiting to reveal her painting. “Well, we’ll just have to spoil you every year on your birthday to make up for all the parties you missed out on growing up.”

Elisa squeals, hopping from foot to foot as we approach. She has draped a light mesh cloth over her easel, and her fingers are twitching with the need to reveal all. “Happy birthday, Alesso.” She throws herself at him, and he readily lifts her into his arms. She clings to him, beaming from ear to ear. “I love you. You’re my bestest friend in the whole wide world.” Her arms tighten around his neck, and she rests her head on his chest.

Alesso folds his arms around her without hesitation. I watch with a lump in my throat as he dusts kisses into her hair while exchanging a meaningful look with me. His eyes are brimming with emotion, and my heart is ricocheting around my chest. My little girl loves him as much as I do, and it’s going to hurt when he eventually has to leave us. “I love you too, princess,” he says, briefly closing his eyes as he hugs her.

“Can I tell you a secret?” she asks, lifting her head from his chest.

“Whisper it in my ear,” he says, playing along.

Elisa eyeballs me as she whispers animatedly in his ear. Pain races across his face for a fleeting moment before he hides it. My brow puckers as I pin him with an inquisitive

look. Maintaining eye contact with me, he whispers something in her ear. Elisa beams wider and kisses his cheek. Then he tenderly places her feet on the ground, taking her small hand in his much larger one. “Show me my painting.” He squeezes her hand. “I’m dying of curiosity here.”

Elisa whips off the covering, revealing her painting. It’s an incredible rendition for a nine-year-old, and I think she has definitely inherited her auntie’s creative ability. My heart is like a lump of mush in my chest as she explains the meaning behind the picture to him. Sierra and Ben come up alongside us, and my brother-in-law has his arm slung protectively around my sister’s shoulders. Sierra fixes me with a wistful look as she inspects the picture and listens to her niece giving voice to her dreams.

I have a sudden frantic urge to run away.

To not bear witness to this, because as much as I want to give my little girl everything her heart desires, I can’t give her this.

“This is amazing, Elisa.” Alesso leans down and kisses both her cheeks. “Thank you so much. I love it, and I’m going to buy a frame and hang it on my wall. You can help me tomorrow, if you like.”

“Yay!” She looks up at Alesso like he hung the moon in the sky, and I get it. I really do. It’s so easy to love him.

Ben tempts Elisa away to play with the others, hauling her onto his back and racing toward the bounce house where Romeo and Rowan are jumping around.

“I think my niece might have inherited the Lawson artistic gene,” Sierra says, smiling proudly at the painting.

“You mean *your* artistic gene.” I rub my hands down the front of my dress. “The rest of us don’t have an artistic bone in our bodies.”

“I don’t agree,” Alesso replies. “That birthday cake looks pretty artistic to me.”

Sierra grins at him before thrusting an envelope at me. “You left that on the kitchen counter. I’m going to grab some

drinks for you two. I need to live vicariously through everyone tonight,” she adds, running a hand over her still flat stomach. “I’ll be right back.”

I know she left on purpose so I could give Alesso his present in private. Gulping back my nerves, I hand the envelope to him. “This is my gift.”

“You didn’t need to buy me anything.” Our fingers brush in the exchange, shooting tingles up my arm. From the way his hand jumps, I think he might have felt it too. “You have already done too much.” Taking my hand in his free one, he gently squeezes my fingers. “Thank you, Serena. No one has ever gone to so much trouble for my birthday. You can’t know how much this means to me. I will never forget it.”

Heat warms my cheeks as I smile at him. “You’re welcome. Everyone should be spoiled on their birthday.” I glance at the envelope in his other hand. “Open it. I hope you like it.” I agonized for ages over what to get him until I came across the event, and I just knew it was the perfect gift.

“No way,” he rasps when he opens the envelope and extracts the contents. His eyes are radiant as he lifts the tickets up. “You got front row seats to the world championship boxing match in Madison Square Garden?”

“I got tickets for everyone,” I confirm. “I’ve never been to a fight before, and I thought it might be fun.”

“We can make another weekend of it in the city,” he says, his excitement palpable.

I try to remember all the fun I had that weekend, rather than focusing on the shitty parts. Maybe a do-over is exactly what is needed. Except I have no romantic expectations this time. “That sounds like a plan.”

Without warning, he pulls me into his arms. “Thank you so much, Rena. This is the perfect present.”

Letting my arms encircle him, I indulge myself with this hug. His familiar scent wafts around me and loneliness batters my heart. I have missed his arms around me, and I want to tell him I’m doing much better and making progress all the time.

That maybe we could try again, but I can't do that to him. I can't expect him to put his life on hold indefinitely for me. Reluctantly, I ease out of our embrace. "You're welcome. I'm glad you like the tickets."

He shoves his hands in the pockets of his pants, like he needs to occupy them, while he stares at me. The outside world ceases to exist as his warm chocolaty-brown eyes enchant mine. I couldn't pull my gaze from his if I tried. Heavy emotion fizzes in the air, igniting an invisible charge between us. My heart thumps behind my rib cage, and inside I'm screaming.

I still want him. Still love him. And I hate that I can't be who he deserves me to be.

That thought breaks the connection, and I avert my gaze, finally drawing air into my lungs. When I look back up, hurt registers on his face, and guilt jumps up and bites me. "What did she whisper?" I blurt the first thing that pops into my head, needing to erase that pain from his face.

His features soften like they do anytime he speaks of my children. I swear he loves them more than their father did. Or at least he outwardly shows he does. Who the hell knows what Alfredo felt deep down inside? He steps a little closer. "I would think that was obvious from her picture." He tucks a piece of my hair behind my ear. "She told me she prays to God every night that he'll let me be her new daddy."

ALESSO

“Serena looks well,” Brando says, handing me a fresh beer. He drops onto the sofa beside me while my gaze remains glued to Rena. She’s chatting with Nat, Sierra, and Marlana at one of the tables, smiling as she sips her glass of wine. It’s late now and the kids are all safely tucked in bed. The night is balmy, perfect for sitting outside, but Ben has lit several patio heaters to keep everyone warm because it’s known to dip to fifty-five at night.

“She does,” I admit, acknowledging how much healthier Serena seems these days. The haunted look she used to sport is a thing of the past, and it’s clear she is healing. She appears to enjoy her weekly therapy sessions now. She is moving forward, and I am happy for her.

But I wish she was moving forward with me.

I take a swig of my beer as that selfish thought lands in my mind.

“Anything else happen between you?”

I gave Brando a censored version of what happened that night with Rena because I needed to talk to someone about it. I didn’t go into specifics because I would never talk about Rena like that to anyone. But Brando knows enough to understand things didn’t end well and that she has closed her mind to the prospect of anything more than friendship with me. “I’m still firmly in the friend zone.”

“Maybe you should make a move. She seems to have turned a corner.”

“It’s only been a couple of months, and the ball is in her court. I don’t want to presume anything and push her back into an unhealthy place. I won’t jeopardize her recovery.”

“You have the patience of a saint.”

“I have feelings for her. Strong feelings,” I admit, and it’s the closest I have come to telling anyone I love her. “I would wait for eternity if I had to.”

“I’m sure your blue balls won’t thank you for that admission,” he drawls, raising his bottle to his lips.

“You let me worry about my balls.”

“All joking aside, I think you’re doing the right thing. I see the way she looks at you. She has feelings for you too. I’m sure when she works through everything she’ll be grateful you waited for her.”

“Right now, I have no clue whether she will ever want anything more than friendship with me, and it kills me, man. I have never wanted anyone the way I want her.”

The sofa dips beside me as Leo sits down, catching the end of my statement. He lifts his beer, clinking his bottle against mine. “From one poor bastard to another, I commiserate.” His eyes are bloodshot, and from the way he was guzzling scotch earlier and knocking back beers this past hour, I can tell he’s smashed. Leo only ever admits his feelings for Natalia when he’s drunk.

“I don’t know how you stand it,” Brando says. “Either of you.” He casts a glance over his shoulder at Natalia. She looks this way, her brow instantly puckering with concern when her gaze lands on a clearly inebriated Leo.

“We have no choice,” Leo says, doing nothing to disguise his longing as he stares at Ben’s sister. Turning his head, he pins me with somber eyes. “It sucks to be us.”

“I wouldn’t say that. At least we still get to share in some part of their lives. That counts for something.”

“I used to think like that,” Leo slurs. “But years of this shit has gotten to me. Now I think it might be best if I never had to

see her again. Especially not with *him*.” His lips pull into an ugly sneer. “I fucking hate that bastard.”

Brando and I both know why he hates Accardi, and it’s more than the fact Leo would already be predisposed to hate whoever was Natalia’s husband.

“You’re lucky Gifoli is dead,” he says. “If Accardi died tomorrow, I wouldn’t waste another second. I’d tell Natalia everything. Lay it all on the line. I know Rena has issues ’cause of that abusive asshole, but you should still let her know how you feel. Don’t make the same mistakes I have made.” He slaps a hand over my chest, in the place where my heart steadily beats. “Let her know you love her before it’s too late.”

“I love Captain America.” Elisa stares dreamily into space as we leave the movie theater after watching the latest Marvel release. She and Romeo are holding my hands as we make our way out of the elevator. Frank rolls his eyes as he grips Rowan’s hand tightly when the little wriggler tries to get loose. Both of us scan the parking lot for threats as we escort the three kids to the SUV.

“You can’t love him,” Rowan says. “You love Caleb.”

I fight a grin. Elisa’s crush on Caleb Accardi is super cute, but I doubt Caleb sees it that way. Most fourteen-year-olds wouldn’t.

“It’s a free world. I can love Captain America *and* Caleb,” she retorts, in typical Elisa fashion. Frank’s lips twitch, and I can tell he’s smothering laughter too. This little girl slays me in the best possible way. I adore her as much as if she was my own flesh and blood. I don’t think Serena realizes how much I love her kids or that I secretly wish they were mine.

“Gross,” Romeo says. “Love is gross. I’m never gonna love any girl.”

“Girls are gross,” Rowan agrees, nodding. “I’m never getting married.” His face contorts. “All my daddy does is slobber all over my mommy.” Rowan lowers his voice a little as I stuff my laughter back down my throat. “And he touches her boobies. I’ve seen him!”

Frank and I exchange an amused expression as we pull up alongside the SUV. I might have to mention that one to the boss. Nario hops out, opening the back doors and helping us to secure the kids in their seats. They talk while we buckle them in.

Ben and Sierra had an appointment with the ob-gyn today, and the boss is working from home this afternoon. Ciro went with them, and Ben okayed it so Frank and I could take the kids to see a movie because Sierra doesn’t work on Fridays and she has no plans after the doctor. Rena is at NYU with Natalia on some kind of orientation day. Both women were accepted to their respective courses, and they are due to start classes soon. I am so proud of Serena. I know she is scared shitless, but the fact she is pursuing her dream shows just how far she has come.

It gives me hope for the future. That we can get to a place where she’s ready to start a relationship with me.

Fabrizio has accompanied Rena, and he’s a competent guy, so I shouldn’t be on edge. Especially when Brando is there too, trailing Nat in secret because she doesn’t know Ben has assigned him and Nario to watch over her, twenty-four-seven, on a rotational basis.

But I *am* on edge.

We still haven’t found that guy from the boutique, and though there have been no further incidents, I don’t believe the threat has passed. I have no clue who is behind it. The Sicilian angle has been thoroughly exhausted and there is no threat there, so it must be someone within The Outfit who still bears a grudge. But why? And how does this person or persons have connections to some low-life New Yorker? It doesn’t add up, and I hate loose ends. I won’t rest until we find whoever it is

and end them. Any time Rena is out of my sight, my nerves are stretched tight and I don't relax until she's back home.

"My daddy never kissed my mommy," Romeo says, frowning. "Maybe my daddy thought girls were gross too."

Not fucking likely. Needing to distract the kids—and myself, because any mention of Alfredo Gifoli fills me with murderous rage—I blurt, "Who wants pizza?"

"Me, me, me!" A chorus of excited approval greets my ears as I climb into one of the empty seats behind the kids while Frank takes shotgun. I tap out a text to Ben as Nario drives us out of the parking lot toward the pizza joint, trying not to let my mood sour.

"We have big problems in Chicago," Ben tells me later that night when I'm back at the house. We are outside, walking the grounds, while Nat and Serena are putting the exhausted kids to bed. "It's a shit show, and Gino is not helping." He cracks his knuckles. "The Commission is growing concerned that we are losing control. It can't all fall apart at the final hurdle."

Last month, he had filled me in on exactly why Gino Accardi has been so distracted in the Windy City and why he's sleeping on the job. *Literally*. "I thought you told him to end things with that Marcela woman?"

"I did, but I'm not convinced he listened. Besides, it's not just that."

"Barretta isn't committed at all," I surmise.

Ben nods. "He is starting to really piss me off. I don't understand the man. He seems to care about The Outfit, so why is he looking to bail now?"

"This doesn't look good. Both of them are making you look weak."

"Exactly. What do I do about it?" His stark blue eyes convey everything he's not saying. He is more than just

concerned. He is gravely worried about Chicago and the potential it has for destroying everything he has spent years working toward. This is also the first time Ben has very directly asked for my advice.

I consider it for a few moments, running options through my mind. “My initial inclination is to consider giving Don Accardi more responsibility. If we made him their don, he might just pull his head out of his ass. Chicago is the largest territory after New York and highly valued by anyone with ambition.”

“But?” Ben asks because he knows me and he senses I have reservations.

“I don’t think we can trust him. Not if you think he’s in love with that woman. Giving him more power could be risky for Nat’s sake. But also for yours. He might want to take control so he can go to war with you. It seems like he has changed, and not for the better.”

Ben nods solemnly. “Those are my sentiments exactly. But I must do something. I can’t just sit back and let things turn to complete shit.” He drags a hand through his hair, and the strain is showing on his face now.

“I think we should hold tight for now. Continue to reiterate to both men that they must do their jobs or face the consequences. And we explore our options. Put out some feelers and see who might be interested in Chicago.”

“Not as many as you might think.” Ben slows down as we near the house. “The Bratva are still circling Chicago, and that’ll make some cautious. We also need to be careful with the message that goes out. We can’t have it getting back to Gino, and we don’t want anyone to think The Commission isn’t anything but a committed unit.”

I fold my arms as I look at him. “Boss, made men gossip worse than women. You can be sure it’s common knowledge, at least among some, that Chicago isn’t yet settled. And no one expects miracles. This is all new. Everyone understands that. You are known for your transparency, and I don’t think that should change. Keep it real, and the men will respect that.”

“Tell me everything,” I say, accepting the glass of red wine Serena hands me when I enter her private living room.

“I love it!” Her giddy smile is exactly what I need to lighten my mood after the conversation with Ben. “It’s an eclectic campus, and I like how it’s spread out,” she says, settling at the other end of the couch, like every night. “I got to meet a few of the professors. They gave us presentations on some of the courses, and it sounds so interesting.” Her entire face is animated as she explains. “I can’t wait to start. I’m really excited.”

“I’m happy for you.” Leaning forward, I lift my glass to hers. “Congrats, Rena. I’m pleased it’s all working out for you. You deserve it.”

She chinks her glass against mine, keeping her broad smile intact. “Thank you. Your support means a lot. Without you, Sierra, and Nat encouraging me, I’m not sure I would’ve had the lady balls to go for it.” She giggles, and her tinkling laughter is a balm to my soul.

“Of course, you would have. You’re always so hard on yourself. Even now.”

“I know.” She kicks off her ballet flats, tucking her bare feet underneath her. She’s wearing a simple white sundress today, and she looks delightfully pretty. Her hair shimmers with golden highlights from spending so much time outside this summer, and freckles adorn her nose and the tops of her cheeks. She is gorgeous, and I know she has no clue. It only adds to the attraction. “Pamela is helping me to work on it,” she explains. “It’s hard though after years of being told and believing I wasn’t good enough.”

“I regularly wish I could dig that motherfucker up and kill him more gruesomely,” I admit. I don’t often mention how I killed her husband, not wanting to send her on a journey into her past, but she’s visibly stronger these days, and I find she

brings him up more often. Like talking about him is exorcising her demons.

“It’s not just because he put me down. It goes deeper than that.”

I arch a brow, encouraging her to continue.

She tugs on her lower lip with her teeth, and the motion has my cock pulsing in my pants. She looks sexy as hell when she does that, and it doesn’t take much to get a rise out of my poor neglected cock these days.

“It’s hard to explain.” Her warm hazel eyes greet mine. Today they have little flecks of amber in them, and they look more brown than green. Gorgeous. Simply gorgeous. “My parents never made me feel any less. Daddy didn’t say much. To him, I was pretty much invisible, but as long as I didn’t cause him trouble or disagree with his plans for my future, he left me alone. Mom always encouraged us, no matter what. She wasn’t pushy when I didn’t have strong ambition like Saskia or creative passion like Sierra. She let me be.”

Her eyes lower to her lap as she sips her wine, looking lost in her mind. When she lifts her chin, she’s smiling sadly. “I realize I always put myself down. I wasn’t as ballsy as Saskia, nor as talented or bravely rebellious as Sierra. My mom is beautiful, and Saskia and Sierra inherited her stunning looks while I resemble my dad. No one made me feel like the ugly duckling, but that’s how I felt growing up.” She laughs lightly. “I definitely suffer from middle child syndrome. I’m a classic case.”

I’m not having that. “You are stunning, Rena. Truly exquisite. The most beautiful woman I know.”

Two pink dots blossom on her cheeks, and she looks adorably awkward as she whispers, “Thank you.”

“Saskia was a self-absorbed bitch,” I continue. “And just because Sierra is talented and feisty doesn’t make your talents or your personality shine any less bright.”

Her timid smile expands. “I love how you always rush to defend me. I’ve never had that before. Loyalty is one of your

best qualities, Alesso. Anyone who knows you is so lucky to be a part of your world.”

Warmth spreads across my chest at her words and the sincerity on her face. “I’m only speaking the truth.”

“You’re just being you. One of the eternal good guys.”

Well, that’s just great. Just what every guy wants to hear, even if I know Rena means it as a compliment. Everyone knows the good guys never get the girl, but I don’t have it in me to be anything else with this woman. “You’re an amazing mother. The best I have ever seen. That is your talent. Your gift to this world.”

Tears prick her eyes, and I panic for a split second until the most incredible smile tips up the corners of her lush mouth. “That is the greatest compliment you could give me. Thank you for saying that.” The blush on her cheeks darkens, and I know she struggles to accept compliments, but she is getting better at receiving them. “I know it’s my greatest achievement, and I love that. I will never be the life and soul of the party or a badass who other women look up to and aspire to be, but I am okay with that. I am rediscovering myself, and I like what I’m finding. There is no greater feeling than being a mom. I know some women want that so badly and don’t get to experience it, so I’m extremely lucky I am Elisa’s and Romeo’s mom. I thank God every day for them. I hate Alfredo. I always will, but I am grateful to him for giving me my babies. They are the very best part of me.”

“I am so proud of you, Serena. Look how far you have come.” The urge to take her in my arms is riding me hard. She has never been as appealing to me as she is now. Sitting here owning who she is and looking comfortable in her skin.

“I’m proud of me too, though I still have stuff to work through.”

“I think we need more wine.” I hop up off the couch, if only to create distance between us, before I reach for her and ruin everything. Serena has given me no indication she is looking for more from me. She seems satisfied with our

friendship, and I have to respect that. At least for now. “We need to toast to you starting the next phase of your life.”

“I can drink to that.” She smiles up at me, and I practically race to the kitchen to stop me from throwing myself at her feet.

SERENA

“Thank you, Grandma.” Elisa hugs my mom while eyeing her new paint set with greedy eyes over Georgia’s shoulder.

“You’re welcome, sweetie. I have missed all of you so much.” She wraps her arms around her three grandchildren, smothering them with love.

“Can’t breathe, Grandma.” Rowan’s plea is muffled against Mom’s blouse until she reluctantly lets them go.

“Can you push me on the swing?” Romeo asks, grasping Georgia’s hand. “Please, Grandma?”

“Duty calls.” Mom’s gaze bounces between me and Sierra. “Keep the Sancerre on ice!” she hollers as the kids drag her outside.

“She looks well,” Sierra remarks, smoothing a hand over her teeny-tiny bump. “Not as stressed as the last time she visited.”

“She’s more settled now,” I agree. “Though she told me last week she’s still struggling to get the right work-life balance.” Mom took over as CEO of Lawson Pharma—the company that’s been in her family for generations—after our father’s death. It’s been a trial by fire, but she is loving it despite the lengthy hours and considerable commitment.

We take the opportunity to clean up the kids’ playroom, while they are outside enjoying Grandma time, because it’s like a bomb went off in here. After, we take a couple of trays

out to the patio with some iced tea, a bottle of Sancerre, some glasses, and cupcakes from the local bakery for the kids.

“Oh my God. I’m exhausted already!” Mom flops into the chair beside Sierra while the kids descend, grabbing drinks and treats before racing back to the playground where Frank will watch over them. Mom looks a tiny bit ruffled. Loose strands of blonde hair have escaped her elegant chignon, and little beads of sweat dot her brow. I know she came straight from the office, and her smart blouse and pencil skirt are not exactly playground friendly. “I had almost forgotten how much energy they have. Oh, to be young and carefree again.”

I pour her a glass of crisp white wine and hand it across the table. “This will help you to relax.”

“It’s beautiful here.” Mom leans back in her seat, admiring the stunning landscaped gardens surrounding us, while sipping her wine.

“I’d like to take the credit, but I can’t,” Sierra replies. “Our gardener is amazing.”

“I’m so glad everything worked out for you.” Mom smiles at Sierra. “And I’m tickled pink you’re adding to your family. It’s perfect. Rowan can’t wait to meet his new brother or sister. It’s all he was talking about.” Now that Sierra is fourteen weeks pregnant and starting to show—albeit barely—they felt it was time to break the news to Rowan. He’s been super excited ever since he found out.

Mom smiles at me as I drink my wine. “I’m happy for you too, Serena, and so proud of you for going back to college and pursuing something you love. Elisa and Romeo appear to be blossoming too.”

“They have really settled down over the summer. Elisa loves painting and her new teacher is a big hit. Romeo hasn’t had a nightmare in months, and he wakes every day with a big smile on his face.”

“Elisa tells me Alesso reads to her most nights, and I get the sense he’s around a lot.” Her eyes spark with mischief. “Is

there something you have neglected to tell me?” She arches a curious brow.

“My God. You’re as bad as Sierra.” I shake my head, but I’m not annoyed. “There is nothing to report. We’re friends. I blew any chance of us being more.” I eventually plucked up the courage to confide in Sierra, so she knows what went down that night in April in Alesso’s New York apartment.

“I’m telling you, you didn’t.” Sierra is starting to sound like a broken record. I know she means well, but I think she’s mistaken.

“It’s been five months, and he hasn’t made a move. I think that says it all.”

“One of these days, I’m going to bang your heads together,” Sierra mutters, staring longingly at our wine as she sips her iced tea.

“Why haven’t you?” Mom asks, slipping off her high heels and emitting a sigh of relief.

“Ben doesn’t want me to interfere.”

I bark out a laugh. “Since when has that ever stopped you?”

My sister grins conspiratorially. “Truth.”

“I have seen the way that man looks at you, Serena, and he was very worried when you were shot. More than was normal,” Mom says. “He’s definitely interested.”

“Then why hasn’t he made a move?” Sometimes I think I see the same lustful glint and wistful longing in his eyes, but then I convince myself I imagined it. He still says the sweetest things, but I know he likes to bolster my confidence, and I refuse to be the sap who reads too much into something that isn’t there. But are my family and friends right? Is Alesso still interested in more than friendship?

“He’s waiting for you to give him a signal,” Sierra suggests, and Mom nods. “He knows what you have been through, and he won’t do anything to jeopardize your

recovery. You're going to have to take the bull by the horns, sis, and show him you want him."

Easier said than done. "I wouldn't even have the first clue how to go about that."

Mom's features soften. "Just tell him what's in your heart."

"What if he doesn't feel the same? I don't want to make a fool of myself or ruin our friendship. He's too important to me."

"I wouldn't suggest you do it unless I was sure he returned your feelings," Sierra adds.

"And when it comes to affairs of the heart, you have to be bold and take a risk," Mom says. "If you want him badly enough, he is worth the risk." I know she is thinking of the man she took as her lover during her abusive marriage to my father. It didn't end well. Dad killed him mercilessly when he found out.

Sympathy splays across my face, and my heart fills with love for my mother. It reminds me I need to have a private conversation with her. "Could we take a walk?" I ask her, exchanging a brief look with Sierra. She knows what I need to say.

"I'll watch the kids with Frank." Sierra climbs to her feet and heads off toward the playground.

Mom and I walk one of the trails through the woods after she has changed into more comfortable clothing and replaced her heels with sneakers. "It's so peaceful here. I can see why you like it."

"It has helped me to heal. I feel safe here, and that has allowed me to focus on the kids and working through my issues."

She stops walking, turning to face me. "I thought the danger had passed?" she asks, looking troubled.

"I'm not sure that's ever possible within our world, but there is no imminent threat. You don't need to worry on my behalf or your own." Mom was concerned The Outfit would

turn on her when she cut all ties with them and refused to allow them to use Lawson Pharma to wash their dirty cash. My father also made his fair share of enemies, and anyone tied to him would be wise to keep looking over their shoulder.

We both know there will always be concerns, but we can't let it stop us from living our lives.

"I'm still a little freaked because they never found that guy from the boutique," I admit, "but Fabrizio goes with me every time I leave the grounds, and that reassures me." I refuse to live the rest of my life in a perpetual state of fear.

"Good. I hired one of Ben's security firms, and I have a new team around me. I'm protected too. We can't let those bastards we were married to continue to rule our lives." Her spine straightens, and a determined look washes over her face as she reiterates my thoughts. "I spent too long shackled to controlling men, and this is a fresh start. I won't be intimidated or forced to change the course of my life."

"Hear, hear." I hug her quickly before easing out of her embrace. I need to get this out. "I need to apologize. I said some horrible things to you the last time you were here. I suspect that's why you have stayed away."

"Sweetheart." She cups my face. "I need no apology, and the things you said were true."

"No, Mom." I hold her hands when she drops them from my face. "I was wrong. It wasn't your fault. I know you were as trapped as me. I know it wasn't your decision to marry me off to that monster and that you couldn't stop it. I didn't confide in you, and that's on me. When you asked if he was treating me right, I constantly lied instead of opening up. I should never have shut you and Sierra out."

"It's not easy to admit the truth. Especially to your loved ones," she quietly says. Lifting one shoulder, she jerks her head forward. "Let's walk and talk."

We set forth at a leisurely pace. "I know you protected us the best way you could," I continue. "I have done the same

with my own kids. Even if I had told you the truth, there's nothing you could have done."

"I suspected, Serena." Pain flickers in her eyes. "Deep down, I knew, and that is my biggest regret. That I pretended it wasn't happening so I wouldn't have to deal with it. I failed you because I couldn't bear to imagine you were suffering the way I was, so I chose not to see the signs." A strangled sob rips from her mouth, and I clutch her hand in mine. "I'm so sorry, honey. I never wanted any of my girls to go through what I did."

"I know." I squeeze her hand. "You're a great mom, and you did your best to shield us. You couldn't have done any more." I tug on her hand, stopping her. I need to face her when I say this. "I take back all the terrible things I said, and I want you to know there is nothing to forgive. I love you, and I'm grateful you are in my life. In the kids' lives. You are as much a victim as I am. It wasn't your fault."

"I prefer survivor," she says. "We are survivors. Those bastards tried to destroy us, but they're the ones rotting six feet under, and we're the ones rising reborn from the embers of their attempted destruction. Who's the winner now?" she shouts, lowering her eyes to the ground. "Burn in hell, assholes. I hope you are both in unimaginable pain."

"You should have seen her. She was magnificent," I tell Alesso later that night when we are drinking wine in my living room. "She's my hero." Mom has really come into her own since Dad passed. I'm not going to say I wish I had bounced back as easily because every abused woman's path to healing is different. I am trying to stop beating myself up over things, preferring to focus on the progress I have made instead.

"Georgia's great, and the kids idolize her."

"They do, and they wore her out! Why else did she retire to bed at nine!" I have a sneaky feeling it was as much to do with giving Sierra time alone with Ben and me ample

opportunity to make a move on Alesso. Both Mom and Sierra spent the rest of the afternoon encouraging me to be brave.

“They’re full of energy for sure.” His brow puckers, and his eyes seem troubled.

“Is everything okay?”

His sigh is weary as he makes eye contact with me. “The call Ben got an hour ago has us all on edge.” Mom had only gone to bed when Ben had to leave for Chicago.

“Why? What’s happened?”

He scrubs a hand over his prickly jawline. “It looks like the Russians set fire to a number of warehouses owned by The Outfit. Things aren’t good there, and this is the last thing we need.”

“I can’t believe Gino is making such a mess of things and all because of some dead ringer for his deceased wife. He makes me sick,” I hiss, enraged all over again on Natalia’s behalf. She discovered her husband was cheating on her with a woman in Chicago a couple of months ago, and though Ben warned him off, I know Nat believes he is continuing to conduct the affair. She doesn’t really seem to mind, and I have noticed she and Leo seem more at ease with one another. I wonder if something is going on? If it is, I guess Nat will tell us in time. I’m not one to pry, and if she is grabbing some happiness at last, then I will silently cheer her on.

“He’s an asshole.”

I bob my head. “I’m glad Ben is changing things. The attitude toward women in the *mafioso* really needs to change.”

“It does,” Alesso readily agrees, “but it won’t happen overnight, and Ben isn’t a miracle worker.”

“I understand, but it helps to have a forward thinker steering the ship, and I trust him to make positive changes.”

“I do as well, but too much change at once can be detrimental, and I worry we have bitten off more than we can chew with Chicago.”

SERENA

“Have you asked him yet?” Sierra inquires a couple of weeks later as we are preparing breakfast in the kitchen before the hungry mob descends.

“No.” I stop slicing bread, eyeballing my sister. “I know I’m being a chicken shit, but a lot has happened the past two weeks and the timing isn’t right. I have hardly seen him, and when we do speak, he seems stressed. I don’t want to distract him.”

Everything came to a head between Nat and Gino the day after the warehouses were blown up in Chicago. Leo discovered Nat had been pregnant with his baby when she married Gino and he had forced her to get an abortion. Turns out, it was all connected to the death of Carlo Greco fifteen years ago. Gino’s first wife Juliet had been murdered by the Grecos in retaliation for Carlo’s death because they believed Gino was behind it. Only now the truth has come out. Mateo—Natalia’s older brother who was gunned down when he was twenty-two—and Leo took Carlo out because he was abusing Nat, and it was the only way to prevent her from being married off to him.

Little did they know what they were setting in motion.

The power play has swung back and forth this past fortnight as Gino seeks to play Ben against Don Maximo Greco, and Ben has been allying himself with Don DiPietro and Don Maltese to win their support in case Greco goes

through with his threat to ask The Commission for a vote of no confidence in Ben as president.

Alesso has been going to the city most days because Ben needs him there. The situation is tense, the guys are stressed, and they are pulling out all the stops to ensure the fragile peace they have painstakingly built doesn't crumble. It doesn't seem like a good time to ask Alesso if he wants more than friendship, so I've been biting my tongue. Even if I'm dying to have a heart-to-heart with him, now I have made the decision to confess my feelings.

The one positive to come out of this is that Leo and Nat are finally able to be together, and I shed tears of joy at their recent wedding. I am so happy for my friend. She literally glows with love, and the way they look at one another is a thing of beauty.

One day, I want that to be me.

"I know things are shit right now, but the timing will never be perfect." Sierra props one hip against the counter, absently running her hands over her pronounced bump. She had her five-month checkup recently, and it's like her stomach mushroomed overnight. There is no mistaking she is pregnant now, and Ben is terrified that shit is about to hit the fan, and he won't be able to protect her. "Have you considered Alesso might need this? Might need you?"

"He isn't giving those vibes."

"Because he is used to dealing with *mafioso* shit by himself. He probably doesn't even realize it himself."

"I want to be there for him," I say, resuming chopping up fruit for my salad. "He has been a rock for me this past year, and I want to be that for him too. Perhaps you are right." Steely resolve flows through my veins as I smile at my sister. "It's time I talked to him."

“I hate the cooler weather,” Chelsea says, pulling up the collar of her Burberry coat and visibly shivering. “I’m so freaking cold.”

“Spoken like a true Texan,” I tease as we walk to the small restaurant in Union Square. It’s only a few blocks from the NYU School of Professional Studies, where our classes take place. Nat is continuing her prehealth studies on the campus at Washington Square, which isn’t too far away, so we have met for lunch a couple times.

Behind us, Fabrizio trails me discreetly. Chelsea has noticed him, and when she asked, I told her my husband was a powerful man with lots of enemies and I have a bodyguard for my peace of mind. She didn’t pry further, seeming to accept my explanation.

“It doesn’t matter that I have lived in New York over seventeen years, I still miss the Texas weather,” my friend admits. Ironically, Chelsea wed at twenty-three too, but unlike me, her twelve-year marriage to her husband has been a happy one. They met at NYU—she worked in the administration department and he was a business student—and it was love at first sight.

“Would you ever return?” I ask, pushing open the door to the restaurant.

She rubs her hands, smiling at the owner as he moves out from behind the counter to greet us. We discovered this place the same day we discovered we were the only two mature students in the HR program, and we come here most every day now. They make the most delicious salads, wraps, and pasta.

“If it isn’t my two favorite ladies,” Peter says, beaming at us as he escorts us to our usual table in the corner. He sets two menus down with a flourish before holding out our chairs.

“You are such a gentleman,” Chelsea says. “If I wasn’t already married, I would run away with you.”

“And if I wasn’t already secretly in love with someone, I might be tempted too,” I quip, grinning at the portly older man.

“Secretly is no good.” He waggles his finger at me. “You need to do something about that. A beautiful lady like you deserves lots of love in her life.”

“That’s what I’ve been telling her!”

Though I have only known Chelsea seven weeks, it feels like longer. We just clicked the instant we met and it’s only adding to my NYU experience. It’s been a long time since I was this happy or this fulfilled. The days fly by between college, the kids, and the work I do for Sierra. The cherry on top would be having Alesso in my life, and I know the only one who can make that happen is me.

“I’m planning to talk to Alesso tonight,” I tell my friend when Peter walks off with our orders.

“Yeah?” Her face lights up. “That’s great.” She reaches across the table to squeeze my hand. “I’m rooting for you.”

“I’m rooting for me too.”

“How did you do on that talent management assignment?” she asks, smiling as the waitress brings my pumpkin spice latte and her cappuccino.

I can’t keep the grin off my face. “I got an A.”

“Way to go, babe.” She dumps a shit ton of sugar into her coffee. “I was pleased with my B though I know I could’ve done better if I’d had more time to work on it.”

I shoot her a sympathetic smile. “You only gave birth to the twins six months ago, and you have two other children who need you. I think it’s amazing you’re even here.”

“Well, it was part of the deal when Lucas wanted more kids. He knows I was waiting until Sophia and Jayden were old enough to enroll at NYU.”

“It’s great he has taken some time off work to help care for your children so you could study. More marriages should be like that.”

She stirs her coffee, staring out the window as she replies. “It helps he is his own boss.” Her husband runs his own highly successful food import-export business.

“Do you miss working there?” I ask because she told me she worked in the company for a few years after they got married before she popped out her first couple kids. It’s where her love affair with human resource management began, but she had had no formal training at that time.

She shrugs. “I enjoyed it, but I loved being at home with the kids when they were little. I know I’m fortunate because not every mom gets to do that.”

“It must be difficult being away from the twins during the day.” I lean back as the waitress sets my Cobb salad down in front of me.

“It is.” Her eyes fill up. “I’m loving the program, but I didn’t think it would be so hard leaving them alone every day. It’s why I send the nanny home when I return even though I should be studying. I feel guilty enough leaving them all day. I can’t justify missing out on dinnertime and bath time to study.”

“I can relate. I loved when my kids were little and they relied on me for everything, but it’s not wrong to take something for yourself. You can still be a good mom and a good student. It’s still early days, and it’s all new. In time, you’ll find a balance that works.”

“I know, and it won’t be forever.” She shoots me a strange look before picking up her silverware and eating her Caesar salad.

“Are you okay?” I ask when we leave the restaurant thirty minutes later, stopping outside the window to button our coats. “You hardly touched your food.”

“I’m fine. Just tired, and that always affects my appetite. The little munchkins kept me up last night.”

Movement across the road catches my attention, and I stare at the guy climbing out of a black Jeep Cherokee. All the blood drains from my face as I watch him close the door and lean back against it, raising one knee and casually resting his foot against the SUV. My legs threaten to go out from under me as I stare at him.

A massive grin creeps over his mouth as he eyeballs me, uncaring he is making his attention obvious. I haven't forgotten his face or the sheer terror I felt when he accosted me that day in the boutique. Whipping my head around, I summon Fabrizio with my fingers. Noticing the frightened look on my face, he runs toward me, immediately herding me into the corner of the building and protecting me with his body. "What is it?"

"That man over there by the Jeep," I say, jerking my head in his direction. "That's the guy from the boutique."

"You're sure?" he asks, looking over his shoulder.

"Positive. It's him."

"Stay here. Better yet, go back inside," he instructs, pulling out his cell as he moves to step off the curb. "I'll call for backup," he adds, cursing under his breath when the man pushes off his Jeep and starts walking away.

"Is everything okay?" Chelsea inquires, concern evident in her tone and in the look on her face.

"I don't know." I'm trembling as I loop my arm through hers, pulling her toward the door. "Let's get another coffee."

I have just opened the door when a man with a deep voice calls out, "Chelsea!"

Chelsea spins around. "Lucas!" Her eyes pop wide as she stares at the tall, handsome man pushing a twin stroller toward us. She glances anxiously at me as I watch Fabrizio turn the corner on the opposite side of the street, out of sight. Nerves prick at my skin, and nausea swims in my gut.

"Darling. There you are!" Lucas halts the stroller a few feet away from the entrance to the restaurant, and I step back onto the sidewalk to stop blocking the door. The twins are fast asleep, looking all cute and snug under matching blue blankets. A wicked glint appears in his eyes when he swoops his wife into his arms and leans her back as he kisses her passionately.

Thrusting her hands into his chest, she forces him to break their lip-lock. Her cheeks are flushed and her eyes narrowed as

she stares at him. “What are you doing here?” she blurts.

“The nanny is sick, so I sent her home. The twins were restless, and I thought a walk would help to settle them. Plus, I need you to mind them this afternoon. I have an important conference call I need to take.”

She stares at him strangely for a few beats. “Oh, okay.” Chelsea seems a little off as she crouches down, her gaze frantically scanning both her babies, checking they are okay. I can only imagine how worrying it must be entrusting them to others every day, even if her husband appears to be taking good care of them.

“Lucas Davenport,” he says, thrusting out his gloved hand. “You must be Serena. Chelsea has told me all about you.” His handshake is firm, his expression friendly. Although his brown eyes lack the warmth and depth of Alesso’s gaze, there is no denying he’s an attractive man.

“Nice to meet you. Chelsea has told me about you too.”

“Has she now?” His lips tip up as he drills a look at his wife. His wide smile is disarming when he returns his focus to me.

Shoving my hands in the pockets of my coat, I dig my nails into the cashmere, needing it to ground me. There is no sign of Fabrizio or the creep, and I’m antsy.

“All good, I hope.” He flashes me a blinding-white smile.

“Of course. Your wife adores you.”

“Let’s not get too carried away.” Chelsea straightens up. “It will only go to his head,” she adds. “Will you be okay if I leave?” She looks conflicted.

“Of course. Go be with your family.” I force a smile on my face. “I’ll take lots of notes in financial management and bring you a copy tomorrow.”

“Thank you.” Rounding the stroller, she grabs me into a fierce hug. “Go back inside and wait for your bodyguard like he said. Don’t move until he comes back for you,” she whispers in my ear. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Enjoy your afternoon,” I say. “It was nice to meet you.”

“The pleasure was all mine” he says, before wrapping his arm around his wife. “I hope to see you again soon.”

I wave them off, scurrying to grab my phone from my purse when it starts ringing. I head back into the restaurant as I answer the call.

“Rena, are you okay?” Alesso asks, and a layer of stress peels off my shoulders when I hear his familiar voice.

“I’m okay.”

“Where are you? I’m coming to get you.”

Alesso came to the city with us today, and I’m grateful he’s close by. I confirm my location and hang up, taking a seat at the counter as I wait for him to arrive.

ALESSO

“How did you lose him?” Ben asks Fabrizio, a couple of hours later as we are preparing to leave his office at the Caltime Holdings building. Rena insisted on returning to campus and attending her class, so I went with her to keep her protected until Fabrizio showed up, sweating and red in the face after chasing the perp all over Greenwich Village.

“If I didn’t know better, I’d say it was a setup,” he says. “Like he had planned his route and set up obstacles in advance so, every time I came close to catching him, someone or something thwarted my plans.”

“Please tell me you got the plates on the Jeep,” Leo says, sauntering into the room, the gold band on his ring finger glimmering under the bright office lights.

“I did.” Fabrizio cuts him a scathing look for daring to suggest he’s incompetent.

“He sent the license number to me earlier, and I have already had Phillip run it. The plates are fake,” Ben explains, shutting down his computer. “No surprises there.”

“This guy doesn’t operate like a petty criminal.” I state the obvious. “Who the fuck is he, and what does he want with Rena?”

No one replies because we are no closer to having answers than we were back in April. To say I’m pissed this guy has reappeared on the scene is an understatement.

“I’m assigning Edoardo to Serena’s detail too. At least until we catch this motherfucker.”

I wish I could be reassigned to her detail, but Ben needs me to help him plan for the forthcoming meeting in Chicago, and he wants me guarding his wife whenever I’m not working on that. The meeting is a big deal. It’s the largest gathering of Italian American *mafioso* in history, and every don and his heir will be in attendance. Gino thinks he is being crowned as The Outfit’s new don at the ceremony, but he’s in for a rude awakening. Ben plans to out Accardi and Greco as traitors with the full support of DiPietro and Maltese.

Ben grabs his jacket from the back of the chair. “Let’s get out of here.”

We meet Serena, Nat, and the twins in the rooftop waiting room, and then we all pile in Ben’s helicopter and head back to Greenwich. Leo, Nat, and the twins have been staying there since the wedding, and I know Ben is happier having his sister close. He doesn’t trust Gino not to pull something if they were to stay in the city

“Are we doing the right thing with Chicago? Exposing our weaknesses like this?” Ben asks Leo and me as we walk toward the house, trailing behind the girls.

I know he’s referring to Greco colluding with the Colombians and Accardi partnering with the Russians in his quest to claim Chicago for his own. In outing them before the entire Italian American *mafioso* we are exposing the divide within the five families and The Commission. It will make some of the dons nervous at a time when The Commission is still in its infancy.

“There is no other solution. If you don’t take control of the situation, they may gain the upper hand,” Leo says.

“New York is fractured no matter what way you look at it. This continues your legacy of transparency. There is nothing wrong with admitting there are teething problems. What’s more important is you are dealing with them head-on and you are not concealing the truth to make yourself look good,” I remind him because we have talked this through excessively.

“You are humbling yourself in front of the others, and they will respond to that.” I clamp a hand on his shoulder, understanding his concern. We are walking a tightrope, and we all know it. His wife is visibly pregnant, and he’s worried about keeping her and Rowan safe. I would feel the same in his shoes.

Being the president of the body responsible for uniting all Italian American *mafioso* is no cake walk. It comes with a shit ton of responsibility and pressure. This won’t be the last time Ben is tested either. But passing this first hurdle will make the latter ones that little bit easier to overcome.

“Spoken like an experienced *consigliere*,” Leo says, offering me a genuine smile. “I can’t wait for Ben to announce your appointment so we get to work together officially.”

“I want that, but announcing it opens up a can of worms.” I eyeball Ben as we step into the lobby. “Has Saverio called again?” A blast of warm air hits me, heating up my icy bones.

Ben nods, depositing his briefcase on the hall table as he hears the sound of approaching footsteps. “I can’t put him off forever. We need to speak with him in Chicago after the meeting.”

Saverio left a cryptic message on Ben’s cell a week ago, which leads us to believe he may have learned the truth about me. None of us have any desire to deal with the hotheaded Vegas boss when there are so many other pressing problems, so Ben is keeping him at arm’s length. Something that will no doubt only exacerbate the situation. Right now, handling the Accardi-Greco problem is the most urgent priority, so Saverio Salerno will just have to wait.

“Daddy!” Rowan charges down the hall, throwing himself into Ben’s arms. “We learned about Mars in school today, and I want to tell you all about it.” The little guy is fixated on space and the stars, and his current ambition is to be an astronaut.

“Alesso!” Elisa screeches, racing toward me with paint smeared on her cheeks. “I did a new painting.” She grabs my hand, tugging on it. “Come look!”

Serena asks to speak to me after I have read Elisa her bedtime story, and I willingly follow her into her private living room, needing her pretty face, feminine voice, and comforting presence to wipe away the stress of today. “How are you holding up?” I ask her, moving to the small kitchen to fix us some drinks.

“I’m fine.” She snatches my hand. “Go sit in front of the fire,” she demands, giving me a gentle nudge. “I’ll get the wine.”

I’m too weary to protest. The Salerno shit is weighing heavy on my mind, along with the Chicago situation and the reappearance of the threat to Serena. I kick my shoes off and swing my legs up onto the couch. Leaning my head back, I rotate my neck from side to side, hoping to dispel some of the tightness there.

“You seem stressed,” Serena says, setting both glasses of wine down on the coffee table.

“And you’re not?” I look at her upside down.

“I’m not letting what happened with that guy today upset me,” she says, surprising me with her words and her actions when she kneels at the back of the couch. “May I?” She lifts her hands, leaving them hovering over my shoulders.

In a daze, I nod. It’s not like Serena to voluntarily touch me. Though, it has been happening more in the past couple of weeks. Her hands land on my shoulders, and I sink into her touch.

“God, Alesso. Your shoulders are tied into knots.”

“It’s been a draining day.” I fight a moan as her fingers dig into the corded muscle along my shoulders and the top of my back, afraid I might frighten her away.

“Tell me about it.”

“You’re really okay?” I ask, leaning back and looking up at her face.

“I am.” A proud smile graces her gorgeous mouth. “I didn’t freeze today. I made Fabrizio aware of the situation immediately, and I didn’t lose my shit when he left either.”

She really has come far. “That’s good, Rena.”

“I was thinking I should learn self-defense.”

I clamp my mouth shut to stifle a groan when her hands roam lower and she kneads my tense muscles through my shirt.

“Could you help?”

Warning the snake in my pants to calm down, and forcing myself to focus on her words rather than her hands, I slowly compose myself enough to answer. “Of course, I can. But it’s a good idea to enlist Leo’s and Ben’s help too. For times when I might be occupied.”

“I would prefer to train only with you. I can make myself available when you have free time.”

“Okay, if that’s what you want.” I close my eyes briefly, enjoying the feel of her hands on me as she works the knots out of my back. “You should probably learn to shoot too.” Ben has a shooting range on the grounds now, and I think all the women should learn how to handle a gun. We are living in dangerous, uncertain times, and I want to ensure they are all as prepared as they can be.

“I know how to shoot. Dad insisted we learn when we became old enough to go to the gun range. I’m a little rusty though, so I could do with a few refresher sessions.”

“It’s settled then. We’ll do both.”

“Thank you.” Leaning down, she kisses my cheek, shocking the shit out of me. I’m not sure what has gotten into her today, but I like it. “I wanted to talk to you about something,” she adds, and I feel her hands fumble against my shirt.

“You can talk to me about anything, but come sit beside me.” I can tell whatever she has to say is important to her, and we can’t carry on a conversation while she’s kneeling behind me, massaging my shoulders and back, and I’m fighting the growing erection in my pants.

I subtly adjust myself as she gets up and comes around to sit beside me. I hand her a glass of wine while I take the other one, peering into her face and giving her my undivided attention. “What’s up?”

She gulps back a mouthful of wine, coughing a little before she gathers herself. “This might come out of left field, but I want to be honest with you. No, I *need* to be honest with you.”

“You can tell me anything.” She’s nervous as shit, and I want to bundle her in my arms and soothe her concerns.

“Do you ever think about us?” she blurts, her cheeks flaring.

“I’m not sure I follow.”

“You told me once you wanted more than friendship and you were happy to wait for me to be ready. Do you still feel like that?”

“Absolutely. On both counts.”

Her face lights up, and my heart fucking swoons. “I’m in a much better place now, and I like you. I like you a lot. I would like to try to be more than friends.”

“Yeah?” My heart swells behind my chest, and I’m positive I look like a lovesick fool.

“Yes. If that’s what you still want.”

“I do.” Taking a chance, I move across the couch, holding her free hand in mine. “I would wait until the end of time for you, Serena.”

She emits a girlish giggle that is a joy to behold. “I won’t ask you to wait that long. Just until Friday.”

“What’s happening on Friday?” I arch a brow while my thumb draws circles on the back of her soft hand.

She lifts her head, thrusts her shoulders back, and confidently holds my gaze as she says, “I’m taking you out to dinner.”

SERENA

“**R**elax, sweetheart.” Alesso reaches across the console to take my hand. “You look like you’re waiting to walk the gangplank, not going out on a date with a devilishly handsome man.” He waggles his brows, hitting me with a suggestive look, and my lips tug up at the corners.

His attempt at humor helps to take the edge off my nerves. “I have been looking forward to this all week,” I admit. “I don’t know where these nerves have come from.”

He squeezes my hand, sending warmth and a rake of shivers up my arm. “If it helps, I have butterflies in my stomach.”

“You do?” My eyes pop wide at his admission.

“I do.” He takes his eyes off the road for a split second to smile at me, and I want a lifetime of those smiles. “The second I saw how beautiful you look tonight, they multiplied because I keep waiting for the moment you realize I am boxing above my weight.”

“Nonsense. I—” I stop myself before I tell him I’m the one boxing above my weight. I have worked hard with my therapist to stop automatically putting myself down, and I’m sure as hell not doing it tonight. “We are perfectly matched,” I say instead, stabbing him with a confident look. “And I’ll fight anyone who says otherwise.”

“You are never more beautiful to me than when you acknowledge your worth.”

Be still my beating heart. Alessandro is officially the most romantic man I have ever met. His words do strange, delicious things to me, and I'm excited to take things to the next level with him. My heart is full of hope, and I have never wanted anything to work out as badly as I want things to work out for us.

"This is my first date," I blurt as Alesso pulls the car into the parking lot behind the steakhouse we are eating at tonight. Fabrizio and Edoardo pull up alongside us. They are on duty tonight because it's their job and Alesso insisted, even though he's here to protect me. He's not taking any chances with the current situation. It means Alesso can have a few drinks because one of my bodyguards can drive his car back.

Killing the engine, he twists in his seat so he's facing me with the biggest grin on his face. "Mine too."

"No way." I vigorously shake my head. "You can't expect me to believe that!"

"It's the truth," he says before sliding out from behind the wheel and walking around the hood of the car. He opens my door for me. "I'll explain when we are seated."

Alesso holds my hand the entire way from the car into the restaurant and over to the round table I reserved in a private corner of the room. I slide into the red leather booth, and he follows me, moving in close. The waitress hands us some menus and leaves a carafe of iced water and two glasses. Alesso moves in a little closer until his thigh brushes mine. "I want to sit next to you," he says. "Is this okay?"

"More than okay." I can't keep the Cheshire Cat grin off my face. I am kicking myself I didn't ask him out two weeks ago. We could have been dating up a storm by now. I force my face to sober up as I turn to him. "Don't treat me with kid gloves. I want you to treat me how you would a normal date. It's important to me, and I'm comfortable with you. I like your nearness. I enjoy your touch."

"I can do that." He circles his arm around my shoulders as we absently peruse the menu. "Even if this is my first date."

I narrow my eyes in jest. “I’m not buying it. There is no way some pretty girl didn’t cajole you into a date at some point.”

“A few have tried, but I didn’t take the bait.”

“Why not?” I trace my fingers over his hand as I stare into his beautiful brown eyes. “I know you’ve been with women. Surely, one of them must have tempted you?”

He looks a little sheepish as he replies. “Honestly, none did. I indulged in one-night stands because I wanted sex without complications.”

“Why?” I tilt my head to the side, genuinely curious. “I’m not judging by the way. Just trying to understand your mindset.”

“After I left home, my sole focus was keeping a roof over my head and food in my belly. I enjoyed casual sex, but I didn’t want the distraction of a relationship. Then I met Ben, and I was focused on my new career path.” He shrugs, glancing briefly at the menu again. “Truth is, I didn’t let myself feel anything for any of the women I was with because I didn’t want to get attached. This kind of life is not easy for women and I didn’t want to drag anyone into it.”

“That makes sense, to a point. But it’s exactly why *mafioso* generally choose girlfriends, and always take wives, within our community. You can’t tell me there haven’t been women within mafia circles who you could have dated.”

The waitress approaches then, putting a temporary hold on our conversation. We scan the menu quickly and order. Crab cakes and rib eye steak for Alesso. Scallops and the filet mignon for me. I order a bottle of the most expensive champagne. We’re celebrating, and I want to treat him because he has looked after me so well for months. Now, it’s my turn to look after him.

“You’re right. I could have dated within our world.” He runs a finger along the collar of his dress shirt, looking a little uncomfortable.

It's challenging not to ogle him outright because he looks hot in his navy suit with white shirt and red tie. I noticed the looks he picked up as we made our way across the restaurant when we arrived. I am not the only one to notice what a great catch he is. "But I have avoided it," he continues, tenderly cupping one side of my face. "The truth is, I have avoided commitment. Evaded scenarios that could lead to it. I have learned to rely on myself, and entrusting my heart to a woman has always scared the hell out of me." His fingers sweep gently along my jawline, and I feel his featherlight touch everywhere. "Until you."

"Really?" I ask.

He nods, smiling adorably at me.

"Wow. That makes me unbelievably happy, and I feel the same way about you."

"That is music to my ears." Leaning in, he presses a slow lingering kiss to my cheek. "I think I was always saving myself for you. I just didn't know it."

Tears prick my eyes, but they are the happy kind for a change. I don't hold back, flinging my arms around him and holding him tight. "In all the ways that matter, you are my first," I choke out, believing it with every shred of my being.

A throat clearing has us breaking apart. The waitress smiles as she holds the bottle of champagne out for our inspection. Alesso takes my hand under the table as she pours each of us a glass. "A toast," he says when she is gone. "To us. To new beginnings."

I clink my glass against his. "To new beginnings."

We chat nonstop over dinner, and it's the most relaxed I've been in ages. Alesso is great company and very knowledgeable on lots of topics. We discuss some of the self-help books we have read, places around the world we would love to visit someday, and our favorite movies and music. Our conversation digresses to my kids several times. "I adore those kids," he says in between mouthfuls of succulent steak. "They

have the most amazing personalities, and I love how they see wonder in everything around them.”

“I lucked out with my kids.”

He stops cutting his steak to look at me. “You’re their mom. Luck wasn’t involved.”

Feeling brave, I lean in and brush my lips against his mouth, almost giddy with how natural it feels. “Thank you, and they adore you too.” I fight a giggle when I see the shell-shocked look on his face. I’m not sure Alesso knows what to do with this more confident version of me. Mom, Sierra, Pamela, and Chelsea would be so proud of me tonight. “But you know that.”

“Do you want more kids?” he asks, cutting another piece of his rib eye.

“I haven’t given it much thought,” I truthfully admit. “But I love kids, and I’m one of the freakish minority of women who love pregnancy, so I definitely wouldn’t rule it out.” Heat rises up my neck. “If I met the right man.” My eyes bore into his, conveying everything I haven’t said.

“I’ll tell you a secret.” He moves his mouth to my ear. “I have always wanted kids. A wife and a family of my own.”

“I doubt that’s a secret to anyone who knows you,” I say. “You’re a family man through and through. Even if you didn’t have that growing up.”

“I never want my children to grow up feeling unwanted or neglected. If I’m lucky enough to have kids one day, I will lavish them with love and nurture them with kindness and patience.” This time his eyes pierce mine with the intensity of all he hasn’t said.

“You will be the most amazing father, and your kids will be the luckiest kids on the planet.”

His lips collide with mine in a firm but brief kiss. “Thank you. I love how you see the best in everyone.”

Not everyone. “I see goodness only where it exists.” He nods knowingly, and we finish our meal before the waitress

arrives to clear our plates.

SERENA

“I have something to tell you,” Alesso says after we have ordered the chocolate mousse to share and a cocktail for me and scotch for him.

“Shoot.” I fold my napkin, setting it on the booth beside me.

“Well, two somethings.” He squirms on his seat, the leather squelching with the motion.

“Hey.” I place my hand softly on his arm. “Whatever it is, you can tell me.”

He moves a piece of my hair behind my ear. “You are truly beautiful, Serena. It’s like you light up from the inside.”

“Thank you,” I graciously say, pleased it comes more naturally to me these days. “I don’t think I told you how hot you look tonight. I’m having a hard time keeping my eyes off you.”

A lopsided smile ghosts over his mouth. “The feeling is most definitely mutual.” Lifting my hand, he brings it to his mouth and brushes his lips across my knuckles. “This feels like the start of something special. Please tell me you feel that too?”

“I do, and as much as I love romantic Alesso, I can tell something is bothering you. Just tell me.” I smooth out the little furrows between his brows. “My mom always says a problem shared is a problem halved.”

“Georgia is a wise woman.” He clears his throat, setting my hand back in my lap. “You know how I’ve been training with Ben and it’s all hush-hush?” I nod because he mentioned that much but couldn’t confide any more. “He’s appointing me as his *consigliere*,” he blurts.

My eyes pop wide. “That is amazing news, Alesso.” I press a kiss to his cheek. “Congratulations. I’m so proud of you.” My smile is genuine. “I can see why Ben chose you. You have so many qualities and skills that will lend itself to that role. I’m betting you will make an excellent *consigliere*.”

“You’re not disappointed?”

I frown. “Why would I be disappointed?”

“I thought you wanted nothing more to do with made men. That you wanted to extract yourself from this life.”

Oh my God. Is that what he’s been thinking this whole time? “I know I said that months ago. But I wasn’t in a good place.” I take his hands in mine. “The reality is, my life is inextricably interwoven into this world. Even if I found a way to escape, it would always find me. I’m a mafia widow, and my kids will forever be known as Alfredo Gifoli’s offspring. My father was a don. My brother-in-law is the most powerful don in the US right now. One of my good friends just married an underboss. Unless I plan to cut myself off from everyone, this is my life.” He still looks unconvinced. I lightly grip his chin, forcing his gaze to mine. “I have made my peace with who I am and the world I inhabit.”

“You’re not just saying it to make me feel better?” he asks as my hand lowers from his face.

I shake my head. “I wouldn’t lie about something this important. The truth is, I am safer inside than out. Your acceptance of this promotion changes nothing for me. Especially not the way I feel about you.”

He rests his forehead on mine. “Thank God. I was worried it might scare you away.”

“Not a chance.” I run my fingers through his hair before we break apart. We are in public, after all.

“At least this way, I’ll be able to properly provide for you.” He looks a little sheepish. And is that a blush I spy on his cheeks?

“You already provide in all the ways that count, Alesso. Nothing else matters to me.” Certainly not money. I have enough to last ten lifetimes, but I know it’s a pride thing for men.

“It matters to me,” he quietly says, asserting my thought. I nod, letting him know I understand. However, I don’t want to start talking about money. It’s a surefire recipe for an argument. So, I divert the conversation before it puts a damper on our perfect date. “How does Ben plan to present this to the men? Will there be any issue because you aren’t of Italian descent?”

A dark look crosses over his face. “That’s the other thing I have to tell you. It turns out I am.”

I stare at him in confusion.

“Of Italian American descent,” he clarifies. “Ben did some digging, and I discovered something when we were in Vegas.”

I tilt my head to the side, urging him to continue with my eyes.

“Saverio Salerno had a half-brother who died when he was eighteen. It turns out he was my father.”

My jaw slackens, and I stare at him in shock. “Holy shit. That means he’s—”

“My uncle.”

Another thought enters my mind. “Oh hell,” I splutter. “That means Anais is your cousin.”

He nods.

There is a modicum of relief in knowing that. Saverio is actively seeking a husband for Anais, and I was a little concerned after the stunt she pulled in Vegas that she would set her sights on Alesso. “Sierra is *not* a fan,” I say. Although the guys made it clear, after the last Vegas trip, she had

switched her allegiance to Alessandro, Sierra has no time for that girl, and I don't blame her.

"I'm aware," he clips out.

Forcing myself to shake off thoughts of the annoying teenager, I refocus on my man.

My man.

That has a nice ring to it, and inside I'm turning cartwheels. Ignoring my inner giddiness, I concentrate on Alesso. "How do you feel about it?"

"I'm not sure." He scrubs a hand over the stylish layer of stubble on his jawline. "At first, I was in denial, and I purposely didn't think about it until I was forced to. When Ben spoke to me after we returned from our weekend in the city, he told me he'd confirmed it, and I've been trying to wrap my head around it ever since."

Hang on here a second. "Wait. Are you saying you knew this as far back as April?"

His brow creases. "Yes. Is there something wrong with that?"

Hurt expands across my chest. "You kept it from me. Why?"

His Adam's apple jumps in his throat. "We weren't exactly on speaking terms, and you have enough on your plate. You don't need to be worrying about me."

"Nope." I vigorously shake my head. "That's not the way this works." I point between us. "That's not the way friends treat other friends, let alone...partners."

"We weren't a couple then," he protests.

"But we are now, right?" I need clarification so I can make my point.

His face lights up, and he leans in, kissing me softly and quickly. "Yes. We most definitely are now."

"Then you can't keep stuff from me, and I can't keep stuff from you. We are doomed to fail from the outset if we start off

like this.”

A solemn expression appears on his face. “This is all new to me, Serena. I’m used to fending for myself. You had enough concerns. I didn’t want to be a burden.”

“I understand your motives were pure, Alesso, but they were misguided. You could never be a burden. Never.” I thread my fingers in his. “I want to be there for you like you’ve been there for me. Lean on me when you need to, and I’ll lean on you when I need your support. I’m not fragile. I have survived enough crap to know I won’t fall apart if you are upset and you need to unload. We need to be equal partners. It’s as simple as that.”

“Okay.” He nods slowly. “You’re right, and for the record, I didn’t purposely shut you out.”

“I know that. But I need you to promise me that you won’t keep stuff from me again. You talk to me. About everything and anything. You let me shoulder some of your stress. Trust me, I can handle it.”

“I promise.” He reels me into his arms, uncaring there are people watching. “I can’t promise I won’t fuck up occasionally, because I’m used to hoarding things inside, but I will never deliberately keep anything from you. I swear it.”

“Thank you for dinner,” he says, opening the door for me. “Though I really think I should have paid.”

We almost came to blows over the check, but I stood my ground. I pull up the collar on my coat as a blast of wind slaps me in the face and tosses my hair around. “I asked you on a date, and I wanted to pay. I’m all about equality though. How about next time you organize our date and I’ll let you pay?”

He snakes his arm around my shoulders, tugging me in close as we walk around the side of the building toward the parking lot. “Sounds like a plan.” He pecks my lips. “And I’ll let it slide this time. You’re lucky I’m confident in my

masculinity. A lot of guys might feel emasculated having their woman pay for dinner,” he teases.

I’m too hung up on the woman sentiment to reply, but I probably should as that’s such a crock of shit. Instead, I just grin at him like a lovesick fool.

Without warning, he moves me over to the wall, caging me in when my spine hits the brick. “You have no idea what that smile does to me. Butterflies are going crazy in my chest.”

“I didn’t realize men got butterflies.” This is the second time he’s admitted that.

“Don’t see why not. I know I can’t be the only one, but I suspect I’m probably the first made man to admit it.” His amused smile turns heated as he brushes his thumb along my lower lip. “All night I’ve been staring at these lips remembering how incredible they feel moving against mine.” Arching his face in closer, he kisses the corner of my mouth. “I can’t wait a second longer to taste you,” he says before claiming my lips in a searing-hot kiss that warms all the chilly parts of me.

I forget our surroundings and my bodyguards sitting in the car, enjoying the show, no doubt. All I am conscious of in this moment is the feel of his warm body pressed against mine, shielding me from the cold, and the pleasure his mouth is extending to mine. Alesso holds my face in his hands, like it’s the most precious thing, as his lips glide skillfully against mine. His tongue slips out, tracing the seam of my lips, and I willingly open for him. We moan at the same time when our tongues caress, and I angle my head so he can deepen the kiss. My hands roam his back through his coat, and I’m burning with lust for this man.

No one else has the ability to render me into a pile of goo like Alesso, and all this from kissing.

He abruptly ends our kiss, and we’re both panting. His arms band around me, and he pulls me in close to his chest. “I never want to stop feeling this, Rena. This is everything.”

Tilting my head up, I stare into his loving eyes. “It’s everything to me too.”

He sweeps hair back off my face. “I don’t want us to hide. I want people to know you are mine.”

“You are nobody’s dirty little secret, and we won’t be hiding. I want everyone to know you’re mine too.” I have already given this a lot of thought.

“I’m glad you said that because made men are the worst gossips, and you can bet Fabrizio and Edoardo were watching my every move.”

I narrow my eyes. “They best not have filmed us.”

“They know better, and they don’t need film to spread the word. If we wanted to keep it a secret, that would be shot to hell now.”

“Besides my kids, you’re the best thing to happen to me, Alesso. Trust me, I want to shout it from the rooftops.”

“Speaking of the kids, what do we tell them?”

“I have thought about this all week. It would probably be prudent to hide it from them. Elisa already prays to God for you to be her daddy, and Romeo has grown very attached to you too. If it doesn’t work out, it could hurt them.”

His face falls.

“But I believe we are meant to be.” I rest my palms on his chest. “I believe in us, and I don’t want to lie to my children.” It would be virtually impossible to keep our relationship from them when we all live together, even if that was what I wanted. Which I don’t.

“I don’t either,” he agrees. “And I believe in us too.”

“We need to temper their expectation. I think we should sit them down and try our best to explain it.” I have a feeling, no matter what we say, that Elisa will be painting more pictures of us as a family and perhaps even depicting our wedding. A little shiver skates over me at the thought, but it’s not the nasty kind.

“Let’s get you inside,” Alesso says, tucking me under his arm and steering me toward the car. He grins down at me, and there’s a wicked glint in his eye. “I know just the thing to warm you up.”

SERENA

I'm still on a high after our date Friday night, and it's just as well considering I haven't seen much of Alesso since. The guys are leaving tomorrow—with Natalia and the twins—for the big meeting in Chicago. The one with all the dons and their heirs. I know a lot is resting on it, and I can only imagine the planning that has gone into ensuring everything will go off without a hitch. So, I haven't complained even though I'm missing my man.

We managed to snag a couple of hours together yesterday, and we talked to the kids. As predicted, Elisa was jumping for joy. Romeo was less expressive, but he doesn't seem unhappy. After our talk, we watched a movie and shared a pizza, and it was the kind of family night I always dreamed of having.

“Oh my God. You are sickeningly in love,” Chelsea drawls, trying to look like she chewed on a lemon but failing. Her smile bursts through her façade. “I'm happy for you.” Around us, the restaurant hums with the busy Monday lunchtime crowd. “You deserve a man like Alessandro.”

“I haven't experienced a normal relationship before. Is it always like this?”

She quirks a brow. Though Chelsea knows I was only with Alfredo, she doesn't know it was an arranged marriage or that I was forbidden from dating other guys. I hate lying to my friend, but to tell her the truth is to put her in danger. She can't know about the world I inhabit. It's not safe. All she knows is I led a sheltered life and wasn't with any man intimately until I

got married. I have told her he was abusive and it wasn't a happy marriage because I can't conceal that from her.

"Like what?" she asks, looking a little perplexed.

"Like I'm floating on air, and I swear my heart feels like it's going to burst every time I see him. Let's not even mention the butterflies!"

"No. It's not always like that." She dumps sugar in her coffee. "Usually only with *the one*." She smiles but it's a little sad.

"Are you okay? You seem a little down."

Her sigh is tired. "Honestly, things aren't great between me and my husband right now."

I'm surprised to hear that because they seem to have a great marriage. Then again, they have young twins, two other kids in school, Lucas runs a busy business, and Chelsea is a mature student in college. That's got to be a lot of stress. "I'm sorry to hear that. You both have a lot on your plate right now."

"Don't I know it." She stirs her coffee slowly. "There's this big event coming up he wants me to attend, and I'm getting sick of doing things for him that support his interests. Lately, some of the expectations are—" She bites down on her lip, looking like she might dissolve into tears. "Too much," she finally whispers. Leaning across the table, she grabs my hand. "I'm grateful for your friendship. I hope you know that. There is no one else I could talk to about this."

Chelsea is friendly with some of her neighbors and a couple of moms from her mom and baby group, but she has no family here. Her parents, her sister, and her brother still live in Texas. Her husband's family is snooty, and they have never approved of her, so she isn't close to them. It must get lonely, and I'm glad I can be here for her.

"I am always here for you. You can talk to me about anything." I wish I could invite her to come stay for a weekend, but it's out of the question. Ben has kept his property a secret for a reason, and now more than ever, we need to be

careful about letting anyone into our lives. It's why I didn't protest when he ran background checks on Chelsea and her husband. I was relieved when nothing untoward came up in the reports.

"Don't mind me," she says, brushing a stray tear away. "It will blow over, and things will settle down. I'll be fine."

Why do I get the feeling she's trying to convince herself more than me?

"I am dreading tomorrow," Sierra admits as we exit the yoga studio later that night, surrounded by bodyguards. "So much could go wrong."

I rub her back. "Try not to worry," I say even though I'm anxious too because Alesso is going with them. "Ben knows what he's doing."

"It's not Ben I'm worried about," she says as Nario opens the back door to her SUV. Although Alesso hasn't been officially announced as *consigliere* yet—they are waiting until things settle in the aftermath of the Chicago meeting—he is no longer my sister's bodyguard. Neither of us are happy about that even though I'm proud of my man and delighted he is getting such an amazing opportunity. It means seeing a lot less of him, and our time together was already precious.

Sierra isn't happy as she had grown attached to him and Nario is a lot surlier. Not as surly as *Ciro*. Man, that guy is a cranky bastard. But Nario will take a lot of getting used to after Alesso. That said, Ben wouldn't assign someone who isn't going to take the best care of his wife. And that is all that matters.

"I think pregnancy hormones are making me more anxious," Sierra supplies when we are both settled in the back seat.

The car glides out of the parking lot, heading toward home.

“Everything is heightened when you’re pregnant.”

Sierra runs her hands back and forth across her bump. “I know I need to chill. That my man can handle it, and it’s not like this is an isolated event. Every time he leaves the house, he is putting himself at risk. I know he has a big target on his head, and I thought I had accepted that, but I’ve been a basket case recently.”

“It’s completely understandable, but Ben is well protected, and he’s smart. You need to trust in that and stop worrying. Stress isn’t good for you or the baby.”

“Ben says the same, and I know me being all stressed worries him too, so it’s a vicious cycle, but I can’t help how I feel.”

“At least this time, we can worry together.” I circle my arm around my sister, and she leans her head on my shoulder. “I’m proud of Alesso,” I whisper in her ear, not wanting to blurt anything in front of the two men in the front seats. The news about Alesso’s appointment cannot be leaked ahead of time. “But I worry too. He’s going to have a much larger target on his head now.” I run my fingers through Sierra’s golden-blonde hair. “It’s kinda funny. Every time Alfredo left the house, I used to pray for something to happen to him. Plead with God that a stray bullet would find its way into his skull, and it never happened. Now, I’ll be praying for the opposite.”

Sierra lifts her head, turning to face me. “Have I told you how happy I am for you?”

“About a million times.” I can’t contain my grin, so I let it loose. Whenever I remember how she and Nat reacted to the news after my date with Alesso, I get a warm fuzzy feeling inside. They couldn’t have been more pleased for me, and having their support and encouragement means the world to me.

I have never had close friends before. Leading a double life during high school made it virtually impossible. No one knew we were mafia, believing the businessman façade my father wore in public. I couldn’t bring friends back to our house or risk going to theirs, and as I wasn’t allowed to date,

parties were few and far between. Father picked my dates for official school dances, which only made me stand out more. I had casual acquaintances in school, but for the most part, I was alienated.

This is the first time I have girlfriends I can confide things in. Sierra and I have grown super close since I moved in, and she and Nat are my lifelines. It finally feels like my life is on track. The only blip is the *mafioso* danger and the fact that asshole from the boutique has snuck back into the shadows. But I refuse to let it drag me down. Things are good, and I won't let anything ruin it.

"I can't wait for all this shit to blow over so you two can spend more quality time together. You know we'll babysit anytime," Sierra says.

Babysitters are something we're not in short supply of, but I appreciate the offer. "Thanks. We will for sure take you up on that."

When we get back to the house, Ben and Alesso are waiting by the front door for us. "What's wrong?" Sierra asks, instantly assuming the worst.

"Nothing, my love." Ben reels her to him, kissing her lips and then her swollen belly through her maternity dress. "I want to spend some time with you alone before we leave tomorrow." He hands her a bunch of roses, and she visibly melts. Ben nods in our direction. "We'll see you in the morning."

We say goodbye, lingering for a moment. "For you." Alesso produces a gorgeous colorful bouquet of flowers from behind his back.

"They're beautiful." Taking them from him, I bury my nose in the delicate fragrance. I lean up and kiss him, feeling an inordinate thrill every time I get to do that. We have stolen plenty of kisses these past few days, even if we've been like ships passing in the night. "Thank you."

"Pretty flowers for my pretty girl." He smiles as he kisses the tip of my nose. "I was drawn to them the second I walked

into the store. When the florist explained they were lotus flowers and she told me the meaning behind them, I just knew they were the perfect flowers for you.”

I slant him an inquisitive look. “Okay. I’ll bite. What do lotus flowers symbolize?”

“Purity, enlightenment, self-regeneration, and rebirth.”

“Wow. They are kinda perfect.”

“I know.” He looks pretty pleased with himself as he brushes a kiss on my cheek.

“You are always surprising me in the best ways.” I loop my arm in his. “Thanks again.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Are the kids asleep?” I ask as we begin to walk.

“They are.” He leads me toward the west wing. “And I have a bubble bath waiting for you.”

“I think I must have died and gone to heaven.” I squeeze his arm, grinning up at him as warmth infuses every inch of me. “You are so good to me. I need to up my game.”

“You give me everything just by breathing.”

I slam to a halt. “God, Alesso. I couldn’t be any happier if I tried. You are incredible. I feel so lucky to have you in my life.”

“Man, they’re all at it,” someone with a familiar voice says from behind.

I swing around, spotting Caleb and Joshua Accardi exiting the living room. They have been keeping a low profile since they permanently moved in. From what Natalia has said, they are unhappy living here, and they are missing their friends and all the action in the city.

“Don’t be mean.” Joshua thumps his brother in the arm. “They’re in love. Love is awesome. You’ll know someday.”

Caleb snorts out a derisory laugh. “Hell will freeze before I’ll let any bitch strangle me by the balls. Love is for pussies.”

He pointedly eyeballs Alesso, but my man doesn't rise to the bait.

He tosses a smile in Caleb's direction. "If I'm a pussy, I'm a proud one." He clamps his hand on the teen's shoulder. "You're far too young to be so cynical."

"I'm old enough to know what I've seen. Love makes fools of everyone, and I'm no freaking fool." With those parting words, he salutes us before walking away with an obvious swagger. Joshua shrugs, looking mildly apologetic, before he races after his brother.

"God help Nat and Leo with Caleb," Alesso says. "I have a feeling he's going to put them through the wringer."

"He's a teenager and a made man to boot. I'd say that's par for the course."

"True. He's a good kid. Just a bit messed up right now," Alesso says.

Caleb has been dabbling in drugs and Natalia is really worried about him. She inspects his bag every day after school, which I know irritates him, but how else is she to check he isn't using again? He could be doing it during the day, when she is none the wiser, and I know that troubles her too. The Commission has plans to deal with the Colombians because they are supplying shit on the streets without approval, and they were responsible for feeding Caleb's habit too.

The guys are trying to get both boys to train with them in the on-site gym or the boxing ring or the shooting range. Anything to bond with them and get them out of the house, as well as giving them an outlet for their frustration. Joshua is generally more pleasant and less troublesome, but he's missing his girlfriend and giving Nat hell too right now.

I don't envy her that.

After a long soak in the lavender-scented bath, listening to music and sipping the glass of champagne Alesso left for me, I am relaxed and all loved up when I get out. I dry myself and get dressed in silk pajamas and a matching robe. There is no point getting properly dressed at this hour of night.

When I reappear in the living room, Alesso is unpacking cartons of Chinese takeout on the large coffee table and a roaring fire is crackling in the hearth. “I would’ve cooked for you,” he says, “but I can’t cook for shit. Nothing kills romance faster than presenting mac and cheese from a box for dinner.”

Laughter wafts from my mouth as I lean in to hug him. “I’m glad you have at least one flaw. Now I don’t feel so bad.”

“Shush, woman.” He reels me into his arms. “You’re perfect, and we both know it.” His mouth descends on mine, and he worships my lips until I feel boneless and thoroughly adored.

“Feed me,” I murmur when we eventually break apart. “Before I’m tempted to eat you.”

He arches a brow as he gently pushes me down on the couch. “I can’t find a single thing wrong with that.” He waggles his brows before heaping some food on a plate and handing it to me with a fork. “Eat. You must be starving. You’ve had a long day.”

“So have you.”

He sits beside me, shoveling a forkful of shrimp fried rice into his mouth. He groans, and the sound cranks my arousal up a notch. Everything about this man turns me on, and it’s such a joy. It’s no wonder I’m walking around with the cheesiest grin on my face all the time. I can touch him at will, and he touches me too, and it’s like the easiest thing in the world. All the months of therapy are paying off, and all the things I never dared to dream for myself are now within reach, and I am seriously walking on a cloud right now. We haven’t progressed beyond casual touches and kissing, and we’ll need to have the S-E-X talk before taking it further this time, but there’s no rush. I can tell Alesso is happy with the way things are, and we only just got together, so taking it slow is the way to go.

“Tell me about your day,” he says, in between food, and I update him as we eat.

“I would love to meet Chelsea,” he says.

“Perhaps you could meet us for lunch one day?” I suggest.

“Sounds like a plan. I’ll be up in the city most days now anyway, so it can be arranged.”

“Cool.” I set my plate down, only half-eaten. Alesso gives me the stink eye. “You put far too much on my plate!” I protest, leaning into his side. “Besides, it means extra for you. You’re a growing boy. You need it more.”

He puts his plate down and proceeds to tickle me, stopping when my squeals get out of control and we risk waking the kids. His features soften as he pulls me into a hug. “This, right here, is everything I never knew I was craving.” He nuzzles his nose in my neck. “Sometimes I worry the intensity of my feelings for you is too much.”

“I can relate.” I wrap my arms around him and rest my head on his shoulder. “I’m so happy I could burst.”

Softly, he tips my head up, staring into my eyes. My heart thuds at the look of sheer adoration on his face and the immeasurable emotion in his gaze. We stare at one another, our hearts full and open, that connection between us buzzing with the strength of our affection. It’s on the tip of my tongue to tell him I love him, but we have only been together a few days, and I don’t want to do or say anything to ruin what we’re building.

As soon as that thought lands in my mind, a little voice shouts *chicken* in my ear. It’s a timely reminder and exactly what I need to hear to grab my courage and say what I have felt like saying for a long time. I’m not afraid to tell him how I feel, even if he isn’t quite on the same page. I know there is nothing I could say or do that would make Alesso run from me now.

Sliding one hand up his chest, I peer directly into his eyes. “I love you.”

He sucks in a gasp, and I'm startled when tears well in his eyes. "I love you too," he rasps, and moisture prods the backs of my retinas. "I have loved you for a long time."

"Me too," I quietly admit. This is everything I have dreamed of and wished for, and I feel like pinching myself. "I had no clue you felt the same way."

"I do. You're my person, Rena. The only one for me." He plants a soft loving kiss on my lips.

My eyes are glassy when we break our lip-lock. "I have never said that to any man before."

"I have never said that to any woman either."

My heart swells with so much love it's a miracle it fits behind my rib cage. "Another first."

"I want all your firsts," he says, sweeping his fingers across my cheek.

"I'll give them to you." I run my fingers through his hair, staring at him in awe. "I can't believe you are mine. It feels surreal. I want to bottle this feeling and inhale it forever."

"Me too, and I'm glad we waited. This feels like the perfect time."

"You are?"

He nods. "I don't regret anything that has come before because it led us here. We are exactly where we should be, and now you're mine I am never letting you go."

ALESSO

Tension is rife the entire journey from the airport to Ben's Greenwich house. Everyone is still shell-shocked and lost in their own thoughts. One by one, we emerge from the SUVs weighted down by the devastating loss of life we just witnessed in Chicago. The meeting was an ambush, and we are lucky we got out of there with our lives. Most didn't. I glance over at the twins. Caleb's impassive face is as worrisome as Joshua's heartbroken one. Natalia tried to comfort both boys, but Caleb was having none of it. Joshua glued himself to her side from the second we escaped the destruction, wearing the same gut-wrenching look he still has on his face.

Watching their father gunned down in front of their eyes is something they will never forget. It doesn't matter if they were estranged or angry with Gino at the time of his death—he was still their father. Now they have lost both biological parents, which is sad. Thank fuck they have Natalia and Leo. Which is more than I had growing up. They will get them through this.

The front door opens, and Sierra, Serena, and the kids rush out to greet us. Sierra flings herself into Ben's arms, sobbing hysterically. She's trying to talk, but she can't form the words. Ben holds her against him in one arm while he lifts Rowan with the other, comforting his son who is upset because his mother is.

I stumble back a couple steps when Serena throws herself at me, caught off guard. "We were so worried!" Anxiety bleeds into her tone. "It's all over the news, and when we

couldn't reach any of you, we thought the worst." A sob rips from her mouth, and I band my arms around her, holding her close, as the kids each hug one of my legs. I place a hand on top of Elisa's head and then Romeo's, hoping it reassures them. They look worried too. All the kids are feeding off their mothers' emotions.

"We tried calling from the car, but none of us had a signal," I explain. "Our primary concern was getting the hell out of there." We didn't know if DeLuca had men stationed on the roads or at the airport to stop anyone who may have escaped, so we had to keep our wits about us. "We sent messages as the plane was taking off, but I didn't realize you and Sierra hadn't received them. I'm sorry you were worried." Most everyone neglected to charge their phones on the plane. It's hard to function when confronted with how close we all came to meeting our maker.

"We thought you died in the explosion. We thought you were all gone," she cries, burying her face in my chest. "I was so scared. I can't lose you." She clings to my shirt. "Not when I've just found you."

"We should get inside." Ben's anxious gaze skates around the property, and it speaks volumes when the boss doesn't even feel safe here.

Romeo climbs onto my back, and I hold Serena's and Elisa's hands as we walk inside.

"Serena." Ben calls out after everyone is inside and the front door is closed. "Can you take care of Sierra? We have urgent business we need to attend to." Sierra clings to her husband, still crying and still in obvious shock. I know Ben would be with her if he could, but the situation is dire, and it requires all hands on deck.

I crouch down, and Romeo slides off my back. He instantly runs to his cousin, whispering in his ear.

"Honey." Ben gently cups Sierra's face. "I'm okay. I know you were scared, but we're okay." He dots kisses all over her face. "Let Rena run you a bath and pour you some wine. One glass won't harm the baby." He kisses her on the mouth as

Serena circles her arms around my neck and plants a fierce kiss on my lips.

“I love you,” she says, her voice projecting loud and proud.

“I love you too.” I don’t give a flying fuck who hears. What we just survived has put a lot of things in perspective. I still can’t believe we have lost most of the dons and their heirs. It’s a clusterfuck of epic proportions, and the danger is far from over. I hold her tight while squeezing Elisa’s hand. “I’ll come to you as soon as we’re done, but it’ll most likely be very late.”

“I don’t care. I’ll be waiting.” She presses her mouth to my ear. “I want you to stay with me tonight.”

I hold her tighter as I nod before reluctantly letting her go. Right now, I would love to lose myself in my woman, but duty calls.

Serena herds the kids toward the playroom while keeping a firm arm around her younger sister’s shoulders. Nat has retreated to her rooms with Caleb and Joshua already, so Leo and I trail Ben to his study. The boss has already dispatched Nario and Ciro to the gatehouse to talk to the *soldati* on the grounds, letting them know what has happened and they are to be on high alert.

“Fuck!” Ben thrusts his fist into the wall after we enter his study, breaking through the drywall and leaving a fist-shaped hole. His breathing is heavy as he rests his hands on the wall and bows his head. Leo and I exchange troubled looks. It’s unusual to see Ben rattled but completely understandable under the circumstances.

Leo strides to the liquor cabinet and pours drinks. Scotch for the two of us and a bourbon for Ben. The boss straightens up, striding behind his desk and dropping into his chair. I take one of the seats in front of him, nodding at Leo when he hands me my drink. “I still can’t wrap my head around this,” I admit, swirling the amber-colored liquid in my glass.

“That makes two of us.” Ben knocks back his drink and slams the glass down on the desk.

“I can’t believe that fucker DeLuca managed to do this,” Leo says, refilling Ben’s glass.

“He played me for a fool.” Ben seethes as he stares into his drink with a murderous look on his face.

“It’s not all on you. Accardi and Barretta were on the ground, and neither of them knew,” Leo says.

“Because they were too fucking preoccupied with their personal shit,” Ben hisses.

“We should call Barretta,” I say. Last we heard, he was in Sicily, preparing to spend his final days in the homeland. “Find out if he knew anything. He’s the closest to the men too. At least some of them must have misgivings about all this.”

Ben is already reaching for his phone. “We need to do a roll call.” He eyeballs Leo as he punches in numbers on his cell. “Pull up our most recent list and start calling around. We need to identify exactly who was in that building when it blew and pinpoint next of kin. We need an updated list of dons so we can start implementing succession planning.” His gaze flits to mine as he lifts his cell to his ear. “Split the list between you, and let’s try to get a handle on the current situation.”

Leo and I sit for hours making calls while Ben talks to the other New York dons and appoints successors to Accardi and Greco on The Commission.

“I don’t care,” Ben snaps into the phone as I end my last call. “We paid you extremely well to ensure you looked after your contact inside The Outfit. Now, I want intel. Not fucking excuses. Do your job or I’ll fly to Chicago and put a fucking bullet in your skull myself.” He slams his phone down and rubs his taut jaw.

“Problems with Donny?” I inquire. Donny is a PI we were using to follow Gino in Chicago the past few months. He has a *soldato* within The Outfit in his pocket, and we need that guy now more than ever.

“He’s freaking out. The bombing is splashed over all the news channels and the airwaves. Feds and other law enforcement are crawling all over the place. Like I give a fucking shit.” Ben claws his hands through his hair, pushing air out of his lungs. “I need to know what the grass roots support is like for DeLuca, and I need intel on who this guy is and how the fuck he hid from us.”

“Did Cinisi have any idea who he might be?” Leo asks after he ends his call. Ben has been forging a working arrangement with the Sicilian boss this past year, and that could pay dividends now.

Ben shakes his head. “He is as clueless as we are and frothing at the mouth because the two guys he had guarding Barretta are missing as well.”

We haven’t been able to locate Thomas Barretta or his bodyguards, which doesn’t bode well. If DeLuca got to him, it means he played Cinisi for a fool too, and no don likes to be outsmarted. Especially in their own territory. I bet Cinisi is spitting blood, and this could work to our advantage. “Will he help?” I ask.

Our numbers are depleted, and that makes us vulnerable. Not only to DeLuca—who is now seemingly in charge in Chicago—but also to our enemies. We don’t know if the Russians are in cahoots with them or not, but they have been sniffing around The Outfit long enough for it to be a valid concern. If they *are* working together, it will only be in the short-term though. I doubt the Sicilians are planning any permanent alliance with the Bratva because Italians and Russians do not make ideal bed partners. The Sicilians will betray them when they cease to serve a purpose.

“He’s going to send his most experienced capo and as many men as they can spare,” Ben explains. “Understandably, he doesn’t want to leave his territory exposed in case DeLuca has set his sights on reclaiming his homeland. But he assured me he’d send as many skilled men as he could.”

A knock on the door claims our attention. Ciro walks in with Phillip behind him. Ben immediately sequesters his IT

expert, shepherding him over to the table in the far corner of the room. Leo and I resume making calls to the other *famiglia* in the US while Ben updates Phillip.

We check in and verify successor details, and these aren't easy calls to make. Grief is rampant, and fear is palpable. But we advise everyone to gather their men for an update and to double and triple security on their assets. Everyone is exposed now, and local enemies won't waste an opportunity to gain the upper hand. We must all be hypervigilant until Ben and The Commission come up with a structured plan to help move us forward and protect what we have built.

"How many more calls do you have left?" Ben asks, glancing over my shoulder as I add some new details to the spreadsheet on my tablet.

I scan down my half of the list. "Eight more," I say.

"Seven for me," Leo confirms.

"Okay, good. I have arranged a meeting with the other Commission leaders. We'll leave for the city in an hour."

"How is Don DiPietro?" Leo inquires. He got shot outside the warehouse. Natalia attended to his injury on the way back, confirming the bullet had narrowly missed an artery. The man still lost a lot of blood though.

"He'll be fine," Ben says. "He's more concerned with retaliation and itching to deliver payback."

"We all are," I say.

Ben rubs the back of his head. "I just spoke with Saverio. He's been blowing up my phone."

"And?" I purse my lips.

"Apparently, he didn't attend to make a point, but he was planning on flying in later to nail us down." Ben doesn't sound convinced as he perches on the edge of the desk. "He knows about you, and he's not a happy camper."

"He can go fuck himself if he thinks he can use this to his advantage," Leo says in a clipped tone. "We just took a severe beating today and our priority is protecting every territory and

every made man in the US. He needs to learn to not be so goddamn selfish.”

“He was supposed to be there, and he didn’t show. As far as the others are concerned, he could have been in on it or tipped off in advance. There will be suspicion. He’s in no position to throw his weight around,” I say because the last thing I need is to deal with that man today or anytime soon.

“Don’t worry.” Ben pushes off the desk and straightens his tie. “I’ll be making those points clear.” His eyes land on mine. “We need to update Sierra and Serena. They need to know about DeLuca, and I won’t let my wife go to sleep without explaining the situation.”

I nod although I’m dreading breaking the news to Rena. This was the very thing she was concerned about from the start.

“Handle the rest of the calls,” Ben tells Leo. “We’ll meet you at the front door in an hour.”

Leo nods, and I climb to my feet and follow Ben out of the room.

“How are you holding up?” I ask him as we walk the quiet hallways. Outside, a mini army prowls the perimeter with every man on high alert, their eyes peeled for any sign of trouble.

“I’m fucking disgusted with myself,” Ben admits, shoving his hands in his pants pockets. “How did he do this under our noses?” A muscle clenches in his jaw. “I won’t sleep at night until I know who this asshole is.”

“We’ll find him. Every made man in the US has an incentive for helping us to identify this motherfucker.”

“I failed everyone,” he adds as we round the bend. “And it’s up to me to make it right.”

“Ben.” I tug on his elbow. “This isn’t on you. You did everything you could have.”

“Did I?” An anguished expression appears on his face. “I should have insisted on holding the meeting in New York. We

could have vetted the venue. Ensured it was safe.”

“This guy wanted to send us a message. He would’ve found a way to do that no matter where we conducted the meeting. And it’s better it was in Chicago and not the seat of power. The Commission can still maintain the illusion of security and power and restore control in a quicker manner.” I hate that he’s beating himself up over this. Yes, he is our president and leader, and I get that responsibility comes with the position, but no one gives more than Bennett Mazzone. “I know it kills you that we lost so many good men today, but we can’t undo it. All we can do is ensure those men didn’t die in vain. Finding those responsible and punishing them is the best way we can honor those who gave their lives today.”

“I fully intend to exact retribution, and when it’s over, we will find some way to remember our fallen comrades. There are important lessons to be learned in all of this too.”

The girls are waiting for us in the main living room, and we quietly close the door behind us when we enter the room. Ben goes to his wife’s side, and Rena stands, coming to me. I sweep her into my arms and dot kisses into her hair.

“Are you okay?” she asks, looking up at me with trusting eyes.

“I’m fine. We have a lot of work to do. Protecting *la famiglia* and all the wives and children is our priority.”

“Is there anything I can do to help?”

“I’m not sure, but being here for me is a huge help. We have some tough weeks and months ahead.”

“I’ve got Georgia on speaker,” Ben says, and I lead Rena over to the empty couch. “You need to hear this too,” he tells his mother-in-law before he launches into an explanation of what happened today and what we learned about their Sicilian relatives.

I tighten my arm around Rena’s waist as Ben continues speaking, and I feel her trembling under my touch. I knew this would shake her.

“I’m doubling your security, Georgia,” Ben says. “I’ve got men on the way to you already, but I would really love it if you came here. It’s not safe to be in Chicago right now.”

“This is my home, Bennett, and I refuse to be driven out of it. I will gladly accept the extra security, and I will be extra vigilant, but I’m not leaving my home.”

“Can’t you work remotely?” Rena asks.

“I can, but that’s not the point.”

“They could go after you,” Sierra says. “Lawson Pharma used to launder their money, and you were Giuseppe’s wife. They may feel they have some claim on you.”

A harsh laugh filters through the phone. “They have zero claim on me. Lawson blood flows through my veins, not DeLuca. I’m more worried about you two. Especially you, Rena. You have DeLuca DNA, and you’re a widow. That makes you the biggest target. Maybe you should go overseas. Hide someplace no one can find you.”

“No.” Ben’s dominant voice bounces off the walls. “I can better protect Rena and the kids here. We don’t know how far this man’s network extends. We need to identify him and then regroup. For now, I would really prefer if you came here, Georgia. At least temporarily until we locate this bastard.”

“I know you mean well, Ben, and I love how protective you are of my girls and me, but I’m not running. I know how to defend myself now, and I’ll take the necessary precautions. If that dickhead comes for me, I’ll give him a taste of his own medicine. No Sicilian will control me ever again.”

My lips twitch, and my admiration for Georgia Lawson has just increased ten-fold.

“I don’t like it, but I won’t force something you don’t want.” Ben concedes.

“I want daily calls,” Rena says.

“And regular text check-ins,” Sierra adds. “We need to know you’re okay, Mom.”

“You’re good girls. I love you both, but please don’t worry about me. You don’t spend over thirty years married to a sick bastard and not know how to protect yourself. I’ll be fine. You worry about yourselves and my darling grandchildren. Expend your energy keeping them safe. I’ll be fine.”

Ben hangs up with his mother-in-law, and a pregnant pause ensues.

“I’ll need someone else to take over my self-defense lessons,” Rena says.

“We should practice daily at the range,” Sierra adds.

“No one leaves the grounds.” Ben juts his chin up, leveling the girls with a pointed look, daring them to challenge him. “It’s not safe.”

Rena and Sierra share a look, silently communicating in that sisterly way of theirs.

“I won’t add to your stress.” Sierra rubs a hand up and down Ben’s arm. “But we can’t stay locked up here indefinitely. The kids have school. I have a business to run, and Rena has college.”

“We’ll rehire Mr. Spielberg, you can appoint a manager, and Rena can study online,” Ben counters.

“I think that’s acceptable in the short-term while you get some emergency measures in place, but we can’t disrupt our lives permanently, Ben,” Sierra replies. “Unless there is a direct threat to us, I think we are safe here. No one knows where we live, and we have adequate security.”

“We can homeschool the kids for a week or two,” Rena says. “But I agree with Sierra. As much as I’m scared, I’m not letting anyone or anything control my life again. Do what you need to do, Ben, and we will all remain on guard, but we can’t hide from this forever. If this person or persons is gunning for us, there is nothing we can do to avoid it indefinitely.”

ALESSO

I t's after four a.m. when I finally climb into the warm bed beside Rena. I try to be quiet, but it's like she was only half asleep because she stirs almost immediately, blinking her eyes open as I crawl under the covers. "Sorry, I didn't want to wake you," I whisper.

"S'fine." She stifles a yawn as she turns on her side so she's facing me. "I told you I wanted you to sleep with me knowing it would be some ungodly hour." She opens her arms, and I sink into her warmth. "I didn't want you to sleep alone. Not after the day you've had."

"It feels good," I murmur, fighting extreme exhaustion. "Coming back to you and the kids. They are sleeping like little angels, by the way." I peeked in Elisa's and Romeo's rooms, to ensure they were okay, before tiptoeing in here.

"You should move your things in," she blurts, and I'm suddenly wide-awake.

"Yeah?" We haven't done much more than making out, and I have never slept beside her, so this is a lot for her to offer. Not that I'm against it. I would move in, in a heartbeat, but I need to know she's not rushing things before she's ready.

She nods, smiling. "Yes." She threads her fingers through my hair, and it's heavenly. I stifle a groan and ignore my growing semi. "I know I won't see much of you going forward because you'll be super busy. I want you sleeping beside me every night so I can hold you and know you're safe."

I cup one side of her face. “I would love that, but we shouldn’t rush if you aren’t ready.”

“I have already committed to you, Alesso.” She brushes her mouth against mine. “I’m ready to do this and ready to move things a little further between us.” She bites on her lower lip. “Sexually, I mean.” Her usual blush is missing, replaced with a hopeful spark in her eyes. “I will have to build up to the main act, but we can do more.”

“That makes me happy but not as happy as getting to wake up beside you every day.” I pull her into my chest, heaving a sigh of contentment when I feel her warm, soft body molding against mine. “We should talk more about this when it’s not the middle of the night.”

“I won’t change my mind.” Her defiant tone has me smiling.

“Good.” I hold her closer and breathe her in. I swear I feel some of the stress leaving my body just having her near. “But now we should sleep.” I dust kisses into her hair. “Go back to sleep, my love. We’ll talk more tomorrow.”

The next couple of weeks pass by in a blur of activity as we work to formulate a plan for training our new dons. All but six dons across the US and their trained successors survived the explosion, so our work is cut out for us. Cinisi sent us fifty good men, and Ben has bolstered our ranks with employees from his various security firms. While they aren’t made men, most are highly skilled bodyguards, and we have sent teams of security personnel to every *famiglia* to provide added protection while their new dons get up to speed.

The Commission has been meeting every morning to work on plans, and it has helped to strengthen the bonds between them.

Luca Accardi—Gino’s nephew—had already been appointed to manage the Accardi *famiglia* in New York in Gino’s absence until the twins come of age and are able to run

the business, so that's been a relatively smooth transition. Gabriele Greco had been earmarked to succeed Don Maximo for years, and he's an experienced made man with sharp instincts and an open mind. It could be argued DeLuca has done us a favor in the long run because I think we will emerge as a stronger, more progressive organization as a result of this forced change.

It doesn't eliminate the current threat though, and some families are already reporting issues with rival *mafioso* in local territories. Ben has set up a hotline within the internal division of Caltime Holdings to answer emergency calls, because our cells are hopping ninety-nine percent of the time and it can be difficult getting through to the boss man.

Ben went with Sierra to the hospital today for a regular prenatal checkup, so I got to come home early for a change. Rena returned to the NYU campus this week, and she had a late lecture today, so I was tempted to stay in the city and travel home with her. But she has a team of bodyguards with her whenever she leaves the house, and I know they will protect her. I wanted to come home to spend some time with Elisa and Romeo. This has been hard on the kids, and I have been absent a lot despite officially moving my stuff in.

I am in the living room snuggled on the couch with the kids and watching a movie when their mom arrives home. Serena races past me like a whirlwind. Her gorgeous face is unnaturally pale, and her hazel eyes are wide and terror-stricken. Alarm bells ring in my ears. "Watch your brother," I tell Elisa, instantly getting up to go after the woman who has claimed my heart.

"Serena?" I call out, entering her bedroom through the open door. Sounds of vomiting alert me to her presence in the bathroom, and I rush to her side.

She is clutching a large brown envelope in her hand as she bends over the toilet and retches. Scraping her hair back from her face, I snatch a hair tie from the sink and tie it around her long locks. Kneeling beside her, I gently smooth my hand up and down her back as she expels the entire contents of her stomach.

When she's done, I hand her a cool cloth, and she runs it over her clammy face before wiping her mouth and slumping against the side of the tub.

"What's going on? Did something happen at college today?"

She lifts panicked eyes to mine, and my heart stutters in my chest. "Rena, please. You're scaring me." I move over in front of her. "Tell me what's wrong, and I'll fix it."

A strangled sound rips from her throat as she clutches the envelope to her chest. "They gave us our new assignments today," she says in a hoarse, lilting voice. With trembling fingers, she removes papers from the envelope, letting them drop to the ground. Picking up a small, square sheet of white card, she hands it to me.

All the blood drains from my face when I read the crudely written words.

BLOOD IN. BLOOD OUT.

"Where did you get this?"

"It was in my envelope." She gulps and tears fill her eyes. "It's him. It's DeLuca." Tears roll down her face. "It's not over, Alesso. It's never going to be over. He is coming for me, and there isn't a damn thing you or Ben can do to stop it."

"It's going to be okay." Lifting her up, I slide underneath her, settling her on my lap. I rest my back against the side of the tub. "No one is getting to you. They will have to kill me stone dead before I will let anyone take you."

"I had a bad feeling about this all along." She shivers as she snakes her arms around my neck. "Dad never mentioned any relatives in Sicily, but my gut told me not to overlook them. It's why I went to Ben in the first place."

"You were right, and we should have pushed harder, but we thought the intel we got was kosher."

"What does he want with me?"

"I wish I knew." I have some suspicions, but I won't voice them because Rena is trembling and shaking, and playing

guessing games isn't going to help. Neither is the fact we can't find a trace of any DeLuca in Chicago or any evidence of someone who moved to the US from Sicily recently. Phillip has recruited a team of internal IT personnel to help, but it's like searching for a needle in a haystack. Our PI on the ground in Chicago wants out, and he contends his man on the inside has gone AWOL, so no intel has been forthcoming from that direction.

We are completely blind, and it's so fucking frustrating.

Rena hugs me tighter, and I hold her close, running my hand up and down her back as she nuzzles into my shoulder. Gradually, her trembling subsides, and when she lifts her head, I spot familiar defiance on her face. "They did this to freak me out, and fuck them!" Fire dances in her eyes. "I'm not giving them what they want. They want to drive me out of college. Force me to abandon my dreams and live in fear, and I refuse to do it." She climbs to her feet, looking like a fierce warrior. "Let's put the kids to bed and head to the gym. Edoardo has been putting me through my paces every night, but I want to go head-to-head with you and see how I fare against a better fighter." She hops from foot to foot. "That sick bastard isn't getting his grabby hands on me."

"Well, how did I do?" Rena asks a couple of hours later, stepping into our bedroom, freshly showered, in a thigh-high silk lace nightie that does wonders for my libido.

"You were amazing, angel." I pull her into my arms and kiss her, my skin still slightly damp from my shower. "My very own badass hot momma." I might be teasing, but there is no denying Rena's sheer resilience to live is driving the massive improvement in her skills. Put her out on an average street and she would easily block any would-be rapist or mugger. But put her up against a made man, honed from years of bloodshed and violence, and she will still have a fight on her hands.

“I meant what I said,” she says, repositioning herself on my lap. She straddles me, tilting my face up to hers. “I’m not letting any asshole get his hands on me again. I would rather die than let that happen.” She absently rolls her fingers along the necklace resting on her collarbone.

“Is this new?” I ask, admiring the gold pendant around her neck.

“Yes.” She bites on her lower lip, and my cock twitches behind my sweatpants. “Sierra, Nat and I got them recently.”

“I like it.” I nip at her earlobe before planting a slew of drugging kisses along her delicate neck.

“Hmm.” A soft moan escapes her lush mouth, and my dick hardens like steel. I move to slide her off my lap, not wanting to make her uncomfortable, when her hands clamp down on my shoulders, holding me in place. Her gorgeous eyes latch on to mine, glistening with arousal. Very carefully and deliberately, she rolls her hips, softly grinding against my erection. A string of curses leaves my lips, as she continues rocking on top of me, while her gaze never leaves mine. “I want you to make me come,” she says, leaning down and licking a path up my neck, and a shiver works its way through me. “And then I want to taste you.”

I have been sleeping in her bed for two weeks, and while we have engaged in some heavy petting, we haven’t taken it further until now. “You know I’m down with that.” I peer into her eyes, noting how green they look today. “Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

“Okay then.” I flip her over until she’s underneath me. “My aim is to please.” We have spoken about sex, and she told me to trust she was comfortable if she asked for something. I know it’s important that she leads this and that I treat her normally, so that means not asking her a million times if she’s okay. But we haven’t tried this since April, and I won’t lie—I’m nervous. This time, I’m going to ensure I’m reading her body language correctly.

“Fingers only?” I inquire, hovering over her, admiring the stunning view. She is laid out underneath me with her hair fanning around her head, looking both innocent and seductive and wholly tempting.

A light blush stains her cheeks. “Your mouth too.”

Precum leaks from my cock, and I’m seconds away from coming like a teenager. I have been dying to do this with her for months, and I can barely control myself. “I love you,” I remind her, like I do daily, because saying it will never get old.

“Love you right back.” Her hands glide up my bare chest. “Now get to work,” she teases with a shy smile.

She’s nervous but determined to be brave, and I will never stop being in awe of this woman. Bending down, I kiss her, gently placing my body over the length of hers but keeping myself propped up by my elbows so I don’t crush her.

“God, I love kissing you,” she says as her hands roam my back. “You were born to kiss, Alesso.”

“I was born to kiss *you*,” I correct, moving my lips from her mouth, along her jawline, and over to her ear. I worship the sensitive spot there, before trailing my lips even lower and gently sucking on the place where her neck meets her jawline. She shivers, and satisfaction flows through my veins. Slowly, we are learning each other’s tells and turn-ons, and I feel a burst of male pride every time my touch gives her pleasure.

I trail my fingers softly across her breasts through her nightdress, silently fist pumping the air when she doesn’t flinch. Feeling brave, I lean down, watching her reaction carefully as I place a tender kiss to the soft swell of one breast. “So beautiful,” I whisper before planting a similar kiss on the other breast.

“I like that,” she whispers, looking at me like I hung the moon in the sky. “More.” Watching her face, I gently cup one breast and brush my thumb against her nipple. It hardens at my touch, even through the lace, and more precum leaks from my crown. “More,” she rasps, as a rosy blush spreads across her chest and up her neck. Her fingers move to the strap of her

nightdress, and she slowly pulls it down, revealing one of her breasts to me for the first time.

“Perfect,” I murmur, lightly rolling my thumb and forefinger back and forth across her nipple, gauging her reaction the entire time. I roll to my side, keeping my hand on her breast while I watch her. I slide the other strap down her shoulder, watching for any sign of discomfort, but all I see is excitement and desire. When her full chest is exposed to me, I cup both breasts, feeling the delicate weight in my hands and the sinful softness of her flesh. “Absolute perfection.” Leaning down, I flick my tongue lightly against one nipple and then the other, and she cries out, arching her back and bucking her hips.

“Alesso.” She grips my arm. “I like you touching me there, but I need your fingers inside me. It feels like I’m going to spontaneously combust.”

I won’t torment her, and I will always give her what she needs, so I move down her body, spreading her thighs as I push her nightie up to her waist. Her pretty pink lips are glistening and ready for my fingers and my tongue, and I waste no time diving in. I move one finger, then two, inside her, while my free hand reaches up to caress her tits. The sounds she’s making are the best and worst kind of aphrodisiac, and I have to stop my hips from dry-humping the sheets. When she is good and ready, I lean down and add my tongue and my lips to the mix, constantly maintaining eye contact, to ensure she is okay, as I slowly break down more of her barriers.

Emotion swells inside me when she falls apart with my tongue on her clit and my fingers in her pussy, and watching her orgasm is utterly breath-stealing. I stay with her until she is sated, moving up beside her when her body stops throbbing and pulsing. “Serena.” My voice comes out breathy and needy, and it’s a true depiction of how I feel inside. “Did you like it?”

“Like it?” she croaks, looking up at me with tears in her eyes. “That was unlike any orgasm I have ever given myself. I never knew it could be like that.” Tears rain down her cheeks, but I know these are happy tears. “Why have I been holding back?” she laughs, grabbing my face and kissing me.

In an unexpected move, she pushes me back on the bed and swings her legs over my hips. “I know things are pretty shitty right now and danger is ever present, but I feel so fucking happy I could climb mountains.” Bending her head, she plants a line of drugging kisses all over my chest, and I almost come this time. “I love you,” she whispers, bringing her mouth to mine. She kisses me deeply and passionately, and I get a kick out of knowing she can taste herself on my lips.

When she ends the kiss and leans back, there’s a slightly anxious look on her face. But it’s soon replaced with one of sheer joy as she maneuvers herself down my body. Her fingers grip the waistband of my sweatpants. “Now it’s my turn to give you pleasure.” Her smile is wickedly sinful as I lift my hips so she can pull my pants and boxers down.

My cock springs free, and she stares at it like she wants to eat it whole.

Hell yeah.

Now, we’re talking.

ALESSO

“Alessandro!” Ben’s impatient tone yanks me from the scintillating show playing on a loop in my head. “Focus,” he snaps. “You’re acting as distracted as you were last year when you first met Serena.”

I haven’t been able to stop thinking about last night.

Best damn blowjob of my entire life.

Her obvious delight only added to the overall effect, and I love that she gets off on giving me pleasure as much as I do with her.

Leo chuckles. “Give him a break, boss. This has been a long time coming.”

I arch a brow in his direction.

“Pun intended.” He flashes me a wicked grin, and I flip him the bird. Leo is guessing I got some last night because I’ve been grinning like a loon all morning, much to Ben’s chagrin.

“Sorry, boss. I’ll focus. What were you saying?”

“They found Barretta and Cinisi’s men in Sicily. All gutted and hanging from the rafters in an abandoned warehouse in the middle of nowhere.”

“Damn.” I scrub a hand over my jaw as I lean back in my chair. We had suspected as much, but it’s still a shitty way to go. “How did Cinisi react?”

“As you would expect,” Ben says. “He wants DeLuca’s head on a platter, and I intend to deliver it.”

“Did Phillip make a breakthrough?” I ask, wondering how much I missed when I was tuned out.

“Unfortunately not.” He swipes his jacket off the back of his chair. “I think we need to consider a Plan B.”

“Which is?” Leo inquires.

“We need to get men on the ground in Chicago,” I surmise.

Ben nods as he slips his arms through the sleeves of his jacket. “Men on the *inside*,” he clarifies, eyeballing me and his underboss. “Think about how it would work while I’m at The Commission meeting. I’ll see you both later,” he adds before striding out of his office in the CH building, leaving Leo and I working at the conference table in his room.

Ben is only gone about thirty seconds when my cell pings. A growl slips through my lips as I spot the caller.

“Saverio again?” Leo inquires, and I nod.

Ben has had a couple of tense calls with the Vegas boss, and he’s not backing down. He’s demanding a meeting. Insisting we travel to Vegas to discuss where my loyalties should lie. I told Ben hell will freeze before I leave Serena when the danger is so pronounced. Especially after she received that warning note at college. Ben sent Phillip over there today with a couple of our *soldati* to try to discover how someone could’ve gotten that close to her. Of course, I wanted Rena to stay home today, but she refuses to be bullied into hiding. One part of me respects that. Another part wants her to stay in Connecticut and never venture out until we find this guy.

“He’s a fucking idiot.”

“He dances to his own tune for sure.” Leo drums his fingers on the table while piercing me with a look. “Do you really want nothing to do with him? He’s your uncle, and he could tell you about your father. Aren’t you the slightest bit curious?”

“Of course, I’m curious. But that information comes at a price, and I’m betting it’s one I won’t want to pay. I have lived this long without knowing anything about my father. I’ll survive.”

“I’m announcing your appointment tomorrow,” Ben says later that night as we head up the stairs to the roof to meet the others before journeying home.

“Are you sure that’s wise?” I ask, walking up the stairs behind him.

“This is the perfect time to make the announcement. Across the US, made men are getting used to organizational changes. Our men will too.”

Ciro opens the door to the rooftop waiting area, and Ben passes through. He glances over his shoulder as I enter the room. “It’s time.” I read the unspoken part of that statement. Putting it out there that I’m his new *consigliere* will also send a pointed message to Salerno.

“You’ll be stirring the hornet’s nest,” Leo says as I stride toward Serena.

An ecstatic smile spreads across her face as she stands, and my heart thumps wildly against my rib cage while butterflies swoop into my chest. Uncaring that we have an audience, I pull her into my arms and kiss her deeply. “Hi,” she says, in a breathy voice when we finally break our kiss.

“Hey, beautiful.” I clasp her head in my hands and tilt her face up. “Were there any issues today?”

“Not since the last time you asked.” I might have gone a tad overboard today, texting her on the hour every hour, but I need to know she’s safe.

“I’m worried. Are you sure you won’t switch to online classes again? Just give us another couple of weeks to try to flush this guy out.”

“I’m not hiding.” The stubborn set of her jaw tells me not to bother arguing. At least not here.

“Did you discover anything?” Ben asks Fabrizio and Edoardo, putting an end to our conversation. Rena’s bodyguards were with Phillip and the other soldiers today. Some guarded my girlfriend while others conducted an investigation.

“Phillip spoke to campus security and their internal tech team, and he personally checked the camera feeds, but there is only one camera over that part of the building and several entrances. We didn’t find anything or anyone suspicious,” Fabrizio says.

“I spoke with the professor’s secretary, and she has no clue how someone could have slipped that into Serena’s assignment envelope,” Edoardo adds. “They were on the professor’s desk overnight, and there was no evidence of a break-in. Professor Lane took them straight from her locked office to the lecture hall the following evening where they were distributed.”

“Another dead end,” Leo says, frowning. “What are we missing?”

“I don’t know, and we won’t figure it out standing around here. Let’s get home,” Ben says, and we head out to the two waiting helicopters.

“I have been thinking,” Serena says later that night after the kids are in bed and we are all in the living room, discussing the note she received. “What if it wasn’t DeLuca who left it for me? What if it was one of Alfredo’s buddies? The anniversary of his death is in a few days. I’m not sure the timing isn’t a coincidence.”

“Why threaten you now if it isn’t DeLuca?” Ben asks.

She shrugs, snuggling in closer to my side. “I don’t know, and I’m sure it probably is DeLuca. It was my initial thought, but I don’t think we can rule anything out.”

“It could—” My words are cut off when blaring sirens blast across the house, and the sound of approaching footfalls

coincides with the ringing of Ben's cell.

"Get down," Ben shouts, pushing Sierra to the floor and sheltering her behind the couch as Leo and I do the same with Natalia and Rena. We pull out our guns and swing into action. I jump over the back of the couch to the window and yank back the curtains, scanning the rear of the property for any signs of intruders while Leo and Ben race to the door, hiding on either side of it with their guns raised. "What?" Ben hisses, and I whip my head around, glancing at the boss as he answers his cell.

Three signature raps pound on the door, but Leo doesn't lower his weapon or drop his guard as he asks whoever it is to identify themselves.

"It's Ciro! Boss, we have visitors approaching the main gate," he shouts through the door.

Ben yanks the door open, almost lifting it from its hinges. "How many?"

"Two armored vehicles, boss," Ciro says. "Brando has every man on the job, doubling the guards around the perimeter and at the gates. Whoever they are, they're not getting past us." After the explosion in Chicago, Ben transferred Brando to the security detail at the house. He put him in charge, while he relocated the capo who usually holds the job to the city, to caretake Brando's crew. The boss is taking no chances with his family, ensuring only the best of the best is guarding them.

"Go with Alesso," Ben says to Ciro. "Take the women and get the kids and escort them to the panic room. Stay there with them, and don't open the door for anyone but us."

I'm already across the room, helping Sierra to her feet first and then Rena and Nat, while Leo is on his cell, calling Nario and Fabrizio who are watching over the kids. He is barking instructions at them as I usher the women from the room.

"I hope you have stocked up on wine in the panic room," Natalia semi-jokes, as we race along the hallway. Ciro and I are on the left with our bodies facing the floor-to-ceiling

windows, shielding the girls as best we can. As we speed walk, I scan the landscape outside, watching for threats. All the floodlights are on full power, and there is no way anyone could sneak up on us undetected.

To avoid a repeat of what happened last year, when the house was attacked and everyone was gassed, Ben had a detection system embedded in the air-conditioning and heating units and all the vents. None of them are sounding alarm bells, so it's safe to say we're not being poisoned.

“And chocolate,” Sierra adds. “For me, not the kids. I can't fucking believe we are under siege again.” She is spitting fire, and I fear anyone who crosses her path.

“We have weapons there too, right?” Rena asks. “Because I'm in the mood to shoot some assholes.”

If we weren't running to safety, I would kiss the shit out of my woman right now.

All of a sudden, the alarms go quiet, and my cell vibrates in my pocket. Ciro and I slam to a halt, and I urge the girls to stop with my eyes. I answer Ben's call immediately. “We're not under attack,” he says. “Or at least, not yet,” he murmurs.

“What's going on?”

“Fucking Saverio,” Ben hisses.

“What?” All the blood drains from my face.

“He's here with Anais and an entourage.”

ALESSO

If looks could kill, Anais Salerno would be ten feet under because Sierra is not holding back in her disdain for the now eighteen-year-old. She is glaring at her like she's the devil in female form. Not that I blame Ben's wife. Anais has had this coming. Couple that with Saverio showing up here unannounced, causing panic and mayhem and forcing the sleeping kids out of bed, and Sierra is ready to spill blood.

"Hey, cuz." Anais slinks to my side, looping her arm through mine uninvited. "I guess it's a good thing we didn't have sex that time, huh?" She waggles her brows and bats her eyelashes while blatantly flirting with me.

"It was never going to happen. I told you I was in love, and I meant it." I attempt to extract her arm from mine, but she holds on tight, refusing to let me go.

"Get your paws off my man," Rena says, marching over and standing protectively in front of me. "*Now.*"

"Wow. Territorial much?" Anais digs her nails into my arm like she plans to never let me go. She pins a derisory look on my girlfriend as she says, "I'm pretty sure blood trumps whatever flimsy hold you have on him."

I pry her claws from my arm and shoot her a glower as I slide my arm around Rena, holding her close. "Stop it. You need to play nice, Anais."

Predictably, she plants her hands on her hips, acting insulted. "Me? What about your little fuck buddy there? She was downright rude to me."

“I want her out!” Sierra demands, her tone dripping with disdain. “*Now*, before I swing for her.”

Anais sneers, her gaze lingering on Sierra’s burgeoning bump. “I didn’t know you were expecting quadruplets. You’re as big as a house.”

Ben swings into action, jumping in front of his wife and scooping her up before she can pounce on Anais. “Control your brat!” Ben snaps at a clearly amused Saverio. “I am this close to sending your ass back to Vegas in a casket,” he yells. “You risk my family by showing up here unannounced, and then you let that little bitch talk shit to my wife? I am warning you, Salerno. I am done with this crap.” Sierra gnashes her teeth at a smirking Anais, and Anais is so distracted she doesn’t notice Rena move up alongside her and raise her hand.

A stinging slap rings out across the room, silencing everyone. “You’ve had that coming a long time,” Rena says. “How dare you continue to insult my sister, especially in her home. You should be ashamed of yourself. Show some goddamn respect! For yourself too.”

“I couldn’t have said it any better,” Nat agrees, shaking her head at Anais. “You should take a long hard look at yourself in the mirror, girl. What you see you won’t like. Women should support one another, not chase after men who are already taken. Grow the fuck up and stop acting like such a spoiled brat.”

I can barely contain my shock as I stare at Rena. It’s not like her to resort to violence, but Anais must have really pushed her buttons. Though I probably shouldn’t condone it, I’m so fucking proud of my woman for defending her sister and standing up to the aggressor. Anais lifts hurt eyes to me before she stuffs the emotion down and her claws reappear.

I slide in between the two women, protecting my girlfriend from retaliation even though I know she’s capable of defending herself. “Don’t. We warned you your mouth would get you in trouble one day, and this is exactly what we were talking about. You can’t go around saying whatever the hell you want to people.”

“Preach,” Sierra says, sending daggers at the girl. Anais’s cheeks turn red in a mix of anger and humiliation as she opens her mouth to speak. I shake my head, silently cautioning her to keep her vitriol to herself.

“Your daughter needs to wait outside in the car,” Ben says, holding his wife in his arms, struggling to contain her. Sierra is still primed to lunge at Anais.

Saverio doesn’t look happy, but he knows when to pick his battles.

I swear I hear a collective sigh of relief when two of Salerno’s men escort the protesting mafia princess out of the house.

Ben is whispering to Sierra, and it looks like they are having an argument in hushed tones. “Come with me,” Leo says, narrowing his eyes at the Vegas don. “We will wait for Bennett in his office.”

They walk off, trailed by armed guards.

“This is bullshit,” Sierra hisses once they are out of sight. “He has jeopardized our safety by coming here! Anyone could have followed him.”

“You think I don’t know that?” Ben grits out, dragging his hands through his hair. “I’m not happy about it, but he won’t leave until we have had this out, so I need you to calm down and go wait for me.”

“You never should have given them refuge,” she says. “Especially not here.” She folds her arms and glares at her husband. “You should have let the Russians take them out and solve all of our problems.”

“I don’t have a time machine! I can’t go back and change the past!” Ben throws his hands in the air in exasperation.

Her green eyes latch on to mine. “I can’t believe you are related to that asshole and that little bitch. And if they think they are taking you from us, they can fucking think again.”

“Alesso is going nowhere,” Ben says. “On that we can agree.”

Ben spends another couple of minutes coaxing Sierra off a ledge.

“Are you mad at me?” Rena asks, her eyes scrunching in concern.

“Mad?” I shake my head. “Absolutely not. You put her in her place, and someone needed to do it.”

“She was rude to my sister, and not for the first time. Something just snapped in me. I probably shouldn’t have hit her, but it was done before I could consider the wisdom of it.”

“I doubt that’s the last time a woman slaps her, and I wouldn’t lose any sleep over it. It might make her reconsider her actions.”

Her troubled gaze glues to mine. “He’s here for you.”

“He can’t have me.”

“I know the way these things work. He’s either going to make some kind of tempting offer for you or deliver a threat in an attempt to force Ben to concede.”

“I eat men like Saverio Salerno for breakfast, Serena,” Ben says, overhearing our conversation. “Trust me when I say Alesso is going nowhere.”

“I should just kill you right now,” Ben grits out, his hands tightening around Saverio’s neck. He has Salerno pinned to the wall in his office, and he looks primed to throttle him. “You barge your way in here, risking my family, and then you spout this shit?” Ben’s head lifts and he glares at the Vegas *soldati* inching toward him, ready to defend their boss to the death. “I’m president of The Commission,” Ben reminds them in a commanding tone. He shoves Salerno away while eyeballing his men. “Stand down, and remember whose house you are in.”

Saverio rubs his neck, looking murderous. He’s a reckless bastard, but even he wouldn’t attempt to hurt Ben when he is

vastly outnumbered. He jerks his head at his men, and they retreat to the four corners of the room. Our *soldati* regard them warily, ready to intervene should any of them step out of line.

“You can’t be serious?!” Leo says, his eyes flaring with anger as Saverio drops into a chair. “How fucking dare you insult the boss by making such demands?!”

Saverio lights a cigar like he hasn’t just committed blasphemy and Ben didn’t just have his hands around his neck. “Simmer down, boy. You’re as hot-headed as you’ve always been.”

“Let me see if I have this correct.” Ben reclaims his seat and grabs his glass, swirling the bourbon around. “You want me to hand Alesso over to you and officially transfer his allegiance from the Mazzone *famiglia* to the Salerno *famiglia*. In exchange, you will deliver a couple of trained Russian spies who can infiltrate The Outfit and find out what I need to know about DeLuca.”

“Correct.” Saverio’s grin is calculating, but he’s a fool to come here and try to play with the boss like that.

“No.” Ben runs his finger along the rim of his glass. “Only an idiot would agree to such a deal. And have you forgotten you owe me?”

Salerno crosses an ankle over his knee, taking a couple of puffs of his noxious cigar. Stifling smoky clouds swirl into the air. I honestly don’t know how anyone smokes that shit. “I haven’t. Call it in. Use your favor to buy my Russian spies.”

“And leave my new *consigliere* exposed to your manipulations?” Ben arches a brow, looking unruffled. “I think not.”

I send a sharp glance in his direction. He knows I won’t let him use his favor to protect my ass. Trading that IOU for me, when we are in deep shit and will most likely need it for something more important, is insanity, and he knows it. I have told him enough times. I won’t let him sacrifice that for me.

“Your new *consigliere*?” Saverio yells, dropping his foot to the floor and sitting up straighter. Leaning forward, he glowers

at Ben. “You have some nerve, Mazzone. Alessandro is my flesh and blood.” He thumps a closed fist over his heart. “Born of my beloved brother.” He looks at me, but I stare straight ahead, like I have every time he has glanced in my direction. “My God, he looks so much like him. I don’t know how I didn’t see it before now.”

“Because you were too drunk, too stoned, and too busy shoving your vile cock in kidnapped pussy,” Leo hisses, his impatience evident.

Salerno jumps up, brandishing his gun in Leo’s face. “You want to say that to me again, boy?” he drawls.

“Sit down and put your gun away,” Ben commands. “*Now*, Saverio,” he adds when Salerno doesn’t budge. “Need I remind you of everything we did for you, or is your memory that short?”

Even among Italian American men, there is little real tangible loyalty, and Vegas is the worst of our kind.

“That doesn’t excuse the way you have deliberately lied and evaded me for weeks!” Salerno shouts. He thumps his fist on the desk. “You dishonor me, my *famiglia*, and my poor dead brother’s memory with this treachery. You gave me no choice but to come here. You have refused to even take my calls!”

Diva much, Saverio?

“We’ve been a little busy.” Ben pins the Vegas don with a cutting look. “In case you haven’t noticed, our enemies are snapping at our heels, attempting to bring us to our knees. That’s more pressing than your hurt feelings and misguided intentions.”

“I told you this Commission business was a bad idea from the start,” he blusters. “If you hadn’t got such convoluted notions in your head, none of us would be in this position right now. Giuseppe DeLuca only made a move because The Commission was the ultimate prize and your mismanagement of that situation led to our current predicament. Your failure to secure Chicago allowed the very men you thought you had

defeated to single-handedly almost wipe us off the map.” I don’t like the sneering look on his face as he jabs his finger in Ben’s direction. “The threat to every made man is on your head, Benny boy.”

“That is fucking bullshit, and you know it,” I snap, having heard enough. “And where were you when it went down? How convenient you weren’t there, and now you just happen to have a couple of Russian spies on the ground in Chicago you are offering to us in exchange for my loyalty?” I fold my arms and level him with a loaded look. “Because that’s not suspicious at all.”

He barks out an incredulous laugh. “Be careful what you accuse me of, boy. I’m still your superior in more ways than one. Watch how you speak to me.”

I walk over to him when he climbs to his feet. “Let me make one thing clear.” I grind my teeth to the molars. “You are nothing to me, and you never will be. My allegiance is to Bennett and the Mazzone *famiglia*. I will never swear loyalty to you.”

“You can’t deny what blood flows in your veins, and you belong in Vegas.” He steps right up to me, and we face off. “It’s your birthright. Russo is old, and he has no living heir. I lost my underboss to the Russians, and his replacement is fucking useless. Vegas needs you. Come and rule by my side, in your father’s stead, as my *consigliere*.” He exhales heavily as he stares at me, his eyes brimming with emotion, but I’m not buying it. “Your destiny lies with me, Alessandro. It’s what your father would want, and Ben knows it to be true.”

“You’re giving me a pain in my face, Anakin,” Leo sneers, coming to stand beside me. My lips twitch at the *Star Wars* reference and the eerie similarity of Salerno’s words. “I can’t understand why you thought it was a good idea to travel all this way to insult Don Mazzone and your nephew. The truth is, *you owe us*. We owe you shit.”

“I know you’re pissed we kept it from you,” Ben says, rounding the desk. “But we haven’t known the truth that long either. This is not the way to handle it, Saverio. Give us your

Russian contacts, and let us end this war with Chicago and get everything back on an even footing. Then we can sit down and have a meaningful discussion about the future.”

“I’m tired of your politics, Bennett. And you can’t do this. He’s my flesh and blood. He belongs in Vegas.”

“The hell I can’t.” Ben approaches, towering over Saverio by a good few inches. “Our world is evolving, and made men get to make their own choices.” Ben casually shoves his hands into his pockets. “Alesso is free to make his own decisions, and his decision is to remain here as my *consigliere*. You heard him. It’s a done deal, and there is nothing you can say or do to change his mind.”

“Ben is correct,” I reiterate, “so do the right thing. The honorable thing. Give Ben the Russians, and when things have settled down, I agree to sit down and talk.”

“How do you have spies within the Bratva in Chicago anyway?” Ben asks before Saverio can instantly dismiss my statement.

“Why should I tell you?” Saverio counters.

“Because it’s in your best interests, dumbass.” Leo rolls his eyes as Ben shoots him a warning look.

Ben eyeballs the Vegas don. “A lot of the families are suspicious of you and the other dons who didn’t attend the meeting and escaped unharmed. It looks shady as shit. At least prove to me you didn’t sell us out.”

“I would never side with the Bratva. You, of all people, know why.”

“Then explain it to me,” Ben says.

“I want to annihilate all Russian scum in the US. I want to wipe those bloodsucking leeches off the face of the earth. I won’t stop until I’m avenged.” I know he hates them after what happened with Gambini in Vegas, and I know he’s a bloodthirsty motherfucker, but wanting to wipe out the entire Bratva in the US is a tad extreme and a tall order to fulfill on your own.

“I don’t have all day, Saverio. You’re seriously testing my patience.” I can tell Ben has reached his limit.

My uncle smirks, seeming unconcerned, which is a mistake. “Not every Russian bastard was killed that day we retook Vegas. I have been torturing a bunch of them these past few months. Managed to turn a few. They have contacts in several states, and we’ve been busy forging alliances and buying allegiance. There is little loyalty or discipline within the Bratva, so it’s been a lot easier to achieve.”

“You bought a couple guys in Chicago and they gave you a heads-up?” Ben surmises as a look of horror materializes on his face.

“You fucking asshole,” Leo seethes. “You knew and you didn’t warn us?!”

Saverio grabs Leo by the shirt, and around the room, men stiffen and reach for their weapons. “I tried to warn you. None of you fucking assholes picked up your phones!” he bellows.

Shock filters through the room, along with regret and a whole heap of related emotions. Goddamn it. He was trying to call us that day, but we thought it was about me. If only we had picked up.

Saverio lets our underboss go. “Well, shit.” Leo sighs, briefly closing his eyes.

“Keeping me at arm’s length backfired,” Saverio says, and his smug tone is wrong on so many levels.

Ben thrusts his hands into Saverio’s chest, and he stumbles over his chair. “You have the nerve to say this is all my fault when you knew?! You knew!” Ben roars. His nostrils are flaring, and his hands are twitching at his side, his fingers dangerously close to his gun. I can tell he’s seconds away from putting a bullet in Salerno’s skull. Tension oozes into the air. “Why didn’t you call the others?” Ben pushes him again, and Salerno falls back into his seat. Ben places his hands on the armrests, putting his face all up in Saverio’s. “If you couldn’t reach me, there were plenty of dons who would’ve picked up your call. You are full of shit, Saverio.” Ben prods him in the

chest, looking ready to rip him limb from limb. “This is on your head, you scheming motherfucker!” Ben grabs him by the scruff of his shirt, lifting him up halfway from his chair. Renewed tension sucks the oxygen from the air. “You knew they were going to kill everyone, and you did nothing.” Ben releases him, as Salerno’s men slowly move toward their boss, hands on guns, ready to start a bloodbath.

“Fuck you!” Ben snaps, glaring at Saverio. “You have never been a team player, but how could you do this? You let every man die! Setting aside your selfishness, how could you even begin to think letting our enemies wipe out most of our skilled leaders would end well for any of us? We are all exposed. *You* are exposed. More so now. No one will ally with you, and you can forget about finding a suitable marriage contract for Anais. You fucked everyone over when you kept your mouth shut.”

Salerno works his jaw from side to side, looking like he wishes he could shoot Ben, but really, what can the man say? It’s all true, and he knows it. I’m guessing he’s regretting his little outburst now. He would have been better keeping that information to himself. Better to be suspected than to know he deliberately fucked up.

“You have an opportunity to put things right now,” I say because this is our leverage. “It’s too late to save those who died, but you can stop more good men from going to an early grave. Put us in touch with your Bratva contacts, and let us end this.”

“I will gladly instigate the contact if you agree to swear loyalty to me.”

“No deal,” Ben interjects before I can say a word. “And you have lost whatever bargaining position you perceived you had. You give me the Russian spies and relinquish your claim on Alesso, and I won’t tell the other dons what you did.”

My eyes swivel to Ben’s. I don’t want to switch allegiances, but Salerno is stubborn, and I can’t see him giving me up, no matter how many threats Ben slings his way. If we can end this now, maybe I’ll have to make this sacrifice. It’s

not like Ben can follow through on his threat at this juncture. If we tell the other families Salerno knew in advance and did nothing, they will focus their energies on him, leaving their territories even more exposed. So, Ben's hands are tied now. Only when things are settled can he release that intel and let the men come for the Vegas don.

Salerno knows it too, so we are caught between the proverbial rock and a hard place.

"No," Ben growls, spotting the look on my face and understanding the wheels turning in my head. "He owes me." He drills me with a look, warning me not to say a word with his eyes, before swinging his gaze on Salerno. "You owe me, and I'm calling it in. Those are my terms. Agree to it, and let's be done with this."

"No can do." Saverio flicks his cigar butt on the ground, mashing it into the glossy hardwood floor in a deliberate attempt to rile Ben up further. He truly is treading a fine line. "What you are asking is two favors in one. My proposition is the only one I'm prepared to offer. It's that deal or nothing."

"You would go back on your word and dishonor your name?"

I don't know why Ben sounds so shocked. We all know the kind of man Saverio is. He is a selfish prick who only ever looks out for himself. The only time he has given us anything is because there was something in it for him.

Sierra was right.

We never should have saved his ass. We should've let him rot in his own blood, piss, and shit. Let the Russians finish the job. Instead, Ben gave him a lifeline, and now it's backfiring, in a major way.

"You act like I'm the only dishonorable man here. You keeping my nephew from me is unacceptable, and you know it." He jabs his fingers in Ben's face. "You will regret your actions."

"Is that a threat?" Ben growls, and every made man in the room reaches for his weapon again. "Because I will end you. I

won't even have to do the dirty work. As soon as I let it be known you were aware of the ambush and you did nothing to warn any other don, they will come after you from every jurisdiction." Ben cracks his knuckles, his determined face devoid of remorse. "I will let them have at you and watch as the vultures pick at your lifeless flesh until you are nothing but a sad sack of bones."

Saverio grins, and the motion stretches his skin, drawing attention to the large ugly scar traversing his face. "It's a promise." They face off for a couple of tense beats, and then Salerno jerks his head at his *soldati*, and they move en masse toward the door.

"If you're not my ally, you're my enemy." Ben calls out when Saverio reaches the door. "Don't call my bluff. I will act accordingly."

"So be it," Salerno says. "Just remember you set us on this path."

SERENA

“G irl, is it just me, or has your bodyguard team doubled in size?” Chelsea asks as we exit the building after our organizational behavior class and are instantly swamped by scary-looking men.

“Yep,” I confirm, linking my arm in hers as she yanks the collar of her wool coat up around her neck. “Things are a little tense right now, and it was this or return to online classes,” I explain.

Her brows furrow in concern, and I hate I can’t tell her exactly what is going on. How the guys are all stressed, more than we have ever seen, and literally working around the clock trying to find a solution to the Chicago problem. Rumors have abounded this past week, and it seems all is not quite so rosy within The Outfit. There is unrest among some of the men, which should be a good thing for us—if we could get to any of them. Every night when Alesso finally crawls into bed, he gives me a quick update, and it doesn’t sound like things are turning in our favor yet.

So, the danger is heightened, and the guys are terrified of letting us out of their sight.

Hence the four-man-strong goon squad who follows me everywhere on campus. I’m garnering more than my fair share of strange looks, and it’s doing little for my reputation. But I’m assured having them close by, and if it means I still get to attend classes and hang out with my friend, then I’m all for it.

Chelsea tugs on my arm, stalling me. “I’m scared for you.” Genuine fear splays across her face. “Maybe you should go overseas. Go hide someplace until this blows over.”

Despite how little I have told her, she is astute and understands more than I realized. Ben works hard to keep stuff off the internet about our family, but there are plenty of people who know who he is, and the rumor mill suspects he’s a mafia boss. It’s not inconceivable to think Chelsea has heard gossip.

“That’s not the way these things work,” I say. “Doing what I’m doing is what’s best. The safest option for everyone.”

She drags her lower lip between her teeth as she clings to my arm, looking like she’s on the verge of tears. My heart swells with love for my friend at her obvious concern. I wish I could reassure her, but I won’t lie. “Chelsea, it’s—”

“Surprise!” Alesso’s dulcet tone sends delicious shivers skating along my skin.

I whip my head around, and my eyes pop wide as my boyfriend stands before me, grinning and holding a bunch of flowers. “What are you doing here?” I blurt.

“I thought I could take you to lunch.” He hands me the bouquet of white, pink, and purple lotus flowers surrounded by baby’s breath and other greenery. Every week, Alesso brings me lotus flowers, and I love it’s become our thing. His head angles in Chelsea’s direction. “Both of you, if that’s okay.” He thrusts out his hand toward my friend. “I’m Alessandro. It’s nice to finally meet you, Chelsea.”

Chelsea loosens her hold on me and timidly shakes Alesso’s hand. Her head dips low, and she doesn’t look at him as she says, “It’s good to meet you too, but I’ll have to pass on lunch. Thanks for inviting me though. I have just remembered I need to go to the library.” Her eyes lift to mine, and if I didn’t know better, I’d say Chelsea has gone all shy around my boyfriend.

“Chels. You don’t have to do that. Come to lunch.”

“It’s cool.” She darts in, kissing my cheek. “Enjoy some alone time with your man,” she whispers in my ear. She pulls

back and fixes me with a smile. "I'll catch you later." She glances briefly at Alesso, wagging her fingers. "Nice to meet you. Enjoy your lunch!" Then she strides away, picking up her pace as if she can't wait to get away from us. Strange.

"I think I might have scared her away." Alesso's hands move to my hips as he slowly reels me into his body.

My lips curl at the corners. "You are a little scary when you want to be."

He tweaks the tip of my reddened nose. "I'm a made man, angel. It comes with the territory."

"Not just any made man." I link my arm in his as we walk off. "A *consigliere*." My smile is proud as I beam up at him. Ben announced his appointment this week, so it's all official now.

"I'm still getting used to it," he admits, keeping his eyes peeled as we walk, protected now by an entourage of six bodyguards, thanks to the addition of Alesso's two. Ben is taking no chances, and he has increased the security detail on his family and key personnel.

"Any change takes time to adjust to," I say, snuggling into his side.

"I hope you're right and the men who are reticent come around."

I peer up at him, frowning as I stare at his handsome face. "I thought you said the men took the news well."

"Most did." He unloops my arm and takes my gloved hand in his when we reach the door to my favorite restaurant. "But there is some disgruntlement."

We halt our conversation while Peter escorts us to my and Chelsea's usual table. I introduce the men, and we place our orders. Then the waitress retreats to grab our drinks. "Tell me what's going on," I say, taking his coat and folding it on top of mine on the little ledge beside our table. I prop the flowers up against the window, smiling at how thoughtful my man is.

“It’s fine.” Moving his chair in closer, he circles his arm around my shoulders. “Most of the men have reacted favorably, but some of the older guys are a little surly because I’m young and I haven’t served years like they have. A few distrust Salerno and the Vegas crew, so my association with them hasn’t helped.”

“You are still you, irrespective of your DNA. They should know that, and as for your age, that will be addressed over time when you prove yourself through your actions.” I cup his gorgeous face, rubbing my fingers against the bristle I find there. “Give it time, and those concerns will go away.”

“I still feel guilty,” he admits, and my heart aches for him.

“I won’t tell you you shouldn’t because you already know that. Me saying it won’t stop the emotion if that’s how you feel.” I rub his arm through his shirt. “But Ben is right. You handing yourself on a silver platter to Saverio isn’t the solution. No one trusts he will deliver his end of the bargain. He has proven he isn’t a man whose words can be trusted. Even if you did this, there is no guarantee he will hand the Russians over. And even if he did, there is no guarantee they can provide any valuable intel or support that will help us to reclaim the territory and get rid of DeLuca for good. All it might achieve is weakening Ben’s position further.”

I don’t mention myself or the kids in this scenario because, when it came up in conversation the night the shit went down with Saverio, we had our first heated argument over it. I tried to tell him we go wherever he goes, but he wouldn’t even entertain the suggestion, citing the danger and his unwillingness to have me around Salerno and his poisonous daughter. I don’t agree, but there is no point discussing it again. It’s hypothetical at this point.

“This.” Taking my hand from his face, he brings it to his mouth, brushing his lips against my knuckles. “This is why you are so good for me.”

I arch a brow and flash him a flirtatious smile. “You are only with me for my conversational skills and advice?”

His mouth glides against mine in a fleeting kiss. “I am with you for many reasons, and you know it.” His eyes burn with lust and love and a whole myriad of emotions, and butterflies swoop into my belly as I melt into the chair, ensnared by the way he is looking at me. Every day, I pinch myself to remind myself this is real. That I have found someone who worships and adores me the same way I worship and adore him. I never thought I’d get to experience this, and it never ceases to thrill me. The fact I can feel like this, with the significant danger that surrounds us right now, is testament to how far I have come in my personal journey.

I know I couldn’t have done it without the support and love of this man. “I love you,” I say. “I love you so much, Alesso.”

His lips claim mine in a passionate kiss. “I love you too, Rena. You and the kids are my entire world. Now and always.” He threads his fingers through mine. “I hope you know that because you are it for me.”

I sense he wants to say more but is holding back, either afraid it might scare me or it’s not the right time to make such declarations.

“You are it for me too, Alesso.” I peer deep into his eyes. “And I don’t want to hold back any longer.”

Hope mingles with desire in his eyes. “What exactly are you saying?”

“I’m saying I am ready to move our relationship to the next level.” I lean into his ear, not wishing anyone to overhear us. Especially the table of bodyguards sitting behind us. “I want you to make love to me this weekend.”

He clasps my face in his hands. “You mean it?”

I can’t keep the smile off my face. “Yes, I mean it.”

At Pamela’s suggestion, we have been doing some controlled sensual touching so my body gets used to the feel of his hands and he learns exactly where and how I like to be touched. I was nervous the first time we did it, but I lit candles in the room, and I had soft music playing in the background,

and Alesso relaxed me with his slow careful movements and his perfectly placed humor that ensured I didn't get locked in my head. I ended up really enjoying it and the body-tingling orgasm he wrenched from me. We have done it a few times since, and I'm completely relaxed with him now and ready to move our relationship to the next stage.

I want to know what it feels like to have him moving inside me.

I am definitely ready.

I press my mouth to his ear again. "I want you so badly it feels like I'm in a permanent state of arousal. Only you can sate my need."

He bundles me in his arms, and I sink into his comforting warmth. "Ditto, babe," he murmurs, nipping my ear. "I can't wait to make love to you."

SERENA

“F uck, Serena,” Alesso’s tone is raspy and tinged with desperate longing as he stares at me in my new expensive black-and-gold-lace underwear. Nerves prick at my skin as I push off the door to my bedroom and saunter toward him, holding my head up and praying my confidence holds. “You are really spoiling me,” he says, as I slowly approach, his eyes devouring me from head to toe. “First with dinner, and now this.”

I slaved away in the kitchen all afternoon preparing a sumptuous dinner and dessert because I want him to know how much he means to me and I want tonight to be special. “You deserve to be spoiled. You look after me so well, and now it’s my turn to look after you.” Sensual music floods the room, and the walls and ceiling are aglow with the flickering of soft candlelight. I made him stay in the living room while I got the bedroom ready—lighting candles, lining up romantic music, and tossing some rose petals on the bed. Nat has the kids until tomorrow, so we have complete privacy to make love for the first time.

“I love you.” I toy with his tie as I gently press my body against his. “Although I’m nervous, I can’t wait to feel you inside me.” I start unbuttoning his dress shirt. “This is another first,” I add, yanking his shirt from his pants and unbuckling his belt. “The first time I willingly give every part of myself to a man.” I remove his shirt and toss it aside. “You own me in all the ways a man can own a woman.” Taking his hand, I place it on the swell of my breast, over my heart. “I am yours,

Alesso. You own me body, heart, and soul, and for as long as I live, I will never want to share my life with anyone but you.”

With deliberate tenderness, he hauls me into his arms and kisses me deeply and passionately. Gentle fingers run up and down my back, and it amazes me that I can bear touch on the raised skin. But we have worked on this, and I have spoken at length with Pamela on the topic, and I am not ashamed of my scars anymore.

My scars are proof of my inner strength.

Proof I survived.

And that is nothing to be ashamed of.

“You complete me, Rena,” he says in a breathy tone when we finally tear our lips apart. “My entire life it has felt like there’s been this void inside me.” He takes my hand and places it on his bare chest. “I’ve been walking around with this hollow ache in my chest, and I accepted that was my fate. Until I met you and you breathed life into every part of me. Now my chest is swollen with love, and the emptiness is gone. You and the kids have centered my world and given it meaning. You are everything I have been craving but didn’t realize. Nothing or no one is more important to me than you, Elisa, and Romeo.”

“Oh, Alesso,” I choke out, swiping happy tears away. “You are everything I never dared to dream. You are my soul mate. I felt it the second our eyes connected that first day but didn’t ever think I would get to love you.” How my heart ached at the helplessness of it all. Sensing I had found the other part of my soul but he was denied to me because I’d already been forced to share my life with another man. It tore at my heart every time I was in Alesso’s presence, and I truly never believed we would have this.

His thumbs sweep over my damp cheeks. “I will love you until the breath leaves my body. Every day from now until our end of days.” He holds my face in his hands as he kisses me. “Soul mates,” he whispers over my lips. “I never believed in it until I met you.”

I rest my brow against his and cling to him, loving the feel of his hand against my lower back and the solidity of his strong biceps under my fingers. “This wasn’t quite how my seduction was supposed to go.” A light laugh trickles from my lips.

“You don’t need to seduce me, Serena.” He separates our brows and tilts my chin up. “You already have me.” A gorgeous smile ghosts over his mouth as he steps back and removes his shoes, socks and pants. My eyes are fixated on his beautiful ripped body as he slides his boxers down his muscular thighs and over his toned legs until he is standing before me as naked as the day he was born.

“You are so beautiful, Alessandro. You steal my breath every time I look at you.”

“Stop stealing all my lines!” He runs his hands up and down my arms, examining my face as he unclips my bra and removes it. Kneeling, he hooks his thumbs in either side of my panties and slowly pulls them down my legs. “I like these,” he says, scrunching my panties in his hand before burying his nose in the material.

My cheeks heat as he sniffs my scent, and I can’t take my eyes from him. His free hand moves to my calf, but I put a hand on his arm and shake my head. “Nuh-uh. This is my show, and I have plans for you.”

He pins me with a saucy smile. “Do you now?”

“Yep.” I step back, glancing over my shoulder. “Lie on the bed on your stomach. I want to massage you.” Sierra gave Nat and me some aromatherapy oils, and I’ve been massaging Alesso’s back and shoulders most nights. Tonight, I want to give him a full-body massage, and I know it will turn me on every bit as much as I hope it will him.

We already talked about contraception. We’re both clean, and I am on the pill, so we are going to make love without a condom. That means I can’t massage him the way I want to, using my normal oils, so after some research, I purchased unrefined coconut oil, which will be moisturizing on his skin

but will also be fine to use on his dick, which will, in turn, be inside me.

I laugh as Alesso hops up and swiftly gets into position. His eagerness is a turn-on in itself. Grabbing the bottle of oil from the bedside table, I climb onto the bed and sit on his ass. We both moan as my bare flesh meets his, and I gently grind on his butt as I warm the oil up in my hands.

“Shit, Rena. If you keep doing that, I’m liable to come all over the bed.”

I giggle as I lean down and press my mouth to his ear. “I like sitting on you like this.” I never thought I could be this open and intimate with a man, but I’m not uncomfortable sitting naked on top of him. My hands land on his shoulders, and a groan leaves his lips.

“Your hands are magic, Rena,” he says, as I knead his knotted muscles.

“So are yours because no one has ever made me feel the way you do when you’re touching me.” I work my way up and down his back, massaging the oil into his skin and easing the tension from his corded muscles. Then I slide down his body and massage his ass and his powerful thighs, teasing his balls with a few soft brushes of my fingers as I work my way along his legs, his calves, and his feet. “Turn over,” I command, and I can hear the lust dripping from my tone.

I throb down below, and my nipples are like sharp peaks, aching to be touched. My entire body feels alive in a way it hasn’t before.

Alesso’s cock springs out when he turns over, standing hard and proud, and I salivate at the bead of precum crowning his head. On instinct, I bend down and swipe my tongue across the tip of his cock, smiling as his dick twitches and a hiss escapes his mouth. I settle on his thighs as I dump more oil in my hands. “I love touching you.” I place my palms on his chest. “You are perfect.” I caress his pecs, moving my hands lower, my fingers dipping into the curved planes of his sculpted abs.

“Look in the dictionary. Under perfection, it spells your name,” he says over a moan, and I giggle at his ridiculousness.

“I love your dick.” My slippery fingers wrap around his hard length. “This is mine,” I growl, a sudden possessiveness sweeping through me as I slowly stroke him. “All mine.”

“It’s yours, babe,” he pants, quick to agree. “But please tell me I can put it inside you soon because I’m about to erupt here.”

I take pity on him. This gorgeous selfless man has been patiently waiting all year for this moment. “I am so wet for you,” I admit as I run my oil-coated hands up and down my body, lingering on my breasts and my stomach. Alesso’s eyes are glued to my fingers, and his dick leaks precum. Climbing off of him, I lie down on my back and turn my head to face him. His fingers move over my body as he stares into my eyes, massaging the oil into my breasts.

“I love you,” he says before claiming my lips.

We turn on our sides, holding on to one another as our kissing grows more frantic, our touching more insistent. I slide my leg in between his, thrusting my pussy against his cock, and a delicious shiver works its way through me. My core pulses with need as I press against him while my hands roam his back and grab fistfuls of his ass.

Alesso gently pushes me down flat on my back before crawling over me. He worships every inch of my skin with his mouth and his fingers and when his lips land on my drenched pussy, I almost launch off the bed. “Damn, you’re soaked.” He drives one finger inside me.

“Please, babe.” I writhe on the bed, my body flush with desire and my need for him at an all-time high. “I need you to make love to me now.”

He adds another finger inside me, pumping them in and out at a quicker pace. “I want you to come first,” he says, lowering his mouth to my clit. It takes him about three minutes to get me off, and then I’m floating above the room, soaring on ecstasy and the wonders of the human body. Sex has never

been like this for me, and I'm high on this incredible new experience.

When I return to earth, he is pushing my thighs farther apart and settling in between them. "I love watching you fall apart under me," he says before his lips come for mine. "You are so beautiful when you fully let go." His cock nudges my entrance, and prickles of anxiety dance over my skin. "Do you trust me?" He stares at me adoringly while he holds himself still at the apex of my thighs.

"With my life."

"I am going to make this so good for you." His fingers sweep over my face. "But I will stop at any time if you need me to."

"I know that." I cup his cheek. "I trust you." I peer deep into his warm brown eyes, seeing so much love reflected there that it erases my nerves. "Make love to me, Alesso."

His tip inches inside me, and our eyes remain connected as he pushes in more, going very slow to enable me to adjust to his girth. My heart is jackhammering behind my rib cage, and heat rolls off his body, suffusing mine, as he carefully drives into me.

I'm acutely aware of everything.

Every place where his body touches mine.

The searing intensity in his eyes as he joins us as one.

The transparent joy when he is fully seated inside me, and the magnitude of the moment hits us both.

I feel him inside me. Hot and thick and throbbing with need. My walls clench around him, and his eyes darken with lust. His arms tremble, and his thighs shake with the primitive urge to move.

Lifting my legs, I wind them around his back and thrust my hips up, the movement pushing him even deeper.

"Fuck, Rena." He collapses against my neck, and his breath is warm on my skin. "You feel incredible."

“I love you,” I say, my words laced with emotion. “I really fucking love you.” I arch my hips up again. “You can move, honey. I want you to move. I’m not going to break.”

I’m startled to see tears shining in his eyes when he lifts his head to me. “You trusting me with this is everything, Rena.” He pulls out slowly and then thrusts back in, and stars explode behind my eyes. We both moan. “I want to do this with you every day for the rest of my life,” he adds, thrusting in and out of me again, and my arms wrap around his back as I move my hips in sync with his.

“That sounds heavenly.” Happy tears prick my eyes as he makes love to me, and my body undulates under a riot of sensations I have never felt before. “This is the most perfect thing ever.” I kiss him deeply as he makes slow sweet love to me, and it’s everything I have desired in my dreams. Blissful happiness spears every nook and cranny of my being as we move against one another, kissing and groaning as our bodies connect in wave after wave of intense pleasure, and I know I will never get enough of Alessandro.

From now until I take my dying breath, I will only ever want this man.

SERENA

“You are so in love,” Chelsea says after the professor ends class. “You just have this glow about you every time I look at you.”

“That could be the sex,” I smugly admit because Alesso and I are addicted to one another and making love any chance we get now. I never knew it could be like this, and I cannot get enough of him. It’s like I have opened a magical door I never knew existed and been exposed to the ninth wonder of the world. “I can’t keep my hands off Alesso, and he can’t keep his hands off me.” The past three weeks, we have been having sex most every night, and sometimes we sneak a quickie in during the day.

Thanksgiving has come and gone, and Christmas is only three weeks away. I’m excited for it, in a way I haven’t been since I was a kid, even with danger still looming over us.

Although, things might be looking up.

Donny—the private investigator who worked for Ben previously in Chicago—reached out to him a couple days ago to say his informant within The Outfit has made contact and is willing to talk to Ben. Donny has washed his hands of it completely, so Ben and Leo are heading to Chicago tomorrow to meet with the guy. It’s been six, almost seven, weeks since the ambush, and Ben knows DeLuca must be planning his next big move. We still have no clue who he is, which is concerning. It’s been far too quiet with enemy threats restricted to local gangs and other mafia across the US, and

that makes everyone nervous. DeLuca is still hiding, and there must be a reason. No one presumes he wiped out most of the Italian American leaders without having an end goal in mind.

“I am so happy for you,” she says, stuffing her notepad and tablet into her bag.

I notice her hands are trembling. “Are you okay?” I know things still aren’t good between her and Lucas. She hasn’t elaborated much when I have asked, but the strain is clearly etched on her face. It’s why I haven’t wanted to say too much about Alesso. It feels wrong to be shoving my happiness in her face when her relationship is going through a bad patch.

“Honestly?” She tucks some stray strands of hair back off her face. “No, I’m not.” She stands, looking around as our classmates stream out of the auditorium, her eyes nervously scanning the room.

Apprehension raises goose bumps on my arms, but I can’t explain it. Something about the way she is acting has me on high alert. Zipping my backpack, I rise and face my friend. “What’s going on?”

She grabs my arm tight. “I need to tell you something.” Her eyes skim around the emptying room until they zone in on the door at the bottom of the auditorium, the one the staff uses. “Call your bodyguards and have them meet you at the rear employee entrance.” She pulls me down the row of seats, toward the righthand-side steps.

“You’re freaking me out,” I truthfully admit when we reach the end of the row.

“I don’t want anything to happen to you,” she cryptically says. “Which is why I’m trying to keep you safe. Come on.” She races down the steps toward the podium. “I’ll explain everything after we get out of here,” she says over her shoulder. “Hurry, please.”

For a brief second, I consider abandoning her because this behavior is odd, even for Chelsea, who can be a little crazy at times. But she’s my friend, and my instinct is telling me I can

trust her, so I do as she says, calling Fabrizio and telling him to grab Edoardo and the other two men and meet me out back.

A few staff members eye us suspiciously as we race down the employee hallway toward the exit, but no one stops us. Chelsea bursts through the door and ushers me outside, her troubled gaze raking over the rapidly darkening staff parking lot as I look around for my bodyguards. She's not complaining about the frigid air, and that's how I know this is serious. "What direction are your bodyguards coming from?" she inquires, and I point left. "Come on. Run."

"You've got to give me something," I say as we jog along the side of the building. Lights flicker to life, and they must be on a timer to come on in the evening. "What is this about?"

"I'm so sorry, Rena," she huffs out, in between pants. "I should've spoken up sooner, but I'm scared."

"That makes two of us," I admit as the sound of approaching footfalls reaches my ears.

Chelsea slams to a halt, grabbing my arm. "Oh God. What if it's them?"

"Them?" My brows knit together. "Who are you talking about?" I ask, struggling to keep the rising hysteria from my voice.

"Thank fuck." Chelsea almost visibly collapses in relief when Fabrizio rounds the corner. "Come on. Let's get you to safety, and I'll tell you everything." Yanking on my arm, she pulls me forward as the other three bodyguards come into view, and we race toward each other.

Pop, pop, pop!

Chelsea screams and drops to the ground, attempting to pull me with her, but I shove her off, standing horrified as I watch more bullets rain down on my bodyguards, their bodies flailing and jerking as they are hit multiple times.

"Run," Fabrizio croaks as he falls forward on his knees, blood bubbling in his mouth. "Run, Rena!" he shouts just as another bullet enters his skull and the light dies in his eyes.

Chelsea is screaming, crouched into a ball on the ground with her hands over her ears, and her high-pitched screeching snaps me out of my dazed state. With trembling fingers, I pull my cell out of my jeans pocket and press my fingerprint to the screen to unlock it. A clicking sound echoes in my ear as something cold is pressed to my temple. “I’ll take that,” a man with a slightly familiar voice says, snatching my cell from my hand before I’ve had time to react.

“No!” Chelsea screams before the sound becomes muffled.

A meaty hand lands on my arm, and the gun at my head presses in deeper. I wince as a dart of pain rattles around my skull. Blood thrums in my veins and rings in my ears, and adrenaline is coursing through my body as terror grips me. “Hello again, Serena,” the man says, coming around in front of me.

“Lucas?” Disbelief laces through my tone, and I’m sure my confusion is evident on my face.

My eyes snap to Chelsea’s, widening when I see the man restraining her. One hand is over her mouth while his other hand pins her wrists behind her back. He has her crowded against the side of a large black SUV, shielding her from sight.

Shocked gasps ring out from a small crowd who has stupidly stopped to stare. One girl has her cell out, and it looks like she’s recording. Screams pepper the air as a barrage of bullets is shot over their heads. The bystanders quickly disperse, and a scary-looking man wearing black fatigues snatches the cell from the girl, pointing a gun in her face as she turns ashen. He prods her frozen form with the butt of his gun, and she takes off like she’s got a rocket up her ass.

“We should move,” the man holding Chelsea says, and my attention returns to him.

“You!” I hiss, glaring at the man from the boutique.

He flashes me a grin and waggles his brows as tears stream down Chelsea’s face. “Surprise.” He chuckles as I glare at him before he jerks his head over the hood of the car. Several men stand from their crouched positions. They are all wearing

black and carrying rifles. Without a word, they climb into two adjacent black SUVs as Lucas drags me toward them.

“You really shouldn’t have done this, *wife*.” Lucas pins Chelsea with a cold look. “Did you really think you could outsmart me?” Digging his nails into my arm, he shoves me in front of him, pressing the gun hard into the side of my head. The creep from the boutique releases his current hold on Chelsea to mirror our position, so we are facing one another, both of us with guns at our heads. “Don’t try it, sweetheart. I won’t hesitate to shoot,” he says, leering at her as she tries to get free.

“You won’t get away with this.” She glowers at her husband over my head.

“You should’ve stuck to the plan,” he says as the creep opens the back door of the SUV. “Now, I’ve got to take you too,” he adds as Chelsea is shoved into the back of the car.

I fall to my knees when I’m pushed inside. Then Lucas is climbing up behind me, dragging me into a seat. The car takes off as he buckles me in, keeping the gun pointed at me the entire time. I tremble as his hands move over my body, squeezing my eyes shut and trying to talk myself off a ledge. This is bad. So fucking bad. And I’m still completely clueless as to what is going on.

The sound of glass smashing has me opening my eyes. Lucas crushes my cell and Chelsea’s under his foot before opening the window and tossing both of them out of the speeding vehicle. Across from me, Chelsea is strapped to her seat with the creep beside her, gleefully waving his gun in her face. Our eyes meet, and I see my fear reflected back at me, but it does little to dull the pain of her betrayal. “I’m sorry,” she whispers while tears roll down her face. “I wanted no part of this, but he made me do it.”

“Shut your mouth, *cagna*,” Lucas barks. “This may hurt,” he adds the same time a stabbing pain shoots through my upper arm.

I barely have time to process the fact he’s stuck me with a needle before I black out.

ALESSO

Leo is absently watching CNN as we work at the conference table in Ben's office at Caltime Holdings. Ben is attending a board of management meeting upstairs while Leo and I are doing prep work for the Chicago visit tomorrow.

"Rich assholes," he mumbles while shaking his head.

I lift my chin, watching the reporter broadcasting from outside the American Museum of Natural History. It's a repeat of the live program from last night. A host of celebrities and politicians attended the gala that acknowledges and honors companies and individuals for their environmental protection work. "It's for a good cause," I say, even if a lot of it is posturing. "And they raise lots of money for charity."

"They're still rich assholes."

I don't point out there are plenty of rich assholes within the *mafioso* because I get the point he's making. I'm about to tune it out and refocus on my work when something—*someone*—catches my attention on the screen.

"Turn that up," I demand, rising to my feet and stalking closer to the wall-mounted TV. "Pause it." I smooth a hand along my chin as I stare at Chelsea's image.

"What is it?" Leo asks, coming to stand beside me. "You know Governor Davenport or something?"

"Not him. Her." I point at Chelsea's blonde head, and it registers that her smile looks forced.

"Don't tell me you screwed his wife?"

I glare at my buddy. “Why would that be your first thought?”

He grins, and I want to punch him. “Something isn’t right.” I rush back to the table and sit down in front of my laptop, my fingers flying over the keypad as I put the name Chelsea Davenport into Google.

“Tell me what’s going on.” Leo pulls up a chair alongside me.

“That woman on the TV, the one they say is Governor Liam Davenport’s wife, is Rena’s friend Chelsea from NYU. Except Rena knows her as Chelsea Avara, and her husband’s name is Lucas.”

Images load on the screen, and I cuss under my breath. In all of them, Chelsea is hanging on the governor’s arm, looking loved up as she smiles for the camera. I scroll down the list quickly, and the pictures span years. In all of them, she has long dark-brown, wavy hair. I wonder if she purposely dyed her hair blonde and cut it short to disguise herself?

I knew there was something vaguely familiar about her when I met her. It’s a wonder no one recognized her on campus, but then again, how many young people would recognize their governor’s wife? Especially if she had changed her appearance. And Rena hasn’t lived in New York long. Unless it cropped up in conversation, there is no reason for her to know anything about Governor Davenport. “It’s definitely her, but I don’t understand what’s going on. She has clearly been married to the governor for years.”

“I’m on his official website.” Leo turns his laptop screen to face me. “It says he has been married to Texas native Chelsea for twelve years, and they have four kids.”

“Something is off, and I don’t like it.” I extract my cell and punch in Rena’s number. “Call Phillip. Get him to email me a copy of the background checks he ran on Chelsea and Lucas Avara.” Fear bubbles up my throat when Rena’s cell goes straight to voicemail. Rena never turns her cell off or forgets to charge it. Even during class, she has it on silent and set to vibrate, so if anything is up with the kids or there is some new

danger, we can reach her ASAP. I call Fabrizio next, and when he doesn't pick up, I seriously start panicking.

"No one is picking up," I tell Leo as Edoardo's cell rings out. "I've got a real bad feeling about this."

"Check the tracking software. Find out where she is, and we'll go get her," he says as the door opens and Ben steps into his office.

He takes one look at our faces and knows something is up. "What's happened?"

I point at the muted TV screen. "That woman is Rena's best friend at NYU, and she's been lying to her. Now I can't get a hold of Rena or any of her bodyguards."

"Serena has a locator chip." Ben strides toward his desk.

"I'm on it," I confirm, pulling up the software on my cell. Everyone in the Mazzone *famiglia* has a detection chip embedded in their arm so we can locate them anytime and anywhere. Right now, I'm grateful for the technology and Ben's smart thinking. "She's at Kip's Bay," I say, frowning. "Why would she be there? She still has one more class."

"The bodyguards are outside the professional studies building in NYU," Leo says, jumping up. "They would never leave her unattended."

"Let's go." Ben grabs his jacket from the back of his chair. "Something tells me we don't have time to waste."

"There is no answer from Chelsea's phone either, and it's also going straight to voice mail," Leo says when we are in the car en route to Kip's Bay. Ben already phoned the house to check Sierra and the kids are okay, and Nat's bodyguards have escorted her home from NYU. We aren't taking any chances until we know what's going down.

Wherever Rena is, she hasn't moved in the fifteen minutes since we left the office because the flashing red dot on my

screen is stationary. I don't want to think about all the implications of that because I'm liable to lose my fucking mind. I need to get there and hope we're not too late.

It's clear she hasn't just wandered off by herself because she wouldn't go anywhere in the city without her bodyguards. So, either Chelsea coaxed her off-site for a reason or she was taken. It's killing me not knowing, and every second that passes only adds to my agony. If it wasn't for rush-hour traffic, we'd be there already, and I wish I could bulldoze our way over all the cars blocking our path.

"I can't find any mention of Lucas Avara being married," Ben says. "Though it's not unusual to exclude that kind of personal information in an official bio. His company seems legit, and he imports olive oil from Europe. Mainly Greece and Italy."

"With a business like that and a name like Avara, he clearly has Italian roots or heritage," Leo says, and the three of us exchange a worried look. It's not inconceivable to assume this guy could have mafia connections, but he's New York based, so what would any made man from New York want with my Rena? It makes me think of the guy who was following Serena. She said he had a strong New York accent, so I wonder if the boss he mentioned is Avara.

"Phillip's reports were collected correctly," I say, my eyes running over the information. "It all stacks up, but clearly someone created false reports and credentials." My gaze roams the fake marriage cert and fake passport with growing trepidation. Serena was set up. But why? Who is this Avara guy, and what, if anything, does the governor have to do with it?

"Avara has virtually no footprint on social media. That should have raised a red flag," Leo says.

"Not necessarily," Ben replies as his cell rings. "He runs a successful import-export business, but he's small fry. I wouldn't expect to see him plastered over the internet," he explains before answering his call. "Shit." He rubs a spot

between his brows. “All of them?” His worried gaze meets mine. “Take care of it,” he says before hanging up.

Tension bleeds into the air as Leo and I wait for the bad news. Ciro blows the horn, cussing at some guy on a messenger bike who cuts out in front of him.

“The bodyguards are dead,” Ben supplies, and all the blood drains from my face. “Shot multiple times at the rear of the campus building. Apparently, news reports are popping up now about a fatal shooting at NYU. It doesn’t seem like they’ve been there long because the police and M.E. have only just shown up. Rena’s and Chelsea’s bags were abandoned near the bodies.”

I bury my head in my hands, willing the traffic to magically disappear so I can get to my girl. Leo’s hand lands on my shoulder. “Keep it together, man. We’re going to find her.”

I can’t fall apart now. I need to keep my wits about me if I’m to extract Serena from whatever danger she’s in. So, I force my fear and panic to subside, and I lift my head, nodding at Leo. “Can you ask Phillip to search any cameras in the area,” I say to the boss. “It would be helpful to know what we’re stepping into.”

“I’m already on it.” Ben raises his cell to his ear.

“We should send someone to Avara’s place of business,” Leo suggests. “The governor’s home and office too.”

“No.” I shake my head as my mind churns options. “That could be too risky. And premature if we find Rena now. We need to plan our moves carefully. All we know at this point is Chelsea was a plant and the deaths of Rena’s bodyguards and her disappearance have got to be connected to that. But whether Chelsea is fully in on this or it’s her husband or Lucas Avara pulling the strings is unknown.”

“It’s possible they are working together,” Ben says.

“Or Chelsea could be having an affair with Lucas and the governor knows nothing about this,” Leo says.

“We haven’t found any ties between them, and there are no pictures of Lucas with the governor online.” I watch as Ben speaks into his cell. “But my gut says the men know each other,” I tell Leo while the boss updates Phillip and gives him new instructions.

“It’s just around the corner now, boss,” Ciro supplies when Ben ends his call.

I peer out the window as East River comes into view. The road stretches up ahead, running alongside the boardwalk, and I instantly know something isn’t right. Ben drags a hand through his hair as he looks at me, sharing my fear.

“The signal is coming from here.” Ciro frowns as he pulls up alongside the curb. “It doesn’t make sense.” He scratches the back of his head as he kills the engine.

“Get out,” I tell Leo because he’s blocking me from exiting the SUV.

“Wait,” Ben cautions, grabbing my arm. “Let the men canvas the area first. It could be a trap.”

As much as I hate to agree, I know he’s right. I give him a terse nod, and he calls the *soldati* in the SUV behind us, telling them to get out and check the area. The men walk by our vehicle, most of them watching the people passing by, their sharp eyes scanning the area for threats. Two of the men stop up ahead and crouch down before straightening.

“Out.” I almost shove Leo out of the car in my haste to get to them. Ben’s cell is ringing as I clamber outside and run toward our men. I hear Leo and the boss running behind me, but all other background noise is drowned out by the alarm bells ringing in my ear.

I slam to a halt beside the two men and drop to my knees in front of the device lying flat on the earthy flowerbed. As if on autopilot, I pull a plastic glove from my pocket and carefully pluck the blood-coated locator chip from the muck, holding it in the palm of my hand. My legs threaten to go out from under me as I stand, turning around to face my colleagues and friends. “They cut it out of her arm.” I’m

struggling to keep the emotion from my voice and my face as I stare at Leo and Ben. From the grim expressions on their faces, I see they share my concern. “We have no way of finding her now, and how the fuck did they know she had this implanted?” Anger and helplessness battle inside me. “What the fuck is going on?”

SERENA

My arm throbs as I slowly regain consciousness, and for a second, I'm transported back to the aftermath of the shootout in the hotel when I got shot and Alfredo was killed. But that was over a year ago, and it's not my current reality.

A door opens and someone says, "She's awake, boss."

My eyes blink open as I fight a wave of nausea and fear. My stomach churns uneasily, and I think I might puke.

"There is a bathroom at the back of the plane if you need to use it," Lucas says, dropping into the seat in front of me.

He's shirtless, and the top button of his pants is undone. Fresh scratch marks are evident on his chest, and my eyes narrow suspiciously. As my focus sharpens, I glance around the cabin of the private plane, scowling when I spot the creep who was following me. But other than him, the rest of the seats are empty. Outside, it's dark, but I can tell we're already in the air. "Where is Chelsea?"

Lucas smirks, and the calculating look in his eyes turns the blood in my veins to ice.

"If you've hurt her, I'll kill you," I hiss. "I don't care if you're her husband." I'm still confused over what has happened and the exact role my so-called friend played in it, but I remember how frightened she was, and I know she tried to thwart his plans and stop this from happening. It doesn't eradicate the hurt I feel knowing she's been lying to me all along, but at least she tried to do the right thing in the end. Even if it failed and she's now being punished for it too.

“Such fighting words for someone in such a precarious position,” he drawls, his gaze skimming over my body in a way that disgusts and terrifies me.

“I mean it.”

He shrugs, completely unconcerned. “Chelsea is fine. She put up a bit of a fight, so she’s currently sedated and asleep in the bedroom.”

“A bit of a fight,” the creep across the way says, chuckling. “It’s a miracle she didn’t wake this one with all her screaming.”

Lucas smirks. “I’d forgotten how much of a wild cat she was in the sack.”

I frown. How could her husband forget? What am I missing here?

“Liam will kick your ass when he finds out you kidnapped and then fucked his wife,” the creep says, and my confusion grows. “It wasn’t part of the deal.”

Lucas’s smirk widens. “I have Liam by the balls, and he knows it.” Lucas drills a look at the creep. “You work solely for me now, understood?”

“Loud and clear, boss.”

“Who is Liam?” I ask because I need answers.

“Liam Davenport is the governor of New York and Chelsea’s actual husband,” Lucas says.

My mouth hangs open. “What the actual fuck is going on?” How did Chelsea get mixed up in this? I’m pissed at her but scared for her too. I hope she’s okay. That sick fuck clearly raped her, and from the marks on his chest, it’s obvious she fought back. Pain tightens my chest, as I think of the state my friend must be in, but I can’t let it derail me. I’m not exactly safe myself, so I push those emotions aside to deal with later.

“Liam and I go way back,” Lucas explains, running a hand through his hair. “We’re friends, but I haven’t forgotten how he stole Chelsea from me. She was my girlfriend first until she met him and it was love at first sight.” He scoffs, crossing an

ankle over his knee. “The slut left me for him, and though we have all remained friends, and I really couldn’t give a shit about the whore, I still owed him payback.” A muscle clenches in his jaw. “He thinks he runs the show, but I’ve finally put him in his place. He works for me. Not the other way around. I needed Chelsea to get to you, and this was a way of driving the point home to my buddy too.”

Lucas is definitely unhinged, and I still have no clue what he wants with me. “Why am I here?” I ask, as he presses the overhead button.

“I can’t believe you haven’t figured it out. I thought you were smarter than this.”

A small, thin brunette materializes from somewhere behind me. “Mr. Avara, how can I be of service?” She plasters a clearly fake smile on her face.

The creep chuckles. “There’s a loaded question.”

Lucas grins at his friend, colleague, whatever he is. “Isn’t it just?” He pins the flight attendant with a suggestive look. “If I said I wanted your pussy or your ass or your mouth, what would you say?”

Her cheeks flare up, but she keeps the fake grin fixed on her face as she says, “You employ me to look after you, sir, so if that is what you need, you shall have it.”

The creep barks out another laugh while I send an alarmed look at the woman. She is shaking, and it’s obvious from her demeanor that the last thing she wants is to give this asshole any part of her body.

“Good answer.” Lucas drums his fingers on the table resting in the space between our leather seats. “Lucky for you, skinny brunettes with fake tits don’t do it for me.”

“I have zero complaints,” the creep says, motioning the woman forward with his fingers.

“Not yet.” Lucas snaps his fingers at the shell-shocked woman. “Bring me a scotch on the rocks and a sandwich and some water for my companion. Some pain pills too,” he adds, watching how I’m cradling my sore arm against my chest.

His words remind me of the pain, and I glance down, noting the dried blood staining the top of my blouse. Someone must have removed my sweater and my coat. I'm not cold, because the cabin is toasty warm, but I feel exposed in this flimsy blouse in front of these monsters. From the location of the blood, I can tell what's happened. Damn. "You removed the tracking chip in my arm."

"I did." He leans back in his seat, spreading his thighs wide.

"How did you even know about it?" I hadn't told Chelsea, and no one outside *mafioso* circles is aware they even exist. Ben is notoriously private, so I'm not sure anyone knows all of the Mazzone *famiglia* have one implanted, except for maybe the New York families.

"Your father told me." He casually throws it out there, to gauge my reaction most likely.

"What?" I blurt, stunned into almost silence. His lips tip up at the corners, and I hate he's attractive. Why are the monsters always handsome? Why doesn't their ugly ever show on the outside?

"Of course, Giuseppe never mentioned me. He couldn't, even if I am his greatest protégé."

"I don't understand."

"Perhaps my real name will help you to fit the pieces together," he says, and an icy-cold chill cascades down my spine. "I'm Stefano DeLuca. Your cousin from Sicily."

"No," I whisper, horrified. I'm racking my brains trying to remember what Ben told me about our family in Sicily. Ah, yes, I remember him now. "You can't be! Stefano died in a boating accident when he was eighteen, and you don't sound remotely Italian."

He chuckles, and the sound is eerie. "I spent years working with a vocal coach to alter my voice, and you think I died because that's what we wanted everyone to believe. Your father and I concocted the whole plan after bonding over several summers when he made the trip home." I don't

remember father visiting Sicily much, but we weren't always privy to his plans, and he was away a lot. "Your father was in need of an heir because your cheating whore of a mother had failed to birth him a son, and I was the most qualified candidate."

"You were the *only* candidate," I retort. "Until Rowan and Romeo were born."

A harsh laugh rips from his throat. "Your weak offspring was never going to be heir. Alfredo knew it too, and when you failed to get pregnant again, he went wild planting his seed in any pussy he could find." He flicks a piece of lint off the leg of his pants. "If you couldn't give him an heir who would be don, he was determined to father an heir who would be an underboss. Though I would never have let it happen," he adds as the stewardess returns with our drinks and my sandwich.

"How do you know all this?" I ask as the creep gets up and stalks toward the woman with obvious intent on his face.

As he passes, I thrust my leg out and take him down. The flight attendant shrieks and steps back as the man tumbles to the ground. Loud laughter rings out, and I eyeball Stefano with a healthy dose of suspicion.

The creep snarls as he climbs to his feet.

"Leave her alone," I bark.

He grips my chin, stretching my neck at an awkward angle. "You offering to take her place, bitch?"

Bile swims up my throat, and my heart pounds behind my chest wall.

He lets me go. "That's what I thought."

I gulp anxiously over the lump in my throat as he stalks toward the clearly terrified woman. Our eyes lock, and I see familiar panic etched on her face as the creep starts dragging her toward the back of the plane.

"This isn't right!" I protest, fixing my gaze on Stefano. "Please don't let him hurt her."

He purses his lips and glares at me. “Women are meant to shut up and spread their legs. Keep interfering, and I promise it won’t end well for you.” He eyeballs me with a warning look before taking a large sip of his whisky. Up ahead, the woman is hyperventilating and pleading as the creep opens one of the doors and shoves her inside. A few seconds later, she screams, and I squeeze my eyes shut, feeling nauseated all over again.

“You’re far too emotional,” he says, and I force my eyes open. “No wonder your husband was displeased.”

I flip him the bird on impulse, half expecting a slap, but he laughs, looking mildly amused. I think the psychotic DeLuca gene might flow through his veins.

“You’re not without endearing qualities. You entertain me, and he was an insufferable fool.”

“He was a pig, and I’m glad he’s dead.”

“At least, on that, we agree.” He pushes my plate toward me. “Eat. You’ll need to keep your stamina up.” The look he sends me chills me to the bone. “Eat and I’ll answer your questions.”

That’s about the only thing he could say to force me to eat. My father was a brute, and I hated him, but he was a smart strategist, and he always said knowledge is power, so keeping this degenerate talking is in my best interests. I pick up the chicken salad sandwich and take a bite.

“I have been intricately involved in the business since I was inducted at thirteen,” he explains, and I try to ignore the cries coming from the back of the plane or the guilt I feel for not doing more to try to stop it. “When your father helped me to fake my death, he got me a new American ID and a place at NYU. I got my degree, built a successful business in New York, and made some powerful contacts. All the time, I was working with your father, and he was grooming me to one day take over as don of The Outfit.” A melancholy look transpires on his face. “My father died when I was young. I don’t really remember him. Giuseppe was my father in all the ways that

mattered.” The melancholy flees his face, replaced with anger, and I wonder if I know why.

“Yet he was planning to appoint Ben as his heir, so his plans obviously changed.” I’m not sure if that’s quite true. He wanted to use Ben to take control of The Commission, and his plans were for Saskia and Ben to rule supreme. I can’t imagine there was a place for Stefano in that scenario.

Anger gives way to a thunderous expression. “That would never have happened, I assure you.”

“You were planning on betraying my father,” I surmise.

“No!” he yells. “I would never have betrayed Giuseppe. I loved him, even if he was making the wrong decisions. I would have shown him the error of his ways, and together we would have eliminated Bennett Mazzone and controlled all of the US *mafioso*.”

Yep, definitely crazy.

In an unexpected move, he darts forward and slaps me across the face. “How could you side with those who murdered him?”

“He deserved to die,” I calmly say, rubbing my stinging cheek. “The same way you do.”

“You will wish me dead by the time I’m through with you,” he agrees, draining the last of his drink.

“Whatever you have planned, I won’t do it.”

“Yes, you will. Unless you want me to kill your entire family.”

Acid swims in my gut at the lethal look on his face. “Ben won’t let you get near them.”

“Mazzone couldn’t stop me from single-handedly wiping out every don in the US.” His smugness knows no bounds, and I’m tempted to throw my plate at him. “By the time he realizes what I have done, it will be too late to stop me.”

Stefano loathes Ben with the heat of a thousand suns. It’s blatantly obvious. Ben was responsible for the demise of his

and Giuseppe's plans. Now, Ben holds the ultimate position of power, something Stefano has admitted he wants. Ben is well-connected and true mafia royalty. He has an heir in Rowan, and their family is expanding.

Stefano is threatened by Ben, and I'm scared for my family. I'm still struggling to see where I fit into all of this. I'm glad it's me he's come for and not my kids or my sister or my nephew, but how do I help his situation?

"Then why do you need me?"

"Insurance."

I hate that fucking word. It's such a Giuseppe DeLuca term. He used to always ensure he had a backup plan in place. Yet he still took a bullet, and he rots under the ground now. So, fat lot of good his insurance ever did him.

"I need to convince everyone in The Outfit that I'm the right man for the job. Some have misgivings. Others are worried about retaliation from The Commission and the grieving families. I understand." He picks up the uneaten half of my sandwich. "I'm a stranger to them. They have only recently discovered the man they knew as Joseph Lawson was in fact their don. They need reassurance."

"I won't give them that. A lot of them are wary of me."

"That may be the case, but they know you. You were Gifoli's wife and Giuseppe's daughter. You're *mafioso* through and through."

"I won't support you. I won't get out there and tell those men what you want me to say."

He finishes the sandwich in one large bite, his eyes blazing with superiority as he stares at me while eating. I pop the cap on my water and drink, purely to have something to focus on rather than the stranger staring at me with wicked intent.

"You really are quite stupid," he says when he finishes chewing. "The last thing I need is you opening that mouth of yours." His eyes darken. "Unless it's so I can fuck it."

Panic crashes into me, and familiar fear tracks through my veins. “You’re my cousin.”

He shrugs. “And?”

“You can’t touch me.” I hate how my voice wobbles.

He roars laughing, and I reach up, running my fingers over my new necklace, allowing it to comfort me. I made a promise to myself. No man is ever putting his hands on me again without permission. I’m prepared to die to see that through.

He leans forward on his elbows. “Firstly, no one knows we are cousins. Secondly, it is legal in both New York and Sicily to marry your first cousin.”

“Marry?” A nervous laugh bubbles up my throat. “You can’t be serious.”

He sits back, another smug smile cresting his mouth. “Oh, I’m deadly serious, Serena. The only way I can legitimize my claim to the throne, so to speak, is by taking you as my wife and having you birth me a son. So, as soon as we land in Chicago, I’m taking you to church and we’re to be married.”

ALESSO

“You can’t go in there!” the older woman shrieks, picking up the phone on her desk as Ben, Leo and I push past her and enter Lucas Avara’s office at the import-export business he owns. It’s past closing hours, and only a skeleton staff remains, which is how we were able to get back here with little trouble.

“Security will be here in a few minutes.” Ben stalks to the man’s desk. “Be quick.”

Leo heads for the locked cabinet on the far side of the room while I rummage through the open shelving, flinging files and books onto the ground in my urgency to find something, *anything*, that will give us a clue as to who Avara is and where he has taken Rena. Phillip found some footage from cameras at the back of NYU that confirmed Lucas is the one who has kidnapped her. I want to borrow Saverio’s axe and hack Lucas to pieces until nothing but fleshy tissue and shards of bone remain.

“You need to leave.” The woman stands in the doorway, looking like she’s shitting herself, but I give her kudos for having the balls to confront us.

“Lady.” Leo walks toward her. “Go back to your desk, and keep your nose out of this. Trust me, it’s safer for you that way.” He slants her a sharp look, and she scurries back to her desk, shaking and scared. She doesn’t know we would never hurt an innocent woman, but the threat is enough. Leo slams the door shut as the woman reaches for her phone again.

There's a loud thud as Ben snaps the lock on the desk drawer and yanks it open, rifling through the contents, while Leo breaks the padlock on the cabinet and begins searching through Lucas's files.

"There's nothing here." Ben sighs in frustration as he sweeps the contents from the top of the desk onto the floor.

"Same here." I grab fistfuls of my hair as I abandon the bookshelves. Whoever Avara is, it's clear he isn't stupid enough to leave anything incriminating at his place of work. My eyes drift to a framed certificate on the wall, and my feet carry me in that direction to take a closer look. "This could be something." I remove my cell and photograph the cert, immediately sending it to Phillip. His team is currently scouring the traffic cam footage to see if they can find where Lucas's SUV went, and he's digging more into his background and Davenport's to see if he can find a connection.

"He graduated from NYU," Ben says, coming up behind me.

"Which is where Davenport went to college. This could be the connection we are looking for."

"I thought Avara went to Harvard." Leo appears on my other side. "That's what it said in Phillip's report."

"It's clear everything in that report is fake," Ben acknowledges. "Put there specifically for us to find."

"Holy shit," Leo exclaims, pushing past me to walk to the framed photos on the wall just in front of the desk. "Hell." He jabs his finger at a photo. "You've got to see this."

Ben and I walk over, and blood leaches from my face as I stare at the photo of a young Lucas Avara with Giuseppe DeLuca, Thomas Barretta, and Alfredo Gifoli.

"Fuck!" Ben yells, slamming his fist into the wall. "He's the Sicilian DeLuca. It's got to be him." It's what we all suspected but didn't articulate.

My chest heaves as pain stretches across it. "He's got Rena."

“Why take her? If he still has a hard-on for Ben, I don’t get how this works to his advantage.” Leo rubs at his temples as I take a pic and send that one to Phillip too. “What’s his angle?”

“We should leave,” Ben says as a commotion sounds outside.

The door swings open, and a portly security guard blocks the entrance, pointing a standard-issue handgun at us. He surveys the files and papers littering the floor and scowls. “Mara,” he calls out over his shoulder. “Call the police.”

Ben steps forward. “Tell them Bennett Mazzone sends his regards.”

The guard’s face pales, and his arm shakes. There aren’t many men working security in New York who haven’t heard of Ben.

“Mine is bigger than yours.” Leo removes his Glock from the back waistband of his pants and aims it at the man. “I don’t want to hurt you, man, but I will if you don’t get the fuck out of our way.”

“Don’t be a martyr,” I add. “When the boss asks, you tell him Don Mazzone is looking for him and it’d be in his best interests to call.” I slap Ben’s business card against the man’s chest as he reluctantly lowers his weapon and steps aside.

“Where to, boss?” Ciro asks when we climb into the back of the SUV.

“Back to CH, Ciro, and contact Pedro. We need the chopper.”

“He must have taken her to Chicago,” I say. “We need to get a team on the ground ASAP.”

“We need to think this through,” Ben replies, his boss mask firmly intact. “He could have taken her as a trap, knowing we would follow. We can’t fall into another ambush. We are no use to Serena if we’re dead.”

“The boss is right.” Leo squeezes my shoulder. “I know you’re desperate to get her back, but we need a plan.”

“We need to interrogate the governor,” I say. “We know he’s somehow involved and DeLuca has his wife.”

“Phillip is running the NYU connection to see if he can find a link, but I agree with you,” Ben says. “He’s connected to this, and it’s got to be our next move.”

“Unless Chelsea hasn’t really been taken.” Leo plays devil’s advocate. “That could have been for show.”

“She was terrified, Leo.” The camera footage clearly showed that. “Even the best actress can’t fake that,” I say.

“For all we know, the governor is in on all of this,” Leo says. “If we show up at his place, he could tip DeLuca off and we’ll lose the element of surprise.”

“We already have.” I massage my pounding forehead. “His staff will have told him we trashed his office. He knows we know who he is, and he knows we will have made the connection with the governor by now.”

“Alessandro is right.” Ben agrees as Ciro weaves through the city traffic. “We have to assume he is one step ahead of us, and we are following a path he has set for us. Perhaps the governor will be a dead end, but he might not be. I have heard he’s a family man and he’s devoted to his wife. It’s quite possible he’s in over his head.”

“He could need us,” I say as the suggestion grows roots in my mind. “If Lucas has taken Chelsea without his knowledge or approval, he’s got to be frantic. He’ll tell us what we need to know if we promise to get her out too.”

ALESSO

“No one can know you were here,” Liam Davenport says the second we are escorted into his personal study at the governor’s mansion ninety minutes later.

“We are aware of the agreement.” Ben strides toward the imposing man. “The commissioner outlined it clearly.” Ben’s best buddies with the police commissioner, and he called him to set up a meeting. Ben extends his arm, and the two men shake hands. “I’m sorry to be meeting under such circumstances.”

“I believe we met once before,” the governor says, gesturing toward the two leather couches positioned on either side of a marble fireplace. A roaring fire crackles in the hearth, but nothing can warm the permanent chill in my bones. Not until I have Rena safely back in my arms. Sierra and Nat are beside themselves with worry, but Ben has assured them we are doing everything we can to find her and bring her home safely.

“At the charity fundraiser for ALS three years ago,” Ben says, nodding. “I remember.”

“What can you tell us about Lucas Avara?” I ask, impatient to be done with the small talk. Every second we lose means someone could be hurting Serena, and it’s intolerable. I want to grab a bunch of men, put them on a plane, and lay siege to Chicago, killing every single bastard who gets in our way until I find my girl. Nothing less will be acceptable.

“Sit, please.” The governor takes a seat, and Ben drops down beside him.

I want to pace the floor, but I know these things have to happen a certain way, so I claim the seat beside Leo on the opposite couch. The governor doesn’t offer us a drink, and I sense he’s as keen for us to leave as we are.

“Lucas Avara has been my best friend since our college days,” he begins. “But he’s a sly motherfucker, and he would trample over everything and everyone to get ahead. Me included.”

“Tell us everything,” Ben says. “Leave nothing out.”

The governor loosens his tie and drops his stoic façade. Transparent concern is etched upon his face, which does nothing to appease my worry. “I need you to promise me that you’ll do everything to bring my wife home safely.” His voice cracks. “She’s my everything, and it’s my fault she’s in this mess. If anything happens to Chelsea, I will never forgive myself.”

“We give you our word,” Ben says. “My sister-in-law speaks fondly of Chelsea, and though I’m sure her betrayal stings, I know Serena would not want any harm to come to her friend. We will get both of them out of there, but we need to understand what kind of situation we’re walking into. That’s where you come in.”

He nods and continues speaking. “Lucas and I met at NYU, and we became close friends. It’s how I met Chelsea, actually. She was working in the administration building, and she was casually dating Lucas at the time. The second we met, we fell for one another. Lucas didn’t seem bothered when she broke things off with him to go out with me.” A muscle clenches in his jaw as he shakes his head. “I was naïve to think he wouldn’t try to exact payback. All these years, he has acted like it didn’t matter, but he took her now to prove a point. God.” He buries his head in his hands. “I don’t know what he plans to do to her, but it can’t be anything good.”

“Governor.” Ben clears his throat. “I know you are worried. We are too, but you need to focus on the pertinent

facts. Are you aware he came to the US under a pseudonym?"

"I only discovered that recently. I knew he was an immigrant from Sicily. He told me his family had all died in a boating accident and he was the only survivor. I knew he had an uncle in Chicago he met on a regular basis, but I had no idea he was part of the mafia until recently."

"Why did you agree to help him kidnap Serena?" I ask, running low on patience reserves.

"He's been blackmailing me." His eyes narrow, and his jaw tenses. "He helped me when I ran for office, and I owed him, so I called in a few favors to get some new shipping routes opened up for him. I thought it was to speed up the imports of his olive oil products from Europe, but the asshole used it to ship men and guns from Sicily. A guy I know at the port tipped me off. When I went to Lucas, I finally saw his true colors. He told me he'd leak the information to the media and ruin my career if I tried to turn my back on him. He's been using that as leverage this past year to get me to do his bidding."

I doubt a man as shrewd as the governor only recently discovered what a snake his best friend is. I'm betting that seed has been growing for years, and Lucas has forced his friend to do shit he would rather not have done, or admit to now.

"You really had no idea he was *mafioso* until then?" Leo asks, disbelief threaded through his tone.

"I had my suspicions, but by then, it was too late."

"What specifically did he ask Chelsea to do?" Ben inquires.

"He made her enroll in the same program as Serena and befriend her. He doctored both their backgrounds to make it seem like they were married. The bastard even took my babies from the nanny a couple of times to show up on campus. It was a threat. A warning to my wife and me not to mess with him."

"And today? How was that supposed to go down?"

“Chelsea was supposed to entice Serena to a rendezvous point where Lucas was waiting to take her. He must’ve known she wouldn’t go through with it, and he was lying in wait for them on campus.” He scrubs his hands down his face. “She didn’t want to do it. We have been arguing for weeks over this. She wanted me to go to the police. When I wouldn’t do that, she wanted me to talk to you.” Liam pins Ben with a pleading look. “I didn’t want to do any of this, but he threatened my family. Said he would kill us all, and he’d already proven how easy it was for him to infiltrate my house and take my kids. The staff knows him as my best friend, and he’s a fucking psychopath. Look at what he did in Chicago. I couldn’t risk it.”

“Chelsea did,” I say as it becomes clearer. I’m not happy she’s been lying to Rena and she waited too long to make a protective move, but she must care about Serena to risk her family and her own safety to try to do the right thing. It’s just a pity she waited until the eleventh hour to do it. If she had been honest with Serena, we could have helped protect the governor and prevent this.

“She’s always had a reckless streak,” he says. “And she cares for Serena.” He knots his hands, looking ashamed as he stares at me. “I know you and her are together, and I can only imagine what you must think of me, but I never wanted her to be hurt. I was only trying to protect my family.”

“At the expense of the woman I love,” I grit out. “A woman who has already suffered horribly at the hands of sadistic men. All you had to do was come to us, and we would’ve protected your family and ended DeLuca. You held vital information we needed these past couple months. It all could’ve been different.”

“You think I don’t know that? You think I don’t know what that madman is capable of?” He throws his hands in the air. “He won’t harm Serena. He needs her, but he doesn’t need my wife, and he wants to send me a message, so don’t preach to me about how things could’ve been different. I have been beating myself up for hours since I heard the news.”

“What does he want with Rena?” I ask.

“What is his plan?” Ben adds.

“He has befriended the Bratva and helped them to reorganize and structure. He has been building a network of Russian support in many states, and the plan is to launch a coordinated attack on key Italian American territories to bring you to your knees and take power for himself.”

“What has he promised the Russians?” Ben asks.

“Land and a partnership, but I fully believe he will betray them once he gets them to do his dirty work.”

“When is he planning this attack?” Leo asks.

“In the new year.”

“Where does Rena fit into this?”

“He hasn’t managed to secure the full loyalty of The Outfit. Many are suspicious of him and unhappy at being forced to work with the Bratva. He killed some dissenters at the start, expecting it would send a message and the others would fall into line, but he suspects there are more opponents. Serena is a way to legitimize him. She’s a DeLuca. She’s known to the men, and he believes she will bring stability to the organization so he can execute his plan for total domination.”

“He’s fucking delusional,” I say. “Rena will never buy into that.”

“He doesn’t care. He’s taking her to Chicago and making her marry him. Then he plans to knock her up and produce an heir so no one can contest his legitimacy anymore.”

“I need to meet that guy tonight,” Ben shouts into his cell as we race across the back lawn of the governor’s mansion toward our helicopter. “It can’t wait until tomorrow.” He has the Chicago PI on loudspeaker so we can all hear.

“That’s going to be a problem,” Donny says, and there’s no disguising the trembling in his voice. “The guy’s just been

dumped on my doorstep, stone-cold dead. He's been gutted, and it's a clear warning. I'm getting out of here, and I'm done with you. Don't call me again." He hangs up.

"Jesus Christ." The strain is showing on Ben's face. "Someone give us a fucking break here."

We climb into the helicopter, strap in, and buckle our headphones on so we can continue planning.

"This is a setback," Leo says, "but we know he has taken the girls to Chicago, so I say we head there with a large crew, like we planned, and we seek out Dominic or Franco. They were on our side previously, and I bet we can win them around again."

Dominic and Franco were two of the guys Accardi and Barretta were training for potential leadership roles before everything turned to shit for us in Chicago.

"We don't know that for sure," Ben says. "It's too risky."

"I agree," I say as the solution becomes crystal clear. "We don't know what DeLuca has promised them. Their loyalty to Gino was virtually nonexistent, and while they may have been loyal to Barretta, he's dead now. They will choose the winning side, and with the way DeLuca wiped the board with us, that most likely isn't us."

"We need another in," Ben says, looking contemplative.

"We have one," I reply, eyeballing the boss.

He understands immediately. "Another in besides Salerno."

"We don't have the luxury of time, Ben. He has the woman I love. The woman I plan to spend the rest of my life with. I'm fucked if I'm going to sit here twiddling my thumbs while he's planning to force her into marrying him. We need to get there now."

"Think this through, Alesso. If we do this, you will lose Serena because I honestly don't think she would move to Las Vegas."

He's actually wrong, but it won't happen anyway because I won't let it. "I wouldn't want her to." I could never take her from her family, and there is no way I want her around the scene in Vegas. That shit would be triggering for her. "Trust me, I'm well aware of what this means. I love her enough to give her up if it means I get to save her."

An agonized expression crosses Ben's face, and heavy silence descends for a few beats. He shakes his head. "I can't allow it. I can't let you do this. We'll find another way."

"With all due respect, boss, this isn't your decision to make. It's mine and mine alone. Remember the things you had to do when it was Sierra who had been taken." I hate reminding him of that awful time, but he made difficult sacrifices in the best interests of protecting those he loved. This is no different. "I don't like this, but unless you can give me an option right now, we have to do this. We need Salerno's Russian spies. They are on the ground now. They can get us a location on Serena and find out what DeLuca has planned. It's our best chance at getting her back in a way that will limit the casualties."

Ben looks torn, and I get it. Sierra is heavily pregnant and seriously stressed over her sister. Ending this quickly is what is best for everyone involved. But losing me to Saverio is a bitter pill for both of us to swallow.

Yet I don't see I have any other choice. "This is the only way to end this quickly," I quietly say. "I know you don't like it. I don't either, but it's our only play." I clear my throat and straighten my shoulders. "Make the call, Ben. Phone Saverio, and make the deal."

SERENA

I wake with a throbbing pain in my right wrist, soreness in my other arm, and a stiffness in my spine. Icy-cold air wafts over my face as I stare up at the wooden ceiling, shivering under the thin sheet covering me. I try to move my right arm, and the bite of cold steel slices against my flesh. I look back, confirming I'm handcuffed to the rusted bed frame. My back aches and my arm hurts as I awkwardly sit up, planting my feet on the debris-strewn floor. I'm wearing the clothes I had on yesterday, but my sweater and coat are still absent. Goose bumps sprout on my arms, and I pull the wrinkled sheet around my shoulders as best I can.

I scan my prison with mounting horror. Slivers of soft light spill through the only window in this cramped dank space. It's a small grime-covered rectangular window pressed right up to the ceiling. Bars cover the glass from the inside, sending a fresh rake of shivers ghosting over my skin. Dirty, exposed stone walls confirm the building is old. The mahogany door is thick and worn. Apart from the single cot I'm sitting on, there is a rickety old wooden chair in the corner and a small, scratched end table.

My mouth is dry, and I'd kill for some water. Or maybe not, I think, as I recall my last conscious memories. I was on a private plane with my psycho cousin, and he forced me to eat and drink. The water must have been drugged. Unless he jabbed me again and I don't remember it. Fear for Chelsea surges to the forefront of my mind along with bubbling hysteria as I remember Stefano's plans for me.

A lock turns, and the door creaks open. My heart thumps frantically against my rib cage, and all the tiny hairs lift on the back of my neck. Stefano enters the room, dressed in a sharp black suit with a pristine white dress shirt and shiny black shoes. His hair is slicked back, and his face is newly shaven.

“You look like shit.” His brows knit together.

“Being kidnapped by force, repeatedly drugged, and chained to a cold, hard bed tends to do that to a person.” A pain spears me through my bladder, and I can’t remember the last time I went to the bathroom. “I need to pee.”

He walks toward me, and I smother my instinctive urge to flinch. I can’t believe I’m at the mercy of a sadistic bastard again, but I’m not the same woman. I’m stronger than I used to be, and I’m determined to get myself out of this predicament or die trying. I refuse to become some new monster’s plaything, and I won’t let him use me to threaten my family either.

“Don’t try anything,” he warns, unlocking the cuff on my wrist. “I have men inside and outside this church. If you try to escape, they will hurt you.”

“Where’s Chelsea?” I ask, wincing when he grabs my arm and pulls me up from the bed.

“Chelsea is of no concern to you. That whore will get what’s coming to her.”

I still can’t believe she lied to me and pretended this asshole was her husband. I’m guessing Stefano blackmailed them into going along with his sick plan. “I meant what I said yesterday. I’ll kill you if you hurt my friend.”

He chuckles as he drags me out the door into a dark corridor. He shoves me up the stone stairs, sliding his arm around my waist from behind when I almost slam face-first into the wall. “Your idle threats amuse me.” He pushes through the door at the top, and we emerge into a brighter, cleaner hallway with wooden paneling on both sides and religious pictures on the wall.

“Don’t touch me.” I pry his arm off my waist.

He yanks me back, pulling me flush against his body, and his fingers move to grip my chin as his other hand holds me firmly against his chest. “We’re about to be married. As your husband, I will own your body.” The hand on my stomach inches lower, and I scream on the inside. He cups my pussy through my jeans, and I almost throw up. “This is mine to do with as I please. I will fuck you continuously until my child grows in your womb.”

That’s what you think, asshole. I will kill myself before any man rapes me again. I ram my sore arm back into his stomach, and he stumbles a little.

“Don’t be a cunt,” he hisses, grabbing my arm hard and pulling me forward. “This will be much easier if you cooperate.”

“Never.” I attempt to wrestle my arm from his hand, but he digs his nails into my sensitive flesh, and I cry out.

He pushes me inside a small bathroom with a toilet, a sink, and a corner shower, and he locks the door behind us.

I fold my arms and glare at him. “I’m not peeing with you watching.”

“I don’t give a fuck what you think. Pee or don’t pee.” He switches the shower on. “Get in and get clean.”

I bark out a laugh. “I don’t think so.”

“You’re getting in that shower, Serena. No bride of mine is going to look like trash on her wedding day. Either you get in or I’ll make you. The choice is yours.”

I’m shaking inside at the thought of this man seeing me naked but even more so at the thought of him touching me. There is nothing I can do to stop this. Not yet, at least, so I’ll have to go along with it, for now. Perhaps there is a way to work this to my advantage.

“I will cooperate,” I say, jutting my chin up and staring at him. “I won’t fight you. I’ll marry you without protest if you promise you won’t hurt my family and you’ll leave my kids alone.”

Winding his hands in my hair, he tilts my face up. “It’s cute you think you hold any bargaining power.”

“It’s cute you think I’ll cooperate without that promise.” Bringing my leg up, I knee him in the balls.

He yells, falling back and cupping his crotch, his breathing heavy and pained. “You fucking bitch.”

“You haven’t seen anything yet. You’re not the only one who can make this difficult. Promise to leave my family out of this, and I’ll make this easy on both of us. Refuse and I’ll be the biggest bitch you have ever seen.” I am under no illusions this man would ever make such a promise and stick to it, but I want him to make it so I have an excuse to cooperate. He will subconsciously lower his guard, and that’s when I’ll strike.

“Fine,” he snaps, straightening up. Grabbing my hand, he hauls me to him, and a nasty shudder works its way through me as my body presses against his. “I won’t touch your family, but if you pull a stunt like that again, I will hurt you ten times over.”

“Agreed,” I say, working hard to keep my tone level. “Now let me pee and shower in private.”

He flashes me a wolfish grin. “That wasn’t part of the deal. I promise I won’t touch you.” He holds up his hands, and his grin expands. “Not until after we are married.”

Not ever, I silently promise.

He arches a brow. “Do you want me to go back on my word?”

Drawing a brave breath, I turn my back on him as I unbutton my jeans. I sit on the toilet before I lower my panties and stare straight ahead as I relieve myself, ignoring the heated eyes drilling into me.

Steam fills the small bathroom as I undress, but I still feel his nefarious gaze watching as I peel every item of clothing from my body. I hesitate before removing my necklace, afraid of drawing his attention to it or losing it, but I don’t know if it’s waterproof, and that could be my only ticket out of here, so I take it off and leave it on top of my clothes.

“Fuck, those are ugly.” He stretches out his arm, and his fingers graze the raised skin on my back.

Good, let him find them repulsive. Not appealing to him works in my favor. He looks at me for a reaction, but I give him nothing. His words don’t penetrate as he intended. There was a time they would have. But not now. I’m a survivor. My scars demonstrate my inner strength. His words can’t hurt me, I remind myself as I step into the shower cubicle, out of reach of his disgusting touch.

“I’ll just fuck you when you’re flat on your back so I never have to see them,” he says, but I tune him out as I wash myself. I’m tempted to go to that invisible place inside me—one I haven’t visited in a long time. I got adept at losing myself in an inner void any time Alfredo was hurting me or subjecting me to his vile cock. But I need to stay in the moment now because I can never forget how dangerous this man is to me. So, instead of disappearing inside myself, this time I let thoughts of Alesso soothe me while I stay conscious of my surroundings and my predicament. I conjure up my man’s handsome face in my mind’s eye and comfort myself in some of our happy memories.

I wash my body and my hair in record time and step out, ignoring the heated gaze of my cousin as he peruses my dripping-wet, naked body, slowly offering me a towel.

After, he takes me to a larger, cleaner, more modern bedroom where he watches me blow-dry my hair, apply makeup, and then dress in the lacy bridal underwear and wedding gown he has procured for me. I move to fasten my necklace around my neck, but he stops me, shaking his head. “Not that. You are leaving your old life behind today. From now on, you are mine.”

He either knows about Alesso or suspects I have a man in my life and he gave this to me. “My kids bought this for me for my birthday,” I lie. “Please let me wear it. It will help to remind me why I agreed to cooperate.”

His expression dithers for a moment, and then he nods. Relief washes over me as I clasp the necklace around my neck,

securing the long gold bar that contains the hidden vial underneath the top of the dress.

“Come.” He stands, offering me his hand. I fight nausea as I accept it and let him lead me out of the room, along the hallway, and into another room.

This room is plainly decorated, and judging by the robes hanging in the open closet, the cross on the wall, and the myriad of candles and bibles resting atop a table covered in a pressed white cloth, I’m guessing this is the sacristy. “Stay here while I speak to the priest.” He points over my head to the window at the back. “Don’t try to escape. I have men outside.”

“I gave you my word,” I lie, clasping my hands in front of me.

“Good.” Leaning forward, he plants his lips against mine. “You promised,” he says a few seconds later when I refuse to move my mouth or part my lips to let his disgusting tongue in.

Forgive me. I silently speak to my love as I force my lips to separate and make myself kiss him back. It’s like kissing a slug, and I put minimal effort into it while relishing the fact I have this kind of power over him. I sense he wants my compliance and for me to like it, and I can work with that. Suck him in and make him think he’s in control when I’m really the one pulling his strings.

Thankfully, he doesn’t prolong the kiss, pulling back a short while later. “You know, this doesn’t have to be a bad thing.” He tucks a piece of my hair behind my ear, and I almost retch all over his designer suit. “We could be happy if you don’t fight me.”

On what planet does this asshole reside? There is no scenario where I would ever be happy with him or content to sit on the sidelines while he plans to take my brother-in-law down.

“Alfredo was old, and though he fucked many women, I don’t imagine he was a good lover.” His fingers brush along

my cheek. "I am skilled in the bedroom, and if you please me, I will ensure you receive pleasure."

Oh, jeez, thanks so much. I force a smile. "I know how to be a good mafia wife." I almost gag on the words, but his ego needs stroking, and I need him to believe I will go along with this farce. "I will please you."

He kisses me again. Harder and deeper this time, and I think my words appeased him. "Good girl." He pats my ass. "Don't let me down." He points behind me again before slipping out of the room and locking the door behind him.

SERENA

I instantly slump against the wall, clinging to it and praying for strength to do what I need to. Through the white net curtains, I spy a couple of men prowling the grounds at the back of the church. Rows upon rows of gravestones line the rear space, and beyond that, I only see trees. Wherever we are, it looks remote. Pushing off the wall, I force myself to focus. I'm sure he won't be gone long, and I need a plan because I'd rather kill him than me. My eyes scan the room, looking for anything I can use as a weapon and something small enough to conceal on my person. But there is nothing.

My fingers tap idly on the table as I think. My eyes latch on to the silver chalice as an idea flares to life in my mind. I never thought the years of forced Christianity would ever come in handy, but it's helpful I know what happens during a Catholic mass. Unclipping the gold bar on the end of my necklace, I remove the vial hidden inside.

Sierra was the one who had unwittingly given me the idea. She told me how Brando had rescued her from the dungeon she was kept in when she had been kidnapped. He had poisoned all of Daddy's men. I suggested we get necklaces made with a vial to hide poison in so if any of us were taken again we had a potential way of rescuing ourselves. I didn't tell Nat or my sister I also had ulterior motives because they never would have agreed to help if they suspected I also did it to have a way out that didn't involve rescue.

I won't be any man's prisoner again.

If it comes down to it, I would rather kill myself than be subjected to that kind of torture again.

Maybe it's cowardly or selfish, but I choose to believe it's me exercising control over my life. No one will ever make decisions about my life again except me.

We chose to keep it a secret from our men because we weren't entirely sure they would agree with us carrying such potent poison around our necks even if it is completely secure and safe. They tend to be overprotective at the best of times, and this is something we wanted to do for ourselves. A way for us to have peace of mind and some security should we find ourselves in dangerous situations. None of us are naïve, and we knew it was a distinct possibility.

I dump two-thirds of the contents into the red wine, swirling the liquid in the chalice, praying this is the chalice the priest will use at the ceremony. The guy we got the poison from—a man Natalia found through her contacts—said this type of poison is the gold-standard poison and we had enough in one vial to kill three grown men, but this is the first time I'm testing it.

I want to leave enough for myself in case things go belly up. I still have to find a way out of the church before Stefano's men realize what I've done and shoot me.

So, there is a lot at stake.

According to our source, the effects should be felt within a couple of minutes. It will attack the nervous system, and the person will die in great pain.

I don't even feel a twinge of guilt.

Footsteps approach in the hallway, and I move out from behind the table, plonking my butt on the small stool in the room as I wait for my groom to show himself.

Stefano looks smug as he leads me down the hallway and through a side door into the church. We wait while the priest gets ready in the sacristy, and once he has taken up position at the altar, it's showtime. Stefano forces me to walk up the aisle on the arm of one of his men, and I can't figure this man out.

He's blackmailing me into marriage but is still concerned with following tradition.

He's nuts.

The priest has stark-gray hair, and he's hunched over like his shoulders are almost nonexistent. He's old as dirt and clearly corrupted, so if he ends up drinking the wine and dying too, I won't feel bad about it.

Stefano holds my hand as the priest conducts the ceremony. I wonder if he can feel how clammy my skin is against his. A line of sweat trickles down my spine and I try to hold my nerves at bay as I scan the small space, taking note of the main entrance and the man standing guard in front of it. A second man stands at the back, in the corner, but that is the only protection I see in the room. I think I can work with that.

The building is even older than the priest with the same exposed stone brickwork as the other rooms. Overhead, a wooden peaked roof looks recently built in the same dark wood as the pews. Religious text is imprinted on embroidered canvas wall hangings under triangular stained-glass windows. The windows are positioned unusually high for such a small church, and I wonder if that was the style when it was built.

The priest stands behind a simple altar, the cloth covering it a bit more ornate than the plain one in the vestry. Two large candles, mounted on gold-patterned stands, are alight on either side of the table. White lilies scent the air from large vases situated behind the altar, and I would like this quaint little church if I wasn't being forced into marrying a psycho in it.

We say our vows, face-to-face, and it's a miracle I'm not struck down dead. Stefano grins like he might actually be pleased about this. My hand shakes as I slide the platinum band onto his ring finger, and I'm sure I'll end up in hell for the vile things I'm thinking about my new husband. If there truly is a God, he will know what is in my heart and that this man could never be my husband. Not when my heart and my soul belong to my Alesso.

The priest offers us the bread of holy communion, and sweat plasters my dress to my back as the moment of

reckoning arrives. I silently fist pump the air when the priest produces the chalice from the sacristy—the one I poisoned. It takes every ounce of strength I have not to pass out from stress when he hands the chalice to Stefano. Stefano drinks deeply from the silver cup, and I hope he can't see the sweat beading on my brow. He smiles as he passes it to me. I give him my sweetest, fakest smile as I absently reach for the chalice, my fingers clumsy in the exchange, as I appear unable to tear my gaze from my new husband.

He's just egotistical enough to believe I'm that enraptured by him.

Not enough that he isn't mad when the chalice slips from my fingers, tumbling to the ground and splashing the contents over our clothes. Panic jumps up and slaps me in the face as I wonder if the poison can visibly damage clothes. I never thought to ask that question. I hold my breath for a few seconds, waiting for my clothes to burn or do something to give me away, but all that happens is the bottom part of my snow-white dress is now a rosy-red color.

Stefano clenches his jaw, and his fingers twitch at his side. If we weren't in a church, I'm sure he'd punish me for that.

"I'm so sorry," I say, finally finding my voice. "I'm so clumsy." My heart is in my mouth as I watch Stefano for any signs the poison worked. I hope he drank enough of it to at least disable him for a while.

"Never mind." The priest walks behind to a silver-and-gold-plated tabernacle. He removes another chalice from inside and a small carafe of wine, pouring some inside. When he returns, he offers me the cup, and I take a small sip before passing it to him. I'm aware I'm visibly shaking, but it only adds to the authenticity of the moment.

The priest rambles on, getting ready to bring the ceremony to a close. The more time passes, the less confident I feel—until it happens.

Stefano sways on his feet, clasping my arm and using me to steady him. Fear is palpable in his eyes as he stares at me. He opens his mouth to speak, and frothy bubbles leak from his

lips. Sweat covers his brow as he slumps against me, attempting to clutch his throat and trying to speak.

“Boss!” Footsteps pound behind me, and it’s now or never. Grabbing Stefano, I haul him around to my front and pull the gun out from under his jacket, where it was holstered at his hip. Using him to shield me, I lift the gun and fire at the man racing toward me. My aim is off, and I only graze the side of his arm. He slams to a halt, unsure what to do. He can’t shoot because he’s more likely to kill Stefano than me. Anxiety settles on my chest as the second guy starts inching up along the inside wall on my left, but I can’t lose my nerve now.

Steadying my hand, I fire again, and this time I hit the bull’s-eye. The guy in front of me drops to the floor with a nice round hole in his brow. I barely have time to breathe before the second man lunges at me from the side. The priest chooses that moment to try to flee, and the man knocks into him. The priest falls back, stumbling against one of the candleholders, and he takes a tumble alongside it. Swinging Stefano’s motionless body around, I slam into the man, pushing him back. His gun skitters away under the pews. Stefano is fucking heavy, and while it helps I’m tall, I don’t know how much longer I can continue to hold him against me and use him as a buffer.

I don’t feel even slightly sorry I stole the idea from Alfredo despite how often I had recurring nightmares from the time he used me as a body shield.

Fists pound on the entrance door as the commotion reaches outside. The guy on the floor scrambles to his feet, and I shoot him at point-blank range, rearing back as blood and other bodily matter sprays in my direction. I hold Stefano up, letting him take the brunt of it.

Out in the hallway, the priest cries out as a man appears from the rear entrance, holding a gun and heading in my direction. He shoots the priest and tosses him aside as I lift my gun and fire. The man drops to the floor, and I fire again, mentally calculating how many bullets might be left in this gun. Before the guy gets up, I throw Stefano aside, jumping over the body of his dead bodyguard, and slam the inner door

shut, bolting it just before he reaches me. Loud pops sound against the door, but these old doors are solid as fuck and too thick for the bullets to push through.

I take a second to regroup, trying to keep my panic at bay as I consider I'm now trapped inside the church with armed assholes at either entrance. Racing down the center aisle, I shove the dead man aside and lift his rifle off his torso, strapping it around my body. Then I check the chamber of Stefano's gun, counting one more bullet. It won't be enough if I'm going to have even a sliver of a chance of shooting my way out of here.

Thank God I've gotten tons of practice in recent weeks and I'm a decent shot.

Kneeling, I ignore the pain in my knees from the hard, cold tile floor and squint under the pews until I spot the other soldier's gun. Shoving the row to the side, I slide under and grab the weapon, feeling more confident now I have a few guns.

I walk around to where Stefano is lying on the floor at an awkward angle with his body halfway on top of his dead *soldato*. Silent tears leak from the corners of his eyes as froth continues to bubble from his mouth. I lean down and press my fingers to the pulse point in his neck. It's faint, but he is still alive. I should use him to try to get out of here, but he's too heavy for me to cart him up and over to the door and then haul him around outside until I've disposed of his men. I don't know how many are outside. He could end up being more of a hindrance than a help.

Without stopping to consider it further, I shoot him through the head, feeling zero remorse I've now taken three lives.

It's kill or be killed, and I won't apologize or feel guilty for putting myself first.

My nostrils twitch as a smoky smell crawls up my nose. At first, I think it's from the gun until a strange crackling sound combines with a blast of hot air, and I look up, my eyes widening in horror. One of the hanging wall signs is immersed in flames, and I watch in a dazed state of shock as the fire

spreads quickly across the wall to the other canvas hangings. Heat roars at me from nearby, and I jerk back a couple steps as the wooden pew beside me bursts into flames. That has a domino effect, and soon several pews are on fire.

That snaps me out of my frozen state, and I race toward the entrance door as glass rains down from overhead when one of the stained-glass windows shatters.

The pounding on the door has stopped, and I wonder if whomever was outside has spotted the fire and run off. Or if they are lined up and ready to shoot me the second I open the door. I have no choice now. I need to get outside even if it means certain death. I'd rather go quickly by bullet than die painfully engulfed in flames.

ALESSO

“It’s around the corner,” Dominic says, pulling the rifle slung over his shoulder around to his chest. “I’m pretty confident our intel is correct, and we should outnumber them three to one, but be on guard.” He eyeballs Ben, and the boss nods, gratitude shining in his eyes.

Dominic and Franco called as Ben was on the phone to Saverio, about to make a deal. Their timing was impeccable. Serena was the catalyst for them finding the balls to reach out to Don Mazzone for help. Both men admitted they spent plenty of time at her house on holidays and other special occasions, and they have always had a soft spot for her, hating what Gifoli put her through. When they discovered DeLuca had kidnapped her and what his plans were, it was the final push they needed to make a move.

There wasn’t much time to discuss how things will pan out, because rescuing Serena is top of everyone’s priority list. Dom and Franco were happy to accept Ben at his word when he promised them the top positions within Chicago in exchange for their help to rescue Serena and bring The Outfit back under The Commission’s jurisdiction.

It makes me think we should have taken a risk and reached out to the guys a few weeks ago.

“She’ll be okay,” Dominic says, noting the worry in my eyes. “DeLuca needs her alive. He won’t harm her.”

“He’ll suffer a gruesome death if he has,” I growl, flexing my knuckles and checking my weapons for the umpteenth

time. I'm itching to spill some Sicilian blood, and Ben is letting me have free rein at the asshole.

Dom calls up Franco, who is in the other armored van behind us with a bunch of Outfit *soldati* who are loyal to them and committed to restoring peace via The Commission. "Be ready," Dom says as we round the corner and the little church comes into view.

"No!" I yell, panic racing through my veins at the sight of the flames shooting through the roof of the church and out through the shattered remains of the high stained-glass windows. Outside, a line of four men has their guns trained on the front door as it visibly rattles, and bile churns in my gut. Shoving my head in between the front console, I shout at the driver. Nario is sitting beside the man, his fingers twitching with the need to inflict pain. "Get a move on it, man, for fuck's sake."

The dude puts the pedal to the metal, and the van screeches as we speed up the road, drawing the attention of DeLuca's loyal men. We're jostled from side to side as the van jerks to a halt at the curb. Dominic opens the door, and we climb out, instantly returning fire as DeLuca's men take aim at us. Brakes screech as our backup pulls up behind us, and more men spill out onto the pavement.

It's over fast because we have the numbers and superior firepower.

"Go!" Ben roars at me as he runs over to Franco with Ciro shadowing him.

I jump over prone bodies as I sprint toward the front doors of the burning church. Thank fuck it's made of stone or I'm guessing the whole place would be aflame right now. Slamming my hands into the wooden front doors, I wince as heat sears my flesh. "Serena!" I holler, yanking on the handles, but the doors won't budge.

"Alesso!" Her faint voice reaches my eardrums. "I can't get the bolt off. The door won't open." The door rattles from the inside as she tries to unlock it.

“I’ll get you out. Hold on!” I go to town on the door, ignoring the pain in my hands as I pound and shake the doors. Using my shoulders, I ram into it repeatedly, and though it trembles, it doesn’t open. Fuck! I’m trying to keep a cool head, but it’s hard when the woman I love is trapped inside. Smoke inhalation can kill, and I don’t know how long she’s been trapped in the burning structure or how bad it is inside. There’s got to be another entrance, at the side or the back, and I’m just about to run off and investigate when Leo materializes behind me.

“Stand back.” He fists a hand in my shirt and tugs me away from the door. “Move away from the door, Rena,” he yells. “Do it now.” We step back as Ben and Dominic appear with a couple of other guys holding a heavy beam.

“Dom found it around the side,” Leo explains as the guys charge toward the door, slamming the beam into it. The doors rattle and buckle a little, but they still remain intact. “The church recently received a new roof, courtesy of that DeLuca prick, and they hadn’t thrown out all the old beams and wood panels.”

The men charge the door again and again, breaking the wood a little more with each thrust until the inner bolt snaps and the doors swing inward. A blast of heat and smoke hits me, stinging my eyes and making me cough. Soldiers swarm around us, keeping their guns raised and aimed at the entrance because none of us know who else might be in there with Rena.

But she’s all I see, staggering through the smoky haze as she exits the building. I push men aside in my haste to get to her, scooping her up and cradling her against my chest as I turn around and run toward the van.

“Alesso.” She coughs, and my panic elevates to a new level.

“Angel, you’re safe now. I’ve got you.”

Her lips graze my neck, and I hold her closer, praying like I have never prayed before, begging God to let her be okay.

“Call a medic,” I shout as I approach the sidewalk.

“Our doc is already on his way,” Franco says, approaching with a blanket and a bottle of water. “Hello, Serena.” He deliberately softens his voice. “I’m glad you’re okay.”

I help Rena up into the van, setting her on a seat with the blanket draped over her shoulders while I brush matted strands of hair out of her soot-streaked face. Ripping a strip off the bottom of my shirt, I wet it with some water and use it to clean her face. “Sweetheart. Talk to me. How do you feel?”

“Gross,” she croaks, and I cringe at the hoarse sound of her voice. “But I’m okay. You got here in the nick of time.”

“Drink this.” I hand her the water, and she brings it to her dry lips, taking measured sips.

“Serena.” Ben’s voice exudes relief as he comes up alongside me. “It’s good to see you. We were so worried. Are you all right?”

She gulps back a mouthful of water before removing the bottle from her lips. “I’m fine,” she says before dissolving in a coughing fit.

“Where’s the doc?” I snarl in a gritted voice, vastly running out of patience.

“ETA in three minutes,” Franco confirms.

“Where is DeLuca?” Ben asks, examining Serena’s face to ensure she’s okay. “We can’t get into the church because all the pews are on fire and the smoke is too thick. We need to find him and end the bastard.”

Rena’s lips tip up at the corner. “I beat you to it.” A full smile lets loose on her mouth as she lifts up the gold necklace from around her neck. “This contains poison, and I put some in the communal wine, knowing he’d drink it before me. It took away his motor functions, but he was still breathing, so I put a bullet in his skull. Trust me, he’s ended.”

Ben grins and leans in to gently hug her. “My sister-in-law is a bona fide badass.” He straightens up, and I can almost see the stress leave his shoulders. “Good job, Rena.”

I wrap my arms around my woman in a tender hug. “I fucking love you.” Softly, I cup her gorgeous face. “And I’m so proud of you.”

“I’m proud of me,” she rasps as a car sounds in the distance. She runs her fingers through my hair. “I didn’t fall apart even though I was terrified. I made a plan, and it worked. Well, right up until the end.”

I dot kisses all over her face. “You’re my hero, babe.” My lips brush against hers. “Always so brave and so strong. I’m in awe of you.” I hold her carefully against my chest as I squeeze my eyes shut and offer up thanks to God or whomever was looking out for my angel today. I know the doc still has to check her out, and I hope her lungs are okay and there isn’t any permanent damage from smoke inhalation. She appears fine, and I’m going to trust in that.

“Visualizing your face and remembering our happy times helped to keep me grounded.” She slides her hands up my chest. “Your love helped to pull me through.”

“I’m never letting you go,” I murmur into her hair. “I hope you know you’re stuck with me now.”

“I have never been happier to hear those words.” Tears glisten in her eyes. “And I think it’s over now. I feel it in my bones. This won’t be hanging over us anymore.”

“It *is* over.” Or it will be, as soon as we get the rest of our plan into play. “I have lots to update you on,” I say, reluctantly stepping back as I spy a tall, thin man with a mass of ginger hair approaching, carrying a medical bag. “But first we need to let the doc take a look at you.”

ALESSO

“Sierra was so relieved to hear Serena is okay she burst out crying on the phone,” Ben admits after we have dropped Serena and Chelsea at Georgia’s house. At the same time we were rescuing Rena from the church, Outfit *soldati* attacked DeLuca’s house and dealt with the men guarding it. Chelsea was found drugged and tied naked to a bed as that degenerate who accosted Rena in the boutique was raping her.

Dominic’s men blew his brains out before untying the poor woman. She was only coming to when we were leaving Georgia’s after showering and changing. We can’t show up to the meeting Dom and Franco have set up looking anything less than composed and in control.

It’s all hinging on this next hour.

“This has been hard on all of us but especially Sierra,” I say. The stress cannot have been good for the baby, so I’m glad it was short-lived. The doc has checked Serena out and given her some oxygen. He wants to monitor her for the next twenty-four to forty-eight hours to ensure there is no permanent damage from the smoke inhalation, but she seems to be doing fine. Thank fuck.

“It’s been a stressful couple days.” Leo stifles a yawn. None of us have slept, adrenaline fueling our bodies so we could do what needed to be done.

“When does Saverio land?” I ask the boss.

“I just spoke with him.” Ben leans his head back, briefly closing his eyes. “They are already in Chicago and en route to

the ambush his spies have set up.”

Predictably, Saverio wasn't pleased when Ben retracted on the deal before it was sealed. However, the boss managed to present him with a proposal he couldn't turn down. “I still can't believe you called in your favor to claim dibs on me.” I shoot him a filthy look, even though I'm thrilled that noose around my neck is gone.

“I was always going to do it, and you know it.” Ben smirks. “You can just say thank you.”

I flip him the bird, and Ben laughs. Ciro smirks through the front mirror, and Nario cracks his knuckles, his need for violence not in any way sated by the quick fight at the church. If he had his way, I'm sure he'd love to see this meeting devolve into chaos, but that is the furthest thing from our minds and the complete opposite of our end goal. So, the man will return home unfulfilled. Unless we let him join Salerno's crew and go after the Russians.

“How confident is Salerno of success?” I ask.

“He's brought a plane full of his best *soldati* with him, and he's as bloodthirsty as ever. Success is guaranteed.” Ben doesn't look remotely concerned.

“Good. That should be enough to unravel the fledgling Russian organization DeLuca was building,” I say.

“I'm not worried,” Ben replies. “As long as Dom and Franco can rally everyone behind the new leadership and reaffirm their commitment to The Commission, that will take care of the Russians. They know they are no match for a united *mafioso*, and they'll run back to whatever hole they crawled out of.”

“I still can't believe you agreed to find a marriage contract for Anais.” Leo rubs the back of his neck.

“I needed something to sweeten the deal.”

“I think getting to annihilate more Russians sweetened the deal enough, but I'm glad you offered that, boss,” I admit. “I dread to think what kind of perv Saverio would have sold her to if left to his own devices.”

Ciro takes a sharp left, following behind Dominic and Franco's SUV. Behind us, several cars and trucks carrying Outfit *soldati* are all heading toward the restaurant where they conduct business. The guys felt it was the best place to hold the meeting even if it's going to be more than a little cramped.

"You're too fucking soft." Leo thumps me in the upper arm. "If I hadn't seen you in action, I'd question your made man status."

I punch him in the shoulder. "I spent years disconnected from my emotions. I'm not going to apologize for having a heart. I know she's a little bitch, but she's my cousin, and I have always felt sorry for her. At least with Ben in charge of the marriage contract, he will find someone decent to give her to. She deserves a chance to have a normal life, and I think she just needs someone to show her what love is. Saverio adores her, that much is clear, but he has no clue how to truly care for her or show her the real meaning of love." I'm aware everyone in the car is listening to me, and I know they'll just throw this back at me forever, but I don't care. "Everyone deserves to have love in their life. There is no greater feeling."

"Pussy," *Ciro* grumbles under his breath.

"Whipped," *Nario* says behind a cough.

I point my finger in Ben's and Leo's faces. "Don't even try that shit with me. Neither of you have any defense."

"Thank you all for being here," Ben says, a half hour later, standing on top of an overturned crate to address the swollen crowd. Leo and I stand to one side, flanked by *Ciro* and *Nario*, with *Dom* and *Franco* on Ben's other side. A deathly hush descends over the space as everyone waits to hear what the big boss has to say. There is barely breathing room in the large basement space as every made man from Chicago has shown up to find out what happens next.

"What has happened this past year has been unsettling for all of us, but we share the same goal. To restore The Outfit to

the great entity it once was and to see peace and stability on Chicago streets again.” A few heads nod. “Dominic and Franco have just explained what has happened with DeLuca and I know there were many of you who were not happy with his plans. I imagine you are relieved that Chicago is back in local hands.” More heads bob. “But I know there are men standing before me who supported DeLuca’s aim and who are mistrustful of me and The Commission.”

No one acknowledges this, which isn’t surprising, and the atmosphere shifts as tension bleeds into the air.

“Losing most every US don and their heirs was a massive blow to Italian Americans in this country. There are many families still angry about what happened here, but that is on DeLuca.” Men shift and the tension thickens. “We are at a crossroads now and the decisions we make here today decide the fate of more than just the men in this room. My goal has always been to unite all Italian Americans within the US and to become the most powerful mafia organization in the country. That goal is still achievable if we all wipe the slate clean and start over. I am prepared to do that. The Commission fully supports that mission, and we have new leadership across the US who share our ideals. While it will take some protracted negotiations and many discussions, I believe I can get agreement from every *famiglia* to leave the past in the past, so we can all move forward and prosper.”

“You can’t expect us to believe that?” someone shouts out, disbelief threading through his tone.

“Dom and I fully support Don Mazzone’s position, and he is a man of his word,” Franco says as unease filters through the room. “We have discussed this with him in private, and we believe what is on the table is the best possible outcome for everyone.”

“The Commission and I are completely behind Dominic and Franco as your new don and underboss, and other senior level positions will be filled locally. It’s time to give Chicago back to Chicago with no more interference from Sicily.”

“Only interference from New York!” another man shouts.

“We are all on the same side, and The Commission wants to see every territory develop and grow to achieve their full potential,” Ben says, projecting his voice to be heard over the hushed mumblings. “The only other option available to us was to punish The Outfit for the part they played in the mass killing. But where would that get us?” His eyes skim the audience, and there is no denying the sincerity on his face. “It would be a vicious cycle of blame and revenge, and all it would achieve is to unite our enemies against us. None of us win in that scenario.”

“What about the Russians?” someone else asks.

“As we speak, Don Salerno is dealing with the Russians here in the city. Within the hour, they will be no more, and his informants will have spread the news to other Russians in other states. Whatever alliances DeLuca had built are fragile at best. The Russians are notoriously disloyal and fractured. They will crumble amid a united Commission and the most formidable *mafioso* organization to ever exist within the US. We are making history here today, gentlemen.”

I’ve got to hand it to Ben. He’s a natural speaker, and though he has oodles of charm, it’s not bullshit. When the boss speaks, people listen because he’s sincere and he’s believable. I can already feel the tide turning in the room.

More rumblings spread. “We would like to make you an offer,” Ben bellows, and the crowd hushes again. “We want a clean slate. We want men committed to Dom and Franco and the new leadership here in Chicago and The Commission. We want peace restored to the streets so we can all forget about agendas and get on with building our businesses. I’m aware that may be a tall order for some, so if you want to walk away, you can. There will be no repercussions for any made man who wants out, provided you don’t retaliate or side with our enemies to harm us.”

Shocked conversation bounces around the room. “You would seriously let us go free?” a stocky older man at the front asks. “That is not the way things are done. It’s blood in, blood out.”

“This is a new world we’re building,” Ben explains. “While tradition is important, and we will maintain those that add value to our organization, things are changing. I’m not saying this will become a usual rule. This is a special situation, and it requires a special solution. So, I give you my word; you can go quietly if you don’t feel you can offer us your loyalty, and there will be no consequence, provided you don’t cross us. If you choose to stay, you will be rewarded with stability and prosperity the likes of which none of us have ever seen. There is strength in unity, and together we are virtually unstoppable.”

It sounds black and white, but it’s not. It will take a lot of negotiation and hard work to achieve harmony and an aligned purpose, but I believe we can achieve it. Ben’s plan is smart. Weed out any possible bad eggs now. We can keep an eye on them much easier if they have walked away, to ensure they stick to their side of the bargain. This will leave a loyal crew open to working with their new leaders and New York and that can only be a good thing.

“You won’t get a more fair deal than that,” Franco says.

“So, what do you say?” Dom adds, standing tall and proud. “Are you with us, and do you support Don Mazzone and The Commission?”

Heads bob and hands shoot up until most men in the room appear to be in agreement.

“Those of you who want to step away are free to leave now,” Ben confirms. “Everyone else, please stay. I believe a celebration is in order.”

The tension breaks up, and men start mingling as Ben shakes hands with Franco and Dom, and the deal is done. About twenty men quietly exit the room, a number that is less than expected and more than manageable.

“I’d call this a roaring success.” Leo clamps a hand on my shoulder.

“Me too,” Ben adds, breaking away from Dom and Franco to let them receive congratulations from their men. “And I just got word from Salerno. They slaughtered the Russians, and the

news is already being spread to other territories. The dons in those areas have been updated, and they will watch reactions and take the necessary action. I expect by morning the Russian threat will be neutralized.”

“How long do we have to stay here before it’s considered rude to leave?” I ask, desperate to get back to Georgia’s house to check up on Rena.

“Fuck, he’s got it bad.” Leo jokes with Ben.

“Fuck you. You are both every bit as whipped as I am.”

“Truth,” they say at the same time.

“Give it a couple hours, and then you can slip away,” Ben confirms.

The party moves upstairs to the restaurant and bar, and despite my eagerness to return to my woman, it’s good to relax and chill out over a few beers.

A ruckus at the door a while later has everyone on high alert until the crowd parts and I see who it is. I’m up off my stool and striding toward the two women before my feet have processed the motion. “What are you doing here?” I ask, banding my arms around Rena.

“We thought you could use the moral support.” She beams at me, looking stunning in an elegant fitted black dress with black and red high heels.

“You look gorgeous,” I say before brushing my lips across hers in a brief kiss. “You too, Georgia,” I add because my future mother-in-law is a beautiful woman too.

She kisses my cheek. “Thank you. I hope it’s okay we came. Ben called and told us the deal was done and we were safe. So, we thought we’d help you to celebrate.”

“We know a lot of these people,” Rena adds. “There are a lot of good, decent men in this room. I thought it was time we spoke with them and buried the hatchet.”

“From what Dom and Franco have said, I don’t think there is any hatchet to bury. You are the reason they reached out to

us. You have the respect of most men in this room, Rena. I think they will be happy to see you are safe and well.”

Ben slides his arm around his mother-in-law, steering her away to speak to Dom and Franco. I stay by Rena’s side as she makes her way around the room, chatting to the men who were loyal to her husband in the past.

Leo procures a glass of champagne for Georgia and some sparkling water for Rena, and I’m so proud of her as she works the room like a pro.

Finally, I manage to grab her into a quiet corner and keep her to myself. “You’re amazing, do you know that? You’ve got to be exhausted.”

She casually shrugs. “I’m alive. Stefano is dead and the Russians are scattered to the wind. There’s a lot to celebrate. I have the rest of my life to recuperate.”

“I’m in awe of you.” The words don’t seem like enough to convey how far she has come.

She flings her arms around my neck and kisses me. “I think it says a lot that I’m genuinely happy and content right now. The old me would’ve been a basket case after the last twenty-four hours, but this feels right. Being here and talking to these men has helped me to achieve that last bit of closure I needed.” She runs her fingers through my hair, and I stifle a moan as my dick hardens behind my pants. I swear she barely has to touch me and my cock turns to steel. “Things are good, babe.” She kisses the corner of my mouth. “We truly can move forward now, and that excites me because I never let myself have hope before, and now, I’m brimming with it.”

“You know what I’m hoping for?” I nip her earlobe.

“I think I might have an inkling,” she teases, pressing her hot body against me as her eyes darken with lust.

“As soon as we finish these drinks, we’re leaving. I’m getting us a hotel room, and I’m going to make love to you and then hold you in my arms while you sleep.” I would love to stay buried in my woman all night, but she needs rest after her ordeal.

There's a wicked glint in her eye as she presses her mouth to my ear. "That sounds wonderful, but I'm not sure I'll last that long." Her gorgeous eyes pierce mine, and all I see is love and longing in her gaze. Her lips move back to my ear. "I've never had a quickie in a bathroom, and I'm thinking that sounds perfect right about now."

All the blood rushes to my dick and I'm painfully hard. "You want me to fuck you in the bathroom here?"

Her eyes sparkle as she nods. My initial instinct is to say no. I don't want to screw her in a bathroom, surrounded by made men who will most likely know what we've been up to, because I respect her so much, and she is worth more than that. Plus, she's been through a lot today, and she's got to be tired.

But I don't turn her down because my woman is owning her sexuality and taking control, and who am I to tell her we can't do this?

If this is what she wants and needs, I'm giving it to her.

I stand and take her hand. "Another first," I whisper, snaking my arm around her waist and holding her close as I lead us through the restaurant toward the bathroom.

EPILOGUE

SERENA – 5 YEARS LATER

“Do you want me to hold him?” Sierra asks Nat as Nat rocks her seven-week-old son in her arms. It’s a glorious summer’s day, perfect for a large outdoor family get-together. I smile as I cast my eyes around Sierra’s enlarged patio, overjoyed to have so many of our family and friends here with us today.

Alesso and I built a house on the grounds of Ben’s Connecticut house too. Like with Leo and Natalia, Ben gifted us a plot of land as a wedding present, and we wasted no time building our own family home.

I love that we all live so close together, but the estate is large enough that it still feels completely private. It really is the best of both worlds, and it offers privacy and security, which is something that’s always needed when you’re a part of this world, even if things have been relatively stable the past few years.

“Is that you asking me or telling me?” Nat arches a brow at her sister-in-law, showing no signs of giving up her baby.

“Quit stalling, and hand the goods over.” Sierra opens her arms for her new nephew as Nat passes the sleeping beauty over. “I want to cuddle my little bubba, and you deserve to rest your feet. You’ve been cooking up a storm for days.” Sierra and I helped with the food prep too, but Nat did the lion’s share because she is such a talented cook and she loves it.

Sierra cuddles Leif close, and her eyes contain an emotional sheen as she stares adoringly at him.

“Something to tell us, sis?” I inquire, my hands automatically going to my enlarged bump. “It would be awesome to finally be pregnant together even if it’s only for a few weeks.”

I’m due to deliver our second child in five weeks, and I honestly wish it was longer. I love nurturing my husband’s babies in my body and, if I have my way, we’ll definitely be having more. Elisa is fourteen now, and she’s a fantastic help with our two-year-old son, Will. I know she’ll be a great support to me when our new baby arrives.

It helps that I work in the HR department of Caltimore Holdings because they have fantastic maternity benefits with part-time, flexible, and remote working options. Being the sister-in-law of the boss has perks too. Though I try to keep our personal relationship out of things at the office. I want to be appreciated and respected for my work, not because of who I’m related to.

Thinking of HR reminds me of Chelsea. I forgave her, but our friendship never recovered. She dropped out of NYU after what happened, and a year later, she separated from Liam and moved back to Texas with her kids. I’m sorry for what she endured, but I think it’s best for both of us that we’re no longer in contact. It opens painful wounds for both of us.

The sneaky look on my sister’s face drags me out of my head. Sierra chews on her lower lip, looking mischievous as she glances around. Ben, Leo, and Alesso are over by the grill, probably cremating the steaks, chicken, and burgers because they are more concerned with drinking beer and gossiping like old women than tending to our food. “You can’t say anything,” Sierra whispers. “It’s early, and I just told Ben last night.” The biggest smile ghosts over her mouth. “But, yes, I’m pregnant again.”

I can’t contain my glee, squealing as I pull my sister into a hug, my big belly stopping me from getting too close. “That is awesome. Congrats.” I kiss her cheek. “I’m so happy for you.” Their daughter Raven is almost five, and I know Ben and Sierra have been trying for another child for the past few years and nothing was happening. I felt bad for her, especially when

Nat and I got pregnant twice in the same span of time. I know Sierra would have loved to be pregnant with us, so this is just great. I loop my arm through hers, grinning. “We get to be pregnant together. That makes me so unbelievably happy.”

“All three kids will be close in age,” she adds.

“I love how close all the kids are,” Nat says, watching Caleb approach. His little sister Rosa is clinging to his back like a spider monkey, and she’s giggling at something he is saying. Rosa has Caleb and Joshua wrapped around her finger, and there is nothing those boys won’t do for their little sister.

“Incoming,” Caleb says, reaching around and prying Rosa off his back. He holds her at arm’s length, scrunching his nose up. “She just dropped a bomb, and it has your name written all over it, Mom.” Bending down, he carefully sets her little legs on the ground. Rosa only started walking at fourteen months, and two months later, she’s still a little unsteady on her feet. Caleb presses a kiss to her cheek, and she giggles, snuggling into his leg.

“Your mom is beat,” I say. “Do her a solid, and take care of it.”

“Nope.” Caleb tips his head back, flicking longish strands of blond hair off his brow. “I don’t do diapers.”

“I can’t wait to spout that shit at you when you’re a father,” Sierra says, cooing at the sleeping babe in her arms.

“You’ll be waiting a long time, Sierra,” he replies. “Kids are not in my life plan.”

“I can change her with you,” Elisa says, appearing at Caleb’s side. She stares up at him with the usual starry-eyed look. Lifting Will off her hip, she thrusts her little brother at me. I scoop my youngest son into my arms, dotting kisses into his dark hair.

Caleb lifts Rosa into Elisa’s arms. “Thanks, Lili.” Caleb is the only one to call Elisa that, and she swoons every time he says it. “You’re an angel.” He flashes her a wide smile, showcasing a perfect set of white teeth, before pecking her cheek, and my daughter practically melts as he walks off.

I can see the attraction. Caleb and Joshua have grown up totally gorgeous, and though Nat and Leo have had issues with both of them over the years, they're good boys deep down.

Elisa isn't even mad Caleb is leaving her to change the diaper alone. She laps up any attention he gives her like it's the most precious thing. My daughter has the purest heart, and she continues to make me proud. I watch Elisa dot kisses all over Rosa's face as she stares after Caleb with so much longing it makes my heart ache.

At nineteen, Caleb is still too old for her, but in time, the difference won't seem so great. I know he doesn't share her devotion, but he's always been good with her. And who knows? Maybe in the future, there might be something between them. Elisa has crushed on him for a long time, and I don't see it fading any time soon.

"Me down, Momma," Will says, wriggling impatiently in my arms as Elisa disappears inside the house to change Rosa.

"I've got my boy." Alesso appears, as if out of thin air. He leans in and kisses me before setting our son on his feet. Will instantly makes a beeline for the playground, and I'm glad when Mom hops up and takes his hand, walking him toward where Raven and Brando and Marlena's twin girls are playing. Rowan and Romeo are riding their bikes, and I can just make out their heads in the distance.

David trails behind Mom, and I smile, so happy she's found love again. I have a feeling her billionaire beau of the last two years is going to pop the question soon, and I couldn't be happier that life is working out great for everyone.

"You should sit down and rest. You've been on your feet for hours," my husband says, pulling out a chair for me.

"Stop fussing," I say even though I love it. Alesso is an attentive, adoring husband, especially when I'm pregnant

"That's an impossibility." He steadies me as I slowly sink into the chair. "You're carrying precious cargo, and it's my job to take care of you both." I tilt my head back and his lips descend on mine. "Love you," he says, like he does every day.

“Love you more.”

He tweaks my nose. “Another impossibility.”

Before I can reply, more guests arrive. “Hey, everyone!” a woman with a high-pitched voice says, and my sister’s face transforms into a scowl.

“Oh, God. I really need alcohol for this,” Sierra mumbles as Alesso heads off toward his cousin.

“I’m not Anais’s greatest fan either though I have tried to like her.”

“She makes it difficult,” Nat agrees.

“Thanks for inviting her.” I pat my sister’s arm as she sits down on the other side of me, still cradling baby Leif against her chest. “Alesso knows she’s difficult, and he appreciates it.”

“She’s Don DiPietro’s daughter-in-law now, so I couldn’t refuse without insulting him.” Sierra glances over her shoulder, and her scowl deepens. Anais’s sense of style is still on the trashy side, and she’s wearing a tight hot-pink thigh-high dress that really isn’t suitable for a family barbecue. “I’m still pissed Ben arranged that marriage. Couldn’t he have sent her to Alaska or outer space? Why did it have to be New York?”

“Damn mafia politics.” Nat narrows her eyes at Anais as she presses a lingering kiss to Caleb’s cheek, her hand resting on his hip. “I don’t like the way she looks at my son.”

“The woman has a problem. She’s married to a great, good-looking guy, yet she still eye-fucks every man she meets. I don’t understand her.” It’s one of my issues with Anais. That, her vanity, selfishness, and lack of girl code really irk me. Alesso has tried to look out for her, but his advice goes in one ear and out the other.

“She’s trouble,” Sierra says as Leif wakes and immediately starts bawling. She hands him to his mother. “And we all know Caleb loves trouble.”

“That’s my concern,” Nat says, standing to go into the house to feed the baby. “Over my dead body will I let that

little witch anywhere near my son.”

EPILOGUE 2

ALESSO

“I am at my wit’s end with her,” I admit, removing more burgers from the grill and dropping them onto the warming plate. “It’s like she deliberately wants to get into trouble.” I shake my head as I watch Anais flirt up a storm with Caleb. He’s not exactly deflecting it, and Cruz DiPietro, her husband, looks close to pummeling Caleb. Even Caleb’s friendship with Cruz’s little brother Christian won’t save him if they don’t cut it out.

“Did you ask him?” Ben inquires, coming up beside us and eyeballing Leo. A few feet back are Frank, Brando, Nario, and Ciro. Apart from Brando, the rest of the guys are still single, and I thank my lucky stars that’s no longer me.

I have the family I always dreamed of, and my reality is even better than the fantasy. Serena and our kids are my everything, and I would lay down my life to protect them. My career is going well, and The Commission has finally achieved unity and stability within the Italian American *mafioso*. There are still issues and tensions from time to time, and rival mafia families continue to be a thorn in our side. The authorities are actively targeting crime families, and more and more, we are legitimizing businesses and trying to keep our noses under the radar. Ben’s smart thinking years ago, in buying up IT firms, has paid huge dividends as we have harnessed technology to enable us to stay ahead of the game.

There are rumblings the Bratva is attempting to restructure again, and we only got word last night that the damn

Colombians have surfaced in the city again, so there are constant problems to solve and fires to put out.

But there is no denying the *mafioso* in the US is the most progressive, successful, and structured it has ever been.

“Yeah, I asked him,” Leo says after taking a long pull of his beer. “He denies anything is going on.”

As one, we turn and stare at Caleb. Cruz has a protective arm slung around Anais’s waist, and he’s glowering at Caleb like he’s ready to rip his head off his shoulders.

“I’m not buying it,” Ben says as we turn around and focus on the grill. If we burn any more of the meat, the women will go crazy on our asses.

“Nor me,” Leo says. “I think he’s fucked her, and if Cruz finds out, it will be World War Three.” Leo sighs and runs a hand through his hair. “I don’t know what to do with Caleb. He’s so reckless. He thinks our rules and the law don’t apply to him. He does whatever the fuck he wants, and he couldn’t care less about the consequences.”

“What about Joshua?” I ask, because he’s always been the more stable of the twins and the only one who can get through to his twin. However, I’ve noticed he’s not been himself lately.

“He’s closed himself off. What Bettina did hasn’t just destroyed him. It’s changed him. He’s so cold with everyone now except his mother and his little sister.”

“Should I have a word with them?” Ben asks as Rowan and Romeo reappear in the near distance.

“That might only make things worse,” I say, turning the steaks over. “They’re nineteen and think they know everything.”

“Didn’t we all at that age.” Leo chuckles.

“We knew jack shit,” Ben says.

“It’s good they don’t gain control until they are twenty-one. Neither of them is mature enough for the responsibility yet, but when they wise up, they will make a formidable team.”

“I agree,” Leo says. “They’re a lethal combination. Joshua is a shrewd strategist, and Caleb gets shit done.”

“Their party-boy image doesn’t do them or the family any favors though,” Ben says. “It concerns me.”

“Luca will remain on The Commission as the Accardi representative for the foreseeable future, and he will have the power of attorney until the twins are twenty-five,” I remind the boss. “They’ll have their act together by then.”

“I hope so, but they really should keep a lower profile. It draws unwanted attention.”

The Accardi twins are the poster boys for the New York mafia, and they are regularly splashed all over the tabloids and the internet. I know both men have received modeling offers from several top brands, something their friends love to tease them about. Girls hang off them wherever they go, and Joshua is as much of a player now as Caleb is. That bitch Bettina really did a number on him. I understand where Ben’s concern is coming from, but we are living in different times, and they are the next generation. At some point, we are going to have to let them learn from their mistakes.

“Let’s be honest, we would all have lapped up the attention at that age,” I say, removing the steaks and putting them on another warming plate. “There are enough of us to help keep them on the straight and narrow. They’ll be fine.”

“Do you ever miss it?” Leo asks, raising a hand and waving at Rico and Frankie as they arrive with their family. Frankie is Nat’s best friend and Rico is her husband and the newly promoted *consigliere* for the Maltese *famiglia*.

“The single bachelor life?” I clarify, and Leo nods. “Not for a second.”

“Nor me,” he instantly agrees.

“We’re lucky bastards.” Ben lifts his beer, and we chink bottles. “It’s not often we get time to stop and look back at everything we’ve achieved, but today is a day to be thankful for everything we have. Family life is the best, and days like today make all the stress worth it.”

“Amen to that,” I say as Sierra calls everyone over to the tables.

“Sierra’s pregnant,” Ben blurts, his face radiating happiness. “We’re not officially announcing it yet, but I wanted you both to know.”

“That’s awesome news.” I’m really pleased for them.

“Congrats, man.” Leo grabs the boss into a one-armed hug, and I do the same.

“Can we join the love-in, or is this a bro thing?” Nat asks, coming up behind her husband and sliding her arms around his waist.

“You can always join my love-in, *dolcezza*.” Leo twists his wife around in his arms and kisses her. “But I don’t share.” He swats her ass, and Nat laughs.

“You told them, didn’t you?” Sierra says.

“I couldn’t help it.” Ben pulls her into his arms, staring lovingly at her.

Sierra giggles. “I told the girls too.”

There isn’t much we keep from one another, and I wouldn’t have it any other way. I grew up without a family, and now I’m a part of the best one. Life really doesn’t get better than this. Giving the two couples some privacy, I walk off, with one of the warm plates, in urgent need of my wife’s lips.

I set the plate down in the middle of the long table as everyone claims seats. “Sit,” I tell Rena, snatching the bottle of wine from her hands. “I’ll handle that. You relax.” I lean down and kiss her, holding her for a few beats, just enjoying the feel of her in my arms. Then I move around the table, pouring wine and enjoying the heat of the sun beating down on my back. The others arrive, setting the rest of the meat down on the table, before they take seats. Georgia is wrangling Will into a highchair beside Rena, while Elisa is strapping Rosa into hers beside Nat. The other kids are old enough to sit on normal chairs, and they sit together, munching on burgers, hotdogs, and fries.

I sit beside my wife after everyone has drinks, sliding my arm around her shoulders as she makes a plate for me. “Thanks, angel.” I cup the back of her head and kiss her softly. “This was the perfect idea.”

“I know, right?” Serena rests her head on my shoulder and contentment pours out of her like a tangible substance, fueling my own happiness. If my wife and my kids are happy, then I am too. Life is as simple as that.

Wine is flowing, there is an abundance of delicious food, and laughter and lively conversation hums in the air as everyone enjoys the meal and the company. At the other side of the table, Elisa has her head bent into Gia’s, and they are whispering as they share covert glances at the twins. Gia is Rico and Frankie’s eldest daughter, and she’s only a few months older than Elisa. “I sense double trouble,” I tell my wife, holding her closer as we look at our eldest daughter and her best friend plotting things I’m sure I’d rather not know.

“I don’t think you’re wrong,” Rena says. “But Caleb seems to only have eyes for one girl tonight.”

“You noticed that, huh?”

“Hard not to. They’re eye-fucking each other like crazy, and I wouldn’t be surprised if Cruz went for Caleb before the night is over.”

“Maybe you could try talking to Anais?” I suggest.

Rena straightens up, turning to face me. She palms my cheek. “I would do anything for you, and I will talk to her if you like, but we both know she won’t listen to me. It’s probably best to say nothing to either of them. They are both the type to do something just because they’ve been told not to. We should stay out of it. Let them fix their own mess.”

I absently nod in agreement as I watch Elisa’s eyes lose their spark as she watches Anais place her hand on Caleb’s arm. “Elisa’s upset,” I say, wishing I could remove the sad look from her face. “I hate to see it. She’s such a good girl. Such a joy to have in our lives.” Elisa has never given us a moment of trouble. If anything, I worry she takes on too much

responsibility. She's growing up fast, and I want her to stay a kid for as long as possible.

"God, I love you, Alessandro Salerno." Rena pecks my lips.

It's still weird to hear my new name. After a lot of deliberation, I chose to change my last name. For a number of reasons, but mostly because my father and I were robbed of the chance to know one another. Taking his name is the best way I can honor the man who gave me life.

"The way you love is fierce. How did I get so lucky?" she asks.

Leaning down, I kiss her lush lips before sliding my hands to her swollen stomach. The instant my palms land on her tummy, the baby kicks. I hold my wife tighter, and if it was possible, I would hold her like this forever. The love I feel for her only gets stronger, and I don't have the words to explain how much our family means to me. "I'm the lucky one," I choke out.

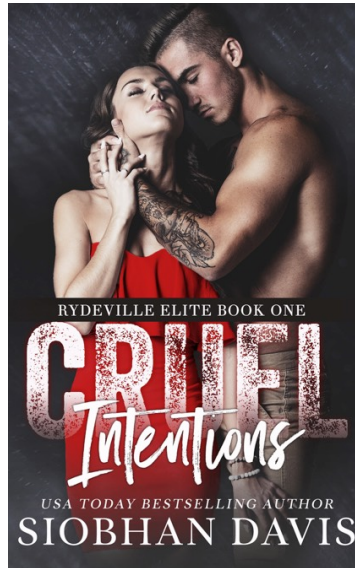
"We're both lucky," Rena softly says. "We overcame adversity to find the other half of ourselves, and life really doesn't get any better than this."

As I kiss my beautiful wife, I can't help agreeing.

This concludes the Mazzone Mafia series, BUT I have some spin-off books slated for release in 2022: VOAMQ, a stand-alone dark mafia romance, and *The Accardi Twins* duet. Subscribe to [my newsletter](#) and/or join my [reader's group on Facebook](#) for updates!

If you want to read another dark romance series, why not check out my [Rydeville Elite](#) series or my [Sainthood](#) series. Both are available in ebook, paperback, and audiobook format. Turn the page to read a sample from *Cruel Intentions*

#1 NEW ADULT & COMING OF AGE ROMANCE



In the power struggle between two elite groups, one feisty girl will bring them to their knees...

Life is a cruel game where only the most ruthless survive. It's a truth my mother rebelled against, and she paid for it with her life. Now, I play *their* game. Publicly accepting the destiny that lies in wait for me when I turn eighteen.

But, behind closed doors, I plot my escape.

Trent, Charlie, and my twin, Drew, rule the hallways of Rydeville High with arrogance and an iron fist. I execute my role perfectly, hating every second, but they never let me forget my place in this world.

Everyone obeys the rules. They have for generations. Because our families have always been in control.

Until Cam, Sawyer, and Jackson show up. Throwing their new money around. Challenging the status quo. Setting hearts racing with their gorgeous faces, hot bodies, and bad boy attitudes.

Battle lines are drawn. Sides are taken. And I'm trapped in the middle, because I made a mistake one fateful night when I gave my V-card to a stranger in a blatant F you to my fiancé.

I thought it was the one thing I owned. A precious memory to carry me through each dark day.

I couldn't have been more wrong.

Because the stranger was Camden Marshall, leader of the new elite and my perpetual tormenter. He hates me with a passion unrivaled, and he won't be the only one. Fire will rain down if the truth is revealed, threatening alliances, and the power struggle will turn vicious.

My life will hang in the balance.

But I'll be ready, and I'm not going down without a fight.

PROLOGUE

Waves crash against the empty shore, summoning me with invisible arms, and my feet move toward the icy water as if I'm pulled by a string. I'm numb inside. Hollowed out. And I just want to put an end to this... charade that is my so-called life.

I never remember a time in my seventeen years on this earth where I had free will. Where every aspect of my life wasn't controlled and mapped out.

And I'm done.

Done with the mask I've no choice but to wear.

Done with the elite crap I'm forced to participate in.

Done with that monster who calls himself my father.

I want out, and the turbulent sea offers me salvation. I scarcely feel the deathly cold water as it swirls around my ankles like the tempting caress of a destructive lover. My silk robe offers little protection against the bitter wind whipping my long dark hair around my face, and goose bumps prickle my skin in everyplace it's exposed.

I walk farther into the water, my body shivering and shaking as the wild waves lap at my calves. An eerie voice echoes in my mind, urging me to stop.

Imploring me to go back.

Pleading with me not to give up.

Suggesting my world is about to change.

I ignore that taunting voice, tilting my head up, surveying the crescent moon in the dark nighttime sky, casting strangely shaped shadows on the land below. My ears prick at the sound of splashing behind me, and my heart beats faster as adrenaline courses through my veins, but I don't turn around.

"Hey. Are you okay?" a deep masculine voice asks from close by.

I'm standing knee-deep in icy-cold water in the middle of the night in minuscule clothing. Does it fucking look like I'm okay? My snarky alter ego mentally responds to his question, but I remain mute. I can't summon the energy to speak or to care what the stranger thinks of me.

I just want him to go away. To leave me alone. To at least give me this.

But no such luck.

He wades through the water, his darkened form brushing against my arm as he moves around me, positioning himself directly in my line of sight so I've no choice but to look at him.

A flicker of warmth enters my chest as I stare into sultry brown eyes that are so deep they're almost black. The glow from the moon casts a shadow around his form, highlighting his masculine beauty in all its glory. He's wearing low-hanging cotton shorts and nothing else. His bare chest is an impressive work of art that speaks to incredible dedication in the gym. His cut abs are so sharp they look painted on. But it's the tattoos on his chest and lower arms that grab my attention. None of the guys at Rydeville High would dare ink their skin. It wouldn't fit the reputations they've so carefully cultivated or suit their obnoxious parents' plans for their futures. The elite wouldn't dream of lowering themselves to something so provincial.

This guy is an enigma, and the first sparks of curiosity ignite inside me.

My eyes trail up his delectable torso, refocusing on his face. He's watching me carefully. Absorbing my gaze like he wants to bury deep inside me and figure me out. My fingers itch to run along the fine layer of scruff adorning his chin and jawline. To mess up his hair which is styled long on top and shorn close to his skull on both sides. A craving to explore his chiseled cheekbones, and to taste his full lips, hits me out of nowhere, reminding me I'm still very much alive.

I can't ever recall having such a strong, physical reaction to a guy upon sight. None of the guys back home have affected

me so potently, except for Trent—he makes my skin crawl with the barest of looks—but this is the complete opposite.

One glance from this stranger heats my blood and stirs desire low in my belly. I cock my head to the side, intrigued and aroused, my previous self-destructive mission all but forgotten.

We don't speak. We just stare at one another and an electrical current charges the small space between us. My body emerges from its semi-comatose state, and I'm equally hot and cold. A shiver works its way through me, and I wrap my arms around my slim frame, desperately trying to ward off the biting cold air clawing at my pale skin.

“You need to get warm.” The stranger extends his hand. “Come with me.”

I wrap my hand around his without hesitation, and we tread through the water back toward the shore. His callused palm is firm against my skin, sending a flurry of fiery tingles coasting up and down my arm. We don't speak as we emerge from the sea, walking across the clammy sand toward a small wooden cabin in the near distance. I hadn't noticed it when I first arrived because I had singular focus.

A thin stream of smoke creeps out of a narrow chimney, and I watch the cloudy spirals with fascination as we walk hand in hand toward the neat wooden structure. In the distance, a sprawling mansion occupies prime real estate, the property submerged in darkness at this late hour.

He pushes open the door, stepping aside to allow me to enter first. A blast of heat slaps me in the face from the roaring open fire, and my body relaxes for the first time in days. The cabin is small but cozy and welcoming. The main room contains a compact kitchen with a stove, sink, and a long counter with three stools. On the right is a three-seater couch positioned in front of a coffee table and a wall-mounted TV over the fireplace. A side room suggests a bedroom with en suite bathroom, and that's the extent of the space.

My bedroom is bigger than this entire cabin, but it isn't half as inviting.

A bright rug resting atop the varnished hardwood floor, the soft colorful throw on the couch, and an abundance of vibrant cushions injects a comfortable, lived-in feel. The old bookcase tucked into the corner between the wall and the door is crammed full of books, DVDs, and mementos, creating a homey atmosphere. The only light is from the flickering flames of the fire and an old-fashioned lamp on top of the coffee table.

He shuts the door and steers me in front of the fire. On autopilot, I raise my palms, relishing the heat as it wraps around my chilly skin. He moves around behind me, but I don't turn to look. I stand in front of the fire, allowing it to thaw my frozen limbs and fracture the layer of ice surrounding my heart.

"Sit down," he commands in that rugged voice of his, draping a blanket around my upper body.

I sink to the ground without a word, tucking my knees into my chest as I peer at him. He drops down in front of me, gently uncurling my legs, drawing one into his lap as he dries my damp skin with a soft blue towel. We stare at one another as he dries both my feet and legs, and that same pull from before pulses between us, rendering some invisible connection.

"I feel like I know you from somewhere, yet I've never seen you before," I admit, eventually finding my voice.

He stalls with his hands on my feet, piercing my gaze with his intense chocolate-colored one. "I know," he says after a few beats.

When he tosses the towel aside, I move closer to him, sitting up on my knees with my body resting on my ankles. I keep my eyes locked on his as I reach up and touch the shorn side of his head, my fingers trailing over the velvety soft hair, tracing the edge of his skull tattoo. It was too dark outside to notice it, but now, I'm even more intrigued by this elusive, hot stranger who appeared out of nowhere to rescue me.

The tattoo is in the shape of a cross, and I wonder if the symbolism means something personal to him. All I know is

it's sexy as hell, and my body naturally responds to him, arching in closer.

He pulls my hand away from his head, pressing a feather-light kiss to the sensitive skin on my wrist, and I feel his tender touch all the way to the tips of my toes. His gentle touch is in direct contrast to his edgy look. With his defined abs, bulging biceps, and ink-covered tan skin, he looks like the quintessential bad boy every girl gets warned about. "Why were you out there?" he asks, keeping his gaze locked on mine.

I could lie, but I'm tired of all the lies.

I'm tired of saying what's expected and pretending to be someone I'm not.

"I didn't want to feel anymore."

There's a pregnant pause as he stares at me, no doubt wondering if I meant that sincerely. "What would you have done if I hadn't spotted you?" he inquires, still trying to puzzle me out.

I shrug. "Kept walking most likely." Allowed the sea to claim me as I'd originally intended when I'd given Oscar, my bodyguard, the slip, and driven here.

"Who are you? What's your name?"

I cup his face, deciding on the truth again. "I'm nobody. I'm invisible. I don't exist except to obey their commands."

A slight frown creases his brow. "If you're in trouble. If ___"

"Don't." I cut across him. "I don't want to talk about it."

Silence engulfs us for a few beats. "What do you want?" he asks, his voice dropping a notch, sounding wholly seductive, although I'm unsure if that's on purpose or not.

"I want to feel something real," I reply without uncertainty. "I want to let go of these chains that bind my body. To feel like I'm in control even if it's only an illusion." My eyes stay locked on his, and electricity crackles in the air again.

He rakes his gaze up and down the length of my body, his heated stare lingering on my chest as my nipples harden. His eyes flit to my mouth before he licks his lips and drags his gaze upward. His eyes bore into mine, and butterflies scatter in my chest, my heart beating faster and faster as my body heats in a whole new way. “I can help with that.”

This time, there’s no doubting his intent, and my core aches with need. My gaze drills into his eyes, projecting my acceptance and permission.

Nodding slowly, he pulls me onto his lap, circling his arms around my waist. “Are you sure?”

I bob my head. “Please make me feel alive. Make me feel like me. Remind me why I should live.”

It’s crazy.

I don’t know him.

He doesn’t know me.

But I feel more hopeful in this moment than I have in years.

Slowly, he brings his face to mine, brushing his lips against my mouth. I close my eyes as my body sags in relief. Snaking my arms around his neck, I angle my head as he caresses my mouth with his luscious lips. His kiss is unhurried and worshipful. His mouth moves leisurely and seductively against mine, and this kiss is unlike any I’ve ever experienced before.

Trent kisses with years of pent-up anger and aggression behind his punishing lips, and it makes me feel dead on the inside. This stranger’s tender kisses unravel the knots that usually twist in my gut, breaking through the walls that cage my heart, allowing warmth and pleasure to invade every single part of me.

I meld my lips and my body to his, straddling his hips and gasping as his hard length nudges against the softest part of me. He rocks his hips gently in expert, measured movements, and a burst of desire shoots through me, overtaking logic and warning and common sense.

I shouldn't be doing this here with some guy I don't know.

It would enrage my father, my twin brother, Drew, and my fiancé, Trent, if they saw me, but that thought only spurs me on, strengthening my resolve.

He stands, holding me to him, and I tighten my legs around his waist as he walks toward the bedroom. Our mouths never separate as he lowers me to the bed, and we gradually shed our outer layers.

I've never been naked in front of any guy before. Trent repeatedly tries to strip me bare, but I enjoy denying him. Now, I spread my legs for this beautiful, rugged stranger, with no hint of nerves or vulnerability, admiring his gorgeous body as he pulls a condom out of his bedside table and rolls it over his impressive length.

We don't talk, but words are redundant. He settles between my thighs, bringing his hot mouth to my pussy, and I almost lift off the bed as he devours me with his tongue and his fingers, quickly bringing me over the edge.

No man has ever done that to me before, and the pleasurable sensations coursing through my body are wholly new. When I come down from the best orgasm of my life, he climbs over me, kissing me passionately as his hands caress my small breasts. His roughened fingers tweak my nipples like he's plucking strings on a guitar, rolling them skillfully until they're taut peaks, and it's not long before I'm writhing in need again.

He positions himself at my entrance, stalling to look at me. "Are you sure this is what you want?" he asks, and another little chip melts off the block around my heart.

No one has ever cared to ask me what I need or what I want, and tears prick my eyes at the obvious concern in his eyes.

"Yes. I want to do this with you."

His eyes are glued to mine as he slowly inches inside me. He stops halfway in, sweeping his fingers across my cheek. "You're so beautiful." He nudges in a little more. "And so

tight.” He flexes his jaw, and I can tell he’s exercising caution. When he pushes in a little more, a sharp sting of pain jolts through me, and I wince.

His eyes pop wide as he holds himself still. Shock splays across his face. “You’re a virgin?” he splutters.

A sly smirk slips across my mouth. “I was.”

“Fuck.” He leans down, kissing me so sweetly I feel like crying. “You should’ve said.”

And have you change your mind? Not likely.

Thoughts of losing my virginity to that psycho Trent were part of the reason drawing me to the sea tonight. I’ve been holding him off for years, but with the wedding approaching, I know I can’t hold out much longer.

Denying him that victory only adds to the joy of this moment.

But it’s way more than wanting to one-up Trent.

I want to give my body to this gorgeous stranger.

To enjoy this one night where I can take something for myself before returning to the gilded cage I live in.

“It doesn’t matter,” I say, bucking my hips up in encouragement. “I want this with you. Right here. Right now. Nothing has made so much sense in a long time.”

He inspects me for so long I fear he will pull out and change his mind, but then he pushes the rest of the way inside me, and I swallow my cry of pain. He peppers little kisses along my neck and my collarbone, gently kneading my tits as he slowly rocks back and forth inside me. “I’ll go slow until it doesn’t hurt anymore,” he whispers across my now overheated skin. “And if you want me to stop, I will.”

“I don’t want you to stop,” I say, threading my fingers through the longish dark strands of hair now falling over his strong brow. “Keep going.”

He makes love to me then, only picking up his pace when I confirm it no longer hurts, but he’s never rough, completely

attentive to my needs, and he brings me to a second orgasm as his own climax hits.

I'm sprawled across his warm body, a few hours later, listening to the comforting beat of his heart, watching his chest inflate and deflate in slumber, wishing I could stay here in this little beach cabin with this beautiful stranger for eternity.

But I know that's only wishful thinking. A fantasy I can't entertain. Bringing anyone into my life risks theirs, and that'd be a poor way of rewarding this man who has given me a night I will cherish for the rest of my life.

Although I hate to leave him like this, it's for the best.

He can't know who I am or understand the implications of what we've just done.

Reluctantly, I ease out of his warm bed and his life, feeling a pang of overwhelming sadness as I get dressed, preparing myself to leave him behind. He looks peaceful in slumber, like a tattooed guardian angel, arriving at the perfect moment to help put things in perspective.

If I'd followed through tonight, they would have won, and I know my dead mother wouldn't want that for me.

I'm stronger than that.

I might be a pawn in a game I don't want to play, but that doesn't mean I can't win.

I need to strategize.

To plan my victory so I can escape the tortured future lying in wait for me.

Determination surges through my veins, and I smile adoringly at the beautiful man who has given me so much more than his body. "Thank you," I whisper, blowing him a kiss. I wish I could taste his lips one final time, but I don't want to wake him. It's better that I leave like this.

My hand is curled around the door handle when I spy a pencil and sketchpad on the coffee table. Without stopping to second-guess myself, I tear a strip off the end of a blank page and pen a brief note.

You can't possibly know this, but you saved my life in more ways than one tonight. You have reminded me why it's important to survive. Given me the strength to fight for what I want. And you have given me a precious memory I will hold close until my dying breath. Thank you. A.

As I close the door and head back toward my car, back to a life I despise, I know I'll be reliving this special night every day for the rest of my life.

But I had no idea that sleeping with this stranger would set certain things in motion. Things that couldn't be undone. And I certainly had no idea that I'd come to hate him and desperately resent giving him my virginity.

CHAPTER ONE

“Get your hands off me!” I shove at Trent’s broad shoulders, pushing him back a couple steps. He immediately reclaims the space, thrusting his face into mine. “This fucking frigid act is getting old, *darling*,” he sneers, enunciating the last word so I’m left in no doubt of his derision.

Aesthetically, Trent is a gorgeous guy—golden-blond hair, striking blue-gray eyes, strong masculine jaw, high cheekbones, and an impressive body that is ripped in all the right places—but the person behind the exterior is repulsive and totally beyond redemption.

Believe me, I’ve tried. Once I realized I was stuck with the douche, I did my utmost to bring out the best in him.

But you can’t extract something that doesn’t exist.

Trent isn’t a nice guy.

Trent isn’t a decent guy.

Trent embodies everything wrong with the society we live in and everything I want to run screaming from.

But I have no control over my life, and I’m on this speeding train regardless of how badly I want to jump off.

His hands dig into my hips, and he thrusts his obvious arousal into my stomach. I work hard to swallow my disgust. Although it’s tempting to push his buttons more, he’s been drinking, and I remember what happened the last time we got into it when he was hammered. A shiver tiptoes up my spine at the memory of him shoving his cock into my mouth while he had me pinned on the bed, his ass pressing down on my chest, as he fucked my mouth with no mercy.

How can a guy look so angelic and be so evil? Trent grinds against me, pawing at my chest and slobbering all over my neck.

At first glance, his mouth is utterly kissable until he opens it, shattering the illusion with the venom that regularly spews from his mouth.

Trent is the stereotypical rich kid. Spoiled, arrogant, and smarmy. He has sailed through life, handed everything on a silver platter, and he thinks his shit doesn't stink. Most everyone trips over themselves to give him everything he needs, especially the posse of women who fight for a temporary place in his bed, and his ego is floating somewhere in orbit.

Which is why he can't fathom my lack of interest and my disdain. Especially since we're engaged and scheduled to walk up the aisle next year.

"Stop!" I push his chest, forcing his vile mouth away from me. "My father's home, and all it'll take is one scream," I threaten.

He narrows his eyes, and his mouth twists into a malevolent grin. "Have you forgotten Daddy Dearest is the one who brokered our marriage deal? Or the reason he'll do anything to ensure it goes ahead?" He takes a step forward, reclaiming the space between us again.

I prod one finger in his firm chest. "Have *you* forgotten *your* father was the one who insisted I remain a virgin until our wedding night?" I take his evil grin and throw him back a smug one. "Or has he changed a generations-old rule because you can't keep your grabby hands to yourself?" I tilt my chin up. "Call one of your fuck buddies. I'm sure they'll be more than happy to suck your dick."

Trent smirks as he extracts his cell, holding it to his ear. I fold my arms across my chest, waiting for the charade to play out.

The funny thing is, he genuinely thinks I care.

News flash—I couldn't care less.

"I need your ass," he barks into the phone, not even attempting to disguise it's anything but a booty call. "No, Rochelle. I literally mean I need your ass. I'm filling all holes tonight, baby. Be ready."

Asshole. He knows how I feel about that bitch.

Grinding my teeth, I work hard to keep my annoyance at bay.

I know Trent fucks around. *A lot*. And, I honestly couldn't give two shits. I shudder to think what'd happen if he didn't have his fuck buddies. Although Christian Montgomery made it a condition of the marital agreement negotiated with my father when I was ten—yes, *ten*—that I remain a virgin until my wedding night, Trent has been badgering me for sex for the past two years. I'd rather skin myself alive than willingly give myself to him, so I've spent two years fighting him off.

Occasionally, I'll feel generous and blow him.

Usually, he'll just take what he wants.

But he's a selfish bastard with no regard for my needs, so it normally means he fucks my mouth, forcing me to swallow, while he tugs at my breasts, sometimes making them bleed.

It's much worse when he's been drinking, so I have some idea of what lies in wait for Rochelle when he arrives at her place.

But I can't find it within myself to feel sympathy. Rochelle is the closest I have to an arch-nemesis at Rydeville High, and Trent knows how much we despise one another, which is why he deliberately called her in my presence.

Keeping up appearances is nonnegotiable if you're a descendant of one of the founding families. It's something ingrained in Trent, Drew, Charlie, and me from the time we were little. And my father is the perfect example of how to act like a raging manwhore behind closed doors while presenting as the perfect law-abiding citizen.

Everyone knows Trent fucks around on me, but provided he's discreet, it's permitted.

Drew is engaged too, but he treats his fiancée with respect, while Charlie doesn't lower himself to bedding high school girls. However, if they wanted to whore themselves out whenever they felt like it, they'd get pats on the back.

Jane and I can barely piss without someone breathing down our necks.

Jane Ford is my best friend—*my only friend*—and she’s also Drew’s intended.

My twin and I are both destined for arranged marriages once we graduate a few weeks after our eighteenth birthday, thanks to the “business” deals our father made with the other elite patriarchs.

Trent rubbing my nose in it is not considered gentlemanly.

Mostly, I don’t care.

But Rochelle grates on my nerves. Making sly digs in contravention of the code. Shooting me filthy looks when the guys aren’t watching. Playing juvenile pranks, like stuffing stupid shit in my locker. Thinking she’s someone important because Trent screws her sometimes. But she comes in handy, occasionally.

Like now.

If Trent thinks I’ll change my mind because he intends to fuck my enemy, he’s another think coming. “Knock yourself out, stud,” I say, smiling pleasantly at him. “And make sure you wrap it before you tap it. Wouldn’t want you to catch an STD.”

Trent throws back his head, laughing. “Jealous much?”

No. Definitely not.

He grabs hold of my arm, yanking me into his hard body. “I’ll ditch the bitch. Just spread those pretty legs nice and wide, and let me fill you up.” He nips at my lower lip, dragging it between his teeth, drawing blood.

“I will never voluntarily have sex with you.” I attempt to wrestle out of his arms, but it’s futile because he’s way too strong. He could overpower me easily, and it’s happened too regularly to count. “You repulse me.” I glare at him, watching his nostrils flaring as he grips my upper arms tight. “You’ll have to force yourself on me if you want any because I will never make it easy for you.”

His fingers dig into my flesh, hurting me, but I refuse to cry out. To show any signs of weakness. “You say that like it

turns me off.” He jabs my stomach with his hard-on while one hand slides down to cup my ass. “Like it would stop me.” His finger prods the crack of my ass through my clothes, and I flinch. “Hate sex is the best.” His mouth crashes down on mine, and I press my lips together, denying him access, refusing to kiss him back. His kiss turns vicious, his mouth punishing, as he bites my lips, drawing more blood, but I don’t back down.

I’m used to his game.

When he pulls back, his eyes almost black with fury, he grabs my crotch, squeezing hard, and pain slices through my core. “This is mine. And I’ll have you. I’ll rip you apart, tear you to pieces until your resistance is futile.” He shoves me away with such force I lose my balance and tumble to the ground.

He may well deliver on that threat when he finds out I’m not untouched, but I’ll cross that bridge when I come to it.

“What the fuck, man?” Drew barges into my bedroom, shoving Trent in the chest, his handsome face red with rage. “How many fucking times do I have to tell you?!” he hollers, extending his arm and helping me to my feet. My twin tucks me beside him in a protective stance, scowling at the blood coating my lips. “Quit this shit, or we’re done, Trent. I fucking mean it this time.”

Trent slants an amused grin in Drew’s direction. “You say that like you’ve any choice in the matter. We’re in this for life. You’re stuck with me, whether you and your bitch of a sister like it.”

“You can’t speak to Abby like that. And I won’t let you treat her like this.”

Trent squares up to Drew. “She’s mine to do with as I please. Butt the fuck out. I don’t tell you what to do with Jane.”

“Because I treat Jane with respect,” Drew retorts, dragging a hand through his dark brown hair.

Trent snorts. “You’re so fucking pussy-whipped. Why you want to tie yourself to the same pussy for life is beyond me.” Trent slaps him on the back, shaking his head. “You should pound as many chicks as you can before you settle down.”

“Ugh.” I step in front of the warring boys. “You’re gross. They love each other, that’s why.” I know it’s a foreign concept to him, but I hate how superior he acts around my brother. Like he deserves some life medal for being a player. “Go, Trent.” I push him toward the door. “Go to that skank and fuck her up the ass. See if I care.”

“You’re going to Rochelle’s?” Drew queries, raising a brow.

“Your sister won’t spread her legs, as usual, and I’m all fired up.” He winks at me. “Lucky for Rochelle.”

“We had an agreement,” Drew protests, and it’s the first I’ve heard of it. “And you’re already breaking it.”

“You decided I should cut Rochelle loose. I didn’t voice an opinion either way.” He saunters toward the door, and a layer of tension lifts from my shoulders. “Convince your precious sister to put out, and I’ll consider it,” he tosses over his shoulder, before leaving, the noise of his shoes echoing in the wide hallway as he walks away.

Drew slowly turns around, inspecting me quickly. “Did he hurt you anyplace else?” he asks, pulling a handkerchief out of his dress pants and gently dabbing at my lip.

The guys were at some function in the gentleman’s club downtown with their respective fathers. Hence why Drew is dressed like he’s attending a funeral. And why Trent is wasted. I hate the way women are treated within the elite social circles, but there are times I’m glad we’re excluded from things.

I harrumph. “You have to ask?” I push the short sleeves of my dress up to my shoulders, skimming a finger over the bruising already blossoming on my upper arms.

Trent never leaves a mark in a visible place.

Appearances and all.

That's something else he has in common with my father. That and the obvious shared psycho gene. Thankfully, Drew seems to have escaped that trait, although he's as arrogant and power-obsessed as Daddy Dearest, so he definitely inherited some of his DNA.

I like to believe there's more of Mom in me.

Drew rubs a tense-looking spot between his brows. "He's on edge because of this upcoming trip."

The guys are leaving next weekend for Parkhurst, some bullshit elite training camp they attend a few times a year. Although the guys will go on to college after graduating high school next May, they will each assume some official responsibility within their family business, fulfilling more public obligations, and this month-long camp trip is part of their preparation.

"Don't make excuses for him," I say, turning around and holding my hair up.

Drew unzips my dress, casting his warm brown eyes to the floor as I slip it off and pull on my silk nightdress. "I'm not. You don't understand the pressure that's on our shoulders."

I whirl around on him, my eyes blazing. "Don't talk to me about pressure! At least you get to have a career and a life! What choices do I have?" I flap my hands about.

"You've got college to look forward to, and Christian Montgomery has agreed you can wait until you get your degree before producing an heir."

"Am I supposed to be grateful?" I shout even though I'm venting at the wrong person.

"You'll want for nothing, Abby." He tenderly cups my face. "And you and Trent will make beautiful babies together."

I push him away, disgusted at the turn in our conversation. "Go away, Drew. I can't hear this tonight."

His features pull into a tight grimace. "Stop being such a whiny bitch," he snaps. "You know how important the alliance

with the Montgomerys is. We've both got parts to play."

I pull back the silk covers on my large four-poster bed, crawling inside, needing this day to be over. "I know, Drew. I've heard this my entire life. I don't need you to constantly reinforce it."

"Sure, I do," he says, perching on the side of my bed, losing his fleeting anger. "Because you've got too much of Mom in you, and I see how badly you want to rebel." He tucks me in under the covers, like he used to do after Mom died when I'd have regular nightmares. Except back then, he'd usually crawl into bed alongside me. "But you can't, Abby. Stop fighting Trent. Give him what he wants, and he'll change. He just wants you to love him."

"He just wants to fuck me," I retort.

"Is that such a bad thing?"

"His dick is rotten to the core, and his touch makes my skin crawl, so that'd be a yes." Drew sighs. "Maybe if he wasn't so aggressive with me all the time. Maybe if he respected me as you do with Jane, things would be different, but he doesn't, and they aren't."

While the Ford family isn't one of the founding families, they are respected within the upper echelons of elite society, known as the inner circle, and our father was keen to secure a formal alliance.

Marriage between both families will ensure that.

Jane's father insisted on a virginity clause too, but Drew and Jane are hot for one another, and they couldn't wait. Unlike me, Jane adores her father, and she doesn't want to disappoint him, so, even though she's already sleeping with my brother, her father doesn't know.

Any time Jane sleeps over, her parents assume she's staying with me, but she usually sleeps in Drew's bed. My father actively encourages it, because he loves getting one over on Mr. Ford and he's a sexual deviant. The private sex room in our basement attests to that.

When I see my brother and Jane together, all loved up and mooning at one another as if no one else exists on the planet but them, I feel the odd stab of envy. If Trent and I were in love, I'd be happy to let him into my bed. But I fucking loathe Trent with the heat of a thousand suns, and I'd never willingly sleep with him.

“Just don't do anything stupid, sis.” Drew presses a kiss to my forehead. “We already lost Mom, and I couldn't bear to lose you too.”

“I won't,” I lie, sitting up and hugging him. “But I won't be Trent's punching bag either.”

“Let him in, Abby,” Drew beseeches. “It'll make for an easier life.”

And as my brother pulls the door closed behind him, I wonder if there's some wisdom in his words and if I should make some alterations to my plan.

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MAFIA & ITALIAN GLOSSARY

Meanings are listed per the context of this book.

- Bratva – The Russian mafia in the US.
- Cagna – Italian for bitch.
- Capo – Italian for captain. A member of a crime family who heads/leads a crew of soldiers.
- Consigliere – Italian for adviser/counselor. A member of a crime family who advises the boss and mediates disputes.
- Cosa Nostra – A criminal organization, operating within the US, comprising Italian American crime families.
- Dolcezza – Italian for sweetness.
- Don/Boss – The head of a crime family.
- La famiglia/famiglia – Italian for the family/family.
- Made Man – A member of the mafia who has been officially initiated/inducted into a crime family.
- Mafioso – An official member of the mafia/the mafia.
- Mob – The mafia/La Cosa Nostra/A crime family.
- Principessa – Italian for princess.
- Soldato – Italian for soldier.
- Soldati – Italian for soldiers.
- Soldier – A low-ranking member of the mafia who reports to an assigned capo.
- The Commission – The governing/ruling body of the Cosa Nostra, which sits in New York, the organized crime capital of the US.

- The Five Families – Five crime families who rule in New York, each headed by a boss.
- The Outfit – The Chicago division of the Cosa Nostra.
- Underboss – The second in command within a crime family, and an initiated mafia member who works closely with, and reports directly to, the boss.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Siobhan Davis is a *USA Today*, *Wall Street Journal*, and Amazon Top 10 bestselling romance author. **Siobhan** writes emotionally intense stories with swoon-worthy romance, complex characters, and tons of unexpected plot twists and turns that will have you flipping the pages beyond bedtime! She has sold over 1.5 million books, and her titles are translated into several languages.

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