



Taken by the

MOB BOSS

FIONA STONE

Taken by the Mob Boss

Enemies to Lovers Mafia Romance

Fiona Stone

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Chapter 1

Sophie

“Damn, Sophie, you’re looking hot!” Mimi says, sitting on the lounge couch in our semi-private changing room. She snaps a picture with her phone and a deep smile lines her face. “Taken for later,” she winks.

“Mimi—” I utter, but stop mid sentence. I run my hands over my hips, feeling a little vulnerable in such a dress. But the fabric of the *Piovere* dress is to die for. I’m trying it on for the millionth time in the last hour ... But whether it’s me looking this hot or the dress, I don’t know, but I feel *good* in it.

“Just buy it already, you have the money,” Mimi says.

I roll my eyes at her in the mirror, but continue looking over myself in the mirror and seriously considering it. I saw it on the *Piovere* feed today and just had to try it on. I knew that Nathan would already have it in stock, he always has everything in stock before it’s released. His shop is literally the space where designers birthed their greatness into the world. I hadn’t expected it to look this good in real life, or feel so great. I sighed.

“C’mon,” Mimi groans, “For the sake of everyone else’s sanity. Look, even your guards are checking you out,” she nods with her head towards the entrance of the changing rooms.

I catch Sebastian turning away quickly. And Rocko. Both men are the size of small mountains. I’ve known them since I was twelve, and Seb has had a crush on me for as long as I can remember. He’s a year younger than me but you’d never know it with the beard he has.

“Just buy it and stop taunting everyone,” Mimi says, standing up from the couch. “We get it, you’re a goddess.”

“Don’t be like that,” I sass Mimi. “If you had this on you’d be turning heads.”

“Honey,” she says, staring at me in the mirror with her long brown curls framing her slim face. “I don’t need to turn heads, I only need to give head.” She bursts out laughing.

I suppress a snort, but don’t laugh. Or try to. But then I see Mimi doubling over at her own joke. “Really?” I say, and then start giggling too.

“Well one of us has to exude sexual energy. You’re about as frigid as a—”

“Okay, okay,” I flap my hands at her to be quiet. “I’m not getting it though. I’m—”

“*Not worthy of a Piovere, yet.*” Mimi finishes. “I’ve heard it before.” She turns and wanders to the entrance of the changing corner and closes the main curtain, which seals us off from the

rest of the store. “C’mon out of the dress then.” She jacks a thumb for me to drop the clothing.

I hug it to my body. “But it’s a Piovere ...”

“We do this every time,” she hisses. “Out!”

I catch the zip in between my thumb and forefinger and pull it down slightly, then sliding my thumb under the shoulder strap I wiggle out and let the masterpiece of a sun dress glide down. I put it back on the hanger with care and lay it on the changing table that Nathan has there for purchases that *won’t* be made.

“This is how we’re spending our Friday night, may I remind you,” she says. “We could be out. We could be anywhere else. We could be getting your v-card punched”

I cough to interrupt Mimi.

“Which is long overdue,” she barrels on. She throws an arm around me. “C’mon Soph, it’s about time.” She looks at me in the mirror, tracing her eyes up and down my body. “You got curves *mamacita*. And hips like that make men really happy. I know.”

For years I’ve struggled with how I view myself. I’ve always thought I was too round, then too tall, too short, not round enough! Always something to label myself ...

“And stop overthinking,” Mimi says, catching my wandering eyes. “You’re a beautiful woman. Believe it. Plus, all that worry will give you crows feet.”

“What are you, my fairy godmother?” I say, a smile teased on my lips.

Mimi cocks her hip and pretends to walk with a cane. “If I’m your fairy godmother, one that grants wishes, I would’ve got that dusty old cooch—”

“Shhhh,” I jump to her and cover her mouth. Both of us giggling like idiots. “C’mon now,” I say. “*They* might hear you.”

“They?” Mimi says, with wide eyes. “As in the bodyguards that follow you day and night? Who most likely know the truth? Of which, Seb has had a crush—”

“Shhh,” I say again. “I don’t exactly want my history broadcast for the world.”

Mimi snorts and then heads back to the couch, she bends and picks up her phone and handbag. I wish I was as effortlessly confident as Mimi. She’s always been so self-assured, and has the ability to help me see a small fragment of the woman she thinks I am. But she is beautiful. She has hips that I’d kill for, and a way to talk to men that makes me look like a mannequin.

“Now, what are we *doing* then?” she asks. “I’ve been leading this guy along on Matcher for weeks now. He wants into these panties, and quite frankly, I want into his too. Are we heading out *finally*?”

I bite my lip. I know I’d promised Mimi that we’d sneak away one of these nights out, but the risk gets my heart racing.

I feel a sweat in my armpits immediately. What would my father think? “Well I don’t know—” I begin.

“Nope!” Mimi snaps, closing her handbag. “We’re heading out. You promised.”

“I know, I know,” I say, picking up my original sundress from home and sliding it on. It was a choice made by Mimi, it’s a little too slim for my taste. A little too revealing.

We’d left my father’s gated home hours ago, under the pretense of a shopping evening in Miami Beach. Which obviously, even father knows, that most shops aren’t in Miami Beach. And at some point, she’d practically forced me to promise her to let us go out. Except that I’ve never been out. I’ve never really been on a date. I’ve lived in the world of one of the most powerful mob families of Florida since I was born. My father is afterall the Don of the Russo family.

“Look, surely there’s something that will convince you to come out with me? You’re such a poor sheltered, helpless, daughter of a Don,” she cries, a hand to her forehead.

“Mimi!” I hiss.

“Oh everyone here knows Prude-zilla,” she says. “Let’s get gone.”

I pull her back from the curtain as she goes to yank it aside. “Look, I know my father would probably let me go out if we *really* wanted to, but—”

“But nothing!” Mimi sighs, then grins at me. “I didn’t want to play it. I didn’t want to spoil the surprise,” she says, raising

her hands and stepping back from me.

I grab my handbag reflexively, “Ruin what?” I ask, looking around as if we’re about to be set on.

Mimi’s face lights up, then her eyes sharpen and she grins like a cat. “I spotted this earlier while you were obsessing over yourself.” She takes her phone out and opens an app. It loads and a picture of the dress I was just wearing comes up. Then a different one. And another different one. They’re all Piovere’s ...

“Piovere is having a secret show this evening. Here, in Miami Beach. At *Hush*,” she says. “Your favorite company in the whole world. Right here. In Miami Beach. And we’re going!”

“At Hush?” I whisper excitedly, my voice jumping up an octave. “Hush, as in—”

“Right around the fucking corner!” Mimi says. Her face is luminescent, she can taste the victory of having finally got me out.

All my life I’ve wanted *something* outside of the mob. As the daughter of Don Russo, and heiress to the second biggest Italian family down here in Miami, after the Colombino’s of course, my life has been lived behind closed doors of security and well intentioned guarding. I know my father isn’t really trying to protect me from the world, he taught me to shoot a pistol for my tenth birthday, but any time I’ve spoken about doing things outside of the family, as in, me being a fashion designer, it’s been a firm *no*.

“Yes,” Mimi says, her eyes wider than mine. She squeezes up close. She expands the post and whispers to me. “There’s gonna be a catwalk, free drinks, photos. Their key designer Tommy Lippe will be there too ...”

“T-Tommy Lippee?” My chest tightens and I can barely breathe. I’ve dreamed of his designs and meeting him for years. He’s a genius. He’s a miracle worker. He’s a—

Colombino.

Obviously I know, and have been reminded plenty of times, that Piovere is a brand owned and used by the Colombino family to traffic drugs and money. But Tommy Lippee, despite his heritage and blood, is a complete master of the cloth.

“Imagine it,” Mimi says. “We’re in the club, the catwalk is happening. The dresses you dream of are walking by, then Tommy Lippee is there too. He asks you to his VIP table. You chat and play coy ... And eventually it’s him who takes your virginity after all these years!”

“Mimi!” I slap her wrist but she giggles like a schoolgirl. “Let’s go to this,” she jabs her phone. “Before you start overthinking and ruining all the fun. It begins in thirty minutes.”

“But what will we do about—” I nod my head at the guards.

Mimi smiles. “Leave that to me. I’ve hooked up with Rocko enough times to think he’ll want some action if I just,” she winks and cocks her hip up.

“And Seb?” I say, cocking my own hips to the side.

Mimi rolls her eyes. “Do I have to think of everything?” She frowns though. “I’m not sure about Seb actually.” Her face falls. “Dammit Soph, can’t you just hook up with him already. Guys are so much easier to control when they think they’re gonna get some.”

“Hey, hold on. Do you still have that repellent spray you have for pervy guys?” I ask, already taking her handbag. “I’ve got an idea.”

“Sure, it’s the green bottle. It says that it’s a perfume, but it’s pure skunk.”

I find it and dab some of the repellent on my wrist. “Follow me.”

“I’m not sure how easy that comes off,” Mimi whispers.

We pull the curtain aside and I make a face of disgust. Sebastian and Rocko turn around expectantly, their already tight suits bulge at the smallest bit of action. Rocko grins at Mimi and she grins right back.

“We have to go to the toilet,” I say. My face is one of disgust. “I think some grandma got a little too excited in the changing room watching her grand-daughter try on a dress or something, cause—” I hold up my wrist to Rocko and Seb’s faces. They get a whiff of my wrist and both gag.

“*Dio mio*,” Seb says. “What the hell is that?”

“I dunno,” I say. “But it’s on the couch. We’ve both been in it. We gotta wash our hands,” I say, pulling Mimi along.

Rocko is still wiping his eyes and trying to sniff his own cologne, as Seb answers for them “Not getting that dress then?” he asks hopefully.

I shake my head. “No, not today.” then after a pause. “But you know father’s rule! We’ll meet you at the toilets,” I say, pulling Mimi along. We don’t wait for his reply and run through Nathan’s shop and out the doors into the mall.

I know that Seb and Rocko will talk with Nathan and get the dress packed up anyway, it’s always father’s demand that I don’t come home empty handed. So I know we’ve got a bit of time.

“How come you never did that earlier?” Mimi laughs, as we run away, suddenly free and peeling out into the streets of South Beach.

“I don’t know,” I reply. “Maybe the reason wasn’t good enough.”

“Uh, excuse me?” Mimi says, looking at me out the side of her eyes.

“Please honey, I can see you any day. But a Piovare and Tommy Lippee?”

We both giggle and cross the street between cars full of people and taxicabs. People are everywhere and the street is pumping. The sun has set and the silhouettes of the palm trees linger before us. The air is hot and the scent of the street is full of food. We weave down the sidewalk, giggling like idiots and not looking back for Seb or Rocko.

We pass a few hotels and cross another street, after another corner the neon haze of Hush appears. The black building is divided by a single pink neon line. It eventually spirals into a glowing finger pressed against a giant set of lips. *Hush!* Is written beside it.

My whole body is humming. I'm so close to seeing real Piovere dresses worn by real Piovere models.

Even if we're headed to an enemy family's club. *It's worth it.*

I can feel it, I'm going to be a fashion designer.

Chapter 2

Luca

“I just love the feel of a crisp fucking suit,” Marco says, rolling his shoulders and looking at himself in the mirror.

“Well, that one begins at ten grand,” I say, taking a sip of my rum.

“Probably why I like it,” Marco grins, looking at me through the mirror. “I mean, is it tailored for me or what?” He turns and looks at himself from different angles. “Look at this ass. This is the ass of a god.” He looks at me expectantly.

I roll my eyes and shake my head. “We’ve got bigger things to think about Marco,” I say.

We’re up in my office, overlooking the club through a one way mirror. Below the crew is setting up for the show tonight. It’s ingenious, one of my best ideas yet. I don’t like to gloat. But sometimes ... I love to gloat. I take another sip of my drink.

“So you wanna go over it again?” I ask.

“Not really,” Marco laughs. “We’ve done nothing but discuss tonight for the last two months.” He steps away from the mirror and rubs his nose. He must’ve brought some coke with him.

“Well I want to,” I grunt. I don’t react to Marco rolling his eyes and folding his arms. Had it been anyone else, I would’ve lost my head and began screaming at them. But I’ve known Marco for years. We’ve been friends since I was eighteen. He’s like a brother.

“Man, we know the plan. We’ve gone over it, and over it. I know. You know. The whole fucking family knows,” Marco says. “We all know which dress is what drug, what it represents and the quantities to order. I’ve updated all the special VIPs as to the order of showing too. You can trust me,” he finishes, sincerely.

I crack my knuckles and roll my head around in my hands. I know we’ve gone over it a million times. I know we’ve gone over it more than we needed to. I’m just nervous. I’m thirty eight fucking years old and *nervous*. Then again, nothing has ever had so much riding on it.

“Now,” Marco says, putting hands on hips. “There’s ladies down there that weigh half your weight and suck dicks like a vacuum cleaner. I say you take the advantage to blow some steam off. I know I will tonight.”

I finish my rum and walk to the window. I don’t reply to Marco as I watch everything happening below. If everything goes to plan, this will cement my position in the family. Surely

after this, my father will finally let me step up to being the Don. He's hinted at it enough times.

From our eagle's nest I can see the backstage we've made behind some quick curtains that have been hung from the ceiling. Adrian's there organizing everything like a military sergeant, and Tommy Lippee, our in-house designer, is floating around with a Martini in one hand and a cigarette in the other. The two of them are the shortest men in a sea of women all heads taller, but as viscous as vipers.

I snort a laugh and then look at the large cavernous space that is Hush. We bought the club a few years ago as an experiment to bring in some legitimate money. As well as laundering a shit ton through it as well, but Hush has become its own thing. It became a success without us even lifting a finger. That credit goes to Dee, the Manager. This is her baby, really. I can see her working behind the bar, running the workers in circles to get set up for the night.

This evening is mostly a private event, but so Piovere looks legit we made it a secret show too. Only announced it hours ago. It's a high ticket entry, which will keep out the riff raff, but even then, it'll sell out. It's gonna be a big night.

"Why haven't you fucked Dee yet?" Marco asks, coming up beside me and talking with his usual candor.

"Cause I don't mix business and pleasure."

"Well you should learn to," he says, adjusting his suit pants. "It's a lot more fuckin' fun, and lot less fuck'n boring." He grins and goes to the side table, pours himself another rum,

pivots and tops mine off too. “You know soon you’ll realize, you need to relax. Stop being so close to the grindstone. Let off some steam and learn to trust others.”

“You sound like my father,” I say, taking the glass of liquor from him.

“He’s a smart man,” Marco says. “Plus, not as grumpy as you.”

“I’m not grumpy,” I snap a little too quickly.

“Well if you ain’t grumpy, you’ve definitely got a big spoon jammed up somewhere,” Marco laughs.

There’s a cheer from behind us and we turn to see the doors opening. The music jumps up in volume and people start pouring in. The bass vibrates up through my shoes and my suit tightens. Even with a late announcement, even with a high ticket entry, it’s still busy as anything. I spot Maurice entering immediately and watch as he’s led to the VIP section. He’s as big as a house and built like a solid wall. Maurice is a runner we know who moves drugs from Fort Lauderdale all the way up to New York. He takes no shit from anyone.

“Looks like it’s game time chief,” Marco says, slapping me on the back and downing his rum. “Let’s get down there.”

“Do I need to remind you who runs this show?” I ask, half annoyed at his casualness now.

“Not particularly, cause I know it’s you,” Marco says. “Which allows me to have some fun.”

He turns and waltzes to the office door and opens it, the music blares into the room and suddenly the bass that I've been feeling in my body turns bright in my ears. The piercing synth drives into a latin feel beat and soon all I want to do is dance.

I make myself watch Marco leave and then observe the floor once more. I'm nervous, but I'm not so young as to let it affect me. I've done big things like this before. But hopefully this time, if all goes right. It leads to even better things.

I finish my rum and leave the office too, locking it behind me. The music swells and soon the DJ begins upping the Piovere brand and the evening's run time. People cheer and I can feel the energy in the room getting hot. It *is* going to be a fun night.

In no time I'm passing Dee and the bar staff, offering a wink of good luck, then climbing the steps and ducking behind the curtains for the changing area for the models. I'm suddenly surrounded by gorgeous women. There's more tanned skin here than a leather yard and most of it is showing, as the models run back and forth making last minute adjustments. I hold myself from staring and look for Adrian, the man running the *actual* show.

I spy him by the entrance to the catwalk, he's marking off his own checklists. Certain dresses are highlighted, representing the special cargo dresses, and others have asterisks next to them.

“Adrian, my man,” I say, hugging him from the side.
“Where’s Tommy gone?”

“Thank god someone here is taking this seriously,” he says, not looking up. “I’ve just had the pleasure of talking with your right hand man.” He looks at me as if Marco’s a dog I have to reel in. “And as for Tommy, I don’t care. I just kicked him out. He was demanding that one of the girls lose another pound. The poor thing hasn’t eaten since last week to begin with.”

I shake my head at Tommy but can’t help a laugh at Marco.
“Yeah, well Marco is a little excited for tonight,” I say.

“A *little*?” Adrian says, pulling the mic away from his cheek and marking off another list. “The man practically had a hard-on strutting through the changing area.”

“I’m surprised he didn’t,” I laugh.

Adrian rolls his eyes and gets back to double checking the roster “Either way, we’re good to go. Maurice has arrived and already made orders of a few things. Sent ahead earlier. I’ve asterisked those. I believe Wendy-Lee just arrived with her entourage too.” He nods to the entrance.

We both lean out between the curtains and view the crowd in the dark. The room is packed, people are pushing closer to the catwalk. It’s the first time Piovere has done something like this. But it won’t necessarily be the last.

I spy Wendy-Lee, the Middle-Aged Mauler, as she’s called, making her way to the VIP zone. She buys and sells high

quantities of drugs to the retirement villages here in the Sunshine State.

“We’re on in five,” Adrian says, holding up his hand.

It’s my queue to leave, the music swells again and the beat changes. Suddenly it’s a bouncy number and a few of the models begin dancing as they prepare themselves. I let my eyes linger on a few women as I make my way back to the dance floor. I better check in with the VIPs before anything else happens. They’re my special guests afterall, and even if the whole party is a sham, I need to play the part. I wish a few of the girls goodluck and make my way to the exit. I notice the eyes following me too. My father’s words from the day before ring in my ear. *You need to settle down and find someone you can love. None of the hussies you bring home and then have my valet service drop off in the morning.*”

I laugh and descend the steps back into the club and begin wiggling through the bodies. I can see Marco already up with the VIP people chatting away. He nods and waves at me and I see Wendy-Lee trapped with him, she gives me narrowed eyes, a clear request to save her. I can’t help but laugh. A light feeling has entered my chest, all the stress of the last few weeks feels like it can finally roll off. I squeeze between a group of people and suddenly find water splashing my face and suit.

No, not water.

I know a vodka sunrise when I smell it.

My blood boils immediately. I turn and look at one of the models in pure anger. My heart surges and wrath floods my veins. Except ...

Her face is angelic. Pure beauty. My heart flips from anger to confusion, then to pure lust. I don't recall seeing *her* out the back. I don't recall seeing her face in the booklet we had for vetted models either. But she definitely must be one of ours. She's amazing. She's—I feel like an idiot all of a sudden. I can't even find words to describe how beautiful she is and can only stare like an idiot.

Then I remember who I am.

Then I remember that she's just spilt a fucking six-dollar drink on my twenty-grand tailored suit.

“What the fuck are you doing out here?” I snap. “Why aren't you behind the curtain getting ready with the other models?”

But her face just turns white. She points to herself and stutters, “Me?”

Chapter 3

Sophie

His face is livid, a demon staring deep into my eyes. I'd shake if I wasn't so scared. The music swells louder and louder until the synth bloom cuts out.

It's complete silence for a split second.

Just as he yells, "Did I fucking stutter?"

I flinch, and a few people turn but the music kicks back in and models flood the stage. The show has begun!

I'm wide eyed and completely unsure of what is happening. "I'm—I'm not a model," I stammer. "I'm just here for Piovere," I gesture at the stage.

His head swivels around, then back to me, eyes bulging. Realization floods his face. And suddenly, instead of a demon I'm looking at what could only be described as a god. He's simply beautiful. His chiseled jaw and slicked back hair. His mouth is gaping open and his cheeks have flushed red.

"I'm so sorry," he says, leaning towards my ear. "I just assumed you were in our show because you're so beautiful."

“*Your show?*” I whisper. He grunts that he didn’t hear me. “I said, I didn’t realize this was your show.”

He waves me off and says something under his breath. “Let me buy you a drink.” He directs me towards the bar and we cut through the sea of people. His grip is firm but *not* hard. He keeps looking at me out the side of his eye, a small grin sitting on his lips. Lips I’d love to taste—

Sophie! I chide myself. Then I realize I’ve just told myself off for liking a man. *Oh god, I really am a prude.* I laugh and wish that Mimi could hear what I was thinking. The man thinks I’m laughing at something though and leans in towards me. “Sorry?” he says.

“Nothing,” I say. “I’m just so happy I’m at a Piovere show. I’ve dreamed of coming to one of their catwalks forever. I love the brand and Tommy Lippee. I’ve wanted to be a fashion designer my whole life.”

His face lights up. “Well maybe after I buy you a drink I can introduce you to Tommy.”

My brain goes blank—like a friggin empty hall! There’s dust and everything coming out of the woodwork, stopping me from speaking anything intelligible. So instead of thanking him, I babble like an idiot. He just laughs.

“You’re welcome,” he smiles, and it is the warmest thing I’ve ever experienced.

We get to the bar and he signals to the manager, she grins and leans in. He orders something for us and she looks at me

with apprehension, then walks off. Apparently not too impressed.

“My friend thinks you’re underage,” he says. “You’re not, are you?”

“No,” I say quickly. A little too quickly probably. Can he tell I’ve barely ever been out. As in, *never*. “I mean,” I say, more casually. “I’m twenty-two.”

His eyes light up, and his tongue flicks out, licking the corner of his lips. “And do you always spill your drinks on men?”

“No, but not all men are worth spilling their drink on. Not all men know Tommy Lippee.” *Where the hell did that come from?* I’m about to excuse myself and fall into the ground with embarrassment, when he laughs again.

Even over the music his laughter is like the sweetest bell I’ve ever heard. My heart flutters and I can’t believe I’m standing here with him. I can’t believe he hasn’t fled from *me*.

“No, I suppose not,” he says. His friend returns and gives us our drinks. “I’ve ordered you another sunrise,” he says. “Since your last one spilled, I figure you deserve to try at least one of the drinks in our establishment.”

“Thank you,” I say, taking the drink delicately. We look at each other for a few seconds, time slows to eternity. Then he winks, and takes a sip of his drink. It reminds me to drink too.

“Are you here with friends?” he asks, as we move away from the bar.

“I was,” I say. “But she’s left me. It’s okay, I have plenty of dresses to look at. I’m just in *awe* of the designs this year.”

“You’ve been keeping a sharp eye on us then?” he asks.

“Only all the time.” I cringe inside, am I always this awkward? He looks so much older, it’s not like he’d be interested in me. I realize I’m not talking. “But you know, not like a stalker or anything. I just really like the designs. And well, Nathan’s shop here in Miami Beach always has the latest dresses. I tried on the new sundress today. The—”

“Valentina,” he says. His eyes light up and I can’t tell if he’s impressed or amused. “You have connections,” he says. “Nathan only uniforms a select few of what he has. He must like you.”

“Oh don’t get me started on Anthony,” I gush. “He’s got everything! And his taste is amazing. He doesn’t have everything, of course. He doesn’t like everything.”

“I could be listening to him right now,” the man says, closing his eyes.

I shut up, suddenly turning red.

“Oh don’t stop,” he says. “I like Nathan. I personally dropped that dress off today. It’s nice to know that something so beautiful I have touched has also graced your beautiful body.”

He stares into my eyes as he says it. I swoon and feel my face burn. “I, um—” Begin to say something, anything, but can’t find the words ...

Does he like me?

“Now,” he says suddenly. “I think I’ve kept you from your evening long enough. If you’re still around at the end, or if we see one another, please don’t hesitate to say hi.” He smiles, and again it’s the most heart throbbing thing I’ve *ever* experienced. I can’t even tell how much older he is than me really ... But he obviously felt the need to make me feel like I’m not an idiot. I swoon even more.

But before I can thank him he turns and leaves. His suit-dressed, god-body cuts through the crowd. People move around *him* as he makes his way to the VIP area.

Mimi appears out of nowhere, fanning her face. “Holy shit, Soph! That guy was fucking hot!”

We both stare after him as he climbs the stairs and begins shaking hands.

“It was definitely something,” I say.

“Something?” Mimi splutters. “He couldn’t keep his hands off you. They were holding you so delicately too ...”

We’re staring openly. I swallow again. I take another sip and realize the warmth that I’d been feeling around my shoulders was his arm. It had felt so welcoming, so at home there, that I’d forgotten all about it.

“If anyone is going to swipe your v-card, Soph, it better be him,” Mimi says.

“I agree,” I say before I can shut up.

Mimi bursts out laughing and spills her drink on some nearby girls. We both start giggling like idiots.

“You think he liked me?” I ask innocently, more in disbelief than a true question. “Oh he wanted to fuck you. Even those out in space with fucking telescopes saw the fuck eyes he was giving you.”

I begin burning up again.

“Forget these dresses,” she says, pushing me along. “Go after him!”

“He said he could introduce me to Tommy Lippee,” I say, pushing back and holding us on the dancefloor. The heat of all the bodies has created a humidity. Through it all, I glimpse the models strutting up and down the catwalk. “How crazy is that?”

“Crazy?” Mimi splutters. “No, what’s crazy is that you’re thinking about some designer who only likes dudes when the hottest fucking man on the planet wants to dick you down!”

The music drops again, just after Mimi’s joke. We look at one another, and for a few heartbeats, it doesn’t even seem true. Then the music returns, and I can’t help but burst out laughing again. We both do. With our arms around one another we double over, barely able to breathe. I’m so happy. So nervous and excited, embarrassed and in pure disbelief that I’m at a Piovere fashion show.

We end up getting more drinks and watching the show. Except the whole time I feel his eyes watching me. And I

openly watch him back. I barely pay attention to the show now. I barely pay attention to Mimi. In the end, as he descends down onto the dancefloor, I feel Mimi lean in close against me. “Good luck,” she says, and then disappears.

I turn to find her, but only see the face of the man as he appears from nowhere. He stands before me, his jacket off now. I can see his rippling muscles and his chest hair is visible under his tight shirt. It’s made of linen. *Linen*. Can he get any hotter?

“You know, I realized that I never introduced myself,” he says. “My name is Luca.”

I offer up my hand. “I’m Sophie,” I say.

He looks down at the hand, his cheek dimpling as he grins. He leans in, hugging me to his body and whispers into my ear. “Sophie, can I interest you in a private drink?”

My heart flutters, and before I can say yes, or can tell my damn legs to start working, he pulls me along. We move through the crowd and glide up stairs behind a curtain I’ve never noticed. We come upon a locked door and he takes a set of keys from his pocket and opens up. We move into his office, and before I know it, we’ve gone from being surrounded by music and people to just the two of us.

“It gets a bit loud down there, doesn’t it?” he says.

I nod. Then realize he can’t *hear* that. “Yeah, totally,” I say. I am literally the biggest idiot this evening. “I really enjoyed tonight.”

He looks up from his drinks cabinet, smiling. “Yes, it has been a success. It’s the first time we’ve done this.” he hands me a drink and he takes a sip of his own. “I’ve only got rum up here. I hope that’s fine.”

“Rum is great,” I say. “My father imports rum.”

“Oh really?” he says. “Who with?”

I avoid the tricky family questions and walk to the window. “Do you often watch people here?” I ask.

He laughs and shakes his head. “No, I’m not here often. I have a manager who runs Hush. But tonight I’m here because Piovere is here.”

“So you work for Piovere?” I say, my eyes bulging.

He chuckles. “You could say that.”

We talk about random things and laugh for the next half hour. The show ends and people begin exiting the building. There’s an after party somewhere else, Luca tells me. I nod, feeling comfortable just to watch people. The awkwardness that has plagued me all evening has finally disappeared with a few drinks. Eventually, we sit down on his couch, far away from the window.

“So you want to be a fashion designer, Sophie?” he says, putting a warm hand on my thigh.

“I do,” I sip my second drink. “There’s just something about creating a vision. You think of something, picture it, draw it, design it and make it! It’s just so—I don’t know— it’s—”

“Satisfying,” Luca says, his other hand propped up under his chin. He holds his own head so delicately. He’s tanned and has dark hair, but his eyes are even darker and more alluring.

His hand slides a bit higher, and I don’t mind. “Yeah,” I say, leaning towards him. “I mean, I’ve never really done any big designs. Nothing crazy.”

“We all must start somewhere,” he offers.

“Yeah,” I say. I feel like I’ve said yeah too much in the last five minutes. I lean a bit closer to him though. His lips look irresistible all of sudden.

“You know, I have to say, you’re a very beautiful woman Sophie,” he utters barely above a whisper. “You take words from me without me wanting to say them. You make me nervous.”

I swallow, my chest practically splits in half. “Me?”

“Do you know the power you have?” he asks.

He leans in and kisses me.

It. Is. Hot.

His lips press against mine and the feeling is electric. A tingle passes between us. His firm hands move up to my shoulders and arms, squeezing ever so gently. I lean against his lips and then pull back, gasping to breathe. I pull him back into me and we roll into the couch, our bodies pressing together. His scent is like heaven, his hands soft. His lips keep exploring mine, and soon I poke a tongue out and he reciprocates. Our energy doubles. I grab a hold of him. His

body is taut. His muscles tighten. Something in me clicks and I change. I don't feel so scared now, I feel sure of myself. Sure of what I want to *do*. Sure of what I want to not *be* anymore.

His hand roves across my body and soon settles on my breast, squeezing my hard nipple in his fingers. I nervously reach down for him, feeling his rigid cock inside his pants. His member nudges in my hands. I giggle.

He pulls away, a smile at his lips. "Is something funny?"

"No," I breathe. I feel him again. I bite my lip. He's big. A sudden fear of if I can take him enters my head. *Not like I'd know*. Suddenly my mind goes into overdrive. I start overthinking. I mean, it's not that I haven't wanted to have sex. I've explored with toys and masturbation. I've watched porn when no one was home. I've—

"Relax," he says. "Your body is tight. We can have fun here before going to mine."

"I can't stay," I gasp, as his hand delicately brushes my crotch.

"Then just a taste," he urges.

I smile back, but then my nerves return. "It's just, well—It's just I've never done this—" my mind goes blank. *Am I really going to say this?* "I've never done it—" and I look around the room.

"I've never done it in my office either," he laughs and gets up off the couch. He pulls me up with him. Brings me against

his body so that I can feel his hard erection at my back. “Just relax,” he whispers.

His hands continue to explore my body, roving up and down with firm squeezes, cupping me here and there. He takes a breast in his hand and begins rolling my nipple between his fingers again as his other hand slides up my dress and beneath my panties. I can feel how wet I am, and by his satisfied intake of breath, he can feel it too. He begins rolling soft circles around my clit. It immediately swells and hardens and I buckle at the hips. I groan involuntarily and he catches me. The only thing holding me up is his firm arm wrapped around my body, his hand circling my clit, and his rigid cock at my back.

“*Ohhhh,*” I shudder and begin to orgasm immediately. He pulls me harder against him and continues rubbing my clit. I orgasm harder, the blood races through my body intensely and pulses into my sex. I feel him breathing hard against my neck. We’re both gasping as I climax.

Being a fashion designer is the furthest thing from my mind. I think of nothing else other than how good this is. How *right* it feels. This night will be with me forever.

Chapter 4

Luca

The scent of her coconut shampoo still lingers in my mind. I can't believe it. I'm still wanting to smell it, that's the craziest part. Normally I hook up with a woman and that's it, I move on. But *she's* still on my mind. Maybe it's because she was the one that called it off first. Maybe it's because she hasn't been accepted on the chat app I told her to get?

I shake my head and try to push it from my mind. Try to bat away the delicate face that has been haunting my mind since she left, this isn't the time or place to be distracted. We're looking out over my father's personal gardens and dock from his personal window. South Beach is in the distance and we've got the window open. The gulls squawk as they eat and I can hear the waves lapping against the reef. It's beautiful. Except for the part where I'm being told off.

"And you're not even listening," my father says. "What'd I just say?"

I look back from the window. "I missed that sorry."

He rolls his eyes. “Probably drinking too much of my rum and enjoying too many of those women I tell you not to go after,” he says, sitting heavily into his chair. “When are you gonna take this seriously?” he asks, looking me in the eye.

“Excuse me?” I say. My blood rages. My heart pisses adrenaline and I go from being tired and daydreaming of a goddess to my heart hammering. “Seriously?” I snap. “I just closed one of our biggest deals *ever*. I did it right in front of a thousand people and we made more money in one night than we did in the final quarter of last year.” I can’t believe my father has just said this to me. “You know I take the family seriously.”

But my father grins, then shakes his head again. But it’s not a good grin. It’s a sad one. “You take business seriously. But the family? The Colombinos? We’re just another achievement for you.”

A slap to my face. “What the hell does that mean? You know I want to lead us. You know I want to be Don. You know —”

“I know you want the title of *Don*,” my father says. “But *being* a Don, being a *leader*, is more than being a bean counter.”

I crack my knuckles in silence and stand, just to do something. I obviously can’t hit my father. Anyone else and I would have. My head is pounding and the anger surging in me isn’t really anger, but confusion. I go to the window. I smell coconuts and watch the palms, but it’s too late for the calming

face of Sophie. “What the hell do you want from me? I’ve given my life to this family. I’ve given my life to these ventures and businesses we use to ferry our goods. I’ve built more and made more. We’re more successful now than ever. We *are* the biggest family in Miami. All of Florida, for that matter. But it’s not enough?” I’m standing over him, fists swinging at my sides as I pace away. I’m livid. But as far as my father is concerned, I’m probably just having a tantrum.

“Is that all?” he asks.

I slump down into my seat again, wishing that I had a drink with me. “I can keep going, but I know it won’t get me anywhere.”

“Anger never gets you anywhere,” he says. “You know that already.”

“But why?” I snap. “What have I done? I can’t do more.”

“I don’t want you to do more,” he says quietly. “I want you to do less. Your mother wanted you to do less.”

“Oh, not that again,” I say, waving him off. My heart still skips a beat. Thinking of Ma is awful. It hurts my heart to think of her face. To think of how her life ended. To think of all the unsaid things I’d wished I *had* said. It’s been two years ...

“Your mother was always better with you. We both know this,” he says, folding his hands in his lap. His thumbs begin to whir in small circles. “And maybe she could communicate what she wanted better than me.”

I snort.

“But despite all that, I am your father. I want you to do less and settle down. You’re thirty-eight. You’re single—”

“*You got no kids,*” I finish for him. “I’ve heard it many times, Pop.” Deliberately calling him the name he hates.

His lip curls slightly, and a snarl flickers in place. “What is the family if it doesn’t continue?”

I stand up now, if this is where the conversation is going, I’d rather leave. “I know, I know,” I say. “The family needs *family* to move forward.”

“Yet you keep bringing hussies back to the fucking house. Or wherever you and Marco seem to hang out.” He says Marco’s name with disdain. He thinks he’s a bad influence on me, yet some of the best ideas for our businesses have come from him. My father doesn’t know though, and doesn’t want to.

“Look, when the right woman comes—”

“She’ll be in your rearview mirror, getting dropped off by Eric,” my father says. “Look, I know I say this a lot, and I ain’t no fucking prude, but you *gotta* get a family. The *family* depends on it. You can’t pass the name onto thin air. You can’t pass our heritage onto a fucking nightclub.”

I glare at him.

“Look,” he says. “Your mother died visiting family. She’d gone back to the home country—”

“And she knew the dangers,” I say, before I can catch myself.

“You watch your tongue, you little shit!” my father snaps. He’s angry. Really angry. I see it in his eyes. Suddenly he’s not an old man. He could put me in my place with ease. His old nickname, *the Vice*, has meaning now. “Your mother went back because she fucking loved her family. Family does that. Family makes you act stupid. It makes you *make* decisions that aren’t logical. Love, for that matter, is what makes us have a reason to fight, to win, to exist. I know you’re successful Luca. I know you’re a great business man. But I also know you’re empty. God did not make you a vessel for a bank account. He made you one for a heart.”

He stares at me, unblinking, and I stare right back. My father has never been so candid. He’s never said so much about my mother’s death either. *His Andrea*.

“You think you’re the only one that misses her? You think you’re the only one that gets to be angry about it?” he says. “Well, I’m fucking pissed. I’m fucking furious. But I’m lucky that I had it. I’m lucky that for a beautiful forty years, I *knew* your mother. That’s what I want you to have, Luca. I don’t give a shit about kids. Kids will happen if they’re meant to. But love? Caring for someone? I see what your mother was and *why* she was. I’m so grateful for it.” He sighs and shakes his head. “This business will eat you alive. This business will turn you on your friends. If you just chase a dollar or a next win, you’ll never create loyalty.”

“When did you get so sentimental?” I ask, a little too condescending.

“When I fuck’n knew I had to,” he snaps back. “Being a Don isn’t a title, or making a profit. It’s more than that. Now —” He swivels and looks out his window. “Leave me. Go earn yourself another medal, sell a dress, fuck a goat for all I care. You’ve made me angry enough as it is.”

I stand there for a few beats. Suddenly I regret every word I’ve just said. It always comes to this, we argue, we butt heads. Then I leave.

I turn away to the door, open it and think to say something to my father, but he’s already picked up his drink as a sign to not say anything. But I do. “Dad, I—”

“If you don’t heed my advice,” he says. “You won’t be the next Don.”

My heart practically stops



A text from Marco comes through, *We still on?*

I shoot a reply back. *Of course.*

I’ve cooled down and then heated back up from my father’s lecture. I understand where he’s coming from, I really do. But I also think he’s completely fucking nuts and still trying to grieve the loss of his wife. Sure I’ll settle down at some point. Sure I’ll have some kids, at some point. But not with him

breathing down my neck. Not with him taking the fucking kingdom from me!

I exhale in anger. It's half at him, and half at the goddess that hasn't been accepted through my request yet in the app. It's bugging the shit out of me. I immediately regret asking her to use an encrypted app. Why didn't I just get her to add me on Instagram?

But that would've led to more questions, like *why do I have an alter ego?* Normally women are stumbling over themselves to get in with me. And she's still silent? She's said nothing!

I open my phone again and check the app, still nothing. I wish for the millionth time that her profile wasn't private. Then I remember who I am.

I take a sip of my coffee and text Marco a few other things. I remind him that there needs to be plenty of booze and women. He replies, *Aren't there always?*

I need to get this off my mind. I've never had a girl stick with me like this. Then again, no girl has ever been so hot. Jesus, it was smoldering in my office last night. She came at the slightest flick of my finger. Her whole body convulsing against me, grinding against my hard-on and me practically coming too.

"Are you going to sit there all day?" Gammie asks. Gammie is my father's chef. She's practically my Grandma ... just without the blood.

"Sorry, Gammie," I say. "Just getting some coffee."

“Get it somewhere else. You stink like you’re club and I think it’s rubbing off on my bread.” She pats a small bowl nearby. “Now go on and get moving. Marco’s already put a call through to Maria down at Key West. It seems you two are partying.” She watches me with a stern eye.

Gammie feels the exact same way as my father about my relationship situation, except by not being blood, she feels she can only say so much. “I guess your talk with your father went well? Still haven’t got a clue?”

I laugh. “You know how it is. I just haven’t found her yet.” Except in my mind I see her again. Smell her coconut hair and hear her saying her name for the first time again. *Sophie*.

“Mmhhh,” Gammie says. “You probably met her and had her dropped off a long time ago. Now you have to settle with the second best. Or third. Or more truthfully, probably fifth best.” She winks at the last one.

I stand from her kitchen table and give her a hug. “Well at least *you* think so highly of me,” I say.

She smacks my butt and then pushes me away. “Get gone!” she says. “You’ve already given your father enough ulcers.”

“All I do is stress him out, huh?” I grin. “Guess someone has to.”

Gammie strolls back to her cooktop and causally stirs a sauce that’s been simmering and teasing my nostrils. “He’s proud of you in his own way.”

“He doesn’t seem to be.”

“He’s just trying to placate his own worries,” she says with a kind face. “We all have our inner demons.”

I smile awkwardly and feel it’s my cue to leave. If there’s anyone that can bring emotional demons up, it’s Gammie. She could have me blubbering like a boy in seconds if I stayed long enough. Which is why I grab a fresh roll and get out of her kitchen. She calls after me but I don’t answer.

I get in my car and head towards the gates, our yacht is docked in the port and it’s currently being stocked and overseen by Marco. We’ll set sail as soon as I arrive. Then to the Keys for a few days. Get away from everything, my father included.

I open *CageChat* once more as I head out the gates.

I see a little heart that someone has accepted me.

Along with a message.

My heart skips a beat and I fumble to open the message from Sophie.

What am I, twelve? But I don’t care.

“Hey! :D” it says.

Chapter 5

Sophie

When I sneak through my window in the early hours, the warm air lingering as I stumble along to my bed, the last thing I expect to see is my father. But it's him sitting there asleep in my recliner, head dropped to the side with a slight snore. My heart melts looking at him, but I'm also aware of how everything has just changed in my life.

And not because I've just hooked up with one of the most beautiful men I've *ever* seen. It's because I know it is possible to be a fashion designer.

Partying at the club with Mimi pulled me out of the Mafia world I've been living and hiding in all my life. I was impulsive. I was daring. More than anything else, I had fun.

But as I slide into bed, watching my father for any signs of him waking, I wonder how he would understand. Or if he could?

I mean, he's not a robot. He is human.

Except immediately my mind brings up countless meetings and businesses I've watched him create and destroy, all with the power of his words. That's what my father has the ability to do, create and destroy. All with the power of his *words*.

I sigh and pull my quilt high, there's so much I want to say to him. I could even risk it, with him being asleep. It's not that I'm afraid of my father, I just understand how the situation will play out. I'll say what I want to do, and he'll say no.

That's it.

Except now I've been poisoned with the vision. I saw what it was like outside this life. I experienced it. I felt it. And it was all possible because of Mimi taking me to a Piovere show. A show where I saw not only what was possible, but I met a man who could help *make it* possible.

Luca is the most beautiful, charming, *hot* man I've ever had the pleasure of meeting. And the pleasure was *definitely* there.

I suppress a giggle. My phone vibrates and I snuggle deeper into the covers. I hope that it's the app that Luca told me to get, accepting me.

But it's Mimi. *So, how'd it go?* she asks.

I bite my lip and text back. *God, we had fun. We traded ...*

Mimi responds immediately. *Traded what?? Did you lose your v-card?*

I suppress another giggle and jiggle under the covers. I feel like a kid staying up late. Not a twenty-two year old woman in her bed. Even if my father is watching over me, in a way ...

I begin typing again, but my father snorts, then coughs. He adjusts himself in the seat and then he's back to snoring again.

I bite my lip. *No*, I text. *But we traded*. I added a winking emoji.

I look at my father again and my heart melts for the second time, I wonder if I should text Seb or Rocko that I'm home safe. Knowing my father, which I do, they're most definitely still out in the city searching endlessly for me. I can already see that for the rest of the year they'll be doing nothing but port patrols and midnight shifts. They'll be punished because I escaped to party with Mimi. They'll be punished while I was freed.

Mimi texts. *Traded what? Traded WHAT woman??*

I snort and text back. *Can't a woman keep her secrets?*

I don't even have a chance to lock my phone before she's responded. First she responds with just a few dots. Then again, more dots. Finally she sends emoji of an eggplant and water droplets...

YOU GOT YOURSELF SOME DICK!! She writes in all-caps.

I press my hand to my mouth to stop the laughter coming out. I'm shaking with mirth, so I bury my head under the sheets so that I don't wake my father. I try to stop myself from remembering. I try to stop myself reliving the last few hours of my life, because if I do, I doubt I'll be sleeping any time soon. Not with what I've seen and tasted ...

But it's too late. I feel excitement tingle across my body. Our passion and energy was the hottest thing I've ever *felt*. Done ... I mean, we didn't have sex, but ...

I gulp and think of replying to Mimi, but then I close the app and open the one Luca told me to download. It's the safe and secure messaging app he uses. You have to be added by a person to get it. He added me and I have to wait until my name is drawn. Supposedly the app only adds so many people a day. It's a part of how they encrypt each user. I'm aware of *CageChat*; our bodyguards use it and most of my father's workers do as well. It's great for illegal stuff ... not so much a hookup you want to message *right now*. As I've never had the need, I've never made an account. I suddenly want to kick myself.

The app still has a loading symbol next to my name. I sigh and snuggle further under the covers. I'm exhausted. I'll just have to check it again in the morning.

I hear my father move again, then he falls into a deeper sleep

As I lie there in the dark, feeling slightly woozy and still drunk, I can't believe it. I can't believe that in the space of one night, I had my first drinks, went to my first fashion show, and hooked up with the hottest man ever. I'm giddy and excited. I could be twelve years old, but I don't care. I'm too happy to.

elle

When I awake in the morning I'm literally coming from a wet dream. I suppress a groan and cover my mouth. I feel how wet my panties are and the visions of Luca are still moving through my head. I can still see his cock, hard behind his trousers. My legs are still weak and I can feel the urge deep in my belly, like a hunger I've never wanted more in my life.

After he'd made me come, feeling his body against me, feeling his rigid cock against my back ... It just hadn't been enough.

Am I still in my bed?

I hadn't even thought about it. Not what I'd do to him or how. I don't even know what he was expecting, I just wanted to please him. I wanted to taste him. I *wanted*—

I shake my head and make myself stop. I open my eyes to remind myself I'm in my room and that *my father* could still be across from me. I look to the side desperately and thank God that my father isn't sleeping there. *That* would've been embarrassing. The last thing I need is to wake from a wet dream and see my father. I shudder and check my phone.

There's a few messages from Mimi and a whole slew of jokes about me and Luca. Mostly to do with me and Luca's dick. I giggle again and just text a winking emoji.

I yawn and stretch, looking around my room I can see that my father has woken and tidied a few things. He's straightened things but left it mostly undisturbed.

All except a note that lies on the recliner he'd slept on.

I gulp and get out of bed quickly, making my way to it. I pick it up and read it.

Meeting this afternoon - my office at two o'clock. We need to discuss your future.

This is it. This is my end. I'll never escape. I groan. This *can't* be the end. Not when I've just glimpsed what life could be.

I want to text Rocko or Seb and know how bad it is. But I'm sure if I text them they won't exactly be happy with me, plus, they'll probably inform my father that I'm up. I climb back into my bed feeling deflated. Just as everything was looking up? I curse myself and look at the clock. My eyes go wide. It's already half past midday. I've been sleeping the day away!

Which means that the note for a meeting this afternoon, is actually, pretty much, right *now*.

I swear and get out of bed. *What am I going to do?* I look at my phone. I reread my texts to Mimi, wondering if there's any reasons I can use to escape. She hasn't said anything as of late other than her jokes. I'm sure the security has been doubled already though. There's no way out. I can feel it.

I unlock my phone, shaking my legs and wanting to be a kid and have a tantrum again. It feels so unfair. But there's a new notification. One that hasn't been triggered, but is showing on the screen. It's *CageChat*.

I fumble my phone and drop it. I go to catch it and my stupid foot boots it across the floor. It slides across the carpet

and into the bathroom. I huff and follow after it. I did need to pee, I suppose. I pick the phone up and gasp in joy. I giggle and dance. I immediately open a chat with Luca and text him.

I lock the screen and start pacing. How quickly will he answer? Would he answer? Why would he? I could just be another hook up to him? I look at my phone, he hasn't texted me yet. I feel like I'm being squished between two planks of wood. I sit heavily onto my toilet, my bladder suddenly bursting with the need to be relieved.

My phone vibrates.

It's *him*.

I open the app.

Hey yourself, Luca says. *What're you up to?*

My heart races. I'm suddenly an idiot and can't think of a single thing to say to him. Instead, I text Mimi immediately. *Mim! Wake up! Wake up now! He's texting me.*

I wait for what seems an eternity until Mimi finally replies. I'm already up! *What are you on about?* Then after a few beats. *Whatttt??*

I grunt in frustration and text her back about Luca and the app. The penny finally drops for her and she replies, *OH MY FUCKING GOD!* This text is followed by countless eggplant emojis and water droplets.

Dick queen! She says.

Stop! I text. I almost groan in frustration. *What do I sayyyy?*

A few moments go by. An eternity. I bounce my legs in frustration. I swap back to the app with Luca. He's still waiting for me to text back ...

I go back to Mimi. *What do I say!?*

What does he want? She asks.

He wants to know what I'm up to? I say.

Mimi sends me rolling eyes. *Are you twelve?*

I groan and text back for her to stop being silly. She replies, *Just be honest. Be you. But be a cooler version.*

What the hell kind of crappy advice is that? But that's all I've got to go off of, so ...

I pull up the chat with Luca. *Just woke up,* I say. *You?*

The screen loads for a bit, informing me that Luca is typing. Then a smiley face comes through. *I'm headed to Key West. Piovere party on our yacht. Want to come?*

My eyes bulge and I'm grateful I'm sitting down. A nervous toot even comes out and echoes out of the toilet bowl. I laugh and realize how stupid I am. I text Mimi immediately.

He wants me to come on a yacht!! I say.

Mimi responds immediately. *On a scale of one to ten, how much do you trust him?*

I pause. *What?* I text.

Well it's two things, Mimi responds. *Either very fucking cool, or very fucking creepy.*

Oh shit I didn't think of that. I open the app back with Luca; he's still waiting for my reply. *Do I trust him?* I switch back to Mimi. *It's a Piovere yacht for the brand.* She responds immediately. *Still applies. You trust him?*

I pause now, looking away from my phone and looking out the window. The palm trees in our yard are still. The sea behind is a deeper shade of blue than the sky. But to me it's the same endless world awaiting for me to step into it. *I do trust him.*

I pull up the app with Luca. *Sounds great! Count me in.*

He responds immediately. *Can you be at the port soon?* he asks.

I look around the bathroom. I quickly finish my business and flush the toilet, I run to the window and see the guards outside. *No, I can't.*

I tell Luca as much. He sends back a frowning face. Then, *What about the helipad at the port?*

I see the face I'm making in the bathroom mirror; it's one of confusion. *What time?* I respond to him.

Whenever, he says. *I'll send my helicopter.*

I lose feeling in my legs and crash to the floor. Giggles immediately pour from me and I can't believe what is happening. I laugh until I feel light headed. *What a choice!* A meeting with my father, where I'll be spoken down to and told I can't dream about the life I want. Or a man who wants me to be *me*, and is sending a helicopter to pick me up!

I text Mimi immediately and she responds to send her a picture of all my swimsuits. I frown, and ask her, *Why?*

Just do it! She responds. *You CANNOT go on a yacht looking like a prude.*

I laugh and head back to my room. I take them all out and lay them on my bed and snap a photo. I send it to Mimi.

Girl, wear your most revealing bikini! She says. *There is a time in every girl's life where she must channel her inner slut.*

I can't help but laugh out loud at her joke. I feel giddy. I feel like I'm some girl in a romance movie or book, not the daughter of a Don.

And today, Mimi continues, you need to channel the slut! You're going on a yacht with countless other women (let's assume models).

I swallow. I hadn't thought of that. Suddenly fear drops into my belly and I feel silly. How would I match them?

Mimi texts. *Go with the orange bikini. With the tie strings on the side and besides. The orange offsets your tan well. You'll look fucking hot. If he doesn't want to take your v-card wearing that, I will.*

I burst out laughing and pick it up. I hold it over my body and look in the mirror. I've never worn this bikini. Mimi bought it for me last year, begging me to wear it with her to a pool party where she wanted to impress this guy she wanted to hook up with. But I chickened out. Was I going to chicken out now?

Are you sure? I text.

Honey, when I wore that, Brad tore it off with his teeth ... is all Mimi writes.

I think of Luca taking the bikini off me with his teeth. My heart flutters and my belly turns warm at the thought.

I return to the chat with Luca. *I'll get there as soon as possible!*

My heart skips a beat and I feel exactly the same as last night. Spontaneous, joyous, *alive...*

That is, until I realize I've got to sneak off the grounds of our mansion and avoid my father.

Chapter 6

Luca

She steps out of the helicopter and I feel like such an idiot. I've spent the morning brooding and being a grumpy asshole to most of the crew and models, despite Marco having organized the best trip yet. I've been sitting at the bar, my hands clawed to my phone waiting for her every message, even when I knew she was on the helicopter and on her way. I'd already wasted most of the three hour boat trip to the Keys by screaming at a waiter for dropping the crab salad and dip. All while Marco sat there snorting coke with models and sporting a blatant erect penis. Now, he is nowhere to be seen.

I almost laugh out loud at the thought now, but I stop myself.

Sophie is closing the helicopter door and coming towards me. She's wearing a light summer dress tied up behind the neck. The wind of the blades pushes the fabric against her body and sends her hair out in a fan. I see every inch of her. I suppress a groan. Her curves are just as I remembered, even better now in the sunlight. Her skin is radiant and she looks as

if she should be floating, not walking. But even then, in her tanned sandals on my timber yacht floor, she may as well be.

We smile at one another and my heart is humming. I try to remind myself I'm the heir to the Colombino Mafia Family, not a boy going on his first date. I feel just like a boy though, there's no other way to describe it. I'm a thirty-eight year old man with the reins of a mafia empire in his reach, and a woman has done this to me.

No, a *goddess* ...

"Hi," she says, leaning in for a hug.

"Hey," I say, hugging her back and kissing her cheek. She lingers ever so slightly. I take her by the hand down from the pad and we head to the pool area where everyone is splashing and tanning. Waiters stand with drinks and trays of food. My brain is blank, what the hell do I talk about?

But she's looking around in awe. "So, you own a yacht?"

I laugh. "Yes. Yes, I do." I place my hand on the small of her back and begin guiding her towards the bar. "Thirsty?"

"No, not yet," she says. "How about a tour?" She's looking around at all the other women with an odd look in her eyes. Surely she can't be insecure? Look at her! None of the women even compare.

"A tour it is," I say. "But I still need a drink." I keep my hand in my pocket to hide the shaking. "How are you feeling after last night?"

“Good,” she says. “A little tired, but completely energized to be partying on a Piovere yacht!”

I smile and look her up and down. “You’re magnificent Sophie. How lucky I am to have met you.”

She grins and leads me away from the bar without me having taken a drink.

“So you have a yacht. Do you party on it often?” she asks.

I laugh. “Enough to justify it. But we actually rent it out most of the year. It’s far easier for expenses, and really, we only use it for the occasional shoot.” I rub her shoulder. She responds with a hesitant hand that brushes my pec. I look down at it.

She turns slightly red and laughs. “That was so *unsmooth*,” she jokes.

We both laugh. It’s good to know I’m not the only nervous one.

“Would you like to see inside?” I ask. “We’ve got twenty luxury rooms, spas, private and shared dining, and a cinema. Lots of areas for fun ...” I smile and swing my arms wide.

I watch her trace my figure and arms. A few of my tattoos have shown. I already know that women like me and my body, but suddenly her attention makes me proud of my body.

She nods. “Sounds fabulous. I’ve always liked areas where *fun* can happen.”

I take her hand and lead her to the main pool deck entrance. The sun is hot and the music is getting turned up louder.

We talk the whole time about unimportant things, joking and small talk. I'm trying to keep my eyes on the things I'm describing and pointing out, not the cleavage she's showing. Even then, I know she sees me peeking as I try to speak to her. We finally stop at the bar area, just the two of us. I'm talking about Piovere and our ideas for the brand. It's at that moment that she leans forward, propping her arms onto the bar and squeezing her chest into the small gap. I can't help but stare.

I stutter and lose my train of thought.

“You know, Sophie, if I'm not mistaken, I'd think you have intentions with me that are impure,” I say, a slight smile coming onto my lips.

She seductively grins back. “Really?” she asks in the most innocent voice she can muster.

But there's one problem, it's laced with *lust*.

I tense my fists under the bar. She can't get any hotter.

I move around the bar and take her into my arms in one motion and give her a kiss. Our lips meet and the electricity explodes. Sparks fly and I feel my body tense and my cock twitch.

I pull back. “I just realized I haven't shown you the master suites.”

She seems flustered, her smile falters and she swallows. “No,” is all she can manage.

I pick her up and she giggles and holds onto me. I jog us down the hall and kick open a door. Luckily an empty room. I let her down and we enter the room together. I turn and close the door. She moves to the bedside table, fidgeting with the tie of her dress at her neck. “Luca ...” she begins, but doesn’t finish. Instead she keeps picking at her dress.

I move to her and take her in my arms, trying to kiss her but she pulls away slightly. “Luca, I have to tell you something,” she says.

My heart suddenly wrenches to a stop. What does she have to tell me? Why has she become nervous and quiet all of a sudden? She’s completely changed. She’s completely—

She exhales and sits down on the bed. “I’m not experienced.”

My brows bunch together and she sees my confusion. “Uuumm,” I say.

She looks pained, like I’m drawing a blade from her abdomen. “I’m not experienced in sex. As in, I’m a—I still have my v-card,” she blurts out.

I’m still confused. *A v-card?* What the hell is that?

She’s completely different from the powerful and confident woman that I hooked up with last night. She’s looking at me and waiting for a response.

“I’m a virgin,” she finally says.

“That’s it?” I say, before I can think. Her face turns shocked, I sit down on the bed beside her and take her hand. “I

don't mean it like that. I mean, is that what's made you nervous?"

She nods. "I just—this whole boat is full of women who look—"

I take her cheek in my hand. I tilt her face up to mine. "It is not a problem," I say. "I don't want you to think that would ever stop me." I can't help but smile. "In fact, I must admit it's a little hot. It's been a while since—" I realize what I'm about to say and stop. "We'll take it slow."

She visibly unclenches, the tension flees from her body.

"Here, let's lie down on the bed," I say. We lay on the bed and I take her into the crook of my arm. We trade a few kisses and she's looking up into my eyes. My groin is slowly growing, the arousal in me waking up. It's exciting to do something like this, it's been so long since I was with a virgin. "As slow as you want," I say.

She nods and wraps her arms around me. We continue kissing, soft and passionate kisses. It's even more arousing than I thought. It's slower. More sensual. I feel myself beginning to throb.

Her hands start exploring my body and I take it as a cue to explore her. Our kisses become more passionate and soon our hands aren't as shy. She's becoming confident and safe. A buzz of emotion floods through me, like I'm being rewarded for a treat. I begin grinning as we kiss and she pulls back.

"What?" she asks, suddenly unsure. "Did I do something?"

“No,” I say, rolling her onto her back and getting on top. “No, never. It’s just so ...” I exhale a deep breath. “It’s very hot.”

“Really?” she says, her eyes going wide.

I nod and kiss her neck. “Very hot.” I kiss the other side of her neck. “But I want you to keep relaxing, okay? You’re doing great.” She nods and I grab her hips in my hands. I squeeze her cheeks and kiss her stomach. “So I’ll help you relax ...”

She doesn’t nod this time, just exhales a deep breath like I’ve just done. She watches me as I kiss down her body, making my way to her core. Then between her legs. I grab her dress in my hands and begin to move it up. “At any time if you want to stop or slow down, just say.” She smiles. “Beautiful,” I whisper.

I move her dress up and kiss the bare flesh of her legs. I kiss higher and make my way upwards towards her sex. I hear her breath turn shallow. I kiss down the other side of her legs, moving away. I slide my hands along the backs of her legs, taking her cheeks again in my hands and squeezing firmly. She bucks slightly into them and I kiss back up her legs.

I keep going ...

I kiss her lips above the panties and she gasps lowly.

“Good?” I ask.

“Keep going,” she whispers.

I take the delicate panties in my hands and begin sliding them down. She bends her legs and I rip them off, flicking them away. I run my hands along her legs again and then open them wide so that I can see her folds and clit. She's wet. My cock bulges in my shorts and I can feel pre-cum sticking to my underwear. I kiss back up her legs and slowly move in closer with each kiss.

She quivers against my lips. I feel the gooseflesh on her body. I lick her clit delicately, while still allowing my hands to move freely. She takes one and grabs ahold of my hand, squeezing firmly. I give another lick and she sighs with pleasure. I settle into a slow rhythm, moving in a circular fashion around her clit but always doing a slow stroke over her entrance too.

Her breathing changes and begins to deepen. I begin to lick harder, pressing against her clit with more force. Her hand is still gripping mine, becoming harder as she gets closer to orgasming.

She shudders once.

I go harder, increasing my rhythm and tightening the circles in which I'm licking her clit. She sighs with pleasure again and her body relaxes, her hand loosens in mine slightly. I keep my rhythm, my cock still throbbing in my shorts. I squeeze her ass again with my other hand and she bucks harder, pushing against my face.

Finally she shudders again and gasps. Her breathing becomes rapid. She bucks against my tongue. She becomes

even wetter and she grinds herself against my face as hard as she can. I concentrate completely on her clit and she stops breathing altogether. A great spasm floods through her body and her tension suddenly releases. I feel as if I could've orgasmed myself from how hot it was. She's gasping. She begins trying to pull herself away from me, suddenly very sensitive.

“How was that?” I ask.

But she's speechless. She beckons me to come up towards her and she kisses me. “That was amazing,” she utters.

We keep kissing and I feel her fumbling with my belt buckle. She feels how hard my erection is and manages to slide a hand into my pants. “I want to keep going,” she says.

We pull each other's clothes off and I'm soon kneeling between her legs with a rock hard erection. I take in the sight of her lying in front of me. She is every inch a goddess. Her form makes me hold my breath.

I lie over her, our eyes remaining locked on one another. I reach down and guide my erection towards her lips, teasing the entrance and slicking the tip of my head. We keep looking at each other and it only heightens the tension. I feel my whole body going rigid with anticipation.

“Ready?” I ask. “Comfortable?”

She nods and leans up to kiss me. Her lips are so soft, so luscious ...

I begin sliding in slowly, letting her feel my full size as I press forward. She exhales deeply and opens her eyes.

“Still comfortable?” I ask.

“It’s a little uncomfortable,” she says, slightly anxious.

“It’s okay, we’ll just take it slow.” I say. We stare at each other for what feels like a full minute, I move around a little so she can adjust to it. I feel as if I can’t get any harder, she’s so damn hot. I still can’t believe she’s a virgin. We kiss again and I begin to find a slow rhythm with my thrusts, sliding out slowly and sliding back in deeper each time. “Okay?”

She nods, but says nothing.

I begin kissing her neck, running my fingers up her arm then down her chest and belly. I kiss her lips.

I slide even slower, and reach down with my hand and begin massaging her clit. I kiss my way across her collar bone, down her chest and pull her nipple into my mouth twirling it with tongue and then giving the other the same attention.. After a few minutes of this, which is fucking *hot*, I feel her body relaxing. I start thrusting deeper each time. I massage with a bit more force.

I smile and lean down, kissing her jawline slowly. “You’re so beautiful. So fucking perfect.” I bring myself out completely and just tease the head and lips, barely entering her. She gasps as I plunge back in. “You alright?”

“I’m good,” she breathes, grabbing onto my back.

I start thrusting with a slightly faster rhythm. She's relaxing a bit more, as in she's not trying to throttle my dick off. My pre-cum is helping the slide, but it makes me stop, suddenly realizing I haven't put a condom on.

"No, don't stop," she says.

I groan into her shoulder and keep going. She wraps her legs around my waist and I adjust the angle, going down onto my side so that I'm not as deep inside her. She nods. "That's better," she says. I continue massaging her clit and we keep exploring each other.

In what feels like no time at all we're both nearing our peaks. She grabs a handful of the sheets and groans, the very sight of it pushes me off the edge. I groan into her shoulder as she starts coming, which sends me off the cliff in turn. I plunge fully inside her, coming as both of us gasp for breath. I roll us to our sides and we just lie there consumed by each other.



We clean up with a quick shower and get back into our clothes. I put on a pair of swimming shorts now to match the bikini she's wearing. The vision of her naked body still dances in my mind, and all I want to do is rip the clothes back off her body, but we've decided to go jet skiing.

I lower one off the yacht and into the water. "You ever been?" I ask, gesturing at it. She shakes her head. "I'll drive

then. Can you grab two life jackets?" I nod at the red jackets on the wall.

"Of course," she says, taking them off. She slides hers on and as she closes the clasp it presses her breasts together for one glorious split second.

I bite my lip. She catches me looking.

The smile on her face is priceless. She comes forward, walking slowly, and goes to hand me my jacket. She drops it suddenly. "Oh sorry, let me get that," she says. As she bends to pick it up, she brushes the bulge of my pants on the way down. It makes me twinge and I grab her ass in my hands.

"Uh uh," she says, wagging her finger. "We're riding jet skis."

I shake my head and it only makes me want her more.

"C'mon," she gestures at the jet ski. "Let's go riding."

"For someone who's never gone jetskiing you're very keen to get out there," I say, stepping down onto it and starting the engine.

She smiles and follows me down, She sits behind me and wraps her hands around my middle. "Well I'd never had sex on a yacht either until today, so I presume there's plenty of fun things I've never done."

My heart races and I feel her settle in behind me. "Ready?" I ask. I don't give her the chance to answer, starting the engine and twisting on the throttle in quick succession. I accelerate

forward and she squeals with joy, holding onto me as we ride away from the yacht.

We're well outside the main boating areas now, so it's just us. The yacht has been drifting between the islands for the last hour, the Captain having set a lazy course for us to experience the best sunsets the Caribbean has to offer. I take Sophie burning towards one of the islands, then turning around, I shoot past the yacht towards another chain of islands. We bounce on waves and splash in troughs, I can feel Sophie pressed against me. Every time we hit a dip, I feel her breasts jiggle against my back.

I take a sharp turn and head away from the yacht in a different direction. Maybe somewhere where we can get some privacy. Almost as if she can read my mind, she grabs my bulge for a hold.

"That's precious cargo," I say.

Sophie giggles in my ear. "I know," she says, sliding her hand under my shorts and beginning to stroke me. A certain pride runs through me now, as if her feeling safe and secure makes me a better person. And her feeling that way is a definite plus for me ...

We bounce along behind the island and then I turn towards another smaller one. My mind goes blank for a few moments as I feel myself growing and my shorts tightening. She strokes faster and begins kissing my neck. I'm holding onto the jetski for dear life. I'm gonna cum in my damn pants. I turn towards

the smallest island that is closest, I've had enough of this. I need to rip her bikini off and feel her again.

I hit a wave and the engine sputters.

Then it stalls.

We come to a sudden stop. I look down at the gauges. We're between two islands and completely hidden to the yacht, my cock is as hard as an anchor rope, and we're out of gas.

Chapter 7

Sophie

“**W**hat the fuck?” Luca suddenly says. The engine has faltered and stalled.

“Is everything alright?” I ask.

His body tenses, the blood drains from his erect penis and I slide my hands from his shorts. He turns slightly. “We’re out of gas. Someone forgot to fill the tanks on these. Even though they knew we’d be onboard.” His body tenses again and I can hear the anger growing in his voice. Suddenly being alone with him in the middle of nowhere begins to seem dangerous.

He growls and tries starting the engine again. It doesn’t turn over. He swears again and punches open a glovebox. Inside is a radio. He turns it on and switches through the static and channels. I can hear him breathing like a wounded beast.

“It’s alright Luca,” I say. “It’s just gas. Someone would’ve made an honest—”

“It’s not the gas,” he quips. “It’s the principle. The *respect*. Someone didn’t do their job.”

I hear the edge in his voice. It's the edge of men I've lived around all my life. Men with short fuses and even shorter levels of sympathy. I take my hands off his waist.

"There's no one on the radio," he snaps. He swears louder then. He tries a different channel. "Fuck!" he screams. "There's no one on the fucking radio. There's no signal from the yacht. It's not even on! Someone is being lazy."

My hair stands on end and I suddenly feel that being with him in the middle of nowhere was a very bad idea. "Maybe not lazy," I offer. "Maybe just an accident? Maybe someone is resetting the console and—"

"Resetting the console?" he says looking over his shoulder. "I have known plenty of lazy people that do things like this. This is what we do not tolerate at Piovere. Or in the Colombinos."

But the truth doesn't hit me straight away.

"We only get the best," he goes on. "Plenty of people will lose more than their jobs for this."

I'm shaking.

"No one does this to me," he says.

"It's not you," I say, feeling like I need to try and calm him. But more for my own safety. "It's probably not to you personally—"

He looks again at me over his shoulder. "I am Luca Colombino. My father is Michael Colombino. Anything that happens to us is *our* problem."

My skin turns to ice then and I go cold. I grip the jetski involuntarily, thankful a small wave has just nudged us. I need something to keep me steady so that Luca won't see me shake.

He's Luca Colombino. Not just any old Colombino running Piovere. But *the* Colombino. He's next in line. He's more powerful than anyone I know. He's also got some pretty serious stories surrounding him. People that have disappeared or changed their minds during important court cases. Men that went to prison and never came out. Hell, men that went into the movies and didn't live to see the ending ...

I gulp, and Luca rolls his shoulders. He growls at the same time. Suddenly the tattoo on the back of his shoulders seems different than when I first read it. *Live without forgiveness.*

I shudder. The very idea of being with a Piovere playboy sounded exciting and hot all this time, but now it seems *dangerous*. I knew they were a cover for the Colombino family, but I didn't understand how close the two really were ...

Luca snarls, he stands on the jet ski and winds up to throw the radio away. Then stops. "Ahh, we'll need it." He sits down and digs around in the glovebox, pulling out a waterproof bag that he places the radio in and another small reader chip. A GPS. "We'll need this. It's how they'll find us." He loosens the strap on the bag and swings it over his head and loops an arm through. "We need to swim to the island."

"What?" I say, the very idea of swimming with him to a deserted island and spending any time with him feels like the

last thing I should do.

“You coming?” he says.

He doesn't wait for me to answer. He jumps from the jet ski and begins swimming to the island. The waves from our jet ski have now calmed to a steady lap. The tide is lazy and the island is only a fifty yard stretch away. I sigh a shaky breath and descend into the warm water. I follow him slowly, making my way with a dog paddle. My heart is burning and my legs seem to get heavier with each kick.

I can hear my father's voice from over the years in my head as I swim. *I told you honey, dreaming gets you in trouble.* I should have listened to him. I shouldn't have listened to Mimi. I shouldn't have lied about going out to get a quick fruit juice before sneaking away from the house. How had I been able to leave so easily after disappearing for a night out? I can only think that my father wanted to keep trusting me, yet I broke it again. I broke it to go partying with a Colombino no less.

Not that I knew he was a Colombino ...

By the time we make it to the island, I've convinced myself that I'm not making it off. Luca is obviously a psycho. He's lulled me into a fake sense of safety by wooing me with all the Piovere business and his god-like sex abilities.

I come ashore and find him rejiggering the radio. He seems calmer. “Sophie, I have to apologize for my behavior out there. I can have a bit of a short fuse sometimes,” he says. “It's no excuse as to how I spoke to you.”

“It’s okay,” I say, hoping he thinks I’m just breathless from the swim and not practically wetting myself. “We all can get caught up in how we’re feeling.”

Have I been caught up in the excitement of how I’ve been feeling? Chasing the exhilaration of our partying more than really him? I don’t know.

He laughs. “Well yes, that’s one way to nicely say I acted like a psycho.” He laughs again and I offer a small smile. He’s switched again. But which is the real Luca?

My mind is flashing with every self-defense class I’ve ever been given. Every scenario is rushing through my head and all I can recall is knee the groin. I almost laugh at my pitifulness. If only I at least had a gun. I’m handy with them.

“Well there’s still no one on the radio,” he says. “Which is odd because the system we have is very hard to turn off.” He makes a face, realizing what he’s just said to me. But he doesn’t explain it any further. Instead he frowns, makes another face and realizes that I’m watching. “Anyway. We’ll wait here, I’ve activated the GPS. If no one from the yacht comes, someone from the Colombino’s will.”

I nod. I’m trying to seem calm, despite also realizing that I left my phone on the yacht. Mimi’s words rebound in my head. *How much do I trust him?*

“We have time now,” Luca says, sitting down in the shade of a bald cypress. The small island has plenty of trees upon it and their roots trail out into the sand like searching fingers. “We can talk more.”

I nod and sit down, but I've put a bit of distance between us. Luca notices. His head hangs slightly and he clicks his tongue. "I've ruined it haven't I?" he says.

"No, no," I offer. He hasn't ruined it. I can understand him getting frustrated, I've lived around men that do worse things when frustrated. But the question is now what do I say? How can I tell him about my life? I can only dodge who I *really* am for so long. "I think the whole last couple hours has just caught up with me. First the yacht and—well you know. Then this and swimming out here," I say.

He shakes his head and smiles. "It's not a big deal, you know? I know everyone makes a big deal out of being a virgin. But, well, think of it like this. How do you feel now?"

How do I feel? I feel like I've just had sex with the *enemy*. Except I don't see him like that... "What do you mean?" I ask, turning towards him slightly as we begin talking. He seems sincere in his apology about his actions. He's the normal Luca from before.

"Well, do you feel different? Do you feel like a different person? Has losing your virginity finally solved all your problems?" He grins.

I laugh. "You're right."

"How old are you again?" he asks.

"Twenty-two," I reply. "But I feel left behind."

Luca smiles. "You're still so young. You could wait until any age you wanted, once you realize that it's all in your head,

the real focus is on who you did it with.” He pauses. “I’m glad that you chose me.”

I burn up red. I’m completely caught off guard and flattered. I feel like it should be me saying this, not him. But, then maybe he’s making me feel better? Even when all this has happened and we’re stuck on an island, he still cares for me.

But would he care for me if he knew who I really was?

A dread washes over me, should I tell him? What would he do if I told him? An image of his angry body tense and ready to destroy me comes to mind. It had barely been minutes ago. But...

If he knew I was a Russo, would he be the *same man*?

“I feel late to things sometimes,” Luca says quietly. So quietly I almost didn’t catch it.

But I do, and I snap back towards him. “What do you mean?”

“It’s silly,” he says, shaking his head. “You might not understand. It’s about ... my family.”

My pulse begins racing. What is this? Is this a Colombino secret that I might learn? Am I undercover now? Would this all justify everything? Would my father let me be whoever I wanted if I brought back a valuable piece of information? I switch that part of myself off though. He’s a human being. Not a chess piece to be exploited. “Try me,” I say. “I still have my secrets.”

He laughs and nods his head. He looks around the small beach we're sharing, as if someone might be listening. "No, my frustrations and feeling late have to do with my father. My mother too, but mostly my father. I know I said it in anger before, but my name is Luca Colombino. My father is Michael Colombino, the Don of our family. I have big shoes to fill. Big shadows to outgrow and live up to. A lot of expectation sits on my shoulders. And since my mother ..." he trails off. But before I can ask a question or he can allow the silence to gain a hold on us, he continues. "All my life I've been groomed for what I do. What we are, is a way of life. Not just an activity or a view opposing the law. It's *different*. There's history with us. History with all mafia families. It's been romanticized in movies and books, but in truth, the reality of this life can be lonely. And yet, family is everything."

It's like he's just reached into my head and expressed some of my own fears and thoughts. We're both the children of powerful men. I realize that it's not that I can't dream, it's that my dreams have already been decided ...

"I know it sounds silly," he says.

"It doesn't," I say, reaching out and taking his hand. "I'm glad you shared that with me."

He smiles at me and leans slightly towards me. "You seem so understanding considering who I am. Normally I can't talk so freely about my family."

I smile, but offer nothing.

"Do you know anyone in the mafia?" he asks.

I get the sudden urge to pull my hand from him. Can he tell that my palms are sweaty? “I do,” I say very slowly. “I’ve got a friend—” An idea strikes me suddenly. “My friend that came to the show. She’s involved. So I’ve seen what it’s like to be within the *family*,” I say, emphasizing the last part. “And the stresses.”

He takes my hand with his other. “And what do you think of the people within the family? What do you think of me?” he asks.

I lean closer. The tension between us has returned. Him breaking his heart open to me has made me forget about his outburst. I want to believe that this is the real Luca. “I like you for who you are,” I whisper.

We lean towards one another.

“And who are you?” he asks.

I don’t reply. Instead I kiss him. The gap between us has closed and suddenly we’re kissing as passionately as we were back in the club. The tension and fear from the yacht has mostly left me. I’m still nervous, I’m still unsure about the future of us. I doubt whether I could really tell him the truth, but I push it from my mind and focus on him.

We eventually lie back and continue kissing on the warm sands. The sun has moved since we first got here, and I only realize how long we’ve been here because the shade we were in has disappeared. The sun feels glorious on my skin. Luca’s hands glide over me, his warmth intoxicating and soothing my fears. Soon our clothes are gone and we’re allowing the

passion to spill over from before. We don't have to talk and communicate like we did there. He knows. I know. And we follow each other's cues in the warm sun.

When I get on my back for Luca to get on top though, he stops me. "I can tell, you will not like sand in there," he says, gesturing between my legs. He laughs and I suddenly feel foolish. But I laugh too.

"I didn't even think about it," I begin.

He smiles. "No, no. I'm holding myself off here as much as you. Come here," he says, pulling me to my feet. We head towards the shadow of the trees and the rising roots. "Here," he says. He sits down on one of the tree roots, his erect cock pointing straight up. "You can be on top." He guides me over him and lets me tease his head. He bites his lip and I giggle.

But this time I realize what he's doing. I let him tease his head until it's lubed up. Then when he's getting ready to lower me down, I surprise him by dropping suddenly and taking him in one go.

He gasps and I realize that maybe it was a bit too soon since I've barely lost my virginity. I wince.

"Are you alright?" he asks, more shocked than even me.

I take a deep breath. "I shouldn't have done that, but," I move around slightly, allowing myself to adjust. "It does feel better than last time," I say.

Luca laughs and we continue grinding like this for a while. We keep kissing and grabbing onto each other, the passion

builds and yet relaxes me. The shock, at least this time, feels like it's more in my head. Because it's actually feeling pretty amazing. With the fear disappearing, it doesn't feel like I need as long to get used to him. He laughs then, and we begin kissing.

Without talking we begin a steady rhythm. He holds me against him, our bodies grinding hard against one another and pressing our warm bodies together. I'm pushing myself deeper onto him, and he's grabbing my body tighter against him. Our lips meet in breathless kisses and gasps. The discomfort is subsiding more and more. He takes my breast in his hand and sucks my nipple as I begin speeding up. The feeling of him constantly sliding in and out is intoxicating. I'm breathless from the thought of him. The thought of us having sex here out on the sand ...

But we can't be together. Our families wouldn't allow ...

Is that why it seems so much more exciting? Like how sneaking out excites me so much?

I grab hold of his shoulders and ride him faster, but not as deep. I can feel myself getting ready to come. He takes one of his hands off my hips and starts rubbing my clit with his thumb as we fuck. I gasp, my rhythm stumbling to a halt. He keeps going though, rubbing harder and grinding his hips against me. I start again and can't keep the rhythm going though. It feels too good. He squeezes my ass in his hands and keeps kissing my neck. My body is becoming heavy, the blood rushing down into my sex and trying to squeeze through the

small gap of my clit. I can feel him getting harder inside me, and that makes me even more turned on. I'm going to come. I can feel my body tightening, even harder than on the boat. I feel his body tightening in my hands too. The strength goes from my legs and I sit down hard onto his lap, orgasming hard. He starts to come inside me, and it's only then that I realize he's groaning deeply into my shoulder.

The immense pressure washing over me softens my mind. My body spasming with pleasure wipes me clean. I'm straining to hold onto him, he feels so good inside me. My lips clamp against his rigid cock and I feel the pressure of his orgasm still going.

I'm flooded with endorphins and the emotions of euphoria. I feel amazing. I feel weightless. I feel like I could tell him anything and he'd understand. I feel like our life is possible. The families will understand. I feel like—

“I lied before,” I hear myself saying breathlessly.

“What?” he says, bleary eyed and blinking up at me.

“I lied,” I say, still feeling his hard cock in me. “My friend isn't in the mafia. I am. My father is a Don. I'm Sophie Russo.”

Chapter 8

Luca

The blood rushes away from my cock quicker than I've ever felt.

“What??” I say. The sudden image of us huddled together on a fucking log rushes into my head and I get the feeling of being trapped. “What do you mean? What do you mean you're Sophie Russo?”

She senses my boiling frustration and steps off of me. She tries to cover herself with her hands, as if it could hide what she's just said.

“I'm Sophie Russo. I didn't know you were Luca Colombino until you said. And I didn't—”

“You were a Russo coming to Colombino territory? Are you fucking crazy?” I say. I rise, heading towards her, but she stumbles back towards the sand. Towards the water. She looks over her shoulder desperately. A flicker of guilt rushes over me, but then I remember who she is.

“No, no, not like that,” she says quickly. I can see the fear in her eyes. “I mean, I knew Hush was Colombino owned. And that Piovere is run by you guys. Everyone knows, but ...” she trails away.

My body is tense and I can feel my fists clamped together at the sides. My blood is boiling. Suddenly the idea of the gas not being put in the jetski tank, the radio being turned off ... I throw my arms out wide and turn in a circle. “Is this all to kill me?” I scream. “Shoot your fucking shot!”

But Sophie looks at me like I’m insane. However, I’ve lived long enough in this life to know the truth. I know a hit when I see one.

“I never expected Thomas Russo to use his own daughter as bait though,” I say, I hope the contempt shows in my voice. “I didn’t think Russos would sink so low.”

“He hasn’t,” Sophie says. “He doesn’t even know I’m here.”

My face changes very quickly. And she realizes what she’s said too, because hers floods with a deeper shade of white and fear. “But my friend knows! She knows I’m partying on the Piovere yacht in Key West.”

I frown. “And why would I trust anything you say?”

“Because I’ve done nothing but trust you,” she pleads.

I stare at her for a long time, then growl the frustration out of my throat. I can’t do anything else. “C’mon, let’s put our clothes on,” I say. “We look like fucking idiots.”

I turn and put my shorts on. I look and she's still standing there, huddling in herself by the water. A part of me pities her. *The part that didn't know she was a Russo.* But the other half of me that knows she's a Russo doesn't care. Let her be embarrassed. Who the fuck knows what all this is.

"Put your bikini on," I say. "Whatever game you're up to is done."

She stands there, I eventually get sick of it and walk to the bag. I take the radio out and try the channel again. It still hasn't found the yacht, and it definitely wouldn't be out of range—these things can signal all the way from Fort Lauderdale to Key West. It's that no one has switched it on. I could try other channels. But that would lead to questions. And questions in this situation are very peculiar. Besides, who knows who's listening if this Russo whore has dragged me into a trap.

I turn back to her, she's halfway to her bikini and she freezes. "Put on your clothes," I say. She weighs up the words and finally rushes to the bikini, sliding it over her body quickly. "You left your phone on the boat," I say.

She pauses. "Yes," she finally says.

"Pretty sloppy if this is a hit," I say. "You can't radio in your position, or call for help." I walk towards her, staring her down.

She groans. "This isn't a hit. I didn't know *who* you were until you said it. I thought you were Luca *at* Piovere. The brand I love. The designs I love. I thought you were a guy I

could just *like*, and have no involvement in the mafia lifestyle.” Her words are sincere. It’s more of a confession than anything else.

Her truth satisfies me. “Okay then, “ I say, folding my arms. I remind myself of how young she is. “You are young,” I say, but this time meaning it to be bad.

The words whip her.

I look to the horizon. I decide to trust her just a little bit. “I’ve made mistakes,” I say. “When our pick up comes, you say nothing. I don’t want anyone knowing who you are. I will give you a different name. I’m merciful but you can be sure that other Colombinos are not. Especially to a Russo. And the fact that you’re the Don’s daughter?” I shake my head in awe of her stupidity and walk away. I head back to the trees we were just fucking under. “We will wait,” I call back to her.

She sits out in the sun for a long time. Letting the water lap at her feet and she seems lost in her thoughts. Maybe she realizes how stupid she’s been, or maybe she realizes how close she came to a dangerous situation. I wouldn’t have killed her. I feel conflicted about it all though. My heart feels torn. I hear the words of my father echoing in my mind and his wants for me to settle down. *What would he say if the girl I’d been thinking of settling down with for the last couple hours was a Russo?*

Eventually the sun begins to set and she comes towards me. She seems frail and afraid. Like all the ground we’ve been enjoying together has crumbled and disappeared. I stare at her,

letting her know that I don't want her to sit next to me. I've shown enough mercy.

I've been trying the radio on and off for the last hour. There's still no one. I was tuned into the public channel before, and there's fishermen out in the area. But no codewords we'd use. Has anyone caught the signal from the GPS?

"So what does Thomas Russo think of his daughter then?" I ask when the silence has stretched on for a time. "Is he like Michael Colombino?"

She considers my words for a long time. "I think he wishes he'd had a son sometimes."

I nod, I could only imagine the difficulty of being the daughter of a Don.

"I don't mean that he's not proud of me, or left anything out on me, I think it's more, he knows how difficult it is for a woman in the mafia." She's staring at her feet.

"It's a man's world," I respond blankly.

She nods. "Yeah. He still taught me plenty of things though. I can handle a gun pretty well, and know some self-defense."

My folded arms tighten and the muscles bulge.

"But this still isn't a hit," she laughs nervously. "Believe me, the last thing I want to do is make *you* disappear."

My heart falters at the last part. It's like I'm some puppy getting attention. I can hear the frustration in her voice though. The confusion. But I quieten it, I need to be an alpha here.

“I just—” she sighs deeply. “I don’t want that life. But in the mafia, that’s not possible.”

I stare at her. I stare at her until my mind goes blank and I don’t know what to think. I wonder what would my father do with this information? The Russo’s have a dud next in line. They have a girl that doesn’t want what lies before her. I could smash their entire family and empire, taking their whole business ... I have her right here in my hands. I could use this as bait. I could pin the old Don with one phone call as soon as we hit land ...

But that isn’t what *I* think. *It isn’t what I’d do*. I too know what it’s like to be in the shadow of a powerful man. The pressure that comes with it. I pity her. I open my mouth to say something, but my jaw snaps shut.

A fishing boat has come around one of the islands, and is headed right for us.

“Our ride has arrived,” I say, standing from the log.

The small boat makes its way towards us and a man waves. I wave back. Sophie looks frightened and unsure. She looks at the boat and the men. Then at me. “Are you sure?” she asks.

“Just because it isn’t the Russo way doesn’t mean it isn’t our way,” I say. “These men wouldn’t be here without the GPS.”

She nods, but she’s still unsure. “But are they Colombino men?”

My blood boils and my teeth grind. “Because I’m giving you mercy to keep breathing, do not take that as a mercy to question my decisions,” I hiss. “This is our boat. But if you want to stay down here, *stay*.”

The men are standing out in the back of the flat hulled boat. There’s two of them. They have a small cabin on the deck and a big net crane at the back. I begin wading out towards them. When I’m waist deep I hear Sophie catching up and following me in.

The closer I get to the boat the less sure I am of them though. It doesn’t look like the markings of a boat we’d use, but I can only trust that someone has sent them.

No one else knows we’re here.

I can assume they’re our men.

Chapter 9

Sophie

We've been traveling for half an hour now. The sun has set and we're bobbing along in the darkness with a small headlight at the front. The two men don't talk much. I say men, but really one is a boy. A teenager. Luca has spoken a little bit to them, both in English and Spanish, but even he hasn't got much from them. They seem nervous.

I tried saying something to Luca but he shook his head fiercely. Looks like he doesn't want me talking.

The waves of the sea bump gently at the boat as we trawl along. There's a few fish that dart out of the spotlight of our boat as we head forward, but other than that, we can't see the lights of Key West at all. I didn't realize how far we'd traveled from there.

Luca tries talking with the captain, they're in the front half of the cabin. There's a wall and reinforced window between us. The door is swinging freely and soon Luca turns and closes it on me.

Now I'm just trapped with the boy. He stares at me openly, just as nervous as when we hopped on. He swallows and then looks away. He wipes his brow and then goes to rise out of the seat he's been relaxing in, then doesn't. He's really nervous.

The whole thing feels off.

This feels like a trap. As if Luca had been right about something being off.

A few more minutes pass and the dread in my stomach only increases. I can't believe what is happening. Who has this system set up? Do all the families? Do we? I make a mental note to ask some of my father's men about the seas when I get back.

If I get back at all, that is.

The thought flashes across my mind quicker than I can realize. It scares me. "I'm getting some air," I tell the boy.

He nods nervously, saying nothing. And watches as I leave. He wipes sweat again when I'm gone. I see him in the reflection of the rear window, he's wiping his hands on his shorts. Everyone is nervous.

I wonder how Luca is in the front. I hate that he's suddenly become cold with me. It's like he's trying to scare me. But he mustn't feel comfortable about the boat either. He said something when we got on board, and the captain didn't reply fully to his satisfaction. Even though he tried to convince me otherwise.

I move to the back of the boat, near the fish crates and crab pots. The boy moves to keep me in his sights, but never gets out of his seat. A motion light comes on, and I can see the end of the boat. Blood covers the floor and I can see some cuttings of fish. The butchering area.

An image flashes through my mind of Luca and I here, killed, just as if we were fish. Dumped just the same too. I shudder and the warm air is cold. The boy sweating most likely from the humidity, is guilty of more than he lets on.

Suddenly the door opens and Luca comes through. He looks around the room, sees the boy and doesn't acknowledge him, and comes out to me. "What're you doing out here?" he demands.

"I couldn't be in there any longer," I say, gesturing my head at the little cabin.

The boy disappears into the front room with the captain. The door flapping loosely.

"We're getting there," Luca says. "Slowly. But getting there." He pauses, looking out into the darkness, he watches the small fish around the boat, following the light. "I was thinking of dropping you off early. There's a pick up point outside the keys. You can make your way from the bar there to the real Key West and get your way home."

I want to ask about the helicopter. I want to ask about *us* ...

But we don't need to say anymore.

"Thank you," I say.

But Luca shakes his head. He folds his arms and looks back at the cabin. “I don’t necessarily trust them, but he has answered all of my questions,” he says. “They’re our men.”

I nod, knowing better than to question him. Luca has become more cold and distant the longer we’ve been on the boat. The longer the afternoon has stretched on. I nod again, unable to find anything to say. I head back into the cabin.

“Where’re you going?” he asks.

“Into the cabin,” I say. “It’s cold out here.”

We both know the chill is really between us, though.

Luca grunts and remains leaning against the rail of the boat watching me. I slump into the chair and the boy and the captain are talking. The engine increases in noise, the strain getting too much on the engine. The whole boat looks old. I’m almost in awe that they made it this far down the Key. They’re talking though. Whispering.

I can’t help but lean towards the flapping door. The boy is sweating even more now, wiping his face constantly. His words are urgent. The engine whines. It slips and misfires and there’s a quiet. I hear words that only I can hear.

“There was only supposed to be one of them ...”

My eyes go wide and I look at the front room. The captain and boy are close. The captain is leaning on his wheel, slumped against it like it’s holding him up. I don’t hear the next words, but the captain spots me watching in the front glass. He turns and smiles politely and grabs the door. “The

lock on this has been broken for a long time,” he says. Then slams the door.

I smile at him through the glass door. Then I swivel and count to thirty very slowly. Forcing myself to breathe deeply and count even slower. Inside, I’m panicking like crazy.

There was only supposed to be one of them...

One of who?

Which one?

I get up calmly and walk towards Luca. He is sitting with his arm propped against his belly, chin in his fist.

“Luca,” I whisper, leaning against him.

He flinches and goes to push me away.

“Stop,” I hiss. I lean against him again. He looks at the cabin. “I just heard them talking.”

“And you want that as a motive to get back into my heart?” Contempt is in his voice.

“No,” I breathe. “I heard them talking over the engine whine.”

“Mmhmm,” he nods. He’s not interested in what I have to say. “They weren’t expecting two of us.”

He pauses for a bit. The information being tossed back and forth in his mind. Finally he nods slowly. “Well it is my receiver from one of my yachts. I imagine they were expecting one person because only one GPS was activated.”

“You know that’s not why they’re nervous.”

But Luca shakes his head. “They know who I am. You should know who I am too,” he says.

“I know who you are,” I say. “But that’s not it. The boy is nervous. The captain is nervous, too. Why can’t you see it?”

Luca leans down, he flashes a quick glance at the captain, who is staring at us. He smiles at me. Leans closer. “I’m only doing this because he’s watching me,” he says about the captain. “But I have lived this life longer than you. I have done things. I have *seen* things. And I’ve met plenty of nervous men like this.” He pulls away. “But the fact remains that no one could’ve known we were there other than those who can read the specific GPS signal,”

“And who can read them?” I ask.

“What did I say about questions?” he snaps. “Go back to the cabin.”

I stare at him for a moment, still shocked by him dismissing me. Then I nod slowly. Am I being crazy? Is he being stupid? Are we both doomed? But obviously there’s more here than I can know. I still think I’m right though. I can feel it.

I sit back down in the cabin. The boy and the captain are talking. But the captain utters something, his lips barely moving, and he smacks the boy over the back of his head. I turn away as he looks. Even though there’s glass there, it feels like I’ve intruded. I settle into my seat, my body is like ice.

I can hear the boy shuffling through a cabinet on the other side. A heavy door slams and soon he comes through the door,

sitting nervously in front of me.

Luca is watching us out on the back of the boat. His arms are still folded. The boy licks his lips and then turns away slightly. The engine whine decreases slightly. Then it turns off completely. The captain sighs and takes a packet of cigarettes off the dashboard. He opens the door, smiles at me, then heads through to the back with Luca.

“The boat is a bit hot,” he says, jerking with his shirt collar. “She needs a bit of time to cool off.”

“Fine, you’ve got fifteen minutes.” Luca licks his lips.

“Perfect,” the captain says. He offers a cigarette to Luca. He shakes his head and I see the captain’s hands shaking as he knocks a cigarette out and lights it. The flame of his lighter shows the amount of sweat on his face too. He takes a hat from his back pocket and pulls it low over his head. “Wind’s get a bit strong here before hurricane season. This old girl battles through though.” He kicks the side board of the hull. “Strong as a goat.”

Luca grunts but doesn’t say anything. He’s staring at me. The captain drags on his cigarette. Then nods to himself, like he’s made a decision. He looks back at us in the cabin. At the boy. Then he smiles at me and turns back to Luca. “You and your girl partying?”

Luca stares at him, not saying a thing. “Smoke your cigarette then start the boat. If your engine blows I’ll buy you a new one and sink this shit heap.”

The captain laughs awkwardly. “Okay, deal.”

He takes a long and final drag from his cigarette. He turns from Luca and flicks the butt out into the water. As he’s walking he reaches up to take his hat off, while with his other hand he reaches behind his waistband. His shirt pulls up and he grips a *gun*.

He’s whipping it out as I scream.

But the gun never gets pulled out fully. Luca bashes the man with a metal bar. The boy next to me spasms and his legs kick out. Luca lunges for the falling man, who’s still clutching his gun. The boy finds his legs and stands, heading to the back door, his arm rising.

A shot is fired.

The boy falls to his knees and crumples backwards. Blood is blossoming from his chest as the gun clatters from his hands to the floor.

A second shot rings out and the captain falls forward, clutching his stomach.

Luca stands holding the gun in his hands.

My heart is racing and my body is shaking like mad. But Luca doesn’t look at the two dead bodies he’s just created. He looks at me with wild eyes. “How did you know they were going to kill us?” he snaps.

I want to answer him, I open my mouth to say something, but nothing comes out. I just keep gasping for breath, looking

at the dead boy. Looking at the gun he'd been drawing on Luca.

The captain and the boy are dead.

Luca grunts and begins going through the clothes of the captain. He searches pockets and only finds one thing. He comes through to me and places a black box of matches on the table.

“As far as I'm aware, Russos have never made matches.” He heads past me into the captain's front room. The engine starts and the whine returns. We jolt forward and continue on.

I stare horrified at the bodies.

Luca comes back. “So?”

Chapter 10

Luca

Sophie just stares at the bodies the whole way home. She doesn't utter a single word.

Once my anger cools off I feel bad for her. I pity her that this is the first dead body she's seeing. It's not a relative, it's not the right time, it wasn't pleasant, any excuse really. Not that seeing a dead body is ever pleasant. The first one I saw was my grandfather. He had a heart attack in the back garden when I was a kid. Then he was dead, his coffee knocked over by the bench he'd been sitting on. I had been playing with my toy truck, I suppose it was why I still never ride in a big rig.

But the bodies Sophie had been looking at are bloody and sad. Some guy and his kid, I now assume. They're noses were the same. Similar hands too. More than that though, they were hired by someone to kill us.

It was sloppy. But even then, something niggles me about them. It's the matches. It's such an odd thing ...

The lights of Key West come into view and I direct us towards the point where I know the port begins. There's the lane lights guiding us. I can only imagine the sight this little boat will be when it comes in. I almost laugh just thinking about it.

"Key West is a few minutes away," I say. Sophie doesn't respond and I turn back to the lights. I can see myself reflected in them. My eyes are hooded and dark. Business mode. "Leave this all with me. I'll handle it. You just get out."

She nods. But still doesn't say anything.

The memory replays in my mind, and I wonder if there was anything I could've done differently. Could I have done anything different to stop their deaths? Could I have avoided shooting them?

I look at the gun the kid had. The thing would've blasted a hole in my chest the size of my fist. But even then, I know the kid's young. Or at least, he looks young. My guess is he's actually closer to twenty, just born with a baby face. It makes me feel somewhat justified ...

I scratch my chin and switch on the radio. I've been trying it while I drove for the last hour. There's been growing chatter across the channels, all the expected talk between fishermen and captains, of weather fronts and tides. But there's still nothing from our private channel on the yacht. I can only think the receiver is broken, or sabotaged ...

"Sophie?" I say, looking back at her. She raises her head. The shock is still in her eyes. "Come here."

She stands woozily, looks at the bodies one last time, then comes to the dashboard with me.

“I’m going to handle all this, okay?” I say. The anger of her identity is still there, but deeper down, I see myself in her. She’s just a kid in the mafia life. No one really needs to see these things, I just grew up with it. I’m not sure what’s worse. “And before you go, let me run and get your clothes,” I say, bringing the knots down on the boat throttle. We enter the entry lane for the port, the lights guide us towards the growing lights of the marina. It’s late, clearly after midnight by the lack of action around, but there’s a light on an enormous yacht I know is mine.

“Why are you being so nice? Don’t you hate me?” she asks, finally looking at me.

I sigh. “I’m still not happy with you. And I still don’t fully understand what happened, but how you’ve reacted here shows me you didn’t know them. If not, then you weren’t aware or directly involved.”

She goes to talk and then closes her mouth. She looks off and swallows thickly. She stares at the marina with glazed eyes, finally frowning. “My father will know,” she says.

I shake my head. “Everyone will know. Someone just tried a hit on the two heirs of the largest crime families in Florida. There’s going to be a fucking storm from this.” The anger grows in my voice as I talk and I have to remind myself that she’s been through enough. “But what your father knows intrigues me.”

“I don’t mean it like that,” she says. “He’ll know I was out. He’ll figure out that I was on the boat.” She shakes her head and looks down at her body. “I mean, I’ve only got a fucking bikini on!”

I can’t help it, but a snort comes out of my throat. She looks at me dangerously, I see for the first time the flame that exists there. But then she softens, realizing the humor of it too and smiles.

“I’ll get your things from the yacht. Don’t worry.” I guide the boat into the marina and the pandemonium begins to unfold before us. “Again, do not mention who you are.”

We arrive by the yacht, which is parked at the nearest bay. Large flood lights light up the enormous boat and I see all the people on the dock running around. A single person points us out and soon men are flooding down onto the lower wooden docks for smaller boats. I see Marco and a few of our bodyguards, pistols already out. I wave.

“Where the fuck have you been?” Marco says. He’s still sporting the shorts and Hawaiian shirt he was wearing on board. At least the coke has been cleaned from under his nose. “It’s been fucking pandemonium.”

I pull the boat up alongside the dock and a few men jump aboard. They move past us with expert precision, guns at the ready despite the two bodies behind us. They soon return and nod to Marco.

“So?” he says, impatiently and staring at me like I’m a child.

I note the condescending tone. He's not addressing me like I'm the second in our fucking mafia. *And* in front of the men.

My blood simmers, but there's no need to show aggression here. Just presence. "There's a jetski of ours, probably floating on its way to Cuba," I say, stepping out of the boat and returning a hand to help Sophie. "We ran out of gas. I radioed to the yacht but there's no receiver. I activated the GPS but no one came." It's my turn to stare at him. "Which, considering whose GPS was activated, is very interesting ..."

Marco stares at me for a beat. *He didn't know that*. Then he realizes how many men of ours are around. He looks embarrassed. "Yes, boss," he mumbles. "But it makes no sense."

"No shit," I hiss, stepping past him.

I guide Sophie up the steps and there's a host of cars all lined up and waiting, black tinted and dark as midnight. I take Sophie by the crook of her arm now and put her in. "I'll be back. I'm just getting your things." I don't give her time to answer.

I head on board and take the shortcut to the bedroom we shared earlier. Images and sounds flood my mind of our glorious afternoon. I can hear her innocent voice uttering her confession, as well as the moans of her intense orgasm ... I catch myself. The moment feels sour, now. I tell myself to stop. *Something special that is now tainted ...*

I take her clothes and phone and bundle them up. Her phone lights up with my movement and I see many notifications. I'm

curious but I don't pry. As far as I'm concerned, the Russos are falling behind. Knowing this, knowing that she is the next in line, I suddenly don't feel threatened.

Obviously someone placed a hit, but was it on me?

Or her?

As I come back down the gangplank, I see her head pressed against the car window. I open the door and give her her things. I open the door and tell the driver to take her wherever she needs to go. Then I go back to her, deciding suddenly to cut her from my heart.

"Today didn't happen," I say, the anger laced with lust is like barbs on my own heart. "Between us there was *nothing*. All you were to me was another woman to bed. A virgin to conquer. I never want to see you again, and if you breathe a word of it, then my mercy will not be as lenient."

The words cut her deeply and I see how much it's wounded her. She is young, I tell myself. She'll get over it. She'll find another fuck, another man. She'll trick someone else and run their life. Even if she's just witnessed me murder two men to protect her.

Was it her?

I don't give myself a chance to go down that road and slam the door without her responding. I watch the car leave, telling myself to be angry. Telling myself that I've just got rid of a Russo spy. But in truth my heart cracks that Sophie Russo has

left me. The goddess that was mine for a few hours has departed. It feels like the sun has winked out.

I close my eyes and exhale slowly.

I open them and turn back to the yacht and all the men gathering and working. Tonight is going to be a long night. Someone tried to place a hit on me. And I mean to find out who.

Then bury them.

Chapter 11

Sophie

A text comes through from Mimi, *Still pissed?*

I unlock my phone and sigh at the same time. I stare at the keyboard for a full minute before replying. *Yeah, he's still pissed. Not escaping his sights just yet.*

Mimi replies straight away. *But it's been a month though!*

It has been a month since the yacht ordeal, as it has now been called. But more than the yacht and the attempted hit, the ordeal has signaled bigger things changing in our house. I've been cooped up more than ever, dragged further into the family business, and escape is literally impossible.

But you know it's all exciting, it's engaging and dare I say interesting ... I roll my eyes and Mimi and I text back and forth a few memes. My father has brought me further into the family business by having me shadow his accountant. Who's the husband of his assistant. Anything I can work from home with really. I'm not to leave the grounds under any circumstances. Not since my last day out.

So what're you gonna do then? Mimi asks, bringing us back to the subject.

I go to reply, but then don't. I don't know what to say. What am I going to do?

We've been texting all morning knowing that today was my day of review. Except there's been no review organized, just a note slipped under my door telling me things stay as they are.

When I came home a month ago from Key West at four in the morning, dropped off by an unmarked car, my father went absolutely ballistic at me. And then subsequently silent with me.

Our home had been like a military warzone. There were men everywhere running around with guns and radios. Every part of my last twenty-four hours was being scrutinized and even Mimi had been dragged in. To her benefit she hadn't ratted me out, but also to her loyalty my father had barred her from visiting me ever again. He said I'd be grounded until he changed his mind ...

Then the next day he said we'd review in a month.

I expected my father to crumble in a week, as he normally did, but this time he held strong. It's literally been a month of me staying in my room, trying not to think about the world that could have been. Obviously the most angry part of his whole series of lectures was the fact that I had single-handedly, and stupidly, continually put my life in danger by being with a Colombino. *Did I not know who they were?* Of

course I did! But my explanations fell on deaf ears. *I should have expected it*, he kept saying.

I've tried forcing myself to forget about the glorious forty-eight hours where I escaped this world. I've cried about it more times than I can count in the last month, but inevitably, I do remember it all. I think of the club. I think of Piovere. But more than that, I think of Luca.

I try to hate him. I really do. But I feel as if I still *feel* the connection we shared, and that it was more than just a love for fashion. I think of how much I liked being around him. I think of how much I liked smiling at him. I think of how good he felt inside me ... And so like the old moth to a flame joke, my finger finds my clit.

Because as much as I've tried to forget him this last month, as well as the whole loss of a dream thing, I've also masturbated like crazy. I just can't stop thinking about him. I can't stop thinking about the yacht, or the island. His enormous—

I blow my bangs to the side and text Mimi something funny I thought the other day. I've just got to change the subject. In truth, I'm just passing the time and trying to keep her company for as long as I can. She's about to start work and will be unavailable.

Then it will be back to the same cycle I've been living with for the last month.

Except for one thing ...

I burp and bile comes up. I feel sick immediately.

I've been feeling sick these last few days.

Nausea each morning like no one would believe. It's like I'm hungry to the point of sickness as soon as I open my eyes. I've never been like this. Yet the thought of anything other than a dry biscuit or cracker makes me want to vomit. Just thinking about *thinking about* my sickness makes me sick.

I get out of bed and run to the bathroom. I don't know how many times I've vomited these last *two* days specifically. By the afternoon I know I'll be famished though.

I run the tap and take a few sips of water. That's helped to push away the sickness each morning. Not always, but sometimes. I sit down and prop myself against the bathtub. The last thing I need to do is faint and hit my head. I close my eyes and just sit, listening to the waves lapping at the foreshore of our private block. It's been as humid as anything these last few days. But no one else thinks though, father's goons are still wearing their damn suits while I'm sweating buckets. I feel like the kid who packed the wrong clothes to summer camp.

Mimi hasn't responded and I feel the loneliness settle in. I can't handle doing accounting today. I feel especially depressed knowing my sentence isn't ending. But I know my father's assistant is going to come any moment and make the same stupid joke, 'Are we pregnant with ambition today?'. I've *almost* laughed zero times at her joke, yet she keeps making it.

I make myself get up, a cold shower will help this feeling of heaviness and lethargy get off me. This depression of never seeing Luca again—

I freeze.

An idea has just crossed my mind. Something so stupid it could be true. Never seeing Luca again. *Luca*. Pregnant with ambition. My eyes go wide as I stare at myself in the mirror.

Am I pregnant?

I squat back down quickly to my butt, because I could faint from this realization. Am I pregnant? My mind clicks into gear.

I'm late too. I was supposed to have my period like a week ago. Not that a week is a big time to be late ... In high school when I was stressed about going to the prom, I was late. When I had to tell my father I was going to fail math, I was late again. But this time? A week?

The sickness in the morning. I look down at my belly. *Is something growing in there?*

I grab my phone and text Mimi immediately. *DO YOU HAVE A MOMENT?* I use all caps for her to know the importance of this text.

She calls immediately. I answer and I can hear the noise of street traffic and people chatting in the background. She must be arriving at work.

“What’s up?” she asks. “You never use all-caps.”

“I never use caps,” I reply. “Unless it’s fucking needed.”

“What’s happened? Your dad finally go nuts?” she asks, even more on edge.

“I need you to go to the pharmacy on your lunch break and bring me something.”

“Huh?” Mimi says, all pretense of care suddenly gone. “You want me to go shopping for you?”

“No,” I hiss. “I need you to buy me a *pregnancy* test. I’ve just realized I’m late. And I’ve been sick for the last week in the morning. And—”

Mimi gasps with joy at the mere whiff scandal. “You’re pregnant with Luca’s baby!”

I hear the chatter of people become loud for a second. Then Mimi is screaming something at her boss. She comes back. “I’m running to the pharmacy now! We need you peeing on a stick pronto.”

“But hold up! You’re working,” I say.

I can hear feet slapping on the pavement. She must’ve kicked off her flats that she wears when she’s waitressing. “This is bigger than a shitty job earning peanuts. I’m looking after you.”

A few moments go by, and by a few, I mean eternity passes as I listen to Mimi struggling to keep her pace of running to the pharmacy. She eventually comes back, breathless but with the urgency fully returned. “What do you need?” she gasps. “Pee stick? Urine test kit? Extra fast?”

“Aren’t they all the same thing?” I ask. “And I don’t know, you’re looking at them.”

Mimi is gasping for breath and I hear packaging rattling about on shelves. Mimi curses something under her breath and the phone is cobbled into her pocket. Soon she’s at the checkout and I listen to her going through. The machine is beeping an awful lot of items.

“How many damn things are you buying me?” I hiss. I feel myself burning up from embarrassment at what Mimi is doing.

“I’m buying you a few. I read this article about this lady who took one test and it said she wasn’t pregnant. So she thought she was all good. Then *boom!* Six months later her belly pops and she thinks she’s been having bad fart cramps. Nope. Actually a baby. Long story short, you’re pissing on every damn stick I can carry.”

I snort with laughter and suddenly feel thankful for Mimi’s friendship. She’s the only one that’s stuck by me this last month. My father’s bodyguards that I was friends with have either turned on me, or been changed out so that I don’t talk to them.

Mimi hangs up, telling me she’ll be here as soon as she can.

I gnaw my phone case and just keep sitting there on the floor. I’ve never had to wait like this before . I feel like an idiot. I feel trapped. I feel nervous and excited and—suddenly dreading what I’ll do. *What if I am pregnant?* Pregnant with a Colombino baby? Do I tell Luca? Do I tell my father? I’m

freaking the hell out and suddenly can't even remember how to pace in nervousness. Which way do I turn? I'm trapped now in my own bathroom doing nothing!

I finally grab my bathrobe and press my face into it. I squeal for a full minute until the energy has drained out of me.

There's no point freaking out until I know the truth.

I might not be pregnant. I might just be late.

But I'm pretty sure I'm pregnant.

I force myself to breathe and get dressed. I tell myself there's nothing different about today. Old Gloria, my father's assistant, will be along any moment to take me to her husband's horribly boring world of numbers. She'll smile at me with that same old smile, and make that same old joke—

But that sets me off again. *Pregnant with ambition?* I can't stop. Am I pregnant?

I go to my room and get dressed, only to realize I'm putting on clothes over clothes. I'm already dressed! I pace the room and look at my phone. I look at the clock. I wait for Mimi to text me that she's not being allowed in by the bodyguards. Anything! It all goes through my head, and before I know it, a full hour has passed.

Now I know I'm crazy and hearing things, because I keep hearing this air hissing.

Finally a pebble hits me.

“Uh!” I grunt.

I go to the window and down in the dirt is Mimi.

“What are you doing here?” I ask, my eyes going wide and searching the grounds. “How did you even get here?”

“I snuck in!” Mimi says, hopping up and pulling herself in. She’s got a plastic bag full of tests jangling about on her shoulder. “Your father’s guards are only looking for men it seems.”

“What the hell is that?” I ask, pointing at the bag of tests. “Is every test in the county in that bag?”

“It’s your truth,” she says, pushing it on me. “Quick, into the toilet.”

We enter my bathroom and suddenly I feel dry, like I got no pee in me.

“Did you drink any water?” Mimi asks, as if reading my mind.

I shake my head and she immediately turns on the tap for me to have a few mouthfuls.

“Panties at your ankles and on the toilet,” she says.

I do and we open the bag. This isn’t the first time that Mimi and I have shared a toilet, it’s not exactly anything exciting, but it is the first time that Mimi has been fully serious and not cracked a joke. She hands me the first stick, then the second, and third. She hands me five in the end, all with caps off and needing pee.

“Fill ’em up,” she says, nodding at me to *get working*.

I stare at her for a moment. Then I look at the sticks.

“You’ve peed in front of me before,” she says, cocking her hip.

“Yeah but not on a stick to tell me I’m pregnant,” I reply.

She huffs and wipes a strand of hair behind her ear. “Fine,” she says, heading to the door and closing it. She slumps down behind the door and keeps talking. “But I’m not leaving. As soon as you’ve peed I’m back.”

I laugh and try to will the pee to come. It takes a long time. I sit there, forcing myself to think of waterfalls and about that time I was in the swimming pool at school and couldn’t hold it until the changing rooms ... I try every trick in the book. In the end it’s holding my breath that does it. Soon I’m peeing all over the damn sticks and placing them on the counter next to me, one after the other like some pregnancy testing machine. If the consequences of this weren’t so big, I’d almost laugh.

There’s your pregnant ambition, Gloria.

Mimi is up immediately and through the door, she sees the sticks lined up and begins the timer on her phone. “Two minutes,” she says.

There’s a knock at my door then. Our eyes go wide and we look at the sticks and then the panties around my ankles. I motion for her to hide in the shower. “I’m not some boy,” she snaps.

“But you’re not meant to be here either!” I hiss back.

I close the door behind me and head to the door. It's father's assistant, Gloria. "Good morning Sophie-bell," she says.

That's also the other thing I don't like about her—the nickname she's given me ...

"I'm almost ready," I say. "Just a bit longer—"

"Oh no, don't worry. Today has a change in plans. You're not working with me or Allen, you're going with your father," she says. "A little father-daughter trip." She's smiling like that wouldn't mean anything worse than being crucified again. Am I being locked in a dark room now too?

I nod. "Oh lovely, I'll just get dressed for going out then."

"Yes," she says, her eyes taking in my current multiple layers of clothes. "From what I understand it's a nice lunch, so wear something smart." She wiggles her fingers like I've never had lunch with my father.

Mimi's alarm starts going off in the bathroom.

"That's a timer I've got going," I blurt. "For waxing."

"Ahhhh," Gloria hums. "Hygiene is important." Then walks away.

Why the hell did I say that? What the hell does she mean by hygiene?

But I don't think about it too much. I race back to the bathroom for Mimi, but she's already in the doorway.

Holding five pregnancy tests fanned out in her hand. All with double pink lines on them.

All positive.

All with ten reasons why today just became a lot more complicated.

“You’re pregnant,” she utters.

Chapter 12

Luca

The waiter finishes pouring the red wine and I nod my thanks. I know it's before midday, not that that's ever really stopped me drinking, but I'm having lunch with my father. It's the first lunch we've had since the yacht incident a month ago. He went ballistic like I was some child—thought my foolishness and women had finally reached its peak. Just more dumb stuff that I was proving to him.

I suspect the real anger was actually over two things. One, it was that someone had been bold enough to place a hit on a Colombino family member, let alone the heir. And two, it was that he could've lost his son. But I'm not sure which angered him more.

I sip the wine; it's a dark red from the home country. I know it's grown in the salty breezes and shaley soil of a mountain. I know a carrot farm used to be on the hectares we grow in. I know all these things because it's my own wine company—another venture started with Marco to move money. I'm the backing and he's the brains. His family have grown grapes as

long as he can remember. And this drink is proof of how good it is.

I hold it up to the light and swirl it. It's a dark wine, but also very colorful. It dances between blood red and violet.

The bitter tannins come through. Are they bitter or am I?

The last thing I need is a lecture again, but my father was very insistent about the importance of us having lunch today. *We must meet*, he'd had his secretary tell me.

I click my tongue and look out over the marina. We're in the private room of his restaurant. There's a few yachts in the distance, some smaller fishing boats also huddled in their shade. Behind, a cruise ship is docked.

A lone gull is sitting on a boat not thirty yards away. It's just taken a huge crap on the steering wheel of the vessel. The owner is there cleaning it and swearing like a sailor. At least I'm having a laugh while I wait.

I look again at the yacht that's furthest from me though. It's one I know well. One I've ridden in many times, and up until a month ago, one I owned. But a part of my father's rage was to strip it from me—to strip a lot of control from me. He said he'd had some re-evaluations to make because of my actions as of late. At first it was the overly flamboyant drug deal dressed in a fashion show, then it was the party boat and almost murder ...

But it was all worth it. I got to meet Sophie Russo, my mind blurts.

I cough. The wine tastes bitter on my tongue.

My anger boils up and I remember her lies, and possibly attempted hit ...

Then there's the mystery of the burner phone. As it turns out, the blackmailer who's been messaging me lost their phone on board. It could belong to anybody, but Marco made sure to ask me very seriously: *how much do I trust her?*

I take the phone out and look at it.

I honestly don't know who's phone this is, but I do know one thing. A small corner of my heart wants this *not* to be Sophie's phone. Desperately. Even though we're enemies, even though I'll never see her again. I just want to keep our few moments together perfect.

That's why my anger at Sophie has struggled to continue. It's softened in magnitudes since I last saw her a month ago. I keep trying to keep the anger going, but I only remember the good things about her now. And by good things I mean great things. The perfect hourglass body. The way her face softened when she came. But really, the one face I remember is the smile she gave me when she saw me getting out of the helicopter. It was like it was just for me. A gift that was mine and mine alone ...

I hear the maitre'd at the front door perk up and soon there's shuffling and greetings being made. The door opens and my father walks in, his face is smiling and welcoming. *He's brought guests.* But it's not just anyone.

My jaw drops. My eyes go wide.

He's brought Tommy Russo to our luncheon.

Shit, did he find out?

Following Tommy is none other than his daughter.

My jaw snaps shut, I remember that I have to look cool. *Look cool?* What is this, high school? But I still think about it and prop myself on my elbow as if I'm bored. *Jesus, I must've liked this girl.*

I stand quickly to greet everyone. Tommy is in a pressed suit shirt and matching pants, he's got a vest on and a gold watch on his wrist. Sophie is wearing the sun as far as I'm concerned and absolutely shines in something that clings to her body. Me? I'm wearing a damn polo shirt and jeans ...

"Now, Thomas," My father says. "I know you two definitely *haven't* met, but this is my son, Lucas. Lucas, I'm sure you're aware of Mr. Russo?" he says, gesturing at the man behind him about the same age. He's dressed in a well tailored suit. Dark color but light fabric, breathable in this humid weather we've been having lately.

"Nice to meet you Mister Russo," I say, taking his hand and shaking it. I do anything to *not* look at Sophie. From the corner of my eye though I can see she looks even more radiant than ever. It's like she's graced us with just a brief moment of our lives to—I shake my head involuntarily. *I'm meant to be hating this girl.*

“No, the pleasure is mine. And call me Tommy,” he says. “This is not a business meeting.”

“Yet,” my father pipes up, and the two laugh.

Sophie is fidgeting with her dress. It’s cute in a way that I now find utterly pathetic. I’m set on being pissed at her for the whole thing with the boat. *My yacht!* I’ve not had any leads on who marked the hit either. Whoever it was covered their tracks pretty well. Maybe she plays pretend better than I realize. But also, judging by the wide eyes she has at the moment, I don’t think this meeting is one she was expecting either.

“It’s always a pleasure catching up with you, Michael, and it’s good to see your son looking healthy. He looks a lot like you,” he replies to my father. “I’m sure Judy and Martha would be enjoying this.”

My father smiles genuinely.

What the fuck? He knows my Ma ...

“If only he had my brains though,” my father replies, laughing. He gestures for them to sit at the table.

The gull on the boat that has shit on the steering wheel is being swatted at and flies away. Suddenly it feels like I’m the one who got crapped on.

“I’d say the same about mine too,” Tommy says, indicating his daughter. “But it seems our kids have already met.”

My father nods in agreement and for the first time, both Sophie and I look at one another. *How do they know?*

“Yes, it’s true,” my father says. “That whole business down at Key West has been bad for everyone.” He puts his hands together, bouncing his finger lightly. “But maybe there are some fortunate things that can come of it.”

“I was hoping for the same too,” Tommy says, pulling the seat out for his daughter, and only seating himself once she practically collapses into hers. Her eyes haven’t left me now. They’re full of fear and dread. I tell myself not to pity her and only remember the bodies I had to have disposed of because of her.

There’s a quiet for a few beats in which I feel no one knows what to say.

But it’s my father who speaks first. “I think Judy and Martha used to start with the champagne,” he says, picking up the drinks menu and reading it.

“Yes, always raved about it,” Tommy replies, reading the same menu.

Sophie and I exchange looks again. A feeling in my chest swells. I feel like I should roar like a fucking lion. “Wait, hold up,” I say, putting my hands up. “How do you two know each other so well? Why’re you so chummy? And how did Ma know Martha?” I’m looking between them and yet everyone is looking at *me* like I’m the crazy one.

“Lucas, you can sit down,” my father says.

Only then do I realize that I’ve stood up in my little speech. I sit down, *like* some child. “I mean, this is all a very nice and

happy reunion. But,” I pause, erring on the words I’m meant to say.

It’s Tommy who speaks, a small smile on his face. “We’re meant to fucking hate each other? We’re meant to shoot each other on sight? Had the guards in the club known that it was a Russo they were letting in, I doubt my little Sophie would’ve got home ...?”

I’m speechless. But not from shock, because *he’s right*.

“See the thing is this,” my father says. “No one knows this, but this restaurant is neutral ground for our families. That’s why I bought it.”

“What do you mean you bought it for neutral ground?” I blurt. “You bought it cause Ma liked the lobster bisque?”

“Why do you think she liked the lobster bisque?” Tommy says, a smile on his lips like a fucking hyena with a secret.

Even with all this, everyone is still looking at me like I’m insane.

“I’ve missed something here,” I say, shaking my head and folding my arms.

“You were right,” Tommy says to my father. “It is fun to stir him up.”

My rage boils quickly and my face turns livid.

“Like a fucking tomato,” Tommy finishes, his face split with a toothy smile.

Suddenly my rage turns to embarrassment and I see Sophie giving me puppy dog eyes. It's all a fucking sham. My father places a hand on my shoulder but I spurn him off.

“Lucas, your mother and Martha were friends. They were friends before they knew either of us. Before she married me she worked in a shelter for women. One night in comes this lovely lady in distress. She's a refugee after the whole Cuban crisis. Came over with her husband, etcetera,” my father waves his hand like I should know this history. “But he used to beat her to within an inch of her life.” Sophie is looking down at the table, Tommy is staring me in the eyes. “Can I continue Thomas?” my father asks. He nods his consent.

“Well, one night she'd had enough. She got out. Came to the shelter and sought refuge. Your mother was there, and she held him back from getting through the door. A few of the women did. They were doing well until he went properly ballistic. Martha offered to give herself up to protect the other girls, but one of the other volunteers had called in her brother.”

“Me,” Tommy says, and his face is grim. “Fourth and Wessock was a place our family had owned from the very beginning. Just a place to lay roots.”

“It's that big warehouse now. You guys move mattresses out of there, I believe,” I say.

Tommy grins. “He's a sharp one. You're right,” he says to my father, who nods. “But back then it was a refuge. Anyway, we rock up and this guy is going ape shit. Nutso and won't stop swearing. He finally pulls a knife on me though. Needless

to say, his hand got broken. The story goes on, but this doesn't matter so much. Regardless though, I'd met Martha and we started going out."

"Martha and your mother stayed friends," my father continues. "Despite her having met me too."

"And you all knew you were each other?" I ask incredulously.

Both men nod. "Oh sure, we had to argue with our parents," my father says. "*A Colombino will put one in your back.*"

"*A Russo will dig out your eyes.*" Tommy says.

"*But had it been anyone else?*" both men say together, wagging their fingers. They start laughing.

Sophie and I look at each other like this is the weirdest joke that's ever been played on us.

"So, this brings us to you two," my father says, once they've both calmed down. "Fortunate timing given all things."

"I think with the rise of the Manettis and their brazen actions as of late, this is very fortunate." Tommy rolls his shoulders.

"What're you on about?" I ask. "The Manettis are two-bit. Half their guys are duds. Half of 'em have spent more time in Labersky Penitentiary than—"

"You've been focusing on Piovere and your pushing substances without focusing on the homefront," my father

says.

“Gotta keep your eyes on the gates,” Tommy says. “No offense.”

“Who the fuck are you to offer your opinion?” I say.

Sophie looks like I’ve just slapped her father, but he grins none the same.

“Lucas,” my father barks.

“No. Fuck you, too,” I say. “You set this up just to fucking lecture me on what I’m not doing? Again? What the fuck do I have to do to get any recognition from you?” I say, before I can even stop myself from sounding anymore like a spoiled child.

“Lucas, calm down,” my father says. “We’re not having this discussion again. This is about bigger things.”

The waiter comes to take the drink order, but she’s frozen on the spot

“The champagne, Margie,” my father says without looking at her. “I apologize for my son, too.”

She walks off. No, scurries to safety is more accurate. My father is boiling up like me. “This is bigger than your own self-importance, Lucas. This is about protecting the families, more than that, it’s about protecting our kingdom. The larger kingdom of that too. The Manettis, in your blindness, have been rising very quickly as of late. They’ve made deals with smaller families while combining with two-bit thugs. But more than that, they’ve colluded with the cartels in *Latin America*. I

don't know who, or how big of a commitment they've made to allow them to have control, but it's enough that they placed a hit on you."

I shut up now. It finally sinks in. I hadn't considered the Manettis at all this last month because of my own stupidity. But then, could the Manettis have placed a hit on me? Still ... "That has to be a fucking joke?" I say.

"It's not," Tommy says. "The two guys you killed on the boat were fishermen from up north. They worked in the docs, but mostly they're earning peanuts as immigrants up from El Salvador. Poor bastards got caught between a rock and a fucking bigger rock. That's how the Manetti's have been operating. Getting desperate people."

"It's like fucking Cuba all over again," my father says.

"Except that's never really stopped," Tommy replies, to which my father nods.

"How they operate is with desperation. They feed on fear of people. They can promise new IDs and visas. Anything that will make immigrants do what they want. Except there's always someone to replace them too."

"That's why the two of them were so nervous," Sophie says, and it's the first thing she's said all lunch.

"Most likely, dear," her father replies, touching her hand.

"So what's the plan then?" I ask. "What's this fortunate opportunity you both keep alluding to?"

Both Dons look at one another now. “Your meeting is fortunate because it’s made things easier.”

“What do you mean?” I ask. “Things to come?” I’m confused again, and because of that, pissed. But it’s Sophie who’s eyes widen, because she gets there before me.

“The Manettis are growing stronger every day, Lucas,” my father says. “They’re bringing in more and more desperate individuals, and they’re becoming more and more dangerous. The only way we can survive, that both Thomas and myself believe, is for the families to combine.”

“The families combine?” The penny is inching towards the cliff. I look at them. Then I look at Sophie. Then the penny drops. “You want us to *marry*?” I scream.

“There’s no *want*,” my father says. “You *will*.” Sophie’s eyes fill with horror and Tommy grins. “It’s the only way. And maybe, it’s the best way,” he says.

“The best? Fat fucking chance. You think both families will get along?” I say. “You two are fucking crazy.”

“Lucas,” my father says, sitting forward and taking my hand. “It’s done.”

The waiter returns with the champagne. It’s in a bucket of ice. She sets it down by the table and swivels it for us to read the plaque engraved upon the side. It says, *To the happy couple. Engaged and in love. Lucas and Sophie.*

We both look at each other.

“Really?” I point at the bucket like it’s a joke. “Fucking really? This is what a Don would do?”

“Lucas, this isn’t your place to question,” my father says, his anger returning.

“I think it very much is,” I say. “You’re marrying me off.”

Sophie is looking at the table cloth, her eyes wide and fearful. She’s muttering something under her breath but I can’t tell what it is.

My father frowns. “Being a *Don* is not about making money. It is not about success. It’s as I’ve said before, it’s the continuation of the family. The continuation of the business is secondary to the family. That is what true legacy is.”

“Bullshit.” I rise again. “If it was that we would attack the Manettis and still fight off the Colombino’s.”

“You think it hasn’t been done?” he says. “Who was the first port of call on this job a month ago? Where’d you think I went first? I called Thomas directly, but why would he risk his own daughter? Why would I risk my son? In this game you have to learn to read the road before the corner comes. If you don’t, you won’t slow down in time to stop yourself driving off the cliff. That’s what we’re going to let the Manettis do. We’ll let ‘em keep thinking they’re alright. We’ll draw their attention away, but all the while they’ll keep getting faster. Eventually it’ll be too late. Because by that point we’ll have men on the inside. We’ll know how to hit them and hit them hard when we do.”

He pauses now, and takes a deep breath. Because in truth he knows we're sacrificing our own family identities. "We'll know because the families will be together. You and Sophie will be married. And with our powers combined, we will secure *our* legacy. As one, we look after more than just ourselves. That is what your mother believed in."

I'm silent. Tommy is looking at me and Sophie is still looking at the table. I click my tongue and turn away, shaking my head. *How the hell did this happen?*

Chapter 13

Sophie

My father's words still reverberate around in my head. The constant repeating of duty, honor, sacrifice, it's all there. His standard speech. Except this time the duty and honor, the sacrifice needing to be made isn't me learning accounting, it's being engaged to the complete jerk of a spoiled asshole Luca.

Who is actually the father of the baby growing inside of me, my brain reminds me. I can't help but for a sigh to escape my lips as I look out of the window.

"Believe me, I feel the same way," Luca says.

We're riding in the back of a private car our fathers have organized for us. We're being delivered to a house in the Everglades on the west side of the Florida peninsula. We're on our honeymoon as far as the world is concerned. Not hiding away while the finer details of the Manetti attempted hit is worked out by our fathers.

Luca clicks his tongue for the millionth time and I want to staple it to the roof of his mouth. “Believe me,” I say, in a terrible imitation of his voice. “*I feel the same way.*”

Luca looks at me with his eyebrows raised. “Really? You wanted it different? Your dream has come true.”

“My *dream*?” I splutter. “What part of my dream has come true with this?” I gesture at the car and the growing house it’s slowly crawling towards from the long driveway before us. We’ve just passed through a big set of heavily armed gates. Men the size of small mountains roam back and forth.

“Let’s see,” Luca says, counting off on his fingers. “You’re out of being an heir, you can do what you want. And that’s about it. Everything else falls to someone else. Just what you wanted,” he says, finishing with a sarcastic smile.

“You’re an ass,” I hiss.

“And yet we’re getting married,” he says, turning away.

I’m grinding my teeth. I’m sure this stress isn’t good for a baby. But I don’t even know about that either! What do I need to be doing differently in pregnancy? There’s so much I don’t know. So much I’m not prepared for.

The car pulls up at the house and comes to a stop at the enormous front doors. Columns rise up to a huge ceiling above. It looks like some sort of sugar plantation thing, except it’s not. It’s new and hideous. It’s over the top and ugly. It’s—

“Home for the next month,” Luca says, opening the car door.

We're immediately greeted by servants and butlers who come and take everything from the car. I've barely slammed the door shut and the driver makes a getaway. In mere seconds, it's just Luca and I standing there again. "Well, you Colombinos sure live differently," I mutter.

"Excuse me?" Luca says.

"You heard me," I sass.

"This house—" Luca points up at the hideous fake roman columns. "—Is not somewhere I would normally live. This is my father's place."

I head for the door without acknowledging him. It's magically opened by a seemingly invisible man who avoids any eye contact as we enter, then shuts it just as quickly. The inside is just as hideous. If the morning sickness wasn't making me nauseous, whoever designed this place has. Black balustrades run along the first floor mezzanine, with garish gargoyle statues on the corners. The hideous carpet runs along the floors *then* up half the wall. It's matching in color and style, deep red and black spots. There's even fake gold inlays all over the place. It's horrible. It's hideous. It's familiar ...

"It's styled exactly like the Scarface movie," Luca says, nodding his head and looking around. "I'm sure you've seen that," he drawls.

"Who hasn't?" I respond. It's all clicked. It's a symbol of stupidity then. What does this have to do with duty and honor, and sacrifice?

“So,” Luca says. “We’ve got a month to make nice.”

“I’ll stay in my half of the house,” I say.

“And I’ll stay in mine,” Luca finishes.

“Deal,” we both say together.

I storm away from him, but realize I don’t know where I’m headed.

“Bedrooms are upstairs, “ Luca says, as I turn back. A stupid grin on his face.

I smile at him, hoping he can see the fire in my eyes. I don’t utter a word and stomp past him, climbing the stairs and walking the mezzanine until I come to another hallway. I follow the maze until I come to something that resembles a bedroom. It’s not one, but the couch by the window is big enough to be a bed.

I collapse onto it and close my eyes. I feel absolutely rotten. I feel sick to my core. I’m nauseous and it’s not just because of the situation I’m now in.

The baby flashes into my mind and so does Luca. We’ve got a month to play nice, he said. *What does that mean?* We have to pretend to be nice? Or, we have a month until we can escape?

I don’t know which I want more. If I want either at all. Will I tell him about the baby though? Should I? It’d only cement our engagement even more. It’d probably make things worse. He’d become protective. I don’t know if I could bear that.

A month ago, that's all you were dreaming of...

I grunt and tell my stupid brain to shut up. I shouldn't have listened to Mimi, nor Luca. I shouldn't have let him charm me with his niceness and beauty in the club. I shouldn't have listened to him when he invited me on his yacht either.

Most of all I shouldn't have given him my virginity.

Who the hell gets pregnant on their first go? What the actual—Does he have super sperm or something? Am I gifted with overly fertile eggs? It's just my luck.

A butler comes to the door and knocks quietly. “Madam?” he asks.

I turn my head and look at him.

“Master Lucas has informed me to inform you that your room is elsewhere. This is a drawing room. I can show you if you'd like—”

“How does he know I'm here!” I snap.

The butler grins like he's heard it before. “There's cameras in the corners. Security reasons. If you'll accompany me?” he finishes, putting his arm out.

I sit there sulking for a few moments, not wanting to give Luca or the butler the satisfaction. But when the man simply keeps staring at me, without blinking, I break and walk towards him. I link my arm in his and he leads me off. It's going to be a long month, is all I can think as the maze begins again. It's not long before I'm feeling nauseous again and praying for a bed.



I didn't know it at the time, but the next two weeks would be some of the longest I'd ever experienced. I thought it had been the first part of the time I spent grounded, but I was wrong.

We maintain our quips and snide remarks. I maintain my silence on the pregnancy, growing more tired each day and able to handle less and less of Luca's sulking and attitude. Maybe it's the hormones and morning sickness, maybe it's the forced proximity of this mansion of a *cage* ... or maybe it's just because I don't like him anymore ... Either way, after the first week of hiding in our bedrooms and drawing rooms, and living rooms, and libraries, and every friggin' room that looks *exactly* the same with its hideous carpeted walls, Luca decides he's had enough and retreats completely.

The next week is even worse. If being trapped in rooms with hideous decor and barely sleeping because of the stress (and the baby) wasn't enough, I have to *hear* Luca, but never see him. Not that I want to see him. It's just I have to hear him talking in that way he does, with his deep voice and resonant tone. It's comforting and warm, and I feel like I could sleep snuggled up against it—but it's just another one of his tricks he uses. I'm aware of him now. But being aware of him doesn't make missing him any easier. It's the baby doing this to me.

I've had enough of this sneaking around. It's been two whole weeks and now it's Saturday and I need fresh air. Sadly, it's taken me *two whole weeks* to actually open the horrific

wardrobe in my room and find that the entire thing has been stocked with all my luggage. No more can I just wear my baggy track pants and jumpers for comfort, it seems.

Looking at my clothes, a pang of guilt shoots through me—I still haven't told Luca. I think about it constantly, and I still wonder if I'm doing the right thing by not telling him. But am I even doing the right thing having it in the first place? *Am I having it?*

It? It's probably a little girl, or boy—

I huff a deep sigh.

If I'm completely honest, the thought of seeking an abortion has crossed my mind a few times. From everything I keep reading on my midnight research binges, there's going to be a lot of work in having this child. A lot of decisions to be made and time lost. And I wasn't even sure if Luca and I were a thing? Should I tell him of a child only for me to give it up?

I know what my father will say, I know what his assistant will say, hell, I know what our Catholic priest will say. It'll all be the same, that it's a precious gift. But what about our situation? We're mafia heirs, and literally just escaped an attempted hit on our heads. What kind of environment is that to bring a baby up in?

I close my eyes and grasp the swimsuit, I breathe slowly and intentionally—that's what the *Pregnant Mothers* article said to do when stressing out. *This was why I was going swimming.* I want to calm my mind and distract myself with a few laps before my afternoon nap. I slip into the swimsuit and

take a towel from the bathroom, wrapping the towel around myself and picking up my phone. I begin making my way through the maze-slash-home and find myself standing on the back patio staring down at the pool. *Someone is* already there.

I watch him in silence, the air trapped in my lungs, from anger or lust I can't tell. I'm cursing him as he swims in his little speedo though. Cursing that perfect butt which—I scoff. Who the hell wears a speedo to the pool?

Luca comes to a stop and flicks back his perfect hair, he begins climbing out of the pool. His muscular arms grab onto the ladder and pull him upwards. His torso stretches out with like a million abs, all defined by the shining sun above. His pecs dance as he climbs, jiggling side to side as they strain. Finally his bulge exits the water and all I can do is stare. An ache hits me. Luca is grinning and smiling as he comes forward. I immediately turn red at the fact that he's caught me!

I back away immediately, hoping he hadn't yet seen me. Except it's not me he's smiling at. A butler comes from below and offers a towel and tray with a drink on it.

I inch forward slightly, watching through the marble balustrade. The ache in my body is different now. It's not one from my belly, nor one in my head of frustration. It's one in my heart.

Seeing him smiling ... Seeing him *nearly* naked too ...

The ache worsens.

It's not his lust I miss, it's his touch. His care. The moments we'd shared before our stupid last two weeks were so delicate.

What is this? I turn quickly and run for my room. I'm not going down this road. I'm not playing this game. I'm not—but I already am.

I groan as I slam my bedroom door shut and I see his rippling body covered in water. *He's getting out of the pool in slow motion ...* I throw my towel on the bed and jump in beside it. *His grinning face is full of happiness and joy. All that's missing is me in his arms ...* I wish for the nausea in my stomach to go away. I wish for the ache in my heart to stop. But all I hear are the caring words he offers me just after we've made love for the first time.

I cry out into the pillow for it to stop, but it's too late.

I know it's not true. These two weeks have been the longest in my life not because I've been bored, but because I've been without Luca.

I lie there wishing for the images of him to leave me. I lie there trying to deny my sudden awareness of my feelings. I'm meant to hate him and be caring for a baby! Not lusting for him just because I've seen him in a speedo!

But I did.

And I *did* see—

“Enough!” I say to the room.

The silence afterwards shocks me. I'm grumpy now. I need to nap. The baby has been paining me as of late too, and these

supposed organ pains aren't going to stop the further along I get. I roll away from the door and try to forget Luca, again. I try to forget his perfect body and smile, again. His tanned skin and strong but gentle hands, again ... I try to forget everything I know of him.

But it's no use.

As I fall asleep for my afternoon nap, all I can think of is the fact that his door is only on the other side of this house. That his bed is only a few steps further. But more than that, I feel that he's not that far away at all, because his child is growing inside me at that very moment.

Chapter 14

Luca

Even as I'm doing it, I know I'm crazy. Even as I log into our systems and go to the camera footage, *I know* I'm completely nuts. And yet I do it. I go to the exact moment I get out of the pool and see the camera pointed at the back patio with Sophie standing there.

She *had* been watching me. I'd spotted someone up on the patio as I swam and in my heart had secretly hoped it was her.

And now as I sit here, aware that I am a fucking twelve year old, I don't know what to think. *I'm meant to hate her*. It's because of her that I'm trapped out here which has made it completely impossible to work thanks to the zero fucking signal in the Everglades. I'm sure there's a whole thing with lead paint going on too knowing my father and his building contacts. But it's beside the point.

I log out of the security system and frown at the face staring back at the black screen. It's my face. My stupid ass self. Swooning over a girl almost half my age.

But what we share isn't bound by a number.

I growl and stand up quickly, the chair shoots back and I storm out of the office, slamming the door behind me. I don't have time to play games. Especially this stupid crap. Not while the enemy has placed a hit on me. Not while the enemy has grown right under my fucking nose. Not while the enemy sent two fucking novices to try and kill me and Sophie.

Sophie?

I swear and boot the wall. Which I regret immediately. My boat shoes are practically canvas and I've just cracked my big toe. "Fucker!" I scream.

The butler coming towards me goes wide eyed and turns around instantly.

The anger isn't at myself though, it's at the fact that every damn word my father said two weeks ago was right. I'd been so obsessed with being a *Don* and growing our business ventures that I conflated the two. Being a leader equaled having a growing bank account.

Well not any more.

I've had plenty of damn time to think on how to move forward. And number one is *not* with Sophie Russo.

The engagement must not happen. Surely the whole thing is a sham. Somehow Tommy Russo is using this to gain ground on us. He's using it to get close enough to slide a knife right up our shirt and then tickle our throats.

I enter my room, and by room it's a fucking wing of the building. I know Sophie took the eastern side. She faces the enormous cypress grove and trees clawing into the muds of the swamp water. It's beautiful at sunrise. If only I could show her the sunset ...

I close my eyes and bunch my hands into fists.

The first week was unbearable, I kept thinking all this romantic crap every time I saw her. To pretend to be angry, to pretend to be frustrated at her when all I wanted to do was take a hold of her and kiss her... It took all my effort. So I cut myself off and hid away. I worked and worked and worked, by the single bar of reception. But it still wasn't enough to stop my thinking of her. And knowing that now after a whole month of being without her she was only mere meters away... I'd rubbed one out every damn shower I took. I just couldn't get those tits—

“No!” I say, opening my eyes and walking to my desk. “Not again.”

This is how it happens every time. Two fucking weeks I've been doing this! Two weeks I've been vowing to never think of Sophie Russo again. Vowing to never even picture her again. Then next thing I know, Sophie Russo is the only thing I can see and hear. Her moans still echo in my head from the yacht. Pretty soon my pants are at my ankles and I'm reaching for a tissue.

It's like puberty all over again. *I really am twelve.*

I take my phone from the desk and check to see if any messages have come through. Because even if I've been unable to contact anyone, one thing that has come through these last weeks have been the messages.

Ever since the attempted hit I've begun getting texts from an unknown number. Or I should say numbers. It changes every time but it's the same person. They say the same things and want the same outcomes. *They want me and the Colombino's gone.* Empty threats to someone like me. But they have got something interesting. They keep sending the same picture of Sophie and I at the docks. It's just as I was closing her into the car. Whoever took it was hiding far away, most likely on a crane.

I can only assume it's a Manetti person attempting this blackmail. Except they have a problem, Sophie isn't mine to care about. They can do whatever they want, it doesn't affect me or the Colombinos ... Except everytime they mention hurting her, I go fucking ape shit inside. I've almost broken this damn phone multiple times over the course of staying here.

I've come to a stop, unaware that I've been pacing the entire time, I go to the sideboard and pour a rum. It barely burns as I swig it down in one go. I need to drown myself. I need to swim again.

Yesterday was the perfect cure until Sophie showed up. I swam until I was ragged and tired. I could barely get out of the

water. It distracted me enough to stop thinking about all of it. The blackmailer. Sophie. My father ...

Then the mere thought of Sophie maybe watching me had given all the energy back.

I start stripping off to change into my swimwear. My shorts slide along the floor with a flick of my foot and I ignore my damn semi with all my might. Even my own cock has turned on me with the thoughts of Sophie Russo being so close by. He's taunting me with an easy win.

I take up my speedos from the bed and slide them on, tucking my dick back up along the waistband. I grab the towel and goggles on the couch, wrapping it around me as I go, and get out the door quickly. I need to get into the pool fast. At least if I'm swimming no one can see the boner I get from thinking about Sophie's miraculous body.

I practically run through the house, stumble down the stairs and pass through the downstairs entertaining room towards the pool. Just as I'm about to yank open the glass door and go out though, I stop immediately. Dumbfounded. Someone's already there.

It's her ...

Sophie beat me to it. She's already out here. I can't go out there. All I can do is stare at her from behind the door. All I can do is watch her luscious lips glistening in the sun. She's wearing a one piece swimsuit and it's shaping her like nothing I could ever have dreamed of. She's got one arm cocked behind her head and her other is holding a book at arms length.

She's got sunglasses on too, so I can't tell if she's seen me yet. But I don't care. Suddenly all I want to do is watch her. Take her in. Her skin glows in the sun, yet dulled slightly. She looks like the sweetest caramel I've ever seen. Her legs bend as a ballet dancer's would. She makes reclining by the pool seem like an elegant poised pose. Her feet point away from her and I follow the line of her legs back to what I've really wanted to look at the whole time. Her breasts held perfectly by her suit and round—

Her mouth drops open.

Shit, she's seen me! I look from side to side, hoping somewhere will magically appear to hide me and my fucking boner pointing out of my speedos.

But then I hear something odd through the glass door.

A snore.

Sophie is snoring. My eyebrows crease and I'm frowning all of a sudden.

She's asleep? I've been spying on a sleeping woman?

Then just as quickly Sophie rolls to the side, off the recliner and into the pool.

There's a huge splash and I cackle with laughter. The mirth rolls off of me and I can't help but laugh even harder out loud.

But after a few beats Sophie hasn't come up.

Sophie hasn't woken.

“Oh, shit!” I scream, yanking open the door.

Chapter 15

Sophie

The last thing I recall doing is reading on the recliner by the pool. I'd been there, and then...

Nothingness. Darkness and sleep.

Release.

Now, not so much. I'm sputtering and choking on water, and it's burning my lungs with its chlorine taste. It feels like someone dragged a bag over my head too. I can't breathe and my vision is blurring more and more. The bubbles become terrifying white spheres of precious oxygen that I'm just screaming away ...

Suddenly hands are grabbing me and someone is lifting me. I don't try to fight it because I'm trying to understand what is happening. Am I drowning?

Then I gasp and it's like being born. We're out of the water and I'm coughing up the water I've just had inside me.

"Are you fucking crazy?" Luca says.

It's him who's saved me. Him and his strong hands and kind heart ...

“What the hell happened?” he asks.

But I'm not really responding. I'm dazed and really a little kind of—fuzzy? I'm not sure. I've never felt shocked like this.

Luca pulls me towards the edge of the pool and helps me out, I'm weak and defenseless. He props me up into a sitting position, then holding me still, he climbs out. I thank God that this was actually a lap pool, what would've happened with a proper pool?

Luca brings his head under my shoulder and picks me up easily. I sense the force in his body and frame and feel safe. I don't know what he's doing or where he's taking me, only that *he's* taking me. The sun feels hotter than before. Maybe I'd been asleep for a while? Am I burning up? My head feels boiling.

The light dims and we're inside somewhere. I can't tell which way he took me. But a light comes on and then we're going through a small open planned room. There's a bed ahead of us, lovely and soft by the looks of it. Luca lays me on my side and then props me up against him.

“We've got to keep you on your side but I don't want you choking, so I'm going to hold you.”

I nod like that's completely understandable. I'm so weak that I just lie there, clinging to him and taking the warmth that is in his body. I don't feel drowned or bad, or anything, just so

shocked. I squeeze him tighter and listen to his heart. It's so calming. It's so enthralling and loud. I'm drawn to it. The shock is that not only would I have died, but also the baby... He's talking but I can't really hear him. I'm too tired. I just listen to his heart instead. It's so strong and powerful. Just like him. Just like his child inside me.

That wakes me up a little bit.

Then it becomes suddenly apparent that he's almost naked.

He's in a speedo.

He must've been coming to swim.

"We have to be careful, you seem fine now, but you can never be sure," he says. "You didn't cough up a lot of water. So either it's still in you or you didn't take in too much, but sometimes—"

His voice fades out again but not because I'm not listening. I open my eyes and look up at him. He stops talking. "You saved me," I say.

He looks at me like I'm an idiot.

"You saved me when I fell in," I add.

Luca blinks in confusion, then chuckles slightly. "Well, yeah, I wasn't going to let you drown."

"But we hate each other?" I say.

Luca smiles slightly, a small dimple on his left cheek. I hope our kid gets it.

“I don’t exactly hate you Sophie,” he says, with a small sigh following it. “We’re just a little complicated at the moment.”

I smile broadly at him and snuggle back against his chest. His heart is beating stronger now. A bit quicker too.

It feels like the perfect moment to tell him the truth. To tell him about the baby, about my feelings for him, about the fact that the last two weeks have been the longest of my life. But I’m also more tired than I could ever have imagined. It’s the baby. It’s almost drowning. It’s the stress fleeing from me and allowing me to relax for the first time since I was last in Luca’s arms.

I turn again to him, he’s continued talking and I’ve heard none of it. I lean up to him, a little closer, I want to tell him. I want to kiss him. I want to taste him again.

But it’s that exact moment that the tiredness hits, and I fall deeply asleep ...

I wake up with a jolt, very aware of the drool around my mouth. “How long have I been asleep?”

Luca is still there and he is smiling. The drool patch on his chest is also still wet... He smiles though. “You’ve been asleep for a couple hours,” he says.

“A couple hours?” I’m shocked and even more embarrassed. “You let me drool on you for two hours?”

Luca laughs. “No.” But his grin doesn’t leave. “You only just started drooling.”

I look at him sideways and cross my arms, I try to be angry but a grin comes immediately .

“You’re very cute when you sleep,” he says. “I mean you’re very cute anyway, so maybe it’s not a big difference.”

This time I do look away, grinning like a fool. But also because I don’t want him to know how happy I am to hear it.

“Don’t we hate each other?” I ask again. I remember saying it before. Before, when I almost drowned. “And what happened by the pool?” I demand.

“You’ll have to fill me in on most of that,” he says. “I only came in at the end, when you decided to roll into the pool in your sleep and drown.”

“Crazy,” I say. I close my eyes and try to remember. Luca takes my hand and I let him . “I was getting fresh air. I was reading. I was escaping that hideous decor of your fathers,” I say, opening my eyes and looking at him. “But I just remember being so tired. Like really really tired.” *Now is a great time to tell him too*, my brain says. “Then I was asleep. Like a deep sleep Because I don’t remember anything other than just spluttering, and your hands pulling me upwards and out of the water. You saved me.”

“You needed saving,” Luca says. But his smile is gone now. Now he just looks at me with concern.

Our baby needed saving too, I think.

I should tell him, yet , this is the most civil conversation we’ve had since we decided to go jet skiing. For the last month

I've pined for just a conversation like this. For us to bond again like the first few hours we shared. Would I risk losing that, ruining that, by telling him I'm pregnant with his child? But that's me thinking that being pregnant with his child is a bad thing? He might love it? He might hug and kiss me and be ever overjoyed?

Might ...

But it's Luca who takes the decision from me. He takes my other hand now. "It's been a long two weeks, Sophie," he says. "I've had a lot of time to think, as I'm sure you have too. And, well, the reason we're not exactly hating each other, and the reason we're complicated is because, well—how do I say it? You and I—"

Something takes over me and plunges me forward. I kiss him, *hard*. I kiss him like I've never kissed him before.

Initially he does nothing and it's like kissing one of those damn singing fish that men put on the walls of their "man caves." Then he realizes what I've done and returns it. The passion. The force. All of it. Then pulls away.

"Sophie," he says.

But I shake my head. "I feel fine. I feel better than I've felt in the last two weeks." I lean and kiss him again. He kisses back. Then everything changes.

Soon I'm on top of him and our hands are searching as quick as they can, as if grabbing a random butt cheek or cupping a side boob will make up for these last weeks apart.

Luca rolls me over so that he's on top and pulls the straps off of my swimsuit, he rolls them off my shoulder and I fold my arm through. He peels it slowly down my body and his eyes widen the more he reveals. He unveils my tanned body. He unveils my pregnant—unbeknownst to him—belly. Then he delicately frees it from between my legs, and unveils my vagina.

He sighs.

I see his bulge move and grab for it. I pull the pointless speedos down and take his hardening erection in my hands.

But he slows us down, lying back with me and pressing against me. Our flesh imprints back against each other, our warmth shares with one another. His body is hot, even after being in this cool pool house for so long. He rolls me to the side and we cradle one another, just feeling each other and looking into our eyes. It's so intense. It's so passionate. I think I'm in—

He kisses me ever so lightly.

Love...

Then he kisses harder and soon our lips are tracing kisses up and down necks and shoulders. I bite into his shoulder as his hand works down between my legs and begins running fingers up and down my lips. He teases my entrance with his finger, wetting it with my juices, and then circles my clit. Involuntarily my hips cock toward him, and I realize he's doing the same. I'm stroking his thick cock faster and faster. The pre-cum is glistening so quickly in my hands.

“Slow down,” Luca says, pulling my hand back. “Slowly,” he repeats.

My heart is racing and I can feel the blood racing around my veins and shooting down into my sex. I’m breathless and we’ve not even begun. I stroke slower.

He gets on top of me now though and spreads my legs wide, he guides his cock down between my folds and drags the head through the wetness slowly. We both watch with held breaths as he does it, then when he finally plunges in, we both groan together.

“I’ve missed you,” he breathes.

“Not as much as I’ve missed you,” I say as he leans forward. I grab onto his back with my hands and hug him tight. He grinds against me and his erection pulses inside me, his stomach presses against my clit and my eyes roll upwards ever so slightly.

He pulls back and keeps a steady rhythm, staring into my eyes as we do make love. He doesn’t stop taking every part of me in. He runs a hand up my side and cups my breast, he kisses a nipple and licks the other. He drinks me and makes me feel so *hot*. And I do the same for him. The muscular body I was lusting for yesterday is right where I want it. He’s right where I want him.

He increases his rhythm, the sounds of our hips slapping together echoes back from the glass doors behind. I pull him down against me and do something I’ve wanted to do the whole time, get on top.

We roll over and I slide back down on him, he feels even bigger. I ground around on him and there's no chance for him to take control here. He tries to tell me to slow down but I press a finger to his lips and guide a hand to my breast. "Shhhh," I say. I ride him harder. I lean back, accentuating the angle in which his cock is entering me.

He gasps a quick intake of breath. I ride him quicker, feeling how much deeper he gets when I grind him at the end of each thrust. We get into a similar dance of breathing and groaning. I feel him beginning to spasm inside me. His face is growing serious, he's holding his breath. God, it's hot. It's making me get close. I'm holding my breath.

He tries to speak again, and I rise extra high and slap down. He shuts up.

I feel how close I am. His hands are grasping at me then his thumb plunges for my clit, rubbing in circles. I fuck him harder, taking his enlarging cock even deeper. We're both moaning now, both letting ourselves go. Both letting our true feelings come out.

I feel his hips twitch and his thumb presses extra hard on my clit. *It's over.* My body gushes with pleasure and I collapse onto his chest, moaning into it. He begins coming inside me and I feel the force of his pleasure. He fucks me now and keeps going, keeps fucking me as I come even harder because of it. We're both moaning together as we orgasm. We're both sweaty and breathless in mere minutes.

Most importantly, we're both together.

Chapter 16

Luca

Her breath is the most calming thing I could ever have imagined experiencing. She inhales so slowly and calmly, then exhales like a sigh of relief. It's the most relaxing thing I've ever experienced. Probably as close to being back in my mother's womb as I could get. I almost laugh. What is happening to me? A fearful voice tries to come up, but I shut it down. *What is happening is I care for a woman. And more than just to give her a cab ride home.* I snort. I'm giddy.

It feels odd though. I don't know how to take this development. I've been taught all my life to be wary of the other families, to hate them and never trust them. Yet being with her, having known her without knowing who she was ... It's breaking my mind to think clearly. I feel like I need guidance.

Except the guidance I've been given has told me to marry her.

What kind of world is it now?

I finally open my eyes and look around the pool house. I've given up trying to get back to sleep. I've been lying here for over two hours listening to Sophie breathing, feeling the strands of her hair on my chest like feathers ...

I look down at her from above. She's a mess of hair and arms and flesh. Even in the light of nighttime though, she shimmers with warmth. Her nose is a perfect little button. Her cheeks are slightly plump from the bone structure beneath. I can only imagine how cute she would've looked as a kid. I can only imagine how cute our kid would look.

That's the problem that's kept me awake for the last two hours. I keep daydreaming of our future together.

I hated her for a month. Hated her. I despised her and all that she'd done to me. Then barely two weeks of being with her in a house and we're going to be happily ever after and married?

Are we really getting married? My heart skips a bit.

I've got to get out of here.

I adjust beneath her on the bed and roll her to the side, laying her head on the pillow. Her naked body lies before me. My eyes trace her like a racing track. She is magnificent. I just want to cherish her and be here for her when she wakes up. I want to protect and guard her. I want to find out who tried to kill us. I want to be with her forever—

I turn away and bite my lip until I almost cry out in pain.

No.

The sex was great. Saving her life was necessary. But it was all emotional afterwards. It meant nothing. It—

But I'm lying to myself.

I dress quickly—as in slide on the tiny ass speedo, and get out of the pool house. She'll be fine by herself. I stop, just about to close the door, and look back at her.

It is a slightly cooler evening than most.

I head back in, just as quietly as when I left, and go back to her. I grab the quilt and slide it over her, tucking her in and hiding her body. *It's something only I can see.*

That's the last one, I tell myself. The last thought I can have.

I leave the pool house and skirt around the pool. It's a full moon and the air is clear. Not a single cloud and I can see the very recliner Sophie was on during the day. It's tipped to the side, as if it were perfectly positioned to dump her into that water. I bypass and head inside to the entertaining room I'd been watching her from.

My things have been tidied and folded, they're sitting on the drinks bar along with Sophie's things. My phone is on top and I take it down. I check it habitually but know there won't be any notifications other than the blackmailer.

And I'm right.

It's just a text, showing the address of one of our real estates.

It doesn't shock or surprise me, *you can look us up in the phone book.*

But I do stare at the phone for a long time. I stare at the background I've got set. It's a picture of me, my father, and Ma. It was just before she left to go and visit relatives in Italy. We're all there at the airport, sending her off as she goes early. Dad and I were meant to follow three weeks later and enjoy a cold Christmas with the extended uncles and aunts in Turin. Fucking freezing compared to our mild ones here. But the coldness wasn't the problem. That Ma got whacked by some old family grudge leaving the airport is the problem.

It's the coldness that has sprung up between me and my father since she died.

Why? Because it was something I'd done as a kid. That was the grudge being repaid. Something completely fucking stupid. Something I don't even remember doing. That's the worst part about this guilt. Somehow it's *my* fault and I don't even know what I did. My father, even if he doesn't know it, blames me. He knows business is business. He knows how dangerous it was for Ma to go home, and not because of my dumb shit, but because of why our family is here in the south of the US. The Colombino's hadn't always been in America. Nor had the Colombinos always been *Colombinos*. We'd been *Azzarettis*. And Ma's grandmother had been one. Then she met a guy, had a kid, got him baptized as something else, yada yada yada.

The screen goes dark and I close that whole mental treasure chest of happy memories. I don't need to torture myself any

more than I already have been this trip. I look up at the ceiling, praying for some sort of strength to figure out what my problem is.

Then it occurs to me.

The roof.

The whole time I've been here I've stayed on the ground and first floor, where my room is. I'd never gone higher. I'm completely fucking stupid.

I run to the main entrance hall and race up the grand stairs, then I open the shuttle door for servants, and race up the three floors to the top where my father had his private little terrace built. The door isn't locked and soon I'm back out in the fresh air. Back out among the midnight breezes and soft scents of tomatoes growing.

It's as I stand among my father's little haven of tomato paradise that I realize everything he's said is right. I mean, I've already realized that it's all right, but now I understand it.

The family is everything. Because the family is involved with everything. We aren't a family in the normal sense. Most people aren't involved with businesses the way our family is. It's personal. All of it. It's a piece of us in the world that exists almost as a living and breathing thing. And if that were the case, I'd been flaunting a kid in a beauty pageant and pocketing the profits. I'd never considered how that was for the family. Only that the family benefited overall.

I stare up at the moon and know that I'm not ready to be a Don. Not yet a leader of this family. That's the true reason why this marriage can't happen. I won't become who I need to be if I don't take it seriously without it.

But then isn't family everything? Marrying Sophie, maybe even starting a family ... That is it too.

I sigh and sit down on my father's bench. Marrying Sophie? Despite trying to push it away, I can see it. She would truly be angelic in a white dress. We'd have it down at that church in Key West, maybe at sunset so the stained glass is shining ... I'd wear a white jacket and black pants. I know I look good in white. In truth it wouldn't matter what I'd wear, she'd outshine me regardless. I'm sitting here under the moonlight smiling like some damn idiot. Even if I'm not ready to be Don, even if this marriage shouldn't happen, I at least feel comfortable up here acknowledging that I like her ...

It suddenly occurs to me how robust my father's tomatoes are. When does he even have the time to come out here? I wonder who looks after it. For the first time, in my entitled little life, I realize it's *family*. That's why I've always known Gammie and considered her our blood. Because family isn't blood. Family is action. What we *do* for one another.

My phone starts beeping and pinging away in my hand, I turn it over and it's lighting up like a christmas tree. Notification after notification. Messages from my father, Marco, everyone. Emails start flooding through along with

some Piovere shit too. I feel like a kid and wonder what to do first!

Then all these missed calls start coming through ...

From this afternoon.

It's my father on repeat. He called like eight fucking times. All the while I'd been fucking Sophie. All while we'd been bonding again. What's happened to him?

Finally my phone pings again with a last message, a voicemail has been left.

I unlock the phone and dial the number. The lady tells me to wait and punch numbers, I nearly jab my finger through the fucking screen. My heart is hammering and suddenly wearing a fucking speedo has me freezing. My heart is shrinking. I hold the phone up to my ear.

My father never leaves messages.

So why now?

For a while it's odd sounds, rhythmic. Then I realize it's just heavy breathing. *Heavy breathing...* The terrace goes dim. I'm staring at the sky line and the birds that have just burst from the forest with a call into the night winds. The heavy breathing increases. There's a throat cleared. The phone fumbles in someone's hands ...

The birds caw and I can hear that they're ravens. Ravens? This far out in the Everglades?

“Lucas,” my father says, his voice weak. “Lucas ...” He’s swallowing, and I know he’s swallowing blood. It’s too thick for anything else. I’ve seen men die. “Lucas, I’ve been—” he coughs. “The rat—” He chokes his way through his words. “The Manetti rat is—”

The line dies and the message ends. The lady is back asking me if I want to listen to it again.

I’m numb. I’m blinking in confusion, I’ve got a sludge bag for a brain and my thoughts are slowing to a steady stop. I replay the message. I listen to my father dying again. I listen to the sounds of where he is again. I listen and try to understand this rage building in me. I listen and try not to hold back the tears. I listen and want to crush this confusion in me but am unable.

The ravens pass over me and I hang up the phone.

I scream up at the moon, unable to think that anyone else other than Tommy Russo is responsible for this.

Chapter 17

Sophie

For the second time today I'm being torn from darkness. Luca pulls me awake and is shaking my body.

"C'mon. Up," he says, calmly and yet forcefully.

I open my eyes and all I see is the rage of the man he was on the jet ski, except it's contained now. His eyes are like tigers. His teeth look as if they could rip me apart, but instead of doing so he's pacing back and forth. "Out of bed, now." He points to the floor like I'm some kind of dog.

"Luca? What's going on—"

"Why?" he says calmly. His eyes are dangerous. He picks up the bowl from the bedside table and goes to smash it, but doesn't. His body is shaking with anger and I can see he's trying his hardest to contain it. "Why did you have him killed?"

"What?" A trickle of fear tickles the back of my head. "What are you—I don't know what you're talking about," I

say. I creep across the bed and try to hold him but he steps back.

“Don’t touch me,” he says flatly. Like a slap. “Why’d you have my father killed?” he says, finally revealing what’s enraged him.

My eyes go wide and my heart sinks. “Luca! When did this happen? I don’t—”

But Luca bats my touch away again. I can see his face growing red, but he keeps his calm. He goes to speak, but then doesn’t. He paces away and then back, his hand raised and shaking. A pointing finger at me. I can see him fighting to not break down. All I want to do is hold him...

“I just—I’ve gotta know Sophie, why’d you have him killed?”

“I didn’t have him killed!” I shout, then cover my mouth in shock. The surprise of it has made my heart race. “We’ve just been here together? Like, when could I do this?”

But Luca is still pacing, shaking his head. The whole thing feels obscenely bizarre with him still in his speedo. “Luca, please put on some pants—”

“You can’t tell me what to do!” he hisses. He growls and opens his phone, pressing it towards me with the loudspeaker on. “Listen to it,” he says. He comes to the bed and presses it into my hands. “Listen!”

“I will,” I cry, as tears come quickly and my heart races. I can’t believe he’s saying this. “I just don’t understand—”

“Neither do I,” he says. “But trouble seems to follow me when you’re around Sophie.”

The phone starts playing its message. It’s really eerie and there’s some heavy breathing I can’t really make out. I’m watching Luca as I listen, the color drains from his face and it’s like a knife is twisting in his heart. “We don’t have to listen,” I plead.

“We must,” he utters.

The phone is being fumbled with by someone and I hear Luca’s father talk. He’s saying Luca’s name and something else... Then he goes away. It comes back briefly then goes away, finally it comes back. He sounds like he’s got no energy. He’s trying to tell us something... the rat? The rat what?

“I don’t follow?” I say.

The veins on Luca’s head bulge and his teeth are grinding like bricks being scraped together. I reach out a final time and he steps off from the bed and turns away from me. His head hangs. “My father has been executed while we’ve been hiding away.” He’s shaking his head, his rage is building again. His fist is tensing and I’m waiting for the wrath I know is there. “I get a hit put on me just as I meet you. My father gets killed, just as I meet you. A lot of things seem to happen around you Sophie Russo.” His hands are bunching in and out of fists. His muscles are rippling. The body I lusted for has become a coiled weapon ready to destroy me as I await my fate.

“Luca, I swear to you. I don’t know anything about this.” I look about, hoping to find anything that can prove my

innocence, but there's nothing. My belongings aren't here. "Look, I've been here with you the whole time. I don't get any reception either—I've not spoken to my father since we left. I'm in the dark as you are."

But Luca is having none of it, the death of his father has broken him. "Out of bed," he says. "Come on, we're getting to the bottom of this. And if not," he pauses and looks at me. "I don't want to begin to think of the fate of Tommy Russo's daughter."

My eyes bulge with terror. He's completely lost it. "Luca, slow down. What has happened?" I push all the crap aside and grab onto him. He tries to push me away and I hold on, determined to not lose him. "We were just here? You were just asleep?" I cry into his shoulder. "I was just asleep—"

"And I've been awake for two hours, " Luca screams, pushing himself away. He's heaving like it's been the most painful thing ever for him. He counts off the hours on his hand. "I've been lying here and trying to discern if this is all a ploy. If this is all some Russo trick? If I—" he pauses, the anger cracking and his vulnerability shining through slightly. "If what I felt for you was some trick of your's to lull me into —"

"Luca, you're getting paranoid," I begin, putting my hands out to reach him.

"Who fed the information about the Manettis growing to my father? Who fed the information for these two-bit hitmen trying to kill me? Who—"

“You’re being completely insane!” I say. “My father didn’t give me away because he wanted to kill you or your father!”

“Then why?” Luca says, his eyes are large and white. He grabs at his hair with no way to go.

“I don’t know,” I say honestly. “We had the same lunch, remember? Our mothers were friends. And that was the first I heard of it. And—”

Luca shakes his head and begins pacing. “Look, how did you get this information? When did this call happen? When did—”

“When you rolled off the recliner into the pool.” Luca looks at me with dark eyes. His face is inclined and it’s even more sharp. “It would’ve been around the same time. A convenient time to trap me with your whore’s pussy.”

I slap him in the face as hard as I can. Doing it without even thinking. “How dare you!” I say, my hand shaking and eyes beginning to water.

His cheek reddens and his face is blank.

“How dare you say to me when I’m—when I’m—” but I can’t say it. I can’t utter the two syllables I need to. Pregnant. “When I’m your *fiance*,” I end up uttering.

This makes Luca grin and his cheek darkens even more, I can tell it’s at least burning. I don’t regret it after such a comment. “There’s only one way to know the truth. We’re going back.” He takes me by the hand and begins pulling me.

“No,” I say.

“Yes,” he says. “If there’s no issues, you’ll have no problem going back to our lives. No? Isn’t that what you wanted anyway? Or do you want me out here for a reason?”

I sigh and relent to his will. But I pull my hand away. “Fine, we’ll go. But I’ve done nothing here but—” I bite the last word off again. Done nothing but what? Love him? A flash of his words before haunts the moment as we leave. What had he felt for me that he was about to say?

Luca leads me out of the pool house and around the pool. We head to the glass doors I was reclining in front of and he opens the door, he takes a few towels and things off of the counter. My phone is among them. Then he comes back and we head around the house. We go to the garage and he keys in a code at the door. It unlocks and we enter.

Inside are a line of sedans.

“We could’ve left at any time?” I ask.

“Any time,” Luca says “But I was holding up my part of the deal of playing nice.”

Luca says nothing more and gets in the car, leaving a towel on top for me. I stand there watching the roller door go up, then finally wrap the towel around myself and hop in. It’s only just occurred to me then that I’d been completely naked this whole argument.

We accelerate out of the garage and fly down the driveway. The bald cypress trees are haunting the night, coming towards us like giant hands to pull us from the road. Luca slows at the

gate and a guard comes out of his little hole, he sees who it is and presses the button to open. We are released and flee towards the city.

Luca drives like a maniac. It's three in the morning and there's no one on the road, especially these back roads, nevertheless he's flying along the bitumen and only slowing at the last minute for each corner. Crossing the glades like this has a lot of long stretches. A lot of time for me to freak out and him to wallow in anger. His jaw continues to click. Then in what feels like no time at all, we get back towards some small sign of civilization and my phone goes crazy.

It begins pinging like mad. There's a few from Mimi and my father. All the social media I'm on and emails.

I open the messages and go through my father's messages. Nothing out of the ordinary. Same for Mimi. I give my phone to Luca and he scans everything while speeding along the highway. We see a few slow crawling rigs making their way to Miami.

"See, nothing," I say.

"You might have a burner," he says.

"I don't have anything!" I press. "I've not been involved in your father's death. Why can't you trust me?"

The lights are flashing by us. I see the anger on Luca's face. But more than that, below the flashing teeth and sharp words, his eyes are rimmed and red. He's worried. He's afraid. I almost wish that he would unleash his anger on me. It would at

least let me know what he's really thinking. With him being so quiet, I can only assume the worst. And as soon as I do that, I get in my own head.

“Just explode at me or something! Yell! Scream! Be like you were with the jetski,” I snap.

He looks at me out the side of his eyes but says nothing.

“If it will make you see clearly, if it will let you get on with grieving—”

“Don't tell me how to grieve,” he utters. He regrips the steering wheel. Licks his lips. “I'm not screaming at you Sophie, because I want to believe that you're not responsible. Despite what my mind and body is screaming at wanting to believe, my heart wants otherwise.”

“Then let me show you!” I take my phone back and call my father. “I'll prove it to you,” I say. My father picks up immediately.

“Honey, are you okay?” he says immediately.

Luca and I share looks of surprise.

“Yes, I'm fine. I'm—”

“Is Luca with you?” he says quickly. “Are you both safe?”

I look at Luca with the phone pressed against my ear.

“Are you with Luca, yes or no?”

“Yes,” I utter.

“Put him on,” he says. “Quickly.”

I put the phone on speaker and place it in the middle of the car. The lights of the growing city are a blur on the horizon, a man made sun that will never really rise or set.

“Luca?” my father asks.

“I’m here, Russo,” he spits.

There’s a pause on the line. “You know?” he asks.

“I got the message tonight.” Luca is throttling the steering wheel.

“Message?” my father says. “What message?”

“My father’s dying breaths. He tried calling me and telling me who the rat is—” He bites the rest of the words off and the car is silent.

I’ve heard the message already, Luca has made me listen to it, but hearing him say it to my father makes it even more real. Someone has *done this* to him.

“Jesus Christ,” my father utters.

“But you probably know that!” Luca says.

“Luca—” my father begins.

“Don’t talk to me like I’m someone you know!” he screams. “I’m alone with your daughter. Be very fucking careful with me.”

I inch away on my seat, suddenly very fearful of Luca. His hands are white knuckling the steering wheel. Now I don’t know what I want, the quiet anger is just as bad as the

explosive one. What happened? Weren't we just spooning in the pool house?

"Luca, you need to listen to me," my father says. "You cannot go to your father's house. It's a trap. It is a *warzone*. The whole thing is in flames. There's been a gunfight—"

"What?" Luca says. He looks down at the phone in shock, as if seeing where the message came from will confirm the pain even more.

"This is why I've been trying to contact you! I didn't know Michael—I didn't know Michael *was* there. I just had my men inform me that all hell had broken out. Next thing, he's—"

"Yes," Luca says.

My father sighs and swears on the other end. "Okay, damage control. Your father and I exchanged information straight away in case anything like this happened. I'm the only person who knows this information."

"His death?" Luca asks.

"No, the location of the Colombino safehouses." My father gets up and there's a sound of him moving things off the phone. I know he's opening his safe. "Michael gave me these last week. Up to date as of a month ago."

Luca turns white. *It really is damage control*. "Why should I trust you?" he asks. "Why should I trust that this isn't some Russo trap?"

My father is quiet. "I would never have killed your father Luca. And like you said, you've got my daughter."

Luca looks at me. The anger drains away to the fear and anxiety hiding beneath. He regrips the wheel and then licks his lips. “Fine. Where do you want to meet? I’ll know if you’re lying.”

My father is rummaging through papers. Finally he stops. “Let’s meet at Abraham and Schofield. Then we can head to wherever you feel is safest.” he says, a sigh escapes his lips. “I’m so sorry, Luca. This is a great loss for the Colombinos. But also, for me. As a man that respected your father, I’m very sorry.”

Luca says nothing. He’s swallowing a thick throat, fighting back tears. “Abraham and Schofield,” he says finally. “We’ll be there in forty-five minutes. If you’re not there in fifty, we’re gone.”

He hangs up my phone and says nothing more.

I stare at the phone, then I stare at him. Disbelief is washing over me that I’d cared for him. Disbelief that I’d considered keeping the baby. Disbelief that I could have loved him ... Would he really have killed me?

Luca continues to say nothing and keeps driving. He increases the speed and soon the lights of Miami are little more than just a horizon of glowing orange. There’s lights and buildings and homes screaming towards us. There’s life. All of them are asleep and safe. Alive.

All except his father.



We arrive at a random warehouse. There's a light on by the side door, a lone bulb hanging from a long chain above a cement stoop and rusted out handrail.

“What's there?” I ask.

Luca says nothing. He gets out and goes to the door, he takes a set of keys from his pocket and digs through them. He unlocks the side door and goes in. A moment later the light is off, and Luca comes back, carrying a shotgun.

I grab the door handle and shut the door, slamming his lock down once it's closed.

But he hasn't left the cement rise of the side entrance. He takes his phone out and then takes the butt of the gun and slams it down into the phone. The thing explodes in a shower of glass and plastic. He comes towards the car then, realizing it's locked and closed up. He looks at me like I'm an idiot. He frowns and takes out a beep, unlocks the car with a single press. He shucks the shotgun and loads a cartridge into the pump chamber.

“This is not for you or your father. It's for our protection.”

“Why'd you break your phone?” I ask, needing to distract him. But he's still not answering any question I ask.

A car pulls up into the car park with us. The windows are tinted and the number plates have rolled back into the body of the car. I know it's a car my father would use. Still, Luca readies the gun. The car pulls up next to us and my father steps out immediately.

I open the door and run to him, tears streaming from my eyes. Suddenly I'm in his arms and he's hugging me to his chest. I cry harder than I've ever cried. Sweet relief washes through me as I sob into his chest and he stands there holding me, petting my hair and doing nothing but be there for me.

I eventually pull away and he's staring at Luca. "Thank you," he says.

Luca shakes his head. "It's nothing. I never touched her. I —" He pauses, conflicted and looking at me. "I never realized how hard it would be to trust among us. I've grown up my whole life against you, it's hard to change in a few weeks."

I stare at him, knowing that the apology was for me.

My father nods though. "I understand. I really do." He signals to his driver in the car and the engine dies. The lights turn off. "Now, we're exposed here and we need protection."

Luca nods, "I have a place in mind. It's a house not in the list my father gave."

My father agrees immediately. "Good. Wherever you want to go."

Luca watches my father for a few moments. "You trust me?"

"Trust is built from taking a chance. We're at war now Lucas, and as the new Don of the Colombinos, I will do nothing but trust you. I made a pledge with your father that we'd all cooperate. I mean to stand by that."

He nods and I see him swallowing again. He scratches his nose. “Okay then. This place is only known to myself and my father. Not many other Colombino’s know of it, if any.”

“That’s perfect for right now.”

“But do you trust your men?” Luca asks. “I need to know.”

“Of course. I’ve vetted my men since speaking with you a couple weeks ago.” Why?”

Luca steps towards us, he gestures at the phone still clutched in my hand. “We need to destroy all the phones. When I was inside, I received a text from our blackmailer. They gave some details that have only arisen in the last weeks. Which means our Manetti rat is also a spy.”

My father’s jaw tightens and I feel his body go rigid.

We can’t trust anyone.

“Do you still feel like gambling?” Luca asks.

“I must,” my father says. “Or your father died for nothing. And the Manettis will destroy us all.”

Chapter 18

Luca

All my life my father was this giant to me. Even though I'm taller than him, even though I have muscles like an ape, he's always towered over me. But now, looking at his semi-charred body down on the morgue slate, he's so tiny.

The cloth is pulled back and only shows his head.

I rub my eyes and keep staring at him, taking him in and letting it wash over me. I've lost him. I'm an orphan now.

It still hasn't hit me. But that's because I'm putting everything into wanting to kill who did this. I'm taking everything that has happened to him, so that I can do it to *them*. The Manettis. I'm taking it in so that I can give it back tenfold.

I take the sheet in my hand and uncover the rest of him. I need to see it again. I need to see what they did to him again. The peeled flesh and wounds. The torture. It enrages me that someone would do this to him.

I cover the sheet back up but still pause at the head. I can't get past the head. I can't cover his face. I can't say goodbye.

It's too soon.

My hand is shaking. The anger that's boiling is simmering and turning to pain. It's going cold and threatening to break from me, pulled like a bad tooth.

I keep inching the sheet further. I know I can do it. But I just don't want to.

The hand of the mortician takes the sheet with me, she looks into my eyes and nods. "It's okay," she says. "You don't have to."

"I need to," I say back, staring at the middle-aged woman with kind eyes. I bet she's done this more than she cares to admit. "It's the only way forward," I say. I swallow, the sheet good and bunched in my fist now, I slide it over his face and say goodbye forever. "It's done," I say to her.

I close my eyes and turn around. The hurt hits me like a punch right into my heart. I cough and it turns into a choke. I try to push the pain away and roll my shoulders.

I'm the Don now.

I've got to look after the family.

I turn back to the mortician and thank her. I pass her and never look back. Gammie will organize my father's funeral. She knows everything, she used to do all the will stuff with him since Ma ...

I flee the basement and morgue. I walk the halls of the hospital and keep turning and taking doors until I'm good and lost. The white walls all become the same and the lines on the floor mean nothing. Nothing until I find a dark corridor and a corner where I can just take a moment.

I close my eyes. But my father is still there. He's burned into my brain. So small and frail on that mortician's metal altar. He's only a mere shadow of the man that my father was. My thoughts stir again, returning to the torture of knowing that it was too late, knowing that I couldn't do anything ... That he was already dead when I found out. Dead by a few hours. How long had it taken him to die? How long had he been tortured before he'd finally been released and been able to seek out Ma? How long had it all happened while I fucking *slept*?

A sob wrenches from my chest and it's like my heart has been flayed. It's violent. It's hurting me more than I could ever have understood. The pain of Ma comes back. The pain of every funeral I've attended comes at me in full strength. Then I'm crouched down hugging my knees. My father is there in front of my eyes on the table. The skin on his chest peeled away and gone. The skin on his arms and shoulders. His cheeks. *The person that had done it had taken pleasure in skinning him alive.*

My teeth crackle against each other and I stop grinding them. I know that Sophie isn't a part of it, I know because she wouldn't order that on someone. Neither would Tommy. Whoever did this to my father wanted to make a statement. They wanted to hurt *me*, specifically.

I feel horrible for how I treated Sophie now. I feel horrible for how I reacted and blamed her. I feel horrible for the fact that I threatened her. I need to call her. I need to make this right, because the truth is I only feel things completely opposite of anger towards her. I don't want to yell at her, I want to whisper. I don't want to have thoughts of violence, but only of lust. I want—I daydreamed about a fucking wedding!

But this is what this has made me into.

My teeth aren't cracking against each other but my jaw is straining with pressure. This is what the Manettis have done and will receive in full return. I'll do it back worse.

I stand and tense my hands into fists. I push all of the images of Sophie from my mind and I vow revenge stronger than any would expect. I don't have time anymore to think about a girl that I have feelings for.

I roll my head in a circle and huff like a bull ready to charge. Gone is Sophie from my mind, and in its place is my father. I grind my teeth again. By the time I'm done with the Manettis, they'll only be spoken in whispers. They'll be a story that people tell because of *me*. It'll be something that creates me. It'll be something that defines me. Because after I'm done, I will be the only one left.

I escape my corner and head back along the hallways. I take the doors and signs and follow the little green men until I get to the rear entrance and head out into the car park. The car from the new house is sitting there, still surrounded by the cars that were parked there when I left. I check the other cars in the

aisle. Still the same models and plates. Nothing new that I can see. I unlock the car and then get down on my hands and knees; a quick scan under the car shows nothing. I look under the seats inside and take a deep breath. No bombs yet.

I take out my phone and dial Sophie. I owe her an apology. Because try as I might, regardless of vowing as much revenge as I can, her face keeps coming back. The angelic face that won't answer her phone ...

I sit there tapping the steering wheel, waiting for her to pick up. She doesn't, and I look around the car as I try to compose an apology over voicemail. "Hi, Sophie. It's me, Luca. Um. Just got out of seeing my father at the morgue ..." I look around the car again, realizing that I didn't check the glove box for any explosives.

"I just wanted to call." My mouth snaps shut and I struggle to say the next bit. "I *needed* to call and—" Again, I stop short. Why am I struggling with this? *I know I'm in the goddamn wrong here!* I lean over and hesitate on opening the glove box. "I just called to apologize about—"

I open the glovebox.

There's no bomb, but there's something worse.

A photo of my father as he lay dying.

My heart jumps through my chest and I hang up immediately. I rip the picture from the cavity and stare at it in horror. I exit the car and search the car park in every direction. I scan everywhere. There's people milling about the entrances

of the hospital. There's cars coming and going. There's nothing out of the the ordinary just—

A car screeches through a corner and launches out of the entrance, one hundred yards off. It's a brown sedan!

I run for it, pumping my arms as fast as I can and pushing my legs to go faster. I know it's useless. I know they wanted me to see them and feel helpless. I know they wanted me to see my father dead and then see them getting away.

I know and still I run.

I race to the entrance and then through the gate. I run down the street among the cars and people, watching it disappear through the lights and traffic. I run, unable to see the sedan once it overtakes a truck. It's long gone.

I come to a stop and fall to my knees. I scream at the sky and vow to kill them tenfold. I'll skin every single one of them alive. I'll destroy all of them for what they've done to my father.

Chapter 19

Sophie

“Dad, are you sure?” I ask again.

“Honey,” my father says over the phone. “We’ve been over this. You’re engaged to Luca now. He’s the Don. As part of keeping our deal, you two are still engaged. You live together now.”

“But—” I don’t finish what I want to say. But he threatened me? But I don’t feel safe here, or anywhere other than being at our home. But I’m *pregnant*.

I know that would get his attention and maybe get him to change his mind. But then, I’m pregnant with Luca’s baby. It would be fitting that I be here with him. But being here with him isn’t really being here. He’s gone most of the day, and when he returns he’s so tired and distraught that he says nothing. He’s grieving, or denying grieving, his father by putting everything into killing whoever was responsible for his death.

“I just, I just want to be in my old room,” I say.

I can tell my words are hurting my father, and I feel guilty in a small way using it as a tactic to get what I want. But he doesn't relent. "No, Sophie. You're at Luca's. And need I remind you you're at Luca's *in hiding*."

"I know," I sigh. "It's the bajillionth time you've said."

"Okay, then. Look, call me if it's urgent, but I need to get to the bottom of this too. Luca needs all the help he can get now. He's been thrown into the deep end here."

My father hangs up soon after and then it's just me again. It's a common theme as of late. Me being alone, me being hidden from everything. Me having my own secret while everyone else has theirs.

I put the phone down on the kitchen counter and take a glass down to have a drink of water. A sickness that's not necessarily morning related, or baby related, or just anything related, has crept up on me. I'm starting to think it's home sickness though.

Luca's safehouse turned out to be his mother's old home. It was her own little private place where she used to go when the main house was too much. She'd come from a small home and life, and sometimes the big mansion was overwhelming, Luca said.

I completely understand. There's a comfort here I've never felt anywhere else. I mean, despite not wanting to be here, or being confused about Luca, the house is still very comforting. There's photos and knick knacks everywhere. I see Luca growing up in the photos, while his father grows older and

sharper. Both of their eyes lose a joyous energy to them, while Luca's mother only seems to grow in joy.

It's been a week since the death of his father. He's still no closer to finding the rat, or anything linking the Manettis outright. The attack on his father's home was quick and precise. In and out. An inside job. It's driving him crazy, he's worried and paranoid about every single person in his family. The only people he doesn't suspect are me and my father, Marco and Gammie. Two of the oldest people he knows, and two of the newest. Everyone else is fair game.

As a sign of trust, and just as much for my own sanity and safety as his, I've set up our phones to be on a joint account. Plus, with the security app I installed, I can track him and he can track me. After his bizarre call the other day, where he *attempted* to apologize and then left midcall, I just don't feel safe. And he still won't talk about it either. All he said was that the "rat" put a picture of his father in the glovebox of his car. But ...

Either way, he won't acknowledge the call and voicemail that I have on my phone. I don't know whether it's because he's embarrassed, or if he thinks I still want him to apologize. I do want him to apologize, he accused me of being involved in his father's death. But at the same time, I know it's not the most important thing at the moment to ask for. That and he is looking after me by letting me stay here at his mother's home.

I log into the app and double check that he's still safe. There's no alerts or anything abnormal about his actions.

Marco made sure the accounts weren't traceable or under our names either.

Other than that, the exchange of our phones and my installing of apps, is the longest time I've spent with Luca for the last week. I tried telling him about the app at dinner one night, he just nodded, but I don't think it sunk in. A lot of our dinner's are like that now. I just feel useless.

There's a knock at the door, then the doorbell rings twice. The door unlocks and soon voices are heard.

At least he's home at a normal hour today though, even if he's brought company.

Luca enters with Marco close behind him.

"Hi," I say.

Luca smiles awkwardly and then leans to kiss me on the cheek. It feels odd, wooden and like a show. He's not done that ever, but it's like he's still too embarrassed about his behavior the night of his father's death. Marco breaks the awkwardness though by smiling and waving. But Marco smiles and waves.

"Hiya again, Soph," he says.

"Hi, Marco," I reply. "How're you?"

Marco nods and smiles. Marco is the only person of the family he's told that we're hiding here. The rest know he's in hiding, but not where. Marco is his right hand man and the only one who's managed to get anything since.

He found another packet of matches.

“Just stopping in for lunch today,” Luca says. “Then back out, so you’ll have the afternoon to yourself.”

“Oh okay,” I say. “What can I get you guys? I whip the apron off of the tea towel holder, excited to be of help. But Marco holds up a bag. “We got rolls from the deli down on Miller,” he says, as if I know where the hell that is. “You like chili?”

I smile. “Sure.”

The lunch is silent and Luca practically wolfs his roll down. He’s finishing it as I’m barely a quarter way in. Marco is slower, but not too much further behind. This is the worst game of ‘playing house’ that I’ve ever seen. I think that even Marco knows too. Luca excuses himself and then is gone, leaving just Marco and I.

He leans forward and whispers. “Sorry,” he says. “He’s very preoccupied.”

I nod. He’s just told the world’s most obvious secret.

“I’ve known him for twenty years, and he gets like this when he’s stressed. Don’t take it personally. He just—” Marco grins. “He has the emotional capacity and threshold of a pin head sometimes.”

I snort and hold my laugh back. “That’s not true,” I say. “He’s—”

Marco holds up his hand. “I know, he’s just lost his father. I know. Just as a best-friend observation,” he grins again. “I know it’s tough though. “ Getting serious and wiping his

mouth with a napkin. “You just gotta be patient. He’s a passionate man. Which is good when it’s good, but sometimes not too nice when he loses his temper...”

My face betrays my deeper feelings. “It’s that obvious?”

“Oh, I know he yelled at you,” Marco whispers. “He hasn’t stopped thinking about it.”

“He said something?” I ask, leaning forward.

“Nope,” Marco smiles. “But he takes that damn phone out every few minutes to go and call you.”

I look away, closing my eyes to stop the tears. Why can’t he show that emotion to me? Then, I feel so stupid. Last week he was in a blind fury and blaming me for his father’s death, now he’s wanting to apologize to me and unable to? What do I want from it all though?

“There’s been a few more messages too, from the blackmailer.” He’s looking at the counter now, shaking his head. “It’s horrible. Just Michael—” he jams a tongue into his cheek. “Michael never questioned me, ya know? Twenty years he treated me like a son ... And this bastard taunting us.” Rage flashes across his face.

I reach across and grab his hand. He smiles and nods. I can only imagine how hard it is for all of them. The Colombinos as a whole must be struggling to grieve and still work as a machine.

Marco sucks his lips in and shakes his head. Then he smiles. “Lemme tell ya why it’s gonna be hard for those Manettis now

that Luca is in charge. One time,” he begins. “This is when he’d just bought himself a new car—leather seats and all that. Might’ve been a Beamer? Anyway, we’re driving along after getting some burgers and fries. I dropped one crumb, one little bee’s dick of a crumb on the carpet. He went nuts. Totally ballistic.”

The story isn’t that funny, but the way Marco tells it, and the fact that I’ve barely had a decent conversation in almost a month, makes me giggle like crazy.

“He’s livid. Fucking demonic. Red like a tomato. He’s screaming at me as we drove down Ocean Boulevard, *Marco you fucking asshole! This is new leather! This is fucking mountain cow brown!*”

I lose it. The laughter is pulled from me.

“And I say, *Mountain cow brown? What the fuck is that? You buy this car from America Car Dealership?*”

I laugh out loud and my sides are hurting.

“It was horrible. A terrible joke. Completely shit. And he fucking laughs his head off. It broke him,” Marco says, finishing his roll and wiping his mouth again. “He just needed to break his cycle. He just—” He smiles at me, then turns serious. “Even if sometimes it’s hard, and *harsh* what he says, you just gotta break that cycle.”

“Break what cycle?” Luca asks.

I jump, and we both turn to him. He’s just emerged from the bathroom. His face is serious. Like laughter is illegal.

“Nothin’ buddy,” Marco says, winking at me. “Just talking.”

Luca nods. “Well, we have to keep going.” Luca comes over and kisses me on the head. Still wooden, still a little awkward, still *different*. “See you tonight,” he says, holding the tip of my chin in his hands.

I stare up into his eyes, unsure of what to make of him. I am with a man that I don’t know anymore, but feel that I didn’t really know in the first place.



Luca arrives near midnight. I hear him moving through the house quietly. He takes a shower and then makes a quick snack for himself. I close my phone just as I hear him coming from the kitchen towards the bedroom, I’ve been up reading about babies.

He opens the door and I pretend to sleep. The light spills over me and I feel him watching me. He enters and peels off his clothes and soon jumps into bed. As he lies down I pretend to wake slightly and turn towards him.

He reaches out and caresses me. I touch him back.

We’re like wooden puppets. I feel unsure, and I feel that he is unsure too. It’s like we have to do this, not want to. But maybe I’m overthinking? I don’t know.

He said he’s forgiven me and apologized for blaming me for his father’s death, and then for how he acted as well. But there’s still distance between us. Those words still feel odd on my tongue. *Forgiven me?* For what? I don’t know what to

make of him now. Would he always blame me so easily? I remember Marco's words.

I touch him again, caressing a hand across his chest. I snuggle against him.

Just have to break the cycle.

I reach out and touch his chest again. I glide the length of his body. I edge toward his crotch. His hands are tentative and hesitant. But soon they begin touching me too. It's like we're kids and inexperienced. He moves towards me and we kiss each other, but it's like ghosts kissing behind plastic masks. His lips are like wax, his hands like plasticine.

I'm compelled to break his cycle though.

We try kissing more passionately, but the heart isn't in it for either of us.

"Sophie," he whispers.

And I know what he's going to say. "I know," I reply. I move away from him, but he stops me.

"No, don't go." he whispers.

I lie there for a few seconds, my heart pounding as I wonder what we're going to do. I slide back to him and he cuddles into me, resting his head on my chest. He holds me tight and squeezes. I go to say something to break the silence but he beats me to it.

"I'm sorry," he says to my belly. "I'm so sorry. I just—" he sighs and then holds his breath again. "I really don't know

what to do. I'm so angry. I'm so confused and—it's my father, you know? I've always been able to separate what can happen in the business and family, but now they're intertwined ... and I just haven't known how to act."

I lie there, stroking his back and hair. I feel a wave of relief wash through me. "Luca, you don't have to say this."

"I do," he says. "I accused you of killing my father. I accused you when all I feel for you is—" He stops now.

I want him to finish what he was about to say. Love? That you love me the way I love you? But he doesn't say anything. We both lie there, silent, listening to the breathing of the other. Then he turns away.

"I'm sorry," he utters.

I lie there in the dark, with his child growing inside me. I feel like I'm in another bed, another universe. How did everything right turn so wrong so quickly? Yet we have a child that I still haven't told him about ...

"Luca?" I ask.

But he doesn't respond, he's already snoring.

So he remains without knowing. Maybe he doesn't have to? Maybe no one has to know? Maybe we won't last after all?

But shouldn't I tell him? Wouldn't this all be easier?

I swallow and close my eyes. I keep hearing Marco telling me how he takes out his phone and wants to call me. I wonder if he lied? I wonder what Luca is thinking, or why he doesn't

just tell me what he's thinking or feeling? Why don't I just ask? He was just telling me ... He apologized ...

I sigh and turn to sleep.

What happened to us?

Secrets, that's what happened.

Chapter 20

Luca

“It’s still fucking disgusting,” one of my father’s friends says. Jay is eighty-two years old, and is sitting on a stack of tires next to Carl, another one of my father’s old friends. They were in the family business when my father was young. “These fucking rat bastard Manettis will pay.” He shakes his fist.

I nod my thanks and smile. “Thanks Jay.”

“And you need any help running this ship, we’re here,” Carl adds in. He licks his lips and uses his handkerchief to dry the spittle at the corner of his mouth. “We don’t have muscle but we got brains, kid. We did this when you were shitting diapers!”

Marco snorts. I look at him as if not to encourage them. I was called down to the warehouse by one of the guards; there’d been a car of elderly gentleman driving around looking for an entrance. When they finally found one, they wouldn’t leave until they’d seen me. I hadn’t seen any of them in years.

“So what’re you doing about it all?” Jay asks. He’s got an oxygen tank by his leg and breathing apparatus he sucks air from every few minutes. “I want pictures of these fuckers too.” He shakes his head. “It’s rude what they’re doing.”

“It’s disgusting,” Marco adds.

Carl nods, pointing at Marco. “He’s fucking right, *disgusting.*”

“Well we’re getting to the bottom of it,” I say. “That’s what we’re doing. We’ve been tracing the signal of their messages as of late. Trying to draw as wide of a net as we can. I’m using a few of my contacts with the Miami Police, but it seems our enemy has just as good a tech as us.”

“Fucking cowards, hiding behind a little fucking phone,” Jay says, coughing and then wheezing. He grabs for his oxygen again.

“When we were young it was all in person,” Carl says. “I remember running up to a young Frank Russo back in the Ocean Beach days, that Tommy fuck’s brother. He was on our turf. I took my razor out and he was off. The pussy didn’t even hang around.”

This one makes me smile. If only they knew I was *engaged* to a Russo now. I think to tell Sophie, she might laugh.

But the very thought darkens me. We’ve soured. The other night we tried to connect... tried to kiss and be together, but even that was distant. I’d ruined it. My anger ruined it. I just—I’m still struggling to apologize. This is the same distance that

came up between me and my father. A coldness that I couldn't get past. I had to try though. Didn't I?

Maybe that was the cycle I needed to break?

I get a text from my phone. It's a security alert. Just a notification to tell me that the phone has been accessed and our account is logged in. I grunt. This shit keeps happening. I think it's only just her checking up on me. But who knows.

I guess she still wants to believe.

But do I?



Marco and I arrive home late in the afternoon after talking with the old boys for a while. We've made no ground on the search for the rat, but maybe that's okay. It was nice to have a normal day for once. It was nice to hear about my father and who he'd been when I was a kid. It's been nothing but stress and hair pulling this last week. I close my eyes and see him. I go about the day and see him. Just vision upon vision of my father on the slab. Then there's the photos...

His friends inevitably asked about the funeral, I've been putting it off I told them. I didn't want to do it until whoever was responsible was rotting in the ground. They respected that.

We walk through the entrance and I pass the picture of Ma and Dad without looking. Sophie is on the couch reading. She's sitting how she's been sitting for the last few days, with her hand on her belly and a book in the other hand. She smiles and looks genuinely happy to see us, or at least Marco.

They've become good friends these last few days. He's always been the better one of us with pressure.

"How's your day going?" I ask.

"Fine," Sophie says. She doesn't move, she dog ears her book and closes it.

"How's yours?" she asks.

"Fine too," I say. "We had some of my father's friends talking with us today."

"Wanting to be Dons themselves now that you're in charge.," Marco adds. "All getting in his ear."

"All with a different plan of attack too," Luca smiles. "It's well meant, but they—the times have changed. I don't think I've heard the word bazooka since I was a kid."

Marco snorts a laugh. "Or tommy gun!" The two grin like friends.

"I bet it was a bit of fun though," Sophie adds.

"Yeah, it was." I take a few glasses out of the cupboard and then grab the bottle of wine that's been on the counter for the whole week and a half we've been here. I open it and pour three glasses. Marco takes the glass and seats himself at the kitchen counter on a stool. A dim opening in my mind reminds me of what I tried to do last night but got too chicken shit afraid of. "It's a little unsettling though," I say. But then realize what we were just talking about, and not what I'm thinking. "Not the bazookas."

“Obviously,” Sophie adds, a grin of her own.

I look at her in all her beauty. I look at the woman standing by me, even when I can become so distant. I need to have a try with her. I need to share. “No, um—we’ve had more messages. More taunting and bragging. From the blackmailer,” I say, drinking a whole glass of wine quickly then repouring for myself.

Sophie takes the glass of wine but doesn’t drink it. Her face hasn’t left mine but has drastically changed, she’s intently watching me. Surprised. Or relieved?

It makes me nervous, but I continue. “They’re bragging that they’re right under our nose.”

Marco puts his glass down and excuses himself. “Gotta drain the lizard,” he utters with a wink.

With the click and lock of the toilet down the hall, we’ve both watched him go. Both watched the last wedge keeping us from being alone since my semi-admission in bed. Sophie is angelic and patient. She holds her glass and watches me intently. I still feel that an invisible bubble is keeping us apart. The invisible bubble I keep making and refusing to pop.

I sigh deeply. I need to try. I need to apologize fully. “Sophie,” I begin, looking into her eyes. But how? “I need to apologize.”

“You already have,” she responds.

“No, but—I’ve been distant. I’ve been awkward. I’ve been everything I don’t want to be with you. And the other night—”

“I accept your apology,” Sophie says. “I accepted it last night too.”

The bubble begins to shrink between us. I walk out from behind the island and lean against it, looking at her on the couch. “Look, I’m sorry for accusing you of killing my father.”

Sophie nods. “I’ve accepted your apology, Luca. And, if I may, I have an apology to make.”

It’s my turn to be confused now. I thought I was the one being a distant arse? “What for?”

“Well, there is something you don’t know—”

The toilet flushes and her eyes dart to the door in fear. Marco is returning, but she hasn’t said what she wanted. She stutters and doesn’t say anything in the end. The door opens and Marco emerges. He makes a beeline straight for his drink. “Bottoms up!” he says, finishing it in one. He’s grinning and looks between us, it’s only then he realizes how serious the conversation has been between us. His grin drops immediately.

I stare, waiting for her to continue. But when she doesn’t, it only lights up a new set of anxieties within me. My phone pings again. It’s another security alert.

“Okay, what did you do to the phone?” I ask, my nervous energy tunneling down into something pointless. “It keeps giving me security alerts. It keeps doing shit, even when I’m using it. It’s getting annoying.”

Sophie's face changes quickly. The vulnerability between us is destroyed by my bubble of anxiety. Whatever she was about to tell me is gone. "Oh, well that's what I was telling you about the other day. I connected our accounts. So we can keep track of one another and, well, if anything happens, you know..." she trails off under my stare.

"As long as nothing is affected you can do what you want," I say, aware that Marco is watching me.

Sophie looks at me, like I've slapped her. "I needed permission then?" she asks.

Marco is still looking at me, I burn up slightly. "No, not like that, just—look, we don't need to do this in front of Marco."

"And what is that exactly?" Sophie says. "It's just a security app. It's so we can track each other. So I can keep tabs on you —"

I snort, before I can ever stop myself.

Sophie exhales a quick breath, puts the glass down and gets up from the couch. Marco looks away and she walks past us both. She goes to the fridge and takes out a tupperware meal and pops the lid. She puts it in the microwave and turns it on. She stares out of the window. I've literally just shit the bed I was trying to fix.

"Uh maybe, I should—" But Marco falls silent under my stare.

My phone pings again. Another security alert. "See. It's going now. You're here. So what's causing it?"

“I don’t know, Luca,” Sophie says. “I just want to know you’re alright. Is that a problem?”

“Never,” I say.

Marco still edges to leave and I still give him a stare not to go. I feel like I’m pushing both away. The blackmailer is getting to me. Getting into my head. Making me think they’re all against me...

It pings again. Then again. A whole barrage of them come through then an urgent message from one of our supply warehouses. The one where we’ve had all our stock ready to send out after the fashion parade a month and a bit ago. My heart picks up a few beats. I call them immediately.

The guard on the other end is nervous. “Luca,” he begins, his voice shaking. “Uh, you might want to get down here.”

“Why? What happened?” I ask. The nervous energy within me transforms. It’s time to be calm.

“Uh well, um, have you looked at the stock recently?”

“Why?” I say, taking the phone away from my ear and crossing over to our systems reporting application. I log in with a scan of my fingerprint and soon I can see our reports and stock levels. Or lack of them.

My jaw drops.

A line of items has just been wiped off the board. More than that, a whole batch of other things have disappeared. All products and accessories for the Piovere brand which equal drugs and quantities. There’s tons missing.

“Shit ...” I mutter. “What the fuck has happened? When—”

Sophie and Marco look at me with curious eyes.

“What the fuck happened?” I repeat. “Is it there?”

“Uh, well you gotta come see, it’s a security thing. Some alert keeps blocking us.” I stare at Sophie. Is this the *something* I don’t know? “And well there’s another thing, the trucks that had that stock were all diverted ...” he fades out. “They’ve disappeared.”

“Diverted where?” I ask. “Diverted where? What do you mean disappeared? Why were they being transported in the first place?” But he says nothing, so I hang up on him and stare at Sophie with my anger boiling to explode.

“What?” she asks, fright coming to her face. Her whole body tenses. “What’s wrong?”

“Is this the *something* I don’t know?” I ask, showing her my phone.

She looks at me, then at Marco as if she’s embarrassed. She doesn’t even look at the phone. “What’re you talking about?”

My heart is vibrating. My hands are beginning to shake. “Well, whatever has happened, your app has compromised us,” I say. I stay controlled and focus on finding out the truth. Meanwhile Sophie’s eyes bulge. “Someone’s most likely hacked into our software and changed stock levels and delivery routes ... they know everything though. More than that, it’s missing because the deliveries have been diverted. It’s all gone.”

“Someone changed where the trucks were headed?” Marco says, his eyes wide. “Like what do you mean?”

“Disappeared like when something is never coming back.” I enunciate the last words. My hands are crushed into fists and I feel the nails digging into my palms. “So, is this the *something?*”

Sophie shakes her head. “No,” she utters. “No. God, no. Never. What I need to tell you is—” but she stops, swallowing and looking at Marco. She looks back at me. “What I need to tell you is different.”

I stare at her, seeing the fear and shock. I just can’t be sure. With everything that’s been happening. It keeps coming back to Sophie...

But before I can ask another question, Marco jumps in. “That’s the whole shipment,” he says, looking between us two. “That’s over a year of work, just gone ...”

“I know,” I utter, still staring at Sophie.

His horror changes. His face turns livid. He pounces at Sophie and she screams. I get in between them and stop him just as he winds his arm back to hit her. I throw him back on the couch.

“What the hell are you doing?” I yell.

“What the hell are you doing?” He tries to get back up but I push him back. “The bitch has ruined us,” he yells. “We’re done! Fucked! We’ve got so many debts that—”

“Is there something that you’d like to share with me?” I ask, towering over him on the seat. His anger is venomous and I can see that he just wants to tear Sophie apart. But I won’t let him.

“Why the fuck are you defending her? You’ve been mad at that bitch for—”

“Stop calling her a bitch.”

“Well you have!” He looks like a boy who lost his favorite toy. “I’m not blind. I’d be doing you a favor by putting her in her place.”

Sophie is shaking and I reaffirm my ground between her and Marco. “She will be where she is until we know the truth. I may not be pleased with the situation—”

“So you think I’m innocent this time?” Sophie asks.

“I don’t know what to think,” I say to her. “Truthfully. A lot of things have happened around you Sophie. I want to believe they’re incidental and not your fault, but I can’t stay blind forever.”

She purses her lips but says nothing. She takes a large breath in, then finally nods. “Fine.”

“We don’t owe her anything,” Marco says. “She’s just some chick that sucked your dick in the club—”

“Be very careful with the next words you say Marco,” I utter. “She’s *my* fiance, remember?”

“Out of convenience,” Marcu whispers.

I look back at Sophie. “I’m going to go check this out.” I look at Marco. “You’re going to stay here.”

“You’re leaving me with this psycho? He wants to rip my head off?” Sophie says, grabbing my arm forcefully. “Take me with you. Please, I swear—”

“No,” I say. “This isn’t so easy to judge, not because I think you may be guilty, but also because it could be a trap.”

Marco and Sophie look at me in shock. “What?” they both say.

“Think about it,” I respond. “If the blackmailer is right under our noses, it goes to assume that they could pull something like this. They know our new phones.” I turn to Marco now. “Which means they’ve probably been learning so much about us with your phone too.”

Marco swears. He takes his phone out and gives it to me. “These bastards will pay.”

“Let’s hope so.” I feel calmer already. I’m sorting this out. I’m not losing my head and coming at it the way Tommy Russo would. The way my father would.

“So you’re just going to leave me with this psycho?” Sophie says, her eyes wide.

“This psycho is still my best friend,” I say. “We all overreact sometimes. But if you are guilty too...I at least trust who’s here.”

Sophie says nothing. I hold out my hand to take her phone too and she relents. I put all the phones in my pocket and head

for the door.

“I’m heading straight for the warehouse. If I’m not home in an hour. There’s a hidden phone in our bedroom under the carpet.” I stand in the doorway. “But don’t take it out. Because it’s only made to dial once ...”

I turn and leave the two of them to stare at one another. I slam the door hoping I’ve made the right decision. Calm and collected. No more jumping to conclusions. No more people getting unnecessarily hurt.

Chapter 21

Sophie

Marco and I say nothing for a few beats, speechless because of the last few minutes. I stare at the floor listening as Luca slams the door on the way out, then the sound of his leaving in the car. He roars off into the night.

We stand, both waiting ...

I look at Marco ...

Then we both scramble for the bedroom and hidden phone.

I beat him to the room and slam the door, locking it just as he barges into it. He pounds on the door and screams for me to let him in. My chest is fluttering. I'm done with this whole Colombino business. I'm getting back to my father now that Marco has shown how two-faced he is. More so that Luca left me with him.

"Let me in, Sophie," he calls.

"I can't trust you," I say to the door as I yank my luggage from the corner and throw the heavy bag onto the bed. It bounces with a soft thump and I rip open the zippers. I begin

opening my drawers and throwing clothing in the general direction of my bag. Tears are blinding me and I can't help but let a sob escape between gasps.

"C'mon, Sophie, open the door." Marco knocks heavily at the timber. "I just got a little out of hand."

"Out of hand?" I say. "You wanted to attack me!"

"It's no different than what Luca is allowed to do," he replies.

"Luca has never attacked me, for your information," I say back. "We've had disagreements, but he's never made an advance the same way you have."

"I just lost my cool for a bit. You gotta trust me," he pleads.

"I don't have to trust anything. I've had it with all this bullshit. I'm tired of being blamed because you two can't see how someone is turning us against one another. You can't stop me or say anything otherwise to make me change my mind." I grab the pile of clothing in the corner I've been meaning to wash and jam it on top of the rest of my stuff. I head for the bathroom and my toiletries.

"Sophie please, don't make this mistake," Marco says.

I can hear the emotion in his voice, but I don't fall for it. "You expect me to stay after that? You expect me to sit here and wait for Luca to return to see if I'm not guilty? I already feel stupid for having been charmed by such an asshole like yourself, I'm not waiting to be stupid again." I slam my hair straightener into its pouch. "The fact that you both can't, or

refuse, to see what's happening is your own fault. I am not guilty in any of this."

Marco laughs. "You need to calm down and think this through. I know you're not guilty. But you gotta understand, we just lost a year of work."

"Potentially," I say to the mirror.

He laughs again and the shock of it brings me out of the bathroom. The lock clicks and Marco turns the door knob, inching it open. I run and boot it closed with my foot.

"Message received," he says through the door. "But are you really going to leave?"

I stare at the door as if it's a representation of Marco's stupidity. "Why hang around?" I say, headed back to the bathroom. "I'm accused of everything under the sun here and bringing down the Colombino family from the inside." I say the last words in a dopey and stupid voice. "I hope that message was received too." I swipe a pen of mascara that's fallen to the ground and stuff it in the toiletries bag. I'm finished here. I stuff it all in my luggage.

"If it makes you feel any better, I don't believe you're responsible," Marco says.

"You've already said," I quip. But the emotion again makes me stop. "Thanks," I say, beginning to look for this phone.

I go to the corner and begin pulling up the carpet. Surely there's a hidden compartment or fake board? I head back to the bathroom and search the roof tiles. I hear a clatter of things

falling and rush back to the room to find my toiletries bag has sprung open and spilt out all over the floor. I groan and rake my face.

“Sophie, just let me open the door so we can talk,” Marco says.

“No!” I say, again. “Don’t you get the message?”

Marco laughs. ”Sure I get the message, I just think you’re reading it wrong.”

“I’m not sure there are many other ways to read someone trying to hit you,” I say. “And stop laughing.”

Marco laughs, again. “That’s very true. But you’re also wrong there.”

I stop, the pulled up carpet in the corner no longer seems interesting. The guy is so thick, it’s infuriating. I wrench the door open. “Stop laughing!”

“Hey you opened the door!” he says, grinning widely.

I groan and go to slam it, but he stops me.

“Okay, hear me out,” he says. “Yes, I overreacted. Look, my hands are up. My bad. And there’s no excuse, but do you think either of us are of sound mind at the moment? I mean, the pressure Luca’s under, the grief and how he’s wanting to bring vengeance for his father ... Hell, even the attempted hit on you both!” Marco pauses, as if that is all I need to hear to be convinced. “And me, well, this is like my puppy. I don’t have anyone because I dedicate everything to this family. This business. I know it sounds silly ...”

He's trying the emotional blackmail on me ... and it's working, slightly. I remember my father throwing himself into the business after mother passed away.

“What I'm getting at is that anyone would crack under so much pressure. Yes, you're completely right, someone is obviously pitting us against each other. And yes, there's nothing wrong with tracking him to be safe. But for Luca, he's almost near breaking point as it is. He just can't communicate it.”

When I don't react, he looks around still trying to find a way to break through. But I'm thinking back to the other night. To this night. He's been trying to reach out, and I've been trying to catch him... but it's like something always stops him.

“I need to be having this conversation with him,” I say. “I need him to be as honest as you. I need—” I stop. I almost blurted out my secret. “I need to be as honest with him.”

“See!” Marco says. “You and Luca are the same. You've come from big families, the only children of powerful men, you've had everything you could ever want.”

“You're losing your ground,” I say. “And why does everyone keep saying that? I don't have everything I want.” I rub my belly absentmindedly. I don't have a father for my baby.

“I'm not finished,” he says. “Most people get nothing in life, and when they push back, they get even less. The advantages you two have been born with are so much to

everyone else. How is someone going to develop emotionally in that life? He's used to giving direction, not taking it."

I go to interrupt and he hurries up to his meaning. "The point is that I was a kid on the streets. I had less than nothing. I had no one and viewed life very different from Luca. Then suddenly I was friends with a kid who had the keys to the kingdom. What's more, they were destined to be his one day. He'd always had what he wanted and never had to battle for it. He didn't need to be greedy about things, because he'd never not had it. Do you understand?"

"Of course I understand, but it still doesn't explain me sticking around with an asshole like you or waiting for him!" I snap.

"But you can't be honest with him if you're not here? And he can't be honest with you either." Marco smiles but says nothing more.

He's got me. I can't crap on about him needing to be honest and me needing to be honest while trying to flee ... I attempt to close the bag and jump onto the thing, pressing all my weight onto it. The thing won't shut, and Marco watches me with a laugh threatening to break free. He leans against the door and folds his arms.

"One thing you should know about Luca is that he's always been greedy for control, not money. So all this time as of late being out of control, being on the sidelines while everyone else does his work, it's making him crazy. Being helpless and

defenseless to an enemy he can't see is making him go nuts. That's how I know you aren't responsible for this."

I pause, pushing on the luggage and stare at him. It makes sense, all of it does, but none of Marco's words or my own has convinced me. "I'm not staying," I say, beginning my efforts again.

"And I'm not going to try and stop you," he replies, watching me try to close the bag again with amusement.

I pause on the luggage. A sudden decision has come to me. A decision about the baby. I want to tell Marco.

Marco leans away from the door. "Before his mother passed away, and even more so since, he's measured every single facet of his life that he could. He doesn't say so, but I've noticed in the way he organizes things—in what worries him. You being in his life is something he can't control."

"Well, he doesn't get to control me," I say, staring at him in shock. "I'm not to be owned. And why can't he say this?" I implore to the roof. The deep conversation I've been craving with Luca is coming from his bonehead friend Marco.

I'm not even trying to close my bag now. "It doesn't justify how he's spoken to me," I say. "Or how you've acted."

"No, it doesn't," Marco says, coming over to the bed and closing the luggage with one hand and then zipping it shut with the other. "But knowing more about him, should hopefully help you understand him."

I stare down at my feet. It does make sense, his need for control and knowing. And it makes sense why it's important to him. But— “He needs to understand that I need my freedom too,” I say.

“I'm sure he wants to give it to you,” Marco says.

“But if knowing is half of his problem, why doesn't he ask?”

Marco laughs now, loud and long. By the time he calms down I feel like he's speaking to me like I'm a child, even if he doesn't mean to. “Sophie, if everyone did what they were meant to, and didn't act how they weren't meaning to, the world would have peace. Most people agree on the exact same thing, they just put the words differently. It's only when we get defensive of our own way does a problem come into being.” He pauses and looks at his shoes. “Once we have secrets, that is when things begin going wrong.”

He doesn't look me in the eye as he says it.

I put a hand to my belly. How would have the last few weeks gone had Luca known I was pregnant? How different would he treat me if he had known the truth? I'd kept that from him and used it against him. I'd kept thinking that everything he was doing he was doing to me and the baby, but would he have been the same person had he known?

Marco is looking at me now, waiting for me to decide on what I'm going to do.

I hold my belly.

“You’re right about the secrets,” I say. “The secrets are what creates divisions. And I’ve got my own secrets that I’m keeping from Luca. And it’s not fair.”

Marco’s eyes widen as he looks again down at my hand on my belly. A smile comes to his lips. Then it disappears. “You ...”

I take a deep breath and close my eyes. I remember my father talking about duty and honor and family, legacy, all this crap that gets thrown around in our family and this life. But the truth is, when it boils down to it, it’s are you going to do what you say you’re going to do. Am I?

Luca isn’t perfect. Neither am I. Luca has been a jerk. But so have I.

Despite all that, we’re tied together by one teeny tiny thing ...

The baby in my belly.

“I’m pregnant,” I say softly. The very first time I’ve ever said it to anyone other than Mimi.

Marco exhales sharply. “Wow,” he says. “Congratulations.”

“Thank you,” I say, but I’m staring at the floor. I’ve turned red and the whole thing feels surreal now. Before the baby was a secret that I was keeping from everyone. That only Mimi knew, and if needed, would be the only one to know had I considered an abortion.

But I’m going to keep it. I need to tell Luca the truth.

“I need a drink of water,” I say.

Marco smiles and nods. “I’d say the same after that.” He laughs with glee.

I smile and head out of the bedroom and for the kitchen. It’s like keeping this secret for the last month has slowly dehydrated me. Or maybe I’ve only just realized what it’s been costing me?

I hear Marco follow me out. “You want a glass too?” I ask, talking over my shoulder.

“You know, before I said I was sorry,” Marco says, coming into the room. “Really I should be thanking you though for sharing your secret.”

I pause, wondering if he had apologized to me. I fill up two glasses with water. “No you never said you were sorry,” I say. “You just—” But I pause, looking at the reflection of Marco in the window. He’s watching me with the same anger as before ...

“I’ve always suspected that you were keeping something from us,” he says. “And so I apologize that you’ve made the next steps even more fun for me!”

He lunges at me as I turn, and something hard bashes into the side of my head. I crumble into the kitchen counter and the two glasses fly from my hand. I hear them distantly smash on something. I hear the water running and it’s loud. I slide to the floor as the lights start going dim.

“Finally, thank you for making my torture of Luca even better.”

Chapter 22

Luca

By the time I pull up to the warehouse twenty minutes later my anger that has been boiling away has returned to a simmer. It's just after midnight and while I'm infuriated, I am more driven than ever to catch my father's killer and make them pay. If this is a trap, if it's the blackmailer fucking with my head ... My heart hopes to god that it's not Sophie.

I screech to a halt and the guard's already at the roller door waiting for me. "Mr. Colombino, I've got—"

"Give it," I say, taking the tablet from him. I scroll through the software and come to a stop just inside the warehouse. I'm completely dumbstruck and my finger hovers over the screen. Nothing is missing.

"What the hell happened?" I ask.

"That's the thing," the guard says, swallowing. "It just updated. Maybe five minutes ago? All the stock returned and, well, it seems everything is fine now ..." He steps away from me tentatively.

“Have you physically checked the stock levels?” I ask, looking at him.

The guard shakes his head. “That’s what I was doing now. I was on my way there when Sam radioed and called me back. It had changed again. Then you were here.”

I purse my lips and stare at all the stock before me. The fashion brand Piovere exists almost entirely within the confines of these walls. Everything ... But hidden far away at the back, within the chilled holding facilities for our perfumes, is the *real* product.

But the fact that the products representing the drugs disappeared and then reappeared doesn’t feel right.

“Let’s go,” I say. The guard turns heel and begins striding alongside me. “Get Sam to look into the software though. Check the login logs and stock reports. I don’t like any of this. If someone has hacked us, then this whole thing is a lot worse than I could have thought.”

“Yes, Mr. Colombino,” he says, turning gratefully and running off.

My blood bubbles at the thought of it all. I picture Sophie and can’t believe I’ve been so stupid. It can’t be her. Surely with everything, every time we’ve tried to talk ... It’s like I’m some kid with a crush. Maybe things moved too fast? Or maybe I just don’t want to screw things up? This is why I don’t date. This is why I bring hussies home and have them dropped off. I don’t have to worry about anything more than a few mini bottles of champagne missing from the limo.

But that thought only makes me think of my father, and all the regrets that have been rolling around my head for the last few days. I push it aside and channel my anger into my vengeance.

My teeth are grinding as I trudge between the high shelves and stock. There's a few forklifts working an aisle over on the night shift, shifting dresses and accessories that are then shipped to an actual sales facility. It's quiet in the big facility other than that. The immense size of the place makes the problem of missing stock seem even larger. Hopeless even, if I let my fear catch in my mind. The guards are the only two who I can ask for any help for the time being. If it were day we'd have many other managers and workers here I could pester. I hope they're waking the right ones up.

My phone pings and I take it out again. Another fucking security alert.

I walk on and come to an intersection, a forklift cruises by and the guy has headphones in blaring away some crap I can't help but only hear the bass of.

A text comes as I cross the way. *Still, she seemed happy until a half hour ago ...*

I stare at this one for a while though. A possibility runs through my mind that I'd never thought of before. But it's a thought that I deem foolish. One that couldn't be true ...

No one would be able to bug us. Barely anyone knew of my mother's house, and even then, Sophie has been home the

whole time. Nor could they put cameras in. If someone had that kind of access they would just do something ...

“Mister Colombino?” the guard calls, running up to me. It’s the same one as before.

“What?” I turn, looking up from my phone and continuing forward. I’m still thinking about the messages, but when I see that the guard looks more terrified than before about something, I stop.

“H—have you looked at the tablet?” he asks.

I don’t answer and unlock the thing instead. The app has closed, so I reopen it and the screen is blank from load up. I refresh the page and wait for it to load again. But it’s still blank.

I still, the hollowness forming in my chest and beginning to bubble in my heart. *It’s just loading.* But when it fails to load again, and I close the app and reload it, the truth finally smacks me in the face.

A truth I don’t want to face. So instead I bark at the guard, “What’s with the tablet?” I demand. “Where’s the stock? The internet should be fine here and it should be reading perfectly.”

The guard swallows. “It is reading perfectly.” He braces for attack.

I almost break the tablet in half. “This is our stock?” I scream.

He nods. “It just all disappeared. All of it.”

I look around the warehouse. I stare at all the fashion accessories and dresses. The packing crates. I run as quickly as I can for the rear. For the cold fridges with thousands of bottles of perfume, fake panels and hidden doors. I burst into the cool room and practically wrench the hidden door off its rails as I open onto the cold room for our drugs. Except it's an empty room before me.

We've been cleaned out ...

I'm speechless. My whole world crumbles.

My phone pings. *Do you like my surprise? I've been planning it for a while.*

Then the same message appears on Sophie's phone.

And Marco's.

I look up my phone to the empty room and walk in. There's nothing here. Every single pallet has been cleared out. This was a year of deliveries that we were going to move slowly. This was a year's worth of work that would be distributed over the course of—

Another message to all three. *Same with this surprise ...*

“There's something you need to know about the stock levels,” the guard says. “Sam just scanned the network users for the last few weeks, and uh—” the man is very uncomfortable. “He looked at who's been logging in and using our system, as you asked. Obviously there's all the usual ones, and everyone that has access doesn't really stand out. E-except

there's only one person who's manually been manipulating the stock lately. And it's quite a bit ...”

My tongue goes thick. *This is it*, I realize. *The rat*.

My phone pings again, but I don't answer.

“The user who's been manipulating stock, and authorized to have this all moved at midnight runs is Marco,” he says. “He's the one who moved all the drugs. But those updates weren't there an hour ago. None of those access records were. We've been using a decoy application, and the whole system is currently deleting itself.”

I feel as if I've been punched in the gut. I crumble and fall onto my ass on the pallet behind me. My heart is beating to a stop. My phone pings again and I look at it.

It's a photo ...

It's a picture of Sophie tied up.

Of course surprises are always best in twos and threes!

I stare at the phone, my eyes bulging. They have Sophie. Marco is the rat, and he's taken Sophie!

“Marco did it all?” I utter. The guard doesn't say anything but looks awkwardly around the room. “Marco did it all?” I scream.

Another text pings on my phone. *What kind of father leaves his poor and defenseless fiance at home alone? Especially when she's pregnant with their unborn child?*

“Mr. Colombino?” the guard asks. I barely hear him. “Sir, what’re we going to do? What should we do to stop the program deleting itself?”

The missing stock. The rat. My father’s killer ... It’s all Marco. Marco, who I’ve known forever. Marco, who’s been my best friend for my entire life. My heart finally stops.

Marco who I left with my Sophie ...

My Sophie, who is pregnant with my baby.

Chapter 23

Sophie

The first thing I realize is that my head fucking hurts. And not just like a light headache, but a real fucking painful migraine. I can feel the wound throbbing at the back of my skull and all I want to do is cradle my head in my hands and get some medicine.

That's when I try to move my hands.

That's when I try to remember what happened.

That's when I remember Marco apologizing ...

My eyes snap open and I'm grateful for darkness, because the sudden movement has just made my head explode with pain and nausea to lurch in my stomach. I go to call out but a gag is tied over my face. Suddenly my body lights up with pressure all over it. There's a coarse rope tied around me and I'm on a chair that is digging into my back. I can feel the painfulness of the rope fibers burning against my skin and then I stop, feeling how tight it is over my belly.

I remember telling Marco about my pregnancy.

My heart is racing and my hands begin shaking like crazy. Panic sets in and the dark only seems to become thicker, enveloping me like a heavy blanket that's slowly choking me. A complete meltdown is on the way.

I call out again desperately despite the gag and try to move around. The need to cry floods my mind and the chair rocks and bounces as I begin to freak out. My calls are dull and the room sounds small and like I'm in some sort of boat. The echoes rebound quickly and then suddenly I'm falling sideways.

The chair crashes to the ground and my head bashes against the cold floor. My eyes flash white and my head lights up in pain. I'm gasping breaths in and hyperventilating, for a split second though, the cold floor almost feels nice.

The cold floor, which is metal.

Where the hell am I?

My mind offers up some hazy memories of riding in a van and coming to a big dark building. I remember Marco talking and people carrying me, he was telling them what to do with me. Something about my clothes ... and rope ...

A key scratches against a lock and my body tenses. I panic even more and freeze, trapped on the ground lying flat against my side. *The complete opposite of what I wanted to do!*

A large metal door swings open and there's a few shadows.

Then a light blares to life!

I close my eyes but it's not enough. White flares break through my eyelids and it magnifies the throbbing wound in my head. I grunt in pain.

As it subsides, I hear Marco laughing.

He walks into the room being used to hold me and his shadow blocks some of the blinding light. I glance up at him with one eye, my breath even tighter and more labored. He's squatting over me and grinning, "Should've left the door locked, Sophie."

I grit my teeth but don't say anything. I hate him so much. I hate him with every ounce of my body. So much so that the sense of betrayal lights a fire of anger within me. I groan at him through the gag. He has me tied up and at his mercy for some reason I don't know *why*.

He chuckles as he picks me and the chair up with one hand. The force of him setting me down sends a new wave of pain ricocheting into my head. I strain against the ropes and grunt as I try to get at him. It burns my flesh.

"You know it's been an absolute pleasure ruining your life these last months." He's still grinning that stupid smile of his like he's a dog with two dicks. His hands are in his pockets and he's cool. "Really, it's been great. Easier than I suspected." He strolls back to the door and says something to the men waiting outside, they close the doors and it's just us now in this metal cube. I recognize it now as a shipping container. "Of course, you weren't meant to be in the picture, but it's funny how fate works out isn't it?" He laughs and

comes towards me, taking the gag from my mouth and letting it sit around my chin.

I rip my head away from him. I still don't understand what is going on. The whole thing is crazy. How the hell has he done this? Why? But they're all pointless questions, all that matters is he's betrayed us.

Us?...

I suddenly remember Luca leaving for the warehouse. What happened there? Was that another trap, or was *I* the trap? Marco trapped him by getting me? My wrists are sweaty as I pull at the bonds. I strain against the rope and Marco grins, thinking it's for him. But it's for Luca. It's for the man I—I shake the image of Luca and I together from my head. There's worse problems right now.

Like the man right in front of me. Marco. The anger begins to dissipate slowly, the sense of betrayal simmers and I can breathe properly. I need to figure out my next step here. "Aren't you meant to be Luca's best friend?" I ask.

Marco laughs. "You and Luca are destined for each other." His face darkens. "You're both blind and stupid. Deaf to everyone around you and completely oblivious to the real world. Although," he pauses and grins. It's pure evil. "You did guess that someone was turning you against one another, so bravo." His eyes grow angry and he advances on me. "You're both so self involved in your own wants and beliefs, that you don't even see how you treat other people. Yes, I was Luca's best friend for a long time. But like I said before, Luca's greed

has always been control. And well, it's kind of mine too. See I grew up with nothing, as I told you, but do you know what it's like to have nothing and then be saved by someone like him? To have to feel grateful all the time? To have to feel indebted? Your entire life?"

"But you guys share so much?" I say. The shock is still struggling to move through my thick head and let me process it. Maybe it's the fact that my head is ringing in pain?

"And yet not enough," he says. "Luca is gifted with so many opportunities and all he does is push his stupid fucking design label. Like I get it, it was a good idea to move drugs and launder money. But that's it. Other than that, he complains over his father not giving him the recognition he deserves ... And what about everyone else?" Marco waves his hand away in anger. "And to think, I almost buried my past to live in his shadow!"

The shock too begins to subside, and now the ropes are hurting me. I've been stripped to my underwear and the rope is burning my skin with each movement I make in the chair. Marco notices my discomfort.

"I must thank you for telling me of your pregnancy too, I tied them extra tight," he says. Then laughs and it echoes around the small container.

"I still don't understand—"

"And you won't!" he screams, suddenly enraged and red faced. "People like you can never understand people like me. You are both selfish brats who have everything and complain

constantly! You know nothing of work.” He paces back and forth, finally stopping in front of me. “But hard work gives rewards. Hard work makes you successful, where you are just entitled. Both of your father’s understood that, I assume that’s why they tied you *together*. There’s no other way to impress the lesson upon you without forcing it down your throat, even if both of you don’t get it.”

I swallow and try to wiggle my hands currently tied up behind me. My body tiring and searing with rope burns is beginning to freak me out. I need to keep him occupied and somehow think of a way to escape. I need the light ... “You don’t know my father,” I say. “He’s not like you.”

“Of course he isn’t like me,” he says, turning around and heading to the door. He pauses with his hand pressed against the door. “But he would respect me for what I’ve done.”

“No he wouldn’t,” I say. I just need to keep him occupied, I believe. The light will give me a way out. I just need—

“Michael respected me,” Marco whispers.

I stop trying to escape. I freeze and my skin begins to crawl at the way he’s just spoken. My flesh prickles and the chair is the only thing holding me up.

“He respected me all my life.” Marco turns around, walking toward me with eyes dark and evil. “He respected me even as I killed him. Although he couldn’t say it, I’d cut his tongue out.”

I shudder, and the question is pulled from me before I can stop myself. “But I heard the voice message. I heard him calling Luca ...”

Marco’s grin leaves me writhing in discomfort. “You think he only died then? I had all that fun *after* giving him his one chance to say goodbye to his son. He begged for it after I’d shot him.” Marco stops, squatting in front of me. “Even then he wasted it. He didn’t tell his son how he felt about him, he didn’t say anything meaningful. Respectful. He just wasted it trying to tell Luca about *me*.”

Marco grips my legs with cold hands and I scream.

“But he respected me as I killed him because I was doing *hard work*. Don’t you see Sophie? I was being greedy. But I was doing what needed to be done.”

I try to push away from him. I’m shaking again. All thoughts of escaping flee my body. I feel weak in the two strong hands of Marco.

“And when Luca finally loses, and he sees what hard work really is, he’ll respect me too.”

Marco stands then, his eyes burned into my mind. He heads back to the door of the shipping container and knocks twice. I remain frozen. The door opens and he steps out into the darkness beyond. A light turns on somewhere, the shadow hiding half of his face. He flicks a switch and the lights inside the container turn off. “But you won’t be alive to see that, Sophie. There’s hard work to be done before then.”

The fact that I'm going to be locked back in this darkness unlocks my frozen body. I scream as the door is slammed shut and locked. I rage in the darkness that Marco has left me in. I bounce about and try to get towards the door. A rope somewhere behind me goes taught and pulls me back. I fall over again and the metal floor bashes against my skull. Drowsy, I scream anyway. I scream until I'm hoarse and out of breath. I scream until I pass out, dreading what is going to happen to me.

Chapter 24

Luca

I screech to a halt in the driveway and get out of the car. The front door is wide open and the light is spilling out onto the small path leading in. My heart is in my throat and I fumble out of the car and stumble through the door and find the house completely trashed.

Someone has gone at the walls with a sledgehammer and the glass has been broken in every window. I run through calling Sophie's name, even though I know it's pointless. Every room is empty and the house echoes back nothing but silence. Every corner is bare. The chairs are upturned and the drawers have been emptied. Her luggage is gone and so is any sign that she'd ever been here. I go back into the living room, the last moments I'd seen her replaying in my head.

Marco screaming and lunging for her. Me defending her ...

Yet I'd believed that she may have been guilty too, in some small part of my heart. Shame envelopes me. How could I have been so blind?

It's all Marco's manipulation. That's the truth. All from the one man I'd trusted. Only for him to turn on me. I turned around helplessly and spotted the broken picture of my parents, mashed into the floor. What normally hung in the hallway had been mashed into the carpet by the heel of a boot. I pick it up and hold the photo in my hands, brushing the bits of glass away. How has this happened? Why? Something like this should've always been more protected—

Protected ...

“The fucking app!” I take my phone out and go to the app. My body is shaking with a mixture of fear and shock, I tap through the settings and find the search bar.

But it doesn't matter, Sophie is where I am. I took her phone.

“The phone!” I run to the bedroom and turn to the corner, only to find the board opened and the phone out and broken.

There isn't any way to find her now. Marco has thought of everything.

All hope is completely draining away. The anger that normally comes with my vulnerability is gone. I feel completely blind sided. I slump against the island. There's no need to lie to myself anymore. I've been doing it long enough, but with her now *gone*, there's no point continuing. My love is gone. The woman I envisioned a future with. The woman I even thought of having a child with. She's gone. And she even was pregnant! She was—

I see the blood on the floor by the sink.

I lunge for it, looking for any other clues. My anger ignites all of a sudden, thinking that Marco has hurt Sophie. *Sophie, who is pregnant.* In the sink is a broken mug. Most of it has been washed clean, but there is a section where blood has seeped into the ceramic joins.

My blood really does boil now and my anger blinds me. I scream and grab the broken shard of the cup and hurl it at the wall. I can't calm this rage anymore. I feel so stupid. How could I have been manipulated so easily? I grab one of the broken stool legs on the floor and begin bashing the kitchen cupboards with all my might until I swing too low and bash the front of the microwave.

The glass shatters and shows the meal Sophie heated up just a few hours ago.

It grounds me and I reverse all emotions again completely one eighty degrees. *What the hell is this? I can't even control my feelings anymore.* I collapse against the counter and slide down and sit on the ground. I take my phone out and find Tommy Russo's number. But I hesitate to call.

I need to call him but I feel so ashamed of myself. That I'd suspected her in the first place—What kind of leader am I? How blind have I been to everything let alone the other businesses? Marco was able to manipulate me for months, years probably. I groan and hit call.

Tommy picks up quickly.

“Luca,” he says.

My voice is dry. I can’t get anything out.

“Luca, are you there?”

My tongue won’t budge from the roof of my mouth. I feel strange all of a sudden. I see visions of my father in my head and it’s like I’m talking to him. How do I tell him the bad news? How would Sophie tell my father, had it been reversed?

“Sophie,” I croak.

“Sophie what?” Tommy says, urgency in his voice. “*Sophie what?*”

“Is gone,” I manage. My legs are drained of feeling and I’m grateful that I’m sitting.

“What do you mean?” Tommy says. “Gone like she left you? Or gone like she disappeared?”

“She’s been kidnapped,” I say.

He swears. “You fucking *what?*” he screams.

“By Marco. He’s the rat. He’s the Manetti rat. And it’s him who’s been doing everything.”

Tommy says nothing. We sit on the phone for a few moments in silence. I’m trying to figure out what to say, how I can guarantee him of getting her back or—

“Okay, damage control,” he says. “How much do you know about Marco? What can you tell me of his dealings in the last few months, and what else do I need to know about him? What

ventures does he have? How much does he know about the Colombino's? What is his family history? How much—”

“Everything,” I utter. “He’s been my right hand man forever. He’s just as tight and in the know as me. Maybe more so, with all that he’s been doing behind my back.” I pause, trying to find the right words that don’t make me sound like a complete idiot. “He manipulated all of our shipments and deliveries, he signed off on deals I was unaware of. He’s been hacking our phones so that I would blame Sophie for everything.”

Tommy is silent at my last confession.

“Tommy, I’m sorry.”

“You can be sorry later,” he replies. “For the time being we’re finding my fucking daughter, then I’m gonna skin this fuck until he wishes he’d never been born.”

“Okay,” I say.

Tommy grunts. “Alright Lucas, up on your feet. C’mon,” Tommy says. “That’s the first thing. Up.”

I do what he says.

“Second, where are you?”

“At the safehouse,” I say. “It was Ma’s old place. It’s been destroyed, and they took Sophie with everything. But Tommy, there’s something else.” I pause and he waits for me. How do I sway the next part? How do I tell him she’s pregnant? “Marco took her, and I can only think that she told him cause she never said anything to me.”

“Just fucking spit it out!” Tommy snaps.

“She’s *pregnant*.”

There’s silence for a long time. I hear Tommy fumbling the phone around. Finally he comes back. He’s overly calm. “You know Greenwood Avenue?”

“I do,” I say.

“Good, get on that and head until you see the intersection of Banebridge, turn left and take the bridge. Drive until you see an old shipping dockyard. You’ll see a green sedan out the front, plates start XGH. Get there as soon as you can. I’ve got information that only makes sense as of this conversation.”

I’m nodding like some dashboard figurine at the faucet in the kitchen. “Right, and what are we gonna do?” I ask.

“Just get there first, alright?” Tommy says. “We’ll discuss it later.”

“Okay, I’m leaving,” I say, heading through the house and out to the car. I’m about to sit into it when I remember my parents’ picture that I’d left on the floor. I head back in and put it up on the kitchen counter, taking a last look at my parents and vowing revenge yet again. Then I close the door behind me and lock it. I drop into the car. “Leaving now.”

Tommy says nothing and hangs up the phone. I reverse out of the driveway and head for Lindgren, it’s the quickest route to get up to Greenwood and out towards the port. I drive like a maniac, speeding through red lights and overtaking every car I come across. I’m trying *not* to think. I’m trying not to feel

ashamed and beat myself up at how I've been acting. I thought I was getting my control back. I thought I could fix this. I thought I could do this, but it turns out, I'm always behind. I'm always falling one step short, and it's because Marco has been blinding me the whole time.

I take my phone out and dial the blackmailer number, the photo of Sophie bound and gagged taunts me.

It rings out and it goes to voicemail as I careen through a busy intersection. "You fucking piece of shit, Marco!" I scream. Suddenly I'm on fire, alive with energy and injustice. "You piece of fucking—" I bark frustration out into the car. "We took you in, you bastard! We took you in and gave you a home. You were nothing without us. Nothing! And if you hurt Sophie, I will—I will kill you. If you hurt her, if you kill her—" But I can't say the baby inside. "I will make it slow. I will make the days seem like years, and the years seem like decades. By the time I let you die you'll have lived an eternity of pain!" Spittle is flying all over the car. I've slowed to a complete stop now in the middle of a different intersection. I'm screaming into the phone as car horns blare all around me and lights flash at me to move. But I don't stop my tirade. "I'm coming for you Marco! I'm going to end you. I'm going to make you regret ever meeting me."

I'm breathless, and the cars are starting to head around me. I think the people have seen me losing my head in the car. I'm gripping the steering wheel now. The phone is broken and I don't remember breaking it or hanging up.

If I lose her, if I lose the baby ...

I didn't even know. That's the worst part. I didn't even know she was pregnant. *But can I blame her?*

Would I tell someone who acts the way I've been acting?

The haze leaves me and I realize I'm still in the intersection. The cars are streaming around me and I shift into gear and inch my way out. I continue on. My anger calms and I'm energized. I felt weak before. I felt scared and trapped. Now I only feel alive with the need to make things *right*.

I turn onto Greenwood and start heading to the side street for the port. It's got no traffic at this time of night and I begin shifting through the gears, gaining speed as everything turns into elongated blurs. The car roars along.

Marco is taunting me over and over, as my head replays all the stupid things I've done. I can see him laughing the way he does when he's won a poker game or some other juvenile game. He's whispering about his control over me. I'm completely losing it.

But through the voices I begin to hear other truths. All the hints that only make sense now. The sly comments he made about Sophie, or the way he summed things up after we saw her, planting seeds about the burner phone after the yacht even. All of them were different ways he was twisting me. He told me that she pitied me. He told me that she was saying things to him behind my back—how did I even believe it all without questioning it? Was this why I was hesitating to tell

her things? All because I'd believe the other things Marco said?

He told me that she was making secret calls on her phone, and I believed him. I believed so many of his lies without question. I grip the wheel even harder and my knuckles are bone white.

I need to make this right.

I need to save her and bring her home to Tommy. I'd understand if she never wanted to see me again. I'd understand if Tommy wanted to kill me too, but I at least have to make this *right*.

I turn onto Banebridge and see the far off lights of the port. The sea runs along the right hand side of me and the silhouettes of gulls are flying in the night air. The green sedan and number plates come up quickly and I pull to a stop behind it. The shipping yard is closed, but there's a small gate that has been left open.

I kill the ignition on the car and the engine dies. I roll my shoulders and try to relax. I realize I haven't thought of anything about Marco. I haven't spent any time figuring out how to solve this problem, only pissed off that it happened to me.

I guess that's Don lesson number one: take a step back in every situation. What would I do if it happened to someone else?

I get out of the car and the silence of the night puts me on edge. There's no one in the Russo car. I head by and through the rusted gate. It swings with a whine and the shadows of many small boats lie before me. They're stacked on enormous metal frames in varying sizes. All giants in the night. But towards the end, near an old rusted shed, there's a light on.

Tommy is there leaning against a barrel, he's in a suit too crisp for what's going on. He's smoking calmly and not looking at me.

"Tommy," I call. I jog to him

I need to do this. I need this redemption from the asshole I've been not just now, but most of my life.

"Tommy," I say, coming to a stop in front of him. I'm slightly breathless. "What're we going to do?"

He looks up at me with eyes cold and dead. Suddenly the end of a shotgun barrel comes to my neck and I'm picked up from behind.

My throat is crushed and the gun is pulled tight by some mountain of a bodyguard. I wiggle my hands onto it and try to pry it away, but it only crushes harder against me. My breathing capacity is cut in half immediately

"That depends on what you say next."

Chapter 25

Sophie

I don't know when I fell asleep, but I know that I am asleep. I must be, because I'm back at Luca's mother's house. And it has to be a dream because he's sitting on the couch with *our* child and they're reading a book. I'm speechless. And every time I look away and come back, the child changes.

"You're home already?" he asks, coming up and over to me.

He kisses me on the cheek and I look at him oddly. I'm still frozen. Okay, this is definitely a dream now. "What do you mean?" I ask.

"Well you went out, and then you came back?" Luca says, smiling.

I shake my head. "But what do you mean? Where is this? When is this?"

Luca's face falls. "Oh my love you're so confused."

My love...

“Luca, we’re not together. You don’t know about the baby. This isn’t real,” I say desperately. My body begins to tingle in fear and becomes cold, as if I’m not wearing clothes.

“Why can’t it be?” Luca asks. “If you love me, why not?”

“Because you’ve been distant, and we’ve been complicated despite Marco’s manipulations.” I fall quiet. “You’ve been grieving and I haven’t really been there for you either. But—” I want to turn away, I didn’t plan on having this argument in my subconscious. “But you apologized and then you seemed to accuse me straight away again! What am I meant to think?”

Luca doesn’t say anything. This part of me doesn’t know what he’d say, so he says nothing. Instead he points at my stomach. “I haven’t been there for you,” he says, then pointing at the child on the couch.

“But you don’t *know*,” I say, enunciating the last part.

Luca shrugs.

I groan and *do* turn away now. “I still don’t know how I feel regardless,” I say to the microwave. There’s a reflection on its glass door. The child. It keeps changing. I turn back, and look past Luca at the kid on the couch. She’s sitting there, then it’s a boy coloring at the table. He becomes a girl again and she’s playing with dolls. My brain is freaking out.

“Well if you had a chance, one last chance,” Luca says, bringing me back to him. “Forget our troubles, forget Marco manipulating us, and if you just remembered the time we were together at my father’s house. What would you feel then?”

What had you been feeling in those two weeks we avoided each other?"

I sigh and shake my head. "It's not that easy."

"Just try, for me?" he asks quietly.

I look up into his deep brown eyes. "Then?" I say. His eyes soften as they look at me, but it's the only soft thing about him, because the sharp jaw and nose that appears on the child on the couch suddenly is his. "In those two weeks, I realized how I felt. If we were there, during that time, I would've said —"

I'm thrust awake and I lurch forward. The chair slams onto its four legs and I'm looking at the manic eyes of Marco.

The words of *loved you*, fade from my mind staring at Marco's insane ones.

Except he's smiling and it makes them even more crazy. "I have a great recording for you to hear," he says. He takes out his phone. "You know, this thing is fantastic. I have *everything* on here. I've got the death of Michael. I've got the death of the Colombino business. And now I've got your fiance losing his mind."

He turns the phone to me and an audio file begins playing. It's Luca screaming his head off. I'm frightened and my mouth falls open because I know what *that* Luca looks like. He's screaming at Marco and what he's going to do to him. What he'd do if he hurt me ...

My dream is flickering at the edges of my memory, leaking away and being covered by the fear and cold of the shipping container. But I hold onto it. Could I get past this mess with my feelings for Luca? He's obviously not that man that he's been fooled into. He's only being the man that Marco has turned him into. But would he become that with me?

Would he be this way if he knew the truth?

Damn secrets. I just can't make up my mind.

Marco is chuckling. "This is too much fun!" He laughs and swipes to something else on his phone. "Honestly it's been years getting this together and I just want to savor every bit!" He sighs. "But what to do with you?" He taps his phone against his chin and watches me as he thinks. He gauges me like I'm a project blueprint. He unlocks his phone and snaps a photo of me. "I know he'll love this though."

I wiggle and yell something unintelligible at him.

"Oh, my apologies," Marco says, coming over and jamming the gag back in my mouth despite all my effort to fight him off.

I cry out at him and jump in the chair. Marco just laughs again.

"Tut tut, you'll fall again," he says.

I become still. My rage bubbling at being treated like some object.

"You've made this all the better, Sophie. I don't mean to keep thanking you, but now I have an angle on Tommy Russo

too. He's been untouchable for years. But now I have his little girl. Maybe I won't kill you so quickly, huh?" He laughs. "Maybe I'll just make Luca *think* you're dead? There's so many options." He comes over and grabs me suddenly, yanking me back by my head. "Could you play dead?"

I scream and he only lets go and starts laughing. He turns away and I use the moment to try and fumble my hands free. I have to believe it's possible. I'm wriggling against the rope and letting it burn my skin. I wrangle harder. Marco turns and comes up close to me, he's excited and reeks of a rum. He breathes me in and then chuckles. He pushes me forcefully and I lose balance.

I smash into the ground again and my head bounces. The pain reignites and begins throbbing. I glimpse him from around my body at the door, he turns the light off and is gone. I'm left in the darkness again, wishing for the sleep I'd just been in to return.

Except this time I know I won't sleep.

I won't sleep because my hand is free.

Chapter 26

Luca

I keep gasping and trying to breathe some air into my lungs. I buck against the gun and bodyguard but it's only jammed tighter against my flesh. It catches my skin and tears it, I groan in pain and the guard lifts me higher.

Tommy comes at me, the light above him casting dark shadows over his eyes. "Why'd you do this to my daughter, Colombino!" he asks calmly. "I should fuck'n skin *you* alive for all this too."

"I swear—" I gasp with my crushed voice. "I swear I didn't know—"

"You're a pretty bad liar, Lucas." He punches me in the gut.

Any air that I had left suddenly leaves me with a gasp.

"How can I believe you're not in this too? How can I believe that you haven't got a van following you? I got my best men watching right now, anyone suspicious comes onto this road and we will kill you quicker than you can blink."

I try to answer. I try to free a hand and wave surrender, but the gun only tightens. I can't breathe. My head is pounding and my heart is throbbing in my ears. "I swear," I choke out. "I didn't do this."

"I'm sorry, what was that?" Tommy asks, cupping his ear. "I'm a little hard of hearing. Obviously, you thought I was some old bastard you could screw with!"

I swallow. A sliver of air finds its way to my lungs. "I couldn't—" I'm dropped to my knees and the gun is pressed harder, a knee is put in my back and it well and truly crushes my throat closed. Tommy is leaning over me.

"You seem pretty fucking capable of it," he whispers "You had my men killed in Labersky six years ago. Pretty fucking capable then. So I'd say pretty capable now. I only trusted this deal because of your father." He slaps me as hard as he can.

"I can't—" I try to say.

"Can't what? Breathe?" Tommy asks.

I nod. "I can't do this to—" I gasp for my last breath. "I can't do this to women—"

"Don't gimme that chivalry crap," Tommy says. "You've done worse to people before my daughter. But you made the mistake of doing this to my daughter!"

He winds up to slap me again. "I can't do this to the woman I *love*," I finally blurt out.

Tommy's face changes immediately. He drops his arm and nods. The gun is removed. I'm pushed to the ground where

sweet oxygen floods my lungs and brain. I lie there for a few moments breathing deeply and grateful for the smell of fucking dirt. I savor the chance to keep on living. My head is pounding and hurting, my throat feels like it's filled with crinkled paper, but at least I'm alive.

Tommy kneels down with me. "The woman you love, huh?" he asks. I'm picked up and put on my knees. I look up at him. "You pulling at my heartstrings, Luca?"

I shake my head softly. I rub at my throat tenderly. It's as painful as anything I've ever experienced. Breathing burns. I rub the raw skin where the gun was pressed and feel the cuts. "I love her," I repeat. "I do. I didn't realize—I've been struggling with trusting her. But it was all Marco. He's been playing us against each other. I didn't see it because I was so blinded by rage and guilt over my father's death. Over all of my stupid bullshit, wanting to be Don ... He just played me. But—" I can't bear to look Tommy Russo in the eyes. I can't stare up at the same eyes, the ones that I love, the ones that Sophie has. I hang my head. "I mean, would I have come into this trap if I'd not felt that way?"

It's silent for a while. The night creeps back in around us and I realize there are many men standing around us. I'm at the center. A fallen man on his knees. It's only then I realize that my execution is still in the cards.

Tommy puts his hands on his hips though. Then he ducks down and puts a hand under my shoulder and helps me up.

“It’s alright, kid, I made some shit decisions too when I first took the job,”

“You’re not gonna kill me?” I ask.

Tommy laughs. “Lucas, I need you to get my daughter back. The woman you love. If I kill you, I lose the last connection to her that I need to get Marco.” Tommy carries me through to the workshop we’ve been beside. The lights come on and the men have followed us too. They all stand there with an arsenal among them. Handguns and shotguns, one guy even has an M4 hanging loosely in his hands. Some of Tommy’s men are ex-military, then. “What did you think I was bringing?” I croak, a laugh falling from my lips. “I came here expecting to die.”

Tommy smiles despite the situation. “Gotta be prepared, kid. Now,” he sits me in a chair and then sinks into one across from me. “So, how much do you know about Marco?”

I shake my head. “I’ve been trying to think it over, but I just met him when I was a young kid. We hit it off and he was homeless. He was stealing cars when I met him.”

Tommy nods his head and licks his lips. “Right. Nothing else? Any times where he seemed a little off? Any times where maybe he was more secretive than normal?”

I shake my head. “Nothing comes to mind. I’ve always been busy, so he was able to work around my business.”

Tommy scrubs his cheek and signals for a man to bring over a piece of paper. On it is a face. It’s a courtroom drawing.

“For a long time, there’s been a mystery down here in the mob families of Miami. This here is Al Manetti.” He gives it to me. “He used to be a big name in the Manetti family forty years ago. He snitched on the family though. Made a deal with the feds that got a lot of them put away. He betrayed the whole family and got a new name. Witness protection and all that shit. Of course, that kind of betrayal runs deep. It took them a long while, but eventually the living family members not behind bars for life found who and where he was. Luckily for your friend Marco, he’d been out at the time they dropped in to say hello. They killed Al and his wife and daughter in the living room. All of them had their tongues cut out.”

I’m staring at the drawing in awe as Tommy talks. He looks just like his father. Marco is his spitting image.

“Hold up, why wouldn’t my father mention this?” I say. “If he knew that Al Manetti had been hunted down and killed, and that his son was alive, wouldn’t he suspect Marco?”

“Maybe,” Tommy says, pondering the thought. “But Michael always felt odd about it. You see, the way Al got a connection into the feds was because they’d tried contacting Michael first. Back then, he wasn’t Don, just the son of a Don instead. He of course said no, but because Al had all of us being watched at the time. Paranoid prick ... well, you can guess the rest.”

“You mean my father *allowed* Marco to hang around because he suspected him?” my body feels as if it’s been punched again.

“Potentially. But you have to also understand that technically Marco was dead. Because before he was *Marco*, I’ve since learned that he is also a spitting image of Sam Piraldo—his witness protection name. Sam died in a car crash off the port bridge heading down Key West on the same night as his parents and sister were killed. Car was found, but no body. Assumed dead once a heavily eaten corpse was found among the shores of the Everglades. He then came into your life five years after he supposedly died. That’s enough time to change who he was.”

“But you think he’d always wanted revenge? Even then, why would the Manettis allow him back into the fold? It makes no sense.”

“Of course it makes no sense, if you assume that any of the Manettis are still involved. Remember how we mentioned the cartels?”

A holiday of Marco’s years ago comes to mind immediately. “He used to go to Cancun all the time during spring break when he was younger. Then he stopped going for a while. He eventually went a few years later though, but at another time. He—” It finally clicks. “The matches!” I say.

Tommy’s eyes widen. “What matches?”

“The matches we found on the killers! That’s where I’d seen them before. Marco took a vacation, which must’ve been five years ago, to Mexico. He was gone for at least a month. Said he had the greatest time of his life or something. But when he

got back he had this box of cigars, and he always lit them with a black box of matches. Just like—”

Tommy signals for one of his men to get some documents, he gives him the folder and he immediately begins scanning a list I can't see. “There's a match factory up in the industrial area of Fort Lauderdale,” he says.

“That's gotta be it,” I say. “Surely that's where he's been operating. He always spoke of Fort Lauderdale like it was a hole. He hated it. He refused to go there if we had work there.”

Tommy rubbed his cheek. He was mulling it all over. “How much would you bet on that being the spot?”

“If they make the same matches, then it's our spot. Marco has refused going there since I've known him, especially over the last few years. Now I know why.”

Tommy nods. “It better be it, and my daughter better be there.” Everyone starts moving all at once. Calls are being made and it's like war has been declared. “And if my Sophie ain't there, you'll be sorry I didn't have Lenny here choke you to death.”



We arrive at the warehouse just after four in the morning. Teams of our men are assembled around us and we've just exited the four vans we arrived in. Everyone is in black and completely silent. It's the Colombinos and Russos working together.

Tommy sent a few men up before us on bikes to scope the place out. They'd seen a lot of activity and then it went quiet. As if they were expecting us. There's a few guards on patrol, but they're mostly on entrances at the front and back of the building. We're on the side, where an unmanned, but most importantly unlocked door is.

We gather at the fence line, a man is cutting an entrance for us with snips. We're going to storm the palace and kill every person in sight.

My heart is racing and I double check the Glock 19 in my hand again. The body armor is snug over my shoulders, as the man continues snipping the fence. It sounds like some tiny crab is snipping its claws in the night.

Tommy is moving among his men and double checking everything. He stops at one of the men. "About time you upgraded from that potato shooter you used to carry, Sebastian," he says. "That'll blow some people away." The guy grins and then slides the pump of his shotgun.

Our goal is a large shipping container inside. One of the men has seen Marco going to and from it, entering it and the light being turned on and off.

It's assumed that Sophie is in there and not some of the drugs.

I hope to God that it's Sophie in there.

We're taking a huge chance. But that's all we have.

"Ready?" Tommy asks.

Before I can nod, a gunshot rings out into the night.

Followed by a scream.

Tommy and I go stark white, my heart lurches and I think the worst.

I don't wait for anyone, pushing through the fence and heading for the open roller door. I forget the side door and head straight at the first guard I see. He's surprised to see me coming out of the darkness. He's surprised to see me drawing my knife before he can say anything. His face remains forever shocked in that surprised face as I plunge it into his neck.

Then, all hell breaks loose and I begin firing at anything that moves.

Chapter 27

Sophie

My mind races with possibilities and as I reach for my other hand I can't believe my luck.

Then the door comes back open.

“But you know, it's rude to leave guests alone when entertaining,” Marco says, coming back in. The light is switched back on but he's not alone. There's a large man with him. He's smirking and staring at me with eyes that make me feel uncomfortable. It sickens me and all I want to do is boot him in the face.

I crush my hand back against my back and pretend it's still tied there.

Marco rights me and sits me down. He nods and smiles between me and the guard. “You know, Miguel here said he liked you before. Said he had a little crush on you. I told him you were engaged to a lovely man but ... Well, I'm feeling generous. So I might let him hang around you for a bit.” He's

smiling as he says this, like it's funny. Like I should be making pretty eyes at Miguel.

Except all I do is glare at him. He's sweating and his shirt looks a size too small for the belly he's got. But then I notice the arms on him. Enormous things that are the size of *me*. I picture steroids running through his veins and not blood. A gun is holstered at his hip and it looks like a toy.

"Either way, I figured I'd let you have some company in here. It can be a little lonesome in these metal containers," Marco says.

I glare at him now, wishing the gag wasn't in my mouth so I could tell him what I really felt. "Mmrmr Frgrgr!" I say.

Marco chuckles. "A naughty mouth too. Now I see why Luca liked you," he giggles. He still reeks of rum, even more so now. He cups my cheek with his hand and I turn away. He laughs again. "Oh this is going to be so much fun. And to think I considered killing you? You're *pregnant*. Even better. I can raise Luca's boy as my own. I'm sure that would drive him even more crazy." He laughs and turns to the guard. Miguel laughs too.

I stare at both of them, then an idea comes to mind. I look at Marco, then at his crotch, and snort a laugh.

He stops immediately. "Got something to say?"

I look away, then look back and snort again. His face darkens. "You think I couldn't have my own boy?" He

advances quickly. “I could show you what kind of man I am? I could have a child.”

I bat my eyelids at him, regretting immediately what will happen. That I’ll most likely get slapped or hit, or worse, but it’s the only thing I can do to get in his head. He comes right up to me, about to say something. I can see the hiss on his tongue and the words he wants to spit.

Then he stops. He smiles. “Good,” he says, wagging a finger. “Very good. At least you’ve got some brains then. I like a challenge.”

I snort again and try to make him feel worse, but he doesn’t take the bait.

“No, no, that was good. Once was enough. Almost had me,” he says. “Well done.”

I bounce now, trying to enrage him but I’ve lost it. He keeps smiling and backing away. I feel the frustration boiling through me, and I bounce on the chair again. I yell and he only laughs. Then Miguel laughs because Marco is laughing. I yell and they both laugh louder. It echoes around the container and I rock to try and escape it.

I scream as I fall back, pinning my free arm. The only chance I’ve had of escape is now trapped under *me*. My numb arm turns painful and I can feel the rope cutting into my shoulder further up. Blood immediately stops to flow as freely as it should and I feel it turning pins and needles all up and down the limb.

“Have fun,” he says, winking at Miguel.

The two laugh and then Marco leaves, the guard is left alone with me. He soon quiets down and watches me openly. I lie on the ground staring at him. He’s unsure what to do, whether to come over or not? He just keeps staring at me. I see him tracing my body and I feel disgusted. I have a stupid thought, that my body is only for Luca. A stupid thought that *I don’t regret*.

Then he takes a tentative step towards me. He looks back at the door for Marco, as if he is a child about to do something he shouldn’t. He comes closer towards me and dread begins to fill me. Dread of the fact that this man is double my weight, a head taller and could probably lift me with ease.

My skin is crawling being at the mercy of this pig. What am I going to do? My heart is racing and panic sets in. I’d been stalling before, trying to drive Marco crazy. But I couldn’t have done anything, really. I was being silly. Stupid. I was—

Stop! Focus, now. *Focus*. There’s a big pig of a man coming toward you!

He takes another peak at the door and then finally commits, he goes to it quickly and shuts it quietly, but doesn’t close it.

Then with eyes full of glee he turns and comes towards me. His big frame lumbers along and his enormous arms are only more enormous the closer he comes. I look again at the handgun holstered on his hip. The toy that definitely isn’t a toy. If he’s anything like the bodyguards my father uses, it’ll

be loaded and live. But there's only one way to find out. An idea comes to mind. The only idea I've got.

I begin wiggling the fingers of my free hand like crazy, trying to get blood back in the hand. I move around on the floor to try and get my weight off my arm. He begins to giggle like he's got a trapped bug that he means to peel the wings off. I stare up at him, fearful and yet driven to at least try my one and only plan.

He grins wide now.

He reaches down with one hand and picks me up effortlessly in the chair. He holds me out in the air at his eye level. His eyes are full of want and lust and I feel sick. Men like this sicken me. He drops me with a loud clatter back onto the floor. The chair wobbles and he holds me still. He chuckles.

But I don't give him any time to enjoy it, because my arm is now free. Blood flows down into my hand and it regains some strength.

He leans towards me, bringing his hip within reach.

I snatch his handgun from his holster. His eyes bulge with fright and I point the thing towards his body and pull the trigger.

The blast of the gun erupts in the room and my eyes reflexively snap shut. The flash blinds me and I tear the gun away from him as he falls back screaming in pain. I put the

gun in my lap and start unraveling the other hand tied behind my back.

I hear some noises outside the container and stop, aiming it at the door. After a few beats, when no one has come, I put it back down and continue untying my hand. Once both are free, I pick the gun back up and point it at the door. I'm shaking, freaking out being so close to escape. I push the feelings of joy aside and continue untying my feet and legs. In what feels like an eternity and every chance for me to have been killed, I'm suddenly free. The rope lies at my feet.

The big man is still rolling around on the floor, screaming, and holding his leg and foot where the bullet traveled through him.

By this point though I realize I'm not the only one firing a gun. I can hear a miniature *war* outside the door.

I open the heavy door and peek out. People are running around like crazy. Gunfire is everywhere and people are screaming in every direction. Lights flash constantly and people call out non stop. Marco, however, is barricaded behind a steel drum and has a semi-automatic rifle.

It's my only chance and I point the gun and squeeze the trigger.

But it just clicks. Nothing happens.

Why the hell isn't the thing firing?

A man grabs the gun in my hand and then elbows me in the stomach. It knocks the air out of me, but as I fall to my knees,

I elbow him in the crotch hard. He groans and falls, grasping himself. I fumble his gun into my hands from the floor and aim again at Marco.

But he's gone.

Chapter 28

Luca

I'd fired guns before, and I'd been fired at, but the thing that surprised me the most about the gunfight with Marco's men was the *sound*. The sheer noise of it all was fucking loud.

I'm reloading my handgun again as I realize my ears are ringing like crazy. I can't hear what the guy next to me is saying, but then I don't really need to, we've been pinned back outside. They expected us, is all I can think.

Maybe it's what Marco wanted.

I slam the magazine home and duck out, taking aim at a man by the shipping container. Once he's dealt with I take aim at another behind shipping pallets. A few of Tommy's men come to back me up, giving me cover fire to move the little bit closer towards the container. I hope Sophie's in there and okay.

I slide to a stop behind some barrels. I can hear Marco's men yelling. Specifically, I can hear *him* yelling too. It enrages

me. I jump up despite the firing and unload a whole mag on the men, but I don't see Marco.

I vault the barrels and head for the shipping container. Just as I get there a giant of a man stumbles out, he's fucking massive and his leg and foot are bleeding. He growls at me and swipes with clumsy hands. I dodge and punch him in the gut. He doesn't even flinch and simply punches me in the chest.

It shocks me and I stumble back. I run and jump at him again, punching as hard as I can into his big, solid head. The punch nearly breaks my fist, but still he doesn't move either.

He just grins and punches me in the gut and I fall to my knees winded. He brings his arms up to clobber me with both his fists.

That's when I jam my finger in his bullet wound.

He screams and falls down, grabbing the wound as I wrench open the shipping container.

"Sophie?" I call. I peer into the darkness but can't see anything. I look for the switch beside the door and find it. The room becomes blinding once the lights are on, but there's no sign of Sophie. Only the ropes that held her.

She either escaped or got moved.

I turn out of the empty container and look back at the warehouse. Tommy's men have advanced inside along with mine. But I'm searching everywhere else. I need to find Sophie. I don't need to find Marco.

But it's Marco I see scurrying away. He's fleeing off behind some machinery towards a ladder. He's carrying a machine gun and when he gets to the ladder, he looks around and then slings it over his back. I could shoot him now.

But I don't, because I want to look him in the eyes when he *loses*.

I chase after him, dodging between the enormous machines and pallets. My pallets of drugs and goods, to be precise. A loud engine starts up beside me and I slide to a stop, a gunshot rings out and I jump back. A few more blasts and the cement floor I'd just been standing on chips up and breaks. I peek out and see Marco giggling away.

I aim and fire at him, but he's already gone.

I sprint for the ladder and don't bother to look to see if he's watching me. I know he wants me to follow him. I climb to the top and get onto the platform. We're on a hanging track that crosses the whole warehouse. Marco is sprinting for the other side and a control deck. The deck hangs over a machine and mountain of lumber which is slowly being fed into it. It's being cut down to the perfect size for match sticks. I follow at a run.

The gunfight below rages on. I fire a few shots off at Marco's men and they suddenly don't know where to look, it serves as enough confusion to draw them away from Tommy's men. They open fire and I take a moment to search for Sophie too. There's been no sign of her. I hope that she's alright, wherever she is.

I catch up to the deck I'd seen Marco turn onto and take the corner at speed. As I come around he rises from behind the control deck and the butt of his gun smashes into my face.

I stumble back into the guard rail, just holding on. My nose is broken and it immediately starts pissing blood.

Marco laughs.

I shake my head to get the stars out of my eyes just as he punches me in the gut. He goes to tip me back and I headbutt blindly and bash into his face. He groans, and the satisfaction is worth the pain of my own broken nose. We tumble back towards the controls and I punch him in the gut. I go for a second and he blocks it. He swings back, jabbing my kidney and I can't help but let a gasp out and drop to a knee. My throat is killing me as I try to keep breathing.

Marco picks me up and I punch at his face. We lose control and crash into the control console. We roll along the buttons and many things beep as we have our scrappy fight. The machine below comes to life, timber starts getting fed in and it sounds like many chainsaws are running below us. I manage to get on top of Marco and punch, he dodges and my fist slams home on a button. I scream and clasp my hand. A top hatch has opened and the both of us look down at the enormous grinding gears.

Marco takes my few distracted seconds to boot my knee. I scream and crumble down. He gets me into a headlock and I elbow his gut. He groans and I roll away. But Marco is already coming at me as I get up.

“Why the fuck are you doing this?” I say through gritted teeth.

“Why not?” Marco says back.

We tussle and I swing a punch at him. He ducks it and jabs again at the same kidney. It only pisses me off even more.

“We took you in,” I say, ducking his punch and landing one in his kidney.

He smiles. “Good for you. Would you like a medal?” He swings another punch which I block, I headbutt him again and it dazes him. He stumbles back towards the edge of the platform with the grinding gears below.

I grab him by the shirt, purely by reflex, and save his life by pulling him away from the edge.

“You always warned me of mercy,” Marco says, immediately elbowing my broken nose.

I fall back, my hands bloodied and slippery. He wraps his arm around my neck and begins choking me. If my neck hadn't already felt as if it had been ripped apart by sandpaper, now it was on fire. I swipe at him, but my arms can't reach him. He's got me done and dusted.

I'm at his mercy.

“You know, for a long time, I was happy with you,” he says. “Your father was a better father than mine had ever been.” He tightens the chokehold. “You should have seen the surprise on his face as I came into his room and shot him in the legs.”

I go berserk, kicking out and swinging fists at him again, but I'm already weakened by his choking. He directs me towards the edge. Towards the match stick machine.

"Even better was his face when I told him I'd kill you," Marco says. "But all the while he just kept asking the same question as you. Why? Well I told him the truth. We're different families. You're Colombino, and I'm Manetti."

"You're a piece of shit," I manage to say.

Marco laughs, kicks me to my knees and forces me to the edge, dangling me above the machine. "That may be, but at least I'm alive."

I headbutt backwards but Marco has me locked in.

"Any last words, Luca?" he whispers. "Anyone else you want to give recognition to?"

I don't say anything, all I think about is my parents. Is Sophie. I wish I could've just seen Sophie one last time before I died.

"Well I've got some for you," Marco says. "You should've —"

A gunshot rings out and it's like Marco grunts. It's almost more like an exhale of surprise.

I push back with all my might, rising up onto my legs and picking him up. He groans again and I don't hesitate this time, I roar and flip him up, over me, and down into the machine.

He slams into the gears and starts getting pulled inwards. I turn away as he begins to scream.

I collapse to my knees. Breathing hard and gripping my throat. I fall back and thank whoever shot that stray bullet. But it's only then that I realize it wasn't a stray at all, and that I'm not alone. Sophie is standing over me, stripped down to her underwear with a gun in her hands.

"Why the hell would you wear that to a gunfight?" is all I can manage as I roll over and stagger up.

Sophie comes over and hugs me. She laughs into my ear and it's the greatest thing ever. We embrace and I carry her away from the edge.

"I didn't have anything else," she says.

I pull her back and smile. My face hurts and my throat hurts, but I can't help but keep smiling. "You're alive," I say. "I'm so happy you're alive. I thought I'd lost you."

"You'd lost me?" she asks.

I shake my head, and dry my face on my shirt. "All I wanted was to see you again." I hug her tight. "Sophie, I've been such an ass. I've been such a jerk to you. I completely understand if you hate me."

"I don't exactly hate you," she replies. "We're just a little complicated at the moment."

I smile. "Didn't I say that?"

She nods.

“Well we are complicated. And it’s only gotten worse,” I say, taking her hand. “Because I love you. And I just want you to know that, I’ll never love anyone more than you. But I can’t control you, own you, or treat you—”

“Do you always ramble on?” she cuts in, squeezing my arm..

I laugh and hug her. “I’m just so happy you’re alive,” I say into her shoulder, as she hugs me back.

“Me too,” she whispers. “But you will love someone more than me, because you’re going to be a father.”

I pull away and we stare into each other’s eyes. The warehouse is finally silent, there’s no more gunfire. I hear Tommy calling out for us, but I don’t reply. Instead, I bring Sophie close and kiss her and celebrate that we’re alive and in love.

And I’m on my way to being a father.

Chapter 29

Sophie

Three years later ...

My skin is burning and the cold wall I'm pressed up against sears my back. Memories flood my mind and I can't help but feel cold too ... except his warmth heats me back up. His lips search my shoulder and find their way back to my lips. Luca kisses me hard and raises my leg up.

The shower spray has been directed to the side for a while now.

Luca teases my folds with the tip of his throbbing cock. He plunges up into me and we both groan in ecstasy. But then, like horny teenagers, we both shush each other and try to be quiet. *It is* our wedding day, and we're staying in a hotel down in Key West. Technically we're not supposed to see each other yet. Technically we can't right now, because neither of us have opened our eyes yet.

He holds my leg more firmly in his hand and lifts me higher, getting a better angle to slide in from. I bite my lip and

hold off the groan. It's cold without the shower spray, but if it was on, our natural lube would wash away. I grab ahold of his ass and squeeze, digging my nails in as he drives into me. He's got such a firm ass. He bites my shoulder and begins fucking into me harder.

I hold on to him and soon he's lifted my other leg up and I'm pinned against the wall. The slapping sound of our bodies meeting is echoing around the bathroom and I can't help but moan from it.

"Shhh," Luca tries to say, but he ends up gasping instead.

I take his head in my hands and suck his ear as he slows down slightly, teasing me with his length. My body surges suddenly and the tension that's been building up in my core is let loose. I growl into his shoulder and it sets him off too. He thrusts hard one last time before he begins to come inside me. The both of us finally open our eyes.

I stare into his deep brown eyes. He stares into mine. We watch each other in bliss and try to catch our breath.

"I think everyone may suspect why we chose the two rooms with connecting doors," Luca whispers.

I begin laughing and he does too. It rings around the room and, to my ears, sounds exactly like wedding bells.



The car comes to a stop and I realize that I'm practically strangling my father's hand. It's gone red in my grip. "Dad, you should've said," I whine.

He just smiles and laughs though. “Honey, I was holding on just as much as you.”

“How can you be nervous?” I say, bringing his hand into my lap. “It is my wedding day after all.”

“Well, that is true,” he says, but his face falters. A crack appears in his smile and through it shines a sad light. “But not every day does a man give away his daughter.”

“Oh, dad, you can’t,” I say, hugging him and trying to hold back tears. “You set me off now, it’ll ruin my makeup. I can’t walk down the aisle with running mascara!”

“I know, I know!” he says, the two of us separating. He smiles and wipes a tear from the corner of his eye. “I *know*, it’s just I’m so proud of you. I’m so proud of being your father. So proud of the lovely woman you’ve become.”

I squeeze his hand and desperately try to hold back the tears.

“You might be giving me away, but I’m not *leaving*,” I say. “You know we live just down the street.”

“And a few over,” he adds.

I nod and don’t correct him. That is true. We were more than just down the street. We were down the street, a few over, and then some! We were living in Luca’s mother’s old home. It had been completely rebuilt since the night of my kidnapping and the revelation of who Marco actually was. Since then it had received a large remodel and make over,

mostly in the same style and vibe as Luca's mother, Judy, had modeled the home. With one exception ...

There was now a little boy's bedroom at the back.

The door man gestures for us to get out of the car and I realize we've been keeping everyone waiting. "Oh we're late!"

"Honey, you're the *bride*," my father says. "You can arrive whenever you want. They've waited three years, they can wait a bit longer."

I playfully pout as he opens the car door. It had been *his* idea for Luca and I to take some time to get to know each other and focus on our growing family before tying the knot, not ours.

We get out of the car and my father helps me with my train. It's been made especially by my team at Piovere, which I now run seeing that Luca has taken over the family businesses, the Russo brand included inside the Colombino one. My father retired a year ago, after seeing how much Luca had taken to his role. He deemed that we were in good hands.

He, of course, hadn't fully retired. He'd just changed his desk and view. He now sat at a small kids table, helping my son to stand and draw. Draw, being a very generous word for what he did, but either way, melting hearts is what he ended up doing.

We walk up the steps and the man opens the door. We're let into a smaller entry way, with a second set of doors. Everything is warm and smells of the enormous lavender

bushes guarding the corners. The candles burning are golden and the scent of the sea washes in from behind us. I turn and smile at the sun that's setting ever so slowly, the silhouettes of palms sway back and forth before us, and I know that the time is perfect.

"You ready, my dear?" my father asks.

"Regardless of if I'm ready or not, it's time to jump into it," I say. "I believe there's honor and duty in a good marriage. Both of which are needed to make a good legacy." I hug my father and squeeze him tight. "Thank you for everything."

He's got tears threatening to fully break free now. And a single tear does fall as he looks me up and down. He coughs and tries to toughen up his voice. He swallows and licks his lips. "You look just like your mother."

I don't say anything and just hug him again. I beg for the mascara not to run and fish for a handkerchief in my hidden pocket. My father produces one and gives it to me to dab at my eyes.

"What did I say about making me cry?" I say, laughter at the edge.

"That was a cheap shot, I'm sorry," he says.

"Very naughty," I quip. "Just as I'm about to walk down the aisle."

We both laugh and take a deep breath, I look at my father and he looks at me, we take a door in each hand and open them up.

Light guitar begins immediately and a cello soon accompanies it. The lavender that was guarding the door runs away ahead of us, smaller columns lining the aisle all the way to the altar. There's sunlight streaming in through the open sandstone building, turning the higher up rose tinted windows into a kaleidoscope of reds, oranges and golds.

But I may as well be blind to it all. Because all I'm looking at are the two men standing at the altar. Luca is proud and dressed smartly in a white tux jacket with black pants. A small bunch of sage and thyme is pinned to his lapel, cut from his mother's garden. And beside him, in a much smaller but exactly matching little suit, is our son, Michael.

He stands with the help of his father, his pudgy little hand grasping Luca's finger as he looks down at the two final people who've finally entered the church.

"Mama!" he calls excitedly.

Luca beams and I smile at my men. My heart is filled with love and happiness, and I clutch onto my father's hand as we walk down the aisle, the sun setting just as we arrive to meet them.

THE END

Did you like this book? Then you'll LOVE (Royal Bosshole's Baby).

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I got pregnant from one scorching hot night on a yacht with a stranger... Now he's my boss.

Desperate to make ends meet I took a job I probably shouldn't have:

Be a fake girlfriend to a billionaire prince.

He needs to save his reputation.

I need a big paycheck to cover bills for my son.

I never in a million years thought it would be *him*.

My new boss and fake boyfriend is my one night stand baby daddy from 3 years ago.

He hasn't changed one bit - still arrogant, reckless, grumpy, and irresistibly handsome.

He also doesn't remember me and has no idea he's a daddy.

I just need to pretend to be his girlfriend, get paid, and carry on my life with my son.

Easier said than done though when his protective arms wrap around me and our lips meet.

It's supposed to be all pretend, but the heart never lies.

Revealing my three year old secret could bring us closer together or tear us apart forever...

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