



THE DON'S

Captor

AMBER ROW

The Don's Captor

An Enemies to Lovers Mafia Romance

Amber Row

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Epilogue

About Author

Chapter One

Natalie

“Congratulations, Miss. Grant, you are pregnant,” the doctor’s warm voice told me.

“Excuse me?”

He had to have had the wrong patient. There was no way I could be pregnant. I was told I would never get pregnant, that I could never carry a child. When I was thirteen, I started to get horribly sick. There was excruciating pain in my right thigh. It was so bad I thought my leg would break with every step. The doctors finally told me I had bone cancer and had to go through all these tests, surgeries, and treatments. The end result was some nasty scars on my thigh, but I kept my leg. I was told the chemo and radiation had destroyed my ovaries. I would never be able to get pregnant. It’s why I wasn’t on birth control; there really was no point.

“You’re pregnant,” he said again before he continued, “I am assuming by your reaction that you weren’t trying for a baby.”

“Not even a little. Since I was a young teenager, I’ve been told that chemo had destroyed any hope of me having children.”

“In most instances, that is true. However, in one in a million chances, it happens. It only takes one egg to be released to get pregnant. Given your history, though, I will refer you to a high-risk OBGYN who will run the proper tests and keep a very close eye on you. I don’t want you to worry; lots of women carry healthy babies to term after chemo. You and your significant other don’t have to worry.”

Significant other? Ya, I’ll go with that. There was no way I was telling this complete stranger that I had a one-night stand in a side alley six weeks ago and the condom broke. I didn’t even take the morning-after pill because, hello, I can’t get pregnant.

“Thanks, doc. This is just a bit of a shock is all. Do I need to do anything?” I asked, trying to get my mind to kick back in.

“I am going to write you a prescription to help with any morning sickness. You also need to get prenatal vitamins everyday. I will also have my office set up appointments for you. Is the phone number on file the correct one?”

“It is, yes.”

“Perfect, I will be in touch then,” he offered with a warm smile before heading out.

This was not what I had been expecting at all. I hadn’t been feeling too great recently, terrified that my cancer was coming back. Out of all the things the doctor was going to tell me

today, this was not one of them. I was shocked, but I'm not mad. This was a dream come true. I have always wanted children, but I had accepted the fact that they wouldn't be mine biologically. Now against all odds, I was going to have my own baby.

I was going to be a mother, holy shit. I sat here for a few moments, trying to process it all and take it all in. I knew I should be freaked out, panicking even, because I was not in a position to have a child. I was only a receptionist at a funeral home. I didn't make much money, just enough for me to live on, but not enough to raise a baby. I would need to find different work, but I didn't know what that would be. I didn't go to college; instead, I went straight to the workforce and started to make money. Now, I only had nine months to get it all sorted out, and I knew it was going to be a lot of work.

I headed out, made my way out of the building and started to walk toward my car. The area was busy. I had to park a good four blocks away, but it was nice out, so I didn't mind the short walk. I still couldn't believe it. I was going to have a baby, but at the thought, I felt a tsunami of pain slam into me. I was going to have a baby and my mom wasn't going to be there for it. She died five years ago from a stroke she had never recovered from. It was devastating. I was an only child, and my relationship with my father was anything but close.

All I had was my mom. We used to talk about what we would do when I had a child and the places we were going to go. Mom would talk about different nursery ideas. All she wanted was to be a grandmother, and now that it was finally going to

happen, she wasn't here to enjoy it with me. It was a bittersweet moment, and I knew it was always going to sting not having her in my life. All I could do was try and make her proud and raise this baby to the best of my capabilities.

I turned the corner to walk down the side alley to reach my car on the other side. I pulled out my phone to double-check that I wasn't going to be late getting back to work. I had taken an hour off to meet with my doctor, and my boss was not happy about it. He was never very friendly, especially when I needed time off. He saved up all his people skills for the clients that came in.

Not that I could really blame him. It costs a small fortune to bury someone. If I only had the people skills stored up, I would save them for the tens of thousands of dollars that walked through the door all day. Before I reached the end of the alley, I heard a glass bottle being kicked. Just as I turned to see who was behind me, a thick bag was tossed over my head.

Instantly, I dropped my phone and started fighting against the bag and the strong arms around my torso. I had no idea who was trying to grab me or how many there were, but it didn't matter. I kicked and squirmed, throwing my body around, trying to do anything to get away from my kidnapper. Everything I tried didn't work as he continued to drag me down the alley. I felt hands on my legs, confirming that there were at least two people.

My legs were quickly picked up, and a tight grip helped them in place. I wasn't in the air for very long, maybe a couple of

seconds, before I was tossed into what I suspected was a trunk. I shot my arms up and started to swing; they weren't impressed by my lack of cooperation.

I felt a bruising grip on my wrists as my arms were pulled behind my back. They put what I assumed was a zip tie around my wrists if the feeling was anything to go by. I didn't let it stop me, though. I started to move my legs, trying to kick out, but the trunk I was in wasn't huge, and I kept getting my feet caught on something. All my efforts were in vain when I heard the thump of the trunk lid closing, trapping me entirely in darkness. I heard the thump of two more car doors closing before I felt and heard the engine revving up before the car started to move.

Complete panic set in as I felt the car driving away, taking me to god knows where for god knows what. I couldn't stop the tears from building in my eyes. This couldn't be happening. I couldn't get my prayers answered, only to be kidnapped and killed before I could even hear my baby's heartbeat. The world was cruel, but it couldn't be this cruel.

I kicked out at whatever I could contact in frustration. I don't know what I was hoping for, maybe breaking a light or something, but nothing I hit helped me. I felt the tears taking on a whole new life, and all I could do was lie trapped in the darkness, crying and praying this wouldn't be the end for me or my baby.

I had no idea how long we had been driving, but when we finally stopped, I felt my heart beating faster. It was going to beat right out of my chest! I could feel a slight tremble starting within my body, and I couldn't help the flinch when the trunk's lid was opened. Once again, rough hands grabbed me and pulled me out. I couldn't get my feet fully under me before they started dragging me away from the car. I couldn't see, but I forced my mind to focus on my other senses.

I knew we weren't on pavement; I could feel and hear the tiny gravel crunching and moving around. I didn't hear any cars, no children, or other people talking, so we had to be somewhere isolated, which wasn't good for me. I had seen enough crime shows to know that the first twenty-four hours are vital and will dictate what happens to me. As hard as it was going to be, I just had to stay calm.

Once my boss discovered that I hadn't returned to work, he would call me and try to find me. The trick was going to be how long he would try. He might assume I had quit and moved on to another receptionist job. There was no guarantee that he would call the police, and from what I also knew from the crime shows, you had to be missing for twenty-four hours before a missing person's report could be filed. The irony was not lost on me right now.

I heard the metal door's bang before being pulled inside, and I felt cold. The air within this building was cooler than the warm sun just moments ago. I was led down multiple hallways before being turned around and dropped into a chair. I couldn't help the groan at the pain that shot up my arms from my

restrained wrists, hitting the back of what felt like a metal chair.

The zip tie was cut, but my relief only lasted a second before both of my wrists were grabbed and held down on the arms of the chairs, where new zip ties were added, effectively keeping me in the chair. I had been expecting the bag to be removed from my head, but instead, I could hear the footsteps moving away slightly. They never left the room, but it almost sounded like they were pacing. I could hear hushed voices but couldn't make out all the words. Just bits and pieces and none of it was telling me what was going on...who these people were and why they had taken me.

I had no idea how long I had been sitting there before footsteps made their way toward me. Instinctively, my muscles tightened, waiting for a blow I couldn't see. I felt a grip on the bag, and a second later, it was pulled off my head. I had to blink a few times at the harsh light now hitting me. Once I could see again, I knew exactly how screwed I was. Right before I stood six men, and none of them looked friendly.

“Natalie Grant, we need to talk.” The thick Italian accent told me exactly how screwed I was.

Chapter Two

Armando

“Who are you?” she asked, doing her best to keep the fear from her voice.

This was fucked up, but there was nothing I could do about it. Dominic had given the order to grab Natalie and bring her here. With Dom being the head of the West Coast faction of the Italian mafia, I wasn't in a position to argue with him or go against his orders, even if I had a issue with him kidnapping a newly pregnant woman.

“Dominic Russo. I am the Don of the Italian mafia all along the West Coast.”

The confusion was evident in her eyes. She didn't expect that answer to come out of Dom's mouth. I had no idea if she even fully understood the situation she was in. Most know about the mafia, generally the Russian faction, but what they knew was from movies like the Godfather.

There was a lot of violence in this world, but there was also a lot of paperwork and business running. Very mundane stuff that never gets talked about. There was also the darker aspect of this world. The stuff that never made it into movies because it was too dark for anyone to watch. Natalie was smack dab in the middle of that darkness now.

“I don’t...why am I here?” she asked. I could tell she was trying to process what was happening.

“The good news is you didn’t do anything wrong. The bad is that you have a piece of shit father who doesn’t seem to care about paying his debts.”

“You’re still not making any sense. What do my father’s debts have to do with me?”

Unfortunately, it had everything to do with her. Different factions of the mafia all had their own rackets. The most common were underground casinos. Others were drugs and arms trafficking, but they were more dangerous in terms of getting caught by law enforcement. Underground casinos were easy. You could set one up within a day and move it a few days later. Hell, the unpredictability of it is what made it so exciting for customers.

“He is a regular at my casinos. He’s got to be the unluckiest man in the world, though. He can never seem to win, and he never knows when to quit when he’s ahead. He’s a hundred grand in debt, and it is time to collect.”

“He doesn’t have that kind of money. I don’t either. How do you even let someone get that far in debt?” she asked with a

slight edge to her voice. I had the fight not to smirk. She was scared, but she had some sass to her. It wouldn't save her, but it might help her get through what was to come.

She also had a point, one I had asked when I first arrived at Dom's faction three years ago. It was typical to allow customers to rack up a pretty impressive debt; however, you could never let it get too high. There is a balance you have to walk. You need to know the customer's income level and then weigh that against the debt to see how long it would take for someone to pay it off or if they are even capable of paying it off.

You always cut them off before they reach the point where the debt is out of their league. Dom didn't have that business model. He had no problem allowing customers to rack up an astronomical debt. He did so because it got him what he truly wanted.

"I am not my customers' accountant. What they do with their money is up to them. I presented your father with a suitable alternative, and he accepted. Unfortunately for you." I could hear how pleased he was. Drawing it out just so he could get his rocks off. I was going to enjoy killing him.

Unrest within the mafia was a given. However, I couldn't care less about running the show. I had my own show to run out East back home. I wasn't working under this despicable devil to make money. I was here for revenge to finally get to kill the man responsible for me losing the love of my life. I was buying time until I could get close enough to him. I could have

killed him long ago by shooting him from a safe distance, but that wouldn't be good enough for me. I wanted to feel his neck snap within my hands. I wanted to see the life drain from his eyes.

"I don't have that kind of money. I work as a receptionist."

The poor girl still thought this was about money. She had no idea that Dom had a sure-fire way to make triple the amount he was owed.

"I have no need for your money. Your father signed away your first born. That baby growing inside your belly right now belongs to me," he said with a deadly smirk.

My eyes flickered over to Natalie, and I could see horror flooding her eyes. The realization of what her own father had given up just to save his own ass. It wouldn't work, though, as Dom would kill him on principle. He couldn't risk any of his past customers growing a conscience and calling the police. Dead men never tell tales.

"I'm not pregnant. I don't know what you are talking about," she tried to deny, but there was no denying what Dom knew. He never left anything to chance.

"Of course you are. You just left the doctor's office where you received the grand news. I run a lucrative business with a large number of connections. I knew you were pregnant a couple of days ago, compliments of the lab rat that ran your blood. You're one lucky girl. If I had to wait any longer for you to finally get knocked up, I was going to kill you and your daddy," he said with a chuckle.

He turned to glance at us before giving Natalie his full attention again. I knew he was loving this. It was one of his favorite parts: to see the fight drain from his victim's face. This was generally the part where the women begged him to let her go and leave her baby alone.

“You think I'm going to hand over my baby to you?” she said with an edge filtering into her voice. That was surprising; it would take more time for her to accept her fate. Dom would like that. He always liked it when they fought. He was a sucker for a challenge, and she was a stupid girl for giving it to him.

“You don't have a say in the matter. I don't let my debts go unpaid. Especially after all of the time I have put in just to get you pregnant. I mean, this has been in the works for a year now. Week after week, sending in one of my guys to fuck you. It was getting tedious. Now that you are finally pregnant, you will be placed in a secure house and guarded until you pop the baby out. Afterward, you will be free to go back home and live your life. It's just that simple.”

It wasn't that simple. He would never allow her to leave. Once the baby was out, she would be killed. She wouldn't even get to hold her baby before her heart stopped. The baby would then go to the highest bidder and, with great luck, to a loving family. Dom didn't care who they were or what would happen to the children; he only cared about the money.

“I will never give my baby to you,” she said, determination deep within her voice.

“I really think you are looking at this the wrong way,” Dom started, grabbing one of the metal chairs and pulling it over to her. He sat down as he spoke. “I have done my research. You work as a receptionist at Reed’s Funeral Home. You make barely thirty thousand dollars a year. Your rent, in a quite frankly shitty apartment for a one-bedroom, is just shy of half of that. You can’t afford to raise a baby. You can barely afford to provide for yourself. You have to think about the big picture, Natalie. Medical bills for pregnancy and delivery are costly. You also need a bigger place, all the items for the baby, plus you will need to provide for the next eighteen years.”

Dom was a natural snake oil salesman. He could convince anyone that what he wanted was actually their idea. A lot of the previous women had fallen for it. He made sure to pick the right women. The desperate ones earned a low income, had no hope of raising a child and giving them the best life. He knew exactly how to play this. The thing was, I wasn’t getting this from Natalie. Yes, she had a dead-end job and wouldn’t be able to give the child everything they ever asked for, but she seemed more capable of love than the previous women.

“If you give me the baby, I will have you in a nice house while you are pregnant. You will have one of the best doctors looking after you. I will pay for all your medical coverage. And once the baby is born, you will be given a cheque for a hundred grand to put toward a new life. Then later on, you can always make another baby when you have a stable home life for the child. I am not the bad guy in this scenario.”

“Said the scorpion to the frog. Your smooth-talking works on many women, but it won’t work on me. You’re not a good man. You’re the devil trying to offer candy, and I don’t have a sweet tooth. You will never get my baby.” Fear laced her voice, but she kept her edge. I had no idea how she was doing this, but I doubted she would be able to keep this up for long.

“Fine, hard way it is,” Dom said with an edge to his voice. He stood as he continued. “Armando is going to be taking you to your new home. He will stay on guard until after the baby is born. And should you go against any of the rules, he’s been ordered to shoot you in the head. I suggest you be a good girl and do as you are told.”

Dom turned and headed out with the rest of the guys, leaving me to deal with her. Under different circumstances, I would be kind and gentle with her, but that couldn’t happen here. I needed to keep my cover intact, which meant being an asshole. I kept my eyes on her as I pulled out my switchblade from my back pocket. His eyes traveled over to it, most likely expecting me to hurt her with it.

I spoke in a dark and cold tone as I stepped closer to her, bending down just enough to hold her wrist while placing the knife against the zip tie. “You don’t want to get that precious cargo hurt? Then don’t fight me. I cut you loose, and you get up and walk to my truck. You sit in the front seat and you don’t talk or make a move to leave. You even think about escaping and I will kill you. Do you understand?”

She looked me dead in the eye and gave a simple nod. I could see her throat muscles moving up and down. I knew she was fighting to keep up this farce of not being scared. Apparently, I was more intimidating to her compared to Dom and the five others. I cut both of the ties off, and she instantly moved to rub her wrists. I firmly gripped her left bicep and forced her to stand. I held onto her as we walked out and got her into my truck. With us both settled, I headed for the safe house, where I would be trapped with her for the next nine months; it wasn't something I was looking forward to.

Chapter Three

Natalie

I kept my eyes glued to the window, making a mental note of every turn, and every street sign I saw along the way. I couldn't escape from this car, but that didn't mean I would be trapped within whatever safe house I was about to be locked up in. I was still fighting with the tremors that had overtaken my body. I was thankful I could keep my head on straight and get through Dominic's speech, but I could barely hold on. Internally, I had been screaming for him to just let me go. This was supposed to be some of the happiest times of my life, and now it was utterly ruined thanks to my own father.

I knew he had a gambling issue and a drinking one to boot, but I didn't think he would try and sell his own unborn grandchild just to pay off his debt. I could only assume that he had figured that I couldn't get pregnant so Dominic would never come and collect... that his debt would be wiped clean and Dominic would never be of the wiser. Only he would think he could con the head of the mafia and get away with it.

He was an idiot, I knew that before, but he had taken this to a new level. And now, because of him, I was being held captive and my baby's life was at risk. I had no doubt that Dominic meant he would make sure I had a doctor, but I also knew it wouldn't be the best. Any doctor worth their salt wouldn't be working for an illegal faction. It would be some doctor that had gotten their license pulled and now had to freelance within the criminal world to make ends meet. They wouldn't be qualified for my unique position and one I was not about to disclose.

If I wanted to get out of this, I would have to play it smart and wait for the right moment to escape. I would also need to scope out the house and make sure I knew where all of the exits were and have multiple plans in place. I had to be patient and clever if I wanted to get my baby and me out of this alive.

We pulled up to a surprisingly lovely house on the outskirts of town. From what I could see of the house itself, it looked like a decent shape. It was two stories, with a long driveway. You could have easily fit six cars in it. The grass was well-kept. There was a fence all around it, and I wasn't sure if I could climb it. I would have to come up with a plan for that because there was a locked gate. I knew I wouldn't be able to get the code. If I hadn't known better, I never would have suspected it was a safe house for the mafia.

There wasn't much in the area, either. No next-door neighbors, no businesses, no one I could go to for help. I was on my own, but at least we were on a road and not off in the woods

somewhere. My guard punched the numbers into the keypad, but I couldn't see it from my position, not that I expected to.

The gate opened and we drove through it and up to the house. He hit a button and the garage door opened. After getting inside, he closed the door and started to get out. I followed suit, as there was no point in fighting. I had to wait until I could slip out. I wasn't going to win against him, and there was no point in trying. It wasn't worth hurting my baby over. I followed him into the house; he spoke as he headed into the living room.

“You can go anywhere within the house and on the grounds. There is a fence all along the perimeter that is electrified and always armed. For the safety of you and your baby, I would avoid it. You follow the rules and Dom has no reason to enforce new ones.”

I suspected the new rules wouldn't be ones I would enjoy obeying. That was fine with me. All I had to do was buy my time.

“And when will a doctor come by?” I asked because that was one of my main concerns right now.

“In a few days. There's food and you can pick a room upstairs.” He paused and started to walk back toward me. I could see the danger in his eyes; under different circumstances, it might have made me pulse with need. I had always been a sucker for the bad boys. “As for any jailbreaks you might be planning, don't bother. None of the windows

open, and there is that pesky fence that will fry you the second you come in contact with it.”

“I’m not an idiot. I’m not about to kill myself just to escape. The police will find me eventually, and then I will get the pleasure of watching them throw you to the floor and cuff you,” I said as I started to close the gap between us. Keeping my back straight and with a fearless tone in my voice, I added, “I’m going to be there at every trial. I’ll visit you in prison just to see what the other inmates think of you helping your boss sell innocent children. Criminals are funny that way. You could slaughter a hundred men, but if you dare raise a hand to a child, they’ll torture you slowly. That’s the part that I am really going to look forward to. For both you and your boss.”

Was I getting ballsy? Yes, but he needed to see that I wasn’t scared, even though my heart was pounding in my chest and the trembling I was fighting to keep down was getting to be a herculean task. I wasn’t going to give this man the satisfaction of seeing me scared and weak.

A smirk spread across his face as his tongue darted to wet his lips slightly. “You’re brave. I’ll give you that. But it won’t last long. Dom is very good at breaking the rebellious ones. You would do well to remember that, sweetheart.”

“I’m not your sweetheart. And you would do well to stay the hell out of my way.”

That was all I had to say, and I turned and headed for the stairs. I needed to get away from him and put as much distance between us as physically possible. I quickly made my way up

the stairs and down the hallway. I checked into every door to see what was behind it. I found there were three bedrooms, a bathroom and a linen closet. The one bedroom had an ensuite bathroom, and I took that room as my own. At least within this room, I could hide in it, not even having to come out for the bathroom.

I would need to eat, but that was a problem for later. The room itself was nice, and I hated that it was nice. I knew that was ridiculous; why would I want to be trapped within a dump? At least if it was a shitty place, I could hate more easily. I could feel like I was a prisoner instead of a guest at some bed and breakfast inn.

I closed the door and noticed immediately that there was no lock on the inside, so I couldn't lock myself in. There was a keyhole on the other side of the knob, so I knew I could be locked in by one of my guards. I wasn't sure how I felt about that because if they did lock me in, it was to keep me from getting out, but at the same time, it kept them from just walking in. It was a double-edged sword.

The room itself was nice, just like the rest of the house. There was a king-size bed with a material frame. The headboard was tall, giving a person plenty of room to sit up comfortably in bed. A long eight-drawer dresser was placed across from the bed. Above it, mounted to the wall, was a flat-screen television. I wasn't sure of the size, but it was big enough to watch movies in bed and not miss a thing.

A desk was off to the right of the bed, placed underneath a window that didn't open. There were even some romance novels by Amber Row arranged on top of it. I didn't have my phone, and there wasn't a landline in the room. A quick look through the desk's drawers and dresser told me there was no laptop or tablet I could use. I found a bunch of clothes, all different sizes, in the dresser and the closet.

They had clearly been using this place as their main baby farm. I couldn't help but wonder how many women had been trapped in this room. I headed into the bathroom to see that it was beautiful. It was all white with a clear glass pedestal and a double sink. There was a jacuzzi bathtub with an all-glass shower stall just off the side.

Whoever had initially built this house did so with love and thought for the people that lived under its roof. I wonder what they would think if they knew what their house had turned into. Then again, I didn't know the history of this place, so maybe they built it knowing that the mafia would own it.

With a sigh, I headed over to the single window within the room. It was massive and allowed a great deal of sunlight to shine into the room. I looked around the frame, but nothing made it possible to open it. There was no latch or lock: just a solid glass panel. I placed my hand against it, expecting it to be cold, only it felt different. It was cool, but it didn't feel like glass.

There was almost a plastic feel to it. I banged against it, and sure enough, it didn't click like a typical piece of glass. I had

no idea what bulletproof glass looked or felt like, but I suspected it was similar to this. Something you couldn't break by smashing it. They had clearly thought through everything with their fancy prison.

I looked through the books, settling on a romance novel I hadn't read before. I suspected I would be reading all the books there until I could get out. How I was going to get out, I had no idea. The fence was going to be a significant issue. I didn't know how to get around, but I had to work that problem out. Maybe there was a note somewhere with the code for it. With no choice but to wait until Assface fell asleep, I settled into my new temporary bed and started reading.

Just after midnight, I felt it was safe enough to sneak out of my cell to look around. I opened my door and paused to hear if there was any movement within the house. It was quiet, so I continued down the hallway, keeping my steps as soft as possible. I had no idea where Assface was, and the last thing I wanted to do was wake him up if he were sleeping. I had no idea, but the guy had to sleep at some point.

All the doors in the hallway were open, which meant that wherever he was, it wasn't up here with me. Carefully, I made my way down the stairs, keeping to the edge to avoid any that might potentially squeak. Once I reached the bottom, I started my search of the house.

The kitchen was to die for. It was all stainless-steel appliances with white countertops and a subway tile backsplash. There

was a large island with its own farmhouse-style sink in it. I would have appreciated it all if it wasn't for the fact that I was being held here against my will. Moving to the living room, I saw Assface sleeping on the couch. I had to fight my deep urge to put a pillow over his face and smother him to death. It would never work, as he would wake up the second it touched him and then overpower me. He lay there sleeping, completely unaware of the potential danger.

More accurately, he didn't see me as a threat, which was fine, as that would be his undoing. Still, I took this time to truly look at him. Had the situation been different and we had met in a bar, or at a grocery store, I would have checked him out. He was muscular and clearly never missed gym day. He had the arms of a man who could easily throw you around in the bedroom, the type of man I usually went for.

I could see a tattoo on his bicep that his t-shirt didn't cover, but I couldn't really make out what it was. He had a day-old stubble along his jaw, and despite not being a fan of facial hair, it made him look good. He was sexy; I had to give him that, at least in my head.

I took the chance and walked closer to him. The curtains were open with the moonlight shining through. As I got closer, I noticed a slight glint as the moonlight hit something from underneath his pillow. A gun. He had a gun under his pillow, and the handle stuck out toward the room. If I could grab it, I would have the weapon, and maybe I could threaten him with it to let me go.

Moving as quietly as I could, I closed the short distance between us and reached out, placing my hand on the butt of the gun. I was too terrified to breathe, so I held my breath and slowly started pulling the gun out. I could see the barrel when a strong hand wrapped itself around my wrist.

Chapter Four

Armando

“What do you think you are doing?” I asked in a deadly tone.

I hadn't heard Natalie coming down the stairs or into the room. Something that never happened to me. I had been a light sleeper most of my life; it comes with the job and family I was born into. I'd gotten used to it. Just like I had gotten used to a lack of sleep and being on alert twenty-four/seven. I should have heard her coming into the room.

I should have noticed she was here long before she had her hand wrapped around my gun. Apparently, I was more exhausted than I had expected. I had been burning the candle at both ends for the past three years, and it was starting to affect me. Comes with getting older, I guess.

I had expected her to drop her hand and back away. I didn't expect her to pull her arm back with all of her strength and dislodge the gun from underneath my pillow. With the barrel now pointing at me, I had no choice but to move. With

practice ease, I was up on my feet and twisting the gun away from me and toward the wall.

Typically, I would point it back at a fucker dumb enough to pull a gun on me, but I wasn't about to shoot a pregnant woman. Natalie didn't quit as she swung out her free arm in a loose punch that I could easily block. She didn't have any fighting experience or much strength. She had lost this fight the second the thought popped into her head, yet she was determined to do whatever she could. I had to respect her for that.

Looking to end this before it got even more out of hand, I pulled her toward me, throwing her off balance and tossing her down onto the couch. I straddled her lap and held her right arm over her head so the gun wasn't pointing at either of us. With my other hand, I pried her fingers from the gun. With it in my hand again, I sat up straight and pointed it right down at her.

"Stop," I growled, clocking the hammer to ensure she knew I was serious.

I hated this. I didn't want to be this man, but I had to be to get justice, but also for Natalie. If Dom thought I couldn't keep her in line, he would have someone else watch over her. Someone who wouldn't care that she was pregnant and would treat her like shit. Slap her around and sexually assault her.

I couldn't allow that to happen, so I had to be an asshole; it was the best way to keep her safe. I felt her settle underneath me. She was breathing heavily from the slight struggle and a

few of her long soft blonde hair had fallen across her face. I had to fight my desire to reach out and move them.

“I don’t want to hurt you, but I will if I have to. We will be trapped in this house together until you push that baby out. Things would go much smoother and better for you if you do as you are told and accept your fate.” She wouldn’t accept it; that just wasn’t who she was. Dom got it wrong with her. She was going to be a royal pain in the ass.

“Accept my fate of being kidnapped?” she snapped as she moved and sat up, forcing me to sit further back. I clocked the hammer back to its safety position and lowered it slightly so it wasn’t pointed at my face. “I have a life. It might not be anything fancy, but it is my life. I have a job, a home, barely alive plants, and this baby. It is my baby, and I will not sit around getting fat just so someone else can take it away from me. This isn’t some pet that I’ve been fostering. This is my child, my flesh and blood. So, no, I will not sit quietly and be a good hostage.”

I huffed before moving off her and putting my gun into the waist behind my back. “You can’t win against Dominic Russo. He always gets what he wants. And right now, that is your baby. You think he’s going to change his mind and let you keep it? You can’t be that stupid. Or maybe you can be. Maybe that’s why you are only a receptionist.”

“And what are you?” she countered as she stood up. “Some know nothing thug, sucking on the tit of his master. You think you are anything special? I might be some lowly receptionist

to you, but at least I don't kidnap people. I don't hurt people. I'm a good person. I care about others and want what is best for them. You are nothing more than a criminal who will get what is coming to him one day."

"We don't pick our family. And maybe you should be more interested in self-preservation. You can always make another kid."

"Wow, clearly, you don't have a soul." She showed disgust at my words. She wasn't the only one. It made me sick to say them, but I had to ensure there was a wall between us. I had to keep a wall between every other woman who came before and will come after her and me. I couldn't get emotionally invested because everything I had worked for would be for nothing, and that wasn't something I could allow to happen.

"I prefer to live and not worry about what comes afterward. A skill you might want to start learning if you are ever going to make it to nine months. Or do you actually think Dom won't get tired of your shit and kill you? You wouldn't be the first surrogate that went night night." Those were memories I really didn't want to think about.

"He's going to kill me either way. I know he will not let me walk out those gates after he has my child. He's not going to risk having a witness to his horrific crimes. If I am going to die, I would rather go down fighting. But I guess that's a concept you don't seem to understand. All you are capable of is following your master's orders like a good little bitch."

“Ok, I’m done,” I snapped, as I grabbed her bicep in a grip that was most likely too tight, but I was sick of this shit tonight.

I dragged her toward the stairs; she was fighting as she tried to get out of my grip, but it was pointless. I got her ass back up the stairs and tossed her into her room before I slammed the door shut behind me. I quickly locked it so she couldn’t try another stunt like that again. I was over this shit tonight. I stormed down the hallway until I reached the last bedroom and went inside, slamming the door behind me.

Once alone, I leaned against the closed door and ran my hands over my face. This was not how my day was supposed to go. I had no idea I would be stuck in this house with yet another walking corpse. None of this should be bothering me, it wasn’t that bad three years ago, but now it felt like I was being rapidly stabbed every time I had to bring another woman here. I didn’t know how much longer I could keep doing this. That was dangerous because that was when mistakes were made, and I couldn’t afford any.

I let out a deep sigh as I dropped my arms and headed over to my bed. I had been here so damn fucking much that I even kept clothes here. I kicked off my boots before getting changed into just some sweats before crawling into bed. Tomorrow was going to be a long ass fucking day, and right now, I just needed some sleep to recharge and be able to handle it. Maybe a night in her room would make Natalie realize she wasn’t going to get what she wanted out of this, so she might as well play nice. But I fucking doubted it.

Chapter Five

Natalie

Holy hell, kill me.

I had gotten a handful of hours of sleep before my stomach decided I didn't need my liver anymore. I'm reasonably sure I have thrown that up along with my spleen at this point. I've been stuck laying on my bathroom floor for hours now. The only nice part about it was that it was cold. The coolness against my skin felt nice, but it was doing nothing to calm my raging stomach.

I had expected morning sickness to start at some point, but I wasn't expecting it to hit me the next day I got the news. I swear it was like my mind had been able to trick itself into feeling good until someone said the words, you're pregnant. After that, it was a complete free for all, one I was currently losing.

My world of misery was interrupted by the sound of the lock to my bedroom disengaging. The last thing I wanted was to see that stupid face of Armando right now, but apparently I

didn't get a say when he showed up. I heard him walking toward me and it took more strength than I cared to admit for me to sit up and look somewhat presentable.

It wasn't for him, but for my own pride and dignity. I didn't want him to think I was weak and vulnerable to him. I had to keep my walls up and not let him see just how terrified I was. When he walked into the bathroom, he was carrying two things in his hands that I was not expecting.

"Saltine crackers and ginger tea. They will help to settle your stomach," he said, placing them down on the edge of the tub so I could reach them without having to stand up. Under different circumstances, I would thank him for his thoughtfulness and generosity. However, he kidnapped my ass, so fuck him.

"Well, you certainly know the drill by now. What is this, your thousandth captive situation?" I asked, giving him the dirtiest look I could muster.

"Not quite. I've only been doing this for three years and despite how hard-working Dom is, he's not that good. But to answer you partly, there is a constant supply in the kitchen along with vanilla ice cream and chicken noodle soup. I have to go out and pick up your anti-nausea medication and prenatal vitamins. I'm leaving shortly."

"You really wanna help? Drive eighty without wearing a seatbelt and hit a telephone pole. I'm not one for gore, but I would love to have those crime scene photos poster-size on my wall."

He wasn't going to be getting any gold stars from me. He was only doing any of this to try and give the baby the best chance, so he or she could be sold off. This was a product to them, and they were just ensuring their product was of good quality. He didn't deserve any credit or praise for any of this.

“Lorenzo will be here shortly to take over guarding you. I highly recommend you stay in your room. And should you feel the strong urge to repeat your antics from last night, fight it. Lorenzo isn't like me. He isn't as understanding as I am and will have no problem hurting you. Be smart and don't put yourself or your baby at risk. Just stay in the room and he won't bother you.”

“I'll get right on that,” I said sarcastically.

I had no interest in going out of my room or meeting with any of the other goons within his organization. That didn't mean I would let him think I was being a good lap dog, doing what I was told. I had no desire to make this easy for him. He didn't even acknowledge what I had said. He just turned tail and headed out, but that was fine with me.

I was losing the battle with my stomach again anyway, and the very last thing I needed was for him to see me puking my guts out. If I was going to be miserable, I preferred to do it alone.

Slowly, I lowered myself back onto the cool tile and closed my eyes, trying to will my stomach to settle. I have always hated being sick, but this was worse because, at least with the flu, you know it will end. You will feel like complete crap for a few days, a week at most, and then you will be better. This

was different, though, because I had no idea how long this would last. Some women never get morning sickness, others get it for the first trimester, and then there are the poor bastards that get it for the whole pregnancy. There was no rhyme or reason for which one you would be, and I hated it. I hated all of this.

I woke a couple of hours later with a start, still on the bathroom floor. I must have fallen asleep at some point, but at least this time, I didn't wake up to an upset stomach. I actually felt a bit better, much to my relief. Being very careful, I moved slowly up into a sitting position, and when the room didn't spin, and my stomach stayed settled, I stood up.

I picked up the crackers and ice-cold tea and moved them to the bathroom counter. I needed to brush my teeth. My breath was horrid, and my teeth felt like fuzz was growing on them. Being careful to not upset my stomach again, I put a very tiny amount of toothpaste on a new toothbrush and made quick work of getting my mouth clean.

With that taken care of, I needed to get myself looking and feeling more human. I was in desperate need of a shower and had to take advantage of the time I had when my stomach was content. It wasn't happy; to be honest, I was feeling a bit hungry, but that could come after I got cleaned up from all of the damp sweat that had dried on my skin. I stripped off my clothes and got under the hot water.

It felt amazing against my skin, and I could forget about where I was for a moment. I let the hot water take me away to a place where I was safe. Where I could be pregnant and enjoy it. I could plan for a nursery and pick out baby names. A place where all of my hopes and dreams would come true. I would have loved to stay under the stream forever, but I also knew that too much hot water wouldn't be good for me. It could make me dizzy or lightheaded, and I didn't want to faint.

After shampooing my hair and washing my skin, I got out and wrapped quite possibly the fluffiest towel I have ever seen around my body. I walked into the bedroom and grabbed some clothes that were my size. I had no idea who had worn them before me or what came of them, something I refused to consider. All that mattered was that they fit and they looked comfortable.

Now that I felt more human, I decided to spread my wings, fly, or at least try to fly. I needed to get a better look at the grounds and with Armando gone. Hopefully, I might find a weak spot in the fence. There were trees on the property, and if there was a large enough one, it might have branches that go over the fence, allowing me to walk across. It was most likely a long shot, but I needed to check it out myself.

Being extra careful, I slipped out of my room, headed down the stairs, and right out the backdoor. This was the first time I saw the backyard, which was breathtaking. It was all plush green grass and big trees in various spots throughout the yard. I had no idea how big the physical yard was; it was hard to tell with some of the trees. Not to mention I had never been really

good with square footage and what makes an acre. It was big, though; you could easily have put another seven houses on the property. Aside from the yard, there was also a good size deck. I was currently standing on it.

There was a barbeque, patio furniture, a fire table, and even a hot tub. Dominic had clearly thought of everything when he first set this place up. I guess he figured if he made his captives feel like they were at a high-end hotel, they wouldn't complain about having their child taken away. I also had to assume that some captives were happy to be there. That had believed Dominic's bullshit lies about getting paid after the baby was born. Desperate people are always willing to believe lies if they think it will save them.

At the sound of a cat-call whistle, I turned around to see who I suspected was Lorenzo. He was not what I pictured when I first heard his name. I was expecting someone to look like Armando, but this man's appearance had my stomach turning. He was older, closer to forty-five if I had to guess. He had a bit of a pot belly and a receding hairline. He just gave me the creeps. The type of vibe you get from someone where all you want to do is get on the opposite side of the room as them.

“Well, aren't you a nice new piece of meat. I was hoping you would come out of that room of yours.” His eyes traveled all up and down my body, and just that simple look made my skin crawl. This man was a pig, and suddenly I was actually appreciating Armando.

“And you look like a sack of shit,” I countered with false confidence.

The dark look that instantly overtook his eyes told me I had made the wrong decision. I should have just excused myself and headed back up into my room. Armando had been right; I was safer hiding out there. He took a step toward me, and instinctively I took a couple of steps back, trying to keep the space between us. Only he had the advantage of having all the space, and I quickly ran out with the railing at the end of the deck fast approaching.

“A whore like you really needs to learn your place,” he growled, as his hand shot out and grabbed at my left arm. Unlike Armando’s grip was firm, Lorzeno’s grip was bruising tight.

“Careful, you don’t want to hurt the baby and piss your boss off.”

I didn’t know much about the mafia outside of a few horrible movies, but one thing they all had in common was that everybody was terrified of the head boss. I hoped that that part wasn’t fiction, and Lorzeno would back off mentioning the baby. It made me sick to use my child like this, but it would be worth it if it protected us both. He turned and slammed my back against the wall. He leaned in closer, and the stench of his breath made my stomach turn.

“What I’m going to do to you is not going to hurt the baby at all.”

He grabbed the side of my jaw in a bruising grip to hold my head in place. I slammed my lips shut and fought against his grip as he brought his disgusting mouth closer to mine.

Chapter Six

Armando

I pulled into the driveway and felt my stomach plummet at the sight of the house. I hated being here, especially with Natalie in the house. It wasn't her fault; I knew that. She didn't want to be in this situation, and she never should have been. Her father had set her up and sold her unborn baby - all so he wouldn't be killed. It wouldn't work. He would still be killed, and I was really hoping I would be the one to do it. I would make sure it was slow.

It was no less than he deserved for doing this to his daughter. Natalie was different from the other captives I've had the misfortune of watching. They generally were divided into two categories: the ones forced to be here like Natalie and those who wanted to be here. I didn't mind the second group all that much. Generally, they were women with a gambling addiction, and this was their way of getting out of debt. Dom didn't always kill them, especially if they were young and fertile. If they wanted to have a child yearly, so be it. I didn't feel bad

for them. It was their choice, and if they wanted to ruin their lives, it was on them.

The women in the first category bothered me and kept me up at night. I hated that they were forced to be here. I hated that they would be killed despite what Dom said. None of them could ever leave alive because the first thing they would do was go to the police. Dom didn't have everyone on his payroll; statistically, these women were more likely to get a cop who wasn't in his back pocket. The number of graves I've had to dig over the past three years has been astounding. Dom needed to be stopped, and I was getting close to being able to do just that.

I headed inside with Natalie's medication. I had done this plenty of times, so I already knew the drill regarding side effects. Most women were fine, a bit tired, but nothing too serious. I was expecting the same with her. When I walked in and didn't see Lorenzo lounging on the couch, my heart beat faster. Lorenzo was one of the older guys and one of the knuckle draggers.

He was a goon, which was all he would ever be. He didn't have much in the intelligence department, clearly having been dropped on his head as a child. From the stories I've heard about his parents, drugs were also a strong possibility. He did what he was told, so Dom kept him alive. The problem was that he enjoyed women far too much. There had been multiple occasions where Lorenzo had forced himself on one of the girls. Dom didn't care as long as it wasn't one of the girls

willing to be there. He wanted to keep them coming back to secure another baby from them.

I didn't want him here with Natalie, but I was given no other choice. It wasn't like I could tell Dom that Natalie was off-limits. That would raise some red flags. Not to mention I had zero reasons to think this way. I had no reason to feel anything for her, yet my heart refused to acknowledge that. I tossed the pharmacy bag onto the kitchen counter as I headed outside to see if Lorenzo was back. I prayed that Natalie had listened to me and stayed in her room. She didn't need to be around a man like Lorenzo; it wouldn't be safe for her or the baby.

The second I walked outside, I saw red. Lorenzo had Natalie pushed up against the side of the house. His grip was bruising her chin, and he was just about to put his disgusting lips against hers. Instantly, my body was moving, and I grabbed him by the back of his shoulders and pulled him off. Lorenzo turned to face me, but before he could say anything, I punched him across the jaw, sending him stumbling down onto the deck. I grabbed a fist full of his shirt and started to punch him across the face as hard as I could.

"You don't touch her," I growled as I gave him a few more hard punches to the jaw before I released him with a jerk and sent him flat onto his back.

He had blood all down his face, and I knew his nose was broken. Dom wouldn't be too happy with my protection display, but he could go fuck himself. I wasn't going to stand around and let Lorenzo try to rape someone and do nothing

about it. If Dom had a problem with that, he could come and say it to my face. It would be the perfect moment that I had been looking for.

“Get the fuck out of here,” I growled, emphasizing my point with a swift kick to his ribs, for which I was rewarded with a groan for my efforts.

Slowly, Lorenzo picked up his worthless ass and stumbled into the house. I knew he would be heading for his car, and there would be a discussion with Dom after all this, but I didn't care. I wasn't going to allow anyone to hurt Natalie. I turned to see how she was holding up. She was trembling slightly, but I could see she was trying to get a hold of herself. I had warned her to not come out of the room, but she hadn't listened. I should have expected as much, as she didn't seem like the listening type.

“Are you alright?” I asked as I placed a hand on her forearm.

She instantly pulled it back as she snapped, “Like you fucking care. All of you are the same.”

“I told you to stay in your room and not to be around him. It's not my fault that you can't fucking listen to a simple order. What did you think was going to happen? These men don't care that you're pregnant. They don't need you all in one piece for that baby to be born. They don't need you mentally healthy and well-adjusted to push it out. Women have been beaten into a coma and kept alive with machines just so Dom can get his return on investment. You are nothing more than a walking,

talking incubator to them, and they don't need you walking or talking to get what they want.”

She didn't understand the seriousness of the situation she was in. I knew she still believed that she could escape somehow. I knew she still believed she could fight and win against Dom. She couldn't. Even if she did get out of this place by some miracle, Dom would just kill her and move on to the next girl. She wasn't unique. She wasn't going to be the exception.

She was going to have this baby and then be six feet under. That is what she had to look forward to. I knew it wasn't much of a life, but if she wanted to give this baby the best chance of surviving, she had to sacrifice herself and follow the rules. She was already dead, and the next nine months were for her child.

“They will never get my baby. You aren't fooling me. I know you don't give two shits about anyone but yourself. So, you can keep your words of wisdom and go fuck yourself,” she growled before she turned and headed toward the door. Just before she went inside, she was apparently not done. “FYI, I don't follow orders, especially not from some dickless piece of shit like you.”

She stormed inside, and I had to fight the urge to go after her. I didn't know what to do once I reached her, though. Part of me wanted to tell her off for speaking to me this way. To demand she respects me and my title of Don. The problem was that she didn't know who I was or why I was there, and I was not about to risk everything for her.

The other part of me, the part I was struggling to keep in check, wanted to go after her and kiss her myself. It had been a long time since I had found a woman who wasn't afraid to speak her mind and stand up for what she believed in or was afraid of a challenge. She would take it head-on. She was brave and resilient, and that made her very sexy in my mind.

She was also off limits, and despite what my body was screaming for, I had to be smart. I had to listen to my brain and remember why I was here. It wasn't to save her but to kill Dom. With his death, others will be safe from experiencing this horror. I had to do this for them and for Alexis. Natalie's fate would have to rest in her own hands; mine were full.

Chapter Seven

Natalie

I couldn't sleep. That was not surprising, considering everything that had been going on for the past couple of days. My body felt weird. I couldn't explain it, but I felt unsettled, anxious even, but I wasn't really anxious. That was the weird part. I just couldn't seem to settle no matter what I did. I decided to venture out of my room to see what I could find. I hadn't had the chance to fully explore between Armando being awake and Lorenzo there. I was still pissed about today about both men, but mostly at myself for not seeing it coming.

I should have been more aware of my surroundings; then I wouldn't have gotten caught off guard by Lorenzo. I wouldn't have needed Armando to come to my rescue and get the following lecture. I hated being trapped in this position and unable to do anything about it. The one comfort I had was nine months to figure out how to escape this place. I would prefer sooner compared to later, though.

I headed into the kitchen to check out what was in the cupboards. I didn't know what I expected to find, but it was all the basic stuff: dishes and food. The fridge was the same, but it held all healthy food, and my mind couldn't help but think about what I wanted to eat tomorrow. I knew I had to eat healthy, so my baby would get all the vitamins he or she needed.

At least I wouldn't have to worry about expenses while I was here, not that that was any form of comfort. I didn't find any weapons, just a few sharp knives, which might come in handy, assuming I wasn't overpowered by the guys trying to stab them. I didn't like my odds, and I suspected they would all be counted, and if the second one went missing, the whole house would be turned upside down to find it.

I checked out the living room next; a quick search told me there weren't any weapons here either. The furniture was lovely - worn but not old. It was that comfy, worn-in look where the seats are soft and not rock hard like when you first brought them home. Under different circumstances, this would have been a dream come true - to enjoy a place as beautiful as this one. Knowing what goes on in here gave the home a creepy vibe. As if I could walk through a closed door and see a torture chamber complete with blood splatter all over the walls and a drain in the floor. Like Martha Stewart on the outside and Norman Bates on the inside.

The way the house was, I couldn't help but wonder who had decorated the place. I couldn't picture Dominic or Armando picking out accent pillows and paint colors. I couldn't help a

small chuckle at the mental image instantly conjured up in my head. Dominic and Armando standing in Pier One Imports, talking to a sales associate about which rug went best with the throw pillows and lamps.

Oh man, fuck me, I was starting to find humor in this situation, and that wasn't a good thing. There was nothing good about this, and I needed to keep my head in the game. I had to find a way to connect with Armando or a weak spot that I could exploit to my benefit. Maybe Armando wasn't my best choice, though.

Maybe I should be waiting for one of the other guys. Surely, it won't be just him and I for nine months. He must have other jobs for Dominic or go home, and I don't know, water his plants. Maybe he's got a cat, though he seems more like a dog person to me.

I went to the backdoor but didn't try to open it. I could see the red light on the top of the frame, indicating that the alarm was armed. The last thing I needed was for the house to sound like an air-raid siren was going off. I couldn't see much out back with the lights being motion censored. I was hoping to spend some time outside tomorrow and maybe even tomorrow evening with the fire pit going. I have never had much outdoor experience. I'd always lived in apartments, some more rundown and disgusting than others, but I had always dreamt of having a house and having children.

I had to give up on my dream of children. Still, the house dream lived on until I was eighteen and discovered that they

were way too expensive. I would never be able to afford one working for minimum wage. It was an endless circle, though, because I couldn't make more unless I went to school, but I couldn't go to school because I made too much to qualify for student loans. It was stupid.

The result was hoping I could start at the bottom and work my way up, but that had fallen short very quickly. If I survived all of this, I would have to do better to find a way to support myself and this baby. I wasn't going to allow them to grow up like I did.

Letting out a sigh, I headed back up the stairs. I didn't really feel like sitting up and watching TV. I wasn't much of a TV person to begin with. I spent most of my time working or on the internet. I didn't have a favorite show that I looked forward to all week long. I was a Netflix person when sick and needed a distraction. Never any reality TV, as I couldn't stand half of those people. Plus, the last thing I wanted to see was someone's rich and famous lifestyle that I was never going to achieve.

Just as I passed the bedroom closest to the top of the stairs, I heard a faint moaning sound. I knew it had to be coming from Armando, and I couldn't help but hope that maybe he was having a nightmare. It would serve him right after everything he had done to me - and I am sure others.

I saw that the door was ajar, so he likely could hear if I was sneaking around. The joke's on him; I learned today which spots on the floor made a creek so I can avoid them. I knew I

should have just continued returning to my room, but curiosity got the better of me. Part of me was actually hoping he was suffering from a nightmare. I would have loved to see the pain written on his face.

I carefully peeked inside, keeping my body as close to the door frame as possible just in case he woke up and spotted me. The room was lit by the moonlight coming through the open curtains. I don't know why, but I would have figured he'd be the man to sleep in the pitch dark. From what I could see, the room appeared to be the same as mine, although I couldn't see every corner.

My eyes scanned the room to the left side, where the bed was. To my surprise, although Armando wasn't sleeping, he was lying on top of the covers with his shirt off and his pants and boxers down around his ankles. His hand was slowly stroking his cock.

Now, I should have walked away. I should have allowed him this moment of privacy, yet despite knowing what he was doing, I couldn't seem to get my feet to listen. My eyes were glued to his prone position, watching his hand move up and down his enormous cock. Even from this distance, I could see he was very well blessed in that department. I licked my lips as my eyes stayed glued to the scene in front of me.

He released a deep moan as his hips thrust upward; I couldn't help but imagine how good he would feel inside me. I was a sucker for a bad boy. He was a next-level bad boy, but I

strongly felt he would be amazing in bed with the kind of talent that would ruin you for other men.

He moaned again as he picked up the pace with his hand. I could tell from here that he was getting closer, and I mentally kicked myself for not looking into his room early when I walked by. I might have been able to get the entire show. He was lightly panting, and I found myself wishing I could be the cause of it.

I wanted to feel him inside of me. I wanted to taste and watch as I drove him crazy with my mouth. It had to be the pregnancy hormones, which was the only logical explanation for why I was still watching the scene play out. I could feel myself growing wetter between my folds, and my body pulsed with the need to cum. With a mixture of a growl and moan, he was cumming. I could just see the shine of his cum, spurting out of his tip and traveling down his hand and over his glorious cock.

My mouth watered at the possibility of tasting it. Had he been anyone else, I would have gone into the room long ago and climbed on top of him. He emitted softer moans with each pulse, which only made me crave him more.

Once he stopped moving his hand, I knew he was done, and it was time for me to sneak away. The last thing I needed was for him to see me standing here. Carefully, I slipped away from the door frame and headed back down the hallway. Closing my door as softly as possible, I immediately headed to my bed and crawled in. The walk around the house hadn't helped to settle

my body and mind, but now I knew exactly what would. I slipped off my own shorts and panties and allowed my mind to wander into a world where none of this was happening, and Armando was free to worship my body.

Chapter Eight

Armando

It was nearing ten in the morning, and I hadn't heard anything from Natalie's room, not even the sound of her throwing up. I had no idea if she was awake, but I had made her a simple breakfast. I didn't tend to cook for others, only when given no other choice, but this time around, I couldn't help myself. There was something about her. Maybe that fire and spark within her eyes had yet to dim, even with everything she knew would happen.

She still hoped to get out of this with her baby. A part of me wanted to protect that hope and didn't want to see it fade. I didn't know what it was about her, but the fact that I seemed to care, even slightly, was dangerous. I had to stay focused on my mission and not let my mind get clouded by a beautiful woman.

I headed up the stairs and toward her room with the tray. I might have had ulterior motives for bringing her breakfast. Dom was coming over today, and the last thing I needed was

her coming out of the room and overhearing us. Or worse, thinking she could escape while I was busy. Dom wouldn't tolerate it and would do whatever he had to ensure she didn't try again. Typically, that meant having me break her leg, which I couldn't stomach. If she were in the room and had food, she should stay quiet, and Dom wouldn't be the wiser. I knocked on the door but didn't hear her granting me permission. I didn't need it, anyway.

I opened the door and saw that she wasn't in bed but standing up looking out the window. I could see the longing in her eyes from her reflection in the glass. Her shoulders were tense, and I knew she was still on guard around me, not that I could blame her. There were no words of comfort I could offer that she would believe. Besides, saying them wouldn't mean much if I had to hurt her because she did something stupid to piss Dom off. I spoke as I placed the tray down on the bed.

“Breakfast.”

“I'm not hungry,” she instantly said, not even turning around to face me.

“Eat it, don't eat it. I don't care. Dominic is coming by shortly, and this time you need to listen to me and stay in the room.”

“Whatever,” she said dismissively.

She wasn't in the mood for company, which was fine with me. I headed back out, but I couldn't trust her to listen. I pulled the keys out and locked the door. I knew it would piss her off, but it was the only way to ensure she would be safe while Dom was here.

I was sure I was already going to hear shit about hitting Lorenzo. I went down the stairs and headed into the kitchen for a quick clean-up. It wouldn't be long before Dom arrived, and I needed to work off my undeniable urge to kill him. Patience was a virtue, but I didn't always have one. I just needed to hold on a bit longer, and then I would have my revenge.



It was roughly an hour later when Dom arrived. He walked in and immediately headed for the kitchen, where I knew he would grab a beer. It didn't matter that it was only noon, as he often drank early. Part of the reason he was starting to lose ground with his men was that he was becoming unhinged. Not that anyone would say that to his face. Or whisper behind his back while he was on the other side of the city. It mainly was the middle-ranking men who had seen it and had problems with it. The lower-ranking men didn't care as long as they continued to get paid.

The higher-up men like me could see it, and we were just waiting for the shit to hit the fan. The middlemen, though, were trapped between doing what was ordered and knowing it was insane and would bring the police around. The middlemen had the most significant risk of getting arrested because the police knew they couldn't flip one of the higher-up men, and the lower men never knew anything of value. The middle-

ranking men were the ones that could get you the intel you needed to shut the whole organization down.

“Five o’clock somewhere?” I asked with a smirk. I didn’t care what Dom did; he knew how valuable I was to his organization, so he let me get away with shit that others didn’t.

“Fucking right it is,” he answered as he came and sat down in the living room with me. “How’s the product?”

“Fine, as far as I can tell. Though, she’s gonna need to see the doc soon. We’re gonna need a baseline.”

We had a doctor within the organization. He wasn’t much of one, but he could get the job done. He had lost his medical license after administering more narcotics to patients who didn’t need them. In exchange, he was paid cash. Then there was the issue of being arrested for having sex with patients who couldn’t pay. Dom had gotten word of it and swooped in to rescue him; in return, the doc had to work for him. From what I had been told, we only had one doctor, and so far, he had lasted longer than the last guy. It was before my time, but apparently, the last doctor was killed after sleeping with Dom’s girl.

Safe to say, he wasn’t the brightest bulb in the bunch. Dr. Holland, or Doc, as most of us called him, was more of a general doctor. He didn’t specialize in anything but could take a bullet out of you and stitch you up pretty well. He didn’t know anything about pregnancies or babies, and I hated that he was the one trying to take care of these women. We’d lost a few because he missed something vital.

“He’s coming by in a couple of days. She just saw one, and she’s early. She doesn’t need to be monitored all that much. Once that baby is born, then you’ll kill her and dump her with the rest. I am already working on the next target.” He was always looking for the next woman to impregnate. It never ended with him, and with the number of illegal casinos he had, he had a lot of potential targets.

“I am aware of my duties. I’ll make it happen. You said you needed to discuss something with me.” It was the whole reason why he was here. Dom didn’t tend to come by the house to check on any of the women. He kept himself away, so he didn’t have to worry about getting caught in case the police somehow had gotten word of this place.

“The father, Jake Grant, needs to be taken out. I want you to do it and make sure it is bloody. He was in one of the casinos last night, gambling away. He thinks he can rack up debt all over again, and nothing will come from it. He’s only one daughter and no sisters or cousins we could use as a trade next time. I want the dead weight cut off permanently.”

I had already assumed I would kill him as we had killed all the others. As a loose end, we couldn’t afford one of them to grow a conscience and speak to the police. I was surprised Dom hadn’t already sent one of the other guys out to kill Jake. What wasn’t surprising was that Jake was gambling again. I had to give it to the man; it took balls to go back into a casino owned by the man holding your pregnant daughter captive. There was clearly no love within the man, not that I expected much. If I had a child, I would never put them in harm’s way. I would

never give them up just to save myself. Jake clearly didn't feel the same, and I was looking forward to killing him.

“I'll get it done tonight.”

This would be the last day on Earth that Jake got to spend. Tonight, I would leave Natalie with Gabriele. He has been my best friend and right-hand man since we were kids. He would make sure that Natalie was safe and taken care of. I refused to think about why it would matter if she was taken care of. I couldn't let any potential feelings cloud my judgment. She was just a woman, all she could ever be.

Chapter Nine

Natalie

It was nearing two in the afternoon, and I was still stuck in this room. I had eaten Armando's breakfast, but only because I was hungry and needed to eat for the baby. Otherwise, I would have left it there to go wrong. The very last thing I wanted was anything from that man. I still couldn't believe he had locked me in here. I knew I was a prisoner, but he didn't need to trap me in this room.

I would have stayed here. I didn't want to see or interact with Dominic, especially after Lorenzo yesterday. It was only solidifying what I already knew: they were all cold-hearted killers, and I couldn't put any trust or faith in them. I also couldn't let my growing attraction to Armando cloud my judgment. I needed to get out of this house and away from them all. I just needed a plan for that.

At first, I thought I could get Armando on my side or one of the guards coming and going. It would be easier with Armando, though, because he seemed to be the one who

would be around me the most. It would be easier to flip the guard that I was around more often than one of the guards who fills in whenever the need rises. I didn't think I could flip Armando, though. He was cold; you could see it in his eyes. The few small fleeting moments when he was nice to me didn't counter what lived within his heart and soul: pure darkness. There had to be a way, though. I just wasn't seeing it yet.

At the sound of the lock disengaging, I looked over at the door and watched as Armando entered the room. He didn't look even slightly remorseful for trapping me in here, not that I was surprised.

"Why don't you come outside? Sit in the sun. It's good for the baby," he said.

It seemed random for him to ask me to come outside. I was allowed outside thanks to the killer fence, but he was inviting me out there this time. Warning bells went off in my head, and immediately I started thinking that this was some sort of trap he had planned. Maybe Dominic was outside with more of his men, and they were looking to make me the entertainment. Well, that wasn't going to happen.

"I'm good."

Understanding flashed across his eyes before he spoke. "I'm not looking to hurt you. It's just us here. I figured you didn't get out much yesterday, and Lorenzo interrupted the time you were outside. It's a nice day. The sun is good for you and the baby. You don't have to if you don't wish to."

He sounded sincere, but it was hard to tell with this man. He had emotions, I'd seen, or anger and frustration at least, but it was something. He hadn't lied to me yet - I had to give him that. It would be nice to be outside and see the backyard more. Maybe if I made it appear like I was accepting my fate, Armando would let his guard down, and I could strike. I had to do it carefully, though. If I changed too quickly, he would suspect something, which would ruin everything.

"Fine," I said tightly before moving off the bed.

I followed him through the house and headed outside. It was a beautiful day out, and I could hear the birds chirping. The sun was warm against my skin, and I knew I had made the right choice by going out. I needed to keep healthy physically and mentally if I was going to get myself and my baby through this. I went and sat in one of the loungers; Armando took a seat on one of the chairs not too far away.

"Are you ok?" I asked, shocking and confusing him at the sudden question.

"What?"

"Are you ok? I couldn't sleep last night. I slept too much during the day. It was late, and I heard moaning. I assume you were having a nightmare unless there was someone else in the house I wasn't aware of." I looked right at him as I spoke. I wanted to see his reaction. I wanted to see a slight panic or embarrassment at knowing I had heard him jerking off.

"I'm fine," he said, not even bothered by what I had asked him. Well, that was no fun. "What about your father? Has he

always been willing to sell you out?" he asked, throwing me off guard.

It wasn't any of his business, but at the same time, maybe a bit of pity toward me would help me in my situation.

"Maybe. He was never the best dad. I grew up with him, though. He, my mom and I have always lived together, so he was involved. It was mainly Mom and me. My dad works in construction and has my whole life. He would normally come home and drink. I learned early on that staying out of his way was better. He was there for every birthday and holiday, though. He was never abusive or anything like that. He just wasn't loving. That was my mom."

It still hurts to think about my mom, especially now. I hated that she wouldn't be here for any of this. I also knew that if she were alive, she would be tearing the town apart, trying to find me. Maybe Dad wouldn't have gotten so deep into gambling with her alive, and I would never be in this position.

"She's dead?" he asked, his tone softening slightly.

I looked over at him; I could see the pain in his eyes, and I knew his mother was dead. It was a shared pain, and maybe it was a start.

"Five years ago. She had a horrible stroke and never recovered from it. The doctors had said it was a hemorrhagic stroke, so her brain was bleeding. They told us not to get our hopes up, but I never thought she wouldn't be here with me. I never thought she would die." Tears started to build in my eyes, and

I had to fight them back as I continued, “I never expected that she wouldn’t make it.

“All of the doctors kept saying that it was impossible. She would have more strokes, and the damage done to her brain was irreversible. I didn’t believe she would die, though. She was my mom, she was Super Woman, and there was no way she wasn’t going to recover. But she only lasted three days in the hospital before she had another stroke, and they couldn’t revive her.”

At the time, I didn’t want her to die. I wanted her to keep fighting and get back to who she was. Looking back now, I understand what the doctors were talking about. She couldn’t see and couldn’t talk or move the right side of her body. If she had survived, there would be nothing left. The woman I knew as my mom was gone, and it would have been cruel to keep her alive because I wasn’t ready to say goodbye.

“I’m sorry you lost her,” he said sincerely.

“When did you lose yours?”

A slight surprise flashed over his eyes as he leaned forward, placing his elbows on his knees. “I guess it’s easy for you to see the same scar. My mamma was killed when I was seven. An enemy of my father stormed into the house one night and killed her. She had just enough time to stash me away in this crawl space. Told me not to come out until my dad came home. I heard the fighting and her screams, but I did what I was told and stayed hidden. When it got quiet, I snuck out and found her. They had beaten her to death. Blood was

everywhere. I remember my dad came home and sent me to my room. Come morning, the blood and body were gone and he was sitting at the table drinking coffee.”

“He was just sitting there? Did you have a funeral?”

I couldn't imagine having to be that young and hide in a crawl space, knowing my mother was being killed. Listening to it happening and not being able to do anything. Also, not to have my own father to comfort me. Even if my dad was shitty, he would have ensured I was ok. He would have, at the very least, comforted me.

“Reading the paper like he did every morning. We had a funeral; it's tradition. But we never moved. I had to walk past where she was killed every day, multiple times a day. It was hard, but you have to learn to live with it over time,” he said with a slight shrug.

“I guess women aren't really that important in your line of work.”

“That's not entirely accurate. A percentage of men have no problem sacrificing their woman to save their own asses. However, there is also a percentage who will protect their woman with their dying breaths. It just depends upon the type of man - whether they strongly believe in family or not. But that could be said for any man, much like your father.”

I had to give it to him; he had a point there. Any man could be more than willing to sacrifice the women within his life if it meant he would be protected. He didn't have to be just a criminal to do it.

“I think he figured he could play Dom and get away with it. That I would be safe with not being able to get pregnant.”

“What? What do you mean you can’t get pregnant?” he asked, confused, and I mentally kicked myself. I wasn’t going to let that information out, but with how our conversation went, it just slipped out.

I could lie and tell him it was nothing. He might let it go, and we could forget I had said it. Or I could tell him the truth. If I lied, things would stay where they are. However, if I told him the truth, it would either get back to Dominic and my life here would be more in lockdown than it already was. Or it could make Armando see that I couldn’t stop fighting for my child because it was the only one I would be getting.

Letting out a sigh, I sat back into the lounge and lifted my knees slightly. My lower back had been hurting a bit, but I knew that could be a common side effect of pregnancy.

“When I was thirteen, I got horrible pain in my right thigh. Everyone said it was growing pains. But then I started to get nosebleeds and bruises from nothing. I would wake up and there would be new ones on me. Finally, the doctors sent me to a specialist, and it came back that I had bone cancer. I had to go through surgery, chemo and radiation.

“The doctors said the same thing: the chemo and radiation would destroy my eggs. I could never get pregnant. I have had to make peace with never having a child for fourteen years. And by some miracle, I got pregnant, and the rest you know.”

“I had no idea. Dom doesn’t get full medical backgrounds on his targets. He doesn’t care what could happen if they aren’t on drugs. I’m sorry you have to go through this.”

He was sorry, but he wasn’t going to be doing anything to stop it, either. He was a soldier and would follow his orders like a good little boy. I was on my own. It was up to me to come up with an escape plan. But maybe, just maybe, I had found a weak spot in Armando that I could exploit; that might be all I need.

Chapter Ten

Armando

I was still reeling from my conversation with Natalie hours prior. I knew it hadn't changed anything. There was nothing Natalie could say that would ever change things. Dom was never going to let her go. He was never going to let the baby go. Still, it made me feel more like an asshole that I was guarding her, keeping her trapped here. I couldn't change that either, or technically I could but I was not about to let one of the other guys watch over her.

They would treat her like shit and try to sleep with her every chance they got. I couldn't save her from her fate, but I could make sure she was at least safe here while she was forced to be here. That didn't ease the guilt eating at my stomach. For fourteen years, she never thought she would be able to have children and then she gets a miracle, only for it to be ripped away from her. If it wasn't for Alexis, I would do something. I would take Natalie and get her someplace safe, but I can't do that. I can't let Alexis' death go unpunished.

My thoughts were interrupted when the front door opened. I looked over and saw Gabriele coming in. He was going to watch Natalie while I took care of her father. I was actually looking forward to killing him. It would not only get her justice but allow me to release some of the tension that had been building up within me.

“How goes it, brother?” Gabriele asked as he went and collapsed down into one of the chairs in the living room.

“Not bad, you?”

“Can’t complain. Talked to the guys back home. Everything is holding down.”

When Gabriele and I left New York, I had to leave it in the capable hands of my third in charge, Andrea. He was a bit of a meathead but able to follow instructions. I had left him very detailed instructions on how to handle everything. So far, it had been going really well, and when all of this was over and done with, I was going to owe him a massive bonus.

At first, I had been worried about how well the guys would do without me there running things. I had expected that there would be some men that wanted to throw a coup while I was away handling this, but surprisingly, everyone was content to stay where they were. I didn’t run my mafia faction the same way as the majority did. I took care of my men, even the lower-ranking ones.

If your workers are happy, they would have no reason to turn against you, either with the law or internally. I had their respect and not just their fear. I had gotten shit for it over the

years, especially when I had first started. It was not how my dad ran things, but I didn't want to rule that way. I didn't want to kill half of my men off just because one dared to whisper about something being unfair. I wanted their loyalty, respect, and appreciation, all of which I had been able to accomplish.

“Good. I want to be done within the next nine months and back there.”

I knew that was putting us on a tight deadline, mainly because we had been doing this for three years, and we were both finally in a position of power within this faction. Still, we would have to make it work. I wasn't going to be doing this again. And if I could finish this before Natalie's baby comes into this world, that would be icing on the cake.

“It's not going to be easy. Why the change? You were thrilled to wait for the right opportunity to present itself.”

“Things change,” I said with a slight shrug.

“Come on, Mando, don't give me that bullshit. I've known you too fucking long to know that you don't change your mind like this ever. What is going on?”

“We've been here for three years. It's already taken longer than it was supposed to. It's time to get back home.”

And it was time to get back home. I had initially thought this would only take six months, a year maybe, but it was three years in, and we were still nowhere with killing Dom. I was done waiting. It was time we forced an opportunity to take him out. Gabriele stared at me; I hated when he did this. He had a

way of looking at you like he could see right into your soul. It freaked me the fuck out.

“It’s the girl, isn’t it? Don’t tell me you have gone sweet for her.” A disapproving tone was dripping from his voice.

“She had bone cancer when she was thirteen. She’s been told that she could never have children practically for half of her life. Then one day, she finds out a miracle has happened and she’s pregnant. Now we’re going to rip that baby away from her.”

There was no point in lying to him. There’s no point in playing it off like it didn’t bother me. It did fucking bother me. It bothered me a lot, and I didn’t know if I could do this. I knew I had to, but it would haunt me for the rest of my life, more so than anything else I had ever done. If I could get justice for Alexis and save Natalie and her baby, I had to try, even if it killed me.

“And that is terrible, but that doesn’t make her any different from the previous women before her. You’ve never had a problem doing this. You know why we’re doing this.”

“You’re damn fucking right. I know why. The other women, most of them were asking for it. The ones that weren’t, the ones traded by their family, were hard to get through. I had to bury their bodies. We stood by and did nothing. Who the fuck knows where their babies end up and what sort of life they will have. Natalie she’s different. She didn’t ask for this. She didn’t ask for a piece of shit, father. She had any hope of having a child ripped away from her at just thirteen, and now she has a

miracle and we're supposed to take it from her and move on with our lives?"

I have hated this mission since I arrived here three years ago. I was fully prepared to bury bodies and kill people. I was not prepared for a baby-making factory with slaves. But I pushed through it because my hatred for Dom was strong enough to get me to the end. Every time I look into Natalie's eyes, I feel that strength wavering.

Maybe it was because she reminded me so much of Alexis, the way she was strong-minded and stubborn. How she was brave even when she was terrified. The fire in her. Maybe it was suicide to rush things, but if I could get revenge and justice for Alexis while saving Natalie and her baby, I had to try.

"So, now you want to save her. What if we can't?" he asked with great patience.

"Then I don't know how I will live with myself. I wasn't expecting this when I first came up with the idea. I knew Dom was involved in human trafficking; I never pictured this. I would have devised a different plan to take him out if I had known. It's too late now, we're already here, but that doesn't mean we have to lose another mother and her child. I know this isn't only affecting me. You cared about Billie."

Billie was three girls ago and a lost puppy, which was the only way I could describe her. She had grown up in the foster system after her mother allowed her father to molest her at just the age of four. It went on until she was seven. She was in school and told her teacher. From there, she went from one

foster home to the next, abused and molested by various foster fathers. Her life was hard: drinking and drugs.

She became one of the prostitutes that Dom took over; he made sure one of her Johns got her pregnant. Gabriele was up to bat for Billie's pregnancy, and I did not envy him for it. Not only did she have morning sickness but she was going through a serious heroin withdrawal. It was not pretty, and Gabriele had nursed her through it all.

He had grown fond of her. We had even been talking about ways we might be able to get her out without it getting back to anyone. Before we even got the chance to get that far, she was dead. It was no one's fault; her pregnancy was a fallopian tube pregnancy, and we wouldn't have known unless she had been given an ultrasound, which our doc doesn't do. The tube burst once the baby got too big for it; she bled out almost instantly.

According to the doc, it would have been excruciating. The guard watching her while Gabriele was handling another job for Dom had locked her in and refused to see her, even as she was screaming and begging for help. Needless to say, I buried two bodies that night, and Gabriele hasn't been the same since.

“Look, if this is what you want, then I'm behind you one hundred percent. I hate being here. I hate doing this to these women and seeing what they go through. So, if there's a way we can stop this and save Natalie and that baby while still killing Dominic, then I'm all for it. I just don't know what that looks like.”

“I don’t either, but there has to be a way.” I sighed as I stood up and continued, “She’s in her room. She hasn’t eaten since lunch. I’ll be back later on tonight.”

“I got her. You be safe,” Gabriele promised.

I knew he would keep Natalie safe and take care of her, assuming she would come out of her room while I was gone. With Natalie protected, I could focus on her father and ensure he got everything he deserved and more.

Chapter Eleven

Natalie

Just after eight at night, my need for food became too much, and I ventured out of my room. I quickly headed down the stairs and made my way to the kitchen. I didn't know if Armando was gone yet, but if he was, I didn't want to run into whoever had been set up to watch over me.

“Can I help you find something?”

I jumped at the sudden male voice behind me and quickly turned to see another man I didn't know. He was around Armando's age and looked just as attractive. I had no idea who he was. I thought I remembered him when I was grabbed, but I couldn't be sure.

“No, I was just grabbing some water,” I lied.

“In the cupboard?” he teased with a warm smile. “You haven't eaten since lunch. Why don't you come to sit down and I'll make you something.”

It was an excellent offer, but I wasn't sure how I felt about him cooking for me. These guys were my guards and not my caregivers.

"No, that's fine. I can handle it."

"I know this is difficult for you, but I'm an old Jewish woman. I think I was one in my past life. I have this uncontrollable need to cook for people. You would be helping me."

I wasn't sure if he was being honest, but it appeared that I wasn't going to get him to change his mind. Plus, I was hungry, anyway. I gave him a nod and went to sit at the kitchen table.

"Anything, in particular, you fancy?" he asked as he moved closer to the fridge.

"I'm pretty easy. What's your name?"

"Sorry, my manners seem to come and go. I'm Gabriele, Mando's best friend."

"Didn't think he was capable of having a BFF," I couldn't help but say. The man didn't strictly come across as the type to have a bestie.

Gabriele gave a chuckle to that as he started to pull out various items from the fridge. "He wasn't born this way, neither of us was, but we were born into it. Our fathers were thick as thieves, and we grew up together. It might seem hard to believe, but he is a good man. He's surrounded by a lot of armor that he's had to put on to protect himself within this world."

“If you didn’t choose to be here, why not leave?”

I could understand them being born into the mafia, but I also knew that wasn’t an excuse either. Lots of people are born into a bad situation, and they find a way out of it. Millions are living within ghettos and gang-infested areas that manage to escape gang life without having to step foot into one. It was possible. It was hard, but they could have done it if they genuinely wanted to.

“Life is rarely that simple. It’s easy to say that if you hate your life, just change it. But just like if you hate your job, you can’t always walk away. You must consider paying your bills and where the next job will be. Sure, that is an oversimplification of the mafia, but the same rules apply. To leave, we have to try and figure out how to do that without being killed. It’s not like we can give our two-week notice and call it a day. There’s no quitting or retiring from the mafia.”

“Ya, but people do it. They get out of the mafia and gangs. They do the right thing and put the criminals, the bad men, in jail. It’s not a glamorous life, and witness protection isn’t easy, but you would at least be saving lives. Doing something honorable.” It just felt like they were trying to take the easy way out and make excuses as to why they were really victims when that was far from the case.

“Witness protection only ends in death for guys with our ranking. And not all mafias are the same. They don’t kill innocent people and kidnap them for their babies. Dominic is insane and runs a very unique ship. A rare handful works well

within their communities and makes a lot of money. Yes, they are very rare, but they do exist.”

“I highly doubt that, but maybe you must tell yourself that so you can sleep at night.”

“I sleep just fine, for the most part,” he said with a shrug before he continued. “You should go easy on Mando. He’s a good man with a good heart.”

I couldn’t help but scoff at that. He was seriously trying to tell me that Armando was a good man. This man worked as my guard to steal my baby once he or she was born. There was nothing good about him; what light might be within him was so far buried that it would never see the light of day.

“You don’t find it hilarious that you are trying to tell me Armando is one of the good guys? You both are holding me hostage so your boss can steal my baby. Where exactly is good in that?”

He stopped what he was doing and turned to face me. The seriousness was mixed with the hurt on his face, and I didn’t understand why it was there. These men were supposed to be cold-hearted killers, so why would my words matter to either of them?

“You know he hates this; so do I. He hates knowing that these women are going to be killed. He hates that you are going to be killed. And I know you must know how this plays out for you despite what Dominic said.”

Oh, I did know. I knew there was no way Dominic would let me walk out of here alive. I would have known too much and become a liability to him. I needed to get out of here before I was too big to run correctly.

“I’m not an idiot.”

“No, you’re not. You’re different compared to the other girls. You actually remind me a lot of Alexis. I suspect that is why Mando cares about you.”

“Alexis?” This was the first time I heard that name. She must have been one of the other girls or something.

“His ex-girlfriend. They had dated for roughly five years, about four years ago. She was the first real girlfriend he’d ever had. He had been thinking about proposing to her. Fuck, he was madly in love with Alexis.” I could hear the slight hurt in his voice, and I knew Armando wasn’t the only one who had cared for Alexis.

“What happened? She couldn’t handle life anymore?”

“She didn’t have a problem with this life. I shouldn’t say that; she had issues, but not with Mando and what he does. She saw him for the man he truly was and not the image he had to give off to blend in with everyone. Alexis came from nothing. She grew up in foster care, in a bad neighborhood, and she didn’t stand a chance. She was grabbed at sixteen by a human trafficking ring, where she stayed until Mando found her at twenty-three. He got her out of the life, got her healthy, protected her, and killed anyone who tried to drag her back into that life.”

“Why would he do that? She couldn’t have been the first prostitute he had seen. Or even the first victim. What made her so different?”

“I don’t know,” he answered with a slight shrug. “You’re right. She wasn’t the first victim or the first sex slave. We grew up around them, and we learned to block it all out and shut our emotions off. For some reason, he couldn’t do that with Alexis. Even after she was healthy enough to be alone, he didn’t want her to be. He fell in love, and she loved him. At first, he was worried about her having a hero complex, but her emotions were genuine. They were together for five years until one night four years ago.”

“What happened four years ago?” I asked curiously.

“She killed herself,” Gabriele said, looking into my eyes to see my reaction.

“Wait, what?”

This was not where I thought this story was going. I thought Alexis would have gotten sick of the life and left. I wasn’t expecting her to kill herself.

“Mando was out looking at engagement rings. I was with him and we were brainstorming different ways for him to propose to her. We got back to his place, and he found her in the bathtub. She had slit both of her wrists. At first, we thought there was foul play, but she had written a suicide note. Mando could tell that she wrote it of her own free will. He thought she was better and healed from what had happened to her. He knew she would always have issues, but he thought they had a

handle on them. The police did an investigation, and it revealed that she was five weeks pregnant. The coroner said she wouldn't have known, but that didn't make the blow any easier on Mando."

This was unreal. I wanted to call bullshit, but the story was too tragic. I had no doubt that either Armando and Gabriele could come up with a horrific story to tell to try and get me to play nice and sympathize with my jailers. But this...this was something else. There was too much detail. Too much vulnerability within the story. It had to be true because no one would come up with all these pain points.

Most people only pick one or two and go with that; they don't throw everything into the pot and hope it's believable. Even within Gabriele's voice, I could hear his pain. Alexis had meant something to him, which was natural, with him and Armando being best friends since childhood. Both would naturally care for whatever girl the other was dating. The thing was, Armando went through all that just to turn around and hold women hostage, to steal their babies.

As tragic as that story was, it didn't justify his actions. It didn't help me understand how a man could do something like this. Both of them had seen tragedy. They both had seen the pain and destruction Dominic was causing, and yet neither one had the balls to step up and do what was right.

"I'm sorry he went through that...what you both went through, but that doesn't justify what you are doing here now. It makes it worse because you both know from personal experience the

pain these women were going through, and you continued to allow it to happen. You continued to be part of the problem and not the solution. Now you believe you have an excuse for wanting to see the world burn.”

“Sometimes, to instill change in a world, you must get your hands dirty. You have to do things you would normally never do to save more people down the road.”

“The ends justify the means,” I stated with understanding.

“Exactly.”

“You do know that’s bullshit, right? It’s just a fancy excuse that assholes use to validate their decisions. Who cares if we blow up an entire city, killing all women and children; we were looking to kill as many men as possible within a terrorist cell. I hacked into a missile and crashed it into a village in China. I was just doing it to show the security flaws within the system. The end never justifies the means; it’s just bloody. And what exactly is your end here? What could possibly be worth all the women you both have killed?

“All the women you have buried and covered up, what happened to them? All the babies you handed over to complete strangers, or do you believe they all went to good loving homes and not a pedophile just waiting for them to become the right age? You could possibly tell me there is no end that will justify the means. It’s just a bullshit excuse you tell yourself at night.”

He could lie to whomever he wanted to. He could lie to himself until he was blue in the face, but he wasn’t going to lie

to me. He wasn't going to try and play the victim or make it appear like he and Armando were the good guys in this situation. Because in this situation, if you weren't helping to free the women, you were one of the bad guys whether you pulled the trigger or not. They knew what was going on and continued to help and allow it to happen so the desired end, whatever it was, could be achieved.

“You know what I miss? The world is black and white. This life, especially for Mando and me, we grew up in it. Born into it, which meant we were born into a world painted with millions of greys. Maybe you're right; maybe the end doesn't justify the means. I don't know. I know that we are too deep into it now to change strategy. No one is asking you to like it. I didn't tell you about Alexis to manipulate you. I just wanted you to know that Armando isn't going to hurt you. You don't have to be scared of him...or me.”

“Until one of you kills me,” I challenged.

Maybe they will be great with me for the next nine months, give or take, but that didn't change the fact that one of them would kill me. Most likely Armando. I was never going to feel safe around him. He was safer than some of the other guards who would be in my life over the upcoming months but never completely safe because he was the man who would kill me.

“Nine months is a long time. Anything could change at a moment's notice. Focus on the present and not the future, Natalie.” He smiled warmly before turning back to make me something to eat.

It was a line, I knew it was, and yet it didn't feel like one. It didn't feel like he was trying to give me false hope or placate me. I didn't want to hope; that was too dangerous. I had to rely on myself to get out of there and not someone else, especially not one of these men. However, maybe there would be an opportunity presented to me. If I reminded Armando of Alexis, I could play on those emotions. It's not something I would typically do, but desperate times call for desperate measures.

Suppose I exploited that weakness, used it to my advantage, and got closer to Armando. In that case, I might be able to manipulate him into helping me escape. After all, if I play by their rules, the end will justify the means. That's not the type of person I wanted to be, but if it meant my baby and I would live, then that was precisely what I would do.

Chapter Twelve

Armando

I dreaded walking into the house. It was after three in the morning, and I was exhausted and desperately needed a hot shower. Natalie's father was genuinely shocked when I showed up to kill him. Apparently, he figured that Dom would actually let him go. Dom would allow a loose end to be walking around, one who had proven he would do anything to get out of jail or be killed.

Jake would talk. I had zero doubt about that. The man had begged and pleaded with me to make a deal with him, so I could let him live. He didn't know that even if I hadn't been ordered to kill him, I would still have done it. It was bad enough that he gave up his first grandchild, but after learning about what Natalie had been through, and this was her miracle, the fucker had the balls to take that from her. He deserved to die, and I enjoyed every second he was in agonizing pain.

Only now, I was having to potentially see Natalie and pretend like I didn't just torture her father to death. I couldn't

understand why her opinion of me mattered so fucking much, but it did. I didn't want her to look at me like I was a monster. I didn't want her to be scared of me. This was dangerous. I was developing feelings for her, which was a very deadly place to be in.

Normally, I could keep a wall between the women who come and go and me. I was doing this to get justice for Alexis. Dom had forced her into a world of human trafficking; because of all the trauma he had caused her, she was dead and took our baby with her. Dom needed to be killed. This faction of the mafia needed to be taken out. It wasn't just for Alexis any longer but also for Natalie. She deserved a real chance at life, she and her baby, and I was going to make sure they got it.

After Dom was killed, I would make sure that Natalie was protected. I could hide her away either in the country or in Europe. I would give her a new identity and money to start a new life. I had to get her to hold on long enough to kill Dom.

I walked into the house and scanned the living room for Gabriele or Natalie. It was very late, and I had been hoping she would be asleep. She needed all the rest that she could get. The place was quiet and dark, so everyone must be asleep. I quickly locked up and reset the alarm. Just as I turned around toward the stairs, I saw Natalie coming out of the kitchen with a mug in her hands.

“Oh, my god, is any of that blood yours?” she asked, with a hint of concern in her voice.

I was covered in blood and dirt, but none of it was mine. I wanted to tell her that her father was dead. Typically, I didn't bother with the other girls in the past, but Natalie wasn't just any girl. She deserved to know the truth. I hated that it would be another for her to be afraid of me – why she couldn't trust me. All of this would have been easier if I had just told her I was going to kill Dom and why, but I couldn't.

I couldn't risk her saying the wrong thing to the wrong person. It would also be too much pressure and stress to constantly worry about what came out of her mouth. Keeping her in the dark was the best chance I had of getting her out of this alive. I just needed to find a way to get her to hold on long enough.

“It's not mine.”

There wasn't an easy way to tell her, so I decided not to tell her. After all, it's not like I could pull her in for a hug and comfort her. I was the enemy in this scenario, and that was not about to change.

“Is it my father's?”

I remained silent. For some reason, I didn't want the words to come out of my mouth.

Hurt flashed through her eyes and then acceptance, which happened much quicker than I had anticipated.

“I figured he would be killed. I knew it was only a matter of time since my mother's death. I figured a loan shark would get him or he'd be in a drunken brawl one night. It's not really a shock, and I've been emotionally and mentally preparing for it

over the past few years. Plus, he's the reason I'm even in this position in the first place. Makes it kinda hard to feel sad and hurt by his death."

"I can understand that. His death may hit you later. Despite what he has done, especially recently, that doesn't change the fact that he was your father...that you grew up with him in your life. I am sure there had to be a moment or two that made up good memories."

I didn't want her to feel bad and grieve the loss of her father. I didn't think he deserved it. However, I also didn't want her to bottle it all up and ignore the pain. She had a right to be furious with him for her situation. She had a right to still love him and grieve the loss. He had been in her life for twenty-seven years, a long time to not have developed a love for him.

Even my own father had put me through hell to prepare me for this life, and I still felt hurt and depressed when he died. It was human nature, and she should allow herself to feel it at some point. It wasn't my place to push her, though; I knew I was the last person she would want to speak with about this. Not only because I was one of the men keeping her here, but I had been the one to kill him.

"I'm sure there is, but all of the bad memories overshadow the good. Maybe that will change one day," she said with a slight shrug.

"You feeling ok? I would have figured you'd be asleep long by now."

“I fell asleep early, woke up about an hour ago and thought some tea might help to put me back to sleep. I’m feeling anxious, well, not really anxious. I guess unsettled would be more accurate. This house, it’s beautiful, but it’s not home.”

A lot of the girls had gone through this. The house had its positives and it was fun to be in for a while. It was a lot like a vacation, but after a while, you just wanted your own bed.

“If you make a list, I can go to your place and pick some things up,” I offered, something I have never done before, but she was unique, and I wanted to try and make this process as positive as possible for her. She was only going to get to do this once, and I wanted her to experience as much as she could with it.

“I’d appreciate that. I’ll think about it and make a list,” she said slightly warmly.

“Was being around Gab ok?” I knew he would be great with her, but I wanted to ensure she didn’t feel uncomfortable with him.

“He was great. He was definitely not kidding about the old Jewish woman part.”

I gave a huff of a laugh before I spoke, “He’s always been like that. His mother had a lot of mental health issues. She was born into this life, but her father was a real fucking piece of work. On top of that, she was bipolar and was on and off her meds most of Gab’s life. He was the one that took care of her. Whenever she was sad, he would cook for her. Whenever she

was happy, they would cook or bake together. Cooking and caring for people became a huge part of his identity.”

Most people assume that if you grew up in this life, you are a cold-hearted asshole who grew up with everything you could ever want. That just wasn't true. A lot of people in this life were broken and fucked up. People don't realize that we see the worst in humanity from a very young age.

I remember the first time I saw a dead body. I was five, and some of my dad's guys were burying it in the backfield at our house. On my thirteenth birthday, my dad's present to me was to learn how to torture someone. He used to make me read different anatomy books to learn ways to inflict the most pain without causing death. That was normal to me. I wasn't born this way; I was made into this person with the skillset I have.

“It's not something I would have suspected,” Natalie admitted.

“Most don't. I gotta get cleaned up. You should get some sleep.”

Given her unique position, she needed to rest as much as possible to ensure the baby was okay. I also really needed to take a shower and wipe the blood of her father off me. It didn't bother me; blood had stopped being an issue long ago, but she didn't need to see it. She gave the nod, and we both headed up the stairs. She headed into her room and I went into my own room with an ensuite shower. I knew Gab would be in one of the guest rooms.

We typically rotated in the main bedroom when one of us was set to be working as the main guard. With me as the main

guard for Natalie, it meant I got the nice bedroom, and he had to suffer in one of the guest bedrooms. Not that he was suffering; it just meant he had to walk down the hall whenever he had to take a leak. I grabbed a towel and headed into the bathroom. I quickly stripped off my clothes and got under the hot water. It felt good against my skin; it was exactly what I needed after today.

I wrapped the towel around my hips and opened the bathroom door. I was instantly surprised to see Natalie sitting on the end of my bed in a pink silk robe. Her long light blonde hair was down; it only emphasized how blue her eyes were. She was gorgeous. There was no denying that. I didn't know why she was here, though. Why she had gotten changed into a robe and whatever was underneath it to come and see me.

“Sorry, you just looked upset and I wanted to check in and see if you were ok,” she said with a slightly shy smile.

“I'm gonna have to call bullshit on that one. It takes a lot more than some blood and dirt to upset me. Why are you really here?”

I didn't know what game she played, but I knew she wasn't here for me. Killing her father hadn't upset me at all. He deserved everything I did to him and more. I hadn't been upset and knew I hadn't given off any indication that I was, so what was she up to? She gave me a flirty smile as she spoke.

“I heard you last night. I couldn't sleep and was walking around the house when I heard you moaning. I thought maybe

you were having a nightmare or something, but then I saw the door partway open and what you were doing. I can't stop thinking about it."

Well, this night was not turning out like I had expected. I wasn't sure what game she played, but I was interested in finding out the rules. She was breathtaking. There was no arguing, and if she wanted to have sex, it would be tough for me to say no. We were allowed to sleep with the women. We could do whatever we wanted as long as it didn't put the baby at risk. I just never did. I hadn't been with anyone since Alexis' death.

I've never been attracted to anyone to the point of wanting to sleep with them. Last night I couldn't stop thinking about Natalie. The desire was so strong all I could do was jerk off in the hopes that it would make the desire fade. Seeing her here in this robe was proving me very wrong.

"Still doesn't explain why you're here." I needed to hear her say the words. I needed to hear that she wanted to have sex.

She gave me a sexy smile as she stood up and pulled the sash on her robe, revealing that she was completely naked. I couldn't help the light groan that escaped my mouth at the sight of her. I thought she was beautiful before, but that was nothing compared to the gorgeous sight before me.

"I think you know why," she played.

"I need to hear you say it." I'd have to be fucking blind, deaf and dumb to not know what she wanted. That didn't change the fact that I needed to hear the words. I needed her to tell me

that she wanted to fuck. Maybe it was unnecessary, but I had to hear the words to put my mind at ease.

She ran her hand down my chest and toward the top of the towel as she spoke. "I want you to fuck me." She quickly pulled the knot from the towel, and it fell to the floor, exposing my already hard cock. Her hand traveled lower as she continued, "You're supposed to take care of me, right? Are you really going to let me go to bed all wet and needy? Are you going to make me play with myself again?"

Fuck it. I grabbed her by the back of her neck and pulled her into me, pressing my lips against hers. She instantly responded and kissed me back with as much need as my own. She felt amazing, more so than I had anticipated. It had been a long time since I had felt the smooth skin of a woman against my own. My cock pulsed with need, and as much as I should be taking things slow, I knew that wouldn't be possible. I ran my hands down her back to her ass. I cupped it and picked her up.

She instantly wrapped her legs around my hips and held onto me. I crossed the short distance toward the bed and moved my hands to her hips before breaking the kiss and gently tossing her down on the bed. She giggled slightly as her breasts bounced with the movement.

I ran my hands up her legs, and she quickly opened them for me. I kissed her inner left thigh before I turned my attention to what I had truly been craving. I ran my tongue along her pussy before sucking on her clit. She gave a deep moan as a moan escaped my own lips at how sweet she tasted. This has always

been my favorite part. I continued to feast on her as I slipped a finger in and started to stretch her. The urge to be inside of her was overwhelming, and I quickly worked her. It didn't take long before she was a moaning mess.

I could feel her inner walls tightening around my fingers, and I knew she was close. I flicked my tongue repeatedly over her clit, and she emitted a mewling sound right before her whole body tensed up. I quickly pulled my fingers out before licking at her core.

"Armando." She sighed a deep moan as she started to cum. I greedily lapped up everything she had to offer. She was so sweet-tasting, like honey, and I would never get enough of it. I continued to lick her through every pulse, and I didn't stop until she squirmed again. I knew she was oversensitive, and that was where I wanted her.

I pulled back and started to kiss my way up her body. Her hands ran through my hair as I took her right nipple into my mouth, causing her to moan and arch up against me.

"Oh, I want you," she begged.

I released her nipple and kissed her neck as I reached the nightstand. I quickly opened the drawer and pulled out one of the condoms. I tore it open using my teeth before I slipped it on and sat up a bit so I was more on my knees, and I could see Natalie fully.

"You sure?" I asked one last time.

"Shut up and fuck me."

I could see the heat in her eyes, and I knew this was exactly what she wanted. I placed my hands on her inner thighs and held her legs open. I lined my tip up with her slick hole before slowly pushing inside of her. She was all hot and wet, and I glided inside her until I was balls deep. It had been a long time since I had been inside of a woman, and I had forgotten how amazing it felt. I could barely keep myself from moving long enough for Natalie to adjust to my size. Despite stretching her, I had a thick cock, and I knew it would take her a moment to adjust.

“I’m good, move,” she ordered, and that was all I needed to hear.

I started to pull out before snapping my hips forward and slamming back inside of her. I focused on finding her sweet spot that would make her see stars. It took a couple of thrusts before she gave me a deep moan, and I knew I had hit it.

“Fuck. Right there, don’t stop.”

I moved my hands around the front of her thighs for better control. I started to rapidly thrust into her, loving the sight of her breasts bouncing with each snap of my hips. Fuck, she felt so good. I never wanted this to end, but I knew it wouldn’t last much longer. I was too worked up. My body was not willing to draw this out. Our moans echoed off the walls, and I could feel her walls squeezing my cock. She was close, and so was I.

“Don’t stop. I’m so close,” she whined as her fists gripped the comforter.

“Cum for me, baby. Shower my cock with your sweet juices,” I growled as I leaned forward and lifted her hips off the bed to give us an even better angle.

With the new position, it only took two thrusts before she was arching back and giving a soft scream while she started to pulse around my cock. The added tightness drove me over the edge, and I snapped my hips forward, burying myself completely inside her as I came with a deep moan. Both our bodies were tight as we continued to pulse against each other. I never thought I was going to stop cumming.

With each pulse that shook my body, more cum shot out of me. It felt like it would never end, and I didn't want it to. The only sound within the room was our panting breaths as we both fought to gain control of our breathing. As our bodies started to come down to earth, I moved back slightly, so her hips were back on the bed. Slowly I pulled out and peeled off the condom as I got up. I shakily walked over to the bathroom and tossed the condom out before coming back out to the bedroom.

I could see that she was barely awake, her energy was completely spent, and she was not alone. I went over and gently maneuvered her to get the cover from underneath her and cover her up. I crawled in on the other side and pulled her to my chest.

“Hm, I should go to my room,” she said with a barely awake voice.

I kissed her forehead before I commanded, "Sleep."

Would it have been the smart thing to do to have her return to her room - absolutely. But that wasn't what I wanted right now. I wanted one night to pretend I was back home with a beautiful woman in my bed. A night where I could be expected and not have to play secret agent games. Just one night and then tomorrow, everything would go back to normal.

Chapter Thirteen

Natalie

It was after eleven when I rolled over and started to wake up. I was still exhausted, and the thought of having to get up was extremely unappealing. That was until my mind clicked in and realized I wasn't in my bed. Groaning, I turned my face into the pillow. Last night I decided to do whatever it took to get my unborn baby and me out of this alive, no matter what I had to do. I hadn't planned to sleep with Armando, but what Gabriele said about Alexis had me thinking.

If I reminded him of Alexis, I could use that to my advantage. Would I be taking advantage and manipulating his grief? Yes, but he was keeping me hostage and had murdered my father. His feelings weren't exactly necessary. That didn't change the fact that I felt vaguely dirty this morning and things between us were going to be awkward.

I had no idea how Armando would feel about last night. I was hoping he wanted another go-around. I didn't want to date him, but I needed him to develop feelings for me; maybe he

would risk everything to get me out of there. Would I be leading him on? Absolutely, but I didn't care about that. I couldn't care about that. He would get over me and quickly move on to the next girl.

It would be awkward as hell for a little while. There was also the chance that he wouldn't want to have sex again, that he wanted to forget it ever happened and keep a massive wall between us. I was hoping that wouldn't be the case. From my personal experience, I knew that if you had good sex, you generally wanted to have it again. But if you had terrific, earth-shattering sex, you never wanted it to stop. I didn't know how Armando felt about last night, but the sex was epic. I'm talking about the best I ever had. I knew it had to be from the added hormones within my system and not him, but still, amazing sex was amazing sex.

As badly as I would love to stay in bed, I knew I had to get up and face the music. Not only was this not my bed, but I needed a shower and to seriously pee. With no other choice, I forced my body to move and get out of bed. I picked up the robe and slipped it on before I snuck out of the room and back down the hallway to my hideaway.

I beelined it for the bathroom and after relieving my bladder, I got the shower going. I was going to be making a list of items I wanted to be brought over. It wouldn't be home, but at least it would feel a bit more like my home, if only temporarily. I also really wanted my own clothes and not the ones that had been worn by dead women. I knew a laptop or tablet was out of the question. They were never going to allow me to have

access to the internet. It meant I had to keep a list of things I would need for the baby and what I needed to do when I broke out of here.

It was going to be a long list, and most of it I wouldn't know how to do any of it. Escaping was just the first step. Staying hidden and getting a new identity was another beast to figure out. Maybe I could pick Armando's brain without it looking like that's what I was doing. This shit was getting complicated.

After cleaning up, I quickly tossed on some black sleep shorts and a black tank top. I hoped to grab something to eat quickly and then curl up in bed. Maybe watch something on the TV to help me fall back asleep. With nothing left to do, I headed out to face the music. I walked down the stairs and heard movement in the kitchen. I didn't know if Gabriele was here or not.

I was torn between wanting him here as a buffer and wanting him gone so he didn't pick up on anything between Armando and me. I had my answer when I walked into the kitchen and saw Armando alone at the stove. I could smell the bacon and my stomach growled.

"Morning. Breakfast will be ready in a few minutes," he said, looking over at me.

"You know you don't have to keep cooking for me, right? I can take care of myself." I offered a small smile so he knew I wasn't upset or annoyed with him. I meant it, too; he didn't need to keep cooking for me. I was use to taking care of

myself. His cooking for me felt weird like he was trying to fatten me up before the slaughter.

“I like cooking and it’s important for you to rest, especially given your situation. You have to be careful that you don’t do too much.”

I went and sat down at the table as I spoke. “I’m supposed to be seeing a specialist, but I am assuming that’s not going to happen.”

I knew that other women went through chemotherapy and had healthy babies. It was certainly possible, but they got full medical care. They weren’t trapped in a house getting looked at by a mafia doctor, which I had to assume wasn’t the best. It was another reason why I needed to get out of there. I needed to have the proper medical care for my child.

“The doc is set to come today to see you. He’ll know what to do and what you need for the baby.”

I highly doubted he was going to give me what I needed. Hell, I didn’t even know what I needed. At least I would be seeing the doctor and that was a start. Armando placed two plates down on the table before sitting across from me. This was new, as we had never eaten together before. It was progress, I just wasn’t sure what type of progress we were in.

“About last night,” I started because one of us had to.

“It doesn’t have to be a thing. We were both horny and in need of a release. It doesn’t have to be anything more than that.”

He was giving me an out and I appreciated it, but at the same time, I was a bit annoyed by it because I needed him to crave me. I needed him to develop feelings, which wouldn't happen quickly without a physical connection. It looked like I had to keep our physical activities going until he took charge. I was hoping that wouldn't take much encouragement on my part. I couldn't push right now; it could look suspicious. I had to play this out naturally and wait for my next opportunity.

"I assume that Gabriele left."

"He did late this morning after I woke up. He said everything went well last night while I was away. Were you ok with him around? You felt comfortable with him?"

I could hear that he sincerely wanted to make sure I was okay around Gabriele. It mattered to him.

"He was nice. I like him a lot better than Lorenzo."

"You don't have to worry about Lorenzo ever again. If I can't be here, then Gab will be. You're safe around him. Given your situation, I know that might sound ridiculous, but he won't hurt you. He'll keep you safe and ensure you are taken care of."

"I am perfectly capable of taking care of myself."

The last thing I needed was to rely on any of the guys here. I also couldn't get used to having the help because once I left, I would be on my own completely. I had to be prepared to handle whatever came my way.

"Of that, I have no doubt," he said with a small smile.

I couldn't tell if he was placating me, but it didn't matter. I would do this on my own and get free from this luxury prison. He had no idea that I was already on the path to freedom and he would be my key to getting out of here. I just needed to keep playing my part. Keep earning his trust, so he wouldn't see the massive knife aiming for his back.

Chapter Fourteen

Armando

It was after two when Dr. Holland came out of Natalie's room. I couldn't tell how everything went based on his face. The man was very good at keeping a poker face regardless of what was happening around him. I've seen him check his phone for texts while a guy had blood spurting out his neck. It was clear why he could no longer practice medicine in a traditional sense. The man had no bedside manner, no empathy, and little care for human life. He was the last doctor I wanted to treat Natalie, but he was the doctor we were currently stuck with.

"How is she?" I asked once he came down the stairs.

"Stable. Everything appears to be normal," he answered as he looked down at his phone.

I ripped it from his hand, and his eyes snapped to look at me. "You know her medical history with chemo when she was a teenager. How likely will she make it to term with a healthy baby?" I demanded.

“How the hell should I know? I’m not a specialist. I’ll do my job to keep the baby alive, and outside of that, I don’t know. It could be born with all kinds of physical and mental complications or deformities. It could also be born perfectly healthy. Shit, she could die during the delivery. In this type of situation, she normally goes through a c-section around thirty-five weeks to ensure she and the baby survive. There’s no telling what chemo could have done to her uterus and birth canal. We don’t have that option, though. All we can do is wait and see if she makes it to term.”

“Is there anything we should be doing to better her odds?”

I wasn’t liking what I was hearing. This situation with Natalie was more dire than I had anticipated. I didn’t even think about the possibility of her not being able to deliver naturally. If I was going to ensure she and her baby lived, I had to get her out of here before the second trimester hit to guarantee she had the best care.

“Probably, but what does it matter? She’s just going to be killed right afterward, anyways. It would be easier for her to die during delivery than having to do it afterward,” he answered with a shrug.

“We don’t kill them all. Some hold value, and we don’t know if she will or not. Now answer the fucking question,” I growled.

Doc sighed. He actually fucking sighed at me before answering. “Make sure she takes her prenatal vitamins. Keep her from lifting anything heavy, and ensure she is eating

properly and hydrated throughout the day. She should be moving to prevent blood clots, especially once she is bigger. All of the traditional methods to help get a woman to full term. Other than that, a doctor would typically closely monitor her with blood tests and ultrasounds. That's something we don't do. That's all we can do."

That wasn't good enough for me. I would have to accept it, but it wasn't good enough. I didn't want her going without the tests that Natalie and the baby required. She deserved the best care, and she wasn't getting it. She wasn't even getting a good level of care. I just gave a nod because there really was nothing else I could say to him. He wouldn't care; nothing I said would change how he handled these women.

Doc held his hand out for his phone, and I gave it back before he headed out. I scrubbed a hand over my face before pulling my cell out and immediately dialed Gab's number as I made my way toward the back and stepped outside.

"Hey brother, how was the doc?" Gab instantly asked.

Gab himself was starting to care for Natalie as well. After speaking with him this morning, I understood that he and Natalie had gotten along well enough. He liked her. He liked that she wasn't afraid to speak her mind. He liked that she had a fire within her. He wasn't wrong either; she was special compared to the others. That's what made this so hard on me, on either of us now. She had wormed her way into our hearts without even trying, and now we both felt like it was our responsibility to save her and this baby, her miracle baby.

“A dick, as usual. We’ve got a problem. Due to her past history Natalie would normally be giving birth through a c-section. According to the doc, if it’s natural, she might die in delivery.”

“Shit. I didn’t think that would be an issue. You said it was bone cancer.”

“Apparently, the cancer treatment could have affected her uterus and birth canal. Normally, she would be closely monitored for the whole pregnancy, and blood tests and ultrasounds would be done regularly to catch any problems early on.”

“Which is something we can’t do. We also can’t do a c-section, which really puts us on a clock, not that we weren’t before. We gotta get her out of there by six months to be safe, right?”

“Ideally. They both need to be closely monitored, and she’s not going to get that while she is here. If we want to ensure they both live and have the best chances of getting through this alive, we need to get her out of here sooner than later.”

“We also have to worry about her trying to escape or say the wrong thing and Dom gets fed up and kills her.”

That was also a major concern that I had. I did not forget about last night. I didn’t think for a single second that Natalie was only horny and needed someone to rub up against. She had a plan brewing within her mind, and I knew she was trying to build some sort of trust or rapport with me. She wanted me to let my guard down so she could escape. It was clever, but it

wasn't going to work. I shouldn't have slept with her, but I couldn't stop thinking about her.

My whole body had been craving her touch; it still was. I had given in last night, but I would need to be careful that it didn't happen again. I couldn't afford to allow any further feelings toward her to develop. Especially because she didn't truly want to be with me. I was a means to an end for her, she was using me, but that was fine. I was expecting it now and would be more aware of it.

"I'm planning on making sure she stays in the room whenever Dom or one of the other guys are here to minimize the risk of her saying the wrong thing to them. I've debated on telling her the truth. Telling her that I was looking to kill Dom before she gave birth, but I doubt she would believe me. There is also the added risk of her saying the wrong thing and getting herself killed."

"I agree. It would be safer to keep her in the dark. I mentioned Alexis yesterday to her. I didn't mean to, but it just came up within the conversation. Her hearing about Alexis and knowing that you and I weren't like Dom might have helped. I obviously didn't tell her about why we were here. I was trying to make her feel more comfortable around us. She doesn't need the added stress, and it can't be good for the baby."

Alexis wasn't a conversation I ever wanted to have. I loved her with everything in me; losing her was still extremely painful. It was devastating to find her dead. To know that she had been in so much pain, and I couldn't stop it. I didn't see it. I thought

she had gotten better. I thought she was in a place where she could be happy and live with the trauma she had endured. I was so very wrong, and I lost the woman I loved and my chance at being a father. I knew she had only been along weeks and there was no chance she knew she was pregnant. Part of me often wondered if it would have changed anything. If she had fought and held on for the baby. We had discussed children at one point.

We had discussed my leaving the mafia in Gab's hands and creating our own family and life. She had no interest in having children, which I understood. She had been through hell in her life and would naturally be apprehensive about bringing a child into the world. Now here I was once again thinking about leaving the mafia and starting a new life somewhere. A legal life where I could have a wife and a child one day. That day wasn't today, so there was no point in thinking about it.

"It's fine. It might help her feel more relaxed, which is best for the baby. Realistically, they will not be safe until Dom is dead and they are out of town. I can have everything set up for when it's time to leave, but we need that window for killing Dom."

"I am working on it. I have been speaking with the guys and trying to see what Dom has coming up that would create an opportunity to move in. I have also been thinking we need a fall guy. Someone we can pin Dom's death on so the rest of the guys don't start looking at you or me. I know we'll be on the other side of the country, but still, we can't be too careful. Not with something like this."

“You’re right. Dom doesn’t have any connections on the East Coast, at least that I know about, but we can’t be too careful. With Dom dead, it will create a power vacuum and we don’t know who will step up to fill it.”

That was going to be the issue. If I was killed, then Gab would take over. We have a logical flow in my organization, something I thought everyone had. Since working for Dom, I quickly learned that there wasn’t a designated number two. Dom went through a lot of guys, even the higher-ups. There was no way of knowing who would take over the mafia upon his death. We had to be extremely cautious about how I killed him and where.

“We’ll figure it out. We won’t let her die,” Gab promised.

I wanted to believe him. I wanted to believe it would be that simple, but I knew it wouldn’t. All I could do was hope that everything worked out, and both Natalie and her baby were healthy. We had a challenge ahead of us, but I was never one to turn away from a hard fight. We were going to make it happen, one way or another. I just needed Natalie to hold on until I could free her once and for all.

Chapter Fifteen

Natalie

It was nearing early evening when I heard the back door open. I had been outside doing yoga for the last thirty minutes to try and settle my mind after the doctor's appointment. I had been in my room, trying to process everything, but it wasn't helping, so I figured a little yoga might be nice. I wasn't a huge fan of yoga, as I had only taken a couple of classes. It just wasn't really my thing, but I had to try and stay calm and yoga was apparently good for that. I still couldn't get over that doctor. Not only was he a complete asshole, but he was useless.

He was the guy you saw when you needed stitches, not someone you would entrust with a baby. Certainly not a baby within my body, but I was going to have him until I got the fuck out of here. Seeing the doctor only fueled my desire to escape. It was made even more clear that I needed to get out of here as soon as possible and if that meant I had to keep sleeping with Armando, then so be it.

“Is that really a good idea? Shouldn’t you be resting?”
Armando asked from behind me.

I looked over my shoulder to see him with his arms crossed over his chest leaning against a wooden post that held up the roof over the deck. I answered as I stretched and went down into the downward dog position. If I was going to be getting out of here, I needed to ensure he couldn’t resist me, and a clear view of my ass was a good place to start.

“The doctor says I need to stay physically and mentally healthy. Yoga is a great way to stay active without too much strenuous activity. Plus, it will help calm my mind and all its racing thoughts.”

“How’s it working?”

“I think it’s a complete load of hippy crap, but I can’t do what I normally do to unwind,” I answered, as I slowly went into the cobra position.

“Painting?” he asked.

I had given him a list of items from my place I was hoping to obtain, and my painting supplies and sketchbook were on it. Drawing has been a huge part of my life, ever since I could remember. I don’t know if I was any good, but it helped keep my mind at peace and was a huge stress relief.

“Painting and sketching are important to me. When I was in the hospital during chemo treatments, it was the only thing that kept me sane. I used to draw or paint a new picture every single time, and the nurses would hang them up on the walls in

the treatment room for me. They were mostly of nature: things that didn't consist of those four walls and needles. They helped, though, and I liked that they also helped the other patients within the room throughout the week."

"I couldn't imagine having to go through surgery and chemo at my age, let alone as a young teenager. You're braver than I am," he said with a warmth in his voice that I hadn't really heard before.

I stood up and shook out my arms and legs as I spoke. "I don't know if it's bravery. Kids don't really get a say in whether they go through treatment. Parents hold all the power in that area and the kids get dragged along whether you want it or not." I walked toward him as I continued. "Don't get me wrong, I am grateful that my mother fought so hard for me. She was amazing. Whenever I felt sad or discouraged, she never tried to tell me that this was God's plan or that one day I would appreciate the struggles I had been going through. She allowed me to feel whatever I needed to feel. I remember one time after my third round of chemo. All of my hair had fallen out. I was covered in bruises and so exhausted all the time. I was done. I was so filled with rage that I thought it would burn me from the inside out. And you know what she did?"

"Tell me," he said, genuinely interested in what I had to share.

"She took me down to the basement and she had set up all of these breakables. There were mirrors, windows, dishes, ceramic figures - just random shit she had to have picked up at garage sales or thrift stores and she had been storing it up in

the basement. She handed me a pair of safety goggles and a bat and told me to swing and scream until I felt like I could breathe again.”

I couldn't help but smile at the memory of my mom standing there in a room full of breakables with these goggles on her face and a supportive smile. “I must have gone obliterated everything in that room for thirty minutes. When I finally finished, glass was all over the floor, it was a nightmare, but she didn't care about that. She didn't care that she would have to spend a couple of hours just cleaning it all up. She didn't care that she had spent money on those items just for me to smash the shit out of them. She just gave me a hug and asked what I wanted for dinner.

“She didn't even have to ask me if I felt better. She just knew. She always knew what I needed. Even if it was unconventional, she was there.”

“She sounds like she was an amazing mom. I'm sorry you lost her,” he said sincerely.

“She was perfect. I try not to think about how she won't be here for this baby. She always wanted to be a grandmother, and she would have been the best. She could walk into a war zone and it wouldn't even faze her. I can't tell you how often she would show up at my place completely unannounced just to talk, but then she would start doing the dishes I had been neglecting or the laundry.

“Mom never lectured me about any of it or brought it up. We'd go out to lunch and I would have paint on my hands or

charcoal on my face; it was nothing to her. It was just part of me and it didn't bother her in the least. She was perfect."

I had to fight back the tears threatening to spill. It wouldn't do me any good to start crying right now. If Mom was here, she would tell me to stay strong and focus on what needed to be done: to survive, no matter what, and that was exactly what I was planning on doing. I could let myself have feelings after I was safe. I shook my head slightly to regain control of my emotions again.

"Ugh, hormones. What about you? Any sweet memories of your mother before she passed?" Killed technically, but he didn't need me reminding him of that.

"Unfortunately, most of my memories of my mama have all been tainted by the one of her death. I do remember her smile and the sound of her laugh. I can't remember the sound of her voice, though, which still bothers me. I wish we had cell phones back then because then I would have stood a chance at finding a video of her. My father didn't really like cameras or video cameras in the house. Too paranoid.

"All I really have are the few memories of her. I do remember she loved to sing and dance. She wasn't very good at either, but she sang and danced all around the kitchen when she cooked. She would blast her music so loud that my father had to soundproof his office just so he could work without being disturbed. Sometimes I still expect to see her when I walk into a kitchen."

I didn't want to feel anything for him, but a bit of sadness was brewing in my belly. I had at least gotten my mother for a good chunk of years, but he lost her before he even reached double digits. There was no telling who he could have been had he had his mother in his life. Maybe she would have been able to shield him from this life. He could have a whole different life he was living. At the same time, if he wasn't here, my baby and I might not have stood a chance at escaping.

"Do you ever wonder what your life would have been like had she not been killed?" I couldn't help but ask.

"That's a dangerous game that I try to avoid. You make one change to your life and there is no guarantee of what your life would be like now. Who you would be. Maybe my life would have been better if she had gotten to live. Maybe she would have stood up for me and told my father that I wouldn't be doing some of the things he had me do at a young age. Maybe I would be a businessperson or a mechanic."

"That doesn't sound so bad." I could picture him being a mechanic, working in a garage or owning one.

"It doesn't. But I also could have turned out worse. She might have encouraged my father's lessons, and I would have grown up to be more ruthless and colder. That's why it's a dangerous game because no answer can make me happy and make me feel like the decisions I have made were the right ones or wrong ones. All I can do is try and make the best decision I can at that given moment," he said with a shrug.

I had to give it to him. He was smart. He had good insights into himself and his life. I didn't want to see him as anything more than my jailer, but he was making it very hard to keep a wall up between us. He don't get to be smart, understanding and sexy. That just wasn't fair. I needed to put the walls back up between us within my mind. I needed to focus on what had to be done so I could escape.

"That's all any of us can do," I said with a small smile before I turned and headed for the door. I turned back around and gave him a sexy smirk as I continued, "I'm gonna shower. Care to wash my back?"

I knew he would agree. He was a man with needs, and he no doubt assumed that my hormones were making me want to have sex with him. I could admit to myself that it wasn't the hormones or even my plan of escape. Sex with Armando was amazing, the best I had ever had, and I would be lying if I said my body didn't want him, which only made all of this easier. I didn't have to pretend to enjoy or want it. I could allow my body to crave his touch, and I would deal with the awkwardness and uncertain feelings later.

"The doc did say I needed to keep a close eye on you," he smoothly said. I could see the heat in his eyes, and I knew he wanted me just as badly as I wanted him. This was good; he was already playing perfectly into my plan. Now, I just needed to keep trying to find the perfect time and way to escape. I took his hand in mine before I turned and walked back inside, with him easily following behind me.

Chapter Sixteen

Armando

The house was quiet, too fucking quiet. Normally, when I got back from my late-night meetings, I could expect Alexis to be watching TV on the couch or asleep. Only tonight there wasn't a single sound within the house. Had it not been for her car in the garage, I would have assumed she wasn't here. I double-checked that the house was locked up before I started my journey up the stairs to reach my bedroom. I had expected to find my beautiful woman asleep in our bed.

My mind had already started going over all the possible ways I could wake her up. Tonight, I had told her I had a late meeting with some of the guys, but I had actually been out with Gab, picking out an engagement ring and brainstorming ways to pop the question. We had a lot of different ideas, some better than others, but I had a good number to choose from. One of which was allowing her to wake up in the morning to the ring sitting in an open box on the bedside table with a simple note asking her to marry me. I wasn't too sure about

that one, only because it felt like a coward's way to ask. At the same time, though, there was a strong appeal to not being there for her to tell me no. I had time to decide, but I didn't want to wait too long and risk her finding the ring.

Walking into our bedroom, I was confused to see she wasn't in our bed like I had anticipated. A quick look to my right, where the en suite bathroom was, showed me the light underneath the closed door. She must be in the middle of a bath, and my pulse raced at seeing her naked, covered in bubbles. I pulled off my coat and boots and headed to the bathroom. Opening the door, I was fully prepared to see my sexy woman leaning back in the bath, covered in strawberry-scented bubbles. What I was greeted with was a horror movie. She was leaning back in the tub, but instead of bubbles and the scent of strawberries, it was pink-tinted water with a strong metallic scent that assaulted my nose.

Time stood still as I froze in place. I kept waiting for her to open her eyes and laugh at me. Telling me that her new bath salts gave the water its pink tint. Some had splashed out, and the pool grew from her dripping fingers wasn't a big deal. My legs shook as I slowly took a step toward her. My heart was pounding against my chest, and I thought it would break my chest plate for a moment. As I came around to face her, my eyes closed to try and buy myself another moment of false hope. My mind screamed that I already knew what I would see, but my heart refused to believe it. The second my eyes opened, I screamed as my legs gave out. Her empty eyes stared back at

me. I gripped the side of the tub and pulled myself towards her. Blood soaked instantly into my jeans.

“Baby, come on, baby, look at me,” I pleaded as tears ran down my cheeks.

I reached out to touch her, to try and wake her up, but the second my hand made contact with her cheek, it snapped back at how cold her skin felt. She was gone. I looked down at her wrists, and it brought a deep pain radiating throughout my body. Each one had a single deep cut going down her arm. Her head suddenly turned and her dead eyes were glazed over as she looked at me.

“Why did you do this to me?” she asked, blood dripping from her mouth.

A sharp breath filled my lungs as I shot up in my bed. The cold sweat that clung to my shaking skin was not foreign. I wished this had been the first time I had that nightmare and seen the horror again. But it wasn't. I've had to relive that night more times than I could count over the past four years. Sometimes, it would end with me finding her, while other times, she would blame me or beg me to get her justice. I knew that grief could linger, and it could take a long time to finally disappear. Just like I knew that I would never truly be over Alexis.

She will always have a special place in my heart. She was the first woman I had ever truly loved. She was the woman I wanted to marry and, most importantly, the woman who would be the mother to my child. A loss like that would never go

away, but I had been hoping it wouldn't continue to hurt this badly.

Tossing the covers back, I got out of bed and threw on some pajamas before I went down the hallways and the stairs. I needed to get some fresh air. I knew there was no hope of me getting any more sleep tonight. I never could when I dreamt of Alexis. I wouldn't have minded the dreams if they were of all the good memories we shared together.

I hated that her death had overshadowed all our shared joy and love. Now, whenever I try to think of her, all I saw was her pain. The pain that I couldn't see when she was alive. I had been so blind to it all. I knew she was struggling, but she was smiling and looking forward to the future. Looking back, I should have seen the signs. I should have noticed that she was hiding so much pain. I thought we were working through her trauma together, but I hadn't done enough.

I looked at the stars sprinkled all across the dark night sky. One of the few things I remembered from my Mama was her belief that every star in the sky was the soul of the dead. When someone dies, a new star is created from their soul and energy left by their body. After her death, I used to spend hours staring up at the sky, trying to figure out what star was her. Every night, I would keep a mental map of where the previous stars were to see which ones were new, but over the years, I couldn't seem to keep up that belief.

Now more than ever, I wished I could believe again. I wished I could look up at the sky and know that Alexis was up there

and at peace. I didn't know what came after death, but I had long since stopped believing in Heaven or Hell. I'd seen too much to have any sort of belief that there was justice in the afterlife. There was no justice here, so why should death be any different?

I didn't know how long I sat here on the back steps before the door opened. I looked over to see Natalie making her way toward me. She looked amazing in her shorts and tank top. I hadn't expected to have sex with her again, but when the offer to join her in the shower was presented, I couldn't turn it down. This was a dangerous game I was playing - that we were both playing.

I didn't doubt for a second that Natalie wasn't trying to devise a plan to make her escape. I knew she was trying to get me to let my walls down so she could slip out. That would never happen, and it only put more pressure on me to kill Dom. I had to get him before she tried to sneak out one night.

Normally, I would never think that any of the girls would be able to pull it off, but Natalie wasn't like the other girls here. She had something deep to fight for and wasn't some weak, delicate flower. There was a fire within her, and she was going to need it if she was going to get through all of this.

"What are you doing up?" I asked because she should be resting. She needed as much sleep as she could get.

"I woke up an hour ago, not feeling too great. I thought some fresh air might help," she answered as she went and sat down on the step by me. We weren't right beside each other, but

close enough that if I shifted just slightly, my thigh would press up against hers.

“Morning sickness?” I asked, worried that something else might be wrong.

“That saying is completely misleading. I can feel terrible at any given point in the day. I blame the nap. I might have been able to sleep through the night if I hadn’t had it.”

I noticed that she had been getting more tired throughout the day. She had been sleeping a lot, but she was moving around and eating when she wasn’t. I knew it was common for women to be sick for a good chunk of their pregnancy, especially during the first trimester, but that didn’t make me worry any less for her.

“Anything I can do to help?” I didn’t know what I could do to help, but I was more than willing to do anything for Natalie.

“I just have to wait it out. Hopefully, things get easier in the next trimester.” I could hear that she didn’t truly believe that, though. She knew better than I did that the stress from her situation could make her sicker and put her and the baby at risk. “Why are you awake? I didn’t wear you out enough today?” she asked, with a slight smirk.

The shower sex had been a great workout and I would be happy to experience again. “You got my heart rate up. Came out for some fresh air.”

“You just randomly decided to get some fresh air at three in the morning?” she asked, skeptical and clearly not believing

me.

I let out a soft sigh. Natalie already knew about Alexis, but I didn't know if I wanted her to know that I still have nightmares over it. Nightmares were a weakness I had been groomed to hide from a very young age. Weaknesses were never allowed to be seen by anyone. At the same time, she had been vulnerable with me, and I was trying to earn some form of trust with her. I knew I would never achieve all of her trust, but if I could get something that might be what keeps her in line so I can have the time to kill Dom.

“Once or twice a week, I have the same nightmare about finding Alexis. It's always the same. I find her in the bath. She's already dead and when I get to her, she looks at me and asks me why. That part changes; sometimes, why did I not help her? Why did I let him hurt her? Why did I kill her? It always changes and I can never get back to sleep afterwards.”

“I'm sorry. I couldn't imagine finding someone I loved and wanted to spend the rest of my life with dead. It never should have happened to her,” she said with true sympathy.

“She had a lot of demons, but she had a beautiful soul. She didn't deserve anything that happened to her. I was naive and foolish to think she would recover from what happened. I got her out of the trafficking ring, but she never got free.”

I felt the tears building in my eyes and fought to keep them at bay. There wasn't much to make me cry, but Alexis still had the power to bring me to my knees. She reached over and placed a hand on my knee as she spoke.

“No one deserves to go through that horror. I’m sorry she had to, and I’m sorry that you lost her. That you lost both of them. I have never gone through what she had, but there is no going back after you experience a trauma like that. You will never be the same again and unfortunately, you either learn to live with who you are now and fight to stay healthy or lose yourself to the demons. You couldn’t have known that she was considering ending her life. When people are in that much pain, they are very good at hiding it. You didn’t miss any signs because she didn’t want you to see them. I’m sure you did everything that you could to help her.”

I thought I did, but obviously I didn’t, because she was still dead and I was left to try and pick up the pieces. I felt a tear roll down my cheek before Natalie wiped it away. I covered her hand on my knee and took a few shaky breaths. I had to try and get myself calmed back down. The last thing she needed was me falling apart. She had enough on her plate.

“You, um,” I cleared my throat before continuing, “You should go back to bed and sleep. You need all the rest you can get.”

“I’m not the only one that needs sleep. Come on, let’s get to bed,” she said as she kept my hand within hers.

I doubted I could fall asleep, but I wanted Natalie to sleep. She needed it far more than I did. I followed her inside, and she took us to my bedroom. This was a bad idea. This wasn’t going to be sex. This would be us curled up in the same bed, sleeping. It was more intimate and a wall I should be fighting

to keep up between us, but I couldn't seem to bring myself to do it right now.

I allowed her to pull me over to the bed, and when she got under the covers and held them open for me, I didn't hesitate to slip under them. Almost instantly, she was curling up against my chest, and I wrapped my left arm around her. This was the first time we fell asleep in a bed together. I had to admit I did miss the feeling. I ran my hand through Natalie's hair. I allowed myself to enjoy listening to her breathing evening out as she drifted off to sleep. To my surprise, I wasn't far behind her.

Chapter Seventeen

Natalie

Waking up curled into Armando's chest was not something I had ever expected to be doing. What made it worse was I woke up feeling good, warm and cared for. Cuddling had always been one of my favorite things when I had a boyfriend, not that Armando was my boyfriend. Still, I enjoyed feeling his arms around me, the rise and fall of his chest as he slept and hearing the rhythmic beating of his heart. For a moment, if I kept my eyes closed, I could pretend I wasn't lying in this bed in a place where I was being held against my will.

Rather, we were curled up back at my home in my bed, which would be too small for us to fit. What was surprising was the fact that I didn't mind the little image I had created. I should have been bothered by the fact that I was curled up against a man who was violent and dangerous. He was a killer. I should be terrified of him, regardless of how well he has treated me. And yet, I wasn't. I didn't even think of him as a killer, which was even more dangerous.

I had forgotten who he was and what he was. I had allowed myself to get lost in his pain of losing Alexis and in his pain of losing his unborn baby. I had allowed myself to get lost in the pleasure his body could give me. I had allowed myself to lose focus on what truly mattered, and that wasn't my growing feelings for him. I had to squash them down and focus on my escape, to focus on my unborn baby and the life I wanted him or her to have.

I knew what needed to be done, so why was I feeling so guilty? Why was my heart telling me that what I was doing was wrong? This was a man who had helped to kidnap me. This was a man who had killed my father. This man was holding me captive and ensuring I never left. This man would be ripping my baby from my arms before he killed me. I owed this man nothing. I owed him no sympathy or mercy, just as he would not show me any.

So, why was my heart making me feel guilty for using his pain against him? He wouldn't feel guilty for anything he was about to do to me. He wasn't feeling guilty for killing my father, something I still didn't know how to feel about. I shouldn't feel any guilt for my own actions, especially when they are driven purely by survival.

I squashed those feelings and forced my mind and heart to focus on what truly mattered. My baby. I was doing all of this for him or her, exactly what any good loving mother would do. I didn't doubt for a second that my mother wouldn't have done this or more if it meant I would live and we would have a chance to be together. Those other women might have been

happy to allow these men to control and dictate what happened to them and their unborn children, but I wasn't those women and was not about to start now. If my actions were hurting Armando, well too bad. He was a big boy and would have to deal with it. I couldn't lose focus on what mattered the most. Armando was a criminal, a killer, and I would not feel sorry for him.

I turned my head and kissed his bare chest as I ran my hand down his stomach. He took a deep breath in as he started to wake up. His hand on my left arm started to rub it; I knew he was trying to clear the tiredness from his mind. A quick glance at the bedside table let me see his phone; it was just after nine. We didn't get much sleep last night, but surprisingly, I wasn't all that tired. I didn't even feel sick, which was a delightful surprise.

"Morning," I said as I continued kissing his chest.

"Morning, he said with exhaustion edging his voice, giving it a nice gruff tone that shot into my core and made it pulse. I had to admit that I had not been this horny before in my life. These extra pregnancy hormones were putting my sex drive into overdrive.

I shifted and started to kiss my way down his chest and over his stomach. I wiggled down, and instead of slowly teasing him, I went for what I wanted. I wanted to feel him in my mouth, and that was exactly what I would do. I instantly wrapped my mouth around the tip of his cock and began sucking on it. He gave a deep moan at the pleasure and

surprise of it. I wasted no time working my way down the length of his cock until I was balls deep. I felt his breathing pick up as he ran his fingers through my hair and moved them back so he could watch me work on him. I was good at this and quickly applied pressure to all his sensitive areas. It wasn't long before he was moaning and writhing beneath me.

“Shit, baby, you're gonna make me cum if you don't stop,” he warned me.

I knew I could have pulled back but I needed to taste him. I worked his cock faster and felt him harden within my mouth. I gave a deep moan, sending vibrations throughout his body. He emitted a deep groan as his hips snapped up and pulsed within my mouth. I moaned as his taste hit my tongue; I easily swallowed what he had for me. When he stopped pulsing, I didn't pull back. Instead, I continued working his sensitive shaft to get him fully hard again. I felt him pull my head off, pulling me in for a rough kiss as he flipped us.

I felt his hands on my stomach as he moved my shirt up. We pulled back just enough for him to remove it. He began to kiss down my neck and worked his way toward my breasts. He took each of my nipples into his mouth; I was instantly moaning and arching up into his touch. He continued his journey down my body, only to stop at my left hip to suck hard on it, causing me to give a deep and needy moan as he left behind a hickey. I was already worked up, and I was in desperate need of more.

“Armando,” I whined.

“Yes, baby?” he asked, and I could feel the smirk on his face as he pulled my shorts and panties down. Before he went, he quickly rid me of the articles and started to place kisses along my inner left thigh.

“Please,” I moaned.

“Please, what?” he teased. He knew damn well what I was asking for.

“You know what,” I whined, hoping he wouldn’t make me say it. I might die if he did.

He kissed his way up my inner thigh and worked his way over to my core. I gave a deep moan as I felt his tongue work its way up my folds and finally grant me the contact I desperately wanted.

“Is that what you want, baby?” he teased.

“Oh, yes,” I answered breathlessly.

He gave me another long lick and moaned as he spoke. “You taste like honey, baby.”

I closed my eyes as his tongue worked me over. I’ve had past boyfriends do this, but none made it feel this good. This man had a magical tongue, taking my body to new heights. I felt him slip a finger inside me, and I arched back as a loud moan erupted. I had to grip the sheets to keep my hands from running through his hair.

I could feel my climax rising, and I knew it wasn’t going to be long before he was making me cum. He slipped in another finger and was instantly seeking out my sweet spot. I couldn’t

stop my hips from wiggling as I felt heat deep within my stomach. He pulled back slightly as he spoke in a husky voice flooded with arousal.

“That’s it, baby, cum for me. Let me taste that sweet nectar.”

He went and sucked on my clit; less than a minute later, black spots danced in front of my eyes. My whole body tensed as I came hard. He pulled his fingers out, and I could feel his tongue licking and sucking as each pulse shook through me. Armando moved back as he spoke, as my body started to come back down.

“I could taste you all night.”

He started to kiss his way back up my body; it only sent more waves of pleasure. I heard some shuffling next to me. I figured he was grabbing a condom. He pulled back and I watched as he slipped the condom on. I quickly opened my legs to make room for him, and he leaned in and pressed his tip against my entrance. He shot me a quick look to make sure I was ready. I was beyond ready. I wrapped my legs around his hips to pull him closer to me.

That was all he needed before he slowly pushed inside of me. He kept his pace slow as he moved deeper, inch by inch. Once he was buried inside me, he paused to allow me time to adjust to his size.

“Damn, you’re big,” I said with a smile as I felt full with him inside of me. He felt amazing in me, and I didn’t think I would ever tire of being with him.

He bent forwards and began to place a few kisses along my neck as I adjusted to his size. After a moment, I spoke.

“You’re good to move.”

He sat back up and looked down at me as he started to pull out. Then once he was almost completely out, he slowly pushed back in. He kept his pace slow. Once he felt that I was adjusted enough, he started to pick up his pace. I squeezed my legs around him tighter, rocking my hips in time with his thrusts. Despite the fact that we had already both come, our need was still too great to drag this out. We rocked against each other at a rapid pace.

He ensured he was buried deep inside me with every hard thrust. The room was filled with our moans and heavy pants. I could feel the heat pooling within my stomach once again, and with a final thrust against my sweet spot, I gave a small scream as I fell off that cliff.

“Armando!”

The tightening of my walls and the added heat from my cum became too much for him to handle as he snapped his hips forward and came hard with a long groan. Both of our bodies pulsed around each other, neither seeming to end. He placed his hand by my head as he fought to catch his breath. My legs gave out, and I could feel them trembling as they rested against the bed.

“Damn,” I said with a lopsided smile as I tried to get my brain to work.

“You can say that again, baby,” he said as he kissed my shoulder.

“Now I’m tired again,” I slightly giggled.

“You relax and I will make us some breakfast,” he said, kissing my lips once more before slowly pulling out.

I lay there and watched as he got off the bed and headed to the garbage to get rid of the condom. It gave me a great view of his bare ass, and I had to admit, it was a great-looking ass. So far, this morning had been good and hopefully, today would end up being a good day.

Chapter Eighteen

Armando

Just after lunch, I made my way up to Natalie's room. This morning after having sex, I made us breakfast and Natalie had been relaxing in bed ever since. I was glad for some time to be alone. The nightmare from last night was still haunting me and even though the sex this morning was amazing, I needed some time to recover from the nightmare. I also needed time to get my head straight. When Natalie first wanted to have sex with me, I didn't overthink it.

I knew her hormones were part of the reason, but I also knew she planned to try and escape. Having sex with me was part of that plan. I should have said no, but she was willing and attracted me. I figured it would just be some fun. I had no intention of letting her or her baby die. What I didn't expect were the feelings starting to develop.

I had kept a thick wall between myself and the women who came and went from this house. I made sure not to get close to any of them. Half the time, I didn't even allow myself to learn

their names. It was easier not to think of them or the babies as people. It sounded terrible, but it was easier for me to think of them as products.

It was as if I were helping to move weapons or drugs. I had been doing all this to get justice for Alexis - to get every single person that Dom had hurt their justice. But, I was screwing up with Natalie by allowing myself to sleep with her and hold her at night. By allowing myself to think of her and the baby as people, and now I was risking everything just to set them free.

It was too late for me not to care about her. The feelings were already there, but I could make sure I didn't allow myself to care too deeply. She would go wherever she wanted when all of this was over and done with. I would ensure she was set up with a new ID and enough money not to worry about working ever again, but they both would be gone.

She was never going to have true feelings for me. She would never be willing to return to New York and allow me to keep running the mafia ring for my division. She wasn't going to want to raise a child within this life, not that I could blame her. A child didn't deserve to be in this life, and that was precisely why I would have left it all to Gab had I known that Alexis was pregnant. I would have walked away and handed control over to Gab, knowing he would be able to keep doing the good we do while still running things. Natalie wasn't going to be my second chance, though. She would never love or accept me, and I needed to make sure I didn't allow my heart to fall for her.

I knocked on her door, and when I heard her grant me permission to enter, I walked in and saw that she was sitting curled up in bed with a sketchpad in her lap. She had a black smudge on her face and never looked more beautiful to me.

“How are you feeling?” I asked.

“Not bad. So far, I haven’t even thrown up today,” she said with a slight smirk. It was good that she hadn’t been sick today. I was hoping that meant she was starting to turn a corner.

“Dom is on his way over here to speak with me. I need you to stay in this room. The less interaction you both have, the better.”

I was hoping she would listen to me this time around. The last time she came out when I was gone, it didn’t go well for her. I would be here this time, but that didn’t mean she would be safe or smart to be in the same room as Dom. I didn’t know why he was coming over. Normally, he didn’t check in on the women. He was coming here for a reason, and I didn’t want Natalie to overhear that reason.

“I’ll stay away. I have no interest in speaking with that monster.”

“I’ll come back up when he is gone. Are you hungry?” I didn’t know how long Dom would stay, but I hoped it wouldn’t be too long. I didn’t want to be around him any more than Natalie did.

“Not right now. Although I thought I might just have a salad for dinner.”

“We have some boneless, skinless breasts. I could barbecue them to add in,” I readily offered. I knew she had been trying to eat right, which wasn’t easy when she was constantly sick. I was more than happy to cook something that piqued her appetite.

“Ya, that sounds good. Chicken Caesar salad is one of my favorite meals,” she responded with a warm smile and I felt the warmth of it within my chest.

“We’ll do that then. I’ll be back shortly. He shouldn’t be here too long.” I hoped.

She gave me a nod and I closed the door, not bothering to lock it. I was trying to earn her trust and despite sleeping together, I knew I didn’t have it. Not locking her in was a small thing I could do to try and show her I meant no harm to her. Ironic, I know, given that she was expecting me to kidnap her baby and kill her within the next seven months. I headed back down the stairs and into the kitchen to see what ingredients we had and what items I would need Gab to pick up when he brought us some more groceries in the next couple of days.

It was busy work that I could do to get my nerves to calm back down. The longer I dealt with Dom, the harder it was for me to keep a level head. It wasn’t just the anger I felt toward him but the pain of the constant reminder of what I had lost.

The sound of the door opening brought me out of my thoughts, and I made my way toward the kitchen opening, so I would be

able to see Dom. He immediately headed into the living room, and I knew he would grab a drink. That was something else I had noticed recently: he was drinking more. Drinking, smoking, and drugs were all acceptable and expected habits for someone in the mafia. I drank, didn't smoke, and never touched a drug.

I also didn't allow my guys to do any drugs. Having a drinking problem was sometimes bad enough, but once you factor in the volatility of drugs, shit always went south. The last thing I needed was the police or Feds banging on my door because they picked up one of my guys going through withdrawal, and he said whatever they wanted to hear just to get his next fix.

Dom didn't seem to have that concern. I had seen him snorting blow with some of the guys and getting shitfaced almost every night. He was getting sloppy, and that would work in my favor.

"Dom," I simply said as I leaned against the entrance to the living room.

"Armando, you have been very helpful and loyal to me since you joined my organization. I wanted to come by and give you a token of my appreciation," he started.

He reached into his interior coat pocket and pulled out a stack of money. The paper band wrapped around told me it was ten grand. He held it out to me, and I went over and took it.

"You didn't have to do that, boss," I managed to say with an even tone.

“You have been a good worker for me. And this time around, you went above and beyond,” Dom said, with a dark smile as he went and sat down on the couch with his drink and continued. “I told you to kill Jake, but I didn’t expect you to slowly torture him. That house was a mess after you left it.”

I had a lot of regrets in my life, but what I had done to Natalie’s piece of shit father was not one of them. I had every intention of simply shooting him in the head and calling it a night. However, the way Jake acted, he genuinely seemed confused and surprised that I was even there. He actually thought he could hand over his pregnant daughter and would be able to go back to gambling in the many underground dens within the city.

It made my stomach turn just looking at him. Seeing him act like he had done nothing wrong by sacrificing his daughter and grandchild. I couldn’t keep my emotions in check, and I made sure he knew exactly what he was worth. I ensured his death was slow and agonizing because that was what he deserved.

“I didn’t like the back talk he was giving me. He was smug, acting like he was worth something and now had value to the organization. I wanted to make sure he knew that he was worthless,” I responded, taking a seat in the chair opposite him.

Dom held his arms open slightly as he spoke, “No judgment here. It’s a shame I didn’t get to see it. I bet it was beautiful work. I wasn’t sure about you at first, Armando, but you have

shown me that I can trust and rely on you. There's going to be a shake-up soon in the organization. Some other guys are becoming a liability, and I firmly believe in promoting from within. I think you would do very well in a senior management position."

A senior manager was what we called the right-and left-hand man. A Don's number two and three. If he was looking for me to move up, it meant he had a structure in his organization or was trying to create one. This surprised me because, to my knowledge, Leo and Alberto were the two men closest to him.

"I am happy to do whatever is required of me, boss," I simply said. If I moved up, that might give me a better chance at getting a shot at him while he was alone. I didn't care if it was Leo or Alberto who was about to be killed; it was irrelevant. They were both disgusting garbage that deserved to be killed.

"That's what I like about you. I'll be in touch," he said as he stood, and I did as well. I walked towards the door with him and once he was gone, I let out a deep breath. I felt like I needed a shower just by being in his presence.

"You tortured my father."

I shot my head behind me to see Natalie standing on the landing of the stairs. I had no idea how long she had been there, but the pain and hurt radiating off her told me she had been there long enough to hear most of the conversation. Including the one piece of information, I had hoped she would never discover. I felt my heart break in my chest at the look on

her face. She now knew the whole truth; it was the last nail in my coffin.

Whatever good she had seen within me over the past few days was gone, and I knew it would never return. I had become the monster she suspected I was, and I could do nothing to change that now.

Chapter Nineteen

Natalie

I knew Armando had told me to stay in my room, but I had no intention of doing that. I wasn't going to allow myself to be seen, but I also wasn't going to miss out on an opportunity to gather information. I needed to know more about Dominic; the best way I could do that was to listen in whenever he was here. I hoped he wouldn't be here too often because I risked him catching me. It became hard to pretend Armando was just some hired thug when Dominic was here giving him orders like killing people.

I didn't know what I had expected to hear, but it wasn't Dominic gloating about how Armando tortured my father to death. A chill ran throughout my body. I knew Armando had killed my father. I knew it was going to happen the moment I was brought here. He was a loose end, and there was no way that Dominic was going to allow someone with a gambling problem to walk around and potentially get picked up by the police. Someone like my father was a detective's wet dream.

Someone who would be willing to do anything if it got them out of jail time.

I didn't expect for him to be tortured to death. That had taken it to another level, one I was uncomfortable with. It made me sick to my stomach. All of this was making me sick. I had slept with the man that didn't just kill my father but had tortured him to death. He had come back covered in my father's blood, and he didn't even seem bothered by it. Regardless of what happened between my father and me, he didn't deserve to die like that. He didn't deserve to die. I would have loved for him to spend the rest of his miserable life behind bars...to be trapped with criminals and have no say in what he did with his life. To have to spend the rest of his life looking over his shoulder and on edge because that's exactly what was going to happen to me.

When I managed to get away from here, I would always be looking over my shoulder, waiting for these men to show up and try to kill my child and me. I was never going to be able to relax and be at peace. I would have to always be prepared to leave in a single moment and live a life where I would go by a false name and never be able to have a real relationship at the risk of putting him in danger. It wasn't a life that either myself or my child deserved, but it was better than the alternative that awaited us if we stayed.

The second Dominic left, I didn't even wait for Armando to notice me. I had to know what happened. I had to know why he went to the level that he did, and I had to make sure he knew exactly what I thought of him.

“You tortured my father?” I had wanted to say the words with strength but couldn’t keep the pain from escaping.

Shock and hurt flashed through his eyes. He hadn’t been expecting me to be behind him, hearing some of what he had been talking about. He had told me to stay in my room, like a good girl, but he should have known better by now that I don’t do as I am told. I had to admit that I was surprised by the hurt in his eyes. Why would it hurt him if I knew the truth?

“Natalie,” he started but paused and seemed at a loss for words.

“I guess there isn’t anything you could really say to that. No way to justify what you did,” I said, disgusted at just the sight of him.

“Justified? I don’t have to justify anything to you. Your piece of shit father served you up to Dom on a silver platter. That baby you are carrying, its father is one of the guys that work for Dom; he sent him to prey on you to get you knocked up. Your father knew all of that, and he allowed it to happen instead of paying his debt. He deserved everything done to him. I am sorry you had to find out, but I am not sorry I did it.”

Gone was the hurt and uncertainty from his voice. The man who stood before me was equally dangerous as the man he answered to. It would have been smarter for me to go upstairs and keep a distance between us, but I have never been the type of woman to back down or wield to a man. And I sure as shit was not about to start now.

“You act like you are any better than Dominic, but you are just like him. You can lie to yourself all you want, but you can’t lie to me. You are a monster, just like he is,” I seethed.

I couldn’t believe I had allowed myself to have sex with him. It was bad enough that he had killed my father, but he had tortured him to death and I had slept with him. My skin was crawling, and now I was going to need a new plan for an escape because there was no way I was ever going to be able to stomach being touched by him now.

“You don’t know anything about me. Do you think you have me all figured out because you know about Alexis? You have no idea why I am here, what I am fighting for. You don’t get to judge me. You don’t get to compare me to that piece of shit,” he snapped, moving closer.

I pushed off from the stairs and met him head on. I was not going to back down to let him try and justify anything to me. He might have been through some terrible shit in his life, but he also chose to stay within this life. He could have left plenty of times, but he chose to stay.

“You made a choice to stay here and work for Dominic. You have no one to blame but yourself. And don’t try and make it seem like you’re sacrificing by being here. You aren’t fighting for anything.” He wasn’t some white knight in hiding. He made his choice, and now he wanted to try and justify his actions. Too fucking bad, it wasn’t going to happen, not with me.

“I hate working for that piece of shit. I’m only here to kill him for what he did to Alexis,” he snapped and I could see the shock filtering through his eyes. He hadn’t been planning on telling me this.

“What did he do to Alexis?” I couldn’t help but ask. I didn’t expect any of this to come out of his mouth. If he wanted to kill Dominic, why was he doing all this when he could shoot him in the head? He could have already done that in the living room. Why go through working for him?

I could see the conflict in his eyes as he turned away from me. He was clearly debating if he should tell me or not. We were already through the looking glass, though, and I wasn’t about to let him walk this back. My life was on the line. The life of my unborn baby was on the line, and I was not going to let him withhold information from me.

He lost that power the second we had sex. I reached out and grabbed a hold of his forearm as he turned to go into the living room. He shot me a look out of the corner of his eye and I couldn’t tell if he was angry at me for the contact or not.

“This is my life on the line. I am sorry for what happened to Alexis and your unborn child. But they are dead and me and my baby are alive. I don’t care what the other women before me did. I am not them. I will not lie down and let myself be killed and my baby be ripped from my arms. I don’t have to tell you for you to know that. You want Dominic dead for some reason, but I can help.”

Did I want to help kill someone? No, but maybe there was something I could do so that Armando could finally kill him. I didn't care as long as we got out of here alive. That was the only goal that mattered.

"You can't help. It's not safe for you to," he said gentler as he moved towards the living room. I let him go, but I followed after him.

"Why do you want to kill him? What did he do to Alexis?" I pressed. I needed to know the truth. I needed to know if there were some redeeming qualities to him. Something that would show me he was more than some killer.

He let out a deep sigh that was dripping with pain and exhaustion as he dropped onto the couch. He was quiet for a moment. I wasn't too sure if he was actually going to tell me or not. I went and sat down on the coffee table in front of him as he began to speak.

"I was born into this world but wasn't born here. I was born in New York City. I run the mafia there. A year roughly before Alexis and I began dating, I found her out this way when I was on a trip. Dom picked her up when she was only a young teenager. She lived on and off the street because of her abusive parents. He saw a beautiful young girl without anyone to protect her and he kidnapped her. Tossed her into his human trafficking ring, got her addicted to heroin and that was her life for roughly six years before I found her. I don't know what it was, but there was something different about her when I first saw her at a party."

“You came down to see Dom?” I asked, just trying to process everything he had said so far. He was a Don in New York City. He wasn’t some muscleman; he was the man that was in charge of his own Mafia.

“No, I didn’t know him then. There’s a good number of factions within the States spread out. Some are Italian and others are Russian. We do our best to avoid the Russians and I make a habit of not interacting with other Italian Dons.”

“Why not? I would have assumed it would be like one huge family. You all have to be related to each other, right?”

I wasn’t too sure how it all worked. Did Italians just pop up one day and decide they will form a mafia? Or were they all connected to a head family in Italy?

“Not quite. At one point in the beginning everyone within your mafia was related to the Don in some capacity. Sometimes it was a close relationship; others it was one of the guy’s third cousin’s kids. Each could be connected back to one of the Head families in Italy. Over the generations though things have changed. The old timers died, some of the head families all died off or the ones that were left were either females or the next in line had no interest in keeping it going.

“Over time, the mafias started to recruit Italians from any family. Now it is all a muddled mix of families and no two mafia factions get along. There is a level of respect, but if you were bleeding out in the street in front of them, they would step right over you and go about their day,” he said with a small shrug.

“I can’t believe I am going to say this, but the mafia got worse since the older generation died off?”

I found it hard to believe that things could get worse, but from what Armando was talking about, it sounded better.

“Yes and no. You have to take the good with the bad. Back in the day there were a lot of hired hits, but the old-timers had a different level of respect. When they said something, you listened, and no one dared to go against them. They all grew up together so they got along. It was different factions coming together to form a huge mafia organization. They were more violent, though. If you were one day late on a payment, someone broke your legs. A week and you were being tortured.”

“Fuck, and now?”

“With the new timers, there’s less respect. They will do what they want unless they know that something bad will happen to them if they step out of line. There is no community like before. Each mafia is on their own and there is more gun violence, but it’s generally from some of the young guns being hot-headed and letting their pride take over.

“Businesses shifted from hired muscles and hitmen to trafficking in anything and gambling dens. There’s no trust anymore; anyone could snitch. Anyone could stab you in the back. So, in a way it’s better, but in some ways the old timers had a lot of things right,” he answered, as he held his hands out for a second in an I don’t know fashion.

“It sounds complicated. Why did you come down here the first time?” If I were to hear him out, I wanted the full story. He let out a deep breath before he told me his story.

Chapter Twenty

Armando

“My father had his hand in a lot of different businesses. None were legal. He had work for hitmen, muscle for hire, gambling dens, guns and drug trafficking. The bulk of our revenue came from the trafficking and hits. He had been mentoring me to take over since I was young. I saw things that no child should ever see. I think he figured that I would become immune to the violence if he started young enough.

“It would become natural to me, and I wouldn’t have a problem doing it when I was older. Only, all I saw was violence. I didn’t see any value to the actions. All my father did was leave destruction in his wake. Once he was finally dead, everything went to me. I slowly started to make changes. I weaned us out of the trafficking rings for both guns and drugs.”

That was not a good time for me. Many of the guys were furious that I was taking us away from that extreme amount of money. I didn’t care, though because money wasn’t everything

to me. It wasn't worth what the weapons and drugs were doing to people. And it wasn't worth the risk of being arrested either.

"How long did that take?" Natalie asked.

"Roughly six months. It had to be handled carefully. We were serious runners, so I had to find suitable replacements for them. Many of my guys weren't happy about it, and some had to be *fired*. However, as the money started to come in from the gambling dens and more security positions, they were good with it."

"Why did you pull away from that?"

"A couple of reasons. The first was because of the destruction they cause people. I hated knowing we were supplying drugs that would be given to twelve-year-olds to be sold on street corners or in their schools. And the guns were the same thing. Every time I read about a mass shooting or a school shooting, I couldn't help but wonder if that gun came from one of the loads we ran. I didn't want to keep living with that guilt. Not being caught by the feds transporting guns and drugs was safer. It would be huge federal time for all of us. It just wasn't worth it to me."

"I can understand the risk of jail being high. I don't know much about transporting illegal goods across state lines, but I have to imagine there are any number of risks along the way. Multiple wanted felons have been arrested and given life in prison because they got pulled over for speeding or a broken taillight."

“That’s right. The risks are very high when you are dealing with trafficking. Now I focus on gambling dens, much like ones that Dominic runs. I am in the process though, or I was before I came here, in turning the illegal gambling dens into legal ones. I want to take us legit. Eliminate unnecessary violence and the risk of being arrested. Something from the past could still come up, but we wouldn’t be adding new charges. Some of my guys aren’t too happy about it, but we would actually make more money going legit then taking the illegal route. The mafia is considered organized crime. I would just prefer for us to be more organized. I started to put things in motion when I got with Alexis. I knew I would marry her and one day have a family. I didn’t want a child growing up in this world. They would have to worry and be scared that one night their front door would be kicked in and their dad would be dragged out in handcuffs.”

That was my biggest fear, or it had been. I didn’t want my child to have to go through the nightmares that I did. My father was never arrested, but I had seen things so much worse than him being arrested. I wasn’t going to put my child through that.

“Which brings us back to my original question, what brought you out this way?”

“Research. Some of the best private clubs and legal gambling dens are in town. I suspect that is why Dom focuses more on his trafficking ring and uses his gambling dens to get his victims. I don’t have to tell you what lengths desperate people

will go to.” The reminder that her father had put her in this position was enough to cause my anger to boil.

“I went to a party at a private club. I didn’t know it was one that Dom supplied girls for. Alexis was one of the girls and I could see how miserable she was. She was thin, barely a hundred pounds, and about your height. There was nothing to her. I could tell she was strung out. But then I looked around and noticed that most women there didn’t want to be there. I left and went back to my hotel room. I couldn’t stop thinking about Alexis though, no matter how hard I tried.”

“You went back for her,” she quickly stated.

“I did. She was in a side alley with a guy four times her age, groping all over her. She was so high she could barely stand. I knocked him out and brought her back to my hotel. I don’t know what it was about her, but I felt like I needed to help her. It was rough, but I got her back to New York and got her sober. I learned what she had gone through and how she had ended up in that club. We didn’t start a relationship right away. It was almost a year since she had been living with me. I had done what I could for her. I made sure she went to meetings and counseling to try and overcome her trauma. I thought she had gotten better. I knew she would always have to fight against what happened to her, but I thought we were winning the fight.”

I was never going to get over the guilt I felt. I can’t help but feel like I should have seen something. I should have seen the signs, but I missed them. Gab had said there were no signs and

no one could have seen it coming, but I was her boyfriend. I was the man she said she loved. She was the woman I wanted to marry and have children with. There had to be signs. Even if no one else saw them, I should have. Out of everything within her life, I should have seen the signs.

Natalie reached over and placed her hand over mine. “I’m not a professional, but I think people often don’t know anything is wrong until it’s too late. People who are struggling with mental health, they hide it. They don’t want others to see them as weak or a burden. And I’m not saying you would have viewed her like that, but she probably didn’t want you to know she was struggling. She could have been worried that you would worry about her or she would let you down. When someone gets to a place that dark, they can’t see the light, and all they can think about is ending the pain.”

“I wouldn’t have looked at her differently. I loved her. I would have done anything for her. I would have fought for her. After she killed herself, the doctor told me that I might feel guilty and want to blame someone. He said that when someone kills themselves, no one is to blame; it was an unfortunate incident. He was wrong, though, because Dom was the one to blame for all of Alexis’s pain. He was the one who put her in that life. He saw a young teenage girl with no one to protect her and took advantage of it. The only way to ensure Alexis gets justice is for Dom to die - for her and every single woman and child that came before and after her.”

“So, we kill him.”

I couldn't help but be shocked by her words or the seriousness in her tone. She meant every bit of those four words, and it was wrong coming from her mouth. She shouldn't be in this world. She shouldn't have to see this darkness. She shouldn't be talking about killing someone. It was wrong, and I wanted to protect her from this, but now I couldn't. All I could do was ensure she was safe while I cared for Dom.

"I kill him and you stay here where you are safe. I know you have been trying to plan an escape since you got here. And I know sex with me was part of it." She was about to talk, but I didn't need her to apologize or anything for it. "It's fine. You are doing everything you can to protect your child, which is more than any other woman who has come here. I went into a sexual relationship with you with my eyes wide open. It was fun while it lasted," I said warmly.

I knew the sex between us would now be over, and I was ok with that. The emotions and the attachment I had developed for her were surprising and were causing me pain. I didn't want to lose our shared connection, and I was afraid that was exactly what would happen moving forward.

"How long have you been working for Dominic?" Natalie asked, not touching on the sexual aspect being over, only confirming that we were taking a huge step back.

"A few years and before you ask, it's not as simple as shooting him in the head and calling it a day. If any of his guys discover who I am, who Gab is - my right-hand man and best friend - they could come for us. They could bring everyone they know

to New York City and start a war. A war that will result in the death of innocent people, and that's not something I can allow to happen. I didn't know about all of this," I said, as I moved my index finger in a circle pointing upward.

"I found out after Dom took us on. I haven't had a window where I could kill Dom and none of his guys could pin it back onto me. Gab is trying to help me find that window. He is aware of your medical background and that we need to get you out of here before your second trimester ends."

"Are you close?"

"I think I am finally on the road to being close. Dom is looking to eliminate some of his higher-ranking guys. He wants me to be his second or third in command. It will give me more access to him. More time for us to be alone in an area, where it could be a hit from a rival crew. With what he does with the trafficking, he is stepping on a lot of toes from local gangs, the Russians and cartels. Any of them could kill him. I just need the right location and to get him there without anyone knowing or seeing us."

"And you said Gabriele is working on that?"

"He is. The best thing you can do is stay away from Dom and the other guys. Don't give him a reason to hurt you. After he is dead, I will get you out of here and set you up with a proper false ID for you and the baby. And I'll set you up anywhere, even out of the country. You and your baby will be safe and free to live your life. I promise you that."

I was hoping Natalie would listen to me. She needed to listen and trust me. If nothing else, she needed to trust that I would protect her, even if she didn't like me. Before she could say anything, my phone went off. I pulled it out and saw that it was Dom. I held my finger to my lips so she wouldn't say anything. The last thing I needed was for Dom to hear her.

"Dom," I said as I answered.

"I need you at the compound," Dom demanded.

"I'll be there as soon as I can. I'll call one of the guys to take over watch and then head out. I'll be there within thirty."

Dom ended the call without saying anything else and I knew something was happening.

"What is it?" Natalie asked, picking up on my distress.

"I don't know. Dom wants to meet. I have to go. I'll call Gab, and once he gets here, I'll head out. Are you ok?"

I knew it was a ridiculous question, but I had to make sure she would be okay with Gab and everything we had just discussed. She was going to need time to process everything she had just learned.

"I will be. I think I'm gonna go lie down."

I gave her a nod because there really was nothing else I could say. I had to give her time and just hope that by the end, she understood why I've had to do all of this.

Chapter Twenty-One

Natalie

Lying on my bed, my mind was going a mile a minute. I had heard the front door open and close a couple of times just fifteen minutes ago, and I knew that meant Gabriele was here and Armando was gone. None of this was what I had been expecting. I didn't know what to think about what I had learned. My mind still couldn't understand that Armando had tortured my father to death, and I doubt I would ever move past it.

I understood that sometimes the end justifies the means, I do, but I didn't think this was one of those situations. I understood that killing Dominic was a delicate process and had to be handled correctly. At the same time, I felt it could have already been handled. We weren't talking about killing the President, as this was one piece of shit scumbag using women to profit off. Why hadn't he killed him yet?

I needed more answers, more insight. With that in mind, I got off the bed and left my room. I went down the stairs and saw

Gabriele sitting at the island countertop with a cup of coffee, scrolling along on his phone. He looked up when he heard footsteps and gave me a warm smile. I had to admit, I liked Gabriele. He seemed different compared to some of the men I had met. He was certainly different from what I thought the guys within the mafia would be like.

“Hey, how are you feeling?” he asked.

“Ok, considering,” I answered, as I went and sat down across from him. “Did Armando tell you what happened before you got here?”

“He did. We’ve been best friends our whole lives. We don’t have secrets between us. He also felt it would be best for me to be aware of what was happening to keep a better eye on you.”

“So, I don’t try to run away?”

“No, he knows you aren’t going to try and run. You still wouldn’t be able to get past the gate and you have nothing that you need to go on the run with. He’s worried about how you feel after everything you have learned, specifically about your father,” he explained gently.

“I don’t know how I feel about that,” I admitted, breaking eye contact and looking down.

“You don’t have to know right now. You got a bomb dropped on you, you’re allowed to need time to process and reflect on what you feel. I’m happy to talk it out with you if you want.”

“It probably seems stupid to you. For me to be upset about the manner in which my father was killed. Part of my mind and

even my heart understands why Armando did what he did. But the other part of me, the daughter part, is hurt and furious that my father had to die that way. I don't know how to connect the two different versions of Armando that I have seen together. I can't picture the gentle and kind man he has shown me to the man who could torture someone to death like it is nothing."

I was struggling with this the most. I was trying to figure out which Armando was the real one. Knowing that he had done this, I don't know if I could move forward. The man I had come to rely on for emotional support could torture someone. I knew it shouldn't matter that he tortured or killed someone, but there was a difference to me. Anyone could kill someone.

I could kill someone. That wasn't out of the realm of possibilities, especially if my child's life depended upon it. However, not everyone could torture someone. Not everyone could listen to someone screaming in pain and begging for mercy and keep going. It didn't seem like it bothered Armando; that spoke volumes of the type of man he was.

"It's not nothing to him. I know he comes across as cold-hearted, a merciless killer, but it bothers him. It didn't happen overnight; it's from a childhood of abuse. And I know you could argue that he could have left and didn't need to stay after eighteen, but you need to realize that he couldn't leave. There is no leaving this world alive, especially for the future heir. His father was horrific to him. When his mother was killed, his father started to groom him. He's had to see people get tortured from a very young age. His father had his own guys

lightly torturing him from his thirteenth birthday and it got worse the older he got.”

I felt a knot within my stomach starting to form. I knew from what little Armando had said about growing up that things were rough for him. I didn't expect for it to be as rough as this. Your parents are supposed to protect you. They are supposed to love you and be there to make sure you don't get hurt. They aren't supposed to be the ones to cause you pain. They aren't supposed to be the ones you fear, and it sounded like that was precisely what Armando's father had been.

“His own father actually had him tortured?” I asked softly.

“He did. He called it light torture because nothing was done to him that couldn't heal. But your mind doesn't know the difference when you are a child or a young teenager. He used to be a really sweet kid. He was always taking photos and he loved to read. He had an eye for business; he was always coming up with new businesses to open. When he told me he wanted to take the organization legit, I wasn't surprised. He's always wanted to be away from this life, and I was happy to help him take the organization legitimately. That is still the plan once Dominic is taken care of. The man you see, the man who has taken care of you, is who Mando is. At his core, that's the man he is.”

I could see that, but it was hard to see anything but what he had done to my father. “What he did to my father, though.”

“I know that is a huge pill to swallow. He cares about you. I think it shocked and scared him how much he cares for you.

After everything with Alexis, he saw your father as a potential Dominic to you. Someone who has caused you pain and put you in the position to be killed. Put you and your baby at risk. I think it triggered his trauma with Alexis and he snapped. I'm not justifying his actions at all. You are entitled to feel however you wish to feel about it. I just don't think he did it because he wanted to. I think he felt like the best way to give you justice was to kill your father that way."

Part of me could understand that, but it was still hard to accept. Like Gabriele said, it was a massive pill to swallow, and it was not going down easily - that was for sure. It was going to take time. I needed time to sort out my feelings because I had feelings for Armando. I swore I wouldn't allow myself to feel anything for him, and yet here I was, feeling. I hated that I had allowed what I felt for him to grow into something more. It was not a good place for me to be, and I didn't know what to feel about it.

"I don't know. I need time. I'll behave and do what needs to be done to ensure Dominic is killed. But I have to get out of here as soon as possible. I need proper medical care."

That was my biggest fear. I've had zero tests so far. Anything could be wrong with the baby and I wouldn't know until it was too late. I had to get in to see a real doctor and it needed to be ASAP.

"We know you do. We're doing our best to get you out of here within the next sixty days. I know it will be frustrating for you.

I know you probably figure we could shoot him in the head and call it a day, but it's not that simple."

"Armando explained why you have to be careful with killing Dominic. That it could blow back to you and everyone back in New York. I understand it, but that doesn't change that it is frustrating."

I wish it didn't have to be handled like this. I wish Armando could have just shot Dominic in the head, and it would be over and done with. The uncertainty of all of this only made my stress levels rise, which wasn't good for the baby. I hated waiting around and letting other people act in my freedom. I wanted to help. I wanted to take matters into my own hands but couldn't.

I had to wait around for some man to swoop in and save me, like I was some damsel in distress. But this wasn't a romance movie. At any given second, something could go wrong and me and my baby could be killed. As much as I was going to hate it, I would have to keep biding my time and waiting for Armando to make his move so I could escape.

"I know I can't fully understand what you are going through. I've never been in your position and obviously I never will be, but I do know what it feels like to have to wait for your life to start and I am very sorry that you have to endure this," he said with deep sincerity to his voice.

"I'll endure whatever I have to if, in the end, I get to have my baby." And that's really what it came down to. There wasn't anything I wouldn't do if it meant I could have my baby and

be a mom. It was everything to me. “Armando said he could get me new identification after all this was over. Is that really possible?” I wanted to believe him, but it was hard because that meant hope, and I wasn’t ready to truly start hoping yet.

“It is and he can make it happen. We have a lot of connections from the organization. He can get false IDs, even passports that can pass inspection so you can fly. He’ll get you all set up with everything you need, including a home and enough money so you won’t have to worry about working again.”

“I have no interest in his money.”

I wasn’t about to take any money from him. It would be tempting, obviously, but I wanted to work. I wanted to support myself and show my child the value of hard work. I had no idea what I would be doing, but I wasn’t going to sit around and let someone else pay my way.

“Ya, he’s going to be giving you some regardless. He’s not going to have you out on your own with a soon-to-be baby and no money. That’s going to be something to make peace with. If it helps, you could look at it like compensation for the trauma you have endured,” he said with a slight shrug.

Like there was any amount of money that would make what they have done right. I knew this wasn’t Armando’s and Gabriele’s fault that I was in this position. That landed firmly on my father’s and Dominic’s plate. Still, being kidnapped and trapped here was always going to be something I carried with me, and no amount of money was going to make it right. The

only thing that would be my freedom; all I could do was hope it came sooner rather than later.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Armando

I pulled into the compound, and my stomach instantly twisted into tight knots. I hated being here. It was one of the housing compounds the organization uses to keep the women within the sex trafficking ring. I hated being here. Dom's organization had five compounds just like this one. All of them held multiple rundown houses one step above a shack.

The women would be housed and kept in them when not working in one of the private clubs. None of the women within Dom's trafficking ring worked the streets because he prided himself on being high-end, meaning that all women had to look good. It wasn't that simple, though, because he also made sure they were all addicted to heroin, so the turnaround was rather high. If they weren't overdosing by accident or on purpose, they were killed because they no longer fit Dom's standards.

Every six months, the women would be transported to a new compound so the women didn't get too comfortable with each

other. There had been problems in the past with them banding together to try and escape. If they were all shuffled around and put in a new place, they wouldn't be able to escape, and it would take time for them to create new connections with each other. New girls would be filtered into the different compounds when they came up.

I hated being here. I hated seeing the look in the women's eyes as they had a hood placed over their head and loaded up into moving vans. There were only two looks: either terrified of what could happen to them or they were dead. I didn't know what look was worse.

If they were scared, I felt like an asshole for bringing that fear into them, but it meant they felt something. With the dead look, they had completely shut themselves off from all emotions and the world. They were defeated and had accepted their fate. In a lot of ways, that was worse.

I pulled my truck up and parked it along one of the box trucks. I pushed down my emotions. I couldn't let any of the other guys see me upset, and I couldn't let the women see it. If they thought I had an issue with what was being done to them, they would try and get me on their side, much like Natalie. Unlike Natalie, they would be horribly punished and only wish they were dead. With Natalie, we were alone as there was no one there to watch our interactions. The best way to keep these women safe was for them to believe I was just like every other asshole here.

I exited my truck and headed toward where a few guys were gathered, waiting for orders. Normally I only did this with Leo or Alberto being in charge, but this time around Dom had placed me in charge. I knew he was testing me, wanting to see how well I did in a more leadership role. I also suspected he would have one of the guys briefed and told to push the limits to see how I handled the situation.

“You all waiting for a written invitation?” I asked, as I walked over to them.

Their heads snapped my way. I could tell they were a mixture of confused and annoyed. Not everyone cared for me. Some of the guys that had been around longer felt like I had wormed my way into their spot. It didn't matter that they were complete idiots and not senior management material. If they had worked for me, they would all have been fired by now. Though, I wouldn't have actually allowed them into the organization in the first place.

“Waiting on Leo,” one of the guys said.

“He's not coming. Get a fucking move on,” I snapped. I didn't want to be here, but if I was going to be here then I wasn't going to tolerate these guys dicking around.

I began to walk through the compound, keeping an eye on the guys as they grabbed the women, securing the hoods before loading them up into the moving vans. I had to turn my eyes away from a couple of women who were fighting against one of the guys. They were the newer women and weren't ready to accept their fate.

I hated having to do this, having to be a part of this. I wanted to help them, but I didn't know how. I hated that I didn't know how to help them. How to fix this. After I took care of Dom, I would need to figure out how to resolve the issue. Right now, my main focus needed to be on killing Dom.



Walking into the house, I let out a shaky breath. These nights were always the hardest on me, but normally I could contain my emotions better. I could keep the wall firmly in place and not let any of it affect me. It was almost impossible tonight to keep myself separated from my surroundings and the emotions stirred up within me. I kept seeing Alexis' face on each woman. I felt like I was losing my mind and it was going to snap at any given moment.

"You ok?" Gab asked, as he came around the living room.

"Great," I responded as I slumped against the front door.

"What did he have you do?" Gab asked, and I could hear the worry in his voice.

"Just a relocation. Natalie ok?"

"Ya, she's asleep. I can stay," he offered, and I appreciated it, but I wasn't in the mood for company, not even from my best friend.

"I'm good." I forced myself to move away from the door so he could leave. I could tell he wanted to argue and stay, but he

respected my decision to be alone.

I made my way into the kitchen as I heard the front door closing. I couldn't seem to stand still. I felt like ants were crawling underneath my skin. I've never felt this way before and didn't know what to do with myself. All my emotions were bubbling up, and it was becoming too difficult to contain.

Before my mind knew what I was doing, I was reaching out, grabbing the first plate I could get and throwing it. It was quickly followed by every other dish on the counter. I swiped my arms across the island, knocking everything off it. I grabbed everything within reach and threw it to the floor as my emotions consumed me before bringing me to my knees,

Chapter Twenty-Three

Natalie

A loud bang jerked me out of a sound sleep. I didn't even remember falling asleep. I heard a couple more bangs but couldn't hear any voices. I sat there as quietly as possible, straining my ears to hear what was going on downstairs. It went deadly silent and I debated for a moment if I should go down and check out what had happened.

It might be nothing, but someone could be down there with Gabriele. I didn't hear anything that sounded like a gunshot, but that didn't mean someone wasn't down there who could hurt me. I didn't hear any footsteps, nothing indicating that someone was coming up the stairs or moving around.

I was now presented with two options. I could either stay up here and hope that no one was downstairs who shouldn't be, plus no one was hurt. Or I could go downstairs and hope that no one was down there who could be looking to cause me any harm. There was no real good option, and I had never been the type of person to sit back and hide. I scanned the room for

something I could use as a weapon, just in case I needed one. There wasn't really much that I could use.

This room was designed to keep someone in and not give them a weapon they could use against their captors. My eyes landed on the bedside lamp. It wouldn't be much, but it was better than nothing. I got out of bed and went over to quickly unplug the lamp before I picked it up and headed to the door.

Being as quiet as possible, I opened the door, thankful that it didn't squeak. I made my way out into the hallway and slowly toward the stairs. I listened to see if someone else was here with Gabriele and me, but I couldn't hear anything. When I reached the railing, I looked over and down at the living room, but could see no signs of damage, no blood, nor signs of a fight. I might have been overreacting.

Gabriele could have knocked some dishes or pots and pans down in the kitchen. I made my way down the stairs, keeping an eye on my surroundings as I descended and headed toward the kitchen. I gripped the lamp tighter in both hands as I took the last step.

I crept around the corner into the kitchen and saw dishes all over the floor; some were broken and others had survived the fall. Anything that had been on the counters was swept to the floor as well. I didn't see any blood or a body, so I was taking it as a positive sign.

I moved so I could look around the island; that was when I saw Armando sitting on the floor with his back against the wall. His knees were brought up and his arms were crossed

over the top of them with his head on his arms. He looked broken, and I was surprised by the hurt that flashed through my chest at the sight of him.

This man had been strong from the moment I met him. He had been the picture of dominance and power. It felt wrong to see him like this - broken, sitting on the floor surrounded by glass and ceramic pieces. I didn't know what he had to do last night, but whatever it was, it was bad enough that he had reacted like this.

I was surprised by my urge to make it right. To try and do something to make him feel better and take away whatever pain or stress he was currently under. I placed the lamp down on the island countertop before I made my way over to him.

I softly spoke, "Armando."

At the sound of my voice, his head snapped up. I could see he was surprised that I was here. He hadn't heard me coming down, and I mentally praised myself for my stealthy movements.

"It's late. You should be sleeping," he said, his voice rough with emotion.

"I heard some banging and wanted to ensure Gabriele wasn't bleeding out. I didn't even realize how late it was," I said, as I went over to him, tossed my leg over his, and sat down on his lap. He moved his legs to make room for me as he placed his hands on my hips. "What happened?"

"It's nothing," he instantly denied.

“You destroyed the kitchen in the middle of the night for nothing. I’d hate to see what you would do if it was something.”

I wasn’t going to let him get away with that shit. Obviously, something happened. I could understand him not wanting to tell me because of everything going on between us, but that didn’t change the fact that we were now in this together. I was still upset with him over what he had done to my father. But seeing him here right now, just looking defeated and in pain, hurt greatly. And if it hurt me, that meant I had real feelings for him, and they were not looking to be ignored. I didn’t know if I could move on from what he had done, but my heart wanted to try.

Maybe it was insane to even think about trying to have something real with Armando. If I were an outsider, I would be telling me to run the fuck away and don’t look back, but I didn’t feel that way. I didn’t want to. Maybe it was the situation we were in. Or maybe against all the odds I found the man I had been waiting for my whole life. Either way, I cared about him, and the thought of walking away from him hurt too much. For better or worse, we were in this together.

“I don’t usually lash out. Despite what some people believe, I’m not a violent person. That isn’t my natural instinct.”

“What happened tonight, then? What made you snap?”

From what I had overheard between Dominic and Armando, I knew that Dominic was looking to take out two of his highest-ranking guys. Armando might have been off doing it. I didn’t

see any injuries on him or blood anywhere. I was hoping that meant whatever he had to do wasn't too bad, but at the same time, I knew that was a false hope because if it wasn't bad, he wouldn't have reacted this way.

"It's nothing for you to worry about," he instantly denied.

"Don't do that. I'm here with you. Whether you like it or not, we are in this together, so you might as well tell me. I'll be safer if you don't keep me in the dark. Something upset you, and I would like to know what it was so I can be there for you. So, I can help you. We are way past the point for you to cowboy this shit alone." I knew he didn't have to tell me, but after everything we have been through, he might as well.

He let out a deep sigh. I knew it was more from frustration at the situation compared to myself. I could see how exhausted he was and that it had been a long night for him. Hell, it's been a long few years for him while he has been working on killing Dominic.

"Tonight, I had to supervise the women's relocation within the sex trafficking ring. Dom has multiple compounds within the outskirts to keep the women when they are not being used at the private clubs. The homes are essentially shacks that house ten or twelve women in each one. He has us blindfold them every six months and move them to another compound. We mix up the women so they don't get attached to each other and potentially try to escape. That had been a problem in the past. Some of the women who have been there for a longer period of time will plan an escape. Normally, the newer girls still

have hope, convincing them that they needed to do something.”

“I can see how that would be dangerous. The new women bring a sense of hope and energy that the older women can absorb. How do you move them? I can’t imagine they all just get into a car together.”

I hated that we were even talking about this. They were human beings, and it sounded like we were talking about dogs or something. They were people and didn’t deserve to be used like this. We had to do something about them even after Dominic was dead.

“We put hoods over their heads and stick them in a box truck before moving them. We have them sit in the box truck and use the chains to keep them in place. Most of them do as they are told. And all of them are addicted to heroin, so a good chunk are too stoned to even realize what is happening. It’s like herding zombies. It gets harder every time I have to do this, knowing that most will be dead when the next relocation comes up. I see them and all I see is Alexis. She lived in those shacks. She experienced what they are experiencing. Some of them have completely lost hope and know that no one is coming to free them. But then some of the newer women still have hope. They go to bed at night believing that tomorrow will be the day that someone rescues them. You can tell the moment they realize that no one is coming. All the light in their eyes drains away, and nothing is left but an empty shell.”

“We have to do something. We can’t leave them there after Dominic is dead. Someone else will take over, and they’ll forever be trapped there. You are saying they are waiting for someone to rescue them, but that could be us - you. You have the power to rescue them.”

I knew he was focused on getting justice for Alexis and making sure I was safe to leave here. At the same time, other victims would be left out, and we had to do something to help them. I knew that not all of them would survive. Even if we got them out this second, seventy percent would easily continue to use and prostitute themselves to pay for drugs until they die.

It was a sad statistic but very real. However, that other thirty percent stood the chance of having a life after this. Every woman within those compounds deserves a chance for a better life; whether they take the opportunity or not, they still deserve it.

“This was never why I came here, but you’re right. I can’t leave them trapped in Hell. After I kill Dominic, I will figure out how to get the women out. You’re right. We can’t leave them behind.”

“We’ll do it together. For tonight, though, you need sleep. Tomorrow we can start to figure out a plan.”

He needed sleep; we both did. I moved to stand, and he got up with me. I kept his hand in mind and guided us to the stairs. I knew we should probably clean up but fuck it. It was late and there was nothing that couldn’t wait until a decent hour. I took

us upstairs and headed into his bedroom. I was already dressed for bed, so I crawled into his bed while he got out of his clothes.

He turned the lights off before he closed the door and crossed over to me. The second he was under the covers, I shuffled over and curled up to his chest. He wrapped his arms around me and ran his hand up and down my biceps as he placed a kiss on the top of my head. It had been a long day, and I knew we had some longer ones ahead of us, but we would get there...no matter what it took.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Armando

Waking up to Natalie against me, it was one of the greatest feelings to have. I never thought I would have a chance with her again. After everything she learned about me and what I had done to her father, I figured it would have been the end. I never expected to hold her again. I didn't know what was going to happen between us. Things were complicated, to say the least, but I was hopeful that she wanted to see what would come from our connection.

I wasn't going to allow myself to get too hopeful. A lot could change between now and when she had her freedom. She might not want any reminders of her experience here. She also might not want anything to do with me and the world I lived in. Having to play a small part in that world for a short period of time, like she was doing now, was one thing. It was something completely different to live every single day. I could never ask her to; if she chose to leave, I would understand and not try and convince her otherwise.

A soft moan told me that she was waking up. I was hoping she was feeling halfway decent this morning. It was always a crap shoot as to whether she would be sick all morning or not. The doctor was set to come tomorrow to check up on her, and I prayed that everything would be fine.

I knew it wasn't perfect; there could be any number of issues we couldn't see, but I was hoping a little bit of positive thinking would work this time around. I placed a kiss on the top of her head as I spoke.

“Good morning.”

She took a deep breath before softly muttering, “Morning.”

“How are you feeling?”

“I'm ok right now. Kinda hungry.”

“What would you like?” I was more than willing to make her anything she wanted.

“Hm.” She thought for a moment before speaking again. “I wouldn't say no to an omelet and some breakfast sausage.”

“I can do that. What would you like to do today?” I was more than happy to do whatever she wanted. We were at a standstill with Dom until Gab could find a way for us to get him alone.

“I would like to relax a bit, but I also want to see about a plan for the women. If I can use a laptop with an Internet connection, that would be really helpful,” she said carefully, and I could tell she was nervous about asking.

No one outside the guards was supposed to have Internet access for obvious reasons. There was Internet within the house, but I could only access a cell phone and laptop. If it had been anyone else, I would have told them no. That there was no way in hell I would trust them with Internet access. However, Natalie had told me that she wanted to help and understood she couldn't leave until Dom was taken out. It would be worth it if there was an easier way to free the other women without putting more attention onto us and my organization.

"I can give you access to the Internet. I have a laptop. I will get breakfast going while you keep waking up. I can bring the food up here if you want," I offered.

"No, I'll come down. I just need a few minutes to get dressed and use the bathroom."

"Take all the time you need," I said, before kissing her lips and we both sat up. We went about getting ready for the day. Once I was dressed, I headed downstairs and was immediately greeted by the mess in the kitchen. I had forgotten that I had lost my shit last night. Letting out a sigh, I began to clean up the mess I had made.

I never reacted this way, but last night it felt like everything was exploding inside me and I needed to release some pent-up emotion. It wasn't my finest moment. I quickly cleaned all of this up before I started to cook breakfast. Thankfully, there were still dishes in the cupboard I could use. Just as the food was almost finished, Natalie joined me in the kitchen.

“Wow, you already cleaned everything up.”

“I’m deadly with a broom,” I teased.

“You should add that to your resume,” she teased back as she went and sat down at the island.

“Aww, you think I have a resume,” I said with a playful wink as I placed her food down in front of her.

“Do you have a laptop, Rebel?” she asked with an easy smile.

I went into the living room and grabbed my laptop before heading back into the kitchen. After unlocking it, I slid it over to Natalie as I spoke.

“What are you looking for?”

“I remembered in the shower that I read an article a couple of years ago. It was about this company that goes in and extracts people from religious cults. They also work with different federal agencies to help shut down the cults. It’s not ideal as they do it for profit,” she explained.

“But I’m a billionaire,” I simply said. I didn’t really want to involve the Feds, but an extraction company sounded interesting.

“I don’t know if it would even be possible, but I thought I would see if an extraction company were even real and if they would do something like this.”

“If they do, though, they could go in and get the women, allowing us to avoid any connection to it,” I stated with complete understanding. It was a good idea and hopefully one

that would work. I sat down beside Natalie as she started a Google search. We didn't have much time, so if we were going to get the women out once I killed Dom, we would need something set up and ready to go for when we were.



“This is exactly what we needed,” she said with a big goofy smile as she leaned her back against my chest.

The hot water felt amazing, but feeling her smooth and wet skin against my own, there were no words to describe it. I placed a kiss on the side of her head as I spoke, “I figured you would enjoy this. It’s been a long couple of days for the both of us. A small bit of normalcy is always good.”

“Hm,” she softly said.

I ran my hands up her thighs and slowly over her arms, then brought my right hand to her chin. I turned her head slightly before slowly pulling her toward me. She willingly closed the small gap between our lips and pressed them softly against mine. I instantly responded and pressed my lips harder against hers; she allowed me to deepen the kiss. I felt her tongue peel out of her mouth and touch my lips, seeking permission to enter, which I immediately granted.

She gave a soft moan as our tongues touched. I ran my hand down her body, placed it on her hip, and turned her, so she was straddling my lap. I cupped her ass and she slowly rocked against me, rubbing her pussy against my hard cock. She felt

remarkable as ever. I knew I would never grow tired of feeling her body against my own.

As we kissed, the whole world melted away. It felt as if time was standing still and there was no one but us in the world. As long as I could feel her against me, nothing plaguing us existed or mattered. I pulled back from the kiss and worked my way down her neck and over to her right breast to suck her nipple between my teeth. She arched back and gave a very deep moan. I knew her nipples were sensitive, and it only heightened her pleasure.

She rocked her hips and started to really grind against me. Both of our needs were becoming too great, and I pulled back and kissed my way back up her neck. I slipped two fingers inside of her and moaned at the feel of her wet folds. She moaned deeply as she started to rock her hips against my fingers.

I pulled back and watched as she fucked herself on my fingers. She was exquisite. Everything about her was gorgeous, and I couldn't believe she was with me. That she still wanted to be with me after everything that had happened.

“You're so beautiful.”

“Armando, I need you,” she pleaded breathlessly.

“I got you, baby.”

I slipped my fingers out, and she lifted her hips up slightly as I lined myself up with her entrance. Slowly she lowered herself down onto my cock with a deep moan. It was the sweetest

sound I had ever heard and one I was never going to get tired of hearing. Bit by bit, she lowered herself down until she was fully seated on my cock. She let out a shaky breath as she paused to allow herself a moment to adjust. I moved my hand down and started to rub her clit as I spoke.

“You feel so good. So hot and wet.”

She arched against me as she let out a mewl. She wiggled her hips for a moment before slowly lifting up and moving back down. I placed my hands on her ass and helped her while keeping her pace. Bit by bit, she began to pick up her pace. It wasn't long before our moans echoed off the tiled bathroom walls and water splashed out of the tub.

We were both already on edge; it would not be long before we fell off the cliff. I moved my hands over her hips to lift her up and slam her back down as I felt her movements getting quicker. With a sharp hit to her sweet spot, she was screaming out.

“Fuck, Armando!”

I felt her inner walls tightening around my cock, squeezing it for everything it had. The heat of her cum and the pulsing of her pussy was all too much for me. I gave a final thrust before burying myself completely inside of her and came. She gave a long moan as the heat of my own cum flooded her insides; we both continued to pulse around each other. She rested her forehead against mine.

We were both too tired to try and move, let alone speak. The room was filled with our panting breaths. After a moment, she

moved back just slightly, and I was able to look into her eyes. At this moment, I realized that I had begun to fall in love with her.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Natalie

I was a nervous wreck and had a hard time sitting down or staying still. I had been pacing around my room for the past hour. I knew I should be resting, but I couldn't get my mind to settle long enough to sit down and relax. Dr. Holland was coming by today to do another check-up on me, and I was extremely worried and nervous about what he was going to tell me.

Part of me couldn't help but think I was being ridiculous because anything he could tell me would be nothing compared to what I needed to hear. He couldn't run any tests so all he could do was check my blood pressure and listen to the baby's heartbeat. All it would tell me is if my body was ok and the baby's heartbeat was still good. He couldn't tell me if something was seriously wrong with either of us. I needed more tests and hoped I could convince him of that today.

I was brought out of my thoughts by the knock at my door and before I even could say for the person on the other side to

come in, the door was opened.

“By all means, come right in,” I said sarcastically to Dr. Holland. Apparently, privacy to this man was overrated.

“You don’t have anything I haven’t seen before. Get on the bed so I can examine you,” he ordered.

I wanted to tell him to go fuck himself, but I wanted to hear my baby’s heartbeat, so I was going to have to tolerate his shit. I went over and lay down on the bed as he went about putting on some gloves. When he was ready, he came over. I ignored the feel of his hands on my stomach as he started to examine me. I didn’t know what good any of this would be if there were no tests done.

I tolerated his examination. It all became worth it when I felt him probe my lower stomach. I held my breath and waited to hear the sweetest sound in the world. After a moment, I felt all the stress and worry released from my body as the sound of my child’s heartbeat filled the room. I had no idea if it was good or not, but the sound instantly had tears in my eyes.

Currently, this was the only way I could know that I had a baby growing inside of me. I didn’t have an ultrasound photo. I wasn’t far enough along to feel any movement. All I had to hold onto was the sound of his or her heartbeat.

“Hm,” Dr. Holland said, as he took the probe away and I was instantly missing the sound.

“Is something wrong?”

I didn't know if he was pleased or not by my baby's heartbeat. His face was unreadable and he didn't have any bedside manner at all.

"It sounds fine," he said, as he moved away, collected the various items he had, and placed them back into his bag.

"What are my odds of carrying to full-term?"

I didn't really want him to answer. I was terrified of the answer, especially in my current circumstance. Still, I had to ask because my mind wouldn't stop thinking about all of the possibilities that could go wrong.

"Do what I have told you to do. That's all I have to say."

He dismissed me as he headed out of my bedroom. What a fucking asshole. Great, now I really had no idea how well the baby was doing and what my odds were. I knew that Armando was trying to make sure I got out of here before my second trimester, but the clock was ticking and with every second, I was struggling to stay positive and not give up hope. The fear was settling in, and I could do nothing about it. I needed time to think and get my emotions back under control before I faced Armando.

I walked into the living room a couple of hours later to see Armando on the laptop. I had taken a hot bath, which had done wonders for my stiff muscles. It didn't help to ease my mind from its worries, but I felt a bit more relaxed, so I took it as a

win. I sank into the couch next to him and curled my legs up to face him.

“What are you working on?” I asked.

“Boring accounting for my own organization. Even though I am out here, I still have to ensure everything runs smoothly. Especially with some of my businesses being legal. How are you? Doc didn’t say much to me on his way out.”

“I’m scared mostly. I asked him what my odds were, but he didn’t answer. I know you are doing everything you can to get me out of here as soon as possible and I appreciate it, truly, I do. I’m still worried and scared though. Even after all of this is over and done with, I don’t even know what I would do or where I would go.”

It had been something I had been trying to figure out for a while now. I didn’t know where to go. Even now that Armando said he could send me anywhere, I didn’t know the best location. I was an American citizen, so it would be best to be within a country that recognized it and wouldn’t be a deficit. I also didn’t want to be in a country where English wasn’t their native language.

The act of having to try and learn a new language was not appealing to me. Then there was the debate between a small town or a large city. Which one would be best? I had no idea. There were pros and cons to both. All of this seemed very overwhelming to me.

“There is the option of you coming with me to New York. I can ensure you have a place for you and the baby. There are

great doctors and I can make sure you have a specialist that you need for the baby,” he offered.

I was surprised by the offer, but it wasn't an unpleasant surprise. I would be lying if I said the possibility of being in New York City wasn't appealing. I had never been there and it was breathtaking from everything I had read and seen in photos online. There would be plenty of jobs and places to live. Some of the best doctors were in New York. It was high in crime, very high, but I suppose it was something I would have to deal with in any city I picked.

“You would want me in New York?” I needed to make sure exactly why he was offering. Did he want me to be there because it was the right thing or did he want me there because he wanted me to be there. Did he still want me to be around him?

“Of course, I would. It's completely your choice where you wish to be at the end of all of this. But I would love for you to be back home with me. I'd love to see you and have you and the baby in my life. It's completely up to you, but the offer will always be there,” he said with a warm smile.

I didn't know what I wanted to do yet, but the offer was very tempting. I needed time to think about it and see if I wanted that. I would be lying if I denied that I was tempted. It looked like I had a lot more that I needed to think about, but maybe, just maybe, I had a new city to call home when all of this was behind me.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Armando

I parked my truck out front of Dom's house. He had called me an hour ago and wanted me to come by to speak with him. I didn't know what he wanted to discuss. I was still hoping he was going to tell me that Leo or Alberto needed to be killed. I had to get closer to him, and it needed to be fast. I got out and made my way toward his front door. I had only been here a couple of times when Dom had decided to throw a party there and not at one of his private clubs.

He had an excellent security system. The first time I saw it, I knew he couldn't be killed in his house. Dom's house looked nice, but I also knew it was mostly for show. He had a serious drug problem and didn't have anywhere near the amount of money people assumed he did. He should be a billionaire but wasted his money on booze and drugs and had a gambling problem. It wasn't uncommon.

A good number of Dons have vices that eat up their money. I had my own, but they were trips. I liked going to different

places and seeing the world. I had multiple real estate properties all over and even a private jet.

I headed inside and went toward the living room, where I suspected Dom would be. He didn't like working in an office but preferred to spread out at the dining room or coffee table. He and I had that in common. I didn't like sitting in an office either, trapped at a desk.

I preferred to see what was around and move about. I tended to work at my dining room table, which was twelve feet long, so I could spread out all the documents I had to work with, especially during tax time. I walked in on him snorting a line, and it took all my control not to go over there and smash his head into the table. I thought about getting him to overdose somehow. I could slip in some fentanyl and let him die that way. That went out the window when I saw that he shared his cocaine with some of the girls he would bring to the parties. I wasn't going to risk one of the girls dying.

"Hey, boss," I said, as I went and dropped down into one of the chairs within the room. It was hard and uncomfortable. Dom didn't really like to accommodate his guests. There wasn't a piece of furniture you couldn't sit in for hours.

He sat up as he sniffed and blinked a few times. I was looking forward to returning home so I could be away from all the drugs. I was sick and tired of having to deal with high people.

"I got a job for you."

"Anything you need," I easily said.

“You need to kill the girl.”

“What girl?” I asked, confused. I had been expecting him to tell me to kill Leo or Alberto, not some woman.

“The whore you’re guarding.”

I felt my stomach drop at those four words. He wanted me to kill Natalie. I wasn’t going to be doing it, but it threw a serious wrench in my plan. I thought we had time, even months, to get Natalie out safely. And now we were down to hours. Dom would be expecting me to do it right away and then get rid of her body.

I had at most until morning before he would be coming by with a new woman. I knew he had one waiting in the wings because he wouldn’t kill Natalie if he didn’t have someone else to replace the financial loss that killing her would cause him.

“The baby is nowhere near viable right now,” I countered, just to buy myself some time to keep my emotions locked down.

“The doc can’t guarantee the baby will survive, and even if it did, there’s no telling what could be wrong with it. It ain’t worth the time needed to secure the product. I also can’t sell a faulty product. Kill her, get rid of the body, and then I can get someone else in there.”

“You already got a woman?” I needed to figure out how much time I had before someone else would come into the house.

“She’s being picked up in a couple of hours. Should give you enough time to kill the whore, get rid of the body and clean up.

The next one coming in has done this twice already, so she will be good and the product will be of good quality.”

“I’ll get it done,” I promised, as I stood up.

“Once she is taken care of, then we can discuss some organizational changes,” he tossed out.

“Whatever you need, boss,” I quickly agreed before I headed for the front door and got out of this fucking place.

It was a struggle to keep my emotions in check and not go running out of here just to get back to my truck. I had no idea what I was going to do; I had almost no time to figure it out. The second I got into my truck, I would turn it on and get the fuck out of here. I pulled my cell phone out and immediately called Gab.

He was going to have to help Natalie get packed up, so we could get her out of here. The trick was where she would go. If we were in New York, it would be easy to figure it out, but we weren’t in New York, and I had no safe houses here.

“How did it go?” Gab asked the second he answered the call.

“He ordered me to kill Natalie.”

“What? Why?” Gab asked, confused and worried.

“The doc doesn’t know if the baby will make it to term, or if there will be any deficits. He wants to cut his losses and get another woman in there. Apparently one of the other women who has done this twice before is pregnant again, and he wants her in there by the end of the night.”

“Fuck. Um...ok. We have to move her somewhere, but the only place I can think of is a hotel,” Gab said. I could tell he was trying to get his mind to process all of this.

“I don’t know how I feel about a hotel in terms of security, but we might not have a choice. We can’t risk her being spotted by anyone connected to Dom. We need to put her in an area of the city where Dom wouldn’t have any connections.”

I didn’t really want to put her in a hotel because you have no idea who could be spying for whom. Right now, we didn’t have any other choice. If there was more time, I could have put her on a private jet and taken her to New York, but we were on a time crunch. There was only so long that I would be able to hide Natalie away before Dom realized she wasn’t dead. Dom had to be killed tonight, which meant we had to get the women captive out tonight.

“We can put her in a high-end luxury hotel in Beverly Hills. Dom doesn’t have any connections there because he can’t afford to be there himself. Where are you going to kill him, though? Plus, I thought we were going to try and free the women too.”

“We have to do it tonight; we don’t have a choice. I’ll be there soon. Get Natalie packed up and wait for me before getting her out. When I get there, we can reach out to the extraction company and get them to go and get the women out tonight. They can work with the Feds and use whatever evidence they have to shut Dom’s organization down.”

“I’ll inform Natalie and get her ready. How far out are you?”

“I’ll be there within thirty minutes. Keep an eye out; I have no idea if Dom is going to send anyone over to help with the clean up,” I warned. He had done that a few times in the past few years and having witnesses wasn’t something we could have right now.

“I got her. I’ll see you soon,” he said before he ended the call.

I tossed my cell phone down and I let out a long breath. This was not how I had been expecting the night to go. I had been waiting for this moment for three years, and now it was looking like tonight I was finally going to get justice for Alexis and my unborn child. I just wished that Natalie would be safe; otherwise, nothing would matter.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Natalie

I was in the middle of a sketch when the knock came to my door.

“Come in,” I said, knowing it was Gabriele. I was hoping that Armando would be back shortly. I didn’t like him being out with Dominic, especially now that I knew he was looking to kill him. He was risking his life to get justice for Alexis and all of the women and children that Dominic had destroyed.

The door opened and Gabriele walked in. I could tell by the stress in his eyes that something was wrong - something had happened.

“What’s wrong?” I instantly asked.

“Mando just called me. Dom has ordered your death. He’s on his way here, so we have to get you out of here and get you into a safe place.”

My blood was instantly running cold. My death had been ordered, and Armando was the one supposed to carry it out. I

knew he wouldn't do it, but that didn't change the deep fear flooding through my system. We were supposed to have more time. We were supposed to have a plan in place for myself and the women. What was going to happen to all of us now?

"I don't understand. Why would Dominic order my death? I thought he made money off the babies?" I asked, trying to get my mind to quickly process the drastic change.

"Apparently, the doc doesn't know if the baby will survive in these conditions, and even if he or she does, what it will be like once they are born. Dom has high-paying clients who want perfectly healthy babies and expect top quality. If the baby is born with some issues due to not having proper care or testing done, then he can only get a low-level offer. To him, this is business and keeping you and the baby alive isn't smart business," Gabriele explained in a gentle voice. No matter his tone, it would never make his words any easier to hear.

I could understand that this was business to Dominic. Morally, I couldn't, but I could in a purely business sense. If you know that your machine isn't going to produce high quality products, you don't keep the machine - you get a new one. Dominic's clients were expecting high quality, and a baby with development problems was not considered high quality. Now, as a mother - or soon-to-be mother - I thought he was an asshole. I didn't care if there were problems with my child; I was going to love them no matter what. The child was perfect, and I was madly in love with them.

"What do we do now?"

“You pack a bag. Mando is already on his way here, and we will get you to a hotel where I will keep you protected and Mando will kill Dom.”

“How, though? I thought he needed to wait until he could get Dom alone without tipping anyone off that it was you,” I asked, as I got up and headed into the closet.

None of the clothes were mine, but I was going to need to wear something until I could get my own place and have some money to afford clothes. I still didn’t know what I was going to do about any of that. I thought I would have more time to plan and figure out what I wanted to do. Armando had offered me to live in New York, but I didn’t know if that was the right move to make.

A part of me wanted to see if something real could develop between Armando and me. Another part was telling me Armando was still involved within the mafia, and it would be dangerous for my child and me to be in that world. I didn’t know what to do - what would be best. It didn’t matter right now because I had to get out of here and get somewhere safe. I quickly tossed some clothes into a duffle bag at the back of the closet. I grabbed the few personal items I had asked Armando to pick up for me.

“What about the women?” I asked as we both made our way down the stairs.

“Mando said we can call the extraction company when he gets here.”

“But will they be able to do it tonight?” I didn’t know if the extraction team would need more time, and if they did, what would we do? Were we going to kill Dom and leave anyways or try to keep me hidden until Armando could kill Dom and the extraction team could save the women?

“I don’t know. We won’t know until we speak with them. We are going to get you set up in a hotel under a false name. It’ll be in Beverly Hills; as far as we know, Dom doesn’t have any connections within that area,” Gabriele said as the sound of a car door closing could be heard. “Go into the kitchen and hide just in case,” he quickly said.

I ran down the hallway and slipped behind the wall by the entrance of the kitchen. My eyes traveled to the backdoor. I was prepared to run out of it should I need to. I felt my heart going up into my throat as I waited for the front door to open. I was praying that it was Armando, but we couldn’t be too careful. Dominic could have easily sent someone else to try and kill me or help clean up the mess afterward. I heard the door open, and a dead silence fell over the room. I didn’t even breathe.

“Where is she?” I heard Armando asking; instantly, my body relaxed at the sound of his voice.

“It’s ok, you can come out,” Gabriele called back to me.

I moved around the corner and could see Armando visibly relax at the sight of me.

“I’m ok,” I told him with a small smile that I hoped would be reassuring.

“You all packed up?” he asked. I could tell he was anxious to get me out of here.

“I’m ready to go. What’s the plan?” I asked as I moved to join them.

“Right now, getting you into a safe place is the priority. Once you are safe, we can figure out what comes next,” he answered, grabbing my duffle bag and continuing, “We need to get going. I don’t know if Dom will send anyone out here.”

We all headed out. I quickly followed Armando to his truck while Gabriele headed to his car. I went to get into the front seat, but Armando stopped me.

“You need to get into the backseat in case you need to duck down.”

I didn’t argue. I just simply opened the backdoor and climbed into the backseat, taking my duffle bag from him. Once Armando got in, he started his truck and we were off.

“What are we going to do about Dominic?” I asked after a few moments.

“I’m gonna have to kill him tonight. I’ll call the extraction team and hopefully they can get the women out tonight as well. They will most likely call the Feds and make sure any of the guys guarding the places are arrested. Dom is going to be the trick. Every Thursday night he goes to the same private club and meets up with a couple of the women there. He always has it guarded with at least five guards. I don’t have a choice, I’m gonna have to do it there.”

“Ya, but that doesn’t sound very safe for you. You would also have to take out the guards to avoid being identified.”

Killing Dominic in a private club with guards wasn’t the best idea. Not only would Armando be risking leaving a witness behind that could tie him back to New York City, but he would also be risking his own life. If he didn’t subdue the guards, any one of them could attack and kill him. I imagined these guards would be carrying guns. All it would take is one bullet, and he would never be coming out of that club alive.

“It’s not a perfect plan, but it’s our only option. I’m not going back home with him still breathing. I am not going to risk him getting out of charges. He must be dead, so all the women and Alexis get justice. This is going to be the best opportunity.”

I could understand that he needed to do this. I wanted Dominic dead as well. It was the only way I would ever feel safe and live a somewhat normal life after this. I had started my plan determined to do whatever it took to escape and keep my baby safe. No price was too high, and now the price might be Armando’s life, and it felt too high to pay.



Close to forty-five minutes later, Armando came out of the very fancy hotel in Beverly Hills. He got into the truck and started to pull out of the carport as he spoke.

“I got a room on the top floor. We can park around the back and slip you in. You need to stay in the room; don’t leave it for

any reason unless Gab is with you.”

“I won’t,” I promised.

I knew what was at risk and was not about to do something stupid. Once we parked, we got out and I walked in between Armando and Gabriele as we made our way to the elevator and up to the top floor. Once we arrived, Armando guided us down the hallway until we reached the room. I couldn’t even appreciate or admire the gorgeous hotel room because all I could think about was what was at stake.

My heart was pounding, knowing that Armando would have to leave now. He was going to have to go up against Dominic and his guards. I imagined his chances of surviving this were less than fifty percent. I would have felt better if he were taking someone with him, but I knew he wouldn’t risk leaving me alone. None of this was playing out like I had expected, but I guess I hadn’t really expected anything.

“Gab, if I am not back in three hours, get Natalie on a plane and take her home,” Armando ordered and it only made the knot within my stomach tighten.

“I will,” Gabriele quickly promised, not even bothering to try and argue with him.

Armando came over to me and placed his hand on my cheek. I felt his thumb rub along my cheek, bringing tears to my eyes. This couldn’t be goodbye. This couldn’t be how our story ended. I didn’t even know until this very second that I wanted there to be a story between us, but I did.

I never thought it would be possible to look past what he had done, specifically to my father, but as we stood here, I didn't even think about that. When I looked into his eyes, all I saw was the man I had been falling in love with, and now I might lose him.

"I am going to do everything within my power to come back here. To come back to you," he promised. I wished that brought me any comfort, but it only left me feeling cold, because it was a promise I knew he most likely couldn't keep.

"I know you have to do this, but I wish you didn't. I wish we could get on a plane, go to New York, and put all of this behind us."

"So do I, but you won't be safe until he's dead. No matter what happens, you will be okay. I know it's hard but try and relax. The stress isn't good for you or the baby. I'll be back in a few hours."

He was trying to comfort and reassure me but was falling short because he didn't know if he would be back. Neither of us did. I appreciated him trying, but it just wouldn't do it tonight. I reached up and placed my hand on the back of his neck, pulling him down to me.

The second our lips touched, I felt a fire spreading across my body. If this was going to be our last kiss, I would make sure he knew exactly how I felt. He hungrily kissed me back, and within seconds, it had me breathless. He pulled back far too soon for my liking, but I knew he had to get going before someone discovered that we were not at the house.

“You do whatever you have to do to come back to me.” I didn’t care what he had to do tonight, as long as he came back to me. We could deal with whatever happened as long as we were together.

“I promise,” he said before he gave me one last quick kiss before pulling back. I was instantly missing the warmth from his touch. I wanted to reach back out to him, but I couldn’t. I could only watch as he walked out the door and pray he walked back through it.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Armando

I parked a block away from the private club. I reached out to the extraction company, and they were preparing to go into the compounds tomorrow morning with the Feds. They wanted to wait until the morning hours so they could ensure that all of the women were in the compounds and not out with clients or at the clubs. I was pleased with that because it meant we had enough time to get Natalie out of town. The only thing that was left was Dom's death.

It was all coming down to me, and I was not about to disappoint Natalie. I checked my gun once more to ensure it was good to go. I also had a knife with me as well just in case. I had no idea how many guards were going to be here tonight, but I was hoping it was under three. I was confident with three, but anymore and things start to go in their favor.

The only comfort and peace I had was knowing that Gab would care for Natalie should I not make it out. He would make sure she got to New York City and set up in a nice home

with a great doctor. He would be there for her and the baby until his dying breath.

Letting out a deep breath, I blocked off all my emotions and what was at stake. I needed to focus on getting in and getting out alive. I locked it all down before getting out of my truck and going down the block. My eyes scanned the area to make sure there weren't any potential threats. The area I was in wasn't too bad. It was more middle class than the lower class, so there weren't any gang members I would need to be concerned with.

The first guard was going to be the hardest because they were standing at the outside door. As I approached, I pulled my knife out and scanned the street again to ensure we would be alone. The last thing I needed were witnesses.

I didn't recognize the guard, but that wasn't surprising considering how many guys Dom had working for him. I didn't know most of the lower ranking men. Once I was close enough, my hand shot out to cover his mouth before my right hand came up, and I shoved the knife under his ribs and right into his heart. I quickly twisted it before pulling out, severing multiple parts.

I knew he would be dead within seconds. I caught his body as it collapsed. I dragged it over to the side alley to try and hide him away. With the guard taken care of, I moved back over to the door and headed inside, turning to lock it before heading up the stairs. The private club was on the top floor of a two-story walk-up. The bottom floor had been a convenient store

that had been shut down. The building itself looked rough, but that was what Dom wanted. He didn't want someone to accidentally come across the private club.

Once I reached the door to the club, I pulled my gun out and held it up as I opened the door. It was never locked or guarded because there was a guard downstairs. Dom figured no one would be able to make it up the stairs, so he never bothered posting a guard at the door. It was a mistake that was going to cost him his life.

I slowly opened the door and poked my head inside, not really certain where the guards would be. I walked in and instantly heard the music playing from the back of the club. This club wasn't your typical club. It didn't have a big dance floor or even a bar. There were no workers here, just the women enslaved to Dom to cater to the men. Tonight, it was just Dom and a few of his lower-ranking men to keep guard.

"This is bullshit. The boss gets to have all the fun, and we are stuck here," I heard one voice say from down the hallway.

"It's our job to keep an eye on him and make sure no one tries to kill him. We'll get to have our fun later," another one said, annoyed as if he's had to explain this before.

I waited a moment to see if someone else would speak, but when no one did, I moved around the corner with my gun raised. I knew the second I fired, I was going to be alerting everyone that there was a problem, but there was nothing I could do about that. I pointed my gun at the first person and fired, hitting him in the chest.

He went down, but the gunshot alerted the guy standing behind him and just as he pulled his gun, I was firing again, hitting him in the center of his chest. I heard footsteps running down different hallways. I knew there were more guards here than I had expected, but it was too late to turn back. All I could do was hope that I got out of this alive.

Eight fucking guards had been here tonight. Apparently, Dom had increased his protection detail. I suspected Leo or Alberto were planning a coup, and it was making Dom anxious. The first two guards had gone down easily, but it became increasingly difficult after that. I had taken a bullet to my right side, but it felt like it was lower. I had run out of bullets from having to take cover and fire, so I had resorted to using my knife.

All in all, I was hurting, but I was still alive and capable of fighting. When the last guard went down, I went to the final door and kicked it down. Within the room, I was met with Dom and three naked women dancing for him. The music was so loud that it was no wonder he didn't hear the fight just on the other side of the door. I went over and hit the power button to shut off the music as Dom spoke.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” There was a slight slur to his words; he was clearly drunk and stoned. He didn't even realize his life was in danger.

“Leave,” I snapped at the women, who didn't hesitate for a single second before grabbing their dresses off the floor and running out of the room.

“What is going on?” Dom demanded, not happy that I had just ruined his fun.

I pulled out the gun I had picked from one of the now dead guards and pointed it at him.

“The fuck do you think you are doing, Armando?” Dom asked with a deadly edge, but it was lost in translation from the obviously stoned tone his voice also took.

“Ending you. I’ve waited for this day for over three years now. The day I would finally get to look upon your corpse. The day Alexis would get justice for everything you put her through.”

I had to fight with keeping my body still. I could feel a trembling threatening to overtake me, but I wasn’t going to let anything jeopardize this moment.

“I don’t know what whore you are talking about. But my guards are going to kill you. It’s a shame, Armando; you could have been great within my organization.”

The cocky son of a bitch was actually still sitting there. He believed I had managed to get past his guards without being noticed. The drugs had eaten away his brain cells. He was so lost in his own world that he couldn’t even see what was right before him.

“You’re guards are dead, Dom. You can join them in Hell.”

One single shot rang out, and the bullet tore through his skull, painting the wall behind him. I took a few steps closer to him. I had waited so long for this moment that I thought I would feel a deep sense of relief and joy, but I felt nothing. There was

a small sense of relief because it was finally over and done with.

There was relief that I could go home now. But there was no joy nor sense of euphoria. All I could think about was getting to Natalie. Despite the fact that I had gotten justice for Alexis and all of the women and children who came before and after her, it didn't change the fact that Natalie was still in danger, and she would be until we were in the air. I needed to get back to her and then the joy would come.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Natalie

“He’s going to be ok,” Gabriele said, doing his best to offer me what comfort he could.

I could tell he didn’t truly believe what he was saying though. Afterall, how could he? Armando wasn’t going in just for a single fight. He wasn’t going up against just Dominic. He was going up against multiple guards who would be standing in his way of Dominic. Anything could happen. One could get in a lucky shot and Armando could be dead. He could be dead on the floor of some sleazy private club right now and we wouldn’t even know it.

All of this was crazy, and what was most insane, I was worried about him. Not just worried but terrified to my core about him. About the man who had tortured my father. It was insane, and yet I was praying with every fiber in my being that he would walk through the hotel door. When all of this started, if you had told me that by the end of this I would be well on my way to being madly in love with my main captor, I would have told

you to check yourself into the mental asylum. And here I was, pacing back and forth in this luxury hotel room so terrified that I can't even sit down, let alone admire the beauty surrounding me. All this was too much, but I had no one to blame but myself.

Dominic and my father had put me in the position to be kidnapped and held captive. But I put myself in this specific position by sleeping with Armando and then doing something so idiotic as to develop feelings for him. Maybe it would have been better if I had stopped my feelings right when they started to bud. Maybe I could have bidden my time until Armando killed Dominic.

At least then I wouldn't have cared if he survived the battle or not. The problem was that it left me feeling lonely. Whenever I thought about not having Armando in my life, I felt like I was missing a piece of myself. As if my arm had been cut off. It made no sense, but none of this did. It probably would have been better to never care for Armando, but I did not want it. Not willing to trade that life for this one because as bad as some of the time had been, and as wrong as this felt right now, I knew the second he walked through that door, it would all be worth it. Assuming he walked through that door, a little voice inside my head reminded me.

“You don't know that. How much time left?”

Gabriele checked his watch before he spoke, “Thirty minutes. If he's not back by then, we have to leave. I know you won't want to, but we have to leave. It's what Mando wants.”

“What if we leave and he shows up five minutes later?” I countered. I was not prepared to leave him behind. Even if he was dead, he deserved to be properly buried.

“Then he will meet us either at the airport or in New York City. Getting you out after the three-hour mark is to ensure you and the baby are safe. We don’t know if Dom is going to send someone to the house. If they get there and find no body or any signs of a murder, they will know something is wrong and start looking for all of us. Plus, one of the guards could get a call in before Armando is able to kill him. It’s just safer for you and the baby to be out of town should shit go south.”

It was logical, but that didn’t mean I was happy about it. “And if he doesn’t make it, you just leave his body to be defiled and god knows what done to it?”

“If Mando is killed, then I will put the call in for our guys and make sure everyone within Dom’s organization is killed, and we will get his body back. He will be given a proper burial. Honestly, though, you need to have more faith in him. He’s very good at what he does and he’s smart. He will assess the situation first. He’s not going to risk being killed. Not when he finally has a chance to have what he has always wanted.”

“Justice for Alexis,” I said with understanding to my voice.

He gave me a kind smile before he spoke. “No, he’s not doing this for justice anymore. He’s doing this to protect you and that baby. He’s always wanted a family of his own and now that it’s within reach, he’s not going to let anything or anyone threaten that. I know it’s hard but have some hope.”

I was fresh out of hope at this point, but I wasn't going to let him know. He appeared to have some, which should have comforted me, but it didn't. My hand migrated over to my stomach. I couldn't help but think about everything that needed to happen. I would need to get tests done as soon as possible. Either way, tonight, I was going to be free. Now I just need Armando to be here for it.

Fifteen minutes later, I heard a beeping at the door, and my heart shot up to my throat. I held my breath as I waited to see who would walk through. Either Armando was finally coming back alive to me, or it someone coming to kill me. Either way, my life was about to change. I saw Gabriele pulling his gun and pointing it toward the door; he was clearly prepared for someone dangerous on the other side. It only took seconds, but it felt like hours by the time the door opened enough for the person on the other side to walk through.

A cry broke through my lips at the sight of Armando walking into the room. He was here; he made it. I felt my knees going weak at the pure relief flooding my body. He was actually here. He instantly came toward me, and I threw my arms around his neck as he pulled me close. The feel of his arms wrapped around me made the tears fall. He was here with me. He was safe, and we were finally going to be safe. We were all going to get to go home. It was over.

"I thought I had lost you," I cried into his shoulder.

"Never, baby."

His voice sounded rough, and I could feel a slight tremble in his frame. I pulled myself back and took a real look at him. He was in pain, which meant he was hurt.

“You’re hurt,” I said as my eyes scanned him.

He had to bruise on his face; I suspected it was underneath his shirt. It was then that I noticed his shirt was wet. I looked down at my own and saw red splotches on my own white shirt.

“Oh, my god,” I said, as my hands began to shake as I reached out and lifted his shirt. The blood might not be his. It was possible that he wasn’t bleeding, and the blood on him and now on me was from killing Dominic or the guards. My hope was crushed when I saw the blood running down his sides.

“I’m ok,” he said, trying to offer me what comfort he could, but that wouldn’t work.

“Is that a bullet hole?” I asked, unable to take my eyes off of it.

“Get on the bed,” Gabriele’s voice broke through, and I completely forgot he was even here.

“I’m alright,” Armando tried, but Gabriele didn’t have it.

“Get your ass on the bed. We have to patch you up so we can get the fuck out of here,” Gabriele said with urgency to his voice. He then grabbed what I suspected was a first aid kit.

“Come on,” I said, turning Armando and guiding him over to the bed.

I got him to sit down before I helped him remove his shirt. Gabriele came over with some towels. He laid them down on the bed before we got Armando to lay down. He had a bullet wound and a couple of slashes from what I assumed was a knife. The bullet wound was right above his right hip. I had no idea if anything important had been hit.

“It’s a through and through,” Gabriele said as he first looked at the bullet wound.

“Is that a good thing?” I asked, as I went and took Armando’s hand within mine.

“Yes, it means the bullet isn’t still in me and you won’t have to dig it out. It’s also closer to my side, so no organs would have been hit,” Armando explained calmly. I think he was far too calm, considering that he had been shot.

“I just need to clean and stitch the entrance and exit wounds closed to stop him from bleeding. I’ll then clean and stitch the cuts, and he will be good to move. When we get back to New York City, then one of our docs can check him over,” Gabriele explained as he got to work.

I continued holding onto Armando’s hand and tried to watch Gabriele, but all the blood was making me nauseous.

“Hey, look at me,” Armando said, and my eyes snapped up to him. “Keep your eyes on me and not what Gab is doing. You’re looking a little pale, baby.”

“It’s just the blood. I’ve never been very good with it,” I said with a shaky breath.

“It’s ok. I’m fine. I know it looks bad, but I’ll be ok. Once Gab has finished patching me up, we can get out of here, and within the next five hours, we will be in New York. Tomorrow we can get you in to see a doctor and get the tests done that you need. You won’t need a fake ID with Dom dead, but we still can if you prefer.”

“No, if you think I’ll be safe using my real name, I would prefer to. I know it’s not safe right now, but eventually, I would like to come back and get everything sorted. My apartment emptied and my personal belongings.” There were items there from my mom that I wanted to keep, and it would be nice to have my own clothes.

“We can do that. I can also have someone come down and empty your place and bring it all to New York for you to go through. That way you don’t have to worry about coming back. We could even make some calls and have your mom transferred over to a cemetery in New York as well,” he offered.

“I didn’t even think of that. That would be really nice. I normally go and see her once a week. I’d really like that,” I said as tears built in my eyes.

“I’ll make the calls tomorrow and get the ball rolling,” he said warmly.

I couldn’t believe that all of this was actually over. I would start my life and get ready to have this baby. I was going to be free and do whatever I wanted. A bright smile spread across

my face. I was free and couldn't wait to see what the future had for me.

Epilogue

Armando

Six months later...

“That’s it, baby, you’re doing great,” I said as Natalie squeezed the hell out of my hands.

She had gone into labor very late last night, and now we were in hour fourteen and our little one was finally ready to come out. These past six months felt like a dream to me. When Natalie agreed to return to New York with me, I suspected she wouldn’t want to live with me. She would want her own place, but I was glad that she wanted to live with me and have me be in her child’s life. All of this felt surreal to me, and sometimes I still expected that I would wake up and all this wouldn’t be real.

Things between Natalie and me had been going great. I was madly in love with her and this unborn little bundle of joy. I knew this was most likely going to be the only child that Natalie could have, but I hoped, down the line, we could adopt another one so this little one could have a sibling. We had time

for that, though, and I would enjoy every second I could spend with my new family.

Since returning to New York, I had been keeping an ear to the ground for Dom's organization to ensure they weren't trying to make any move against us. I was pleased that there was no retaliation or rumor of it. It was safe for me to say that they didn't know it was me who had killed Dom; as far as they knew, I was either dead or in jail.

"One last big push, Natalie, and your sweet little one will be here," the nurse said with a warm smile.

Natalie gave a scream as she pushed one last time before the room was filled with the sound of a baby's cry. At the sound, tears were instantly filling my eyes. It was the best sound I had ever heard.

"Congratulations, Mom and Dad, you have a beautiful baby girl," the nurse said with a warm smile as she held up our daughter for us to see.

She was beautiful and gross, but mostly beautiful. I felt Natalie slump against me, all of her energy completely drained. Her shoulders jerked slightly. I knew she was crying. The nurse placed our daughter on Natalie's chest, and we worked on cleaning her up.

"She's beautiful, baby," I said as we cleaned her up.

"I never thought this would happen. That we would make it," Natalie said, as the tears freely rolled down her cheeks.

I knew this had been a long and arduous struggle for her. Every day she was terrified that her past chemo would work against her and she would lose our daughter. She didn't even decorate the nursery until we got cleared by the doctor that our daughter was viable should the worst happen and Natalie go into early labor. It wasn't until we reached that point that she started to feel excited and happy.

We got the nursery together with all our little one would need for the next two months. It had been a lot of work, but I was happy to do it. Gab also helped out; he was turning into a great godfather.

"I just need to look her over," the nurse said as she took our daughter and brought her over to the doctor.

I placed a kiss on the side of Natalie's head before I spoke, "You did so good, baby."

"She's beautiful. She looked healthy, though, right?" Natalie asked, worried already that something could be wrong with her.

"She looks perfect. They have to check her weight and take her vitals, that's all."

I knew for a while that Natalie would be overprotective and worry easily. It was natural for a first-time mother, but given her history, she was going to be more worried about something going wrong. It was something I was going to have to watch over because I didn't want it to get out of hand. I didn't want her to develop any problems postpartum.

She wasn't the only one who would feel overprotective, though. I already had a new security system with cameras and alarms on every window. To most it might seem extreme, but to me it was the best way to protect my family. I was still the Don of my organization and despite the fact that I had been working toward making it all legal, we weren't there yet. A few operations needed to be made legit, and until that happened, I couldn't get a deep breath in.

After a few moments, the nurse brought our little girl back all wrapped up in a hospital receiving blanket. Natalie instantly took her in her arms and gave her a beautiful teary-eyed smile.

"Hello, Mia, I'm your momma."

"And I'm your daddy," I said as I touched her tiny head.

I still couldn't believe this. When Natalie told me she wanted to live with me and be a family, I never in my wildest dreams expected her to want me to be the father of her only child. I knew I would love her, regardless if Natalie would allow me to have the title. Mia was a miracle baby who deserved to be loved and spoiled.

Knowing that Natalie wanted me to be her daughter's father sent a deep warmth throughout my chest. It spoke volumes to how she looked at me. Gone were the days when all she saw was a killer. The man who had killed her father. She now saw me for who I truly was, and I couldn't have been happier. This was my family, and I was going to cherish every single second I spent with them.



“Alright, little Mia, welcome home,” I said as I opened the front door.

She had been alive for two days, and we finally took her home. These past two days had been unlike anything I had ever experienced. I had never really been around children. I had friends growing up, but that was different. As an adult, I didn’t have much experience with them, so taking care of this tiny human being was both nerve-wracking and terrifying.

I was so worried that I was going to burp her too hard or hold her the wrong way and hurt her. She was so small and precious that I just wanted to wrap her in bubble wrap without anyone touching her. Natalie was also having a hard time with it as well; this was something she had never expected to enjoy. She had been told most of her life that she would never have children, and now she was caring for a daughter. We both didn’t want to do something wrong.

The nurses at the hospital had been amazing. I would donate to them to show how much I appreciate their kindness and patience. They showed us how to change Mia’s diapers, feed and burp her, and bathe her properly. They weren’t bothered by the hundreds of questions we asked. They were remarkable and deserved to have something to show for it.

“I can’t believe she is all ours now. I don’t really feel ready,” Natalie said softly.

“I know what you mean. I keep wanting to look around for a nurse just in case. But they showed us how to take care of her and we are capable of doing this.” I moved closer to her and wrapped my arms around her as I continued, “You are an amazing mom and little Mia is very lucky to have you in her life. You got this.”

“Thank you, and if I don’t have this, then I at least have you and know you can handle it. Although she already seems to have you wrapped around her little finger,” Natalie teased.

I gave them both a loving smile as I spoke. “She and her momma have that in common.”

This was not the life I ever expected to have a year ago. I never thought being happy and moving on from Alexis and the loss would be possible. Yet I was standing in the living room I shared with the woman I loved and our daughter. I didn’t know what I did to deserve either of them, but I was forever thankful to have them in my life. We both headed up the stairs to bring Mia to her nursery and lay her down in her crib.

We had both been doing a lot of reading of parenting books. They all said it was important for Mia to get used to sleeping in her crib and not always on someone. We could still hold onto her throughout the day, but we had to try and get her used to being in her crib so that when she got older, we didn’t have any problems with her not liking to sleep alone.

I couldn’t help but smile as we walked into the nursery. Natalie had gone with a simple design of white and a soft pink. The walls were soft pink, and a white cherry blossom tree had

been painted on the wall right where Mia's crib was. We also had her name in white wooden letters right in the middle above her crib.

The furniture was all white. There was a white padded rocking chair in one corner. Her bedding was a soft pink along with a mobile to match. When we were designing it, I told Natalie I didn't care what it looked like as long as she was happy. I was just happy to put it all together for her and see the joy light up her eyes.

"She's so cute when she sleeps," Natalie said as we both looked down at Mia. She was a thumb sucker, but I supposed that was better than having to worry about where her pacifier was.

"She's perfect," I agreed lovingly.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the velvet ring box I had been carrying around for the past couple of days. I had wanted to propose to Natalie for a little while now. I had been too scared to do it before. I knew she loved me but didn't know if she was ready for marriage. I was taking a huge risk that scared me, but I also knew I couldn't spend the rest of my life afraid to ask her the big question.

I couldn't spend my life wondering if she had said yes. I knew women preferred to be proposed to in a more romantic setting with a huge gesture. However, the moment felt right and I doubted there would ever be another that felt more right than now. I wrapped my right arm around her and brought my left hand up with the box open.

“Armando,” she said softly as she took in the ring.

“I know this isn’t very romantic and probably not how you had pictured it. You mean the world to me. I can’t imagine not having you in my life. How we met was highly unorthodox, but I am glad you came into my life. Life is precious and short. I don’t want to waste any more precious time. I would be honored if you would become my wife.”

She turned in my arms while tears flowed gently down her cheeks. I was hoping they were happy tears. A broad smile spread across her face and twinkled in her eyes.

“Yes, yes, of course, I’ll marry you,” she said with a slight giggle of joy.

My arms instantly circled her to pick her up. I moved back as I twirled us around in a circle, her laughter filling the room. Words cannot describe the joy I felt at hearing her say yes. She would be my wife, and I could not have asked for anything more.

“You are going to wake her up. Put me down, silly,” she teased.

I placed her back on the ground. I immediately grabbed the ring and slipped it onto her finger as I spoke, “I don’t know what I did to ever deserve someone like you and Mia in my life, but I will make sure you never regret this.”

“I know I won’t. I love you.”

“I love you too, baby.”

I closed the gap between us and pressed my lips against hers. She instantly melted into me, kissing me back with just as much passion as was passing through me. Our future was unknown, but I knew it was going to be wonderful. I had two amazing girls in my life and was looking forward to spending the rest of my days with them.

The End

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**I've always flirted with danger...
but when the man you hate
becomes your child's father,
he can only stay an enemy for so long.**

We met in the bloody aftermath of a shootout,
that claimed the life of my father and all his men.

I'm the only witness,
And I'm thrust into the arms of Alessandro.

A sexy Italian God, given flesh
and sent to live amongst mankind,
Who offers me a safe haven until the smoke clears.

For the next thirty days,
the heat between us is irresistible.

The passion immeasurable.

Making me almost forget how we met.

But suddenly,

with money to start over,
he kicks me out and brushes *us* aside.

It's clear he has secrets.

So I held on to my own...

For there's more than one heart beating inside me.

But when the demons from his past

comes back for revenge,

The danger could affect not only my loved ones...

But my heart as well.

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About Author

Amber Row is an author of steamy mafia romances that are guaranteed to keep you up all night. These sexy mafioso's definitely bring the drama, passion, and danger that will keep you wanting more. Before playing with words, Amber got two bachelor's degrees, one in Network Security and the other in Piano Performance, a Master's in Information Technology, and a Master's in Business. Apart from being an author, she is a classical pianist, piano teacher, amateur photographer, and portrait artist. She lives in Sacramento, Ca, where she loves to spend evenings reading next to a cozy fire with a fine bottle of wine and diligently working on her next novel.



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