

"We're in this together."



THE
Ones LEFT
Behind

Work Husbands Series
PART ONE

BESTSELLING AUTHOR
BLUE SAFFIRE

THE ONES LEFT BEHIND

PART ONE

WORK HUSBAND SERIES

BOOK THREE



BLUE SAFFIRE



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WORDS FROM BLUE

*Revenge is sweetest served cold, but don't lose yourself
waiting to serve it.*

—BLUE SAFFIRE

PREFACE

Outcast

Gio

Ah, everyone is here. We're ready for my turn. All eyes are on me but allow me to get some shit straight. No matter what picture has been painted about me, I've never been a *finook*.

Not that it's anyone's business what happens in my bed or who's in it. It wouldn't make a damn difference. I'd still gut you and hang you from a rusty hook by your asshole for fucking with my family.

However, Jace has never been in my bed for me. He's only there for her. *Her*. She's what holds us together. All I do is for her.

Hold on, I'm moving too fast. You've been peeking through the looking glass, but from the wrong angle. I need you to understand why we are who we are. Why I have a doll collection. Why there's a doll master and curator. You need to see just what all my hand has been in.

Some may see my mother as the mastermind. Okay, I could see that too. However, even Ava Di Lorenzo didn't see who her son would become. Yes, she has trusted me, but she's never known the full plan. No one has. The plan to make it so no one could take away what the two most important people in my world asked me for.

I'm not just the doll collector. I'm the ultimate puppet master and genie. I grant wishes, I make shit happen.

Nyla wants to hold on to the family she has left. Jace wants a family of his own. I want to restore my family and give them both what they asked for. All within a world that says I can't have that. An antiquated world that fears anything that's different.

How do you exist in a world that calls you names and shakes its head at all you love? You blow that motherfucker up and show them the beauty of all that you are.

I, Don Gio Michelangelo Di Lorenzo was born for this. If you're not for me, you're against me, but you won't take away what brings me joy.

It's time we tell you our story. It's the only way for you to understand us. Let us show all the things the others couldn't.

CHAPTER 1



*W*e're Different

Nyla

SUMMER 1995...

“We can't sit in silence like this all day,” I mutter into my lap.

Jace remains silent, but Gio scoffs bitterly and pulls a face. The glare he sends my way sends a chill through me. I bite my lip and stare at him pleadingly. He sinks down in his seat and fidgets with the remote against his thigh, turning it in circles over and over.

We should be having fun out by the pool like we would have done a week ago. Like normal teens or at least as close as we can get to being normal teens. We've been different all our lives.

Goonies plays on the TV as I sit on the floor of Gio's bedroom with my back to the screen as Gio and Jace sit across from each other in the two game chairs, refusing to acknowledge each other. They're both so stubborn. We all are.

Ava says it's our battle for dominance that will bring us together or tear us a part. We all crave it, but in different ways. I'm willing to find a balance for us as friends and family, but I believe that's the problem.

Wiping a hand across my forehead, I frown and pout. I hate this. The silence is killing me. Neither of them is

watching the movie.

It's been a hot day. We came inside to cool down, but the real discomfort is coming from the tension surrounding this room. It's my fault. I didn't mean for things to get like this.

However, I should have known better. This is Gio, after all. I know him better than anyone.

It's just...I thought. I still don't know what I thought. Mommy calls me an old soul. She says I always want to grow up too fast and I have a hard head. I think my hard head has cost me everything this time.

I've been in love with these two all my life. I love them both for different reasons, but I love them the same. Jace has always been there for me emotionally and I him. Gio, oh God, when it comes to Gio there is something in my soul that has always belonged to him.

The boy can have anything from me he wants. He was my first kiss and I hope someday he will be my first like he promised. We come together on a mental level too. I know how Gio thinks. People underestimate him and they are so wrong to do so.

The three of us complete each other. We're closer than close. What started out as a crush on my two best friends has turned into something so much more.

I look over at Gio's face. He's so angry with me. Looking back down into my lap, I lift my headphones back onto my head and press play. Tears build as Brandy's "I'm Yours" plays. This is what I need Gio to understand.

I will forever be his, I'm not saying I don't want him. I have enough love for them both. I didn't mean to cause this, I only wanted to show him what could be.

I stand up and go to climb into his lap. He purses his lips and glares at me but doesn't stop me from settling in place. I place the CD player in my lap, then take the headphones and place them over his ears. I press the button to restart the song.

He cradles his arms around me and tugs me into him. I melt into his embrace, leaning my head against his shoulder,

then lift my hand to cup his handsome face. He looks into my eyes with his hazel gaze.

His gaze softens as he listens. Some of the anger fades and I push my hand into his thick, dark, messy locks. He cups the back of my neck as he leans in and crushes my lips.

It's like I'm breathing for the first time in a week. I've missed this so much. He deepens the kiss, pulling a moan from me.

I run my fingers through his hair, knocking the headphones out of place. The music is loud enough to still be heard. Gio shoves a hand into my box braids and groans. It's then Jace's scoff rings out, causing Gio to stiffen and his anger to return.

"Please don't," I whisper softly.

Gio places his forehead to mine. "What about that kiss... what about me...makes you think I can't give you everything you need?"

"I never said you couldn't—"

He stands, cutting me off and causing me to come to my feet. "Yes, yes, you are telling me this," he growls.

"No, I'm not. You read all the things I gave you. You did your own research. You understood before..."

"Before I found you kissing him?" He folds his arms across his chest and tilts his head to the side.

I turn and face the sliding doors of the bedroom, staring out at the pool as the curtains bellow in the ever so slight breeze from the fan. I wish I could jump into the water and hide from this. I don't want him to be angry with me.

"She only kissed me to see if the connection was there before—"

"If you don't shut the fuck up," Gio snarls.

I whip around to make sure he's not charging at Jace. I don't want them to fight over me again. Although, Jace is right. We only kissed to see if we had a real connection. One as strong as the one I have with Gio.

“She’s fifteen.”

“You’re both only sixteen. What’s a year?”

“Shut up, Ny. Just shut up.” I pout and fold my arms over my chest. “You know how long it took me to call her mine. How hard I fought with it.”

He turns back to me and points a finger. “And you, why do I always have to do what you want? I wanted to wait until your sixteenth birthday to take you on a date and become your boyfriend. No, it had to be now or never, you drive me crazy, Ny.”

“But you love me. That’s why you do things for me. You can’t help it because you love me.”

I smile as I search his face. I can still fix this. He loves me. He’ll give me anything I want.

He pushes a hand through his hair and growls at me. Then in Italian he grumbles. “*Questo... questo è ciò di cui mi occupo.*”

I move to cup his jaw. “Yet, deal with me you will. I love you, Gio. You will always be everything to me.”

With that, I lift on my toes and kiss him. He wraps my waist in his arms and holds me tight, swaying me from side to side. He kisses me hard. It’s his way of showing his dominance. I’m okay with that because my submission is for him. However, Jace is what I need to survive who Gio will become.

I may only be fifteen, but I see and know a lot. I get this life of ours. Ava is grooming us all for something, something we’ll need each other for.

We may not need each other this way, but in my heart, I know this feels right. I didn’t meet that couple for no reason, my interest was piqued, and now I want it all.

I push one hand into Gio’s hair and hold my other hand out behind my back. A smile comes to my face when Jace’s warm palm slips into mine. He gets it too. He doesn’t want to hurt Gio, he wants to see us happy.

I break the kiss and look into Gio's eyes. The anger and hurt are so clear, but I know with time I can fix that. "You will always be enough, Gio, but the three of us will make us feel complete."

I peck his lips and back away, holding his gaze. Releasing Jace's hand, I reach to grab hold of the back of his long blond hair and tug his head down as I turn slowly, looking away from Gio at the very last second.

Jace is tentative about the kiss at first. That same spark from our first kiss is there. It holds all things sweet and patient about Jace. Not the rough heat I get from Gio's scorching kisses. However, this feels as right as when my lips touch Gio's.

I pull away and look up at Gio. He shakes his head and rolls his eyes at me. Grasping the back of my head, he kisses my forehead and then does the same to Jace.

He presses his forehead to Jace's and takes a deep breath, then blows it out. This is who we are, friends, family. We get each other. They are my life.

"I'm sorry I kicked your ass. I knew what she's been hinting at. I've just been dealing with how I feel about it."

Jace nods. "I get it. Riccardo has been calling us faggots since we were little. It made me uncomfortable at first too. I love you, but not like that. I want you both happy, with or without me."

"Does that mean what I think?" I ask hopefully.

"I'm thinking about it, but we need to be able to trust each other. No hooking up behind my back."

I squeal and leap into Gio's arms, wrapping my legs around his waist. He places his forehead to mine and releases a long breath. Jace wraps his arms around my middle and kisses the back of my head. I kiss Gio, then tilt my head back to kiss Jace.

"Shit, fuck," Gio suddenly curses. I follow his gaze, turning for the sliding doors in time to see Ava rushing away. I slide down Gio's front and step back like he's on fire.

“I’m...I’m sorry,” I stutter.

Gio runs a hand through his hair. “Don’t worry about it. I’ll talk to her. Let’s get out of here. We shouldn’t do this around here anyway.”



Ava

I HAVE no idea why I’m so surprised. I saw this coming. I just didn’t think Gio was cut out for a poly relationship. Yet for Nyla I think my son would do anything.

However, I’m still shocked and fearful for my three babies—I wasn’t the only one to see them. I need to protect my children. I won’t teach them that their actions are wrong, they’re not.

Do I think they’re ready for this? Nyla has always been so mature. Jace is a people pleaser. However, my Gio...I don’t know if he’s ready.

I watched my own relationship go up in flames. I made the mistake Nyla is about to make. I chose two dominant men.

I assumed that they could give me all I needed and put themselves aside. Emil would have done anything for me. Lucas would have too, but he couldn’t bring himself to my grant ultimate wish.

I need to think this through. Riccardo has always been a problem for me. I’ve only allowed him to stay close because I’ve wanted to keep an eye on him. Today, I regret that decision with everything I am.

I’m going to have to kill him, I can’t put it off any longer. Gio has just given him what he’s been looking for. My thoughts race as I plan my next move and rush into the side doors of the house.

I stop in my tracks as the blood drains from my face. Dante is at the door of Gio’s bedroom with his hand on the knob. I

don't want him to walk in on what I just witnessed. He's eight, he won't understand.

"Dante," I bark.

I shake my head at him. I've told my younger boys to stay out of Gio's room uninvited when he has company. They never listen.

"What have I told you about going into Gio's room uninvited? You have to respect others' privacy. Get your hand off that door. Where's Dario?"

I look around for my other son. He's usually the curious one. I would expect to find him here.

"I...I only wanted to hang with Gio," Dante whispers.

I run a hand through my hair, trying to get my thoughts together. I need to find out where Riccardo went. I'll blow his brains out all over this house if he does something to harm those kids. I need to know exactly what he saw. I close my eyes to calm the rage inside.

"You can't go in there. You need to listen when I tell you something, Dante. Go to your room. You boys are out to make me crazy," I say to get Dante away from that door before I can go handle this situation.

I clench a hand over my heart as Dante mopes away. He's my more sensitive child. He also has a violent side when he's angry—something I need to tame. I'll have to smooth this over later.

Once I'm sure Dante is gone, I go in search of Riccardo. I can't find him anywhere. My anger rises with each passing moment.

I pull out my phone and call Beth. She's not here today, but I think it's time she comes over. We need to talk.

"Hey," I breathe into the phone. "It's time."

"I'll be there in a few."

CHAPTER 2



*N*ever Enough

Gio

I HAVE this heavy feeling in my gut like I should have gone after my mother instead of taking off with Jace and Ny. My head is just so fucked up.

Nyla isn't like any of the other girls at school. It's not just the dark makeup and goth look. She's a force of her own.

Her presence has a vibe all to itself. She fills a room like I can. Her presence matches mine. Shit, I never thought about how the three of us could take over a room, but still coexist.

Nyla is smart. Smarter than any of the girls my age. I want to protect that.

Her need to know and learn about everything places her in danger. She was dating an asshole at school I hate—Matthew Pike—just to find out who I was interested in. Matt brought her to a party and tried to feed her beers, thinking he could take advantage of her.

I had to put a stop to that shit. That was when I gave in and took her to the movies for our first date. The signs were there even then. She was venomous toward Jace's date.

I think I've always known the truth. And still, I'm struggling with this. It's not like Jace hasn't always been

around. Honestly, I know he's better for her. He can give her all that emotional shit I'm not built for.

In my family's line of work, feelings will get you killed or hurt the ones you love. I can't allow anyone to know Ny is my one true weakness. *Nonno* told me a long time ago I needed to get that under control and never let it show to anyone. Which is why I'll go along with this craziness for now.

But is it crazy? Look at how happy she is.

I look at Nyla sitting between myself and Jace in this ice cream parlor. The big smile on her face means everything to me. *Compersion* that's what Ny's research called it—some Uptonian community in New York coined the term in the seventies. The state of happiness and joy for another's happiness.

Fuck, I'm finding logic for this shit. I may be able to find reason in what she wants from me, but my world never will. No one is going to want to hear that Jace and I are metamours. None of that verbiage will mean shit to them.

All my world will see is my *mullignon* girlfriend and my *finook* best friend which would by association makes me a *finook*. Three horny teenagers that decided to fuck each other. It doesn't matter that I won't have sex with Ny until she turns eighteen, I don't give a shit what she says. That's the one thing I'm not giving in on and I'll beat the shit out of Jace if he tries.

Aw, fuck, am I really going to share what's mine with another dude? I've shared everything with Jace. All my life, what's been mine has been his. Including Ny, before now. She was our best friend, but when she became my girl, she was mine.

Now, as I look at her leaning her head against Jace's shoulder, a part of me wants to flip this table over. Ny was the first thing I had to call my own. I've wanted her for so long.

I close my eyes as she shifts closer to me and slides her hand over my thigh. Her small breasts press against my arm, and she places her forehead against my cheek. How can we have this bond, and she still needs more?

“Stop overthinking it. Let’s be like old times. You never questioned sharing when we were little.”

“You weren’t asking me to share pussy back then,” I snap and regret it right away.

Ny snaps her head back. “I’m still not asking for that since you’re hell-bent on making me wait.”

I turn to her and tap my temple with my pinched fingers. “When did you become sex crazed? I don’t give you dick, so you want two? Where is this coming from? Where’s my Ny?”

“Fuck you, Gio. It has nothing to do with sex and you know it. Or did you not read anything I gave you?”

My face feels hot as I glare at her. I’m so pissed I start to bark at her in Italian.

“I read it, *Cara*. I read all of it. I get it. You feel I’m missing something. I’m not enough. I’m never enough,” I seethe, knowing she and Jace understand my words.

Tears start to spill from her eyes as she shakes her head. “That’s not what I’m saying at all. It’s not about you, Gio. Don’t make me the bad guy. I’ve never said you weren’t enough. You know what? Maybe we’re not mature enough for this. Just forget it.”

“Where are you going?” I shout as she pushes out of the booth and starts to leave.

“I’m going home. My baby sister is smarter than my present company. I’ll spend time with her.”

I work my jaw as I watch her and Jace walk out. I’m not worried, I have the keys to the car. They can’t leave without me.

She’s right though, we’re too young for this shit. In my heart I know Nyla will forever be mine. I’ve been plotting for years on how to make her mine for life and then take over for my mom as Don of the family. That’s all I’ve ever wanted. Did I see Jace in all of that? Yes, but as my consigliere. Nothing more.

Now...I don’t know. *Fuck me.*



Ava

I sit behind the desk in my study, trying my best to hold on to my temper when all I want to do is fly across this desk and strangle this man. Riccardo keeps trying me because he discounts me as a woman. I've run this family just fine.

If I ever prove he was behind Emil's murder, I'm going to remove every tooth in his lying, trifling, scheming mouth and then I'm going to filet him. I don't care who he has protecting him.

He's forcing my hand. I'm not ready to deal with him. I've been biding my time.

"I told you this would happen," Riccardo hisses low as he sits across from my desk.

He has no idea the only reason he's still breathing is because my father and godfather wish it. He's crossed too many lines as it is. However, I'll allow him to keep thinking I'm weak.

"Why do you hate my son so much? Why can't you leave him alone?"

"I've warned you repeatedly about the friends he keeps. If this gets back home, you're going to ruin your family's name."

"You speak of things you know nothing about," I seethe.

All he saw was Gio's hold on Jace's head, nothing more, he said it himself. Now he's making assumptions. Funny, I believe his prejudice also discounts Nyla, as if she wasn't there between the boys.

His hate didn't allow him to see that. I'm not so sure that's a bad thing as I think about it. What Riccardo doesn't know is that I'm aware that he's been seeking permission to overthrow me.

His first mistake. He doesn't know all the players on the board. I do.

“This isn’t what we agreed to. My son was meant to be head of the family. You’ve given more respect to those *mulignons* in New York. You won’t even take his name and now this. The insult.”

My head is ready to explode. Frances was never built to be the Don of my family. My father named me as his successor and that’s the way it will stay until I hand the family to Gio.

“Is that your real problem? I won’t bow to your son, and he will never have the title of head of my family.”

“Ava, please,” Frances says.

See, he’s no Don. If not for him, I wouldn’t have to deal with this man. I should have killed Frances myself for the disrespect he’s brought to my family. As if I was some stupid girl he could play with. If not for my own plans, I would have left him to the fire he started and the wrath of my father.

“You shut the fuck up. You...you’re the reason things are the way they are. You’re a pussy and she treats you like one.”

I snort. He tells no lies there. However, I’ve had enough of this in my home.

“I think it’s time for you to leave,” I snap, not hiding my ire.

“No problem but know that I won’t stand for this. This isn’t over.”

I stand from my seat behind my desk and clear my throat. “You should respect who I am and what my papa has decided. If I have to make myself clear, I’ll erase your entire bloodline. I’m a Di Lorenzo by blood, don’t make me prove it.”

“You’re a whore, your son is a *finook*, and that other little one is a psychopath waiting to happen.”

“Enough,” Lucas growls.

“You,” Riccardo roars then scoffs. “You’re lucky to be who you are.”

“And you will be wise to remember who I am. We’re not too far from the other side for your actions to have

repercussions. Now leave as Ava asked you to.”

Riccardo balls his fists as his cheeks redden. He turns his gaze on Gwen and glares at her. She gives him a look as if to dare him to try her. Instead, he spins on his heels and storms for the door. Frances slinks out after his father like the pet he is.

“Disgusting,” I say under my breath.

I’m beyond tired of pretending to be in love with him. Frances is only out to save his ass and protect his own family, not mine. He will cover my children for as long as it benefits his. That’s the one thing I can trust about him.

Lucas, Gwen, and I move from the room to ensure Riccardo exits my home. We step out into the hall as Beth reveals herself from my hidden room.

“That’s a huge problem. I think it’s time we send word to your father,” Gwen says. We’d been planning before Riccardo decided to show his face to comment on what I found him watching earlier.

She’s right. I need to talk to my father but knowing Riccardo has reached out to others makes me wary of the families. I don’t know who else he went to. I find it hard to believe he placed all his eggs in one basket.

The wrong basket at that. This wouldn’t be the first time someone has tried to usurp my family. It didn’t work then and it’s not going to work now.

“I can no longer trust anyone. I need to go to my father myself.”

“I’ll go with you,” Lucas says.

I give him a smile. Now this is a man I can trust. “No, I need you here to watch over my boys. Gio, Jace, Dario, and Dante are my world. None of this matters if something happens to them. That man has a hard-on for Gio and Jace. They’re not safe around him.”

I plan to win this war, but I need Lucas here to watch over our children. He’s the one person I know will care for my boys

like I would because they are his and Jace is as good as his. He's been raising him for our lost friend.

"I'll go," Beth says.

"But what about the girls and Carl?"

"I'll talk to Carl. We've always known this could be a hand we'd have to play."

"We should talk to him tonight. I'll come with you. Maybe I can help smooth things over."

"You don't have to."

I reach for her hand and give it a squeeze. "I want to, and I'd like to talk to Ny. I'm sure Gio is going to drop her home if he hasn't already."

I'd like to see where Nyla's head is. I feel responsible for all of this. I'd like to help her navigate things as much as I can. I haven't told Beth what I found the kids doing. She doesn't know what has set this all in motion.

Like the soldier she is, she's just ready to go. I love that about her. I trust her with my life.

CHAPTER 3



*B*aby Soldiers

Ava

“HEY, babe, I’m back, is Ny home yet?” Beth calls into the house as we arrive.

Lizzy comes running into the common area with a smile on her little face. She’s tall for a three-year-old. I get why Carl doesn’t want his youngest child around my life. I’m not offended.

Which is why I don’t take it to heart when he enters the room with a frown once he sees me. Carl has done a job or two for me, but he’s chosen to take a step back in the last few years as Beth has started to train Ny with Jace and Gio.

Nyla has been skilled at hand-to-hand combat for years. However, the trip to Italy with the boys didn’t sit well with Carl. What the kids did disturbed him.

I think he hates my son. He’s not going to be happy to find out Gio and Ny have been dating for the last few months. The two think they’re hiding it from me and Beth, but we know.

Wait until she finds out about Jace.

I sigh at the thought as I scoop Lizzy up into my arms. “Hey, tiny bug. Why don’t you come with your Auntie Ava into the kitchen?”

Lizzy smiles, showing off her tiny teeth. I pinch her little cheek. She's so adorable.

"Carl, let her take her. We need to talk," Beth says as her husband gets ready to speak.

He releases a breath as Lizzy and I leave the room. We don't get far before their voices start to rise. I knew this wasn't going to go over well. The man has never understood Beth's loyalty to me.

"How about a cookie?" I coo at the small child in my arms.

"Cookie, yes, please." She gives me that adorable smile again, revealing the dimple in her right cheek.

I place her on her feet and go into the pantry to grab a cookie. Lizzy steps inside to peek at me as the silent alarm goes off, notifying the household that someone has entered the property with a vehicle that's not recognized.

Carl designed the system. I stiffen right away. It can't be Gio's car, Beth made sure to put the sensor on his birthday gift before I gave it to him. The same goes for Jace's jeep. This is not the kids.

The lights continue the soft pulse as I rush out of the pantry. Carl and Beth join me in the kitchen with stern expressions. I lick my lip and rub my hands on my thighs. Foolishly, in my comfort I left my pistol and purse in the car.

"Take Lizzy and go into the safe room. We have this. Take care of my daughter, Ava. I don't care what happens, don't expose her or you. Hurry."

I don't like this, but I nod and grab Lizzy to rush through the pantry into the safe room as Beth requests. Once behind the sealed door, I take the seat in front of the monitors.

Lizzy looks around as she sits in my lap. I brush a hand over her hair and start to sing to her in Italian. However, I stop singing and narrow my gaze at the screen as six men push their way into the house, holding out guns.

I cover Lizzy's eyes and turn her head as a seventh man enters from the side door and shoots Carl. I bite back a sob. I

never had anything against the man. After all, this was why he didn't want me around.

I push the button for the sound, knowing this room is soundproof. My blood boils as I hear what's being said.

“Where is she? Riccardo wants you and that bitch gone tonight. We saw her in the car with you, we know she's here.”

I look down at Lizzy. Instantly, I feel like I'm going to be sick. I'm torn between helping my friend and keeping her daughter safe.



Gio

I'm still warring with my feelings as I pull up to our secret place on Ny's family's property. It's a road in the brush behind the house. We come this way to say good night without her parents seeing us make out.

Ny hasn't said a word to me the entire ride from the ice cream shop. Jace is in the back, silently stewing. I'll deal with him during the ride home.

Ny gets out and slams the door behind her. Jace exits too and starts in the direction of the house, probably needing to use the bathroom in the guesthouse. I roll my eyes but get out to catch Ny before she takes off.

I make it around the car and reach for her arm to tug her back to me. Pulling her into my embrace, I kiss the top of her head. I tighten my hold as she stands stiffly.

She always smells so good. Sweet like candy. I place my nose in her hair.

“I'm still figuring things out, Ny. This isn't what I saw for us,” I breathe.

She shrugs. “Maybe you're right. It was just a thought. We don't have to do this. I should have thought about how you would feel more. I know how much you question yourself because of your grandfather.”

“Baby, I didn’t say no. I’m trying to understand why.”

She turns in my embrace and looks up at me. “We have this thing. You both pull me. I can talk to you about anything. You make me think. That stimulates me mentally. With Jace, he’s there for me emotionally. He gives me comfort and affection.”

I grin at her. I would fall in love with a girl who thinks of things no other fifteen-year-old thinks about. It’s how we were raised. We’re thinkers. Jace is just a quiet thinker.

“Yeah, I can sort of understand that, but you know I’ll try harder. When in private, I can be more affectionate. If that’s what you need,” I reply.

She cups my face. “Gio, forget about it. This isn’t for us.”

I lean in and take her lips. Relief washes over me. I really don’t want to share her and this thing of ours is hard enough without me having to defend a relationship with two people.

I want Ny and that’s going to be the fight of my life as it is. Once I’m made, then I can start to think about changing things around me. For now, I need to keep my grandfather off my ass.

She wraps her arms around my neck. I deepen the kiss. Her lips are so soft, they make me forget everything. I slide my hands into the pockets of her jean shorts and pull her closer.

She breaks the kiss and looks up into my eyes. “I don’t want to ruin things. I love you, Gio. I will always be yo—”

Her words are cut off as Jace comes running back our way.

“We need to call for help,” Jace rushes out.

“What?”

“What’s going on?”

“Gunmen are in the house. I counted six. They have your mom at gunpoint, and it looks like your dad is down. I didn’t see Lizzy.”

Nyla grabs the car keys from my hand and moves for the trunk of my car to pop it. I round it in time to watch her open the hidden compartment Gwen added. She pulls her braids up

into a ponytail and then pulls out a vest and tosses it on before she grabs the rifle.

“He said we need to call for help, not run into danger,” I say as I move to block her.

“Gio, that’s my family. No one is trained better than we are so you’re either going to help me or get out of my way.”

I sigh as I take the vest Jace hands me. He already has one on and a semiautomatic rifle in his other hand. I throw on the vest and grab the two Glocks that are left.

“Cover her,” I bark as I notice Ny is taking off without us.



Nyla

I fight back the tears as I move to the house. This is what we’ve been trained for. I don’t have time to be a baby. I have to help Mom and find Lizzy.

I hide behind a tree and lift my rifle to look through the scope. I count four in the room with my mom. I inhale deeply as I see my father bleeding out on the floor.

I have to keep a level head. Ah, fuck that. I squeeze and put a bullet through the head of the one holding a gun to my mother’s head. Glass shatters as my bullet blows out the back sliding doors. The guy drops to the floor and Mom gets down.

The others turn, looking for where the shot came from. One of the guys starts to shoot in my direction, but I’m not sure he knows where I am. I smirk as I feel Jace coming up behind me. It’s always like this.

When the three of us train, we breathe each other. I feel Gio when he closes in. I know what I need to do next.

I get low and fire at the guy now fighting my mom. He drops from either the force of Mom’s kick or my bullet. Maybe both. Jace moves past me and takes out two others.

Gio flies by, guns blazing as two more guys appear. I turn my attention to the next guy to reveal himself. He makes seven, not the six Jace counted.

I can't get a shot off. I have to shift out in the open a little more to lock in. I breathe and take the shot, but something is wrong. Jace and Gio slow their run and freeze. I drop the rifle to my side and run up behind them. My chest heaves as I step through the broken glass sliding door.

I look down and the tears start to spill. My mom is lying lifeless next to my dad. She's gone. I didn't get my shot off before that bastard shot her. I drop to my knees.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry," I sob.

I was too late. My mom is gone because I didn't get here fast enough. I crawl to my dad as his chest slowly rises and falls. His breathing is so shallow, he's wheezing.

Trying to find the wound to stop the bleeding, I hover over him. I shake my head, not knowing what to do. Ava appears with Lizzy in her arms.

"Mom, what are you doing here?"

"They were here for me," Ava says in a detached voice.

Dad lifts his hand and cups my face. I start to sob more. I should have waited for Gio and Jace. We could have saved Mom together. I'm always in such a fucking rush.

"Ny...baby. This isn't your fault," Dad wheezes. "This isn't on you. Be a child. Stop playing with fire and be a child. Live your life, Ny."

With that, he takes his last breath. I fall back on my butt and scream as the tears fall. Gio drops to his knees and tugs me into his arms. I wrap my arms around him and sob my heart out. I don't miss it when Jace wraps his arms around us both.

My entire world has just been ripped from me. Nothing, and I mean nothing, matters to me in this moment.



Ava

I feel nothing but rage. I loved Beth like a sister. From the first time I came to America in my teens she's been like family. I became bi-curious because of her beautiful soul.

Beth was always a protector. She taught me how to shoot my first gun and coached me through my first fight as one of the girls in the neighborhood tried to whip my ass. We used to laugh about that.

Now, my friend, my love is gone. I feel hollow. First Emil, now Beth. Riccardo is taking away my core piece by piece.

“What will you do?” Gio says as the cleaning crew moves about one of my best friend's home.

Elijah put Lizzy down for a nap in her room once he and Gwen arrived. He was the only one able to calm her. I believe she's in shock. I don't know how this will affect her.

Ny sits on the sofa wrapped in Jace's arms, small hiccup sobs releasing ever so often. Beth would be proud of the kids. They did well, that last guy came out of nowhere. Not even Beth saw him.

“We're going to add one more body to the count. I died here too,” Gwen says.

“What?” I lift my head to stare at one of my last friends and counselor.

“Riccardo is out to pull us all from you. I'm next, trust me. Let's make him think he's succeeded. He can't touch Lucas. He's not stupid enough to do that, but I'm expendable.”

“She has a point, Ma.”

I look at my son. Sometimes I wish I could slow all of this down so he can be a boy. I want to cover all my boys from this thing of ours and allow them to be children for a while, but I can't.

I have to get my son ready to be more ruthless than any Di Lorenzo has ever been. This is his world and he's already a pawn in this game we play. Like my father, I refuse to be a loser in this, and my son will never know this type of loss or any other.

I nod. "Make that four bodies."

"What?" Gio says and frowns.

"If I'm gone, Riccardo will feel safe."

"Until it's my time," Gio thinks aloud. "He'll play his hand."

See, my boy is a quick thinker. I can see in his eyes he knows where this is going. He glances at Ny and determination fills his gaze.

"But I still don't think Jace and I will be safe here. We'll come with you."

I can tell from his tone; *we'll* doesn't include Nyla. Reminding me I need to figure out arrangements for my best friend's two girls. I know I can't take them or the boys with me.

"Your father would never allow anything to happen to you."

"Ma, he allows his father to talk to me like shit. I'm better off with you."

"She means your real father," Jace says.

"Not this shit again," Gio grumbles at Jace. "Just because he has hazel eyes like ours doesn't make him our father."

"He's right," I breathe. "Lucas is your father and we're going to need his help for this."

Gio's mouth falls open. "But you told me I was wrong. I asked you years ago."

"You didn't need to know then. Now you do."

Gio's cheeks turn red. I know he's angry. This was what was best. At that very moment, Lucas enters the house looking

as if he's ready to commit a murder.

“He would dare to do this? Ava, I don't think I can ignore this. You're a made woman, a Don. They were here for you. This slaughter was meant for you,” he bites out.

“Dad?” Gio says as if testing the word out.

Lucas turns to his son with a surprised expression on his face. His eyes soften and he cups the back of Gio's head and tugs him into his embrace. Gio wraps his arms around him and clings to his father's shoulders.

Lucas whispers something in Gio's ear and he nods. This moment is more heartbreaking than I ever thought it could or would be. My heart aches because I wish Beth and Emil were here for this. We had planned to tell my boys the truth together when they were old enough and safe.

My heart breaks for the decisions I've made. I still don't know how my father will react to all I have to reveal. I've always known I wouldn't be allowed to be the Don of this family in peace. Remarks have been made, I've been excluded from deals, my envelopes have been forgotten until I used force to establish who I am.

I understood early on that I needed to survive until I could hand the family over to Gio. There was no other way. However, Riccardo has placed a question mark on my son's back and now is too soon.

Gio isn't yet a man. He hasn't earned his first promotion. There's no way the books will be opened for him now. We need more time. I need to buy myself more time.

My father's health has gone back and forth. In truth, I think he's been suffering from a broken heart all my life. My boys have brought light back to his eyes.

Once I tell him of the things going on here and the whole truth, I'm hoping it will change his heart and he will help me for my son's sake. It's no secret he has had plans for Riccardo. Now so do I.

“Lucas. Gwen and I died here tonight. No one outside this house is to know any different.”

Jace releases Nyla and stands. Gio nods and pulls the two Glockes from the back of his waistband. Swiftly, Jace grabs one cleaner and snaps his neck. Gio shoots the other two in the back of the head.

“We’ll clean this up,” Lucas says. “Who made the call?”

“Gio,” I reply.

“When the cleaners arrived, there was a second attack. We handled it but their guys didn’t make it. After, I used their supplies to clean it all up,” Gio says emotionlessly.

I nod. “That’s good, but you and Jace should drop the van off with their guys. I’ll give you a drop location they’ll find.”

“I’ll make the calls and take care of all of this. What’s the plan for you and Gwen?” Lucas mutters. I know he’s not happy about this.

“I need to talk to those friends of ours. It’s time I put them in play. I’ll go to Barbados before I head to Italy.”

“I’ll go,” Gwen says. “He’s my brother-in-law. You’re better off going straight to your father.”

“No. I’ll go, you go with Ma. It will be better coming from me. You and Ma need to disappear. No one should know either of you is still alive.

“I’ve got this. I’m a son looking for revenge. What do you need? Who do I need to see?” Gio says.

“He’s right,” Lucas says. “Let’s look at the long game. If you won’t allow me to get involved, allow Gio to start making friends with your pawns. He’ll be king now that you’re removing yourself from the board.”

“You’re going to make friends with a funeral director. He’s the one person you can trust with this information. He’s going to help you with all funeral arrangements from here.

“You’ll find we have something he’s been wanting. In time, you will settle that debt, but it has to be at the right time. These are friends of ours with mutual interests.”

“Then it should be me. Riccardo will be watching Gio. It will look strange for him to disappear now.”

“Fair point. I say Jace goes and delivers the message for a meeting with Gio. He has a business here. It won’t look out of place. Allow Gio to talk to him here in the States,” Gwen says.

“I don’t want Pat involved. She’s not to be the civilian in the middle of this anymore. Gio’s only to deal with the brothers.”

“Pat Mitchell?” Gio says in confusion.

“Son, you have a lot to learn,” Lucas says. “The doctor and her family have been longtime friends of ours.”

“You and Jace will join me in Italy, but not now. Give it some time.”

“Ava,” Lucas growls.

“It has to be this way. You need to watch over Dario and Dante. Gio’s place is with me. Like you said, this is the long game. Patience, my love. It will all work out in the end.”

Nyla stands with tears running down her cheeks. She sways as she comes to her feet as if drunk with sorrow. Looking up through her lashes at me she glares.

“And me? What am I to do? Pretend he didn’t take my life from me?” She tilts her head sideways, looking on the verge of snapping. “What is there for me? I have nothing left. What about me, Don Ava? Where do I fit in all of this?”

“Ny,” Gio hisses.

I hold my hand up. “No, Gio. She has a right.”

I move toward the girl I’ve seen like a daughter of my own since she was born. I pull her into my arms and hold her tight. As she collapses into my embrace. I whisper in her ear. “You become who she trained you to be. This is what he needs you for. Give it time. You all will be together again. I will send for you when the time is right.”

I back away and hold on to her shoulders as I look into her eyes. “For now, we allow everyone to forget who you are. You

will live a normal life and grow up with your sister.”

“Elijah can take the girls. I know he’ll be more than happy to do this for Carl. Give it some time, I’ll find a way to come back and help out.”

“Elijah? Gwen—”

“It’s okay. I trust him and he’ll understand.”

“I can’t ask you to do this for me.”

“You’re not asking. It’s already done. I know he will do this. It won’t be forever.”

I release a breath. She’s right. We need time. That’s all. If everyone can play their part until the right time, we can get through this.

“Riccardo just needs to forget us. Once that happens, we can start to move,” I say.

Nyla wipes a hand under her nose and snuffles. “He’s my kill. I’ll do whatever else you want, but when he dies, it’s my bullet. That’s all I ask.”

“I’ll make it happen,” Gio replies before I can protest.

With that, my life as a mother ends. I put Ava Di Lorenzo to rest, along with my best friend and her husband. Not forever, one day I will resurrect, and I’ll call for my price in blood.

CHAPTER 4



I know All

Ava

I STAND in my father's study stunned. However, I shouldn't be. This is Giuseppe Di Lorenzo. It's only been a few days and he already knows of all that's happened in New Jersey, while never taking a step away from his home in Italy.

"Papa, why haven't you ever said anything?"

"You had to learn. Your actions and the actions of the others had consequences. I wanted you to learn from them."

I breathe a sigh of relief. My father has known everything all along. It's like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders. I furrow my brows.

"Wait, but I thought you'd be furious."

He shrugs. "I was. Not so much with you. I wanted you to experience life, I believe this is what you have done. My anger was more so with Frances. I was going to have him killed, but this is how I learned Riccardo was up to no good, just as I thought."

"You mean going to Don Ferrari?"

"Riccardo has been to more than your godfather."

My mouth falls open. I knew it. "What makes him so bold?"

“I’ve never allowed Riccardo to know the connection between you and Don Ferrari. The bastard has been planning for years. After my father reneged on the marriage between Riccardo and my sister, he became unhinged.

“The Espositos have always felt entitled to something that has never belonged to them. Riccardo has made friends in high places. Knowing I would figure him out. Don Giovanni Barbieri had forbidden me from ending Riccardo’s sorry life.”

“But isn’t he the one who had his father executed?”

“Yes, it’s all complicated. However, as long as Giovanni is alive Riccardo is safe.”

“Son of a bitch,” I snarl. “So, I will kill Giovanni.”

My father pulls a face. “And start a war we’re not ready for? No. I’ve been waiting patiently all of this time. We will continue to wait.”

“Then I have to leave. I can’t stay around here. It’s too dangerous.”

He nods. “Yes, I believe this is true, you can go to the farmhouse you were born in. It’s in the country and no one knows of it, but first I want you to explain your life to me. Teach me what I do not understand, and I will teach Gio to be ready when the time comes.”

I smile. This has always been his way. A lesson for a lesson. I will give him what he asks for to get my son the mentor he needs.

However, my smile drops as I look my father over and wonder if he can hold on long enough to teach Gio anything. Concern for my father’s health fills me.

“What is this look? I will be fine. You will see.”

“Papa, maybe Gwen can help with your diet and that will give you more strength.”

“The future of my family will give me all the strength I need. What was done is a slight against me. I will not close my eyes before I’ve seen this right.”

That's a promise I know in my bones he will keep.

CHAPTER 5



*F*riends of Ours

Gio

Two months later...

IT DIDN'T TAKE Jace long to get Kington Thompson here to the States. My father has handled keeping anyone from digging into what happened or finding out there are no bodies for Mom or Gwen.

Everything has been going to plan except for Frances's move. He has told everyone that my mother disappeared and abandoned her sons. He's trying to play the victim.

He knows my grandfather will come to America and have his head if he finds out his daughter is dead. Knowing the truth, I take my hat off to the pussy. However, little does he know, he's only going to piss my mother off.

I wish him luck. Too bad for him, my mother has told *Nonno* everything. Yet, none of that is my business.

My part is here, in this funeral parlor with this giant amber-eyed Bajan. Kington Thompson stands with his hands clasped in front of him with a hard look on his face. He takes me in but doesn't say anything. Jace stands at my side as unbothered as I am.

I already know who I'm dealing with. These guys don't play. However, I have a goal here. This needs to become my

friend, not my mother's. I need to establish who runs the Di Lorenzo family now.

“Wuh can I do fuh ya muddah dis time, big man?” Kington asks as he locks eyes with me.

“I’m not here for my mother. I’m here for me.”

“How yuh mean? Yer friend dey say yuh muddah sent ya. I don’t have time for games, boy. Ava always takes care of my people. I do wuh I can to help she out. Yuh understand?”

Do I understand? Just barely. His accent is so thick, but I get the gist of it. He’s loyal to my mother. I respect that, but I need him to understand I’m the next Don and I’ll take care of his people as well.

“She did. However, I need to come to an agreement with you. Right now, I’m nobody to anybody. I’m not even considered a man, but that’s going to change. When I’m done, my name will be the only name that matters.

“I’ll get you that name you want. In return, I need your help. I want everyone connected to your brother’s death, my mother’s attack, and the motherfucker trying to take all I love, gone. I was told what you do, that will come in handy at the right time.

“In the end, I’ll have more to give you and your family than my mother offered.”

He gives a full belly laugh. “Yuh Ava’s boy aight. Talk big talk like she. Wuh can *yuh* do for *muh*? Eh?”

I nod to Jace. You see, I did my research. Kington has a daughter here in the States. The real reason he came over so fast. He had business to handle.

His daughter’s boyfriend tried to use her as a drug mule. She got caught and hasn’t said a word, but the boyfriend has been singing like a canary, blaming it all on her. She’s about to go up for the charges and Kington’s brothers can’t get involved.

“No songbird, no song to sing,” I say as Jace returns with the boyfriend in a gilded box. I open the lid.

“*Ohh* Rasshole,” one of the other guys says as the contents of the box come into view.

“My offering so you understand who I am. A friend of mine is down at bookings making sure your daughter is released.”

Kington moves closer until we’re nose to nose. “Respect,” he says as he glares into my eyes. “Yer muddah made muh a promise. Yuh make gud on it, we gud.”

He lifts a hand and signals for one of his men to come for the box. Then he pats my cheek and smiles.

“I like yuh. Ava should be proud.”

My phone rings in my pocket. I pull it out and look down at it. It’s Ny again. I ignore the way my heart aches and send the call to voice mail. I don’t want her hurt anymore.

This is no longer her world. In a few months, my mother will send for me and Jace. Ny can live her life as a normal girl. I’ll get her the kill she asked for, but that’s not going to be anytime soon.



Nyla

Sitting in the center of my bed, I hold my phone to my ear, not realizing I’m holding my breath as well. I blink back my tears and wipe under my nose as my call goes to voice mail again. Gio won’t answer my calls and I’m not supposed to go to the house. I pout and toss more things into the box I’m packing.

We’re moving. Elijah has purchased a new house for us. He’s been trying his best. Lizzy whines for Mom and Dad a lot and all I do is mope around.

In my head, I keep playing all the things I could and should have done differently. I had the shot four seconds before I took it. Four seconds made the difference in me being motherless.

“Ny,” Lizzy calls as she stands in my doorway with a teddy bear clutched in her arms.

“Hey,” I reply and force a smile. “You want me to brush your hair?”

She gives me a sad smile and nods her head. I push the box to the floor and wave her over. She comes to the edge of the bed and places her bear down before she grabs the bedspread and pulls herself up onto the bed. I lean to reach for the grease and brush.

I should probably place her hair in box braids. I don’t know when Ava will send for me, and Elijah doesn’t have a clue what to do with our hair.

“I miss Mommy,” Lizzy whispers as she places her head on my thigh. I start to brush and grease the first section of her hair, tears welling up.

She doesn’t remember what happened that day the way it happened. I’ve asked. She remembers seeing Mom and Dad fall and then her memory jumps to Elijah and Gwen arriving. I’m not sure what that means or how I feel about it. She’s so young.

At least we’re getting her to eat more than ice cream these days. It took a month, but she eats Elijah’s cooking now. He’s actually not a bad cook.

“I do too. We’re going to get through this. I need you to be a big girl for me. Be strong. Elijah is here to help. Okay?”

“Okay.”

I talk to my little sister until I’ve greased and brushed all her hair. She falls asleep in my lap by the time I get to the other side. When finished, I place her on my pillow and climb off the bed.

Moving to the window seat, I try calling Gio again. Again, my call goes to voice mail. I don’t hang up this time.

“Why are you doing this? Why won’t you talk to me? Gio, please,” I sob into the phone.

I hang up and toss the phone across the room. I'm so heartbroken. Wrapping my arms around my knees, I sob into them as I rock side to side.

I've lost everything.

CHAPTER 6



*J*ntention

Gio

Three months later...

“Ah, my Michelangelo,” Nonno croons as he walks over and palms my face, then kisses my cheeks. “It’s good to see you. Look at you, you’re almost as tall as me, no?”

I chuckle. “Not yet, Nonno. But I’m getting there.”

He smiles and slaps my cheek, before turning to Jace. His eyes light up. Moving over to Jace he cups his face and kisses his cheeks as well.

“Welcome, *l’altro mio nipote.*”

Jace’s eyes go wide, but he catches himself and smiles. We have all always treated Jace like family, but I know for a fact he still feels like an outsider. My best friend has never felt like he’s had a family of his own.

It’s so clear having Nonno call him grandson means a lot to him. My grandfather has just earned Jace’s loyalty. I note the fact for later to make sure Jace remembers who his loyalty lies with first.

Nonno moves between us and places a hand on each of our backs as he guides us forward. I take note of the fact that while still a little frail, he looks better than the last time I saw him.

I take a deep breath. It feels strange to be here without Nyla. It's always been the three of us.

“Our friend will be here after nightfall. You boys will be staying with me while here. I will teach you like I did my daughter.”

I pause and turn to my grandfather. I look him deep in his eyes. “Good, I want you to teach me how to take over and make everyone pay. This isn't her fight anymore. It's mine.”

I don't have to explain who I'm talking about. I know from the look in his eyes, he understands who she is. He nods.

“Yes, we were right about you. This I will do, but you are wrong to think she will walk away. She has a score to settle.”

“No problem. I'll give her that, but this is mine now.”

He gives another sage nod. We start to walk again. The weight of what I have planned settles in as my course is etched in stone. From this moment, all my actions will be to restore my family's name.

Everyone before me has had a goal. I need to establish those and then carve my path through them. Those goals not in line with mine will be the ones annihilated.

“If you are willing to listen. I will teach you to play to win.”

“What about Riccardo? When do we get to deal with him?”

“Ah, I was told of your ambitions there. I am not done with my old friend, but there are”—he waves a hand in the air—“how do you say? Obstacles preventing a move against him. You will have to learn patience there. The only thing you need to know about Riccardo as of now is his plan.”

I spin on my grandfather. “Why not now?”

“Patience. Riccardo is not our endgame. You, as Don of this family, are. You do not fit the position now, but you will. I will make it so.”

“Why don’t I fit? I’m not a *finook*, *Nonno*. Neither is Jace,” I bite out.

He pats my cheek and smiles. “I never said you were. I know who you are, Michelangelo. You do not, not yet, but I know who you will become. You are the future. The future the families don’t see coming.

“Your mother started something, and you will finish it. The world is changing and if we don’t change with it, this thing of ours won’t exist. You will rise from the ashes, and it will be the example you set that will determine what this world will look like.

“So have patience, my Michelangelo. Be crowned the king, kill the enemy’s pawns, then you take his head,” Nonno says as he looks me in the eyes.

I nod my understanding. Determination fills me. I become Don and I get to create what my life will look like.

“MAMA,” I say as I drag her into a tight hug after she slips into Nonno’s study where we’ve been waiting.

“My son. How are you? How are Dario and Dante?”

“Fucked up. They think you abandoned them. Frances lied and told everyone you took off. Not that you died.”

“What? That son of a bitch.”

“Oh, don’t worry. He’s on my list,” I snarl.

“No, Frances is mine. Where’s Jace?”

“I wanted to talk to you alone. Ma, I need to know what you intended to do with the families. What were you planning?”

“We have time for this, Gio. I haven’t seen my boys in months. Go get Jace for me. I want to see him before I have to go. I can’t stay long.”

“Are you not safe? Did Kington send the men you asked for?”

“Kington sent everything I asked for. Thank you. You did well, Gio. It’s just not wise for me to remain here for long. No one can know I’m still alive.”

“Okay,” I reply and pull her into another hug before I head out to get Jace.

I note that Kington is someone I can trust. He didn’t tell Ma of my request and he still honored hers. It was all a test. If he would have sent word of the deal we made, I would have lost a resource.

Good, I can move forward with my plan. First, I need to reveal everyone’s wants and needs. What are they after?

Then I’ll control their access until they’re no longer needed. I’ve paid attention to the lessons Nonno has given over the years.

His need to teach me may have changed, but class has always been in session, and I’ve had a front-row seat by choice.

CHAPTER 7



*N*ot As Planned

Gio

Three months later...

We're at the old farmhouse in the country in Italy. It's where Mom and Gwen have been staying. There's not much around so there's little to do outside the video games Nonno bought for us.

Jace and I are standing outside my mother's office as we listen to the three-way call she has on speaker. She and Gwen—who now goes by the name Denise—are talking to Dad and Elijah. They're getting an update on things back home. While I haven't answered any of Ny's calls, I do want to know how she's doing.

However, I haven't liked a word I've overheard so far. Ny is struggling without me. Without us.

"I don't understand," my mother says angrily. "What's going on? How was she suspended?"

"She keeps everything bottled up. She won't talk to me. I've tried," Elijah says.

"That I understand, but why was she suspended?"

"Ava, let him explain," Gwen says.

“She’s been training a few girls at the school in self-defense and combat. Apparently, all girls who have been picked on or who have predators in the home.”

“Okay, so what’s the problem?” Ma asks impatiently.

“I don’t think there is one,” Gwen bites out.

“I don’t either, but what the school is taking issue with is that one girl placed her stepfather in the hospital and the mother blames Ny—”

“What bullshit,” Ma growls.

“I’m not done. Ming, one of the other girls beat up one of the students on campus after finding him slapping around her sister who he’s dating. His family is pressing charges on Ming. They want to sue Ny and the estate.”

“That’s a money grab. Those assholes are money hungry and already have enough. I’ll take care of that,” Dad says.

I work my jaw at the sound of my father’s voice. I’m still processing the fact that he’s my dad. For eight years he’s been a father to my best friend, but I’ve been starving for a father like him.

I push back my anger as my mother’s voice pulls my attention. She’s getting more pissed by the second. Her accent is starting to show.

“Again, why is my goddaughter suspended?”

“It has all been adding up, but yesterday she broke a boy’s arm. It was off campus but not far and they’re using it against her. Some kid she used to date or something.

“She still won’t tell me much. Her friends stopped by and that’s how I found out what I know.”

I grind my teeth. Matthew Pike is lucky I’m not in the States. Although, I’m considering going back. I look at Jace and he has the same scowl on his face.

“Elijah, pull her from that school. She’s too smart for them anyway. She can handle homeschooling,” Ma bites out.

“Babe, I’ll call you back. Let me talk to Ava for a sec,”
Gwen says and ends the call.

“This was the wrong thing to do, Gwen. I left my best friend’s babies. Ny needs me.”

“We... we left our best friend’s babies in the hands of a man who will die covering them and will always make sure they’re safe. I’ve been working things out for my return. I’m ready to go back. I’ll handle this. We have to stick to the plan.”

“Stick to the plan? This all sounds crazy now. Have you seen Gio? Jace? They’re miserable. All the shit they had to go through just to come stay with me this weekend alone is enough to break their spirits.”

She’s wrong. I wouldn’t have it any other way. Having to detour a few times was nothing compared to not spending time with her at all. This is all my fault to begin with.

“Beth would have wanted us to finish this. This is what you two always wanted. A place in your world for women and others. Don’t tell me Emil and Beth died for nothing.”

“But they’re gone. Why am I still doing this?”

“Because of your son. They told you, you couldn’t be a female and be Don. They told you, you couldn’t be in love with a woman and be in this thing. They told you I couldn’t be more than your consigliere and even then, I could never be made so I don’t count for shit.

“Beth was your motherfucking soldier. She wasn’t just ready to die. She did, all for you, for this thing. Now your son is facing that same world and guess what?

“He’s in love with a Black girl, his best friend is Danish American, but make no mistake, Jace will be his consigliere and, Ava, they’re going to find their way into a relationship just like yours.

“It’s been happening all their lives. Gio loves them both, and for them, he’s going to bend. He’s going to figure it out, but if you don’t finish this, he can’t have any of that.”

“But he’s so much like his father. It will never work.”

“Allow them to decide that. For now, we guide them into what you couldn’t have. Gio gets the crown, the girl, and the respect they all deserve.”

“He’s the one. My father said it the day Gio was born. He’s the change the families don’t know they need.”

“He is. I’m heading back, I can help Elijah and I’ll help Ny channel some of that anger,” Gwen says.

“Yes, she needs you. She’s making soldiers, Gwen. She’s just like her mother.”

“Yeah, I see that, but soldiers for what?”

“That’s what I need you to find out. She’s a smart girl. Something has triggered this, and I’ll put money on it connecting to my son.”

I look Jace in the eyes and we have a silent chat. I know why Ny is making soldiers. I left and she doesn’t think I’ll keep my promise.

I’m always a step ahead of everyone else, but Ny has always been a step ahead of me. I knew a long time ago my godmother was training an army for Ma. I once mentioned wanting an army of my own. This is Ny answering my thoughts.

I wave Jace to follow me back to our rooms. When we get out of earshot of the office, I look at him.

“She’s making them for you.”

“I know.”

“Matt was a message.”

“I know that too,” I snarl. I pause and turn to him. I hate what I’m about to do, but it needs to be done. “I think you should go back with Gwen. Ny needs you, but Jace, I still want her, and I plan to make this right. Don’t do anything to take her from me. Give her what she needs, nothing more.”

“I promise. You can trust me. All I’ve ever wanted was my own family. That’s you and Ny. I’ll never do anything to destroy that.”

This I know, which is why I've made peace with it. I tug my best friend into a hug. "You fuck her, I'll kill you," I whisper in his ear.

I release him, pat his cheek, and give a smile he understands. Like me, it's innocent until it's not. He returns the smile.

"You will give her to me. I'll wait."

"Fuck you," I snort.

He shrugs. "Now, that's not going to happen. You don't need to ever worry about that."

We laugh like nothing just happened and head for dinner.

CHAPTER 8



*L*eft Behind

Nyla

Two weeks later...

“One, two,” I hiss at the punching bag in front of me. “One, two.”

The sound of the force of my punches echo through the basement. I blink back the tears I refuse to allow to fall. They left me. Everyone left me.

As if I have no value to them and I don't matter, they left me behind. I've been left to figure it out all on my own. I thought breaking Matt's arm would show Gio I needed him, but that didn't work.

I'm still here alone. It's been almost six months and it's getting harder to breathe. Getting kicked out of school may not have been the best idea. At least, when I had school, I got to leave this house.

However, I was drowning there without Gio and Jace. If one more person would have asked me about them, I was going to lose the last of my mind I have left.

“One, two.”

“I hope it's not my face you're seeing.”

I freeze and gasp. Tears fill my eyes and I turn toward the sound of a voice I've needed to hear so bad.

"Jace," I breathe as I run into his arms.

He lifts me off my feet as he holds me tightly. I bury my face in his neck as I try to pull my gloves off. He smells so good and comforting.

He places me back on my feet and I look around him for Gio. Disappointment hits hard. I wrap my middle with my gloves clenched tightly in my hands.

"He couldn't return yet," Jace says knowingly. "He sent me."

"Oh...but...but... why won't he talk to me?"

Jace tugs me back into him and kisses my forehead. "Everything is changing. He's becoming someone else. We have to let him do that."

"But doesn't he see that I need him?"

"Yes, he does. That's why I'm here. He wants me to take care of you."

I pout. "But I need him."

He scoffs. "I'm not going to take offense to that. For now, you're stuck with me."

"Sorry. You know what I mean."

"What I know is that he wants to keep you out of this for as long as he can. What's up with the soldiers?"

"He's going to need them."

"Yeah, well, he wants to talk to you about that."

I take a sharp inhale. My heart pulses at the thought of a chance to talk to Gio. I just want to hear his voice. I miss him so much.

"When?" I ask hopefully.

"Look at you two. Scheming already," Gwen says as she walks into the room.

I'm stunned at first. She looks so different. She has chopped off her long locks for a Caesar cut and it's dyed platinum. She's wearing violet-colored contacts as well.

If I didn't know her voice so well, she might have fooled me. I tear up and run to hug her. She tugs me into a tight embrace and rocks me back and forth. I break down and release the sob I've been holding in.

I hadn't realized how much I needed Gwen too. I lost everyone at once. It's been hard to cope with.

I pull away and look Gwen in the eyes. "Will you be staying with us?"

She looks at me sadly. "No, I had to create a new life. I have a new husband and home."

"Husband?"

"You remember Martin."

I give her a side glance. I never got the impression that Martin was into women. As a matter of fact, when he hung out with Mom and Gwen it was as clear as day he wasn't.

Gwen winks at me. "You give the illusion needed for the environment you want to control. Always remember that."

"What about the company? The women who need you?"

"I'll still run the company. Martin is completing the sale of it into my new name. I'll be up and running in a few weeks."

"I can come work for you, right?"

She bites her lip. I look at her pleadingly. Her shoulders sag.

"You're too young for field work, but I guess you can help out around the office and training gym... after you finish your schoolwork."

"Will I be going back to school now that Jace is here?"

She pulls a sad face. "No, you're going to continue homeschooling. Jace will be in and out of the country for a bit."

“You’re leaving me again,” I say this to Jace as I turn to him.

“Only when I have to.”

I mope over to him and wrap my arms around his waist. He holds me tightly in his arms. For the second time I note he’s gotten taller. I wonder if Gio has changed.

At least I have Jace, for now. It’s not the same, but it’s something.



Gio

“I’m proud of you. You did the right thing,” Nonno says as we sit in his study.

“So why does it hurt so much? Nonno, I’m so afraid I’m going to lose her before I can make all this right.”

My grandfather sighs and gets up to go pour a drink. He pours one for himself and then another. Ambling back to his seat, he hands me a glass.

“Drink up and listen.” I throw the drink back and wince. “Good boy. I didn’t understand these people when I first got to know them. What America has done to their culture is an ugly thing.

“The world paints a picture of them, and we all blindly believe it. So I went along with the rules and thoughts of them being beneath us. Then word got back to me about your mother’s friends.

“I kept an eye on things and learned your mother had more loyal friends in the Blacks she involved herself with than she did in her own home.

“I paid a friend to oversee her care and while taking my money, he was taking the money of another to harm my daughter. This man is dead, but your mother is alive because of her friends.

“You were in love with Ny from the first time I saw you two together. I’d come for a visit and your mother threw a party. Everywhere she was, you were. Jace wasn’t that far behind, watching.”

“I think I remember that.”

He nods. “It was cold, and you took off your little jacket to cover her. Then there was a puddle, and you didn’t want her to dirty her little white shoes, so you took your jacket and placed it over the puddle but made Jace hand over his jacket to keep her warm.”

Nonno’s eyes light up as he chuckles. “I say this to say. You have been determined from the beginning to keep her safe and happy. Changing our world for her will be a light thing in the end. For now, you can’t allow anyone to know she’s your weakness. If they want to think you are in love with a boy, allow them to believe that.

“Let me ask you a question, Michelangelo. Can a man with no hands still strike?”

I narrow my eyes at my grandfather. I know he’s testing me. “Of Course.”

He pats my cheek. “And this is why you will be great. No one else would answer this way.”

I stare down into my empty glass. They’re never going to expect me to become Don as long as there are rumors of me being gay. No one would expect Nyla to train assassins for me to use someday to crash my enemies. We’re kids, but they will never expect my army to be all women.

“All odds are against me. Just like they were with Ma. That was her plan, to make it so women and others could run the family with her, am I right?”

Nonno winks. “That you are.”

“Then it’s done. I’ll make happen what she couldn’t.”

Nonno stands and pats me on the shoulder. “Remember, everyone has a role, and they should play that role well. Choose wisely who you place where. Don’t fall into what

others think you should do. Do what you do well, but always know how to do everything.”

With that, he leaves me to think to myself. I know exactly what I need from Ny and Jace. It’s time I make that call. I go to the phone on Nonno’s desk and dial.

“Hello.”

“Is she still awake?”

“Yeah, she’s right here.”

“Let me talk to her.”



Nyla

I sit curled up in Jace’s lap as he holds me. We’ve been like this for hours, sitting in silence. Jace never speaks much, but this is comforting.

He’s lending me his strength. Nothing needs to be said. He knows my pain. He’s been here before and Gio and I were there for him.

We were too young to know the right things to say so this is what we did for him. I still remember how Gio took care of him. If you didn’t know any different, you would have thought they were brothers by blood.

Jace’s phone rings, breaking into the silence. I shift so he can answer it. My mind is on the fact that Gio didn’t come back.

“Yeah, she’s right here.”

Jace hands the phone to me. My heart races as I take it from him. Placing it to my ear with a shaky hand, I take a deep inhale.

“Hello.” My voice comes out in a whisper.

“Hey, you okay?”

“I miss you. I’m so lost, G. I thought you would be here for me. Why are you breaking my heart?”

“Ny, come on. You’re smart. You understand this all has to look a certain way. I need you to do something for me.”

“What? Can I come see you?”

“In time. Are any of your soldiers male?”

I smile. He does understand what I’m doing for him. “No, but now that Jace is here, maybe he can get some guys to listen to me.”

“No,” he says firmly. “I want you to keep doing what you’re doing. Only girls.” I bite my lip, hoping he’s jealous. “I do want Jace to help you though.”

“How?”

“I know how I’m going to use them. However, they can’t be random. Jace is going to cultivate your choices. He’ll guard them too, keep them safe until I need them.”

“Like a curator?”

“Exactly.”

“Wait, but how? They’re only teenagers like us.”

“That’s the thing. Jace will choose which ones you will keep. Those are the ones you’re going to hold on to for now, but that’s it. You stop until I’m ready to collect.”

“Ready to collect?”

“Yes, baby. I’m coming for you and my doll collection when the time is right. You’re my doll master.

“They answer to you. Jace will be my curator. He will find the right women, dig into their lives, and make sure they’re what we want. I will approve each one for you to train.

“He will keep them safe. Can you do that for me?”

Tears begin to fall. I know the way he thinks. I heard what he just did. My heart breaks all over again.

“You said women. That means you’re not coming anytime soon.”

“I love you, Nyla. Do this for me and we’ll be together. I promise.”

As if I know how to tell him no. My body shakes with my tears. If he needs this, for him, I’ll do it. “Okay.”

He hangs up and I start to cry harder. Jace pulls me into his chest. I sink into his comfort.

“How long do you think he will make me wait?” I ask on a hitched breath.

“I don’t know, but I’m here whenever you need until then.”

CHAPTER 9



*B*irthday Visits

Nyla

Two years later...

“It’s your birthday and Jace is coming in, why the glum face?”

I turn to Uncle Lucas as we sit on the tarmac waiting for Jace’s plane to land. I’m turning eighteen tomorrow but it’s not as exciting as I thought it would be.

I don’t get to talk to Gio much and Jace comes in every few months to spend time with me. It’s been four months since his last visit, but it feels like forever. I can’t help feeling like something is missing. There’s a massive hole in my heart.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“How do you do it? I know you’re here for the boys, but don’t you miss her?”

“Every day. Taking Jace and the boys back and forth to Italy gives me a chance to check in, but it’s never enough.”

“He doesn’t even want to talk to me.”

“I don’t think that’s the truth. I’ve sat with my son. We’ve talked. He feels he’s making the necessary sacrifices for now.”

“I wish I would have been satisfied with what I had. Now I have nothing.”

Lucas clicks his tongue. “You have a lot more than you think, Ny. I promise one day it will get better.”

“Yeah, thanks. I know we shouldn’t be seen together so thanks for the ride too.”

“You let me worry about who sees what. This weekend you enjoy your birthday. I think it will be the best one yet.”

Right in that moment the private jet lands. I had wanted to go to Italy for my birthday, but Lizzy throws tantrums when I’m gone for too long. She hasn’t been sleeping well either. I think she fears I’ll never return.

“There he is.”

I look out of the window to find Jace coming off the plane. Oh my God. He’s gotten so tall. His hair is so much longer. Is that a mustache and beard?

I rush from the car and run into his arms. He drops the bag and huge teddy bear in his arms and catches me as I wrap myself around his big body.

“Happy birthday,” he croons, and his voice is so deep and soothing.

It’s deeper than when we talk on the phone. He smells better than the last time he was here too. Not that I didn’t love his cologne before. I’ve always been attracted to Jace, but oh my God, this is insane.

“Thank you,” I say as I slide down his front. I peek around him at the bear he dropped. “Is that for me?”

He blushes and nods. “I hope it’s not too childish. You said you liked my cologne the last time I was here. There’s a bottle of it inside. When he doesn’t smell like me anymore, you can spray him.”

“Aww,” I coo and lift on my toes to wrap my arms around his neck. “I love it.”

He gives me another squeeze and rocks from side to side. Something in one of the jet’s windows catches my attention. I narrow my eyes and try to focus.

“I’m starving. Come on, I want to buy you dinner.”

I pull back and look up at him. “Really? Like a date?”

He winks at me. “Whatever you want it to be. It’s your birthday.”



Gio

My fists are balled against my thighs. I want to get off this plane and let her know I’m here. She looks so beautiful.

All the dark makeup is gone, and you can see my Ny. She took the braids out and her hair is around her shoulders in long, thick straight strands. I want to comb my fingers through it as I inhale her.

She’s still skinny as a stick. Jace and I have filled out a lot in the last two years. She looks so small in his embrace. It stings to watch her in his arms. However, I told him to make sure her birthday is amazing. I asked my best friend to do what I can’t.

“This is killing you,” Gwen says beside me.

She’s returning from Italy too. Jace and I spent time at the farmhouse with her and Mom for a while. I think she’s running from things with Elijah, but I’m going to mind my business.

As far as Ny knows she’s been away on assignment for the security firm. Knowing how much Ny wanted to come to Italy, I thought it best if she didn’t know where Gwen would be.

“It is, but I’m here to watch out for her, not coddle her.”

“I wouldn’t call showing love to the girl you love coddling.”

“I can’t love her. Not in the open. Look at why I am here,” I seethe.

I’m here for more than Ny’s birthday. It’s come to my attention that one of Riccardo’s men has been looking for a promotion and a way to be noticed.

He's been asking questions and my mother and girl have come up. I'm here to make sure he can't ask any more questions. Jace will take care of his buddy.

I can't allow them to bring attention back to Ny. She's almost forgotten. I can't have her back in my life until she is.

This has set that back. I'm not entirely sure Riccardo's ear hasn't been pulled and I won't risk it. However, I'm going to make sure he never has confirmation.

"Once this is done. You're taking them on a trip. Lizzy should start training. She's important to Ny. When Ny comes away with me, I need to know everyone she cares about is safe."

"I've got it. Your mother wants the same thing. You think just like her," Gwen says proudly.

"Thanks for all you're doing for us."

"No thanks needed."

I almost ask her why she does what she does, but I remember Nonno telling me why he thinks the bond was formed. Gwen is the reason for my mother's first kill. Beth helped clean it up. The three were inseparable from there.

It's not something you ask a woman about. It's also why Beth picked her soldiers the way she did and why I will do the same. We will hand them a reason to be loyal.

CHAPTER 10



*H*andling Business

Nyla

I've had so much fun today. We went to dinner and Jace drove me around in the new car Lucas gave him as a present. I love that Lucas still spoils him like a son. Jace even gave me a new Sidekick. I've been wanting one of those.

However, something has changed in the last hour. Jace keeps looking at his device and it keeps buzzing. I'm hoping he'll stick around until midnight for my birthday, but I'm starting to wonder if he has another girl waiting for him this visit.

I pull my hair up in a ponytail and scoot closer to him as we play video games in my room—well, I'm playing, he's watching. I try sticking out my nonexistent boobs. I've been hoping he'll try to kiss me all day.

His Sidekick buzzes again, causing him to check it. I pout to myself and focus back on the game. Project 007 is one of my favorite games. I love the first-person shooter action.

“Hey, gorgeous, I have to go. I'll see you tomorrow,” he murmurs and leans in to kiss my forehead.

I sag my shoulders. “Aww, do you have to go? It's only an hour before my birthday. I wanted to bring it in with you.”

He cups my face and kisses the corner of my mouth. “I promise to text at midnight. I need to be somewhere.”

“Are you going to see a girl?”

“Never,” he breathes. “I’m forever yours. I’ve loved you all my life, Ny. You have no idea all I’ll do for you.”

He kisses my forehead again and stands. Just then Lizzy ambles into the room with her doll baby under her arm. She walks right by Jace and comes to sit and pick up the controller I’ve abandoned.

I stare after Jace. My heart hurts as I wonder where he’s off to. I love him too. Maybe it’s wrong for me to be so hung up on Gio when Jace is always here. I don’t blame him for not wanting to kiss me.

Tomorrow, tomorrow I’m going to let Gio go and move on with Jace. He’s the one who shows he cares. Look how often he comes to see me.

Yup, I’m letting Gio go once and for all. I knit my brows as I turn my attention to the TV screen. Lizzy is five, but she’s also really smart. Which she proves as she plays the game with her tiny hands and maneuvers the level like a pro.

“Holy cow, Lizzy. You’re killing it.”

I guess I startle her because the screen goes red. I wrap an arm around her and squeeze. I love this little girl so much.

She looks up at me as I release her and makes a little rat face as she sniffs the air. I smile and laugh, she’s so stinking cute. However, she’s right, it smells good in here. Jace’s scent is still lingering in the room.

“Okay, you. Let’s get you tucked in.”

I take her to her room and get her into her bed, then read her a story. I have another thirty minutes before midnight once she falls out. I head to my room for a shower.

Jace

I wanted to stay until Ny's birthday, but Gio and I need to make these hits happen at the same time. He's on his way to the address I got for him for Pauly R's goomar.

Pauly T. is my job. He's at a restaurant across town. Lucas invited him out under the pretense that he'll get a shot at running a crew if he does a job for him.

Total bullshit. Lucas has been running things here in the States for Nonno in Ava's absence, but he would never allow someone like Pauly T. to do anything more than park his car. Riccardo and his minions are all stupid. Riccardo's arrogance will be his downfall. He thinks he's controlling things.

He was actually happy to see Lucas step in, never questioning Nonno's move. I guess it's because Frances is his pawn. However, the Di Lorenzos are the smart ones here.

Lucas moves as if he's an adviser to Frances. You would never know he's an acting underboss. Frances is as much his pawn as he is his father's.

I'm learning from the best. Patience will get me to my goal. However, first I need to make sure our girl remains safe.

I park the Jag and head for the back door of the restaurant. Apollo, one of our guys, lets me in. He's still a kid, about fourteen, working his way up in the family.

Lucas likes him. He's caught Gio's attention too. I think he has a place for him. Tonight, he's a dish boy. His main job, letting me in the back door.

"He just went into the john. No one else is in there," Apollo says as I walk by him.

I nod and keep moving. I know the place well enough. Lucas used to own it. He sold it a year ago and uses it now for business he doesn't want to be tied to.

I pull my Sidekick to check for a text from Gio. I see the go-ahead and move in on my target. I find the bastard singing drunkenly to himself at the urinal. He looks back at me and chuckles.

“Hey, guy. Almost done.” He zips up and looks over his shoulder again. “Great party out there, ain’t it?”

Instead of answering him, I walk up behind him and wrap my arms around his neck. He tries to fight me off, but I tighten my hold and lift him off his feet. He kicks at the half wall of the urinal, but it’s no use. I snap his neck and drop him to hang over the wall.

I walk to the sink, wash my hands then send a text to Gio.



Gio

I grunt as I get the text from Jace. I climb out of the Benz Coupe and move through the trees to get to the house Pauly is heading for.

I slip into the back door and shrug my leather jacket off as I scope the place out. It has a modern cabin feel. Nice place. Pauly’s goomar comes from money.

I look up and find what I need. The exposed beam rafters are perfect. I toss my jacket on an accent chair and run at the wall to climb and get up to the rafters. I get up there and perch on the beam then wait.

It doesn’t take long before headlights brighten the house. Seeing the angle I’ll need once Pauly enters the house, I turn, swinging my legs on the other side.

The engine turns off and I ready myself. The key enters the lock and Pauly pushes inside, talking loudly. I drop my upper body down as I pull my guns and start to fire, hanging by my knees and calves. Soon there’s nothing but the sound of my breathing.

I release my legs from the beam and flip, landing on the balls of my feet with my guns aimed at the entrance. Standing up, I holster my guns, and fix my cuffs. Turning, I grab my jacket, toss it on, and head for the back door I came through.

Looking down at my watch as I climb back into the car, I smile. I still have time. I can make it.

“Happy birthday, baby.”

CHAPTER 11



*S*urprise

Nyla

I RUSH THROUGH MY SHOWER, not wanting to miss Jace's text. My mind goes back to my earlier decision. I truly thought Gio would at least send me a gift.

He didn't and that stings. These last two years have been so hard. Losing my parents and my best friends and boyfriend all at the same time took something from me.

I dress in a pair of panties and a tank top. Looking in the mirror, I see so much sadness staring back at me. Something has to change. Jace is good for me.

I go to walk out of the bathroom and shut off the light as I step into my bedroom. Out of the corner of my eye I see a figure sitting in my accent chair by the window. I pull a knife from the door panel and toss it.

"Fuck, Ny. You almost got me."

I gasp as I hear the voice. It's deeper now, but I would know it anywhere, in any tone.

"Gio?"

He turns on the lamp in the corner. My heart nearly jumps out of my chest. He looks so different, yet the same. He's taking up the entire chair with his big body and presence.

He's dressed in all black. Slacks, a dress shirt, and shoes, looking the part of the Don he'll someday be. Oh my God. What do they eat in Italy?

He has a bit of stubble on his chin, and he's cut his hair. It's now in a neat blowout. I love it on him.

He doesn't move as he sits staring at me, taking me in from head to toe. I'm too in shock to move. He sits forward and places his arms on his thighs.

I cross my thighs and wiggle my toes. His nostrils flare and he sits back. He drags a hand down his face before he beckons me to him with two fingers.

I take in a breath and go to him. When I stop in front of him, he stands. I tip my head back and look into his eyes. Oh my God, oh my God. He's so much taller and his body is so built.

He tugs me into a hug, and I melt into him like he's home. It's so different from the hugs I get from Jace. Jace's hugs are filled with love and affection. Gio's hugs are filled with possession and passion.

I feel like I can't breathe, but I don't want to if it means he's going to let me go. He pulls away slightly and looks me in the eyes. Next thing I know, his lips are on mine and my legs are around his waist. He kisses me so deeply, I swear it reaches into the depths of my heart and starts to put all the pieces back together.

"I've missed you so much, baby," he groans when he breaks the kiss and just inhales me.

"You were on the plane, I thought I saw something."

"I wanted to give you your birthday gift in person. Happy birthday, Ny."

"Thank you. You're the best present ever."

He scoffs. "But I'm not the present."

He places me on my feet and reaches for his jacket from the chair he has just stood from. "Here, put this on and grab some shorts."

I poke my tongue out at him for being so bossy. My face hurts from smiling so hard as I run to get a pair of shorts to throw on.

Wrapped in his jacket, I take the hand he offers me and follow him through the house into the garage. Sitting in the middle of Elijah's classic cars is a brand-new black Benz Coupe. I freeze and cover my mouth as Gio wraps his arms around my waist from behind.

He kisses the top of my head. "Do you like it? Check the right pocket of my jacket. The keys are in there."

"You got me a car?"

"Yes. I know you think I don't think about you. I do. All the time. I still love you, Ny. I promise I do.

"That's why I have to stay away. I don't know how to hide the way I feel about you. You're my greatest weakness. If anyone figures that out, I could lose you."

"I would never allow that to happen."

"But I can't take that chance."

I turn in his arms and look up at him. "Thank you. For the car and for being here. I've missed you so much it hurts."

He leans in and kisses me. I wrap my arms around his neck and hold on tight. He kisses me breathless as he backs me toward the car. When the backs of my legs hit the cool surface, I gasp into his mouth.

He groans and deepens the kiss. His cologne surrounds me and brings so much comfort, while driving me crazy. I've missed him so much.

"I have one more gift for you," he says against my lips.

I pull away and look at him curiously, but I get his meaning as he slips his hand into my shorts. It hits me then that it's my eighteenth birthday, the birthday he promised he'd take my virginity on.

"Gio," I cry out as he gives me my first-ever orgasm against the car he just gave me for my birthday.

As I shake against the car, he kisses my forehead and pulls his hand out of my shorts to stick his fingers in his mouth. I look into his hazel eyes, and I see the war there. I know before he says anything this is as far as this will go. I almost burst into tears.

“Come on. I’ll spend the night. Let me hold you for your birthday.”

“But Gio—”

“No, Nyla. It’s not right. It isn’t time yet.”

“But I’m eighteen.”

“I know, but I’m not that strong. If I have you, I’m not going to let go. Give me time. I need to do this my way.”

“I won’t take that from you and then leave. You would hate me. Let me do this one thing right.”

I nod. I get it. I may not like it, but I get it.

We return to my room. I take off his jacket and climb into my bed. He kicks off his shoes and takes off his pants.

He looks at me after placing his watch and cuff links on my desk and smiles. When he takes off his shirt, my mouth drops open. Not only is he chiseled out, but he also has tats.

“When did you get those?”

“Earlier this year,” he says as he climbs under the covers and pulls me into his arms. “Happy birthday, baby.”

I wiggle free and reach for my CD player on the nightstand. “I want to play something for you.”

“What is it?”

I shrug. “A reminder for us both.”

I hand him the headphones and press play. I’d been listening to this song all week, hoping I’d see him for my birthday. It’s SWV’s “Here for You.” He has a hold on me I can’t forget, even if he’s forgotten about me.

He tightens his embrace around me as he listens. I can’t stop smiling. The song ends and he takes the headphones off,

kissing the top of my head. “I hear you, baby. Go to sleep.”

CHAPTER 12



*N*othing but Truth

Nyla

Two years later...

I've been out skating with Ming and some of the girls. I won't be getting any planned or surprised visits this year, just like last. That fact was made clear when my birthday gifts from Gio and Jace arrived this morning, with apologies for missing my day, again.

I'll be honest, I was disappointed, but for once I didn't want to sit around thinking about boys. Gio and Jace are living their lives in Italy and I'm here. Jace's visits are less frequent and Gio's calls are nonexistent.

I'm growing tired of being forgotten. At twenty my body has finally started to bloom, and I turn plenty of heads. Why on earth do I insist on moping around over two boys I never see?

I walk into the kitchen and come out of my thoughts as Elijah and Gwen jump apart. I grab an apple and bite into it. Then I point it at them and tilt my head to the side as I fold my other arm across my chest. Elijah clears his throat as his cheeks redden.

"You two do know I've known you were a thing since I was like nine, right? Go on. Have your moment. Don't mind me."

“We’re trying to keep things from Lizzy, not you. She’s not ready to carry on the lies about things going on around her. We need her to repeat what she sees, that’s the best way to have people believe what we want,” Gwen says.

“I get it, *Aunt Denise*,” I tease and wink.

“Where have you been?” Elijah asks. “I thought we were going to go shopping.”

“I wasn’t in the mood. I needed to blow off some steam.”

“The boys aren’t coming?” This he directs toward Gwen.

“No, and they’re twenty-one now. I don’t think you can call either of those two boys anymore.”

“So Gio will be made soon?” Elijah asks hopefully.

“No, Lucas says someone’s blocking the books from opening. He thinks Riccardo is still playing his trump card by pulling Don Barbieri’s ear. Gio’s going to have to force them open.”

“How long will that take? I mean, he has to take the oath before Giuseppe can hand him the family, right?”

“Yes, but I’ve told you, it’s more complicated than that. Gio isn’t going to just become Don after one promotion. This will take a while.”

I can hear the sadness in Gwen’s voice and see the longing in Elijah’s eyes. He stands, places a hand on her backside and tugs her in to peck her lips.

“I’m going to the garage to work on the cars. Let me know if you need me.”

With that, he turns and leaves out of the room. I take a seat at the kitchen island and put down my half-eaten apple, keeping my eyes on Gwen. She looks after Elijah with a long face.

“Why do you do this? You could have taken a clean break and ran off with him to have a happy life.”

“No, I really couldn’t have. Elijah has always wanted things I can’t give him. Besides, I couldn’t leave you girls

behind. Beth would never do that to me.”

“Don’t you want a normal life? Why stay loyal to Ava? She can’t stop you from taking off, by the time she found out, you’d be long gone.”

“And I would have betrayed the person who saved my life. There would be no Elijah, no me, if not for Ava. I would protect her with my life just as your mother did.”

“But why?”

“I’m assuming your mother never explained to you why we recruit from the women’s shelters.”

I shake my head. “I always thought it was because they could use the money for a fresh start.”

“And yet, you choose the same types of girls she would have.” She shakes her head. “I used to spend my summers in Brooklyn with my aunt. She wasn’t nearly as wealthy as my mom and dad, but her home was safe, and she paid attention.

“My parents didn’t have time for that. They paid people to watch over what they couldn’t. I wish they would have vetted those people more.

“Ava and Beth picked up on my fear of returning home. Ava delayed her return home one year to follow me home to find out what was going on. What she found was my butler raping me for the twenty-fifth time. My brother wasn’t home, and my parents were traveling as usual.”

“Oh my God, you counted each time. I’m so sorry, Gwen.”

“I’m telling you this so you understand our bond. Your mother came from a physically abusive home. As tough as she was, she couldn’t comfort me. Ava did it, while Beth cleaned up and got rid of the body.

“That woman has killed for me, lied for me, protected me. I would go to the ends of the earth for her and her children.

“I... I can’t give Elijah children. I think in some way this was my way of trying to make up for that. He loves you girls and although he’s making a sacrifice when it comes to me, I think he understands why I must.”

With tears in my eyes, I reach across the counter and cover her hand. “I’m so sorry. For what it’s worth, you’ve been a great mom to me. I know it’s not the same, but I’m glad Mom had you as a friend to watch over me.”

“You don’t know what that means to me,” she sobs. “I had Carleen, she was like a daughter to me. I miss her so much, but I try to give you girls all the love I would give her if I could be in her life.”

“I hate Riccardo Esposito. He’s taken so much from so many people I love. When I get to end his life, I’m sending his ass on an express train to hell.”

“He deserves it, but forget that. It’s still your birthday. Let’s do something fun.”

“Okay.”

CHAPTER 13



*H*is Plan

Gio

Nine months later...

I sit slumped in my chair at the breakfast table, stewing. Something has changed, someone has moved on the board. I haven't found out who or what, but I know it has.

I've had this feeling since a few months back when I decided Jace shouldn't go back to the States. He was pissed, but I always follow my gut. I'm so close to having Ny back in my life, I don't want to chance anything.

"Dante, your brother will be arriving today."

Dante has been here for a while. The acting out has gotten worse when he's back home. Nonno thought it best to allow him to spend some time here with me.

"Are we still spending the summer in Naples?" My little brother asks excitedly.

"Yes, you boys will head over in the morning. I'll be there in a few weeks. It will be good for you boys, time to bond as brothers."

"Yes," Dante says with a grin and blush, his voice cracking.

My little brothers are growing up fast. They'll be taller than me at this rate. Dante is only fourteen and he's starting to grow whiskers.

I frown as I think of the fact that my brothers know none of the truth, and here I am, almost six years later, no closer to being able to give it to them. The thought tastes bitter in my mouth as I think of missing Nyla's birthday two years in a row. That's not happening again.

She didn't even call to thank us for her gifts this year. Jace hasn't heard from her in months. I'm ready to kill everyone and go home.

"Gio, what's this face?" Nonno says after taking a sip of coffee.

I sit up and snap, releasing all the things that have been building up. "It's been almost six years. Six. That fat fuck Don Barbieri eats enough steak to keel over while plowing that young bride of his, yet the bastard doesn't look any closer to meeting his maker anytime soon.

"I'm tired of waiting. All I have learned about is the business. Why do I need to learn about the restaurant business?"

Nonno slams his hand down on the table. "Because it is the business we are in. You can't learn this thing of ours without it."

I frown. "What do I need to do to get the books open?"

"Michelangelo," he snarls. "I understand your anger and impatience but remember yourself."

I huff and fall back in my seat. Dante looks between me and my grandfather in confusion. I pull a hand down my face.

"Dante, go walk Ralphie."

"Okay, Nonno."

My grandfather watches as Dante leaves the room, then he turns his sharp gaze on me. He lifts a hand to signal for his men to leave the room. I know I just fucked up.

“Never speak so freely about Giovanni in our home or anywhere else like that ever again. If you do, you won’t live to see the books open. You think we can trust everyone around us?”

“You can’t. Just as I have ears everywhere, so do our enemies. I’ve waited longer than you for this. I have more to be angry about.

“You want to receive your promotion. Do what Riccardo has done to prevent us from taking his life. You give favors in high places and become indispensable.”

He taps the side of his head with two fingers. “Use your head. What value do you have? The most valuable man in a room is the man who has figured out what every other man in the room needs.

“Know a man’s weakness, what he needs, what he fears to lose most. Then find out how to control it. Be the man everyone needs Gio, not the man who whines about not getting his way.”

I work my jaw as the wheels turn. A light bulb goes off. I nod as my new plan sets in.

The dining room doors fly open and my father walks in. He has a huge grin on his face. He comes to my chair, cups my head and kisses the top of it before doing the same to Jace.

“I know his plan. Riccardo has gotten comfortable and thinks he’s invincible. He doesn’t even care who he speaks in front of.”

“This could be a trap,” Jace says.

“He’s not that smart.” I snort.

“This is true. Where is Dario?” Nonno says.

“He’s walking the dog with Dante.”

Nonno nods. “Go on, what do you have?”

“He’s raising Frances’s boys to think they have a right to the family. He has also pulled Dario in because he believes

you're going to make him Don since Gio is a *finook*. He thinks you're hiding Gio here, so no one finds out."

"I've got his *finook*," I grumble and grab my shit.

"Hold on. I'm not done. He's boasting that once Dario is promoted to Don, he's going to kill you all and take over things. While placing Frances's sons in your positions," Dad says tightly.

"Hold on. You've mentioned Frances's sons twice. Why am I just learning about them? How many are there?"

"He has three. They were under Ava's protection. Your mother made a deal with Frances when the twins were born. No harm would come to them as long as you boys stayed safe."

"So these sons are important to Frances *and* Riccardo?"

"They are."

"I want to know who they are. Do they know me?"

"No, I don't believe they do. I told you, Riccardo doesn't count you as a threat. Just Dario and Dante and he has plans for Dante too."

I lift a brow. "Oh really?"

"Yes, he's trying to find the pieces for that plan. The goal is to make it so there's no one to carry the Di Lorenzo bloodline into the next generation. At least no one who can be made."

I roar with laughter. I can't stop laughing. Dad and Nonno look at me like I've lost it.

"This is his plan? This is what he's been up to? Fuck outa here."

Dad smiles. "I have one more thing you want to hear. He's lost favor with Don Barbieri. He still won't sanction a hit, but Riccardo's been banned from Italy. I'm still getting the details on why."

"Because he's a piece of shit," I hiss.

“Be slow to anger and quick to think,” Nonno says.

“This isn’t me angry. This is me ready. I know what I have to do. It’s time.”

CHAPTER 14



*F*ace the Facts

Gio

“I knew it. I knew Frances would betray me. Between that bitter bitch and his father, it was only a matter of time, but you don’t worry about them. I have plans for their family,” Ma seethes as she paces the living area in the farmhouse.

I came here to tell her all Dad found out. He is back at Nonno’s with the twins. Dario is cooking for everyone. I’ll slip back in by dinnertime.

“We should head back to the States.”

“No, Barbieri may have banned him from Italy, but that’s not enough. He’s still untouchable. This could start a massive war. Something you’ve never seen. We have to wait.”

I huff. “For how long? Nonno has been talking about me needing to wait for the twins to help me.”

“Nonno is right, you will need your brothers.”

“They’re fourteen. Need them for what?”

“This is above revenge. You are to be Don. Do you know the target that will be placed on your back? Not just from our enemies. Do you know what the RICO act is?”

“No.”

“It’s the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act. Let me explain. It’s a United States federal law that provides for extended criminal penalties and a civil cause of action for acts performed as part of an ongoing criminal organization.

“A single charge comes with twenty years. Riccardo did me a favor. I was facing ten counts before he made his move. Those friends of ours were smoothing things over. A nice working mom like me, I couldn’t have done half of what they wanted to charge me with.” She gives a cynical snort and goes back to her pacing.

“What do you have to combat this reality of our lives?” she continues.

“I kill Riccardo and then take over the family business.”

“This is bigger than Riccardo,” she says as she slaps the back of her hand in her other palm. “You have to know the board and be able to see everyone on it. You need to know all the moves and consequences behind them.

“There are reasons for everything we’re teaching you, but you can’t see that because you’re leading with your heart. You can’t afford to do that, Gio. If you do, you will lose everything.”

“Then what am I supposed to do? I’m already losing her,” I bellow.

Mom purses her lips. “Stop trying to do this without her. You’re not listening to me and your grandfather. You’re only as strong as your soldiers. Yes, Jace will serve you well, but you need more than him. More than someone in your ear. You need the force that will open doors.”

“And you think that’s Ny?”

“I know it is because I know you. You think I don’t see your wheels turning or her loyalty to you? Her soldiers were for you.”

“But I can’t have both. If she’s in my life to stand with me, I can’t have her any other way.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t have what she needs. I can’t give her what she needs. I lost all that a long time ago. Every time I was told I couldn’t show love openly or that I wasn’t enough... I don’t have that soft shit she needs anymore.”

Ma licks her lips, pulls her skirts up and takes the seat across from me. I stare her in the eyes, hoping she has the answers I need, because I’m struggling to make it all make sense. I thought I had it, but when it comes to Ny, I’m so lost.

“Oh, Gio. I’m so sorry. We were trying to prepare you, not break you. Let me ask you something.”

I nod. “Has she ever asked you for those things?”

“No.”

“Before all of this, when you two started, were you any of those things?”

“No, but—”

“But nothing, Gio. Nyla knew who you were then, and she loved you. Give her who you are.”

“And Jace?”

“What about Jace?”

I roll my eyes. “You saw. I know you did. That’s where all this came from. How am I supposed to deal with that? He’s everything I’m not. She’s not asking me for those things because she gets them from him.”

“Is that such a bad thing? The idea of a relationship like yours is to be happy and prosper. Everyone plays a part in that common goal.”

“There’s not a relationship. We’re not doing that shit. It’s me and Ny.”

“But you’d be stronger with Jace. You’re already doing this, Gio.” She tilts her head to the side. “Tell me, why do you send Jace to the States?”

“Ny’s unhappy. I want him to do what I can’t... *Fuck.*”

She smiles. “You see. Stop thinking about the sexual aspect of the relationship. Emil was our third for two years before Beth or I ever slept with him. He took care of us. He brushed our hair, drove us around, he was my bodyguard when I needed. He was whatever we needed to keep things going in our lives. Seeing us happy made him happy. He was whatever I needed to be successful at building our family’s name.”

“And Dad? How did he fit in? I’ve gotten to know him more and I don’t see him being okay with sharing or sleeping with some other dude.”

She rolls her eyes. “Your father never slept with Emil. Neither of them were bi. Beth and I needed the masculine energy they gave. We fed each other. They lent us their control and strength and we gave them love and attention. Our love for each other allowed us to share. Together we had peace. Do you see?”

“Yeah, I hear you.”

“But you are still going to try to do this without her.”

“No, I hear you.”

“But you will ignore me. Listen, my son. You do what makes you happy. That’s all I want. But take heed to what your grandfather and I are telling you. You can’t do this without Dario and Dante. You shouldn’t do it without Nyla and Jace.

“It’s up to you to play this in the way that allows you to win because it’s the one thing that isn’t optional. You will not lose, and I will not lose you.”

“I was born to win. You don’t have to worry about that.”

I feel those words in my soul. Whatever it takes, I will be the last one standing and all that belongs to me will be beside me.



Nyla

“I’m so glad you agreed to come out with me. I didn’t think you gave me the right number at first.”

I smile and laugh to myself, I almost didn’t. His eyes drop to my cleavage for the millionth time, reminding me why I wasn’t going to come on this date.

The only reason I’m here is because I need to stop sitting around the house. This guy seemed nice enough. He’s no Gio or Jace for sure.

Stop comparing. He’s never going to add up. Ain’t that the truth.

“Thanks for the date. This has been fun.”

“Would you like to get out of here?”

My phone lights up for the millionth time beside my hand. I glance at it and see the same international number. I’m not interested in long-distance calls. Calls that should have come nine months ago.

“Actually, do you mind taking me home?”

“Umm. Really? Already?”

“Yeah, I promised my little sister I’d be home to read to her.”

It’s a lie. Lizzy can read chapter books to herself now. At nine, she’s been displaying signs of being Carl Manning’s child.

“Okay,” my date says disappointedly.

We stand and start out of the restaurant. If he spent more time talking to my face and not my chest, this night might have ended differently. I might have let him put one of my nipples in his mouth.

I smile to myself as my phone starts to ring in my hand as if my thoughts were heard. I send it to voice mail as I climb into my date’s car.

Is it bad I don’t remember his name? He climbs in behind the wheel and glances over at my chest and I don’t feel bad at

all. My shirt isn't even that tight or low. If it were, I wouldn't blame him.

I suck my teeth when my phone rings again. "Excuse me, I need to take this," I murmur.

Maybe this is Ava. I wouldn't want her to think I don't want to take her calls. I answer and lift the phone to my ear.

"Hello?"

"Why haven't you been answering my calls?"

"You're not my dad."

"Don't play with me, Ny. Where are you?"

"I'm headed home from a date. How can I help you?"

"Put your phone on speaker."

"What?"

"*Metti il telefono in vivavoce.* Do you understand me now?"

I pull the phone from my ear to make sure I'm hearing correctly. Gio has lost his damn mind with all that bass in his voice. This is the first time he's called me in over two years, and he wants to boss me around. I rant in my head but place the phone on speaker.

"Okay, now what?"

"Whoever the fuck you are, don't say shit, just listen. You better take my girl home right the fuck now. I know five hundred and sixteen ways to commit a murder and get away with it, but I love to learn new shit and I don't like to repeat myself. Don't become a lesson, cocksucker."

"Are you for real?" I snarl.

"Fuck around and find out, Ny."

"I'm hanging up."

"Yeah, all right. Your ass better be home in ten and call me b—"

I hang up before he can finish. I look at my date and roll my eyes. He looks like he just shit his pants. Yeah, he's not my type, but that shit Gio just pulled has my nipples so hard they hurt.

I bite my lip and smile. However, I don't plan to call him back. Let him stew and see how it feels.

I've got something for him.



Jace

I stand in the corner of Gio's room up against the wall, my arms folded over my chest and one leg crossed over the other as I watch him on the phone with Ny. His face has turned red with anger. This isn't good. He was already in a shit mood.

"She's on a fucking date," he seethes after hanging up the phone.

"She wasn't going to sit around forever."

"Shut the fuck up, Captain Obvious."

I hold my hands up. I knew this was coming. I haven't been to see Nyla in so long it physically hurts.

I know I'm needed here but I also think Gio has been keeping me from her to keep us from getting too close in his absence. I get it but he's ruining this for us. Many would probably wonder why I'm obsessed with Nyla and have waited on the sidelines like this.

They're my family. All I've ever wanted or known. This is something I know I can have.

I just have to be patient and do my part. Where my family is from, this isn't uncommon. Denmark was part of the communal revival movement, my dad was very active in the community, even after his breakup with Ava and their unit.

It's what I know. After my parents were killed. I longed for a family of my own, a safe place, love—and that has always

been Gio and Nyla. So I will wait and hope Gio doesn't destroy it before it comes together.

He waves his hand in the air as if waving off the call and his anger. This gets my attention because his mood changes right before my eyes. The calculating Gio comes out.

I move to sit in the chair facing him as he sits on the foot of his bed. The video game we were going to play is forgotten.

“This Ming, you still think she's a fit? Is she still in Ny's life?”

“Yes, she's the only one you liked. They're still friends. They skate together.”

“Skate?”

“Yeah, Nyla took up roller derby. She and Ming are on a team together.”

I watch him take in that information and bank it. It's amazing to watch him work. More so because we think alike.

“Do you think you can get her to come here?”

I tilt my head, wondering what he's planning this time. Gio's brain moves so fast, if you're not a thinker, you'll be ten steps behind him, wondering what you missed.

“Ming?”

“Yeah, I need to know how loyal she is to Ny.”

“Okay, I'll make that happen.”

“Good.”

“Is that all?”

“No, I know how I'm going to create my value. It's time for you to start finding my collection, like we talked about. Each one needs to be smart, a head turner, and willing to do anything, including lay down her life for us.”

“Us?”

“Don't play stupid. You know what I'm saying. If I'm to be king, Ny is my queen, and you're my knight, all of this will be ours. For now, I'm setting up the board, I'm going to allow

Riccardo to play out his game. Dario has to move through the promotions.”

“I see.”

My thoughts turn to Frances’s sons. Gio looks me in the eyes, the look in his says he knows what I’m thinking.

“I want to know everything about them. If they move an inch, I want to know where. I have a feeling they will be of use to me.”

I nod. I had planned to look into them anyway. I always have Gio covered.

“And the rumors?”

He gets up and comes to slap my cheek then smirks. “You’re not so bad. If I’m going to be into guys, you will work.”

“Fuck you.” I laugh and shove him back.

He shrugs. “Let them keep talking. I’m going to make everyone envy me. They’ll all wish they had my life. Find my collection. I’ll control the narrative from there.”

“And Ny?”

“She will come to me. I just made sure of that. Weren’t you paying attention?”

I grin. Yeah, I was. I give it a week.

I stand and head for my room to jump on Black Planet to start my search for his collection and to summon Ming. I’ve had my eye on a few I think Gio will like.

Once logged on. I go to Nyla’s profile. I lift a brow as I notice she’s finally uploaded photos. I miss her face and have been hoping she would post something.

I start to choke as I click on the first full-length photo. I click through them all, biting my lip.

“Fuck me.” I pull a hand down my face and groan. “Please don’t fuck this up,” I mutter like a prayer.

CHAPTER 15



*T*ake Me Home

Gio

Three days later...

“Lucas told you their plane comes in today. Why are you playing these games with her?”

“I’m not playing games with her. I’m trying to see where her head is, if she can handle this task. If this doesn’t look right, we can’t pull it off.

“Nonno was the first person to point out to me I was in love with Ny. What he sees will tell me my next move.”

Jace snorts. “You’re going to fail.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

He laughs. “You’ll see.” With that, he turns and dives into the pool.

I roll my eyes and turn my attention back to my guests. They’re pretty, but not my type. However, Jace and I have given the short one attention enough for it to look like we’re both interested.

Marco will be sure to carry that back to the other families. I realized he’s the one Nonno feels has his ears open for things to run and tell. I’m going to use that.

“Can I get you ladies anything?” I croon as the two look up at me from the loungers they’re perched on.

They both give goofy smiles as they ogle my bare chest. The one we’ve been given attention to shakes her head no but drops her eyes to my swim trunks as she bites her lip. Her friend blushes as she drags her eyes over me.

They can both relax. It’s not happening.

I shrug and hop on the lounge between the two, stretching my long legs out in front of me. There’s music playing and the grill is going, with Nonno cooking up steaks.

I look cool on the outside, but my stomach is in knots. The last time I saw Ny was the morning after her birthday when I left her sleeping in her bed. I couldn’t wake her or wait for her to wake because I wouldn’t have been able to leave.

I had taken things too far by fingering her tight, hot pussy. I almost caved. I wanted to take her that night right on top of that car. The way she fell apart for me, I’ll never forget it.

Now, I’m twenty-two and she’ll be twenty-one in October. There will be nothing to stop me from claiming her this time. I haven’t seen her in years, and that was by design. I knew I would break if I laid eyes on her.

Placing my hands behind my head, I lift my face to the sun. Today will be a good day. That thought is short lived as the Italian music that was playing at a reasonable level is replaced by Phil Collins “Take Me Home” and starts to blur.

My lips turn up, she’s here. That’s my girl announcing herself. I open my eyes and turn my head toward the house.

I sit up so fast my head spins. This isn’t the Ny I left sleeping in her bed over two years ago. I stand, balling my fists and cross my arms over my chest.

I can’t take my eyes off her. Nyla has become a full-grown woman. The black bikini she’s wearing leaves nothing to the imagination.

Her shapely hips sway as she struts her brown ass into the pool area. Her breasts have gotten huge and accent her toned

frame as she high steps like a model in black strappy heels. The diamond bracelet around her ankle catches my attention.

It's the gift I sent for her last birthday. She tosses her straight hair over her shoulder, and I swear I'm caught in a dream. I don't know what I was expecting, but this wasn't it.

I only lose my hard-on when I watch her freeze before she runs into Jace's arms to wrap her lush body around him. I snap out of it and quickly look around. Noting Marco isn't around I pull my shit together. Then my gaze lands on Nonno.

"Fuck," I hiss as I catch him with his eyes on me.

Jace was right, I wasn't expecting Nyla to walk in looking like this. I totally failed my own test.



Nyla

Gio has me so fucked up. He had the nerve to lose it over my date, but I just sat here for the last thirty minutes, watching him from the house with these chicken heads.

I'll show him. Taking off my wrap, I toss it aside and smooth a hand over my hair. They have some old Italian music playing through the outdoor speakers.

I go to the stereo and put on something I know both Jace and Gio will recognize as me announcing myself. I left this Phil Collins album behind years ago. I smile to know Nonno kept it.

I was so upset when I left it behind. Gio bought me a new one a few weeks later. He'll know this is me.

I'm sure of it. Once the song starts, I crank up the volume and head for the back doors to make my entrance. I put all the sway I have into my hips as I walk out in my six-inch heels, making sure to high step so my breasts jiggle in my bikini top.

My attention is pulled from a stunned-looking Gio as the sound of water splashing grabs my ears. I turn my head toward

the pool and freeze. Jace emerges from the water like a god. His long hair plastered around his face and shoulders.

I bite my lip and grin. From the window, I could see that both my childhood friends have become stunning men, but Jace like this is so sexy.

He comes out of the pool with a huge smile on his face. I forget about snatching Gio's little friends to toss them out and run for Jace. He catches me in his arms and holds me tight as I wrap my legs around his waist.

His embrace is so comforting, I don't have it in me to be angry with him. I know he's not the one who sent for Ming and these girls have been in Gio's face when he's the one claiming I'm his girl.

"You look amazing. I'm so happy you're here," Jace says in my ear.

I slide down his front and look up at him. "That makes one of you. Wait until I'm done. We'll see if you still want me here." I snort. "Ming is in my room, by the way."

"Cool, thanks."

I place my hand on his waist as I look up into his gray eyes. Jace is simply gorgeous no matter what color his eyes are, but I love when they're this color. It adds to the mystery that is Jace.

I wink at him and drag my hand across his taut stomach as I move past him to get to Gio and his friends. He hasn't moved from near them since I walked out. For that I want to flip them both.

I stop in front of him and look into his eyes. How can a simple look take your breath away? The way he looks me up and down causes my pulse to race.

I tear my gaze from him and look at his little friends. "You both can go. You're not needed here."

"Who are you?"

"Oh, you understand English. I thought you didn't since y'all are still here but let me say it in Italian anyway. *Potete*

andare entrambi. Non sei necessario qui.” I smile up at Gio. “My Italian is still good, no?”

He says nothing as he smirks at me. He crowds my space and leans into my ear. “You didn’t call me back.”

“No, I did you one better. I brought this to your doorstep. What’s up, Gio?”

“How you doing, Ny?”

I tip my head to the side and raise my voice with my answer. “I’m about to get real stupid in a second because I know I said leave,” I say without looking away from him.

He lifts a hand and waves the two to leave. Just then Nonno comes over. I turn to him and smile like nothing is going on.

“Nonno,” I squeal and throw my arms around his neck.

“My Ny. Look at you. Such a beautiful woman now. I’m so happy to see you.”

I beam at him as he releases me. “I’m happy to be here and to see you too,” I say in Italian.

“You’re Italian is still beautiful as ever. Come, come. Let me feed you. Where’s your friend?”

“She can be a bit shy. She’s unpacking and getting herself together. She’ll be out soon.”

I roll my eyes at Gio as I follow Nonno. He grabs my wrist and leans in my ear again.

“This isn’t over. You’re gorgeous, by the way. I can’t wait until tonight.” His gaze drops to my lips. The hum that passes between us is undeniable.

I snort and snatch away from him. I don’t know what the hell he’s expecting tonight, but it won’t be what I think he’s talking about.

“Damn,” he breathes as I start to walk away.

I look over my shoulder to find his gaze on my ass. I don’t have the hugest butt, but I’m doing well enough for my frame.

It's going to grab your attention.

Gio has nothing but lust in his eyes as he bites his lip. I grin and turn back to focus on Nonno, but I don't miss the opportunity to sway my hips.

CHAPTER 16



*A*lways Be Here

Nyla

I might be a little tipsy from the wine Nonno broke out to celebrate. I'm definitely avoiding Gio. My heart hurts.

At the end of the day, I think I'm over my childhood crush. He hurt me too deeply when he left me. Now, I don't need Gio the way I used to. However, wanting him is something else.

I've been sitting under the stars with Ming in the sunroom. It's such a beautiful night. I stare into a glass of wine, pondering my feelings.

I look up and catch a glimpse of Jace through the side doors. He's heading toward the guesthouse.

"Hey, I'll be right back."

"Where you going?" Ming asks.

"Shh," I put my finger to my lips as if I have some secret. "I'll be right back."

I get up and run outside to follow Jace. He and Gio disappeared on me and Ming a while ago, right after Nonno turned in for the night. I have so many questions for Jace.

The guesthouse is lit up when it comes into view. I wonder if Jace plans to sleep out here tonight. It's not like he had to

give up his room for Ming. I think of the girls from earlier and ball my fists as I tiptoe forward.

When I get to the front door, I peek my head in. “Jace,” I whisper-call and giggle to myself. Yup, I’m tipsy.

My curiosity is piqued as I see the candlelight all around. I slip inside to find out what he’s up to. I’ve never thought about Jace moving on to date someone else.

“Jace,” I whisper again.

I frown and wrap my arms around my middle. My drunken mind begins to clear, and my heart starts to ache. Faced with the possibility that he’s here with someone else burns as much as finding Gio with those girls at the pool did. I blink back tears as it sets in that I’ve lost both my boyfriends—even if Jace and I never made anything official. I played with fire and got burned.

I’m going back home in the morning. There’s nothing for me here. I’ll be okay with that. It’s time I figure out what I’m going to do with my life.

It was never realistic to think I could ride off into the sunset with my childhood friends and make some happy family. It was childish. That couple I met was nice, but they were living in some fantasy, I should have known better.

Suddenly, someone comes up behind me. I duck, turn, and swing for their midsection. My fist is met with solid muscle.

The sound of a deep grunt greets my ears. I lift my gaze to find Gio with a towel wrapped around his waist. Faster than I can react, he grabs me by the neck and spins me into him, pressing his body to my back.

My head clears and I take in the music playing as he breathes in my ear. I close my eyes. I can’t take being this close to him. His body heat is like fire against my back. My chest heaves as I reach for his wrist.

“You remember the promise you made me? Did you mean it?” he breathes heavily into my ear.

I knit my brows and that's when the song playing registers. It's SWV "Here for You." Tears fill my eyes. I can't believe he remembers. I'm not her anymore. A lot has changed in the last two years.

"I was a different girl that night. Things were different."

He turns me to face him. Pinching my chin between his fingers, he lifts my head and searches my face with those hazel eyes.

"Nothing has changed but time. I still love you."

"How can you say that to me? Everything changed for me, my parents are gone, you left me. I've been all by myself."

He closes his eyes as a pained expression covers his features. Tugging me forward, he presses his lips to my forehead. I try not to feel, not to allow him back in.

"I'm doing what needs to be done to give you what you asked for."

"What did I ask for that would make you abandon me like I'm nothing?"

He groans. "You really think you could be nothing to me?"

"Yeah, Gio. I do. You haven't called. I show up here and you're all in some girls' faces. Do you know how that made me feel? I'm not some toy you can play with and put away when you feel like it. I'm a person, I have feelings.

"I once thought I understood you. Now, it's like I don't know you anymore."

"You know me better than anyone. Think, Ny. Why would I do any of this? What world are we a part of? What can't I have? Ask yourself why?"

I knit my brows. "Because you're an asshole?"

He chuckles. "God, I've missed you so much. But seriously, do you understand?"

I chew on my lips. "You were testing me with those girls. I failed, didn't I? This thing, you're going to change it so we can be together, right? You can't have me because I'm Black."

“You got it, baby. It’s all for you. You’re here because I need you, but you have to learn how to hold that temper because I need to create an illusion for a while. No one can ever see who you are to me, not until I finish this.”

“So long as you know, I no longer need you, Gio.” He looks down as if his feelings are hurt. I reach for his cheek until his eyes meet mine and smile up at him. “I might want you though.”

He crushes my lips, pulling me into his all-consuming passion. I hold on to his face and melt into him. He groans as he palms my ass and pulls me into him.

Breaking the kiss, he begins a trail of open-mouthed kisses down my neck. Whimpering, I lift onto my toes and push my fingers through his hair.

“I love you so much, Ny. I’ve missed you.”

“I love you too.”

He growls and rips the towel from his waist. I drop my gaze and my mouth falls open. His body is sick. I noted his muscled arms and chiseled abs earlier in the day, but he definitely doesn’t miss leg day and wow...are all penises that big?

I don’t get long to ogle him. He has me in his arms, wrapped around his waist and he’s in motion.

Our lips clash in a hungry kiss. I reach to release the top strings of my bikini. He grabs the fabric and pulls it from my body, tossing it over his shoulder. My heart is racing, I try to tell myself I’m not dreaming.

He carries me into the bedroom where more candles are lit. I have to hold back the tears. He was waiting for me. All of this is for me.

“Oh God.” I know for sure I’m not dreaming when he takes my nipple into his mouth as he rolls the other one between his fingers. “Gio.”

“Hold on, baby. I’ve got you.”

He places me on the bed and starts to kiss his way down my body. I begin to get nervous as he moves lower and starts to peel my bikini bottom off, chasing it down with more kisses against my skin.

My body is on fire for him. I hold my breath when I feel his fan against my mound. This is really about to happen. I cry out and buck off the bed when he slides his tongue through the lips of my pussy.

He hums and flicks his eyes up to look at me. I suck my lip into my mouth and watch as he devours me. It feels amazing. He adds two fingers, pumping them in and out of me. I fall onto my back and stare up at the ceiling in awe.



Gio

She tastes like perfection. I knew she would. I thought I was going to lose my mind waiting for Jace to get her to follow him here. I've waited long enough to have her.

I claw my fingers up her thigh as I eat her out and finger her with my other hand. She's so gorgeous. I don't know how long I'll be able to hold out, but I can't rush.

I need to have her, but she needs to enjoy this more. My heart is pounding. I don't have a ton of experience myself. Yeah, I lost my virginity at fourteen, but I haven't been with a ton of girls.

Ny begins to convulse, and her stomach caves. My confidence boosts. I may not have a lot of experience, but I haven't had any complaints either.

"Turn over for me," I command.

She smiles up at me but wiggles to flip over. I straddle her thighs and bite my lip as I look down at her fat ass. It's perfect, just enough.

I'll be back to watch it bounce on my cock later. For now, I want to heighten her desire for me. Reaching for the oil on the

nightstand, I then pour some on my cock and stroke it as I look down at her sexy body.

Growing impatient, I pour some of the oil across her back and over her ass. I place the bottle down and start to massage the oil into her skin. Her skin starts to glisten and glow under my palms. I groan, my length pulses in anticipation.

Gliding my palms down to her cheeks, I start to massage them, pulling moans of pleasure from her lips. Her juices glisten from her fat folds.

“You have such a pretty, fat pussy,” I grunt as I rub my thumb against it, then push the digit in a few times.

She lifts her ass in the air as if offering me her little kitty. That’s when my patience ends. I climb off her to turn her back over. Her tits jiggle as I reposition her and grab the oil again.

Squeezing the liquid all over her front, I look her in the eyes, saying all the things I know I can never say out loud. I’d give my life for her. She can have anything she wants. All she has to do is ask. I’d take my last breath getting whatever it is to her.

I’m in awe of her as she rubs the oil into her breasts, I lick my lips and lower to dive into her pussy again. Knowing she’s a virgin, I want to get her ready for me. I’m thick and long, she’s going to need to be fully aroused to take me easily.

“Gio, please,” she whimpers.

I push my face in deeper and coax another orgasm. She starts to keen and it’s like music to my ears. My heart swells. I’m finally going to claim what’s mine.

I lift to my knees and tap my length against the top of her mound before I push down on it to slip into her pretty pussy. I only have the tip in, but she gasps and lifts her breasts toward me.

“Gio,” she breathes like a prayer.

I grab a handful of her hair and tug her up toward me to take her lips. Ravenous, I kiss her deeply as I push in more. I’m resting on my knees to have more control of how much I

feed her. She's taking me like this is where I've always belonged.

I break the kiss and turn my face to press my cheek against her forehead as I push all the way in. She gasps and whimpers as I break through her barrier.

I still and look into her eyes, silently checking to make sure she's okay. She gives a nod, placing her hands on my back and clawing at my skin. I sit back and start to pump my hips as I watch her pussy suck me in.

"Fuck, you feel so good, baby."

She bites her lip and smiles at me, holding her legs open and out to the sides. I can't help panting as I plow into her. We both look down at me going in and out of her tight body. She's creaming all over me. I'm covered in her thick essence.

"Gio, fuck," she cries out and throws her head back. "Yes, yes. Oh my God, yes."

I start to go deeper, holding her legs open wide for me as she loses her grip. This is why I've kept my distance. I knew she would ruin me. She owns me and doesn't even know it.

I lean in and grab the sheets by her head and start to pound into her. This pussy is so good. Reaching for her breast, I squeeze and ride her harder. Sweat drips down my nose and hangs from the tip as I get lost in her.

I stick my tongue out to catch the drop before it drips onto her. Her eyes light up and she lifts to lick my face and capture more of my sweat. I turn and take her lips, kissing her as deep as I can.

She's tightening around me, squeezing so hard, I'm struggling to hold back. I open my mouth to cover hers and breathe her in. Instantly, it's like our souls connect.

"I'm coming, I'm coming."

"Fuck, baby, I know. I can feel it. This will always be my pussy, Ny. Always."

I crush her lips and kiss her hard. She comes, but I can't stop fucking her. I lift and bring her ankle with the bracelet to

my lips. I circle my tongue against her skin as I rock my hips into her, calling for another climax.

The fact that she starts to sing nonsense is a total turn-on. I rub my palms against her oil-slick skin and groan, not knowing where I want my hands most.



Nyla

My voice is raw from screaming, but I don't want him to stop. Like everything else he does, he fucks with so much intensity. The way he looks me in the eyes, I feel him in my soul.

This is what I always knew we would be. He's so hard inside me, it feels like he's going to pound through my back. Yet, I feel him swelling more. I reach for the bed over my head and fist the sheets.

He drops his eyes to my breasts and reaches to palm them. I cry out as he kneads them. He moves one hand between my legs and starts to rub at my pussy as he rolls my nipple between his fingers. His long lashes fan across his cheeks as he watches the action.

“You're so gorgeous,” I pant. “Ah, ah, ah, ah, Gio.”

“Not as gorgeous as you are. Come for me one more time, Ny.”

I lift onto my elbows, and he leans in to kiss me while still rubbing and thrusting. Our lips connect and I feel his kiss in my toes. He's pounding faster and harder, going deeper with each thrust. I can think of nothing but him. I feel him everywhere.

I point my toes and hold on to the arm he uses to hold me by the back of the neck as he fucks me into the mattress. His moans and groans are so sexy.

“I love you,” he breathes, then kisses me.

Then, as if it's getting too good, he breaks the kiss and looks into my eyes. We hold each other's gaze and I know the

moment I'm going to come and come hard. He seems to sense it too as he swells inside me and tightens the hold he now has on my leg.

“Gio,” I scream as we both go over.

His hot cum fills me up and a smile comes to my lips. That was everything I dreamed of and more. I close my eyes and fall back against the bed to catch my breath.

Gio gets up after a few beats. I open my eyes to look after him curiously. He pads to the bathroom and disappears inside.

I look down my body and find a towel beneath me. It's covered in blood. Reality hits. I just lost my virginity.

Gio comes back into the room with a hand towel in his hand. Silently, he wipes between my legs. I watch him closely. His mind is somewhere else.

“What's wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“Was it that bad? I can get better.”

He snorts and leans in to kiss my lips. “You were amazing. If you get any better, I'm chaining you to my bed.”

I smile like a goofball. *I had sex with Gio*. Even as I squeal it in my head, it doesn't seem real.



Gio

Watching my cum spill from her body was like a dose of reality. I know she's on birth control, but that's not what bothers me. What hit me in the chest like a ton of bricks is the fact that if we were to have children, they would always be targets.

Because of me they would always be in danger. Look at all I'm doing to keep her safe and in my life now. My children would be my greatest weakness next to Ny.

“What’s wrong?” she asks again as she lies across my chest.

“Everything was so much simpler when we were kids. You wanted an ice cream cone, I got you one. You wanted someone to push you on the swings, I pushed you. If you were scared while watching a scary movie, I held your hand.

“I never questioned giving you what you needed. If I couldn’t do something, Jace was always there. He had my back to make sure you were taken care of. I’ve always known you were mine, then we got older, and things became... complicated. Our wants don’t seem to matter as much.”

“But isn’t that why I’m here, what we plan to fix?”

“Yeah, but we’ll have an even bigger target on our backs once it’s all over.”

She lifts up and looks me in the eyes. She’s so fucking beautiful. It pains me to know I’ll never see her swollen with my child.

“Don’t you remember what my mother used to say?”

“Your mom said a lot that has stuck with me.”

“She told us to leave an example. You don’t just eliminate your enemy. You make sure everyone watches you slaughter them. You leave a mark so everyone else thinks three times before they ever try you again. Now, tell me what you need from me. How do we set an example?”

“I fucking love you.”

I crash her lips. However, deep inside, I pray she never asks me for children. It’s the one thing I don’t think I can bring myself to give her. The one thing I will say no to.

CHAPTER 17



*L*oosen Ends

Gio

I squeeze Ny's face and kiss her hard before we walk out of the guesthouse to head up to the main house. Last night is still on my mind. I would love nothing more than to spend the day making up for lost time, but I have shit to do so I can have her with me for life.

Jace walks up and gets between us, bringing reality back in. He throws an arm around Ny's neck, causing me to frown. We agreed to make Ny look like our buddy in for a visit, but I'm feeling possessive after what happened between us last night.

"Marco is working today," Jace murmurs.

"Did he do as we thought?"

"Sure did."

"Good, his job is done."

Jace turns to me and winks. "I thought you would say that. I made sure the hogs weren't fed this morning."

"Sounds like some fun is about to go down. I want in," Ny says.

"Not this time. I need you here with me. I need to see something."

“Do I get to see her?”

She doesn't need to say who. I figured she'd want to see Ma. The hogs are on the farm, but I don't want to leave Ming here alone and I don't know if she can be trusted with what Jace is about to do.

“Tomorrow. I'll take you myself. We can stay the weekend there.”

“You're sending Ming back tomorrow, right?”

“Depends.” I shrug.

“*Gio*,” she drags out in warning.

“You trust her. I need to make sure you're making the right decisions. There will be no weak links, especially not the ones connected to you. Besides, I'm looking for something.”

“Should I even ask?”

“No, you'll figure it out,” I reply.

Jace kisses the top of Ny's head and takes off. I fight against moving closer to her to place my hand on her back. Nonno and Ming come into view, having breakfast on the pergola and I think better of it. I glance at Ny and grin to myself as I flick my gaze over her.

“Hey, you might want to go up and soak in the tub.”

She looks up at me and bites her lip. “Is it obvious?”

“Hell yeah,” I laugh. “I should have placed you in the tub last night. That walk is a dead giveaway.”

She throws a punch at my arm. I dodge it, then pull her into a brotherly-looking hug. Placing my lips to her ear, I whisper, “I can't wait to spend the weekend fucking you. Get your rest now.”

I release her and watch as she walks away to head into the house. She looks so fucking adorable in my T-shirt. I miss her already.

Schooling my features, I walk over to join Ming and Nonno. I'm shirtless and in a pair of gray sweats. Although

I'm not looking at Ming, I'm observing her reaction to my presence.

My Ny is a beautiful woman and she's already wealthy without me. I need to know the people around her aren't jealous or envious of her. She has to be able to trust the women closest to her.

I note that Ming takes me in, but she looks away quickly. I question if it's because she's shy or if she's doing it out of respect for Ny. I start to fill my plate with fruit as I wait for the staff to bring out my breakfast.

"Ming, would you mind giving me and my grandson a moment?"

She wipes her mouth and stands. "No, not at all. I'm going to go catch up with Nyla."

"Thank you."

Nonno watches until Ming disappears. I bite into a piece of mango. I already know what's coming.

"It's the way you look at her. From the time she arrived how you feel has been written all over your face. When she's near you your posture reads possession. These are the things I've noticed. Those are the things you need to work on."

"Anything else?"

"She is the same with you. She will need to learn to control her feelings as well. The rumors about you and Jace have taken on life. However, having her here exposes you all. I would think she was the third person in your relationship. This isn't what you want, *si*?"

"No, she can never be thought of as ours."

"Then you now know what to fix."

"Thanks, Nonno."

He nods and goes back to his breakfast. My waffles and sausage are brought out and I dive in as I think over what my grandfather has said.

“Oh, and my Michelangelo,” he says, pulling me from my thoughts.

“Yes?”

“I want *nipoti* from you, but be wise about when you choose to make that happen, *capisce?*”

“*Capisce.*”

He doesn't have to worry about this. I don't plan to get Ny pregnant ever. My feelings from last night rise again. Nope, fatherhood is a weakness I can't afford.



Jace

I'm on my way to prepare for my task when my name is called. I turn to find Giuseppe staring at me. He gestures with his head for me to follow him.

I run a hand down my beard before nodding and following him. He dips into his study. I note none of his men are around.

He stops and turns to me. I walk up and stand in front of him. He reaches for the back of my neck and tugs me down so he can lean into my ear to whisper.

“Today is to be Marco's last day in my employment. Empty his desk and see him off the premises.”

I straighten and nod. Marco doesn't have a desk. What Nonno just asked for is the same hit Gio has already ordered, but I don't say a word.

I walk out of the study, not needing any further instructions. I find Marco coming out of Ming's room. Before he can step all the way out and close the door, I rush him and push him back inside.

Pulling the knife from the holster at my back. I shove it into his forehead with all the force I have. His eyes roll in his head. I catch him before he falls back and drag him over to the hidden panel in this room.

These things are one of my favorite parts of this house. Nonno taught us to use the tunnels when we were little. I dump Marco inside and go back to clean whatever mess I may have left behind.

I fix the chair that was knocked over. Looking around, I try to see if anything looks out of place. Not finding anything, I go to check Marco to see if he took anything.

Once I'm satisfied. I toss his body over my shoulder and head for the car I have waiting to take his remains to the farm. Marco's employment has been terminated.

CHAPTER 18



*A*ce the Test

Gio

I sit at the side of the pool, watching Ming. She's a pretty girl. Not what I was expecting, but pretty. The name Ming Wu had me thinking she would be an Asian girl.

That was my assumption. I won't make that mistake again. I was expecting some nerdy Asian chick from the things I've read about her.

Instead, the girl who has arrived with Nyla is a pretty Blasian girl. She's darker skinned with slanted eyes and long, silk, straight hair down to her ass. Her lashes are crazy long and her lips are full.

Like Ny she looks like a pretty doll. Nice body, pretty face, and she seems smart too—transcripts mean nothing. I need her to be street smart, not just book smart. I wanted an East Asia girl, but she'll do.

She looks away from me shyly. I like that about her, it will be useful. I can work with that.

Diving into the water, I swim over to where she's standing in the pool. She looks up at me and blinks a few times. She's not just pretty, she's cute, about five-five and thick. She can work.

“Your family owns skating rinks? Is that right?”

“Yes, they do.”

“But they’re having some financial troubles. Your parents’ divorce and some investments gone bad. They’re about to lose the rink you and Ny like to skate at.”

These are all facts. I’m not asking questions. The research was done. Jace was thorough.

“Y...yes. How do you know that?”

“You’re in Ny’s life. I need to know everything about you.” I smile and tilt my head. “I’m protective of my friends. I want us to be friends, Ming. Would you like that?”

“O...okay.”

I crowd her space, reaching to run my hand down her braided ponytail. Then I lean into her. She looks like she’s about to freak out. Placing my palms flat on either side of her outside the pool, I lean into her ear.

“You’re really pretty. You know that?”

“Um, thanks.”

“You should stick around a little longer. I don’t think Ny is headed back tomorrow.”

“Aren’t you and Ny a thing?”

“We don’t have to be if you’re down to fuck.” I place a hand on her hip and look into her eyes.

“Can I kiss y—”

I start to choke before I can get the last word out. She just throat chopped me. My eyes water as I smile.

“I don’t know what you think this is, but Nyla is my best friend. I’d die for her and there’s not a single dude I’d allow to come between me and her after all she’s done for me.

“Fuck you, and I’m going to tell her about this, you asshole. I can’t believe she’s so crazy about you. What the fuck?”

Ny comes sauntering out of the shadows, clapping her hands. “I’m glad you passed his test because I was going to

kill your ass if you touched him and make him get rid of the body. *Gio*,” she drags out my name. “Your ass plays too much. I’ve only been here two days and you’re trying to make me catch a body.”

“What?” Ming says, looking between the two of us.

Ny takes a seat beside her, placing her long legs into the water. I fight against my impulse to stare at her, rooting myself to where I stand so I don’t move closer as Nonno’s words play in the back of my head.

I shrug. “I do want you to stay longer, but I would never cheat on Ny. By the way, that’s the first secret I need you to keep. Ny and I are only friends to the rest of the world. I don’t care who you think someone is to us. We’re friends.”

“You were testing me? Why?”

“I needed to know you’re not the type to be a problem for her, my goals, or our relationship. I want to help you and your family, Ming. In return, I have something I want you to do for me and Nyla.”

“Okay, I’m listening.”

“You can say we’re about to become business partners. Nyla has given you a set of skills. You also have a few skills of your own I want to acquire. You come work for me, I’ll help you with the rink. I’ll put it in your name. However, you will also give Ny access to the facility for what I’m asking for.

“I’ll pay for all the upgrades and renovations. I also need you to run point for Ny. You will work with her and Jace until my goal is accomplished.”

“What exactly is your goal?” Ming asks, looking at me warily.

“I need soldiers. Soldiers who serve two purposes. The men I’m about to engage will need favors, I will grant those favors. My soldiers will be liaisons between myself and these men and on occasion, my soldiers may need to exterminate them or others.”

“You’re talking about women, women soldiers.”

“Yes, I’m building a house for them with our new partnership. You will house my collection.”

“Your doll collection,” Ny snorts. “You don’t just want soldiers. You want pretty killers.”

I wink at her and tip an imaginary hat. I knew she would pick up on what I’m up to. Men don’t think clearly around pussy. They’re willing to lose it all for it. I can control just about any outcome with the right pussy.

That’s why I need a collection. If I have the pussy, I have the value. So I control the fucking room.

“Loyalty is key, and discretion is a must. We don’t hesitate to kill. You’re either with us or against us and if you’re against,”—I shrug—“there’s no need for you to exist.”

“Cool. My parents are driving me nuts. I could use my own thing. I’m in.”

And just like that, I have my first doll.

CHAPTER 19



*S*omething for You

Nyla

“Look at you. You’re so grown up and pretty,” Ava coos as she hugs me and rocks back and forth.

“It’s so good to see you. You look great.”

“I spend most of my time working in the sun. It’s a far cry from my old life.”

“I told you we could move you somewhere else, somewhere away from Italy and America. You can have your life back,” Gio says.

“I’ve grown attached to this place. I like knowing your grandfather is in the same country as I am. This is home.” She waves him off. “Come, Nyla. Sit with me. You have to tell me all about what you’ve been up to. Is there someone special in your life?”

I look up at Gio. He has his eyes narrowed on my face. I don’t get to answer as he moves behind me, wraps one arm around my waist and his other hand around my neck to tip my head back, then kisses me breathless right in front of his mother.

“Oh, I didn’t realize you two picked things back up.”

“Actually, I came to visit Nonno and somehow, this guy has been all over me since I arrived,” I tease.

“Fuck outa here,” Gio croons, tugging me into him and burying his face in my neck. He pinches my ass, causing me to yelp.

I look up at him and pout. He pecks my lips before saying, “She almost made me go back home to kill some guy. Showing up was her way of saving her little friend.”

“I love seeing you this happy, Gio. I’m also glad you’re here, Nyla. I’ve been wanting to talk to you for some time. Did Jace come with you guys?”

“He’s showing my friend around.”

“Oh. Is she pretty?”

“She is, but I doubt he’s noticed. He can’t take his eyes off Ny,” Gio grumbles.

“Can you blame him? I still can’t believe how grown up you are. Come on, make yourself comfortable. Would you like something to eat, drink?”

“I’m fine, we had a big breakfast.”

“I’ll go talk to Ming. We all know Jace is giving her the silent tour.”

We laugh as Gio kisses my cheek and turns to leave. I sit with Ava, not able to remove the smile from my face. It’s so good to see her.

She reaches for my hands. “Are you happy?”

I shrug. “I guess I am now. It’s good to be back with Gio and Jace. I felt like something was missing for so long.”

“I haven’t seen Gio look so happy in a long time. You’ve all been through so much. I’ve wanted to talk to you about what I saw that day.”

My cheeks heat. “That was nothing. We had actually gotten into a fight and Gio and I decided we weren’t mature enough for something like that.”

“That was six years ago. Jace still has feelings for you. Gio knows that as well as I do.”

I sigh. “I’ve been trying to ignore that since I’ve been here. Gio and I have taken our relationship to the next level. I don’t know where Jace fits into that now.”

“You still care about them both?”

“I’ve loved them both all my life. It’s different but the same. I don’t know. Like, Gio has this fire I’m drawn to, while Jace has this comfort that pulls me in too.”

“I get it. You can see the flames that burn between the three of you. They pull toward each other. You know you have different types of soul mates. They’re not always intimate partners. Sometimes they start out as something totally different and grow into intimate partners later.

“I’m not trying to force anything on you, but I wanted to let you know I’m here if you need me. I’ll help guide you as much as I can. Not that I had much success at it, but I want to be the emotional support for you I wish I’d had.”

“You, Mom, and Emil, right? I found pictures of you three.”

“And Lucas. Yes.”

“Oh, I’m not trying to be selfish or anything, but I don’t see another woman in this. We have a bond I want to keep between the three of *us*.”

She snickers. “I totally understand. Not everyone is the same. What worked for me and your mother doesn’t have to work for you.”

“Can I ask what happened? Why didn’t it work?”

“Lucas wanted to father my children. That was a hard limit for him. The rest of us were okay with a communal family. When we couldn’t agree, things unraveled.”

The wheels start to turn. I know how possessive Gio can be. Would he be okay with me having a baby by Jace?

I do want children someday. I know for sure Jace wants a family. We’ve talked about it enough.

He wants children of his own someday. He'll make such a good father. His eyes sparkle when he talks about it. I've never had that conversation with Gio.

Images of dark-haired little boys play in my head. I would love nothing more than to have a baby with Gio someday. Jace would make cute babies too. Can our friendship evolve into that type of family? I'm almost afraid to even think about it. I don't want to lose what I have all over again.

"Relax, Ny. Breathe. No decisions need to be made today. The most important thing is to be honest and consider everyone's feelings. You have to know yourself before you can service a unit.

"Your self-confidence and knowledge of self will mean a lot to who you are to the boys and who they become to you. Gio has a lot to learn about himself, but I think he will surprise everyone."

I absorb her words and save them for later. I've always gotten the impression from Jace as if he's waiting for something—me to break up with Gio or for Gio to give in. Whatever it is, I have the feeling I will have to face this someday.

"Tell me about this Ming. She's your friend from back home. What brought her here with you?"

"Gio summoned her." I roll my eyes. "She's cool. I trust her with my life. She became a friend when I needed one. You know?"

"I see. What are your plans, Nyla? Are you going to go to college? What are you doing for you?"

I wrinkle my brows. "But I thought you would want me to help Gio. I never thought about what I'd do. I've been waiting for your call."

She cups my face in her hand. "You will help Gio. This I'm sure of, but don't forget yourself. He and Jace are taking online law classes, why shouldn't you? You can still do something with your life too. You're as smart as my son, if not

smarter. You can be your own earner. And the best part is, he's never going to ask you to kick up to him."

I laugh and smile. "I guess you're right. I'll think on it. It would be nice to have something to call my own."

She pats my hand. "Good."

CHAPTER 20



*P*assion and Fire

Nyla

“GIO,” I squeal as I run through the barn.

I’ve been running from him for about twenty minutes. He’s chasing after me because I ate the rest of his mozzarella Ava made. It was so good; I couldn’t help myself.

“Come here. I blinked for one second and you stole my food right off my plate. I’m going to kick your ass, Ny.”

I giggle as I run faster. I go to turn the corner, but he wraps his arms around me and tackles me down into a pile of hay. The wind is knocked out of me, but I can’t stop smiling.

He kisses all over my face as I lie beneath him, panting for air. “If you say you’re sorry, I might have mercy on you,” he says in my ear.

“What if I don’t want mercy?” I say as I look up into his eyes.

He takes my lips and kisses me passionately as he palms my ass and rolls us so I can straddle him. Things heat up quickly as he pushes my dress up. He breaks the kiss to look me in the eyes.

“I thought I was crazy. You don’t have panties on,” he says while frowning up at me, even as he fingers my wet slit.

I shrug. “They’re not always needed. Thongs chafe.”

He rolls his eyes but wastes no time reaching to release his zipper. I lean over him to kiss him again. Grabbing the back of my neck, he deepens the kiss while using his other hand to guide himself inside me.

I gasp into his mouth as he thrusts into me. He grasps my throat as I start to ride him slowly. I look him in the eyes and that dark intensity is there.

He grabs my ass with his free hand, guiding me on his length. I bite my lip and start to circle my hips because it feels like the right thing to do in this moment. He groans and tightens his hold.

“Fuck, Ny, just like that.”

I keep riding him until my legs start to shake. He flips me onto my back and starts to thrust deep inside me. Too deep, I reach for his waist and try to hold him back.

He tugs the top of my dress down and captures my nipple between his lips. Soon his thrusts turn into a mix of pleasure and pain. I hold on to his lower back as I try not to cry out too loudly.

“Gio,” I cry when he goes really deep as he sucks my nipple and flicks his tongue against it.

He leans in my ear, his voice deep and husky with lust. “I love when you call my name. You feel so good. I can’t get enough of you.”

“Oh shit,” I scream. He feels amazing. The hay stabbing me is ignored as he shifts, pinning my legs back as he looks down our bodies to where we connect. I love watching him enjoy my body. It’s almost as big a turn-on as having him inside me.

I reach for his shirt and tug it up. He releases me long enough to get it off. Reaching for my mouth, he sticks two fingers inside. I suck on them as he moves his lips to my neck to pull the flesh there into his mouth.

I moan around his fingers. He drags them from my mouth down to my throat. When he lifts his head to connect gazes with me, his eyes are so dark with lust. His face is twisted with it as well.

“I love you,” I cry.



Jace

I stand outside the barn, with my head back against the wall and my eyes closed. It's not that I didn't know they had taken things to the next level. I just wasn't expecting it to hurt so much to see them together.

I'd come out here to find them after they ran out of the house thirty minutes ago. Ava wanted me to check on them. I should have known this would be what I would find.

Gio doesn't have to be guarded here. He's been trying on and off to control his reactions to Ny but most of the time he's been allowing himself the time with her.

“You're in love with her too.” I open my eyes and look down at Ming.

She holds her hands up. “Your nose is red and so are your cheeks. Want to take a walk, dude? I can tell you're on the verge of tears.”

I push off the barn and start walking. I take a deep breath to pull it together. I'm not sure if I'm doing the right thing anymore. My silence has always been a problem.

This time it's an issue for me. I've lost control of what I wanted. I'm losing my family all over again.

“Want to talk about it?”

I snort. “I'm not much for talking.”

“Yeah, I get that. Listen, I only know what Ny tells me, but I know you're important to her.”

“I know I am. That's not the problem.”

“She’s in love with your best friend. She’s your best friend’s girl. Where do you go from there?”

“I like you, Ming. You’re cool and all, but you don’t know us. This is more complicated than that.”

I turn and pick up the pace so she can’t follow. I’m done talking. I’ve waited this long. I’ll just have to be a little more patient.

CHAPTER 21



Sweetest Moments

Jace

IT'S BEEN a month since Ny has been here in Italy. Nonno left for Naples to join Dario and Dante. We've had the estate to ourselves.

I wasn't expecting that. I haven't had a moment to breathe from Ny and Gio's relationship. I feel like I'm growing less and less important to them.

The connection between me and Ny is still there. We're drawn to each other, but she's placing a wall between us. Honestly, I'm not entirely sure it's intentional. I try not to show how unhappy I am because I truly am happy for them.

I love seeing Ny smile so much and Gio has been in a better mood as well. Needing an escape, I came out to the lake on the property to read a book and get lost.

"Hey."

I look up from my book as I sit with my knees bent and my head down. Ny is standing before me looking more beautiful than ever in a sundress with her hair in a ponytail. I look back down at my book.

"Hey."

"What are you reading?"

“A thriller mystery. You can borrow it when I’m done.”

She moves to stand between my legs and starts to lower to sit. I move my arms out of the way and watch her.

“Or... you can read it to me. I love your voice and when you read to me. I miss that.”

I used to read to her when I’d go to visit. When we were little, Gio would read to us both while Nyla would lie between us. Those were different times. I was allowed to be there for her, to be more to her.

I sigh and shift a bit to be able to read from the book. However, she leans in and rests against my chest and curls into a ball between my legs the way she used to.

I begin to read aloud, and she melts into me. My chest aches. This was the pain I wanted a break from.

“Jace?”

“Yeah.”

“What’s wrong? Something is different. You don’t talk to me the way you used to.”

“I’ve been busy doing my part. It’s not you, I’m focused.”

She lifts her head and looks at me. I look out toward the lake because Ny knows me. She’ll see the truth in my eyes.

“I can help. I’ll be training them when you find them so I can help.”

“No, I’ve got it. I know what he’s looking for.”

“I just wanted you to know I’m here.” She goes back to resting her head on my chest. “I’m always here.”

I kiss the top of her head. “I know.”

I go back to read and soak in the feel of her in my arms. This is what I thought I could have. Gio would probably flip his shit if he found us like this.

However, I’m breathing for the first time in a month. I take in the breath like it’s my last. It’s the only time I will ever

think to steal from Gio because if I don't take this breath, I don't think I'll find my next.



Gio

Something has changed. I don't mean since Ny and I took our relationship to the next level. It's something else. Something about Ny that's bonding her to Jace.

I sit up in one of the trees, watching them from a distance as he reads her a book. I know he's been having a hard time with my relationship with her. I think she feels guilty, but then there's something else I haven't put my finger on. Then it clicks.

"They have a trauma bond. Fuck," I murmur to myself.

The realization hits hard. Jace lost his parents in almost the same way when he was eight. Now Ny has lost hers. I should have seen this coming. I pushed them into it.

I'm watching her try to fight the pull, but they're as much magnets to each other as Ny and I are to one another. I'm not an idiot. I'm watching it happen every day.

While I've been giving Ny all my attention and affection, I know that's going to have to stop soon. I need to figure out what my next move is concerning her.

I can't keep her here in Italy and I'm not sure I'm ready to go back to the States. I've learned enough about the business to go home and run it. Dad has stood in long enough, at least with our legit business. I can give him a break.

Jace runs a hand down Ny's ponytail, and she tips her head back to look up at him. The smile on her face is one I want to see her keep. I know I'm not going to be able to do that for her for much longer.

I rub at my chest. *Am I being selfish?* My thoughts travel back to when we were little. There's a reason I'm so loyal to Jace. Anyone else, I would have killed them by now.

“You really love him as a friend. I do think you would have killed someone else by now.” I look down my leg to see Ming standing below as she speaks my thoughts back to me.

“We were about seven and Ny was six. Jace’s dad had taken us to the beach. Ny wanted ice cream, so Uncle Emil went to get us cones,” I start in answer.

The day is as clear to me as if it were yesterday. It was hot and the beach was crowded. Ny’s hair was cornbraided up into a ponytail with clear beads at the end. She had on a pink-and-yellow bathing suit. My trunks were blue and Jace’s were yellow.

“We weren’t supposed to move. I was showing off for Ny. I’ve always had the biggest crush on her. I ran into the ocean to show her I could swim against the strong currents of the Atlantic. I was doing fine at first. Emil taught us all how to swim. However, Jace was the better swimmer.

“Because of me, he got to prove that. I was pulled under and couldn’t come back up. Jace saved my life. I would have been embarrassed too, if Ny hadn’t kissed and hugged me because I was okay.

“I’ve owed him my life since. He has always been like a brother to me, but that made him bleed in my eyes. What’s mine has always been his.”

“Except for Nyla. I think I’m starting to understand.”

“Understand what?” I frown down at her.

“Nothing. None of it is my business. I was just looking for you guys to tell you I’m leaving for my flight in an hour.”

“Ny will want to see you off. I’ll call you in a few days about the construction. Have a safe flight,” I say, dismissing her.

“Thanks,” she murmurs and rushes away.

I’m left pondering my memories. That day at the beach clings to my thoughts. Jace could have drowned in that water with me. He risked his life to save mine. I wonder if he regrets that now.

CHAPTER 22



*T*riple Flame

Gio

I SMILE as Nyla's crazy laugh fills the kitchen. She just burned our dinner. I love her for trying, but she's never going to work at one of the family restaurants.

"Thank God Nonno's not here. He'd be so disappointed," she laughs, then turns to me. "I promise to get better. Our kids won't starve."

I stiffen, not wanting to touch that subject. Jace snorts, drawing my glare. He's been hitting the grappa pretty hard tonight. He's been this way for the last few days since Ming left.

I've told Jace how I feel about having children. He tried to tell me then it would be a problem. I shake the thought off and get up to help get something to eat on the table.

"Go sit down. I've got this," I say as I kiss the back of Ny's neck.

"I'm sorry," she says and makes this cute face.

I kiss her nose. "Your aim is A1. I'll let you pass on the cooking."

"Because you need a shooter more than a wife who can cook."

“Baby, when you’re my wife, you won’t be a shooter. You will be shopping somewhere, living the life.”

Jace pulls a face and gets up to stumble out of the room. I stare after him. I’ll deal with him later.

Ny sighs and then whispers, “Gio, I don’t know what to do. I know something is bothering him.” She looks down. “I think it’s us.”

“Let me worry about him. I’ll have this pasta and gravy done in twenty minutes.”

“Okay. I’m going to go sit with him while we wait.”

“All right.”



Jace

I flop down on the couch and cover my face with my hands. I don’t know what the fuck is wrong with me. I’m not a child. So what? I’m not getting my way.

I need to pull my shit together before I lose both my friends. That I’ll never be able to survive. Somehow, I’ll get over not having what I’ve wanted all my life.

“Hey.”

I drag my hands down my face and look at Ny. She’s staring back at me with concern written all over her face. I purse my lips. I’m so drunk, I can’t feel my face.

“Hey.”

She sits beside me and runs her hand through the front of my hair. She gives me a wobbly smile. I look away and run my hands over my thighs.

“Talk to me, Jace. You’re not happy.”

I shrug. “I just need to sober up.”

“Remember that one time we all got sick from drinking that beer?”

“Yeah, Gio was so mad at himself because you were sick. I spent that night holding your hair. He had passed out on us.”

“Where did we go wrong?”

I’m silent. I don’t know how to tell her how I really feel. It’s never been easy for me.

A record I found in this room a few months back comes to mind. It said everything I feel. I get up to see if I can find it.

I remember the jacket. Flipping through Nonno’s collection, I find the one I’m looking for. Ben E. King. “I (Who Have Nothing).”

I place the record on the record player and turn to hold my hand out to Ny. We all learned to dance when we were little, it’s how we were trained to fight.

She takes my hand and I spin her into me and look down into her eyes. She looks back at me, searching. The song tells her just how I feel as I sway us. I have nothing and I’m no one, but I love her so much.

Gio gets to give her everything I wish I could. I dance her around the room as I watch the words sink in. I’m bleeding my heart out in this moment.

Placing my forehead against hers, I let her feel what I feel. I know the moment Gio has entered the room. I back away and nod, turning to leave.

“Jace,” Ny calls after me, but I’m gone. I need some air.

I’m outside, headed for the guesthouse. My goal is to put space between myself and my two best friends. However, I don’t think that’s going to happen.

“Jace, *Jace*,” Gio bellows as he catches up to me and grabs my shoulder.

I fling him off and turn to face him. We’re both about the same height, six-five, so we’re eye to eye. I glare at him before I turn to walk off again.

“Bro, what the fuck is wrong with you? What was that?”

I turn back to face him. “That was how I feel.”

“Like you’re no one and have nothing?” he asks, his face covered in confusion.

“Come on, Gio. For her eighteenth birthday, you gave her a car. I gave her a fucking teddy bear and my cologne. Do you remember how hard I worked around here to make money for that Sidekick she wanted? Last year, I gave her a digger I made. You gave her a diamond ankle bracelet.

“You’re getting ready to take over the world, I’m nobody in all of that. My father was killed being who I’m trying to be. What future do I have? I have no family, no real money until my trust kicks in and that’s still nothing next to what you two have. I have nothing and now, I don’t have her.”

“Jace,” he chokes out.

“What?”

“I never knew that’s how you felt. Yeah, I know you want a family but all that other shit. You’re not a nobody. I can’t do this without you.

“Our money has always been yours. I thought...she loved those gifts. I thought you were thinking of shit she’d cherish because it came from your heart. I didn’t know you were saving for that Sidekick. I thought you just wanted to help Nonno out and he always gives us money for doing shit. I didn’t think about it. I never thought about the money.”

“Because you don’t have to worry about the money.”

“Bro, you’ve loved her for as long as I have. You had time before we hooked up to go after her, why didn’t you?”

I scoff and narrow my eyes at him. “You know the answer to this. You have spoken for me most of my life. I was always afraid I wouldn’t use the right words.”

“Bullshit. She learned to speak your language. You could have told her.”

“What good would that have done?”

“We wouldn’t be here.”

“Yes, yes, we would. Gio, I’m not trying to take her from you. That’s not what I want.”

“Then what do you want?” he bellows.

“You have no idea how it is to be one of the ones left behind,” I choke out, tears clogging my throat. “To want what’s gone and will never return. To have your life stripped from you. We get that. It’s tied me to her and you in ways I can’t explain.”

“What I want is for you to allow her to decide if she doesn’t want me. Give her that option. You’re about to hurt her and I can fix that, so we don’t both lose her. Let her decide she doesn’t want to be shared.

“If I’m not what she wants, I promise I’ll get over it. But I can’t take this...this pull. I know you see and feel it. It doesn’t make either of us less of a man to love her together.”

He cracks his knuckles at his sides. A sign he’s restraining his temper. I roll my eyes and go to turn away again.

“Wait.”

“That’s all I know how to do.”

He closes the distance between us and tugs me into a hug. I hug him back because the small eight-year-old boy inside who lost his mom and dad needs this. Gio was the first person to hug me after my parents were killed. He has been my person since.

“I never knew how you felt. You mean as much to me as my family does. We’re setting up some new accounts for you. Never again will you feel like you have nothing.”

“You don’t have to do that. I gain access to my trust next year.”

“Fuck outa here. I’m not allowing another day to go by where you can’t buy anything you want. Buy her something nice. Something you’ve always wanted to give her.”

“Thanks.”

“Don’t thank me yet. Come on. We all should talk.”



Gio

I have to be out of my mind for what I'm about to do. However, the pain in my friend's voice and the hurt on his face tugged at something in me, but his words are what hit the mark.

You have no idea how it is to be one of the ones left behind. I get it. It's exactly what I thought. Their trauma bond gives them something Ny and I will never have. I also understand why he never went after Ny in the first place.

He wouldn't even speak to her when we were little. He would only whisper to me for me to talk for him. It's the reason she learned to speak Danish to talk to him for herself. He looked so embarrassed the first time he ever spoke to her.

I remember her smiling up at him, so happy he spoke. She talked his head off for the rest of the day. I never knew fear of speaking was why he never asked her out. I thought it was more a bro code thing.

I've never made it a secret how I feel about Nyla. At least not to Jace. My mind is reeling.

We enter the living room to find Ny crying as she sits on the couch where I left her when I ran out after Jace. Jace goes to sit beside her and wraps his arms around her.

"I'm sorry," he says.

"No, I'm sorry. I did this. I should go back home."

I sit in the accent chair and crack my knuckles. I take a deep breath then begin.

"No, you're not going back yet. I'll find a place for us to stay since Nonno and my brothers are coming back. Listen, some things are going to change. We're all stronger together.

"All I want is to see you happy, Nyla. That's all I've ever wanted. If... if we're going to do this. I have some rules.

“You never penetrate her without asking me first. Petting and all that other shit, fine, but no fucking. If you’re not happy, Ny. You talk to me.

“Jace, you have to talk to me too. We don’t run to anyone else about what’s going on between us. We talk to each other or no one at all.

“This is our thing between us. We need to be able to trust each other. I’m going to need time to wrap my head around this, so if my mood is fucked up for the next few days. Allow me that.”

“What are you saying?” Ny says as she sniffles.

“Jace isn’t the only one I’ve been watching. You’ve been feeling guilty about having feelings for him.

“I want you in my bed every night. I’m not okay with you leaving my bed to wake up in his. We’re both huge and we’re all tall so we’re not all sleeping in my bed, but you’re with me at night. You wake to me.”

“Are you okay with that?” Jace asks Ny.

“Oh my God, your accent is coming out. You’re nervous,” Ny says as she cups his face. “I’m okay with this as long as I don’t lose you both. I can’t go through that again.”

Jace looks at me. I silently answer his question. Turning back to Ny he tugs her gently into a kiss. I close my eyes and take a deep breath, reminding myself I’m going to have to be distant with Ny again.

I can’t show her half of the affection I have over the last five weeks. Nyla shows the world a hard shell, but she needs that softer side I can’t give her. And Jace, he has always needed love. Ny does that for him.

I’ve seen it with my own eyes. She calms him. As long as he knows she’s okay, he’s good.

Jace groans, and Ny releases a moan, causing me to look at them. He’s caressing her breast. I don’t know if I can take this. I get up and go to make a drink.

CHAPTER 23



A Gentle Hand

Nyla

I CAN FEEL the nerves coming off Jace. I'm just as nervous as he is. Once we do this, there's no turning back. I'm terrified of losing him and Gio.

However, I feel like we need to try. He holds my hand in his as he leads me upstairs to his room. My mind goes to where Gio went to. I wonder if he's okay.

We step into Jace's room. Once inside, he closes the door behind me. It clicks softly, but I still nearly jump out of my skin.

"We don't have to do this," he murmurs, his accent showing through again.

I smile up at him and lift on my toes to kiss him. He kisses me back with a different kind of passion from Gio. It's possessive, while still gentle. I lock my hands in his hair and the first thing to stand out to me is the lack of hair product that Gio's has.

He breaks the kiss and searches my eyes. I give him a smile. He brushes his finger across my cheekbone.

"I can put on some music if you want."

"What do you have?"

“My CDs are over there.” He points to the CD case on his desk.

I move to the desk and pick it up. Once I have it unzipped, I browse through the discs. I find Total’s first album and put it into the CD player on his desk. I skip through to the song I want and “Don’t Ever Change” starts to play.

I feel his body heat as he steps up behind me. He palms my breasts over my dress as he starts to kiss my neck. Gently, he sucks the skin on my neck into his mouth as he pinches my nipples. I turn my face up and he takes my lips.

I whimper into the kiss, reaching to fist his hair. I’m so lost in his kiss; I cry out when he slips his fingers into me after lifting my dress and pushing my panties aside. He groans as I soak his fingers.

Placing his forehead to mine, he continues to work my pussy with his long fingers. I lift my dress and pull it over my head. Turning to face him, I drop the dress to the floor. He palms my ass and lifts me onto his waist, then moves to the bed.

He kisses me sweetly as he lowers me onto the mattress. Pulling his shirt over his head, he drops it to the floor and pulls the band from his wrist to pull his hair up in a bun on top of his head. Then he works to get his pants off. I scoot up the bed but freeze the moment he drops his pants and underwear.

I don’t know what I expected. I thought Gio was a one-off...but damn. Jace is giving him a run for his money. They’re both big and long with plenty of girth.

He strokes himself as he places a knee on the bed. I reach out for him to give me his other hand and tug him to me. His big body covers mine and I cradle him between my legs.

“I love you, Nyla,” he whispers in my ear. “I’ve loved you all my life.”

Before I can reply, he kisses me. His big hands are everywhere. He’s not as rough as Gio can be. It’s different in a nice way. Jace takes his time to kiss his way down my body

with open-mouthed kisses. Then peels my panties from my body.

When he settles between my legs, he starts to feast on me like I'm some delicate flower. This is new. I love the way Gio devours me, but this has a nice pace to it.

He bobs his head into me as if he's enjoying every moment. My climax starts to build slowly. His beard is a bit of a shock. I like the way it brushes my skin. It's like an added sensation.

I bow off the mattress as I lock my legs around his head, crying out his name. Jace moves back up my body and links our fingers together as he holds my gaze and slides inside me. He catches my gasp in his mouth as he rocks gently into me.

There's a different type of passion coming from him. I'm taken someplace I've never been before. It dawns on me that he's making love to me.

I've only ever been fucked and wouldn't have known the difference until now. I stare up at the ceiling as he works his hips into me and groans in my ear. I bite my lip as tears fill my eyes.

“Are you okay? Do you want to stop?”

“No, I'm fine. Please keep going.”

I look into his eyes and see they're green. I smile and cup his face, bringing his lips to mine. He runs one hand up my side and palms my breast, squeezing and kneading it in his big hand.

Breaking the kiss, he moves to pull my nipple into his mouth. My toes curl and I tighten my legs around his waist. There's a connection flowing through us.

“Jace, yes,” I moan.

He picks up the pace and I can do nothing but hold on to his back, digging my nails in. He slips a hand under my ass and tilts my hip up. His thrusts are deeper like this.

“Oh.”

“You don’t like that?”

“Yes, I do.”

“You’re so wet. Tell me what you like. I want to make this good for you.”

“I don’t know what I like. I was a virgin before Gio,” I pant. “This is nice though. Don’t stop.”

He pulls a face. I bite my lip, not knowing what to say. It feels amazing. Although it feels like he’s a little unsure of himself.

He pulls out and rolls me onto my side, reentering me from behind. Wrapping his arms around me, he pumps his hips into me as he holds me in a hug and nuzzles his bearded face into my neck.

“Jace,” I cry out and grasp his hands.

He moves one of his big thighs between my legs and plants his foot into the mattress as he really gets into it. It’s still not rough, but just right. His deep, heavy breaths and groans are right in my ear. I’m going to come like this.

I feel him swelling inside me and panic. Gio didn’t say if we should use condoms or not. I wasn’t thinking because it’s not something I worry about with Gio.

I’ve been on the pill for years, but I don’t want to do anything that will make Gio upset. The sound of Jace’s hips slapping against my ass and the feel of his balls slapping against me pulls me out of my thoughts.

“Ny,” he groans as he pulls out and comes in his hand.

I lie there with my eyes closed. I didn’t know I’d feel so guilty after. I curl into myself and hold on to my knees.

Jace gets up. I’m lost in my thoughts while he’s gone. When he returns, he brushes a hand over my hair and kisses my head.

“Will you let me clean you up?”

I turn onto my back and allow him to clean between my legs. He looks me in the eyes and sadness fills his green gaze.

I sit up and brush a lock of hair from his face that's slipped free.

“We don't have to do this again.”

“Why not?”

“You hated it.”

“No, I didn't. I feel bad that I liked it. I really liked it.”

He gives me that little Jace smile I love so much and leans in to kiss me. I wrap an arm around his waist and hug him to me. After a few beats, he tosses the towel and positions us in the bed so he can spoon me. Then we talk like this is a normal part of our day.



Jace

I put on a pair of basketball shorts and wrap a sleeping Ny in a blanket. Lifting her into my arms, I use the hidden passageway to carry her to Gio's bedroom. She only stirs a little as I carry her.

She's so beautiful. Making love to her was everything I thought it would be and more. However, I've heard her scream for Gio. I didn't think she was enjoying it at first.

After we talked, I understood. She was in her head the entire time. The second time, after we talked some, it was different. I think we were both more relaxed and in the moment.

“I almost shot your ass,” Gio grumbles as he aims his gun at me when I come through the hidden door into his room.

He puts the gun down and picks up the glass beside him. I move to place Ny in the bed beside him. He glares at me.

“Did you enjoy yourself?”

“Gio, don't. We can talk in the morning.”

“It was a simple question.”

“I love her. It was the best night of my life. I lost my virginity to the only girl I’ve ever loved.”

His mouth drops open and he blinks at me in shock. I tighten my fists at my sides and look away from him as I work my jaw.

“Fuck outa here. I thought...Cindy Applegate? No?”

“No, it’s always been Ny for me.”

“Why didn’t you say something?”

“Gio, Riccardo has been calling me a faggot all my life. There was a point when I wondered if he saw something I didn’t. I didn’t want to tell you and you look at me differently. I knew I’d never be her first, but I wanted her to be mine.”

“Fuck.”

I turn to head back the way I came. I get to the door when Gio calls my name. I turn to look at him. He has moved Ny to the center of the bed.

“It will be tight, but come on. Stay. It will be like our sleepovers when we were little. You should get to spend the night with her.”

I smile and nod. I know this is big for him. I appreciate the gesture.

I climb into the bed and place a hand on Ny’s hip.

“You touch me, I’m fucking you up,” Gio teases.

“Shut the fuck up and take your drunk ass to sleep.”

He chuckles. “I love you, Jace. I wouldn’t do this shit for anyone else. If something ever happens to me, I need you to take care of her.”

“Shut up. I’ll die before I let something happen to either of you. I love you too.”

CHAPTER 24



*N*ew Recruit

Gio

“IS THAT EDIBLE FOOD?” Jace teases as he walks up behind Ny in our new kitchen, placing a hand on her waist. She looks up and pulls a face before sticking her tongue out at him. He pecks her lips.

We’ve been living in this apartment for a month now. I’m starting to get used to seeing them together. It doesn’t piss me off nearly as much as I thought it would. It really is an extension of the friendship we grew up having.

Things between the three of us have gotten better, we’re all closer. However, I was annoyed the first few weeks because Jace wanted to fuck every five seconds, which meant he asked me a million times for permission. I understood though.

He was finally getting his cock wet. It was still an adjustment because I was fucking the shit out of Ny in my anger. I knew what I was doing, but I couldn’t stop myself. I’d fuck her, then leave to lick my wounds.

It has become routine for Jace to hold and console her after. Kind of like when we were little, and I’d kick her ass during training and would need to go sit by myself because I was so mad I hurt her.

It had to be done, it made her stronger, better, faster, but I was still angry I had to do it. I guess Jace has always been

cleaning up my messes. Back then, he held her while she cried angry tears because she wanted to be better.

“Babe, I didn’t burn the eggs. You want some?”

I look up from my laptop to see the hopeful look in her eyes. Ny can’t cook for shit, but she’s always trying. She’s getting better. I’ll give her that.

“Yeah, why not.”

The way her face lights up makes my heart skip a beat. I look back at my computer screen at the files Jace sent me. I’m looking for a specific match. I know what Petey Romano likes. I need to own him, and this doll needs to grab his full attention.

I look up at Jace. “You ready to go do that thing?”

“Yeah, she’s ready. I leave in the morning.”

“Is she okay?” Ny asks.

“A little banged up, but she’s in a safe place for now. I’ll get to her in time.”

“Handle the boyfriend first. Then collect her.”

“To make her feel safe and like we gave her a gift, right?” Ny says as she chews on a piece of bacon.

“Exactly. If he’s still out there, she’s not going to be focused on training. She’ll spend all her time afraid he’ll come back for her. That puts you in danger. This way, he’s taken care of and Jace looks like a hero. She’ll be loyal to him and open to you because he’s handing her over to you.”

“Which means I’m going back home?” I hear the sadness in her voice.

I miss her already. Our long talks at night, the scent of her lying next to me. I’m not ready to let any of that go, but I know it’s time. We have to prepare.

“I’ll fly you in once a month, but yes, for now, you’re going back.”

She rounds the counter and climbs into my lap. I place my forehead to hers. Absentmindedly, Jace places a hand on her back. She relaxes and buries her face into my neck.

I remind myself this is why I'm doing all of this. The freedom to be us and to have her in my life. I don't care what people think. I'd give my life for these two and I know they'd do the same.

"I'm going to miss you."

I kiss her forehead. "This time, I will at least call."

"You better or I'm coming back here to burn all your shit down."

I laugh as I grab her face and kiss her hard. "Just remember not to play with me. No dates or bullshit to get someone killed."

"I have all I want. I don't need more than you and Jace. Besides, Jace is coming to the States after this thing in Japan, right?"

I growl and she laughs. Yes, Jace will be with her for a while. I've been in my feelings because I can't be. I'm still working out my plan to head back home. I'm not living under Frances's roof, that's for fucking sure.

However, all my moves need to look as if I'm none the wiser. I need to establish employment outside of our thing and get a place of my own. It's all in the works.

I glance at my computer, decision made. My next move is important. I need Romano to secure several of my next steps.

"I want the Russian girl. After he collects her, he'll be with you."

Ny leans into my ear. "I love you. I'll be waiting for you."



Nyla

I leave in the morning when Jace does. Nonno's putting me on his jet. Jace is flying out on Gio's plane. I have this deep ache in my heart. I'm going to miss them both, but I have this sinking feeling when it comes to Gio.

I don't think I'm going to find the same man when I see him again. There have already been subtle changes. He's taken on more responsibility with Nonno and it's taking its toll.

I want him to know he always has a safe place in me. I'm not even angry with him for the rough, angry sex he has with me. I like it. Gio pours all his passion into it.

I understand him enough to know he's expressing himself. I think he knows I don't love him any less, but I want to make sure of that before I leave.

He's been in a mood for hours. I came into our room to shower before dressing up in the black fishnet outfit I purchased as a part of my going away gift. I knew my time was coming.

I smile down at the mile-high gold heels on my feet. Gio loves when I wear heels. My mind goes to the last time we all dressed up to go out. We came back from the club and Gio spent the night with my legs around his head and waist, eating and fucking me like only he can.

When I open the bathroom door, he's already in the bedroom sitting in the accent chair with his head thrown back as he stares up at the ceiling. He lifts his head and narrows his eyes at me as he looks me up and down. I saunter over to him and stand with my legs spread wide.

"I want to show you how much I'm going to miss you."

He gives me a crooked smile that lights up his hazel eyes. Leaning forward, he reaches to grab my ass and pull me into him. Then he presses the side of his face against my stomach.

"Sometimes, I wish I could fast forward to when this is all done."

"I know what you mean. Let me ease your mind for a bit."

He turns to kiss my stomach. Then looks up into my eyes. I bite my lip and reach to pull my hair up in a tie. He smiles and sits back in the chair. I wink at him and drop to my knees.

My stomach clenches. I'm a bit nervous. This is my first time giving head.

I place my hands on his thighs. "Wait," he says with a frown.

I suck in a breath and my shoulders sag. I thought he would want this. He cups my face and lifts it until I meet his gaze.

"Get off your knees. You should kneel to no man. We should all kneel to you. Come, you sit."

He helps me up and I sit in the chair he vacates. Gio stands before me with a wide stance like the one I had. I reach for his belt, keeping my eyes on his.

He nods for me to continue. I release the belt, then his zipper. Reaching inside his jeans, I pull out his heavy shaft. I scoot to the edge of the seat. He steps closer to help close the distance.

I look at his tip, finding the precum there. Sticking my tongue out, I lick my way through it. I like the taste and hum with pleasure as it fills my mouth. Opening wide, I allow him to glide into my mouth and across my tongue.

"Mmm," I hum.

Gio groans and runs his hand over my head. I start to suck on him like a lollipop. This causes him to start to buck his hips in and out of my mouth. I wrinkle my brows but relax my jaw and allow him to fuck my mouth.

"Ny, just when I think shit can't get better." He grasps the back of my head and starts to pump into my mouth in earnest. "Do you know how much I'm going to fucking miss you?"

I hum around him in answer. Placing my hands on his thighs, I try to take over again. That's not happening with Gio.

He palms my neck and squeezes until I open my mouth more. Then he shoves in deep until I start to choke. That's

when he backs out and stares down into my eyes while tipping his dick against my outstretched tongue.

I feel like he's challenging me. Reaching for his length. I use my hands to work him by twisting my hands, I stroke him up and down and bob my head against the first three or four inches I can fit into my mouth.

"Yes," he groans and throws his head back while lacing his fingers behind his head.

I smile and get more into it. When I flick my gaze up, he's watching me with a sexy smile on his face. I feel proud of myself as he looks at me.

Drool spills from the sides of my mouth, but I'm on a mission. My jaw starts to ache after a while, and I slow my pace. Gio grunts and places his hands behind my head as he pumps his way to a finish.

"Fuck, Ny," he yells as he comes in my mouth, and it slides down the back of my throat.

CHAPTER 25



集 めた人形

Jace

I step out of the staircase as my target passes by after he steps off the elevator, heading for his apartment. This piece of shit is half my size. Yet he's been beating the shit out of Kamiko.

From the posts in the forum, Kamiko found herself in this situation because her uncle sold her off. She was living in New York with her family until her parents were killed in a shooting at the restaurant her father and uncle owned.

The uncle didn't want to be bothered and sold her to this asshole. She popped on the forum, asking for help. There was something about her posts that drew my attention.

Gio liked her right away. I've been monitoring her posts since. This trip has been the perfect opportunity, Kamiko was able to get away once they arrived. They're here in Japan for a wedding that's not going to happen.

I shrug off my trench coat and allow it to fall to the ground, revealing the twin axes harnessed to my back. Pulling them, I rotate them in my hands before me, then plunge the one in my right hand into his shoulder, pulling him back to me.

I silence his scream with my other blade across his throat. Making quick work of severing his head from his body, I stuff it into the bag I have across my chest.

That didn't take much. I shrug, turn, grab my trench, and head back the way I came. I'm jogging down the stairs when a scream pierces the air. I smile to myself and pat the bag with the head inside.

"Someone just found the rest of you, asshole."

"I'M HERE FOR KAMIKO."

"Oh, you big guy," the buck-toothed woman says from behind the counter and shakes her head. "No Kamiko here."

I purse my lips. I know she's here. This is where I sent her.

"Tell her J the Curator is here for her."

She turns and hurries through the door behind her. When she returns, she has a girl who could pass for her daughter with her. No chin, dark mousy hair, and unhealthy-looking skin. She smiles, revealing the same bucked-tooth smile.

"No Kamiko, but I have Misaki. She my daughter. You handsome, take her."

I snort. "Give Kamiko this," I say, handing over the bag. "Don't open it. It's hers."

Misaki takes the bag and rushes back the way they came. I'm starting to grow impatient. I need to board the plane to get to Russia. Alyona's husband is on a business trip. I have three days to get her out. She's the one Gio needs.

If Kamiko keeps playing games, I'll leave her. She's no longer in danger, she's just without resources. As I have the thought, a girl with dark hair and blue eyes comes running out to fling herself around me.

She pulls away quickly and clutches the bag I sent to her to her chest. I look her over. Her left eye has fading bruising around it and her lip looks like it's healing from being busted pretty badly.

"Thank you. I am ready. I will do whatever it is you need."

I nod. Once healed up, she's going to be very pretty. Her eyes are definitely distracting. Gio will be happy with this one.

I gesture for her to follow me. She hasn't released her hold on the bag yet. I'll give her time. The thick lining inside will hold up for a while more before the bag is saturated in blood.

She'll have to hand it over before we board our plane. For now, she can bask in her new security.

CHAPTER 26



*M*ost Valuable

Gio

A year later...

SWEAT DRIPS down my face and back. My heart is pounding as I have a tight grip on Ny's ass as I pound into her pussy. It's been too long since I last had her in my arms.

"Fuck, I've missed your ass so much," I groan as I spill inside her for the fourth time since I've been here.

I'm back in Jersey because Nonno wants me to spend more time with my brothers. Who am I kidding? I miss Ny and it drives me crazy to hear her voice in the background when I talk to Jace.

They've been living together in the Tuxedo Park house I bought her for Christmas. If you want to fuck with my woman, you first have to get into the gated community, then you have to make it through the small mountain roads to the house. I dare a motherfucker.

While a part of New York, it's still close enough to Jersey and access to New York City. It's the perfect location for how I plan to keep things for a while. I'm also here for my Dollhouse to come to fruition.

I roll onto my back and Ny turns over, still catching her breath. With my eyes on her face, I reach to circle her nipple

with my fingertip. She brings her gaze to mine.

“How long will you be here?”

“For a while. I think Nonno was sick of my shit and used my brothers as an excuse to get rid of my grumpy ass.”

“What’s this about moving the dolls?”

“They need more room, from what Jace says. The rooms at the rink were fine at first, but I don’t want to treat them like slaves. I think the new dorms will be nice. They’ll have the freedom to come and go and they won’t be on top of each other.”

“But that’s only for the girls who’ve been with us for a while, right? New recruits should come in like the old girls had to. You give me one more of those privileged bitches who act like we didn’t just save them from a life of hell, some bodies are going to start turning up.”

I chuckle. “I talked to Jace about that.” I lean in to peck her lips. “You’re their master. They need to respect you. Start giving promotions to those you can trust. The others will fall in line.

“If they really become a problem. You know what to do. We’re giving them a nice life, but we can take it away. Loyalty is all I ask for; loyalty is all I’ll accept.”

“Say no more. I know at least three of those bitches I plan to drown at the bottom of a pool.”

“Is it really that bad?”

“Honestly, I think they’re getting antsy because they don’t understand what their roles will be. What you want them for.”

I grunt. “I’ll clear that up for them soon. Alyona is going on her first assignment. Is she ready?”

“I don’t fuck with a few of them, but they’re all ready.”

I grab her face and kiss her deeply. “That’s my girl. I knew I could count on you.”

“Always,” she purrs as I start to kiss my way down her body.

“HE JUST ARRIVED THROUGH THE BACK,” Jace says in the driver’s seat next to me as we sit in the SUV.

“Good. He needs to be here for this. I want him to see firsthand.”

I left Ny knocked out in our bed. I don’t want her to be seen while I handle this. Petey has the keys to what I need to accomplish next. He also has a goomar who’s been making too much noise.

She’s seen and heard way too much. It’s creating business issues for Petey but silencing her isn’t as easy as one would think. That’s where I come in.

Now here is what I know about Petey Romano. Alyona, my Russian find, is Petey’s type to a *T*. She’s tall blonde and has crystal clear blue eyes.

Petey also loves a good chase, so Alyona only has to make him think he has a shot. Once she silences his problem, she’ll play nice, but not too nice. Giving Petey enough of a chase to distract him and keep him happy.

However, Petey would never tell a soul he used one of my girls for a hit. He’d look like a pussy. Which is how I want it. Word will get out about my problem-solving but it will always come in the form of *I know a guy who knows a guy who does a thing*.

And if Petey decides to run his mouth, I’ve always wanted to expand my reach to the Bratva. Let’s just say his goomar thinks she’s untouchable for a reason. A reason Petey doesn’t want to answer to.

A man always has options. I’m here to prove to Petey one of his.

“Alyona, how you doing back there, sweetheart?” I call into the back seat.

“I’m ready to do my part, boss.”

I smile. “You understand what I need you to do?”

“I wait for reckless girlfriend to arrive. Get into agreement and put bullet between eyes. Make sure guy sees me, smile, and leave. You will lead him to me.”

“You got it, sweetheart. Show me what you got.”

“Thanks for the opportunity.”

She climbs out of the SUV and saunters over to Petey’s club. It’s one of many. I need him to come up off the New York location. It’s right between the Di Lorenzo Industries offices, the new dorms for the Dolls, and where my apartment will be once it’s ready.

It’s where I plan to run the Dollhouse. What will look to others as a gentlemen’s club will be none other than a hit house. With tunnels below allowing for those Bajan friends of mine to offer their cemetery services.

You might come in, but good luck making it back out. If you’re invited to my Dollhouse, someone came to me for a favor. It’s also where everyone will learn to come to me for favors.

New York’s most exclusive dungeon and tit den. Petey’s club is the perfect location because it has four levels, including the underground level that dumps into the tunnels. The place was once a church converted into a library turned club.

I have ten dolls who once stripped for a living. Dangerous as fuck to look at and be around. However, the bottle-service girls will be just as lethal. It has never been my intention to force my girls into sex work. Although everyone will play their part and what they choose to do with their bodies is their own business.

I’ve yet to meet them all in person, but I know everything about each one in my collection. I know who will do what and just where to use them. Are you seeing how I’m becoming the most valuable man in the room, like Nonno advised?

My gift is in not taking everything literally. That will be the curse others will fall into. Seeing my dolls with me and Jace will uphold the rumors Riccardo started about me. And

yet, it's all an illusion to make others envy what they don't understand.

To have balls enough to flaunt a bisexual relationship says a lot about me. It says I don't give a fuck. Which leads me to the next thing I need from Petey before the Dollhouse opens.

I need to pull off getting those books open and I'm going to use him to do it. Every move has two heads that will roll, otherwise the move is useless, too much energy wasted.

"Here we go," Jace says and nods out the window.

Petey's goomar pulls up in her red BMW with a screeching halt. She jumps out, yelling and fussing. Alyona steps off the line she's waiting on and bumps the screaming broad as she passes her.

The chick turns and gets in Alyona's face. Wrong move. Alyona shoves her. That's when the target spits in her face. Alyona pulls her gun and puts a bullet right between her eyes.

I can't help the smile that comes to my lips. *Well done.* Petey steps out the front door right then. Alyona turns, flipping her hair and since her back is to me, I can only assume she smiles.

Petey watches after her as she takes off. Ming and Kamiko are waiting a few blocks away to pick her up. She'll be fine. A few months ago, Nonno and I were here for him to introduce me to my mother's officer friends.

I have lots of friends now, from New York to New Jersey. I'm well covered. When the Dollhouse is up and running, I plan to have a party for those friends to create a few insurance plans.

Nothing like a married cop caught with his pants down or a single cop soliciting sex. Nasty business there. No one sees me coming and that's the way I like it.

"*Andiamo.* I made good on my promise. Now this guy needs to come through on his," I say to Jace and step out of the SUV.

CHAPTER 27



Taken Care Of

Gio

I SIT at the kitchen island reading the paper and looking at the latest group of potentials Jace has for me. I don't have my core dolls yet. I have three at most, I need twelve.

I take a sip of my coffee and look up as Ny's heels clicking against the tiles grabs my attention. She looks fantastic in a pair of tight black jeans with a sheer black shirt. However, she has a pout on her face. I scowl and get ready to ask what's the problem, but Jace beats me to it.

"What's the matter? I thought you were taking your car in for service. What happened?"

She comes to stand beside me and leans her head on my shoulder. I place my hand on her lower back right above her ass.

"I did, but they started with this long list of things that need to be done. I get the car is older now. It's not even about the money. I swear they're only taking advantage because I'm a woman."

I kiss her forehead.

"List the car. I'll get you a new one in the morning. I would today, but I'm hanging with my brothers."

I flick my wrist to check the time. Dario and Dante should be waiting for me. I tap Ny's ass and she straightens.

"You're really getting me a new car? I didn't mean for you to think I wanted a new one."

I peck her lips. "I should have gotten you a new one by now. List it. It's no big deal."

She gives a teary smile. "You guys spoil me. First the house, then Jace fully furnishing the place, now a new car. If I haven't told you guys thank you, thank you so much. I mean it. You both know you don't have to do things like this for me."

"But we do it because we want to," Jace says as he walks up behind her and kisses the back of her head.

Nyla looks up at him and smiles then turns back to me. "Where are you and the guys going?"

"I'm taking them skating."

I know Ny has plans to go to the rink and I wanted to be around her. I've only been in town for a week and it always feels like something is off when she's not around.

"Do you think they'll remember me?"

I look her over. Nyla looks nothing like she did when she was fifteen. From the bob she wears now to the toned curves of her body, I wouldn't put the two together if I didn't know better.

"No. Besides, we'll keep our distance. That's important now. Outside of this house we're strangers."

I catch the sad look in her eyes before she covers it. I hate it, but there's nothing I can do. This is how it has to be.

"Come here," I murmur.

She moves into my embrace, and I kiss her forehead. Someday this will be how I treat her all the time. Today just can't be it.

CHAPTER 28



*B*rotherly Love

Jace

WE'RE TAKING A SKATE BREAK, sitting at one of the tables with nachos and fries in front of us. I work my jaw and try not to draw Gio's attention to what I'm looking at. Some guy has been trying to hit on Ny for the last thirty minutes. I want to smash his face in.

Ny catches my eye and smiles at me. I give a slight nod to let her know I'm watching and ready to knock this guy the fuck out. Gio is too busy laughing with his little brothers to notice and that's the way it needs to remain.

If he sees this shit he's going to blow. There will be no question as to who Nyla is to him. I dial back into the conversation as I take a deep breath.

"She was going to kiss me," Dante says and pouts.

"In your dreams. This guy thinks he's so cool," Dario teases.

"Well, at least I'm not in love with my best friend and won't do anything about it."

"Fuck you."

Dario frowns and folds his arms across his chest. I can't help but smile. Dario is totally in love with Carleen. I'm

surprised she didn't tag along today. She's a pretty girl. I can see why he's crushing so hard.

"Are you two focusing on your books the way you are the girls?" Gio asks. They both groan and palm their foreheads. "Listen, I was all about the girls at your age too, but you're destined to be a part of something. You guys need to be ready for that. Our legacy means something."

Dario's eyes light up and he leans in. "Are you talking about that thing? You know, *la cosa nostra*."

"*Che ne sai a riguardo?*" Gio says, switching to Italian.

"I know what Papa Esposito told me." Dario pokes his chest out.

"Yeah, well, be careful of the shit coming out of his mouth. This isn't the place, but I'll teach you what you need to know from here. You should learn from a Di Lorenzo."

"I told you," Dante grumbles as Dario's smile falls and he looks down at the table.

Dante pops a fry into his mouth with a smug grin. It's no secret Dante hates Riccardo. I was livid to find out he wanted to place Dante in a psych home.

"What about you, Dario? You're not letting Carleen out study you, are you?" Gio changes the subject.

Dario blushes. "She's going to be a surgeon. She has to study more."

"Bullshit. You guys still hang out all the time?"

"Yeah."

"Then I want you in the books with her. I bet she's not here because she had to study."

"But she doesn't have a cool brother in town," Dario mutters.

Gio reaches to mess his hair. "I'll be around. We'll spend plenty of time together. You just make sure you're using that brain for good and not just thinking about tits and ass."

“But there’s nothing wrong with tits and ass, right? Because I love a good pair and a nice ass,” Dante says with a goofy grin.

“Fuck outa here. You wouldn’t even know the first thing to do with either,” Gio taunts and chuckles.

His laughter stops as he turns his head right as that guy grabs Ny’s wrist. The way Gio stiffens and cracks his knuckles, I know there’s no stopping him. However, Nyla does what Ny does.

“*Oh*,” the twins croon in unison as she rocks the guy’s head back with an uppercut with her free arm.

His ass is laid out for the count. Everyone in the rink stops to see what just happened. Ny stands with her arms across her chest, looking sexy as hell.

Gio stands and gets ready to move in her direction. “It’s getting crazy in here. You guys want to go play some ball?” Dante asks.

Gio seems to snap out of his rage and turns to look at his brothers. “Go wait in the car. I need to say hello to someone.”

He nods for me to follow them out. I stand and head to the SUV with them, keeping their focus on me.



Nyla

I feel him before I see him pass me. Gio locks eyes with me and silently tells me to follow him. This guy isn’t getting up off his ass anytime soon.

I turn and walk after Gio as he heads for the hall that leads to the training rooms and offices. Once behind the metal door that closes the rooms off from the rink, he spins to face me.

He grabs my face and lifts me onto his waist before stepping into the nearest door, which turns out to be one of the training rooms. My back hits the padded wall, causing the breath to be knocked out of me.

Gio's lips are on mine before I can regain my breath. He holds on to my face as he kisses me roughly. I shove my hands into his hair and hold tight.

"I've wanted to stab a knife in his fucking neck for the last forty minutes. Before he approached you. I noticed the moment you caught his attention," he says against my lips.

"He was an asshole. I had it."

"I know, but I should have been able to step in. This shit is chipping at my sanity."

He crashes my lips and kisses me passionately, nipping and sucking at my lips. I moan into his mouth as he cups one of my breasts and rubs his finger back and forth over my nipple.

He goes to unbutton my pants, but I grab his wrist. He looks up at me and narrows his eyes.

"Che cosa?"

"The cameras. The feed goes out front."

He groans and places his forehead against my chin. "I forgot. I need you."

"I'll be waiting at home. Go finish hanging with the boys. They look so happy to have you here."

He kisses me hard, then looks me in the eyes. "I want you in heels and something sexy when I get in."

I slide down his body and feel his arousal pressing against his jeans. I bite my lip and look into his eyes. He looks back at me with so much fire and lust.

Leaning in, I then kiss his cheek. "I'll be waiting. I love you."

He palms my ass and tugs me into him. "I love you more," he says against my lips then kisses my forehead.

My shoulders sag as he turns and leaves. Knowing he was here had me a little giddy. Even though I wanted to slap a few girls that were drooling over him and Jace.

He's right, it is hard to act like we're nothing. There's a pang in my heart as I think about the fact that I can't even hang with him and the twins. I grab a pair of gloves and head for the heavy bag.

I'm not interested in skating anymore, but I need to blow off some steam. I turn my face up to the camera and frown. Ugh, that would have been a hot moment to watch back.



Gio

I come out of the back of the rink and the asshole who grabbed Ny is heading for the bathroom. I change courses to follow after him. He touched what's mine and that's a problem for me.

Since I can't fuck out my frustration, I'm going to make a point now that no one is watching. I slip into the bathroom after him and find none other than Jace with the dude in the air as he holds him by his throat. I should have known. It's exactly what I planned to do.

"I don't ever want to see you here again. If someone tells me you stepped foot in here or around her, I'm going to kill you myself," Jace hisses.

I pull my gun from my ankle holster. "Respectfully, bro. I don't think you made yourself clear enough," I say to Jace, closing the distance to grab the guy from Jace's hold and shove my gun in his mouth.

The fear in his eyes is the right amount now. I grin. "Yeah, now I think you understand us."

This motherfucker pisses himself. The door to the bathroom opens and I turn my head slowly. Dante stands with his mouth open.

"Come in and close the damn door," I grunt. "Lock it behind you."

"I just needed to pee."

I nod my head toward the urinals. “Handle your business. This doesn’t concern you.”

He hurries past us as I turn my attention back to this bitch in front of me. “Have we made ourselves clear, Pissy Pete?”

He nods and whimpers. I drop him and return my gun to its holster.

“Is she okay?” Jace asks me in Danish.

I look him in the eyes and answer. “*Andiamo.*”

“What about him?” Dante asks as he finishes washing his hands.

“What about him?”

“Nothing.” He shrugs and heads out of the bathroom ahead of us.

CHAPTER 29



*N*ormal

Gio

HANGING up the phone with Ma, I step out of the home office and pad barefoot up the hall, following the sound of the TV. When I make it to the living room, I find Jace and Ny on the couch.

“Everything okay?” Ny asks as her head rests in Jace’s lap as he’s stretched out on the lounge part of the sectional.

I move to lift her long legs and sit, placing them in my lap. My black sleep pants tent as I run my hand up her silky-smooth skin. I throw my head back and stare at the ceiling. I haven’t been this frustrated in a long time.

“They had to rush Barbieri to the hospital, but his fat ass is still breathing,” I mutter.

“That’s good, right? We can make our move soon.”

“*Marone*. No,” I bite out. “He’s expected to make a full recovery.”

“God, why won’t his ass die?”

“My thoughts exactly.”

“Say the word, I’ll kill him, and no one would know,” Jace says with his arms crossed over his bare chest.

“It’s too risky. Trust me, I want to be done with this, but like Ma said, I could start an unnecessary war. That would be playing into Riccardo’s hands.”

“Ugh, that man isn’t about to ruin my night. This is a good movie. Watch it with us,” Ny says.

I remain quiet, but I’m still stewing. Ny sits up and crawls into my lap. She cups my face to turn it to her and presses her forehead to mine.

“We’ve been patient all this time. A little longer isn’t going to hurt us.”

I take her lips, needing her comfort. Jace clears his throat, causing me to look over at him. He has a pillow in his lap covering his gray sweats.

“Are you getting hard, motherfucker?”

“She’s in her bra and panties. I’ve had a semi for a while. You two making out is hot. I like to see her enjoy herself. It’s a turn-on.” He shrugs.

I think this over. We’ve never taken Ny at the same time, but I’ve watched her bring herself to climax. She’s gorgeous while she pleasures herself.

I shake off the thought of watching Jace fuck her. That’s not us. I’m not there.

“*Marone*. Go take a cold shower. This isn’t your personal LimeWire, asshole.”

He flips me off but doesn’t get up. Ny moves to curl into my side. I wrap an arm around her and hold her close.

“I wanted to watch this anyway,” she says.

“You guys hungry? I was thinking about ordering a pie.”

“Order two, I’m not getting any sleep tonight.”

“Anything to shut you two up so I can watch this movie.”

I punch her side and her laughter fills the air. It’s just what I need. For the next four hours, I hang with my two childhood

best friends, eating pizza, watching a movie, and playing video games like we have no real cares in the world.

I pretend to be normal. Something I've never been in real life. Something I'll never get to be.

CHAPTER 30



I Think

Nyla

IT'S BEEN a month since Gio's been living in the States. Unfortunately, I don't get to see him every day. Since they finished his apartment, he and Jace moved out. Or at least you can say they don't stay in Tuxedo with me anymore.

It gets so lonely here in this big old house. Most nights, when Gio lets me know he's not going to make it, I go to stay the night with Lizzy and Elijah.

Tonight, I decided to stay at the house to work on a paper for my online classes. I'm majoring in business. I don't know what I plan to do with my degree when I'm done. This is just something for me, like Ava suggested.

I bite my thumbnail as I read the same page over in my textbook. My period is late. I don't know how Gio is going to take this.

I know it's his. Jace and I have been using condoms for the last year and we haven't really had sex since Gio has been here. It's like Jace is waiting for something.

I haven't pushed the subject because I like how things are. Jace is there for me emotionally and Gio has been trying to be everything as best he can.

Which is why I'm so concerned. This could change so much. However, I never knew how much I wanted a baby until now. I jump when my phone rings.

"Hey," I answer, seeing it's Jace.

"Hey, I felt like something was wrong. Everything all right?"

"Jace, I think I might be pregnant. My period is late."

"Really?" He says excitedly.

"It's been about a week. I haven't taken a test or anything. I'm too scared to."

"I'll go get one and come up. We're almost done here."

"He's not coming tonight?"

"You do know it's not intentional. He's working and his mind is occupied. By the time the night ends, he doesn't trust that either of us are alert enough not to lead someone to the house."

"I understand and I want you with him to make sure he's safe. I'm just starting to feel the distance, you know?"

"Yeah, I understand."

I scoff. "I know a baby isn't going to make this better. He'll never come to see me."

"I don't think that's true. That's his one weakness. If he were a father, he'd be tied to you, and this would all be over. No Don, no dolls, nothing but you."

"I doubt that...Jace, I could be having his baby. This would change everything."

"It would."

"You're not upset?"

"No, why would I be?"

"Don't you want children of your own?"

"Any child you have would be mine too. No matter who's seed it comes from. I want all of us. Not pieces."

“I wish there was a way to...” I clamp my mouth shut.

“To what?”

“It’s stupid. Forget it.”

“Nothing you say is stupid. What?”

“I wish I could have a baby by you both. You know, at the same time.”

“It’s not stupid, Ny. Look up superfecundation twins.”

“What? Like insemination? Would they do that?”

“Look it up. It’s not what you think. Hey, baby. Gio’s ready to go. You need me to head up with that for you?”

My stomach starts to hurt as my head spins. I’ll be twenty-one in a few days. Maybe I should wait until then to take a test and tell Gio. The thought takes root and I smile.

“No. Go get some rest. I’ll be fine. Love you, Jace.”

“Love you too, baby. Call me if you need me.”



Jace

I hang up and stare down at my phone. Gio is going to be pissed, but I couldn’t be happier. I’m getting a family. I had hoped to plant the seed about superfecundation twins before this, but I’ll take this baby just the way it’s been made.

“Everything okay?” Gio asks as he settles into the seat beside me.

“Yeah.”

“What’s with the shit-eating grin?”

“Nothing, nothing at all.”

“Good, I need to make a stop to talk to Gwen.”

“*Gio*,” I groan.

“I don’t like the idea of her working for the firm. Gwen should have known better. She can train the dolls. Fuck, send some of them to work for Gwen, but Ny is out of the question.”

“Did you notice she didn’t ask you for permission?”

“*Marone*, that’s the first fucking problem.”

“For you. She’s going to lose her shit.”

“I don’t give a fuck. I said no.”

“You should leave this fight alone. Things have been good. It’s been peaceful. You just might get what you want without rocking the boat.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing.”

“Exactly, take me to Gwen’s.”

CHAPTER 31



I f I Could...

Gio

NY'S BIRTHDAY IS TOMORROW. It's been a while since I've been to the house. I hate this distance when she's so near. When I was in Italy, it was different. We were oceans apart. Now, she's a toll away.

However, Barbieri is still alive, and Riccardo is still in my little brother's ear about a promotion that's not meant to be his. He may not see me as a threat, but when he does realize his mistake, I can't have him target the woman I love.

I'm lost in thought as Jace's phone rings. He's driving us to the house. We wanted to surprise Ny. I got her a fur coat and diamond earrings for her birthday. I hope she likes them.

"Hello," Jace says as he places the phone on speaker.

My blood runs cold as Ny's sobs fills the air.

"Nyla, baby, what's wrong?"

She doesn't answer me, she just starts to sob more. Jace doesn't have to be told to hurry the fuck up. He steps on the gas to get us to her. We're not that far from the house.

"Ny, talk to me," Jace pleads as we clear the gate.

I'm ready to lose my shit. My heart is pounding. All I've done to keep her safe. If someone has found her and the house,

I'm killing everyone.

"Nyla, please. What's wrong? Are you okay?"

"I wanted it to be real. I wanted it so bad," she cries.

"Oh, no," Jace groans. "Baby, calm down. We're coming. It's going to be all right. I promise."

"What the fuck?"

Jace shakes his head at me. I grab the grab handle to keep from coming out of my skin. The hurt in Ny's voice pierces my heart. I just need to get to her and lay eyes on her.

Jace pulls into the courtyard, and I jump out of the car before he comes to a full stop. I race into the house, looking for Ny. I find her on the living room floor, curled into a ball with the phone on the floor in front of her face.

"Baby?" I call as I race to her.

I scoop her up into my arms and hold her tight and start to rock. She buries her face in my neck and clings to my jacket.

"I was so excited."

"About what? Talk to me."

Jace comes and sits on the floor with us. Ny turns from my arms and jumps into his. I feel a deep pang in my chest.

She starts to sob all over again. "It's going to be okay. Not this time, but someday."

"I didn't know how much I wanted this. I hate that it wasn't real."

"Someone tell me what the hell is going on," I demand.

"I...I thought I was pregnant," she says, rocking my entire world.

"By who?"

I close my eyes, knowing that's a fucked-up question in this moment. Jace glares at me over Ny's head. I shrug out of my coat and suit jacket.

“You. Jace and I use protection, and if you haven’t noticed, he hasn’t been asking you for permission.”

“Yeah, I noticed. Are you two having problems?”

“No,” Jace replies. “Things have just been different. We can get each other off without sex.”

“*Marone*. All right, all right.” I hold my hands up. “So you thought you were pregnant. What happened?”

“My period came. I’m not.” She pouts. “I really wanted to be.”

I palm my face. “Ny, listen to me. I love you with everything I am, but I don’t think we should have a baby.”

“I know, now isn’t a good time. I’m still young, we have this thing to take care of. I get it, but I really started to get excited.”

No, baby. I don’t ever want to have children.

I don’t have it in me to say the words out loud. She’s already so upset. Jace looks me in the eyes as if searching for something. I sigh and look away.

I’m not going to lie, there is a part of me that’s disappointed. However, I don’t want Jace to see that. If he does, he’ll help Ny to get this from me someday. I can’t have that.

“What happened to your birth control? Should I be using condoms too?”

The thought of anything between us burns like acid. However, I’m anything but reckless. If she’s stopped her pill, I should know.

“Birth control isn’t one hundred percent and I had to change mine. I thought maybe...” She shrugs.

I stand. “I’m going to take a shower. I’ll cook when I get out.”

With that, I grab my things, get up, and leave to be alone with my thoughts. I almost wish it had been a person I had to kill waiting when I arrived.

A baby. She really wants a baby. The one thing I don't want to give her.



Jace

“If I could, I'd make this better for you,” I murmur into Ny's hair as we sit in the same spot on the floor while I hold her.

“He wouldn't have wanted it,” she says sadly.

“You can never tell what Gio wants. I don't think he's ever had a chance to decide what he wants for himself.”

“This is just going to keep getting more complicated, isn't it?”

I kiss the top of her head. “All things get complicated before they work out perfectly. In the end, he's going to make sure all your dreams come true. Mark my words.”

She looks up at me. “When did you become the wise one out of us?”

“I always have been.” I wink at her.

“I love your eyes this color.” She cups my face and looks into my eyes.

“What color are they?”

“Gray. You're both too gorgeous not to procreate,” she breathes.

“The mother of our children will do right by us.”

“I'm never late. Do you think this was a sign?”

“A sign of what?”

“We should stop tempting fate. Maybe what we're doing is wrong.”

“Tempting fate how? I don't see anything wrong with who we are. Let me ask you a question.”

“Go on.”

“Are you happy?”

“Yes.”

“If we broke up and it was just you and Gio, would you still be happy?”

I hold my breath, knowing I’m taking a risk here. If she wants to break things off, it’s going to rip me in half. There’s still so much I’m waiting patiently for. She shifts in my arms and runs her hand through my hair, then moves her hand to scratch her fingers through my beard. Her eyes light up.

“Not as happy as I am now. I’d miss times like this.”

“Then we’re not hurting anyone. We belong together. This is our family.”



Gio

I stand out of sight, listening to every word they say. I rub at my bare chest, then place my hands in my sleep pants pockets as my thoughts race.

“All I want is to hold on to the family I have. You, Gio, Lizzy, Elijah, and Gwen. If I got a baby somewhere in there, life would be perfect, but I don’t think that’s for me. He doesn’t want that.”

“I think you’re wrong. At least, I hope you are. You want to keep your family. I want a family of my own. It’s our only wish. Something tells me they’ll be heard, and we’ll have it all.”

I inhale sharply and pull a hand down my face. A part of me longs to give Ny what she wants. I’d love to watch her swell with my baby.

Maybe in a few years this will be over, and I’ll come back to this. I didn’t know she would want this so badly. Or maybe I’ve always known and that’s the real reason I know I can’t fail.

My children will belong, and their mother will be respected. It's all or nothing. Meaning, I'll burn all this shit down and there will be no families if mine can't live in peace.

I nod to myself and turn to head to start dinner. If it's a baby Ny wants, against my better judgment, a baby she will get.

CHAPTER 32



*H*er Pleasure

Gio

Six months later...

I WALK into the house fuming. Dad wanted to join me and my brothers for a baseball game. I had Yankees tickets and he thought it would be a great idea to surprise the guys so he could bond with his sons.

It's their sixteenth birthday. They're good kids, they deserved this. The last six months have allowed us to become closer like Nonno wants. They text me every morning and come into the city most days to be with me in the office. I can see in Dante's eyes a passion for business, I like that. I'm going to guide it.

Why am I pissed? That motherfucker Riccardo picked Dario up before we could leave for the game. I just missed them. Dante said that cocksucker knew I was on my way and talked Dario into spending the weekend at his place.

Offering him some big gift. Of course, at sixteen, Dario jumped at receiving some special gift. I'll have to talk to him about that. It means he can be lured into anything. I can't have that.

"Hey, what are you guys doing back here so early?" Ny says.

I look up from my phone to find her in a tank top and panties while watching TV, with a book in her hands. A smile comes to my face. I don't know how she does that shit.

She never picks one. As if the TV needs to watch her read. I could never focus like that.

“Riccardo fucked the night up,” Jace says.

“How?”

“He took Dario with him. The game wasn't the same. Dante was agitated. My mood wasn't any better.”

“Aww, that sucks. You guys want to watch a movie with me?”

“Let me change,” Jace says.

I shrug out of my suit jacket and take off my cuffs to roll my sleeves up. Kicking off my shoes, I then pull off my socks and stuff them in my shoes before I take a seat next to her on the couch.

Ny bites her lips as she places her head on my shoulder and slides her hand into my shirt. I open two more buttons as she glides her hand across my pecs. I flex my chest and look down at her face. She lifts her gaze to mine and smiles.

“Is that better?”

“Whenever you're near, it's better.”

I pinch her chin between my fingers and lift her face to take her soft lips. She climbs to straddle my lap, her hot pussy searing me through my pants. I cup her ass and pull her into my erection.

She moans as I kiss her neck and slip my hands into her panties. I find her wet folds from behind and start to finger her.

She claws her fingers against my face, bringing my lips to hers. I nip and bite at her lips. She soaks my fingers as she rocks her hips against my digits.

“Gio,” she whispers and throws her head back.

I bite at the tops of her breasts exposed by her tank top. I'm hard as a rock. It's been weeks since I've been here. When I got here this morning, she was busy with schoolwork. As bad as I wanted to throw her up against the desk and fuck her on it, I held back to allow her to get the paper done. I don't think there's anything that can stop me from fucking her now.

At least that's my thought until Jace plops down on the couch beside us. I roll my eyes and start to pull my hand from her panties.

Ny catches my wrist and kisses me deeply. Breaking the kiss, she breathes into my mouth. "Don't stop." I work my jaw. "Please," she whimpers while grinding in my lap.

"Ny," I say in warning.

"You said we should talk when something is wrong. Jace and I don't have sex because I don't feel right when it's just us. I...I want to try with you both."

I push her off my lap. "So, I'm not enough," I fume.

"That's not what I said. I don't have sex with Jace because I feel guilty you're not there. I like it, but it makes me feel guilty.

"If anyone should be hurt, it should be him. I never have a problem having sex with you. I'm just asking you to try."

I growl. "I share you with him already. Do you know how that makes me feel?"

She stands and pulls her top off. I look to Jace to find him staring at her tits as he licks his lips. I shake my head. I can't with these two.

"I'm not trying to ignore how you feel, babe. You both make me feel different. I love the way you fuck me. Your touch sets me on fire. Jace has a way of taming that fire. I think having the two will be amazing."

She climbs back into my lap, completely naked this time. I'm horny as fuck and can't think straight. I have something to say but it's not coming to me.

“*Marone*. I hope to God you never ask me to jump off a bridge,” I grumble as I grab her by the throat to kiss her.

She reaches to free me of my slacks. I groan as she pulls me out and starts to stroke me. Ny has gotten so good at sex. My heart pounds from the thought of being inside of her.

I groan and drop my head back as she sinks down on me with an audible gasp. I grab her hips and hold tight as she rides me. It’s the sound of Jace’s groan that pulls my focus.

I lift my head to find Ny stroking him as he has a handful of her hair, holding her head back as he kisses her. He breaks the kiss and looks down at her riding me with so much lust in his eyes.

I look into Ny’s face. She has just as much lust covering her features as she bites her lip and bounces on me. I start to thrust up into her. She’s soaking my cock.

“Fuck,” I groan.

“Gio,” she cries.

I’m not going to lie. This shit is kind of hot. I thought I was as hard as I could get before. Now my shit is so hard it hurts.

Jace lifts a leg to plant his foot on the couch and Ny leans over to suck him off. I snap, wrapping my arm around her waist and pumping into her harder. I palm her breast in my free hand and bring it to my lips.

She starts to cry out around his dick. I lift my head and watch her enjoy herself. Damn, I don’t want to admit this is turning me on, but it is.

She lifts her head and looks me in the eyes. I can see in her gorgeous brown eyes she’s about to come. The way her pussy ripples around me, I know this for a fact.

Jace moves behind her and starts to fondle her tits. I roll my eyes in the back of my head as she squeezes her walls around me.

Oh my God. She’s killing me.

My toes curl and I blow my load so hard I see stars. She convulses in my hold. Jace leans into her ear and murmurs something, causing her to shake and ripple around me more.

My mind is blown. I'm still hard inside her. I reach for her ass and start to finger her hole. I've taken her there before. I know she can handle it.

I look Jace in the eyes and nod. His eyes light up. Ny falls forward, wrapping her arms around my neck.

"I love you," she pants into my ear and starts to slow grind.

I scoot down on the couch, guiding her hips as I start to thrust up into her again. Jace disappears, but I can't stop to think about what he's thinking or doing.

Ny is riding the fuck out of me. Biting her lip, she reaches for her breasts to pinch her own nipples while staring into my eyes. Jace returns with a tube of lube.

I ignore him stroking his dick with lube and continue to fuck the shit out of her. Ny stills and gasps as Jace pushes into her from behind. He hisses as he wraps her upper body in his arms, palming her tits. I wait to feel pissed off or uncomfortable.

The feeling never comes because I can't stop looking at Ny in awe. She's so beautiful as she takes us both. Jace has his face buried in her neck as he pounds into her.

He's not as rough as I am, but she seems to like the contrast. If her wet pussy is any indication, she fucking loves this.

"Oh my God, Gio, don't stop. Please," she cries when I stop thrusting, wanting to give her a reprieve.

Jace releases her from his bear hug and gently wraps his hands around her neck. She rolls her eyes into her head as she pants and fucks me back while taking him. Her brown nipples are so hard and sexy.

I lean into her ear. "This is what you've always wanted, isn't it? To fuck us both. How does it feel, baby? You like

that?”

“Yes, yes, yes.”

“But this pussy will always be mine. Don’t get that fucked up. Now you’re just going to have to take us both. Be careful what you ask for, my nasty little freak.”

The way she’s creaming around me, I know this isn’t the last time we’ll do this. I get it. It’s all to see her pleasure. The research I did years ago makes sense. Seeing her happy turns me on.

I look into Jace’s face. He looks at her the same way I feel. Like her pleasure is his. When he roars and pulls out, I get it. My seed spills into her at the same time.

Ny collapses against my chest and starts to snore. I look down at her face and snort.

“Help me get her cleaned up, with your hairy-ass legs. *Marone*. Your ass never heard of a razor?” I say to Jace.

“Fuck you,” he snorts as he stumbles to flop down on the couch. “Give me a minute.”

I smile and throw my head back against the couch, turning to look at him. “Bro, I’m not going to lie. That was amazing. It wasn’t what I thought. You know?”

“It was incredible. I definitely felt what’s been missing.”

“You’re not offended? It doesn’t make you feel some way?”

“Nah, not at all. She’s a passionate person, but she loves you like crazy. I know she loves me too and I think that fucks with her head sometimes. I always know when she starts to feel guilty. That’s not what I want for her. This...she let go and enjoyed herself. That shit was hot.”

“Yeah, it was,” I say as I absentmindedly stroke her back.

And because this is my best friend, I think that made the moment special. I know for a fact Jace respects Ny. He loves her almost as much as I do.

We’d both do anything for her.

CHAPTER 33



*B*ig Mistake

Nyla

I OPEN my eyes slowly and blink the sleep away as I try to focus on the hazel gaze staring back at me. I reach for Gio's handsome face. He turns his head and kisses my fingers.

"We need to get you in a tub," he says.

"Okay."

"But we all can't fit in the one here. Come on. We want to take you somewhere."

I look at him in surprise. Gio and I have never been on a date since we were teens and first started dating. I get so excited, and then it hits me, I'll probably have to hide my emotions and affections.

"Don't worry. I've thought this out. We can be us. A hotel room, room service, and a shopping spree for you while I see about a friend. Jace will shop with you. We can have dinner after."

Excitement hits all over again. "Where? We can't do all of that here or in New York."

"The Magnificent Mile, baby. I'm taking you to the Chi. Riccardo doesn't have reach there."

I cup his face and kiss him. "I love you so much."

“I love you too. *Andiamo*. We have a flight to catch and a bubble bath waiting.”

“You’re really going to take a bath with me and Jace?”

“Look how excited you are,” he teases, then mocks. “‘*You’re really going to take a bath with me and Jace?*’ We all need to have a talk, and this would make you happy, so yeah. For you, Nyla, I’d do a lot of shit. Clearly.”

“You don’t have to say that so dryly.”

He leans over and places his lips next to my ear. “I’d do anything for you. You stole my heart before I knew how to talk and take a leak straight. Better?” He pulls away and pecks my lips.

I smile so hard my face hurts. “I knew we could have this. Jace doesn’t even care if our children aren’t his.”

He freezes. “Slow down, Nyla. We still have a long way to go.”

“I’m sorry. I’m just so excited. That was so intense and now our first date. Promise you’ll play chess with me and share a bottle of wine.”

I smile at him. It’s our thing. When he drops his shield and allows me fully into his mind.

I long for those moments as much as I do having him in my bed. Gio is a beast in the sheets, but his mind is so fucking sexy to me. He and Jace finished at the top of their online classes. I have no doubts if they had gone to Yale, they would have been fighting back offers from top-tier law firms.

“I’ll get us a bottle and a board.”

“Yay, this is going to be awesome. I’ve been so stressed out with school and training the girls. Gwen hasn’t been giving me assignments as much as I thought she would. I need to get my mind off things.”

“Well, get ready.”

“You’re so bossy,” I tease.

I get up and realize my legs are still jelly. It dawns on me someone carried me into the bedroom. I smile as I cross my legs and squeeze my thighs together. That was so much better than I thought.



Jace

I can't stop smiling. Last night was amazing. Nyla and I have never connected like that alone. Last night it was as if she stopped overthinking and just accepted who we are. Gio did too.

I wasn't expecting her to initiate things. She's mentioned the idea, but I wasn't sure Gio was ready. I learned a lot from watching them together. I can't wait to do it again.

I look over at Gio sitting with his sunglasses on. He's smiling too. Ny squeezes my hand in hers, causing me to look down at her as she sits between us in the SUV.

"What are you smiling about?"

"You," she replies.

I lean in to peck her lips. The best part of all of this is how happy she is. The flight was short, but she talked nonstop. When Gio said he wanted to do something nice for Ny outside of the house, I didn't think he meant flying her to Chicago, but I shouldn't be surprised.

He's been wanting to take her on a real date for a long time. Yet he's never had the luxury. Caution has always come first.

However, in this moment, I can feel the excitement coming off Nyla. Without him saying it, I know this is what Gio wanted. We have a surprise for her here. Something we've been working on for a while now.

"We're here," Nyla sings as the SUV pulls to a stop in front of our hotel.

Gio turns to her and kisses her. “Breakfast and a good soak. Then you can go shop,” he says before turning to get out of the car.

Ny turns to me and wiggles her brows. “I like it when he’s bossy. Come on, sexy. A bath awaits.”

I chuckle at her as she takes Gio’s waiting hand and climbs out of the car. I round the vehicle and take her outstretched hand. The three of us walk into the lobby hand in hand.

“This place is nice,” Ny says, pulling a face and nodding her head. Gio looks down at her and scoffs.

“Fuck outa here. Like you thought I’d do anything less. Am I slacking, baby? Or do you just need me to remind you of who the fuck I am?”

Ny coughs behind her hand. “Don’t get a big head.”

“Too late,” I tease.

“You talking again?”

“Leave him alone.”

Gio palms her ass and draws her to him for a kiss. I look her over and start to get hard. She has on a white V-neck crop Tee under a denim jean crop jacket, with a matching denim miniskirt, and black heeled boots that stop at the knee.

I can’t wait to get her upstairs, into our room. I know Gio wants us to talk, but I’m ready to move beyond that. I feel like something was unlocked inside me last night.

“I’ll get the key. You two meet me by the elevator,” Gio breathes when he releases her.

Ny bounces over to me and wraps her arms around my waist. I cup the back of her neck and kiss her. I lead with my tongue, kissing her more passionately than I ever have.

“Oh,” she breathes when I pull away.

“You don’t like that?”

“No, that was...Come here.”

She holds on to my ears as I kiss her the same way again. I wrap an arm around her waist and hold her against me. I release a groan when she sucks my tongue into her mouth.

“I’d sure like to be next.”

I look up at the guy who spoke and catch him staring at Ny’s ass. Quickly, I move her behind me as I glare at this asshole.

“Excuse me?”

He holds up his hands. “She’s hot and I saw the other dude kiss her first. I wouldn’t mind fucki—”

“*Jace*,” Ny screams as I knock his ass the fuck out.

She has her hands on my chest, pushing me to the elevator. I don’t take my eyes off the guy, I just put him on his ass. His friend looks like he’s debating on taking me on.

Gio steps up behind him just when he looks like he’s made a decision to get involved and whispers something to him that freezes him in his tracks. I nod, good choice. It would be nothing to lay his ass out too.

“Jace Sorensen, are you even hearing a word I’m saying?”

I turn my gaze to Ny. “No.”

She rolls her eyes. “You and Gio can’t knock out every guy who says something out of line to me. They could throw us out of here.”

“Not likely.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because you and your boyfriends own the place. Only ones getting the fuck out of here are that asshole and his friends.”

“What?”

I close my eyes and groan. In my rage, I just fucked up. “It was supposed to be a surprise. We’ll sign off before we go home.”

Gio walks up behind her as we step onto the elevator. He kisses the back of her head. Ny looks up at him in confusion.

He pecks her lips. “I want you to have an insurance plan if anything ever happens to me. This is the first of many of the properties and businesses I plan to place in your name.”

“Gio.”

“What? We need legit shit that no one can trace to the family. Things they can’t take from you. My shares and yours are in your name, I set up a trust. In the meantime, I have a guy that’s going to run things for us.”

“This is...it’s insane.”

“No, it’s smart. I trust you and Jace. This was the right move. You train my dolls; I take care of you. You don’t have to work for Gwen and the firm. I’d prefer you not.”

Ny narrows her eyes. “You, you’re the reason she’s not sending me out on assignments and into the field. I should have known. Ugh.”

The elevator dings on the penthouse floor. He places a hand on the small of her back and leads her off the elevator. We don’t have bags because Gio plans for us to shop for everything.

“I always protect what’s mine.”

“Why don’t I like the sound of that?”

Gio shrugs. “You go and get that bath started. Jace and I need to check on something.”

“*Gio.*”

“What?”

“Let it go,” she whines, and she grabs both our hands to try to drag us into the suite. “Please.”

He tugs her to him by the back of her head and kisses her forehead. “You know me better than that. Go start the bath. It’s my place of business. If Jace felt he had to knock his ass out. I know he did something I can’t let slide.

“Do as I say. We’ll be right back.”

“Jace,” she pleads.

I shrug my shoulders. “Listen to him. We’ll be right back.”

She throws her hands up. “Why do I bother?”

CHAPTER 34



*N*ew Rules

Gio

I HAD a feeling I needed to handle that shit in the lobby. When Jace told me what that asshole said, I knew exactly what needed to be done.

I don't have a cemetery connection here so I had to see how resourceful Tony C. can be. He'll be running things out here after all. I think he's going to work out just fine.

Ny runs her hand up my chest, bringing my attention back to her in the bathtub. I look into her eyes and everything else is forgotten.

"This was supposed to be about us. Come back to me," she purrs.

I grab the back of her hair and kiss her. She moans into my mouth as I palm her breast. I break the kiss and look down at her lips.

"We need to have some new rules. When we get back, there will be a California king in our bedroom. Jace can spend nights with us from now on.

"They're also installing a bigger bathtub. That's going to take a little while so we're going to use the upstairs master for a bit. If your birth control changes again, we need to know right away and the time between the changeover.

“You.” I point to Jace. “Continue to use condoms and you still need to ask permission for penetration. I can’t say how long we’re going to do this. Once Ny and I are married, I don’t know if this is something I want.”

Jace nods, but Ny looks at me with a little disappointment. I pull her into my chest. “What?”

“Nothing.”

“This doesn’t work if you don’t talk to me.”

“It’s just...I felt so complete last night.” She lifts a hand as I open my mouth. “Hear me out before you lose your shit. This isn’t about you not being enough for me.

“Deep in my soul, I felt like something was complete. As if from the day I was born, two pieces of it were somewhere else. In two other people. You *and* Jace. Last night, those pieces returned.”

“It’s not even legal for the three of us to be married. What exactly is it you want, Ny?”

“You can be my husband. Jace and I can have a handfasting ceremony. I want you both. I need you both.”

I cup the front of her forehead and tug her to lie back against my chest. “Stop talking. Just stop talking. Learn to know when I’ve given enough, Ny. You always ask for too much at once. I’m done for now.”

Silently, Jace lifts her foot to his chest and starts to massage it. At least he knows when to leave me alone. *A handfasting ceremony.*

One of these days she’s going to push too far.

CHAPTER 35



*O*ur First Date

Nyla

GIO LOOKS SO sexy sitting across from me in his black suit and shirt, with the top three buttons open. His tanned skin is peeking out, reminding me of the hard body beneath.

This restaurant is amazing. The chandeliers, the ambience, everything is perfect. I smile at him as I sip my wine.

“This is so nice.”

“I’m glad you like it. Someday we’ll be able to do this more.”

“You’ve been doing fine, Gio. I understand why things are the way they are.”

“That doesn’t mean I like the way they are.”

“Let’s not. I don’t want to ruin the night.”

“Don’t drink too much. The chessboard is waiting back at the suite.”

I tilt my head as I look at him. “I would think you would want to get me drunk so I don’t kick your ass.”

“Fuck outa here. When have you ever beaten me?”

“You haven’t figured out that I allow you to win? I don’t want to bruise your ego.”

“Why do I believe you?”

“Because you know it’s true.”

“Here, I have something for you.”

He places a jewelry box on the table. I look at him in shock. He and Jace have spoiled me so much on this trip and it’s only been two days. I wasn’t expecting him to give me anything else.

“What is it?” I ask excitedly.

“Open it.”

I open the box and gasp. The diamond necklace inside is gorgeous. The lights of the restaurant bounce off it, making it sparkle with brilliance.

“Thank you,” I choke out.

“Hey, I know you’re not going to cry.”

“Shut up, Gio. It’s beautiful. I love it.”

He stands and rounds the table. “Let me put it on for you.”

The scent of his cologne surrounds me as he leans over me to pull the necklace from the box. He places it around my neck and fastens it, leaning in to kiss the side of my neck and then the back of my head.

“It’s not half as beautiful as you are.” He squeezes my shoulders and returns to his seat.

“Are you happy, Gio?”

I ask the question because lately, there’s something in his eyes. One minute you’d think he’s enjoying life. Living it up. He has a great position at Di Lorenzo Industries, he runs a club, his younger brothers look up to him, but I know him. Something is off.

“For now, I am.”

“Don’t do that with me. Finish the thought, G. Talk to me.”

He releases a heavy breath. “I didn’t think this would take this long. Granted, I’m not ready. I don’t have it all in place yet, but I thought I’d be closer to the end of it by now.”

“I can train more girls. Maybe I can help pick them too. I know what you’re looking for now.”

“Baby, this isn’t on you. You’re doing your part. I know my mother is still hiding things from me. Once I figure out what...Listen, I don’t want to think about all of that.

“How’s school? Have I told you how proud of you I am?”

“School is fine. I’m proud of you too. This is a lot. Don’t lose yourself, Gio. I’m always here for you. Talk to me when you need.”

He purses his lips and nods. “Let’s take dessert back with us. I can eat chocolate cake and beat the pants off you.”

“Oh, are we switching to poker?”

He roars with laughter and a genuine sexy smile comes to his lips. I love this man so much. I wish I could take all this away for him. I never should have let him promise me Riccardo. I could have done that on my own and he and his family wouldn’t have been involved or connected.

We stand and he helps me into my jacket. I look up at him and he kisses my lips. Placing his hand on the small of my back, he guides me forward, but leans into my ear.

“Ny. I’ll do what I said. It’s not on you.”

“You don’t know me,” I tease.

“Yeah, baby. I do. Stay away from Riccardo until I give you the word. Trust me, you’re not doing me any favors. I’ve got it covered.”

CHAPTER 36



*S*mart Grandson

Riccardo

“OH, Dad, Grandpa, you’re here. I want you both to meet Bethany,” Franky says as he walks into the living room.

I tighten my jaw. I thought this was my smart grandson. I’ll give it to him. This one is pretty but she’s still a *mulignon*. Although she looks to be mixed race. I look her over dismissively.

Franky’s smile falls and he shuffles his feet as he looks down at them. He should be ashamed. If he’s smart, he’ll get his dick wet, get her out of his system and move the fuck on.

“Guess who she goes to school with?” Franky says as he lifts his head and looks like something has just occurred to him.

I’m intrigued. My interest is piqued. After all, as I said this is my smart grandson.

“Dante and Dario Di Lorenzo.”

“Ah, now you’re saying something worth listening to. This is how you get a promotion. I knew you had it in you.”

Frances scoffs. “Don’t listen to him and his fake promises. You’ll never be made. It’s not possible. Ignore him and his bullshit, Franky, I’m warning you. He’ll get you killed with his nonsense.”

I wave my son off. “Once I’m Don, they won’t be able to stop us. You keep thinking on your feet. You will move up in our family.”

“The bullshit,” Frances fumes.

“Anyway, hello, Bethany, is it? Come sit. Tell me about your parents.”

I think I’ve just found the piece I’ve been looking for. I’m going to take Dante out of the equation. That will leave my pawn as the last and only option. This *mulignon* might be worth something after all.

Well done, Franky. Well done.

CHAPTER 37



*M*aster NY

Gio

Three years later...

I walk out onto the catwalk above the training room. My gaze lands on Ny. She's pissed at me.

"THIS SHOULD HAVE BEEN FIXED weeks ago," Jace murmurs beside me.

"Here you go telling me shit I already know. I like it when you're quiet, you know that?"

He snorts. "Whatever. You miss her as much as I do. Fix it."

I turn to look at him. He must have lost his mind. The smile at the corners of his lips gets him a pass. He's right, I do miss her.

So much has changed. There are more eyes on me, I had to change the way I move. The Dollhouse has been a great success.

Nothing happens in New York or New Jersey that I don't know about. Most of it has my hand moving through it. I'm not just the most valuable man in the room, I'm the most valuable man in the families.

Yet I'm still not a made man. Not even Romano was able to make that happen for me. It's why I now own eighty percent of his businesses and he's sleeping with the fishes.

His usefulness ran out a year ago. The Russians took care of him for me, keeping my hands clean on a made guy and granting me my Russian expansion.

I'd say it's still a win. Where am I losing? My girl has forgotten I can't always be there, and I have a target on my back. Riccardo isn't as confident in discounting me. He's back to trying to expose my weakness.

A weakness that's not real. No matter how good I am at making it look otherwise. A doll is in danger of losing her life because I'm so good at making things look a certain way.

I had to hide Essence away until Ny calms the fuck down. If she finds her, she's going to kill her. I can't have that.

"I told you choosing Essence was going to be a problem. She looks too much like her."

"Would you please shut the fuck up. I know that. I told you why I chose her. Did you not see the way Robby looked at Ny. I want those trucking yards and I'm not using Nyla to get them. Essence was necessary."

"She was also disrespectful. This didn't have to go this way. Ny's not stupid. Yeah, those pictures were bullshit, but Essence likes fucking with Ny and she wants to fuck you."

I pull a face and gesture with my hand for him to get away from me. "Can't you go find someone else to annoy or just shut the fuck up, Jace?"

This is the one time I wish my mother would mind her own damn business over in Italy. Had I gotten to the pictures before she showed Ny, I wouldn't be in this predicament. She knows Ny has a temper like fire.

"I can't go another month without her talking to me. If I knew where you sent Essence, I'd kill her myself. Fix this, Gio."

I get ready to snap, but Ny's voice pulls my attention below. The sound makes my heart skip a beat. I have the chessboard set up with a bottle of wine waiting. I just want to spend time with her and talk. A month has been way too long. I need her.

"Ming, Kamiko, Alyona." The girls move to stand around her as she calls them. "These are what true dolls look like. They're what you are here to become. Forget the roller derby team they see out in the rink. That's not who we are.

"You're here to become trained assassins. A part of a team of assassins. *A team*," she yells.

"Those men up there"—she points up to the catwalk Jace and I are standing on, acknowledging our presence for the first time—"they're not *your* fuck toys and you will *never* get a chance to fuck either of them.

"You do your fucking job and don't touch them unless they give you permission. And when given permission you use the methods you're taught so you're not disrespecting *me*. Your damn master. Do I make myself clear?" she snarls.

"Yes, Master Ny," they say in unison.

"Well, shit. The anger is still fresh," Jace murmurs.

"*Marone*. You're still talking. Why?"

"Good," Ny replies to the girls below. "Anyone has a problem with that. You come see me. If you can beat my ass, I'll let you have at them.

"I won't be your problem. I'll be theirs. And trust me, neither of them wants those problems."

Ny lifts her gaze and glares at us. "How did I get in the middle of this?" Jace asks, his accent slipping out.

"That's *our* crazy woman. That's how."

Ny sighs like the madwoman she is. "But there's not one of you in here who can whip my ass so let's get to this training. Watch and learn."

Music fills the training room, and my lips curl up into a smile. Busta Rhymes “Put Your Hands Where My Eyes Could See” blares through the speakers. I look at Jace and he nods. I start to take my cuff links off and place them in my pockets.

Turning, we head for the stairs that lead down to the main floor. I remove my watch and then work on the buttons of my dress shirt.



Nyla

I lock eyes with Essence’s little friend, Joann. She’s another one who thinks it’s wise to try me. I’m going to teach her right now, I’m nothing to play with.

I’ve got something for Essence too. I’m going to bring that bitch’s head back and hang it from one of these wooden staffs in the middle of this training gym when I find her.

It’s the disrespect for me. It’s not like they don’t know the rules. Essence has been trying me since day one.

The fact that Gio is protecting her is what has my blood on fire. Jace fucked up when he allowed the disrespect to happen. He should have blocked that cum rag from getting near Gio in the first place.

Joann steps up as if she can beat my ass. I wave her forward with a smile. “Oh, you really trying it, I see,” I say as she takes a staff from Kamiko. I twirl the one in my hand and take a stance.

The others around us are watching in silence. I’ve been pissed for weeks and not keeping it a secret. I’m glad Gio is here to see the problem he’s created.

I’m going to give them all a good show. It will be years before another one of them tries me. I move lightning fast as I attack.

Joann yelps as I crack her ass in the back with the staff. Her back bows, bringing a smile to my lips. She’s too slow.

She's not thinking of anything I taught her. Too cocky for her own good. I move on tempo and attack again.

I spin around her and swing. She blocks the first hit, but I spin the staff behind my back and catch her with the second.

Something behind me grabs her attention. A quick glance tells me my entire class is looking at the same thing. I walk backward to reposition myself to see what has their attention.

I frown as soon as I see them. Gio and Jace are sauntering their big asses down the stairs, Jace is shirtless and Gio is still coming out of his dress shirt.

At twenty-six, there's no mistaking they're grown-ass men, no more transitioning from boys into men. I'm almost five-ten and they tower over me. Both stand at six-five and are fine as fuck. Gio is around two hundred and ten pounds and Jace has to be about two hundred and forty-five. All muscles and solid sexiness.

Gio gets to the bottom of the stairs and kicks off his dress shoes, then pulls off his socks. Jace comes out of his construction boots and rolls up the bottom of his jeans.

Ming hands them both staffs as Gio gestures for them. Joann has the nerve to attack as if I'm not aware of my surroundings. I crack her across her stomach, sending her backward.

She falls into Gio, who steadies her. She glares at me and charges at me again. I pop her in her ribs on each side and spin away.

Gio stands with the staff planted in front of him. "You're not going to beat her like that," he calls to Joann. "You're ignoring the beat. Catch the rhythm."

He starts to rock his hips on beat. I narrow my eyes at him. He slides a foot out and drags his toes across the floor in front of him as if drawing a line, then throws the staff out at his side, taking a stance.

"Come, like this," he says to Joann.

Oh, I'm going to beat his ass. Joann moves her slow ass beside him and tries the same move. I don't give her time to catch it. I pounce and swing. Gio blocks the hit, protecting her.

I growl and spin away. Joann gains some balls and steps around Gio to come for me again. Jace holds out his staff to block her, doing an aerial flip over the staff to place his body between us.

"Jace, no. Let them fight."

"If Ny gets hit, I'm fucking you up," Jace bites out.

Gio pulls a bitter face. I give a smug smile. I don't need Jace's protection but the pissed look on Gio's face is priceless. I spin around Jace and swing for Gio.

"*Ah*," I yell as I swing.

He blocks the hit and glares at me. In a split second, I spin to hit Joann as she tries to sneak up on me. Jace blocks her, shoving her away with his staff like an annoying fly.

Gio turns his attention to attacking me. I block him as he backs me across the gym. By the time Jace takes a blow across the back to shield me, I'm center gym. My chest is heaving and I'm fuming.

Jace and Gio go at it while I try to catch my breath. Out of the corner of my eye, I notice Ming nod at Kamiko and Alyona. The three grab staffs and run at me.

I take a stance in confusion, but ready for them. Jace and Gio side flip across each other and cross staffs to shield me. I dip under their staffs and charge at Ming, backing her off. I have my weapon at her throat.

She drops hers and her arms at her sides. I look over my shoulder and see Gio and Jace have Kamiko and Alyona in the same posture.

"This...this is who they are," Ming says. "You don't come between that. That's not what we're here for. What Essence did was wrong. I will deal with her *when* she returns. We're here to serve them. They have given us all something we can never repay. I'll only say this once. Respect Master Ny or die."

I nod at Ming and drop my staff to the floor. Gio comes up behind me and wraps his sweaty arm around my head, tugs it back, and kisses my lips.

He drags his lips against my skin, moving to my ear. I fight against melting into him. This isn't over.

"I couldn't come to you to explain. I needed her to do what she did. She wasn't disrespecting you and you know I love you too much to ever cheat.

"This is the first moment I've had to come to you, but I shouldn't have had to. You should trust me," he breathes in my ear.

I tug away from him. "Where is she, Gio? That's the only thing you need to talk to me about," I growl and sashay my ass away. "And the more you protect them against me, the bigger the problem we have."

"*Nyla*," he barks.

I toss my middle finger up. That bitch was seconds away from pulling his dick out. I'm sure if I had video, I'd have proof she did. That man has me fucked up.

CHAPTER 38



Said What I Said

Gio

WHY DID I have to fall in love with a woman who's so stubborn? I probably shouldn't have tried to help Joann, but the point is for them to learn. She's too slow to take Ny and she wasn't following the rhythm.

Nyla is a beast at what she does. Joann didn't stand a chance with or without me. I only backed Ny down the way I did because she was angry. If she wasn't in her emotions, we would have had a real fight, not a backdown.

However, I can't leave shit the way it is. This has gone on long enough as it is. Jace and I aren't talking now, and Ny is stewing while still ignoring my calls. *Enough.*

That's why I drove myself out to Tuxedo to settle things between us. I enter the house and the place is dark. I remove my suit jacket and strip down out of my clothes. By the time I'm outside the bedroom, I only have on my watch and the Cuban link bracelet I wear on my right wrist.

I walk naked into the bedroom to have a gun pointed in my face. Nyla stands in her panties and bra, staring down the gun at me. I frown and knock the barrel out of my face.

“Put that shit away.”

“Get out and lock the door behind you,” she says as she puts the safety on and climbs onto the bed to place the gun back behind the headboard.

“We’re done with this.”

“Get out, Gio.”

“I said what I said, Nyla. This is over.”

I climb on the bed behind her, grabbing her by the throat as I turn and sit on my knees with my back against the headboard. I pull her against my chest and reach for her pussy with my free hand, pushing her panties aside.

Pressing my lips against her neck while still holding it, I rub her little fat pussy, pulling a moan from her lips. I open-mouth kiss my way to her ear and suck her lobe into my mouth then push a finger into her. She lifts her hips to release her feet from beneath her.

I kick one leg out over the side of the bed, keeping the other one bent. She settles between my legs as she moans.

“Now I have your attention,” I breathe into her ear. “Nothing happened. You’re the only one I want.”

“Yes, she looks like you. I told you why that is. We could find a hundred women who look just like you, but you would still be the only one who owns my heart.”

“Fuck, baby. That’s it, come for me. I’ve missed you so much,” I groan against her skin.

“Gio, I’m pissed at you.”

Yet she’s still trembling for me. Giving her neck a little squeeze, I bite down on her earlobe. Then I kiss her temple.

“I know, baby. I’m here to remind you of who I belong to. This pussy is the only one I’m ever inside of. Let me fuck you and show you how much I miss you.”

I cover her lips before she can reply and kiss her deeply. I groan into her mouth. I’ve missed her so fucking much.

I shove a hand into her bra cup and pinch her nipple before I knead her mound. She comes all over my hand. I lift it to

suck my fingers clean. She reaches back for my face and pulls me in to kiss her, sucking on my tongue for her own flavor.

I release her bra and tug the fabric away to toss it. Her breasts bounce free, taunting me. She's so fucking gorgeous. Nyla has a stunning brown complexion.

She turns on the bed and dives in to suck my cock. I throw my head back and reach behind me to steady myself. The sound of her sucking and slurping grabs my attention.

I look down my body and watch her suck me for all I'm worth. Her eyes are on me, so fucking sexy. I cup her face and watch her in awe.

She takes me in deep and gags on my length. I bite my lip and grab a handful of her hair to pull her head away.

"Marone, come here."

I place her on her back and put her legs against my chest as I guide my way into her tight heat. Leaning in to take her lips, I start to rock into her as I kiss her deeply.

"Ah, ah, fuck, fuck, fuck," she cries out.

I'm just getting started, but she feels so damn good. I lift her hips and drill down into her. Fisting my hands and planting them on the mattress, I really get into it. Her toes are curled at my sides as she claws at my back.

"This is all yours," I groan. *"Fuck, Nyla. How could I want anyone else? You feel what you do to me? I only get hard like this for you. I only love and want you."*

"Gio," she screams. *"Oh God, oh God, oh God. Yes, yes, yes, yes."*

"I'm going to come so deep inside you. You're so wet."

She groans hard and long. The more I thrust, the wetter she gets. The sound of her soaked pussy is battling with the sound of my hips slapping her ass.

I'm not ready to come, so I pull out and eat her juicy pussy. She plants her feet into the mattress and lifts her hips to

ride my face. I groan into her pussy and keep eating like it owes me something.

It does. An orgasm.



Nyla

I should have pulled the trigger. At least then, I would be at the hospital to stitch his ass up, instead of him tearing me apart with his dick and tongue.

I can't stop riding his face. I turn sideways as if that will help, but he just follows, groaning his pleasure. I want to hold on to my anger, but I can't. Not with him saying the things he's said and taking my body like this.

He lets up to lie on his back. If I'm not going to be mad, I'm not going to be outdone either. I go for his hard dick and swallow it whole. The way he groans makes my pussy pulse. He tastes so good and smells even better.

Gawk, gawk, gawk.

I put in work on his pulsing erection. He pumps his hips up into my mouth as he holds my hair back. I lift my head and smile at him.

“Come here, baby. I need that tight pussy. Come sit on it.”

I straddle him and reach between my legs to hold him up as I sink down on it. I bite my lip and roll my eyes. He feels so good.

“Gio,” I whimper as I bury my face in his neck. He pumps up into me, tearing my pussy up.

I lose my mind when he grabs my hips and starts to pull me down into him as he thrusts up and grinds into me.

“Oh. My. God. Gio, please. Babe, oh shit.”

“Whose dick is this, Ny? Who do I belong to?”

“Me.”

“Say that shit louder.”

“Me. You belong to me.”

“Damn fucking right,” he says and slaps my ass. “So fucking good. Don’t ever doubt me again. I’d die for you. There’s no fucking way I’m cheating. No way.” He slaps my ass again.

I come so hard I see stars. He’s not done though. He flips me onto my back and places one leg across his body as he pounds into me.

I stare into his hazel eyes and see all the love he’s promising. He grabs my breast to squeeze it, then slaps it. I buck off the bed.

“Best pussy in the world. I have it all. What more could I want? Start trusting me, Ny. All of this is for you.”

He turns me onto all fours and starts to pound into me from behind as he presses down on the center of my back. I roll my eyes into the back of my head and bury my face into the mattress.

“Fuck nah,” he growls and grabs my hair to pull my head back. “*Voglio sentirti urlare per questo cazzo.*”

And scream for his dick I do. He hears it all right. Our neighbors miles away probably do too.

CHAPTER 39



*N*ew Recruit

Gio

“We good?” I ask Jace as he walks into the kitchen.

“Is she speaking to us?”

“Yeah, I squashed that shit last night.”

“Then we’re good. What am I doing with Essence?”

“I’ll give you the address to find her. Send her back to the dorms. Let Ming deal with her.”

He tosses a file onto the island and nods at it. “You’re going to want to look at that one. She’s in Queens. He’s related to a cop. He’s beating her ass for fun because he can get away with it.”

“What does she do?”

“She’s a nurse, but he’s not letting her work. She lost a baby about a month ago. That’s when she started looking for help.”

I open the file and look at the picture. She’s gorgeous. Slanted green eyes, gorgeous mocha-brown skin, and silky dark curls. I flip to the next picture, and I’m sold. She has a banging body.

“Collect her.”

He nods and pulls his phone out. No doubt to reach out and let her know we're going to offer to change her life. "Take Ny."

He lifts his head to look at me. I shrug and wipe my mouth with a napkin. She looks like she needs a female friend. My gut says to send Ny.

"You sure?"

"Yeah, this one needs her."

I have a good feeling about this one. Nyla hasn't been able to promote any of the other girls. They're not ready. I might need to shake things up to push their loyalty in the right direction. I need more like Ming, Kamiko, and Alyona.

I can't have another Essence situation. She fit a need, but I saw from the beginning she would be a problem. I'm not interested in fucking her, but I don't think she's ready to accept that.

She took things too far, knowing I was in a tight spot that night. Honestly, if I didn't need her, I would let Nyla get rid of her. I didn't like the position she put me in.

All I told her to do was play things up with me and Jace. We were being watched and I wanted it to get back that Jace and I indeed have a thing going where we share and are involved with each other.

I'm going to handle the situation. I just need her to serve her purpose first. I close the folder then look through my phone for messages and emails. I have a full day ahead of me.

"Last month was my fault," I say without looking up. "I'm giving you a free pass. Use it before the week is up."

"What about that thing I was telling you about? Her early birthday gift. It's next week."

"Then use it then. Did you get the gift?"

"Yeah, I hope she likes it."

I smile. He's nervous. His accent is slipping. Ny will love anything he gives her, but this will be over the top. She's going

to go nuts.

“Trust me, she will.”

“Thanks for fixing this before it was too late.”

“Why not let me fuck up and step in?”

I’ve been wondering about this for a month. I know Ny’s real anger was with me. I thought for sure he was going to swoop in to save the day. Instead, he harped on me making the time to fix it.

“This doesn’t work for me without you.”

“You do know there’s never going to be anything between us. I’m not changing my mind about that. I don’t give a fuck who asks.”

He frowns. “You’re an asshole. You know that?”

“An asshole you’re not getting into.”

He rolls his eyes. “That’s not it for me. Listen, what I want is to know that Ny is always happy and taken care of. Emotionally, financially, physically, mentally. We each give her those things but neither as a whole.

“With you, I know no matter what happens she’s good. She’ll be happy. I do my part, you do yours. Like when we were kids, and she wanted to go on the merry-go-round but couldn’t hold on for long.

“You were there to hold her up. I was there to push. Her smile and laughter made my world, and I was so grateful to you because I didn’t have to tell her I couldn’t make something happen for her. Am I making sense?”

I stare at him and process his words. I remember that and I felt the same way. I would have figured it out, but I was glad he was there to help. She was so happy. It was then I knew I’d do anything to keep that smile on her face. We were so young, but I knew.

“Yeah, I actually get it.”

“Hey, baby,” Ny sings as she walks up behind Jace and presses her face against his back.

“What’s up, gorgeous?” He winces and turns to pull her in front of him as he dips his head to kiss her.

I left him at the apartment soaking last night after he took a few blows during that fight. I did feel bad when I saw the marks across his back. I didn’t think he was going to jump in the way he did.

Turning my attention to NY, I take in the silk robe she has on, and my thoughts go to last night. Make-up sex might be my favorite. Given how often I piss her off, I can’t wait until next time.

“Babe, did you eat? I’m starving,” she turns to say to me.

“I left you some eggs and bacon in the warmer. I need to get out of here. You’ll be with Jace today. He’s making a pickup.”

“About Essence—”

“She’s coming back. I need her to complete the task. Then I’ll handle her. She’s not a problem you need to think about.”

“Who are we picking up?”

“A girl in Hollis. File’s right there,” I reply and finish my juice.

I round the counter and pull her into my arms for a kiss goodbye. I knead her ass over the silk robe. I’m sure it’s sore from last night.

“Be safe, allow Jace to control the situation. I’ll try to come back up this evening.”

She smiles up at me. “I won’t hold my breath. I saw your schedule. Call me, I’ll be happy.”

“That I can do.” I peck her lips. “I love you.”

“I love you too.”

I turn to Jace. “I want this one. Don’t let her back out. Make it happen.”

“Got it.”



Nyla

I sit on the porch of this really nice house in Hollis, Queens. You wouldn't know from looking at this house that there's a woman getting her ass beat damn near every night. People make assumptions all the time without knowing what's going on behind closed doors.

I give thanks that I have two men who love, provide for, and protect me, while poor Reeshemah has a fuckboy I can't wait to put on his ass. Like how does this happen? I read her file, she's smart, she used to be outgoing. She's stunning. I haven't seen many women close to my complexion with green eyes. They stand out on her face.

I sigh. Love will have you doing all types of things when you lose yourself. I'm not judging. I just don't want Reeshemah to remain in this situation. She...no, all women deserve better.

"Hello, can I help you?" I look up to find the woman I'm waiting for staring at me cautiously. Her voice even sounds timid.

"J the Curator sent me."

Her face lights up. "Oh, that was fast. Come on inside."

She looks around as if to make sure no one is watching. The fear in her eyes is palpable. It makes my blood boil. I can't wait to teach her to defend herself. She'll never have to fear anyone ever again.

She scurries into the house as I follow leisurely behind her. The place is just as nice on the inside and smells really nice. She leads me into the living room still looking nervous.

"So, how does this work? Donny will be home soon so we need to be quick."

"I'm sure you were given your options."

“Yes, I can stay here and die. Or learn something new and change my life. What will I be learning?”

“Does that even matter?”

“No, not really,” she gives a small scoff. “As long as I’m not selling my body, anything is better than here.”

“You won’t have to sell your body, but I’ll teach you how to use it as a weapon. You will become feared and not the other way around. We pay well and all we ask is for your loyalty and respect.”

“Reeshemah, who the fuck you in here talking to?”

The way she jumps makes me furious. I turn slowly as the heavy footfalls move toward us. Donny comes into view, and I snort. He’s a big guy, but that doesn’t faze me.

“Who the fuck are you?”

“Rude much?”

“You’re in my house, bitch. I said, who the fuck are you?”

“I got your bitch.”

“Please don’t. His brother is a cop. He’ll make this worse for us.”

“I don’t give a fuck if his brother is the head of the FBI, CIA, and the Department of Justice. If he calls me out my name again, he’s going to need the world’s finest detective to find his ass.” He looks like he’s going to make a move. “Oh, honey, try me. I break dudes like you down for fun. And there’s a big motherfucker outside just waiting to put his hands on you. Make my fucking day.”

Just then, Jace appears. I point at him. “See.” I give a smug smile.

“Reeshemah, you’ve got five seconds to get these people out of my house.”

“Or what?” I say with my gun drawn, silencer already in place. “Sweetheart, you don’t need a thing from here. We’ll give you a fresh start. So are you going with option one or two?”

“Either way, he’s going to kill me,” she sobs.

I pull the trigger and holster my gun, then turn to face her.
“Now, what was that?”

“Oh, my God,” she breathes as if taking a breath for the first time ever.

“I’ll get a cleaner,” Jace murmurs.

I tilt my head to the side. “So what will it be?”

“Option two.” She nods frantically.

“You’re twenty-three, Reeshemah. Your life is just getting started. I promise, it gets better from here.”

She runs to me and wraps me in a hug. I hold her tight and rock her as she shakes with tears. This one feels right. I don’t question if she needs us. I know she does.

CHAPTER 40



*B*eauty

Jace

MY PALMS ARE SWEATY as I sit dressed in a tux in the living room of this hotel suite. I'm waiting for Ny to finish getting ready. I've been planning this for years. My moment to take her on the perfect first date.

It couldn't be any small gesture. Even after having the money to do this for her, I wanted to think and plan it out. This needed to be something planned just for her.

When she comes out of the bedroom in the sparkling black floor-length gown, I almost swallow my tongue as I stand and stare. She's breathtaking.

The bob she used to wear has grown out. Her hair now reaches between her shoulder blades, but tonight she has it in big curls that rest over her right shoulder. The strapless gown hugs her body and places her breasts on display.

"You look gorgeous," I say when she stops in front of me.

"Thank you." She lifts her hands to smooth them down my lapels. "You look great yourself."

I place my hands on her hips and lean in to kiss her. As I slide my tongue into her mouth, I move my palms to her ass. She moves her hands into my man bun. I know I'm going to have to fix it before we leave.

I don't mind, I love when she runs her fingers through my hair. It's why I haven't cut it in years. I peck her lips twice before releasing her so I can give her the gift I have for her.

"Come here for a minute. I have something for you."

I lead her over to the couch by the hand. I notice she has on the diamond necklace and earrings Gio gave her. They're perfect for tonight.

She sits on the couch, and I take the seat next to her, reaching into my tux jacket for the jewelry box. Handing the box over, I watch her with bated breath.

"Oh wow, Jace. It's gorgeous." She holds her wrist out for me to fasten the diamond bracelet in place.

Removing it from the box, I place it on her wrist. As I bend my head over her wrist to lock it in place, she runs her other hand through my hair. Pulling a piece down to twirl around her finger. I look up once the bracelet is in place.

"Thank you."

She leans in to kiss me. I place a hand on her waist and take over the kiss. I groan into her mouth. I have to force myself to pull away.

I look down at my watch. "We need to go. I don't want to be late."

"Where are we going?"

"It's a surprise."

"Can I guess?"

I roll my eyes. "Or you can get up and let's go. Our limo is waiting."

"Ugh, you hang with Gio too much."

We make our way to the door. I open the closet for our coats, but only find mine.

"Where's your fur?"

"I wasn't going to wear it."

"Why not?"

She shrugs. I take mine out and put it on. She looks me up and down with a smile at the corners of her lips.

“Okay, Jace. I see you. Damn. You’re fine as fuck, you know that?”

“Where’s your coat, Ny? We need to go,” I chuckle.

“Hold on. It’s in the room. I’ll be right back. This dude in here looking like a GQ Viking, trying to show me up,” she mutters as she rushes for the bedroom.



Nyla

I’d be lying if I said I’m not super excited. I was surprised when Jace told me to pack an overnight bag, my jewelry, and my fur. Once we arrived at the hotel this morning, he sent me to the spa and this gown was waiting for me when I returned.

We had lunch at a restaurant a few blocks away. After he took me to a bookstore. This has been an amazing day.

I wonder what he’s up to next as we ride in the back of the limo. I look over at him and he looks a little nervous, but he’s so freaking handsome. The tux, the fur, his man bun. I don’t think I’ve seen him like this before. I know he gets dressed up for parties with Gio, but never like this.

I reach to cup the side of his face and lean to press my face against his jaw. “I’m going to love wherever you take me. No matter where it is. Today has already been great.”

I pull away to look up into his eyes. They’re gray now. They were green earlier.

His gaze drops to my lips. I bite my lower lip and smile. Placing his hand behind my head he dips to take my mouth.

I love the way he kisses. It’s so much different from when we were younger. His kisses now have a smooth possessiveness about them. They’re more passionate and devouring than they used to be.

He groans and pulls away. “I love you. I wanted to do something to make you smile.”

“This is our first real date. I’m already smiling.” A look of awe comes over his face. “What? What did I say?”

“I didn’t think you realized that.”

“That it’s our first date? Jace, do you really think I value us so little? I know the date of our first kiss, the first time we made love, and I still remember the first time you told me you love me.”

He pecks my lips. “We’re here.”

I look out of the window and gasp. I turn into him and bury my face in his shoulder. “The opera house? Really?”

“I still remember the first time your mom took us. You were so excited.”

I look up at him with tears in my eyes. “Thank you. This means the world to me.”

“Gio said you would like it. I was sort of second-guessing myself.”

“You shouldn’t. You’re a great boyfriend. And you should call Gio because you can so get it for this.”

He grins from ear to ear. “He already gave me permission.”

I grab his coat and pull him into me. I kiss him with the promise of later. I reach to squeeze him over his pants.

He breaks the kiss and places his forehead to mine. “We need to get inside.”

“This is going to be *awesome*,” I sing.

CHAPTER 41



*S*top Thinking

Jace

THE NIGHT WENT BETTER than I could have hoped. I sat watching Ny's face as she took in the show. She was so entranced.

My heart was so full from watching her joy. A happy Ny is a gorgeous Ny. Her joy emits from her entire being.

"She loved it," I say into the phone.

"I told you she would. You didn't have to call me. I respect it, but it wasn't necessary. Go enjoy the night. I'll see you guys in the morning."

"Thanks, G."

"Yeah." He hangs up.

I toss the phone down and pick up my glass of Herradura dark tequila. Then I cross the room to where I placed my iPod on the music deck. Throwing back the drink, I pick up the iPod and scroll through for the playlist I made for tonight.

Dru Hill's "Beauty" starts to play through the speakers. I put the glass down and loosen my tie. I start on the buttons of my shirt but leave it tucked in.

I've been waiting for Ny to come back out. She told me to wait out here. I look toward the bedroom and the door is still

closed.

Kicking off my shoes, I then take off my socks. With the glass in hand, I go for another drink. Once poured, I take it back to the couch to sit and wait.

The light from the bedroom grabs my attention as the door opens. Ny stands in the doorway in the sexy heels she wore this evening and her fur coat. She's naked beneath the coat, with only her jewels twinkling at me. I can't take my eyes off her as she sways her hips and comes to me.

I've been semihard most of the night. Now I'm ready to come through my pants. She stops before me. I stand to tower over her.

I reach into the fur and palm her plump ass, lifting her onto my waist. She cups my face, and our lips and tongues collide. Ny nips at my lower lip. I swipe my tongue into her mouth and take over the kiss.

She whimpers and pushes her fingers into my hair. One by one, I shift my arms under her thighs to hold her up by her ass. As we kiss, she reaches down behind her to rub my length over the fabric of my pants.

I brush her hair from her face and continue to devour her mouth. She moves her lips to my neck and begins sucking kisses against it. Needing to taste her, I walk us over to the desk in the suite and knock the chair out of the way with my leg. I place her on the edge of the desk and lower to feast on her delicious pussy.

Without looking, I reach behind me for the chair and pull it closer to have a seat. Holding on to her thighs, I really get into it.

"Jace, please, please," she cries.

"Mm," I hum into her and keep eating while rubbing her nub.

Her legs start to shake. I look up her body and find a lust-drunk look on her face. She cries out and starts to convulse.

I back off and look at her. The smile she gives me as she tilts her head to the side is what I live for. She reaches for my hair and frees it to fall down around my shoulders.

I shrug out of my shirt, not taking my eyes off her. Reaching up, I run my fingers through my hair to push it out of my face. I lift from the chair and move in to take her lips and drink from that smile.

Ny grabs my ears to hold me to her as I sip from her lips. I fist her hair and pour all my love into the kiss. Reaching between us, she unfastens my belt and unzips my pants.

I break the kiss to push my pants and boxers down my legs and step out of them. She pushes at my chest as she climbs off the desk. I turn to prop my ass against it.

Ny sits in the chair and pulls up close to palm my cock. I watch with my mouth open as she takes me between her lips. Ny gives great head. I throw my head back and clench my jaw as she soaks my length and sucks me deep.

The sounds she makes when she's sucking cock are almost as good as the feeling. She slurps and hisses, causing me to look back down at her as she spits on my tip and works the moisture into my length while looking up at me.

I narrow my eyes at her when she licks her palm before reaching to tug at my balls. My cheek twitches. This is why I'm never hard pressed to penetrate her. Ny has been giving me superior head for years and I could spend hours eating her pussy.

"Yes, baby. Just like that," I groan.

She dips her head to suck my balls, then runs her tongue up the underside of my superhard shaft. I scoop her curls into my hand and hold them as she bobs up and down. She still has on the fur, but it's fallen down one of her shoulders.

She looks like a queen sucking the fuck out of me. My hair has fallen in my face, but I can't bring myself to push it away. Not if it means releasing my grip on her hair. It's as if holding on is helping me to keep from blowing my load.

"Ny, baby, I want inside you," I pant.

She reaches into her pocket and pulls out a foil packet. I smile and grab it. Biting into the packet, I then remove the condom and roll it on as she wipes her face clean on her sleeve.

I stand and dip to scoop her out of the chair, with my arms under her thighs. Lifting her, I move us to the couch. Once I'm seated, I take her lips and kiss her tenderly.

Breaking the kiss, she reaches for my length and sinks down on me slowly while staring into my eyes. I pulse inside her as she fully seats herself on a long sigh.

I reach into the fur and grasp her hips as she rocks unhurriedly. I note the songs have cycled through a few, but this one is perfect for the pace we've set. Usher starts to sing "That's What It's Made For" as she swirls her hips on me.

I glide my hands to her breasts and knead them as she rides me. She throws her head back and I watch in awe of her and the fact I'm the one giving her this pleasure.

"Fuck, Ny. That feels so good."

"You feel good too, baby. You're so hard."

She reaches for the back of my neck and looks me in my eyes while bouncing and grinding on me. It's so intense. We've never made love like this.

I growl and reach into the coat to wrap my arm around her waist as I stand and head for the bedroom. I grab her ass and bounce her gently as I go. She bites her lip and throws her head back, calling my name.

I lean in and lick her sweaty throat, groaning when I get to her ear. "You're so beautiful."

I push the fur from her shoulders. She releases one arm, then the other, to allow it to fall to the floor. I place her on the bed and look over her sexy body. She crawls backward up the mattress. I follow, looking up through my lashes at her.

Nyla

Oh my God. It's never been like this between us before. Not when it's just the two of us.

The way he's looking at me as he crawls toward me like a panther is so fucking sexy. His hair is in his face and all around his shoulders.

I stop and fall back against the bed. He covers me and combs his hair out of his face to kiss me. I dig my nails into his back as he kisses my neck.

"I love you so much," he breathes in my ear.

"I love you too."

I cry out as he lifts my legs onto his shoulders and sinks into me. Seeming to not have the angle he wants, he moves his arms between my legs to push them around his waist. Grabbing my waist, he holds it tight as he dives in deep.

My back bows off the mattress. I try to push him back, but he grabs my hands and moves them over my head, pinning them down against the mattress. He places his sweaty forehead to mine and works his hips.

Flicking his tongue out, he licks my lips. I moan from somewhere deep. I'm stunned. Jace has always made me feel good, but this is next level.

"Oh, shit. I'm coming," I cry.

"Good, I want to make you come all night."

"Jace."

"Fuck, Ny. Keep raining on me like that. I can feel you squeezing me through the condom. You always feel so good."

I want to feel guilty about this, but it's not taking root. This man is making love to me, while still fucking the shit out of me. He's found the balance we've never had.

He pulls out and lifts my hips from the bed to bring my honey to his mouth. I'm pinned on my shoulders as I ride his face. My heart is pounding so hard.

“Jace, ah, ah, baby. Oh my God, what are you doing to me?”

He grunts and pushes a finger in my ass. My eyes cross and I convulse, locking my legs tightly around his head. I’m fisting the sheets so tightly my hands hurt.

“*Fuck.*”

Even as I scream the word, I can’t believe what’s happening. He lowers my hips and pushes back into me. He kisses me deeply while he thrusts inside me. It’s not fast or too hard, but just right as he makes love to me until I pass out.



Jace

“Tell me something I don’t know about you,” Nyla says as she looks up at me sleepily.

We’ve gone four rounds and she’s passed out after each. I look up at the ceiling and try to think of an answer. There isn’t much she doesn’t know.

“Our first time was my first time,” I murmur.

She sits up and looks down at me. My cheeks heat. I look away from her, but she palms my face and turns it back to her.

“You’re serious?”

“Yes.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I was nervous, and I knew Gio had real experience I didn’t have. I didn’t want to disappoint you or give you low expectations.”

“But you were amazing. I wouldn’t have known better either way. That night I wanted to connect with you. I would have been fine if we didn’t have sex.”

“So why did we?”

“Because I felt like you wanted to,” she whispers.

I sit up and cup her face. “I did, but we didn’t have to. I was happy to just have you in my arms.”

“Gio’s right. We all need to talk more.”

“I think we’re doing fine.”

“Really? Gio doesn’t seem any closer to wanting a baby and he’s put an expiration date on this.”

“Trust me, I don’t think it will expire. We all want the same thing. He’s coming around to it.”

“Jace?”

“What’s up, gorgeous?”

“What changed tonight?”

I look her in the eyes. Something did change tonight. We bonded in a new way. The connection was deeper.

“I stopped thinking,” I reply as the truth sets in.

I wasn’t thinking about how I wanted this to end. I wasn’t thinking about what I didn’t have. I wasn’t thinking about Gio. My mind was on pleasuring Ny the entire time.

She moves to sit between my legs. I cradle her between them and wrap my arms around her, kissing the top of her head.

“I like when we don’t think,” she murmurs as if lost in thought now.

“But?”

“No buts. I like when we don’t think. We all think too much.”

“Yeah, but that’s who we are.”

“What if we let all this go? What if we found a place and lived our lives. Fuck Riccardo, fuck this thing. He hasn’t been made, why not let it go?”

“None of us would be happy with that. We’re owed,” I say bitterly.

CHAPTER 42



*H*e's Ready

Lucas

Two years later...

“HE’S READY,” Ava says as she runs her hand up my bare chest.

I should have known we wouldn’t get to enjoy the afterglow for long. Gio has made waves. He has the attention of everyone in America and quite a few here in Italy.

Blocking this promotion any longer is going to get his attention soon. He’s twenty-eight and some of these kids are being made for less.

This is the real reason for this trip. Riccardo is starting to turn his head back in Gio’s direction. My son is smart. He’s made his connections look as if they belong to his grandfather. That has kept him in the shadows all this time. However, his moves are becoming larger and gaining him more presence.

“I agree. I’ll go talk to my uncle.”

She sucks in a breath and sits up, still running her hand over my chest. “I was thinking. Make it all three boys. I hear there’s a problem in Brooklyn. My boys scratch his back, and the books open to all of them. Bring it up, make him aware of them. I’ll handle the rest.”

“I remember thinking you were too pretty and smart for Frances,” I murmur.

“You were right. He did me a favor.”

“I’m sure if he knew who I truly was, he wouldn’t have dared.”

“That’s always been my ace. I wanted great sons. I needed to give them a great father. You, Lucas, are Italy royalty. I don’t care what last name you go by. Your blood is your blood.”

I sit up and grab the back of her hair as I capture her lips. I want to make the most of the trip. We can talk later.

CHAPTER 43



*D*on Ferrari

Lucas

“HAVE you told him who he is yet?”

“My son’s arrogance can walk beside him. If he knew who he really was he’d flatten all of America and Italy to take everything over. No, this is best. Gio will learn who he’s connected to when the time is right.”

“Mm,” Don Ferrari nods. “This is true. I’m impressed with him. He reminds me of Michelangelo.”

“My father would be proud of him.”

“Yes, his great-grandparents would be proud.” My uncle gets a distant look in his eyes.

“Does Riccardo Esposito still believe he’s Michael Corleone?” He snorts.

“He’s still plotting against things that don’t belong to him.”

He narrows his eyes at me. “But he still doesn’t know who Gio is? Who you are?”

“He only knows of my connection to the Cipriani family. He hasn’t figured out whose son I am. No, he knows nothing.”

He nods. “I think it’s time to open the books for him. I want him untouchable. Barbieri will be out of the way soon.”

Then we set my great nephew loose.”

“My youngest two have put in work with their brother in the last year.”

“Ah, Rio the Butcher and Dante the Italian savage, a.k.a. Dante the inferno. I’ve heard. Do you think they have the discipline?”

“I will give them the discipline. They also look up to Gio. They’ll be fine.”

He nods. “I’ll be watching. If they prove themselves, I will open the books to them all, but Gio’s time is now.”

“Why are you doing this?”

This may be my uncle, but Riccardo felt he could come to him for a reason. I’m still not sure how much we can trust him. He did go straight to Don Giuseppe but I’m still always going to stand on the side of caution when it comes to my wife and sons.

This thing makes you question everyone. And I mean *everyone*.

He narrows his eyes on me. “Riccardo never does his research. He sets fires without having facts. Giuseppe and I had plans. We saw this thing would take a turn. I couldn’t have imagined the effect technology would have on earnings, but the drugs and then those RICO laws in the States in the seventies started the beginning of the end as we know it.”

He shrugs and continues. “Barbieri protects Riccardo to spite me. You stepped into this unknowingly, but you gave me the hand I needed. It will be my blood to burn it all down.”

Well, damn. I look into my uncle’s acid-burned face. I’ve seen pictures of him when he was younger. He looked as handsome as my father was. Identical twins with the looks of Roman gods.

Now you can’t make out those looks. It’s been this way for over thirty years. Since they tried to torture him to find my father.

That was when wars amongst the families were ruthless and had no rules. The things my uncle did after getting free aren't even spoken of.

Although his face doesn't reveal who he is, I see Gio in him. My son will set an example the same way.

“Come, have dinner with your uncle. How is my good friend Giuseppe?”

“He is well.”

CHAPTER 44



*M*ade Men

Gio

FINALLY, I have a lead on something that will actually open the books. To be honest, I've done enough already. My name rings bells all the way in Italy.

Even with a stigma over my head not many will test me. It's starting to become dangerous for me not to be made. I'm a threat and with no protection it's only a matter of time before someone gains the balls to try me.

Which is why I stay away from Ny and Jace is always with me. This has been my worse nightmare. It's not so much that I can't go to see Nyla. It's that she won't keep her harder-headed ass away from me.

She shows up at the Dollhouse in those blonde wigs with those gray contacts. As if that will keep attention off her. I can't even explode when she walks in to send her ass back home.

"Where are you?" Dario asks, bringing me back to the car where we're waiting.

"Thinking."

"Yeah, well, this kind of needs your focus. Who are these guys again?"

“Some Irish crew. They’ve been moving in on a friend of ours. We’re going to shut them down.”

“What exactly are we waiting for?” Dante asks.

“They’re not all here,” Jace says.

“What’s your rush?” I turn to look into the back seat.

At twenty my brothers are a handful. They think they know it all and know nothing. If they did, Dante wouldn’t be dating that treacherous slut Bethany.

I saw her for what she was a few years ago. It’s why I had Nonno force Dante to go to college. In a few months, I’m going to plant the seed for him to send Dante and Dario on a trip to travel the world.

I hope he’ll meet someone else to open his nose or at least forget about Bethany. She sure hasn’t been thinking about Dante. The world isn’t that small.

I know it’s no coincidence she’s fucking our enemy’s spawn’s son. See, these two don’t know shit, but I’ll protect them while they make mistakes.

“I wanted to catch Bethany before she goes to bed,” he mutters.

I snort and straighten in my seat. “Let me ask you a question. Forget about her for a second. Tell me who you wish your perfect woman could be.”

“What?”

“Come on, humor me. Tell me your wish for the perfect woman.”

“I could answer that easy,” Dario says.

“Oh yeah? Then answer.”

“Carleen. She’s all I’ve ever wanted. I know it’s not possible because of this thing, but it would be her for me. Always has been.”

I grunt and nod. I sort of already knew that. I can’t blame him. Carleen has become a gorgeous young woman. I’ve

caught the way he looks at her.

“I don’t know,” Dante says in almost a whisper. “She should be gorgeous, not fake but real beauty. I love curves so she doesn’t have to be some skinny woman.”

I turn to look at him again. His eyes brighten and he becomes more animated. “Yeah, beautiful and graceful. I like them smart and if she can make me laugh that’s a plus. I want her to give me a son I can play ball with.

“And...and I want her to be able to handle me. You know, this side of me. The savage I have to be for this thing. She should match my savage. That’s not real though,” he says and turns to look out the window.

“Why not?”

“Because...I’m crazy. Something is broken in me. There isn’t a woman for that.”

I scoff because he’s just described almost perfectly the woman I’m in love with. “You’d be surprised. And Dante?”

“Yeah?”

“You’re not crazy. I’ve done most of the shit you’ve done and more and I sleep just fine at night. She’s out there and I bet if you stop to think about it, you’d see Bethany is none of that. She’s not the one, bro.”

“Yeah,” he replies, bringing a frown to my face. His stubborn ass isn’t listening to me.

I go to dig in, but a car pulls up. The last two we’ve been waiting on have arrived.

“This is it,” Jace says.

“*Andiamo*. In and out. We’re not carving anyone up tonight. One to the head, two to the chest.”

CHAPTER 45



The Call

Gio

JORDAN SPARKS “NO AIR” plays as I sip at my drink, then place my cigar back in my mouth. Jace sits beside me with his own drink as his gaze remains on Ny. She’s dancing around the living room with a smile on her face.

This is the happiest I’ve seen her in a while. I think we’re all relieved now that I’m made. The Irish hit did the trick. Dario and Dante took the oath with me. I wish Nonno would promote me to Don now, but I know that’s not going to happen.

“Come dance with me, baby,” Ny coos. She’s on the right side of tipsy.

I stand but hold my finger up as my phone rings. “Hold on, I need to take this.”

She pouts and goes to pull Jace from his seat. I turn to move to the home office for a bit of silence. Closing the door behind me, I answer the call.

“Big man, ya gud?”

“It’s good to hear from you, my friend. How you doing?”

“In-troot, not as gud as yuh. We need ta chat. I coming to sih yuh. Ya somebody now, eh? A lil’ nobody na mo. Tings

changed and I need yuh to do some ting fuh muh. Yuh understand?”

“I’ve got you. When?”

“The judge be in touch soon. Yuh gimme a place, I provide the time.”

“Fair enough. I’ll be waiting.”

The call ends and I hang up and place my phone in my pocket. I puff at my cigar a few times, then pull it from my mouth to stare at the embers.

“Never a dull fucking moment.”

I go back out into the living room to find Jace spinning Ny. She takes one look at my face and her smile falls. I hate that she can feel my energy so easily.

“What? We didn’t even get one night. What now?”

“I don’t know. Our Bajan friend wants to talk.”

“Is that bad?”

“You let me worry about him. Dad is handing me some of the restaurant union takes. That’s all cool, but there’s money to be made on the internet that’s not illegal yet.

“I need you and Jace to find the loopholes, businesses, and earners that keep us paid and clean. No drug shit. That’s always going to be an attention drawer and the first thing they regulate.”

Jace places a hand on Ny’s back. “I’ll get my laptop.”

“Okay,” she murmurs.

Between Jace’s law degree and Ny’s business and technology degree, I’m giving this task to the perfect pair. It’s time to build my empire. I’m not falling with the Five Families — ’cause trust me, that shit’s coming. When my mother asked me how I’d handle this, I started to plan.

Dirty money is short money, I’m in this for the long run. So what I’ve been made, that’s just the beginning. I can’t get comfortable. In this thing, you never arrive and if you think

you have that's when they blow your brains out and you're in someone's trunk.

I'm only untouchable in theory. Now it's time for me to make it an absolute. Whatever Kingston needs, I'll handle it. I need him to do a few things for me as well.



Nyla

I sit out on the back deck in the hammock with Jace. I have his laptop in my lap as I sip at a cup of coffee to sober up. I'm not going to complain about the night being cut short.

It's been so long since they have been here at the house with me, I'm just happy they're here. Gio seemed to be so happy. I know how much this has meant. He's waited so long for this promotion.

I honestly thought it would happen years ago. Although, doing it with his brothers has meant a lot to him. He's proud of them.

"We can get to this in the morning," Jace says, breaking into my thoughts.

"You sure?" I turn to look through the back door.

Gio is on the phone, I think he's talking to Nonno or his mother. I smile because he looks relaxed and he's so animated as he talks.

"He's not going to mind. I'm sure once all the calls are done, we're all going to be naked, making up for lost time."

"I brought something special for tonight. I hope you guys like it."

He cups my face and turns it up to peck my lips. "We'll love anything you put on. Now tell me what's on your mind."

"I don't know. A lot."

"Talk to me."

“Do you ever feel like we’re doing all of this in vain? Like, are we truly living life?”

“Do you remember how my parents were killed?”

“No. I remember more about when you arrived at the house. You went home that night because you had a tummy ache, right?”

“Yeah, Papa took me home. I didn’t want to leave you and Gio, but I got so sick.”

“I remember that part. I was so sad after you left. Gio got us ice cream and we watched a movie. It was a scary movie, so I curled into his bed in the middle of the night.

“I was getting into his bed when the commotion started downstairs. I hadn’t realized he was already gone.”

“Yeah, you were up the stairs. I remember that.”

“What...What happened?”

“Mom’s boyfriend Fredrick shot her in the head. I heard the shot and went to see what was going on. He didn’t know I was there. Dad had dropped me off before he came in.

“Fredrick made a call, then sat on the couch getting high before he put the gun to his own head and pulled the trigger.”

“Oh my God, Jace. I didn’t know that.”

“I wish it had been me to pull that trigger. Mom did nothing but love him.”

“Well, if he killed himself, what happened to your dad?”

He releases a heavy sigh. “I didn’t understand it all that night. For years, the pieces didn’t fit in my brain. Gio was the one to tell me what really happened.” He takes a pause and frowns. I reach up to push a hand through his hair, then twist a lock around my finger.

“Fredrick’s junkie ass was paid to get my father to the house. The murder-suicide was to lure Dad there that night. He killed my mom, made the two calls, got high and shot himself.

“I think he knew my father was going to kill him when he found my mom. They weren’t together anymore, but he still loved her and would do anything for her.

“Fredrick was a dick. I still don’t know how Mom got involved with him. My father hated him.”

“Yeah, that I remember. Emil wouldn’t leave us at your house when he was around, and he never let me stay around him alone. I remember that well. Your dad would hold my hand and make me follow him everywhere,” I say.

“I should have called Ava, Beth, or Gwen to let them know what I saw. I was...I was so confused. I sat by Mama rocking. Not knowing what else to do.

“Then Papa came. He told me to go and hide in the closet. Not to come out no matter what I heard.

“The two calls, one was to Papa, the other to the men who showed up. They ambushed him. I could hear him fighting them off. Then the shots came, and the silence followed.”

“I’m so sorry, Jace.”

“So you understand why I have to finish this. It’s not in vain. My parents were taken from me.

“I know Riccardo was involved. Then I watched him take your parents from you and Ava from Gio. He doesn’t think it’s the same.

“I didn’t think it was either, but over the years, I’ve started to see I was wrong, he hurts like we do. Ava didn’t get to watch him become a man. He hasn’t been able to spend time with her or Lucas like he wants to.

“We’ve all been left behind, we’re all the same. It’s not in vain because he owes us what he stole.”

“But Jace. Revenge is stealing my life from me. I’m twenty-seven. I want to get married and have a family. With each year, it seems like that’s getting further and further away.”

“He won’t allow that. Gio will burn the world down before that’s taken away from you.”

Tears burn the backs of my eyes. “I’m trying to be strong, but even the strong have days when they need to scream just to make sure they still know how to make a sound.”

“Ny, I’m here anytime you need to scream. In the end, we’ll be standing and living the life we chose. Hold on. We’re going to make it.”

“I hope so,” I murmur.

Gio comes out of the back door and beckons me with two fingers. Just what I need, time to get lost in something other than my thoughts. In truth, I need them both to hold me together.

As I walk to Gio, he looks behind me and nods for Jace to follow. My heart swells. As if reading my mind, he knows I need them both.



Jace

I look down at Ny’s hand on my chest as she sleeps. Turning my head, I find Gio knocked out on the other side of her. Even after all the exertion of our night, I can’t get my mind to quiet down so I can pass out too.

After my talk with Ny, my memories are chasing me. I keep seeing the day I lost my parents over and over again. I was too weak, too small to do anything. Papa told me not to move, to stay hidden.

I hid in the closet, waiting. The silence spoke so loudly once the men were gone. Mom’s bloody blonde hair flashes in my head.

That day had been so much fun before my stomach had started to hurt. I was so sad when I had to leave. Ny had braided one side of my hair so we could play Vikings.

Images of that day begin to rush me all at once. They move so fast that it takes my breath away. I sit up and throw my legs over the side of the bed.

Ny moans behind me and reaches out in her sleep. Quickly looking over my shoulder, I find her hand where I once had lain. I squeeze my eyes shut and shake my head clear.

I stand, not wanting to disturb either of them but needing to catch my breath. Moving to the foot of the bed, I lift my arms to hold on to the iron post of the bed frame. Ny has refurbished the room.

It has a more masculine feel now. She said it comforted her when we weren't around. I can understand that.

We leave her alone so much. I can't wait for the day when we don't have to live like this. I watch them both as they sleep.

Gio looks peaceful. Something I can't always say about him. Especially when Ny isn't around.

Turning my attention to Nyla, I take in her naked body. I'm going to need to talk to Gio soon. My conversation with Ny earlier rings in my ears.

She's getting restless. At twenty-seven, she wants more or at least to know the time line for when more will come. We can't lose her.

She promised. Whether she knows it or not, I remember her words.

We're your family now. We always will be. Don't cry. I promise, Jace, we're your family.

I close my eyes as it all comes back to me. The fear, the pain, the loneliness. I open my eyes and look at my two best friends. They're my anchors. They have been since that day.

Ny rolls over to face Gio and moves closer to him. Gio wakes and takes in a sharp inhale. Placing a hand on Ny's back, he kisses her forehead and wraps an arm around her to pull her closer. He looks around, his gaze landing on me.

"She's cold. Pass me that blanket," he says and nods to the chair in the center of the room where the bedspread was thrown.

I move to grab it and toss it over them. Gio looks at me and narrows his eyes. His brows knit.

“Why do you have your naked ass up standing over me?” I scoff and give him the finger. Real concern fills his eyes. “You all right?”

“Yeah, bad night.”

“You want to talk? We can go out on the deck,” he says low.

“She’ll miss us. Maybe tomorrow.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah, thanks.”

He shrugs, leans to kiss Ny’s head, and passes back out again. I climb back into bed and place a hand on Ny’s hips. She covers my hand in her sleep and I calm as my lids finally grow heavy.

CHAPTER 46



Say the Word

Gio

I HAVE to say I was intrigued when Judge Rick Thompson told me Kington wants one of those favors I bestow at the Dollhouse. The man has his own means of making a problem disappear.

Now I stand here on this dock in Atlantic Beach on a property few know belongs to me. Jace and Ny are at my sides. The boat Kington is arriving on heads toward us.

I have my hands in my pockets, with my shades on as the salty sea air whips at my hair, shirt, and slacks. I look over at Ny, she's chopped her hair off again. It falls right at her chin, but even it's blowing across her face as the pretty white sundress she has on whips around her legs.

I snort to myself. She looks innocent but that's pure bullshit. I get it.

She's not who needs attention today, it's my dolls. A dressed-up Ny is the only woman getting attention in any room.

"You sure you want her here?" Jace says.

"Yeah, I have an ask for an ask."

"Okay." He shrugs.

“Showtime,” Ny says as the boat draws nearer. I lock eyes with Kingston right away.

He gives me a bright smile. I return it and note the hand he has placed on one of the other guy’s shoulder. I’m assuming this is the guest of honor.

“Big man, dis ma nephew, Keith. I tell he how yuh know how to trow a party. He turning twenty-one. A big man he too.

“Come, Keith. De man make time for we.”

Keith steps off the boat onto the dock. I hold out my hand to shake his.

“Happy birthday. How you doing?” I say.

“Gud, gud. Tanks, man.”

His eyes go straight to Ny. I wrap an arm around his neck. He looks at me, then back at Kingston who’s whispering to Jace. Keith’s gaze then goes back to Ny.

Now here’s what I know about Keith. He’s actually Kingston’s godson who lives in Brooklyn. Although he calls Kingston his uncle.

He likes to talk and when he talks, he doesn’t tell the truth. He boasts about shit he knows nothing about and makes promises in his godfather’s name.

That’s dangerous in this life we live. His lies have stirred up some bullshit surrounding Kingston’s name. That bullshit got all the way back to St. Kitts and there was an attempt on Kingston’s life and some money came up missing along the way. All nasty business.

As we stand here, I’m learning he also doesn’t know how to read the room. Although Ny has on shades, her body language says she’s not interested. Yet Keith won’t stop staring at her hungrily.

I give his neck a little squeeze. “Nah, she’s not for you. Your party is waiting inside.”

He nods and pulls a hand down his face, licking his lips. I laugh to myself. I guess she didn’t dress down enough.

I pat his cheek. “Come on, you’re going to love your guests.”

I have Ming and Holly inside. Because of her former brother-in-law, Reeshemah decided to change her name. I started calling her Holly because we found her in Hollis. It stuck.

I like Holly, I was right about her. She and Nyla have built a bond. Ny trusts her and she’s been one of the better recruits when it comes to combat and weapons.

Tonight, I want to see if she has a stomach for seduction and murder. Keith here has offered an opportunity and I plan to use it fully.

“Damn. Aight, aight,” he says as we step into the house and Holly and Ming come into view.

“Get this man a drink. It’s his birthday,” I croon.

Ming saunters over with a drink in her hand. Keith takes it and downs it without a second thought. Ming slips under his right arm and Holly comes to slide under the other as I step back out of the way.

“Uncle Kingston. Man, ya hooked yer boy up. This is lit.”

“Guh on. Ya enjoy yerself. Gio, come sit. Let’s chat.”

I go to sit in the accent chair as Kingston takes the couch. From here, I’m able to keep my sights on the girls and Keith. Ny comes and sits on the arm of the chair I’m sitting in.

“Yuh look like a bad woman I used to know,” Kingston says to Ny as he looks her over.

“This is someone I want you to know. If something happens to me, she’s the one who has the name you want.”

“Wuh stopping muh from killing yuh and getting dat name from she?”

“That bad woman you used to know, did you come to know her through his mother?” Ny says.

“Fah real.”

“Good. That bad woman was my mother. May she rest in peace, but my mother was child’s play next to me. You touch him, everything you love will cease to exist.”

Kingston sits back in his seat with a smile on his face showing all his teeth. He pulls a face and nods. I place a hand on Ny’s knee.

“Big chat, girl.”

“My guns are bigger, and I don’t pull unless I’m going to blast. Just like I don’t say shit I don’t mean and can’t back up.”

“Dis must be yer woman. She chat just like yuh.”

“She’s my business partner. She’s also my liaison to my grandfather. This friendship needs to look like it’s an old relationship between you and him. She’s going to step in to make sure that happens.”

“Ah. Ya know the favor we done fa yer muddah and grandfaddah?” I pause and stare at him. He waves a hand. “Never mind dat. I hear wuh yuh say. I like she too. Yuh kids are yer mouddahs’ trilden.”

“We are.”

“Now, fa wuh I need. Yuh see, I don’t like liards,” he says loudly. “If ya can lie to muh or about muh, yer a liability. To lie shows muh yer only ability. Yuh understand?”

I understand. Although I know it’s a rhetorical question. I like the way he puts it though. Liars are liabilities. Get it... lie-ability. I’m going to bank that one.

“It’s the only ting a liard relies on. The only ting dem know how to do. I don’t trust a man who has the ability to lie.

“I don’t like lies and I don’t like liards. Yuh steal from muh and lie, yer as good as dead to muh. I don’t care who ya are.”

I look over at Keith. He swallows hard and starts to look nervous, wiping his hands on his thighs.

“Now, for y ya here. I made a promise to his muddah, I wouldn’t murdah da boy. Yuh understand? I never break my

word, but Keith is a liard and a t'ief. He must go," he raises his voice at the end, spit flying from his mouth.

"Say the word."

"Rasshole, he take muh fuh a goathead. He done."

I nod at Holly and Ming. Holly pulls a gun and places it to the back of Keith's head.

"Uncle Kington, please. I didn—"

He doesn't get to finish. Holly pulls the trigger and turns to take a seat as if nothing happened. *Good, good girl.*

She's ready.

My attention is drawn to the front door as it opens. I squeeze Ny's knee, so she doesn't react. I don't want to look like I'm not in control of this situation.

Jace heads to the door to intercept my brother and defuse the situation. I'm going to have to have a talk with Dante. No doubt he found the spare key in my office. I purse my lips and turn my attention back to Kingston.

"Ya, clean dat up," Kingston says to one of his men. "Tanks."

"No problem."

"Big man, I wasn't sure if ya changed now dat ya somebody. Respect, I still see the man ya come ta muh as. Gud. Now tell muh wuh else yuh need from muh."



DANTE

I wanted to do something special for Bethany. She's been so patient. I know she wants to get married, but Nonno insists I finish school first.

I've been interning for Di Lorenzo Industries, and I came across a file on Gio's desk. It was a list of properties. This one

in Atlantic Beach seemed like the perfect location to take Bethany to for a private romantic date.

“These houses are so nice. They’re right on the water, like they have their own private pieces of the ocean. We should totally get something like this after we’re married.

“We can raise a family in a neighborhood like this. Promise we’ll live somewhere like this, Dante,” Bethany says from the passenger seat.

“We can live wherever you want. I promise.”

I pull up to the address I found. My brows knit. The sun has started to set, and the lights are on in the house. This place should be vacant.

“Hey, stay here.”

“What’s going on?”

“Stay here. I’ll come back for you.”

I get out of the car and move to the house. I pull the key I found in Gio’s office and open the front door. When I step inside, I freeze. One of Gio’s dolls stands behind a chair while whispering to some guy sitting in it.

I’ve seen her with Gio and Jace before. She’s gorgeous. My brother has some serious game, all his girls are hot as fuck.

However, her looks aren’t what has my attention. It’s the gun behind her back. There’s a big dude with an accent talking to Gio across the room.

Gio nods and she places the gun to the back of the guy’s head. The girl pulls the trigger then goes to take a seat as if nothing just happened and begins to turn the pages of the magazine in front of her.

“What are you doing here?” I startle as Jace appears in front of me.

“I...I thought this place was vacant. I was trying to have a date with Bethany.”

“Not here, kid. You saw nothing, you know nothing. Go home,” he says and holds his hand out for the key.

I nod and hand over the key. Turning, I pull a hand down my face. Then a smile comes to my lips. My brother is a fucking genius.

Those dolls may or may not be playthings for him and Jace, but they are definitely his soldiers. That shit is smart as hell. Had I not seen it with my own eyes, I never would have believed it.

“Well, fuck me. Wow.”

I climb back into the car. “What happened? Why aren’t we going inside?”

“We’ll do something else.”

“After that long drive, seriously?”

“Bethany, I said we’re doing something else,” I say with finality.

She slumps in her seat and pouts. I roll my eyes. It was a long drive, but she’ll get over it.

CHAPTER 47



*F*uture Hope

Jace

“WHAT’S THAT? What are you reading?” I say as I go to sit beside Ny on the couch with a pint of ice cream in my hand.

She plucks the pint from my grasp and steals my spoon. I frown but take the laptop from her lap instead of fussing. My heart skips a beat as I see what she’s researching.

Superfecundation twins. She’s finally looking into it.

Hope blooms. I’ve waited so long to breach this topic. Gio will be the harder sell, but I know Nyla will be for this.

“Do you really think it would work? It says the chances are one in thirteen thousand.”

“That’s because people don’t try to do it on purpose. Think about how often we have sex as a threesome. If we’re both actively trying to get you pregnant, the odds would be better. It would be intentional.”

“Or we could have the eggs implanted. You know, one from you and one from him.”

I know it’s a long shot to do it naturally, but I still get a little disappointed. I’ve always dreamed this would be how I finally get my family.

“Yeah, that’s an option.”

She moves closer and places her head on my arm. I shift to wrap my arm around her and kiss the top of her head.

“Whatever we do, he has to agree to it. That’s going to be harder than my body releasing two eggs at once and both of your sperm surviving the trip to them.”

I laugh. “That might be true.”

She turns her face up and looks at me. “*But,*” she draws the word out. “I want this. I’m going to at least try to get him to try. One way or the other.”

I don’t know if I should get excited. Even if Gio gets on board, she’s right. The odds are crap.

“Look, let me show you something,” she says handing me the ice cream and taking the laptop back. “There’s a drug that will cause me to release multiple eggs and it’s low risk. Here it’s called Clomiphene.”

Hope takes root again. She’s really been digging into this idea. She’s sold. All I have to do is plant the seed with Gio. My dream is right ahead of me.

But he doesn’t want children and he’s going to put an end to this.

The thought taunts me and tries to steal my wish. I won’t let it. Not after waiting all my life.

“That’s awesome. However, it’s not time to take this to him.”

“I know. It’s the worse time to ask him. I’m just getting the information together. He has until I’m thirty-five. That’s my decision. If this isn’t over by then. I’m going to explore my options.”

“Nyla,” I say warily. “We know this can still take time.”

“Yeah, that’s why I’m giving myself a time line. I love him, but this can’t be it. I want more than a hollow relationship. And he can’t use you as a placeholder.”

I look at her, feeling a little guilty. I have been filling in for Gio, where he can’t give Nyla what she needs, but that’s what

our relationship is about. I thought she understood that.

“I see your thoughts. Yes, I like that you two are two parts of a whole, but sometimes you pull more than your weight. That’s not fair to any of us. Sometimes, I just need him. Who he’s supposed to be to me. You know?”

“Yeah, I get it. By the way, he’s not coming tonight.”

“I figured,” she mumbles.

“Why aren’t you with him?”

“He didn’t need me today.”

“Hm.”

“Come on. I’ll get the dominos and you owe me a pint of ice cream.”

She sticks her tongue out. “It was so good too. Don’t you know sharing is caring? You did a service to the community.”

“The community is greedy, and I want my ice cream.”

“I’ll make that happen. You just keep waiting.”

“Come on, brat.”

“You love me.”

I peck her soft lips. “I do.”

CHAPTER 48



*B*leeding Heart

Nyla

Four years later...

IT'S ALMOST CHRISTMAS. I need to finish my shopping. I want to get Lizzy some new books. At eighteen, her taste is all over the place.

I figured I'd come to the house to look through her current books and take a peek into her closet. I'll probably pick up a few new outfits for her.

"Hey, Ny, what's up?" Elijah says as he walks past Lizzy's room.

"Hey, Dad."

"You sticking around for lunch. This old man could use the company."

"You're old?" I chuckle. "Yeah, why not? I'm just checking out Lizzy's things to see what I can get her for Christmas."

He nods. "I'm going to make us lunch. See you downstairs."

"See you," I murmur as I look over the books open on Lizzy's desk. I pick one up and a slip of paper falls to the floor.

I bend down to pick it up. My brows knit as I read the words on the page. Tears fill my eyes and I take in a sharp breath. I drop to my knees and sob.

I knew Lizzy wasn't happy with her high school and she tends to stay to herself, but I didn't know she was being bullied. Oh my God.

I keep reading the words over and over, trying to understand. My sister is so sweet. I can't believe she's been thinking of taking her life.

My cell rings and I try to pull it together to answer. I wipe a hand under my nose and bring the phone to my ear. My hand is shaking.

"Hello?"

"What's wrong?" Gio demands.

I break down again, not able to hold it in. "Lizzy. She's being bullied at school, and she wrote a suicide note. Gio, why? I can't lose her. How didn't I see this?"

"Baby, calm down. Did you talk to her?"

"No, she's not here. I'm going to fuck them all up."

"Nyla, you can't do that, baby, and that's not going to fix whatever is going on with Lizzy."

"Then I'm going to make her fuck them up."

"You said she doesn't have a lot of friends. Maybe she needs something to do, someone to hang with."

"I try to make time for her as much as I can. I work, I can't always be here."

"I know that, baby. Maybe Gwen can find something for her to do so she's around you more. I promise there's a way to fix this. Talk to her, find out what she's thinking. I'll be home tonight. We'll talk about it."

"Thanks, Gio. This means a lot."

"Anything for you. She's going to be fine."

I pull the phone from my ear and hang up. I sit with the note in my hand for I don't know how long. I plan to talk to Lizzy all right. When I'm done, she's going to know she's perfect and she's going to fuck those kids up.

As a matter of fact, I stand and change my plans. This shit ends today. I won't lose my sister.

I rush down the stairs, headed for my car. "Dad, I'll have to take a rain check, sorry," I call as I exit the door.

I jump in my car and head for Lizzy's school. No one bullies my sister.



Gio

Lizzy means the world to Nyla. When she's not working, she's at the house with Lizzy. Nyla works a lot though, helping Gwen with the business.

She may not go out in the field a lot, but the office work keeps her busy. Then there's all the stuff she does for me and training the dolls, working the internet side of things, and traveling when I need her to. I feel like this is my fault.

I look up as Ming walks into my office. I had Jace send for her. I'm going to step in and fix this for Ny.

"Have you met Lizzy?" I ask, getting straight to the point.

"Nyla's little sister? Yeah, in passing. She's a sweet kid."

"She needs friends. I want you to give her a job at the rink. Become her friend. Make her a part of the roller derby team."

"Won't that expose the dolls?"

I shrug. "As long as she doesn't figure out who Ny is to me or her involvement I don't care. Figure it out. She needs to be around people who treat her well."

"Okay, I've got it."



Nyla

“I should have known you weren’t going to let this go,” Gio breathes.

“I didn’t mean for her to get arrested, but it was so worth it.” I give a sinister smile as I sniffle while sitting between Gio’s legs as we sit on the bed in our bedroom. “I just wish I saw this sooner.”

“Did you get to talk to her?”

“Yeah, you know what? The part that gets to me is she wasn’t afraid of them, she’s afraid of herself. What did we do? What did Gwen and I do to her?”

“You guys gave her the skills to protect herself from a very real threat. You’ve given her what you’ve given dozens of others who are now in a position not to be bullied or abused.”

“Maybe college will be better for her. I’m going to pay closer attention, that’s for sure.”

“And even then, you can do but so much. She’s going to make her own decisions and all you can do is hope she listens to the wisdom you’ve been giving her through the years.”

“Are we talking about my sister or your brother?”

He blows out a breath. “Both.”

“You did all you could to try to keep him from marrying her. It’s what he wants,” I say as I look up into his eyes.

He scowls. “She’s a cunt. Why can’t he see that?”

“Love blinds you sometimes.”

He snorts. “*Love*. Bullshit. She’s two years older and gave him some ass. Now he’s lost his mind. He’s not thinking with his head, he’s thinking with his dick.”

“The wedding is in a few months. What are you going to do?”

“*Stugots*. I’m going to let him bump his head. This is the only way he’s going to learn. If I try to force him to see, I’ll make it worse. I hate it but I have to let this one happen.”

“That’s really mature of you. The old Gio would have put an end to this and told him to get the fuck over it.”

“I’m thirty-one. I can’t lead my life with the mind of a sixteen-year-old.”

I reach to cup his face and lift up to kiss him. He takes over the kiss. Peace washes over me.

“I love the man you’ve become, but I don’t think there was ever a time you thought as a sixteen-year-old.”

He chuckles and kisses my nose. “That might be true.” He shrugs. “I love the woman you’ve become, but I see so much more coming. Lizzy will be fine. I promise.”

“Thanks for the talk and for coming up. I know you have a lot going on.”

“Anything for you.”

CHAPTER 49



W edding Mistakes

Nyla

Five months later...

I'M a little bummed I don't get to go to the wedding. I may not be fond of who Dante has chosen to marry, but I still wish I could be there to see him cross this milestone in life.

I feel like we've all missed out on so much, so many opportunities as the family we once were. I can only imagine how all of this makes Ava feel. I've been thinking about going to see her soon.

"Good morning," Jace croons as he comes into the kitchen.

"Today's the day. You guys ready?" I ask without looking up from my computer.

"I'm ready to do my part. You have those docs ready for me?"

"Yup, they're in the printer."

I turn to point and have to do a double take. Jace looks damn fine in his navy suit and white dress shirt with a blue tie. His hair is down, but it's not taking anything away from the look.

"Wow, now I'm really bummed I can't go. Look at you. You look so handsome."

He winks at me. “I’ll make my exit as soon as I’m no longer needed. I don’t like her or her family.”

“That makes two of us,” Gio grumbles as he enters the kitchen looking just as good as Jace.

I fold my arms over my chest and pout. I hate it here. This is so not fair.

Gio comes over to peck my lips. “It’s going to be a shit wedding. We’ll fly out to Miami in the morning. It’s private property. I can give you all my attention.”

It’s like I light up from inside. This is what I’ve been wanting for months. Some real time and affection from him.

“I’m so ready.”

“You have those papers Jace needs?”

“Got them,” Jace says, holding them up.

“A prenup and a bogus contract for her to think she’s gaining shares of Di Lorenzo Industries?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Jace, you’ve got this?”

“After discussing the shares, I’ll have the prenup flipped to the signature page. She’ll sign it. I’ll have Dante sign the prenup as well,” Jace says.

“A simple bait and switch,” I say and smile. “Jace can read them over to make sure I did them the way he told me.”

“Looks good.” Jace nods.

Gio kisses my forehead. “Thanks, baby.”



Gio

This cunt thinks no one knows she’s fucking someone other than my brother. I’ve got news for the Kumar family and Riccardo. I’ve linked them all together and I see what’s at play. This is all a part of Riccardo’s dumbass plan.

I want to avoid this all, but Dante's hard head has made that difficult. As much as this mistake leaves a bitter taste in my mouth, I have to let it go—for now.

“It's taken care of,” Jace whispers in my ear.

I nod and narrow my eyes as my brother, Dante, stands before me at the altar with Dario at his side. I will always protect my brothers, even from themselves. I know I'm not done with this one. The Kumar family has moved to the top of my list.

My gut tells me to allow this to play out altogether. Riccardo's arrogance grows stronger with each move he thinks he makes successfully. It's the only reason I haven't killed his pawns and covered my brother from this mistake now.

“*Andiamo.*” I tap Jace on the arm and head to stand beside my brothers.

Let's get this shit show over with. I have a woman I actually love and who loves me back that I need to get back to. I hate that she's not here. I know she wanted to be.

I look up and find Riccardo's eyes on me. I smile and turn to grasp Jace's hand as I lean into whisper to him.

“We're being watched.”

Jace squeezes my hand as I back away and look into his eyes. To be honest. This has become easy for me because of the connection we have when we're pleasing Ny. Sometimes a look is all we need to know we're going to send her flying, or we need to switch things up because it's too much for her.

I tap into that, hoping it bleeds through in this moment. I turn to look at Riccardo and he's frowning like he smells shit. I wink at him and want to laugh my ass off.

Right on cue, Ming, who's our date for the wedding, comes over to straighten both our ties one by one before she lifts on her toes and places a kiss on our cheeks. Ming is safe, and she's become one of my trusted friends, so she knows I mean nothing by it when I plant a hand on her ass as she pecks my cheek. She actually blushes, which makes this more authentic.

“That’s your one for this occasion,” she leans to whisper in my ear.

I throw my head back and laugh. “This is why you’re our favorite,” I murmur against her forehead as I kiss it.

“Thanks for the opportunity.”

“Thanks for your service.”

She turns to go back to her seat, and I look at Riccardo. His ass is stewing. I love fucking with this dick. I hope he strokes the fuck out.

I turn my attention from him and find Nonno watching me with a smug grin on his face. Jace grabs my shoulder from behind and gives it a squeeze.

“Check your phone.”

I pull the device from my pocket and open the text from Nyla. I have to shift to give my cock space in my pants, reaching to tug at the fabric when that’s still not enough. Fuck, this wedding needs to be over.

The music starts and I look up. My gaze passes Riccardo and his sour ass face. I smile. I guess my reaction to my woman might have been right on time.

I’m still going to spank Ny’s ass for sending that photo of herself naked in our bed. I think for a second. She sent that shit to Jace too.

Little freak.

CHAPTER 50



*D*i Lorenzo Empire

Gio

I WALK over to Nonno with a glass of champagne in my hand. He pulls me in and kisses both of my cheeks. Looking at me with pride in his eyes, he nods for me to follow him.

We start to walk the grounds of the wedding. I lift my glass to my lips and start to talk. “Any word on Barbieri yet?”

“No, nothing yet. Patience.”

“The man has nine lives,” I hiss.

“Yes, it feels like it, but that’s not where your focus needs to be. Dario will start to work in the restaurants. Dante should take over for you at the company. He has a mind for business. You can serve as an adviser.”

“Pushing me in the background again. I like it. I can move freely. Take some pressure off Jace and Ny,” I reply.

“Among other things. You’re gaining too much power, too fast. I’m getting information too slowly. You need to be focused on what you need me to know. Remember, you are using me as cover.”

I know what he’s talking about. I made a last-minute decision I didn’t get to talk to him about. It got back to Italy before I could tell him. I had other things on my plate.

I lift my glass again.

“Sorry about that. I’ll hand things over to him once he comes back from his honeymoon. It might settle him and rein in his temper.”

The reason I had to make the last-minute decision. Dante slaughtered one of Robby’s guys. The guy was low level, but Robby felt slighted. I had to put him down before he came for my brother.

“It’s just rumors for now. I’m sure you handled it so there’s no confirmation. Remember, ten steps ahead and always keep your pawns in the know of what they need to know.”

“You’re not a pawn, Nonno,” I say.

He stops and turns to look at me sternly. “Yes, Michelangelo. I am and you will do well not to forget that. I’m teaching, learning, and guiding. This is how a great leader works. *Capisce?*”

“*Capisce.*”

He starts to walk again. “Now, tell me, what can you teach me this visit?”



Nyla

I walk into the gym at the house and LL’s “Headsprung” is blasting. Lizzy comes into view beating the shit out of the heavy bag. I smile with pride. She’s moving with a confidence she didn’t have five months ago.

I pick up a pair of gloves to spar with her. I’ll admit. I was pissed when she took the job at the rink. I thought Gio had sent Ming for her to train as a doll.

I would have killed him. However, Lizzy seems to be making friends with some of the girls and she’s not aware of who they are or what they do. Since the main training facility moved to the Dollhouse basement, she wouldn’t make the connection.

“Hey you,” I call over the music with a smile.

She spins with her hands up. Seeing it's me, she drops them and wipes at the sweat on her face. My heart swells as she gives me that pretty dimpled smile.

In the span of seconds, my heart pangs as I think of Dante. I would hate to watch Lizzy make such a big mistake. I give Gio so much respect for letting this happen.

“Hey, you okay?”

I shake off my thoughts. “Yeah. Come on. Show me what you got.”

She smiles, then nods and starts for me. All smiles are gone as we square up. She's just like Mom and doesn't know it. I anticipate her attack because she's going to come at me just like Mom would have. She leads with her left.

All the women in our family can fight orthodox and southpaw. We're ambidextrous, we have no dominant side. We can do most things from either side.

Lizzy frowns when I block her, and she quickly shifts to orthodox. I'm expecting that too. I catch her with two body shots. She frowns and shakes it off.

I watch with pride when she starts to dance. I get ready because she's about to show me who Beth's girls are.

“*Ah*,” she yells as she throws a right hook that rocks my head to the side.

My ear is ringing. “Nice,” I say and shake it off and dance back.

In real life, the person fighting her isn't going to see a baby sister, so I forget all that and take her ass to task. You can hear the force of our blows thunder though the gym over the music.

I don't get workouts like this with the dolls. Lizzy is matching my skills and challenging me. Even as I taste the metal flavor of my blood in my mouth, I grin and fight.

“Girls, girls,” Elijah bellows right as I rock Lizzy's head back with an uppercut. “What the hell?”

I bend over and place my hands on my knees to catch my breath. Lizzy sits up from the floor and shakes her head with a little grin. We both laugh.

“Are you two crazy? I could hear you in the laundry room. I thought a thunderstorm was starting outside. I come this way and find it’s you two punching the shit out of each other with smiles on your faces.

“I’ve fucked this up.” He runs a hand through his hair. “I knew I couldn’t raise two girls.”

“Dad, you’ve done great.” I laugh.

“Gah, come, the both of you. I have ice packs and I’ll cook dinner.” He turns and walks off, talking to himself.

I turn to Lizzy and help her up, tugging her into a hug. I hold her tight. “Now that’s my badass sister. You never give up on life. You beat its ass just like that. I love you so much,” I whisper to her.

“I love you too.”

I squeeze my eyes shut. I’m going to see this through for her. She’s the one who never got to know Mom and Dad.

I’m going to finish this. For her.

CHAPTER 51



*O*ur Singer

Jace

GIO LEANS forward from the back seat to slip two hundred-dollar bills into Apollo's pocket then slaps his cheek. "Thanks, kid."

"No problem, Gio."

Apollo drove us home from the wedding. I didn't drink much, but I know Gio has been planning the chance to have this talk. I figured it would happen tonight.

"Let me ask you something, Apollo. You like working for me and my family?"

"Yeah, you guys are great."

"Good, good. How do you like working the kitchens and restaurants?"

"They're where I got my start. They're great places to learn too. Not just about cooking and how restaurants run. The staff talks a lot because they don't think anyone's listening. I hear things."

Gio falls back in his seat as if thinking. Only I know he's already decided what he plans to do. This has been coming for months.

Gio pulls a hand down his face tiredly. He then loosens his tie. I loosen my tie and drop my head back, allowing him to do his thing. Apollo has shown his loyalty and value over the years.

Gio wouldn't allow him here if he didn't absolutely trust him. He deserves this. It's a step in the right direction for him.

"You get along with Dario, no?"

"I do. We hang a bit. His crew is down to earth. They all earn well too."

"I want you to do a favor for me. I need a right hand for Dario. A right hand who answers to me. In time, this will all make sense. Can you do that for me, Apollo?"

"Yeah, I got you, Gio."

"Good, we never had this conversation. All you need to do is report to the kitchen on Monday and learn everything you can from Dario, so he wants you with him. I'll take care of the rest."

"Got it. Thanks, Gio. I appreciate this."

"You're welcome, Apollo. That's my little brother. I don't have to tell you how important this is. Don't fail me."

"I won't."

"Good night," Gio says and pushes his way out of the car.

I dig in my pocket and pull out a phone. Apollo turns to look at me. I give him the phone.

"When he wants you, he'll call this phone. Keep it on you all the time."

"Got it."

I get out of the car and tap the roof before I follow Gio into the house. I wanted to leave that wedding hours ago. Ny has been on my mind all day. Especially after the picture she sent us.

Gio heads straight for our bedroom. The first thing I notice as I enter the room is the shower running in the master bath.

Gio turns a tired grin to me. I nod and toss my tie down.

We're both undressing to join Ny when she starts to sing in the shower. In the middle of tugging his shirt off, Gio turns to me slowly with his mouth hanging open.

She really gets into singing "Love" by Keyshia Cole. I burst into laughter. Gio joins in, doubled over with his hands on his knees.

"God, she's terrible," he snorts.

"Should we get in there to stop this?"

"*Marone*. Please, my ears," he laughs. "I love her, but she can't hold a note to save her life. Jesus."

She hits another run. I bark out my laughter and rush to get my clothes off. This must stop. We both head to the bathroom naked. Gio steps in before me.

He freezes and begins to vibrate with rage. I step beside him to find out what's going on. Ny has her back to us, but the black-and-blue bruises are easy to make out.

She turns to look over her shoulder at us and smiles. I growl when the bruise on her face comes into view. She looks down her back and shrugs like nothing is wrong.

"What the fuck happened?" I bite out.

She moves to open the glass shower door. I move to her quickly and brush my hand over her face.

"It's nothing. Lizzy and I went a few rounds," she laughs.

Gio moves to my side and grazes a hand over her ribs. She winces and bites her lips.

"It's not fine. You look like you went a few rounds with a Mack truck," I bite out.

Gio grunts and turns to rush from the bathroom. I palm the back of Ny's head and tug her into my chest. Gio comes back into the bathroom with his phone on speaker.

"Apollo, how far did you get?"

“I just passed through the gate. Do you need me to come back up?”

“First, I need you to find about ten to fifteen ten-pound bags of ice. Then bring those back up.”

“Got it. I’ll be right back.”

“Oh my God, you guys are worse than Dad,” Ny groans and rolls her eyes.

“What did you two go a few rounds with? Nunchucks?”

“No. We had on gloves.”

“Fuck outa here. Lizzy did that with her fists?” Gio says with his mouth open.

“We may have gotten a little carried away.”

“You think?” Gio and I say in unison.

“Relax. I’m fine. I can think of something we can do while we wait for the ice,” she purrs.

“You think either of us wants to touch you right now?” Gio hisses. “Come here, Ny.”

He holds out his hand for her. She turns to cut the shower off then steps around me to place her hand in his. He tugs her to stand in front of him as he faces the mirror. Gently he holds her face and tilts it for her bruise to face the mirror.

She winces a little. “Oh, it wasn’t that bad when I got home.”

Gio turns her so she can look at her ribs and back. She pouts. “I get it, Gio.”

“Do you?”

“Yes, I do. Calm down.”

He starts to grumble in Italian. I’m totally in agreement. I don’t know what she was thinking.

Nyla

“That feels nice,” I moan as Jace massages my shoulders while I sit in an ice bath.

I hadn’t noticed how bad the bruises were. Elijah was pretty upset when Lizzy started to show a little bruising. The bruise on my face had just started to bloom when I arrived back home.

Gio takes my wineglass and fills it back up. I have to say, I was a little disappointed when they both put on basketball shorts. I was hoping the night would have ended a whole lot different, but this is even better.

I get both my guys and some quality time. We’ve been chilling and talking. Something we haven’t done together in a while. I take the glass Gio hands me and take a sip. He settles back on the floor with his back to the tub.

“Is she at least feeling better? How’s her mental state?”

I smile. I love that he cares about how my sister is. Gio is such a family man, I know he’ll make a great father.

“She’s a lot better. I’d let her beat my ass again to see that spark and confidence in her eyes. It felt good. You know, to just let go with someone who could match my skills and to see her smile and have fun.”

“You and Gwen did good if she did this to you. I’m impressed,” Gio says tiredly.

“I was thinking the same thing,” Jace says.

“How was the wedding? You guys seem exhausted.”

“It was shit, just like I told you it would be. A bunch of wasted time and money.”

“I thought I was going to barf. Her family is so phony,” Jace says disgustedly.

“I’m exhausted from pretending I gave a fuck.”

“Gio,” I chuckle and reach to run my hand through his hair. He grabs my hand and brings it to his lips, sucking my fingers into his mouth.

I moan and pull my hand back. “Was Dante happy?”

“As a pussy-sprung fool.”

I spit out the sip of wine I had just taken. Jace laughs too. “Yeah, you’re tired and grumpy.”

“I’ll sleep on the plane in the morning.”

“I think I’ve had enough. Who wants to shower with me?”

“You’re not going to sing, are you?” Gio looks over his shoulder and teases.

“If I’m in there by myself, I am.”

“I will,” they say at the same time.

“I hate y’all,” I laugh.

“But we love your noncooking, nonsinging, gorgeous ass,” Gio croons.

“But I can fight.”

“I’m questioning that one from the looks of it.”

I stiffen and turn my head slowly to look back at Jace. He has a smug smile on his face. I glare at him.

“Bro, you stole the words right out of my mouth,” Gio snickers.

“Fuck you both,” I mutter and stand from the tub. Then mutter to myself, “I can kick both their asses. The nerve.”

CHAPTER 52



*F*eelings

Gio

Three years later...

SOME MAY CALL THIS STUPID, but I guess I'm feeling cocky. I also want to meet Frances's boys in person. I've been watching them from a distance.

However, something has been nagging at me and I want to see how these guys think. I'm also showing my balls are bigger than Riccardo's and so is my brain. Right now, I have my cock in his mouth, but he thinks he's eating caviar and sipping champagne.

For me, it was the smug look on his face when Bethany announced she was pregnant. He really thinks he's outsmarting me.

I ignored his bullshit after the wedding when calls started coming a few days after. The son of a bitch never fails to do as I know he will. So here I stand right in the open about to buy a Manhattan condo from his bitch-ass grandson.

"Mr. Luciano, how do you like this view?"

I nearly laugh as he calls me by the bogus name I gave him. Ny walks over to my side. I place my hand on the small of her back. She has on one of those blonde wigs I loathe. It dulls her skin tone and takes away from her natural beauty.

She looks up at me with those gray contacts. Another distraction from her gorgeous face.

“It’s not up to me. You have to please her,” I say to Lou Kelley.

“Happy wife, happy life, right?”

I don’t miss how he takes Ny in and devours her body with his gaze. I note that for future reference. His grandfather would die a slow death. I snort and head for the kitchen.

“This place is nice though. Is it the only unit available? I might talk my brother into buying. We’re sort of close, you know?”

“I totally get it. I’m pretty close with my brothers as well.”

“Oh yeah, I only have the one. How many do you have?”

“I have two. I mean, I have a few cousins who are close like brothers. By the way, I do have another unit I’d be happy to show him.”

“I’ll think about it. Your brothers, are they in real estate with you?”

“No, Jacob is a chef. Franky works for my grandfather. One of my cousins is between jobs. To be honest, he spends all his damn time playing video games. I’ve tried to hire him, but he’d rather game and chat online with his nerdy-ass friends in those chat forums.”

“I’d like to see the bedrooms for the kids,” Ny says as she enters the kitchen.

Again, Lou turns a heated gaze on her. No doubt mind-fucking her. Jace comes over and stands behind her with his arms crossed over his chest.

Lou clears his throat. “What is it you said you do again, Mr. Luciano?”

“Investments. My wife and I own several developments as well.”

“In New York? Maybe I can help you sell a few units.”

“No, Miami and Boston.”

His excitement dies a bit. “Oh, I’m looking into getting my license in Boston. My brother, the chef. He’s out there making a name for himself.”

“Oh really?”

“Yeah, my other brother goes out to see him a lot. He has a place out there too.”

We enter the room staged as a nursery. Ny walks over to the baby crib and stands looking down into it as if she’s lost. My heart aches.

Ignoring Lou and his babbling, I walk over and wrap my arms around her. I start to kiss at her neck.

“*Che cosa? Qual è il problema?*” I ask in a whisper.

“Nothing.” She turns in my arms and looks up at me.

I pinch her chin between my fingers and take her lips. She wraps her arms around my neck and melts into me. I growl, knowing she’s lying to me, yet not wanting to have that conversation either. She turned thirty-five this year.

It’s been fourteen years since she thought she was pregnant. I’m going to have to face this soon. I feel it in my bones.

Lou clears his throat and gives a fake chuckle. “Maybe I should show you guys the master.”

“Maybe you should shut the fuck up before you lose a commission,” I grunt.

“Of course, of course. I’ll step out front and let you guys walk through. If you have any questions just call for me,” he says.

Pussy.

I wave him off, not turning from Ny. She has her eyes downcast as she stares absently at my chest. I lift her chin to lock eyes with her.

“Talk to me.”

“I will, just not here.”

I purse my lips and nod. She’s been distant for the past few weeks. Jace has noticed it too. I think he knows more, but he’s not talking. Something we promised to do.

I peck Ny’s lips and nod. This isn’t the place for the talk I think is coming. I’ll hold back for now.

I turn to Jace. “You know what to do.”

He nods and leaves the room. I check my phone quickly, hoping nothing has come up so I can head home with Ny tonight.

I send a text to Salvatore to have him pick up Ny’s car. She’ll be riding with me and Jace. I look up to find her staring into the crib again. Reality bites hard.

Twenty years is a long time to ask someone to trust you. Fourteen years is a long time to ignore your woman telling you how much she wants a baby. A blind man can see how bad I’m fucking this up.

However, I need more time. I’m sure there’s something my mother is leaving out and I’m still trying to figure that out. I’m not the only one playing the board.

“Come on. We’re done here,” I say.

“Yeah, okay, I think you’re right.”

Her words cause my stomach to sink. I remember that she’s always a step ahead of me, no matter how many steps ahead of everyone else I am.

If I don’t think fast, I might lose her. That’s not an option. It’s never been an option.

CHAPTER 53



*Y*ou Ask too Much

Nyla

ONCE MY BIRTHDAY CAME AROUND, I told myself I'd leave. However, every time I try, I feel sick to my stomach. I don't know how to tear my own heart out.

Although today, standing in that nursery looking into that empty crib, it did something to me. I'm allowing my life to go by and I'm not even sure why. My father's last words play in my head.

Live your life, Ny.

We pull up to the house and Jace puts the truck into park. Gio turns to me as he sits beside me in the back seat. He places a hand on the back of my neck. I close my eyes and hold back the tears.

The ride here was silent. I've had plenty of time with my thoughts.

"Talk to me."

"I haven't been living my life. This isn't what I wanted. I don't know what I want anymore. Everything has been about revenge and hurt. I don't want to hurt anymore, Gio." I can't stop now that the words are flowing.

"I don't want this bloodlust. I want to give life, not take it. I want to be in the moment, not planning for ten moments in

the future. How did I lose myself like this?”

“I know it’s been a long time. My patience is running out too. You think I don’t want to be married to you already? I’m working with what I’ve been given.”

“I’m thirty-five, Gio. I want babies. Time doesn’t move backward. It only goes forward.”

“I know, Nyla. I know.”

“Do you even want to have a family with me? With us?”

He furrows his brows. “I...I’m going to be honest. I don’t want to have children in this life we live, but for you, I’d do it.”

I lick my lips. “No, you don’t get the question. Or at least, I didn’t say what I mean.”

“What do you mean?” he asks, looking more confused.

“I did some research and found there’s a way for me to conceive and carry a baby from each of you at the same time. They would be twins, but from separate eggs and you would each be a father to one of them.”

“Ny,” he grinds out.

“It’s not guaranteed, but she’s found a way to increase our chances,” Jace starts.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me. You know about this?”

“Yeah, superfecundation twins. We have a one and thirteen thousand chance, but that’s when it happens by accident. If we’re actively doing this, I think we have a better chance. It’s possible.”

“Fuck outa here. And if one of us gets her pregnant and the other one doesn’t. What then?”

“I’d love them no matter who the father is.”

“*Jace,*” Gio drags out. “If you don’t shut the fuck up. Both of you can stop talking to me. I give an inch and you take off running a mile.”

“A wedding and a handfasting, I was thinking about caving on that. Maybe once this is over, we can do that.”

“But what about a baby?”

“Shit, Ny. Maybe we can freeze a few eggs since we don’t know when we can be done with all of this.”

“So maybe you’ll marry me and maybe we can have a baby. Do you hear how that sounds to a woman five years out from forty, with no end to this in sight? I’ve given up my entire life. I’ve loved you more than myself.”

Tears start to fall. He drags a hand through his hair then cracks his knuckles. He reaches to cup my face.

“How long do I have to process this? I feel you slipping away.”

“You take all the time you need, Gio. I’m going to work on me. I’ve done so much wrong. Your mom once gave me some great advice I should have listened to. So while you decide what you want, I’m going to be working on that advice, but I won’t be waiting on you or anyone else.”

“Why does that sound like you’re leaving us?”

“Hear whatever you need to hear.”

“What do you need to hear?”

I scoff. “Oh no, boo. I’m not giving you the strings to pull me, my dear puppet master. I’ve danced enough for you.

“You find what *we* need from you and I’m not talking about Jace. I’m talking about you and me because you forgot about me somewhere along the line. This thing, it’s all you think about, all you want.

“If you want me, Gio. I’m going to need to know that because I don’t feel it anymore.”

With that, I get out of the car and go into the house to pack my things. I wrap my arms around my middle and try to hold myself together. I’m walking away from my best friends and I’m not totally sure it’s the right thing to do.



Jace

“What the fuck just happened?” Gio says almost to himself.

I shake my head, trying to piece things together myself. My heart burns because I don’t think I can fix this one. I’ve held it off for as long as I could, but it’s been coming for a long time.

“I don’t know, but you need to start that fast-thinking shit before she’s gone.”

“Fuck,” he roars and punches the window so hard it cracks.

I glare at him and lift a brow. A lot of good that’s going to do us. He slumps down in his seat and covers his face with his hands.

“Something’s always trying to take her from me. She’s the only thing in this life I’ve wanted, but no matter what I do, something always stands in the way of that. I’m so fucking tired.”

“Nothing worth having comes easy.”

“I fucked up. I stopped doing my part. She’s right, I’ve been relying on you to give her things she wanted from me, not you, but I can’t... How can I protect her, give her what she wants, and do this?”

“Can I be honest?”

He’s silent for a moment. I don’t think he’s going to answer me at first.

“Bro, when the fuck aren’t you?”

I turn to look back at him and we lock eyes.

“You have to stop telling yourself what you can’t or shouldn’t have. You’re greater than that. It’s time to take our lives back. That’s what I’m hearing her say.”

“I’m not losing her. I don’t care who has to die. She wants to live. *Andiamo*, let’s go get our lives.”

CHAPTER 54



*S*omething Missing

Gio

One year later...

I'M in the home gym, shirtless, with sweat dripping down my back as I punch and kick at the heavy bag in front of me. Fall Out Boy's "The Phoenix" is blasting in the background, speaking to my mood. It's Nyla's birthday and we're still not talking.

Letting her leave our home was one of the hardest things I've ever done. I knew I didn't have what she wanted then. I needed time to set up this new board, the one where I crown my queen and take my kingdom. I don't have it in me to abandon either.

I have to finish what I started. There's a part of Ny who needs this as much as I do. Riccardo doesn't get to win.

"Fuck," I bellow.

My head is so fucked up. I didn't buy her a gift this year, because I need something bigger than money to say how I feel. I need Ny to hear me. She needs to know I hear her.

I catch the heavy bag, then shove it away. This is getting me nowhere. I'm only punishing my body for something it didn't do.

I turn and cut off the music. Grabbing a towel, I wipe my face, then toss it around my neck. I head for the kitchen to make a shake.

I'm right outside the kitchen when I overhear Jace with his phone on speaker. He's talking to Ny. I'm surprised she's finally answering his calls. She has cut us both off.

"It's good to hear your voice," he says.

"I figure you're calling for my birthday. And I might need a favor."

"Happy birthday, baby. What do you need?"

"It's my sister. I'm not in Jersey. I've been gone for a while. She sounds off. Can you check on her?"

"Of course."

"Jace, if she looks like she's falling apart again, call me. I'll come back."

"You do know she quit the job at the rink? Something about focusing on her final semester."

"No, I didn't know that. How do I keep fucking up when it comes to her?"

"You're not fucking up."

"Yes, I am. I'm being selfish."

"Baby, for the first time ever, I don't think you are. You were at your breaking point. You need time to heal."

"But I'm not healing. I'm hurting so bad, and I don't know where to start. I don't know what I want to do with my life. I have Gwen covering for me with Dad and that's messing with their relationship. Lizzy sounds like she's lost and I'm here miserable."

"Then come back. We'll figure it out together."

"I can't. I won't hurt him like that. I can't choose you and not him."

"I'm not asking you to. I'm asking you to let him fix it."

“Bye, Jace. Thanks for the call. Check on my sister, please.”

“I love you, Ny. I’m here whenever you need me.”

“I love you too. I haven’t stopped loving either of you.”

The call ends and I close my eyes. Lizzy, that’s the gift I’ll give her. I’ll give Lizzy the friend she needs. I’ll have a part of Ny and she’ll know her sister is okay.

New plan in mind, I start to piece things together. I turn the corner and Jace comes into view.

“You were there the whole time,” he says.

“At least she’s talking to you.”

“Have you tried to call?”

“All the fucking time.”

He holds his hands up as if in surrender. “You know she’s stubborn. I’m not saying she’s wrong, but she’s not going to make this easy for us either.”

“Let me ask you something. This twin thing. It doesn’t sound crazy to you?”

“No, at the end of the day, Ny has been telling us she’s not going to choose between us. Yes, she loves you as her first everything because that’s who you are to her, but she loves me too. It only makes sense she wouldn’t want to choose who her baby’s father is.”

“Um.” I fold my arms across my chest. “Do you think we can really pull it off?”

“What does it hurt to try?”

“Jace, I don’t want children. Look at what I’m doing to keep Nyla safe. I’m not pretending my children are nothing to me like what I’ve done to Ny... I want to take it back with all my heart.”

“We can’t go back. We can only go forward. I want what she wants with everything I am, but I’m not going to force that

on you. I don't think there's been a time in your life I haven't seen something forced on you.

"This has to be your decision. Your happiness."

I throw my head back and blow a breath out, then shake my head clear.

"Babies from us both," I scoff.

"I have a question for you. Really think about it. You're willing to share a wife with me, right?"

"I've thought about it."

"If I had a child with someone else and something were to happen to me, would you not raise that child as your own?"

"That would become my son or daughter. You know that without question."

He sits silently, staring me in the eyes. "God, I hate you."

"The world teaches us we're not masculine if we show love to another man openly. You know I love you like crazy, I'd die for you, if you need a hug after a fucked-up day, my arms are open.

"You need to talk, I'm a listening ear, but I'm no less masculine than you. There's never been a question about my manhood, other than from an old prick who's probably the one wishing he could date some poor dude."

I laugh. "I wouldn't be surprised. Whoever the poor bastard is, he's a lucky motherfucker to dodge that asshole."

"My point is. Don't make decisions according to stereotypes like the one Riccardo has tried to place on us. If you want Ny and me as your family, do that.

"If you want to give Ny a baby and share that with me, do that. This has all been about you carving out a world for what you want, but it's up to you to decide what that is."

I look my friend in the eye. "To be honest. This all sounds crazy, but when I think of the two people who want this from me, it seems right. I wouldn't do this for anyone else."

“Yeah, I get it. It’s the same for me.”

“When’s the next roller derby paintball tournament?”

“*Gio*,” he says in warning.

“You want her back or not? Let me do what I do.”

“I want her back, not for her to come back and kill you.”

I wave him off. “Get me a team and place them in the tournament. She does still do them, right?”

“Yeah, she does.”

“Good.”

“What are you planning?”

“Shit, you talk a lot these days. I need to change the water filter or some shit.”

“Ha ha.”

“I’m going to be her friend. I’m going to be there for her since Ny can’t.”

“Why do I see red all over this?”

“I don’t know if she’s a virgin and I don’t plan to fuck her to find out, so I don’t know why you’re seeing red. Just do what I asked. I’ll handle Ny when her claws come out.”



Nyla

“This is the second birthday of yours where I’ve seen you looking glum over my son,” Lucas says as he comes to sit outside the barn with me.

“Do you ever feel like you’re wasting your life waiting for something to happen around here?” I say and nod back toward the house where Ava is.

“I love that woman in that house. I believe in what she’s trying to do for our son. I would waste away for a thousand

years waiting for her. But that's me. My sanity has been questioned often."

"I need to find me. I'm so lost, so angry. I don't even know who or what I'm angry at anymore. I'm upset with everything and everyone."

"Why are you upset in this moment?"

"I'm mad at myself because I feel like I've abandoned Lizzy, Gio, and Jace. Heck, all the dolls and my responsibilities, and for what? I'm no closer to finding me or my purpose."

"Let's start there. You've called your sister every day since I've been here. I wouldn't say you've abandoned her. Ava told me what happened between you and the boys. I say good for you.

"Your type of relationship doesn't work without honest and clear communication and goals. It's not wrong of you to want a clear time line. Unfortunately, as a woman, you do have a clock that we as men take for granted.

"I don't think Gio meant to be insensitive to any of that. My son's main goal is to secure a safe environment for you and his family—outside of you, mainly his mother."

"I know, that's why I feel so selfish. He has so much on his shoulders. I thought I could do this with him, but now I'm asking myself at what cost. Can I afford my love for Gio?"

"That is a question that rests within you." He chuckles.

"What's so funny?"

"You do know my son is coming for you? One way or another."

"Yeah, I know. A part of me wants to know what's taking so long and the other part is telling me to run."

"It's been a year. I do believe your time is almost up. Ava will miss you."

"I'm going to miss her too."

"What made you bring Holly along?"

“She reminds me of the good I do back home. I thought I’d find answers with her here with me.”

“I like her. Ava does too. She’s a real friend. Hold on to that.”

“I’m sending her back. She’s one of our best. I need her with him, not me.”

“There you go putting him first. *Marone*, it won’t be long before you’re right behind her. Remember, clear communication and goals, Nyla. That’s how you make it work.”

He gets up and heads back toward the house. I sit and think about our talk. I was clear about what I want. Gio’s the one who needs to communicate with me.

But you don’t answer his calls.

Fair point, but I know my strengths and weaknesses. I talk to Gio. I’m going back and I’m not ready.

CHAPTER 55



*I*n Need of Friends

Gio

I'M ANNOYED. If my phone rings one more time with some bullshit, I'm going to explode. I didn't think I could loath Bethany any more than I already did.

She's proven me wrong. The cunt doesn't even want to take care of her own child. Dante needs a new wife, not a spoiled brat.

Bethany's days are numbered, I can promise you that. The more unhappy he sounds, the more I want to blow her brains out. I wish Ny were around to handle her for me.

Speaking of Ny. I know where she is now. She's been hiding out on the farm with Ma. I know this because my mother can't help herself when it comes to meddling. I've been called selfish, insensitive, and closed minded.

All in one conversation. It's like she's been waiting for a year to say all those things. A year, she's known where Ny has been for a year and didn't tell me until today.

"Ow," Jace says and winces. "That had to hurt."

"I shouldn't have put money up on this. I'm losing my face and shirt."

"What's twenty grand to you?"

“*Stugots*, if that was all I bet. I’m down forty.”

He turns to glare at me. I palm my face and shake my head. “Ming suckered me into a side bet.”

Jace laughs so hard, I want to punch him in his throat. I roll my eyes and focus back on the reason I’m here. Lizzy is adorable.

She’s a much fuller version of Ny. She’s shy but has this drive and focus during the matches. She’s the main one kicking my team’s ass.

She runs her arm across her forehead and smiles at one of the other girls. The light bulb goes off as I watch that smile light up her face.

All that ass and those cute tits. She’s Dante’s walking dream, and if she’s anything like her sister, she’s his perfect match. The wheels start to turn.

I’m going to make this happen. I just need time and the perfect opportunity. Two birds, one stone.

Lizzy gains a new friend and Dante is going to get his wish. I’m almost positive that once I get to know Lizzy, she will check off all the boxes. I feel it in my gut.

“I don’t like that look in your eyes. What are you thinking?” Jace says.

“*Stugots*. At least, nothing that concerns you.”

He groans and shakes his head. Wanting to make my presence known, I stand and saunter over to Lizzy. She has her head down over a book as I approach her.

“You owe me twenty grand,” I lean to whisper in her ear.

She turns to me with those big brown eyes, and they widen as her cheeks start to glow. My heart aches a bit as I look at her up close. If Ny and I had little girls they’d probably look like this.

Ny really wants to put that pressure on the world. Me, a father to girls who look like this? Someone would lose their son if they so much as shed a tear.

“Excuse me?” she breathes.

“You have one of two options. Join my team to earn me back my money or spend the night in my bed.”

She scoffs, then looks me over and laughs. “Nice one. I told Ming I just had some personal stuff to sort out. I’ll be dedicated to the team from here on out. No need to prank me.”

“Who’s pranking? You’re really good out there. My team didn’t stand a chance. Come win my money back for me. Or...”

I look her over. I remember when she was a newborn. Ny was so happy to have a little sister. It was all she talked about. This is not that tiny little bundle.

Yes, she’s right up Dante’s alley. I still don’t get why he settled for Bethany. I’ve seen his type. His face lights up when he sees women who look just like this.

“Or what? Sleep with you? I don’t even know you. I may read romance novels, but I know I’m not about to live one. Do you mind? My book was getting really good,” she says, dismissing me.

I hold my hand out. “My name is Gio. I’m the owner of your new team and I think we’re about to become good friends.”

She looks at my hand and then at my face. Something crosses her features quickly. She wrinkles her nose, and it reminds me so much of Ny.

“You want to be my friend?” she says this almost hopefully.

I can’t help wondering what happened to the friends I sent to her. She seems to still have a bond with Ming. I’m not sure what happened with the others.

I reach in my pocket for my cardholder and pluck a card out. Turning it over, I scribble my personal cell on the back. I place the card in her small hand and wink at her.

“Call me anytime you need.”

“Di Lorenzo Industries. Gio Di Lorenzo. Executive assistant to Dante Di Lorenzo,” she reads the card.

She looks up at me and gives a little smile. “Okay, I’ll play for you, but I’m not sleeping with you. A friend, maybe. Your vibe is hella sick. You seem like you’d be fun to be around. Yet, I don’t think you’d be judgy. I’d rather be alone than judged.” She clamps her mouth shut.

“Sorry, I babble when I’m nervous.”

I give her a smile. “I like it. All the best friendships are built on honesty. You don’t have to worry about me seducing you or judging you. I have three brothers, but I always wanted a sister.” I tap the tip of her nose. “It’s official, you’re too adorable for a quick fuck, and I need a friend more than a fuck buddy.”

She pulls a disbelieving face. “You...you need a friend?” She rolls her eyes.

“Why is that so hard to believe?”

“You’re drop-dead gorgeous. You look like if I sniffed you, I’d smell money. Yup, there it is, I just got a whiff. And in the last two minutes, you made me not even care that I’m not reading. Trust me, bubby, that’s a feat.” She purses her lips with her hands on her hips.

I burst into laughter. I love her already. She has Ny’s sass with a twisted sense of sarcasm. I pull her into a hug.

“None of those things mean anything if they’re not genuine. We’re going to be great friends,” I murmur into her hair.

“If this is how you pick girls up, it’s kind of hot. I totally get it. Get their guard down. Play like the new best friend. Then bam.

“You’re fucking their brains out and leaving a dear John letter by morning. It’s not you, it’s me, but thanks for the head. Have a nice life.”

I release her and laugh again. I probably would be that kind of douche if I wasn’t absolutely in love with her older

sister. I look up and the smile falls from my face as I find Holly watching me.

I school my features. She disappeared when Ny did. I know she was with her. I take a quick glance around the rink to see if I catch sight of Ny.

As disappointment fills me, I turn back to find Holly. She's walking away with the phone to her ear. Instead of following behind her to demand answers, I turn back to Lizzy.

"Come on, let's get you a team T-shirt. I need to get in my new bet. You make me back the forty I lost, I'll split it with you."

We start to walk to the other side of the rink where my team is, licking their sorry wounds. Ny needs to get back here and see what's up with these guys. Jace pulled some of my dolls for this.

"I thought it was twenty," Lizzy says, pulling me from my thoughts.

"The other twenty was a foolish loss of my own. I'm not holding you to that," I say and turn to wink.

"Aw, how sweet of you. Twenty grand still isn't getting you any of this ass."

I smile and laugh. "Good, you're priceless. Keep that same energy until the guy proves he's worth it."

She snorts. "I don't interest guys. You don't have to worry about that."

I stop in my tracks. "Fuck outa here. You can hold a conversation, you're funny, pretty, and that body is a gift in itself. I'll let you in on a secret."

"What's that?"

"Most guys are too intimidated by women to approach them. I can count at least ten guys in here who want to talk to you but haven't built up the nerve," I reply.

"How could you tell that?" she asks and looks around the rink shyly.

“They’re all looking at me with regret. I stole their girl.”

CHAPTER 56



Contracted

Nyla

Three months later...

“I WISH you could meet him, Ny. I think you would like him. He reminds me so much of you. You know, always building up my self-esteem. He brings me a new book every time we hang out,” Lizzy gushes over the phone.

I’m still trying to figure out what the fuck Gio is up to. I think he’s trying to make me kill him. Lizzy has been going on and on about him for months. If it weren’t for the fact that she sounds so much happier, I would have been on his doorstep with my Glock by now.

“So are you guys dating or something?”

“No, no. Yeah, he’s gorgeous but I don’t think he sees me that way. First, he’s older than me and he’s only ever treated me like a little sister. I mean, when we met he asked me to sleep with him, but I think he was joking.”

“What?” I seethe.

“It was nothing. Like I said. He was joking. To be honest. He broke up with someone and I don’t think he’s over her. He gets silent sometimes and has this faraway look. He doesn’t like talking about her.”

“*Humph*. Be careful, Lizzy. Maybe you should stop hanging with him until I get back. Let me check him out, run a background check.”

“I’m twenty-four, Ny. He’s the only real friend I’ve had in a long time. He gets me, he allows me to be me.”

“Fuck,” I say, away from the phone.

I’m going to bust his shit. Damn puppet master. He’s trying to draw me out. That’s his endgame.

“Ny,” Lizzy whispers. “If you think I shouldn’t hang out with him. I’ll stop. Are you coming home soon?”

“I’m coming back soon. I promise. Don’t stop. Let him be your friend. I’m sorry. I just want to protect you. I love you.”

“I love you too. I miss you.”

“What else is new? Your graduation is coming up. I’m so proud of you.”

“Yeah, this semester has been hard. It’s like I know it’s the end so it’s dragging. I hate writing my papers and will find anything to do instead. I’ve been at the office with Aunt Denise a lot.”

I lift a brow at this. It’s the first I’m hearing about it. I guess that’s better than her going out on contracts. I’ll be calling to check in with Gwen.

“Nyla, honey, I need to talk to you when you’re done,” Ava calls.

“Hey, Lizzy. I need to go. Love you.”

“Okay, I love you too. Later.”

“Later.”

I hang up and go into the living room where Ava is waiting for me. She has a straight face, telling me this is business. I take the seat across from her and fold my hands in my lap.

“I need you to do something for me. A guy in Naples has been running his mouth. I need him silenced before they come out here looking to confirm his words.

“Do you think you can do this for me? You would need to go tonight.”

“Of course, you know I will.”

“Good, I have the address and information here. Go to his hotel suite and deliver what his big mouth has earned him. Make sure you’re understood.”

“Got it.”

She smiles and it reminds me so much of Gio’s smile when he’s holding cards no one else sees. “Thank you, honey. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?”

“Yes, a friend of ours will see to your accommodations for me. Stay the night in Naples. You can return tomorrow. You’ll look like a young tourist. Enjoy yourself.”

“Thanks, Ava.”

“No, thank you and be careful.”



Gio

I thought she’d be back by now. I’ve been in Lizzy’s life for three months and still no Nyla. Don’t get me wrong. I’ve been enjoying my time with Lizzy.

She has become a friend or more like a little sister. I grow more fond of her with every meeting. Jace doesn’t speak much around her, but he likes her too.

However, it’s time I pivot. I know for a fact Lizzy is what I’ve been looking for when it comes to Dante. I need to ease her into his life. This needs to happen naturally. She can’t know what I want, and he doesn’t need to know what I’m up to either.

Lizzy is too shy, and Dante is stubborn and won’t see what’s right in front of him. No, this will have to play out as naturally as possible. Good thing I’ve mastered patience.

“Hello, Gwen, how you doing?” I say into the phone as I pick it up.

“I’m good. You wanted to talk to me on a secure line. Are they okay?”

“They’re fine. As a matter of fact, I’m going to check on them in person. I need something else from you.”

“What do you need?”

“Lizzy, I want to contract her.”

“What? For what?”

“That I can’t tell you. In fact, can you add a clause to the contract that I’m not to be asked about her assignment?”

“Gio,” she groans. “She’s Elijah’s baby. He’s closest to her. He’s going to have questions.”

“I need you to do this for me. Tell Elijah I came for Ny because she’s avoiding me. Instead of taking the assignment, Nyla pushed Lizzy on me. It’s not unlikely. He does know Ny has left me.”

“Yes, but how long is this contract for?”

“Indefinitely. I don’t know how long it will take and I need her for as long as it takes.”

“Tell me one thing. Will she be in danger?”

“No. Do this for me and I’ll owe you.”

There’s a pause on the other end. I wait her out. I need this done before I get on my flight.

“There is something you can do for me. I want to wake Carleen. Do you think you can trigger her?”

“You got it.”

I’ve been meaning to turn my attention to Carleen and Dario. They’re both unhappy. I need to promote Dario again and that’s weighing on his head. Carleen isn’t faring well with her residency.

I can do more than wake her. I plan to push her and Dario into the life they’re ignoring.

She sighs heavily. “Fine. I’m sending over the contract. But, Gio?”

“What’s up?”

“Nyla watches the database. She already left me a message asking about Lizzy working here. As long as Lizzy was only working in the office, I didn’t have to add her. This contract will add her. Ny was my next call after returning yours.”

“Good, I’m counting on it.”

“Why do I always get stuck in the middle?”

“It will be fine. I’ll be waiting for that contract.”

CHAPTER 57



The Hit

Nyla

I SIT in this coffee shop with my head ready to explode. Gio has contracted my sister for a job. I really don't know what he's playing at, but I'm going to fly back first thing in the morning to find out.

I slam my laptop closed and growl. I need to make this hit so I can get out of here and pack my shit. I'm not waiting until the morning to return to the farm. Gio plays too much.

I shove my laptop in my backpack and zip it up, then toss some cash on the table. Looking at my watch, I see it's time. I start for the hotel address I was given while grumbling to myself.

"Has Gwen lost her mind? Why is this man playing with me? Pissing me off isn't going to get me back. Does Jace know about this shit he's pulling? He needs to get his friend."

The elevator chimes as I get to the penthouse floor. I look up and get focused. I'll deal with Gio later. Music blares through the suite I walk into. I have my guns out as I move stealthily.

Something feels off. First, the song playing is Whitesnake—one of Gio's favorite groups. "Is This Love" is not the typical Italian ballad you'd expect to hear in Naples. Second, I've been fucking the man since I was twenty. I know his scent

as if it were my own. This place reeks of Gio. Third, the place is filled with roses. The fourth thing to penetrate my brain is his presence.

I feel him before I see him. I keep moving until he comes into view, sitting in all black with the top three buttons of his shirt open, while in a wingback chair, watching me with those intense hazel eyes. His ankle is resting over his knee.

I tilt my head to the side as I take him in. He cracks his knuckles and works his jaw. The man is perfection, and he knows it.

“Why are you trying to make me kill you?” I hiss.

“Ogni momento in cui sei lontano da me, mi sta uccidendo.”

My knees nearly give out. Italian is sexy spoken by anyone, spoken by Gio, it’s panty melting. I close my eyes and try to calm my nerves and build my resolve.

“How can every moment away from me be killing you when it took you a year and three months to come for me?”

“Ti amo, Nyla. Tu sei l’unico per me. Non farmi vivere senza di te.”

“Stop it, speak English.”

He stands and starts to walk toward me. He stops right in front of me and covers my hands, still holding the guns, pushing them down at my sides.

Lifting a hand to my chin, he lifts my face. “Why? You understand me. You know I just told you I love you.” He covers my heart with his hand. “You feel in here the same as I do, no? Baby, don’t make me live without you. Is that better? Does it mean any less in English?” he says against my lips.

“Why did you contract my sister? What game are you playing now? You’re here, so it isn’t about me.”

“She’s a piece I’ve been missing. She’s for my brother.”

“What?” I look at him in confusion.

He smiles. “Dante will be happy, and I do believe at the right time that will be with Lizzy. She’s perfect for him.”

I lift my right hand. “I should shoot you now. Dante is married with a baby and he’s five years older than Lizzy. Again, why are you trying to make me kill you?”

He knocks my hand away. “Your sister means a hell of a lot to me. I could never hurt her. Dante won’t be married to that cunt forever. That’s a promise, and when I remove that bitch, I’m going to slide Lizzy right in where she belongs.”

“So fuck what Lizzy wants and Dante’s whole life because this is what you think is best. You’re unbelievable, Gio.”

I roll my eyes and turn away from him. He grabs my face and turns it back to him, hovering inches away from my lips. I snarl at him.

“You fail to see this is always about my family. I’m tearing myself apart for all of you. You will all be safe and happy if it kills me.”

With that, he takes my lips and kisses me passionately. I click on the safeties to my guns and holster them, freeing my hands. My fingers are locked in his hair as he devours me. He groans in my mouth and moves his hands to grab my ass and lift me onto his waist.

My heart is breaking because nothing has been resolved, but I know I can’t pull away. It’s like finally going home, but he came for me this time. That means a lot. Gio sends for you, he doesn’t go to anyone.

He reaches between us and unfastens my jeans, then slips his hands into the back, finding my core from behind. I whimper and tug at his hair.

“*Mi sei mancato così tanto,*” he says huskily in my ear.

“I missed you too, but something has to change, Gio.”

“It will, baby.”

He releases me to slide down his front. I look at him curiously. He looks good, smells good, and feels good. I miss him and want him.

He drops to one knee and lifts an open ring box. I break down into tears. Suddenly strong arms wrap around my waist and I'm being rocked back and forth in a comforting embrace.

Jace kisses the back of my head. I stare at Gio through my tears. They both came for me.

“We can't live without you. I'm going to get over myself and do what I should have done a long time ago. Will you marry me, Nyla? I can't promise you an ordinary life. I still need to finish what I started, but I want you by my side.

“I'll find us the best way to make this wish you have come true. I'll find a way to make it all happen. Trust me, give me a little more time.”

“Okay, yes.” I nod.

CHAPTER 58



*L*unch & Friends

Gio

Three months later...

I SIT with Lizzy in this restaurant as we wait to have lunch with Ny. I'm supposed to be meeting her sister for the first time. I figured while we wait, I'd hand her the contract to come work for me. Well, Di Lorenzo Industries and Dante.

I needed to move some pieces around before I offered her the mail room position at Di Lorenzo Industries and told her about the contract I placed for her services. I laugh at the bewildered look on her face.

“You're going to pay me what to work in the mail room?”

“It's a two-million-dollar contract to start in the mail room and move up through the company as I need.”

“Wow, but I'm starting that channel thing with my sister. A lot of gamers are taking off and making good money. You encouraged me to do it. Why, when you knew you had this in mind?”

“You have a certain set of skills I need. When the time comes, I'll ask you for them. That could take a few years. I want you to have your business and do something you love.

“I promise, you're never going to have to give your gaming or the business up for me. I'll make it all work. You

can have both. I am asking for a few sacrifices, but your gaming and business are not among them.”

“Okay, I think I can handle that.”

“We have a deal?”

She gives me that smile I love and pushes her glasses up her nose. I hope my first daughter looks like her, glasses and all. A little version of who I’m sure will be the cool auntie.

Lizzy is hard on herself. However, it’s hard not to love and want to protect her. She’s perfect for Dante. I can’t stop thinking about that.

“Deal. Anything else I need to know?”

“Yes, this is between us. Jace is the only other person who knows. You have a problem, you come to me, no matter what department you’re in.”

“Got it. I sign here?”

“Yes.”

I look up as Jace and my fiancée walk in. I almost break into a face-splitting smile until I remember myself. I lift my glass and take a sip.

“Oh, there she is. My sister just walked in. Look, Jace is coming in with her. Talk about perfect timing.”

Nyla and Jace stop at the table at the same time. Ny looks up at him and raises a brow, playing the part perfectly. I stand and smooth my tie down.

“Ny, this is my friend Gio, and this is Jace, his assistant.”

Jace reaches out a hand and Ny takes it. She then turns to me. I hold my hand out, but instead of shaking hers, I lift it to my lips. She gives me a smug smile.

“It’s nice to meet you. Your sister talks a lot about you.”

“She’s the best,” Lizzy gushes.

Ny takes a seat and reaches for her napkin to place in her lap. That’s when I notice her bare ring finger. Steam is probably coming from my ears.

I look pointedly at her hand. She bites her lip and turns away to speak to Lizzy. I'm fuming. I don't hear shit and don't bother to say another word to Ny either.

I pull out my wallet and wave over the waiter. I hand him my card and turn to Lizzy.

"I need to go. I'll see you first thing tomorrow. Thanks for doing this for me."

"No, thank you." She frowns. "Aw, you have to go? You didn't get to have lunch."

I stand and lean in to kiss her cheek. "I'll grab something on the way. Call me later. We'll make plans for the weekend. I heard about a pop-up bookstore. It will be my treat."

I love the way her eyes light up like her big brother just promised her the world. I can't help kissing her forehead. I turn to Nyla and nod before I leave without another word.



Nyla

"What was that about?" Lizzy says as she watches Gio leave.

I don't know how to feel. I know he's angry, but I'm still stuck on watching him with Lizzy. He does care about her.

I've never seen him like that with anyone before. It's like he lets his guard down just for her. I can tell he truly sees her as a friend.

It almost brings tears to my eyes. He knew my sister needed a friend and he gave her something he hadn't given in a long time. Jace and I don't get that Gio. Honestly, while grateful I'm a tiny bit jealous.

"He's intense," I say as I pull myself from my thoughts.

"I wonder what's bugging him. I wanted you guys to hit it off. I would love for you two to become friends."

I shrug. I can't tell her that her best friend is a Capo and I'm the trainer of his assassins *and* he's my fiancé. Or that the

reason he's so pissed is because I'm not wearing my engagement ring. It's bad enough he's going to be pissed when he finds out it came up missing at the Dollhouse training facility.

Ming has been hot for the last two days. Holly is ready to bust everyone's ass. I've been pissed but I'm trying not to blame the whole for something one person has done.

I'm working on my temper. I lost a year and three months with the men I love because of my temper. I'm trying to live in the moment and not my rage.

I plan to tell Gio, but he is not working on his temper so let him be mad at me. The alternative will be me having to start from scratch training a new class of dolls.

"Did you see all my new subscribers? You have a ton too. I have a good feeling about this."

I turn my attention back to Lizzy as she changes the subject. More puppet master shit. Gio knows I'm restless to have something of my own. He also knows I love to game as much as Lizzy does. He planted the bug in her ear about this new business of ours, putting my degrees and skills to work.

"Want to go to the house and talk strategies and merch when we're done? I'm sure Dad will feed us again," I say.

Her face lights up. I feel like shit that she's so starved for my attention. I don't do it on purpose. I have a ton going on.

"Sure, that would be great. I would love that."

I reach to brush a hand over her hair. "I'll grease your scalp and brush your hair too."

"Did you drive? You want to ride with me?"

"Yeah, come on." I don't have the heart to tell her my car is outside. Jace drove, but it was in my car. I had planned to drive back to New Jersey myself.

CHAPTER 59



*A*nswer Me

Gio

NY WANTS to keep the peace. I get that. She's their master. Discord amongst her and the dolls doesn't serve me. Okay, I understand, but no one is going to steal from me and think they're going to get away with it.

From the beginning, one of the most important things to me was loyalty to Ny and respect for us all. You can't learn from someone you're jealous of.

I already know who took the ring. My first option was to tell Ny and let her kill her while I watched with joy. That would be a Dario move.

My next option was to allow Ming, Alyona, and Kamiko to torture her. Filleting her thieving hands daily until she eventually dies. Again, not how I move, that's more Dante.

Which brings me to my third option. Something Gio Di Lorenzo would do. The reason I'm here.

"Damn it, Gio," Holly huffs as Jace disarms her at the door when she goes to pull her weapon.

I sit in a chair in her apartment, facing the door, waiting for her. I was intrigued when Ny gave her this place a few months ago. It means she's going to promote her. That makes four out of the twelve I'm looking for.

“How you doing, Holly?”

“I was fine until I found you two in my apartment.”

I look around. “It’s a nice place. Ny favors you the same as the other top dolls. She took you to meet my mom. That means she trusts you immensely.”

“I owe her a lot.” She shrugs. “I love her like a sister. So what’s your point?”

“If you love her, you want to see her happy. That’s what I want too.”

“*Okay.*”

I move forward in my seat and drape my arms over my thighs. I stare into my palms as if lost in thought, not saying a word. The anticipation in the room builds.

“I need you to do something for me, Holly. A few things actually. First, I want you to tell me what happened to Nyla’s ring.”

She purses her lips, drops her hip, and folds her arms over her chest. I was expecting the attitude. I get it. She’s protective of Ny. She wants to handle this for her master, but I’m not having that.

“*Answer me,*” I bellow.

She sighs and drops her arms. “After it went missing, I watched the cam footage.

“Ming doesn’t know I know how to tap into them. I watched that bitch Essence steal it right out of Ny’s locker. She doesn’t deserve another pass.

“I heard about what she did before I got here. I erased the footage so no one else would know. I want the ring back, then she’s going to come up missing,” she snarls.

“I knew I liked you, but this is my doll collection. Each of you has a purpose. Let me teach you something.

“Every move has consequences. While I respect the one you wanted to make, you were about to place Ny in danger. At

the right time, Essence will play her part and everything she's done to harm my woman will be paid in full.

"Do you understand me, Holly?"

"Yes," she murmurs.

"Get me my fiancée's ring. Make sure no one sees you."

She nods her understanding. I'm still fuming, but I have other business here. I shift my train of thought.

"You were a nurse, right?"

"Yes, for a little while."

"Then you understand the pressures of working in the hospital?"

"Yeah, I did it long enough to understand that. The doctors would vent to me. It's why Donny hated it. I would have coffee with some of the residents and they'd spill their frustration. I'd just sit and listen."

"Perfect. I need you to do this for a resident I know. Sit, listen, and give her a little push to think about her options. Can you do this for me?"

She lifts her green eyes to look at me. I see a new determination in her gaze. Ah, she thinks she's failed me and Ny. Good, that means she'll never fail us again. Mission accomplished.

"Yes, I can do that."

"Good, her name is Carleen Mitchell. Jace has the name and address of the coffee shop she likes to go to for breaks. I want to know where her head is, so you'll report to me after every encounter. I'll let you know when you're done."

"Thanks for the opportunity."

"I'm not done. My mother isn't getting any younger. I want to send you back to Italy to keep her company and watch over her. When this job is done, I'll send you there."

Her face tightens for a moment. I know this might seem like a punishment, but it's not. She's one of the best and Ny

trusted her enough to take her around Ma. That means a lot.

“May I ask a question?”

“Sure, why not?”

“How did you know I knew?”

“Ny can’t lie to me. I went looking for the footage myself when I figured out the ring was stolen. I’m going to let you in on a little secret.

“All systems involving my and my family’s businesses have been fitted with time-stamp signatures. Anyone who enters, whether from within or hacking from outside, leaves a fingerprint so to speak. I traced yours.”

“Damn. She’s right, you’re always thinking ten steps ahead. That’s genius.”

I stand and move toward the door, stopping to place a hand on her shoulder. “Never forget who we are. We’re great friends to have but enemies you never want to make.”

I squeeze her shoulder and wave for Jace to follow as I leave.



Nyla

I stand out on the deck staring at the mountains, lost in thought. It’s like I’ve been so distracted lately. It doesn’t help that I’m being pulled in a million directions. The dolls, Nonno, Ava, Gwen, Lizzy, I’ve been needed by everyone for this or that.

I’m not a careless person. I know I didn’t misplace my ring. Someone had to have taken it, but who would be that stupid? I growl when her face pops into my head.

“I’m going to kill that bitch.”

“It’s been taken care of. He’s already commissioned a new ring. He’s not really mad at you,” Jace whispers in my ear as he comes up behind me and wraps me in his embrace.

“Then why is he treating me like he is?”

“You don’t see it, do you?”

“See what?”

He snorts. “You wouldn’t because he doesn’t want you to. That make sense?”

I turn in his embrace. “Can you not speak in riddles.”

“He’s about to collapse the illusion. He’s setting the last pieces in place to lift the curtain. He’s about to end this one way or another.”

“But why push me out?”

“It’s Gio. It makes sense to him. My guess would be there’s something you can’t know so when he blows it all up, your reaction is what he needs.”

“Fucking puppet master.”

“Damn genius.” He gives a huge grin.

“Oh my God, you’re enjoying this. You like watching him dance us around.”

He grins. “I can appreciate a fellow artist.”

I side-eye him. I need to stop underestimating Jace. You can’t live with Gio and not be like him. You either learn from him or realize how much you’re just like him.

“Mm,” I murmur to myself. “I’m watching you. You’re not innocent at all.”

“*Har aldrig sagt, at jeg var det,*” he says in Danish and winks.

CHAPTER 60



*L*et it Burn

Riccardo

Three and a half years later...

“YES, I SEE,” I murmur into the phone.

I flop down into my chair and pull the phone from my ear. I’m not ready, this is too soon. These boys aren’t the crew I need. My grandsons have so much more to learn, and Dario still hasn’t been promoted, but I’m out of time.

Don Barbieri is dead. My protection is gone. I’m going to need to make a move before Giuseppe strikes. My mind races for my next move.

I need to hit somewhere that will cripple them for a while. I pick the phone back up and dial Franky. I need him now.

“Hello.”

“Franky, what do you have for me? I need to know something now.”

“I’m still working, Pop.”

“I’m out of time,” I bellow.

“The finook still has those sex parties. That’s what happens in that club he has. He’s there all the time. That’s the most I have.”

“Fucking useless,” I growl and slam the phone down.

The phone rings, raising my irritation.

“What?” I snarl as I answer.

“You hung up on me. I remembered something else. There’s a Black girl. I think she’s important to Gio. She’s with him more than any of the others.”

“He’s not into girls. What use is this to me?”

“I’m just telling you what I know. Go by the club, see for yourself.”

“I’ll do just that. You be on standby. I might need you.”



Nyla

“I’m so sorry,” I say to the little bundle in my embrace.

I sit in this hospital, nuzzling this tiny baby’s head. I’m filled with so many emotions. She’s gorgeous and motherless.

I fight back the tears. I tried. Andy was one of our younger dolls, but she wasn’t with us long. She had so much potential though.

Fuck.

I didn’t get to teach her to keep this from happening. She went back before I could keep her from losing her life.

“I should have killed him when she came to us,” I sniffle.

Andy didn’t know she was pregnant when she reached out to us. She stayed with us most of the pregnancy. I only went to see Ava for a few weeks. When I returned Andy was gone.

I knew she went back. Her scared voice as she called me for help will forever haunt me. That son of a bitch beat her to death and this little one almost didn’t make it. I got there just in time to save her, but only her.

Andy took her last breath pushing her out. My thoughts spiral. My heart is aching.

“You must be Ny.” I look up to find an older white woman.
“Andy spoke highly of you.”

“You must be her mom.”

“Yes.”

I stand and move to hand her the baby. I know I can't keep her, no matter how much I want to. Andy was a hard doll to secure. We never should have taken her in. She had too many ties.

Family, a baby on the way, her crazy ex. There was just something about her that made me want to protect her.

“Don't blame yourself. We all tried,” the woman says as she takes the baby.

I can't speak so I bob my head. I kiss the baby's forehead and turn to leave. “Ny.”

I turn to look her in the eyes. “Thank you. I lost my daughter, but you kept him from taking everything.”

My lips tremble as I try to smile and reach to give her arm a squeeze. I rush from the room and race to the elevator. Thankfully, no one is in the car with me.

I put my head back against the elevator wall and break down. Nothing has changed. I'm still not married, and at thirty-nine, I don't have a single child.

Gio only put a Band-Aid on my feelings. Here we are three and a half years later, and I still have nothing. No revenge, no family. Nothing.

“What am I doing?” I sob.

I can't keep doing this. I thought it was my temper that made me leave last time, but in truth, I did the right thing. This thing of his is more important than me. I don't want to look up in another ten years and still be waiting.

Waiting to deliver a bullet that should have rung out twenty-four years ago. I'm tired. While waiting for this man to die, I'm dying.

The elevator makes it to the ground level, and I step out. I'm so numb, I don't know how I get to my car. I drive to the Dollhouse on autopilot.

When I park, Snow Patrol's "Chasing Cars" starts to play. I fall against the steering wheel, sobbing. I've sacrificed everything and I haven't gotten my mom and dad back.

They're never coming back. I can't even go out in public with the men I love. I'm so broken, I don't think I can make another month, let alone another year or two of this.

I start to hyperventilate. I'm having a full-on panic attack. I find my phone and dial the last number I called. I don't even know who that was.

"Hello."

"Gwen," I sob. "I can't breathe. This is never going to end. I love them, but I can't. I have to get away."

"Ny, I need you to calm down and breathe for me. Come on, honey, breathe. Where are you?"

"I'm at the Dollhouse. I wanted to tell him I'm going. This is not what I want."

"Okay, I'm going to text Jace and have him come outside."

"Please don't. He's only going to try to stop me. I just need a minute. I need to get out of the car. I'll call you back."

My thoughts are so jumbled, and my chest feels so tight, like I'm having a heart attack. I hang up and push the door open. I nearly tumble out of the car. Leaning against it, I suck in a deep breath with my eyes closed.

"You." Is snarled before me.

I open my eyes and lock gazes with Riccardo Esposito. He's glaring at me as he looks me up and down.

"What do you want?"

"You look just like your mother." He tilts his head and moves closer. "What's your business with the *finook*?"

He scoffs. His breath fanning in my face, it reeks of alcohol. “Tell me you’re not one of his playthings. That would be a fucking waste. Just like your mom. You know, she was a gorgeous woman. She would have been my one exception if I were going to lie with one of your kind. Too bad I had to have her killed before I got a taste.”

I ball my fists at my sides to keep from swinging. My gun is in the glove compartment. I calculate how fast I can get to it.

“Hey, honey, how you doing?” Lucas comes out of nowhere and gets between us.

“Hey,” I say and try to force a smile.

He turns to Riccardo. “I guess you heard about Don Barbieri?” Lucas says tauntingly.

I look at him and knit my brows. His meaning sinks in, and I reach for the gun at his back. Lucas grabs my wrist and leans into my ear.

“Not like this. Not yet.”

I growl and pull away. Riccardo laughs and nods his head. “I think I have what I came for. I’ll be seeing you again.” He winks at me and leaves.

My blood is boiling. Everything just changed. My purpose has been reignited.

CHAPTER 61



*T*rading Favors

Gio

I TAKE a sip of my drink and bare my teeth. I'm growing tired of this place. It smells like ass and sex and reeks of corruption. At forty, I'm starting to understand Ny a lot more.

That motherfucker Barbieri just won't die, but I swear it feels like I'm dying waiting. I look around the Dollhouse. For all the power I've gained, I still don't have the world I want.

My gaze lands on Essence. I narrow my eyes. This cunt, I scowl and turn to Jace.

"Tell me again why I'm allowing that cunt to keep breathing."

He looks up to follow my gaze. "For now, you're keeping her in case you need a decoy, but say the word, a number of the girls would love to make her disappear."

I frown. "Ignore me. Seeing her face annoys my soul."

I still haven't gotten over the fact that she stole Ny's ring. For three and a half years, I've wanted to rip her head off. Ming usually keeps her far away from me.

Since proposing, I've contemplated several scenarios on how to keep Ny safe. Essence is only breathing for that purpose. I carry Ny's original ring on me in case I need it for one of those scenarios.

I hate thieves as much as I hate liars. She's going to die, and it will be painful if I can help it.

"Hey, Gio."

I turn my attention to the pleasant voice. I find Antonia Thompson staring back at me. I sit up and place my drink down, then stand. I move to kiss the cheeks of the gorgeous federal prosecutor, who's also the niece of my Bajan friend and Dario's best friend's cousin.

"How you doing, Toni?"

"I'm good. It's good to see you."

I tilt my head and narrow my eyes. She's nervous. Truthfully, I wasn't expecting her tonight.

"What brings you here? You know you can always come to the office."

"This isn't something I can talk freely about in your office."

"Okay." I nod. "Come have a seat."

She sits and takes a look around, turning up her nose a bit. I grin. I made the same face only moments ago. This place has changed. More guys come for pleasure than favors. They've become too comfortable in the Dollhouse—in life in general. Leadership is shit these days in most families.

"What can I do for you, Toni?"

"I need you to find someone for me."

"Don't you have access to the FBI database?"

"Again, not something I can do at work or in the open. I need a little finesse on this."

"You have a name?"

"Yes." She pulls a piece of paper from her purse and hands it to me.

"Kaden Alderman, do you want him gone once I find him?"

“Please, no. I want to know how he’s doing. Where I can find him.”

“And why can’t you do this?”

“Gio, I’m willing to trade favors. I shouldn’t be looking for this man and my father would explode if he found out what I’m up to.”

I lift a brow. “You’re not about to cause me any trouble, are you?”

“No, not for you. Other than the fact that he might be hard to find.”

“All right, Toni, but I need something from you. I’ll do whatever you need as long as you keep an eye out for anything coming for me or my family. If it crosses your path, I’m the first to know. Is Kaden here worth that?”

She licks her lips. “Yes, I’ll... I’ll let you know if I hear or see anything. Please, Gio, find him for me.”

“You got it, gorgeous.”

Her shoulders sag and she sighs in relief. This guy must really mean something to her. I don’t ask questions. I need this favor that has fallen into my lap. I’m not going to look a gift horse in the mouth.

“Where are my manners? Can I get you a drink?”

“No, I think it’s time for me to go. I see a few people who don’t need to see me and don’t want me to see them, if you know what I mean.”

“Got you. I’ll see you around, Toni. I’ll let you know as soon as I find him, but you stay in touch.”

“Good luck. Don’t give up. I know it’s not going to be easy.”

I furrow my brows but say nothing. Essence walks by, swaying her hips, causing me to bare my teeth. The cunt is too stupid to know to stay the fuck away from me.

I look around for Ming and see she’s serving a bottle. When she turns and catches my eye, I nod her over. I wait for

her to come to me.

“What’s up, boss?”

“Why is she here? Get her out of my face before I choke her with my bare hands.”

“You got it. I’ll find something for her.”

“Not too far,” Jace speaks up. “If we need her to play decoy, we need to reach her.”

I grunt. “Just keep her thieving ass out of my face. She doesn’t get a third strike from me.”

“Not a problem.”

My phone rings, drawing my attention. Dad’s name comes up on the screen. I pick up and put it to my ear.

“How you doing?”

“Meet me in the basement. Ny is with me. You have a lot you need to know.”

“On my way.” I hang up and stand. “Ming, hold off on that order.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah, I think I’m going to need her.” I turn to Jace. “*Andiamo*. We’re needed downstairs.”



Jace

As we walk into the basement my gut sinks. The look on Ny’s face unsettles my stomach. I clench my fists, ready for a fight.

If someone hurt her, I’m going to kill them. Her cheeks are streaked with tears. Something isn’t right.

“What’s going on?” Gio says.

“Barbieri is dead. There’s already some unrest amongst the families. Riccardo has lost his protection and I think he’s lost his shit,” Lucas says.

“He most definitely has,” Ny snarls. “He ran up on me outside.”

“He what?” Gio and I roar in unison.

“I was coming to see you. When I got out of the car, he ran up on me.”

“What did he say?” Gio demands.

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Nyla, baby, I need to know.”

“He was drunk. He said he wanted to fuck my Mom, but he had her killed before he got a chance.”

“What the fuck?” I seethe.

“He’s a dead man,” Gio hisses.

“Yeah, he is. Too bad Lucas stopped me.”

“You tried to kill him?”

“Well, duh. Barbieri is gone. I want my life back. His ass is as good as dead.”

“You’re not looking at the bigger picture.”

“What? Gio, are you kidding me?”

“Ny, he’s right. There’s so much more at stake here.”

“I don’t give a fuck,” Ny screams. “I’ve wasted my entire life. You told me to wait, and I have. This doesn’t get any more of me. He dies and it’s happening as soon as I get the opportunity.”

“And it will have been all for nothing,” Gio says.

“Nothing, nothing? I’ll tell you about nothing. My parents are gone. Twenty-four years of my life are gone. My hopes to be a mom...gone. I’m done. I don’t give a shit about this bullshit anymore.

“You all have a great life. I’m out of here.”

“Ny,” Gio calls after her. “*Nyla.*”

“Goodbye, Gio.”

CHAPTER 62



*B*roken

Nyla

“HEY, HEY,” Ming calls after me.

“What, Ming? I need to get out of here.”

“Hold on. You’re emotional. I’m not allowing you to drive like this. Come sit in the office and calm down while I close out. I’ll drive you home.”

“And how am I going to get my car home?”

“I can take it for you,” Essence says as she walks by.

As if I would tell her where Gio and I stay together. I roll my eyes and clench my fists. Today is not the day.

“That’s a good idea,” Gio says from behind me.

I spin on him. “Have you lost your damn mind? You know what? I don’t care. Let her have the fucking car.”

“Ny,” Gio says in warning.

“Ming, you want to take me home, I’ll be in your car waiting.”

“Okay. I’ll be quick.”

She hands me the keys and I push my way past Gio, shoving my car key into his chest. “Maybe she’ll get lucky enough to have all your attention.”

“Ny,” he calls after me.

I ignore him and storm out. I get into Ming’s car and mutter to myself as I wait. I’m getting my ass as far away from here as I can. Twenty-four years, twenty-four, and this man wants me to wait longer.

And why the fuck would he allow that slut to take my car to our home? Like if Gio wanted to lose me, that right there did it. About twenty minutes go by.

I turn to look out the window and see Essence sashaying her ass out of the club in a fur that looks a lot like mine. I bite down on my fist to keep from going inside and beating the shit out of Gio.

Has he been fucking this bitch behind my back? Is she why he stays in the city so much? He’s not that crazy.

She jumps into my car, and I see red. I reach for the door handle to go drag her ass. As the cool metal touches my hand, my car explodes across the road.

I gasp and stare in disbelief as the flames and smoke billow up. Some part of the car flies back down from out of the sky and lands in the middle of the street.

“What the fuck?”

Gio and Jace come running out. Jace wraps around Gio, trying to stop him from running to the car. They both fall onto their asses and watch as the car burns.

I furrow my brows. It looks like Gio’s shoulders are actually shaking with tears. I’ll be...this motherfucker.

I don’t need to see a thing more. I climb over into the driver’s side and start the car, driving out of the other end of the parking lot. It’s time I leave these men behind.

CHAPTER 63



*A*ndiamo

Gio

NOW YOU UNDERSTAND US. You get why we are who we are. We're not trying to force anything on anyone. This is us. What others like, what they do, that's their business.

This has never been about labels. This has been about love, loss, and trying to find our way. We're three souls that burn brighter together.

All I do is for Nyla. The day she was born, my heart started beating properly. Her first breath was a call to my soul to find her and Jace heard its echo.

Am I sorry for all the time we've lost? Yes, I truly am, but I'm not sorry for the things I've done and all I'm about to do. Not for a single fucking moment.

I think you also understand why we're about to fuck shit up. We've lost enough.

I won't lose Ny forever too. They say it's lonely at the top. Well, from my view, I say fuck them. Everyone who's meant to be here is here. I always finish what I start. They want to bring this to my doorstep.

Andiamo. I want all the smoke.

EPILOGUE



The Root

Where it began

Italy...

DON DI LORENZO sat with the small bundle in his arms, trying not to completely break down. She was gone. His *Bella* hadn't survived. They didn't get enough time together.

Never in his life did he feel more helpless. What was he to do? He kept their love a secret to keep this from happening—he couldn't take her being gunned down in the street like his two brothers. Someone was always looking to harm his family.

He did all he could to keep that from happening to his wife. However, fate still took his love away. This life had been crueler to him than he'd been to any of his enemies.

The one perfection, his only joy had been ripped right from his grasp and in her place was this small being.

"Ava," he choked out. "I will name you Ava. It's what she would have wanted."

He drew his daughter into his chest and vowed in his heart he'd forever protect her. His only child. There would be no sons, for he knew he would never love again. He would teach Ava their way and she would be greater than any son given the title of Don.

“Che prometto sulla mia vita,” he whispered, making the promise on his life.

“Don Di Lorenzo.” Giuseppe looked up at the mention of his name.

He vaguely acknowledged his home was filled with people, the midwife, the staff, his men. His grief was so deep he didn’t want to talk to anyone. However, when his gaze landed on Marcello, he knew this was one person he couldn’t send away.

This man grieved with him. It was his loss too. Giuseppe stood with his daughter in his arms. Marcello cupped the back of Giuseppe’s head and kissed both of his cheeks before looking down at the baby in Giuseppe’s arms.

“Thank you for coming,” Giuseppe managed to say.

“Alessia was so full of life. This pains me greatly.”

Giuseppe gave a nod. Marcello held his arms out for the baby. It pained the new father to release her, even for a moment. Ava was the last part of Alessia he had left. However, he did hand her over to her adopted uncle.

“Have you named her?”

“Yes, her name is Ava.”

“Bella. She’s as gorgeous as her mother. Will you return to Naples?”

“I don’t know what I plan to do.”

Marcello nodded. “I understand. It pained me greatly to send my brother, his wife, and son, to the Americas. Now I have no one left here.”

“Their lives were in danger. You did what you must.”

It was the truth. He understood the other Don’s choice. His twin brother and his family were safer in America. Giuseppe hadn’t known of Alessia’s adopted relation because of all the name changes to protect them.

She was never given their last name. Rumor was she was the child of Marcello’s uncle, taken in by his father and

mother.

Furrowing his brows, Giuseppe started to truly think of what to do next. He hadn't thought that far ahead. He and Alessia had moved to the country to live a quiet life, on the land Marcello had given them as a wedding gift—something not many knew.

Giuseppe had seen too much war, too much death in his life. He wanted a taste of the simpler things. The farm had treated their union well until that day.

At first, he thought he'd expand the business into the States. Alessia talked of wanting to go to America. He sent Riccardo to get a feel for the country and the opportunity there.

It was also his way of separating Riccardo's ambition from what meant most to him. Riccardo had too many questions about Alessia. Giuseppe nor Marcello wanted the knowledge of their relationship known to others.

It was all a part of their plan once the knowledge was discovered by Don Di Lorenzo. The two families stood to gain from the connection. Somewhere down the line, the two families were connected and had strong ties to the Cipriani family, the second strongest of the Five Families.

Something Giuseppe felt Riccardo didn't need to know. His consigliere had begun to make him question him and his motives. Giuseppe hadn't become known for his ruthlessness because he lacked smarts. He saw what no one else did.

He paid attention to details. He knew he had few he could trust. Everyone wanted something.

He was starting to question how far those around him were willing to go to get what they desired. However, none of that mattered to him anymore. Greed, war, and blood weren't going to bring his wife back.

Now...now, he had a daughter to raise.

"I think I will go back to Naples. This place holds too many memories. I'd rather it be forgotten. Maybe one day Ava

can make a home on these lands for herself, but I will not return.”

“Our arrangement still stands. The land remains yours.”

“Thank you. Give me time to think through all of this. When I find a way to heal, we can talk of our plans.”

“Take your time, my friend, but I have a question.”

“Ask, I have nothing to hide.”

“How much do you trust this Esposito you allow in your ear?”

“He has his uses and purpose. My eyes are always open.”

“My sister loved you and I’ve grown to respect you. So I will tell you this. Riccardo is much like his father. He’s not to be trusted. Don’t take your eyes off him and you have done right not to tell him of our connection. Continue this path, my friend.”

“Thank you. I plan to do just that.”

Marcello kissed Ava’s forehead as she started to whimper. “I shall be her godfather. I believe my sister would have wanted it.”

“She would have. It will be an honor.”

“Anything you need, I’m here.”

“Thank you, Marcello. I will remember this.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Blue Saffire, award-winning, bestselling author of over thirty contemporary romance novels and novellas, writes with the intention to touch the heart and the mind. Blue hooks, weaves, and loops multiple series, keeping you engaged in her worlds. Blue writes for her own publishing company Perceptive Illusions as Blue Saffire as well as Royal Blue.

Blue and her husband live in a house filled with laughter and creativity, in Long Island, NY. Both working hard to build the Blue brand and cultivate their love for the artists. Creative is their family affair.

Blue holds an MBA in Marketing and Project Management, as well as an MED in Instructional Technology and Curriculum Design. She is also an NLP Master Practitioner.



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you so much for entering the Di Lorenzo world with me. I'm having so much fun with this series even as it challenges me. I thought I could end it in three books, but this world has so many nuggets it would have been a disservice not to break this book into two. I promise not a word is being wasted. This is going to be epic.

I love all of these characters and the pieces of them you've seen and have yet to see. I had to do this in four phases, and you've just finished phases one and two. Book four will be phases three and four. Are you ready?

Thank you for all of your support and patience. I'm doing what I love and sharing it with you. Each story holds a piece of me. This one has allowed me to spread my wings in my craft. I hope you watched the movie in my head come to life on these pages the way I intended.

Thank you to my husband, who sees it all and holds me down as I push through. He knows the good, the bad, and the ugly. He's willing to tell me when I'm wrong and when I've done nothing wrong and that's important. Thanks, boo. I love you to life. I'm going to talk one more book out in this series. Hang in there with me. LOL

To my Source, my all, my Creator. Thank you for blessing me to know myself and to know when I need to find myself, again and again. This gift is from you and I thank you for trusting me to use it. Thank you for blessing my hands, my mind, and my life. To God be the glory. HE's the author of my story.

Next! The Last Ones Standing! Gio hasn't shown you nothing yet.

THANK YOU

Wait, there is more to come! You can stay updated with my latest releases, learn more about me, the author, and be a part of contests by subscribing to my newsletter at

www.BlueSaffire.com

If you enjoyed *The Ones Left Behind*, I'd love to hear your thoughts and please feel free to leave a review. And when you do, please let me

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