

A DARK MAFIA ROMANCE

THE
Roma's
PROMISE

SHAE COON

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Book Club Questions

Shae Coon

THE
ROMA'S
PROMISE

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The Roma's Promise

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Disclaimer

This book is for mature readers only, 18+. It includes rough sexual scenes, intense and humiliating punishments, violence, criminal elements, and mentions of trafficking. Reader discretion is advised.

What If...

You weren't you
And I wasn't me
Then maybe there'd
Be a chance we
Could be
But I am I
And you are you
So what could be
Will have
To do.

- R.S. Green

Prologue

A psychotic break is defined as someone losing touch with reality and experiencing delusions or hallucinations.

I would argue that we all need a break from reality once in a while. Apparently, my doctors disagree. And so does my husband.

Husband. The word sounds foreign to me. Especially when the title comes with a man I don't remember. He tells me it was love at first sight and that we married soon after meeting because we couldn't imagine life without each other. Then something happened, and I went missing for a couple of days. My husband searched for me high and low, eventually finding me asleep on the doorstep of *Basilica Santa Maria* and completely delusional.

I was screaming about being taken by the mafia to repay an old family debt and that I had escaped. According to them, it was all a figment of my imagination. Emiliano Calvano was a real person, but one I must have seen on TV or read about in the papers and pulled into my delusions. My beloved pet, Rooster, died a few months ago back in America. And my sisters? Estranged for nearly a year, torn apart by our mother's death.

Everything I thought I knew to be real was a phantasm, illusions of a broken mind...

At least, that's what they tell me.

1

Greta

“How are the daily exercises going? Are you feeling more focused?” Doctor Meyer, my psychiatrist, asks like she does every time I see her. She is a tall blonde German woman with blue eyes and slight wrinkles around her eyes and mouth.

I’ve been at Saint Augustine’s Mental Health Hospital in Sardinia for barely a month, and if I wasn’t crazy before, I sure as shit am now. Every day is the same: sleep, eat, group activities designed for kindergartners, drugs, drugs, and more drugs. Drugs to help us sleep, to help us be calm, even drugs to enable us to take a crap. How does anyone get well in a place like this?

“I told you: I was never unfocused,” I spit.

“I see,” she says condescendingly and scribbles something into her tablet.

“No, I don’t think you do, Doctor, or else you would tell them that I’m completely in my right mind and not a danger to myself or others and to let me the fuck go,” I argue. The look of murder I send her way doesn’t help my cause.

Unfazed, she just sighs and lays down her tablet. “We’ve been over this, Mrs. Marius—”

“Don’t call me that! That’s not my name.”

“Fine. We’ve gone over this, Greta. I cannot in good conscience report that you’re stable enough to return to society when you still cannot see that what you think you went through was just a hallucination. Greta, you won’t even accept that you’re married.”

“Because I’m not!” I shout and grip the edge of the suede sofa cushion to stop from launching myself at her.

“I know what you tell me, but I’m telling you for the hundredth time, I do not know that man. You say I have hallucinations, but that doesn’t explain me not remembering a man I supposedly love so much that I married him within weeks of meeting him.”

“Your mind is blocking out—”

“Fuck you! You can stop with your psycho-babble bullshit. I know what’s real, and I’m done with this conversation.”

“Very well. Your husband... Mr. Marius,” she corrects, “will be here shortly to visit you. We will try again another day.”

Without another word, I stand and storm out of her office with a hard slam of the door. “Easy, *Piccolo*, you will shake the whole place down,” the male nurse, Diego, cautions, levity painting his tone.

“Good. Then I could get the hell out of this damn place,” I murmur and start walking toward the main hall.

“You wound me, little one. You wouldn’t miss me?” he asks in mock offense, and I can’t help but smile at the gentle giant. He is tall as a mountain, built like a lumberjack, with his broad chest, bushy beard, and deep brown eyes. The man is intimidating until you get to know him, and then he is just a giant teddy bear.

“You would be the only one I missed. You could always go with me, be my bodyguard. Just get me out of here.” I smirk up at the man.

“I’ll get right on that. For now, you have a visitor.” He guides me to the recreation room where family members sit with their institutionalized loved ones and pretend that they aren’t entirely creeped out by this place.

“Oh, joy. Someone else to try and make me feel nuts.”

“No matter what you believe, the man seems to care for you. There are worse things than a man loving you

through this,” Diego argues, and I snort at his attempt at romanticizing the situation.

We enter the room, and there he sits—my supposed husband. Tall, handsome, and imposing as hell. My pulse quickens, and the same cold chill I feel every time he visits climbs my spine. It’s a warning—of what I don’t exactly know.

As soon as his eyes meet mine, Sebastian smiles broadly and takes me in his arms. “*Piccolo Uccello.*” He calls me *little bird*, something I’ve told him repeatedly to stop doing.

I don’t return the hug, but just like all the other times, it doesn’t faze him. He just holds me tighter and lays a kiss on my head. “I told you not to call me that.” I pull from his arms and plop in one of the wood chairs.

“My apologies. I’ve missed you, and the name just pops out. How are you?” he asks sincerely and takes my hands.

“I’m stuck in a mental institution, Sebastian. How the hell do you think I’m doing?”

“*Sì.* That was a stupid question, but I have good news for you. I’ve decided it would be best to take you home.”

I sit up straight, hope tickling my nerves. “Really? You’re taking me back to Texas?”

His smile drops, and his eyes grow sad. “Greta, you’re my wife. I’m taking you back to *our* home. Though not the one in Rome but in Germany where there’s more land.”

“You want to take me to Germany?” I squeak and stand so suddenly that my chair falls back with a resounding bang. I don’t have anything against Germany, but it will make it much harder for Emil to find me.

He stands and picks my chair up before taking my shoulders in his large hands and applying slight pressure to have me sit down. "In Germany, we will have more privacy, and you can enjoy nature while recovering. I'll be honest: I thought this was the best place for you, but see that I was very wrong. You will have weekly therapy sessions and a nurse on staff to help with any ... issues that may arise."

"Issues meaning if I suddenly decide to murder everyone in their sleep?" I'm only half kidding because if the warning bells tell me anything, it's that this man is not who he pretends to be.

Sebastian laughs and kisses my knuckles. "I do not foresee you doing something so drastic."

I shrug. "I don't know. Didn't you hear I'm insane? Regardless, I'm not going to Germany, Sebastian." I pull my hands from his.

His eyes darken with the rejection before he leans forward with his elbows on his knees. "Not yet. You're right. We will stay in Bolzano for a few weeks while the restorations on our home in Germany are completed," he speaks softly, almost reverently, but like a switch has flipped, his eyes turn cold, and his hands fist. "I am your husband, and seeing as you're considered unfit to take care of yourself, I have the last say, *Piccolo Uccello*. And I say you're leaving this hospital today, and we're going to Bolzano, then to Germany. Do you understand?" I shiver at the malice in his tone and the maniacal look in his eyes.

"Yes," I whisper, my voice drowned out by the warning bells blaring in my head.

"*Buona.*" He smiles. "Diego will take you to your room to change while I take care of your discharge papers." He stands and takes me with him with our hands entwined.

“But what about Doctor Meyer? She said she can’t sign off on letting me out.” I argue only because I have the distinct feeling that I’m safer in this place than I’ll be in this man’s home.

“You let me worry about the doctor. Now go.” He turns me toward Diego, and as I walk to my room, it feels like I’m walking to my demise.

2

The night Greta escaped

Emiliano

“Are you *Vipera*?” I ask my father for what seems like the hundredth time. The bastard can take torture like a skilled soldier. Impressive for someone who never spent a day in the service. Regardless, the bastard keeps his silence.

The moment I step into the warehouse, I know that my father will meet a brutal end—after I get every detail of his trafficking operation. I want every player in his twisted game, and I want it *now*.

I have the woman I love waiting for me back at my penthouse. I don't want to be in a putrid-smelling warehouse surrounded by my men, waiting for my worm of a father to talk. I haven't spoken the words to her, but I vow I will the moment I step through those doors tonight. Then I will lay her on *our* bed and worship her body with mine.

“You think you have it all figured out, don't you, boy? But you know nothing,” Idris rasps through blood-stained teeth. My fist comes down with a sickening crunch. If his jaw wasn't broken before, it is now. My men had time to work out their frustration; now it's my turn. He howls as bones crack and teeth fly.

Music to my fucking ears.

“I know you play a role in the abductions here in Rome and that the Conti debt was never ours to collect. Is that the real reason you wiped out the Vasile family? Did they even take my mother?” I ask through clenched teeth.

“Your mother was a traitor and a whore! She thought she could take you and run away? I knew her—” I

silence him with a blow to his gut.

“You will not speak about my mother like that. She was a good woman stuck with a cruel bastard for a husband.”

He gasps out a laugh. “You have no idea what she was or what she did. I kept her secret and allowed her to live—until she thought she could leave me.”

Done with his bullshit, I fist a hand in his hair and wrench his head back. “Stop talking in fucking riddles,” I grit.

“I don’t think I will. Beat me to within an inch of my life, boy. You will get nothing from me.” He grins at me, his jaw swollen and slightly off to one side.

I’m seconds from slitting his throat when my phone vibrates in my pocket. Stepping away, I check the caller I.D. to see Marco’s name flash across the screen, and my stomach drops. There’s only one reason he’d be disturbing me right now.

“What is it?” I cut to the chase.

“*Padrone*, she’s gone!” Marco huffs breathlessly.

My vision goes red, and my need to kill is like a hit of cocaine in my bloodstream. “What do you mean ‘she’s gone!’”

“There was a fire, *Signore*. We escorted both women from the apartment but lost her in the rush of the crowd. We’ve been searching the area for over an hour, and there’s no sign of her. But *Signore*...” Marco trails off, and my patience has come to an end.

“Speak!” I command with a tremble of rage in my voice. At least I tell myself it’s rage and not panic or worse... Fear.

“When we got the all-clear to go back into the apartment, they told us that the cause of the fire was intentional. Someone lit dish rags on fire in the sink, and

Camil was asleep at the time, so that only leaves *Signorina White*.”

Silence echoes around the room louder than any gunshot or scream of torture as I take in Marco’s words.

Intentional.

The word holds a powerful punch and one that lands hard and brutal on my chest. “You’re sure she wasn’t taken?” I choke out, but I already know the answer.

“There was no one else in the apartment, *Signore*. Camil said she came out and found Greta standing by your bedroom door. We escorted them through the stairwell and got separated by the crowd. She didn’t even try to respond when I called for her in the crowd.”

She ran.

The part of me that has come to care for Greta is relieved that she wasn’t taken while the beast inside me beats its chest and howls in betrayal.

She left me. Betrayed me.

I give her a piece of me I’ve never given anyone else, and she spits on it like it’s nothing, a piece of filth on the bottom of her shoe.

“I want every man we have on the streets searching for her! Now. I’ll be at the penthouse shortly, and I want an update,” I order before disconnecting and heading for the basement stairs. “Have Matteo stay with him. You two are coming back to the penthouse with me,” I tell Lorenzo and Boian. Both nod and follow me to the waiting SUV, where Alto sits waiting for us. The second my car door is shut, I order Alto to take us to the penthouse, and the look of murder in my eyes has the SUV squealing out of the parking lot as Alto stomps on the gas.



I burst through the penthouse doors to the acrid smell of smoke. Marco stands in the foyer, back ramrod straight, hands behind his back. He knows what's coming, so when my fist lands hard on his jaw, he doesn't try to block it.

My hand goes around his throat, and his back hits the wall. But it's still not enough, so I jerk him forward and slam him against the stone wall again. His head makes a loud *thunk* sound. Still, he barely lets out a grunt of pain. "You were to watch over them both, and you will be punished for your failure," I growl in his face.

"*Sì, Signore,*" he chokes around my crushing hold. I release him from my grip, and he gasps, then straightens and schools his features.

"Where's Camil?" I ask.

"She was given a sedative and sleeping comfortably in her room. Victor has the camera feed ready for you."

Without another word, I head to my office, where Victor stands with his laptop on the now-righted desk, ready for me to watch the feedback. I sit at my desk and hit the space bar to bring the feed to life. I watch as Lorenzo, Boian, and I stand and study the information they brought me, then the moment I find out the disgusting truth about my father. The desk goes flying, and we all stomp from the room.

For minutes, nothing happens. Then I see her. Greta sticks her head in through the cracked door—the fucking door I forgot to shut and lock in my rage. Her eyes take in the mess, then she steps inside and begins to clean up, first grabbing my useless laptop from the floor and placing it on the chair, then gathers the papers off the

floor, and I don't need to watch to know what happens next. Still, my eyes remain glued to the feedback. She drops the other papers but keeps the ledger in her hands. The ledger with my name and family crest on it. The ledger with my forged initials next to the date of sale of women and children. I see the moment Greta figures out what she's seeing. How she deciphered it, I do not know.

Greta shakes her head, and the paper quakes in her hand as she visibly trembles. "No, no, no, no. Emil, please no," she pleads with a sob, and my chest splits open, my heart ripped out.

I'm close to launching the laptop across the room when Greta turns the paper over and studies something on the back before dropping it and bolting from my office. I stand swiftly and take in the papers still littering the floor. When I find what I'm looking for, I round the desk and sweep up the paper Greta dropped. Turning it over, I see what sent her running.

Greta White - €2,000,000 - USA – 01/ 01/ 2021

"Son of a bitch!" I roar and pummel my fist into the wall. My knuckles split, and blood paints the wall as I keep punching.

"Emil!" Lorenzo shouts, but I ignore him and keep throwing punishing blows. But I can't decide who I want to punish more: myself for being so careless or Greta for believing I was capable of such monstrosities?

Perhaps both.

"Calvano, enough!" Boian booms and has me in a triangle hold seconds later. I deliver an elbow to his gut, and when his hold loosens, I twist around and deliver a punch to his jaw. The big bastard barely flinches, then wipes the blood from his lip. "Are you done?"

"Fuck you!" I spit.

“We’re wasting time. Greta doesn’t know the city well and has no money, so she can’t have gotten far,” Lorenzo interrupts my and Boian’s standoff.

Fuming, I turn blazing eyes to him. “Every one of my enemies is after her, and without my name to protect her, she’s open game.”

“Then pull your shit together, and let’s find her before they do,” Boian grumbles, and I know he’s right. I need to pull myself together. This is not the time to lose control, but the thought of Greta being out in the city alone and at my enemies’ mercy is enough to fray any control I have left. The only thing keeping me from losing it entirely is the knowledge that Greta didn’t betray me. Still, her belief that I would sell women and children into slavery and her right alongside them, cuts deep.

“You’re right, my friend. Lorenzo, I want footage from any cameras in a five-mile radius.”

“Sì, Padrone.”

“Marco, you’re on the streets with the others. I want this city swept from one street to the next.”

“Sì.”

“Boian, I want an update on any movement from Stefan Vasile or whatever fucking name he goes by.”

“Sì, Signore,” he says but doesn’t move from his spot. “We will get her back, Emil,” he affirms, then walks out of my office, where I’m left alone with only my thoughts.

She left me.

I want to hate her for it. Hate her for not trusting me. Hate her for making me feel helpless. But I can’t seem to find it in me to hate this woman. After all, she has every reason not to trust me. I took her, threatened her sisters’ lives, and had her punished and humiliated. Still, her believing the worst of me has my chest tightening and

my throat tightening with rage. I still plan on telling her I love her the moment she's in my arms again.

Right before I reddened that sweet ass of hers for running from me.

3

Greta

Bolzano is a city in the South Tyrol province of northern Italy. It's set in a valley amidst hilly vineyards and the gateway to the Dolomites Mountain range in the Italian Alps. The city is full of history with the imposing 13th-century *Mareccio* Castle and the *Duomo di Bolzano* cathedral with its Romanesque and gothic architecture. It's like a fairy tale land tucked away in its own world.

Sebastian's home, however, shatters that fairy tale with its three-level, boxy concrete and glass exterior. While the grounds are green and plush with domestic shrubs, flowers, and trees, the house is a contemporary stain upon the ancient city—all wrapped with a pretty little bow in the form of a twelve-foot stone wall with a sizable steel gate.

The moment the car comes to a stop in front of the cube-style home, I scan the area and count no less than five cameras. And those are just the ones visible to the naked eye.

My door opens right as I glimpse the back of a suited gentleman rounding the corner of the house. "Are you coming, *Piccolo Uccello*?" Sebastian asks, his hand held out in offering. An offering I don't take as I unfold myself from the Porsche and stand next to my supposed husband.

"I told you not to call me that. I'm not your anything," I huff and step around him, arms crossed over my chest.

"My apologies," he sighs. "It will take time for me to come to terms with your ... mental state. But I have no doubt all will come back to you as we spend more time together." He steps into me, and I dig my nails into my

arms like a cat ready to pounce on an unsuspecting mouse. His fingers ghost over my cheek to a lock of my hair. He tucks it gently behind my ear before cupping my cheek. “You will remember me, Greta. We have all the time in the world.” His words are spoken softly, but his tone harbors a bite of a threat behind the loving façade. He releases my cheek and guides me to the front door with a possessive hand on the small of my back.

As we approach the glass door, a petite, lithe figure approaches, and for one hopeful second, my heart leaps at the thought of seeing Camil’s smiling face. But that hope is dashed when the stern glare of a woman barely older than me stares back at me with fierce black eyes. “Greta, this is *Signora* Rossi, my house manager.”

The woman’s eyes narrow on me when I do not respond. “So, she still pretends to not know?” she asks Sebastian haughtily.

My hackles rise at her speaking as though I’m not there. “I don’t remember because this is all bullshit!” I grit and feel Sebastian’s fingers dig into my back before he leans into my ear.

“Be nice, little Greta. I’m being patient with you, but I won’t allow you to disrespect my staff,” he warns, then presses a kiss to my cheek before guiding me inside the glass and concrete box he calls home.

Though the exterior leaves much to be desired, I must admit the interior is beautiful. There’s a large living area overlooking the mountains and the swimming pool. Large windows characterize the property and give a breathtaking view from every corner of the house.

“There are four levels. The basement has a spa, indoor swimming pool, gym, and garage. Our bedroom is on the second floor with a spectacular view of the mountains. It has a fireplace, a bathroom with a jacuzzi, and direct access to the solarium. This floor has two

bedrooms, the main living area, kitchen, dining room, and my office.”

“And where will I be staying?” I turn to Sebastian.

A charming grin stretches his lips before he schools his features and answers, “You will stay in our room. The room is plenty big, as well as the bed.”

“No. I will not sleep in bed with a stranger.”

“You will do...” His words trail off in a grumble. “Come with me.”

“Where are we going?” I ask but follow out of morbid curiosity.

“To my office, where I’ll provide proof that you and I are married.”

“Pff, sure,” I scoff.

Sebastian ushers me into his office, and I nearly gasp at the gorgeous view of the mountains from the floor-to-ceiling windows that take up the entire back wall. Besides the spectacular view, his office is simple with its black two-seater leather couch, coffee table, utilitarian computer desk with a shiny black surface, and matching high-back chair.

My legs take me directly to the glass wall, where I stare off into the distant mountains and imagine getting lost in their depths. “Greta?” I turn at Sebastian’s voice to find him holding out a white embroidered envelope for me to take.

I take a step back as though the simple white envelope is a snake ready to strike. “What is it?”

“Open it,” he orders.

Again, curious, I take the envelope with trembling hands and pull out the thick tri-folded document. My pulse thunders in my ears, and my brow dampens when I read the big, bold words at the top of the document.

CERTIFICATO DI MATRIMONIO, and below it are my and Sebastian's names and signatures.

I swallow around the lump in my throat as I read the date that says we married nearly three months ago. "This... How..." I can't complete a coherent thought as I look at my signature. A perfect match.

But that's impossible.

"Do you see now?" Sebastian comes to me and tilts my chin to bring my eyes to his. "You're my wife. You're Greta Marius." I shake my head vehemently, and his hand drops. "What more proof do you need, Greta?" His tone turns edgy, and I can feel his growing aggravation.

"This has to be forged," I accuse, then startle when he slams the side of his fist into the glass next to my head.

"Enough! I've played your game long enough. You're my wife, and I understand you're sick, but you will accept what I say."

My eyes narrow. "What happened to being patient, oh loving husband of mine?" I regret my mocking words the moment they pass my lips.

Sebastian's blue eyes blaze with fury, and the next second, my back hits the glass wall, and his hand wraps around my throat. My nails claw at his wrists as I struggle to breathe, and my teeth clench together painfully. I lift my knee to strike, but he knocks it out of the way and presses his big body against mine.

"You will watch your tone, wife. Here are your choices: You can live a privileged life, wanting for nothing," his grip tightens, "or spend your days locked away like a disobedient pet."

My vision goes fuzzy, and my hands fall limp to my side. I'm seconds away from blacking out when he drops me, and I land hard on the hardwood, gasping and sputtering for oxygen. "What will it be, Greta? Privileged wife or caged pet?"

I study the man in front of me: the maniacal look in his blue eyes, the tick in his jaw, his nostrils flaring with barely controlled rage. I've never been more terrified of a person in my life. Emiliano is a brutal don who basks in torturing his enemies, but at least he has lines he won't cross. With Sebastian, I get the eerie feeling that he'd not only cross those lines but turn and give them the middle finger. Sebastian is a different beast entirely, and one that makes a cold chill scamper across my skin as he watches me from above, waiting for me to submit. This man undoubtedly doesn't care that I am a woman or his wife. He will hurt, torture, and take from me in the most monstrous ways if I don't obey.

That's why, with a jerky nod, I agree to be a good little wife.

Sebastian smiles in triumph and then sits in his office chair. "Good girl. Now crawl to me. Crawl to me like a good obedient wife," he orders.

And I obey.

4

Present Day

Emiliano

One month. An entire fucking month with no word or clue as to where Greta could be. Lorenzo hacked into airport surveillance cameras, flight manifestos, and anything else we could get into to see if she caught a flight out of the country. So far, nothing. My men scoured the streets of Rome, questioning neighbors and business owners, but none have seen *mia perla*. Our last sighting of her came from a CC camera across from *Basilica Santa Maria*. I watched, heart pounding at the small glimpse as an exhausted Greta slumped against the ancient church doors in defeat, only for the camera to glitch and go offline moments later. That's when I knew there was more to Greta's disappearance. My jewel was clever, but she was alone in an unfamiliar country and couldn't hide her tracks this well without help. Or my worst fear. She was taken.

"Nothing new from your father," Boian reports as he walks into my office.

"You're losing your powers of persuasion, my friend," I throw back and receive the middle finger from my second-in-command.

"The man is missing all his fingers on his right hand, nearly blind in one eye, and if it were not for the doctor we brought in to keep him alive, the burns would have festered and killed him." He drops his big body to the chair across from my desk. "The old bastard is either tough as nails or doesn't know anything."

"And the families?"

"They have been questioned. And yes, I believe them when they tell me they do not have Greta. The Roma

families only work to gain from you having Greta, and they wouldn't fuck that up. We're still working on the others."

The others being enemies who would use Greta to get to me. The power I would hold by finding, punishing, and marrying the lost Conti descendant was no secret; some were foaming at the mouth to take that power.

"And what about Vasile?" I inquire.

"Like the fucker doesn't exist," Boian grits. "The last time we got a hit on him was the video feed from the restaurant in Germany the night Greta was taken."

"It doesn't mean he didn't send someone for her," I argue.

"That's true. Meaning they were watching and waiting for the right moment to strike."

I nod in agreement. The more time passes, the more I'm sure that that worm, Vasile or Marius, or whatever his name is, has my jewel. But for the one video in Germany, Vasile has been off the grid, and both his home in Germany and Rome show no signs of life. But Lorenzo is the best hacker in Europe, so it is only a matter of time before we catch up to him.

"Have you spoken to her sisters?"

"Camil has texted them as Greta with photos of them together and updates," I answer absently. Greta's sisters are the least of my worries.

"And what we discussed?" Boian asks, and my eyes latch onto his in scorn.

Getting to my feet, my fist lands hard on my desk, and I lean in his direction. "I am not bringing in the feds."

"Jax Townsend is not the feds, Emil."

"But Pierce Marron is. Do you not think Townsend will go to him?"

Boian lifts his large form from his chair and mimics my stance across from me. “And do you not think her sisters will get suspicious and call Marron House themselves? At least if *we* get Townsend involved, we get to write the narrative.”

A growl vibrates up my chest because I hate that he’s right. The more Camil texts Greta’s sisters, the more I feel we’re one wrong word away from them alerting the entire FBI in an effort to find their sister. Still, it’s a risk I will have to take. I don’t need the feds snooping around my business. I will find Greta and kill the bastards who think they can take what is mine.

“The answer is no. I’ll find her myself.” I dial Lorenzo, ignoring Boian’s growl of frustration.

Lorenzo picks up on the second ring. “*Si*, Don Calvano?”

“Have you de-scrambled the cathedral footage?”

“I’m close.”

“Good. Get it done, Lorenzo. I’m tired of waiting,” I warn.

“*Si*, Don,” Lorenzo returns like a loyal soldier, then hangs up.

I toss my cell on my desk and drop back to my chair with a heavy sigh. I haven’t had a good night’s rest since the night Greta ran, and I don’t see that changing anytime soon.

“I think we should send Camil away until this is all over,” Boian grumbles from where he stands across from my desk, shoulders tight, expression severe.

I let out a humorless laugh. “And you believe she’ll accept being sent away while her friend is still missing?”

His hands fist at his sides, and his jaw ticks. “I don’t give a shit if she accepts it. She’ll be vulnerable while we work to find Greta. Our enemies know she’s family and

could take our preoccupation with the search as an opportunity to gain leverage over us.”

I study the man in front of me, the fire of determination in his eyes, the tension in his shoulders as he speaks of Camil’s safety. He is always protective of us, but with Camil, that fire blazing in his violet eyes tells me there’s more.

“What exactly is going on between you and Camil?” I probe, and when any other person would have missed it, I catch his flinch at my question.

“Like I said, we’re family, and she could be in danger—”

“*Cazzate*,” I call bullshit.

His teeth clench, and his hands fist at his side. “Leave it the fuck alone, Emil. There’s nothing between Camil and me. She’s family the same as you.”

“So, you aren’t in love with her?” I ask with a wicked smirk and receive a threatening growl from my second-in-command.

“No,” he answers on a deep swallow and goes to leave, stopping short when he nearly bumps into Camil, who stands at the threshold of my office.

Her ghostly gray eyes stay riveted on Boian as she passes him to bring me a manila folder with the daily reports from *Comfort de Elită*, the furniture business we use to launder the millions that come through our doors.

Her eyes finally pull the daggers from Boian’s when she hands me the folder. “Here are the reports. Any news on Greta?” she asks stoically, never betraying how much she heard of my and Boian’s conversation.

“Nothing new,” I answer while I scan the pages that I’m positive Camil has gone over herself at least three times to ensure everything is correct.

“Please keep me informed, Emil.” Camil turns and goes to exit when she stops beside Boian and pins him with a lethal stare. “Try and send me away, you bastard, and I’ll spend the rest of my life making yours a living hell.” Then she walks out the door. While Boian just stands there staring after her, I can’t help but laugh.

Boian’s violet eyes swing my way with contempt, but I shrug off his wrath. “I hate to tell you I told you so, my friend.”

“*Figlio di puttana*,” he curses and runs a hand through his dark hair.

“Indeed, my friend. Indeed.”



“Deep Seas Fleet,” Lorenzo says out of the blue from his place in the seating area of my office.

“The luxury yacht maker? What about it?” I inquire.

He stands, laptop in hand, and places it in front of me. The image on the screen is grainy but clear enough to see a large man with stark blond hair, and in his arms is my *mia perla*. She’s limp in his arms before lifting her head and thrashing weakly. The man pulls her tighter to his chest just before another figure comes into view and sticks what I can only assume is a needle in her thigh. Greta’s head lulls back, then she’s out. My skin burns with a fury I’ve never felt before when the man bundles her into the SUV before driving away. Greta may have run, but these men took what’s mine. They took the very heart from my chest, and I will rip theirs from theirs when I find them.

“I don’t know who the man is yet, but see this?” He pans the shot to the left, making more of the bulky black

SUV come into view. “I ran the plate, and it came back registered under Deep Seas Fleet. And, of course, everyone in Europe knows the type of customers they deal with. Smugglers, drug dealers, dirty politicians—the list is long and covered in shit.”

“Who’s the owner?”

“You aren’t going to believe it, but no one knows. We know it’s independently owned, and the chatter on the streets is that you speak with one man. If you’re approved, and once payment is made, you’re given a completion date and nothing more until the project is completed. At that time, you receive a location and have twenty-four hours to pick up your shiny new toy.”

“What’s the name of the man you speak to?” I ask, and though I know it’s a long shot, I still pray that he tells me it’s Vasile.

“Bernardo Rizzo. Most likely a fake name.”

Leaning back in my office chair, I scratch at my week-old stubble as I look back at the screen. My chest aches at seeing my jewel in another man’s arms, and the unpleasant taste of jealousy bubbles up my throat. Illogical? Yes, still, it doesn’t stop my blood from heating with the need to rage and claim what’s mine.

“I want the man’s name in that video,” I grumble, and Lorenzo nods before taking back his laptop and getting to work. My brain working through my next move, I lounge back in my chair, hands behind my head. “Boys, I think it’s time I look into getting myself a yacht.”

5

Greta

Surrounded by the beautiful Dolomites, the mountain village becomes a winter wonderland in the holiday season's early days. It's famous for its Christmas markets. I long to stroll down the streets and take in the buildings decorated in ribbons, Christmas gifts, and lights strung across their facades. I want to indulge in the famous Loacker chocolate treats in the café and try one of their hot cocoas specialized just for me. I want to joke with my sisters and explore the town with my baby nephew in my arms.

I want my damn freedom.

With each passing day, my memories become increasingly jumbled, and I begin to question what I think I know. Am I really married? Did my sisters and I really have a falling out? We all went through a grieving process after mom died, and I would be lying if I said we didn't fight like cats and dogs at the beginning, but eventually, we pulled ourselves together and came together as a family.

Or is that all in my mind?

After the incident in his office, I was reluctant to challenge Sebastian by demanding I be allowed to call my sisters. Still, after a few days of being left alone to unpack my thoughts, I approached him with a tremble in my request. Surprisingly, he simply smiled kindly and handed me his phone. I was so elated that it took three attempts to press Addie's name in his contacts. But that elation soon faded to gut-wrenching disappointment when that dreaded voice came over the line. *We're sorry, but the number you're trying to reach is no longer in service.* That night I cried myself to sleep.

Can I really be delusional? And if so, how do I get my mind back?

My thoughts are interrupted when Sebastian walks into the room in long strides with a serving tray in his hands, and I hate the fact that I actually find my husband attractive.

Not that I plan on doing anything about it.

“Good morning, *Uccellino*. How did you sleep?” he asks the same question every morning as though his outburst days ago never happened. He sets the tray of fruit, croissants drizzled in chocolate, and espresso so strong it will have me wired the entire day on the nightstand.

I avoid his stare when I answer and run a hand through my disheveled chestnut hair. “Not too well. I think I’m still adjusting.”

“That’s to be expected. I’m still looking for the best therapist for you, and I hope to have someone by the end of the holidays. Speaking of which, is there anything special you would like to do for Christmas?” I stare in irritated amazement at the man that made me crawl to him just the other day.

When I don’t answer, he sits on the bed beside me, hands me my espresso, and watches me intently as I drink the dark concoction. It has a bite, but the generous amount of half and half and something else I can’t place helps it go down smoothly.

“Greta, I must apologize for my behavior the other day. I ... wasn’t myself. I’ve been searching for you for so long, believing the worst.” He clenches his eyes shut and sighs heavily. “I thought I lost you, and for you to question me like that made all those fears come rushing forward again, and I snapped. I know you don’t remember right now, but that’s not who I am with you.

And I'm truly sorry, my love." He lifts my hand to place a delicate kiss on my knuckles.

Tears prick the back of my eyes at the sincerity in his voice, but I shake them away and gather my voice. "What do you mean you're not like that with *me*?"

He smiles around my hand. "Ah, you caught that, did you? I suppose you will remember eventually." He sighs again and places my hand on my lap.

"Remember what?" I ask around the lip of my espresso cup.

"I manufacture and supply yachts for the rich and powerful, and not everyone I deal with is ... on the right side of the law. In fact, most of our money comes from supplying yachts to criminal organizations or corrupt politicians that need more specialized watercraft."

My stomach drops to my feet. "What do you mean by specialized?"

"Things like a panic room, holding cells, hidden and secure vaults for weapons and drugs. Playrooms." He winks at the latter as though what he does is nothing but another day at the office instead of supplying criminals with the opportunity to traffic weapons.

Does he traffic people too?

The question is on the tip of my tongue, but at the last minute, I chicken out. Instead, asking, "You said *our* money?"

He smiles and tucks a dark lock of hair behind my ear. "Yes, my love. You've helped develop inventive designs and ideas on how best to conceal our client's product."

Horror slams into me like a Mack truck, and my stomach sours further with disgust. The espresso threatens to revolt at the possibility of me being party to helping bring more devastation and death into this world is enough to make me sick. But then, a hard dose of

reality hits me when I remember falling for another criminal not too long ago. One that ended up being so much worse in the end.

But was what I saw on that ledger real? Was any of it real?

While stuck in that institution, I would question if what I saw was right. Was Emiliano really dealing in flesh? My brain screams yes, but my heart... my gut says there's more than meets the eye. Emiliano kept me out of his dealings for the most part. Still, my stomach tightens with the truth. Real or not, I was in love with a criminal.

"I can see your beautiful mind going round and round." Sebastian brings my hand to his lips again. "Do you forgive me for my misdeeds the other day?" For an instant, my mind blanks on what he's referring to when his eyes drop to my neck, reminding me. I swallow and nod mechanically. With my forgiveness, he smiles brightly. "*Grazie, amore mio.*" He kisses my forehead before grabbing the breakfast tray and placing it between us. "Enough of the bad. Let us have our breakfast, and then I have a surprise for you."

He brings the croissant to my lips, and I take a healthy bite. A moan slips from my lips when the warm butter mixes with the decadent dark chocolate in my mouth. Sebastian's eyes darken and blaze with desire at my wanton food orgasm, and I have to look away from his piercing blue gaze.

"What surprise?" I ask around my bite of food.

He smirks at my unladylike behavior before answering. "A client of mine is holding his annual Christmas party tonight. So, I thought I would take you to get a new dress, and we can walk around the market while we're out. Perhaps it will help you remember parts of our life together." His eyes fill with hope, and I wonder if he's right. And if so, is that what I want?

I find my spirits lifting and my own hope unfurling in my chest. Because if I can remember, perhaps I can get out of this mess and back home, and even find my sisters and repair our relationship. Or maybe I'll find that my gut is right, Sebastian is full of shit, and everything I believe in having happened really did happen.

So, with an encouraging smile, I take another bite of my breakfast and answer with, "Sure. Why not?"



An hour later, we drive through the large gates with two hulking SUVs at our rear, and I find myself flashing back to the night Emiliano took me on a date. My chest aches, and tears threaten to fall when I remember how he held me on his lap at that restaurant. I fight back the tears and shake off the absurdity that I still feel something for the man who planned to sell me and had already probably sold hundreds of others.

But is it true?

We park in the vendor parking area, but no one dares stop us. Sebastian offers me his hand, and when I take it, he tucks my arm under his. To this Texas girl, it is freezing as we walk arm-in-arm down downtown Bolzano. Still, the wonder and beauty of the town, decorated and aglow with the Christmas spirit, has me smiling my first genuine smile since being thrust into this new reality. The city is illuminated with millions of twinkle lights, Christmas trees with the Nativity scene décor and *Babbo Natale* figurines hanging from their branches, and hand-blown Murano glass bulbs glitter in the lights. We hit every stand and load up on chocolate, local foods, handcrafted decorations, and handmade knits. We listen to live music and watch little skits and plays being

enacted. Our final stop is to buy me a dress for this evening's party, a long sleeve Tom Ford number: classy with its fitted design, a boat neckline, a cowl open back, and a hem that hit just below my knees. But my favorite part of the dress is the faux leather material that gives it just the right amount of sass. I feel like a badass in it, strong and powerful. I know I will need some of that strength tonight.

As we walk back to the SUV, I ask about the party, and Sebastian explains that there will be many of *our* clients attending and that no one knows about my "situation." Seeing an opportunity to trip him up, I ask, "How am I supposed to pretend to know these people? You only told me about this party this morning, and you've told me nothing about them."

Johnny-on-the-spot, he answers with, "This is the first time we've been introduced into Bolzano society together. Remember we met in Rome and spent the days following our courthouse wedding in the capital?" And with an encouraging embrace and a soft kiss to my lips, he says, "Be yourself, my love. Remember that we're married, act accordingly, and everything will be fine."

I'm not so sure.

The drive back to his—our—house is filled with silence as I ponder how I will pull off pretending to love a stranger while contemplating a way to catch him in a lie. Because no matter how much I question my sanity, I can't rid myself of the gut feeling that the life Sebastian presents as my own is the lie. Not the life with Emiliano's amber eyes shining up at me from the piano as he poured his heart out in song. Not my sisters' lyrical laughter or wisecracks. Nor my precious Rooster standing by my side, loyal and protective. And as much as I hate Emiliano for the secrets I uncovered ... I miss him too.

“We have a couple of hours before we have to leave. I have work to do before then, so take some time to relax, but do not be late.” Sebastian’s words break through the fog of too many thoughts.

I turn to him with a false smile. “I’ll be ready.”

He brings his knuckles to stroke the apple of my cheek before exiting the car and rounding the hood to open my door. We jog to the door to escape the frigid air, and he instructs one of his men to grab our things and bring them inside before kissing my forehead and heading to his office.

With at least an hour to burn before I start getting ready, I do some yoga. With the soft waves of Tibetan singing bowls playing over my room’s sound system, I let myself get lost in the movement of each position and the cleansing stretch of each muscle and tendon. I release each breath in tandem with the switch in position, allowing my body to relax, and before I know it, it’s time to get ready for the party.

I chug the saccharine sweet concoction Sebastian sends up from the nutritionist I saw regularly in the hospital. The prescription label lists a host of vitamins and medical jargon and is supposed to help with memory recall.

I toss the bottle in the recycling beneath the bathroom sink, take a deep cleansing breath, and begin the process of building the persona of an adoring wife.

Wife.

My thoughts keep going back to that word and how I’d come to like the idea of being Emiliano’s wife and decide to use that feeling to aid in pulling off this farce for the evening.

“Make sure you do not look like a slut this evening,” Miss Rossi—or, as I’ve come to learn, Maria Rossi—says from the doorway of my room.

Turning to the woman who seems to loathe my very existence, I give her my own look of disapproval. “Excuse me? When exactly did you become a fashion consultant?”

The woman’s eyes narrow, and she tips her chin up in superiority. “I do not need to be an expert to know you American women have no respect for yourself and compensate by wearing slutty outfits to catch your men. I will not have you embarrassing *Signore* Marius.” I blink at her in astonishment, then burst into laughter. “What is so funny?” She practically spits in anger.

“You,” I chortle, “thinking you know anything about me. Do you know what I think your problem is? Not that I may embarrass Sebastian, but that I will be the one on his arm tonight, and *I* will be the one he introduces as his wife.”

“I have no idea what you mean,” she argues, but I see the fire that ignites in her eyes at my words.

“I’m not blind, Maria. I see the puppy dog eyes you give him when he speaks to you. You want him, but he doesn’t see you as anything but another employee to be at his beck and call.”

Her look of superiority morphs to one of murder, and she takes a threatening step toward me but halts when Sebastian walks in wearing a perfectly tailored black single-breasted blazer and high-rise flat-front trousers. His hair is still damp from the shower, his beard is trimmed close to the skin, and the diamond earring sparkles in his left ear.

He looks at Maria in question before he turns his blue gaze to me, and they shine with lusty appreciation as he takes in my leather-clad form. He approaches me with a knowing smirk, like a predator with his prey caught in his crosshairs.

With his hands stuffed casually in his trouser pockets, he leans into me and whispers, "I will be the envy of every man in that room tonight. It will be difficult to hold myself back from killing every man that looks your way." He brings his lips to the pulse point of my neck and with the lightest brush of his lips, places a tender kiss against my skin. Goosebumps skitter across my skin at the touch, and when his lips come down hard and possessive on mine, it's not my husband's blue eyes that flash across my vision as my eyes flutter shut, but the glowing amber eyes of the wolf that stole me to repay a debt. The man I fell in love with despite our wretched beginning.

Emiliano devours my lips like a starved man, and I let him take what he needs. Because I need him too. A moan slips from my lips as he plunders my mouth, my panties dampen with desire, and my clit sizzles with need. My hands thrust into Emil's long, curly...

The feel of the close-cropped strands of Sebastian's hair kicks me out of the fantasy, and mentally shaking myself, I pull away. We're both breathless, and Sebastian's erection presses against my stomach. Gathering my wits, I give him a coy smile, wipe my gloss from his lips, and turn on my façade. "Behave, husband. There will be potential clients there tonight." I lace my arm through his and turn us toward the door. "Now, shall we?"

He chuckles at my bravado and brings my knuckles to his lips. "What will I do with you, wife?" He guides me out of my room, and Maria Rossi is nowhere to be found.

6

Emiliano

The hours drag on as my men and I pore over more and more of my father's documents, all with my name printed in big, bold letters, while my men on the streets turn over every stone for information on the men in the video and the mystery Bernardo. More hours go by for Greta to get farther and farther away.

The situation in Rome is still a concern. Call it a gut feeling, but I'm convinced that the tourist abduction and Greta's are linked. How? I have no clue, and after weeks of being locked in a cell and tortured, my father still hasn't given us a name for the person they call *Vipera*, and I'm starting to wonder if he genuinely doesn't know their name. Like all the other *Scorpioni* under the Vipers' rule, my father may never have gotten close enough to find out who they may be.

"Emil," Boian calls from the door of my office.

"Yes?" I answer without lifting my eyes from the document in my hand.

"I sent your father to one of the safe houses outside of town."

That gets my full attention. My eyes lift to my second's, a threat to tread carefully. "There better be a damn good reason."

"His wounds began to fester, and he spiked a fever. I sent him to be treated, and I'll return him to his cell once the doc is done."

Releasing a grumbled sigh, I run restless hands over my face before responding. "Don't bother. I may still need him, so keep him under heavy guard for now."

“Already done. Do you—” Boian’s question is interrupted when Luca storms into my office. Again, his hair is disheveled, his eyes wide in concern, and I swear the kid never relaxes a day in his life.

“Sorry to interrupt, *Signore*, but a Xander Cain is at the gate demanding to see *Signorina* White.”

My already frayed patience is on its last thread when I address Luca. “You’re interrupting a meeting for this? Tell him to fuck off.”

“We did, *Signore*. He told us Greta’s sister called them saying that she suspected something wasn’t right with Greta, and he’s here to do a well check.”

Well check, my ass. Whoever this asshole is, he’s skilled enough to find where Greta is staying. “Who exactly is ‘them’?” I ask Luca, and I pray it’s not who I believe it to be.

“Marron House Security.” There it is—exactly the type of people I didn’t want involved.

“Fuck,” I murmur and run a hand through my overgrown hair. The last fucking thing I need is interference from someone with a savior complex.

I’m about to order Luca to take the guy to the warehouse when my computer and security monitors go black. Immediately, my men draw their guns, and Boian moves to exit when my cell phone vibrates across my desk with an unknown number.

Snatching it up, I answer but say nothing. “Having some equipment issues, Mr. Calvano?” the voice on the other side of the line mocks.

My pulse rises, my jaw clenches tight, and my fist comes down on my desk with an echoing boom. “You motherfucker. You have no idea who you’re playing with,” I snarl into the phone.

“I know exactly who you are, Mr. Calvano, and I’m not here to get into your dirty dealings. I’m here to check on Greta and reassure her sisters that she isn’t lying dead somewhere.” His words are like a knife to the gut. The very thought of Greta no longer on this earth makes me want to burn all of Italy to the ground.

“*Padrone,*” Boian whisper-shouts to get my attention. I turn steely eyes to him. “He fucking hacked our security, and that’s no small feat.” He quirks a brow, and I can hear his unspoken words. “*We could use him to find Greta and bring her home.*” I want to punch the smug bastard and tell him that I don’t give a fuck about how good the MHS hacker is, but the memory of Greta’s smiling face sends an ache through my chest before the memory turns to a nightmare where her gorgeous blue eyes go empty in death.

With an indignant growl, I tell the bastard, “You have ten minutes to convince me not to gut you like fish, Cain. Hand the phone to my man.”

There’s a slight shuffle then my guard answers, “*Sì, Padrone?*”

“Search him, then send him through,” I instruct, disconnect, and pin my second-in-command in place with a warning. “You better be right, or you will join him at the warehouse.”

He nods. “*Capisco.*” *I understand.*

What feels like hours later, Luca knocks and walks into my office, followed by Xander Cain. He’s tall and packed with lean muscle, his jet-black hair disheveled, and black thin-rimmed glasses frame his blue eyes. A surge of jealousy bubbles to the surface at the fact that this man has come to Greta’s rescue.

Do they know each other? Did he touch my jewel?

The thought has my hands fisting at my sides as I stand and take in the man standing in front of me, a

slight smirk playing on his lips. My men point their guns at Cain's head when he reaches into his pocket. He retrieves his phone, taps something in, and suddenly, my computer and the security monitors come to life. "Don't worry. You didn't lose anything. I simply disabled the image from broadcasting," he assures me.

"How very clever of you, Mr. Cain. Surprising considering *I*—a known criminal—was able to step inside a charity event funded by Marron House Security itself," I mock, gesturing for him to sit.

Cain's eyes flash with murder. "You weren't our concern at the time." There's more to his words, but I don't bother asking. He sits and gets straight to the point. "Where's Greta White, Mr. Calvano?" I have to give it to the man. He has balls the size of melons to demand answers from me. "Again, I know who you are, Mr. Calvano, and frankly, I don't give a shit. We just want Greta home safe and sound."

His words both relieve and infuriate me. He's not here to try and take down my empire, but he's here to take *mia perla* from me.

Not going to happen.

"I appreciate your honesty, Mr. Cain, but I assure you Greta was happy with me. Our beginning was not ideal, but we've come to care for one another."

"Was?" Xander asks, ignoring my confession. I stare blankly at him as I mentally kick myself for my fuck up. "Was, Mr. Calvano?" he prompts again, and after a beat, I decide, fuck it, and tell him everything—at least the parts he needs to know.

I finish with the night Greta found the falsified document indicating I was active in the flesh trade, and because of that, she ran. I show him the video of Greta being taken, and like a skilled poker player, he remains

stoic as he watches the two men drug and carry her away.

“So who—”

Scratch, scratch, scratch. Rooster’s insistent scratching and whining interrupts Cain, and I can’t help but smirk at the mutt that has become attached to my side. The door opens, and when Camil ushers the big brute in, he immediately trots over to me and plops down beside me.

A look of surprise washes over Cain’s face as I pet Rooster’s head. “It seems you charmed both the beauty and the beast,” Cain quips.

I ignore his jab. “To answer your question, we do not know who the man is. However, the vehicle is registered to Deep Seas Fleet, a yacht manufacturing company that caters to the rich, famous, and dirty,” I clarify. “I’ve set up a meeting with their only point of contact, a man named Bernardo.”

Cain gives me a condescending tilt of his lips and pushes his glasses up the bridge of his nose. “That’s one way to go, Mr. Calvano.” Again, he’s taunting me, and I’ve had enough.

“Enough with the Mr. Calvano shit. Call me Emiliano, and if you have a better suggestion, please share them with the group.” I gesture to my men.

Cain lifts his hands in surrender. “No, sounds good to me. But I want to be in that meeting.”

“No. These types of people do not like a crowd. Especially when *dirty dealings* are being discussed. He’ll smell your fed stench from a mile away.”

Cain’s eyes narrow, and he leans forward in his seat. “Let’s get one thing clear: I’m not an amateur. I may work for a reputable and above-board company, but I have no problem balancing the line between legal and illegal to get the job done. Now, either I go in with you or on my own, and none of your men will see me coming. I can

really fuck this up for you, Emiliano, or you can lose the lone wolf routine and accept my expertise.” He leans back in his chair and taps the armrests rhythmically. “What will it be? Get this shit done and save the woman you supposedly care for, or fuck around and let her get farther and farther away?”

His words affect me more than I would ever admit, and the sinking, gut-churning thought of my pearl vanishing forever is enough to squelch my rising temper at the smug bastard in front of me. I nod in agreement. “Very well, Cain. We will try it your way.” I’m the one to lean forward this time. “But if I get a hint of betrayal from you, even the great Caleb Marron won’t find your body.”

His face stretches into a wide grin, and his eyes light. He stands and extends his hand to me to shake. “Fair enough. And the same applies if I get a hint that you’re keeping Greta against her will. Deal?”

I take the man’s hand. “Deal.”

7

Greta

I'm in hell. A bit dramatic? Perhaps, but strolling through the ostentatious mega-mansion of an international drug and human trafficker is most people's version of hell on earth. All but the two-hundred guests meandering around the twenty-nine thousand square foot mansion dressed in their best, all looking to make deals and alliances to further their power.

And if what Sebastian says is true, then I'm one of these people. The very thought has my stomach cramping and bile rising up my throat, and the sudden fogginess in my head, like I just woke up from a deep sleep, wasn't helping.

"Smile, *Piccolo Uccello*." Sebastian's words are clipped, and the fingers at my waist dig into my ribs painfully. "We're here to make friends, not alienate potential customers."

His words have a chill clawing up my spine, and I have to force myself not to tell him to go fuck himself. Instead, I smile at my husband and run my hand down the buttons of his expensive dress shirt. "I'm sorry. I think this party is too much, too soon after getting out of the hospital. So much is clouding my mind." I bring my fingertips to my temples, where a headache has begun to form.

Sebastian's lips caress my forehead when he speaks. "I'm sorry, my love, but it couldn't be helped. I need to speak with Franzese before he heads back home." I look around, then back to Sebastian in question. He smirks before answering my unspoken question. "His *other* home in Naples."

I hum in understanding, then sip from my champagne glass. The image of Camil and I drinking the bitter concoction after picking my wedding dress flashes before my eyes, causing my heart to pinch. I rub at the spot absentmindedly.

Is she doing well?

Is she scared for me?

Is she demanding Emil track me down?

Is she even real?

The last thought sends another ache through my chest and stabbing pain to my temples. The same stabbing pain happens anytime I try to recall a memory. It's like my brain immediately tries to shut down any recollection.

"Remember, the doctor said to not force it," Sebastian murmurs into my hair while massaging my neck.

"I know, but the...images sometimes spring up, and I start to analyze them. It's hard to stop," I answer.

Sebastian turns me in his arms and lifts my chin. "I understand, but I need you to work harder to let them go. Focus on the here and now. Focus on us," he finishes with a tender kiss on my lips. Another dagger stabs at my temple as the vision of Emiliano's lips on mine screams forward, but I hide the memory behind a hum of deceitful lust. Sebastian smiles against my lips, then turns me back to face the crowd.

"Now, *Piccolo Uccello*, let us go conquer the world." He looks at me with a playful smirk. "One greedy bastard at a time."



An hour goes by, then another, and I'm stuck listening to my husband promise to deliver "fresh product" to our host Anthony Franzese while the potbelly Italian practically gropes the young, terrified woman at his side. The longer we stay and mingle among these monsters, the more I'm convinced Sebastian is lying about me being a part of his business. There's no way I'm party to such a thing. It takes everything in me not to vomit all over the man's expensive handmade Italian loafers just looking at the waif of a girl—no doubt a trafficked woman—standing like a dead-eyed statue next to the pig.

"I believe we have a deal, *Signore* Vas... Marius," Mr. Franzese says, and I pretend not to notice his blunder.

But in true Sebastian style, he plays it off. "If we're to do business, you must remember my name, *Signore* Franzese." He chuckles and slaps the man on the shoulder harder than necessary if the wince on Franzese's face is any indication.

"*S...sí,*" the pig stumbles. "So many people I've spoken to tonight, and one begins to blur into another." He swallows nervously, and sweat lines his receding hairline.

"I understand, my friend." Sebastian smiles down at me, and I return it with my own. "I think it's time my wife and I took our leave. I look forward to doing business with you." He shakes the man's hand and then starts on a path to the exit before stopping and grumbling something under his breath.

"What? What's wrong?"

"Nothing, I just need to speak with one more person. Can you entertain yourself for a few minutes?" he asks but is already walking away before I can answer.

Gripping my leather clutch tightly, I watch the partygoers laugh and drink while I stand to the side,

softly humming a song. One that pokes at a memory as the words “It’s alright. It’s okay” and “you’re not a demon” pop into my head. The tune is familiar, yet I can’t remember where I’ve heard it.

“Mio Dio! Signorina Greta!” A cheerful voice rings out from my left. I turn to see a short round man approach. His smile is a mile wide, his eyes the color of dark cocoa, and salt and pepper hair with a bushy mustache to match.

He envelops me in a warm hug, and the smell of herbs and spices has my mind grasping at an image just out of reach. I hug the man back and clench my eyes shut at the thumping in my temples while my chest warms with affection when he squeezes me tighter.

You know this person, Greta. Think, think.

He pulls away with wide eyes and a knowing smile. “Oh, what am I saying. It is *Signora* Calvano now, yes?” My heart stops, and goosebumps race along my skin. “Is Emiliano here? I would like to speak with that scoundrel about not bringing you back to my restaurant more often.” He laughs, but his smile drops, and his laughter vanishes when I still haven’t spoken a word. “Are you alright, *mia bambina?*”

I stare into the man’s eyes for what seems like an eternity when suddenly, it clicks. The restaurant, Emil and me on a date, the piano, the song I hummed earlier, and finally, the confirmation that everything I thought I knew is real.

My head pounds with the vivid recollection, but it doesn’t stop the smile and joyful tears that form. I hug the man again. “Alfonzo, the best chef in Italy!”

I’m not insane.

He pats my back and pulls away to look at me. “*Corretto, mia bambina.* That’s why I, Alfonzo Moretti, am requested by name to cater such,” he gestures around

the room, “lavish affairs as this.” I smile at his bravado and nearly sob with relief as he speaks, but my joy is quickly dashed when his words remind me of where I am and *who* I’m with. My skin suddenly feels too tight, and my brow lines with perspiration as my panic rises. I can’t let Sebastian see Alfonzo. If he finds out that the kind older man let the cat out of the bag, he’ll hurt him or worse.

Alfonzo is still jabbering when I take his hand and drag him to the side to a dimly lit corner of the room. “Alfonzo, I know this will sound insane, but I need you to leave and not mention you ever saw me to *anyone*, okay?”

Concern clouds the dark chocolate of his eyes, and the lines around them deepen. “*Signora*, are you in trouble?” he whispers, and I don’t bother to lie.

“Yes, but I refuse to get you involved. If you want to help me—”

“Of course I do,” he states firmly as though insulted.

I take a cursory look around. No one is paying us any attention, and Sebastian is nowhere in sight. I turn pleading eyes back to the stout man. “Then I need you to do as I say. Walk away and pretend we never spoke. Do you understand?” My heart gallops in a chaotic rhythm as the seconds tick away while Alfonzo studies me before finally nodding, turning, and walking away.

I nearly collapse in relief, then almost jump out of my skin when a strong arm wraps around my waist and lips ghost over the shell of my ear. “What are you doing all the way over here, my love?” Sebastian asks playfully but with a scent of accusation coating his tone.

Still playing my role, I face him and place a hand on his solid chest. “I couldn’t handle the crowd anymore. I needed to find a quiet spot to catch my breath. Are you finished?”

His eyes narrow in suspicion, and for two heartbeats, I think I'm caught, but I relax when he places a kiss on my forehead. "I understand. You've done very well tonight, considering the circumstances," he says the latter with a hint of disgust, as though my supposed mental disorder is something to be ashamed of. Refusing to cause a scene, I bottle up a snappy retort and smile as he guides me out of the mansion to his car.

The ride home is quiet except for the deep timbre of Carlo Magno playing quietly in the background. With each passing mile, my anger boils, and the urge to draw blood nearly consumes me. My knee bounces, my hands sweat as they squeeze the empty clutch in my hands, and a surge of adrenaline rushes to my muscles, ready for a fight.

"What's wrong?" Sebastian sighs next to me as he takes the turns at breakneck speed.

"Nothing. Just watch the road." My answer is clipped, but I don't give a shit.

"Excuse me? What the fuck did you just say?" Sebastian's hands white-knuckle the steering wheel, and a cloud of menace thickens the air around us.

I never get to answer because the gates to his home open, and he barely misses clipping the side mirror as he races up the driveway. He slams on the brake, jerks the shifter into park, opens his door, and rounds the hood, all before I can unbuckle my seatbelt.

The next thing I know, my door swings open, and he reaches in, grasping my upper arm with bruising force, and drags me from the car. The entire time I keep my eyes forward and my chin high while the beast inside me roars to bleed this man dry. To tear his throat out with my bare teeth.

I stumble beside him in my heels as he marches us up to the door and into the house. The click of the lock is

like the start bell to a boxer. I turn on him, but Sebastian's hand goes around my neck, and my back hits the wall with a painful thud. I refuse to show an ounce of discomfort. Even when he brings his face centimeters from mine and speaks through gritted teeth. "How dare you speak to me in such a way? I am your husband, and you will respect my authority."

I ignore his asinine comment. "You're a fucking liar," I grit back instead.

"What are you talking about?" His fingers flex around my throat, and my heels lift from the ground when he presses me higher on the wall.

"I'm not your wife..." I say through gasps of breath. "I'm not insane. I know ... everything that happened between Emiliano and me was real."

He tips his head to the side like a curious child. *A demented child*. "Really? Did the voices in your head tell you that? Or are you back to believing those fucking stories in your head?" he taunts, but I only smirk.

"No. Though, I must admit you had me questioning my sanity there for a second." His grip on my throat tightens in warning, but I refuse to back down. "But tonight," I choke, "I got confirmation of your lies."

A mocking smile spreads across his handsome face. "Really? And how is that?"

"Does it matter? I know the truth now, but what I don't know is why." I wrap my fingers around his wrist and press my thumb hard against his inner gate pressure point. He winces, and his grip loosens slightly. "Why, Sebastian? Or is that even your real name?"

He strokes the pulse of my neck with his thumb, and his lips stretch into a demented grin. He looks maniacal, and goosebumps skitter across my skin at that look. "You want to know the truth, little Greta?" I swear my

heart stops for a second. He releases my throat, and I sag against the wall while I gulp in precious oxygen.

He gestures for me to follow him. "Where are we going?" I ask to his back.

"No questions. If you want to know the truth, you will do as you're told. What's the truth worth to you, Greta?" He speaks over his shoulder, his eyes taking a lazy path to my lips, then down my body as his tongue laves his plump bottom lip.

What's the truth worth to me?

As much as I want to run and hide in my room, bury my head in the sand, I also want... need the truth. Decision made, I steel my spine and lift my chin, but my voice still trembles as I speak. "I want the truth," I answer.

He licks a path across his upper teeth, then gives me a model-worthy smile. "Then follow me."

We walk past one room after another until we reach what I know to be his room. My throat thickens with uncertainty, and the blood thunders through my veins when he opens the door and ushers me inside.

"Take off your dress and lay on the bed," Sebastian orders, and after a beat of second-guessing myself, with trembling fingers, I do as he says.

It's only flesh, Greta. He may demand your body, but you still have your heart, mind, and soul.

My dress drops to the floor, and my heels are discarded. I climb onto the four-poster bed in my black lace bra and panties and lie in the middle of the king bed. The whole time I can feel Sebastian's heated stare on my skin like a physical touch.

"Good girl. Now, where should I begin?" He steps to my side and runs a finger from my collarbone to my breasts, stopping at my belly button, where he circles.

My abs tighten, my nipples peak, and I have to blink away the tears of shame that sting the back of my eyes at my body's reaction.

What the fuck is wrong with me?

"Little did I know that I was the one in danger of your darkness." Emiliano's words ring through my mind, and as crazy as it sounds, now that I know what Emiliano and I had was real, every touch from Sebastian feels like a betrayal. I owe Emiliano nothing besides a punch to the testicles. Still, doubt at what I saw nags at me.

Sebastian sits beside me and continues to draw invisible lines along my skin, a smirk planted firmly on his face. "Let's start with facts, shall we? Your family's debt was never owed to the Calvanos but to my family, the Vasiles." I gasp as a brick in the wall that is my control thuds to the ground. "That's right, *Piccolo Uccello*. Emiliano's grandfather wiped out my family before *that* truth could be revealed. I was only spared because I was ... away at school in Germany. They didn't bother to come for me after, so I stayed in Germany to be raised by nuns and ultimately trained by ex-military mercenaries." The hand currently not stroking my skin fists, and an ominous cloud passes over his face as he seems to drift into a memory.

"What does that mean? *That* truth? What else were they hiding?" I hate that my curiosity is getting the better of me.

"A bombshell," he says with a sinister smirk before continuing. "I waited until I was old enough—strong enough—to use my family name to make the connections I needed to rise from the ashes the Calvanos created with the massacre of my family. I began selling drugs, then became a low-level pimp before moving to more lucrative opportunities. Soon enough, I carved out a nice little business for myself, and I was far enough away from Italy to keep under the

Calvano's radar. It wasn't until recently that I decided it was time to make my mark on their territory."

My mind grapples with what he's telling me.

Low-level pimp, more lucrative opportunities... aka flesh trade.

Then it hits me like a hammer to the head. "The missing tourists in Rome."

Clearly impressed that I put two and two together, Sebastian strokes my cheek and smiles like a proud papa. "Correct. But I couldn't infiltrate Rome without help. So, with evidence of the Calvano's many deceptions, I bartered a deal with the recently dethroned Calvano. Work with me or have his family secrets revealed and be thrown to the wolves of the six families. Though the old man would argue he had no choice, Idris Calvano was thrilled for the opportunity."

Idris' involvement is no surprise, but what about Emiliano? I open my mouth to ask but shut it again. I wasn't sure I wanted to hear confirmation of Emiliano's involvement in selling human beings.

Ultimately, I don't have to ask because Sebastian can read it in my tear-glazed eyes and in the tremble of my lips. "You want to know if Emiliano had any involvement in my business." He sighs and runs a hand over his short dark hair. "I wish I could say he was as eager as his father, but I can't because I never offered it to him. I knew about Emiliano's war against the flesh trade, so we forged documents and used Emiliano's letterhead to give our business legitimacy with buyers. I set my plan to take over Rome in motion when I found out he had found you. I started small, taking one or two women every couple of months. When I received confirmation from Idris that you were in Emil's hands, I escalated the abductions to distract Emiliano. I knew he'd eventually let his guard down regarding you, and I would seize the opportunity.

Emiliano did all the work for me, and now I have his precious *perla*,” he mocks.

“Don’t fucking call me that,” I growl, which only seems to amuse him as he continues to smirk and stroke my skin, and while before my body reacted to his touch, now any trace of sexual attraction is gone, leaving nothing but fury in my veins as he runs a hand down my leg.

I kick his hand away and lift myself off the bed when suddenly he’s on top of me, straddling my hips, chest pressed against mine. “Where do you think you’re going? You wanted the truth, so lie still and listen.”

With his massive body pressing mine into the mattress, my instinct kicks in, and I bring a knee up to unbalance him, but he’s quicker and lifts his ankle to capture mine, then presses his kneecap into my thigh. I grunt and squirm beneath him as he digs his knee into my muscle. Pain shoots up my thigh to my hip, and I can’t help but wince. So, I don’t see his hand remove something from his pants pocket until the syringe hovers over my face.

I still instantly, my skin going ice cold as a memory tries to punch through. A church, stark blond hair, the pinch in my neck. “Wha... what’s that?”

Sebastian drags the capped needle down my neck, over my collarbone, and back up. “Haven’t you wondered why your memories come and go? Your gut tells you they’re there but just out of reach?” I swallow and manage a slight nod. “That’s because I’ve come up with a little concoction that helps keep those pesky memories at bay. I’ve been feeding you a little bit a day, but it seems you will need a full dose tonight.” He uncaps the needle with his teeth and spits the cap to the side. “Be still for me, and in the morning, it will be like none of this ever happened.”

Ding, ding, ding!

With strength I never knew I had, I rip my hand out from under Sebastian and bring the heel of my palm flying up to catch him under his chin, making his head snap up and his teeth to clink together violently. He curses but holds tight to the syringe, so with a twist of my arm, I elbow him in the temple. He cries out and teeters to the side, and I'm so focused on twisting my body out from beneath him that I don't feel the needle's sting in my bicep until the plunger is pressed and the liquid inside sends a sickly-sweet taste to my mouth.

I pull the syringe from my arm with lank hands, but it's too late. The heavy pull of whatever drug this maniac created takes effect, and my limbs drop to the bed. "You son of a..." My words slur before trailing off.

Sebastian strokes my hair and looks down at me in victory. "Sleep, *Piccolo Uccello*. Tomorrow will be a new day, and this will all be like a bad dream." I want to kick and scream when he kisses my lips, but my body won't obey my brain's demand to move.

And with a villain's kiss upon my lips, my eyelids slide shut, and darkness takes me.

8

Emiliano

The meeting with Bernardo is set for two days from now. After further discussion—and a fuck ton of hesitation on my part—we agreed that it will be Xander who will meet with him under the guise of being an up-and-coming arms dealer while my team and I listen outside in one of my armored Jeeps. Xander assures me that the video and audio devices he'll be wearing are undetectable, and the gun he'll carry is made from a unique material undetectable to metal detectors.

I hate to admit it, but I'm relieved to have the man's help and believe him when he assures me neither he nor the Marron House army will be raining hellfire on my home... At least until Greta is found, then all gloves are off if I try to keep her against her wishes—a war I am more than willing to fight.

My work is yet again interrupted by the low humming sound coming from my desk drawer, and I know immediately what—or more like *who*—it is.

Over the last few days, “Greta” hasn't communicated with her sisters, and their calls have become more persistent.

Pulling the phone from the drawer, I eye the wide grin of Miriam White while she flips the camera off. “They're not going to stop. I've already gotten half a dozen calls from MHS informing me they're blowing up their phones. Not only that, we've had to intercept a couple of calls to local law enforcement here and in Texas,” Xander enlightens me from his place on the couch across my office, never lifting his eyes from his laptop.

I know he's right, but fuck me, what am I supposed to say? “And what exactly am I supposed to tell them? I

kidnapped your sister for a debt you knew nothing about, and now she has been taken by a rival faction and has been off the grid for over a month?" I grouse.

Xander shrugs. "Exactly. Although, let's leave out the kidnapping part. As of right now, they're under the impression that Greta came here on a whim, then met someone. We will keep to that narrative." The phone stops vibrating, only to immediately start up again. "Here, let me talk to her."

"Fine. Fuck it." I hand him the phone, and to my surprise, he puts it on speaker.

"Hey, Mir—"

"Don't 'hey me,' you Italian-speaking fucker! I know some shit is going on, and I want to speak to my sister, Right. The. Fuck. Now!" the youngest sister spits, and I can't stop the grin from stretching my lips.

I like her.

"Miriam, it's me, Xander Cain, from MHS. I was sent to Rome to check on your sister."

"Oh. Good. Where is she then?" Her snippy tone turns to one of desperation. It seems her sisters are this hothead's weakness.

"That's a long story."

"Bullshi—"

"A story I plan on telling you, but I need you to be calm and level-headed, but most of all, I need you to trust me, Miriam. Can you do that?" We wait to see if the firecracker will relent.

Finally, she relents. "I trust you. Now tell me what's going on." Xander lets out a breath of relief and does as she demands. He starts from our love affair and goes from there. Xander plays me off as a low-level thug rather than the mafia don I am, but I put my ego aside for now. He tells Miriam that Greta was abducted while

sightseeing and that we've been searching for her and believe we've found a lead.

The whole time Miriam remains so quiet that Xander has to check to ensure the call is still connected. "Miriam, you still there?"

Miriam clears her throat, and her tone is painted with vulnerability when she finally speaks. And fury. "I'm coming to Rome."

"Miriam, I don't —"

"Save it, Xander. We're talking about *my sister*, and I don't care if I have to scrape together every penny I've saved. I'm coming to Rome to help find her."

Shaking my head at Xander, I silently convey not to bother trying to convince her to stay in Texas. Instead, I extend an olive branch. "I'll send my plane for you. It will be faster and more comfortable for your son."

Xander cuts aggravated eyes my way, and I answer it with a challenging tip of a brow. The man may be an asset to finding Greta, but this is still my world, and he'll need to learn to play by my rules.

"Your plane." It's not a question. "Never knew a low-level thug could afford their own plane."

The girl was smart.

I shrug though I know she can't see me. "I do my job well."

"Mhmm," Miriam returns.

"My plane can be at Alliance Airport at 5 AM Central Standard time tomorrow morning."

"I'm bringing Addie. Greta is going to need us both." She leaves no room for argument before disconnecting, and I can't help but chuckle while Xander groans and rubs a hand over the scruff on his chin.

“You won’t be laughing when that tornado hits Rome,” he grumbles, and I only laugh harder. It seems all the Conti descendants are pains in the ass.

A knock sounds on my office door, interrupting my brief mirth. “*Entrare*,” I call out, and Dom enters, an unsettling look in his dark eyes. Dom is the soldier Boian put on Camil to watch over her while we go after the one responsible for taking Greta—much to Camil’s protest.

“What is it?”

He looks around at the men in the room before switching to our ancestry tongue. “Excuse the interruption, Don Calvano, but I felt you needed to be aware that Miss Radu and I were followed today while at the market.”

Before I can respond, Boian is out of his chair and in front of Dom, hands fisted at his side, back ramrod straight. “Was anyone hurt?” he asks, shirking the real question he wants to ask—was Camil hurt?

“No, sir. They were amateurs, and I was aware of them the entire time. I lost them after only a few strategic turns in the Rover.” Boian nods, then turns violet eyes, ablaze with fury and ... fear on me. We don’t say a word, but the message is loud and clear. Camil needs to be taken to safety. She’ll hate us for it, but at least she’ll be safe.

With my nod of agreement, Boian storms from my office. Things are about to get really ugly in the Calvano house.

9

Greta

The crisp morning air hits my exposed breasts, and my nipples harden to diamond points. The smell of winter fills my nose, and my warm breath creates vapor halos in the air. It's freezing outside, but my body is on fire as I lie naked across the damp earth, my hand drifting along the skin of my tummy and down to the trimmed triangle of hair between my thighs. Feeling, exploring.

"Don't you dare touch what's mine," a deep sultry timbre comes from above me. My eyes open to see his face cast in dark shadows, yet my body lights up at the touch of his warm skin against mine.

"Then do something about this ache," I plead with him. "Please, help me."

"So greedy. Hungry for what only I can give you." His tongue glides a fiery path along my neck, down my collarbone to my breasts, where he takes a nipple into his mouth and suckles harshly.

"Ah!" I thrust my breast into his mouth, and his growl of approval has my hips swiveling and my need to be filled growing in ferocity. "Please, I need...."

I yelp when his hand comes down on my pussy with a stinging slap, then moan when he soothes the sting with a swirl of his fingers on my clit. "I know what you need. You're not the one in control, Greta. Now be a good girl and open your legs wide for me."

I do as he demands, and I'm rewarded with his head dipping between my legs, where his tongue laps up my wetness. My back arches as bolts of ecstasy race over my nerves, and my stomach tightens with the intense flutter of pleasure.

“So good,” I groan and clutch the soft curls on his head. He eats me like a starved man, switching from sucking on my clit to spearing my sex with his thick tongue. “Oh God, please. I need to come. I...”

He pulls my hands from his hair and slams them to my side, then lifts himself until I feel his breath on my lips and smell my musk on his breath. “You will come when I permit it, and it will be with my cock buried inside you,” he growls and, thrusting his hips, impales me on his cock. I cry out at the sharp pinch of pain as his thick cock tunnels deep, then moan when that pain morphs into sweet euphoria.

“Fuck! Your cunt is heaven,” he groans into my neck, and I want him to lift his head so I can see him, but when he pulls out to his tip and thrusts again, I can do nothing but moan and whimper at the pleasure crashing over me. He picks up his pace and dips his hips at just the right moment, hitting my clit with each deep thrust.

“Yes, right there!”

“You like that, mia perla? Fuck, you’re so wet for me. Whose pussy is this? Who owns you, Greta?” he rumbles and bites the tender flesh of my neck when I don’t answer quickly enough.

“Ah! Yours. It’s your pussy. You own me. Oh, dear God, yes!” I cry and lift my hips to meet his thrusts as my orgasm crests.

“I can feel you tightening around my cock. Are you ready to come, mia perla?” he gasps, and I nod, speechless from the pleasure wracking my bones. “Say my name, Greta. Say my name when you come on my cock.”

My orgasm teeters on the edge as I grapple for a name I can’t seem to recall.

“Do it, Greta! Say my name!” he pleads, and my heart pinches at the desperation in his voice.

“I ca... can’t. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.” Tears trail down my temples as the world around us becomes fuzzy. I reach out for

him but find nothing but empty air. The orgasm just out of reach vanishes as my head grows heavy, and the sudden thumping in my skull threatens to split my head in two.

I groan as the dream fades and the daggers in my head dig deeper. My eyes and mouth are sticky, my limbs leaden, and the smell of grease and spice makes my stomach roll.

What the hell happened?

“I don’t think champagne agrees with you.” I startle at Sebastian’s voice, bolt upright in bed, and curse when my world swirls in front of me, my stomach twists, and my head pulses painfully.

Clutching the sides of my head, I groan and clench my eyes shut. “What happened?” I croak, and Sebastian hands me a glass of water and two ibuprofen, which I swallow eagerly.

He sits beside me on the bed, his ripped torso bare and his lower half donned in black pajama pants. “You were nervous at the party last night and needed some liquid courage. I went to speak to a potential client, and upon my return, you were...” he smiles wide, “uninhibited.”

I groan again and flop back down on the pillows that feel like boulders against my skull. “I hate champagne.” I turn into the pillow and notice with startling realization that I’m not in my bed.

I swing my eyes to Sebastian, who’s still smiling at me. “Do not worry, *Piccolo Uccello*, nothing happened. I put you in our room to keep an eye on you. *Signore Rossi* undressed and dressed you.”

I look down to see the long white, short-sleeved night dress I’m wearing, and though the thought of that one-acorn-short-of-a-nuthouse seeing me naked is unpleasant, I’m glad it was her rather than Sebastian himself.

“Thank you,” I mumble.

“You’re very welcome. Now you must eat.” He grabs a tray stacked with bacon, eggs, and a mountain of pancakes from the side table.

I clutch my stomach when it twists. “I don’t think I can,” I grumble in protest.

“You must. The fat will help with the hangover. Come.” He places the tray at my feet and extends a hand to help me slowly rise to sit with my back against the headboard.

Sebastian places the tray on my lap and takes a piece of crisp bacon between his thumb and index finger. “Open,” he instructs, but I don’t comply. This feels too intimate, and something needles at the back of my mind. Something I was meant to remember, but I can’t quite recall.

Shrugging it off, I go to take the bacon from his fingers, but he pulls back before I can grab it. “I can feed myself, Seb,” I assert and go to pick up a piece of bacon off the plate.

His hand captures mine firmly, and that needling feeling returns. “I know you can, my love, but I want to take care of you. I shouldn’t have let you drink so much last night. It could affect your recovery.” He pushes a lock of hair behind my ear and smiles lovingly at me. “You called me Seb.” The sudden change in topic has my lashes fluttering rapidly in confusion.

When I finally realize what he’s referring to, I silently curse myself for my mistake and cast my eyes away from his ocean blues that hold so much hope. “It just seemed easier.”

Rough fingers stroke my cheek, and my heartbeat picks up its tempo when a previous memory tries to push through. The pounding in my head begins a tango as I try to grasp the image, only to remain distorted. All but for two golden eyes that seem familiar.

“It’s what you used to call me, Greta. This is progress.” He places the bacon against my closed lips. “Now be a good girl and open for me.” This time I do as I’m told. Sebastian continues to feed me, and before I know it, my plate is empty, and the stabbing in my head has dissipated to a dull ache.

“Better?” Sebastian asks while removing the tray and placing it outside the door.

“Yes, thank you. I would kill for a shower and a toothbrush, though.”

Sebastian chuckles and pulls the blankets back for me. “No need to commit murder, *Piccolo Uccello*. The bathroom is stocked with everything you will need. I’ll be in my office when you’re done. Later, if you’re up for it, we can hike up to the mountain base.”

“In the rain?” I ask, wide-eyed. I’m all for exercise, but not at the expense of catching pneumonia.

Sebastian crosses his muscled arms over his chest while trying to contain the smirk playing on his lips. “What’s wrong? You can’t handle a little drizzle, little bird?” He cocks a dark brow in challenge.

And I can’t help the smile that stretches my lips. The thought of getting outside and working my body to its limits and showing this cocky bastard what I’m capable of has the competitor in me taking the bait. “Not at all. Just don’t come crying to me when you get your ass handed to you by a girl,” I throw back, then turn to head to the bathroom when my hand is clasped, and Sebastian gently pulls me into his chest, a bright, mischievous smile planted firmly on his face.

My eyes study his before dropping to his pouty lips, where his teeth bite into the tender flesh, causing a tingle to race up my spine. When he feels the goosebumps along my skin, his smile drops, and his eyes turn predatory right before he brings his lips down on mine.

My heart thunders in my chest when his tongue sweeps a languid path across my lower lip, and when I don't rebuke him, Sebastian deepens the kiss, his hands gripping my hips in a possessive hold as he grinds his erection against my tummy.

Warm all over and moaning in wanton need, golden eyes flash across my vision, the smell of leather and sage cloud my senses, and a deep phantom voice whispers, "*Sei mia, mia perla*. You're mine, my pearl." The endearment has me gasping against soft lips and my temples throbbing as I cling to the image of those eyes.

Sebastian fades into the ether as the phantom's hands slide to my ass, squeezing the twin globes and pressing his erection against my stomach. I moan into his lips, and he growls against mine as he slowly gathers my nightdress at my hips, his pinkies grazing the bare skin beneath.

"*Eccola.*" There she is. "*Il piccolo Uccello*. My little bird," the voice says, but the endearment is all wrong, and like a wrecking ball smashing into a brick wall, the image of my golden-eyed phantom comes crashing down.

My eyes shoot open, and my skin chills when they lock on azul eyes. I push against Sebastian's chest, and he lets me go freely, confusion and hurt swimming in the ocean that is his eyes. "What's wrong?"

I take a step back and touch my fingertips to my lips, my brain still scattered and confused about what the hell just happened. "I... I don't..." I struggle to come up with a rational explanation for my sudden change. "I just don't think I'm ready for this—" I wave a hand between him and me, "to be more."

Sebastian stands stoic for what seems like minutes before releasing a deep exhale and running a hand over his short-cropped hair, then dropping them to his hips. His eyes search mine, and I detect a spark of anger in their blue depths. "I understand," he finally says, that

spark burning hotter when he steps into my space. “But don’t be a prick tease, Greta. You won’t like the consequences.”

With the threat barely off his lips, he turns and leaves, leaving me chilled to the bone but also stoking the fury bubbling beneath the surface at his warning.

Something isn’t right, and my instincts tell me I need to remember something—or someone—and that the golden-eyed phantom may hold the key.

10

Emiliano

“I said fuck off!” Camil’s raised voice echoes through the penthouse, and I inwardly cringe when I hear glass shatter and Boian’s responding curses.

“I’m doing this to protect you!” Boian shouts back.

“Bullshit, Bo! You want me out of the way.” Camil’s voice grows closer when she stomps into the living room. “Instead of sending me away, you should let me help. Greta is dear to me. You can’t expect me to sit in some remote location waiting to hear whether she has been found! Or if she’s even alive.”

“You can help by doing as you’re told,” Boian grits, and I can only imagine the scathing look Camil is throwing his way. “I’ll make sure you’re kept informed of our progress,” Boian attempts to reassure her.

“The answer is no.”

A long pause echoes louder than the shattering glass from before, and when Boian speaks again, I know exactly what’s coming. “My apologies, *Fiore*. I must have given you the impression you had a choice.” Another pause.

“You son of a—” Camil’s curse slurs as the tranquilizer takes hold.

“Are her things ready?” Boian asks one of my men, and they talk briefly before the penthouse door opens and then shuts a second later.

Leaning my head back against my chair, I breathe through the guilt knotting my stomach and scrub my hands over the scruff of my chin.

Guilt. An emotion I never struggled with until Greta came into my life. And fuck if it isn't a bitch of an annoyance.

My cell phone buzzing across my desk breaks through the fog of guilt, the number for the front desk flashing across the screen. "*Si?*"

"*Signore*, there's an Alfonzo Moretti here. He insists on seeing you."

Curiosity as to why the chef from my favorite restaurant in Olbia was here in Rome, insisting on seeing me, has me allowing him access.

I meet Alfonzo at the elevator, and the moment the doors open, the small man storms into my home and turns on me with fury shadowing his pudgy face.

"By all means, Alfonzo, come in," I quip humorlessly and turn to face him, my temper stoked by his blatant disrespect.

"I'm here because I can no longer sit by and let this happen," he blurts, fists clenched at his side.

"I didn't ask why you're here. However, tread very carefully, old man. I'm not known for my patience with those who disrespect me. Now explain and be quick about it."

Alfonzo's face pales at the realization of his actions. His hands unclench only to wring them nervously as he explains, "My apologies, *signore* Calvano. I meant no disrespect, but..."

"But?"

"But I've been worried since the night of *Signore* Franzese's party. She seemed so frightened and—"

The hairs on the back of my neck stand on end, and my blood pumps adrenaline through my veins at the thought of the *she* he speaks of is *mia perla*. "Who? Who seemed frightened, Alfonzo?"

His brow furrows in confusion. “*Signorina* Greta,” he states matter-of-factly, and it’s as though rays of sunshine split the dark clouds surrounding me.

In two long strides, I’m in front of the man, my hands gripping his shoulders. “Tell me everything,” I order, nearly breathless with anticipation.

“I...” He clears his throat. “I was catering *Signore* Franzese’s annual gathering—”

“Anthony Franzese?” I interrupt.

“*Sì*. That’s where I ran into *Signorina* Greta.” The lines around his eyes deepen with his scowl, and his eyes turn distant, recalling the memory. “She was standing alone when I approached her. I asked if you were there, but she seemed ... confused ... as though she didn’t recognize me. Then something changed, and she addressed me like an old friend...” He trails off, eyes still looking off into the distance.

“Yes?” I grumble, my patience wearing thin.

He shakes his head and then brings his eyes back to me. “We were having a lovely conversation when just as quickly, she became terrified. I asked her if she was in trouble, and she said yes and begged me to leave and tell no one I saw her.”

A punch to the gut from a skilled fighter couldn’t have hurt more than his words. *Mia perla* was out there terrified with no one to protect her.

But she’s alive, I remind myself.

Swallowing the lump in my throat, I continue my interrogation. “Did she mention anyone? Perhaps why she was so afraid?”

“No. To be honest, I assumed it was you, *signore*.”

My hackles rise at his assumption. “Is that why you stormed into my home? You thought I was terrorizing her? Did she look terrified the last time we saw you,

Alfonzo?” I was the don of the most powerful crime family in Italy, and my reputation as a ruthless leader only aided in keeping my people in line. The people may appreciate my contributions to the city, but they know what I’m capable of because I never bother to hide it. So why did my stomach churn at the thought of anyone believing I could hurt Greta?

Alfonzo swallows audibly. “I know who and what you are, *signore*,” he says in the way of an answer. “Can you begrudge me my concern?”

Releasing him from my hold, I round my desk and gesture to one of the overstuffed leather chairs. “Take a seat, my friend, and tell me everything you remember about that night.”



I never was one for sitting and waiting, so while Xander moves forward with Bernardo—in case Franzese is a dead end—I set up my meeting with Anthony Franzese. Typically, I wouldn’t waste my time on vermin such as Anthony Franzese, but I want *mia perla* back, so I grit my teeth and set up the meeting under the pretense that I’m interested in some of his “product.” Franzese canceled his flight back to Naples.

Alto pulls up to the large gates of Franzese’s Bolzano home, the guard scans the inside of the vehicle, and when he’s satisfied, the gates open, and the large, gaudy mansion comes into view. Alto parks the SUV in front of the gold-trimmed front steps where Franzese stands with a wide grin on his smarmy face.

Cracking my neck, I open my door and glare at the guard that approaches me with the intent to search me. “Touch me, and you will lose your hands.”

Franzese wheezes out a boisterous laugh. “*Va bene, Gian.*” He waves off the guard. “Welcome, Don Calvano. It’s an honor to have you here.”

“Franzese.” I offer my hand and quietly seethe when I think of what those hands have done to innocent women and children.

“Please call me Anthony. If we’re to do business, we must be friends, no?”

“No,” I return. “You will be a supplier, not a friend, Franzese. Now it’s fucking cold out here, and I’m an impatient man.”

The pig swallows loudly, then chuckles nervously. I stare at the *cazzo*, making it clear that I’m not a joking man. His mirth dies instantly, and he leads us inside and to his office. “Please sit.” He gestures to the gold velvet couch, and while I sit, Alto stands sentry at the door. “Scotch?” Franzese asks.

“Enough with the pleasantries. Sit down, and let’s get this shit over with,” I grumble. Like a good little boy, he sits in his high-back office chair like a fucking king on his throne—all an illusion and one I plan to snuff out. “Nuncio,” I call out when Franzese’s ass hits the leather.

His eyes narrow and then go wide with fear when Nuncio walks in with a roll of duct tape, a leather bundle under one arm, and Rooster at his side.

“What’s the meaning of this?” Franzese stands on trembling legs. “How did—”

“Sit. Down,” I command calmly. Looking past Nuncio, he searches for his guards, who won’t be showing up. When he realizes no one is coming to his rescue, he slowly sits back in his chair.

Nuncio instructs Rooster to sit by the desk facing Franzese, and I swear the man is about to piss himself when Rooster gives him a warning growl. Nuncio chuckles and lays his bundle atop the desk, opening it

for Franzese to get a good look at the knives, bone saw, and pliers. “I guess dogs can sense you’re a piece of shit, too.”

Franzese’s eyes volley between Rooster and the implements of torture Nuncio is running his fingers over like a lover’s caress.

“What do you want? Money, territory? Wo... women?” Franzese stutters, and I bare my teeth at the latter but rein myself in when I remember time is of the essence.

“There was a young woman at the recent party you held—”

“There were a lot of young women there. I don’t—” He never finishes his statement. Nuncio’s fist is swift and like a sledgehammer when it comes down on the man’s jaw.

“Do not fucking interrupt me!” I rumble, and Rooster growls and stands, ready for me to give the command to attack. “As I was saying. There was a young woman there that night. Greta White, long dark hair, dark blue eyes, American.” Franzese’s eyes grow wide at the latter, and my heart nearly punches out of my chest.

Bingo.

Nuncio brings out his ten-inch hooked blade and twirls the menacing piece as he steps next to Franzese. “I... I don’t....”

“Ah ah. No lies, Franzese. We already have confirmation she was here. What I want from you is the name of the man she was with.” When the slimy bastard doesn’t speak, Nuncio’s hand shoots out, Franzese cries out when what hair he has left is fisted in Nuncio’s hand, and the hooked edge of his blade makes contact with the skin just below Franzese’s left eye.

“Please, Don Calvano. You know this world. If I speak, I’m as good as dead.”

I shrug. “True. The question is: do you wish to die now, slowly and painfully, while you piss and shit yourself? Or live a little longer, maybe years longer, before you get what has been coming to you?”

Nuncio presses the blade into the soft flesh beneath Franzese’s eye, and the oily man grunts and clenches his fists as a trickle of blood runs down his cheek. “Vasile!” the man calls out. “Stefan Vasile or Sebastian... Whatever the fuck he calls himself. He... he introduced her as his wife.”

My blood runs cold in my veins while the beast inside roars for blood. “And what did she say?” Franzese’s brow furrows in confusion, so I clarify. “Did she refute being his wife?”

“N... no. She didn’t say much at all.”

I nod. “Did he mention where he was staying?”

“No, but I know he has a home here in Bolzano. I was a guest in his home once in Rome, and he mentioned building a house here. Couldn’t stop talking about it.” His words are labored, and his eyes can’t decide where to settle—on me, the knife at his eye, or Rooster, whose short hair stands on end, teeth bared, and paws slowly creeping closer.

Almost disappointed with how easy it was to get information from the pig, I nod to Nuncio, and he immediately releases Franzese, who slumps in his chair with a relieved sigh.

“Rooster, heel,” I command Greta’s beast, and he obeys. Nuncio gathers his bundle, and we leave his office, but not before I turn around and look back at him, still shaking and sweating in his chair. “It was a pleasure doing business with you.” I turn to leave, then snap my fingers as though remembering something. “I almost forgot. The warehouse you use to store your product is being burnt to the ground as we speak. Your offshore

accounts have been drained, the money distributed evenly among the families of the eleven women we rescued from the warehouse.” Franzese’s face turns a dark crimson, and while I would love to taunt the fucker some more, I have shit to do. I jerk my chin at Alto. “Put the little piggy out of his misery.” I walk out the door, Franzese’s pathetic pleas of mercy a sweet lullaby before the gun goes off.

One cazzo malato down, only hundreds more to go.

11

Greta

Timberlines laced up tight, insulated black leggings, long-sleeve thermal Henley, and a puffer jacket ensure I stay nice and toasty during our hike. I slip on my leather gloves as my brain goes over the flashes of images plaguing me all morning when I hear Sebastian yelling at someone in rapid-fire German.

I tip-toe down the stairs and lean over the banister to find Sebastian pacing in his office. He has a murderous scowl on his face, and one hand is fisted at his side while the other white knuckles the phone at his ear.

“Find someone else, and do it fast!” he orders, then slams the phone down on his desk. I turn to go back upstairs when his voice halts my steps. “Come here, *Piccolo Uccello*.” His clear blue eyes lift to mine, and the command is not to be disobeyed.

My steps are hesitant as I make my way to Sebastian’s office and ask from the doorway, “Is everything alright?” But he doesn’t speak. Instead, he crooks a finger, gesturing me to come closer.

When I don’t move, he smiles at me like a doting husband, but something in his eyes unsettles me. “Do not be afraid, Bird.”

Straightening my spine, I close the gap between us. As soon as I’m within reach, his hands grasp my hips, and he’s pulling me between his legs, where he leans against his desk. My hands land on his hard chest, and his smile stretches, showing perfect white teeth. “That’s better. To answer your question, no, everything is not alright. One of our partners was killed, and his warehouse burnt down.”

My heart thrills at the news, but I know I have a part to play. So instead of dancing with joy, I furrow my brow and ask, “What about the product?”

“Gone,” he answers, hands tightening on my hips.

“All of them? Gone as in dead?”

“Yes, all of them, and no, not dead, taken.”

“But why? Why would someone do—”

“Because they want what’s mine.” He drags me closer, and I gasp when one hand goes around my throat. His Mediterranean eyes lock with mine, and I take a moment to study the deep pools for the first time.

Ringed with the darkest green hue, specks of gray throughout the palest blue ... and something that chills me to the bone. Something that penetrates the rainbow of colors, warning of the animal beneath.

Clearing my throat, I take a step back and smile. “Well, from what I’ve learned about you, you won’t let it keep you from *taking* what you want.”

His face is stoic as he studies me, then he bursts into laughter and lands a swift playful slap on my ass. “Very true, Bird. Speaking of wanting.” He turns to the side table displaying the ugliest vase I’ve ever seen and picks up a square velvet box. “Merry Christmas, my love.”

Christmas? Where has the time gone?

He opens the box to reveal a beautiful strand of pearls. I smile down at the elegant piece of jewelry when a sudden lightning bolt of pain rips through my skull. My eyes clench shut, and I have to catch myself on the desk or go spilling onto the carpet.

Sebastian’s hand shoots out to steady me. “Whoa. Are you alright, *Piccolo Uccello*?”

Hell no, I’m not alright. It feels like Mike Tyson is beating the shit out of my skull, I want to snip back. Instead, I rub

at my temples and nod. “Yes, but I don’t think the hangover is quite finished with me yet.”

He places the jewelry box back on the table and brings me back into his arms to place a kiss on my forehead. “My poor little wife. Let’s get going before it gets too dark. The fresh air will do you some good.”

“Good idea,” I agree and let him take my hand and guide me to the back door. “Wait, I didn’t get you anything for Christmas.”

Sebastian smiles over his shoulder. “There’s still time, little bird.” He winks.



Emiliano

“Does anyone have eyes on her yet?” I ask through my comms, keeping my voice steady while my heartbeat is anything but.

We located Vasile’s home in Bolzano three days after meeting with Franzese. It took Lorenzo and Xander working around the clock and me and my men torturing a few Bolzano thugs to get the information we needed, but we got it.

“Not yet, boss,” Alto reports back.

“That’s a no go on my side,” Lorenzo follows.

“Nothing, *signore*.” Nuncio is the last to answer.

“Xander, what do you see?” I inquire. Xander is hidden in the trees just off the property, where he controls the drones. They’re whisper quiet and can reach heights that make them undetectable to the naked eye. Perfect for what we need.

“Fucking trees... Give me a minute,” he returns, and I have to refrain from telling him to hurry the fuck up. My skin feels too tight while my blood pumps copious amounts of adrenaline through my muscles. I’m ready to crack skulls, but I must be patient and wait. “Okay, gentlemen, the numbers look the same. Two guards in the front, two in the back.”

“What about inside?” Alto’s disembodied voice comes through.

“We have two bodies in the kitchen, one in a room off the north side, and two coming out the back as we speak.”

My ears perk up, and the breath is knocked from my lungs when the back door opens, and *she* steps out.

Mia perla.

Her chestnut strands lift in the chilly winter breeze, her nose and cheeks flush pink, and her big blue eyes shine as she breathes in the winter air. My body screams for me to move from my cover in the brush of the forest. To run to her and kill every motherfucker that gets in my way. She’s mere yards away, but I can’t get to her. Not yet.

“Target spotted, but she’s not alone, gentlemen,” Xander’s voice comes through my comms right as Vasile steps out and takes Greta’s hand.

My blood boils, and my hands nearly crush the binoculars I use to watch them.

“*Aspettalo, Capo,*” Alto tells me to take it easy.

To which I fire back with, “Fuck off, old man,” and get a chorus of chuckles in return.

“Focus, gentlemen. It looks like he’s taking her into the woods.”

“Why the fuck is he taking her into the woods?” My heartbeat picks up to dangerous levels.

Did he get wind of our arrival and is now about to kill her?

The thought has me lifting myself from the brush, but I halt with Xander's following words. "Don't move, Calvano. I'm picking up audio now." The comms go quiet, and the hum of the blood rushing in my ears is deafening as I wait for him to speak again. "They're hiking. I think we just got handed the fucking winning lottery ticket, gentlemen," Xander hoots like the victory is already ours.

But I won't celebrate until that bastard, Vasile, is dead and *mia perla* is in my arms. "Let's not get ahead of ourselves. The battle is not won yet."

"*È tăn è epì tâs,*" Xander quotes the ancient Greek proverb.

Either with it or on it.

12

Greta

Glorious. It's the only word to describe the beauty of the world I'm hiking through. The tall trees with their limbs glistening with dew, the smell of fresh rain and winter, and then, like magic, a dusting of snowflakes fall and dance around us. It's straight out of a Disney fairy tale—and rare for this time of year in Bolzano, the temperatures holding steady at a crisp thirty degrees Fahrenheit, allowing the snow to stick and stay around a little longer.

"Incredible, isn't it?" Sebastian voices my unspoken thoughts.

"It is," I return and hold out my tongue to catch a snowflake.

"In the spring, the Lupines grow wild as far as the eyes can see. A rainbow of pinks, purples, blues, and fuchsias spread across the entire base of the mountains."

A smirk plays on my lips when I turn to him and continue to walk backward as I speak. "How very Robert Frost of you, Seb. Should I—" I yelp as my foot catches on a tree root. I brace myself for the pain of hitting the forest floor, but it never comes. Sebastian's arms lock around my waist, and my breasts crush against his hard chest.

"Careful, Bird," he warns with a playful glint in his eyes before they turn red hot with desire. Those lethal blue eyes trail to my lips, and while my skin pebbles and my tummy tightens at that look, at the same time, for reasons I can't understand, my chest aches as guilt washes over me.

I don't have time to ponder the disconcerting feeling when Sebastian's lips crash down on mine, and my back

hits a tree. The kiss is demanding and possessive as he eats at my lips savagely. The tightening in my stomach trails down to my core, where my clit zings. But the ache of guilt in my chest steals my breath, and tears sting the back of my eyes.

What's wrong with me?

Frustrated, I growl into Sebastian's mouth and grip the short strands of his hair, desperate to drown the guilt that clings to me like oil.

"That's it, baby. Give yourself to me," Sebastian groans against my lips and takes my bottom lip between his teeth. I moan into his mouth when his hands grip my ass, and he lifts me from the ground. "Fucking jackets," he growls and thrusts his denim-covered erection against my center. My legs wrap around his waist, and I grind my core against his hardness. "Mmm, you're playing a dangerous game, Bird." He smiles into our kiss, and his words stab at my chest.

"You're playing a dangerous game, little girl. One that you will lose." A voice comes from the deep recesses of my mind. A voice that tugs at the guilt burning inside my chest, and this time I let the tears escape my eyes.

I wrench my lips from Sebastian's, and he takes the opportunity to nibble and suck on the skin of my neck. "Seb, stop. I... I can't." I push against his chest, but he has me locked between his body and the tree.

When I wiggle to get free, he bites down painfully on the pulse point of my neck. I cry out, but my pain only seems to spur him on as he tightens his grip on my ass, digging in his fingertips. "Enough of your shit, Greta. You're my wife and will give me what a husband is owed."

"You're hurting me!" I grunt and push against him with my pelvis.

“Good. It’s what you get when you tease a starved animal,” Sebastian grits and brings a hand to my throat, cutting off my oxygen. My hands fly to his wrist, where I dig my nails into his skin. “That’s right, hurt me. Because for every drop of my blood you spill, I’ll spill three times as much of yours.”

“Let ... go of me,” I choke beneath his hold, and as though I never spoke or he wasn’t draining me of oxygen, he brings his mouth down on mine again in a bruising kiss. My legs drop, but he keeps me pinned against the tree while his other hand reaches between our bodies, shoves it down my leggings, and thrusts rough fingers inside my sex. I scream around his lips, and suddenly, the stale smell of booze and cigars invades my nostrils, and another voice, different from the one earlier, echoes in my head.

“You have a tight little cunt. I was told I couldn’t fuck you with my cock, so I’ll fuck you with my fingers.”

The voice repulses me, and bile rises up my throat, still restricted by Sebastian’s hand.

And like a twig beneath my feet, I snap.

I bite down hard on his bottom lip, and when he pulls away with a curse, I bring my palm flying up into Sebastian’s nose. His chin whips up, and the snap of bone has him stumbling back and releasing me from his hold. I clutch my aching neck as I gasp for air. “You son of a bitch. Don’t you ever touch me again!” My throat protests as I curse the bastard.

He straightens and turns watery eyes on me, his nose, lips, and chin coated in blood. I shudder in revulsion as he wipes some of the blood away with two fingers before placing them in his mouth and humming in satisfaction.

There’s an audible pop when he pulls his fingers from his mouth. “Three times as much, Greta. Or did you forget that too?” he taunts, then charges at me.

I steady my stance for the blow, ready to fight him until my last breath. With eyes laser-focused on the charging bull in front of me, I never see the dark shadow that approaches from behind.

“Stop, fucker!” the shadow bellows, and my lungs seize in my chest. I can’t recall how or why, but I know that voice. The deep timbre and authoritative cadence coats me in a blanket of warmth.

Sebastian stops in his tracks, eyes wide, teeth bared. “How the fuck did you find us?”

“Does it matter? I found you, motherfucker,” the shadow says, and I turn to see his gun raised at Sebastian. He takes another step forward, and his amber eyes lock on me when he comes into full view. Suddenly the world stops, my heart jumps into my throat, and a rush of relief has my knees nearly buckling while my temples pulse with nauseating pain.

What the hell is going on?

The man’s eyes swing back to Sebastian. “Greta, get behind me,” the man orders, but I stand frozen and not from the winter weather.

“Greta, do not move,” Sebastian seethes.

“Who are y—” I wince and bring a palm to my temple.

“You don’t fucking talk to her,” the man growls.

“She’s my wife, Calvano. I’ll speak to her however I wish. After all, I’m all she knows.” Sebastian’s lips stretch into a Cheshire Cat smile.

What the hell does that mean?

“What are you talking about? Never mind, I don’t give a shit. Your men are dead, your home will be blown to shit in about five minutes, and your entire operation will be crushed within days. You’re done,” the man—Calvano—gloats victoriously.

Sebastian's eyes drop, and his shoulders sag in defeat. And while the stranger seems confident in his victory, Sebastian's hand twitches to grab the gun I know he has hidden in a holster at his back, proving that he has no plans to surrender.

The man whistles, and seconds later, a massive Doberman steps to his side. The large dog's eyes latch onto me, and he whines, shifting from paw to paw as though he wants to come to me. Watching him, my eyes prick with tears, and my heart warms for the beast while fuzzy black blob tugs at my memory bank.

"Come quietly, or I'll order him to attack. Nothing like the feeling of canines hitting bone, Vasile."

"Fuck you, Calvano," Sebastian spits and raises his gun. My stomach drops, and my muscles engage as the unexplainable pull to protect the man propels me forward.

"Greta, no!"

BANG!

I jerk backward into the man's arms as blazing-hot pain engulfs my shoulder. The man's dog whimpers beside me and licks my cheek, but his yips of concern are drowned out when another shot goes off right above me, and there's a howl of pain. Then the man instructs someone to secure Sebastian.

"Greta. What the hell were you thinking?!" he scolds me.

"Who are..." I hiss when a bolt of pain shoots through my arm and chest as he lifts me in his arms.

"*Scusa, mia perla*, I know it hurts, but I need to get you to the hospital. Lorenzo, take that fucker back to Olbia. Alto, get the fucking car! She's bleeding out." More words are exchanged, but I can't make anything out clearly as the winter fairy tale fades around the edges,

and the last thing I hear before everything goes black is the man's plea. "Don't leave me, *mia perla*. Not again."

13

Emiliano

The bastard is lucky the shot to Greta's shoulder was a through-and-through, and no significant damage was done. Otherwise, I would... What the fuck am I saying? Regardless, I'm going to boil the man alive.

For the first time since my mother was taken, I was terrified. I felt helpless when Greta leaped in front of that bullet, her body jerking violently with the impact, and livid as I cradled her in my arms the whole ride back. Three emotions warred inside me as we drove what felt like hours when it was only minutes to one of the many private hospitals in Italy that I kept funded, therefore, providing care for me, my men, and the six families with utmost secrecy.

Now Alto and I sit, waiting to hear about her condition.

Greta is strong. Stronger than all my men put together. Stronger than me. And stubborn as hell, and she'll not simply lay down and die.

"Uh, *scusa*, I'm looking for my sister Greta White. I was told she was here." I recognize Miriam's voice and groan at the thought of getting an earful from the woman not known for pulling any punches with her feelings toward me.

"*Signorina* White's fiancé is already in the waiting room if you—"

"My sister doesn't have a fiancé. Now, if you're talking about that narcissistic, egomaniac—"

"Miriam," Xander scolds, then guides her and Adelaide toward the waiting room reserved for my people and me.

As the trio approaches, both sisters' eyes latch onto me with hellfire glowing in their eyes. I jerk my chin at

Xander, and he takes the hint to shut the waiting room door.

The sisters take a seat across from me, and while Adelaide grabs a magazine she clearly can't read but uses to ignore me, Miriam narrows her eyes at me and literally snarls.

"A pleasure to finally meet you, ladies," I say deadpan.

"Fuck you, Calvano. My sister better be okay because I'll gladly display your heart on my wall if she isn't." She leans forward. "Right next to your dick."

While I admire—even respect—the woman for having the balls to speak to a known murderer in such a way, her ballsiness is starting to piss me off.

I go to tell her as much when my phone vibrates in my pocket, and I pull it out to see Boian's name flash across the screen.

Once he returned from whatever off-the-grid location he planted Camil, I instructed him to watch over Rome for as long as I was gone.

Hitting the answer button, I stand and walk to a secluded corner. "*Si?*"

"Idris is dying." He gets right to the point, and while the average human would feel even the slightest bit of sadness for the man that raised them, I feel ... nothing.

The man was no father to me, and I still believe he's the reason behind my mother's abduction and ultimate murder. He wasn't talking, and I'd taken more than my pound of flesh from him in the form of fingers, skin, and bone. I was done with the waste of a human being.

Still, my curiosity was piqued. "What happened?"

"Sepsis has set in. I guess the doctor wasn't as thorough with his treatment."

"Dispose of the body after he dies," I instruct.

“No formal burial?” Boian asks, already knowing the answer.

“No. And make sure to send the doctor a healthy bonus for his trouble,” I finish, then disconnect the call.

“Everything good?” Alto asks from my side.

“My father is dying,” I answer dismissively, and Alto nods and returns to his seat.

“*Signore* Calvano,” the doctor approaches our group.

“*Sì.*”

“*Signorina* White is stable. We were able to fix the thoracoacromial artery without further blood loss.” The breath I didn’t know I was holding gushes from my lungs, and I’m light-headed with relief.

“When can we see her?” Adelaide asks through happy tears.

“She’s heavily sedated, but you can see her now. Only two...” The doctor’s words die on his tongue when he catches my look of warning. No one, not even the doctor, will restrict anyone in my trusted circle. And when he swallows audibly and looks like he might piss his pants, I know he’s gotten the hint. “Room 125.”

Smiling, I slap him on the back harder than is needed, say, “Thank you, Doctor,” and head for the doors leading to the patient rooms.

“I guess being a criminal has its perks,” Miriam mutters, not too quietly behind me.

“Let it go, Miriam,” Adelaide grouses, and I can’t help but smirk at the differences between the three sisters. Miriam is a foul-mouthed fighter, Adelaide is the quiet peacemaker with a spine of steel, and Greta is a mix of both, only with a dark side that keeps me craving more of *mia perla*.

“It may not be in Greta’s best interest to have so many people crowded around when she wakes,” Xander cautions quietly as we make our way to Greta’s room. “There’s no telling what that asshole did to her. She didn’t even seem to recognize you.”

“I’m not leaving her to wake up alone in a strange place, Cain,” I grit, and when he grabs my bicep to stop me, I turn and fist his collar in my hands before slamming him against the wall. “You won’t keep me from her,” I breathe in his face.

His hands grip my wrist, and his eyes spark with violence. “I’m not trying to keep you from her, Calvano. I’m thinking of her mental well-being. Think about it from her point of view. If she wakes up to half a dozen people she may not even recognize, how the fuck do you think she’s going to react?” His hands tighten on my wrists, but I refuse to show even an ounce of discomfort.

Finally accepting the truth in his words, I release him and run a shaky hand through my hair. No matter how much I hate the idea of not being there when Greta wakes up, I need to do what is best for her. “I’m not leaving this hospital until she opens her eyes, so what do you suggest?”

“We all go in now, but when she wakes, it needs to be just her sisters,” he returns, and I immediately hate the idea. Miriam is pissed, and Adelaide can’t lie if her life depended on it.

And I tell him as much. “I won’t have them,” I point to the sisters, “filling her head with shit to turn her against me.”

“Emiliano.” Adelaide places a hand on my shoulder, and I turn my wrathful gaze to her. She doesn’t so much as flinch and continues, “Please let us do this, and I give you my word that we won’t speak a single word against you. Right, Miriam?” She turns a warning look on her

sister, who crosses her arms over her chest and murmurs a reluctant agreement.

Looking between the two sisters, I remind myself this is what's best for Greta, and with a growl, I do something I never did before Greta came into my life... I give in.

14

Greta

So many voices.

Am I back in the hospital? None of the voices sound like Diego or that bitchy nurse that couldn't crack a smile if a gun was placed to her head. Have I gone so deep into the insanity that I'm hearing voices? Why won't my eyes open? Or are they open, and I've drifted to a deep void inside my head?

"It's been two days. Why isn't she waking up?" I want to cry at the sound of Adelaide's voice.

But what if it isn't real?

"The doctor said her body could be protecting itself, and the drugs he gave her could be fucking with her brain." A burly voice comes through the blackness.

"Maybe she's protecting herself from *certain people*, and that's why she won't wake up." *Miriam too?*

"Miriam, you said you wouldn't do this," Addie's gentle scold has me smiling. At least it would if I could move.

"I said when she's awake I would be good, but she's not awake, is she?" my younger sister counters, and between their bickering, a tiny gurgle, then a giggle comes through as though my nephew is putting in his two cents, and my heart leaps for joy.

My nephew's sweet baby talk is interrupted when the burly voice mumbles, "*Gesù Cristo.*"

Who is that, and why are they speaking Italian?

"Greta has no reason to fear me." This time the voice is deep and smooth like molasses, and my heart picks up to a gallop. The voice soothes me while intoxicating me at the same time.

“Then why did she run? You still haven’t explained that to us,” Miriam argues, and for some reason, I want to sit up and defend the man.

“Miriam, enough. I told you I would tell you everything once Greta was awake and settled.” *Xander Cain?*

More arguments ensue, and the more the voices around me bicker, the more I’m convinced they’re real. But why can’t I see them, and why do I feel like I’ve been hit by a truck?

“Ugh,” I hear myself moan, and instantly the voices go silent, feet shuffle, and an animalistic growl emanates from a distance before a door opens and shuts.

“Greta? Come on, babe, open your eyes,” Addie coos.

“Let’s go, chickadee. Time to wakey,” Miriam goofs, but her jesting can’t hide the concern in her tone.

Slivers of light break through the slits of my eyes, and I put all my strength into opening them fully. When I do, I nearly burst into tears when I see my sisters and nephew smiling down at me.

“Oh, my God, Greta!” Addie chokes and collapses into a chair next to my bed, smothering her head in my lap as she sobs. Slowly lifting my hand, I pet her hair to comfort her.

“How you feeling, sis?” Miriam asks as she bounces the sweet baby boy on her hip.

I smile up at her. “I…” I cough through my dry throat, and Miriam hands me a cup of water, deflecting Dean’s grabby hands like a pro.

“Sips. We don’t need you puking.”

I chuckle around the cup and then hand it back to her. “As I was saying. I thought you hated me, so seeing you both here, I feel pretty good.”

Miriam freezes, and Addie's head swings up, her eyes red and swollen. "Who told you that?" Addie asks.

I wipe away a fallen tear from her cheek. "Sebastian," I answer, and like a punch to the head, my mind spirals, and scenes flash in front of my eyes.

Kissing Sebastian in the snow, a gun in his hand, a beast standing next to the phantom from my dreams, then...

"He fucking shot me!" I cry in fury. The machine at my bedside beeps in warning as my heart rate climbs. My sisters stand on either side of me, squeezing each of my hands while they try to bring me down. "My own damn husband shot me!" I screech.

"Your husband? Greta, what the hell are you talking about?" Addie questions.

"Jesus, what kind of bullshit did that bastard feed her?" Miriam mumbles, then bends to get eye level with me. "Sebastian wasn't your husband, babe. And I'm going to go out on a limb here, but I'm pretty sure *everything* he told you was hog shit."

I gasp, this time in relief rather than rage, as more tears spring from my eyes. "Does that mean I'm not... I'm not insane?" I sob and release their hands to cover my mouth.

"Insane? Is that what he told you? I'm going to kill that motherfu—"

"Miriam! We need to calm her down, not rile her up," Addie lectures and turns her eyes back to me. "Why would you think you're insane, Greta?"

My teeth chatter and my body shakes as copious amounts of endorphins and adrenaline dump into my blood. "H... he did. Sebastian did," I clarify with a tremble in my voice. Closing my eyes, I take a deep inhale then exhale before speaking. "I remember waking up in a mental health hospital, strapped to a bed, and told I had had a psychotic break." My brow furrows as I try to recall

more memories, but the images are fuzzy. “I don’t remember what I did to land myself in a mental hospital, and when I asked Sebastian, he said it didn’t matter and that he’d take care of me. He also said we were married and showed me the marriage certificate.” An imaginary hand closes around my throat, and suddenly I can’t get enough air. My heart rate rises, and with it, the stabbing pain in my shoulder.

I wince and reach for the wound when Miriam grabs my hand and pulls it into hers. “Whoa, easy, sis. No more for now. Just know that you’re completely sane, and we’re here for you *as always*.” I giggle around another gasp, and more tears fall.

“Aw, don’t cry, sis. You know what I think will make you smile?” Miriam whistles loudly, and the next thing I know, light shines from the door opening, and the beast of a dog from before comes galloping through the door. My skull feels like it will split open any minute when like a bolt of lightning, the memory of me holding the runt of the litter of Dobermans abandoned on the street comes rushing forward. I sob with glee when he rushes to my bedside and waits patiently for the okay to jump on the bed with me. I pat my leg, and he jumps on the end of the bed before leaning over me and sniffing my injured shoulder.

I pat his smooth head and kiss his cold, wet nose. “Rooster,” I sigh and breathe in his doggy smell. “I’m okay, baby. I missed you so much,” I cry into his sleek fur. My head pounds with more memories of my baby boy, but I couldn’t care less. He is in my arms, safe and sound.

Rooster yips, then circles at the foot of the hospital bed several times before plopping down with a happy grumble.

15

Emiliano

Pacing outside Greta's room is driving the nurses and attending doctors crazy. And commandeering one of their workstations so I can get some work done while I'm banned from seeing her is getting metaphorical daggers thrown at me, but I don't give a shit. I am not leaving this hospital without her by my side.

My fist comes down hard on the nurse's station as I study the numbers in front of me. Sebastian was making out like a bandit with his flesh trade. Add in the luxury yacht-building business; his wealth nearly matches my own.

But not for long.

After burning Vasile's operation to the ground, I released everything having to do with the trafficking to Xander, who sent it to his bosses. He assured me MHS would work to find the women and children and close down shop. My attorney is currently taking out the trash in ways of anything illegal associated with the yacht business, which I plan to re-brand, restaff, and legitimize within six months with one of my trusted men at the helm.

"Emil," Adelaide calls.

Standing, I give the petite little brunette nurse a wink before walking to Addie, where she stands outside Greta's room. "Is everything alright?"

"Yes, everything is fine. She... she remembers you from the day she was shot. She asked us if we knew who you were, and of course, we told her yes...." She trails off.

"And," I prompt impatiently.

“She wants to thank you for saving her life. We told her she knew you previously but not in what capacity. Emil, I don’t know how you should handle this. All ask is that you use your best judgment.” She squeezes my bicep, a plea in her voice.

Nodding, I move around her and enter Greta’s room to infant cooing preceded by laughter. I stop just inside her room to watch her from the shadows, hoping it will be the last time I will have to watch from a distance.

“You’re so handsome. I can’t stand it,” she baby talks, then buries her face in the boy’s stomach, pretending to gobble him up.

My chest pinches, and I can’t stop the smile that stretches my lips watching her play with the little boy.

She’ll make a wonderful mother.

“Oh, hey there,” her lyrical voice floats in the stale hospital air to reach the deep longing inside me. “Emiliano, right?” She smiles and fuck me if my knees don’t go weak.

Ignoring Miriam’s scowl, I step from the shadows and walk to Greta’s bedside, stopping a few feet away with my hands tucked into my jeans, so I don’t reach out for her. “That’s correct, Emiliano Calvano. Though you may call me Emil.”

“Emil,” she tries my name on for size, and I have to keep my eyes from fluttering shut hearing her sweet voice say my name. Though, there is no help for my cock that stretches against my zipper. “Come to think of it, your name does sound familiar, but I just can’t place it. Would you mind filling in some blanks?”

“Greta, I’m not sure—”

“Miriam, it’s Greta’s decision,” Addie defends, and with a quiet growl and one last warning look from Miriam, they take the boy and leave.

Greta watches me, a slight smile on her beautiful face and a twinkle of curiosity in her sapphire eyes. “Before you begin, I believe a thank you is in order. You saved my life.”

“Let’s not forget you saved me first,” I argue.

She chuckles and brushes a dark lock of hair from her cheek. “I suppose you’re right. Still, thank you.”

I nod in acknowledgment. We both fall silent until my curiosity gets the better of me. “Why did you do it? If you don’t remember me, why did you jump in front of a fucking bullet for me?” I ask through clenched teeth.

Not the least bit intimidated by my ire, she puffs out her cheeks adorably and lets out a heavy sigh. “I don’t really know. Maybe ... instinct? No, not instinct,” she corrects. “More like protectiveness. Like something deep inside me drove me to protect you. Like ... we were connected,” she whispers the last part more to herself, but I hear her loud and clear, and I can no longer keep my distance.

I walk up to the edge of the bed and gather her hands in mine. “We are connected, Greta. We were...” I pause with the words *in love* hovering on my lips. I’m desperate to remind her how we had fallen for each other but remembering all the shit I have to tell her first, I alter the truth slightly, “together. Our beginning was not conventional or ideal—it was fucked up, actually.”

Her eyes galvanize into a metallic blue, and her beautiful face turns stern. “Tell me everything.”

So again, I do something I’ve never done before meeting *mia perla*. I obey. I go all the way back to the beginning. I tell her about her great-grandmother and grandmother, how they “owed” the Calvanos, and how I collected on that debt. I nearly crush the bed railing in my hand when I tell her about the punishments and the assault my father permitted against my orders. As I recall

the events of our life together, I want to tear my father limb from limb while shredding the flesh from my bones for not protecting her. For giving into my family's need for revenge—no matter how much I stand to inherit upon mine and Greta's marriage.

Greta's expression volleys from stoic to rage, to disgust, and everything in between as I continue to tell her our story. My voice is steady and unfeeling. Only when I tell her the reason behind her running from me do I let myself show any emotion.

Sorrow, helplessness. Rage.

"You left and put yourself at risk because you didn't have the fucking patience to wait for me to come home and explain!" I seethe and lean into her personal space. "Because you didn't fucking *trust* me."

Her hands launch forward, and she shoves me harder than I would expect for someone with a bullet wound in her shoulder and without so much as a wince. "What the hell did you expect?!" she barks. "After what you just told me, you're lucky I didn't cut your balls off and feed them to Rooster."

With a growl, I stand, grip the roots of my overgrown hair, and drop my head back, praying for patience. Because fuck if she wasn't right, but it didn't stop the anger at her betrayal from burning molten hot in my chest.

I drop my head and place my hands on my hips to hide the shaking. "You're right. I told you that our beginning was fucked up—"

"Pfft, you think?" she interrupts, and I'm back in her face, but this time I catch her hands when she moves to shove me again. Gripping both wrists in one of mine, I bring the other to her cheek, where I stroke her soft skin in an attempt to soothe the savage beast inside her.

“Despite it all, and no matter how much we fought against it, we felt something for each other. I never pretended to be a good man, Greta. I’m not a knight in shining armor. I’m a man with immense power that I yield with a fair hand but an iron fist. I’m the assassin with a mark. I’m the monster in the shadows.” I bring her hands to my lips to lay feather-soft kisses on her fingertips. “But I’m *your* monster, *mia perla*. I’m the man who will steal, kill, torture, and die for you, and a part of you knows that. That’s why you were pulled to protect me. You knew I would do the same for you. You knew we were meant to be together.”

Her face remains stern, but her eyes glisten with knowing. Only her pride won’t let her acquiesce.

“How do I know everything you told me is true? How do I know we ... cared for one another?” She lifts her chin in challenge.

I drop my hand from her cheek to place it over her heart. “Because you feel it too, but you don’t want to give in to it because it will mean you want something that others would run screaming from. But that’s the thing, *mia perla*: with me, you don’t have to run from who you are and what you desire. I’ve seen all of you,” I bring my lips a hairsbreadth from hers, “and I’ve never wanted anything more in my life,” I finish, then slam my lips to hers, hard and hungry. She’s stiff and unyielding for seconds before her lips go soft, and she devours my mouth with a ferocity that tells me I’m not off the hook. A point punctuated by the sting of her bite and the taste of blood on my lips. I smile around her savagery and speak against her lips. “Duly noted, *mia perla*.”

16

Greta

I'm insane!

I have to be for agreeing to stay in Italy. Right? Especially after everything Emiliano unloaded on me at the hospital. Yet I believed every word he spoke, much to my chagrin. With every word he spoke, my mind flashed with images moving too fast for me to see fully, but the emotions that came with them were all too real. I felt the anger, fear, anxiety, and deep affection he spoke about.

So being the curious idiot I am, I agreed to stay not just in Italy, but in *his* home in Olbia. My sisters were naturally wary of my decision, but again Addie made the point that it was my decision. After Emiliano handed me my phone and swore that I would always have access to it, Miriam eventually gave in and retracted her claws.

Unfortunately, neither one could spare any more time away. My nephew had doctor's appointments back home, and my sisters had to return to work. My heart sank at their impending departure, then warmed at Emiliano's offer to pay for their lost wages and have Dean seen by one of the best pediatricians on the island. Both sisters, even Miriam—although begrudgingly—thanked him but declined his offer.

Xander promised to get them safely back to Texas, but not without making triple sure I was good with staying, and only after his brief but heated conversation with Emiliano.

Soon after, I was fitted with a sling and discharged. The quick plane ride over the Tyrrhenian Sea was breathtaking, but as we drive down the village streets of Olbia, the welcoming waves and shouts of "welcome

home” were what had me in awe. By his own admission, Emiliano was a criminal—a murderer—yet the people seem to love him. Of course, to this day, Pablo Escobar is still revered as a modern-day Robin Hood, even after bringing his own city to destruction. And I suspect Emiliano uses the same tactic Escobar did.

“You take care of them,” I mumble, focusing on the people shouting and waving as we pass.

“I ensure they live in relative peace and security by providing funds to the city to maintain the buildings and homes and economic support for those struggling to put food on their table,” he answers robotically.

I roll my eyes. “In other words, you take care of them, so they keep your dirty little secrets.” I’m not sure why I’m being snarky with him, and when he doesn’t snap back, I feel like a bitch. “Sorry. It’s just a lot—”

“Don’t apologize. You’re partly right. However, I do care for the people under my protection,” he says earnestly, and I’m inclined to believe him.

Suddenly, Rooster stirs next to me and starts whining and staring out the window. “What’s wrong, baby?”

“He wants you to roll down the window. The people love to share their freshly baked bread and treats with him. He has become quite spoiled.” Emiliano chuckles, and I can’t help but smile at my boy.

I roll down my window and let him step across me as the driver—Alto, I believe—slows enough for people to approach and hand Rooster handfuls of bread and baked dog biscuits that smell so good even I’m tempted to try one. My heart warms with the people’s affection for him, and tears prick the back of my eyes when a mother lifts her little girl to hand Rooster a dog cookie.

But the shouts of “Benvenuto a casa, Signorina White,” Welcome home, have the tears tipping over my lids and falling down my cheeks.

I wave to the crowd as Alto speeds up and raises my window. Rooster settles back on my lap with a happy grumble, and I wipe away the rogue tears and stare out the window. “They know who I am. How? I thought I was a prisoner. Payment for some bogus debt.”

Emiliano releases a frustrated sigh from his seat upfront and turns to look back at me. “I told you, Greta, though we didn’t start off on the best of terms, we began to care for one another. When you ran away,” his eyes narrow on me, and I narrow my own right back, “I had all of Rome looking for you. It’s no surprise it got back to Olbia.”

“Yeah, but they seem happy to see me. Like a returning soldier or—”

“Their queen?” Alto pipes in.

“Something like that,” I mumble.

“That’s because you are. Italy has its government, but like it or not, it’s the underworld that keeps things running smoothly. Politicians are just a cover—”

“Because the people don’t want to know what dirty deeds it takes to run the country,” I finish for him.

“Exactly. We work together to keep the peace. Yes, sometimes blood is shed, and people are removed from their positions, but it’s never mindless killing. The people of Olbia know this and are grateful for our leadership and protection.”

“That doesn’t explain them welcoming me.”

“Doesn’t it? Part of the debt re-payment was your hand in marriage. The people know this too.” I swallow my boiling anger at the reminder of being forced to marry. “But it wasn’t until I enlisted their help in finding you that they understood the true nature of my feelings for you. Because I don’t ask for help, Greta. Not from my people. I keep my affairs separate, so to ask for their help showed them how important you were to me.”

“Your prize,” I mock, but he only shakes his head and turns back in his seat as we make our way to his villa.



Emiliano

The woman could try the patience of a saint, but there's no point arguing with her right now. All she sees is a criminal and a low life. It doesn't matter that she melted into my kiss or that it took her a good two minutes to push me away and slap me. It will take time for her memory to return. I just hope it will come back before she decides I'm not worth the effort.

The large gates to my home open, and a sense of pride warms my stomach when I hear Greta gasp as the villa comes into view. I want her to love this place as much as I do and find the same peace from its beautiful azure waters, soft sands, and the glorious view of the caverns just offshore.

“Incredible,” she says more to herself.

“Wait until you see the back. It's your favorite place to exercise and train Rooster.” Alto smiles at her through the rear-view mirror, and my nerves prick with jealousy when she gives him her bright smile.

Then like a switch has been flipped, her eyes widen, and she gasps. “You helped me. Train Rooster, I mean.” I turn in my seat to look at *mia perla*. The smile she throws back to Alto lights up the interior of the SUV while tears pool in her eyes. “I... I remember. The beach, Rooster chasing after me. It was chilly and...” She suddenly stops and locks eyes with me. The tears dry immediately, her brow furrows, and fury shoots from her sapphire eyes.

I watch in smug satisfaction as the scene plays through her mind. Me taking chase after her, pinning her to the stand, accusing her of trying to escape. I see the moment the memory of *what else* happened on that beach plays through her beautiful head when her eyelashes flutter and her cheeks flush bright pink.

“What else happened, *mia perla*?” I can’t help but tease.

She returns her stare back to the scenery. “I don’t remember,” she lies, and I snicker when the pink of her cheeks turns crimson.

“You’re such a little liar, *mia perla*.” I smile and exit the SUV.

Alto helps Greta from the vehicle, and when her feet are fully planted on the ground, he gestures to her arm in the sling and says something that has her throwing her head back in laughter. The jealousy from before returns with the force of a sledgehammer. I want to be the one to make her laugh so uninhibitedly. Was it childish and petty to want to punch the smile right off Alto’s face? Yes. But did I give a shit? Not one bit. However, I don’t get to lament the torrent of emotions churning inside me or knock a few of my driver’s teeth loose when Boian rushes out the front door like a bull charging at a matador.

“The *cazzo* escaped!” is all he says as he storms toward his armored Range Rover, but it’s enough to have my heart stilling in my chest and rage turning my blood to molten lava.

“Are you fucking kidding me! How did he escape?” I bellow at my second.

“I don’t know, Emil. Are you coming or not?” Boian yells back, and if he were any other man, I would string him up and beat him to within an inch of his life.

Instead, I turn to Alto. “You’re to guard her with your life. If anything happens to her, I’ll slit your throat. Do you—”

“Don’t talk to him that way!” Greta squares up to me as she steps in front of Alto, her eyes throwing daggers. “Go do what you have to do. We will be here when you get back.”

While her words are meant to calm me, they only bring back the memory of the night she ran—the devastation, the pain, the betrayal. Quick as a cat, my hand wraps around her throat while the other fists her hair to pull her nose to nose with me. “Let me make this very clear: if you run again, Alto will pay the price.”

Her eyes widen. “What?!” she asks through labored breaths. My hold on her throat is by no means tight, yet her chest rises and falls heavily as she gulps for air, panic bubbling below the surface. The human side of me wants to take her in my arms and console her, while the beast lying below the surface of my control beats its chest at the thought of her putting herself in danger. Of her leaving me... *again*.

So, I grant her no mercy. “That’s right, *mia perla*. You may have lost all sense of self-preservation, but I know you wouldn’t want another person to be punished for your stupidity. Alto knows what his job is and what it means if he fails. Do you?” I growl against her lips. I’m taunting her but also challenging *mia perla*; as I knew it would, the panic vanishes like smoke in the wind, and something lethal takes its place.

And when I bring our lips closer, she bares her teeth, then snaps at my lips. “I won’t run. Now remove your hand from my throat, Calvano, or you will be mourning the loss of your left testicle.”

There’s my girl.

Grinning, I loosen my hold on her hair but keep my hand on her throat and lay a kiss on her forehead, ignoring her claws digging into my wrist. “Good. Your clothes are still in your room, and the library is fully stocked. Stay inside for now and rest,” I dictate and watch as the desire to tell me to fuck off shimmers in her eyes.

In the end, she only nods and allows Alto to escort her inside, and I wait until they’re safely tucked inside my villa before turning back to Boian. “Now, who the fuck do I need to kill?”

17

Greta

I can still feel Emiliano's hand around my throat. The moment his hand shot out, the memory of Sebastian's hand on my throat had my knees nearly buckling in terror and panic, threatening to starve me of breath. Then like a tectonic plate, something shifted, and panic gave way to a startling sense of safety. Of course, the very notion that I was safe in this man's hands had me back to questioning my sanity. But it wasn't until desire pulsed along my skin, and my clit sizzled under his dominant hold that I got pissed. That's when my claws came out to play—literally. I wanted to claw out his gorgeous eyes as much as I wanted to claw his back as he rode me to ecstasy. In the end, I sheathed my claws and decided the battle between body and mind was best fought another day.

Now, I'm strolling alongside my burly guard as he shows me around Emiliano's island villa. Alto wasn't kidding when he suggested the inside was as beautiful as the outside. It is four bedrooms, not including Emiliano's office. The master bedroom overlooks the grander side of the beach while the kitchen, living room, and dining area open onto the terrace with a sea view and outdoor dining. Alto explains that the impressive training gym and shooting range were added a few years back when Emiliano started spending more time here instead of in Rome. However remarkable, it is the library with the most drool-worthy collection of books lining three walls that has me dancing with excitement.

Once I've completed my library jig, Alto guides me to the backyard, where I stutter to a halt and stare, mouth gaping at the scene before me. A small beach with sand that looks as soft as brown sugar disappears under the

waves of the sea's crystal-clear waters. There's a plush garden that ends with a shaded area right in front of the water, equipped with sunbeds and beach umbrellas closed for the winter months, and granite boulders stand sentry on either side of the villa, creating an environment of natural beauty. In the distance, I can see a private dock with a James Bond-looking speed boat tied to it.

"Glorioso, no?" Alto says at my side.

"Sì, mozzafiato."

"I'm glad you remember you speak the language. What would you like to do, *cara?*" he asks, and the endearment rings in my ears, along with a sudden flash of him smiling down at me in the dead of night. Then like an old movie reel, it skips to a gun in his hand as he points it at someone's head.

My head begins to throb, and my eyes clench shut as the swirl of images threatens to crack my skull open. My knees turn to Jell-O, and my shoulder throbs with the brutal beating in my head.

"Signorina White, are you alright?" Alto's question comes out muffled, as though I'm underwater, and I have to shake my pounding head to bring myself back from drowning. He sighs and pinches the bridge of his nose. "Of course, you aren't. You must get some rest."

"I think that's a good idea," I agree and follow him to my room, where he shows me around the robin's egg blue room. Front and center sits a white king-sized sleigh bed with matching white side tables that give an elegant contrast against the pale blue comforter. The floors are made of distressed white wood, and a built-in desk with a white office chair is tucked neatly to the side. The only items littering the polished white wood are a laptop and a legal pad. To the right, there's a small walk-in closet stocked with clothes for all occasions. On one wall are sneakers, heels, and flip-flops. Along the other, a center island holds various bathing suits and undergarments.

My final destination is the bathroom, designed to give an open and peaceful feel with white granite countertops, distressed white hardwood floors, and a large open shower with a claw-foot tub set off to the side.

“Rest, *cara*. You’re due for two of these,” Alto instructs from the bedroom. He places my pain meds on the side table next to a bottle of water.

“Is the water bottled sealed?” I switch off the bathroom light and join him in the bedroom.

His brow furrows in confusion at my question, but I don’t bother to explain. Instead, I pick up the bottle and scrutinize the seal. When it crackles upon twisting it open, I nod and set it back down.

Still looking complexed, Alto stares at the water bottle like it could hold the meaning of life. When he doesn’t find an answer, he looks back at me. “I’ll have lunch brought up. If you need anything else, text me.”

“I will. Thank you, Alto.” I manage a small smile.

He smiles back, then shocks the hell out of me when he places a gentle kiss on my forehead. “You’re very welcome, my child.” My eyes sting with unshed tears at the big man’s fatherly affection, and when he walks out of my room and closes the door behind him, I allow myself a moment to imagine him as my father growing up.

Would things have been different? Would my mother have spiraled?

With a heavy sigh, I decide those questions are useless and begin to shed my clothes and search for a pajama set. I find a two-piece set with pants and a long sleeve button-up made of the softest material known to man. Careful of my throbbing shoulder, I remove my sling, change, then climb onto the luxurious bed. I swallow down my pain medication, and within minutes, I feel myself melt into the plush mattress. I float into a

blissful sleep with dreams filled with golden eyes, possessive hands, and whispers of an unfamiliar melody.

It's alright, it's okay...



Emiliano

The bodies of my men litter the ground outside the large steel warehouse, bullet casings glittering in the morning sunshine around them. Marco lies in a pool of blood inside, his throat cut from ear to ear, while Lorenzo's moans of agony come from the next room where the doctor works to sew up the deep gash in his gut and reset his dislocated shoulder. The stubborn bastard refuses drugs, but there will be no avoiding knocking his ass out to remove the bullet in his chest that blessedly missed his heart.

"What the fuck happened, Boian?" I circle Marco's body, my hands fisted at my sides, my blood pumping the acidic need for retribution through my veins.

"All I could get from Lorenzo before the doc got here was that they were ambushed," he answers, his own wrath barely contained under his stoicism.

"I can fucking see that! But how? We have measures in place for such an event. We should have seen this shit from a mile away." I kick the chair Vasile was tied to across the room, the loud clatter of metal against concrete echoing off the steel walls.

"We did. Lorenzo sounded the alarm, and I was immediately notified, but the guy had a fucking army on us within seconds. None of it makes sense, Emil. We had him. He was stripped and searched. He had no way to communicate, and we killed everyone at the house.

So, who the fuck sent the calvary?” Tension and rage electrify the air around us as we ponder where we went wrong. We underestimated the bastard, that’s for sure. Stefan Vasile has more loyal followers than I thought, *or* the men that attacked us are hired mercenaries. My bet is on the latter.

“We had to have missed something.”

“Or *someone*,” Boian utters more to himself. The sound of gravel under tires signals that our clean-up crew has arrived, and the curses tell me they’re just as pissed.

Letting them work, I enter the room where the doctor has administered the anesthesia and is scrubbing in for surgery. “Will he make it?” I inquire stoically. Now is not the time to be emotional. My men need to see me in control.

“He’s strong, and Boian was able to stop much of the bleeding, so I’m optimistic.” Without another word, I leave the sterile room, letting the doctor work.

“I just checked on Camil. Besides her giving Dom a headache, everything is quiet,” Boian reports from behind me, and a wave of relief helps settle some of my rage.

“Good. We don’t know how much this *cazzo* knows. Keep her under lock and key no matter how much she protests.”

“Already done.” We both head out of the warehouse. “Do you think Greta is up to going over anything she may have learned while staying with Vasile?”

Jerking the door open, I speak to Boian over the roof of the Rover. “She’s strong and just as determined to catch the fucker. She’ll be ready.” I plop down into the leather seat, Boian following.

“And what about you?” he asks.

I turn a questioning look to my second. “What about me?”

He tilts his neck side to side, the slight popping of nitrogen released between bones louder in the car’s interior. “There are things that might have happened between them, Emil. She was told he was her husband—”

“Finish that sentence, and I’ll cut out your fucking tongue,” I seethe, hands fisted, heart punching a hole through my chest.

He points a finger at me. “That right there. That’s what I mean, *mio amico*. Will you be able to keep your shit together if the worst comes out? Will you be able to forgive her?”

“I only blame her for running, not for Vasile’s manipulations,” I return. Yes, it would gut me if she and Vasile have been intimate, but I won’t blame her. She was taken, drugged, and gaslighted to think everything she knew was a figment of her imagination. But something tells me that *mia perla* wouldn’t just give herself to Vasile on his words alone, and seeing the fight she put up against him the day we rescued her only strengthens that belief. “Greta wouldn’t give herself to him so easily, but if she did, I wouldn’t blame her, so there’s nothing to forgive.”

I feel Boian’s violet gaze burning into my profile. Turning my eyes to him, I smirk at the dumbfounded look on his face. “What? Is it so unbelievable that I can show mercy?”

“Yes,” he answers too quickly, then peels out of the parking lot.

18

Greta

The azure waves turn a deep gray, matching the dark overcast sky ... and my mood. I hate the rain. The least it could do is storm. Lightning, thunder, and whipping winds are thrilling and electrifying. But bleak and dreary rain is dull and depressing.

“Greta, would you like something to eat now that you’re awake?” Alto asks from the doorway of my room.

I turn from the large picture window and smile at the older man. “Not now, but thank you.”

He nods. “*Signore* Calvano and Boian have sent word that they’re on their way back and would like to speak to you.”

With a heavy sigh, I nod. “I can imagine. Let’s go to the library. I don’t wish to have this conversation here.”

Without another word, Alto turns, and I follow. We reach the tall double doors, and he ushers me inside. The smell of spine glue, old text, and wood polish are better than any high-priced meditation guru. Instantly, my muscles relax, and my head doesn’t seem so foggy.

Alto sits in one of the overstuffed chairs while I take the time to observe the different titles along the shelves. Classics in English and Italian sit atop the polished wood, their spines perfectly aligned. My fingers flutter lovingly over each one, tingling to take one out and get lost in its depths.

I’m about to pluck Stephen King’s *It* from its slot when a series of books set behind glass catches my eye or rather the author’s name on the covers. “*Signore* Calvano has read all of your books and keeps them here as a source of pride,” Alto answers the curious tilt of my head.

My head whips in his direction, my eyes wide in disbelief. Emiliano Calvano, don of the Roma mafia, murderer, drug trafficker, and no telling what else, reads Rom-Com?

“No,” Alto laughs, and I realize I asked the question out loud. “He reads *your* Rom Com.” I smile at how the words “Rom Com” sound in his heavy accent, but my smile drops when I feel rather than see him enter the room. Like a cloud drifting over the sun, his presence sends a shadow over my soul and a shiver up my spine, and I can’t seem to dislike the feeling. Because while there’s trepidation, there’s also the excitement of danger, the thrill of the fight. It’s the same feeling I would get before I sparred with my trainer— only my clit never tingled, my nipples never begged to be sucked, and my heart never pounded like a jackhammer in my chest when my trainer stepped in the room. In fact, no other man has *ever* elicited the type of reaction that Emiliano’s mere presence does.

“*Mia perla*, how are you feeling?” His deep, sultry accent makes little fireworks explode under my skin.

Taking a calming breath, I prepare to face his golden eyes, strong jaw, and unruly black curls. But when I turn to face him, there’s no amount of preparation that can ready me for the look of possession and genuine concern in those eyes. Or the pinch in my chest and the profound pull of desire for the bad man.

I square my shoulders and wince with the deep ache in my wound. “Sore, but otherwise fine.”

“Fine,” he mumbles with a smile. “Is that code for ‘not so good’?”

“No, it’s not,” I guffaw. “Not all women are passive-aggressive, Mr. Calvano. If I say I’m fine, it means I’m not great, but I’m not bad. I’m ... fine. And if you knew me like you say you do, then you would know that.” I finish with a lift of my chin.

He lifts his hands in surrender, a placating smile perched on his handsome face. *Jerk*. “You’re right. You have always been, how do you say?” He contemplates for a second. “A straight shooter,” he finishes, and for some reason, I find the statement hilarious.

Laughter explodes from my lungs, and two of the three men stand silently amused as I get out all my giggles. The man behind a smiling Emiliano—Boian, I believe—stands completely emotionless. I’m sure I look insane, but I don’t care. It feels good to laugh.

I wipe my eyes and take deep breaths to calm my laughter. “Sorry. I’m not sure why that tickled me so much.” With one last deep breath, I compose myself. “Alto said you wanted to speak with me?”

A still smiling Emiliano steps forward. “Yes...” He pauses when his eyes zero in on my injured arm. “Why are you not wearing your sling?”

I roll my eyes. “Is that what you wanted to talk to me about? Did Alto tattle on me?” I turn to my guard. “You know what they say, Alto. Snitches get stitches.”

Alto chuckles. “It was not me, my dear.”

With narrowed eyes, Emiliano looks between Alto and me before he schools his features and decides that my arm is a battle for another day. “Vasile... Sebastian escaped, thanks to the help of an army.” My heart plummets to my stomach, and I have to swallow around the lump in my throat. “An army that couldn’t have been his men.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because we slaughtered every man in his employ,” Boian answers without remorse, and when his words should sicken me, I feel nothing but a sense of justice. “Is there anything you remember from your time with him?”

“Such as?”

“Building alliances, locations he may own, people in government he may have in his pocket?” Boian clarifies, and I mentally curse myself when nothing immediately comes to mind.

I begin pacing the length of the library as I try to think of anything useful but still come up blank. Sebastian may have said I was involved with the business, but he never disclosed any details. Granted, I found out he was full of shit, but I wish he had told me something. The name of an ally, co-conspirator...

I halt in my pacing when it hits me like a brick to the head. I swing around to face the three men. “What about a woman? Was a woman among the dead the day you came for me?”

Three sets of eyes look from one to the other. “We aren’t in the business of killing women and children.”

“So that’s a no.”

“What are you getting at, *mia perla*?” Emiliano asks impatiently.

“Sebastian had a maid. No, she was more like an assistant.”

“Like Camil?”

I shrug, not recognizing the name. “I don’t know. This woman was in charge of taking care of my needs and setting appointments for Sebastian. She sometimes brought him paperwork to sign and even gave his men orders in his absence. More importantly, she was in love with him. He didn’t show any signs of feeling the same, but he obviously trusted her.”

“You think she orchestrated the attack?” Boian asks, his tone dripping with disbelief that makes my back rise.

“Don’t underestimate what a woman would do for the man she loves.” I turn my back on the man and address Emiliano and Alto instead. “Think about it. Sebastian

always thought ahead. I would bet he was counting on his enemies dismissing the idea or being completely blind to the possibility that a *woman* could pull off an escape of this magnitude.” To punctuate my point, I approach the sizable violet-eyed man. “And you fell for it hook, line, and sinker.” I stare at him with a condescending smirk before turning back to Emiliano. “I could be wrong, but I don’t think I am. Find Maria Rossi, and you may find Sebastian.”

Emiliano studies me for a moment before looking to his second-in-command. “Do as she says. Keep looking for Vasile but add Rossi to the list.”

Alto and Boian nod, then leave Emiliano and me alone. When the silence stretches to uncomfortable lengths, I decide it’s time for my escape. “I’ll leave you to work.”

“Stay.” Any other time, the command would have me bristling. Only the hint of desperation in his tone has me stopping and turning back to him.

I swallow at the look of hunger in his eyes, the thick vein of his neck pulsing heavily, and the clenching and unclenching of his hands. “Did you need something else?”

With one long stride, he’s in front of me, pulling the air from my lungs and replacing it with his scent of cedar, leather, and something spicy. His hand lifts to my cheek, and my eyes flutter shut when his rough fingers stroke a fiery path across my cheek to my chin, where he tips my head back to bring my lips to brush against his. “So much, *mia perla*. I want so much right now, but you aren’t ready.” His lips land feather soft on mine, and I sigh at the barely-there caress. “Your body remembers me, but only when your mind and heart remember me will I take you to my bed and worship you like the goddess you are.” Heat pools at my core, and my lips tingle at the barely there touch of his caress. I want more, but he

pulls away, and I'm instantly cold from the absence of his body.

A sudden flash of memory bolts to the forefront of my mind. "*What's wrong, mia perla? You can't handle a little cold water?*" Emiliano's naked body sprints to the icy waters of the Tyrrhenian Sea.

"*Challenge accepted, Calvano.*" I return and chase after him ... naked. I dive into the sea's icy depths, then pop out and jump into his arms to warm myself. We laugh as he holds me with tenderness.

"Greta," Emiliano's hands grip both sides of my jaw, his warm touch stealing me from the memory. With a flutter of my lashes, I bring him back into focus and plant a palm against my temple as the thumping begins.

"I'm okay," I say through a tight jaw.

"What the hell just happened?" I open my eyes to find his handsome face doused in worry.

My chest warms at his concern, and lifting my fingers to his forehead, I smooth out the worry lines between his eyebrows. "I just remembered our swim in the sea. Our very *naked* swim."

The look of concern morphs into a mischievous grin, and he takes my hand in his, gently kissing my palm before nipping the pad. And like my own personal pain killer, the thumping in my head dissipates to a low ache at his touch.

"And do you remember *why* we were naked, *mia perla?*"

My cheeks heat. "I can only imagine. After all, you're a fiend, *Signore Calvano.*"

Emiliano throws his head back in laughter, and something inside me lights up and buzzes like a neon light at the sound. My gut tells me that he doesn't laugh often. "Very true, *Signorina White.* But I do not remember

you protesting.” He brings me into his rock-hard chest. “In fact, I believe your exact words were ‘*Fottimi con la lingua.*’” *Fuck me with your tongue.*

My eyes widen, and I bury my head in his chest in embarrassment. “*If* I said such a thing, it had to be because you hypnotized me or...”

He lifts my head from his chest with a Cheshire cat smile playing on his lips. “Or?”

I shake my head and smile back at him. “I have no idea.”

“I do. You let the darkness inside you out for the first time in your life. From the moment I saw you at the charity event, I knew you were made for me. You had the aura of a queen. Charming, controlled, lethally beautiful, and,” he kisses the tip of my nose, “vicious.”

My back comes up at the latter. “I am not vicious!”

He chuckles and sweeps a lock of my hair from my face. “There’s a dead man with a crushed hand that would disagree.”

Again, my eyes widen, and a cold sweat breaks out along my skin. “I... I killed someone?”

His fingertips latch onto my chin, and he shakes my head lightly, his handsome face now stern. “He deserved what he got, Greta. He sexually assaulted you. In return, you ensured that even if I were to grant him mercy, he’d never touch another woman like that again. But no, you didn’t kill him. I’m the one that gave the order.”

I remember him mentioning the assault in the hospital, but there is one question I didn’t dare to ask at the time. “Did he ra—”

“No,” Emiliano cuts me off and wipes away the tear that escapes my eye. “He didn’t, but he did enough to warrant his death. Don’t lose sleep over that *cazzo.*” He wipes away another tear, and the knot in my stomach

loosens, and something I refuse to acknowledge springs to life in my chest at the thought of Emiliano exacting justice for what was done to me.

19

Emiliano

With Greta's help, we have a clearer path to finding Vasile, but I would be lying if I said that is my main concern.

Resurrecting Greta's memories is beginning to consume my every waking hour. I spoke with the physician, who informed us he doesn't feel the drugs that Vasile pumped into Greta's system will cause permanent memory loss. However, he recommended a full day of IV fluids packed with electrolytes and vitamins to help flush out the toxins. I was ready to tell him to get his ass over to the villa and set Greta up. It took a Herculean effort to suppress my need to control and command and allow Greta to decide for herself. Thank God she agreed, and the doctor was summoned immediately.

So here we are back in the library, where I scour through documents taken from Vasile's home in Germany. At the same time, Greta sits in the overstuffed armchair, bare feet sitting on the matching ottoman, reading through the manuscript she started writing before she ran, an IV piercing the soft flesh of her hand, the bag now half empty.

I've seen my men poked, sliced open with scalpels, and bleeding out as the doc worked on them, but it isn't until the doctor began placing the IV, causing Greta's beautiful face to screw up in pain, that my instincts to rage against the doctor nearly get the best of me. Only Greta's vulnerable request, "Will you hold my hand?" that soothes the beast. She seems so childlike at that moment, and the image of a dark-haired little girl with her eyes and ballsy attitude has me nearly breathless.

As head of the families, I am expected to produce an heir, but I was never one to give a shit about their

expectations in that respect. Now, I can't stop imagining children with my unruly dark curls and Greta's sapphire eyes running around our homes, torturing the staff with their messes.

"What are those?" Greta's melodious voice hits me square in the chest, and I have to stop myself from rubbing at the aching where it hit its target.

Lifting my eyes to *mia perla*, I take in my woman and pray to a God that abandoned me years ago that I don't lose her.

Swallowing the lump of emotions her mere presence brings about, I answer. "Both personal and financial documents confiscated from Vasile's home in Germany. I already searched through the one from Bolzano."

"What are you looking for exactly?" I loved her childlike curiosity.

"I'm trying to find where he may have found sanctuary while my men search for the Rossi woman," I answer and flip to the next page, reluctantly casting my eyes away from her before I'm tempted to say, "fuck it," and abandon my work.

"Hmm. I know you said that the men that helped him escape had to be paid mercenaries, but..." She trails off.

"But?" I prompt.

"What if they weren't? What if he has more connections than we thought? One thing I do know about Seb... Stefan was that he was clever and patient. Look how long he waited to make his move against you. Are we sure he doesn't have another powerful figure supporting him? A silent partner, so to speak?" She finishes with a tilt of her head and a thoughtful gleam in her eyes. Fuck she's sexy when she talks conspiracy theories. But hell, she's sexy all the time. And born for this world. She's fierce, intelligent, and the perfect balance of vicious and merciful.

I re-arrange my pulsing erection in my jeans before answering. "You have a point. Here." I hand her a stack of documents. "Search through those and let me know if anything sends up red flags."

Her eyes widen as she takes the papers from my hand. "Really? You'd trust me with that?"

My brow furrows in confusion. "Why would I not?"

She shrugs. "I don't know. It seems like an important job, and I could miss something that you or your men would catch. Something..."

"Criminal?" I smile, to which she only shrugs.

Unable to bare even the smallest distance between us, I stand and cross the room to her, where I lift her feet and drop them on my lap, sitting on the ottoman facing her. Her feet are tiny in my large hands. She lets out an un-ladylike, but sexy as hell, groan when I dig my fingers into the arch of her feet. I clench my back teeth and think of old ladies in their underwear to keep my dick at bay, but there's no hiding my "growing problem" when she gasps, then purrs like a wanton kitten as I graze my thumb over the ball of her foot.

"If you continue making those noises, *mia perla*, I can't be held responsible for my actions," I caution while running a calloused fingertip across the area again. She shivers in my hands and bites down on her lower lip to stifle another moan, and the image of those pouty lips wrapped around my cock has pre-cum staining my boxer briefs. "Greta," I growl in warning.

"What? I didn't moan," she argues.

"You know what you're doing, *mia perla*. Your mind may not remember how to drive me crazy, but your body does."

She lifts a foot from my hands to bring pointed toes to my chest, where she runs her big toe up and down the buttons of my shirt. "Stay on topic, *Signore Calvano*," she

coos innocently, then yelps when I take her roaming foot to my lips and nip her heel.

“*Comportarsi, mia tentatrice.*” I tell my temptress to behave, to which she responds in perfect Italian.

“*Mai, mio diavolo.*” *Never, My devil.* And Jesus, her calling me *her* devil sets my wretched soul aflame.

Careful of her IV and her wounded arm, I lift her from her seat and sit her astride me. She bites her bottom lip again, this time suppressing a mischievous smirk. My cock jumps behind my zipper, begging to be buried deep inside her. My palms cup both sides of her face. “You’re playing with fire, *mia regina.*” My fingers flex against her silky skin as I resist the need to take what I want.

Her slender fingers grasp my wrists, and her eyes spark with a mixture of defiance and lust. “I’m not your queen, Emil,” she says haughtily, but her words lack conviction.

Bringing my lips a hairsbreadth from hers, I taunt them with a feather-light kiss, “Not yet.” Then I slam my lips down on hers, sealing my declaration.

Her lips are stiff and unyielding before she answers my demanding kiss with brutal nips, bleeding me. I hum in approval and encourage her brutality with a bite of my own, getting the desired effect when she growls against my lips and spears her fingers into my hair. She winces at the tug of the IV in her hand and the pull on her shoulder wound, but when I attempt to disengage, *mia perla* has none of it.

She slaps my hands away, again wincing. “Greta, stop,” I grumble, but she’s a wild woman as she devours my mouth.

“Shut up, Emil, and fuck me,” she breathes against my bloody lips, and hell, who am I to argue with what my queen wants? So, without argument, I bring my lips back to hers. Our lips battle for control, our hearts pounding

against the others. With desperate hands, I unsheathe my cock from its denim confines, lift the sweater dress she's wearing just enough to expose the top of her lace-covered pussy, unhook her black lace bra, and rip the matching panties in my impatience to get at her wet heat.

Her hands disengage my hair, and her lips leave mine cold and wanting when she pulls away to rip open my shirt, the muffled pings of buttons flying and our labored desperate breaths echoing around the vast library. Her eyes immediately land on the Calvano family crest tattoo on my pec. Her fingers ghost over the black ink, her brow furrowed in thought. My heart bludgeons itself against my chest bone while my skin fizzles and my cock aches at her touch. I want to slam her back to the floor and ride her hard and fast.

"You were drunk." Her words are barely a whisper, but I hear them nonetheless. My already thundering heart becomes a raging storm as hope surges through it like a bolt of lightning. Her eyes lift to mine, and a smile as warm as the summer sun stretches her lips. "I remember the first time I saw your tattoo. You were drunk, and there was a woman—"

I cut her words off with the press of my lips to hers. "A mere distraction from the woman I truly wanted." Her eyes narrow on mine, then flutter shut when I guide my swollen cock to her dripping pussy.

"Emil," she sighs and tips her head back on her shoulders, baring her vulnerable neck in offering. An offering I happily take as I lick and suck on her silky skin.

As much as I want to pound into her wet heat, I force myself to ease into her tight pussy slowly. My eyes roll back, and a hiss escapes my clenched teeth when her walls clench around my cock like a fist as I guide myself to the very end of her. "*Gesù Cristo*, Greta, you're so fucking tight. You were made for me, baby." My breaths

stutter from my lips, and sweat breaks out along my brow as I hold myself back from coming too soon like a teenage boy.

But again, *mia perla* has none of it. With a smile, she lifts herself until just the tip of my cock is inside her, then drops down hard. I bellow her name as she moans mine, and then we're fucking like wild animals. Her tight nipples slide against my hard pecs, and her nails dig into my back as she rides me hard. Our gasping breaths mingle, our eyes never leaving the other's as we chase euphoria. I bury a fist in her damp locks and grip the roots tightly. Her hip thrusts falter at the dominant hold, and she melts in my arms as she gives herself over to me. Submitting to me. *Trusting* me.

Her walls flutter around my cock, and thank fuck for it because I'm not sure how much longer I can hold out. "Emil... yes, yes! I'm coming," she pants against my lips. I lick the cupid bow of her lip, and at the same time, I tip her hips at just the right angle to hit that spot deep inside her that will have her orgasm tipping on the side of otherworldly. I know I've found it when her eyes widen, she sucks in a stuttered gasp, and her mouth gapes in a silent scream. She uses me as an anchor as her body convulses in my arms, her nails bleeding my back. And I'm done for as the stinging pain of slicing flesh tips me over the edge. My balls tighten, my cock swells, and with a roar of her name, I come so fucking hard my vision goes fuzzy, and my head feels full of helium.

The woman is going to kill me one day. I chuckle at the thought. There was a time when I had no doubt she planned to do that very thing.

"What's so funny?" she asks against my skin, where her face is tucked between my neck and shoulder while we work to gather our breath.

"Nothing, *mia perla,*" I answer, then sigh in contentment. Because for the first time in my life, I feel

entirely at peace.

I loosen my hold on her hair and soothe the sting with a gentle massage. She lets out a heavy sigh, then lifts her head from my shoulder. Her cheeks are flushed, her eyes shimmer with sexual satisfaction, and a thin sheen of sweat glistens on her forehead.

Fuck, she's pure perfection.

She grips the wet roots of my hair much like I did hers and her eyes turn stern. "We didn't use protection." But her smile gives her away.

She remembers.

"Worried I'm an '*STD-carrying culprit*'?" I repeat the words she threw at me after our first time together.

Her smile widens, and when she throws her head back in laughter, *Gesù Cristo*, it's as though Zeus himself strikes my heart with a thunderbolt. I pull her closer to feel her body shake in her merriment.

"I remember!" she hoots and throws her arms around my neck, pain from the IV and shoulder wound forgotten. My hands trace the sides of her spine, basking in the feel of her petal-soft skin. Her skin cascades with goosebumps at my touch. She lifts her head and brings her tear-coated eyes to mine. "I remember, Emil," she chokes, and I squeeze her tighter.

"I'm happy for you, *mia perla*. Though it was not my finest hour." I grin, then ask, "What brought this on?"

She shrugs. "Maybe the IV drip is working—"

"That's not what I'm referring to." I smirk and squeeze her plump ass.

She lets out a little squeak, then shrugs again before answering. "I don't really know how to describe it. I mean, there's no denying I'm extremely attracted to you—"

“Extremely, huh?” I squeeze her ass again.

Her eyes narrow. “Don’t interrupt.” I give her a smug smile, and she fists my roots to the point of pain. My cock hardens inside her, and her own lips twitch at a smirk when she feels me. “As I was saying, I’m attracted to you, and even if my mind can’t remember much, my body—my soul—does.”

I hum in acknowledgment and brush the tip of my nose against hers. “And what are they telling you?”

“That there was something between us. Something dark but light too.” She shakes her head. “I’m not making any sense, am I?” Her hands loosen in my hair.

“On the contrary, you make perfect sense. Our beginning was not one of fairy tales, Greta, but with each passing day, light—your light—shines through that darkness.” Never before have I spouted such poetic words, but with Greta, it comes naturally. Greta has a darkness inside her, a fierceness that could make men quake in fear, but her light is the deadliest because it blinds you while carving out your heart and feeding it to you.

She tips her hips forward and flexes her Kegels, eliciting a groan to escape my lips at the feel of her pussy tightening and relaxing around my cock. “Even where there’s light, there can still be shadows,” she breathes and tightens her fists in my hair again as she rolls her hips, and I can’t find the strength to speak. She feels fucking incredible, and I don’t mean just her pussy. Her in my arms, her hands strong and threatening in my hair, her breasts pressed against me with diamond-hard nipples. It’s an overload of sensations, but none compares to the deep throbbing in my chest where my cold, dead heart comes back to life with each breath we share.

“Do not worry, *mia perla*. I’m the only monster in those shadows,” I promise with a punishing thrust.

20

Emiliano

Maria Rossi is a tiny slip of a woman, but the look she throws my way when I walk into the very warehouse my men were slaughtered would make a lesser man piss himself.

“Maria Rossi. Age thirty, reported missing two years ago, parents Angelina and Iacopo Rossi, both deceased,” I finish, then toss the folder containing her life story in front of her where she kneels, both wrists chained to the concrete floor.

She doesn't bother to answer. Instead, she stares daggers at me. Resolved that this will take a while, I pull up a chair and make myself comfortable. “Vasile gave you free rein of his home, and I have photos of you shopping in the market without a leash.” I smirk when she growls at my last comment. “So why not go home, Maria? Your parents only recently passed. You could have had ample time to be with your loved ones again before their death.”

Her lips curl up in a snarl, and she shifts in her chains, her knees aching, no doubt. “And why would I return, hmm? Why would I return to the people who sold me in the first place?”

I wish I could say I'm surprised by her words, but it would be a lie. Human beings stopped surprising me a long time ago. In fact, it was the day my mother was taken from me and returned beaten and bloody that I gave up hope on humanity—until Greta.

“Interesting. Still, why stay? Why not run?” Honestly, I don't give a shit, but the more I rile her up, the more likely she'll let something valuable slip.

But the tip of her chin and the cock of her brow reveal she's on to my game. She spits on my shoe before saying, "Fuck you, Calvano. You won't get what you want from me. I will never tell you where he is. So do your worst, *cazzo*."

With a heavy sigh, I button my suit jacket before nodding to one of my men to bring out my tools. "Very well, Rossi. If you want to protect that piece of shit, then so be it. We will do this the hard way." I give her a wicked grin. "My favorite way."

Typically, I try to avoid torturing women, but I'll make an exception for this one. Not only did she help keep Greta prisoner, but she is protecting the man we are confident is *Vipera*—a man that commissions the kidnapping, sale, and enslavement of women and children. So, if torturing the man's location out of her is the only way, then it's a line I'm willing to cross.

I pull the six-inch shearing scissors from the leather case holding my favorite filleting tools, and I'm about to remove her index finger when my phone rings in three quick, consecutive chimes, signaling that it's Greta calling. She knew where I was going tonight, so she'd only call if it's important.

"Saved by the bell—literally. Although..." I hand the shears to my man and gesture with a nod to continue, then walk to the far corner of the warehouse to take Greta's call. "Is everything alright, *mia perla*?" I ask in way of greeting.

"Emil, I think you need to come home," she answers, and the hairs on the back of my neck lift at the trepidation in her voice.

My heartbeat screams in my ears, and my blood races like a formula one race car. I calmly stride out of the warehouse doors when I want to sprint like a man on fire. Because that's what it feels like as I imagine what could unsettle *mia perla*.

I swing open the door to my Maserati Super Sport, and the second the door is shut, I fire up the engine and stomp on the gas. I dock my phone to let the Bluetooth take over. “Talk to me, Greta. Where are you? Are you in a safe location?”

“Emil, calm down. I’m fine,” she assures me, and my shoulders instantly relax. My heart goes from racing to a steady jog, but my foot never lifts from the accelerator.

Running a shaky hand through my hair, I exhale a stuttered breath. “Then what the fuck, Greta? You scared the shit out of me. Are you trying to kill—”

“Emil!” she shouts over my rant. “While I’m safe, it’s still crucial that you get home. I found something in the documents you gave me to look through. Something that you need to see for yourself.”

I want to ask what the fuck the “something” is, but if she says I need to see it, I believe her. “Fine. I’ll be there in ten minutes.”

“See you soon,” she ripostes, then disconnects, leaving me piqued and no less worried.



I arrive at the villa seven minutes later and open my car door before I even put it into park. I jog up the few steps to the front door and call out for her. “Greta?”

“Up here!” she shouts back from the direction of her room, and for a split second, I’m pissed she’s in her room rather than mine. Mentally shaking myself, I focus on why I raced home like a bat out of hell.

Her door is open when I get close, and I enter before shutting and locking the door. When I turn to address

her, I'm struck dumb at the vision of her in teal silk lounge pants, bright yellow fuzzy socks, and a tight black ribbed tank top. If it were anyone else, the cozy outfit would never catch my attention. But on Greta? Fuck, it's like the Pied Piper calling to my cock. Her nipples are tight and straining against the thick fabric of her tank top, her ass firm and high in the silk with just the slightest glimpse of panty lines. My girl despises thongs almost as much as she hates sky-high heels.

"Really, Emil?" Greta's accusatory tone brings my wandering eyes to her deep blues, and I can only shrug at being caught eye-fucking her.

I adjust my erection in my slacks, then approach her when she picks up a piece of paper and extends it for me to take. "What is it?"

"Take it," she says in answer.

I take the paper and sit in the desk chair already pulled out from her time searching through the documents. Greta sits across from me on the bed, a leg tucked under her plump ass, and watches me, and from the apprehension on her face, I know I'm not going to like what I see.

Biting the bullet, I study the document in my hand, immediately recognizing it as someone's birth certificate. Upon further reading, I see it's Stefan Vasile's birth certificate, but it isn't the *cazzo's* name that has my vision static at the edges and my heart hacking at my chest bone. Rather, it's the name listed under "Mother's maiden name."

Gillie Malina De Santis

My mother's name...

21

Greta

Emil races through the small town at breakneck speed. It's nearly two in the morning, and the streets are still bustling with people. The sounds of merriment and drunken hoots breach the bulletproof glass while Emil swerves around pedestrians and lays on his horn when drunkards stray into the street. All I can do is hold on for dear life.

"So, what's the plan?" I ask and palm the dashboard when he takes a sharp left, fishtails, then pulls the sports car back into place like a pro, and I find myself turned on by the skill with which he handles the gorgeous car.

Now's not the time Greta.

"The plan is to finish what I started with my father," he grits, and when I don't respond, he continues, "Torture the fucker until he gives me every piece of information he's kept secret for over two decades."

I nod in understanding and ask, "Isn't he dying?"

"Yes. He would be dead by now if the doctor hadn't kept him on a heavy dose of antibiotics per my orders. Sepsis is a painful way to die," he says the latter with a devilish quirk of his lips.

A few minutes later, we pull up to a small cottage that looks like it's seen better days, and Emil rounds the car and takes my hand in his. A warm tingle travels from our hands to my chest, where little fireworks pop with the chased touch.

The ground beneath us is cracked and uneven as we walk to the front porch. "This is a safe house? It looks like it's about to fall apart."

"Looks can be deceiving, *mia perla*," he mumbles.

“Meaning?” I drawl, but he doesn’t answer. Instead, he shows me.

He places his palm against the window next to the door, and five little dots glow green below his fingertips, then a mechanical *snick* from the door that, on closer inspection, is made of solid steel. He ushers me into the main room, which looks more like a bunker in the Pentagon than a dilapidated villa with wall-to-wall concrete, no windows, and only a few vents for circulation. There’s a small kitchen, and a hall that leads to what I assume are bedrooms and bathrooms. The room has three large computer monitors on one wall with matching servers enclosed in a metal cage off to the side.

“Wow, you weren’t kidding.”

“Come on. I want to get this shit over with.” Emil guides me down the hall, where we enter a bedroom that reeks of antiseptic and death. Emil’s father lays prone on the simple king size bed with the sheet pulled up to his chest. Bandages cover his arms, part of his face, and both hands.

Dear God, Emil doesn’t play around.

I try to find empathy for the older man but come up empty. Instead, I feel ... vindicated. Though I don’t remember Idris’ crimes against me, Emil told me what he did, and he had no reason to lie.

I nearly laugh at the sick satisfaction I get from the old man’s misery. Here I am looking at a man who was tortured by the man I let inside of me—more than once—and when any normal person would be sickened at the sight of the mangled older man in front of them, I feel lucky to have someone who would go to such lengths to avenge the wrong that was done to me.

Who lets a man sexually assault a woman and then stick her in a dog cage?

“*Figlio*, have you ... come to finish me off?” Idris sputters through labored breaths. Emil says nothing when he retrieves the folded birth certificate from his suit jacket and tosses it on his father’s chest.

The dying man picks up the paper with trembling hands and blinks the words into focus. His one good eye scans the page, then a malevolent smile breaks the surface of his face. “So, you found out what kind of woman your mother really was? A whore.” I wince and swing expectant eyes to Emil, waiting for the explosion. But it never comes. Instead, Emil stands stock still, emotionless, his hand clutching mine painfully. But I refuse to ask him to ease up. I squeeze his hand back, letting him know I’m here with him for better or worse. It’s a heady feeling, but one I feel deep in my soul.

“Explain,” is all Emil says, and I cast my eyes back to Idris and steel myself for what he’s about to tell his son. Or rather, confirm what Emil and I already suspect.

“Gillie’s and my marriage was, as many are in the families, a way to increase our power. Her family had the fortune, but they saw the marriage for what it could be. More. More money, more power. So, my father persuaded hers to promise her to me since we had not found the Conti women. Your mother was beautiful, rich, and knew her place in our world. And she gave me an heir. It was perfect.” The older man’s eyes turn lethal before he continues, “Until she started fucking Cristian Vasile and became pregnant with his child. I was ready to kill her and the unborn bastard, but her father begged on bent knee for her life. He vowed to send the child to the Vasiles once it was born, and Gillie would never be permitted to see or even speak of the child if I would just keep her as my wife. I agreed—*after* he signed over the entirety of your mother’s inheritance to me.”

“Greedy motherfucker,” Emil spits and goes to lunge for his father, but I pull him back before he can strangle the older man.

Emil's blazing amber eyes swing to me, and I take his hand in both of mine. "Let him finish. We both know there's more."

His eyes search my face, his body vibrating with violence. I silently plead with him to listen. His jaw ticks with the amount of restraint it's taking him to not kill Idris. Finally, he nods then turns back to his father. "What finally made you kill her?" he asks, and my heart breaks for the little boy that lost his mother so early in life.

"Ah, you figured that out too? I kept my word and stayed with the bitch." I grasp Emil's bicep when I feel him take a step forward. Because as much as I know his father's words hurt, Emil needed to know the truth to find closure.

"It was years before I learned she was plotting to take you and run away with the Vasile fucker and their bastard son. The night before she was set to execute her plan, I had my men take her to an abandoned home the Vasiles used for interrogations, and the rest is history. Her body was found by the head of the Fieraru family one evening when he went to pick up a package left there days before. It didn't take much to convince him that the Vasiles—who had been a thorn in his side for years—were to blame. Your mother's body was returned, and stricken with grief, her family demanded the deaths of the Vasiles. So, with great pleasure, my father obliged, and the Vasiles were wiped out ... all but one," he sneers.

When he's done speaking, his skin is a sickly gray, and his breathing is choppy. I turn my eyes back to Emil, who stands stoically beside me, vibrating with rage. "Is Stefan Vasile *Vipera*?" he asks, and his father barely gathers enough breath to confirm.

"Yes, but don't be fooled, my son. I wasn't some lowly scorpion like all the rest. I pulled Vasile's strings without

him even realizing it. I enjoyed profiting off the bastard son of the whore tha—”

BANG!

The back of Idris’ head explodes from the bullet Emil fires into it. Brain matter paints the wall behind him, and his lifeless eyes stare at the ceiling.

My ears are still ringing when Emil lowers his gun, and one of his men enters the room. “The clean-up crew is on the way, *signore*,” the man says, then leaves.

As though he didn’t just kill his father, Emil turns, having never let go of my hand, and guides me out of the room, out the front door, and to his car. There is an eerie stillness in the air as we walk to his car, and the chill that runs along my spine has nothing to do with the weather and everything to do with the detached, empty look on Emil’s face.

“Emil, are you—” My words are stolen from me when Emil swiftly swings me around and then crashes his lips to mine. His assault is brutal, punishing, and I can’t get enough. We bite, suck, and growl against each other’s lips, neither of us willing to submit because as much as he soothes me with his touch, I know my strength—my unwillingness to back down—soothes him as much as my submission does. When he finally pulls away, we’re bloody and gasping for air. He wipes the blood from my lips with a thick thumb before bringing it to his mouth and sucking it from his digit. My pussy weeps at the gruesome act, and I’m one second away from stripping him and riding him on the hood of his fancy car.

As though reading my thoughts, he pulls me close, grinding his erection against my stomach. “Later, *mia perla*,” the Roma don promises.



The ride back to his villa is made in comfortable silence, both of us lost in our ponderings. Emil is undoubtedly turning over the bombshell his father dropped on him, and me... I think about how the hell I fell, not once but twice, for a mafia don. It seems my emotional recollection is speeding forward while my mental recollection is taking its sweet time.

We pull up to the villa and walk the path lit by LED garden lights. It's nearly four in the morning, and the sun has not yet crested the horizon. The house is as silent as the grave when we enter, the soft glow of the baseboard lighting our only guide. "Get some rest," Emil dictates, and I don't bother to argue. After the revelation he's been dealt, I'll be surprised if he emerges from his office for days. I gently kiss his lips and turn to go upstairs when I'm swung around and crushed to his chest. His lips descend on mine, soft and reverent this time. He cups my cheeks and moves me where he wants me while his tongue plays at my lips, never entering my mouth. When he pulls away, his lips are poised to say something, but he seems to think better of it and swiftly turns and walks away.



If I have to guess by the view of the impending sunrise from my bedroom window, it is nearing seven AM, meaning I haven't slept more than an hour. So many times, I wanted to get up and go to Emil. To comfort him, distract him, whatever it took to ease that haunted look in

his eyes. Instead, I force myself to stay put and let the brooding Roma don process the truth of his mother's demise and that his newest enemy is his half-brother.

It isn't until I hear the soft lyrical strands of "Auld Lang Syne" that I sit up in bed and check my phone. It's half past seven ... and New Year's Day. That explains the late-night partying in the town last night.

I quickly brush my teeth and hair that has become unruly after so long without a trim. I let the music guide me to a wide-open space with large windows allowing the morning sun to bathe the room in warm sunshine. Tiny dust motes dance in the beams of light as Emil, head bowed, eyes closed, plays the classic tune again. He seems lost, but not to the music. Rather, he was lost in his thoughts, unreachable. And completely heartbroken.

Tears sting the back of my eyes because I don't know how or when it happened, but our hearts have become one. I can feel his pain, and before I know it, I'm behind him, my arms wrapping around his shoulders and my lips on his temple. He freezes for a split second before his shoulders relax, and his hands lift to mine on his chest. I lean into his ear. "Don't stop. You play beautifully."

He nods against my cheek and starts to play again. This time the song is more of a modern tune. Something that tugs at the threads of my memories. My brow furrows, and my mind grapples with where I've heard the song. Then, as though being engulfed by the sea, memories come crashing over me.

Dancing with Emiliano at the gala, the airplane, the debt... the punishments. The latter makes me shiver, but my mind doesn't stop long enough to dwell as it floods with more memories. *Emil chasing me on the beach. Me, torturing the man that violated me...* Everything. It all comes back in a split second. I stumble back and gasp for air.

“Greta!” The fear in Emil’s voice sends me to my knees, and Emil follows me to the floor, hands clasped firmly on my cheeks, his amber eyes glowing with anguish but so much love that it sends a painful zing through my chest. “Greta! What is it?”

I clench my eyes shut as rivers of tears streak down my cheeks. “I ... remember. I remember,” I choke through my sobs.

“Open your eyes, *mia perla*.” It’s not a request. I open my eyes and look into his puzzled amber ones. “That’s a good thing. What did you remember?”

“Everything,” I whisper. “Every moment, every fight, every touch.” I place a hand over his heart. “Every feeling...”

His eyes search my face then he abruptly releases me. I immediately feel cold and alone at the loss of his touch. “And now you want to leave. You want to leave *me* because it’s too much ugliness.” He stands before helping me to my feet and walking away, but I don’t let him escape.

Grabbing his solid bicep, I dig my bare heels into the hardwood, forcing him to stop or have me stumble. “Don’t you dare walk away from me, Calvano.” My words are soggy with tears but resolute. He doesn’t turn or even acknowledge me, and my cheeks heat with anger. “Fine, be a coward. Pull away and assume the worst instead of giving me two damn minutes to gather myself and *talk* to me. I swear you’re the most arrogant, self-sabo—”

A huff of breath gushes from my lungs when my back is slammed against the wall, my chin forced to the heavens by Emil’s hand circling my throat, and my wrists seized in one of his before he yanks them up over my head. And as fucked up as it is, I’ve never been more on fire for this man, and I don’t give a shit how demented that makes me.

He brings his face close, his warm breath coating my face like a breeze on a warm Texas day. “What did you just call me, *donna debole*?” *Weak woman*.

My anger goes from a burning ember to a raging fire. “Fuck you! I am not weak!” I grit through clenched teeth.

A sinister smirk tips his lips. “But you are, no? You call me a coward, but you’re weak for running from me in Rome. You say I’m assuming the worst instead of talking to you, yet you gave me no chance to explain the ledger you found. You’re not only weak but a hypocrite too.” He removes his hand from my throat and wrists before pushing off the wall and turning again to leave, his words hitting me like a bat to the head. Because he’s right. I was weak *and* a hypocrite.

But no more.

I race after him, my heart in my throat and shame coating my insides. I reach him just before he steps onto the chilly sand of his private beach. “You’re right!” I shout. He halts but doesn’t turn. I shiver in the cold breeze, but I know I won’t get any sympathy from the Roma don who stands with his back to me. “I was both those things, and I’m ... ashamed. That night, a part of me knew it wasn’t true, but I think the craziness of how much I felt for you had me drowning. Especially when I actually considered staying with you even if it were true.” I wince at the admission. “Emil, I’m sorry. I am weak, but only when it comes to you.” It’s silent except for the heartbeat in my ears as I see the man I love so vulnerable.

I begin to think I’m too late when Emil swings around and charges for me, so many emotions battling in his amber orbs, and though I should be trembling in fear, I pulse with desire instead. One cruel hand fists the roots of my hair while the other grips my hip harshly, and as his mouth comes down to plunder mine, this time I don’t

fight him for control. Instead, I let him take and take some more.

Only when we're starved for oxygen does he pull back and presses his forehead to mine. "You would stay with a man you thought did such disgusting things. And I would rip out my heart by letting you go if it's what you wanted."

I smile at his words, breathing them into my soul. "Sounds pretty messed up," I giggle.

"Sounds like us, *mia perla*." He places a reverent kiss to my lips before searching my face. For what I don't know, but when he speaks again, it obliterates any doubt left lingering in my mind about my feelings for this man. "I should have told you I love you before that night in Rome."

"Emil," I sob.

"I've only ever loved one woman, *mia perla*. My mother." He cups both my cheeks. "Until you. I'm a hard man to be with. An even harder man to love, but if you stay, I promise to be the type of man that you could love one day."

My eyes widen, and more tears escape as I look at this beautifully broken man in astonishment. "Emiliano Calvano, you stupid, stupid man." I grip two fists full of his hair and squeeze hard. "I *do* love you. You make me as angry as you do happy. You bring out the worst and the best in me. I've never felt stronger or more worthy of love than when I'm with you. I'm *not* leaving you." It's my turn to take his lips, and this time, the shiver that runs across my skin isn't from the chilly Olbia air but from the fire he ignites in my soul.

We're ravenous as we tear at each other's clothes, with no concern for the cold breeze. Our need for one another could set the whole island on fire. Emil falls to his ass on the chilly sand, then lays back with me astride

him. I lift enough to bring him to my weeping center, then spear myself on his thick cock. It hurts like hell, much like our love for one another, but that pain takes us to unimaginable heights of pleasure. I swivel my hips, teasing him, but he has none of it as he lifts me by the hips and slams inside me from beneath.

“Emil!” I cry out.

“Fuck me, *mia regina*. Fuck your king.” His words are a deep grumble as he impales me. And I refuse to let my king down. I lift and slam back down on his upward thrust. He barks out a string of curses and jerks his head back as we ride each other to oblivion.

My clit rubs against his pubic hair, and too soon, electricity explodes from my clit, and my muscles lock. “I’m coming! Jesus, Emil. Yes!” My body grows damp with sweat, and my heart threatens to break free from my chest as surge after surge of euphoria wracks my bones.

Emil thrusts twice more before his hips lift to bury his cock deep inside my core, my name on his lips as he bellows his release. We’re both panting, and my lungs begin to burn with the cold air. My teeth chatter as an icy gust of sea air blows across my sweat-coated skin.

“Fuck,” Emil curses before standing with me in his arms and hot-footing it to the villa. “*Amo una donna azza.*” He mumbles that he loves a crazy woman under his breath, and I smile and place a kiss on his pec. “You make me lose my mind, *mia perla.*” I hum into his warm chest and close my eyes in contentment.

The next time they open, all hell breaks loose.

22

Emiliano

The shrill ring of my cell phone has my eyes shooting open and a curse flying from my lips. Greta and I barely made it out of bed to eat between our wild fucking with a bit of lovemaking thrown in here and there. The woman is insatiable, and I am all too happy to oblige her gluttony for orgasms.

Greta stirs when Rooster sits up from his cot at the end of our bed and growls low in his throat. “What’s wrong, baby?” she coos with a sleepy rasp.

My phone rings again. “What?” I answer and watch the hair on the dog’s back rise as he bares his teeth.

“*Signore*, we’re und—” The guard stationed at the gate never gets to finish. A deafening blast sounds from the other side of the line before the entire villa shakes.

Greta sits up with a startled yelp. “He’s here!” She leaps from the bed and rushes to get dressed. While she’s jumping around on one leg, attempting to put on her pants, I go over the plan in my head.

“Greta, come.” I gesture for her to follow me into my closet but turn to find the space behind me empty. “Get your ass in here, *perla*,” I growl in warning.

“Not if you’re going to tell me you’re locking me up for my own protection,” she returns, and I’m confident she gestured with finger quotes on the “own protection” part. With a heavy sigh and a tug of my bed-mangled hair, I resolve not to fight a losing battle with this woman. Because she’s right. I was going to lock her in the safe room on the other side of a hidden door built into my closet.

Instead, I change direction and walk to the shelves that hold my watches and cufflinks. Placing my thumb on the face of the dummy Jaeger Le Coultre watch, I wait for the face to turn green, then the whirling sound of gears moving. The shelf drops down to expose an arsenal of weapons that would make a Texan drool. And if I needed further proof, the look on Greta's face as she steps next to me would be it. Her eyes sparkle like a mother looking down at her newborn child, and she smiles despite the house shaking with another explosion.

"I'm assuming you know how to use these?" I grab a 9MM and a seven-inch Espada knife, only to hesitate when something occurs to me. "Your shoulder." After our time in the library, I scolded her again about not wearing her sling, and she finally relented, only *after* I threatened to surgically attach it to her arm.

"My stitches are gone, and the doc says I'm doing well. I'll probably have some residual pain for a while, but otherwise, I'm good."

Forever my little fighter.

I nod in approval, and she takes the gun and knife in hand, barely able to hold back a squeal of excitement. I shake my head at the insane woman. *Insane and made just for me.* When she finishes dressing, I hand her the shoulder holster with extra ammo, then slip the Kevlar vest over her head. Like she's done it a million times, she immediately tightens the vest and slips her arms into the holster, securing her gun. She's wearing solid black from her Timberline boots, black Defender tactical leggings, to the long sleeve black turtleneck. She holsters the knife in the built-in sheath of the leggings, and as I watch her gear up for battle, my dick grows stiff, and I have to adjust myself before strapping Rooster into his own Kevlar vest I had specially made by Marron House Technologies a few weeks ago.

Greta takes the comm system from me and expertly places it in her ear. “How did the men not see this coming?” Her question isn’t accusatory, more like genuine curiosity.

Lorenzo chooses that moment to burst into my room. “They’re using fucking grenade launchers,” he answers Greta’s question, and looking at him, you would never know he nearly died not too long ago.

“Fuck me,” I curse and finish setting my own comms.

Greta looks between us in confusion. “I thought we had a security system that could detect movement up to a mile. As far as I remember, the maximum firing range on a grenade launcher was 437 yards,” she finishes, and Lorenzo and I stare at her in dumbfound wonder.

Well, Lorenzo does. I stare at her with barely restrained lust. The woman is sexy on an average day, but here, amidst the chaos of talking weapons and strapped to kill, she is a fucking siren calling to a sailor lost at sea.

“The launchers on the open market, yes, but on the black market, you find all manner of illegally modified weapons. Typically sold by different military branches to fund their wars.”

“Enough,” I interrupt, and both go silent. “It doesn’t fucking matter how it’s possible. Are the guards in place?”

“Yes, *signore*.”

“Has that bastard Vasile shown his face?”

“Their faces are covered. I can’t determine if he’s out there.”

“Fucking, *codardo*,” I growl and grab Greta’s hand. I take the stairs two at a time, and Greta doesn’t complain as she follows behind, speaking to Lorenzo in rapid-fire

Italian while Rooster's nails clack against the hardwood floors,

I catch the tail end of their conversation when we hit the bottom stair. "*Sì, Mia Regina.* We knew this was a possibility, so we brought some of our men in from Rome and surrounding cities."

"And how many do they have?" She asks all the right questions, and my chest swells with pride.

"Forty at most," Lorenzo answers.

"Forty? That doesn't seem like much." She turns to me, brows furrowed. "He has to know you have at least double that."

"I'm sure he does, *mia perla.* If I had to guess, he's relying on the grenade launchers to do most of the work while his men sit and wait to clean up what's left."

"So, what, we just wait for them to come after us? We let them destroy our home? How many more grenades do they have?" Right then, another explosion rocks the ground beneath our feet, and the reinforced front door shudders but holds steady.

"That was their last one, Capo. They're headed this way," one of my men announces over the comms.

"How do they do that?" Greta smirks.

"Do what?" I question.

"Answer a question they never heard me ask?"

I grin wide and lift my chin in pride. "Skill, *mia perla.* Skill and a hell of a lot of training. Are you ready for this?" My smile drops along with my stomach. Because, while I know she'd find a way to fight whether I allow it or not, my need to protect her—shield her—consumes me, and I'm two seconds away from saying, "fuck it," throwing her over my shoulder, and charging upstairs to lock her in the safe room.

But she already has her weapon drawn, eyes fierce, and stance steadfast beside me. Her eyes catch mine, and I send her a silent warning. *“Stay by my side, or I’ll blister your ass.”*

She smirks and shakes her head. “Yes, Capo,” she smarts, and my cock stretches against my zipper at hearing her call me boss while my mind files the insubordinate comment for later.

Forcing my head back in the battle, I draw my weapon, and the four of us move forward as gunfire rings out. Lorenzo swings open the heavy door, and Greta and I take cover off to the side. In his attempt to bring down the villa, Vasile gave us cover with the smoke and dust from the surrounding explosions. That also means he has the same advantage. It doesn’t matter because my men are at the top of the food chain in this battle. Sharks lurking in the depths, ready to come out of nowhere to consume him, flesh and bone.

“Now!” Lorenzo yells over the gunfire and picks off masked men with deadly accuracy. Greta and I move as one as we release hellfire on the swarm of commando wannabes.

1, 2, 3 go down by my hand and 3, 4, 5 by Greta’s. One man screams in severe pain as Rooster clamps down with about three-hundred and five PSI on one man’s leg. A bite I’m all too familiar with. I smile at the memory. I wanted to kill the damn dog, then. Now, I couldn’t part with the mutt; he’s my organization’s best guard.

Rooster finishes the man with a crushing bite to the throat, then speeds off to find another. Greta’s back hits mine and she brings down two more men while I cover the front, taking down three of my own.

The odds are in our favor, and we’re littering the lawn with corpses. My men check in one at a time with status

updates. So far, I've lost four good men. One to the explosions and three to the ensuing gun fight.

"Kill every last motherfucker!" I howl and turn just as one masked asshole aims for Greta. He goes down with his brains painting the manicured lawn.

"Thanks, baby," Greta yells over her shoulder.

"Just keep fighting, *mia regina!* You can thank me later," I yell back.

"I'll make you proud, *mio amore,*" she returns, and my heart swells with happiness I've never felt until she came kicking and screaming into my life.

"You already do," I say too quietly for her to hear.

I hit another man right between the eyes when I hear Greta grunt from behind me and turn to see her in hand-to-hand combat with a guy twice her size. I aim at the fucker's head, but they shift, placing Greta in my crosshairs.

"Fuck. Move, baby."

Mia perla is holding her own, but when the man lands a solid hit to her cheek, her head whips to the side, and he takes advantage with a fist to her gut.

A second later, I'm charging forward, but in their struggle, they have moved too far for me to get to her quick enough. So with my vision clouded with a red veil of fury, I bellow at the top of my lungs, "Rooster, "ə'tak!" A split second later, Rooster rounds a large shrub and bolts to where his human struggles with the man. He leaps onto the man's back, sinks his canines into his neck, and jerks his head from side to side, shredding skin. The man howls in pain and reaches back to dislodge the beast, but Rooster hangs on for dear life. Greta uses the distraction to grab the knife from her leggings and sinks all seven inches into the man's chest. He drops to his knees with Rooster's teeth still piercing

his neck as he falls forward, plunging the knife deeper into his chest.

“Rooster, release.” He immediately obeys before he’s off again to find his next victim. I pay him no mind as I grip Greta’s shoulders and examine her bloody split lip, already blackening eye, and the long gash on her temple where the man hit her with the butt of his gun. “Go inside. Lock yourself in the safe room. You’re done...”

“No, Emil. We stand together.”

I seethe with a mixture of anger and fear I’ve never felt before. *I can’t lose this woman.* “Greta, do not fucking argue—”

“No!” She gets in my face. “Until death does us part, Emiliano Calvano. We may not be married—*yet*—but it still stands.”

My grip tightens on her shoulders, desperate to make her understand. I’m about to rail her when her eyes widen at something behind me right before a blazing flame of pain shoots up my thigh and into my hip, causing my knee to buckle and hit the damp grass.

“Emil!” Greta cries, then gives an audible growl when she lifts her eyes to the motherfucker at my back. “Give up, Sebastian. Your men are no match for ours.” Her voice is strong, her loyalties engraved in steel.

“They aren’t my men bleeding out on the ground. They’re his,” Stefan returns, and with the strength of my queen by my side, I stand and face my brother. “Or rather, I should say they were *our mother’s* men. She came from a wealthy family, and with that came an overprotective father. His men became hers, then all it took was a little DNA to prove I was hers and a sob story of how you’ve become one of the biggest sex traffickers in Rome, tarnishing their dear Gillie’s name, and *voilà*, the De Santis soldiers became *my* soldiers.”

I shake my head at his words. *It's a lie. It has to be.* Granted, I banished them from the *famiglia* after finding out they didn't lift a finger to help find my mother. Of course, I didn't know what I knew now at the time. Still, they wouldn't betray their daughter's firstborn... Would they?

"They despise your father, Calvano, but their hands were tied by tradition and the threat of ruin by your grandfather, so when I told them you had gone into the same business your father tried so many times to get them to fund..." He trails off with a shrug.

The sound of gunfire suddenly goes silent as I take in his words. My mother's smiling face flashes before my eyes. Smiling in sheer joy as I played my first full piece on the piano before morphing into a look of horror with streams of blood trailing like rivers from her eyes and her mouth gaping in a silent scream.

I shake the vision away and come back to the scene before me. My men circle the three of us, guns raised and waiting for my command while Greta stands tall beside me, her lip, cheek, and temple leaking blood from battle. Strands of her chestnut hair have fallen from its tight braid. I smile at the messy mop on her head and tuck a thick lock behind her ear. I smile inside at her strength. My Queen in all but name. One of the many things I plan to change when this bullshit is over.

Mia perla looks at me with love and devotion, but the fear she tries to hide behind the deepest blue of her sapphire eyes makes me decide that a quick death is too easy, too merciful for the sick fucker who tried to claim my queen as his own. "Stand down," I order, my eyes still on *mia perla*. My men obey but keep their weapons unholstered and cocked.

"You want my kingdom, *brother*?" I turn to the man that shares my blood. "Then fight for it like a man. No

weapons, no interference. Just you, me, and our bare hands.”

I turn back to Greta, and without a word, I communicate everything words could never express. I know she hears me when she kisses my lips and whispers, “Me too, *mio amore*.” Then, without preamble, she pulls the knife from my thigh, and like the wicked siren she is, she runs her tongue over the flat edge of the blade, gathering my life’s blood on her tongue before swallowing it. My men gasp in awe at the Calvano Roma tradition signifying a husband’s and wife’s eternal bond. With her actions, she has commanded their undying devotion.

She takes a step back, and I turn to Stefan, whose face is painted in disgust.

Fucking hypocrite.

“Do we have a deal? I’m wounded, after all. Who knows? You may actually win,” I mock, and like the dumbass he is, he takes the bait. He throws off his heavy black cargo jacket and Kevlar vest, and I do the same.

“Wait,” Greta calls out from the circle of my men. I swing my eyes to her and watch as she rips the sleeve of her shirt, then kneels at my feet to tie it below my knife wound. “Finish this, Emiliano Calvano.” She punctuates her order with a painful tug on the knot, and I grunt in acknowledgment of her silent command. “*Don’t fucking die.*”

With fire in my blood, adrenaline acting as a natural anesthesia for my thigh, and the eyes of my men and the woman I love watching, I square up with my brother. Right away, Stefan makes a fool’s move by lunging at my middle in an attempt to knock me on my ass. My elbow comes down on his spine, and he grunts at the hit but doesn’t fall. He lifts me from the ground, and I use the move to wrap my legs around his waist, my arm goes

around his neck, and I shove his chin to his chest. Stefan drops me, and I pivot until my back is to his front, my arm still around his neck, and pull his head toward my chest, crushing his windpipe against my shoulder. His face turns a cherry red as he sputters for air. My leg screams in agony, but I refuse to relent.

Just a little more...

The hit to my kidney is weak but painful enough that my hold on his neck loosens, and he slips through my arm swinging around with a powerful roundhouse kick to the ribs. I stagger to the side, and Stefan uses the opportunity to step and lunge at me with a Superman to my chest, knocking me back a few steps.

The fucker has skills; I'll give him that.

His eyes gleam with victory, but this time when he goes to step, I catch him with an uppercut. His head jerks back violently, and the sound of his teeth clanking together is like the sweetest lullaby. Done with the *cazzo*, I go in for the kill. His jaw crumbles under my fists, his nose snaps, and his teeth fly loose with each punch, but it's the punch to the liver that drops him as his blood pressure plummets and his heartbeat slows to a crawl. His eyes bug, and he curls in on himself as pain wracks his body. But the fight is not over until the life drains from his eyes.

Limping to where he lays in the fetal position, I lift him to his ass. "*Fratello*, brother, don't do this," he whimpers.

But his plea stirs no sympathy from me, only disgust. With my hands on each side of his jaw, I'm ready to snap his neck when my eyes catch on Greta's, and the sorrow in those sapphire eyes nearly breaks me.

The woman could be ruthless and could dole out harsh retribution as much as me. Still, family is everything to her, so it's no surprise that his words pierce her beautiful heart. I can't fault her for one of the very things that drew

me to her in the first place. One of the reasons I love her so deeply and the only reason I release him from my hold.

I toss him to the ground, roll him over with my foot, and plant it firmly against his throat as I speak. “You’re banished from my country. If I hear even a whisper of your return or that you’ve started up your flesh trade again, I won’t be so merciful next time. No matter the blood that runs through your veins. No matter my queen’s wishes.” I press down harder on his throat until his face turns purple and his hands grapple to pull himself free—only then do I turn and walk away. It’s over. I smile as I lock eyes with Greta, then freeze as I watch as the woman I love lifts her gun and points it at me. Time slows as my men shout and raise their guns, but it’s too late. *Mia perla* pulls the trigger.

23

Greta

The binder stuffed full of wedding paraphernalia sits in my lap, but for the life of me, I can't seem to open it. Emil and I were supposed to be married months ago, but those days have come and gone. Now, I sit in my library and ponder what might have been. Would I be carrying our first child by now? Would we be taking down flesh traders together as husband and wife? Avenging angels haunting the dreams of demons?

Sighing, I brush my fingertips over the binder cover where Camil put a photo of me staring into the mirror while the seamstress knelt in front of me, pinning the hem of my wedding dress.

"It won't bite you, *mia perla*," his voice whispers over my neck.

I smile and tilt my head to give him better access. "Easy for you to say. Men get away with doing nothing for the wedding while the women stress over every little detail," I huff and slump in my overstuffed reading chair. I turn my head to kiss my fiancé's scruffy cheek. "When is Camil getting back?"

He kneads the tight muscles of my shoulders with large, calloused hands. And I ponder, and not for the first time, how the same hands that have tortured and killed so many can worship and ravage me in kind.

"Soon. Boian has already landed, and I should hear from him any minute."

"Good. I miss her, and she's probably the only one who could sort this wedding bible out." I chuckle. The binder is snatched from my lap, and with a sharp tug, Emil lifts me from my chair, takes my spot, then plants me in his lap. The binder falls to the hardwood, and he

gives it a swift kick across the room, papers ripping from its bindings and scattering across the library floor. “Emiliano Dorin Calvano!” I scold and go to clean up the mess when his arms wrap tightly around me, and a warning growl rumbles from his chest.

“Fuck all the pomp and pageantry. You want the wedding planned for you? You, me, your sisters, Camil, Boian, and a priest. You will dress however the fuck you like. I only ask you to have Sand Spurrey buds sowed into your hair. I’ll meet you there,” he points to the little stretch of sand between two towering stones, “and we will be married with the sunset over the Tyrrhenian Sea as our background.” He finishes, and the picture he paints has tears stinging my eyes and a smile stretching my lips.

I snuggle into his chest and let out a sigh of elation and peace as he combs his fingers through my dark strands. My body goes liquid in his arms at the vision of him and I becoming husband and wife with our closest friends and family gathered, the Tyrrhenian Sea as our backdrop.

“When?” I speak against his black T-shirt.

“Two weeks from today,” he answers quickly, and I smile at his impatience.

“Okay,” I readily agree and bury myself further into his chest, where it vibrates with his laughter.

“You say it as though you have a choice, *mia perla*. I took you once, and I’ll feel no remorse for dragging you kicking and screaming down the aisle.”

I give his nipple a hard tweak through his tight shirt for his highhandedness and smile when he yelps, then smacks my thigh in reprimand.

I settle back into his chest and sigh. “Why Sand Spurrey?”

He doesn’t answer for three heartbeats. When he finally does speak, my heart pinches and warms all at

once. “They were my mother’s favorite.”

“Then I would be honored. Everything you said sounds wonderful.”

“Then why do you not sound happy?” His tone holds a bite of irritation, and his fingers still in my hair.

“I am happy.”

“But?” he prompts and starts back with his caressing.

I sigh into the hard muscles of his chest and pick at invisible lint. “I just wish it didn’t have to end the way it did with Stefan. I know he was a sick bastard, but he was your brother... I don’t know.” I lift my head and search his amber eyes. “You’re sure you’re not angry with me for killing him? I would understand if—”

“I am not having this conversation again. He was blood, yes, but he was not my brother. And no, Greta, I’m not angry at you. The asshole was going to shoot me in the back, and you saved my fucking life by putting a bullet through his head.” His hand fists the roots of my hair, and he jerks my head back. “And I don’t want to hear another word on the subject. Am I clear?” He is not to be toyed with, so I simply nod. He loosens his grip on my hair and goes back to stroking it instead, and I immediately bury my face back into his chest. “Oh, *mia perla*, what will I do with you?”

“Love me,” I murmur.

“*Sempre*,” he agrees. *Always*.

“*Sempre*,” I repeat.

We sit silently in a loving embrace until our tender moment is interrupted by his buzzing phone in his pocket. He lifts his hips with me still sitting on his lap and answers. “*Sì, mio amico?*” He listens for a moment, and I watch as the sweet-talking man from seconds before transforms into the wrathful don right before my eyes.

His eyes narrow, and fury ignites in his golden orbs. He sits up straight but doesn't loosen his grip around my waist as he speaks in rapid-fire Italian to who I can only assume is Boian. "Find her! I do not care what you have to do—who you have to kill—find her," he orders his second-in-command, his heart pounding beneath my hand on his chest, his body vibrating with rage.

He disconnects the call and drops the phone on my lap as he stares off into nothingness. My heart thunders like a summer storm in Texas with all the horrific scenarios that could cause such a visceral response from him.

My hands cup each of his cheeks, and I gently shake his head to bring him back to me. "What's going on, Emil?"

He doesn't answer for what seems like minutes, and when he finally speaks, my stomach drops, and my own anger bubbles to the surface. "Camil is gone. Boian thought she was taken, but Dom said she knocked him out with some of her sleeping pills, and when he woke, she was gone."

"Why? Why would she do that?" I ask through angry tears. I love Camil, but what she did was stupid and dangerous.

I should know.

"I do not know, *mia perla*, but if anyone can find her, it's Boian." He leans his head back against the chair, closes his eyes, and huffs out a humorless laugh. "And God help her when he does."

The End

Turn the page for a sneak peek into Boian and Camil's story in *The Roma's Lies*.

Sneak Peek

THE ROMA'S LIES

Sinaloa, Mexico 2010

“What the fuck is taking so long, Sergeant Greco?” the captain bitches for the hundredth time over my comms, his Texas accent thick, though easier to understand after being under his command for nearly five years.

“I’m double-checking the house,” I answer with an indignant growl as I scan the Sinaloa compound with my heat vision binoculars. They’ve been glitching for the last twenty minutes, the heat signatures going in and out. What does the man want? I’m not about to blow the shit out of a compound that housed enslaved women and children without being sure they are all out safely.

Someone needs to develop better military technology for this type of shit.

“For fuck’s sake. I swear to Christ, I’ll require balls the size of melons in the next batch. Or maybe I should just keep to American products.”

I roll my eyes. The “batch” he’s referring to are lethal mercenaries who aren’t afraid to get their hands dirty for the greater good. Skilled killers, brutal, and unremorseful.

Mercenaries like me.

Emiliano and I enlisted into the Italian military forces straight out of high school. While Emil was content with staying with the ISAF, patrolling, peacekeeping, and so on, I craved something on the darker side. The kind of missions you were lucky to come back from alive—a source of contention between me and a silver-eyed siren back home in Rome.

Camilla Radu was mine and Emil's childhood friend, but she was no longer a child. She wrote to Emil and me often and would enclose a photo of herself on her birthday each year. I watched her grow from the skinny, awkward thirteen-year-old girl I left behind to the eighteen-year-old woman with mouthwatering curves and the classic Italian beauty she was now. And fuck, if I didn't have to talk my dick down at seeing her photo.

"Just blow the damn thing, so we can get out of this shit stain of a city," the captain grumbles.

"We're sure that the women and children are out?"

"I told you the count three times, Greco. Now. Blow. It," he orders. With a heavy sigh, I press the button. Half a second later, the sky lights up like New Year's Eve in Italy. The ground rumbles below me where I lay hidden in the sparse foliage, far away enough not to be hit by debris but close enough to feel the heat of the blast. The sound of destruction soothes the beast inside, and the demons of my past are imprisoned in their cell once again.

"Mission accomplished. I'm heading back." I gather up my gear and tools to head back to HQ.

Three flesh traders down, thousands more to go.



The photo hovers above my face while I attempt to decompress. Tracing her eyes, smile, and curves with my eyes have my nerves firing on all cylinders and my dick begging for attention.

"Greco! Boss man wants to see you," one of the guys on my team yells from the open flap of my Temper tent.

“Now?”

“Now.”

“Fucking hell.” I pull myself up with a grunt and tuck Camil’s photo into the *Spanish for Dummies* book she sent me last year. Grabbing a shirt, I throw it on as I walk out into the hot evening air and head to the control tent where the “boss” calls me after every mission.

Captain Phips’ voice can be heard before I even get two yards from my tent. “I understand what you’re saying, sir, but—”

“But nothing, Phips!” the boss bellows through the phone speaker. “This was supposed to be quick and clean. You got the quick part, but you royally fucked up the clean part. What part of no women and children did you not understand?!”

I freeze in place right outside the control tent door. Women and children? Fuck. Please don’t tell me...

“Sir, I was not the one on scouting duty, but I assure you the man that was will be disciplined for his fuck up.”

The man on scouting duty. Meaning me.

I charge into the tent, and the look of fear on the captain’s face tells me that he knows I heard him throw me under the bus. “Sir, this is Sergeant Boian Greco. I was—”

“Sir, I have to let you go. I’ll call you when it’s done.” The captain disconnects the call and watches me hesitantly where I stand fuming.

“When what’s done, Captain? When you’re done torturing me for a fuck up you were instrumental in?”

“The numbers came straight from your scouting logs, Sergeant.”

“And you assured me that all twenty of them got out before I blew the fucking place to hell!” I roar. “How

many? How many did I kill?”

The captain runs a trembling hand over his salt and pepper scruff and moves behind the desk, using it as a barrier. “Five,” he answers, and like a lion let loose from its cage, I pounce. The metal table goes flying, and I have the captain by the throat, his feet dangling in the air.

“Five? Can you not fucking count!? You knew there were still victims in there, and you still ordered me to blow it.” I squeeze his throat tighter, and he grapples at my hand, but I have at least four inches and thirty pounds of muscle on him.

“They ... weren’t ... victims,” he chokes under my hold.

I drop him back on his feet and fist his collar. “What do you mean. I heard the boss with my own ears. Women and children. Explain.”

“All the women and children we went there to rescue got out, but the fucker had his wife and kids at the compound. I couldn’t risk not getting the victims out to grab his piece of filth family.”

He might as well have hit me with a sledgehammer. I stumble back, eyes wide, heart thundering in my chest. Bile rises to my throat, and tears prick the back of my eyes. “You knew a woman and her children were in that compound and took it upon yourself to be their judge, jury, and executioner?”

“I did what needed to be done, Greco. If we went back into that compound for some *la concha de tu madre’s*, motherfucker’s family, it could have cost us the mission, and there would be a shit ton of pissed-off mercenaries banging down my fucking door demanding their payday that wouldn’t come!” His breathing is shallow by the time he’s done with his pitiful excuse.

I take a threatening step forward, and he trips over his feet and stumbles into the filing cabinet to get away from

me. “Fuck the money. You’re not God. You don’t get to decide who lives and dies.”

“What the hell do you think we’ve been doing, Greco?” The bastard has the balls to laugh. “With each mission, we do exactly that, and last I checked, you receive a payday just like the rest of us,” he sneers.

“I don’t give two shits about the money, and I don’t kill innocent—”

“Of course, you don’t care about the money. You’ve got your mafia buddy Calvano to line your pockets. Well, we ain’t all so lucky, asshole. Now the question is are you gonna keep bitching like a little girl, or will you nut up and help us take these bastards down?” The edge of his lips tip up in knowing. He thinks he has. He knows why I joined this particular team. They were known to go into the roughest areas and battle some of the most dangerous men in the world. It was like the purest heroin to an addict. But unlike an addict, I’m not willing to sacrifice innocence for my fix.

I unbuckle my gun holster and lay it on top of the filing cabinet by his head. “I’m out,” I say, then walk out of the command tent to never look back.

But what’s the old saying? Never say never...

Book Club Questions

1. After reading their story, how do you feel about Emiliano and Greta as a couple?
2. How was the book overall?
3. What was going through your mind when Sebastian revealed the truth to Greta?
4. Was there anything the author left out that you wish she expanded on?
5. What character or characters would you like to see a book written about?
6. What emotions did this book bring to the surface?
7. Describe the story in three words.
8. Do you plan to read Boian and Camil's story in *The Roma's Lies*? Why or why not?
9. Who would you choose to play the lead characters if it were made into a movie?
10. Would you recommend this series to a friend? Why or why not?

Shae Coon

I write books that come with a warning.

I am a native Texan, wife, and mother. After four years of deliberating, writing, and re-writing my first manuscript, I decided to publish my first novel in 2019. Now, I am living my dream of taking others to a world of seduction and romance through my writing.

Now, go be naughty.

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Beau and Professor Bestialora
The Goat's Gruff
Goldie and Her Three Beards
Pied Piper's Pipe
Princess Pea's Bed
Pinocchio and the Blow Up Doll
Jack's Beanstalk
Pulling Rapunzel's Hair
Curses & Crushes

NICK SAVAGE

The Fairlane Incidents
The Fortunate Finn Fairlane
The Fragile Finn Fairlane
Us Of Legendary Gods
So We Stay Hidden
The West Haven Undead

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A Game of Sales
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My GIF is Bigger than Your GIF
Power Play
Plugging in My USB
Hunting the White Elephant
Caution: Slippery When Wet

LGBT EROTICA

DOMINIC N. ASHEN

Steel & Thunder

Storms & Sacrifice

Secrets & Spires

Arenas & Monsters

My Three Orc Dads: a Novella

ESKAY KABBA

Hidden Love

Not So Hidden

GRAYSON ACE

How I Got Here

First Year Out of the Closet

You're Only a Top?

You're Only a Bottom?

I Think I'm a Serial Swiper

Lookin in All the Wrong Places

What Makes Me a Whore?

A Breach in Confidentiality

Back Door Pass

My European Adventure

An Unexpected Affair

Finding True Love

LEO SPARX

Before Alexander

Claiming Alexander

Taming Alexander

Saving Alexander

The Case of Armando

ROBERT LEWIS

Someone to Love

Someone to Come Home To

ROMANCE

ANN SHEPPHARD

The War Council

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All or Nothing

All the Way

All Night Long: Novella

All She Needs

Having it All

All at Once

All Together

All for Her

KT BOND

Back to Life

Back to Love

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LYNN CHANTALE

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Broken Lens

Blind Fury

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VIP's Revenge

Chef's Taste

MANDY FATE

Love Me, Goaltender

Captain of My Heart

MIMI FRANCIS

Private Lives

Private Protection

Private Party

Run Away Home

The Professor

Our Two-Week, One-Night Stand

SHAE COON

Bound in Love

Controlling Assets

For His Own Protection

Her Broken Pieces

The Roma's Claim

The Roma's Promise

LGBT ROMANCE

ESKAY KABBA

Hidden Love

Not So Hidden

Signs of Affection

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Mikaél's Moment: Type 6

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Check Yes, No, or Maybe

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