



VENGEANCE

The Vengeance Series

MICHAELA JACKSON

VENGEANCE
(A TALE OF VENGEANCE 5)

By

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THE COMPLETE SERIES

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The Complete Series

VIPER

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VENGEANCE

A Note From the Author:

This book contains threats of physical violence, actual physical violence, pregnancy, discussion of pregnancy and childbirth complications, off-screen labor and childbirth, dubious consent, references to sexual assault and rape, sexism, and other themes that readers may find disturbing. Please read at your own discretion. Your mental health is important.

1

Viper

Car crashes.

Not the most exciting or thrilling way to kill a person but effective. Common enough that no one is ever going to suspect foul play. Sometimes I even get to have a little fun with the killing. Like today, as I walk up to the car of one of my boss's lieutenants. Well, an ex-lieutenant after tonight. One who's going to need to be replaced by someone my boss thinks he can trust and someone I know *I* can trust.

I snatch the jammed driver's door open, and before he sees my mask and realizes who I am, the man mutters, "Please. Please..."

"No thanks," I say.

The man registers who I am and begins to groggily stammer, "N-n-no. No. I didn't. I've..."

I grab the man by the back of the head and slam his head hard against the steering wheel, silencing him for good.

I catch the bright headlights of another car coming toward me. They come to a stop just near the wreck before getting out and approaching me.

“Eileen,” I say.

“Adrian. In the middle of a mess as usual,” she says as she takes in the scene before her with her hands in her pockets and her blonde hair in a messy bun at the top of her head.

“Well, sometimes when you’re cleaning house you have to make things more of a mess first.”

Getting rid of Pray is only one part of the puzzle toward taking over his criminal empire. But that means shit if the people under me are loyal to Pray and Pray alone first and will plan their own war against me. Not that they’d have any hope of winning. But it’s better to get rid of these guys while I know exactly where they are and can use the guise of a war to hide it. There’s going to be a enough chaos when all this is over without having to worry about my fucking so-called allies.

“Going to blame this one on Dele or Vicious or whoever the fuck else too?” Eileen asks.

“Who else?” I say taking out the calling card of said assassin. A masquerade mask. The calling card of an assassin who hasn’t seen the field in months because her actual alter-ego is cooped up in New York City right now.

“I hope you know what you’re doing.”

“I know exactly what I’m doing,” I say as I tie the mask around the dead body’s hand where whoever finds him will clearly find it. “I’m making everyone fear her.”

“Exactly. Fear her so much they’ll think it’s just as bad a deal to side with her as it is to side with Pray, and they’ll decide on something stupid instead. Like the fact that Pray has a dick and Dele doesn’t.”

“A lot of them are already going to decide based on that. That’s why I’m doing this. They’ll overlook that Dele doesn’t have a dick if they keep hearing that Pray is losing soldiers left and right to her personal assassins. And then they’ll notice that Dele is only sending her assassins after legitimate, logistical targets and doesn’t send her assassins after her own without proof or a good reason like Pray has been doing. That’ll be enough for them to see that doing business with her is a good deal.”

Eileen eyes the body and then me. “Perhaps.”

“No. Definitely,” I correct. “But I didn’t call you all the way out here so you could question my methods in making sure Dele has the allies she needs.”

“What then?”

I direct Eileen to follow me to my car, pop the trunk, and take a thick orange folder out a brief case.

“Here,” I say.

“You had to call me out here for this? You couldn’t have gotten a regular foot soldier?”

“Not for this.”

“What about Dele’s sister?”

“She’s not aware we’re working together, and she and her girlfriend are on my kill on sight list, regardless of how Dele

feels about it.”

Eileen gives me a dry look before taking the folder.

“What is this?”

“Everything I’ve got on the Russians.”

“The Russians? But aren’t they neutral? Chalked it up to family infighting and decided to let us tear each other apart?”

“That’s what they say.”

“You know otherwise.”

“Just a hunch.”

Pray’s been keeping it quiet, and I don’t know how the fucking hell Dele knew about it when she mentioned it the last time I saw her, but I’m sure the Russians are going to be very concerned about Pray possibly putting in a bid for president. The fact that he’s a fucking US governor was bad enough. It gave him access to certain things and places that most mob bosses could only dream of having access to. Allowed him to sidestep and get around the law in ways that other criminal families and organization never could unless they have a deal with a politician themselves. But for Pray to gain the fucking presidency... that would be a problem.

Not to mention that it’s not a pipe dream. He’s got the clout, the money, the popularity. Is just conservative enough to appeal to a conservative voting base but progressive enough that those more left leaning will settle for him. He could probably win by a fucking landslide, and it would be a disaster for all the families.

It's one thing having your own men and militia behind you to deal with your rivals and enemies but a fucking whole other thing to have the god damn Department of Justice potentially in your pocket where all it would take is the stroke of a pen to get the ball rolling on an investigation or to just make people's lives harder.

It's clever. But it's also daring and goes against what limited codes organizations like ours have. Because while we generally bribe politicians and government officials often, it's a complete conflict of interest to be one of those officials. They let Pray get away with the governorship. There's no way he can be allowed to get away with a presidency.

I suspect the Russians will be very interested in learning about it.

“Hope your hunch was worth coming out here.”

Eileen walks back toward her car. I almost let her drive away. I almost let her leave without asking anything. But what can I say. Every man has a weakness. Even men like me.

“How's she doing?”

Without turning around, Eileen says, “I was wondering if you were going to let me get away without asking.”

“So?” I ask, ignoring her teasing. She's one of the few people I'd ever let get away with it.

“She's managing as best she can when she's running a criminal empire and a war.”

Which is to say she's just fine and right in her element. This is the kind of stuff Dele has been doing since she was a teenager regardless of whose side she was fighting for.

Eileen adds, "I think she misses you. She's... been under a lot of stress."

That's not what Eileen was going to say.

"What's wrong? Is she okay? Are the twins okay?"

"They're fine," Eileen assures calmly. "Her and the children are fine. All of them. Anything you want me to pass on to her?"

I allow Eileen to change the subject for now. I'm not going to get anything out of her right now. I don't have the time, and Eileen has proven over and over again that I can trust her, even when she has ulterior motives.

"Tell her not to show any weakness. I don't care how stressed she is or how much she misses me. Sentiment like that gets people killed in times like these because they don't think clearly."

"I'll tell her you said you love her. She said she loves you, by the way."

"I doubt it."

"Not in as many words. But that's what she meant when she said don't get yourself killed picking off all these damn lieutenants."

"I don't need her worrying about me."

"She loves you, and she's in a vulnerable state right now. She's going to regardless."

I don't say anything and get in my car to leave. It's almost dawn and someone is going to be along soon to find this wreck

and call the authorities. It's not until I'm driving away and long gone that it dawns on me what Eileen said.

A vulnerable state?

What the hell did she mean by that?

I pick up the phone and dial Cres, my pretend, lesbian fiancée. She picks up immediately.

“What's up?”

“See if you can get one of your girls in New York City and into Dele's salon to check in on her. Report back what she finds out.”

I don't give Cress the chance to argue with me about how hard it's going to be to get anyone past the paranoia and intelligence of the Bianchi-Uccello family before I hang up on her.

2

Dele

Like every time I lay back on the bed while my doctor completes an ultrasound, I wait with bated breath. Shoulders tense. Body stiff. No matter how many times she tells me to relax and take a deep breath to release the tension and ease my nerves.

“Okay,” she says as she puts the ultrasound wand away and begins to wipe my swollen stomach.

“Okay?” I ask.

She smiles and says, “Everything’s just fine.”

It’s the same things she’s been telling me at every bi-weekly checkup, but I still let out a relieved sigh, and the tension I hold every time I have an appointment leaves me. For now.

She sees this and says, “I know you’re bracing yourself for something awful to happen. But at this point, it’s fine to start making concrete plans. You’re fine. The baby’s fine. And I’m

only a call away and will give you all the care I know and have access to make sure you're both fine. You don't have to be so nervous."

On some level I know that to be true. On some level I understand that I'm privileged to have the best prenatal and maternal care money can pay for. That using that care, I've been assured over and over again that my pregnancy is normal, uncomplicated, and shockingly low risk. That I've had no complications. No high-blood pressure. No bleeding. No UTIs. Just the normal aches and sickness that are expected.

But I've lived my entire life waiting for the other shoe to drop. I've lived my entire life fighting tooth and nail for everything I wanted and sometimes not getting it or having to settle for what I could take. So the idea that my pregnancy can be this easy. That in just two and a half short months, I'm going to have a baby. One that I gave birth to this time. It's something I don't quite believe. That I can't let myself get worked up or excited about because I want it so bad, I don't think I could take the disappointment if something went wrong.

This isn't something that if it fails I get a do-over to try again later. It wasn't supposed to be able to happen in the first place. So I doubt there's any way that the miracle of genetics and biology that caused me to carry a pregnancy this long this time will ever come along again.

And that's all without the mob war I'm heading against the most powerful mob boss in the country.

"She's not going to listen," Eileen says as she walks into the room, reserved as always and with her blonde hair thrown

into her usual messy bun.

“I have to try,” my doctor says with a smile as she packs up her things while I stand up and let my dress fall back down to my thighs.

I walk with Eileen out the personal medical suite to head back to the main part of the Bianchi-Uccello estate.

“He’s fine,” she begins without any preamble. I don’t have to ask who “he” is.

“Staying out of trouble, I hope.”

Eileen scoffs. “You’d have better luck making a mountain give an inch.”

“So not slowing down on managing Pray’s lieutenants then.”

“Managing,” Eileen repeats. Then, “Yes. He told me to tell you not to show any weakness no matter how tired or stressed you are.”

“Was that before or after you passed my message for him not to get fucking killed managing these damn lieutenants?”

“Before.”

I give Eileen a piercing look. “You didn’t tell him about...”

I quickly run a hand over my stomach before dropping it to my side. At home, my pregnancy is no secret. But it’s better not to get in the habit of openly talking about it when I have to spend most of my time hiding it.

“I didn’t. Not like I need to. Addy Bianchi may be able to keep a pregnancy from the media, but she’s not going to be

able to hide a baby.”

That’s something to deal with when the time comes, and it’s no use trying to convince Eileen of that. One thing I’ve learned about her these last few months she’s been with me is that she rarely, if ever, budes when she’s made up her mind about something.

“What did he give you?”

Eileen passes me a yellow folder, but I don’t open it until were back at the main part of the house and sitting in my home office.

It’s a bunch of files with names and photos of all the biggest players in the bratva. The Russian mafia. Every boss, every lieutenant, captain or whatever the hell they call themselves. Like the Italians, power amongst them has less to do with titles and more to do with understanding. The titles and structure that people think our organizations run under are mostly classifications that law enforcement we haven’t bought off adhere to and the public has latched onto in their fascination with us.

The Italians have never had much to do with the Russians. Their much smaller and younger than the Italian families with less power and connections As long as they stay off Italian turf and don’t interfere with our business, we let them be, and they’re not dumb enough to start shit with us, no matter how big and ruthless their soldiers.

But according to Isabella, Pray’s greed has weakened the Italians. Interpersonal fights and disputes have never been anything new. It’s an expectation of the business and the same as with any people or family. But never like this.

The Russians have tried their damndest to stay the hell out of it because they think we'll implode from the inside and destroy each other so they can gain more ground. And while both Isabella and I would like to say there's no chance of that happening, the way Pray has things set up, even when we come out of this on top, there's a possibility the power and influence we have will be tarnished.

But that's not why me and Viper care about them being allied with us. What we care about is the fact that the bratva are damn good black market weapons dealers. And if we want to see this fight with Pray through to its inevitable conclusion, I need a lot more that I've been able to get my hands on. Substantial as that already is.

"They're going to be hard to convince to ally with us. Even with all the ways they benefit and could expand their power by doing it," I point out.

"That and the fact that you don't have a penis," Eileen adds. "But Adrian seems to think proof of Pray's plan to campaign for president will persuade them to our side."

I hadn't gotten that far into the files, so I ask, "Proof?"

"Keep going."

I skip the rest of the information on the Russians and get to the information on Pray's plans to run for president. Potential platforms to run on. Campaign deals and promises. His potential base. The states he'll tour. The people, places, and events he'll visit. A list of rich donors to help fund him. A carefully crafted narrative and information both good and bad to release at just the right time to keep him being talked about and in people's faces.

It's a lot more than what I had and ever thought I'd be able to get my hands on about his bid for president. I'd known about it. Only because Delilah's girlfriend, the woman who almost had me killed nearly a decade ago, has an interest in things like politics and called that Pray was preparing to make the bid. But I've never anything beyond her very educated guess to prove it.

This proof changes everything, though.

Mixing crime and politics in this way has always been something anyone who works in the criminal underworld frowns upon. Too much scrutiny. Too much opportunity for a journalist or overeager investigator to put obscure pieces of evidence together and expose us for even the most airtight of records.

But if anyone could pull it off, Pray could. And it was one thing for him to have a monopoly on crime in the country, but it's a completely different thing for him to have even proximity to the highest legal authority in the land. He could systematically eliminate every single one of his rivals and never implicate himself. Go down in history as the man who beat the mob for good while it never being known that he and them were one and the same.

If this doesn't convince the Russians to side with us, nothing will.

"When's he planning to announce his bid?" I ask.

"After his term as governor is up."

"Right after the election or after the change of power."

"Depend on which one benefits him the most."

“We’ll assume the earliest date then. We’ve got to get him out of here by November.”

“That’s going to be tight.”

“If we get the Russians help, we can pull it off.”

“I’m not talking about that. I’m talking about...” Eileen nods her head toward my belly.

I resist the urge to rest a hand there. She’s right. November is just a month after I’m due.

“That’s if I go that far,” I correct. “Something to worry about when it comes.”

“I’d feel better, and I know Adrian would feel better, if you had a contingency plan. Just in case.”

“We’ll talk about it if we can’t get the Russians on board.”

Eileen says nothing, but if I know her as well as I think I’ve learned, she’s going to make her own contingency plans for me. If she were anyone else, I’d be suspicious. But Viper trusts her more than anyone else. Maybe more than me sometimes. So I don’t bother to ask what she’s planning. Whatever it is will, at the very least, serve Viper’s interests and, generally, his interests help mine. So I guess I’ll trust Eileen too.

3

Dele

ele,” Eileen says as we ride to the neutral hotel venue
“**D**that we’re meeting the Russians at.

It’s a luxury dinner spot attached to a luxury hotel. Neither the Italians nor the Russians own it, have any investments in it, have ties with the owners or any of the investors, and the business has no ties to anyone else. A good old, honest, American, pulled themselves up by their bootstraps establishment. Well, as good and honest as an American corporation can be. Because corporations and their managers are just the criminals who are legal.

“What?” I ask.

Eileen looks me over and then begins to adjust the layers of my carefully constructed dress. Maybe to better disguise and hide my six and a half month pregnant belly.

“About the Russians,” she says, “I know you’re used to giving orders and being the boss because you’ve proven

yourself by your own merits but the Russians don't care about that."

I frown. Eileen is trying to tell me something other than what she's telling me.

"What..."

Eileen continues, "Adrian has given you a lot of freedom for a woman. A lot more freedom than most women in any mafia or criminal organization have. More than even Isabella Uccello. Not that your proximity to her has helped that. The Russians aren't going to appreciate you handling them like they would another man. What you call standing up for yourself and your empire, they'll take to mean that you're too emotional. God forbid they figure out you're pregnant. They might just throw you out the room."

"So what are you saying I should do?"

Eileen doesn't answer until she's satisfied with my dress. Then she says, "There's no good answer. When you're a woman in this business, there never is."

If Eileen had anything else to say or if I had anything else to ask, it's forgotten as we pull up to the hotel and restaurant.

The door opens and Eileen steps out with me.

Next to me, Jeune, the missing French mafia prince who defected after I rescued his lover, Marcus, from his lover and said lover fall into step next to me. In light of the war and my pregnancy, I had them called back from where they were stationed with Wyan, my old mentor, to watch over the child army we covertly stole from Pray a year ago.

Bella has men she implicitly trusts. and I trust Bella with my life. She's like the sister I always wanted, but could never get in my relationship with my actual sister. So I trust anyone she trusts implicitly. But it's never been more important for me to have the people I handpicked and who I can trust around me. It shows the reach of my power is more than just the power Bella and the name of her family have given me. It shows that I can build something and maintain it with my bare hands. And in front of the Russians, that's important. I need them to know who they're dealing with.

“Careful, Miss Bianchi,” Jeune says.

He hooks his arm in mine to help steady me since my equilibrium has gotten worse and worse the more my pregnancy progresses. But I'll take being unsteady on my feet over any other complication.

I walk into the restaurant with my entourage in tow. No one stops us. The Russians and I equally split the cost to rent it for the evening to talk. I'd offered to pay for it myself and so did the Russians do the same on their end. We both declined the offer. For either side to cover the cost would have effectively made this place non-neutral.

While Jeune continues to help steady me when we get to the table, Marcus takes out both my seat and Eileen's to help us sit before they both take seats on either side of us. It's a strange position for two people who are supposedly only bodyguards to take, but it's also a strategic decision.

No one knows that the French mafia prince is missing except the French themselves. It's something they're keeping hushed since for people to know they don't have an heir would

already weaken their precarious position. As far as anyone is concerned, the French heir is overseas in France for his studies. But tonight, as far as the Russians are concerned, we have the French on our side. Inconsequential of players in all this as they are.

“Right on time,” says their *pakhan*, Isaak Vorobev.

He’s an old man, but not quite ready for retirement yet.

I nod to him, and then nod to the much younger man to the right of him. His youngest and favored son and the heir to the main Russian Bratva family, Vaughn Vorobev. It’s the strangest thing of all about them right now.

If there’s one thing I’ve learned about the bratva, it’s that they’re very traditional and conservative in their values. For Isaak to skip over Alik, his oldest and married son, something drastic must have happened. But like the French aren’t broadcasting that their heir is missing and like I’m not broadcasting my pregnancy, Isaak isn’t broadcasting the reason. Again, it’s not something that matters right now. The Russians are allowed to have their secrets just like all the other mafia families do.

What does matter is that Vaughn’s word weighs heavily in Isaak’s ear. If I can convince his son, his father will follow.

But the business is later. First, dinner, made by the restaurant’s premier two-star Michelin chef, carefully watched and observed by a trusted guard from both our sides to make sure nothing untoward was happening.

We go over the obligatory pleasantries. Family (both of us carefully probing for information that we might not have

already knows), our open business ventures (many of which are fronts to launder and clean the dirty money from our illegal gains), and some of the other non-secret interests.

It's only when we get to desert that the Vaughn, not Isaak, brings up the reason we all know we're here.

“So, about your little war.”

I sip on my sparkling cider, discreetly brought out by the waiter and indistinguishable from the alcohol everyone else is partaking of. So this is how Isaak is going to play it. Let the future of the Bratva decide on something that will affect his sons more than him since he'll be dead in a few years.

“There's nothing little about it,” I say in the Italian accent I've spent so much time perfecting, I forget that I'm not actually Italian. “I'm assuming that you had a chance to look over the documents I gave you?”

“We did,” Vaughn says.

“Then I'm sure you comprehend the gravity what will happen if Stephen Pray isn't stopped.”

“See, that's the thing. We don't.”

“Until the DOJ is knocking on your door because Pray knows all your dealings since he's made deals with you while his businesses are conveniently looked over,” I say bluntly.

“No need to be so aggressive, Addy,” Vaughn chides.

I say nothing as I sip on my drink while focusing on the hand Eileen has put on my thigh to soothe me. We knew this would happen. She warned me.

“Just stating a fact,” I say.

“Your fact is based in speculation. We don’t know that Mr. Pray will take the presidency yet.”

“Maybe not. But do you want to risk waiting until it’s too late to stop him if he gets too close?” I ask.

Vaughn opens his mouth to say something, but his father puts his hand up to stop him. The young man’s mouth twists in displeasure at being silenced, but he instantly silences himself anyway. Someone’s eager to take his father’s place, it seems.

“Let’s cut the pretenses, Addy. Shall we?” Isaak asks. “We all know about your little dispute with Pray. And we all know that you’re outgunned and need access to our weapons. The question is why do we need you besides this conjecture you’re offering us.”

“It’s not conjecture.”

“Then tell me where you got it from.”

I could drop Viper’s name. I could tell them that he’s on my side and that I got this information from them. It would be a surefire way to make them sit up and pay attention at least. But I can’t potentially compromise him like that. Not when I don’t know the Russians can be trusted.

“I can’t tell you that. You’re just going to have to trust me.”

“Trust, sweetheart, is earned.”

“I’m not—” Eileen squeezes my thigh before I can finish my statement and instead I grit out, “That’s true. I have some idea of how I can gain that trust but I’m curious to hear your ideas.”

Because if building a fucking business from the fucking ground up and getting most of Pray's enemies on board isn't enough to earn some level of trust, I don't know what the fuck is.

"How old are you, Addy, dear?"

They're wasting my fucking time. If Viper were here, he would have already shot someone to make a point. But I don't have that luxury right now, and the last thing I need to be in the middle of right now is a gun fight. So even though I know he knows the answer to this, I answer him.

"Twenty-nine."

"My youngest son and heir is twenty-eight." I know where he's going before he finishes and Isaak knows I know it too. Doesn't stop him from finishing. "He's in need of a wife. You're in need of a husband."

"I don't need a husband."

"Don't you? To help run your business? To be the one to negotiate deals like this with his head and not his emotions? Because I guarantee, if you had one, he'd be offering that little daughter of yours as future payment without hesitation."

I reach for my gun, once again thinking Isaak is lucky Viper isn't here. He would have shot the man in the mouth already.

Even on his very best days, Viper's an asshole. But he's never been an ass to me just because I'm a woman. He's never put limits on what he thought I was capable of *because* I was a woman, even while at the same time being keenly aware that I

was a woman and the unique dangers being a woman put me in because of this business.

With my hand on my gun under the layers of my dress, I say, “Let me get you straight. I built my fucking business from the ground up right under Stephen Pray’s nose after he killed, bought off, or scared the shit out of anyone else who wanted to off him. And I run my business the way I fucking want to and the way it fucking needs to be run. So the last fucking thing I’m ever going to do is marry an entitled ass man, hand him the business I built, and sit to the side and watch him run what I’ve built into the ground.”

“Are you trying to insult me and my family to my face when asking for my help?” Isaak asks in an even tone.

“I’m not trying to insult you and your family. I *did* insult you and your family.”

Of course, that was after he insulted me. But he’s not going to believe or comprehend that.

Eileen lets out a barely audible sigh next to me, and I feel the tension in the room as everyone puts a hand on a gun, waiting to see who’s going to shoot first.

Isaak lets out a sharp cry, raising out his seat, and Eileen, Marcus, and Jeune all stand with their guns drawn, only faster than me right now because the extra weight of my pregnancy at the front of my body slows me down nowadays.

But just as soon as he’s let out the cry, he falls back down with a strangled gasp. And then another and another. His oldest son, Alik, is at his side first and then, after a moment of hesitation, Vaughn.

I stand to get a better look at what's going on, but Marcus, Jeune, and Eileen are corralling me to an exit.

“Wait. What—?”

“Don't look a fucking gift horse in the mouth, Addy,” Eileen says as the rest of my security flanks us and ushers me out the disastrous dinner.

4

Dele

saak Vorobev is dead,” Eileen informs me on our way
“**I**to the salon the next morning.

“How tragic,” I mutter blandly.

After the conversation preceding his heart attack or whatever the hell happened at dinner, his death is no loss to me and only a minor inconvenience in my negotiations with his family. When you’re in the mafia, viciously insulting someone is as common as a sunny day. If it doesn’t involve stealing money and turf or killing a family member, it’s usually forgiven and forgotten within a few days.

“We’ll allow them to grieve and then pick up on negotiations,” I say. “Think they’ll be open to letting them using our smuggling routes and storage facilities to help move their weapons? Maybe even cede some of our drug market to them?”

“Maybe,” Eileen says.

Eileen is very sparring with words when she has nothing to say. That's not new. But usually she'd have something to say about this. The fact that she's not concerns me. I have to ask her about it later, though, because we pull up to the salon, and I'm immediately ushered out and have to put on the socialite personality of Addy Bianchi that the public expects to see.

The massive two story hair salon, named *Bianchi's*, is more than just a salon. It's an experience where anyone who thinks they're anyone wants to be. Already, it's booked out six months, and we have plans to build another in the heart of Manhattan which will make for two places with expensive clientele to launder millions of dollars through that no one will blink an eye at. Between the salons, the non-profit to produce wigs for those who have lost their hair, and the online store, no can prove my money is dirty even if they suspected it was.

I don't know a damn thing about doing hair or hair products. But as soon as my rich clients see me, they usher me over for pictures and try to inflate my ego over something that the only reason I was able to pull off is that I have the money and privilege to hire the smart people who know the chemistry of hair and hair products to do it. But as long as they're paid and I keep a good work environment, they're content to let me be the face of all this and don't ask questions.

It's not long before I'm overwhelmed by the people and attention and also winded. So when no one is looking, I try to slip away to one of the luxury, private rooms in the back to rest for a few minutes only for familiar brown hair to catch my eye at the bar with fat rollers in her hair.

"Cres," I call out in surprise.

She turns to me with a grin.

“Addy,” she replies with a wave.

She pulls me into a hug when she sees me, and if she notices my stomach in the way, she doesn’t say anything. Or maybe she just knows it’s not safe to say anything.

I’m inclined to believe the latter when she says, “Come on to my room. We can talk there.”

I follow her to where she’s rented a private room for her experience. No sooner than the door is closed, and she’s plopped on the couch do I ask, “What are you doing here? How are you here?”

Cres doesn’t answer and instead says, “This is actually a really cool idea. Your salon. I mean, if I’m going to spend five to eight hours every two to four weeks getting my hair done, I may as well do it somewhere like this.”

“It wasn’t just my idea. You helped.”

“Yeah, but it was your drive and determination that put it together. Sorry about not making it to the grand opening.”

I shrug as I join her on the couch. “We’re on opposite sides of a mafia war. Which begs the original question. What are you doing here and how?”

Cres smirks. “I don’t run an all-female underworld spy ring and not have a few tricks for getting into a city I’m not supposed to be in and a spot at an exclusive salon without anyone knowing.”

“You could have just asked me. I would have gotten you in.”

“You know that’s not as fun.”

I smirk this time. Because she’s right. It’s not as fun.

“But why?” I ask, not letting her forget the point.

“Adrian was worried about you.”

“Worried?”

“Well, he didn’t say it in as many words but he wanted me to get someone to check in on you.”

Eileen. She must have said something

“I’m fine.”

Cres gives me a onceover and says, “Don’t lie.”

“I’m not lying. I am fine.”

“That may be true, but you’re not being all the way truthful.”

“How would you know?”

“Really? I don’t. People like you and Adrian are really good liars with really good poker faces and not a lot of tells. Your expressions, demeanors, and body language are the same across all emotions because you’re perpetually on guard. So it’s hard to tell if you’re on guard for something out of the ordinary. It’s a good skill to have. Only person who ever comes close is Eileen.”

She’s wrong about the fact that Viper and I don’t have tells. We do. But I suppose only the two of us can see them in each other because it’s only around each other than our guards are truly down... despite the fact that we have every reason to be on guard around each other.

“But Adrian would know. So if he’s sending me to check on you, something’s going on. So give me something to go back and tell him.”

“I can’t.”

“Why?”

“I’ll tell him in person.”

“In person when? There’s no telling how long he’ll be stuck on the west coast and Midwest and you on the east coast until Pray is dead.”

“We’ve got a timeline.”

A timeline where I’ll likely be telling Viper about my pregnancy by presenting him with the baby resulting from it. But I’m going to tell him in person nonetheless.

Cres pauses to look me up and down critically before saying bluntly, “You’ve gained weight.”

“That’s rude to point out.”

“I know it is, and normally I’d never mention it to another woman but I’m on a mission from Adrian. And I rather be rude than have to face his temper because I didn’t bring him anything.”

Cres leans forward but doesn’t touch me and then frowns before leaning back.

“It’s not the normal kind, though. It’s in your face and nose and... you’re all glowy.” She pauses. Then, “Holy shit. You’re pregnant!”

“Not so loud.”

“Holy shit. You’re pregnant!” Cress repeats in an excited whisper. “Adrian is going to freak.”

“You can’t tell him.”

“I’m not. Totally get why you want to tell him in person. But holy shit! I thought you couldn’t get pregnant.”

“So did I.”

“And you said if you did... Everything’s okay, right? No complications or anything.”

“Just perfect.”

“Holy shit.”

“You can’t tell—”

“I know.” Then, “Fuck. If Pray finds out about this he’s going to want to kill you more than he already does.”

“See why I’m keeping it so quiet?”

“Right,” Cress says. Then with a nod she says, “Okay. Got it. Now that you’ve given me something to work with, I can figure out what to tell Adrian so he won’t figure out I’m lying.”

“You don’t have to lie. Just tell him that if he wants to know, he can figure out a way to come find out for himself, and that if he touches a hair on your head to try to get it out of you, I’ll shoot him again.”

“You won’t shoot him.”

She’s right. I won’t.

“Stab him then.”

Eileen walks into the room then, and I instantly know that something has happened and whatever had her quiet early today has suddenly become relevant.

“What?” I ask.

“Deal with the Russians is off the table.”

“Off the table?”

“There’s evidence that Isaak was poisoned.”

The implication doesn’t need to be said but I say it anyway.

“They’re blaming it on me.”

As if I didn’t have enough fucking problems.

5

Viper

“You’ve got five seconds to come up with something better than what you just told me or I might decide to throw you into the Pacific ocean with a chest filled with your entire wardrobe tied to your body to anchor you to the ocean floor.”

“Creative,” Cres replies.

“I’m serious.”

“I know you are. And if that’s what you decide to do, no amount of begging and pleading is going to change that, and I damn sure can’t fight you,” she says, not taking her eyes of whatever TV show she’s watching with her curly brown hair pulled up in a messy bun wearing a pair of tights and a t-shirt as she scrolls through a food delivery app.

I snatch the phone out her hands, click off the television, and lift her up by her neck. Briefly, I wonder if this is what it’s like to have a younger sister.

“Start. Talking.”

Cres sucks in a choked breath and says, “That’s what she said. That if you wanted to know you could find out for yourself.”

“I don’t care what she said. Dele says a lot of things that are irrelevant to me getting what I want from her. And it’s certainly irrelevant to the job I gave you. So tell me, what did those observation and people skills you’re so proud of glean when you snuck into New York to see her?”

“Nothing.”

“You’re lying,” I say squeezing her neck tighter.

“I’m not.” She tries to say something else, but has to preserve what little of her airway isn’t constricted to breathing. I loosen my grip. She continues, “Dele’s hard to read. She’s got a poker face as good as you or Stephen Pray. So all I have to bring to you is what she said. And that’s what she said.”

Cres is still lying. If she were lying to keep the secrets of anyone else, I’d kill her for her disloyalty. But more than loyalty to me, I appreciate the loyalty to Dele. Dele is my number one priority, and those loyal to me know that to be loyal to me is have my priorities as their priorities. So while it may be frustrating that Cres won’t give away Dele’s secrets, it’s to be commended.

I let her go. She falls back onto the couch with a sharp gasp and glares up to me to say, “Asshole. You didn’t have to choke me.”

“I didn’t drown you in the Pacific ocean.”

Between coughs, Cres says, “That’s all you’re concerned about? Just Dele and her secrets? Not that the Russians think

she killed their boss and that this might start another war?”

“Not in particular.”

The situation with the Russians, while unfortunate and inconvenient, matters little in the grand scheme of things. The Italians have been at this for a lot longer than they have and are a lot more well-connected. At the end of the day, they can pull a few strings to get the weapons Dele is going to need even if it's harder to get their hands on than it would have been if the Russians allied with them.

The important thing about the Russians in this conflict was having them on our side so they wouldn't be on Pray's. But since they aren't inclined to be on his side either, we can deal with what they plan to do about their thoughts that Dele killed their fucking *pakhan* at another time. Dele's and the Uccello's people can thwart whatever pathetic attempts they try on her in the meantime.

And in a way, Isaac Vorobev dying, regardless of who was or wasn't responsible for it, is a boon for us. They'll be dealing with their own crisis as power is transitioned to his youngest son. Because this kind of power is never transitioned peacefully. Vaughn is going to have to make a show of strength to prove his worth to anyone thinking they might be able to cede power from him.

I leave Cres to her devices and head to my office.

While Dele is more than capable of getting her hands on another source of weapons herself, I can arrange a weapons deal for her faster than she can without dealing with the Russians.

I pick up my phone and shoot off a text to my contact, dock it onto a stand and mentally prepare myself to be thoroughly irritated by the time I'm done with this conversation. Either I've caught him at a good time, or it's a bad time, but he didn't care after figuring out who was messaging him.

The phone immediately begins to vibrate for a video call, and the latter is immediately proven to be true. My contact is sitting on the edge of a pool completely naked and with both a two women practically fighting over his cock with their mouths. I don't know why the hell I'm even surprised.

“Adrian Blake. What do I owe this pleasure to?”

The mahogany-haired man suddenly throws his head back and groans.

“I'm guessing to one of the women sucking your dick right now,” I reply.

“Hold on a minute.”

I sigh and count for patience as the view of the phone is suddenly of the clear blue sky at wherever the hell Hudson is and suddenly all I hear is the sounds of his moans and groans as he finishes getting sucked off. Stupid bastard didn't even have the fucking decency to put the fucking phone on mute.

“Fuck!”

I've gotten to seventy-three, far longer than a minute, by the time Hudson picks up his phone and comes back into view, this time with a towel around his waist and sitting in a chair at the side of the pool.

If I ever see him again, I'm going to shoot him as soon as I see him for the indignity of this. But Hudson doesn't give a damn. He never has. Which is the reason I'm contacting him right now.

Back during the first war Pray started, Hudson was neutral and sold weapons to everyone who could pay for them, including the Soles. He'd only ever negotiate with me, though, since we had a long history even before the Soles took me in. That and he liked my temperament. He eventually became more of a liability than a boon, though, seeing as he continued to conveniently turn a blind eye when he knew our enemies were laying traps and ambushes for us during our dealings under the excuse that the beef of his clients were none of his business.

Hopefully, he still lives by that philosophy. Because even though his neutrality was always a danger to us, that also meant his neutrality was a danger to our enemies because he wouldn't tell them what we were planning either.

"Now. To what do I owe the pleasure of you contacting me. It's been a while. Since you went turncoat on the Soles, right?"

"Before, actually," I reply. "But I have no time for your whims and games."

"Somebody wants to skip the date and wooing to take me straight to bed and pound my asshole," Hudson says. "Even a whore gets payment first."

I ignore him and say, "I need weapons. A lot of them. Yesterday."

“Weapons? Don’t tell me Pray’s little war with Addy Bianchi has gotten so bad that you’re that strapped and cornered already. If that’s the case, no amount of weapons are going to help you, and I’m going to lose a lot of money it seems.”

“This isn’t on behalf of Pray. This is for a personal project.”

“The only personal projects I deal in are things like personal militias. So that begs the question, what’s your personal project.”

“That doesn’t concern you. The question is can you get it.”

“That’s not a question.”

“Then I’ll send you the details and who to deliver them to with half the payment upfront and the other half after confirmed delivery of good product.”

“On one condition.”

“What’s that?”

“I’m having a little party next week. It’s my birthday. I would be honored if you could attend.”

“Where is it?”

“The greatest city in the world, of course. NYC. Rented a venue. Neutral grounds. Going to be all decked out. I’ll even put in a few special requests for you.”

“You know good and well I can’t come to New York. If any of Addy Bianchi’s people find out I’m there...”

They’ll just take me to Dele, and she’ll find a way to slip me back out the city. Might even get a good fuck in before I

have to disappear. I'm more concerned about Pray finding out I've risked going to the city. I take enough risk when it comes to all this as it is. And while I could just inform him that I'm going off the grid, I don't go off the grid often. It's usually reserved for extreme cases and missions.

"Come on. It's not like everyone doesn't know Addy is your old girlfriend. What's the worst that will happen. She'll hold you prisoner, chain you to a wall, strip you naked and—"

"I dare you to finish that sentence."

Hudson rolls his eyes. *"You always were so serious. Never had a sense of humor."*

"I just didn't find the things you found funny humorous."

"Look. I'll give you your weapons. I'll even throw in a steep discount. Just come to my party. You always did make things entertaining."

If this were anyone but Hudson, I'd assume this was a trap. But since it is Hudson, it's almost inevitable that he just wants my company so he can bother me like he's been doing since he met me as a child.

"Just don't make a big deal out of it," I finally reply.

"Now Adrian. You know I look out for my friends."

"If this is friendship, I hate to see how you treat your enemies."

"One last thing," Hudson says in a hurry before I can hang up. *"Dele Martin..."*

"She's dead," I say immediately.

“I’ve heard some rumors that might not be true and that if I asked the right people, I could learn the truth for myself. Thought you might be one of those people. She grew up real pretty last I saw her. If you can get ahold of her, maybe extend an invite from me for—”

“I’m sure you heard that I killed almost a hundred men in her name once,” I say in warning.

“Nothing that was ever confirmed.”

Of course it wasn’t. Though I’d admitted to it and the Soles definitely hadn’t approved when they found out, no one wanted me in jail so the whole thing was chalked up to a gas leak explosion.

“If not her, what about—?”

I hang up the phone before he can finish.

6

Dele

I've never had a preference for being hot or cold. I was pretty indifferent to both. The only thing hot or cold weather did was determine how I dressed for the day so the weather wouldn't kill me.

Now, I've had the unfortunate experience of being a human incubator during the summer and practically daydream about the cold fall and winter months.

The hot weather wouldn't be so bad if I could dress accordingly. If I could wear a pair of shorts, a crop top, or anything light and flowy in the wind. But the necessity of hiding my pregnancy from the public means I don't get that luxury. The tailors are already being creative enough as it is with my outfits by using clever capes and patterns that pull away from and draw attention from my stomach. It would be a much taller and likely impossible feat to tell them to do it with less fabric.

So when I have the rare luxury of not having to meet with anyone or not having to show my face at the salon or not having to run a fucking mafia war, I can usually be found inside wearing an oversized pair of boxer shorts and a tank top. At night, even that's too much and when the children are in bed, I lock myself in my room naked with the fan running full blast to keep cool as I sleep.

Sometimes, I can't sleep though. While my pregnancy has been relatively easy and I have nothing to truly complain or worry about no matter how much I don't believe it, there has been one annoying thing...

How much I want sex and how impossible it is for me to have it right now.

More specifically, how much I need Viper's cock and how impossible it is for me to have it.

I thought I knew what needing Viper's hot cock in me was. But it's only recently and during my pregnancy that I've found myself daydreaming about it. That I've tuned out someone droning in a meeting to imagine his hands caressing my breasts, running a gentle hand over my swollen belly, down to my pussy, and fucking me through an orgasm with his fingers. That I've left those meetings with my pussy aching painfully for release and gotten home to find my panties soaked. That I've gone to bed frustrated and woken up even more frustrated because none of my vibrators or dildos or other toys can give me the kind of release I want. That they're nothing compared to a hot sweaty body—Viper's hot sweaty body—pressing against my own hot sweaty body and his cock pounding roughly into me.

Between the heat, the lack of sex, and the pregnancy hormones, I can admit that I'm not the most pleasant person to be around some days. Especially without anything to take out my frustration and, often, boredom on.

So Eileen tells me that Viper has found someone willing to procure us weapons, but it involves me having to get out my bed, get dressed, and physically go somewhere to meet that person on a Saturday afternoon, I'm not particularly happy about it. Fortunately, though usually unfortunately, the person is likely an egotistical ass of a man like many of the players in this business, and I'll have an excuse to be a bitch. Either that or it's an egotistical woman who I can still be a bitch to or it's a woman whose company I actually might enjoy and make me temporarily forget that I unwillingly dragged myself out the house for this.

The meeting place is a discreet hotel in a not unexpensive part of town, but definitely not as loud and luxurious as some of places my other business partners who want to feel seen and validated and like the world to bow at their feet would stay. It's a good sign. Whoever this is Viper set me up with knows how to be discreet and doesn't mind it.

Whoever the dealer is requested that I come up to the room completely alone. No one was particularly keen on that, but Viper gave explicit instructions to do exactly what the dealer requested. And if Viper thought someone was laying out a trap for me, he wouldn't have even let me meet them.

But just because Viper told me that doesn't mean I'm stupid. A lot of things can happen between scheduling a meeting and having it, including people getting a better deal.

Not to mention that as much as I trust Viper, he's been wrong about people before. Therefore we bend the rules of exactly what coming alone means.

On every floor outside the elevator and the staircase, an undercover guard is present to watch carefully. Days before, I called my sister, Delilah, back to New York to act as a decoy. It's not something she hasn't done before. Being that I'm pregnant, and it's not safe for me to go outside the state right now, Delilah has been dressing up as me or as my long unused alter-vigilante-ego, Vicious to do the things that I can't do from New York. So she doesn't ask questions when I call her here and instruct her to go up first disguised as me and ascertain whether or not our so-called dealer can be trusted.

It's not five minutes before she calls down and says that I'm good to go. Her strained tone gives me pause, though.

"Are you sure?" I ask.

"I'm sure. Positive, in fact."

"Then why..."

"You'll see when you get here."

I almost call the entire thing off. But Delilah didn't say any of the code words or phrases that would have notified me that it was unsafe, and if Delilah was setting a trap, she knows how to lie better than that. She'd know how to keep her voice cool and calm and unsuspecting.

So I decide to go up the elevator to one of the upper floor suites that our dealer is staying in. I catch Marcus disguised as waiter in the hall, and he nods that I'm good. Regardless of all the reassurances, though, I casually stick my hand into a

hidden pocket of my dress where one of my guns are to be prepared. Just in case.

The door to the suite is unlocked.

I expected a number of things when I got here. The dealer, all his men ready to ambush and get rid of me. Maybe an orgy.

What I didn't expect was to find a dark haired man in casual pants and button-up shirt with his gun pointed to Delilah's head.

I take out my gun and aim it at the back of his head at the same time as he says, "I thought my instructions said to come alone, *Bell*."

"V—Adrian," I squeak out, barely remembering that I'm not sure if Delilah has figured out that Adrian is Pray's mysterious enforcer.

Viper turns to look at me with a smirk on his face, gun casually still pointed at Delilah's head.

"I knew I could count on you *not* to do exactly as you were told. Good, girl."

Normally, the "girl" part would irritate me, and I'd remind him I'm far from a girl anymore. Especially now with his fucking baby inside me. Instead and inexplicably, the first thing I blurt out is, "What did you do to your hair?"

Because gone are the wavy dark blonde locks that I'm used to. They're as dark as my natural hair color and combed back straighter and away from his face.

"Now you know how I felt when I first saw you in that blonde wig. It's just temporary."

“Hate to interrupt,” Delilah says, “But your boyfriend is still pointing a gun at my head.”

“He’s not my boyfriend,” I deny at the same time as Viper says, “I’m her fiancé.”

I glare at Viper. “I never agreed to marry you.”

“You also never said you wouldn’t.”

“Regardless, he’s still pointing a gun at my head.”

“Adrian,” I say while giving him a dry look.

“I told you the next time I saw your sister, I was going to shoot her. When are you going to start taking my warnings seriously.”

“I take all your warnings seriously. But I also didn’t know you were going to be the mysterious dealer I’m supposed to meet.”

“Technically, I’m just an intermediate. But that’s beside the current point.”

Already, my back and feet are beginning to hurt from standing. So I calmly walk past my sister and Viper, sit my gun on a side table, and sit on the couch. Then I kick off my shoes, toss off my hat, and prop my legs up on the length of the couch while leaning on a pillow against the arm.

“Viper, you said you’d murder Brin next time you laid eyes on her and only my sister if she tried to stop you. Besides, do we really have the time to get rid of a body?”

“You say that like getting rid of bodies is a hard task for me.”

That's true. After a while, getting rid of a body is only a matter of calling in an associate, making them take it away, and getting someone to clean up the mess if there is one. Probably ten minutes with resources like ours.

“Well, if you're going to kill her, be done with it already. Or was I only supposed to do what you said and not what you do when you said don't take out a gun unless you intend to pull the trigger?” I ask.

“Oh, I intend to.” Viper contradicts his words by taking the gun from Delilah's head. “Eventually.”

Viper gives my sister a pointed look. Delilah turns to look at me.

“You have some serious explaining to do about all this.”

“Not concerned about leaving me with a man who pointed a gun to your head.”

“He knew I wasn't you the minute I walked through the door. Besides, I also have the benefit of knowing who the real person is under Addy Bianchi. Once rumors of your affair started circulating, I knew either he knew exactly who you were and wasn't saying anything or didn't recognize you and proved my point over the years that you deserved better than him.”

“Are you saying your point was disproven?”

Delilah scoffs and walks out the suite, probably to go somewhere and be seen around New York so no one ever suspects the Addy Bianchi they know is holed up in a suite with a man who's supposed to be her enemy.

Delilah also has the benefit of being able to wear the clothes that I can't right now. Her appearances in crop tops, fitted tanks, and flowing jumpsuits have made it so no one has suspected my pregnancy yet.

She hasn't even totally left the room when Viper sits his gun next to mine, crosses over to me, straddles my legs and takes my face into his hands. He presses his lips against mine, gentle at first—gentle for him anyway—as though afraid if he kisses me too hard, I might break. Or maybe he's afraid I'll disappear because it's been so long and he can't quite believe I'm here. Like I can't believe he's here.

And it's not just him physically here with me that I've been denied. I've been denied a text asking me some mundane detail that doesn't really matter to our plan because he's too stubborn to admit he just wants to talk to me. I've been denied hearing his voice in my ear over the phone or video calls to go over more complicated things late at night that can really wait until morning but he really just wants to hear my voice too.

When this is all over, we're going to work on that. Stop finding a reason to be around each other because we don't want to admit we want to be around each other. Because for so long, we couldn't admit it.

But later. Right now, I focus on his hot lips on mine.

He kisses me harder. Demanding. Takes my breath away. Gives me no room to fight back. But I don't want to fight right now. Right now, I relish in the fact that this is what I've been dreaming of for months.

As though reading my mind, Viper pulls away just slightly and murmurs, "I've been waiting to do this for a while now."

His lips are back on mine again. Already, my heart is racing, I can feel my pussy soaking my panties, and I'm growing hotter with more need to take my clothes off and have his hot skin pressed against mine. I'm so desperate with desire for him that I almost forget about my pregnancy until his lips begin to travel down my jaw and neck. His hands begin to search the layers of my dress to find a way to get it off me.

"Wait," I say, reaching into his dark blonde—no black—hair and tugging to pull him away. "I have to tell you something."

"Cres told me as much. It can wait."

He's about to settle his weight on me. Any other time, I'd relish in his heavy body on top of my smaller one until it almost crushed me. Today, I rush to stay him with a hand on his chest and the other on my stomach, just in case I can't stop him in time.

Viper notices the hand on my stomach and takes the hint as he sits back.

"What's wrong?" he insists as he takes my hand away from where I placed it on my stomach and places his hands there instead. "Are you hurt? Eileen told me you were fi—"

Viper cuts himself off as his hands begin to feel the distinct curve of my round belly under my dress. He instantly lifts the hem all the way up to my breasts, exposing my pregnant belly to his gaze.

"I'm fine," I assure. Then I take his hand, still gripping onto the hem of my dress, and place it on my belly where I feel the baby moving. "We're fine." And then, even though it's

obvious from the sight of my stomach and the movement I know he feels under his hand, I add, "I'm pregnant."

Viper

I'd already suspected what was going on the moment I placed my hands on her stomach and instead of encountering smooth, toned skin through the layers of her dress, I encountered hard curves. I certainly figured it out when I lifted up her dress, and saw her swollen stomach. But there's something about hearing it come out of her mouth that confirms it and makes it real. Also, her insistence that she wanted to tell me herself and Cres's refusal not to tell me anything is... understandable now, at least. I make a mental note to make it up to Cres with some exclusive item she hasn't been able to get her hands because she's not influential or famous enough later.

Right now, I look at Dele dazed, not sure how to react to the news. Because of everything I suspected her little secret could have been, this wasn't it.

Movement through her belly under my hand snaps me out of my stupor.

“I thought you said it wasn’t possible,” is the first thing I manage.

Dele just smiles and shrugs. “Well, don’t get too excited about doing it again. Even my doctor said it was a lucky fluke when they examined me.” She frowns and says, “You are... excited, right? Well you don’t have to be excited. I’m not excited. But you’re okay with this. If it happens?”

I feel myself break out into a grin as I look down at her and say, “I’m excited.”

Then the full comprehension of what she said dawns on me. “You’re not? Then why didn’t you—”

“No. No. I don’t mean like that. I mean... I’m excited. At least, I want to be. But...” Dele sighs and averts her gaze from me as she continues, “This wasn’t supposed to be able to happen. And I can’t convince myself that something’s not going to go wrong if I let myself get my hopes up. So I’m taking it one day at a time.”

I roll my eyes. And I’m supposedly the paranoid one. “That’s nonsense. Everything will be fine.”

“I hate when you make promises you can’t keep.”

“So you lied when you told me you’re both fine.”

“No... just—”

“Is that what your doctor said?”

“Yes, but—”

I grab her chin and force her to look at me.

“Then *everything* will be fine.”

“You know how much can happen between now and a delivery with a person who has a non-scarred reproductive system?”

“Everything will be fine. I’ll make sure it’s fine.”

“Viper—”

“And if it’s not, I’ll die for making you feel safe when you weren’t.”

She still doesn’t believe me. I can see it in her eyes. But she does give a small nod and smile as she says, “Such a drama king.”

I ignore her as I caress her stomach, still disbelieving and still a little apprehensive myself despite my reassurances. This changes a lot. Fuck, we’re in the middle of a war that we’re ostensibly on different sides of. Everything is almost in place for a takeover except for a few key figures that I can’t easily get to and is going to inevitably just end in all out fighting with Pray’s militias and ours. Hence dealing with this dealer. And if that doesn’t work out, I’m working on another idea, but... well, there’s no guarantee on that one.

“Nope,” Dele suddenly says, taking my hands off her stomach. “You can be awed and mesmerized later. Right now. You’re going to fuck me.”

I chuckle and say, “Someone’s very forward today.”

“Maybe. But I’ve never needed sex so badly in my life, and even though you shouldn’t be here for a thousand reasons, you are, and I might as well take advantage of it.”

Even without being pregnant, Dele was always one to take what she wanted when she was sure of it, so I’m not surprised

when she grabs me by the collar to urge me back down to her. Gently. So as not to crush the baby.

I pick up where I left off, kissing her neck and the top of her chest, between her breasts through her dress, down the curve of her bare stomach all the way down and around to the sweet, wet heat of her pussy.

I'd intended to take it slow. To relish every moment of this short time with her. But she clearly needs what only I can give her. And I may be an ass, but not so much of an ass that I'd deny my pregnant fiancée what she clearly needs right now.

I lift up enough to remove her panties before burying my head between her legs and putting my mouth to her pussy.

She's already so wet, and I haven't done anything to her yet.

"You really did want this," I mutter.

Her hand comes to my head and pushes my mouth back to her.

"Stop talking and start eating."

I obey, covering her with my mouth, and immediately concentrating on the swollen nub of her clit.

Dele lets out a loud moan, grinding her hips forward and pushing her pussy closer to my mouth and tongue. I've haven't been sucking or licking her for even a minute before I feel her seize under me and lift her hips as she moans through an orgasm.

Fuck, she's never come this fast before. Knowing how much she's needed and wanted this only makes me feel the

same, and I need to fuck her with my cock just as desperately. How did she stand this for even a few moments, let alone months?

She keeps her hand on my head to keep my mouth pressed against her clit when normally I'd have to make her let me keep going after making her come that hard. I decide to take advantage. To see what peaks of pleasure I can get her to in a short period of time when I have her cooperation like this.

I make her come twice, thrice, four times and am working on the fifth time when she says breathily, "Viper..."

I lift my mouth off her clit enough to say, "Is it too much? Do you want me to stop?"

"No," she says immediately. "I'm just hot. I need you to help me take my clothes off."

I sit up to help her get rid of the layers that I can only imagine she's wearing to disguise her pregnancy. A cardigan. A dress that pulls away from her stomach. A tank top beneath that.

When she's finally naked, she tries to push me back down between her legs. But I don't let her, taking the chance to strip myself naked too. When I'm done, I settle between her legs, and drag her forward from the pillows she was propped up on to align her pussy with my cock.

"Not like this," she says shaking her head and sitting up. "This is going to hurt my back."

"How then?"

She pauses to look around the room before urging me off the couch and then slowly swinging her legs around to plant

her feet on the floor. She takes a moment to catch her breath before carefully lowering to her knees on the floor and turning to face the seat of the couch. Then she leans the top of her torso onto the soft cushions with her arms crossed.

“Like this,” she pants out, nodding for me to get behind her.

I settle behind her and align my cock with her pussy hole.

“Any other rules?” I ask.

Before she can answer, I slam my cock into her. Fuck, she’s so hot and tight still after all this time. I could lose myself in her. I want to lose myself in her. But I have to hold back until I know what’s fine and what’s not fine for her right now.

I can’t keep myself from pulling back out and slamming back in, though, causing her to let out a shaking, sighing moan.

“Rules, Bell.”

“Just—” I slam back into her. “Just none of the rough stuff. No... No fighting or slamming me down. No choking.”

“So none of the fun stuff,” I joke.

“This feels pretty fun to me,” Dele says breathlessly as she pushes backward to meet my thrusts. She can’t keep up, but she can be forgiven for that.

“What about this?” I ask, reaching into her hair and pulling to make her curve her back and give a better angle as I keep thrusting into her.

“That’s...ugh!” A moan overtakes whatever she was about to say. “That’s fine.”

“What about this?” I ask as I slap her ass with my hand.

She lets out a squeak of surprise and then says, “Ooo. I like that. That’s... That’s fine.”

I slap her ass again, and she lets out another moan.

“Does it hurt?” I ask.

“Yes!”

“Do you like it?”

“Harder.”

I bring my hand down harder. Not as hard as I can, but harder than I think even some of my best soldiers and associates could take. But this is what Dele likes. She likes it when I hurt her. When I beat her entire body. If she weren’t pregnant, spanking her like she’s a fucking child likely wouldn’t be enough for her. But for now, it’s going to be enough. I’m going to make it enough.

She comes around my cock, her walls clamping so hard around my cock I can’t help but to come afterwards even though I didn’t think I was that close to finishing. But I don’t stop.

I can’t stop.

I slap her ass again and continue to thrust. I continue to slap her ass until it’s so red it will likely bruise without some kind of attention to it later. But I don’t care, and neither does Dele as she screams and cries out in pleasure every time I spank her and thrust into her pussy.

I let go of her hair. Stop spanking her. Reach around to cup her breasts, as swollen as her stomach, into my hands. Then I pull her up until her back is pressed against my chest while I thrust into her.

“Is this okay?” I ask as I pinch her nipples, already suspecting they’re sore and sensitive from her pregnancy.

“Oh. Yes. Please.”

“What about this?” I ask, taking one of my hands to reach between her legs and stroke her clit.

The answer is her coming on my cock. And coming. And coming. It doesn’t stop. Not even when I come hard inside her and stop thrusting to just continue pinching her nipple and stroking her clit.

Her body is trembling against me, her come is gushing from her pussy and onto the floor every time her body seizes with pleasure. Until finally she comes so hard that it’s enough to make me come for a third time in short order inside her without doing anything. The grip her pussy has on me so overwhelming that I come more intensely than I likely ever have in my life.

We both moan so loud it’s a wonder the entire city didn’t hear us. As it is, probably only our neighbors and guards heard it.

Spent, for now, I let Dele fall forward to lean on the couch and then carefully lean over her.

“If that’s what pregnancy sex is like, then I’m going to need you to stay pregnant forever,” I say.

She laughs, probably trying to sound incredulous but only managing to sound sleepy.

“Only if you carry it half the time,” she says drowsily.

“Someone’s sleepy.”

“Maybe now I can get some sleep since being horny won’t keep me awake.”

“Then go to sleep.”

“But what about the dealer.”

“He can wait.”

8

Dele

I wake up comfortably warm and snuggled under a light cover. It takes me a minute to remember why I'm so relaxed and then I remember that I was thoroughly and happily fucked by Viper before I all but passed out.

He picked me up afterward, carried me to the bedroom and laid me on the bed on my side before picking up the phone to ask the front desk for something and disappearing into the bathroom. I had mostly dozed off when he came back out in a pair of lose pants and a warm cloth and bowl of water. I fell all the way asleep to him wiping me clean and massaging some kind of ointment into my pleasantly sore ass.

Naturally, Viper is the first person I look for when I wake.

He's not in the room, so I creep out of bed. I wince a little at the soreness of my thighs and ass, but am altogether pleased to feel it. I've missed feeling like this.

I walk out the bedroom completely naked and find Viper—to my dismay—dressed with a woman putting the final touches on a dress on a mannequin with a pregnant belly similar to mine.

Viper immediately sees me and ushers me over. Not bothered by the presence of another woman seeing me completely naked and pregnant because I'm sure Viper has paid and threatened her very well for her discretion and silence, I walk to where he is.

He puts his arm around me, pulls me into his side as he says, "I had to get some last minute adjustments on your dress since I didn't count on you being pregnant when I got this made. Is it satisfactory?"

It's a short, fitted black dress that might still be a problem, even with the added ruffles around the breasts to draw attention away from my stomach. But then the tailor attaches a cape to the bust by zipper that pulls away from the body and disguises the fake belly of the mannequin.

"It should do," I say.

Viper nods to the tailor. She takes it for the dismissal that it is and leaves without another word.

"Where are we going?"

"I was invited to our dealer's birthday party, and I'm taking you as a plus one."

"Did he say you could bring a plus one?"

"Not in as many words," Viper says. "Besides, I thought you'd like to meet him yourself. These are your weapons after all."

I sigh and say, “I guess.”

My statement comes out as more of a whine, but Viper would have noticed my reluctance regardless.

“You don’t want to go?”

“I mean... I guess I don’t mind. I just was hoping we could stay in.”

Viper raises his eyebrow at me, and then catches me pressing my thighs together.

He chuckles as he moves to stand in front of me and pulls me to him.

He whispers in my ear, “The dozen times you came earlier weren’t enough?”

“Nope,” I reply, making sure to pop my lips with the p sound, unashamed by my desire.

“I might actually not be able to keep up with you.”

“You’re admitting to it?” I ask with a feigned gasp.

“I said might.”

He slowly backs me into the wall. If I weren’t pregnant, he almost certainly would have slammed me into it. But he’s being careful. If I didn’t love him already, I’m sure I would now.

His hand slips between my legs and he rumbles, “One more. Then we have to leave.”

“Three more.”

“We’re already late, Bell.”

“Two.”

He doesn't say yes, but he doesn't say no either as he sinks two of his fingers into my hole and begins to thrust while making sure the palm of his hand slaps my clit every time they go back inside me.

I let out a sigh of pleasure and grind myself into his hand as he fucks me.

Fuck, I've never needed him to make me come so badly. Even after earlier tonight, the desire hasn't waned. And that's saying something considering that was probably the best fucking sex of my life. The intensity of it all. How overwhelming it was but it still not being enough. Still being able to take more. The only reason I let Viper stop is that I got too tired to chase it.

But I'm rested now. More rested than I have been in a while, and I want all that Viper can give me tonight. For once, I know I can take it. And I don't know if having it will sate me for the next couple of months until I give birth or make my desire so much worse because I've tasted what it's like.

He hasn't thrust that many times before I'm falling apart on his fingers, my hands grabbing the front of his jacket. My hard, pointed nipples pressing against the fabric of his shirt.

I want to tear his shirt off right now. I want him to be as naked as me and come all over his face as he eats my pussy again, but Viper's not going to risk losing this dealer.

He does keep going, though. Puts a third finger in me to work me to a second orgasm on his fingers, allowing the orgasm to finish and me to finish moaning before he pulls his hand away, kisses my lips, and says, "Now go get ready."

I pout as he backs away from me. Even more so when he begins to lick my come off his fingers without breaking eye contact with me.

“What kind of ass teases the woman carrying his baby like this?”

He shrugs, continuing to lick his fingers clean.

“Go get dressed, Bell. You’ve got fifteen minutes.”

“I’m going to need thirty. I can’t move as fast as I used to... Unless you come help?” I ask hopefully.

“Not falling for that trap.”

I sigh and go get ready.

“You’re going as Dele, by the way,” Viper shouts into the room for me to hear from the bathroom. “No blonde wig tonight.”

I lose track of how long it takes me to get ready. But long enough that I know it’s longer than the unreasonable fifteen minutes that Viper gave me, especially since I had to wash and dry my actually hair after I took my wig off.

When I come out the room in my dress and the comfortable flat but stylish shoes Viper got for me with my hair tumbling down my back, Viper walks up to me, takes me into his arms, and puts his hand on my disguised pregnant belly.

“Look at you,” he says, leaning his forehead onto mine. “All grown up and swollen with my seed. About to have my baby and become my wife.”

“I didn’t agree to that last part,” I remind.

“Semantics.”

“This better not be an impromptu secret, forced wedding.”

“Are you wearing a white dress and veil?” is all he asks.

I decide to take that as answer. But I can never be sure with Viper about things like this. Nor would I ever put it past him. Him and other people’s personal boundaries don’t typically mix. Even mine. Maybe especially mine.

He gives me a pair of sunglasses, hooks his arm in mine, and walks me out the suite and down the elevator. We don’t go through the main lobby and instead go through a discreet exit to where our ride is waiting for us.

The place where we’re going turns out to be at an event venue in a neutral business district that none of the competing crime lords and mafias have bothered trying to take over yet. A wise place for a weapons dealer to have a party if his aim is to sell weapons to whoever has the money for them and stay out of the middle of conflict. But also, a potentially dangerous place for us specifically because it’s neutral. Because neutral doesn’t always mean no one is going to shoot you if they see you and want to. It just means the establishment isn’t going to do anything to help or stop either side.

We’re stopped in a well-lit foyer to sign NDAs before we go inside, pretty much telling me the kind of debauchery I’m likely to run into here. So I’m not surprised when we’re let through the double doors into a large transformed room with hanging platforms of naked men and women dancing sensually, an unending colorful wall of alcohol, all kinds of drugs being passed around, a corner where a group of guests

have decided to have an orgy while a crowd watches in a corner near the back, and no telling what else.

While I've been to a lot of parties with people with money and time to blow, the vibe is familiar, and a glance at the elevated platform in the center where the host of the party is, sucking it all up, confirms it.

“Hudson is our dealer?” I ask. Then, “He's still dealing?”

“To a select number of clients he likes.”

“I'm guessing he still likes you?”

Viper huffs in answer before gesturing me forward.

As we walk past throngs of people on the way to the center of the room, I spot Alik Vorobev and his wife, Nadia. While Alik doesn't notice me, his vibrantly red-haired and green-eyed wife does. She clearly recognizes me, even with my dark hair and shades when most people haven't. But she only discreetly nods at me before turning her attention back to whatever story it is someone in their little group is telling.

Interesting.

One of Hudson's men come to meet us before we're even halfway to the center raised platform. He moves people out the way and makes a direct path for us to get to Hudson who has already made room for us to sit.

“You made it,” Hudson says.

As he lets me brace on his arm so I can discreetly ease myself down onto the soft cushions in a way that I can easily get up later, Viper glowers at the man and says, “First things first.”

Quicker than anyone can see, Viper's hand goes from hanging casually at his side to holding his gun and pointing it in Hudson's direction. And while everyone, even his security is registering that, he's pulled the trigger and shot precisely into the cushion between Hudson's spread legs. Hudson's security gets ready to spring into action...

Until Hudson laughs loudly and says, "This is why I always liked you kid."

His security eyes Hudson in guarded confusion, awaiting his cue on what to do.

"You need better security," Viper says as he takes a seat next to me, unbothered by all the men surrounding us with hands on their guns.

Either he's confident that Hudson's men won't shoot or he's had his men infiltrate this party long before we got here. Likely the latter.

He continues, "If I'd really wanted to kill you, you would have been dead by now."

"It's not in your interests to kill me, kid," Hudson says as he waves for a round of drinks.

I obligatorily take it, but naturally refrain from drinking it. Just put the glass to my mouth and tip it until the alcohol is touching me lips.

"Lucky for you," Viper replies. "Now. I'm here at your party. Let's talk business."

"Not so fast," Hudson says. "Who's the pretty little lady on—Well, fuck me. You actually went and found her for me. Adrian. What a wonderful gift."

“She’s *not* for you.”

Hudson ignores Viper and says, “Little Dele... Well, not so little anymore. You grew up as gorgeous as I knew you would. Still trying to keep up with this guy? Or is he trying to keep up with you now?”

I give him a polite smile as I put my glass down next to the heavy metal abstract art centerpiece on the table near me. Same old Hudson.

Viper brought me to one his lavish birthday parties a decade ago. When I was just seventeen and starting to understand the power my sexuality had over men and women. I went through an all but naked stage, wearing the tightest, no room for imagination dresses I could get my hands on when I was allowed to go on assignments in places like this. Wyan hadn’t liked it. And while Phae had understood the attention from men and women was thrilling and new, even she’d cautioned me.

Really, like everything I’d done back then, I’d been vying for Viper’s attention. He’d taken one look at me and said to both Wyan and Phae, “She can wear what she wants. I can fight.”

So could I. And I’m sure Hudson hasn’t forgotten that the first and only time we met, all of us ended up spending a night in jail for Hudson thinking he was allowed to cop a feel as the birthday boy. But maybe that’s the point for him. Hudson always did like to live on the wild side. It’s a wonder he’s still alive.

“We’re keeping up with each other,” I reply.

“How about you ditch him for the night and take a spin with a seasoned man like me? I bet—”

This time, the shot into the cushion between his legs comes from my gun.

Again, he laughs even as his security looks at both me and Viper on more heightened alert. I put my gun away and pick back up my drink.

“Only another crazy fucker could deal with a crazy fucker like him,” he says raucously. Then he looks at Viper and says, “Please tell me she’s the client. It would make this birthday boy’s night.”

“She is,” Viper says as he discreetly trades his empty glass for mine and downs it.

“Oh, this is going to be fun,” Hudson says.

I frown and say, “I have a feeling that I’m going to be shooting more bullets at you during this partnership.”

Hudson only laughs and sniffs a line of coke passed his way. Then he says, “Have your boyfriend send me over the drop-off specifics. In the meantime, get drunk. Get high. Have a good time.”

That’s something we won’t be doing. With the deal concluded, more than ever, I’m aware of how much I want to get out this dress. Not even so Viper can fuck me, though there’s definitely going to be plenty of that tonight. But simply because I find most clothes like this too tight and irritating during my pregnancy.

Viper immediately begins to get up to leave, but I pat his thigh and tell him to wait so I can go to the bathroom.

The fact that Viper lets me go alone confirms to me that he's got men all over the place to watch in case anything happens. I'm in the middle of washing my hands when Nadia Vorobev herself walks into the bathroom.

"I know you didn't kill my father-in-law. Alik doesn't think you did either," she says promptly in fluent American English.

I don't know what she's getting at or why she's talking to me, but I don't sense a threat from her, so I say, "That's nice. But it's your brother-in-law that needs convincing."

"He won't be convinced." Nadia shakes her head and says, "Dele..."

I narrow my eyes at her.

"How do you know that name?"

Without breaking eye contact with me, she says, "We met once. When we were teens. You won't remember. I didn't look like this."

I look into her green eyes, wondering where I could have ever met her before but nothing comes to me. I met so many people as a teenager both directly and in passing. There's no telling.

"That doesn't matter right now, though," Nadia says. "What matters is that there are things happening that have nothing and everything to do with you." She hands me a piece of paper and adds, "Alik and I will try to help you as much as we can. He wants the alliance. Without the marriage. But our hands are tied. Me and my husband's help probably means

little to you in the grand scheme of this war, but if you need anything we'll do what we can to help.”

I glance at the paper she gave me. It has her phone number on it.

“Wouldn't this be seen as a betrayal to your boss? To your family?”

Nadia huffs and says, “Not when they betrayed you first.”

There's a story there, but it's not relevant to me or my business. It's definitely domestic infighting that has little to do with me save for the fact that I'm a convenient scapegoat for someone who doesn't want to be found in their family.

So I simply nod and am about to walk out the bathroom when I hear a ruckus coming from outside.

Nadia and I exchange a look before going outside and finding the raised platform in the center of the room in chaos. Hudson is sitting down, holding his nose and between his eyes, blood pouring between his fingers as his team tries to pry his hands away to get a good look, while Viper sits right where I left him holding the bloody god damn heavy metal abstract art centerpiece that was on the table next me earlier.

Hudson must have said something to really piss Viper off, because Viper doesn't look angry when I approach him. He's sipping his alcohol with an unhinged, self-satisfied smile that's more dangerous than one of his glares could ever be.

“You god damn, fucking bastard,” Hudson manages despite the fact that his face is currently smashed in. “Fucking take everything so fucking seriously. I fucking swear.”

“I could have killed you,” Viper says casually. Then he sees me, sits the glass down and the art piece, and asks, “Ready to head out, my love?”

9

Dele

s the deal still on?” I ask Viper when we return back to
“**I**the hotel room.

He was quiet during the ride back which isn't particularly out of the norm for him, but the stiff clenching and then unclenching of his right hand told me otherwise.

“Of course, it's still on,” he says as he roughly gets undressed, snatching his cuffs apart so that the cufflinks go flying about the living area before we even reach the bedroom. “Hudson can spew all that crap about neutrality all he wants, but even he knows it's a bad look to break a deal after he knows he pissed off the client.”

“What did he say?”

“I'd rather not repeat it.”

“If it was about me, I'd rather know.”

“It wasn't about you. He doesn't have the type of intimacy with you to say something so vile.”

“Then who was it about?”

Viper, predictably, doesn't answer me, leaving me to puzzle out the pieces. Outside of me and the kids, there's a very short list of people that Viper cares about. And I say care in a very loose sense of the word because for him that means he finds them useful or entertaining enough not to kill. Eileen he probably considers a sister but would never say. Cres too. A little less than Eileen but definitely somewhere in the realm of pseudo sister. Maybe more like annoying, pseudo stepsister who he's forced to put up with and has grown slightly on him. Wyan... is a mixed bag. At one point I would have considered Phae, but I know for a fact the only reason he didn't kill her seven months ago is because I asked him not to.

But there's nothing Hudson could have known or said about any of them that would have provoked such a strong reaction.

I go to what I know about Hudson and Viper's relationship. Viper knew him long before the Soles found him and long before he met Stephen Pray. But that's hardly anything to go on because I know nothing about the first ten or so years of Viper's life. Except for the fact that the Soles found him after he ran away from a foster home when he was nine after he'd been taken away from his...

“He said something about your mother.”

He doesn't reply, but not the kind of silence when he's trying to ignore me. It's that silence anytime something about his past is broached. Especially his mother. The only reason I knew he knew who his mother was is that Wyan casually mentioned it to me. But other than that, he *never* talks about

her. If I didn't know any better, I'd say he didn't even have a mother. That Viper was created a monster that not even hell could contain and placed here to see if we could figure out what to do with him.

When he lays down in just in pants, still refusing to say anything, I ask the obvious question even though I doubt it.

“Is Hudson your dad?”

That makes Viper laugh. Not in amusement, though.

“Fuck no. If he was, I would have killed him a long time ago.”

“How did he know your mother then?”

Viper doesn't answer for a long time, but I don't pry. Not yet. First, I'm going to give him a chance. I take the time to strip completely naked before lying next to him on my side to face him.

Finally, he says, “The only reason I'm telling you this is because I know you aren't going to let me have peace if I don't, and I can't resort to my normal tactics to shut you up right now.”

“Makes you rethink wanting me pregnant all the time, doesn't it?”

He huff out a laugh. Then, “Before Pray took all that over, Hudson came to where we used to live to see if he could trail a route through Texas for his weapons. And what better place than some barely on the map small town so insignificant that I can't remember the name of it anymore. My mother was a high school dropout with no marketable skills and no family to speak of, but I do remember that she loved me. Even when the

drug addiction was at its worst, she was a good mom, and she did what she had to do give me what she could in a world where no one would help her.

“Naturally, the one thing she was good at was the one thing that Hudson and his men would be looking for when they passed through town. They saw her at a strip club and just had to have her. She even let her regulars come to our apartment. And it was on one of those apartment visits that I bashed Hudson in the face with a fucking platform shoe, just like I did tonight.”

“Why?”

Viper laughs and this time I hear some amusement.

“I was six and didn’t have a comprehension of what sex was, and I’ll leave it at that. Needless to say, I had a comprehension of what sex was after that, and, luckily, Hudson found the whole thing funny. He saw in me what it took a long time for other people to notice. That I’m not a normal person. That I don’t process things the way other people do. Emotionally, that is. “ Viper sighs. “Regardless, the comment that earned him that bashing tonight was something related to that time. And Hudson knows very well he shouldn’t have said it in front of me. So don’t worry. Our little weapons deal is fine, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

I was, but I’m not anymore. Not because I’m so certain that the deal is still on like Viper is, though. But because I know Viper better than anyone in the world, and yet this is the first time I’ve learned anything to do with the first ten years of his life.

“Tell me more. About your mother.”

“There’s not much to say. She did what she had to do to take care of me, and then I got taken away from her when I was eight because a nosy fucking neighbor called to report that they saw me playing in the yard by myself, and it didn’t look like anyone was home. I didn’t see my mother again after that. An officer came by and put me in car and I became a ward of the state.”

“Did you ever find out what happened? Why she never looked for you?”

“The police searched her house, found her stash of drugs, and a judge took one look at a sex working drug addict who left her kid at home by himself because she couldn’t afford daycare, and threw the book at her. She died not long after that. Some heart condition. Though, in the romanticized version of the story when people write biographies of my infamy in a hundred years, it will probably say something stupid like she died from a broken heart. What do I know. Maybe she did?”

“What was her name?”

“Why?” He places a hand on my belly. “So you can get in your head the idea to name our daughter after her?”

“I never told you if it was a boy or a girl.”

“You don’t have to. I already know. It’s a girl.”

“How would you know?”

Viper shrugs. “A hunch.”

I don’t confirm or deny his suspicion.

“Besides, you couldn’t name her after my mother even if you wanted.”

“Why not?”

“You won’t understand without knowing my mother’s name. And if I tell you, you’re not going to believe me because you’re going to think I’m shitting you.”

“Why? What was your mother’s name?”

“Adele.”

For a moment I’m confused. Because not a day in his life since he’s known me has Viper ever called me by my full name. Then it dawns on me.

“You’re shitting me.”

“I’m not.”

“Adele was absolutely *not* your mother’s name.”

“It was.”

“It’s not even that common.”

“It’s not. But that was her name. And then a feisty little fourteen-year-old came into my life with the exact same name, and I knew it was destiny.”

“You don’t believe in destiny.”

“I don’t. Except for in this case.” Viper rolls over to face me and pulls me close. “You were destined to be right here with me. But the universe knew they had to give me a big neon sign for me to notice. And even then, it took me a while to realize how.”

It occurs to me that I don't know how much alcohol Viper has had tonight. For a man as huge as he is, it's never taken much for it to loosen his tongue, which would explain why he's so forthcoming tonight.

"Fuck," he mutters into my hair. "I love you."

I don't get a chance to answer because suddenly I'm on my back, and he's settled between my legs. And as I look into blue eyes that enchanted me the first day I laid eyes on him, I realize that even with his tongue loosened by alcohol, what he revealed tonight was a lot for him. Even with me, when his guard is at its least.

He needs me right now. He needs us. He needs *this*, and lucky enough, I'm more than horny enough to give it to him.

I take him by surprise and manage to flip him over onto his back so that I'm the one straddling him.

His expression betrays his surprise, and I laugh and say, "Just because I'm huge and less fast right now doesn't mean I can't still pull off my tricks."

I lean down and press my lips to his, shoving my tongue into his mouth before he can do anything. The taste of alcohol lingers in his mouth as I explore it with my tongue.

Usually, me doing something like this is an attempt at gaining control. But tonight, none of what I'm about to do is about control. Tonight is about pleasing him and seeing to his needs. Just like he does so much and goes out of his way to please me and see to my needs. Even when he's hiding it behind selfishness or being a general ass.

I pull my lips away, not having the breath capacity to kiss much longer right now, and move slowly down his jaw and neck until my face is level with his pecs and nipples. I cover one of the nipples with my mouth. He jerks under me slightly from the sensation and I look up to make sure it's okay. Because for all that Viper has explored every single inch of my body over the years, I haven't had to chance to properly explore his.

"Is that okay?" I ask softly while deliberately grazing my fingernails over the side of his chest.

"Yes," he replies hoarsely, chest heaving up and down.

I smile and lower my mouth back onto his nipple, trying different things. Listening to his breath and moans and feeling the way his body squirms or twitches to figure out what he likes. Eventually, I find a rhythm, playing with his nipple with my tongue. Nipping it with my teeth. Taking as much tight skin into my mouth as I can and sucking as hard as I can until I can't anymore and letting go, eliciting a choked groan from him.

I move to the other nipple, but my hands are restless. So I reach up to play with the other nipple in my hand. His pecs are pronounced and meaty but not made for me to grab onto the way a woman's breasts are. So I reach down into his pants and grab his cock instead.

It's hot. Thick. Hard. Exactly the way I like it when it's inside me. I'm almost tempted to stop and sit my pussy on it.

Instead of sitting on his cock, though, I pump it in my hand, not particularly keeping any rhythm or paying attention to what I'm doing beyond letting my hand do whatever it

wants. Viper doesn't complain. In fact, his breaths become more labored. His groans become louder and his hand finds its way to my hair, keeping my mouth securely attached to him.

Viper's hips jerk as he begins to pump his cock further into my hand while I resort to simply sucking on his nipple as hard as I can and concentrating more on massaging his cock.

A growl rips from Viper's throat and he says, "Fuck. Bell."

And then he comes so hard his seed shoots all the way up until it hits my chin and chest. He's still hard afterward, though, which tells me all his anger from earlier isn't released. That adrenaline is still running through his veins. It's good and well, though. Because I lift my head off his nipple and sit up to position myself to sit on his cock.

I let out a pleased sigh as I say, "You feel so good."

His cock inside me still feels as exquisite as it did earlier that night. The multiple orgasms having done nothing to sate my desire for him. Nothing to make me grow tired of the feel of him inside him. Because despite all the toys I've tried to use over the past few months, there's nothing like having hot sweaty skin pressed against me as I bounce up and down on his cock, chasing both our pleasure.

My hips start to ache with the movement of bouncing up and down, and I start to feel the ache of exhaustion over my body from the exertion. But I need the high of an orgasm more than I want or need rest right now. So I adjust my movement to a more rocking back and forth on Viper's cock, which lets me rub my clit back and forth against his skin at the same time.

Either Viper figures out that I'm getting tired or the change in motion isn't enough for him because he grabs my hips and to stop me and lifts me up off his cock. Or he tries as I resist in protest.

"No," I pant and then have to take another breath. "I want to do this for you."

He pulls me down toward him, lifting to meet me halfway, and kisses me before saying, "You already do enough for me, Bell."

Then he manages to get me off him and maneuver so that he's behind me as I kneel sitting up on the bed. Then he rams his cock into me. My entire body shudders with pleasure, and while his cock ramming into me is still as good as ever, I miss having his hot chest pressed against mine. My hard, pointed nipples on his chest, holding me close as he rams into me. But the baby in my belly is too big for that now.

So I settle with leaning my back towards Viper and saying, "Please. Hold me."

He does, wrapping an arm around my sensitive breasts and pulling me close to him so that my back is pressed to his chest. So that I can melt into his embrace like I always have while he does the work of bringing us both to pleasure.

I crane my neck around, wanting to feel closer still, even though we're as close as two people possibly can be with his cock inside my pussy. He understands what I want and leans his head forward to press his lips on mine.

His lips kissing mine is what sends me over the edge, make come hard around his cock while his mouth catches my

loud moan.

Viper then lets me go, and I fall forward on my elbows completely spent as he continues to ram into my pussy while I ride the lingering quakes of my orgasm. Suddenly, Viper's hand grips my shoulder with the same grip that he might have gripped my hips if he weren't being so conscious of the baby. And then his grip tightens as he rips out a vicious roar and comes inside me, riding it out with a few more weak thrusts until it's over, and he pulls out of me.

I crawl up the bed to lie down properly. Viper simply moves to sit on the edge of the bed, running a hand through my hair as he says, "Worn out already? And to think I thought I wasn't going to be able to keep up with you."

I'd normally take that as a challenge. But I'm too exhausted to care and say, "Yay. You win."

"How about we call it a stalemate? Doesn't feel like a win when you're not in your peak fighting condition."

He lays down next to me and holds me in his arms until I fall asleep.

When I wake up the next morning, he's gone—back to being Pray's Viper—and I have to go back to being his enemy, Addy Bianchi.

10

Dele

hen this is all over,” Bella begins as she helps me
“**W**pin up my hair for tonight. I didn’t want to bother
with a bunch of people and stylists as an event like
this should have dictated.

She repeats in a more wistful tone, “When this is all over
and after you’ve have the baby, I’m going to take you all to
Italy to see our ancestral and family home. Meet the rest of our
extended family back in Italy. Go to the beach. The salty water
and air and all the fresh food will be good for you. Allow you
to relax. Especially after you have the baby.”

“I really can’t see that far into the future right now, Bella,”
I say honestly, allowing myself to run a hand over my stomach
as it tightens with the false contractions I’ve been having for
weeks now.

“I can’t believe I’m agreeing with Adrian Blake on
something, but he’s right. Everything’s going to be fine. If you
can’t trust him, you can trust me. Women in our family have
always had easy, uncomplicated childbirths.”

“You forget I’m not related to you, don’t you?”

“Now who ever came up with such an unsubstantiated rumor?” Bella asks and continues before I can possibly argue with her. “You’ll be fine. And I’ll be right there with you being such an overbearing older cousin when everything happens and advocating for you every step of the way that your doctor is going to try to throw me out.”

I laugh and say, “I suppose.”

“Now come on. Last big thing before you can rest for the rest of the month until the baby gets here.”

I stand from my vanity and head downstairs to greet the children before I’m off to the grand launch of my new luxury makeup brand at my salon. The last big event and party that I’ll show my face at before “taking a break” to give birth and before hopefully there’s enough in place for Viper to make a move against Pray without being instantly killed by the guards and mercenaries that Pray keeps around him.

“Behave for the nanny,” I say to my eight-year-old twins.

Next to them, Bella’s daughter, Velia, huffs and says, “I still don’t see why I can’t go.”

“When you’re older,” I assure. “It’s not a party for children.”

“What do people do at adult parties that’s different from children parties?” Lady asks.

“The things only adults can do,” I reply much to Lady’s chagrin. “Besides, they’re not all you think they are. I rather be here with you guys tonight.”

“Then why are you going?” Leon asks.

“Because just like you don’t want to go to school, sometimes adults have to do things they don’t want,” I reply. I bend over and kiss them both on the forehead. “I’ll see you later tonight.” Then, because these are my children, I add, “Behave.”

They both give me innocent smiles that I know better than to trust, but I have no time to reinforce my rules as I’m ushered out to the ride that will take us to the salon for the makeup launch.

Most people who are supposed to be at the launch are already there and no sooner than I step out the car am I ushered into the building where I’m immediately crowded by people wanting to talk to, congratulate, and possibly network with me. I graciously go with it anticipating having the excuse of being away from the public eye while waiting to give birth and a little afterward. Though, as far as the public is going to be concerned, I’m just taking a little rest and recuperation after working so hard all these months and years while never taking a break.

Eileen is never far from me the entire night, constantly making sure that I keep a glass of alcohol in my hand the entire night. Periodically, I toss it in a plant or trash and switch out when another server comes by to keep up appearances. All the while I keep the servers bringing around hors d’oeuvres in sight because I’m constantly famished nowadays.

Bella is making rounds to the people I’ll inevitably be unable to get to the rest of the night.

“Is it almost midnight?” I ask Eileen.

“Two more hours,” she says.

I sigh, about to say something before feeling the buzz of my phone in my pocket. I take it out to see Nadia Vorobev is calling me.

It’s no mystery how she got my phone number. A woman with her connections could get it if she wanted to. And though I had no intention of ever contacting her, I put her number in my phone for prudence’s sake. Having access to the sister-in-law of the current Russian mafia boss could come in handy. But I had never expected her to call me. Not this soon. Maybe not ever.

It’s the abnormality of it that makes me pick up the phone.

“*Addy,*” Nadia says as soon as I pick up the phone. “*You need to get out of there now. He’s there. In the city. Vaughn made a deal. Alik tried to stop him but—*”

“What are you talking about?”

“*I’m talking about—*”

Whatever Nadia said I don’t hear as a man comes into my line of vision. An older but clearly fit man with white hair and beard in an expensive tailored suit, standing next to a white-faced Bella and for all appearances seeming friendly and welcoming. But I know that’s anything but...

“*Addy. Did you hear me? I said Stephen Pray—*”

I pull the phone from my ear and end the call as Bella walks over with fucking Stephen Pray. Of all people. How the fuck is he here and how the fuck do he get into my fucking city without—

Suddenly I wish I hadn't hung up on Nadia. The Russians. The Russians let him in.

"Addy, my dear."

I put my phone away and say, "Mr. Pray. I didn't know that you'd be able to make it. My people never received your RSVP."

There wasn't one to send, of course. He'd never been invited. Even if he had, there was never any reason to believe he'd come to New York City. A place full of many of his enemies. I try to meet Eileen's eyes out my peripheral, but she's no longer there. Hopefully calling Viper. Because there's no way he could have known about this. Hopefully, he knows about it now.

"Well, I couldn't miss such a big milestone in our business. To think. Only a few short years ago, you were just opening an online luxury hair line and now... Now all of this."

That is to say, a few years ago he'd never have considered that I was a threat to him except for Viper's fixation with me. Now? He knows better than that.

"It actually reminds me of myself," he says. "My business started as a small family run operation and now... now it's a global empire. Seeing that you remind me so much of myself I couldn't just not be here."

Translation, he thinks this has gotten out of hand and hasn't been able to stop me from a distance so is coming to stop me himself. It's both a heartening and terrifying prospect. Heartening because it means he sees me as more of a threat and more powerful than I may give myself credit for.

Terrifying because I know what he did to the last group of people he saw as a threat to his business. The people I'm a survivor of, though, he's unaware.

Eileen comes back, putting a hand on my back and whispering to me so that Pray can't hear, "He's on his way. But you're going to have to stall Pray. Whatever his plans are."

That's to say, keep him here. Terrifying as it is to have the man near me, the best place to keep him is in my sights. Keep your enemies closer, as they say. As long as he's here and all eyes are on us, he can't make a move.

Eyes on us.

That's it.

I direct Eileen to get our workers to get the attention of the crowd and get all eyes on us.

When the room is quiet, I begin, "I'm not going to keep you long. This is a night of celebration, and I wanted to have it with you. But I just wanted to stop and introduce some of you to the man who helped to make this possible. Who saw my vision and didn't doubt it even when I was unsure if it would work. Mr. Stephen Pray."

The crowd cheers and laughs and holds up their drinks on toast.

"I'm honored to have him here with us, and he's personally agreed to unveil my new makeup line to you all tonight at midnight, at which point it will be available for sale to the public," I say.

Pray smiles and pretends to be bashful, but I see through the act. He's enraged. But he's not going to do anything. He's not going to risk contradicting and ruining the generous and gracious persona that he's cultivated over the years to hide the ruthless, evil man he actually is.

With all eyes on him, it buys me time. It buys Viper time. Hopefully, it's enough.

11

Dele

Over the next two hours, Pray and I watch each other like predators circling the same prey and waiting for the other to make a move. The problem is that I'm not exactly sure what Pray is waiting on.

There are only two things that Pray risks losing in all this. Himself and his empire. He's secure in knowing (or at least thinking) that his empire can never be taken from him, and that if he's killed there will be no empire to take because only he could have ever kept it together. But even so, he's confident no one is powerful enough to take those things from him. And that makes him even more dangerous. Because it'll make him take risks others aren't willing to take. Risks people like me aren't willing to take.

I have a lot more to lose than Pray. Not just an empire. Not just my life. But my children's lives. Particularly the one in my womb and whose life is tied to mine right now. That significantly limits what I can do at the moment. One wrong

move and Pray no doubt makes a move on my house where my children are and where he no doubt have men waiting. Or he decides to kill me and be done with it.

But no. He's not going to do that. Not after the launch. There's too much visibility. And for the amount of hubris that he has, Pray likes to do things quietly. Make things explode in a way where he's as far from the radius of the mushroom cloud as possible and doesn't cause too many eyebrows to raise and too much investigation. Hence why Viper always has to behave anytime he... gets out of hand with one of his killings

"Cheers to a successful launch, Miss Bianchi," Pray says when it's all over. His smile, while wide and bright to the average onlooker, is clearly feigned.

"Well," I say putting on the infamous flirty charm that Addy Bianchi is known for, "I had help."

"Yes. I'm sure."

Translation, he knows that this little war against him doesn't just begin and end with me. He knows he's missing something, and he's not going to kill me until he knows exactly what. That gives me time.

"The night is still young," I say. And then I make a gamble. One that might help me or doom me. "Perhaps, you'd like to continue celebrating with me tonight at our Long Island estate."

Both Eileen and Bella look cautiously at me and Pray, but I can tell they both agree with my invitation. We can't stay here. And we can't let Pray take us anywhere where he might have

set a trap. There's no telling what's neutral ground with the Russians apparently on Pray's side.

At least back home we have the advantage. The extra weapons. Security masquerading as servants and nannies and landscapers. We know every exit, every extra hall, and every hiding place. If Pray messes up, we'll be more prepared to take advantage of it there. And more important than that, it's private and away from prying eyes. Just like Pray would want.

Then I add, "We can talk more about my business and future plans."

Pray gives me a long look, no doubt calculating whether he should accept this invitation just like I calculated inviting him.

In the end he says, "This is far past this old man's bed time, but I suppose one night of indulgence won't hurt."

I give him a bright smile and say with a thick Italian accent that's no longer expected of me after all these years, "Excellent."

The ride back to the house is long enough that it's possible Viper is in the city already. But I also know not to put all my eggs in one basket as the old saying goes. While a body double got in the car with us pretending to be Bella's husband, Bond, he went to make sure our family's private jet is ready in case we need to make a quick exit out the country. Hopefully, it won't come to that. But just in case.

When we arrive at the house, like they always do, the children meet us at the door. Even though it's well past their bedtime even for a weekend. And for the first time, the

allowance of Lady and Leon having all the freedom they want in their own home comes back to bite me in the ass.

To their credit, Leon and Lady immediately pause upon seeing Stephen Pray. I've kept most aspects of our family business from them so far, but they are very aware of who Stephen Pray is. They know he's a dangerous man, that he's their archest enemy, and that their number one job if they ever run into him is to get away.

They have enough sense to know that they shouldn't run away in this moment, but I don't miss the questioning look they shoot me before a change comes over Lady.

She's always had a very uncanny inclination toward lying and acting and violence. A lot like her father.

"Sorry," she says to me, pretending to be bashful. "We didn't know you were bringing anyone else home."

"You should be in bed," I chide. Normally I wouldn't. Normally I would let them linger and then let them follow me to my room while I undressed and they asked me questions until they feel asleep on my bed.

Seeming to comprehend that something is drastically wrong, neither argue and start to go back upstairs, until Pray steps forward and says, "Wait, Addy. I think this would be the first time I've ever had the pleasure of being in the same place as your children. If you don't mind. I'd like to formally meet them considering I probably won't be here in the morning when they wake again."

Leon and Lady look to me for the cue on what to do. I simultaneously have every reason to send them upstairs and

every reason to allow Pray to meet them. Sending them upstairs would keep them out of Pray's devious and observant gaze but also make him suspicious about why I'm so eager to keep them away from him. Besides the obvious, of course. Keeping them with me would allow him to get a good look at Lady and Leon. A good chance to see Viper's face on Leon and Phae's face on Lady.

"Sorry," I end up saying. "They really should be in bed. Perhaps you may be able to stay in a guest room and meet them in the morning?"

He's not going to stay. He's going to be gone long before morning and so will we if worse comes to worst.

I see the question in Pray's eye but ignore it as I watch Lady and Leon follow my cue and go back to their room.

Bella and I then lead Pray to the sitting room as Eileen follows.

"Actually, if you don't mind Isabella. I'd like to talk to Addy, dear, myself."

It's not a question. Bella exchanges a look with me before saying, "I'll go make sure the children are in bed."

What she really means is that she'll get them ready in case we have to make an impromptu exit.

But while Bella is glad to and does leave, Eileen doesn't go anywhere. Pray gives her an expectant look to which Eileen gives him her usual taciturn expression and says while nodding to Pray's own guard that's sitting inconspicuously in the corner of the room, "If he gets to stay, I get to stay."

I don't know what Viper has been paying Eileen all these years, but whatever it is, she needs a raise. Because she's loyal to him and his orders as ever. Even when he's not around to see. Pray doesn't make a fuss about it, but he's clearly not happy about it.

We both stare at each other for a moment, not breaking each other's gaze, waiting on the other to start talking. Not even moving. Both our hands clasped in our laps. The only time I almost falter is when I feel my stomach contract with another false contraction. At this point in my pregnancy, they almost always hurt but have never been labor. So I don't worry about that as I keep my eyes on Pray.

Finally Pray smirks, and I know he's about to talk. But why have I feel like I'm the one who has lost this stalemate?

"You know," Pray says, "I see a lot of myself in you."

"So you told me earlier."

"Yes, but we couldn't talk as freely as we can now," he points out. Without waiting for me to agree or disagree with that, he continues, "I started out much like you. With a vision of the power that my family could acquire and eventually bringing that vision into fruition. The only difference is that my family wasn't... pliable to my vision."

I've never spent a lot of time wondering where Stephen Pray came from and who he was related to. All I know is that there have always been a lot of rumors that he was once related to *the* Italian mafia. The Fantonis. In Sicily. I've never been privy to circles where it was discussed beyond that, and though Bella may know, I've never cared or thought to ask. Frankly, it was never relevant.

“I don’t usually talk about business this late, and it’s been a long day. So if you’d please get to the point,” I reply.

“Such a fiery spirit,” Pray comments.

I pause to wonder if he’s reminded of the fiery fifteen-year-old girl who argued with him in his office. The woman who he was concerned had pull over Viper so he ordered him to kill her. But there’s nothing in his eyes. No recognition. I’m just Addy to him.

“I think that if we worked together, our assets and talents could be mutually beneficial to each other. Your control of the east coast. My control of the west and the Midwest.... It would be the biggest partnership in history. Not even the global organizations could compete with us.”

If I were naïve and didn’t have the laundry list of people who Pray has turned his back on, betrayed, and plans to betray in the future, I might actually believe him. But it would start as a partnership. Or, at least, the guise of one. And then he’d find a way to get rid of me. He’s familiar with the phrase keep your enemies close too, after all. I’m sure.

“Tempting,” I reply. “But I’ve already got a good deal.”

“The question is, with who?”

I don’t answer. One thing I’ve learned over the years is that if you don’t say anything, either the other person is going to keep talking and reveal something important or they’re going to end the conversation without answers.

Pray didn’t come all this way not to get answers. So he keeps talking.

“While I applaud your brilliance, there’s no way you could have done this on your own. You would have needed someone’s help.”

“You did it on your own,” I point out.

“So I let the world believe. Just like you hope I’m so stupid as to believe that Adrian hasn’t been helping you every step of the way.”

I swallow my instincts to immediately reply, and the false contraction helps with that because I don’t think I could talk straight through it.

Finally, when I’ve risen above my instincts to deny him and the discomfort of my stomach contracting, I say, “But you don’t know that. Do you?”

He doesn’t say anything, so I decide to keep talking and hope Viper gets here soon.

“You don’t know anything about me. You don’t know what to do with me and neither does anyone in your inner circle. And you can’t trust Adrian’s judgment. So you had to come yourself.” I’m technically just rambling, but the more I talk, the more this makes sense. “All this time, you’ve enjoyed your usurped power unchallenged. Not a threat in sight. Until me. And you don’t know what the right move is. You don’t know how far the branches of my influence spread. Whether killing me will unite all the enemies outside and inside your empire against you. That’s quite a position to be in.”

I could say more, but another contraction comes and I’m forced to stop talking. Because this one hurts. More than any of the painful false contractions I’ve had before.

“I was hoping not to end this night in violence,” Pray says. “But it seems that someone needs to be shown her place.”

I don't intend to wait to find out exactly what that means, I pull one of my guns out my dress, and so does Eileen. I have mine on Pray and hers is on the bodyguard who has a gun pulled on me. For some reason, the only person who isn't flustered is the one man who doesn't have a gun in his hand.

Suddenly, Bella is dragged into the room. Her hair, once in a neat elegant bun before she left, in disarray and half down her back. Her evening dress from the night is ruined and ripped in multiple places along the skirt. But even still, it takes three of Pray's largest guards to hold the petite, snarling woman as she struggles in their grip.

“I asked for the children,” Pray says in displeasure.

“They've disappeared. She won't tell us where they are.”

“I'm sure she can be made to cooperate,” Pray says.

Bella cackles and snaps, “Fuck you.”

One of the guards knocks her in the head with the butt of his gun and throws her to the ground before pointing his gun at her.

“Now how about we let calmer minds prevail?” Pray asks. “Unless you want to see her die.”

I don't take my eyes off Pray, but I am more than aware of Bella picking herself off the ground with blood trailing down the side of her face.

“Do it, Addy. Kill the motherfucker.”

I don't hesitate.

Because Viper taught me when I was fourteen not to pull a gun on someone unless I intended to shoot it.

I pull the trigger.

Fuck Pray's empire.

12

Dele

I pull the trigger.

Eileen too pulls her trigger and the guard with a gun pointed at me falls to the ground before he can think to pull his on me.

Unfortunately, Pray is fucking quick for a man his age, and has reached up to jerk my hand over before I can finish, causing my bullet to go into the couch.

His grip is strong, and I get a firsthand demonstration of my suspicion that Pray is a lot more skilled than most egotistical mobs bosses who can't hold a gun straight. But it's not his grip on my wrist or twisting it that makes me drop my gun. It's my stomach contracting again, and it takes everything in me not to wince and try to soothe the pain.

I'm not optimistic enough to hope that these are just very painful false contractions. My doctor and I have been preparing for the possibility of early labor since I was five months with the hopes that I'd at least get to eight months, if

not nine. Two weeks ago, the date marking my eighth month came and went, and we'd hoped maybe I'd get all the way to nine but didn't get our hopes up for it.

But of all the times to go into early labor. Now?

I can't let Pray see that, though. Because I'm not sure he'd hesitate to do something vile like crush my stomach if he was going to go after Leon and Lady. Wherever Bella hid them.

In the meantime, one of the massive guards have managed to cross the room and disarms Eileen and holds her in his grip.

"Foolish girl," Pray says, throwing me back onto the ground.

I mentally curse. If I weren't pregnant, between me and Eileen, we could make quick work of Pray's guards. I've been outnumbered worse than this. But I didn't get this far into my pregnancy to let my baby be killed like this. Eileen knows that too, hence why she's not fighting back. Not yet. We need to be in a better position.

"Since you want to be so stubborn, see firsthand the consequences of your failure."

Two of the three guards who dragged her in pick Bella up off the ground while the other hands Pray a gun. I forget about my pregnancy and lunge for Bella.

I catch her in my arms when Pray's guards drop her. After Pray has put a bullet between her eyes.

A loud wailing scream pierces the house, followed by shouts. It's me. But it doesn't feel like me. It feels like someone else screaming and shouting curses at Pray. Someone

else holding Bella's body. Someone else grabbing my gun that Pray set aside and aiming at him only to miss in anguish.

Pray turns toward the entrance, and I want to take another shot at him but my hands are shaking too badly. But Pray ignoring me makes me pay attention to what's got his attention.

There's a commotion outside. The unmistakable sound of muted gunshots like there's a firefight going on. And for all I know, maybe there is. Maybe that's why none of the rest of the security has come to our aid because they're preoccupied outside. Whatever it is, Pray isn't sure what it is either.

Eileen springs into action then. She takes down the guard holding her, grabs her gun to shoot Pray's other two guards and then aims at Pray.

Unfortunately, he's able to dodge her bullet by jumping behind the large entertainment center. Eileen makes her way over to me without stopping shooting at Pray to give him no opening to shoot at her.

"Come on," Eileen commands.

"We can't leave her," I protest.

"She's not here to take," Eileen says grabbing onto me and physically dragging me from Bella's body.

I could fight her. I *would* fight her. If not for the contraction that wracks my body, not allowing me to resist her and deal with the pain.

Eileen drags me to my feet and out the room, leaving Pray behind.

“We’ve got to go.”

“But—” I cut myself off and suck in a sharp gasp at the next contraction. “Pray.”

Eileen takes note of my pause, gives me a onceover, and says, “Fuck. You’re in labor.”

“It’s not supposed to happen this fast,” I say as the contraction ends and we make our way to the garage to escape and get to the private jet I hope Bond has prepared.

“These kinds of things generally pay no mind to how we think things are supposed to happen.”

“But my doctor said it’s supposed to take hours. Maybe even a day for my first labor,” I manage to rush out before another contraction comes.

“Hopefully, he’s right then.”

She sounds like she has as much hope as I have despite my denial.

Eileen and I say nothing more as we make it to the garage where our escape car is. The children and Velia are already there when we open the door, ducked down under a compartment in the trunk of the car, just like they’re trained to if we have to escape.

“Why was that man here, Mama?” Leon asks immediately.

“I’ll tell you later, little one,” I say as Eileen puts me in the back seat.

“Aunty, where’s my mommy?” Velia asks.

I don’t answer. I can’t answer.

“We’ll talk about everything later. Now be quiet. I need to concentrate,” Eileen says, not particularly kindly but not unkindly either, as she gets into the driver’s seat.

The garage door raises and we spot three pairs of feet as it begins to lift. Eileen revs the engine, getting ready to gun the accelerator.

But then I spot the familiar silver pistol, put my hand on Eileen’s shoulder and say, “Wait.”

Viper ducks down under the garage door when it’s high enough and makes his way to us. Following behind him are Marcus and Jeune.

He takes one look in the car and doesn’t ask questions. Just looks at Eileen and says, “Move over. You’re going to need me to drive if we have any hope of getting to that fucking plane.”

Viper

Eileen has always been a “no news is good news” type of person. Even before I sent her to look after Dele, she was never prone to calling me to ask questions, confident in using her best judgment and explaining it or asking forgiveness afterward. A habit that never died from her CIA days where she was dropped in situations, left with an objective, and could go months without guidance or instruction. If I get a text from her, I know it’s something that she mostly has a handle on but can’t decide what the best course of action is between two options. If I get a call from her, I get concerned.

So as soon as I see her name show up on the screen of my phone, I’ve already pinged my security to get the jet ready. My second jet. The one that’s not publicly known to belong to me so I can go places and my enemies aren’t immediately alerted to my presence.

“What happened?” I ask.

“He’s *here*.”

I don’t need to ask who he is. There’s only one person she’d refer to as he and expect me to know who he is without further explanation.

Pray. He’s somehow gotten in New York and is wherever Dele is. Fuck.

“I’ll be there in three hours. Stall.”

Eileen, as usual, doesn’t complain and simply ends the call. Because there’s no telling whether or not they’ll be able to stall at all because she probably knows as much about why Pray is there as I do. Nothing. A problem in and of itself. Not that I’ve ever been able to keep total tabs on where Pray is and what he’s doing. But going to New York City to face Dele himself is a logistics move that I definitely should have been included in. With most of my competition dead or not really competition, there’s no question that I’m Pray’s most trusted and right hand man. Whether people think that as Viper or Adrian matter little to me. Just that they’ll fall in line behind either persona in lieu of Pray.

So for Pray to do something so drastic and leave me out, it means that maybe he doesn’t trust me as much as I thought. Maybe he’s onto the fact that I plan to betray him. Or maybe he doesn’t. Maybe he knew not to bring me because of my known weakness for who he thinks is only Addy Bianchi.

Either way. It’s not good. And either way, after tonight, my cover is going to be blong. Because there’s no way I’m leaving Dele to fend for herself against Pray regardless of what the consequences are.

In less than twenty minutes, I'm on my jet on the way to New York.

It'll only take two hours since I had the forethought to move the bases of all my operations to a central location in the country. Illinois. Easy to get to Pray and easy to get to Dele in case of an emergency. But it's still not fast enough. There's little I can do about it, though, except anxiously pace my jet the whole time restlessly, completely high on adrenaline and cortisol by the time the plane lands.

"Sure you don't want me to come with you?" Revnor says as I walk off the jet and he stands at the top of the stairs.

He's temporarily serving as executioner and right hand until this is all over and Eileen is back to take her place in that role. Something that Pray has only allowed because of all the necessary reshuffling since the war and my sporadic but systematic elimination of the key players in his power hold.

"No. You make sure Cres and all the people in my employ and their families are protected and put into hiding. Just in case."

Revnor furrows his bushy eyebrows and asks, "Just in case what?"

A difference between him and Eileen. Revnor is prone to ask clarifying questions.

"Just in case," I reply before getting in the car and directing the driver to drive.

There's no telling who Pray has managed to get on his side in the city. So we were forced to land in a strip outside of it. There are only so many private jets. So no doubt someone is

looking for something suspicious. But there are millions of cars. Thousands of them luxury and transporting a rich client. So I won't be drawing any attention to myself.

I'm rarely nervous, but as I grip my mask in my hand. This mask that has inspired terror in thousands from the shadows and that's not counting the terror my own face has inspired because I was no angel of light before becoming this. Viper. As I hold it, I notice a tremor in my hands. Because there are so many unknown variables in this whole situation, and something tells me tonight is a turning point.

I message Eileen that I'm in the city, and she immediately replies that they're heading back to the Uccello Long Island Estate. It's a good call. It gives them the home advantage to wait things out until I arrive. If they haven't taken any chance they get to kill Pray and be done with it. To hell with his criminal empire. We can work with what we have. But it's not worth anything if Pray kills Dele.

I have the car stop a ways away from the estate and walk the rest of the way. I would run, but it's a waste of energy I'm going to need to fight through Pray's people and whoever the hell he's allied with to let him in the city. And there's no telling who. Though the Italians are the biggest, there are many criminal families, gangs, and organizations that operate out of New York City. Most of them are all either allies of the Italians or have an ambivalent relationship at worst.... The Irish. The Russians. There's some French presence in the US, but not a huge one.

Wait.

The Russians. They're no longer ambivalent. Outright accusing Dele of killing their boss isn't an ambivalent stance. Of course they'd help her biggest enemy.

I make a mental note to deal with them when this is all over. But first getting to Dele and the children.

I get to the brick and gated wall that encircles the estate. But I was expecting that. What I wasn't expecting or wasn't sure to expect was the entire estate to be encircled by Pray's men and the Russians I'm assuming he's allied with. Their guns point through the main gates and toward the top of the wall at a stalemate with Dele's men and women.

I can't say I've ever been particularly eager to go even one on one with men from the Bratva, let alone with however many are mixed in with Pray's people. But, at the very least, this is going to be fun. Hopefully Dele's and Isabella's men are competent.

I stay to the shadows and first shoot and take out the ones who look like they'll give me the most trouble. Once they're alerted to something amiss, I move through the shadows to stand amongst them before taking them out one by one.

But as capable as I am, even I couldn't take all these men out without suffering damage. And that's not something I can afford if I want to get to Dele.

I have to take a punch or two or three to avoid worse injuries like stabbing and hits to the head, but I don't feel the pain. I keep going, channeling all my anger that Pray would dare begin to threaten what's mine. Whether he knows that or not.

Thankfully, Dele's and Isabella's men turn out to be competent and begin to take advantage of the chaos to shoot into the men gathered, causing them to turn their attention away to return fire. With their forces sufficiently diminished and the remaining distracted, I take the time to scale the gated wall and land on the other side, only to come face to face with the two men I recognize as Dele's preferred bodyguards.

They don't hesitate to come at me, and I have to admit that they're trained well. I'd applaud them if I weren't so annoyed.

"I'm on your side," I snap ducking a punch and then backing away from a kick.

It would take little effort to take them out, even as well trained as they are. But Dele has a soft spot for them, and they'd die to protect her. People like that are hard to come by.

"You think we're stupid, Viper?" one of them ask. The blonde. I don't know their names. I never bothered beyond recognizing that Dele frequently has them with her.

I don't have time for this. So I do something that may come back to bite me later, but really doesn't matter right now.

I snatch my mask and hood off so they can see my face.

It gives them both pause. They exchange a look without taking their eyes off me or letting down their guard. Very well trained it seems.

"Adrian Blake?" the one with sandy brown hair says.

"Addy's boyfriend?" the blonde adds skeptically.

"Fiancé," I correct.

The sandy-haired one groans and curses in something that sounds like French before saying, “You’re Viper?”

I was prepared for them to ask more questions than that, but then I remember that these two are one of the few who are privy to know about how involved me and Dele are. Dele specifically asked for those two almost a year ago when we found Pray’s little child army and needed to help Wyan secure it.

“That’s something that you can discuss secretly among yourselves later. Now. Where’s Dele?” I ask.

They nod for me to follow them, though they wisely keep me between them and don’t let their guard down as they lead the way across the grounds. Just in case I really am here to help Pray.

As we cross the wide expanse of yard, the two explain to me that the plan is get Dele to the Uccello’s private jet and out the country. In Italy, they can seek refuge with family there so they can plan what the next move is while secure in the knowledge that Pray definitely has no presence there.

We arrive at a large luxury garage door that begins to lift as soon as we arrive. When it’s high enough, I duck under it to find a large black SUV in front of me with Eileen in the driver’s seat. I don’t waste any time going to the driver’s side and opening the door. I glance in to ascertain that Dele is in the car with the children in the back. Velia is with her. I’ll ask her where Isabella and Bond are later. Right now, we need to get away.

“Move over. You’re going to need me to drive if we have any hope of getting to that fucking plane.”

Viper

Eileen wastes no time moving out the driver's seat, pulling herself into the back where Dele is rather than the passenger seat. Instead, the blonde guard sits in the passenger seat while the other gets in the back. He crawls to sit with the children.

I don't wait for any of them to be secure, though, as I put the car in drive and ram my foot on the gas to speed off the estate.

"Where are we going, Eileen?" I demand.

"I'll give you directions as we go."

Right. Using GPS in these situations pose a massive security risk to say the least.

Eileen directs me to the back gate where guards are waiting to open it and let us out as we approach. I zoom out them and into the long private road that leads to the main road along the estate. As I approach it, I become aware of two cars

giving chase behind us. Of course, Pray had people waiting. Unsurprisingly there are more blocking the road.

“Hold on,” I say at the same time as Eileen says, “Right.”

I swerve off the road onto the brush and grass on the side of the road to get around the men blocking the road before making a sharp right turn. I hear the ping of bullets hit the car, but ignore that when I hear Dele suddenly grit in pain.

In the rearview mirror, I see she’s gripping Eileen’s hand and grimacing.

“Pray hurt you,” I immediately surmise, and if I didn’t have to personally ensure Dele’s safety, I’d be personally ensuring Pray’s end and making sure there were no remains to ever find.

“She’s in labor,” Eileen says calmly.

That’s worse.

“Oh, fucking, come on,” I growl but concentrate on the road.

“That’s what I said,” Dele manages before she squinches her face in pain and can say no more.

Cars come up behind me. A dozen if I’m counting right. I have to give Pray credit for not underestimating us. I hear bullets bouncing off the car again. The blonde man next to me lets down the window, leans almost half his body out and begins returning fire while the sandy haired one does the same from the back seat.

It’s not going to do anything except slow them down, but that’s enough for me to keep a good enough distance between

them.

“Left,” Eileen says when I get to the next road.

As soon as I make the turn, three cop cars that had been sitting come to life and speed behind me.

“Get back in,” I say to the blond next to me, preparing to do defensive maneuvers to get them off our back.

“No,” Dele says. “They’re ours. Undercover. Escorting us.”

With the cops flanking us, it’s not as hard to maneuver through what traffic there is at this time of the night. People get out the way at the sound of sirens. But that also means they get out of the way of our pursuers.

Well trained as they are, Dele’s guards don’t have her precise aim. She would have already shot out the tires of half the cars by now and been working on the rest. It has to do. But it also means that by the time we get to our destination, our pursuers are still on us.

Fortunately, Bond had the forethought to have more of their bought and owned cops and men at the site of the Uccello’s private jet. They let us through to the plane and immediately close rank to block our pursuers.

A chaotic gunfight immediately ensues. I get out, duck behind a car and join the fight. I find Eileen right at my side soon after.

“Marcus and Jeune are handling it,” Eileen answers my question over the loud gunfire before I can ask why she isn’t helping Dele and the children.

So that's Dele's guard's names. I'll have to figure out which is which later.

"We have to go," Eileen says to me next, grabbing onto my arm to force me to retreat.

She's right. I chance a glance back to make sure Dele and the children are safely onboard before nodding and backing away to the plane. Eileen keeps herself just in front of me as we both back toward the stairs and onto the plane.

We're halfway up when a body barrels past us.

It's Bond Uccello. One of his men is behind him, shouting, "Sir. No."

"What the fuck is he doing?" I ask.

"I'm going to kill that motherfucker if I have to do it with my bare hands," he shouts belligerently.

"Pray killed Isabella," Eileen says quickly in explanation as we back into the plane. The man who followed Bond takes one last look at his employer before turning back to get on the plane. He reaches out to close the door, only for a bullet to whizz through at the last minute and strike him in the shoulder.

The door is closed and we're secure, so I give little thought to him, instead going over to where Dele is sitting with the plane medic holding some kind of monitor to her stomach and a stethoscope to her heart.

"What's wrong?" I demand in time with Dele gripping the side of chair she's in as a contraction wracks through her.

"Frankly," says the medic, "the problem is she's about to give birth on an airplane when someone with her conditions

should be in a hospital.”

I’m about to ask exactly what he means by that because it sounds foreboding when Eileen shouts, “Adrian.”

“Not now Eileen.”

“Yes now. Our pilot has been shot.”

I turn to Eileen, who is kneeling next to the man that was shot while closing the door. He looks fine. For a man that’s been shot in the shoulder, but he definitely can’t fly the plane. Even with Eileen controlling the bleeding as she wraps his arm.

“He says if you take control he can guide you through it,” Eileen says.

It takes me a second longer than it should for me to comprehend what Eileen is saying.

“I can’t fly the fucking plane. You don’t have a co-pilot?” I snap.

“The only reason you didn’t get the license is that you didn’t pass the physical. But that’s irrelevant given the situation,” Eileen reminds.

“Think you can do it?” the pilot asks, wincing as Eileen tightens the wrapping on his arms.

“That’s probably irrelevant right now too,” I snap as I drag the man up from where he’s sitting and drag him to the cockpit with Eileen behind us.

“Where are you going?” Dele asks reaching to grab my hand.

“To fly the fucking plane,” I snap, snatching my hand out her reach and continuing to the cockpit.

A groan and then something that sounds like a scream comes out of Dele’s mouth, and I belatedly realize that was probably a harsh manner to talk to my pregnant fiancée while she’s in labor. But the situation is getting to me.

I dump the pilot unceremoniously into the co-pilot’s chair though with his fucked up arm he’s not going to be much help in the role.

After I’m settled in the pilot’s seat, the pilot walks me through everything while Eileen stands behind me watching my every move intently as though she can learn to fly a plane by watching this once. But I appreciate her with me nonetheless because, though I’d never admit it, this is nerve-racking. Between flying a plane when I couldn’t even get clearance to get the fucking license because I automatically failed the physical, Dele’s cries in the back as she labors, and the knowledge that I have her life and our children’s literally in my hands but that’s our best bet because if we go back, we’ll certainly be overwhelmed... It’s enough to make an average man shit his pants and go in a corner to cry.

But I’ve never been anywhere near average.

For one time in my life, my ability to completely fixate obsessively over a thing comes in handy as I tune out all the chatter, and just do what the fucking pilot says. That fucking tunnel-vision that Dele told me was a weakness when all this first started. But it’s a strength right now, because the next thing I know we’re in the air, and it’s that tunnel-vision that keeps me focused for the next eight hours. Even as for the first

three hours Dele screams through contractions and I can't be at her side to help soothe her. As the next two hours after that, the medic coaxes her through pushing. Through the shouts of, "She's out," followed shortly by piercing cries, and then the medic saying, "Miss Bianchi. Stay with me," followed by worrying silence.

All of that has to wait until I get us across the fucking Atlantic ocean and safely landed to the coordinates and navigation the pilot gives me into Italy.

Viper

An average man would likely collapse in his chair in relief after they flew eight hours across the Atlantic ocean with barely any piloting experience. Well, the average man who could pull off such a feat. But I'm even less average than that.

So as soon as the plane is safely at a stop wherever the hell we are, I rush out my seat to where the medic is dutifully Hoovering over Dele, covered in a blanket, with her dark hair wet and sweaty, face pale, and shivering.

“What’s wrong with her?”

“The birth was hard on her given the circumstances,” he says. “We can stabilize her with proper medical equipment. But without it... I can’t make any guarantees.”

“Help is on the way,” Eileen declares.

I don’t know how she knows this, but I’ve never not been able to trust Eileen before so there’s no reason for me to doubt

her now.

True to be word, the door to the plane opens, and in rushes a team of doctors with a stretcher. They carefully lift Dele onto it, jerking her out her fitful sleep.

Her hazel eyes dart around the room as she asks weakly, “Where’s...”

“Where’s what?” I ask running a hand over her hair.

“Where’s my... my baby? Where’d she...?”

That’s actually a good question. A question that I obviously take too long to answer because Dele panics and begins to twist on the stretcher.

“Where is she? She was right there. I saw her. I heard her crying.” Then, of all things, tears begin to well up in her eyes as she looks at me searchingly. “Is she okay? You said... You said she’d be okay.”

“She’s fine,” I assure while looking around the plane. “She’s—”

“She’s right here,” one of her guards says and then unceremoniously dumps a small bundled body in my arms.

“Right here,” I say, adjusting my arms to more comfortably hold the baby dumped into my arms.

Fuck, she’s tiny. But for all I know, all babies are this small. She’s got a head full of dark hair just like her mother’s, and her eyes are closed so I can’t see what color they are. But one thing is clear, she’s gorgeous. Perfect.

It’s typically a challenge for me to make emotional connections with people for all that I have a tendency to

hyper-fixate on my emotional connections when I can make them. But for the child in my arms, it's instant. Even though I don't even know her or who she is or what she'll grow up to be, there's no doubt in me that she's mine and I'd burn the world for her with no hesitation. Just like I'd do for her mother.

The lead doctor says something gently to Dele in Italian that makes me snap out of my stupor and pay attention. I'm guessing Dele must not be as in any immediate danger if he's taking the time to just talk to her.

Dele nods and replies back like she's been speaking the language her entire life, and the thought crosses my mind that she's more Addy Bianchi than Dele Martin even in her private life.

"Make sure you help him," she mutters tiredly as the stretcher is carefully pushed off the plane. "He doesn't know anything about babies."

She's right. I don't. But if I can fly a fucking plane, I doubt it's that hard to figure out.

I follow the stretcher off the plane while more people who I don't know carry a sleeping Leon, Lady, and Velia off the plane. I narrow my eyes, but next to me, Eileen only nods to assure me. Not for the first time, I suspect that Eileen is much more than she pretends to be but again don't dwell on it.

Eileen and I follow up the entourage, being the last to descend off the plane.

Waiting for us is another entourage of people. But I don't get the sense that they're a threat. Not yet anyway. At the head

of it in a tailored suit is a man who looks startling like Stephen Pray. The only thing that stops me from pulling a gun on him is that he looks younger and his hair is a darker gray compared to the stark white of Pray's. And where Pray is lean this man is fat.

“Adrian Blake. I've been looking forward to meeting you,” the man says. He takes a glance at the baby in my arms and says, “Ah. I see congratulations are in order. We'll have to celebrate later.”

“Who the fuck are you?” I say, what little filter I might have had gone after the stress of the last twelve or so hours.

The man laughs and looks at Eileen.

“Well, you weren't lying when you said he could be a little rude, were you, Iliana?”

I look at Eileen and ask, “Iliana?”

Eileen only shrugs at the man and says, “No man can be fault free, Uncle.”

Uncle?

“I can't be held responsible for what I'm going to do if someone doesn't give me answers,” I say calmly because I do *not* have the patience right now.

“You'd threaten your gracious host while holding your newborn in your arms.”

“I'd do a lot more.”

He laughs once, and then a change suddenly overcomes him as he goes from boisterous and unserious to severe and smirking as he looks at Eileen.

“You’re right. He’s going to fit right in.”

I’m two seconds from pulling a gun on this man. The only reason I haven’t is I haven’t figured out the logistics of getting into a fight with half a dozen men with a baby in my arms. That and this man has Dele and my other children in his grasp.

Finally the man holds out a hand to me. I stare at it for a moment before reluctantly taking it.

“The name’s Sabino *Fantoni*,” he says. Before I can react to *that* revelation, he says, “We have a lot to talk about concerning my brother. But Iliana tells me it’s been one hell of an adventure getting over here. My drivers will take you and Iliana to our villa. Your family is probably already there.”

Before I can demand any answers, the man turns and walks away with half of his entourage ushering him to one car while the other half takes Eileen and I to another. The door doesn’t even get a chance to close before I growl, “What the fuck, Eileen? Or should I say, Iliana?”

“I’m still Eileen. It’s been a long time since anyone has called me Iliana.”

“Eileen,” I growl in a warning.

In my arms, the baby fidgets in annoyance, and I instinctively rock her in my arms to calm her.

“Yes, Adrian.”

“You never worked for the CIA.”

“I did.”

“But not *for* the CIA. You infiltrated it for the fucking Italian mafia. The *Fantonis*,” I add because that’s an important

distinction.

In the last year since I found out my ex-wife was the secret daughter of Stephen Pray who was rumored to be part of the Fantoni Italian crime family, I've done quite a bit of research. They're legend, to say the least. They are *the* Italian crime family. They can trace their bloody legacy and their family's involvement in professional crime back centuries.

They have a lot of power and sway in their home country, but never had a lot of interest in taking their exploits to the US... until Stephen Pray's, AKA Sansone Fantoni's, father got the idea to expand their power west and started Pray Drinks, trying to capitalize of the obsession with prayer and God and Christianity that his initial target customer base had.

Or at least, that's what Cres and I could find out. They're shrouded in so much secrecy it was hard to get much.

"I knew you were smart," Eileen responds. "I wanted to tell you before but it was too risky."

"Eileen," I growl again, preemptively rocking my daughter to make sure she stays asleep.

Eileen sighs and says, "My family has been working for a long time to try to bring down Sansone Fantoni. Ever since he murdered my father and stole our western business. But he acquired so much power, not even the might of the Fantoni family was able to touch him, especially not when we had the scrutiny of the CIA on us. So I was sent to infiltrate the CIA so one of our own could be assigned to watch and spy on us while I could also use US government resources to spy on my uncle. But it became increasingly clear that we weren't going to be able to get to him except from the inside."

“Which is where I came in,” I surmise.

“No. At first, I was supposed to kill you.”

Eileen wouldn't be the first person close to me who has wanted to kill me, so I'm not bothered. I just had a child with a woman who left me for dead.

“What changed your mind?”

“I thought you could make a great weapon against Pray when we thought Phae died and the circumstances were mysterious at best. If we could turn you against Pray, we could get to him.”

“So your family wants me to be their fucking pawn?”

“More than that. They agree that you're the best choice to take over all Pray's operations and rule the new branch of the Fantoni Empire in the west since there haven't been any sons born in the family since my Uncle Sabino. No matter how many wives and mistresses they went through.”

“Still sounds like a pawn.” Because the only thing that means is that as soon as someone has a son they no longer need me.

“Maybe. But we both know you have... other plans.”

“Other plans that you haven't told your family?” I surmise.

“It's not always necessary for your left hand to know what your right is doing.”

I smirk. Eileen may be a Fantoni, and she may technically be their spy, but it seems her loyalties still lie with me.

“Why do you hate your family?” I ask. “Phae didn't want to be a criminal, but you don't seem to have any problem with

that. So what is it?”

Eileen doesn't answer immediately, and I allow it. The answer isn't really important. I'm just... curious. Motivations tell a lot about a person and reveal how you can keep them close to you.

It's not until the car stops, lets us out in front of the expansive Fantoni villa, and a servant takes me to a room that Eileen follows me into that she says wryly to me, “You freed me from my prison.”

“Prison?” I ask, settling on the bed as I wait for the maid to come back with baby supplies. I'm sure my daughter is hungry by now.

“Don't worry. You're going to have a good time shaking things up around here.”

“As long as you promise to help.”

“What do you want to know about my family?”

“Everything.”

Viper

I've got a lot to do and little time to do it if my plan to cement my and Dele's power with the Fantoni family is to work. Sleep is going to have to wait, even though I'm exhausted. So is food. But one thing that cannot wait are the three children holed up in a bedroom together and refusing to let anyone inside.

I leave the baby with one of the maids left to assist me with her, and Eileen stays back to keep an eye on them.

"Miss Bianchi," one of servants is saying as others try to pick the lock on the door to no avail.

"I told you. I don't know who any of you people are." Lady's voice says clearly from the other side. "When you can bring my mother or father to me to tell us what's going on, we'll open the door. And if you break down the door, I'll shoot you."

“They’ve managed to jam the locking mechanisms,” the servant says, giving up on unlocking the door.

“Move aside,” I order.

With no protest, the three people gathered at the door move aside. Whether they’ve been given orders to listen to me or they looked at me and figured out not to test me, I’m not sure.

“Lady,” I say through the door. “Open up.”

It’s not an order. It’s not a request either.

There’s silence on the other end. Then, “Daddy?”

She’s not certain. Could be the stress of the day. Could be that I haven’t seen her in almost a year.

“It’s me, little one,” I say trying to match Dele’s soothing tones. She’s the one who usually deals with Lady and Leon when they’re being stubborn. I’m, in her words, the fun parent.

“Prove it.”

“I can’t do that unless you open the door.”

“Tell me something only you would know.”

“Like what?”

“Like the first time you met mama.”

That’s actually a good test. Only four people know that story. Me and Dele. And Wyan and Phae, and apparently Dele told the children.

“She shot at me,” I mutter.

“Yeah. But why?”

“My old mentor decided to take her under his wing. Thought she had potential. I walked in on him teaching her how to shoot, and according to her, she was so nervous when I walked in the room she kept missing her target. I laughed at her and said, ‘Sure. Potential,’ and walked away. And the next thing I know, a bullet is whizzing past my ear.”

“And what did Mama say?”

“How’s that for potential?”

“And then you said?”

“You missed, hot stuff, and she said, ‘I know. That’s the point.’ And ever since...”

“She’s been pointing a gun at you every time she’s mad at you,” the twins say together.

The door clicks. I open it, enter the room, and close it behind me.

“Dad,” Leon and Lady yell as they launch themselves at me.

They’ve long since grown out of me picking them up into my arms and carrying them. Especially Lady, who usually rolls her eyes and trudges ahead defiantly. But today, neither protest as I pick them up and they bury their faces into my shoulders and neck.

“Is Mama okay. These people wouldn’t tell us anything.”

“She’s fine,” I assure belatedly realizing I don’t have the exact answers to that. But she better be. Or the Fantonis are going to go from possible allies to enemies when I burn their entire estate down.

“Where’s the baby?” Leon asks. “We heard her crying. Is she okay?”

“She’s fine,” I say.

“Can we meet her?” Leon asks.

“We can,” I reply as I set the twins down on the ground to look them over.

Despite the fact that they barricaded themselves in the room, it appears they cleaned themselves up in the attached bathroom and found it safe to change into the clothes that were provided for them. Lady, also, actually has a gun in her hand.

“Where did you get that?” I ask. Not that I object. I knew how to use a gun at her age. The only reason I hadn’t taught her is that Dele constantly objects to it.

“I took it,” Lady says vaguely.

I raise an eyebrow expectantly.

“I took it from where Eileen takes me when she shows me how to shoot,” Lady elaborates.

Of course Eileen had something to do with this. The lecture of how dangerous guns can be in her small hands can come later. I simply take it from her for now to put away later.

Then, remembering that the twins weren’t brought here alone, I look around the room for Velia Uccello.

She’s laying on the bed, asleep, still in the same clothes as before.

Before I can ask the question, Leon explains, “They had to make her go to sleep because she wouldn’t calm down earlier when they wouldn’t tell her where Aunt Bella was.” Then he

looks at me. “Where is Aunt Bella anyway? And Uncle Bond.”

“They’re dead aren’t they?” Lady says matter-of-factly.

Dele would probably chide her for her lack of tact and bluntness, but Lady also didn’t steal that particular trait.

“Isabella, yes. I don’t know about Bond. I’m going to have to make some calls.”

That’s something for Dele to reveal to the girl and deal with. I hardly knew what to do with Lady and Leon when they threw cried as children, let alone the reaction of a young child finding out that she just lost her mother. Fate, unfortunately, doesn’t smile down on me.

“Where are you going?” a quiet voice asks as we’re about to leave.

I turn to see the platinum-haired girl with her eyes open and watching us warily. I’m a cruel man, but I also remember what it’s like to wonder where your mother is and not be given answers. It may be painful, but the least I can do is let her know.

“Your sister is down the hall,” I say to the twins. “Eileen is there. She’ll introduce you to her.”

The twins nod and leave side by side to find Eileen and the baby. I close the door again and walk over to where Velia is now sitting up on the bed.

As soon as I’m standing over her, she asks quietly, “Where’s my mommy?”

“I think you already know the answer to that,” I say bluntly.

She buries her head in her knees and shakes her head.

“She’s dead,” I say deciding that the best thing to do is rip off the band aid. And because this is likely true I add, “Your dad is probably as well.”

Predictably, she bursts into tears. Dele would probably pull her into her arms to comfort her. But I don’t know this child, and she doesn’t know me except that when I would send Lady and Leon gifts, I would send her something also. Besides, I’m not good at comfort. However, it would be cruel to just leave her. So I nudge her to lift her face out her knees and then put my finger on her chin and tilt her face up to me.

“Your parents knew what they signed up for. It’s the unfortunate realities of the life they chose to make a better one for you. Safe from the man who took them from you and knows no bounds in his hunger for power.”

I don’t know that she comprehended any of that, but she does answer and makes me think she did.

“Still doesn’t mean I’m not sad,” she says, lips trembling.

“No. It doesn’t,” I say. “But don’t wallow in it. Be sad. And then do something about it.”

“I can’t do anything. I’m just a kid,” she reminds me wryly, a bit of personality shining through at her annoyance at me.

“You won’t be one day. And when you aren’t, I’ll make sure the legacy your parents left you is yours to do with as you please.”

Velia nods and then rubs her eyes as she says, “Thank you, Mr. Blake.” Then, “Mommy was wrong about you. You’re not that bad.”

Of course, Isabella has planted her ideas about me in her daughter’s head. To be fair, her ideas weren’t all wrong.

“Just wait. You might find out she was right.”

It’s not meant to be funny, but Velia laughs and then asks, “Can I meet the baby too?”

“After you get cleaned up and changed,” I say, eyeing the robe and gown she’s still dressed in.

“Right,” she says getting up to grab the clothes left out for her before running to the bathroom. She pauses before closing the door and says, “You’ll wait for me. Right?”

I don’t really have time to wait at all. But I suppose I owe it to her mother who took my family in, no questions asked, even knowing it could lead to her being taken away from her own. Guess I’ll be adding the only heir to the Uccello-Bianchi empire to my list of people and things who can’t wait.

“Right.”

Viper

The thing about our quick escape here is that I'm in hostile territory no matter how gracious the Fantonis appear to be, I have a bunch of people who need to be protected, and I don't have the men to do it.

So when Sabino Fantoni decides that he's allowed me long enough—less than twenty-four hours—to get settled and that he wants to meet with me, I have little choices for how to use the people I have.

Eileen is coming with me. She has to even if she's the only one I trust after myself to keep my children and Dele safe. That leaves Dele's two guards. In the end, I decide to leave one of them with Dele while she's currently under sedation and put the other one on guard in a room with Lady, Leon, Velia, and the baby, who is being cared for by a maid that Eileen hand chose from the staff. Apparently one that had a hand in raising her and who she trusts the most to not betray us

in the event that the Fantonis decide to cut their losses with me.

Reluctantly, I also give Lady back the gun I took from her. It's a lot to ask one man to protect three eight-year-olds and a newborn. So if one of those eight-year-olds has the guts to shoot someone, why not. I'll fight Dele over it later when she finds out.

With everyone I have to worry about as secure as they can be, I get dressed in a suit that Sabino's people provided for me and make my way to where we're meeting with Eileen flanking me.

I enter the brightly lit room overlooking the beach just a few miles away. Unsurprisingly, sitting around the table are all men in their expensive suits. There's only one chair empty. At the end of the table all the way opposite Sabino. It signifies that I'm the one with the least power here. But as far as I'm concerned, it's the head of the table and they just don't know it yet.

"Adrian," Sabino says.

"Mr. Fantoni," I say curtly and then glance at what's presumably my chair before looking up at him. "We're going to need another seat. For Eileen as my chief advisor."

Everyone pauses and then discretely looks toward Sabino.

"We don't allow the women in the room when matters of business are being discussed."

"She's my chief advisor," I repeat simply. "She needs a chair."

It's a clear challenge to his authority. He knows it. I know it.

It's his house. His conference room. He has most of the power. Technically, I should cede to his rules. He wants to abide by outdated traditions of patriarchy? That's his right in his house. But I also know that even at a disadvantage, even with Sabino holding most of the cards, he doesn't hold all of them. He needs me too. The question is, will he pick this battle?

In the end, he nods to a guard at the door. They leave and return shortly after with another chair that I direct them to put to the right of my chair. Eileen and I both sit at the same time.

Sabino glances at Eileen. She nods respectfully, and just that gesture throws him. Despite the revelation that Eileen is his niece and a Fantoni, she's still on my side. Or at least, it appears that way to Sabino. But he can't be sure. That uncertainty is definitely unsettling him. Just as my insistence that she gets a seat at the table next to me.

"I'm sure Eileen has filled you in on why you're here," Sabino says.

"She has. But I'd like to hear it from you."

Sabino smiles. He thinks I don't trust Eileen. He thinks he can use that against me. He thinks I have no clue what I'm doing and that they can manipulate me. And maybe that would have been true a decade ago. But I've spend a decade under his lying, scheming brother long enough to know how to get them to do exactly what I want them to do without them being any the wiser.

They give me the same spiel that Eileen first gave me before she spilled the rest of her family's secrets to me. That they've been trying to find a way to take down Stephen Pray since he betrayed them. That after years of searching, Eileen noticed me and told them I could be an asset. Then he sells me all the things he could offer me in return.

I pretend to be interested as I sip on the coffee that's been provided. Nodding when appropriate, but otherwise not paying much attention. All I need to do is for them to confirm what Eileen has already told me and what they think I'm not smart enough to figure out and that I don't have the leverage to use against them.

"So. What do you say?" Sabino asks.

I could drag this out. String them along and have entertainment in the process of getting what I want. But Dele should be awake soon. And I want to be there when she does. So I cut to the chase.

"What it sounds like is that you all need me a lot more than I need you."

That's not true. I'm going to need them to get back across the Atlantic ocean to make a move against Pray. But they don't know that.

"Not from where I'm standing, Blake."

"So I suppose the fact that I'm the father to Stephen Pray's grandchildren means nothing."

I hate having to bring my children in as leverage in all this. But I'd be a fool not to play this card.

"Stephen Pray's grandchildren?"

“I was married to his daughter. Adelena Fantoni. She goes by Phae nowadays. You know that of course. Seeing as I sent her back here to you earlier this year.”

Sabino lets out a boisterous laugh. “What kinda shit are you high on, Blake? Don’t you know the first rule of this business is to not get hooked on your own product? Maybe you won’t be as useful as you thought.”

“Eileen,” I say.

She takes the yellow envelope she’s been holding and passes it down the table.

“Adelena Fantoni. Born on a Sunday night. May 7th, thirty-five years ago. Eight pounds, three ounces, twenty inches long to a Sansone Fantoni, AKA as Stephen Pray—you’ll find the name change petition in there—and Tina Krine. A child Tina Krine didn’t want on account of a sexual assault allegation and was paid a very substantial sum of money to keep quiet about. She hasn’t been heard or seen since the birth.”

That could mean she took her money and left the country or that Pray had her quietly dealt with. Hard to know. Dele is the only woman I’ve known of who ran from Pray and was never caught by him. Regardless, it doesn’t matter.

“There’s also a petition for a name change from Adelena Fantoni to one Phae Galani. That was hard to get my hands on seeing as it was all sealed, but you’ll be surprised the things people will do for you with the right persuasion,” I add. “You’ll also see copies of a marriage certificate to said Phae Galani as well as a her death certificate.”

When Sabino looks up from the evidence of everything I've just told him, face white, I add, "Now tell me again how my children aren't the grandchildren of Stephen Pray."

"So what? You're going to wait out until my brother dies and then pop up with his grandchildren to get your share? Why Mr. Blake, I thought you were less of a coward than that."

It's meant to bait my anger, but I have Sabino right where I want him. With information that him and his family have kept under wraps and that he didn't know I had.

"Not at all," I reply. "Your brother doesn't deserve a peaceful death where he basks in the legacy of having never been stopped. With or without your backing, I'm going to kill that man. But it's better that you do. And it's better that you do it on my terms. Or else, I'm sure Phae will be very interested in learning after I kill him that she's the heir to his entire empire and by virtue of blood, she can destroy it."

"You wouldn't dare."

"I would."

I wouldn't. I would never just allow Phae to dismantle her father's empire because her father's empire was built on my blood and suffering. It's as much mine as it's hers or Pray's or anyone else who wants to stake a claim on it.

"I should kill you where you sit."

"But you won't. Because you could just kill Pray and go about your business but you want his business. Makes me wonder if the coffers are low..."

It's a bluff. Something I don't have any evidence of except for the observation that Sabino seems entirely too keen on

getting his hands on the business that Pray has built. If it really didn't matter. If all that mattered was getting their hands on Pray, they wouldn't need a pawn to put in Pray's place to keep things together.

“Bastard,” Sabino says.

I shrug. “Takes one to know one.”

“What do you want out of all this, Blake?”

I could tell them I want to live out all my days in peace with Dele and my children and that acquiring the power Pray has and keeping it is the only way to ensure that. But they'd all laugh in my face. They only respect family as far as it's useful to them and in the way they allow. Otherwise, they'd have seen Eileen's talents as more than just a pretty spy ages ago. They would have seen that as soon as she saw a better deal, she'd take it.

“I'll be your little pawn. I'll run Pray's empire. But I want insurance.”

“And what do you propose?”

“Give Addy Bianchi Adelenia Fantoni's birthright. Make her the long lost, secret daughter of Stephen Pray. Then, we'll practically be family.”

“Why would we do that?”

“Because *Addy*,” I say, putting stress on the name because I almost called her Dele and the less people who know about Dele, the better. Especially since Eileen never confirmed it to her family, no matter how many people think they know and how many rumors there are.

“Because Addy,” I continue, “is everything that you wanted Phae to be but isn’t. She wants in on the business and would make sure to keep everything in tact after Pray’s downfall. And now you can cut off Phae’s bloodline without cutting my children out like you planned. Because Adelena Fantoni would still be their biological mother. And I’d run the business and get my share by virtue of being their father.”

I pause before adding severely, “You wanted a pawn. I’ll be your pawn. But it’s going to be on my terms. It’s either *that* or you don’t get your fucking empire *or* vengeance.”

Sabino sits back in his chair and looks at me for a long time. So long that I think he’s going to throw all caution to the wind and order me killed regardless of everything he stands to lose from it.

Finally, he lets out a boisterous laugh and says, “Oh, you’re going to fit right in around here. Intelligent. Cunning. A way to get rid of the danger my daughter could be to our future while securing your own. Don’t get me wrong. I love Phae. I raised her as my own when her father decided she wasn’t worth his time. But she’s got too much of her mother in her. Tina didn’t understand the Fantoni way either.”

The laughter disappears from his face as he leans forward and says gravely, “There’s just one fucking problem. If Addy Bianchi is Adelena Fantoni, it means you’ve made three babies with her and haven’t made an honest woman out of her.”

“I’ll get right on that as soon as we’re done with your brother.”

“No. You want the help of the family, you respect the family and make an honest woman out of my *niece* first.”

“I don’t have any objections to that,” I reply, deciding that after all the taking I’ve done this meeting, I can give on that.

Besides, it’s going to take at least a month or so to get everything in place before I deal with Pray once and for all. The only one who’s going to have an issue with getting married is Dele. But she’s continued to deny my proposal for no reason other than being stubborn, and I’ve humored her for too long.

A little force on the matter won’t hurt her.

Dele

Years of fighting, espionage, being chased, and everything else that comes with being involved in the criminal underworld has trained my body to wake to full alertness. So when I open my eyes, I instantly catalog a few things.

The first is that I'm sore. My entire body, but my stomach and thighs in particular.

The second thing is that I have no clue where I am. The bed is comfortable, though, and someone took to the time to make sure I was propped up. I'm also attached to a blood pressure and heart monitor. The only thing to deduce from that is someone wants to keep me alive. But that's not an assurance. Pray kept Phae alive and put her through hell still.

The third thing I notice is that wherever I am, I can't remember what led to me being here. My last memory is Eileen rushing me into a car and then Viper showing up and

leading us on a chase through New York City while I labored in the back seat. Everything after that is a—

My hand goes to my stomach. It's still a little round, but it's much more pudgy and soft than firm and hard like before. And I feel empty. Hollow. Don't feel a foot nudging into my ribs, a head pressing down on my bladder, an arm moving or punch me.

My baby. Where'd she go? *Who* took her?

First things first, I start to turn my head to look for and make my heavy arms move to feel for a weapon.

“Always ready for a fight,” I hear Viper say.

I turn my head into the direction I hear his voice coming from and see him sitting in the far left corner of the room near the door.

“Relax,” he says as he stands up to walk over to me. “Everything's fine. We're safe. For now.”

“For now?”

“There are some things that need to be cemented in place before my paranoia will allow me to believe we're completely safe. But we're safe enough. Safe from Stephen Pray.”

If Viper thinks we're safe enough, that works for me. It allows me to relax on that end. But now that I'm assured that I don't have to prep for a fight, I can refocus on the fact that I'm not pregnant and I don't know where my baby is.

“Viper. Where's—”

Viper holds up a hand to silence me and then walks to the far right corner of the room near the window where a basinet

is. He reaches in and picks up the small bundle inside. She squirms, unhappy about being disturbed from her sleep but settles down quickly with a few gentle rocks of Viper's hands. It's a mesmerizing sight. Seeing hands that are usually so rough, hands that have murdered and killed, become so caring. He's not even that gentle with me, and I've never asked or wanted him to. But for the baby in his hands, he can find the softness.

He walks over to me with her and sits next to me on my bed before placing the comfortably swaddled baby in my arms.

Already, she has a head full of straight dark hair. She's still a little red from birth, though I can see some of the warm tan undertones from her father in her complexion, and her eyes are unquestionably blue. Not blue for now like Lady's were when she was born. Blue like Leon's were and stayed after he was born. Blue like her father's.

The bonding. The intense feeling of protection and desire to die for her if needed. The desire and curiosity to get to know this little person and who she'll grow up to be. All of it is instant, and the instantaneousness of it surprises me.

With Leon and Lady, it took weeks to feel any of that. Not that I wouldn't have protected them or died for them. But as a thing I was just going to do. Everything I did for them was going through the motions of making sure they stayed alive and making sure we stayed hidden. It wasn't until they started getting bigger and I started being able to discern their personalities and they did more than just eating, pooping, and sleeping all day that the bonding developed and fierce

protective and motherly instinct arose. That I started to feel like I was actually their mother and not just pretending.

At the same time, even though the path to those feelings are different, the feelings are the same. There's no caring for this child more than the two that didn't come from me. No favoritism in my heart. Just that I got here quicker and with less trauma this time around.

I look up at Viper and ask, "Did you name her?"

"I thought you'd want to do that."

I did. But also, Viper has never waited to do anything he could do himself because he thought someone else would want to do it.

I hadn't come up with any ideas that I was attached to over the last few months but in this moment, I know exactly what to name her.

"Bella," I decide.

"Another Isabella?"

"Just Bella," I clarify.

Isabella was the mafia queen in New York City who a lot of people either feared and hated or loved and respected depending on which side of her crusade to marry her husband they were on. But Bella? Bella was my friend. The sister I wanted and needed but could never get in my relationship with Delilah. The woman who took me in and showed me the ropes and gave me a new life from the ruined remains of Dele Martin to create Addy Bianchi.

“Just Bella then,” Viper says. Suspiciously without argument. I would ask why he’s giving in so easily if not for more pressing matters at hand.

Bella squirms in my arms and before making a motion with her mouth that signal to me she’s hungry. Without missing a beat, I pull down the gown I’m wearing to put her to my breast, hoping I retained something from all those latch classes I took while pregnant. While I’m doing that I get down to business.

“Where are we, and what’s the status of everything?”

“We’re at the Fantoni family estate in Sicily.”

“The Fantoni...” I trail off.

“You know them.”

“I know of them. Bella... Isabella mentioned them before. After everything that went down with Phae, she told me that’s the family Phae came from and that Stephen Pray is related to them, but that they have no interest in what happens in the west. They’re mostly concerned about their European and eastern business.”

Viper huffs. “Well, as it turns out, they are very interested in the dealings and happenings in the west. I’ve made a deal with them. We help each other to take down Stephen Pray and Sabino Fantoni lets us rule the Western Fantoni Empire.”

“So you’re his glorified pawn?” I ask. No way Viper would have so easily taken a deal like that knowing what it would reduce him to. There has to be more.

He laughs. “That’s what he wanted.”

With Bella finally latched onto my breast, I give Viper my complete attention.

“So, what did you give him?”

“You.”

“I’m going to let you explain that, because I sincerely doubt you sold me over to mob boss to do what he pleases with me.”

“Give me some credit, Bell. I didn’t go through all this trouble to have you to give you away. What I did is bartered to make you a Fantoni.”

“Make me a Fantoni?”

“Turns out, Stephen Pray used to be Sansone Fantoni, and he had a daughter before he abandoned her and his family disowned him for killing his brother,” Viper explains. “She was raised by his younger brother, Sabino Fantoni, who grew up to be the current patriarch of his family with his eldest brother dead and Stephen Pray disowned.”

“A daughter,” I mutter. Then it dawns on me. “Phae. Phae is Pray’s daughter. Not his niece.” It also dawns on me that Phae is a lot more dangerous now than I thought she ever was. And she was dangerous enough before. “Is she here? Does she know?”

“She’s here. I haven’t seen her, though. And no. She doesn’t know, and it’s going to stay that way. At least until we... cement some things.”

“What things?”

“Well, one thing. You as Adelena Fantoni, the long lost daughter of Stephen Pray.”

“What? No! I’m not. I...”

Viper leans over and puts a hand on my face. While caressing me, he asks, “And why not, Bell? What objections do you have about it?”

“I...” None. I have none.

There’s no reason why I can’t play this part. My entire life has been playing a bunch of parts. I can easily become Adelena Fantoni, the heir to Stephen Pray’s empire after we kill him. But maybe that’s it.

“If I do this, I can’t go back.”

“Go back to what?”

“Dele Martin, I guess. Well, not Dele Martin. But just... Dele.” I say.

Because while my mother named me Adele Martin and Isabella came up with Addy Bianchi and I was Dee for a while out of necessity, I built Dele from the ground up. I chose that identity and grew up and into everything that name meant to me. Freedom. Independence. Power. And while I’ve gone by a lot of names to protect myself over the years, I could always go back to being Dele. Addy Bianchi will have served her purpose when Stephen Pray is dead and not trying to murder me. But to become Adelena Fantoni... that’s a life sentence.

I don’t even know why I care. I’ve never been particularly attached to my identity before. But it’s like Phae and I discussed last year. Names have power. The name Dele has

always made me feel powerful. Because I decided who she was and what she became.

“Adele. Adelena. You can still be Dele if you want,” Viper says.

“Not like that,” I say. “I mean... There’s no going back if I become Adelena Fantoni. I’m going to be expected to be her. Whoever she is.”

“Well,” Viper says, “They certainly didn’t like her the way Phae decided she wanted her to be, and she didn’t even know the power of the identity she abandoned. The way I see it, no one knows she exists, and she’s a blank slate for you to do whatever you want to do with. I sold Sabino on you to get him to agree to giving you the identity in the first place. So make her whoever you want to be.”

“I’m sure they have some expectation of who they want Adelena Fantoni to be.”

Not even just sure. I have no doubt. Just as the Fantoni family rejected a woman like Phae, no doubt they would reject a woman like me.

“So fuck up their expectations. Trust me when I say they need us more than we need them. Be you, and they’ll adjust.”

“And if they don’t?”

“They will. I assure you.”

I laugh and look down at Bella. I don’t even have to ask if he means he’s going to hold a gun to their heads and made them. That’s exactly what he means.

“This going to take a lot of planning,” I say instead. “I need to make contact with my people.”

“More planning than all the planning we’ve done in the last decade already?”

“No. But I’ve suddenly got a lot less time on my hands,” I say rocking the baby in my arms to make the point.

“Right. Not to mention all the wedding planning we’ll be doing. But I think we can just leave most of that to Sabino’s people.”

I frown. “Wedding planning.”

“We’re getting married while we’re here.”

“Viper. I just had a baby.”

“Exactly. You have no reason to say no.”

“No. I mean my uterus is pretty much an open wound. I’m not marrying you.”

“Of course, not. I’m not that impatient. It’s a little over a month from now. We’ll make sure your doctor clears you first. Is that your only objection?”

“None except for the fact that I never agreed to marry you.”

“No. You didn’t. But you’re just being stubborn because you know that no matter where you go or what you do, all roads always lead back to me. And you know I know this. You just don’t want to give up the last of the power you think you have over me.”

I hate the way he knows me so well. I hate the way he’s learned the rules of the back and forth game we play and

figured out the reasons for my maneuvering when it comes to him.

“It’s very simple. I love you. You love me. Or did you lie to me about that?”

“Not like you’d care if I said I did.”

“No. I wouldn’t. You’re mine, and you always have been. You can’t help loving me even if you try to deny it. I thought we established that already.”

We did. Back when Phae returning from the dead threatened to tear us apart again. I wish I hadn’t so I could have more leverage over him.

“Right now, I hate you for forcing me into this.”

Viper shrugs. “You’ll get over it. We have three children together. It’s the natural next step. So that’s what we’re doing. Are you going to cooperate or will you make this difficult?”

“As if you’re giving me a choice.”

“That’s a good girl.”

He’s teasing me now. He knows how much I hate being called a girl. Part of it is because that’s what people called me to be condescending before I set them straight with my guns or a well-placed punch. The other part is that for the better part of my late teen years, I wanted Viper to see me as much more than a girl. All things considered, my irritation with the word makes a lot less sense now. No one sees me as a just a girl anymore. Especially not Viper.

So instead of being irritated, I want to laugh. But I don’t want to give him the satisfaction he’s seeking.

I turn my head to look down at Bella sleeping with her mouth still on my nipple to hide a smile.

Viper sees it anyway, and smirks knowing he's won his way.

I still feel like I've lost something, though. Even though this is everything a younger me dreamed of and all I still want now.

To marry Viper would be to lose every piece of actual leverage I've had to use against him all these years. First the children. Then my body and sex. Then my reluctance to tell him exactly how I felt about him. Marriage was the last thing I could hold over his head. I was always going to say yes eventually. Viper is right about that. But I was hoping it would wait until after we killed Pray and this war was over but now it won't.

Now, I have nothing to hold over him. Now, after everything we've been through and all the betrayals between us, all I have to give Viper is the one thing I've never been able to give him but have no choice but to hope works to see us through to the end of all this.

My trust.

Dele

Viper is right in his assumption that Sabino's people do the brunt of the planning for our wedding. The only thing I have anything to do with is when they come ask me what my preferences are, get my measurements for the dress design I pick out, tell me the planned time and date of our ceremony, and then they're out of my hair.

Maybe if I didn't have more pressing things to do, planning my wedding would mean lot more to me. But now, I couldn't care less about it.

In between taking care of a newborn, I spend time making contact with my people back in the states to see what the fallout has been and to arrange logistics for when we go back to confront Pray. This time, hopefully, taking him by surprise.

Already, according to my sources, he's unsettled. Not because I slipped away from him but the reason why I slipped out his grasp. Viper. His most entrusted enforcer. A traitor. On his enemy's side the entire time and he never saw it coming. Maybe because he killed his brother without a second thought. Abandoned his daughter without a care in the world for her. He can't comprehend that someone would risk the power and proximity Viper has to save their family.

He's trying to hide how shaken he is, according to the spies we have near him, but he can't. And it doesn't help that without prompting or instruction, my sister has stepped up to play decoy. Pretending to be Addy Bianchi and act like she never left New York while she and my lawyers and spokespeople have fed the public the story that Isabella and Bond Uccello died from a robbery gone wrong after the two longtime married lovers ditched their security to spend some time together. Simple. But commonplace enough in New York city and an effective excuse for why Addy Bianchi was holed up in some undisclosed location with her children, making plans to take the bodies back to Italy for the funeral.

In other words, Pray doesn't know what the hell is going on, doesn't know who he can trust, and we've essentially got him paranoid and on retreat. If not the fact that I'm recovering from giving birth, I wouldn't be waiting a little over a month to go after him. I'd be ready to make a final crushing blow right now.

But while this is the most scared and on the run we've had Pray and the greatest advantage we've had, he's also likely at his most dangerous. Like an animal that's just been wounded. In shock, scared, and desperate. Desperate enough to take risks

he might not normally take that may be his undoing or could be ours if we're not prepared for it. So better to wait. Better to wait until his guard is down enough that we can go in and eliminate him. Or for him to think he has the advantage again so he'll underestimate us.

It's all good and well anyway. That gives me time to enact one last part of this plan that I haven't discussed with Viper or Sabino. Not that I've talked to Sabino much beyond him coming to offer congratulations on the new baby, my impending nuptials, and becoming part of the Fantoni empire. They have similar ideas to the Russian clans about a woman's place in all this. So better to let Viper be the talking head for both of us on that front for now.

With Bella strapped to my chest, I make my way to the opposite side of the Fantoni estate to where we've been staying to find the one person I know resides here but who I've very noticeably not seen. To be fair, it's a big estate. But also, I've been spending my days walking around, in the garden with the children, in many of the other common areas. I should have run into them by now. So that just means I have to find them myself.

I knock on the door the way I've heard the servants knock before they come in my room. I'm going to go in regardless, but I'll give the courtesy of asking first.

"Come in."

I open the door and slip inside. Phae doesn't even look back toward the door from where she's curled up in a seat near the window with a cup of coffee and a book. I silently walk over to her, taking the time to observe her. Her hair has grown

out in the last nine months or so since I've seen her. Dark brown and curly again with most of the black from before cut out, and hanging in a short bob around her neck.

She looks... content. Not at peace. I doubt she'll ever be able to find that. But okay with her lot in life nonetheless. Settled. I try to imagine what that would be like. To be forced to be around people I ran from because I'm different from them. To have everything I've ever worked for taken from me. For your life to end up totally different than what you thought it would be and not being able to do a damn thing about it. But I don't have to imagine. I know what that's like. And knowing that allows me to feel some empathy for her.

Some.

She still tried to take the life I rebuilt from me.

“So Viper really didn't kill you,” I begin.

Phae startles and jumps around to look at me.

I ignore her shock and sit on the opposite side of her couch.

“I wasn't sure he hadn't gone behind my back and did it anyway. I can never know about those kinds of things with him.”

Phae recovers, and sits up straight to look directly at me before saying in an even tone, “That's one thing we agree on.”

There are a lot of mind and power games I could play here, but I don't need to. Phae knows who I am and what I stand for and knows all that she's lost to me. No need to rub it in her face. Despite everything, I have a lot of respect for her.

So I reach into my pocket and toss a micro-sd card across the couch to her. She looks at it but doesn't pick it up.

“What's that?” she asks.

“The means to Stephen Pray's downfall.”

Her eyes narrow. “I thought you and Viper made clear that you didn't want any part in that.”

“We didn't want any part in the downfall of his empire. Not him. Well... not his entire empire. There is part of it that's disconnected enough from everything else we want that taking it down will take down Pray while keeping what we want out the radius of the blowback.”

“What is it exactly?”

“Delilah has been cataloging all the players and the logistics of Pray's human trafficking ring. I might be a ruthless drug dealer, racketeer, and a killer when I have to be, but this is a type of evil I don't want anything to do with and neither does Viper. We planned on dismantling that side of the business once everything was said and done anyway, but I think you can make much more use of it.”

“What do you mean? What do you want me to do with it?”

“Do what you do best. Write it all down. Tell a story. I've got an in with the New York Times. They're ready whenever you are. Which is in about three weeks.”

Phae takes the micro sd card and tosses it back across the couch to me.

“You think this is supposed to be some kind of... consolation prize for destroying my life? For ruining my life's

work. For taking my husband and children from me?”

“I didn’t take your husband from you. The reason you kept him as long as you did is that I always ran him back to you before we could ever do anything to hurt you.”

I expect her to call me a liar for that seeing as she didn’t believe Viper when he told her he never cheated. But she doesn’t. Whether because she believes that now or it just doesn’t matter anymore, I’m not sure. I don’t care to wonder.

I continue, “You died. And then your husband moved on. That simple.”

It’s not that simple. While Viper never cheated and I never asked him too (except once when I wasn’t in my right mind, and he turned me down), in a way, I am a homewrecker. Whether I did it on purpose or not. Whether Phae enabled me or not. But we’re not rehashing that again. And I certainly don’t feel guilty about it anymore. Everyone is the villain in someone else’s story, and it just turned out that I happened to end up being Phae’s.

“And I didn’t take your children from you. They’re here. At the villa. You’re free to see them whenever you want.”

“You know I’m not going to do that. And you know why. It’s like you said. It was always supposed to be your life.”

There’s nothing to say to that so I toss the SD card back to her side.

“It’s not a consolation prize. The article revealing to the public of Stephen Pray’s atrocious human trafficking ring and the crimes attached to it are going to be in all the biggest newspapers in the world and going to be breaking news with

or without you having a hand in it. But I thought I'd offer it to someone I once considered a friend and still have a lot of respect for. I thought I'd give you the tools to enable you to fight again since I took it away from you, after all."

"So it's absolution you seek from me."

"If I wanted your forgiveness, I'd ask for it."

Phae picks up the SD card again, this time playing with it between her fingers.

"Why do you need this? You and Viper are going to kill him. That gets you your empire. Why this too?"

"Because I want more than just for him to be dead. I want the world to know him for the filth he is."

That and it's an insurance policy. Just in case the feds want to look too close into his death when this is all over. This gives them a clear and obvious motive so they won't look too closely into the man's dealings and find things Viper and I don't want anyone to find before I can make sure it's all carefully hidden and stashed away.

But Phae doesn't need to know all that.

"Another thing we agree on," Phae replies. Then, "It's going to take me a while to go through all this and write it up."

"Better get to it then. There's a lot at stake. You might even win a Pulitzer. Under your pen-name, of course."

I stand up to leave, accidentally jostling the sleeping two-week-old on my chest. Bella squirms against me. I put a hand on her back to pat her lightly as I leave the room.

"Dele," Phae says before I can open the door.

“Phae.”

“Congratulations. On the baby. And the wedding.”

I wasn't looking for absolution or forgiveness. But this is Phae's way of giving it to me. Of making peace with everything she lost so I could gain it.

I wasn't looking or asking for it, but I'm grateful nonetheless. And I feel like the fifteen-year-old girl who Phae welcomed into her house and helped usher into womanhood, even after Phae figured out that said girl had caught her husband's attention. She never held her husband's wandering eye against me. She was never mean or cruel, and I could always go to her. She was kind to me. Still is, it turns out.

“Thank you,” I reply quietly and leave the room.

Viper

People and their stupid wedding traditions. I haven't seen Dele since yesterday morning because the women of the Fantoni family, who are numerous but I've only seen in passing since they're never involved in any of the business, rushed into the room and stole Dele away to get her prepared for the wedding, and I'm not allowed to see her until then. Then, hours later in the evening, Sabino along with the rest of the Fantoni men came to steal me away for a final night of bachelordom which involved a lot of alcohol, cigarettes, jokes and laughter, and thankfully no other women. There's a lot of things I can say about the Fantoni's, but they're loyal to each other and their families. If there's any infidelity happening, they're very good at keeping it quiet.

It had been a long time since I'd needed to pretend all there was to me was a charming playboy who likes to indulge. But I put on the act for the sake of comradery until everyone was too drunk to notice that I was being aloof. Everyone

except Jeune and Marcus. Both of whom dutifully accompanied me with just a look from Eileen, who stayed behind to watch the children last night.

At the very least, talking to them was enlightening. A French mob prince and his own bodyguard turned boyfriend, saved from the rigid conformity of Jeune's father. Though, the French would likely accuse Dele of kidnapping them. Not that it matters.

The French mob is barely a player on the board of the criminal underworld with no scary powerful allies and little influence. It will be nothing to deal with Jeune's father and put him as the head of his family. Dele and I wouldn't benefit from it, but loyalty should be rewarded. Especially for their loyalty to and protection of Dele. So I add them to the list of people I feel are owed favors. Eileen is at the top of that list. Then Cres. These two. Velia Uccello in lieu of her parents.

But those are matters for long after today. Today, this wedding.

"Ready?" Eileen asks from the doorway, wearing a long neutral beige, sparkling dress.

I simply nod before following her out to the garden where the guests are. It's all family, but the Fantoni family are many. So even an intimate, family only wedding means a hundred and fifty people.

I stand at the altar, and not long after, the procession begins. It's not long. Just Leon and Lady with Velia between them. Leon is supposed to be holding the pillow with the rings on it with both hands and Velia is supposed to be helping Lady drop flowers. However, Leon is balancing the pillow with one

hand while holding Velia's hand as she avoids looking at the crowd with her cheeks visibly pink. Lady does her job dropping the flowers but scowls the entire way while periodically tugging at the elaborate, braided bun at the top of her hair.

When they get to the end of the aisle, all three let out a sigh of relief for different reasons before going to their seats.

Then, Dele comes around the corner where she was hiding behind a tree and begins walking down the aisle by herself.

Honestly, Dele could have walked down the aisle in a plastic garbage bag, and I would have been blown away. However, she's a sight to behold walking down the aisle in a white, jeweled, lace wedding dress with off-shoulder sleeves that hugs her breasts, her waist, her hips, and then flares at the knee. I've never cared whether or not Dele wore makeup, but today she's added an extra touch to her everyday face with black wings and crystal jewels accenting her eyes. Her dark hair tumbles in waves down her back with a few of the front pieces pulled back in a braid so they stay out of her face.

If I believed in the sort of thing, I'd think she was a goddess. Come down from the heavens to grace and awe the world with her beauty before deciding to forsake her heavenly home to spend it with the regular human man she's chosen to give her affections to. And compared to here, I am regular. Nothing particularly special. Just a boy who was given a gun and told where to point it. But Dele. She is everything, and I'll spend the rest of my life trying to match up to her greatness.

Instinctively, I reach out to help guide her to the alter to stand in front of me. Unhesitatingly, she takes it. The simple

contact makes my mouth go dry and sends heat through my body. I take a deep breath to keep my composure. But somehow Dele knows because when she's in front of me, hand still in mine, she smirks.

I can't let her get away with that.

So no one but her and maybe the priest officiating can hear, I say, "For someone forced into this, you look quite pleased."

Another woman would giggle and blush.

Dele, as I knew she would, rolls her eyes like she's been doing toward me since she was fourteen.

The priest goes through the ceremony, and as expected, we say, "I do" with no hesitation. Not even her. Despite me forcing her into this when she didn't want to yet.

"You may now kiss the bride," the priest says.

Having been waiting for that part since that all began, I snatch Dele to me, causing her to let out a squeak of surprise and lose her footing as she falls into me. I kiss her hard and forcefully while the crowd claps and cheers behind us.

When I pull away, I look into her shiny, dazed eyes and say, "*Mine*. Now and forever."

Dele smiles slightly and averts her gaze from me before looking back and saying, "I thought we settled that long before now."

"Just in case you forgot."

"I could never."

I let go of her just to hook my arm around hers to pull her close to my side. She ushers for the children to join us. Leon is still holding Velia's hand, so she too joins us. A maid then places Bella in Dele's free arm and we stand still long enough for the photographer to get decent pictures before we walk back down the aisle as husband and wife.

I've about had enough of the reception. I'd had enough of it as soon as it started. I hadn't even wanted to go by the time I'd kissed Dele at the altar, wanting nothing more than to whisk my new bride away somewhere, hitch her wedding dress up to her waist and fuck her. I actually tried to do just that, but Dele insisted that Isabella would haunt her from the grave for disrespecting our guests and new family like that.

Now, hours later, after toasts and dinner and dancing, Dele is making rounds to make sure she meets as many members of the family as she can before the night is over leaving me to sit and sip on alcohol with Sabino and some of my new male cousins-in-law. All by marriages from other Italian crime families into the Fantoni family to one of their daughters in some form, fashion, or another.

"Word of advice," says Lorenzo, dark-haired and, like most people, a couple of inches shorter than me.

"I'm listening."

He leans into me and points to Dele who is talking to stocky brown-haired man with a bunch of rings on his fingers. Then he says, "Get a handle on your woman."

“Get a handle on her?” I ask, feigning confusion. I know exactly what he means. But I’m bored and ready to go and letting him dig his grave before I eviscerate him is going to be entertaining.

“You give her too much freedom,” Lorenzo adds.

“Freedom?”

Sabino laughs and says while putting a heavy hand on my shoulder, “I’ll put it in straight words for you. He means she talks too much.”

“Does she?”

He ignores my question as Lorenzo adds, “And she has no sense of humor. I was playing around with her earlier, and she didn’t crack a smile. Then I told her she’s prettier when she smiles and she should smile more, and she walked away.”

“Women. So emotional,” Sabino says in agreement. “Assert your power over her as her husband now or you’re inviting nothing but problems and nagging in the future.”

“Have you ever played chess?” I ask suddenly.

If Sabino is thrown by the seemingly random question, he doesn’t show it. Lorenzo and a couple of the others do.

“Not really.”

“I did. In my youth.”

That is to say, I randomly picked it up at around fifteen and like I did with a lot of things, intensely fixated on it for months at a time. Even got Wyan to take me to a few chess tournaments before my fixation waned and I got bogged down with fighting and killing one gang or another. Every now and

then, I'll still break out a chess board to play it in the rare occasions that I'm bored and have nothing pressing to do but don't have access to my cars or garage.

“The king. It's the most important piece on the board. You corner it, the game is over. And yet, the most powerful piece on the board is the queen.” I look in Dele's direction, now talking to someone else. “She can move in whatever direction she wants. As far as she can and wants across the board. She can go places and do things that the king cannot. Even though he's the most important piece on the board. She's so critical, that in some cases, to carelessly lose her means the end of the game. She's the only piece other than the king that you only get one of.”

Well, unless you manage to make a pawn into a queen and, honestly, it's a more apt description of Dele. But that's not the point I'm making right now.

I look away from Dele to give the men around me a pointed look.

“Dele is my queen. She best serves me when I don't try to keep her locked in a pretty cage. My most powerful ally and soldier. Sure, I can shoot a gun. But look at her out there,” I say nodding my head to her. “She's doing her obligatory rounds and probably cataloging everything she learns about them for future use or to come back to tell me if she finds it particularly *interesting*.”

“And *if* someone were to get through your security and attack right now or *if* for some reason you decided to turn on us, she'd take her guns from under her dress and take out twelve men singlehandedly because that's just how good I

made her. I'm not sure you can say that same about your pretty smiling wives. They're little more than sitting ducks ripe for the taking, and without their mothers to protect them, so would all your little children."

No one says a words when I'm done. All silent. No smiles. Just glares at me.

Finally, Sabino says, "What the fuck are you getting at Blake?"

"That's Fantoni. Per our agreement. We're family now. Remember?"

And now that we're family, I don't have to hold my tongue in an effort to be polite. Politeness is for strangers.

I sip my alcohol and chuckle. "For fuck's sake, I'm just playing around. Don't you have a sense of humor? Smile a little."

They don't. Good. It's time they begin to comprehend what happened today. They just let the god damned poisonous snake into their garden. I am the Viper after all.

I set my glass down on the table and go to where Dele is.

I set my hand on her waist and pull her into my side when I step next to her. I place a kiss on the side of her head and say, "Ready to go?"

She turns to look at me with a smile and says, "Just been waiting for you to come get me."

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Dele

'm surprised you didn't come to get me earlier," I say
"I as Viper leads us out the area of the villa where the wedding reception was held.

"I was just getting know our cousins."

"Were you?"

"Yes," he says, sounding a little too innocent for my liking.

"Viper."

Suddenly, Viper grabs me and shoves me back against the wall.

"No more talking," he says before pressing his lips hard against mine.

I instinctively melt into him. Heat flaring in my body as my hands find the front of his tuxedo to pull him even closer to me than he already is, desperately needing to get this off him and my dress off and have his hot skin against mine. How tempted I was earlier, to let him whisk me away right after the ceremony. To let him take me to an alcove before the reception. To lift my wedding dress to my waist and fuck me.

I don't know how I said no to him and forced us both to behave.

"I need you," he says. "It's been too long."

We've been apart for long times. The longest being during my pregnancy. But not like this. Not being in proximity and near each other for an entire month and barely touching each other. But planning an attack against a mob boss, giving birth, and taking care of a newborn in addition to three more children will keep a couple apart naturally.

I feel him start to lift the hem of my dress. I stay his hands with mine.

"What?" he asks, pulling away to look at me with intense eyes.

"I just... the doctor cleared me. But... it's different down there."

"Different?"

"Drier," I say vaguely.

As much as I want him, as much as I want Viper's cock inside my pussy, I don't feel myself getting as wet as it would have gotten before I gave birth.

"Oh," he says. Then smirks. "We'll take it slow then."

He suddenly drops to his knees. Lifts my dress up to my waist. Pushes my panties aside.

"Wait. Not here."

"Yes here. I'm going to get you good and soaked and wet for me so you can take my cock."

“You can do that when we get back to our room.”

“No. Because as soon as I get you to our room, I’m going to get you completely out this dress and naked to fuck you with my cock without delay. Now shut up talking.” He starts to dip his head between my thighs but pauses to add, “Unless it’s moaning my name.”

And then his mouth is on my pussy and if not for bracing myself back against the wall, I might have collapsed at the sensation of his mouth on me. I can tell I’m not as wet as I might have been before having his baby, though.

Viper gets to work fixing that, using his tongue to lick my up and down the folds of my pussy, trying to stimulate my natural arousal. Thrusting his tongue back and forth into my hole. Pulling away. Inserting a finger and causing me to gasp in surprise.

He’s not satisfied with the wetness though, because he pulls the finger away and reinserts his tongue back and forth.

“Fuck,” I mutter, legs shaking. But I’m not as close as I might have been before yet. It still feels so good, though. Orgasm or not. “Viper.”

“I’m getting you there, Bell,” he assures.

He stops fucking me with his tongue and puts his mouth directly on my clit. I grind myself down into his mouth as he licks my sensitive nub with his tongue in an attempt to get me wetter and wetter. He inserts a finger into my pussy again. Satisfied this time, he inserts a second, causing me to squirm some to adjust to the girth of them.

Fuck, just his two fingers stretching me feel like so much right now. I love how much I can feel them as he thrusts them back and forth while he licks at my clit. But I don't know how the fuck his cock is going to fit back inside me again if just his fingers make me feel this full.

“Viper...”

His free hand squeezes my hip tightly to get my attention.

“What?”

“Not Viper.”

“What do you mean not—”

He brings his head from under my dress to look me in the eye, blue eyes intense and determined.

“That name is used to inspire terror in my enemies. To be their nightmare. You're not my enemy.”

“You used to be,” I blurt out. “My nightmare that is.”

I don't think that was ever a secret from him. Aloof and uncaring (sometimes uncomprehending) about people's feelings as he can be, one thing I know Viper comprehends and can sniff out well in people is terror. He feeds off of it. That said, I never gave him the satisfaction of confirming that he was once my nightmare. Not when it would have mattered to him. Not when he would have taken it as a victory against me.

Now it's not victory. Now, at worst, it's just a statement of fact. He was my nightmare once.

“And you used to be my enemy,” he states.

That too is a statement of fact. The reminder of that is a bullet scar on his chest.

He continues, “But not anymore. To you, I’m Adrian. Always Adrian. Viper’s mask or not.”

I smile some. “It’s an old habit. Might take a while to break.”

He smirks and says, “I know exactly how to help you.”

He dips his head back between my legs and picks up where he left off with his mouth sucking on my clit and his fingers thrusting into me. My legs almost give out again as I feel myself suddenly at the edge of explosion.

“Yes. Please. Vi—”

He suddenly stops and my legs quake and my stomach clenches from the denial after being so close.

“Every time you call me the wrong name, I’m going to stop. Now let’s try again.”

He goes back to sucking my clit and thrusting his fingers, taking me back towards an orgasm. I don’t give him a chance to stop again. Today, I’m a quick study, and when I feel myself about to come, I moan, “Adrian...”

The next thrust and suck, I come on his mouth and fingers. I scratch at the hard wall behind me for purchase, finding none as Viper continues to suck and lick my clit and the length of my pussy.

We’re in the fucking hallway of someone else’s house but I can’t bring myself to care as I’m overwhelmed by sensations, as I feel Viper’s tongue in every nerve. I sink more into the

wall, put my hand in his hair simultaneously trying to pull him away because it's too much and keep him there because it feel so good.

I come again, barely able to stand now, and Viper lets me ride through it on his mouth and fingers before coming up from under my dress and standing up.

He holds his two fingers in front of my face to demonstrate the stickiness and slick covering them.

“Looks like you're nice and wet now.” Then he says, “Open your mouth.”

That's the only warning I get before he shoves his fingers into my mouth, allowing me to taste myself on his fingers. Once I've gained my bearings, I begin to lick it off his finger as he thrusts them back and forth into my mouth. As I feel my pussy begin to ache for another orgasm so soon after I've already had two.

He pulls his fingers from my mouth, and then lifts me to his arms to carry me the rest of the way to our room.

It's not the same space we've been occupying since we got here. The family suite we've been sharing with the children. The space we're staying in tonight is a single bedroom with a large king-sized bed in the center. A bed that Viper unceremoniously drop me on top of as soon as we're there before proceeding to start taking off his tuxedo.

“I'm going to need help,” I say as I watch him undress. “With my dress.”

“Fuck your dress,” he says as he finishes getting his clothes off.

He hikes my dress up to my waist. His hands find my panties and tears them off. He drops the ruined fabric on the ground and then yanks me roughly to him by the thighs.

Then his cock is inside me, and I reach forward to brace myself on his arms because I can feel every single inch of him. It's not uncomfortable, but my pussy feels tighter than it's been in a long time. Viper's cock filling me up feels like a good stretch. It doesn't feel bad. Not awesome either. But also not uncomfortable.

"Fuck, how are you this tight," he asks, Then he looks down at me and asks, "You okay?"

"Yeah. It just... feels like..." I squirm my hips, trying to adjust to the stretch his girth is causing.

"Feels like what, Bell," he says through gritted teeth, reacting to my squirming.

"It feels like being a virgin again."

"Do you want to stop?"

"No... I... Just get on with it," I say. Because weird as it feels right now, I know that if I just push through it, I'll get what I want in the end. Hopefully.

If Viper was the decent guy my sister thought I should date, the decent guy that Isabella thought I should date, he would doubt my assurance and stop. But Viper has never doubted me when it comes to what I think my limits are.

So he pulls out and slams back in and doesn't hold back as he continues to thrust over and over again. It's slow going for me, but eventually my pleasure begins to build, coiling tight in my belly. My body grows hot and my dress starts to become

too tight and uncomfortable. But even though I'm close to falling apart—so, so, close—I need something more. Something...

I reach between my legs to touch my clit. But even that's not enough. I need...

“Viper,” I growl.

He stops thrusting, only adding to my desperation for a release that I can't get to come fast enough.

“What did I tell you?” he asks.

“And what are you going to do about it if I refuse, *Viper*?” I challenge.

I see the glint in his eyes as he recognizes what I'm doing. What I want him to do.

“I suppose I'd have to punish you,” he says.

And then his hand is around my throat. Squeezing as hard as he dares as he continues to thrust into me.

Between his hand around my neck, him pounding into me, and my dress feeling like it's too tight, I have no breath to waste on taunting him with a name he doesn't want to hear from my lips or the one that he does. The only thing that leaves my throat are desperate whines as Viper's cock fills me up. As I feel each and every thrust on every single part of my body. As I ball my hands in my bunched up dress until...

I let out choked gasps as I come, my hips lifting off the bed so high that Viper has to let go of my throat to pin them down so he can keep thrusting to finish inside me after waiting so long.

Without his hand restricting my throat and not able to think about anything else except the way my body tingles with pleasure, I moan, “Viper. It’s so good. I... yes.”

He comes in me, and I feel his hot seed flood my pussy.

He leans down over me. I think he’s going to kiss me, but instead he puts his mouth to my ear and says, “Clearly, it’s going to take more effort to get you to call me by the right name.”

“That sounds like a threat.”

“So what if it was?”

Viper is always good on his promises when it comes to those.

My heart leaps at the thought. Not in fear. But in excited anticipation at what he has in store for me.

Viper

I slide my cock out of Dele's tight pussy and tug her forward by the arms, forcing her to sit up and then stand. Then I whip her around so her back is toward me.

I toss her hair over her shoulder and run my hands over the laced back of her bodice, sorely tempted to rip it to pieces. But even I know how important a memento a wedding dress is. So I find the laces, neatly tucked into the back of her dress and begin to slowly loosen them.

"Hurry up, Viper," Dele says.

Her chest is heaving, there's a fine sheen of sweat all over her body, and she keeps pulling at the front of her dress, clearly desperate to be naked. Normally, that would be all the encouragement I needed to throw caution to the wind and rip her clothes to shreds. But not today.

Today, I stop. Bury my face into her neck. Kiss it. Mutter into her shivering skin, "How are you ever going to learn to

call me by my proper name again if I give into your requests before the lesson can stick?”

It's a testament to how desperate she is to be out of this dress and for me to fuck her again that she doesn't try to be stubborn about it as she sighs, “Adrian.”

“That's a good Bell,” I say.

But it's still not good enough. Not if she only says it because I ask, but when she thinks of me, she still thinks of me as Viper. And I am. Most times I'm more the nightmare that is Viper than I am the man that is Adrian. Honestly, there's not much difference between the two. But for Dele, there is. For Dele, I don't want to be associated with a nightmare. For Dele, I want to be associated with the pleasure I can give her tonight. And when I'm not giving her pleasure, I'll be her personal attack dog lurking in the shadows to protect her and waiting for her command, only coming to heel at her request.

I'll still torment her, of course. Hurt her when I know she wants me to. When I know she needs to me. But I'll never be her nightmare again.

That starts tonight.

I take my time undoing the laces of her bodice, and when they're all loosened up, rather than immediately taking it off her, I bite at the exposed skin of her neck and back. A strangled breath leaves Dele's lips.

“Do you like it? When I bite you. Do you like it more than when I kiss you?”

“Yes,” she says shakily.

“Yes, what?” I ask pointedly, licking a long stripe with my tongue along the initial trail of my bites.

“Yes, Adrian.”

I let myself continuing to bite at her skin be my response, finally beginning to tug her dress down, but only a few inches at a time, exposing hot skin and biting every inch of it.

Finally, her arms are out the dress and I’ve covered her entire back in bites. So I pull her dress the down her hips and let it fall to pool around her feet on the floor. The holster she always wears to keep her guns on her when she wears dresses follows, leaving her in nothing but her shoes and a strapless bra.

I reach between her legs from behind. Before I even plunge my two fingers into her, I feel her arousal slick on her warm thighs. When I insert my fingers into her tight wet hole, I almost abandon all thought of dragging this out anymore from being so painfully hard for her again.

Almost.

Because when she feels my fingers in her, Dele moans, “Viper,” and I can’t let her get away with that. Before the night is over, she’ll have forgotten that name.

But I can’t hold out that long, so I whip her around to me and force her to her knees. Without warning, I shove my cock into her mouth. She gags around it. I only give her time to brace her hands against my hips before I grab her hair and begin to bob her mouth back and forth on my cock.

It’s not as hot and tight as her pussy would be but it’s hot and tight enough.

“Bell,” I moan.

She moans over my cock, having gained her bearings as I continue to deepthroat her. She keeps moaning around my cock. Louder and Louder. The vibrations traveling through my entire body. Feeling like she’s consumed my entire body until I come in her mouth, shooting my come deep down her throat, making her choke and gag again. But Dele, my stubborn Bell, manages to take it like she always does and doesn’t spill a drop.

I take my cock out her mouth and look down at her.

She’s managed to somehow get her bra and shoes off without me noticing, leaving her completely bare to me. Her hair is a mess. Her makeup is ruined. Her eyes, still jeweled around the perimeter, are shiny, and dried tears stain her cheek from gagging around my cock. Her mouth is messy with saliva. Her dark nipples are hard and pointed and one of her hands is between her thighs trying to rub herself off but to no avail because what she wants, what she *needs* is my cock again. Yet she still looks as much like a goddess from heaven as she did when she walked down the aisle to me earlier today.

“Beg,” I demand.

“Please Vi—” I raise an eyebrow. “*Adrian*. Please. Fuck me again with your cock. I need you.”

“That’s not all you want, though. Is it?”

“Hurt me, Adrian. Hurt me and don’t hold back.”

It’s not begging or even a request. But fuck it. I don’t feel like being picky.

I put my hand around her neck, snatch her up off the ground, and slam her onto the bed. I shove her legs open, but instead of ramming into her like she probably expects, I slap her glistening pussy. Hard.

She yowls in pain. Or pleasure. Or both. I'm not sure she can tell the difference right now. I slap her pussy again. She cries out again. I keep going, never letting up. Her entire body trembles and shakes from the sensations.

"I want to hear you say my name," I growl, pausing my strikes.

She tries to clamp her legs together to bring herself release. I force her to keep them open.

"Adrian," she mutters.

"Say it again."

"Adrian."

"Now don't stop," I command and continue to slap her pussy.

She doesn't, and I reward her.

She comes with one final slap to her pussy, her come squirting out of her so hard it coats my chest and splashes onto my face, and without even thinking, I'm pounding my cock into her hole that's somehow tighter than it was before.

She's been reduced to putty as I pound into her. The only things leaving her lips being the barely coherent whimpering of my name.

"Yes, Bell. That's it. Keep saying it," I say and then have to stop because I can't focus on words when her heat is

consuming my entire being like this.

Her hands reach for me, and reach back. Pulling her to sit up. Giving her what she wants and what I want and pressing her hot sweaty body against mine.

It's not possible for us to be any closer than we are now, but it doesn't stop us both from trying. From her pressing kisses into my shoulder and chest, from me wrenching her head back and capturing her lips and then groaning into her mouth as with one final thrust I come massively inside her.

She shouts my name, and then her eyes roll back and she passes out for a few seconds, before coming back with foggy eyes and a dazed smile.

We both fall onto the bed without concern about cleaning up right now or even moving. I'm totally spent, but even now, I can't help but anticipate being ready to fuck her all over again.

Dele

Over the next two days, Adrian and I never get dressed. We fuck, have meals brought to our rooms, sleep, fuck again, take a shower to get cleaned up only to fuck again during and after.

I do get a little anxious about being away from Bella, though. She's only five weeks only and when the twins were this age, I spent every second of every day with them for the first three months before I started working. I'm already going to be leaving her all the way across the Atlantic in a week or so, and there's no telling how long it will be before I can send for the children. If I can send for them. So I have Bella brought to the room doing the day.

Not only that, the sex makes my breasts swollen and leaky with milk, especially when Adrian decides to suck and pinch and play with them. So I feed Bella every few hours when she's with us, pump what she doesn't eat, and give it to the servants when they come to get her at night.

On our final night cooped up in this room, though, on this mini honeymoon before we have to get back to our lives and back to plotting against the man who is legally my father now after taking on the identity of Adelenia Fantoni, I decide to keep Bella with us.

I've just placed her in the bassinet near my bed when there's a knock in the door. Adrian throws on a pair of trousers and opens it to reveal Lady, Leon, and Velia at the door.

"Velia was worried when the maids didn't bring Bella back," Lady blurts out.

Velia glares at Lady and says, "So were you! You're the one who said we should come to make sure."

"And I couldn't let them go by themselves!" Leon interjects, interrupting the argument between the two girls.

I tie the sash around the robe I threw on to combat the slight chill as I nursed and go to the door to spare them all their pride.

"Well, it's definitely too late to go back to your rooms by yourself this late. So I guess you'll have to sleep here tonight."

Lady rolls her eyes and says, "We're not babies. But if you're going to make us."

With that, she shoves her way into the room and Leon and Velia follow behind her. If Adrian is irritated that the presence of the three older children has guaranteed we won't get in one last fuck before tomorrow forces us back into the real world, he doesn't voice it. Just clicks off the light, opens the curtains of the window to let the starlight shine through, and gets in the

bed next to the children on the side closest to the door, while I get in on the side closest to the bassinet and window.

I watch over the children until they fall asleep. It doesn't take them long. After that, still not tired myself, I'm content to simply watch them breathe. To think, something so mundane and normal and unexciting brings me so much peace and joy. A decade ago, I would have laughed anyone out of my apartment for suggesting one day I'd want this.

"You're thinking loudly over there," Adrian says.

"I was just picturing how I would have reacted ten years ago if someone had told me in a few short years I'm be any child's mother, I would have laughed. Let alone if you told me I'd have four."

"So we're claiming Velia now?"

"You already did."

The children have been clingy in response to the trauma of fleeing New York, and Bella and Bond's death, and I haven't missed the way Adrian's made sure to include Velia. How when the children would follow him to the office Sabino gave him to work from when I was still recovering and did little more than sleep all day, he'd look back to make sure Velia was there or ask if she was coming. How when he comes to our suite late after a long day of planning and meetings, he peeks into Velia's room in addition to the twins. How, even before that, he used to send her gifts along with the twins for every holiday, special occasion, and even the twin's birthday until Bella told me to tell him to put a stop to the last.

And Velia has grown fond of him too.

Bella is no doubt rolling in her grave at the fact.

“What am I supposed to do? Ignore the last living heir to the Uccello estate?”

I let him save face and say, “We’ll let Velia decide exactly what place she wants to have with us. Anyway, I was just thinking how peaceful this is. How this would have driven me insane even for a few minutes back then.”

Adrian doesn’t answer, but I wasn’t particularly expecting one. So I settle into my pillow to get an hour or two of sleep before Bella wakes up for a feeding.

“We could stay here, you know.”

I prop myself back up on my elbow to look at Adrian and find him mirroring my position.

“Stay here...?”

“Pray’s not coming after us. He’s too afraid. We could let him fight a ghost that’s not coming until he realizes it or his paranoia kills him while we go somewhere he has no reach. Away from all this mafia and criminal shit. You could... go somewhere and become a lawyer or start a non-profit to help people and I could... Be your fucking trophy husband who stays home with the kids and tinkers with his car collection or something.”

“Is that what you want?”

I already know the answer to that.

“No. But we don’t know how this is going to end. And I would if you asked me. If you told me right now you wanted

to run away from all this. If you wanted to live the rest of your days out... in peace.”

I laugh at the way he says “peace” as though it’s literal ash on his tongue.

“That wouldn’t be peace for me,” I say.

“That’s literally what you just said.”

“If we did that, I’d always wonder if and when Pray would track us down and find us. Even if he didn’t, I’d always wonder about the people we made promises to and abandoned. I wouldn’t be able to live with myself. Even being able to lay next to my children and watch them sleep relatively safely, I would be restless. I would never be at peace. I can’t enjoy these moments with them and with you without finishing what we started. We *have* to finish what we started.”

“Even though the woman we started this all for isn’t dead and doesn’t want anything to do with this?”

“Maybe she was the catalyst, but this has never just been about her. Or at least, it’s not anymore.” I want to cuddle up under Adrian’s warmth. Touch his face. Kiss him. But the children separate us, and I’m not willing to disturb them. So I reach over and grab his hand. “This is about you and I now. This is about making Stephen Pray regret the day he forced us to become enemies and tried to drive us apart permanently only to make a bigger enemy for himself. This is our vengeance, Adrian. No one else’s.”

The grin Adrian gives me is wild and feral and devious and unhinged and matches the glint in his eyes.

“What?” I ask.

“Nothing. You’re just going to make one fucking hell of a mafia queen when this is over Mrs. Fantoni.”

“I’m already one hell of a mafia queen,” I say, letting go of his hand and settling back into my pillow to go to sleep.

“That you are. I’m just the enforcer.”

“Only for now, Adrian.”

I assume the conversation is over based on the silence that follows. But then Adrian says, “You called me Adrian.”

“What else am I supposed to call you? Is it not your n— Oh,” I say, understanding the significance of that. Adrian. He’s Adrian again to me. Not just to humor him by calling him by his name or because we’re in company where that identity is secret and I have to force the name off my tongue. But in my head, he’s Adrian. When I look at him, I see Adrian. The good. The bad. The heinous. And the heartbreak. It’s all him, and I can forgive that now.

The realization is suddenly overwhelming and I feel like I need to cry, but the ability to give into crying for the hell of it was bred out of me long ago. So I just settle for letting out a shuddering breath instead.

I feel his hand around mine again, not realizing until then that I’d reached back out for him.

“I missed you,” I say quietly.

“I’m sorry for making you wait, my love.”

Viper

It crosses my mind that I still haven't made good on my promise to induct Dele into the mile-high club yet as I glance at her sitting next to the window as we fly back to the states. But we're both too high strung and anxious about what's about to come for any good sex to come of it, so doing that is going to have to wait for another time. Besides, these last few hours are dedicated to planning.

It seems like all we've been doing is planning and planning, but there's no way to overplan this. Every time we go back over things again, one of us comes up with another scenario that we didn't think about before and discuss how to adjust and account for it. Even now, after going over everything hundreds of times, the possibilities seem endless, and at this point it's clear that we'll never be able to plan for every exact scenario. We're going to have to eventually play it by ear.

I finally relax to sit next to Dele toward the end of our flight to go over an obscure detail that is probably going to be insignificant but that could very well make the difference. She's occupied, though. Staring intently at her phone, and when I look over, the camera feed of our suite back at the Fantoni villa is on the screen.

The maid that's been helping with Bella the entire time is tending to her while Leon, Lady, and Velia listen intently to some story that Phae is telling. I'd initially protested Phae having access to them while we were away, but Dele correctly deduced that if Phae wanted to steal them away, she has nowhere to go. And besides that, Dele seems to be under the impression that Phae has made peace with the consequences of turning her back on everything and anyone involved with a life she wants nothing to do with. The least Dele feels she can do is give her a chance to spend time with her children when she doesn't have to face us while doing it.

Dele wasn't going to budge, so I let it be since we have cameras installed everywhere with people constantly watching them to make sure Phae does nothing. Still.

"If you're so concerned about Phae with them, why did you give her permission to see them while we were away?" I ask.

"Because she wanted to and that's the only way she was ever going to." Before I can say anything else, Dele says, "Not everyone is as vindictive as you are, Adrian. Phae and I have an understanding. It's fine."

"Then are you going to tell me why you're watching the camera feed like you are worried?"

“Because I am worried. Just not about Phae.”

There’s no need to ask why Dele is worried. What isn’t there to be worried about? No matter how confident I am that we’ll be able to pull this off.

Dele closes out the feed and sets her phone down.

“I have something for you,” I say as I reach behind my chair to grab what’s obviously a gun case.

Dele takes it and carefully sets it on her lap before opening it.

“New guns,” she says, placing her hands over them while they’re still in the case before taking one out.

“Consider it a wedding gift. But it was about time anyway. You had your other ones for what? A decade? Long overdue for an upgrade.”

“I know,” she says. “But those guns were special to me.”

“Clearly since you moaned about losing one of your pair the entire month.”

“I didn’t moan.”

“You did. Hopefully, those are an adequate replacement.”

“As long as they were from you, they would have always been adequate.”

“Is that why you kept the other ones so long?”

Dele rolls her eyes and leans over to kiss me on the cheek.

“I love you regardless, but it can never be said that you are quick on the uptake when it comes picking up on things like sentiment.”

Eileen comes over and says, “We’re about to land.”

Dele reaches over to grab my hand.

“You ready?” I ask.

“I don’t think we can ever be ready enough, but we’ll have to make do.”

She’s right. If we don’t do this now, if we turn back because of fear now, we might not ever do it. It has to be done now. Pray played his hand. Now we have to play ours.

The plane lands right in Pray’s backyard. Not too far outside of his beloved city at a base running right out his backyard. It’s risky, but Pray’s not the only one who made allies with neutral parties. Or, in this case, with parties he think are his allies and would notify him of this kind of activity. We just didn’t have the man and weapon power. I’m still not confident about that if I’m honest. Even with the help of the Fantoni’s resources. But the hope is that we can move quick enough to get to Pray before he mobilizes all his people.

“So,” I ask without preamble when Dele, our entourage, and I walk into the base.

Revnor, our point man on this, says, “He took the bait.”

The bait being Addy Bianchi’s very public return alone to New York City for a private meeting. Of course, it wasn’t the real Addy Bianchi. Or who people think is the real Addy Bianchi. It was Dele’s sister. Delilah. Their uncanny resemblance despite not being twins has come in handy and makes me glad I didn’t kill her three months ago.

Both Dele and I had reservations about using Delilah as bait for two opposite reasons. Despite their tumultuous

relationship and the fact that they don't even talk outside of business and not even that if they can get someone else to pass it along, Dele still cares for her sister and doesn't want her hurt. My reasons had nothing to do with sentiment and everything to do with wondering if Pray would be fooled.

I assured Dele that Pray knows the last thing he'd want to do is kill who he thinks is Addy Bianchi if he wants to bait me to him. He could risk it, but he also won't risk inciting my ire not knowing who to trust and what resources I have on my side.

Dele assured me that if she could look Pray directly in the fucking face and he couldn't recognize her as Dele Martin, the woman he apparently wanted dead because of my apparent "fascination" with her, then there's no way he'll recognize that Delilah *isn't* Dele dressed up as Addy.

We were both right. Not long after Delilah attempted to quietly return to New York, Pray knew she was there and had her men whisk her away to him in Colorado.

"You sure you want to do this?" Revnor asks. "You don't know what he's got planned."

"We already checked for bombs," Wyan says. "If there was chance that this was a trap to get rid of him once and for all, I wouldn't allow it."

"You can't allow or not allow me to do anything."

"*Advise* it, then."

"Besides," I say. "Pray is a vindictive bastard. This is personal for him now. He's going to get his hands dirty to

either kill me or punish me—whichever one he’s chosen,” I add not, even though I already know what Pray has chosen.

Which is why the fucking bastard took Delilah to Pray Drink headquarters. It’s a smart move. Though that’s where all the offices operate out of, no shipments come in and out of it like some of his other bases. That way, in case someone gets involved he doesn’t want to, there will be nothing to find but a dead body and no motive.

Hopefully.

“You going to be able to pull your part off?” Revnor asks Dele.

“When have I ever not been able to do something I put my mind to, Rev,” Dele says.

“Well, you’re the one that just dropped a kid.”

“She’s good,” I declare, and that’s all that needs to be said on that. Because if she wasn’t, and I personally tested to make sure she was fine to do this, she’d be back in Italy right now. Or, at the very least, she wouldn’t have gotten on a plane with me.

“And if she’s not, she’ll have backup,” Wyan assures.

I look along the wall to the six men and women Wyan brought with him. Barely men and women. The child soldiers that were once under Pray’s control but are now under ours. While deprogramming the younger ones seems to be a slow but steady work in progress, the older ones, mostly sixteen or so and above, have been an issue. The only saving grace is that Pray never got around to telling them what their *exact* purpose was. Wyan was quick to give them one on my command.

Protect Dele at all costs. Unlike Pray, they know what she looks like, all her quirks, and can spot her through just about any disguise. According to Wyan, they've proudly taken to calling themselves Dele's "Fangs" as Dele will be their bark and they'll be the bite.

Dele will be going in undercover by herself mostly, but in the event that she gets in trouble, these young men and woman are instructed to get to her by any means necessary.

"Alright. Let's go," I say, and everyone mobilizes to take their places.

"Wait," Dele says.

"What?" I ask turning to her.

She grabs me by the collar and pulls me to her, crushing her lips against mine. We've got to get a move on, but I've never been able to resist Dele and so return the kiss. I'm ready to drag her to a nook for a quick fuck before this all goes down when she pulls away and says, "Good luck."

"Something tells me that we're all going to wish your relationship was still secret by the time all this is over," Revnor says.

In response, I do something uncharacteristically childish of me and reminiscent of the relationship I used to have with the people in this room. I flip my middle finger on the way out.

Viper

Pray gave very specific instructions to go to him alone. I'm certain he has no expectation that I'm actually going to be alone and that I'm not planning something, but I have to appear to be following his directions. I have to appear to be taking every precaution to keep the woman he thinks is Addy safe.

So I go to him alone with my only guard being my driver. Said driver only gets as far as the doorway before they're stopped, and I'm escorted the rest of the way alone. I'm not concerned about the driver, though. Pray usually likes to take care of the help *after* he's taken care of the main target. So long as I'm alive, all my people are alive.

My gun was confiscated when I went through the metal detectors. Yet I'm still crowded by four of his men as they escort me up the elevator wary of any move I might make. Good. They should be. Even though I'm not going to do a thing.

I'm led to a conference room. One of the expensive ones with a glass entryway. glass floor to ceiling windows with the good view, and exits at both ends of the room.

Pray is there at the head of the table, with two of his men behind him and Delilah sitting next to him looking roughed up but no worse for wear. My escorts gesture for me to sit in the seat right next to Pray, but on the opposite side of Delilah. Two of escorts then stand behind me while the other two leave.

First, I make eye contact with Delilah. She looks at Pray, who rolls his eyes and says, "Go ahead. Assure him that you're okay. That way I can have his full attention during our discussion."

"I'm fine. He didn't hurt me," Delilah assures.

I nod at her. There were three ways she could have answered that, and she answered the way that signals to me that Pray is still under the impression that she's just Addy. At the very least, he hasn't given any indication to otherwise.

"Now that that's out the way," Pray's eyes harden to steel and gives even me pause, "Let's have a discussion."

There's nothing to discuss. It's clear what's happened and what part I have in it. So when Pray stands in one moment and the next moment I feel his fist connect into my face, I'm not surprised.

I laugh. "Bastard. It's going to take more than that to—"

He doesn't let me finish and hits me again. Not one to simply take a beating, I prepare to fight back, but Pray says, "Let's not be so hasty."

Then one of his men yanks Delilah out her seat and tosses her onto the floor with a gun to her head. She's supposed to be Addy. I'm supposed to care about her. Pray *knows* I care about the real her. If I suddenly act like I don't after risking everything to get her away from him, he'll know something's up, and I won't be able to buy Dele the time she needs.

I meet Delilah's eyes and while she's trying to pretend to be scared, I can tell she's actually annoyed at this game. Still, we need to stall for Dele. Because while I'm confident in my abilities to deal with whatever Pray has in store, he's not a stupid man. There's a reason he brought a woman he thinks I care about as bait to stage this execution. Because that's what this is supposed to be. An execution.

Well, I always did tell Dele that sometimes she had to learn to take a few hits if she wanted to win a fight. Time to take that advice.

I don't hit back, and the next time Pray strikes, the force is so hard that I fall out the chair. Fucking bastard. For an old man, he sure hits hard. But I can take it. I have to take it. I take every kick. Every punch. And when his men drag me off the floor when they think I'm down so Pray can continue, I take that too.

If this was just a simply punishment for failure, he would have been done a long time ago. But his plans today were to bait me into this trap so he can kill me. He's just making it personal instead of treating it with his usual pragmatism.

There's no way he can think it's this easy. There's no way he thinks I would just kneel over and go down without a fight. He can't be that arrogant.

But he is. He is that arrogant, teetering on his pedestal because he knows how powerful he is without anyone to keep him supported and grounded and remind him of his blind spots. That's why he's going to die a violent death by my hands with his empire in my grasps, and I'm going to die an old man in my bed passing my gains to my children.

"Is that all you've got?" I spat when his men drop me onto the ground again

"No, my old friend. It's not. But I rather save that for Addy, dear, after you're dead."

I have to give it to Delilah, she's been one hell of an actor this whole time, screaming and yelling for Pray to stop as she watched him beat me. And she continues to. Attempting to lunge for Pray only to have a guard hold her back. She is having way too much fun with this.

Pray reaches for his gun, and I get ready to actually fight him because Dele is taking too long and the plan is *not* for me to die here today.

He takes out his gun, only for a bullet to hit his wrist, causing him to curse and drop it.

"Hands *off* my husband."

Dele

I try to calm my nerves as I watch my husband go through the metal detectors and then be escorted onto an elevator up to Pray while I'm forced to stay behind. But that was the plan all along. Adrian goes up to meet Pray. I stay down here and deal with his men.

They're not all his men of course. Just his elite. Then men who rotate being with Stephen Pray at all times. Only second to Adrian in terms of prowess.

That's what they think anyway. Because no one outdoes me in keeping up with Adrian Blake.

Four went up with Adrian. Four more are down here. Two on the nearest exit to outside. One at the detectors and one standing behind me to make sure I make no sudden moves. No wonder Pray was building a child army if this is his elite. They should have checked me for weapons.

They're fast. But I'm faster.

I press a button to cause static in their earpieces so they can't alert their teammates. By the time they realize something is wrong, I've drawn and aimed both my guns. As they're hands are reaching for their guns, I pull the triggers to shoot the one near the metal detector and one near the door. I want to stop and marvel at how responsive the triggers of my new guns are, but I make a mental note to fawn over it with Adrian later. Instead, I reach back to grab the guard behind me and use the height leverage to pull him down by the neck and flip him over my shoulder while in the process I miss the bullet from the remaining man at the door.

The one I flipped over my shoulder slams onto the ground lifeless with his neck twisted strangely. I give no mind to it as two of the four who escorted Adrian upstairs come down the elevator and the one still at the door is fixing his aim. The one at the door already has his gun out, so I shoot him first before he can shoot me. Then I make a run to duck behind the reception desk as the other two begin to shoot at me.

They're smart, though. They know not to waste their bullets shooting while I have cover, putting us at a temporary stalemate. They can't call for help because they've stepped into the field of the device on me that disrupts their radios and phones. I can't risk getting up to take a shot without getting shot myself. Not yet, anyway. I listen for their footsteps and breathing. Notice the chair next to me. Kicks it a distraction. Just as I planned, a bullet in the direction I pushed the chair giving me the chance I need to stand and shoot the shooters clean through both their heads.

I jump from behind the desk and say, "His most elite. Sure."

Or maybe they are, and that's just how good Adrian trained me to be.

I take my earpiece out my pocket and say into it, "Surround the place now. I'm going up."

"Not alone," both Wyan and Eileen say into my ear.

"I won't be alone. Adrian will be there," I say.

That's not what they mean, but regardless, I'm not leaving Adrian up there with his sociopath of a boss any longer than I have to.

"You all just focus on securing the perimeter, making sure he's got no other men around the other parts of the building, and keeping Pray's men from getting in before the authorities come," I say.

"What authorities?" Wyan ask.

I take off my earpiece, grab a keycard off one of the guards, and make my way to the elevator, ignoring Wyan's questions. I scan the keycard to get access to the upper restricted floors. The elevator can't move fast enough, and I hardly wait for it to open before I walk out the elevators and down the hall, my heart pounding in my chest. Because while I have every confidence in Adrian, this is the man who abandoned his daughter, tried to kill her, and, when he failed, imprisoned her for seven years and kept her in line by making her think he had her children captive. There's no limit to his depravity.

I walk in on Viper kneeling on one knee with Pray reaching for his gun. I don't even think, I grab both my guns,

shoot Pray in the wrist with one and shoot the guard near Delilah but not holding her back.

“Hands *off* my husband.”

“Finally, I can stop acting all helpless and like a stereotype,” Delilah says.

All hell breaks loose, and when I say all hell, I mean all hell. Delilah is able to handle the man holding her, and Adrian, while looking beat up with blood running down his face from where I’m guessing Pray hit him, is able to deal with the one guard that tries to subdue him while the other assists his boss who is nursing a literal bleeding hole in his wrist. But what none of us expected or can handle are the men who flood through the door behind them.

Adrian knows that too, because he retreats, jumps across the table to punch the guard Delilah is dealing with in the throat, and drags her in my direction to retreat.

We barely begin down the hall to the elevator before we hear bullets hit the glass doors behind us and rush forward looking for cover. We’re about to round the corner before the bullets pierce the glass or the other guards come through but stop upon seeing more of Pray’s men coming and take our chances going for the stairway

We’re inside and locking it behind us before belatedly realizing that trapping ourselves in a closed off space when we don’t know where our enemies or allies are is a bad idea.

“Wyan, what’s the status?” I ask putting my earpiece back in as we go down the stairs.

“You’d know if you’d kept your earpiece on instead of ignoring us.”

“Why were you ignoring them?” Adrian demands.

“No time,” I snap.

“We ran into some trouble.”

“Please tell me the stairway is secured.”

“Depends on which one.”

“We’re in the north staircase,” Adrian says.

“That one is secured. It’s the south one that we’re having difficulty with.”

“That’s where Pray is going to try to escape,” Adrian says.

“Please tell me you have a way for use to get over there before he escapes?” I ask.

“There’s no way he’s escaping.”

“Don’t underestimate Pray,” Adrian says. Then, “I can get us to him. We’re going to need to go down seven more floors.”

“Don’t you have some sort of grappling hook?” Delilah asks.

“What do I look like? Batman?”

“Kind of with that stupid ass mask you wear as Viper.”

Neither I nor Adrian ask how she figured that out. Delilah always did have her nose in places she shouldn’t. Instead we rush down the stairs to the floor Adrian referred to and open it to a large open conference/ballroom floor with a clear pathway to the south stairway on the other side. We run across the floor. Adrian practically snatches it off the hinges as we enter only

for it to be empty and to hear nothing coming from above or headed below.

“You two go down. I’ll head up,” Delilah says.

“But what if—”

“I’m not afraid of that fucker.”

I look at Delilah. My sister. For all the hell she’s given me, and all the decisions I made that she didn’t like, we’re going to look out for each other. Even if we don’t particularly like *or* love each other. Something tells me she’s going to pull one of her disappearing acts after this, but maybe it’s better that way.

“Don’t die,” I say.

“I stopped taking orders from you at thirteen.”

There’s no time to tell her she’s been taking orders from me for the last five years as Adrian and I rush down the stairs. When we get to the end, we open up the door to outside and instantly both our vision and hearing is impaired thanks to a chaotic gunfight. It’s impossible to know who’s who and, more importantly, who’s shooting at who because of the chaos. And even more important than all that, we can’t find Pray.

With little choice, Adrian and I begin the perilous journey through the firefight to find Pray, if he got down here. He may still be in the stairway. But if he’s not, we can’t risk losing him.

Adrian suddenly shoves me behind him as three people in all black grab approach, but they raise their arms in surrender.

“Miss Bianchi. Wyan sent us to meet you.”

I recall the six young men and women Wyan brought with him for backup but that I wasn't able to bring in with me when I drove Adrian in under the guise of being his driver and single guard. My "Fangs," as the children have apparently dubbed themselves.

"Mrs. Fantoni now, actually," I correct absentmindedly.

"What do you need?" says the shortest one. A young girl, who I know is at least all of eighteen, but looks twelve with her black doe-shaped eyes, warm ivory skin, and deep copper-red hair.

"We need to find Stephen Pray."

The tall one with golden brown hair pauses to listen to his earpiece and says, "We've got eyes on him, he's about to get away."

"Not if I have anything to say about it. Now make yourself useful and lead the way," Adrian snaps.

"You don't have to be an ass," I chide even though the three lead us anyway. But I still take the time to say, "Sorry about him."

I don't miss the way they preen under the consideration and make a note of it for later. They lead us around the corner to the other side of the building where Pray's men have broken the perimeter we secured to get Pray out.

We could let him leave. If he comes back, he's either a dead man at our hands or the feds are going to get him because of my back up plan. But that's not enough. Not enough for me. Not enough for Adrian. Not enough for my children.

Without thought, I launch myself forward and fling myself through the men trying to cover Pray and get him into a car. I land on his back and we fall backward to the ground. His men converge onto us, but I lock my legs around his body and my arm his head, trying to cut off his circulation even as he viciously bites into my arm, tearing a chunk of skin, and tries to disarm me.

His men begin to fall from bullets on top of us until someone, likely Adrian, grabs them and literally tosses them away like dolls until they're away from us and Adrian has a gun pointed directly into Pray's temple. The only thing he's waiting on is for me to get out the way.

I immediately let go of Pray, and Adrian lifts him up by the collar before hitting him hard in the side of the head with the butt of his gun. The old man is dazed enough between Adrian's hit and blood loss from me shooting his wrist earlier that when Adrian drops him, he can't do anything but slowly try to get up.

Adrian points his gun at Pray, while my Fangs have their guns raised at what remains of Pray's security in a standoff to see who's going to shoot first. I raise my guns and block their view of Adrian.

"It's over, *Sansone Fantoni*," Adrian says.

"It certainly is Mr. Blake," comes the voice of a man walking up behind Pray's men.

Then, suddenly, we're surround by the actually fucking feds and not our men who are disguised to look like feds to make this whole thing look legitimate.

Even Adrian isn't impulsive enough to commit a blatant murder in front of the real feds and very reluctantly, he stands down. Then so do Pray's guards, and so do I and the Fangs.

"Alright. Take him away," says, the lead federal agent. A man with long black hair pulled up into messy man-bun with a mustache and goatee.

His men more than outnumber Pray's men and gather both his guards and Pray himself to take into the secured prisoner trucks.

While they're occupied with that, I get a good look at Adrian. His lip is busted, he's bleeding from somewhere on his head, his mouth is bloody, his clothes are ruffled and torn and likely hiding a myriad of other bruises, and he keeps rolling his right shoulder backward and forwards.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

He's needs to go see a doctor. But he gets my meaning and nods.

"Been through a lot fucking worse than this. And when I say that, I don't mean you shooting me."

I don't care if he's been through worse. I know Adrian. He has an exceedingly high tolerance for pain. So him saying he's fine brings me little comfort. I'm about to tell him as much when the lead fed makes his way over to us.

"Mr. Blake," the man says. "Come with me."

"It's Fantoni now, actually."

"Is it? Stephen Pray got a long lost son after all?"

"A long lost daughter," Adrian corrects, nodding to me.

The man eyes me and says, “Hm. Guess she better come too then.”

“Are we under arrest?” Adrian demands.

“No. We just need to go to a secure place and talk is all.”

Adrian and I have been on both sides of this business long enough to know that’s a way to lure us into a false sense of security to have us right where they want us when they do decide to arrest us.

“We can find somewhere in there,” I say nodding to Pray Drinks office headquarters. “And I’m sure you won’t mind if our security comes with us. And we can record the conversation.”

“You Italians and your paranoia,” he mutters. Before Adrian or I can say anything to that, he says, “If those are your demands, sure. But we talk tonight. We need to get our stories straight.”

Viper

We go into what's likely an interview room on the first floor of Pray

Drinks headquarters. We sit him with his back to the wall while Dele and I sit on the opposite end with our back to the door to keep him from escaping and to allow for a quick escape for us if needed. Outside the door, Dele's Fangs dutifully stand guard to warn us ahead of time if this looks like a trap, though we'll likely know long before because the real feds didn't arrest our people, and they'll let us know if anything changes.

Joining us in the room is Eileen, who takes one look at the black-haired man who stopped me from killing Pray and says unenthusiastically, "Jake."

Jake replies, "You're the one who broke my heart, babe."

"You know him?" I ask.

“Yes. And he’s about as much a fed as I was a CIA operative. I just could never find out who he was working for. I’m guessing it’s been Pray all along.”

Jake shrugs.

“What do you want?” I demand.

“So impatient, Mr. Blake. I’m sorry. Mr. Fantoni. Always wanting to dive right into the meat of things.”

I level the man with a steady glare. I am not above shooting him right now. Especially since Eileen has explained exactly what kind of fed he is. But to be truthful, I am a little impatient. The adrenaline is starting to wear off, and I’m starting to feel the aches and pains of letting Pray beat me up earlier. And though Pray has unquestionably lost, my desire to have him dead isn’t yet quenched. The quicker we do all this, the better.

Jake sighs and says, “What’s going to be our story? I know you had something in mind before you stormed into this place to murder Stephen Pray, a very public figure and authority. I’m sure it has something to do with the story that just broke.”

“Story?” I ask.

“You know. The one you fed to the feds and the Times about Stephen Pray running an illegal and abhorrent human trafficking scheme. Why the hell do you think we were even activated?”

I have no clue what he’s talking about, but Dele speaks up and says, “You came to arrest Pray, but you work for Pray?”

“I work for Pray, but legally speaking I am a fed,” Jake says. “I’ve swept a lot of things under the rug for my employer

over the years and found “no evidence” to a lot of accusations, but whoever pulled this off was thorough. I’m assuming this story was your doing?”

Dele nods, and I can’t say I’m surprised. Of course, she was scheming the entire time behind my back. She always is. She could have mentioned it, though. I wouldn’t have stopped her. It was a good idea. To have an “insurance plan” in case things didn’t go as planned.

“I noticed in your investigation and evidence, you very specifically left out anything to do with the Pray’s... other businesses. And made sure there was nothing that could tie back your husband or you,” Jake adds. “So I’m assuming your play here is that you want to take down Pray, keep all the businesses but not the human trafficking one. Right?”

“And if that was what we wanted,” I say carefully, even though we thoroughly searched Jake for bugs and listening devices. He was cooperative about it, but I can’t be too careful. Not until we have something incriminating on him on record.

“What do you get out of this?” Dele asks bluntly.

“The same deal me and my team of feds got out of this deal before. A shit ton of money from the profits of all your illegal activities that I will continue to sweep under the rug, so long as you’re discreet about it, and the heads-up if any of your men have talked or are planning to talk to the feds,” he says.

So that was how Pray knew who was getting ready to snitch all the time? I knew he had some in with the feds. I just didn’t know who.

“And, working with me can do wonders for your reputation. If anything does come out, you schedule a press conference, you say how you have no idea how this happened and say you plan to fully cooperate with the federal investigation with the feds right at your side. People will think we’re doing the job their taxes pay for, I help you and your crooked lawyers hide whatever you need to hide, I bring the public the results of our thorough investigation, we all keep making a shit ton of money for years, hopefully decades, to come.”

“If that’s your job for Pray, why turn on him now? Why not do your job, investigate, and put him right back where he’s been all this time?” Dele asks.

Jakes takes out a cigarette, lights it, and takes a smoke in an immature show of being the one in control. But he’s not. Because if he was, he would be doing just what Dele suggests he should actually be doing. Like everyone else who has ever tried to exert a show of control over us, it’s very clear he needs us.

“Because this human trafficking thing is so fucking big, the big boys from Washington are going to get involved. I couldn’t stop it if I wanted to. No matter what I try to do, Stephen Pray is finished. His other businesses... They don’t have to be. I thought we could all benefit.”

“And if we don’t want to take your offer?” I ask.

Jake sighs and rolls his eyes.

“Look, you and I both know that I need you more than you need me. You’re the ones in control here. You’ve got me literally backed into a corner with a recording of this entire

conversation where I essentially offered to let you bribe me, you've created an airtight scenario with a bunch of failsafes so you don't end up in prison, and you somehow got the fucking backing of the infamous Fantoni family in Italy, and now all the money and capital to do whatever the fuck you want. I don't think even the feds can stand up against their network and connections. You've won and you know it. I know it. I'm just ensuring my cut of the fucking prize and making things a little easier on you so you don't have to make the extra leap to find someone else who will do the same shit I do."

I smirk. Pray's not even dead. Just arrested, and already people who work for him are coming to beg and grovel at the foot of the power I now hold. Well... that they think I hold.

"That's going to be my wife's call," I reply. "She's your new boss. I'm just one of her many enforcers."

Dele glances at me, hiding her surprise at that revelation well enough. But that's something to talk about with her later. I simply nod my head toward Jake. She then looks directly at him and says, "Some conditions before we begin our partnership."

"Go for it."

"Some people are going to need to die."

"Always."

"Including Stephen Pray himself," she adds.

Jake waves a hand and says, "As long as you make it look like a suicide, I don't care."

"And before you report to your superiors, I need to send Eileen to Pray's vineyard to get some things."

That is to destroy the smoking gun that is a paper trail to all the man's crimes that he kept in his fucking hubris.

“She better get to it now then. They'll be wanting to freeze and seize most of his assets soon.”

I nod to Eileen that we'll be fine, and she nods before leaving the room.

Jake then advises, “I'd also involve calling the lawyers right now. This is going to be a shit show with all your father's money tied into it. I know you both have your own fortune. But it would be a shame to let that entire fortune go to waste. It would help if you could get a hold of your financial statements so you piece apart what are ill gains and what are legitimate.”

“That's already done. Like you said, an airtight scenario,” I say.

“Like I said, indeed,” Jake says lighting another cigarette. “Looks like this is going to be a very long and fruitful partnership. Now, let's run through what we're going to tell the public about why you were here tonight so we can all have our story straight.”

Dele

The story we agree on is a simple one. After Bella's and Bond's deaths, I was left to try to sort through the fallout. In the process I found "mysterious evidence" of my connection to Stephen Pray, and worse than that, I supposedly found out that Bella and Bond found out about Pray's sex trafficking ring and were getting ready to report him but he had them killed first. With no one else to turn to, I turned to Adrian who helped me get all the evidence to a reporter, and they got everything over to the feds. But Pray found out we were conspiring and cornered us when I'd flown out to see Adrian and discuss everything.

In hindsight, it's not so simple. There's a bunch of details we have to fill in. A bunch of questions that Jake asks us to poke holes in our narrative the same way other feds and lawyers will, so we have to come up with the answer to those questions. Even if we don't have the answers, we have to be prepared for them so we won't be phased.

It's a week before the initial questioning and initial searching of Pray Drinks headquarters and all Pray's properties is done. Very quickly, they figure out that Pray meticulously kept anything and everything to do with his legitimate business away from his illegitimate sex trafficking, so it's likely that most of his assets that were seized will be turned over to me. But, of course, that's pending a trial in the court of law that's never going to happen because Stephen Pray will be dead. The investigation will come to a dead end, leaving the public to sensationalize the entire thing through movies and memes and some interviews of the few men and women lucky enough to survive and brave enough to come forward.

Pray goes down, his personal legacy in shambles while keeping the rest of his empire secret and his legitimate business, Pray Drinks, intact.

Somehow, we managed to pull this shit off.

Suddenly, we're the owners of the most powerful criminal organization in the west. We might just be the most powerful people in the west right now. But I'd prefer not to think about that. That kind of thinking makes you complacent. That kind of thinking makes people arrogant like Stephen Pray and not able to see the fucking enemy right under your nose.

Now, there's just... one last thing to settle.

Well, two things.

Actually, a lot more things. Most of Pray's support is willing to submit to the new management as long as we keep the money coming in. But there are some who have scattered

and who Viper is going to have to end up dealing with. However, that's for later.

In the immediate future, there are two things.

One of them is something that I have no hopes of winning because Adrian clearly made up his mind about this a long time ago.

“Adrian,” I repeat yet again, even though Adrian has said every time that he doesn't care, “the agreement with the Fantonis was that you would run all Pray's businesses and make the decisions about it. Marrying me and becoming an actual Fantoni was just your insurance plan.”

“That's what I told Sabino and you. But let's be frank,” he says without taking his eyes from looking out the window of our private jet as we fly to our destination.

The way he's looking out the window and barely paying attention to our argument tells me that I won't win. He's already made up his mind, hence being so disengaged from our back and forth. If he was open to other options or hearing what I had to say on the matter, he'd look at me.

“I don't have the temperament to run this business. I hate people. My first answer to everything is shooting it. And frankly, I find the idea of running a business and this empire boring as fuck. But you... you built a fucking empire from the ground up while planning to go to war with and steal one. You're the obvious and natural choice for who should be in charge.”

“And what are you going to do?” I ask, because Adrian surely isn't going to just be a stay-at-home dad and my arm

candy in the midst of all this.

“Enforce your benevolent rule.”

“You’re not that generous of a person.”

“I’m not.”

“And you’re not good at being subordinate to anyone for long considering what I helped you do with Pray.”

“You mean what I helped you do to your father.”

I give him an unimpressed look. As though sensing it, he finally turns to look at me.

“Don’t worry, I’m still keeping my shares and ownership in Pray Drinks and some of his other subsidiaries, and I’m still the Viper. You won’t be calling all the shots. I’m still the most powerful man in the western hemisphere.”

I frown at him and say, “Don’t let it get to your head. Don’t think that just because we’re married, I won’t murder you if you slip.”

Adrian, the unhinged and psychotic man that he is, leans over into my chair, puts his finger on my chin, grins, and says, “That’s exactly why I’m putting you in charge.”

That makes absolutely no sense. None of this makes any sense, and I would tell him that if not for him distracting me with his lips.

Fuck. I hate the way he makes me feel like I’m sixteen all over again when he kisses me. The way my body instantly goes languid. The way my entire body begins to tingle. The way I feel my body and pussy begin to flare to life. Even more so when he presses his lips harder against mine and pries my

mouth open to thrust his tongue inside. Back and forth. Making his kissing feel like he's fucking me. But it's not fucking me. Even though it feels like it, and when he pulls away, even just barely so that I still feel his hot breath on my lips, I'm left wanting.

"I never did induct you into the mile-high club," he mutters.

"Now really isn't the—"

He smashes his lips against mine again, and even though I really don't want to resist, even though I want to give in, I'm not going to let him think he can just shut me up with dick when he doesn't want to hear me.

So I open my mouth and bite his lip, right in the area that's still healing from where Pray bust it open while beating him. But Adrian simply groans in my mouth. Doesn't even try to pull away. He gets closer, crowding me in my chair until suddenly my seat is all the way down and I'm laying back with him lying on top of me.

I finally let go of his lip because we both have to breathe. Then, when his mouth is back on mine, I taste the blood from where his lip has burst again. Not deterred, I lick at his lips to clean up the blood only for him to pull away from me yet again.

"Is that all the fight you have left in you?" he asks, cupping my face and running his thumb over my swollen lips.

It's then that I get it. That I get Adrian handing me all this power and exercising it.

He always did like it when I fought him. He always did like to give me the picture of control and dominance. He always did like to let me win a fight every now and then. But that's just it. He likes it. He lets me. At any time when he feels like it, he could exercise his power and dominance over me. But he doesn't. Instead, he chooses to let me be his weakness. He chooses to trust me. He chooses to allow me the freedom to exude my power and exercise it against others because it only poses the threat he allows it to pose to him.

In essence, any semblance of control I have over Adrian is just an illusion. But so long as he stays enthralled and fixated and in love with me, I won't ever have to worry about it. He likes the challenge of me. It entertains him. Even though he could figure out how to overcome me if he really wanted to.

I'll give him all that and more for as long as he wants me to and even when he thinks he doesn't until we both die natural deaths or at each other's hands. Because that's the only way it can ever be.

But not today.

"I don't want to fight you right now," I say in a sultry whisper. "I just want you to fuck me."

He kisses me again, and the next thing I know, my dress is being ripped from my stomach, all the way up to the high collar at my neck and all the way down to where it stops at my thigh.

"Adrian. This was a new dress."

"I'll buy you a more expensive one later," he mutters. Then my bra and my panties meet the same fate until my

naked body is on display for him.

His mouth is suddenly on one of my nipples and two fingers are plunged into pussy. I hold him to me and grind my hips down to meet the thrust of his fingers, overwhelmed by the suddenness of the intrusion and his mouth on my nipples at once. He keeps a slow but steady pace with his fingers, while leisurely sucking on my nipple and massaging the rest of the breast with his other free hand as he does so.

My pussy is still super tight after the birth but not uncomfortably so anymore. I feel like his fingers are on every inch of my body with every thrust. But it's too slow. I'm too eager, my body is too eager. The tight knot of heat inside me is too tight, and it's never going to give me the release and the resulting high I want to feel at this pace.

"Go faster," I demand, digging my nails deep into his back so he gets the point.

He takes his mouth off my nipple and chuckles. I hiss at the chill that hits my nipple compared to the warmth of Adrian's mouth.

"Now you want to fight me," he says, stopping his fingers completely.

"Ass," I say and then my body shudders when he thrusts his fingers one good, hard time taking me just to the brink of release but not all the way there. I dig my nails hard into his back and drag them down as far as I can, feeling blood begin to pool down my nails' path.

He groans into my chest, and seemingly satisfied with my "resistance," he continues thrusting his fingers. Harder. Faster.

Until the hot coil of tension in me bursts and I get the release I seek. Adrian tries to pull away. But I keep him close to me in a vice grip as I ride out the crest of my orgasm until my body is too flooded with the warmth of pleasure to keep up the strength needed to keep him on me.

He stands up, and without caring that one of the plane's attendants or our security can come in at any moment, he strips completely naked. He has a few new scars now from where he allowed Pray to beat him. Some bruises that still haven't completely faded in the last week. A cut across the side of his left eye that had to be stitched and is definitely going to leave a scar that will definitely make him look more intense and stern than he usually does. But otherwise, he's well and whole. We both are. Somehow, we both made it to the end of this when the likelihood was that one of us, if not both of us, wouldn't.

He dives back over me, running kisses all over my torso, and the fire in me that was doused by my earlier orgasm ignites again. But this time for something much bigger than his two fingers.

"You know," he says while continuing to kiss me, "I think we should try again."

"Try again..." I trail off and have to catch my breath as he nips a piece of skin and then sucks it. "Try again for what?"

"Another baby."

I laugh. Or try to. What leaves me is a whine as Adrian kisses and licks my inner thigh, so close to where I want—*need*—him to be.

My thighs quake as Adrian carefully kisses everywhere around my inner thighs *except* my aching, wet pussy.

I manage to control my breath enough to finally reply, “Never again.”

“But Bella,” he says, directing the heat of his breath onto my pussy without putting his mouth on it, “is so gorgeous. Wouldn’t you like another one?”

“Only if you carry it,” I manage. Then I grab the back of his head and try to shift my hips downward to his mouth and keep him there, but he resists and begins to kiss back up my body.

“I’m not going to deign to answer that.”

“Besides, it was a lucky fluke,” I say and after I let go of his hair, he goes back down to torture me between my thighs.

“We don’t know that.”

“We do actually. We’ve been fucking for how long now and—” He finally puts his mouth onto my pussy and I start to forget the entire conversation. But I will not let him have the last word of this. “And it took five years for me to get pregnant.”

He takes his mouth away to answer, and I curl my toes so tightly, as much as the shoes I’m still wearing will let me, that I feel my leg begin to cramp.

“That was only when I got maybe three occasions a year to fuck you. Now, I get to have you whenever I want as much as I like. Bet I could manage it in another year or two.”

“Or,” I manage, only to lose my breath as he puts his mouth back on my pussy, “we could adopt.”

He again stops to say, “We could still do that. But I want another person that’s all me and you.”

I groan in frustration both at his insistence and his refusal to fuck me the way I want.

“We can get a fucking surrogate. Now will you please stop talking and just fuck me?”

He grins up at me and says, “You were the one that insisted on being difficult about my request.”

Adrian stands back up and his cock suddenly intruding into my pussy makes me forget any response I could have come up with. He is relentless, chasing both our pleasure with such vigor that I don’t even have enough breath to moan, the sounds coming from my mouth little more than pathetic whimpers as Adrian fucks me.

It’s still as deliciously overwhelming and everything that it was before everything ended.

Truthfully, I was scared this would all change. Despite everything he’s said and done I was afraid that he’d want me less. That he’d be less fascinated by me. That suddenly not being secret or forbidden fruit would cause his fascination with me to wane. That as soon as he didn’t need me and have an invested interest in keeping me happy, he’d discard me. And, yes, he married me. But I wouldn’t be the first wife of a hot rich guy who was just wife and partner in name while largely ignored.

But here he is talking about a future. Here he is talking about letting me rule the empire I helped him secure for himself and more babies. Here he is, still fucking me like it might be the last time, and here I am still wanting and willing to take as much he's wanting and willing to give and more if and when I can convince him.

Suddenly, Adrian reaches back into my hair, forces me to sit up some, and makes me look directly into his intense blue eyes as he continues to thrust his cock in and out my pussy.

As though he read my mind earlier, and for all I know, maybe he can when it comes to me, he growls, "I'm going to fuck you like this for as long as you live and whenever I want."

"Yes," I pant without hesitation as my pleasure continues to build and compound, though I don't know how or why because it already feels like so much.

"And I'm going to give you everything I've got," he punctuates this with a hard thrust of his cock before adding, "And then some."

He thrusts hard into me again, hitting just the right angle and I arch toward him, trying to let my head fall back. But he doesn't let me.

"Eyes right here, Bell," he orders as he stops.

My entire body is quaking in need, and I feel stupid to think I ever thought he couldn't or wouldn't make me feel this way anymore after everything was over.

"And you are going to take every single bit of everything I give you. Even when you complain. Even when you think it's

too much.”

“Yes. Yes!”

“Good, Bell,” he says and continues to fuck me.

I’m vaguely aware that an attendant has walked into our area of the plane when they say, “Mr. and Mrs. Fantoni. We’ll be landing soon.”

“Perfect timing,” Adrian answers without missing a beat as he kisses me, causing me to wonder if he’s talking to me or the attendant. “We’re almost done.”

I don’t know whether the attendant has left or not and I don’t care. All I care about is doing exactly what Adrian wants me to do. Which is exactly what I want to do. To take and take everything he’s giving me even though it’s too much until I...

Everyone on the plane probably hears me moan as I come hard while holding Adrian in a death grip. Continuing to take everything he’s throwing at me and he continues to give. The thrusts of his cock. His seed when he comes inside me with a roar. His bruising kiss when his lips connect with mine again as we both come down from the high of our coupling.

He rests his forehead on mine for a few moments, and I get lost in the depths of his blue eyes. Then, he pulls away from me but his gaze lingers. He wants to keep going. I do too. But it’s going to have to wait until later. We’re on a tight time schedule. Officially, everything may be over, but unofficially there’s still one thing left to do.

Viper

Pray is being held in a secure prison in the middle of fucking nowhere. It's one of those fancy fucking prisons for the rich. I guess the saying that the rich never go broke is true. Because even with most of his assets frozen or seized, he can afford to pay extra to be kept in this place. A place I would have probably happily signed up for if it meant this or the handful of foster homes I was placed in over the course of a year before I said fuck it and ran away.

He's kept in strict isolation with a strict and small roster of who is allow to come see him. The head investigator for his case. His attorney. The guard who brings him food. The janitor who comes to clean his cell under strict supervision. There's also a strict sign in and security procedure.

In essence, the investigators want him alive and well to tell them everyone he was working with and connected to so they can get their hands on them. I don't know whether or not Pray would talk if his lawyers and the feds gave him a good deal.

His only code of honor is to himself, after all, and there's only one rule to it. Preserve and save himself. Everyone else is expendable.

But he's an old man being accused a heinous crimes. No matter how good the deal is, he's going to die in prison, and I know for a fact he's spiteful enough to take everyone down with him. Especially me and Dele. Even without any evidence thanks to Eileen's quick moving in helping to gather, secure, and erase anything that could connect us to any of his illegal businesses.

It doesn't matter though. We're going to make sure he doesn't get the chance.

We walk right past all the steps to the extensive check-in process. The detector doesn't beep when we walk under it. The cameras won't record us ever being here.

The guard at Pray's door nods and lets Dele and I in the room.

The room, while comfortable, is shockingly sparse. Nothing that could possibly be used as a weapon. Nothing that could possibly be used for Pray to kill himself. If he wanted to, that is. Pray's too prideful and vain for that. If there's one thing I can respect about him, he's going to persevere to the end. Like a fucking cockroach.

He looks up from the book he was reading comfortably on his bed and smirks like he doesn't know exactly why I'm here.

“Adrian, my old friend. I've been expecting you.” Then he looks at Dele and says, “And Miss Bianchi. Or are you going by Miss Fantoni? Since apparently you're my secret, long lost

daughter now, according to my lawyers. They showed me all the legal paperwork, documents, and, certainly forged, blood tests.” He chuckles and looks back at me, “You, Adrian are a lot more clever than I ever gave you credit for.”

“I’m probably just as clever or not clever as you thought,” I reply. I nod toward Dele and say, “The credit likely belongs to my wife.”

Pray looks at me, feigning wonderous surprise as he says, “Well, then I suppose congratulations are in order. You know, all these years people noted our relationship as father and son. I being the father figure you never had and you being the son I was too much of a workaholic to slow down and produce. And now look. You’re really are my son.”

“Forgive me for not being over the moon considering that I know what you do to your blood. Children included,” I reply blandly.

At Pray’s questioning look, Dele adds, “We know who Phae really was to you, and you tried to kill her anyway. And when that didn’t work, you locked her away to rot in fear for her children. They say even Satan loves his children. But looking at you, I’m not sure that’s true.”

Pray’s expression turns to steel as he looks at Dele and says, “Miss Bianchi.”

“Mrs. Fantoni,” she corrects breezily.

Pray continues as though he didn’t hear her. “I have to say that you, Addy, dear, took me by surprise. I never saw you coming. My own fault, of course. I should have had you

disappeared away when you came with Adrian and Cres to view my vineyard for their wedding.”

I let out a laugh. And then another. And another after that, no doubt sounding as unhinged and unstable as most people believe that I am. Then, just as fast, the humor is gone, and I fix Pray with a stern look. Fuck, I really wish I could punch him right now. But we can't risk one scratch on him that would call into question the suicide his death is going to appear to be. I'm going to have to settle with the look on his face after this one last revelation instead.

So I grab the metal chair in the room, no doubt carefully inspected to make sure Pray can't take it apart to use as a weapon. Then I sit the chair in front of where Pray is sitting and gesture for Dele to sit down.

“I want you to look at her,” I command. “Look *Addy* directly in her fucking face and tell me if you recognize anything? Tell me if you see what it was you fucking missed that you never saw her coming.”

Pray doesn't say anything for a while, but I can look at him and see there's no recognition. No dawning moment where he realizes exactly where he fucked up with “Addy, dear.”

“I'm really going to have to fucking spell it out for you,” I say.

Dele gets up from the seat, and I sit to look Pray directly in the eye as I begin.

“Eight years ago, you offered me a deal. Be your enforcer, help you take down your enemies, my comrades, and you'd spare me and my family. You didn't intend to keep your

promise. You already had plans to kill Phae because she was dangerous no matter what. But back then I was naïve. Back then, I believed you were a man of honor. I believed you were my friend. So I agreed with one request. We spare a certain Dele Martin.

“But you insisted she die with all the other Soles. You insisted I kill her, even though I was sure I could get her to see our way. And then you gave me an ultimatum. Her or Phae.” Everyone in this room knows how that all ended. Partially anyway. But Pray is about to realize it. So no point in needlessly going over the fallout. “That was the moment you fucked up. That was the moment you were doomed.”

It’s still not clicking for Pray. Still no realization in his face.

I feel Dele come stand behind, lean down, and throw her arms over either of my shoulders while leaning her head over my left one. She kisses me on the cheek, no doubt leaving the stain of her lipstick. Then she turns to look Pray straight on and says, “You should have just let him keep me.”

It finally dawns on Pray. Realization dawns in his eyes before he goes rapidly pale.

I instinctively lean back into Dele’s warmth. I could say more, but Dele’s statement says it all. That’s what it boils down to. That’s what it’s *always* boiled down to. Keeping Dele. Phae was smart enough to realize that, even though our marriage would have inevitably fallen apart. Pray could have learned that from her if he hadn’t been so keen on getting rid of her. Pray could have figured it out himself, if he had stopped looking at her as a distraction for his enforcer.

Finally, Pray's expression twists into something wicked and demonic. As though he's being possessed. It might be terrifying if he were actually dangerous anymore.

"I should have killed you the moment I learned he'd killed all those men over you," Pray snarls.

I have the satisfaction of Pray's last words being words of regret before I get tired of him talking and stick a syringe in his neck. He seizes and begins to struggle for breath in seconds. He dies in less than a minute. Dele goes to the door and takes Pray's dinner from the guard who is actually one of her Fangs and sets it on the table. She then takes the plastic spork from it, snaps off the end, and hands it to me. I then proceed to shove the piece of plastic down Pray's unmoving throat. With the task done, I lay him down on the side, and put everything back into place while the janitor, one of my own men undercover, vacuums the room to make sure no DNA from Dele and I is left behind.

Dele and I walk back out hand in hand. Under the metal detector. Past the rest of the check-in area. Back outside. Then we get into our waiting car to take us back to our jet, where I look forward to continuing right where I left off with her. With her naked body writhing under me, taking everything I plan to give her and then some in our own personal celebration for what's just occurred. Never mind the chaos it's going to cause for some people in a few hours.

There's officially nothing left to be done.

Stephen Pray and everything to do with him is over.

The reign of my wife, Adelena "Dele" Fantoni, and I, Adrian Fantoni, her loyal enforcer and executioner, Viper, has

begun.

Epilogue

Dele

I glance up at the clock on the wall in my office. I technically have another minute to work, but another minute isn't going to make a difference in my work for the day. Especially when there's always work for me to do. Legal documents and contracts to sign. Meetings to have. Networking to do. Connections to make. People to bribe. People to threaten. People to give the order to kill.

Being a business woman and a mafia queen is a 24/7 job. But that doesn't mean I have to do it all hours of everyday. I could work all night and there would still be something to do. So I've taught myself to get as much work done as I can in the time that I've allotted for myself barring an absolute emergency and then deal with the rest the next time I'm scheduled to deal with it.

I close out my desktop, grab my cold cup of coffee and walk out my office. About half the time, I work in office after I made New York City one of Pray Drink's main operational

hubs. The other half and a lot of times more, I work from home. But I made it a point when Adrian and I purchased, moved into, and renovated this estate to make sure that all the work offices were on an entire different part of the property so that Adrian and I have to walk a fair distance to get to. That way, we can make a clear and physical boundary between the business and family, even though so much of the business and family cross and blur that boundary all the time. At the very least, it means we have to go out our way to work even when we're at home.

I walk out into the hall, and before I even cross the foyer, I hear the sounds of the television on in the main living area of the house. It's my children's favorite room to lounge in, so I gave up trying to keep it clean and always ready for guests a long time ago. I'm not going to limit where my children can and can't go in their own home... within reason.

"Hey, Ma," Leon and Lady chorus disinterestedly without looking up from what appears to be homework.

"Hey, Aunt Dele," Velia says from where she's lying on her stomach in front of the television watching some makeover show.

"Hello," I reply back, not at all annoyed at their apparent disinterest. With the twins eleven and Velia not that far behind, they're getting to the age where they only want anything to do with me when they want something to do with me.

"Mommy!"

But there is one person who's always ecstatic to see me still. I kneel down to Bella's level as she throws her arms

around my neck in a hug. I use one arm to swing her onto my hip before standing and heading to the kitchen.

“Were you good for your nanny?” I ask.

Bella nods vigorously, her dark curls bouncing back and forth as she does so. I’ll ask her nanny and then judge that. At three years old, she’s a curious thing with enough energy to explore it. She can hardly sit still long enough to go over her letters, sight words, and colors before she wants to get up and run. Preferably outside, but inside will do.

I pop the coffee in the microwave, and, curious as ever, Bella leans forward to look at it before turning to me and asks, “Can I have some?”

“No. But you can have some juice? Where’s your cup?”

Bella makes a show of looking around, her hair flinging everywhere as she does so—and I could have sworn I put it in two braids with bows before passing her off to her nanny.

After she’s finished swiveling in my arms to look around the kitchen, she looks at me with big blue eyes and says with a shrug, “I don’t know.”

“Why don’t you go look for it? Ask Leon to help you,” I say, setting her down.

Bella nods again and runs out the kitchen only to run straight into a pair of legs and falling back on her bottom.

“Watch out there, Little Bell,” Adrian says as he bends down to help Bella get back to her feet.

I’m not sure how long Bella is going to like Adrian calling her a name that makes her a diminutive of her mother, but it’s

fitting. She's the spitting image of me. The only distinction are the blue eyes she inherited from Adrian.

The jury's still out on her personality.

"Where are you running off to?" Adrian asks, still kneeling on the ground so he can be somewhat eye-level with her.

"Find my cup."

She tries to dash past him, but Adrian grabs hold of her before she can.

"No running in the house," he says sternly, even though like every other time, Bella is going to forget as soon as her father is out of sight.

"Sorry, Daddy," she says with a sunny smile.

Adrian doesn't look impressed, but Bella giggles, kisses him on the cheek, and then darts around him to make her way down the hall while singing Leon's name.

I'd worried about Adrian with Bella when she was born. I worried about him with all the children, but especially her. Not for one second did I believe he would hurt her or any of our children, but I did wonder if he had it in him to have the patience and temperament needed to raise children full-time. Especially one from infancy. I'd wondered if the extent of his fathering would end up being expensive gifts and protecting them when needed, but otherwise not spending much time with them or being very involved until he decided he wanted to.

Like most things with Adrian though, when he decides he wants to do something, he excels at it, and I had nothing to

worry about at all. Just as easily as he draws a gun and kills, he can turn that off to be a patient, doting, and involved father.

“She never sits still for long, does she?” Adrian asks as he stands.

He approaches me and pulls me into his side before placing a kiss on the side of my head.

“Are you surprised? Just like her father.”

“I was going to say just like her mother.”

I set my coffee aside and turn completely into his embrace before welcoming his kiss.

A lot has changed in the last three years. Our business has grown. Our influence spread. Our power cemented after a turbulent first year of cleaning house and weeding out most of Pray’s supporters. We’ve settled into our relationship and have less and less misunderstandings and miscommunications as proximity—as opposed to our previous absences—have made us grow fonder of each other. But this? The way heat ignites in me every time he kisses me and makes me feel like the sixteen-year-old girl who desperately wished she could have him and never thought she’d be able to? That hasn’t changed.

He breaks our kiss and says, “How was work?”

“Same old thing I always deal with... except the Bratva is starting to annoy me.”

They’ve insisted for the last three years that I killed their *pakhan*, despite my consistent denial. Now, they’re asking for retribution for the death.

“We’re going to have to meet with them about this,” I add.
“They won’t let it go.”

“You’ll have to set it on the calendar for when I get back,”
Adrian says.

As promised, Adrian has been my loyal enforcer. Just like he once was for Pray. That’s not to say that we don’t argue about how to deal with things behind the scenes. But we never give anyone ideas that they can come between us or that Viper won’t do exactly what I ask of him.

It’s been shockingly easy for Adrian to maintain that identity, even though he runs and makes quite a few decisions for our businesses. But despite all that, Adrian is still known to be extremely private and reclusive, if reformed from his previous playboy ways after amicably breaking off his engagement with Cres when news about Bella came to light. At least, as far as the public is concerned.

In reality, Cres happily gave Adrian back his ring and, not eager to go back to her father, joined on as a Creative Experience Director under the business name for my hair and beauty company, *Bianchi’s Inc.*, while still running her underground group of women seducers and spies. Periodically, Miguel Ferro, Cres’s father, tries to get Adrian to cooperate in getting his daughter back. Adrian and I have consistently responded that he knows where his daughter is and if he wants her so bad, he can come get her. Miguel has tried a handful of times and been thwarted every time. Sometimes by me and Adrian’s men, and sometimes by just Cres herself.

Adrian then says, “Or, Viper can make a pit stop for you on the way back from his first assignment.”

“Actually letting you kill one of the Russians without reason will cause more trouble than we already have with them.”

“We’d be doing them and us a favor. Alik is much more suited to run their family than his younger brother, and he believes you didn’t kill his father.”

“So his wife says,” I reply. But I haven’t had contact with Nadia Vorobev since she called to warn me that her family had helped smuggle Pray into the city away from the watchful eyes of the authorities I bought off to look for him at any turn.

“Come on. It could be fun,” Adrian pleads. “You could meet up with me and help.”

“I’m not starting another war over something that can be resolved without blood.”

“Why not? Not like they’d stand a chance.”

He’s right. Our resources far eclipse the Bratva. But Pray’s resources far eclipsed ours when we took his entire operation. I don’t need the personal lesson in hubris to know to be humble still despite our power.

I change the subject rather than answer.

“Did Eileen and Wyan ever get back to you about what my sister and Brin are doing?”

“Looks like your sister has really gone the straight and narrow.”

Delilah all but disappeared after we killed Pray. But I’m used to her disappearing on me and don’t have any feelings about it. It was inevitable really. At that point, she’d just

become another cog in the machine that was easily replaceable. Brin went with her. Last I had heard, the two got married. Then they popped up on our radar starting a non-profit for sex trafficked women. Naturally, I couldn't let it be.

At my doubtful look, Adrian adds, "You know. As straight and narrow as your sister can be."

Of course.

"We'll have to send her a donation," I decide. "It'll be good publicity."

While us and our businesses are mostly detached from the scandal of Stephen Pray, the media stench sometimes lingers and gestures of goodwill to organizations that work to end trafficking help.

"What happened to leaving work on the work side of the house?" Adrian asks.

"You brought it up."

"Conversationally so I could soften you up with concern about your goals and ambitions."

"Soften me up for what, Mr. Fantoni?"

He pushes me against the counter and kisses me while simultaneously reaching a hand between my legs and pressing up against my pussy through my jumpsuit. Almost instantly, I turn to putty in his arms.

He pulls his lips away to look down at me with a smirk.

"You could have just walked up to me and done that," I say.

"Don't give me any ideas, Bell."

He dives in for another kiss, but I stop him and say, “Bella’s going to be back with Leon for her juice.”

Adrian contemplates this for a moment before picking me up and walking us out the kitchen and down the hall to one of the downstairs bathrooms. It’s not entirely childproof as Bella is liable to run here demanding to be let in go potty. But at least there’s a door and a lock between us.

As soon as the door is closed and the lock turned, Adrian is upon me. I think he’s going to hoist me up on the sink, but apparently, he took note of what I was wearing and decides to strip me of my jumpsuit first.

Much more practiced with finding the clasps and ties that hold them up than he was years ago, he undoes the laces at the back of my jumpsuit in one flourish and a few moments later I’m naked with my clothes a pile on the floor. I help him get out his clothes, and when we’re both naked, I start to prop myself up onto the sink, but Adrian stops me and turns me around.

I’m barely able to brace myself against the sink before I feel his cock fill me all the way up. He cups my pussy with one hand and then trails the other hand up my stomach, between my breasts, until he’s holding my neck and jaw and forcing me to look in the mirror.

“Look at us,” he says pulling his cock out of me and thrusting hard back in, damn near lifting me off my feet with the force. He continues this hard steady pace as he says, “Look at us together with nothing between us.”

I do as he holds me. As he thrusts his cock into me. As he rubs his hand back and forth against my clit and my legs shake

from the force and feelings of it all. As he fucks me and rubs my clit until I come so hard I squirt liquid all over his hand and the floor and my thighs. And then he comes, and it bursts forth inside me and when it has no room, it dribbles out of me, mingling with my come and dripping down my thighs.

And all the while, Adrian holds my face in place with his right hand and makes sure I keep my eyes on the mirror. Looking at us. Coming together to fall into pleasure. Literally joined at the hip. My gaze then falls to his right arm, holding my jaw. More specifically, his tattoo.

He finally found the time to finish it. The grim reaper swooping down from an inky-black but starry night sky. Shrouded in its long black cloak, face obscured and unable to be seen in the fog. In one skeletal hand a silver pistol. In the other, a scythe with a snake wrapped around it and an inconspicuous grey-ish black masquerade mask hooked in its fingers.

There's another tattoo too. On his left shoulder in bloody red. My name. Possessive form. *Dele's*. Right where I once carved it there myself with the tattoo looking like I might have carved it there once again.

And right above my breast, a similar tattoo. Right over my heart. *Adrian's*.

Pray's empire. Being a mafia queen. A business woman. The money. The glamour. The connections. The networks. I didn't care about any of that a decade ago and I don't care about it now, though I enjoy their perks. For me, it's always been about this. About having Adrian Blake all for myself.

I am his.

And he is unquestionably, *undoubtedly*, mine.

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THE FANTONI'S WILL RETURN

IN

THE FRUITS OF VENGEANCE

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